

# ROCKIN' in TIME

CUSTOM EDITION FOR CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE



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*Rockin' in Time,*  
*A Social History of Rock-And-Roll*, Fifth Edition  
by David P. Szatmary

*Rockin' Out,*  
*Popular Music in the U.S.A.*, Third Edition  
by Reebee Garofalo



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by David P. Szatmary

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by Reebee Garofalo

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# Chapter 1

## ***The Blues, Rock-and-Roll, and Racism***

It used to be called boogie-woogie, it used to be called blues, used to be called rhythm and blues. . . . It's called rock now.

Chuck Berry

A smoke-filled club, the Macomba Lounge, on the South Side of Chicago, late on a Saturday night in 1950. On a small, dimly lit stage behind the bar in the long, narrow club stood an intense African American dressed in an electric green suit, baggy pants, a white shirt, and a wide, striped tie. He sported a three-inch pompadour with his hair slicked back on the sides.

He gripped an oversized electric guitar—an instrument born in the postwar urban environment—caressing, pulling, pushing, and bending the strings until he produced a sorrowful, razor-sharp cry that cut into his listeners, who responded with loud shrieks. With half-closed eyes, the guitarist peered through the smoke and saw a bar jammed with patrons who nursed half-empty beer bottles. Growling out the lyrics of “Rollin’ Stone,” the man’s face was contorted in a painful expression that told of cotton fields in Mississippi and the experience of African Americans in Middle America at mid-century. The singer’s name was Muddy Waters, and he was playing a new, electrified music called rhythm and blues or R & B.

The rhythm and blues of Muddy Waters and other urban blues artists served as the foundation for Elvis, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and most other rock-and-rollers. A subtle blend of African and European traditions, it provided the necessary elements and inspiration for the birth of rock and the success of Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Despite their innovative roles, R & B artists seldom received the recognition or the money they deserved. Established crooners, disc jockeys, and record company executives, watching their share of the market shrink with the increasing popularity of R & B and its rock-and-roll offspring, torpedoed the new

music by offering toned-down, white copies of black originals that left many African-American trailblazers bitter and sometimes broken.

## THE BIRTH OF THE BLUES

The blues were an indigenous creation of black slaves who adapted their African musical heritage to the American environment. Though taking many forms and undergoing many permutations throughout the years, the blues formed the basis of rock-and-roll.

Torn from their kin, enduring an often fatal journey from their homes in West Africa to the American South, and forced into a servile way of life, Africans retained continuity with their past through music. Their voices glided between the lines of the more rigid European musical scale to create a distinctive new sound. To the plantation owners and overseers, the music seemed to be “rising and falling” and sounded off-key.

The music involved calculated repetitions. In this call-and-response, often used to decrease the monotony of work, one slave would call or play a lead part, and his fellow workers would follow with the same phrase or an embellishment of it until another took the lead. As one observer wrote in 1845, “Our black oarsmen made the woods echo to their song. One of them, taking the lead, first improvised a verse, paying compliments to his master’s family, and to a celebrated black beauty of the neighborhood, who was compared to the ‘red bird.’ The other five then joined in the chorus, always repeating the same words.” Some slaves, especially those from the Bantu tribe, whooped or jumped octaves during the call-and-response, which served as a basis for field hollers.

Probably most important, the slaves, accustomed to dancing and singing to the beat of drums in Africa, emphasized rhythm over harmony. In a single song they clapped, danced, and slapped their bodies in several different rhythms, compensating for the absence of drums, which were outlawed by plantation owners, who feared that the instrument would be used to coordinate slave insurrections. One ex-slave, writing in 1853, called the polyrhythmic practice “patting juba.” It was performed by “striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing.” In contrast, noted President John Adams, whites “droned out [Protestant hymns] . . . like the braying of asses in one steady beat.”

African Americans used these African musical traits in African-American religious ceremonies. One writer in the *Nation* described a “praise-meeting” held in 1867: “At regular intervals one hears the elder ‘deaconing’ a hymn-book hymn which is sung two lines at a time, and whose wailing cadences, borne on the night air, are indescribably melancholy.” The subsequent response from the congregation to the bluesy call of the minister, along with the accompanying instruments, created the rhythmic complexity common in African music.

Such African-inspired church music, later known as gospel, became the basis for the blues, which applied the music to secular themes. Bluesman Big Bill Broonzy, who recorded nearly 200 songs from 1925 to 1952, started as “a preacher—preached in the church. One day I quit and went to music.” Broonzy maintained that “the blues



On the cotton plantation, 1937. Photo by Dorothea Lange.  
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won't die because spirituals won't die. Blues—a steal from spirituals. And rock is a steal from the blues. . . . Blues singers start out singing spirituals.”

### **FROM THE RURAL SOUTH TO THE URBAN NORTH**

During and after World War I, many Southern African Americans brought the blues to Northern cities, especially Chicago, the end of the Illinois Central Railroad line, where the African-American population mushroomed from 40,000 in 1910 to 234,000 twenty years later. Many African Americans left the South to escape the boll weevil, a parasitic worm that ravaged the Mississippi Delta cotton fields in 1915 and 1916. Some migrated to break loose from the shackles of crippling racial discrimination in the South. As Delta-born pianist Eddie Boyd told *Living Blues*, “I thought of coming to Chicago where I could get away from some of that racism and where I would have an opportunity to, well, do something with my talent. . . . It wasn’t peaches and cream

[in Chicago], man, but it was a hell of a lot better than down there where I was born." Once in Chicago, migrating African Americans found jobs in steel mills, food-processing plants, and stockyards that needed extra hands because of the wartime draft and a sudden cutoff of European immigration. They settled in Chicago's South and West Side neighborhoods.

The migrants to the Windy City included guitarist Tampa Red, who moved from Florida to Chicago in 1925. Pianist Eurreal Wilford ("Little Brother") Montgomery, born in 1907 on the grounds of a Louisiana lumber company, performed at logging camps until he ended up in Chicago. Big Bill Broonzy, an ex-slave's son who worked as a plow hand in Mississippi and laid railroad track in Arkansas, headed for the same destination in 1916, when drought destroyed the crops on his farm. In 1929, pianist Roosevelt Sykes, "The Honeydripper," took the same route. A few years later, harmonica wizard John Lee ("Sonny Boy") Williamson, the first Sonny Boy, migrated from Jackson, Tennessee. And around the same time, guitarist Sleepy John Estes, the son of a Tennessee sharecropper, moved to the Windy City. George Leaner, who began selling blues discs in Chicago during the 1930s, recalled, "The Illinois Central Railroad brought the blues to Chicago. With the thousands of laborers who came to work in the meat-packing plants and the steel mills came Peetie Wheatstraw, Ollie Shepard, Blind Boy Fuller, Washboard Sam, Little Brother Montgomery, Blind Lemon [Jefferson], Memphis Minnie, and Rosetta Howard."

These migrants played different styles of blues. At first, most brought country blues. By the early 1940s, when the urban setting began to influence the music, they recorded a hybrid of blues, vaudeville styles, and newer swing rhythms which included the boogie-woogie, rolling-bass piano, a sound that had been associated with the jump blues band of Louis Jordan. Some dubbed the early Chicago blues the "Bluebird Beat" because many of the blues artists recorded for RCA Victor's Bluebird label, formed in 1933.

Lester Melrose, a white music talent-scout producer, documented the Chicago blues scene during the 1930s and 1940s. As Willie Dixon, bassist, songwriter, and talent scout told *Living Blues*, "I started goin' up to Tampa Red's house where a lot of the other blues artists was, on 35th and State Street. He had a place up over a pawnshop. And a lotta the musicians used to go up there and write songs, lay around in there, and sleep. Lester Melrose always came there when he was in town. That was his kind of headquarters, like. And whenever he was in town, and different people had different songs that they wanted him to hear, they came by Tampa's house. . . . Big Bill Broonzy and a bunch of 'em would hang around there. And we get to singing it and seein' how it sounds. If it sounded like it was alright, then Melrose would say, 'Well, looky here, we'll try it out and see what happens.'" Melrose himself boasted that "from March 1934 to February 1951 I recorded at least 90 percent of all rhythm-and-blues talent for RCA and Columbia records." He included on his roster Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red, Sleepy John Estes, Roosevelt Sykes, Sonny Boy Williamson, and many others. By using several of his artists in one session, Melrose featured vocals, a guitar, and a piano to create a Chicago blues sound more enlivened and sophisticated than the more subdued country blues.



Listening to the blues. The South, early 1940s. Photo by Russell Lee. *Permission by Library of Congress, F34-31941.*

The blues became even more entrenched in Northern urban areas during and after World War II, when thousands of Southerners in search of work streamed into the cities. "World War I started bluesmen up North and No. II made it a mass migration," pointed out Atlantic record executive Jerry Wexler. Mechanical cotton pickers and the need for workers in wartime industrial factories pushed many African Americans northward.

From 1940 to 1944, estimated *Time* magazine, more than 50,000 African Americans from Mississippi alone headed for Chicago. They paid about \$15 for the trip on the Illinois Central Railroad to the Windy City, the home of *The Defender*, the widely read, black-owned newspaper that encouraged Southern sharecroppers to migrate to the North. From 1940 to 1950, 214,000 Southern African Americans arrived in Chicago, an increase of 77 percent in just one decade, and the African-American population in Chicago increased to nearly a half million. About half of the new migrants came from the Mississippi Delta region, which stretched 200 miles from Memphis to Vicksburg.

Many of the Delta migrants had heard a propulsive, acoustic, personalized style of blues on their plantations. On Saturdays, at parties, at picnics, and in juke joints, they listened to the moans, the heavy bass beat, and the bottleneck slide guitar of local musicians. Their favorites included Charley Patton, the king of the Delta blues, who played around Will Dockery's plantation during the 1920s, and in 1929 recorded his classics "Pony Blues," "Pea Vine Blues," and "Tom Rushen Blues." He played with Eddie ("Son") House, a Baptist preacher who taught himself how to play the guitar at age twenty-five and in the 1930s cut such discs as "Preachin' the Blues." Robert Johnson, one of the most celebrated and legendary Delta blues artists, learned his guitar technique from Patton disciple Willie Brown and picked up Delta stylizings from Son House. During his brief recording career, which began in 1936, he released such gems as "Dust My Broom," "Sweet Home Chicago," "Crossroads," "Love in Vain," and "Rambling on My Mind."

## **MUDDY WATERS AND CHICAGO R & B**

Muddy Waters (a.k.a. McKinley Morganfield), who grew up in Clarksdale, Mississippi, listening to Johnson, Patton, and Son House, merged his Delta influences with the urban environment of Chicago. He had his first introduction to music in church. "I used to belong to church. I was a good Baptist, singing in church," he recollected. "So I got all of my good moaning and trembling going on for me right out of church."

Muddy bought his first guitar when he was thirteen. "The first one I got," he told writer Robert Palmer, "I sold the last horse we had. Made about fifteen dollars for him, gave my grandmother seven dollars and fifty cents, I kept seven-fifty and paid about two-fifty for that guitar. It was a Stella. The people ordered them from Sears-Roebuck in Chicago." A young Muddy played locally around his home base, a plantation owned by Colonel William Howard Stovall. In 1941, on a trip to the Mississippi Delta in search of Robert Johnson, musicologists Alan Lomax and John Work discovered Waters, then a tenant farmer, and recorded him for the Library of Congress.

Two years later, Muddy moved to Chicago "with a suitcase, a suit of clothes, and a guitar," hoping to "get into the big record field." "I wanted to get out of Mississippi in the worst way," Waters told a journalist. "They had such as my mother and the older people brainwashed that people can't make it too good in the city. But I figured if anyone else was living in the city, I could make it there, too." Waters worked in a paper container factory and then as a truck driver by day, playing at parties in the evenings.

In 1944, Muddy bought his first electric guitar, an instrument probably invented and introduced for mass consumption by Leo Fender. Two years later, he formed his first electric combo. Possibly the archetype of Chicago R & B artists, Muddy Waters felt compelled to electrify his sound in Chicago. "When I went into the clubs, the first thing I wanted was an amplifier. Couldn't nobody hear you with an acoustic." At least partly out of necessity, Waters combined his Delta blues with the electric guitar and amplifier, which blasted forth the tension, volume, and confusion of the big-city streets.





The Muddy Waters band, 1954. From left to right: Muddy Waters (guitar), Jerome Green (maracas), Otis Spann (piano), Henry Strong (harmonica), Elgin Evans (drums), and Jimmy Rogers (guitar). *Permission by MCA Records.*

By combining the sounds of the country and city into a nitty-gritty, low-down, jumpy sound, Muddy Waters reflected the optimism of postwar African Americans, who had escaped from the seemingly inescapable Southern cotton fields. The urban music contrasted sharply with the more sullen country blues, born in slavery. Willie Dixon, a bassist from Vicksburg, Mississippi, and composer of blues-rock classics such as “Hoochie Coochie Man,” “I’m a Man,” and “Just Want to Make Love to You,” recalled, “There was quite a few people around singin’ the blues but most of ’em was singing all sad blues. Muddy was giving his blues a little pep.” The peppy blues of artists like Muddy Waters became known as rhythm and blues.

After four years of perfecting his electric sound in Chicago clubs, Muddy signed with Aristocrat Records, owned by Polish immigrant brothers Leonard and Phil Chess, who had operated several South Side bars, including the Macomba Lounge. At first, as Muddy told journalist Pete Welding, Leonard Chess “didn’t like my style of singing; he wondered who was going to buy that. The lady [Evelyn Aron, a partner of the Chess brothers] said ‘You’d be surprised.’ . . . Everybody’s records came out before mine. [Macomba house vocalist] Andrew Tibbs had two records before me. . . . But when they released mine, it hit the ceiling.” “I had a hot blues out, man,” Muddy remembered about his first disc, “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” backed with “Feel Like Going Home.” “I’d be driving my truck and whenever I’d see a neon beer sign, I’d stop, go