

Boogie Lightning

John Lee Hooker and the Electrified Blues

The world,” said John Lee Hooker, “is a natural born jungle.” A stew bubbled on the yellow stove. Bright California winter sunshine beamed through net curtains. Hooker stood in his kitchen. His long arms hung relaxed at his sides; his hands lined and pulpy soft. He had on a bright red shirt, nondescript brown pants, and suede rubber soled shoes; no belt. On his head was a skinny-brim hat of horsehide. He turned to the stove, lifted the lid of the stew, smelled hard, and grinned. As he straightened up, his thought came back to him. A slow sadness moved over his face. “People don’t know which way to go. They are confused. Lost in this world. That is what I see. Race against race, religion against religion, people fighting. It is hard to explain.”

In the living room, resting on an aquamarine expanse of wall-to-wall, was a Florentine-style phonograph console rigged up with flashing red and blue light panels. One of his recent albums was on at medium volume. A nice lick caught his ear. “That, that was Steve Miller.”

He sat down at the table. “Now where was we at? Yeah. My music is the blues. It tells my story, my problems. People can listen, maybe it’ll help them solve their problems. We could be one happy family in this world. We’re in it together, enough room for everybody.” He looked straight at me. “We’re not here to stay, you know, we is just passing through.”

[THE MUSIC MOVES NORTH]

In 1948, as John Lee Hooker remembers, a man named Elmer Barbara lived at 609 Lafayette Street in Detroit, Michigan. Barbara owned a small record store and in the back had a primitive record cutting lathe, on which he could make passable dubs. Like most such, the store was a musician’s hang-out, and Barbara, a watchful sentry at the recording industry’s remotest border, fancied himself a talent scout. That a Bing Crosby-to-be would stroll in wasn’t likely, but a future Inkspot or Louis Jordan might. Who knew what made for success in the record biz? Yet to Barbara and many others, some facts were obvious.

Blacks bought records when they could afford to, and in 1948 more could than ever before. Equally important from *Michael Lydon is the author of Rock Folk, now a Delta paperback, and Boogie Lightning, to be published this winter by Dial Press.*

a businessman’s point of view, they were reachable as a market. Selling to black Americans before the war had been by mail order or small-order salesmanship on backwoods routes out of Willy Loman’s nightmares. After the war, however, millions of blacks were living in the big cities of the North, Midwest, and West.

These were blacks a business could get to, concentrated in numbers large enough to make a bulk operation profitable. They didn’t have much money but they spent what they did have on fast turnover consumer items. Barbara had more new customers in his store than he had new records to sell them. The major record companies had let their race catalogues atrophy in the war years. They still recorded jazz irregularly, and pushed only that black music which had an equal if not predominant white appeal.

It made sense for Barbara to help supply himself by getting records made that he could sell. There was available talent. In the migration had come musicians—not many jazzmen or band-trained players who could read charted arrangements and get jobs in Detroit’s established music market, but blues singers, pickers, blowers, and thumpers. Their music—sometimes raw, sometimes elegant—was fiercely individual and made little or no reference to the kinds of music then deemed popular. In the South the bluesmen had chopped cotton by day and played fish fries at night; they swept offices and washed cars in the North, playing the bars around midnight. They had arrived with their audience—get them on wax and a record business was ready made.

“I came to Detroit in 1942, when I was about 20,” said John Lee. “Originally I’m from Clarksdale, Mississippi, the Delta. Now I haven’t been there for a *long* time. I started playing the guitar when I was 13 years old. I learned from my stepfather, Willy Moore. The style I play now, he played then. Too bad he never made anything out of it.” Moore was an accomplished blues guitarist, and the young John Lee heard not only him, but Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Patton, and others whose names are lost who came to play at Moore’s house. When he left the Delta for Memphis at 14, he believed he was *good*. Memphis didn’t care, so he moved on to Cincinnati. He left there for Detroit and war work in the booming motor factories. He had never stopped playing, and after the war started getting jobs in the clubs along Detroit’s Hastings Street. At times he even had a small group with him; mostly he worked alone.

by Michael Lydon

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“First we put a mike onto his guitar and we put a speaker in a toilet bowl next door. Then we put a mike under that so the sound would echo off the water. Then I put a board under his feet to make his tapping louder, and put a mike down there.”

“I had heard that this Elmer Barbara was cutting local guys who played guitar and harmonica, stuff like that. I walked in one day. He worked with me night and day for months, cutting dubs and trying different experiments. But he didn’t have the set-up to make real records, so when we had something that was good, I took it to Bernard Besman. I didn’t know Besman, but he was a record distributor who also had a label, the Sensation label. He liked the dub, and I started working with him.”

Bernard Besman, then about 30, was a small frog in the next bigger pond. A pianist who loved the rippling swing of Earl “Fatha” Hines, he himself had worked under the name Dean Dennis and had played a commercially passable imitation of Carmen Cavallero. But even before the war, he had been more drawn to the business of music than to a performing career.

In the army Besman booked bands for the Special Services, and after discharge he teamed up with an accountant friend to distribute records in Michigan for the Los Angeles-based Pan American label. Now in North Hollywood himself and in the toy business—his company has the Bozo the Clown merchandising franchise—he remembers his Detroit days with a phlegmatic pleasure.

“Playing music and selling records, I found out, are two different things,” he said, sitting on a back office couch. “In 1946 we got a little store on Linwood Avenue, did well from the start. Rafael Mendez, a trumpet player, had a hit on Pan American, as did Eddie Cantor. But one label wasn’t enough to keep us going, so we got the Exclusive label, Joe Liggams of ‘The Honeydrinker’ was with Exclusive; Johnny Moore, and that blues singer, Charles Brown, he was on it too. Then we got Modern and Aladdin. With them we had the three big race labels. The white stores wouldn’t take their stuff, I’d say it went to an 85-90 percent black audience. Before us, those records weren’t available in Detroit except by special order, and there were about half a million Negroes in the city then. We were doing \$22,000 a month at the end of the first year.”

Distribution got the product to the store; the problem was to get the customer in to buy it. Radio was the obvious answer—a record played is its own advertisement—yet so obvious that the big record companies tried to make sure that only their products got aired. “There weren’t even disc jockies then, per se,” said Besman, “there were radio announcers. Program directors picked the records, and they bought their own records. I was the first guy in Detroit to take records to the stations and give them away. The first

real disc jockey in Detroit was Ed McKenzie, known as Jack the Bell Boy. He had a program and chose his own records. When I brought in my race records, he was afraid of them; maybe he’d squeeze in one in 20 on the air. But whatever he played would be popular. He was a red hot jockey.”

An organ instrumental of “You Can’t Be True, Dear” and then “Peg O’My Heart” by the Harmonicats—“If anybody tells you what record is going to go big, they don’t know nothing”—put Besman and his partner on easy street. They moved to larger offices on Woodward Avenue next to the Paradise Theater which, like New York’s Apollo, featured movies and name black acts. The flow of musicians and enthusiastic audiences gave Besman the same idea that was inspiring Elmer Barbara. In 1948 Besman recorded Todd Rhodes, a local black bandleader who headlined the Sensation Club. Rhodes did a tune called “Bell Boy Boogie” and Besman put it on his own label which he named Sensation after the club. McKenzie was of course flattered and made it his theme song. The record then did so well that Besman was able to lease it for national distribution to Vitacoustic, the company which had supplied him with “Peg O’ My Heart.” “After that people started coming in to me with dubs. About November, it was cold I know, John Lee Hooker walked in.

“He had on an old overcoat, and was skinny as could be, about my age, I thought. I looked at his shoes—I could see holes in them. He had a dub he had made someplace, real lousy reproduction, it was called ‘Sally Mae,’ a blues. He wanted to record, he said. He had a speech impediment, too; he stuttered, and I thought, ‘My god, how can a man like that sing. I gotta see this, I’m gonna try it.’ I said, ‘I’ll record you, but alone, nobody else.’ The record he had brought in had piano and drums. I didn’t like them. He played for me, and I thought he had possibilities, but I was puzzled.”

Besman figured that in 1948 it would be tough to sell a bluesman playing solo guitar—that was old-fashioned. Band records had accustomed the blues audience to a fuller, larger sound. Yet he also intuited that Hooker sounded best alone. “I knew I had to do something. So first we amplified his guitar. He had an old Stella and no amp. We put a mike onto his guitar, and we put a speaker—this was a tiny two room studio, remember—we put it in a toilet bowl next door, actually in a toilet bowl. Then we put a mike under that so the sound would bounce off the water—I wanted an echo effect. Then the sound went back into a speaker in the studio, came out of that, and got picked up along with his voice. I put a board under his feet to make his tapping louder, and put a mike down there.

“We worked almost three hours on ‘Sally Mae,’ getting nowhere. So I thought, what the hell, why don’t I have him do a boogie, Rhodes did so well with one. But Hooker didn’t know how to play a boogie. . . . Finally he got it, or part of, a semblance of a boogie. ‘Boogie Chillen’ isn’t really a boogie, but John Lee, he had enough originality that it was a big record.”

“Boogie Chillen” was indeed a big record; it sold several hundred thousand copies—an enormous sale for a blues record in 1948. Moved by distributors like Besman in Chicago, Philly, Memphis, and Oakland, and aired by disc jockies like Jack the Bell Boy in New York, Nashville,

Boston, and Cleveland, it was a hit. Moreover, they were able to follow it up; Hooker and Besman did many sessions after the first one, and 16 records were released on the Sensation label over the next three years. All had solid sales. "John Lee never wrote *songs*," said Besman, "He was illiterate. He'd have a subject matter, or I'd suggest something, and he'd do something with it, making up the words as he went along. He never had a plan, so the same song always came out different. He could make a story out of anything. In reality he's a genius."*

[THE ELECTRIFIED, CITIFIED BLUES]

John Lee Hooker was not alone. In that migration north and cityward came a generation of bluesmen who were, as record jackets like to proclaim, giants. They had to be. It was a very difficult life they faced in the northern ghettos, and they had to struggle every day to survive. In the city, family and church did not hold so strong; the land and tradition had been left behind. To make music of city-life required imagination and indomitability. The old theme of the blues could be reworked to express new dimensions of dislocation, but the sound and pace of country blues fit the city no better than brogans and bib overalls. Back in the Delta, one man played a guitar with the low accompaniment of crickets and whippoorwills; Detroit and Chicago never stopped their roar. How to make sounds which could stab through that noise with the same intensity country blues had in its setting was a musical problem that many bluesmen new to the city encountered mid-career. They had to solve it to continue to make sense as artists, and to get work as musicians.

The answer was electricity in all available forms. Electrifying the blues guitar was the most dramatic change. "You had to play electric in those clubs, they were so noisy," Hooker recalled, "but the sounds you could make! I loved electricity. You barely have to touch the guitar, and the sound comes out so silky. Electric sound is so lovely. I felt drawn into it. T-Bone Walker, he was the cat we all listened to for electric."

Walker, a gnomelike Texan, drew notes from his amplifier which would hang in the air, glistening and tremulous, sending shivers through his audiences. He made it big with "Stormy Monday" (though the days have different names, the song says, one is no better than the next). Lowell Fulson learned from Walker, so did B. B. King and Albert King. Muddy Waters took all he had learned from Robert Johnson, Son House, and Charley Patton; he added his own hooded fierceness, and made it electric in Chicago. His band—over the years there have been several bands—became the prototypical city blues band to which electricity was indispensable. Guitar, bass, and often piano were electric, vocals came loud through a public address system. Waters' harmonica player, the late "Little Walter" Jacobs, played his harp directly into a microphone, creating sounds which are still haunting on records.

Howlin' Wolf was part of that generation and a complete original. His personality is engraved on his records as in-

* Many of the Hooker-Besman sides have been re-released on three excellent LP's, two on the specialty label (*John Lee Hooker Alone* and *Going Down Highway 51*) and one on United Artists (*Anywhere, Anyplace, Anytime*).

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delibly as are those of the Parisian stonecutters on the gargoyles of Notre Dame. Elmore James, J. B. Lenoir, J. B. Hutto, Arthur Crudup, the magnificent Sonny Boy Williamson on amplified harmonica—these men and others, created electric blues in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Chicago was the center of the movement and records produced by Leonard and Phil Chess document it well. Chicago became the blues mecca, but the new urban blues happened all over the country—in Memphis, Houston, Los Angeles, Oakland, and Detroit, and on labels like Sun, Aladdin, Specialty, Modern, Kent, Black and White, Aristocrat, Excelsior, and VeeJay, plus numerous others.

Hooker recorded for many of them. While he was working with Besman, he also did sessions with Detroit's Joseph Von Battle, one of the first black record producers, who put out Hooker on his own JVB label (years later he was the first to record Aretha Franklin).

Many musicians have played under pseudonyms to hide their moonlighting, but John Lee Hooker must have set a record. His discography is a melange of names—from John Booker to Texas Slim. "I was after the big bread," Hooker said, "I didn't care what they called me, or who they were, if they'd pay me, I'd play. I never changed my style, but I'd change my name." He didn't make big bread but did work steadily, an accomplishment in itself.

He was even then an impressive stage performer. Besman remembered one early concert. "I got him on a show a radio man put together, a theater concert with five different bands, swing, Dixieland, dance, something for everybody. He put John Lee on in the middle. He came out all by himself, sat down, and started playing. People didn't know what to make of him, whether to laugh, boo, or listen. After the first number, there was complete silence. Then John Lee started up again, a boogie, and people started tapping their feet. He had 'em then, by the end, they were shouting."

In the late '50s, however, work fell off. "Those were the hardest days," Hooker recalled. Like the other electric bluesmen (and jazz and country musicians), he found it hard to compete with the rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll bands which after 1956 took the spotlight from all but the most popular performers.

A core of loyal blues fans, however, made it worthwhile for Hooker to continue touring and recording. Rock 'n'

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CAMBODIA

The War at the End of the Tunnel

No one really cares about Cambodia," a Cabinet Member in the Lon Nol government told me bitterly in 1970. "The Americans, Thieu, the communists—all they care about is Vietnam." This remains true in 1973; to the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, and the Thais, Cambodia is just a domino not important for itself but for the influence it has on Asian power politics. And it is one of those ironies of history that Cambodia, which bloodlessly negotiated its independence from France and managed to escape much of the Vietnam War, now finds itself at the center of the next war in Indochina. Today the urgent questions about Southeast Asia do not involve the future of citadels like Saigon or Hue, but of Phnom Penh. Will the capital city fall? Will the Thais and the South Vietnamese be called upon to invade Cambodia? How will events there affect the rest of Indochina?

To anyone who has spent much time in Phnom Penh, it seems almost miraculous that the city has not already fallen. At different times over the last three years, guerrillas

have been only a few miles outside the town and have frequently managed to cut off highways connecting the city with the provincial capitals. Ships bringing supplies up the Mekong River from Saigon have been sunk; rice and gasoline are regularly rationed; rockets occasionally slam into the downtown areas; and the only airfield has been hit several times. In recent months air strikes have moved close enough to the city that people routinely spend afternoons sitting by the river and watching the pyrotechnics from explosions on the opposite bank. The black market flourishes; bordellos do an almost assembly-line business; and everywhere there is evidence of decadence and despair.

Diplomats with a flair for melodrama liken Phnom Penh to Shanghai before World War II. Politicians, however, are inevitably reminded of the last days of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam. The ailing Marshal Lon Nol, swayed by his younger brother Lon Non and a court appointed astrologer, has cracked down on political opposition by making widespread arrests, closing most newspapers, and placing cronies in lucrative military and cabinet posts. Plots and counterplots flourish, cabinets rise and fail, and the Khmer Rouge guerrillas keep closing in from all sides. Exasperated American officials, shirt-sleeved in the heat, rush to and fro from government offices with proposals for government reform and military offensives.

Seemingly, the situation could not be worse. Yet while Phnom Penh is riddled with strange astrologers and soothsayers of all kinds, prediction of the future is a risky business, especially for westerners who habitually take a far too apocalyptic and accelerated view of events in Indochina. A North Vietnamese diplomat once told me when I asked him when Hue would fall, "We are making history and history takes time." What is unfolding in Cambodia will take time too.

[AMERICA'S BOTTOMLESS PIT]

To American journalists and officials in 1970, Cambodia seemed like an island in a sea of blood. Although right next door to Vietnam and Laos, it was miraculously free from the scars and bitterness of American occupation. Pentagon and CIA people, as well as White House hawks, had seen their long and patient intrigues rewarded by the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Now they were not only able to strike against

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Ailing President Lon Nol at inauguration



by Judith Coburn