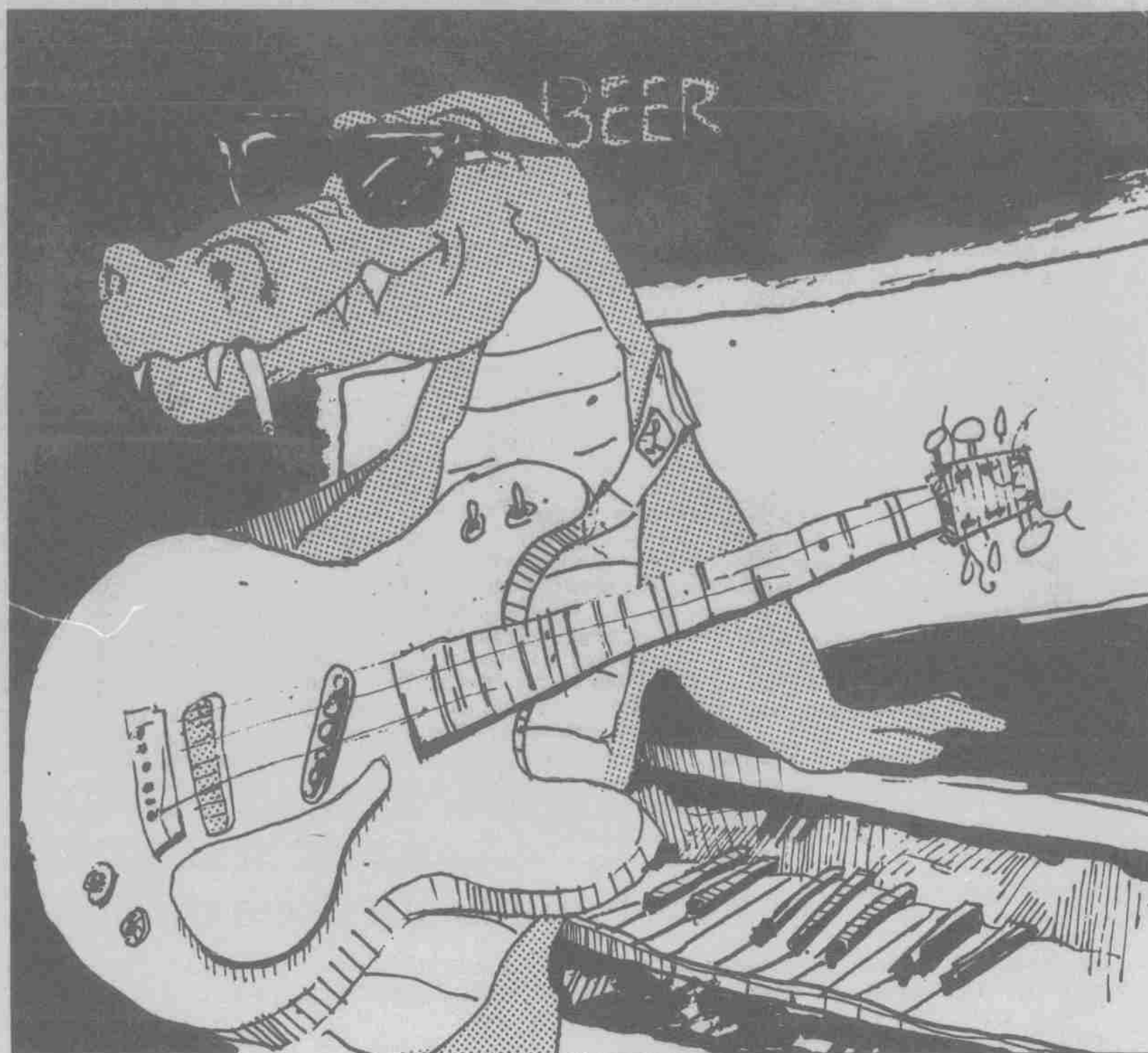


DIVERSIONS

Good days for 'Gator

By
Stew
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Brian Barber/Diversions

CHICAGO — Robert Cray, who used to play the blues in the Zoo Bar less than two years ago, is now on Casey Kasem's Top-40 countdown. Albert Collins struts and picks through David Letterman's audience and a blues jam featuring various legendary artists performs on the Grammys in front of millions of viewers.

And at Chicago's Alligator Records, sales are tripling. Their company's staff has doubled in the last year.

Yes, the latest blues revival is on. And Alligator Records is responding just as fast as the record-buying public, which is snatching up blues records faster than ever.

The three-story, tan house near Loyola University is unlikely accommodations for the world's major blues label. But inside this small Chicago office/house, Mindy Giles, vice president, and Bruce Iglauer, president, answer a steady stream of phone calls from record distributors, radio stations and journalists. The hallway walls are lined with Grammys and placards celebrating the biggest names in Chicago blues: Koko Taylor, James Cotton, Gatmouth Brown, and Son Seals.

Giles has her theory on why blues music is suddenly taking off again. The seed for this revival was planted in the late '60s when Albert King, B.B. King, Eric Clapton and a long list of other musicians, whose roots were deep in the blues, ruled the airwaves.

"The ages of radio programmers, A & R people and the others who help control and shape what we listen to are now in their mid-30s. When they were 17 and 18 years old

these were the artists that meant something to them. Now they're saying, 'This is the music I really like,'" Giles said.

But fans of the blues stretch far beyond the baby-boomer, "yuppie" generation.

At a recent Johnny Winter concert, Giles saw hordes of 15- and 16-year-old boys seriously into Winter along with their dads, all dressed in black T-shirts and screaming their heads off at Winter's guitar picking.

In 1977, when the blues was anything but hip and dinosaur rock bands and disco ruled the airwaves, the basic Alligator release would sell 4,000 to 5,000 copies. Now, basic sales are 12,000 to 15,000 (cassettes, records and CDs). Sales are doubling and tripling.

Some of Alligator's major artists are far outselling these figures. The Grammy-nominee "showdown" LP featuring Albert Collins, Robert Cray and Johnny Copeland has sold 100,000 units and is still selling about 4,000 copies a month, finding new life on CDs and with Robert Cray's recent success.

"Our LPs tend to have a longer life because they're not worked for singles. Programmers will tend to hear the whole album. And we don't stop promoting these albums between artists' records," Giles said.

Sales for CDs are "flying out the door," she said. Alligator's research shows that a new audience is buying Alligator CDs that never bought their records or cassettes. CDs also are giving new life to Alligator's back catalogue, boosting sales for older releases like the first two Johnny Winter Alligator releases and Lonnie Mack's "Strike Like Lightning."

Alligator president, founder, talent scout

and producer, Bruce Iglauer has been away in Austin, Texas, for a week. A pile of mail is stacked up around his desk. He answers a steady flow of calls from all over the country, trying to catch up on business, eat lunch from a styrofoam cup and talk to a reporter at the same time. His office walls are covered with posters, signed album covers and awards received during Alligator's 16-year history.

'I want to keep recording music with a strong roots feel, using the best sense of the words "roadhouse music."

—Iglauer

Alligator Records started in 1971 when Iglauer fell in love with the music of slide-guitar master, Hound Dog Taylor. He spent \$2,500 dollars of inheritance money to finance an LP.

"I never dreamed this would be a full-time job for me, let alone anyone else," he said, taking a spoonful of soup.

Alligator now has nine full-time employees, two part-time employees and one college intern. Until last year, Alligator was still run out of Iglauer's home. Now the company has moved to only slightly roomier conditions, which will be made more comfortable when the family living on the third floor leaves at the end of the month.

Alligator's staff and office is expanding as a direct result of the current renewed popularity in blues music.

"It (the revival) is something we've had a hand in creating, and something we're responding to. Not only does it mean we can pay our bills, but we can take chances on new artists."

Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials and the California-based little Charlie and the Nightcats are some new artists for Alligator.

"Plus, we can fulfill our regular artist's dreams, like bringing in the Memphis horns and (drummer) Jim Keltner on Lonnie Mack's last album."

Iglauer owes part of Alligator's success to constant touring by its artists. That, combined with Iglauer's production techniques, which preserve a live feeling even in the studio, creates excitement even when albums don't get airplay, he said.

Iglauer wants to keep doing what Alligator has done best over the last 16 years.

"I want to keep recording music with a strong roots feel, using the best sense of the words 'roadhouse music,' something structurally simple that packs an emotional punch," he said. "And it has to be easy to dance to, because I'm a lousy dancer."

"'Genuine' is a very important word around here," Giles said. "... Like Willie Dixon says, blues is the universal language. Everytime I step into a Chicago blues club I see people dressed for Las Vegas, college students, conventioners, poor white people and poor black people. The blues is the great equalizer. Everybody there has a great time."