



**Arkansas Delta Music Heritage Research Project - Part I**



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Prepared for  
Department of Arkansas Heritage  
Delta Cultural Center  
Helena, Arkansas

Helena-West Helena  
Advertising and Promotion Commission  
Helena, Arkansas

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*I'm Goin' Over' n Ol' Helena . . .*  
**Delta Music Heritage Research Project**  
**Part I**

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The people of Helena love their city and many have a deep appreciation for its history and a love of the blues. Jack and Wes Hornor shared their memories of the blues in Helena, the King Biscuit Festival and told stories of Sonny Boy Williamson and other bluesmen they had met over the years. Jerry Pillow, who worked with the King Biscuit Festival for many years, told us about the blues in Helena, the festival and Sonny Boy Williamson's last show at a high school graduation party in Wabash. Chuck Roscoff, who is a passionate blues historian, cleared his schedule to talk about the blues and answered many questions via email. Joe Griffith discussed the proposed bronze of Levon Helm and contributed recollections about bluesman Willie Cobbs. Ernest Cunningham helped with Phillips County geography, places associated with blues performers, and the proper pronunciation of place names. Bubba Sullivan of Bubba's Blues Corner spent hours discussing blues artists with Joseph Brent and took a day to show him the locations of stores along Hwy 44 and Hwy 20 where the King Biscuit Entertainers performed in 1947 and 1952. He also shared memories of the people who owned the local groceries that dotted Phillips County in the 1950s and 60s.

Sam Elardo identified places where musicians lived in Helena and the places where they played. He also put us in touch with Lugene Wilson, who drove a truck for Interstate Grocer Company during the heyday of the blues in the 1940s and 50s. Sam is also indirectly responsible for our introduction to Jim O'Neal. When the Mississippi Blues Trail unveiled their marker at Biscuit Row, Joseph Brent was in Helena. He had the opportunity to speak with people associated with the Mississippi Blues Trail and they provided contact information for the project historians, including Mr. O'Neal. Jim O'Neal, founder and longtime editor of *Living Blues* magazine and a blues promoter and author, has been more than kind. He freely shared information regarding artists in Helena and the Arkansas Delta.

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We thank Steve Johnson for spending time to show us many of the photographs that his father, Rogerline Johnson, took of the blues artists who played in Helena and Phillips County. The Johnson Collection is an invaluable resource.

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We thank Cliff E. Jones and John M. Bennett of Mid-South Community College. Dr. Jones showed Joseph Brent sites associated with the blues in West Memphis; Mr. Bennett gave him a tour of the new KWEM radio station and shared recollections of the city's blues scene.

## **Introduction**

The Arkansas Delta Music Heritage Research Project was undertaken by Mudpuppy & Waterdog, Inc. at the request of the Helena-West Helena Advertising and Promotion Commission and the Arkansas Department of Heritage Delta Cultural Center. The object of the project was to determine if there were sufficient information and associated sites to make a musical heritage interpretive program, similar to that undertaken for the Civil War, feasible. The authors conducted research at archives and libraries including University of Georgia—Hargrett Rare Books & Manuscripts Library, University of Mississippi Blues Archives, Cincinnati Public Library, Phillips County (Arkansas) Library, University of Kentucky Fine Arts Library, Kentucky State University, Western Kentucky University, and the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Interviews with Helena residents Sam Elardo, Jack Hornor, West Hornor, Thomas Jacques, Steve Johnson, Jerry Pillow, Carla Robinson, Chuck Roskopf, Bubba Sullivan and Lugene Wilson; Cliff Jones, Ph.D., Vice President of Learning and Instruction at Mid-South Community College; and Jim O’Neal, founder and longtime editor of *Living Blues* magazine, provided insight into the musical heritage of the Arkansas Delta and the places where that music was made. The authors also conducted preliminary fieldwork to determine the location of former and extant sites associated with blues artists.

During the research phase of this project eighty-two musicians were identified. Forty-nine are blues musicians, twenty-nine are artists in other popular music genres, and four are classical music artists. Not all were born in the Arkansas Delta, but all spent a significant amount of time in the region. In addition, nearly 200 places in fifteen counties were identified that are associated with the musical heritage of the Arkansas Delta. They include birthplaces, graves, sites of juke joints, grocery stores and other places where musicians lived, worked and died. Forty-two sites are in Helena-West Helena and another twenty or so places are known to have been in Helena but could not be positively located. Twenty-three were identified and located in Phillips County. Another twenty in the county have not been located. The rest are scattered across fourteen counties. Given that the authors were not charged with specifically identifying places it is very likely that these numbers are low and that many more places could be located and possibly interpreted.

The musical legacy of the Arkansas Delta is significant. Few places can boast of being the home of so many people who have left their stamp on music. Blues, classical, country, folk, gospel, jazz, and rock-and-roll musicians, singers and songwriters came out of the Delta. The Arkansas Delta’s broad musical heritage reflects, in part, historic settlement and land use

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patterns and the area's natural features. From the cotton fields of the Delta have come some of the world's best musicians.

This document is not an interpretive plan but does include a chapter on the ways in which the musical heritage of the Arkansas Delta might be interpreted for residents and visitors as part of an economic development incentive. There is a real opportunity to interpret the musical heritage of the Arkansas Delta. Other states have already taken advantage of their musical heritage and the authors urge Helena-West Helena Advertising and Promotion Commission and the Arkansas Department of Heritage Delta Cultural Center to move forward with an interpretive program.

This document was never meant to be the definitive history of the musical heritage of the Arkansas Delta nor was it ever meant to be the all inclusive list of musicians who were born, lived and worked in the Arkansas Delta. This research was meant to be a starting point for any future work that the sponsors might wish to undertake.

## **Musical Heritage of the Arkansas Delta**

Arkansas has always been known for music; *The Arkansas Traveler* was one of the most popular songs of the 19th century. The fiddle is the “state instrument.” In 1858, the first music published in Arkansas was a gospel song *I Am Near to Thee*, written by newspaperman John E. Knight with music by Ben F. Scull. The list with ties to Arkansas who have made their mark in the music industry is long and impressive. Though not the only area in the state to produce music or musicians the Delta region has produced some of the nation’s best. What other place can boast of Johnny Cash, Sonny Boy Williamson,<sup>1</sup> Levon Helm, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Louis Jordan, Howlin Wolf, Luther Presley, Big Bill Broonzy, Conway Twitty and William Warfield?<sup>2</sup>

Western music can be divided into three broad forms: folk, classical and popular. Folk music is “a type of traditional and generally rural music that originally was passed down through families and other small social groups.”<sup>3</sup> It was passed down and learned through hearing rather than reading, often from friends, relatives or in institutions such as church or school. Folk music was often associated with activities such as life-cycle rituals, work, games, and folk religion. It is more likely to be participatory than presentational.<sup>4</sup> The Delta blues, which originated from call and response field songs and spirituals, was a regional style of early-twentieth century American folk music. Blues songs told of “failed romance, stories of sexual escapades (often described in double-entendre references), and tales of rambling and life on the road, as well as apocalyptic musings on salvation and damnation.”<sup>5</sup>

The Oxford English Dictionary defines classical music as “serious or conventional music following long-established principles rather than a folk, jazz, or popular tradition.” The term classical music is often applied to all art music produced or rooted in the traditions of Western music between the period from roughly the 11th century to the present, although music historians apply the term only to music written in the European tradition during a period lasting approximately from 1750 to 1830, when forms such as the symphony, concerto, and sonata were standardized.

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1 Note: Unless otherwise specified, in this document “Sonny Boy Williamson” refers to Aleck “Rice” Miller, not to John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson.

2 Michael B. Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey: The Saga of Arkansas from Prehistoric Times to Present*, Rose Publishing Company, Inc., Little Rock, Arkansas, 1993, p. 552.

3 Bruno Nettl, “Folk Music,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/art/folk-music>.

4 Ibid.

5 Ted Gioia, “Mississippi Delta blues,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/art/Mississippi-Delta-blues>.



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The great American composer Leonard Bernstein defined two ways in which classical music differs from other forms of music. The first is that the composer specifies the exact notes, the exact instruments, and often the exact number of each instrument. The composer also defines the rhythm, tempo, loudness, and other variables to help the performers give an exact rendition of the music as he intended it to be heard. The second is that the construction of classical music forms—the fugue, sonata, symphony, concerto, and so on—is defined by strict rules. Classical music is permanent, precise and unchangeable. There is only one way it can be played. Differences in the performance of a piece of classical music reflect the personality of the performer in trying to achieve what the composer intended.<sup>6</sup>

Popular music is commercially oriented music intended for a wide audience. In contrast to classical music, popular music is fluid and open to endless interpretation and improvisation. There is no end, Bernstein said, to the ways in which a piece of popular music can be played or sung.<sup>7</sup>

Popular music—blues, country, gospel, folk, jazz, and rock and roll—is the principle focus of this research document, although it also covers the small number of classical music performers with ties to the Arkansas Delta. Three contexts—the blues, other popular music and classical music—provide a short history of each form of music in the Arkansas Delta. Biographies provide additional information regarding performers' careers and their association with the Arkansas Delta.

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<sup>6</sup> Leonard Bernstein, "Young People's Concert: What is Classical Music," [http://www.leonardbernstein.com/ypc\\_script\\_what\\_is\\_classical\\_music.htm](http://www.leonardbernstein.com/ypc_script_what_is_classical_music.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## **Blues Music in the Arkansas Delta**

Arkansas has a strong blues heritage. Many of the most well-known blues musicians were born in Arkansas; many more spent a substantial part of their lives in the state. Quite a few had their first public exposure on Helena radio station KFFA's live blues broadcasts. The importance of KFFA's "King Biscuit Time" is difficult to overstate. Thousands of people listened to the broadcasts and this exposure helped the blues come into its own as popular music. An interviewer asked bluesman McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters, if he had been listening to "King Biscuit Time" ever since it started. He replied, "Every time there wasn't a radio around I'd run to the next house where one was at, to hear 'em play. They was good."<sup>1</sup> It seems he wasn't the only one.

The blues and the Mississippi River Delta are synonymous. This land washed flat by floods, which deposited some of the richest and most productive soil in the world, attracted those hoping to make their fortunes in agriculture.

Settlers, many of them the younger sons of prominent Tennessee and Mississippi families, came to Arkansas in the early 19th century, and they brought enslaved African Americans with them to work the farms and plantations. After emancipation many African Americans stayed to work the land as tenant farmers and sharecroppers. The subsequent oppression of the Jim Crow South created an environment in which the blues flourished. Bluesman Arthur Lee Williams expressed it this way: "Downheartedness, that's all it is, hardship. You express it through your song."<sup>2</sup>

Unlike jazz or ragtime, blues owes almost nothing to Western forms of music. Many of its deeper roots lie in Africa, but its heart and soul is the experience of African Americans in the Deep South. It is the most American of music, and its influence on popular music at home and abroad is unquestioned. Without the blues there would be no rock and roll. Rhythm and blues is simply a branch of the older form. The tentacles of the blues reach into gospel, country and jazz. It may well be the most influential style of popular music in the world.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Jim O'Neal and Amy O'Neal, "Interview with Muddy Waters," *Living Blues*, No. 64, March-April 1985, pp. 15-39.

2 William Ferris, *Blues From the Delta*, Anchor Books, New York, 1979, p. xii.

3 Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Blues Singers*, seventh edition, A Da Capo Paperback, 1994, p. 9 and David Evans, "Blues," in Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1989, p. 995.

## **Background**

On January 1, 1863, in the second year of the Civil War, every slave in the Confederate South was freed by President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln's extraordinary war measure affected only individuals residing in states in rebellion against the United States. Its legality was questioned by many at the time, leading ultimately to the drafting of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the passage of which ended slavery in this country in December 1865.<sup>4</sup>

In the three decades after the Civil War former slaves realized civil rights they had long been denied. Black men were elected to office in every former Confederate state in positions ranging from the U.S. senate to county and city offices. The new state constitution drafted in Arkansas in 1868 gave "African Americans the right to vote, serve on juries, hold office, and serve in the militia."<sup>5</sup> It provided for free public schools for both races, established the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, redrew legislative districts, gave more power to the governor, and disenfranchised anyone who "served in or aided the Confederacy." Arkansas' black population doubled between 1870 and 1890.<sup>6</sup>

Conservative whites fought back. To pay for the entire program proposed by the Republican legislature property taxes were raised. During the election of 1868, violence erupted as the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante organizations murdered black and white Republicans, U.S. soldiers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, county and state officials. Anyone who opposed the views of the Conservatives/Democratic Party was targeted. By 1874, conservative forces had regained control of Arkansas and had written a new constitution.<sup>7</sup>

The new constitution took much of the power of taxation away from the legislature and returned it to local government. Overall, state government was weakened and taxes lowered. The state's planter elite, while poorer, returned to political power. Low taxation and limited state government enabled them to preserve the status quo well into the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

The hard-won rights of African Americans were lost in the 1890s when the return of former Confederates to political power ushered in the era of Jim Crow. In 1891, public coaches were segregated by an act of the Arkansas legislature. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld

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4 Kelly Houston Jones, "Emancipation," in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4850>.

5 Jeanne M. Wayne et al., *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, The University Press of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 2002, p. 215.

6 Ibid.

7 Wayne et al., *Arkansas*, pp. 226-234.

8 Wayne et al. *Arkansas*, pp. 234-236.

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*Picking cotton in Phillips County ca. 1940.*

segregation laws in the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which allowed codification of the concept “separate but equal.”<sup>9</sup>

Segregation in Arkansas was not as codified as in other Southern states, since the legislature only acted when customary racial separation broke down, but it touched the lives of blacks and whites to a much greater degree than the laws suggest. Though specific statutes

were never enacted, by the time of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, most stores, restaurants and hotels were racially segregated and convention demanded separate water fountains and public restrooms. It was from this world that the blues was born.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Beginning of the Blues**

Arkansas’ blues legacy is enormous, second only to Mississippi. The state has produced some of the most famous and influential blues performers. Two Arkansas cities played a vital role in its development—Helena and West Memphis. Blues historian Paul Oliver said of the blues: “The blues is the common folk song of the Afro-American Negro, simple, yet almost unique in its twelve-bar structure, and based on the tonic, dominant, and subdominant chords in the major scale.”<sup>11</sup> Big Bill Broonzy told a reporter in London: “We was prayin’, spirituals, you know, they put new words to them and hollered across the fields when they was feeling low, and that’s the blues.”<sup>12</sup> The blues was derived from the work songs and field hollers that were part of the long, hard work days that made up the life of black men and women in the Delta. The blues came out of the Mississippi River Delta on both sides of the river, the land of plantations and catfish farms. Rural and flat, this is the land that in the Jim Crow era gave birth to a form of music that arose from poverty and making do with too little. It reflected the oppression and harsh conditions that black residents faced every day, whether they lived in Mississippi, Arkansas or Louisiana.<sup>13</sup>

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9 Ibid.

10 Carl H. Moneyhon, “Jim Crow Laws,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4577>.

11 Paul Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1984, p. 19.

12 Ernest Borneman, “Big Bill Talkin’,” *Melody Maker*, August 11, 1951.

13 Evans, “Blues,” p. 995.

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The first known recording of this music was done in 1901 in Coahoma County, Mississippi, when an archaeologist named Charles Peabody arrived in the area to excavate prehistoric mound sites. The group of black men he hired in Clarksdale sang as they rode out to the site each day and while they worked, “timing their call and response to the rhythm to the digging.” Struck by the music, Peabody wrote down a number of lyrics and attempted musical transcriptions, though he found it difficult to copy some of the music he heard into notes. He presented his descriptions in an article published in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* in 1903.<sup>14</sup>



*W.C. Handy*  
*Library of Congress*

That same year, W.C. Handy, a well-known and classically trained black musician, found himself in Tutwiler, Mississippi, awaiting a long-delayed train. While he waited he heard a black man playing guitar and singing, “Goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog.” The man’s simple one-line song about his destination made a lasting impression on Handy, who later wrote, “I’m afraid I came to think that everything worthwhile was to be found in books. But the blues did not come from books.”<sup>15</sup>

Sometime later, Handy’s band was playing a dance in Cleveland, Mississippi. At the request of the patrons, he surrendered the stage to a local string band. They played a tune that Handy recalled as, “stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps.” When the string band finished the crowd went wild and threw them more money than

Handy’s band was paid that night. Handy began to compose blues music. While his tunes and those Delta musicians created are different, he gave legitimacy to the blues.<sup>16</sup>

In 1912, Handy published sheet music for one of his blues songs. It was the first time a blues number had been published and it precipitated an avalanche of commercial sheet music by both black and white artists. By the mid 1920s, blues singers, mostly women, were performing in cabarets and vaudeville theaters across the country. Elements of jazz came into the blues as it moved out of the rural South. Musicians traveled from the Delta to Memphis and on to Chicago. By the 1940s and 50s, bluesmen had incorporated electric guitars and added bass, drums, piano or an organ, and often an electrified harmonica to the mix. The style peaked in the 1950s in Chicago, its development aided by the talents of Arkansas bluesmen who helped

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*, Penguin Books, 1981, pp. 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1940, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Handy, *Father of the Blues*, p. 77.

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create the sound called “Chicago Blues.”<sup>17</sup>

The consensus among historians is that the blues began on Will Dockery’s plantation in Sunflower County, Mississippi, in the early part of the 20th century. It was there that Henry Sloan taught Charlie Patton to play guitar. In 1918, Sloan left Mississippi for Chicago while Patton remained in the Delta with a following of his own. Patton played at Dockery’s and like the earlier black musicians moved around the region to places where he could play, drink whiskey, find women, and make a little money.<sup>18</sup>

Little is known about Patton and less about Sloan, though both seem to have been born in Mississippi. Unlike other bluesmen, Patton had a base of operations and set up engagements ahead of time. Chester Arthur Burnett, later known as Howlin Wolf, met Charley Patton at Dockery’s in 1926. Patton taught Burnett the guitar and he spun Patton’s style into his own.<sup>19</sup>

Just as it’s unlikely that the blues sprang fully formed at Dockery’s Plantation, it’s also unlikely that the music and musicians were confined to one side of the river. The Mississippi River Delta is vast— some fifty-eight counties and parishes in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi make up the Delta region. Over the years many historians, musicologists and writers have specified the state of Mississippi when they discuss the *Mississippi Delta*. The error is understandable given that some of the writers were from Europe and other regions of the United States. The plantation system, so well documented in Mississippi, was also employed in Arkansas and Louisiana. The biographies of bluesmen often state that they were born in one state and grew up in another. Perhaps more than most, musicians crossed the river and traveled north or south hoping to make a better living.<sup>20</sup>

Charlie Patton, who played in Arkansas and Louisiana as well as Mississippi, is a good example. Burnett, Patton’s protégé, though born in Mississippi, spent a great deal of time in Arkansas. In his early career in the late 1920s, Burnett played in Parkin, West Memphis, Pine Bluff and Brinkley. His family moved to Arkansas in 1933 and they lived in Forrest City and West Memphis. While in Arkansas he met a new group of musicians, including Aleck “Rice” Miller who became better known as Sonny Boy Williamson. Later, when Burnett had become

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17 Evans, “Blues,” pp. 996-997; Terrence Halaire Buckalew, “Blues Music in Arkansas,” MA Thesis, University of Arkansas, 1993, p. 5.

18 National Park Service, “Charley Patton—Delta School,” [http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/blues/people/charley\\_patton.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/blues/people/charley_patton.htm).

19 Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 54; Charley Patton, *Charley Patton: The Complete Recordings, 1929-34*, liner notes, Acrobat Music, 2014.

20 Bo Beaulieu and Marcus Littles, *A Look at the Mid-South Delta Region: A Glimpse at its Assets, Socioeconomic Complexion, and Emerging Opportunities*, Southern Rural Development Center, 2008, p. 6.

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known as Howlin Wolf, Arkansas radio stations would help boost his career.<sup>21</sup>

According to Burnett, Sonny Boy Williamson married his half-sister, Mary, in the 1930s. While Williamson courted Mary, Wolf managed to get some harmonica lessons from him and he later credited Williamson as the man who taught him harmonica.<sup>22</sup> “Sonny Boy showed me how to play. I used to strum guitar for him. See, he used to come there and sit up half the night and blow the harp to Mary.”

Many other musicians toured the Delta region in the late 1920s and 30s. Big Bill Broonzy, perhaps one of the most famous country bluesmen, was born in Arkansas moved to Mississippi and later moved back with his family to Arkansas. While in Arkansas he made a fiddle out of a cigar box, which he played until he got his first guitar. Broonzy joined the army and served in Europe during the First World War. He came back to the states and lived at least for a time in Arkansas, where he wrote and played his songs.<sup>23</sup>

Peetie Wheatstraw, born William Bunch in Tennessee, moved to Cotton Plant, Arkansas as a child. He’s another bluesman whose early life is lost in the mist. It is known that Wheatstraw traveled the south playing piano before he eventually settling in East St. Louis. There he played in clubs and bars the rest of his life. He influenced many of the blues piano players in Arkansas and elsewhere.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the most famous of the Delta musicians is Robert Johnson. Johnson was born in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, about thirty miles south of Jackson, in 1912. His family moved to the Delta when he was young and he later worked on a farm near Robinsonville, Mississippi. It was there that he learned to play the guitar. He listened to Son House, Willie Brown, and others and according to Son House he was not very good. Johnson disappeared and when he reappeared six months or a year later his playing was remarkable. It is this episode that spawned the legend that Johnson had sold his soul to the devil. By the 1930s, he had a large regional following. About 1934 he had moved to Helena where he began a relationship with Ester Lockwood, the mother of Robert Jr. Lockwood. From Helena he continued traveling the region playing jukeboxes, plantations and cafe’s in Arkansas and Mississippi. He also traveled north, perhaps playing on a radio program with Johnny Shines in Detroit. Johnson died in

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21 National Park Service, “Charley Patton—Delta School,” [http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/blues/people/charley\\_patton.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/blues/people/charley_patton.htm); Pete Welding, “An Interview with Bluesman Howlin Wolf,” *Blues Unlimited*, January 1969, p. 4; Pete Welding, “An Interview with Bluesman Howlin Wolf, “2–Up Around Drew,” *Blues Unlimited*, March 1969, pp. 8-9; “Living Blues Interview: Howling Wolf,” *Living Blues*, Spring 1970, p. 14.

22 Welding, “An Interview with Bluesman Howlin Wolf, “2–Up Around Drew,” *Blues Unlimited*, pp. 8-9.

23 Jas Obrecht, “The Legend of Big Bill Broonzy,” *Guitar Player*, August 1986, p. 68; Yannick Bruynoghe, “Big Bill’s Blues Part IV,” *Melody Maker*, September 3, 1955 and Bob Groom, “Big Bill Broonzy,” *Blues World*, August 1970, No. 33, p. 7.

24 Jamie Mettrailer, “William Bunch (1902-1941), aka: Peetie Wheatstraw,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=5880>.

1938, just as he was attaining national recognition.<sup>25</sup>

### **Making Records**

While most bluesmen did not achieve wealth, a number were eventually able to earn a living from their music. Beginning in the late 1920s the recording industry began to take notice of the blues. Like everything else in America at that time, the record industry was segregated—the industry called music made by and for black people “race records.” Though recording began earlier it boomed between 1927 and 1930. Talent scouts in the south brought musicians to studios in Chicago, Illinois; Grafton, Wisconsin; Dallas, Texas; Jackson, Mississippi; New York; Richmond, Indiana; San Antonio, Texas; and elsewhere. A large number of bluesmen were represented on the records that resulted from these sessions.<sup>26</sup>

The recordings were 78rpm shellac disks. They were inexpensive to produce and could be played on equally inexpensive windup phonographs, which was important to the market as many poor people in the south, both black and white, did not have electricity. Big Bill Broonzy traveled to Chicago in 1927 to make his first record, *House Rent Stomp*. His style, which incorporated jazz elements, was more popular than some country blues artists and unlike many of his peers he continued recording during the Depression. Broonzy often teamed with his half-brother Washboard Sam, born Robert Brown in Walnut Grove, Arkansas. By 1941, Broonzy and Sam had recorded some 150 songs for Chicago’s Bluebird label.<sup>27</sup>

In June 1929, Charley Patton made his first recordings in Richmond, Indiana, for Gennett Records. He completed two more sessions later that year in Grafton, Wisconsin, for the Paramount label. During the three sessions he recorded over forty songs including *Pony Blues* and *Pea Vine Blues*. He later recorded additional tracks in New York for the Vocalion label. He died in 1934, soon after finishing his final recordings.<sup>28</sup>

The most famous of all blues artists, Robert Johnson, made all of his recordings in two sessions—the first in November 1936 in San Antonio, Texas, and the second in Dallas, Texas, on June 19, 1937. A salesman/talent scout heard Johnson play on a plantation in Mississippi and brought him to Texas. Johnson recorded some of the most well-known blues songs in those

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25 Jas Obrecht, “Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues,” *Guitar Player*, April 1982, p. 34; Samuel Charters, “Seeking the Greatest Bluesman,” *American Heritage*, July/August 1991, p. 53; Pete Welding, “Ramblin’ Johnny Shines,” *Living Blues*, July/August 1975, p. 27.

26 Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, pp. 48-56 and Giles Oakley, *The Devil’s Music: A History of the Blues*, A Harvest/HBJ Book, New York, 1976, pp. 133-135.

27 Obrecht, “The Legend of Big Bill Broonzy,” pp. 68-69; Tim Ferris, “Robert Johnson, He was born, He Played guitar, He died,” *Rolling Stone*, February 4, 1971 and Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Blues Singers*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1979, pp. 84-85.

28 Charley Patton, *Charley Patton: The Complete Recordings, 1929-34*, liner notes, Acrobat Music, 2014.



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sessions including *Love in Vain* and *Sweet Home Chicago*. He died before all of his recordings were released.<sup>29</sup>

Sometime in the 1950s, Ike Turner, working for Modern Records of Los Angeles, came to Helena, Arkansas, and recorded James “Peck” Curtis, Robert “Dudlow” Taylor and W.C. Clay. Turner tried to induce Houston Stackhouse to record either at that session or another, but Stackhouse declined. It is unclear where the recording took place, but it may have been at the KFFA studios.<sup>30</sup>

Many other blues artists had recorded for record companies by World War II. Few made a living from sales of their recordings. Most blues artists depended on live performances for most of their revenue, and often held day jobs as well. Generally, bluesmen received money for the recording session, and often signed contracts relinquishing rights to the songs. Big Bill Broonzy, who made 300 records beginning in 1927, would not make a living solely from his music until the 1950s.<sup>31</sup> Sonny Boy Williamson signed his first recording contract with Jackson, Mississippi’s Trumpet Records in 1950. He received \$10.00 for signing and pennies for each record sold.<sup>32</sup> In 1967, Houston Stackhouse made a recording with Testament Records for which he received \$50. He later recalled a conversation with the record company representative: “He said I was gonna get some sort of royalty, but I ain’t got nothin’ yet and that was 1967 and this is 1973, I ain’t got no royalty yet.”<sup>33</sup>

### **The Blues on the Air**

Radio station WOK signed on the air in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, on February 18, 1922. Though people in the state may not have realized it, entertainment was changed forever. WOK, which stood for “Workers of Kilowatts,” was the first radio station to broadcast in Arkansas. It only lasted two years before signing off, but WOK was the first of a long line of radio stations to bring entertainment into the homes of Arkansans. Stations from other states could be heard in parts of Arkansas, but local radio gave home-grown talent the opportunity to reach a large audience.<sup>34</sup>

By the time WOK went off the air radio stations in Hot Springs, Fort Smith, Little Rock

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29 Obrecht, “Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues,” pp. 37-38.

30 Jim O’Neal, “Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse,” *Living Blues*, Summer 1974, p. 36; David Edwards and Mike Callahan, “Modern Records Story,” <http://www.bsnpubs.com/modern/modernstory.html>; Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 239.

31 Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*, p. 112.

32 Willie Williamson contract, Trumpet/Diamond Record Collection, University of Mississippi, Box 5 Folder 1.

33 O’Neal, “Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse,” p. 36.

34 Ray Poindexter, *Arkansas Airwaves*, By the Author, North Little Rock, Arkansas, 1974, pp. 1-19.

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and Fayetteville had begun to broadcast. The most influential of the early radio stations was KTHS in Hot Springs. Like many stations its programming reached across the spectrum, playing waltzes, hoedown numbers, and even performances by glee clubs and choirs from nearby colleges. In 1924, KTHS featured a Little Rock comedian named Benjamin “Whitey” Ford, who in later years went by the moniker “Duke of Paducah” and became a featured performer with the “Grand Ole Opry.” The comedy team “Lum and Abner” got their start on KTHS in 1931 performing on a flood relief show. Jeanette Davis, who earned fame with Arthur Godfrey, began her career as Dorothy Davis on KOTN in Pine Bluff.<sup>35</sup>

It is not clear exactly which radio stations could be heard where in the Delta. AM radio signals could be heard further at night, and weather conditions also played a role in the signal’s clarity and how far it would carry. Some of the larger stations in other states and the more powerful stations in Arkansas and Mississippi could be heard across the Delta at certain times of the day. In the 1920s radio was new and reasonably affordable. Most people had a radio or had neighbors who did. Between 1921 and 1922, radio ownership skyrocketed. Statistics vary, but the increase was somewhere between 1100 and 1900 percent. Radio ownership jumped from 50,000 sets to nearly one million in one year’s time! Radio stations broadcast music, news, sports and eventually programs not unlike the television shows of today. The first play-by-play of a University of Arkansas football game was broadcast in 1924.<sup>36</sup>

Churches started up radio stations, primarily to air revivals, ministry and other services. In Little Rock the First Christian Church started KFMP in 1923, the First Presbyterian Church of Pine Bluff began KFPX by 1924, and the First Baptist Church of Little Rock was granted a license to operate KGHI in 1928. In addition to religious music and services many of the church-owned stations had regularly scheduled family-oriented secular programming. These included boxing and wrestling matches, other sporting events, popular music, and election returns. Gospel music and religion were a part of the offerings of most radio stations. The “Saturday Night Jamboree” on KTHS featured gospel music. Most of the programming on all stations was aimed at white audiences, though some offerings, such as sports, crossed racial lines.<sup>37</sup>

In the mid-1920s, sixty percent of radio programming was music and most was live acts; there was very little recorded music on the air. Stations, which had a lot of air time to fill, welcomed local talent. Regional and national shows were also broadcast, such as “National Barn Dance” from Chicago, “Grand Ole Opry” from Nashville, and “Louisiana Hayride” from Shreveport.

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds: A Celebration of Popular Music in Arkansas*, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1996, pp. 17-19; Poindexter, *Arkansas Airwaves*, p. 278.

<sup>36</sup> J. Fred McDonald, *Don't Touch that Dial: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960*, Nelson-Hall, Chicago, Illinois, 1979, p. 19; Poindexter, *Arkansas Airwaves*, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Poindexter, *Arkansas Airwaves*, pp. 38-45, 83-84, 179-184; Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, pp. 33-35.

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The infusion of these shows and the introduction of radio networks in the mid 1920s did not crush homegrown talent in Arkansas or elsewhere. Local performers incorporated what they liked from nationally known artists and adapted it into their acts.<sup>38</sup>

By the 1930s, radio was an institution in America. During the Depression it was estimated that nearly ninety percent of American homes had at least one radio. Arkansas stations carved out niches for themselves by creating programming popular with their listeners. Stations in Jonesboro and Little Rock produced their own version of the popular *Barn Dance* program. Perhaps the most famous and groundbreaking of all the local radio shows was “King Biscuit Time” on Helena’s KFFA.<sup>39</sup>

KFFA, which began broadcasting on November 19, 1941, was the nineteenth station in Arkansas to go on the air. It began with only 250 watts, which gave it a broadcast range of 35-40 miles. The station reached as far as Batesville, Clarksdale and Senatobia in Mississippi, and in Arkansas to Forrest City, Marianna, Hughes and Crumrod. On good days it could be heard as far as Brinkley, Clarendon and West Memphis, Arkansas; and Cleveland, Mississippi. The broadcast day began at six a.m. and ended at ten p.m. Like all radio stations, it had time to fill and was looking for acts to fill it.<sup>40</sup>

On November 21, 1941, two days after KFFA’s debut, a live blues program called “King Biscuit Time” went on the air at 12:15. It’s safe to say that no one listening could have predicted that the fifteen-minute program that aired Monday through Friday would become one of the most influential blues programs in the nation. It all started two days before KFFA went on the air. Helena residents and blues musicians Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Jr. Lockwood went to station manager Sam Anderson with a proposition. They would perform



*L-R: Sonny Boy Williamson, Sam Anderson and Robert Jr. Lockwood ca. 1941 in the KFFA studio. Gladin Collection, University of Mississippi.*

<sup>38</sup> McDonald, *Don't Touch that Dial*, pp. 24-25; Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>39</sup> Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, pp. 17-21; McDonald, *Don't Touch that Dial*, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Carolyn Pittman, “Helena-West Helena Newspapers since 1930,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 26, Nos. 3&4, June 1988, pp. 53-55.

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on the radio at no cost to the station if they could announce where they would be playing that night. Anderson was receptive, but insisted they find a sponsor. He arranged an audition with Interstate Grocer Company, who had just begun selling their new King Biscuit brand flour. Interstate and the bluesmen signed a deal—the company would sponsor the show in return for on-air advertising and would pay the performers a small sum. “King Biscuit Time” proved so popular with listeners that Interstate Grocer Company launched *Sonny Boy Cornmeal*, which had Williamson’s likeness on the bag. They even put his image on the side of their delivery trucks. Sam Anderson said that the show was most popular when Williamson performed.<sup>41</sup> KFFA was not the first radio station in Arkansas to air blues musicians. KLCN in Blytheville employed Calvin Frazier of Osceola, Arkansas, and Mississippi-born Peck Curtis, as well as other musicians in the 1930s. The show, however, was short-lived and not nearly as influential as KFFA’s “King Biscuit Time.”<sup>42</sup>

On November 21, 1941, at 12:15 p.m. KFFA listeners heard the following announcement read on the air:<sup>43</sup>

Today Interstate Grocer Company, your local distributor of King Biscuit Flour opens a series of fifteen-minute programs, scheduled to come to you at this time each weekday Monday thru Friday over radio station KFFA and dedicated to your independent retail grocer. We bring you those Rascals of Rhythm Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Jr., featuring blues songs and their own interpretations of modern day music. We sincerely hope that you will find our programs interesting, and entertaining, and delightful. And remember King Biscuit flour is its sponsor. If you have never tried this flour don’t delay, buy a sack of it today, as you have a delightful treat in store for you. It’s real honest-to-goodness short patent flour, perfectly suited for those delicious biscuits, rolls, cakes, and fancy pastries. It is truly different and now, Sonny Boy Williamson.<sup>44</sup>

The show opened with the King Biscuit Theme, was performed by Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Jr. Lockwood and over time by the various artists that staffed the show.

Good evenin’ everybody, tell me how do you do?  
Good evenin’ everybody, tell me how do you do?

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41 Rose Kettler, “King Biscuit Time,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 20, December 1981/March 1982, p. 4; Buckalew, “Blues Music in Arkansas,” p. 49.

42 Oakley, *The Devil’s Music*, pp. 220-221; Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 176.

43 Robbie Fry, “King Biscuit Time [Radio Program],” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2618>.

44 King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA Script, 1941,” Ms3355, Box 1, Folder 5, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries (Hereinafter cited as King Biscuit Papers).

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These King Biscuit Boys has come to welcome you.  
Every morning for breakfast, King Biscuit on my table.  
Every morning for breakfast, King Biscuit on my table.  
Invite my friends and next door neighbors!<sup>45</sup>

The 3,115th “King Biscuit Time” show aired January 31, 1953, from the Plaza Theater in Helena. The program listed W.C. Clay, Peck Curtis, David Harold, Robert Jr. Lockwood, Willie Love, Pepper Martin, Robert Nighthawk, Joe Willie “Pine Top” Perkins, Houston Stackhouse, Dudlow Taylor, Joe Willie Wilkins, and Sonny Boy Williamson as bluesmen that had performed on the show.<sup>46</sup>

The lineup of Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Jr. Lockwood was enhanced in 1942 with the addition of Peck Curtis on drums and Dudlow Taylor on piano. By 1944, the show had become so popular that in addition to the five-days-a-week radio show the King Biscuit Entertainers were doing a half-hour show each Saturday morning at the Plaza Theater, the black theater in Helena, located at 118 Walnut Street. In 1946, in addition to King Biscuit Flour the show also advertised Sonny Boy Corn Meal.<sup>47</sup>

A complete run of KFFA scripts is not available. The first extant script to feature Sonny Boy Corn Meal was February 1946. The patent application states, “The trademark was first used on December 18, 1942.” It also states that the representation of the human figure is fanciful, though it is clearly Sonny Boy Williamson. The trademark features a drawing of Williamson sitting on an oversized ear of corn and holding a harmonica. The meal, like the flour, became quite popular in the region. The trademark was patented on August 29, 1950.<sup>48</sup>

By 1944, “King Biscuit Time” was being broadcast on KFFA and WROX, Clarksdale, Mississippi. In early 1946, the station joined the Delta [radio] Network. A script dated February 25 of that year begins “Pass the Biscuits! Cause its King Biscuit Time over the Delta Network!” On June 28, the script announced, “Friends, this is our last broadcast for the summer over the Delta Network.” “King Biscuit Time” remained on the air on KFFA and other stations and in September was back on the Delta Network. The typed script for September 16 reads “Pass the Biscuits! Cause its ‘King Biscuit Time’ over KFFA” but KFFA is scratched out and “The Delta Network” written in by hand. KFFA remained part of the network at least through 1948—there are no scripts extant for 1949—but by 1950 the station was again the sole

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45 O’Neal, “Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse,” p. 29

46 King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA Script, January 31, 1953,” Box 2, Folder 1.

47 Lorenzo Thomas, “For Bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson, Pass the Biscuits One More Time,” *Arkansas Times*, June 1979, p. 28; King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA Script, April 29, 1944,” Box 1, Folder 5.

48 King Biscuit Papers, “Patent Registration No. 529713,” Box 2, Folder 11; King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA script for week of February 25, 1946,” Box 1, Folder 6.

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broadcaster of “King Biscuit Time.” It is not known if the Delta Network ceased to exist or if KFFA simply ceased to be part of it.<sup>49</sup>

In 1946, Sonny Boy Williamson left Helena and for the first time Peck Curtis took over the show. The lineup varied but for a while it was Curtis, Houston Stackhouse on guitar and Dudlow Taylor. Sometimes Willie “Pinetop” Perkins would take Taylor’s place at the piano. According to Houston Stackhouse, Williamson always took over the show when he was in town. “Anytime he’d come back, he’d take his program back, and when he would leave Peck would take over. That’s the way they’d run it.”<sup>50</sup>

This group of musicians—Curtis, Stackhouse, Perkins and Joe Willie Wilkins—formed a band and played around the Delta for four or five years. They played on KFFA by day and at dances at night. After a while Houston Stackhouse took a day job at the Chrysler plant in West Helena and could no longer do the radio show, so they brought in W.C. Clay. However, Stackhouse continued to play with the band at evening appearances.<sup>51</sup>

In 1947, Interstate Grocer Company took the King Biscuit Entertainers on the road. The first show was March 1 at Broom Brothers Store three miles north of Marvell. That summer the King Biscuit Time Entertainers played forty-seven shows—forty in Arkansas in Lee, Monroe, Phillips and St. Francis counties, and seven in Mississippi.<sup>52</sup>

Before the coming of supermarkets, Phillips County had over 150 small grocery stores. These local stores carried the staples every household needed, but they could also make a sandwich and sold beer and soft drinks. Many had juke boxes and all were community gathering places. Bringing the King Biscuit Entertainers to these stores made sense. It allowed customers who bought the flour and the corn meal to see the people they heard on the radio, and the store

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49 King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA week of script February 25, 1946,” “KFFA script June 28, 1946,” “KFFA script week of September 16, 1946,” Box 1, Folder 6 and King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA script week of January 2, 1950,” Box 1, Folder 11.

50 O’Neal, “Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse,” p. 27.

51 O’Neal, “Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse,” pp. 27-28.

52 King Biscuit Papers, “Special Announcement, June 16, 1947,” “Special Announcement, June 23, 1947,” “Special Announcement, July 7, 1947,” “Special Announcement, July 14, 1947,” “Special Announcement, July 21, 1947,” “Special Announcement, July 28, 1947,” Box 1, Folder 4; King Biscuit Papers, “Special Announcement, August 4, 1947,” “Special Announcement, August 11, 1947,” “Special Announcement, August 18, 1947,” “Special Announcement, September 1, 1947,” “Special Announcement, September 2, 1947,” “Special Announcement, September 8, 1947,” “Special Announcement, September 29, 1947,” “Special Announcement, October 6, 1947,” “Special Announcement, October 13, 1947,” “Special Announcement, October 21, 1947,” “Special Announcement, November 7, 1947,” “Special Announcement, November 10, 1947,” “Special Announcement, November 25, 1947,” Box 1, Folder 8.

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owner benefited from the crowds they attracted.<sup>53</sup>

Beginning on Saturday June 21, 1947, the King Biscuit Entertainers played shows in LaGrange, Mariana and Haynes in Lee County. A week later they appeared at nine stores in Phillips County—one in Cypert, four south of Marvell, two in Turner, and two in Creigh. On July 12 they played five shows in Rondo, two between Rondo and Aubrey, one in Aubrey and one in Moro in Lee County. The following Saturday they played Lundell, Mellwood, and Elaine. The last Saturday of July they played two shows in Southland, one in Lexa, and the last at Walnut Corner. All of the Saturday shows were at stores, most likely stores that Interstate Grocer Company served.<sup>54</sup>

The first week of August the King Biscuit Entertainers took the ferry to Mississippi and played Friar's Point, and two stops in Clarksdale—the first at the corner of Vine and Sunflower and the second at 806 5th Street. The rest of August was filled with dates in Arkansas and Mississippi. August 9 the tour hit Kendall, Poplar Grove and Marvell in Lee County. The next week they were back in Mississippi in Bobo, Alligator, Duncan and Shelby. The following week they played Marvell, Postelle, Palmer and Blackton in Phillips and Monroe counties. On Tuesday night, August 26, Sonny Boy Williamson and his King Biscuit Entertainers played the Silver Star Theater in West Helena.<sup>55</sup>

Williamson, the radio station, and Interstate Grocer Company struck a deal. According to John Rogers, who worked for Interstate Grocer, "He would advertise the product [King Biscuit flour or Sonny Boy meal] at those dances. That was part of the contract."<sup>56</sup> The dates for all of the evening shows were announced as part of the daily "King Biscuit Time" broadcasts as well as the times and places for the Saturday road shows. While there is no documentation for the 1947 tour, a 1952 script for a show in Sherard, Mississippi, indicates that the King Biscuit Entertainers simply did a fifteen-minute radio-style show complete with commercials for the Saturday shows. Given the performance times and the distances that had to be driven longer shows would not have been possible, and it followed the format those familiar with the show would have expected.<sup>57</sup>

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53 Bubba Sullivan, personal communication, May 11, 2015 and Morse Gist, May 5, 1992, interview, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 06-013, Smithsonian Productions.

54 King Biscuit Papers, "Special Announcement, June 16, 1947," "Special Announcement, June 23, 1947," "Special Announcement, July 7, 1947," "Special Announcement, July 14, 1947," "Special Announcement, July 21, 1947," Box 1, Folder 4.

55 King Biscuit Papers, "Special Announcement, July 28, 1947," Box 1 Folder 4; King Biscuit Papers, "Special Announcement, August 4, 1947," "Special Announcement, August 11, 1947," "Special Announcement, August 18, 1947," Box 1, Folder 8.

56 Thomas, "For Bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson, Pass the Biscuits One More Time," *Arkansas Times*, p. 28.

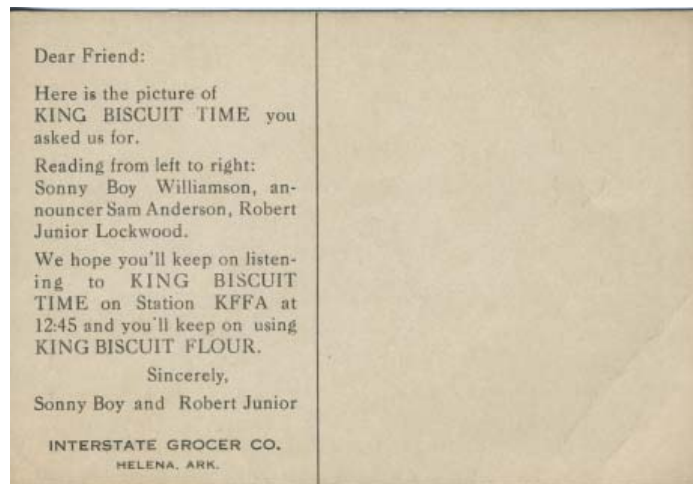
57 King Biscuit Papers, "King Biscuit Time, July 28, 1952," Box 1, Folder 13.

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In September 1947, the entertainers began a series of evening shows in Arkansas and Mississippi. One night in Sumner, Mississippi; three nights in Lyons, Mississippi; one night in Marks, Mississippi; two nights in Glendora, Mississippi; two nights in Widner, Arkansas; one night in Parkin, Arkansas; and one night in Sunflower, Mississippi. In between the evening dates they played six shows at stores in the Oneida-Old Town area of Phillips County.<sup>58</sup>

The rest of September and early October Williamson and the band played evening performances in Marks, Morehead, Chamber and Greenville, Mississippi, and Widner and Hughes, Arkansas. They played five dates on Saturday, October 4 at stores between Marvell and Wycamp, Arkansas, and two Saturday shows on October 11 at stores on Old Town Road and at Helena Crossing. The Entertainers played five evening dates at Lyons, Mississippi; Widner, Arkansas; Chambers, Mississippi; Helena, Arkansas; Clarksdale, Leland, Friars Point and Morehead, Mississippi in October. In November they played Dubbs and Dundee, Mississippi; three nights in Helena; one show near Clarksdale; and shows at Jonestown, Moon Lake Inn near Lula and Lyons, all in Mississippi.<sup>59</sup>

The radio show began to take requests. The “King Biscuit Time” announcer told listeners that if they sent requests for songs to the station on a penny postcard, the King Biscuit Entertainers would play them on the show. When a song was played, the names and hometowns of those who had requested it were read on the air. The promotion was wildly popular. According to station manager Sam Anderson, KFFA received thousands of postcards. Interstate Grocer



Company began putting preaddressed postcards in bags of King Biscuit flour to make it easier for customers to send requests. KFFA also began offering eight-by-ten-inch photos of the King Biscuit Entertainers for ten cents each. The photos, made by Ivey Gladin, featured the King Biscuit Entertainers and Mr. Hugh Langston, the announcer.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> King Biscuit Papers, “Special Announcement, September 1, 1947,” “Special Announcement, September 2, 1947,” Box 1, Folder 8.

<sup>59</sup> King Biscuit Papers, “Special Announcement, September 8, 1947,” “Special Announcement, September 29, 1947,” “Special Announcement, October 6, 1947,” “Special Announcement, October 13, 1947,” “Special Announcement, October 21, 1947,” “Special Announcement, November 7, 1947,” “Special Announcement, November 10, 1947,” “Special Announcement, November 25, 1947,” Box 1, Folder 8.

<sup>60</sup> King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA script, May 5, 1947,” Box 1, Folder 4.



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Sonny Boy Williamson left the show and Helena in 1947 and was gone for a year. It is likely that he was in and out of Helena in 1949 and 1950, but many of the scripts are missing so it is impossible to know for sure. Again, according to Anderson, the show was most popular when Williamson was on the air.<sup>61</sup>

At the end of 1951, Sonny Boy Williamson came back to Helena. While Williamson was out of town Peck Curtis held the band and the show together as evidenced by Curtis's name in the scripts as part of the program. In early 1952, KFFA announced that Sonny Boy Williamson was back and by May the words "your favorite recording artist" were added to Williamson's introduction in the "King Biscuit Time" scripts. In 1950, Williamson had signed a recording contract with Jackson, Mississippi's Trumpet Records and was becoming very well known.<sup>62</sup>

In February 1947, another influential radio station went on the air. KWEM in West Memphis was set up as part of the University of Arkansas Razorback Network in 1946 but problems delayed the first broadcast until 1947. KWEM, located at 231 Broadway Street, became a pay-for-play station. Any performer willing to pay the \$20.00 fee or who could find a sponsor could hit the airwaves. The daytime-only station launched the careers of several musicians including B.B. King, Howlin Wolf, Scotty Moore, Ike Turner, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Joe Hill Louis to name but a few.<sup>63</sup>

The proximity of the station to Memphis guaranteed a large audience. In the late 1940s, Sonny Boy Williamson with Willie Love, Elmore James and Joe Willie Wilkins secured a spot on KWEM. Sonny Boy Williamson bought a house in West Memphis, where most of the musicians in his band lived. He remained in the West Memphis/Memphis area until the early 1950s. In addition to bluesmen other artists, including Johnny Cash, found slots on KWEM. The station maintained the live format until 1955 and added a second studio in Memphis. Sadly, less than twenty years after it signed on the station went off the air, shutting down in 1960.<sup>64</sup>

Howlin Wolf (Chester Arthur Burnett) formed his first band in West Memphis. The band with Willie Johnson and M.T. Murphy on guitars, Junior Parker on harmonica, Willie Steel

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61 Thomas, "For Bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson," *Arkansas Times*, p. 27.

62 Lorenzo Thomas, "For Bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson, Pass the Biscuits One More Time," *Blues Unlimited*, September 1979, pp. 27-28; King Biscuit Papers, "KFFA script December 31, 1951," Box 1, Folder 12; King Biscuit Papers, "KFFA script January 7, 1952," "KFFA script, May 12, 1952," Box 1, Folder 13; Willie Williamson, Contract with Trumpet Records, Trumpet Record Collection, Box 5, Folder 1, University of Mississippi Special Collections.

63 Mid South Community College, "KWEM," <http://www.kwemradio.com/>.

64 Marc W. Ryan, *Trumpet Records: Diamonds on Farish Street*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi, 2004, pp. 27-28; "Nelson Street Blues," *Blues Unlimited*, October/November 1973, p. 13.

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on drums, and a piano player called Destruction, hit the KWEM airwaves in 1949. The band featured electric guitars, a sound that would help usher in the “Chicago sound,” which obviously began in Arkansas. Burnett found sponsors for a show that aired each day at 3 p.m. The show ran for five years, after which time he relocated to Chicago. While Howlin Wolf was living in West Memphis he recorded his first single, *Saddle My Pony*, backed with *Worried All the Time*. Sam Phillips recorded the songs at his Sun Studio in Memphis and they were released on Chicago’s Chess Records.<sup>65</sup>

Legal greyhound racing began in West Memphis in 1935. Like Helena, other forms of gambling could also be found in the back rooms of the bars and jukeboxes. The best joints in West Memphis were on 8th Street and along Broadway. Unlike Memphis, which had a curfew, West Memphis, then known as the “Las Vegas of the South,” was wide open. When the bars and clubs closed in Memphis patrons often drove across the bridge to Arkansas to keep the party going. Bluesmen played at the Willowdale Inn, Cotton Club, and Plantation Inn on Broadway. “Beale Street West,” a row of jukeboxes on 8th Street, offered more of the same. Perhaps thirty night spots in the small downtown area catered to blues fans. B.B. King worked the Square Deal Café in West Memphis and did guest spots on Sonny Boy Williamson’s show before departing for Memphis.<sup>66</sup>

Five years after the 1947 King Biscuit Entertainers tour, Interstate Grocer Company sponsored a second. In that five years much had happened. Many of the region’s best bluesmen, including Sonny Boy Williamson, had gone to Chicago. The Chicago sound, which was Delta Blues with electric instruments, changed the blues, it “became louder and more aggressive.” Howlin Wolf who helped create the sound called it West Memphis-style, but for most people it was Chicago Blues. Many bluesmen recorded in Chicago, but others found opportunities in Jackson, Mississippi, and elsewhere. In Helena in 1952, when the King Biscuit Entertainers hit the road, Sonny Boy Williamson had records he could tout.<sup>67</sup>

The 1952 regional King Biscuit Entertainers tour began in June. This time, instead of being transported in a grocery delivery truck, the entertainers traveled in a used school bus painted red and white. On one side of the bus was the likeness of a bag of Sonny Boy Corn Meal and the words *Sonny Boy fancy white Cream Corn Meal*. The other side had a likeness of a bag of King Biscuit Flour and the words *Light as Air White as Snow King Biscuit Flour*. On both sides

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<sup>65</sup> Welding, “An Interview with Bluesman Howlin Wolf, “4–Up Around Drew,” p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Charlotte C. Wicks, “West Memphis,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=871>; Mid South Community College, “KWEM,” <http://www.kwemradio.com/>; Whayne et al., *Arkansas*, p. 369; Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 207.

<sup>67</sup> Stephen Koch, “Blues Music,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas of History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2605>; Ryan, *Trumpet Records*, pp. 170-176. It is unclear if the King Biscuit Entertainers visited stores serviced by Interstate Grocer Company between 1948 and 1951. The available scripts from KFFA only indicate large scale tours in 1947 and 1952.

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of the bus, below the pictures, were the words *Listen to King Biscuit Time! Monday through Friday 12:15 P.M. Over KFFA Helena, Ark.* When the week's tour itinerary was announced the spokesman always ended with, "Look for the King Biscuit red-and-white bus!" The tour began Saturday, June 28, 1952, and played eighty shows—forty-nine in Arkansas and thirty-one in Mississippi. As always, the King Biscuit Entertainers earned extra money playing local clubs and dances at night. In a mutually beneficial agreement, KFFA announced where the musicians would be playing; in return the band prominently displayed bags of King Biscuit Flour on the stage at their evening engagements.<sup>68</sup>

Unlike the 1947 tour, which featured Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Jr. Lockwood, this tour's ensemble was much larger: Sonny Boy Williamson, Peck Curtis (drums), W.C. Clay (guitar), Dudlow Taylor (piano) and sometimes an unknown trumpet player. The show also included "Ball the Jack," an African American fire-eater in black face makeup. The first five shows were played at stores south of Helena. The next week took in five more stores along Hwy 44 in Phillips County, ending in Elaine. In early July the King Biscuit Entertainers played two evening shows in Mississippi, one in Tennessee and two in Arkansas.<sup>69</sup>

The tour covered many of the same places visited in 1947, but the 1952 tour extended further from Helena. The Saturday shows were all in the afternoon, generally beginning around 1:30 and ending by 5:00 p.m. Available photographs show that large crowds greeted the shows. On July 12, 1952, the tour visited Lexa, LaGrange, Marianna and Haynes, Arkansas. The next week the tour traveled Hwy 20 in Phillips County, visiting six stores and finishing up at Helena Crossing. The last Saturday in July the King Biscuit Entertainers took the ferry to Mississippi and played Friars Point, Farrell, Sherard, Rena Lara, Hill House, Round Lake, and two stops at or near Deeson.<sup>70</sup>

On the first Saturday of August the Entertainers performed at the grand opening of the Handy Dandy Supermarket in West Helena and then played in Lee County, at six stores in Rondo, Vineyard, Aubrey and Moro, and a couple of stores along the road between Vineyard and

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68 King Biscuit Papers, "Special Announcement, June 23, 1952," "Special Announcement, June 30, 1952," "Special Announcement undated for evening dates," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, July 7, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, July 14, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, July 21, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, July 23, 1952," "Special announcement for July and August evening dates undated 1952," Box 1, Folder 13; King Biscuit Papers, "King Biscuit Tour announcement, August 9, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, August 16, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, August 23, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, August 30, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, September 1, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, undated 1952" "King Biscuit Tour announcement, September 22, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, October 4, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, October 11, 1952," Box 1, Folder 14.

69 King Biscuit Papers, "Special Announcement, June 23, 1952," "Special Announcement, June 30, 1952," "Undated Special Announcement for evening dates undated 1952," Box 1, Folder 13.

70 King Biscuit Papers, "King Biscuit Tour announcement, July 7, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, July 14, 1952," "King Biscuit Tour announcement, July 21, 1952," Box 1, Folder 13.

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Aubrey and between Aubrey and Moro. They also played four evening dates in Mississippi and Arkansas that weekend. The following Saturday they played stores in Onedia, Marvell, Midway, Kendall, North Creek, and Walnut Corner. On August 16, the tour again crossed the river for six shows at stores in Mississippi—Clarksdale, Davenport, Bobo, Alligator, Duncan and Booger Bottom. The next Saturday they were back in Mississippi for three shows in Merigold, Shelby and Clarksdale. The last Saturday of the month they played two stores on US 79 west of Marianna, and continued on to Monroe, Clarendon and Holly Grove in Monroe County.<sup>71</sup>

September took the men back to Mississippi for five shows in Lambert, Marks, Belen, Jonestown and Lula. The next weekend the tour returned to Arkansas as the band played at stores south of Elaine on Hwy 44 at Deerfield, Ferguson, Crumrod, Lumdell and Mellwood in Phillips and Desha counties. On September 20, they played the Phillips County Fair at Marvell. On September 27, the King Biscuit Entertainers began at Turner in western Phillips County and played at seven stores in that area. The next Saturday they did two shows in West Helena. The last five shows of the 1952 tour were in Mississippi—two just outside of Clarksdale, then Dubbin, Mattson and Clairmont.<sup>72</sup>



*Old Howe Lumber Company store in Wabash. The King Biscuit Entertainers played here in 1952.*

Hundreds of people, black and white, came out to see the performances. Thousands more listened to the “King Biscuit Time” broadcasts. Blues reached a wider audience than ever before, giving musicians exposure they could not have gotten solely through live performances. KFFA’s live programs took the blues to a wide spectrum of people and helped it come into its own as popular music.

“King Biscuit Time” was not the only program on KFFA, in fact, it was not even the only blues program on the station. Like most radio stations, programs were created to appeal to local tastes. A 1944 KFFA program guide shows the variety of offerings. On Sunday, programming featured news and religious shows. All programs ran fifteen minutes and those that aired on

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71 King Biscuit Papers, “King Biscuit Tour announcement, July 23, 1952,” “Undated announcement for July and August evening dates,” Box 1, Folder 13; King Biscuit Papers, “King Biscuit Tour announcement, August 9, 1952,” “King Biscuit Tour announcement, August 16, 1952,” “King Biscuit Tour announcement, August 23, 1952,” “King Biscuit Tour announcement, August 30, 1952,” Box 1, Folder 14.

72 King Biscuit Papers, “King Biscuit Tour announcement, September 1, 1952,” “Undated King Biscuit Tour announcement,” “King Biscuit Tour announcement, September 22, 1952,” “King Biscuit Tour announcement, October 4, 1952,” “King Biscuit Tour announcement, October 11, 1952,” Box 1, Folder 14.

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weekdays ran five days a week. Morning shows might feature live country music with local performers like the Copeland Cowboys, or syndicated shows such as Bob Wills and Guy Lombardo. Some programming targeted black listeners. “Harlem Favorites” preceded “King Biscuit Time” in the lineup and “Swing Time in Harlem” followed it.<sup>73</sup>

The popularity of “King Biscuit Time” inspired other Helena businesses to sponsor at least three additional KFFA blues programs. Muddy Waters, Jimmy Rogers and Charles “Doc” Ross performed on the “Katz Clothing Store Show,” which aired at 6:00 a.m. The distributors of Bright Star Flour sponsored a show featuring Robert Lee McCollum, aka Robert Nighthawk, Joe Willie Wilkins, and Pinetop Perkins. Houston Stackhouse, Robert Jr. Lockwood, and James Starkey played on the “Mother’s Best Flour Show,” which aired at 2:00 p.m.

When Robert Jr. Lockwood left the “Mother’s Best Flour Show” in 1945, he was replaced by Little Walter Jacobs and Dudlow Taylor. Marion Walter Jacobs was born in Louisiana in 1930. The lean teenager came to Helena to meet Sonny Boy Williamson and to hone his skill on the harmonica. Jacobs sat in with bands in cafe’s in Helena where afterwards he slept on a pool or craps table. The youth bummed meals and cigarettes from better fixed musicians. Eventually he landed the “Mother’s Best Four Show” where he worked with David “Honeyboy” Edwards. It was at Edwards’ suggestion that Little Walter left Helena for St. Louis, and eventually Chicago, in 1947.<sup>74</sup>

KFFA began broadcasting in 1941 on the second floor of the Floyd Truck Lines building at 215½ York Street. It remained there until 1964, when the station moved to the Helena Bank Building at 302 Cherry Street. It was to the York Street studio that “Sunshine” Sonny Payne returned in 1951 after a long absence, and it was then that he became the announcer for “King Biscuit Time.” Access to the modern studio was via a rickety stairway on the outside of the building. Available photographs show a clean studio which appears to have acoustic tile on the walls and carpet on the floor. The talent and the announcer shared a microphone. The control room that monitored the broadcast was separate, but visible through a small window in one of the walls. The setup was much like any radio station of its time.<sup>75</sup>

“King Biscuit Time” ran a live format continuously from 1941 to 1969, and stayed on the air playing recorded music until 1980. The show was revived in 1986 to coincide with the first King Biscuit Blues Festival and has been on the air since. Many of the biggest names

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<sup>73</sup> King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA Program Schedule February 6 to March 5, 1944,” Box 1, Folder 5; Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 197.

<sup>74</sup> Neil Slaven, “Confessin’ the Blues: Part 1—The Story of Little Walter,” *Blues Unlimited*, March/April 1975, pp. 5-6.

<sup>75</sup> Liz Lottman, “ ‘Sunshine’ Sonny Payne (1925-), aka: John William Payne,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas of History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4297>.

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in the blues played on “King Biscuit Time” including Frank Frost, Elmore James, Robert Jr. Lockwood, Willie Love, Pinetop Perkins, Houston Stackhouse, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Herbert Wilson.<sup>76</sup>

Williamson eventually left “King Biscuit Time” and moved to Belzoni, Mississippi. There, he and Elmore James broadcast via a remote hookup on WAZF, a Yazoo City radio station. The show, which aired at 3:30 p.m. was sponsored by Tallyho, a locally manufactured, vitamin-enriched and alcohol-infused tonic. The duo worked out of Belzoni into 1948. From Mississippi, Williamson traveled north, spending time in Detroit, Chicago and Milwaukee. He returned to Arkansas in the late 1940s and settled in West Memphis where on June 4, 1948 he married Mattie Gordon, whom he had met in Belzoni. It was also in West Memphis where he met Chester Burnett, a DJ on radio station KWEM. Burnett, better known as Howlin’ Wolf, teamed with Williamson to produce a highly successful radio show featuring other big name bluesmen such as B.B. King and Albert King. The show led to recording contracts for both Howlin’ Wolf and Williamson in the early 1950s.<sup>77</sup>

In 1951 Sonny Boy Williamson made his first record in Jackson, Mississippi, for Trumpet Records. On January 4, Williamson, Elmore James, Joe Willie Wilkins, Willie Love, and a local drummer named Joe Dyson recorded *Eyesight to the Blind* backed with *Crazy 'Bout You Baby*. The single became a regional hit, which helped the fledgling record company get off the ground and spread Williamson’s fame. Records provided another income stream for bluesmen and it helped legitimize the music. Though the blues remained “black music” in the segregated south, whites were beginning to take notice in Europe and in the northern states.<sup>78</sup>

In October 1949, Muddy Waters’ band came to Helena from Chicago just after it finished recording several singles for Chess Records. The band, which featured Waters, Jimmy Rogers on guitar, “Baby Face” Leroy Foster on drums and Little Walter Jacobs on harmonica, got a one-hour show on KFFA sponsored by Katz Clothing. The 6 a.m. show left the band plenty of time to play other shows, but it also meant they had to be at the KFFA studios



<sup>76</sup> Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, p. 20.

<sup>77</sup> Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., six volumes, Stockton Press, New York, 1995, p. 2017; Irwin Stambler, ed., *Encyclopedia of Pop, Rock and Soul*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1989, pp. 299-300; Robert Santelli, ed., *The Big Book of Blues: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, Penguin Books, New York, 1993, pp. 457-458; Mississippi Blues Commission, “Turner’s Drug Store,” <http://www.msbluestrail.org/blues-trail-markers/turners-drug-store>; Mike Leadbitter, “Bring it on Home,” *Blues Unlimited*, January 1973, pp. 6-7.

<sup>78</sup> Ryan, *Trumpet Records*, pp. 28-30.

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early in the morning.<sup>79</sup> In fact one morning Little Walter and Jimmy Rogers overslept, leaving Waters and Foster to carry the show. Twenty minutes after the show had started they arrived. According to Rogers, “So between the commercial and the song we came in and he had set up the equipment. We just jumped in and started workin’ out. Yeah, it was a lot of fun.”<sup>80</sup>

Helena was the band’s base of operations. From there they played in Mississippi, taking the ferry across for shows and rushing back to make the last boat at 1:00 a.m. They and other musicians were drawn to Helena by KFFA, where they could use their time on the air to advertise their other shows. Muddy Waters and the band also had a semi-regular show at the Owl Café on Missouri Street, where Houston Stackhouse would sometimes join them.<sup>81</sup>

As Williamson was beginning his recording career, another Delta bluesman, Big Bill Broonzy, began a tour of Europe. He recorded his first single, *House Rent Stomp*, in 1927 and between then and the end of the 1940s recorded hundreds of singles. His sound landed him a spot on John Hammond’s 1938 *From Spirituals to Swing* show at Carnegie Hall in New York City. The event brought Broonzy acceptance by white audiences. He experimented with his music, incorporating horns and piano into his songs, creating an urban “Rhythm and Blues” style. Ironically, the 1950s folk music revival brought Broonzy new fame. He became a favorite at folk festivals not as a modern R&B player but in the guise of an old country blues guitarist. It was as such that he toured Europe, sometimes accompanied by a bass player.<sup>82</sup>

Big Bill Broonzy made several tours of Europe, the first in 1951 and again in 1952. During the second tour he sang with Mahalia Jackson and played with pianist Blind John Davis. The success of the tours led to return visits in 1955, 1956 and 1957. While in Europe, Broonzy recorded in Paris, London, Denmark and Holland. The audiences regarded him as “a combination of creative artist and living legend.”<sup>83</sup> In addition to numerous recordings, his time in Europe resulted in a published biography *Big Bill’s Blues* written with Belgian jazz critic Yannick Bruynoghe.<sup>84</sup>

The 1950s were kind to bluesmen as record companies in the north began recording and promoting their music. Phillips County native Robert Jr. Lockwood left Helena in the mid-1940s and went to Chicago. He returned in 1948 to West Memphis where he stayed a year before leaving again for Chicago, where he remained for the next ten years. Lockwood became

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79 Slaven, “Confessin’ the Blues: Part 1,” p. 7; Jim O’Neal and Bill Greensmith, “Living Blues Interview: Jimmy Rogers,” *Living Blues*, August 1973, p. 12.

80 O’Neal and Greensmith, “Living Blues Interview: Jimmy Rogers,” August 1973, p. 12.

81 O’Neal, “Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse,” Summer, 1974, p. 30.

82 Obrecht, “The Legend of Big Bill Broonzy,” pp. 68-71.

83 Max Jones, “Big Bill Broonzy,” *Melody Maker*, August 23, 1958.

84 Groom, “Big Bill Broonzy,” p. 8; Obrecht, “The Legend of Big Bill Broonzy,” pp. 72-74.

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a studio musician for several record companies in that city. Sonny Boy Williamson also went north. In the 1950s he lived near Chicago, in Milwaukee, and spent some time in Detroit.<sup>85</sup> But Williamson always came back to Helena. Bluesman James Morgan remembered hearing Williamson, Dudlow Taylor, W.C. Clay and Peck Curtis playing at Scaife's Café on Elm Street in 1957. According to Morgan "[They] were putting down the blues like I never heard before."<sup>86</sup>

Sometime in the 1950s, Little Rock native Sammy Lawhorn came to Helena to play guitar with the King Biscuit Entertainers. Lawhorn, who left Little Rock when he joined the navy and lived in Chicago after his service, came to Helena at the insistence of Houston Stackhouse. Lawhorn joined Sonny Blair on harmonica, Peck Curtis on drums and Dudlow Taylor on piano on "King Biscuit Time." Lawhorn left Helena and moved to Memphis in the early 1960s, where he was a studio musician for Home of the Blues Records. He played on Phillips County native Willie Cobbs' single, *You Don't Love Me*, which was recorded by Home of the Blues and released by Vee-Jay Records.<sup>87</sup>

Many Delta bluesmen moved north sometime in their lives, but most never forgot their Arkansas roots and often returned to play shows. As Robert Jr. Lockwood explained, "I come down here, and I know I'm going home." For many years, Lockwood returned to Helena in October to celebrate its blues heritage at the King Biscuit Blues Festival.<sup>88</sup>

### **The Blues Goes Mainstream**

In 1962, two German blues enthusiasts conceived an idea to bring authentic American blues music to Western Europe. The result was the American Folk Blues Festival, an "extravaganza" that brought first-rate blues performers to Europe. The festival format allowed each artist to play three or four songs before the next act took the stage. The first tour featured John Lee Hooker, Memphis Slim, Willie Dixon and others. Its success led to a decade of blues shows that attracted not only European jazz enthusiasts, but also a younger generation of rock and roll fans including members



85 Terry Buckalew, " 'Steady Rolling Man': Arkansas Bluesman Robert 'Junior' Lockwood," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LIII, No. 1, Spring 1994, pp. 84-86; Leadbitter, "Bring it on Home," pp. 12-13.

86 "Decoration Day: Blues and Rhythm remembers Sonny Boy Williamson," *Blues & Rhythm*, May/June 1990, p. 13.

87 O'Neal, "Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse," p. 28; Rick Miline, "The Muddy Waters Band," *Blues Unlimited*, January 1966, p. 4; Santelli, *Big Book of the Blues*, p. 95.

88 Buckalew, "Steady Rolling Man," p. 88; Diann Sutherlin, *Arkansas Handbook*, Fly-By-Night Press, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1996, p. 159.



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of bands that would be part of the “British Invasion” in the mid1960s. This musical movement was composed of British rock and roll groups, led by The Beatles in 1964, whose popularity spread rapidly to the U.S. Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin Wolf, Muddy Waters, Junior Wells and other artists toured Europe with these shows in 1963 and 1964. Ironically, young English artists in bands such as The Animals and Rolling Stones brought the blues back to America from across the Atlantic.<sup>89</sup>

While in Europe in 1963-64, Williamson found the fame and adoration that had eluded him in the U.S. For a few months in a half-dozen countries he became the most popular bluesman in Europe, regularly appearing on television and radio. He recorded a song, *I’m Trying to Make London My Home*, that expressed his love for the city that let him be himself and loved him for it.<sup>90</sup> Before leaving London, Williamson told the British newspaper *Melody Maker*, “I enjoy hearing them singing blues here; it makes me feel good. In the States, you don’t have no white boys sing the blues.”<sup>91</sup>

Across the South, African Americans had begun a second struggle for the civil rights lost at the turn of the twentieth century with the onset of “Jim Crow” segregation. A victory came in 1954 with the U.S. Supreme Court’s unanimous ruling in the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* case. The Court ruled that racial segregation of children in public schools violated the “Equal Protection Clause” of the Fourteenth Amendment. The ruling led to action in Little Rock. In 1958, nine black youths enrolled at Central High School. The Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum in Arkansas and across the nation, but it would be another ten years or more before the complete desegregation of facilities, reinstatement of voting rights, and other basic civil rights would be achieved in the South. De facto segregation of many facilities continued into the late 1960s, including restaurants and bars where blues musicians played. Yet, by the mid1960s, the blues had crossed the color line in the United States.<sup>92</sup>

In 1961, Willie Cobbs, born in Smale and living at the time in Hughes, went to Memphis to cut a record. The single *You Don’t Love Me* backed with *You’re So Hard to Please* was recorded at Echo Studios in Memphis. WDIA in Memphis played the record, which became a minor hit for Cobbs. It was later covered by the Allman Brothers Band and many others, becoming a blues-rock standard.<sup>93</sup>

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89 Gerard Herzharft, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, translated by Brigitte Debord, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1992, p. 5.

90 Bob Groom, “Rice Miller: Harmonica Wizard,” *Blues World*, No. 30, May 1970, pp. 9-10.

91 Max Jones, “Mystery Man of the Blues,” *Melody Maker*, January 11, 1964.

92 Whayne, et al., *Arkansas*, pp. 357-369.

93 Kerry Kudlacek, “Willie Cobbs,” *Blues Unlimited*, May 1968, p. 7; Bengt Olsson, “Willie Cobbs,” *Blues Unlimited*, June 1970, p. 16; Brett Bonner, “Willie Cobbs: I want to make some music we can shake our ass to,” *Living Blues*, November/December 2000, p. 19.

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The “British Invasion” of the early 1960s brought the blues to a young, white mainstream audience for the first time. English rock bands recorded blues songs that American teenagers bought. The British bands The Animals and the Rolling Stones unabashedly played American blues. The *Rolling Stones*’ original song line-up included several blues standards: Robert Johnson’s *Dust My Broom*, Ray Charles’ *Confessin’ the Blues*, and Muddy Water’s *Got My Mojo Working*.<sup>94</sup> Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richard wrote: “You were supposed to spend all your waking hours studying Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Howlin Wolf and Robert Johnson.”<sup>95</sup>

The Animals played a concert with Sonny Boy Williamson in Newcastle, England, in 1963, which was later released as the LP *The Animals and Sonny Boy Williamson*.<sup>96</sup> In the liner notes of the band’s first American LP, *The Animals*, three members of the band listed meeting Sonny Boy Williamson as one of their most thrilling experiences. Eric Burdon, the group’s lead singer, listed as his personal and professional ambition to, “Tour the States by car and meet U.S. blues men on their own ground.”<sup>97</sup>

In 1963, having completed a major tour of Europe, Sonny Boy Williamson began a club tour of England. The English band The Yardbirds was his backup at the Crawdaddy Club in London. An album featuring nine of Williamson’s songs from that concert, *Sonny Boy Williamson and The Yardbirds*, was recorded and released in 1966 on the Phillips label.<sup>98</sup> “The Yardbirds were thrilled to be playing backup for Sonny Boy Williamson, one of their long-time idols and one of the great blues artists after whom they patterned their sound.”<sup>99</sup> The guitar player for The Yardbirds on that tour was Eric Clapton, who has since been inducted into both the Rock and Roll and Blues halls of fame.<sup>100</sup>

### **The End of Live Music on KFFA**

In late 1964, Sonny Boy Williamson returned to Helena, where he had a room at 421½ Elm Street. The room on the second floor of the building was across the street from the Elm Street Café, where he often played. He resumed his duties with “King Biscuit Time,” which by then had become a thirty-minute show. Upon Williamson’s return Sonny Payne wrote a new introduction for the show: “Sonny Boy has just returned from a tour overseas where he

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94 Keith Richards with James Fox, *Life*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2010, p. 97.

95 Richards with James Fox, *Life*, p. 110.

96 Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, p. 193.

97 The Animals, *The Animals*, liner notes, MGM Records, 1964.

98 “The Yardbirds,” <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/the-yardbirds/biography>.

99 Bob Scherl, *Eric Clapton—Yardbirds Live with Sonny Boy Williamson*, liner notes, Mercury Records, 1970.

100 “The Yardbirds,” <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/the-yardbirds/biography>.

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played for the armed services and night spots in London, Rome, Paris, Berlin and other cities in Europe.”<sup>101</sup> With Williamson on the show were Peck Curtis, Pinetop Perkins and Houston Stackhouse. Both Stackhouse and Sonny Payne recalled Williamson telling them that he had come home to die.<sup>102</sup> Stackhouse said he told him, “Well Stack, I done come home to die now. I’m just a sick man Stackhouse.”<sup>103</sup>

Sick or not, Williamson continued to perform on *King Biscuit Time* and at area juke. He and the King Biscuit Entertainers played in Arkansas and Mississippi, with Stackhouse driving the elderly bluesman around. According to Stackhouse, Williamson wanted to visit old haunts and people he had known in the area. Often he would ask to be driven down a country lane to visit people or a juke where he played in the old days.<sup>104</sup>

In early 1965, Levon Helm and his band Levon and the Hawks were also in Helena. They had come to play the prom at Marvell High School and the Catholic Club in Helena. Levon’s group, which later became The Band, met Sonny Boy Williamson on the street and they all went to their motel, the Rainbow Inn in West Helena, where they played together until evening. Williamson regaled them with stories of playing with bluesmen and English rock and roll groups. They went for barbeque and were accosted by the Helena police. The young white men were in a new car with Canadian plates. It was 1965, the height of the civil rights movement, and the police suspected that they were “outside agitators.” The situation was defused, but Helm and the others returned to the Rainbow Inn, packed up, and drove to Fayetteville.<sup>105</sup>



*Sonny Boy Williamson’s band set up and played on the concrete tennis court shown here.*

In May 1965, Williamson played a high school graduation party in Wabash, Arkansas. At what would prove to be his last show, Sonny Boy Williamson, Houston Stackhouse and Peck Curtis set up on a concrete tennis court and played a show for the high school graduates. Jerry Pillow, who was at the party, remembered trying to talk with Williamson, but the gruff old bluesman told him that he

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101 King Biscuit Papers, “KFFA script, undated,” Box 2, Folder 2.

102 Sonia Khatchadourian, “A Ray of Sunshine in the Blues,” *Living Blues*, May/June 1991, p. 39; Levon Helm with Stephen Davis, *This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band*, An A Cappella Book, Chicago, Illinois, 1993, p. 116.

103 Sonny Payne, “A Note from Sonny Payne,” Undated KFFA form letter, re “King Biscuit Time,” Subject file, “KFFA,” Phillips County Public Library, Helena, Arkansas; O’Neal, “Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse,” p. 35.

104 O’Neal, “Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse,” p. 35.

105 Helm with Stephen Davis, *This Wheel’s on Fire*, pp. 116-120.

didn't have time to talk; he had a show to play.<sup>106</sup>

The day before he died Williamson went fishing with some friends down by the river. He was off by himself and very quiet. When he didn't arrive at the studio the next day no one thought anything much about it. Peck Curtis went to Williamson's lodging to get him and found him dead. According to the death certificate, Sonny Boy Williamson died on May 25, 1965, of natural causes. After a funeral attended by many friends and fans his sisters took his body to Tutwiler, Mississippi, where he was buried. In 1980, Lilian McMurry, who owned Trumpet Records, paid for the headstone that marks his grave.<sup>107</sup>

"King Biscuit Time" continued for several years after Williamson's death. Sources vary as to how long the show continued with a live format. One says the live format ended in 1968, another says it continued into the 1970s.<sup>108</sup> When the show went off the air in 1980, Sonny Payne said, "About 80 percent of the musicians were dying off and the young people didn't want to play the blues, didn't want to capitalize on it. At the end, we were just playing records. There weren't any people to play. There was nothing left to make it interesting."<sup>109</sup> The show was brought back in 1986 to coincide with the first blues festival in Helena. As of this writing, it broadcasts out of the Department of Arkansas Heritage Delta Cultural Center on Cherry Street. It airs each weekday at 12:15, still hosted by the legendary "Sunshine" Sonny Payne.

### **Northern Festivals Give Blues a New Life**

In 1964, while several American bluesmen were touring Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival, others were appearing at the Newport Folk Festival in Newport, Rhode Island, among them Muddy Waters, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Son House, Skip James and Otis Spann. All of the bluesmen were put up in a rented house that came to be known as the "Blues House." Fred McDowell and Muddy Waters took part in workshops held at the festival. The festival's lineup also included Joan Baez; Peter, Paul and Mary; Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash.<sup>110</sup>

The Newport Folk Festival continued to feature blues artists from 1965 to 1968. Son House, B.B King, Howlin Wolf, and others performed in the racially mixed lineup. Though bluesmen were part of the festival offerings, so were the likes of Jimmy Driftwood, Bob Dylan, Janis

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106 Bubba Sullivan, Helena, Arkansas, personal communication, May 11, 2015; Jerry Pillow, Helena, Arkansas, personal communication, September 4, 2014.

107 O'Neal, "Living Blues Interview: Houston Stackhouse," p. 35; Ryan, *Trumpet Records*, p. 163. The death date on the stone is incorrect.

108 Khatchadourian, "A Ray of Sunshine in the Blues," p. 39; King Biscuit Papers, Rayburn S. Moore, "King Biscuit Time," Box 1, Folder 3.

109 Payne, "A Note from Sonny Payne."

110 George Wein with Nate Chinen, *Myself Among Others: A Life in Music*, Da Capo Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2003, p. 326.

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Joplin, and Richie Havens. The blues was simply part of a larger mix of music played for a racially mixed and an increasingly leftist-to-radical political audience, which included members of Students for a Democratic Society, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and other left-leaning groups in the charged atmosphere of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement.<sup>111</sup>

The Ann Arbor Blues Festival was a three-day blues affair. Beginning on August 1, 1969, the festival featured a mix of old Delta country bluesmen and younger Chicago electric artists. It was an event where both the performers and the audience felt “cautious and somehow expectant.” The festival opened with Roosevelt Sykes, Fred McDowell, J.B. Hutto and the Hawks, Jimmy Dawkins and Junior Wells. B.B. King closed the show with some spell-binding blues as well as an emotional talk.<sup>112</sup>

The festival, like Newport, included workshops, which often turned into impromptu concerts for those in attendance. Sleepy John Estes opened the second day which included Luther Allison, Clifton Chenier and Otis Rush. Howlin Wolf and Muddy Waters ended the second night. Ann Arbor had a midnight curfew and Howlin Wolf took more than his allotted time, forcing Waters to finish off the show with a “masterful but short set.”<sup>113</sup>

Sunday featured an afternoon and evening set. The early sets featured a reprise of some earlier performers mixed with new acts. Arthur Crudup started the first set, followed by Jimmy Dawkins, Roosevelt Sykes, Luther Allison, Big Joe Williams, Magic Sam, Big Mama Thornton and Freddie King. Sykes exceeded his earlier performance and Thornton and King brought the crowd to its feet. Sunday night featured Sam Lay, T-bone Walker, Charlie Musselwhite with Freddy Roulette, Lightnin’ Hopkins, James Cotton and Son House. Son House closed the festival with his country blues and tales of Robert Johnson. His wife came out and the two of them did several spirituals to close the festival.<sup>114</sup>

The performers were excited about the festival because they were paid a commercial rate. B.B. King told a reporter, “The Blues Festival is a dream for some of these guys, not for the prestige but because they need the bread.”<sup>115</sup> The three-day festival drew 20,000 fans and made a small profit. This low-key event spawned the blues festivals that are held each summer from coast-to-

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111 Wein with Nate Chinen, *Myself Among Others*, pp. 328-241.

112 Jerry Heist, “A<sup>2</sup> Blues,” *Rolling Stone*, November 1, 1969, p. 20 and Alan Glenn, “Column: Singin’ the Ann Arbor Blues,” *The Ann Arbor Chronicle*, August 27, 2009, <http://annarborchronicle.com/2009/08/27/column-singin-the-ann-arbor-blues/>.

113 Heist, “A<sup>2</sup> Blues,” p. 20 and Glenn, “Column: Singin’ the Ann Arbor Blues.”

114 Glenn, “Column: Singin’ the Ann Arbor Blues.”

115 Ibid.

coast. They created a venue for performers who were still working day jobs to make ends meet and playing their music at night and on weekends.

### **Social Change and Fame**

For many bluesmen change came too late for them to be part of the rebirth of the blues. Obviously, the blues were not reborn, only “discovered” by a white audience, which at long last helped the artists profit from their music. Sonny Boy Williamson died in 1965, just as the “British Invasion” was underway and the blues was coming back home. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, bluesmen played to appreciative audiences at an increasing number of major venues, such as Bill Graham’s Fillmore East and West.

By 1970, desegregation and the realization of voting rights had changed the social and political landscape of the south. Black men and women held elective office in all of the former Confederate states, and many of the clubs and restaurants where the hard-working bluesmen once earned a living had simply disappeared. Most of the best bluesmen went to Chicago, but over the decades many have returned to the south. In towns where they were once shunned or ignored, they are now welcomed as native sons.

The blues is recognized in the states where it was born as the internationally significant art form that it is. The Mississippi Blues Trail has become a significant part of the state’s tourism development. Visitors from all over the world come to Mississippi for an authentic blues experience. Mississippi Blues Trail historical markers have been erected all over the state, as well as in Arkansas, California, Maine, and even Europe.<sup>116</sup>

As Little Rock native and author of *Deep Blues*, Robert Palmer, so eloquently put it thirty years ago:

Yet the music of Charley Patton, a functionally illiterate rounder who sang for common laborers in an isolated geographical pocket that most of the rest of America had forgotten or never knew existed, still informs, entertains, and moves listeners all over the world. Son Seals could still add a little pressure to his guitar strings, slide into a note just so, and instantly communicate something of his personality, the creativity, the accomplishment of a man who called himself Robert Nighthawk and learned from Houston Stackhouse, who learned from Tommy Johnson, who learned from Charley Patton, who learned from Henry Sloan—the tradition is unbroken, the language is still spoken and understood.<sup>117</sup>

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116 Mississippi Blues Trail, “List of Blues Trail Markers,” [http://www.msbluestrail.org/blues\\_marker\\_list](http://www.msbluestrail.org/blues_marker_list).

117 Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 276.

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The Mississippi River Delta—the landscape that forged this music—remains. Times have changed, but the timeless music still calls. Those who seek its meaning, its source and its power will come here, where it all began. Each person will be motivated differently, but many will try to recapture the unbreakable spirit that created a remarkable American genre.

## **Blues Artists of the Arkansas Delta**

### **Altheimer, Joshua “Josh”**

Born: 1910, Pine Bluff, Arkansas

Died: November 18, 1940, Chicago, Illinois

There is little biographical information available for Josh Altheimer, but it can be said that he was a pianist of distinction, known for his richly percussive accompaniments. Altheimer played in the Chicago blues scene of the 1930s, accompanying artists such as Big Bill Broonzy, with whom he worked for three years. He also played on a number of Lester Melrose-sponsored recording sessions for the Bluebird label. Altheimer was not a solo artist. He played with bands, where his always reliable and sometimes outstanding piano work supported artists including Lonnie Johnson, Washboard Sam (Robert Brown) and John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson. Some of his best work may be found on Big Bill Broonzy’s *Big Bill’s Blues* and the LP *Chicago Blues*.

Sources: Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, p. 125; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 10.

### **Anderson, Little Willie**

Born: May 21, 1920, West Memphis, Arkansas

Died: June 20, 1991, Chicago, Illinois

Willie Anderson learned to play blues harmonica as a boy by watching and listening to his father. His playing did not mature until his family moved to Chicago in 1939 and he met Little Walter Jacobs (Marion Walter Jacobs). Anderson acted as Jacobs’ personal assistant and on occasion substituted for him on stage. He also worked with other noted Chicago bluesmen including Jimmy Johnson, Smokey Smothers, Johnny Young and Muddy Waters. Anderson released the LP *Swinging the Blues* on the B.O.B. label in 1979 and later contributed to the anthology LP *Low Blues*.

Sources: Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p.11.

### **Broonzy, “Big Bill”**

Born: Lee Conley Bradley, June 26, 1903, Lake Dick, Arkansas

Died: August 15, 1958, Chicago, Illinois



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William Lee Conley Broonzy was born in Mississippi but grew up on a farm near Pine Bluff, Arkansas. An uncle taught him to play violin and he was soon performing locally. After serving in the U.S. Army during World War I, Broonzy tried his hand at farming but decided he wanted to make his living as a singer and musician. He performed briefly in Little Rock clubs before moving to Chicago in the early 1920s. Broonzy learned how to play blues guitar from Papa Charlie Jackson and quickly became proficient. He accompanied Big Napoleon Strickland, Theo Edwards, Sleepy John Estes, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, Jim Jackson, and his mentor, Papa Charlie Jackson. In 1923, he recorded his compositions *Big Bill Blues* and *House Rent Stomp*. Later in the 20s, he recorded other popular original compositions including *Date With An Angel Blues*, *The Walking Blues*, *Big Bill Blues No. 2*, *House Rent Stomp No. 2*, *Bull Cow Blues*, *Serve It To Me Right Blues*, and *Mama Let's Cuddle Some More*. He went on to make more than 250 recordings as a featured artist and many more as an accompanist.

During the 1930s, Broonzy had no trouble finding work in Chicago clubs and recording as a sideman. He went to New York in 1932, where he recorded with his band on the Vocalion, Oriole and Meltone labels, cutting such singles as *Too Too Train Blues*, *Worryin' You Off My Mind*, *Shelby County Blues* and *Mistreatin' Mama Blues*. During the late 30's he was the bestselling male blues artist in the country, combining rough-edged rural blues with the more polished sounds of urban blues. His voice never lost the sound of rural gospel singers with its narrative style, clear diction, and remarkable range and flexibility, but his guitar playing was innovative and sophisticated. His style was to dominate the blues scene until the Second World War.

In 1938, Broonzy was popular enough to substitute for Robert Johnson in John Hammond's famous Spirituals to Swing concerts at Carnegie Hall. In the years just before World War II his style lost favor with black audiences but he found a new audience on the New York folk circuit, where his acoustic mix of gospel, folk and blues was very popular. Unfortunately, the folk music audience was too small to provide an income. Broonzy supported himself as a cook, porter, molder and piano mover among other jobs. In 1950, he joined a group called I Come for To Sing formed by Chicago folk artists Win Strake, Studs Terkel and William Lane. As the post-war folk boom progressed, Broonzy got an increasing number of solo engagements as a result of his involvement with the group. In 1951, he received an offer to tour Europe.

His European performances were marked by critical acclaim. Broonzy was largely responsible for introducing the blues to France and the British Isles, where he was immensely popular. When he returned he found that his European exposure had raised his visibility in the U.S. and he received offers for television and radio appearances. He toured overseas again, this time to the Pacific, South America and Africa. Between 1953 and his death in 1958, he finally generated enough income from his music to live comfortably.

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Big Bill Broonzy was a seminal figure in the Chicago blues scene prior to World War II and is one of the most highly acclaimed blues artists. At one time he was so well known that only his nickname, “Big Bill” was required on a record label. In 1955, Broonzy and writer Yannick Bruynoghe told the story of his life in the book *Big Bill’s Blues*. Broonzy was inducted into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 1980. Some of his best work is found on the LPs *Big Bill’s Blues, Remembering . . . The Greatest Minstrel of the Authentic Blues, Big Bill and Sonny Boy, Bluebird No. 6*, and *Big Bill Broonzy: Vol. 1, Vol. 2 and Vol. 3*.

Sources: Bob Riesman, *I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy*, Kristin Baggelaar and Donald Milton, *Folk Music*, pp. 44-45; Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 67; Donald Clark, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, pp. 161-162; Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, p. 65; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 68-70; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, pp. 38-40; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, pp. 565-566; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 58-59; Irwin Stambler and Genlun Landon, 2nd. Ed. *Encyclopedia of Folk, Country and Western Music*, 1983, pp. 73-75.

### **Clay, W.C.**

Born: 1927, Jonestown, Mississippi

Died: unknown

W.C. Clay played on Helena’s KFFA-AM show, “King Biscuit Time,” appearing as a regular from 1950 into the late 1960s. Unlike many bluesmen of his generation who moved to Chicago, Clay elected to remain in the Helena area. In 1976, he was living in Elaine, Arkansas. He may be heard with other blues artists on the LP *Keep It to Yourself—Arkansas Blues, Volume I*.

Sources: Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, p. 20; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, p. 842.

### **Cobbs, Willie**

Born: July 15, 1932, Monroe, Arkansas

Willie Cobbs learned music from his family, whose gospel a cappella choir traveled Arkansas playing revivals and other special events. At the age of eight or nine, Willie became the choir’s lead singer. He and his friends formed a quartet at school, winning regional and state prizes for their singing. The first instrument Cobbs played was a diddley bow, a single-

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stringed instrument he made himself. He taught himself to play harmonica and, at his father's insistence, took piano lessons. His interest in the harmonica grew after he heard Sonny Boy Williamson on KFFA-AM, Helena, Arkansas. He heard Williamson live in 1947, when the King Biscuit Entertainers played at a nearby grocery store in Monroe, and later, when Williamson and the King Biscuit Entertainers played at his uncle Lee McCullough's store in Smales.

In 1948, Cobbs moved to Chicago to live with his aunt. He worked in a meat packing plant and it was there that he met Little Walter Jacobs. The two joined forces, playing for tips on Maxwell Street. Cobbs' first professional job as a musician was in the 1950s, when he joined Eddie Boyd's band as a harmonica player. Boyd, a piano player, also employed Robert Jr. Lockwood.

In 1952, Cobbs joined the U.S. Marine Corps. He remained in service, mostly outside of the country, through 1956. While in the service the only blues artist he listened to was Jimmy Reed, a southern-born guitarist and harmonica player. In an interview in 2000, Cobbs told *Living Blues* magazine, "I patterned myself after him" (Bonner: 17).

After his discharge from the service, Cobbs formed a band in Chicago with Eddie King and Left Hand Frank Craig on guitar, his brother Parker Cobbs on bass and piano, and Willie Frank Black on harmonica. The band played Chicago and traveled the South. Cobbs made his first recording in Chicago in 1958 for Ruler Records—the single *Slow Down Baby* backed with *We'll All Be There*. After making the record, Cobbs returned to Arkansas where he met and began playing with Forrest City Joe (Joe Pugh), who was playing at a pool hall there. The duo teamed briefly with Willie Nix, a guitar player, drummer and DJ on WDIA in Hughes. Cobbs and Nix parted ways when Nix and Sammy Lawhorn, Cobbs' other guitar player, could not get along.

In 1960, Cobbs recorded a single in Memphis, *You Don't Love Me* backed with *You're So Hard to Please*. *You Don't Love Me* became a local hit and Cobbs formed a band and played in Arkansas and the region. Sonny & Cher and the Allman Brothers Band later recorded the song, and Dawn Penn's reggae version became an international hit.

Cobbs toured with Howlin Wolf and Junior Parker in the late 1960s. During that period he created the Riceland Label in Stuttgart, Arkansas. He got out of music in the 1970s and opened the Blue Flame Club in Stuttgart; the Tip Top Club in Hughes; and Mr. C's Barbeque in Greenwood, Mississippi. In the 1990s, he released his first LPs, *Down to Earth* for the Jim O'Neal-produced Rooster Records and *Pay or Do 2 Months & 29 Days* for Wilco Records. In 2000, he released the LP *Jukin'* on Rounder Records. Cobbs lives in Smales, Arkansas, and continues to play clubs and festivals.

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Sources: Brett Bonner, "Willie Cobbs," *Living Blues*, Vol. 31, No. 6, 2000, pp. 15-23; Sheldon Harris, ed., *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 62-63; 433-434; Bengt Olsson, "Willie Cobbs," *Blues Unlimited*, No. 73, June 1970, pp. 15-16.

### **Cotton, James**

Born: July 1, 1935, Tunica, Mississippi

Born to Mose and Hattie Cotton, James was the youngest of nine children. The family worked a farm/plantation and his father was also a Baptist preacher. James began driving a tractor when he was six years old, earning \$3 a day. His mother played harmonica and gave James one for Christmas when he was five or six years old. Initially, he showed limited interest in the instrument but after he heard Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller)<sup>1</sup> play on "King Biscuit Time" on KFFA-AM in Helena he became determined to learn to play it.

When Cotton was nine, his uncle took him to Helena to meet Sonny Boy Williamson. After the introduction, Williamson agreed that Cotton could come and live with him. He became a sort of apprentice to Williamson, staying with him for about six years. In 1948 Williamson moved, taking his band and Cotton to West Memphis, where he bought a house. By this time, Cotton was part of the band that included Elmore James, Joe Willie Wilkins, Willie Love and Forrest City Joe (Joe Pugh). The Williamson show on KWEM-AM, West Memphis, was sponsored by Hadacol tonic. Williamson's house burned in 1949. Shortly afterward, his wife Mattie left West Memphis and Williamson soon followed her.

Cotton kept the band together for a few months and then put together another band, James Cotton & His Rhythm Playmates. The band broke up sometime in 1950 and Cotton joined Howlin Wolf's (Chester Arthur Burnett) band. While working as a truck driver in West Memphis in 1955, Cotton landed a job playing with Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield) in Memphis that led to a twelve-year association.

After he left Muddy Waters, Cotton formed another band and recorded the LP *James Cotton Blues Band*. In the late 1960s, he toured with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Janis Joplin and other rock bands. Cotton has recorded over 30 LPs including *Breakin' It UP Breakin' It DOWN* with Muddy Waters and Johnny Winter, the Grammy-winning *James Cotton with Joe Louis Walker and Charlie Haden Deep in the Blues*, and *The James Cotton Band—100% Cotton*.

Sources: Bill Greensmith, "Cotton in Your Ears," *Blues Unlimited*, July/August 1976, pp. 5-11; Sheldon Harris, ed., *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 130-132; Helen Doob Lazer, "Living Blues Interview: James Cotton," *Living Blues*, No. 76, July/August 1987, pp. 23-33.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, "Sonny Boy Williamson" refers to Aleck "Rice" Miller, not John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson..

**Curtis, James “Peck”**

Born: March 7, 1912, Benoit, Mississippi

Died: November 1, 1970, Helena, Arkansas

James Curtis was born in Mississippi but raised in Arkansas. In the 1930s, he traveled the South playing washboard, washtub, jug, and drums for medicine shows, carnivals, minstrel shows and vaudeville. Curtis also sang and was known as a hot-stepping tap dancer. He played with the South Memphis Jug Band, and in the 1930s was a frequent accompanist to a young Howlin Wolf in West Memphis. In 1942, Curtis, who had worked on radio in Blytheville, Arkansas, joined Robert Jr. Lockwood and Sonny Boy Williamson on KFFA-AM’s “King Biscuit Time” in Helena, Arkansas. Curtis began playing washboard but soon switched to drums. Occasionally he would tap dance on a piece of plywood, the sound going out clearly over the airwaves. When Sony Boy Williamson tired of the routine of a daily radio show and went on the road, Curtis took his place as singer and band leader. In the 1960s, Curtis was still drumming on the show, now in the company of musicians like Frank Frost. By the time the live show ended, he had appeared on more “King Biscuit Time” shows than any other performer.

In the late 1940s, Curtis frequently toured with Sonny Boy Williamson, working juke joints in the Little Rock area. He also appeared on KNOE-AM, Monroe, Louisiana, in the mid-40s. In 1947, Curtis teamed with singer and guitarist Houston Stackhouse, playing clubs and juke joints across the South through the 60s. A number of their recordings appeared on albums, including one in which he told the story of Sonny Boy Williamson’s death. Curtis may be heard on the LPs *King Biscuit Time*, *Mississippi Delta Blues: Volume 1* and *Arkansas Blues*.

Sources: Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, pp. 20, 42, 46; Rose Kettler, “King Biscuit Time,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 20, Nos. 1 and 2 combined, December 1981 and March, 1982, pp. 4-9; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, p. 1020; Robert Santelli, *Big Book of the Blues*, p. 110

**Davis, CeDell “Big G”**

Born: 1927, Helena, Arkansas

CeDell Davis’ nickname, “Big G” refers to the guitar, an instrument he mastered in spite of enormous odds. His first instrument was a diddley bow that he made when he was five years old, but he soon graduated to a \$2.50 “Bud Jones” guitar that he taught himself to play. Davis contracted polio when he was ten. The disease kept him in and out of the hospital for three years and left his arms and legs partially paralyzed. The paralysis made it impossible for Davis to hold and play a guitar in the accepted fashion. He learned to play left-handed, stringing his

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guitar “backwards” and holding it in his lap with the neck to the right and using a butter knife for strumming and picking. Davis is one of the few guitarists to play both bass and lead at the same time.

By the time he was fourteen, Davis was playing in clubs with musicians many years his senior; at twenty he was writing songs. He also became an excellent harmonica player. During the 1940s, Davis appeared frequently on “King Biscuit Time” broadcast by KFFA-AM, Helena. Davis met Robert Nighthawk, whom he had long admired, about 1950. They began to play together and for a decade in the 50s and early 60s toured the South together.

In 1961, Davis settled in Pine Bluff. He continued to work locally, appearing regularly at the Jungle Hut, and occasionally playing with Robert Nighthawk. He became active with the State Arts Council and the public school system and was a visiting artist with the Department of Arkansas Heritage. During the blues revival of the late 60s and early 70s Davis was ‘discovered’ by blues historians and began to play clubs in Missouri, Tennessee, Illinois, Iowa, New York, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. A reviewer in the *New York Times* wrote: “CeDell Davis’ blues is dance music. He plays, shuffles, boogies and stomps with a furious beat, hammering out bass lines and playing treble-string leads with his knife on a canary-yellow electric guitar. He is also an utterly original stylist who, even when performing familiar blues standards . . . transforms them into downhome stomps. And his vital, expressive singing is part Joe Turner shout, part Delta moan.”

Davis may be heard on the LPs *Keep It To Yourself*, *Arkansas Blues: Volume 1* and the solo album recorded in 1994 on Fat Possum Records, *Feel Like Doin’ Something Wrong*. His latest LP, *Last Man Standing*, was released in February 2015.

Sources: “CeDell Davis,” clipping from the Vertical File, Special Collections, University of Arkansas, publication not identified, no date; Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, p. 48; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 1074.

### **Davis, Larry**

Born: Larry C. Davis, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, December 4, 1936

Died: Los Angeles, California, April 19, 1994

Davis was the son of L.C. Davis and Mattie/Katheryn Payne. Earlier sources give his birthplace as Kansas City, but more recent information indicates he was born in Pine Bluff. He grew up in Little Rock and England, Arkansas and began playing the drums about age nine and started playing professionally at age fourteen. He sat in with B.B. King’s band in 1951 and played drums with local Little Rock musician Sunny Blair. Davis toured Arkansas with

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the Bill Fort Band and Hugh Holloway. In the mid-1950s he toured with Billy Gayles working clubs in St. Louis and as far away as Los Angeles. In 1958 he and guitarist Fenton Robinson cut the single Texas Flood backed with I Tried for the Duke label. Though, Texas Flood was a minor hit, issues between Davis and the record company ended their relationship after a second single.

Davis moved to St. Louis where he eventually landed a job playing bass with Albert King's band. He would later switch instruments, this time to guitar. He worked to create a style that blended the blues and a rhythm-and-blues sound. A motorcycle accident in 1972 forced him to give up music for nearly ten years. In 1981, Davis made the lp Funny Stuff for Jim O'Neal's Rooster Blues label. The record won the WC Handy award for album of the year and Davis received the artist of the year award.

Davis spent most of his career playing shows in the Arkansas region and Midwest. He always called Little Rock home. Davis's Texas Flood was covered in 1983, by Texas blues artist Stevie Ray Vaughan on his first lp of the same name. His last album Sooner or Later was released in 1992.

Sources: Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 116; Bob Eagle and Eric S. LeBlanc, *Blues: A Regional Experience*, p. 164; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 149; Louis Guida, Lorenzo Thomas and Cheryl Cohen, *Blues Music in Arkansas*, p. and Bill Dahl, Larry Davis, AllMusic, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/larry-davis-mn0000780781/biography>.

### **Frazier, Calvin H.**

Born: February 16, 1915, Osceola, Arkansas

Died: September 23, 1972, Detroit, Michigan

Calvin Frazier was born into a family of musicians and learned guitar as a boy. As a teenager, he often worked with Robert Johnson in a local street band that played the Osceola area during the 1930s. In the mid-30s he made frequent appearances on KLCN-AM, Blytheville, Arkansas. At some point he married Frances M. Dunlap, a cousin of blues singer and musician Johnny Shines.

Sometime after 1934, Frazier joined with Johnny Shines and Robert Johnson, working jukeboxes, fish fries, house parties and cafés in the South. They went north to Canada in the late 30s and on their return passed through Detroit, where they appeared on "The Elder Moten Hour," a popular religious radio show. Frazier decided to remain in Detroit and got a job outside of music, though he seems to have remained active as a musician. In 1938, he recorded in Detroit by Alan Lomax with Sampson Pittman for the Library of Congress. Through the 40s

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and 50s Frazier was an active member of Detroit's blues club scene, playing as a sideman in local bands. He toured with the Jungle Jive Revue in 1946 and in 1951 recorded with the T.J. Fowlers Band on the Savoy label. In 1956, Frazier worked a long residency at Detroit's Palmer House, a portion of which was recorded and released on the JVB label, which he also recorded with in 1958. He often worked day jobs outside of music but about 1970 formed a band to play local clubs. Frazier made his last recording in 1972 in Chicago, accompanying Washboard Willie for a Barrelhouse label LP.

Source: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 182-183, 460.

### **Frost, Frank Ottis**

Born: April 15, 1936, Auvergne, Arkansas

Died October 12, 1999, Helena, Arkansas; he is buried in Magnolia Cemetery

Frank Frost learned to play the piano as a young man, often accompanying church choirs. He went on to master the organ, guitar, and harmonica, the instrument for which he is best known. Frost moved to St. Louis in 1951, where he played behind Little Willie Foster. During a stint as a guitar player with Sonny Boy Williamson's band in St. Louis, Williamson taught him the fine points of blues harmonica. Frost met drummer Sam Carr in St. Louis, who invited him to join his band, which was soon playing local clubs backing Williamson, an association which lasted until 1959.

Frost and Carr returned to Arkansas in 1962, and with the addition of guitarist Big Jack Johnson formed a group they called Frank Frost and the Nighthawks, with Frost on organ. The band recorded an LP for Phillips International in 1963 called *Big Boss Man*. They played juke joints in the Delta in the 60s and 70s and backed Robert Nighthawk, Carr's father, whenever he played in Mississippi. In the early 60s, Frost became a regular on "King Biscuit Time" on KFFA-AM, Helena, Arkansas. In 1966, Frost and the Nighthawks recorded an LP for Jewel. The band, whose members had continued to play as a group and separately, signed a recording contract with the Chicago-based Earwig label in 1978, and changed its name to the Jelly Roll Kings. In 1979 their LP *Rockin' the Juke Joint Down* was released. Their music has been described as "... a very tough and raw, but tight, down-home blues sound ..." (Larkin, ed.: 1567.)

*Living Blues* magazine's Jim O'Neal said of Frost, "Mississippi singer-multi-instrumentalist Frank Frost and his band were responsible for some of the finest southern blues records of the 1960s" (Harris: 183). The group continues to play together sporadically, mostly in the Delta, though they did tour Holland with great success in the early 80s. In 1986, Frost appeared in the film *Crossroads* and in 1990 he released his first solo LP *Midnight Prowler*. In 1996, he



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headlined a live broadcast of the revived “King Biscuit Time” show from the Old State House Museum. He continued to perform with the Jelly Roll Kings and with local bands in the Helena area until his death.

Sources: Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, p. 54; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 183; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 1567; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 146, 210.

### **Hare, Pat**

Born: Auburn Pat Hare, December 20, 1930, Cherry Valley, Arkansas

Died: September 26, 1980, St. Paul, Minnesota

Pat Hare was known for his raw blues guitar sound, which imparted an urgency and tension to every song he played. He made his first appearance on the Memphis blues scene in 1948 as a member of Howlin Wolf's band. Between 1952 and 1954 he played as a session musician for Sam Phillips at Sun Records, recording with Junior Parker, James Cotton and other Memphis bluesmen. Hare recorded a few solo sides including his own composition, *I'm Gonna Murder My Baby*, a “chilling performance of unparalleled menace” from the “most aggressive picker to work at Phillips' studio” (*Cochran: 43*). In 1954, Hare moved to Houston, playing with Junior Parker and touring with the Blues Consolidated Package with Bobby “Blue” Bland and Big Mama Thornton, among others. He later moved to Chicago and joined Muddy Waters' Band, playing with James Cotton and Otis Spann. He stayed with the band for a number of years but his long-time drinking problem worsened and he was fired in 1960.

Three years later he was working in Minneapolis with Mojo Burford, but in 1963 he was arrested for killing his girlfriend and a policeman. Hare was convicted in 1964 and given a life sentence. He died in Stillwater Penitentiary in 1980. Hare's magnificent guitar work may be heard on the LPs *Mystery Train* (with Junior Parker and James Cotton) and *Muddy Waters: The Chess Box*.

Sources: Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, p. 43-44; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 167.

### **Harris, James D. “Jimmie/Jimmy”**

Born: April 12, 1921, Earle, Arkansas

Died: March 2, 1990, Forrest City, Arkansas\

James Harris' family moved to Chicago when he was a child. He became interested in music as a boy and taught himself harmonica. As a teen he hoboed around the South, frequently

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returning to his birthplace, Earle, Arkansas. At some point he became proficient with a pair of dice and worked as a professional gambler, earning himself the nickname “Shakey Jake.” Harris dropped out of high school during World War II to serve in the U.S. Army. After returning to Chicago, he worked local club dates as a sideman and began to sit in with Muddy Waters, Little Walter and other bluesmen.

In the late 1940s, Harris formed a band and for the next twenty years worked in Chicago. He made his recording debut in 1958 on the Artistic label with *Call Me if You Need Me*, which featured his nephew, guitarist Magic Sam (Samuel Maghett). In 1959 and 1960 he recorded on the Prestige-Bluesville label and in 1962 for Polydor. That year, he also toured with the “Rhythm & Blues USA” show, working concerts and festivals throughout the U.S. and Europe. Sometime in the late 60s he moved to Los Angeles, subsequently appearing in the short film *Conversations with Shakey Jake* (1972). He started a short-lived blues club and the Good Times record label in 1977, both of which he dissolved in 1982. While on the West Coast, Harris played an important role in the emergence of numerous blues-rock groups including those of Rod Piazza and Hollywood Fats. He also acted as manager and advisor to his nephew, Samuel Maghett (Magic Sam), who was a great blues guitarist and vocalist, and a key figure in the emergence of the West Side Sound, in which Harris’ influence should not be discounted.

Harris recorded and performed in the Los Angeles area until 1988, when he returned to Arkansas to live near Pine Tree. His harmonica playing may be heard on the LPs *Mouth Harp Blues*, *Further on Up the Road*, *Make it Good to You* and *The Devil’s Harmonica*.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 213-214; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, pp. 306-307; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 361.

### **Howlin Wolf**

Born: Chester Arthur Burnett, June 10, 1910, West Point, Mississippi

Died: January 10, 1976, Hines, Illinois

Chester Burnett was born and grew up on a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta. As a boy he worked in the fields and listened to the songs the other hands sang. At night, he heard blues musicians in local juke joints and became fascinated by the country blues recordings of Jimmie Rodgers. In the 1920s and 30s, his interest in music growing, Burnett began hanging around well-known blues performers, especially Charlie Patton. He studied the techniques of Robert Johnson and learned to play harmonica from his brother-in-law, the famous Sonny Boy Williamson. At some point he learned to play a little guitar, but it was his vocals, harmonica playing and stage presence that insured his place in blues history.

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Throughout the 20s and 30s, Burnett combined farming and music. In 1923, he moved to Ruleville, Mississippi, working on the Young and Myers plantation. About 1928, he began to play local dances, fish fries and suppers, as well as juke joints and streets in Ruleville, West Point and the surrounding area. It was about this time that Burnett adopted the nickname Howlin Wolf from a string of nicknames he had had over the years. Burnett later said, "I just stuck to the Wolf. I could do no yodelin' [a reference to his idol, Jimmie Rodgers] so I turned to 'Howlin' " (Stambler: 300). His flair for the dramatic, towering physique, powerful voice, and the wolf howls with which he punctuated his music all added to his growing reputation.

In 1933, Burnett moved to Twist, Arkansas, to work on the Nat Phillips Plantation. During the early 30s he worked local joints including Will Smith's Place, Vandy Cobb's Place and Will Weilers' Place, on the streets, and at social occasions in and around Hughes, Arkansas. In the mid-30s he occasionally toured with Robert Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Texas Alexander and others, working juke joints in Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas. Between 1938 and 1941, he played with Robert Jr. Lockwood and Baby Boy Warren in Church's Park (now W.C. Handy Park) in Memphis, worked juke joints near Robinsonville, Mississippi, and Dooley Square in Tunica, Mississippi.

Between 1941 and 1945 Burnett served in the U.S. Army, frequently entertaining troops. After his discharge he returned to farm work in Twist, Arkansas. He moved again, spending 1946 to 1948 in Penton, Mississippi, combining farm work with music. In 1947, he formed a band that included future greats James Cotton and Little Junior Parker and worked juke joints near Lake Cummins, Mississippi. He and the band worked juke joints near West Memphis, Arkansas, in 1948, and drifted south playing in juke joints, barrelhouses and small clubs. That year he went to work for KWEM in West Memphis as a sort of jack-of-all-trades, acting as DJ, singer, producer and advertising salesman. He stayed at KWEM for almost three years and while there cut his first record for Sam Phillips of Sun Records, under contract to Chess Records of Chicago. Burnett recorded two sides in West Memphis. Assisting him on two tracks were harmonica player James Cotton and pianist Ike Turner. One of the first songs he recorded was *Saddle My Pony*. Burnett made several recordings between 1951 and 1953 for Sun, Chess and RPM, and at least one other was recorded in West Memphis, this time for the RPM label. In 1952, he began to appear on a weekly radio show on KXJK-AM, Forrest City, Arkansas. Burnett, now firmly established as Howlin Wolf, built up a large and loyal following in the black community during his years in Arkansas. He had his first big hit with the single *Moanin' at Midnight* in 1951, after which Chess Records signed him to a contract. The success of *Moanin' at Midnight* and his new recording contract induced Burnett to leave Arkansas for the center of cutting edge blues—Chicago.

Burnett became a major draw at the 708 Club, Big Squeeze, Club Zanzibar, Peppers, Rock Bottom Club, Sylvio's and other Chicago clubs. His music took on a faster tempo in response to local preferences and the artists with whom he played. During the 50s and 60s he made a

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number of recordings for Chess that had substantial sales, including the singles *Sittin' On Top of the World*, *Smokestack Lightning*, *I Ain't Superstitious*, *Back Door Man*, *Little Red Rooster*, and his original composition, *Killing Floor*.

In the early 60s, young artists, notably the Rolling Stones in England, were discovering the blues. The result was an explosion of interest in the blues and blues artists that continues to this day. During the 60s and early 70s, Burnett performed at numerous music festivals including the first International Jazz Festival in Washington, DC (1962), the International Jazz Jamboree in Warsaw, Poland (1964), the Newport Folk Festival (1966), the University of Chicago Folk Festival (1968), the Mariposa Folk Festival, Toronto, Canada (1968), the Ann Arbor Blues Festival (1969, 1970, 1972), the Washington Blues Festival, DC (1970), the Notre Dame Blues Festival (1971), the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival (1973), the International Blues Festival, Louisville (1974), and the Urban Blues Festival, Chicago (1974). He toured Europe and England with the American Blues Festival from 1961 to 1964, and with the American Folk Blues Festival from 1964 through 1973.

Burnett kept up a steady stream of club appearances throughout the 60s and early 70s, always returning to the Chicago clubs that had welcomed him in the 50s. All through the 60s he was a frequent guest on the "Big Bill Hill Show" on WOPA-AM, Oak Park, Illinois. In 1965, he made his one commercial appearance—on the ABC-TV teen-oriented show "Shindig" at the request of the rock group, the Rolling Stones. He appeared in the 1971 short film *Wolf* with fellow bluesmen Hubert Simmons and Albert Luandrew.

The interest of rock fans in blues music prompted Chess to urge Burnett to work up new tracks in the late 60s and early 70s. Chess released the LP *Howlin Wolf* in 1969, followed by *Message to the Young* and *The London Howlin Wolf Sessions*, which feature Wolf playing with Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood, Bill Wyman and Charlie Watts. Wolf was in poor health when he recorded what would be his last LP, the highly acclaimed *Back Door Wolf*, in 1973.

Burnett was a great innovator of post-war blues and his music has had an effect far beyond the blues community. Some of the many rock artists and groups he influenced include the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton and Cream, John Fogerty and Creedence Clearwater Revival, The Yardbirds, and Led Zeppelin. His influence is most keenly seen in Woodrow Adams, Birmingham Jones (Wright Birmingham), Johnny Shines, Floyd Jones, and James Jones, aka "The Tail Dragger."

Some of Burnett's outstanding blues can be heard on the LPs *Moanin' in the Moonlight*, *Cadillac Daddy*, *Rocking Chair*, *The Real Folk Blues*, *More Real Folk Blues*, and the boxed set *Howlin Wolf: The Chess Years*. He was also an accomplished songwriter and some of his compositions have become blues and rock standards, including *Smokestack Lightning*, *Highway 49*, *I've Been Abused*, *Mr. Highway Man*, *My Mind Is Ramblin'*, *Sittin' On Top of the*

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*World, Little Red Rooster, Backdoor Man, That's All Right, Killing Field* (later renamed *Killing Ground*) and *Saddle My Pony*.

Sources: Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 74; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 93-95; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, 2nd edition, pp. 89-90; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 2017-2018; Irwin Stambler, *Encyclopedia of Pop, Rock & Soul*, pp. 299-300.

### **Jackson, Lee "Warren Lee"**

Born: August 18, 1921, Gill, Arkansas

Died: July 1, 1979, Chicago, Illinois

As a young man, Jackson Lee was often to be found at Alf Bonner's juke, where he learned to play guitar on a homemade instrument. During his teens he played locally and then left the Marianna, Arkansas, area to play in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Florida. He was back in Arkansas in 1949, appearing on KXJK-AM, Forrest City. Shortly afterward he moved to Chicago, where he worked at the Tuxedo Lounge, Turner's Blue Lounge and the Chess Club with bluesmen such as Johnny Shines, Big Walter Horton and J.B. Hutto's band, Hutto's Hawks. He recorded in the mid-50s and 60s on a number of labels including Keyhole, Testament, Delmark, and Bea and Baby.

In the 1970s, Jackson toured with the Blues All Stars on the American Blues Festival tour and the Chicago Blues All Stars, playing festival dates in the U.S., England and Europe. He also worked the Wisconsin Blues Festival in Beloit and the Jazz Expo in London. In the 70s he returned to Chicago, where he played in clubs and made a few recordings, including one in 1973 with J.B. Hutto on the Delmark label.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 266-267.

### **Johnson, Robert**

Born: Robert Leroy Johnson, May 8, 1911 (sources vary), Hazelhurst, Mississippi

Died: August 16, 1938, Greenwood, Mississippi

Robert Johnson is a legendary figure in the blues world but facts about his personal life remain sketchy. He was raised largely by his stepfather, Charles Spencer (Charles Dodds), in Memphis. The first instrument he learned to play was the harmonica. He later learned to play guitar by watching his brother Charles play, and later by watching and listening to Son House, Charley Patton and Willie Brown at engagements around the Delta. By the time he

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was in his late teens, Johnson was a blues guitar master. The space of time between his taking up the guitar and becoming a virtuoso was very short, giving rise to the legend that Johnson sold his soul to the devil to be able to play as he did. Johnson's playing was typified by the boogie-pianist's left hand "walking bass" notes, dramatic rhythms and agitated whining effects produced by a bottleneck slide. It has been called piercing, tense and rhythmic. He used his impressive voice—described as taut, often strained—to great effect.

Johnson wandered the Delta as an itinerant musician. He toured with Son House, Willie Brown and Willie Borum and worked solo in clubs, juke joints, bars, fish fries, dances and just about every other social occasion. In 1931, he visited Helena, Arkansas, and met Esther Lockwood, Robert Jr. Lockwood's mother. The two began a relationship that lasted until Johnson's death in 1938. The relationship was close enough that they are remembered as being married and some biographers refer to Lockwood as Johnson's stepson but this has never been verified. In any case, Johnson lived with Esther Lockwood off and on for the next seven years and it is true that the relationship seems to have been the only lasting one Johnson forged in his short life. Robert Lockwood, who was profoundly influenced by Johnson, remembered him as a big brother, almost a father. The two frequently toured together, playing juke joints and clubs in the Delta. Johnson traveled to New York, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, San Antonio and Dallas but always returned to the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas. In the late 30s, he frequently played with Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin' Wolf and Elmore James. In 1937, he played with Johnny Shines and Calvin Frazier on the "Elder Moton Hour," a religious program on local radio in Detroit. While in San Antonio in 1936 he cut his first recordings. In a three-day session he cut sixteen sides for the American Record Company including *I Believe I'll Dust my Broom*, *Sweet Home Chicago*, *Terraplane Blues*, *Cross Road Blues*, *Come on in My Kitchen* and *Walkin' Blues*. Just seven months later in Dallas, Johnson recorded *Traveling Riverside Blues*, *Love in Vain Blues*, *Hell Hound on My Trail* and *Me And The Devil Blues*. All are acknowledged classics and have been covered by innumerable blues and rock musicians. Johnson died in 1938 of poison, apparently at the hand of a jealous husband. He was twenty-seven years old.

Johnson's lyrics reflect his troubled life. His evocative blues songs were made even more powerful by his voice, which gave his performances an incredible emotional intensity. His songs are dominated by the themes of unrequited love, the power of the supernatural, and the irresistible urge to keep on the move. He remains one of the most popular blues musicians in history. His work is considered the link between the Delta blues of the mid-30s and modern Chicago blues and is regarded as ". . . the fulcrum upon which post-war Chicago blues turned" (Larkin: 2191). Johnson has been acknowledged as perhaps the most accomplished and influential of all blues musicians.

Johnson was inducted into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 1980 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. His electric performances are captured on the Columbia LPs *Robert*

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*Johnson: King of the Delta Blues, Volumes 1 and 2* and *The Complete Robert Johnson* on CBS/Sony. Biographies include *Robert Johnson* by Samuel Charters (1973); Alan Greenberg's *Love in Vain: The Life and Legend of Robert Johnson* (1983); *Deep Blues* by Robert Palmer (1981) and *Searching for Robert Johnson* by Peter Guralnick (1989). The 1986 movie *Crossroads* was loosely based on his life.

Sources: Terry Buckalew, "'Steady Rolling Man': Arkansas Bluesman Robert 'Junior' Lockwood," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LIII, No. 1, Spring 1994, pp. 75-89; Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 242; Donald Clark, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, pp. 619-620; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 288; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, pp. 173-174; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 2191-2192; Stanley Sadie, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, pp. 682-683; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 219-220; Ronald Zalkind, *Contemporary Music Almanac*, pp. 245-246; Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, p. 216.

### **Jones, Floyd**

Born: July 21, 1917, Marianna, Arkansas

Died: December 19, 1989, Chicago, Illinois

Floyd Jones moved to the Mississippi Delta with his family as a child and learned guitar as a teenager. He left home about 1933 and reputedly acquired his first guitar from Howlin Wolf. Jones hoboed through Mississippi and Arkansas, playing jukeboxes, picnics, fish fries and house parties. About 1945 he went to Chicago with his cousin, blues guitarist Moody Jones. The two worked Maxwell Street for tips, often playing with harmonica player Snooky Pryor and Homesick James. The foursome also worked the Club Jamboree and others. Jones recorded in 1947 with both Snooky Pryor and Sunnyland Slim before forming his own band and recording for Chess, Vee-Jay Records and JOB.

Jones was one of the best composers of the post-war period and his singles recorded with Snooky Pryor, *Stockyard Blues* and *Keep What You Got*, remain classics. Other compositions include *Dark Road*, *On the Road Again*, *Cryin' the Blues*, *Falling Rain Blues*, *Rising Wind* and *Hard Times*. Jones frequently worked outside of music, holding down a day job for most of the years he was in Chicago. This limited his touring and the exposure he received, as did his limited recording. In spite of the fact that he was not well known outside of Chicago, Jones is regarded as a pioneer of the post-World War II Chicago blues sound. He continued to work Chicago clubs into the early 80s. Jones appeared in two blues documentary films, the English film *Chicago Blues* (1970) and *Maxwell Street Blues* (1980). He may be heard on the LPs *Baby Face Leroy & Floyd Jones*, *Drop Down Mama* (various artists), and *Masters of the Modern Blues, Vol. 3: Floyd Jones and Eddie Taylor*.

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Sources: Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 242; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 293-294; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 2209; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 224-225.

### **Jordan, Charley**

Born: Charles Jordan, Jr., July 11, 1890, Memphis, Tennessee or Mablesville, Arkansas  
(sources vary)

Died: November 15, 1954, St. Louis, Missouri

There is little biographical information available for Charley Jordan. Most older sources state that he was born in Mabelville in Pulaski County, Arkansas. *Blues: A Regional Experience* (2013) gives his place of birth as Memphis, Tennessee and cites his social security application for the date and place of birth. He apparently grew up in Arkansas and some sources note that served in the military during World War I, though that cannot be confirmed. He registered for the draft in St. Louis in 1917 and on that form he gave his birthplace as Memphis, Tennessee. In the 1920s he traveled around the South playing house parties and other venues. While living in St. Louis he teamed up with Peetie Wheatstaw and the pair became a popular duo. Jordan supplemented his music income as a bootlegger. It was while plying this illegal trade that he was injured by a gunshot. The bullet damaged his spine and he walked on crutches afterward.

In June 1930, he recorded eight songs for the Vocalion label. He recorded solo and as an accompanist to Peetie Wheatstaw. At some point in the 1930s, Jordan and Big Joe Williams, who he had teamed up with, ran a club/recording studio in St. Louis. Through this business Jordan served as a talent scout for the Vocalion and Decca labels. He also continued working as a musician playing with Big Joe Williams, Memphis Minnie, Roosevelt Sykes, Casey Bill Weldon and others. Over the course of his career he recorded over 50 songs on the Vocalion, Victor, ARC and Decca labels. His best known song *Keep It Clean* is still covered today. Jordan can be heard on *Charlie Jordan Vol. 1, 1930 – 1931*; *Charlie Jordan Vol. 2, 1931 – 1934*; *Charlie Jordan Vol. 3, 1935 – 1937* and *The Essential Charley Jordan*.

Sources: Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 261-62; Sheldon Harris, ed., *Blues Who's Who*, p. 297; Bob Eagle and Eric S. LeBlanc, Eds. *Blues: A Regional Experience*, 238; Bernard Klatzko, "The 'Conspiracy' Against Charley Jordan," *78 Quarterly*, 1992, pp. 39-41.

### **Jordan, Louis**

Born: July 8, 1908, Brinkley, Arkansas

Died: February 4, 1975, Los Angeles, California

Louis Jordan's father, a bandleader for the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, taught him to play clarinet



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when he was seven years old. Sometime later, he saw a saxophone in a store window and was instantly enamored. He saved enough money to buy it and his father taught him to play. Jordan had his first professional experience touring with his father as a band member and dancer during school vacations. After majoring in music at Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock Jordan embarked on his career. In the late 20s he toured briefly with Ma Rainey's show working the *Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) circuit*, the vaudeville circuit for African American performers. He began playing in Hot Springs and was invited to join Ruby (Junie Bug/Tuna Boy) Williams' Belvedere Orchestra at the Green Gables Club there.

Jordan later worked with Jimmy Pryor's Imperial Serenaders in Little Rock and other bandleaders in Arkansas before moving to Philadelphia to join tuba player Jim Winters in 1932. After leaving Winters, Jordan worked with several bandleaders including Charlie Gaines, Leroy Smith, Fats Waller and Kaiser Marshall. He joined drummer Chick Webb's band in 1936 and remained until Webb's death in 1938. His exposure as a sax player and vocalist with Webb's band gave Jordan the visibility he sought. In addition to Webb's band, he recorded with the Louis Armstrong Orchestra, the Jungle Band in New York, and Ella Fitzgerald's Savoy Eight. Jordan moved to New York in 1938 and put together a nine-piece band. The group played a long residency at the Elks Rendezvous, and for a time were known simply as the Elks Rendezvous Band, the name under which they recorded for Decca in 1938. The band was featured in the movie *Swinging the Dream* in 1939 and renamed the Tympany Five. Jordan was noted for his sense of humor and the name appears to be a joke, since there were always at least seven members.

Between 1939 and 1947, the Tympany Five recorded extensively for Decca while playing residencies at clubs and touring. During this period and into the 50s, the Tympany Five was one of the most popular bands in the country. Jordan's band, known as the "King of the Juke Boxes," appeared in five musical film shorts in 1942: *Down, Down, Down; Fuzzy Wuzzy; The Outskirts of Town; Five Guys Named Moe* and *Old Man Mose*. The following year they were featured in the shorts: *G.I. Jive; Hey Tojo Count Yo' Men; Honey Chile* and *If You Can't Smile and Say Yes*. Jordan and the Tympany Five continued to tour, playing Detroit, Hollywood, Washington DC and New Orleans, and playing long residencies at selected clubs such as the Trocadero Club in Hollywood. In the mid-40s, they appeared on Al Jarvis' "Downbeat Jubilee" on the Mutual radio network, on the syndicated radio shows "Jubilee USA" and "Command Performance" and on the "Radio Hall of Fame Show" on ABC-Blue Network. The Tympany Five also appeared in the feature length films *Follow the Boys* (1944) and *Meet Miss Bobby Socks* (1944).

In 1944, the Tympany Five made four musical film shorts: *Jumpin' at the Jubilee, Ration Blues, Don't Cry and Say No*, and *Jordan Five*. They made four more musical shorts the following year: *Louis Jordan Medley Nos. 1 & 2, Buzz Me, Caladonia*, and *Tillie*. The band worked the Paramount Theater in New York in 1945 and 1946, and appeared in the feature films *Swing*

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*Parade of 1946*, *Beware*, and *Look Out Sister* in 1946. The Tympany Five played a number of high profile clubs including Billy Berg's Swing Club in Hollywood, the 400 Club in New York and the Regal Theater in Chicago. In 1947 they were featured in another full-length film, *Reet, Petite and Gone* and in 1949 made an appearance on Ed Sullivan's "Toast of the Town" show on CBS-TV. Between 1944 and 1949, Jordan and the Tympany Five had a string of hit singles that topped a million in sales, including *Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby*, *Caledonia (Boogie)*, *Beware!*, *Saturday Night Fish Fry* and *Choo Choo Ch'Boogie*—which sold over two million.

In 1951 and 1952, Jordan led a big band and through the 50s continued to tour and record both as a solo and with the Tympany Five. In 1954 he and his second wife moved to Phoenix, Arizona. In 1962 he made a solo tour of England and he toured Asia in 1967-68, but the heyday of his type of music was over. Rock and roll was beginning to take center stage. Jordan moved to Los Angeles in 1972 and continued to play clubs all over the U.S. and to record as a solo and with various bands when his health permitted. He was still a crowd pleaser, if on a smaller scale, and remained popular until his death in 1975.

Jordan was one of the most important post-war figures in music in this country, with a far-reaching influence. His musical ability was combined with showmanship and his performances were full of vitality. His songs, sung in his smooth voice with a strong blues feeling, combined witty lyrics with a wailing, tight, small-combo blues sound. His humor, use of puns, and use of words to stress the beat were combined with a furious rhythm uniquely his own. Jordan took a small combo and created an individual style that proved to be one of the most popular sounds of the 40s and 50s. Louis Jordan LPs were at the top of the sales charts. He was the embodiment of what later came to be called rhythm and blues, but his music was more than that. It was a confluence of the music of the past and the music of the present with music yet to come—rhythm and blues, jazz, blues, pop, and rock and roll combined with swing and humor. Jordan and his band still resist classification. His innovative combining of jazz, blues and showmanship along with his shuffle-boogie style, adopted by Bill Haley in 1953, laid the foundation for rock and roll.

Jordan and the Tympany Five were awarded five gold records during their career. He also recorded hit records with Ella Fitzgerald (*Baby It's Cold Outside*) and Bing Crosby (*My Baby Said Yes*) and is recognized as the first non-popular music artist whose recordings received wide play on pop radio stations and whose songs were listed as hits on both the pop charts and blues/jazz charts. Jordan was an accomplished songwriter. Some of his compositions include *I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town*, which was his first million-record hit, *Knock Me A Kiss*, *Five Guys Named Moe*, *Boogie Woogie Blue Plate*, *Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?*, *Choo Choo Ch'Boogie*, *Saturday Night Fish Fry*, *Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens*, *Open the Door Richard*, *Ration Blues* and *Reet Petite and Gone*. His songs have been covered by Woody Herman, Pearl Bailey, Moms Mabley, B.B. King, Little Richard, Chuck Berry and Joe

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Jackson to name a few. In 1990, a musical featuring music written or originally performed by Louis Jordan entitled *Five Guys Named Moe* opened in London; four years later it was the Lyric Theater's longest running musical and went on to enjoy a respectable run on Broadway. Louis Jordan was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1983 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987.

Jordan at his best may be found on the LPs *Go! Blow Your Horn; Somebody Up There Digs Me; Hoodoo Man 1938-40; Knock Me Out 1940-1942; Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five, More 1944-1945; The Best of Louis Jordan; Louis Jordan's Greatest Hits, Vols. 1 & 2; Rockin' and Jivin', Vols. 1 & 2; Rock and Roll Call; Five Guys Named Moe* (Original Decca Recordings, Vol. 2); *One Guy Named Louis: The Complete Aladdin Sessions*; and *I Believe in Music*. His life story is told in John Chilton's *Let the Good Times Roll: A Biography of Louis Jordan*.

Note: The musical film shorts named above were developed in response to the military's and musicians' union's ban on recording in place from August 1942 to September 1943. These films enabled performers to keep in touch with audiences who did not have access to full-time network radio programming. They were made by independent film companies and shown in over 600 theaters, most in the South. Jordan's appearance in a film short guaranteed a packed house.

Sources: Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 245; Donald Clark, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, p. 632; John Clifton, *Who's Who of Jazz*, p. 180; Malone Dumas, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography Supplement 9*, pp. 441-443; Leonard Feather and Ira Gitler, *The Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Seventies*, p. 208; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 297-299; Gerard Herzhaft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, p. 180; Barry Kernfield, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, p. 637; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 2221-2222; Edward Mapp, *Dictionary of Blacks in the Performing Arts*, 2nd edition, p. 278; James R. Peabworth, *A Dictionary of 132 Arkansas Composers*, pp. 39-40; Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, pp. 228-229; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 227-228; Diann Sutherlin, *The Arkansas Handbook*, p. 72.

### **King, Albert "Al"**

Born: Albert Nelson, April 25, 1923, Indianola, Mississippi

Died: December 21, 1992, Memphis, Tennessee

Albert King was born in Mississippi but his family moved to Forrest City, Arkansas, when he was quite young. He grew up in Arkansas, his family living in several different towns over the years. King taught himself to play guitar on a homemade instrument. In the late 40s

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he was working roadhouses in Osceola and frequently appeared with the Harmony Kings Gospel Quartet in South Bend, Indiana. After some time in St. Louis, Missouri, he returned to Osceola where he worked with a group called the Groove Boys, occasionally performing on KOSE-AM. He moved north again, settling in Gary, Indiana. While there he played drums as a sideman for Jimmy Reed and John Brim, playing with the latter on his highly regarded Chess recording *Tough Times*. In 1953, King convinced the Parrot label to record him as a blues singer and guitarist and cut *Bad Luck Blues* and *Be On Your Merry Way*. The recordings were fairly successful, but King received little in the way of cash from Parrot. He returned to Osceola, working with the Groove Boys and taking jobs outside of music. In 1956, he moved to St. Louis where he formed a trio to work local club dates. Between 1959 and 1964 he recorded for the Bobbin, King and Coun-tree labels. He had minor hits with *I'm a Lonely Man* and *Don't Throw Your Love On Me So Strong*, which made it to number fourteen on the R&B charts in 1961.

In 1966, King signed with the Memphis-based Stax label—it was the turning point of his career. He was advised by producer-drummer Al Jackson and worked with keyboardist Booker T. Jones, guitarist Steve Cropper, bass player Donald “Duck” Dunn, and The Bar-Keys, some of the best studio musicians in Memphis. Over the next few years he cut such hits as *Laundromat Blues*, *Crosscut Saw*, *Overall Junction*, *As the Years Go Passing By*, *Born Under a Bad Sign*, *The Hunter*, *Cold Feet* and *I Love Lucy*, an homage to his distinctive ‘Flying V’ guitar. The songs were based in the blues but had enough Memphis soul to cross over in the charts.

King was the first blues artist to play the legendary Fillmore West in San Francisco and he became a regular, cutting the LP *Live Wire/Blues Power* there in 1968. He was the first blues artist to perform with a symphony orchestra when he performed with the St. Louis Symphony in 1969. In 1970, he released the excellent LP *King Does The King's Thing*, a tribute collection of Elvis Presley material. In the 60s and 70s, King toured extensively in the U.S. and UK. He made a number of television appearances in the late 60s and early 70s, including Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” on ABC-TV (1968); “Upbeat” a syndicated show from WPIX-TV, New York (1968); the “Merv Griffin Show,” WNEW-TV, New York (1969); “Jazz Scene at Ronnie Scotts,” on England’s BBC-2-TV (1970); and “Farewell to Fillmore East,” PBS-TV(1971). He was solicited by Miller beer in 1971 for a national television commercial. In 1974, Stax went into bankruptcy and King signed with Utopia/Tomato. Although he lacked the excellent backup he had enjoyed with Stax, he released two fine LPs, *Live!* and *New Orleans Heat*. King continued to tour, often before rock and soul crowds, until his death from a heart attack in 1992.

King was one of the premier blues guitarists of the post-war period. He played his Gibson ‘Flying V’ guitar “Lucy” left-handed and his sound was very distinctive. He was a master of

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the single-string solo and able to produce a tormented blues sound different from that of any other blues guitarist. His guitar breaks would, “. . . build to a climax, incorporating clusters of fast single-note runs—usually on a minor scale—with hard, biting notes that almost scream” (Hardy and Laing: 249). He influenced dozens of guitarists including Son Seals, Eric Clapton, Robert Nighthawk and Elmore James. His voice was powerful, raw and husky, his style drawing on blues shouters like Joe Turner and Jimmy Witherspoon. Essential listening includes the LPs *Masterworks*, *Born Under a Bad Sign*, *Door To Door*, *Years Gone By*, *The Pinch*, *King of the Blues Guitar*, *Let's Have a Natural Ball*, *Laundromat Blues*, *Wednesday Night in San Francisco* and *The Ultimate Collection* as well as those mentioned above.

Sources: Phil Hardy and Dave Laing, *Encyclopedia of Rock*, pp. 248-249; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 303-305; Gerard Herzhaft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, pp. 182-185; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, pp. 2308-2309; Dave Marsh and John Swenson, eds., *The New Rolling Stone Record Guide*, p. 273; James R. Peabody, *A Dictionary of 132 Arkansas Composers*, p. 41; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 233-234; Ronald Zalkind, *Contemporary Music Almanac, 1980/8*, p. 248.

### **Lawhorn, Sammy**

Born: Samuel David Lawhorn, July 12, 1935, Little Rock, Arkansas

Died: April 29, 1990, Chicago, Illinois

Sammy Lawhorn was raised by his grandparents in Little Rock, Arkansas. When he was twelve he was given a Stella guitar and, shortly afterward, a Supro electric guitar. By the time he was fifteen he was playing jobs around Helena, Arkansas, with Elmon (Drifting Slim) Mickle. He became one of the King Biscuit Boys, backing Sonny Boy Williamson and Houston Stackhouse, who taught him to play slide guitar. In 1953, Lawhorn enlisted in the U.S. Navy and remained in the service until 1958. He returned to Arkansas and teamed with harmonica player Willie Cobbs. They toured, and Lawhorn played on the original recording of *You Don't Love Me*. Cobbs and Lawhorn traveled to Chicago in 1960 and Lawhorn decided to stay. He backed Junior Wells for a while at Theresa's Club, one of Chicago's most famous blues clubs, and then met Muddy Waters. After they played together at Pepper's Lounge, Waters invited Lawhorn to join his band. He stayed with Waters for ten years, playing clubs in Chicago, touring and recording.

Unfortunately, Lawhorn's problems with alcohol worsened and the relationship ended about 1974. Lawhorn returned to the Chicago club scene and appeared regularly at Theresa's Club until his death in 1990.

Lawhorn's guitar playing was remarkable in its well-crafted phrasing and dynamics. His trademark was a quivering sound obtained when he used the tremolo bar. Unfortunately,

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Lawhorn recorded only one LP, *After Hours*, and it is not a true gauge of his talent. A better representation may be heard on the LP *Muddy Waters: The Chess Box*.

Sources: Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 246;  
Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 2415-2416.

### **Lawlars, Ernest “Little Son Joe”**

Born: May 18, 1900, Hughes, Arkansas

Died: November 14, 1961, Memphis, Tennessee

Ernest Lawlars was raised in Hughes, Arkansas, but little else is known about his youth, including when he learned to play guitar and washboard. He seems to have worked outside of music until he was about thirty, when he began playing with Robert “Keghouse” Wilkins. They worked local juke joints and on the street for a number of years and in 1935 recorded in Jackson, Mississippi, on the Vocalion label. The duo moved to the Memphis area shortly afterward and worked with local jug bands at house parties, dances and on the streets. Lawlars moved to Chicago about 1938 and the following year married blues singer and musician Lizzie Douglas, known professionally as Memphis Minnie. He played the Chicago club scene through the late 40s, working frequently with his wife, Memphis Minnie, and recording with her on the Vocalion and OKeh labels. In the late-40s he toured with Willie Love’s Three Aces, playing gigs throughout the Delta. He returned to Chicago and resumed playing in clubs, again working and recording with his wife and as a solo. During the 50s, Lawlars recorded on the Regal, Checker and JOB labels in both Chicago and Memphis. In 1957, his health failing, he retired from performing. In 1960, he and Lizzie returned to Memphis.

Lawlars’ songs include *Afraid to Trust Them*, *Every Time My Heart Beats*, *Flying Crow Blues*, *I’m Not The Lad*, *Levee Camp (Blues)*, *Life Is Just a Book*, *My Feet Jumped Salty* and *She Belongs to the Devil*.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 316-317.

### **Leavy, Calvin “Slim”**

Born: Calvin James Leavy, April 20, 1940, Scott, Arkansas

Died: Pine Bluff, Arkansas, June 6, 2010

Leavy’s style was influenced by gospel music. Both his parents sang in the local Baptist church choir. A talented singer, he joined Sacred Fire, his brother’s gospel group. Seeking another direction Calvin and another brother, Hosea, formed Leavy Brothers Band in 1964. After a very successful run in Arkansas the band moved to Fresno, California and toured the west coast.

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Eventually, he left the group and California and returned to Arkansas. He played clubs in Little Rock. It was in 1970, while working the Little Rock club scene, that Leavy recorded Cummings Prison Farm. The stylish, funky-up electric Delta blues number made the Billboard soul charts rising to number 40 and stayed there for five weeks. It was the number one song on radio station WDIA in Memphis, Tennessee, making it a major regional hit. Unfortunately, the success of the song did not lead to bigger things for Leavy. He recorded ten additional singles four under his name and six more as Calvin Leavy and the Professionals.

His last performance in Little Rock was with the gospel group Zion Five. Soon after that he was arrested under Arkansas a “drug king-pin” law. The law targeted crime rings and Leavy was the first person arrested under it. He was convicted of:

“operating a continuing criminal enterprise, delivery of a controlled substance, public servant bribery, and use of a communication facility—a pager—in the commission of a felony operating a continuing criminal enterprise, delivery of a controlled substance, public servant bribery, and use of a communication facility—a pager—in the commission of a felony.”  
(Encyclopedia of Arkansas)

Leavy was sentenced to life plus twenty-five years. Ironically, he was sentenced to Cummins Farm. He died in prison.

Sources: Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 250; Gwendolyn L. Sheldon, “Calvin James ‘Slim’ Leavy, (1940-2010),” in Arkansas Encyclopedia of History and Culture, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=6346>; Harold Lott, “Psych of the South: Calvin Leavy’s ‘Cummins Prison Farm,’” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 29, 2011; Bob Eagle and Eric S. LeBlanc, *Blues: A Regional Experience*, p. 164.

### **Lockwood, Robert “Junior”/“Jr”**

Born: Robert Lockwood, Jr., March 27, 1915, Turkey Scratch, Arkansas

Died: November 21, 2006, Cleveland, Ohio

Lockwood’s father abandoned him and his mother shortly after he was born. He was raised by his grandparents on their farm near Marvel, Arkansas, and as a child learned to play their pump organ. Lockwood left school at fourteen to find work in nearby Helena, the largest town in the vicinity. In the 1920s, Helena had over one hundred saloons, juke joints and gambling parlors, and many hired musicians to draw customers. Consequently, Lockwood was exposed to a great deal of blues music and musicians, the most influential being the legendary Robert Johnson. On a trip to Helena in 1931, Johnson met and began a long-term relationship with Lockwood’s mother, Esther, who was fifteen years his senior. Johnson and Lockwood, who

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were less than five years apart in age, formed a very close relationship. When Lockwood heard Johnson simultaneously play lead and rhythm on the guitar he decided that he, too, wanted to play guitar. Johnson taught Lockwood to play—and he is the only person known to have been taught by Johnson. Lockwood proved to be a quick student. Within a short time he could reproduce Johnson's playing so well it was difficult to tell them apart. Johnson and Lockwood traveled the south, playing gigs wherever they could. Their relationship came to a tragic end when Johnson was murdered in 1938.

Lockwood stopped playing for a time after Johnson's death. When he returned to the guitar it was with a new direction. Lockwood, a long-time fan of jazz, began to fuse its sophisticated, polished sounds with the classic Delta country blues he had learned from Johnson. In doing so, he created a new sound. Shortly after Johnson's death, Lockwood met Sonny Boy Williamson, who had a reputation as an excellent blues harmonica player and vocalist. Between 1938 and 1941, Lockwood worked mostly with Williamson but also with Howlin Wolf (Chester Burnett) and Henry Robert "Baby Boy" Warren, and as a solo in towns throughout the Delta. In 1941, Lockwood went to St. Louis, where he backed Peter "Doc" Clayton on a recording and made his first solo recordings, including *Little Boy Blue*, *Take a Little Walk* and *Mean Red Spider*. While in St. Louis, Lockwood frequently performed with pianist Albert "Sunnyland Slim" Luandrew. In November 1941 he returned to Helena with Sonny Boy Williamson, who convinced him to become guitarist for the live blues show he was putting together for Helena's new radio station, KFFA-AM.

"King Biscuit Time" went on the air November 21, 1941, with Williamson and Lockwood performing as a duo. The two were paid almost nothing, but in exchange the show's emcee announced where they would be playing at night, which greatly increased the crowds they drew. In June 1942 they added pianist Robert "Dudlow" Taylor and drummer James "Peck" Curtis to the show. The King Biscuit Entertainers made regular appearances near Helena and toured the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas in 1947, appearing during the day at groceries selling King Biscuit Flour as part of their job with KFFA, and at night working extra dates at jukeboxes, clubs and theaters. Lockwood remained with "King Biscuit Time" for two years. It was at some time during his tenure that he traded his acoustic guitar for an electric, making him the first known entertainer to play electric guitar on the radio. Differences with Williamson and management and the constraints of a program locked into a Delta country blues format contributed to Lockwood's decision to leave in 1943. That year he started a new show on KFFA. "Mother's Best Flour Hour" gave Lockwood a format not exclusively blues-oriented and he began to play some jazz. He stayed with the show for two years, leaving only when the Starkey Brothers, with whom he played, were drafted into the U.S. Army.

In 1944, Lockwood took a job with the Union Pacific Railway and ended up out west. In Casper, Wyoming, he joined a swing band and toured the West. He left when they toured



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the South and the audience responded negatively to the integrated band. Lockwood returned to Arkansas in 1947 and met Bill “Destruction” Johnson, a talented jazz pianist, in West Memphis. Johnson taught Lockwood to pluck the strings of his guitar with a pick rather than his fingers, obtaining a “jazzier” sound. Lockwood and Johnson put together a band and secured a radio program on KLLR-AM, Little Rock. A year later, Lockwood returned to West Memphis and met up again with Sonny Boy Williamson and Howlin Wolf and played with them, B.B. King and others in the Memphis area through the late 40s.

In 1950, Lockwood, like so many blues figures, went to Chicago. Through the 50s he worked as a session musician with the Mercury, JOB and Chess labels, and as a sideman in clubs with artists such as Eddie Boyd, Otis Spann, Willie Mabon, Roosevelt Sykes, Muddy Waters, Sunnyland Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson. It is on his recordings with Otis Spann, which display delicate runs and big, chunky chords, that Lockwood’s move to a more sophisticated jazz style is evident. Many consider these piano-guitar duos to be among the greatest recorded by anyone, anywhere. In 1960 Lockwood and Sonny Boy Williamson put together a band and secured a thirteen-month residency at a club in Cleveland. When it ended Lockwood decided to remain in the city. He had recently married and purchased a home and wanted more stability than the music business could provide. He worked outside of music for most of the decade. In 1969 he appeared at the Chicago Blues Festival and in 1970 recorded for the British film *Blues Like Showers of Rain*. That year he also appeared at the Ann Arbor Blues Festival and met an old friend from Helena, Roosevelt Sykes. Sykes encouraged Lockwood to return to music full-time and asked him to play on his forthcoming album.

Lockwood took Sykes’ advice and in 1970 recorded his first LP as soloist and lead, *Steady Rollin’ Man*. Over the next five years he released three LPs including *Blues Live in Japan*, which was recorded during his 1974 world tour with the Blues Festival. In the mid-70s Lockwood was given a twelve-string guitar by his wife, Annie. He experimented with the sound and was soon using the instrument exclusively.

Lockwood appeared at a number of festivals in the 70s including the University of Miami Blues Festival (1972 through 1975); in the Berlin Jazz Festival, Berlin Germany (1974); in the Monterey Jazz Festival, California (1975); in the Midwest Blues Festival, University of Notre Dame (1976); and in the John Henry Folk Festival, Princeton, West Virginia (1977). Lockwood continued to record well into the 80s, often with guitarist Johnny Shines, who was also a protégé of Robert Johnson. Together they produced two remarkable LPs, *Hangin’ On* and *Mr. Blues Is Here to Stay*.

In 1990, Lockwood began to hold his own annual blues festival. He played at every “King Biscuit Time” festival from the first in 1986 until 2005. He said of coming to Helena, “. . . I know I’m going home” (Buckalew: 88). Lockwood was inducted into the Blues Foundation’s Hall of Fame in 1989.

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Lockwood's contribution to music and the entertainment industry is hard to overestimate. His music is the link between classical acoustic Delta country blues and electrified, urban, contemporary blues. Although the influence of Robert Johnson is evident in Lockwood's earliest recordings, by about 1940 he began to move in his own unique direction. Lockwood's LPs include *Windy City Blues*, *Does 12*, *Johnny Shines and Robert Lockwood – Dust My Broom*, *Robert and Robert*, *What's the Score*, *Plays Robert Johnson*, *Robert Lockwood*, and *The Baddest New Guitar* in addition to those mentioned above.

Sources: Terry Buckalew, "'Steady Rolling Man': Arkansas Bluesman Robert 'Junior' Lockwood," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LIII, No. 1, Spring 1994, pp. 75-89; Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 276; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 334-336; Gerard Herzhaft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, pp. 210-212; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 2532-2533; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 265-266.

### **Love, Willie**

Born: November 4, 1906, Duncan, Mississippi

Died: August 19, 1953, Jackson, Mississippi

Willie Love was raised in the Mississippi Delta and spent most of his life there. He learned to play the piano as a child and left home in the early 1930s to hobo through Mississippi, playing at clubs, dances and juke joints. In 1942 he made his first appearance on "King Biscuit Time" on KFFA-AM, Helena, Arkansas. He became a regular performer on the show and frequently toured with Sonny Boy Williamson's King Biscuit Time Entertainers. Love formed The Three Aces and the group worked in the Delta region. He appeared with Williamson on the "Hadacol Show" on KWEM-AM, West Memphis in 1949. In 1949 and 50 he toured with Sonny Boy Williamson, Willie Nix and Joe Willie Wilkins as The Four Aces, and had his own program, the "Broadway Furniture Store Show" on KWEM. In the early 50s Love continued to play on the road and recorded frequently with Sonny Boy Williamson under his own name and with his group, The Three Aces, on the Trumpet label based in Jackson, Mississippi.

In 1952, he left the Delta to work with Henry Robert "Baby Boy" Warren at the Harlem Inn in Detroit, but returned home to tour with Sonny Boy Williamson, working juke through Louisiana and Texas in late 1952 and early 1953. Because Love spent almost all of his life in the Delta he did not achieve the recognition he might have for his tough, down-home blues, effective singing voice and notable piano playing. Compilations of his recordings from the early 50s are on the LPs *Clownin' With the Wind* and *Delta Blues 1951*. His best composition is *Nelson Street Blues*, which describes a street in Greenville, Mississippi.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 338; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness*

*Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 2565.

**Lucas, William “Lazy Bill”**

Born: May 29, 1918, Wynne, Arkansas

Died: December 12, 1982, Minneapolis, Minnesota

William Lucas was six years old when his family moved from Wynne, Arkansas, to Advance, Missouri. He learned to play guitar but really wanted to play piano. Sometime after the move, his parents purchased a piano and Lucas learned to play even though he had been nearly blind since birth. Unfortunately the piano had to be left behind when the family moved to Cape Girardeau when he was fourteen. Before this move Lucas was already playing guitar on the streets of Advance for tips. He continued to perform and in 1940 was working in St. Louis as a solo and with Big Joe Williams, who gave him his first real exposure to the blues.

Lucas moved to Chicago the following year, working the Maxwell Street area for tips, frequently with John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson. He and Williamson toured northern Illinois and Indiana and southern Michigan in the early 40s. Back in Chicago he worked clubs with a number of notable bluesmen including Earl Dranes, Willie Mabon, Little Walter, Homesick James and Snooky Pryor. In the early 50s he formed his own trio and appeared on the “Big Bill Hill Show” on WOPA-AM in Oak Park, Illinois. At some point he abandoned the guitar and returned to piano. He joined Little Hudson’s Red Devils in 1951, played numerous club dates, and appeared on a number of recordings. He also recorded with Homesick James, Snooky Pryor and the Blue Rockers on the Chance, Parrot and Excello labels. In 1954, he recorded with his own band, Lazy Bill and His Blue Rhythms, on Chance. He continued to work club dates in Chicago as a solo and as a sideman through the mid-60s.

Lucas moved to Minneapolis in 1964, where he played clubs, bars, coffee houses, dances and concerts. In the early 70s he resumed touring, working the college circuit. He made appearances at a number of festivals including the Wisconsin Blues Festival in Beloit (1970), the Ann Arbor Blues Festival (1970) and the Midwest Blues Festival at the University of Notre Dame (1976). He started his own label, Lazy, and recorded the LP *Lazy Bill and His Friends*. He recorded for the Philo label in 1970, 1971 and 1973. In the late 70s and early 80s he played the Artist’s Quarters, Homestead Pickin’ Parlor, Extempore Coffee House and other folk and blues clubs and coffee houses in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Lucas’s authentic barrelhouse, chordal boogie-style blues may be heard on the LPs *The News About the Blues*, *Lazy Bill and His Friends* and *Lazy Bill Lucas*.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, p. 342; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 2565.

**Mickle, “Drifting Slim”**

Born: Elmon Mickle, February 24, 1919, Keo, Arkansas

Died: September 15, 1977, Los Angeles, California

As a boy, Elmon Mickle learned to play harmonica from John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson. In the 40s he frequently performed with Sonny Boy Williamson and Peck Curtis in juke joints and clubs in the Little Rock area and was a featured performer on KDRK-AM/KGHI-AM in Little Rock. In 1951, Mickle formed a band with Baby Face Turner, Junior Brooks and Bill Russell. The group recorded on the Modern/RPM label and performed at local clubs into the late 50s, when Mickle learned to play guitar and drums and worked occasionally as a one-man band. Mickle moved to California in 1957, where he worked clubs in the Los Angeles area. He recorded for several small labels in the late 50s and 60s including Elko/EM, J Gems, Wonder, Magrum and Styletone. In the late 60s he recorded the LP *Somebody Done Voodoo the Hoodoo Man* using the stage name “Model T Slim.” He performed at the Folk Music Festival in San Diego in 1971. Poor health kept him from playing many club dates after that engagement.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 371; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 1246.

**Nighthawk, Robert**

Born: Robert Lee McCullum, November 30, 1909, Helena, Arkansas

Died: November 5, 1967, Helena, Arkansas; he is buried in Magnolia Cemetery

Nighthawk was born and raised on a farm near Helena, Arkansas. He taught himself to play the harmonica and left home in his teens. Nighthawk hoboed throughout the Delta, playing in juke joints and clubs and frequently working outside of music. Through the mid-20s and into the early 30s Nighthawk played with the Memphis Jug Band, William Warren at the Black Cat Drug Store, and with his cousin Houston Stackhouse at local parties and dances. Stackhouse taught him to play guitar and they often appeared on WJDX-AM in Jackson Mississippi, in the early 30s and frequently worked in Memphis with John Lee Hooker. Nighthawk went to St. Louis about 1935, where he quickly became part of the city's active blues scene. In 1937, using the name Robert Lee McCoy after his mother's maiden name, he recorded as a sideman and a soloist on the Bluebird label. He accompanied both John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson and Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman) and recorded what was to become his signature song, *Prowling Night-Hawk*, during these sessions.

By 1940 Nighthawk was in Chicago, where he cut a few sides for Decca. He didn't stay in the city long, returning first to St. Louis and then Helena. Through the 40s and 50s he played clubs and juke joints in the Helena area, and seemed more comfortable there than in bigger cities. Between 1943 and 1947 he made numerous appearances on the “Bright Star Flour Show”

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and “Mother’s Best Flour Hour” both on KFFA-AM in Helena. He toured the Delta and made numerous appearances on WROX-AM in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and WDIA-AM in Memphis. Nighthawk was a ceaseless roamer. In the late 40s he was back in Chicago, where Muddy Waters heard his guitar playing and arranged an introduction to producers with the Chess/Aristocrat label. He had minor hits with the singles *Black Angel Blues* and *Annie Lee Blues*, which demonstrated his maturing technique with slide guitar. The recordings he made with Chess/Aristocrat remain some of his best.

Nighthawk worked clubs in Chicago and in Cairo, Illinois, in the late 40s. He formed the Nighthawks Trio about 1949 and traveled throughout the South into the 50s. Nighthawk returned to Chicago several times between 1951 and 1954, recording on the United/States label. Through the 50s and early 60s he bounced around between Chicago, St. Louis, and Helena, always on the move. He spent quite a bit of time in Helena playing clubs, jukeboxes and fish fries, often with his son, Sam Carr, and CeDell Davis. In 1963 he appeared in the film short *And This is Free*. The following year, he formed another group, the Flames of Rhythm, and worked the Chicago area. He recorded again, this time on the Decca/Testament label. During the Decca/Testament sessions—his last substantial sessions—he recorded the singles *Sorry My Angel* and *Sometime* with backing from Buddy Guy and Walter “Shakey” Horton. In 1965, he appeared on KFFA’s “King Biscuit Time,” taking over Sonny Boy Williamson’s spot on the show after Williamson’s death.

Nighthawk is considered one of the great slide blues guitarists. His emotional, intense style is deeply based in the Delta blues tradition. Nighthawk’s playing was “. . . coarse and daring. Nighthawk used the slide to drive his brand of blues rather than merely enhance it” (Santelli: 312). His deep, expressive voice enhanced the smooth sound of his slide “. . . which seemed to make his guitar literally weep. . .” (Leadbitter in Harris: 399) resulting in a dark, brooding blues sound. His recorded work is considered an important, pivotal addition to blues history. His music influenced some of the blues greats including Frank Frost, Earl Hooker, Elmore James, Frank Seals and Muddy Waters.

Nighthawk wrote a number of songs during his career including *Annie Lee; Bricks in My Pillow; Feel So Bad; Kansas City, Maggie Campbell; Night Hawk Boogie, Seventy-Four; The Moon is Rising; Sweet Black Angel; Take it Easy; Baby and You Missed a Good Man*.

Sources: Jeff Harris, “Robert Nighthawk,(1909-1967)”, aka: Robert Lee McCollum,” <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=5522/>; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 398-399; Mike Leadbitter, “Robert Nighthawk,” *Blues Unlimited*, November 1971, pp. 4-7; Moorhead Directory Service, *City Directory: Helena-West Helena, Arkansas*, p. 301; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 312.

**Parker, Junior “Little Junior”**

Born: Herman Parker, Jr., March 27, 1932, West Memphis, Arkansas

Died: November 18, 1971, Chicago, Illinois

Parker sang with local gospel quartets as a child and frequently sang on the street for tips. While in his teens he played harmonica with Sonny Boy Williamson, who reputedly taught him the finer points of the instrument. In 1949, he joined the original Howlin Wolf band and toured Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi and Missouri with them into the 50s, eventually assuming leadership of the group. He worked with B.B. King’s Beale Streeters in Memphis before forming his own band, the Blue Flames, in 1951. The Blue Flames played the Memphis area and recorded on the Modern label in 1952 and the Sun label in 1953. His single *Feelin’ Good*, recorded for Sun, made it to No. 5 on the R&B charts and was followed by the successful *Mystery Train*.

Parker moved to Houston in 1954 at the urging of the producer Don Robey. He recorded for Robey’s Duke label for four years and released several hits including *Barefoot Rock* and *Next Time You See Me*. Between 1954 and 1961 Parker assumed leadership of the Johnny Ace Revue to lead the Blues Consolidated Package, one of the most popular revues of the decade. His vocals were compared to Bobby “Blue” Bland, a lifetime friend who often joined the revue. He influenced not only Bobby Bland but other great blues vocalists including Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton.

Parker continued to tour and record throughout the 60s, mainly in Chicago but also Los Angeles, New York and at the Ann Arbor Blues Festival. During this time he recorded on the Minit, Mercury-Blue Rock, United Artists and Capitol labels.

Parker was a harmonica player, bandleader and composer. He wrote *Bare Foot Rock*, *Blue Shadows Falling*, *How Long Can this Go On*, *I’ll Forget About You*, *Love My Baby*, *No One Knows* and *Pretty Baby*. His song *Mystery Train* was covered by Elvis Presley in 1954 during his now-legendary Sun sessions. Parker is mostly remembered for his exceptionally smooth, honeyed voice. During his career many of his records made it onto the R&B charts. Purvis Spann summed it up in *Living Blues Magazine* when he said, “He was one of the greatest blues singers of them all” (Spann in Harris: 407). Parker’s LPs include *Mystery Train*, *The Best of Little Junior Parker* and *Junior’s Blues: The Duke Recordings, Volume One*. His last LP, *You Don’t Have to be Black to Love the Blues*, was released just after his death.

Sources: Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 344; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, p. 407; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 369.

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**Payne, John/James William, “Sunshine Sonny”**

Host of KFFA’s “King Biscuit Time”

Born: November 29, 1925, Helena, Arkansas

Sonny Payne was one of four children born to Gladys and William Payne. Payne’s mother died in 1938. By 1940, he had secured a paper route and moved into a boarding house. Even though he moved out of the house, he spent a great deal of time at the gas station where his father worked. It was there that he met and became friends with blues guitarist Robert Jr. Lockwood.

Payne held other part-time jobs in addition to his paper route—he washed dishes in a café and worked as a car hop for a drugstore. In 1941, when he learned that a radio station was being established in Helena, the inquisitive fourteen-year-old went to the studio at 215½ York Street and asked for a job. KFFA-AM hired Payne before the station signed on the air. He ran errands, cleaned records, changed needles on turntables, and cleaned the station. At night his boss gave him basic classes in radio, teaching him to read copy and operate the equipment. Payne’s job led to a career that will forever link him with radio station KFFA.

Payne was sweeping floors the day his friend, Robert Jr. Lockwood, and harmonica player, Sonny Boy Williamson, came into the studio to talk to the manager. The two men proposed playing on the station for free, if they could announce where they would be playing at night. Sam Anderson, general manager of the station, told them they needed a sponsor and sent them to Interstate Grocer Company. The company’s sponsorship led to “King Biscuit Time,” which ran uninterrupted on KFFA from 1941 until 1980. Less than a year after the first show was broadcast, Payne got the opportunity to be an announcer.

It was spring or summer 1942 when Sam Anderson, who was announcing for the show that day, realized that he’d left the commercial copy in the control room just as a song was ending. With no time to retrieve it, Anderson banged on the control room glass and gestured for Payne to read the script. He stumbled through it, making his first live announcement. Afterward, he studied and practiced reading scripts and was soon allowed to do a few shows on his own.

Payne’s job at KFFA paid \$12.50 a week, which covered his room and board but very little else. So in December 1942, sixteen year old Sonny Payne joined the army. There are two versions of the story— Payne got his father drunk and he signed the papers, or Payne lied about his age and the recruiter looked the other way. A member of the 75th Signal Battalion, he served in the Pacific Theater in the Aleutian Islands, New Guinea, and the China-Burma area during World War II. His battalion set up communications, mostly stringing telephone wire. Payne spent six years in the service.

In 1948, Payne returned to Helena but soon left again. He had learned to play the upright bass and spent several years on the road playing as a side man for the Tex Ritter, Kay Kaiser

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and Abe Lyman bands and numerous others. It was during this period, while he was living in Chicago, that Payne married a pianist. The marriage ended in divorce. The couple had one child, Cheryl, who died of a heart attack at the age of thirty-one.

In 1951, Payne returned to Helena for good. When he came back Sam Anderson gave him the “King Biscuit Time” show. Payne stayed with the station—reading the news and sports, selling ads, and taking on anything else that needed doing. Soon after he returned to KFFA, the King Biscuit Entertainers made their second tour of grocery stores in the Delta region and he recalled those tours fondly, saying “We used to have so much fun going to those rural stores (Khatchadorian, p. 38).”

The live “King Biscuit Time” shows ended about 1969. Sometime before that, Payne married his second wife, Josephine, now deceased. Payne kept “King Biscuit Time” going for another ten years, playing recordings. In 1980, Max Moore, the owner of Interstate Grocer Company died and the show went off the air but Payne continued to work for KFFA. In 1986, when the first blues festival was held in Helena, “King Biscuit Time” went back on the air. The first two songs Payne played were by Sonny Boy Williamson, a tradition he maintains to this day.

“King Biscuit Time” is now broadcast from 12:15 to 12:45 p.m. weekdays from the Delta Cultural Center on Cherry Street in Helena. People from all over the world come to see and hear Sunshine Sonny Payne host “King Biscuit Time.” The State of Arkansas and numerous organizations have recognized Payne’s contributions to the blues and the state. In 1990, he won the Blues Foundation’s Keeping the Blues Alive Award. He received a George Foster Peabody Award in 1992 “for outstanding achievement in the field of radio broadcast journalism.” The Arkansas Broadcasting Association recognized Payne with their Pioneer Award in 1993. He was inducted into the Arkansas Tourism Hall of Fame and named Volunteer of the Year by the Department of Arkansas Heritage in 2003. In 2005, he won his second Keeping the Blues Alive Award. Five years later, he was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame. Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe paid him a special tribute when he made May 13, 2014, Sunshine Sonny Payne Day.

Sources: George Hanson, “Sonny Payne: The Profile of a Legend,” *The King Biscuit Times*, Vol. 3, No. 5, Sept/Oct 1994, pp. 41-44; Sonia Khatchadourian, “A Ray of Sunshine in the Blues,” *Living Blues Magazine*, May/June 1991, pp. 36-39; and Liz Lottmann, “Sunshine” Sonny Payne (1925-) aka: John William Payne, *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4297>.

**Payton, Earlee**

Born: November 28, 1924, Pine Bluff, Arkansas



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Earlee Payton was born and raised in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Inspired by live performances and the recordings of John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson and Rice Miller “Sonny Boy Williamson,” he learned to play the harmonica when fifteen. Payton moved to Chicago about 1942, but was only marginally involved in music until 1948, when he began to sit in with Muddy Waters and his group at Chicago’s Du Drop Inn. After that, he frequently worked as a sideman to blues groups in Chicago. He formed a band with Otis Rush in 1951, playing the Club Alibi and others. In 1954, he formed his own group, the Blue Cats. After he took on Freddy King as lead guitarist the band moved from Ricky’s Show Lounge to the Zanzibar and the Cotton Club. In 1956, the band plus Robert Junior Lockwood on rhythm guitar backed Freddy King’s debut single, *Country Boy* for El Bee. Payton and his Blue Cats worked the local club scene in Chicago into the 60s but Payton also worked alone, performing as a sideman. In the late 70s, Payton was again working as a sideman in Chicago with groups including the Tail Dragger Band. He then seems to have given up music.

Sources: “Earlee Payton,” *AllMusic*,” <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/earlee-payton-mn0001009364/biography>; Bill Greensmith, “Payton’s Place,” *Blues Unlimited*, No. 109, August/September 1974, p. 15; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, p. 410.

### **Perkins, Pinetop**

Born: Joe Willie Perkins, July 7, 1913, Belzonia, Mississippi

Died: March 21, 2011, Austin, Texas

Perkins was raised on Deadman Plantation, Honey Island, Mississippi. He taught himself guitar and was playing local dances when scarcely in his teens. A few years later he learned piano and frequently worked The Old Barrelhouse Honkytonk on Honey Island. He took the name “Pinetop” from boogie-woogie inventor Pinetop Smith, whose work he greatly admired. Through the late 20s and into the 40s he played clubs, dances, and juke joints in Mississippi. He worked briefly with Big Joe Williams in St. Louis but returned to the South a short time later. Perkins met Robert Nighthawk and the two played some club dates around Helena, Arkansas. He appeared with Nighthawk on the “Mother’s Best Flour Hour” and the “Bright Star Flour Show” on KFFA-AM in Helena. Between 1943 and 1948, Perkins was a semi-regular on KFFA’s “King Biscuit Time” and frequently toured locally with both Nighthawk and Sonny Boy Williamson.

Through the late 40s and into the early 60s Perkins played barrelhouse piano and sometimes guitar as a sideman to Big Joe Williams, Robert Nighthawk, John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson, Earl Hooker, Little Milton, Albert King, and others. He recorded as a sideman to Robert Nighthawk, Boyd Gilmore and Earl Hooker. Perkins worked throughout the South and Midwest, playing club dates in Cairo, Illinois; Chicago; St. Louis; Memphis; Greenwood,

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Mississippi; and Sarasota, Florida. In the early 60s Perkins settled in Chicago, playing at local clubs as a solo and sideman. In 1969, Otis Spann, the legendary pianist for Muddy Waters band, passed away. Perkins replaced Spann and remained with Muddy Waters' for ten years. He received a good deal of attention in that position and recorded a substantial amount of material, both with the band and as a solo. Perkins became a favorite with audiences on both sides of the Atlantic who were drawn to his rural, Southern-based Mississippi-barrelhouse style of piano playing.

Perkins' LPs include *Chicago Boogie Blues Piano Man*, *Chicago Blues Session Volume 12*, *Boogie Woogie King*, *The Ultimate Sun Blues Collection*, *With Chicago Beau and the Blue Ice Band*, *Living Chicago Blues* and *Jacks and Kings*.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 412-413; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, 2nd edition, pp. 165-166; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 3226.

### **Pittman, "Buddy" Sampson**

Born: ca. 1905, Mississippi County, Arkansas?

Died: June 1, 1945 Saginaw, Michigan?

Very little is known about Pittman. Most of what we do know comes from Alan Lomax's Detroit interviews in 1938. It is believed he was born in Mississippi County, Arkansas, near the small town of Driver and grew up in Blytheville. At some point in his life he worked for the Lowrance Brothers building levees along the Mississippi River. His song *I've Been Down in the Circle Before* is about the Laconia Circle levee in southern Phillips County. In the song he also mentions that the levee camp is off Highway 44 near West Helena.

Pittman probably met Calvin Frazier in Blytheville. Frazier and Pittman possibly with Johnny Shines and Robert Johnson left Arkansas and traveled north. Pittman and Frazier settled in Detroit and the other two returned south. It was in Detroit in fall 1938 where Alan Lomax found and recorded Pittman. The songs recorded by Lomax are Pittman's only known work. They are important as they document the transfer of the Delta country blues to a Midwestern urban setting. Thirteen of Pittman's songs can be found on *The Devil is Busy*.

Sources: John Cowley, "Shack Bullies and Levee Contractors: Bluesmen as Ethnographers," in *Songs about Work: Essays in Occupational Culture for Richard A. Reuss*, pp. 147-149; Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, pp. 505-507; and Sampson Pittman, *The Devil Is Busy*, Liner Notes, Laurie Records, 1992.

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**Pugh, Joe Bennie “Forrest City Joe”**

Born: July 10, 1926, Hughes, Arkansas

Died: April 3, 1960, Horseshoe Lake, Arkansas

Pugh spent much of his life in Crittendon County, Arkansas, where he was raised on farms outside of Hughes and West Memphis. As a child he learned to play harmonica, and like many “harp” players of the 30s, greatly admired John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson and attempted to emulate him. Pugh played in jukes near Hughes as a teen and then hoboed through Arkansas, working jukes and clubs in the mid-40s. In the late 40s he worked with Big Joe Williams in St. Louis and later traveled to Chicago where he played in clubs and acquired a reputation as an outstanding harmonica player. In 1948 he recorded eight sides for the Aristocrat label, though only two were released at the time: *A Woman on Every Street* and *Memory of Sonny Boy*. The second title referred to the death of John Lee Williamson six months earlier.

Pugh returned to Arkansas after the recording session and appeared with Howlin Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson on the “Hadacol” show on KWEM-AM radio in West Memphis and with Willie Love’s Three Aces on the “Broadway Furniture Store” show on the same station. Pugh returned to Chicago in 1949. He remained there for five years, working much of the time with Otis Spann at the Tick Tock Lounge and other clubs. Pugh returned to Arkansas in 1955. He worked outside of music for the most part but played occasional weekend jobs with Willie Cobbs. In 1959 Pugh recorded again, this time for folk music collector Alan Lomax for his *Southern Folk Heritage* series on the Atlantic label. Pugh recorded both as a solo and with a band that included guitarist Sonny Boy Rodgers. He recorded several of John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson’s songs and a piano blues song entitled *Red Cross Store*. Pugh died in 1960 from injuries received in an auto accident. He is recognized by many to be one of the best harmonica players that ever lived. He may be heard on the LP *Memory of Sonny Boy*.

Sources: Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, p. 425; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 3356.

**Ross, Charles Isiah “Doc/Doctor”**

Born: October 21, 1925, Tunica, Mississippi

Died: May 28, 1993, Flint, Michigan

Charles Ross worked on a farm in Mississippi with his family. His father played harmonica and bugle, which he picked up in the army. One of his uncles also played harmonica, and two played guitar. Ross’ brother-in-law bought him several harmonicas and as a teenager he began playing area birthday parties. He was greatly influenced by John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson, whose music he heard on local jukeboxes.

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Ross was drafted into the U.S. Army near the end of 1943. He served throughout World War II and mustered out in 1947. He played in some U.S.O. shows while in the service and picked up the nickname "Doctor." After he returned to Mississippi he teamed with Wiley Galatin and they found a local business to sponsor a fifteen-minute radio show on WROX-AM in Clarksdale. The duo also played shows and other gigs around the Delta.

After he established his reputation in Mississippi, Ross came to Helena, Arkansas, and secured a show on KFFA-AM sponsored by Katz Clothing Store on Cherry Street. Ross, accompanied by Wiley Galatin and piano player Ernest Lane, the trio became Doctor Ross and His Jump and Jive Boys. The show aired Monday through Friday at 6:00 a.m. While in Helena, the group played the Hole-in-the-Wall, Roger's Café, Isadore's and other area clubs and jukes.

In 1950, Ross and his band left Helena for a radio program on WDIA in Memphis. He was called back into the army in 1950, serving through 1951. Upon his return to the states he recorded a single for Chess Records, *Country Clown* backed with *Doctor Ross's Boogie*. He and Wiley split, and Ross returned to West Helena, joining the "King Biscuit Time" show on KFFA. At the time, the show's lineup was James "Peck" Curtis, drums and vocals; Ross, harmonica; W.C. Clay or Houston Stackhouse, guitar; and Robert "Dudlow" Taylor, piano.

Ross left KFFA and Arkansas again in 1953 to play on WDIA-AM in Memphis. While there, he cut two singles for Sun Records before moving to Flint, Michigan. He took a job with General Motors and became a part-time musician, working as a one-man band in Flint, Detroit and Chicago. In the 1970s, he played colleges and blues festivals at home and abroad.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, ed., *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 442-443; Mike Leadbitter, "Dr. Ross," *Blues Unlimited*, December 1972, pp. 4-6; Barry Lee Pearson, "'Doctor Ross' One Man Boogie," *Living Blues*, September/October 1991, pp. 10-17.

### **Seals, Son**

Born: Frank Seals, Jr., August 13, 1942, Osceola, Arkansas

Died: December 20, 2004, Chicago, Illinois

Seals, one of thirteen children, grew up in the music business. His father, Jim "Son" Seals was a trombonist with F.S. Wolcott's Rabbit Foot Minstrels and later owned the Dipsy Doodle Club in Osceola, Arkansas. Seals' father gave him a set of drums when he was about ten years old and taught him the basics of music. While a teen he worked as a drummer in his father's club, backing some of the greats including Sonny Boy Williamson, Robert Nighthawk and Albert King, who was a good friend of his father. When he was seventeen he learned how to play guitar with help from his father and Albert King. He formed his own band, The Upsetters, and worked clubs in Little Rock including T99 and Chez Paris, where he opened for artists B.B.

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King, Bobby “Blue” Bland and others.

Between 1963 and 1965, Seals was often on the road as second guitarist with Earl Hooker’s Roadmasters. He toured as a drummer with Albert King in the late 60s, including a date at the Fillmore West in San Francisco in 1968, which was recorded on the King LP *Live Wire/Blues Power*. He returned to Osceola at the end of the 60s to play with visiting bands at the Blue Goose Club, Harlem Club and others in Osceola. After his father’s death in 1971, Seals moved to Chicago where he worked with Hound Dog Taylor and The HouseRockers at the Psychedelic Club. The next year he formed his own band to work at the Expressway Lounge. Bruce Iglauer, president of Alligator Records, heard Seals play and signed him for an LP. *The Son Seals Blues Band* was released in 1973 and contained the instrumental *Hot Sauce*, which became his trademark.

Seals lived in Chicago for many years but his heart remained in Arkansas. He told writer Peter Guralnick “. . . I’d go back there today if I could just make it economically. People down home really knew how to enjoy themselves. Every Sunday is the Fourth of July” (Cochran: 82). He continued to record and perform until at least 2000.

Seals won recognition on both sides of the Atlantic with the LP *Bad Axe*, released in 1984. He was a powerful singer and is considered one of the leading guitar stylists of Chicago’s post-60s blues generation. His work is reminiscent of Magic Sam and, not surprisingly, Albert King, with its piercing, razor-sharp notes. Seals was also a respected arranger and composer. His compositions include his trademark, *Hot Sauce*, as well as *Cotton Picking Blues*, *Going Back Home*, *Sitting at My Window* and *On My Knees*. Seals’ brilliant guitar work may be heard on his LPs *The Son Seals Blues Band*, *Midnight Son*, *Chicago Fire*, *Bad Axe*, *Live ‘N’ Burning*, *Living in the Danger Zone* and *Lettin’ Go*.

Sources: Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, pp. 81-82; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 450-451; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, p. 306; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 3701-3702; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 359-360.

### **Shields, Lonnie**

Born: April 17, 1956, West Helena, Arkansas

Lonnie Shields grew up with gospel music. When he was eleven he acquired his first guitar and took lessons from Eddie Smith, a respected local musician proficient on several instruments. At the age of thirteen he got his first amplified guitar and joined a band called the Checkmates, and later Shades of Black. Shields continued his music education, learning saxophone, harmonica and bass. He spent some time as a singer with a gospel group, Christian Stars. With

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the band, he played mostly soul, funk and R&B. His first real exposure to blues was through drummer Sam Carr, from whom he learned a great deal. Shields began to play blues in juke joints and clubs in Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas, often with Carr and harmonica player Frank Frost, both members of the Jelly Roll Kings. His real public debut was at the first King Biscuit Blues Festival in 1986. He impressed Jim O'Neal of Rooster Blues who recorded a single of Shields called *Strong Woman*. The song was a regional hit and over the next few years Shields recorded a number of songs which were released in 1993 as the LP *Portrait*.

Shields' debut album, a provoking blend of gospel, Delta blues, R&B, and soul, marked him as one of the most promising new blues musicians. His music shows the influence of B.B. King, Little Milton and Z.Z. Hill, as well as Jimmy Reed, Sam Carr and Frank Frost.

Sources: Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, p. 48; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, 2nd edition, p. 186; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 3761; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 362.

### **Shines, Johnny**

Born: April 15, 1915, Frayser, Tennessee

Died: April 20, 1992, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Johnny Shines was born just outside of Memphis, Tennessee. When he was six years old the family moved to Memphis where he attended grade school. His mother taught him to play guitar and as a child he frequently worked the streets for tips. Shines moved to Hughes, Arkansas, in 1932, where he worked as a sharecropper. He began to play in get-backs (open houses), plantations and roadhouses around Hughes part-time. He worked Church's Park (now W.C. Handy Park) in Memphis for tips and played jukeboxes and house parties near Helena. In 1934 Shines met Robert Johnson in Arkansas. He and Johnson teamed up and traveled the South working jukeboxes, fish fries, house parties, cafés just about anywhere else they could find employment. Along the way Calvin Frazier joined them and they went north, into Canada. On their return they appeared on "The Elder Moten Hour," a popular religious radio show in Detroit. Frazier decided to remain in Detroit, and when Shines and Johnson returned to Memphis in 1937 they, too, parted company. A short time later, in 1938, Johnson was murdered.

Shines remained in Memphis working in what is now W.C. Handy Park and small local clubs. He occasionally toured in Tennessee, Arkansas and Missouri, sometimes with "Baby Boy" Warren. In 1941 Shines moved to Chicago. He played for tips on Maxwell Street and later that year formed a trio that played Chicago area clubs including Club DeLisa into 1943. He formed another group, the Dukes of Swing, which worked at the Apex Chateau from 1943 to 1945.

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Shines recorded for Okeh in 1946 but the cuts were not released until years later. He continued to play the club scene in Chicago, working as a solo and sideman to bands including Sonny Boy Williamson's. He recorded again in 1950, this time on the Chess label, and in 1952 on the JOB label. However, his records failed to generate enough sales for either label to record him again. Shines' style of downhome, Delta country blues was losing favor to the new post-war electric blues.

By 1958, Shines had quit playing guitar and gotten a job outside of music. He was unable to stay away entirely though, and started working nights as a house photographer, taking pictures at blues clubs in Chicago. In the mid-60s, Delta-style blues came back into vogue and Shines resumed his music career. He recorded for Vanguard, who included some of his cuts on their acclaimed *Chicago/The Blues/Today* compilation. Shines' cuts on the album generated sufficient interest among record companies that he recorded on the Testament, Blue Horizon, and Adelphi labels within the next few years. He began to perform at numerous venues including the University of Chicago R&B Festival, Ash Grove in Los Angeles, the Chicago Blues Festival, and the Half Note and the Electric Circus in New York. In 1969, he toured with the Chicago All Stars, working clubs in the U.S. and Europe.

By 1970, Shines had left Chicago and settled in Holt, Alabama, but he didn't spend much time at home. Over the next decade he toured unceasingly, performing at over twenty-five festivals in the U.S. and Canada, along with innumerable club dates. Shines toured the UK and Europe in 1970. He formed his own group, the Stars of Alabama, and played dates in Mississippi and Alabama in the early 70s. In 1972, he toured with the Chicago Blues Festival, playing dates throughout Europe. He toured the college circuit in 1974 as part of the Southern Folk Festival and in 1975 played club dates in Japan, performing with a blues package show. In 1977, he performed throughout the South as a member of the Portable Folk Festival. He recorded on the Advent, Biograph, Blind Pig and Blue Labor labels. Shines appeared in the stylish horror movie *The Velvet Vampire* in 1971 and also appeared the documentary film, *Roots of American Music: Country and Urban Music (Part II)*. In 1973, he was featured in the videotape *Johnny Shines: Black and Blues* and in 1978 appeared on the PBS-TV program "Good Mornin' Blues." That year, Shines teamed up with another Robert Johnson protégé, Robert "Junior" Lockwood. Over the next several years they toured the U.S., Canada, England, Europe and Australia and teamed up on several excellent LPs: *Dust My Broom—Johnny Shines and Robert Lockwood*; *Robert Jr. Lockwood and Johnny Shines* and *Mr. Blues Is Back to Stay*.

In 1980, when interest in Robert Johnson and his disciples was at an all-time high, Shines suffered a stroke. His rehabilitation was slow and he never completely regained dexterity in his right hand. Shines resumed touring, however, relying more on the slide in his guitar playing. He also continued to record, producing some impressive albums for Rounder, Hightone and Blind Pig, including *Hey Ba-Ba-Re-Bop*, *Back to the Country* (with Snooky Pryor) and *Johnny Shines*.

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Shines was an intelligent and articulate man. He was aware of his position as a protégé of Johnson's in the blues world and took full advantage of the opportunities that came late in his career. Many have said that his own talent and contributions have been overshadowed by his standing as one of Robert Johnson's students. It is true that he was repeatedly asked to tell Johnson stories and to play Johnson's songs as he did. However, it's important not to underestimate Shines' own contributions. He was one of the last of the original Delta bluesmen and his style remained true to that sound, untouched by more modern blues trends. Pete Welding said, "[He rates] among the most important and individualistic blues stylists of the post war years . . . a forceful explosive singer whose strong, vibrato laden voice possesses a range and sensitivity which is rivaled by few other bluesmen" (Welding in Harris: 459).

Shines was a prolific composer, writing over fifty songs including *Arguing and Brooding*, *Back to the Steel Mill*, *Can't Get Along With You*, *Delta Pine*, *Devil's Daughter*, *Evil Hearted Woman Blues*, *Want to Warn You Baby*, *Lost Love Letter Blues*, *Nobody's Fault But Mine*, *Mean Black Gobbler*, *Too Long Freight Trains* and *You're The One I Love*. LPs not mentioned above include *Standing at the Crossroads*, *Johnny Shines with Big Walter Horton*, *Traditional Delta Blues*, *Last Night Dream*, *Sitting on the Top of The World*, and *Nobody's Fault But Mine*.

Sources: Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 403; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 457-459; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 3764; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 363-364.

### **Simmons, Mack "Little Mack," "Mac Sims"**

Born: January 25, 1934, Twist, Arkansas

Died: October 24, 2000, Chicago, Illinois

Mack Simmons was born and raised on a farm near Twist, in Cross County, Arkansas. He was interested in music as a child and taught himself to play harmonica. He remained in Arkansas into his late teens, working outside of music and playing harmonica at house parties near Twist. When he was eighteen he moved to St. Louis, where he occasionally worked with Robert Nighthawk. In 1954 Simmons moved to Chicago, formed his own group, and began to work the Chicago club scene. He played in a number of clubs and also secured a four-year residency at the Cadillac Baby Lounge. During the late 50s Simmons recorded on the CJ and Bea and Baby labels and in 1961 on the Checker/Pacer label. Through the 60s Simmons was active as a session musician in addition to working at local clubs.

In 1969, Simmons formed the Royal Aces. The band played for three years at Pepper's Lounge and recorded on two occasions, in 1969 on the Miss label and in 1973 on the Blue Light label. In the early 70s Simmons made two appearances via remote broadcast on WOPA radio, Oak Park, Illinois, and in 1972 was a featured guest on the "Big Bill Hill Show" on the same



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station. Simmons toured Europe in 1975 as a member of the Chicago Blues Festival. When he returned to the U.S. he recorded on the PM label and became the owner and operator of the Zodiac Club in Chicago, where he performed regularly.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 460-461.

### **Smith, George “Harmonica”**

Born: Allen George Smith, April 22, 1924, Helena, Arkansas

Died: October 2, 1983, Los Angeles, California

George Smith, one of three children, was always interested in music. His mother, who played piano, guitar and harmonica, taught him to play harmonica when he was four years old. The family moved to Cairo, Illinois, when Smith was a child. Before he was in his teens, he was working with the Early Woods Country Band, touring Illinois, Kentucky and Mississippi.

He left home in the late 30s, traveling throughout the South and for the next decade worked various jobs, some in music and many outside of it. He worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps, played the harmonica for tips, and did some street singing, billing himself as ‘Hip-Cat’. Between 1941 and 1943 he toured with the Jackson Jubilee Singers, working churches out of Jackson, Mississippi. In 1948 he went to work for the Dixie Theater in Itta Bena, Mississippi, as a projectionist, promoter and sometime performer.

In 1951 Smith moved to Chicago, where he worked with Otis Rush and as a solo in local clubs for the next two years. In 1954 he joined the Muddy Waters Band, worked club dates and toured through the South for about a year. He spent some time in Kansas City, playing the Orchid Room and recording on the RPM label. He returned to Chicago in 1955 and recorded on RPM and with Otis Spann on the Checker label as “Little Walter Jr.” and “Harmonica King.” Later that year, Smith went to Los Angeles and toured with Jack Dupree for Universal Attractions, playing club dates in the Southwest. He recorded with Dupree in Chicago in 1955 and then went back to Los Angeles where he formed a trio to work with Big Mama Thornton. Smith continued to record, sometimes billing himself as “George Allen.”

In the mid-60s Smith formed another group, Bacon Fat, and worked club dates on the West Coast. He returned to Chicago for a few months in 1966 to play again with Muddy Waters and then went back to California and resumed work with Bacon Fat and, especially, with his protégé Rod Piazza. Through the remainder of the 60s and into the early 80s Smith played numerous club dates, often working with Big Mama Thornton, Rod Piazza, and another of his students, William Clarke. He recorded as a solo and sideman with a number of small labels including World Pacific/Liberty, Blue Horizon, Blues Way, BluesTime, Advent, and Deram in Los Angeles, New York, Hollywood and in England. He performed at blues festivals

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throughout the country and toured Europe and Japan in the late 70s and early 80s.

Smith was one of the greats of blues harmonica, adept on both the standard harmonica and the difficult chromatic harmonica, and he influenced many California harp players who followed. Some of his best songs are on the compilation *Harmonica Ace* and the LPs *Oopin' Doopin' Doopin'* and . . . *of the Blues*. Other LPs are *Blues With a Feeling*, *Arkansas Trap*, *No Time for Jive*, *Blowin' the Blues*, and *Boogiein' with George*.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 468-470; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, p. 317; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 3841; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 371-372.

### **Smith, Claude “Blue Smitty”**

Born: November 6, 1924, Marianna, Arkansas

Died: 2007, Joliet, Illinois

Claude Smith spent the early years of his life with an aunt in Chicago but returned to Arkansas when he was eleven. He learned to play guitar and often listened to Robert “Junior” Lockwood and Sonny Boy Williamson on KFFA-AM’s “King Biscuit Time.” Smith remained in Arkansas until he joined the armed forces during World War II. After he was discharged in 1946 he returned to Chicago. He met guitarist Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield) and harmonica player Jimmy Rogers and the three formed a trio, performing in small Chicago clubs. Waters said of Smith: “He really learnt [sic] me some things on the guitar, too.” Jimmy Rogers said: “Smitty was real good at the time, he sure was. He had the style, you know – he had his own little thing.” While working with Waters, Smith taught him chords and single-string solos minus the bottle neck, which became Waters’ preferred way of playing.

Smitty, Waters, and Jimmy Rogers played at the Chicken Shack. Later they joined the musicians’ union and got higher paying work at The Flame, where they added Eddie Boyd. Boyd left and the guys moved to the Purple Cat, and added Little Walter and Sunnyland Slim. Eventually Smitty, who wanted to get into jazz, left Chicago.

In 1947, Smith moved to Harvey, Illinois, and formed his own band. Three years later he was playing in Joliet at the well-known blues venue, Club 99, where he played for seven years. It was during his years at the club that he picked up the name Blue Smitty. While there in 1952 Smith signed a recording contract with Chess. He recorded just one session, which resulted in the release of one single, *Crying*, backed by *Sad Story*. Smith continued to play in blues clubs in and around Joliet and the region through most of the 60s, when he apparently gave up music. Smith’s limited recording makes it easy to underestimate his role in the Chicago post-war blues scene. His influence on Muddy Waters should not be discounted, and many blues historians consider Smith one of Chicago’s earliest modern guitarists. Jim O’Neal wrote in *Living Blues*:

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“Whether Smitty’s music was a major catalyst in the modern Chicago blues movement or not, clearly he was years ahead of his time, and one wonders what might have happened had he stayed in Chicago and continued to record.” He may be heard on the LP *Drop Down Mama* (Various Artists) on the MCA/Chess label.

Sources: Amédé Arduin and Johnny “Geechie” Temple, “Blue Smitty,” *All About Blues Music*, <http://www.allaboutbluesmusic.com/blue-smitty/>; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 427 and 442; Jim O’Neal, “Blue Smitty,” *Living Blues*, Vol. 44, pp.9-11 and Vol. 45, pp.54-57.

### **Smith, Willie “Big Eyes”**

Born: January 19, 1936, Helena, Arkansas

Died: September 6, 2011, Chicago, Illinois

Smith was raised by his sharecropper grandparents on a farm in Arkansas. Growing up he worked in the fields, listened to “King Biscuit Time” on Helena’s KFFA-AM and learned to play harmonica. When he was seventeen, Smith traveled to Chicago to visit his mother who, it is said, took him to a club to hear Muddy Waters. The next day, he asked his mother to buy him a drum kit and decided to stay in the city. About a year later, in 1954, Smith, playing harmonica, formed a trio with drummer Clifton Jameson and guitarist Bobby Lee Burns. The group gained a following and played dates in the Chicago area for several years. He also played harmonica with Bo Diddley, Arthur “Big Boy” Spires, Johnny Shines and others. In 1954 he joined Little Hudson’s Red Devil Trio as a drummer. After dates or between sets he began sitting in on drums with Muddy Waters’ band. Waters was impressed enough to ask Smith to play drums on a recording session in 1959. After that, he began to fill in for Waters’ regular drummer, Francis Clay, and also recorded with the band. In 1961, Smith replaced Clay as a regular in the band, where he remained until mid-1964. During this time he recorded a tribute to blues vocalist Big Bill Broonzy with James Cotton, Jo Jo Williams and Muddy Waters.

In the late mid-to-late 60s he found it difficult to make a living from music and drove a cab, worked in a restaurant and held other odd jobs. He decided to concentrate on his music career again after hearing Muddy Waters play 1968. He asked to sit in with the group and the next day Muddy Waters invited him to rejoin the band. Smith remained until 1980 when he and several other former members of Waters’ band formed the Legendary Blues Band—bass player Calvin Jones, pianist Pinetop Perkins, and harmonica player Jerry Portnoy, with Smith on drums. Smith, Jones and Perkins had worked with the Muddy Waters band for almost a dozen years. Portnoy, the relative newcomer, had joined Waters in 1974.

The Legendary Blues Band signed with Rounder Records and with the addition of guitarist Louis Meyers, recorded *Life of Ease*, released in 1981. They followed with *Red, Hot and Blue* in 1983. The band remained popular on the club and festival circuit in spite of a number of

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personnel changes. Perkins left in 1985 and Portnoy a year later. In 1989 the Legendary Blues Band signed with Ichiban Records. After the addition of guitarists Smokey Smothers and Billy Flynn and harmonica player Mark Koenig the band recorded *Woke Up To the Blues*, which was nominated for a W.C. Handy Award.

The Legendary Blues Band was nominated for several Grammy awards and recorded a number of critically acclaimed albums on the Ichiban label including *Prime Time Blues*, *Keepin' the Blues Alive*, and *U B Da Judge*. They backed up Buddy Guy, Howlin Wolf and Junior Wells and toured with Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton. They played behind Muddy Waters on the soundtrack of the feature film, *The Last Waltz* and appeared in *The Blues Brothers* as street musicians backing John Lee Hooker. Smith's solo recording career began in 1995 with the release of *Bag Full of Blues* on the Blind Pig label.

The Legendary Blues Band sound is solid Chicago blues. Smith's traditional shuffle-style drumming has been called the heart and soul of the Chicago blues sound. In the last years of his career he often returned to his first instrument, the harmonica. Solo LPs include *Born in Arkansas*, *Way Back*, *Bluesin' It*, *Bag Full of Blues* and *Blues from the Heart*. In 2010, Smith received a Grammy Award for his work with Pinetop Perkins for best traditional Blues CD for *Joined at the Hip*.

Sources: Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 2445; "Willie 'Big Eyes' Smith: 1936-2011," *Chicago Tribune*, September 25, 2011; "Willie 'Big Eyes' Smith: Blues drummer and harmonica player renowned for his work with Muddy Waters," *Independent* (London, UK) September 22, 2011; "Willie 'Big Eyes' Smith dies at 75; blues musician," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 2011; "Willie 'Big Eyes' Smith Official Home Page: Biography," <http://www.williebigeyessmith.com/about/wsbio.htm>.

### **Stackhouse, Houston**

Born: Houston Goff, September 28, 1910, Wesson, Mississippi

Died: September 23, 1980, Helena, Arkansas

Houston Stackhouse was born and raised on the Randall Ford plantation outside of Wesson, Mississippi. Early in life he was influenced by his uncles, bluesmen Luther and Charles Williams, who played piano and guitar throughout the region, and local fiddler Lace Powell. Stackhouse learned to play harmonica, violin and mandolin by the time he was in his teens. After the death of his mother when he was about fifteen he moved to Crystal Springs, Mississippi, to live with distant relatives Wade and Estelle Stackhouse, who adopted him and encouraged his musical interests. Crystal Springs had a thriving blues scene and Stackhouse met Tommy Johnson and his brothers, Mager and Clarence. Tommy, who had already issued the popular recording *Canned Heat Blues*, would later be known as one of the most influential

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blues singers in the region. Stackhouse learned to play blues guitar from Tommy, and in turn reputedly passed on the lessons to his cousin, Robert McCollum, who would later be known as Robert Nighthawk. In the late 20s and early 30s Stackhouse, Tommy Johnson and Nighthawk frequently worked together, playing clubs, juke joints and dances in central Mississippi. In 1931, he appeared with Nighthawk on WJDX-AM, Jackson, Mississippi. Through the remainder of the 30s and into the 40s Stackhouse worked in Mississippi, frequently with a group known as the Mississippi Sheiks Number Two, playing dances and house parties.

In the mid-1940s, Stackhouse made a number of appearances on radio station WROX-AM in Clarksdale, Mississippi. From about 1944 to 1947, he frequently worked with Robert Lockwood and Walter Jacobs in and around Helena, Arkansas. In the spring of 1946, he joined Robert Nighthawk on his radio program "Mother's Best Flour Hour," on KFFA-AM in Helena, where he remained about a year. He then joined Sonny Boy Williamson on the station's "King Biscuit Time." Stackhouse became a member of the King Biscuit Entertainers, traveling throughout the Delta in Mississippi and Arkansas until well into the 60s. When Stackhouse joined the group in 1947, it was made up of Williamson, Joe Willie "Pinetop" Perkins, James "Peck" Curtis and Joe Willie Wilkins. Stackhouse and Curtis became good friends and the two worked together off and on until Curtis' death in 1970. During the mid-60s Stackhouse also occasionally worked with the Boyd Gilmore Trio around Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Stackhouse didn't make his first recordings until 1967, when he recorded on the Testament label at a session that included Peck Curtis and Robert Nighthawk. Later, he recorded several times on the Flyright and Adelphi labels. For the first time, Stackhouse was able to make his living solely from his music. The increased recognition generated by the recordings led him to tour outside Arkansas and Mississippi for the first time in the early 70s. He appeared at a number of blues festivals including the Festival of American Folklife in Washington, DC (1970 and 1971), the River City Blues Festival in Memphis (1971-1973), the University of Arkansas Blues Festival (1972) and the University of Chicago Blues Festival (1973). Stackhouse toured New England with Hacksaw Harney in 1972. That year and in 1973 he joined Joe Willie Wilkins' revived King Biscuit Boys, working club dates in the Midwest and, in 1976, touring the UK and Europe. While in England in 1976, he appeared on an episode of "The Devil's Music—A History of the Blues" for BBC-1-TV. After the European tour, Stackhouse retired but made a few more appearances—in 1978 on "Good Mornin' Blues" on PBS-TV and at the Delta Blues Fest in Greenville, Mississippi. His last performance was at the Delta Blues Fest in 1979.

Because Stackhouse, unlike most blues musicians of his generation, never left the South for Chicago, he failed to receive due recognition until late in life. His crisp, snarling guitar sound helped give the famed King Biscuit Entertainers their hardened edge. Stackhouse is now recognized as one of the important guitar stylists and singers of post-war blues. He may be heard on the LPs *Houston Stackhouse 1910-1980*, *Big Road Blues* and *Mississippi Delta Blues Vol. 1*.

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Sources: Terrance Halaire Buckalew, *Blues Music in Arkansas*, unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Arkansas, May 1993, pp. 28-43; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 483-484; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 3927; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 380-381.

### **Stidham, Arbie**

Born: February 9, 1917, De Valls Bluff, Arkansas

Died: April 26, 1988, Cook County, Illinois

Arbie Stidham grew up with music. His father Luddie was a musician with the Jimmie Lunceford Band and his uncle Ernest Stidham was the leader of the Memphis Jug Band. As a child, Stidham learned to play harmonica, clarinet and alto saxophone but generally performed as a singer. When a teen he formed the Southern Syncopators Band and worked school dances and clubs in and around Little Rock. The Southern Syncopators toured with Bessie Smith in 1930 and 1931. For most of the next two decades the band appeared frequently on KARK-AM, Little Rock, and continued to work clubs in Little Rock and Memphis.

In the late 40s, Stidham moved to Chicago where he met Lester Melrose of RCA-Victor. Melrose signed Stidham to the label and that year he released *My Heart Belongs to You*, which was an immediate success. Over the next decade Stidham recorded on the Sittin' In With, Checker, Abco and States labels as a solo, and with the Lucky Millander Band and the Lefty Bates Band. An accident forced him to give up the saxophone in the mid-50s and sent him into a long depression. While recovering he took up the guitar, studying with Big Bill Broonzy. About the same time, he made an appearance on Stud Terkel's "I Come For To Sing" program on local television.

In the 1960s, Stidham recorded the LP *Arbee's Blues* with Memphis Slim and Jump Jackson on the Folkways label, and accompanied himself on guitar on the Prestige-Bluesville label. He worked club dates in Atlanta, Chicago and New York. He moved to Cleveland, Ohio, in the late 60s where he worked outside of music for a time. In the early 70s he played a long residency with the Casablanca Club in Youngstown, Ohio, and recorded with the Ernie Wilkins Orchestra on the Mainstream label in Atlanta. He recorded in 1973 on the Folkways label and also appeared in the film, *The Bluesman*. Through the mid-70s Stidham gave occasional guest lectures on the blues at Cleveland State University.

Stidham was a powerful, deep, grizzly-voiced singer who combined the down-to-earth tonality, insistent beat and vibrato of a country blues singer with jump tempo and other characteristics of urban blues. He may be heard on the LPs *Arbee's Blues*, *There's Always Tomorrow* and *My Heart Belongs to You*.

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Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 484-485; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 3974.

**Sykes, Roosevelt**

Born: January 31, 1906, Elmar, Arkansas (near West Helena)

Died: June 11, 1983, New Orleans, Louisiana

Roosevelt Sykes was the son of a musician. His family moved to St. Louis briefly, but returned to Arkansas about 1913. He learned how to play organ as a child and later taught himself piano. By about 1920 Sykes was working around Helena, Arkansas, as a barrelhouse piano player. He worked with Lee Green in the mid-1920s, playing piano in Lake Providence, Louisiana. By the late 20s he was in St. Louis, where he worked at the Jazzland Club, Cardinal's Nest and other venues. He also made frequent trips to Memphis and Chicago to work clubs in those cities. In 1929 he recorded with the OKeh label and his rendition of *Forty Four Blues* learned from Lee Green established his reputation as a solid blues pianist. Sykes remained in St. Louis through the 30s, working the club scene as a solo and with other piano players, especially St. Louis Jimmy Oden, with whom he toured the U.S. in a series of one-night dates in the late 30s. Sykes frequently acted as a talent scout for the Victor and Decca labels in the 30s. He recorded a number of times for Meltone, Victor and Decca, both as a principle and session musician. Sykes frequently used a pseudonym on his recordings, including *The Blues Man*, *Dobby Bragg*, *The Honeydripper*, *Easy Papa Johnson* and *Willie Kelly*.

In 1941 Sykes moved to Chicago, where he played clubs, often working with Memphis Minnie and Son Joe. He continued to record—with the Jackson Jump Band on the Specialty label, and as a principle and accompanist on the Bluebird and Bullet labels. In 1943 Sykes formed a big band, the Honeydrillers, the name taken from the nickname he had acquired as a smooth-talking ladies' man. Sykes and the Honeydrillers toured the South regularly during World War II and the years immediately following. In the early 50s, he toured widely as a solo artist and worked club dates in Chicago with Lonnie Johnson, and with his own trio, recording on the United label.

By the early 50s, Chicago audiences had begun to favor hard-edged electric blues over Southern, rural blues. In 1954, Sykes moved to New Orleans, where his barrelhouse style of piano playing was still admired. He found plenty of work in Memphis and St. Louis as well. He continued to record, always in demand as a solo and session musician. In 1961, he was the subject of a Belgian film, *Roosevelt Sykes: "The Honeydriller."* During the blues revival of the 60s and 70s Sykes was busier than ever. He toured with the American Blues Festival, working dates in England and Europe. He performed at a number of festivals including the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, the Wisconsin Blues Festival in Beloit, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the University of Pittsburgh Blues Festival, the Mariposa Folk Festival in

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Toronto, the Festival of American Folklife, the Winnipeg Folk Festival and others. In 1970, he teamed with Homesick James for a tour of France and Spain. In 1971 he was the subject of another documentary, *Roosevelt Sykes*. He appeared in the French films *Blues Under the Skin* (1972) and *Out of the Blacks Into the Blues, Part I: Along the Old Man River* (1972). He made more recordings than ever, both as a solo and with other artists including Memphis Slim, many on the New Orleans-based Imperial label. In 1975, he was a guest on “Blues Piano Orgy” on WLDC-AM, New Orleans. The following year he appeared on the BBC-1-TV series “The Devil’s Music—A History of the Blues.” Sykes continued to work festival and club dates until his death in 1983.

Sykes was a prolific composer, writing over one hundred songs during his career. Among his most popular compositions are *Night Time Is the Right Time* and *The Honeydripper*. Sykes was one of the most important pre-World War II blues pianists and he influenced just about every blues piano player who followed, including Detroit Jr., Fats Domino, Willie Mabon, Memphis Slim, Pinetop Perkins, Otis Spann and Henry Townsend. His technique emphasized intricate chord patterns and brass figures melded with a crisp, urban blues into which occasional jazz elements were inserted. His powerful voice, which reflected his contagious good nature, enhanced his vigorous piano style. His piano playing in the 40s perfectly reflected the transition from southern-based, rural blues to the modern, post-war electric blues. He was a major figure in St. Louis, Chicago and New Orleans, where his piano style influenced the new rhythm and blues.

Many of Sykes’ earlier recordings have been reissued. Recommended LPs include *The Country Blues Piano Ace*; *The Honeydripper 1929-1941*; *The Honeydripper, Vol. 2, 1936-1951*; *In Europe*; *Raining in My Heart*; *Goldmine*; *West Helena Blues (The Post War Years, Vol. 2, 1945-1957)* and *Feel Like Blowing My Horn* (with Robert “Junior” Lockwood).

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 489-491; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, pp. 331-333; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 4058; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 385.

### **Taylor, Robert “Dudlow”**

Born: date and place unknown

Died: ca. 1968

Very little is known about Robert Taylor’s personal life. It is thought that he was born in Louisiana and moved to Helena, Arkansas, as a young man. A pianist, Taylor was one of the original members of the King Biscuit Entertainers. He joined KFFA-AM’s “King Biscuit Time” in 1942; shortly after Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Jr. Lockwood added James “Peck” Curtis to the band. Taylor stayed on as a “King Biscuit Time” regular, appearing on the air and touring with the rest of the cast until after Williamson’s death in 1965.



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Taylor, a large, shy man, was a competent and dependable sideman. His playing was not schooled but he had a fine understanding of the nuances of the blues. He rarely, if ever, performed outside of the Helena area except as a member of the King Biscuit Entertainers. His playing is known from only one LP, *The Fifties: Juke Joint Blues*, which features various artists.

Sources: Rose Kettler, "King Biscuit Time," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 20, Nos. 1 and 2 combined, December 1981 and March 1982, p. 6; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 388.

### **Washboard Sam**

Born: Robert Brown, July 15, 1910, Walnut Ridge, Arkansas

Died: November 6, 1966, Chicago, Illinois

Robert Brown, allegedly the illegitimate son of Frank Broonzy and half-brother to Big Bill Broonzy, was raised on a farm in Arkansas. He learned to play washboard as a boy and left home in his teens, going to Memphis where he played on the streets for tips. In 1932 he moved to Chicago, where he again played for tips on the street, often with Hammie Nixon and John Estes, and began to play clubs with guitarist Big Bill Broonzy. Broonzy's influence led Brown, a talented vocalist and songwriter as well as musician, recording as a singer on the Bluebird label in 1935. Brown often worked with Broonzy, guitarist Willie Lacy, pianists Memphis Slim and Bob Call, and bass player Ransom Knowlin, all regulars of the polished 'Bluebird Beat' created by Lester Melrose. He also recorded as a sideman to Bukka White and Jazz Gillum, and with the State Street Swingers on the Vocalion label. Between 1935 and 1949, Brown recorded about 180 songs on the Melrose and Bluebird labels. He was very successful among his contemporaries and songs like *I've Been Treated Wrong*, *I'm Not the Lad* and *Diggin' My Potatoes* could be found for years on jukeboxes in the Chicago area.

Brown's scratchy, percussive washboard enhanced the recordings of many early blues artists in addition to those named above. He was one of the most popular washboard players of the 30s and 40s but was unable to make the transition to electric blues following World War II and became inactive about 1950. He did record on the Chess label in 1953, and in the mid-60s was still working the Fickle Pickle and other clubs and coffee houses in Chicago. He made a brief European tour in 1964, working concert dates in England and on the continent.

Brown was one of the few musicians to record commercially with the washboard. Despite the rural nature of the instrument, his style was urban and extremely sophisticated. He sang in a deep, passionless voice, often with jazz accompaniment. "[Sam's] deep, heavy voice was perfectly suited to the blues he sang, and he had a penchant for better than average lyrics,

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leavened with a wry sense of humor” (Kent in Harris: 86). Sam was a talented vocalist and songwriter. He is the composer of *Back Door*, *Booker T. Blues*, “*Diggin’ My Potatoes*, *Every Tub Stands on Its Own Bottom*, *Fast Woman Blues*, *Going Back to Arkansas*, *Good Luck Blues*, *I’m a Prowlin’ Groundhog*, *It’s Too Late Now*, *Jazz Gillum’s Blues*, *Louise*, *Lowland Blues*, *River Hip Mama*, *Soap and Water Blues*, *Warehouse Blues*, *You Got To Run Me Down* and many more. His recordings are available on the LP compilations *Big Bill Broonzy and Washboard Sam* and *Washboard Sam*.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 84-86; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, p. 357; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 430-431.

### **Weldon, Casey Bill**

Born: Will Weldon, July 10, 1909, Pine Bluff, Arkansas

Died: September 28, 1972, Kansas City, Missouri

Casey Bill Weldon’s background and early life have never been fully documented but he is thought to have gotten his start playing guitar with medicine shows that traveled the South during the 1920s. He worked Beale Street in Memphis for tips in the early 20s, and in 1927 recorded with the Memphis Jug Band on the Victor label. He also recorded a few of his own songs with Victor during the same sessions, including a chilling, haunting composition called *Turpentine Blues*. During the 20s he met, married and divorced Memphis Minnie (Lizzie Douglas). He later married blues singer Geeshie Wiley.

In the early 30s he moved north, recording with Charlie Burse and the Picaninny Jug Band on the Champion label in 1932. He reportedly worked in Kansas City, picking up his nickname, Casey (K.C.). By the mid-30s he was in Chicago and had altered his playing and singing from country-blues style to a more urban sound. He played steel guitar with a slide, holding the guitar flat in his lap in the Hawaiian manner. He performed under the name Casey Bill and was often billed as the ‘Hawaiian Guitar Wizard’ at clubs. His playing was influenced by Hawaiian player Sol Hoopii and western swing player Leon McAuliffe, yet he remained firmly rooted in the blues. Between 1935 and 1938, Weldon recorded nearly seventy songs on the Vocalion and Bluebird labels as a solo, and with Big Bill Broonzy, Black Bob, the Brown Bombers of Swing and others. He composed and recorded the blues standards *Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town* and *Somebody Changed the Lock on My Door*. Weldon’s singing was in the same vein as that of Broonzy, Jazz Gillum and Washboard Sam but his arrangements, unique in the blues, set him apart from other artists. In spite of the fact that his recordings did well commercially he never recorded after 1938.

Weldon faded from the Chicago blues scene about 1940. Some reports had him living in Detroit and working outside of music, others placed him on the West Coast recording

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soundtracks for films. In truth, no one knows where he went or what he did after his years in Chicago. His LPs include *Bottleneck Blues*; *Will Weldon*; *Master of the Steel Guitar*; *Casey Bill Weldon (1935-1937)*; *Complete Recorded Works 1936-1938 Vols. 1-3* and *Bottleneck Guitar Trendsetters of the 30s* (with Kokomo Arnold).

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 547; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, p. 359; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 4423; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 441; Jimmy Cunningham, "Casey Bill Weldon (1901?-1972?)," in *Arkansas Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=7783>.

### **Wells, Junior**

Born: Amos Blackmore, December 9, 1934, Memphis, Tennessee

Died: January 15, 1998, Chicago, Illinois

Junior Wells was raised in Arkansas, near West Memphis and Marion. His grandmother was a gospel singer and his family wanted him to pursue a career in gospel music, but Wells had other ideas. Inspired by local legends such as Howlin Wolf and Junior Parker, he taught himself to play harmonica and began to play the streets of West Memphis for tips well before he was a teenager. In 1946, Wells moved with his mother to Chicago and by the age of fifteen was sitting in with Tampa Red. He formed a group with Dave Myers on bass and Louis Meyers on guitar called the Little Boys and/or the Little Chicago Devils and played at the C&T Lounge in Chicago. Before long the band changed its name to the Three Deuces and then the Three Aces. The trio worked with Muddy Waters and other artists in Chicago before adding drummer Fred Below to the group and becoming the Four Aces.

The Four Aces worked the Chicago club scene from 1949 to 1952, when Wells replaced Little Walter as harmonica player in Muddy Waters' band. Little Walter, who was leaving Waters to begin a solo career, took the remaining Aces as his backing group. Wells stayed with Waters for about a year and then began to record on his own, though he returned to work and record with Waters in 1954 and 1955. After leaving Waters, Wells worked frequently with Memphis Slim. In 1953 and 1954 he recorded with the Aces, though this time the billing read Junior Wells and His Eagle Rockers. During these sessions he recorded *Hoodoo Man*, a song he returned to again and again over his career.

Wells' career was interrupted by a stint with the U.S. Army from 1953 to 1955. When he returned to Chicago in 1956 he reunited the Three Aces, playing clubs in Chicago and touring across the country into the late 50s. Wells did more recording, releasing *Little By Little* and *Messin' with the Kid* around 1960. In 1958, he began an association with Buddy Guy that lasted into the early 90s. The duo began recording together in the early 60s but it was not

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until the release of the LP *Hoodoo Man Blues* in 1966 that Wells became a major figure in the Chicago recording scene. The album, now a classic, “. . . featured Wells’ scintillating harp and vocal work and Guy’s backing guitar riffs, and captured the vinegary blues of one of the most powerful Chicago bar bands of the 60s” (Santelli: 443). Wells and Guy continued their success with the LPs *It’s My Life Baby* and *Coming at You*. In 1970, they toured with the Rolling Stones and in 1972 released the live LP *Play the Blues*. In 1990, Wells and fellow blues harmonica players James Cotton, Carey Bell and Billy Branch recorded the LP *Harp Attack*.

Wells continued to perform in Chicago through the 70s, frequently at the famed blues club, Theresa’s Lounge. From about 1963 through the 80s he was a familiar figure at festivals, including the Chicago Folk Festival; the Chicago Blues Festival; the Bath Festival in Bristol, England; the Washington Blues Festival, Howard University, Washington, DC; the Philadelphia Folk Festival; the Newport Folk Festival, Rhode Island; the Toronto Blues Festival; the University of Miami Blues Festival and others. He toured frequently, including in England and Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival in 1966 and 1972. He made two good-will tours for the U.S. State Department—to Africa in 1967-1968 and to the Far East in 1969. He appeared in the UK film *Chicago Blues* in 1970 and in two French films in 1972, *Blues Under the Skin* and *Out of the Blacks Into the Blues*. Wells continued to perform in Chicago until his death in 1998.

Wells, with John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson and Little Walter Jacobs, is one of the most influential harmonica players of the Chicago post-war blues. He helped define the post-war sound, first as a player with Muddy Waters then with the Three Aces, with Buddy Guy, and lastly as a soloist. His “. . . sweeping harp solos, which often include articulate staccato wails and a sense of phrasing not unlike Little Walter, as well as his whiskey-soaked vocals, have made Wells one of the deans of Chicago blues” (Santelli: 442).

In addition to the albums above, Wells recorded the LPs *Blues Hit Big Town, On Tap, Alone and Acoustic* (with Buddy Guy), *Southside Blues Jam, You’re Tuff Enough, Junior Wells sings at the Golden Bear, Buddy and the Juniors, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells Play the Blues, Better Off With the Blues* and *Drinkin’ TNT ‘n’ Smokin’ Dynamite* (with Buddy Guy and Bill Wyman).

Sources: Charles Eugene Claghorn, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Music*, p. 467; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 547-549; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 4428; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 442-443.

### **Weston, John “So Blue”**

Born: December 12, 1927 (sources variously say Helena, Brinkley and Marianna, Arkansas)

Died: June 30, 2005, Brinkley, Arkansas

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Weston was born and raised in Arkansas and during his lifetime worked as a farmer, butcher, car mechanic and carpenter. He remembered seeing Sonny Boy Williamson walk across his parent's farm as a child, Williamson on the way to juke joints or country suppers, a belt of harmonicas strapped to his chest. He listened to Williamson on Helena's KFFA radio but didn't become active in music until he began to play guitar at the age of thirty. He learned something about the subtleties of blues harmonica from Willie Cobbs and became proficient on both chromatic and diatonic harmonica. Weston made his performing debut in the 70s as a member of the Speckled Rhythms, a family band led by Jobie Kilzer. He performed solo in local clubs and outside of Bubba's Blues Corner, Helena's famous blues record store, for years remaining unknown to all but residents of Helena. That changed in 1989 when Weston, then sixty-one, won the Blues Foundation's Lucille Award in their amateur talent contest.

From 1967 to 1991 Weston ran his own nightclub, Johnny's Club, in Smale, Arkansas. He recorded his first LP, *So Doggone Blue*, for the Fat Possum label in 1992. Two LPs were released in 1997, *I'm Doing the Best I Can* on Appaloosa and *Got to Deal with the Blues* on Midnight Creeper. On the latter he was joined by Little Rock slide guitarist Mark Simpson, who he had begun performing with in 1995. Weston performed at the Helena Blues Festival/ King Biscuit Blues festival from 1989 on and toured near Helena with his band, Blues Force. His harmonica playing was accomplished and original and he sang in a soft, gentle voice reminiscent of Little Milton. His last LP was *I Tried to Hide From the Blues* on Fedora, which he said was his best record. One reviewer said of it, "Weston's music is unvarnished and from the heart. It romps and stomps and tells a little story about its creator. What more do you want from the blues?" (Jazz Depot, "Review of *I tried to Hide From the Blues*"). Weston was inducted into the Arkansas Entertainers Hall of Fame in 2005.

Sources: Arkansas Entertainers Hall of Fame, "Inductees: John Weston," <http://arkansasentertainershalloffame.com/home2/?p=58>. Jazz Depot, "Review of *I tried to Hide From the Blues*," [http://www.jazzdepot.com/j\\_weston/5027.html](http://www.jazzdepot.com/j_weston/5027.html); Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., p. 4439; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 443-444. James Tighe, "John Weston: Driving Down Highway 79," *Living Blues*, May/June 1993, pp. 43-45.

### **Wheatstraw, Peetie**

Born: William Bunch, December 21, 1902, Ripley, Tennessee

Died: December 21, 1941, East St. Louis, Illinois

William Bunch was raised in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, where he learned to play piano and guitar as a young man. He traveled around the South for a couple of years before settling in East Saint Louis about 1929. Upon arriving in St. Louis, Bunch assumed the professional name Peetie

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Wheatstraw, taken from a black folk tale. Vocalist Wheatstraw teamed with Lonnie Johnson, one of the best blues guitarists in St. Louis. Their successful partnership lasted for close to a decade. Wheatstraw cut his first record in 1930 on the Vocalion label. It was the first of a large number of his recordings issued by Vocalion and Decca.

Wheatstraw was an immediate success. During his short career, Wheatstraw—often billed as the “High Sheriff of Hell” and the “Devil’s Son-in-Law”—was one of the most influential blues singers in the nation. He made frequent tours of the South during the 30s, often accompanied by blues singer-songwriter Harmon Ray. In the late 30s he recorded for Decca with Bumble Bee Slim (Amos Easton) in Chicago and James “Kokomo” Arnold in New York. In 1939, Wheatstraw and Big Joe Williams went into partnership, operating the St. Louis Club, where they frequently performed. Wheatstraw died in 1941 of injuries sustained in an auto accident. He was thirty-nine and at the height of his career. He is buried at Cotton Plant, Arkansas. The Sonny Boy Blues Society and the Bunch Family erected a headstone for Wheatstaw at the Morningstar Baptist Church, near Cotton Plant in June, 2011

Wheatstraw was one of the most successful blues singers of the 30s. His style influenced many of the vocalists who followed including Bill Broonzy, Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown, Floyd “Dipper Boy” Council, Jack Dupree, Jimmy “Peetie Wheatstraw’s Brother” Gordon, Andrew “Smokey” Hogg, Robert Nighthawk, Harmon Ray, James Sherrill, Johnny Shines, Sunnyland Slim and Casey Bill Weldon. Most of his numerous recordings are out-of-print but the LPs *The Devil’s Son-in-Law 1937-1941*, *Peetie Wheatstraw and Kokomo Arnold* and *The Devil’s Son-in-Law* are available. A biography, *The Devil’s Son-in-Law* by Paul Garon, was published in 1971.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who’s Who*, pp. 551-552; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 4443-4444; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, p. 444.

### **Whitman, Essie Barbara**

Born: July 4, 1882, Osceola, Arkansas

Died: May 7, 1963, Chicago, Illinois

Essie Whitman’s father was the Rev. Albert A. Whitman, first cousin of the poet, Walt Whitman. When she was ten years old, Essie won a talent contest sponsored by a St. Louis, Missouri, theater. In the late 1890s, the family moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where Essie frequently performed at local benefits and socials. About 1900, Essie, her sister May (Mable) and their mother, Caddie White Whitman, formed an act in which they sang jubilee and harmony songs. They toured Europe as part of a vaudeville show in the early 1900s. When they returned to the U.S. they added pianist Tony Jackson to the act and billed themselves as

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the New Orleans Troubadours. The Troubadours toured the vaudeville circuit the length and breadth of the country between 1904 and 1910.

In 1910, the Troubadours began to bill themselves as the Whitman Sisters and played at major theaters across the country until 1918. Essie then began to tour as a duo with her sister Alice, a dancer; singing and doing comedy acts on the vaudeville circuit. In the early 20s they added a variety of acts and performers to their own and toured the country as a revue. In 1921, Essie cut her first recordings with the Jazz Masters on the Black Swan label. She and Alice stayed in New York the following year, working at the Lafayette Theater. In 1925, Essie settled in Chicago, though she and Alice continued to tour as a duo and she frequently acted as costume and set designer for the act as well. The sisters continued to perform through the 20s. In 1930, Essie and Alice teamed with their sisters, Alberta (Bert)—a dancer and male impersonator—and May, a singer, in their own revue at New York's Lafayette Theater.

During the 30s, Whitman founded the Theatrical Cheer Club to aid show performers hard hit by the Depression. She was also active as an evangelist in church affairs until her death. At the height of their career the Whitman sisters “were the royalty of Negro vaudeville” (*Stern and Stern in Harris: 559*). Mabel (May) Whitman died in 1942, Alberta (Bert) Whitman in 1964, and Alice Whitman in the early 70s.

Sources: Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds*, p. 12; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 558-559.

### **Wilkins, Joe Willie**

Born: January 7, 1923, Davenport, Mississippi

Died: March 28, 1979, Memphis, Tennessee

Joe Willie Wilkins, an only child, taught himself harmonica and worked in his father's string band at local dances from the age of ten. He also learned to play fiddle and accordion. When he was twelve, his father bought him a guitar and he learned to play with help from Bob Williams, Pat Rhodes and Sam Harris—members of his father's band. From that time, it was his chosen instrument. He left home in his teens and began to perform on street corners, in juke joints and in barrelhouses, frequently in the company of Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Jr. Lockwood. Lockwood was a major influence on Wilkins, and they frequently traded ideas on guitar technique.

Wilkins served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. When he was discharged he went to Helena, where Williamson was performing on his own show on KFFA-AM, “King Biscuit Time.” Wilkins was a frequent guest on the show and became a member of the King Biscuit Entertainers, which included Williamson, James “Peck” Curtis, Willie Nix, Willie Love,

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Pinetop Perkins, Dudlow Taylor and, later, Houston Stackhouse. Wilkins toured with the group into the late 40s, and recorded with Williamson into the early 50s. He also toured with Williamson, Willie Love and Willie Nix as the Four Aces, working jukes through Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee in 1949 and 1950.

In the late 40s, Wilkins also made frequent appearances on two other KFFA programs, Robert Nighthawk's "Bright Star Flour Show" and "Mother's Best Flour Hour," which Lockwood hosted after leaving "King Biscuit Time." About 1950, Wilkins settled in Memphis, Tennessee. That year, he appeared with B.B. King on the "Pepticon Boy" show on WDIA-AM, Memphis, and with Willie Love and the Three Aces on the "Broadway Furniture Store" show on KWEM-AM, West Memphis, Arkansas. Through the 50s and 60s, Wilkins recorded with a number of different musicians as a sideman and became the unofficial house guitarist for the Trumpet label, recording with Willie Love, Arthur Crudup, Willie Nix, Roosevelt Sykes and others. Later, Wilkins worked for Sam Phillips at Sun Records in Memphis, backing other artists in the same unofficial capacity.

In 1972, Wilkins formed a group called Joe's King Biscuit Boys, worked clubs in and around Memphis through the 70s and toured the Midwest in 1973 as part of the Memphis Blues Caravan Show. Wilkins performed at a number of festivals during the 70s including the Festival of American Folklife, Washington, DC; the River City Blues Festival, Memphis; the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, Michigan; the Monterey Jazz Festival, California and the Delta Blues Fest in Greenville, Mississippi. In 1976 he appeared on "The Devil's Music—A History of the Blues" on BBC-1-TV in England. Active in music until his death, he played a long residency at the Birth Of The Blues Club in Memphis in 1978.

Because Wilkins worked primarily as a sideman his influence as a blues guitarist has often been overlooked. His style was unique, a blend of roughened Delta rhythms and searing single-string solos, and he performed his best for every blues artist he backed. His contributions during his long association with the King Biscuit Entertainers, a group who made radio history and influenced a whole generation of blues musicians, should not be ignored. Jim O'Neal of *Living Blues* magazine said that Wilkins was, "One of the greatest blues guitarists Memphis has ever known" (O'Neal in Harris: 561). The LPs *Goin' in Your Direction* and *Joe Willie Wilkins & His King Biscuit Entertainers* are considered essential listening.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 560-561; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2nd ed., pp. 4479-4480; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 448-449.



**Williamson, Sonny Boy “Rice Miller”**

Born: Aleck Ford, December 5, 1912, Glendora, Mississippi

Died: May 25, 1965, Helena, Arkansas

Aleck Ford, the son of Millie Ford, later assumed the surname of his stepfather, Jim Miller. Early in life he was given the nickname “Rice” and later performed under the name Rice Miller. He was interested in music at a very young age and learned to play the harmonica when he was five years old. Before he was ten, he was performing at local parties for tips. In his early twenties he left home, working as an itinerant spiritual singer and musician throughout the South, often using the name “Little Boy Blue” instead of Aleck or Rice Miller. Sometime in the 1920s he began performing blues at jukeboxes and parties, working mainly in Arkansas and Mississippi. In the late 20s he traveled further afield, performing in New Orleans at Delpee’s Club.

In the 30s he traveled through Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi and Tennessee, often working as a one-man band with harmonicas, drums, and zoot horn. He picked up jobs where he could—at dance halls, lumber camps, carnivals, plantations and ballparks. In the early 30s he spent some time in Caruthersville, Missouri, performing with Sunnyland Slim (Albert Luandrew). He worked at the “Grand Ole Opry” in Nashville in the mid-30s and in the late 30s frequently worked with Elmore James, Big Boy Crudup and Robert Johnson, playing jukeboxes and parties in various locations throughout the South. By this time Williamson had a firmly established reputation as an excellent blues harmonica player and vocalist. He toured the Delta with Howlin Wolf in 1937 and 1938 and at the end of the decade was working with Robert Jr. Lockwood, mostly in and around Clarksdale, Mississippi. One of the many stories that grew up around Williamson, which may or may not be true, was that he and Lockwood were arrested for vagrancy in Sardis, Mississippi, and sentenced to three weeks in the local jail. They began to play in their cell and soon had quite a crowd gathered outside their jailhouse window. They played every day of their sentence and by the time their three weeks were served had amassed almost \$2,000 in tips.

Late in 1941, Sonny Boy Williamson, as he was now calling himself, and Robert Jr. Lockwood made their way to Helena, Arkansas. Williamson knew that a new radio station was due to go into operation in November. He approached station owner Sam Anderson about doing a show on KFFA-AM. Anderson was agreeable on the condition that Williamson find a sponsor. He set up an audition for Williamson and Lockwood with Max Moore, the owner of the Interstate Grocer Company, producers of “King Biscuit” flour. Moore agreed to sponsor the program and “King Biscuit Time” went on the air November 21, 1941, playing Monday through Friday from 12:15 to 12:30.

The program was an immediate success and the station was soon averaging 1,000 pieces of mail each week. In 1943, James “Peck” Curtis and Robert “Dudlow” Taylor joined the show.

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Interstate Grocer soon started taking the “King Biscuit Entertainers” to do live shows. They traveled by bus to a new location at least every other week, performing at several grocery stores that carried King Biscuit flour over a two-day period, one of which was usually a Saturday. At some stops over 1,000 people turned out to hear them play. Williamson was so popular that in 1947 Interstate Grocer began producing Sonny Boy Corn Meal. The label featured a likeness of Williamson and soon the company had trucks painted to show Williamson sitting atop a huge ear of corn. He appeared on every “King Biscuit Time” show from its debut until sometime in 1944. Even after he left the show, his association with it remained strong, and he was still the ‘official’ leader of the King Biscuit Entertainers. Williamson made appearances on the show and toured with the King Biscuit Entertainers frequently but irregularly for the rest of his life.

While performing on “King Biscuit Time” Williamson kept a full schedule of performing dates, in fact that was one reason to do the show—to obtain advertising for local appearances. Williamson left Helena in 1944, though he always kept a room there and considered it his home. Between 1944 and 1946 he made frequent appearances on KNOE radio, Monroe, Louisiana, and KARK-AM/KGHI-AM, Little Rock. He also toured in Florida and Louisiana, occasionally returning to take over “King Biscuit Time” from Peck Curtis, who led the show in his absence. In 1947 and 1948 he had a radio show with Elmore James on WAZF-AM, Yazoo City, Mississippi, sponsored by Talaho Syrup, a patent medicine. While he was in Yazoo City, Williamson met and married Mattie Gordon. Though their relationship was tumultuous it was enduring—one of the last songs Williamson recorded was *Mattie is My Wife*.

Williamson worked with Robert Nighthawk on the “Hadacol Show” on KWEM-AM, West Memphis in 1949. A frequent guest that year was a young guitarist named B.B. King. In 1951, Williamson made some of his first recordings, in Jackson, Mississippi, for Trumpet. The following year, he and Elmore James recorded the Robert Johnson song *Dust My Broom*, which made it into the top ten on the R&B charts. After the success of *Dust My Broom*, Williamson’s contract with Trumpet was assumed by Chess, a larger operation. One of his first releases for the label was the single, *Don’t Start Me Talking (Or I’ll Tell You Everything I Know)*, which became a hit. Williamson had a number of very popular songs over the course of his career including *Cold Chills*, *One Way Out* and *Eyesight to the Blind*—his first solo recording for Trumpet, which was later recorded by the British rock band The Who on their 1969 LP, *Tommy*. Other singles included *Bring It on Home*, *Nights By Myself*, *Ninety-Nine*, *Fattening Frogs for Snakes*, *Your Funeral and My Trial*, *Wake Up Baby* and *Nine Below Zero*.

In the 50s Williamson toured the South, often working with Willie Love, at other times with Baby Boy Warren and his combo in Detroit, and as a solo everywhere in between. He spent a good deal of time performing and recording in Chicago but also worked in St. Louis and Milwaukee. Williamson was one of the most popular blues musicians in the country, recording for Chess, Mercury, Ace, JVB, Drummund, Excello, Spivey, Trumpet and other labels.

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Williamson entered the 60s with a full schedule of touring and club dates; he was on the road constantly. In 1963, he toured England and Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival and appeared on England's Granada-TV on "I Hear The Blues." That year he toured England again, this time with Chris Barber's Band. He was the subject of a Danish film short *Sonny Boy Williamson* and recorded and performed with British groups The Yardbirds (with Eric Clapton), The Animals, and the Cyril Davies All-Stars. Williamson returned to England and Europe in 1964 with the American Blues Festival. While in England, he began to imitate classic English gentleman's attire, but with his own sense of style and humor, wearing a bowler and kid gloves.

Williamson commissioned suits in the classic, proper style from an English tailor but had them made in a harlequin design—half grey and half black. He carried a black umbrella, *de rigueur* for an English gentleman, and a fancy attaché case full of harmonicas. At six feet six inches tall and weighing about 240 pounds he presented an unforgettable appearance.

After his last overseas tour, Williamson returned to Helena, Arkansas. He told "King Biscuit Time" producer Sonny Payne that he had "come home to die" (Buckalew: 54). He resumed his role on "King Biscuit Time," appearing daily on the live show. Williamson also made an appearance on "Some of the People" on KUHF-FM in Houston and performed in clubs near Helena. He went to visit old friends and old places, often in the company of good friend and fellow "King Biscuit" performer, Houston Stackhouse. On May 25, 1965, Williamson failed to turn up at KFFA for the daily broadcast. When James "Peck" Curtis went to Williamson's room at 421½ Elm Street he found that Williamson had died in his sleep the night before.

Williamson was one of the most influential blues performers of his generation. He, with Robert Jr. Lockwood, was one of the first electric blues acts in the Delta. He was the first blues performer to become famous largely on the basis of his radio performances. "King Biscuit Time" was one of the first, if not the first, radio program to feature black performers. A generation of Delta musicians grew up listening to Williamson and others on "King Biscuit Time." He influenced performers outside the Delta and the U.S. as well, into England. A partial list of those who owed a debt to Williamson include Clarence Anderson, The Beatles, Carey Bell, Eddie Burns, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Cotton, Frank Frost, John Lee Henley, Howlin Wolf, Lightnin' Slim, John Mayall, Little Junior Parker, Snooky Pryor, Hound Dog Taylor, Junior Wells and Little Sonny Willis.

Williamson was a masterful songwriter and performer. His songs, often on-the-spot-improvisations, were combinations of poetry, Delta storytelling, embellishments and humorous exaggeration. In describing his songs one blues historian said, "All of Williamson's songs have a strange, unique tone to them. They do not boast . . . or threaten . . . but they do speak of troubles and disappointments in a way that we have come to expect from the blues" (Guida, et al: 2).

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Williamson is acknowledged to have been a musical genius. His songs and music display “. . . an extraordinary instrumental virtuosity, an ability to create in an instant a romantic or dramatic climate, a sarcastic voice insinuating mischievously original, eloquent, and witty compositions . . .” (Herzharft: 385). His devastating humor distinguished him from his peers. Some of his songs, *Don't Start Me Talking*, *The Key*, *Nine Below Zero*, *Checkin' Up On My Baby*, *Bring It On Home* and *Help Me*, are among the most accomplished masterpieces of post-war blues and these acknowledged classics can be found in any serious blues harmonica player's repertoire. His style was uniquely his own and he was the master of his instrument: “Williamson's blues harp style included intricately woven phrasing, bold sonic textures, trills and vibrato, a wide range of dynamic passion and a superb sense of timing . . . his playing made the harp the center of attention, no matter how many other great blues musicians shared the stage with him” (Santelli: 457). Another wrote, “There was a uniquely sensitive and speech-like quality in his playing . . . he preferred to play his own blues songs . . . and they tended to be autobiographical” (Keller: 5).

Sources: Terrence Halaire Buckalew, “Blues Music in Arkansas.” MA Thesis, University of Arkansas, 1993, p. 54; Louis Guida, Lorenzo Thomas and Cheryl Cohen, *Blues Music in Arkansas*, p. 2; Rose Kettler, “King Biscuit Time,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 20, Nos. 1& 2 combined, December 1981 and March 1982, p. 5; Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, pp. 576-578; Gerard Herzharft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, p. 385; Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, pp. 457-458.

### **Woodfork, “Poor” Bob**

Born: Robert Woodfork, March 13, 1925, Lake Village, Arkansas

Died: June 1988, Chicago, Illinois

Robert Woodfork learned to play the guitar on a homemade instrument when he was in his teens. He moved to Chicago when he was sixteen and worked outside of music for a couple of years before entering the U.S. Army in 1943. He served in the army until 1947, entertaining frequently at USO shows in England. When he returned to Chicago, Woodfork worked as a sideman with the Otis Rush Band, performing at local clubs. From the late 40s through the 50s he worked and toured with a number of prominent bluesmen including Jimmy Rogers, Howlin Wolf and George Smith. He worked again with Otis Rush at the Club Alibi in Chicago in 1955. From the late 50s and into the 60s he was a sideman with Little Walter's band at Chicago clubs and recorded with both George Smith and Sunnyland Slim. In 1965, when European audiences were first becoming aware of the blues, he cut his first recordings as a solo for Decca. Woodfork worked as a sideman with blues artists in the Chicago area well into the 70s. He recorded two LPs as a solo, *Blues Southside Chicago* and *Have A Good Time*.

Sources: Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who*, p. 589; Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, p. 4549.