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# I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy

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# I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy

Guitarist and singer Big Bill Broonzy (1903-1958) was a towering figure in the history of the blues. A prolific and inventive songwriter, he wrote and recorded hundreds of songs over the course of his thirty-year career. Broonzy was a trailblazer in bringing the blues to an international audience during his tours of Europe in the 1950s. Along with his colleagues Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, and Studs Terkel, he was one of the architects of the folk music revivals in the United States and Great Britain in the 1950s and '60s. Broonzy was also a creative artist who spoke out against racial injustice in his songs, his interviews, and his writings.

Born in Jefferson County, Arkansas, in 1903, Broonzy's first instrument was a homemade cornstalk fiddle. His professional debut came as a member of a black string band for country dances, performing first locally and then regionally. When he moved to Chicago in the mid-1920s, he shifted from rural musical styles and instruments to urban ones, learned to play guitar, and was soon recording his first songs for the leading blues record label, Paramount Records. An unusually versatile blues musician, Broonzy was served well throughout his career by his skill in discerning changing tastes in popular music, and his ability to adjust his playing style and songwriting to move in new directions.

During the 1930s and '40s, Broonzy became one of the most popular blues musicians in the country. His recorded output was prodigious, averaging one 78 rpm record per month for nearly a decade. He also played as a guitarist on hundreds of sides for many successful blues artists. In 1938, he was invited to travel to Carnegie Hall to appear at an unprecedented showcase concert of African American musicians titled "From Spirituals to Swing." Broonzy's performance of his song "Just A Dream," in which he imagined a black man "in the White House, sitting in the President's chair," received thunderous applause from the overflow crowd, and it represented a turning point in his career.

In the years following World War Two, Broonzy began to change his repertoire to appeal to the white, politically engaged audience members who had responded so favorably to him at Carnegie Hall. Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, and other artists had started a group called People's Songs, in which the performers used their talents to fight for strong unions and racial equality. It was at People's Songs concerts organized by Lomax in New York City that Broonzy began performing his song "Black, Brown, and White Blues" in which he presented compelling vignettes

of racial prejudice. Beginning in the late 1940s, he joined disc jockey Studs Terkel and singer Win Stracke in forming a racially integrated Chicago-based folk music revue called "I Come For To Sing." The group's multi-year residency at the prestigious jazz club The Blue Note played a key role in establishing the commercial viability of folk music in the city.

When Broonzy traveled through Europe for months at a time in the 1950s, he served as a remarkably effective ambassador of the blues. He was a charismatic speaker and performer who introduced songs with descriptions of the world of the American South from which the blues emerged. When he spoke enthusiastically to overseas audiences and journalists about the talented blues artists who would soon follow in his footsteps, often endorsing them by name, he set the stage for the many successful tours of Europe by blues musicians during the decades to come. In particular, his records and appearances on British television served as an entry point into the blues for a set of British teenagers, including Pete Townshend, Ray Davies, and Eric Clapton, who described his first experience watching Broonzy perform as feeling "like I was looking into heaven."

A significant and enduring element of Big Bill Broonzy's legacy is the example he set by providing generous amounts of assistance and guidance to younger performers. Just as better-established artists had helped him when he first came to Chicago, Broonzy used his stature to help newly-arrived musicians get their start in the city's intensely competitive blues scene. None of those he aided spoke of him more emphatically, or with more gratitude, than Muddy Waters. Waters, who served as the lead pallbearer at Broonzy's funeral, once expressed his view of his mentor in succinct terms: "Mostly I try to be like him."

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*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.*

