

The Chief Blues Story



FEATURING

EARL HOOKER • ELMORE JAMES • MAGIC SAM • JUNIOR WELLS
LILLIAN OFFITT • FRANK BUTLER • G. 'DAVY' CROCKETT
AND MANY MORE

Anyone familiar with the work of guitarist and singer Rory Gallagher will immediately recognise 'Messing With The Kid', the Junior Wells recording, as a highlight of the late, great Irishman's repertoire. Similarly, 'It Hurts Me Too', originated by Tampa Red but popularised by Elmore James, was a standout track of Eric Clapton's back-to-the-blues album 'From The Cradle', released in 1994. The song has also been covered by the Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan and others.

It's clear, then, that Chief Records has an illustrious fan base, even though its short period of operation spanned just five years from 1957 to 1961. This compilation contains many of the musical highlights that resulted.

As well as the aforementioned Elmore James and Junior Wells, Chief's roster of Chicago-based blues artists included guitarists Magic Sam and Earl Hooker. But the brains behind the label, with its distinctive Red Indian chief with head-dress logo, was one Mel London.

Born in Mississippi in 1932 and only 25 years old when he founded Chief Records, London already owned a music publishing company, Melva Music. He not only produced but was also credited with writing many of the songs that made Chief's name, even singing on first release 'Man From The Island'. Earl Hooker was his right-hand musician, featuring on singles by Junior Wells and Lillian Offitt, among others, as well as putting out instrumental discs under his own name.

Elmore James' 1957 Chief recording of 'It Hurts Me Too' did not chart, but a later version for Fire/Fury became an R&B hit. Junior Wells also performed the song and often used James' lyrics. He recorded it several times, most notably in 1979 with long-time guitar partner Buddy Guy.

Wells can also be heard here on the opening 'Calling All Blues', where his harmonica duets effectively with Earl Hooker's slide guitar. Unfortunately this was erroneously credited to Elmore James on release, so our compilation redresses the balance somewhat. (The pair can also be heard on 'Lazy Mule'.)

The aforementioned 'Messing With The Kid' was inspired when Mel London came to collect Wells for a studio date only to find him babysitting his daughter Gina. When the pair finished their scheduled recording session with time to spare, they fashioned this number between them in a matter of minutes, and the result became Wells' (and Rory Gallagher's) theme tune.

Of the other artists featured, Mississippi-born guitar-player Magic Sam (real name Sam Maghett) had recorded alongside Otis Rush on the short-lived Cobra label but found it difficult to surpass the impact of those early tracks in later recordings with Chief. His death in 1969 with precious little studio material in the can meant he never got the chance to cash in on his influence on the British R&B boom. We include six sides here.

Nashville's Lillian Offitt first made waves when a university student, singing in her spare time for her local Excello Records label. After a move to Chicago she took up the vocalist's position with Earl Hooker's group and signed to Chief Records. 'The Man Won't Work' (featuring AC Reed on sax), and 'Will My Man Be Home Tonight?' were paired as a single, and the aching B-side became a local hit. (We also include an instrumental version, 'Blues in D Natural'.)

Further singles 'Oh Mama'/'My Man Is A Lover' and 'Troubles'/'Shine On' failed to capitalise on early promise, and when she saw commercial success elude her Offitt left music for family life.

Singers Melvin Simpson and Frank Butler, plus exuberant duet partners Bobby and Lucy, are other names we feature here. Little is known about these artists: Melvin Simpson was apparently the son of another singer, Marcellus 'Big Daddy' Simpson, while Frank Butler recorded just three singles in his lifetime. His debut was for Ebony in 1956, followed swiftly by the featured 'I Can't Believe It'. He didn't record again until 1970, where he cut one 45 for J.V. again in Chicago, and that was the last that was heard from him.

Mel London ran the Profile label alongside Chief to release pop product, its logo a Roman emperor with a laurel wreath, but both imprints would founder in 1961 due to tax problems. A subsidiary label Age carried on for a few more years. Chief released 41 singles in total, the last of which were reissues of existing product.

Chief's founder died in 1975, and received a glowing obituary from Living Blues magazine. 'The blues world owes Mel London more than he ever realised', wrote its editor Jim O'Neal. Chief may not have been the most successful or prolific of blues labels, but few can doubt on the basis of this collection that its musical impact far outweighed its output.

Sleeve notes by Michael Heatley



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