



REISSUES | COMPS | BOXSETS | LOST RECORDINGS

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Ann Arbor Blues Festival 1969

THIRD MAN

The legendary blues festival, rediscovered and compiled. By Jon Dale

FIFTY years on, it can be hard to grasp the purchase the blues had on America's counterculture in the '60s; the way young listeners and artists were beginning to understand, in a much broader way, how the blues really was the bedrock of much of the music they loved, from rock'n'roll to psychedelic rock to jazz. Blues legends were being rediscovered, careers were being reignited. In the midst of all this there was 1969's Ann Arbor Blues Festival – the first, and still the best, to draw together blues legends for a three-day conference on exactly what this music could be, when played at its peak, by players who knew their history inside out.

The event came about thanks to the energies of a number of University of Michigan students, including John Fishel, who was the co-chair of the entertainment committee on campus, and festival director Cary Gordon. Throwing around ideas for a festival – early suggestions included bringing over groups such as Cream or The Rolling Stones to headline – Fishel argued for a blues lineup that brought originators of



the genre together under the same roof for a three-day celebration both of the music's history and its significance to the contemporary counterculture.

Gordon, Fishel and their collaborators soon found themselves travelling to Chicago, for many the current home of the blues, on a semi-regular basis. While in the city they'd catch a number of shows and spend time with Bob Koester, who ran the local record store Jazz Record Mart and record label Delmark Records. By 1969, Delmark had branched out into releasing free jazz, but the blues was still core to the label's catalogue; Koester was the perfect guide for some young university students whose nascent yet deep love of the blues had them searching for artists who were core to the genre, while keeping an eye open for new developments and upcoming players.

Approaching the programming with a rare combination of desires – enthusiasm, learning, an eye for detail, a respect for history, an openness to the now – led to a festival that, in retrospect, is almost an index of the greatest blues players around in America in the late '60s. The committee's programming was smart enough to bring in players who were ➤



Freddie King at
the Ann Arbor
Blues Festival,
August 1969



fundamental to the music's history – BB King, Roosevelt Sykes, Son House, Muddy Waters, Big Mama Thornton – while cocking an eye to other developments (Clifton Chenier's zydeco), and bringing newer players into the fold, such as Luther Allison, whose debut album had been released in 1968, although he'd earned his stripes playing with Howlin' Wolf and Freddie King.

The festival kicked off on Friday, August 1 at Fuller Flatlands, a field on the outskirts of the university campus. Around 10,000 people attended, including some blues obsessives travelling in from Detroit and further afield. The majority of the audience, though, as John Fishel's brother Jim notes in his liners, were "eager white high-school and college kids". Jim was one of them, a young blues obsessive just setting out on his broader musical education. Jim would tag along on his brother's research trips to Chicago. When it came to the festival himself, he brought along a Norelco quarter-inch tape recorder to document the majority of the sets.

These recordings, restored by Jim's archivist son Parker, are the core of Third Man's *Ann Arbor Blues Festival 1969* set. They're rough and ready, closer to field recordings of an event, but that's their magic. There's something arresting in the quality of the sound here; despite the lo-fi provenance, it's clear and vivid, with wild audience interjections capturing the bonhomie of the event. Those good vibes extended backstage, with the performers hanging out together as if this were a

family reunion, blues



Blues brothers: (l-r) Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters relax backstage at the festival

musicians talking about their grandchildren, sharing road stories or spending time with audience members who'd made their way backstage thanks to a fairly lax approach to security.

Jim Fishel had also landed the job of festival "host" for Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, Fred McDowell and Big Mama Thornton. Each of these blues legends contributes a potent performance. Crudup's "So Glad You're Mine" is bare-boned, simultaneously taut and laid-back, the guitar switchblading between clipped and loose, Crudup's voice rich and shuddering with emotion. Mississippi Fred McDowell performs "John Henry" at the request of BB King, and it's one of the most startling five minutes here, with McDowell's guitar winding across a trebly tightrope, his slide swooping and diving before holding notes in a claustrophobic clutch, all while chipping out a rhythm with piston-pulse mechanics.

Big Mama Thornton and The Hound Doggers' "Ball And Chain" is one of the set's absolute highlights. Slight but tight, the Hound Doggers wind out a loose blues groove over which Thornton sings out proud – she's almost peerless in her ability to elaborate on a melody and theme without ever lapsing into tired theatrics. Then The Hound Doggers' guitarist bursts into the fray with 10 seconds of volume overload, the guitar molten, before stretching out on a solo that's an object lesson in the blues, punctuating the song with all the drama needed while keeping everything – tone, notes, improvisation – just so.

Every song here has its merits; there isn't a dud among them. It's great to hear Clifton Chenier emerging out of the overloaded, intensely wrought blues extensions of Luther Allison and the Blue Nebulae; Magic Sam's "I Feel So Good (I Wanna Boogie)" is particularly wild given its provenance, with Magic Sam turning up at the event without backing band or instrument; the quickly assembled combo play as though their lives depend on it. Perhaps the most startling performance, though, is Son House's "Death Letter Blues", where House's chilling delivery freezes time, his guitar reduced to barest essentials, his voice gnarled but beautiful.

Listening back, it's no surprise that the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival has, over 50 years, developed such a strong mythology. Woodstock might have had broader cultural purchase, but Ann Arbor was more focused, more definitive, and the music, on this evidence, was simply better. As performer James Cotton told Jim Fishel, "I think that's the best festival I ever went to in my life! Everybody was just ready for it." And how.

Extras: 9/10. The set is available as a CD or two double-LPs (each double-LP with an extra track, from Pinetop Perkins and Big Mojo Elem respectively). There's a deluxe edition with coloured vinyl, a 50-page book, and reproductions of various ephemera from the festival (tickets, poster, press clippings, an autographed program). All editions feature liner notes from Sophie Abramowitz, David Beal and Parker Fishel, and recollections from Jim Fishel. Early orders of the set come with a free Mississippi Fred McDowell 78rpm.

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BB KING
Live In Cook County Jail ABC, 1971
An incredible electric blues set, recorded late the previous year. Many

go for *Live At The Regal*, but this one just bests it. King turns things on a dime, his guitar fluid when it needs, stinging and crushing when punctuating these legendary songs.

8/10



HOUND DOG TAYLOR & THE HOUSE ROCKERS
Beware Of The Dog!
ALLIGATOR, 1976

The overlooked Hound Dog in two sets from 1974, the year before he passed. This collection carves everything down to barest essentials, The House Rockers (here, Brewer Phillips and Ted Harvey) along for a wild ride. 9/10



MUDDY WATERS
Muddy 'Mississippi' Waters Live BLUE SKY, 1979

Recorded across 1977 and 1978, produced by Johnny Winter (who also joins on guitar for a few songs), Waters is on startling form, getting the audience on side from the get-go. You're here for his slide guitar and voice, though, and he completely delivers, each song perfect for his talents. 8/10



SLEEVE NOTES

- Disc: One**
1 Dirty Mother For You – Roosevelt Sykes
2 So Glad You're Mine – Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup
3 Too Much Alcohol – JB Hutto & His Hawks
4 I Wonder Why – Jimmy "Fast Fingers" Dawkins
5 Help Me (A Tribute To Sonny Boy Williamson) – Junior Wells
6 I've Got A Mind To Give Up Living – BB King With Sonny Freeman And The Unusuals
7 John Henry – Mississippi Fred McDowell
8 Everybody Must Suffer/Stone Crazy – Luther Allison And The Blue Nebulae
9 Tu M'as Promis L'Amour (You Promised Me Love) – Clifton Chenier
10 Hard Luck – The Original Howlin' Wolf And His Orchestra
11 So Many Roads, So Many Trains – Otis Rush

- Disc: Two**
1 Long Distance Call – Muddy Waters
2 Movin' And Groovin' – Charlie Musselwhite
3 I Feel So Good (I Wanna Boogie) – Magic Sam
4 Jelly Jelly Blues – Shirley Griffith
5 Call It Stormy Monday (But Tuesday Is Just As Bad) – T-Bone Walker
6 Ball And Chain – Big Mama Thornton And The Hound Doggers
7 Juanita – Big Joe Williams
8 Key To The Highway – Sam Lay
9 Mojo Hand – Lightnin' Hopkins
10 Off The Wall – James Cotton Blues Band
11 Death Letter Blues – Son House



Q&A

Jim Fishel
How a teenage blues fan helped preserve the music's legacy

Jim Fishel recorded the acts at the Ann Arbor Blue Festival. Below: the original flyer

WHEN the planning for Ann Arbor Blues Festival kicked off, had you just finished at University of Michigan?

Well, I never went to the University of Michigan. My brother transferred to the University of Michigan in 1967. I was graduating high school in 1969. In the summer of 1968, my brother was telling me that he was going to go off to Chicago, walk into the Jazz Record Mart and start talking to Bob Koester, and give [writer, blues promoter and photographer] Dick Waterman a call. We had been brought up on jazz and blues together, just as fans, and while I listened to a lot of bands and a lot of white blues performers, and jazz performers, it was the originators that I really got into, and thus we started hanging out in the inner city in Cleveland, and then in Chicago, to get the feel. I was pretty naïve in those days. I thought I was fairly worldly, because I had seen probably about 20 per cent of these artists in small clubs, or in the case of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf and BB King, there was a black nightclub called Leo's Casino in Cleveland, which used to have a blues festival once a year. But my education started right quick, and I realised that as hip as I was, I didn't realise some of the lingo. I had studied

black history, but found out that I was definitely a fly on the wall absorbing everything.

What for you were the highlights? It's kind of weird to ask that, because I would imagine the entire festival was the highlight...

Nothing disappointed. As I grew to know the artists, I realised that showmanship was not their thing. Musicianship was the important thing, and so I changed my opinion for the better of some of these musicians. Otis Rush, to this day, is one of my favourites. He never would bend to playing the guitar behind his back, with his teeth, jumping on his back, getting in the audience. I've come to realise, as each year passes, that this guy played a style that others can emulate, but it's impossible to imitate. Perhaps the greatest moment is the one that's previously been released, when we gave Bob Koester – because he was signed to Bob, and my brother had stayed with Bob – we gave him the tape we had

mastered of Magic Sam (released as half of 1981's *Magic Sam Live*). That set was brilliant. Anybody who's heard it would say that. Magic Sam came in as more-or-less an unknown, and as the story goes, came without a guitar, came without a band, came late. I was prepared for a complete letdown, but my brother said, "I saw him play in the club, just wait." Luckily, Sammy Lay was there as a performer and he said, "I've played with him before, I can sit in." Then we put a call out for a bass player, only to find that the first bass player who had nearby equipment and wasn't performing was Bruce Barlow, who was then known as "Buffalo" Bruce Barlow, who was the bass player in Commander Cody And His Lost Planet Airmen. He had never played with Sam before but, to this day, whenever I run into his former bandmate Bill Kirchen, we always joke about that, because I said, "Of all you guys, Burrow was the luckiest, just because he got to sit in and play with Magic Sam, one of the greatest sets." There were just so many moments where the audience was enraptured, where I was feeling it.

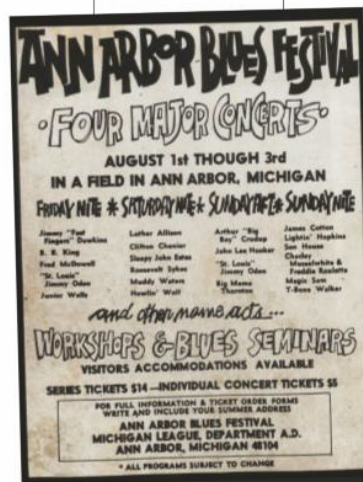
With the Ann Arbor Blues Festival recordings you did, on the Norelco tape recorder, the performances are the thing, but the fact that they were recorded as they were is so much of the core of what makes this set work.

My son said, "What are we going to do, put echo here? Dad, it is what it is, we had to repair the tapes, you're lucky they survived." He has since worked on a bunch of historical projects for the Bob Dylan bootleg series. He understands that music is sacrosanct and that every note played was not perfect.

What did you learn from the experience of the festival?

I was a relatively hip young teenager, but really not very hip. It gave me a lot of background which I took into my later life, when I first became a writer and reporter, because I was a journalism major. My brother and I did four years of three concerts, each year, of blues at the University of Miami when I was down there, with many of these artists. There are amazing tales of those years, but I was a little wiser at that point. I learned that these were down to earth people. We had an assortment that went everything from Chenier playing his zydeco, which was a complete revelation to me at that point, because I wasn't really hip to that music – I knew about Cajun but I didn't know about black Cajun dance parties, and that Chenier was the king. And all these incredibly fragile older guys that were there, as well as all these young guitar slingers. It was an educational experience, an experience that we all hope we get at least once in our life.

INTERVIEW: JON DALE



“Showmanship was not their thing. It was musicianship that was important”

JIM FISHEL