

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## Legendary Bluesman John Lee Hooker celebrates 50th anniversary

By LARRY MCSHANE  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — The latest album from venerable bluesman John Lee Hooker boasts an all-star cast of collaborators: Eric Clapton, Bonnie Raitt, Carlos Santana, Van Morrison.

But there's one notable absence from Hooker's wish list of friends on this celebration of his half-century in the music business.

"There ain't no way I could get him," Hooker says from his California home, his voice a barely audible croak. "Stevie Ray. Stevie Ray Vaughan, he would be No. 1. I loved Stevie."

"It's just too bad," he says with the wisdom acquired from five decades of singing and playing the blues. "That's the way it goes, though."

It's a single sad note in an upbeat year for Hooker. The son of a Mississippi sharecropper has reaped an assortment of riches in 1998: his new album, "The Best of Friends"; a 50th anniversary tribute concert arranged by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; a pair of Grammy awards for a tune he did with Morrison, "Don't Look Back"; and the announcement of a lifetime achievement award from the Rhythm and Blues Foundation.

"I'm hanging on, like a vine ... It's just nice to be around," Hooker says. "I'm still kicking and hopping. I'm not as young as I used to be, but I'm still kicking. I'm young at heart."

Hooker, who turned 81 in August, credits his longevity to one core belief: "I believe in the Great Maker. I believe in that. I could be wrong, but it's working so far. I still got my mojo working."

Hooker's mojo dates way back. The Clarksdale, Mississippi, native, born in 1917, wound up working as a janitor in a Detroit auto factory by day and playing the blues by night.

Hooker signed a record deal in 1948, and quickly scored a million-selling hit with "Boogie Chillen" — a tune remade for the new album with Clapton helping



John Lee Hooker

out on guitar.

It was English kids of Clapton's generation who rediscovered Hooker in the early 1960s, when the delta bluesman's sound was copied by the Yardbirds and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. Mayall's band backed Hooker on a 1964 tour of England.

That influence still reverberates today — Robert Plant and Jimmy Page titled their most recent album "Walking into Clarksdale." And Hooker recently performed on a track for Mayall's upcoming album.

Hooker's touring continued over the years, but he stopped recording during the late 1970s and didn't start again until 1989. His studio drought ended with "The Healer," which received critical praise while selling more than 1 million copies.

That same year, he joined the Rolling Stones for a pay-per-view show on their "Steel Wheels" tour. Stones guitarist Keith Richards is among the legion of guitarists who take a little bit of Hooker's style on stage with them.

"There's a continuity there," Richards said recently. "With John Lee Hooker, you feel the continuity of a long tradition... You get in the dressing room and realize you've known each other forever."

Hooker knows the feeling —

and he can explain it, too.

"People related to the blues, because the blues have been there since the world was here," he says. "All music comes from the blues. The blues are always the same. They will never die."

Hooker says he doesn't play much guitar these days — "Just once in a while," he confesses. "I've got a whole roomful of guitars. I can't hardly walk without tripping over 'em."

But he's well aware of younger performers like teen-age blues sensation Jonny Lang: "I know him real well." And he keeps in touch with old friends like Bonnie Raitt: "Ooooh, she loves me, and I love her. She's big now. She's a good person, too."

Raitt's Rhythm and Blues Foundation — she's one of its founders honors Hooker with a lifetime achievement award Feb. 25 in Los Angeles. Smokey Robinson will be host of the event.

"What am I most proud of? That's a good question," Hooker says. "There's so many things I'm proud of. I'm proud that I'm famous. I'm proud that I'm fond of people, and people love me."

"Lots of things."

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## 'Family Matters' star dies of cancer at 29

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Actress Michelle Thomas, who had television roles in "The Young & The Restless," "The Cosby Show" and "Family Matters," died of cancer at age 29.

Miss Thomas died last Tuesday in Manhattan, according to her publicist Kahdijah Bell.

Miss Thomas appeared on the CBS soap opera "The Young & The Restless" as Callie; on "The Cosby Show" as Justine, who was the girlfriend of Theo — the character played by Malcolm Jamal Warner; and on "Family Matters" as Myra, who was the girlfriend of Steve Urkel — the character played by Jaleel White.

She had guest appearances in a number of other TV shows, including "Roseanne," and also performed in music videos, Los Angeles theater productions and several movies, including "Hangin' with the Homeboys."

She had recently received an NAACP Image Award nomination for outstanding actress in a daytime drama series.

"We are terribly shocked and deeply saddened by Michelle's death and our thoughts and prayers are with her family," said William J. Bell, co-creator and senior executive producer of "The Young & The Restless." "Michelle was a great talent with a bright future ahead of her. She will be missed by all of us."

Miss Thomas was born in Boston and raised in New York. She attended the Montclair School of Arts and the Broadway Dance Center.

She is survived by her parents, Phynjuar Thomas, a stage actress, and Dennis Thomas, who was a member of the band Kool & the Gang, of Weehawken, N.J.

At press time, funeral arrangements were not available.

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