

Fine Blues From Muddy Waters

Muddy Waters has been an imposing figure in the blues, probably the music's most imposing figure, since Alan Lomax recorded him for the Library of Congress in 1942. His Chess records of the 50's were so powerful and intense that few other bluesmen have come close to matching them. But lately Mr. Waters has been ill, and at his appearance during the Newport Jazz Festival last summer he was a shadow of his former self.

Late last year, the rock guitarist, Johnny Winter produced a new Muddy Waters Album, "Hard Again." He put Mr. Waters together with James Cotton, a harmonica player who left Mississippi for Chicago several years after Mr. Waters, and fleshed out the group with Mr. Cotton's regular bassist and drummer and Mr. Water's pianist and rhythm guitarist. The album was excellent, except when Mr. Winter played tastelessly busy guitar solos and screamed in the background. One wondered how this mixture of talents would work on stage.

At the Palladium on Friday evening, it worked very well indeed. The group performed without Mr. Waters during

the first half, and although Mr. Winter still played too many notes and tended to hog the spotlight, his vocals were gritty and direct and much of his guitar work was restrained and appropriate.

Mr. Cotton's dramatic harmonica style, which combines the percussive high-register effects that were popular in the Delta during the early 50's with the more legato Chicago style associated with Little Walter, lent the numbers on which he was featured soloist a raw edge of excitement. Pine-top Perkins's vocal on Robert Night-hawk's "Anna Lee Blues" and his chopping, incisive piano solos were highlights of the evening.

Mr. Waters's hour on stage seemed more like 15 minutes. He prowled restlessly, roaring out the assertive lyrics of "Mannish Boy," and turned in a two-chorus slide guitar solo that brought down the house. Mr. Winter may not be the world's subtlest blues guitarist, but his energy and the aggressive playing of the band pushed Mr. Waters into one of the finest blues performances this reviewer has seen in years.

ROBERT PALMER