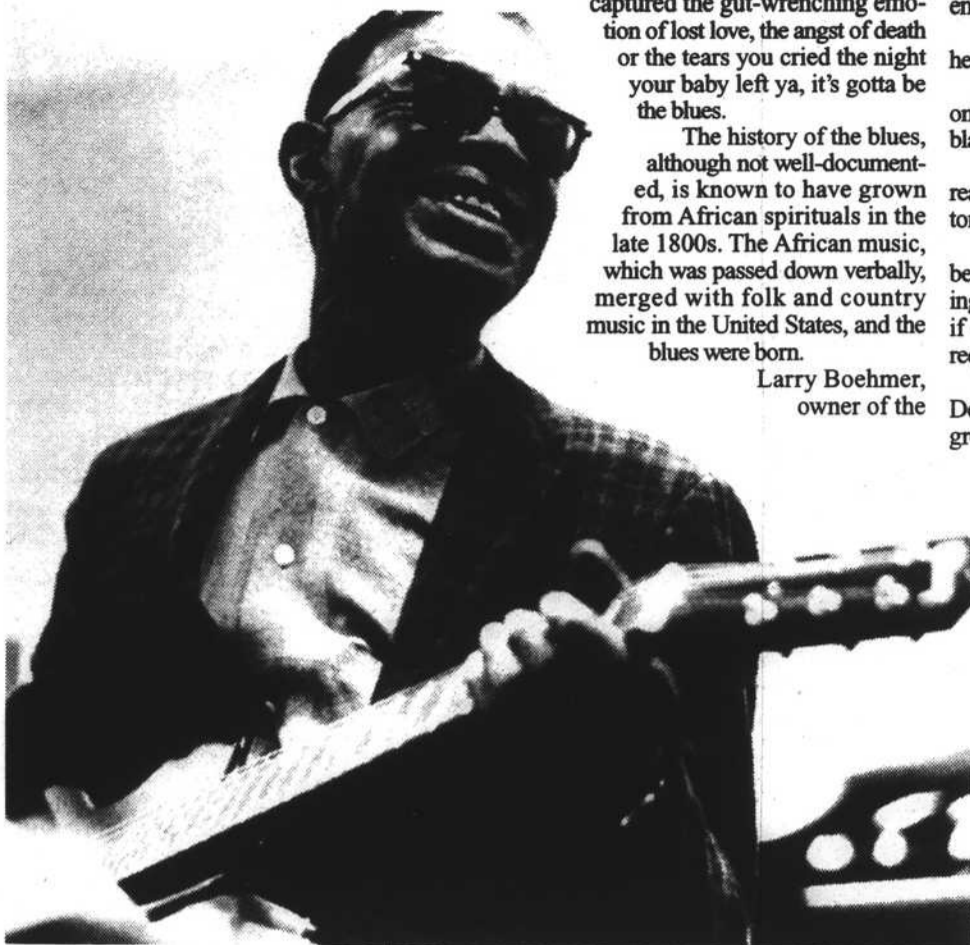


# IN APPRECIATION OF ... THE BLUES

STORY BY SARAH BAKER



**LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS** is just one of the many Southern musicians who popularized black folk music, including the blues.

If any musical style has ever captured the gut-wrenching emotion of lost love, the angst of death or the tears you cried the night your baby left ya, it's gotta be the blues.

The history of the blues, although not well-documented, is known to have grown from African spirituals in the late 1800s. The African music, which was passed down verbally, merged with folk and country music in the United States, and the blues were born.

Larry Boehmer, owner of the

Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St., said the key to the blues is the emotion behind the music.

"There's a feeling that goes along with the blues," he said. "There's something magical about it."

Most of the original blues performers recorded only singles, not albums, and the targeted audience was blacks and poor whites.

This recording style, by single song, is part of the reason for the relatively bad documentation of the history of the music.

The singles were cheaply made, and some would become too distorted to hear after as few as six playings. Most of these didn't survive to be heard today, and if they did, an amazing amount of technical work is required to make them audible.

Most of the original blues songs, referred to as Delta blues, feature simple, usually three-chord progressions and have structures that are open to endless improvisations.

Delta blues originated in Mississippi, often called "the land where blues were born."

Boehmer said there is a big difference between the Delta blues and the Chicago blues, which were developed in the late 1940s and early '50s.

"Delta is acoustic, where Chicago is louder, up-tempo and electric," he said.

The Chicago blues took what the Delta blues started and improved upon it. The later style added drums, bass and piano to the original sound and made room for more singers, harmonicas and a possible horn section.

Boehmer said one reason for the addition of the Chicago blues had to do with the invention of the cotton gin.

"The Delta blues worked its way up the Mississippi to Chicago when the black workers came up to cities to find factory work," he said. "Some moved to Memphis, but Chicago was the

big one."

Boehmer said the music changed once it got to the cities.

"The music had to get louder to compete with the noise of the city," he said.

Boehmer said most of the original blues artists did start in the South.

"Most of the artists came from the Mississippi delta area in the past, and most of them come from that area today," he said. "All of the older Chicago guys came from the South originally."

Boehmer said there are a few reasons that people keep coming back to listen to the blues.

"It's the emotion," he said. "It hits the public whether it was 30 or 40 years ago or today. For the blues to be done well, it has to have that feeling of emotion. The emotion makes the blues, even though they aren't very intellectual, more than just a cerebral experience."

Boehmer said it takes a special kind of person to successfully play the blues.

"Not everyone can play the blues," he said. "All the best performers are able to transfer that emotion."

Boehmer said he couldn't remember a time when the blues weren't a part of his life.

"I first heard the blues when I was 7 or 8, and I'm an old man now," he said, laughing. "But I've been a fan for my whole life."

Boehmer said blues greats like Albert Collins and Buddy Guy were some of his favorite blues artists.

"A lot of the bluesmen who were the real deal are dead, and we're opening up a whole new generation."

He said it was hard to pinpoint one reason why he loves the blues.

"I don't know why I am a fan of the blues," he said, "other than when I heard it, it was the sound I was looking for. When it's there and done properly, it is very powerful."

## PRINTED MATTER

For those interested in finding out more about the blues, information abounds, both in printed material and online. Here are a few of the better resources.

### Online

**The Blue Highway**, <http://www.thebluehighway.com>, offers information on the history of blues music as well as biographies of blues greats, news about new artists, and a "blues mall" to help find that special, hard-to-find piece of blues memorabilia.

**The Blue Flame Cafe**, <http://www.blueflamecafe.com>, is an interactive blues encyclopedia offering information on almost any blues artist. It also offers a photo gallery and links to other sites on the World Wide Web.

**The House of Blues**, <http://hob.com/>, is the national blues club started by one of the original Blues Brothers, Dan Aykroyd. This Web site offers information on blues artists as well as other artists, upcoming shows at the House of Blues, and live online chats with different artists.

### Books

**"Nothing But the Blues,"** edited by Lawrence Cohn, 1993. With an

introduction written by B.B. King, this book traces the origins of blues music. It is a comprehensive history of the genre and includes photographs of musicians and fans.

**"The All Music Guide to the Blues"** edited by Michael Erlewine. This book is part of an ongoing series of AMG books, which are constantly updated. This guide has reviews and ratings of more than 2,000 recordings and profiles of more than 500 musicians.

**"The Big Book of Blues"** by Robert Santelli. This is a biographical encyclopedia that has more than 600 biographies of artists.

### Magazines

#### "Blues Revue"

Touting itself as the "American Blues Magazine," this publication offers opinion columns, reviews of compact discs and the latest charts on blues releases. It also features a large section of artist profiles.

#### "Blues Access"

This magazine, which also features an online site at <http://www.bluesaccess.com>, has features on blues artists. It also has articles on blues festivals throughout the United States, letters to the editor and news on new artists.

## A DAY AT THE ZOO

It started out with a jukebox and a few 45s.

It has become one of the most well-known blues venues in the United States. And it's right here in Lincoln.

The Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St., opened nearly 25 years ago and is still going strong.

Larry Boehmer, owner of the Zoo, said he brought the first band into the bar in 1974.

"It was a trial run," Boehmer said. "I was still in grad school at the time."

Boehmer said once he graduated in 1974, he started to manage the bar full time.

"We started running weekend bands, and that was successful, so then we started running bands six nights a week," he said.

Boehmer said the bulk of the

music the Zoo plays has been blues.

"We do some other weird things, too," he said.

Boehmer said over the years, the Zoo has attracted a regular crowd.

"We see some different people, some regulars," he said. "We see both young and old. I got a call from a guy who just moved here from Chicago and was delighted to find a place like this."

The Zoo is nationally known for the blues artists it brings in. Boehmer said over the years, the Zoo has brought in blues greats such as Robert Cray, Coco Taylor, Albert Collins and Buddy Guy.

Boehmer said the secret to his success is simple.

"The only necessity to be successful is a love for the music, a love for the blues."

## Lightnin' Hopkins

A master of the down-home guitar style, Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins was a gritty and soulful blues man with vocals to match. When he was 8 years old, he made his first guitar out of a cardboard box; and two years later, he was playing with Blind Lemon Jefferson. Hopkins' best-known work was recorded for the Aladdin Label starting in 1946, and this period is captured excellently in EMI Records' 1991 compilation "The Complete Aladdin Recordings."

## Blind Lemon Jefferson

Despite his brief recording career, which spanned only three years, Jefferson recorded more than 100 tracks and remains one of the most influential country blues artists of all time. His vocal style has been widely imitated, and his improvisational melodic style became the standard for blues guitarists for years to come. Yazoo Records' 1990 release, "Blind Jefferson - King of the Country Blues," is probably the best introduction to this artist.

## Robert Johnson

Although he lived to be only 27, Johnson is held as one of the most celebrated figures in blues history. His influence on the development of blues guitar was substantial, and he is said to have developed his remarkable guitar skills by selling his soul to the devil. "The Complete Recordings of Robert Johnson" (Columbia, 1990), is a two-disc boxed set that covers Johnson's career.

## B.B. King

Regarded as the most popular bluesman ever, B.B. King began his career in 1951. He is given credit for helping blues music attain its place in popular western culture today. King recorded "The Thrill is Gone" in 1970, which launched him into international stardom. "King of the Blues," a CD box set that contains some of his best work, was released in 1992.

## Leadbelly

Born Huddie Ledbetter in 1888,

## ARTISTS



**R.L. BURNSIDE** introduced the blues to a new generation, partially by recording with punk-blues outfit the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion. These recordings were released on the album "A Ass Pocket of Whiskey."

Leadbelly was one of the first great popular blues men, and perhaps the most notorious. Already a convicted murderer, he was discovered in a Louisiana prison in 1933, where he was being held for assault with intent to murder. But despite his criminal record, Leadbelly became one of the first black artists to cross over into the pop culture of white America, and his mastery of the 12-string guitar made him a unique figure at the time. Besides his blues work, Leadbelly also recorded with legendary folk artists Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, and he subsequently charged his music with politics. Some of Leadbelly's better work can be found on the 1996 release "All-Time Blues Classics."

## Bessie Smith

During her heyday in the 1920s, Smith was as known for her personality as her boisterous blues vocals. Her talent made her into one of America's most respected female vocalists and led to sold-out concerts throughout the country. Her off-stage behavior, which included excessive drinking and fre-

quent fistfights, turned her into a cultural icon. Her best work is contained on "Empress of the Blues 1923-33."

## Muddy Waters

Muddy Waters was the first of the great Chicago bluesmen and was responsible for the mesh between deep Mississippi Delta blues and hard, electric Chicago blues. He is said to have helped cultivate a new respect for blues music. "The Best of Muddy Waters" (Chess Records, 1958) contains a collection of his hit singles, including "Hoochie Coochie Man" and "Got My Mojo Working."

## Junior Wells

Junior Wells is held as one of the principal harmonica greats of the post-war Chicago blues era. Wells' sweeping solos helped to define the sound of the blues harp. The 1966 release of "Hoodoo Man Blues," which Wells recorded with guitarist Buddy Guy, began the reign of one of the most popular Chicago bar bands of the '60s.