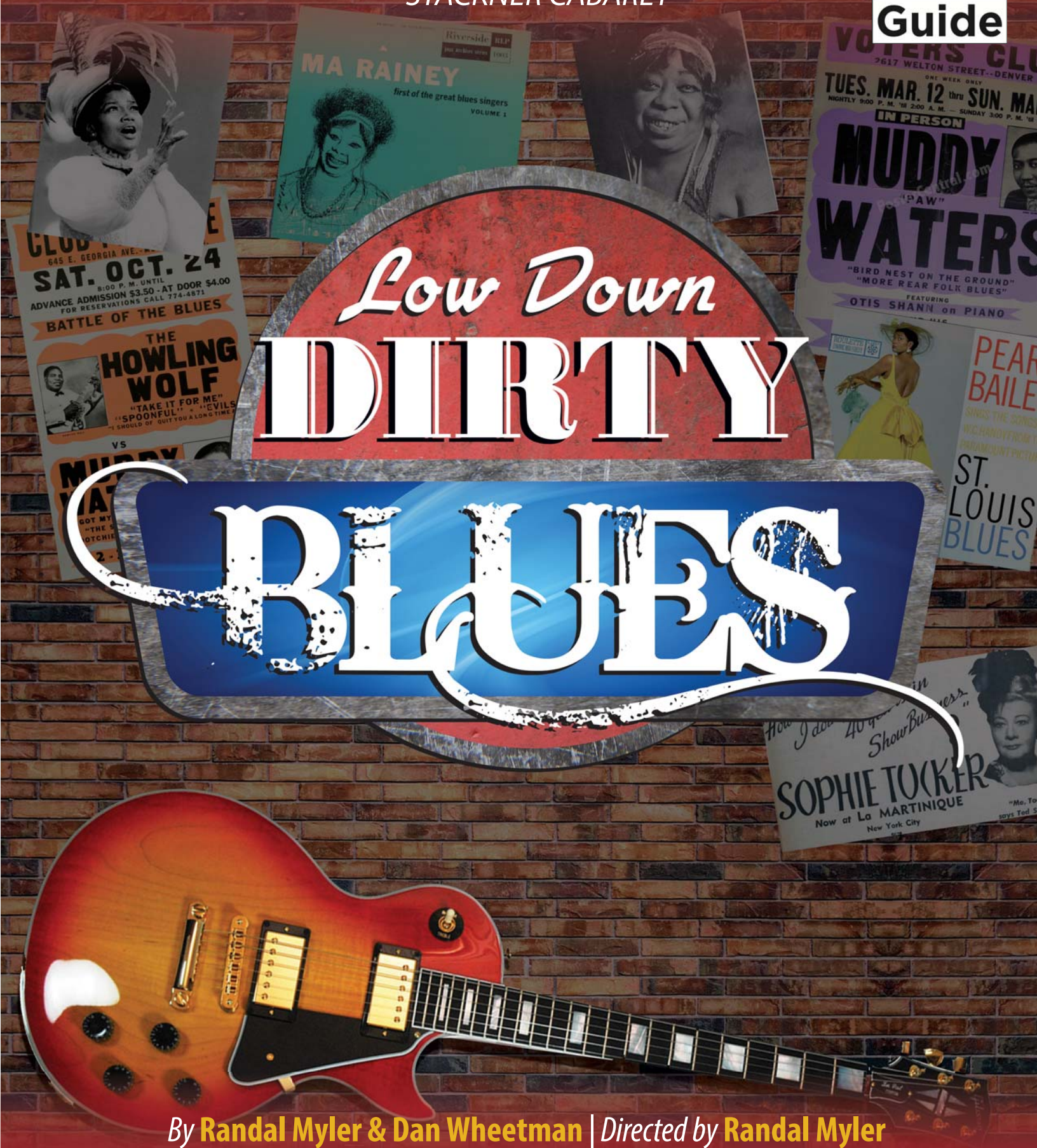
MARCH 20 - MAY 24
STACKNER CABARET

Play Guide

Low Down DIRTY BLUES



By **Randal Myler & Dan Wheetman** | *Directed by* **Randal Myler**
Executive Producers **David & Camille Kundert**

THE STACKNER CABARET SEASON IS SPONSORED BY SALLY MANEGOLD

Milwaukee Repertory Theater Presents

STACKNER CABARET

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Mark Clements
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Chad Bauman
MANAGING DIRECTOR

* * *

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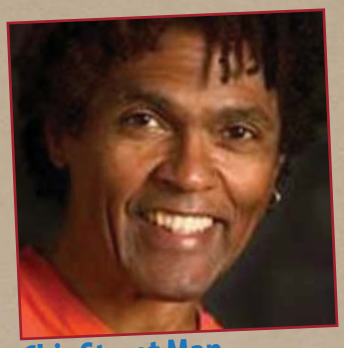
About the Play

On a Saturday evening at "Big Mama's Home of the Blues," a contemporary blues club in Southside Chicago, three singers—Felicia, Chic, and Sugaray—begin their last set of the evening, music rich with innuendos and sass. Between sultry crooning, the trio banters with each other, sharing personal anecdotes, both humorous and thoughtful. They reflect on how blues music has changed throughout the years, desiring to return to the blues of old: the low down, dirty kind. In the end, through their riotous musical numbers, they prove that the blues is not just music, it is a reflection of lives built on hardship but sustained with love.

Cast and Creative Team

Felicia P. Fields



Chic Street Man

Caron "Sugaray" Rayford

Robert Stephens

Randal Myler
Director

Dan Wheetman
Music Director

Scenic Designer
COLLETTE POLLARD

Sound Designer
JOSHUA HORVATH

Stage Management Intern
AUDRA KUCHLING

Sound Director
ERIN PAIGE

Costume Designer
JANICE PYTEL

Casting Director
JC CLEMENTZ

Production Manager
JARED CLARKIN

Technical Director
TYLER SMITH

Charge Scenic Artist
JIM MEDVED

Lighting Designer
ROBERT PERRY

Stage Manager
KIMBERLY ANN MCCANN

Lighting & Video Director
SEAN NICHOLL

Properties Director
JAMES GUY

An Interview with
Dan Wheetman, Co-Writer and Musical Director

Education Interns, Deanie Vallone and Keane Schmidt, sat down with writer and musical director of *Low Down Dirty Blues*, Dan Wheetman, to talk about artistic collaboration, musical influences, and why Milwaukee Rep is the perfect place for the blues.

How did you and Randal Myler [Co-writer and Director of *Low Down Dirty Blues*] start working together?

Dan Wheetman: At the Denver Center [for the Performing Arts], they were getting ready to do a tour of *Quilters*. I got a call; they were looking for a fiddle player. I went on tour with them. That was the first thing I worked on with Randy, and he and I just hit it off. He hired me back for other shows, and then we just started writing. We have worked together a lot and have just been great friends. He and I have a great working relationship. There is so much respect on each side. We always go for what is best. There is never any ego about that.

What is the history of the show's development?

DW: Randy and I both have a long history of working in genres. We have written shows about Appalachia and coal mining and truck drivers. This show sort of came out of a show we had written called It *Ain't Nothin' but the Blues* which is a big historical overview. It starts in Africa with African chants and goes all the way to Chicago in the second act, where white and black music intersect. It came out of that show, the idea to look at a very particular kind of blues—low down, dirty blues. The early women's blues, especially, was very double entendre. That is how we started. As with anything it morphed into what it is today, which is a little broader than women's blues from the 1920s.

Why did you choose to focus in on this particular kind of blues music?

DW: It is a spicier kind of blues. This was specifically about a kind of blues that has two sides to it. On one hand it is a more intimate look, it is a smaller group and a smaller palate. You try to tell the story of the blues, but that is an enormous story that starts in England because the ballad structure is the basis for the blues. This is not so much a historic thing; it is a story about the people, these three people in this club and their stories, which includes the music but it is more of a personal talk about what brought them to where they are.

How did you narrow down and choose the show's set list?

DW: Everything that is in a show should always move the story forward. It is a trial and error. You bring in a stack of stuff and you start working. You think, "This is a really great tune but it is not helping or doing what it needs to do in that spot." So it either gets moved to a different spot or it gets replaced. It also has to do with the cast because the music has to fit who is in the show in so much as they are responsible for delivering it with authority and truth. You cannot give them something they cannot be truthful with. For example, Sugaray had a couple of songs that were very important to him, so we found spots to put them in. When someone is singing something they deeply believe in, it is way more powerful than me saying, "Here, you sing this." You have to be collaborative if you are going to work with people. It is just way more

fun. I do not have enough hubris to believe that I have the final answer. I have the question, and it is for all of us to find the answer as best we can.

What made you choose Chicago as the setting?

DW: The blues starts in the South; it comes out of slavery, work songs, field hollers, spiritual music. Blues does not become 'the blues' in the form that we know it until just before the 1920s. There are songs that are blues-like, but it is actually the recording industry that creates what we know as 'the blues'. As record companies in the north came down and began to record black artists in the south, they got very specific about what they recorded. Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rabbit Foot Blues" got to be very popular, and so they started recording this particular form, what we call blues today. After WWI and WWII, because of Jim Crow and the invention of the cotton gin, there is the largest peacetime migration—over six million people migrate from the south and go north to find jobs in factories. They go to Chicago, and Chicago becomes the first northern hub. Chicago has Chess Records and Muddy Waters picks up an electric guitar. He goes in and records for Chess Records. And, as they say, the rest is history. Chicago becomes the hub of the early electric blues. Even today, you go to Chicago and you go to blues clubs.

How does the venue influence the production?

DW: The [Stackner] Cabaret is a perfect room for this, for the interaction with the audience. These guys are performers, first and foremost. They live on the interaction between performers and audience members. It is going to be a pressure cooker in there sometimes; it will be delightful. The audience better put seatbelts on because these guys are going to blow the roof off that place.

Randal Myler and Dan Wheetman (on guitar) work on a multimedia piece at Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School and Camp.
Photo credit: Nicole Inglis; *Steamboat Today*

The Sound of *Low Down Dirty Blues*

Tonight's Set List

Song	Artist
"They Call Me Big Mama"	Big Mama Thornton
"Rough and Ready Man"	Alberta Hunter
"Crawlin' King Snake"	John Lee Hooker
"Come on in My Kitchen"	Robert Johnson
"My Stove's in Good Condition"	Lil' Johnson
"Born under a Bad Sign"	Albert King
"Rub My Back"	Albert King
"Don't Jump My Pony"	Denise LaSalle
"Mojo Hand"	Lightnin' Hopkins
"I Got My Mojo Workin'"	Muddy Waters
"You Bring Out the Boogie in Me"	Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee
"Big Leg Woman"	Freddie King
"If I Can't Sell It"	Ruth Brown
"Baby What You Want Me to Do/ Rock Me All Night Long"	Albert Collins
"Hey Baby"	Denise LaSalle & Big Bill Broonzy
"I'm Not That Kind of Girl"	Denise LaSalle
"Shake Your Money Maker"	Elmore James
"Spoonful"	Howlin' Wolf
"I'd Rather Go Blind"	Etta James
"Death Letter"	Son House
"Good Morning Heartache"	Billie Holiday
"Change is 'Gonna Come"	Sam Cooke
"Lord I Tried"	Traditional
"Nobody's Fault but Mine"	Blind Willie Johnson
"Everyday I Have the Blues"	B.B. King

12-Bar Blues: Form and Structure

Blues music often takes on a "12-bar" form, typically played to a 4/4 time signature, which uses 12 bars to convey a musical theme. Generally, this form has three "segments," each segment consisting of four bars. These segments correspond to patterns of lyrical verses and chord progressions. Lyrically, the 12-bar form follows an "A-A-B" pattern, where it introduces a lyrical verse in the first segment ("A"), repeats that verse in the second segment ("A"), and responds, in some way, to these verses in the third segment ("B").

From "They Call Me Big Mama"

THEY CALL ME BIG MAMA CUZ I'M SO NICE AND ROUND (A)
THEY CALL ME BIG MAMA CUZ I'M SO NICE AND ROUND (A)
I CAN ROCK AND I CAN ROLL AND I CAN REALLY GO TO TOWN (B)

Structurally, the 12-bar form is based around a chord progression using only three chords, which appear, one at a time, in each of the segments.

FEATURED ARTIST:
Erin Paige, Sound Director

A ringing doorbell. The low, mournful notes of a cello. The scattered flapping of birds' wings. A jazz singer's sultry voice. "Sound is such a natural thing," says Milwaukee Rep Sound Director, Erin Paige. "If it is done seamlessly, if it is so well-integrated into the text and into what the director is trying to do, it feels effortless. But it takes a lot of work to look and sound effortless."

Paige earned her BFA in Sound Design from South Oregon University, though she started college "assuming [she] was going to be a *grand dame* of the stage." When she realized acting was not her calling, she spent a summer working in the sound department of Music Circus in Sacramento. Not only did the work turn her to a new theatrical field, it "prepared [her] for the repertory theater model of keeping all those shows in your brain at once." After spending five seasons with Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Paige took an Assistant Sound Supervisor Position during The Rep's 2011/2012 season. Eventually she shifted into the newly created Sound Director role.

As Sound Director, it is Paige's responsibility to make sound a natural, yet integral part of every Rep show. Since most of the Sound Designers for The Rep's shows are not local, Paige serves as liaison, helping them adapt their designs to fit the theater spaces. Putting it honestly, Paige says, "They come to me with champagne dreams, and I have to whittle them down to manageable projects we can actually do." This means getting creative and collaborating with other departments. "What if a speaker needs to live in a purse?" she muses. "Then I talk to costumes and say, 'Can the purse have a pocket in it?'" For shows with live music, she makes sure that the performers have the necessary equipment, and that all of the voices and instruments not only are at a balanced volume, but can be heard at all. "Good sound," says Paige, "is capable of mashing all these elements together into a picture that you can understand aurally." For *Low Down Dirty Blues*, this meant coordinating all of the performers and their instruments. "For this show, it is such a reactive process on our end. We based everything around the performers in the show, and what came about during rehearsals." She adds, "But the hardest part of my job is done because they already sound amazing."

In the Stackner in particular, time is the biggest challenge since it has the shortest tech period. She cites the Stagehands—Dave Hicks (Stiemke), Rick Grilli (Stackner), and Jason Pruzin (Powerhouse)—as essential in getting through the tech and run processes. Since she is basically "a department of one," her favorite shows are those in which she gets to work alongside other talented artists. "*Ragtime*," she replies, when asked about a favorite past show. "It was fun and challenging. Coming into it, you could not ask for a lovelier group of people. It was the kind of show where you work so hard and you love it so much, that you become kind of delirious. It was really hard, but I loved it."

Mapping the Blues: A Global History

Chicago and Detroit

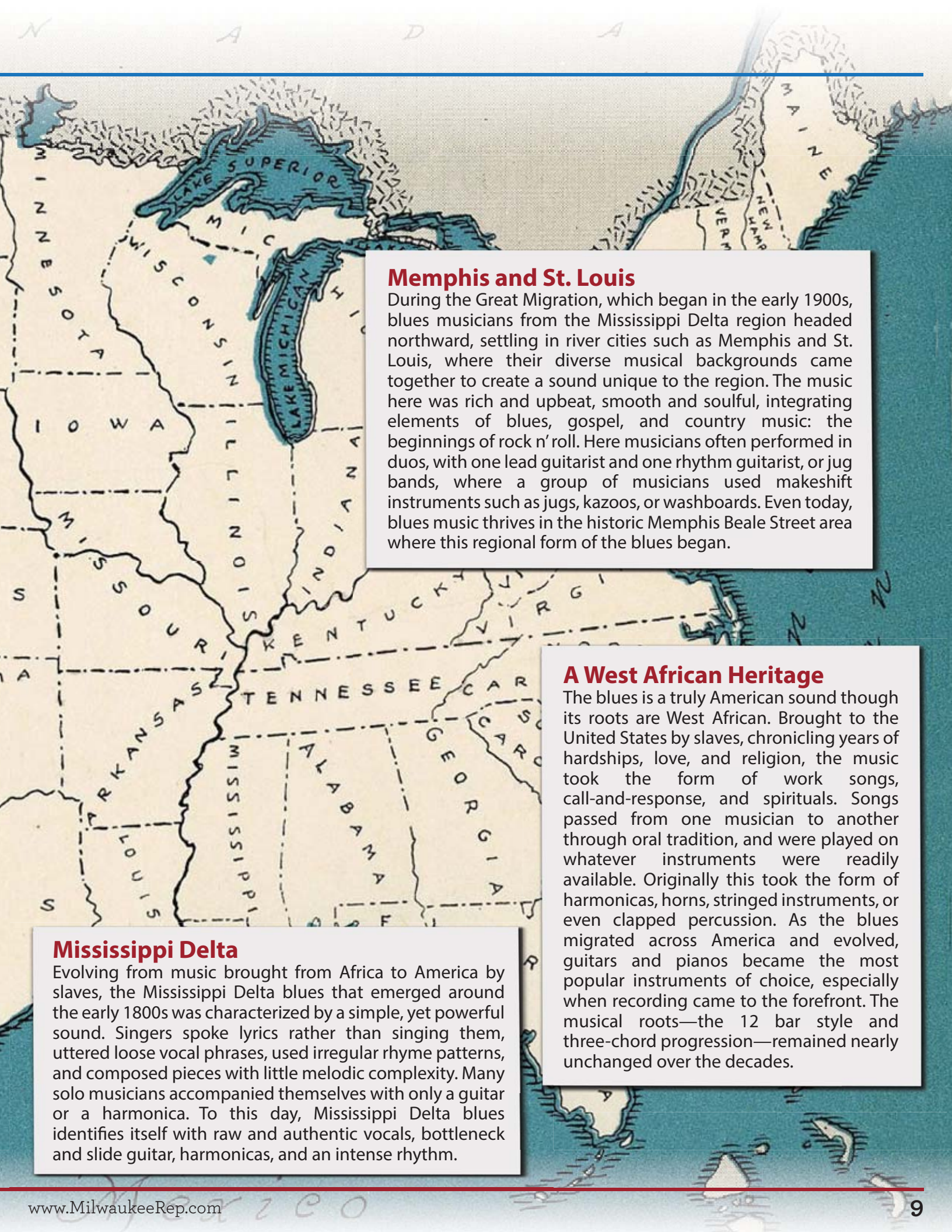
During the 1920s, many people migrated north for jobs, heading to the rapidly industrializing cities of Chicago and Detroit. These cities electrified the raw, country-style southern blues. Blues musicians of Chicago and Detroit often performed in bands, and they amplified everything: guitars, pianos, and harmonicas. Even the lyrics were charged—in a sexual manner. These musicians revolutionized blues music, producing some of the most influential blues artists of the 20th century. Although the blues' popularity waned, its late-1960s revival has renewed interest in the blues, which lives on in Chicago blues clubs to this very day.

Popularizing the Blues

In 1903 an African-American musician, W.C. Handy, sat at train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi. After falling asleep waiting for his train, he woke to find a man singing about his destination while sliding a knife down his guitar strings. Handy said it was "the weirdest music [he] had ever heard." In 1912, Handy published a musical composition referencing a new term: "blues." He continued to document this style of music, transcribe it into sheet music, and promote it in subsequent years, leading to the blues' entry into popular music. Despite Handy's attempts to commercialize the musical style, early Mississippi Delta blues lived on only through oral tradition. Nevertheless, these musicians heavily influenced generations of artists—including Muddy Waters and B.B. King—who migrated elsewhere across America. Though Handy was not the first to discover the blues, he certainly played a major role in introducing it into popular culture.

Texas and Louisiana

Louisiana and Texas produced a variety of blues styles in the early 20th century, all drawing on the eclectic blend of musical influences and cultural heritage brought to the region by French, Spanish, African-American, Creole, and Cajun migrants. This style of blues often centered their music on a piano and a horns section. Mexican musical influences in Texas helped introduce guitar techniques inspired by jazz-style improvisation. Although the blues lost popularity in these regions around the mid-20th century, a mid-1970s revival has since brought the blues back to life in both states, thriving especially in Austin and New Orleans.



Memphis and St. Louis

During the Great Migration, which began in the early 1900s, blues musicians from the Mississippi Delta region headed northward, settling in river cities such as Memphis and St. Louis, where their diverse musical backgrounds came together to create a sound unique to the region. The music here was rich and upbeat, smooth and soulful, integrating elements of blues, gospel, and country music: the beginnings of rock n' roll. Here musicians often performed in duos, with one lead guitarist and one rhythm guitarist, or jug bands, where a group of musicians used makeshift instruments such as jugs, kazoos, or washboards. Even today, blues music thrives in the historic Memphis Beale Street area where this regional form of the blues began.

A West African Heritage

The blues is a truly American sound though its roots are West African. Brought to the United States by slaves, chronicling years of hardships, love, and religion, the music took the form of work songs, call-and-response, and spirituals. Songs passed from one musician to another through oral tradition, and were played on whatever instruments were readily available. Originally this took the form of harmonicas, horns, stringed instruments, or even clapped percussion. As the blues migrated across America and evolved, guitars and pianos became the most popular instruments of choice, especially when recording came to the forefront. The musical roots—the 12 bar style and three-chord progression—remained nearly unchanged over the decades.

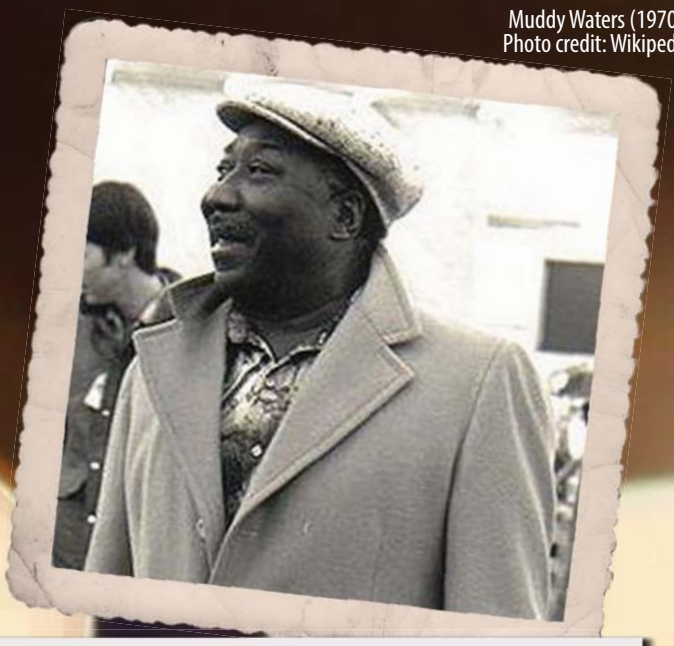
Mississippi Delta

Evolving from music brought from Africa to America by slaves, the Mississippi Delta blues that emerged around the early 1800s was characterized by a simple, yet powerful sound. Singers spoke lyrics rather than singing them, uttered loose vocal phrases, used irregular rhyme patterns, and composed pieces with little melodic complexity. Many solo musicians accompanied themselves with only a guitar or a harmonica. To this day, Mississippi Delta blues identifies itself with raw and authentic vocals, bottleneck and slide guitar, harmonicas, and an intense rhythm.

Blues Pioneers Mentioned in the Play

Big Mama Thornton (circa 1955-1960)
Photo credit: Wikipedia

Muddy Waters (1970s)
Photo credit: Wikipedia



Big Mama Thornton *(1926-1984)*

In *Low Down Dirty Blues*, "Big Mama's House of the Blues" derives its name from Big Mama Thornton, who is perhaps best known for her original recording of "Hound Dog," a song that Elvis Presley later covered. With her vocal prowess and her ability to play the drums and the harmonica, Big Mama Thornton was an important blues figure in her own right. Thornton used her deep, powerful voice and confident defiance to confront issues of gender and sexuality.

Muddy Waters *(1915-1983)*

Originally from the Mississippi Delta region, Muddy Waters took the rough, raw Mississippi Delta blues to the Chicago region, where he revolutionized Chicago blues with his skill on the electric guitar and as a bandleader. One of his songs was adopted as a moniker by a British rock n' roll group—you may know them as the "Rolling Stones."

Howlin' Wolf *(1910-1976)*

Inspired by Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson, Howlin' Wolf was a showman—a craft in which he was unparalleled. Embodying the raw sound of the Mississippi Delta blues, Howlin' Wolf sang with a coarse, grainy, and powerful voice that brought a sense of authenticity to his songs. Today, The Howler's music lives on in rock n' roll bands such as the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin.

Howlin' Wolf (1972)
Photo Credit: Doug Fulton

Blind Lemon Jefferson (1920s)
Photo credit: Wikipedia

Blind Lemon Jefferson *(1897-1929)*

At the outset of the 1920s, when the blues industry was enamored with female singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson brought attention to male blues artists. Regarded as the "Father of the Texas Blues," Blind Lemon Jefferson revolutionized guitar styles in the region, influencing artists such as T-Bone Walker and Stevie Ray Vaughan, who followed in his footsteps.

Sunnyland Slim *(1907-1995)*

A blues journeyman, Sunnyland Slim brought the original Mississippi Delta blues sound first to Memphis and then Chicago. Once there, Sunnyland Slim's piano style influenced many young bluesmen, including the likes of Muddy Waters and B.B. King, whom he helped gain footholds in the blues industry.

Sunnyland Slim
Photo credit: Jan Persson

Bessie Smith (1936)
Photo credit: Carl Van Vechten; Library of Congress

Bessie Smith *(1894-1937)*

An influential blues and jazz figure in the early 20th century, Bessie Smith was one of the most successful musicians of her time. Touted as the "Empress of the Blues," Bessie Smith brought a genuine fervor to vaudevillian blues with her bright vibrato, clear intonation, and growling, guttural delivery.

Visiting The Rep

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is located in the Milwaukee Center downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company.

The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The Stackner Cabaret is located on the second level and can be accessed via the escalator or elevator.

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