

MAKING BLUES TIME December 10, 2010

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This article is about musical time, something we might agree to call “making time.” The classic blues players, like all great musicians, literally “make” time. They don’t just follow along in time like most of us do when listening. They set the time, inset the time with their music, but it goes deeper than that. Every once in a while you and I might look at our watch and see what time the clock says, but the time in between those clock checks goes unchecked? It just passes, like the old song from Sandy Denny, “Who knows where the time goes?” I certainly don’t know where it goes. My point is that while clock time seems to be regular, what goes on when you and I are not watching the clock can be anything but regular. In other word time contracts and expands, especially when it comes to musical time.

The really great blues players, and we all have our favorites, actually can ‘make’ time. Time is also something we make. My favorite for “making” time would have to be Big Walter Horton, the Chicago blues harmonica player. In my opinion he could make the best time. He could show me the best time I have ever had musically, the very best time I have ever experienced. And I have of course (like we all do) my own sense of time, you know just going along each day, like each of us are doing now, reading this – taking our own sweet time.

But with Walter Horton, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf and other blues greats, somehow their music takes over time as I know it. They can overtake my personal sense of time and replace it with the kind of time that they make, which is for me a much more vast sense of time, you know, more time, time enough to do other things in -- extra-ordinary time. I can synch up or resonate to their time and it becomes (for the moment) my time. Big Walter Horton (for me) is a great director or conductor of time and I gladly groove along with him to his beat. Great blues players can expand time and, in that expanded time, these musicians give us more room to experience or listen, creating an envelope (almost like an aura) with their music, an envelope in which I have more room or space to know myself, to relax, to be myself, or to just think and be here now. Making time is what this article is about.

Musical Time Beyond Time

Making time is one of the hallmarks of the great blues musicians. Most of them are gone and I have resigned myself to not hearing their kind of expanded musical time played live any longer, although I can still hear it on some recordings. It is gone. However, to my surprise, I actually experienced this form of blues time live a couple years ago after a very long hiatus. It was at a Michigan music festival called “Wheatland,” held not far from where I live here in mid-Michigan. Perhaps 20,000 people attended it.

They had a musician there named Aubrey Ghent, a lap-steel player from somewhere in the southeast; I believe it was Florida. Ghent plays gospel music and, sure enough, that day he was making time like the old masters. I was spellbound. I had not heard profound “blues” time like that since back in the day around Chicago and places like that. And Aubrey Ghent was sitting up there on the stage playing blues time, just like they used to.

Aubrey Ghent was ‘making’ the time. It immediately put me back in a musical space when I used to listen to players like Muddy Waters, a space where a blues player would take over time

as I knew (and lived it) and would put me through something I could not put myself through, taking me on a trip and to a place where I sure liked to go.

Aubrey Ghent had that kind of sense of time and one of the songs he displayed it on was, to everyone's surprise, "Don't Worry, Be Happy," the Bobby McFerrin tune. The whole audience just stopped whatever time they were having and went on Ghent's time for a while. And of course the rest of the night we were all telling each other about that incredible music. What I am after here is what makes that kind of music time incredible?

Maybe at the end, after you listened to Ghent, you would say to yourself, "Wow, that music was 'really' good," but it is way more than just the music being 'good'. Most of those present had just experienced something that they never had before and that some of us hadn't heard for a very long time. And maybe they can't quite remember it or maybe they remember it later, slowly, over a period of time, calling it back into memory with satisfaction, a little bit of that time, reading it back to themselves.

Anyway, Howlin' Wolf would put me through something like that when I was with him. And another blues player who did that to me was Chicago's Magic Sam. Some of you may not know of Magic Sam, but he was one of the most virile, seminal guitar players that have ever played the guitar. And he also was an incredible singer, and I 'mean' incredible! You can hear what I am pointing out here on the Delmark album "West-Side Soul" by Magic Sam here:

http://www.amazon.com/West-Side-Soul-Magic-Sam/dp/B000004BIF/ref=pd_sim_m_2

And in the re-release of his Cobra and Chief Recordings from 1957 here:

<http://www.amazon.com/Essential-Magic-Sam-Cobra-Recordings/dp/B000059RVO>.

I first heard Magic Sam live in Chicago back in the mid-1960s in one of these large rooms like you find in some of the Chinese restaurants in the major cities, the ones with really low ceilings. I am talking about big rooms, where they have all these little tables and chairs that kind of go way back in the distance. You can't even see the end of them and in this case everyone was already standing. I couldn't see Magic Sam. I had just squeezed in the door and was flat up against the back wall, and the place was packed. All I could make out were heads as far as I could see. Yet I could hear this incredible sound coming from somewhere way up front. It was Magic Sam's voice, which immediately made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I had never heard anyone sing like that. It was literally a shimmering sheet of sound. It was Magic Sam making time. That kind of time was rare then and almost impossible to find now.

In my opinion what we are getting from blues players today, and I don't mean to offend anyone, so I will try to say it gently, is the music "it sounds like this," as in: "it sounds like Howlin' Wolf." To myself I just call it "reenactment" blues. Today we are now reenacting something that used to be there but no longer is like: Howlin' Wolf used to be there, but he is no longer with us, and so on. Or we could just say that no one sings like the Wolf, and those who try are just re-enacting Wolf, trying to sound like Wolf.

The problem with younger players re-enacting Wolf's songs is that they always make me think of Wolf, and whoever is singing does not really sound like Wolf. This spoils it for me, because there is no comparison. I would rather these young players just sing Wolf's songs in their own voice and with their own experience, so I could hear 'them', and not them through a Wolf filter, and often a lousy one at that. That's just me.

Consider this: Most musicians listen to someone like Howlin' Wolf or Big Walter Horton and they set about to learn Wolf's style, to play Wolf's licks, and so on, in hopes that they can make the kind of music Wolf makes. But this is just exactly backward to what would actually be needed to create the effect of a Wolf or a Muddy Waters, and this point may be a little subtle. Playing Wolf's licks, and so on, will never get you there. Wolf is not doing that. Wolf is not trying to resemble anyone. He has managed to get his mind and consciousness (whatever we want to call it) into a certain state so that anything he plays already has that sound and perfection. It is already perfect "Wolf." You can't imitate perfection and why would you want to?

Therefore, to play like Wolf plays, you would first have to perfect not your guitar licks, but your mind, your consciousness, pay your dues, and get yourself into a state where anything you do, including playing music, will already be significant, and will exactly signify you and where 'your' head is at. Do you understand? Don't work on the licks only, but work on perfecting yourself, your life, your consciousness, and where your mind is at. Then whatever you do will sound right, at least right for you. Anyway, back to "making time."

The main blues players from back in the 1960s were all incredible, but the greatest time-maker of all time (for me personally) was the harmonica player Big Walter Horton. He could set or make time better than anyone I have ever heard. I refer you to Volume Three of the "Chicago the Blues Today!" album on Vanguard, and the song "Black Spider Blues," as an example. Horton is playing there with Johnny Shines and the two of them are making time together. Here is a link:

http://www.amazon.com/Chicago-Blues-Today-Various-Artists/dp/B000000EJ0/ref=sr_1_4?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1291988413&sr=1-4

And it is perfect. If you were to add someone else, the time would probably immediately change for the worse and the expanded sense of time that I can clearly hear on the record would be lost, unless that player too was of the same caliber.

And by "making time," I mean this: We all have a sense of time. Musicians who play regularly know that on the really good music nights they can make time slow down or somehow expand; time stretches. I may not have the best words here. The energy and effort put out by the musician to build the musical time actually creates not just a slowing down or expanding of time, but also produces some kind of mental or psychological space in which the audience can think or exist in. It's like clearing out the menial cobwebs when I listen to one of these masters; they somehow give me time to perhaps know more about myself. I learned this years ago in a little bar in Ann Arbor called Mr. Flood's Party.

Musicians, at least this one, constantly worry about how they sound. You know, is it good or good enough? Anyway, back then, playing harmonica and singing in that bar along with my brother Daniel (on guitar), I had a good night. I felt that finally I was playing what I intended to play and I looked at the audience, thinking, well somebody might be giving me the thumbs up, like "Michael, you're doin' good man!" But there wasn't any of that. As I looked out over the audience, everyone was in some sort of trance. They were all looking into their own mind as if in some kind of reverie. And I suddenly realized what was happening and said to myself: Oh, I get it now. It's not about me! I realized that, like everything else in life, even music has a "what's in it for me" quotient, and in this case it was about what was in it for them, the audience. My music only gave them the room to experience their own thoughts more fully.

Great musicians make space in time. They expand time into space and make more room. They make room for us. They make time and in that expanded time people can get some very personal and specialized jobs done, like thinking or feeling whatever they need to. We all do this, and music is not the only avenue. For example, I work a lot. And I get up like at two or three in the morning and I work until five at night. I might take a nap. And then somewhere around 6 PM I like to watch a movie. It doesn't have to be a whole movie or it might be two movies. It often is just a little bit of a movie. In that movie time, that down time, I am, of course, watching the movie, but I am also mulling things over that happened that day in my mind. Movies may be the most common form of meditation for most people, because we really are just looking at a spot on the wall and holding very still. Isn't that what meditators do? Anyway, in that down time I get things done in my mind (while I am watching the movie) that I need to do. I am processing the day's events. For me, it is very relaxing and actually quite necessary.

When great blues players play, they create a similar kind of time in which we, the audience, can get into and experience. So the great time setters, the great blues musicians (great musicians of any kind) take over our sense of time, take over what we can call clock time, this time and that time. They take it over and supplant it or replace it with their sense of time, what they know how to do. They're setting the time. They are creating or making the time for us and suddenly our mind is caught by their sense of time. We are into it. This is why live performances can never be replaced by recordings.

We might say afterward, "Oh, isn't that an incredible guitar player" or we could also say "Wow, he or she took me on a trip." Musicians make time and in that time we have our own personal experience. It is not only about 'their' music, but also about our life. That is the point here. That is what great music is all about.

I can remember one example and it's a good one. In Chicago, back in the mid-1960s I went into a club, a tiny little place (I forget the name of it; it might have been "Mother Blues") that Howlin' Wolf was playing in. There was nobody there. There was only Howlin' Wolf and next to him there was his wonderful guitar player Hubert Sumlin. That's it. So we came in and it was almost totally dark. There was just a little bit of light up near the stage. Wolf was sitting on a chair way up front and singing like only Howlin' Wolf can sing. And for a while, time just stopped. It was not so much that, as it was that the walls, that whole place I was in, faded and gradually became transparent.

Not just the walls, but from the walls on out forever. What remained was this consciousness (I guess it was me) floating in an ocean of translucent space. And scout's honor, I was not on drugs! Everything just went void. For that time I forgot where I was in my life. I had to reach inside to get a hold on myself, and there was nothing to get a hold of. Wolf's voice and the power of his musical time had taken over mine. I could have been anywhere in the universe – somewhere, and yet there still no place. Place had nothing to do with it.

I was transfixed by Wolf's time. And of course I came out of it, but it was like: how could I forget this? That's what I mean by time. Wolf's time was better than mine. I wasn't even prepared for the experience; it just happened. He took me deeper than I could get by myself. It is like one of those times when somebody dies that is close to you. Those events kind of stop you in your tracks and make you, for a time, more open. You are popped out of your groove and open to alternatives. Life is new again.

Toward an Explanation

What am I talking about here and how does it work?

This is where words can fail, but I will give it a try. You may have to meet me halfway. Have you ever been in one of those car accidents or near accidents when you see it coming, but maybe can't avoid it? It is easy to find these events when driving on ice. Your mind concentrates and you are "right there." Time slows down and everything seems to be taking place in slow motion. That is somewhat similar to what I am pointing at here when I use the term "making time." In times of stress, intense awareness, or extreme concentration, time stretches and slows down. You can see it all happen. Time just somehow expands or makes room. "Making time" with the blues is like that.

The standard blues progression is just twelve bars which keep repeating themselves over and over. In order to take control of that progression and go deeper with time, the blues musician has to concentrate (be aware) and articulate each bar of that blues progression, putting the brakes on here and rushing to catch up there. What matters is to emphasize and willfully stress, accentuate, or push the time leading up to this or that change here, and drag out the turn-around or what-have-you over there.

If a musician is aware or present enough, and has enough experience, he or she can articulate the blues so that, although clock time just ticks on along, the end result of the effort is to expand time, slow it down, and we go between the clock-ticking seconds into what can only be described as expanded time, time in which we are beyond the distractions of the moment (our regular life) and able to taste or experience what is beyond, beneath, above (use your own words here) the normal. I don't want to call it eternity, because that term has been overused, but it is somehow outside, however marginally or temporarily, our normal sense of time. This then is what I mean by "making time." Musicians do this all the time (pun intended).

And really great musicians give us such great time or can make time so well that we can hitch a ride with them, even if only for the length of a song. For those moments we are on their time, traveling with them, part of their mandala, and they are taking us deeper within conventional time to something greater than that. It is easier to experience this than to put it into words. Let me try another metaphor.

The discipline and energy of making music can create more room in time than we normally have – expansion or extension. Think of it as an aura or envelope of normal time that somehow expands time as we know it (and the moment) into something deeper and wider – stretches time. It doesn't stretch time longer, as in making a song last longer; it stretches the time deeper as in: going beyond normal time into somewhere else. I don't have a word for it. In other words, when time appears to slow down, the song in clock time does not slow down or get longer in duration. That stays the same. It is our consciousness and experience that stretches or reaches deeper inside ourselves. We expand.

In other words, intense musical activity creates space, an envelope or aura, and the 'kind' of our musical activity (the kind of blues we play) creates the kind of space or room we can experience or rest in. Different musicians create different spaces for us. Think of it as a living room, room to live, room to move around in, something like a time out from whatever line of life we are usually travelling along.

The more that the musician is able to work the time, the more of an aura or special space surrounds the moment, and in that space or in that extra room, there we are, experiencing it, living it. We are experiencing not only the music, per se, but the music allows us to experience ourselves as well, to go where we can't usually get to on our own, except rarely. And this brings up the question: what is music? I won't go there just now, but when great musicians make time, and we experience that expanded time, we use it like money to think about or spend however we like. It is not only about their music; this experience is beyond the music, if you mean labels, lyrics, notes, song titles, and albums. Music is not only about what it means, as in the words of a song, but those words and notes are only references, means and ways to experience the heart of music, the purpose, which is to experience what I can only point to here.

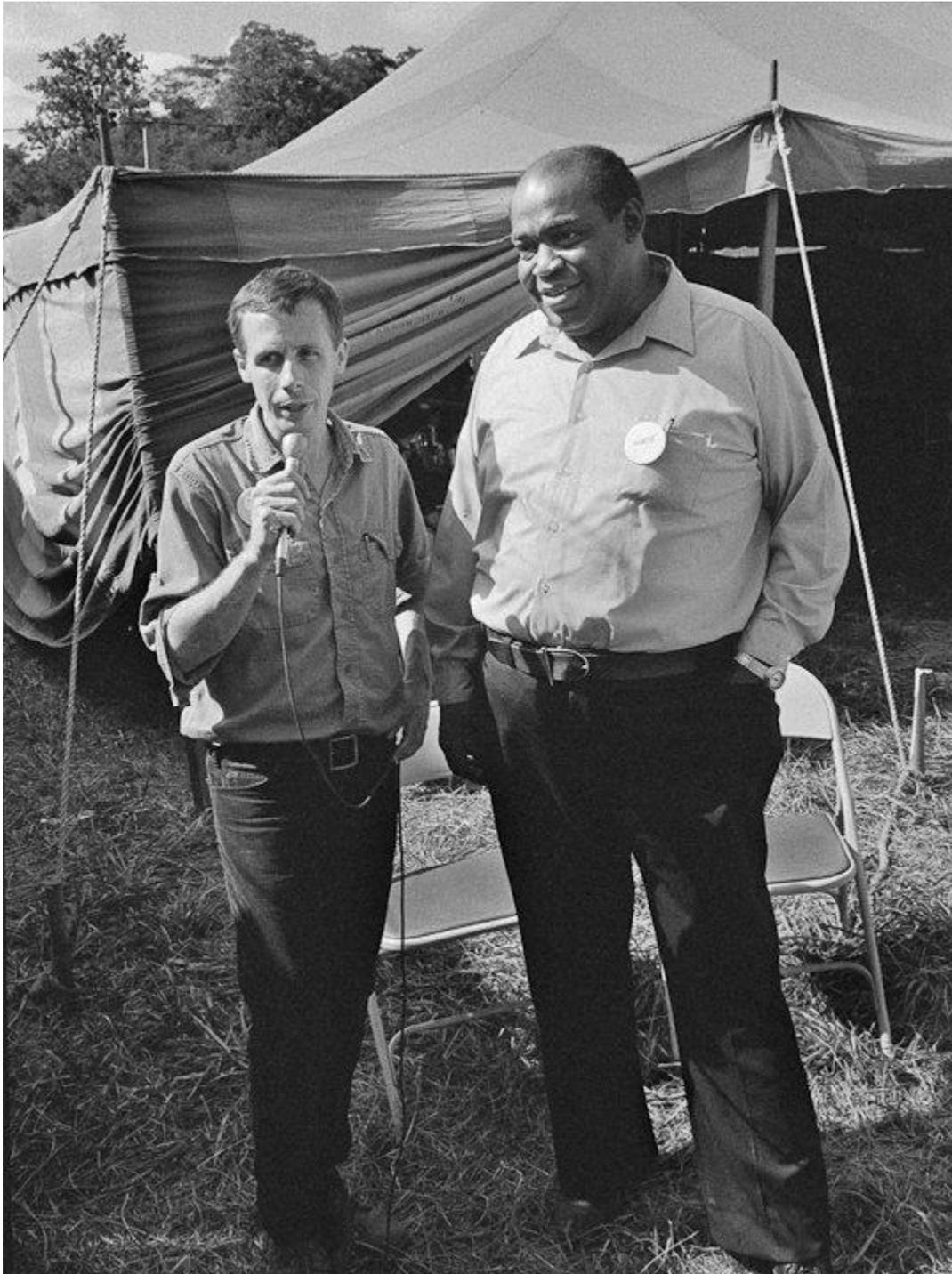
The words and sound of music depend on what they mean, the sense it makes. And 'sense' is always an experience, not an idea or thought. When great blues musicians make time, we sense it and have a deeper actual experience. We live it. Often that experience is 'special' because we can't get there from here, not from our day-to-day experience. That is why we listen to music. A great musician is capable of transforming our day, sending us back home with a deep experience and sometimes with a new sense of direction

There you have the general idea of making time. Please don't read this article as a know-it-all statement from me, but more as a question, something I am thinking about and interested in, something to be discussed.

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Gibson Les Paul Guitar.



Michael Erlewine interviewing legendary songwriter and bass player Willie Dixon.



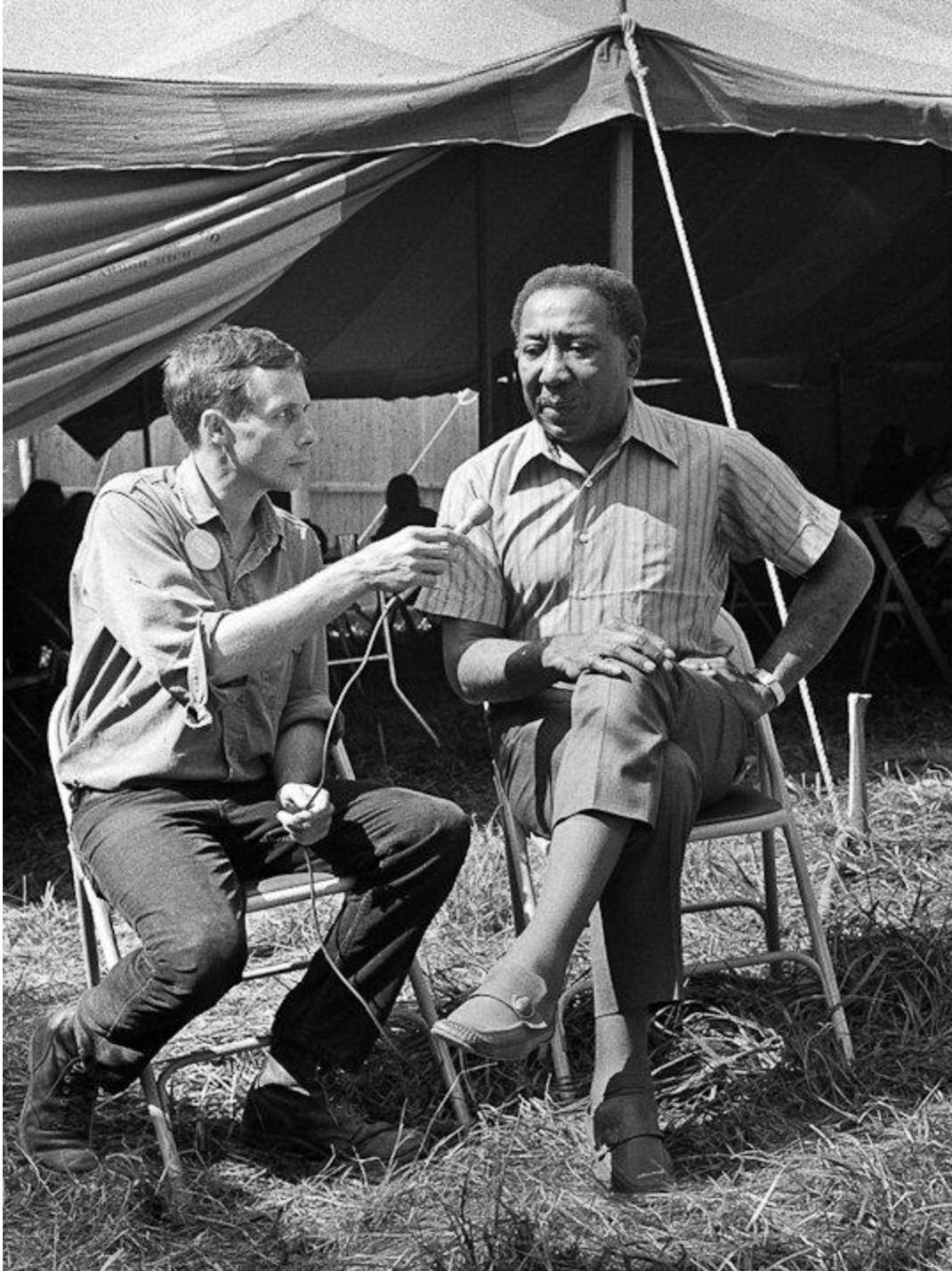
Michael Erlewine interviewing blues singer Koko Taylor.



Michael Erlewine sharing thoughts with blues singer Howlin' Wolf.



Michael Erlewine standing at back with legendary bluesman Robert Pete Williams. Brother Philip Erlewine on right.



Michael Erlewine interviewing blues singer Muddy Waters.