Real Blues in Ann Arbor

Howard A. Husock

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Within the past year, America has suddenly found time to experience something called the "rebirth of the blues." On magazine covers, in underground journals, in popular music—the blues.

Blues has surfaced into the popular culture. It has surfaced not from the so-called underground or "hip" sub-culture but from an underground far deeper—the black culture. For blues, the only purely native American music, ironically was spawned and nurtured by a man often considered as less than an American, the black man.

Blues was born of people poor and hungry but now, in the midst of the revival, answers needs for those who are rich but still hungry, hungry in spirit. And those who are hungry in that way, who view the blues revival as more than a passing commercial fad, feel an obligation to look into those black roots and listen to what the surviving black musicians are playing.

A group of such blues enthusiasts has formed in Ann Arbor and with the help of a grant from the University of Michigan has planned a three-day excursion into the black origins of the blues, called the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, to be held outdoors on August 1 through 3.

The lineup of performers has been designed to give the audience a chance to examine first-hand, from black musicians, the evolution of the blues and almost any of its styles.

Without B.B. King there would be no Eric Clapton, and B.B., now acknowledged as the living "king of the blues," will be at Ann Arbor to wring the blues from his shining guitar "Lucille."

Without "Big Mama" Mae Thornton, there would be no Janis Joplin, as Janis admits on the cover of her "Cheap Thrills" album, and "Big Mama" Mae will be at Ann Arbor to sing her "Ball and Chain," which became Janis' encore number.

The recent publicity splash on Johnny Winter has not produced a similar splash for Muddy Waters, to whom Winter owes an incalculable debt. But not everyone is ignoring Muddy's Chicago version of amplified blues. He will be at Ann Arbor along with his contemporaries such as James Cotton, Howlin' Wolf, Junior Wells, John Lee Hooker, J.B. Hutto, and Otis Rush.

Although there are many white musicians who have gained great popularity with their version of the blues, Ann Arbor Blues Festival is perhaps the finest assemblage of bluesmen in history.

But any act, musical or otherwise, can be meaningless unless it can be understood in its context. For the blues, the context has always been the black American sub-culture, but that subculture has not been a constant thing and neither has the style of the blues.

The earliest spawning ground for blues lies far south of Ann Arbor in the humid delta countryside of Mississippi. There, throughout the black man's itinerant wanderings from slavery to sharecropping, the old African chants took on new rhythms, the pounding hammers, the dragging hoes, the drive of the chain-gang.

The music matured and refined to become a set verse pattern of three lines, the first two the same and the third a rhyme and a resolution to the problem usually posed in the first two. This Mississippi style began to form after the Civil War and was finally recorded in the late 1920s and early '30s.

Three pivotal figures can be recognized in the development of this "country" blues style: Charley Patton, Son House, and Robert Johnson. Of this triumvirate only House remains alive and will make one of his rare appearances in Ann Arbor.

Charley Patton, in forming what was at times a prototype blues and sometimes a refined music, applied his knowledge of popular songs and spirituals to lay the bedrock of recorded twelve-bar blues. His music was very much tied to the land and his community, but it is mainly the legacy of his vocal style and guitar playing that he passed on to Son House that has immortalized him.

Son moved more closely to a set pattern of blues but still left a lot of leeway for himself for spontaneous emotion, and certainly that leeway never has really left the blues. He became and remains a virtuoso of "bottleneck" guitar, a blues style in which the guitar is tuned open to a chord and the fretting is done with a glass neck of a whiskey bottle or with a metal pipe.

The story of Son's relation to the young Robert Johnson is perhaps the most important in blues history. Johnson, an eighteen year old genius fresh from a plantation, listened extensively to other bluesmen, especially to Son House. He took Son's music and tightened it and refined it.

Johnson developed the walking or boogie base and was able to express his personal emotions, poetically and originally. He pointed the blues to the city, to Chicago, the destination of the post-depression migration of blacks from Mississippi. Johnson, the quintessence of country blues artists, really signaled the end of country blues as a popular idiom.

But don't let that statement make you shy away from the country blues. It gave way to the pressures of urban ghettos and all the new urban rhythms, but it still can be at times the most powerful blues of all: a solitary man and his guitar. I once heard a man say of Son House's performance: "It's like he dies on stage."

But from Robert Johnson through Elmore James, B.B. King, Howlin' Wolf, James Cotton, and especially Muddy Waters, the blues took on its amplified "Chicago" sound. Muddy Waters first recorded as a Mississippi bottleneck guitarist, but by 1949 he had begun recording with amplified guitar, bass, drums, and an amplified harmonica, called a "harp," from the term mouth harp.

The Chicago style drew heavily from Mississippi, but it also reflected the Texas blues sound of Sam Lightnin' Hopkins and T-Bone Walker, the first bluesmen to amplify their guitars. The Chicago sound rocked the bars on Chicago's South Side and still does. But its influence has extended beyond Chicago, beyond the black community.

The rock-'n'-roll sound of the fifties and sixties was just an up-tempo of the Chicago blues sound. But despite its contribution to the rock culture, the Chicago style has itself remained intact. Artists such as Muddy Waters, James Cotton, Junior Wells, J.B. Hutto, one of the new young guitarists, and Otis Rush will appear at Ann Arbor before a new, mostly white audience that has adopted this old but immensely alive form of music.

The new blues audience and the new white musicians have found out that all those words like alienation and despair and dehumanization come right down to the blues.

The new blues audience has come from the suburbs and yet are learning about real feelings of love and anguish and about the realities of being on the road or even behind bars. They will be going to Ann Arbor to learn from the black bluesmen what the blacks have known for a helluva long time.

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