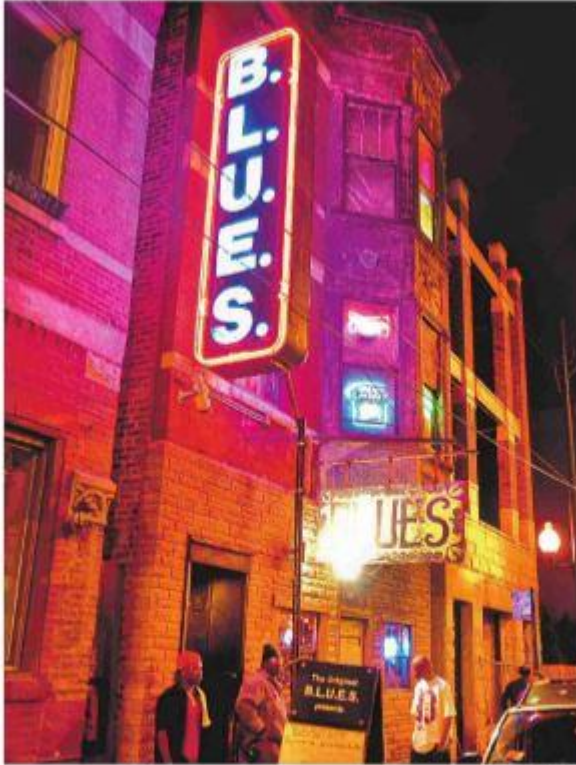


# TRAVEL



## HEAR THAT BUZZ? LISTEN

Chicago's electric blues emerged from the city's largely African American South and West sides to light up 20th century popular music and inspire rock 'n' roll. In the 21st century, you can still find the sound, albeit blaring on a different side of town. Here's your guide to the best of the bunch. **L4-5**

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# CHASING THOSE CHICAGO BLUES

Clubs where guitars boof and harmonicas groof can still be found around the city. The addresses have changed over the years, but the music continues to push hard and go deep.

By Christopher Reynolds

CHICAGO — “Dancing Aloud,” a sign said. On stage, guitarist Corey Dennison, 43, white and well tattooed, had just opened an instrumental conversation with a grandfatherly figure in a White Sox cap.

“This is my old man, Mr. Carl Weathersby,” Dennison told the crowd. “He taught me everything I know about the blues.”

Weathersby, 65, and African American, nodded. The notes rose, fell and tangled like family voices around a dinner table. The players, related only by a passion for music, grinned and winced the way soloists do.

In the audience 100 blues lovers roared, clapped, drank and chattered in three or four languages.

This was Kingston Mines, the oldest, biggest club of its kind in Chicago, on a recent Monday night. Like the rest of the international audience, I was here to listen to an embattled American sound — Chicago-style electric blues, born in the mid-20th century as African American families moved north from the Mississippi Delta.

In that migration, legions of country blues musicians traded their acoustic guitars for electrics, started playing their harmonicas through microphones and launched an era of rough-edged, streetwise music, sibling to soul, cousin to gospel.

The sound filled mostly black clubs on Chicago’s South and West sides. New arrivals played for tips on Maxwell Street, and the biggest names released albums on Chess Records and blazed a musical path that rock ‘n’ roll soon would follow.

But Chicago and pop culture have moved on.

Though the vast, free Chicago Blues Festival takes over Millennium Park every June, and the locally headquartered Delmark and Alligator labels release new blues and roots tunes, rap music now dominates the South and West sides.

You must go to the Loop and north, where the tourists are, to

find the remaining handful of all-blues clubs.

I wanted to see and hear them before things changed any more, so I spent three days and nights this summer chasing Chicago blues through five clubs, one museum exhibition and one storied old studio.

## ‘It’s just real’

Kingston Mines, born in the late 1960s and a fixture on Halsted Street in Lincoln Park since 1982, was my first stop.

Although the surrounding neighborhood is collegiate, urban and prosperous, the club aims for a rural juke-joint feel, with fried okra and catfish fingers on the menu, a map of “blues country” on the wall and tangles of Christmas lights here and there. It’s too big to be called intimate, too gritty to be mistaken for a House of Blues.

It features two stages (so two bands can alternate sets without long delays in between) and a kitchen (Doc’s Rib Joint). The live music plays until about 3:45 a.m. every night except Saturday into Sunday, when it lasts an hour longer.

“There’s pretty much no place I know like this on the planet,” said Joanna Connor, a singer and guitarist who has played at the club for more than 30 years.

“It’s just real, man. It’s real people,” Dennison told me.

Dr. Lenin Pellegrino, a general practitioner and social crusader, owned the club for decades, relying on an audience that’s a mix of locals, tourists and students from nearby DePaul University.

“Doc” Pellegrino died in May at age 92. His grown children run the club.

“It’s an integrating force,” manager Lisa Pellegrino told me. “We have people sitting here who, back home, their countries are at war.”

As I chatted with the musicians between sets, I learned how Weathersby broke in as a guitarist for bluesmen Albert King and Billy Branch, started his own group, then hired Dennison and mentored him for years.

Nowadays Dennison and his band play two nights a week at Kingston Mines. Weathersby, who has moved out of state, had dropped by to listen.

As in all the clubs I checked out, the monthly schedule showed a mix of black and white performers, mostly homegrown. The audiences were probably less than 10% black and included a lot of blues-hungry visitors from Europe and Asia.

More than once, I thought of a question Chicago Tribune music critic Howard Reich posed in 2011: “How long can a black musical art form remain dynamic when presented to a largely white audience in settings designed to replicate and merchandise the real thing?”

I have no answer. But the music, done right, still thrills. Stories of loss and longing. Bursts of wild exhilaration. Moments of understanding that reach beyond age and race.

“It’s electric folk music,” Bruce Iglauer, the Chicago-based founder of Alligator Records, told me. “And folk music changes as the folks change.”

Whatever the future, there is plenty of blues culture to see and hear this year in the city.

At the Chicago History Museum, I browsed through the “Amplified: Chicago Blues” exhibition (through Aug. 10, 2019), which includes vintage photos of wild nights in long-gone South Side clubs; hands-on features inviting you to sing or play guitar (with the amp’s distortion level set to good ‘n’ crunchy); and an introduction to many of the region’s key players.

From Mississippi came Muddy Waters to sing “Mannish Boy,” Howlin’ Wolf to sing “Smokestack Lightnin’,” Bo Diddley to lay down the five-beat syncopated rhythm that drives “Who Do You Love?,” Willie Dixon to write “Hoochie Coochie Man” and shape the Chicago blues scene for years as a bassist and producer.

From Tennessee came Koko Taylor to sing “Wang Dang Doodle.” From Louisiana came har-

monica player Little Walter and guitarist Buddy Guy, now 82 and still performing at his club, Buddy Guy's Legends.

### A heaping of history

My other daytime stop was Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation, a surprisingly compact building that housed Chess Records from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. There, tour guide Janine Judge led me upstairs to the studio where Waters, Diddley, Taylor and Dixon did some of their best work.

This was also where Chuck Berry recorded "Johnny B. Goode" in 1958 and Etta James recorded "At Last" in 1960; where the Rolling Stones recorded a smoldering instrumental track titled "2120 South Michigan Avenue" in 1964 while on their first U.S. tour.

Judge, carrying a portable speaker, cranked up the volume on classic songs and pointed out the late Dixon's old bass in one corner.

She explained how brothers Leonard and Phil Chess built the label and how Dixon sued Led Zepplin decades ago, accusing the band of using his words and music in the songs "Bring It on Home" and "Whole Lotta Love." This led to settlement payments, amount undisclosed.

Without that cash, who knows whether this building would still be standing?

By night I club-hopped, paying cover charges of \$5 to \$12.

At B.L.U.E.S. on Halsted, down the street from Kingston Mines, I stepped in just as host Big Ray was asking the out-of-towners where they were from (England, Hungary, Australia).

The club, snug and narrow, holds about 60 people. The stage was so small that the bass player sat on the keyboard of an upright piano.

This bar is known for musicians often sitting in — "more jamming, more surprises," Iglauer said — and many a music lover has spent an evening wandering back and forth between B.L.U.E.S. and Kingston Mines.

At Rosa's Lounge the scene is similarly intimate, and the hospitality has a homespun Italian inflection. Italian immigrant (and drummer) Tony Mangiullo opened

the place in 1984, and it's been a fixture in the Logan Square neighborhood.

I showed up on a slow weekday night — fewer than 10 customers were inside and nobody on the street outside. On stage, Nigel Mack, a singer and multi-instrumentalist, was working without his usual guitarist. That meant we didn't get the harmonica heroics Mack is known for, but I was happy to sit up close and admire his slide guitar work.

The city's blues scene "goes up and it goes down," Mack told me during a break. "But the state of the blues has got to be healthier here than it is anywhere else in the world."

At Buddy Guy's Legends, a posh place next to the Hilton in the South Loop, I caught Mz Peachez and Her Casanovas.

If I were smarter, I'd have arrived early enough to order dinner — those who reserve ahead and sit to eat get the best spots. While I stood in back, Mz Peachez assessed her crowd and veered from standard blues titles to disco favorites "Bad Girls" and "I Will Survive."

Maybe a few purists were offended, but dozens of Brazilian tourists jumped out of their seats to dance. (I'm guessing that medley doesn't happen in January, when Guy himself usually does a month-long residency.)

At the House of Blues in the heavily touristed River North area, I was too early for live music but got a juicy burger with sweet potato fries.

To those who would say that patronizing the House of Blues in Chicago is like eating at Taco Bell in Los Angeles, I can only say: Yes, it is. But it books a lot of local blues acts, often two per night.

On my last night in town, I circled back to Kingston Mines, where Dennison again was prowling the stage, singing Willie Nelson's lyrics about how "the nightlife ain't no good life, but it's my life."

Weathersby was in the audience again.

"The things that blues are about — they aren't going away as long as there's people," he told me. With players such as Dennison on the scene, Weathersby added, "It's

in good hands for another 20 years."

Then up on stage, his protégé invited him to sit in, and the guitars started talking.

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## If you go

### WHERE TO LISTEN

**Kingston Mines**, 2548 N. Halsted St., Chicago; (773) 477-4646, [kingstonmines.com](http://kingstonmines.com). Cover charge \$12-\$15.

**B.L.U.E.S.** (a.k.a. Chicago B.L.U.E.S. Bar), 2519 N. Halsted St., Chicago; (773) 528-1012, [chicagobluesbar.com](http://chicagobluesbar.com). Cover charge usually \$5-\$10.

**Buddy Guy's Legends**, 700 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago; (312) 427-1190, [buddyguy.com](http://buddyguy.com). Open daily. Cover charge \$10 weekdays, \$20 weekends.

**Rosa's Lounge**, 3420 W. Armitage Ave., Chicago; (773) 342-0452, [rosaslounge.com](http://rosaslounge.com). Cover charge \$10-\$20.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Chicago Athletic Assn. Hotel**, 12 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago; (312) 940-3552, [chicagoathletic.com](http://chicagoathletic.com). Stately institution dates to the 1890s. Doubles from \$179 in September.

**Hotel Versey**, 644 W. Diversey Parkway, Chicago; (773) 525-7010; [hotelversey.com](http://hotelversey.com). Boutique hotel (formerly a Days Inn) in Lincoln Park. Doubles from \$179 in September.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Blue Door Farm Stand**, 2010 N. Halsted St., Chicago; (312) 265-0529, [bluedoorfarmstand.com](http://bluedoorfarmstand.com). Rural touches. Seasonal emphasis. Dinner main dishes \$14-\$34.

**White Oak Tavern**, 1200 W. Webster Ave., Chicago; (773) 248-0200, [whiteoakchicago.com](http://whiteoakchicago.com). Dinner main dishes \$14-\$30. Tavern offering rustic meals.

### TO LEARN MORE

**Choose Chicago**, [choosechicago.com](http://choosechicago.com)

**Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation** (and Chess Records tour), 2120 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago; (312) 808-1286, [bluesheaven.com](http://bluesheaven.com). Check website for tour times. Tuesdays-Saturdays, \$15 per adult.