**The Reel Blues with Joe Merriweather and Ted Dorman,** Decatur, Illinois. 1966-1971. Blues Brothers style revue.

 Brice Creighton, Guitar (70-71)

 Ted Dorman, Trumpet (66-71)

 Jim Fitzpatrick, Trumpet (70-71)

 Jim Gleeson, Farfisa keyboard (66-67)

 Phil Hazenfield, Bass (66-68)

 Tom Jenkins, Trombone (67-69)

 Jay Kraft, Tenor Sax (1970-71)

 Rich Macy, Bass (69-71)

 Marsha Martin, Vocals (66)

 Joe Merriweather, Vocals (66-71)

 Paul McNalley, Tenor Sax (66-67)

 Mike Milo, Tenor Sax (66-67)

 John J Poindexter, Hammond B-3 Organ (66-71)

 Mike Ritchie, Guitar (66-69)

 Jerry Shaw, Trumpet and Vocals (66-71)

 Larry Songer, Drums (66-69)

 Rick Grammer, Bass

On 20 August 1966, the Reel Blues was created through the consolidation of members of three well-known Decatur Bands: The Casuals (Ted Dorman, Phil Hazenfield, and Marsha Martin); The Chessmen (Mike Ritchie, Paul McNalley, Mike Milo and Larry Songer); and Preston Jackson & The Rhythm Aces (Joe Merriweather). The Casuals drummer Ted Dorman switched from drums to trumpet and vocals for this line-up. In a relatively seamless transition, some personnel brought organizational talents aside from the music: Mike Milo’s father, George, took over booking the band, Mike Ritchie selected songs and organized practices, and Phil Hazenfield took over finances and tax records. George Milo was immediately successful and band jobs soon filled the calendar. Within six weeks the band began playing at venues where the source bands formerly played, such as Burgess-Osborne Memorial Auditorium in Mattoon and the Airmen’s Open Mess at Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul. Weekends consisted of band jobs on Friday and Saturday nights with practice on Sunday afternoon.

After only a few months, Marsha Martin decided to leave the band for another opportunity. On Friday, 09 December 1966, the band played a club at Chanute Air Force Base. Unhappy about the absence of Marsha, the club manager wrote up a “Discrepancy Report” on The Reel Blues and handed it to us as we were packing up. In the box labeled *Discrepancy (Make a specific statement as to the offense*):, he wrote NOT BRINGING MARSHA and it was signed *U.S. AIR FORCE*. However, the band continued to play there, so it must not have been an impeachable offense.

Often at the band’s three set gigs, the full crowd wasn’t always in attendance until near the end of the first set. The band developed a presentation strategy in which the first set featured mostly Top 40 cover songs with Ted Dorman on vocals. At the beginning of the second set, the band would a make spectacle of bringing out “the star of the show, Joe Merriweather” for the remainder of show. Those sets contained primarily Rhythm and Blues songs. With Ted Dorman acting as Master of Ceremonies, Joe Merriweather’s introduction to the crowd mimicked the James Brown introduction featured on Brown’s *Live at the Apollo* album. Meriweather was a workhorse and did three sets on a four-set job. Probably the best received song Joe sang was Otis Redding’s *Try a Little Tenderness*. “He just killed it,” reflects bassist Phil Hazenfield.

On 13 January 1967, Phil Hazenfield and Steve Fisher, member of the Decatur band The Fugitives, officially became business partners and opened The Morgue Teen Club on Pershing Road in Decatur to an inaugural audience of 700 teens. The Fugitives and The Reel Blues alternated sets for the event. The Reel Blues would only play the Morgue two or three times a year, primarily focusing on playing venues in other communities within a 75 to 100 mile radius of Decatur. The Morgue did however provide The Reel Blues a convenient locale for Sunday afternoon practice.

In August 1967, the band was returning to Decatur from a Sunday afternoon gig at the Airmen’s Open Mess at Chanute Air Force Base, where, in a cavernous mess hall, the band had been accompanied by a choir of 750 enlisted airmen during the chorus of The Animal’s *We’ve Got to Get Out of This Place*, when a stop motivated by curiosity about a new rock bar in Champaign, the Chances R at 63 East Chester Street in downtown Champaign. The band walked in and found a Champaign band The Regiment playing a risqué Rolling Stones song *Let’s Spend the Night Together* to a packed audience of partying University of Illinois students. The Chances R was re-purposed brick warehouse with a three-story open area adjacent to the bar. In the rear of the open space there were multi-level balconies above a two-tiered stage facing the dance floor. The forty foot high ceiling featured old Tiffany lamps and backlit stained-glass windows

Phil Hazenfield relates, “It was by far the coolest bar we’d ever seen.” “We soon met the owner, Otho “Bub” Bartholow, who told us all his bands were booked through Blytham Ltd., a Champaign booking agency, and gave us their card.” A week later, a few members of the band made a trip to Blytham Ltd. to meet with owner Bob Nutt and his chief booking agent, Irving Azoff, about playing Chances R. According to Hazenfield, “Within a half hour we were signed with the agency and on our way home to let George Milo know we had a new agent.” Milo was supportive of the shift and wished the band good luck. Shortly thereafter the band executed a contract to play Chances R for the first time on 30 September 1967.

The signing with Blytham was the beginning of a lucrative relationship which now expanded the band’s territory to a 200-mile radius of Decatur. New venues included the YMCA in Beloit, WI.; the Cheetah II (formerly the Aragon Ballroom) in Chicago; the Barn in Whiteland, IN; fraternities and sororities at the University of Illinois, Champaign; DePauw University, Greencastle, IN; Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN; Indiana University Field House, Bloomington, IN and the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville, IN. In addition, the band was booked into various teen clubs such as the Jaguar in St. Charles, IL and The Barn in Sterling IL. There band also played teen dances held in barns on rural Illinois farms of which Blytham had access to, as well several teen clubs in various Chicago suburbs.

In late 1967, creative director Mike Ritchie decided to modify the band’s sound through some personnel changes. Many of the band’s cover songs featured trumpets and trombones rather than saxophones. Saxophone players Paul McNalley and Mike Milo were released as was Farfisa keyboard player Jim Gleeson. In their place, Jerry Shaw on trumpet and Tom Jenkins on trombone, were added. With these adjustments, the horn section now had that low bottom horn sound popularized by bands that backed rhythm and blues artists such as James Brown and Joe Tex. Additionally, the band added 17-year-old keyboardist John J. Poindexter who had his own van to transport his Hammond B-3 organ and the accompanying Leslie speaker cabinet which featured rotating speakers, which produced a sound favored by many top tier rhythm and blues groups. This new sound increased The Reel Blues’ popularity and resulted in a substantial rise in income for band members.

During the early fall of 1967, Irving Azoff booked The Reel Blues into a teen club in Batavia, Illinois. The band was sharing the stage with the Shadows of Night, a garage band rock group who had the hit *Gloria* in 1966. The deal was each band would play two sets. The Reel Blues ended up playing two of Joe Merriweather’s featured sets, which went over well with all in attendance. In the dressing after the show, the members of the Reel Blues were approached by the members of the Shadows of Night who came asking the band for autographs primarily because of their appreciation of Joe Merriweather’s style and performance.

In the fall of 1968, The Reel Blues were booked into the Cheetah II, a Chicago disco housed in the former Aragon Ballroom. The Aragon, located at 1106 West Lawrence Avenue, Chicago, was built in 1926, and featured a Moorish architectural style, with an interior featuring characteristics one might come across in a North African cities such as Casablanca or Algiers. The capacity of the room is 4,500 people. The Aragon has hosted and continues to host a variety of events ranging from world championship boxing and Spanish/ Vietnamese/English language rock concerts. Concerts by major music acts at the Aragon have included shows by the Glenn Miller Orchestra, the Guy Lombardo Orchestra, Wilson Pickett, the Rolling Stones, Jethro Tull, Traffic, John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers, Grand Funk Railroad, Lynyrd Skynyrd, The Clash, U2, Stevie Ray Vaughan, The Police, Metallica, Nirvana, Green Day and the White Stripes.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Reel Blues was scheduled to play the Cheetah II/Aragon with Baby Huey and the Baby Sitters, a popular soul band from Gary, IN. The lead singer, Baby Huey, was 350-pound James Ramey, who backed by a 10-piece band with a large horn section. The Reel Blues were looking forward to matching Joe Merriweather against Baby Huey. Soon after they set-up, the band was informed that Baby Huey had cancelled. The Reel Blues ended up playing a four hour show to a crowd of several hundred people who didn’t seem to mind it was just a performance by one band. The members of The Reel Blues were disappointed to not get to see Baby Huey and the Baby Sitters which was basically a band that was a forerunner of The Blues Brothers genre.

In 1969, Phil Hazenfield left The Reel Blues to concentrate on passing the CPA exam. He was replaced by Rich Macy, formerly the bass player for the Shattertones in Bloomington, Illinois. Shortly thereafter, Mike Ritchie, Larry Songer and Tom Jenkins also left the group. Mike and Tom were replaced by Brice Creighton, guitar and Tom Fitzpatrick, trumpet. Jay Kraft, a Millikin University music major came on board with his tenor sax and Ted Dorman moved from trumpet to the drums. The horn section was then two trumpets and a sax.

Everyone else stayed and continued to record The Reel Blues legacy for another year. The band broke up in early 1971. Jay Kraft would later move to Nashville where he continued to have a successful career in the recording industry.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Original Recording:

There’s Nothing I Wouldn’t Do – Lyrics by Joe Merriweather

Cover Songs:

First Set – Top 40 Covers:

Archie Bell & the Drells – Tighten Up

Arthur Conley – Sweet Soul Music

Joe Cocker – The Letter

Jay and the Techniques – Apples, Peaches, Pumpkin Pie

Aaron Neville – Tell It Like It Is

Soul Survivors – Expressway to Your Heart

Spencer Davis Group – Gimme Some Lovin’

Fantastic Johnny Z – Boogaloo Down Broadway

Isley Brothers – It’s Your Thing

Joe Merriweather’s Sets: Rhythm & Blues Covers:

Sam & Dave – When Something is Wrong With My Baby, Hold On, I’m Coming and I Thank You

Temptations – My Girl, (I Know) I’m Losing You and I Can’t Get Next to You

Joe Tex – Skinny Legs and All, Show Me and S.Y.S.L.J.F.M. (The Letter Song)

Wilson Pickett – In the Midnight Hour, 634-5789, Land of 1,000 Dances Everybody Needs Somebody to Love, Funky Broadway and Mustang Sally

James Brown – Cold Sweat-Part 1, It’s a Man’s Man’s World and I Got the Feelin’

Otis Redding – Respect, Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa (Sad Song), Tramp, (Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay, Sweet Lorene and Try a Little Tenderness[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Glenn McDonald, “Historic Music Venues: The Aragon Ballroom,” *Fender*, last modified 02 August 2011, <http://www2.fender.com/experience/fender-picks/historic-music-venues-the-aragon-ballroom/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Phillip Hazenfield, *The Reel Blues*, 13 March 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)