



*Paul Natkin photo.*

John Lee Hooker, June 3, 1990

VALLEJO, Calif. This oil refinery town in the port of San Pablo, about a half-hour northeast of San Francisco, is an unusual place to tap the kerosene legend of boogie bluesman John Lee Hooker.

The tidy streets of the hilly subdivision in which Hooker lives are lined with homes wearing bright stucco facades. A midday sun casts shadows on green front yards, all of which are cut like tight skirts on big legs. That's real short, but for the 72-year-old Hooker, it's been a real long ride from the fields of his native Clarksdale, Miss., to the spacious home he shares with band members on Primrose Lane here.

When you pull into Hooker's driveway, the first thing that catches the eye is a majestic white Cadillac parked in the garage bearing the California license plate "Doc Hook." Once you motor past the garage into his living room, you are surrounded by colorful Hookabilia. There is a blown-up portrait of Bonnie Raitt embracing Hooker minutes after they won a best traditional blues Grammy this year for "I'm in the Mood," a duet remake of his 1951 million- seller. The winning song came from Hooker's Grammy-nominated album, "The Healer," which also features contributions from Los Lobos, Carlos Santana and George Thorogood. One living-room wall is covered with gold and silver records, commemorating not only "The Healer" but also Thorogood's cover of Hooker's 1959 hit "Crawlin' Kingsnake" from his LP "Maverick."

Some members of Hooker's entourage are milling about, but Doc Hook is nowhere to be seen. Richard Kirch, a Chicagoan who plays guitar in Hooker's band, talks of his salad days with the late Hip Linkchain and Jimmy Dawkins (Kirch met Hooker in 1975 when Dawkins was Hooker's opening act at Wise Fools Pub). Suddenly, Hooker is ready to talk, and Kirch leads the way to the bluesman's bedroom.

Hooker is lying in bed, his body half under the covers, his head back on a wrinkled white pillow. His weathered eyes are nearly shut, and they look like worn slits on an antique arcade machine. His handshake is warm and wide, his long fingers are from the field - Hooker's stepfather Will Moore was a Mississippi sharecropper who played blues guitar at weekend house parties.

Hooker, wearing a loose black tank top, is watching Harry Caray sing and dance through another Cubs rain delay. A big baseball fan, Hooker sees up to six games a week via a satellite dish in his backyard. A color portrait of a baseball card depicting Hooker as the manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers hangs to the right of the bed. The Dodgers are Hooker's favorite team.

This is not how you expect to find the man who put the boogie into blues. The material in Hooker's expansive catalog (domestically, he has released at least 58 albums) is characterized by voodoo rhythms, mood-directed chord changes and vocals of brooding venom.

To see Hooker in concert is to witness who has embodied a life of raw blues, a man who has always pitched them deep and inside. Hooker usually wears menacing dark shades and a porkpie hat (he was a role model for the Blues Brothers), he stomps his foot hard for

percussion, and he sways back and forth like a winter branch in a spring windstorm.

Reference books say that his birthdate is Aug. 22, 1917, in Clarksdale, Miss., but in recent years, Hooker has claimed he was born in 1920. He said he added three years to get in the Army, because if you got in the Army, you could get girls.

Hooker's mother and father broke up when he was a kid. His natural father, a minister, would not allow music in the house. Hooker followed his stepfather - a contemporary of country-blues artists such as Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson - through Mississippi and Memphis, before heading off on his own to Cincinnati and then in 1943 to Detroit.

Hooker credits his stepfather for the hypnotic soul he injects into his blues, all the way from the foot stompin' to the chord rompin'. "I got all that from my stepfather," he says with eyes still nearly shut. "I was 12 or 13 years old in Mississippi when he taught me how to be direct. I'm playing what he was playing. But it's not something you can learn from books.

"If you write it on paper, it's fake, but if it comes from here," and Hooker slowly lifts his right hand and pats it against his heart, "it's automatic-natural. It's not soul if you're gettin' it from a piece of paper. My stepfather never had a chance to get known, but I took that (what he did) and made it worldwide. I will carry it on until I leave here.

"I hope somebody can carry it on after I'm gone."

Like most of his Southern peers, Hooker played acoustic and call-and-response blues until he migrated north, when he went electric. Hooker, however, was better prepared than most, since his stepfather had delineated between the slow, field-like feel of slide guitar and more percussive licks that absorbed walking bass lines and matched the urgency of urban life.

"As a kid, I heard about people north playing electric, but I had never seen anyone play one but T-Bone Walker," he says. "I knew that was to come someday, so it didn't hit me by surprise. T-Bone gave me my first electric guitar. It was a pawnshop gift. He was close to me when nobody knew about John Lee Hooker. I loved him like I loved my pick. I'd follow him around. When I first played electric, I didn't care for it. But I had to go with the times. There's only one way in and no way out."

Hooker's first record was the electric swamp sound of "Boogie Chillen," cut in 1948 on the Modern label out of Detroit. It sold a million copies. At the time, Hooker was working in an automotive plant. Suddenly, he was clicking on all cylinders. He began recording under the pseudonyms Delta John, Birmingham Sam and even as an English aristocrat, Sir John Lee Hooker.

"I didn't do that myself," he says. "My manager did it. I was smart and I wasn't smart. I was very young. When 'Boogie Chillen' came out, everybody wanted a little piece of me.

When 'I'm in the Mood' came out, everybody wanted another piece. Every little record company was coming at him (his manager). I knew I was under contract to Modern, but he'd say, 'They're cheating you anyway, so we'll make you some outside money.' So I did.

"He'd take me out at the middle of the night so nobody would notice us and he'd record me with these other companies. He'd say, 'Get up kid, get your clothes on. Let's go. I've got a deal.' He'd give me a different name like Texas Slim (for King Records in Cincinnati). Along came another company and he'd give me another name. People still brand me for doing that, but the manager did it. I didn't know anything about contracts, publishing or songwriting royalties. I'd just get my guitar and play." All told, Hooker recorded 70 singles on 21 labels

between 1949 and 1954.

Hooker never lived in Chicago, but he commuted between Detroit and Vee-Jay Records, based in Chicago, for eight to 10 years, starting in 1955. Hooker cut about 90 tracks for Vee-Jay, and they are generally regarded as his most consistent work. Jimmy Reed and Joe Hunter played on some tracks; it was at Vee-Jay that Hooker developed a tight relationship with tremulous Reed bassist Eddie Taylor.

Hooker enjoys talking about his days in Chicago.

"Vee-Jay had some of the best blues singers around," he says. "Jimmy Reed. Dee Clark. (As well as Roscoe Gordon and Billy Boy Arnold.) And Chicago was loaded with dynamite blues singers - the best in the world. Muddy Waters, Jimmy Rogers. A manager picked me out of Detroit to come to Chicago. I preferred Detroit because I figured I'd be just another blues singer in Chicago. Nobody sounded like John Lee Hooker, nobody had that beat. But I knew it wasn't Chicago blues."

Hooker recorded "Dimples," his signature song at Vee-Jay, in 1956. (It later became the first single for Stevie Winwood and the Spencer Davis Group.) A 1959 session with Taylor on bass produced remakes of "I'm in the Mood" and "Crawlin' Kingsnake." Just as it was with Reed, Taylor's determined bass textures and direct sense of treble was the perfect complement to Hooker's boogie guitar.

"Ooh, I loved that man," Hooker says of Taylor, who died at age 62 in 1985. "He was real sincere. A very private person. We traveled together and we shared things together. He made Jimmy Reed, really. If it wasn't for Eddie Taylor, there would have been no Jimmy Reed. I really didn't need a bass when I was with

Eddie Taylor. He could make his guitar sound like bass. That was one big loss. He didn't get the recognition he should've got."

Hooker is finally getting the recognition he deserves. He just put the finishing touches on a recording session for producer Jack Nitzsche, who composed the soundtrack for the new Dennis Hopper film "Hot Spot." Hooker was accompanied by "The Healer" producer- guitarist Roy Rogers, a native of Vallejo, musicologist Taj Mahal and jazz great Miles Davis. There is talk of a "Healer II" album, which may be produced by Van Morrison, who wanted to produce the original, but scheduling conflicts got in the way. (Hooker appears on the just- released Van Morrison concert video.) A more distant rumor has a Bob Dylan-Hooker project in the works.

As Hooker talks from his bed, WGN-TV has cut away to a highlight film of the Cubs 1984 divisional championship season. The since-forgotten Keith Moreland is trucking around the bases to the boogie of ZZ Top's "La Grange." Hooker's head springs up off the pillow to the glow of a gentle smile.

"That's my song," Hooker says and gets reflective. "I love people. The people put me there. But after all this press and recognition, you know, I'm just a human being."

But, the hook, if you will, is that if there ever was a man who understood how to strike black gold, it is this bluesman who now rests in the port of San Pablo.