

This Day in History... April 30, 1983

Death of Muddy Waters

On April 30, 1983, legendary blues musician Muddy Waters died in Westmont, Illinois. Dubbed the “Father of Modern Chicago Blues,” Waters had dozens of hits over the years and has been a major influence for generations of musicians.

Waters was born McKinley Morganfield in Mississippi. His exact birthdate is unknown, often cited as either 1913 or 1915. April 4, 1913 is generally accepted as his likely birthdate. Waters’ mother died shortly after he was born, and he was raised by his grandmother. She gave him the nickname “Muddy” when he was young because he liked to play in the muddy waters of Deer Creek.

Waters discovered his love for music in church and taught himself to play harmonica when he was young. He bought his first guitar when he was 17 and played his music around town. During the 1930s, Waters also toured the Mississippi Delta with Big Joe Williams, playing harmonica on stage.

In 1941, ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax came to town to record blues musicians for preservation by the Library of Congress. He recorded Waters right in his own house, and when he heard it played back, he couldn’t believe how it sounded, later saying “I sounded just like anybody’s records.” When he received a copy of the record, he took it to a local jukebox and played it over and over. Lomax recorded Waters again the following year and these recordings were later released for sale.

Waters moved to Chicago in 1942, a haven for blues musicians, hoping to make it big. He made ends meet by driving a truck and working in a factory during the day, then playing in clubs at night. Big Bill Broonzy invited Waters to open his shows, giving him the chance to perform in front of large crowds. Fellow musician Willie Dixon remarked that while most other musicians were playing sad blues, “Muddy was giving his blues a little pep.”

Waters started recording with other musicians in 1946. Two years later, he scored his first big hits with “I Can’t Be Satisfied” and “I Feel Like Going Home.” His signature song, “Rollin’ Stone,” was released in 1950, also becoming an instant hit.



Howlin’ Wolf was once part of Waters’ band and after he left, the two had a rivalry that lasted for years.

1951 was a great year for Muddy. His records for the Aristocrat label were being played on black radio stations all over the south. One of Chicago’s best blues clubs, Smitty’s Corner, made Muddy Waters the house band. And what a band it was! Each musician was a top-rate entertainer, many of whom went on to have their own successful careers. Some of these musicians included Little Walter Jacobs, Jimmy Rogers, Elgin Evans, Otis Spann, and Howlin’ Wolf. Together they recorded such hits as “Hoochie Coochie Man,” “I Just Want to Make Love to You,” and “I’m Ready.” Muddy’s band had a distinctive sound with wailing harmonica, heavy piano, bass, and drum rhythms, and slashing slide guitar from Muddy. Perhaps the band’s greatest feature was Muddy’s physical, aggressive vocals, which were drenched with emotion.

Waters had several hits throughout the 1950s, many which climbed the charts, including “Sugar Sweet,” “Trouble No More,” “Forty Days and Forty Nights,” “Don’t Go No Farther,” and “Got My Mojo Working.” In 1958 he brought electric blues to England, which had only known acoustic blues up to that point. Their performances inspired several rising musicians from such notable groups as The Rolling Stones (named for Waters’ hit song), Cream, and Fleetwood Mac.

In 1960, Waters recorded one of the first live blues albums at the Newport Jazz Festival. And in 1963, he performed in the first of many annual tours of Europe as part of the American Folk Blues Festival. Waters scored his first Grammy Award in 1971, for Best Ethnic or Traditional Recording. He went on to win five more in the same category over the next decade. Waters continued to record, perform, and tour until his health began to quickly decline in 1982. He died from heart failure on April 30, 1983.

Several spots in Chicago have been named in Waters’ honor and his boyhood home in Clarksdale, Mississippi is now the Delta Blues Museum. He’s been inducted into the Blues and Rock and Roll Halls of Fame, with four of his hits listed among the 500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll. Several musicians have recorded Waters’ songs or cited him as an influence including The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Led Zeppelin, Allman Brothers Band, Humble Pie, Steppenwolf, and AC/DC, among countless others. After his death, B.B. King said of Waters, “It’s going to be years and years before most people realize how greatly he contributed to American music.”



From the 1994 Blues and Jazz Singers issue



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