

50 of the Most Influential Blues Songs of the 20th Century

I JUST WANT TO MAKE LOVE TO YOU – MUDDY WATERS

ROLLIN' STONE – MUDDY WATERS

I GOT MY MOJO WORKING – MUDDY WATERS

I'M YOUR HOOCHIE COOCHIE MAN – MUDDY WATERS

Willie Dixon an important writer and producer wrote both “Hoochie Coochie Man” and “I Just Want To Make Love To You” during the 50s in Chicago. His songs were simple enough to appeal to the aspiring British and American teenagers. Both became an integral part of early Stones performances and were eventually recorded by them. “I Just Want To Make Love To You” is also famous for its more R&B version by Etta James, which has become famous via its use in Coke commercials. “Rollin’ Stone’ is featured because this was the song from which the Rolling Stones derived their name and you can’t get more influential than that. “I Got My Mojo Working” is a song that Muddy covered from its original version by Ann Cole. It became his showstopper for the rest of his life and a list of the many-recorded versions would fill a small book such was its popularity.

AIN'T LOVING YOU BABY – JIMMY REED

BIG BOSS MAN – JIMMY REED

BRIGHT LIGHTS BIG CITY – JIMMY REED

The simplistic musical style of Jimmy Reed was very easy for teenage players to master. His music appealed across the board and was as popular with pop singers and country singers as our listing shows. He was perhaps the most commercially successful blues singer if you count his pop hits.

PRETTY THING - BO DIDDLEY

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Perhaps not as many versions as you might think but what there were became profoundly influential. A generous performer he helped many of the aspiring beat groups master his music during the 60s.

LET IT ROCK – CHUCK BERRY

JOHNNY B.GOOD – CHUCK BERRY

Perhaps not the most obvious choice of song but “Let It Rock” attracted a lot of attention and is a little bluesier than many of his numbers. As far as influence goes any of his songs fit the bill and the choice could be arbitrary although many of his songs spoke directly to teenagers not the more adult audience for blues during the 50s. Its possible that every one of rock and pops greatest artists have recorded “Johnny B. Goode”.

I'M A KING BEE – SLIM HARPO

GOT LOVE IF YOU WANT IT – SLIM HARPO

Slim Harpo sadly died without ever touring outside of America and being able to capitalise on his immense influence on rock groups. One of The Stones favourite performers his lazy lilting Swamp blues style epitomises the sounds of the sultry state of Louisiana. His style was as equally simple to play as that of Jimmy Reed.

DIMPLES – JOHN LEE HOOKER

BOOGIE CHILLEN – JOHN LEE HOOKER

After B.B. King John Lee Hooker was the most popular recognisable blues man in the world during his later years thanks to album collaborations with the likes of Carlos Santana and Van Morrison. “Boogie Chillen” his first hit was a huge record, which over the years almost defined a style of its own, and there is no doubt that Z.Z.Top built their entire career on its riff. “Dimples” was a mod anthem in Britain and actually charted in the UK some 10 years after its original American release.

THE NIGHT TIME IS THE RIGHT TIME – RAY CHARLES

HALLELUJAH I LOVE HER SO – RAY CHARLES

This song was originally recorded by R&B singer Nappy Brown and covered by Ray Charles. It was though Ray’s version that drew the attention. There is a theory that Ray Charles’ music was introduced to British musicians via Eddie Cochran on his fatal UK tour. Eddie had hits with Ray Charles songs and although Charles’ discs were released in the UK they would have made little impression. This song was immensely popular with British bands, as was “Hallelujah I Love Her So”.

SEE SEE RIDER – BEA BOOZE

As you can see this traditional blues song was popular with very different kinds of performers and despite most versions being credited as ‘traditional’, arranged by the performer, it is this version that wields the most influence. Bea Booze based her hit on and indeed credits, vintage 1920’s blues performer Ma Rainey for her version which topped the R&B charts in America for four weeks during 1942 at a time when both black and white audiences were immersed in big bands.

I WISH YOU WOULD – BILLY BOY ARNOLD

I AIN'T GOT YOU – BILLY BOY ARNOLD

Top harmonica player, Billy Boy was an early partner with Bo Diddley and “I Wish You Would” does have elements of Bo’s sound. Jimmy Reed also recorded “I Ain’t Got You” and both versions were extensively covered and performed. Although never recorded officially by them, both of these songs were important elements in the early live performances of The Rolling Stones.

SMOKESTACK LIGHTNING – HOWLIN WOLF

GOIN’ DOWN SLOW – HOWLIN’ WOLF

LITTLE RED ROOSTER – HOWLIN WOLF

SPOONFUL – HOWLIN’ WOLF

“Smokestack Lightning” was another original blues song that managed to chart in the UK when reissued. Howlin’ Wolf was idolised by many of the British groups who recorded many of his songs. “Little Red Rooster” another Willie Dixon song eventually became a No.1 pop hit for The Rolling Stones and it is worth noting that soul singer Sam Cooke took it into the US pop charts a year earlier. “Going Down Slow “ was written and originally recorded by St Louis Jimmy Oden but it was Wolf’s version that inspired the other versions over the years “Spoonful”, another hit song from Willie Dixon, was based on a Charlie Patton blues from the 20s and was covered most notably by Cream and featured heavily in their live shows.

GOOD MORNING LITTLE SCHOOLGIRL – SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON No.1

There were two Sonny Boy Williamson harmonica players and John Lee Williamson is commonly known as Sonny Boy Williamson No.1. Although not a chart hit in America this became another song like several others we have mentioned that was covered time and time again and not just by beat groups as there are blues versions too numerous to mention.

EVERYDAY I HAVE THE BLUES – LOWELL FULSON

RECONSIDER BABY – LOWELL FULSON

Originally written and recorded by Memphis Slim under the title “Nobody Loves Me” in 1949 and covered by Lowell Fulson in 1950. It was Fulson’s version that hit the charts and was then revived by B.B. King in 1955 and although it did not chart as highly as the original it did become B.B.’s theme song for the rest of his career. He has recorded it numerous times and still performs it today. The song was then a hit again for Count Basie with his vocalist Joe Williams in 1962. Fulson’s 1954 hit “Reconsider Baby” is equally important having generated numerous revivals and most importantly became an integral part of Elvis Presley’s career in his later years.

MY BABE – LITTLE WALTER

Another Willie Dixon song based on the spiritual “This Train” and another song performed live by countless groups and artists. It has generated an enormous amount of covers over the years and our list illustrates just a fraction of them.

(THEY CALL IT) STORMY MONDAY – T- BONE WALKER

T-Bone Walker was a pioneer of the electric guitar and influenced B.B.King’s guitar style tremendously. His original song was a hit in 1948 and has since become a standard generating scores of recordings.

BABY PLEASE DON’T GO – BIG JOE WILLIAMS

Recorded and written by Big Joe Williams in 1935 this has become one of the most recorded blues songs of all time generating hits for Van Morrison’s group Them and for rock guitarist Ted Nugent. A look at our list shows just how wide its appeal has been.

ST.JAMES INFIRMARY – BOBBY BLAND

Bobby Bland has also enjoyed hits with “Stormy Monday”, “Reconsider Baby” and “Goin’ Down Slow” but it was this version of the traditional tune based on an 18th Century British ballad that attracted the attention of Britain’s blues bands. Although Bobby’s version brought about numerous covers after he recorded it in 1960 its most influential version is probably Louis Armstrong’s 1928 recording.

STEPPIN OUT – MEMPHIS SLIM

Not too many covers of this instrumental but thanks to Eric Clapton it has sold a phenomenal amount of records and is about as well known as a blues song could be. Clapton first recorded it on the classic British album “John Mayall’s Blues Breaker’s featuring Eric Clapton”. Some years later it became an integral part of live performances for Clapton’s next group “Cream”, where it was used as an improvisational piece at virtually all of their concerts often running for 20 minutes.

HOW LONG HOW LONG BLUES – LEROY CARR

Leroy Carr was a big star in the 1920s and his smooth vocals and melodic piano were a huge influence over later blues performers like Charles Brown and T-Bone Walker. First recorded in 1928 and a huge hit for the period it ushered in a whole new-sophisticated blues style and continues to be recorded today.

CROSSROADS – ROBERT JOHNSON

DUST MY BROOM – ROBERT JOHNSON

RAMBLIN ON MY MIND – ROBERT JOHNSON

Probably the most influential blues artist of them all he was born in 1911 and made just 29 recordings during 1936 and 1937 and died in 1938 at the age of 27. These recordings failed to sell but did influence Muddy Waters a great deal. Johnson's slide guitar style and songs were also the basis of the career of Elmore James another influential performer. After the folk revival of the 50s Columbia Records released in 1959 the album, "King Of The Delta Blues Singers" and took his music to a new generation of listeners. "Crossroads" recorded by several blues artists in the 50s including Elmore James was another song that became an important element in the repertoire of Cream. In 1990 Columbia released every version of Johnson's songs on a 2CD set and saw it enter the US pop charts and eventually sell 250,000 copies. In celebration of his centenary during 2011 a new CD is to be released featuring new interpretations of his songs.

DON'T START ME TALKIN – SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON

The second Sonny Boy, Rice Miller, toured the UK and Europe many times and stayed for quite considerable lengths of time. He worked and recorded with both The Yardbirds and The Animals and this was his most popular and recorded number.

SO MANY ROADS, SO MANY TRAINS – OTIS RUSH

I CAN'T QUIT YOU BABY – OTIS RUSH

ALL YOUR LOVE – OTIS RUSH

Otis Rush, a Chicago based guitarist influenced by the B.B.King school of guitar was very popular with both UK and US blues players and these numbers were recorded by British pioneer John Mayall on his various albums. Willie Dixon is again the author of "I Can't Quit You Baby" which was a featured track on Led Zeppelin's 1969 debut album. "All Your Love" was another showcase for Eric Clapton on the album "John Mayall's Blues Breakers featuring Eric Clapton."

SEVENTH SON – WILLIE MABON

Yet another Willie Dixon song "Seventh Son" became much more famous via Mose Allison but it is arguable if his version or Mabon's original is the most influential. Mabon was a sophisticated Chicago club performer who had a few hits in the early 50s none of which generated the kind of cover activity that Dixon's voodoo related song has over the years. Another blues classic heard by thousands via hundreds of recordings who probably don't recognise it as a blues song.

ROLLIN & TUMBLIN – ELMORE JAMES

Like Slim Harpo, Elmore James also died before being able to capitalise on his incredible popularity outside of America. Every emerging group including the Stones performed or recorded Elmore's songs, several of which like this one were either versions of numbers first recorded by Robert Johnson or Muddy Waters. It was though the group Fleetwood Mac and their guitarist Jeremy Spencer who put Elmore's electric slide guitar on the map.

I'M SO GLAD – SKIP JAMES

Skip James was another pre war blues singer who enjoyed little commercial success until the folk revival when he was able to record again, many of the songs that had made him famous amongst record collectors. "I'm So Glad" which he wrote and recorded in 1931 may not have received many covers but it was featured on Cream's debut album "Fresh Cream" and was then a regular feature on their shows. A live version of the song is on their album, "Goodbye". Deep Purple who supported Cream on their 1968 farewell tour also featured the song on their debut album "Shades Of Deep Purple" making it another of the blues most heard songs.

THAT'S ALLRIGHT MAMA – ARTHUR BIG BOY CRUDUP

MY BABY LEFT ME – ARTHUR BIG BOY CRUDUP

Arthur Crudup enjoyed six R&B chart hits between 1945 and 1951 but neither of these songs figured. What makes these so important is that they were amongst the first songs that Elvis Presley recorded at Sun Studios and "That's All Right Mama" became his first single release. For the rest of his life Presley acknowledged Crudup as a major influence on his career. Crudup died in 1974 but had enjoyed a revival, touring and recording in the UK in 1970 and touring with Bonnie Raitt shortly before his death.

I'M A LOVER NOT A FIGHTER – LAZY LESTER

Not many covers but certainly a song that received enormous exposure in live performance and one that is still performed today. Lazy Lester is still recording and touring today and comes from the same recording stable as Slim Harpo. The song was a very early part of the repertoire of The Kinks.

MYSTERY TRAIN – JUNIOR PARKER

Written by Parker with Sun label owner Sam Phillips in 1953 the song was revived for Elvis Presley in 1955. Although only a b-side it has since become acknowledged as one of Presley's best early recordings. Parker's recording is now also considered one of the most important 'roots of rock' recordings ever to emerge from the blues scene. Parker went on to a long and successful career until his death in 1971. This is one of the most recorded songs in our collection.

HIDEAWAY – FREDDIE KING

THE STUMBLE – FREDDIE KING

Freddie was another blues guitarist influenced by the B.B.King style and it is Freddie who Eric Clapton cites as his greatest influence. These two instrumentals have been recorded countless times and were again numbers popular with live bands across Europe and America. The aforementioned Blues Breakers album features Clapton's rousing take on "Hideaway" whilst Mayall's replacement for Clapton, Peter Green recorded "The Stumble" for the album, "A Hard Road".

GOOD ROCKING TONIGHT – WYNONIE HARRIS

A No.1 R&B hit in 1948, this became Elvis' second Sun single in 1954 where it became an immediate influence over the emerging rockabilly movement. Roy Brown, who wrote the song, had offered it to Harris before recording it himself. Harris declined the song but when Brown's version hit the chart in 1948, covered it and grabbed the lion's share of sales leaving Brown stalled at No.11. As he wrote the song Brown of course continued to earn from it for the rest of his life. The various recordings of it are just too numerous to mention and our list is just a fraction.