

symposium in blues

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"When you play the blues, play like an old man, take your time.." Muddy Waters

People sometimes ask me when I first discovered blues... Some folks think that because my generation was raised on the Beatles and the Stones etc that the blues came into the picture later... I heard blues, bluegrass, 'old country', old rock & roll and jazz before I ever heard the Beatles [and their contemporaries].

When I was nine or ten years old my uncle Louie got out of the army and came back to his stompin' grounds in central Illinois and he brought his wife with him. He met his wife when he was stationed in Hawaii and she was native Hawaiian and beautiful and very different than anyone else in our family as far as looks and attitude. It was almost like she was reciting poetry when she spoke words like Oahu or Honolulu or ukelele or Humuhumunukunukuapua'a [a fish], and she taught us that 'aloha' meant hello *and* goodbye. She was mellow and calm and I'm sure that came from growing up in paradise.

Uncle Lou and his wife weren't sure where his job as a lineman for the phone company would take him next so instead of buying a house he bought one of those cool looking Airline travel trailers and we had the biggest backyard of anyone else in our extended family so he parked the trailer in our backyard and we became one big happy family for that summer. Louie had traveled quite a bit in the course of his time in the Army and he seemed like a man of the world to us small town kids even though he was from the same place as us. Travel can do that to ya. Like everyone in our family he loved music and had heard a bunch of big band music on the radio when he was young and he had also heard the old string band country stuff that was played by my great grandfather Sam Spencer and other various great uncles and second cousins twice removed etc etc. To Louie it was all just good music regardless of category..

That summer we all sat in the backyard in lawnchairs with uncle Lou and his wife and she had decorated the outside of the Airline trailer with the Hawaiian equivalent of Christmas lights and Lou stuck some tiki torches in the ground to keep the mosquitos away and he played albums on his portable record player. In his collection he had some Tommy Dorsey big band stuff and some Ray Charles stuff and some Elvis

and then he put on this one old record with a variety of old blues and I was instantly hooked on this song by Leroy Carr called "Rocks in My Bed".

It was Leroy Carr singing and playing piano and Scrapper Blackwell on guitar. It was from the 1930s and Leroy's voice was reedy and sad and Scrapper's guitar was pointed and understated and they sounded like they were in a small room and there was no reverb or any effects it was just a pure unadulterated 12 bar blues and it was a slow to medium tempo and they were takin' their time tellin' their story and Leroy was singin' about how hard it was to sleep with his baby bein' gone and I'd never heard



anything that sad and lonesome and as I said before I was nine or ten and my parents weren't divorced yet but when they split up a couple years after that, man , oh man, those blues really spoke to me.

A scant few years later in the mid 1960s I found a compilation record titled "Symposium in Blues" with Leroy Carr's "Rocks in My Bed" on it and when I played that song it transported me back to that summer-long backyard Airline trailer party. Jackpot! There were other vintage blues and old jazz songs on 'Symposium' and my other two favorites on that LP were Lonnie Johnson's recording of "Lonesome Road" and Leadbelly's recording of "I'm On My Last Go Round". Leadbelly played 12-string guitar and it was tuned down really low and it sometimes sounded like a barrel house piano sittin' on a railroad car rolling down the tracks at 90 miles per hour. It really kicked! Lonnie Johnson had one foot planted in the dirt with raw-boned blues and the other foot danced it's way through old style jazz and his solos were dazzling. I'm sure Django Reinhardt was influenced by Lonnie Johnson and the duet recordings made by Lonnie Johnson and Eddie Lang. You could spend years learning all the guitar licks on this record. Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Mildred Bailey, Ethel Waters

and others were also on this record. The liner notes were by Leonard Feather who was a musician/producer/ music journalist on the A-list of writers who wrote about jazz and blues. One of the best things about albums besides the size of the picture or artwork on the cover was the back cover if it had interesting liner notes. This album alone was an education in itself..... a symposium in blues...

What is it about the old recordings from the 1920s and 30s that makes them so compelling? The tone is thinner than recordings that came later. A lot of these old recordings are scratchy and full of pops and clicks but I still love the sound and the otherworldly vibe. It's a form of time travel for sure. The people that made these records were somehow different from us and they went through some hardships that we'll never know. It seems to me that as technology has improved there's an inverse principle in play because I've become less interested in high quality audio in general, maybe not for all music but for blues, jazz and folk that's certainly the case. Don't get me wrong I'm not a pre-digital 'vinyl only' fuddy-duddy. I own recording equipment that will get a state of the art sound and I almost always find that I want to push the meters one thin hair past clean when I'm recording. It could be my musical upbringing but the same feeling pervades many 'modern' musicians when they record and mix. That's why we have 'volume wars'. We wanna dirty it up..

The US Postal Service printed postage stamps of this Robert Johnson photo without the cigarette...



A few myopic and historically challenged rock-writers of the baby-boomer generation have said that rock & roll was the big bang... the 'beginning' of it all. The writers of this type of rock-journalism are just making a living and ya don't get paid much for negative reviews (just ask Lester Bang) and that's why so few of them look back to see the bigger picture...

Be forewarned... I'm gonna rag for a paragraph.... I know it's a generational and I'm getting old, but the new stuff doesn't have the same depth to my ears or maybe I should say I eon't resonate with it... I was largely raised on the music of the 1960s and I don't relate to hip-hop or the new rap stuff and I don't relate to 'new country'...

"Country music ain't country music now. The so-called country artists now get it as close to pop and rock as they can and still call it country." Charlie Louvin of the Louvin Brothers

Whatever happened to outlaw country? [that's your best stuff, Willie]... While I'm raggin' let me say Hey, Mr. Dylan, why don't you sit down with just your acoustic guitar and play some of your 'oldies but besties'? It doesn't get much better than "The Times They Are A Changin'" or "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall". Remember when the Beatles quit? They left us wanting more...

"Not enough artist's work end up in the trash can.." Leonardo DaVinci

An old blues master like Muddy Waters didn't mind playin' the same twenty blues songs his whole life because he had enough wisdom to know that he couldn't really improve on the masterpieces he'd already made so many years before.

The old stuff is hard to improve on... The old blues and the roots of country are the basis of it all... In the old country-blues you can almost smell the chitluns cause it's the real shit. The vintage jazz is the best jazz... it's dreamy and intoxicating like absinthe & wine... The old country stuff was real-darn-good like the country-est fried chicken your grandma ever made. The old rock & roll [early Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard and Fats Domino] was like drivin' around town in a T-bird convertible sittin' next to Betty Paige with the top down [hers and the car's]. The best bluegrass is like havin' a knock-down-drag-out family reunion hog roast and everybody brought their banjos and guitars and fiddles and all your aunts and uncles and moms and dads and brothers and sisters and grandpas and grandmas and great grandmas are singin' "Honey Let Me Be Your Salty Dog" around a big bonfire after dark while you're

sneakin' down to the lake to kiss your second cousin Sallie Mae from Podunk, Kentucky...

"the blues had a baby and they named it rock & roll.." Muddy Waters

If you put your ears in front of the Victrola [like that dog in the picture] you can hear the roots of rock in the chord structures, in the melodic content, in the improvisation and in the sheer rawness of the blues. Some say the delta blues of the 1920s was the first incarnation of rock & roll but what the hell, it goes all the way back before the Elizabethan ballads that were imported into Appalachia and way before the slave songs sung on the docks of the Port Of New Orleans way way back thousands and thousands of years to the first caveman who rolled some stones off of a cliff and started a rock-slide while doing his imitation of a howling wolf. "I've got rocks in my cave... and I cain't sleep good no-mo.." That's the rolling-rock blues, baby.. What was the first real big bang of rock & roll? How 'bout the first proto-human Cro-Magnon or Neanderthal who danced around a fire while making mouth noises and pissing & moaning all night long to scare away those friggin' sabre-toothed tigers... t-t-talk about a r-r-revolution....

At first I didn't specifically delve into vintage pre-war blues guitar styles or old blues songs per se but rock had a lot of blues in it so things started to come together for me in a big picture way. I learned a few rock songs and certain guitar styles that would serve the song and I steadily worked on being able to take the right kind of guitar solo in the right place then I would switch back to the rhythm guitar parts and then would sneak in licks between chords.

One of my best friends from high school is John Pennell and he [like me] is a Beatle fan... Actually, John is a Beatle fanatic... He got me started with fingerpicking guitar on songs like "Blackbird" and "Julia" by the Beatles and "Rain On The Roof" by Lovin' Spoonful and a couple of nice fingerpicked songs by Simon & Garfunkel and that got me headed in the direction of classic fingerpicking ragtime-folk-rock tunes like "Alice's Restaurant" and later to "4 & 20" by Stephen Stills and "Helplessly Hoping" by Crosby, Stills & Nash.

I retained the memory of hearing "Rocks In My Bed" and the starkness of that listening experience stayed with me the whole time while I was teaching myself to play. I knew rock & roll and boogie-woogie blues were totally connected and I was aware that the old pre-electric style of blues pre-dated rock & roll and pop stuff and a whole

lot of rock stuff was built upon the foundation of the blues but in my mid-teens I was still more interested in Jimi Hendrix and Cream and the Beatles etc cause it was all new and exciting and really good. I didn't start studying the old acoustic blues till I had gone through a phase learning lead guitar stuff from lots of records by the Allman Brothers and the Grateful Dead and Quicksilver Messenger Service and lots of late night jam sessions with my central Illinois buddies like Bob Shoemaker and Phil Baker and John May...

In my mid to late twenties I was in a band with a guy named George Faber who could play blues harp really well and he showed me some different ways to approach the instrument. Up until that time I usually played with a harmonica rack around my neck like Dylan and I usually only played first position and cross-harp style. George showed me which harp to play when you play in a minor key and how to overblow the top notes in first position which he called Jimmy Reed style. By osmosis I picked up some of his other harmonica tips and tricks and also a few blues vocal tips cause he was a damn good blues singer [for a white guy..]. A Hohner Marine Band \$5.99 harmonica with wooden reeds became a screamin' mouth machine when you blew it really hard and you could get a huge honkin' tone when it went through a microphone into an overdriven amp. That was about as raw as you could get. If ya knew how to cup your hands around the mic and blow with every bit of lungs you could muster, all the dogs in the neighbor would begin to bark. Some old blues guys called it a 'Mississippi saxophone'. That's the kind of stuff George would tell me second-hand cause he made trips up to Chicago in his late teens and tried to learn as much as he could from seeing the blues live. At that time there were still blues masters like Junior Wells and others still alive and were playing the clubs regularly. When Muddy Waters had a car wreck and wound up in the hospital in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois for a while, George said he went and visited him. Back then George would do anything to soak up some of that blues-soul.

That was around the same time when I began bypassing the rock sections and started searching through the blues bins at records stores and swap shops. For a long time one of the best places to buy new & used records in the area was Record Service in Champaign, IL, owned and operated by a friend named Phil Strang. There I bought a bunch of old blues records by people like Robert Johnson and Leadbelly and Son House and Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker and Blind Lemon Jefferson and Son House and Reverend Gary Davis and Blind Boy Fuller and Blind

Arthur Blake and Blind Willie McTell and Mississippi John Hurt and Tampa Red and the LPs were so cheap like a \$1.99 or \$2.99 or \$3.99 and sometimes I'd score somethin' for 99 cents.

I learned as much as I could from these records and started playing acoustic solo and duo gigs during the week when the band wasn't playing. I had a lot of blues and folk-blues in my repertoire and a lot of the local listeners at gigs hadn't heard very many [if any] of these old blues songs so it was almost like playing original songs. I usually included a couple original blues songs in the set too, and in the late 1970s and early 80s I became known as the 'acoustic blues-guy' around town. I was in the right place and time to open some shows for Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker and other Chicago blues artists like Son Seals and Mighty Joe Young and Blind John Davis... If I never did anything more than that then at least I have those feathers in my hat and it all started with Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell's recording of "Rocks In My Bed"...



Muddy Waters