

TRAVEL

CHICAGO

BY PHIL TRIPP

Chicago is the largest non-coastal city in the US but is on the shores of the Great Lakes, which whip gales through the concrete canyons, hence the name 'Windy City'. It's also one of the top five music cities where, in the early 1900s, poor black workers made the trek north bringing their traditional jazz and blues music formats with them.

It's where the folk blues electrified with guitarists and singers like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Rush, Magic Sam, Elmore James and Buddy Guy seared the local scene. Great harmonica players also were bred there; Junior Wells, Sonny Boy Williamson, Paul Butterfield, Sugar Blue, Big Walter Horton, Charlie Musselwhite, James Cotton and Little Walter Jacobs are the main players coming out of ChiTown.

Delmark Records was the earlier proponent and **Alligator Records** the latter champion, but it was the Chess brothers who nurtured the blues, R&B and earlier rock scene. Unlike Stax Records and Sun Studios in Memphis and the Motown Detroit HQ, what was formerly the Chess building at 2120 S. Michigan Ave. is home to the **Blues Heaven Foundation** founded by Willie Dixon and embroiled in controversy that it's not a Chess museum.

Chicago also has jazz roots with Benny Goodman and Bud Freeman in the '30s and '40s; Gene Ammons and Nat King Cole in later years. Plus it has a folk scene that thrived in the '60s and '70s with John Prine, Steve Goodman and Bonnie Koloc.

Add to that the soul sounds of Curtis Mayfield, The Staple Singers, Rufus, Chaka Khan, The Chi Lites plus Lou Rawls and the city has a diverse range of homegrown artists and genres. This may have been helped along in no small part by being a mob town from the days of Prohibition until recent years with the speakeasies of yesteryear evolving into the cozy clubs and dives of today.

The Aragon Ballroom (aragon.com, 1106 W Lawrence Ave) was built in 1926 at a cost of a million dollars and it looked it. Designed as a replica Spanish palace courtyard with mosaic tiles, garishly painted plaster, soaring arches, crystal chandeliers and a terracotta ceiling, it was a ballroom that broadcast its shows nationally.

It holds up to 4500 people and in its early years topped 18,000 dancers a week, hitting over fifty million by the '50s.

It became a concert hall in 1972 and hosts top touring acts in all styles as well as wrestling and boxing. You can also find Latin artists here since Chicago is also home to Mexican and South American migrants who emigrated here to get away from the bordertowns.

Chicago Theatre (thechicagotheatre.com, 175 N. State St) is the other major venue that features top touring acts. It's a French Baroque movie palace built in the '20s with a 29 rank Wurlitzer organ and grand fixtures. This is home to Allman Brothers when in town as well as Prince, Van Morrison and Dolly Parton.

Chicago is a festival town too. In 1991 the international touring festival **Lollapalooza** got its start in Grant Park and was cancelled in 1998 when it ran out of steam, only to be revived in 2003.

But the Big Mama is the **Chicago Blues Festival** (chicagobluesfestival.us) that began a year after the death of Muddy Waters in 1983. Kicking off the summer each June in Grant Park over three days, it's the largest free blues festival in the world and the biggest event in Chicago. It honours



a recently departed local blues identity and features a wealth of local performers as well as global stars.

Ending the summer over Labor Day in early September is the **Chicago Jazz Festival** (chicagojazzfestival.us) that has been grooving along since 1979 as a four-day free event. It showcases local talent alongside national and international artists aiming to educate and encourage appreciation of America's one unique music invention. It's split between three venues – Grant Park, Millennium Park and the Chicago Cultural Centre.

For the months of June through August, **Ravinia** (ravinia.org) is Chicago's sound of summer in an open-air covered pavilion as well as other linked indoor venues. Ravinia features classical, opera, jazz, and even a little rock and country with the mix this year including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as its anchor act, Tony Bennett, Kiri Te Kanawa, CSN, Lyle Lovett, Duran Duran, Hall & Oates and Diana Krall as an eclectic mix.

You'll want to immerse yourself in the clubs though. **Buddy Guy's Legends** (buddyguy.com, 710 S. Wabash) rocks seven nights a week with lunch performances Wednesday to Sunday featuring Cajun and soul food. It's not just a club, it also houses a major archive of blues memorabilia and you'll



often find Buddy himself at the bar in between tours and he plays more than 15 shows there in the month of January.

Blue Chicago (bluechicago.com, 536 N Clark St) is in the River North entertainment district and features terrific women singers like Big Time Sarah,

Shirley Johnson Nellie 'Tiger' Travis and more belters.

SPACE (evanston.space.com, 1245 Chicago Ave, Evanston) is in the suburbs but it's worth the train to it. Built by musicians, it's home for touring blues artists but also an eclectic array of other bands from Allen Toussaint to Webb Wilder. No seat is more than 12 meters from the stage with great sightlines and perfect sound.

House of Blues (houseofblues.com/Chicago, 329 N. Dearborn St) follows the standard of HOBs everywhere and is more rock than blues, but the **Sunday Gospel Brunch** is an outstanding value and performance with reservation for the three sittings de rigueur.

City Winery (citywinery.com/Chicago, 1200 W. Randolph) should be mentioned because it's a wine bar and winery, roots and comedy venue with Sunday Klezmer Brunches as well as a cracking restaurant.


If you're looking for real Chicago barbecue, go no farther than **Smoke-**

TRAVEL

Daddy (thesmokedaddy.com, 1804 W. Division St) where the pulled pork and ribs are as legendary as its seven nights free live blues roster of artists.

There are a lot of rib joints and soul food restaurants in Chicago, but many are in dubious areas so best to stay in town. There are two cool places to doss down. **Check In, Rock Out** is the program that lends Gibson electric guitars to guests at the **Hard Rock Hotel** (hardrockhotelchicago.com, 230 North Michigan Ave) with a Line 6 Pocket Pod amp and Dr. Dre headphones so as not to disturb other rooms while shredding.

And if you're looking for a central city hip housing option right near the House of Blues, the **Amalfi Hotel** has renamed itself in the HOB brand (www.amalfihotelchicago.com/il/house-of-blues-hotel-chicago.cfm, 20 W. Kinzie St).

As for local street press, **The Chicago Reader** is the best bet for live gigs and other cultural features. The city newspaper's site is chicago.metromix.com/music. 



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