

Otis Spann - My Home in the Delta – The Blues Collection 32

Written by bluesever

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An integral member of the nonpareil Muddy Waters band of the 1950s and '60s, pianist Otis Spann took his sweet time in launching a full-fledged solo career. But his own discography is a satisfying one nonetheless, offering ample proof as to why so many aficionados considered him then and now Chicago's leading post-war blues pianist. Spann played on most of Waters' classic Chess waxings between 1953 and 1969, his rippling 88s providing the drive on Waters' seminal 1960 live version of "Got My Mojo Working" (cut at the prestigious Newport Jazz Festival, where Spann dazzled the assembled throng with some sensational storming boogies).

The Mississippi native began playing piano by age eight, influenced by local ivories stalwart Friday Ford. At 14, he was playing in bands around Jackson, finding more inspiration in the 78s of Big Maceo, who took the young pianist under his wing once Spann migrated to Chicago in 1946 or 1947.

Spann gigged on his own and with guitarist Morris Pejoe before hooking up with Waters in 1952. His first Chess date behind the Chicago icon the next year produced "Blow Wind Blow." Subsequent Waters classics sporting Spann's ivories include "Hoochie Coochie Man," "I'm Ready," and "Just Make Love to Me."

Strangely, Chess somehow failed to recognize Spann's vocal abilities. His own Chess output

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was limited to a 1954 single, "It Must Have Been the Devil," that featured B.B. King on guitar, and sessions in 1956 and 1963 that remained in the can for decades. So Spann looked elsewhere, waxing a stunning album for Candid with guitarist Robert Jr. Lockwood in 1960, a largely solo outing for Storyville in 1963 that was cut in Copenhagen, a set for British Decca the following year that found him in the company of Waters and Eric Clapton, and a 1964 LP for Prestige where Spann shared vocal duties with bandmate James Cotton. Testament and Vanguard both recorded Spann as a leader in 1965.

The Blues Is Where It's At, Spann's enduring 1966 album for ABC-Bluesway, sounded like a live recording but was actually a studio date enlivened by a gaggle of enthusiastic onlookers who applauded every song (Waters, guitarist Sammy Lawhorn, and George "Harmonica" Smith were among the support crew on the date). A Bluesway encore, The Bottom of the Blues, followed in 1967 and featured Otis' wife, Lucille Spann, helping out on vocals.

Spann's last few years with Muddy Waters were memorable for their collaboration on the Chess set Fathers and Sons, but the pianist was clearly ready to launch a solo career, recording a set for Blue Horizon with British blues-rockers Fleetwood Mac that produced Spann's laid-back "Hungry Country Girl." He finally turned the piano chair in the Waters band over to Pinetop Perkins in 1969, but fate didn't grant Spann long to achieve solo stardom. He was stricken with cancer and died in April of 1970. --- Bill Dahl, Rovi

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