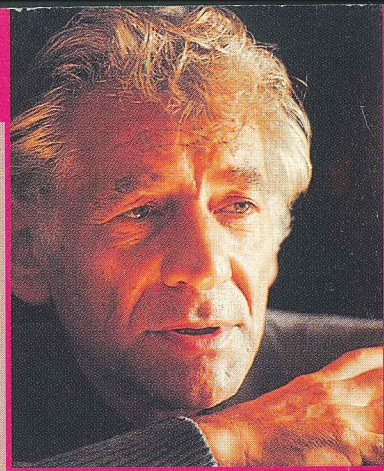


The last days of musical maestro Leonard Bernstein

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JOHN LEE HOOKER, WHOSE BOOGIE BLUES HOOKED A GENERATION, IS LIONIZED BY HIS ROCK ADMIRERS

SONG

Reclined in his La-Z-Boy and tubing with *The Flintstones*, a favorite show dished up by the satellite receiver in his California backyard, John Lee Hooker sure doesn't look like he's got the blues. But Hooker's got 'em bad. And that, of course, is good. "The blues is the only music," Hooker says with a low growl. "Everything else they's doing—rock 'n' roll, pop—it all comes from there. Some-

thin' 'bout a woman. Somethin' 'bout a man. Somethin' 'bout a man and a woman. That's the blues. I don't try to figure it out too much though. Just is."

Hooker is something of an elemental force himself. At 71, he has become the grand old man of a music tradition he inherited growing up in the Mississippi Delta town of Clarksdale. Now enjoying an old-age roll, he won his first ever Grammy

this year for a duet with Bonnie Raitt, one of several blues disciples who appeared on *The Healer*, his first LP in a decade. He rumbles through the sound track of *The Hot Spot*, the steamy new melodrama directed by Dennis Hopper. And last week he was honored at the Benson & Hedges Blues festival in Manhattan by an all-star cast of boosters including Joe Cocker, Raitt, Johnny Winter, Gregg Allman and

"I like the small clubs, kind of dirty. That's where I come from, that's my roots," says Hooker.



Photographs by Kim Komenich



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SONG

others who point to Hooker as the source of much of their own style and substance.

Among the musicians who paid fitting tribute by raising money for a pet project—the Delta Blues Museum in Hooker's hometown of Clarksdale—was Raitt, a friend for two decades. "John Lee has maintained his swampiness after all these years," she says. "He's never lost his primal roots. He's remained as foreboding sounding and looking as you'd expect from an old bluesman. And he's got that fire in him still."

"What makes blues great is its wisdom," says Chicago bluesmaster Willie Dixon. "And John Lee has that wisdom."

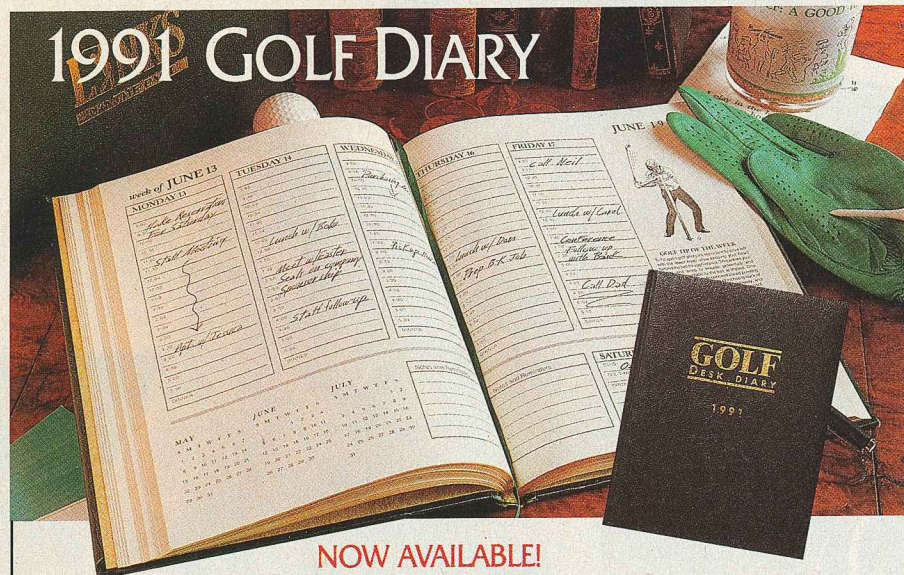
"I don't play a lot of fancy guitar," Hooker says by way of self-analysis. "I just got this heavy, good rhythm, you know. I play a heck of a funky beat. What I do is soulful, it's the feeling."

It's a feeling he discovered as a boy growing up in the Delta flatlands, a region that in the 1920s was rich not just with cotton but with such gritty, itinerant bluesmen as genre giant Charley Patton. Their music found little acceptance in the home headed by William Hooker, a Baptist minister. "You know how those preachers are," John Lee says. "They think it's the devil's music." But Hooker, the fourth of 11 children, gained a formidable ally at age 12 when his sharecropper parents split and his mother, Minnie, married Will Moore, an amateur blues singer and guitar player who performed at local fish fries. "My style today is what he taught me," Hooker says gratefully. "If it wasn't for him, I would have been just a

Hooker (in 1963) "always played down-home blues," Willie Dixon says. "He always seemed to have his own rhythms."



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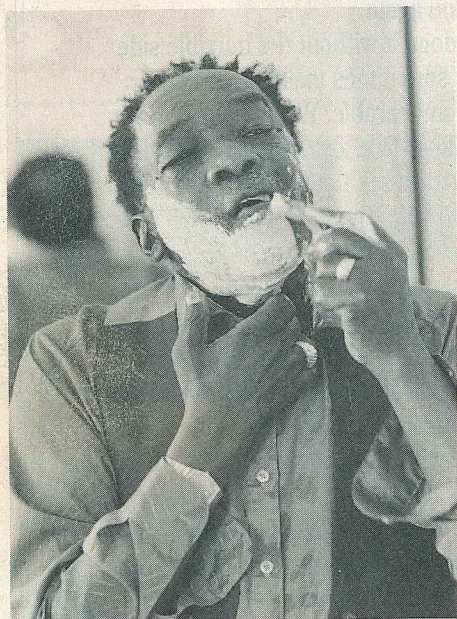
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► Hooker was the man of the hour at a Madison Square Garden party in his honor. Musicians included Bonnie Raitt, second from left.



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▼ "In my life and in my music, I didn't do nothing bad," says Hooker, working himself into a gentle lather.



regular unknown person forever."

At 14, Hooker joined the Army, "a big thing if you wanted to get girls," he recalls. "You put on a uniform, and they would run to you." Stationed in Detroit, he was booted out after just three months when the Army learned his real age. Faced with the hard labor of sharecropping at home, Hooker soon headed back north, in search of stardom. "When I ran away, I was a strong-headed kid," he says. "I never did have no doubts I'd make it."

Hooker drifted through Memphis and

Cincinnati, where he made a name for himself as a gospel singer, before landing back in Detroit in 1943. Working as a janitor in a Chrysler plant by day, he played to black audiences in local bars at night. "I was the talk of the town in Detroit," Hooker says. "There wasn't as much competition there as Chicago."

But he was still sweeping up at Chrysler when he was discovered by the owners of the Modern Records label in 1948. That year he released his first single, "Boogie Chillen," an immediate hit that brought him to the attention of white audiences for the first time. When his "I'm in the Mood" sold an astonishing 1 million copies in 1951, he hung up his broom for good. Hooker, who eventually recorded more than 100 albums, was a legend by the early 1960s when a young Bob Dylan and the then fledgling Rolling Stones opened his concerts. As happened so often to the blues performers who were rock's progenitors, Hooker never enjoyed the enormous financial rewards reaped by his young imitators, including such groups as the Animals, Doors, Yardbirds and Canned Heat, among a host of others. "I was happy just to be out there playing," he says philosophically.

And although he never got rich, Hooker didn't go broke either. "I've always kept my head above water," he says. "I'm very conservative with money. So many stars make big, big money and then blow it like

they was shooting a gun. I learned it ain't what you make, it's what you save."

Hooker socked away enough to allow him to live comfortably in Vallejo, Calif., a mostly white town. Three other Bay Area properties he owns are "like money in the bank," he says. With an old yellow Cadillac and a new Toyota Supra in the garage, he shares his modern split-level house with a nephew and two band members who look after their venerable boss like doting grandsons.

Hooker, who has eight children and an equal number of grandchildren, blames the road for ruining his home life. "It was hard on the wives," says Hooker, who divorced his last wife, a young photographer, four years ago. "I went through three of them and still ain't got one."

Now, with his reputation secure, he foresees less roadwork and more time in the La-Z-Boy. "I'm gonna retire real soon," he says, insisting he has recorded for the last time. "I don't know what I'm gonna do with myself. I don't like fishin' or goin' on vacation. I just wanna kick back and enjoy life."

Winter, a fan since childhood, will be sorry to hear the news. "When John Lee goes," he says, "it's going to be the end of an era." But Hooker doesn't see it that way. "As long as there's people on this planet," he says, his eye glinting with the wisdom of years, "somebody's gonna be alone and have the blues."

— Steve Dougherty,
Dirk Mathison in Vallejo