

MUDDY WATERS

Early life

Although in his later years Muddy usually said that he was born in [Rolling Fork](#), Mississippi in 1915, he was actually born at Jug's Corner in neighboring [Issaquena County](#), Mississippi in 1913.^[4] Recent research has uncovered documentation showing that in the 1930s and 1940s he reported his birth year as 1913 on both his marriage license and musicians' union card. A 1955 interview in the *Chicago Defender* is the earliest claim of 1915 as his year of birth, which he continued to use in interviews from that point onward. The 1920 census lists him as five years old as of March 6, 1920, suggesting that his birth year may have been 1914. The Social Security Death Index, relying on the Social Security card application submitted after his move to Chicago in the mid '40s, lists him as being born April 4, 1915.

His grandmother Della Grant raised him after his mother died shortly after his birth. His fondness for playing in mud earned him the nickname "Muddy" at an early age. He later changed it to "Muddy Water" and finally "Muddy Waters".^[5] He started out on harmonica but by age seventeen he was playing the guitar at parties emulating two blues artists who were extremely popular in the south, [Son House](#) and [Robert Johnson](#). "His thick heavy voice, the dark coloration of his tone and his firm, almost solid, personality were all clearly derived from House," wrote music critic [Peter Guralnick](#) in *Feel Like Going Home*, "but the embellishments which he added, the imaginative [slide technique](#) and more agile rhythms, were closer to Johnson."^[page needed]

On November 20, 1932 Muddy married Mabel Berry; [Robert Nighthawk](#) played guitar at the wedding, and the party reportedly got so wild the floor fell in.^[citation needed] Mabel left Muddy three years later when Muddy's first child was born - the child's mother was Leola Spain, sixteen years old, (Leola later used her maiden name Brown), "married to a man named Steve" and "going with a guy named Tucker". Leola was the only one of his

girlfriends with whom Muddy would stay in touch throughout his life; they never married. By the time he finally cut out for Chicago in 1943, there was another Mrs. Morganfield left behind, a girl called Sallie Ann.[6]

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Early career

In 1940, Muddy moved to Chicago for the first time. He played with [Silas Green](#) a year later, and then returned to Mississippi. In the early part of the decade he ran a juke joint, complete with gambling, moonshine and a jukebox; he also performed music there himself. In the summer of 1941 [Alan Lomax](#) went to Stovall, Mississippi, on behalf of the Library of Congress to record various [country blues](#) musicians. "He brought his stuff down and recorded me right in my house," Muddy recalled in *Rolling Stone*, "and when he played back the first song I sounded just like anybody's records. Man, you don't know how I felt that Saturday afternoon when I heard that voice and it was my own voice. Later on he sent me two copies of the pressing and a check for twenty bucks, and I carried that record up to the corner and put it on the jukebox. Just played it and played it and said, `I can do it, I can do it.'" Lomax came back again in July 1942 to record Muddy again. Both sessions were eventually released as *Down On Stovall's Plantation* on the [Testament](#) label.[7]

In 1943, Muddy headed back to Chicago with the hope of becoming a full-time professional musician. He lived with a relative for a short period while driving a truck and working in a factory by day and performing at night. [Big Bill Broonzy](#), one of the leading bluesmen in Chicago at the time, helped Muddy break into the very competitive market by allowing him to open for his shows in the rowdy clubs.[8] In 1945, Muddy's uncle Joe Grant gave him his first electric guitar which enabled him to be heard above the noisy crowds.[9]

In 1946, he recorded some tunes for [Mayo Williams](#) at [Columbia](#) but they weren't released at the time. Later that year he began recording for [Aristocrat](#), a newly-formed label run by two brothers, [Leonard](#) and [Phil Chess](#). In 1947, he played guitar with [Sunnyland Slim](#) on piano on the cuts

"Gypsy Woman" and "Little Anna Mae." These were also shelved, but in 1948 "I Can't Be Satisfied" and "I Feel Like Going Home" became big hits and his popularity in clubs began to take off. Soon after, Aristocrat changed their label name to [Chess Records](#) and Muddy's signature tune "[Rollin' Stone](#)" also became a smash hit.

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Commercial success

Initially, the Chess brothers would not allow Muddy to use his own musicians in the recording studio; instead he was provided with a backing bass by Ernest "Big" Crawford, or by musicians assembled specifically for the recording session, including "[Baby Face](#)" [Leroy Foster](#) and [Johnny Jones](#). Gradually Chess relented, and by September 1953 he was recording with one of the most acclaimed blues groups in history: [Little Walter Jacobs](#) on harmonica; [Jimmy Rogers](#) on guitar; Elga Edmonds (a.k.a. Elgin Evans) on drums; [Otis Spann](#) on piano. The band recorded a series of blues classics during the early 1950s, some with the help of bassist/songwriter [Willie Dixon](#), including "[Hoochie Coochie Man](#)" (Number 8 on the R&B charts), "[I Just Want to Make Love to You](#)" (Number 4), and "[I'm Ready](#)". These three were "the most macho songs in his repertoire," wrote [Robert Palmer](#) in *Rolling Stone*. "Muddy would never have composed anything so unsubtle. But they gave him a succession of showstoppers and an image, which were important for a bluesman trying to break out of the grind of local gigs into national prominence."^{*[citation needed]*}

Muddy, along with his former harmonica player [Little Walter Jacobs](#) and recent southern transplant [Howlin' Wolf](#), reigned over the early 1950s Chicago blues scene, his band becoming a proving ground for some of the city's best blues talent. While Little Walter continued a collaborative relationship long after he left Muddy's band in 1952, appearing on most of Muddy's classic recordings throughout the 1950s, Muddy developed a long-running, generally good-natured rivalry with Wolf. The success of Muddy's ensemble paved the way for others in his group to break away and enjoy their own solo careers. In 1952 Little Walter left when his single "[Juke](#)" became a hit, and in 1955 Rogers quit to work exclusively with his own band, which had been a sideline until that time. Although he continued

working with Muddy's band, Otis Spann enjoyed a solo career and many releases under his own name beginning in the mid-1950s.