

THE Friday EDITION BLUES crossroads

The continuing saga of John Lee Hooker and Eagle Park Slim



John Lee Hooker

"You have to pay your dues if you want to sing the blues"

— Ringo Starr, 1971.

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“Are you ready? I said are you ready for The Man, ladies and gentlemen. Are you ready for the Godfather of the Blues? Please welcome John Lee Hooker!” The portly bar announcer makes way for the gray-suited black man riding the crest of a good vibe wave caused by the genuine admiration and plentiful beer inside Mother’s Mattress Company, a Corvallis club. Hooker’s welcome is reminiscent of the cheers accompanying the return of a long gone prize-fighting champion.

Forty miles south and a few hours earlier at Zoo Zoo’s health food restaurant in Eugene, a 220-pound bluesman with the unlikely sobriquet of Eagle Park Slim, parks himself and his acoustic in a wooden chair. Underneath a purple Gay Pride banner, he strums and sings an old traditional called “Easy Rider,” as his washboard bassist plunks out the beat. The five customers chomp down their tempeh and omelets fairly oblivious to the background music. It might as well be Muzak to them.

Story by
Paul Sturtz

Photos by
Hank Trotter

Eagle Park Slim, 43, and John Lee Hooker, 68, represent a two-generation blues odyssey that started in the fields of the South, transplanted to urban areas like St. Louis and Detroit in the 1940s, and was finally smuggled to the West Coast.

Eagle Park’s trip began in 1942 after his parents stopped cotton-picking in Arkansas to start a tavern in Eagle Park, Illinois, just over the bridge from St. Louis. Every weekend The Village Tavern was a magnet for area blues enthusiasts and sometimes the blues legends. People like Albert King, Little Milton and Sonny Boy Williamson would at one time or another make their way to the tavern.

One night in 1958, two years after Slim started learning guitar from bands stopping through, his idol, Chuck Berry found his way over the bridge. “He had just recorded a tune called ‘Sweet Little 16,’ one of his first hits,” Eagle Park remembers. “He came rolling out to my mama’s place in a big Cadillac. My dad started hollering ‘Chuck Berry’s here, Chuck Berry’s here!’ And so he came in and played a tune and I got a chance to jam with him.”

That same year, Slim had his first experience with the big, bad, evil music business. His first band made a rhythm & blues record entitled, “Shirley, Can’t You See” and were told by their manager that they would have to play a number of promotional dates without pay. After they enthusiastically played the shopping centers and bars, the manager pocketed the money.

“I was a kid. The man screwed us around, one of those type stories,” Slim says.

Now you know how some people get the blues.

In 1948, 10 years before Slim had his first whiff of music business deception, John Lee Hooker had already tasted stardom as his eccentric brand of blues first hit with “Boogie Chillen,” a record that still ranks as his favorite.

Unlike B.B. King and Muddy Waters, other legendary bluesmen of the time, who made the classic sojourn northward to Chicago, Hooker decided to go to Detroit and work at the Ford Factory. “I never did want to go to Chicago. I left home at 14 and I wound up in Memphis, Cincinnati and then Detroit. I wanted to live in Detroit so I’d have a big field all by myself.”

My phone interview with the Hook talking from his home in San Carlos, California began inauspiciously enough. “I was wondering if you had a few minutes to talk about you and your music,” I began. He shot back, “As long as it doesn’t take long.”

Informed from a conversation with a Hooker acquaintance, I thought I would try my pre-planned icebreaker: “I hear you like to talk about baseball, women and music.” I got a cold response, a pungent “Huh?”

Trying to regroup, I could think of nothing other than to repeat the question. This time Hooker said with his characteristic growl, “Well I love baseball and I love women. If you’re a man, you got to like women.”

As for music, Hooker says, “It picks you up. It means everything to me and that’s my life.”

Having dispensed with the topics at hand, I decided to go see Hooker up in Corvallis. Despite his age, he is still able to tour four to six months a year — the Corvallis gig was one stop on a six-city tour up to Vancouver, British Columbia. He is still able to the some of the energy that inspired white blues and R&B groups like Canned Heat, ZZ Top, and the Animals (who revamped his 1962 hit “Boom Boom”) in days gone by.

All Hooker has to do is growl a few choice lines and throw in a few choice guitar licks on his red guitar, and the effect is completely satisfying. “Let’s get down in the mud now,” or “Let’s do the boogie,” were all that was needed to send the crowd into paroxysms of raucous cheers.

His crack backup band, the Coast-to-Coast Blues Band, provided the up-to-date effects needed to make the boogie sound vital in 1985.

“It’s a complete turnaround. It’s an entirely different world,” Hooker says. “You have to change with the times. As the times change and the music change, I try to change with it. I got the same beat but I build a young group around it.”

Though it’s probable that Hooker tours partly for the money, he says he’s set for life. “I live off royalties from other singers doing my songs.” After Hooker has announced near the end of the show that he’ll give an autograph to



Eagle Park Slim

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