

VINTAGE MUDDY WATERS

The Development of The Muddy Waters Band

Preceding the commencement of his commercial recording career, Muddy Waters was employed in Chicago as a truck driver. He had turned his hand to many types of work, in steelworks and labouring, and had found accommodation with his relatives, contenting himself with his musical activities of an evening or in his spare time.

Whilst out making deliveries one morning, Aristocrat Records telephoned his home, leaving a message that Muddy was required for a session and should get on his way there immediately. A friend raced around the busy streets in search of him, eventually spotting his van outside a store, told him the news, then took over the deliveries whilst an excited Muddy rushed home to collect his guitar and make all haste to the studios.

The resulting recordings were magnificent, electrified and direct, yet still containing an element of the country blues style, ideal for the negro public's musical taste at that time. The records sold well and the name of Muddy Waters was starting to receive attention.

Until this time Muddy had mainly been working as a sidesman on a rather irregular basis with artists like pianist Sunnyland Slim and Leroy Foster, after having been initially introduced by Big Bill Broonzy, undoubtedly the major blues figure in Chicago during that period. The opportunities were now ideal for him to form his own group, and this soon led to the formation of his classic band with Jimmy Rogers and Little Walter.

Little Walter Jacobs was first heard playing on the South-side street corners around the Maxwell Street market area. Even at this stage he was remarkably accomplished on the harmonica, for he'd been playing around with the instrument since childhood. "I just liked the sound of the harmonica, but what really made me choose it was that most of the kids, my mother too, tried to dissuade me from playin' it. Of course that made me int'rested, an' the more they tried to disgust me with it, the more I caught on."

Walter had a large repertoire, consisting of various jigs and popular tunes, for his first influence was a white hillbilly harmonicist who would play, sing and yodel at local parties, and as a child, Walter would listen and try to imitate him. His key to the blues, however, was undoubtedly "Sonny Boy" John Lee Williamson, whom Walter would always unhesitatingly name respectfully as his only influence, "The first Sonny Boy Williamson I heard when I was a kid. I'm not talkin' about the new one, (Rice Miller), the first one was called John Lee Williamson, an' he's the **only** one. Sonny Terry, he's good but not really my kind of harp player. All the rest of 'em took their patterns from me."

Jimmy Rogers had come to Chicago at the age of 17, playing harmonica first, then changing to guitar. He had received a musical upbringing from Henry Walker, a guitarist friend of his grandmother's, although his mother highly disapproved of her son wanting to choose music as a future career. In Chicago he started playing with some regularity in groups led by Baby Face Leroy and Sunnyland Slim, and whilst working with Clarence Smith, later to record as "Blue Smitty", met Muddy's brother, who soon made an introduction.

Of this period Little Walter said, "When Muddy made 'I Can't Be Satisfied', he didn't know nothin' else but that one tune to play. He came over to my house with Jimmy Rogers who played guitar, an' we started a trio."

Electrical amplification soon took an important role in the forming of the group's style. Jukeboxes were now becoming increasingly popular, and the band had to play loudly and with unhesitating insistence to keep their audience. Muddy added a heavy bass-guitarist and a driving drummer. His half-brother Otis Spann was also in Chicago, alternating between earning a living as a pianist and a plasterer. Spann was an almost old-time style boogie pianist, having been much under the influence of Big Maceo Merriweather, and

somehow his way of timing and playing fitted perfectly. Little Walter developed a literally revolutionary approach to harmonica playing by cupping a microphone close to the instrument, thus with the use of his hands, adeptly producing an amazing range of tonal effects, often resembling an organ. He also started using the large chromatic harmonica with enormous success.

The overall band sound was fantastic. The intermingling of the guitars was unrivalled by any other group. Muddy laid emphasis upon the bass strings and underlined his shouted vocal passages with stinging slide guitarwork on the top registers, whilst Rogers, with an almost methodical perfection supplied counter riffs and melodic lines with a remarkable play upon harmony. Walter's irresistibly buoyant harp added the necessary lift and phrasing against a solid foundation of rolling piano and pulsating rhythm.

A series of magnificent recordings came from the band during the '50s, making Muddy the undisputed giant of the entire blues field. Other members of the band were now also recording regularly and with success. Walter was becoming involved with his own solo standing and left to form his own band the "Jukes", following up the impact of his hit record. He introduced his friend Henry Strong as a replacement, but he was killed. "He got messed up with a woman. She got angry with him, and just meaning to cut him she went and killed him. He died in the back of Muddy's car on the way to the hospital." Walter Horton did a spell with the band, but further disruption was caused when Jimmy Rogers was dismissed, following a rather hazy disagreement which involved smoking and drinking on-stage and some trouble with the powerful Musician's Union in Chicago. He left and formed a band with pianist Eddie Ware, but soon afterwards had to limit his musical work due to an ailment which required surgery. He was becoming sadly disillusioned, and his last known appearance for many years was at the "Castle Rock" in '59, with a band consisting of Mighty Joe Young, Charles Edwards and S. P. Leary.

With the departure of Walter and Rogers the band sound changed completely. Pat Hare and James Cotton, musicians from Memphis, were enrolled as regular replacements. Both were technically adept, but lacked the inexplicable warmth and communication to be found in the work of their predecessors. They did contribute to get a tough overall sound, however, and although the poignancy of the original combo was lost, it was replaced by a rather brash and fast excitement, ideally suited to their club performances. Pat Hare was lost from the band and imprisoned, apparently for life, for having shot his wife, but Cotton remained right up until recent years, continually improving. During this period a long list of names have appeared as members of the band, including such foremost artists as George Smith, Hubert Sumlin, Otis Rush, Mojo Buford, John "Big Moose" Walker, Eddie Taylor, Fention Robinson, Matt Murphy and Earl Hooker. At times saxophones were added to "update" the sound, but the lineup has always returned to the format of guitars, harmonica and piano.

James Cotton reached maximum efficiency, and after a considerable period of association with Muddy, left to form his own band. Otis Spann now became the foundation and began to receive long overdue recognition as an artist in his own right. At times the band seemed to become somewhat shallow, and it was usually Spann who remained unchangeable and would regain an essence of the old atmosphere. After rather unexpectedly leaving Muddy on a solo attempt, his death was reported on April 25, 1970. He was 40 years old. Muddy Waters, after many unrepresentative experiments may now have come to a crossroads. When recently interviewed and asked who were his favourite musicians and the most memorable to have worked with, he unhesitatingly replied, "Little Walter, Jimmy Rogers and Otis Spann."

KEITH TILLMAN. (November, 1970)

VINTAGE MUDDY WATERS

NOTES:

"I'm fifty-one now and I'm not nearly as good as I was. You know I can't use that steel like I used to; and of course I'm doing pretty good; live comfortable and all, and it's a lot harder for me to feel the blues. I can't control the slide like I used to, but I still does my best. And another thing too. These guys I have with me are very good, but there was nobody better than (Little) Walter, Jimmy Rogers and me! Man, you better believe that! There just aren't any musicians like that coming up nowadays. Yeah, they was really great. Jimmy Rogers is one of my favourite people; he was just a wonderful guitarist. To tell the truth about it, my very favourite artist was Robert Johnson and Son House. Yeah, I really liked Robert."

These words were spoken by Muddy Waters to Rick Milne in 1967 and reflect the feelings of a man who is very aware of his position in life today. It took an awfully long time for Muddy, the best musician on a Mississippi plantation, to become the relatively sophisticated entertainer of white college kids, and over the years something was lost. As his own people abandon the blues, Muddy finds that he is thrust further into an alien world in the attempt to make money by music. His friends are dead and gone and there is no competition. Competition led to the great Muddy Waters; a creative musician and a dramatic showman, able to whip his black audiences into a frenzy as he arrogantly shouted that he was a "Hoochie Coochie Man." Muddy's endless variations on old themes and lack of new material, coupled with a stage routine that has become almost mechanical, indicate that the great days are gone for good. As no one really seems to expect more than the old "Mojo" routine, who can blame the great man for resting on his hard-earned laurels?

Let's go back to the beginning

Just north of Vicksburg, Mississippi, on Highway 61, stands the little Southern town of Rolling Fork. It is in Starkey County and the Mississippi River flows nearby. Here McKinley Morganfield was born on April 4th, 1915, and supposedly was nicknamed little "Muddy Waters" because of his fondness for playing in the waters of Deer Creek which ran by his home. His father, Ollie Morganfield, was a sharecropper and his mother died when he was three years old. Muddy was raised by his grandmother who lived at Clarksdale, but would come home periodically to see his father. Ollie Morganfield played guitar. Muddy would sit and listen to him and think of being able to play too. At an early age he took up the harmonica to entertain himself and by the time he was able to leave school and begin work in the fields he was an accomplished musician. Music was a part of the weekend activities for all the field hands and at the age of fifteen Muddy was leading a small string band that played at the plantation dances, joints or country suppers. When he was working on the plantations around Clarksdale he would come into town on Saturdays to listen to the big names of the time or to sit in with friends. It was the influence of Son House and Robert Johnson that caused Muddy to switch his harmonica for a guitar in 1935. Muddy's world was small. To him Clarksdale was the big city; Memphis and Chicago meant nothing. Picking cotton by day, guitar by night—that was life. He met up with other musicians who were coming up just like himself. He would travel around a little with guitarist Scott Bohanna, a childhood friend, and knew Robert Nighthawk, Raymond Hill and Ernest Lane. His singing and "bottleneck" guitar playing earned him a big local reputation; a reputation that caused friends to direct folklorist Alan Lomax to him in 1941.

Alan Lomax was in the South recording in the field for the Library Of Congress and he was after Robert Johnson. Robert however was dead, so Alan went to the Stovall plantation at Clarksdale and Muddy cut his first record. Although this was was a solo performance, Muddy was playing in the area with a small group that included Son Sims on fiddle, Louis Ford on mandolin and Charles Berry and Percy Thomas on guitars. In 1942 Alan came back again and recorded all of them. These sessions and a short tour with Silas Green's troupe from New Orleans made Muddy dissatisfied with Mississippi life and like so many of his contemporaries he went North to Chicago to start a new life in 1943.

In Chicago he found a home with relatives and a job in a paper mill. In the evenings he became a member of a musical circle which revolved around people like Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Boy Williamson. Muddy's fierce guitar style and dramatic vocalising soon made its presence felt and he was booked into Sylvio's, a famous blues club on West Lake. Playing with an electric guitar provided by an uncle, Muddy became a popular part of Chicago's blues scene. His obvious talent soon took him to the recording studios. In 1946 he tried his luck with Columbia and then joined Aristocrat in 1947. His amplified, but earthy country blues sold exceptionally well, not only in Chicago but also in the South and songs like "I Can't Be Satisfied" and "Rollin' Stone" turned him into a successful "Race" artist. When Aristocrat folded and was replaced by Chess, Muddy became one of their first big artists and his blues dominated their catalogue throughout the early 'fifties. To help his personal appearances Muddy got together a little band which at first included people like Sunnyland Slim, Leroy Foster, Lee Brown and Big Crawford. Johnny Jones too was associated with Muddy on a casual basis, but it was not until Little Walter joined in late 1948 that the great Muddy Waters Band got together. At first Walter played guitar leaving the harp to Jimmy Rogers, who had also just joined, but they soon switched instruments. Leroy Foster was the drummer initially, but was replaced by Elgin Evans who was a skilled musician, unlike Leroy. With this group Muddy began to record for Chess and also for other labels, letting Walter or Leroy handle the vocals. The whole group would play in the street outside the shops selling their records in an attempt to promote them, but it was not until Chess signed individual members of the band to solo contracts that anyone managed to rival Muddy himself as a major name.

This period, as Muddy has said, was the great time. He was in tremendous form and producing a string of fine blues singles with people like Walter and Jimmy Rogers. He had the toughest band in Chicago and no one could compete with him. "She Moves Me" was the first really big seiler and in 1952 it was all over the R & B charts. Muddy and his band were established and settled down to steadily cutting records under their own names and making personal appearances all over the country. An association with Willie Dixon resulted in two smash hits during 1954—"Hoochie Coochie Man" and "Just Make Love To Me"—and in the same year Otis Spann became pianist with the band, adding much to the overall sound and eventually allowing Muddy to give up playing guitar and thus concentrate on his singing.

When Muddy hung up his guitar, much of the "country" went out of his music and he was never quite as successful as he was before. Realising this, he returned to his old role during the late 'fifties, but this time he was "discovered" by the white audiences and his future was assured. However, he had lost Little Walter and by 1961 had dropped Jimmy Rogers. Otis Spann was the only strength left with the band and the new members who began to fill the thinning ranks spent too much time trying to imitate their predecessors, doing little to inject new life into Muddy's performances. This may have been his fault of course, for having developed a very well known "sound" he may have been reluctant to change. In the recording studio he had to. Over the last few years he has been recorded in a variety of ways and with a variety of gimmicks to boost his record sales. Originally records by Muddy Waters sold themselves, only now do his promoters consciously sell him as a blues singer, and this is because they are trying to deal with an audience they do not understand. Perhaps whites put up with a lot of mediocrity when it is presented live, but this does mean that they will buy it.

Thus the great years of Muddy were between 1948 and 1958. A decade of varied, distinctive, amplified "country" blues. It is to this decade that we dedicate this album and when one plays it, the horrors of "Electric Mud" and the like are banished completely and we can really appreciate just why Muddy is, and was, one of the major blues artists of the post-war era. Today all the old band members are gone and this means that performances like these will never be repeated, but this should not cause us too much concern, for songs like "Smokestack Lightning" are timeless and sound as fresh today as they ever did.

MIKE A. LEADBITTER (November, 1970)

THE MEN BEHIND MUDDY WATERS

LITTLE WALTER

Born Marion Walter Jacobs on May 1, 1930, Little Walter hails from Alexandria, Louisiana. He was the son of Beatrice and Adam Jacobs and learned to play a harmonica at a very early age. During his teens he travelled widely, playing engagements at New Orleans and Monroe, Louisiana before making his way to Chicago via Helena, Arkansas, Memphis and St. Louis.

He met Muddy in 1948 and a close association resulted, lasting until 1952, when Walter's "Juke" on the Checker label, shot into the charts. This one record started a revival of interest in the harp as a lead instrument all on its own and Walter's amplified sounds became much copied. National tours were arranged to cash-in on the hit and Walter had to leave Muddy and form his own band. Although he never returned to work for the man who gave him his start, Walter's friendship with Muddy lasted and he was often used on the man's record dates, or would just jam with him when they were both in Chicago.

Walter's advanced techniques and almost uncanny ability, coupled with an impassioned blues voice, kept him in the R & B charts until the late 'fifties. At the time of his murder in 1968 he was bothered about his loss of popularity with his old audiences and had become bitter and violent. His sudden success in white circles during the 'sixties meant little to him and he acted like a man who had just given up everything.

JIMMY ROGERS

Jimmy's real name was James Lane and he was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1924. He arrived in Chicago during 1945 via Memphis, and became friendly with Muddy right away. He was with Muddy right through the early years of struggle and played both harp and guitar in the early groups.

Jimmy possessed a very distinctive voice and guitar style, and it was only natural that he should

record under his own name. In 1950 he cut "That's All Right" for the then small Chess label and it was an immediate hit thanks to enthusiastic plugging by D.J. Big Bill Hill. Though Jimmy continued to record big selling records, he stuck by Muddy and never tried to make it alone. Both would help each other with their respective records and usually the results were magnificent.

In 1961 he was dropped by Muddy. Jimmy's contract with Chess had not been renewed and he was not acting like he used to. When Muddy turned on him, he quit the scene and vanished into obscurity. Only in recent months has he determined to try again. He is currently with the new John Littlejohn band and reputedly plays as well as ever.

OTIS SPANN

Born at Jackson, Mississippi, Otis Spann was a bit of a child prodigy. He was raised with Johnny Jones, another important blues pianist, and had won a talent contest at the age of eight. At fourteen he was pianist for a Jackson band and three years later led his own combo in Chicago. Playing at the Tick Tock Lounge, he was backed by Forest City Joe and Francis Clay.

Unable to make it under his own name, Otis dropped the band and joined Muddy as pianist. He began to appear on Muddy's records from 1954 onwards, and also made his first solo record that year for Checker. He stayed with Muddy until the middle 'sixties, but finding that the white audience liked him, tried to make it on his own. Again he was not too successful. His health was not helped by his various over-indulgences and he died this year after several minor heart attacks.

There is no doubt about the talents of Otis Spann. He was a brilliant blues pianist and could sing with strength and emotion. Some of his greatest work was with Muddy and he was often responsible for the really rocking sound on record and at live performances.

MIKE A. LEADBITTER (November, 1970)



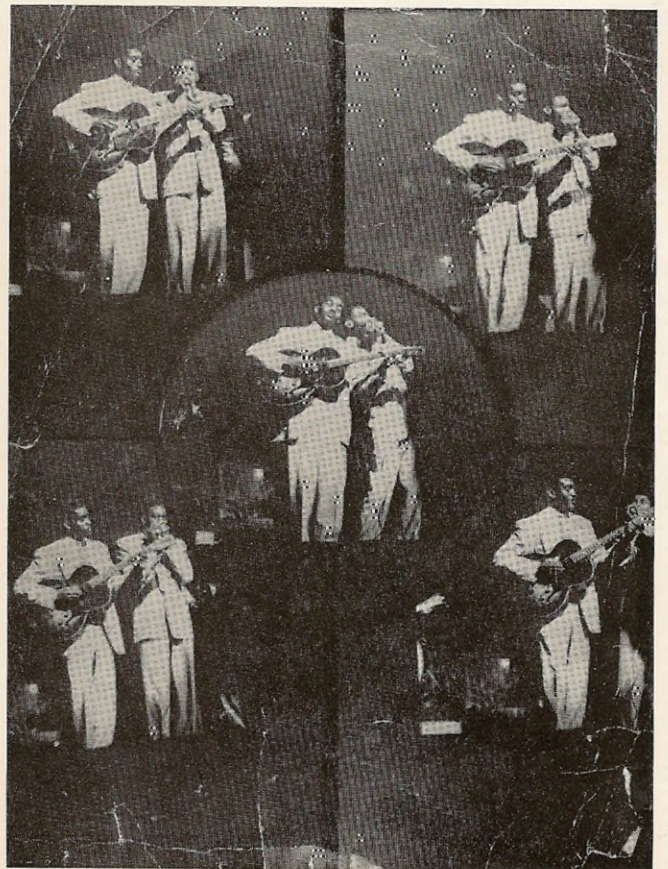
JAMES COTTON c.1958



MUDDY WATERS c.1967



LITTLE WALTER c.1967



LITTLE WALTER & LOUIS MYERS c.1952