

Powerful Muddy Waters continues blues legend

By Casey McCabe

McKinley Morganfield was born on Sunday, April 4, 1915 in Rolling Fork, Miss. His mother died when he was three, and his father sent him to a Clarksdale plantation to be raised by his grandmother.

Morganfield used to sneak out and play in the mud when he was little, so his grandmother called him Muddy. His friends add-

In his early days of performing (singing and playing harmonica), Muddy's local popularity took him from a salary of 50 cents a night (plus a fish sandwich and a half pint of moonshine) at age 13, to \$18 a night in the 1930s. Often a "night" of playing meant 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

It wasn't until age 17 that Waters began playing the guitar, showing the influence of Robert Johnson, Son House and other early Delta bluesmen who pioneered the "bottleneck" style on guitar.

In 1941, two folk researchers came to the Clarksdale plantation, where Waters was working, and made recordings of his raw, unamplified country blues for the Library of Congress. His work around that time was viewed as a refreshing dose of reality from the music-stifled blues that was prevalent during the wartime.

In 1943, like many black Southerners, Waters left the Delta to move north to Chicago, working in a paper mill and as a truck driver. In the many local clubs of Chicago, Muddy became influenced by Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Boy Williamson. He was soon to buy his first electric guitar

and surround himself with some of the greatest sidemen the blues has known, including Jimmy Rogers, Little Walter, Willie Dixon, James Cotton, Francis Clay, Freddie Below, Pat Hare, Walter Horton, Luther Tucker and Waters' half-brother, Otis Spann.

Charting Waters' influence in the music of this century is not difficult. For instance, his 1954 song "Rollin' Stone" has been acknowledged as the inspiration for Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone," and the basis for the British rock band and the popular American music magazine of the same name. It also has been noted that Jimi Hendrix taught himself to play the guitar by listening to Muddy Waters records.

When asked about groups such as the Rolling Stones and the Allman Brothers Band, who have earned small fortunes from his songs, Muddy says, "I don't ever give it a thought. If they had never started taking my stuff, I don't know that I could have moved up."

The years haven't dimmed Waters' power. Last year, 8,000 people jammed a Chicago stage to see the legend in person. The police, it was reported, were hard pressed to "keep the place from exploding."



Photo by Mark Billingsley
Muddy Waters

Waters Thursday night appearance in Lincoln found a slightly more subdued, but no less appreciative, sell-out crowd in Kimball Hall, an auditorium more familiar with the aesthetics of ballet, symphony and opera.

Leading off for the Fourth Annual Great Plains Blues Festival was Lincoln's own blues institution, the Heart Murmurs. Down to a foursome in the last year, the band still responds with characteristic tightness. Taking a majority of the spotlight was Jim Cidlik on piano and vocals, displaying a virtuosity that could keep him in the company of any blues band in the country. Also in usual good form was Sean Benjamin, whose talent also goes beyond the blues guitar monopoly he has in the city.

But there was no doubt who the man of the evening was. After a warm-up by the capable but unemotional Muddy Waters

band, the man himself strode onstage, strapped on his chipped and primitive 1957 Fender Telecaster, and slipped into a blues persona that few could hope to match.

Muddy is 65 now and still touring heavily. He keeps his guitar work elemental, sits on a stool for much of a performance, and wears earplugs. But one thing he has that only increases with his age is his presence. Waters has a riveting look that keeps his music timeless.

Sidemen John Primer and Rick Kreher may be faster and more accurate now than Waters, but by just watching them view Muddy during a show reveals where their respect lies, and that is on the man in the spotlight. Waters often would use his slide to produce the night's most torrid guitar work, but it was the growling vocals of the ever virile Muddy Waters that makes his show most rewarding.

"Baby Please Don't Go," "Champagne and Reever," and the classic "Got My Mojo Working," kept the crowd alive, but the growing anticipation finally burst when Waters was called out for an encore of "Mannish Boy." Highly simplistic with an irresistible power, Muddy was off his stool for this one, and the audience that had been too comfortable all night, launched out of their seats as well.

Muddy Waters again proved himself an American music legend. As a father figure to an entire generation of musicians, the chance to see him perform is the only way to explain the power of his presence

Review

ed the last part, Waters, and the nickname has come to represent one of the most influential blues artists of the last 40 years.

It has taken the popularity of blues-based on rock 'n' roll, and the promotional backing of CBS Records to give Muddy Waters his world-wide recognition of late. But among the musical community itself, Muddy has long been an inspirational figure representing the powerful primitive style wrought from the Delta blues.

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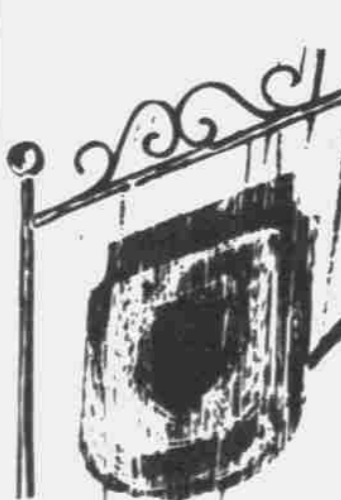
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