

“I’m Your Hoochie Coochie Man”—Muddy Waters (1954)

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Essay by Robert Gordon (guest post)*



Muddy Waters

Bluesman Muddy Waters was known for the power he conveyed in music: manliness, deep hurt and deep pride, sexuality. His themes were reinforced by his style: his songs hit hard, his vocals were declamatory, his band played like a swinging fist. Several of his songs could be considered his signature, and one of those is “Hoochie Coochie Man.”

Odd that a man so full of machismo would be identified with two giggly pseudo words—“hoochie” and “coochie.” What do they mean anyway? Most likely they’re variants of the word “goochie” which was a southern slang term for vagina dating to the Reconstruction era. Muddy, with children by a variety of women, with female fans who’d throw underpants on stage, with a passion for sex—he was a hoochie coochie goochie man for sure.

The song “Hoochie Coochie Man” was brought to Muddy in late 1953 by Willie Dixon, a bassist and songwriter who would, within a year, bring Muddy other songs that solidified his hoochie coochie image: “Just Make Love To Me,” “I’m Ready,” and “Natural Born Lover.” As a songwriter, Dixon untied, sorted, and repackaged songs, lyrics, toasts, children’s games and an array of quips and boasts, putting his name on them and creating a catalog of his own. Then other, more dynamic singers made the songs into hits. He drew heavily from traditional sources, this boom-era of recording and mass distribution codifying what had been a loose and communal pool of melodies and lyrics. “There was quite a few people around singing the blues,” he said. “But most of ‘em was singing all sad blues. Muddy was giving his blues a little pep, and I began trying to think of things in a peppier form.” A hit performed by Muddy but written by Dixon would have as much remunerable benefit for its author as its performer (sometimes more so, if other people then covered the song).

One night Dixon came to Muddy’s gig at the Zanzibar. The band was drinking and working up the audience until the heat and sweat was too much, the cigarette smoke too thick, and they needed a break. Women and fans always surrounded Muddy after each set, and he greeted them politely, though his eye at this moment was on making his way to the bathroom. Dixon saw him enter, and followed him in. “I was in the men’s house when Willie Dixon came in and said he had a song he wanted me to look at,” recalled Muddy. Dixon’s reputation was established among Chicago’s blues musicians, and Muddy knew he’d recently got tight with the Chess brothers who ran Muddy’s recording label. Dixon ran down the song’s lyrics; if he had them on paper, they did the functionally illiterate Muddy no good. Muddy liked what he heard. (One commercial aspect of the song was that it had a chorus; many of Muddy’s, even hits such as “Long Distance

Call,” were built on a feeling and did not have even a refrain.) “He got his guitar,” said Dixon. “We was standing up in there playing and practicing.” Willie Dixon was a behemoth of a man, over six feet tall and topping three hundred pounds. It was hard to find a space he didn't crowd, and the cramped quarters of the Zanzibar's men's room no exception. One imagines Muddy leaning against the hand sink, his feet beneath Dixon's girth, his torso angled back against the mirror; Dixon, for whom this moment is initially more important--he's doing the pitching--with his head at an odd angle around the paper towel dispenser, pressing back his weight to give Muddy's guitar room. He told Muddy, “Well, just get a little rhythm pattern y' know. You can do the same thing over again, and keep the words in your mind.” Muddy reached back to his single, “Mad Love” (the only Dixon-penned song he'd yet sung, and the first to put him on the charts after a two year lull), and reworked the stop-time rhythm. It fit. He told Dixon he was going to open the set with it.

Suddenly the noise in the Zanzibar seemed to die away, the stench of old beer and gin-soaked floorboards dissipated, the smoke dispersed. Muddy's only concern was to gather the band and hit the stage before he forgot the lyrics. He gave the band the key, played them the pattern. *Repeat it, here's where it changes, listen at me--*they knew how to back him. After several rounds of exchange, they fell in together. “Oh man, the people went crazy,” said Muddy, and Dixon remembered, “He done it two or three times that night.” Like his granddaddy had shown young Muddy how to control an ox with a whip, Muddy could bring a song down.

Lyrically, “Hoochie Coochie Man” was perfectly suited to the stop-time rhythm. The first pause follows quickly on the song's opening notes, a tease for the listener--what was that? And when it happens again, it's like a game, the band messing with the audience. Little Walter's harmonica playing may be his most saxophone-like ever. Muddy Waters sings sex and seduction, boasting and braying, preening like a peacock, voodoo imagery enhancing his masculine power:

*I got a black cat bone
I got a mojo too
I got a John the Conqueror root
I got to mess with you.
I'm gonna make you girls
lead me by my hand
then the world'll know
I'm the Hoochie Coochie Man*

The club's reaction was only the first indication of the song's potential. Muddy's early hits had been largely unaccompanied though his gigs quickly expanded to a full band. He'd been trying to get his full band onto sessions, and this was one of the first times the company allowed it. It's his classic lineup: Jimmy Rogers on second guitar, Little Walter on harmonica, Otis Spann on piano, Willie Dixon on bass, and Elgin Evans on drums. The songs give a hint at how exciting Muddy's club act was in his prime.

“Billboard” couldn't keep quiet about the song: “We're so happy with Muddy Waters on Chess 1560 doing 'Hoochy Coochy [sic] Man' that we can't help mention it again for a top spot. Action gets better every week.” Record label head Leonard Chess went south to bolster sales, and partner Phil Chess told the magazine that the record had sold an astounding 4,000 copies in a single week. It became Muddy's top selling single, and spent three months in the national charts, where it rose to number three.

Muddy was at the height of his powers. His music harnessed the potency, the virility, in the blues. His lyrics did not flinch in their openness about sex. His braggadocio was salacious and

uninhibited. This was not the image of America that Eisenhower's White House nor television's "I Love Lucy" suggested. The boldness of his delivery and the lyrics to his songs disquieted the establishment and frightened them. The blues were considered obscene, making Muddy the boogie man incarnate. He relished the success and the reputation, painting on the side of his band car, "Muddy Waters and his Hoochie Coochie Boys."

Robert Gordon is a writer and filmmaker. Born and raised in Memphis, TN, the home of the blues, he returned there as an adult because of both the love and the hate in the city. Among his works are the award-winning biography "Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters" (Little, Brown), and the documentary "Muddy Waters Can't Be Satisfied" (American Masters).

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