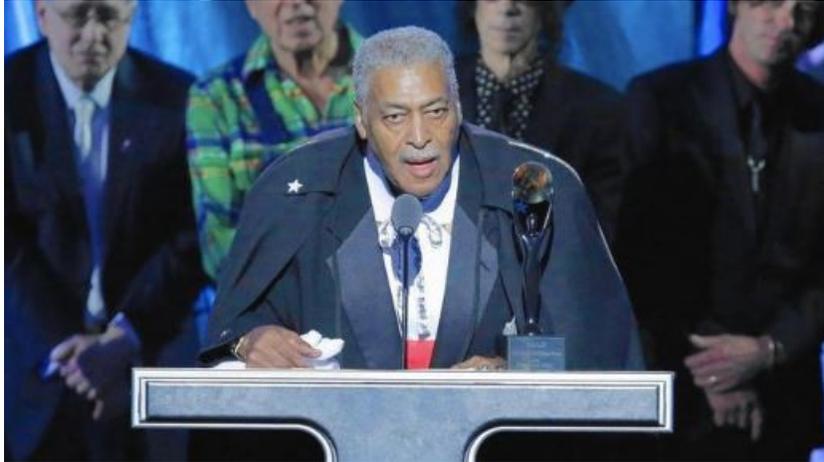


SAM LAY: Chicago Trib. Text 4.28.2005



Sam Lay, of The Butterfield Blues Band, speaks at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony Saturday on April 18 in Cleveland (Mark Duncan, AP) He had drummed for Muddy Waters and Bob Dylan. Meet Sam Lay, who lays down one heck of a beat.

A late recent Sunday night, pushing midnight, and Sam Lay was on the phone and on the road. "I hope you can hear me," he said. He has always been heard, loud and clear. The man who is almost without any argument one of the most influential and great drummers in the history of popular music had the night before been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a member of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band in ceremonies at the hall's home in Cleveland. "Sam does not just play the drums," said his longtime friend and musical collaborator Corky Siegel. "He sings the drums."

This HOF thing is old hat for Lay. He is already in the

Blues Hall of Fame in Memphis, Tenn., and the Jazz Hall of Fame in Los Angeles, and though the word "legend" is tossed around so cavalierly these days that it is applied to winners of televised dance contests and to Cubs rookies, Lay is the real thing.

Born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1935 to parents who worked the Pullman train cars, he is an 80-year-old living and vital link to the history of the blues. Moving north to Cleveland and then to Chicago, he played the drums and sang with virtually every giant of the blues: Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Hound Dog Taylor, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Willie Dixon, James Cotton ... the list is long, as is that of the number of recordings featuring or starring Lay.

If you are a blues fan, you might know some of these biographical details. Or you might have learned about him from watching a spectacular new documentary, "Sam Lay in Bluesland," which had a screening here as part of the Chicago International Movies & Music Festival.

Produced by Michael Prussian and Starr Sutherland and directed by John Anderson, which one gets to know and hear Lay, in performances and interviews, as a musician and something of sartorial splendor. His



stories are, frankly, pretty amazing, and his manner is warm. He is funny and wise, undeniably cool.

It is easy to understand why those interviewed in the film — Siegel, Charlie Musselwhite, Iggy Pop and many others — are so effusive in their praise and tender in their admiration. We meet Lay's barber of 25 years in his shop in the city's Austin neighborhood. Lay's wife of many decades, Liz, is charming and honest, as are their children, Debbie and Bobby. Old movie clips, many of them shot by Lay as a former hobby, evoke the exuberant blues club scenes of decades past, and much music, past and present, sparks the film.

There are also revelations, among them learning that

it was Lay who played drums for Bob Dylan when he famously/controversially "went electric" at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. Lay later played on Dylan's great "Highway 61 Revisited" album.

*It is an exuberant and stirring film, the irresistibly enchanting Lay at its center.*

Plans for it are uncertain — "We are hoping it will be available in some form, online, DVD, etc., by the fall," Sutherland says — but you can get a taste and some sounds by visiting [samlayinbluesland.com](http://samlayinbluesland.com).

Dylan was not interviewed for the film, but he sent a telegram to Lay after the drummer-singer was awarded a "Legends and Heroes Award" by the Recording Academy in 2002. It said, in part:

"Congratulations. ... It's good to be recognized. ... It's so well-deserved. ... you are second to none — your flawless musicianship and unsurpassed timing, maestro with the sticks and brushes."

Siegel peppers the film with such comment as: "If you want to know the history of the blues, talk to Sam Lay. He knows it because he was there."

He first saw Lay in 1965, when the drummer played the bygone Big John's on the North Side as part of Paul Butterfield Blues Band. What Siegel now calls "the best band I ever heard in my life" fueled the blues boom, introducing the music to white audiences and inspiring a generation of players and fans.

Lay first played with Siegel and his Siegel-Schwall Band in 1969, and they have been sharing stages and music and good times ever since.

"Corky is just a great cat all the way," Lay said from inside his car on the road. "Not just in music but in life itself. He's a blessing in every way."

- Rick Kogan, Chicago Tribune