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## *The Odyssey of Otis Rush, 1934-2018*



*Otis Rush performing in 2002. Photo: [Masahiro Sumori](#).*

In 1969, after nearly 14 years of constant gigging in small blues clubs and cutting scorching singles for obscure labels, songs that received limited radio play but were greedily snatched up by young white rockers desperate to learn the rudiments of the Chicago blues, it looked like Otis Rush was about to finally get his due. Rush had just

been signed by the notorious Albert Grossman, then the manager of Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin and Peter, Paul and Mary. Grossman told Rush that he had landed him a recording deal with Atlantic Records.

Rush headed down to Muscle Shoals, Alabama to record one of the first sessions at the soon-to-be-famous studio out on Jackson Highway. The album, *Mourning in the Morning*, was produced by two other musicians from Chicago who idolized Rush, Michael Bloomfield and Nick Gravenites. Bloomfield, one of the more authentic white blues guitar-players, and Gravenites were then heading the short-lived jam band Electric Flag. Bloomfield had convinced Grossman to sign Rush, telling the portly manager that he was the Jimi Hendrix of the blues. Like Hendrix, Rush was a lefty. Unlike Hendrix, Rush usually played a left-handed guitar with the order of the strings reversed, featuring the low E string on the bottom. The Rush sound was strikingly lyrical and, though many tried, nearly inimitable.

The new Muscle Shoals Studio had been founded by some of the best session players in the south: keyboardist Barry Beckett, bassist David Hood, guitar player Johnny Johnson and drummer Roger Hawkins. By 1969, the Muscle Shoals Rhythm section had already backed some of the best music made by Percy Sledge, Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett and Etta James. Hawkins, a native of Indiana, is widely regarded as one of the sturdiest drummers in the history of rock music.

When Rush showed up in Alabama in the spring of 1969, Duane Allman greeted him at the studio and showered him with praise, telling Rush he was the equal of the immortal B. B. King. Allman ended up playing on a few tracks, including the haunting instrumental cover of Aretha's "Baby, I Love You."

The album met with hostile reviews. Most of the blame has to be placed on Gravenites and Bloomfield, who freighted the record with six of their own songs, including two irredeemable stinkers, "Me" and "My Old Lady." Inexplicably, the clunky "Me" opens the album, souring the entire experience. In retrospect, there's some fine playing on the record, particularly on the devastating cover of B. B. King's "Gambler's Blues" and the Minister of Stroll Chuck Willis's "Feel So Bad," which, with Rush's spine-tingling vibrato, lethally cuts even Elvis's version. The problem with the album as a whole is there's far too Bloomfield and not nearly enough Otis Rush. Rush is one of the best songwriters in the history of the blues. After all, he learned at the feet of Willie Dixon. But Bloomfield and Gravenites allowed Rush to record only one of his own songs on the album, "My Love Will Never Die," which had made a splash on the R&B charts in 1959.

The record failed to capture the menacing and intense sound of Rush in a live setting—or even the Cobra singles recorded in that primitive studio where the West Side blues was born.

In the wake of the dismal reviews, sales of “Mourning in the Morning” floundered and executives at Atlantic suddenly terminated Rush’s contract. Rush, who has battled depression his entire life, returned to Chicago, distraught and angry. As Eric Clapton, Dave Mason and Peter Green were ripping off his licks for hit singles, Rush was back on the West Side, playing bars and blues joints for cash and tips and making the occasional festival appearance, often backed by an inept band of hastily assembled local musicians.

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Otis Rush was born in 1934 in Philadelphia, Mississippi, one of the most racially mixed towns in the Delta. In Rush’s youth the population of Philadelphia was almost equally divided between whites, blacks and Choctaw Indians. As a consequence, Philadelphia was also one of the most racist towns in Mississippi, a hotbed of Klan activity and, of course, site of the 1964 murders of civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner. In 1980, Reagan picked the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia as the locale to give his first post-convention speech, an attack on the federal government that launched his own race-baiting “Southern Strategy.” J.L. Chestnut, one of two black people in the huge audience, recalled Ronald Reagan shouting that “‘the South will rise again and this time remain master of everybody and everything within its dominion.’ The square came to life, the Klu (sic) Kluxers were shouting, jeering and in obvious ecstasy. God bless America.”

Like many black youths in the Delta, Otis sat near the radio every day at 12:15, tuning in to KFFA, broadcast out of Helena, Arkansas, for the King Biscuit Time show, hosted by Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Lockwood, Jr. For half an hour Williamson and Lockwood played live in the studio, often featuring other rising stars of the blues, such as B.B. King, James Cotton and Pinetop Perkins (who was an original member of the studio band, called the King Biscuit Entertainers.) Otis decided he wanted to be a blues player. He began playing the blues harp at the age of six and later his father rigged him a makeshift one-string guitar out of a broom handle and baling wire.

Rush’s father was a sharecropper, toiling in the parched red clay soils of eastern Mississippi. But mechanization was slowly drawing this brutal way of life to a close. In 1948, Rush’s father moved the family (there were 8 Rush children) to Chicago. At the age of 14, Otis began working 12-hour days in the stockyards. At night he played the blues

with two other young stockyard workers, Mike Netton, a drummer, and “Poor Bob” Woodfork, a guitar player recently migrated up from Arkansas. The band began to get some paying gigs in some of the new clubs springing up on Roosevelt Avenue. One night when Rush was 18, Willie Dixon walked into the Alibi club on the West Side of town. Dixon, one of the true geniuses of American music, had just left Chess Records in a bitter dispute over royalties. The great bassist and arranger had taken a job with the new Cobra Records, a small Chicago label run by a TV repairman. Dixon was enthralled by Rush’s uniquely expressive, almost tortured guitar-style and signed him on the spot.

In the studio, Dixon, the real architect of the Chicago Blues sound, assembled a small talented R&B combo to back Rush, featuring Shakey Horton on harmonica, Harold Ashby on tenor, veteran drummer Odie Payne, Little Brother Montgomery hammering the piano and Dixon himself on stand-up bass. The first song Rush recorded was Dixon’s “I Can’t Quit You, Baby.” Dixon said he wrote the song about an obsessive relationship Rush was having with a woman at the time. Dixon wanted to provoke an emotional response from the singer and he got one. “I Can’t Quit You, Baby” opens with a chilling falsetto scream, then Rush launches into a staccato guitar attack unlike anything heard before it. Led Zeppelin (and dozens of other bands) would cover Rush’s version of the song but never capture the excruciating fervency of the original. The recording was released in the summer of 1956 as Cobra’s first single. The song hit number 6 on the Billboard R&B charts.

Over the next two years Rush and Dixon would release eight more records, each of them dazzlingly original. The sound was aggressive and confident, like the hard-charging jump blues “Violent Love,” where Rush’s slashing guitar chords seem to be engaged in a romantic combat with the horns. Rush’s own composition, “Checking on My Baby,” is an eerie, minor key blues that sweats sexual paranoia. This is not the blues of despondency and despair, but of defiance and, at times, rage. It’s music with an edge, sharpened by the metallic sounds of urban streets, of steel mills, jail cells and rail yards.

Despite hit singles from Rush, Magic Sam, Ike Turner and the Rhythm Kings and the young Buddy Guy (who Rush discovered at “Battle of the Blues” show at the famous Blue Flame Club), Cobra Records went bankrupt in 1958. Rush followed Willie Dixon back to Chess Records. This was the beginning of Rush’s seemingly endless professional odyssey, from label to label. Even with Dixon back in his slot as artistic director at Chess, Rush’s relationship with the label proved a disappointment. In two years, Rush recorded eight

songs for Chess, but management only released one single, the brilliant “So Many Roads, So Many Trains,” featuring one of Rush’s most vicious guitar solos.

Feeling abused by Chess, Rush bolted in search of another label. He cut one hard rocking single, “Homework,” (later covered by Fleetwood Mac and J. Geils) for Duke Records and that was it for six very lean years. Rush hit the club circuit, performing two and three times a night, often in different venues. In those days Rush tended to close with one of his fiercest compositions, “Double Trouble”, a tormented minor key blues about a man who has lost his job and his lover. Rush plays the song with a nerve-racking intensity:

*I lay awake at nights, false love, just so troubled  
It's hard to keep a job, laid off, having double trouble  
Hey hey, yeah, they say you can make it if you try  
Yes some of this generation is millionaires  
It's hard for me to keep decent clothes to wear*

Otis Rush is the Thelonious Monk of the electric guitar: an uncompromising and eccentric genius who redefined the possibilities of his instrument. His playing is beautifully idiosyncratic. There is an existential quality to Rush’s solos, there are spaces in his runs, decision spaces, where notes are bent and left hanging in a state of suspension, before snapping back in an unnerving coherence. At his best, Rush’s playing conveys a gamut of emotions, often in a single song, from dread and anxiety to manic ecstasy. In a live setting, Rush’s playing could be erratic, one false note from collapse. That’s a huge part of his ingenuity, of course, his aptitude for sustaining such an acute intensity in his playing night after night. In those bleak years in the mid-1960s, when everyone had left him for dead, Otis Rush became a master of the hardboiled blues.

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In late December of 1970, Rush got a call from Grossman, the man whom Dylan described as looking just like Sydney Greenstreet in *The Maltese Falcon*, telling the bluesman not to despair for he, Albert the Great, had just secured a five album deal for Rush with that titanic label on Hollywood and Vine, Capitol Records.

So in February of 1971 Rush flew to San Francisco to record the songs for the ill-fated album *Right Place, Wrong Time*. This time Rush co-produced the project with Gravenites and exerted himself in the roster of songs. The band featured some of the Bay Area’s best blues musicians, including guitarist Fred Burton, bass player Doug Killmer and piano player Mark Naftalin. Rush opens up red hot with a lacerating version of his pal Ike Turner’s “Tore Up,” where Rush seems to vent a decade’s worth of frustration with two

brutal solos. The album also includes a chilling, heart-rending cover of Tony Joe White's "Rainy Night in Georgia," where Rush replaces his normal falsetto with a deep soulful voice like a gritty Otis Redding.

But the real gems of the album are Rush's own compositions, including the brooding, shuffling title cut, which is a blues but perhaps unlike any blues you've ever heard before, a song that bleeds bitter irony: The album closes with the harrowing "Take a Look Behind," where Rush demonstrates how absolutely he absorbed the B. B. King style and then ripped it up, transforming King's bright, single-string runs into dark and ferocious riffs, each note stabbing like a stiletto at the vital chords of life.

*Oh,            yeah,            looking            back            over            our            slate*  
*I            can            see            love            turn            to            hate*  
*But            if            I            only            had            the            chance*  
*I            say            if            I            only            had            the            chance*  
*I'd never make the same mistake again*

There's not a misfire on the entire record. Each song, each solo is flawlessly constructed. The record was a masterpiece in an era awash with mediocre imitators of the Chicago blues style that Rush and his buddy Magic Sam Maghett on the West Side had perfected. By 1971, it was too late for Magic Sam, who was shockingly felled by a heart attack in 1969 at the age of 32, but it seemed certain that Rush, and by extension the West Side Blues, was at last going to enjoy the acclaim and perhaps even riches he deserved.

Then inexplicably the executives at Capitol, never the brightest bunch on the block, shelved the album, burying the landmark tapes deep in their vaults. Why did Capitol unjustly sabotage the legendary Otis Rush? One theory holds that the company was run by reactionary suits with little appreciation for musical innovation. This was, after all, the label that tried to kill off the Beatles in their infancy (see Dave Marsh's merciless skewering of Capitol executives in [The Beatles Second Album](#)) and turned their collective nose up at the Doors because they thought Jim Morrison "lacked charisma." The Lizard King may have yearned in vain for an adequate singing voice but nearly every pore in his body supplicated an evil kind of charisma.

Less charitably it might be speculated that Capitol executives, who presided over a predominantly white roster of talent, were innately suspicious of the blues and, more pointedly, black culture itself. Recall that Jimi Hendrix's blistering song "Red House" was cut from the North American release of *Are You Experienced?* because the big shots at Track Records contended that "Americans don't like the blues." Perhaps Capitol

executives felt that Rush's album was too black, too raw, too plaintively urgent. Perhaps they felt that such a record, about as far as you can get from *Pet Sounds*, would never sell to white audiences conditioned by the homogenized and anemic blues of Clapton or the ponderous thrashings of Led Zeppelin, whose early recordings ruthlessly pillaged the songbooks of Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters and Rush.

A frustrated and justifiably embittered Otis Rush had to battle the label for five years just to liberate his own tapes. Finally he had to buy them back. The album was released in 1976 on the tiny Bullfrog label. Sales were bleak. It did win a Grammy nomination in the category of "traditional" blues—a bizarre accolade to say the least, because even today, forty years later, the smoldering music captured on the tracks of *Right Place, Wrong Time* screams its unyielding modernity, its intense relevance to life on the unforgiving streets of America.