

Blues Unlimited's 50th Anniversary

By John Broven & Bob Groom

Can it be that *Blues Unlimited* was first published in April 1963, all of fifty years ago, from that memorable address: 38A Sackville Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex? Let's raise our glasses to Mike Leadbitter and Simon Napier for launching a magazine that turned out to be the driver of modern blues journalism and research, writes John Broven.

The time and place could not have been better: The American Folk Blues Festival had just started; blues books were gradually appearing; American LPs were beginning to be imported into a Britain stepping out of post-World War II austerity; the civil rights movement was beginning to resonate; and there was a voracious audience wanting to know more about the poorly documented world of blues and rhythm & blues. What little that dribbled out was found in jazz and pop weeklies and monthlies, published usually without much enthusiasm. Crucially, academia was disdainfully ignoring black music along with rock'n'roll. The answer was to do-it-yourself.

The prelude to *Blues Unlimited* was the Blues Appreciation Society, formed by Leadbitter and Napier in 1962 to foster biographical and discographical research. As a fellow Bexhill Grammar School boy, where all three of us had been smitten by rock'n'roll and r&b, I was invited to help. A fully fledged magazine duly followed. The name, acquired from Max Vreede in Holland, was perfect: You could say the magazine covered all aspects of the blues, and there was unlimited potential.

Leadbitter, always one for having a good time and generous with his vast knowledge, favoured postwar down-home blues and r&b, and had a penchant for discography; the worldly wise Napier preferred prewar country blues, gospel and, yes, hillbilly. Mike proved to be a writer of clarity and merit if sometimes acerbic, while Simon – a perceptive reviewer – had the all-important business and production expertise acquired through involvement with his family's antique shop.

Mike didn't ask me to contribute to *Blues Unlimited* number one; he instructed me. Despite my protestations at a lack of journalistic experience, he said, 'You've been buying Excello singles from Ernie's Record Mart in Nashville, and you've been corresponding with Jay Miller in Crowley, Louisiana. Write something!' And so I penned my first-ever article in *BU1*: 'The Southern Record Men Number One: Jay D. Miller'. I guess some things in life are meant to be.

I can still picture Leadbitter and I in line collecting the eight piles of double-sided stencilled pages, one sheet at a time, which were laid out on a table in Napier's parents' gloomy attic. With Simon in charge of the stapler, high tech it wasn't. Oh dear, I notice now that the pages of my dog-eared copy aren't in sequence and the stapling is haphazard at best. Regardless, almost 200 copies of the first issue were ready for sale at one shilling and sixpence, mainly to BAS members. Napier was listed as sole editor, with Leadbitter joining him as R&B editor in *BU5*. Soon a series of Collectors Classics monographs was being published separately.

What was *BU's* legacy? Possibly one of its biggest achievements was to give a platform to many talented, often young, writers and discographers including Bruce Bastin, John Godrich, Cedric Hayes, Don Kent, Pete Lowry, Neil Paterson and Mike Rowe. There was also the recruitment of established writers – and great supporters – such as Paul Oliver, Francis Wilford Smith and Pete Welding. Quite simply, Napier and Leadbitter encouraged a collegiate style of togetherness and co-operation that is rarely replicated today, especially in business or politics. At the root of it all, the co-publishers had a deep mutual respect for the music – and for each other.

In 1968, Leadbitter affirmed his discographical vision with the publication of the monumental 'Blues Records 1943-1966' (Hanover Books) with Neil Slaven. Then Mike edited 'Nothing but the Blues', a compendium of the 'best of Blues Unlimited' (Hanover, 1971). Fittingly, the dedication was to 'those who made it possible for *Blues Unlimited* to survive and prosper – our writers and agents'. At the time he was already involved in blues LP reissues, notably the 'Genesis' Chess box sets.

The three of us were involved in a joint venture with the publication of my first book, 'Walking to New Orleans,' by Blues Unlimited Books in 1974. Again, it was Leadbitter who cajoled me into writing it. On seeing the draft again, he said, witheringly, 'Is this it?' and then on presentation of the rewrite: 'I can't believe the improvement'. None of us had any experience in book production and publishing, but guided by *BU's* printers, Unwin Brothers of Old Woking, Surrey, we survived a potentially disastrous experience. It was typical of Simon

when Pelican Books of Louisiana approached me to license the book in the United States that he said, 'It's yours, go ahead'. By then the book was well in profit due mainly to the enthusiastic support of *BU's* subscribers. That was when the book's title was changed to 'Rhythm & Blues in New Orleans', but that's another story.

Napier had handed over the editorial reins to Leadbitter in 1973 from *BU103* onward, but was still co-publisher; he was also publishing *Old Time Music* with Tony Russell. Then Mike died tragically in November 1974 at age 32 after editing *BU110*. He was in the process of finalising, with others, the 'Delta Blues' book that would have been a masterpiece if published. The magazine was kept alive by an editorial committee, principally Bill Greensmith, Mike Rowe and Bez Turner, that upheld *BU's* values of innovative research until running out of steam at No. 148/149, a joint issue, in winter 1987.

Looking back, *Blues Unlimited* was a pioneering influence for the startup of other blues-based magazines such as *R&B Monthly* (1964), *Blues World* (1965), *Jefferson* (Sweden, 1968), *Soul Bag* (France, 1968), *Living Blues* (Chicago, 1970), *Block* (1975) and then *Blues & Rhythm* (1984) and *Juke Blues* (1985), all of which are still published except the first two. This print explosion benefited immeasurably the artists, record labels and other sectors of the music business.

In 2009 Mike Leadbitter was elected posthumously into the Blues Hall of Fame. Surely a place should now be found for Napier, who died in 1990 at age 51 after being a pivotal partner in the Flyright enterprise. Rest assured, *Blues Unlimited* was a marriage of equals, resulting in the magazine's enduring impact for fifty years and still counting. Happy golden anniversary, *BU* – and thanks again, Mike and Simon.

Bob Groom veteran blues magazine publisher and writer recalls:

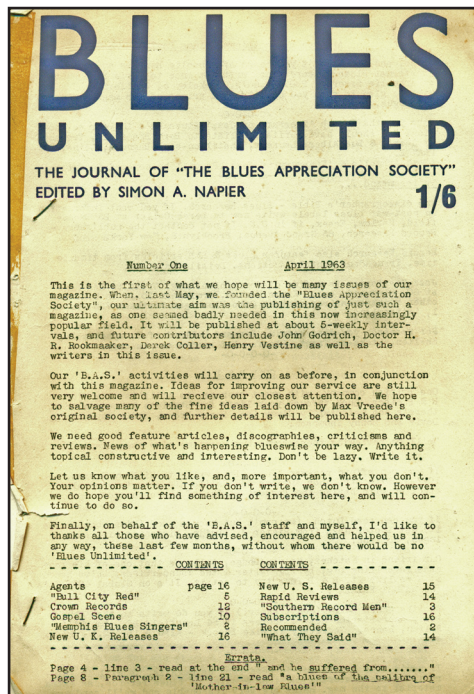
Back in the 1950s, when I became interested in the blues, there were only a few sources of information on the music, mostly in jazz publications like *Jazz Journal*, *Jazz Monthly* and *Melody Maker*. The publication of two books, Sam Charters' 'The Country Blues' (1959) and Paul Oliver's 'Blues Fell This Morning' (1960) opened up new vistas and further stimulated my interest in pre-war blues. In 1962 The Blues Appreciation Society was launched by Simon Napier. From it emerged *Blues Unlimited* magazine, first published in April 1963, and edited by Simon (later with Mike Leadbitter) which was largely devoted to all aspects of blues but also covered Cajun, Zydeco and later some country. (Simon Napier and I regularly corresponded in those days and he was very helpful in sending tapes of record rarities and newly rediscovered bluesmen, which we then discussed. He and I also shared an enthusiasm for the music of Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie. Although living in Sussex, Simon originally came from Cheshire and we were kind of kindred spirits.)

BU was and remained the premier international blues magazine, although other quality magazines soon entered the arena e.g. *R & B Scene*, *R & B Monthly*, my own magazine *Blues World* (1965-1974) and later *Living Blues*, published in America. Mike's death in 1974 and Simon stepping back from the editorship left Mike Rowe and the editorial committee to keep it going through difficult times in the late 1970s (when the Blues Revival seemed to be running out of steam with the onslaught of Disco) but many excellent issues were published before the end eventually came in 1987.

There was nothing high powered about *BU* in the early days with a lo-fi record player and an even lower-fi typewriter. I too started my magazine with a stand-up Imperial typewriter, which would now be a museum piece. In those days it was enthusiasm and elbow grease that produced a magazine, not electronics.

Mention should also be made of the many booklets *BU* published, as far back as 1964 featuring Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Howlin' Wolf, also Chuck and Bo, while Elmore James and Homesick James followed in 1965. That year they published John Godrich's useful 'Survey of Pre-war blues artists reissued on EP And LP 1951-1964' to complement the recently published first edition of Godrich and Dixon's 'Blues And Gospel Records 1902-1942' (to which *BU* and its readers had contributed).

Apparently the *BU* basement was the scene of many a gathering of enthusiasts but being up in the North I never visited it, although Simon did once visit me on a trip back to his natal county. He was curious to know the readership of *BW* as opposed to *BU* but I managed to keep him guessing. Not that I wanted it but some kind of rivalry had developed between the magazines, perhaps reflecting the divide that even today still exists between North and South in England.



Blues Unlimited number one, complete with crooked staples. Courtesy of John Broven.