

NEW ANDERSON DOC PROFILES BLUES LEGEND SAM LAY

BY MARK FRAZEL

With his astonishing, wondrous *Sam Lay In Bluesland*, Grammy-nominated director John Anderson vaults into the front ranks of this town's jostling roster of exceptional documentary filmmakers. Giant steps beyond his own *Born In Chicago* (2013) – itself a must-see – Anderson's new film will take its rightful place in the pantheon of all-time greatest Chicago movies.

The story of 80-year-old Sam Lay unfolds in chapters of our city's social, racial and musical history, each era or part of which could be an entire film. Mixing rich interviews, archival clips and present-day concert performances, Anderson creates a compelling film portrait of a blues legend.

Sam Lay's American journey took him from Birmingham, Alabama to Cleveland, then Chicago. Long-time friend and collaborator Corky Siegel says, "If you want to know about the history of the Blues, Sam Lay is the guy. He knows it because he was there. Sam's musical, Sam's funny, Sam's a wild dresser, Sam's a historic figure because he knew the people."

He was playing his copied-by-legions double-shuffle beat with Howlin' Wolf by 1960. Lay rues the sorry altercation he had with the Wolf, which led to their parting ways. Lay admits he pulled a gun on his bandleader, probably not the wisest move. "I'd seen him before giving the bartender all the bullets from his own gun," so wily Lay knew Wolf couldn't harm him.

With bassist Jerome Arnold and a skinny University of Chicago physics major guitarist from Tulsa named Elvin Bishop, Lay next drove the propulsive rhythm section of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Starting with a weekly gig at Big John's at 1638 North Wells, on the white north side, the group became first a local, then national sensation. After blues guitar prodigy Mike Bloomfield plugged in, their course-setting first LP in 1965 would take modern Chicago-style urban blues to a mainstream, white audience. No other act played the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival and Woodstock.

Sam Lay acolyte and one-time drummer Iggy Pop, who in 1966 traveled from his hometown of Detroit to Chicago to meet Sam, testifies, "That first Butterfield album was so good – I could not get to Side Two for many months. I'd play Side One, then, like, I'd put on the Stones' 'Get Off Of My Cloud', and it sounded so ... bloodless."

At the Newport Folk Festival on July 25, 1965, when Bob Dylan strapped on an electric guitar, Sam Lay was playing drums. For Dylan, Lay also recorded *Highway 61 Revisited*.

The film's richest treasures are the flickering images from Sam Lay's own wind-up Brownie Hawkeye camera. Smiling, partying faces whirl past the lens in these startling history Instagrams from inside various rocking, crowded South Side nightclubs. Caught on postage-stamp sized club stages are priceless images of Muddy Waters, Albert King, Otis Rush, Little Walter, Jimmy Reed and Howlin' Wolf.

In 1969, Lay played on Muddy Waters' *Fathers and Sons* album. He was the original drummer for the James Cotton Blues Band. Sam Lay is still performing, and the songs from two shows with his band in the film are captured with the same skill as Anderson's earlier live performance concert films *Brian Wilson Presents SMiLE* and *The Beach Boys: Doin' It Again*.

Sam entered the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a founding member of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band in April 2015.

If you love music, see this film.

SAM LAY IN BLUESLAND

Directed and Edited by John Anderson

Produced by Starr Sutherland

Executive Producer Michael Prussian for VT Productions

Co-Producer Barry Goldberg

Director of Photography Aaron Hui

Music Mix Frank Pappalardo

Design Casey Stockdon/Red Dynamo

Mark's article appears in *ReelChicago* here

<http://www.reelchicago.com/article/anderson-s-compelling-doc-blues-great-cimmfest150404>