

# REVIEWS



## Albums

**GENESIS III  
SWEET HOME CHICAGO**  
Various Artists  
Chess (UK) 6641 174

My Head Can't Rest Anymore: Take A Little Walk With Me (Baby Face Leroy); Dark Road: Big World: Overseas\*: Playhouse (Floyd Jones); It Must Have Been The Devil: Five Spot (Otis Spann); Eight Ball\* (Gus Jenkins); One Of These Days: Murmur Low (Big Boy Spires); I Declare That Ain't Right\*: Matchbox Blues\* (Little Henry); Sad Story: Elgin Movements\*: Date Bait\* (Blue Smitty)/Mean Red Spider: Hard Days\*: Burying Ground\*: Last Time I Fool Around With You\*: Screaming And Crying: Where's My Woman Been: Rollin' And Tumblin' Pts. 1 & 2: Stuff You Gotta Watch\*: Lonesome Day\*: Iodine In My Coffee\*: Flood\*: I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man: Oh! Yeh: Smokestack Lightning\* (Muddy Waters)/Juke: Boogie\*: Mean Old World: Sad Hours: Don't Have To Hunt No More: Tonight With A Fool: Quarter To Twelve: Blues With A Feeling: Last Boogie\*: Fast Boogie\*: Light's Out: You're So Fine: Blue Light: Last Night: Thunderbird: I Got To Go (Little Walter)/Today, Today Blues: The World Is In A Tangle: She Loves Another Man: Hard Working Man\*: Chance To Love: My Little Machine\*: Mistreated Baby\*:

What's The Matter\*: You're The One\* (Jimmy Rogers); Rattlesnake: It Was A Dream: Ice Cream Man: Lifetime Baby\*: Tough Times: Go Away: That Ain't Right (John Brim)

\*previously unissued

Before getting down to the business of reviewing the music contained in this latest and arguably best Genesis box, I think it would be appropriate to use this opportunity to make a few comments about some of the prevailing attitudes towards reissue albums. As it is, the release of both new and reissued product has proliferated in recent years to a point where in the foreseeable future we will reach a state of saturation, especially with regards to reissues.

Ironically enough this previously uncontemplatable situation will have been brought about by the many bootleg companies whose ambitious, often overlapping, programmes have flooded the market with sometimes poorly planned product. Though we have all benefited from these records, it is frequently infuriating to have to duplicate up to half an album of tracks to acquire three of four new ones. More than this, it creates hell when you are asked to compile albums by a company whose catalogue is already well plundered by indiscriminate bootleggers. Do you satisfy collectors by avoiding duplication or do you provide the

company with the most commercially viable compilation? Having been involved in several abortive reissue programmes for major companies, I know how hard it is to persuade them first to initiate and then to persevere with blues releases.

So, given the many problems of preparing a Genesis box, I think the continuing achievements of this exemplary series of records should be emphasised at a time when the fainter hearts at Polydor squash Simon Gee's admirable Juke Blues series and the new brooms at RCA have swept any thoughts of blues reissues firmly down the trumpet. In fact, along with the erratic Vintage releases in America and Genesis and the 'Golden Decade' series in England, the Chess/Checker catalogues must have more reissued product on the market than any other company; and though there must inevitably be some duplication of material, I hope it is possible to keep both programmes alive. For though the Vintage series has made available a significant amount of previously unissued recordings and repackaged many legendary performances, its intentions seem to have been a haphazard conjunction of commerciality and documentary interest, ranging from unambitious but worthwhile collections by Jimmy Rogers and Little Walter, covering old ground with Muddy, Wolf and Elmore James, to curiosities like the J.B. Lenoir album and some albums of real value to me like the Albert King/Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, Lowell Fulson and Sonny Boy records. I think the essential difference between the Vintage and Genesis projects is that the former is largely devoted to a one-album-one-artist formula, whereas the latter is an attempt to document the different phases of the postwar blues resurgence as reflected in the Chess and Checker catalogues. Each set of records has a definite theme, each a logical follow-up to its predecessor, each complementing the other volumes, creating a unique memorial to some of the finest artists to emerge from Chicago (and Memphis) and the men who recorded them.

And so to Genesis III, subtitled 'Sweet Home Chicago' and compiled by Mike Rowe. The time span is six and a half years from Muddy's 'Mean Red Spider' recorded in November 1948 to Walter's 'I Got To Go' recorded at the end of April 1955. In fact, it is Walter's presence that dominates all four records, covering his development from the gifted disciple of John Lee Williamson to the most dynamic, forceful and original harmonica player Chicago has yet seen. Apart from the sixteen tracks of Album 3 devoted to his own recordings, he is also featured on another 21 tracks by Floyd Jones, Muddy, Jimmy Rogers and John Brim. This is not just a deliberate tribute to one man's achievements, for one of the many things that these records make you realise is just how fundamental his contributions were to the success of many Chess releases.

One look at the amount of asterisks above will show how much previously unissued music has been included, though I would dispute the pedantry of classing three of the twenty-three unissued items as such; the John Brim title was on a Blue Horizon album that had the

unofficial blessing of Marshall Chess and subsequently appeared in a slightly amended form in the Vintage series; and if you have the Sunnyland Muddy album you will already have rather low-fi versions of 'Flood' and 'Smokestack Lightning'. But against such petty criticism we also get two records that were listed for release, one of which never made the market and the other hardly left the company warehouse, namely John Brim's 'Rattlesnake' and 'It Was A Dream' and Walter's 'Don't Have To Hunt No More' and 'Tonight With A Fool'. Almost without exception, the unissued tracks are of astonishingly high quality, particularly in the case of the eight new Muddys, the five new Jimmy Rogers and that ultimate 'Boogie' of Little Walter's. It is hard to understand why any of the unissued Muddy titles never saw the light of day before now, unless it was a surfeit of first-rate material, or in the case of 'Last Time I Fool Around With You' and 'Stuff You Gotta Watch' it was a question of maintaining Muddy's commercial identity.

Taking the records consecutively, Album One opens with Baby Face Leroy Foster's JOB single that was leased to Chess, with Snooky Pryor's very sensitive harmonica accompaniment. This was long thought to be Little Walter, and shows the truth of Jimmy Rogers' statement that Pryor was the first man in Chicago to use an amplified harmonica. Otis Spann's controversial single follows, with his 'strangled' voice further obscured by some fairly harsh distortion. Jody Williams is easily distinguishable as lead guitarist on 'Devil', but is that really B.B. King on 'Five Spot'? Now I have a fairly sacrilegious confession to make. I have never found it easy to listen to Floyd Jones' 'Dark Road' and 'Big World', and with the two other titles from the session all in one go, I'm afraid I get something of the feeling I used to feel listening to whole Walter Davis sessions — strain. The very spare, pedestrian accompaniment, with Walter and Jimmy Rogers very restrained behind Jones' sometimes diffident voice, force the listener's attention onto the lyrics. It is important and necessary that Floyd Jones and the prewar traditions that he represents should be included here. but for my own pleasure I shall play the other sides. I feel much the same about the Big Boy Spires record as well (gasp!), and though again it is right to include it, perhaps it has seen the light of day a little too often to make its proper and justified impression here.

This can hardly be said of the rest of Side Two of this album, since only one other side has been previously issued. Gus Jenkins' 'Eight Ball' has only harmonica and drums to back his piano, but Walter Horton provides a typically stirring accompaniment to Jenkins' recording debut. The debt to Walter Davis comes as a surprise after hearing some of Jenkins' later records. What ought to have been Henry Gray's recording debut are both fairly routine numbers, which have gained immeasurable importance by being the only examples of Henry Strong's harmonica playing. His debt to Walter is obvious, but if he had lived he would definitely have challenged Walter's subsequent lionisation. Blue Smitty's three sides make you

wonder how a band with him and Muddy together must have sounded. A distinctly urban singer and guitarist, hard to categorise, his accompanists include an excellent pianist by the name of Melron Jett, sounding like a fugitive from Looney Tunes.

Album Two is devoted to Muddy Waters, and in itself is a magnificent achievement. For me, what Mike Rowe has done here is to finally fix Muddy firmly into context with his Chicago contemporaries. For the first time we are given other facets of Muddy as a performer, which allow a fuller, more complete impression of the sort of repertoire his band must have been playing during the early '50s. Before this album I had tended to think of Muddy and then the other Chicago bluesmen; now he takes his position amongst his fellow artists, still the most charismatic figure and their leader, but no longer set apart. As I've already said, the quality of the unissued material on this album is at least the equal of that issued at the time. Both 'Hard Days' and 'Burying Ground', besides having been already recorded in 1946 for Columbia in markedly different style, are excellent; the latter title was re-recorded as 'Sad Letter Blues' a year later and despite Little Walter's presence on that, it's odds-on that this first version was the best. The two titles that do most to alter our views of Muddy are 'Last Time I Fool Around With You' and 'Stuff You Gotta Watch'. Johnnie Jones' great rocking piano leads off 'Last Time', which is a reworking of Memphis Minnie's 'Black Rat Swing'. The fact that this title wasn't even mastered may indicate a reluctance on Len Chess' part to depart from Muddy's established image. The same was probably true of 'Stuff You Gotta Watch', a rocking number with its origins in '40s jump blues, complete with a chorus vocal off-mike by Walter and Jimmy Rogers. From the same session comes a truly beautiful version of Leroy Carr's 'Lonesome Day' with Muddy using his falsetto voice, picked up from Robert Johnson and reminding us of the con-

nection between Carr and Johnson. 'Iodine In My Coffee', a distant cousin of Walter Davis' 'Ashes In My Whiskey', is reputed to have Junior Wells on harmonica, but I would reject the suggestion since the style is consistent with the other three titles from this session on which Walter's presence is firmly established. Although we are all already well aware of Muddy's original material from this period, it is these last four titles which force us to see such well-known songs as 'Hoochie Coochie Man' and 'Just Make Love To Me' (with its spine-chilling harp solo) in an entirely new light; and the fact that Muddy recorded a fine version of 'Smokestack Lightning' some two years before Wolf provides one with food for thought. And perhaps in some small measure, that also gives you some idea of the value of this album, let alone the other three.

Which brings us neatly to Little Walter. Some controversy has recently singed the pages of *Living Blues* about the quality of the significant amount of unissued material that remains in the Chess vaults. Having been privileged enough to hear some twenty of these titles, I must reluctantly admit that much of it shouldn't see the light of day. In most cases the alternate takes are inferior performances, i.e. 'Last Night' sans harmonica is a desultory affair; and though Walter's instrumentals are still unequalled, a lot of the unissued ones seem to have served as studio warm-ups, routine performances that would do little to enhance his reputation. Given the responsibility, I think I would have opted for the policy of repackaging the issued material as on the Vintage albums. As it is, Mike Rowe has been very discriminating in including three extremely good instrumentals which add rather than detract from what we know of Walter's abilities. 'Boogie', from his second session, is an astonishing performance; it is truly incomprehensible that this was never issued before.

The other two boogies and 'Don't Have To Hunt No More'

don't quite reach the same standard as 'Boogie', but are nonetheless excellent. Most of the other tracks should be familiar with most people, though they have previously been on import albums and are being officially released here for the first time. As they are being discussed elsewhere in this *BU*, it would be invidious to repeat any comments here; except that this album concentrates on the early Walter, before his inventive powers began to wane.

The final album brings us Jimmy Rogers and John Brim. Once again, in Jimmy Rogers' case, Mike has chosen his tracks well, enabling us to get a better, fuller understanding of the influences behind his music. I had never realised before this exactly how eclectic Rogers was. In him, far more than with Muddy, we see the logical development of the immediate postwar Chicago blues, brought up to date but still recognisable. In fact he represents a transitional style from the previous decade, and the nine tracks included here follow him from the lyrical melancholy of 'Today, Today Blues' to the stomping, previously unissued version of 'You're The One' recorded five years later. Once again, Little Walter plays an important part, the highest point being reached on the other three titles from the 'Money, Marbles And Chalk' session. His harmonica solo on 'Chance To Love' owes more than a little to Walter Horton, achieving a chilling intensity almost but not quite equalled on 'My Little Machine', adapted from John Lee Williamson. 'Hard Working Man', also unissued, has Walter on guitar, though the high point comes with Eddie Ware's rippling piano solo. His characteristic style is also well featured on 'World Is In A Tangle' and 'She Loves Another Man'. 'Mistreated Baby' and 'What's The Matter' feature the sturdier inventiveness of Johnnie Jones; Po' Bob Woodfork contributes some heavily distorted slide guitar to the latter title. It is really difficult to understand why 'You're The One' was re-recorded a year after the version heard here, since it is at

least as good as the later, issued recording with fine harp from Walter and surely that's Muddy on second guitar?

John Brim's voice is not far removed from that of Jimmy Rogers, though Brim's is coarser and less capable of nuance. 'Tough Times' was originally recorded for Parrot and subsequently bought by Chess. It is still difficult to believe that it is actually Jimmy Reed playing harmonica, sounding for all the world like Snooky Pryor. 'Rattlesnake', backed by Walter's band, is 'Hound Dog' disguised; it is a singular experience to hear the scions of Chicago blues trying to emulate a Memphis style of playing. Both 'Ice Cream Man' and 'Lifetime Baby' deserved to have been issued at the time they were recorded; the first is akin to J.B. Hutto's 'Pet Cream Man' if a little less overtly sexual, and 'Lifetime' is a moving blues on which Brim's vocal takes on a unique sensitivity. I really can't get over 'Go Away' with great stomping drums by Grace Brim who must have had both feet on the bass drum pedal. Fantastic. 'That Ain't Right' slows the tempo down and James Dalton contributes a fine harmonica solo.

Mike informs me that the door is tentatively open for at least a fourth Genesis box should there be a sufficient response to this one. Frankly, the wealth of material both known and unknown on these four records has to make it the reissue of the year, and the booklet which features many fine photographs and the expected informative notes (with only one Rowe pun) makes an excellent adjunct to a meticulously prepared release. Finally, if you're thinking this review is getting just a little nepotistic, I think it is important to stress the fact that this sort of project demands a great deal of anyone who attempts it. Mike Rowe's achievements here demand a vote of thanks which I'm sure I won't be the last to give.

Neil Slaven

Gus Jenkins



Henry Gray (Georges Adins)

