

Big Jay McNeely Interview: 13th July 1991

Q: It's great to speak to you, that was a great show! You made history. You were rock n' roll before there was rock n' roll

BJMcN: In the early Fifties it was holiday time, man, playing things white kids would respond to!

Q: Well there's not too much in the history books, not too much documented, about you other than bits and pieces on reissue albums, so what for you were the highlights of those years

BJMcN: Well, I broke up the Jonnie Rae sessions in California! I was playing to four, five thousand white kids every week. We'd go to a theatre in the neighbourhood [the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles] and pack it. It's all closed down but at 12 o'clock [the concert began at midnight] we start at so they'd board me out in L.A. At that time our kind of music — they called it Race Music back then — none of them white radio stations would play it, only Hunter Hancock and he was white. So he was in the middle of things. He'd play only for black audiences, white artists would record one of their numbers, he wouldn't play it. He'd strictly stay with the blacks. I had to leave town 'cos they wouldn't give me a permit to play and so what they did after, they saw the white kids respond so much to my music they'd take the saxophone out, put the guitar in, and now they could market it to the white race...[and he's not joking, a key riff halfway through his own hit, '3-D' unmistakably re-appears played by guitar on Bill Haley's massive hit 'Rock Around the Clock']

Q: Going back to those early years, 'Deacon's Hop' was your first hit record and put you on the map, so to speak

BJMcN: 'Deacon's Hop' was a big number — I started to play it tonight but the band hadn't really gotten into it like I wanted, so I thought it best to stay in the pocket with everyone else. My first hit record was 'Deacon's Hop', yes, then there was '3-D' — there were a lot of things on Federal [record label]. And 'All That Wine Is Gone' on Imperial with the late Jessie Belvin, that was big for me in '59. Then I had to go on the road 'cos if I'd been white with that type of charisma, I could have made a million dollars. But a pioneer never makes anything — like a pioneer finds a land, a

pioneer never makes anything after he breaks new ground. I was just too early, but now, if the style of music was like it was then — like it's '91, if you look at it, it was '49, you're looking at 50 years. I continue on. But they bring more white artists — so as soon as a black artist cut a record they'd have one out the next day, and they was on major companies. So being on a major company they'd just flood you, because sometimes they could take a number recorded by another artist and put it out all over a bunch of cats with a small company.

Q: You'll know you were not alone in this, Pat Boone covering Little Richard would have been funny if it wasn't so tragic, but you got your records are still out there, like 'Something on Your Mind' which was another biggie

BJMcN: Everybody covered that — Buddy Guy did it, even Professor Longhair did it! It can be done Country and a whole bunch of ways

Q: I've seen amazing photos of you in the old days, crowds going wild, and you used a lot of those gimmicks tonight, and they still work!

BJMcN: Yeah, my act became known for honkin' and screamin' — the light act, laying on the floor, getting the audience screaming and hollering!

Q: It was amazing the audience reaction you got — and still get! But you went out of music at one point in your career — that seems incredible...

BJMcN: I wanted to go to meetings — you know, like Jehovah's Witness and things — you become conscious of your spiritual needs, you know? It's built within each one of us to worship, some people worship the sun, some the trees, the creator, so that's the point. I had to make a decision to stay in music or go to the meetings. So when I did it was very rough 'cos I didn't know anything but music. I had no other trade. The reason I got into playing music was when I was sixteen I had a job [at the Firestone Rubber Company] and I felt there had to be a better way to make a living than working eight hours a day — nothing wrong with that — but I was sixteen then. I said 'Hey man!' My brother had a saxophone, so I went up there and got that thing, an alto a guy

called Buddy Hovrett gave us. I said, 'Man, I'm going to learn to play this thing!' So I studied it. The neighbourhood was very poor, you know? And I used to practise ten, twelve o'clock at night, and they'd call the police on you. I was determined, my brother got out of the army and I had a band — Charlie Parker had come to L.A., I have to say he inspired me the most. I got close to him and my mother even ended up washing his clothes! Charlie Parker's dirty laundry! I started playing jazz with [alto saxophonist] Sonny Criss and [pianist] Hampton Hawes — we were at the [Los Angeles] Polytech [High School] together — we had a band together, played the Last Word. I played with Miles Davis when he first came out of St. Louis, playing in L.A., he sat in with the band — they all did when they came out to the West Coast — Howard McGhee, Teddy Edwards. Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie — all the guys who came out to the West Coast. Roy Porter, a whole lot of jazz guys on the scene then. Sonny Criss, Hampton Hawes, we went to the [Los Angeles] Polytechnic [High School] together, Sonny Criss and I was at Poly, then we left together and went to Jefferson High. That's where Ernie Andrews and the Farmer brothers come from — Jefferson High School. A lot of good players. So after I got out of school I studied. I went to a teacher. I went to Joseph Cadaly. He played first saxophone in the RKO Studios. I studied *solfeggio*, ear training, learned how to breathe and use the diaphragm properly — then I ran out of money, had to stop after a year. By the time I stopped a guy called Ralph Bass [a talent scout for Savoy Records] said, 'Big Jay, do you want to record?' I said 'Yeah!' So he gave me one of the Glenn Miller records with a soft tempo and I come up with 'Deacon's Hop', and boom! It was a smash hit, man! [In February 1949 it topped the Race Records chart]

Q: So that's how you got into rhythm and blues from jazz?

BJMcN: I wanted to make some money — that's the first thing! I came from a poor family, I think everyone has to find out where they fit in the music stream. I like jazz, I started off playing jazz. I played alongside the greats — Charlie Parker, had a band with Sonny Criss and Hamp Hawes. At times I play a lot of light jazz tunes but one time I wanted to be a comedian — one time I got shot off the stage at the Lincoln Theatre there, then came back with my saxophone the next week — won second prize! I like to entertain people, that's where I belong, I belong in music so I just made the shift by starting off playing jazz — it helps you to be able to do more variety of things, like with this show here [The Blues Revue featuring Otis Rush, Big Time Sarah and Big Jay McNeely that

played the North Sea Jazz Festival on Saturday 13 July 1991], it's a blues type of thing, so you're locked into the blues. However, when I do my own show, I do 'Autumn Nocturne', 'Exotico', 'I Can't Stop Loving You', and get the whole audience to sing! But this is a blues type of thing, so you lock into the blues. So I lock right into what they're doing rather than change the whole programme. So that's it, when you have a stack of things to learn from from a teacher you can't learn on your own. You learn how to breathe properly, how to get a big sound, how to approach this, how to approach that, I mean — you can tell when a pianist plays, you can tell whether he's studied, you can hear it flowing through his playing — same thing with a horn. A person has to have some quality to what they're doing. So that's what you figure. I first recorded in '49, honkin' and screaming, but there's another side to me too, but people didn't get a chance to hear me 'cos they wouldn't record me!

Q: Well, those records on the Savoy label back then — you, Sam 'The Man Taylor', all those guys — you certainly started something that's still going strong, you had something the public wanted! But listen, just picking up your story again, how did you get back into music?

BJMcN: Well, I was in the Post Office for 12 years, but I never stopped playing, for a long time I played five nights a week, then I got a job at Tiki's playing weekends, two nights a week and Chuck Landers, the one that managed me you know? He got this thing in London [a '1950's R&B Spectacular' at the Electric Ballroom in Camden Town, London where Big Jay topped the bill over Chuck Higgins, Young Jessie and Willie Egan] so we all went over. So I said I would come over if I could record. I didn't know what I was going to record. I didn't have no ideas in my head. So we went over there and recorded, uh...it was pretty good!

Q: What label was that? Was it Ace?

BJMcN: Yuh. Ace Records... er, then we did a Grammy performance [for the internationally televised Blues segment of the 1987 Grammy Awards], so anyway, I got a real enjoyment doing the Grammy Awards that year. That was the first time they had the blues on the Grammy, there was Albert King, B B King, Ry Cooder, Junior Wells, Robert Cray...

Q: Wow, that's some company you were keeping

BJMcN: Yeah, Etta James and myself. That was the only year they had it on there, you know, and we broke it up! It was a good show, so then I came over [to Europe] and started the Boogie Woogie [McNeely regularly performed at the International Boogie Woogie Festival in The Netherlands] then I came over, played with an international group. [Detroit] Gary Wiggins and I was introduced to Germany [in 1989, McNeely was performing with Wiggins during the European Saxomania Tour II at West Berlin's Quasimodo Club the night the Berlin Wall came down, 'and Cold War legend has it that they blew down the Berlin Wall in 1989 with earth-shaking sonic sax torrents outside the Quasimodo Club']. So now I've just come back from Australasia and we recorded while I was in Australasia. We did the Gold Coast festival, TV shows and er...and now we've got North Sea, Montreux, and a festival up in Scandinavia — I was up there for two days. So we gotta do one in Brussels on the 20th...

Q: Well, I know people are waiting for you outside, so thanks so much for making time for me at short notice, it really was very generous of you, but I'm hoping we've still got time to do that photo we talked about?

BJMcN: Sure, man. Let me get my saxophone, you want me in my gloves too?.... Can you send me a copy of the magazine when it comes out?

Q: Sure, can you write down your address and I'll do it myself

WIND UP INTERVIEW

My feature on Big Jay was published in The Wire magazine in their November 1991 edition, a copy of which was sent to Big Jay's home address at his request, to which he kindly sent a letter of thanks, a small courtesy that has never been forgotten. Warm hearted and generous, I was saddened to learn of his passing on 16 September 2018, aged 91 years.