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# Everybody Talkin' 'Bout a Spoonful: The Blues, from America to England and Back

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*Skidmore College*

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Everybody Talkin' 'Bout a Spoonful  
The Blues, from America to England and Back

By

Edward Giza IV

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE

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Advisors: Gordon Thompson, Sandy Welter

**THE MASTER OF ARTS PROGRAM IN LIBERAL STUDIES  
SKIDMORE COLLEGE**

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## ABSTRACT

Though the blues are typically considered one of the few uniquely American musical styles, a group of British performers in the 1960s championed the blues to mainstream audiences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. This essay explores the journey of the blues from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago and then across the Atlantic to England. It examines the various changes the genre underwent throughout this journey as well as aspects of the blues that remained static. Utilizing the song "Spoonful" as a common thread between these locations, this essay details how changes in popular opinion, advancements in technology, and sheer force of will on the part of its devotees brought the blues to the forefront of 1960s popular music scenes.

## Introduction

Over the first half of the twentieth century, the blues<sup>1</sup> evolved from an isolated form of folk music into a fully established popular genre. Developed across southern plantations over the latter half of the nineteenth century, “the blues” represented a blend of African and American musical traditions. The term “blues” itself is fairly broad in scope; initially, the “blues” encompassed a variety of sounds, from field songs to spirituals. By the 1950s, however, it was primarily associated with the twelve-bar blues form, which served as the skeleton for developing popular genres from rhythm and blues (“R&B”) to rock and roll. The developments over this period impacted much of the Western popular music that followed. In this essay, I will follow one particular path of progression in the genre’s development. By following the blues’ transition from juke joint dance music to radio rock, I aim to glean what has made the blues endure as a popular genre over the earlier half of the twentieth century.

In the first section of this essay, I will trace the blues’ journey through three locales musically and socially integral to the genre’s development – the Mississippi Delta, Chicago, and England. Though these three locations are by no means the only ones of import, many musicians followed a direct trajectory from one to the next. By tracing their footsteps, one can see the evolution of this art form as it passed through each region. By the 1920s, the Mississippi Delta was a hotspot for

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<sup>1</sup> The term “blues” is of indefinite origin and encompasses an incredibly broad range of sounds. Much like the term “rock music” today, blues meant any number of things. One can simply listen to the vast difference between W.C. Handy’s 1912 “Memphis Blues” and Blind Lemon Jefferson’s 1927 “Match Box Blues” to recognize that “the blues” is a term often used quite loosely. Really, the primary similarity between these songs is the inclusion of “blues” in the titles. For the purposes of this essay, “the blues” refers primarily to the twelve-bar blues form.

blues music. Farmhands hoping to avoid manual labor picked up guitars to earn an easier keep, and the post-World War One migration from the rural Mississippi Delta to urban Chicago is but one example of farmhands following the perceived promise of work in the continuing wake of the industrial revolution. Though advancements in farming technology might have pushed these individuals away from farm work, advancements in musical technology helped cement their places in their new urban settings. The advent of electric instruments and amplification allowed performers to play for larger audiences effortlessly; the sheer volume afforded by electrified instruments provided access to stylistic nuances previously unable to pierce the raucous racket of juke joints. Musicians developed more tightly focused song forms, smoothing out uneven measures and fleshing out instrumentation. Advancements in recording technology led to a boom of “race records,” permitting listeners to affordably hear their favorite tunes again and again. This allowed for the broadening of the blues’ fan base, both locally and abroad.

In the late 1950s, several British jazz musicians took notice of these untapped sounds and aspired to bring them to new audiences overseas. Though the earliest British blues musicians were primarily middle agers from the jazz scene, blues music was quickly adopted by British youth culture. Prior to their appropriation of the blues, British youths did not have music to call “their own.” Early attempts at playing blues and rock and roll music led to “skiffle,” a curious style drawing influence from country blues, New Orleans trad, and jazz traditions, amongst others. As more American blues records appeared in England towards the late-1950s, many of these performers turned towards mimicry of their beloved “authentic” American blues



players. Ravidly collecting the few records upon which they could lay their hands, British blues aficionados were fervent enough in their devotion that they kept many American bluesmen<sup>2</sup> actively touring well throughout the decade. American bluesmen found a new audience for whom to perform, and many waning careers received a second wind. By the mid-1960s, England's blues scene had heavily fused with its jazz and pop scenes. Individuals formerly bent towards emulating their idols had found their own voices, leading to divergent genres from psychedelic blues (Jimi Hendrix, Cream) to heavy metal (Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath).

Secondly, I will detail several key figures in each of these locales. As mentioned above, many of these musicians served as direct influences on the subsequent generation. Several of these musicians performed together over the years, and some were even mentored directly by these predecessors. It is impossible to cover the breadth of the important figures in blues music within the scope of this essay, even just focusing on the performers from these specific locations. As such, I have chosen a few individuals from each of these locales as examples of the changes taking place during that specific timeframe. The mysterious Charley<sup>3</sup> Patton and Robert Johnson upheld Delta traditions through the 1920s and '30s, and display the then-burgeoning recording industry's effect on the genre. Willie Dixon was the behind-the-scenes Renaissance man for Chess Records throughout the development of Chicago's blues music scene, writing songs for many luminaries

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<sup>2</sup> I use this term gender-neutrally, but it bears mentioning that the branches of blues I will be discussing were typically male affairs. Female blues/jazz singers such Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith were prominent through the 1920s, and England's Jo-Ann Kelly was a prominent blues singer throughout the boom and into the 1980s.

<sup>3</sup> Depending on the source, Patton's given name is spelled either "Charley" or "Charlie." For consistency's sake, I use "Charley" throughout this essay.

and keeping recording sessions flowing smoothly. Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters were two of the most prominent front men of 1960s Chicago, and their competition for band and audience members fueled the fire for each to put on better performances. Both were firmly rooted in the Mississippi Delta but came to define the Chicago sound. Furthermore, both performed overseas for eager British audiences. Alexis Korner, Cyril Davies, and John Mayall each served as renowned British bandleaders in their own rights, and mentored many of the younger musicians eagerly delving into the British blues scene. The Rolling Stones were one of the earliest popular examples of British blues performers turning towards pop to broaden their audience, and their success played an indirect role in propelling a young Eric Clapton to superstardom. Though these individuals are but a sampling of the many that toiled towards perfecting their particular flavors of blues, they provide a fascinating glimpse at the myriad musical evolutions that took place over a short fifty years.

Finally, I will utilize several recordings of the song "Spoonful" as a specific example of the musical and technological changes that occurred within the genre from the early 1920s to the late 1960s. Though "Spoonful" is not the best known of blues standards, the song has been present in some form since at least 1929, as well as in each of the aforementioned locales. Variations in its structure and overall sound reflect the changing tastes of both blues performers and listeners. Of primary interest are Charley Patton's 1929 recording, Willie Dixon's 1960 rearrangement for Howlin' Wolf, and Cream's 1966 studio and 1968 live recordings. Other recordings fill important gaps, but these four display the evolution of a particular branch of the

blues — from rural blues featuring a single performer to a full urban electric band to late-1960s psychedelic blues — better than words possibly can. In essence, “Spoonful” exemplifies what I believe to be one of the blues’ greatest strengths: saying a lot with a little. For a song based on a single chord, “Spoonful” covers a lot of ground.

Ultimately, I aim to examine one particular path the blues wandered from the late-1920s to the late-1960s. The 1960s were an incredible decade of growth for British popular music, and much of this growth would not have been possible without the influence of the American blues of prior decades. Though the concept of British blues might seem baffling to the uninitiated, the lines of influence are direct. The musicians of the Mississippi Delta taught or became the musicians of Chicago, and visiting musicians from Chicago inspired British upstarts to pick up their guitars. Though the blues underwent massive stylistic changes over these forty years, the essence of the blues remained relevant, popularly viable, and celebrated by its devotees.

## 1. From the Mississippi Delta to Chicago to England

Though the idea of blues musicians from England is puzzling to many observers, one need only mention the strong influence of the blues upon late-1960s rock bands such as Cream and Led Zeppelin to allay this disbelief. The roots of these groups can be clearly traced back to countless visits from Delta and Chicago musicians (such as “Big” Bill Broonzy) throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Though these musicians came from drastically different backgrounds, the tendency of American bluesmen to follow the promise of a paycheck alongside the cravings of ravenous British blues audiences led to the vibrant 1960s British blues scene. Whether former juke joint superstars or starry-eyed British art students, these performers had found a captive audience.

### Roots

Despite the nebulous nature of the blues' origins, there is no doubt that the style stems directly from the early Black American experience. In his *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, LeRoi Jones writes: “[It] is impossible to say exactly how old blues is – certainly no older than the presence of Negroes in the United States. It is a native American music, the product of the black man in this country: or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives” (17). During the times of slavery, plantation owners restricted the leisure activities of their slaves. Field song developed as a vocal art form, since this singing was essentially an accompaniment to physical labor. Though not necessarily encouraged, plantation owners figured

singing was less obtrusive than other activities and possibly helped to synchronize coordinated physical exertions, such as team hammering (Southern 161). Utilizing this sort of repetitive action for a basic rhythm, call and response patterns emerged where singers would follow the individual leading the song. This style is highly reminiscent of African drumming patterns where a group of percussionists will respond to the statements set by the master drummer. It is worth noting that drums were strictly forbidden on the plantations for this very reason (Jones 19). Plantation owners could plainly understand field holler lyrics, but could not discern the hidden messages encapsulated within the “talking drum” rhythms. Fearing insurrection, slave masters restricted leisure activities to those they could comprehend. As slavery gave way to sharecropping, these musical traditions developed into a form of entertainment rather than a way to speed the workday along. By combining the spirituals of their former masters, field hollers, and African polyrhythms, these musicians slowly developed what would become the blues by the turn of the twentieth century.

### **My Home Is In the Delta**

Early Delta blues songs frequently sported uncomplicated lyrics, likely due to the genre’s improvisatory roots. Repetition and embellishment were key elements of the Delta blues style. Moreover, blues lyrics often took a back seat to interpretation and raw emotion. Willie Dixon describes that it is not necessarily what is said so much as how it is said: “If the artist can express the song with inspiration, it inspires the public because music has that generating thing. If it touches you and you can

feel it, you can inspire someone else. It's just like electricity going from one to the other" (Dixon and Snowden 88). In a sense, these blues represented countless acts of sublimation, churning negative feelings into something positive. Slavery had ended, but the life of a sharecropper remained a difficult one. Many farmers were, at best, breaking their backs to break even. The small joy of channeling one's anguish through a guitar helped both performer and listener cope with the daily frustrations of life. This idea holds true regardless of setting — having a bad day is a universal concept.

Delta bluesmen from the turn of the century through the 1940s often honed their craft in juke joints — party houses that kept the whiskey pouring late into the night. Juke joints were not entirely about relaxation; coming from the Bambara language, the word juke translates to “evil, disorderly, wicked” (Davis 47). After a hard week of work, farmhands simply wanted to drink, dance, and gamble the night away. The Delta blues were forged for live, raucous, pick-up performances in this sort of venue. With so much booze flowing, it was not uncommon for the mood to take a harsh turn. Johnny Shines, an early traveling companion of Howlin' Wolf, describes the havoc of a typical juke joint: “See, they couldn't use mugs in there because people would commit mayhem, tear people's heads up with those mugs. Rough places, they were. When you were playing in a place like that, you just sit there on the floor in a cane-bottomed chair, just rear back and cut loose. There were no microphones or P.A. setups there, you just sing as loud as you can” (Segrest and Hoffman 36). The din of the juke often got such that hollering over the crowd was the only way to be heard. As most patrons were unable to actually hear the

performance, showmanship was every bit as important as musicianship. Charley Patton, for example, was infamous for playing his guitar behind his head or while writhing about on the ground to hold the attention of the juke patrons. These antics gave the audience something non-aural to enjoy over their whiskey, and served as a precursor to the sorts of shenanigans that would become commonplace as R&B performers such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard stepped into the spotlight.

Drifting from juke to juke, playing all-night sets to keep one's belly full of fried fish and whiskey, the lifestyle of a bluesman sounds rather romanticized. Rough as it could get, the life of a juke joint performer provided many of the perks of the modern day rock star, and the occasional complimentary cup of whiskey surely tasted sweeter than one earned through backbreaking labor. This rose-tinted view likely pushed certain upstarts to follow the footsteps of juke joint regulars. Given this proclivity for avoiding hard manual labor, it makes sense that many juke joint performers chased opportunities in cities as they became available. Chicago became one of the primary inheritors of many Delta bluesmen. Shortly after The First World War brought about urban labor shortages, the boll weevil destroyed countless cotton crops. As is often the case with the blues, the performers simply followed the work. Furthermore, Chicago was more racially tolerant than the Delta plantations. Professor Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. recalls an interviewee putting this rather succinctly: "I'd rather be in a jail in Chicago than in a church in Alabama" (139). Though likely an exaggeration, this sort of statement goes a long way towards displaying the better times migrants hoped for in the big city.

## **Sweet Home Chicago**

The migration of blues performers from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago was not a singular event. As mentioned earlier, these performers trickled into larger cities as farming opportunities dried up. As many Delta bluesmen were migrants anyway, there was little difference between trekking to a different farm and trekking to Chicago. Furthermore, the Chicago blues refused to stay in the city; by the time the Chicago scene was in full swing, rural blues styles were becoming a relic. Davis notes: “[w]hen Muddy Waters boarded that train in 1943, the Delta that Charley Patton had known no longer existed. And when Waters plugged his guitar into an amplifier in Chicago a few years later, the transformation of the blues from a rural folk idiom to an urban popular music had already been under way for several decades – a slow and tentative process, much like the migration itself” (48). As country sounds fell out of public favor, it became impossible to keep urban records out of the Delta. Urban blues and R&B trickled into country jukeboxes. Globalization might be too strong a word, but advances in recording technology were steadily making urban music more accessible to those outside the actual city.

The shift from a country to an urban setting obviously necessitated changes to blues performance. The most recognizable change accompanying the blues’ journey to an urban setting is the addition of amplification. Initially, this change was a practical one; larger venues and audiences simply required amplification for sound to carry. The next logical step was the switch to electric guitars. The electric guitar’s lower string action better-suited beginners, and permitted the performer to dedicate his focus towards nuance rather than on simply being heard. Beyond helping to



carry sound across crowded blues clubs, the electric guitar provided a wider variety of previously inaccessible timbres, dynamics, and articulation, affording more intricate interpretation. They also allowed for longer sustain, allowing notes to resonate for far longer than before. Softer, slower blues, which previously would have been ill suited to live performance, were able to develop.

Despite the boom of talent in Chicago, making a living as a musician was far from a simple task. Since music markets were segregated, the major labels limited their interests in black musicians to dedicated subdivisions, such as RCA's "Bluebird" label. Chicago's sheer concentration of untapped talent led to the rise of several independent record labels dedicated to the music of black performers. This "race record" market presented the opportunity to actually make a living as a musician. Primary among these independent labels in Chicago was Chess Records (née Aristocrat Records), founded in 1947. Brothers Leonard and Phil Chess did not know very much about blues music, but they recognized a market for it and capitalized upon this demand. Chicago had consumers with the disposable income to purchase blues music, and the brothers soon assembled one of the most impressive stables of performers in popular music history. Journalist Don Snowden details the impact of the Chess brothers' decision to focus on the race record market: "The Chess brothers were the first to gamble on recording the new style and classic Chicago blues became so thoroughly identified with the label bearing their name it was often described as 'the Chess sound.' It was a rough-and-tumble roar of guitars, harmonica and drums, rooted in the country blues of the Mississippi Delta but heavily amplified to slice through the din of Windy City nightclubs" (Dixon and

Snowden 79). This gamble clearly succeeded, as Chess managed to outlast or absorb the majority of their competitors. By the late 1950s, Chess boasted the most recognizable names in Chicago blues, including Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson II, and Little Walter. Chess was also instrumental in the rise of R&B, producing records by Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry. Though it is still called into question whether the brothers fairly compensated their artists, the label's impact on Western popular music cannot be denied.

### **A Stepping Stone**

The primary gateway to the blues in 1950s England was skiffle, a hybrid of country blues, New Orleans trad, and jazz. Skiffle remains a curiosity in that the genre is defined more by its nature than by its sound. Skiffle bands were comprised of whatever instruments the performers had on hand or could cobble together from everyday materials — a British equivalent to American jug bands. Harold Pendleton, co-owner of the Marquee Club, recalls bandleader Chris Barber originating the first British skiffle band as an excuse to let trumpeter Ken Coyle rest mid-set: "This little band was composed of a crude guitar, a homemade bass, a suitcase that was played with whisk brooms and a washboard strummed with thimbles... He got the name from having read about the rent parties that used to be given in poor, Negro quarters to raise money — that blacks of New Orleans called them skiffle groups" (Szatmary 103). This low barrier to entry made skiffle a common starting point for British musical aspirants. Since purchasing an instrument was not strictly necessary, many youths that otherwise might have shied away from musical performance

embraced skiffle's do-it-yourself nature. Though these musicians were more likely to emulate Buddy Holly than Howlin' Wolf, for many it was the primary gateway to popular American music.

A skiffle band was likely to play any song that the band knew well enough to stumble through, whether foreign American folk song or familiar British music hall tune. Lonnie Donegan, a former member of Chris Barber's Jazz and Blues Band, championed skiffle and helped bring American folk song to the forefront of British popular music. Since rock and roll had yet to make an impact on the country, updated skiffle renditions of tunes such as Leadbelly's "Rock Island Line" were novel amongst British teens. By generating interest in American folk music, skiffle paved the way for blues and, eventually, rock and roll. Interest in these new styles, however, insured that skiffle's widespread success was short-lived. The jazz set had approached skiffle as a novelty act in the first place, and the blues folks simply utilized it as a stepping stone to introduce more people to the blues. There were certainly diehard skiffle enthusiasts, such as Donegan, but certainly not enough of them to keep skiffle en vogue. Once there was sufficient audience for the blues and R&B, skiffle fell out of the public eye.

### **The British Blues Boom**

By the 1950's, the blues had begun their slow creep into the British consciousness. Post-World War II England was a bleak place for youths. The draft was no longer in effect by the 1950s, leaving graduates without direction. British youngsters faced a decision: find a job in the factories, or continue on with school.

As many American bluesmen had picked up their guitars to avoid farm work, many British youths shuffled off to art school as the preferable alternative to getting a job. Instead of doing their schoolwork, however, some students sought refuge in the music brought overseas by American soldiers:

The postwar American military presence in Britain contributed to an environment in which American musical tastes influenced British musical sensibilities. Whether the records that American servicemen brought with them, the short-distance broadcasts from their British bases, the more powerful broadcasts from their German bases, or even the gigs that all the bases provided, American culture proved to be an important influence on many British musicians in this era. (G. Thompson 259)

These sounds were not their parents' music. American music was unfamiliar and new, but also something British youths could latch onto as their own; given the general scarcity of American albums, owning a rare recording was something of a status symbol. Whether they picked up a guitar to emulate their jukebox heroes or to impress the girls of their fancy, these youths found purpose in their music.

Despite its attraction of so many youths, early British blues scenes were noticeably devoid of the age barrier oft seen in popular music. This can likely be attributed to the non-commercial nature of the early boom. Until the British blues scene began to overlap with its pop scene, there seemed to be far less emphasis on the notions of "visual cohesion" that permeated pop scenes. In 1962, Alexis Korner was 34 and Cyril Davies was 30, a solid ten years older than most of their cohorts. Though ten years is not a major age difference in the real world, the music business

was just as ageist in the 1960s as today. These folks readily played alongside younger players, such as Eric Clapton, Long John Baldry, and Mick Jagger, which likely would not have been the case in a pop group. Furthermore, the incredibly mixed backgrounds of the players contributed to the ragtag nature of early British blues band compositions. There were certainly professional musicians gigging their way through the blues scene, primarily jazz players, but there were just as many holding down day jobs or wading through schoolwork. It is somewhat comforting that the scene looked open to all interested parties, with great emphasis placed on enthusiasm. Not everyone was necessarily cut out for stardom, but anyone was able to contribute.

### **Putting It All Together**

Barber's influence extends past his involvement in the skiffle scene. Hardly a traditionalist, Barber melded elements of the blues into jazz performances, and his Jazz and Blues Band featured some of the preeminent bluesmen England had to offer. When the British Musicians' Union repealed its ban on American musicians performing in England in 1956, Barber wasted little time in bringing American bluesmen from Big Bill Broonzy to Muddy Waters across the Atlantic to perform (Szatmary 115). As budgets rarely allowed promoters to bring over entire groups, skiffle musicians and jazz players alike found themselves mixed into the world of the blues. Bob Brunning, founding member of Fleetwood Mac, details the situation: "[Promoters] who wished to present blues performers in Europe have often been unable to bear the cost of importing entire American bands. However, there has

never been a shortage of enthusiastic local r 'n' b outfits willing to practically pay for the privilege of working with their authentic heroes..." (166). The more frenzied of these fledgling blues players approached their idols with reverence, trying to mimic their recordings and performance immaculately. Such players were as rigid in their expectations of the performers as they were in their interpretations of their records. Specifically, bluesmen were expected to play acoustic instruments and carry an encyclopedic knowledge of their craft's history. Muddy Waters nearly caused riots during his first British performances solely because he sported a small electric amplifier (Brunning 12). Despite this curious reaction, most American bluesmen were not in a position to turn down a paycheck. As before, many simply followed the work and trekked to and from England well throughout the 1960s.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, visiting American bluesmen had much reason to be flattered. Early British performers treated the blues as an art form instead of a simple source of entertainment. In their eyes, the blues was a subject of reverence. Blues records were readily available in America, yet British music stores did not carry an extensive enough selection for the typical enthusiast. As such, the owner of a rare record could expect many callers simply hoping to scope out the album's cover. Rock biographer Dave Thompson describes how "...a young Tom McGuinness once walked three miles to catch a glimpse of a John Lee Hooker album cover. He didn't know the record's owner, and he didn't hear the record. 'I knocked on his door and said I hear you've got... and he brought it to his door to show me" (11). Scarcity bred intensity, and the upstarts meticulously transcribed the few available blues records. This mimicry was the bedrock upon which the early

British blues boom was based. Early on, few saw reason to pen original material as there was such a rich catalogue of established songs to draw from.

With such rigid definitions of blues music and performers, the occasional shattering of these perceptions was inevitable. When prodded about the details of his studies, Tennessee bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins always replied, "I never met nobody, I never seen nobody.' Journalists would then say 'Well then, how did you learn to play the blues?' and Lightnin' would reply, 'I used to buy these records, listen to 'em!' The news that Lightnin' learned the blues in exactly the same way as many British musicians used to unaccountably infuriate journalists!" (Brunning 188). The race record boom allowed younger American blues musicians to practice their craft alongside the turntable, just as their British counterparts. Blues music was no longer simple background noise for juke joints and rent parties, but a developing branch of popular music. Furthermore, blues music was no longer confined by region due to the reach of record distributors. By the time British interest in the blues had taken root, American interests had shifted from the early Chicago sounds to the more danceable R&B. Without immediate access to current American trends, British tastes lagged behind and embraced sounds from which many American musicians had already moved. There was little chance of the visiting Americans completely matching the Brits' expectations, but these discrepancies did little to diminish the fervor of British fans.

The reactions of American bluesmen to the mania of their British counterparts were reasonably mixed. Sonny Boy Williamson II allegedly claimed, "Those English kids want to play the blues so bad — and they play the blues so bad" (Clapton 48).

The very same musician pulled a knife on a young Eric Clapton, simply for Clapton's questioning whether he had lifted his name from a harmonica predecessor.

Understandably, some of the American originals simply could not comprehend the desire of their British counterparts to play their music; without having "lived" the blues, how could they adequately play the blues? Most of the Chicago players came from somewhat similar backgrounds, all far removed from the experience of the British middle and working classes, and the blues' awkward shift from entertainment to art form must have been flustering. Nevertheless, the boom presented a number of opportunities to collect a paycheck whether the American stars respected their backing musicians or not. Though possibly disconcerting, successful collaborations helped invigorate the careers of many bluesmen that might have otherwise been swept under the tide of R&B and rock and roll.

Occasionally, however, the Americans trekking overseas appreciated their experiences. The Groundhogs accompanied boogie bluesman John Lee Hooker on several occasions, and Hooker had nothing but praise for them: "I'm bound to say that John Lee and his Groundhogs are the number one best blues band you have over here, and they fit in with my type of music perfectly. Often the boys know what I'm going to do before I do it" (Brunning 98). This camaraderie was rare, but displayed that there was certainly hope for the British scene to flourish. Furthermore, the race situation in the British blues boom was a strange one. The British musicians themselves seemed rather colorblind; it would be a curious situation indeed for these performers to shun their idols based on the color of their skin. The visiting American bluesmen, typically black, were performing with white British musicians and for



predominantly white British audiences. By all accounts, British performers simply did not seem to acknowledge the issue.

### **Aftermath**

By the 1970s, the blues boom had subsided. The musicians involved were still working, but most had delved into various offshoots of the classic blues with which they had started. Some, such as Korner and Mayall, carried on rather traditionally, while folks like the Rolling Stones threw themselves fully into rock and roll. Several musical styles spun directly from the 1960s blues boom; the British heavy metal that surfaced in the early 1970s was essentially a faster, darker brand of blues, and the American southern rock of the later '70s fused blues basics with cleaner variations of the virtuosity seen in late-1960s psychedelic blues, which is later discussed in the context of Cream. The blues clearly played an integral role in the development of England's popular music in the 1960s. Though the blues were a curious style for British performers to champion, the impact of this decision cannot be denied. The blues of 1950s Chicago helped shape the 1960s British Invasion, which ultimately shaped most mainstream pop music that followed.

## 2. From Charley Patton to Eric Clapton

The best way to explore the blues' evolutions as they traveled through these regions is to examine its practitioners. Over a short thirty years, these individuals brought the blues to massive audiences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. I cannot stress enough that these performers are but a sampling of those that shaped the sounds in these regions. Delta luminaries such as Son House and Big Bill Broonzy, Chicago superstars such as harp wizards Sonny Boy Williamson and Little Walter, and budding rock stars from Jimi Hendrix to Jimmy Page all contributed greatly to the genre's progression. Still, the musicians outlined below clearly illustrate the transformation of the Delta blues into late-1960s psychedelic blues.

### **Charley Patton**

The most striking feature of early Delta blues musicians is how little we concretely know about many of them. Charley Patton, the prototypical Delta bluesman, is no exception. We have few details about Patton's life beyond that he was a common fixture in Delta juke joints. A single photograph of the man is known to exist, and it is still disputed whether or not the man in the picture is even Patton at all. Certainly, the reserved visage depicted therein does not measure up to the wild reputation upheld by the younger generation that followed in his wake. One of the few details commonly agreed upon relates to Patton's stage presence; his frenetic stage antics and ferocious voice made him an immeasurable influence on younger performers of the region: "An astounding showman, he beat his guitar like a drum, played it between his legs or behind his head, rode it like a pony, and threw it up in

the air and spun it, all while maintaining a driving dance beat in 4/4 time with the accent on the 2 and 4 – a metric novelty that he popularized...” (Segrest and Hoffman 18). This accent on the second and fourth beats, eventually described as a backbeat, became fundamental to rock and roll rhythms. To younger juke musicians, Patton stood as a shining example that one could make a living without resorting to manual labor. That his particular form of breadwinning was accompanied by whiskey, gambling, and the occasional free meal certainly did not diminish the appeal of the bluesman lifestyle.

Musically, Patton resembled a songster or minstrel. Recording fifty-eight songs between 1929 and 1934, he did not restrict his repertoire to exclusively blues songs. This versatility allowed him to play whatever sort of music a given audience might prefer, ensuring a steady stream of gigs. Across the body of his recordings, one is likely to hear the standard twelve-bar blues, as in his “Going to Move to Alabama,” just as readily as the danceable ragtime of his “A Spoonful Blues” or the gospel-tinged country blues of his “I Shall Not Be Moved.” Regardless of style, Patton’s hoarse roar is often incomprehensible as he slyly comments upon his own performance between stanzas. Though his words are difficult to understand, the emotion in his voice conveys the intent of his songs masterfully. He keeps a steady beat on the lower strings of his guitar while playing melodies on the upper strings; his meter is occasionally irregular, but this depends wholly on the style of the song. Beyond all else, Patton exemplified the showmanship and versatility of early Delta blues performers, ideals that carried on through the genre’s travels to urban settings.

## Robert Johnson

Not every bluesman was known for his onstage theatrics. Robert Johnson gained notoriety for his impressive guitar prowess and peculiar brand of self-promotion. Johnson himself remains something of an American legend; few facts are known about his life, and even the circumstances of his death are vague. What is certain, however, is Johnson's impact on the overall mystique of the genre. Though an allegedly unimpressive performer in his early days, Johnson surfaced after a short absence with an interesting tale to tell about some crossroads: "Legend goes that he disappeared for a year or so, before astonishing his former tormentors with his newfound prowess. Johnson's own explanation was that he struck a deal with the Devil. More likely, he spent every spare moment practicing... after being ridiculed off the bandstand in Kansas City" (Davis 2). Given how few confirmed details remain about Johnson's life, this legend has essentially become a scrap of Americana. Even in popular music today, an "image" is as necessary as skill, if not more so. Having this spooky reputation precede his performance was the best sort of advertisement. As the saying goes, there is no such thing as bad publicity.

After his reemergence, Johnson was reputedly musically peerless. His songbook is today considered blues standard, making him one of the earliest prolific blues composers. A scant forty-one recordings from the late 1930s comprise nearly everything concretely known about the man, which is testament to the impact he made during his short recording career. Johnson's recordings display an amount of polish rare amongst his contemporaries, likely because he harkened the bleeding of Delta blues style into the upcoming prominence of big city sounds. Some of his best

known tunes, such as “Cross Road Blues,” “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom,” and “Sweet Home Chicago” have seen countless cover renditions and reinterpretations. Based solely on the recurring nature of his songbook, Johnson’s influence is noticeable upon most blues performers that followed. Johnson’s voice is thin but piercing, his diction clear, and his guitar-picking crisp. Even though he is primarily associated with the Delta blues, songs such as the ragtime “They’re Red Hot” display the variety of his repertoire and his proficiency with other guitar styles. Even his alternate takes are stylistically quite different; within this small sampling of recordings, one can hear the ways in which Johnson would tinker with his songs to achieve different moods or styles. For example, Headlam notes: “In the two cuts of ‘Cross Road Blues’... the first version has additional verses and is faster and more raucous, closer to ‘Terraplane Blues,’ than the slower, more measured second version” (“Blues Transformations” 63). Beyond showcasing Johnson’s talents, these alternate takes serve as an early example of the blues’ versatility; the songs’ structures are loose enough to allow drastic improvisation without compromising the song itself.

### **Willie Dixon**

Not known by name to most casual listeners, Willie Dixon was a seminal figure in both the development of the Chicago sound and the exportation of the blues to England some years later. Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1915, Dixon grew up in a curious environment compared to many of his contemporaries. His mother encouraged literacy from a young age. Their neighborhood was integrated, and

Vicksburg was home base for no less than Charley Patton (Dixon and Snowden 7). Though his mother emphasized education, Willie was more interested in travel and music. His journeys soon brought him into contact with street corner musicians: “I really began to find out what the blues meant to black people, how it gave them consolation to be able to think these things over and sing them to themselves or let other people know what they had in mind and how they resented various things in life. I guess it kind of rubbed off on me because after you see guys die and everybody living in hopes...” (Dixon and Snowden 25). He developed an interest in both vocal harmony and the upright bass, and exercised both skills between stints as a farmhand, a Golden Gloves boxer, and a hobo. Around 1938, Leonard “Baby Doo” Caston convinced him to hang up his boxing gloves to focus on his musical interests, drawing one of the most influential behind-the-scenes men in Chicago blues into the industry (Dixon and Snowden 43). Hired by Chess Records as a session bassist in 1948, Dixon soon became Chess’s resident jack-of-all-trades (Dixon and Snowden 60). Though the label was Chess in name, the studio would not have functioned so smoothly without Dixon’s guiding hand.

Eventually, Dixon served as session producer, composer, and liaison between the Chess brothers and the musicians. The brothers Chess handled the business aspects of the company, but knew little of actual record production. They required an individual with both a keen ear and knowledge of blues practices, and Dixon filled this niche. Dixon was capable of keeping a session running, and knew how to capture the essence of a song on tape. He spoke the language of the blues, but was more conversationally eloquent than many of his peers. Dixon’s greatest

contribution to the blues, however, was his hefty songbook. Though his own recordings were not commercially notable, Dixon excelled at writing to other musicians' strengths. He penned a large number of Chess's greatest hits, from Muddy Waters' "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man" to Howlin' Wolf's "Wang Dang Doodle." Boasting more music theory knowledge than many of Chess's blues stars, Dixon understood the craft of penning popular music. He recognized that the simplest way to write a pop tune was to create a catchy hook to grab attention: "You know how it is, a lot of guys feel like if you made a song complicated, it would do more. I always tried to explain that the simpler a thing is, the easier it can get across with the public" (Dixon and Snowden 84). This concept would become the norm as R&B and rock and roll stepped into the limelight, and Dixon continued to write songs for his colleagues through the rise of rhythm and blues. His songwriting efforts played no small role in the success of Chess's biggest stars. Having seen both sides of the business, Dixon provides an insightful view of the Chicago blues world and its eventual intersection with the pop world.

### **Howlin' Wolf**

Chester Burnett, born in 1920 and better known as Howlin' Wolf, was one of the primary beneficiaries of Dixon's songbook (Segrest and Hoffman 4). Wolf's brand of blues was a hardened electric interpretation of the Delta blues. Woodshedding in Memphis, Wolf cultivated the wild performance ideals of Charley Patton in an urban setting. Wolf's signature growl served as a bridge between these two sounds, putting a roughly polished spin on familiar tunes. Though a competent

guitarist and harmonica player, both were overshadowed by Wolf's vocal prowess; the sheer bravado of his voice carried him through a steady career. Blues scholar Dick Shurman puts it best: "What musical instrument wouldn't be overshadowed by That Voice?" (Segrest and Hoffman 92). Bellowing over juke joint crowds, Wolf's roars and howls made him one of Chicago's preeminent blues vocalists.

This power was not simply in his voice; Wolf stood over six and a half feet tall, and weighed in around three hundred pounds. Combined with Wolf's obstinate nature, this imposing presence made him difficult to work with. Those who learned to work around Wolf's temperament, however, helped create some of Chicago's finest blues records. By 1952, Wolf had severed his personal ties in Memphis to record exclusively with the Chess brothers in Chicago. Many of Wolf's most successful recordings were adaptations of older juke joint standards. Though his Chicago recordings were more polished than the music of the juke joints in which he cut his teeth, Wolf never lost the raw fire of the Delta. Dixon in particular was adept at penning and adapting tunes for Wolf's particular voice; this relationship will also be discussed at length later on.

### **Muddy Waters**

While Wolf carried the grit of the country blues into Chicago, McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters, quickly adopted the refined electric sounds that many listeners associate with 1950s Chicago. Though Waters grew up with the same musical influences as his Delta contemporaries, he embraced changing tastes. Among the earliest signees on Chess Records (at that time still



Aristocrat), Waters pioneered the more upbeat Chicago sound: “By combining the sounds of the country and city into a nitty-gritty, low-down, jumpy sound, Muddy Waters reflected the optimism of postwar African Americans, who had escaped the seemingly inescapable Southern cotton fields. The urban music contrasted sharply with the more sullen country blues, born in slavery” (Szatmary 6). Songs of hardship were becoming passé; Waters instead focused on topics that would become rock and roll tropes in a scant few years, such as embellished masculinity and wooing ladies. Contrary to many of his predecessors, Waters’ diction was incredibly crisp, and his tone relatively clean even when shouting. His guitar fills complemented his vocals, but still melded into the ensemble seamlessly. Whether playing standard twelve-bar blues or R&B, his rhythm section supplied laid-back beats to keep heads bobbing and feet tapping. Truly, it is difficult to imagine a better representation of the Chicago blues than recordings of Muddy Waters’ band.

In updating his sound, Waters became the quintessential Chicago bluesman. Waters was to Chicago what Robert Johnson was to the Mississippi Delta: “Muddy so dominated Chicago blues in the wake of hits such as “Rolling Stone” and “Hoochie Coochie Man” that we tend to categorize other Chicago bluesmen as Muddy’s forebears, Muddy’s rivals, Muddy’s progeny, and those from his own generation whom he completely overshadowed” (Davis 188). It is difficult to view the Chicago blues without the lens of Waters’ impact. Muddy Waters *is* the Chicago blues, and his swagger and smooth style remained the template for up and coming performers following his footsteps on both sides of the Atlantic.

## Rivalry

The perceived rivalry between Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters beautifully displays the competitive spirit of the Chicago blues. Though their styles were quite different, they actively competed for the attention of audiences, the loyalty of band members, and the availability of gigs. Willie Dixon had to present new songs to one as if written for the other just to trick the pair into recording them; both Wolf and Muddy believed the other was getting Dixon's better songs, and would jump at the chance to secure one of those "better" songs for themselves (Dixon and Snowden 149). Many of the blues' shining moments stem from this sort of competition; so many Chicago blues songs are built on such a foundation of bravado that it is impressive the musicians got on even as well as they did! James Cotton, one of Wolf's early harmonica players, recalls the general rivalry of early blues groups: "See, round here there's so many musicians that it's real competitive and you're up against these big bands with the saxophones. Now Wolf would never let anyone outdo him onstage; that's where the tail dragging [like a dog] and everything came from, and the band was the same... With the amplifiers and everything we could go up against a nine-piece band and blow [them] right off the stage" (Segrest and Hoffman 67). Simply putting on an excellent show was not enough for these performers – they insisted on producing shows that would put their rivals to shame. As in any business, competition was a good thing for the consumer; the result of this sort of rivalry was better performances for all.

### **Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies**

Though the British blues boom originated heavily through visiting Americans, it did not take long for British performers to come into their own. England's answer to the odd coupling of Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon was Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies. Though oft credited as the fathers of the boom, neither man enjoyed vast amounts of personal popular success. Their influence, however, was essential in fueling the enthusiasm of their successors. Musical differences between the two were vast, and they commonly shared fallings out. Though the duo had played together in some capacity since the early 1950s, their time together as co-bandleaders in Blues Incorporated lasted less than a year. Their London Blues and Barrelhouse Club was amongst the first British institutions dedicated specifically to blues music, and served as a venue for many of the American bluesmen passing through the country (Brunning 13). Blues Incorporated featured a line-up too transient to garner much lasting success, but the group served as a stomping ground for budding bluesmen to practice their craft before founding their own outfits. Even after Davies left to found his All Stars in late 1962, they each continued to offer opportunities to their younger compatriots. Without the opportunities provided by Korner and Davies, it is unlikely that the British blues boom would have flourished.

Of the pair, Korner was the musical progressive. He fostered a deep love for classic American blues records, yet still enjoyed experimenting with various instruments and styles. For Korner, the blues were a springboard for musical exploration. While many of his contemporaries focused on rigid mimicry, Korner was more interested in what "the blues" could encompass. He encouraged the continued

integration of jazz players into the scene, and his use of horns was one of the common causes of his frequent rows with Davies. Barber claimed that his "*raison d'être* [was] to bring people together" (Paytress 14). Korner enjoyed a long performance career, but it is with good reason that he is most fondly remembered as a father figure of the blues boom: "He was... sophisticated, erudite, cut-glass upper-class accent – but with an innate sense of what constituted good music. He played guitar and sang but was a much better bandleader, surrounding himself with the best musicians on the British jazz and burgeoning blues scene and always happy to give new blood a chance" (Shapiro 58). Always willing to lend a couch to visiting musicians, Korner shared his love of music with anyone willing to listen. His malleable view of what the blues could be allowed for experimentation that more traditionalist outfits avoided. Beyond his career as a musician, he hosted various radio and television shows over the years, bringing the blues to broader and broader audiences. This fostering environment eased new musicians into the scene, ensuring that it could and would prosper.

In contrast to Korner's versatile outlook, Cyril Davies was a staunch traditionalist primarily interested in recreating the sounds of Chicago. He was considered one of the country's "most authentic" bluesmen, but his stubborn adherence to what he considered authentic blues was the cause of several fallings out with his band mates. As mentioned earlier, listeners throughout the early British blues boom entertained very specific notions of what constituted a bluesman and blues music. Davies was an opinionated man who saw little reason to compromise his view of what the blues should be, or really, his views on anything at all. While

Korner was well spoken and fatherly, Davies embodied the more stereotypical temperament of a bluesman: “Cyril Davies was a rough diamond, a working-class [auto body mechanic] from West London. He was grumpy and opinionated, with a violent temper and old-fashioned sense of chivalry. He once smashed a guitar over the head of a guy in a queue for fish and chips for swearing in front of a lady” (Shapiro 58-59). Though a difficult man, Davies still encouraged the youngsters following his trail. He was unable to see the British blues scene through the heights of its success, as his promising career was cut short by an untimely death in 1964. Though he surely would have disapproved of the pop edge many performers adopted, he served as a driving influence to many of the younger musicians on the scene. Above all else, Davies showed that classic blues sounds were not strictly an American affair.

### **John Mayall**

Traditionalist John Mayall was another primary father figure for British blues upstarts, and was also primarily interested in emulating the sounds of Chicago. He sang and played harmonica, guitar, and piano, but was best known as a bandleader. Like Korner and Davies’ respective groups, Mayall assembled an impressive array of performers for his various Bluesbreakers line-ups. His traditionalist stance attracted individuals focused on creating “serious” music. As the decade progressed and the blues became more and more pop-oriented, traditionalists found refuge in his Chicago-based style. Mayall was rather confrontational towards pop music in general, and disdained the rock and roll hybridism that made its mark on the British

blues scene as the 1960s progressed: “These days there are a lot of fringe blues groups which are, in reality, semi-pop and very contrived. They're all part of this blues boom, but if the boom went out it wouldn't affect people like Peter Green and me because we're out of trend... Mine may be the minority in music, but the people who dig it stick with you for life” (Hjort 190). There is certainly credence to his beliefs, as he is actively performing the same traditionalist blues to this day.

Unfortunately, Mayall's quick temper ensured that few remained in the Bluesbreakers' line-up for long. In his *Rock Family Trees*, Pete Frame details fifteen major Bluesbreakers line-ups just between 1963 and 1970, not even taking into account the countless players standing in for itinerant band mates (35). These constant line-up changes likely accounted for the Bluesbreakers' lack of significant popular success, as promising musicians often peeled away from the group to found their own bands. Amongst the musicians passing through the Bluesbreakers was the best-known name in British blues — Eric Clapton. Clapton's involvement with and departure from the Bluesbreakers is detailed later.

### **The Rolling Stones**

Long before their heady days as “The World's Greatest Rock and Roll Band,” the Rolling Stones served Chicago-style R&B to eager listeners in packed London blues clubs. Members Mick Jagger and Keith Richards had been childhood acquaintances, but developed their interests independently. Richards recalls the fabled train ride where he bumped into his childhood friend: “Under his arm he had four or five albums... we haven't hung around since the time we were five, six, ten

years. We recognized each other straight off... And under his arm, he's got Chuck Berry and Little Walter, Muddy Waters. 'You're into Chuck Berry, man, really?' That's a coincidence..." (Paytress 10). By that time, Jagger had been performing regularly as a singer for Blues Incorporated. Around June of 1962, Blues Incorporated was scheduled to perform for the BBC's *Jazz Club* program — but the BBC was not willing to pay for the entire band. Jagger graciously bowed out in hopes of drawing bigger crowds to the Marquee, and Korner rewarded his generosity with the back-up band slot for Blues Inc.'s weekly Marquee Club performance. The Rolling Stones were born with this performance, then comprised of Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Brian Jones as Elmo Lewis, Dick Taylor, Mick Avory, and Ian Stewart (Paytress 15-16). The band was soon supporting Cyril Davies's All-Stars at the Ealing Club regularly, injecting R&B between sets of Chicago blues. By early 1963, Giorgio Gomelsky had booked them as the main act at the Crawdaddy Club as the band began to straddle the line between playing the blues and navigating the initial consequences of Beatlemania (Paytress 22). The Rolling Stones were, in essence, the first marketable youths to champion the blues in England.

The creeping influence of rock and roll was not far off. Andrew Loog Oldham stealthily contracted the band out from under Gomelsky, and the band's focus quickly shifted towards the commercial. The band's first single, a 1963 cover of Chuck Berry's "Come On," paid homage to their R&B roots. Their second, John Lennon and Paul McCartney's "I Wanna Be Your Man," showed the band already adopting a pop sensibility. Mick explained the band's view to curious fans in *Melody Maker*. "We have always favoured the music of what we consider the R&B greats —

Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed and so on – and we would like to think that we are helping to give the fans of these artists what they want, as well as doing more commercial numbers” (Paytress 39). This malleability would become standard practice for the Stones, as their style drifted through R&B, rock and roll, and even disco music over the years. Though upsetting to traditionalists, it is worth again pointing out that most older blues performers followed trends just as readily. Non-musically, Oldham’s primary contribution to the band was their image. After a few sour interviews, Oldham strived to push the band as unsavory rogues – the antithesis to the cheeky but wholesome Beatles — figuring there was no such thing as bad publicity. Abrasive, unkempt, unabashedly sexual, the Stones were everything parents hated about rock and roll music. Upsetting parents is one of the simplest ways to attract teenaged fans. This sort of posturing was certainly not new to the blues. Playing up one’s reputation has always been a key component of blues performance, whether Johnson’s tale of the crossroads or Waters’ “Hoochie Coochie Man” bravado. Oldham simply shellacked this posturing with a veneer of pop sensibility.

### **Eric Clapton**

Born out of wedlock to a British woman and a Canadian soldier in 1945, Eric Clapton was raised by his grandparents (Clapton 5). Though the topic was not specifically discussed, Clapton figured out that his “Mum and Dad” were not his proper parents. He grew up very comfortably with his loving grandparents, but ached over the rejection he felt from his birth mother. From a young age, music was his



coping mechanism, whether through his grandmother's harmonium, Saturday morning children's radio shows, or live pub performances (Clapton 15-17). Badgering his grandparents into purchasing his first guitar during the skiffle boom, Clapton found solace in expressing his pain through music. He truly discovered his calling as a teenager, when he first discovered the blues. Clapton recalls: "It's very difficult to explain the effect the first blues record I heard had on me, except to say that I recognized it immediately. It was as if I were being reintroduced to something that I already knew, maybe from another, earlier life. For me there is something primitively soothing about this music, and it went straight to my nervous system, making me feel ten feet tall" (33-34). Clapton came of age at a particularly opportune time, as there was no shortage of kindred souls in England in the early 1960s. Bouncing from Robert Johnson to B.B. King and beyond, Clapton ravenously absorbed every blues record he could acquire. He was recruited by Tom McGuinness to play guitar for the Roosters in 1963 and leapt to The Yardbirds within the year, beginning an illustrious career bound to cross several genre boundaries (Clapton 40).

Oldham's abduction of the Stones from Gomelsky had a greater impact than one might initially imagine. Gomelsky did not forget this slight, and he jumped at the opportunity to contract the up-and-coming Yardbirds — featuring a developing Eric Clapton — when it arose. Though conceived as a blues ensemble, Gomelsky soon steered the band towards a more marketable pop sound; if he could not have the Rolling Stones, he would sculpt something better. Clapton recalls, "I think Giorgio had an agenda from day one. What he had missed out on with the Rolling Stones,

he would make up for with the Yardbirds. He would take us up a notch, make us bigger than the Stones” (48). Gomelsky eagerly set the band off at full speed. One of their very first gigs was backing Sonny Boy Williamson II, with relentless touring following shortly thereafter. Soon, the band members could genuinely claim to be full-time musicians. Gomelsky dressed the band in matching suits and had them playing noticeably non-blues numbers. Graham Gouldman’s pop tune “For Your Love” was a chart topping success for the Yardbirds in 1965, but this was certainly not the sort of success Clapton was seeking. The band was essentially a pop group, and Clapton was, at that time, a steadfast traditionalist. Clapton and Gomelsky mutually decided it might be best to part ways.

As it became increasingly pop-oriented, The Yardbirds’ music reflected noticeable changes to popular music. The band’s live performances were gradually getting longer; three-minute songs became six-minute songs as improvised jam sessions filled in the gaps (Clapton 49). Pop crowds appreciated this virtuosity, which was a drastic shift from what one expected to hear from the average pop ensemble. This trend towards the virtuosic would become more and more common during the blues’ late-1960s shift towards psychedelia.

Though “For Your Love” was a massively successful single, Clapton found himself unemployed and aimless. His reputation as a solid guitarist and devotee of “real blues” quickly led him to a position in John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers, as the highest profile performer the band would see besides Mayall himself. Clapton’s tenure in the Bluesbreakers was a time of both growth and frustration. The ceaseless touring schedule was an excellent way to hone his skills, and garner an

even more impressive reputation. “Clapton is God” graffiti sprung up around London throughout this time, causing Clapton to wonder if he might be better off as a bandleader in his own right as well as causing a fair amount of embarrassment (Clapton 64-65). The upcoming release of 1966’s *Blues Breakers: John Mayall with Eric Clapton* only reinforced these thoughts. Given equal billing with the bandleader, it is unsurprising that Clapton’s thoughts turned rather quickly to founding his own group. This timing is interesting, as Clapton’s thoughts of leaving the Bluesbreakers as commercial success looms parallel the timing of his decision to leave the Yardbirds just as “For Your Love” was hitting stride. Whether he was actively avoiding commercial success or simply chasing artistic whimsy is uncertain, but his next endeavor would see commercial fame as inevitable.

### **Cream**

By 1966, Clapton was tiring of his stint with the Bluesbreakers. He felt he had accomplished as much as he was able in the band’s context, and was aching to try something different. When drummer Peter “Ginger” Baker prodded him for opinions on creating a new group, Eric leapt at the opportunity. Clapton insisted on the inclusion of bassist Jack Bruce; he had seen the duo play together in Graham Bond’s band, and saw no other rhythm section capable of carrying the power trio. Baker was reluctant – both he and Bruce are known to have fiery tempers that have clashed on several occasions – but saw no other way to convince Clapton to collaborate. Their goal was, essentially, to just play and see what happened. They saw themselves as the cream of the crop of British blues players – hence their

name, Cream. Still, the group's varied interests and prolific talent left them unsure of where to actually begin. Clapton recalls: "Musically, we didn't really have a plan. In my mind, when I had fantasized about it, I had seen myself as Buddy Guy, heading a blues trio with a very good rhythm section. I didn't know how Ginger and Jack saw it in their heads, except I'm sure that our style would have leaned more toward jazz. Since [manager Robert] Stigwood probably had no idea what we were doing, either, it is clear that the whole project was a colossal gamble" (Clapton 77). Given this directionless start and enough time, Cream truly could have evolved into any sort of musical entity. The group had planned to keep the new band under wraps until they were rehearsed and ready to make the announcement. However, Baker slipped during an interview with *Melody Maker* and announced the band's formation, leaving Cream to face a curious music press and Clapton to face a furious John Mayall, to whose band he still technically belonged. Beneath the leering eyes of the music press, the band was forced to scramble together a performance-ready set in a relatively short amount of time, leading them to initially focus heavily on blues standards with which they were already familiar.

By the time Cream made their debut, the British blues had transformed into a wholly different entity. Cream's live performance style was evolving more quickly than they could record studio material, leaving their albums sounding curiously old-fashioned by the time they actually made it to market. Lyrics were becoming more and more abstract; interesting wordplay and vivid images took precedence over relatable lyrics. The come-as-you-are visuals of the earlier British blues boom were replaced with the flashiest and most colorful garb on the market. By the late-1960s,

psychedelia was in full swing. There were still traditionalists plugging away, but the psychedelic and pop markets had swallowed the more commercial end of the British blues scene. While the band's debut, the 1966 *Fresh Cream*, features a blend of blues standards and newly written pop numbers, their sophomore effort, 1967's *Disraeli Gears*, shows the band mostly abandoning the blues for psychedelic rock. When they did perform live blues, songs were significantly longer than the original versions, sometimes five or six times over. "Before Cream, Procul Harum's Gary Booker once marvelled, 'nobody would have sat down and listened ten minutes to a guitar solo. Nobody would even have thought of *playing* one.' Now Clapton was unleashing at least one every set, and the bass and drums were not far behind" (D. Thompson 3). As far as popular markets were concerned, the blues had essentially morphed into a different genre.

### 3. **Everybody Talkin' 'Bout a Spoonful**

“Spoonful,” a 1960 Willie Dixon composition based on Charley Patton’s 1929 “A Spoonful Blues,” is a fine example of both the blues’ versatility and the stylistic changes that took place within the genre throughout the mid-twentieth century. Over a thirty-year span, the song’s core served as the foundation for a ragtime guitar number, an electric Chicago blues song, and one of the most famous examples of late-1960s psychedelic blues. Reducing the concept of Patton’s original tune to a brooding E chug, Dixon morphed “A Spoonful Blues” into one of the most enduring songs in Howlin’ Wolf’s repertoire. Wolf howls Dixon’s interpretation of Patton’s original lyric; whether diamonds, gold, coffee, tea, love, or bullets, everyone is ready to fight over a spoonful of something. Though Dixon’s lyrics are not quite as grim as Patton’s, the foreboding riff upon which he chooses to dwell sets the mood admirably. Four years later, Paul Butterfield recorded a faster arrangement of the song with his Blues Band, which was released on Elektra’s *What’s Shakin’* electric blues compilation in 1966. Blues/rock supergroup Cream followed soon thereafter with a jam-based “Spoonful” based on the skeleton of Butterfield’s arrangement. With Cream’s studio version clocking in at twice the length of Wolf’s and live performances stretching out to nearly twenty minutes, “Spoonful” had become a wholly different entity from Patton’s ragtime guitar number. By building on the song’s simple framework, it can be tailored to different audiences. This grants performers the freedom to reinterpret the old into the new and ensures the song’s core remains accessible to future generations. As a well-known piece on both sides

of the Atlantic, “Spoonful” is an excellent vehicle with which to explore the various changes the blues underwent throughout its overseas travels.

### 1929 — “A Spoonful Blues”

Amongst Patton's 1929 Paramount recordings is "A Spoonful Blues," a comically bleak tune about the lengths a man will traverse to satisfy cocaine<sup>4</sup> addiction (See Appendix A.1). Informing the listener that he is "about to go to jail about a spoonful," Patton gleefully runs through a series of situations stemming from the stimulant. There is no evidence suggesting that Patton himself was a cocaine addict, but it is likely that he ran across a number of them during his travels, as the drug had until recently been legal and available. The history of popular music in the United States is one of appropriation, and Patton was not opposed to plucking stories, melodies, and lyrics from folks he encountered throughout his travels. Music journalist Francis Davis writes: "To a greater extent than any of his contemporaries, Patton drew on personal experience, reshaping verses in common usage to his own ends. But his lyrics were observational rather than autobiographical" (97). Patton was both a storyteller and minstrel. Leisure time in juke joints was rough, and Patton's playfully grim lyrics exaggerate this. Bar room scuffles, domestic violence, murder, day-to-day madness — all about a spoonful:

*Lookie here, baby, would you slap me? Yes I will! Just 'bout a...*

*Baby, you know I'm a fool 'bout my...*

*Would you kill a man? Yes I would, you know I'd kill him just 'bout a...*

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<sup>4</sup> Though Patton's recording was about cocaine, listeners later assumed Howlin' Wolf and Cream's recordings spoke of heroin.

*Most every man that you see is fool about his...*

*You know baby, I need that ol'...*

*Baby, I wanna hit the judge 'bout a...*

*Baby, you gonna quit me? Yeah honey, just 'bout a...*

*It's all I want, baby, this creation is a... (Patton)*

Though he drops the word from the end of most phrases, Patton makes it abundantly clear that this little spoonful is the driving force behind these problems. He shouts through the lyrics with a chuckle, as if to recognize the absurdity of the activities he preaches. There is little variety to the hijinks he describes, beyond the single-minded pursuit of that spoonful. Patton interrupts his singing with spoken interjections, answering his own questions and commenting on his own performance. Though the quality on these aged recordings is understandably poor, his snickers and under-the-breath comments give the listener an inkling of what it might have been like to hear his antics in person.

While some later musicians emulated the cleaner vocal tones of Robert Johnson, Patton's rough voice was an undeniable influence on his musical descendants, such as Howlin' Wolf. As evidenced by his shouts throughout this track, Patton's hoarse holler is used to bellowing over noisy juke crowds. Though volume is not an issue, Patton is often unintelligible. His frequently elided syllables combined with his constant comments make it difficult to comprehend his lyrics. The poor quality of the aged recording bears some responsibility for this, but Patton's diction is poor throughout his better-preserved recordings as well. There is no indication whether this is incidental or stylistic, but it is likely that many words would



have been lost in the juke environment anyways. The recording process was assumedly not an artistic endeavor for most 1920s bluesmen so much as a meal ticket, so it is unlikely that Patton would have layered extraordinary amounts of finesse over his typical holler. Even though the listener cannot understand all of his words, this recording relays Patton's enthusiasm and showmanship admirably.

"A Spoonful Blues" follows a VI-II7-V-I progression in E major. Patton displays his mastery of the common Delta blues technique of playing a bass line on the lower strings while playing melodies and fills on the upper. His bottleneck slide glides between chords with somewhat irregular rhythm and constant passing notes, coinciding with the chaotic nature of the subject matter. The song features a cheerful ragtime feel that is indicative of Patton's tendency to keep a diverse repertoire. Really, though, it can be easy to overthink Patton's intentions for this tune. Most likely, his intentions consisted primarily of getting folks onto the dance floor. The Delta blues were not taken "seriously" until some time later; at the time, this recording would have been more suited to a jukebox than academic dissection. As a jukebox tune, it certainly has the groove to keep listeners dancing. Though not necessarily the sound that jumps to mind when one thinks of the Delta blues, this sort of number displays the variety of songs one might have heard in a juke joint.

### **1960 — "Spoonful"**

Willie Dixon's rearrangement of "A Spoonful Blues" was the first of many blues classics Howlin' Wolf recorded in June of 1960 (Segrest and Hoffman 168-169) (See Appendix A.2). Beyond the title, however, Dixon's rendition shares few

traits with Patton's ragtime song. Stripping the title down to a simple "Spoonful," Dixon displays his understanding of the "less is more" pop sensibility. The transition from one musician to a full band is striking, as the burden of filling sonic space does not fall upon any one individual. No one member of the backing band stands out in the mix; each musician tastefully blends into the ensemble. A relentless E7 chord with a major third replaces the ragtime guitar, with a minor third creeping in during the chorus. The main riff is simplistic, but the sheer number of fills and frills in the instrumentation flesh out the arrangement. Rather than showboat, each musician works toward forming a cohesive whole. Dixon himself plays the bass line, while Fred Below keeps a steady shuffle on the drums. Freddie Robinson and Hubert Sumlin, Wolf's oft right-hand man, supply guitars while Otis Spann completes the ensemble with driving piano (Segrest and Hoffman 368-370).

To be fair, this is Wolf's band, and one can assume he insisted on being the center of attention. Nevertheless, the other performers manage to squeeze a fair amount of expression into the short gaps between verses. Even in the opening measures of the song, Sumlin makes bold statements about the grim turns the song might take: "He holds the bend just below B natural and lets the note sustain for around five beats. A classic opening gambit: it says you're serious. By 'worrying' the tri-tone...you are immediately stating dark intent" (Blake). By stressing the tritone before Wolf even enters, Sumlin hints that the song might not be as upbeat as the opening lyrics suggest. Though this sort of nuance might seem minor, it contributes greatly to the overall mood of the piece. The general contour of the melody reinforces this initial mood. While the melody of "A Spoonful Blues" features a step

upwards in the third phrase to lighten the mood, Dixon's melody descends relentlessly. Wolf moves up a minor third for the refrain, but his vocal melody otherwise continually sinks. Even though Patton used far darker lyrics, Dixon's melody is far less lighthearted than Patton's.

One cannot discuss a Howlin' Wolf recording without emphasizing the remarkable power of his voice. Wolf's howl is unmistakable; while he is often imitated, no one quite matches his tenacious growl. Given the amount of time he spent hollering over boisterous juke joints in his younger days, the strength of his voice is unsurprising. Not known for his melodies so much as his tone, Wolf was a vocal force to be reckoned with. "He was less a singer in the conventional sense than an indomitable force of nature. He didn't so much sing as cackle with malevolent glee, and as gargantuan as he was, ...on listening to him on record you think of him as somehow even bigger — Godzilla about to stomp Tokyo, because it was in his nature and because it would be fun" (Davis 193). Wolf's voice is every bit as intimidating as his physical presence, yet it remains appealing. His tone is rough, but not grating. He has the instincts to know when to take his vocals down a notch and when to roar. "Spoonful" displays a more reserved Wolf than one might expect. Despite its dark lyrical turns, "Spoonful" is a much more tender song than other numbers intended to get dancers on their feet.

Dixon opts to utilize less harsh lyrics than Patton. Potential allusions to drugs remain present, but the true focus falls on the notion that everyone is willing to fight for a spoonful of something. Dixon explains: "The idea of 'Spoonful' was that it doesn't take a large quantity of anything to be good. If you have a little money when

you need it, you're right there in the right spot, that'll buy you a whole lot... But after you write these songs, people who have bad minds, their minds will tell them what they want to believe... People who think 'Spoonful' was about heroin are mostly people with heroin ideas" (148). Instead of emphasizing the verbs, Dixon fixates on the nouns — most prominently, love. This change symbolizes a change of audience; Wolf's Chicago audiences were presumably more refined than Patton's, and adjusting the emphasis away from drug references better suited this set of listeners. Moreover, love songs are typically amongst the most commercially viable. Dixon knows how to write a successful pop song, and choosing relatable subject matter is one of the most important phases of the process. Of the various spoonfuls Wolf lists, love is the only thing that truly satisfies:

*It could be a spoonful of diamonds*

*Could be a spoonful of gold*

*Just a little spoon of your precious love*

*Satisfy my soul*

*Men lied about a little...*

*Some of them cried about a little...*

*Some of them died about a little spoon...*

*Everything fightin' about a spoonful*

*That spoon, that spoon, that...*

*It could be a spoonful of coffee*

*Could be a spoonful of tea*

*But a little spoon of your precious love*

*Good enough for me (Wolf, His Best)*

Like Patton, Wolf drops the word "spoonful" from the end of many sentences. His voice bleeds naturally into the ensemble, allowing Robinson to finish his sentences with guitar embellishments and creating a call and response pattern between voice and instrument. Dixon still remarks about actions resulting from that spoonful, but pays closer attention to the spoonful's contents. As mentioned above, this rendition puts the heaviest weight on love. Whether diamonds, gold, coffee, or tea, love trumps them all. From the outset, Dixon's lyrics are far less brutal than Patton's. The song remains optimistic about things worth fighting for, and the general fighting is less severe than in Patton's version. His final verse, however, takes a decidedly nasty turn:

*It could be a spoonful of water*

*Saved me from the desert sand*

*But one spoon of them forty-five*

*Saved you from another man (Wolf, His Best)*

Love still trumps all, but it can also turn one to a spoonful of bullets to maintain it. Traces of the original versions' message remain: good things can drive people to commit bad actions. This twist is shocking, because the prior verses are relatively sentimental. With a few lyrical changes, the tune could have been a haunting love song, but Dixon chose to instead remain realistic. In a rough world, one has to accept the bad with the good.

### 1969 — Willie Dixon's "Spoonful"

Dixon himself recorded a version of "Spoonful" for his 1969 *I am the Blues*, which might be closer to his original vision of the song (See Appendix A.3). Dixon steps in as singer and reprises his role as bassist, hustling the song along at a speedier pace with the aid of Clifton James' drumming. For this version, Dixon shifts the song up to G minor, and the main riff is traded between the band members. Dixon is better known as an arranger than as a front man, so it is hardly surprising that his arrangement emphasizes instrumental solos over the vocal melody. Guitarist Johnny Shines actually "sings" a verse on his guitar, which contrasts drastically with Sumlin's fifteen seconds. This leads into Sunnyland Slim's rolling piano solo, which lasts nearly a minute. Ultimately, these relaxed solos lend a less weighty mood to the song; rather than Wolf's howling about love and violence, the listener is treated to instrumental explorations of the melody. Dixon is clearly in no rush to speed through the song, as the piece lasts nearly twice as long as Dixon's arrangement for Wolf. This could very well be an example of a musician changing his style with the times, since, by the late 1960s, many blues fans were interested in instrumental virtuosity over lyrics. Dixon likely surrounded himself with seasoned, easily coordinated studio players for the *I am the Blues* sessions. This allowed for a more polished product than was possible when working with a less technically proficient performer, such as Wolf.

The previously referenced set of lyrics is typically utilized in cover recordings, but might not necessarily represent what Dixon had originally written. Ron Malo, a recording engineer for Chess Records, recalls: "...Willie would have to yell in [Wolf's]

ear the next lyric line on a new song. Wolf didn't know how to count so he didn't know when to come in. Wolf was a natural singer and performer but he learned things one way and that was it. He had to learn and memorize it and if we changed the introduction from what Wolf learned, he'd be completely lost and Willie would have to cue him in" (Segrest and Hoffman 174). As such, it is likely that the lyrics Wolf got on tape are not exactly what Dixon had in mind. Dixon progresses from the "coffee" verse to the "water" verse, and closes with a variation on the "coffee" verse. This change sacrifices some of the song's textual build. In Wolf's recording, the first two verses are rather sweet, and the third then exposes the dark side to that sweetness. Though it is not certain whether this was the original verse order Dixon had intended for Wolf, Dixon's recording is certainly less lyrically poignant than Wolf's.

#### **1964 — Paul Butterfield's "Spoonful"**

In 1964, The Paul Butterfield Blues Band recorded an up-tempo blues-rock version of "Spoonful" for their debut album (See Appendix A.4). This material was not released as intended, and the track did not surface until appearing on Elektra's 1966 *What's Shakin'* compilation. The song never made the cut for a proper Butterfield album, but its placement alongside music featuring an up-and-coming Eric Clapton shows Elektra's belief that it had potential for popular appeal. Though this recording is not well known in and of itself, it bears mentioning as the skeleton upon which Cream built their sprawling renditions of the song. Butterfield's band is generally regarded as a traditionalist Chicago blues outfit, but this track displays the

popular blues' mid-1960s drift towards blues-rock sounds. It is curious that Butterfield opted to not play harmonica on this track, as he is regarded one of the better-known blues-rock harp players of the 1960s. This is likely due in part to the fact that the band had not quite found "their sound" at the time of the track's recording. As such, their recording of "Spoonful" is not especially indicative of the style for which the band was eventually known.

The song is ostensibly recognizable as Wolf's "Spoonful", but the changes in instrumentation and tone lend it a rock and roll mood. Butterfield's band transforms "Spoonful" into an uptempo shuffle in A minor driven by a piercing bass riff. This riff, based on the "that spoon, that spoon, that spoonful" refrain, runs continuously throughout the song. This removes the major third that Sumlin sprinkled throughout his solos, and ensures that the listener can recall the riff long after the song has finished playing. The song's structure is otherwise stripped down, with little variation between verses. Butterfield's vocals border on rock and roll wails, but he generally sticks to the lyrical progression used by Wolf. He too drops the word "spoonful" from the ends of most phrases, allowing Mike Bloomfield to insinuate its presence with a guitar lick. Furthermore, Bloomfield's guitar riffs respond to Butterfield's vocals, recalling the call and response pattern of Wolf's recording. As soon as the first refrain hits, the lyrics are startlingly different:

*I'm just wild about that...*

*I'm just crazy about that...*

*I'm just wild about that...*

*Everybody talkin' about...* (Butterfield)



These new lyrics further signify the blues' change in audience during the mid-1960s. Though psychedelic influences had not yet seeped into the blues scene, rock and roll exclamations clearly have. Dixon's original lyrics concerning lying and death return for the second chorus, so this change was clearly not an issue of censorship. More likely, Butterfield was appealing to younger audiences with the sorts of lyrics one might find in a typical 1960s pop song.

### **Cream — From the Studio to the Stage**

"Spoonful" was amongst the earliest blues covers in Cream's repertoire. The tune was a familiar one to the three blues devotees, and it quickly became a staple of the band's performances as they hastily struggled to piece together a live set list. As the band began performing before rehearsing enough material to fill a typical set, they developed their drawn-out, jam-based style in part to fill time. British bluesmen, especially those with jazz backgrounds, were already extending improvisatory breakdowns, and the necessity to fill stage time led Cream to do so even more. Furthermore, the band was hoping to break away from the traditionalist blues scene while still honoring their blues roots. Bruce comments: "At that time, bands like Mayall... were trying to recreate the sounds of Chicago blues. Doing that was completely valid, but it was something I didn't want to do. Those original blues records had been done so well, which meant you could only ever be second best. But, if you treated those songs with a great deal of love and respect, you could remake them into your own" (D. Thompson 147-148). This notion was common amongst British blues enthusiasts by the late 1960s. Many of the musicians — the

members of Cream included — who had performed under the tutelage of Mayall, Korner, Davies and Barber chose to update their traditionalist sounds in hopes of generating something new.

In the short six years since Howlin' Wolf's "Spoonful," changes in music technology had become increasingly noticeable. Guitarists began to stretch guitar textures further and further as the decade progressed, incorporating techniques such as distortion into their repertoires. The presence of more accessible studio overdubbing made a remarkable difference, as bands were able to layer more instruments into the recording than they could physically play live (such as Bruce's harmonica here). While this technology existed when Wolf was recording his rendition of the song, it is unlikely that the record labels would have been willing to spend the extra money and time on recording the song over and over. One must wonder how these earlier recordings might have panned out if Wolf had a fully-recorded backing track to practice with instead of having to record his vocals live with the band. Post-Beatlemania, many established rock groups became increasingly indulgent with their studio time, allowing for experimentation.

It is fortunate that Cream recorded "Spoonful" both in the studio and live, if only for the drastic differences between the two performances. The primary similarities between the tracks are the main riff and lyrics. Lyrically, Cream's recordings of "Spoonful" utilize the lyric set from Wolf's recording with minor dialect changes. Though it might seem trivial, Jack Bruce often completes his sentences with the word "spoonful," generally mirrored by Clapton's guitar. This was likely just an artistic decision, though the change also has some commercial merit in the hook-

laden world of popular music. Like Dixon, Cream's focus is on the instrumentation more than the lyrics; the live *Wheels of Fire* recording, which clocks in just under seventeen minutes, seems to include the lyrics as a formality. As it is rare to see a wholly instrumental number in the pop scene, to which Cream now belonged whether they wanted or not, this formality was likely a necessity.

### **1966 — *Fresh Cream***

Cream's *Fresh Cream* recording of "Spoonful" stands as a fine example of musicians building upon earlier works (See Appendix A.5). Combining the laid-back chug of Wolf's recording with some of the rock sensibility of Butterfield's, the band creates something that remarkably fits both molds. Cream's small size naturally restricts the arrangement; even with studio overdubs, most of their early material could be performed for a live audience. Bruce's harmonica and bass reprise the refrain-based riff from Butterfield's recording, with embellishments from Clapton's guitar. Bruce does not try to imitate Wolf's howls; he relies, as usual, on his clean, former-choirboy tone to carry through the song. In contrast to the over the top performances for which he is known, Baker remains noticeably reserved with his drums throughout the first half of the song. Given Cream's desire to break away from strictly traditional blues, the general reserve displayed throughout this recording is surprising. This recording is markedly more traditional than Butterfield's, but still updates the song for newer audiences.

Over twice the length of Howling Wolf's recording, Cream's version escalates from a fairly standard cover to a short jam on the song's main riff. This section,

running from approximately 2:16 to 3:51, allows the band to showcase their improvisational jazz influences. Post-solos, the familiar riff returns and Bruce's vocals take on a frenzied tone. The riff slowly fades until the last twenty seconds of the recording, where the whole band again goes all-out for a gigantic finish. Beyond their jazz roots, this section displays developments in popular music trends. Clapton's popular success was certainly not negligible by this time, and some amount of rock and roll showboating was necessary to please audiences. These sections fit together nicely and the song displays a natural build and decline. While portions of the piece are reinvented, a listener familiar with Howlin' Wolf's original will readily recognize the piece as an homage. Without straying too far from its source material, this song cleanly represents the "something new from something old" mentality of the tail end of the British blues boom.

The meat of Cream's innovation comes into play during the solo section of the song. At 2:16, Clapton veers into a guitar solo lasting nearly two minutes. He favors his single-string style of soloing, similar to his fills during the verses. Bruce concurrently solos on his bass while Baker seals the gaps with drum fills. As the song progresses, the instrumental fills become more complex and stray further from the original groove of the song. Bruce's harmonica, holding a tonal center, is soon the primary tether to the starting point. The bass returns to the familiar riff around 3:46 and the rest of the band snaps into place, resuming the "Spoonful" with which we are familiar. After one more verse, the song winds down in a typical rock and roll fashion. Though the two minutes of improvisation are significantly more extravagant than Sumlin's short solo, they are not indicative of the lengths to which Cream would

push this envelope during their live shows; this virtuosity was not commercially documented until their 1968 *Wheels of Fire*.

### **1968 — *Wheels of Fire***

As Cream is a three-piece outfit, the lack of studio overdubs lends their live *Wheels of Fire* recording of “Spoonful” a drastically different feel from their studio endeavor (See Appendix A.6). Notably missing is Bruce’s harmonica, which shifts the duty of carrying the riff to Clapton’s guitar. Even so, the riff drops in and out of the song as it progresses. By this point in the band’s career, Cream was primarily known for their improvisatory jam sessions, lessening the need for catchy hooks. Besides the reduction to a guitar, bass, drums, and vocals line-up, the opening section is very similar to their studio recording. Once the solo section begins around 2:40, however, the similarity ends. The absence of harmonica is especially noticeable during this section; Bruce and Clapton seemingly take turns stressing the E to keep the solos rooted. Bruce begins to stray around 4:10, as both guitarists flashily tease their way around the key. By 6:50, both guitars are wailing away, and Baker’s drumming becomes increasingly frenetic. The build to the main riff’s homecoming that begins around 8:04 shows the band rediscovering their focal point. Over the next five minutes, the band slowly gambols towards the familiar riff. Their playing becomes much more subdued, and the listener can sense that there is a common goal shared between the musicians. The return of the main riff at 13:31 brings the listener home after a long journey through the unknown. The audience applauds, and the listener is reminded of the melody with which they began. This is

an interesting moment, as it truly exemplifies how far a song can be stretched without becoming something else entirely. From here, the track winds down much as in the studio recording, leaving the audience to their wild applause.

This recording is more indicative of Cream's live performance style than the *Fresh Cream* studio track. Though Cream's live performances were no doubt fascinating to behold, some of the flair is lost in translation to audio recording. One cannot help but visualize the musicians feeding off of the energy of his compatriots. Regardless, the lengthy virtuosity found in this recording clearly shows that the blues emerged from its trip to England a drastically changed genre. The days of mimicry were done, replaced by days of experimentation. This experimentation was possible due to the song's very loose structure; so long as the hook remained present, the song was recognizable as Dixon's. This idea was a constant across many British blues cover recordings of the late-1960s. For example, Cream's *Wheels of Fire* recording of "Crossroads" latches onto a single Robert Johnson hook and builds an entire rock song around it. Though the end result does not particularly sound like Robert Johnson, the song is clearly an homage to him. As the 1970s rolled around, bands such as Led Zeppelin took this formula a step further, churning out drastically revised renditions of blues classics, just as Willie Dixon had done in the 1950s and 1960s.

#### **1969 — *The Howlin' Wolf Album***

Primarily worth mentioning as a curiosity, 1969's *The Howlin' Wolf Album* featured a psychedelic recording of "Spoonful" (See Appendix A.7). The cover of the

album displays plain black text on a white background, reading “This is Howlin’ Wolf’s new album. He doesn’t like it. He didn’t like his electric guitar at first either” (Wolf, *The Howlin’ Wolf Album*). Based on Wolf’s reaction, one can guess how the recording turned out. At best, Wolf sounds hesitant. Though Wolf’s voice has not lost any of its raw fire, there is very little inflection or emotion to be found. As the recording was essentially a product without any real emotional investment, listening to it is essentially an exercise in hearing a performer go through the motions for a paycheck. The instrumentation works well enough for what it is, though the harsher instrument tones cause the song’s repetitious nature to stand out. Instead of the now-familiar riff, a fuzzy guitar hammers an E, scrambling down an octave at the end of each phrase. This new riff plays throughout, while distorted guitars with wah-wah effects wail in the background. Utilizing psychedelic guitar tones just for the sake of it instead of for making any sort of musical statement, the track stumbles through four minutes of repetition. Though Wolf’s indifferent yowls are not enough to hold the track together, it is interesting to see things circle around and hear the teacher become the unwilling student. Regardless, this recording shows record labels acknowledging the popularity of the psychedelic blues; it also displays the resurgence of interest in the previous generation of bluesmen towards the end of the decade.

### **Legacy**

Despite, or perhaps because of, its simplicity, “Spoonful” has remained an ubiquitous standard throughout the blues’ many travels. It has found a home in the

repertoires of countless performers, each of whom can tailor the piece to suit their given styles thanks to the song's barebones structure. Even today, the song is featured in the repertoires of modern rock and roll artists, from the indie rock Stone Foxes to lo-fi blues-punk artist Scott H. Biram. Though every iteration is not necessarily a successful experiment, the very fact that such innovation is possible is testament to the song's versatility.



## Conclusion

As one of few uniquely American musical styles, the blues shaped popular music worldwide through its contributions to most popular styles that followed its wake. This essay treads one of many paths the blues strode during the early half of the twentieth century, but one could easily trace several trajectories from rural areas to urban centers, overseas and back. Though the migration of the blues from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago was an organic and expected progression, the blues' travels to England were far more curious. Timing played a major role in this development; American records trickled into the county just as postwar youths were struggling for creative outlets. This happy coincidence led countless individuals from markedly different social and economic backgrounds to pursue an art form initially honed by poor, rural farmers. These youths opted to play the blues with vague hopes of escaping a lifetime of factory work, much as their musical ancestors had sought to avoid farm work. More realistically, they harbored hopes of impressing their girlfriends and annoying their parents. Though drastically different cultures, each nourished the blues in different ways.

These changes in locale gradually shifted the way in which the average bluesman functioned. Rough lives as migrant farmers prepared early bluesmen to approach their music as work. The musicians of the Delta, and hence the musicians of Chicago, developed facets of the blues as survival tactics. To compete against rival musicians, these performers had to be larger than life and able to hold the attention of rowdy, potentially dangerous crowds. Later musicians embraced the louder sounds and physical shenanigans popularized during this time, especially as

rock and roll music stepped into the limelight. Bluesmen carried these performance ideals into Chicago, and through this spirit of rivalry, the performance standards and general musicianship of these performers increased. With a prolific songwriter such as Willie Dixon providing competing bandleaders with material, it is unsurprising that this period saw such a boom of creative growth. The earliest British bluesmen, however, did not face this struggle. Though bands would compete for attention, most early British performers were not trying to make a living with their music and were often performing for one another. They were able to develop the blues as a hobby or as art, since most of the performers' paychecks did not rely on its marketability. As such, there was no real impetus to follow popular trends. This enabled the initial traditionalists to adhere to their preconceived notions of what the blues encompassed, and allowed later performers to build upon this framework once the influence of rock and roll enveloped the British blues scene.

The blues are an incredibly young musical style, yet the genre has seen countless evolutions and permutations over the past century. This fluidity has allowed the blues to endure shifting tastes and trends as well as the inclusion of increasingly complex music technology. The common blues practice of appropriating the material of one's predecessors has kept the music accessible to new audiences. "A Spoonful Blues" likely would not have found much popular success amongst 1960s British audiences, but the song's core led to one of the most memorable tunes of the British blues boom. By updating old ideas, blues standards constantly evolve and develop. In this particular case, we witnessed Dixon streamline a chaotic juke joint ragtime dance number into a straightforward riff-based blues-rock song. In

turn, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and Cream developed “Spoonful” into one of the best examples of 1960s psychedelic extravagance. The blues’ inherent simplicity allows for this limitless variation and creative expansion. Though this convention of appropriation has likely stalled in the days of countless music copyright lawsuits, it is undoubtedly one of the building blocks of modern Western popular music. From rock and roll to hip-hop, creative debts are owed to the minstrels that wandered from juke to juke.

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## APPENDIX A

The attached compact disc, Appendix A, contains the following recordings, in track order.

Patton, Charley. "A Spoonful Blues." *Complete Remastered Sessions*. Master Classics Records, 2009. MP3.

Wolf, Howlin'. "Spoonful." *His Best: Chess 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection*. Chess, 1997. CD.

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Wolf, Howlin'. "Spoonful." *The Howlin' Wolf Album*. Cadet Concept, 1969. LP.