

The passing of a blues legend: John Lee Hooker

By Philip Sprake
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John Lee Hooker, the gifted, charismatic blues guitar player and singer, died in his sleep at his home in Los Altos, California, aged 80, on June 21.

Survived by eight children and 19 grandchildren, Hooker was born August 22, 1922 in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the fourth in a family of 11 children. Hooker's father was a sharecrop farmer and Baptist minister who strongly discouraged his son's early interest in the blues. Like so many other singers of his generation and background, his first musical experiences were of singing gospel music in church. His introduction to the blues guitar came via his musician stepfather, Will Moore.

At the age of 14 he ran away from his home to Memphis, Tennessee where he met and played with Robert Lockwood, a close relation to the legendary blues guitarist Robert Johnson. Hooker and Lockwood played together in and around the Memphis area for a couple of years before the young musician moved to Cincinnati where he spent 10 years as a blues/gospel singer playing in local groups.

In 1943 he moved to Detroit, hoping to supplement his music income with a job in the auto industry. After various jobs he eventually found work as a janitor in one of the city's auto plants. Detroit became his home for many years and he became a regular act at blues clubs and bars in the city's Hastings Street area. In 1948 he made his first recording, *Boogie Chillin'*, which rose to number one on the US rhythm and blues charts and became a big commercial success for Modern Records, his recording company. Most of Hooker's early recordings were performed solo or with a second guitarist—only one or two of his early albums were with backup bands. This was not typical of his live performances, which generally featured piano, drums and guitar backing.

Hooker recorded prolifically and successfully for Modern Records during the late 1940s and early 1950s, producing some of his classic songs such as *In The Mood* and *Crawling King Snake*. But he became increasingly unhappy with low royalty payments from Modern Records and started to record under other names such as Delta John, Texas Slim, Little Pork Chops, John L. Booker, John Lee Cooker and various others to avoid contractual obligations and raise extra revenue.

By the late 1950s the market for Hooker's music had begun to wane, encouraging him to look for new audiences. He began performing at folk clubs and festivals, including the Newport Folk Festival, where audiences of mainly young white listeners began to appreciate what black audiences had long recognised. In the 1960s his reputation grew among younger up-and-coming rock musicians. Many British groups, such as The Rolling Stones, The Animals and The Yardbirds, regularly cited him as a major influence. In fact, Hooker's work was more widely recognised outside the US at this time and he toured Britain and the continent every year during the 1960s.

But popular interest in blues music continued to decline throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, affecting Hooker's career. This hiatus ended in 1989 with *The Healer* album. Described by many as a "revival" for John Lee Hooker, *The Healer* was not so much a revival as an extension of the base he had built up in the preceding decades. The album gathered together musicians and close friends such as Carlos Santana, Bonnie Raitt and Robert Cray and became a catalyst for renewed interest in the veteran artist's work. It sold more copies than any previous Hooker album and won him a Grammy Award for the best blues album.

Similar recordings followed, including *Mr Lucky*, which had Ry Cooder, Van Morrison and Albert Collins as guest musicians and became the first blues album to reach the top three in the British charts. The best album from this period is *Boom, Boom* (1992), featuring the classic title track along with nine other Hooker originals, including solo tracks *I'm Bad Like Jessie James* and *Sugar Mama*.

Much of the blues of Hooker's birthplace was played on acoustic steel-stringed guitars, often open-tuned to produce a single chord when strummed. Combined with raw and emotional vocals capturing the harsh life facing blacks in the Mississippi Delta, it became known as the Mississippi Delta Blues. This was John Lee Hooker's style and none played it better. But Hooker gave this earthy sound an almost free-form musical structure and combined it with non-rhyming blank verse to create a new urban sound, later known as the Detroit blues.

Many of Hooker's early recording sessions were played solo because few other musicians could follow him. As San Francisco-based blues musician and producer Roy Rogers explained: "It may sound easy to play, but it's not. He takes the music as far as he can and he leads with his voice, and much of it is improvised on the spot. Blues is really a music about how you feel and John embodies that."

Hooker's sound is unmistakable. His sparse guitar work, accompanied only by his constantly tapping foot and deep, almost growling, voice encapsulate the sound of contemporary blues with its deeply emotional mixture of good times and deep sadness. As Hooker once explained: "Sometimes on stage, when I'm singing them, it gets so sad and deep and beautiful, I have to wear dark glasses to keep the people from seeing me crying. I'm not kidding. The tears just start running. With the words that I'm saying and the way that I sing them, sometimes I give my own self the blues."

Hooker's standing among fellow musicians and artists is of the highest order. As blues guitarist and singer Bonnie Raitt commented last week: "John Lee's power and influence in the world of rock, pop, R & B, jazz and blues are a legacy that will never die. Getting to know and work with him these last 30 years has truly been one of the greatest joys of my life."

While this giant of post-war blues threatened to retire

on a number of occasions in the last few years of his life, he did not give up performing. In fact, on the weekend before his death he had played two concerts in northern California, receiving standing ovations.

John Lee Hooker, who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991 and given a Lifetime Achievement Award at last year's Grammy presentations, leaves behind a recorded legacy of over 100 albums and countless others under various pseudonyms. The musical world is certainly the lesser for his passing.

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