

# Reverend Billy C. Wirtz's List of Gotta-Hear, Game-Changing Blues Originators



**From the editor: You may know him as a boogie-woogie/blues pianist, comedian, radio personality or writer, but here at the Blues Festival Guide, we praise the Rev. Billy C. Wirtz as a connoisseur of all things blues. Whether you're new to the blues or a well-weathered fan, follow the Rev's teachings and know you are in good hands.**

Blues is the coolest music in the Universe, an existential view of life in song form that surfaced in the South during the early twentieth century. It first became popular in rural communities and then, thanks to the efforts of W.C. Handy and other trained musicians, written and introduced to a mass audience. The first commercial release, "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith, came in August 1920, and soon the market was flooded with all styles of blues. For the next twenty years, it enjoyed immense popularity, giving way to rock 'n' roll in the '50s, resurrected by "The British Invasion" of the '60s, and mainstreamed with the "second blue wave" of the '70s and '80s. Artists like B.B. King and Muddy Waters have become household names, and the music has endured into the digital age.

Blues lays the foundation upon which much of popular music is based. Country, jazz, hip-hop and rock 'n' roll all began with the blues. The worldview of songs like "Crazy, Mixed Up World" by Little Walter ring all too true these days, and a new generation of listeners enjoy the music that offers a graduate course in "keeping it real."

If you're at a typical blues event, you've likely heard a lot of guitar playing, a few harmonica players and several singers. While you're waiting your turn at the porta-potties or for the spouse to finish texting the pet sitter, I present to

you some players, singers and personalities that I love. By no means a master list, here are a few of the originators, game changers and wig-flippers of the blues style.

## GUITAR

If you're a fan of Stevie Ray or Eric Clapton, dig deep on the following six-string heart stoppers:

### **Guitar Slim (Eddie Jones)**

*Style: guitar blues, Louisiana R&B*

Guitar Slim, the wild man from Louisiana, was an enormous influence on Hendrix, Buddy Guy, Jeff Beck and anyone else who ever blew the speakers in an amp. He'd arrive at gigs in a red Caddy, dressed in a red suit, playing a red guitar, hair dyed red, often escorted by two women dressed in... His recordings on Specialty all feature unhinged solos that redline the studio levels and actually distort the recordings. The original "alpha guitar male," enjoy his four-barrel killer tunes played with horns and a young Ray Charles on piano. Pick up his album *Sufferin' Mind*.



### **Johnny "Guitar" Watson**

*Style: experimental, guitar, funk blues*

Etta James called him one of the great geniuses of music. Featuring stunning guitar and an incendiary, slashing style of playing on blues tracks, Johnny "Guitar" Watson evolves into funk and beyond, and is sampled to death by the hip-hop crowd. He also wrote the soundtrack for *American Pimp*. Pick up *The Very Best of Johnny "Guitar" Watson* on Rhino CD; it's out of print, but still easy to find.

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## Elmore James

*Style: slide guitar master, Chicago blues*

If you like the slide guitar, this is where it really begins on the electric. George Thorogood, Duane Allman, J.B. Hutto and Little Ed all kneel at the Shrine of St. Elmore. You'll listen to this guy and say, "That sounds like..." It does, except that it's the other way around, they sound like Elmore. Look for *Blues Masters: The Very Best Of Elmore James*. Fabulous.

## T-Bone Walker

*Style: Texas blues, big-band blues, guitar blues*

The Babe Ruth of the blues. Mr. Walker revolutionized the electric guitar and how it's played. He introduced chord progressions that have become standards and trademark solos. A true giant, every single blues artist – and most rock 'n' roll players – owe him a big one for his solo and chordal techniques. Look for *T-Bone Blues*, either on CD or vinyl. It's flawless, one of the greatest blues albums of all time.



## WOMEN SINGERS

### Big Maybelle

*Style: classic blues, R&B blues*

She often walked the line between blues and jazz, and OMGodzilla could this woman sing. Find a copy of her Savoy recordings and prepare to be blown totally away. She was also a major influence on Janis.

### Dinah Washington

*Style: classic blues, R&B blues*

Dinah Washington was a jazz/blues/pop singer without equal, who led a tumultuous personal life (married seven times) and was a wealthy rock star in her day. Look for her album *Back to the Blues*, and please check out some of her crossover hits like "What A Difference a Day Makes." She's as smooth as it gets, like honey on your auditory receptors.

### Sister Rosetta Tharpe

*Style: classic blues, R&B blues*

It turns out that in the male-dominated world of guitar, a gay middle-aged Black woman became one of the most influential guitar players in history. Originally a gospel singer, she was condemned by her peers for playing "the Devil's music." (I'm sure Satan was glad to have her in his band.) Sister Rosetta was Johnny Cash's favorite artist, a major influence on rockabilly, and a was terrific, spirited blues singer. Hallelujah! Look for her "Greatest Hits" albums.

## MEN SINGERS

### Bobby "Blue" Bland

*Style: classic blues, R&B blues*

Bobby Bland will make your blood run cold and then fill you with the spirit. What a voice – I actually envy you if this will be the first time you hear "Turn On Your Love Light" and "Yield Not To Temptation." His early records on the Duke label feature a magnificent backup band led by Joe Scott. He's insanely great. Look for "Best Of" collections on MCA CDs or Duke vinyl.

### Big Joe Turner

*Style: classic blues, R&B blues*

One of the godfathers of rock 'n' roll, Big Joe Turner began as a "blues" singer in Kansas City in the '30s, singing all songs in the key of "C." He was a great barrelhouse voice from a three-hundred-pound blues OG. Find any number of great collections with his blues and rock 'n' roll together.

### Ray Charles

*Style: R&B, gospel blues, soul*

The man who brought The Church to the blues. Literally. Several of his songs were direct copies of gospel standards, like "There's a Man Going 'Round Taking Names" became "I Got A Woman." No worries, it all sounded so good. His early stuff on the Atlantic Record label defines soul.

## HARMONICA

Harmonica, often called a Mississippi saxophone, is one of the instruments most closely associated with blues. Anyone can blow a few notes, but being one of the hardest instruments to play well, mastery is limited to a very select few. Here's a couple of the greats:



### Little Walter Jacobs

*Style: R&B, gospel blues, soul*

A deeply troubled individual but most deserving of the "genius" moniker. His technique: awesome. His approach to improvisation: jaw dropping. He used a taxi dispatcher microphone to amplify the harp so he could be heard over the band, wailing his way into blues immortality – first with Muddy Waters, and then on his own. Every harmonica player you see at festivals has been schooled and humbled by Marion "Little Walter" Jacobs. The latest album by The Stones features three of his compositions. Pick up any one of several "Best Of" collections and hear for yourself.

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### Paul Butterfield

Style: R&B, gospel  
blues, soul

Paul Butterfield was not only a tremendous harmonica player and singer, his first album opened a door that ushered in an entire new era of blues. Up until the release of Elektra 78865, blues – and especially Chicago blues – featured only Black artists. Butterfield and his mixed band changed all of that. The anthem "Born In Chicago" opens an

album that paved the way for bands like the Thunderbirds, The Nighthawks, J. Geils and a hundred more all over the Western world. He also gave the world one of its first guitar heroes named Mike Bloomfield. An all-time fav, grab *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band* Mono or CD; look for the guys all standing on the corner. Get a copy and play it loud!

Blues isn't merely a musical genre. It's a worldview and outlook on life that's touched lives and helped people get by for nearly a century. It keeps you laughing through the tears and grounded in the way things are. I hope this brief look at artists and styles turns you on to some of the originators, enhances your appreciation of the game changers, and results in maximum wig-flippage. Amen. 🎵

All the art images in this feature are provided courtesy of the artist, Kelvin Baldwin. The scope of his collection reflects almost every aspect of the African-American landscape, but Kelvin is most passionate about capturing the energy and soulful expressions of the characters of performing artists "on canvas such that the whole world can enjoy over and over again." Check him out at [www.kelvinbaldwinart.com](http://www.kelvinbaldwinart.com) and contact via [baldwinart@hotmail.com](mailto:baldwinart@hotmail.com)

Born in Aiken, SC, Reverend Billy lives in Ocala, FL, with his girlfriend Linda, eight cats and one horse. He tours, has a radio show and sells collectible records. Find him on Facebook at William Wirths or online at [revbillycwirtz.com](http://revbillycwirtz.com).



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Photo by Dave Schlenker