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CONDITION BLUES



From its first release back in 1971 it became the leading blues label in the world's premier blues city. This year, Chicago's **Alligator Records** celebrates 50 turbulent years of keeping faith with the original roots music, from Hound Dog Taylor (main pic) to Kingfish (insert, left). **Alan Harper** catches up with founder Bruce Iglauer, and traces the label's history.

Chicago, 1982: Alligator Records' global HQ appeared to be a modest, wood-framed house in a shady suburban street, a couple of blocks from the Granville L stop. The label's owner, Bruce Iglauer, met me at the door.



It was a Saturday morning, and he confessed to being tired and hungover and anxiously awaiting a phone call from one of his artists, Albert Collins, who was touring in California. It seemed that the tour bus had suffered a gearbox problem between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The band was due onstage at a blues festival in an hour and a half.

Thirty-five years old, bearded, bespectacled, articulate and amusing, Iglauer never intended to start his own label, he explained. Like many others in the Chicago blues business, he started out working for Bob Koester, on the Delmark label and in the Jazz Record Mart. When Koester turned down Hound Dog Taylor, Iglauer's favourite band, Alligator came into being. *Hound Dog Taylor And The HouseRockers* (AL 4701) came out in September 1971.

When Iglauer said his office was his bedroom, he wasn't joking. Of Alligator's three other employees, two worked upstairs and the third was based in a back room on the ground floor. "We had a total of five at one time, but early this year I let the other guy go, because of money," he said.

Lonnie, Albert, Koko and Son sounded like a children's television show, or perhaps an unusually progressive legal practice, but in fact these were four of the most successful blues artists of the day, and they were all signed to Alligator. Lonnie Brooks was a youthful-looking and dynamic singer and guitarist from Louisiana, who had scored a few local hits in the late 50s on Goldband under the name Guitar Junior. He moved to Chicago in 1959. As a female vocalist, Koko Taylor was practically unique in the Chicago blues, but she was extremely popular. She recorded for Chess in her youth, and by 1982 was too expensive for the city's small blues clubs. Alligator's star attraction was the Texas singer and guitarist Albert Collins, the "master of the Telecaster", who in the 60s enjoyed some crossover success into the rock market, recording several albums on Imperial after an introduction from blues-rockers Canned Heat. His signing by Alligator in 1978 was the latest step in a long blues career.

The youngest of the foursome, Son Seals, was an Alligator discovery, picked up by

the label in 1972. At the age of 40, Seals had built a reputation in Chicago as an exciting live act, but he originally came from Osceola, in Arkansas, an hour north of Memphis. By blues standards, his success had been meteoric – he had made four albums for Alligator, he had played regular club dates, toured all over the US, and travelled overseas. His career seemed in

great shape, at a time when most bluesmen hardly had a career at all.

The first Son Seals album, *The Son Seals Blues Band* (AL 4703), was fascinating – not musically, but for what it revealed about the label's priorities. The Hound Dog album's success with the young college crowd encouraged Iglauer to try the same formula again, with a small band, a mix of covers and originals, and a charismatic frontman who played guitar. Iglauer just needed to find the right artist: and suddenly there was Son Seals, an exciting, unknown but undeniably "authentic" young blues singer and guitarist. Despite Seals' Memphis roots and eclectic tastes, Iglauer wanted him for his ability to front a hard-driving Chicago blues band. As he noted, "For the white audience, I think blues is essentially interpreted as a branch of rock'n'roll."

But almost as soon as the first Seals album hit the racks in 1973, the market began to change. The 70s was the decade of disco. The grassroots "disco sucks" movement came to a head in 1979 when, in a well-publicised stunt, white rock jock Steve Dahl blew up a pile of disco records in the outfield at Comiskey Park after a White Sox game. It was reported as a harmless bit of fun, but it wasn't for Iglauer: "Disco had such a strong identification with being black music – there was a real anti-black undercurrent in the anti-disco thing." An undercurrent had begun to surface: "Album-oriented rock radio has become lily-white. You can play an old Motown cut, that's fine, and Hendrix. Nobody else allowed, not even Stevie Wonder. When I walk into a station, and they look at the cover, and without even breaking the shrink-wrap, say, 'We can't play this record – our audience can't identify with this kind of music', what they're saying is, 'We think our audience doesn't want to hear [black artists].'"

This was a problem for a label whose slogan was "genuine houserockin' music"

and whose acts were all black. "It's very discouraging right this minute," said Iglauer. "I feel that the black market is where the real future of the blues is going to lie." If white rock radio had pulled down the shutters, the label would have to try and get more airplay on black stations. This change in approach could be traced in Son Seals' albums. His second album, 1976's *Midnight Son* (AL 4708), was a notably more polished effort than the first, with tighter arrangements and jazzy horn parts. It seemed like much more the kind of record that a musician of Seals' eclecticism – he was a Memphis man – might have wanted to make. The third (*Live and Burning*, AL 4712) was a punchy 1978 club set and a great advertisement for his live show, but the fourth, 1980's *Chicago Fire* (AL 4720), both looked and sounded like it was made with the black record-buyer in mind. It had more interesting melodies,

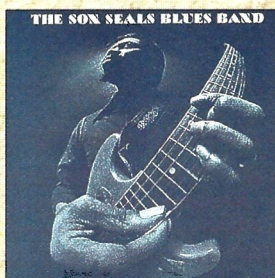
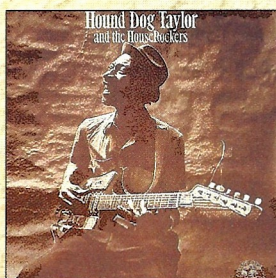
Its slogan is still 'genuine houserockin' music'

more complex scoring, horns, funky bass, and superior production values. There were still blues-rock elements, but they were competing with some solid R&B. And where previous cover photos played up Seals' image for white college kids as a dangerous blues-rock axe-man, there on the front of *Chicago Fire* was a well-groomed guitarist wearing a pinstripe suit.

Amy O'Neal at *Living Blues* magazine had made a simple point to me about the difference between white and black blues taste: "The twain don't meet," she said. Huge stars like Bobby Bland and Little Milton were all but unknown to the white blues fans of 1982. That summer saw a massive R&B hit for ZZ Hill, *Down Home Blues*, from his *Down Home* album, released by Malaco Records out of Jackson, Mississippi. The song was everywhere: on the radio, blaring from the cassette players of passing cars, and happily absorbed into the repertoires of Chicago's jobbing blues bands. For a while that summer, whatever band you were listening to, in whatever club, you could be pretty sure of hearing the song

played most nights. It became a standard, like Hoochie Coochie Man or Sweet Home Chicago.

He was undoubtedly selling more records than all the Alligator artists put together, but I had never heard of ZZ Hill. He was a 46-year-old, Southern "soul-blues" star who



worked the chitlin circuit and was therefore all but invisible to white audiences. Down Home Blues was a memorable song, beautifully produced, with keyboards, a funk-laden bass and some incisive guitar playing. Hill's vocal was as committed and honeydripping as Bobby Bland's, but smoother, and he was backed by some fabulous gospel singers. It wasn't anything like Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf or any of the other acts central to "white" blues taste. The song had a conventional blues chord structure, the loping rhythmic vibe of a Jimmy Reed tune, and the groove of a soul ballad: more Barry White than Bukka White. The lyrics hinted at the hitherto unsuspected seductive possibilities of old blues songs:

"She said, Your party's jumpin' and everybody's having a good time / Now you know what's goin' through my mind / Do you mind if I get comfortable and kick off these shoes? / While you're fixin' me a drink / Play me some o' them down home blues"

What could she possibly mean? If I had a woman on my sofa kicking off her shoes, I don't think I'd risk putting I Can't Be Satisfied on the turntable, or Black Snake Moan. Not unless she had a pretty good sense of humour. How about Bo Carter's Please Warm My Weiner? What this lady meant when she asked for some "down home" music was smooth and urbane blues, possibly with horns and strings: the sort of stuff that was way too slick for most white blues fans, but which, in a world of black music now dominated by newer forms, she clearly regarded as quaintly old-fashioned. Whack anything on the record player that a white fan thought of as "down home" and

she'd be gone before you'd stuck an umbrella in her pina coloda.

This song owed no debt to the romantic, hobo-savant mythology so beloved of white aficionados and exemplified by the cult of Robert Johnson. Neither was it a cultural anachronism like the Chess Records catalogue, revived and revered by white rock bands and record-buyers. It was black music that had not

Son Seals was an electrified version of the romantic myth

been expropriated by whites, and could not be patronised. It was smooth, smart, sophisticated and upwardly mobile.

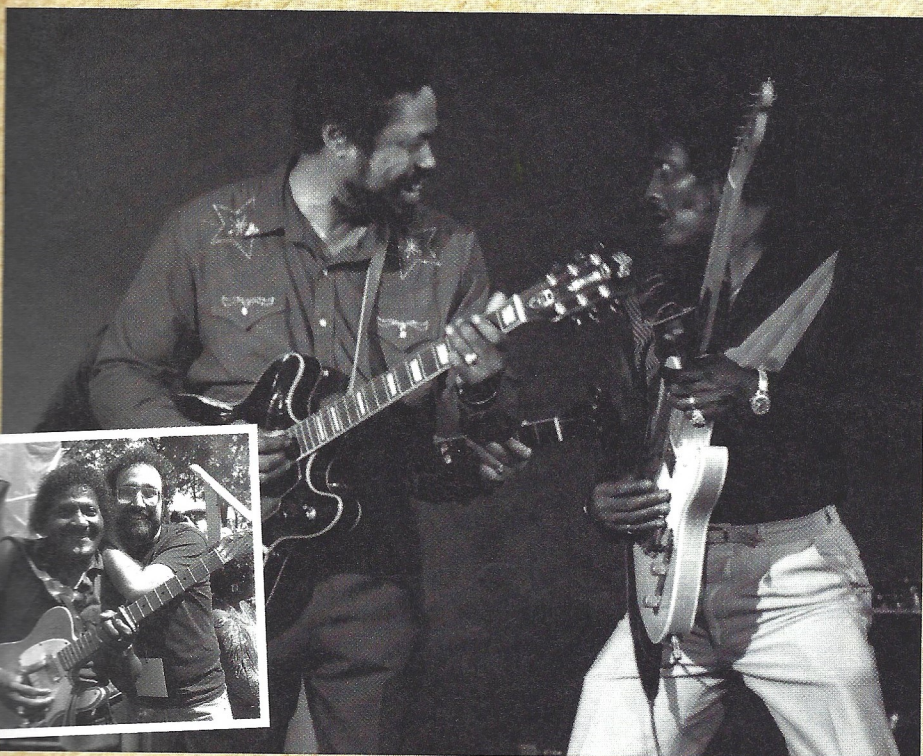
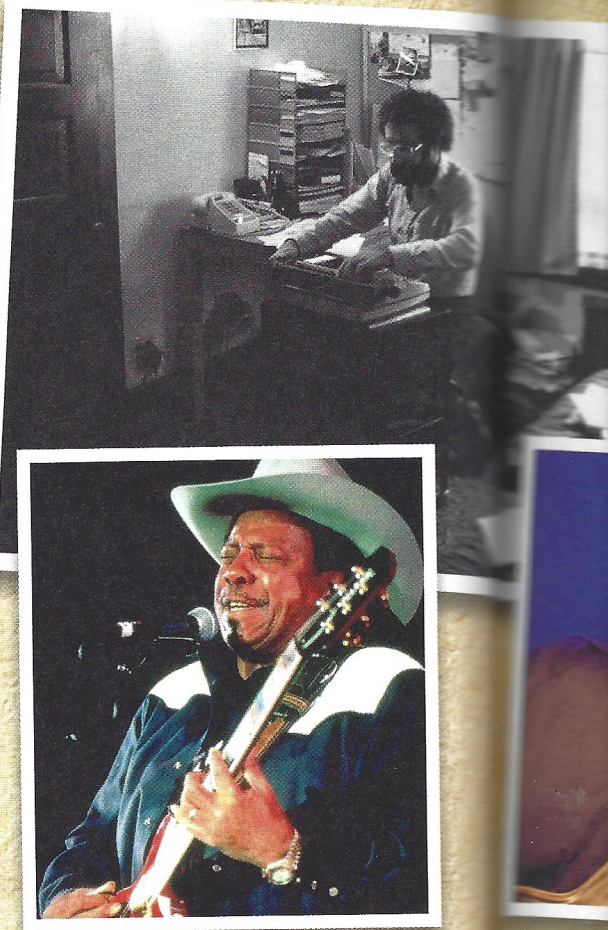
Which Son Seals wasn't. He neither sang like Bobby Bland nor played guitar like Little Milton. He didn't groove like ZZ Hill. Seals was, essentially, a rock musician, an electrified version of the romantic myth. Iglauer might have been right about the black market being the future of the blues, but it seemed unlikely to me that Son Seals would be breaking into the chitlin circuit anytime soon. His career was built on the fascination that white boys had for black men with guitars, and it was going pretty well: record sales might have been slow, but he had plenty of bookings. The college kids all knew that Son Seals was great live.

Chicago, 2021: Bruce Iglauer still lives in the modest, wood-framed house in the shady suburban street, but the Alligator label has moved into two larger buildings nearby.

"The label grew to a staff of 22 by the end of the 90s, but with the shrinking of the industry due to digital pirating, which caused the death of thousands of record stores – more are going out of business now due to the coronavirus – the staff has shrunk to 14 plus me," he says today, by email. "At one time we were releasing up to 14 or 15 new releases a year – now it's more like eight, and less in this crazy worldwide recession in which no artists can tour."

We hadn't spoken since 1982. The intervening years had been eventful ones for the label. But through thick and thin it had remained dedicated to the blues. Its slogan is still "genuine houserockin' music". And the question of race and "authenticity" remains an ever-present undercurrent. As black blues talent became harder to find the label signed white musicians who were felt, in true blues style, to have paid their dues: among them Elvin Bishop, Johnny Winter, Roy Buchanan, Lonnie Mack.

And in contrast to 1982, the ageing demographic of the blues is no longer confined to black fans: "Too many of our listeners look like me," says Iglauer. "Grey-haired or no-haired. As far as black fans, the people who I was reaching out to many years ago on black-oriented radio were older than I was. For black people, it's a very old form of music that appeals to grandpa and great



Fret there be love: (inset left) Bruce Iglauer with Alligator Records signing Albert Collins; Son Seals (left of photo) onstage with Collins in 1982

OUR KIND OF BLUES

Chicago's Alligator on vinyl

For me, the most important Alligator albums are the *Living Chicago Blues* series, released between 1978 and 1980 (Alligator 7701-7706), which inspired me to go to Chicago to research my book back in 1982.

With four bands on each, this six-record set stands as a monument to an era which looks increasingly like a golden age.

The first Hound Dog album provided a foundation for Iglauder to build on. "Hound Dog Taylor was not what would normally be called a 'good' guitar player," admits Iglauder. "He played mostly in one key, repeated the same licks, and could be very sloppy. But I started a label because he played the happiest music I ever heard." His first album remains one of the label's all-time best sellers, with more than 100,000 copies sold in the US, which puts it in company with Johnny Winter's *Guitar Slinger* and 3rd Degree (AL 4735 and 4748), Delbert McClinton's *Live From Austin* (AL 4773), and Professor Longhair's *Crawfish Fiesta* (AL 4718).

"You'll note that almost all of these are from the 70s and 80s, when the blues market was larger and popular music was much more blues-rooted," says Iglauder. "Our No 1 seller over the years has definitely been *Showdown!* by Albert Collins, Robert Cray and Johnny Copeland (AL 4743). That and the 20th Anniversary Collection (ALCD 105/6) have both sold over 300,000."

The numbers are generally much lower. Early on, Iglauder would start a new album with an order for a couple of thousand pressings plus promotional copies, re-ordering if it went well. "As things got better, we might press 5,000 to 7,500 to start," he remembers. "But the marketplace was very different then. Artists who used to sell 40,000 copies now sell fewer than 10,000. *Kingfish*, whose release is our best-seller in some years, has sold 21,000 copies on CD and about 5,000 copies on LP – a huge number these days."

For every success there have been the inevitable also-rans. "The most obscure is one I licensed from the Joliet label, *There Is No Excuse* (For Not Serving The Lord) (AL 1201) by Prince Dixon And The Jackson Southernaires, one of our few gospel records," says Iglauder. "Others would be Johnny Jones With Billy Boy Arnold (AL 4717), *Condition: Blue* by Tony Mathews (AL 4722), The Mellow Fellows' *Street Party* (AL 4793), Noble 'Thin Man' Watts' *Return Of The Thin Man* (AL 4785), Rafal Neal's *Louisiana Legend* (AL 4783) and maybe Johnny Heartsman's *The Touch* (ALCD 4800)."

Alan Harper

Alligator released two compilations on 18 June to mark its 50th anniversary: a 24-track double LP (AL 5000), and a 58-track triple CD that feature stand-out recordings from the likes of Big Walter Horton, Fenton Robinson, Roy Buchanan, Shemekia Copeland and Billy Branch.



House of blues (clockwise from above left, opposite page): Alligator's Bruce Iglauder in his office bedroom, 1982; original Alligator signing Koko Taylor; the label's current star attraction, Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram, and (inset) Alan Harper's book *Waiting For Buddy Guy*; Lonnie 'Guitar Junior' Brooks

grandpa. Southern Soul, 'Grown Folks' Music', is what most black people think of as blues now. For white audiences, blues is also not a very fresh form of music. Pop music has gotten very removed from any kind of 'roots', so the vocabulary of blues is not familiar to young listeners. We need visionary artists, young or old, who are well rooted but not devoted to playing and singing and writing blues that sound like 50 years ago."

Alligator's latest find is Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, a 22-year-old singer and guitarist from Mississippi. "He had been on my radar for a long time," says Iglauder. "I saw him as a young teenager playing a tiny stage at the King Biscuit Festival in Helena some years ago. Then he played the Chicago Blues Festival in 2018 and was sensational – I hadn't realised how good he had gotten."

In conversation with his manager, Iglauder discovered that Kingfish had an album ready to go, recorded in Nashville by Tom Hambridge (whose production credits include Buddy Guy and Devon Allman). "I was rather surprised they hadn't

approached me, but I assume they were trying for a bigger label," Iglauder admits. After what he describes as "the longest, most arduous negotiation of my career", *Kingfish* (Alligator AL 4990) was released in May 2019 – to rave reviews. "Radio stations that hadn't touched an Alligator release in years played it, including large non-commercial stations and even some rock FM stations, plus every blues radio show in the world."

Does it help that Kingfish is a black

artist? Yes and no. "Kingfish can talk about feeling that he is carrying on the tradition of his forebears in a way that no white artist could," says Iglauder. "Being black gives him more credibility, but it also may hold him back from reaching the same heights as a young, handsome and talented white musician. Certainly, today, his chances of reaching international stardom while being black are much better than they would have been in the 60s or 70s. And with his talent, charisma and emotional honesty, plus being a fine man who loves to move people with his music, he has what it takes." 🎸

Excerpts included from Waiting For Buddy Guy – Chicago Blues At The Crossroads by Alan Harper (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

