To dig the blues, you've got to dig a little

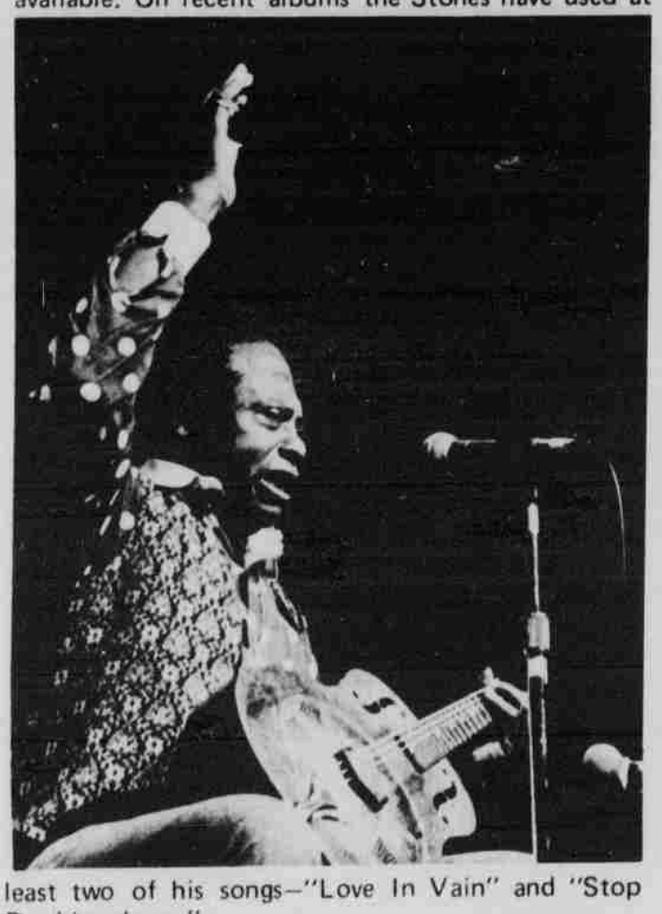
This is the last of a two-part series on the blues by Fine Arts writer Bart Becker

by Bart Becker

To dig the blues, you've got to dig a little . . .

In the 1930s and subsequent years, blues began to divide into two camps—rural and urban.

People familiar with Rolling Stones music might want to listen to some of the Robert Johnson records available. On recent albums the Stones have used at



least two of his songs—"Love In Vain" and "Stop Breaking down."

Stylistically, Johnson was a Mississippi Delta blues man. The music of that area places a high premium on the close relationship between voice and accompanying guitar. Johnson was uncanny in that relationship. In most of his performances, voice and guitar seem a single instrument.

Columbia recently released what amounts to a "best of" album of Johnson's work. Called *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers,* the two volumes include 20 of his songs, originally recorded for the American Recording Company in 1935-36. The second volume includes both "Stop Breaking Down" and "Love In Vain."

Although Lightnin' Hopkins probably can be classified as modern, he is another good example of rural blues. *The Best of Lightnin' Hopkins* is available on Everest's Tradition series. It includes "Short Haired Woman" and "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Blues instrumental solos traditionally have been carried by two instruments: the guitar and the harmonica or mouth harp. Two of the best examples of early blues harp are done by Sonny Boy Williamson I and II.

Little Walter is the man who first amplified the harp in the blues. He cupped the microphone in his hand and manipulated it to produce the sound he desired. Walter played with Muddy Waters' band in the early Fifties before going out on his own.

Another singer and harp player who bears mentioning and listening is Junior Wells. For years a stalwart and proponent of the Chicago blues sound, several good recordings of his material are available today.

There are a couple of performers who have gained a larger measure of contemporary recognition than many of their colleagues. Muddy Waters is quite possibly the most well-respected of all the blues performers today. Almost any of his recordings will be valuable to the inexperienced blues listeners. Any of his sidemen or associates are equally competent.

In addition, such names as John Lee Hooker and the Kings—BB., Albert and Freddie—now are familiar to most rock fans.

For a good introduction and lesson in the blues of this era, it would be more valuable to listen to some of the music than to read about it. The Chess Vintage series is a good one for highlighting many performers.

Peter Guralnick's book, *Feel Like Going Home,* is written in a style that may be highly palatable to someone curious about the blues but not too plugged into it yet. It contains some lively journalistic portraits of Muddy Waters, Johnny Shines, Skip James, Howlin' Wolf, Sam Phillips and Sun Records and the Chess Brothers.

Many blues people who had performed for years for a largely black audience now enjoy popularity with a young, white audience. In many cases this is due to rock performers tinting their music a little blue in order to slide the rock fans into some blues appreciation.

White performers like Paul Butterfield and Mike Bloomfield hung around Chicago blues joints for years, playing with older black musicians and developing a blues style.

These musicians and their bands had moderate success with the rock market, but it was Cream that really opened up the market to the blues. Touted as a "supergroup," Cream plowed through America and helped tune some of their audience in to the blues.

Cream played loud enough for the rock audience which, at the time, was idolizing Jimi Hendrix and the Airplane. Eric Clapton is a good blues guitarist and Cream arranged a lot of traditional blues tunes.

That paved the way for a lot of groups to mix some blues with their rock, making it palatable to the heretofore unexposed audience.

Canned Heat, a white blues band, helped John Lee Hooker achieve some recognition among young whites. By recording a couple of collaborative albums, John Lee's name and music became more familiar to rock fans.

B. B. King, Albert King and Freddie King have achieved about as much success with rock audiences as any blues performers. They've made the transition to rock charts more strongly than any other performers and probably are the most familiar names to the casual observer and listener.

A lot of bands are capable of playing some good blues and do so occasionally. But it's usually thickly mixed with rock.

Both the Allman Brothers Band and the Rolling Stones are good examples of this.

The late Duane Allman was a good guitarist and a good slide guitarist. His band always rocked, but it often had a good dose of the blues built into its material.

The Stones have recorded some older blues material, and most of their original material can be classified as blues. The difference between a lot of the nouveau blue groups and the older performers is that the new bands use volume as one of the aspects of their music. That shows the influences of rock on them.

In any event, the Stones and groups that lean toward the blues have opened the collective rock mind to the blues.

Unfortunately, most blues artists remain available only on smaller labels, therefore remaining largely unexposed to the large young audience. A few older performers, for example, the Kings and some newer artists, like Taj Mahal, are easily available.

The point is that newspaper articles will not give a feeling for, or an understanding of, the blues. All a newspaper article can do is drop some names and suggest some records and books. But the records have to be listened to and the books have to be read to be enjoyed.

daily **nebraskan**

Editor-in-chief: Jim Gray. Managing Editor: Tom Lansworth. News Editor: Randy Beam. East Campus Editor: John Russnogle.

The Daily Nebraskan is written, edited and managed by students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and is editorially independent of the University faculty, administration and student body.

The Daily Nebraskan is published by the CSL subcommittee on publications Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday throughout the school year, except on holidays and vacations.

Second class postage paid at Lincoln, Nebraska 68508.

Address: The Daily Nebraskan/34 Nebraska Union/Lincoln, Nebr., 68505. Telephone 402/472/2588.