Blues Unlimited's 50th Anniversary

By John Brown & Bob Groom

Can it be that Blues Unlimited was first published in April 1963, all of fifty years ago? From that memorable address: 38A Sackville Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex? Let's raise our glasses to Mike Leadbitter and Simon Napier for launching a magazine that turned out to be the driver of modern blues journalism and research, writes John Brown.

The time and place could not have been better: The American Folk Blues Festival had captured everyone's attention; blues books were gradually appearing; American LPs were beginning to be imported into a Britain stepping out of post-World War II austerity; the civil rights movement was beginning to resonate; and there was a voracious audience wanting to know more about the poorly documented world of blues and rhythm & blues. It was a heady time and I was only just starting to get immersed in blues, jazz, and pop weeklies and monthlies, published usually without much enthusiasm.

Crucially, academia was dismally ignoring black music along with rock'n'roll. The answer was do-it-yourself.

The prelude to Blues Unlimited was the Blues Appreciation Society, formed back in 1961 by Simon Napier in Bexhill. The first book, ‘Walking to New Orleans,’ by Blues Unlimited Books in 1974. Again, there was nothing high powered about it, but Mike and Simon’s drive was contagious. There was unlimited potential.

I notice now that the pages of my dog-eared copy were beginning to go out of steam with the onslaught of Disco but many excellent issues were published separately.

Looking back, of other blues-based magazines such as Blues & Rhythm, R & B Scene, R & B Monthly, my own magazine Blues World (1965-1974) and later Living Blues, published in America. Mike’s death in 1974 and Simon stepping back from the editorialship left Mike Rowe and the editorial committee to keep it going through difficult times in the late 1970s (when the Blues Revival seemed to be running out of steam with the onslaught of Disco) but many excellent issues were published before the end eventually came in 1987.

There was nothing high powered about BU in the early days with a lo-fi record player and an even lower-fi typewriter. I too started my magazine with a stand-up Imperial typewriter, which would now be a museum piece. In those days it was enthusiasm and elbow grease that produced a magazine, not readership.

Mention should also be made of the many booklets BU published, as far back as 1964 featuring Muddy Waters, ‘John Lee Hooker and Howlin’ Wolf, also Chuck and Bo, while Elmore James and Homesick James followed in 1965. That year they published John Godrich’s useful ‘Survey of Pre-war blues artists reissued on DVD 1953-1964’ to complement the recent publications: edited first edition of Godrich and Dixon’s ‘Blues And Gospel Records 1902-1942’ (to which BU and its readers had contributed).

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