

It was probably sometime in the summer of 1970 that I first approached Bob Koester with the idea of my producing a Hound Dog record for Delmark. Having only seen him sitting in at jams, Bob was unimpressed, just as I had been at first. So when I began to feel him out about Hound Dog, he showed no interest. But ever since walking into Florence's that Sunday in the late winter of 1970 and hearing that primal boogie groove, I had become convinced that Hound Dog Taylor & The HouseRockers were something special. I returned to Florence's almost every Sunday after that to see them perform and to get to know Hound Dog.

Hound Dog told me he had been a farm worker in Mississippi—a tractor driver, which was a more valued position than field hand. He had first played a piano that he hauled around to parties in a wagon before switching to a more portable guitar. He told me that the Ku Klux Klan chased him out of Mississippi in 1942 because he had an affair with a white woman. Fleeing when a cross was burned in his front yard, he slept in drainage ditches and hid out at his sister's until he could get to Chicago. Once there, he took a series of labor jobs, including building wooden television cabinets, all the while playing on Sundays at the Maxwell Street Market for tips. Sometime in the late 1950s, he quit his job and started playing music full time. He performed more nights of the week than most bluesmen because Hound Dog Taylor & The HouseRockers were one of the cheapest blues bands in the city. In 1970, the band charged forty-five dollars (fifteen dollars a man) to play on weekend nights and thirty dollars (ten dollars a man) for weeknights. And those prices were negotiable.

A typical Hound Dog set began with Brewer Phillips playing raw, distorted lead guitar, squeezing the strings to the breaking point, performing instrumentals, and singing well-known blues songs in a voice that was as cracked as his dental work. Giving Brewer the spotlight, a low-key Hound Dog played the bass notes on his guitar because there was no bass player in the band. After he did two or three songs, Brewer would announce, "And now let's bring to the bandstand the star of the show, the one and only Hound Dog Taylor!" Then he'd take the single microphone stand over to Hound Dog. Of course, Hound Dog had been sitting there playing all along, but now the imaginary spotlight swiveled over and—surprise! It's Hound Dog Taylor! We didn't know he was here! At that point, Hound Dog took over and became the focus of the show.

A natural entertainer, Hound Dog loved being the center of attention, and he consciously projected a persona that said, "Don't take me seriously." He knew he looked funny; he knew he talked funny; he knew that if he smiled that big smile, people would smile back; and he knew that if they had a good time, people would buy drinks for him. It was clear that Hound Dog was a serious alcoholic. "I need my red water," he would say. He drank Canadian Club; he generally put a double shot of it into his morning coffee. He drank steadily through the day and was generally drunk by the end of the night. He usually smelled strongly of alcohol. Sometime in 1970, I saw Hound Dog open up for Howlin' Wolf at Big Duke's Flamingo, a West Side club on the corner of Roosevelt and Washtenaw. I told the waitress, "Get Hound Dog a drink on me." She came back and said, "That'll be two dollars and fifty cents." I was horrified. A shot of whiskey in those days cost only about fifty cents. "What did he order?" I asked her. "Half a pint," she said.

Everyone noticed Hound Dog's left hand. Just beyond the fifth finger was another finger, perhaps an inch and a half long, with joints and a fingernail. His fifth finger, where he wore his slide, was unusually long and strong. Whereas most slide players make their hand into a wedge to produce more pressure on the strings, Hound Dog could play with a heavy steel slide lined with brass, using just his fifth finger. As a result, he could move the slide quickly, creating a lot of vibrato. That's part of what made his sound. But above all, it was his rhythms that were so infectious.

After he made a little money, Hound Dog had some matchbooks printed up. The cover read, "Hound Dog Taylor & The HouseRockers," and the spine, "Blues and Rock & Roll." For him, the slow songs were blues and the fast songs were rock and roll. That was the only difference. By that definition,

Hound Dog played a lot more rock and roll than blues. He wanted to see people dance, and that meant he played a lot of shuffles, the syncopated beat that sounds like a horse cantering. He played fast shuffles, slow shuffles, and medium-tempo Jimmy Reed–style shuffles (known as lump-de-lumps), alternating with driving boogies, grinding stomps, and romping up-tempo songs like his signature tune, “Give Me Back My Wig”:

*Give me back my wig
Honey, now let your head go bald
Really didn't have no business
Honey, buying you no wig at all.*

He couldn't read music and probably could not have told you the names of the notes the strings on his guitar were tuned to, and, as he tuned by ear, they might be different on different nights. He was entirely self-taught. Stylistically, he reminded people of the late blues giant Elmore James, but, though he played Elmore's songs regularly, Hound Dog always denied any Elmore influence. In fact, he sometimes claimed that Elmore had learned from him.

As it became apparent that Bob wasn't going to take an interest in Hound Dog, I began thinking about producing the record on my own. Not only did I love the band, but I also wanted to show my mentor and father figure that I was ready to follow in his footsteps. As the year rolled on, I imagined starting my own label and financing a Hound Dog record using \$2,500 I had inherited from my grandfather. By this time, Wesley Race had become Hound Dog's close friend and number one fan. When I revealed to Wesley that I was thinking about creating a label to record Hound Dog, he said he wanted to be involved and would contribute \$1,000 toward the costs and become my junior partner in the new company. I was happy to say yes. Besides his financial investment, I thought his presence in the studio would be invaluable because Hound Dog loved and trusted him. Wesley and I shook hands on a partnership.

In early 1971, I stood with Hound Dog on the steps outside Pepper's Blues in the Loop and told him I wanted to record him. He knew me as a loyal fan because I had been to so many of his gigs. “I'd like to make an album with you,” I said. “I'm wit' you, baby, I'm wit' you,” he replied, without asking about any particulars like money or a contract. I'm sure he had received nothing for the two 45s he had cut for local labels. His only reward had been hearing his music on the jukebox. Now that he was being courted by a white “hippie,” he must have thought that at least this record might lead to some gigs for a new audience of young white fans. Plus, with no other recording opportunities, what did he have to lose? I think he was shocked when I told him that I would pay him to record.

Although he didn't ask about money, he did ask, “Who's going to play bass?” “You don't need a bass player,” I told him. “You've got a special sound with the two guitars and drums.” “Everybody has a bass player,” Hound Dog said. I knew perfectly well I wasn't going to record him with a bass player, but to placate him I arranged a rehearsal at Pepper's with Elbee Huggins, a solid bassman who sometimes played with Howlin' Wolf. As I expected, it was a musical disaster. Brewer Phillips had no idea what to do. Normally, the presence of a bassist would have freed him up to play chord-based rhythm guitar, but Brewer wasn't a chords man. His brilliance was playing driving, ever-varying bass patterns on a regular guitar. He struggled to find his way. “It's not the same with a bass player,” I said to Hound Dog after the rehearsal. “You know it and I know it. Let's just record what you guys do every night.” He didn't argue.

Just before we were ready to record, Wesley came to me and told me he had to back out of our deal; he had a family emergency and needed the money. Although he didn't join in my business, he more than earned his credit as coproducer. Over the weeks before the sessions, he made a list of virtually every

song the band played. He and I put together a list of songs to be recorded. We knew that this was not a band that needed rehearsing. Through their many nights of performing together, each musician could feel the direction of a song and play what fit it best.

Following Bob Koester's example, I booked time at Sound Studios with engineer Stu Black, a former engineer for Chess Records who was Bob's first choice for Delmark sessions. Stu, whose catchphrase was, "I've done it all, from Howlin' Wolf to Steppenwolf," had recorded dozens of blues sessions. Hound Dog and I signed the first Alligator recording contract at the studio on Tuesday, May 25, 1971, just before the first session. The second session followed on June 2. I paid Hound Dog \$480, plus royalties to come. I paid Brewer and Ted \$240 apiece as sidemen (\$120 per three-hour session; our sessions went longer than three hours but nobody complained). That was the studio-scale payment set by the musicians' union as Bob Koester had taught it to me. As was the norm, there were to be no royalties for Brewer and Ted since they were considered sidemen.

We set up the band members in the studio just as they normally arranged themselves in a club—Hound Dog on the left, Ted Harvey in the middle, and Brewer Phillips on the right. They used their own equipment. Hound Dog played his Kingston Japanese guitar through his Sears Roebuck Silvertone amplifier. Although the amp was manufactured by Danelectro, a company famous for its inexpensive fiberglass guitars, it had six Lansing speakers, a good brand. Two of the speakers, however, were cracked, which created distortion that the cheap guitar only added to. Ted had his trusty Slingerland drum set. Brewer plugged his beat-up Fender Telecaster into a relatively new Fender Concert amplifier that he had recently bought.

We recorded simply, with one microphone on each guitar amp, one vocal microphone for Hound Dog, and four microphones for the drums (one on the bass drum, one on the snare drum, and a stereo pair overhead). Stu asked me if I wanted any reverb (the slight echo effect heard on most commercial recordings), but I thought it would sound too slick and "studio-ish." I told Stu, "No. Just make it sound like their instruments sound. Don't do anything fancy." My goal was to get a recording that captured as much as possible the spirit and feel of the band's performances at Florence's. I wanted to remove any possible barriers to making this happen in the studio.

Delmark sessions had taught me that musicians usually wore headphones in the studio so that they could clearly hear one another. I suggested to Stu that instead of using headphones, we point some smaller speakers toward the band, so it would seem much more natural to musicians who weren't used to being in a recording studio. I also thought this would make them feel less inhibited because they wouldn't be chained down by headphone cables. Brewer Phillips always played standing up and dancing around and I didn't want to keep that from happening. I wanted them to feel as relaxed and loose as they did in Florence's.

I was excited and scared and worried that, without the enthusiasm of an audience to feed their energy, it would be hard to capture the spirit of their live performances. Hound Dog felt the same way. After the first couple takes, he said, "Send that boy [meaning Wes] in here," From then on, Wes stayed in the studio with the band while I sat in the control room with the engineer. That gave the band an enthusiastic one-man audience to play for. It took a little while for them to get loose, but once the alcohol was flowing and they realized they could just do what they knew how to do, they lost any studio jitters and began having fun making music together. As the sessions went on, Brewer and Ted even began to holler encouragement to Hound Dog during the performances, just as they did in the clubs.

Wes and I were determined to keep things moving along so that the band didn't grow bored. We worked from the song list we had put together. When Hound Dog said, "Hey, baby, what do you want to hear?" we could say, "How about '44 Blues'?" "I'm wit' you, baby, I'm wit' you," he would answer, and launch into the song. "Give Me Back My Wig," "Held My Baby Last Night," "Wild about You, Baby,"

“It Hurts Me Too,” and “It’s Alright” were all songs we had heard the band do live and included on our essentials list. Brewer Phillips was featured on a searing slow blues called “Phillips’ Theme.” Hound Dog also came up with a few surprises, like “55th Street Boogie,” “I Just Can’t Make It,” and “She’s Gone,” all songs we had never heard him play before.

In the course of two evenings, we recorded twenty-five songs, with no more than four takes of any of them, and in many cases, one take only. To keep the budget down, we recorded directly to two-track, mixing as we went, which meant there would be no way to repair anything later. I knew when we left the studio that we had the record we had dreamed of. It was everything I wanted it to be, an album that captured the electric energy and exuberance I had first heard in Florence’s. It was stripped down, emotionally honest, and true to the spirit of the band. After Wes and I chose the sequence of songs, the studio cut the master lacquers used for manufacturing LPs. The total bill was nine hundred and seventy dollars. That’s pretty good for a record that went on to sell close to a hundred thousand copies in the United States alone.

There are musicians who can play all of Hound Dog’s notes and who understand his technique. But they can’t play with Hound Dog’s attitude, rhythm, and drive. They can play his licks, but they can’t play his music, because they haven’t lived the life that created it. They haven’t driven a tractor in Mississippi or seen a cross burning in their front yard or slept in a drainage ditch. I suppose most other musicians also can’t play while drinking Canadian Club from morning to night.

There is a magic in doing something incredibly simple better than anybody else can do it. When a musician has the ability to stir the deepest, most elemental place inside the listener, that magic is even more powerful. In all my years listening to blues, I’ve rarely heard any electric blues that’s simpler and more direct than that of Hound Dog Taylor & The HouseRockers. And I mean that as high praise.

Even before my first recording session, I tried to find just the right name for my fledgling label. Almost all of the names I toyed with were those of exotic animals, from armadillos to zebras. In the end I chose Alligator Records because my girlfriend, Bea van Geffen, had given me the nickname “Little Alligator.” It was a reference to my unconscious habit of playing drum parts by clicking my teeth together as I listen to the radio or a record (I can play almost a full octave on my teeth).

There were other reasons that the name Alligator appealed to me. Alligators come from the South, just like the music and most of the musicians I love. Alligators have an image of being dangerous. I’m not dangerous, but I thought it would be good if people thought I was a tough, ruthless businessman. Also, an unpaid bill from a label with a name that started with A would be at the top of each distributor’s payables pile. An illustrator named Michael Trossman designed the Alligator logo as a favor. He was trying to draw a realistic alligator, but I kept telling him to make it more of a cartoon, happier and more fun. Finally he came up with a smiling alligator that looked like it had just dined on a distributor who hadn’t paid his bills. I loved it.

From the beginning, my goal had been to create something that would last, both as a body of music and as a business. Even before completing Hound Dog’s record, I had decided that attention to packaging was going to be a priority. Most small-label blues album covers struck me as either garish or bland and uninspiring. I was prepared to spend money on a professional, eye-catching look that said something about the feel of the music and might generate sales. Why go through all the trouble of making a one-of-a-kind record and then package it like it’s not important?

The sepia-toned, starkly lit cover of Chuck Berry’s 1970 Chess release *Back Home* inspired the first Hound Dog cover photo. I had been introduced to a very talented, experienced, and eccentric photographer named Peter Amft, and discovered that he had taken the photo of Chuck Berry that I loved so much. As a favor, he agreed to take the cover photograph of Hound Dog at no charge. It was a masterpiece of simplicity—Hound Dog holding his cheap Japanese guitar, his hat perched on his head,

grinning his infectious grin. I spent extra money on custom-mixed ink and special textured paper to achieve a classic look. Using Musical Products, the same down-at-the-heels pressing plant on the near South Side that Bob used for Delmark, I ordered a thousand copies of *Hound Dog Taylor and the HouseRockers* in August 1971.

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