

Blues Man

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By the time he was ten, Hubert Sumlin was smoking cigarettes and watching blues singers perform in the rough Mississippi delta roadhouses. Today, at age 74, he's proud that Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards and blues-rocker Eric Clapton cite him as one of their major influences. Sumlin also happens to live right here in Milwaukee.

Story by Larry Widen

In no other musical genre can one find the dichotomy that comprises the essence of the blues. In song after song, the sacred exists, albeit uncomfortably, alongside the profane. In one verse, the singer may be plotting to put a bullet between the eyes of a cheating woman; in the next he's searching for redemption and his own little piece of heaven. At the core of the blues is the enduring myth surrounding Robert Johnson, the now-legendary "King of the Delta Blues." As the story goes, Johnson's musical prowess was the result of an unholy deal forged one dark night in 1931 at the crossroads of Mississippi state highways 61 and 49. Kneeling in the dirt, Johnson sold his soul to the Devil, who then tuned the singer's guitar so he could literally play any song. A ferocious bolt of lightning from the sky sealed their pact.



1931 was also the year future blues icon Hubert Sumlin was born in the plantation town of Greenwood, Mississippi. No lightning was recorded that evening. Times were harsh in the middle of the Great Depression, especially in the rural South. Sumlin's family, like many others, struggled to make ends meet. His father was a sharecropper who farmed 25 acres of plantation land, growing cotton, tobacco and vegetables. After dinner, the Sumlins often gathered around an old wind-up Victrola and listened to records. "I guess I was about six years old when I found these old Robert Johnson records in somebody's trash," Sumlin says. "They were pretty beat up and I could only play half of the song in some cases, but man, when I heard Robert sing and play that guitar, I knew I wanted to do that too." Sumlin and his older brother, A.D., tried to emulate Johnson's slide guitar style by stretching wires across nails pounded into the wall. "We played them wires all the time," Sumlin says. "And believe it or not, we actually got pretty good."

One summer day in 1938, Sumlin's mother gave him a guitar she bought at the Greenwood drug store. "That old round-hole cost her \$5.00," he says. "And she didn't make but \$8.00 a week." As Sumlin and his brother took turns playing the guitar, the singer Robert Johnson lay dying in a house just blocks away. A jealous husband had slipped Johnson a glass of whiskey laced with strychnine. The blues singer was 27 years old that August night when the Devil arrived to complete their bargain.

In the months to come, Sumlin devoted countless hours to practicing on his guitar. He also began sneaking into the local roadhouse taverns where black musicians were allowed to play. These were dangerous places for adults, much less a boy of ten. On Saturday nights, the bootleg whiskey flowed freely and tempers flared. A casual glance at another man's woman often erupted into violence, sometimes fatally. Hours later the sunrise and Sunday church services offered redemption, the sacred once again co-existing with the profane.

"At that time Howling Wolf's band was playing a lot, and I went off to see them every chance I got," Sumlin says. "I used to find a lady walking into the roadhouse and I'd kind of slip under her skirts to get past the man at the door." Sumlin says once inside he was inevitably caught and thrown out. "So I hit upon the idea of piling a bunch of Coca-Cola cases on top of each other by the outside wall," he says. "I'd climb on top of those crates and watch the band through a little space by the exhaust fan." One

night, as Sumlin was in his precarious perch, the fan fell into the building and onto the stage. Sumlin, who had been leaning against it, followed in its wake. "Wolf picked me up and made the manager get me a chair," Sumlin says. "I watched the whole show sitting right by the stage."

Afterwards, Howling Wolf took Sumlin home and explained the situation to his mother. "She was very nice to Wolf, and thanked him for bringing me home," Sumlin says. "But after he left, she whipped me bad! She was so mad at me! I guess it didn't take, though, 'cause next week I was right back there again watching the band."



Sumlin's opportunity to become a professional musician came in his early teens when he met harmonica player James Cotton at school. "Cotton had a little band that asked me to join," Sumlin says. "We played any place that would have us. It was a real turning point for me, though. You get real good real fast when you got an audience looking at you." Sumlin says he never made much money in those days, but it didn't matter. "You gotta remember, all my life we were poor folks. I was used to having nothing," he says. "So I could eat real well for a dime."

Sumlin never lost touch with Howling Wolf, who in turn was always looking out for his young protégé. At the time, Wolf had a weekly radio show on a West Memphis, Arkansas radio station and often invited local performers on the show. "You know, Wolf heard me and Cotton one time and liked the band's sound," Sumlin says. "He gave us 15 minutes on his show one night, more than he ever gave anybody else." After the show, Howling Wolf invited Sumlin to sit in with his band at a little club on 15th Street in West Memphis. "Maybe that was my job audition, I don't know," Sumlin says. "I took a few more years, but when I was 22, I finally got the call to join Wolf for real."

Howling Wolf's fame was beginning to extend beyond the confines of the Mississippi Delta in 1954. Chicago had a large African American population and Wolf, like many blues artists, migrated from the South to work in one of the city's many bars and nightclubs. The veteran bluesman offered Sumlin a permanent position as lead guitarist with his band. Although Sumlin stayed with Howling Wolf for the next 25 years, the initial relationship was fraught with tension. "Wolf had a certain sound, and he felt the guitar needed to come in at certain points underneath his voice," Sumlin says. "I bet I was fired from that band 200 times while I was learning what he wanted me to play. Sometimes I was fired for five minutes, sometimes for one or two days. I had to listen to him, though. He was 20 years older than me!" Eventually the two musicians were able to agree on a unique sound that led to hits like "Evil" and "Smokestack Lighting."

But times and tastes were changing. By the end of the 1950's, younger African-Americans wanted no part of the blues. Sumlin speculates that in their minds the blues might have been a link to a negative part of history. "Maybe it reminded them of slavery or the cotton field hollers and chain gang songs, I don't know." In any case, with their audience dwindling, blues bands were finding it harder and harder to secure bookings.

What none of them knew at the time was that the blues were being rediscovered 4,000 miles away by a handful of British teenagers from working-class families. Heavily influenced by the earliest Elvis Presley records and movies like 1956's "Rock Around the Clock," future music superstars such as Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, and George Harrison all amassed precious personal collections of recordings by virtually unknown American blues performers. By teaching themselves to play guitars from these records, Clapton, Harrison and Richards fueled the riff-driven rock rhythms that launched the so-called British Invasion. By the late 1960's, a second wave of blues-based hard rock came from bands like Led Zeppelin, Cream, Humble Pie and Deep Purple, to name just a few. There's some irony to be found in the way English musicians were able to successfully reinvent one of the only original American art forms and sell it back to white American audiences who accepted it as brand new.

As bands like The Rolling Stones, Beatles and Yardbirds gained fame in the United States, they went to great lengths to pay homage to their mentors. When the Stones were scheduled to perform on the television show "Shindig" in 1965, they insisted Howling Wolf and his band perform on the show with them. Between 1969 and 1972, Stones' guitarist Keith Richards made several unpublicized pilgrimages into the Mississippi Delta to search out the last of the original blues performers. And when Howling Wolf was invited to make a record with some musicians in London, Eric Clapton refused to take part unless Sumlin came along with the deal.



"Fellows like Keith and Eric and the others, they're just great men," Sumlin says. "I've heard people complain that all they did was steal everything from the old blues singers, but you know that's not true. Me and Wolf and Muddy [Waters] learned things from Robert Johnson and Charley Patton. Then the English kids learned things from me and guys of my era. We're all just passing the torch here." Sumlin says the reason blues music continues to reach new audiences is because it's a realistic reflection of the human condition. "Men are always gonna be men, and women are always gonna be women," Sumlin says.

"The blues don't try to hide any of that."

When Howling Wolf lay dying in a Chicago hospital in 1976, he asked Sumlin for his mother, who he hadn't seen in 20 years. "I went down to Mississippi to fetch her, but she wouldn't come and visit him, even one last time," Sumlin says. "She told me, 'He knows what he done... he's been playin' the Devil's music all these years.'"

After the Wolf's death, Sumlin began playing occasionally with James Cotton, Muddy Waters, Les Paul and many other noted musicians. He stayed busy for the next 20 years playing in Howling Wolf tribute shows around the world and guest starring on his friends' various CDs. By 1994, Sumlin had relocated to a house on Milwaukee's northwest side to be closer to his wife's family. The same year he lost his mother. "You know, she lived to be 99 years old," Sumlin says. "She was a wonderful woman who made a lot of sacrifices so her kids could have things. I'm glad she lived so long and saw what that first \$5.00 guitar led to."

In the last few years, Sumlin has had serious health problems. After a cancerous lung was removed, he suffered a heart attack just a few months later. "Even after I had that lung out, I still didn't quit smoking. It took a heart attack to straighten me out," Sumlin says. "Today I got three stents in my arteries. But I don't smoke or drink anymore, and I feel real good."

While Sumlin was recuperating, Keith Richards asked him to join the Stones onstage at New York City's Roseland Ballroom. Director Martin Scorsese also invited Sumlin to participate in a huge tribute to the blues held at Radio City Music Hall. That concert became the film "Lightning in a Bottle," and was released in December of last year. Sumlin says it took a lot of his energy just to make the appearances, but the effort ultimately speeded up his recovery. "Playing those concerts made me want to get healthy and stay healthy," he says.

Now in his mid-70's, Sumlin was recently named one of Rolling Stone magazine's Top 100 Guitar Players. His new CD, "About Them Shoes," recorded with Richards, Eric Clapton and a host of other friends, has just been released. He's also touring the United States and Europe on a rigorous concert schedule, hardly looking like a man who was close to death two years ago. "I still got some blues to play," Sumlin says. "I'm planning to stick around for a while."