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**“Got a Right to Sing the Blues”**  
*by Muddy Waters, told to Alfred Duckett*

When I was a kid, growing up in Rollingfork, Miss., there were a lot of things happening around me to make me sad.

People talk about Negroes in the South having trouble, but in my lifetime, I've seen a lot of progress made and a lot of Southerners getting to learn to appreciate my people as human beings.

I'm not up on a platform preaching. I make my living recording blues which sell to millions of people all over the country and appearing in night clubs which fortunately for me, are usually jammed with people who want to hear my music.

Somebody once asked me what my blues meant. I answered in one word -- “trouble.” I don't know whether they got the message but what I meant was that the blues -- from the gut-bucket, alley blues which I can offer right straight up to the sophisticated, drawing room lament fashioned by that master musician, Duke Ellington -- the blues belong to my people. The blues are an expression of trouble in mind, trouble in body, trouble in soul. And when man has trouble, it helps him to express it, to let it be known.

Back in Rollingfork, Miss., I made up my mind when I was pretty young that I was going to live a good life. My name wasn't Muddy Waters then. It was McKinley Morganfield. But my folks called me Muddy -- and don't ask me why. After I got into the show business, the public added the “Waters.” Lots of people think I wrote the tune “I'd Rather Drink Muddy Water.” Sorry to say I can't claim that one. Fact is, I was hearing that tune when I was a youngster.

In those boyhood days I always had an ear for the blues. I loved the blues. I guess I was born with two things -- trouble and love for the blues. The music of Big Bill, Lonnie Johnson, Leroy Cobb and others fascinated me. My daddy played a guitar in his day. But it was a good buddy of mine, Scott Bohanna, who taught me guitar after I'd been fooling around with the harmonica for a few years. My uncle, Joe Grant, gave me a chance to get some real kicks out of the songs I was writing -- alley blues, country blues -- what people call gut-bucket. People down home appreciated and liked my music. They understood it.

But it was a different story when I came to big time Chicago. I found out that my people who had left the South, even though they still weren't really free, wanted to run off in a corner and escape their troubles. They wanted to make believe trouble didn't exist. The way I felt, that's the best way to let trouble beat you. The way to defeat trouble is to look it straight in the eye. That's what I was doing when I sang my blues.

## DIDN'T LIKE THE BLUES

The blues didn't move anybody in the big city. They called it sharecropper music. They said I was a square and would never get anywhere trying to sell the public that kind of stuff. They laughed at me when I wailed the blues. I had every reason to believe they had a right to laugh. For quite a while I didn't get anywhere with my music. I was working but only because I wanted to work -- not because anyone wanted me. People let me appear in their places because I would work almost for nothing. If I had been forced to depend on my income as a musician, I would have starved to death. But I didn't intend to starve. And I didn't intend to give up my determination to play the blues. So I sold venetian blinds whenever I could get a chance.

My big break came when a talent scout for Leonard Chess of Chess Records heard me in a club. He understood. And he believed that what I was doing could be commercial in a big way. He took me to Leonard. To Leonard my music was a big joke. He didn't believe in my blues. He thought it was a waste of money to invest in my career. But he didn't want to let the talent scout down and he took an immediate liking to me. My first record for Chess Records was "Feel Like Goin' Home." It went over like mad. Then the talent scout knew he had been right. Leonard knew that he had played a good hunch even if he hadn't wanted to. And I knew that I had been right to stick to my guns in spite of everything.

After that, I had it made. People began to listen to the blues they had laughed at. They began to realize that these blues expressed their own feelings when they were low or discouraged. It's a funny thing about people and trouble. When a person think he's the only one in hot water, he's miserable. But when he gets to realize that others have the same kind of trouble--or even worse--he understands that life isn't just picking on him alone.

Somebody once wrote that a whole school of blues has come about in imitation of Muddy Waters. I don't agree that it is in imitation. No one can duplicate the blues I create and play. And neither can I imitate the ones who came after me. What makes me proud is that, in making a success for myself in Chicago, I was able to open the doors for other blues artists to come up. Maybe that happened in other parts of the country too.

My daddy, Ollie Morganfield, who still lives in Rollingfork, is proud of my success. But he is more proud that I remember what he once told me. He advised me to forget about the folks who laughed at me. But, he warned, if I ever got to be big, I should never feel like saying "I told yo so."

I don't feel like saying that. I feel as though these folks should know now that it doesn't pay to run from trouble. Like Joe Louis said, you can run, but you can't hide. Long as we're Negroes, we got a right to sing the blues -- and long as we sing them, we ought to be proud of them.

-- Excerpted from the *Chicago Defender*, March 26, 1955

## Entry Ticket Prompt:

After reading "Got a Right to Sing the Blues" by Muddy Waters and *before coming to class*, answer the following questions below. Bring this page to class on the day of the lesson.

- Where did Muddy Waters grow up? What was his name before he became known as Muddy Waters?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Muddy Waters writes: "Somebody once asked me what my blues meant. I answered him in one word -- 'trouble.'" Describe what you think he means.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What are some reasons why people move today?