

Fathers, Sons, and Hippies

Changes in American Blues in the 1960s and its Connection to the Counterculture

by

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the changing landscape of American blues music in the 1960s as well as the blues' connection to the 1960s counterculture. This paper makes frequent use of oral histories from musicians and counterculture members. It also uses underground press publications to gauge the perceptions and opinions of the counterculture with respect to blues music. This project traces the journey of mid-century blues players from the Deep South up to northern industrial cities while arguing that commercialism and professionalism was a major part of their careers. This project then explores the younger generation of blues musicians (those born in the 1930s and early-1940s) as they developed relationships with the older generation of mid-century blues players. The younger generation, using a wide variety of influences, developed a new, energized subgenre of the blues during the 1960s.

Older blues musicians in Chicago generously shared their music with younger musicians, both Black and White, while forming close, familial relationships with each other and sustaining the genre through the 1960s. Largely through the efforts of several notable blues artists, the genre became popular in White American circles. The mixed-race Paul Butterfield Blues Band largely increased the blues' popularity with White people and the counterculture. While early-1960s White blues fans were largely members of the folk revival, valuing only acoustic Black country blues, the counterculture largely embraced the blues in all its forms by the late-1960s. Unlike the folk revivalists, the counterculture did not demand Black blues artists play folk-blues, and instead valued electric blues, albeit some problematic perceptions remained throughout the 1960s.

The counterculture embraced blues music for many reasons. The genre was a basis for other popular genres like rock, it could be adapted and appropriated to fit countercultural views, and it was a method of rejecting the mainstream. The counterculture also developed a progressive blues cultural, using the blues to demonstrate solidarity with Black civil rights advocates. Blues musicians from Chicago found unprecedented popularity within the counterculture and greatly influenced countercultural musicians. Blues musicians likewise embraced the counterculture, adopting subversive lifestyles and incorporating countercultural motifs in their music by the mid-1960s. The paper concludes with a discussion of post-1960s blues, arguing against the myth that the blues stagnated and vanished since the end of the 1960s.

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## **Dedication**

To Katie. My Chicago connection.

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## Introduction

The year was 1966. Ed Denson, a music manager and record producer living in the San Francisco Bay Area, went to the Fillmore Auditorium for a night of music. The place was packed, as around 2,000 audience members filled the venue after the performance the previous night had thrilled the crowd.<sup>1</sup> The same acts were playing the next night when Denson attended. The promoter for the Fillmore, Bill Graham, had booked a double bill as he often did. The Quicksilver Messenger Service was the first act to play; they were a psychedelic rock band coming out of the 1960s hippie music scene in the Bay Area.<sup>2</sup> Denson, as an active member of the West Coast counterculture, was more than happy hearing Quicksilver's performance.

The second act of the double bill was the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Coming out of Chicago, the Butterfield Band featured both Black and White performers, an anomaly at that time for blues groups. Each member of the band had begun their career under the mentorship of the great blues legends such as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Little Walter Jacobs. By 1966, the Butterfield Band had been learning and playing the blues for years, and when Quicksilver pleased the crowd, Butterfield blew their minds.<sup>3</sup> The band was tight, and wholly professional. Each member of the band knew their role and the performances were expertly executed. The performance even included wild stage antics, like a fire-eating routine, to delight the crowd.<sup>4</sup> The band laid out some classic hits, such as a cover of Muddy Waters' "Got My Mojo Working," while also testing out some new material, namely a psychedelic, Indian-inspired "raga" jam that exhibited the musical prowess of lead guitarist Michael Bloomfield.<sup>5</sup> Electric blues were new to the Bay Area in 1966, but with Butterfield's

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Denson, "A Trip with the Blues," *Berkeley Barb*, April 1, 1966, p. 4, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

reception, the blues would become a major part of the West Coast and the counterculture throughout the late-1960s.

Blues music, as an artform and industry, changed dramatically throughout the 1960s as it transitioned towards new fanbases and a new demographic of musicians. The purpose of this thesis is to examine these changes as blues music worked its way from southern American plantations and towns to underground club scenes in Chicago and other northern industrial cities, to American countercultural hubs, and finally, to the White mainstream audiences in the late-1960s United States. Through this thesis, I hope to provide more detail to the history of 1960s blues music, which is a severely understudied topic. I also hope to provide insights into how the blues relates to the tumultuous social climate of the 1960s by demonstrating the strong link between this genre and the counterculture.

Chapter one of this thesis provides context for the following chapters by discussing mid-century blues musicians. In this chapter, I examine the journeys of many mid-1900s blues musicians as they moved from the Deep South of the United States to northern industrial cities as a part of the Great Migration. I argue here that, despite dominant perceptions of early and mid-century blues as a simplistic or primitive genre, these blues musicians created musically complex music with intricate motivations. As an extension of simplistic perceptions of the blues, the genre has also been seen as a non-commercial artform. This perception is also a myth. Early and mid-century blues musicians made conscious efforts to commercialize their blues in order to pursue careers and escape the sharecropping system in the Deep South. Though these simplistic and non-commercial perceptions of the blues were intended to preserve the integrity of the genre, it effectively forced Black blues musicians to conform to a specific image, robbing them of some agency.

Chapter two discusses how a younger generation of blues musicians (those born around the 1930s and early-1940s) broke into blues scenes in the late-1950s and early-1960s



with a specific focus on Chicago. This chapter describes the proliferation of the university folk scene in the United States. This community, which formed some of the basis for the late-1960s counterculture, valued blues and other American music only in its acoustic form. These communities strongly favoured early and country blues from exclusively Black musicians and had little to no exposure to electric blues music. Despite this preference, the university folk scenes, or folklore societies as they were known, were frequented by several members of the younger blues generation. These folklore societies helped spread awareness of the blues throughout many American cities and laid some of the foundation for the growth in blues popularity among White people.

This chapter also draws several short biographical sketches of notable younger blues artists such as Buddy Guy, Taj Mahal, Sam Lay, Nick Gravenites, Paul Butterfield and Michael Bloomfield. In this chapter, I illustrate how many of the mid-century generation of blues musicians, especially Muddy Waters, helped the younger generation get their starts in the blues industry. Indicative of the increased integration of the Northern United States in the 1960s, younger blues musicians, both Black and White, were welcomed into the genre by the older generation. I also argue that the radio and locations of these younger musicians played an important part in exposing them to blues and other genres of music. Due to this exposure, younger artists were able to combine multiple styles of music with a youthful energy to create a subgenre of blues that was distinct from the older generation. However, difficult racial dynamics arose due to White people adopting the blues. Problematic perceptions of blues music pervaded White audiences and musicians, though often White musicians who worked in close contact with their peers and mentors developed more nuanced views of the genre.

Chapter three explores the growing blues scene in the North Side of Chicago during the mid-1960s. Blues was previously found only in predominantly Black neighbourhoods of the South and West Sides of Chicago. However, the genre began to flourish in the

predominantly White North Side after a series of performances by Big Joe Williams, Charlie Musselwhite, Michael Bloomfield and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band created a blues scene in the North. Here, I note that the British Invasion was important in popularizing the blues among American Whites, but the North Side blues scene was also tremendously important. This chapter also discusses how the older generation of mid-century blues musicians mentored the younger generation in Chicago. The older generation displayed profound generosity towards the younger musicians, supporting them emotionally, financially and provided advice when it was needed. Though the Chicago blues scene could be competitive at times, the generosity of older blues musicians helped carry the scene through the 1960s. This chapter also looks at the mid-1960s explosion in popularity of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Through the band's debut album and performance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, many folk music fans, or folkies, were exposed to electric blues for the first time. Despite folkies' rigid preferences towards acoustic music, Butterfield was a success in the mid-1960s and further pushed the blues into White audiences' interests.

Chapter four illustrates the move many blues musicians made from Chicago to the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid and late-1960s. Chicago blues musicians had been developing their music and professionalism for years. This presented a drastic contrast with the West Coast music scene, which had a reputation for being amateurish. Chicago blues musicians' professionalism, defined by their technical skill, band cohesion and well-executed performances, gave them an authority in the West Coast. These blues musicians became influential among Bay Area performers, who, with some exceptions, only had exposure to acoustic folk-blues. Chicago blues musicians were also influenced by the West Coast counterculture, including psychedelic motifs in their music creating a new subgenre of psychedelic-blues. Blues musicians similarly adopted countercultural lifestyles and imagery.

Chapter five, the final chapter, discusses how the American counterculture embraced blues music in the late-1960s and early-1970s. Blues artists were featured prominently in counterculture festivals or other events and blues records sold well in the counterculture. The counterculture, who embraced electric music far more than participants of the folk revival, had more complex perceptions of the blues than the folkies of the late-1950s and early-1960s. People in the counterculture embraced both electric and acoustic blues and, while Blackness was still given credibility with respect to the blues, many styles of the blues were enjoyed, and White blues musicians were perceived as valid blues artists. However, White blues and Black blues were considered different genres, suggesting many counterculture members placed more importance on race than actual music.

The blues became popular among the counterculture for a multitude of reasons. Blues formed a basis for the popular music of the late-1960s. Thus, many counterculture members, eager to find the roots of their favourite music, looked towards the blues. Counterculture audiences also loved the perceptions of blues as an underground genre and used the blues as a method to reject the mainstream. People in the counterculture also appropriated the blues to fit into their preconceived beliefs, such as anti-war values or music as an experience. Similarly, the blues was used as a method to demonstrate solidarity with Black civil rights activists during the Black Power movement of the late-1960s. While many mainstream audiences started embracing the blues more and adopted the genre as a safe form of Black culture compared to Black Power influenced soul music, the counterculture developed a progressive blues culture that fit into the movement's radical and subversive values.

Chapter five ends with a discussion of the blues in post-1960s America. I argue the perception that blues stagnated and vanished is a myth. Though blues has diminished in popularity since the 1960s, later artists like Stevie Ray Vaughan profoundly innovated the

genre. Additionally, artists like Buddy Guy, Charlie Musselwhite and a resurgence of young Black artists have continued to create blues music into the 2020s.

### **Methodology and Sources**

Due to the lack of formal documentation within the blues industry for most of its history, this paper makes frequent use of oral history. Interviews and transcripts used in this paper provide biographical information, details about musicians' musical influences and peoples' perceptions about blues music. The book *Michael Bloomfield: If You Love These Blues – An Oral History* is a collection of oral history centred around blues guitarist Michael Bloomfield. This book provided valuable insights into the blues scene in the 1960s. Other interviews, such as the 1979 Muddy Waters interview titled “Muddy Waters- Interview 1979 [RITY Archives]” provided similar insights. Oral history was also used to construct a narrative focused on the changing landscape of blues music in the 1960s. An original interview that I conducted with blues musician Charlie Musselwhite on June 28, 2023, provided many narrative details, such as an account of how the North Side Chicago blues scene developed in the mid-1960s. I have included a series of mainstream magazine articles in my source base such as a manuscript for Nick Gravenites' 1997 “Bad Talkin' Bluesman” articles that were originally published in *Blues Revue* magazine. These sources further help fill out narrative details.

This paper also made use of an extensive examination of underground countercultural newspaper and magazine publications from the mid- and late-1960s. These newspapers were largely written by students, activists and other common counterculture members. Thus, these newspapers provide an accurate account of perceptions and opinions found within the counterculture. Additionally, the examples of articles provided in this paper reflect trends that were found during my research.

Special care was taken to corroborate major claims and details in the sources I used. I habitually sought alternate accounts of stories to verify information. For example, an article from the counterculture publication *the Seed*, claimed that a man named Bob Wettlaufer was involved in the North Side Chicago blues boom. During my interview with Charlie Musselwhite, we discussed Wettlaufer and Musselwhite provided more detail about his involvement in this phenomenon. Through my research, I found countercultural publications to be riddled with minor factual errors such as incorrectly stating the birth date of a musician or misspelling a name. Thus, corroboration was an important part of my research methodology. Fortunately, my use of these publications dealt mostly with the perceptions of counterculture members, so most of my analysis was a qualitative look at these articles, rather than relying on them for historical information.

## Chapter One: **Commercialism and Artistry in Early Blues**

It was a summer day in 1943 when McKinley Morganfield, also known as Muddy Waters, left Clarksdale, Mississippi, on a train headed towards his new home, Chicago.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the 1930s, Muddy, who had been sharecropping most of his life, established himself as a prominent blues musician in the Deep South, performing in juke joints, at fish fries, for radio programs and at dances.<sup>7</sup> The Southern United States, an already harsh region for Black people due to the rampant discrimination and violence, became even more cruel when the Great Depression hit. With the overproduction of cotton and the rise of mechanized cotton farming equipment, Black southerners bore the brunt of this changing time and faced unprecedented job shortages.<sup>8</sup> What little money was available for a musician and sharecropper like Muddy Waters had run dry. Though he spent time working in Chicago factories, Muddy always kept his mind on his music career, claiming “the big city” would give him “more opportunities to get into the big record field.”<sup>9</sup> Chicago, for Muddy, was a calculated move which would eventually carry him to music stardom.

Muddy’s blues was more than just an emotional release for his tough sharecropping life; it was a tool to escape it. A tool that combined the professional, artistic innovation of a passionate musician with the savvy business sense of a man who knew how to make a living from it. Though Muddy’s story is unique in many ways, his journey from the Deep South to northern cities like Chicago shares many traits with the lives of countless other blues musicians. Howlin’ Wolf, Big Bill Broonzy, Hubert Sumlin, Little Walter Horton and so many more used the blues to escape the oppression of southern sharecropping and marketed

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2002), 81.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Will Romano, *Incurable Blues: The Troubles & Triumph of Blues Legend Hubert Sumlin* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2005), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 83.

their music to make it a viable career. There exists a common misconception that blues musicians who established themselves in the first half of the twentieth century were purely artistic musicians with little to no commercial intent behind their music. This notion is a myth that robs Black blues musicians of their agency in creating a career in the music industry. Before and during their journeys to the north, blues musicians demonstrated agency in commercializing their music. Even blues musicians who were based in the South for their entire lives, like Robert Johnson, demonstrated this drive for financial security through their music.

Early and mid-century blues musicians developed their music and stagecraft, altering it intentionally and professionally to appeal to their audiences. This is further proven by blues musicians forming bands, dispelling the image of the lonely country blues guitarist and highlighting the musical complexity that pervaded the genre. Several blues musicians made many business decisions to promote themselves and earn a living through ventures such as opening their own juke joints, seeking out radio stations in order to advertise themselves or travelling to cities where they could make records. Travel was used as a means of commercializing blues as well. Many early blues musicians would work their way through the Deep South and into big cities on tours for the express purpose of money-making. Additionally, these travelling blues musicians inspired younger generations and shared techniques with those eager to learn.

Throughout these ventures, the blues musicians of the early and mid-century 1900s continued to passionately innovate their genre, taking inspiration from their experiences. The artistic-commercial dichotomy of early and mid-century blues indicates that commercialism and artistry are not mutually exclusive concepts. Furthermore, the financial motivations of blues musicians does not mean that blues did not serve multiple purposes. As many blues

musicians will state, the genre was used as a catharsis and mental escape from oppression as well as a financial escape.

### **Artistic Purity and White Naivety**

During the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, the event coordinator Alan Lomax delivered a scathing introduction for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band before they took the stage. The festival had featured many other blues performers, all of whom Lomax lauded, but his perceptions of the Butterfield Band were different. As a young, energetic, fully electric band made up of both Black and White musicians, the Butterfield Band conflicted with Lomax's strong opinions of what blues music should be.

Alan Lomax had conducted several academic field trips to the Deep South during the 1940s in order to record and study African American "folk-song."<sup>10</sup> While Lomax's work yielded an impressive archive of interviews, notes, recordings, manuscripts and various other materials, it also gave him a strong perception of blues music as a purely artistic form of culture. To Alan Lomax, the blues, specifically the early blues, was a simple music that represented no commercial ambitions from its exclusively Black performers. Thus, two decades later, when it was time for Lomax to deliver his introduction for the Butterfield Band which he believed contradicted these simple pillars of the blues, he made his feelings clear.

Used to be a time when a farmer would take a box, glue an axe handle to it, put some strings on it, sit down in the shade of a tree and play some blues for himself and his friends. Now here we've got these guys, and they need all of this fancy hardware to play the blues. Today you've heard some of the greatest blues musicians in the world

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<sup>10</sup> Rob Cristarella et al., "Coahoma County, Mississippi, Field Trips, 1941-1942: A Guide" (PDF document at The Alan Lomax Collection, The Library of Congress, Washington D.C., 2016), 3.



playing their simple music on simple instruments. Let's find out if these guys can play at all.<sup>11</sup>

While this thinly veiled insult explicitly centred around the Butterfield Band's use of "fancy hardware,"<sup>12</sup> it also reveals Alan Lomax's perceptions surrounding blues music. His interpretation of the blues as a simplistic genre is clear, but he also rejects any commercial or financial motivation that could be present among blues musicians. When Lomax stated that "a farmer would... play some blues for himself and his friends,"<sup>13</sup> he argued that a proper blues musician could not be a professional. Instead, a real blues artist was someone who primarily worked a different job (likely a Black sharecropper) and performed the blues for personal pleasure or hobby pursuits. This was a simplistic definition of early blues music, and one that Lomax glorified. Lomax found purity in this simplicity and therefore rejected commercial motivations or any complex mix of personal catharsis and financial agency that could act as a driving force for a blues career.

Alan Lomax's pure perceptions of early and mid-1900s blues music were intended to preserve the authenticity of blues music.<sup>14</sup> For Lomax and many other White folk fans during around the 1960s, commercialism, electric instruments and White involvement were considered corruptive forces in an otherwise pure genre.<sup>15</sup> In actuality, this authenticity debate proved to be far more of a hindrance towards Black blues players than a compliment. These perceptions unintentionally oversimplify the complex motivations behind the genre, characterize its musicians as primitive, and rob Black blues musicians of their agency in making careers for themselves. During the early-1960s, many Black blues musicians were forced to conform to these primitive images, donning overalls and playing solo acoustic

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<sup>11</sup> Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s: A Story in Black and White* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 52.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

guitars.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, many blues artists openly embraced electric instruments by the early-1940s. These perceptions, though intended to show empathy towards Black artists, highlight a naivety and simplistic understanding of the motivations behind the blues among White folk audiences.

This commercialism-free interpretation of blues musicians clearly influenced Alan Lomax's conduct during and after his research trips to the Deep South. In perceiving little to no financial motivations among blues musicians, Lomax likewise perceived no ethical qualms in recording a multitude of blues musicians and selling these records with the Library of Congress. Though certain musicians were meagrely compensated for their recordings, like Muddy Waters who was given twenty dollars,<sup>17</sup> a small flat fee for making a record is clearly exploitative in nature.

Alan Lomax was not the first person to argue for the primitive nature of early blues music, and he was certainly not the last. The concept of the simplistic bluesman and, more generally, early blues as a simple, non-commercial genre proliferated itself throughout American culture and has become one of the predominant perceptions of the genre. Liner notes, books, newspapers, music industry personnel and even blues musicians themselves will describe the genre in simplistic terminology. In the liner notes for Muddy Waters' live album *At Newport 1960*, music producer and journalist Jack Tracy describes Muddy's blues in simplistic terms such as "unadorned,"<sup>18</sup> or being full of "earthiness and heartiness"<sup>19</sup> ensuring to contrast the blues with "the most advanced of jazz compositions."<sup>20</sup> In a 1967 article for the underground newspaper, *Berkeley Barb*, music manager and record label owner Ed Denson described the generation of younger blues musicians in San Francisco as having

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<sup>16</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 67.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Tracy, liner notes for McKinley Morganfield, *At Newport 1960*, Muddy Waters, Recorded July 3, 1960, Chess LP 1449, 1960.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

performed “intellectual blues.”<sup>21</sup> This description is clearly intended to draw a line between the perceived sophistication of the blues of the 1960s with the traditional blues of the 1920s through 1940s.

During a 2013 interview, countercultural cartoonist and renowned blues enthusiast Robert Crumb discusses his perceptions of commercialism in blues music. Crumb, who expresses a strong disdain for anything he perceives to be commercial, highlights the perceived purity in what he deems to be pre-commercial blues. Crumb states that “the difference between the stuff that I really like (the 1920s and early ‘30s) and [electric blues] is a whole different mood... a magic that’s not there. Maybe it’s a romantic thing. It conjures up visions of dirt roads and going deep into the back country.”<sup>22</sup> Crumb’s “dirt road”<sup>23</sup> imagery clearly alludes to the notion of simplistic music. Crumb, who idolizes this simple bluesman motif, links the purity of simple blues with his disdain for commercialism, claiming that “something has been lost in this... whole commercialisation of music.”<sup>24</sup> Robert Crumb’s disdain for commercialism is strongly pronounced, and he represents a widely held belief that anti-commercialism is synonymous with early blues music. Notably, Crumb values the complexity of early blues music, and has highlighted the professionalism and intricate stagecraft of blues musicians in several of his blues-centric cartoons.<sup>25</sup> Crumb’s divergence from typical perceptions of early blues suggests that, while there are variations in opinions of the blues, anti-commercialism and simplicity still present the dominant perception of the genre.

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<sup>21</sup> Ed Denson, “The Folk Scene,” *Berkeley Barb*, September 15, 1967, p. 8, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>22</sup> Garth Cartwright, “Interview: Robert Crumb.” Red Bull Musical Academy. December 5, 2013. <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2013/12/robert-crumb-interview>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Robert Crumb, *R. Crumb Draws the Blues* (London: Knockabout Comics, 1992), 1.

### Non-Commercial Beginnings

Though blues music quickly became a commercial path for many of its early and mid-century musicians, the initial inspiration for many blues players was as a reaction to the harsh conditions they endured in the Southern United States. In a 1979 interview, when asked about the nature of blues music, Muddy Waters responded by saying “you goin’ way back down to slavery times.”<sup>26</sup> Muddy’s comments suggest the blues was born out of slavery and the after effects of this institution. However, Waters and his cohort of mid-century blues musicians were not slaves as he notes in his interview, yet their situation in the Deep South was full of hardship: “I wasn’t... no slave, but I really wasn’t free.”<sup>27</sup> Muddy Waters makes a clear connection between the origin and identity of mid-century blues music and the oppression faced by Black southerners. “I was always singing just the way I felt, maybe I didn’t know it, but I just didn’t like the way things were down there - in Mississippi.”<sup>28</sup>

Harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson summarized Muddy Waters’ meaning in a 1947 interview when asked why someone would have the blues: “we colored people have had so much trouble... [we] tried to be happy anyway!”<sup>29</sup> While corroborating Muddy’s point about the origins of the blues, Sonny Boy also highlights a major inspiration for blues musicians in the early-1900s, the need for a catharsis.

Due to the brutal conditions Black people experienced in the Jim Crow south, the blues was often used as a pseudo-therapeutic release from the trauma endured in day-to-day life. Many early and mid-century blues musicians were born into sharecropping families around the Mississippi Delta region, working long and hard days on plantations while often

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<sup>26</sup> ReelinInTheYears66, “Muddy Waters- Interview 1979 [RITY Archives],” YouTube video, 7:13, December 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTDfhWTA29I>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 42.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Lomax, Alan Lomax Collection, Manuscripts, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, p. 11 1947, Manuscript, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2004004.ms230202/>.

half the yield of crops they farmed went to the plantation owner.<sup>30</sup> This was a brutally unjust system that resembled many aspects of slavery, which had been abolished nearly 50 years before Muddy Waters and many of his cohorts were born. “If I have lots of trouble...” blues pianist Memphis Slim stated in the same 1947 interview with Sonny Boy, “the blues [is] the only thing that gives me consolation.”<sup>31</sup> In some ways, the blues acted as a spiritual release during a troubling time. “The blues and-er spirituals are somewhat on the same order. I mean, if you have troubles... you go to church and you sing, you feel happy,” stated Slim, “you gets a little consolation there. Well, it's the same with the blues, I mean a blues is just a something like a spiritual.”<sup>32</sup>

Big Bill Broonzy (also present during the interview), agreed with Slim and suggested that the blues was used to express the emotions that grew out of these traumatic experiences: “it helps anybody to explain... their [feelings].”<sup>33</sup> The blues, as Big Bill notes, developed into an experiential genre of music. One that was used to describe any number of emotions, troubles or situations. From sexual insecurities to romantic conquests, to the oppression of sharecropping, to joy-filled dances, the blues could be adapted to the experiences of the musician. The blues could be used to express emotions about mild inconveniences just as they could for heart-wrenching tragedies. In the 1947 interview, Sonny Boy recalled one factor that encouraged him to start singing the blues was the lack of good liquor that he had access to on plantations. “You couldn't get this good whiskey. You got to drink what you could. I was drinkin'... some of that white [corn] whiskey... made out of that real corns... And so 'n' that give me that blues and I started.”<sup>34</sup> Early blues could be adapted to any degree of scenario, story or emotion that was experienced, creating a complex genre that gives

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<sup>30</sup> Romano, *Incurable Blues*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Lomax, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

insights into the lives of real, complex human beings. The fact that Alan Lomax could oversimplify this nuanced piece of culture after conducting this interview in 1947 demonstrates how deeply ingrained the notion of blues simplicity is in American culture.

The breadth of topics is but one aspect of this genre's complexity. "We grew up together." Sonny Boy Williamson says of a young love interest, "I wanted to [love] her and [asked] her mother for her... she turned me down... that's the reason I thought of the [song] LITTLE SCHOOL GIRL."<sup>35</sup> Here Sonny Boy recounts a lost love and, in his 1937 recording of the song, titled "Good Morning, School Girl," he reflects the insecurity of being rejected by his lover's mother: "Tell your mama and your papa / Baby, baby, we're gonna do nothing wrong."<sup>36</sup>

In Muddy Waters' rendition of an old blues standard, "Rollin' Stone," he portrays the joy, pride and lust of his sexual endeavours with many women. "I went to my baby's house / And I sit down oh, on her steps / She said "come on in now Muddy / You know my husband just now left."<sup>37</sup> A thematic antithesis to Sonny Boy's "Good Morning, School Girl," "Rollin' Stone" demonstrates both the breadth of emotional expression that the blues could portray, while dealing with common topics which include were part of life in those times: women, drinking, dancing, the desire to travel or escape, and the lamentations of a hard life.

Big Bill Broonzy, in the 1947 interview, reminisced of a song he had written which indicated these lamentations and a feeling of hopelessness that came through the sharecropping institution. "Lawd I could hear my-nngg / My name a-rangin'-nnng / All up an' down [the] line-nng... / Now an' I don' believe I'm doin' nothin' / But gradually throwin' away my time-nng."<sup>38</sup> Though Big Bill's song presents a dire and helpless image of himself,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>36</sup> John Lee Curtis Williamson, "Good Morning, School Girl." Track #1 on *Good Morning, School Girl / Sugar Mama*. Bluebird B-7059, 1937, digital MP3.

<sup>37</sup> McKinley Morganfield, "Rollin' Stone," Track #1 on *Rollin' Stone / Walking Blues*, Chess 1426, 1950, digital MP3.

<sup>38</sup> Lomax, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, p. 14.

this was not the nature of early blues music. The blues was a way for Black people in the Deep South to express their discontent with their situation and, at times, rebel in an unjust system. Big Bill would sing this song while he worked,<sup>39</sup> thereby openly deriding his duties while completing them.

Blues guitarist Hubert Sumlin would use blues music as a tool to rebel against the sharecropping system, often shirking his work duties to play guitar in the fields.<sup>40</sup> On one occasion, when Sumlin was caught playing guitar instead of working the cotton field, the plantation owner destroyed his guitar.<sup>41</sup> However, due to the clout Hubert's mother held with the plantation owner, he was forced to buy Hubert a new guitar.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in some ways, the blues opened avenues to diminish the control that plantation owners held over the sharecroppers.

Blues may have started out as a non-commercial artform, but it was not simple. The genre represented a complex mix of therapeutic release, catharsis, emotional expression and protest. Despite these non-commercial beginnings, commercialism and financial motivations were injected into the genre by blues musicians at a very early time.

### **Commercialism, Agency and Professionalism**

Similar to how Hubert Sumlin used the blues to rebel against the sharecropping system, many blues musicians turned to music as an escape from the extreme poverty of this institution. "Well, one of the reasons that I started playin' the blues was from-uh just feelin' bad, lack of money... and-uh, fact of the business," said Big Bill Broonzy in 1947, "[I] couldn't find a job around at that time to make no extra money — workin' on the farm,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Romano, *Incurable Blues*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

plantations 'n' things like that.”<sup>43</sup> Big Bill indicated a conscious decision to commercialize his music, which would act as a driving force for the career decisions made by many of the blues musicians of the first half of the twentieth century. In making these financially motivated career decisions, early blues musicians demonstrated agency in altering their life situations. An agency that is robbed when these musicians are perceived as simple, and non-commercial.

With a drive for commercialism, there also came a drive for professionalism. In Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow’s 2019 biography of early blues legend Robert Johnson, *Up Jumped the Devil*, the authors describe Johnson’s professional development of his stagecraft in order to make a name for himself. “He was a dancer and harmonica player in ways that surprised his companions, and he used all his entertainment talents to further his quest for fame and freedom from the burdens of sharecropping.”<sup>44</sup> Stagecraft and performative skill were paramount to making a career out of the blues in the Deep South. It was important for early blues musicians to distinguish themselves from others in order to draw crowds and gain notoriety. Crowds and notoriety led to gigs which led to more money than one would see from working on a plantation. In Clarksdale, Mississippi, the town that Muddy Waters spent much of his young life in, juke joint (essentially bars with dancing, drinking and gambling) owners would survey the streets where blues musicians would busk.<sup>45</sup> If a musician seemed particularly adept at drawing crowds, the business owner would hire them to perform at their juke joint.<sup>46</sup> It was a mutually beneficial agreement and a career step in the right direction for a burgeoning blues musician. As Conforth and Wardlow state in *Up Jumped the Devil*, “Playing in a juke was quite profitable by Delta standards.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, stagecraft and professional performative abilities were a focus for early blues musicians.

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<sup>43</sup> Lomax, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce M. Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2019), 23.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 43.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 81.



Robert Johnson was one such musician who could draw in a crowd. Johnson worked hard to develop his act and created a stage persona that was separate from his real personality. Johnson, who could be prone to shyness,<sup>48</sup> worked hard to overcome his quiet and timid side to display his raucous stage presence. On one occasion, when asked to perform for a group of musicians, he was overcome with “a bad case of stage fright”<sup>49</sup> and needed to turn his back to the musicians in order to perform for them.<sup>50</sup> Despite these tendencies, Johnson infused his music with lively and dynamic rhythms which allowed him to energize the crowds he would play for at juke joints.<sup>51</sup> Juke joints, which often featured rowdy, all-night-long parties,<sup>52</sup> necessitated the kind of high-energy performances that Johnson provided. Notably, Johnson altered his technique to provide a more danceable sound. Johnson often infused his music with a “damping effect on the bass strings to provide more rhythm for dancing.”<sup>53</sup> Johnson was an actor, he knew what was popular with audiences, and he altered his act to gain an edge in a competitive music market.

Blues legend Howlin’ Wolf was another such musician who took his stagecraft seriously. Wolf worked hard to develop his wild stage antics, often being known for wild performances in which he would writhe around on the stage.<sup>54</sup> Wolf’s stage presence was matched only by his stage persona. Using his deep voice and size, the blues musician developed a professional image of himself that appeared intimidating and powerful to those he performed for and with. Rhythm & blues and gospel musician “Pops” Staples, who had often listened to Wolf perform, stated, “He was just a few years older than me, but he was so powerful I wouldn’t even dare speak to him.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 257.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

<sup>54</sup> James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, *Moanin’ at Midnight* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 280.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*.

Blues musicians in this time also expressed a keen desire to professionally develop their music, just as they did their stage antics. Harmonicist Kim Field wrote in his book, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, that Little Walter, Muddy Waters and Jimmy Rogers “were not only awesomely talented; they were committed to putting in long hours shaping their ensemble sound.”<sup>56</sup> Harmonicist Little Walter Jacobs, who was born in Louisiana in 1930<sup>57</sup> (much later than his contemporaries, but since he began performing around the early age of 12,<sup>58</sup> he is closer to Muddy generationally than to Buddy Guy, who was born in 1936), made a conscious effort to professionally alter his music. Said Field: “His blues playing... began to show signs of a swinging complexity and daring that reflected the influence of jazz soloists, particularly jump tenor virtuosos like [jazz sax player] Arnett Cobb.”<sup>59</sup> Little Walter developed his blues music throughout the 1940s by infusing elements of other genres, like jazz.

Howlin’ Wolf also worked to develop his sound as much as he did his physical performance. Taking inspiration from multiple sources like Little Walter, Wolf would consume, alter and adapt many factors into what became his signature sound. Around the early-1930s, Howlin’ Wolf spent a great deal of time learning from older blues musician Charlie Patton.<sup>60</sup> Wolf was enthralled by Patton’s stagecraft and guitar prowess.<sup>61</sup> Initially imitating and adapting Patton’s stage antics,<sup>62</sup> Patton’s instruction also introduced more musical complexity into Wolf’s songs.

In James Segrest and Mark Hoffman’s biography of Howlin’ Wolf, the authors describe a technique that Wolf picked up from Patton and carried with him throughout his

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<sup>56</sup> Kim Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers: The Evolution of the People’s Instrument* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 173.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin’ at Midnight*, 35.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

entire career. The 1954 single “Evil Is Goin’ On” featured “an unusual vocal, Wolf shouted out the first lines of each verse in a constricted voice and then sang the last lines in a different voice. The result was a call-and-response pattern between the singer and himself—a trick Wolf picked up from Charlie Patton.”<sup>63</sup> By recognizing Charlie Patton’s talents and ability to attract the interest of crowds,<sup>64</sup> Howlin’ Wolf used his lessons with Charlie to professionally develop his own music, creating a unique sound and stage persona. This distinct sound helped the Wolf gain notoriety and, when he released “Evil” in 1954, helped him find commercial success.<sup>65</sup>

Notably, Howlin’ Wolf’s signature howl was inspired by “the first great country music star,”<sup>66</sup> Jimmie Rodgers (not to be confused with Muddy Waters’ long-time guitarist Jimmy Rogers) who would sing certain parts of his music as if he were yodelling.<sup>67</sup> Though Wolf’s music never included yodelling, he took inspiration from Rodgers and, per his own words, “adapted it to my own abilities.”<sup>68</sup> On Wolf’s 1959 album, *Moanin’ in the Moonlight*, the track “Moanin’ at Midnight” features Wolf humming a deep, rich tone before smoothly transitioning to a series of high-pitched, falsetto “woo’s.”<sup>69</sup> The end result gives Wolf’s vocalization a pseudo-yodelling sound while retaining his signature blues style. Similar to the inspiration he took from Charlie Patton, Wolf developed his music by taking inspiration from a variety of sources, including fellow blues musicians and early White country, demonstrating that his blues was not the isolated, simple genre that many would believe.

Patton was a part of an even earlier generation of blues musicians born in the late 1800s, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter and Son House

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Chester Burnett, “Moanin’ at Midnight,” track #1 on *Moanin’ in the Moonlight*, Chess LP 1434, 1959, digital MP3.

(although House was born around 1902, he was closer in age to the previous generation than to Wolf's). This earlier generation inspired and taught their techniques to the younger generation of musicians born in and around the 1910s, such as Howlin' Wolf (born 1910),<sup>70</sup> Muddy Waters (born 1913)<sup>71</sup> and Robert Johnson (born 1911).<sup>72</sup> Through a culture of sharing in the early blues community, Wolf and his cohorts' talents were nurtured by the older generation. This was a culture that Wolf's generation carried with them into the 1960s, where they embraced an even younger generation of musicians such as Buddy Guy and Michael Bloomfield.

Just as Charlie Patton taught Howlin' Wolf, so too did Son House nurture Muddy Waters' musical curiosities. House, who caught the attention of Waters because of his expertly piercing slide guitar, would sit with Muddy and play tunes at his request. "I used to say to Son House, 'Would you play so and so and so?'" because I was trying to get that touch on that thing he did."<sup>73</sup> Muddy adapted House's style and defined his own way of using the slide. This would in turn help Muddy Waters establish his signature, recognizable sound, a feature that helped him achieve prominence as a blues musician.

Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Little Walter Jacobs, Robert Johnson and so many more musicians from the Deep South developed their stagecraft and music through the 1930s and 1940s. These innovations helped progress the careers of southern blues musicians. Thus, in taking the actions to alter their performances, these musicians demonstrated their agency in monetizing their craft while introducing layers of complexity into their music. While musicians like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf clearly displayed this agency, they were still

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<sup>70</sup> Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin' at Midnight*, 18.

<sup>71</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 28.

<sup>72</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 43.

<sup>73</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 45.

inspired and nurtured by a previous generation of blues musicians like Charlie Patton and Son House.

### **Generational Differences and Commercial Similarities**

Though Son House and Muddy Waters' respective generations can each be categorized as "early" blues musicians, there is a generational separation between them. The age difference between these two generations (those born slightly before or around the turn of the twentieth century and those born around the 1910s) contributed to the older group inspiring the younger musicians since the older blues players typically established their careers sooner than Muddy and his cohorts. Additionally, the younger generation more commonly travelled to northern cities and adopted fully electric instruments throughout the 1930s and early-1940s.<sup>74</sup> These generations are not set in stone, however. Big Bill Broonzy, though born closer to Patton and House, established himself in the 1930s as an electric blues guitarist in Chicago alongside T-Bone Walker,<sup>75</sup> who was closer to Muddy's age. Though the difference in ages between the two generations is relatively small, these contribute to some perceptive differences in the motivations of each generation.

Robert Crumb, in a 2013 interview, expressed his disdain for Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, finding them, and all other electric blues musicians to be too commercial as opposed to musicians like Charlie Patton or Blind Lemon Jefferson.<sup>76</sup> "That doesn't interest me at all,"<sup>77</sup> Crumb said of Wolf and Waters' electric blues careers, claiming that electric blues lost its charm for him during its "push to make music modern and commercial and slick."<sup>78</sup> Crumb raises an interesting argument about the nature of electric instruments and

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<sup>74</sup> Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin' at Midnight*, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Aquila, *Let's Rock!: How 1950s America Created Elvis and the Rock and Roll Craze* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 22.

<sup>76</sup> Cartwright, "Interview: Robert Crumb."

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

commercialism, arguing that the “slick”<sup>79</sup> sound of electric music hinders the original artistic vision. However, Crumb fails to recognize that commercialism existed in blues even before the electric blues musicians such as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf adopted their new, amped up styles. Muddy and Wolf had been professionally developing their music by the 1930s, even though they only adopted electric guitars by the 1940s.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, Muddy Waters had started an endeavour into blues entrepreneurship. By the early-1930s, after realizing how his music drew crowds to juke joints, Muddy decided to host his own parties.<sup>81</sup> “I’d have my own Saturday-night dances. I got hip and started making and selling my own whiskey, playing for myself.”<sup>82</sup> Here, Muddy’s shrewd business sense highlights the commercial motivations behind his blues music, using his guitar prowess to draw in crowds to drink and gamble, with all the profits returning to him.<sup>83</sup>

This kind of financial motivation is not just limited to Muddy and Wolf’s generation. Charlie Patton was another such musician who professionally developed his performances to gain notoriety. Patton, who came to prominence in the late 1920s,<sup>84</sup> was particularly adept at drawing large crowds.<sup>85</sup> Recalls Muddy: “What got to me about Patton was that he was such a good clown man with the guitar. Pattin’ it and beatin’ on it and puttin’ it behind his neck and turnin’ it over.”<sup>86</sup> Patton’s wild stage antics would lead him to some success as a blues musician in the 1920s and early-1930s, allowing him to start producing records starting in the late 1920s.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin’ at Midnight*, 87.

<sup>81</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 47.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin’ at Midnight*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 46.

<sup>87</sup> Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin’ at Midnight*, 32.

Blind Lemon Jefferson, another of Muddy Waters' early influences,<sup>88</sup> demonstrated a similar drive to commercialize his blues. Jefferson, who was born in Freestone County, Texas in 1893,<sup>89</sup> used the blues as a method to escape the sharecropping situation he was born into,<sup>90</sup> just as Robert Johnson did years later. Jefferson, like many other blues musicians, would travel from his home to major cities, such as Dallas or Atlanta, where he could perform his music on streets and in bars or cut records.<sup>91</sup> For Jefferson, the blues was a way for him to physically escape sharecropping by making a career out of his art.

Jefferson and Patton demonstrate the trends of some of the very earliest blues musicians who, similar to Wolf and Waters, used financial motivations to forward their blues careers. Jefferson's journeys to surrounding areas also highlights the major trend for blues musicians before the 1950s to travel as a means of commercializing their blues.

### **Travel and the Birth of the Chicago Blues Scene**

Travel was an extremely important endeavour for early blues musicians. Not only did it allow them to leave behind the hardships of sharecropping, but it opened up new career opportunities. Just as Blind Lemon Jefferson travelled to perform in different cities across the Southern United States, so too did Charlie Patton, drawing crowds in many different towns across the Mississippi Delta.<sup>92</sup> As a member of the younger generation, Little Walter Jacobs spent much of his life travelling from a young age. By the age of 12, Little Walter had travelled to New Orleans to perform shows.<sup>93</sup> At the age of 15, the young harmonicist was developing his music in West Helena, Arkansas.<sup>94</sup> Finally, at the age of 17, in 1947, he had

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<sup>88</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 41.

<sup>89</sup> Alan Govenar, "Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Myth and the Man," *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (2000): 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/779314>.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>92</sup> Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin' at Midnight*, 33.

<sup>93</sup> Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, 172.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

signed his first record deal in Chicago,<sup>95</sup> where he would stay for the rest of his tragically short life. Robert Johnson similarly travelled to San Antonio in 1936 and 1937 to record many of his songs and arrangements.<sup>96</sup> Notably, these travels were all characteristic of financially motivated career decisions, such as playing for larger crowds in big cities or larger towns and travelling to areas where a record could be cut.

By the 1930s and early-1940s, many blues musicians began travelling to northern cities such as Chicago, Detroit and New York. This move was made largely due to the Great Depression and increase in mechanized farming equipment which caused massive job shortages for Black southerners.<sup>97</sup> However, notable exceptions including Little Walter, Muddy Waters, who travelled to Chicago in 1943,<sup>98</sup> and Howlin' Wolf, who came in 1952 or 1953,<sup>99</sup> moved to Chicago to further their musical careers.

Blues musicians throughout the 1940s worked hard at factories during the days and played in the many clubs during the nights.<sup>100</sup> Chicago, which had been dominated by the jazz scene by the time Muddy moved there in 1943,<sup>101</sup> began to change into the world's foremost blues hub due to the sudden influx of blues musicians and southern blues fans throughout the 1930s and 1940s. But it was not just the blues musicians that changed Chicago. Big northern cities offered up their own transformative power. Due to the extra noise created by major cities, including more people, cars, trains and other fixtures of a thriving metropolis, acoustic instruments could not break through the sounds of the cities like they could through the quiet country nights. This new noise obstruction led to blues musicians adopting electric instruments. "I came up to Chicago and only just had my guitar,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Conforth and Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil*, 1.

<sup>97</sup> Romano, *Incurable Blues*, 7.

<sup>98</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 81.

<sup>99</sup> Segrest and Hoffman, *Moanin' at Midnight*, 122.

<sup>100</sup> Aquila, *Let's Rock!*, 21.

<sup>101</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 86.



and used to play neighbourhood pubs, taverns,” said Muddy Waters in a 1981 interview, “and it wouldn’t cut through.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, the urban blues were born. A harder, amped up version of the southern country blues that came out of the need to ring over the sounds of the city.

Developing their music in the South during the first half of the twentieth century, blues musicians demonstrated their agency, musical complexity and commercial motivations in a variety of ways. Through professionally developing their music and stagecraft, early blues musicians could distinguish themselves in the musical field, draw crowds and, in turn, find success playing in bars or signing record contracts. The notion of the simplistic, non-commercial blues player ignores the complexity of the music and motivations that blues musicians demonstrated. Starting as a form of expression during a traumatic time for Black southerners, the blues became a way to escape sharecropping while acting as a viable career path for those who wanted to combine passionate artistic expression with commercial motivations.

As previously noted, the blues musicians of the first half of the twentieth century consisted of two generations. Those born before and around the turn of the century and those born around the 1910s. Though the older generation tended to influence the younger generation, both groups demonstrated the same drive for commercialism in their blues careers.

Travel was an important trend in early blues careers, with musicians frequenting large cities or sizable towns where they could perform for crowds and cut their own records. These travel habits were indicative of the same commercial motivations that encouraged blues musicians to develop their music and stagecraft. Eventually travelling north to cities like

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<sup>102</sup> ITV Channel Television, “A Chance To Meet... Muddy Waters - 1981,” YouTube video, 9:45, December 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5gPUdbmSkk>.

Chicago, Detroit and New York (though largely because of job shortages in the South), blues musicians like Muddy Waters established the Chicago blues scene and embraced electric instruments. By the early-1950s, Chicago's blues scene was booming and musicians like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf were finding huge success as recording artists.<sup>103</sup> The prominence of the blues scene in Chicago would set the stage for an entirely new generation of blues musicians in the coming years. A generation of both White and Black performers that would continue to innovate the genre.

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<sup>103</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 114.

## **Chapter Two:** **A New Generation**

It was 1958. A young, energetic blues musician by the name of George “Buddy” Guy had kicked off his career in the Chicago blues scene by landing a residency at the 708 club on the South Side of town.<sup>104</sup> At the 708, Guy frequently performed with Junior Wells, another young blues player whom he considered his brother,<sup>105</sup> and Muddy Waters, a mentor and father figure to Guy.<sup>106</sup> Guy had left his home and family in Louisiana and this was the new one he found. A large, musical family that was fathered by Muddy Waters.

Throughout the late-1950s, Chicago blues club patrons were, as Buddy Guy recalled, “one hundred percent Blacks, unless you saw a White cop or the owner of the club was White.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, when “two White faces”<sup>108</sup> entered the 708 on a night around 1958, Guy was sure to hide his open bottles of liquor that he illegally snuck into the bar, hoping to avoid any unwanted attention from the two suspicious newcomers.<sup>109</sup> Lamenting that “we can’t even drink our stuff now,”<sup>110</sup> Guy continued to nervously hide his booze from the suspected cops while the White officers frequented the clubs in the South Side.<sup>111</sup> About six months later, Guy noticed one of the police asking Howlin’ Wolf to sit in and play guitar with him at another South Side bar.<sup>112</sup> Guy realized that this “White face”<sup>113</sup> was not a cop. This was Michael Bloomfield, a young, aspiring White blues musician who, in Guy’s words, had “been listening hard, and... learning to play hard.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Buddy Guy with David Ritz. *When I Left Home: My Story* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2012), 88.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>107</sup> SiriusXM, “Buddy Guy Recounts the 60s | SiriusXM,” YouTube video, 2:39, May 12, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RX5seGYDkng>.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Guy with Ritz. *When I Left Home*, 123.

Bloomfield was not the only “White cop”<sup>115</sup> that frequented South Side clubs in the late-1950s. Musicians Paul Butterfield, Elvin Bishop and Nick Gravenites had been touring the South Side blues club circuit at this time,<sup>116</sup> with Charlie Musselwhite soon to follow in the early-1960s.<sup>117</sup> While these White blues enthusiasts had given Muddy Waters a fright just as they did Guy (Waters assumed they were tax collectors coming after him for his outstanding payments),<sup>118</sup> Waters would soon adopt these young blues musicians into his musical family just as he did Buddy Guy. By the early-1960s, Muddy Waters’ blues family, just like the fanbase following the blues, would grow to include both Black and White people. This was Buddy Guy’s young generation of blues musicians. An energetic generation that exemplified the growing integration and cross-cultural exchange of the 1960s while growing from the generosity and musical innovation of the previous generations. This generation included many notable blues musicians such as Paul Butterfield, Michael Bloomfield, Sam Lay, Charlie Musselwhite, Nick Gravenites, Taj Mahal, the aforementioned Buddy Guy and so many more. As the blues began crossing into the mainstream around 1965, a variety of factors contributed to its rise in popularity. A developing North Side Chicago blues scene was fostered by several of the young blues musicians who came up in the Chicago scene while the British Invasion exposed many young Americans to the work of the older generation of blues musicians. Additionally, college folk scenes paved the way for electric blues to enter academic music scenes across the Northern United States.

By the 1950s, many university and college folk societies incorporated country blues into their listening repertoire. Reflective of a growing movement to embrace authentic

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<sup>115</sup> SiriusXM, “Buddy Guy Recounts the 60s.”

<sup>116</sup> Nick Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman,” manuscript, 1997, retrieved from <https://www.bluespower.com/a-ngbtb.htm>.

<sup>117</sup> LearnTheHarmonica.com, “The Charlie Musselwhite Interview | Charlie talks Clarksdale blues with harmonica player Liam Ward,” YouTube video, 45:30. April 19, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVPsH7le474>.

<sup>118</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 167-168.

American culture, these societies listened almost exclusively to early and mid-century acoustic blues. These societies helped spread awareness of blues musicians and the genre throughout college towns and the Northern United States. By the mid-1960s, particularly in industrial cities like Chicago and Detroit, colleges would embrace the newer electric blues subgenre and continue to spread the music throughout the United States as the blues began transitioning from an underground genre into the mainstream.

From the late-1950s through the mid-1960s, a younger generation of blues musicians featuring both White and Black blues artists (encompassing those who were typically born in the 1930s or early-1940s) was mentored by Muddy Waters' generation. These younger musicians, many of whom were based in Chicago or other northern industrial cities, further innovated the genre, introducing a youthful energy and influences from many styles of music into the blues. Many members of the younger generation were exposed to the blues through local radio programs from their areas, stressing the importance of both access to radios and location as factors for influencing this burgeoning demographic of blues players. Muddy Waters and his peers openly welcomed young artists into the blues industry, giving many blues musicians their starts by allowing them to sit-in during gigs.

### **Welcome to the Blues: Sam Lay and Buddy Guy**

The younger generation of blues players, those born in the 1930s and early-1940s, came up through many different regions. Unlike the older generation, who were mostly born and raised in the Deep South, the younger musicians came from the South as well as large northern cities. While artists like Mike Bloomfield and Paul Butterfield hailed from Chicago, Buddy Guy, like his blues forefathers, was from the South. Born George Guy on July 30, 1936, in Lettsworth, Louisiana,<sup>119</sup> Guy was exposed to the blues at a young age. Guy's father

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<sup>119</sup> Guy with Ritz. *When I Left Home*, 14.

was a blues fan and a family friend named Coot would play blues tunes on his old guitar.<sup>120</sup> In 1949, a young Guy heard John Lee Hooker's "Boogie Chillen" for the very first time.<sup>121</sup> "I thank God that my daddy had this one record by John Lee Hooker called "Boogie Chillen." That's the record that did it,"<sup>122</sup> recalled Guy in his autobiography. What "Boogie Chillen" did was inspire Guy's lifelong love affair with the blues. Guy also began frequently listening to the radio. Compared to previous generations of blues musicians who would have grown up in the 1920s, the radio was much more accessible for the younger generation growing up in the 1950s. Guy took full advantage of his access to a radio and was glued to the radio any time the blues came on.<sup>123</sup> The radio and his father's records ensured that Buddy Guy had significant exposure to the blues from a very young age.

Sam Lay, who was born one year earlier than Guy, in 1935, in Birmingham, Alabama, found similar exposure from the radio. "There was a station that come on late over in the night... WLEC out of Nashville. I would take our little radio and... sneak under the cover with it," said Lay, "That was the devil's music they say. Well, I'm going to get the devil tonight 'cause I'm going to listen to me some old [Howlin'] Wolf."<sup>124</sup>

Buddy Guy, by the age of 15, had moved to Baton Rouge.<sup>125</sup> Living with his sister and going to school in town, a family friend purchased Guy a new, fully stringed electric guitar,<sup>126</sup> replacing his beat-up acoustic with only two strings. The young guitarist began to busk and play in clubs around Baton Rouge<sup>127</sup> and, though he was making little money in those days, musical inspiration was everywhere.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>124</sup> *Sam Lay in Bluesland*, directed by John Anderson (Independently Produced, 2018), YouTube Movies.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 52.

Much like the older generation before him, Buddy Guy was inspired by the stagecraft of his idols and took inspiration from them to develop his performative ability. While living in Baton Rouge, Guy witnessed a life-changing performance from a musician named Guitar Slim.<sup>128</sup> Guy was awed by Slim's stage antics, and recounted how Slim entered the concert venue riding on the shoulders of a "giant fat man,"<sup>129</sup> while playing the guitar. Guy saw Slim "sling [his guitar] around his hip like a bag of potatoes,"<sup>130</sup> and play his guitar "between his legs... behind his back... on his back... jumping off the stage... hanging from the rafters."<sup>131</sup> Slim's aggressive treatment of his Fender Stratocaster "got into the feeling of the music."<sup>132</sup>

Guy watched the concert carefully and it heavily influenced his performances from then on. Guy remembered, "This artist showed me how to present myself to the public. He taught me how to attract and excite a crowd."<sup>133</sup> Guy took this lesson to heart and developed a stagecraft of his own that combined Guitar Slim's wild stage performance with Guy's own fiery, angry presence. Charlie Musselwhite remembered seeing one of Guy's performances in Chicago during the early-1960s. "I remember Buddy Guy at the bar just jumping up and down, screaming at Earl Hooker."<sup>134</sup> Guy's feisty stage persona and energetic performances exemplified the growing energy of the youth in that era. Coming out of the 1950s, a decade of conformity, young Americans were looking to express themselves and Buddy Guy was emblematic of this youthful energy. While the onstage aggression was mostly unique to Guy, his peers shared this energy through their music and performances. Paul Butterfield, Michael Bloomfield, Sam Lay, Nick Gravenites, Charlie Musselwhite and many others each developed a style of blues that intensified the genre.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>134</sup> Kim Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, 192.

Sam Lay similarly presented himself with a signature style in front of audiences. After moving to Cleveland in 1955,<sup>135</sup> Lay was invited to play drums with some musicians at a wine bar after striking up a conversation with the performing band.<sup>136</sup> Lay had not played the drums before, but he quickly became accustomed to them. By the time Lay met his wife, Elizabeth, in 1958, he was playing consistently and had adopted a flamboyant style.<sup>137</sup> “He always had his hair fixed,”<sup>138</sup> recalled Elizabeth, “he had the Little Richard thing and he would be looking nice all the time.”<sup>139</sup> Taking inspiration from an artist that he loved in his young adult life, Little Richard, Sam Lay would continue to present a flashy image of himself. Lay eventually developed a reputation for his vibrant, fantastical costumes later in his career.<sup>140</sup>

One of Buddy Guy’s main musical influences came from B.B. King. King, who grew up a sharecropper in Mississippi, was born between the old and young generations of blues musicians in 1925.<sup>141</sup> However, King is often considered closer to Muddy Waters’ generation since he had begun recording in the early-1950s. King’s style is extremely unique. King frequently made use of a specific scale, one that became known as the “B.B. Box,” which essentially involved playing a standard blues scale in third position on the guitar but adding the sixth note of the respective major scale. The inclusion of the sixth, which gives King his signature, jazzy sound, was likely derived from King attempting to imitate and combine the jazz oriented styles of T-Bone Walker and Lonnie Johnson, two of his biggest influences.<sup>142</sup> Likewise, King’s frequent string bends came from an imitation of Walker’s style.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Anderson, dir., *Sam Lay in Bluesland*.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Guy with Ritz. *When I Left Home*, 89.

<sup>142</sup> CAD Audio & Guitars, “B.B. King Talks about his Musical Influences,” YouTube video, 11:20, December 21, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dir1Q6I\\_q9A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dir1Q6I_q9A).

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*



“[Walker] had a way of bending the strings that might be the reason why I bend the strings today,”<sup>144</sup> recalled King in an interview. B.B. King also developed rhythmic complexity by listening and attempting to imitate Blind Lemon Jefferson, a blues musician known for his unorthodox tempo changes. King’s signature vibrato came from imitating the sound of his cousin, Bukka White’s slide without using a slide himself.<sup>145</sup>

One of the most distinct sounds of B.B. King’s guitar is his phrasing. As King described in an interview, he plays the guitar as if he were telling a joke or singing.<sup>146</sup> “If I’m talking to try and make a point to you... it’s like telling a joke... if I start it like so - like that - and cut it off you don’t get the point,” King stated as he played a short, choppy lick on his guitar.<sup>147</sup> King then played a similar lick that was smoother and sustained for longer. “But if I do [this], then I feel that you’ll laugh.”<sup>148</sup> King’s storytelling method of phrasing guitar solos h, combined with his bending which gave him a “crying sound,”<sup>149</sup> helped him to develop a style that was packed full of emotion and soulful melodies. This guitar style would explode in the late-1960s as an incredibly popular style to imitate and, in the late-1950s, Buddy Guy combined this influence with those of his other heroes to produce his own style, just as B.B. King did.

Sam Lay also adopted a style similar to that of his biggest blues hero, Muddy Waters. Often being criticized for sounding too much like Waters vocally, Lay combined his powerful, Waters-esque vocals with a drumming style that uniquely reflected the upbeat, syncopated rhythms from the gospel music he grew up with which he developed into his

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 88.

signature “double shuffle.”<sup>150</sup> Lay also incorporated a “boogie-woogie” style he learned from Little Walter’s 1952 song “Juke.”<sup>151</sup>

Lay and Guy exemplified the musical development of their generation. Having access to the radio, live performances and prolific blues bar scenes, they were exposed to a wide breadth of styles to imitate, combine and craft into their own. Though there were some notable exceptions that did not attempt to imitate their blues heroes, such as Paul Butterfield and Charlie Musselwhite, the entirety of this generation of blues players were influenced by the music around them. Additionally, with access to many more types of music than their musical forefathers, this generation developed a subgenre of the blues that expanded the genre in many ways.

By the late-1950s, Sam Lay was being welcomed to sit in and work with many artists around Cleveland when Little Walter hired him as an assistant.<sup>152</sup> In 1959 Lay and his wife moved to Chicago to live with Little Walter.<sup>153</sup> While working as Little Walter’s assistant, Lay lived rent free at Walter’s Chicago home and was frequently welcomed to sit in during Walter’s club performances.<sup>154</sup> Little Walter displayed a generosity here that was exemplified through many of the older generation’s members. Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Little Walter, Big Joe Williams and many more early blues musicians embraced the younger generation and gave them their starts in the Chicago blues scene by allowing them to sit in.

Lay continued performing in Chicago, and started gigging with Howlin’ Wolf in the early-1960s, not too long after he had begun working as Little Walter’s drummer.<sup>155</sup> During one performance with Little Walter, the established harmonicist was furious that Sam Lay

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<sup>150</sup> Anderson, dir., *Sam Lay in Bluesland*.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

had written “Howlin’ Wolf” on his bass drum.<sup>156</sup> Walter fired Lay for this but, when one member of the older generation had a lapse in generosity, another stepped in. Howlin’ Wolf extended a helping hand to Lay, wanting to support him and hire him full time after losing his job with Little Walter.<sup>157</sup> “Your wife is pregnant and I want you to take good care of her and you’re coming with me,” Wolf said according to Lay’s wife.<sup>158</sup>

After moving to Chicago in 1957, Buddy Guy was similarly welcomed into the blues sphere by one of his blues heroes. After a performance at the 708 club in 1958, Muddy Waters met with Guy.<sup>159</sup> Waters informed Guy, who had been struggling to find work as a musician in Chicago, that the 708 was about to sign him to a residency position.<sup>160</sup> Waters fed the hungry Guy a salami sandwich and remarked on his ability to get the crowds “hot and bothered.”<sup>161</sup> It was there that Guy established a deep connection with Waters.

As Buddy Guy continued his residency at the 708, Muddy Waters showed his support as the young musician was breaking into the scene. “[The 708] was where Muddy would come look after me,” Guy wrote in his autobiography, “he kept feeding me that salami and telling me I could play the guitar. He’d just sit there and smile while I played. That smile was better than the few dollars Ben Gold [the 708 owner] was giving me.”<sup>162</sup> Waters’ support helped Guy enter the blues scene and stay on his career path, even when the guitarist considered packing up and heading home to Lettsworth.<sup>163</sup>

While Buddy Guy and Sam Lay were being welcomed into the blues, the University of Chicago and other schools across the Northern United States began developing their folk

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 78.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 80.

music scenes. These underground folk scenes would help raise a significant portion of Guy and Lay's blues generation while proliferating the White blues fan base.

### **From City Centres to Colleges: Nick Gravenites and the 1950s Spread of the Blues**

Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s was a multicultural city and home to many families that immigrated from other parts of the United States or the world.<sup>164</sup> Yet most of the city was deeply divided along racial, ethnic and class lines, with neighbourhoods separated by mere streets almost entirely keeping to themselves.<sup>165</sup> This was the world Nick Gravenites grew up in. Gravenites, who was born in Chicago in 1938,<sup>166</sup> found success in the mid and late-1960s, writing the opening track to the Butterfield Blues Band's debut album, producing two records for Quicksilver Messenger Service and replacing Janis Joplin as the lead singer for Big Brother and the Holding Company. Gravenites, who was the son of Greek immigrants, was first exposed to American culture through working at his parents' candy shop.<sup>167</sup> Gravenites recounted in a 1997 article for *Blues Revue* magazine, "I read every comic book, listened to all the hits on the jukebox, served all the people of Chicago."<sup>168</sup> Gravenites' experiences growing up in Chicago gave him a wide breadth of musical influence. From folk music to blues to his mother's mournful Greek vocalizations which Gravenites described as "Greek blues," the young Chicagoan had plenty of musical inspiration from a young age. "My influences were not only Delta blues, but the wide spectrum of music from all over the world."<sup>169</sup> But before Gravenites could experience these influences, he needed to explore the city that he grew up in.

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<sup>164</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

By the mid-1950s, Gravenites had found his family's culture too "restrictive"<sup>170</sup> and decided to branch out into other neighbourhoods of Chicago to seek out the Americana that he craved since discovering it at his parents' candy shop. Fortunately for Gravenites, the early stirrings of the folk revival were well underway in colleges and universities across the United States. Folklore Societies, clubs where students could share folk-music records and play folk tunes, had been developing in colleges during the 1950s.<sup>171</sup> In 1956, Gravenites was attending the University of Chicago, a school with a particularly vibrant folklore society. These societies were obsessed with music that was commonly deemed to be "authentic," recalled Norman Dayron, University of Chicago student, friend and producer of guitarist Michael Bloomfield.<sup>172</sup>

Dayron, who attended the University of Chicago in the late-1950s and early-1960s,<sup>173</sup> recalled folklore societies' focus on "mostly rural, Southern music."<sup>174</sup> This was the kind of music that many, like cartoonist Robert Crumb, considered to be devoid of commercial motivations and corruptions.<sup>175</sup> In 1997, Nick Gravenites suggested that many folk-fanatics in the 1950s were motivated to seek out folk and blues music for historical preservation. "Authenticity was very important to the folk musicians that we knew, after all, we were looking for America in its roots... and we felt that we were keeping the music alive in its original form for future generations."<sup>176</sup> Folklore societies, which were predominantly White, embraced this perceived authenticity and non-commercialism with early and mid-1900s folk

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Jan Mark Wolkin and Bill Keenom, *Michael Bloomfield: If You Love These Blues - An Oral History* (Lanham: Backbeat Books, 2000), 31.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Cartwright, "Interview: Robert Crumb."

<sup>176</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

and country music.<sup>177</sup> Thus, early and mid-century country blues records fit comfortably into the repertoire of folk records being distributed in these societies.

Gravenites remembers taking part in record exchanges for blues artists such as Leadbelly and Lightnin' Hopkins, while records from folk artists like the Carter Family also made appearances.<sup>178</sup> Notably, Chicago and urban electric blues records were absent from these folklore society record exchanges, despite the University of Chicago's relatively close proximity to the South Side and its blues scene. The lack of Chicago blues in the University of Chicago's folklore society highlights the folk enthusiast perceptions of electric music's commercialism during the 1950s and 1960s.

According to Gravenites, the University of Chicago had a radical reputation in the 1950s.<sup>179</sup> Unlike the rest of Chicago at the time, the Hyde Park area in which the university was located held many Black and White neighbourhoods.<sup>180</sup> "The Hyde Park neighborhood, surrounded on three sides by the black ghetto, and on one side by Lake Michigan, was so totally isolated from the mainstream of white Chicago that most people, including myself, didn't know where it was located."<sup>181</sup> Gravenites also recalls his stay at the University of Chicago as a time defined by a culture of "radical academic experimentation."<sup>182</sup> As Norman Dayron recalled, "The University of Chicago... was a very radical place—politically radical. The curriculum was very advanced. You didn't have to take classes or show up. You had to take these eight-hour comprehensive exams in which you had to demonstrate mastery of a subject."<sup>183</sup> It was in this isolated, radical area that the University of Chicago's folklore society grew. The early murmurings of White American blues enthusiasts were underground

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<sup>177</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 31.

<sup>178</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Wolkin and Keenom. *If You Love These Blues*, 33.

college movements that would stay isolated from the mainstream as they spread across the Northern United States in the late-1950s and early-1960s.

These folklore societies gave birth to a breed of blues fanatics deemed “bluesniks” by Delmark Records owner Bob Koester.<sup>184</sup> Bluesniks exemplified the anti-commercial, underground aspects of beatniks, combined with a passion for early and mid-century country blues. In 2007, Koester recalled seeing many bluesniks make pilgrimages to his Jazz Record Mart to visit with Big Joe Williams, a blues musician born in 1903 in Crawford, Mississippi.<sup>185</sup> Williams had cut a series of records for the Okeh label in the 1930s and was currently living in the basement of the Jazz Record Mart around the early-1960s.

As student folklore societies flourished at academic institutions, Gravenites noticed folk musicians and folk enthusiasts travelling to other schools, spreading their own knowledge about blues, folk and country while learning from folklore societies in other college towns. “Folk musicians started performing in coffeehouses and small cities, and the Folklore society visited other schools, such as the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.”<sup>186</sup> Here, Gravenites highlights the proliferation of folk-blues scenes across the Midwest and Northern states. This inter-college exchange helped raise awareness of blues musicians in college towns which paved the way for blues hotspots and college tours in the late-1960s where academic locations such as New York, Ann Arbor, Madison and Boston would host a plethora of blues shows at local clubs and universities.

By the early-1960s, record labels began taking note of the spreading folk-blues fan bases across American universities and began producing historical re-releases of classic country blues artists’ work. In 1961, Columbia released a compilation of Robert Johnson

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<sup>184</sup> Bob Koester, Liner notes for Joseph Williams, *I Got Wild*, Big Joe Williams, recorded 1958/1961, Delmark DE 767, 2003.

<sup>185</sup> Ed Ward, *Michael Bloomfield: The Rise and Fall of an American Guitar Hero* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2016), 56.

<sup>186</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

tracks on an album titled *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. The double LP featured a cover that played into the perception of early blues and folk authenticity which was prominent in academic folk circles. *King of the Delta Blues Singers* features a bird's eye view of Johnson alone, head hung over his guitar, sitting in a chair.<sup>187</sup> The downward camera angle and head hung position portrays Johnson in the same problematic light that the perception of authenticity and anti-commercialism does for early and mid-century blues musicians. Johnson appears pitiable, alone and depressed on this album. Meanwhile, the simple design of the cover implies that Johnson's music is likewise simple, an ironic implication given the musical complexity that can be found inside the record sleeve.

Despite the inaccurate imagery on the cover, the release of folk-blues compilations specifically for a generation of young, White blues aficionados both helped further spread the blues among academic crowds and indicated the degree to which folk-music scenes proliferated in the 1950s. The White blues fan base was spreading and becoming notable, even if they were still underground movements focused mostly on country blues and folk music.

### **Taj Mahal's Diverse Influences and University Folk Scene**

Taj Mahal is a blues artist that exemplified both the spreading university folk-blues scene and multicultural influences of blues musicians during the late-1950s and 1960s. Henry St. Claire Fredericks Jr., or Taj Mahal as he would later become known, was born in 1942 in New York city.<sup>188</sup> Large cities in the United States had become multicultural hubs due to the Great Migration and immigration. It was in this backdrop that young Henry Fredericks Jr.

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<sup>187</sup> Robert Johnson, *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, Columbia CL 1654, 1961, Vinyl Record.

<sup>188</sup> Laura Sydell, "Taj Mahal: Still Cooking Up 'Heirloom Music' His Own Way," *npr music*, June 30, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/06/30/196647551/taj-mahal-still-cooking-up-heirloom-music-his-own-way#:~:text=In%201964%2C%20with%20his%20new,musicians%20that%20included%20Ry%20Cooder.>



was exposed to a plethora of musical cultures. Fredericks was born into a musical family and, in a 2018 interview, the musician recalled his early life. “My dad was a Caribbean classically trained musician that grew up in... the swing and bebop and jazz. You know, jump blues, big band era. All that kinda stuff. I was born in 42, so... I inherited all that great 30s and 40s music, and some 20s music and even earlier.”<sup>189</sup> Due to his father’s musical background, Fredericks listened to a lot of jazz as a child. “I came into the world listening to Count Basie, Jimmy Lunceford, Jimmy Cleveland, Jimmy Rushing, Louis Jordan, Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine. On and on. Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Helen Humes, Marian Henderson. It was marvelous, music everywhere.”<sup>190</sup> Fredericks was born into a musical family, and his mother, who was originally from South Carolina, was a pianist.<sup>191</sup>

When he was very young, Fredericks’ family moved to Springfield, Massachusetts. Springfield was a city that Fredericks found to be musically and culturally diverse. Fredericks was exposed to the blues early in his life in Springfield. Several of his neighbours had moved to Springfield from Stovall Farms in Mississippi, the same plantation where Muddy Waters grew up. One neighbour of Fredericks’ neighbours, a young boy named Lyn Perry, taught Fredericks the blues when he was about 13 years old.<sup>192</sup> By the time Fredericks met Perry, he had recently begun playing guitar. Fredericks father was tragically killed when Fredericks was about 12, and his mother married a man who, according to Fredericks, “could really play [the guitar].”<sup>193</sup> Along with his time spent with Perry, Fredericks was exposed to the blues through the radio. Fortunately for Fredericks, he could pick up blues stations from all across

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<sup>189</sup> Pat Healy, “Taj Mahal on Working with Howlin’ Wolf, Muddy Waters, the Rolling Stones, and More,” *Berklee Online*, July 2, 2018, <https://online.berklee.edu/takenote/podcast-episode-022-taj-mahal/>.

<sup>190</sup> Jacob Uitti, “Taj Mahal Shares His Deep Passion For Music: ‘I’ve Never Known Life and Breathing Without Music’,” *American Songwriter*, 2021, <https://americansongwriter.com/taj-mahal-shares-his-deep-passion-for-music-ive-never-known-life-and-breathing-without-music/>.

<sup>191</sup> Healy, “Taj Mahal on Working with Howlin’ Wolf.”

<sup>192</sup> Sydell, “Taj Mahal: Still Cooking Up ‘Heirloom Music’.”

<sup>193</sup> Healy, “Taj Mahal on Working with Howlin’ Wolf.”

the United States. “If you was a radio kid like I was, I listened to the radio deep into the night. There was always a lot of different kinda music that was on. You’d hear music out of Chicago, hear music out of Memphis, Louisiana. As far away as New Orleans.”<sup>194</sup>

Around 1959, Fredericks began attending the University of Massachusetts<sup>195</sup> for Animal Husbandry.<sup>196</sup> After noticing that many people around his age did not share his appreciation for blues and jazz, Fredericks was relieved to discover the thriving folk music scene at the University of Massachusetts.<sup>197</sup> By the late-1950s and early-1960s, university folk scenes had grown to include more blues, and Fredericks embraced the music scene at his school, both performing and enjoying the folk festivals that began spreading through northern university towns after Muddy Waters’ successful performance at the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival. “[My studies] coincided with all that big folk music and folk explosion and all that kind of stuff. Those folk festivals started including a lot of older blues people. So, that was real good. I got a chance to really get a close-up of people like Mississippi John Hurt, Sleepy John Estes, Skip James and Yank Rachell, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Reverend Gary Davis, Reverend Robert Wilkins, Son House, Lightnin’ Hopkins, all those guys.”<sup>198</sup>

Around 1959, Fredericks had adopted a stage name, Taj Mahal.<sup>199</sup> Naming himself after the Indian mausoleum, Mahal hoped his new name would reflect the peaceable ways demonstrated by Mahatma Gandhi and an idealized interpretation of Indian spirituality.<sup>200</sup> “In looking out into the world, it didn't look all that nice out there... And who were the nice people? Certainly, Mahatma Gandhi was.”<sup>201</sup> Mahal’s adoption of Eastern influence for his

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Uitti, “Taj Mahal Shares His Deep Passion For Music.”

<sup>196</sup> Sydell, “Taj Mahal: Still Cooking Up ‘Heirloom Music’.”

<sup>197</sup> Uitti, “Taj Mahal Shares His Deep Passion For Music.”

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Healy, “Taj Mahal on Working with Howlin’ Wolf.”

<sup>200</sup> Sydell, “Taj Mahal: Still Cooking Up ‘Heirloom Music’.”

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

stage name reflects the countercultural leanings of university students in the late-1950s and 1960s.

After graduating from the University of Massachusetts around 1963, Mahal began touring around Ivy League schools in the North-Eastern United States with his band, the Electras. After signing a record deal with Columbia in the early-1960s, Mahal moved to California in 1964 to further pursue his music career.<sup>202</sup>

Mahal's wide breadth of musical influences and his university music experience contributed to his development of a style that incorporates many different genres. Though he did not undergo the same mentorships with older blues players that Buddy Guy and his Chicago peers did, he exemplified the thriving university music scene that proliferated the blues fan base during the 1950s and 1960s. This university scene would bring many of the young Chicago-based blues musicians together, such as the aforementioned Nick Gravenites, Mike Bloomfield, Elvin Bishop and Paul Butterfield.

### **Paul Butterfield and the South Side Blues**

It was at a folklore society event, a "folk music hootenanny," that Nick Gravenites met Paul Butterfield in the mid-to-late-1950s.<sup>203</sup> The son of a lawyer and a University of Chicago employee, Butterfield was raised in the interracial Hyde Park neighbourhood, near the university.<sup>204</sup> Butterfield grew up listening to his father's jazz records and was introduced to the blues through his brother's collection of 78s.<sup>205</sup> "My brother, my family used to play a lot of blues records. Old 78s. They used to listen to people like Muddy, Gene Ammons,

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<sup>202</sup> Healy, "Taj Mahal on Working with Howlin' Wolf.": Sydell, "Taj Mahal: Still Cooking Up 'Heirloom Music'."

<sup>203</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Don DeMicheal, "Father and Son: An Interview with Muddy Waters and Paul Butterfield," *Down Beat* (August 7, 1969): 13.

Charlie Parker.... It was more jazz than blues, but the feeling I got was from blues.”<sup>206</sup> Like many blues musicians from the younger generation of 1960s players, the radio was also tremendously important for exposing Butterfield to blues music. Growing up in Chicago, Butterfield was perfectly located to tune into the wide variety of blues playing on the airwaves. “There used to be WGES [radio station],” recalled Butterfield in 1969, “and they used to play from 11 to 12 o’clock at night nothing but blues. And Nashville, Tenn., John R. used to play nothing but blues. We used to hear it when I was 10 years old.”<sup>207</sup>

It was the late-1950s and Butterfield was about 16 years old when he met Gravenites. Butterfield was attending the University of Chicago Laboratory School, a program best described as a “very advanced high school run by the university.”<sup>208</sup> Paul Butterfield was born in Chicago in 1942.<sup>209</sup> In the late-1950s, Butterfield spent much of his time at the University of Chicago folklore society, where he would meet Elvin Bishop, a young aspiring musician who would become the rhythm guitarist for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band by the early-1960s.<sup>210</sup>

Butterfield’s friends and peers often characterized him as a hard, tough man. Norman Dayron remembered, “Paul was very quiet and defensive and hard-edged. He was this tough Irish Catholic, kind of a hard guy. He would walk around in black shirts and sunglasses, dark shades and dark jackets.”<sup>211</sup> Butterfield clearly presented a tough, mean image. Michael Bloomfield was notably afraid of Butterfield early on in their relationship. “It took a lot of persuasion to get me to play with Paul, because he was such a personally intimidating guy. I was scared to even work with him.”<sup>212</sup> Bloomfield’s assessment of Butterfield was not

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 40.

<sup>209</sup> Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, 211

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 212

<sup>211</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 40.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 94.

entirely unfounded. Charlie Musselwhite recalled on one occasion seeing Butterfield hit Elvin Bishop during a performance. “I have this picture of seeing [Paul]... going over to Elvin and, with his back turned to the audience, hitting Elvin in the side, with his right fist. He could be kind of a bully.”<sup>213</sup> Chicago was a tough city in the 1950s and 1960s, and Paul Butterfield reflected this aggression through his demeanour.

Despite these rough assessments of Butterfield, Nick Gravenites, who knew the harmonicist for longer than Bloomfield, Musselwhite or Dayron, offered a more innocent portrayal of Butterfield. “Now the Paul Butterfield I knew was a sweet guy, a nice kid who liked to jive, came from a good family in the Hyde Park neighborhood in Chicago,” wrote Gravenites in 1997, “there was no “thug” in him, no gangster vibes, no savagery, no violence, no hatred that I could see.”<sup>214</sup> Notably, Gravenites refused to supply Butterfield with any drugs, hoping to preserve his innocence. “He would ask me for reefers, but I refused to be the one to first turn him on.”<sup>215</sup>

Notably, Gravenites’ claim that he refused to turn Butterfield onto drugs presents a much more sober image of Butterfield than he himself would admit to in a 1969 interview for *Down Beat* magazine. When discussing his early forays into the South Side club scene, Butterfield claimed that he and Gravenites “were more interested in getting high, dancing and having ourselves some good times than anything else.”<sup>216</sup>

It is possible that Gravenites’ more charitable perception of Butterfield stems from his own reputation as a tough character. Gravenites, who also reflected Chicago’s rough social climate, was a self-described frequent substance user in those days<sup>217</sup> and had picked up a reputation for his aggression around the early-1960s. Bob Koester never experienced this

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> DeMicheal, “Father and Son,” *Down Beat*, 13.

<sup>217</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

kind of anger from Gravenites, but recounted that he was “always hearing these stories of what a violent guy Nick was.”<sup>218</sup> It is also likely that Butterfield was a figure who needed to be warmed up to. Though initially terrified of Butterfield, Bloomfield noted that once the two of them got to know each other better, he felt more comfortable playing music in the harmonicist’s presence. When Bloomfield recounted the early days of playing in the Butterfield Blues Band around 1965, he stated, “For a while [Paul] thought I was a turkey, and then, when he realized I was not a turkey, he gave me utter freedom to do what I wanted to do... The thing became a really good act, and I added a lot to the band.”<sup>219</sup>

It seemed Paul Butterfield had two sides to him. Regardless of his dichotomy, Gravenites portrayal of Butterfield highlights a fraternal bond that formed between the two musicians during the late-1950s. Gravenites clearly saw Butterfield as a younger brother, and together Gravenites would lead Butterfield to the South Side blues scene. “Nick Gravenites was the first cat to take me down to see... Muddy, about 1957.”<sup>220</sup>

Gravenites and Butterfield began performing together around the Hyde Park folk scene and the University of Chicago folklore society after they met in the late-1950s.<sup>221</sup> Gravenites had picked up the guitar shortly after he started spending time at the folklore society.<sup>222</sup> Gravenites frequently played guitar and sang during his folk scene days but he would work primarily as a vocalist during his late-1960s and early-1970s music career, making use of his distinct, powerful voice.

Butterfield, who had played the flute prior to his folk scene days, quickly switched to the harmonica after being exposed to the folklore society.<sup>223</sup> Likely due to his past musical experience and some natural musical gift, Butterfield demonstrated an immediate prowess as

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<sup>218</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 37.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>220</sup> DeMicheal, “Father and Son,” *Down Beat*, 13.

<sup>221</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 40.

a mouth harp player. Remembered Norman Dayron, “Paul had been playing the flute and he had just taken up the harmonica and immediately showed tremendous ability with it. I knew he was a great blues musician.”<sup>224</sup>

Butterfield’s unique musical prowess allowed him to enter the South Side Chicago club scene soon after meeting Nick Gravenites. Here he would be exposed to live blues music for the first time and develop his signature style. Though Gravenites and Butterfield spent much of their time around the University of Chicago folklore society, they did not share the same strict notions of blues authenticity that many folk fanatics did in the 1950s. The two young, White musicians embarked on their first trip to a South Side club around 1957.<sup>225</sup> While many South Side clubs were close in proximity to Hyde Park and the university, it was extremely uncommon to see any White people enter these blues clubs unless they were police or other government men looking for someone.<sup>226</sup> Thus, when Buddy Guy, Muddy Waters and other blues musicians spotted Gravenites, Butterfield and any of the other rare White Chicago blues fanatics in the 1950s, they assumed the club was getting a visit from some lawman or government official.<sup>227</sup>

Gravenites and Butterfield fell in love with the South Side scene and shortly after their first trip, they began frequenting blues clubs, oftentimes with Elvin Bishop and other friends from the folk scene.<sup>228</sup> While quietly observing for some months, Gravenites and Butterfield would see such performances as Bo Diddley at the 708 and a “Battle of the Bands” between Little Jr. Parker and the Otis Rush Band with Louis Meyers.<sup>229</sup> The two blues enthusiasts would also take trips to see Muddy Waters perform.<sup>230</sup> Gravenites

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> DeMicheal, “Father and Son,” *Down Beat*, 13.

<sup>226</sup> SiriusXM, “Buddy Guy Recounts the 60s.”

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, 212.

<sup>229</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>230</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 167.

remembered some of Waters' performances in the late-1950s and it was clear that he had retained the professionalism and powerful stage presence that he developed throughout his career. "Muddy never started a show, he'd have the band do a few numbers to warm up the room, and when he came on the stage, he brought with him an aura of power and command that transfixed the audience and melded the band to him."<sup>231</sup>

After a short time of silently observing, Gravenites and Butterfield got to know the performers at the clubs. No longer believing them to be cops or taxmen, the established blues musicians welcomed Gravenites and Butterfield into their community. Throughout the late-1950s and early-1960s, Gravenites would sit with Muddy Waters and other established blues musicians in the clubs and buy drinks for their tables.<sup>232</sup> Butterfield took a much more active role in the music scene. Eventually informing Waters and his peers that he was a harmonicist, Butterfield would be allowed to sit in with established blues musicians and play along.<sup>233</sup>

It was here that Muddy Waters demonstrated the same generosity towards these young White musicians that he did with Buddy Guy. Despite Butterfield's lack of experience, Waters would frequently allow him to come up on stage and play with him. "I used to go out and play with Muddy when I couldn't play nothing," claimed Butterfield in a 1969 interview, "but he'd let me come up."<sup>234</sup> Displaying impressive patience, Waters was welcoming to Butterfield even when the young harmonicist was learning his craft. "I was blowing some lousy stuff. Just blowing it, drinking wine, getting high, and enjoying myself... Muddy knows that I used to come down to him and play some nothing stuff but nobody ever said 'Well, man, you're not playing too well.'"<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> DeMicheal, "Father and Son," *Down Beat*, 13.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.



Despite Butterfield's self-described "lousy stuff," Waters saw Butterfield's burgeoning talent as a blues musician. In the same 1969 interview, Waters said to Butterfield, "you always had this particular thing, this something that everybody don't have, this thing you're born with, this touch. 'Cause you used to have the joint going pretty good."<sup>236</sup> Butterfield's "touch" was enough to keep Waters inviting him up on stage. "As soon as you'd walk in," Waters said to Butterfield, "I'd say, 'You're on next, man.'"<sup>237</sup> This was the beginning of Butterfield's father-son relationship with Muddy Waters. Mike Bloomfield recalled on one occasion sitting with Waters and harmonicist James Cotton at a club. "They'd be looking at Paul and just be beaming at him, like, 'That's my boy.' That's what their eyes were just shining out and saying."<sup>238</sup>

Waters' generosity that he demonstrated in giving young Paul Butterfield a chance to play was not unearned. Butterfield displayed a natural musicianship that allowed him to comfortably insert himself into the South Side music scene. "I never practiced the harp in my life. Never. I would just blow it," claimed Butterfield.<sup>239</sup> Butterfield's claim that he "never practiced"<sup>240</sup> likely involved some degree of hyperbole. He and Gravenites played music constantly during their time at the University of Chicago,<sup>241</sup> though performing is quite different from sitting down and practicing technique, which is likely what Butterfield meant by this comment. However, Butterfield's hyperbole does not diminish his impressive musical ability that he demonstrated from a relatively young age.

Butterfield was a unique musician to come out of his generation. Unlike many of his peers such as Mike Bloomfield or Buddy Guy, Butterfield did not consciously try to imitate his musical heroes. When discussing his musical influences, Butterfield said, "I never sat

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 78.

<sup>239</sup> DeMicheal, "Father and Son," *Down Beat*, 13.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

down and tried to figure out what [Waters was] playing. I just played.”<sup>242</sup> Despite not intentionally imitating any of his blues heroes, Butterfield displayed strong influences from his predecessors. “The people I listened to were Muddy, [Otis] Spann, people who were around [Chicago]—Robert Nighthawk was playing, and Wolf was playing, and Magic Sam... like Magic Sam is pretty close to my age, and Otis Rush is—but I listened to anybody I could listen to.”<sup>243</sup>

Of all the Chicago-based musicians that Paul Butterfield had listened to during the 1950s and early-1960s, one of his biggest stylistic influences was Little Walter Jacobs. Throughout the 1940s, Little Walter introduced many to a harmonica style with a “harder sound” when he began amplifying his harp with a microphone and amp.<sup>244</sup> Little Walter, being one of the first to amplify his harmonica, achieved a slightly distorted sound through his amp that is present in many of his Chicago-based recordings. Little Walter’s style became quite popular after he established himself as a musical innovator in the 1940s and Paul Butterfield’s style reflects that. Little Walter’s unique style acted as a basis for several Chicago-based blues musicians. In an obituary for the innovative harmonicist written in 1968 by Chicago club manager Bob Wettlaufer, Little Walter is credited as the man who “originated the harmonica style that has been popularized by Jr. Wells and Paul Butterfield.”<sup>245</sup> By the early-1960s, Butterfield had combined Little Walter’s hard, distorted harp with a strong, heavy vibrato that exaggerates the vibrato technique of Sonny Boy Williamson II, creating his own signature style. “I was influenced by Little Walter and when I got to play some more, by Sonny Boy, the second,” Butterfield claimed.<sup>246</sup> The harmonicist then infused this style with the powerful energy and aggression that he displayed in his

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<sup>242</sup> DeMicheal, “Father and Son,” *Down Beat*, 13.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, 173-174.

<sup>245</sup> Bob Wettlaufer, “The Music Scene,” *The Seed*, March 15, 1968, p. 11, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>246</sup> DeMicheal, “Father and Son,” *Down Beat*, 12.

everyday life. Harmonicist Kim Field described Butterfield's harmonica technique as an "edgier, hot-rodded style" when compared to Little Walter.<sup>247</sup>

### **Michael Bloomfield: Musicological Blues**

Paul Butterfield and Nick Gravenites were not the only White blues musicians frequenting the South Side. Michael Bloomfield had also been frequenting South Side blues clubs as a teenager towards the end of the 1950s.<sup>248</sup> Like Nick Gravenites and Paul Butterfield, Mike Bloomfield was born in Chicago. Also, like Gravenites, Bloomfield exemplified the growing desire among young Whites to embrace American folk, country and blues music as a field of study. A trend that became popular within university folk circles. The son of a successful kitchen wares manufacturer,<sup>249</sup> Bloomfield was born into a prosperous home on July 28, 1943.<sup>250</sup> When Bloomfield was 13, like many Jewish boys, he celebrated his Bar Mitzvah.<sup>251</sup> It was at this ceremony that Bloomfield received a transistor radio as a gift.<sup>252</sup>

Bloomfield's new radio would expose him to the world of the blues. Just as the radio helped Buddy Guy and Paul Butterfield tune in to listen to their musical heroes, Bloomfield was exposed to the myriad genres that were being broadcasted across Chicago.<sup>253</sup> Since his parents were not music enthusiasts,<sup>254</sup> Bloomfield's radio was his primary gateway into the world of musicianship and his home in Chicago was a multicultural hub full of music that he could absorb as a young, impressionable boy. "There was just layers of music and lots of

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<sup>247</sup> Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, 213.

<sup>248</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 187.

<sup>249</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 23.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid*.

music and Chicago was just loaded with blues and jazz,”<sup>255</sup> said Charlie Musselwhite, referring to the state of the music scene in Chicago. The volume and diversity of music allowed the older generation of blues players to develop the classic Chicago blues, while the younger generation, who were exposed to this musical diversity for most of their formative years, integrated many more genres into their music. Bloomfield recounted to biographer Ed Ward, “When I was really young, I couldn’t tell the difference between black music, rockabilly, rock ‘n’ roll... I mean, they could be playing ‘Shrimp Boats Are A-Comin’,’ or Muddy Waters, and I dug ‘em all.”<sup>256</sup> Though his keen musical ear had not developed yet (and it would develop into a useful tool for him), Bloomfield’s exposure to the radio awakened a love of music that would grow to consume him as an obsession. “The AM radio was a freaky thing with me. Just to hear the music that I loved—to hear Sun Records, Elvis Presley records—to turn on a radio, and maybe get John R. from Nashville or something, playing that music that I just loved.”<sup>257</sup> Notably, John R. was the same blues disc jockey that a young Paul Butterfield tuned into.

When he was 13 years old, Bloomfield began playing guitar<sup>258</sup> and he practiced constantly. This musical fixation, however, came at the expense of his formal education. Bloomfield was uniquely creative and intelligent in his youth, but he often found himself at odds with educational administrators. In his sophomore year, Bloomfield was expelled from his high school for disobeying an order from his dean during a talent show when he was told to play one song, not a rock ‘n’ roll piece, and take no encores.<sup>259</sup> Of course Bloomfield, as a young rebellious type, disobeyed. Thus, the expulsion. Although this was a relatively minor disciplinary issue in the grand scheme of things, Bloomfield was showing an early inkling of

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<sup>255</sup> Charlie Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich, June 28, 2023.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 10.

<sup>258</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 35.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 37.

his disdain for authority and establishment that he would fully display when he embraced the late-1960s counterculture.

Bloomfield thrived as a young guitarist. “By the time I was 15, I was the best I knew, or that anyone around me knew, I was a monster,” remembered Bloomfield.<sup>260</sup> Many of Bloomfield’s peers and friends would corroborate his tremendous skill on the guitar. John Hammond, musician and friend of Bloomfield, noted that “Michael set a standard for guitar players, if you’re going to be a lead blues guitar player, you better know what you’re doing.”<sup>261</sup> “Mike was a guitar player of uncanny virtuosity,”<sup>262</sup> stated Nick Gravenites, who met Bloomfield in his folk scene days. Bloomfield would receive similar praise from countless other musicians he met throughout his life including guitarist Carlos Santana, Jefferson Airplane lead guitarist Jorma Kaukonen and his Butterfield bandmate Elvin Bishop.<sup>263</sup>

Bloomfield demonstrated a love of rock ‘n’ roll from a young age, citing Elvis Presley as an early musical hero of his.<sup>264</sup> While his taste in this genre would stay with him throughout his life, Bloomfield would quickly find influence from many different genres. Growing up in Chicago during the 1950s, Bloomfield was exposed to a vast selection of music. Absorbing influences from jazz, country, folk, rock ‘n’ roll, and especially blues, Bloomfield developed a style with a “deep background in a variety of form,”<sup>265</sup> as Elvin Bishop stated. Bloomfield’s virtuosity and breadth of styles was supplemented by his wicked speed on the fretboard. Indicative of his energy and excitement at diving into the world of music that he loved so much, Bloomfield’s fingering speed was unmatched among his peers.

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<sup>260</sup> Sarles, Bob, dir. *Sweet Blues: A Film About Mike Bloomfield*, directed by Bob Sarles (New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 2014), DVD.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>263</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>264</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, 10.

<sup>265</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

Norman Dayron remembered this speed, and how impressively clean Bloomfield could play while maintaining this tempo, on the day that he met Bloomfield in 1960 at a folk music shop. “I’m standing in the shop, and I hear this fantastic three-finger guitar playing—very fast, very clean... I thought it was a record or something.”<sup>266</sup>

As Bloomfield began hanging around the University of Chicago folk scene in his mid-to-late teenage years, he drifted more towards his love of the blues, but he still demonstrated the desire to learn many distinctly American music styles that Gravenites and other folkies obsessed over.<sup>267</sup> Bloomfield was a perfect fit for the University of Chicago folklore society.

Like Buddy Guy, Sam Lay and many others in his peer group, Bloomfield began imitating his blues and folk heroes. Nick Gravenites remembered hearing Bloomfield perform at a folk music shop around 1960. “He was sixteen and brash, and the sounds he got out of the guitar mimicked exactly the authentic folk styles of the American music he was mad about. I’m not talking about approximating the sound, which is what most of the guitarists I knew were doing, I’m talking about doing it exactly right, the right chording, the right fingering, the right feel.”<sup>268</sup>

Bloomfield’s ability to exactly imitate the styles of blues artists was remarkable. It was clear that, as Buddy Guy stated, Bloomfield had been “listening hard.”<sup>269</sup> Bloomfield was, in fact, listening hard, and he began developing an encyclopedic knowledge of blues styles from a relatively young age. Bloomfield would demonstrate this breadth of knowledge later in his life, when he released his 1976 album *If You Love These Blues, Play ‘em as You Please*. The album, originally intended to be an instructional album for guitarists, is a near encyclopaedia of the blues all performed by Mike Bloomfield.<sup>270</sup> Many of the songs are

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<sup>266</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 50.

<sup>267</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 123.

<sup>270</sup> Michael Bloomfield, *If You Love These Blues, Play ‘em as You Please*, Kicking Mule Records 9801-2, 1976, Digital MP3.

written by Bloomfield and each one accurately represents the styles of a plethora of blues artists such as B.B. King, Earl Hooker, T-Bone Walker and more. The 2004 release of *If You Love These Blues* features narration tracks from Bloomfield, clearly indicating the inspiration and style of each track.<sup>271</sup>

Bloomfield clearly had a passion for blues music, and this passion soon developed into a pseudo-academic pursuit. Bloomfield stated, “By the time I was 17, I was interested in [the blues] from a musicological standpoint. I was trying to discover where the old blues singers lived.”<sup>272</sup> This drive to study the blues soon led Bloomfield to the South Side blues scene towards the end of the 1950s.<sup>273</sup>

Like Paul Butterfield and Nick Gravenites, Bloomfield would head to the South Side with some friends and quietly observe the performances from their blues heroes.<sup>274</sup>

Bloomfield also began performing in those days, however most of his gigs were playing rock ‘n’ roll hits on Chicago’s North Side.<sup>275</sup> But Bloomfield was continually drawn to the South Side, completely enamoured by the sound of Muddy Waters and the other blues icons he got to see. “All these guys were in their prime,”<sup>276</sup> said Elvin Bishop, referring to the state of the blues scene when the young musicians began exploring the South Side.

Bloomfield frequented the South and West Side clubs throughout the late-1950s and early-1960s, just as Butterfield and Gravenites did. Bloomfield was witness to performances from countless blues greats such as Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Elmore

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 29.

<sup>273</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 187.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 40.

<sup>276</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

James and so many more.<sup>277</sup> When Bloomfield met Paul Butterfield, Nick Gravenites and Elvin Bishop, around 1960,<sup>278</sup> they would frequent the clubs together.<sup>279</sup>

By the end of the 1950s, Bloomfield had introduced himself in the South Side clubs and told the performers that he was a guitarist. Bloomfield was then given many chances to play. Bloomfield's unique talent had caught the attention of Muddy Waters, just as it did with Paul Butterfield and Buddy Guy. "When I first heard Michael," said Muddy Waters, "I knew he was gonna be a great guitar player."<sup>280</sup> Waters had a habit of sharing the bandstand with young, aspiring musicians. The experienced blues player used his status to help teach Bloomfield and his peers. "Every time [Michael] and Paul would come in, [I would] let 'em sit in and do a couple of numbers. That's the way kids learn, you know, sittin' in and getting the feeling and getting the smoke of it."<sup>281</sup>

Waters took pride in his ability to give young musicians their start in the blues scene, stating in 1969, "What makes me happy is to see how many kids been influenced by me."<sup>282</sup> For Waters, he was happy to continue the culture of sharing he had experienced in his youth, when he learned his craft from Son House and other old blues players. Waters noted, "I'm not the kind of guy who'll hold the bandstand for myself... 'cause I'm not jealous of nobody—you play what you play and I'll put you on my bandstand."<sup>283</sup>

Many other older blues musicians would allow Bloomfield the chance to play with them such as Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Jimmy Reed, and Big Joe Williams.<sup>284</sup> These sit-ins with blues legends allowed Bloomfield to develop a very unique style. Having access to

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<sup>277</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 41.

<sup>278</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>279</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 167.

<sup>280</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 194.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> DeMicheal, "Father and Son," *Down Beat*, 12.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Jan S. Wenner, "The Rolling Stone Interview: Mike Bloomfield," *Rolling Stone* (April 6, 1968), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-rolling-stone-interview-mike-bloomfield-228277/>.



so many different genres from folk to jazz to blues, Bloomfield incorporated what he learned through his mentorships into his developing techniques. “Unlike a lot of other guitarists,” said blues musician Joe Louis Walker, “Michael learned from the source... So he was able to come up with a style that was just a combination of all his influences.”<sup>285</sup>

Bloomfield took a particularly strong influence from B.B. King. Holding a deep admiration for the older generation of blues musicians, Bloomfield was particularly drawn to B.B. King’s unique style and stature in the blues community. Stated Bloomfield, “Muddy Waters, he was like a god to me. Well, if he was a god, B.B. King was a deity where I couldn’t even imagine ever knowing someone of his magnitude and greatness.”<sup>286</sup> But Bloomfield did meet B.B. King through the Chicago club scene, and the two became close friends.

Bloomfield was enchanted by B.B. King’s signature style which featured phrasing that emulated soft singing or talking. “If I could play exactly like B.B., be B.B. junior, I’d be content. But I had to accept myself for what I was,”<sup>287</sup> said Bloomfield. Bloomfield’s style could be greatly varied due to his range of influences and genres that he played, but he did end up achieving a style that resembled King’s gentle singing guitar. “You know I like sweet blues... I play sweet blues. I can’t explain it. I want to be singing. I want to be sweet.”<sup>288</sup> Bloomfield’s “sweet blues” were on full display on the 1968 jam session album *Super Session* which he recorded with Al Kooper. In the track “Really,” Bloomfield’s guitar part makes full use of the “B.B. Box” early in the song, playing slowly and sweetly, before infusing this style with his signature speed and psychedelic, jazz-based licks.<sup>289</sup> The end

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<sup>285</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>286</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 25.

<sup>287</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 30.

<sup>288</sup> Wenner, “The Rolling Stone Interview: Mike Bloomfield.”

<sup>289</sup> “Really,” track #5 on Michael Bloomfield and Al Kooper *Super Session*, CS 9701, 1968, Digital MP3.

result is a song that combines the many influences of Bloomfield, helping him achieve a unique blues.

Bloomfield's combination of influences and styles holds true for Buddy Guy, Paul Butterfield, Sam Lay, Charlie Musselwhite and any other blues musician that began their career through mentorships with the older generation. The close contact and learning that was present in the younger Chicago-based musicians allowed them to develop a style that resembled the older generation's Chicago blues while combining additional influences and techniques to create a new brand of blues. Buddy Guy's 1960 single "I Got My Eyes on You" demonstrates the similarities and changes that the young generation brought to the genre. Written by Willie Dixon and Buddy Guy, the song makes use of a typical box shuffle walking bass line and a horn accompaniment that is reminiscent of B.B. King's work. Guy's vocal and guitar work on this track are what distinguishes this song from the older generation's work. Guy screams his vocalizations and his guitar part hits double stops with a quick and powerful vibrato that creates a frantic, energetic warbling sound.<sup>290</sup> Buddy Guy, like Paul Butterfield and Mike Bloomfield, combined older blues influences with his youthful energy to create a new brand of Chicago blues.

Michael Bloomfield also continued to develop his style under the tutelage of established blues players during the early-1960s. While the Chicago blues scene was consuming much of his time, Bloomfield still stayed connected to the folk scene. Around 1962, Bloomfield became the manager of a folk music coffeehouse, the Fickle Pickle, on the Near North Side of Chicago.<sup>291</sup>

Though Bloomfield, Butterfield and Gravenites were becoming more involved in the electric blues scene, the country-style folk and country blues music scene continued to spread

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<sup>290</sup> "I Got My Eyes on You," track #1 on Buddy Guy *I Got My Eyes on You / First Time I Met the Blues*, Chess 1753, 1960, Digital MP3.

<sup>291</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 53.

across college towns in the Northern United States. In 1997, Nick Gravenites gave a lot of credit to folklore societies for bringing about the blues revival of the 1960s, claiming that the travels of folklore societies “were the seeds being planted... that blossomed into the blues revival, and folk-rock.”<sup>292</sup> While the university folk scenes were incredibly important in proliferating the fanbase of blues music leading up to the blues revival, there were a variety of factors that contributed to the explosion of the North Side Chicago blues scene and the mainstreaming of blues music. Young, dedicated musicians based in Chicago and other large cities helped popularize the genre among young Whites while the British Invasion bands like the Beatles and Rolling Stones helped further raise awareness of the older generation of blues musicians such as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf. Throughout the 1950s, the British blues movement was developing. This decade saw the early stirrings of blues bands that would explode in popularity in the United States during the mid-1960s, like the Rolling Stones and the Animals.

### **Muddy Waters in England and the Newport Blues**

During the proliferation of university folk-blues scenes, Muddy Waters embarked on his monumental 1958 tour of England.<sup>293</sup> The blues had been gaining popularity in England during the 1950s through widely available American blues records and performers like Alexis Korner, but Waters’ tour energized blues lovers across the country. Having previously only heard older styles of blues, Muddy’s new, electric Chicago blues, which he had been developing for more than a decade, shocked and delighted British audiences.<sup>294</sup> “I had my amplifier and [Otis] Spann and I was going to do a Chicago thing. We opened up in Leeds,

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<sup>292</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>293</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 160.

<sup>294</sup> Eric Burdon, *Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2001), 151.

England. I was definitely too loud for them. The next morning we were in the headlines of the paper, ‘Screaming Guitar and Howling Piano.’”<sup>295</sup>

Waters’ tour of England inspired a young generation of British musicians, which contributed to the British blues movement. Waters’ performances in England influenced artists like Eric Burdon, lead singer of the Animals. Burdon noted this in his 2001 memoirs. “Alexis Korner is usually perceived as the guy who gave birth to English blues, but I’ll never forget Muddy Waters’s second appearance at Newcastle’s City Hall... I was blessed to be able to listen to him live. His Voice was like the howling wind.”<sup>296</sup> Mick Jagger and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, who named their band after Waters’ song “Rollin’ Stone,” found similar inspiration from Waters’ musical catalogue.<sup>297</sup>

The 1958 tour in England marked the beginning of a period of success for Waters after the downturn in his career during the mid-1950s rock ‘n’ roll explosion.<sup>298</sup> Around 1960, Waters received a visit from Atlantic Records vice president Nesuhi Ertegun who came to Chicago to see one of Waters’ performances.<sup>299</sup> Ertegun, a big fan of Waters, was inspired by Waters’ show and suggested to George Wein, director of the Newport Jazz Festival, that Waters be included in the 1960 festival.<sup>300</sup> Thus, in July of 1960, Muddy Waters exposed hundreds of young, White students in Newport, Rhode Island to his brand of hard Chicago blues. The show was well-received and symbolized the readiness of many White folk-blues fans to transition into hard, Chicago blues fans.

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<sup>295</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 161.

<sup>296</sup> Burdon, *Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood*, 151.

<sup>297</sup> Gordon, *Can’t Be Satisfied*, 23.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

<sup>299</sup> Jack Tracy, liner notes for McKinley Morganfield, *At Newport 1960*, Muddy Waters, recorded July 3, 1960. Chess LP 1449, 1960.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid*.

### **Conclusion: On the Verge of Popularity**

Throughout the late-1950s and early-1960s, young artists began entering the blues scene. These artists were witness to a myriad of influences from the radio, big multicultural cities and observing concerts or live performances. These influences, which far exceeded the variety of those afforded to the older generation of blues players, were absorbed by the young musicians at an early age, deeply affecting the music the young artists developed. Many young artists were openly welcomed into music scenes by the older blues generation and further developed their music within the Chicago blues scene.

While many blues musicians were entering the industry, university folk music scenes were developing across the Northern United States. These scenes, which prized authenticity in the form of traditional folk, country and blues music, would help spread awareness of the blues throughout White demographics. Though university students were uninterested in, or unaware of, electric blues, the positive reception of Muddy Waters' 1960 Newport Jazz Festival set, which was largely viewed by folkies, indicated the willingness of White audiences to embrace electric blues

### **Chapter Three:** **Fathers and Sons**

Throughout the late-1950s and early-1960s, a young generation of blues artists entered the blues scene. Chicago, by the early-1960s had a quickly developing subgenre of blues, a younger, faster, harder blues. By the mid-1960s, Big Joe Williams, Charlie Musselwhite and Mike Bloomfield would bring old and new blues to the Near North Side of Chicago, performing at a bar called Big John's. Soon after the North Side of Chicago would explode with the blues as other clubs brought in more blues artists to emulate Big John's success. As the North Side scene continued to grow, the blues would move closer to mainstream popularity. Despite the common perception that the British Invasion popularized the blues among White and mainstream audiences, the work of Bloomfield, Musselwhite and the Paul Butterfield Blues band was imperative to the growing popularity of the blues in the mid-1960s.

The mentorships provided to the younger generation of blues players by the older generation was important for the continued development of the Chicago blues scene. Older blues players like Muddy Waters, Little Walter and Howlin' Wolf demonstrated profound generosity towards the younger players by welcoming them into the scene. The older players developed familial relationships with the younger musicians and supported them while providing advice, guidance and, on occasion, teachings. Through these mentorships, young blues musicians were able to develop their craft and expand the popularity of the genre.

The blues would continue to step closer to mainstream popularity during the Newport Folk Festival of 1965. As folk fans watched, the interracial Paul Butterfield Blues Band demonstrated their new, harder style of the blues to a positive, receptive audience. The popularity of Butterfield's Newport set highlighted the growing interest in blues among traditionally strict folk audiences. However, Bob Dylan's electric set was received with far

more hostility, showing that audiences were not entirely ready to accept all kinds of electric music.

As the blues transitioned into a predominantly White fan base, certain racial issues arose. Though cultural appropriation was largely not discussed in the 1960s, certain critics raised concerns about cultural theft. Additionally, White blues fans and musicians could, at times, present un-nuanced perspectives about race and the blues. The blues authenticity debate, which aligned with Alan Lomax's perceptions of the blues, exemplified the kind of overly simplistic perceptions of blues that were problematic, despite the intent to respect Black cultures. White blues musicians who came out of Chicago mentorships tended to present more nuanced perceptions of race and the blues. Artists like Michael Bloomfield, while occasionally misguided in his understanding of blues as a form of Black cultural expression, frequently acknowledged issues of cultural appropriation and the social factors which motivated the blues.

### **Charlie Musselwhite and the North Side Scene**

In 1962, Charlie Musselwhite travelled to Chicago looking for a factory job.<sup>1</sup> Musselwhite, who was born in Mississippi in 1944, moved to Memphis, Tennessee at a young age,<sup>2</sup> where he was exposed to many early blues musicians, those of the previous generation to Muddy Waters'. "Well, the guys I knew in Memphis were Will Shade, who had the Memphis Jug Band, Gus Cannon, Furry Lewis, a guitar player named Earl Bell, um, there were others... and Willie B. or Willie Borum... He gave me my first harmonica rack, he played guitar with a harmonica on a rack."<sup>3</sup> Blues was all around Musselwhite when he lived

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<sup>1</sup> Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, 190.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

in Memphis. Hearing the blues on the radio and on records,<sup>4</sup> Musselwhite was exposed to Muddy Waters, Little Walter and other Chicago-based blues players while he was welcomed by many of the early blues musicians around Memphis. Musselwhite embraced the blues as a passion, picking up the harmonica as his instrument of choice, but he had yet to consider blues as a career option. “Well, I wasn’t thinking about being a performer,” said Musselwhite, “I just loved the music and I liked getting to know them and I’d hang out with them and we would have jam sessions and I picked up a lot of things that I learned from guitar and harmonica kind of by osmosis. Just being with them. And they were real welcoming and flattered that I was interested in them and their music.”<sup>5</sup>

When Musselwhite moved to Chicago in 1962, looking for a factory job like many other southern Americans, he had no idea that he was moving to the world’s foremost blues hub. “I didn’t even know anything about a blues scene in Chicago, I had no idea, all I knew about Chicago – all I knew – was that it was a big city up north that had a lot of factory jobs.”<sup>6</sup> After getting a job as a driver for an exterminator, Musselwhite began to learn about the city and the blues culture that had been developing there for the last 20 years.<sup>7</sup> “I saw signs on the windows of bars, posters on telephone poles saying stuff like ‘Elmore James, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf,’ and that’s when I realized that there was this whole blues scene right there,” Musselwhite recalled, “and so... I’d make note of the addresses of where these clubs were and I’d go at night when the people were playing there so I could [see them] – all my heroes that I listened to on records were right there.”<sup>8</sup>

Having come to Chicago through Memphis, Musselwhite had an instant connection with some of the established blues players in Chicago. “Will Shade... had also taught Walter

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<sup>4</sup> LearntheHarmonica.com, “The Charlie Musselwhite Interview.”

<sup>5</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



Horton... so then in Chicago we both had this connection with Will Shade.”<sup>9</sup> Having grown up in an interracial area in Memphis,<sup>10</sup> Musselwhite was comfortable travelling to the predominantly Black neighbourhoods where the blues clubs were located. Musselwhite began spending much of his free time at the clubs, requesting songs, having some drinks and getting to know the staff and performers. “I mean, once you found a couple of the clubs, it was easy to find out all the rest of the clubs – who was playing where. And coming from Memphis, I already knew how to drink, so I fit right in.”<sup>11</sup> Though he was often the only White person in the clubs, Musselwhite felt welcomed into the scene.

After he spent some time enjoying the music, a waitress he knew at Pepper’s Lounge suggested to Muddy Waters that Musselwhite should get a chance to play. Waters, who had been so welcoming to many of Musselwhite’s peers over the last five years, was equally welcoming to the young harmonicist. This was Musselwhite’s introduction into the Chicago blues scene. Recalled Musselwhite, “When Muddy found out I played, he insisted I sit in, and then guys saw me sitting in with Muddy and started offering me gigs and that was my ticket out of the factory. I was looking for a job and I found one as a harmonica player.”<sup>12</sup>

Musselwhite played in clubs, spent time with the established blues musicians like Big Walter Horton, Muddy Waters, Little Walter and worked in Bob Koester’s Jazz Record Mart<sup>13</sup> during the early-1960s. This was where Charlie Musselwhite met Michael Bloomfield. Remembered Musselwhite, “[Bloomfield] came in looking for blues records and he found out I was from Memphis and he wanted to know all about Memphis, and we just became friends right away.”<sup>14</sup> Bloomfield’s musicological drive to learn about American culture drew him to

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> LearntheHarmonica.com, “The Charlie Musselwhite Interview.”

<sup>11</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

Musselwhite, and the two would have a tremendous impact on popularizing blues among White people together.

After an altercation with Bob Koester, Musselwhite began working at Old Wells Record Shop in Old Town on the Near North Side.<sup>15</sup> Big Joe Williams, who was a friend of Musselwhite's and had been living in the basement of Jazz Record Mart, moved into the back room of Old Wells with Musselwhite.<sup>16</sup> In the early-to-mid-1960s, Old Town was a predominantly White, blue-collar neighbourhood known for its cheap rent.<sup>17</sup> However, the low rent also attracted its share of artists. Recalled Musselwhite, "When I first moved there, it was just kind of a cheap rent area, blue-collar. But there were artists that lived there because it was so cheap. There were painters and sculptors and poets, so it was kind of a bohemian kind of thing."<sup>18</sup> Old Town was also home to the Second City, the innovative improv comedy theatre that had opened its doors in 1959.<sup>19</sup> Despite the large population of blue-collar workers, Old Town's "bohemian" population ensured that the area was ripe for exposure to previously unheard of artforms.

Before the Fourth of July weekend in 1964, a small neighbourhood bar, one that fit the blue-collar setting of Old Town, called Big John's was hoping to introduce some live music for the holiday weekend.<sup>20</sup> The bar decided to hire Big Joe Williams for this weekend. Charlie Musselwhite recounted these events. "Somebody at Big John's was aware that Big Joe lived down the street, and they kind of thought Big Joe was a folk singer or something. They didn't really know what they were getting into (laughs)."<sup>21</sup> Though the folk-blues scene was spreading through universities in the Northern United States, Blues on the North Side of

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<sup>15</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> "60 Years of Comedy History," The Second City, The Second City, Inc, 2023, <https://www.secondcity.com/history/>.

<sup>20</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Chicago during the early-1960s was rarely listened to, especially electric blues. “They wanted some guy to come in and play the guitar at the bar and Joe asked me to come with him and we were going to play as a duo,” recalled Musselwhite.<sup>22</sup>

Musselwhite and Big Joe Williams’ performance on the Fourth of July was a massive success, leading to a regular gigging opportunity on the North Side. “So here I am and Big Joe, it was his gig, and we’re playing and, man, they’re selling the drinks and the bar is doing great business. We were supposed to just play that one night and they said, ‘just come on back tomorrow night,’ and it just turned into a regular gig, we were just playing there all the time.”<sup>23</sup> Not long after, Michael Bloomfield joined Musselwhite and Williams, initially playing piano.<sup>24</sup> After Williams left on one of his characteristically frequent travels, Bloomfield switched to guitar. Bloomfield and Musselwhite then brought in a drummer and a bassist to make a full band.<sup>25</sup> On the nights Musselwhite and Bloomfield were not playing, they urged Big John’s manager, Bob Wettlaufer, to hire members of the older generation of blues players like Muddy Waters and Little Walter.<sup>26</sup> Soon, Big John’s turned into a thriving blues scene and other North Side clubs began hiring South Side blues players to emulate that success.<sup>27</sup> “We got Wettlaufer to start hiring people like Muddy and Little Walter and, gosh, everybody was starting to come up to play, and then other bars on the North Side saw the great business Big John’s was doing and they wanted to hire blues bands too. So it all started on that Fourth of July,” recounted Musselwhite.<sup>28</sup>

Due to the diminishing interest in blues among young Black people in the 1950s and 1960s, the Chicago blues scene began to flip to the North Side from the South.<sup>29</sup> Higher pay

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

and a booming fan base waited for the established South and West Side blues players who began to frequently play for predominantly White audiences on the North Side. Many Black artists still performed regularly on the South Side, but North Side gigs became more frequent throughout the mid-1960s. Early in the North Side blues boom, the scene retained the same underground, bohemian quality that Nick Gravenites exemplified through his university bluesnik days. Artists, actors and comedians like George Carlin<sup>30</sup> and Second City cast members<sup>31</sup> would frequent North Side clubs.

When Bloomfield and Musselwhite received an offer at another North Side club for more money, they left Big John's and Wettlaufer brought in the Paul Butterfield Blues Band to fill in.<sup>32</sup> Butterfield, who offered Sam Lay and bassist Jerome Arnold more money than they were making with Howlin' Wolf to join him and Elvin Bishop, continued to grow the North Side scene with his band.<sup>33</sup>

Musselwhite, Bloomfield, Big Joe Williams and the Butterfield Blues Band were incredibly important in popularizing electric blues among White Americans. Charlie Musselwhite, in a 2023 interview, recalled that his time at Big John's "was extremely important! I mean, people on the North Side apparently were interested in the blues but they didn't even know where to go. And if they did know where to go, I'm sure they'd be afraid to go. But suddenly, here it is on the North Side and they know where it is and they feel comfortable going there and it's really popular. So now the... blues got the exposure on the North Side regularly."<sup>34</sup>

The 1960s were a period of increased integration, however, as Nick Gravenites noted, Chicago and its neighbourhoods were still deeply divided.<sup>35</sup> Charlie Musselwhite, Big Joe

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<sup>30</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>31</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>32</sup> Wettlaufer, "The Music Scene," *the Seed*, March 15, 1968, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, dir., *Sam Lay in Bluesland*.

<sup>34</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>35</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

Williams, and later Mike Bloomfield and the Butterfield Blues Band (before Bloomfield joined in 1965) delivered the blues across racial barriers in Chicago to a predominantly White audience that was willing to accept an interracial demographic performing electric blues musicians.

The Butterfield Band's tenure at Big John's further helped the North Side blues explosion continue, and soon the scene expanded beyond its underground roots. "Along with places like Big John's getting popular with tourists, tourists would come in from the suburbs to look at the beatniks, you know. And then they started opening up more and more clubs and – all up and down Wells Street and North Avenue. It became more of a tourist place; they wanted those tourist dollars."<sup>36</sup>

Notably, the North Side blues explosion occurred just months after the Beatles initiated the British Invasion in February of 1964. The British Invasion contributed heavily to the popularization of blues among Whites, given how open bands like the Beatles and Rolling Stones were about naming their blues influences. Muddy Waters once attributed much of his fame amongst Whites to the Stones. "The Rolling Stones created a whole wide-open space for the music... They said who did it first and how they came by knowin' it. I tip my hat to 'em. It took the people from England to hip my people — my white people — that a black man's music is not a crime to bring in the house."<sup>37</sup>

The British Invasion was tremendously important for mainstreaming the blues and garnering White appreciation of the genre. However, the efforts of local Chicago musicians, both Black and White, should not be understated. "I'm told that it was the Beatles and the Rolling Stones that popularized the blues for white America... What the hell do you think the Paul Butterfield Blues Band was doing the years they spent playing blues for white

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<sup>36</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 189.

America?” wrote Gravenites.<sup>38</sup> Chicago-based blues musicians turned many American Whites and White folk fans onto electric blues. Additionally, the encouragement and assistance that was shared between the two generations of blues musicians – the older generation welcoming the young into their scene and the young encouraging North Side clubs to hire the older players – helped grow the genre. This relationship between the older and younger generations of Chicago-based blues musicians carried and developed the genre throughout the late-1950s and 1960s.

### **Mentorships**

A distinguishing factor of the younger generation of Chicago-based blues musicians in the late-1950s and 1960s is that they formed a unique bond with the older generation of blues players in Chicago. The younger generation developed close, familial bonds with the older players and developed their music in close proximity to their blues heroes. Additionally, the older generation fostered a supportive environment and, though there was some competition and less-welcoming moments, the scene was mostly conducive to helping young artists enter the industry.

As previously discussed, artists like Buddy Guy, Sam Lay, Mike Bloomfield, Paul Butterfield and Charlie Musselwhite were encouraged to play music in blues clubs during the late-1950s and early-1960s. The initiation of many of the younger blues players’ relationships with the older generation came through sit-ins, when an artist playing a show invited someone to come up and play a few songs. Sit-ins were a major way for young blues musicians to start their careers, who often received offers from other clubs after being seen sitting in with an established blues player.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>39</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

Artists like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter and more would be commonly motivated to invite young, aspiring musicians up on the stage for a multitude of reasons. One major reason was the need for musicians to take breaks while playing. The Chicago blues scene was a demanding environment, as Charlie Musselwhite noted: "We would play seven sets a night – or eight sets, actually. For every hour you would play 45 minutes on, 15 minutes off."<sup>40</sup> The sheer length of performances in Chicago clubs encouraged blues players to invite others on stage for purely utilitarian purposes. Stated Musselwhite, "Muddy's home club was Pepper's Lounge... and he played from 9pm to 4 in the morning and on Saturday, went until 5... Sunday morning. So there was a lot of time to kill and so sitting in was something that happened a lot and Muddy was happy to have somebody sit in and he would encourage people to."<sup>41</sup>

Waters and his peers would invite others to play for more reasons than to grab a moment of brief respite. The younger generation idolized the older blues players and, in the wake of diminishing interest in the blues from young people, the older generation was flattered and receptive to the interest and respect being shown to them by young musicians. By the 1960s, many young Black people shifted their interests towards soul music.<sup>42</sup> As Ulrich Adelt noted in his book *Blues Music in the 1960s*, soul presented a celebratory image of Black Power born out of the civil rights movement compared to blues, which was often seen to be sombre and lamenting.<sup>43</sup>

The blues is a vast genre, and even occasionally dealt in civil rights issues (like with the work of J.B. Lenoir), however despondency was the primary perception of blues music at the time. Thus, blues music created a generational rift between younger and older Black

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

musicians and music fans. The young, at times, felt that remaining in a lamenting state showed some form of subservience to White oppression.<sup>44</sup> Charlie Musselwhite remembered this dynamic when he would converse with his Black coworkers about his weekends listening to blues. “There was a lot of people who looked down on the blues like they were Uncle Toms or something and they criticized us.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, when Musselwhite and his peers, White or Black, entered the blues scene, they were welcomed with open arms from a group of older musicians who were happy the genre would stay alive. “All the guys I knew, they were really flattered that I knew them and respected them and loved their music,” said Musselwhite, “and would seek them out and go by myself to all these clubs every night. I just – I didn’t have any problems and I just fit right in.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Yank Rachell, a member of the older generation, remembered mentoring Michael Bloomfield: “He learned from us... He was a good player, and he had a lot of respect.”<sup>47</sup>

The Chicago blues scene was competitive, even despite the welcoming older generation, and there were times when competition overtook generosity. Muddy Waters, possibly the most generous of the older blues players in terms of how frequently he is attributed with helping start careers, was not always so welcoming to his colleagues. Remembered Waters, “I’d say back in ‘47 or ‘8 – Little Walter, Jimmy Rodgers and myself, we would go around looking for bands that were playing. We called ourselves the Headcutters, ’cause we’d go in and if we got a chance we were gonna burn ‘em.”<sup>48</sup> Here, Waters noted his intent to embarrass other bands and steal their business. As time went on, and Waters became an established musician in Chicago, he used his status to assist others. However, competition did still exist in Chicago during the 1960s. As Buddy Guy noted in his

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<sup>44</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>48</sup> DeMicheal, “Father and Son,” *Down Beat*, 12.



autobiography, “Some of the guitar gunslingers wouldn’t help you if you was bleeding to death. They’d see that as one less competitor to worry ’bout.”<sup>49</sup>

Certain blues musicians could show both generosity and competitiveness, like Little Walter, who gave Sam Lay a home when he first moved to Chicago, but soon after fired him for advertizing Howlin’ Wolf’s band on his bass drum during a gig with Walter.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Howlin’ Wolf welcomed Sam Lay into his band when Lay needed to provide for his wife, but was notoriously stingy when paying his bands,<sup>51</sup> compared to the younger generation, like Buddy Guy or Mike Bloomfield who more equitably distributed the money their bands were making.<sup>52</sup>

The city of Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s created a complex dynamic between the old and young generations of blues musicians. Chicago was a tough factory town that had a reputation for being competitive and mean in all its industries.<sup>53</sup> However, with the diminishing interest in the blues, older blues players were thrilled to share the artform that they were passionate about with a group of young musicians who revered them. These two contradictory factors created what Charlie Musselwhite described as a friendly competition. “In Chicago there was more competition. But in a real friendly way. People weren’t like, sabotaging you and making you sound bad... you would help one another.”<sup>54</sup>

Regardless of the competition, many older players nurtured the younger musicians, giving them advice, encouraging them and mentoring them. Through this environment, the older and younger blues players developed a strong bond with each other. Many of the older players became parental figures to the young musicians. In a 1968 interview, Michael Bloomfield recalled his close relationships with Big Joe Williams and Muddy Waters: “Big

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<sup>49</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 89.

<sup>50</sup> Anderson, dir., *Sam Lay in Bluesland*.

<sup>51</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

Joe Williams, he was like a father, a close friend. With cats like Muddy, man, it's like seeing your old uncle. Seeing Muddy on the road or at a gig or something, it's like gigging with the whole family or something... It's a very close thing."<sup>55</sup>

Bloomfield, who travelled throughout the Southern United States several times with Big Joe Williams around 1963, developed a profound appreciation of Williams and his peers. Though he once idolized his blues heroes, the close contact he had with them in the Chicago blues scene helped them form real friendships that transcended Bloomfield's musicological desires to learn about American culture. Bloomfield and Williams would occasionally fight, or request favours of each other, indicating a level of comfort between the two that resembles familial relationships.<sup>56</sup> These familial relationships were common between the older and younger generations. Charlie Musselwhite fondly remembered his time spent with the older generation in Chicago: "Black and White, we all just had a good time, enjoyed each other. Playing together, working together, touring together, living together. We were just in this together, that's all there was to it."<sup>57</sup> Likewise, Buddy Guy described Muddy Waters and B.B. King as two important figures in his life. "Muddy was twenty-three years older than me, and... I looked on him like a father. B. B. is eleven years older, and he was more like a big brother."<sup>58</sup>

The older generation, acting like the parental figures they were, would often provide advice and guidance to the younger generation like how Waters encouraged Buddy Guy and fed him salami at the 708 club early in Guy's career.<sup>59</sup> Guy also recalled the first time he met B.B. King, who had come to see Guy at the 708 after hearing about how much they sounded

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<sup>55</sup> Wenner, "The Rolling Stone Interview: Mike Bloomfield."

<sup>56</sup> Michael Bloomfield with S. Summerville. *Me and Big Joe* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1980), 30.

<sup>57</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>58</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 88.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

alike.<sup>60</sup> King showed no resentment towards any potential imitation on Guy's part, but rather, offered the young guitarist advice. King said, "Well you sounding good. All I can tell you is this – use straight picks when you play. You gonna have less trouble with straight picks."<sup>61</sup> Guy followed King's advice and the two became close friends for the rest of King's life<sup>62</sup> until he died in 2015.

B.B. King had a similar relationship with Bloomfield, acting as a caring figure in Bloomfield's life. "Michael... was a very good friend of mine. I felt very close to him," stated King.<sup>63</sup> In 1970, Bloomfield lost all motivation to continue playing guitar.<sup>64</sup> Concerned for his well-being, Bloomfield's mother contacted B.B. King after one of his shows and asked him to speak with Bloomfield, who looked up to King.<sup>65</sup> After this meeting, King called Bloomfield on the phone and encouraged him to keep playing. Recalled Bloomfield, "[B.B. King] said, 'you gotta keep those fingers in shape. You... just can't let what you got... go to hell... you gotta keep on keeping on.'"<sup>66</sup> Bloomfield took King's words to heart and, at least for a time, was able to find motivation to continue his career.<sup>67</sup>

Bloomfield's interaction with King highlights the reciprocated feelings between the older and younger generation. It was clear that Bloomfield cared deeply for his mentors B.B. King, Muddy Waters and Big Joe Williams who, likewise, cared deeply for Bloomfield. After recording the 1969 album *Fathers and Sons*, a double LP that Bloomfield conceived which included members of both the old and young generations, Muddy Waters proudly accepted his role as a father figure to the younger generation. "I am the daddy, and all these kids are

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>64</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 159.

<sup>65</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

my sons.”<sup>68</sup> Waters took pride in the number of young musicians he mentored and influenced. Remarked Waters in a 1979 interview, “Once you read back on me, how many good things I did for peoples... how many peoples is big stars today that came from my music and I don’t feel... bad that they made the big bucks and I didn’t. I’m proud for them.”<sup>69</sup>

Along with advice, the younger generation would learn from sitting in or spending time with their mentors, like Buddy Guy, who received advice on which pick to use from B.B. King. Bloomfield, whose musicological interests motivated much of his musical career, learned a lot from his blues mentors.<sup>70</sup> Charlie Musselwhite, however, mainly focused on improving by himself rather than taking direct lessons from others, yet the older generation still provided advice and shared some of what they knew while spending time with Musselwhite as friends. “Nobody was really teaching, I would go over to Walter Horton – or, I called him Shaky’s apartment and it was supposed to be for lessons but all we did was sit around and drink and talk,” recalled Musselwhite, “the only thing Walter ever taught me was, the only thing he said that made sense was just ‘learn your patterns.’ So, when you learn your patterns, you can have... a C harmonica – key of C, you can play in many different keys on that one harmonica.”<sup>71</sup> Despite Musselwhite not taking explicit lessons from Horton, the two were close friends, and Horton could still offer some advice.

Many of the young blues musicians also gave back influence and opportunities to the older generation members that inspired them. Charlie Musselwhite and Mike Bloomfield encouraged North Side clubs to hire their blues heroes like Little Walter Jacobs and Muddy Waters, helping to repopularize their music during the 1960s. Additionally, by the mid-1960s, when the Butterfield Band had travelled to San Francisco, Mike Bloomfield encouraged Bill Graham and other promoters in the Bay Area to hire B.B. King, causing an explosion in

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<sup>68</sup> DeMicheal, “Father and Son,” *Down Beat*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> ReelinInTheYears66, “Muddy Waters- Interview 1979 [RITY Archives].”

<sup>70</sup> Wenner, “The Rolling Stone Interview: Mike Bloomfield.”

<sup>71</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

King's popularity.<sup>72</sup> The generosity shown to the younger generation was repaid in kind when the young blues players had achieved success thanks to their mentorships.

A musical exchange of influences also occurred during these Chicago mentorships. The younger generation, who developed a harder, more energetic version of classic Chicago blues, took influence from the older generation and returned it later in the 1960s. By the late-1960s and 1970s, older blues musicians were producing songs that were clearly influenced by the younger generation. Muddy Waters' 1977 album *Hard Again* features many re-recordings of his classic hits like "Mannish Boy" and "I Can't Be Satisfied" with a harder tone.

The Chicago mentorships were tremendously important for continuing the Chicago blues scene in the late-1950s and 1960s. In the face of diminishing interest in the blues, the older generation of blues players embraced young musicians' interests in their craft and welcomed them with open arms. The younger blues players then expanded the genre into the North Side of Chicago and, eventually, helped it reach the mainstream. Through the generosity of established blues musicians like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter and others, young blues musicians were able to start their careers and help carry on the genre. With a new, energetic group of blues players and growing interest in White and mainstream audiences, the blues was ready to continue spreading in the mid-1960s.

### **The Mid-1960s: Blues Approaching the Mainstream**

After continuing to grow the North Side blues scene at Big John's throughout 1964, the Butterfield Blues Band began attracting the attention of record labels. In 1965, Elektra Records signed the Paul Butterfield Blues Band to a contract and the band soon began working on their debut album.<sup>73</sup> Michael Bloomfield was brought in as the lead guitarist to

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<sup>72</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>73</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 73.

help round out the band.<sup>74</sup> That same year, the Butterfield Band was recruited to play at the Newport Folk Festival in July of 1965 by Paul Rothchild, who had worked to get Butterfield signed at Elektra and produced their initial recording session.<sup>75</sup> The Festival was an extremely popular event for college students and folkies who mainly believed in the authenticity and integrity of older folk and folk-blues music.<sup>76</sup> Like Muddy Waters had done five years earlier, the Butterfield Band was about to expose a whole new demographic to the electric blues.

It was just before the Butterfield set that Alan Lomax gave his reductive introduction of the band, questioning the ability of a blues band with White members.<sup>77</sup> These comments indicated the resistance among many folk music fans to adopt new, electric blues played by Whites, which defied all perceptions of the simple, Black bluesman in folk circles. Additionally, Lomax's comments prompted Albert Grossman, who was considering managing the Butterfield Band at the time, to initiate a physical altercation with Lomax. Recalled Bloomfield, "They got into a fistfight, these two sort of elderly guys, I was screaming, 'Kick his ass, Albert! Just stomp him!'"<sup>78</sup>

Despite Lomax's scathing introduction, the Butterfield set was incredibly well received. As musician Eric Von Schmidt noted, "The reaction of the crowd to the Butterfield Blues Band set was very positive... People were dancing. There was no doubt about how they felt about it at all."<sup>79</sup> Sam Lay corroborated Von Schmidt's comments, remembering the reception of the folkies who were adamant on listening to older music, Lay noted "It felt like the world caught up to us."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 98.

<sup>76</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 79.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 104.

<sup>80</sup> Anderson, dir., *Sam Lay in Bluesland*.

While the success of Butterfield at Newport demonstrated that many folk fans were ready to embrace electric blues (a shift in interest that would become widely spread by the late-1960s), many fans were still hesitant to accept electric music en masse. The Butterfield Band, minus Paul Butterfield, accompanied Bob Dylan along with Chicago blues musician Barry Goldberg later in the festival. This was Dylan's first live foray into electric folk music and the reception was extremely negative. The crowd, who had championed Dylan as a man of the people, free of commercial corruption, perceived Dylan's switch to electric music as selling out.<sup>81</sup> Thus, while Butterfield's work at Newport further helped increase the popularity of the electric blues, moving the genre one step further into the mainstream, Dylan's set proved that perceptions of authenticity still pervaded the folk music scene.

In October of 1965, Butterfield released their debut album, *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band*.<sup>82</sup> The album was not a huge mainstream success, but it sold well for a blues record at that time.<sup>83</sup> While it only peaked at 123 on the Billboard Hot 200 chart,<sup>84</sup> the album was extremely influential amongst musicians. Carlos Santana remembered the impression the album's title track, "Born in Chicago," had on him, stating, "It was like the anthem... people were singing it in schools."<sup>85</sup> The album also opened up new avenues for the band to begin touring across the United States. Sam Lay remembered, "After that first Butterfield Blues album came out, things really bloomed for us... We played some of everywhere, all over the country."<sup>86</sup>

*The Paul Butterfield Blues Band* is also significant because it epitomized the sound of the younger generation of blues musicians. Featuring the guitar virtuosity of Michael Bloomfield, the aggressive, hard-driven musicality of Paul Butterfield and the unique,

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<sup>81</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 86.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>83</sup> Anderson, dir., *Sam Lay in Bluesland*.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>85</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>86</sup> Anderson, dir., *Sam Lay in Bluesland*.

complex drumming of Sam Lay, *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band* featured a collaboration of cultures, influences and styles to produce the harder, more energetic version of the blues that this generation had been developing for around eight years. The first Butterfield album captured all the styles of each performer and combined them into a well-defined subgenre of the blues.

Performing a mix of covers and original songs written by Nick Gravenites, Paul Butterfield, Mike Bloomfield and others, the album showed both the strong influence from the time spent being mentored by the older generation while branching off into something new. The album's fifth track, "I Got My Mojo Working," a cover of a Muddy Waters tune, highlights the band's collaborative process. Leading off with Bloomfield's quick, clean guitar, this version of the song significantly increases the tempo of Waters' original. Sam Lay's signature "double shuffle" comes in next with Jerome Arnold's bassline, giving the song a complex, yet driving rhythm. Charlie Musselwhite once described the collaborative nature of Lay's drumming which is on full display here: "[Lay is] not just sitting there keeping time, he's like part of the song... he'd help paint the song."<sup>87</sup> Paul Butterfield then joins with his "hot-rodged" harmonica, playing a quick and hard rhythm part. Finally, Elvin Bishop's guitar joins to give the song more dimension, filling out the guitar parts.<sup>88</sup> After the quick introduction, Lay begins singing. Butterfield sang most of the tracks on this album, but Lay, who received massive vocal influence from Muddy Waters, takes centre stage on this song. Here, Lay sounds like a young, fully energized Muddy Waters.<sup>89</sup> When combined with the instrumentals, Lay showed how he adapted his vocal inspiration into a new style.

Commenting on the band's overall style, producer and historian Dick Shurman noted, "The

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, "I Got My Mojo Working," track #5 on *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band*, EKS-7294, 1965, Digital MP3.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.



Butterfield Band had a blues that was tougher, harder and meaner than any other blues band.”<sup>90</sup>

The first Butterfield album exemplifies both the distinct style of young blues musicians and the cross-cultural collaboration that occurred between Black and White blues players in Chicago during the late-1950s and 1960s. Indicative of the increased integration of the 1960s, Butterfield was one of the first mixed-race blues bands and, while only one member’s name represented the band, the music was made through a collaborative process. Despite this open cultural sharing on the part of many musicians, several issues arose from the adoption of the blues by White demographics.

### **Racial Dynamics in the Blues**

The older generation of predominantly Black blues musicians in Chicago were open and willing to share their culture with any young musicians, regardless of race. Though the concept of cultural appropriation was widely undiscussed, some raised concerns about White blues musicians entering the scene. Scholar Charles Keil, in his 1966 work, *Urban Blues*, notes the history of White people stealing and appropriating Black cultures when he claims that Black populations in America “have a culture to guard and protect.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, a journalist for the magazine *Sounds & Fury*, Julius Lester, wrote a review of Butterfield’s album in 1966, criticizing the band for stealing the blues from Black people.<sup>92</sup>

Given the long history of White appropriation of Black culture in America, Keil and Lester make compelling arguments. It should also be noted that the work of the Butterfield Band was a highly collaborative process. Additionally, both support and musical influences were afforded between Black, White, young and old blues musicians.

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<sup>90</sup> Anderson, dir., *Sam Lay in Bluesland*.

<sup>91</sup> Charles Keil, *Urban Blues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 192.

<sup>92</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 105.

With the close contact and friendships that formed between Black and White blues musicians in Chicago during this period, many White blues musicians developed nuanced perspectives on the racial factors that motivate the blues. These perspectives were far more humanistic than those possessed by Alan Lomax and other folk-blues authenticity zealots, which demanded blues be played by Black country blues guitarists with only acoustic instruments. Michael Bloomfield, who spent a great deal of time with various Black blues musicians, befriending and learning from them, often acknowledged the disconnect between White people and the racial factors that surrounded blues music.

In Bloomfield's 1980 miniature memoir, *Me and Big Joe*, he recounts his travels with his friend and father figure Big Joe Williams across the Southern United States. After one trip to St. Louis with Williams, Bloomfield was upset to find the situations that created the blues, namely poverty and oppression, were less romanticized in real life than the perceptions the "simple country bluesman" myth would suggest. Finding himself put off by sights of extreme poverty,<sup>93</sup> Bloomfield ended his short book by commenting on the disconnect between him and the harsh lifestyles which initially created the blues while noting the importance of understanding these factors.

Joe's world wasn't my world, but his music was. It was  
my life; it would be my life. So playing was all I could do,  
and I did it the best I was able. And the music I played,  
I knew where it came from; and there was not any way I'd forget.<sup>94</sup>

Of course, Bloomfield's perceptions of the blues were not without flaws. His assertion that the blues was his music is a bold claim. Despite Bloomfield being welcomed into the genre by Black artists, a claim of ownership over a Black artform, even part ownership, holds some negative connotations when considering the history of cultural appropriation of Black

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<sup>93</sup> Bloomfield with Summerville, *Me and Big Joe*, 32.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

art. However, Bloomfield was, at other times, quick to note the problematic nature of Whites adopting a Black culture. While Bloomfield was very charitable in his appraisal of Butterfield, Musselwhite and other White blues artists' abilities, he was often self-deprecating. In response to Julius Lester's critical review, Bloomfield, though initially mad, acknowledged what he felt was cultural appropriation on his part. "It was cultural rip-off. It's been one since the history of black music. Joe Turner had 'Shake, Rattle and Roll'; Bill Haley had the hit. LaVerne Baker had 'Twiddle-Dee-Dee'; Georgia Gibbs had the hit. 'Pinetop's Boogie' became the 'Dorsey Boogie,' and they had a hit on it. And Elvis – constantly."<sup>95</sup> Bloomfield's awareness of this sensitive history demonstrates that, while his perceptions around race and music were somewhat flawed, he appreciated the sensitivity of the matter. Additionally, Bloomfield was quick to discuss his influences throughout his career, found work for the Black artists that inspired him, influenced their music, and paid respect to the older generation. Though not perfect, Bloomfield's perceptions of race and blues were far more nuanced than those of the authenticity-motivated folk audiences.

In the 1950s and 1960s, blues and folk music authenticity was a major debate. This debate, which aligned with Alan Lomax's perceptions of racial authenticity in blues music, often negatively impacted Black blues players. Demanding that blues musicians be Black, simple, acoustic, country blues players, the folk audiences often pigeon-holed musicians into a style of blues that was inauthentic to what they played. Since the 1940s, many blues musicians, like Waters, Little Walter and Howlin' Wolf, had gone electric. Even though American folk audiences intended to respect the authenticity and culture of Black artists, they actually put up barriers for Black artistic freedom. Muddy Waters, in 1964, noted the unfair demands given to him by White American audiences compared to European audiences, who

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<sup>95</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 134.

were more interested in blues-rock. “In Europe they don’t want me to ‘Uncle Tom’ or clown like I have to here. They just want you to play the blues!”<sup>96</sup>

The younger generation of blues musicians understood this unfair categorization of the blues. Michael Bloomfield pointed this out when he noticed Lightnin’ Hopkins putting on a country act for the Newport crowds at the 1965 Folk Festival: “It was real weird, because it was such a scam: they had Lightnin’ Hopkins there, who had played electric guitar for years and years, and who was sitting there with his processed hair and his pimp shades, and he had this slick mohair suit on, and I think he came out, man, in bare feet, with overalls... I mean, he just acted like a farm boy.”<sup>97</sup>

Likewise, Nick Gravenites addressed the tendency of White Americans to pigeon-hole the blues into a specific style. “[The blues is] a lot bigger than these little boxes people try to fit it in... My feeling is that if you say someone can do something because of race, you can also say they can't do other things because of race.”<sup>98</sup> The close exposure to the older generation, knowing them as colleagues, friends and mentors, allowed Bloomfield and his White peers to develop a more nuanced opinion of their culture.

Blues music strongly reflected the period of growing integration in the 1960s, yet integration did not necessarily mean equity for Black Americans. Racism towards Black people was still rampant across America. Additionally, the criticism faced by White blues musicians pales in comparison to the discrimination felt by Black Americans in the music industry and in most other facets of public life. During a time when integration was becoming increasingly common in the Northern United States, there was still hesitancy and hostility in many circles towards Black people and Black artforms. The local Chicago Federation of Musicians union was comprised of two segregated chapters for most of the 1960s. Despite a

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<sup>96</sup> Michael Bloomfield, “An Interview with Muddy Waters,” *Rhythm and Blues* (July 1964): 7.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

strong interest in integration from many members of the Black Local 208 union much earlier, they would not merge with the White Local 10 until 1966.<sup>99</sup> On October 6, 1963, Local 208 Law Committee chairman Harold Youngblood read a resolution arguing for the integration of the two chapters. Youngblood insisted that, “the arbitrary division along racial lines of the brotherhood of professional musicians in this jurisdiction is mutually harmful to both Locals 208 and 10 of the American Federation of Musicians... such division is both undemocratic and un-American.”<sup>100</sup> Members of the Local 208 were not only concerned with the integration of the union, but what the “terms of the merger” were, suggesting a wariness about partnering with a White institution.<sup>101</sup> Chicago’s two musician union chapters demonstrate a mere iota of the constant discrimination endured by Black artists in the 1960s, even when cross-cultural sharing became a major part of the blues.

### **Conclusion: Westward Bound**

As the Chicago blues scene continued to develop in the 1960s, more White audiences became interested in the genre. Big Joe Williams, Charlie Musselwhite and Michael Bloomfield started a massive surge in blues popularity on the North Side of Chicago through their work at Big John’s. As the Paul Butterfield Blues Band began playing at Big John’s, the blues scene gradually moved closer to mainstream popularity.

During the 1950s and 1960s, young blues musicians in Chicago were mentored by the older generation of blues players. The older generation welcomed the interest that young players had in their artform, given the diminishing young interest since the mid-1950s. Additionally, older blues players acted as parental figures to the younger generation, giving

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<sup>99</sup> “Chicago Federation of Musicians: A History,” Chicago Federation of Musicians, Chicago Federation of Musicians, 2023, <https://cfm10208.com/about/our-history>.

<sup>100</sup> “Minutes of the Board of Directors, Local 208, A.F.M., October 6, 1963,” October 6, 1963, *Minutes of the Board of Directors Meetings, American Federation of Musicians, Local 208, 1963*, Chicago Public Library, *Chicago Blues Archive*, retrieved May 3, 2023.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

them advice, occasionally teaching them, or just being friends and supporting them. The generosity shown to the younger generation by the old helped carry the genre, and expand it as it entered the mid-1960s.

The Butterfield Band's performance at the Newport Folk Festival and the release of *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band* further helped spread the popularity of electric blues. Additionally, the reception of Butterfield at Newport and their first album highlighted the increased interest from folkies and college students in electric blues, rather than just country blues. Despite this success, many White blues fans still demanded what they perceived as authentic blues and folk, as evidenced by the negative reaction to Bob Dylan's electric set at Newport 1965. The Butterfield debut album, which epitomized the cross-racial collaboration and new style of the younger generation of blues players, paved the way for Butterfield's cross-country tours in the mid-1960s.

Though young White musicians were welcomed into the blues scene by established Black artists, several issues arose from this crossover. Notably, White artists and audiences could occasionally present problematic perceptions of blues music, though White blues musicians often developed a more nuanced understanding of race and the blues when compared to White folk-blues audiences. Additionally, the late-1950s and 1960s saw a period of collaboration between White and Black blues artists, in which influence and support was shared openly. Despite this cooperation, Black artists still faced constant discrimination in the music industry and in their everyday lives.

With blues music's popularity at an all-time high, and the Butterfield Band coming off a successful Newport performance and moderately successful album, the blues was ready to spread further across the United States. By the mid-to-late-1960s, the electric blues would reach the West Coast. California. A location primed for a blues explosion due to its high student population and appreciation for underground or countercultural music.

## **Chapter Four:** **'Frisco Blues**

Between 1959 and 1964, Nick Gravenites spent an extended period of time travelling between his home in Chicago, college campuses, and the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California.<sup>1</sup> Gravenites socialized and played music in the thriving underground folk coffeehouse scene on the West Coast, a scene that embraced the folk revival of the early 1960s. Like many of the university folk scenes around the United States, folk music in the Bay Area was almost completely devoid of any blues except for a selection of older country blues.<sup>2</sup> The Bay Area saw some blues music through clubs in Oakland, Richmond and San Francisco, but these West Coast blues scenes were largely unknown to the predominantly White folk scenes.<sup>3</sup>

Though White West Coast musicians had little to no exposure to electric blues, the music scene was primed for an introduction to the blues by the mid-1960s. Academic institutions in California, such as University of California, Berkeley were a part of the consistently growing university folk scene. These university folk scenes heavily fed into the counterculture of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> The music and lifestyles of the counterculture were defined by psychedelic sounds and imagery, experimentation with music, sex and drug use, as well as radical left-wing political ideology. While the counterculture spread through major cities and university towns across the United States, the Bay Area of California became one the epicentres of this movement. Additionally, many of the folk musicians from the Bay Area, who had been exposed to some country blues, began to embrace electric music through folk-rock and psychedelic-rock while simultaneously becoming a part of the 1960s

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<sup>1</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>2</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

counterculture.<sup>5</sup> The year 1965 saw the founding of several popular counterculture folk and psychedelic-rock bands such as the Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and Jefferson Airplane. Thus, after the major breakthroughs of the Butterfield Band in 1965, and the Bay Area's newly adopted electric music and pre-established folk scene, West Coast musicians were ready for the blues. As blues musicians entered the West Coast counterculture music scene in the mid-to-late-1960s, they both profoundly impacted the music and performances of counterculture musicians while embracing countercultural lifestyles and music themselves.

After the Butterfield Band's 1966 performance at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco, many more blues artists began performing and living in the Bay Area. The professionalism and stagecraft demonstrated by blues musicians when they broke into the West Coast music scene contrasted drastically with the music culture already present in California. This professionalism contributed to the influence imparted by blues musicians, specifically Chicago-based players, on West Coast rock artists. Musicians like Michael Bloomfield continued the culture of sharing and mentorship he experienced in Chicago by assisting others with their music careers. Other artists like the Butterfield Band, Nick Gravenites and B.B. King also became a major source of influence for San Francisco-based musicians. King's distinct style became a tremendously popular technique for artists to imitate and adapt in the late-1960s.

Highlighting a two-way influence during this time, the music and lifestyles of the 1960s counterculture impacted blues musicians who came to the Bay Area. Many artists began embracing psychedelic sounds in their blues music and included political messages in some of their songs, creating a new subgenre, psychedelic-blues. Notably, the younger generation of blues musicians largely embraced the counterculture, while the older blues

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



musicians such as Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf dabbled briefly in psychedelic music, but mainly continued to favour the blues they had been playing throughout the early-1960s.

### **San Francisco Bound**

After the release of the Butterfield Blues Band's debut album, they began touring the United States. It was not long after that the band met Bill Graham, promoter for the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco, in 1966.<sup>6</sup> Graham convinced the Butterfield Band to perform at the Fillmore that year resulting in an enthusiastic reception among the San Francisco crowds.<sup>7</sup> At that time, electric blues had been absent from the Fillmore and San Francisco music scene, but Bill Graham was a trusted promoter who would often attract a wide variety of musicians. Charlie Musselwhite noted the interesting selection of music at the Fillmore in the late-1960s, saying, "People would go to the Fillmore no matter who was on the bill, they didn't even maybe know the name but they trusted Bill Graham to bill... good music. And he would mix it up, I mean, he would have – I don't know if this ever happened – but he could have like Ravi Shankar and Count Basie or something."<sup>8</sup>

Given the positive reception of the Butterfield Band in West Coast venues, promoters began looking for additional blues acts to bring in. Michael Bloomfield often gave specific recommendations to Bill Graham or Chet Helms, manager of the Family Dog club.<sup>9</sup> "Michael was a great mentor," stated Helms, "who then directed us to a lot of the individuals out of that Chicago scene."<sup>10</sup> Bloomfield continued the culture of support found in the Chicago blues mentorships by opening career opportunities for his mentors, often recommending them to Graham, Helms or other promoters. Charlie Musselwhite stated that West Coast audiences

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<sup>6</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 120.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>9</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

“didn’t know about Muddy Waters or B.B. King until guys like Mike Bloomfield talked Bill Graham into hiring B.B. King.”<sup>11</sup> The success of the Butterfield Band was repeated by the performances of B.B. King and other blues artists. By the late-1960s, the Bay Area continued to see a major influx in blues artists touring and living there. Though many artists continued to perform regularly in Chicago, the late-1960s marked a major migration of talent to the West Coast. Artists like the Butterfield Band, Charlie Musselwhite, Buddy Guy and others spent extended periods of time around San Francisco.

The decision to leave the Chicago blues scene for San Francisco was often motivated by financial reasons. Just as Muddy Waters’ generation left the South to further their careers, so too did many musicians leave Chicago. Discussing his decision to move West, Charlie Musselwhite recalled, “I didn’t really know anything about the West Coast but after my first album came out I started getting calls from all different places around the country and this one guy from California called and he put together a whole month of work for really good money compared to what was going on in Chicago.”<sup>12</sup> The West Coast music scene offered new avenues for career advancements that could not be matched in Chicago. Musselwhite initially only planned to work in California for one month, but the opportunities and venues provided there surpassed what Chicago could offer. “All the way up through Oregon and Washington, there’s all these clubs that were a lot bigger than the little blues clubs I’d been playing in...” stated Musselwhite, “since they could get more people into them they could make more money and there wasn’t any point in me going back to Chicago once I realized I could stay there and work. And they were playing me on the radio. They weren’t playing me on the radio in Chicago.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

The increase in exposure and money provided sufficient motivation for many Chicago-based blues musicians to move West. However, social factors also played a role in driving musicians out of Chicago. Chicago had a tendency to be a mean city in the 1960s. Writing about his youth in 1997, Nick Gravenites discussed the rough social climate he was involved in. From a young age, Gravenites began carrying a gun and – straying briefly into a desperate life of crime – mugged some people.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that Chicago was a city with a violent climate. Even people like Charlie Musselwhite, who was widely well-liked, could be influenced by Chicago’s rough social scene. “I beat up Bob Koester one day. He just pissed me off one time too many,” recalled Musselwhite of his former landlord.<sup>15</sup> Bob Koester was a notoriously contentious person, but the altercation highlights the violent nature of Chicago. Gravenites, who dealt with substance abuse and violent tendencies while in Chicago, made a conscious effort to leave for San Francisco.<sup>16</sup> Wrote Gravenites, “I saw myself for what I really was, a drunk, a thief, and a thug. The toughest thing in the world is to see yourself, and what I saw I didn't like at all. I made a decision to leave Chicago and go back to San Francisco and leave all my bad-luck blues behind.”<sup>17</sup>

For many musicians, San Francisco offered a vastly different culture than the tough, factory town version of Chicago from the 1960s. “I love the west coast, there’s a lot of beautiful people and wonderful things happened there musically and in many other ways and I still love the West Coast,” remembered Musselwhite.<sup>18</sup> Despite his fondness for California, Musselwhite still loved the music scene in Chicago, as he fondly remembered, “we all just had a good time.”<sup>19</sup> However, Chicago’s harsh environment could still take its toll, as Musselwhite noted, “When I left Chicago, it was cold, unpleasant. I got off the plane [in

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<sup>14</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>15</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 79.

<sup>16</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

California], it was sunny, people were *very* pleasant... So I just decided, ‘I’m not going back’... California was just real conducive to life, I thought. Chicago was just such a bad-news, dead-end, bad-luck, rough motherfucker. I had great times there, though.”<sup>20</sup>

By contrast, the West Coast was far more welcoming for many musicians. Nick Gravenites passionately remembered the youth culture in California when he first travelled there in 1959. “There was a powerful charge in the air and it spoke of energy and youth, for optimism, it spoke for good and truth and change, it spoke of a new awareness, it offered hope for the soul, my soul, my savaged, damaged heart.”<sup>21</sup> Gravenites also recalled a slight culture shock when staying in the West Coast. On many occasions, he remembered seeing his friend and member of Big Brother and the Holding Company, James Gurley accompany his girlfriend, Nancy who carried a “beanbag frog.”<sup>22</sup> “They made an odd trio, James, his girlfriend, and the frog. Instead of talking to James, you'd talk to the frog.”<sup>23</sup> While Gravenites explained this behaviour by attributing it to a motorcycle accident Gurley was involved in, author David Talbot explained that it was done for shock value, “just to see people’s bug-eyed reactions.”<sup>24</sup> Regardless of Gurley’s intent, his behaviour demonstrates the unorthodox and experimental social culture present in the Bay Area counterculture during the late-1960s. Though this culture could be welcoming, it was less conducive to musical professionalism than the tough Chicago music scene.

### **Professionalism and Influence in the West Coast**

In the mid-1960s, the Bay Area music scene was far more amateurish than the Chicago blues community. As Nick Gravenites noted, “Most of the hippie bands that were

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<sup>20</sup> Field, *Harmonicas, Harps, and Heavy Breathers*, 192.

<sup>21</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> David Talbot, *Season of the Witch: Enchantment, Terror and Deliverance in the City of Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 113.

playing in this area were the result of a lot of acid and not too much expertise.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, when the Butterfield Band and other Chicago-based musicians began entering the scene, they demonstrated a performative professionalism that shocked and inspired many West Coast musicians. This Chicago professionalism was defined by the tightness and coordination of the bands as well as each member’s advanced proficiency with their instruments. The end results of this performative ability were deliberate stagecraft and well-conducted shows put on by bands like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, that delighted audiences at Newport in 1965.

By the mid-1960s, young blues musicians in Chicago had been developing their music and performative abilities for years. By contrast, many of the musicians around San Francisco were former folkies who had recently gone electric.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Chicago blues musicians worked long and hard hours, surrounded by professional musicians in many genres, not just the blues. Charlie Musselwhite explained, “You had to play until 4 or 5 in the morning. Night after night, you know, I would play, say, Wednesday through Saturday night, then Sunday morning I would be out on the streets playing for tips around nine in the morning, eight o’clock Monday morning you might play a breakfast show that went until noon. Tuesday might be the only day you had off. So, you know we really put in a lot of work.”<sup>27</sup> The Bay Area musicians tended to perform at a much less demanding pace. “We went to California, yeah I mean, at the very most people would play three sets a night, and often they just played one 45-minute set or hour set,” noted Musselwhite.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Musselwhite attributed some of the professionalism of Chicago blues musicians to the difference in genres played. “Chicago was just loaded with blues and jazz. And if you’re playing that kind of music, you got to think about it, it’s not just mindlessly strumming a

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<sup>25</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 112.

<sup>26</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

chord. If you're an improviser, you got to know how that works, with chord changes and playing melodies and, it's different than strumming a chord on a guitar and strumming a folk song."<sup>29</sup>

In 1966, the Butterfield Band demonstrated this disparity in professionalism at the Fillmore Auditorium and sent waves through the Bay Area music community. In a 1966 article for *Berkeley Barb*, record producer and music manager Ed Denson noted the disparity in performances between a Quicksilver Messenger Service set and the Butterfield Band who came on after. "The bands made an interesting contrast... I was content to hear the Quicksilver people who have a good sound, but I understood what professional meant when the Butterfield group went into its first number."<sup>30</sup> Denson, who was in awe of the performance onstage, described the Butterfield Band's stage antics in detail. "I was really caught up in [the music] when there was a burst of light on the stage. I jumped up thinking the guitar had exploded and saw Bloomfield standing there with a lighted firebrand which he held for a second then stuck in his mouth, pulling the fire off it like it was a popsicle. It brought the whole scene to such an incredible climax that I just stood there for ten minutes."<sup>31</sup> In a 2014 interview, Gary Duncan of Quicksilver Messenger Service noted that the Butterfield Band was "very structured, very tight, everyone could play. There wasn't no fucking around."<sup>32</sup>

Other Chicago-based blues artists received similar appraisals for their wild and entertaining performances. Jules Fremond, contributor for the *East Village Other*, wrote about the energy and command Buddy Guy had over the audience during a 1968 performance at the Fillmore. "Guy sang and played standing up, lying down, and jumping around all over

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Denson, "A Trip with the Blues," *Berkeley Barb*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

the stage. Whatever he did, whatever he played, it was with an absolutely incredible sense of authority.”<sup>33</sup>

The professionalism demonstrated by Chicago blues players gave them an authority in the West Coast and these musicians spread their influence throughout the Bay Area. Prominent 1960s guitarist Carlos Santana once wrote, “The first time I saw Michael Bloomfield play guitar was when the Butterfield Blues Band came to San Francisco... And it literally changed my life enough for me to say, ‘This is what I want to do and want to be for the rest of my life.’”<sup>34</sup> Michael Bloomfield was a tremendous influence for musicians who found popularity in the 1960s counterculture. As someone who was mentored by older blues musicians in Chicago, Bloomfield passed on that generosity to the young artists in the Bay Area and acted as a mentor figure to them.

Carlos Santana attributed Bloomfield with getting him his start in the music industry by inviting him to play during a jam session at the Fillmore.<sup>35</sup> Bloomfield, who had never played with Santana before, allowed the young guitarist to borrow his guitar and play along.<sup>36</sup> After hearing the jam session, Bill Graham asked Santana to open for Howlin’ Wolf and Steve Miller at the Fillmore.<sup>37</sup> “I felt like somebody had just given me a key and opened a huge door for me. So Michael opened the door for me to be in the field that I’m in today,” said Santana of Bloomfield’s generosity.<sup>38</sup>

Bloomfield was similarly generous with other musicians. Bloomfield’s virtuosity on the guitar led to him quickly becoming renowned as an expert in San Francisco. Jorma Kaukonen, lead guitarist of Jefferson Airplane, remembered how Bloomfield mentored and

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<sup>33</sup> Jules Freemon, “Pop, rock & jelly.” *East Village Other*, April 12, 1968, p. 12, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>34</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, vii.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

taught guitarists who were just beginning to pick up electrics: “When [Bloomfield] first came to San Francisco, I... had just started playing with the Jefferson Airplane. I had never played electric guitar before really, and he was one of the first guys that showed me how to do stuff. To bend notes, to feedback, to sustain things.”<sup>39</sup>

Michael Erlewine, founder of AllMusic.com and former member of The Prime Movers Blues Band (a relatively short-lived blues band from Ann Arbor), experienced the generosity Bloomfield showed many musicians when he came to San Francisco during the Summer of Love in 1967. Erlewine, penniless and without a place to stay, was supported by Bloomfield, who found them accommodations and arranged for them to open for Cream at the Fillmore.<sup>40</sup> Like Michael Bloomfield, Buddy Guy also continued the tradition of mentoring younger musicians, albeit long after the 1960s. Guy, who has had a career spanning nearly eight decades, has mentored blues guitarists such as Stevie Ray Vaughan, Christone “Kingfish” Ingram and Quinn Sullivan. Guy and Bloomfield’s welcoming attitudes towards young musicians clearly reflects their upbringings through the Chicago blues scene and is indicative of the mentorship provided to them by artists like Muddy Waters and B.B. King. Nick Gravenites also formed connections with many of the artists around the Bay Area. Gravenites wrote multiple songs for Janis Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Company and produced the first two Quicksilver Messenger Service albums.<sup>41</sup> Gravenites work with these groups as a writer, producer and occasional singer further highlights the tangible impact that Chicago-based musicians had on Bay Area musicians.

Musically, Chicago-based blues players also had a major influence on the West Coast. The psychedelic song “East-West” by the Butterfield Blues Band had a tremendous impact on psychedelic-rock. The song, which the Butterfield Band performed during their 1966 tours

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<sup>39</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Erlewine, *Ann Arbor: The 1960s Scene* (Ann Arbor: Self Published, 2019), 136.

<sup>41</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 155.



of the Bay Area combined the Eastern Indian influence with Western pop music and hard-driven Chicago blues.<sup>42</sup> Written by Bloomfield and Gravenites, the song features an extended Indian inspired raga-jam that shows off Bloomfield's guitar prowess and extensive influences, playing a range of styles from blues to jazz to abstract, Eastern inspired runs.<sup>43</sup> While Indian influence was becoming more prominent in the music of the counterculture by the mid-1960s with bands like the Beatles experimenting with the sitar on tracks like 1965's "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)," "East-West" presented one of the earliest examples of an extended, one-chord jam style song.<sup>44</sup> This style of song became extremely popular among countercultural bands, particularly in live performances. Furthermore, Bloomfield biographer Ed Ward attributed "East-West" as a major influence on the Grateful Dead, who made heavy use of this style of jamming in their live concerts.<sup>45</sup> Though the song's title is clearly a reference to Indian (East) music and American (West) pop, the title aptly symbolizes the convergence of the Chicago blues scene in the East and the San Francisco folk-rock scene of the West.

Other artists, like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, became major musical influences on Bay Area rock musicians around the mid-to-late-1960s. Much of the basis of late-1960s rock was founded in blues music. Additionally, the openness from bands like Butterfield, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles about their influences inspired many psychedelic-rock bands to seek out these artists and begin covering their songs.<sup>46</sup> Some artists who had relocated to the Bay Area from other regions, such as Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, had previous experience listening to and playing electric blues, but Bay Area folkies who became rock musicians had little to no exposure to electric or Chicago blues. Canned Heat, a blues band

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<sup>42</sup> Denson, "A Trip with the Blues," *Berkeley Barb*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, "East-West," track #9 on *East-West*, EKS-7315, recorded 1966, Digital MP3.

<sup>44</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 115.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Denson, "A Trip with the Blues," *Berkeley Barb*, 4.

that formed in San Francisco in 1965, was a purveyor of electric blues. However, the band's founding members, Alan "Blind Owl" Wilson and Bob Hite, were mostly inspired by country blues artists such as the early work of John Lee Hooker.<sup>47</sup>

B.B. King became a particularly major influence for rock and blues musicians across America after coming to San Francisco. King's career exploded after Bloomfield introduced him to the West Coast music scene.<sup>48</sup> His unique style, bending guitar and signature "B.B. Box" pattern made him one of the most imitated and adapted guitarists in 1960s rock music. "B.B. King was such an influence," said Bloomfield about the impact King had on guitarists, "I learned from him, and I know [Eric] Clapton learned from him. We all learned from this man. He was like the Ravi Shankar, the guru."<sup>49</sup> Nick Gravenites once rhetorically asked in a 1997 article, "how many bluesmen started their careers as B.B. King clones?"<sup>50</sup>

King's distinctive style made it easy to spot which guitarists he impacted. In a 1976 interview for the *Ann Arbor Sun*, King discussed the myriad of musicians who were inspired by him.<sup>51</sup> The interviewer acknowledged King's widespread influence by stating: "The way you play guitar has influenced just about everybody who plays rock and roll."<sup>52</sup> King's response to this comment indicated the prevalence of his influence throughout the Bay Area. "I've heard people say that, but I didn't pay attention to it until I was reading where Ralph Gleason had mentioned that he'd been going to the Fillmore West where a few of the young guitars had been coming in there and he said nearly everybody was playing something that I had played or something similar to what I was playing. That's when I really started to pay

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<sup>47</sup> Fito de la Parra, with T.W. McGarry and Marlane McGarry, *Living the Blues: Canned Heat's Story of Music, Drugs, Death, Sex and Survival* (Sudbury, MA: eBookIt.com, 2011), 11.; "You're Gonna Get the Blues," *The Great Speckled Bird*, May 17, 1971, p. 6, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>48</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 120.

<sup>49</sup> Wolkin and Keenom, *If You Love These Blues*, 123.

<sup>50</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>51</sup> "An Interview with B.B. King: In Between the Blues." *Ann Arbor Sun*, September 10, 1976. p. 9. *Independent Voices*.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

attention.”<sup>53</sup> King, who had been renowned in blues communities for both his guitar and voice, also noticed that the rock-centric White audiences mostly favoured his guitar prowess. “Starting about ‘67, the last of ‘66, that’s when my guitar started to catch on more with the whites than it had been with the blacks. It started to get popular then. Not the singing, but the guitar.”<sup>54</sup>

Many other guitarists have attributed influence to King. Jimi Hendrix, another prominent counterculture guitarist noted the mixture of influences that made up his style, though he was influenced by King and other blues guitarists before his time spent in California in the late-1960s. “Like I used to like Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran and Muddy Waters and Elvin James. See a mixture of those things and hearing those things at the same time, which way do you go . . . B. B. King and so forth.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, later artists like Lenny Kravitz have credited King as an inspiration,<sup>56</sup> suggesting his influence has carried on well beyond the 1960s. The breadth of King’s influence even subtly found its way through certain facets of popular culture. In a 1993 episode of the show *The Simpsons*, titled “Brother From the Same Planet,” a scene parodying *Saturday Night Live* portrayed the show's bandleader G.E. Smith distinctly making use of the “B.B. Box” pattern on guitar.<sup>57</sup> Clearly this was not a direct reference to King, but it demonstrates how ingrained his style became in rock guitar throughout the second half of the twentieth century. King also played guitar on the track “Born Under a Bad Sign” on the 1990 novelty album, *The Simpsons Sing the Blues*.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Jan S. Wenner and Baron Wolman, “Jimi Hendrix On Early Influences, ‘Axis’ and More,” *Rolling Stone* (March 9, 1968), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/jimi-hendrix-on-early-influences-axis-and-more-203924/>.

<sup>56</sup> “BB King's Influence on Modern Music,” BBC News, BBC, May 15, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-32753062>.

<sup>57</sup> *The Simpsons*, 1993, Season 4, Episode 14, “Brother From the Same Planet,” directed by Jeffrey Lynch, Aired February 4, 1993 on Fox.

<sup>58</sup> *The Simpsons Sing the Blues*, Geffen Records 9 24308-2, recorded 1990.

Despite the tremendous impact Chicago blues musicians had on the West Coast music scene, this was not a one-way relationship. Many blues artists who travelled to San Francisco in the mid-to-late-1960s began to embrace the countercultural lifestyles and music present in the Bay Area.

### **Embracing the Counterculture**

Coming from the cold, tough environment of Chicago to the sunny and welcoming counterculture on the West Coast proved to have an impact on many blues musicians, not just Chicago-based ones. Musical influence and inspiration often come through exposure and the surrounding music scenes. For blues musicians who had gone West in the mid-to-late-1960s, both the music and lifestyles of the Bay Area counterculture proved influential. “We showed up [to San Francisco] in our continental suits...” stated Elvin Bishop, “and within three days... that hair was growing, the tie-dyes were taking the place of the suits and everything, we just took right to it.”<sup>59</sup>

The members of the Butterfield Band largely embraced the counterculture music and styles. After Michael Bloomfield left the band due to its demanding touring schedule, the Butterfield Band drifted towards soul and rock with orchestral accompaniments, a production technique popular among West Coast counterculture bands.<sup>60</sup> The band’s 1968 album, *The Resurrection of Pigboy Crabshaw*, featured psychedelic, swirling imagery on the cover. Additionally, many of the tracks, such as “One More Headache” and “Driftin’ and Driftin’” were a mixture of Butterfield’s signature Chicago blues with hints of soul. The album also made heavy use of a horn section and, though blues artists like B.B. King made frequent use

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<sup>59</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>60</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 121-122.

of horns as early as the 1950s, this orchestral accompaniment marked a departure from the straight, hard-driven blues of Butterfield's first two records.<sup>61</sup>

Bloomfield's departure from Butterfield before their transition into a new genre did not mean Bloomfield disliked the San Francisco sound. Bloomfield, who had been a big fan of early rock 'n' roll artists, admired the rock music of the counterculture such as the Beatles.<sup>62</sup> In a 1968 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Bloomfield complimented the Beatles' ability to continuously develop their music. "The masters of music — the Beatles who slowly evolved to music for men with serious patterns and serious and curious ideas. There's no juvenality about it at all. They developed the pop scene."<sup>63</sup> In 1967, Bloomfield demonstrated his own drive to further change and develop his music when he formed the Electric Flag with Nick Gravenites, fellow Chicago blues musicians Barry Goldberg, R&B and soul musician Buddy Miles and bassist Harvey Brooks.<sup>64</sup> The Electric Flag represented a combination of Bloomfield's folkie days of searching for American music roots and history while embracing the experimental sounds of the counterculture and branching off into new genres. "I want to do all kinds of things, American music. That's our thing, American music," said Bloomfield in 1968, "whatever strikes our fancy, whatever there's no staying in one bag when there are way lot more things to do."<sup>65</sup>

The Electric Flag's 1968 debut album *A Long Time Comin'* featured a plethora of counterculture motifs. Like *Pigboy*, *A Long Time Comin'* featured psychedelic imagery on its cover with combinations of soul, rock, blues and orchestral arrangements in its tracks. The first track on the album stands out as a distinct example of the convergence of Chicago blues and West Coast rock. The song "Killing Floor," is a cover of a 1964 Howlin' Wolf song of

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<sup>61</sup> The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, *The Resurrection of Pigboy Crabshaw*, EKS-74015, recorded 1968, Digital MP3.

<sup>62</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 231.

<sup>63</sup> Wenner, Jan S., "The Rolling Stone Interview: Mike Bloomfield."

<sup>64</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 123.

<sup>65</sup> Wenner, Jan S., "The Rolling Stone Interview: Mike Bloomfield."

the same name. The song's tempo and energy are increased in usual Bloomfield fashion, and a horn accompaniment replaces Hubert Sumlin's rhythm guitar part.<sup>66</sup>

The song does not only include the sounds of the counterculture; political commentary is also present in this track. Notably, the beginning of the song features a short segment from president Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 address to Congress in which he urges the United States government to honour the voting rights of racialized groups.<sup>67</sup> "Killing Floor" plays Johnson's opening statement: "I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy," before cutting off the speech with a laugh track and launching into the song.<sup>68</sup> During 1966, Johnson was heavily criticized by members of the counterculture for his role in the continuation and escalation of the Vietnam War. Thus, when the laugh track cuts off Johnson's speech, it exposes the perceived hypocrisy of Johnson, who argued for domestic human rights while continuing a violent war in Vietnam. The inclusion of Johnson's speech also alters the meaning of the song's name. The original meaning behind the lyrics in "Killing Floor" are clearly a metaphor for the singer's mistreatment at the hands of a cruel love interest. However, when paired with a critique of the United States' conduct in Vietnam, the term "Killing Floor" begins to represent Vietnam and the mass casualties experienced by both sides of the conflict. Opposition to the Vietnam war was one of the defining traits of the counterculture, and "Killing Floor" indicates that Bloomfield, Gravenites and their Electric Flag band members embraced this ideology during their time on the West Coast.

Nick Gravenites, who was a veteran of the West Coast scene by the late-1960s, included political messages in some of his other musical endeavours. During a 1967 performance by Quicksilver Messenger Service at the Fillmore, Gravenites acted as a guest

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<sup>66</sup> The Electric Flag, "Killing Floor," track #1 on *A Long Time Comin'*, CS 9597, recorded 1968, Digital MP3.

<sup>67</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "March 15, 1965: Speech Before Congress on Voting Rights," Speech at United States House of Congress, March 15, 1965, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-15-1965-speech-congress-voting-rights>.

<sup>68</sup> The Electric Flag, "Killing Floor."

singer for the band during a song he had written titled “Year of the Outrage.” The song is a nearly eight minute long, psychedelic-rock jam session in which Gravenites highlights a multitude of contemporary political issues including war, consumerism and police brutality.<sup>69</sup> One line in the song critiqued the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War: “The army needs more men for its war / the boys are turning weird by the score.”<sup>70</sup> Another line highlighted the rampant police brutality in the United States: “The cops they say, everyone’s bad / the doctors say, everyone’s mad.”<sup>71</sup> Gravenites clearly embraced the political beliefs of the counterculture which were on full display in much of his music.

Freddie King, another young blues musician who spent an extended period of time in Chicago, also infused political imagery in his lyrics. In a 1970 cover of the blues standard “Look Over Yonder Wall,” first recorded by James Clarke in 1945, King replaces a phrase in the song to include a reference to the Vietnam War. In Clark’s original version of the song the verse reads: “Well I know your man went to war / Leave you was kinda rough / I don’t know/ how many men he killed / But it was enough.”<sup>72</sup> Given the time of recording, this version was most likely a reference to World War II. Additionally, the criticism of the man who left for the war centred around leaving his wife or partner, rather than the actual act of war. King’s version reads: “I know your man been to Vietnam, baby / I know he had it kind of rough / I don’t know how many men he killed / But I think he done killed enough.”<sup>73</sup> King’s version describes the Vietnam War itself as “rough.” King’s updated version shows a distinct connection between him and the anti-war counterculture ideals that were demonstrated by the Electric Flag and other musicians in the late-1960s. The Chicago-based

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<sup>69</sup> Quicksilver Messenger Service, “Year of the Outrage,” track #6 on *Live Across America 1967-1977*, CLO 0321, recorded 1967-1977, Digital MP3.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> James Clark, “Look Over Yonder Wall,” track #1 on *Look Over Yonder Wall / Love Me or Let Me Be*, CS 36948, recorded 1945, Digital MP3.

<sup>73</sup> Freddie King, “Look Over Yonder Wall,” track #1 on *My Feeling for the Blues*, SD 9016, recorded 1970, Digital MP3.

blues guitarist J.B. Lenoir took on social issues in his music. In 1965, Lenoir recorded “Alabama Blues,” a song that criticized Alabama and, by extension, the United States for its rampant police brutality towards Black people.<sup>74</sup>

Not all musicians were as eager to include political messages in their music as Bloomfield, King, Lenoir or Nick Gravenites. Despite learning about many causes and issues during his time in California, Charlie Musselwhite did not feel the need to include politics in his music. “I got my eyes opened up to a lot of things I didn’t know about before. But I never felt like putting politics in my music was something I – you know people would come to be entertained, they don’t want to think about that stuff necessarily.”<sup>75</sup> Although Musselwhite left politics out of his music, he still embraced new causes through actions that were derived from humanitarian compassion rather than broad political motivations. During the Occupation of Alcatraz, in which a group of Indigenous peoples occupied Alcatraz Island between 1969 and 1971 to protest Indigenous land theft, Musselwhite showed his support for the protesting group. “I went over and gave them a generator because they didn’t have any electricity out there and I took my whole band out there and we played and – hooked up the generator and played, and took amplifiers and everything and they had a big dinner for us all... and it was a good time. I guess you could consider that political, but it wasn’t like I was out waving the flag and trying to get attention for myself, it was just something I did for them.”<sup>76</sup> Musselwhite’s actions demonstrated an impact that the progressive and countercultural environment of San Francisco had on musicians.

Like many musicians in the Bay Area, Michael Bloomfield also exemplified a countercultural lifestyle. The guitarist was known to embrace some of the anti-establishment qualities of the counterculture. Biography Ed Ward characterized him as someone with a

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<sup>74</sup> J.B. Lenoir, “Alabama Blues,” track #1 on *Alabama Blues*, LR 42.001, recorded 1965, Digital MP3.

<sup>75</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*



“need to abjure virtually all show business concessions.”<sup>77</sup> Though Bloomfield’s contentious relationship with business dealings was one that developed far earlier than when he reached the West Coast, he strongly displayed his anti-establishment, anti-business personality after moving to San Francisco. Bloomfield was suspended numerous times in the late-1960s and 1970s from the American Federation of Musicians union for failing to pay dues from the money he made through gigs. Though it was common for musicians to miss some dues payments in the 1960s, Bloomfield’s case was extreme, and demonstrated his lack of motivation to comply with business and establishment standards in the music industry.<sup>78</sup> Overall, Bloomfield was suspended about five times in an almost nine year period between October 2, 1965 and January 10, 1974.<sup>79</sup> In a 1973 letter to the secretary-treasurer of the AFM, Bloomfield’s union file was described as “cumbersome” due to his multiple suspensions and the shows he played during his suspensions, which made it nearly impossible to track the backed dues he owed.<sup>80</sup>

Buddy Guy was another musician that exemplified the convergence of Chicago blues and the counterculture. Guy’s fiery attitude and aggressive stage presence meshed well with the increasing social unrest of the late-1960s. Guy embodied the anger of young Americans through his performances. One article for the *Berkeley Tribe*, a countercultural newspaper, recounted a performance by Guy in which he commented on police brutality (with the author of the article replacing the word “police” with “pig”) and ridiculed politics. “On stage he raps about pig harassment, how he’s going to run for president and campaign with his blues, and if

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<sup>77</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 138.

<sup>78</sup> “Minutes of the Board of Directors, Local 208, A.F.M., April 18, 1963,” April 18, 1963. *Minutes of the Board of Directors Meetings, American Federation of Musicians, Local 208, 1963*, Chicago Public Library, *Chicago Blues Archive*, retrieved May 3, 2023.

<sup>79</sup> “Case 65 TB 461,” August 31, 1965, *Michael Bloomfield: AFM Inactive File*, Chicago Public Library, *Chicago Blues Archive*, retrieved May 3, 2023.

<sup>80</sup> “RE: Michael Bloomfield Case 474, 1972-1973,” October 16, 1973, *Michael Bloomfield: AFM Inactive File*, Chicago Public Library. *Chicago Blues Archive*, retrieved May 3, 2023.

elected how he'll do two things: turn everyone loose and then turn himself loose.”<sup>81</sup>

Summing up the performance, the author wrote, “Buddy Guy is young, spaced and angry,” indicating Guy fit in well with the radical and energetic counterculture scene.<sup>82</sup>

Guy also made use of some psychedelic imagery during the late-1960s and early-1970s. On his 1968 album, *A Man and the Blues*, the cover for the record showed Guy surrounded by bright, swirling colours which create a psychedelic image.<sup>83</sup>

Many more Chicago-raised artists experimented with the new sounds and styles of the counterculture such as Steve Miller or the aforementioned Barry Goldberg who were both Chicago blues musicians before relocating to San Francisco. Luther Allison was a guitarist who made frequent use of psychedelic-rock guitar parts and a wah-wah pedal in his blues. In a 1969 article for the countercultural publication, the *Madison Kaleidoscope*, writer Mark Rohrer deemed Allison to be the “Jimi Hendrix of the blues” in reference to Allison’s psychedelic guitar.<sup>84</sup> Even blues artists who pursued careers outside of Chicago like Taj Mahal accepted and fit in well with the counterculture. Mahal’s name, as previously mentioned, came from an idolized view of Indian peacefulness. The adaptation of Indian culture was a major aspect of the counterculture. Additionally, Mahal’s reputation for mixing and combining different cultural music types worked harmoniously with the musical experimentation and diverse influences present in the counterculture.

Through the increase in influences and musical experimentation, blues musicians on the West Coast were able to create a new genre of blues music occasionally known as psychedelic-blues. This new subgenre of the blues featured the same increased energy that the younger generation of blues players had established by the mid-1960s but it also featured

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<sup>81</sup> “Shake,” *Berkeley Tribe*, September 26, 1969. p. 20, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>83</sup> Buddy Guy, *A Man and the Blues*, SVRL 19002, recorded 1968, Digital MP3.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Rohrer, “Blues Notes,” *Madison Kaleidoscope*, December 1, 1969, p. 17, *Independent Voices*.

psychedelic instrumentation, political symbolism and influence from soul and rock. Artists like Luther Allison, the Electric Flag and the Butterfield Band made major breakthroughs in this genre with their work in San Francisco during the late-1960s.

### **Blues and the Generational Divide**

Not all blues musicians embraced the counterculture as openly as artists like Bloomfield and Guy. Howlin' Wolf was outspoken about his disdain for psychedelic-rock and his criticisms of hippie blues fans. In a 1969 interview, Howlin' Wolf discussed *The Howlin' Wolf Album*. This album featured re-recorded psychedelic versions of Wolf's classic hits and was thought up by record producer Marshall Chess. "Oh, well, that was Marshall Chess's ideas, you know, I never did go for it and never did like it 'cause that queer sound, that bow-wow. I just don't like it. I still don't like it. But the teenagers go for it, you know," said Wolf of his album.<sup>85</sup> Another 1969 article quoted Wolf giving the album a far less charitable assessment, saying, "It's dog shit."<sup>86</sup>

Wolf also criticized the academic approach to studying blues that many folkies turned counterculture members had. In an interview that was conducted during the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival, Wolf discussed what he felt was a disconnect between White counterculture members and their music with the blues. "These [blues] performers have the biggest hearts in the entertainment business, and there were thirty or forty thousand kids here trying to learn about heart... Thousands of hippies, hipped up children, with great big heads and tiny hearts, trying to lose that big head and get that big heart. The big head and hard heart of modern rock and roll and psychedelic music has gone as far as it will go."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> "The Wolf," *Ann Arbor Argus*, August 5, 1970, p. 15, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>86</sup> Edward Taub, "Blues are Popular But There's Still Hope," *North Carolina Anvil*, September 13, 1969, p. 8, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Erlewine, "An Interview with Howlin' Wolf," In *Blues in Black & White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals*, edited by Michael Erlewine (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 29.

Muddy Waters had a similar appraisal of psychedelic music. In Buddy Guy's autobiography, Guy recounted discussing Waters' 1968 album *Electric Mud* with him. Like *The Howlin' Wolf Album*, *Electric Mud* was similarly conceived by Chess and featured the same format of psychedelic re-recordings of classic hits. "That psychedelic shit drove me up a wall," said Waters, according to Guy, "Worst part was when I got to the show, they wanted me to play it live—and I couldn't. What's the point of making a record when you can't even play it with your own band?"<sup>88</sup>

Wolf and Waters' musical preferences highlight a generational divide between older and younger blues musicians in the 1960s. Many members of the younger generation openly embraced the lifestyles, music or causes of the counterculture while many of the older generation preferred to continue playing the blues that they had developed prior to the 1960s. Though some older artists like B.B. King made albums that dipped into countercultural sounds and styles (like King's 1969 album *Completely Well*), these endeavours were mainly thought of by producers as a way to capitalize on hippie fan bases.<sup>89</sup> This contrasted with the younger generation, who embraced both music and countercultural political rhetoric, action and lifestyles.

### **Conclusion: The Audiences and the Popularity Boom**

West Coast and counterculture musicians were extremely receptive of the incoming blues players in the late-1960s. The professionalism of Chicago-based blues players and their years of experience gave them an authority with which they could influence and inspire artists like Carlos Santana and the Grateful Dead. Artists like Michael Bloomfield continued the culture of support and mentorship found in the Chicago blues scene by helping many

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<sup>88</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 236.

<sup>89</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 34.

West Coast artists with their music careers. Bloomfield also repaid his mentors' acts of kindness by helping them come to the West Coast to perform at much larger venues for more money. After B.B. King arrived on the West Coast, he became one of the most imitated guitarists of the 1960s. King's distinct style influenced countless guitarists in the second half of the twentieth century.

Blues musicians were not the only ones who spread their influence in 1960s California. Many blues artists were impacted by the sounds, lifestyles and political causes of the counterculture. Blues musicians in the late-1960s often included political messages in their music or psychedelic instrumentation. Other artists took up causes or lived countercultural lifestyles.

Despite the widespread embrace of the counterculture by younger blues artists, the older generation was often more hesitant to accept the music and hippie mentality. This presented a stylistic and musical generational divide between old and young blues artists.

The embrace of the counterculture by blues musicians was also matched by the popularity they received from countercultural audiences. Across the United States, the counterculture had been developing and growing since the mid-1960s and it was ready to embrace the blues. As electric blues became more well-known in university and counterculture circles, the popularity of young and old blues musicians exploded into the underground and the mainstream communities across America. The counterculture developed a very unique relationship with blues music, and the genre became an integral part of the subversive culture in the late-1960s.

## **Chapter Five:** **The Hippie Blues**

“The music is spokesman for the culture.”<sup>1</sup> These were the words written by Sam Silver, a contributor for the underground countercultural newspaper, *East Village Other*, based out of New York. Silver’s words highlight the importance of music to the counterculture. For a movement that was known for its self-expression and experimental music and lifestyles, music was a method for counterculture members to profess their beliefs. Due to this intimate connection with music, members of the counterculture became passionate about a variety of genres. One such genre was the blues. Around 1966, as White West Coast audiences were first becoming exposed to electric blues, so too were other countercultural Americans finding out about this genre. Blues music became a popular and important part of the movement’s culture in the late-1960s and early-1970s and found new prominence in this community.

During the late-1960s, as more White countercultural audiences began listening to the blues, the genre gradually made its way into the mainstream as well. Blues festivals saw a major rise in the late-1960s and beyond, such as the massive Ann Arbor Blues Festival of 1969. Blues performers were also frequently included in important counterculture pop festivals such as Woodstock in 1969 and the Monterey Pop Festival of 1967. Similarly, many of the definitive counterculture pop stars such as Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix had extensive experience as blues musicians.

Blues records and live blues performances were frequently discussed and reviewed in countercultural newspaper publications. Countercultural newspapers and magazines gave a clear indication of the discussions and interests present within the movement, given that they were run by students and community members.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Silver, “Monterey Pop Festival,” *East Village Other*, July 15-30, 1967, p. 6, *Independent Voices*.

Since many members of the counterculture were formerly involved in the academic blues studies of the folk revival, blues as a field of study and discussion topic was also frequently brought up in these papers. Though many of these counterculture blues fans were former folkies, the counterculture largely embraced electric blues music. Notably, members of the counterculture developed a more complex understanding of the blues than the one demonstrated by Alan Lomax and other folkies earlier in the decade. Discussions of blues in the late-1960s were inextricably linked to discussions of race, but White blues artists were not always deemed inauthentic and Black blues artists were not all considered to be primitive. While some interpretations of the blues remained simplistic, counterculture blues fans were less likely to pigeon-hole Black blues artists into specific, overly simplified roles than folk revivalists of the 1950s and early-1960s.

Blues music was so openly embraced by the counterculture for a multitude of reasons. The simplest reason is that blues made up the basis for much of the rock music that was extremely popular in the counterculture. Given the history of blues and its connection with the mistreatment of Black people in America, the genre was a way for progressive members of the counterculture to express solidarity with Black people. The emotional expression and early motivations behind the blues were also appropriated by White members of the counterculture and adapted to their beliefs and experiences. As an extension of this, blues was used as a method to reject the mainstream and embrace subversive or underground values. Due to the dominant perception of blues as an anti-commercial artform, it was adopted as an expression of the widespread anti-commercial beliefs in the counterculture.

### **Blues Popularity Through Festivals, Performers and Albums**

During the 1965 breakout of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, their well-received performances and albums among folkies and college students demonstrated that fans

favouring what they perceived as simplistic music were ready to embrace fully electric, mixed-race musical acts performing blues. The band's 1966 album *East-West* charted for 29 weeks, peaking at number 65 on the Billboard 200 album chart, a moderate success and good recognition for a blues record at that time.<sup>2</sup> After the album's release the band continued their touring and began making the rounds at different colleges across the United States.<sup>3</sup> It was not long after that other blues artists began performing at colleges around the United States and Canada. Since college towns were major hubs for the counterculture during the late-1960s, these performances actively spread the blues throughout the counterculture.

By the late-1960s and early-1970s, many members of the folk-revival movement had fed into the counterculture.<sup>4</sup> Across the United States, bluesniks were becoming blues freaks. Blues music was a prominent part of the counterculture while slowly becoming a genre that was listened to in the mainstream as well. It is generally accepted that the blues became a mainstream genre by the end of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> The counterculture began to embrace electric blues as early as 1966, when blues artists began flooding into the Bay Area, the heart of the counterculture. Along with college gigs, blues artists frequently performed at auditoriums that were popular among the counterculture, such as the Fillmore in San Francisco and the Grande in Detroit.

Bill Graham of the Fillmore was known to frequently bring in blues artists based on Michael Bloomfield's request.<sup>6</sup> Likewise Chet Helms, manager of the Family Dog music venue in San Francisco, also followed Bloomfield's suggestions.<sup>7</sup> In 1969, an article in the *Madison Kaleidoscope* reviewed a Luther Allison concert at the Great Hall auditorium on the

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<sup>2</sup> "The Paul Butterfield Blues Band," billboard, Penske Media Corporation, 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/the-paul-butterfield-blues-band/>.

<sup>3</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>4</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>5</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



University of Wisconsin campus.<sup>8</sup> A 1971 article from the *Ann Arbor Sun* described a concert at the Hill Auditorium in Ann Arbor, Michigan in which “Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, John Lee Hooker, and Terry Tate knocked out some killer music to a real full crowd.”<sup>9</sup> These performances are just a few of the large swaths of blues concerts available through countercultural institutions and venues. Blues performances were present and popular in the counterculture. These large auditorium concerts, while a major departure from the small Chicago blues club scene, represented the merging of the blues with the large-scale performances of the counterculture. These larger concerts also indicated the growing popularity of the genre, and its journey into mainstream popularity.

As the counterculture accepted the blues into its concert scene, it also welcomed the blues into its culture of music festivals. Blues acts were common in counterculture music festivals during the late-1960s. The Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 saw a host of blues acts grace the stage during the three-day event. Blues acts such as Canned Heat, who were extremely outspoken about their blues influences, played at Monterey.<sup>10</sup> Other acts included the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, the Blues Project (led by Al Kooper), the British blues group the Animals and the Steve Miller Band.<sup>11</sup> Though the Steve Miller Band was not a conventional blues band, Steve Miller himself was brought up in the Chicago blues scene, and this was a fact of which many blues fans were aware.<sup>12</sup> Michael Bloomfield’s band, the Electric Flag, made their debut at Monterey in 1967. The Electric Flag represented a fusion of American genres of music, yet Bloomfield, and audiences, still considered the Electric Flag to be a blues band. In Sam Silver’s article about Monterey, he calls the Electric Flag “the best

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<sup>8</sup> Rohrer, Mark. “Blues Notes.” *Madison Kaleidoscope*, December 1, 1969. p. 16-17. *Independent Voices*.

<sup>9</sup> “Blues,” *Ann Arbor Sun*, October 1-4, 1971, p. 4, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>10</sup> “You’re Gonna Get the Blues,” *the Great Speckled Bird*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Silver, “Monterey Pop Festival,” *East Village Other*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ed Denson, “Folk Scene,” *Berkeley Barb*, September 15, 1967, p. 12, *Independent Voices*.

possible blues band.”<sup>13</sup> The Electric Flag’s debut at Monterey received a positive reception from audiences.<sup>14</sup>

Notably, the Monterey Pop Festival got mainstream media attention as well. While it was largely organized by members of the counterculture, the concert was covered by mainstream media and attended by mainstream music fans.<sup>15</sup> Sam Silver noted in his article that “a good part of the audience was either innocent or straight,” with the term “straight” acting as a synonym for “mainstream.”<sup>16</sup> Silver also highlighted an article from a mainstream media outlet which reported “that people were smoking LSD at the festival,” despite LSD not being a substance that is ingested by smoking.<sup>17</sup> This article and the mainstream audience turnout highlights that, while a disconnect between the mainstream and counterculture existed, as music became popular in the counterculture, it also gained some mainstream traction. Thus, as blues continued to grow in popularity amongst subversive communities, mainstream audiences started to take notice by the late-1960s.

The historic Woodstock Music and Art Fair, held in upstate New York on August 15–18, 1969 was often considered the pinnacle of the counterculture. Woodstock featured many blues performers in its lineup. Canned Heat and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band made another appearance while Texas blues guitarist Johnny Winter also performed.<sup>18</sup> The prevalence of blues acts at major countercultural music festivals demonstrates both the demand for blues artists and their already established popularity within the late-1960s.

In addition to taking part in countercultural festivals, members of the counterculture began to put on music festivals featuring exclusively blues artists. From August 1 to 3, 1969,

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<sup>13</sup> Silver, “Monterey Pop Festival,” 6.

<sup>14</sup> Sarles, dir., *Sweet Blues*.

<sup>15</sup> Silver, “Monterey Pop Festival,” *East Village Other*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> “The Woodstock ‘69 Lineup,” woodstock.com, Woodstock, 2023, <https://www.woodstock.com/lineup/>.

University of Michigan students and Ann Arbor community members organized a major blues festival.<sup>19</sup> The event, which took place in Ann Arbor, organized by counterculture members, featured the largest lineup of blues musicians at an American music festival.<sup>20</sup> Performers included a mixture of electric and country blues players, as well as young and old. Blues players such as Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Son House, Big Mama Thornton, Luther Allison, Charlie Musselwhite, Arthur Crudup, Sam Lay and many more were present. Blues festivals had occurred prior to Ann Arbor in 1969, such as the Memphis Country Blues Festival of 1967, but these were mostly country blues events.<sup>21</sup> While there was blues present at Newport folk and jazz festivals, Ann Arbor was exclusively blues. Additionally, no other blues festival in America had matched Ann Arbor's scale. Jim O'Neal, co-founder of *Living Blues* magazine, stated that Ann Arbor saw about 20,000 people cumulatively over the three-day event.<sup>22</sup>

The festival was seen by audiences and performers as a celebration of the blues. Michael Erlewine, who was involved in the festival as a staff member and interviewer, noted, "[Blues performers] came from all over to play, of course, but they also came just to be together, to hang out – a real celebration."<sup>23</sup> Charlie Musselwhite got a similar sense of social celebration from the Ann Arbor Blues Festival while also noticing the impact the festival had on the blues spreading popularity, "It was great just to be there hanging out with all your friends backstage, you know. And it was so exciting to see the blues get all this attention. It was very new for blues to get this level of attention."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Miller Francis Jr., "Payin' Some Dues – Blues at Ann Arbor," *The Great Speckled Bird*, August 18, 1969, p. 10, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Erlewine, "The Ann Arbor Blues Festival: A Brief History," in *Blues in Black & White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals*, edited by Michael Erlewine, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Jim O'Neal, "Ann Arbor: A Rite of Passage," in *Blues in Black & White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals*, edited by Michael Erlewine (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), i.

<sup>23</sup> Erlewine, "The Ann Arbor Blues Festival: A Brief History," in *Blues in Black & White*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

A 1969 article from the *Ann Arbor Argus* reviewing the festival agreed with this notion of celebration. Pat O'Donohue and Thomas R. Copi wrote, "Blues music has languished in brown-paper-bag nightclubs and on the chicken circuit, while its imitator, pop, has made millions for artists at summer festivals and at colossal concerts. But on August first, blues and the festival form got together in Ann Arbor."<sup>25</sup> O'Donohue and Copi erroneously use the term "chicken circuit" rather than Chitlin' Circuit, but their message is clear; blues music was exploding in popularity, and this was epitomized by the Ann Arbor Blues Festival. "It was very new for blues to get this level of attention," said Charlie Musselwhite, "The huge crowds that were coming, I mean, this meant something to all of us. This was – it confirmed our suspicions! We always knew blues was great and now people were finding out about it."<sup>26</sup>

The festival was seen by audiences to be of monumental importance. "One of the greatest events in the history of blues is about to take place," wrote Mark Rohrer in the *Madison Kaleidoscope* on July 22, 1969.<sup>27</sup> Rohrer also celebrated the recognition that Black artists were receiving from this festival when he noted that Ann Arbor was a festival "not depending on white stars and bubble-gum rock to draw an audience."<sup>28</sup> This is notable. The fact that hippies and counterculture members came out in droves to watch an almost exclusively Black lineup of musicians holds significance.

Other counterculture members felt similarly about this appreciation of Black musicians. Miller Francis Jr., writer for the *Great Speckled Bird*, stated, "The 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival of August 1-3 may mark the beginning of an interest by young white people in the relationship between black music and the experience of black people in

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<sup>25</sup> Pat O'Donohue and Thomas R. Copi, "But is it Jazz?," *Ann Arbor Argus*, August, 1970. p. 19, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>26</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Rohrer, "Blues Notes." *Madison Kaleidoscope*, July 22, 1969. p. 17, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

America.”<sup>29</sup> Of course, this statement is not true. Many White blues aficionados had been well aware of the history of blues music since the folk revival. Yet Francis’ statement further illustrates the excitement and perceived importance of the festival. Not only were many members of the counterculture highly anticipating this festival, but the word of the event travelled far across the United States. The underground press frequently discussed this festival which was taking place in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The Ann Arbor Blues Festival of 1969 was a major success. Despite a lack of mainstream media coverage compared to Woodstock, which happened only weeks later, the enthusiasm for Ann Arbor within the counterculture demonstrated the popularity of the blues. The Ann Arbor Blues Festival has continued in some form, becoming the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival in later years, but the popularity showcased at the 1969 event led to further blues festivals. “I don’t think that was the first blues festival but it was one of the first,” stated Charlie Musselwhite, “and after that there was more blues festivals or festivals that would have a blues stage or a blues day or something. It really made blues more well known and spread the word about it. It never really got back to where it was, just buried in little bars on the Southside of Chicago.”<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the growing blues festival culture, many of the quintessential counterculture musicians were, in actuality, blues musicians. Guitarist Jimi Hendrix, who was greatly influenced by artists like Muddy Waters and B.B. King, considered himself to be a blues musician. Hendrix covered many blues songs such as Albert King’s “Born Under a Bad Sign” and Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy.” Additionally, Hendrix outright stated that his music was blues. In a 1970 interview with Keith Altham, when asked about whether his

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<sup>29</sup> Francis Jr., “Payin’ Some Dues – Blues at Ann Arbor,” *The Great Speckled Bird*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

music represented anger directed towards the establishment, Hendrix replied, “Well, see it’s nothing but blues, that’s all I’m singing about.”<sup>31</sup>

Jorma Kaukonen, lead guitarist of Jefferson Airplane was another blues musician who made his way into the psychedelic rock scene. Kaukonen, who had his musical roots as a folk-blues guitarist, partially named Jefferson Airplane after Blind Lemon Jefferson.<sup>32</sup> Kaukonen also performed on the album *The Legendary Typewriter Tape* with Janis Joplin in 1964. This album, which was not released until 2022, featured a series of folk-blues songs performed with just Kaukonen on guitar and Joplin on vocals.<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, Joplin was a major countercultural musical figure with blues roots. Joplin’s influences included early blues musicians such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Victoria Spivey.<sup>34</sup> Joplin also deeply admired Big Mama Thornton, and found major success by covering “Ball and Chain.”<sup>35</sup> Joplin, more than Hendrix or Kaukonen, was perceived by the counterculture as a blues musician. Due to many former folkies’ obsession with musical roots and blues history, knowledge of Joplin’s musical influences was widespread. An article for the *Ann Arbor Argus*’ 1969 Blues Festival Program describes Big Mama Thornton as Joplin’s “greatest influence.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, discussions of Big Mama Thornton and Janis Joplin were almost inextricably linked in the counterculture. A 1971 article for *the Great Speckled Bird* newspaper described Thornton’s blues as the “foundation for Janis’s style.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Blank on Blank, “Jimi Hendrix on The Experience | Blank on Blank,” YouTube video, 5:59, August 26, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nK2lfs\\_uiwk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nK2lfs_uiwk).

<sup>32</sup> “Jorma Kaukonen,” Jefferson Airplane, Jefferson Airplane Inc., April 22, 2016, *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160422082613/http://www.jeffersonairplane.com/the-band/jorma-kaukonen/>.

<sup>33</sup> Janis Joplin and Jorma Kaukonen, *The Legendary Typewriter Tape*, OVLP-495, recorded 1964, Digital MP3.

<sup>34</sup> Ann Angel, *Janis Joplin: Rise Up Singing* (New York: Abrams, 2010), 11.

<sup>35</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> *Ann Arbor Argus: Blues Festival Program*, August, 1969. p. 2, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>37</sup> “You’re Gonna Get the Blues,” *the Great Speckled Bird*, 6.

Joplin was also marketed as a blues musician. A 1968 advertisement for the Big Brother album *Cheap Thrills*, found in an issue of *the Seed*, focused exclusively on Joplin, discussing her influences and emotional blues vocals. The ad read: “It is a blues voice, ragged and painful but somehow beautiful and moving at the same time, a voice which has learned from Bessie Smith and Dinah Washington and Esther Phillips and Big Mama Thornton... but it is a voice unique with Janis... Each performance has the agonizing intensity of a woman giving birth.”<sup>38</sup> *Cheap Thrills* was a massive success for Joplin and Big Brother, peaking at number one on the Billboard 200 album charts for eight weeks.<sup>39</sup> The album would remain in the top 40 for 29 weeks.

Ulrich Adelt, in his book *Blues Music in the 1960s*, states that Joplin’s music had become “eclectic” towards the end of her career, suggesting that her music diverged from blues as she found commercial success.<sup>40</sup> Adelt makes a compelling argument given that several songs on *Cheap Thrills* and later albums focused largely on psychedelic-pop, yet Joplin’s repertoire of music still consisted of a healthy dose of blues tunes. *Cheap Thrills* included several blues tunes such as “Ball and Chain,” “I Need a Man to Love,” and “Turtle Blues.” While Joplin’s version of “Ball and Chain” departed greatly from Thornton’s,<sup>41</sup> the awareness that this cover was inspired by Joplin’s admiration for Thornton was prevalent in the counterculture. Thus, Joplin’s popularity, music and perceptions as a blues artist demonstrate the willingness of the counterculture to embrace her as a blues star. While her work’s appeal as pop music contributed to her commercial success,<sup>42</sup> she still maintained a public image as a blues singer.

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<sup>38</sup> *The Seed*, August 1, 1968, p. 11, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>39</sup> “Cheap Thrills,” Billboard Database, Penske Media Corporation, 2023, <https://billboard.elpee.jp/album/Cheap%20Thrills/Big%20Brother%20%26%20The%20Holding%20Company/>.

<sup>40</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 99.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Janis Joplin was a tremendously popular musician within the counterculture, yet her outspokenness, appearance, bisexuality, and ideals of, what Adelt called, “sexual agency,”<sup>43</sup> drew many thinly veiled sexist criticisms from music enthusiasts. Joplin had been bullied from a young age in her hometown of Port Arthur, Texas.<sup>44</sup> Joplin was a nonconformist throughout her entire life, and this drew the ire of many.<sup>45</sup> However, even in the counterculture, where nonconformity was prized, Joplin’s personality was heavily criticized.

Many discussions of Joplin focused on her appearance or womanhood, rather than her credibility as a singer. Nick Gravenites, who was a close friend of Joplin, remembered a man in the music industry discussing why he thought Joplin would not be successful. “To him, the reasons were obvious,” wrote Gravenites, “She had a pimply complexion, her singing voice was impossible to understand, she dressed like a bag of laundry and her band was amateurish. Of course, he was dead wrong, because he was looking in the wrong place, he could never see her deep soul and her cast-iron guts.”<sup>46</sup> The criticisms here were largely focused on Joplin’s appearances, exposing a double standard for women in the music industry. The previously discussed advertisement for *Cheap Thrills* likens Joplin’s vocals to “the agonizing intensity of a woman giving birth.”<sup>47</sup> This comment simplifies the complexity of Joplin’s music and vocal performances to a specific gender role.

Other discussions of Joplin suggested that she was unprofessional or volatile. The previously mentioned article in the *Ann Arbor Argus*’ 1969 Blues Festival Program stated, “While Janis Joplin can be lackadaisical on stage, Big Mama Thornton, her greatest influence, cannot.” A 1968 article in *the Seed* rhetorically asked readers: “Hear about Janis

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<sup>43</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 102.

<sup>44</sup> The Dick Cavett Show, “Janis Joplin On Attending Her Upcoming High School Reunion | The Dick Cavett Show,” YouTube video, 5:19, May 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V71B5fFSg1E>.

<sup>45</sup> Angel, *Rise Up Singing*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>47</sup> *The Seed*, August 1, 1968, 2.



Joplin bopping Jim Morrison on the head with her Southern Comfort bottle after he pulled her hair at a party in L.A. ?”<sup>48</sup>

In a 1969 article in *the Spectator*, writer Mike Bourne criticized Joplin’s drinking and open sexuality as a pretentious and contrived public persona. “The thing that bores me about Janis Joplin is her pretention, this Venus-With-Southern-Comfort Sexual Myth good p.r. has forced onto a listening public anxious for some Great White Hope to cover Aretha. Consequently, most every white female soul singer tries to make it like good ole Queen Gravel-Throat.”<sup>49</sup> Here, Bourne lamented Joplin’s public persona, claiming it was “forced onto” her listeners.<sup>50</sup> While Bourne’s remark about Joplin’s “Gravel-Throat” vocals was a criticism of her singing, the author took real issue with her personality and self-expression. The counterculture was a movement that paved the way for open self-expression and sexuality in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, Bourne’s criticisms suggest that sexual agency in women was still controversial, even in a progressive countercultural setting. For women in music, double standards presented barriers and prejudices that were still deeply ingrained in society. Yet Joplin still found major success before her death by overdose at the age of 27.

Other blues artists also flourished commercially in the counterculture. B.B. King saw a massive surge in success in the late-1960s and beyond, becoming one of the most famous blues musicians of all time. King’s late-1960s and early-1970s albums like *Completely Well*, which were specifically marketed towards hippies, sold well and charted within the top 50 pop albums.<sup>51</sup> A re-release of King’s 1965 *Live at the Regal* in 1971 and *Live in Cook County Jail*, released the same year, found success as well.<sup>52</sup> Muddy Waters found

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<sup>48</sup> Bob Wettlauffer, “Music Scene,” *The Seed*, August 1, 1968, p. 9, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>49</sup> Mike Bourne, “Bloozenuff,” *The Spectator*, March 11, 1969, p. 15, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 22.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

commercial success with his psychedelic, hippie-marketed blues album *Electric Mud*, and his collaboration album featuring both the older and younger generation of blues players, *Fathers and Sons*.<sup>53</sup> The success of both the psychedelic *Electric Mud* and the more conventional blues in *Fathers and Sons* indicated that audiences favoured Waters for his blues, rather than being drawn in by Chess Records' promises of psychedelic-rock.

Michael Bloomfield was also a popular musician within the counterculture in the late-1960s, yet he was not without his ups and downs. Though Electric Flag's debut album *A Long Time Comin'* received an underwhelming commercial response, this can be explained due to poor marketing by Columbia Records and sub-par production values from the Columbia producers.<sup>54</sup> *A Long Time Comin'* received little airplay on the radio and a writer for *Hit Parader* magazine partially blamed Columbia's massive catalogue of artists as the reason Electric Flag got little marketing attention.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, Bloomfield was unable to get engineers at Columbia to fully cooperate with his vision in the production process.<sup>56</sup> Musician Al Kooper noted the disparity between Bloomfield's recording presence and performances before he recorded the album *Super Sessions* with Bloomfield in 1968. "I was very dissatisfied with the way he [Bloomfield] was recorded up to that point. His live playing was like 300 times better than his performance on a record to that point."

Kooper's assessment of Bloomfield's live performances aligned with that of the counterculture. The Electric Flag continued to perform at many countercultural venues and festivals throughout the late-1960s, even after Bloomfield left the band in June of 1968.<sup>57</sup> Bloomfield found more commercial success on Kooper's jam sessions album *Super Session* and the live version of this record, *The Live Adventures of Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper*.

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<sup>53</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 236.

<sup>54</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 141.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

Both these albums, which were much closer in sound to conventional blues than *A Long Time Comin'*, sold well, with *Super Session* reaching gold (achieving at least 500,000 sales).<sup>58</sup>

By the late-1960s and early-1970s, blues albums were selling better than they ever had. Much of this commercial success came from the growing interest in blues music within the mainstream, yet counterculture audiences greatly contributed to these album sales. Discussions and advertisements about these albums were common in countercultural publications during this time. Many publications featured regular music columns that frequently reviewed blues albums. The *North Carolina Anvil* featured articles by a writer named Edward Taub who, in a 1969 article, celebrated the album *Fathers and Sons* as “a flawless synthesis of the old Chicago Blues style and the new Chicago-cum-San Francisco Blues which Bloomfield and Butterfield have helped develop.”<sup>59</sup> Bob Wettlaufer, who managed Big John’s in Chicago during the mid-1960s, frequently contributed to one of Chicago’s countercultural publications, *the Seed*. Wettlaufer, who wrote regular articles titled, “Music Scene,” reviewed Waters’ *Electric Mud* on August 1, 1968, stating that the psychedelic sound “will infuriate some traditionalists but will sure as hell gas everyone else.”<sup>60</sup> Though not all blues album reviews were this positive, frequent underground press contributors discussed blues albums and performances, indicating the genre was becoming popularized within the counterculture.

Notable members of the counterculture also took interest in blues music. Robert Crumb, the influential countercultural cartoonist, loved the blues. While Crumb strongly favoured earlier, acoustic forms of the blues and other genres of music due to its dominant image of anti-commercialism, he still openly embraced the blues. Crumb incorporated blues music as an inspiration for his work throughout his long career. From the early-1970s and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>59</sup> Taub, “Blues are Popular But There’s Still Hope,” *North Carolina Anvil*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Wettlaufer, “Music Scene,” *the Seed*, August 1, 1968, 9.

onward, Crumb created many blues-centric cartoons which told stories throughout blues history, favourably compared the blues to modern pop, and discussed specific blues musicians.<sup>61</sup> Crumb, like many members of the counterculture, deeply cared about blues music and idolized blues artists. Around 1980, Crumb created a deck of trading cards titled “Heroes of the Blues,” which featured drawings of his favourite blues artists with a brief biographical write-up.<sup>62</sup>

John Sinclair, an influential activist, poet and founder of the White Panther Party (a predominantly White group designed to support the Black Panthers), was also particularly passionate about blues music. Sinclair was an influential figure in the Ann Arbor counterculture community. In an article he wrote for the *Ann Arbor Argus*’ 1969 Blues Festival Program, Sinclair displayed his passion for the genre by discussing the history of the blues and how he could relate to it as a member of the counterculture. “We love it,” wrote Sinclair about the counterculture’s passion for the blues, “and take it home with us to bed, and fuck it and sleep with it and eat it and feel it inside us.”<sup>63</sup> Here, Sinclair spoke volumes to his love of the blues and the counterculture’s embrace of the genre.

John Sinclair and Robert Crumb, as influential members of the counterculture, represented broader interests within their movement. These interests included a deep passion for blues music. Sinclair and Crumb also held strong opinions about the importance of blues music and their perceptions of the genre with respect to social issues in America. These perceptions of the blues were shared by many members of the counterculture and frequently discussed.

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<sup>61</sup> Crumb, *R. Crumb Draws the Blues*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Crumb, *R. Crumb’s Heroes of Blues, Jazz & Country* (New York: Abrams Comicarts, 2006), 9.

<sup>63</sup> John Sinclair, “Killer Blues: A His/tory,” *Ann Arbor Argus: Blues Festival Program*, August, 1969, p. 3, *Independent Voices*.

## Blues Discussions and Perceptions

During the folk revival of the 1950s and early-1960s, White folk fans had rigid perceptions about the authenticity and, by extension, quality of blues music. Many White folk-blues fans from the 1950s and early-1960s strongly favoured Black country blues.<sup>64</sup> Any variations in the blues in the form of electric instruments or White musicians were deemed inauthentic by White folkies. Though the authenticity debate was intended to preserve Black artforms, it effectively forced blues musicians into specific roles as acoustic, country blues players. These roles contradicted many of the styles of blues musicians who had been playing with fully electric bands since the early 1940s. By contrast, counterculture members from the late-1960s had more complex perceptions of blues music, however, several perceptions were carried over from the folk revival. Blues could be a controversial topic in the late-1960s, and many counterculture members strongly held onto their perceptions of the genre, despite these perceptions becoming more widely varied by the end of the decade.

Blackness was largely still considered a sign of credibility, authority and often quality with respect to blues music. In Mark Rohrer's July 22, 1969, discussion of the upcoming Ann Arbor Blues Festival, he is thrilled that the lineup of musicians is predominantly Black. Before listing the musicians, Rohrer wrote, "The lineup is as follows (and brother, it's almost all black)."<sup>65</sup> Here, Rohrer's excitement came not from the names on the lineup, but the racial makeup of the lineup. Similarly, some writers still reduced the roles of White blues players to imitators. Miller Francis Jr.'s discussion of the Ann Arbor Blues Festival in the *Great Speckled Bird* stated that White blues was an "imitation, dilution and exploitation of black musical forms with little if any attempt to understand the origin of those forms."<sup>66</sup> Francis' criticism came from a place of concern over appropriation and exploitation, yet he made an

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<sup>64</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Rohrer, "Blues Notes," *Madison Kaleidoscope*, December 1, 1969, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Francis Jr., "Payin' Some Dues – Blues at Ann Arbor," *The Great Speckled Bird*, 10.

argument on behalf of Black musicians who would not make this argument themselves. Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Big Walter Horton and many of their peers were close friends with White blues musicians and openly shared their music with them. Rohrer's comments thus disparaged the innovation to blues contributed by many younger artists and the agency of older Black blues artists who shared this music. The comments were also reductive of the more harmful forms of Black exploitation in the music industry, by depicting this form of cultural sharing as exploitation.

Rohrer's statement continued the trend of perceiving White blues as inauthentic, demonstrating there were some who still perceived the blues this way. However, by the late-1960s, many counterculture members would assess the quality of blues music based on musicality rather than the race of its performers. A 1971 article for the *Great Speckled Bird*, referred to Canned Heat as a "teeny-bopper Blues band," suggesting the author considered the band's blues to be unprofessional and diluted.<sup>67</sup> Yet the author spoke highly of the contributions of White bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn's contributions to the album *Fathers and Sons*.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Paul Butterfield and Michael Bloomfield, though not without occasional criticisms, were lauded across counterculture publications. Edward Taub, writer for the *North Carolina Anvil*, acknowledged in a 1969 article that he felt Bloomfield's work with the Electric Flag "isn't near what it could be."<sup>69</sup> However, Taub still had a high opinion of Bloomfield and Butterfield stating, "Bloomfield has made some major contributions to progressive blues. His work with Butterfield and on the two 'Super Sessions' is exceptional."<sup>70</sup> These sentiments were supported by the growing commercial success of Bloomfield and Butterfield throughout the late-1960s. In Mike Bourne's previously discussed

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<sup>67</sup> "You're Gonna Get the Blues," *the Great Speckled Bird*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Taub, "Blues are Popular, But There's Still Hope," *North Carolina Anvil*, 12.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

article, “Bloozenuff,” for *the Spectator*, the author highlights the absurdity of deeming some artists’ blues “real” and others’ inauthentic.

Accepting it as a blatant imitation of a black music or not, the white blues scene has nonetheless a power of its own. In the eclectic medium popular music has become, though, this cultural separation is hardly much of a significant divergency anymore; in fact recent white bluesmen have turned to simplistic blues styles much truer to roots than those even mainline black groups create. Siegel-Schwall’s Shake..., for example, is a lot closer to original blues styles than the psychedelic soul of Waters’ Electric Mud, and yet both are still valid blues excitements regardless of one’s white colour and the other’s seemingly white musical character.<sup>71</sup>

Here, Bourne pointed out the hypocrisy of valuing one artists’ music as more authentic blues because of race when another artist could be creating far more conventional blues. This was a particularly well-conceived argument since, by the late-1960s, experimentation and the melding of genres was common among blues artists. In a 1967 article of Austin, Texas’ counterculture publication, *the Rag*, writer Dan Barton directed criticism towards folk revivalists for their rejection of electric music, further suggesting White blues fans were shifting away from the rigid perceptions of blues as a simple, acoustic genre. “The sound of a note played on an electric guitar is not intrinsically more or less valuable than the same note played on an acoustic,” stated Barton, declaring his opinion early in the article.<sup>72</sup> Barton then criticized folkies as “luddites,” who lacked professionalism and “could applaud incompetent singers because the words mattered more than the sound of the words.”<sup>73</sup> Barton’s criticisms highlight a larger embrace of more blues styles from a

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<sup>71</sup> Bourne, “Bloozenuff,” *The Spectator*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Dan Barton, “Searching for Order in an Amorphous Universe,” *The Rag*, March 20, 1967, p. 6, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

multicultural group of musicians while rejecting the authenticity debate of the early-to-mid-1960s.

Counterculture members embraced all sorts of blues during the late-1960s and beyond. Muddy Waters' *Electric Mud*, while often considered to be an over-commercialized and over-produced album, was a major commercial success.<sup>74</sup> The album was, and remained to be, controversial for many years due to the drastic psychedelic departure from Waters' signature style, but many members of the counterculture adored the new direction for Waters. As previously mentioned, Bob Wettlaufer, club manager and contributor to *the Seed*, deemed *Electric Mud* "wildly refreshing."<sup>75</sup> An article from Lansing Michigan's *the Paper* from featured an extensive review of *Electric Mud* which called it "the best new album of the year."<sup>76</sup> It is notable that many critics panned *Electric Mud*, yet the success of the album, and its spiritual successor from 1969, *After the Rain*, demonstrated that there was a demand for new kinds of blues.<sup>77</sup>

The 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival also demonstrated this interest in diverse blues styles. During the planning stages of the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival, students of the University of Michigan originally intended for the event to be focused on British blues-rock.<sup>78</sup> When student John Fishel became one of the two lead coordinators, along with fellow student Janet Kelenson, he shifted the focus from White blues-rock artists to their inspirations.<sup>79</sup> What Fishel ended up with, however, was a broad mix of early blues artists from Son House's generation, Muddy Waters and his peers, as well as younger players such as Buddy Guy and Charlie Musselwhite.<sup>80</sup> All lead performers except Charlie Musselwhite,

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<sup>74</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 236.

<sup>75</sup> Wettlaufer, "Music Scene," *the Seed*, August 1, 1968, 9.

<sup>76</sup> "McKinley Morganfield Makes It," *The Paper (East Lansing)*, October 22, 1968, p. 9, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied*, 205.

<sup>78</sup> Erlewine, "The Ann Arbor Blues Festival: A Brief History," in *Blues in Black & White*, 10.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*.



an artist who was often given credibility due to his country roots, were Black.<sup>81</sup> Yet, the lineup at Ann Arbor featured wildly different subgenres of blues, from Roosevelt Sykes' jazzy piano blues to Muddy Waters' urban blues to Luther Allison's psychedelic-blues, the festival was a concoction of different eras of blues music. Ann Arbor's lineup demonstrated that Blackness was still largely equated with quality and credibility in counterculture blues circles, but Black artists were no longer demanded to play specific styles as they were during the folk revival. This was a more complex perception of blues music. Some aspects of this view still held onto rigid ideas about blues and race, but it did not contradict Black artists' freedom and agency to perform their preferred music.

It is notable that many young artists were grouped with the older blues players during the Ann Arbor Blues Festival. For many counterculture members, Black and White blues artists were not considered to be a part of the same peer group despite their similar musical styles and upbringings through mentorships. Often discussions centred around the blues distinguished between White blues and Black blues, rather than the more stylistic distinctions of older and younger generations. A 1966 article for the *East Village Other* favourably reviewed the debut Paul Butterfield album, but harshly distinguished between Black and White blues. The author lamented "the inept Mod-horseshit of white blues performers."<sup>82</sup> Other counterculture members were less harsh in their assessment of what they considered White blues as a genre. Many writers mentioned White blues neutrally or positively as one would with soul or R&B. Mike Bourne, when reviewing the work of Charlie Musselwhite in a 1969 issue of *the Spectator*, applauded Musselwhite's reverence for traditional blues and called him "the total white blues creator."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> "Electra Twice (coming and going) Paul Butterfield Blues Band: ELK-294 / Love: ELK-4001," *East Village Other*, July 15, 1966, p. 12, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>83</sup> Bourne, "Bloozenuff," *The Spectator*, 14.

Michael Erlewine also considered Black and White blues artists as separate peer groups. In his 2019 self-published memoir, *Ann Arbor: The 1960s Scene*, Erlewine discussed why he was not musically interested in his “peers.”<sup>84</sup> “Groups like the Grateful Dead, [Janis] Joplin, The Band, and so on... didn’t interest me... [they] were people much like me. No matter how great they were, we all drank from the same cup... all drawing inspiration from the same musical root-source.”<sup>85</sup> However, Erlewine also listed some of his favourite blues artists, such as, “Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Otis Rush, Little Walter, Magic Sam, Buddy Guy.”<sup>86</sup> Erlewine listed several younger blues musicians, who drew from the same “root-source” as White blues musicians, suggesting that he perceived Black blues as a separate entity from its White equivalent. Other White blues artists considered themselves separate from their Black peers at times. In Buddy Guy’s autobiography he recounted Bloomfield and other White blues musicians grouping him with Muddy Waters and other older innovators of the blues. “When [White Chicago blues artists] got famous with bands of their own, they never forgot us. They told the press, “Listen to Muddy and Walter. Check out the Wolf and John Lee. Don’t forget Buddy. These are the originals.” I wasn’t an original, but I was glad to be named in that company.”<sup>87</sup> This distinction between Black and White blues artists demonstrated that many distinct racialized perceptions of the blues continued into the late-1960s, however, some complexity was achieved through the acceptance of electric and fusion blues styles.

Primitive perceptions of blues still existed in the late-1960s as a holdover from the folk revival and earlier periods, yet these perceptions also became slightly more complex. Instead of perceiving all Black blues to be primitive, many members of the counterculture felt that blues styles differed in their complexity. The *Ann Arbor Argus*’ 1969 Blues Festival

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<sup>84</sup> Michael Erlewine, *Ann Arbor: The 1960s Scene*, 131.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Guy with Ritz, *When I Left Home*, 219.

Program described Howlin' Wolf's music as "primitive blues," but described B.B. King as "a very sophisticated guitarist with little trace of the country influence in his playing."<sup>88</sup> The article also described Big Mama Thornton as a consummate professional, stating, "[Big Mama Thornton's] performances combine the emotive force of country blues with the style and polish of such immortals as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith."<sup>89</sup> Another *Ann Arbor Argus* discussion of the Blues Festival in 1969 made a distinction between urban, electric blues and country blues. "The festival was weighted slightly toward city blues... but more plaintive, less sophisticated country blues [idiom] was amply represented by the legendary Son, Sleepy John Estes, Clifton Chenier and others."<sup>90</sup> Clearly dominant perceptions of early blues primitivism were still prevalent throughout the counterculture, but the images of newer Black blues musicians as "sophisticated" artists added slight nuance to this interpretation of the blues. However, the perceptions of primitive blues during the musical experimentation of the late-1960s became increasingly arbitrary. In the Blues Festival Program, Howlin' Wolf was considered primitive, despite his use of a fully electric band since the early-1940s.

Another holdover from the folk revival was blues fans' interest in the history of the genre. According to Nick Gravenites, a major motivation for folkies' love of American music was the search for roots and history.<sup>91</sup> The desire to study blues as a historical subject was still prevalent among blues fans in the late-1960s. Many articles about blues music included discussions of the genre's past, often linking blues to the mistreatment of Black people in America. John Sinclair's article for the 1969 *Ann Arbor Argus: Blues Festival Program* describes the early history of blues music. "Blues developed as the cultural expression of a dispossessed people, slaves ripped off from their own culture and forced to live and work in a

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<sup>88</sup> *Ann Arbor Argus Blues Festival: Program*, 11.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> O'Donohue and Copi, "But is it Jazz?," *Ann Arbor Argus*, 19.

<sup>91</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

totally alien culture, one that was considerably more than just hostile to their own.”<sup>92</sup>

Counterculture member, record producer and music manager Ed Denson displayed an awareness of mid-1900s blues history when he discussed the San Francisco blues scene in a 1967 article for the *Berkeley Barb*.

Above all I think of Frisco as the blues, a development of a tradition which began in the flat Delta of the Yazoo in Mississippi, moved to the slums of Chicago with the northward flight of the country negroes, and thru a gigantic cosmic coincidence was found meaningful in Liverpool and San Francisco when the people there needed a music.<sup>93</sup>

Musicians’ roots were also considered a sign of credibility in blues musicians. Since blues music was largely no longer judged based on skin colour alone, blues fans looked to the musical influences and career paths of musicians to determine how “real” they were. A 1969 review in the *Madison Kaleidoscope* of John Mayall’s album *The Turning Point* gave Mayall credibility for his blues “roots” while disparaging other White blues artists. “I’m not quite sure what leads me to listen to John Mayall when I rarely listen to white blues when I want to do some serious listening, at least not white blues vocalists.”<sup>94</sup> Mark Rohrer, author of the article, disliked most White blues players, however, Mayall’s experience as a blues musician won Rohrer over. “[Mayall] really has some roots in the music he plays; after all, he’s 35 years old and has been playing the blues long before the Butterfields and Bloomfields came along.”<sup>95</sup> Notably, Mayall is only nine and ten years older than Butterfield and Bloomfield respectively, and, while Bloomfield played rock ‘n’ roll from a young age, both artists began their professional careers as blues musicians. However, it is Rohrer’s perception of Mayall’s

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<sup>92</sup> Sinclair, “Killer Blues: A His/tory,” *Ann Arbor Argus: Blues Festival Program*, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Ed Denson, “Folk Scene,” *Berkeley Barb*, September 15, 1967, p. 12, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>94</sup> Rohrer, “Blues Notes,” *Madison Kaleidoscope*, December 1, 1969, 18.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

“roots” that gives him more validity as a White blues musician over Butterfield and Bloomfield.

Roots and credibility were also demonstrated through artists’ influences. As previously discussed, Janis Joplin was often linked to Big Mama Thornton in blues discussions. A 1968 obituary for Little Walter Jacobs in *the Seed* stated that Jacobs “originated the style of harmonica that has been popularized by Jr. Wells and Paul Butterfield.”<sup>96</sup> The 1969 *Ann Arbor Argus: Blues Festival Program* discusses the influences of nearly all the festival performers in a series of short biographical sketches. The program discussed the influences of old and young musicians alike, such as Muddy Waters’ influence from Robert Johnson or B.B. King’s influences from an assortment of musicians including T-Bone Walker and Blind Lemon Jefferson.<sup>97</sup> In an attempt to give the only White performer credibility, the program incorrectly attributes Big Walter Horton as the one who taught Charlie Musselwhite how to play the harmonica. “Charley Musselwhite is a young bluesman with both feet firmly in the traditional style of the music. Musselwhite learned to play harp from Big Walter Horton in Chicago.”<sup>98</sup> Musselwhite himself contradicted this statement in a 2023 interview, stating that he learned to play the harmonica when living in Memphis, which would have been before he had met Horton.<sup>99</sup>

While roots and history were important to counterculture blues fans, historical accuracy was less scrutinized. Counterculture articles discussing the blues were often riddled with minor factual errors. The previously discussed article from the *Ann Arbor Argus* that called the Chitlin’ Circuit the “chicken circuit” is one of many small errors found in blues discussions.<sup>100</sup> A 1969 article from *the Kudzu*, an underground newspaper out of Jackson,

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<sup>96</sup> Wettlaufer, “The Music Scene,” *The Seed*, March 15, 1968, 11.

<sup>97</sup> *Ann Arbor Argus: Blues Festival Program*, 11.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>99</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>100</sup> O’Donohue and Copi, “But is it Jazz?,” *Ann Arbor Argus*, 19.

Mississippi, stated that Albert King was “B. B.’s brother,” though there is no relation between these two artists.<sup>101</sup> Many articles also incorrectly stated birth dates or the years that musicians travelled, however these dates are more commonly disputed even among modern historians. Despite several factual inaccuracies, the history of blues music, and by extension, Black history, held an important place with countercultural blues fans. The knowledge of Black history related closely to the concept of solidarity with Black people among White counterculture members. This was one of many reasons blues music was so openly embraced by the counterculture.

### **Why the Counterculture Got the Blues**

The counterculture was a socially conscious movement with many political causes. These motivations informed much of the culture behind the movement, including the counterculture’s embrace of blues music. The interest in blues music stemmed from a variety of reasons, the simplest of them being that blues music heavily influenced the popular music of the late-1960s. As previously discussed, artists like the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Janis Joplin, Canned Heat, Butterfield, and Bloomfield were extremely open with their influences. Additionally, with the counterculture’s wide awareness of musical influences, it was well-understood in the counterculture that blues formed part of the foundation of rock music. “If you listen to music today you undoubtedly dig, or at least respect, the blues,” said a 1971 article in the *Great Speckled Bird*.<sup>102</sup> Many blues artists even attributed the rise in their commercial success to the popularity of rock artists, such as Muddy Waters who credited the Rolling Stones, or B.B. King, who saw an increase in popularity when Michael Bloomfield attributed him as his influence.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Dabney Tannehill, “The Adventures of Kooper-Bloomfield,” *The Kudzu*, March 18, 1969, p. 7, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>102</sup> “You’re Gonna Get the Blues,” *the Great Speckled Bird*, 6.

<sup>103</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

Other reasons for the blues' rise in popularity in the counterculture were more socially motivated. The counterculture often used music as a method of political and social expression. During the late-1960s and 1970s, popular music within the counterculture frequently featured themes of drug use, anti-war protest and other common causes within the movement. A major characteristic of counterculture members was a desire to reject the dominant culture of the mainstream. Blues music was used within the counterculture to fulfil this desire. The blues was perceived as an underground and anti-commercial style of music and, as a result, drew the interests of many counterculture members. This underground aspect drew the interest of Nick Gravenites, who was a proto-counterculturalist in the late-1950s and early-1960s. Wrote Gravenites about the blues, "This "Devil's Music" was played in warehouses and funky dives peopled by sinners and criminals, drunkards, slackers and dope fiends, the underground elements of society. It was this underground element that I identified with, was kin to. I felt at home in this underground society because, [let's] face it, I'm a Chicagoan."<sup>104</sup>

This perception of blues, and the knowledge of its history being played by people oppressed and discriminated against by White mainstream America led to its wide embrace in the counterculture. Many members felt like they could use the blues to reject the music or culture of the mainstream. In a 1967 article for the *Berkeley Barb*, Ed Denson highlighted this dynamic in a brief outline of the history of blues music. Wrote Denson, "the third wave of blues bands were the hippies, and they played blues for just the opposite reason that the Englishmen did... because it was not rock and roll, and so not corrupt. For the hippies used to be the people who listened to folk music."<sup>105</sup> Denson's classification of hippies as "the third wave of blues bands" is arguable, however his reasoning for why hippies embraced the genre

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<sup>104</sup> Gravenites, "Bad Talkin' Bluesman."

<sup>105</sup> Denson, "Folk Scene," September 15, 1967.

is fitting. Other members of the counterculture exemplified this phenomenon. A 1968 article for the *East Village Other* written by Bob Rudnick and Dennis Frawley discussed the state of popular record companies during the late-1960s. The article lamented the large mainstream production companies, “The atmosphere of major record companies hangs heavy over the hit or miss hype swill that stagnates music in a swamp of packaged formula sounds shooting into the veins of the unaware.”<sup>106</sup> The article continued with a favourable discussion of independent record companies that frequently put out blues or jazz records.

Great gusts of sounds conscientiously produced are emanating from isolated independent labels throughout the country... Bob Koester’s Delmark label... Nick Perls’ Yazoo-Belzonia and Alan Douglas’s Douglas International represent three distinctly separate strong paths of independent production not being invaded, subverted and controlled by the Moloch, mother-lode mammoth record company/colony.<sup>107</sup>

Rudnick, Frawley and many counterculture members found haven from the corruption of mainstream music through smaller labels. A 1974 article by Elias Longknife in the *Joint Issue* advocated for readers to purchase underappreciated “bargain bin” records instead of, what Longknife felt, were more commercially driven albums.<sup>108</sup> “Matter of factly, most commercial music is shitty music. Pre-programmed Bubble Gum Soul or your middle of the road folkie belting out sweet soft puffy cotton ball ballads.”<sup>109</sup> For Longknife, the blues contrasted the problem of mainstream commercialism. “Then come the computerized soul of plastic black groups who make Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy Waters spit with disgust.”<sup>110</sup> Longknife proceeded to recommend several “bargain bin” albums which he felt transcended

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<sup>106</sup> Bob Rudnick and Dennis Frawley, “Kokaine Karma,” *East Village Other*, September 27, 1968, p. 8, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Elias Longknife, “Bargain Album Revue,” *Joint Issue*, February 15, 1974, p. 6, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.



the commercialism of larger, mainstream labels. Longknife recommended one album titled *This is Bull* by the artist Bull. One of the reasons this album stuck out to Longknife was largely because, “at the back there is an endorsement by B.B. King.”<sup>111</sup> The liner notes on *This is Bull* are attributed to King, but it is difficult to verify that he actually wrote them. Notably, the management company listed on the back was the same company that represented King at the time but, regardless of the veracity of these liner notes, Longknife saw the blues as a symbol of purity from the corruption of the mainstream.

Chiefly among Longknife’s perceptions of the blues is his idea of the genre as an anti-commercial artform. Due to the dominant perception of the blues as anti-commercial, the genre aligned perfectly with the counterculture’s pre-existing belief system. The counterculture’s anti-commercial preferences extended far beyond their music tastes. The belief was an extremely important way for counterculture members to reject the mainstream. An article written by Bob Rudnick and Dennis Frawley in the *Ann Arbor Argus*’ 1969 blues festival program highlighted their lament for the commercialism found on many radio stations and how this commercialism impacted the music industry. “Music is the swiftest form for revolutionary change. When controlled on the radio by the fat pigs that own airwaves, it is chopped up and mushed into short, nice pretty pieces for packaging in a mindless, tasteless, restricting empty teat for the screaming worms who are serviced by the exploiters.”<sup>112</sup>

Countercultural cartoonist Robert Crumb also prized early blues for its perceived anti-commercialism. Though Crumb preferred older, acoustic country-blues, his perceptions of the genre did not exactly conform with the purists of the folk revival. Crumb celebrated the complexity and professional showmanship of early blues musicians. In his 1984 short comic,

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> *Ann Arbor Argus Blues Festival Program*, 13.

*Patton*, Crumb highlighted the stage antics of early blues player Charley Patton.<sup>113</sup> Crumb noted Patton's "dynamic, driving dance rhythms, his theatrics, clowning and stunts," while stating that he was "drawn to the... more complex rhythms" of Black music.<sup>114</sup> For Crumb, blues was complex, yet he saw it as uncommercial. Likewise, Crumb perceived newer blues and electric music as commercially corrupt. When discussing his romanticized views of older acoustic music (including blues, country and folk), Crumb stated that the qualities that made older music great were "Something that has been lost in the push to make music modern and commercial and slick."<sup>115</sup> Crumb felt similarly of Janis Joplin's earlier acoustic blues work. Crumb, who designed the cover for Big Brother's 1968 album *Cheap Thrills* as a favour to Joplin, stated, "Ever heard any of this pre-Big Brother stuff [Joplin] recorded? She was great. Then she got together with those idiots. The main problem with Big Brother was they were amateur musicians trying to play psychedelic rock and be heavy and you listen to it now and it's bad... just embarrassing."<sup>116</sup> Crumb's preferences differed from many of the electric blues fans of the counterculture, yet he still exemplified the drive for anti-commercialism in all facets of culture.

As discussed in chapter one, early blues quickly developed as a commercial pursuit for Black musicians. However, the perceptions of blues among counterculture members often aligned with their preconceived views. Blues was frequently appropriated by the counterculture to fit into the opinions of its members. The origins of the blues as a deeply personal and experiential motivated the counterculture to adapt the genre as an extension of their experiences and causes. In a 1969 article from the *Berkeley Tribe*, an unidentified author spoke to the emotional relationship that counterculture members formed with the blues, while

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<sup>113</sup> Crumb, *R. Crumb Draws the Blues*, 1.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>115</sup> Cartwright, "Interview with Robert Crumb."

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*.

advocating for people to use the genre as a therapeutic medium. “The blues are so damned personal. If you ever wonder where your head’s at, improvise singing to a twelve bar blues shuffle. Or listen to a blues and write new words to it. It all comes out there in front of you whether you want it to or not.”<sup>117</sup> The author later wrote new words to an existing blues song when they recounted a live Buddy Guy performance of the blues standard “Love Her with a Feeling.” When recounting a line from the song, the author replaced the word “cop” with “pig,” highlighting the counterculture’s stance against police brutality and disdain for police in general.<sup>118</sup> “When the pigs bust her and take her to the judge, the judge sees her shake and puts the pigs in jail instead.”<sup>119</sup> Buddy Guy and many other blues musicians did not shy away from social commentary during the late-1960s but, in many cases, counterculture blues fans altered the original intent of the music to fit into their set of values. In this case, the original lyric was intended as a joke about the woman’s sexual appeal, rather than a commentary about the police themselves. In another article from a 1968 issue of *the Paper*, an unidentified author projected their views about the Vietnam War onto Muddy Waters when discussing the album *Electric Mud*.

Buy it, open and contemplate the centerfold. Without listening you will understand that Muddy Waters is a soul brother to keep tight with, one who has no vested interest in killing, napalming, or maiming his fellow human beings. Look into his eyes. If those aren’t the eyes of someone who is painfully aware of the tragicomedy, and is willing to help us all get through it, with a smile, then there is no help.<sup>120</sup>

Notably, Waters did not include anti-Vietnam War or other social commentaries in his

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<sup>117</sup> “Shake,” *Berkeley Tribe*, 20.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> “McKinley Morganfield Makes It,” *The Paper (East Lansing)*, 9.

music. In a 1979 interview, when asked if he included political messages in his work, Waters did not even understand the question and responded, “are you saying I’m prejudiced?”<sup>121</sup> Thus, the unidentified author from *the Paper* entirely projected their opinions onto Muddy Waters and his music. Similarly, an article for the *Space City News* in 1968 featured the title “Muddy Waters Meets Big Mama in Vietnam.”<sup>122</sup> The article discussed blues records and a “summer festival” music event that the Vietnamese National Liberation Front held, but the two topics were unrelated.<sup>123</sup> The article demonstrated that, even when there were no tangible connections, counterculture members made links between the blues and causes important to them.

The blues was also adapted to fit into the experiential music culture of the late-1960s and 1970s. The counterculture, with its multi-day festivals, large scale performances and frequent drug use at these events embraced music as an experience, rather than something that was just an aural medium. Blues, as a genre that was widely known to originally be an emotional and experiential artform, was inserted into the music experiences of the counterculture. An article for the *Ann Arbor Sun* written in 1971 recounted a blues event in Ann Arbor, featuring a sizable lineup of blues artists.

Buddy Guy had just finished a killer set with Junior Wells.  
I ran out of mixer. I decided to go backstage because with all those people back there I figured there must be some mixer of some kind. I went into Muddy Water’s dressing room and found a hard party goin on inside. Muddy, his son, Barbara Holliday, and some friends of everybody’s were there. I found some ginger ale and mixed a drink... After we jived for a while about how nice Southern Comfort is and how strong I made my drinks, Junior Wells walked in and signed some posters with his name and with Muddy’s.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> ReelinInTheYears66. “Muddy Waters- Interview 1979 [RITY Archives].”

<sup>122</sup> Willie, “Muddy Waters Meets Big Mama in Vietnam,” *Space City News*, September 12, 1969, p. 9, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> “Blues,” *Ann Arbor Sun*, 4.

It is notable here that the author of this article wrote little about the actual music at this concert and opted to focus almost exclusively on the experience. Blues had become more than just a music style for the counterculture, it was a culture of its own and a lifestyle. Wrote Nick Gravenites, “To me, the blues isn't so much a musical style as it is a life.”<sup>125</sup> Poet and activist John Sinclair agreed with this lifestyle interpretation of the blues when he wrote in 1969, “The blues is a whole thing. Dig it like that, and get down in it. And it will take you from there, as far as you will go. If you are ready, it will take you where you have to go.”<sup>126</sup>

Sinclair, who was a major civil rights activist during the Black Power movement of the late-1960s, also embraced the blues to show solidarity with Black people fighting for their rights. In Ulrich Adelt’s *Blues Music in the 1960s*, he argued that a major reason for Whites gaining an interest in the blues during the late-1960s was that it was a safe form of Black culture to consume, compared to Black Power motivated soul music.<sup>127</sup> Adelt makes a compelling point here, particularly because the Black Power movement and organizations like the Black Panthers isolated Black civil rights activists from many of their White supporters.<sup>128</sup> Adelt attributes this phenomenon to the creation of a “conservative blues culture” among White blues fans.<sup>129</sup> However, where this phenomenon was true among mainstream White blues fans in the late-1960s and beyond, an opposite effect occurred for many White counterculture blues audiences.

John Sinclair, founder of the White Panther Party, wrote an article titled “Killer Blues: A His/tory” in 1969 highlighting the blues as a pathway to unity between the counterculture and Black civil rights activists.

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<sup>125</sup> Gravenites, “Bad Talkin’ Bluesman.”

<sup>126</sup> Sinclair, “Killer Blues: A His/tory,” *Ann Arbor Argus: Blues Festival Program*, 3.

<sup>127</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 29.

<sup>128</sup> Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 220

<sup>129</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 29.

We are an oppressed people too, now, whether we like it or not, we want to admit it. And though the peculiar quality or quantity of our oppression differs from that of the blues people, the oppression is constant and will work to bring our culture closer to theirs, and will unite us in our common struggle against the common oppressor. And the music is what will bring us together finally, as we relate to the music of their culture and feed on it, and feed it back to them through their music.<sup>130</sup>

Combining the experiential adaptation of blues within the counterculture with a drive to show support and unity with Black Power advocates, Sinclair highlighted the importance of blues to the counterculture as a means to understand the oppression of Black people in America. Notably, this was not a reciprocated perception of blues among young Black people during the late-1960s, but it demonstrated the progressive blues culture of the 1960s counterculture. Discussions of the blues within the counterculture were quick to bring up the history of Black oppression in the United States and its relationship to the blues. Counterculture blues fans were equally quick to show their open appreciation for this genre, which represented a protest against harsh discrimination. Likewise, many counterculture publications featured both articles about the blues and articles suggesting an overlap in support for the readership and contributors to these publications. An issue of the *Ann Arbor Argus* from August 5, 1970, featured a *Living Blues* interview of Howlin' Wolf and a reprint of Sinclair's 1969 "Killer Blues: A His/tory." The issue also featured an article that gave support to the Black Panther Party, calling attention to, what the author felt was "the government's conspiracy to destroy the Black Panther Party, a conspiracy which has already killed 28 members of the Party and harassed and jailed hundreds of others."<sup>131</sup> As the home

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<sup>130</sup> Sinclair, "Killer Blues: A His/tory," *Ann Arbor Argus: Blues Festival Program*, 3.

<sup>131</sup> Margaret Hudgins, "The Day Before," *Ann Arbor Argus*, August 5, 1970, p. 5, *Independent Voices*.

of the White Panther Party and the annual Ann Arbor Blues Festival, Ann Arbor was a radically progressive counterculture hub with a major passion for the blues.

Other publications featured support for the Black Power movement. An issue of *the Rag* from Austin, Texas featured Dan Barton's aforementioned article criticizing acoustic blues fans. This same article included an article criticizing sportswriters for their discrimination against Muhammad Ali for his outspokenness as a Black athlete. Wrote the article, "For sportswriters to approve of a champion he needs to be a mindless gentleman. If the sport is boxing (which represents our ideal of masculinity) and the Champion's black, then he needs to be a Tom. Muhammad Ali is black, but he is certainly not a Tom. The sportswriters hate him."<sup>132</sup> The article was supportive of Ali's social activism and lambasted sportswriters for demanding complacency among Black athletes.<sup>133</sup>

For the counterculture, the blues was not a safe form of Black culture to appropriate, but rather a method to show solidarity with Black people. This perception contrasted greatly with the mainstream conservative blues culture described in Adelt's work, but it further demonstrated the counterculture's practice of adapting the blues to fit its experiences and values. While the counterculture embraced the blues whole-heartedly, the genre had fully breached the American mainstream by the end of the 1960s, where it would stay for years to come.

### **Conclusion: Blues Beyond the 1960s**

The blues was strongly embraced by the counterculture in the late-1960s and early-1970s. Counterculture audiences, who had recently embraced electric music, began to consume electric blues. Blues records sold better than they ever had during the late-1960s,

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<sup>132</sup> "No Shuffling Darkey," *The Rag*, March 20, 1967, p. 3, *Independent Voices*.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

and blues performers were present at major countercultural events, such as Woodstock and the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival. Furthermore, many influential countercultural pop musicians such as Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix or Jefferson Airplane lead guitarist Jorma Kaukonen were blues musicians themselves. The popularity of blues artists in the late-1960s demonstrated both an embrace of blues within the counterculture, and a crossover in the popularity of the blues with the American mainstream.

As many folk revival bluesniks became counterculture blues freaks, perceptions of the genre greatly changed. Some perceptions, such as Black authenticity in the blues largely remained, however, counterculture members became more open to styles of blues and did not demand Black artists conform to country blues archetypes. Additionally, audiences were more open to White blues artists and mixed-race bands such as the Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

The blues was embraced by the counterculture for numerous reasons. As a basis for much popular music, blues provided the roots to many artists that had found success within the movement. Blues was also a method for counterculture members to reject the mainstream, while living through blues as a musical experience. The experiential origins of blues allowed counterculture members to adapt the genre into their experiences while appropriating the genre to fit into their social views. The genre was also a way for counterculture members to show support and demonstrate solidarity with Black civil rights advocates in the late-1960s, creating a progressive blues culture which contrasted Adelt's notion of the mainstream conservative blues culture.

Blues, as a genre, saw some hard times in post-1960s America. In Alan Harper's 2016 book *Waiting for Buddy Guy*, the author presented the blues through a declension narrative,



arguing that the genre was diminishing in popularity in post-1960s America.<sup>134</sup> Blues artists found decent commercial success throughout the 1970s, particularly B.B. King, whose career had exploded since the late-1960s. King had many hits in the 1970s and beyond.<sup>135</sup> However, a series of deaths in the 1970s and 1980s proved detrimental to the blues as a genre. Among others, Howlin' Wolf died in 1976, Muddy Waters died in 1983, and Janis Joplin, Michael Bloomfield and Paul Butterfield all died of accidental drug overdoses in 1970, 1981 and 1987 respectively.<sup>136</sup> A major perception of the blues is that it simply stagnated and went away throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, blues remained an integral part of American music. Stevie Ray Vaughan, a protégé of Buddy Guy and Albert King, was a smash success throughout the 1980s with numerous albums peaking in the top 50 of the billboard 200.<sup>137</sup> Vaughan's signature style took inspiration from artists like Albert King, Albert Collins, Freddie King and Jimi Hendrix while infusing 1980s "shredding" to provide a technical and advanced style that innovated blues guitar. Vaughan died in a helicopter crash in 1990, ending his short yet innovative career. In Vaughan's absence, the blues has seen success through other artists as well.

Buddy Guy, while popular in the counterculture since the late-1960s, finally found mainstream success in the 1990s and 2000s, with well-charting albums like *Damn Right I've Got the Blues* and *Rhythm & Blues*.<sup>138</sup> In the late-2010s and early-2020s, blues saw more of a resurgence in popularity. Young Black people once again began taking interest in the blues again. Artists like the Grammy Award winner and Buddy Guy mentored guitarist Christone "Kingfish" Ingram and fellow Grammy winner Jontavious Willis broke into the scene while

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<sup>134</sup> Alan Harper, *Waiting for Buddy Guy: Chicago Blues at the Crossroads* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2016), 172.

<sup>135</sup> "B.B. King," billboard, Penske Media Corporation, 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/b-b-king/>.

<sup>136</sup> Ward, *Michael Bloomfield*, 189.

<sup>137</sup> "Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble," Billboard Database, Penske Media Corporation, 2023, <https://billboard.elpee.jp/artist/Stevie%20Ray%20Vaughan%20And%20Double%20Trouble/>.

<sup>138</sup> "Buddy Guy," billboard. Penske Media Corporation, 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/buddy-guy/>.

established artists like Charlie Musselwhite, Elvin Bishop, Buddy Guy, Taj Mahal continued to produce blues albums. “Today, a lot of young Black guys are rediscovering blues and starting to play it and they’re really good... some guy talking about taking it back, you know, well, you shouldn’t have let it go (laughs), And it’s great, you know, there’s Jontavious Willis, and -- there’s just... a lot of young guys,” stated Musselwhite in 2023.<sup>139</sup> Additional artists like Gary Clark Jr., Ben Harper and Keb’ Mo’ have found success in the post-1960s blues industry. It is a myth to claim that the genre has stagnated or disappeared since the 1960s and 1970s, even though the blues has not found the same mainstream success that it had since then. Discussing the 2020s blues resurgence, Charlie Musselwhite confidently stated, “The blues is back!”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Musselwhite, interview by Joel Gingerich.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Blues music went through a series of drastic changes during the 1960s. New subgenres of the blues, such as the young energetic style from the early and mid-1960s or the psychedelic-blues of the late-1960s, expanded the boundaries of what was considered blues music. Starting its life in the Deep South, the blues quickly turned from a cathartic expression of disdain for the oppression faced by Black people in America to a commercial means for professional musicians to escape their oppression. As the genre became electrified and worked its way up to northern industrial cities in the United States, young artists, both Black and White, embraced the blues. Through close mentorships and a reciprocated relationship of support and influence between younger and older musicians, the Chicago blues scene was sustained throughout the early-1960s and grew in popularity. The North Side Chicago blues explosion, and the growing popularity of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band contributed to the popularization of blues among White people. By the mid-1960s, the blues was beginning to gain notoriety within the White American mainstream, but it still had some ways to go.

After the Butterfield Band went to the West Coast, many of their peers and mentors followed suit, leading to a massive uptick in blues popularity, both in the counterculture and the mainstream. Counterculture members had a far more complex view of the blues than the folk revival participants of the late-1950s and early-1960s, often accepting the blues in many different forms from Black or White artists. This heavily contrasted the folk revival, which only valued Black, acoustic, country blues. Though the counterculture viewed Blackness as a sign of credibility in the blues, they did not demand Black artists perform folk-blues. The counterculture embraced the blues whole-heartedly, as the roots of popular music, a method for rejecting the mainstream, as a way to express their own political views, and as a way to demonstrate solidarity with Black civil rights activists.

In post-1960s America, the blues has declined in popularity, yet artists like Stevie Ray Vaughan in the 1980s brought bursts of both popularity and innovation to the genre while established blues players such as Charlie Musselwhite and Buddy Guy continued to put out music into the 2020s. Other artists like Ben Harper and Gary Clark Jr. have likewise enjoyed popularity in the blues industry. Additionally, a resurgence in popularity among young Black people has led to several younger Black artists finding success with the blues, such as “Kingfish” Ingram and Jontavious Willis.

It is a major hope of this paper that it will be used for further studies. The 1960s blues scene has been severely understudied, and many issues still need to be researched. Blues is a tremendously important part of American history. It provides insights into the oppression endured by Black people and how they rejected these circumstances. The blues demonstrates how certain facets of culture became integrated and appropriated in the 1960s. Just as the counterculture viewed the blues as a method of cultural expression, so too can it be used to examine the cultures that embraced this genre. As countercultural writer Sam Silver stated, “the music is spokesman for the culture.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Silver, “Monterey Pop Festival,” *East Village Other*, 6.

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