



Little Walter

BY

ASHLEY KAHN



Little Walter," they called him. Often, there would be a certain four-syllable epithet inserted in the middle, reflecting the height of respect his musical talent commanded – and the level his anger could reach. Small in stature he may have been, but there was nothing diminutive about his influence or his attitude. Musically, Marion Walter Jacobs was a giant. The blues, of the electric Chicago variety, were his area of expertise. The harmonica, blown through a bullet-shaped microphone, was his instrument of choice. Jacobs drew from what he heard – the spontaneity and sophisticated swing of jazz, the distortion and raw majesty of electric blues – to create a fluid and fiery vocabulary. To this day, his legacy resounds in the wailing of thousands of harp players who freely borrow from his sonic inventions. That successive generations of rock singers – Mick Jagger to Kim Wilson to John Popper and beyond – choose to double on mouth organ is much to his credit.

Considering how Jacobs almost single-handedly established the importance of a modest device like the harmonica, one needs to reach beyond the blues circle to find his parallel. Think of Lester Young – and, later, John Coltrane – and where they took the tenor saxophone. Or Muddy Waters – and, later, Jimi Hendrix – and what they managed with the electric guitar. That Jacobs was able to match the power and the emotional expression of other, more intricate instruments makes his accomplishment even more remarkable.

Born in 1930 in rural Louisiana, Jacobs had barely reached his teens when he lit out for New Orleans. Pre-

cocious, pugnacious, and extremely talented, he worked his way north, busking on street corners in Memphis, Helena, and St. Louis, hanging with and learning first-hand from blues heavyweights like Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Jr. Lockwood. At age fifteen, he arrived in Chicago and immediately began making his mark on the local blues scene (small surprise he was dubbed "Little," given his age). Though he played – and first recorded

on – guitar, it was his harmonica prowess that brought him work and attention.

Yet there was a problem: In the boisterous confines of the city's South Side blues clubs, it was hard for an acoustic harmonica to be heard above all the chatter and din, let alone compete with

hard-driving groups with electric guitars and drums. Jacobs blew the harp through a microphone, but he took the technique much further than those who'd done it first. With precision, he made use of the peculiarities of amplification to emphasize the drama inherent in the music: in-your-face, distorted timbres; tightly controlled fluctuations in tone and volume.

The sound was revolutionary. In no time, he was playing in the hottest new band on the scene, led by Muddy Waters. Together, they called themselves the *Headhunters*, traveling from bar to bar and slaying the competition. In the studio, recording for the city's Chess Records label, they began to notch national sellers – "Louisiana Blues," "She Moves Me," "Honey Bee," and "Long Distance Call" (the last featuring Jacobs blowing what was essentially a ringtone precursor).

So scene-shaping was the group's sound that in the following years "you couldn't get a job at that time

"The harmonica is the mother of the band," according to Otis Spann



Clowning with his second instrument while on tour in Europe



ABOVE: Snapping and smiling: Onstage in Chicago, mid-sixties.
OPPOSITE: At the American Folk Blues Festival, London, 1967.

without a harmonica player," recalls the Chicago harp player Billy Boy Arnold, with little complaint. "The harmonica is the mother of the band," Waters's pianist, Otis Spann, echoed. "Once you get a good harp lead off, you in business."

At the close of a Waters session in 1952, Jacobs was accorded the chance to cut an instrumental he had written. He played his harp with the elastic phrasing of a saxophone while Waters's band provided the bounce of a jump band. "Juke" proved a chart-topping R&B sensation, the biggest single released by the Chess label to date.

Jacobs continued to record with Waters and with many other blues giants through the fifties, but it was clear he had his own career path to follow. He took over a group led by another harp player, Junior Wells, which included guitarists Louis and David Myers and drummer Fred Below, and called them the Jukes. Jacobs — then 22 — was a headliner with a hit. Between '52 and '58, his recordings yielded a string of fourteen Top Ten R&B hits, including his biggest seller in 1955, a reworking of the spiritual "This Train" that he secularized and called "My Babe." Jacobs penned many of his hits, most of which were *not* instrumentals but vocal numbers, his voice as expressive and popular an instrument as his harmonica. The amount and the originality of Jacobs's output is staggering. He experimented with a variety of tempos and grooves, and blew solos of imagination and artful construction. He wrote lyrics that reflected a chin-first approach to life and love: "Mean Old World," "Boom Boom, Out Go the Lights," "It's Too Late Brother," "Tell Me Mama," "Blues With a Feeling," "Temperature." Jacobs's instrumentals were filled with jazz-like inventiveness; some, like "Teenage Beat," helped introduce the organ-like fullness of the chromatic harmonica into the blues idiom.

At the height of his powers, Jacobs was a full musician: a singer and instrumental virtuoso who composed songs, conceiving and explaining to his band what he wanted by playing it on harmonica or guitar. "He was always calling rehearsals for us to go over new tunes or tighten up our old ones," Below recalls. "It was like Walter was running a school . . . the beautiful thing was you could check out what you learned each day by playing it in the club that night."

Yet with all that talent and good fortune, Jacobs was unfortunately saddled with an explosive temper and a taste for alcohol, the latter often sparking the former. He lived hard, drank hard, and, by the early sixties, a telltale croak had become part of his voice. Ironically, as his drinking increased, his reputation was also on the rise. Here and abroad, his music was reaching a larger, younger audience, hungry for the sounds of the real blues. He toured Europe twice.

The only surviving footage of the harmonica giant catches him live in Denmark in 1967. He was looking beyond his thirty-seven years: His fingers were bloated, and his once youthful face bore scars from years of street fights. The next year, back home in Chicago, Jacobs fought for the last time and died a day later from a coronary thrombosis. It was an ignominious end for a man who had carved a place for himself among legends and then became one himself.

Today, Little Walter is most often referred to as a "blues harp wizard," yet "amplified harmonica pioneer" is more accurate. Manipulating hands, harmonica, and microphone, Jacobs took a primarily metal-and-wood object and taught it to speak with an emotional complexity and honesty it had never uttered before. ♪



