

# John Lee Hooker

## 'The blues tells a story of people's life'

By TERRY KELLY

John Lee Hooker sings the blues with 'downhome' style.

Home is Clarksdale, Mississippi, where he was born in or around August, 1917. It is the same area, in the flat heart of the rural south, that produced such singers as Robert Johnson, now somewhat of a legend, who, although poisoned at 24, has had an effect on the blues that can still be heard.

Son House and Muddy Waters also came from this district, and Bessie Smith was killed near here in the 30s. It is a place to be from, I guess, steamy and full of the dry earth and heavy nights that come out in its artists' blues. John Lee Hooker left when he was 16 years old.

He moved around a bit, then got a job at Oak Ridge, Tennessee as a water boy, carrying water to the men who worked building the new town and the atomic plant. He used to play his guitar around the camp at night. He played then the style he plays now, and he learned it from his stepfather, Will Moore. This is what he has to-day, a "strictly down-home style" that he says is "more deep". When you listen to a John Lee Hooker record you can hear Will Moore, and perhaps other bluesmen who haven't been recorded.

From Oak Ridge Hooker went to Cincinnati, where he spent the war years. He left Cincinnati for Detroit, where he started working at a war plant.

There were more places to play in Detroit then, along Hastings Street, than there are now but as John said, "they wasn't payin' as much money." He "messed around Detroit and ran into a fella name a Elmra Barber," who had heard him play.

Elmra Barber had a record shop on Lafayette, 609 Lafayette Street. John used to go down there every night. They would sit around the back of Elmra's record shop and play. There were "drinks, wine and beer, on the table."

John cut a tape back there in Elmra's office, called Boogie Chillin'. It was cut on a dub, there were no real tapes, and Elmra carried it down to Sensation Records. They heard it and liked it.

Someone said, "Oh yea, this kid's got a tremendous voice." He was recorded. Sometimes, if he was offered a "big piece of money" to record for other companies, he would use other names.

There have been records released with Texas Slim, The Boogie Man, Birmingham Sam and his Magic Guitar, and on all of them the magic guitar was John Lee Hooker's.

He never worked in a factory again. Playing the blues in clubs every night, it was the start. He has recorded a record a year since then, often many more, sometimes alone, sometimes with a back-up group. There is more push with a band, a "good blues band", and he prefers to perform with one.

For 10 years his blues appealed strictly to blacks. It was race music. In the last 10 years it has, as he said, "really broke out among all nationalities, especially the kids."

"The kids really take to the blues. I mean I enjoy playin' for young kids. They really dig it better than the grown-up peoples. I can't understand. They really know what's happenin' with the blues. I just can't figure how the young kids know so much about the blues."

Now he tours Europe. Having been to Europe more than any other blues artist, he likes the way "the blues is really big over there," but he doesn't like England. "The food's bad, the weather's bad, and you can't get good fried chicken."

I talked to him at the Waldorf where he always stays when he is in Toronto because they have a kitchen there and he loves to cook. I went up about six o'clock on a Friday night and the living room of the suite was as dim as the late fall darkness outside. He was in the bedroom, watching T.V. lying with his arms across the sheets, his arm defined but looking smooth. Some cough syrup and an empty beer bottle stood beside the bed. It was more a conversation than an interview. He stutters sometimes, and his strong friendly smile shows short broken front teeth. This is what he said about certain things I wanted to know.

On travelling: "Do you like it?"

"Yea. Sometimes, some places. Some places I don't really enjoy. That's when it's miserable. There's some places that you go that you just — you know what I mean. Now you, you ain't got to stay there in your position. Sometimes I got to stay two and three weeks in a place I — well, the money's nice, but that ain't everything." He laughed. "Sometimes you like the peoples. They ain't as friendly in some places. One night stands; it's rough."

"What about B.B. King? Didn't he do something like 340 one night stands in a row?"

"Yea. I couldn't do that."

"You couldn't, eh?"

"I wouldn't attempt to do it. I wouldn't do it," and he leaned up and had a drink of cough syrup. "I'm not that pressed for money, Good God," and he coughed, but said it wouldn't bother his singing.

On loneliness: "At one time I had a wife," he said, "but I, you know, I ain't no more. That's where you got to learn to cook for yourself."

"You're not lonely without a wife?"

"So long as — well — you pretty happy when you do. But it's a lot of time when you got one on the road a lot. You got one and you ain't got one." We laughed. "Most time she's home. So no, it don't bother me. I'm not lonely."

"As long as you got friends where you go, eh?"

"Oh yea. I always be back home. I don't never be away



from home too long. I be away maybe a week, two weeks."

"Doesn't it bother you coming back to hotel rooms night after night?"

"You would, eh? Maybe you ain't used to it."

"But you don't mind it?"

"Naw, I come home and go to bed. But you do get kinda lonely sometimes. But sometimes I want to be alone to rest. I just come in and watch T.V. When I go to sleep it keeps me company. Most times I got somebody with me. I got a chauffer, you know. This time he ain't comin' with me. I usually take a couple a people with me all the time. Most time I get lonely when I'm overseas. Peoples nice over there but it's not like back this-a-way. I like the United States and Canada. When you in Canada you practically in the United States. You know what I mean. You ain't too far."

On the Blues: Once you recorded with the Vandellas didn't you?"

"Yea."

"Was that just to get a little bit of the soul market?"

"Yea. Now speakin' of soul. I'm glad you asked that."

"You've been waiting?"

(I hoped it wasn't a set speech but it wasn't and I believed him. He talked of his art.)

"The blues tells a story of people's life, of what people went through, the life that they livin', what they goin' through. You listen to the words. That tremendous sound. The beat the blues got. It really gets into you. Maybe it ain't happened to you, but you know what it's talkin' about."

"Who's your favorite singer of the blues?"

"Well they all good but everybody got a favorite. Little Walter; before he died."

"Like the interview I made yesterday over the radio. They say soul. But the blues is soul. Pop is not soul. I tell you why."

He softened his voice, less textured.

"You see soul music," he paused, "the blues come from your heart and soul," emphasizing soul, each word separate. "You say it with a big feelin'. Di-rect from your heart and soul. But pop music's happy music. Everybody's jumpin' around, they dancin'," he moved his fists in circles, rocking his shoulders, stretching smoothly the word dancin' "whoopin' and hollerin', that's not soul," his voice higher.

"I don't know why people call it soul. I think it originated from overseas. What we doin' is soul music. The blues is soul, because you got the blues, and you feelin' everythin'. It goin' right. You see people with their heads down," he lowered his head, "and you singin' and sometimes when you sing tears are startin' in your eyes, the person what's singin' em. It's comin' right from your heart and soul. You sing em with all your heart and soul. And it's soul." He said soul, matter of factly, finished.

"What the Vandellas were doin', they call it soul. They did a couple of good things for me. It sold pretty good, it was pretty nice. But I prefer doin' it without the chorus girls."

"Well you're O.K. now, aren't you? You don't have to scuffle like you used to?"

"Oh yea, well now it's all smooth sailin'. I gets too much work. It's work, work all the time. Really makes

good money now. It ain't like it used to be. The blues singers, they really makin' it now. I'm pretty set as far as the money wise. I just like to do this."

When he was in Toronto Hooker played at the Colonial Tavern on Yonge Street.

"That's a nice place. It's not a tough joint. I guess you've played some tough joints?"

"Wooo-eee. Have I played. Them fellas starts drinkin'. They knockin' each other out. Mostly them fights starts over a woman. They never fights the musicians. Place I do like to play is the Riverboat."

"Oh, why?"

"I like Toronto. Everybody's listenin'."

Everybody wasn't listenin' when I went to hear him on Saturday night. Perhaps it was our table, distant, but where we sat it could have been any band up there, any noise. The parade to the can went down the aisle beside us. Chicks, sullen and good-looking, went by, their skins softly pale only because of the flourescent lights. They were part of night clubs.

Now I didn't want everybody to sit and worship 12-bar blues, but some of the small salesman faces, slick for Saturday night, aspiring to a cool toughness or a loud thick-shouldered indulgence, coarse, cheek toughening smiles, caused an angry pity.

John Lee Hooker had said he didn't like people who asked him question, personal questions, about his life and other things when he was trying to rest at a club, and have a drink. But at least they'd listen when he played and not pound at their own wit as they said "O.K., chief." to the waiter.

He played, leaning slightly forward, toe-tapping by keeping his toe down and lifting his heel. It was his blues, simple and bass-voiced without too much guitar work. Honestly in that beat, not so much night hard as strong. If there was rage, it wasn't a hysterical frantic scream but a sure menace. He is a slight man and as he plays up-tempo numbers he snaps his fingers and rocks with a deliberate power.

It can be pretty tough music. A friend who hadn't heard Hooker before said that when he hears it he feels like he wants to go somewhere and get beat up. But it was only a record he heard.

There is sex in his music and it's honest. "They likes it, them soft songs," he said. "They" being women.

The backup group, The Atlanta Blues Band, had a little too much noise for the lyrics, and they weren't that tight. But sometimes you could really hear him.

After his first set he came by our table.

"Hiya kids. You made it down, eh?"

"Sure," and I introduced my girl.

"He told me he was bringin' you down. You name Sally?" It wasn't.

"He come see me yesterday, you know," his smile wrinkled. "I was in bed, the cover up."

"Pretending to lift the cover up. He stood talking, standing straight. I noticed he had a tab collar and thin tie. He hitched his pants up, then left. I really liked him.

He walked back to the stage, a square-shouldered slim and leaning walk, looking ahead.

He drank a beer very quickly, his high forehead tilted back, outlined against the light of the stage, before he got up for the next set.