

Bill Lupkin had to play the blues.

He knew that back in the 1960s when, rebuffed by his teenaged rock 'n roll bandmembers in Fort Wayne, Indiana for wanting to try a Howlin' Wolf tune, he found black bands to sit in with. He moved to Cincinnati and opened for James Cotton, whose encouragement convinced him to relocate to Chicago in 1968 to try and make it as a musician.

An encounter with impresario Bob Reidy led to a tryout with Louis and Dave Myers and Fred Below—essentially Little Walter's former band, **The Aces**—with guitarist/mandolinist **Johnny Young**.

"I knew I was in real deep," remembers Lupkin.

But it worked out well enough that Below invited him on the 1969 American Folk Blues Festival tour of Europe, which Willie Dixon vetoed in favor of Carey Bell.

"I wasn't hurt," says Lupkin, "I mean, who was I? I was actually honored that Below even thought I was worthy enough."

It opened up a new opportunity to play with **Johnny Littlejohn** and **Jimmy Rogers** with whom he had regular gigs at Wise Fools and at Alice's Revisited, where he participated in a historic onstage reunion between Rogers and **Muddy Waters**.

With Rogers and Littlejohn they gelled into a tight unit that moved to a residency at Ma Bea's on Chicago's gritty West Side where regulars included **Sunnyland Slim**, **Willie Dixon**, **S.P. Leary**, **Charlie Musselwhite**, **Big Walter Horton**, **Eddie Taylor**, **Junior Wells**, **Jimmy Dawkins** and others. Even Wolf himself dropped in from his gig down the street at Big Duke's Blue Flame Lounge to join them onstage for a heartstopping set.

"It was probably the heaviest shit I've ever been involved in," states Lupkin. "I mean bar none."

Working at Pepper's Lounge on South State with his brother Steve on bass, Lupkin endured trading licks with both **Junior Wells** and **James Cotton**, who he says, "cut him to pieces."

"It really makes you decide," says Lupkin, "you're either going to get better or you're just going to get out and do something else."

In 1972 he got the call to record for Shelter Records in California with **Jimmy Rogers** on *Gold Tailed Bird*, co-produced by **Freddie King**. On that tour the Rolling Stones came to hear them and things were looking up. But disputes over money brought the tour to a halt.

Then, stranded in California after an invitation to record with **Canned Heat** proved fruitless, Lupkin put a band together that backed **T-Bone Walker**, **Lowell Fulson**, **Roy Milton**, **George Smith** and **Pee Wee Crayton**. But as magical as some of those collaborations were, that West Coast period wasn't all fun.

"We were kind of out of place out there. We had everyone tellin' us, 'You can't just play straight blues. You got to make it more rock.' By the time I left California, in 1976, I wasn't playing music I liked. So after that I kind of just hung it up for a while."

Bill Lupkin returned home to his large family and the stained glass business that he and his brothers run. And it was another decade or so before he was persuaded to perform again.

"I never really got away from my harps," Lupkin reflects. "I always was kind of playing. But I didn't see much point in it for a while."

He cautiously became acclimated to performing again and in 1999 **Blue Loon** issued his *Live at the Hot Spot*. The following year he guested on **Barrelhouse Chuck's 25 Years of**

Chicago Blues Piano, Vol. 1, and the year after that on **Big Bill Morganfield's** second CD, *Ramblin' Mind* on the **Blind Pig** label, and also on **Nick Moss' Got a New Plan**.

In 2006, **Nick Moss** brought Lupkin in under his **Blue Bella Records** label for two solid, chart-making releases of all-original material, first issuing *Where I Come From*, and following with *Hard Pill to Swallow* in 2007.

When you listen to Bill Lupkin play you are hearing a style tempered in the forges of Chicago's South and West Side blues clubs. Few have held their own as Lupkin has on the home turf of the kings of blues and returned as a valued member of the band. While the "real deal" label has been rendered fairly meaningless by the web-gushing of unimaginative writers, it just doesn't get much more real and powerful than Bill Lupkin and his blues.

—Justin O'Brien 2/09

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