

# MUDDY WATERS



| <i>Recording years</i> | <i>Main genre</i>     | <i>Music sample</i>                        |
|------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| <i>1941-1982</i>       | <i>Electric blues</i> | <i><a href="#">You Shook Me</a> (1962)</i> |

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*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Muddy Waters*

Years: *1960*

George Starostin's Reviews

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# SINGS "BIG BILL"

Album released:

June 1960

V A L U E  
2 4 3 2 3

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Tell Me Baby; 2) Southbound Train; 3) When I Get To Thinking; 4) Just A Dream (On My Mind); 5) Double Trouble; 6) **I Feel So Good**; 7) I Done Got Wise; 8) Mopper's Blues; 9) Lonesome Road Blues; 10) Hey, Hey.

## REVIEW

From 1947 to 1959, Muddy Waters had altogether recorded more than 40 singles for the Chess label — including, by my approximate calculations, about 70-80% of his «golden» repertoire that helped establish a new electric blues language and laid down the foundation for just about the entire rhythm'n'blues scene across the Atlantic. And through *all* of that time, his label did not offer him a chance to put out even one proper LP — with the belated exception of **The Best Of Muddy Waters**, a rather randomly assembled compilation released in April 1958. Admittedly, this was typical of Chess and Checker records; all of their blues artists, including Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson II, etc., had to wait for almost a decade before getting the LP treatment — and, in fact, their rock'n'rolling brethren, such as Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry, got an easier break, starting out later yet releasing their first LPs earlier: the chronological distance between Chuck's first single ("Maybellene") and first LP (**After School Session**), for instance, is just two years. Ah well, as usual, «cheap lightweight entertainment» gets the upper hand on «serious traditional art»...



Technically, this is just a disclaimer that Muddy's musical career by no means starts here — it's just that much, if not most of it, falls on the pre-LP age, which, in turn, falls outside the scope of these reviews. Nevertheless, Muddy continued to be a significant presence in the musical world in the Sixties as well, and much of what he did even at the time when his classic style fell out of vogue deserves to be appreciated; leaving him out of that decade's musical history would be worse than a crime, it would be a mistake (pardon me for my Talleyranding). Anyway, if you are here to learn about why you should listen to Muddy Waters, the best solution is to simply *do it* ([His Best 1947 To 1956](#) is a good introduction and a required minimum) without asking. Assuming we're all on the same page here, let us now check out the circumstances under which Muddy was finally allowed to record a proper LP.

The circumstances in question were rather sad: Big Bill Broonzy, one of the most famous and hard-working country-blues, folk-blues, and urban blues performers of the first half of the 20th century, and also one of Muddy's principal mentors and sources of inspiration, had died in August 1958, and Muddy presumably felt obliged to pay his teacher a suitable tribute, which would have hardly fit on the two sides of a measly single. Considering that Big Bill recorded more than 300 (!) songs over his three decades of activity — most of which were carbon copies of just a small handful of templates, of course — making the actual selection was probably a painful activity, yet somehow Muddy settled on ten numbers, some of which were well-known classics of the blues genre ('I Feel So Good', 'Hey Hey', 'Just A Dream'), others less distinguished, but on the whole, representing most of those of Big Bill's templates which could be easily recast in the Chicago-style 12-bar electric blues mold. (Particularly folksy, «jiggy» stuff, such as 'John Henry', did not agree with Muddy's persona and was wisely left outside the scope of the album).

However, one thing Muddy never did in his life was try to impersonate somebody else. His musical personality, though certainly influenced by Big Bill as well as lots of other old country blues performers, was uniquely his own, and the only way he could cover other people's material was by adapting it to (or, as today's world might have formulated it, «appropriating it for») the Muddy Waters sound. As a result, these ten songs are virtually undistinguishable from the regular, «classic» Waters material — vocally and instrumentally, they all sound as if they could have been written by Willie Dixon or any of Muddy's other songwriters for him in the late Fifties. Worse, few of them have the kind of special distinctive vocal or lyrical hooks that make Muddy's classic singles stand out from each other. Mostly, it all just feels like a single jam session where the guys got together, quickly recorded some takes without a lot of creative thinking, and went home.

Which still leaves us with two positive aspects. First, **Muddy Waters Sings «Big Bill»** is simply a cool 30-minute long

example of how nice, tight, and passionate the Muddy Waters band sounded around late 1959. You can never do wrong with Otis Spann on the piano; and even if Muddy's most legendary collaborators — Jimmy Rogers on lead guitar and Little Walter on harmonica — were no longer with him at the time, their actual replacements — Pat Hare on lead and James Cotton on harp — were every bit as good. It should be noted that the album was recorded in stereo, and Muddy made good use of that by often making his instrumentalists solo at the same time in different channels — listen, for instance, how on 'Double Trouble' Cotton soars with his harmonica in one speaker while Spann shows off his virtuoso runs in the other one; and then, later on, in 'Baby I Done Got Wise' the same interplay is going on between the harp and the guitar.

It's such a fine-sounding group sound, altogether, that I can even excuse the band for losing what made the original 'Hey Hey' so unforgettable — its famous sliding «zoop» as part of the riff (which Eric Clapton would later revive as part of his **Unplugged** program). This is an exclusively acoustic technique, and the effect could only be vaguely hinted at in this electric recording, but the song still sounds every bit as enjoyable as everything else on here, just because Muddy's band is such a joy to listen to. When the piano, the guitar, the harp, and even the rhythm section all take the tune in different directions, yet still feel tightly coordinated, who could truly complain? Maybe the guys aren't creating anything seminal here, but they are still having a mighty good time.

The other interesting thing is, of course, to be able to *compare* how Big Bill's originals contrast with being recast in Muddy's style. As a singer, Bill had a rather ordinary, «neighborly» voice — expressive and versatile, but soft and friendly, not in the slightest way «invasive» or «intrusive»; the original version of '[Just A Dream](#)', for instance, comes across as something that could have been played for entertainment in a dining room and nobody would have paid the lyrics or the vibe the slightest attention — just a bit of guitar, piano, and singing that's good for one's digestion. Muddy's version, on the other hand, is impossible to ignore from the very first seconds — Otis' and James' opening chords ring out and blast away with frenetic urgency; and Muddy's much lower, much more aggressive and hyperactive delivery of the verses adds an emotional strain that can only be subtly felt, not directly experienced in Bill's performances. You do know for sure that Big Bill's feeling of deep dissatisfaction with life in 1939 must have been far more genuine than Muddy Waters' feeling in 1960 — but Big Bill *implies* that feeling, whereas Muddy just lays it out for you in the open. Who's the greater artist in between the two? Not a question that can be easily answered.

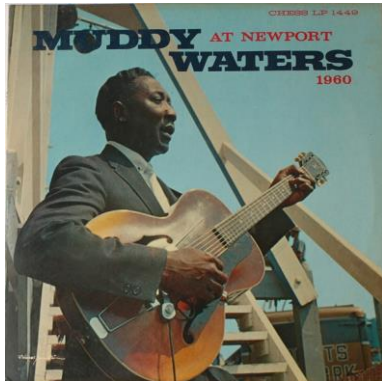
When the vibe is optimistic rather than sad, Muddy is in an even more winning position, because few people in the world could sing more convincingly about being satisfied (rather than dissatisfied) than Mr. McKinley. The unquestionable

highlight of the record is his version of 'I Feel So Good' — Big Bill's recording from 1941 (cut just five days before Pearl Harbor, no less!!) is a classic in its own right, but he could never sound as proud, wholesome, and convincing as Muddy when delivering the "I feel so good, I feel like ballin' the jack" punchline. This version is lining up quite well next to 'Hoochie Coochie Man', 'I'm Ready', 'Mannish Boy', and all those other self-gigantizing anthems that had so convincingly made a Greek titan out of the little black dude over the previous ten years — turning what used to be a bit of downhome friendly jive into a sprawling epic.

On the whole, the importance of a record like this can perhaps be best understood if we think about it this way. It is easy to understand the idea of «blues music taken up to the next level» by comparing an album like **Muddy Waters Sings «Big Bill»** to the actual singles released by Big Bill. But could we, even in theory, imagine an album of blues music taken up to yet *another* level by listening to an LP called **Mr. So-And-So Sings Muddy Waters**? I don't think so. In terms of production quality and virtuoso playing, this album could certainly be transcended; in terms of the overall vibe, going higher than this is just unthinkable. This is not to say that other artists could not successfully cover Muddy Waters — from the Stones to Jimi Hendrix, many did — but the best of those reinventions usually went beyond the blues as such, and veered off into completely different musical territory, whereas Muddy is really quite strictly following the conventions of the genre; all he does is take most of them to their natural limits, just standing there and ballin' the jack like there was no tomorrow. And in some sense, there *would* be no tomorrow for classic electric blues.



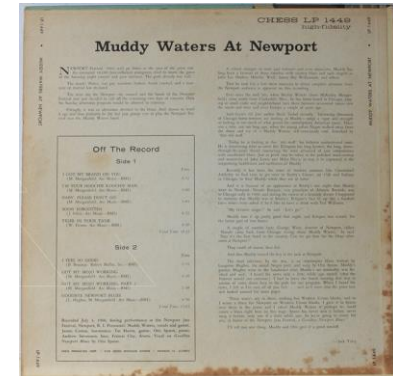




## AT NEWPORT

Album released: **V** **A** **L** **U** **E**  
**November 15, 1960** **2** **5** **4** **3** **4**

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) I Got My Brand On You; 2) I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man; 3) Baby, Please Don't Go; 4) Soon Forgotten; 5) I Wanna Put A Tiger In Your Tank; 6) I Feel So Good; 7) **Got My Mojo Working Part 1**; 8) Got My Mojo Working Part 2; 9) **Goodbye Newport Blues**; 10\*) I Got My Brand On You; 11\*) Soon Forgotten; 12\*) Tiger In Your Tank; 13\*) Meanest Woman.

### REVIEW

Muddy's performance on July 3, 1960 at the annual Newport Jazz Festival has long since passed into legend, but, as with many legendary events, the real reasons for its passing into legend are not immediately obvious. Without doing a little digging around for information and relying instead on simple blurbs from the endless online musical resources that mostly regurgitate each other's waste, one might even form the wrong impression that Muddy's performance on that day was the first, or at least the most important one, to introduce the art of Chicago electric blues to white audiences. Well, it is true that electric blues had been a pretty rare guest at Newport — but even before 1960, the Festival was no enemy to musicians whose interests lay outside the jazz universe; thus, Chuck Berry played Newport as early as 1958, when you can see the rock'n'roll master confidently take his place next to Louis Armstrong and Thelonious Monk in the footage of *Jazz On A Summer's Day*, one of the greatest concert movies to preserve priceless evidence for posterity.



Actually, arguably a much more legendary *and* influential event in the history of electric blues in general and Muddy Waters in particular was his and his band's tour of England in 1958 — when, eight years before Dylan played a similar cruel trick on his UK admirers, Muddy shocked the general public by plugging in his guitar and going loud and wild on a crowd that was expecting an authentic acoustic Delta sound from an authentic cotton field worker, passing on that olde «Negro plight» to all those in search of a guiding light. *That* tour left the public baffled and divided, but would be directly responsible for the beginning of the British rhythm'n'blues boom, the formation of Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated, and, eventually, the Rolling Stones. Unfortunately, very little documented evidence of that tour survives, although at least one show (at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, from October 26) was captured on tape — you can listen to this performance of '[Rollin' Stone](#)', for instance, and imagine a young and excited Brian Jones sitting in the audience, just about to make a personal decision of historical importance...

Of course, by the time we get to the summer of 1960, Muddy Waters was already as famous both in the US and in the UK as he was ever going to be — some might even say he was already past his prime, with his last single to hit the R&B charts having been 'Close To You' back in 1958. The idea that his Newport performance was "*the point at which blues finally broke through to white America*", as it is currently advertised on Amazon, can hardly be viewed as anything other than myth-making promotional hogwash — although, admittedly, the [surviving footage from the show](#), only partially overlapping with the recorded album, *may* be the first instance of a few white American people captured on camera while clapping and toe-tapping to a Chicago electric blues performance. That said, it was certainly not the Newport Jazz Festival of 1960 that made, for instance, somebody like Paul Butterfield, a white native of Chicago who'd been hanging around blues clubs since the late 1950s, want to form an electric blues band. And while **At Newport** did make history by becoming the first live electric blues LP of any importance, upon release it did not even make a dent in the blues charts of the day, never mind the general Billboard 200, which, at the end of 1960, was far more preoccupied with buttering our souls with Frank Sinatra's **Nice 'n' Easy**, The Kingston Trio's **String Along**, and Elvis' **G.I. Blues** soundtrack.

If we are really craving for myth and symbolism, it might be more amusing — and/or sorrowful — to note that Muddy Waters' performance at the Newport Jazz Festival incidentally put an end to the Newport Jazz Festival itself (at least, a temporary one, but even after it reopened, it was no longer the same Newport Jazz Festival that it used to be). From 1954 to 1960, the Festival had been an uninterrupted tradition that typically attracted a modest-size crowd of elitist-intellectual enthusiasts; however, the theatrical release of *Jazz On A Summer's Day* in March 1960 did the Festival a great promotional favor *and* a colossal disservice at the same time — that year, the venue passed into mythological Shangri-La territory, and a



huge crowd of proto-Woodstock-style teenagers descended on the town that summer, resulting in chaos, riots, and a joint decision on the part of city officials and concert promoters to cut the festival short for fear of escalation; Muddy's show turned out to be one of the last, if not the very last performances on Sunday, July 3. Just the usual routine, one might say: all good things are bound to die the minute they become *too* popular.

But it is a little ironic that the last performance at the «old style» Newport Jazz Festival (which would resume in 1962, but already in a somewhat different light) was not a jazz performance, but an electric blues one — symbolic indeed, as if a new, simpler, but more modern, vital, and instantly gripping form of music was less-than-gently ushering out the older values. In that way, Muddy's performance at the venue is indeed comparable to Dylan's going electric at the Newport Folk Festival five years later (damn that lucky Newport for all of its historical symbolism!), even though it was nowhere near as much of a shock (everybody knew that Muddy Waters would be playing electric blues with his band, which he'd been doing for years, whereas Dylan's «conversion» to the world of rock'n'roll was known only to those who'd bothered to buy **Bringing It All Back Home** several months earlier, and even those people might have secretly been hoping that that LP's first side was just a temporary aberration on Bob's part). Just put this together with [Ray Charles' magnetic performance](#) from the previous day of the Festival, and the inevitable impression is that jazz is slowly starting to lose its artistic supremacy, while newer forms of African-American music like R&B and electric blues are quite shameless in encroaching on its territory — an early analogy of later developments, such as, for instance, hip-hop yappin' at the heels of rock 40–50 years later.

With this new feel in the air, it does not even matter all that much that only about half of Muddy's setlist here consists of indisputable Muddy Waters classics; the other consists of recently recorded rehashings of earlier hits ('I Got My Brand On You', 'Tiger In Your Tank', or the particularly aptly-titled 'Soon Forgotten') that only devoted Muddy Waters aficionados might remember with any degree of fondness these days. (The CD reissue of the album adds the studio equivalents of all of these performances as bonus tracks — and while everything Muddy recorded in those days sounds fairly nice due to the sheer musical greatness of his band, there is nothing particularly exceptional, inspired, or innovative about these songs). What matters is that we have here a tight, well-coordinated bunch of masters of the art, all set to show their allegedly «sophisticated» jazz-raised audiences that simple, «generic» 12-bar blues can be just as spiritually rewarding as an inspired run through 'Diminuendo And Crescendo In Blue'.

The sensation that they were out there to prove something on that day is very much reinforced when you play the studio version and the stage version of the opening number, 'I Got My Brand On You', back-to-back. The studio original is faster,

opting for a slightly martial, danceable tempo — but both James Cotton's harmonica and Otis Spann's piano seem to be holding a little back on that one, fully ceding the spotlight to Muddy's vocals, while the guitars are mainly there just to keep the rhythm steady. Live, Muddy slows the tempo down to a crawl, but only so that all the talents of all his players could be showcased at the same time. Here, Cotton blows his harp virtually non-stop, weaving smoky patterns all around Muddy's voice; Otis plays all sorts of improvisational figures on the piano; Pat Hare weaves in menacing electric guitar lines; and even Muddy himself takes to his slide guitar every now and then, bringing in a bit of that cotton field spirit to compensate for too much Chicagoan urbanism. Every now and then, there are *four* musicians soloing at the same time — yet the song never descends into messy cacophony, what with all the members so perfectly in tune with each other. Okay, maybe not «perfectly» perfectly, but who really needs «perfectly» perfectly? «Imperfectly» perfectly is alright with me.

If there's one potential problem, it is that, having established that massive groove, they never really bother changing it until the very end. The basic principle here is that no egos are being stroked — or, what is really the same thing, all the egos are being stroked at the very same time. When a guitar or harmonica player takes a solo, all the other lead players rally behind him, upping their game as well for a «symphonic blues» sound; neither Muddy himself nor any of his players get to have the stage all for themselves even for one moment. This is admirable in spirit, but in practical terms, it makes things a bit too monotonous and predictable, so by the time *another* generic slow blues number like 'Soon Forgotten' comes along, I no longer find myself concentrating on the power of individual melodies. On the positive side, for every one of those rather inferior recent re-writes Muddy compensates with a classic like 'Hoochie Coochie Man' or 'Baby Please Don't Go', where the individual melodies are already ingrained in your brain anyway.

In very general terms, the most important aspect separating the band's live playing from their studio production is that of... well, studio production. Muddy's Chess-era records typically used a heavy echo or reverb effect, making all the songs sound a little like they were coming at you from inside a deep dreary forest, or a dark cavern, or the top of a lofty mountain — in other words, there was a sort of supernatural mysticism about them, subtly emphasizing the voodoo powers of the singer and the *zombi*-like status of his musical warriors. On stage, those effects clearly could not be recreated, which is why the all-out assault on the senses from all the players at once is so much more important — to hell with the magic of subtlety, hooray to the power of brutal frontal musical attack. And, of course, this means that **At Newport** really works best when the band is at its most rock'n'rolliest — although it takes them quite a while to get there. The warm-up begins with 'Baby Please Don't Go', when the tempo starts accelerating and drummer Francis Clay starts getting a lot of attention for himself, then continues with the lively and fully danceable performance of 'Tiger In Your Tank', a song that ruthlessly steals its bridge

from Muddy's own 'I Just Want To Make Love To You', something that is very easy to leave unnoticed given that most people are probably going to spend their time wondering how it would be physically possible to put a tiger in a tank. (The answer is actually quite simple but, nowadays, requires one to be familiar with [the history of 1960s advertisement](#)).

Of course, the culmination of the show is reached during Muddy's seven-minute long extended performance of '[I've Got My Mojo Working](#)' — although the original studio version was released as early as 1957 (with Muddy rather faithfully copying the basics of the [earlier arrangement of Ann Cole](#), but replacing the sax-enlivened party atmosphere with his own voodoo magic), it is *this* particular performance that blew the minds of thousands of British teenagers, making pretty much every 1960s rhythm'n'blues outfit in the UK include the song in their repertoire... and yet there has never been a single British rendition that would even remotely approach the raw power of this performance. There have been good versions, for sure, but there's just too many ingredients here that would need to be replicated. For starters, nobody in the world can do the bilabial trill ("mbbbbrrrrr.... woykin'!") as smoothly as Muddy did in his prime. More seriously, you need to have a great harp blower *and* piano player doing their lines in perfect unison at a fast tempo. And even *more* seriously, this is drummer Francis Clay's chief moment of glory — he's going all-out here on his instruments, as if channelling the spirits of all the crazyass Gene Krupa-like drummers at the same time. This is the kind of bombastic, aggressive, non-stop onslaught on all the elements of your drum kit at once that the UK only saw with Keith Moon several years later.

It is also a performance that necessarily has to be seen rather than just heard: for this song, Muddy loses the guitar in order to fully concentrate on the «ritualistic» aspect of the performance, as he eventually all but goes in a trance, shamanizing at the crowd like he's *really* trying to get his mojo working on those wimpy white-ass bourgeois intellectuals. (I like some of the actual crowd shots — most of the people captured on camera sit there either in complete bewilderment or mildly trying to clap and toe-tap like a bunch of shy pupils learning their first social skills). Some of the stage behavior is completely random, like Muddy all of a sudden going into a waltzing position with James Cotton, making him temporarily drop his harmonica (and nearly get entangled in his own microphone cord!) It's just such a wonderful gradual descent into tightly controlled madness, by the end of which the crowd finally comes awake...

...only to find themselves saying 'Goodbye To Newport Blues', an odd, once-in-a-lifetime epilogue which does not even feature Muddy himself: it is a largely improvised slow blues arrangement of a poem, quickly put together on the spot by the former Harlem Renaissance leader Langston Hughes after he'd learned of the canceling of the remaining two days of the festival. Allegedly, Muddy was supposed to sing it himself, but ceded the right to Otis Spann due to complete exhaustion

after the 'Mojo' workout. Obviously, it is not much of a song, just a little bit of slow jamming to wind things down, but coming right on the heels of 'Mojo', this 'Goodbye' feels like a serious cold shower — the atmosphere suddenly changes to almost depressive, more in the style of Otis Rush's suicidal blues than Muddy's hoodoo blues (I think that they even go into the solo of 'Double Trouble' for a moment there). Curiously, the first line sung by Otis goes something like "oh, what a *groomy* day in Newport" (this is how some of the lyrics sites have it) rather than "oh, what a *gloomy* day in Newport" (as reported by other lyrics sites) — and I actually hear *groomy* myself, with no idea of whether it is just a speech defect on Otis' part or if Hughes really invented the word *groomy* on the spot himself, as a portmanteau of *gloomy* and *groovy*. I'd much rather like it to be the second option, of course, given that the day was indeed groovy and gloomy at the same time.

With Spann's final wail of "goodbye Newport, whoah goodbye goodbye", the music comes to a close, and the album itself is eerily closed with the MC's final, somewhat sorrowful announcement of "*goodbye, Newport*", as if the entire recording's big message to us was to announce the end of an epoch. Like I already said, we shouldn't be reading *too* much symbolic value on this chain of events. After all, the Newport Jazz Festival would eventually reopen, and jazz music still had a few more years to itself as the indisputable leader of artistic progress in music (at least until 1964–65 or so, before serious critical attention got finally usurped by the likes of the Beatles or Hendrix). Moreover, the music played out there by Muddy and his band was by no means «cutting edge» for 1960 — even if we're strictly talking about electric blues, people like Freddie or Albert King were much more «hot shit» at the time than Muddy, with all of his aesthetics and stylistics carried over from at least the mid-1950s. But even if we cut out all the temptation to aggrandize and mythologize, there is still no denying the objective huge influence of this Newport groove on the entire burgeoning electric blues, rhythm'n'blues, and, ultimately, hard and heavy rock movement overseas.

I mean, look at something like Blues Incorporated's seminal **R&B From The Marquee** debut live album from 1962 — Alexis Korner and his friends cover a whole *four* numbers from **At Newport** in their live set, meaning they must have worn out their vinyl copies to near-exhaustion by then. With full emphasis on collective groove rather than individual soloing, this might not have been an album to particularly inspire the likes of, say, Eric Clapton, or Jeff Beck, or any other aspiring young guitarist at the time with the dream of becoming a virtuoso soloist; but it was just the right thing for all sorts of circles of musically-minded friends striving to join their voices in a free flow of musical nirvana, no matter how feeble or untrained any of them might feel on the individual level. And even then, it took the UK bands years and years to reach that level of musical freedom and wildness — the difference between what might be called a *natural* transmission of the tradition and an *artificial* / *learned* transmission of it. The wonder of **At Newport** is in that these guys have this blues

*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Muddy Waters*

Album: *At Newport (1960)*

George Starostin's Reviews

sound almost literally in their blood, whereas Alexis Korner and the rest had to inject it through carefully sterilized needles; it was not until bands like the Stones and the Animals understood that they had to perform this music on their *own* terms, based on their *own* breeding and experience, that they managed to turn «UK rhythm'n'blues» into something truly unique and worth our while.

