

Sidemen: Long Road to Glory—A heartfelt tribute to three bluesmen

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The evolution and legacy of the blues is a broad topic. Scott D. Rosenbaum's recently released documentary *Sidemen: Long Road to Glory* is a heartfelt contribution. The film's title refers to the three musicians at the center of the narrative: guitarist Hubert Sumlin, keyboardist Pinetop Perkins and drummer Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, who played as "sidemen" with blues greats Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters.

All three were introduced to the blues as youth in the rural American south where they were born and raised. Smith, the youngest of the trio, was born in 1936 in Helena, Arkansas, the site of the groundbreaking radio show "King Biscuit Time," launched in 1941—and still broadcast today—that featured black blues artists, such as Rice Miller (aka Sonny Boy Williamson II) and Robert Lockwood, Jr. The daily broadcasts helped to inspire many in the region, both black and white, to become blues musicians, including Smith.

Perkins, born in 1913, the oldest of the three, became a regular on "King Biscuit Time" after leaving the plantation in his youth and drifting to cities like Memphis and Helena in pursuit of a career playing blues. (Remarkably, he was still playing piano in public until his death at 97!)

The film portrays Sumlin (born 1931) as a boy catching the attention of Howlin' Wolf as Sumlin attempts to sneak into a performance in Memphis. Both Wolf and later Sumlin, with his family, migrated to Chicago in the 1950s, part of a widespread phenomenon known as the Great Migration.

From early to mid-twentieth century, millions of African-Americans relocated northward from the rural South to escape discrimination and grinding poverty, and seek work opportunities in industrialized northern cities. To illustrate the historical narration spoken by Marc Maron, *Sidemen* makes use of stylized sketches,

reminiscent of the series of paintings called "The Great Migration" by Jacob Lawrence. The simple and cartoon-like representations effectively evoke the backgrounds of the three musicians.

Contemporary blues and rock artists such as Johnny Winter, Bonny Raitt, Joe Perry of Aerosmith, the late Gregg Allman, Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi present moving on-screen tributes to the contributions of Sumlin, Perkins and Smith. Trucks, an extraordinary young guitarist and songwriter, is especially eloquent in his appreciation of Sumlin's guitar mastery.

The point is made by Raitt and others that Sumlin's style had an indelible influence on guitarist Jimi Hendrix. Further, Shemekia Copeland, blues vocalist and daughter of the late blues legend, Johnny Copeland, explains, "All the kids that play guitar now, even if they don't know it, they've stolen something from Hubert Sumlin."

Sumlin played with Howlin' Wolf's band as lead guitar from 1954 almost continuously until Wolf's death. The personal relationship between the two was like father and son. The death of his mentor and collaborator in 1976 devastated Sumlin.

Pinetop Perkins and Willie "Big Eyes" Smith were separated in age by about 23 years, but shared some ten years playing in Muddy Waters' band starting in the late 1960s. A clip of an elderly Perkins responds to assertions that he ought to have plenty of money: "How're you going to have plenty of money when you're a sideman. No way!"

In 2011, during the making of the documentary, the filmmakers were faced with the tragic deaths of all three of their subjects, within eight months of each other, necessarily changing the scope and spirit of the project. The "long road to glory" evinced in the title expressed a more eulogistic approach.

Rosenbaum can be forgiven for succumbing to a certain generational myopia. He has told interviewers that childhood memories of Muddy Waters' performance in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*, which chronicles the final performance by The Band in 1976, opened his eyes to the influences of the blues in the popular music that he was familiar with. *Sidemen* is Rosenbaum's second feature length film. His first was a 2009 drama called *The Perfect Age of Rock'n'Roll*, co-written by him and Jasin Cadic.

That film focused on the tawdry and sleazy aspects of the popular music business. Big egos and self-serving chicanery abound, but the five minutes genuinely worth watching comprise the scene in which the rock band happens into a juke joint where Sumlin, Perkins and Smith, along with harmonica player Sugar Blue and bassist Robert Stoger, are on stage. It was this connection that generated the idea for a documentary. The booking agent for the elderly bluesmen asked Rosenbaum if he could use the film's name to promote a world tour, and the idea for *Sidemen* was hatched.

The Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger explains in *Sidemen* that his group, as well as many other British bands who covered the tunes of Chicago Bluesmen, such as "Little Red Rooster," "Killin' Floor" and "I'm a King Bee," were saying to Americans: "Wake up and realize what you have there."

The film argues that two albums were decisive in repopularizing the blues in America. The first, in 1971, was Howlin' Wolf's *The London Sessions*, in which Wolf is joined by Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood and Rolling Stones members Bill Wyman and Charlie Watts. The other is *Hard Again*, by Waters and produced by Johnny Winter and released in 1977. This conclusion is based on *Billboard* magazine's album standings derived from record sales. While many in Rosenbaum's generation may have purchased these "super-session" albums, the notion that blues music was a dying art form until the collaboration of many more financially established (white?) rock musicians resuscitated it is a vast oversimplification.

The official music business with its "hit songs," "hot albums," Grammy Awards and "Hall of Fame" inductions provides a much distorted picture of musical influences and merit. The inclination of *Sidemen* to overstate the value of such superficial measures is a weakness of the film. The Reagan era in American

politics produced a plethora of formulaic and shoddy hits that generated billions for the record industry, but as time passed, left little of substance behind.

Despite its weaknesses, *Sidemen* presents the music—the best element of the film—in a passionate and caring way. Unfortunately, Rosenbaum's film has a very limited distribution and a small audience. It is currently being shown in a few art house cinemas across the country. In fact, the showing that this reviewer attended had no more than five people in the audience. One would hope that it will be made more accessible to gain the audience it deserves.



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