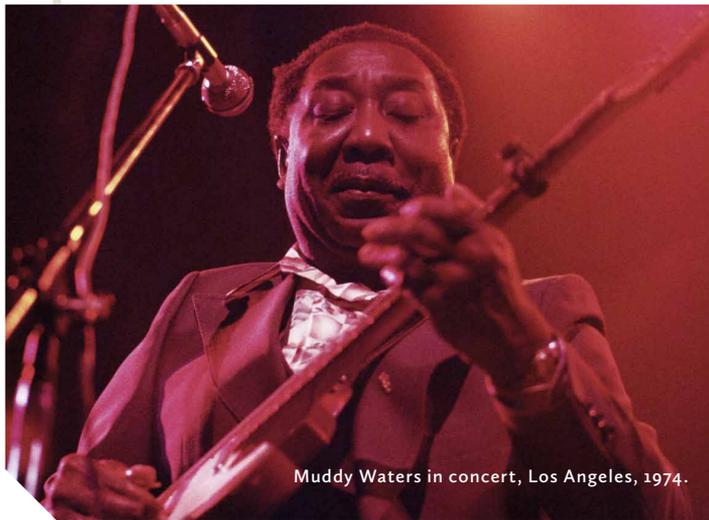


Muddy Waters and Me

J O E L K U R T Z M A N

I ADMIT IT, I'm not very cool. I wear glasses. I worked on computer models of the economy in graduate school and sometimes still do. I'm not partial to Lady Gaga's dress made of meat, and I never knowingly listened to Robin Thicke's top-selling single, "Blurred Lines." But there was one day when I was cool. Well, not an entire day, it was actually just a few minutes.

I was in high school in Los Angeles, and one night some friends and I went to a legendary music club called the Troubadour. Back then, the Troubadour



Muddy Waters in concert, Los Angeles, 1974.

was where rock 'n' roll royalty hung out when they were recording in L.A. They listened to each other play and tried out new songs. At the time, my favorite artist was Muddy Waters, who was known as the king of the Chicago blues sound and whose songs included "Baby, Please Don't Go," "Mojo Workin'" and "Man-nish Boy." Waters, born in a tiny town in Mississippi, was part of the great migration of African-Americans from the rural South into the industrial cities of the North. That migration brought music from the Mississippi Delta to places like Chicago, where it encountered Chicago's distinctive sound and, along with that, met up with the electric guitar. The results of these encounters transformed popular music.

Many artists of the 1960's "British Invasion" were inspired by Muddy Waters, including the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones. Some of these artists played with Waters as well.

Anyway, I was sitting at a table at the Troubadour — which was a very rudimentary place at the time with a rutted concrete floor, a stage (but no backstage or curtain), a wait staff that seemed to have no regard for the fact that artists were playing, and a couple dozen wobbly tables made steady by shoving books of matches under the legs.

As I sat, listening to Waters's first set, I felt lucky to be alive.

Muddy Waters and his band could not have been cooler. They were wearing black suits with thin lapels, white shirts, thin black ties, sunglasses and what we now call hipster hats. They had exceedingly cool names like "Baby Face" Leroy Foster.

Anyway, at the break I excused myself and went to the restroom. But, as I said, the Troubadour was a no-frills place without such traditional amenities as dressing rooms. So, when I walked into the facility, I was greeted by Muddy Waters and his entire band, who were in the restroom — *how shall I put this?* — preparing themselves for the next set.

I was thunderstruck. I muttered something lame like, "Great set, guys," not knowing for sure what a "set" was and whether I should call them "guys."

"Why thank you, my man," Muddy said, offering his hand, which I shook. He seemed to be in a jovial mood. "Glad you liked it."

Not knowing what to say next, I think I said something like, "I have all your albums."

"That's very cool, man, I like that," he said. Then he handed me something he and the band were sharing.

What happened next is my little secret. But listening to Muddy Waters, and then meeting him, was an experience I won't forget. These artists, given who they were and what they played, were the idols of not just my generation, but of other artists as well. And, for, like, 30 seconds, I felt I was part of their group, which was, I don't know, kind of cool. K/E