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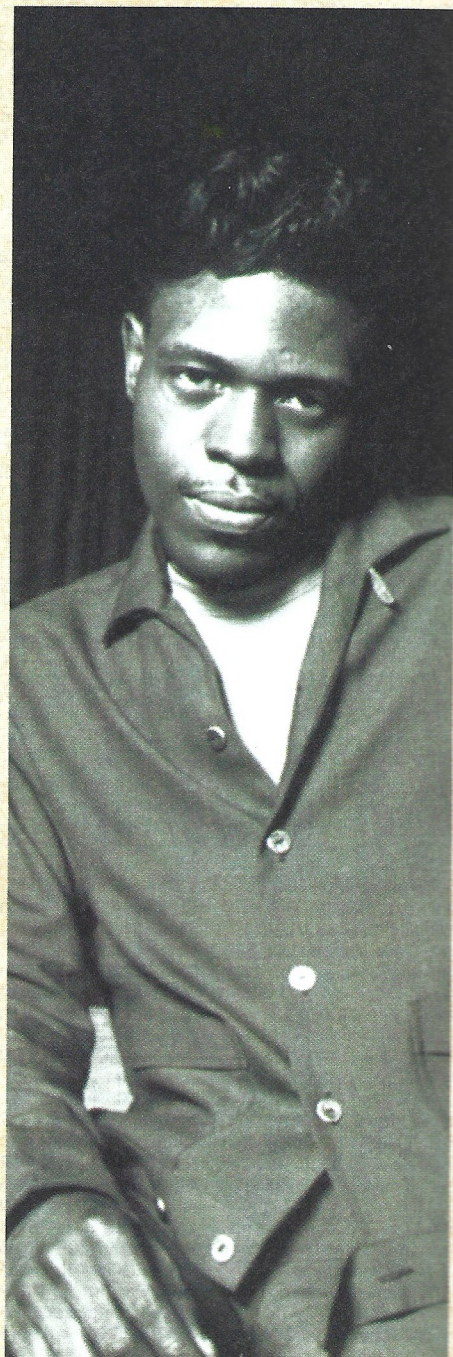
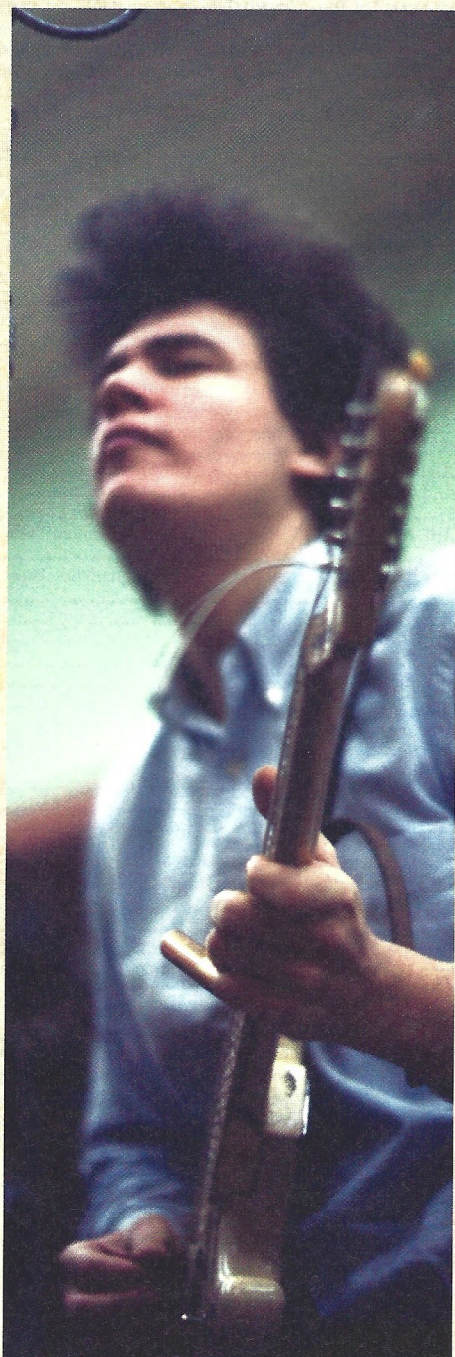
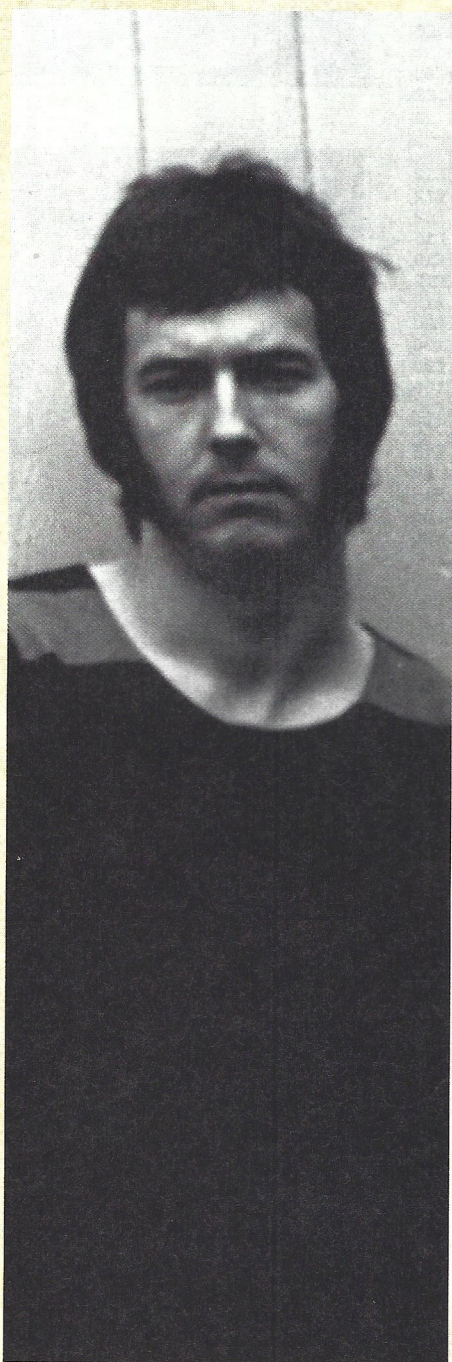
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POINT BREAK

Three seminal blues albums were released within a few months of each other in 1966 by **John Mayall**, **Paul Butterfield**, and **Junior Wells**, all focused on the Chicago blues sound. Each one came from a radically different point of the cultural compass, and, as **Alan Harper** suggests, all three left behind more questions than answers...



By the summer of 1966, the British blues boom was running out of steam. Bands and fans were moving on to pastures new, inspired by the burgeoning creativity of The Beatles, the irresistible swagger of the Stones and the diverse talents of other nascent rock acts from the Small Faces to The Who. In mid-May, Capitol Records released *Pet Sounds*. A few weeks later Columbia put out *Blonde On Blonde*.

Always behind the curve, British blues was about to bring out an album that would prove to be its most enduring monument, while simultaneously disappearing up an artistic cul de sac. Its release followed close behind two other albums, both by blues groups from Chicago – both influential, both in their different ways exploring the possibilities of the art form, and both, as it turned out, venturing up their own particular blind alleys.

The *Beano* album, or more properly *Blues Breakers* by John Mayall with Eric Clapton (Decca LK 4804), embodied the English blues sensibility. Released in July, it was well-read, moderately adventurous, and illuminated by flashes of brilliance. It featured a studious performance of Robert Johnson's Delta blues classic Ramblin' On My Mind, a Mersey-beat version of Mose Allison's Parchman Farm, and an enjoyably noisy attempt at It Ain't Right by Chicago harmonica ace Little Walter. The vocals were of variable quality and rendered in not-very-convincing American accents. The songwriters were credited, so you knew whose records to look for at Dobell's on Saturday. A yawn-inducing two-minute drum solo in What'd I Say was allowed to stay in, presumably because everyone else was too polite to object.

There was more to this album than careful carbon copies of American 45s, thanks to the improbable quality of the 21-year-old Eric Clapton's musicianship. Given equal billing with his bandleader, he was granted plenty of space to perform on almost every track, the best of which, by a long way, were those included solely to showcase the young man's talents as a guitarist: the Otis Rush cover All Your Love and, especially, the instrumental gems Steppin' Out and Hideaway. These mark the first flickers of that dawning realisation crucial to the development of blues rock: if your singer can't sing, or at least not like Muddy Waters or BB

King, turn the spotlight on the guitarist.

Clapton's take on the Rush guitar classic was a straightforward, if slightly ponderous, homage to one of his heroes, with few departures from the script. His arrangement of Steppin' Out showed real verve, as he took the piano, saxophone and guitar parts of the original Memphis Slim tune and made it sound like it was written for solo guitar. On Hideaway he started with a virtuoso vignette by Freddie King and built upwards, adding 24 bars, a raft of new ideas, and somehow contriving – in a solo instrumental – to take three guitar solos. Those of a trainspotterish bent enthused about the tone he achieved with his appropriately Anglo-American combination of Gibson guitar and Marshall amplifier. A picture on the sleeve's back cover showed Clapton, all Mod hairdo and

TITANS OF CHICAGO BLUES ENJOYED A RENAISSANCE

manly sideburns, tuning the Les Paul as a cigarette smouldered in its machine heads. Even years later, burn marks seemed to scar most of the second-hand guitars for sale in Denmark Street.

Over in the US, meanwhile, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and other titans of the Chicago blues were enjoying a career renaissance. None of them had scored a solid hit single since the 50s, but just as in the UK, young white Americans had discovered the old blues, and they were led there by white musicians – among them a prodigious young harmonica player from a prosperous white neighbourhood in Chicago itself.

The Paul Butterfield Blues Band (Elektra EKL 294), the first album from the eponymous collective, came out in late 1965. It offered a more realistic Chicago blues experience than the Bluesbreakers' English effort, with a rhythm section

comprising Sam Lay and Jerome Arnold from Howlin' Wolf's band. It, too, featured a white virtuoso on guitar, in the shape of 22-year-old Mike Bloomfield. Butterfield's harmonica was raucous and confident, as Chicago blues standards competed for groovespace with a smattering of lively originals. The opening track was the swaggering Born In Chicago. There were no slow blues, perhaps because they knew enough to know their limitations. Two tracks were improvised instrumentals showcasing the guitars and harmonica, which hinted at what the band might be like to see in a live setting.

Bloomfield's guitar playing seemed more solidly grounded in the Chicago blues than Clapton's. It was easy to imagine him lurking in South Side clubs, absorbing lessons from great sidemen like Louis Myers and Jimmy Rogers, rather than sitting at home playing along to Freddie King 45s. But in spite of Bloomfield's undoubted abilities, the record wasn't a prototype rock guitar album in the way that the Bluesbreakers' was – the bandleader was a harp player.

At a time when Greenwich Village coffee houses routinely paid pastiche blues musicians like John Hammond Jr and Dave van Ronk more than they paid actual blues artists like Skip James and Big Joe Williams, it was perhaps inevitable that the album's sleeve notes, by Pete Welding, tied themselves in knots over the troubling issue of "authenticity": Butterfield played in Chicago's blues clubs regularly, "in the company of some of the city's better young negro bluesmen". By concentrating on modern Chicago blues and ignoring older, "country blues" styles, Butterfield had "neatly bystepped the problems that have prevented other young blues interpreters from attaining a comparable degree of fluency, ease, conviction and utter authority." Apparently the privately educated Butterfield, the son of a Hyde Park lawyer, could claim "a long intimacy with the culture that produced the music". The music itself "was much less bound up in a maze of socio-cultural factors... because these factors are not operative in the contemporary blues to the same degree, or in the same way, as in the older blues".

At least the music knew what it was trying to say. Butterfield was a good singer and a terrific harmonica player. Bloomfield was fantastic on guitar. An arch little note on the cover advised playing the record at the highest possible volume, long before such exhortations could be found on virtually every rock album.

Butterfield's band



Breaking the mould (opposite page l-r): Eric Clapton, Michael Bloomfield, Junior Wells. (Right) 'The Beano Album'

was different from Mayall's in lots of ways, the main one being that the Americans learned their blues in Chicago's clubs, while the Englishmen – apart from occasional gigs in support of touring American acts – had learned by listening to records. It showed in the overall quality of the two albums. There were noticeable areas of weakness in the English effort, and a number of duff songs, but no such shortcomings with the Butterfield album. It was solid. They were good.

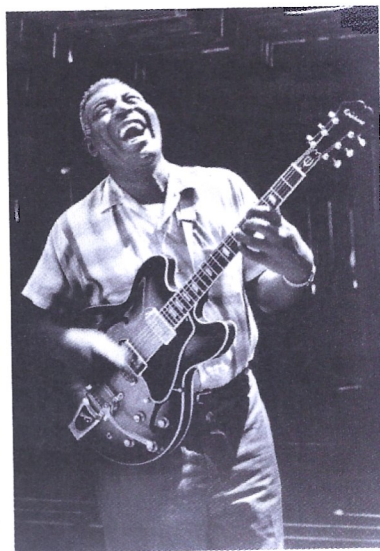
"Much more so than Mayall, the Butterfield band was a real crucial band in the white blues boom, probably because they were actually a good band," Bruce Iglauer told me at his Alligator Records HQ. "Although everybody I knew owned that Mayall album."

But although their album was an excellent, faithful, and lively reproduction of an urban blues style that had reached its apotheosis 10 years before, I felt that Butterfield and his band were just a little too respectful. Their record had little to offer that you couldn't get from a Chess Records

WELLS MADE THE BLUES BREAKERS SOUND LIKE AMATEURS

compilation of Muddy Waters' or Little Walter's singles. The only thing new about it was that the band's frontmen were white, whereas in Eric Clapton, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers knew they had found a musician capable of something genuinely special, whose instrumental virtuosity looked to the future, even if their album's repertoire did not.

While Butterfield and his band were recording their album in New York, Junior Wells was doing the same in Chicago. "I thought, 'Here's a beautiful sound, and it's getting wasted,'" Bob Koester told me in the Jazz Record Mart on Lincoln Avenue. He had long used the record store to fund his label, Delmark, recording jazz and country blues. But



Three kings: Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters and Buddy Guy, the latter of whom was the star of Junior Wells' urban blues debut LP *Hoodoo Man Blues*

since encountering Wells at Theresa's Tavern on Chicago's South Side, he had decided to take a punt with an urban blues album, *Hoodoo Man Blues* (Delmark DS-9612). "Pete Welding in *Down Beat* gave it two stars, said it was a terrible record: it wasn't noisy enough, in effect, it should have had another guitar," he recalled. "Well, that wasn't what was going on at the club. The Buddy Guy trio plus Junior is what it really was: Buddy had the trio at Theresa's, and Junior was the separately hired feature artist."

Amos Wells Blakemore Jr arrived in Chicago as a boy and made his first records in his own name in 1953, aged just 18. Elmore James and Muddy Waters served as session men. He learned to play harp at the feet of Sonny Boy Williamson, and fronted The Aces, one of the finest of all Chicago blues bands. By the mid-60s he was at the forefront of the city's blues scene, a veteran of the Muddy Waters band and the resident headliner at Theresa's. He was born to perform: a brooding and almost sinister presence during a slow blues, and an eccentrically electrifying dancer, he sang and played as if totally possessed. When Junior Wells was up onstage, nothing else in the

room could hold your attention.

When it came to musicianship, the band on *Hoodoo Man Blues* made the Bluesbreakers sound like gifted amateurs and even put Butterfield's people in the shade. But if Mayall and Butterfield had set out to make Chicago blues records, Junior Wells must have set out to make something else, because his album didn't sound anything like theirs.

The opening track, *Snatch It Back And Hold It*, reminded me of Brand New Bag – even before Wells' sardonic reference in the lyrics to James Brown's huge summer hit. The album's sound engineering had a spacious, architectural quality, giving parts of the session the feel of modern jazz. The music had a precision unusual in a blues record. Silences between phrases were like white space. It was spare, and it was funky. The next song, *Ships On The Ocean*, a beautiful, slow, 12-bar blues – lyrically opaque, to be sure, but full of feeling – dispelled any doubts about what sort of album it was. Throughout, Jack Myers' bass was jazzy and melodic. On the drums, a flamboyant Billy Warren seemed to have been plucked from some razor-sharp 40s dance orchestra, but he was just as adept at shepherding a song along with

no more than a delicate tap on the ride cymbal. As for the guitarist: how could anyone that good be content to play with such discipline, as a sideman? It was, of course, Buddy Guy.

Essential listening: The Paul Butterfield Blues Band's debut (left) set new standards for white American blues

