



Chicago Blues

Chicago was the right place at the right time with the right people for the blues to remake itself. Starting in the 1920s, the Midwestern capitol had opened up to the music born in the rural south, attracting the men and women who created and performed it and rewarding those who made a business of it. Chicago ushered the newly arrived, rough-shod style into the faster-paced urban life, introduced it to new audiences and possibilities, and eventually exported it to the world beyond. In the process the blues was transformed to mirror its new settings, not losing sight of its origins but increasingly aware of broader horizons. And from the '20s to this day Chicago changed, too, becoming ever prouder of its identification with the blues.

Mississippi Delta bluesman **Robert Johnson** recorded "Sweet Home Chicago" in 1936, but even before then Chicago was a bright spot on the blues' map. The city had been founded, after all, by a man of African and French descent, **Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable**, just after the American Revolution, and had attracted a sizable African-American settlement before the Civil War. Evolving into a major U.S. transportation, manufacturing, industrial, and communications hub, Chicago registered a population of 110,000 Americans of African ancestry in 1920 – almost five per cent of its residents. In the course of the next 40 years that demographic grew dramatically. Due largely to the Great Migration of southern blacks escaping Jim Crow social policies and pursuing better work opportunities in northern urban centers, African-Americans in Chicago numbered more than 800,000 in 1960, approximately one third of the city's total.

Those decades encompassed the Roaring '20s (aka the Jazz Age), the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-War economic expansion. They witnessed the outbreak of jazz, the development of coast-to-coast radio broadcasting and the recording industry, enormous gains in national productivity, the advent of television, the Civil Rights struggle, and the advance of America as a world superpower. The Chicago blues reflected all that change.

Inexpensive fares on the Illinois Central Railroad, which stretched north from whistlestops in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas to Chicago's grandiose Union Station enabled blues and jazz musicians such as **Blind Lemon Jefferson**, **Louis Armstrong**, **Jelly Roll Morton**, **Sippie Wallace**, and **Alberta Hunter** to leave their homes for performing and recording opportunities unavailable to them in the south. Transplanted blues artists such as guitarists **Big Bill Broonzy** and **Tampa Red**, pianists **Maceo Merriweather** and **Georgia Tom Dorsey**, and harmonica player **Rice Miller** (aka Sonny Boy Williamson) welcomed colleagues to the city, helping them adjust, find work and housing on the mostly black South Side. Based on their successful recordings and the emergence of jazz, swing, and boogie woogie as widely popular sounds, the blues evolved from its initial presentation as racy songs sung by women or novelty "hokum" played by men solo or in duets to basic arrangements for small, loose bands.

What's known today as "Chicago blues," though, was launched by **McKinley "Muddy Waters" Morganfield**, the Mississippi-born guitarist and singer who, encouraged by pianist **Sunnyland Slim**, in 1947 amplified his instrument to emphasize the power of his lead lines and bottleneck slide embellishments. Waters recorded for Aristocrat Records, a firm started by the Polish immigrant Chess brothers, and eventually added a second guitarist, bassist, drummer, pianist, and harmonica or saxophone soloist to his ensemble, as if to match the din of Chicago's street traffic and elevated trains, stockyards, and steel mills.

Waters' lively, authoritative vocals appealed to his black listeners by referring both to the old southern culture and the immediate challenges of the north. He updated songs that had been regional hits in the Delta, and introduced a circle of fellow blues musicians including harmonica virtuosos **Little Walter Jacob**, **Junior Wells**, and **James Cotton**, guitarists **Jimmy Rogers** and **Buddy Guy**, and pianist **Otis Spann** to his producers, who soon renamed their company after themselves: Chess Records. In 1948 bassist **Willie Dixon** joined Chess, first as a recording artist and then as a staff producer and songwriter, writing lyrics and music for virtually all the label's stars.

Muddy Waters' muscular electric blues resounded not only throughout Chicago but all over the U.S., inspiring imitation, variations and competitions among musicians such as **Chester "Howlin' Wolf" Burnett**, **Elias "Bo Diddley" McDaniel** and **Chuck Berry**. All of them had contracts with Chess Records, which promoted them throughout the 1950s through nationally-broadcast radio shows to a newly empowered and racially diverse listenership: teenagers. The music's urgency and bristling gleam reverberated so powerfully with white youths that **Elvis Presley** and his cohorts, including **Jerry Lee Lewis**, **Carl Perkins**, and **Johnny Cash** at Memphis' Sun Records, followed suit.

Not only American rock 'n' roll was based on the Chicago blues: in the early 1960s British skiffle bands discovered the style, with **John Mayall's Bluesbreakers**, **the Yardbirds**, **the Who**, **the Rolling Stones** and **the Beatles** all casting themselves on the Chicago blues model. Chicago blues also had a pronounced affect on America's folk music revival. When Bob Dylan performed the first set featuring amplified instruments at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, he was accompanied by electric guitarist **Mike Bloomfield** of the Chicago-based **Paul Butterfield Blues Band**.

Although in the 1960s other American cities – such as Memphis with soul and Detroit with Motown -- began to challenge Chicago blues' pre-eminence, new blues artists including **Otis Rush**, **Magic Sam**, **Koko Taylor**, **Hound Dog Taylor** and **Son Seals** surfaced from Chicago's black neighborhood venues and the outdoor market Maxwell Street. They were recorded by new local labels such as Delmark and Alligator Records and, due to international tours, continued to exert profound influence abroad (**Led Zeppelin** featured a psychedelic version of Rush's composition "I Can't Quit You Babe" on its first album in 1969).

By the 1970s the Chicago blues could no longer be considered solely a black American art form, or even a sound limited to the blues. Significant blues elements were at the core of the contemporary gospel promulgated by the **Staples Singers**, embedded in the soul and soundtrack music of **Curtis Mayfield**, and adapted to orchestral form by Chicago composer **William Russo**, as recorded in 1973 for Deutsche Grammophon by the **Siegel-Schwall Band** and **San Francisco Symphony** conducted by **Seiji Ozawa**. Although many of the low rent black blues clubs on Chicago's South and West Sides closed down, victimized by urban renewal and changing musical preferences, the white North Side sustained the music with new venues providing platforms for both established and breakout artists.

When Muddy Waters died at age 70 in 1983, he was an internationally revered artist whose last four recordings, produced by white Texan blues guitarist **Johnny Winter**, had been the best-sellers of his career. Howlin' Wolf, Waters' closest rival, had died seven years earlier at age 66, having performed onstage with the Rolling Stones and been honored by the Grammy Hall of Fame. In 1984 the City of Chicago acknowledged their contributions to its distinctive artistic heritage by establishing an annual Chicago Blues Festival, held each June in the city's downtown Grant Park. In 2007, the free, four-day, six-stage Chicago Blues Festival reported 750,000 enthusiasts in attendance to hear dozens of local and international performers. This is just one indication that while Chicago blues has provided a foundation for rock 'n' roll, soul, contemporary gospel, comedy acts such as the **Blues Brothers**, house music, jazz fusion, some rap and hip-hop, and musical offshoots currently grouped under the umbrella term "pop," the essence of Chicago blues itself has never died.