

The MUSIC MAKER RELIEF FOUNDATION or BLUES MUSIC IN THE AGE OF FAIR TRADE



Most of them are ageing African-American men and women with colorful monikers such as Mr. Q., Drink Small, Sweet Betty, Captain Luke and Little Pink Anderson, and they are yet to leave their mark on the world.

Although generations of musicologists have predicted the demise of the original blues that once shaped rural life in the Southern states, these survivors are the living proof that Black America's primal music didn't disappear with the emergence of the civil rights movement and the end of segregation.

While the African-American ghettos successively adopted soul, funk and hip-hop as their musical idioms, the natural heirs to the great pioneers that graced festival stages during the blues revival era of the early Sixties kept singing the blues for friends and neighbors at dances and fish fries in the small towns and remote hamlets of the Deep South.



It wasn't until a young music buff named Tim Duffy took notice of this unsuspected musical scene that one of the best kept secrets of the late 20th century was finally unveiled. Rather than merely document this formidable culture, Duffy decided to proceed with a much more ambitious project.

Duffy started his Music Maker Relief Foundation in 1994 in a small utility building behind the rental house he and his wife had in the back of a used car lot in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. From the start, MMRF Inc. was a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping the true pioneers and forgotten heroes of Southern musical traditions gain recognition and meet their day to day needs. Duffy's dream was to restore their dignity to the many Afro-American blues griots who lived in extreme poverty and needed food, shelter, medical care, and a decent funeral on the day of the great rendez-vous.



Fifteen years and a hundred albums later, with much-needed financial backing and moral support from the likes of Taj Mahal, B.B. King and Eric Clapton, the Music Maker Relief Foundation has proved that the old blues hadn't died with Lightnin' Hopkins or Son House, and that the rural South still boasted a wealth of untapped blues talent.

Today, with the help of the Dixiefrog label, Tim Duffy's MMRF has found sympathetic ears this side of the Atlantic, and the actors of his musical ark are increasingly wooing European audiences, getting rave reviews wherever they appear.



Through their artistic commitment and integrity, these veterans of the blues exude the generosity and humor that was once the privilege of the blues before the genre was hijacked by big business in the wake of the planetary success of John Lee Hooker and Buddy Guy.

When they appear on stage, the affiliates of the Music Maker Foundation draw on their deepest Southern roots, breathing new life into the very same tradition that Alan Lomax documented so well several decades ago for the Library of Congress. Putting the blues in the age of fair trade, Duffy wants his Music Makers to know how much we value the gifts of music and inspiration they have delivered to the world, making our souls richer in the process.



A few of the Music Maker Foundation recipients...



ESSIE MAE BROOKS

Essie Mae Brooks was born in Houston County, Georgia in 1930. Her father was a great drummer in the nearly forgotten African-American tradition called "Drumbeat." He would play the drum every weekend and people would gather and dance all night long. Her grandfather was a harmonica player and Essie started singing to accompany him. She began singing and writing gospel songs as a girl and has never stopped.



ADOLPHUS BELL

The Birmingham, Alabama area, famed for the richness of its gospel tradition, is also the home of several blues singer, including this unconventional one-man-band. A living juke box who belts out the great blues classics of yesteryear whenever he plays on the sidewalks of the towns he goes through, Bell is also a fine tunesmith and a moving storyteller.



GEORGE HIGGS

This singer, guitarist and harmonica player received a well-deserved standing ovation when he appeared a few months ago at the Cité de la Musique in Paris where his folk blues, work songs et spirituals kept the audience spellbound.



EDDIE TIGNER

This Macon, Georgia native — a city that also spawned rock'n'roll hero Little Richard — was brought up in a mining camp in Kentucky by his piano-playing mother after his father died from mustard gas in World War I. While working in an elementary school cafeteria, he's also been playing his piano in small clubs around Atlanta since 1991.



BEVERLY GUITAR WATKINS

When Tim Duffy met this sixty-some guitar wonder, she was playing on the streets of the Underground in Atlanta. She put on a tremendous show and was obviously a star. Thanks to the Foundation, she soon started performing in clubs, tearing down the house wherever she appeared. Coming up under Piano Red back in the 50s and 60s, she plays low-down, hard stompin', railroad-smokin' blues. She'll tell you, "people are impressed to see a black woman play like a man."

MUSIC MAKER IN WORDS...

ERIC CLAPTON : "A fabulous project... real evidence that the music I have always loved is alive and well."

B. B. KING: « I cannot encourage people enough to learn more about Music Makers and to listen to the music that they document and preserve. These artists will make you want to cry and shout for joy as only the real blues can do!"

MORGAN FREEMAN: "Music Makers is a perfect complement to the exciting and promising resurgence in America's roots music."

TAJ MAHAL: "Music Makers clearly dispels the notion that real blues musicians are long gone. A testament to the tremendous originality and musicianship of these artists!"

PETE TOWNSHEND: "A labor of love and honor for the blues, and all its loudly unsung old-timers."

BONNIE RAIT : "It's great to have this window on some under-appreciated bluesmen and women... Music Makers do a terrific job bringing these artists to light."

ROSANNE CASH: "Music Makers is an essential document of roots music in America. It is alive with the voices of these great musicians, and a pure pleasure to ponder."

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