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Blues 'once was lost but now' it's found

By **Mark Fisher**

For the Times West Virginian

"Lost & Found: The Blues Legacy" is one of the most important releases of the last few decades. When considering the lack of technology at the dawn of R&B and rock and roll, alongside the lack of musical archaeologists out there today, you are forced to realize that a wealth of wonderful music has been lost over the last 60 years and a wealth of musical superstars forgotten.

This three-CD collection is a rare find, though; it chronicles European live performances from Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Muddy Waters & Otis Spann, Howlin' Wolf & Hubert Sumlin, and more. Available commercially for the first time and backed by the Chris Barber Band.

As the story goes, legendary UK bandleader Chris Barber found these tapes in his personal archive and, thankfully, decided to share them with us. Throughout the '50s and '60s he was single-handedly responsible for bringing some of blues and gospel's greatest voices to the UK for the first, and perhaps only, time.

Each performance is captured extremely well, considering the time period, as they were recorded for radio broadcasts. Further, this introduction to European audiences would help form the very foundations of rock and roll. Let's face it: Mick Jagger would have sold his soul to become Muddy Waters for a day. He still may be willing, as a matter of fact.

The first disc in the series features performances by Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Each performance features solo selections as well as ones backed by the Chris Barber Band.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe is particularly amazing here. One of gospel music's first superstars, she is too often ignored by musical archivists.

Not to be outdone are Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. Opening with "Midnight Special," the duo immediately have the audience in the palm of their hands. Their harmonica laden blues is simply awe-inspiring. This is a testament to a time that will never exist again and you can hear it in performances of "John Henry" (with a verse I've never heard before), "Cornbread, Peas and Black Molasses," and "This Little Light of Mine," connecting them spiritually with Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

Disc two begins with an in-studio performance of five songs from Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. The contrast between these recordings and the live ones really isn't all that striking. It's pretty much the same. It's just slightly clearer and a little less energetic, due to lack of an audience. That said, the collective Big Band feel of "Do Lord" is a pretty special moment as it blends gospel soul, blues licks, and one of the best Big Bands in the world.

Next up though is the centerpiece of this series, an amazing set of songs from the legendary Muddy Waters & Otis Spann. When Waters voice hits, it forces you to pay attention. This man IS the voice of the blues and by the end of "Hoochie Coochie Man," which opens the set, that fact is no longer open for discussion.

"Baby Please Don't Go" and the deep soul of "I Feel Like Going Home" are highlights among highlights as well. Pianist champion Jack Dupree almost the album (technically there is a lone song by Louis Jordan that brings the album to a close) and following Muddy Waters & Otis Spann is no easy task. Wisely Dupree is able to keep your attention due to his completely different style. While he is undoubtedly enjoyable, you'll honestly still be thinking about Muddy Waters.

Disc three rounds out the series with a string of performances from 1964. The album opens with Sonny Boy Williamson, a blues singer and harmonica player who tears into songs like "Help Me," "C-Jam Blues" and a solo offering of "Your Funeral, My Trail," among others. Williamson sounds like his was in his later years at this point and his harmonica/voice combo is as powerful as music gets.

If you don't see the harmonica as a real instrument, Williamson will

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change your mind in short order. It's like an extension of his voice and among the most expressive things I have ever heard.

Big Band Jimmy Witherspoon takes the mantle twice here and fans of Big Band will not be disappointed. Witherspoon and Barber provide a nice change of pace as well after being wonderfully inundated with Blues and Gospel.

Howlin' Wolf with Hubert Sumlin and the Chris Barber band are also present and accounted for here, and by 1964 rock and roll was officially born. This is proof. In fact, this is the only recording of "May I Have a Talk With You" that exists.

I could write all day about the importance and merit of these once-lost recordings. The massive scope of this collection is barely rivaled in similar collections. All of these recordings are really well-done and the performances are heartfelt and soulful.

At the risk of sounding old, this is gone forever. Music has lost this part of itself. If you love music, then you owe it to yourself to go to the source and discover where it all came from. "Lost & Found; The Blues Legacy" is an excellent place to start.

"Lost & Found: The Blues Legacy" is available everywhere now via Music Video Distributors. For more information visit www.musicvideodistributors.com and www.blueslegacy.net.



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