

Jimmy Johnson interview.

At the Kingston Mines, 2548 N. Halsted, Chicago.

10 September 1982, 9 pm.

(We start with me listening to a cassette of solo music that JJ has done at home.)
Well, naturally I gotta have a band to play on the bandstand, 'cos I can only play one instrument at a time. But I just enjoy doing it, you know what I mean? You'll notice that even on the blues there's a different arrangement that I got on it. So I can get my own arrangements much easier like that.

How did you start off doing this?

Well, always, you sit down and practise on the instrument and all of a sudden you get a idea in your head and you play it to see how it sound. And it sound all right, so you say, oh , that's a good idea, and you get it down on tape. But that music there sound almost as good as my records.

Yes, the quality's very good.

Yeah, that's what I mean. And I do that at home! Just imagine if I'd been in the studio, where they have a big board, you know. 'Cos this is only - well, it's a good board, it's a kind of expensive board, but in the studio you'd get much better quality than that. Although that is a pretty good quality.

That first track is like a mixture of soul, and funk, and jazz, and blues.

It's a Ramsay Lewis tune. No. Grover Washington. What does he play? Jazz? Kind of funk-jazz.

What makes you want to do a solo record?

Just the fun of doing it.

You're not dissatisfied with your Alligator and Delmark stuff, then?

Not really, no. OK, the reason why I do it, you know when you accompany something that do you a lot of good, 'cos you accompany something. How many people you know do that?

None.

One. There's one dude. Stevie Wonder. (The synth player starts tuning up. Tape stops.)

It seems like your career has taken off since you started playing blues.

Yeah, you could put it like that. But also you could put it another way. It's a matter of changing circuits.

Is this better than the soul circuit?

Oh yeah. The soul circuit is only as good as your hit record, only as good as your record. If you got a hit record, you're good. And when it die, you die with it. It's hard to get built up to where you last. If you got a hit record, and you don't get another hit record in a couple of years... ain't no record. Like the local musicians ain't nothing, unless you play with a big artist.

The blues circuit in this town seems quite healthy. Plenty of bars, everyone seems to get a chance.

Yeah, Everybody that is, if you play blues. If you don't play blues, a lot of them, they won't hire you. Although the general public, they will accept any kind of music if it's good. Like do yourself with feeling, and it's good music, they will accept any kind of music, 'cos sometimes I will do some soul music, and it go over better than blues. Yeah. But if that's all the kind of music you do, most likely they won't hire you. You won't get a chance.

Looking through your past, the Alligator recordings seem to be quite a landmark.

That was the first thing got me kind of started. I had recorded, but like you say, I was on the soul circuit, and the record didn't sell two copies. It might have been OK music, but the soul circuit is kind of funny - if you got a record on the soul circuit, it's got to be played every day on the radio for it to sell. But if you make a blues record, it'll never sell a million, but it's going to sell, you know what I mean? And it don't have to be played on the radio.

Although that would be nice.

Oh, I wish they would. Then you could get a big seller. 'Cos you only get to a few people, there's so many people, you never get to 'em.

I bought your Delmark LP. What impressed me most about it is the fact that there are new songs on it.

Well, the next one is the same way. There's nine originals this time, the whole LP is original.

It says on the back that the songs are by the Jimmy Johnson band. Does that mean you wrote them together?

I got a little help from the band, and Carl, he wrote Strange How I Miss You. He wrote all the words to that, except maybe a couple of words in there I might have changed, but that was mostly the one he wrote. And the rest of the band, we would just sit down in rehearsal, and they would have an idea here and there. If I get stuck for a word, maybe I'd get a word from him, a word from him - 'Oh, yeah, OK, that's good.' You know, like that. That's a real good way, if you get a band, and you get cooperation from the whole band. It's much easier for a bunch of guys to do something than it is one. Like say for me, if I'm going to record a song, I don't know whether it's going to be good, or bad. But one thing - I gotta make it different. See, when you play a tune, you want it to be identified, when it starts playing. You can identify it. Not just sit back and play Jimmy Reed and sing over the top of it. I don't like that.

That happens a lot.

I know. I listens to it a lot, and I don't like it. Naturally you never know what the public will like, but you have to use your own ideas about the way the music supposed to go, and th n if somebody like it, good.

I've been doing a lot of listening, and it gets boring when everybody sings the same songs.

You heard my band yet? Well, you notice, my band is different from other bands.

When you hear my band, you can't category it with Joe Blow. Even if we do the Thrill Is Gone, we're going to do it a different way.

Your synth player is good, and I can't think of another blues band that has one. And also you give him a lot of solo time. I don't know another blues band that have one. Right. Some people have told me, man that synthesiser don't fit no blues. Ha! Don't tell me what don't fit. I don't wanna sound like Pine Top Perkins. I wanna sound like Jimmy Johnson. If you goes a long ways different man, I'm telling you, there are going to be people who are hot going to like it. But you don't go by one of the people not liking. You gotta go my the majority, and I believe as long as you're different, you're chances are better. Now you got your die-hard blues fans. They probably don't like that synthesiser, know what I mean? But I think on the other hand, I make up for it by playing music where I don't bore, you know what I mean? At least make it exciting.

It seems to me that if you're going to keep the blues alive, you're going to have to put new things into it.

Right! Exactly. That's exactly right.

And these 'purists' aren't doing the music any favours by saying that you've got to sound like Muddy Waters or Jimmy Reed or Sonny Boy Williamson.

No. That might be OK for today - but you gotta think about tomorrow. Eventually people gonna get bored with that type of music. People always looking for something new. That's why - excuse the word, I don't usually like the word, because a man is a man to me, regardless - but that's why white people started to listening to blues a lot. Because they got tired of their other music, they got tired, they wanted something new. So the blues was new to them, but it wasn't new to us, because we've been listening to it since the twenties and the thirties. You know what I mean? But to them, it was new music.

It seems that the white market has to be considered now - maybe more than the black market.

Well, the black audience, they are very sophisticated when it come to music. See, what we're playing for these people, they heard this shit thirty years ago. Thirty to forty years ago. So they're searching for something new. Their music done went like, to me it went like space music. You ever notice how that shit sound with all them noise and shit in it? Really left music, you know. They're looking for something new. This ain't new to them.

Your new Delmark LP is going to be Delmark's last for some time.

Will this make a gap in your recording career?

Oh no. It's easy for me to get with another company, now. When you once get a name, it's easy. See, like a lot of people that bought the other record, they will buy this one just for curiosity. To see what the next one sound like. So when you once get a name, people always know they can sell a record, and it's easy to get a record deal with them. But when you're a new artist, that's when it's hard.

After the Alligator series, why did you go to Delmark, and not stay with them?

Steve Tomashefsky, I like him. Me and him are real cool. You know how it is when you like somebody. I think he's a real nice feller, and he needed an artist. Alligator don't need no artists, they got a lot of artists. Delmark didn't have no artists. They had nothing, all they had was old records by Jimmy Dawkins, Junior Wells, and different people. They didn't have a new artist. I was the first new artist that they had, you know, that's playing the modern music. With Alligator I felt it would have been kind of like a Fat Race, but I figure with Delmark, I'm the only one that they got to push! You know what I mean? Alligator, they got Son Seals, Lonnie Brooks, Fenton Robinson, Albert Collins, Koko Taylor - you know what I mean? So he's got to put a lot of attention to those, so I might get lost in the shuffle!

Well, it's worked out very well. What's your new one called? North and South. Whatever that means.

Who named it?

The producer, Steve. I didn't like it. He have his reasons. I really didn't like Johnson's Whacks. It's meant to be funny, novelty. And after it turned out - you know, from the beginning I didn't like it, I wasn't real excited about it - but after it turned out, it turned out OK. So he probably had a good idea, because his ideas are sort of like mine - he want to be different. You'll notice I didn't put my picture on the LP. Like the first thing a person will do is stick their picture right up there on the cover. So he was trying to think of a different idea, you know, put something on the cover exciting, but not my face up there man, because everybody do that.

It's not even on the back. I'm very impressed. I like the songs on it. Twelve Bar Blues is very funny.

It's a novelty. It's got two meanings. Like a twelve-bar blues, you play it, and like twelve bars is like bars, you know, you go in and drink.

That stuff you just played me - there was Driving Wheel and the Grover Washington tune - is that a representative mix of what you'd put on an LP? A mixture of jazz and funk and blues...

Oh yeah.

So you don't think of yourself as a definite bluesman?

Well, I don't really like to be labelled. You know, 'There's a blues guitar player.' I'm a musician, you know what I mean? I play guitar. I play music. I play any kind of music, hillbilly, any kind, it don't matter to me. I love music. It's all I do all day, mostly, is practise and listen to music. All I do, practise and listen to music. I like it, you know what I mean? Some people may grab their guitar and go up and play to make this money. But in the daytime I just enjoy sitting down and just practising on some of them instruments. Just do me a lot of good to practise on them. And then I make my music, and sit around and listen to it, and it's: 'Wow, look what I did.' You know? And plus, the reason why I make this music, I'm like experimenting - 'cos this computer drummer, you almost have to go to school to

learn how to operate it, because it's so complicated. So I'm like experimenting with it, 'cos it will do any kind of thing that you want done, if you smart enough to put it in.

If you did do this LP, you'd still have to perform it with the band, teach them how to play it.

Oh yeah. I could take my tape-recorder and make all of tracks, and play the tape on the stage, and play with it, but that's different when people look at a band up there and just look at one cat. I know a cat, he hires a band to make his tracks for him, and he get on the bandstand - and a lot of people don't really like that. He plays pop with it, Little Mac, Little Mac Simmons. He record the track, music, and then he sing and play the harp on the bandstand. It sound all right, but it just look funny, when you hear all that music and you see one guy standing up there, blowing a harp. People like to see the live performance. There would be no way for me to go into that - unless things got awfully bad. They'd have to get real bad for me to do that. There wouldn't be a lot of fun in doing that. You have fun playing together, you know, like musicians playing together? You have fun doing that.

You're always playing in Chicago. You've come up quite a way in the last few years.

Well, I play in Chicago a lot more than the most, but I can't give you no reason for that. I'm basically lazy, I don't really like the road. I'm not what you'd call a big name...

In Chicago you are.

Well, if I start travelling, then I start to get small again.

Well, you've been to Europe, I've seen you. I've got that Black and Blue LP you're on, live in Montreux, with Buddy and Junior, '78. Must have been fun playing with those guys. Did you enjoy Montreux?

Mostly all the gigs in Europe, I always enjoy them.

I've heard it said that it doesn't pay too well any more, the circuit.

Well, the dollar went so hot. I had a tour, was coming up in October, but they had to cancel it because the dollar went so high they couldn't afford it. Man, what is it? Seven francs for a dollar? It's usually a little better than four. So look what they gotta pay, 'cos they gotta buy the American dollar in order to pay me.

I saw you in Paris in '79 with Dizz, Moose, Big Mojo, Odie Payne, and Willie James Lyons. What was that like?

That was a drag. It was better with Buddy and Junior, 'cos see, we had some sidemen in the group. Like, I was one of them. I know how to be a sideman, know what I mean? But on this gig, man, we had no sidemen. Nobody want to play for you! It get to be drag. And I tell them to their face it was a drag. That was something I'll never do again. Oh man, talk about hard. 'Cos see, like when you're doing your thing, them cats, they just won't play. But now see, when we was with Buddy,

I was a sideman, Odie Payne was a sideman, Dave Myers was a sideman, who else was a sideman? Did we have a piano player? No. But any way, they had me as a sideman, Dave Myers as a sideman. He's the type of cat, sideman don't mean nothing to him, he'll just play. He's not trying to be a star. Me, Dave, and Odie. So at least you had three sidemen. Right. Because if I'm going to play for Buddy and Junior, I'm gonna play for them cats, man! I'd do that right today. If I pick up my guitar and go up on that bandstand to play for somebody, believe me, I'm gonna play the best I can - behind them. And not try to jump out in front of them.

I remember about two months ago, in here, it was your gig, and James Cotton came up and pretty much took over.

I really didn't like that, he wouldn't like it if I did it to him, but now he's supposed to be a big deal, but to me he's no big deal, not like that. That wasn't right. Let me call him up. This is my gig, man! But I just went along with it, you know.

I noticed. And when he went down, you did Caldonia at about two hundred miles an hour.

Yeah. Well, I don't want to play it the way the next cat play it! We got our little thing on it, the way we play it. James, he did that before. I respect him, but I really didn't like it. As a matter of fact, he was high, too. He was very high. But now, I never did that to anybody, I don't care who they are. I'd never walk up on somebody's bandstand and take the mike out of their hand, you can't do that man, that's not pro.