

FROM THE SHADOW OF THE BLUES

MY STORY OF MUSIC, ADDICTION,
AND REDEMPTION

JOHN LEE HOOKER JR.

WITH JULIA SIMON



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To Mom, Dad, and Big Mama, thank you for putting up with what no family or parent should ever have to go through. Because of your long-suffering love; visits to jails, prisons, and hospitals; and picking me up over and over again out of the dirt in which I should have remained, because of you—and only by the grace and mercy of God—I am who I am today.

“John Lee was unique. No one sounded like him. No one has ever tried. He was rhythm all in one chord, no fancy stuff. No fooling! His voice could frighten a ghost, and what he said was not dinner conversation. “Crawlin’ Kingsnake,” “Boom Boom,” and “Boogie Chillen’”: these aren’t songs by someone looking for a chart topper. But they did top the charts! Unique because there is nothing like him. He doesn’t fit into the neat little boxes musicians are often forced into. It feels as if you are being put in touch with music before recording, before technology demanded a format. He stands alone. If you got the chance to play with him, you realized there was no compromise. You played with him—he didn’t play with you. I was privileged to be there. *I’m so happy to know that John Lee Hooker Jr. is following proudly in the preeminent footsteps of his amazing father!*”

—Keith Richards, **The Rolling Stones**

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INTRODUCTION

SOLEDAD PRISON

After I was released from a Michigan prison stint in 1972, my dad invited me to live with him out in California so I could get back on my feet. When I arrived in Oakland, I was not surprised to see beautiful people of all races and nationalities coming by my dad's house almost daily; there is no need to wonder if I enjoyed my new home. One day, my dad shared some very exciting news: we were going to record a live show in the notorious Soledad Prison that housed Sirhan Sirhan, convicted of the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and the Soledad Brothers, charged with the murder of a prison guard in January 1970.

These days, before anyone enters a correctional facility, the authorities run a thorough background check to see if the person has ever been arrested or convicted of a state or federal crime. Someone like me, with a prison record, would be barred from entry. Yet for some reason, I was allowed in to play the show. Ed Michel's production firm at ABC Records had set it up. When we arrived on June 11, 1972, it was very hot and dusty; all the inmates were grouped by ethnicity, nationality, race, and gang. My dad said to me, "Junior, this is your chance to go big time. I'm giving you this opportunity to establish your name. I want you to open up and do t-t-t-t-two songs."

I sang "Superlover" and "I'm Your Crosscut Saw." It was surreal. After I was introduced, the guys welcomed me with a loud round of applause

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and a “Go ’head, Junior Hooker. Sing, boy!” Before I left the stage, I introduced my dad, saying, “The Boogie Man.” They rose to their feet as he hit a slow, signature John Lee Hooker-style blues song. It was literally standing room only; they loved that man called John Lee Hooker. I smiled as I watched. I was so proud of my dad. But at that moment, I also was sick as a dog from heroin withdrawal. I really just wanted to hurry up and get out of there so I could get paid and get some dope.

As I stood by the stage, watching my dad mesmerize the crowd, I dreamed, wondering if I could be just like him one day.

Fourteen years later, in 1986, I was sentenced to sixteen months at Soledad Prison for grand theft person. We drove up to the penitentiary through the thick fog, and I thought to myself, “Oh my God. There’s the same gun tower.” I saw the central yard, where we’d done the show, and emotion overcame me as I reflected back to June 11, 1972. It was the same sally port gate, but this time, I was driving in on the Gray Goose, the bus that transports prisoners throughout California, and I was chained around the waist, wrists, and ankles, like a recaptured runaway slave. After I went through all of the preliminary stuff to check in, I was summoned to see my counselor. He told me I would be going to a dorm in the south part of the prison to do my time; I was to report to my supervisor in the landscape department.

After I put my stuff up and fixed my bed, I headed for the supervisor’s office, located inside a shed. The door was open, but I knocked before I went in. The supervisor looked up and said, “Come on in.”

I asked, “Is this the landscape office?”

He said, “Yes, you’ve come to the right place.”

The guard took my paperwork and asked for my prison ID; after seeing it, he looked up at me and said, “I’ll be darned. I remember you.”

I answered, “I’ve never been here before, sir. Maybe you’ve mistaken me for somebody else.” When I said that, I was thinking from a prisoner’s perspective: I hadn’t done time there as an inmate.

“Oh yes, you have,” he replied. He reached in his drawer and pulled out an eight-by-ten black-and-white photo with me onstage and him, Ernie, a skinny guard at the edge of the stage, from fourteen years earlier. The photo is the album cover of *Live at Soledad Prison*. I was blown away. If I had wanted to lie, I couldn’t: he had the evidence in his hands.

Ernie gave me the best landscape job on the crew: he put me in the section where the officers live on the grounds. He said, “I’m going to

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put you in charge over there. You'll be cutting grass and making sure the guys are doing the right things. Conjugal visits are there. You'll be taking care of that. I'll keep you out of the old, dirty, and messy jobs around here."

Many years later, when the Lord had delivered me from dope and cleaned me up, I was back in the church and visiting prisons all over the United States, but there was one prison I longed to enter: the infamous Soledad. I prayed to be allowed back in to preach and testify to the power of God. Other chaplains, guards, and volunteers kept telling me, "You can't get into Soledad. If you've done time in there, it's going to be hard."

On the application, where it asked, "Have you ever done time here at Soledad?" I wrote, "Yes," and gave the years when I was an inmate there. I knew the God I serve could do anything; I prayed to be allowed in. When I saw the Lord open that door, I danced and shouted, "Hallelujah!" The scriptures say, "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (Psalms 84:11).¹

I wanted people to see the glory of God. I was a dope fiend who'd had a gig to record at Soledad Prison, then it became my residence as a convict, and now I was going back as a chaplain of God to exemplify His amazing grace.

After I was cleared, I walked into Soledad South and saw the very dorm where I'd been housed and the yard where I'd taught Bible study. I was escorted to the central main yard, where we'd recorded, and then I entered the chapel to listen to the inmates preach and sing; I was smiling ear to ear. After the inmates finished speaking, I was invited up to the pulpit. I almost started to cry because I was experiencing something extraordinary—a miracle that only the Lord can perform. But I took a deep breath and testified about the year 1972, a date when some in attendance were not even born. I testified about when we'd recorded there and how, fourteen years later, I returned as a prisoner, and how I was now standing in the pulpit before them as a man of God, a chaplain who is saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost. I told them God can do anything if you just follow Him faithfully. I expounded on the traps that were waiting for them upon their release and told them to be sure they were grounded in faith, to be serious about following God;

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if not, I told them they would fail—either return to prison or die in the streets. I told them of my ups and many downs and of how I never gave up. They clapped and waved their hands in the air and glorified God. I left Soledad, and while driving in my car, I said, “Thank you, Jesus. Look where you have brought me from. Thank you, Lord, for opening the door that some said would never open up to me.” It was one of the highlights of my ministry, being allowed to go back in there as a representative of the Kingdom of God. “For with God nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37).

My name is John Lee Hooker Jr., the son of John Lee Hooker, the famous blues artist. My dad was born in the Mississippi delta into a family of sharecroppers. He left home as a teen to try to make it as a musician. First, he went to Memphis, then to Cincinnati and on to Detroit. He made his first hit record, “Boogie Chillen,” in 1948. Even then, my dad had an original sound: he told stories about life and played the guitar with his own special groove. I was born in Detroit in 1952. When I came along, my dad and mom, Maude Ella Mathis (after she married my dad, Maude Ella Hooker), already had two daughters: Diane and Vera (later, Zakiya). After me came my younger brother, Robert, and my three younger sisters, Shyvonne, Karen, and Lavetta. Even though my dad was a successful musician, we didn’t have much money growing up. Record companies took advantage of my dad, so we lived in low-rent houses. He could finally afford to rent a house around the time I first went to school, in the mid-1950s. Because my dad needed money for his family, he was on the road a lot, performing. He often stayed away for three or four weeks at a time, sending money back to my mom to pay the bills.

My dad became more famous when “Boom Boom” came out in 1962, which earned him some money and recognition. But back at home, I was growing up with a dad on the road and a mom who cheated while he was away. I turned to drugs to escape the pain and hurt in my family. Drugs led to crime—mostly thefts and burglaries to get money to feed my addiction. In 1969, when I was seventeen years old, I was arrested and sentenced to a drug program instead of prison time. My life for the next thirty years, give or take, was spent in and out of jails and prisons, doing time for crimes related to my dope addiction. Finally, I was released from prison for the last time in 1998; however, that was not the end of my drug habit: I had several falls before I was finally clean

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and sober. In 2003 I completed my final drug program. By then I had formed my own blues band and started touring throughout the United States. My first album, *Blues with a Vengeance*, was released in 2004, nominated for a Grammy Award, and won the W. C. Handy Award for Debut Artist. My third album, *All Odds Against Me*, released in 2008, also received a Grammy nomination.

For about ten years, I had a very successful career as a blues artist, touring all over the world: across the United States, Europe, Turkey, and even Russia. But after six albums, I decided to give up singing the blues and touring and devote myself fully to the Lord. I went back to school and became a chaplain to preach and minister to all, including those in the very prisons where I'd served time. Instead of singing blues, I turned my attention to gospel and the music that testifies to my experiences. I now preach, minister, and perform gospel music at events and in prisons in the United States and in Germany, where I am now living. My life story is one of ups and downs, successes and failures, but most especially of second, third, and fourth chances. I hope that it will provide faith, inspiration, and hope to those struggling with addiction and imprisonment, helping them to turn their lives around. My life testifies to the evil of drugs, but it also shows that everyone deserves the opportunity to try again. If the Lord can forgive me, then he can provide anyone who has faith a chance at redemption and salvation.

1

GROWING UP
IN DETROIT

1

FAMILY AND EARLY FIGHTS

My earliest memories are from when I was four or five years old, growing up in Detroit in the early 1950s. It was lawless, violent, and corrupt. A police squad called the Big Four rode in unmarked black cars, striking fear in the hearts of every minority in the neighborhood. Police brutality and racial profiling were standard procedures. Police took bribes from drug dealers, loan sharks, fence men, and even pimps who didn't want their prostitutes arrested. Most Black people, poor Whites, and Asians—my family included—played the “numbers” (an illegal, Mafia-run gambling game).

We were a very close family: my father; mother; two older sisters, Diane and Vera (later, Zakiya); and my younger brother, Robert, lived on the west side, on Bangor Street. My grandmother, Big Mama (Addie Mathis), who lived on the east side and worked as a maid on the west side, would catch the bus to her job. She'd come over to babysit, hang out, cook, and play blackjack and bingo for pennies and nickels because, most of the time, my dad was on tour on the road and my mother worked downtown at Kresge Dime Store.

Like most children going to school for the first time, I was kind of nervous. Even though we lived around the corner from the school, my mother escorted me that first day. The teacher was kind and introduced me to the class. She told everyone to say hello to the new student, Johnny Hooker. Right off the bat, my eyes scanned the small room to see if I was in any danger. I felt the intensity of being in a class with different ethnicities and nationalities and especially with people who were bigger than me. I was accustomed to being around my siblings

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and people in the neighborhood and was nervous, thinking I had to stay there all day with people I didn't know. Everybody looked alright, and I had never been attacked, but still, it felt strange.

That first day, I came out of school with homework in my little book bag to show my family. I knew how to get home: walk out of the school, turn right, and there was my house. Back then was not like now, when parents pick up their kids because they're afraid they might be kid-napped. Suddenly, a big-headed boy I didn't know (named Ralph) came up and said, "Who do you think you are? What are you doing over here, boy?"

I answered, "Why, Wha-wha-wha-wha-what did I do?"

He had two or three guys with him, but I was paying attention to Ralph. He pushed me and said, "Did you hear me, boy?" I started running—all the way to the front door. Big Mama was in a rocking chair, watching cowboy movies; I could hear the bang, bang, bang. She walked up to the screen door, looked out at the boy who was chasing me, and said, "You better get your butt out there and fight him back, boy. And, no, you ain't getting in this house. If you don't get back down there and fight him, I'm gonna whup the mess out of you. Now, get down there."

My Big Mama was a big girl. She used switches from the bushes or trees, a belt, an extension cord, or even her shoes to punish me if I got sassy with her. *Bam!* She shut the screen door and made sure it was locked. I had to handle this big-headed boy, or she would handle me.

I put my book bag down, put on my mean face, and ran. I didn't even size him up. I grabbed him in a headlock and pulled him to the ground. I was imitating my hero Bobo Brazil, the Black wrestler on TV. The ground was muddy and wet because it had been raining. When I had him in a headlock, I saw a little hole full of mud, grabbed some, and shoved it in his mouth. I heard him cry out, "Stop it!"

Then Big Mama said, "Alright, let him go. Let him go, Junior."

She had been watching the whole time. She wasn't going to let anybody get hurt, but she wanted to make sure I defended myself. That standard has followed me all of my life, even to today.

The bully went home dirty, with mud all over his face. When my dad got home, he found out about it. Pretty soon he and this tall man were talking in front of our house. Ralph's dad said, "Your boy beat up my son for no reason at all, and he better not do it again, or he'll have to see me."

FAMILY AND EARLY FIGHTS

My dad looked up at him and said, “You tell yo boy, the next time he mess with my son, I’m going to come and see him and you too.”

My dad had a speech impediment: “B-But you ain’t g-g-g-g-gonna go do na-na-na-nothin to my boy. That’s my son. Your boy came a r-r-r-round here and started it and chased my son home. And my son whupped him. Now, keep him away from here.”

Before that I had only gotten into fights with my sisters and brother. This was my first real fight outside, my first violent act. This big-headed boy, who looked like he might’ve been in the first grade, had chased me home. I’d just started school, and this boy wanted to be a bully. Fighting him made me stronger; it taught me to defend myself. That’s how it’s always been in my family: you better fight, even if you get whupped. You don’t run, you come on with it.

We lived in a gray house where the roof leaked because the wood was rotted and decayed; we had a bucket to catch the drops. From our backyard you could see down the alley: glassy, dirty, and smelly, with dead rats that a car might’ve run over. That was typical.

One day, I saw a gang of teenage boys beating up my older cousin Willie. I was four or five; what could I do to some eighteen- or nineteen-year-olds? All I could do was run and tell Big Mama what happened. I saw them beat up Willie from twenty yards away. He ran toward me until they quit chasing him, and then they threw bottles at him. I heard them breaking: *pow, pow!* He was crying. That was the first time I’d ever seen him cry, because he was an older dude, about eighteen. He had to go back to school the same way the next day, so Big Mama gave him a butcher knife. That was the last time I saw Willie until I’d grown up a little and moved to the east side.

I must admit I became a troublemaker—a class clown who always made the kids at Scripps Elementary School laugh with my silly antics. In 1963 I kept getting my classmate Edwin Titus in trouble. I would make faces and he’d burst into this loud, goofy laugh. The teacher would turn from the blackboard or lift her head up from checking homework, then make Edwin go stand in the corner. I always kept a straight face.

Mr. Palato, the principal, had salt-and-pepper hair and a fake smile. He always looked as though he only had one eye focused on you: “I’m watching you, Hooker.” One time, when my teacher, Mrs. Adams, left her desk, I went inside the drawer and stole money. It wasn’t much, but five dollars was big bank to me in those days. Sometimes, she would

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catch me talking during a test or cracking jokes during quiet time. As punishment, Mrs. Adams made me stand in the cloak room, where I'd then go inside the pockets and steal money. If I was lucky, I got a dollar bill and a gang of change. When being sent to the cloak room didn't deter me, I was sent to the principal's office.

Mr. Palato would yell, and people could hear him from far away: "Johnny Hooker, do you think getting an education is a joke, son?"

"No, sir."

"Oh yes, you do! Because your name keeps coming to my attention."

So that "it wouldn't happen again," he opened his desk and pulled out a miniature boat paddle with about six holes in it, then told me to bend over. With each contact with my butt, I would yell, "Ahhhh!" and he would say, "Am I making myself clear, Johnny?"

"Yes, sir." These days, he'd be arrested for child abuse or assault on a child. But back then, our parents knew this was going on and accepted it—at least most did—because the same thing had happened to them as children. My butt was stinging when I left that office. My classmates had heard the violence, and I could see the little smirks on all their faces as I entered the room.

Another boy in school, Calvin Robinson, and I were foes, and everyone knew it. We would get into confrontations in practically every class we attended together because we were jealous of each other. We constantly made challenges: "I can run faster," or "The waves in my hair are better." One day, during physical education, Mr. Redding, the gym teacher, was fed up with us and decided to settle it in class so that we wouldn't escalate. He asked, "Who has some boxing gloves they can bring to class next week?"

I had gotten boxing gloves as a Christmas gift, so I said, "I do."

"Okay, Johnny, bring them to school next week, and you can settle your squabbles. Okay?"

Calvin and I agreed. We were both confident we would be victorious.

Monday afternoon, the word was out: "You don't want to miss this: Johnny Hooker and Calvin Robinson are going to fight it out today with boxing gloves in the gym!"

Mr. Redding put a floor mat down so that if anyone got hit and fell to the floor, they wouldn't get hurt too badly. He gave us instructions: "After this, I don't want to ever see you two in each other's faces, or I will send you both home with a suspension from school. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," we both agreed.

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There were no mouthpieces or grease put on our faces to protect us from cuts. It was all “Go for what you know.” We squared off, Mr. Redding blew the whistle, and we began to fight. Calvin was a wild man. He swung for the fence without a plan for how to defeat me. I was a little more calculated, as I was a Cassius Clay fan. Move, jab, and then try to knock him out with my overhand right. The fight lasted only one round. I hit Calvin with a jab, a one-two punch, and shots to his body, and the teacher stopped it so he wouldn’t get hurt. Calvin Robinson was crying because he’d lost the fight. Mr. Redding had us shake hands; there were never any problems between Calvin and me after that.

I was not all that bad, because Mr. Palato allowed me to join the school marching band. We had white helmets and marched during Parents’ Day and for graduation. I was also chosen to be on the safety patrol. I had a helmet with a band across my shoulder and wrapped around my waist. Inspired by the safety patrol, I became a Boy Scout. They made me the treasurer. Dues were a dime a week, and I collected them. It was my job to turn the money in at the end of each month, but I didn’t; I stole it all. I was the Judas who turned Jesus in for thirty pieces of silver. They fired me.

My dad would always say, “You make sure you get you a ba-ba-ba- ed-ed-education.”

Both my parents always encouraged working hard, going to school, and going to church. They didn’t go to church, but they would drop us off there. If my sisters Diane and Zakiya weren’t babysitting and my mom wanted to go somewhere, they would drop us off at Sunday school. I don’t think it had any effect on who I am today, or maybe it did, I don’t know. At the time, I was never inspired by a message. As a matter of fact, I stole money out of the Sunday basket. I would pretend to put something in and then grab a dollar and pass the collection. Sometimes, when the preacher would be preaching up a storm, people walked up and threw money on the floor. My cousin Joe had a shoe where the sole was not stitched. I watched him go up to the pulpit and slide the money in his shoe, so I mimicked him. If Joe wasn’t with me, I would tear my sole off and steal money.

My dad had a big hit with “Boom Boom” in 1962 on Vee-Jay Records. The song has a great riff and a strong groove that get you moving from the opening beat. The backing band was the Funk Brothers from Motown, with Joe Hunter on keys, James Jamerson on bass, Benny

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Benjamin on drums, Hank Cosby on tenor sax, and Larry Veeder on guitar; they add so much life and energy to the track. Still, they keep my dad's performance front and center. My dad's lyrics tell a story of love and romance with attitude and confidence: "I'm gonna shoot you right down, right off your feet; take you home with me. . . . Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom." No sign of his stutter here—just straight-ahead punch: "Boom Boom." The song made it to the Billboard R&B chart and even the Billboard Hot 100. My dad's signature sound was all over the country. Later, bands like the Animals and Big Head Todd and the Monsters covered "Boom Boom." It was even recognized on the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's list entitled "The Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll."

Of course, my dad was the biggest thing in the neighborhood. He was huge. All the record stores had his song. Black Bottom, west side, east side, north side—"Boom Boom." He was the man. For some reason, people wouldn't call me Boom Boom, but they called me Bam Bam, and the nickname stuck.

I loved my papa so much; when he had to leave, I would say, "Daddy, please don't go."

He would answer, "I got to go, Junior. We got to pay the bills."

I would cry and cry when he left. My sisters and Big Mama would have to pull me away from him and hold me back. He would be gone three weeks, sometimes a month, and it killed me. I used to hug his suits in his closet and play his music and cry.

When he called from the road, I could hear this muffled sound. I could tell when he was overseas because I could hardly hear him, but I heard that distinctive voice. I would ask, "Daddy, when are you coming home?"

"I'll be home in two more weeks. And if y'all are good, I got something for you."

He was my buddy. One time, when he didn't want me to cry, he took me with him to Canada. I was maybe seven or eight years old. I was in the back dressing room, and I could see all the people. The women were screaming like he was Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson. He did this funny little dance when he got up with his guitar. He couldn't dance a lick, but whatever he did, they all loved him.

But taking me with him was not a good thing. He'd gotten me my own room, but I still walked into his room. Then a lady came in, and

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they started kissing passionately. I knew this wasn't right—this blonde was not my mother. I had never seen anything like this before. Because I was a kid, I started crying. I believe my dad told the girl, "I'll see you tomorrow, honey."

I blew his date. I'm sure he thought, "Junior ain't coming with me no more."