



The only known  
photograph of  
Charley Patton, 1929

# CHARLEY PATTON

AN ORIGINAL BLUES ARTIST, HE CREATED  
AN ENDURING BODY OF AMERICAN MUSIC.

BY ASHLEY KAHN

**T**he blues, apparently, began in the mists.” So wrote music historian Luc Sante in a brilliant essay on the folk style from which so much American music, and now worldwide expression, has grown. One of the very first stars of the country blues – the OG of Delta blues, to be specific – was Charley Patton (1891–1934).

Like the blues, Patton’s origin story remains hidden and veiled, teasing us with mere details. We know he was a role model and influencer: His line of influence defines perhaps the strongest thread in the musical tapestry of rock & roll. It begins with the tight Mississippi blues circle that came up around him, learning from his innovations – Willie Brown, Tommy Johnson, Son House, Henry “Son” Sims, and especially the celebrated, mythic Robert Johnson. Next came a younger generation of blues players who witnessed or studied with Patton – Chester Burnett (a.k.a. Howlin’ Wolf), McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters), Willie Dixon, Elmore James, and Roebuck Staples – who all brought the music up north and amplified it, translating it for electrical instrumentation and group performance. In the 1960s came another generation, who took it further and louder and gave it global reach – Bob Dylan, Cream, Taj Mahal, Ry Cooder, Canned Heat, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, the Allman Brothers, Led Zeppelin, Bonnie Raitt, and countless others. Collectively they erected what today stands as a shrine to Patton’s sound and spirit; perhaps he should be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame for his architectural as well as his musical contributions.

Here’s what else we know: “Charley Patton saw a world of changes in the fifty-odd years of his life,” music journalist Robert Palmer noted in his seminal study *Deep Blues*, further detailing how Patton, as a skilled Black musician, was truly ahead of his time. “He rarely worked for whites except to furnish a night’s entertainment, and

he was never tied to a menial job or a plot of land for very long. He went where he pleased, stayed as long as he pleased, left when he wanted to . . . And he created an enduring body of American music, for he personally inspired just about every Delta bluesman of consequence, and some blueswomen as well . . . He is among the most important musicians [of] 20th-century America . . . Yet we know very little about his formative years, and practically nothing about how he learned his art.”

Charley or Charlie or Charles? We’re not even sure how he spelled his name. It’s “Charlie” and “Charley” on various record label materials and “Charley” on his gravestone.

More details: Patton was born in rural Mississippi, halfway between Jackson and Vicksburg, around the same time as the Delta blues was first forming itself into a distinct structure and identifiable sound: the 12-bar, I-IV-V harmony that became the lingua franca of twentieth-century American music. Of course, other Black music styles predated and coexisted, from field hollers and spirituals to reels, jigs, and ragtime guitar pieces. By the time Patton came of age, the blues resonated in all aspects of Black cultural expression.

Patton was hooked on music from an early age and picked up the guitar, much to the chagrin of his churchgoing stepfather. In many ways, he was not his father’s son. The subject of Patton’s heritage has long been a matter of discussion: It was said he favored his mother, Annie, who was half Native American – either Choctaw or Cherokee. The sole existing photograph of Patton, taken in 1929 when he was nearing 40, shows him looking stately and fashionable in a high-backed chair. It also reveals his slight physique and multiracial characteristics.

While still a youngster, Patton and his family relocated one hundred miles north to Dockery Farms, a relatively new cotton-and-lumber farming plantation filled with



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African American sharecroppers and hired laborers. The move landed Patton in the center of a burgeoning blues scene. Get-togethers took place every weekend with music provided by local front-porch players as well as itinerant musicians. There were self-accompanied guitarists and string bands, all playing the blues. Patton became a disciple of resident bluesman Henry Sloan – a rough-hewn, self-taught guitar master about whom even less is known – as well as the more urbane string- and jug-band members of the well-recorded Chatmon family.

These were the musical poles Patton would work between for the rest of his career: the ribald and the urbane. Raw tunes of sexual conquest and bravado, and more tempered, heartfelt songs dealing with the personal travails, social challenges, and details of a Black man living in his part of Mississippi. Loneliness and abandonment, partying and dancing, local lawmen, floods, infestations. And like many bluesmen of his generation, Patton struggled to navigate the ways of the Good Book while often giving in to the temptation of good times: drinking, carousing, womanizing . . . and more drinking. “It’s boozy booze, Lord, to cure these blues,” Patton sang on “Tom Rushen Blues.” Then it was back to preaching and teetotaling.

On occasion, Patton preached and led Sunday services. In the spoken asides on his blues recordings, you can hear the holy man coming through; his “You’re Gonna Need Somebody When You Die” offers a full-on Sunday sermon.

As imaginative as his guitar playing was, with its expressive slidework, exotic tunings and patterns, and polyrhythms affected by snapping and slapping the strings, Patton’s singing was his calling card. His rasp – unusual for one of his slight stature – was his signature. He was a master of textural nuance and flow, a precursor of so many rough-edged voices to come, from Howlin’ Wolf, Captain Beefheart, and Tom Waits to DMX, Busta Rhymes, and Wu-Tang’s ODB.

Patton’s voice was malleable as well, covering an emotional range from whispered intimacy to a guttural roar. He could moan with disarming strength and sensitivity; he stretched lyrics and reassembled syllables, favoring emotional effect over meaning. At times, he vocally jumped between registers. Or he turned up the heat by shifting from open-mouthed to tight-jawed. On some tunes, like his signature “A Spoonful Blues” – later re-

visited by Howlin’ Wolf and Cream – Patton simply dropped words, allowing the guitar to complete the lyric.

Patton’s recordings are masterworks of orchestration. The call-and-response between voice and guitar, the interaction of the lead and bass lines, and the rhythmic strumming on the guitar itself serve as a one-man model that would be divided among multiple players in future electric blues bands and rock & roll ensembles.

Patton’s recorded legacy numbers over fifty sides for Paramount Records in 1929 and for Vocalion in 1934 – two of the era’s leading labels specializing in what was then termed “Race Records”: Black music for African American consumers (a “race man” being one proud of his ethnicity). The number not only suggests how prolific and stylistically diverse Patton was, but also implies numerous unrecorded songs from his repertoire. Paramount made him the focus of a “Masked Marvel” marketing campaign, asking fans to identify him and win a free disc. But both his labels went out of business during the Depression, with the master copies of Patton’s recordings then lost or destroyed. In the decades that followed, his music was only available via 78 rpm discs; even now, with cutting-edge audio software, the limits of the original source material offer a narrow sonic image with which to appreciate his mastery.

Then again, Patton’s enduring impact should not be measured through his recordings alone. He was a stellar performer, even in the humble context of an outdoor party or juke joint. His peers in the Delta remembered him mostly for his entertaining antics: playing the guitar behind his back and between his legs; tossing it in the air mid-song, then catching it without losing the beat. He had a knack for creating lyrics on the spot, freestyling the country blues. “Patton was underrated by some of his contemporaries precisely because he was a consummate Saturday night entertainer,” wrote Palmer. Son House once described Patton as a man who could “make a song out of anything,” and that wasn’t a compliment. But when he heard Patton’s recordings again in the 1960s, House was genuinely startled by his musical excellence.

We are celebrating that excellence tonight – the kind of excellence that continues to reveal itself the more we hear it through the mists of the past and realize how tightly it is still woven into the musical fabric of our culture, and our lives, today. Such is the undying sound of Charley Patton.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:  
 The Mississippi Delta farm where  
 Patton's family settled; Patton's  
 gravestone, Holly Ridge, Mississippi;  
 Paramount Records ads for star  
 bluesman Charley Patton, ca. 1930.

**"Mean Black Cat Blues"**

A Good Blues Song  
 With a Hot Guitar




Sung by  
**CHARLEY PATTON**

**12943** —MEAN BLACK CAT BLUES

Paramount  
 78 rpm

**THE MASKED MARVEL**

AKA  
 ELDER  
 J. J.  
 HADLEY



AKA **CHARLEY PATTON**

