

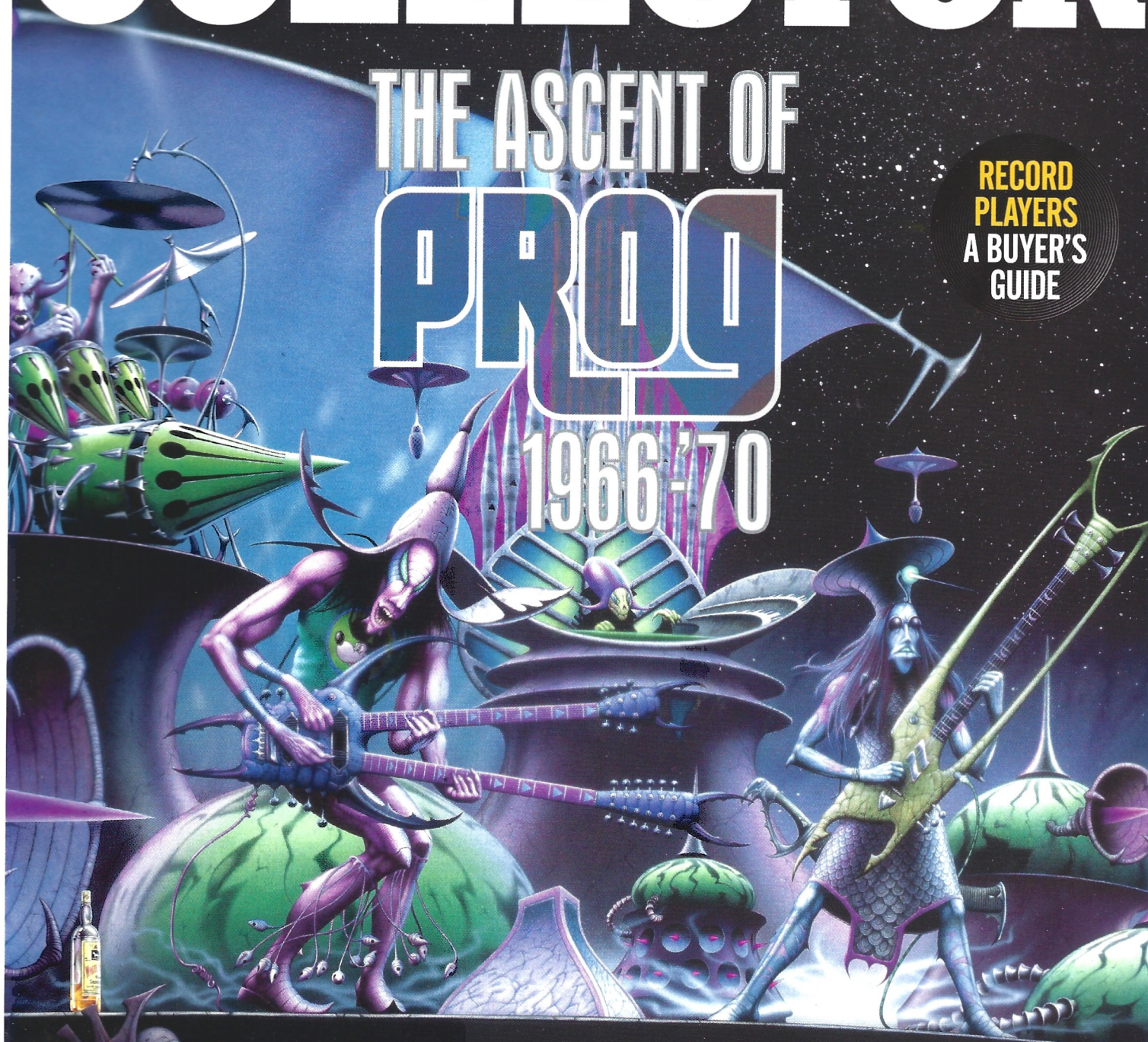
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WEST SIDE TO WEST COUNTRY

In our March issue, *RC Investigates* looked at music collections held by libraries, and was told Exeter University's contained "nothing significant". Not so. In fact, its record archive is one of the world's most inspiring, as author Alan Harper can testify

One steamy July evening in 1982 I met a man carrying a guitar outside the Kingston Mines on Chicago's North Halsted Street. He was wearing a cowboy hat, a shiny red suit, a yellow shirt and a blue tie. I asked if I could do an interview with him sometime? "Sure," he replied. "Checkerboard, Monday." He went by the name of Lefty Dizz. I'd seen him in Paris in 1979, and also in the Checkerboard Lounge, drunk, playing the guitar with his foot. "I've been drunk since I got back from Korea," he explained. "I'm 47, not 37. I killed a lot of people."

Though a superstar in his own estimation, Lefty Dizz wasn't well known outside of Chicago. Before I arrived in the city, first as a student, and then as the aspiring author of

Waiting For Buddy Guy, I hadn't heard of him. But in the clubs, he was already a legend of sorts, a charming and good-natured clown prince of the blues who was respected, on his good nights, as a terrific guitarist and entertainer. He also had a bit – OK, a lot – of an alcohol problem.

I had travelled to Chicago to seek out the remnants of its fabled blues scene, inspired by the records in my university library. The American Music Collection at Exeter had a huge quantity of pre-war blues on tape, and impressive racks of vinyl. The old songs laid the groundwork, but it was a handful of Chicago blues LPs that really got me.

Alligator's

Living Chicago Blues series came out in 1978, on three LPs initially – three more were to follow in 1980. They took as their template Samuel Charters'

legendary 1966 *Chicago! The Blues! Today!* trio on Vanguard. I discovered the Vanguard set first and thanks to them became perhaps the only student who ever skipped lectures in order to go to the library.

For an impressionable young fan brought up on Butterfield, The Allmans and Eric Clapton, who had bunked off school to see Albert King and Muddy Waters, listening to the Vanguards – Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, JB Hutto, Big Walter Horton and the rest – was bliss. And any dismay I initially felt about being too late to catch this music for myself was dispelled by the arrival of the Alligator records, with their new clutch of bands and artists, and the promise, explicit in their title, of a living blues scene.

BLOOD FOR RECORDS

The librarian in charge of the university record collection was David Horn, co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion To Jazz*. "I'm interested in jazz, but I have fairly catholic tastes," he explains today. "I wanted to

**"I wanted to
assemble a
collection to improve
knowledge of all
American music"**

WEDNESDAY
THURSDAY
FRIDAY
SATURDAY

Eddie CLEGG
ADDIE Y
PHIL GUY

LEROY BROWN
And Other Rock & Rollers
HEAR THE MUSIC OF...
CHUCK BERRY - ELVIS PRESLEY
BUDDY HOLLEY - BO DIDDLEY
CRIBBY CHECKER etc.



Carrie and Lurrie Bell
after inspiration hit

assemble a collection to improve knowledge of all American music." His chance came in the form of a grant from an American academic body, initially to buy books, but the remit extended to film and music. As Exeter's nascent American music collection began to mount, David received an offer from an American collector of blues and gospel records named Roger Misiewicz. It was postmarked from Canada.

Today, neither man can quite remember how they first got in touch. "Us old folks have our brains too cluttered up with music and life to recall every particular," Roger jokes now. But for Exeter, the association was an astounding stroke of luck. The involvement of this "mysterious American draft-dodging record collector", as he appears in *Waiting For Buddy Guy*, created the core of the university's American music collection.

Roger had been collecting since about 1967, when he was a student in Pennsylvania. "You could pick up gospel 78s for 15 cents, and I used to sell my blood once a month and

go to the Sam Goody's nearby and get two LPs," he recalls. "That's being poor, but possibly over-committed." Later, doing his PhD at Duke in North Carolina, he remembers canvassing the town of Durham for old records: "I found a place with 78s and bought a box of Memphis Minnie and another of Sonny Boy Williamson – the guy thought I was nuts. I ended up giving them as gifts to friends."

When his call-up papers arrived, Roger chose Canada over Vietnam. He soon discovered there were few blues records in Canada, but he subscribed to magazines and met like-minded people rummaging in record bins. "I collected via auction lists most of the time, but my friends from university days



would send me stuff they found," he says. "I bought records essentially one at a time on 78, and bought all the LPs as they came out."

Being of an analytical cast of mind, Roger would buy LPs to fill in the gaps in his 78s, and developed a card index system, following the dates in the second edition of Godrich and Dixon's *Blues And Gospel Records 1902-1942* discography.

"At that point I had enough money to buy a tape recorder, and made my first 13 tapes of the material in discography order," he says. By the time they were finished, "I had so many more records that I started again."

He began corresponding with David Horn at Exeter, and a deal was struck: Roger would send in a reel of tape containing about



Lefty Dizz:
killer licks

160 blues and gospel songs, in Godrich & Dixon order, compiled from 78s and LPs, while David sent two blank tape reels in return. "I would make one for myself and one for them," he remembers. There would eventually be 100 reels in the Exeter collection, containing 15,675 songs – around 75 per cent of the G&D discography.

Now 70, Roger still lives in Canada – "best decision I ever made" – and his collection includes some 6,700 pre-war blues and gospel 78s. It has plenty of talismanic recordings by the likes of Charley Patton and Robert Johnson, and many rarities, including Black Patti 8001, Hey Lawdie Mama, recorded in 1927 in Chicago by Long Cleve Reed and Little Harvey Hull. "It was the only one in existence," he says. "I was able to correct the G&D discography using it as evidence." Since then, another two examples have reportedly surfaced.

Roger also came to an arrangement with Johnny Parth of the Document label in Austria, who was compiling his *5000 Series* of pre-war blues collections. "I was getting his new records, and since he seemed to be following a similar format, I started sending him tapes too," says Roger. "He also used various European collectors, and some US collectors I got to know through him, like Bob Graf and Larry Cohn. I enlisted people like Joe Bussard, Ken Romanowski, and anyone else I could prevail upon.

"All of this was basically non-commercial, just manic hobbyists doing their thing," he adds. "I've never been a dealer, or even much of a trader, just someone who's happy to help out where I can."

"I WANTED TO KILL THEM"

Among the star turns featured on Alligator's *Living Chicago Blues* series were harmonica virtuoso Carey Bell and his talented guitarist

son Lurrie, who – at 23 – was the same age as I was. In 1982 they went into the studio for Rooster, a new label co-owned by *Living Blues* magazine founders Amy and Jim O'Neal, who had discovered the blues the way most white fans did: "The Animals, The Rolling Stones, The Beatles – the British invasion opened our eyes to the American music we didn't know existed," she confessed to me in the magazine's basement office.

Rooster had made albums with Eddie Clearwater, described by Amy as a "West Side Chicago rock'n'roller", and the redoubtable Magic Slim. Both sessions went smoothly, and the albums were well received. Carey and Lurrie Bell's *Son Of A Gun* offered more of a challenge: "Carey and Lurrie are a whole different ball game," Amy said. "Their record was a bitch to produce... brilliant musicians, but their heads are not on straight. They don't rehearse. They get in there and wait for the lightning bolt to strike. In the studio. You know what studio time costs? The session was just bizarre. I wanted to kill them." The album is pretty good.

About the only people buying Chicago blues albums at the time were young white fans. It was a minority music with a dwindling fan-base. Southern "soul blues", on the other hand, was big news. ZZ Hill's *Down Home* album, recorded by Malaco in Jackson, Mississippi, began its two-year residency in the R&B charts in 1982, and the title song probably sold more copies that year than all Chicago blues singles in living memory. Soul blues could still command a substantial black audience, though its stars, from Little Milton



to Bobby Bland, were simply not on the radar of most white fans.

For their fourth album, Rooster took a gamble on Larry Davis, a 45-year-old singer and guitarist from Kansas City, who had worked the South since the late

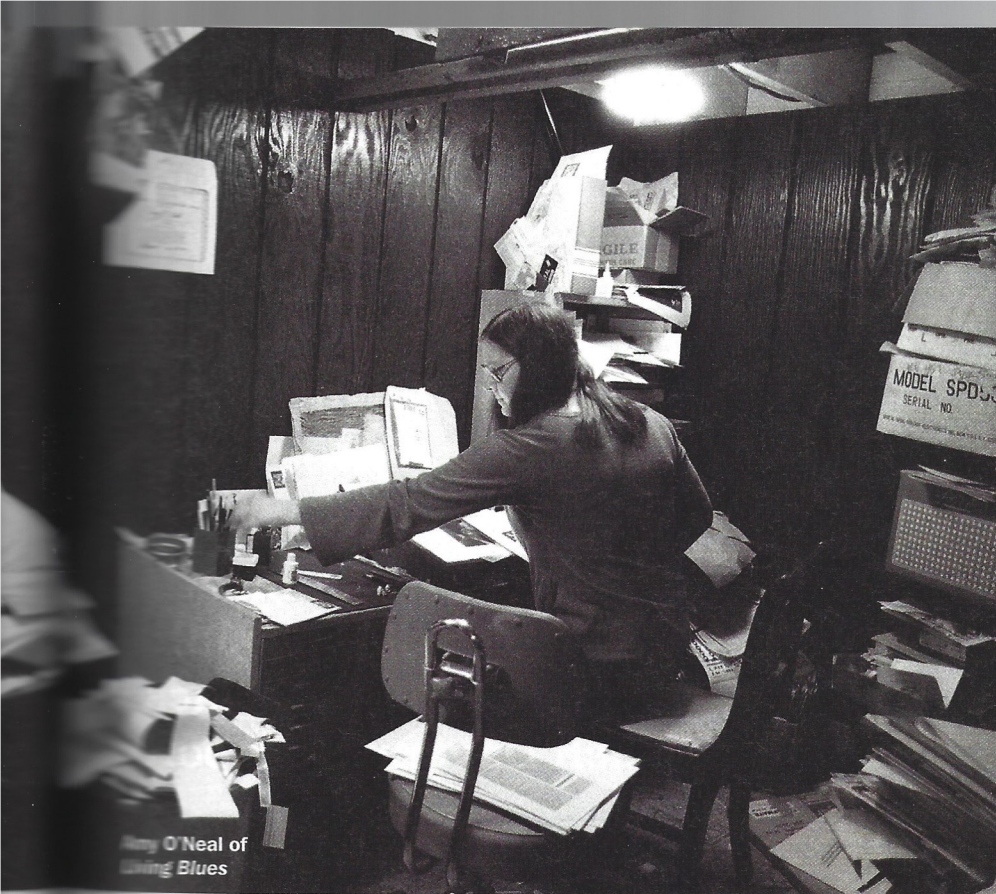
50s and cut singles for labels like Duke and Kent. "Larry is very much a more Southern-style, contemporary blues artist," Amy explained. "We're trying to open up everybody's ears: white blues taste in Chicago is about 15 or 20 years behind what is legitimately happening."

Larry's album *Funny Stuff* was produced by saxophonist and bandleader Oliver Sain. "Oliver knows about how to manufacture a more commercial, black, blues-oriented record," said Amy. The differences were subtle – funky bass, little hints of synthesiser – but *Funny Stuff* was clearly the kind of record which many white fans would regard as somehow inauthentic, like Howlin' Wolf with backing singers, or Muddy Waters with a horn section. "The twain don't meet, they really don't," said Amy. But it was selling.

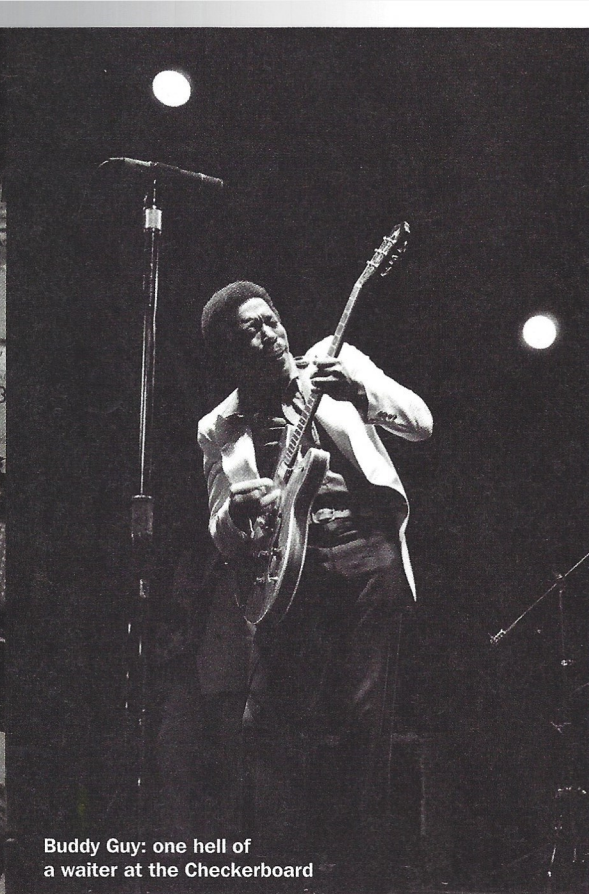
To Amy there was a more important indicator of success than mere sales: "We have got some airplay on black radio stations, which is very gratifying. That's such a trip... a record we produced, on black radio."

STEF'S MAGNIFICENT ORGAN

The university library's music collection has not stood still. Though American And Commonwealth Arts, the collection's parent degree course, has not been taught at Exeter since the mid-90s, the library accepted a bequest of about 600 jazz and classical 78s in



Angie O'Neal of
Living Blues



Buddy Guy: one hell of
a waiter at the Checkerboard

1996, and a significant donation 10 years later from the Guernsey collector, Leslie Eke.

Eke's mass of recordings have not yet been properly catalogued, but retired senior lecturer Bob Lawson-Peebles, a jazz and classical fan with a sizeable collection of his own, is working part-time on a comprehensive listing. "Every spring, I say it'll be finished in September," he says. "But I do think it might be done by the end of 2016."

The Eke donation brought about 6,500 additional LPs and CDs to the Exeter collection, which now boasts more than 15,000 recordings. "It complements it very well," says Bob. "It immensely strengthens our holdings in Caribbean steel bands, cajun and gospel, urban blues and modern exponents of ragtime, like William Bolcom." Other gaps were filled by artists such as Nat 'King' Cole, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, The Mills Brothers and Jack Teagarden. Significant blues content includes John Lee Hooker and Memphis Slim. There are reissues of earlier American music on the Document, Timeless, Frog and Retrieval labels. Among the LPs are 26 of jazz and hot dance music on Harlequin made by American and local musicians in places like Hungary and India, plus 1,500 of non-American jazz, and a fair representation on the Polish Nagrania and Muza labels.

Eclectic doesn't begin to cover it. There is obscure jazz and blues recorded in south-west England on cassettes given out at gigs. And about 100 LPs of Hammond organ music – hit tunes from the 70s, mostly, many by Dutch keyboard maestro Stef Meeder. Their sleeves invariably feature a busty young maiden in the altogether, while Stef himself, with his magnificent organ,

can be found on the rear. "These give new meaning to the Forsterian epigraph 'only connect'," Bob muses thoughtfully.

Despite this, the American Music Collection has suffered a decline in status, and now lies in a forgotten corner of the old library basement. David Horn, who left Exeter in 1988 to take up the directorship of the Institute Of Popular Music at Liverpool, describes this as "a scandal". It is accessible to students and researchers, at least in theory, but the current library staff know little about it, and access involves making appointments and providing lists.

Blues scholar Robert Ford, author of *The Blues Bibliography* and a man who spent a year in the late 90s transferring all of Exeter's taped pre-war "Godrich & Dixon" blues onto the 621 CDs where they can be found today, remembers the music collection's "relegation" from the Audio Visual Department: "I found the attitude of the people in charge pretty depressing – they didn't appreciate the importance of the collection."

Jazz FM DJ Helen Mayhew was a contemporary of mine at Exeter: "My ears were opened to a whole new world of great music," she told me. "It undoubtedly helped me towards a career in jazz. I still play songs on my programmes which I first heard in the library. It's a collection which should be preserved and cherished."

According to David Horn, *Waiting For Buddy Guy* is the first book to owe its inspiration to Exeter's collection. It doesn't

look like there will be any more for the foreseeable future. Or scholarly bibliographies. Or jazz DJs.

"It's a collection which should be preserved and cherished"

100 PROOF OLD GRAND-DAD

We sat in Lefty Dizz's car outside the Checkerboard Lounge to do the interview. East 43rd Street, in the heart of Chicago's impoverished South Side, was a forbidding prospect to a young white fan, especially one who had to get there on public transport. But the Checkerboard itself was always a welcoming haven. I usually went in the hope of hearing the club's owner, Buddy Guy, but though he was on the bill every week, he didn't play there much. You could wait a long time for Buddy Guy.

Lefty Dizz had the Blue Monday residency. He wasn't well documented, so I had to begin by asking him basic facts about where he was from, and how he got started. He listened carefully, spoke fast and fired back his answers with a spiky intelligence. When I started generalising in my 23-year-old way about white and black audiences, he shot me down: "Are you kidding? You're assuming. You don't know. Ask questions if you're going to do this, otherwise I'll interview you."

That gave him an idea. "When did you start in this business?" he demanded. Sheepishly, I gave him a fairly recent date. "All right. And what brought you to this?" That one was easier: I really liked the music. "You have a feeling for the blues. When did you first feel the blues?"

But his eyes were full of mischief. He couldn't keep it up, and the car filled with laughter. "You're a big boy now! Here, have a sip of this Granddaddy," he offered, producing a slim bottle from his jacket. "All right. Anything you write about me, just write the truth." ☺

Waiting For Buddy Guy: Chicago Blues At The Crossroads by Alan Harper is published by University of Illinois Press, 2016. www.waitingforbuddyguy.com