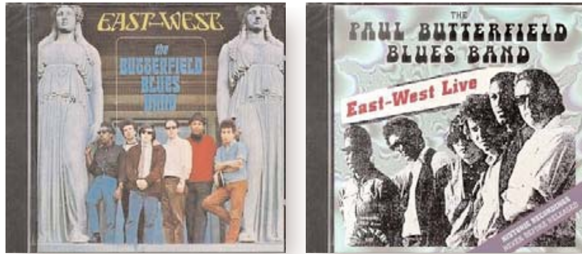
Beyond the Blues: A Critical Look at 'East-West'



East-West, Butterfield Blues Band, Elektra 7315-2

East-West Live, Butterfield Blues Band, Winner 447

BY DAVID DANN

I first encountered the Paul Butterfield Blues Band in 1969 when I began listening to Boston's "underground" FM station, WBCN. Free-form commercial radio at its finest, WBCN served up an eclectic mix of folk, rock, gospel and blues, and afforded a young high school student the opportunity to hear the wealth of American music hidden behind the cacophony of Top 40 broadcasting. I had just moved with my family to the area and was searching for something to listen to, and there was plenty to hear on WBCN. The Butterfield band – and especially its guitarist, Mike Bloomfield – caught my ear. They played edgy, tough music. Exciting music. Music called "blues."

I learned that they were from Chicago and that they took inspiration older black musicians who lived there. Musicians like Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter and Muddy Waters. I soon learned about their music, too. But Butterfield remained a favorite.

I was in college when I bought the Butterfield Blues Band's second release, "East-West." It was astonishing. There was nothing to compare with "Work Song" and the title track, the tunes that formed the essence of "East-West." The music seemed like jazz to me, or like something beyond jazz because it was created with electric instruments. I listened again and again – especially to "East-West."

Many years later, with the release of live versions of "East-West" in 1996 by Winner Records, I started listening again. Over time I became curious about the structure of piece. How did it fit together? Were there recognizable melodies? Was "East-West" simply a pyrotechnic display, or was it more?

I decided I would look into these questions by giving a close listen to all the versions of "East-West." By comparing the live versions and the studio take, I eventually discerned a logic and coherence behind the virtuosity, and came to understand the broader historic importance of "East-West's" many innovations. These are the results of those investigations.

First, though, a little background.

An experiment in fusion

"East-West" is a remarkable oddity. On the one hand, it was a '60s pop-music hybrid, combining the disparate musical styles of blues, jazz, modal and Eastern musics in a way that appealed to rock listeners. On the other, it was a virtuoso display that challenged the very notion of "popular" and pushed the limits of how pop music was heard.

'East-West' was the creation of the band's star guitarist, 23-year-old Michael Bloomfield.

The piece was recorded by the Butterfield Band in the summer of 1966 – probably in July – and was released on their Elektra recording, "East-West," in August of that year. It was the creation of the band's star guitarist, 23-year-old Michael Bloomfield. Inspired in part by the Indian classical music of Ravi Shankar and the modal experiments of John Coltrane, "East-West" used a bass line borrowed from singer Nick Gravenites' tune, "It's About Time," (Gravenites was originally given co-composer credit along with Bloomfield) and was an extended improvisation based on scales rather than chords. It began as a vehicle for Bloomfield's formidable musical prowess; after a year of performances, it had become something much more.

Butterfield and company were the toast of folk-rock critical circles at the time they were developing "East-West." Their performance at the Newport Folk Festival in July of 1965 had served notice that something new was happening in folk music, and the release of their debut album on Elektra later that year demonstrated that electric music could offer substance as well as surface. The Butterfield crew brought a new seriousness to popular music, adapting the grown-up musical vernacular of Chicago blues and developing from it an esthetic where performers not only entertained, they *played*.

"East-West" was arguably the crowning achievement of that early Butterfield musical juggernaut. With Bloomfield at the lead, the tune explored the outer reaches of pop accessibility for the period. One can only imagine what the well-dressed couples at the Whisky A-Go Go in the summer of 1966 must have thought of its pyrotechnical excesses as the band charged ahead.

After Bloomfield left the group in early 1967, the Butterfield aggregation never again played "East-West," nor did it continue to probe the limits of contemporary music. It didn't matter, though – history had been made, and pop music, whether it knew it or not, would never be the same.

TO UNDERSTAND "East-West's" structure and development, we will have to parse its various components. A tune that in the studio was a fairly straightforward series of virtuoso improvisations leading to a collective crescendo turns out to be something more complex upon detailed examination of the three other versions on the Winner label.

These versions come to us from live performances of the Butterfield Blues Band recorded by fans and preserved by the group's keyboardist, Mark Naftalin. They are of varying quality sound-wise, uneven in their execution and seemingly chaotic in their structure. But a closer look reveals a masterwork in the making, an epic piece filled with virtuosity and risk-taking, an ensemble tour-de-force that has few equals. These recordings capture in their 13-to-30 minutes an ebullient moment in the evolution of American music – one that's still being felt today.

A word about the choice of "East-West" versions for this review: It takes into account only those recordings which currently are commercially available. There are two other early examples of "East-West" that are known to exist and that periodically circulate among collectors. One was recorded at the Fillmore Auditorium in October 1966 and the other, a "jam" based on the tune, was recorded in performance by Bloomfield and Mark Naftalin with members of the Jefferson Airplane just before Michael left the Butterfield Band. That rare variation on "East-West" doesn't really qualify as a true rendition of the tune, but the October version, originally issued on a recording called "Droppin' in with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band," is the real McCoy. It unfortunately is missing an important portion of the piece's third section and, for that reason, has been omitted from this discussion. It is also quite difficult for the average listener to find.

To help make sense of the detailed analyses that follow, I've included a graphic representation of each version of "East-West." It should make comparisons between the four examples easier and will allow the reader to see how the elements of each piece fit together and evolve over time.

"East-West" 1

The earliest version of "East-West" that we have was recorded at the Whisky A Go Go in Hollywood in the winter of 1966, probably in January. It is nearly 13 minutes in duration and ends somewhat abruptly. The sound quality is only fair, but the balance is good and all solos are easily discerned.

For fans of Michael Bloomfield, this is the live version of the piece that offers the best example of his extraordinary talent. He dominates "East-West" 1 throughout, driving the piece and defining its structure. This raga-influenced tune is clearly his idea. Both Elvin Bishop and Paul Butterfield seem still to be finding their way here.

"East-West" 1 is the only version of the piece that consists of four or more distinct sections, each framed by a crescendo followed by a pause. According to Mark Naftalin, the final portion or portions of "East-West" 1 were unrecorded, so we're limited to the four that exist. For practical purposes, we'll label them (1) Blues-rock, (2) Eastern, (3) Melodic and (4) Slow.

THE PAUL Butterfield Blues Band in Hollywood, 1966. From left, Jerome Arnold, Butterfield, Michael Bloomfield, Billy Davenport, Mark Naftalin and Elvin Bishop. ELEKTRA PROMOTIONAL PHOTO

The first three of these sections feature Michael Bloomfield; the last section opens with Bloomfield and then has a brief interlude from Elvin Bishop followed by a harmonica solo from Paul Butterfield. The piece is in 4/4 and is structured around a D-minor scale. It does not modulate – there are no chord changes in the conventional sense.

SECTION (1), the Blues-rock section, is by far the shortest opening portion of any version of "East-West." It begins with Jerome Arnold's ostinato bass part accompanied by drummer Billy Davenport's bossa nova beat. Elvin Bishop plays a repeated D-minor chord pattern emphasizing the second and fourth beats of each measure and establishing the tonal mood. After a bar or two, Michael Bloomfield launches into his solo with a ferocity that lasts until he builds to a brief crescendo ending at 01:57.

The mood changes abruptly in Section (2) as Bloomfield continues to improvise, this time using a modal scale. Bishop backs him with an octaves-based drone, suggesting the tamboura accompaniment of Indian classical music and giving the section its Eastern flavor. Mark Naftalin can be heard reinforcing the drone with single note runs. After less than two minutes, Bloomfield's solo reaches a crescendo, ending the section at 03:47.

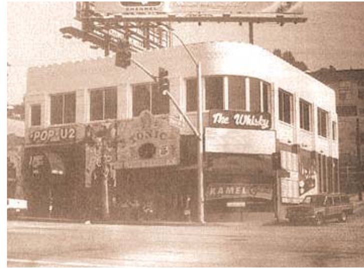
In Section (3), the Melodic segment of the piece, Bloomfield again is the soloist but now with a restrained attack. He starts (3) on an Eastern-sounding G which, after four bars, resolves to the consonance of A. He then spins out airy melodies that stand in stark contrast to the fiery improvisations of the preceding sections. After a few minutes, at 04:28, Bloomfield introduces a four-note phrase that we'll designate Motive A. This is the figure that introduces the famous 40-bar phrase in the studio version of "East-West," but here Bloomfield repeats and varies it for a few minutes before moving into wide-open arpeggios using fretted and open strings, broadening the tonal color of the piece. He then builds furiously to a roiling crescendo at 07:26, tracked closely by Naftalin's electric piano. Bloomfield's last chord, brimming with overtones and dominated by an open A and D, is allowed to decay for a full 6 seconds.

After an awkward pause, during which some members of the stunned audience begin to hesitantly applaud, Bloomfield starts Section (4), the Slow section, at 07:37. Building on chords for a moment, Bloomfield then does something rarely heard in pop music: he intentionally plays a dissonant passage using minor seconds, starting at 07:57 on what sounds like A over A-flat. He does this not once but three times. The moment is jarring, fleeting and revolutionary, and captures the essence of

"East-West" as pure creative experimentation. The solo continues with Bloomfield playing two-note chorded phrases and arpeggios that lead up to a false crescendo at 09:46. He then returns to the comping pattern of Section (1) and settles into the background.

THE RHYTHM SECTION vamps until Elvin Bishop enters at 10:08, accompanied by Butterfield on maracas. Bishop's Gibson sounds thin after Bloomfield's roaring Les Paul and he has turned the reverb way up on his amp, giving his solo a ghostly, far-away sound. His contribution lasts only 14 bars, and while it has a melodic beauty and coherence, it's clear that Bishop is still finding his way in the esthetic of "East-West."

Butterfield, on the other hand, is never at a loss. The most musically mature of the group's soloists, his sound was fully formed even on the earliest Butterfield Band recordings from 1964. He enters at 10:34, announcing his presence with a robust D held for 6 bars. He then plays a blues solo in his best Big Walter-inflected style, full of runs and swoops, sounding as if he expects the 12-bar turn-around at any moment. Bloomfield accompanies with D-minor chords, at first accenting the third beat of every other measure, and then switching to every other measure's downbeat.



THE WHISKY A Go Go in Hollywood where "East-West" 1 was recorded in early 1966.
PHOTO FROM CHICKENONAUNICYCLE.COM

And then, at 12:31, the recording ends rather anticlimactically with the band sounding a final D, given an odd sonority by Butterfield's major-sounding harp chord clashing with the minor chords of the guitars. As Naftalin has remarked, the remainder of "East-West" 1 went unrecorded, so we'll never know how this early version of the piece was concluded.

"East-West" 2

The second version of "East-West" comes from the spring of 1966 and was recorded at Poor Richard's during a visit home to Chicago by Butterfield and company. It clocks in at about sixteen minutes, has acceptable sound quality and is the first complete version of the piece. This performance precedes the Elektra recording of "East-West" by just a few months and is the live version that most resembles the studio take in terms of overall structure. Interestingly, it was recorded by Dan Erlewine, a Chicago guitarist who would later be the source for Bloomfield's second Les Paul guitar, the legendary 1959 sunburst model.

DAN ERLEWINE
PHOTO FROM MIKE-BLOOMFIELD.COM

"East-West's" original structure – one consisting of five or more sections – has been tightened here. East-West" 2 now has only three parts: Blues-rock, Eastern and Melodic. The Slow and other portions of the tune have been jettisoned in favor of an expanded third section.

Section (1), the Blues-rock portion, now opens with a solo from Elvin Bishop while Bloomfield accompanies using a couple pick-up notes and octaves to accent the second and fourth beats of each measure. Arnold and Davenport again vamp on the bossa rhythm. The 4/4 tempo is slightly slower than it will be in the upcoming studio recording, but Bishop is far more confident than he was a few months earlier. He improvises in D for a full three minutes, developing themes and playing bright chordal clusters. Butterfield interjects harmonica accents here and there, participating actively now in building the musical tension. At 03:00 to 03:04, he echoes Bishop's staccato riffs with uncanny precision – one can hear how hard he's listening.

After Bishop concludes his solo and starts pounding out a D-chord accompaniment on the second beat of each measure, Butterfield offers a brief harmonica solo starting at 03:17. He opens again with a sustained note, this time a B, the sixth note of the D scale. He improvises in earnest for slightly over 30 seconds and then moves the band into its first crescendo break at 04:03.

WITHOUT MISSING a beat, Bloomfield kicks off Section (2), the Eastern section, with a flurry of modal runs. Bishop picks up Bloomfield's earlier accompaniment pattern, playing unisons or octaves instead of chords, while Naftalin shadows Bloomfield's sorties with single-note runs and clusters. At about 06:40, as Bloomfield builds toward the piece's second crescendo, Naftalin plays a series of two-note chords in 3/4-time, foreshadowing the intriguing rhythmic complexities to come in "East-West" 3. Almost without pause, Bloomfield weaves line after line until he builds to an intense 14-bar crescendo ending at 07:28. Nine of those fourteen bars feature a cluster that has as its top note a D which is two octaves above middle-C, the second highest fretable note on Bloomfield's '54 Les Paul.

Spontaneous gasps and applause ripple through the audience as the band pauses and Bloomfield moves on to the Melodic portion of "East West" 2, Section (3). The shear volume of the performance is evident by the amplifier hum clearly heard here during the opening minutes of the section. Photographic evidence indicates that the Butterfield Band had been outfitted with Fender amps by the spring of 1966, the front-line players favoring that formidable blues workhorse, the Twin Reverb. With Bloomfield using two of these for himself, it's not hard to imagine that the crescendo breaks in "East-West" might have produced not only a release of musical tension for a club audience, but a moment of physical relief too.

Michael Bloomfield opens the Melodic section with a three-note phrase that forms the basis for much of the improvisation that follows. It's a variant on Motive A, heard initially in Section (3) of "East-West" 1, and consists of D-E-F#. With that, he outlines the major-scale tonality of the section. Naftalin subtly shadows Bloomfield's every melodic turn, giving Section (3) a depth it otherwise might have lacked. His contribution to "East-West" is often overlooked in favor of the piece's more flamboyant soloists, but Naftalin's musical sensitivity and intuition are clearly evident here.

Butterfield is all ears too, peppering Bloomfield's lines with brief phrases that are sometimes more felt than heard.

BLOOMFIELD PLAYS single- and double-note lines, creating a jazz feel for several minutes until he reintroduces Motive A at 09:09. He then moves on to a new theme at 09:44, one which will be heard again in the studio version of "East-West" and one that arguably becomes the piece's musical culmination in "East-West" 3. Motive B, as we'll call it, is, like Motive A, based on three notes – typically F#-G-A, but with the A repeated in triplet fashion. Bloomfield introduces it, playing in what sounds like thirds, with Naftalin accompanying. At 10:40 or so, he sounds briefly like a steel pan player (!) as he continues to spin out lovely variations on B. Naftalin and Butterfield adroitly accent his phrases, creating a true ensemble feel – the players clearly know each other's music. Bloomfield returns to Motive B at 12:09, restating it again in a series of variations before bringing in a third figure, Motive C. This phrase introduces a new element in Section (3): a guitar duet with Elvin Bishop.

Throughout the Melodic section, Bishop has remained on the sidelines, letting the other members of the band support Bloomfield. Now he emerges at 13:02 playing a counterpoint to Bloomfield's melodic line. Their duet is the first example of the sort of interchange that would later be refined by the Allman Brothers' Duane Allman and Dickey Betts and, to some degree, the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir. Michael and Elvin do an intricate pas-de-deux until 14:28 when the band comes in on Motive D, a rhythmic figure that sets up the final crescendo. Bloomfield drifts into modal territory as the rest of the band builds around Motive D's repeated rhythm, both Bishop and Butterfield interjecting phrases of their own.

When the crescendo kicks in, it lasts for a dozen bars before coming to a resounding halt at 15:52. Oddly, the recording ends before the band can sound the final, imminent D-chord. Though it is heard in the studio version and in "East-West" 3, it appears to have been edited out here. We do have the cries of delight from the audience, however, before the quick fade.

The Studio Version of "East-West"

This is the version of "East-West" that most Butterfield fans are familiar with. It was recorded in New York, most likely in July of 1966. The Butterfield Band by this time was having a profound effect on the West Coast rock scene, particularly on bands in the San Francisco area where it had taken up residency. The band's performances at the Fillmore Auditorium in that city had become legendary, setting the standard for musicianship and making the blues a required part of any serious group's repertoire. Bloomfield had also encountered Jimi Hendrix in New York in July and was undoubtedly influenced and inspired by the flamboyant guitarist's extraordinary technique.

THE FILLMORE Auditorium, the Butterfield Band's base in San Francisco in 1966. PROVIDED PHOTO

"East-West" retains the three-section structure and overall form of "East-West" 2, and opens as 2 does with the rhythm section comping on the bossa beat and Bloomfield offering octave accents. The tempo is a bit quicker and brighter than it was in the second live version of the piece. Elvin Bishop jumps right in, opening his solo with a two-bar unison on what sounds like the open D-string and a fretted D on the A-string. He then casts a series of angular lines, his Gibson ES-345 cranked up for maximum volume and sustain (Elektra by this time had learned how to record loud electric music in the studio). Bloomfield drops out thirty seconds into the piece, giving Bishop more rhythmic freedom, and then, after a minute or so, Mark Naftalin's electric piano emerges from the mix, briefly creating a gentle melodic aura. At 01:24, Butterfield enters under Bishop with a sustained D for a few bars; Bishop hits a two-note chord on the downbeat and then trails off. Butterfield launches into a short solo at 01:31.

THE STUDIO VERSION of "East-West" was supposedly edited, no doubt due to its unusual length for a pop recording of the period. If there were indeed edits, it sounds as if there might be one here as Butterfield begins his solo. Bishop seems to continue his solo as it fades, blending into Naftalin's chords before reappearing, now comping with Bloomfield behind Butterfield. In any case, Bishop's solo is considerably shorter at a minute-and-a-half than the three minutes of version 2.

Butterfield reels off a series of bold rhythmic phrases, big melodies right out of the blues tradition. It's interesting to note that his "East-West" solos rarely ever exceed the two- or three-chorus length of solos on an average blues tune. At 02:43, Butterfield begins building toward the first crescendo with both guitarists furiously punching out supporting chords. Bloomfield slowly ascends toward that high D using eighth-note accents until the band reaches the end of the Blues-rock section with an abrupt stop at 02:54.

Bloomfield then leaps into his modal solo, opening the Eastern section with a brief tremolo between D and D-flat, accompanied only by bass and drums. Jerome Arnold's part throughout each version of "East-West" has been that of the anchor, providing a harmonic underpinning and an unvarying rhythm. His bass pattern has consisted of a single repeated scaler run, beginning and ending on D an octave apart and starting between the second and third beat of each measure and ending on the downbeat of the next. Now, with the start of Bloomfield's solo, Arnold changes to a line that begins on the downbeat and consists of what sounds like A, C and D, with D accenting the third beat. Coltrane fans will recognize this pattern as very close to the one used in the saxophonist's 1964 composition, "A Love Supreme." Bloomfield

acknowledged Coltrane as a source of inspiration for "East-West," and Arnold certainly was familiar with Coltrane's piece, so the similarity may be more than just coincidence.

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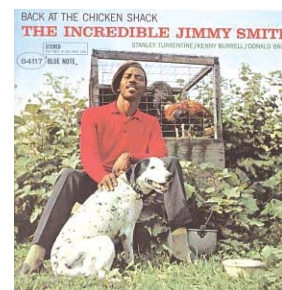
As the band moves into Section (2), the "exotic" quality of "East-West" becomes evident. Bloomfield spins out line after line, accenting his phrases with flatted fifths and seconds, occasionally allowing a plucked open E to drone behind his D-based improvisations. Naftalin's noodlings begin to emerge from the mix at 03:15, giving Bloomfield's slippery melodies a harmonic grounding. Bishop comes in with sustained chords on every other downbeat, then varies his accents randomly to the second, third and fourth beats. At 04:45, Butterfield begins to play pedal tones behind Bloomfield's increasingly urgent improvisations, and Michael creates a series of phrases using octaves over open-string drones. The piece assumes a raga-like sonority as he and Bishop merge in a wash of D-based overtones and Bloomfield's solo line climbs toward that D two octaves above middle C. At 06:45 Butterfield pushes to the front with a full-blown D-flat-to-D warble, signaling the start of the Eastern section's crescendo. At 06:56, Jerome Arnold switches to a repeated D played in eighth note-rhythm and the rest of the band follows, building to an intense climax at 07:13.

NOW BLOOMFIELD MOVES into the piece's Melodic section, and the stage is set for one of the great musical passages of progressive rock. Instead of the D-E-F# phrase that he opened with in version 2, Bloomfield reduces the line to a simple E to F# glissando. He moves easily up to A, to B, hanging back on the beat, and then gracefully drops down to F#. His phrasing gives the section an open, jazzy feel and stands it in stark contrast to the musical firestorm which preceded it. Bloomfield then masterfully varies this eight-bar line until 07:44 when briefly he introduces a second theme and variations, and though he ascends to the high D, the volume of his playing diminishes almost to the point of inaudibility. Mark Naftalin's electric piano weaves in and out of the passage, but it is the rhythm section that quietly carries this opening portion of Section (3). Arnold has returned to the original bass line from Section (1), the Blues-rock section, and Billy Davenport supports him with high-hat and sticks, and what, at moments, sounds like open palms on the drum heads.

At 08:32 Bloomfield introduces the now-familiar Motive A, a four-note scaler run consisting of D-E-F-F#, and creates from it a marvelous compound phrase that twists and turns for a full 60 seconds, only resolving back to D some 40 bars later at 09:38. It's no overstatement to assert that the coherence, clarity and Bach-like motion of this passage, "the 40-bar phrase," establish Michael Bloomfield as one of rock's greatest soloists. Certainly no one else before him had exhibited such *musical* virtuosity.

Bloomfield then plays a quiet series of descending and ascending chords on the downbeat to introduce Motive E at 10:02, a phrase that moves from D to F# and back on the first beat of each measure. Motive E will form a prominent part of the Melodic section of "East-West" 3, but here it passes in an instant as Bloomfield is joined by Butterfield at 10:18 for Motive B. This theme, F#-G-A, with the A repeated in triplet rhythm, is more clearly stated here than it was in "East-West" 2. The phrase, with a slightly different rhythm, is one that is commonly used in traditional blues, heard for example as the opening melody in Muddy Water's "Forty Days" (1956), and given full melody status in jazz organist Jimmy Smith's 1961 "Back at the Chicken Shack" (often known simply as "Chicken Shack"). Bloomfield treats it here not as the driving 2-bar motive for a 12-bar blues shuffle but as the extended 4-bar opening theme in what emerges as an AABB-patterned call-and-response in the less conventional 16-bar blues form. In "East-West" 3, Motive B becomes the glorious melodic/harmonic hook which brings the piece to completion. But it would take six more months for "East-West" – and the band – to reach that degree of focus. Here Motive B is primarily a vehicle for Bloomfield to set up the duet portion of Section (3).

At 10:49, Bloomfield plays Motive C for 8 bars with Butterfield blowing pedal tones behind him. Then it's Bloomfield and Bishop in a joyous counterpoint at 11:01, Michael primarily taking the higher line and Elvin working the middle register. Naftalin shadows, as is his role in "East-West," mingling here and there with the soloists to add a third melody to the guitars. The momentum builds for a minute and then at 12:23 the band punctuates the rhythm as a unit. The final crescendo kicks in at 12:49 and runs for 12 bars before ending with a glorious flurry on a final concluding chord, Butterfield's harp having the last say. This is the first time we hear "East-West" with its ending intact.



"BACK AT the Chicken Shack" by Jimmy Smith features a classic blues riff that is similar to Motive B in "East-West." PROVIDED PHOTO

"East-West" 3

We come now to the version of "East-West" which is easily the most musically advanced of the four examples discussed here. It was recorded at the Golden Bear in Huntington Beach, CA, and, regrettably, has the poorest sound quality of the three live versions. Bloomfield, who once again is the primary soloist, is unfortunately under recorded. But by early February of 1967 the piece had largely evolved into an ensemble work, and the sound of "East-West" 3 is sufficient enough to convey the band's remarkable interplay.

Michael Bloomfield left the Butterfield Band shortly after this performance took place, so it is likely that this was one of the last times the "East-West" was played. The tempo is nearly that of the studio version of "East-West," and the form

remains three sections: Blues-rock, Eastern and Melodic. At nearly thirty minutes in length, this is by far the longest version of "East-West" that we have, though Mark Naftalin recalls performances that went on for nearly an hour.

"EAST-WEST" 3 OPENS, as has become the convention, with Elvin Bishop's solo. Persistent hints of feedback indicate that volume levels are way up, and although Bishop and the rhythm section start out with restraint, the sound soon becomes enormous. Elvin by now appears to be quite comfortable soloing within the open-ended context of "East-West." He creates melodies and variations, plucks open strings as drone accompaniments to his lines and switches handily between pickups to sharpen his attack. Bloomfield can be heard comping occasionally in the background, and Butterfield wafts in and out of the mélange, contributing unearthly-sounding pedal tones. By "East-West" 3, Bishop has clearly taken on Bloomfield's aggressiveness and ardor for clusters of notes; indeed, the latter's influence is so pervasive that Elvin's soloing is at times difficult to distinguish from Michael's.

At 05:51, Butterfield begins to assert himself, interjecting an insistent triplet fill, but Bishop does not give ground just yet. He picks up Butterfield's pattern and tosses it back, charging ahead with his solo. Butterfield responds with a series of held notes, beginning at 06:15, and then launches into his own brief solo. The guitars play sustained tones behind him beginning at about 06:30, creating a most unusual moment. While Arnold and Davenport are churning ahead, a juggernaut of rhythmic intensity, and Butterfield is improvising a line full of gutsy, drawn-out phrases, Bishop and Bloomfield layer notes suggesting G and C chords – the fourth and flatted seventh chords in the key of D – behind Paul's D-scale assertions. The effect is extraordinary and disorienting all in the same moment – it's as though "East-West" has come unglued and everyone is playing a different tune. What we have in this brief segment is undoubtedly the first example of an *atonal* passage played in a pop music environment (and there haven't been many others since). Butterfield momentarily rallies the players at 07:31 with a repeated staccato figure and the band focuses while he fires off an intense 45 seconds of blues harmonica playing, punctuated by Davenport's crashing accents.

But then at 08:32, Naftalin (or perhaps Bishop) recreates the atonality with a few off-kilter arpeggios and Butterfield reverts to D-based pedal tones. What follows is a passage more startling than the previous: by 09:10, "East-West" 3 seems to have dissolved into complete musical anarchy. That a pop group – albeit one as progressive as the Paul Butterfield Blues Band – would venture into such uncharted territory in a public performance shows just how willing to push the limits these young musicians were.

By 09:10, 'East-West' 3 seems to have dissolved into complete musical anarchy.

At 09:22, Butterfield calls a halt to the experimentation with a throaty "Yeah!" shouted over his harp mic. The band moves into "East-West" 3's first crescendo at 10:18 and, after building furiously for 12 bars, comes to complete halt at 10:38.

BEFORE THE AUDIENCE has a chance to catch their breath, Michael Bloomfield roars out of the gate. His opening volley comes so close on the heels of the crescendo that it borders on violence. He opens the Turkish bazaar that is Section (2), the Eastern portion of "East-West," with a wild modal run, and Bishops punches a descending E-string glissando in support. A listener can be heard to utter a stunned "Wow!," and Bloomfield is off. He improvises around a series of rhythmic motives, worrying the notes, repeating staccato runs and building tension as Davenport and Arnold – Jerome's booming bass notes frequently overwhelming the sound mix – forge ahead. At 12:22, Bloomfield plays a D, holds it for a bar, stretches it to an E and then back again several times, accentuating the semi-tones between the two notes with a nervous tremolo. The effect is almost sitar-like, except that the volume by this point is almost certainly ear-splitting. Bishop begins to play in 3/4 time, plucking a single note for every downbeat in the pattern and creating a secondary pulse counter to the steady 4/4 being laid down by Billy Davenport. Bloomfield unleashes a fusillade of notes for another three minutes before triggering a second crescendo beginning at about 14:48 and concluding abruptly at 15:23.

BILLY DAVENPORT came up with the idea of using a bossa nova beat for "East-West."
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To open Section (3), the Melodic section, Bloomfield starts with the fifth note in the D-scale, a resounding A. He then outlines the section's major tonality by playing a variation on the now-familiar E-F#-A-B-and-back run. Mark Naftalin is once again right there, shadowing Bloomfield's lines with sympathetic phrases of his own, and Butterfield quietly lends support like some ghostly blue zephyr. The band's performance has gone from exceedingly loud to nearly inaudible (except for Billy Davenport's insistent symbol-and-tom-tom accenting of the third beat of each measure) in the blink of an eye. A few audience members offer faint applause, but most seem to be waiting for what comes next.

At 15:55, Bloomfield uses a technique that he would employ to good effect in the Electric Flag, the band he would form in the spring of 1967 after leaving Butterfield. He strikes a note with the volume on his Les Paul turned down and then gradually turns the volume up, making the note audible. The result produces a vocal-like sound, and when done well with a series of notes, can make the guitarist's lines seem to sing. Guitarist Jeff Beck would later turn this technique into a fine art, but here Bloomfield simply plays a single note over every

other measure, eliciting an approving "Hey!" from a band member. After a minute during which he begins to combine a wide tremolo with the volume technique giving his guitar a decidedly unearthly sound, he holds a note to the point of feedback and then launches a solo based on the D-major scale. Butterfield, Bishop and Naftalin have all but dropped out at this point, allowing Bloomfield room to freely improvise over the bass and drums. At 19:26 he plays a series of octaves evoking the 12-string sound associated with the Byrds (a group the Butterfield band had shared a stage with numerous times) and then goads Davenport into building to a false crescendo at 19:42, similar to that heard in the final section of "East-West" 1.

AT 19:51, BLOOMFIELD introduces Motive E, the phrase that uses whole notes to move from D to F# and back. Bishop picks up the line and Butterfield follows, playing off the mic to create an acoustic sound. Michael begins quietly to solo again while Billy Davenport switches to mallets and, after a few minutes, "East-West" 3 has become an ensemble effort. The virtuoso display and excess of the early versions of the piece have been put aside in favor of a collective effort to make music. The effect is stunning.

Out of this collaboration emerges Motive B at 24:34. What was a standard blues riff – the familiar "Chicken Shack" phrase – now becomes something transcendent as Bloomfield, Bishop and Naftalin softly play the F#-G-A call-and-response melody and Butterfield feels his way with the harmony. They play through the 16-bar line twice, and the last two bars of the second 16 stand as some of the prettiest in all pop music. Pretty – and pretty profound.

The virtuoso display and excess of the early versions of 'East-West' have been put aside in favor of a collective effort to make music.

But there's no time to savor the moment. The band moves immediately on to Motive C at 25:28 and into the Bloomfield/Bishop duet which is, at this point in "East-West's" evolution, a wild, ranging affair. And then without pause the two guitars begin Motive D, firing up the final crescendo. Mark Naftalin, ever the quiet, supportive accompanist, asserts himself for the first time with a full-blown rendition of the Christmas hymn, "Joy to the World," while the band creates an absolute torrent of sound.

The final crescendo then builds interminably, stretching for 16 intense bars before crashing to a halt. The players then tag their efforts with a final D-chord and the audience erupts in boisterous applause. A winded Butterfield can be heard over the uproar bidding the crowd good night: "On behalf of the band, we'd like to thank you very much. We're going home, baby!"

Epilogue for a Masterpiece

And so, after detailed examination, it becomes clear that "East-West" is a richly complex and fluid composition constructed loosely around recurring themes and motives – figures that refer not only to the American blues idiom but to jazz and eastern traditions as well. "East-West" stands in stark contrast to the popular music of its time for this fact alone.

But "East-West" also set the standard for musicianship in 1966. Butterfield and company played their sets with precision and professionalism, and demonstrated what a pop band comprised of serious players could sound like. It also established the benchmark for rock improvisation and technical skill, and did so before any of its soloists had reached his 25th year.

It might be a stretch to argue that "East-West" is first evidence of a hybrid musical form that would grow and develop in the seventies and eighties, but it may well be true. Miles Davis was largely responsible for the creation of electric jazz in 1968, and Miles was an admirer of Michael Bloomfield. He knew Bloomfield's work with Electric Flag and had probably heard "East-West" prior to forming his own ground-breaking electric band. The resulting genre, known as "fusion," combined elements of jazz and rock in a fashion first pioneered by "East-West." Fusion would drift into excess and superficiality in later years, but its basic esthetic was established by the Butterfield Band in 1966.

MILES DAVIS created electric jazz, or "fusion," in 1968. He may have been inspired in part by Michael Bloomfield's "East-West."
PROVIDED PHOTO

Today "East-West" is known primarily to music historians, aging boomer blues fans and the occasional young guitar wiz. But it deserves a better fate. I assert that "East-West" should be widely acknowledged as one of the seminal works of American popular music. It's true that the piece is an artifact, a fond memory of the heady days of the '60s, but it is also true that "East-West" has also served as inspiration for countless musicians to *learn* their instruments. It established a standard for rock virtuosity, and it showed that experimentation could be an end in itself.

A thirteen-minute pop tune with no words? Inconceivable to anyone except maybe the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Cream, the Allman Brothers and countless other groups.

After 1966, that is.

David Dann is a commercial artist, amateur musician and host of "Crosscurrents" on NPR-affiliate WJFF 90.5 FM in upstate New York. He maintains a collection of 7,000 blues and jazz recordings and writes occasionally about music for web publication. An extensive discography and performance history for Michael Bloomfield can be found at www.blooms-disco.com. For more information, visit the official Bloomfield Web site at www.mikebloomfield.com.

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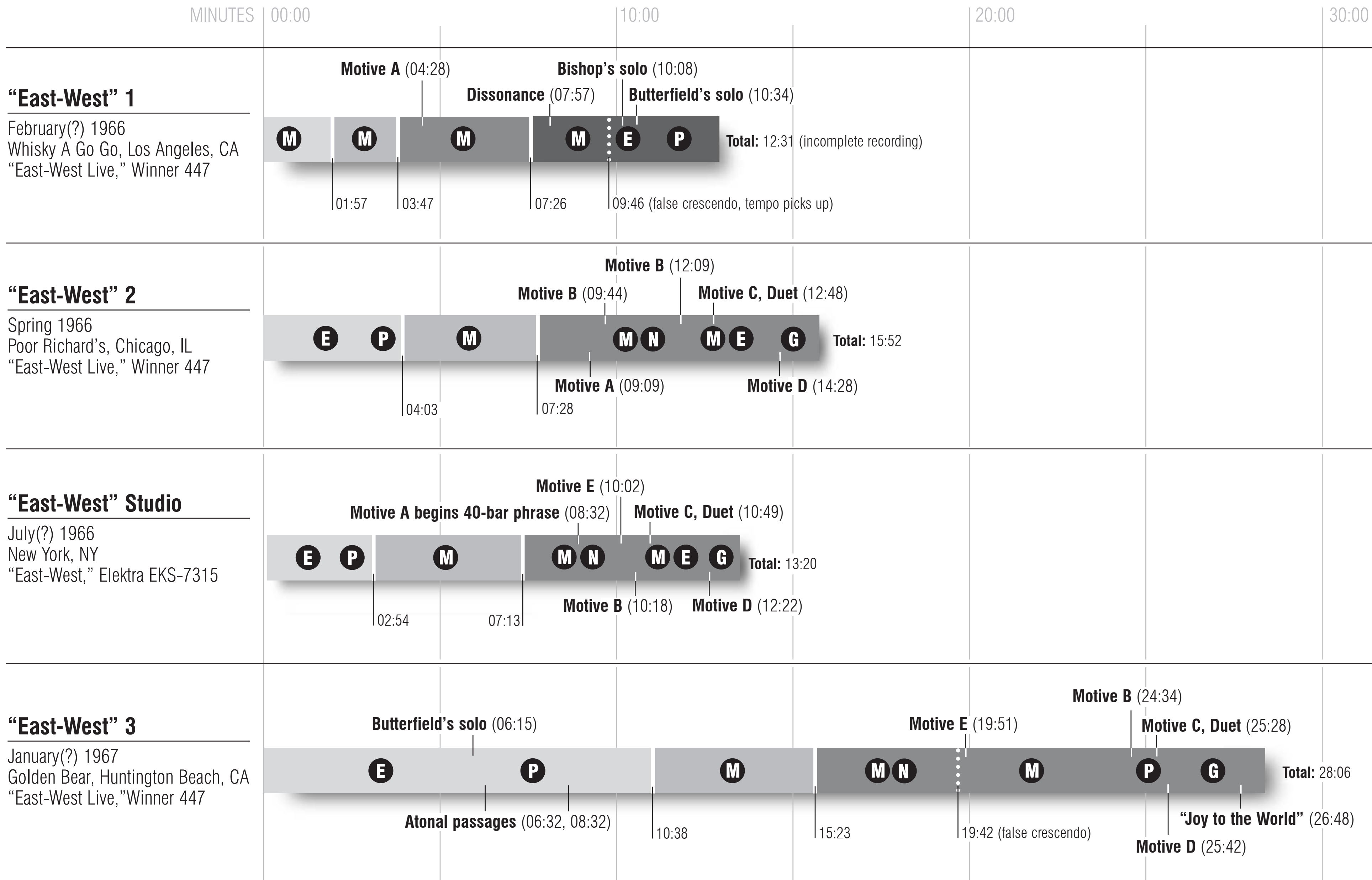
Structure and Development of ‘East-West’ • Paul Butterfield Blues Band, 1966-67

A graphic representation by David Dann



Sections

BLUES/ROCK   EASTERN   MELODIC   SLOW

Soloists

M Michael Bloomfield   E Elvin Bishop   P Paul Butterfield   N Mark Naftalin accompaniment   G Ensemble

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