

Sweet Home Chicago

1. *George Thorogood - Goin' Back*

If we are to look at the development of the blues in Chicago, we must first understand the history of the city itself. Trace the history of the city from its first permanent settler, to its role in the War of 1812, and finally to why it began to attract thousands of settlers in the 1830s, forming the basis for the modern city of Chicago.

Slavery

2. *Now Let Me Fly*

The music that is known as the blues was born from the songs slaves used to sing while working in the fields throughout the American south. Work songs, prisons songs, and spirituals all helped to form the emotional, musical, and rhythmic DNA of the blues. Some slaves attempted to escape along the Underground Railroad to gain their freedom, and many of the songs they sang in the fields referenced aspects of the journey north. Tell me about these early slave songs, what they sounded like, why and how they were sung, their secret meanings, and the Underground Railroad. Try and work in one of the "stations" of the Underground Railroad located in Chicago, such as the famous Quinn Chapel, a church that continued to be the headquarters for civil rights in Chicago for over a century and a half.

Sharecropping and the Blues

3. *Robert Johnson - Sweet Home Chicago (1937)*

After legal slavery ended, most African American still lived under a form of economic slavery called sharecropping. Economically, they were often still tied to southern planters, and socially, they still faced racism and legal prejudice. The blues is sometimes called "sharecropping music," because it was so exemplary of this practice. Where once there were hundreds of slaves working and signing together on a plantation, now those same slaves were working on the same plantations, but working individually on their own plot of land. The songs, like the work, were often the same, but became more individualized instead of many voices singing together, the same spirituals, work songs, and field-hollers were now often heard being sung or played by a lone sharecropper. Tell us how the sharecropping system worked, and why most workers felt like it was little to no improvement over slavery.

Great Migration

4. *Big Bill Broonzy - Key to Highway (1940)*

Between 1910 and 1960 millions of African-Americans made their way from the hard life and poor wages of the South up north to Chicago to try and make a better life for themselves. When they came they carried with them their music, ideas, possessions, and superstition. This brought the blues to new audiences and ushered in a new era in music. Tell me more about this phenomenon. Why did it happen? What did southerners hear about these northern cities that made them sound so appealing? Where did most of Chicago's African American migrants come from? Did they find what they were looking for in Chicago?

The South Side and Chicago Jazz

5. *Sam Theard - That's Chicago's South Side (1929)*

As southern blacks began to pour into Chicago, many gravitated to the part of the city known as the "South Side." With its factories and stockyards, there were jobs available, and this part of town became home to poor immigrants of all nationalities. But as more blacks flooded to the city, other ethnic groups began to move out into surrounding neighborhoods, making the South Side increasingly segregated. Housing discrimination and restrictive neighborhood covenants further reinforced this, preventing blacks from freely moving to other parts of the city. The South Side, therefore, developed into a black metropolis. In the 1920s, areas on the South Side like "Bronzeville" and "The Stroll," became musical and cultural centers of black life, and if you wanted to come to hear the hottest jazz in country, played by the best in the business this was the place to be. Talk about where exactly the South Side is, was like during the 1920s, and the importance of this area to African American life in Chicago.

Race Riots of 1919

6. Maceo Merriweather - Worried Life Blues (1941)

The Great Migration brought thousands of African Americans to Chicago looking for jobs. And during WWI, with many young men overseas fighting, there were plenty to be had. But once those veterans came back from the war looking for work, many became resentful of the African Americans who had filled those positions. And there were other new ethnic groups arriving in Chicago as well looking for jobs and housing. All of this competition led to heightened tensions, and when a black teenager was killed by a white man at a Chicago beach, all of that built up tension boiled over into a week of violence. It was clear that racism was alive and well in Chicago, and it was enough to give anyone the blues. Tell us more about the Race Riots of 1919, why they started, and if anything changed because of them.

Sonny Boy and the Chicago Harmonica

7. Sonny Boy Williamson I - My Little Machine (1940)

Today, the harmonica is an integral part of the Chicago Blues sound. Possibly more than anyone else, Sonny Boy Williamson I is responsible for that. He moved to Chicago in the 1930s, and cemented his reputation as the best harp player in town (A "harp" is what blues musicians call the harmonica). He made the harmonica a featured instrument, putting it right out front and demanding attention. The expression and rhythm of his music created a fresh and exciting sound that would lay the foundations of what was to come. Tell me about the life and death of Sonny Boy and why he was so important to the Chicago Blues.

(Sonny Boy Williamson is one of the most confusing bluesmen to research because there are two famous harmonica players who both call themselves "Sonny Boy Williamson." The one we are dealing with here was born John Lee Williamson in 1914 in Jackson, TN. He is often referred to as Sonny Boy Williamson I.)

The Defender and the Illinois Central

8. Sunnyland Slim - Illinois Central (1947)

The city of Chicago as we know it today was built as a transportation hub, and throughout its history railroads have played a large role in its development. One of the most important railroads was the Illinois Central. This ran from the Gulf of Mexico all the way to Chicago, and during the Great Migration, it was one of the main ways that the blues traveled from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago. Branches of the railroad snaked through the rural Mississippi Delta, providing numerous points that a sharecropper might make their escape. In addition, copies of Chicago's black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, were spread through the delta. The *Defender* did much to persuade southern blacks to come to the Windy City. Billing Chicago as the "promised land," it organized migrant clubs and offered group discounts on train fare. Tell us about the Chicago Defender and the Illinois Central railroad, and their influence on the Great Migration.

Muddy Waters - King of Chicago Blues

9. Muddy Waters - Can't Be Satisfied (1948)

The Father of the Chicago Blues, Muddy Waters started out in the Mississippi Delta before traveling up north during the Great Migration. He plugged in his guitar, and changed the history of music forever. Tell me about the Great Migration, Muddy's rags to riches story, and why his music was so revolutionary and influential.

Maxwell Street

10. Sonny Boy Williamson II (Rice Miller) - Eyesight to the Blind (1951)

After the Great Migration, Maxwell Street, in Chicago, became home to many African Americans from the Mississippi Delta. The music of the Delta (the blues) was often heard in the neighborhood, performed by street musicians in the famous markets held on Maxwell Street. Although many African Americans made their home on Maxwell Street, it was a melting pot of all sorts of ethnicities and nationalities, and the atmosphere on market days was simply crazy. Tell me about Maxwell Street, its culture, the musicians who made it famous, and why it is known as the birthplace of Chicago Blues.

Chess Records

11. Elmore James - *Dust My Broom* (1951)

This Chicago record company changed the history of the blues and popular music. More than any other company, Chess defined the sound of Chicago Blues, and so it might be surprising to learn that it was started by Polish immigrants. Tell me about the Chess brothers, Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters and the other artists that made this record company different from all the rest.

Highway 61

12. Jimmy Rogers - *Chicago Bound* (1954) w/ Little Walter

Highway 61 is known as the "Blues Highway," and countless numbers of Mississippi bluesmen have made their way north along this highway. The highway starts down in New Orleans, snakes through the Mississippi Delta, Memphis, St. Louis, and up near Chicago before ending near the Canadian Border. It is no coincidence that these cities have such strong blues traditions. Tell me about Highway 61, the main stops along the route, its role in the blues, and how many African-American who ultimately made their home in Chicago spent time along the route.

Little Walter

13. Little Walter - *Mellow Down Easy* (Willie Dixon - 1954)

Though his name might suggest otherwise, Little Walter Jacobs was a giant on the Chicago blues scene. Originally from the Deep South, Little Walter first migrated to Memphis and then Chicago to make a name for himself. Like many new comers, he cut his teeth at the crowded outdoor markets on Maxwell St., and realized that if he was to be heard over all the hustle and bustle, he would have to use an amplifier. From his dirty, amplified sound to his saxophone-like riffs, Walter's harmonica playing revolutionized the blues and changed the sound of Chicago forever. Tell me the story of Little Walter, how he came about his signature sound, and how he influenced the Chicago Blues.

Ida B. Wells

14. Etta James - *W.O.M.A.N* (1955)

Born a slave in 1862, Ida B. Wells became one the most important civil rights activists in American history. A skilled writer, Wells used her pen to wage an impressive anti-lynching campaign, and was run out of the south by the KKK. She finally ended up in Chicago and continued to fight for civil rights in the city and our nation. Tell me more about this remarkable woman and her impact and legacy in Chicago.

Chicago Stockyards

15. Howlin' Wolf - *Killing Floor* (1964)

Near the turn of the century, poet Carl Sandberg called Chicago "the Hog Butcher for the World." There was plenty of evidence to back up his claim. Since the Civil War, Chicago was the biggest meat packing industry in the country. During various eras in history, different immigrant groups provided the bulk of the labor force for the famous Chicago Union Stockyards, including African Americans at one point. Tell me more about the rise and fall of Chicago's meat packing industry and the part that African Americans played in that story.

Bo Diddley

16. Bo Diddley - *Who Do You Love* (1957)

Elias McDaniel, or Bo Diddley, as he was known, was one of the most important figures in American music. Though born in Mississippi, he was living in Chicago by the age of 6. Though he was well-versed in the blues and recorded at Chess records with blues giants like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, he had a sound and a swagger all his own. He built his own guitar and effects pedals, and was one of the first "guitar slingers" of rock and roll. In fact, he has a musical style named after him! Talk about what made Bo Diddley so unique and influential, the origins of the "Bo Diddley Beat," and why he (like many other black musicians) was never adequately compensated for his musical success.

Chicago's West Side

17. Otis Rush - *I Can't Quit You Baby* (Willie Dixon - 1956)

In the 1940's, the second wave of the Great Migration brought thousands of new African-American migrants into Chicago. Due to overcrowding on the South Side, many began to expand to the West Side of the city and by the 1950s and 1960's, an expanding west side community began to appear. The West Side became a very segregated territory with white residents moving out to other neighborhoods. Once the white residents left, the quality of schools and other city services began to suffer and sometimes disappear completely. Adjacent white neighborhoods used various tactics to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods, and the west side soon was filled with slums and ghettos. These discriminatory housing practices restricted the freedom of blacks from living wherever they wanted, and created segregated and decaying black communities. Dr. Martin Luther King even came to Chicago in 1966 to try and raise awareness of these urban problems, and rented an apartment on the West Side. It was in this overcrowded and dilapidated West Side that a new, angrier style of Chicago Blues emerged. Talk about the development of the West Side, the housing problems blacks here faced, and the artists and sound that made up the blues on the West Side.

Pullman Porters

18. Jimmy Reed - *Big Boss Man* (1960)

In addition to the railroads themselves, Chicago was also home to the Pullman Palace Car Company, which produced and operated sleeping cars for railroad passengers. The porters on these railroad cars were generally African-American, and formed the first labor union led by African-Americans. Talk about the Pullman Company, its importance to Chicago, its black porters, and their fight to secure equal employment rights.

Hoodoo

19. Junior Wells - *Hoodoo Man* (1965)

During the Great Migration, thousands of people made their way up from the south to try and make it in the big city, Chicago. When they came they carried with them their ideas, possessions, and their superstitions. Hoodoo was a kind of black magic practiced by many of the early bluesmen, and references to this can be found in many of their songs - mojos, black cat bones, John the Conqueror Root, and other "lucky charms" crop up all over the blues. Tell me about this superstition. What is Hoodoo? What are these charms supposed to do? What does it mean to be a Hoodoo Man?

Willie Dixon

20. Koko Taylor - *Wang Dang Doodle* (Willie Dixon 1965)

It could be argued that there is no bluesman more important than Willie Dixon. As a talent scout, song writer, arranger, musician, and producer at Chess Records in Chicago, Willie Dixon shaped the sound of the Chicago blues in every facet. His songs have gone on to be Blues standards and Rock and Roll classics. His musicianship can be heard on almost all of the legendary tracks to come out of Chess Records, and he devoted much of the last years of his life to preserve and protect the history of the blues. He worked tirelessly to gain back royalties for himself and many other black bluesmen who had been exploited by record companies in the past. Tell me about the life, music, and significance of this amazing blues hero. Be sure to include a quote or two – Willie has a lot of good ones.

Hound Dog Taylor and Alligator Records

21. Hound Dog Taylor - Give Me Back My Wig (1971)

The story of the Hound Dog Taylor is the story of the Chicago Blues. Once a Mississippi sharecropper, Hound Dog found his way to Chicago's Maxwell St. in the 1940s. Though he played with a few big names over the years, he never gained any notoriety outside the city. Playing clubs around the south and west side on a weekly basis for decades, Hound Dog Taylor played the blues for all the right reasons. It was full of emotion and raw energy, and it was perfect for having a good time. It wasn't until Hound Dog attracted the attention of a young white blues fan named Bruce Iglauer who decided to start a record company just so he could record this music that he had fallen in love with. The company was called Alligator Records and today it is the premier blues record label in the country, and still produces some of the most authentic blues acts in Chicago and across the country. Tell me the story of Hound Dog Taylor and why this simple Mississippi Delta sharecropper made his way to Chicago, his musical career, and how the record company that his music inspired is still spreading the gospel of the blues around the world.

Chicago Blues Today

22. Buddy Guy - Meet Me in Chicago

Though not as popular as it once was, the blues is still alive and well in Chicago. Legends, owned by Chicago blues icon Buddy Guy, still provides live blues all week long, and a handful of other blues clubs still survive in the city. And for three days every year, Chicago hosts the "Chicago Blues Festival" which is the largest free blues festival in the world, and attracts a half million people each year. Tell me about the blues in Chicago today, the Chicago Blues Festival, and the life and legacy of Buddy Guy, the last living links to the heyday of the Chicago Blues.