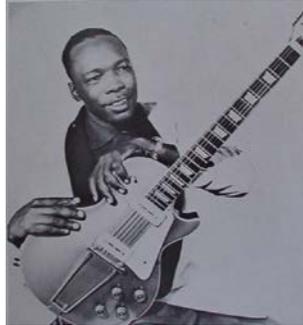


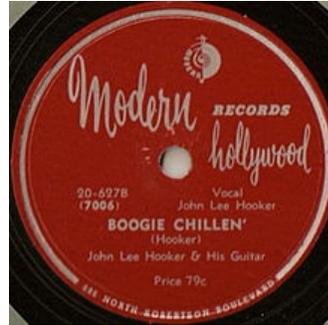
# “Boogie Chillen’”—John Lee Hooker (1948)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Jas Obrecht (guest post)\*



John Lee Hooker



Original label

From more than a half-century, John Lee Hooker reigned as the blues’ foremost boogie man and one of the genre’s most idiosyncratic performers. While he recorded more than a hundred albums with some of the finest blues and rock musicians, the heartbeat of his music was always his mesmerizing voice, propulsive guitar playing, and rhythm-driving foot taps. Like Lightnin’ Hopkins, Muddy Waters, and precious few others, Hooker was a musical law unto himself and a direct link to early blues. As Keith Richards observed after playing some sessions with Hooker, “With John Lee, there’s a break in the continuity of styles. What he picked up has got to come from one generation further back than anybody else, and John Lee can still make it work.”

Nowhere is this more evident than on Hooker’s breakthrough 1948 single “Boogie Chillen’.” When Hooker recorded the song, he was 31 years old and had recently moved to Detroit, Michigan. Accompanying himself with an acoustic guitar outfitted with a sound-hole pickup and tuned to an open-A chord, he framed most of the song’s repetitive, hypnotic feel with a one-chord riff that seemed equal parts West African music and Mississippi blues. Hooker had tested the song at house parties before he recorded it. “That was done at the old United Sound Systems there in Detroit,” he recalled. “They put a ply board under your feet, and your feet would just tap it. The amp was behind me, one mike. They didn’t have all that stuff they got now. The records was good quality, though.”

Hooker began his lyrics with a theme familiar to most teenagers:

*Well, my mama, she didn’t ’low me just to stay out all night long, oh lord,  
Well, my mama didn’t ’low me just to stay out all night long,  
I didn’t care what she didn’t ’low, I would boogie-woogie anyhow*

His second verse recounted an experience he’d had after arriving in Detroit several months earlier:

*When I first come to town, people,*

*I was walkin' down Hastings Street  
I heard everybody talkin' 'bout the Henry Swing Club  
I decided I'd drop in there that night  
And when I got there, I said, "Yes, people!"  
Yes, they were really havin' a ball*

With a sage "Yes, I know" and an exhortation of "Boogie Chillen!," Hooker launched into a primitive, slashing, hard-driving solo set to his rhythmic foot-tapping.

For his final stanza, Hooker sang of overhearing a liberating conversation:

*One night I was layin' down,  
I heard mama 'n' papa talkin'  
I heard papa tell mama to 'let that boy boogie-woogie,  
'Cause it's in him, and it got to come out  
Well, I felt so good,  
That I went on boogie-woogie'n' just the same  
Yes!*

Hooker, raised in the country between Clarksdale and Vance, Mississippi, credited his stepfather, Will Moore, with teaching him how to play in the distinctive, open-tuned guitar style heard on the recording. "I used to see Will Moore play," he said in his 1997 interview in "Living Blues" magazine. "He had a guitar, and he give me one—an old Stella. I started off from there. Will Moore taught me what I know. The things that I'm playing now, that's what he taught me." While Will Moore influenced the song's arrangement, the lyrics were pure John Lee Hooker. "I wrote that song in Detroit when I was sittin' around strummin' my guitar," he explained. "The thing come into me. It was just a old funky lick I found. I heard Will Moore do a song like that when I was a little kid down South, but he didn't call it 'Boogie Chillen.' But it had that beat."

Released by Modern Records in November 1948, "Boogie Chillen'" rocketed up the "Billboard" R&B singles chart, reaching the #1 position in January 1949. It stayed in the charts for 18 weeks, becoming one of the era's biggest R&B hits. "Everywhere you went," Hooker recounted, "you could hear that song." The single had a lasting impact on many aspiring musicians. It was the first song mastered by young Buddy Guy, then living in rural Louisiana, and Houston's Albert Collins. Elias McDaniel, who'd later find fame as "Bo Diddley," described it as "the first record I paid attention to." B.B. King, then a Memphis-based disc jockey, placed the song in heavy rotation on his show. "That was a monster hit!" King recalled. "When John Lee made 'Boogie Chillen',' that wasn't blues. That was get up and get it! When people say 'blues' and you say 'Boogie Chillen',' how in the heck could he be blue? He's havin' a ball. He's havin' a good time!"

By decade's end, Hooker had landed three more of his original songs in the R&B Top 10: "Hobo Blues," "Hoogie Boogie," and "Crawlin' King Snake." In 1951, he recaptured the #1 spot with "In the Mood." These were Hooker's glory years, and he proved to be

extraordinarily prolific. (It's estimated that between 1949 and 1953, he made some 70 recordings on 24 different labels, using a dozen different names.) In 1951, Hooker began recording with Eddie Kirkland, a scrappy guitarist whose slashing rhythms and savvy bass lines helped him keep a downhome feel while forging a more disciplined, commercial sound. Signing with Chicago's Vee Jay Records in 1955, Hooker was often backed on records by a small ensemble.

During the 1960s, British Invasion bands began covering Hooker's songs, which, in turn, introduced his music to rock and roll audiences back home. During the 1960s and '70s, Hooker issued albums on many labels, with dwindling returns. Finally, he later remembered, "I got so disgusted, I said, 'I'm not gonna record no more.' The record companies, they rob you blind." He stayed out of the record business for about eight years. A new manager, Mike Kappus, helped him re-launch his career: "Mike worked hard, got me a record deal, got me pulled together." Hooker's 1989 album "The Healer," with stellar appearances by Carlos Santana, Bonnie Raitt, Robert Cray, and Charlie Musselwhite, among others, brought him back into the spotlight. This led to several new albums, often with famous guest stars, and many CD collections of past works.

Near the end of his life, I asked Hooker where listeners could hear his best recordings. "Back when I was younger coming up," he responded, "I was playing more hard blues by myself. I could play more guitar and do more by myself. I had no band to interfere. I could do what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. 'In the Mood,' 'Dimples,' 'Boom Boom,' and 'Boogie Chillen',' I would say. That's the real, real blues--the deep, deep blues."

John Lee Hooker passed away on June 21, 2001.

*Jas Obrecht is a longtime editor for "Guitar Player" magazine and is the author of "Rollin' & Tumblin': The Postwar Blues Guitarists" (Miller Freeman, 2000), "Early Blues: The First Stars of Blues Guitar" (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), and "Talking Guitar: Conversations with Musicians Who Shaped Twentieth-Century American Music" (University of North Carolina Press, April 2017).*

\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.