Blues Legends – John Lee Hooker Vol.1

1. Leavin' Chicago (Hooker) - 3:51
2. Wednesday Evening Blues (Hooker) - 3:58
3. My First Wife Left Me (King) - 3:34
4. Sally Mae (Hooker) - 3:12
5. War Is Over (Goodbye California)
(Hooker, B. Besman) - 2:44
6. She Was in Chicago (Hooker, B. Besman) - 2:58
7. Boogie Chillen (Hooker, B. Besman) - 3:08
8. Henry's Swing Club (Hooker) - 3:10
9. Stomp Boogie (Hooker) - 3:08
10. Who's Been Jiving You? (A. Crupud, Hooker) - 3:09
11. Black Man Blues (Hooker) - 3:30
12. Shake Your Boogie (Hooker) - 3:01
13. Poor Slim (Hooker) - 3:26
14. Mercy Blues (Hooker) - 3:15
15. Boogie Woogie (Hooker) - 3:30
16. Helpless Blues (Hooker) - 3:38

He was beloved worldwide as the king of the endless boogie, a genuine blues superstar whose droning, hypnotic one-chord grooves were at once both ultra-primitive and timeless. But John Lee Hooker recorded in a great many more styles than that over a career that stretched across more than half a century. "The Hook" was a Mississippi native who became the top gent on the Detroit blues circuit in the years following World War II. The seeds for his eerily mournful guitar sound were planted by his stepfather, Will Moore, while Hooker was in his teens. Hooker had been singing spirituals before that, but the blues took hold and simply wouldn't let go. Overnight visitors left their mark on the youth, too: legends like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, and Blind Blake, who all knew Moore.

Hooker heard Memphis calling while he was still in his teens, but he couldn't gain much of a foothold there. So he relocated to Cincinnati for a seven-year stretch before making the big move to the Motor City in 1943. Jobs were plentiful, but Hooker drifted away from day gigs in favor of playing his unique free-form brand of blues. A burgeoning club scene along Hastings Street didn't hurt his chances any. In 1948, the aspiring bluesman hooked up with entrepreneur Bernie Besman, who helped him hammer out his solo debut sides, "Sally Mae" and its seminal flip, "Boogie Chillen." This was blues as primitive as anything then on the market; Hooker's dark, ruminative vocals were backed only by his own ringing, heavily amplified guitar and insistently pounding foot. Their efforts were quickly rewarded. Los Angeles-based Modern Records issued the sides and "Boogie Chillen" -- a colorful, unique travelogue of Detroit's blues scene -- made an improbable jaunt to the very peak of the R&B charts. Modern released several more major hits by "the Boogie Man" after that: "Hobo Blues" and its raw-as-an-open wound flip, "Hoogie Boogie"; "Crawling King Snake Blues" (all three 1949 smashes); and the unusual 1951 chart-topper "I'm in the Mood," where Hooker overdubbed his voice three times in a crude early attempt at multi-tracking. But Hooker never, ever let something as meaningless as a contract stop him for making recordings for other labels. His early catalog is stretched across a road map of diskeries so complex that it's nearly impossible to fully comprehend (a vast array of recording aliases don't make things any easier).

Along with Modern, Hooker recorded for King (as the geographically challenged Texas Slim), Regent (as Delta John, a far more accurate handle), Savoy (as the wonderfully surreal Birmingham Sam & His Magic Guitar), Danceland (as the downright delicious Little Pork Chops), Staff (as Johnny Williams), Sensation (for whom he scored a national hit in 1950 with "Huckle Up, Baby"), Gotham, Regal, Swing Time, Federal, Gone (as John Lee Booker), Chess, Acorn (as the Boogie Man), Chance, DeLuxe (as Johnny Lee), JVB, Chart, and Specialty; before finally settling down at Vee-Jay in 1955 under his own name. Hooker became the point man for the growing Detroit blues scene during this incredibly prolific period, recruiting guitarist Eddie Kirkland as his frequent duet partner while still recording for Modern. Once tied in with Vee-Jay, the rough-and-tumble sound of Hooker's solo and duet waxings was adapted to a band format. Hooker had recorded with various combos along the way before, but never with sidemen as versatile and sympathetic as guitarist Eddie Taylor and harpist Jimmy Reed, who backed him at his initial Vee-Jay date that produced "Time Is Marching" and the superfluous sequel "Mambo Chillun." Taylor stuck around for a 1956 session that elicited two genuine Hooker classics, "Baby Lee" and "Dimples," and he was still deftly anchoring the rhythm section (Hooker's sense of timing was his and his alone, demanding big-eared sidemen) when the Boogie Man finally made it back to the R&B charts in 1958 with "I Love You Honey." Vee-Jay presented Hooker in quite an array of settings during the early '60s. His grinding, tough blues "No Shoes" proved a surprisingly sizable hit in 1960, while the storming "Boom Boom," his top seller for the firm in 1962 (it even cracked the pop airwaves), was an infectious R&B dance number benefiting from the reported presence of some of Motown's house musicians. But there were also acoustic outings aimed squarely at the blossoming folk-blues crowd, as well as some attempts at up-to-date R&B that featured highly intrusive female background vocals (allegedly

by the Vandellas) and utterly unyielding structures that hemmed Hooker in unmercifully.

British blues bands such as the Animals and Yardbirds idolized Hooker during the early '60s; Eric Burdon's boys cut a credible 1964 cover of "Boom Boom" that outsold Hooker's original on the American pop charts. Hooker visited Europe in 1962 under the auspices of the first American Folk Blues Festival, leaving behind the popular waxings "Let's Make It" and "Shake It Baby" for foreign consumption. Back home, Hooker cranked out gems for Vee-Jay through 1964 ("Big Legs, Tight Skirt," one of his last offerings on the logo, was also one of his best), before undergoing another extended round of label-hopping (except this time, he was waxing whole LPs instead of scattered 78s). Verve-Folkways, Impulse, Chess, and BluesWay all enticed him into recording for them in 1965-1966 alone! His reputation among hip rock cognoscenti in the States and abroad was growing exponentially, especially after he teamed up with blues-rockers Canned Heat for the massively selling album Hooker 'n' Heat in 1970. Eventually, though, the endless boogie formula grew incredibly stagnant. Much of Hooker's 1970s output found him laying back while plodding rock-rooted rhythm sections assumed much of the work load. A cameo in the 1980 movie The Blues Brothers was welcome, if far too short.

But Hooker wasn't through; not by a long shot. With the expert help of slide guitarist extraordinaire/producer Roy Rogers, the Hook waxed The Healer, an album that marked the first of his guest star-loaded albums (Carlos Santana, Bonnie Raitt, and Robert Cray were among the luminaries to cameo on the disc, which picked up a Grammy). Major labels were just beginning to take notice of the growing demand for blues records, and Pointblank snapped Hooker up, releasing Mr. Lucky (this time teaming Hooker with everyone from Albert Collins and John Hammond to Van Morrison and Keith Richards). Once again, Hooker was resting on his laurels by allowing his guests to wrest much of the spotlight away from him on his own album, but by then, he'd earned it. Another Pointblank set, Boom Boom, soon followed.

Happily, Hooker enjoyed the good life throughout the '90s. He spent much of his time in semi-retirement, splitting his relaxation time between several houses acquired up and down the California coast. When the right offer came along, though, he took it, including an amusing TV commercial for Pepsi. He also kept recording, releasing such star-studded efforts as 1995's Chill Out and 1997's Don't Look Back. All this helped him retain his status as a living legend, and he remained an American musical icon; and his stature wasn't diminished upon his death from natural causes on June 21, 2001. ---Bill Dahl, Rovi

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