

Pinetop Perkins

Biography

Pinetop Perkins is one of the last great Mississippi bluesmen still performing. He began playing blues around 1927 and is widely regarded as one of the best blues pianists. He's created a style of playing that has influenced three generations of piano players and will continue to be the yardstick by which great blues pianists are measured.

Born Willie Perkins, in Belzoni, MS, in 1913, Pinetop started out playing guitar and piano at house parties and honky-tonks but dropped the guitar in the 1940s after sustaining a serious injury in his left arm. Perkins worked primarily in the Mississippi Delta throughout the thirties and forties, spending three years with Sonny Boy Williamson on the King Biscuit Time radio show on KFFA, Helena, Arkansas. Pinetop also toured extensively with slide guitar player Robert Nighthawk and backed him on an early Chess session. After briefly working with B.B. King in Memphis, Perkins barnstormed the South with Earl Hooker during the early fifties. The pair completed a session for Sam Phillips' famous Sun Records in 1953. It was at this session that he recorded his version of Pinetop Smith's Boogie Woogie.

By this time, Pinetop had developed his own unmistakable sound. His right hand plays horn lines while his left kicks out bass lines and lots of bottom. It was Pinetop, along with Pete Johnson, Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, and Little Brother Montgomery, who provided the basic format and ideas from which countless swing bands derived their sound - whole horn sections playing out what Pinetop's right hand was playing. Although Pinetop never played swing, it was his brand of boogie-woogie that came to structure swing and, eventually, rock 'n' roll.

Still, with recent successes the exception, Pinetop is best known for holding down the piano chair in the great Muddy Waters Band for twelve years during the highest point of Muddy's career. Replacing the late, great Otis Spann in 1969, Pinetop helped shape the Waters sound and anchored Muddy's memorable combo throughout the seventies with his brilliant piano solos. In 1980, Pinetop and other Waters alumni decided to go out on their own and formed the Legendary Blues Band. Legendary recorded two records for Rounder and toured extensively.

Pinetop, who had been labeled a sideman throughout most of his career, eventually left Legendary to concentrate on a solo career. Within two years, he had his first domestic record as a frontman and had a most impressive touring schedule. Since going solo, Pinetop has been featured on many nationally syndicated news and music shows, and appeared in numerous movie productions, as well as television and radio ads. He has also headlined nearly every major showcase room in North America and most of the major festivals around the world.

It's certainly ironic that Pinetop waited for his eighth decade to blossom as a headliner releasing 15 solo records in 15 years beginning in 1992. **Born In the Delta** (a multimedia enhanced CD), his Telarc debut, documented an amazing historical figure and had an abundance of entertainment value for a contemporary audience. On his 1998 release, **Legends**, Pinetop collaborated with master blues guitarist Hubert Sumlin. Together, they blended the traditional delta blues sound with modern electric blues rock, showcasing the spirit and energy of the music. Both CDs were nominated for Grammy's—in 1997 and 2000 respectively. This was followed by a 2005 Grammy nomination for **Ladies Man** released by MC Records.

In 2005 he was also presented with a lifetime achievement award at the Grammy's. In 2000 he received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts. He has been featured in the documentary **Piano Blues** directed by Clint Eastwood for the Martin Scorsese PBS series, **The Blues**. In addition, he continued to win the Blues Music Award for best blues piano every year until 2003 when he was retired from that award, which now bears his name--the Pinetop Perkins Piano Player of the Year.

In 2007, still on the road in his 94th year, Pinetop Perkins' unique life was chronicled in Peter Carlson's biographical documentary DVD, **Born In The Honey**, which includes a live CD with a rare studio outtake track.

Beyond his musical accomplishments Pinetop is a friendly, charming, and gentle man. He says yes to everything and goes where he's taken, but somehow, life turns out well for him. He's quick to joke and play with words and he still goes out every night. He loves people and makes everyone around him feel good. Then he plays the piano and sings his blues and brings us his special gift.

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