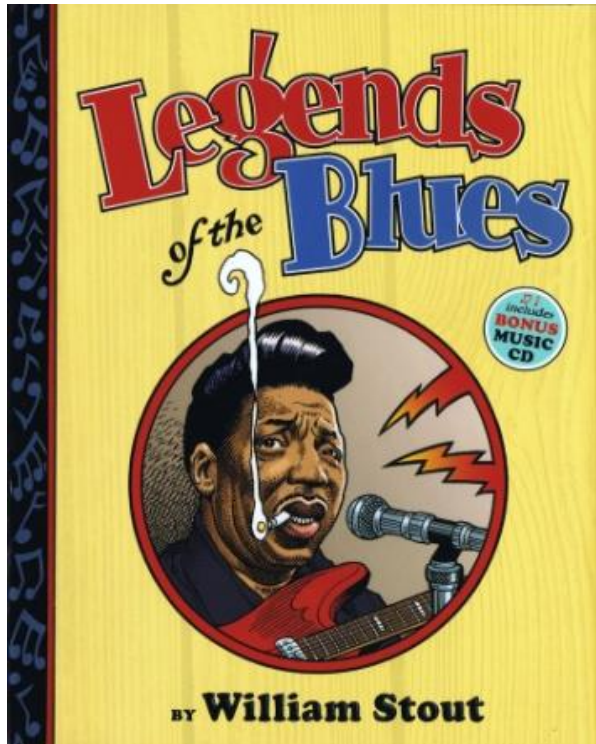


Los Angeles Times

Vivid portraits in William Stout's 'Legends of the Blues'



"Legends of the Blues" by William Stout

(Abrams ComicArts)

By DAVID L. ULIN

MAY 1, 2013 6 AM PT

LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK CRITIC

In 1980, R. Crumb produced a set of 36 trading cards called "Heroes of the Blues." It's a great little set, backing Crumb's drawings with short biographical sketches of performers such as Blind Blake, Charlie Patton, Big Bill Broonzy and Peetie Wheatstraw. If there's any downside to the project, it's that it doesn't cover enough territory. Only 36

musicians? That barely scratches the surface of this most quintessential of American folk-art forms.

As it turns out, this is the motivation for William Stout's "Legends of the Blues," coming May 7 from Abrams *ComicArts*, which picks up where Crumb left off. Featuring 100 musicians, the book has little overlap with "Heroes ..." -- save, as Stout says, "Skip James and Blind Willie Johnson, two bluesmen I just couldn't bear to leave out" -- making the projects complementary in the most fundamental sense.

In a preface, Stout traces the lineage: "The U.S. government declared 2003 as the official 'Year of the Blues.' As a result, *Shout! Factory* ... decided to release a series of 'best of' CDs by prominent American blues artists. *Shout!* licensed the blues trading card images from Robert Crumb to use on its CD covers. But there were some

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musicians that Robert hadn't drawn for his card set. Despite the record company's request, he didn't want to produce any new blues art for *Shout!*"

The solution? Stout was brought in to produce covers for Ma Rainey, Mississippi Fred McDowell and J. B. Lenoir. The rest, as they say, is history.

"Legends of the Blues" is a terrific piece of work, one that digs more deeply into the canon than did Crumb. In addition to such well-known names as Bessie Smith, T-Bone Walker and Bo Diddley, Stout gives us the unexpected: Helen Humes, Blind Joe Reynolds, the great boogie-woogie pianist Pete Johnson.

The drawings are evocative of Crumb's style, impressionistic portraits with some subtle touches -- Robert Johnson's pupils take the shape of little skulls. And yet, there's a quietness, a stillness, to them also, a sensibility that is Stout's alone.

Stout knows his stuff -- the blues is, he admits, "my personal desert-island music" -- and his experience reveals itself in a variety of ways.

Did you know that the phrase "dust my broom," later used as a song title by Robert Johnson and Elmore James, originated in the 1930s Georgia slide player Kokomo Arnold's "Sagefield Woman Blues"?

Or that Arthur Crudup, best known for having written Elvis Presley's early hit "That's All Right," was so resentful over lost royalties that he referred to Presley as Elvin Preston out of spite?

"Legends of the Blues" is full of such tidbits, as well as lists of recommended tracks and interesting covers, not to mention the basic details of birth, life and death.

At the center here, however, remains the music -- which is made explicit by the inclusion of a CD featuring, among others, Bukka White, Mississippi Fred McDowell and Blind Willie McTell. It's a lovely touch, in a book full of them: a tribute to "the all-encompassing gumbo" of the blues.

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David L. Ulin is the former book critic of the *Los Angeles Times*. A 2015 Guggenheim Fellow, he is the author or editor of nine books, including “Sidewalking: Coming to Terms with Los Angeles,” the novella “Labyrinth,” “The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time” and the Library of America’s “Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology,” which won a California Book Award. He left The Times in 2015.