

The Sound Journey of Little Walter

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Preface

After over forty years of playing blues harmonica, I was planning on codifying my thoughts on Little Walter Jacobs. Following an unrelated discussion with collaborator Will Panther on early recording techniques for his own project, he stumbled on sound engineer Bill Putnam's role in recording Walter. What began as a personal opinion article reached a literary crossroads, and a more objective, structured examination began.

I would like to thank Charnie Guettel for her help editing and Diane Roblin. My gratitude to the musicians who took time to discuss Walter's impact on harmonica history, Bebopwino, The Red Saunders Research Foundation, Bharath Rajakumar, Adam Gussow, Carlos del Junco, Dr. Nick Ouroumov, and Joe Filisko. Blues harmonica players may differ in their backgrounds and approach, but all remain united regarding the groundbreaking innovations found within The Sound Journey of Little Walter.

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0.1 Introduction

The memory of Marion Walter Jacobs was honored on March 10, 2008 by his posthumous entrance into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He was the juice in a team where extraordinary chance and coincidence in recording advancements, in-house creativity, and savvy business operations all collided to create a format of lasting musical significance, Chicago blues.

Little Walter contextualized blues harmonica in ways that continue to redefine its relevance. From his emotive moans to his signature full bodied attacks, you can hear air around his notes, a sparkle and buttery depth from his attack, and release that is considered the definitive amplified harmonica blues sound. Here is an explanation of the characters who influenced and helped create the sound of Little Walter.

0.2 Early Influences

Little Walter was born May 1, 1930, near Marksville, Louisiana. He began imitating John Lee Williamson, who used the stage name Sonny Boy Williamson. In 1937, Williamson had a huge hit on the race record charts with 'Good Morning Little School Girl' on Chicago's Bluebird Records. His was country blues with harmonica, vocals, and acoustic guitar. Considered a pioneer by featuring the harp as a lead instrument, his sound was heard beyond the deep South, particularly Chicago and Detroit.

Walter at fourteen, Jimmy Rogers and many other ambitious bluesmen moved to Helena Arkansas in the early '40s. Jobs at the railroad yard and unloading cotton bales for shipment on the Mississippi River provided patrons for a scene of rough blues clubs. However, the biggest attraction for young blues musicians was radio station's KFFA's hit program The King Biscuit Hour.

KFFA had a listener radius of around 40 miles. In 1941, two bluesmen, Rice Miller and Robert Lockwood Jr, approached the station's owner, Sam Anderson, about starting a blues radio program. They were a smash hit, playing blues and hawking both the sponsor's King Biscuit Flour, and another product added due to their success, Sonny Boy Meal. Rice Miller also went by the name Sonny Boy Williamson. Though John Lee likely had the name first, Miller is more often associated with it, as Williamson died in a mugging in 1948, while Miller had a highly visible career until his death in 1965. Here we'll use Sonny Boy Williamson to refer to Rice Miller, as he had a long relationship with Little Walter.

Miller also had a straight Delta blues style. He was adept at changing from playing the harp to singing, and was a supreme showman. He made an almost organ-like sound by hitting arrays of notes strewn together and used different harmonicas for tonal effect. As a crowd pleaser he played a wide array of music ranging from tinpan alley to country songs including 'You Are My Sunshine,' but excelled at his own autobiographical blues numbers with harp playing that was 'sensitive and speechlike.' [11, p. 177] He was much older than most blues musicians appearing on the scene in the '40s, not recording until almost fifty, and less than fifteen years younger than the forefather of the previous generation's bluesmen, Charlie Patton. His birth date is a mystery with varying estimates from the late 1890s to 1908 on his gravestone.

Among the first to play amplified, he did not stray from the acoustic quality of his harp, unlike the later Chicago blues harmonica players. Sonny Boy used the radio program to improve his live show price boasting that announcing his gigs on KFFA allowed him to charge \$75 a night while most musicians were making \$45 a week. Miller's recordings and relationships beyond the Delta followed the success of those he influenced, and often at their urging. He counseled the young Riley 'BB' King, on compensating for his difficulty playing and singing at the same time by alternating between the two.

Little Walter started out as a street musician. He would wait at Sonny Boy's gigs until Miller left the bandstand and sit in with the band. "Sonny Boy began instructing him in some of the finer points of harp technique." [11, p. 201] Legend has it that Miller assisted Walter in a knife fight which consummated their long lasting friendship.

This is the traditional influence for Walter. While Delta blues is the core of his sound, he added a swing blues component, primarily from the music of Louis Jordan .

Jordan was also born in the deep South in Brinkley, Arkansas on July 8, 1908. He was a prodigy, who read music well, and joined his father's Brinkley Brass Band after World War I. [1, p. 8] Touring with different minstrel shows, he gravitated towards his axe, the alto-saxophone, and was exposed to A players and entertainers including the stage techniques of Manton Moreland, later the eye-rolling valet in the Charlie Chan movies. This was the other side of the tracks from the Delta blues crowd. His customers at gigs in Hot Springs Arkansas included Al Capone, and others vacationing from the North. At 15 he battled Lester Young on the bandstand and was outplayed because Young could improvise. [1, p. 16] This encouraged Louis to increase his already grueling practice regime.

He landed in New York in the late 1930s in Chick Webb's big band. Webb had the house band at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, which along with a pool of dance halls including the Cotton Club, was at the heart of the swing era. In this environment Louis Jordan went from being a virtuoso to a strong player among the very best of the era, and perhaps the best musicians ever.

The Savoy could hold over 4000 patrons and followed the dance crazes of the roaring '20s into the evolving swing styles of the '30s. It became famous for the Lindy Hoppers dance team where Norma Miller became coronated 'the Queen of Swing.' In the '20s Louis Armstrong would make some of his best recordings with his 'Savoy Ballroom Five' band. The band's tenor sax player, Teddy Hill, would run the Savoy house band in the early '30s. When offered the job of managing Harlem's Minton's Playhouse, Hill took his young trumpet player, Dizzy Gillespie, and other Savoy regulars including Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker with him. Minton's, including its legendary Monday musician's night off jams, became a primary incubator for be-bop.

In the late '30s when Webb recruited Louis Jordan from a band in Philly, the Savoy Ballroom was at its zenith. Chick was featured in the Savoy's famous battles of the bands, where as many as twenty thousand were reported to block traffic for blocks around. Their only clear loss was to Duke Ellington with his sophisticated harmonies; "I can't take it," said Webb, "This is the first time we've ever been washed out." [1, p. 56] In 1937 the Benny Goodman band 'buckled under the musical onslaught,' of Webb's band. In 1938 they barely defeated Count Basie's band fronted by the twenty-two year old Billie Holiday, while Chick Webb's vocalist was Ella Fitzgerald at twenty.

The Count Basie band was a favorite of Robert Lockwood Jr, Sonny Boy Williamson's partner at The King Biscuit Hour. While most famous for being Robert Johnson's stepson, Lockwood had a significant career in his own right. He enthusiastically soaked up musical influences beyond the Delta from network radio broadcasts. Peers like Rice Miller balked at his recommendation to expand their musical horizons. Lockwood played electrically amplified guitar on his radio program and is believed by many to be the first to do so. While older musicians were tentative, he included his amplification techniques while teaching guitar to BB King, Jimmy Rogers and Muddy Waters. Although Muddy was less interested in learning beyond the straight Delta acoustic style, Lockwood's amplification advice turned out to be prophetic.

Buddy Johnson's band would become the house band at the Savoy in

the early '40s. Walter would later record a version of Johnson's 'I'm Just Your Fool,' and appeared on bills in the '50s with Buddy's band featuring the charismatic tenor player Purvis Henson. However, it was the band that Louis Jordan would plan for while a sideman at the Savoy that would be the fundamental swing influence for Little Walter.

Jordan figured out that with a combination of hot jump blues sax leads, syncopated rhythms, and persona, groups smaller than the big bands could play ballroom sized venues. In the early '40s, his Tympany Five band surprised the music world by whipping up rooms of dancers with less than eight unamplified sidemen.

He became a bridge from the swing era to small bands later trying to harness the power of amplification. Jordan's 'Caledonia' is still in BB King's regular set; the opening to 'Johnny B. Goode' quotes Louis' hit, 'Ain't That Just Like a Woman,' and his manager, Milt Gabler, went on to produce Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock.' Jordan believed that rock n roll was just rhythm and blues played by White people. He would get the title 'The King of the Juke Box,' and it was from these recordings that Little Walter would mimic Louis Jordan's swing horn style.

Robert Lockwood Jr gave Walter his big break in 1945 with a radio spot on a show on KFFA sponsored by another flour company, Mother's Best. With his "unusual style which combined deep blues feeling with the lighter phrasing he'd absorbed from Louis Jordan's records, he was an immediate hit... drawing more fan mail and requests than Sonny Boy and the King Biscuit regulars." [11, p. 202]

Little Walter would return to Helena throughout his career. He moved back in 1948 after wearing out his welcome on Chicago's Maxwell Street, and again with Jimmy Rogers for a season in 1949, as they prepared to record a set of hits that what would become the Chicago blues, fronted by its main man, Muddy Waters.

0.3 Muddy Waters

At a recording session in April 1948 in Chicago, Muddy Waters, after two attempts at urban blues, used his bottleneck and did two old Delta numbers. He had recorded them before, but with an acoustic guitar. Now Muddy used an electric guitar. The results were 'I Can't Be Satisfied,' and 'I Feel Like Going Home.'

The recording was historic, as Robert Palmer states:

This was the old, deep Delta blues, no doubt about it, but

it was also something new. It stood out amid the glut of r&b releases by sax-led jump combos and blues balladeers because of its simplicity, its passion, and its hypnotic one-chord droning. Blacks who lived or had lived down home snapped the record up, and women in particular responded to the undercurrent of sexuality.

[11, p. 161]

Leonard Chess said "What's he saying? Who's going to buy that?" Evelyn Goldberg, Leonard Chess's partner from Aristocrat Records, which became Chess Records, disagreed; "You'd be surprised who'd buy that." [5, p. 44] Muddy said, "Evelyn was the one that really liked me." [11, p. 159] The record sold out in one day. More copies were pressed, and soon the disc was selling steadily in Chicago and throughout the South. Demand inspiring art became the pattern for Chicago blues.

Palmer explains the community who fueled the outset of Chicago blues:

Blues in the Delta, which may or may not have been the first blues anywhere but is certainly the first blues we know much about, was created not just by Black people but by the poorest, most marginal Black people. Most of the men and women who sang and played it could neither read nor write. They owned almost nothing and lived in virtual serfdom. They were not considered respectable enough to work as house servants for the Whites or to hold responsible positions within their own community. It came from an almost entirely Black community as the stronghold of northern Mississippi's poor Whites was the hill country to the east of the Choctaw ridge, which marks the abrupt end of the Delta... On the big plantations poor Whites were decidedly unwelcome.

[11, p. 15]

"Ma" Rainey, who ran a Black minstrel troupe in 1902, heard a girl sing a "strange and poignant" song about how her man had left her. Rainey had never heard anything quite like it before and decided to work it into the act. The response from rural Black audiences was overwhelming. [11, p. 44] The people in the crowd impressed with Rainey's discovery were Muddy's patrons. By 1930 Chicago had more Mississippi-born residents than any city outside the State. Muddy Waters would join this trend moving from his native Mississippi to the big city once for a short time in 1940, and

relocating in 1943 to increase his status from a successful part-time juke joint operator in Mississippi, to a full-time professional musician.

The African roots of the blues influenced Waters' historic recording. The slide, or bottleneck used by Muddy was based on an African one stringed instrument. The guitar amp, which Muddy and others cranked to be heard in small clubs, used tubes which break up harmonically when they distort. The appeal of distortion had a long history as "European and American visitors to Africa have often been puzzled by what they perceived as an African fondness for muddying perfectly clean sounds. African musicians will attach pieces of tin sheeting to the heads of drums or the necks of stringed instruments in order to get a noisy or rattling buzz." [11, p. 30]

The call and response tradition is part of an African conversation between musicians where a "master drummer 'talks' to his accompanying drummers," and "horns, flutes, xylophones and other instruments are also capable of talking." The flatted third blue-note, is believed to come from "African peoples pitch-tone languages" where "one indicates the desired meaning by speaking at an appropriate pitch level." [11, p. 29]

Little Walter moved to Chicago in the mid 1940s. His first night his harp filled his hat with \$50, and he'd found his new home. Muddy says he "kind of bypassed around Walter for a while cause he had a bad, mean temper, always stayed in fights." [11, p. 159] By late 1948, Muddy, Walter and Jimmy Rogers were a team, as Waters said, "we had three naturals. Me, Little Walter, and Jimmy. Naturals from our hearts." They rehearsed relentlessly. Rogers described Walter's progress: "His ears were open, but he just didn't have nobody to sit down with and really teach him. He was mostly playing between Rice Miller and that saxophone sound of Jordan; after he came with us, we developed him mostly into a harder sound." [11, p. 208]

On July 11, 1951, Little Walter who'd been playing his harp through an amplifier live, used an amp in the studio for the first time. A small combo with electrically amplified instruments could now do what Jordan had done with acoustic instruments a decade earlier. These were affordable 6v6 tube based amps with 8" or 10" speakers first from the catalogues of Premier, Valco, Masco, and Danelectro, and later Gibson, and Fender. Walter never wasted notes and these amps spoke with Walter's voice. This harp rig has remained almost unchanged since the 1950s, unlike the rigs of Muddy Waters and many other guitar players who moved to the larger Fender Reverb amps in the mid 60s, for Waters the Fender Super Reverb.

In the '50s, Walter is seen using an Astatic JT-30 microphone. This is based on a crystal element. In the 60s, he is seen using a Shure Model 535 omni-directional dynamic [7] mike similar to the cardioid directional Shure

SM58. The mike is important because the cupped hands around it can shift to let in more or less air, affecting the tone of the electrified sound.

Walter's amp was likely miked by a ribbon microphone in the studio. As Malcolm Chisholm said, "you can not live without ribbon microphones, we had lots and lots of them at Chess." [4, p. 119] Although thought to be brittle compared to Neumann U47 and U67 condensers for vocals, ribbon mikes capture the texture of a blazing amp. The amps were not miked live in the '50s. By the mid 60s the Shure SM57 became the standard for miking guitar and harp amps live and in the studio. Like ribbon mikes, the SM57 is a dynamic mike. While not as accurate as ribbons, they don't lose their focus when overwhelmed, and when they break up they augment the distortion of the tubes. The exact placement of an SM57 in front of an amp has become an art form unto itself, and their indestructibility is a big part of their success. Ribbons are still used in many studio recordings, but regardless, the main characteristics of the electrified harp sound remain intact with either setup.

The electrified distorted amp sound Muddy Waters stumbled on trying to be heard in live clubs, and adopted by Little Walter, created the standard harp rig. It is not, however, their live performances that define the genre, but their Chess recordings. The man who captured and augmented the Little Walter sound was Bill Putnam.

0.4 Bill Putnam

Bill Putnam was a pioneer in the formation of the modern recording studio. He debated with his good friend Les Paul, who made the first multi-track recording. Along with Atlantic's Tom Dowd, everyone learned it from them. Putnam built some of the first mixing consoles. As one of his mixing proteges Bruce Swedien said, "every console, I don't give a damn if it's analog or digital, hell, every mixing situation today is the brainchild of Bill Putnam." [2]

He engineered for a dizzying array of artists first at his Universal Recording in Chicago in the '50s, and then in the '60s at his Universal Studios in California, including Mahalia Jackson, Hank Williams, Sam Cooke, Count Basie, Chuck Berry, Lesley Gore, Jerry Butler, Stan Kenton, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra('Strangers in the Night'), Ray Charles('Modern Sounds in Country and Western'), and his personal favorite Duke Ellington.

As an influence he was a mentor to Cosimo Matassa, who mixed the

Specialty's roster in New Orleans, from Little Richard's legendary recordings to Allen Toussaint's productions. He engineered Jerry Butler's 'For Your Precious Love,' and advised its 15 year old writer Curtis Mayfield on the arranging, as Butler recalls Bill recommending, "'that's the heart and soul of your song right there in that guitar.' So right there, Curtis guitar became the glue." [3] Putnam pressed the masters and more for Sam Phillips at Sun. Swedian, who met Quincy Jones at Universal Chicago, went on to mix Michael Jackson's 'Off the Wall,' 'Thriller,' 'Bad,' and 'Dangerous.'

When Leonard Chess decided he wanted to get in the recording business in 1947, "it was Bill Putnam ... who told Leonard to see the Aarons," [5, p. 37] at Aristocrat, for whom Putnam was already engineering. In 1957 Putnam helped the Chess brothers build and staff their 2120 studio, but until then, they used his Universal Chicago studio. Joe Tarsia, who created the Sound of Philadelphia said, "look, before Putnam, we were working in the realm of broadcast, not recording, per se. He solved problems for himself, and by doing so, he solved problems for the rest of us." [2]

From the 1920s until the early '50s radio ruled. Radio was about tubes and more tubes. For larger orchestras, several mikes would be mixed to one signal in a radio console loaded with tubes and broadcast live to tube radios. Included in this mix was the ambiance of the room. [9, p. 57] Delicate ribbon mikes captured the nuances of vocalists. Until 1948 with the invention of the Ampex tape recorder, and the Neumann U47 microphone, recorded music couldn't attempt the quality of live radio broadcast.

Bill's father had a radio show that broadcast Gene Autry. Putnam owned a radio shop in high school and said he 'wanted to get into radio broadcasting in the technical area.' He got a degree at Valparaiso Tech Institute in Indiana before working at two radio stations in his home state of Illinois. During WWII he worked in the Army Radio Corps where he would create a tube based earpiece used by FDR's bodyguards. [2]

After the war he started his studio in Evanston, Ill, Universal Audio, before moving his operation to Chicago, and later, in 1958 to California, where he started selling mixing consoles, as well as stand alone microphone preamps and limiters like the ones in his mixing boards. His sons, Bill Jr. and James, have continued to sell these popular preamps and limiters. These preamps, a volume boost from the input of the microphone to the console, were tube based as well. Bill cranked them for Walter's harp mike. This added another layer of tube distortion and warmth to the sound.

In 1947-48 Putnam first ran a speaker into a bathroom and miked it to add the ambiance of the room found in live broadcasts. With Jim Cunningham, he built the first echo chamber, a room dedicated for this purpose. [2]

Quickly, echo chambers became an industry standard used at Capitol, for the Sinatra/Nelson Riddle sessions, and at Columbia's famed 30/30 where Tony Bennett and Johnny Mathis recorded.

While echo chambers and miking techniques captured the live club feel, reverb augmented the sound. Bill Putnam had a million seller in 1947 with a chromatic harmonica group, The Harmonicats' 'Peg O' My Heart.' Swedian said this, "was the first time that anyone used reverb artistically." [4, p. 127] Putnam believed it was his use of reverb that was his main contribution to the recording process.

Cosimo comments that "the musicians union had a strike...But harmonica players weren't considered musicians." [6] While the harp and saxophone are both reed based, the sax was a heavyweight in the big band era. The harmonica was seen as a child's instrument, or used by blues musicians and hillbilly acts. Matassa continues; "the harmonica with those big swimming reverbs sounded like an organ." Bill had used reverb to fatten up the harp sound of 'Peg O' My Heart,' making it a more serious instrument.

Putnam added reverb to 'Juke,' an instrumental based on a lick played in live gigs that was a #1 hit for Jacobs in 1952 and the biggest seller for Chess to date. The song had, "the presence of a variable slap back echo," Peter Doyle comments in his book, Echo and Reverb: "By the fifth verse, the stop verse, the drum triplets seem to be now quite clearly produced by tape echo, displaying the characteristic 'syncro-sonic' machinelike strictness. By the sixth verse it becomes clear that delay has been added to the harp." [9, p. 180]

This tape effect, that Sam Phillips would make famous as slapback echo, was different from the 'boxcar' echo Les Paul created earlier, fitting a number of movable playback heads. [9, p. 181] This is not to argue who did what first, or even the exact method Putnam used for his tape echo. However, it is interesting that Elvis archivists have had trouble figuring the 'Mystery Train Mystery,' of finding the dry takes,(recordings without reverb added) for Sun's 'Mystery Train' that weren't in the masters Phillips gave to RCA, but were later found with other dry tapes in Univeral's archives. "The task of 'Bill' (Bill Putnam) was to produce acetate masters, probably not a tape. Yet, a source that corresponds to a 'Bill tape' is available on 'When All Was Kool'." [12] Putnam's contribution to Sun may have gone beyond pressing masters and technical advice. Sam Phillips had a close relationship with Chess, sending them artists including Howlin Wolf. It suffices here to say Putnam used tape echo on Walter's harmonica adding a lushness and augmenting the power of the amplifier.

We now have the Little Walter Sound, an electrified mix of traditional

field blues, a horn player's jump sensibilities, and a varying degree of echo and reverb. Now, he and Muddy needed a catalogue to set the standard for electric blues. This was contributed by Willie Dixon.

0.5 Willie Dixon

Willie Dixon wrote the majority of Muddy Waters hits. He was also basically the producer of most of the blues recorded at Chess, arranging the parts, running the sessions, and usually playing upright bass. As Buddy Guy said, 'I don't think anybody wanted to go into Chess doing any blues without Willie.' [8, p. 146]

In the 1940s he was in the successful Big Three Trio that recorded with Columbia, and he did gigs playing bass with Louis Jordan. Unlike the other Chess blues musicians he could play upscale clubs. While he sometimes played with Muddy and Walter in the late '40s, "they was workin' one side of town and we was working the other because we always worked mostly for White people and they worked mostly for Black." [8, p. 67]

Dixon's belief and support of the blues was deep and philosophical:

The blues being the true facts of life, we know it has been a fact of life that the people of the world have always made whatever they wanted. In making the many things of the world, we've made everything but peace. If you accept the wisdom of the blues, we can definitely find peace.

[8, p. 229]

He promoted the blues at every turn. Willie started writing blues harmonies including for his hit 'Wee Wee Baby.' "They knew it was a blues but when we started singing in harmony, people didn't know whether to call it blues or something else." [8, p. 68] Beyond using this technique to sneak blues into popular music clubs, Dixon believed that this was the backbone of the Chess sound. As Malcolm Chisholm, who mixed Chuck Berry's early sessions said, "blues is polyphony... it requires working with some kind of standard. Mine is Will's because what I know I learned from him." [8, p. 94]

Dixon's harmony knowledge had deep roots. Also born in the Delta, in Vicksburg, Mississippi, he began as a quartet singer with his Union Jubilee Singers. In the '50s Dave Clark and Don Robey at Duke/Peacock sent him a "letter to get spiritual groups together and record 'em." He "recorded many spirituals with the Mighty Clouds of Joy, the Spirits of Memphis, the Blind Boys, just about every group they ever recorded," including those for the

Pilgrim Jubilees 'Old Ship of Zion,' and 'Stretch Out,' "and we recorded them at Universal Studios in Chicago." [8, p. 160]

He wrote songs specifically for Muddy. While Robert Johnson had a hell hound on his tail, Muddy was your 'Hoochie Coochie Man,' understanding the feel good quality of jump blues without losing the blues, as Louis Jordan had exploited earlier with songs like, 'Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens.'

The spread of Little Walter's music occurred after his best recordings were made. Again the work of Willie Dixon and Waters would propel Walter's recordings to the status of national treasures.

Muddy Waters first went to England in 1958. "I had opened that amplifier up, boy, and there was these headlines in all the papers. Chris Barber he say, 'you play good, but don't play your amplifier so loud. Play it lower'... Next time I come I'll bring some old songs first." [11, p. 260] His second time around, amplified blues would go over much better.

In the early '60s Horst Lippman decided to try to bring over American blues musicians for an American Folk Blues Festival in Germany. "The problem was that I wasn't able to go to America, and I needed a connection. I got in touch with Willie Dixon in Israel (on tour) and he responded at once. When he was back in Chicago, we made the fixed plan for the first tour." [8, p. 126]

Willie Dixon arrived at Frankfurt in August of 1962. [8, p. 127] This would begin a series of successful tours of Europe and England that would spread the blues. In 1963, Lippman and Dixon brought Muddy Waters and Sonny Boy Williamson to England. Giorgio Gomelsky, whose Crawdaddy club featured the Rolling Stones, followed by the Yardbirds, and later the Moody Blues, recalled that "there were about 40 blues fans in London that had collected some records and had been looking towards the blues for regenerating the entire music scene, which was dying on its feet at the time... We didn't have access to records... The first time the American Folk Blues Festival came over, I got the Stones tickets." [8, p. 134]

Again Dixon was the advocate and teacher:

Kids would come and say they liked our music and wanted to sing our music. Sometimes I'd write it out for 'em. Sometimes I'd put it on tape recording for 'em. When I got ready to leave there, I just load the tapes with everything and a few years later here they come in different groups and things. I wouldn't know one kid from another because years afterwords, when they came to Chess recording studio, they were grown with a lot of hair on their face and I wouldn't know who was who.

[8, p. 134]

Muddy Waters grew to ambassador status after these performances. Keith Richards described the early influence of Muddy:

I heard Muddy through Mick Jagger. We were childhood friends, hadn't seen each other for a few years, and I met him on a train around 1961. He had a Chuck Berry record and 'The Best of Muddy Waters.' I was going to mug the guy for the Chuck Berry because I wasn't familiar with Muddy. We started talking, went 'round to his house, and he played me Muddy and I said, 'Wow. Again.' And about ten hours later, I was still going, 'Okay, again.' When I got to Muddy and heard 'Still a Fool' and 'Hoochie Coochie Man' that is the most powerful music I've ever heard. The most expressive.

He named us in a way, and we basically wanted to turn the world on to Muddy and his like. This little band of ours had finally found a gig, and we put our last few pennies in for this ad in a magazine. We called to tell them where we were playing at and they said, 'Well what's your name?' And on the floor was 'The Best of Muddy Waters' and on the first side was 'Rollin' Stone.' So we named ourselves the Rolling Stones. I always felt that Muddy ran the band, that there was a real connection

[10, p. 1]

As Muddy Waters said, "before the Rolling Stones, people over here didn't know nothing and didn't want to know nothing about me... But The Rolling Stones and those other groups came over here from England playing this music, and now, today the kids buy a record of mine." [11, p. 259] The Rolling Stones, Led Zepplin, Eric Clapton, The Animals, and most of the British invasion bands recorded Dixon songs.

Chicago blues had an ambassador in Muddy Waters, an engineering genius in Bill Putnam, and a poet laureate in Willie Dixon. They created Little Walter's catalogue.

0.6 Catalogue

Muddy in his 'I Can't Be Satisfied' session was backed only by bass player Ernest 'Big' Crawford. Muddy had already tried several cuts with alto saxophonist Alex Atkins, including 'Mean Disposition.' After the success with his electrified guitar, he added Little Walter's harmonica.

In 1947 Walter first recorded for Bernard Abram's Oar-Nelle label, at his Maxwell Street Radio and Records store with the confident, rhythmic, rolling harp quality of 'Just Keep Loving Her.' However, it is the songs with Chess both with Muddy and solo in the 1950s that are his legend.

Leonard Chess wanted to capitalize on the success of 'Can't be Satisfied' with more duos with Waters and Crawford, and was reluctant to use Muddy's live musicians in the studio. Waters and Little Walter would record sessions including 'Sad Letter Blues' with only Crawford on bass in 1948. On the '50 Parkway session, 'Rollin' and Tumblin' featuring Baby Face Leroy on vocals and drums, Walter and Muddy produced an exciting rockin' and raucous, chant-like holler, and the Chicago blues catalogue began to bloom.

Their breakout single 'Louisiana Blues,' in October 1950 with Crawford on bass, was a top ten rhythm and blues hit early in 1951. Later in '51 Walter's 'She Moves Me' featured the key element of call and response between Muddy Waters and Walter's harp, the essence of harp blues accompaniment, and the legendary appearance of Leonard Chess's one musician credit on bass drum. By the release of 'Juke' in 1952 Muddy's live drummer Elga Edmonds aka Elgin Evans, and Jimmy Rogers as a second guitar were added to the mix.

Muddy Waters most famous accompaniment came together with Dixon's 'Hoochie Coochie Man,' in January 1954. With Walter there was Dixon on bass, Waters' live piano player Otis Spann, Jimmy Rogers, and drum duties would alternate between Elgin Evans and Fred Below, with some debate as to who played on which sessions in that era. While the size of the band was now expanded, the bass and piano were still low in the mix at the insistence of Willie Dixon who understood the importance of the harmonica and guitar in juke joint blues. The alternating between Muddy's vocal, and Walter's harp doubling with the electric guitar paramount in the mix is the cornerstone of Chicago blues.

Walter left Muddy's live band after the explosive success of 'Juke.' He fronted his own group borrowing Junior Wells backup band The Aces featuring shuffle master Fred Below on drums, and guitar playing brothers, Louis and David Myers from Mississippi. They had success in areas where other blues bands had not with the quartet's mixture of jazzy jump blues and Delta soul. At the Apollo Theater they killed where Muddy with James Cotton was almost booed off the stage. As none of this was captured in recordings, this is a minor part of Walter's folklore.

Jacobs still recorded with Waters, playing on most of his hits in the '50s including the widely covered 'I Just Wanna Make Love To You.' Muddy would have a second career starting with his Live at Newport album in

1960, but by then Little Walter had moved on. James Cotton played on the Newport LP, and younger musicians would back up Muddy Waters in later years. He continued this minimalist formula with an emphasis on the harmonica created with his virtuoso sidekick until his passing in 1983.

Walter had fourteen top ten hits including the instrumentals 'Off The Wall,' 'Sad Hours,' and 'Roller Coaster.' The guitar duties on most of his classics were carried by Jimmy Rogers, Lockwood, or another of his proteges, Luther Tucker. His recordings also included several other of the notable sidemen of the day including Buddy Guy later in his career and Bo Diddley, who set up a trance-like riff on 'Roller Coaster,' recorded in '55. This an example of the depth of Walter's catalogue, a relentless, free flowing instrumental that most harmonica players stay away from covering, believing it is "holy harp territory." It is a challenge to improve on this, as Walter explodes and blows in a stream of conscious flow that takes the listener on a 3 minute ride of precision and control. There is also some fluctuation between the recordings. 'Blue Lights,' cut in '54, is a haunting track with the echo cascades far more pronounced than those in 'Juke,' particularly near the song's conclusion. This set of instrumentals recorded in the '50s is the standard for the harmonica as a lead instrument.

Bill Putnam recreated the live room feel with his echo chamber. He placed the harmonica dominant in the mix above the guitar, and with amplification and his added reverb, the harp now had the power of a saxophone. Jacobs was able to jump the rhythm to satisfy the harp's new lead instrument status without sacrificing the guttural phrasing and tones of the Delta. He could go dynamically from gently bending a note to blowing to distortion. The quality of the mixing and the accuracy of the Ampex tape it was captured on improved on the novelty feel of previous acetate based blues recordings, as the listener can hear the nuances, emotion and heart of Delta blues in Walter's playing.

Little Walter also had success with vocal songs, apexing with 'My Babe' in 1955. He had to be urged to record it by Willie Dixon. [8, p. 88] It was a huge #1 hit, and was featured at his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Along with cuts including 'Last Night,' 'Mellow Down Easy,' and 'Blues With A Feeling,' Walter's vocal numbers are built around the harmonica breaks. The vocals are controlled and simple and work to frame the harmonica breaks that had been the meat and potatoes of earlier harmonica players.

After mid 1957, Leonard Chess backed off Walter's studio efforts. Blues hybrids entered the recording market and it was time for labels to expand their base or gamble on their present stable. He did continue to record

throughout the latter 1950s including 'Crazy Mixed Up World,' and 'Everything Is Gonna Be Alright' in '59. However, Jacob's limited, careful output reflected his physical descent, with his vocals and full harmonica dexterity declining. Although the moments were few, he still had gas left, but the difficulties of a hustler's lifestyle had robbed him of considerable capabilities. His session on Feb 5, 1963 yielded hopeful results including 'Dead Presidents,' and the ironic flashback, his last recording for Chess subsidiary Checker, 'Southern Feeling.'

While this catalogue sets the standard for harp players, none of this would have been heard if someone hadn't put all these folks together, and sold the records. These were the achievements of the great opportunist of the blues, Leonard Chess.

0.7 Leonard Chess

Blues had an appeal beyond its legitimacy and Leonard Chess turned this into sales. He brought the Muddy Waters crew, Bill Putnam, and Willie Dixon together, and kept the ship going until his death in 1969.

Born in Poland as Lejzor Czyz, the family name was changed to Chess after they moved to Chicago in 1928. He learned English as a hodgepodge of slang from Jewish and Black folks living in Chicago's South Side. His relationship with the Black community became familial. With his brother Phil by his side, he wheeled and dealt Chess into one of the great labels.

Nobody knows how many records Chess sold as Leonard kept that hidden. "Chess did not belong to the RIAA(Recording Industry Association of America) so we never got official RIAA gold records. Leonard would not open his books for the RIAA certification so he made up his own gold records and gave them to his artists." [8, p. 201]

The Chess operation was like a company town where he would make sure employees got their rent paid, bought them cars, and covered emergency expenses, but kept them from getting a major piece of the action. Willie Dixon was on salary for \$150 a week, a pittance of his contribution, and the royalties owed him. He later sued Arc, Leonard's publishing company. There was, however, a lot of love between Chess and his artists, as many believed that the other record companies were at least as corrupt, but you knew where you stood with Leonard Chess. His bond was familial with Muddy, who always credited Chess with making him a star.

Chess paid off police to keep his club, the Macomba Lounge, open after hours before his Chess records days. The payoffs he made to distribute

records to DJs and others made it difficult for artists to tell how much of their royalties went to Leonard, and how much were used to promote their records. This was the industry standard at the time, as Columbia and RCA paid DJs with checks and wrote them off as business expenses. One good example of Leonard's promotional style was Chess's relationship with Alan Freed.

Phil Chess knew Freed from his early DJ days in Akron Ohio. "Freed was still married to his first wife when he met Jackie, and he needed some cover to see her on the job at a dance studio. When Phil was in town, Freed recruited him to go to the studio on the pretext of dance lessons." [5, p. 85] This relationship became more fruitful when Freed became a major New York DJ. When Leonard heard Chuck Berry's 'Maybeline' he knew he had a hit, and "made sure that Freed got a copy... going to New York to deliver it personally. Freed gave it enormous airplay." [5, p. 117] For the writing credits of 'Maybeline,' Freed was listed with Berry as coauthor along with Chess's landlord Russ Fritto. [5, p. 118]

Chess eclipsed the several Maxwell Street recording upstarts on the main strip of Delta based blues clubs in Chicago, and outlasted their competitors including Vee Jay and Cobra. Without him, Chess records quickly vanished as well. "After Leonard died, the company began slowing down quite a bit because he was the one who did most of the business pertaining to the company." [5, p. 174]

0.8 The Disciples

Over the last fifty years most blues harmonica players have, in some way, been influenced by Walter Jacobs. Whether drawn to his tone, techniques or catalogue, all professional players regard him as the standard reference. The first round of torchbearers recorded prior to Walter's death on February 15, 1968. Paul Butterfield placed three Little Walter tunes on his first release, the landmark 1965, The Paul Butterfield Blues Band. John Mayall introduced his blues addiction in 1966 with Eric Clapton, a significant re-introduction to the genre for the North American scene. Charlie Musselwhite introduced Stand Back in 1966. These rookie sessions owe gratitude to Walter and injected the vitality of youth and the mind exploration of the time. The West Coast was represented by Rod Piazza and his Dirty Blues Band in 1967. Rod has continued to acknowledge Walter in addition to his main mentor, the formidable George 'Harmonica' Smith . The in-demand excellence of Kim Wilson continued igniting new harp interest in the late

1970's. The main similarity from all Jacobs' students is the ongoing search for his full tone and phrasing. The late William Clarke incorporated the techniques of all proponents of this tradition.

This second wave of acolytes created a reference point for the introduction of blues harmonica work shops, aiding the growth of blues festivals, regional blues societies, the harp gear world, on-line harp instructional programs and global harmonica blues chatter. The legacy continues with the traveling roadshow, 'Harmonica Blowout,' presented by Mark Hummel and has included the entertaining Rick Estrin, Muddy's sideman Jerry Portnoy, J. Geils Band's Magic Dick, and the late Paul deLay.

In the last two decades a group of dedicated players has used Little Walter's sound as a base as they extend the genre. Walter traditionalist Bharath Rajakumar delivers an uncanny dedication to Walter's tone and attack. He views his playing as "preserving the lost language of that era and adding to it." Although not a Little Walter stylist harmonica master overblower, Carlos del Junco has recorded Jacobs' material and feels that "he was one of the guys you have to salute, and what tone and rhythmic control!" Dennis Gruenling has an appetite for all things Walter and integrates freshness into his respectful relationship, while a musical affinity for Jacobs is heard from the gifted harmonica innovator/futurist, Jason Ricci. Educator and modern blues harmonica stylist Adam Gussow comments on his dealing with the Walter oeuvre: "I began to view him as a seductive and dangerous genius whose approach on amplified harp has been so pioneering, so widely imitated, that he'd suck the oxygen out of the room for the great majority of contemporary players. We as harmonica players, had lost our way by assuming that THE way was to model our sound on his sound and make ourselves into, in effect footnotes and emendations to Little Walter. Mastery of the tradition is a PRELUDE to creativity."

0.9 Conclusion

Little Walter became a conduit from the raw soul of Delta blues to the jump r&b rhythms of the era. Jacobs was the sugar in Muddy Waters' coffee and sonic lightning captured and delivered by Bill Putnam. The in-house team was completed by the wisdom and repertoire of Willie Dixon and the marketing skill set of Leonard Chess. His legacy produced deferential mimicry for some, while others use his rich inheritance as a base to build upon.

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