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GEORGE MITCHELL

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# **ROBERT JUNIOR LOCKWOOD AND THE BLUES**

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DOWN HOME

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UNCHANGING

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OLD FASHIONED

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These are some of the words that come to the minds of many people when they think of folk music. But human beings are creative animals, and they have a tendency to change things of value handed down to them by their forefathers to fit their own way of life. This has certainly been the case with that type of folk music called blues. Two powerful social forces—migration to the cities and advancing technology—changed blues as they changed the way of life of the people who sang and played blues.

Blues were born in the relative quiet and solitude of the fields and shacks of black sharecroppers in the rural South. At the end of a day's toil, a man might get out his old acoustic guitar or harmonica and make music, accompanied only by the crickets and katydids.

But new farm machinery reduced the need for the hand laborer, and hundreds of thousands of black people were forced to move to northern cities, where the way of life was different. The cities were crowded and loud, and music played and sung

by one man no longer fit the needs of either musicians or listeners. But the emotions expressed in the old blues were still there, so the natural move was to basically retain the music of the South but to add more and louder instruments. So when the electric guitar was introduced, bluesmen adopted it immediately.

Another important technological influence on the blues, the phonograph record, made it possible for musicians of one region to incorporate into their own music the styles of musicians from other regions. Beginning in the 1920's, hundreds of country bluesmen who previously had been heard only by their friends were brought into the homes of thousands via the record player. American blacks have never looked upon blues as a quaint folk music; until the late fifties, blues was simply the popular music of the day for them. But during the last decade, the popularity of blues among a black audience has steadily declined, and today it is difficult to find a black night club featuring a blues band. The major devotees of blues today



are young middle-class whites, who have psychedelized this music of the shacks of the South and the ghettos of the North.

The life of Robert Junior Lockwood, of Cleveland, Ohio, reflects all of these trends in blues.

Lockwood was born in 1916 on a farm near Marvelle, Arkansas, where he lived until he was about seven. He then moved to St. Louis to live with his mother, but they soon returned South, and Lockwood spent most of the first half of his life in Helena, Arkansas.

"I quit school in the seventh grade and started to work and never went back," recalls Lockwood. "My mother was working as a cook and wasn't getting paid nothing, and a man could get paid ten or fifteen dollars a week. So I just stopped her from working. When I first quit school, I was chopping and picking cotton, but most of the time I was carrying water, and I got paid a dollar a day. Then I started carrying water in a levee camp, but I didn't have to do that kind of work long because I started playing guitar when I was thirteen and by the time I was seventeen or eighteen I was playing professional. At that time, all the musicians was playing house parties and things like that, just them and their guitar, just playing by themselves. They would pay you about a dollar and half a night; start playing around 9 or 10 o'clock and play till day."

Lockwood learned to play guitar from the legendary Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson, whom Lockwood claims as his stepfather since Johnson lived with his mother for about six years. "I was thirteen years old when Robert Johnson got with my mother. He was about eighteen and she was twenty-eight. They met in Helena. He was just there playing. See, back in that time, dudes like Robert and Blind Lemon Jefferson, they didn't have no booking agent like the fellows have now. And they didn't have any help; you know, they just played the guitar by themselves and played on the streets, and they made a pretty decent buck.

"Well, Robert was the best thing that could have ever happened to me because I had always wanted to play.

Just as fast as he put the guitar down, I picked it up. And he saw I was really interested in playing, so he finally taught me. And I learned real fast. In about two weeks, I was playing two or three songs. And Robert left and went down in Texas and stayed six or eight months and when he came back I was playing all the songs on the records we had by him. And that dude played some curious guitar.



"At that time, I sounded so much like him that sometimes people got confused as to who was Robert Johnson. Once I went to Clarksdale with Robert, and he was playing on one end of this bridge and I was playing on the other and people was just going to and from across that bridge; they was real confused.

"And then after Robert got killed ... I just wouldn't accept the fact that he was dead, you know. Anyway, it was after Robert had died, and I went to Elaine, Arkansas, and I played that Saturday down there on the streets. And I came home to Helena that Sunday, and somebody told me, 'You know, I seen Robert Johnson down to Elaine.' So I went back to Elaine trying to find him, and it finally come to me that it was me they had seen down there.

"When I first learned to play, I was playing by myself. And there was no such thing as an electric guitar. We had acoustic guitars then

and the people had to be real quiet. I don't think I would like to play like that again. You know, a lot of people have asked me about playing by myself. Uh-uh, I don't think so. I just got used to playing with bands and trios, and I just wouldn't feel comfortable playing by myself. That's what they call folk song, right? I feel like that's for dudes when it's just about over; that's just for somebody who's just about washed up, who's just about given up, who ain't never going to try to progress no more. You know, when I was a kid, it was exciting to play music, period. But, I mean, as the years pass, man, things change."

Things were really beginning to change in 1940 when Lockwood visited Chicago to cut two records of his own. And, from 1941 until 1943, he played guitar over the radio in Helena with one of the first famous bluesmen to form a band, the second Sonny Boy Williamson. After having his own program for a year, he moved to West Memphis and met B. B. King, with whom he played for about a year. In 1945, he moved to Chicago and for the next twenty-six years played guitar with such well-known bluesmen as Sonny Boy, Little Walter, and Otis Spann.

He moved to Cleveland in 1960. The demand for blues was no longer so great, and during the last ten years Lockwood has played only sporadically. But recently he has appeared in a couple of blues festivals and recorded an album for Delmark Records.

In Cleveland, he holds a job during the day and on weekends plays and sings with a young white blues band in which the electric instruments are turned all the way up.

"Things sure do change," Robert reflected.



GEORGE MITCHELL is the author-photographer of *BLOW MY BLUES AWAY*, a book on black country blues from the Mississippi delta. Formerly an award-winning writer for the *Columbus News*, Columbus, Georgia, he is presently writing a book on black teenagers of the rural South. 10M/12,