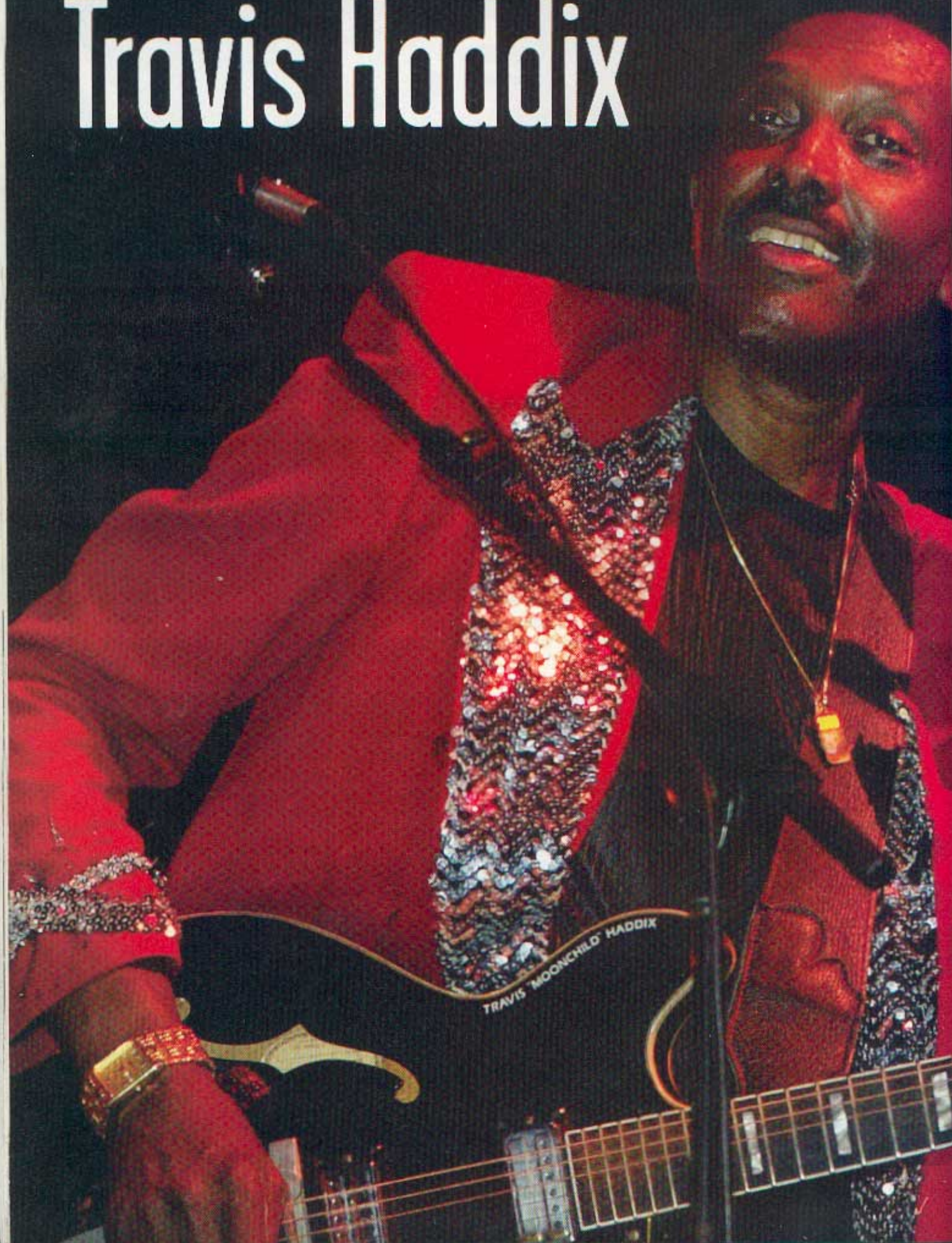


# Travis Haddix





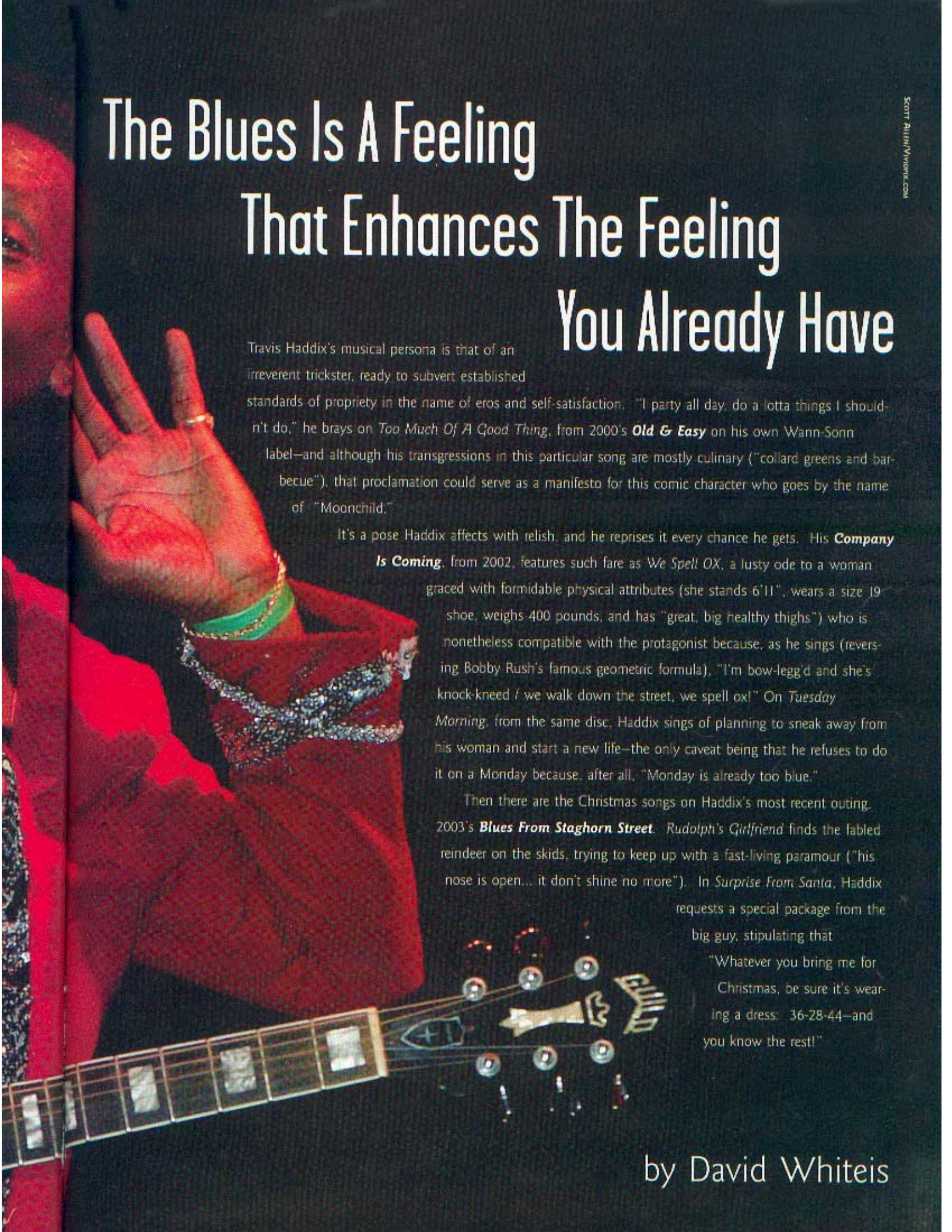
# The Blues Is A Feeling That Enhances The Feeling You Already Have

Travis Haddix's musical persona is that of an irreverent trickster, ready to subvert established standards of propriety in the name of eros and self-satisfaction. "I party all day, do a lotta things I shouldn't do," he brays on *Too Much Of A Good Thing*, from 2000's **Old & Easy** on his own Wann-Sonn label—and although his transgressions in this particular song are mostly culinary ("collard greens and barbecue"), that proclamation could serve as a manifesto for this comic character who goes by the name of "Moonchild."

It's a pose Haddix affects with relish, and he reprises it every chance he gets. His **Company Is Coming**, from 2002, features such fare as *We Spell OX*, a lusty ode to a woman graced with formidable physical attributes (she stands 6'11", wears a size 19 shoe, weighs 400 pounds, and has "great, big healthy thighs") who is nonetheless compatible with the protagonist because, as he sings (reversing Bobby Rush's famous geometric formula), "I'm bow-legg'd and she's knock-kneed / we walk down the street, we spell ox!" On *Tuesday Morning*, from the same disc, Haddix sings of planning to sneak away from his woman and start a new life—the only caveat being that he refuses to do it on a Monday because, after all, "Monday is already too blue."

Then there are the Christmas songs on Haddix's most recent outing, 2003's **Blues From Staghorn Street**. *Rudolph's Girlfriend* finds the fabled reindeer on the skids, trying to keep up with a fast-living paramour ("his nose is open... it don't shine no more"). In *Surprise From Santa*, Haddix requests a special package from the big guy, stipulating that "Whatever you bring me for Christmas, be sure it's wearing a dress: 36-28-44—and you know the rest!"

by David Whiteis





Sometimes, of course, the trickster himself gets out-tricked. In the title tune of **Company Is Coming**, our hero discovers that his woman's "family" consists almost entirely of "tall, dark, and handsome" men, and decides to force the issue by calling a family reunion to gather them all into one place. But if *My Wife, My Woman, My Girlfriend* (from 1998's **Signs Of The Times**) is any indication, he's probably not so innocent himself: "My best friend's a back-stabber," the singer laments in a voice that drips with disingenuous self-pity. "He already took my wife and my woman, now he's trying to take my girlfriend, too!"

Even at his most impish, though, Haddix exhibits a wry philosophical bent that hints at substance beneath the stance. "The truth is not always the answer," he proclaims in *Getting By With A Lie* (on **Signs Of The Times**, and recently covered by Artie "Blues Boy" White), "but it's so much better than tryin' to get by with a lie." And he does, in fact, have his serious side. *Grandsons Are Fun*, from **Company Is Coming**, is a tender paean to the joys of a tight-knit extended family. Nestled between those two transgressive holiday anthems on **Staghorn Street** is *Christmas 1911*, a loving tribute to his father, Chalmus "Rooster" Haddix, who was born on that day and died in 1997. And scattered throughout Haddix's albums are enough songs of sensitivity and caring—the Bobby Bland-influenced *Nice To Be Needed*, also from **Staghorn Street**, sounds especially heartfelt—to convince a savvy listener that the "real" Travis Haddix is a man of much more depth and decency than the antics of his musical alter-ego might sometimes indicate.

That impression is heightened by the music itself. Haddix delivers his fables of mischief, mayhem, and mercy in a smooth but sinewy baritone, backed by arrangements that meld aggression with horn-leavened soul. His leads, influenced by the string-bending Kings yet back-alley raw, are both incendiary and insinuating—a blend of uptown eian and downhome raucousness, shot through with sensual fervor, calculated to please listeners and dancers from the 'burbs as well as the 'hood.

Haddix was recently in Chicago to lay down some tracks with Artie "Blues Boy" White for his upcoming disc, on which he'll have guest-star billing—the projected title is **Artie and Travis: Best Of Friends**—and which also features a couple of his songs. After the session we had a long talk about his life and career. Haddix, who's been married for 43 years and recently retired from his long-time job as a mailman, chuckled as he reflected on the contrast between his rakish "Moon

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Travis "Moonchild" Haddix, age 18 months, 1939, Walnut, Mississippi.

(left) Travis' father Chalmus "Rooster" Haddix

(below) Travis' mother Sylvia "Keenon" Haddix



Child" persona and his actual lifestyle. "Most people," he noted, "think of a bluesman as being totally unintelligent, abuser of alcohol and drugs, womanizer—but that's just not true at all. Sometimes, with some people, of course, it's true. But for the most part a bluesman plays the blues because it's what he likes to do. Very few things that I write about pertain to my life and my livelihood—I don't live a very exciting life!"

That's not to say he doesn't come by the blues naturally—indeed, as he describes it in his unpublished autobiography *Caught In The Middle*, his life story traces the trajectory of the classic mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century blues experience with such fealty that it could almost serve as an archetype.

Born in a cabin in the hamlet of Hatchie Bottom, Mississippi, in 1938, he grew up listening to his father play the blues on guitar, harmonica, keyboards, and violin (as well as various homemade instruments including a bass, pan pipes, and a musical saw).

After graduating from Walnut High School in Walnut, Mississippi, in 1957, he moved to Milwaukee to rejoin his family, who'd moved there a year or two earlier, and then went on to Cleveland, Ohio. After a





courtesy Travis Haddix

stint in the Army, he returned to Cleveland and began to gig around town (he lost one of his early back-up bands to Johnnie Taylor) while holding down day jobs to help support his wife and children. He recorded a few 45s for the Cleveland-based Del-Nita label, but it wasn't until the late '80s, when Clarence Carter helped him get a contract with Ichiban, that he began to make serious noise as a recording artist. After recording five CDs for Ichiban, he left the struggling label about seven years ago. He's been fully independent since then.

Characteristically, *Caught in The Middle* dwells humorously—one might even say obsessively—on Haddix's boyhood experiences of sexual awakening ("Every morning when I got up, I would see some farm animal would be up behind another... the bull would be behind the cow, the male dog behind the bitch... the rooster on top of a hen, the boar behind the sow, the stud behind the mare. When... I got to the game it had already begun"). But it also portrays him as a serious-minded young man who worked hard, excelled in athletics (he aspired to attend Marquette University so he could play on that school's fabled basketball team), and later diligently pursued both his dream of becoming a professional bluesman and his domestic responsibilities as husband, father, and family breadwinner.

Today, looking back on his childhood, Haddix cherishes with special fondness his vivid memories of the parties and backyard barbecues that served as his neighborhood's primary source of weekend relaxation. His father was often hired to play at these functions. The music, as he remembers it, was strictly blues and very downhome.



courtesy Travis Haddix

**(above left) Walnut High School Graduation, 1957.**  
Back row - Professor A. F. Bynum and Travis Haddix.  
Front row - Elaine Crum and Bette Parks.

**(above right) Travis Haddix (third from left) at Fort Bliss, Texas, 1962.**

**(right) Travis Haddix, Pforzheim, Germany, 1962.**

**(below left and right) Travis Haddix in the Army, Germany, 1961.**



courtesy Travis Haddix



courtesy Travis Haddix



courtesy Travis Haddix



"My dad was a Delta bluesman," he relates, speaking in measured tones with such precision and careful enunciation it sounds almost as if he's reading from a script. "He played several different instruments and he played them all very well. Everybody called him 'Rooster.' His real name was Chalmus. I got introduced to music at a very early age because of his playing. It was Delta acoustic music—Robert Johnson would be a good example of the kind of music he played. [His fiddle playing] was sort of a country and western type of fiddling music. It was between country and western and blues. My dad played at the old-fashioned fish fries.



Travis Haddix (far left, brown suit) with Chuck and the Tremblers, 1963.



Travis Haddix and his wife Essie Mae Fleming Haddix, 1976.

(right) Ernest and D.L. Rocco, Del-Nita Records promo shot, Cleveland, Ohio 1963. Left to right - Jake Webb (vocal/Sax), Danny Moore (drums), Ernest Goode (bass), Billy Richardson (lead guitar), Travis Haddix (vocal/guitar).

courtesy Travis Haddix



Travis Haddix (front) with Ernest and the El Rocco's, 1960.



courtesy Travis Haddix





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Travis Haddix, 1980s

(left) Chuck and the Tremblers, Del-Nita Records promo shot, 1964. Back row, left to right Bill Cross, Charlie Favors, Ray Cross, Bill Hartman, Charles Barklaey. Front row, left to right Johnny Moore, Napoleon Boyd, Bernard Watt, Travis Haddix.

things of that nature. Saturday night parties and things, to pick up extra money."

Haddix says that Joe Hill Louis would sometimes come through the area and perform at these events, but most of the time the entertainment was provided by local celebrities like his dad. "They would all join in and play," he recalls. "Very seldom they played in a juke or tavern—they played outside. People that played guitar and played gospel music would sometimes venture in, play some blues on Saturday night, and they could also play in church on Sunday. Blues was sort of looked down upon as devil's music, but some people were brave enough."

Haddix's gifts as a raconteur are, at least



Civil rights activist Carl B. Stokes and his wife Shirley campaigning to limit the violence of the ghetto uprisings in 1965. Chuck and the Tremblers is on-stage behind them. Travis Haddix is standing with his arms crossed.

COURTESY TRAVIS HADDIX



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COURTESY TRAVIS HADDIX

Travis' brothers. Left to right Glen Ricky, Alvie Lovorn, and Cloyce Allen Haddix.

(left) Travis Haddix 1968.

in part, another legacy of his father. "Rooster" Haddix had a wealth of salty anecdotes at his disposal, many in the venerable Southern African American tradition of trickster tales, in which clever black men or women make fools out of dim-witted whites. One of those stories, which Haddix relates in *Caught In The Middle*, is as follows:

There was a Southern gentleman driving a long Cadillac who drove by where a sharecropper was plowing a field. The gent got out of the car and pulled out a long .45 caliber pistol, pointed it at the sharecropper's feet and asked, "Hey boy, have you ever danced?" The sharecropper replied, "No, I have been too



busy working in the fields so I never learned how to dance." The southern gent began to fire the pistol at the sharecropper's feet. The sharecropper was jumping from one foot to another and actually doing a dance. The southern gent says, "Now boy, you can dance," as he started to walk back to his car. The sharecropper pulled out a double-barreled shotgun from underneath his cultivator. He raised the mule's tail, pointed the shotgun at the head of the southern gent and said, "Hey mister, have you ever kissed a mule's ass? The southern gent replied, "No, but I have always wanted to."

Most of Haddix's own lyrics avoid that kind of barbed social commentary, but he concurs that his love for storytelling dates back to his childhood, and that it's intertwined with his lifelong love of the blues itself. "When I was a kid," he says, "I loved to entertain people and sometimes tell jokes, and most of my jokes that I would tell would rhyme in some way or another. So I guess that's how I picked up songwriting, by telling a story and adding a little humor to it. It was a fun thing to do."



Young Travis's first instrument was the piano, but he switched to guitar after witnessing the man destined to become the most influential modern blues guitarist of them all. "My older brother Hal," he remembers, "took me over to see B.B. King at WDIA studio in Memphis, and I became interested in what the guitar could do. They had Studio A and Studio B, and they'd run me from one studio to the other. That was my inspiration, but my greatest inspiration was my dad and all of his friends."

It wasn't until he was a grown man—home from his overseas military jaunt, married, and already a father—that Haddix began to realize the fruits of this childhood inspiration. First he worked in local bands, playing rough ghetto dives ("those were the good old



Travis Haddix showing off his Lake Erie fishing trophies.

(below all three) Travis Haddix with friends Floyd Peters and Lenny Brooks back from goose hunting.



days," he writes sardonically about his years of dodging bullets and ducking bottles in backstreet gin mills). But he eventually began leading his own group, a soul/R&B aggregation dubbed the Now Sound, later the Travis Haddix Band. One of the venues they played was a Cleveland show lounge called the Plush Entertainment Center, where artists like Johnnie Taylor, Denise LaSalle, Tyrone Davis, and Joe Simon would perform. That was where Taylor discovered he liked Travis's band so much he wanted them to back him up, which they immediately hit the road with him to do. Their leader, though, opted to "stay home and raise my two daughters," although he did put together a new group, and he continued to perform around the Cleveland area.



It was another gig at the Plush—this one as an opening act for Clarence Carter—that led to his association with Ichiban, with whom Carter was then signed. After Carter helped facilitate his signing with the label in 1988, Travis cut five discs there over the next ten years. They were mostly well received by both critics and listeners, but they didn't elevate him to front-line status. In the early '90s, though, he garnered the opportunity to embark on his first European tour—an experience that gave rise to one of his more memorable road stories:

"We were in Switzerland on tour when somebody brought a cow into the bar! I'm a Mississippian—I can look at the body language of an animal and tell what's going to transpire. And this cow was really nervous; I



Travis' brothers Alvie Lovorn and Cloyce Allen Haddix.



knew things was gonna go bad. I tried to move my guitar to the other end, but I didn't make it. She wreaked havoc—she reeked all over everything, as a matter of fact! So I spent the rest of the night trying to clean up the neck of my guitar."

Haddix actually formed his Wann-Sonn label—named for his daughters, Wanda and Sonya—in 1989, but he didn't begin to release material on it until he left Ichiban in '98. By then, he says, he'd known for some time that Ichiban was having financial problems, and he was eager to take his career to a higher level. "I accomplished a lot of things with Ichiban," he reflects, "but there were a lot more things I believe I could have accomplished. And I could sort of hear it through the grapevine, that the label wasn't going so well, that rumors had started going around. So after talking to some more people—I talked to Bruce Iglauer at Alligator, I talked to Tommy Couch at Malaco—I decided that the best thing for me was to get [on] my own label for a while."

Travis has released six discs on Wann-Sonn so far, and he maintains he's been mostly happy with the success he's had, writing and producing his own product and getting it distributed. But he harbors no romantic illusions about the joys of independence, as he struggles to balance the roles of label owner, self-producer, promoter, publicist, and recording artist: "It is extremely difficult, and extremely expensive! When you talk about 'Get your own label and you're the man—the unfortunate thing about that, you are the man whether it goes good or whether it goes bad. There's nobody that you can depend on when things are not going well.

And you are the man! It has its advantages, and it also has its disadvantages. You have the latitude when you're with your own label, but if you can't work nine days a week and 27 hours a day, it's very difficult.

"Sales are going down. I do pretty well from my van because I take them [CDs] with me and I sell them at the venues where I play, and I've been doing very well with that. But the sales, I shouldn't say the sales of CDs, the sales of blues [overall]—there's just fewer and fewer people gravitating toward blues music. It's coming back, but it's a slow process.

"It's a funny story. In Cleveland, I walk into a record store, and I don't identify myself. 'You have any Travis Haddix?' 'Yeah, we have it, it's over there in "Contemporary This-or-That.'" 'Why don't you have it in the blues section?' 'Oh, well, Travis is not blues.' 'He's not!?' So I just walk out. I don't focus on placing my music in the record stores any more, because they get pushed back. They only have a certain amount of space, and they want to put the records that's gonna sell rapidly, have a big turnover, they put those in the available places. They put the others over there in the grab-box."

Given the difficulties in owning and operating an independent label, Haddix maintains that he wouldn't mind going back to "a major label, just for a minute or two" to see if the financial and professional support might help him establish himself more firmly as a nationally and internationally known blues figure. He's confident that he has the determination and the artistic vision to remain his own man, even if he finds himself back in someone else's stable. Songwriting comes easily—if sporadically—to him, and as a sharp-eyed observer of life and the foibles of the human condition, he's not about to run out of material.

"When I begin writing," he explains, "I may write 20 or 30 tunes, because I might not be inspired to write any more in a couple years. So I do 20 tunes at one time, and then I come back and sort of clean them up.

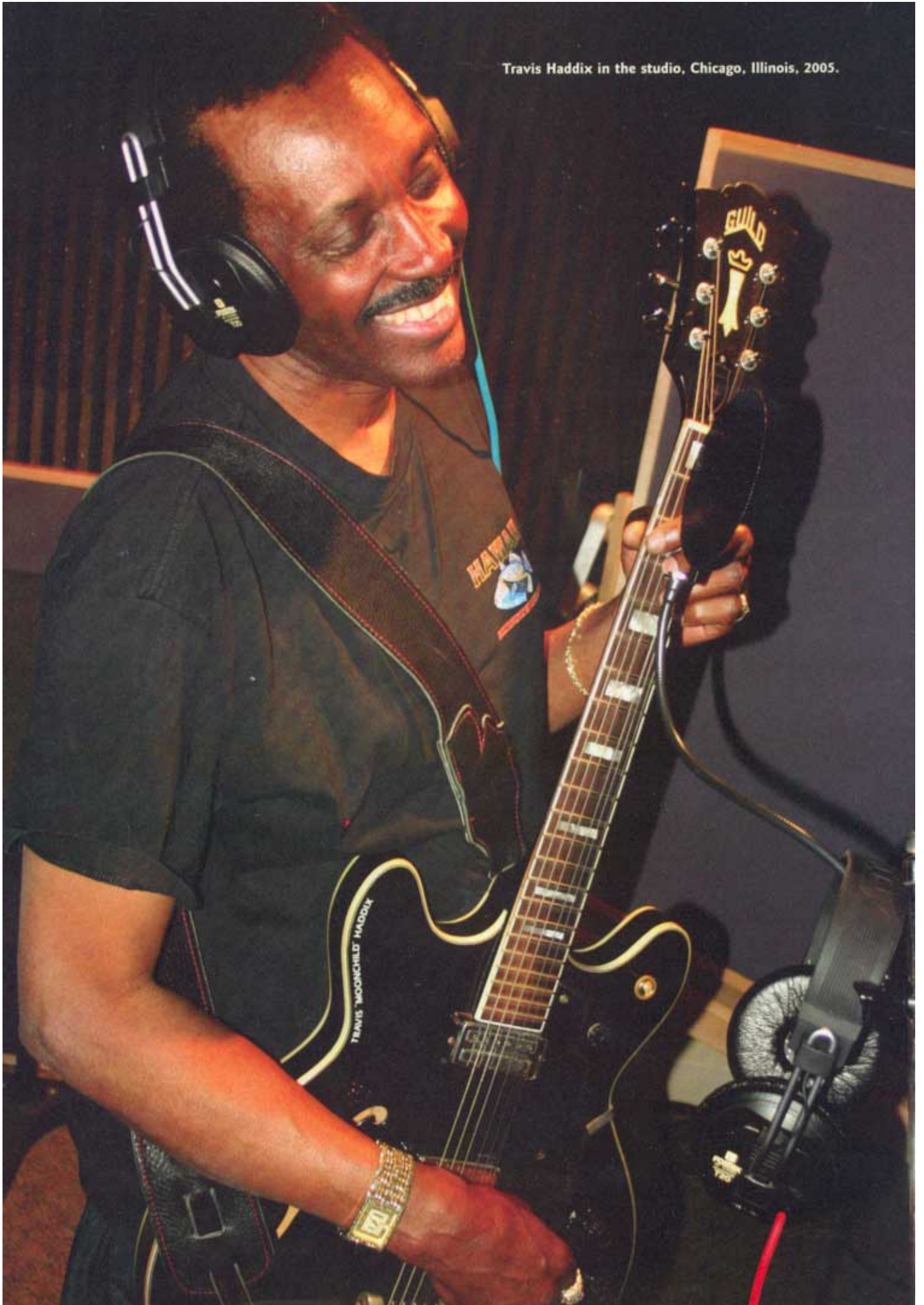
"I talk to people on the street, friends of mine tell me their stories, or something I see on the street, and I write about it. To give you an example, I played with Kenny Neal at the Slippery Noodle in Indianapolis, and Kenny had instructed one of his brothers—his brothers play with him—to do something, and apparently he didn't do it the way Kenny wanted it done. And Kenny used the expression 'You can't even do wrong right!' And I went back to my hotel, and I wrote a song called *Do Wrong Right*. That was an idea that I got from



Travis Haddix with Robert Lockwood, Jr.



Travis Haddix in the studio, Chicago, Illinois, 2005.





Travis Haddix with Latimore



COURTESY TRAVIS HADDIX

friend of mine, and Smitty asked Artie if he would mind if a local guy—this was back during the '80s—if he'd mind if a local guy would open the show. So I came in with my band and opened the show, and the rest is sort of history.

"Young people especially, young people don't really know what the blues is. Their definition of the blues has been based on the stereotype, and that bothers me. I co-host a radio program back in Cleveland. I'm playing the blues every Monday night; my show is called 'Blue Monday.' It's on WCSB, 89.3 FM, the Cleveland State University radio station. [The audience is] predominantly white, but now I've started to draw the black audience into the music.

"That's my way of doing something about the radio exposure, to introduce people back into the blues. And they are beginning to come around. Young people are beginning to recognize the blues a little bit more. It's starting to become more of their life—they're

Kenny Neal. Other things that inspire me to write are things I hear in bars or nightclubs, and I write about them. And I add a little sense of humor to them."

That sense of humor is important to Haddix, and he works hard to maintain it. "The word 'blues' sort of means you're sort of melancholy," he muses, "but you can sing tunes that make people smile. They're blues tunes that can add a smile to somebody, or help them get through the day, whatever it is that they're doing. So the blues is not necessarily something that's going to make you feel bad. The blues is a feeling that you already have. If you feel like crying, then the blues will probably make you cry. But if you're relatively happy, then you can—and I know this is a paradox, an oxymoron, to say 'I'm gonna sing some happy blues'—but you can sing blues that make people happy and make people smile. And it's all part of the blues."

As is, of course, maintaining a constant work schedule, staying on the road as much as possible, picking up session gigs along the way, doing everything in one's power to keep the income coming in and one's name in the public eye. Haddix is a bit vague about when he's going to release another disc under his own name ("I'll probably do another one of my CDs for 2006"), but in the meantime he's keeping his plate as full as he can. He works around Cleveland on a consistent basis, and over the years he's cultivated a friendship with that city's undisputed blues patriarch, Robert Lockwood Jr. It's a relationship that Haddix says has taught him more about blues—the art, the business, the life—than any other one thing he's ever experienced. And, of course, given Lockwood's

Travis Haddix in the studio with Artie "bluesboy" White, Chicago, Illinois, 2005.



JOSHUA WALTER

legendary crustiness, it's also kept him humble. Robert Jr., he maintains, will think nothing of striding up to the bandstand in the middle of a set, if he thinks Travis isn't doing what he should, and barking, "Travis! You need to get your mind on what you're doing or get the fuck off the stage!"

But in fact, there's little danger that Travis Haddix will let his mind wander too far from his music, either on stage or off. "I'm touring quite often now," he asserts. "Now that I have retired from all of my day activities, I'm specifically with my music. I've toured Europe quite often, been to Hawaii quite often. And now I'm doing this new CD with Artie, a guy that I have been writing for, and been involved with, for the last 25 years. We met at a place called Smitty's in Cleveland. Smitty was a good

involved in the blues more in their life than they were ten or 15 years ago.

"What I try to do with my blues is to modify 'em just a little bit, not stay specifically with the traditional blues, and not exactly with soul/blues. I try to mix the two together, and carve my own niche, so that when people hear the music, they can say, 'That's Travis Haddix because that's the kind of music that he plays.' Add a little humor to my blues and change it from traditional blues over to something that's more palatable to young people. I try to mix and match things until it sounds like me, like Travis Haddix.

"The most interesting thing for me is to entertain people. I love to entertain people, to see them smile, and to do things to make people happy, if only for a little while."

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