

Marooned: My Desert Island BLUES LIST



Illustration by Matt O'Brien

By Reverend Billy C. Wirtz

Jan. 15, 2027 – Onboard the 50th annual Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise, there's general panic. Not because Jimmy Thackery has misplaced his teeth, but due to a navigational error – the Hoogiffsadam, flagship of the Cruise Lines, is headed straight for a desert island in the Caribbean.

Knowing that I might never leave this place, I'm faced with having to select 10 blues albums to help me survive the ordeal. Fortunately, a solar-powered record player was discovered under a palm tree. Although I could easily pick 50, the lifeboat captains and editors limit the castaways to just 10.

This is trickier than you might think. Up until the late '60s, blues was not an album-driven market. Before that, it was almost all 45 and 78 R.P.M. singles. Many great songs and artists suffered from lack of decent reissues and collections.

The ones listed here aren't supposed to be the best blues albums of all time, just ones that I've worn out the grooves on over the last 40 years of listening.

1 – *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Elektra 7294 (stereo) Elektra 294 (mono)*

This is the album that changed everything – I mean everything – for a generation of blues musicians and fans. Prior to this album, most white folks considered “blues” to be the domain of septuagenarian black artists from Mississippi singing about going to the penitentiary.

With the first few bars of “Born in Chicago,” the blues revival of the '60s was ushered in. We sat there stunned, listening to Mike Bloomfield's stinging guitar solo on “Shake Your Moneymaker,” Sam Lay's atomic backbeat on “Mojo,” and knew we had just crossed over into another dimension. From here, we blues addicts began searching for something stronger, with an even better kick. One of the first collections I ever bought was:

2 – *The Blues Volume 2, Chess CH 9267*

It opens with a hillbilly beat by Chuck Berry. Then it goes from John Lee Hooker to the sophisticated stylings of Jimmy Witherspoon. This 30-minute sampler released in the '60s was simply a dip into Chess Records' enormous vault. It was one of the first records it released when its executives suddenly became aware that whites were buying the blues. Also in this reissue series is my favorite one by Muddy Waters:

3 – *Muddy Waters, The Real Folk Blues, Chess*

At last count, there are nearly 200 Muddy Waters albums available. There are none finer than this one, guaranteed.

Muddy put together the best band in post-war Chicago – Otis Spann on piano, Jimmy Rodgers on guitar and Little Walter on the harmonica – and made records that just have to be heard to be believed. They are carefully orchestrated, arranged and performed by Muddy in the prime of his creative period, not a weak one here. Repeated listening

brings new discoveries. This is pure, raw genius. And it even has a couple cuts that predate the band period, with my mentor Sunnyland Slim on piano.

4 – Big Maceo, *The King of Chicago Blues Piano*, RCA Bluebird

Speaking of great piano players, this one, on RCA Bluebird, was a favorite of Sunnyland Slim, David Maxwell and yours truly.

Maceo was a 6-foot, 6-inch tall southpaw from Detroit. He played with a thunderous left hand that literally shook the room. This double album features his greatest sides, along with many of his classic duets with guitar wizard Tampa Red. It is lyrically very sophisticated and a good representative of the guitar-piano duets that were so popular in the '30s and '40s. Don't miss "Chicago Breakdown."

5 – B.B. King, *Live at the Regal*, ABC

This is the best "live" blues album ever recorded. This is B.B. King like you've probably not heard him. It was recorded at Chicago's Regal Theatre when his career was in a downturn, and just months away from his rediscovery by the rockers in the mid-'60s. The band is loose, the arrangements swing like Count Basie, and B.B. preaches a special kind of sermon to the faithful. Essential.

6 – Guitar Slim, *Sufferin' Mind*, Specialty

Not long ago, I saw Buddy Guy on Tavis Smiley. As Smiley began singing his praises, Buddy dismissed him rather abruptly and said:

"Everything I do, came from a guy named Guitar Slim." He paused, and then for effect, added: "Everything."

Eddie "Guitar Slim" Jones was the deal – a Cadillac drivin', stylin' and profilin' guitar slinger who drove audiences insane back in the early '50s. He wore red suits, dyed his hair red and wailed away on his red Strat while hanging upside down from the rafters of Masonic Halls in South Louisiana. He was the original wild man of the highways. Read about him in Guy's book *When I Left Home*. This album corrals some of that manic energy and amazing guitar sound.

The tone is an over-amped buzzsaw going through watermelon, with chunks flying everywhere. If you're a fan of Buddy Guy, or blues guitar in general, do not let this one get away.

7 – Bobby "Blue" Bland, *Two Steps from the Blues*, Duke DLP 74

Exquisite, classy and understated, this album is the total opposite of Guitar Slim, and yet every bit as powerful, featuring horns, strings and Bland's liquid honey voice. The selections are phenomenal, but the sequencing also hits the target. It has the coolest cover ever of any genre by far, complete with alligator shoes, shades and an off-the-chain badass conk (hairstyle). Under the watchful eye of Don Robey, Bland was the Suge Knight of the blues.

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The album cover for Mr. Sipp, 'The Mississippi Blues Child', features a man in a tan suit sitting on a red electric guitar. A smaller inset image shows him playing a guitar. The text includes the title, release date, social media links, and the Malaco Music Group logo.

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The album cover for Latimore's 'Straighten It Out' features a close-up of his face singing into a microphone. A large treble clef and musical notes are overlaid on the left side. The text includes the artist's name, website, album title, and booking information.

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2014 Blues Blast Nominee, Soul Blues Album #10 on RMR Top 50 Blues Album Chart #11 on Living Blues Chart

6/16 - St. Robert Fair - Shorewood, WI	7/24 - Buddy Guy's Legends - Chicago, IL
6/18 - Enderle Park Concert - Milwaukee, WI	7/25 - Skyline Drive-In Theater Concert - Shelbyville, IL
6/19 - Untitled - Chicago, IL	8/11 - Victorian Village Resort - Elkhart Lake, WI
6/20 - Private Event	8/16 - 1st & 3rd Concert Series - Rochester, MN
6/26 - Northwoods Blues Festival - Spooner, WI	8/17 - Bayfront Blues Festival - Duluth, MN
6/27 - Private Event	8/17 - St. Crispin Casino - Turtle Lake, WI
6/28 - Summerfest - Milwaukee, WI	8/18 - Alpina Inn - La Crosse, WI
7/3 - Ripon Summer Concert - Ripon, WI	8/11 - Italian Community Center - Milwaukee, WI
7/12 - Smiling Moose - Oshtemo, WI	8/15 - Private Event
7/16 - Sioux Falls Jazz & Blues Fest - Sioux Falls, SD	9/12 - Blues at the Crossroads Festival - Terre Haute, IN
7/17 - Zoo Bar - Lincoln, NE	
7/18 - Uncle Bo's - Topeka, KS	

• More Summer Dates TBA •

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8 – Albert King, *Live Wire/Blues Power*, Stax Records

This album is an all-time fav. What's really interesting is that it's almost entirely instrumental. King was a master guitar player, and this album recorded in 1967 at the Fillmore West testifies to that. His career was in a bit of slide at the time, as black audiences had almost completely forgotten the blues players. All of a sudden, these hippie kids with their free love and good reefer were hanging on every lick from his Gibson Flying "V" guitar. Even if you're not the world's biggest guitar fan, you'll grab ahold of this little gem. Seriously – I get real bored with long meandering solos, but this one never gets that way. King told the story, not needing words.

9 – Etta James, *Rocks the House*, Chess 9184

This album is the best example of how blues sounded in the black nightclubs of the '50s and '60s. Jimi Hendrix grew up in these joints and a teenaged Etta James grew old in them. This is another album recorded when blues was yesterday with blacks and not yet with whites. Etta covers B.B. King, Jimmy Reed, Jessie Hill and even does a secular take on James Cleveland.

The band is the house group at The New Era Club in Nashville. She purrs, growls, scats and even mumbles her way through an incendiary set. The cover shows her clad in a cocktail dress, with Cleopatra eye makeup and an ace bandage on her arm. According to legend, the bandage covered up the needle tracks. No matter, it adds even more grit to this classic document of a night on the Chitlin' Circuit.

10 – Various artists, *The Best of the Chicago Blues*, Vanguard, VSD 1-2

Vanguard was one of the very first folk (white) labels to begin recording blues in the '60s. I've always loved this collection. I'll bet I've heard it over 1,000 times. It features cuts from Jimmy (as he's listed on the album) Cotton, an extremely young Buddy Guy, Junior Wells and Otis Spann, the king of post-war Chicago piano. It's just a nice selection of various styles. It features lots of harmonica, guitar and rolling piano. This double set is a great introduction for friends and family members who've never heard the blues.

A final note: These are all albums I've listened to for years. This list isn't meant to be a list of all-time best, just a few that I never grow tired of. All of these are available on CD, MP3 and vinyl. Go to Amazon.com or any of the online spots for the best deals on CDs. Better still, go to Discogs.com and spring for the original issues on vinyl. Trust me, Muddy Waters sounds great on a CD. However, listen to *The Real Folk Blues* on vinyl and you'll pee yourself. 🎵

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