

by Howard Gladstone

Toronto is a funny place as far as the blues go. You could count on one hand the number of times a serious blues artist has been in town in recent months.

Junior Well's Chicago Blues Band played to sparse crowds at the Riverboat a few months back. Albert King played second fiddle to Eric Burdon and the Animals at the cow Coliseum (imagine that!). The Cream stank out Massey Hall. Howling Wolf's Band played to a shivering and largely unresponsive outdoor audience at Mariposa. Buddy Guy did a lot more soul than blues at Time Being at the CNE to appeal to all the teenyboppers.

It looked like Toronto wasn't really a blues town at all, and then a couple of things happened to change all that. CHUM-FM switched to rock, and the Rock Pile opened. The station exposed more blues to the TO audience than they had ever heard before through such artists as Mayall, Waters, Wells, Cream, Butterfield, Wolf, and so on. After a few successes and a few failures with big name rock groups, the rock emporium decided to try a blues policy. John Lee Hooker was the first artist they brought in, with Muddy Waters, John Mayall, B.B. King, Albert King all scheduled for future appearances, depending on the response to Hooker.

Three years ago Hooker was at Burton Auditorium here at York, and the place was as empty as a Soc Sci lecture. Last summer he appeared for a gig at the Riverboat. The night I saw him, there couldn't have been more than 25 people present for the evening. When I heard he was appearing at the Rockpile I assumed the same thing would happen; instead, he played to a large and highly enthusiastic audience who really were digging his music. Obviously, a

Toronto not a blues town



John Lee Hooker

lot of people have become converted to blues in recent months.

Hooker was backed at the Rock Pile by the McKenna Mendelson Mainline, Toronto's finest band. On their own they are loud and heavy; behind Hooker, they were quiet and controlled and very professional, although one could sense they hand't had much opportunity to rehearse. Hooker kept looking around to cue them for a solo, or to become quieter. Mendelson's harmon-

ica playing, especially, was excellent. The band provided an excellent frame over which Hooker could hand his subtle and sensitive voice and guitar.

Hooker himself was excellent. He learned his guitar style from his step-father in Mississippi, and it is a style now copied and played by many blues guitarists, both white and coloured. The melodies to his songs are so subtle that it is sometimes hard to sense chord changes. His voice is perhaps the most

honest and pure in blues; you really believe what he says, and the audience was feeling it deeply. The standing ovation he received was a much more honest one than that given to the Iron Butterfly a few weeks back.

While Hooker's blues are quite urbane (he lives in Detroit), the country origins of his music are quite evident. Canned Heat, who appeared before an even larger audience on Sunday, have gone back to an even purer country

sound, practically denying the fact they come from Los Angeles. Al Wilson's country slide guitar mixes nicely and forms a neat contrast with Henry Vestine's very modern electric blues guitar. The group dedicated one song to Hooker, another to Sonny Boy Williamson — and their style paid much more than lip-service to the blues traditions. Their popular "On the Road Again" is very modern in the use of sitar and electric guitar, but it still shows deep respect for the country blues in Wilson's nasal singing and excellent harp playing.

Bob Hite, (Bear), the 300 pound lead singer of Canned Heat said that the audience had heard some good music before they had come on — meaning the Mainline.

And this brings me to a question. Why does any group from Toronto have to leave this city before they receive the recognition they deserve? Steppenwolf left for California; the Band went to Woodstock; even groups like the Market and the Paupers had to leave before they were recognized in their home town. And now the Mainline is splitting for England where "blues is king," as John Lee Hooker said.

Why? If Toronto is ever going to be more than a concert site, good bands from this city will have to be appreciated here before they leave, not after they are applauded in other cities. The Mainline played to a practically empty house at the Rock Pile a few weeks back — there is nothing that can justify this, for they are at least as good as many of the name groups that drew packed houses.

It would be nice if one day they could come back and appear at the Rockpile as a headline attraction, not a backup group. No, even that is unimportant; just as long as they are recognized as being the fine band they are.

Jerry Shiner

RICHLER - BITING BUT FUNNY

by David McCaughna

Hunting Tigers Under Glass Mordecai Richler, McClelland and Stewart, \$5.95.

Hunting Tigers Under Glass is a small collection of Mordecai Richler's essays published over some years in magazines like *The New York Review of Books*, *Commentary*, and *Macleans*. He states in the foreword: "These essays and reports, written over seven years, are knit with three themes: Jewish experience, concern with literary matters, and the changing Canadian scene. More often than not, the themes are entwined, which is only natural. After all, I'm a Jewish writer from Canada." Indeed, Richler's essays cover a surprisingly wide range of topics, aside from the obvious Canadian based ones he writes on George Plimpton (*Paper Lion*), comic books, films, Mailer, Jews in sports, Malamud, and recollections of his first journey to Israel.

Richler rarely bores, even when he deals with usually prosaic topics like sports his wit and vivid prose style bring the subjects to life. He wrote the essays for pleasure and they can be read as such. Richler's essays are not great, important works but are simply knit and enjoyable. What he has to say usually isn't terribly earth-shattering but he often displays a perceptive glint into all-too frequently written about subjects.

Richler has a sort of love-hate relationship with Canada. He is, for instance, somewhat dubious about the nation's current culture craze: "For now that the country is culture-crazed and more preoccupied than ever before with its own absence of a navel, how one yearns for Canada's engaging buckeye suspicion of art and artists of not so long ago." But he doesn't really see Canadian culture as anything really Canadian, anyway, but simply as an American import — a conclusion which does not take a great deal of insight to discover.



Photo by Allan Lamb

Mordecai Richler

"To be a Jew and a Canadian is to emerge from the ghetto twice, for self-conscious Canadians, like some touchy Jews, tend to contemplate the world through a wrong-ended telescope." Yet Richler has a pride and a mellowed, nostalgic love of his country. While laughing at the idiosyncrasies and follies of his nation he has a passion for it. Twice in **Hunting Tigers Under Glass** he repeats a joke to illustrate the insipid haste of English speaking Canada to accommodate French Canadians: "A man sitting by a pool sees a lady drowning. 'Help, help,' she cries. He rushes over to the French Canadian lifeguard and shouts, 'Aren't you going to do anything?' 'I can't swim,' he says. 'What! You're a lifeguard and you can't swim?' 'I don't have to. I'm bilingual.'"

Especially amusing is an essay on the Catskill resort area of New York. This section of the state is full of gaudy resorts catering to Jewish holidayers from New York City. Richler is deft and biting but never stoops to vindictiveness. He views the social pretenses of his fellow Jews with a pity as they escape the summer torments of the city only to be re-embraced by ultra-city comforts, kept busy with social games, staying safely away from the natural beauties of the Catskills.

Although Richler is always aware of his Jewishness, he never becomes maudlin or narrow-sighted. In Israel, soft spot for many Jews, he keenly observes an ironical attitude of many Jews there. Like the Jerusalem lawyer who, when Richler argues that the Arabs should be given a fair shake in what is their land too, says, "All right. Conditions in their camps are deplorable. However, the conditions I lived under in Dachau were worse."

Hunting Tigers Under Glass is a highly enjoyable little book that reveals Mordecai Richler's wit and perceptiveness with the essay form. With the publication of this collection and of **Cocksure** last spring Richler has certainly merged as Canada's most significant popular writer.