

Stew's Blues

By Stew Magnuson
Diversions

1986 has been a great year for blues on vinyl. Virtually every major blues artist released an LP this year. Most of the blues' magic isn't found on records, though. The blues is best in a hot, sweaty nightclub with a screaming guitar and a moaning harmonica. Still, blues artists often transfer this energy onto a record. No, it's not the same as being in the Zoo Bar on a Friday night when Magic Slim blows the crowd away with just the right chords, but sitting at home alone, one can stick a blues record on the turntable and hear about all of life's woes — "My baby found somebody new," "I found somebody new," "My baby's sleeping with somebody else" and even worse, "I ain't got no baby." These are the time-honored clichés, but the blues are more than painful tunes.

I love to hear Muddy Waters belt out the words:

"I felt so good/Hope I always will/ You know I feel so good."

What joyous music to wake up to in the morning.

The Chess Re-releases on MCA Records

Last year, MCA Records bought the entire Chess Catalog. For those who don't know, Chicago's Chess label, along with Sun and Atlantic, were virtually responsible for bringing rock 'n' roll to the world. Chess recorded such people as Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters and hundreds of other equally important artists. In November, MCA released the first 12 re-issues in a hopefully

long series of classic blues and rock. Now the executives at MCA have something better to do than fabricate the 300th repackaging of Buddy Holly's Greatest Hits.

Among the first 12 is Howlin' Wolf's first LP, "Moaning in the Moonlight," John Lee Hooker's "John Lee Hooker Plays and Sings the Blues," "Muddy Waters at Newport, 1960" and "Muddy Waters Plays Big Bill Broonzy." Now these late, great artists are available to a whole new audience of younger listeners. This music still is as fresh as the day it was recorded. The best part is the price. All the re-releases list at \$4.98 or lower. I challenge anyone who is unfamiliar with these artists, but who listens to Z.Z. Top or George Thorogood regularly, to take a chance on any one of these records. You won't be sorry.

New Releases

The end of 1986 saw the release of four records from major blues artists.

In each of these LPs, a listener can hear the many different approaches a blues artist can take.

The jazz/funk stylings of Albert Collins, The Texas Boogie of Johnny Winter, the smooth, bluesy soul of Robert Cray and the rock 'n' blues of Lonnie Brooks.

Johnny Winter, "3rd Degree," (Alligator Records)

Johnny Winter's voice sounds like he gargles with gravel every minute, and his guitar — well his hands are all over the neck for non-stop blues licks. Winter is the quintessential Texas guitarist. His guitar overwhelms the lyrics and virtually all other instruments.

Johnny Winter isn't a household name with people under the age of 30. For those who don't know, he was once hailed as America's answer to England's Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck. His rock/blues LPs sold millions in the early '70s. Now Winter has returned to his blues roots, totally leaving rock 'n' roll behind. That's good, a musician can grow old gracefully with the blues.

"Third Degree" is Winter's third LP since his return to the blues. It's all guitar. And that's what Winter does best. He takes his slide and works up

high-energy Texas boogie. Except for one song, all the cuts on "3rd Degree" are covers. The history of the blues goes 20 years before rock 'n' roll, so artists like Winter can go further back and dig up some real obscurities like J.B. Lenoir's "Mojo Boogie," the opening song, followed by the equally unknown "Love, Life and Money" by Little Willie John.

These obscurities are great. Maybe Elmore James' "Shake Your Money-maker" is a little overcovered, but Winter's guitar scorches so well that it hardly matters. What makes "3rd Degree" stand out from his last two Alligator releases, "Guitar Slinger" and "Serious Business" is the reunion of Winter with his original rhythm section, drummer John Turner and bassist Tommy Shannon. The three broke up in the late '60s when Winter left the blues for rock 'n' roll. Now they're back after 16 years, helping Winter on three songs.

Also notable are the two acoustic songs on a National Steel guitar, "Evil on My Mind" and "Bad Girl Blues." Winter recreates the raunchy Mississippi delta-blues sound, the basic blues kicked out for years before anyone had even thought of an electric guitar. If you want to hear a screaming blues guitar by a true master, this is the blues LP for you.

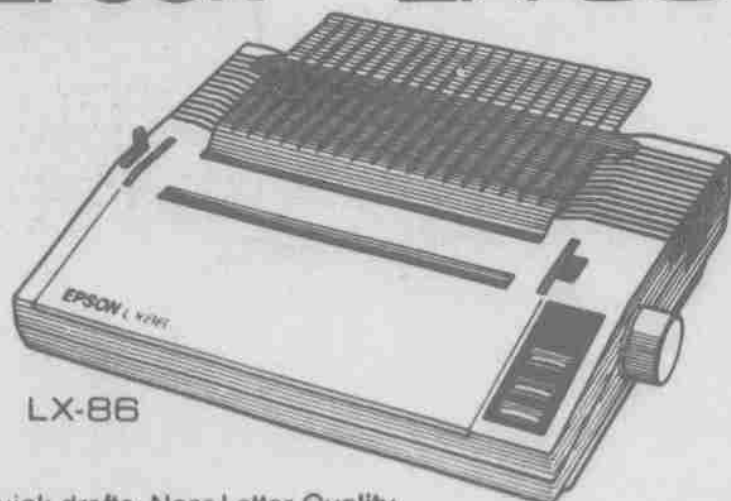
The Robert Cray Band, "Strong Persuader" (Polygram/Hightone Records)

I have to admit Mucous TV got to me on this LP. I saw Robert Cray's video for "Smoking Gun" and ran out to my favorite record store the next day and bought "Strong Persuader," the most talked-about, written-about blues LP in years.

There are several reasons why "Strong Persuader" is getting so much press. Yes, Cray is the first black blues guitarist to sign on a major label since B.B. King. Yes, he's on David Letterman and MTV. Only a few years ago, Cray was a Zoo-bar semi-regular, and now music critics are raving all over the States. There's a reason that goes beyond Cray's signing on a major label. Cray's "Strong Persuader" is a beautifully

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