

How Europe Got The Blues

Appreciation of blues in England and Europe increased rapidly beginning in 1940 when the African-American folk music scene began to tour overseas. Leadbelly was engaged for a series of concerts in France. After playing in Paris, Leadbelly, now terminally ill, abandoned the tour and returned home, dying five months later. Josh White was said to be the first blues guitarist to play in England. He toured Sweden, Denmark and the United Kingdom in 1950, playing before royalty in each country. He returned in 1951, a year which also saw the first European tour for Big Bill Broonzy. Both men, who had been hard-core blues men in the 1930's, presented themselves as folk artists when performing overseas. Muddy Waters, with his piano man Otis Spann, toured England in 1957 and the British were horrified by his 'noisy' guitar. They were expecting folk blues. When Muddy returned with an acoustic box in 1958, the Brits had caught up and now demanded amplified blues? In the mid 1950's English jazz band leader Chris Barber usually allowed his banjo player, Lonnie Donegan, to play a set of skiffle music at intermissions. By 1956 Donegan was playing his international hit, DOES YOUR CHEWING GUM LOSE IT FLAVOR, but he also played Leadbelly songs like ROCK ISLAND LINE and MIDNIGHT SPECIAL. Liverpool's leading skiffle group was the Quarrymen, soon to be renamed the Silver Beatles, and finally the Beatles. 1962 was a critical year for blues overseas. Musicians and blues fans Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies formed a group called Blues Incorporated with Charlie Watts on drums. Over the next 18 months the band's floating personnel included Mick Jagger, Jimmy Pye, Eric Burdon, Rod Stewart and Jack Bruce. Keith Richards met and befriended Mick Jagger when he saw Jagger with an armful of Muddy and Chuck Berry LPs. Pye Records in England had begun to reissue Chess blues LPs two years earlier. Also by this time Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry and Rosetta Tarpe had appeared overseas. But the biggest event by far was the decision of two German jazz promoters, Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau, to arrange an American Folk Blues festival to tour England and the continent. These tours occurred annually for a decade and sporadically after that. They featured every pre- and post-war artist who could be found from Sleepy John Estes and Skip James to Howling Wolf and Sonny Boy #2. In 1963, BLUES UNLIMITED, the world's first English language blues magazine, began in England. Another British mag., BLUES WORLD, soon followed. In Sweden, JEFFERSON (named after Blind Lemon)

was published, and Italy offered IL BLUES. During these years, a long list of blues pianists toured overseas and eventually chose to live there. These included Champion Jack Dupree and Memphis Slim (both in Paris), Eddie Boyd (Helsinki), Willie Mabon (Amsterdam), Curtis Jones (Munich) and Blind John Davis. Blues record labels also sprung up like Black & White (France), Storyville (Denmark) and "77" (England). Significantly, the blues boom in England and Europe led to a blues revival in America. This was because the "British Invasion" enabled groups like the Rolling Stones, the Animals (with Burdon), the Yardbirds (with Clapton and Page), Them (Van Morrison) and Taste (Rory Gallagher's power blues trio) to feed blues and rock-blues back to Americans, many of whom didn't realize the music was theirs in the first place. For a complete telling of this story, I recommend the book CROSS THE WATER BLUES edited by Neil A. Wynn of the University Press of Mississippi.

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