Blues Legacy: Tradition and Innovation in Chicago
By David Whiteis
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Blues Legacy: Tradition and Innovation in Chicago is the fourth book on blues from author David Whiteis, who has been a well-respected observer and documenter of the blues on the Chicago blues and soul scene for more than 40 years. For this project, Whiteis has undertaken a difficult task in attempting to relate how the legacy of Chicago blues is carried forward by African American musicians currently performing.

Blues Legacy is separated into four main chapters: “Bequeathings,” “Council of Elders,” “Inheritors,” and “Heirs Apparent.” Beginning with musicians who came to Chicago from the South, he attempts to show who passed down the tradition, then explores how the blues has changed and adapted as part of a living culture. An unstated running subtext is the state of the blues today, as represented by today’s working African American Chicago blues musicians.

It is perhaps easy for a cynical reader to view this as an exercise in “who’s left” on the Chicago scene, and certainly the demise of the blues has been predicted or mourned on a moving subject, albeit a slowly moving one. And Whiteis dareingly attempts to tackle a moving subject, albeit a slowly moving one.

“Bequeathings” represents those older musicians who had a personal relationship with the originators of postwar Chicago blues—caveats as to discuss some permutations, influenced as the music has been by musical and cultural change. This is an unavoidable subject and subject to change and Whiteis daringly attempts to tackle a moving subject, albeit a slowly moving one.

Whiteis has created a menagerie of sorts for himself by assorting musicians into these groups. Readers may scratch their heads to see what musicians land in which chapter, and may wish to delve into the inclusion and the exclusion of others. Some will ask, for example, why the classically trained Talle Theodore Maxwell is included in the “Council of Elders,” or why the adult sons of Carey Bell don’t exist anymore . . . Today, we’re trying to continue and to re-create it, but when he was starting out as a blues musician he was playing with the African American community at house parties. They worked together until health issues sidelined John. And he did not shy away from examining the rough spots in their personal and professional interaction.

Wiggins also talks about the music he has made on his own with artists like Cory Henry and legendary bluesman John Cephas and his own bands: the Chesapeake Sheiks, House Kings, and a foreword by Elijah Wald. As a teenager in the early 1970s, he heard blues players at a Smithsonian Institution. He was such a different thing than playing with the younger folks I’m playing with now. He was playing with the African American community at house parties. They worked together until health issues sidelined John. And he did not shy away from examining the rough spots in their personal and professional interaction.

The Washington, DC scene was a unique exploration of the history and community at house parties. They worked together until health issues sidelined John. And he did not shy away from examining the rough spots in their personal and professional interaction.

When the artists speak for themselves, they relate how the legacy of Chicago blues is carried forward by African American musicians currently performing. This is an exercise in “who’s left” on the Chicago scene, and certainly the demise of the blues has been predicted or mourned.