WARMING BY THE DEVIL’S FIRE
A Film By Charles Burnett
In Warming by the Devil's Fire, filmmaker Charles Burnett explores the internal struggle between the sacred and the profane through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy visiting family in Mississippi during the mid-1950s. Sent there to be baptized by his preacher uncle, the youngster is instead kidnapped by another uncle, who shows him just what he's supposedly being saved from — lust, liquor and the music that fuels the devil's fire: the blues.

The soundtrack to this sensual tale is a blues history lesson in itself, featuring classic recordings from such early pioneers as W.C. Handy, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, Delta legends Charley Patton, Son House and Robert Johnson, plus post-World War II electric blues masters Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Sonny Boy Williamson.
Martin Scorsese Presents

The Blues

About The Music

The music featured in Martin Scorsese’s The Blues is available from Universal Music Enterprises and Sony Music:

- Martin Scorsese Presents The Best Of The Blues, a single-CD compilation, offers a 21-song overview to the series.
- Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues — A Musical Journey, a 5-CD boxed set, contains commercially available collections — representing each artist’s recorded works from all of the legendary blues labels. Individual artist compilations include:

THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND - ERIC CLAPTON
JIMI HENDRIX - SON HOUSE - ROBERT JOHNSON
B.B. KING - J.B. LENOIR - TAJ MAHAL
KEB’ MO’ - BESSIE SMITH
STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN - MUDDY WATERS

"I’ll never forget the first time I heard Lead Belly singing “C. C. Rider.” I was entranced. Like most people of my generation, I grew up listening to rock & roll. All of a sudden, in an instant, I could hear where it had all come from. And I could feel that the spirit behind the music, behind that voice and that guitar, came from somewhere much, much farther back in time.

Many people I know had the same shock of recognition. Rock & roll seemed to just come to us, on the radio and in the record stores. It became our music, a very important way of defining ourselves and separating from our parents. But then we uncovered another, deeper level, the history behind rock and rhythm & blues, the music behind our music. All roads led to the source, which was the blues.

We all like to imagine that art can come from out of nowhere and shock us like nothing we’ve ever seen or read or heard before. The greater truth is that everything — every painting, every movie, every play, every song — comes out of something that precedes it. It’s a chain of human responses. The beauty of art and the power of art is that it can never be standardized or mechanized. It has to be a human exchange, passed down hand to hand, or else it’s not art. It’s endlessly old and endlessly new at the same time, because there are always young artists hearing and seeing work that’s come before them, getting inspired and making something of their own out of what they’ve absorbed.

When you listen to Skip James singing “Devil Got My Woman” or Son House singing “Death Letter Blues” or John Lee Hooker laying down one of his snaking guitar figures, when you really listen — and believe me, it’s not hard, because this is music that grabs your full attention from the first note — you’re hearing something very precious being passed down. A precious secret. It’s there in all those echoes and borrowings, all those shared phrasings and guitar figures, all those songs that have passed down from singer to singer, player to player, sometimes changing along the way and becoming whole new songs in the process.

If you already know the blues, then maybe these selections will give you a reason to go back to it. And if you’ve never heard the blues, and you’re coming across it for the first time, I can promise you this: Your life is about to change for the better.

- By Martin Scorsese
01. **Jelly Roll Morton**  
*Turtle Twist*  
(Jelly Roll Morton)  
Jelly Roll Morton (Piano); Barney Bigard (Clarinet); Zutty Singleton (Drums)  
Recorded New York, December 17, 1929  
Originally Victor V-38108

02. **Ma Rainey**  
*See See Rider*  
(Lena Arrant)  
Ma Rainey (Vocal), Accompanied by Her Georgia Jazz Band: Louis Armstrong (Trumpet); Charlie Green (Trombone); Buster Bailey (Clarinet); Fletcher Henderson (Piano); Charlie Dixon (Banjo); unknown (Percussion)  
Recorded New York, October 16, 1924  
Originally Paramount 12252

03. **Son House**  
*Death Letter*  
(Eddie "Son" House)  
Son House (Guitar, Vocal)  
Recorded New York, April 12-14, 1928; originally on The Legendary Son House: Father Of The Folk Blues, Columbia CS 9217

04. **Billie Holiday**  
*I'm A Fool To Want You*  
(Frank Sinatra, Jack Wolf, Joel Herron)  
Billie Holiday (Vocal), Accompanied by Ray Ellis & His Orchestra: Billie Butterfield, Mel Davis, Bernie Glow (Trumpet); Urbie Green (Trombone); Gene Quill (Alto Saxophone); Hank Jones (Piano); Barry Galbraith (Guitar); Mitt Hinton (Bass); Ossie Johnson (Drums); unknown String Section, Harp & Choir.  
Recorded New York, February 19, 1958  
Originally on Lady In Satin, Columbia CS 8048

05. **Mississippi John Hurt**  
*Big Leg Blues*  
(Mississippi John Hurt)  
Mississippi John Hurt (Guitar, Vocal)  
Recorded New York, December 21, 1928  
Originally Okeh 8759

06. **Memphis Jug Band**  
*K. C. Moan*  
(Tewer Blackman)  
Will Shade (Harmonica); Ben Ramey (Kazoo, Prob. Vocal); Tewer Blackman (Guitar, Prob. Vocal); Charlie Burse (Prob. Vocal)  
Recorded Memphis, October 4, 1929  
Originally Victor V-36158

07. **Robert Johnson**  
*Sweethome Chicago*  
(Robert Johnson)  
Robert Johnson (Guitar, Vocal)  
Recorded San Antonio, November 23, 1936  
Originally Vocalion 03601

08. **Tommy McClenann**  
*Deep Blue Sea Blues*  
(Tommy McClenann)  
Tommy McClenann (Guitar, Vocal); unknown (Bass)  
Recorded Chicago, September 15, 1941  
Originally Bluebird 89005

09. **Bessie Smith**  
*Muddy Water*  
(Peter DeRose, Jo Trent)  
Bessie Smith (Vocal); Joe Smith (Cornet); Jimmy Harrison (Trombone); Buster Bailey, Coleman Hawkins (Clarinet); Fletcher Henderson (Piano); Charlie Dixon (Banjo)  
Recorded New York, March 2, 1927  
Originally Columbia 14497

10. **Sonny Boy Williamson**  
*Crosseyed Heart*  
(Sonny Boy Williamson)  
Sonny Boy Williamson (Harmonica, Vocal); Otis Spann (Piano); Robert Lockwood Jr., Luther Tucker (Guitar), Willie Dixon (Bass); Fred Below (Drums)  
Recorded Chicago, September, 1957  
Originally Chess 910

11. **Elmore James**  
*Dust My Broom*  
(Written by Robert Johnson, Adaptation by Elmore James)  
Elmore James (Guitar, Vocal); Sonny Boy Williamson (Harmonica); Leonard Ware (Bass); Frock O'Dell (Drums)  
Recorded Jackson, Mississippi, August 5, 1953  
Originally Trumpet 146
12. **Muddy Waters**  
*You Can't Lose What You Ain't Never Had*  
(McKinley Morganfield)  
Muddy Waters (Guitar, Vocal); Sammy Lawhorn, Pee Wee Madison (Guitar); Otis Spann (Piano); Willie Dixon (Bass); Francis Clay (Drums)  
Recorded Chicago, April, 1964  
Originally Chess 1895

13. **W.C. Handy**  
*Beale Street Blues*  
(W.C. Handy)  
W.C. Handy (Vocal); Charles Cooke (Piano)  
Produced by Thomas Yassalov  
Recorded New York, 1951-52  
Originally on *A Musical Biography: W.C. Handy, The Father Of The Blues*, Heritage Records 0052

14. **Charley Patton**  
*Hang It On The Wall*  
(Charley Patton)  
Charley Patton (Guitar, Vocal)  
Recorded New York, February 1, 1934  
Originally Vocation 02931

15. **Sister Rosetta Tharpe**  
*Up Above My Head (I Hear Music In The Air)*  
(Sister Rosetta Tharpe)  
Sister Rosetta Tharpe (Guitar, Vocal); Marie Knight (Vocal); Accompanied by The Sammy Price Trio: Sammy Price (Piano); Pops Foster (Bass); Wallace Bishop (Drums)  
Recorded New York, November 24, 1947  
Originally Decca 48900

16. **Stephen James Taylor**  
*Give Me Freedom*  
(Stephen James Taylor)  
The Dubes Jackson Blues Band featuring: Carmen Twillie (Lead & Background Vocals); Stephen James Taylor (Background Vocals)  
Produced by Stephen James Taylor; Recorded and Mixed by Rich Raposa  
Recorded Los Angeles, May, 2002; first issue

17. **Mildred Jones**  
*Mr. Thrill*  
(Mildred Jones)  
Mildred Jones (Vocal) with the Pluma Davis Band: Jimmy Vincent (Trumpet); Bob Lakefield (Tenor Saxophone); Allen Clark (Baritone Sax); Bert Kendrick (Piano); Carl Lott (Bass); Duke Barker (Drums)  
Recorded Houston, 1954  
Originally Peacock 1638

18. **John Lee Hooker**  
*I'll Never Get Out Of These Blues Alive*  
(John Lee Hooker)  
John Lee Hooker (Guitar, Vocal); Otis Spann (Piano); Luther Johnson, Sammy Lawhorn, Muddy Waters (Guitar); Mac Arnold (Bass); Francis Clay (Drums)  
Recorded New York, August 30, 1966  
Originally on John Lee Hooker: Live At The Café au Go Go, ABC/Bluesway BL 6002
I remember when I was very young my mother used to play Elmore James’s version of “Dust My Broom.” I never understood the meaning of the lyrics, especially “I’m getting up soon in the mornin’, I believe I dust my broom.” In fact, I didn’t understand the meaning of any lyrics from any blues song—except for W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues,” and that is because I spent time as a young boy learning to play it by heart on my trumpet.

Many years later, as an adult, I found myself humming and whistling songs that were escaping from deep in my subconscious. The lyrics that were lost to me many years ago are now, in many ways, the cornerstone of how I see human relationships. They are for me, as they are for August Wilson, a rich source of images and dialogue. As Willie Dixon said, “Blues is the truth,” and looking back at that period when my head was someplace else, I realize how much wiser I would have been then if I had somehow been able to appreciate those songs. However, blues is about life, and to appreciate the blues you have to have experienced life—or you at least need to have enough intuition to see through the veil that hides the human condition.

The lyrics were a veil to me, but I felt and could appreciate the music. “See See Rider” (or “C. C. Rider,” depending on the version) was a big hit; I knew it must have had a special meaning because it was played so much. It later became special for a lot of us when we got to that point in life when a man is paranoid about another man talking to “his woman.” There is a lesson to be learned here. There is no doubt that the generation that created the blues was much wiser than we gave it credit for—and it is a sad irony that singers like Billie Holiday, who provided such instructive images and insight, couldn’t save themselves.

I remember listening to a jazz station that played, every Sunday at twilight, records by artists who had died. The program was called The Immortals. Billie Holiday was a legend then, and even before her name had been announced, I knew it was Billie Holiday the first time I heard her. From then for as long as the program was on the air, I was always sitting in front of the radio listening to The Immortals.
The struggle between the sacred and the profane so evocatively depicted in Charles Burnett's *Warming by the Devil's Fire* has long been recognized as one of the most important subtexts of blues music's role within, and impact on, 20th-century African-American society and culture. In the Deep South, for example, where scores of phantom-like itinerant musicians rambled for decades through the Mississippi Delta's maze of rural roadhouses, back porches and brothels - their shadowy, often liquor-plied and violent lifestyles an extension of the lurid, lusty songs that dominated their repertoires - along with an accompanying air of morally loose conduct that flew in the face of the teachings of any church, urban or rural.

Given its physical and psychological surroundings, then, it's understandable that, even with its considerable popularity, the often profound artistry of the blues was obscured by its image for so much of the first half of the century. It is always instructive to note that "Father of the Blues" W.C. Handy, responsible for some of the earliest published blues songs (such as this collection's "Beale Street Blues," written in 1916), was a classically trained composer who, while always stressing the importance and viability of the blues as an authentic musical form, nonetheless regarded it as "primitive." And, while his outsized personality was closer to the perceived blues profile than that of the reserved Handy, the New Orleans musical pioneer Jelly Roll Morton (heard here on 1929's "Turtle Twist") also regarded himself as a composer and conductor whose work sought to lift jazz - and by association its close cousin, the blues - to higher, more refined ground. (While his stage name was sexually suggestive, the Creole-born pianist referred to himself in song as Mr. Jelly Lord.)

It was, of course, the Prohibition-fueled "Roaring Twenties" and its accent on the risqué that helped put blues squarely on the commercial
map. And as the success of recordings such as Ma Rainey’s “See See Rider” and Bessie Smith’s “Muddy Water,” which featured accompaniment from the likes of Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins, and other rising jazz musicians, led to the great explosion of blues recordings throughout the country in the twenties and early thirties, those who saw the new music as potentially corrupting could hardly have been pleased with the results.

Even in its best light, the blues was seen primarily as an expression of race — what author/critic/period chronicler Carl Van Vechten called “the Negro’s prayer to a cruel Cupid.” In its worst light, it was deemed musical prayer to the Devil, and that particular conceit was indeed consciously cultivated by the solitary figures of the Delta’s deep blues. Robert Johnson may have been urbane enough to author an ode to “Sweet Home Chicago,” but it was in Mississippi that one spoke in hushed tones about the crossroads (referenced in his “Cross Road Blues”) where the guitarist had supposedly sold his soul for the ability to play the blues as none before him — or after him — could. In point of fact, Johnson, who died in 1938 at age 27 (tellingly, some would argue) from a poisoned drink of whiskey, had absorbed much from two decidedly mortal performers who helped define Delta blues in the first place: Charley Patton — heard here on one of his final recordings, 1934’s “Hang It On The Wall” — and Son House, whose music was still smoldering with intensity when he recorded “Death Letter” during his 1960s rediscovery.

Both Johnson, whose harrowing songs included “Me And The Devil Blues” and “Hell Hound On My Trail,” and House, who detailed his personal fall from grace on “Preachin’ The Blues,” strongly influenced Muddy Waters, and it was Waters’ journey from Stovall’s Plantation in Mississippi to the teeming streets of Chicago — and his necessity-as-mother-of-invention shift from acoustic to electric guitar — that symbolized the modernization of the blues in post-World War II America. Hearing slide guitar specialist Elmore James searing his way through Johnson’s “Dust My Broom” in 1951, or such Chicago-scene stalwarts as Waters and Sonny Boy Williamson working their brisk trade later in the fifties and sixties with songs such as (respectively) “You Can’t Lose What You Ain’t Never Had” and “Cross My Heart,” it was clear that the blues was finally on its way toward at least a modicum of respectability, musically and culturally, and accepted as such by audiences on both sides of the color line.

By then, even the church had been touched by the blues, as gospel performers like the remarkable singer and guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe had brought elements of blues phrasing and sensibility to “Up Above My Head (I Hear Music In The Air)” and other songs. Ultimately, as the world portrayed in Warming by the Devil’s Fire slowly passed, and such artists as Ray Charles and Sam Cooke openly mixed the once diametrically opposed blues and gospel styles to create soul music, the concern became more a matter of propriety (sounds of the church turned secular) than of the blues daring to enter sanctified territory. As the boundaries blurred, it was now questions of personal character and upbringing that one pondered in determining the power of music as a force either pro or con for shaping an individual’s spirit. And suffice it to say that by the time John Lee Hooker was singing “I’ll Never Get Out Of These Blues Alive” in 1966, the perception of the blues and its meaning to the African-American experience had changed enough that his final destination was — thankfully — no longer a foregone fiery conclusion.

Billy Altman

Billy Altman is a Grammy-nominated music critic and historian, and a recipient of the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for Excellence in Music Journalism. A longtime editor of Creem, and a former assistant curator for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, he teaches a course in music and culture at New York’s School of Visual Arts.
The Blues, executive produced by filmmaker Martin Scorsese and premiering on PBS in September 2003, anchors a multi-media project to help raise awareness of the blues and its contribution to American culture and music worldwide.

The series is motivated by a central theme: how the blues evolved from parochial folk tunes to an universal language. The Blues traces the journey of the music from Africa to throughout America, across to Europe, and back again, and explores its contribution to all popular music. Simply put, it is the journey from Robert Johnson’s Delta blues “Love In Vain” to John Coltrane’s transcendental anthem, “A Love Supreme.” Driven by the beat of performances by famous players from every kind of music the blues has inspired – hip hop, rhythm and blues, soul, country and rock ‘n’ roll – this seven-part series takes us on a journey as soulful and ebullient as the music itself.

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