

VARIOUS ARTISTS
DOWN HOME BLUES CHICAGO; FINE BOOGIE
Wienerworld

There's a less than subtle cultural feature UK visitors to the USA always notice, and that's the generosity of the helpings in American restaurants compared to our more frugal approach. When it comes to music, we blues fans feel well done by with a double album, but here's a gut-filling 5CD box, enough to satisfy the widest appetite.

This sterling labour of love on the Wienerworld label is the work of two men, blues aficionado Peter Moody and renowned writer/blues historian Mike Rowe, who have been compiling blues albums for over half a century. Here, spread across 134 rare tracks, is a complete overview of Chicago's down home blues golden era. There may well be similar sets but they often include repetition, popular tracks but 'the usual suspects', but in this hefty set there are many previously unheard gems, alternative takes and unissued material.

All the big names are here; Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Jimmy Reed, in fact the whole Chicago royal family tree, plus John Brim, Birmingham Junior, Baby Face Leroy, Dusty Brown and other less familiar names. There are some superb performances such as John Brim's Ice Cream Man and Life Time Baby, and the terrific feminine-sounding tracks by Lazy Bill.

The sessions span the brilliant blues decades, the 1940s-50s, and as well as discovering such powerful yet forgotten acts such as Georgia Boy McCain, Mildred White or Gray Haired Bill, on these five disks you'll find Sunnyland Slim and Little Walter rubbing shoulders with Memphis Minnie or Jimmy Rogers. There is also the sheer delight of the accompanying 88 page book by Mike Rowe, which is a stand-alone work of art in itself, containing a fascinating selection of previously unseen photos and a full sessionography.

Fifty years ago, when we older folk started discovering the blues, a set of recordings like this would have seemed like some rich man's science fiction dream. But here it is - all the Chicago blues you can handle in a smart box. Indispensable!

ROY BANTON