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THESE BLUES ARE INSPITE OF YOU MR. CHARLIE:
ORAL HISTORIES OF BLACK CHICAGO BLUES
MUSICIANS DISCUSSING MATTERS OF
RACE

Andrew Thomas

96 Pages

My thesis explores the impact of race on Chicago Blues musicians from 1985 to 2012, a time when musicians began publicly challenging the control of their music by white promoters. While there are a few scholarly works that discuss race and blues, none of them are written by a Black Chicago Blues musician. This thesis fills that void and provides further insight on race and marginalization through the experiences of musicians captured in their oral histories.

Chicago-style Blues music is an African American art form that since its inception has been controlled and commodified chiefly by whites, who are gatekeepers. I argue that white gatekeepers mostly hire white blues artists as headliners for blues festivals, recipients of record label contracts, and winners of blues music awards. This thesis answers the central question: Do white gatekeepers predominantly hire, market, and give awards to white blues artists over Blacks because they are racist, or is it because it is more profitable to bolster white artists? Importantly, these actions are not mutually exclusive, meaning gatekeepers may hire white artists over Blacks because white overrepresentation among blues consumers may create market incentives for promoters to privilege white artists over Black musicians. In other words, the gatekeepers may be responding to white consumers' racist preference for white blues artists.

KEYWORDS: Chicago Blues, Oral Histories, Race, Marginalization, Exclusion

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MUSICIANS DISCUSSING MATTERS OF
RACE

ANDREW THOMAS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of History

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2023

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THESE BLUES ARE INSPITE OF YOU MR. CHARLIE:
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RACE

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A.T.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In 1971, Bruce Iglauer received a \$2,500 family inheritance and used it to start Chicago's most eminent blues record label, Alligator Records. Alligator Records is the longest-running record label that exclusively publishes blues music. The first artists Iglauer recorded was Hound Dog Taylor and the House Rockers. Hound Dog Taylor was an African American blues singer-songwriter, who performed regularly on Chicago's Southside. Iglauer recorded Taylor and his House Rockers, live at Florence's Lounge for two nights. The record was a success for Iglauer, so he continued recording more African American artists. During the span of the next thirty years, Alligator's roster changed from being exclusively African American blues artists to racially mixed. On May 19, 2011, Bruce Iglauer, was interviewed by the *Chicago Reader* and was asked about the change. His incendiary remarks sparked outrage amongst Chicago's blues musicians; especially the African American musicians with a parent who had been signed to Alligator Records in the past. Iglauer replied, "I was marketing to the white audience. No doubt about it... show me an African American artist who has their act together in business... who doesn't have a significant drug or alcohol issue... and I will take that artist real seriously."¹

A year later, his article became a major topic of discussion at an academic symposium, "Blues and the Spirit," at Dominican University on June 8, 2012.² The symposium panel included six African American Chicago Blues musicians, three white blues music industry employees that advocated for Black Chicago Blues artists, and one white Chicago Blues musician. All of them spoke out about racism in the blues music industry. This thesis continues the work started at that symposium asking this central question: Do white gatekeepers

¹ David, Whiteis, "At 40 years old Alligator Records continues to evolve" *The Reader*, May 19, 2011, <https://chicagoreader.com/music/at-40-years-old-alligator-records-continues-to-evolve/>

² "Opening Plenary: 2012 Blues and the Spirit Symposium," YouTube Dominican University, River Forest II, June 8, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnqA20vPV7k>.

predominantly hire, market, and give awards to white blues artists over Blacks because they are racist, or is it because it is more profitable to bolster white artists? Notwithstanding, they are not mutually exclusive, meaning gatekeepers may hire white artists over Blacks because white overrepresentation among blues consumers may create market incentives for promoters to privilege white artists over Black musicians. In other words, the gatekeeper may be responding to white consumers' racist preference for Blacks.

Chicago-style Blues music is an African American art form that since its inception had been controlled and commodified mostly by whites. I will argue that blues music gatekeepers mostly hire white blues artists as headliners for blues festivals record label contracts, and winners of blues music awards. This happens for two reasons. First, there are white music consumers who want to see people that look like them perform blues and will pay a significant amount of money to see it. Secondly, white people have more spending power than Blacks, which means it is more lucrative to market to white consumers. To understand these consumer dynamics, I will highlight that African American Chicago Blues musicians are not marginalized from performing in Chicago Blues clubs; in fact, they dominate Chicago's live music scene. However, white club owners controlled the careers of Chicago's Black blues artists by paying them less than what they are worth, barred them from playing other clubs than their own, and stipulated how their music should be played. Evidence shows that even though African American artists dominated the live clubs, they were underpaid and exploited by the owners. Chicago Blues clubs paid very little in the 1980s and the pay did not increase throughout the mid-2000s. For Chicago Blues musicians to earn a living, many of them toured. Blues magazines were a popular way for blues artists to promote their upcoming tour dates and albums. Research shows white blues artists outnumber blacks on magazine covers, as blues award winners, and Chicago's top-

selling record label owner admitted in 2011 that he discontinued signing African American blues artists.

Blues authenticity was obscured by gatekeepers and academics who type casted blues musicians as poor, illiterate, and destitute. To get perspective and voicing of Black blues musicians that laid the foundation for Chicago Blues, I referred to Willie Dixon's *I Am the Blues*, Billy Boy Arnold's *A Blues Dream*, Buddy Guy's *When I Left Home*, and Bobby Rush's *I Ain't Studyin' Ya*. These autobiographies delineated how the authors struggled with racism in the blues music industry and their everyday lives.

None of the publications focuses on the control white gatekeepers have on blues music, and the adverse effects gatekeepers had on Chicago's Black blues artists. There are no published works that are written about Chicago Blues musicians and race, from a Black perspective, let alone a Black, Chicago Blues musicians' perspective. As a Chicago Blues drummer, who has performed on the blues scene for twenty years and has discussed race with various musicians many times, my experience adds to other African American musicians who have written about racism in the music business or conducted oral histories with their cohorts. In the late 1960s, the esteemed jazz drummer Arthur Taylor wrote *Notes & Tones*.³ In the book, Taylor, interviewed his colleagues about the evolution of jazz music, racism in the music business, and white gatekeepers. Some of the interviewees were Miles Davis, Nina Simone, and Randy Weston. This thesis is inspired by Taylor's work, but instead of jazz shaping the motif, I refer to the blues.

Importantly, I interviewed ten Black Chicago Blues musicians and used their testimonies to support my argument. The interviewees will show that racial discrimination and economic gain are the reasons why white gatekeepers hire and market white blues artists more often than

³ Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interview*, (New York, NY: De Capo Press, 1977).

Blacks. Most of the interviewees are originally from Chicago, others migrated there during the 1970s, into the 1990s. They all currently perform on the Chicago Blues scene and have been for many years.

The method I utilized to conduct oral histories is called the *snowball method*, used by historian Anne Enke in her book *Finding the Movement; Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*. The snowball method occurs when interviewees refer potential narrators to the interviewer.⁴ An example of this is when I interviewed the lead singer for the legendary blues band Mississippi Heat, Inetta Visor, I asked her at the end of the interview, who should I interview next, and Visor referred me to Tony “T. C.” Coleman who is a drummer that has toured with some of the most famous acts in blues, including Etta James, Bobby Blue Bland, and B.B. King. Coleman’s father was a blues singer in the 1960s known as, “King” Coleman, who penned a hit song, “The Mashed Potatoes Man.” Coleman recommended I interview E. G. McDaniel who is a second-generation Chicago Blues musician. McDaniel’s father was Floyd McDaniel— lead singer for the 1930s quartet The Rhythm Rascals. Some of the musicians lead their band, and others are band members who perform in many different bands; the industry term for them is side musicians. My questions included how race had affected their parent's careers:

- 1.) Did your father/mother have a white fan base or a majority African American?
- 2.) Did your father/mother receive royalties or fair compensation for their work?
- 3.) Did your father/mother discuss racism in the music business?

After asking the interviewees questions about their parent's careers, I asked about theirs:

⁴ Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement; Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, N.C & London, U.K: Duke University Press, 2007), 15.

1.) Do you have a white fan base or mainly African American?

2.) Do you think white blues musicians make more money than African American blues musicians?

3.) Do you think the music business is racist towards African Americans?

The oral histories in this thesis were approved by the Institution Review Board (IRB) in compliance with the guidelines for all research that involves human subjects.⁵ The IRB guidelines are derived from the “Oral Histories Association (OHA) Principle and Best Practices” document revised in 2018. The guidelines protect the rights of the narrators. This is achieved by conducting interviews with integrity and respecting the narrators and the communities from which they are from. “This means a commitment to an ethical process and to honoring diverse cultural values, ways of knowing, and perspectives.”⁶ Interviews that are not conducted in compliance with the OHA or IRB may misquote and misconstrue interviewee statements or publish interviews without written consent. The oral histories in this thesis were conducted with written consent from the subjects and is reflective of the narrators unaltered opinions and lived experiences in the blues world.

Chapter one of the thesis discusses the origin of Chicago Blues from 1940 to 1985. Chicago Blues has a rich history that began with Southern blues musicians who traveled to Chicago in the 1940s and 1950s during the second wave of the Great Migration. I will explain the employment conditions upon their arrival to Chicago and how Chicago Blues musicians earned a living with their music. By the mid-1950s blues, and other forms of African American

⁵ IRB-2022-384, *Oral Histories of Second-Generation Blues Musicians on Race*, November 9, 2022. I changed the title of the thesis after it was IRB approved. I extracted “Second-Generation” out of the title since there were a few artists included in the oral histories whose parents were not blues musicians.

⁶ “OHA-Principles and Best Practices: Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History.” Revised October 2018, <https://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/>.

music were covered by white pop singers. I then discuss why this occurred and how it affected blues artists. Next, I discuss how the 1968 Chicago uprisings affected the Chicago Blues scene. When Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, many Chicago Blues clubs on the cities' South and Westsides were destroyed during an uprising. However, later that year the first blues club on the Northside opened, precipitating a burgeoning blues scene in a predominantly white neighborhood. I also discuss the origin of Chicago's blues industry gatekeepers, who consist of the owners of the Chicago Blues clubs, concert promoters, record labels, members of award show committees, and blues magazine owners.

In chapter two, I discuss the origin of the Chicago Blues festival and why the festival promoters hired white blues acts. This will explain how white blues artists became a mainstay at the Chicago Blues festival which caused a trend that continued from 1985 until 2012. Next, I will discuss what constitutes a Chicago Blues artist as "authentic." "Authentic" blues musicians have been type-casted as being from the South, illiterate, poor, and destitute. These tropes truncated most white blues artists from being hired at Chicago Blues clubs while Blacks were being stereotyped. Next, I reveal that African American blues artists were being excluded from being on the cover of blues magazines, headliners at blues festivals, and winners of awards at blues award shows. White blues artists in 2011 were dominating these platforms, while Black artists were being marginalized. Bruce Iglauer admitted that he was not interested in signing Black artists to his Alligator Records label and the following year, that became fodder for discussion at "The Blues and the Spirit Summit" held in 2012, at Dominican University.

In chapter three, I reveal the oral histories of ten Chicago Blues musicians. The interviews will offer further insight into the people and themes discussed in chapters one and two and highlight answers to the thesis question: Are Black blues musicians being marginalized

because blues music gatekeepers are racist, or is it because it is more lucrative to hire white blues artists?

Chapter four is the conclusion of the thesis, and it will cover all of the major themes discussed throughout the thesis.

CHAPTER II: THE HISTORY OF CHICAGO BLUES 1940-1985

There are many definitions for the blues. Willie Dixon, the author of *I Am the Blues*, noted, “The blues are the facts of life, it is the *roots*, and all of the rest of America’s music is the *fruits*.”⁷ I define blues music as the soundtrack for African American’s pains and struggles in the United States. Blues music does not have a distinct definition because it means something different to all that invest their lives performing it. Furthermore, the exact date and location of where the blues originated are inconclusive, which is another aesthetic that adds to the obscurity of the music. Blues historian Amiri Baraka claims in his book *Blues People*, that blues is rooted in slavery and began from work songs before the antebellum period, in Mississippi.⁸ However, more recent research reveals in Chris Thomas King’s book, *The Blues the Authentic Narrative of My Music and Culture*, “Blues music was created in the 1890s, in New Orleans, by free Black Creoles.”⁹ Despite conflicting locations and dates of its origination, it is agreed by historians that it began in the South after the Reconstruction era, which was a violent and tumultuous time for African Americans. This was due to racial discriminatory laws known as Jim Crow laws. Lynching had become so pervasive in the South that in 1892, Ben Tillman, a one-eyed governor for the state of South Carolina nicknamed “Pitchfork,” publicly supported lynch mobs and “preached unrestrained white supremacy.”¹⁰ It was an extreme act of violence used mostly to regain economic control and reduce all political gains African Americans had amassed during Reconstruction. White vigilante mobs lynched African Americans with impunity

⁷ Billy Branch, interviewed by Andrew Thomas, November 15, 2022.

⁸ Amiri, Baraka *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, NY: Harper Press, 1963),61.

⁹ Chris Thomas King *The Blues the Authentic Narrative of My Music And Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2021), 20.

¹⁰ Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

after President Rutherford B. Hayes pulled military occupation out of the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. Military protection from the mobs was paramount for African American survival during and after the Reconstruction era. Without it, whites could lynch Blacks with no consequence.¹¹ Lynching continued into the twentieth century: 36 African Americans were lynched in 1917, 60 in 1918, and 76 in 1919.¹² Some of the Blues musicians that lived in the South during this period managed to circumvent the racial violence, and they shared their stories in their autobiographies.

Big Bill Broonzy, born in 1893 in Mississippi, was known as the godfather of Chicago Blues. During Broonzy's late teens, he left home and traveled throughout the South as a blues musician. He experienced trauma when he was nearly lynched by whites, and barely escaped the incident by stowing away on a freight train. A white man helped him by assisting him onto the train and giving him food. The man told him before they departed, "Goodbye and good luck but don't ever come back here again [meaning the South] because we don't like Negroes in this part of the world."¹³ Broonzy followed the white man's advice and migrated to Chicago, like thousands of other African Americans who left the South in this era, known as the Great Migration.

After the turn of the century, African Americans left the South in masses. "Between 1915 and 1918, five hundred thousand African Americans left for cities like Milwaukee, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Detroit. Another 1.3 million left the South between 1920 and 1930."¹⁴ Subsequently, African American southerners continued to migrate to Chicago

¹¹ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence In America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: the University of North Carolina Press, 2009),6.

¹² Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 122.

¹³ Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 16.

¹⁴ Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: Race, Power and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2006), 36.

not only to avoid being lynched but also to circumvent racist practices such as peonage. This was a system in which mostly African American and poor whites were arrested for violating arbitrary laws like vagrancy, or for simply being unemployed.

Willie Dixon was born in 1915, in Vicksburg Mississippi, when at just 13 years old he was arrested for stowing away on a Northbound freight train while traveling to Chicago. Dixon stated in his autobiography *I Am the Blues*, “The next thing I know, the guys (the police) put cuffs on us and put us in the back of this damn little truck. They locked us up all night, picked up five or six other guys and all of them were Black.”¹⁵ Dixon was arrested for hoboeing, detained, and a victim of peonage. Willie Dixon was a victim of this scheme for a month at Harvey Allen County Farm. He was beaten by men with leather straps before he escaped the plantation by stealing a mule and riding it to Memphis. When he got to Memphis, he “hoboed” again to the freight yards of Chicago, arriving in 1936.

Bobby Rush is another Chicago Blues musician who migrated to Chicago. He did not leave the South under duress like other blues musicians. Instead, he left to abandon his inherited job as a sharecropper. Rush was born in 1937, in Claiborne Parish in Northern Louisiana. Rush explained, sharecropping was a daunting task because his family and all the Black sharecroppers in his hometown were being cheated out of their earnings. Rush explained,

A big part of the sharecropping deceit was that all the plantation owners had these little stores. Black sharecroppers would buy from these stores, [mostly] on credit...In other words, you paid up when your fall crops came in. Problem was that the little profit you made went right back into the hands of the very plantation owners that you were sharecropping for. Not to mention that if they charged you two dollars for flour, they

¹⁵ Willie Dixon, Don Snowden, *I Am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story* (London, UK: De Capo Press, 1989), 26.

were probably getting it for a dollar. So, you A get screwed six ways from Sunday: the product markup, the credit ruse, combined with any profit you may squeeze out being sucked like a vacuum cleaner right back into the white folks' hands. So, you were never free. Never had the opportunity to buy land. Never had the opportunity to have a dream. Rush decided that he did not want to live as a sharecropper, so, he left home and arrived in Chicago in 1953, via train.¹⁶

Mike Rowe explained the significance of the Illinois Central Railroad to blues for Chicago. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Illinois Central Railroad ran almost one thousand miles beginning in New Orleans, with stops in Jackson and Greenville, Mississippi before arriving in Chicago. African Americans from Mississippi and Louisiana mostly rode the Illinois Central Railroad mainly because it was the only one accessible to them.¹⁷

In the 1940s, many African Americans left the South not only to escape violence but also to take advantage of the new employment opportunities in the North created by WWII. In June of 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the National Defense Advisory Commission which hired citizens to manufacture munitions for the war. Many jobs in the North were previously filled by immigrants, but the war truncated European immigration. This created a vacuum, that was filled by African American workers from the South.¹⁸ To further elicit African American employees, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, banning discrimination in employment practices by Federal Agencies and unions associated with the war effort. This order along with employment training services strengthened employment opportunities for African Americans.

¹⁶ Bobby Rush, *I Ain't Studidin' Ya: My American Blues Story* (New York, NY: Hatchett Books, 2021), 15.

¹⁷ Mike Rowe, *Chicago Blues: The City & The Music* (Boston, MA: De Capo press, 1981), 32.

¹⁸ Rowe, *Chicago Blues*, 25-26.

In 1941, *Bags and Baggage* newspaper published an interview of Dr. Robert C. Weaver, Chief of the Negro Employment and Training Office, who solicited “Negroes throughout the country to take advantage of defense classes now open to all trainees.”¹⁹ A. Phillip Randolph’s threat of executing the March on Washington is recognized as the catalyst for President Roosevelt’s executive decree.²⁰ “The prospect of a march on Washington D. C., by 100,000 angry Blacks scared the government half to death.”²¹ Randolph used the march to leverage the government to emanate employment opportunities for Blacks. Despite The Fair Employment Practices Committee and EO8802, by 1945, Black employment declined. Previously, during the war, African American workers were offered jobs because they were needed for the war effort, not because the government wanted to ameliorate Black unemployment.²² When the war ended, Black unemployment rose again. Unemployment was high, the job market was competitive, and many Blacks faced discrimination.

Chicago Blues musician Bill Broonzy wrote about Black labor discrimination in his autobiography *Big Bills Blues*. Broonzy was in search of a job in Chicago when he answered a help-wanted ad. When he arrived at the office there was an African American lady in line, with about fifty whites. They waited about five hours with a number, in hopes of being called for an interview. They were notified they were not getting a job when a white man came out and announced, “Sorry but we won’t hire any Negroes today and don’t know when we will.”²³ Bill wrote about the incident in 1945, in a song entitled “Get Back- (Black, Brown, and White)”:

¹⁹ "Ask Negroes to Train for Defense Jobs." *Bags and Baggage*, Readex: America's Historical Newspapers, July 1, 1941, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A12912F9FC45BBE2B%40EANX-12B76B722EC269C8%402430177-12B76B724F7D83E0%402-12B76B729D1F98D0%40Ask%2BNegroes%2Bto%2BTrain%2Bfor%2BDefense%2BJobs>.

²⁰ Touré F. Reed, *Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2020), 41.

²¹ Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 179.

²² Reed, *Toward Freedom*, 43.

²³ Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues*, 59.

I went to an employment office.
Got a number and I got in line.
They called everybody's number.
But they never did call mine
They say if you white, should be all right
If you brown, stick around.
But if you're black
Mmm, Mmm, Brother, git back, git back, git back²⁴

Broonzy's song highlighted the employment discrimination many African Americans experienced during the mid to late 1940s. The economy continued a downward trend until the 1950s when the Korean War began. African Americans were able to work in the defense plants again, and from 1951 to 1953, Blacks enjoyed some prosperity, until 1954 when the war ended. Blues musician John Brim wrote a song about it in his 1954 release of *Tough Times*. Brim correlated the failing job market to the 1930s recession:

Me and my babe were talking, and what she said was true
She said, 'It seems like time is getting tough, like they was in '32
You don't have no job, our bills are past due
So now tell me baby, what we gonna do?²⁵

In 1955, journalist William Haber wrote a newspaper article for the *Chicago Defender* about the lack of employment opportunities for African Americans entitled, "How Secure Is Negro's Economic Security." Haber explained, "The racial occupation pattern has been dented, but not removed. The gap between white and black has been narrowed, but is still very wide, too

²⁴ Big Bill Broonzy, "Black, Brown, and White" Storyville records 6.23703, 1951.

²⁵ John Brim, "Tough Times," Parrot Records, P-53194, 1953.

wide for a democratic society based on the conception of an equal opportunity for all.”²⁶ Haber also pointed out that Black workers were being locked out of skills training positions, which was the cause of Black unemployment. In 1959, A. Phillip Randolph established the Negro American Labor Council to combat this problem by eliminating racial bars in skilled trades, but the Council failed. Later that year, it was reported in the *Chicago Defender* that “Pockets of unemployment exist in 74 major industrial areas and noted that Negroes had about twice as great a jobless rate—13 percent—as white workers.”²⁷ Even though the job market was volatile in the 1940s and 1950s, some blues performers were fortunate to find jobs, for those who could not they relied on playing music full-time to earn a living.

During the 1940s, some of the most notable blues artists that performed on the night-club circuit were, Memphis Minnie, Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Boy Williamson, Tampa Red, Johnny Shines, and J. B. Lenoir. For most musicians, club performances did not pay enough to cover living expenses so, playing at rent parties became another outlet for musicians to earn money.

Late night, after the bars and clubs closed in Chicago, rent parties offered entertainment that included gambling, dancing, food, and alcohol.²⁸ Musicians that performed at rent parties during the 1930s and 1940s played piano, harmonica, or acoustic guitar. As unamplified music, this style fit the space of small gatherings. Described today as Country Blues, it has developed for street performance where the musicians replaced acoustic guitars with electric ones and added amplifiers to their harmonicas to outstrip the noise of the city. Amplification changed the

²⁶ William Haber, “How Secure Is Negro's Economic Security,” *Chicago Defender National Edition 1921-1967*, Aug 13, 1955, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/illinoisstate.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/how-secure-is-negros-economic-security/docview/492889665/se-2>

²⁷ “Report Dip in Unemployment: Negro Jobless Rate is Highest” *Daily Defender 1956-1960*, April 08, 1959, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/illinoisstate.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/report-dip-unemployment/docview/493733902/se-2>.

²⁸ Bill Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story As Told To Yannick Bruynoghe* ed. Yannick Bruynoghe (London, U. K.: Cassel & CO, 1955), 42-43.

music from Country Blues to Chicago Blues. The first guitarist to take credit for playing amplified blues was T-Bone Walker, who admitted, “I don’t know whether I *was* the first guitar player to use the electric. But I was *one of* the first...I think it was 1939.”²⁹

Mike Rowe explained, "The largest audience a street musician could reach was to be found at the Maxwell Street market area” which had been home to eastern and southern European immigrants prior to WWII, and which became the meeting place for all the newly arrived singers and the center of the amateur blues activity of Chicago.³⁰ Maxwell street was an open-air market that extended a few blocks “where on Sunday morning people came from everywhere to sell their goods. [Mostly] garage sale stuff, they’d have it in the streets all over the place.” It was a great opportunity to meet musicians, entertain a big crowd, and earn some tips. Willie Dixon worked at the Chicago Stockyard during the week and played music on Maxwell Street on the weekends; he explained, “I remember many times when we used to come home with \$50 a piece and that was more than the average guy was making as a salary. I was working the stockyards and I wasn’t making but \$30 a week.”³¹ Other than playing for tips on Maxwell Street, another way for a blues artist to earn money was *scabbin*.

Scabbin refers to when an artist walked to several clubs in one evening asking music club owners for permission to play on-stage for tips. After a few songs and a few dollars earned, the musician would move on to the next venue. Blues musician Jimmie Lee explained how he began his career as a Chicago Blues musician playing at church, then on Maxwell Street, and then on to scabbin, with a fellow musician named ‘Blind Percy. “I started playing on the streets with this blind man, in churches and things like that... Then there was a man named Louis...he told me,

²⁹ Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York, NY: Collier Books, 1978), 121.

³⁰ Mike Rowe, *Chicago Blues*, 47.

³¹ Willie Dixon, *I Am the Blues*, 50-51

Boy, I'm gonna buy a guitar and amplifier for you to play on. So finally, one day he came with a “Silvertone” guitar and a Gibson amplifier. Then I’d play on Maxwell Street every Sunday, and he’d collect the money... We’d go from club to club, and we’d get \$25 or \$30 a night in each club. We did that up until about 1949.”³² Scabbin was a popular way for veteran blues musicians to earn money in between gigs and gain exposure which was a popular strategy to becoming a hired blues musician who performed at clubs.

By the 1950s, a new crop of blues entertainers was performing in Chicago. They were not playing the old Country-style Blues their predecessors played with acoustic instruments at house parties, instead, they played with the power of electricity; further cementing the Chicago Blues Sound. Although there were musicians like T-Bone Walker and Blind Percy during the late 1940s that amplified their instruments and played them on Maxwell Street, Little Walter Jacobs was the first to amplify a harmonica and make the sound a commercial hit by recording the instrumental, “Juke.”

Little Walter Jacobs was born in Parish, Louisiana and migrated to Chicago in 1946. Before settling in Chicago, Jacobs toured the South with guitarist ‘Honey Boy’ Edwards as a blues duo. In 1952, Jacobs stepped out on his own as a solo artist and recorded his first single “Juke” for Chess Records. The single became a hit, was #1 on the Billboard charts for eight weeks and is still the biggest hit of the Chess Records label. “Juke” was inspired by alto saxophone solos that were dominant in jazz and rhythm & blues music in the late forties and early fifties. Walter was a fan of jazz music and mimicked the sounds on his harmonica.³³ “Juke” was on top of the Billboard charts and the aftermath of its success inspired artists to write more

³² Mike Rowe, *Chicago Blues*, 48.

³³ “Deep Listening: How Little Walters Juke Revolutionary Techniques Redefined His Instrument,” *Channel Eye Media*, March 31, 2021, <https://channeleye.media/deep-listening-07/>.

up-tempo instrumentals. Before “Juke” Country Blues songs during the 1940s had lyrics. Big Bill Bronzy’s popular hit, “Key to The Highway” is a song written about the Great Migration:

I've got the key to the highway
Billed out and bound to go
I'm gonna leave here, runnin'
Because walkin' is most too slow
I'm going back to the border
Where I'm better known
'Cause you haven't done nothin'
But drove a good man away from home
Give me one mo' kiss, mama
Just befo' I go
'Cause when I'm leavin' here
I won't be back no mo'³⁴

Chicago Blues lyrical content was vast. In the late 1930s and 1940s when African American blues musicians had good times at rent parties and social events, they wrote songs about it. But when the Black population suffered, the songs were about job discrimination, homelessness, and poverty. Blues musicians wrote about all aspects of life, including taxes, war, and politics.³⁵ In the 1950s, Chicago Blues reached its pinnacle in songwriting and musicianship, known as the Golden Years of Chicago Blues. The most influential musician of that era is Willie Dixon.

³⁴ Big Bill Bronzy, “Key to The Highway,” Vocalion records, P-05441, 1940.

³⁵ Mike Rowe *Chicago Blues; The City & The Music*, 96-97. J. B. Lenoir sang about taxes, politics, and the Korean War.

Willie Dixon migrated to Chicago in 1936. He became a songwriter and bassist who became a full-time staff songwriter and session bassist for Chess Records. Chess Records, established in 1950, released songs written by Dixon that became known as the “Chess Sound” which set a precedence for what constitutes Chicago-style Blues. The instruments used to create “The Chess Sound” was amplified harmonica, acoustic bass, electric guitar, piano, and drums. Some of Dixon’s biggest hits in the 1950s were “I’m Ready,” written by Dixon and sung by Muddy Waters in 1954, and “Maybellene,” written by Chuck Berry and produced by Dixon in 1955. “Maybellene’s” success solidified Chuck Berry to become the first “actual rock ’n’ roller.”³⁶

As the 1950s progressed, Chicago Blues evolved. However, in 1955, a new sound was burgeoning on the Westside of town. It was a new style of blues that made the “Chess Sound”—which began just five years ago, seem old. It was called “Westside Soul,” a style of blues that emphasized electric guitar riffs, smooth-sounding vocalists, and danceable rhythm sections akin to soul music. Cobra Records was an ephemeral African American-owned label that ran from 1955 to 1959. Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, Ike Turner & his Kings of Rhythm, and Magic Sam were some of the most notable artists on Cobra Records, all of whom had hit songs.

When blues, rock ’n’ roll, and soul became the vogue in the 1950s, music industry executives hired white artists who could sing the popular songs in those genres. When an artist records a song originally performed by another artist, the process is known as “covering a song.” White artists who covered songs originally recorded by African Americans became normalized in the music industry. In a 1953, newspaper article titled, “A Critic Takes A Look And Says Let’s Save Negro Music,” the journalist John Henry explained that African American music was

³⁶ Dixon, *I Am The Blues*, 91.

inspired by real-life experiences but pop music, which was performed mostly by white artists lacked realism. To ameliorate this, white music executives instructed the white pop artist to record blues and soul songs previously recorded by Black artists. The writer used “How Much Is That Doggie In The Window” as an example of a popular pop song performed by white artists that lacked lyrical substance, which was the biggest commercial hit of that time.³⁷ Henry also noted that white music consumers preferred being entertained by white artists rather than Blacks, because the music industry's lack of diversity shaped their taste.³⁸

By the end of the 1950s, blues music was not popular with the masses because soul, rock, and rhythm & blues were gaining popularity, but it was still being performed nightly in clubs on Chicago’s South and Westsides. Blues music was unknown to many throughout the United States, but by the 1960s it traveled internationally, making its way to Europe.

In 1962, two German concert promoters Horst Lippman and Fritz Rau brought the first American Folk Blues Festival to Europe. Lippman and Rau met Willie Dixon in Chicago and told him about their idea to host a blues tour in Europe. Dixon became the producer and musical director for the tour, and they traveled throughout Europe for four weeks; the tours continued throughout the 1970s. “Nowhere was the impact of those shows felt more thoroughly than in England. The Folk Blues festivals triggered a whole new phase in music...”³⁹ Blues music tours began burgeoning in the United States. The 1960s and early 1970s became known as the Folk Music Revival. The folk festivals gave many white people their first opportunity to hear blues music; many of them fell in love with the music.

³⁷ John Henry, "A Critic Takes a Look and Says-- Let's Save Negro Music!" *Freedom* May 1, 1953, *News Bank: Black Life in America*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.bpl.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AAHX&docref=image/>

³⁸ John Henry, "A Critic Takes a Look and Says-- Let's Save Negro Music!" *Freedom* May 1, 1953, *News Bank: Black Life in America*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.bpl.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AAHX&docref=image/>

³⁹ Willie Dixon, *I Am the Blues*, 122.

The Folk Music Revival inspired many white musicians to study blues. Billy Branch is a veteran Chicago Blues musician, who explained that by the late 1960s, the blues musician milieu was racially diverse, “Historically white people have always gravitated towards Black music, maybe not so much in mass, but you always had a steady trickle of white fans and musicians. I mean, even in 1969, by the time I appeared on the scene, white musicians were playing in the clubs and, and jamming in the clubs... It was more young white cats when I came along, I was one of the few Black cats trying to learn how to play the harp (the harp is a slang term for harmonica).”⁴⁰

The early 1970s fostered a new generation of white blues musicians that became famous, Corky Siegel, Paul Butterfield, Charlie Musselwhite, and Michael Bloomfield are a few. Corky Siegel was inspired to play harmonica by listening to Bob Dylan and Bob Buchanan records, both of whom were a part of the Folk Blues Revival.⁴¹ Bob Dylan is often credited by white musicians for being a conduit to blues music via The Revival. Chris Thomas King explains this further when he purported that in 1964 many Folk Revivalists considered Bob Dylan, “The voice of a generation, a poet...[and] prophet.”⁴² He was the star of the Folk Festivals because he sang blues, played harmonica, and was embraced by Black Blues artists. Dylan along with John Hammond, Michael Bloomfield, Charlie Musselwhite, Elvin Bishop, and Paul Butterfield is described by Thomas King as part of a new wave of white American musicians, who for the first time, promoted themselves as blues musicians.⁴³ The Folk Music Revival became a high point in history for many white blues gatekeepers and music fanatics that discovered blues during this

⁴⁰ Billy Branch was interviewed by Andrew Thomas on November 15, 2022.

⁴¹ Marty Gunther, “Featured Interview: Corky Siegel,” *Blues Blast Magazine*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.bluesblastmagazine.com/featured-interview-corky-siegel/>.

⁴² Chris Thomas King, *The Blues*, 181.

⁴³ Chris Thomas King, *The Blues*, 179.

era. They visited Chicago's South and Westside blues clubs to hear them play. There were music venues in Chicago's Black neighborhoods that featured live blues before 1968. However, after the Martin Luther King uprisings many were destroyed.

During the 1960s, some of the most notable blues clubs were, Peppers, Theresa's, and Ada's Lounge on the Southside, the Club Zanzibar, Silvio's, and Vis Lounge on the West side.⁴⁴ On April 5, 1968, one day after Martin Luther King was assassinated most of the businesses in the Southside and Westside neighborhoods were looted and burned down. The city's high school children as reported by the *Chicago Tribune*, were the protagonist of the uprisings when they began looting and destroying stores on 63rd street on the Southside and Madison Ave on the Westside.⁴⁵ Blues bassist Carl Norrington performed in the clubs during the 1960s before the riots, he reminisced on the days when the Westside was vibrant with blues clubs, "Bobby Rush, Freddie King, Luther Allison, Magic Sam, Eddie Taylor Sr.— they all played at Silvio's, later renamed the Riviera... Two blocks away at Lake and Sacramento [street] was the Boula-Boula [club]. Duke's Blue Flame and the Avenue Lounge stood at California and Madison [street], near the site of the now-closed Wallace Catfish Corner [restaurant]. Ma Bea's Lounge was at Sacramento and Madison [street]... Then, in 1968, the riots came... The Riviera [theater] wasn't destroyed, but it was broken into. Everything slowed up in the area."⁴⁶ Most of the Westside and Southside blues clubs that were destroyed were never rebuilt. However, white-owned blues clubs sprang up downtown and in white neighborhoods on the cities' Northside and suburbs.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Caleb Dube, dissertation p.42

⁴⁵ Tony Briscoe, Ese Olumhense, "Rage, Riots, Ruin," *Chicago Tribune*, Tony Briscoe, Ese Olumhense, August 16, 2018, <http://graphics.chicagotribune.com/riots-chicago-1968-mlk/index.html>.

⁴⁶ Bonnie McKeown, "Veterans of West Side Blues Recall the Music," *Austin Weekly News*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.austinweeklynews.com/2019/02/18/veterans-of-west-side-blues-recall-the-music/>

⁴⁷ Bonnie McKeown, "Veterans of West Side Blues Recall the Music," *Austin Weekly News*, February 18, 2019,

The oldest Northside blues club is the Kingston Mines, established in 1968, months after the uprisings. The owner, Doc Pellegrino explained in an interview with American Blues Scene, that it was a struggle to open a blues club on the Northside because “not many [white] people knew about the blues. People were touchy about it. They were afraid of what I was doing. I had all Black musicians and half of my employees were Black.”⁴⁸ The Northsides second oldest blues club is B.L.U.E.S., which opened in 1979, by Robert Hecko who admits, “He never listened to blues music before opening the club.”⁴⁹ His friend and business partner Bill Gilmore was a concert promoter who had experience in booking blues bands and suggested turning the former bar Omni, a neighborhood waterhole into B.L.U.E.S., a bar hosting live blues seven nights a week. Kingston Mines and B.L.U.E.S were across the street from each other. The location became known as “Blues Alley,” and subsequently more bars featuring live blues opened in the area. Hecko was interviewed by the *Chicago Tribune* to celebrate his club’s tenth anniversary, he stated, “The popularity of blues goes up and down. But right now, it seems so popular, there is a club on every corner...”⁵⁰ Blues clubs became a mainstay on the Northside and downtown.

Some of the Chicago blues artists that played the clubs were releasing records. However, by the early 1970s most of the Chicago Blues independent labels that recorded blues during the 1950s were out of business. The only one that is currently functioning is Delmark Records. In 1958, Bob Koester started Delmark Records. Delmark Records was a business venture that Koester started as an extension of his store the Jazz Record Mart. Koester bought a music catalog

⁴⁸ J D Nash, “Kinston Mines Owner Doc Pellegrino Dead At 92,” *American Blues Scene*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.americanbluesscene.com/2018/05/kingston-mines-owner-doc-pellegrino-dead-at-92/>.

⁴⁹ Judy Hevrdejs, “AN ORIGINAL, B.L.U.E.S. CELEBRATES 10 YEARS,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 28, 1989, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-07-28-8902200920-story.html>.

⁵⁰ Judy Hevrdejs, “AN ORIGINAL, B.L.U.E.S. CELEBRATES 10 YEARS,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 28, 1989.

from a man named Seymour Schwartz who had amassed a large collection of 1930s jazz artists.⁵¹ Koester subsequently recorded local blues musicians and traveled throughout the South to recruit more artists. With the profits of the store financing his record business, Delmark Records flourished and became the oldest steady operational record label in Chicago. Koester hired employees and taught them the facets of the music business. The shop became an incubator for future blues music gatekeepers. One of the shop's former employees stated, “Loads of employees went on to start record labels, among them Bruce Iglauer (Alligator Records), Chuck Nessa (Nessa Records), Michael Frank (Earwig Records), Amy van Singel and Jim O’ Neal (Rooster, plus Living Blues magazine), Bruno Johnson (Okka Disk Records), and Steve Dolins (Sirens Records). Club owners Joe Segal (Jazz Showcase) and Pete Crawford (Blues Etc.) both worked in the shop.”⁵² Bob Koester hired the stock clerk—Bruce Iglauer, who like many others fell in love with blues music while listening to artists from the Folk Blues Revival. In 1971, Iglauer who was Koester’s most accomplished student founded Alligator Records.

In the 1970s, Bruce Iglauer frequented blues bars on the city's South and Westsides often. He loved live blues, but there was one band he enjoyed most of all, Hound Dog Taylor and The House Rockers. Taylor’s band was loud, exuberant, and danceable, but when Iglauer pitched the act to Bob Koester to become a Delmark Records artist, Koester passed. Iglauer sensed that passing on Taylor was a mistake, so he recorded Taylor himself and he became Alligator Records' first artist. During Iglauer’s first year in the record business, he sold 9,000 copies of Hound Dog Taylor's album. By 1991, he grossed four million dollars in record sales. Bruce

⁵¹ Cary Baker, “Bob Koester Speaks About Delmark Records and the Jazz Record Mart,” *American Blues Scene*, November 3, 2022, https://www.americanbluesscene.com/2022/11/bob-koester-speaks-about-delmark-records-and-the-jazz-record-mart/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=bob-koester-speaks-about-delmark-records-and-the-jazz-record-mart.

⁵² Peter Margasak, “Remembering Jazz Record Mart from inside,” *Chicago Reader*, February 19, 2016, Peter Margasak <https://chicagoreader.com/blogs/remembering-jazz-record-mart-from-inside/>.

Iglauer went on to become one of Chicago's most eminent blues music industry gatekeepers. He accomplished this by propelling Alligator Records as the highest-earning Chicago Blues record label and becoming a committee member for the Chicago Blues Festival.

The Chicago Blues Festival began in 1984. Iglauer explained his committee duties during an interview with *The Chicago Ambassador*, "I've been involved with the festival from day one, first as chairman of the committee that booked the talent, and..., as a member of the advisory committee."⁵³ The festival is held every year on the first weekend in June and it was declared by Mayor Harold Washington as Chicago Blues Festival weekend. 140,000 people attended the first Chicago Blues Festival making it the largest blues festival in the world. The first Chicago Blues Festival was a tribute to Muddy Waters who had died the previous year. All the performers at the festival were artists he worked with. They were mostly all Black blues artists except for Johnny Winter, a white blues musician that befriended Waters. Winter did not headline the festival; he accompanied the band as a side musician. The very next year, the festival featured mostly Black artists again however, the headliner of the show—which is the most coveted spot because the headliner receives the most money and performs last—was Stevie Ray Vaughan and his band Double Trouble, who were white.⁵⁴

Conclusion

When blues musicians left the South during the second wave of the Great Migration in the 1940s, their music became an artistic expression and a tool for their survival. Musicians scabbed' through Chicago's Westside and Southside carrying their instruments and amplifiers.

⁵³ Bob Chiarito, "Bruce Iglauer – One of the last beacons of the blues still going strong," *The Chicago Ambassador* <https://thechicagoambassador.wordpress.com/2016/05/20/bruce-iglauer-one-of-the-last-beacons-of-the-blues-still-going-strong/>.

⁵⁴ Larry Kart, "BLUES FEST, ALL IN ALL, A GRAND SUCCESS," *Chicago Tribune*, June 10, 1985, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1985-06-10-8502060580-story.html>.

Some played for tips, while others worked jobs during the day and performed at night. The job market was plentiful during war times in the 1940s and 1950s (WWII and Korean War) due to the defense plants. But, when there was an armistice, African Americans were released from their jobs. Labor discrimination became a popular topic in Chicago Blues lyrics.

During the 1950s, white artists covered Black music because white pop music lacked realism. Newspaper journalist John Henry further explained, the lack of diversity in the music industry shaped white music consumer's taste. In other words, whites preferred being entertained by white artists because that is what they were accustomed too. Music industry gatekeepers profited off white artists that performed Black music.

By the mid-1960s the Folk Music Revival was burgeoning in Europe and throughout the United States. This Revival introduced many white music consumers to blues music for the first time, burgeoning a new consumer base in Chicago Blues. Some of these consumers worked at Jazz Record Mart, a store that opened in 1963 that became an incubator for Chicago Blues gatekeepers.

By the 1970s, the gatekeepers opened blues clubs, started record labels, and published blues magazines. They mainly marketed to white music consumers perpetuating the trend that began in the 1950s. By the mid-1980s, the Chicago Blues gatekeepers who formerly worked at Jazz Record mart controlled the Chicago Blues industry.

Chapter two discusses the transition from Chicago Blues music consumers being mostly Black to white during the 1980s, and the role gatekeepers played in making this happen. It also explains the controlling nature of Northside blues club owners over Black blues musicians. These musicians were excluded by the gatekeepers from, being on the cover of magazines, being nominated for awards, receiving record label contracts, and headlining at blues festivals. The

discrimination was a major topic of discussion on the 2012 Dominican University "Blues and the Spirit" summit.

CHAPTER III: WHITE DOMINANCE IN CHICAGO BLUES 1985-2012

Introduction

This chapter explores how Stevie Ray Vaughan— a white blues-rock artist— and John Belushi and Dan Akroyd— two comedic actors who became famous for mimicking Chicago Blues musicians on *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*— brought national and local attention to Chicago Blues. White Chicagoans and tourists frequented Chicago’s blues clubs and attended the Chicago Blues Festival en masse due to the popularity of *SNL* and burgeoning star Stevie Ray Vaughan. This chapter also explores the criteria of an “authentic” blues musician. During the 1980s/1990s, Chicago Blues club owners on the Northside established the criteria for “authentic” blues acts, from musicianship to stage performance. I will also demonstrate the various ways these white gatekeepers undermined and even damaged Black artists. Indeed, while most of the blues musicians were Black, largely white club owners exerted profound influence over this historic Black art form, instructing Black artists how and what to play in an ironic pursuit of “authenticity.” Adding insult to injury, blues club owners underpaid Black artists, forcing them to pursue their livelihoods, on the road. If this was not bad enough, blues magazines—such as *Living Blues*, *Blues Revue*, and *Blues Blast*—and blues music awards consistently marketed white artists over Black artists.

I use quantitative data to determine if whites from 1985 until 2012 received more festival headlining slots than Blacks at the Chicago Blues Festival, if whites outnumber Blacks on the cover of blues magazines, and if whites received more blues awards during the 1980s into the mid-2000s. I refer to *Living Blues Magazine* because it was established in Chicago by Jim

O’Neal who was a former employee of Jazz Record Mart which was an incubator for Chicago Blues gatekeepers, *Blues Revue* magazine because it was *Living Blue*’s biggest competitor, and *Blues Blast Magazine* because it is the largest selling electronic blues magazine established in 2007. Lastly, I discuss the 2012 “Blues and the Spirit” Summit at Dominican University. Since 2008, the Summit brought together blues musicians, and consumers to examine the history, and social politics of the Chicago Blues industry. In 2012, the panel discussed the exclusion of African American Blues artists at festivals, award shows, and on the cover of blues magazines. Bruce Iglauer’s 2011 incendiary newspaper article in the *Chicago Reader* became a major point of the conversation. The Summit held a panel of Black blues artists, David Whiteis, a white blues journalist, and Barry Dolins who was special events director for the mayor’s office, who is also white. Dolins hired the acts at the Chicago Blues Festival, so he is considered a Chicago Blues gatekeeper.

“Who The Hell Are You to Define my Blues” ...Sharon Lewis

Stevie Ray Vaughan was born on October 3, 1954, in Dallas, Texas. He started playing guitar at ten years old and was self-taught. By his junior year of high school, Vaughan dropped out of school and moved to Austin, TX to play music full-time. He joined a band that was named after the Otis Rush song “Double Trouble.” In 1983, Vaughan signed a deal with CBS/Epic Records and recorded his first album *Texas Flood*, voted “Best New Talent and Best Electric Blues Guitarist in a 1983 readers’ poll by *Guitar Player Magazine*.”⁵⁵ Vaughan stated that he learned how to play blues by listening to “B.B. King, Albert Collins, Buddy Guy, and all the

⁵⁵ Stone, Calen D., and James M. Manheim. "Vaughan, Stevie Ray." In *Contemporary Musicians*, edited by Angela Pilchak, 185-188. Vol. 52. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2005. *Contemporary Musicians* (accessed December 5, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3430500069/GVRL.contmpmusic?u=ilstu_milner&sid=bookmark-GVRL.contmpmusic&xid=0764423f.

masters, trying to absorb their feel and sound.”⁵⁶ CBS’s executive producer John Hammond who signed Vaughan to his deal, complemented Vaughan, “I was so delighted by Stevie’s sound...It’s unlike anyone else’s—and he’s such a marvelous improviser...He’s the kind of creative force one looks for but rarely finds...”⁵⁷ While Vaughan was a masterful guitar player, his sound was hardly innovative. In fact, he learned how to play the blues by listening to African American artists. This is an example of what blues scholar Amiri Baraka calls “The Great Music Robbery” where a white musician is credited for innovating music that they covered.⁵⁸

In 1984, Vaughan became the first white musician to win a W. C. Handy Award (later renamed a Blues Music Award) for Entertainer of the Year and Blues Instrumentalist of the Year. He also won his first Grammy Award for a song he recorded titled “Flood Down in Texas” on a compilation album, *Blues Explosion* along with several other Black Chicago Blues performers.⁵⁹ Vaughan went on to win six Grammys in total. He sustained a successful career even though he was addicted to drugs and alcohol. His drug abuse was not a secret. Vaughan admitted in an interview with *Guitar Player* magazine, “I’m an alcoholic. I didn’t know that for a long time...I started drinking when I was about six, and through the years, the more pressures and the more things that I have become involved with, it ended up where I started using drinks and other drugs to keep me going.”⁶⁰

Despite Vaughan’s addictions, in 1985, Bruce Iglauer recommended him to perform at the Chicago Blues Festival. The very next year, Vaughan could not finish a European tour due to his drug and alcohol abuse. He stated in an interview with the *Washington Post*, “I woke up one

⁵⁶ Stone, Calen D., and James M. Manheim. "Vaughan, Stevie Ray." In *Contemporary Musicians*

⁵⁷ Stone, Calen D., and James M. Manheim. "Vaughan, Stevie Ray." In *Contemporary Musicians*

⁵⁸ Amiri Baraka, Amina Baraka, “The Great Music Robbery,” in *The Music; Reflections on Jazz and Blues*, 331.

⁵⁹ *Blues Explosion*, Atlantic Records compilation album, 1984. <https://rateyourmusic.com/release/comp/various-artists/blues-explosion.p/>

⁶⁰ Nolan, Tom. 2020. “30 Years on Remembering Stevie Ray Vaughan.” *Guitar Player*, October 1, 2020. <https://www.guitarplayer.com/players/30-years-on-remembering-stevie-ray-vaughan>.

day in very bad shape. Woke up crying, scared to death, and didn't know why. Physically, I was a wreck. Mentally, spiritually and emotionally it was chaos...I had been adding to the fire in the meantime with the only way I knew how to cope with it, which was to stay jugged {on a cocaine high} and drunk, too." Vaughan was admitted into a hospital in London, England "long enough to dry out" and tried to finish the tour. The very next show he fell off the stage when he attempted to perform his encore. He claimed it was not due to his substance abuse addictions.⁶¹

Twenty-six years later, Iglauer shared his feelings about African American blues artists during a 2011 interview with *The Chicago Reader* when he stated, "show me an African American artist who has their act together in business... who doesn't have a significant drug or alcohol issue... and I will take that artist real seriously."⁶² Previously in 1985, Iglauer recommended Vaughan to headline the Chicago Blues Festival despite his publicly known and well-documented substance abuse issues, but later in the newspaper article he claimed that he avoided working with African American artists because of drug and alcohol use; this was hypocritical. Iglauer's neglect of signing Black artists, his statement in the newspaper article, and his acceptance of Stevie Ray Vaughan despite his addictions revealed his bigotry. Notwithstanding Iglauer's bigoted statement and hypercritical actions, it is unclear if Iglauer is a racist. However, what it is clear is that the city could earn more money if they booked a white artist.

Bruce Iglauer and Barry Dolins hired Stevie Ray Vaughn and his band "Double Trouble" because they believed it would attract more whites to the festival.⁶³ Chicago's white population

⁶¹ Mike Joyce, "Stevie Ray Battling His Blues" *Washington Post*, February 19, 1987.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1987/02/19/stevie-ray-battling-his-blues/bb8c8927-06ef-49c6-80de-149ba07ecffe/>

⁶² David Whiteis, "At 40 years old, Alligator Records continues to evolve" *Chicago Reader*, May 19, 2011
<https://chicagoreader.com/music/at-40-years-old-alligator-records-continues-to-evolve/>.

⁶³ Caleb Dube, *Between Starvation and Stardom* p. 128

had more spending power than African Americans. “By 1998 it was estimated 40 percent of [white festival attendees] reported incomes of over \$41,000 per year.”⁶⁴ This translated to more money spent on food, alcohol, and music merchandise, sold by vendors at the festival. Vaughan and his band “Double Trouble” were a new act on the national music scene, but they were paid \$15,000 for their performance which was a large amount of money for only a three-piece band. Barry Dolins explained that he paid Vaughan and Double Trouble because “he sold a lot of records... [and] He had a big following.”⁶⁵ Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble must have been a financial success because the promoters continued to hire more white blues artists.

From 1985 through 2011, with intervals, white blues artists performed at the Chicago Blues Festival. Though some of the artists were primarily blues acts, others were not. For example, in 1987, Carl Pickens a white rockabilly guitarist performed; in 1988, the festival featured Barrelhouse Chuck, a white Chicago Blues style pianist; in 1990, Charlie Musselwhite, a white blues singer and harmonica player performed; in 1995, Tracy Nelson—a white singer most known for collaborating with Willie Nelson in country music performed at the festival. During the mid-1980s into the 1990s white blues musicians and The Blues Brothers characters further attracted white music consumers to attend the Chicago Blues Festival, and subsequently blues clubs on Chicago’s Northside.

In 1976, Dan Ackroyd and John Belushi dressed in bee costumes and covered the blues song “I’m A King Bee” on the late-night TV show *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*. The song was originally recorded by an African American blues singer ‘Slim Harpo’ in 1957. Belushi rolled around on the floor and did flips while Ackroyd played harmonica and wore a brimmed hat with

⁶⁴ Caleb Dube, *Between Starvation and Stardom* p.128 The amount would be higher today, due to inflation.

⁶⁵ Caleb Dube, *Between Starvation and Stardom* p. 128 The amount would be considerably more today due to inflation.

shades—which was the typical “blues man” costume, as they performed under the moniker Howard Shore and the All-Bee Band. The comedic act was a hit and “the Bees were the first ever reoccurring characters on *SNL*, appearing 11 times in the first season.”⁶⁶

In 1980, *The Blues Brothers* movie was released, inspired by the *SNL* comedic routine. The movie, stars Belushi and Ackroyd as Jake and Elwood who were two blues musicians who grew up in an orphanage on the Westside of Chicago. They were released from prison to discover their orphanage was to be foreclosed upon due to \$5,000 back taxes owed. To save the orphanage the duo produced a blues concert. While promoting the show they were chased by state police, a bar owner, a country music group called the “Good Ole Boys,” a jilted lover armed with an M-16 machine gun, and Nazis; they eluded them all by performing their blues set in a packed theater.⁶⁷ The success of the *SNL* skit and movie attracted whites to blues music on a national scale.⁶⁸ The movie’s popularity and Stevie Ray Vaughan’s success in blues music drew white Chicagoans to the Northside blues clubs. Belushi and Akroyd’s fictional characters Jake and Elwood were buffoonish, amateur musicians who performed with some of the most popular blues, soul, and jazz entertainers of that era—John Lee Hooker, Aretha Franklin and Cab Calloway. The characters Jake and Elwood played blues just as well as the Black famous entertainers in the movie, which gave them the perception of “authentic” blues musicians. The Chicago Blues club owners hired mostly Southside and Westside-dwelling African American blues artists because blues was considered authentic when performed by them.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Andy Hunsaker, “WATCH: The Blues Brothers Made Their *SNL* Debut 45 Years Ago Today, By Way of the Bees,” *Primetimer*. January 17, 2021, <https://www.primetimer.com/watch/45-years-ago-today-in-snl-history-the-first-ever-blues-brothers-appearance-by-way-of-the-bees>.

⁶⁷ Roger Ebert, “The Blues Brothers,” *Roger Ebert* January 1, 1980. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-blues-brothers-1980>.

⁶⁸ Caleb Dube, *Between Starvation and Stardom*, 45.

⁶⁹ David Grazian, *Blue Chicago; The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*. (Chicago II: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 36.

White blues musicians were considered inauthentic by many of the Northside club owners. Some white musicians have disproved the myth that only Blacks can play blues music. A musician's race is not the basis for authentic or inauthentic art. David Grazian explained in his book *Blue Chicago; The Search for Authenticity in Blues Clubs* that, "Race alone makes for a fairly poor predictor of *any* type of inherent talent or ability, including those related to the music and arts."⁷⁰ Johnny Otis, a white music producer who created Black music concretizes this claim. Otis, a self-proclaimed blues man "looked white and sounded white... [however] He had been intimately involved for so many years with r & b as a performer, songwriter, talent scout, disk jockey, and record producer..."⁷¹ Johnny Otis proved that white people could play Black music skillfully. The quality of the music determines if it is authentic, not the race of the artists that makes it. Another example of whites that played "authentic" soul, blues, and r & b is a group of studio musicians from Muscle Shoals, Alabama. The quality of their music was impeccable.

In the late 1960s, Muscle Shoals Alabama was home to a group of white musicians known as the Muscle Shoals House Band who was known for recording Black music. African American artists from Northern cities like Chicago, New York, and Detroit traveled to Muscle Shoals to record at Rick Hall's Fame Studios where the band exclusively worked.

The House Band members were guitar players Duane and Gregg Allman, bassist David Hood, guitarist Eddie Hinton, drummer Roger Hawkins, and keyboardist Barry Becket. They recorded soul, blues, and r & b for Aretha Franklin, Percy Sledge, Clarence Carter, Wilson Pickett and many more African American artists. The band also recorded Southern Rock songs for John Hammond who was a white blues artist and Boz Skaggs who also is a white soul

⁷⁰ David Grazian, *Blue Chicago; The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*. 41.

⁷¹ Arnold Shaw, *Honkers, And Shouters; The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York, NY: Collier Books, 1978), 158-159.

singer.⁷² Johnny Otis and The Muscle Shoals House Band leave little doubt that one does not have to be African American to master the blues. However, white blues musicians needed more than musical talent, and skill to be considered authentic.

White blues musicians are considered credible when they are pupils of or collaborate with veteran Black blues musicians. This gives the perception they are accepted in the genre and can play blues just as well as Black artists. Examples of this are: Mike Bloomfield, who learned how to play blues guitar from Muddy Waters; Stevie Ray Vaughan who learned how to play blues guitar from Albert King; and John Mayer who learned blues guitar from Buddy Guy and featured him on his tour dates.⁷³

Unfortunately, some blues artists do not play well; they have neither the chops, nor the talent. To compensate for it they dress *like* a blues performer to gain acceptance from studied musicians. The musicians who take this route are “inauthentic” insofar as they lack both the skills necessary to be a blues musician.

The characters in the movie *The Blues Brothers* played by John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd wore shades, brim hats, and black suits with skinny ties. The look became the norm for “white guys” who were not seasoned musicians but wanted to play blues live just as they saw the characters in the movie. Charles Mitchell, a Black blues concert promoter and creator for *Jus’ Blues Music Foundation* explained in an interview with *Music Movies and Hoops*, “Most of that audience think that because you go buy a hat and put it on and some sunglasses, now you a bluesman... That’s just the style of Black folks. That’s what we do, we dress and we’re

⁷² Summer McStravic and John Roos, *Blues-Rock Explosion; From the Allman Brothers to the Yardbirds*, (Mission Viejo, CA: Old Goat Publishing, 2001), 3-5.

⁷³ John Mayer, “Buddy Guy; Guitar Visionary” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/jan/24/buddy-guy-john-mayer>.

trendsetters of who we are, we're not trying to be somebody else.”⁷⁴ Few of the white Chicago Blues acts who dressed like Black artists to project authenticity got gigs. The club owners and some of the consumers believed that Black blues artists held a ‘cultural soul’ which makes blues musicians authentic.⁷⁵

“Cultural soul” is a musical aesthetic that relates to deep vocal tones, vocal inflections, and syncopated rhythms that are found in old traditional 1950s blues songs. The club owners believed to cover the songs correctly, they must be performed and mimicked as close to the original performance as possible, and those original performers were Black. Moreover, most white gatekeepers in the blues music industry were influenced by “The Folk Blues Revival” in the 1960s. Their conceptions of “authentic” blues were, thus, rooted in 1960s Folk Blues.⁷⁶ Had they wanted to, Black Chicago Blues musicians could have simply preserved the style of a previous generation of blues artists, but blues—which is an improvisational art form—is not stagnant. The music has continuously evolved, blending with soul, rock & roll, gospel, jazz, and funk.

Many Black blues musicians took exception to club owners telling them how to perform. The personal and spiritual nature of the genre fosters an intimacy between artists and their instruments that offers little room for third parties. Sharon Lewis, a Black vocalist who has performed in blues clubs on Chicago’s Northside since the early 1990s recalled “one club owner telling a musician don’t do your material here. We want real blues.” The owner explained to Lewis that her music—which was an amalgamation of rock & roll, soul, and blues—was too

⁷⁴ Nico Carter, “The Black Blues, Pt. 2: Authenticity, Chicken bone, and Blackness” *Music Movies and Hoops*, March 21, 2022. <https://musicmoviesandhoops.com/the-black-blues-pt-2-authenticity-chickenbone-and-blackness/>.

⁷⁵ David Grazian, *Blue Chicago*, 35-36.

⁷⁶ David Whiteis, *Blues Legacy; Tradition and Innovation In Chicago* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 221

progressive.” I [tell the club owners], you blues purists get on my nerves... Fuck you! That’s not *your* blues. You know, I don’t have a prejudiced bone in my body, but... Who the *hell* are you to define my blues?”⁷⁷

Some of the relationships between Black blues musicians and the Northside club owners were volatile. This was because Black blues musicians had been playing the Southside and Westside club circuit for many years and were already seasoned musicians before playing on the Northside. They were not accustomed to being told how to play blues by a white person, who most likely never played it. The club owners were controlling while also cheating Black artists, by paying them less than what they were worth.

Billy Branch, a Black Chicago Blues musician explained in an interview with blues journalist David Whiteis that many of Chicago’s African American blues legends were not receiving fair pay for performing in the Northside clubs, “I could see the mistreatment. It was very apparent that they [Black blues performers] weren't getting paid very much money. I remember fighting, getting into it when they gave Jimmy, twenty-five or thirty dollars—I just went off. ‘Man, this guy is a legend.’ Club full of people! ‘How are you gonna pay this guy this?’”⁷⁸ Branch was disheartened by how his mentor, Jimmy Walker, could be treated so unfairly. Walker was a Chicago Blues pianist who had been performing since the 1940s and was highly respected in the Chicago Blues milieu, but the club owners relegated him to the position of a common wage-laborer. If we analyze the Chicago Blues gatekeeper and blues musician relationship through the gaze of Marxism, the Northside club owners would be the bourgeoisie and the blues musicians would be the proletariats.

⁷⁷ David Whites, *Chicago Blues; Portraits and Stories* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 189.

⁷⁸ David Whiteis, *Chicago Blues: Portraits and Stories*, 159.

In Karl Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, he delineated that capitalism divided society into two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie is the "class of social production and employers of wage-labor," and the proletariats are "the class of modern wage-laborer's who, having no means of production of their own are reduced to selling their labor-power in order to live."⁷⁹ Marx further explained that the bourgeoisie--who in this case is club owners--reduced the aesthetic of nobility exuded by Black veteran blues musicians. Marx stated, "the bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the [person] of science, into its paid wage -laborer's."⁸⁰ Veteran blues musicians like Jimmy Walker were revered by their peers and blues consumers who were aware of the contributions they made to blues music, yet their eminency was not recognized by the club owners. Veteran blues musicians were confided in and sought after for advice by the younger blues musicians. They taught the aesthetics of blues musicianship and shared stories about their life that revealed hardships they faced in the music business. Notwithstanding, the gatekeepers did not revere them, instead they treated them as they were nothing more than wage-laborers who they could exploit and control.

In the 1980s and 1990s Black blues musicians have revealed through interviews that they were being cheated and controlled by Chicago Blues gatekeepers; however, this was not a new practice. White producers and financiers controlled the entertainment market from the 1790s into the 1920s and onward.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Karl Marx, Frederick Engles, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" In *The Marx-Engles Reader second edition* edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978),473.

⁸⁰ Karl Marx, Frederick Engles, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 476.

⁸¹ David Grazian, *Blue Chicago; The Search for Authenticity In Urban Blues Clubs* (Chicago II: University Of Chicago Press, 2003),44.

The exploitation of Black blues artists has become a practice that has been perfected since the 1930s. When Chicago Blues gatekeepers became successful, they taught their employees how to take advantage of the blues musicians they signed contractually. Lester Melrose who “was responsible for shaping the Chicago sound of the late ‘30s and ‘40s,” recorded at least 90 percent of all rhythm-and-blues talent for RCA Victor and Columbia from March 1934 to February 1951. Melrose instructed Elvis Presley to cover Chicago Blues musician Arthur ‘Big Boy’ Crudup's songs and "Crudup never saw any of the money.”⁸²

In the 1950s, Chess Records founders Lenard and Phil started Chess Records in the trunk of their car. Lenard traveled the South looking for Black blues artists to record. It is unreported if they learned their business practices directly from Lester Melrose, but Lenard did just as he did. He recorded Arthur ‘Big Boy’ Crudup in Jackson, Mississippi; it is unknown if Lenard cheated him or not, but it is assumed it was another bad business deal for Crudup because he stated, “I swear I’m never going to record for that man again.”⁸³

Bob Koester founder of Jazz Record Mart and Delmark Records traveled the South scouring for new Black blues talent to record for his label like his predecessors.⁸⁴ In the 1960s into the 2000s, Delmark Records signed artists, and many were paid poorly or not paid at all for their work.⁸⁵ They have also recorded artists without releasing their music when they were alive, only to released it after the artists died without paying their families or estate any royalties.⁸⁶

Lonnie Baker Brooks recorded for Chess records and subsequently, Alligator Records. When asked if he was cheated out of money by any of the record labels, he explained that he did

⁸² Mike Rowe, *Chicago Blues; The City and The Music* (London, England: De Capo Press, 1973), 17.

⁸³ Mike Rowe, *Chicago Blues; The City And The Music*, 126.

⁸⁴ The inherited business practices of Chicago Blues gatekeepers will be discussed further in oral histories in chapter three. This will also be corroborated by veteran blues singer Katherine Davis's interview.

⁸⁵ Inetta Visor, interviewed by Andrew Thomas on December 1, 2022.

⁸⁶ E. G. McDaniel, interviewed by Andrew Thomas on January 8, 2023.

not know. “Everybody [blues artists] gonna think they did better (sold more records) than what they did. Only the producer knows if the record did well, he could be telling you the truth or lying to you. So, I say it like this, what you don’t know won’t hurt you... You just have to forget it because you’re going to go thru a lot of trouble to find out... Everybody thinks they are getting cheated but a lot of times the man (record label owner) may have to go under the table (make a cash payment to the radio deejay) to get your record played and he gonna get his money back. It will cost you more money (in lawyer fees) to find out if someone is stealing from you than what you gonna get.”⁸⁷

Brooks understood that if an artist has a record that was deemed successful, the artists was going to expect a large sum of money from the record label. They have this assumption without knowing the exact number of copies the record sold or the expenses that went into marketing and distributing the record. Brooks breakout album was “Bayou Lightning” recorded in 1979, which was produced by Bruce Iglauer and released on Alligator Records.⁸⁸ Alligator Records founder Bruce Iglauer does not have a reputation for cheating his artist, but like many gatekeepers before him, he established paternalistic relationships with Black blues artists. These kind of relationships between gatekeepers and artists were established since the mid-1950s.

In the 1950s, Muddy Waters was credited for being the first chart-topping blues singer on Chess Records. Muddy Waters and Chess Records founder Leonard Chess never had a record contract or any legally binding agreement between them. Waters was said to “go to the Chess family with big dental bills or overdue car payments and receive a sizable advance on royalties on the spot, with no questions asked... On the other hand, if Muddy were to become “uppity,” it

⁸⁷ “Lonnie Brooks shares reflections on the recording industry” interviewed by Larry Crowe *History Makers Digital Archive*, December 4, 2003, Session 1, tape 3, story 1 <https://da.thehistorymakers.org/storiesForBio;ID=A2003.287>.

⁸⁸ “Lonnie Brooks reflects on the success of his album 'Bayou Lightning'” interviewed by Larry Crowe, *The History Makers Digital Archive*, December 4, 2003, Session 1, tape 5, story 1, <https://da.thehistorymakers.org/story/4050>.

is possible that his career might be seriously disrupted.” Charles Keil described Waters and Chess Records' business agreement as one that, “smacks of the old plantation and paternalism.”⁸⁹ Leonard Chess seemed benevolent when he provided Muddy Waters with cash advances, a house, and a car, but he never paid him what he earned for his work. If Waters demanded his royalties, he would have been dropped from the Chess Records roster. Leonard Chess controlled Waters by providing him with provisions that made him comfortable but not enough money to live independently on his own.

Bruce Iglauer's business practices were reportedly not as egregious as Leonard Chess, although, he was controlling of his artists and was paternalistic as well. He stated in a documentary, “We are a full-service record label. We produce the records, manufacture and package the records, publicize the artist, and do the radio promotion, and we manage a number of the artists. We handle the financial end of the business, we have to do that, we do everything you can do in the record business because our artists need these services. Very often they have no background of taking care of business for themselves and if they are going to succeed and we are going to succeed, we have to do these things for them.”⁹⁰

Iglauer assumed that his record label roster, which in 1992 comprised mostly African American artists, were uneducated and therefore could not handle business for themselves. This way of thinking undermines the accomplishments that they achieved before he met them. When Iglauer considered signing an artist to Alligator Records he watched them perform live to judge whether they were skilled musicians. This means that the artists were already booking themselves and handling their business independently, without a record deal.

⁸⁹ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 79-80.

⁹⁰ *Pride and Joy: The Story of Alligator Records*, directed by Robert Mugge featuring Bruce Iglauer, documentary, 1992.

Carlos Johnson is a veteran Black Chicago Blues musician who is an example of the many artists that have toured globally without the help of a manager or record label. Johnson did so because he was able to build a fan base performing as a side musician in Albert King's band in the 1970s. Johnson recorded for Alligator Records in 1984 as a side musician for Chicago Blues artist Son Seals.⁹¹

Paternalism was not exclusive to the blues record industry. Unfortunately, some of the Northside and downtown blues club owners had a controlling mentality towards the Black musicians they hired.

Rufus McCullum and Doc Pellegrino were blues club owners in the Northside of Chicago in the 1990s. McCullum owned Roosters Blues and Doc Pellegrino owned the Kingston Mines which was several miles away. Both owners hired Black blues musicians from the South and Westside talent pools to perform at their clubs. This culminated in a feud between the two owners that began as a disagreement a few years prior when McCullum worked for Pellegrino as a bartender for the Kingston Mines. Pellegrino taught McCullum how to operate and successfully run a blues bar while he worked for him. McCullum used what he learned to open Roosters Blues but when McCullum began poaching Pellegrino's musicians to play his new club, their relationship fell apart.

The feud went on for ten years while the musicians played both clubs. However, when another establishment opened on the Northside owned by a New Yorker name Jimmy Goldman—Brother Jimmy's—Pellegrino enacted an ultimatum for the musicians. The ultimatum prohibited the musicians who worked at Kingston Mines from working at Brother Jimmy's and especially McCullum's Rooster Blues. The rule was considered unfair especially because

⁹¹ Don Wilcock, "Featured Interview—Carlos Johnson," *Blues Blast Magazine*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.bluesblastmagazine.com/featured-interview-carlos-johnson/>

Rooster Blues was several miles from Kingston Mines and had developed its following. Brother Jimmy's was not a traditional blues club, it was a restaurant that featured blues bands on weekends. Most blues clubs in Chicago during the 1990s, featured live blues five to seven nights a week. Pellegrino thought Goldman was a threat to his business because he hired musicians that had been playing at his club and Goldman also paid blues musicians more money than him. Instead of Pellegrino matching Goldman's pay or offering perks to the musicians to keep them loyal, he fired them. Billy Branch was especially outspoken about Pellegrino's demands, stating in a *Chicago Tribune* interview, "You know, it's hard enough getting work in the city; it's wrong to tell a musician he can't work someplace...He says we're 'his' musicians... It's just plantation mentality." When Pellegrino was asked why he issued an ultimatum he explained, it was because McCullum "hired his musicians behind his back."

Pellegrino did not think he was punishing the musicians to serve his ego, he figured since the musicians played his place seven nights a week, which was more often than Brother Jimmy's and Roosters that they should exclusively work for him. "I told them [blues musicians], I said, people who play there can't play here. They can play anywhere else they want but not here..."⁹² More of the Northside club owners did the same as Pellegrino, by demanding that the artist they hired could only work for them. "Musicians working at Blue Chicago (a popular downtown blues club) were advised not to accept work from Famous Dave's, a rival nightclub."⁹³ There were paternalistic relationships between gatekeepers and Chicago's African American blues artists and most of the artists were being underpaid for their performances yet, Black blues artists still played the Northside clubs. They were hired more often than whites. Doc Pellegrino did not

⁹² Achy Obejas, "Battle Over The Blues," *Chicago Tribune*, December 8, 2000, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2000-12-08-0012080035-story.html>.

⁹³ Caleb Dube, *Between Starvation And Stardom*, 17.

allow any all-white blues bands to perform. If white blues artists performed, they had to have Black side musicians in the band.⁹⁴

Blues clubs in Chicago do not pay artists a large sum of money so many of them toured to earn a living. However, to have a successful tour an artist must be marketed to music consumers so they would know when the artist comes to their town or city. In the 1990s into the early 2000s, blues magazines were a common platform used to advertise a blues artist. Being on the cover of a blues magazine was the most coveted spot because it ensured music consumers were abreast of the artist's upcoming activities.

Jim O'Neal, Amy van Singel, Paul Garon, and Bruce Iglauer created *Living Blues* magazine in the spring of 1970, in the back of Bob Koester's Jazz Record Mart.⁹⁵ *Living Blues* is the only blues magazine that exclusively features Black blues musicians, O'Neal explained why, "While I and some of the other staff members learned a lot about blues through the white musicians, we felt that they were already well covered in the larger magazines and newspapers, and on the radio, whereas it was difficult for the Black artists to receive the same kind of recognition."⁹⁶ Since 1970, the year of the magazine's creation, no white blues musician has ever appeared on the cover, only Black artists.⁹⁷ *Living Blues* was the most prominent blues magazine, but other magazines sprang up throughout the 1990s. They did not follow *Living Blues's* policy of exclusively featuring Black artists on the cover. In 1991, Chicago native Bob Vorel started *Blues Revue* magazine. *Blues Revue* marketed itself as "The world's largest blues publication devoted to the listener and musician whose musical passion is the full spectrum of

⁹⁴ Katherine Davis, interviewed by Andrew Thomas on December 3, 2022.

⁹⁵ Ulrich Adelt, "Black White and Blue: Racial Politics of Blues Music in the 1960s" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Iowa, 2007), 163, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

⁹⁶ Ulrich Adelt, "Black White and Blue," 178.

⁹⁷ "Back Issues" *Living Blues magazine*, <https://livingblues.com/product-category/issues/page/24/>.

the blues.”⁹⁸ When the magazine began, there were Black and white artists on the cover at about the same rate, but by 2011 sixty-eight percent of the artists that were on the cover were white.⁹⁹

Data

The Blues Coalition was a committee of blues consumers, academics, and artists who started a Facebook page to expose blues magazines, festivals, and award shows that disproportionately bolster white artists. The research data was used at the 2012 Blues Summit at Dominican University by the panelists. The data purports that from 2007 to 2011, twenty-five issues of *Blues Revue* magazine were released with only eight African American artists on the cover.¹⁰⁰ Because *Blues Revue*'s circulation spans several countries the dearth of Black featured artists gives the impression globally that African Americans are no longer leaders in the genre. The Blues Coalition's data also revealed that African American blues artists were being underrepresented at award shows.

The Blues Music Awards was established in 1980, by Joe Savarin in Memphis Tennessee, and is known only second to the Grammy Awards as the highest award a blues musician can achieve in the United States. At its inception, it was named the National Blues Awards then renamed the W. C. Handy Awards in 1995. W. C. Handy was a blues songwriter and is known as the “Father of the blues.”¹⁰¹

In 2006, the W. C. Handy Awards was renamed the Blues Music Awards. *Living Blues* magazine conducted polls for the award categories before 2006, but a committee of one hundred “blues experts” replaced them in choosing artists to be nominated for the awards. The award

⁹⁸ “Blues Revue Magazine Profile and History” *Datanyze*, <https://www.datanyze.com/companies/blues-revue-magazine/11864793>.

⁹⁹ Blues Coalition, “Covering Up—A First Glance at the Last 25 Issues of Blues Revue,” *Facebook*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/395230421657458/>.

¹⁰⁰ Blues Coalition, “Covering Up—A First Glance

¹⁰¹ W.C. Handy, *Father of The Blues an Autobiography* (New York: De Capo Press, 1941), 216.

winners were chosen by vote. Any person could join the Blues Music Award membership committee because there is no professional musical experience required, it was and is currently accessible to the public.¹⁰²

From 1980—the first year the awards were held—until 1984, all the award nominees and recipients were African American. In 1985, Stevie Ray Vaughn was the first white blues artist to receive a Handy Award. From 1985 to 1994 the recipients of the Handy Award were mostly African American with only eleven white award winners. From 1996 to 1999, the Handy Awards added a new category, “Best New Crossover Artist” whose nominees list encompassed all white blues artists that mostly played rock music. Eric Clapton was the recipient of this category all three years. From 2000 to 2006 more whites became the recipients of Handy Awards.

Out of 27 award categories, whites won ten awards in 2000, four in 2001, five in 2002, four in 2003, eleven in 2004, six in 2005, and ten in 2006 which is the year the award name changed from the W. C. Handy Awards to the Blues Music Awards. From 2007 until 2012 the award recipients changed from mostly Black to heterogeneous, with white artists winning about half of the awards. In 2010, the award winners were mostly white; eighteen white blues artists won awards to ten African Americans. In 2012, it was the same outcome with whites winning more awards than Blacks.¹⁰³ From 1995 to 2012 Charlie Musselwhite, a white harmonica player, was the winner of the “Harmonica Instrumentalist” category thirteen times. The Blues Music Awards were not the only blues awards that held mostly white recipients. One was an electronic magazine titled *Blues Blasts Magazine*.

Blues Blasts Magazine was founded by Bob Keiser in 2007. In 2008, the magazine held its first award show with ten categories that had three white winners and seven Black, which

¹⁰² “Forty-Years of The Blues Foundation” *The Blues Foundation-About* <https://blues.org/awards/>.

¹⁰³ “Award Winners And Nominees” *The Blues Foundation*, <https://blues.org/awards/>.

included a “Lifetime Achievement Award,” given to David “Honeyboy” Edwards. In 2009, Koko Taylor an African American female blues artist won the lifetime achievement category. That year, seven white blues artists won awards and only two Blacks won.

In 2010, Otis Rush, a Black Chicago Blues artist won the lifetime achievement award and there were five white award winners and four Blacks. In 2011, for the first time, a non-musician won the lifetime achievement award, and he was white. The winner, Michael Frank was a typical Chicago Blues gatekeeper. He “discovered blues” music in the 1960s by listening to white folk artists during the “Folk Music Revival.” He was inspired by blues music in the 1960s, so he traveled to Chicago to see Muddy Waters perform. He became an avid blues fan, remained in Chicago, and was hired as a Jazz Record Mart employee. Frank learned the blues music business from Bob Koester, along with the other store proteges, and started a Chicago Blues record label, Earwig Records. He befriended ‘Honeyboy’ Edwards and managed his career while running the label.¹⁰⁴ Frank did not spend his entire life playing blues and was not a part of the Great Migration like ‘Honeyboy,’ but he was given the same award as him. Gatekeepers were not only picking the winners of blues awards, but they also *became* the winners of blues awards. By 2012, the awards were completely tilted in favor of white blues musicians; there were seven white winners and only two Blacks. From 2009 to 2012 whites won more Blues Blasts Magazine Awards than African Americans and they were underrepresented at blues festivals in Canada and the United States.

The Blues Coalition also revealed Black blues musicians were rarely headliners on blues festivals, most of them were white. In 2011, The Thunder Bay Blues Festival, located in Ontario Canada, on Lake Superior featured twenty-one blues acts and only three were Black and none of

¹⁰⁴ Mark Thompson, “Michael Frank; 2011 Lifetime Achievement Award” *Blues Blasts Magazine*, <https://www.bluesblastmagazine.com/michael-frank/>.

them headlined the concert. The Harvest Moon Blues Festival located in Melody Mountain Farm, New Hampshire held thirteen blues acts, only two were African American and none of them were headliners. The Dohoney Blues Festival in Dana Point, California featured sixteen acts; five of the acts were African American and one of them headlined. Chesapeake Bay Blues Festival held annually at Sandy Point State Park in Annapolis, Maryland featured fourteen acts and only five were African American, none of them headlined. The Canton Blues Festival held at Centennial Plaza, in downtown Canton, Ohio featured eight acts. Out of the eight, one was an African American band that did not headline.

Dr. Janice Monti a white blues consumer and scholar posted a statement on Facebook in response to the research data, “I think all the progressive people connected to the blues community who understand the injustice of this need to figure out ways to make some changes. Hope we can talk about this on May 18-19th.”¹⁰⁵ Dr. Monti’s statement ended with an invitation to the Blues Summit that she hosted on May 18, 2012.

Bruce Iglauer’s inflammatory comments in *The Chicago Reader*, where he explained that he does not take Black artists seriously because they have substance abuse issues, was a topic for discussion amongst the panelist at the 2012 “Blues and the Spirit” Summit. A rebuttal written by Chicago blues veteran Billy Branch has been disseminated throughout Chicago among its blues musicians, it read:

“Show us a record label that has at its helm, an individual who can recognize the dedication and contributions of the numerous African American artists who have aptly demonstrated their ability to continue the blues tradition for more than three decades, despite being paid substandard wages and being ignored by organizations that purport to

¹⁰⁵ Janice Monti, *Facebook* post March 15, 2012.

honor and ‘award’ the so-called top artists in their respective fields. Show us a record label that recognizes that as bandleaders, numerous African American blues musicians have had the sufficient business sense to continue to maintain active international touring schedules, and enough charisma to attract an ever-expanding diverse audience. Show us a record label that recognizes African American blues musicians’ ability to carry the blues into the future as demonstrated by their successful musical collaborations with hip-hop and rap artists as well as with world-music giants from Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. And finally, show us a record label that is not so insensitive to suggest that most African American blues musicians have a significant drug or alcohol problem, and we will consider allowing the label to record our music.”¹⁰⁶

The participants on the panel were Sugar Blue and Billy Branch who are African American veteran Chicago Blues harmonica players, Matthew Skoller a white blues musician that advocated for African American blues musicians, Deitra Farr and Sharon Lewis who are veteran African American Chicago Blues singers, the aforementioned Barry Dolins who coordinated the 1985 Chicago Blues festival and worked as Deputy Director for the Mayor's Office of Special Events, Wayne Baker Brooks who is an African American Chicago Blues musician, Lincoln T. 'Chicago Beau' Beauchamp who is an African American writer, blues record producer, educator, and author, Brian Lukasavitz a white lawyer and advocate for African American Chicago Blues musicians known as “The Blues Attorney,” and David White is an author and blues journalist who is white. Sugar Blue began the panel discussion with a poem:

I wrote this in memory of Koko Taylor, Willie Dixon, Pinetop Perkins, ‘Honeyboy’ Edwards, Hubert Sumlin, and my contemporary Michael ‘Iron Man’ Burks. I am

¹⁰⁶ Rosalind Cummings-Yeates, “Race Rags and the Blues” *Illinois Entertainer*, August 31, 2011, <https://illinoisentertainer.com/2011/08/sweet-home-september-2011/>.

reminded of the incredibly bountiful legacy that our fathers have left us, of the trials that they endured, and of the assault of their legacy by those that would steal the cultural heritage of our people. The Blues witnessed the slave quarters where we knew the lash, in the shacks of tenant farmers who knew the backlash. Working from sun to sun, sharecropping for slave wages, or no wages, in a Jim Crow system that denied the equality promised by emancipation.

The comforts and securities of a decent meal and safety in their homes that their labors should have afforded them were nonexistent.

Lynch mobs, fielded by the evil of racism, alcohol, fear, and hatred slaughtered men, women, and young boys for a Sunday afternoon diversion after church service. Women and children picnicking and playing games under the mutilated corpses hanging in the trees as they swayed gently over them in the summer breeze. The dignity, joy, and fellowship, stolen from the taskmasters on a back porch or at the gatherings to break bread and share the day's travails moved with the rhythm and rhymes of the Blues. Music made for the people, by the people, and full of the laughter, love, loss, and pain of life's day-to-day struggle to survive. This is a part of my heritage in which I have great pride. Paid for in the blood, the whips, guns, knives, chains, and branding irons ripped from the bodies of my ancestors as they fought to survive the daily tyrannies in the land of the free, where some men were at liberty to murder, rape, and lay claim to any they desired. To this crucible, the Blues was born. Screaming to the heavens that I will be free; I will be me! You cannot and will not take this music, this tradition, this bequest without a struggle as fierce and bloody as the one that brought us in chains of iron beneath the putrid decks of wooden ships to toil in pain but not in vain! We've been redlined,

deadlined, and headlined, from Mississippi to Harlem, from Cabrini Green to Compton, Detroit, and all across this nation! These Blues are not of you or for you though some are about you! These Blues are in spite of you Mr. Charlie, these Blues are mine and my children as they were my grandfathers and his fathers!

Sugar Blues' poem was an attempt to reclaim the Blues as a Black art form, by explaining that Chicago Blues was created by people who were the progeny of enslaved people who circumvented lynching's and survived thru Jim Crow. Despite all the difficulties that racist institutions and racist whites caused for African Americans they still made beautiful music that is an aesthetic to African American heritage. Sugar Blue lamented that whites were trying to control the blues industry, take credit for it, and claim it as their own. Blue resented that and expressed his frustrations by stating "These blues are not of you or for you though some are about you. These blues are inspite of you Mr. Charlie."

The next panelist was Matthew Skoller a highly revered white Chicago Blues harmonica player. Skoller had studied and learned to play harmonica from veteran African American Chicago Blues harmonica players, James Cotton, Sugar Blue, Billy Branch, and many more. He began his monologue by stating, "We must acknowledge that blues music is intrinsically African American. That seems like an obvious statement, but it seems that the white-dominated blues industry does not want to acknowledge or support the African Americans that gave us this gift, we call the blues. Has anyone seen the t-shirt that states, *There's no white or Black there's just blues*? I have seen several examples of this problem...In 2006 the BMA's changed its name from the [W. C.] Handy Awards to the Blues Music Awards as an attempt to make blues *racially non-specific*. In 2011 at the BMA's, twenty-five awards were given, seventeen were awarded to

whites eight to Blacks...Money makers who appropriate the Blues and claim ownership need to be stopped.”

Next, Deitra Farr a veteran African American Chicago Blues singer explained that Black artists are being treated like, “the stepchildren of the Blues” because they were underrepresented at blues festivals. Farr poignantly stated, “I often wonder, would a polka festival exclude the Polish people?”

Barry Dolins, the only concert promoter on the panel spoke after Deitra Farr. He stated, “The promoters are looking for the bottom line, and they try to market the music to a more palatable audience and that understanding of their role is taking them in the wrong direction. They need to get an awakening to all of this.”

Dolins did not imply that promoters were booking white artists more often than Blacks because they wanted to appropriate their culture, or because they were racist. He admitted through his own experience that gatekeepers hire white actors because the promoters want to make more money.

After Dolins spoke, Sharon Lewis a veteran Black Chicago Blues singer explained the plight of African American blues women. Lewis stated, “Last [years] Grammy Awards there was four women nominated, three white one Black...I don’t think any of those white women stepped foot in a Chicago Blues club...I’m tired of having to explain my heritage to those who want to take it...I am here as a seasoned professional female who wants to give you a taste of what we go through from the talent buyers and promoters who overlook us...Promoters and talent buyers need to stop overlooking us, stop looking at us as second class in this industry...I’m here to reclaim my heritage...we deserve to be treated as blues women, with respect...” Lewis explained that African-American blues women are marginalized more often than men. This

intersectionality discrimination was relegated to Black women, while white women who performed blues were award recipients.

Billy Branch was the next guest on the panel. He started his monologue by mentioning Bruce Iglauer's inflammatory remarks he made during a *Chicago Reader* interview, Branch stated, "You can image the obstacles we are facing when the top record company makes a statement like that; do we have a chance? I wrote a rebuttal, forty of us signed it but some refused because there is a fear of reprisal...It's a throwback to Jim Crow. You can't say what you feel due to reprisal. This is where we are right now. We have blues festivals with no Black artists, that's insane...Like Little Richard said, I don't mind y'all (white blues players) playing them, just remember their ours..."

Lincoln T. Beauchamp is an African American blues author and professor at Harper College who spoke after Billy Branch. He addressed Bruce Iglauer's article when he stated, "Fifteen years ago if you stated out loud blues is Black music, Black musicians would have been afraid to lose gigs...I don't know if anybody is surprised by what Bruce said when I read it (meaning the newspaper article in the *Chicago Reader*) I thought he stated what he feels about Black musicians—it's sad."

Wayne Baker Brooks is a Black Chicago Blues musician who is the son of the late blues singer Lonnie Baker Brooks. Brooks discussed the importance of ownership in the music business, and explained why Black blues musicians were struggling financially. He stated, "white people own the PR firms, the record companies, the booking agencies, any way to get your music to the fans, they own it...I own all my music because I watched my dad, how he was signed to companies that he didn't feel he was getting what he deserves...We have to own our own business." Brooks expressed that his father was cheated by record labels and warned that

today's artists must start their own record labels and retain ownership of their music. Brooks was not the first to suggest this solution. In 1951, Paul Robeson spoke at a conference for Equality for Negroes in Arts, Science, and Professions and advised, "independent means must be found" for African Americans to be prosperous in the music business.¹⁰⁷

Blues journalist Whiteis claimed that many of the white blues consumers are racist. He believed they enjoyed blues music because it reminded them of the Jim Crow era when Blacks were considered the inferior class. He explained that he heard white blues patrons in Northside blues clubs using the "N-word" and witnessed them being disrespectful to elderly blues artists.

Conclusion

In 1985, Stevie Ray Vaughan, was hired by concert promoters, Bruce Iglauer and Barry Dolins to perform at the Chicago Blues Festival. Vaughan was a burgeoning star in the blues world and Iglauer and Dolins knew that Vaughan would attract white consumers to the festival. Iglauer and Dolins wanted to capitalize from the spending power that white Chicagoan's had.

White musicians who covered blues music was a profitable trend, because many white music consumers like to see white blues musicians excel at playing blues. The ones who excel are considered authentic because they deemed credible by learning from or collaborating with veteran Black blues artists. This is paramount for white blues musicians to be considered "authentic." This is one of the reasons that Stevie Ray Vaughan was beloved. He learned from Albert King, he was a skillful blues musician, and he proved that he could play just as well as Black blues performers.

¹⁰⁷ John Henry, "A Critic Takes a Look and Says-- Let's Save Negro Music!" *Freedom* May 1, 1953, *News Bank: Black Life in America*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.bpl.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AAHX&docref=image/>.

In the 1980s, there were a few white blues musicians who achieved fame and stardom. However, the ones who were not famous, were rarely hired, especially at Chicago Blues clubs. Kingston Mines club owner Doc Pellegrino did not allow all-white blues bands to play at his club. He believed that only Black blues artists could be considered authentic blues musicians. In fact, many Chicago Blues club owners believed that being Black was a criterion for “authenticity,” but they did not revere Black musicians. Many were paid low wages, told how to play their music, and controlled by club owners.

Even though Chicago Blues club owners treated Black blues musicians poorly they relied on them to sell an “authentic” blues experience to their predominantly white patrons. This was not the case on the national blues festival circuit. National blues festivals featured music acts by both white and Black artists. However, white artists were hired more often than Blacks and were preferred as headliners.

In 2012, at the Dominican University “Blues and the Spirit Summit,” Black and white Chicago Blues musicians spoke out about discrimination, and economic exclusion. Black blues musicians believed they were being excluded from magazines because of racism, and many of them lacked exposure the magazines provided. The panel also discussed the blues concert promoters that predominantly hired white blues artist. Barry Dolins, defended his and other promoters’ position by explaining that promoters booked white artists to support their “bottom line.” Making money was more important to promoters than preserving cultural heritage.

Sugar Blue, a Black Chicago Blues harmonica player, charged gatekeepers with cultural appropriation of the blues. Contrarily, Matthew Skoller, a white Chicago Blues harmonica player, echoed that cultural theft was a problem but also pointed out that monetary theft was a

problem too, when he stated, “Money makers who appropriate the blues and claim ownership need to be stopped.”

Economic discrimination and cultural appropriation were reoccurring themes during the Summit. Economic discrimination is more problematic than cultural theft, because without money, and lack of resources blues artists could not survive. There are many Black Chicago Blues musicians despite whites being a part of the blues, who have maintained careers in the music business. White blues musicians have been accepted and taught how to play the blues by Black blues musicians since the 1960s so, Black artists did not mind whites learning to play it. Cultural mores like food, and art are shared amongst ethnicities and blues music is an example of this. However, the problem is created when culture becomes appropriated. That happened when Black blues artists in the early 1960s taught whites about the blues in Europe during the Folk Festival tours and subsequently throughout the United States. By the mid-1970s the students of the blues became the bosses, and now gatekeepers. They did this by creating and controlling *all* of the blues orientated businesses. Subsequently, the Black blues artists who were the teachers were excluded from the record labels, magazines, and awards that gatekeepers created from the cultural more they were once invited to learn.

Chapter three explores the reasons why in the late 1960s Blacks turned away from blues music. Also, the chapter discusses why white music consumers prefer white blues artists over Blacks. Chicago blues musician Billy Branch believes it is because of “Elvis Presley Syndrome.” The interviews also reveal, the differences that Black blues women have in the blues world than Black men.

Chapter three concretizes the misdeeds committed by Chicago Blues gatekeepers towards Black Chicago Blues musicians. Black blues musicians revealed, if gatekeepers marginalized

them, and if so, do they believe that it was due to them being racist or because they prioritized making money.

CHAPTER IV: ORAL HISTORIES OF BLACK CHICAGO BLUES MUSICIANS

Introduction

This chapter encompasses ten oral histories from Black Chicago Blues musicians. I interviewed them to learn their opinions on whether the marginalization of Black musicians by blues industry gatekeepers is due to racism or commodification. To help determine this, I asked how the musicians were treated by Chicago Blues club owners and record label owners, whether they are excluded from blues award shows, and from headlining blues festivals. Some of the interviewees lead their own bands and others are side musicians. The questions were fitting to the interviewees career and accomplishments. So, if they did not win a blues award or tour extensively, I did not ask them about award shows or touring. Some of the artists were candid, while others were reserved. They all gave their opinions on why blues industry gatekeepers have marginalized Black artists. Some even gave solutions on what the Black artistic community should do about it.

“...I call it the Elvis Presley Syndrome...” -Billy Branch

Billy Branch was born October 3, 1951. He lived in Chicago until 1955, at which point his family relocated to Los Angeles. Branch was raised by his grandmother who was a classical pianist. Branch’s father fought in the Korean War and also played bass with music groups during his military tenure. At ten years old, Branch discovered he was naturally gifted at playing harmonica and fell in love with the instrument. When he was seventeen years old, he moved to Chicago to attend University of Illinois-Chicago, where he earned a bachelors in psychology. Upon arrival, he attended an outdoor blues festival that featured Willie Dixon, Earl Hooker, Big Mama Thornton, Muddy Waters, Koko Taylor, and many more Chicago Blues musicians.

The concert influenced Branch to become an avid blues fan and musician. During the rest of the summer of 1969, and onward, Branch frequented many blues clubs throughout the city where he honed his craft, playing blues harmonica. In just six years after moving to Chicago, Branch became the harmonica player in Willie Dixons band. Over the course of his career, Branch has played on over three-hundred recordings and received three blues Grammy nominations. Branch is also an educator, who was one of the first artists to develop a Blues in the School’s curriculum. In this role, he travelled globally teaching blues history and music lessons to pupils. Branch explained, “I’ve been so dedicated to teaching blues in the schools because the blues is the story of our existence in, America.” I began my interview with Branch by asking him about his arrival in Chicago, in 1969.

What where your favorite clubs to attend when you first arrived during the summer of 1969?

“Jr. Wells nephew brought me to my first club, which was Theresa’s, that was my favorite place. On the Southside there was Theresa’s, Florence’s Lounge, and Peppers. A string of them opened on the Northside. One was Alice’s Revisited, located 950 w. Wrightwood Ave.”

Did white people attend those clubs?

“White patrons attended the Black clubs. As you know, white fans have always flocked to Black music wherever it is. It could be in the deepest part of the hood, and white people will find it, and enjoy it, and be regulars.”

Do you think that Black musicians are receptive to white’s playing blues music?

Well, I think culturally, uh, black people are just warm people anyway. And you know that, that, you know, black folks, as I’ve told many of my white friends and associates, I said, black people can’t afford the luxury of racism because you have to, for all your goods and services, you have to have relationships and interaction with white people. We don’t manufacture the cars; we don’t own the banks. We don’t own the gas stations; we don’t own the jewelry stores or the large department stores. So, it would be pretty, self-defeating to not make cordial or amiable relationships with these white merchants that you gotta deal with.

Did Blacks outnumber whites at the summer blues concert, or was it the other way around?

“No, it was mostly whites in attendance. The concert was downtown, Grant Park, so a lot of whites where there.”

Do you think blues was pretty fresh to white people when you came to Chicago?

“Well, you have to keep in mind, historically, white people have always gravitated towards Black music. Maybe not so much in mass, but you always had a steady trickle of white fans and musicians. I mean, even in 1969, by the time I appeared on the scene, there were white musicians jamming in the clubs and playing with cats like Junior Wells, and Lefty Dizz, and some other cats, you know? I would also go to the Westside clubs, where you had young white cats who around my age, just like me, that were trying to learn how to play this music. We had a handful of young Black cats, just a handful. It was more white cats on the scene. And, when I came along, I was one of the few Black cats trying to learn how to play harp.”

Some people say that Blacks abandoned the blues in the 1960s; what do you think about that?

“It’s a complex issue. I remember when I was playing with Willie, wherever we go, whatever show we play, they’d [blues consumers] always be lined up to see Willie Dixon. I remember pulling up to a club in Montreal and he said, Hey boss, you know, Black folks used to line up like that for blues. Willies take on it was that Black folks were tricked into, turning away from the blues. And

there's a multitude of reasons. You know, one thing is people coming from the, the South for some the last thing they want to be reminded of is the horrors of the South. And, the blues is embedded in those memories. You know, just even the name blues are [associated with] bad times and struggle, the Jim Crow South, the lynching's, and the segregated South. And, the blues is attached to that. And, then people deem it as, as low class. You know, jazz was viewed as sophisticated, when you think Duke Ellington, [John] Coltrane, and Miles Davis. But, when you think about cats like Muddy Waters and Jimmy Reed, these guys had very little, if any formal education, the, stigma, the perception is of an inferior cast. you what I'm saying? And, that's why a lot of [Black] folks say, I love jazz, but I don't care. We're blues. But, you see in my experience over these 50 years or so is that, everyone likes the blues. They just don't know they like it. <laugh>

Branch delineated that some Black music consumers who attended his shows preferred jazz music over blues. These patrons who attended his show in Southside music venues were consumers of many different styles of music. Most of those venues did not exclusively feature blues performers, they showcased jazz, funk, soul, and r & b artists. Therefore, many of the patrons who attended his performance were unaware that he was a blues artist moreover, they harbored negative stereotypes about blues. Branch was able to convince them, through playing that blues, music was not a low-class music and that if they just listened to his band they would like it. Branch has maintained a blues fan base on Chicago's Southside despite the class division that is prevalent in blues and jazz music.

You told me a while ago that Willie Dixon wrote a complaint letter to the FCC about the blues being taken off the radio: can you talk about that?

Willie Dixon, I credit that as the pinnacle of my blues career, one of the absolute highlights, my tenure was six years in his band. I learned so much, I became a much better performer. And, I learned so much about the depth of the blues and the importance of blues as our cultural legacy through, Willie Dickon. Willie Dickson preached that all the time. It was around the time, or maybe prior to when I joined the band [that he wrote the letter]. I keep wishfully thinking that somewhere in my vast archive, I've still got a copy of that, but I don't know. He wrote a letter to the FCC mimeograph letter and to every member of Congress. And, it was a well worded letter. In essence, it stated that there was a conspiracy to keep the blues off of the radio and he made the correlation. He explained it like this. He said, if it becomes known that my culture is just as rich or richer than your culture, then what basis do you have to discriminate against me? So, he made the connection between the lack of blues being played on the radio as a deliberate effort to suppress African American culture, which I thought was pretty deep <laugh>.

Did Dixon ever talk about being financially exploited in the blues industry?

Well, I can't remember any specific conversation, but the whole concept of Blues Heaven when he, purchased 22 20 South Michigan, which was the old Chess [Records] studios, the purpose of it was to provide a conduit or an institution to safeguard against the abuses in the music industry.¹⁰⁸

In other words, to teach cats how to manage their publishing companies and copyright and things of that nature because of the historical, excesses of, exploitation against the musicians, particularly Black ones and uneducated ones. And, of course, you know, he's got in Blues Heaven--which is the museum--he's got the napkin of the original, lyrics to "Whole Lot of Love." He had to sue Led Zeppelin to get the rights back to that, which was one led Zeppelin's biggest hit records. He was one of the few guys that came out on top because he realized the value in publishing and owning your own music and copyright. And, the hundreds of songs that [he wrote] that were hit records that became covered by blues, as well as pop, and rock [artist].

In 1994, Branch started his own band, The Sons of Blues. They played the Northside clubs frequently and held a residency at the Kingston Mines.

Can you talk about the incident between you and Doc Pellegrino? I read in a Chicago Tribune article that he gave you and your band an ultimatum, where you could not play any other Chicago Blues club. Can you tell me about that situation?

"Doc Pellegrino, to his credit created the Kingston Mines. For over 50 years he had some of the greatest acts in Chicago Blues. But, in typical Billy Branch style, if he did something wrong, I called him out on it. There was a period of time when I wasn't working at the Kingston Mines. A place opened on the Northside, I think it was Jimmy's Barbecue or something. A lot of musicians started playing there and Doc put out an ad in the newspaper, saying Jimmy's were taking his musicians. I told him, those were not your musicians, they were free to play wherever they wanted to. I called him a plantation owner. So, he forbade anyone to work for Jimmy's. Doc bragged that he used to march with Dr. Martin Luther King, I said, if Dr. King was here, he would be on the musician's side. So, years later, him and his manager of the club, who was Black had a falling out, it was over a girl. The manager got (financial) backing and opened his own club. That was Rooster Blues over on Lake and Halsted Street. The disingenuous part about it was, he copied the Kingston Mines. The Kingston Mines used to have the little skinny tables; he copied the Kingston Mines exactly. He had two stages, but he was so stupid. He wanted two bands, but he only had a two o'clock license. So, he'd have to start, like at six or seven to try to accommodate two, or three sets. Now, you know, on the blues scene people weren't coming out that early. He was taking a hit. So, he asked me to play. That's when Doc told me, if you play for him, you can't play for me. We played there and Doc fired us. Doc eventually called us back after Rooster Blues closed down."

¹⁰⁸ Willie Dixon's Heaven Foundation, <https://www.bluesheaven.com>.

I would like to know your opinion about authenticity. Can white musicians play the blues authentically?

“No one ethnic group has a monopoly on pain or suffering. But, blues scholar and poet Sterling Plumpp pointed out, they had more slaves in Brazil than the United States, but yet the blues didn't develop in Brazil. So, there is something unique about the African American experience that gave us not only the blues but Mahalia Jackson, James Brown, John Coltrane, Little Walter, and Muddy Waters. I would not discourage any musician from pursuing whatever inspires them to play. Anybody can play the blues. But there is something to be said about the Black experience.”

You have been pretty outspoken about white blues artists dominating the blues festival circuit. Can you talk about that?

“It's kind of crazy when you think about it because, it would be like, a Black artist being a hit seller in Irish Celtic music. They've got blues festivals without any Black artists on them now, which is like an oxymoron. How would these different ethnicities react, if there was a Polish music festival that had all Black people performing in it?”

Do you think white blues artists earn more money than Black blues artists?

“Stevie Ray Vaughan, at some point may have possibly made more money than B. B. King. We have that same phenomenon happening now, where the white artists command considerably more—when you're talking about on the top tier—than Black artists in the blues field.”

Do you think blues industry gatekeepers are racist towards Black artists?

“The record industry is going to gravitate toward what-sells, whether you are Black or white. So, you can't really take that attitude, that it's just about Black and white. It's about money, if they see potential to make money, they're going to get behind it, you know?...I said it in an interview years ago that white people would spend more money to see a white person playing blues than they would a Black person. A case-in-point, the Blues Brothers had probably the biggest blues selling blues album of all time. Look at Stevie Ray Vaughan. I call it the Elvis Presley syndrome. Elvis Presley was one of the most top selling artists that sang Black songs, played blues guitar, and danced like he was a Black artist.”

Have you ever had confrontations with racist blues fans?

“Well, for the most part we didn't have to deal with racist fans because there's an aspect of the blues subculture that forges genuine relationships across the color barrier. A lot of these white fans are very devoted and dedicated, not only to the music, but to the welfare and wellbeing of the artists. And, some of them are very sincere in their approach. Some, not all of them, but for the most part, these people come because they love the music. A lot of them know the history, some of them don't, but they are devout fans. I mean, of course there were a few incidences, but for the most part, you always would feel embraced and appreciated.”

Who should I interview next?

“Katherine Davis has been around for a while; you should talk to her.”

Katherine Davis

Katherine Davis was born February 25, 1953, and was raised in the Cabrini Green Housing Projects on Chicago’s Northside. Davis was the progeny of musicians. Her grandfather was a trumpeter who played with Louis Armstrong and Count Basie. Her father, Wesley Davis deejayed at a bar he owned on Chicago’s Southside. Davis’s mother played piano and sang at church. Davis and her family lived on the Northside until 1967, when they moved to the Southside. Davis sang at church and studied voice at Sherwood Conservatory of Music. In 1980, Davis began singing at blues clubs, she also studied opera and jazz. By the mid-1980s, Davis was working four nights a week at the Kingston Mines, singing the classic blues songs of ‘Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Davis stated, “I was, studying music. I was in church in the eighties, before I came out into the blues and jazz world. I went around the classical music because I loved to study music. I wanted to be an opera singer. I was singing the classic blues.” By the early 1990s, she was a resident singer for Blue Chicago, a popular downtown blues club. Davis recorded blues albums for Delmark Records, GBW Records, and The Sirens record labels.

Considered Davis’s background, I asked her about Chicago Blues clubs.

You started your career working at the Kingston Mines, can you talk about that?

“I came up under the wings of Doc Pellegrino and all the other club owners. I worked at the Kingston Mines for many years, and I was the co-host for Frank Pellegrino’s Blues Jam. So, I met a lot of musicians.”

How was your experience working for Doc Pellegrino?

“Doc was powerful in the blues world. He had control over all the other clubs. Tuesday at the Kingston Mines, I would be in that meeting with them, and he was telling all the club owners how

to run they clubs. I remember some of the things that he would say. He didn't want white musicians on the stage. Musicians had to play [blues music] straight ahead, eight bar, 12 bar, 24 bar blues, nothing else (Doc told the musicians in his club how he wanted them to play blues). He only allowed one white musician to play on the stage for the whole night. Even if it was just a jam, whites could not jam. Only black musicians could jam, when there was a jam.¹⁰⁹ I was in the meetings and I, heard them talking, it was a hearsay for me. They felt comfortable enough to talk around me. I heard everything they was saying about how they felt, who they liked, who they didn't like. They were mistreating Johnny Dollar,¹¹⁰ he had a falling out with Doc [Pellegrino] and Dollar snatched Doc's toupee off his head. [After that] he got blackballed and couldn't get no work. The Kingston Mines was a plantation."

Did Doc book the bands?

"The barmaids are the ones that pick the bands that play in the clubs. So, the barmaids and the bartender plays a big part, but they are not specialist in music."

Has the pay increased in the blues clubs from the 1980s till today? Are they still paying the same amount of money?

"Yeah, the clubs were paying \$400 back in the seventies and eighties, they still paying that same \$400 now in 2022. So, that's why you have four pieces in most bands."

I know you worked for a club downtown, Blue Chicago, what was that like?

"Gino the owner, had a sixteen-foot picture of me, right at Ohio St. when you come off of the expressway. There was another one on Clark St. They used a sketch of my picture because Gino said I looked authentic; I never got a dime for that."

What makes a blues singer authentic?

"I'll just say as a Black woman, everybody looks at what you doing. First, the [club owners] gotta keep you where you are. They gotta make sure that your teeth is rotted, you can't get to a dentist, and you look sick. They gotta make sure that you stay there, and when you play in a club, they will be there to bring you up in a wheelchair. I watched it over and over again. It's still going on. They don't want somebody educated, looking successful, with a fresh haircut. They don't even want you to have your hands manicured. They want you with knocked out teeth and they want you in raggedy clothes. They want you to have that look of suffer because they feel that that's the only way you'll be able to play the blues."

¹⁰⁹ A jam occurs when professional and amateur musicians play together for free. The performances are informal and happen on Monday nights when there are not many patrons in attendance.

¹¹⁰ Johnny Dollar was a Wolf Records Chicago blues recording artist, <https://www.wolfrec.com/shop/johnny-dollar-my-baby-loves-me/>.

Did Doc [Pellegrino] seem paternalistic, was he controlling of his employees?

“Doc said in a weekly Kingston Mines employee meeting, Don’t give them [blues musicians] too much [money] because if you do, they're not going to do right with it. They used Valerie Wellington as an example of a blues singer that achieved success on the blues scene. Wellington was getting commercials and everything. Her name was big. She bought a house, she had a car, money was rolling in from commercials, but it was a rumor out that she had a problem with cocaine. She died of a brain aneurysm in 1989.¹¹¹ And, shortly after she died, I was sitting at the table with the decision makers, and they used her death as an example. They said, that's why you can't give them too much because they don't know what to do when you give them too much. It is control. If they can't control us, they're not going to use us.”

Katherine Davis was a Delmark Records recording artist. I asked about her experience working for the founder, Bob Koester.

I understand you recorded for Delmark Records; did you know Bob well?

“Yeah, Bob Koester was telling me these ugly stories about how he collected music. He discovered these old Black men [who were musicians]. He started taking tape recorders and interviewing them. Bob captured a lot of those blues artists music and oral interviews. And then, when the artists died, he took all that music and went in the studio and made albums. So, the musician’s families never knew that they had been recorded and that there was profits being made. The artists family never received a dime, and Bob Koester told me that himself. I don't know what it is because they [blues gatekeepers] do open up to me, you know, and talk to me. When he told me that, I was just like, oh hell no, that's because I seen the other labels doing it too. Earwig Records owner, Michael Frank, was in that business too. Some of those labels sold their collections to bigger labels. It was a way of hiding what they did.”

Did Bob [Koester] try to control you?

“Bob Koester wanted me to record an album for Delmark and play an album release party at Blue Chicago. They only wanted to pay me \$100 [for the party]. When the recording session didn’t happen, I got an offer in Greenville, South Carolina for \$1500. It was the same night Blue Chicago wanted me. I canceled; I gave them a month notice cancellation from the Blue Chicago show. Bob Koester got pissed off and said, he was going to take the music I recorded previously. He blackballed me, that means you can’t work any of the blues clubs. Bob would threaten me by saying that I would never work for him again.”

Who do you think I should interview next?

“You have to talk to Inetta, she been out here for years with Mississippi Heat.”

¹¹¹ Janita Poe, “Valerie Wellington, 33, Blues Singer” Chicago Tribune, January 4, 1993, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1993-01-04-9303150336-story.html>.

Inetta Visor

Inetta Visor was born February 4, 1955, and raised on the Southside of Chicago. Both of her parents worked blue collar jobs, mainly at factories. Visor's parents were music lovers and played blues music in their household. When Visor was a child she sang at the "5 cent talent shows in the neighborhood, on her friends front porches." Visor has an eclectic musical taste. In 1984, Visor sang as a backup in a rock band, The Whole Truth Band. They played rock clubs mostly on the Northside and throughout the Chicagoland area. Throughout the mid-1980s and into the 1990s, Visor sang in rock and reggae bands until she began singing blues with Mississippi Heat in 2001. Mississippi Heat was signed contractually to Delmark Records. Visor recorded eight albums with the band as lead vocalist. When I interviewed Visor, I began with asking her about her childhood neighborhood, on the Southside of Chicago.

Inetta, can you tell me what your neighborhood on the Southside was like, when you were a kid?

"Our address was 6811 South Yale. I do remember our next-door neighbor used to have a lot of parties and they played a lot of blues. Memorial Day was his day, he would get up at five in the morning and start playing blues. I remember him playing "Next Time You See Me" by Little Junior Parker, I remember a lot of stuff he played by Bobby "Blue" Bland."

Where blues clubs in your neighborhood?

"One of the best well-known blues clubs was Bill Street, which was on 69th and Halsted. You had, Guys and Dolls that was on 69th and Halsted going west; I don't remember the exact address, but it's a big empty lot now. I remember seeing, Eddie Kendricks [the singer from the Temptations] there. There was all kind of blues clubs. It was like, we didn't even have to drive."

What happened to them?

"The MLK Riots happened. After the King riots, all of that really got messed up. Chicago was so segregated at that time, there were boundaries that Black people couldn't cross without having problems. My neighborhood, Inglewood was prosperous because a lot of the stores were Black owned, and a lot of the professional people lived in the neighborhood. Inglewood was prospering because we were buying among ourselves. 63rd and Halsted was the place to be. There was three

movie theaters; then you had the huge series department store, but the majority of the stores up and down 63rd Street, to 67th Street were Black-owned. So, when the riots happened, a lot of those stores couldn't financially recover. A matter of fact, a lot of the stores, are still boarded up."

Did Black people from the Southside go to the Northside for blues after the 1968 riots?

"There was still a few blues clubs that were open, but it just seemed to me that Black people got disinterested in blues. I remember there was a lounge, I think it was called the President's Lounge; we used to go there just to hang out. A couple of blues guys came in and, Black folks was like, oh Lord, we gotta listen to this? I think [Black] blues musicians started going to the Northside because white people appreciated it more."

Why do you think Blacks abandoned blues?

"Black people started getting disinteresting in the blues because to them it was depressing. It reminded them of hard times. And then, music started moving on. Motown came in and was doing a different form of music, pop. And, I think, you had the groups like the Temptations, and the Miracles, and the Impressions, and all of them; they had the fancy acts and, blues people weren't that fancy. They come in, they sing, they didn't have no choreography. When Motown, and all of the other people started coming in with their music, Black folks just got disinterested in the blues."

I pivoted the interview at this point and asked Visor about blues authenticity.

What do you think the club owners on the Northside expect out of an authentic blues singer?

"Well, for one thing, they want to keep the blues post-war. They think the blues should have been forever kept in its purest form and that it should never have changed. I mean, that's just how serious some of these blues Nazis are. And, as for women, they expect Black women singers to look like they've been through hard times. They expecting a raw attitude, you got to bend over and shake your butt, you have to act like you have street attitude. Even if you looking elegant, they still want you to put your hand on your hip. They want raw sexual energy."

Do you think whites can be authentic blues performers?

"I don't think blues is exclusively Black, but they seem to be kind of pushing us [Black blues artists] out of the door. I think anybody has the right to sing it, because it is an expression where people can talk about hurt, pain, and all races of people go through something. They go through heartbreak and hard times like everybody else. But, I guess my problem is, how we are being pushed out of it."

Have you been pushed out of the blues or marginalized in any way?

"Delmark puts out a magazine. Every year they have all their artists that's on the label pose for a picture in front of the Delmark Records building. It's like they take a big class picture. And if you

notice, the last one that they did, was the 60th anniversary. I think Bob [Koester] had just passed away, and all of a sudden all the artists are white, and I think it was just one Black person [in the picture]. I mean, this is Delmark Records, and it was a complete turnaround. There was only one Black artists on the photo.”

So, is Delmark now signing mostly white blues artists?

“They seemed to be picking up more, white blues artists than Black.”

Do white artist excel faster than Blacks?

“Oh yes, absolutely because, I'm looking at—what's this girl that's out now, that they making a big deal out of—Ivory Ford? Where did she come from? They're making a big deal outta her. What's the other one? Brett Hart.”

Do you think the blues award shows are biased toward white artists?

“They had all these white people that was nominated for blues awards. And I'm like, where do these people come from? I never heard of them. Where do they come from and how long have they been doing this? I was surprised when Sidney Lauper—who had been a rocker and a pop artist most of her life— did one blues CD and got accolades up the ying-yang. How does that happen? There's Black people out there that's been singing blues for years. It's like, come on now. Really? What about all these other women out here who have made blues CDs? How come she got Grammy's for one blues CD that she did?”

Who should I interview next?

“I know Tony has a lot to say. He was talking about this stuff before he was with B. B. [King].

You should give him a call.”

Tony “T.C.” Coleman

Tony “T. C.” Coleman was born August 12, 1955, in Kissimmee, Florida. He was raised by his grandmother. His mother died on his tenth birthday, and his father left his mother when Tony was born, to live in New York City. Coleman's father was King Coleman, a singer, who penned a hit song “Mashed Potatoes.” King Coleman was also an announcer for the Apollo Theater, and disc jockey during the 1970s.

Tony Coleman played drums for local bands until he graduated high school in 1973 and joined the army. After three years of being in the military he moved to Chicago and began his blues drumming career. In 1977, Coleman toured with Otis Clay and subsequently Bobby Blue Bland before joining B. B. King's band. Coleman toured with B. B. King for twenty-five years. I began my interview with Coleman by asking about his music career.

I understand you recorded quite a bit with Chicago Blues musicians, even while maintaining your regular gig with B. B. King?

“Yeah, a lot of stuff with Alligator, Delmark, and the rest of em, you know how it goes.”

Have any of the non-musicians that worked for those labels ever tell you how to play the blues?

“Yeah, years ago I got a call to do a record with Katie Webster. That was when she was with Alligator. When we got in the studio, we were doing a song that had a gospel feel, like a Ray Charles number. Katie was singing and then Bruce [Iglauer] said, Hey, hey, hey, hey, do you have to play that drum beat on these kinds of songs? I said, what are you talking about? He asked, can't you change it up or some kind of way, make something different out of that? I said, no, that's the gospel feel. He said, well just humor me. Could you like, maybe play on the kick (bass) drum, what you're playing on the snare and vice versa? I was like, what? He said, quick just try it. I was like, what the fuck? You know? So, pap-boom-pap, then I said, Hey man, get outta my face man. Go over there and sit-down buddy. Get the fuck outta here with that. I was like, who is this guy, trying to produce us?”

Do you think the blues music industry is racist towards Black artists?

“First of all, we know that there is racism throughout the world and in America, we know that; anybody want to deny that, that's their problem. I got so many good white friends in my life, but I say it like this; everybody ain't racist and every Black person ain't my friend either. All I can say is this, start your own labels together. You know, start your own shit and be unified and do your own thing. Start your own companies. Promote yourself. Book yourself. Start your own booking agency. We have to work together, I'm past being angry about racism and acknowledging it. It exists, but what are we gonna do about it is my question. I'm tired of blaming, others for my shortcomings.”

There are no Black-owned Chicago Blues record labels, booking agencies, management companies, magazines, or award shows. There is only one Black-owned Chicago Blues club

which is Buddy Guy's Legends. All of the other blues businesses in Chicago are still owned by the original gatekeepers who were former Jazz Record Mart employees. To ameliorate this, Coleman believed that Black people should unite, pool their money together, and become blues gatekeepers. Coleman is correct, in that there is not enough Black ownership in blues. However, more Black ownership in blues may not equate to Black musicians earning more money, which is the core of the problem.

Who should I interview next?

"So, do you know who E. G.'s dad was, he was a staple of Chicago Blues. Talk to E. G."

Edward Gregory McDaniel

Edward Gregory McDaniel (E. G. McDaniel) was born May 23, 1960, in Chicago, IL. His father, Floyd McDaniel was a singer during the early 1930s, for the musical group the Rhythm Rascals. He moved to New York City, and was a guitarist for Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, and Billy Holiday. During the 1980s, Floyd McDaniel moved back to Chicago, operated two nightclubs, sang background for Sam Cook and the Ink Spots, and sang lead in his own band, The Four Blazers. Floyd McDaniel played the Chicago Blues Festival in June of 1995, and died a month later, just one day before his 80th birthday. In 1997, Delmark Records released an album by Floyd McDaniel and the Four Blazers, "Mary Jo." E. G. McDaniel's mother, Bessie Jackson was a musician as well. She was a pianist for Cab Calloway in the 1930s, when she met and eventually married Floyd McDaniel. When the McDaniels birthed their son E. G. in 1960, Bessie retired from the music business. Floyd became E. G.'s biggest musical influence.

E. G. McDaniel learned to play bass from his father. By 1997, he was playing in Chicago Blues clubs and touring in Byther Smith's blues band. Byther Smith was a blues singer that was a friend of E. G.'s father, Floyd McDaniel. In his career as a blues bassist, McDaniel has

recorded many albums with Alligator and Delmark Records. Some of the artists he has recorded with are, Byther Smith, Eddie Clearwater, Mississippi Heat, Junior Well, Zora Young and A. C. Reed. To get a better understanding of who E. G. McDaniel's parents were and their contributions to music, I began our interview with asking questions about them.

E. G., can you tell me about your father?

“My father was a graduate of Wendell Phillips High School, in Chicago. When Black people were able to go high school, they went to trade school. So, you learned a trade. My dad's trade was music. He learned all of his music reading and writing in high school, which supported him after he graduated. He then, joined a band called The Rhythm Rascals. They would sing all the popular tunes, and they were discovered and asked to be in the 1933 World's Fair century of progress that was happening here in Chicago. And, upon playing at the century of progress, they were also, working for Al Capone. You never hear Black people in our history ever say anything bad about Al Capone, make a note of that. That's because he put a lot of us to work in his speakeasies, which is what my dad did. The Rhythm Rascals were discovered by Cab Callaway. In 1940, in New York both my parents worked for Callaway. My mother was a background dancer, my dad sang, was choreographer, and played guitar. He also played guitar for the Ink Spots.”

Did your father ever mention racism in the music business, in those days?

“When you played in the Cotton Club, you came in through the back. You never sat out front. Black people didn't sit out front, and you didn't mingle with the crowd. You did your performance, and you went back to the back of the theater.”

Can you tell me about your mother?

“My mother was from a prominent family and did not like blues. She was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. There were a lot of Black people that were upwardly mobile. Her family had good jobs and were making decent wages to be able to afford to live in a nice comfortable house. Not everybody was downtrodden as we try to make it seem. A lot of Black people didn't want to be reminded of the downtrodden that we had to go through. And, some of that was the blues. See, a lot of the blues that we like in Chicago that is often talked about by white people—which is your Muddy Waters and your ‘Howlin Wolf’s—that is blues that was from the Delta of Mississippi. That's why Nina Simone wrote the song, ‘Mississippi God Damn.’ If you listen to that song, she's trying to tell you that not everybody comes from Mississippi. And, the thing about it is, that they wanna put all of us in that stream of consciousness when we play blues to say that it's gotta come from the Delta.”

What was your neighborhood like, on the Southside?

“As a kid, I remember in the 1960s, 63rd Street was like State Street downtown. You had all kinds of stores, but after the riots of Dr. Martin Luther King, everything changed.”

Some people seem to think that Black people stopped listening to blues in the late 1960s, do you remember it that way?

“It's not that we don't like the blues, but we like to dance. So, Blacks created rhythm and blues. Now, the lines [that define musical genres] *are* blurred. Tyrone Davis was called a soul singer, but a lot of his fans who were mostly Black, considered him to be a blues artist. If you went to a Tyrone Davis concert in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a lot of Black people there, and a lot of people were there dancing. And, when you listen to the older stuff that ‘Howlin Wolf put down, and Muddy Waters put down, that music is admired by white people. People don't go there to dance to those artists they go there to listen. There's a difference. It may seem like Black people have abandoned the blues, but they didn't. They just moved on. In our community we're always developing, we're always growing, we're always inventing, and a lot of the white people who love our blues music want us to stay right there, [in the past].”

Can white blues musicians be considered authentic?

“You know, in certain clubs they didn't allow it. They would say, our tourists didn't come to see that, they came to see Black people play. So, things have changed. But, when Black musicians were playing the blues, we were very heavily exploited.”

Has a blues club owner, or “boss” that was not a musician, ever tell you how to play blues?

“Yeah man, they try and tell us how to play our blues and sometimes I have a problem with that, because how can you judge me on the way my heritage is? That sounds kind of prejudiced. It's like, you don't see young Black kids learning how to play klezmer music and then, telling the people who know how to play it, that they're playing it wrong. In the eighties, everybody was getting through disco, and you had more artists that were trying to write and sing more r & b songs. That's why a lot of Black people changed. We were always evolving and always trying to change. And, at that time, there were a lot of white club owners that didn't want change. They would tell you, don't play that music.”

Did you ever have any problems with the record labels in Chicago?

“I've done a lot of recordings for Delmark. The owners that have Delmark now are not the same owners. When my dad was on the label, it was owned by Bob Koester. The last conversation I had with my father about Delmark was 1994. Delmark called my father and let him know they had just acquired all the music and record rights to United States record label. Which meant that anything that my dad had recorded with the Four Blazers was primarily in their hands.¹¹² And purposely, I asked my dad, I said, well, they have your music from the 1940s to the fifties; will you be able to capitalize on that and perform some of your music? He said, they're not gonna put it out, they won't put it out until I'm dead and gone. And my dad died in 1995, and they put it out in 1997. My dad

¹¹² The album *Mary Jo* was originally recorded on United States Records in the 1940s and was re-released by Delmark in 1997. This website encompasses the Four Blazers discography. <https://www.discogs.com/artist/1655952-Four-Blazes>.

was disappointed because it could have enriched his life had they put it out right away. My dad could have capitalized on it.”

Do you think the gatekeepers of blues are racist towards Black blues artists?

“It’s all about money. Those people that run the clubs and run the record labels; they wanted to make money off of us. And that’s simply put.”

Who should I interview next?

“Talk to the blues women, anyone of them. I think they have it worse really. Dietra Farr, Inetta, Mzz. Reese, they all been through the b.s. and they still out here singing proudly and doing their thing.”

Mzz Reese (Priscilla Young)

Priscilla Young was born May 7, 1962, in Jackson Mississippi. Her father, Herbert “Bubba” Thomas was a singer for The Canton Spirituals, an award-winning gospel musical group. Her mother, Bettie Thomas sang in the church choir. In 1976, the Young’s moved to Chicago, Il and settled on the Westside.

Priscilla Young attended Roosevelt high school. After graduating high school, she attended college at Jackson State where she played women’s basketball and earned her bachelor’s degree. After graduating college, she moved back to Chicago to work as a teacher and basketball coach at Nash Elementary. In 2011, she attended a show that featured local blues singer Joe Barr, who invited her to sing onstage. Young stated after that experience, “she knew she had what it take to be a blues singer.” Young continued to frequent music clubs singing with Joe Barr’s band before eventually starting her own. Young named herself Mzz Reese, because she “ate Reese’s Pieces on-stage one night and it went over well with the audience.” She named her band the Reese’s Piece’s. Reese has performed at the Chicago Blues festival two times, but rarely goes on tours. I began my interview with Mzz Reese by asking her about her music career.

I understand you started singing in church, can you talk about that?

“Oh Yeah, I got my start in the church, I sang in the choir, and I was a choir director. I learned to direct from my mother. My dad gave me lots of vocal training lessons at home, but I sang with him mostly at church. I’m still rooted in church and still go to this day. Singing the blues outside of church is actually how I make a living; singing is my gift.”

How would you describe your musical genre?

“Well, my style is Southern Soul. I'm a soulful singer, not a Delta Blues singer. You could put me in a category with Johnny Taylor, Denise LaSalle, and O. V. Wright. They call it Southern Soul, but really it's all blues.”

Is your fanbase mostly Black, or white?

“My fanbase is mostly Black. When I first started I performed in mostly Black clubs. Dr. Jays was Black-owned, The Ambrosia Room, and Buddy Guys also Black-owned. So, 80% of my shows are for mostly Black people.”

Do you feel compelled to crossover? Do you want to attract more white fans?

“Yes, absolutely yes, I mean, whoever receives me, I would welcome them to come listen.”

Is there a difference between Black and white club proprietors? Which do you prefer working for?

“I love Black owned clubs, but they want you to play all night and underpay you. When I work with the white promoters, I’m asked to sing an hour at best and they pay me what I’m worth, whatever I ask for. It's sad, but that's how it goes sometimes. There are Black-owned clubs that don't wanna pay the new up-and-coming artists no more than \$300 but, he wants them to play past midnight, that's terrible.”

I pivoted the questioning in the interview to gain Mzz Reese's perspective of blues authenticity.

Can white people sing Southern Soul?

“They probably can, but I never seen it. I hired a white guy in my band as a drummer. He did well, he lasted for two years.”

When you get interviewed for blues magazines, has anyone ever asked you about your education?

“No.”

Have you ever felt compelled to mention that you are a college graduate in a magazine interview?

“I think that if I did, they would look at me different. Their whole approach would change. There was a time when Blacks wasn’t allowed to be educated. Some people are afraid to talk about that, but I will if I’m asked.”

Who should I interview next?

“Ronnie plays on both the Southside and Northside a lot. You should ask him some questions.”

Ronnie Baker Brooks

Ronnie Baker Brooks was born January 27, 1967, in Chicago II. His father Lonnie Baker Brooks was an Alligator Records recording artists. Brook’s mother, Jeannine Baker, was a homemaker. Brooks learned to play the guitar by playing along to his father’s records, and he joined his father’s band in 1986. Brooks played guitar in his father’s band for twelve years, after which he started his own career as a solo artist. He released his first album in 1998, titled “Golddigger,” and four more albums throughout his career, under his own record label, Watchdog Records. In 2000, he was nominated for a Blues Music Award for Best New Artist. Brooks has toured globally and played in Chicago Blues clubs throughout his career. I began our interview by asking Brooks about his father, who recorded for Alligator Records.

So, can you tell me about your father Lonnie, how did he get started in the music business?

“My dad left home in 1951, he was seventeen. He became a recording artists named ‘Guitar’ Jr. He wrote a big hit “Family Rules” that was getting played on the radio. He sounded like a white guy because it was a country song. My dad loved country music. When my dad went to perform the show, the concert promoter didn’t know my father was Black, his picture wasn’t on the record. Now, this was before Charlie Pride (a Black Country artists) became famous. They had my father go through the kitchen and they hid him, and the band knew the song and everything. When they brought him out and they saw he was Black, they said, I don't want no niggas singing no country. And dad said, that hurt his soul because he loved country so much, and he loved seeing people happy, playing music.”

I understand your father started a blues band when he moved to Chicago. Did he have predominantly white fans, or Black?

“You know, at one time his fans was predominantly Black, and he wasn't making no money. He made more money when whites started listening to him. He was happy that anybody was listening to the music. I don't think he cared what color they were.”

I wanted to know more about Ronnie's career, so I asked him about his fanbase.

I know you play the blues club circuit a lot, both on the Northside and Southside. Do Black people come out to your shows?

“Blacks still support blues, but they are critical. I go to a club here on the Southside of Chicago. Matter of fact, I was just there Sunday night, and it was all Black, and it was free. They had a great band there called The Source One band. Joe Pratt and his band play there every Sunday night. I go down there and play for free. What it does for me is it keeps me honest, because the white fans on the Northside are easily impressed, they like whatever I do, but not Black folks. It taught me to stay true to the music and to stay authentic with the music. You have to play for them from your soul not your head.”

What makes blues authentic?

“When it comes from deep down. It has to have depth and meaning.”

You said that the Southside club was filled with Black people who came to hear the blues but, some people say that Blacks abandoned the blues, what do you think about that?

“A lot of kids abandoned it because they're all trying to get out of the ghetto. Their mentality was, “I want to get out of it now.” The illusion of money made hip-hop popular. If you were living in a two bedroom or one bedroom shack, sharing it with twelve kids, you want to get out of that. They don't want to wait for a blues career. With the blues, you gotta build it up and put some time in it to make some money. Whereas, in hip hop, you can be an instant star. Also, the blues reminded them of bad times, so they didn't want to be reminded of that.”

Do you think Black blues artists are getting opportunities to perform on festivals?

“A few of us, but we rarely headline. A lot of white people don't support Black blues musicians, but of course they're gonna support a white kid. A white audience supports them because they can relate to them more. They think, oh that person is just like me. They can't relate to a Black musician. Whereas when they see a Black musician, it's more of an experience. They can't

experience *our blues*. There is a wall up because of race in America, so that's my philosophy with that.”

Do you think the blues music industry is racist toward Blacks?

“The music business is a tough business. There are a lot of Black people that have gotten screwed in this business. My father was one of them. He told me in his early days he had millions of dollars taken away from him. I know some white people that got screwed in the business too so, I would hate to say it's racist.”

Ronnie, and his father Lonnie Brooks both recorded for Alligator Records. I asked Brooks what he thought about Bruce Iglauer’s 2011 newspaper article in the Chicago Reader.

A lot of us blues musicians were pretty upset about Bruce’s article. I know your dad, and Bruce had a lengthy business relationship. Did you ever speak to Bruce about the article?

“My father was on Alligator Records; he recorded a lot of material there. There's a relationship there that my father and Bruce built. I'm gonna keep our conversation about his article personal. I know it stirred up a lot of controversy. I believe Bruce has a good heart. I believe that it is a business too. So, I'm gonna just leave it at that.”

Even though Brooks knows his dad “had millions of dollars taken away from him,” he rationalized his father’s exploitation because whites were being exploited too. While this might be true, Iglauer did not make public inflammatory comments about white artists. In fact, he bolstered white artists over Blacks, yet Ronnie Brooks believed that this was not egregious.

Who should I interview next?

“Talk to my brother, Wayne, I learned a lot from my little brother, he’s really good with business.”

Wayne Baker Brooks

Wayne Baker Brooks was born April 30, 1970. His father was Chicago Blues legend Lonnie Baker Brooks. In 1988, Brooks graduated high school and joined his father’s band as a road manager and rhythm guitar player. The trio-Lonnie, Ronnie, and Wayne Baker Brooks-

performed over 150 shows a year globally. In 1998, Brooks co-authored the book *Blues For Dummies*, with Cub Koda and his father, Lonnie Brooks. In 2003, Brooks became a solo artist. He formed the record label Blue Island Records, under which he released his first album, *Mystery*. The album is an amalgamation of hip-hop, rock and blues. In 2004, Brooks headlined the Chicago Blues Festival. Brooks is very knowledgeable about blues history. So, I began our interview by asking him what may have caused African Americans to stop listening to blues.

Some people say that Blacks abandoned the blues, but your brother Ronnie and Billy Branch have been playing blues for Black people on the Southside for a long time. So, what do you think, did we abandon the blues?

“So, in the sixties, it was mostly Blacks in the clubs, but then integration started in the late sixties with Black and white audience members. It started after Martin Luther King was shot and killed. That's when the Black audience left the blues. The white audience started coming in more and we were leaving the Delta style blues, the Chicago lump the lump blues right around that time period. When Martin Luther King was shot and killed, the Black community was #1 in shock, #2 felt hopeless because they lost their leader; and #3, gravitated towards James Brown. James Brown was the most popular known person at the time, other than Martin Luther King. So, everyone gravitated towards James Brown then Black folks gravitated to the Motown sound and left blues on the back burner. That's why, in the seventies, disco almost killed blues because Blacks was now gravitating towards a more progressive sound, soul, and Black pride music.”

Wayne Baker Brooks, has his own band, The Wayne Baker Brooks Band, where they perform regularly on the national blues festival circuit. I wanted to know his opinion on white blues musicians dominating blues festivals.

When you played in your dad's band, you guys toured 150 dates a year. Do you still tour that much with your band.

“No, that was a while ago. There aren't too many bands tour that much nowadays. The market for blues is slower. There aren't as many festivals now as it was back then.”

On the Blues Summit panel in 2011, you guys talked about the lack of Black musicians on blues festivals. Why do you think that is the case?

“The reason why concert promoters hire whites is because it is easier to market a white artist to a white audience. I learned this from Bruce [Iglauer], and this is how he thinks as a businessman. It’s easy to market a low white guy or a white gal to a white audience. When you go as an audience member, when you go see someone that you like, and you just now knowing who this person is, and you thinking, wow, this dude is amazing. You know, usually as an audience member, you wish that you was that person up there performing, kicking ass, like they kick ass. And, most of the audience members, who are white, they're not going to relate to wanting to be an old, poor black man on stage playing the blues. So, in short terms, it's easier to market a white person to a white audience, that’s just business psychology. I don't think that's racist; it is what it is.”

You mentioned Bruce Iglauer, and his business practices. Do you think he’s fair with Black artists concerning his label Alligator?

“I think all record labels exploit their artists, but I don’t think Bruce screwed them over. He wasn't making a lot of money and I think he loved the music that he was recording and promoting. He loved Hound Dog Taylor, and no one would sign him other than Bruce. He put up his own money and he recorded the man, and the rest is history, with his label fifty-one years now. Did Alligator give artists bad deals? I don't know. Do a lot of labels give artists bad deals? Yes. I don't think he would make any artist sign a bogus contract. But, will it balance towards him? Hell yeah, because he's putting a lot of work in just as much as certain artists.”

Is that why you remain independent? I noticed you never signed a record deal with Alligator or Delmark.

I think everybody nowadays should start they own label. Record labels are going to exploit their artists, that’s a standard practice. They put up the money and they do all the marketing, they do all the promotion, they do all the sales, the artists just creates.

Similar to his brother, Ronnie, Wayne Brooks believed that musicians being exploited by gatekeepers was “standard practice” in the blues music. Both Wayne Brooks and Tony T. C. Coleman believed that Black business ownership was key; whereas Brooks believed individual Blacks needed to own their own businesses, Coleman saw advantage in ownership as a Black co-op or collective.

Who should I interview next?

“Man, I don’t know, people are scared to talk about this kind of stuff. You a drummer, you talk to any drummers.”

“Yeah, I talked to “TC”

“Well, there you go he knows what’s up. You know DuJuan, Tim’s son, he talks about this stuff all the time, he’ll talk to you.”

DuJuan Austin

DuJuan Austin, born May 12, 1976, is a Chicago Blues drummer. His father Tim Austin was a blues drummer as well, who performed with some of the biggest names in blues and Latin music: Mavis Staples, Otis Rush, Junior Wells, Carlos Santana, and Buddy Guy. Tim Austin died April 3, 2019, leaving a legacy as Buddy Guy’s drummer for twenty-five years. DuJuan Austin is a highly recommended drummer on the Chicago Blues scene. He graduated from Fenger Academy High school and went on to study art at American Academy of Art College. Austin also plays drums for multiple blues acts, Mississippi Heat, Ms. Peaches Staton, Nellie “Tiger” Travis, Matthew Skoller, and many more. Austin has also recorded many records for Alligator and Delmark recording artists. I began our interview by asking about his father, Tim Austin’s illustrious career.

I understand your dad’s first gig was with Mavis Staples, how did he get the gig?

“My grandfather went up to the staple singers when my dad was like 15 and told them, my son could play drums. That’s actually how Pop Staples got my father’s number. My father started playing with the Staples when he was seventeen, that was in 1974.”

Did your dad ever discuss what he got paid as a blues drummer?

“His motto was ‘some money, is better than no money,’ and he lived and died by that motto. He went from getting paid \$125 to \$175 on a real good night or on a weekend in the city, to getting paid \$200 or \$300 a gig. I think he was making between \$500 or \$600 a gig for a 45-minute set when he started playing with Buddy Guy; plus, the five-star hotels, flying first class, he wasn’t complaining at all. But he was only making \$300 a gig with Mavis Staples.”

Is there a difference in pay from when your dad started out playing drums in blues clubs until now?

“It’s the same. That is the most sickening and embarrassing thing I think I’ve ever had to deal with as a professional. McDonald’s pay has gone up; everybody’s pay went up. When I was 25 years

old, I was getting the same hundred dollars my daddy was getting when he was 25. When my daddy was 40, and now I'm 40, I'm getting the same thing my daddy was getting when he was 40. \$100 was the base pay for this level, right? Now, if you earned anything over, you were supposed to be grateful for it. This is the mentality they had us functioning under forever.”

Do you think the clubs and festivals pay white blues musicians the same low wages as Blacks?

“Well, I don’t know exactly but, I make money playing with this white kid name Jimmy Nick out in Naperville, Illinois and other places in the suburbs. Jimmy is an up-and-coming player, not as talented as some of the young Black guitar players. When I played with Jimmy on Wednesdays, my pay was \$200, sometimes \$225 with tips. Sometimes, I was walking outta there with almost \$300. I am not exaggerating. I said, hell, the clubs we played wasn't even big venues like Buddy Guys Legends or Blue Chicago. They were small taverns. I could do three gigs with Jimmy and have \$800 in my pocket. I was thinking, how is he paying us \$200 plus tips on a Wednesday night? And, I know he got his cut. So yes, I do believe it's another pay rate that a lot of these clubs have for us Black musicians because they don't have to pay us nothing else. I made more money with him than musicians that’s been out here playing blues for over thirty-five years.”

Do you think we get less money because of racism, or do you think it's because whites purchase more blues albums than Blacks and the owners or promotors want to appease them?

“I think it’s all because of racism. If we aren’t careful we’ll look back thirty years from now and our kids will believe that the blues was white music. We thought for a long time that rock and roll was white music. They'll see blues as white music. When I go to blues festivals, a lot of times its mostly white, that’s what happened to rock & roll. First, it was Chuck Berry and Little Richard, that’s what rock & roll was. Then came the Rolling Stones, look how much the Rolling Stones get paid versus Little Richard. He still don’t have a Grammy.¹¹³ That speaks in itself on how the industry is and how it's marketed and geared towards white people. But, they got the money and the control to direct it, where they wanted to be directed.”

What did you think of Bruce Iglauer’s comments in the Reader, a few years back when he talked about not signing Black musicians because we are not sober enough to be taken seriously?

“I thought he actually was not speaking from a racist point of view. Black musicians are saying the same exact thing that he said. I think Iglauer picks white musicians over Blacks because the white guys are not full-time musicians. So, they're eager and happy just to be a part of the blues. They come to the recording session two hours ahead, you seen them. They're not high. They don't have to be high. They don't live in the hood. They don't live in the ghetto. Everything isn’t about racism. A lot of the Black blues cats are undisciplined in their rehearsing, never on time, and come to work intoxicated, which is different from the white guys coming in. They are just happy to be getting a chance, to be a part of our world.”

113 Little Richard never won a Grammy in competition but was recognized in 1993, for a Grammy “Lifetime Achievement Award.” <https://www.billboard.com/music/awards/little-richard-1988-grammys-best-new-artist-rant-9374831/>. <https://www.grammy.com/news/little-richard-dead-at-87>.

You play a lot on both the Southside and Northside; I know most of the people who see you perform on the Southside are Black. Do you think Blacks abandoned the blues?

“Blacks support the blues on the Southside, if it’s free entrance. The clubs on the Southside don’t last long because of the lack of community. Black people don’t have communities anymore. I’ve been playing blues a long time. Blacks from the Southside don’t come to the Northside for blues. I think whites support the blues a little more than Blacks. Blacks don’t support it as much as whites because we live the blues every single day. So, if you live this life, if you are of that life, why would you want to go and hear it regularly?”

Who do you think I should interview next?

“Marquise, you know, he’s probably the most outspoken out of all of us, I think it’s because he so young. Talk to Marquise, he ain’t scared.”

Marquise Knox

Marquise Knox was born in St. Louis Mo, February 8, 1991. He is a young blues singer-songwriter, yet he has veteran status because he started his career at thirteen years old. Knox is the progeny of blues musicians. His grandmother Lillie taught him to play guitar, his cousin was blues legend Big George Brock, and he performed at blues concerts with his uncle Clifford Knox. Knox was raised by his grandmother. When Knox was sixteen, he recorded his first album titled “Man Child” which was nominated for a Blues Music Award for Best Artist Debut. Knox tours the United States and Europe frequently, while maintaining a steady presence in Chicago and St. Louis Blues clubs. Knox has been outspoken about race on his social media platforms and was very eager to do this interview. I began with asking about his family’s rich history.

I understand you come from a rich family history of blues musicians; can you talk about your family?

“My people from Grenada, Mississippi. Magic Slim is my cousin on my mom side, and Big George Brock is a cousin of my mom.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Magic Slim, 1923-2013 was a Chicago Blues musician, <https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/magic-slim-the-teardrops-3/>. Big George Brock, 1932-2020 was also a blues musician, <https://www.baucomspreciousmemories.com/obituary/George-Brock>.

Did they give you any advice on how to navigate the music business?

“I recorded my first album at 13 years old, and at 16 I recorded my second album in Salina Kansas. Henry Townsend was my blues mentor, he told me, you need to make \$2,500 every time you step outside your house, because when you step outside the house, you on their time and they paying you for being on their time. My people told me what to watch for in business, how to carry yourself with respect, and to show up on time and all this other stuff. But the common denominator was always, carry these Black blues on, and represent us to the best of your ability, and do not let them white boys take over the blues.”

Do you think that whites are taking over the blues, because the audience is mostly white, and they want to see white blues acts or do you think the promoters hired them more than us because they are racist towards Black artists?

“I think there's a great bias that exists in the blues. Promoters may not be racist or bigoted, some have good intentions. They start out understanding that they are promoting Black heritage music. After about two or three years they waiver, and instead of promoting Black heritage, it becomes all about having a party with their friends. So, then the concert promoters just want to book their friends, or some of these men want to book the blues women so they can get close to them, or they just want to book some guitar player that they like. They want everybody to think that everything is a party with the blues—the popular theme nowadays is there's no Black, no white, just the blues—as if we all get along. No, we are struggling, Black women who are single have less than \$200 in their checking account at any given time in the month. That's the blues, then you wonder why little boys are killing and stealing, that's the blues.”

Are you being excluded from the big opportunities in the blues, you know, the head lining slots? You ever think the promoters may be overlooking you, because you are Black?

“There are concert promoters who think I'm too political. They try to say, I'm like a Malcom X. We are in the blues world, and I cannot speak about Blackness, but they making money on Black history; the blues is Black history. I could never be too political as long as I'm centered in Blackness and playing the blues.”

Do you think Black people abandoned the blues, and that is why white musicians are the majority on blues festivals?

“They (concert promoters) act like we don't exist now. And now, the first thing they say is, there isn't any Black folks playing blues. Well, yes we are. We've been doing this a long time. I've been doing this since I was 12 years old. That's when I got my first paycheck, I used to get snuck inside the clubs. I come up underneath the ranks of all those blues guys, around the town and then on the national front. I think if you went out into the Black neighborhood fifty years ago, the clubs was

playing the blues. And, right now today, if you get ready to go out in the Black community to have a good time you still going to that hole in the wall (a term for small no frills dance club in Black neighborhoods) and guess what? That hole in the wall will be playing blues and Southern soul. Blues music wasn't broadcasted like r & b, and the rest of the music that was showcased. Blues had a safe haven inside the Black community because blues clubs existed there and still do. So, white people have never really been inside Black people's homes. White people have never been inside our community, really, unless they were getting drugs or hookers, and it is about still the same way today. But, we've been in their household. My grandma used to say, we familiar with white people, we've been in their homes, scrubbed their floors, we know everything about the white community. Now, how many of them have been in a Black person's house to make that broad statement, that Black folks abandoned the blues? Have they seen the record collection of every Black person's grandma or grandpa? Have you been in the house to see it? Cause we've been inside your house. We know what your house look like. Have you been inside ours to make that distinction? To have the qualification to make that statement they would have to know enough about us. They just reading about us from books and statistics and haven't been around us. So, how can we abandon something, if I got the blues, and you got the blues? The white man did not bring us the blues, we found it where we was at, in the Black community."

Can white people play the blues?

"I think they got the right to play it because they have hands (Marquise jokingly laughs out loud). Outside of that, they cannot feel it. They cannot feel it the way we feel it and that's not being racist. Because the blues is more than a missed paycheck, a missed woman, a missed love or a missed opportunity. It is the complete domination of American suppressing Blacks with slavery, sundown laws, Jim Crow laws. And then, they used the prison industrial system, and they'll never understand this. How can you have the blues when the totality of whiteness is being propped up automatically. In order for the white man to have the blues, he'd have to lower his condition in his standing in America. And, he's not going to do that, so he would be lying to say that he feels like he got the blues. So, whites have the right to play the blues, they just don't have them."

Do you think the blues industry is racist towards Black blues artists?

"I think it is, it's a bigoted game. To charge a concert promoter with racism, You'd have to prove that it's in their heart. We couldn't prove that unless somebody starts spewing racist comments out of their mouth. But, now when you start claiming to be an ally of Black people and you put on the festival and you book three and four Black people out of 10 or 12 bands band, well we know what's up. And then, out of those three and four Black people, you put them onstage before three o'clock, before a crowd shows up, we know what's up! And then, you can just go on down from there. I done got to the point now personally, where I don't even try to be mad at the way white people treat us in the industry. I try not to even be mad at the way that they treat me. I know that it is bias. Because, I know a lot of promoters personally, and I know how a lot of them feel because I'm very outspoken. So, I can just imagine, if they feel that way about me, how they feel about an average Black person. Inside the blues industry they want to hush up Blackness. We can't charge white fans with being racist, but they are bigoted, and they are biased to the Black people of today. They like dead Black blues musicians. They don't give a damn about no living Black [blues]folks, unless we gonna talk about their discography—about CDs and the music—that's fine. But now, you start

talking about the lifestyle of Black people, that's going to have to lead you talk about social issues. The blues world do not want to wrap itself socially, around Black people. But, they do for handicapped people, they raise money for programs for leukemia patients or, cancer, diabetes, or anything, but they won't raise a dime to help Black folks. What kind of business is this?"

Conclusion

The oral histories reveal that there are three reoccurring themes. They were class division amongst Black people, white dominance in all aspects of the blues industry, and the perception that blues musicians did not believe that gatekeepers were racist. In this section I discuss each of the key themes and provide examples using excerpts from the oral histories.

In the 1950s and 1960s Black people were divided by class. Many upward mobile Blacks did not like blues, instead they preferred jazz. Blues was associated with low-class dwelling Blacks, whereas jazz was correlated to upper class Blacks. E. G. McDaniel explained, "my mother was from a prominent family and did not like blues. She was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. There were a lot of Black people that were upwardly mobile. Her family had good jobs and were making decent wages to be able to afford to live in a nice comfortable house." She identified as upper class and like many Blacks did not want to be reminded of the oppression the genre is rooted in. Billy Branch's interview showcased class division as well.

Billy Branch echoed McDaniel when he explained that there are Black people who do not like blues music because it is associated with an inferior class. He observed this when he performed for Black music consumers on Chicago's Southside. He stated, "You know, just even the name blues are [associated with] bad times and struggle, the Jim Crow South, the lynching's, and the segregated South. And, the blues is attached to that. And, then people deem it as, as low-class. You know, jazz was viewed as sophisticated, when you think Duke Ellington, [John] Coltrane, and Miles Davis. But, when you think about cats like Muddy Waters and Jimmy Reed,

these guys had very little, if any formal education, the, stigma, the perception is of an inferior cast...And, that's why a lot of [Black] folks say, I love jazz, but I don't care. We're blues.”

Branch delineated that Blacks like blues, they just did not know it; when his band, the S.O.B.'s played on the Southside, the patrons enjoy it.

A second theme that emerged from the oral histories is the prominence of white ownership in the blues music industry. In 1951, Paul Robeson highlighted this problem during his speech at the conference for Equality for Negroes in Arts, Science, and Professions yet, it still remains a current issue. There are no Black owned blues record labels in Chicago, no exclusively Black blues committee that produce award shows, no Black owned blues magazines, and there is only one Black owned blues club in Chicago, Buddy Guys Legends.

Tony T. C. Coleman lamented that he was aware that racism and exclusion exist in blues, but he was more concerned about how Black blues musicians were going to deal with it. He believed that group economics and Black ownership was a path to Blacks being successful in the blues business. Coleman stated, “All I can say is this, start your own labels together. You know, start your own shit and be unified and do your own thing. Start your own companies. Promote yourself. Book yourself. Start your own booking agency. We have to work together, I'm past being angry about racism and acknowledging it. It exists, but what are we gonna do about it is my question.”

Wayne Baker Brooks agreed with Coleman that Blacks should have more ownership in blues however Brooks explained that Black *individuals* should own their own businesses. Brooks stated, “I think everybody nowadays should start they own [record] label. Record labels are going to exploit their artists, that's a standard practice.” Tony Coleman advised that Blacks needed to unite and own their own record labels so there are more Black gatekeepers in the

music business. This suggest that Blacks will operate in good faith not to be exploitive toward other Blacks, which is an obfuscation. Having more Black owners in the music business does not guarantee that Blacks will act in good faith toward other Blacks. There are Black music business gatekeepers who already exploit Black musicians just the same as white owners. Mzz Reese concretized this when she explained that she was underpaid by Southside Black owned blues clubs. The club owners and musicians were of the same ethnicity, but this did not prevent the owners from exploiting the workers. Moreover, the Brooks brothers explained that being exploited and cheated is standard practice in the music business which means that both Black and white gatekeepers exploit all musicians, no matter their race. To ameliorate this Blacks must own their own business and work in the best interest for themselves to circumvent being exploited. The third theme the oral histories revealed is that most of the interviewees believe that the blues music industry was not racist towards Black artists.

Sixty percent of the interviewees perceived that gatekeeper's in the blues industry predominantly hired white artists over Blacks because it was more profitable. I was especially concerned with Ronnie Baker Brooks opinion on this matter because his father was an Alligator Records recording artists when the founder Bruce Iglauer made inflammatory comments about Black artists in the *Chicago Reader*. I expected a vitriolic outburst from Brooks about racism in the music business, but to my surprise he calmly stated, "I know some white people that got screwed in the business too so, I would hate to say it's racist." Ronnie's brother Wayne did not think gatekeepers were racist either. He believed that it is easier for concert promoters to market white blues artists to white people because whites can relate to them, which is another way of explaining the Elvis Presley Syndrome. I asked Billy Branch if he thought the blues industry was racist toward Blacks and he answered, "The record industry is going to gravitate toward what-

sells, whether you are Black or white. So, you can't really take that attitude, that it's just about Black and white. It's about money...”

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The title of this thesis, *These Blues Are in Spite of You, Mr. Charlie*, was inspired by a quote extracted from Sugar Blue's poem he recited at the 2012 "Blues and the Spirit" summit at Dominican University. Blue's poem explained that Black people endured racial discrimination, Jim Crow, and lynching. These injustices notwithstanding, under these circumstances, the blues emanated.

Blues music is an expression of the struggle that Black people experienced due to racism. I expected that the musicians' narratives would indicate that racist gatekeepers were the reason that Black blues musicians were excluded from lucrative gigs, causing them to struggle financially. This is somewhat true; however, the onus is not exclusively on the gatekeepers, it extends to the music consumers. As explained by Barry Dolins, the gatekeepers are responding mainly to the racist preference of white music consumers, who have historically suffered from the "Elvis Presley Syndrome." Whites are eager to celebrate other whites playing blues music.

Even though the most powerful, white gatekeeper in Chicago Blues, Bruce Iglauer, gave a public, bigoted statement, that does not prove that all white gatekeepers are racist. Marquis Knox further explained that the blues, "...is a bigoted game...to charge a concert promoter with racism, you'd have to prove that it's in their heart." White gatekeepers claim they love the art, but many have little regard for the *Black* artists. This is reflective of the axiom "They love our rhythm but hate our blues."

When Black blues musicians talk, sing, or write blues songs, they have the option to express their disdain for institutional racism or the individuals that perpetuate it. When this occurs, it is often shunned by white music consumers, who want nothing more than to "have a

good time,” and “forget about their problems.” Blues music lyrics serve as a reminder that Blacks have social and economic problems that must be addressed, so we can have a decent quality of life. For many white music consumers, they already have great livelihoods, the laws are governed in their favor, and the wage gap is tilted to favor them.

I expected the oral histories would reveal that Black Chicago Blues musicians believed they were being marginalized because *Mr. Charlie*—which is synonymous with white blues gatekeepers—were racist. However, to my surprise, the findings were opposite. Despite the exclusion to which Black blues musicians succumbed, most of them did not blame or believe that white blues gatekeepers were intrinsically racist. This made me wonder why, even though they were marginalized by white gatekeepers, and in some cases, their parents exploited by them too, they saw it as standard business practice. More research may be required to fully understand their disposition and reluctance to see race as a factor in their treatment.

Another aspect of the interviews, was that the two youngest participants, Marquis Knox and Dajuan Austin, believed that the blues industry *is* racist, whereas the veteran musicians defended the industry, stating it is not. I suspect that Knox felt this way, because he is militant and very outspoken about race on his social media platforms and during his live performances. Knox stated, “there are concert promoters who think I'm too political. They try to say, I'm ‘like a Malcom X.’” He is aware that his remarks about race are the reason why concert promoters excluded him from blues festivals. However, I wonder, is he excluded by gatekeepers because they are offended by what he believes or are they afraid he may offend the music consumers, who may be thwarted by his disposition? Knox and Austin are, most likely, earning the least money out of all of the interviewees, so their perception that the music industry is racist may have been shaped by gatekeepers who excluded them from lucrative opportunities in blues.

Dajuan Austin is a side-musician. Side-musicians make the least money in the blues field, and to make matters worse, blues club salaries have remained the same for decades. Blues musician pay does not adjust for inflation. Austin explained, “now, I’m 40 [years old], I’m getting the same thing my daddy was getting when he was 40 [years old]. A hundred dollars was the base pay for this level...” Chicago Blues clubs pay about four-hundred dollars for a four-piece band. When the band splits the pay, the members receive one-hundred dollars each. One hundred dollars is the base pay for side-musicians in Chicago Blues clubs, which is a modicum amount, when compared to a veteran musician’s salary. Veteran artists may not believe that the blues industry is racist, because their earnings may be considerably more than the younger artists. Also, their top-tier status in blues may have afforded them business relationships with blues gatekeepers, that the younger artists have not yet established.

Young artists are not the only group of musicians being paid less than their worth. It is common knowledge that women, in all professions, have it harder than men. Women are paid less money and face gender discrimination. Furthermore, Black blues women confront a unique intersectionality of working in a male-dominated profession that is run by whites. More research is needed to examine how Black blues women cope with marginalization, being pressured to perform in a hyper-sexualized manner, and being excluded from lucrative gig opportunities. So, not only do they face the same problems that male artists face in an industry that does not compensate them fairly, but they are also reduced further by their sexualization.

I would be remiss without considering my own positionality in this project. Although the finding that most blues musicians did not perceive that racism was the underlying factor in their or their parents’ treatment in the industry may seem like an anomaly, I am certain that the interviewees were candid in their oral histories. If this research was conducted by an outsider of

the blues milieu, or a white researcher, it may be perceived that this lack of perceived race discrimination was really artists' reluctance to open up to an outsider. Because I am Black, an insider in the Black blues community, and personal friends with most of the interviewees, I can trust that what they were telling me is their truths. If I were not an insider—both in terms of race and the industry itself—they may not have been open or candid about their experiences.

This thesis lends a voice to Black blues musicians that have been silenced, marginalized, and exploited in the genre. The oral histories reflect what we think about our profession. It gives a voice to Black blues musicians, who were never asked how racism affected their livelihoods. Many Black blues musicians have remained silent on this matter from fear of reprisal—Billy Branch stated this on his monologue at the 2012 “Blues and the Spirit” summit at Dominican University, when he passed out a rebuttal to be signed by Chicago Blues musicians, in response to Bruce Iglauer’s incendiary remarks in the *Chicago Reader*. These Black musicians have watched blues music being controlled and commodified by white gatekeepers, who have bolstered white blues musicians to the top tier of the genre. Most Black blues musicians are relegated to performing in low-paying blues clubs, where racial Black tropes are marketed to mostly white music consumers, under the guise of selling an “authentic” blues experience. I will continue this research to educate blues consumers, gatekeepers, blues musicians, and academics, about the atrocities that have been committed by blues music gatekeepers. Hopefully, this will aid in the eradication of unfair treatment of Black blues artists.

This project is the first of its kind. No other Black Chicago Blues musician has written academically about blues and race. That is paramount because the blues has been explained only through the perception of white scholarship. They are not a part of *our* Chicago Blues milieu, which means they are outsiders. Some of the outsiders try to play blues music as a hobby and use

their interest in the genre as a license to publish books so they can profit off of Black culture. Some have even written obfuscations about Black culture, claiming that blues is “American” music.

Blues is not “American” music, it is Black music. When the blues were invented in the late 1800s, Blacks were not considered or accepted as Americans. Blues music reflects the pain and struggles Blacks have endured, at the hands of the “Americans” who caused it. To be considered an “American” in the 1800s meant that you were white. Today, anything that is labeled “American” still means white, because that is the historical connotation of the word. The word “American,” when attached to blues music, usurps Black peoples contributions, culture, and history under the guise that Blacks have assimilated to being “American,” resulting in Black heritage music being referred to as “American.” If a Black blues musician refers to themselves or their music as “American” that is *their* option. But, if they do not want to call blues music “American,” because they understand that “Americans” did not invent it, and that Black people who lived in this country did, then they can call it Black music, and it should be respected in that way. When outsiders who write about blues ignore this fact, it bolsters more “Americans” that make “American” music, which perpetuates the “Elvis Presley Syndrome.”

Blues industry gatekeepers’ marginalization of Black performers persists because of the profits it generates. Blues gatekeepers are in the music business to earn money, not support Black heritage. Veteran Black Chicago Blues musicians who dedicate their entire lives to learning, teaching, and playing the blues are highly respected in the blues milieu. Yet, class division, capitalism, and the disposition of the bourgeoisie diminishes their regality to mere wage-laborers. Greed minimizes art.

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