



Quintus McCormick, Chicago Blues Festival, 2010. Photo: Mike Stephenson.

QUINTUS McCORMICK INTERVIEW

By Mike Stephenson

My real name is Quintus Darrell McCormick and I was born and raised in Detroit, before I could read and write my aunt would go tell me to put on different songs by Bobby Bland or B.B. King. I would go to the records and never put the record on the wrong side and never make a mistake about putting a record on. I got a guitar for Christmas and my brother got a tape player, I was about eight at the time. I learnt how to play Bill Doggett's 'Honky Tonk' and we taped a piece of it and I sang a few words to it and my mother heard it and it just gassed her. Her father used to play guitar for things like fish fries and as he got older he started preaching and the guitar stayed under the bed. So maybe I just inherited something. My grandmother on my father's side, she played piano and taught piano at the YMCA.

I got hit by a truck when I was seven. This paint company blew up and I went to investigate the fire and the police blew the whistle for us to cross the street and I was in a race with other kids to get across the street and this truck hit me and everything went in slow motion. I was in hospital and eventually they cut my leg off as it got gangrene.

My mother, when I was young, asked me if I wanted to take music lessons. I learned guitar at a church right opposite the school I was at. I used to practice the guitar all the time then. I was thirsty and hungry to learn. This guy asked me to play Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway To Heaven' when I was sitting on the porch one day and I blew him away with it, and then a little later I got home and I found a Strat sitting on the couch. This guy Jerome Lockheart, he was selling the Strat for \$125 and he gave me that guitar. It was like having a real guitar to play after the other guitars I had played, it was like playing lightning. It was good that I had played other guitars that weren't so good as it made my playing more precise and my dexterity better and my chording better. We had little rock groups back then. My mother, when I was about twenty I visited Gary one day to see her mother for Mother's Day and I went and ended up staying around, and my cousin at church asked me to stay as he wanted me to play. Back then I wouldn't play nothing but gospel.

Basically I was going to work, going to school and going to church and I stopped playing secular music. My life was devoted to Christ then. I would play for the choir in the church. The name of the church was the Trinity Deliverance Centre in Detroit. I came to Chicago in 1978 and I stayed and I got a job the first day I came here. It was me paying bank drafts all over the world and calculating prices for fashion stores and about a year after that I went into a singing contest. Before that I was still playing but playing anything. I would play at the Church of Zion with my grandmother and stuff but that was still in Indiana. My grandmother had sixteen kids and my mother was the youngest of them.

I went back to school for music in Chicago. I was working at the Sears Tower and something hit me thinking, did I want to stay in this place for the next

twenty years with a wife and car and nice house but you would not be satisfied, I hadn't pursued what I am best at which is music. So I got out of there and went back to school for music. I went to Harold Washington School and left there and went to Columbia College and then went to Roosevelt College for a semester. I had to stop from time to time to go to work. I couldn't go straight through with college. I was grown by then, I was something like 25 then so I had to work to survive and get through college.

I met different guys back then and a guy would let me buy sheet music for next to nothing, so I was listening to a lot of popular music playing different chords and different songs and it all helped me get the words right for songs. I can read music which helps me develop chords when I play, that others may not be able to do or hear. In school you have to learn how to spell chords, you learn music theory and I was a freak for learning that. I graduated from Columbia College with an Instrumental Performance major. I didn't stay at Roosevelt College too long as they wanted me to redo classes I had done already. The only reason I went there was because James Mack was there teaching, he was an arranger and producer for just about everything Tyrone Davis did. Mack was into the industry and into orchestra stuff. He taught us to learn music and not to make mistakes. He only taught a certain amount of classes, so to get to Mack was a heck of a thing.

Mack had opened up a class called Orchestration. In our class you had to write what you played. He wouldn't let you make mistakes. There is no mistakes in music, the only mistakes you may hear on record is when somebody let it go through when they were recording and they didn't have the equipment back in the early days, so that's maybe why mistakes were made and heard. I got taught to be precise in my music and I'm grateful for that. If I play a wrong note or chord it's like scratching a blackboard to me.

When I first got to Chicago I would go to singing contests, then eventually I put a band together with guys from the neighbourhood, we would go to the park and play anything and drink beer. I started playing at a theatre in Chicago in a story about the other Cinderella and that play got going from 1987 through to 1989 and it went out on the road for a while. It was supposed to run for just three months but it just kept going. That was my opportunity to meet the Lone Ranger and other musicians who had been through Columbia College themselves who could read music, so I tried to be around them as much as I could so I could learn more about the structure of music. I didn't start playing the blues until about 1989.

My buddy Rick Hall, he used to play with The Dells and now he plays with Buddy Guy. I would play with him and the first job I did with him was at the Checkerboard and we would play with J.W. Williams. I did some other jobs with J.W. like Artis' at the weekend, he had a regular date there for years. He asked me to join his band the Chi Town Hustlers so I played with him for about a year up to 1991. I played with Lefty Dizz, that was great. I used to come home in a great big limousine and had a pot full of money and I'm thinking, I love this. I was a senior in school writing music at this time so I wasn't thinking of playing the blues for a living. J.W. helped me get some blues chops, which helped



Quintus McCormick, Chicago Blues Festival, 2010. Photo: Mike Stephenson.

me develop blues guitar and understanding more about it. I had been used to playing Z.Z. Hill stuff. Later on in 1992 I played with James Cotton and I had just graduated from Columbia College and I had just got a job at the Hilton. I would go into Legends club just about every day and hang out and I started meeting other people there and I did a stint with Jimmy Tillman and Jackie Taylor, they would take me to other clubs. I recorded about seven albums when I was in the church from about 1985 through to 1992, this was a church on the South side of Chicago. Every year they cut an album. When I started playing with James Cotton I started going to church less. James was good to me and he helped me on the road and he nurtured me and he told me stories of the older guys in the blues like when he was with Muddy, and that helped me get into the blues. I then played with the Scott Brothers, we were backing up Otis Clay. In 1994 I decided that I wanted to play the blues and get a band together. So I did. I learnt a lot at Buddy Guy's Legends watching other blues acts and I started promoting myself such as being the guitarist for James Cotton and A.C. Reed. I had to start selling myself to the clubs in Chicago.

When my first band was working, there was some guys that graduated from North Western and they would come around and see me at gigs such as Rosa's and Buddy Guy's and they asked me if I would like to put a live CD together as they were putting together this record company. They wanted to make live albums with artists, so I went to work on this thing. I had cut a demo before this but it was mostly cover tunes, but for the live CD 'Live At The Morseland' (recorded in 1998 at the Morseland Music Room in Chicago), I wrote six of the ten tunes on there.

I was talking to John Primer and I told him I had this CD I had been working on and I had a lot of stuff down on there, and we talked about me going to Wolf Records to get it out but we decided that maybe Delmark Records here in Chicago would be interested and Bob Koester was interested and he wanted to hear us live and he came out to see us at Bill's Blues club and he then wanted to listen to my demo. What happened is that Shirley Johnson was cutting a CD at the time and she needed some more songs so I called her and told her I had some songs and she cut one of my songs 'You're Just Using Me' on her Delmark CD 'Blues Attack'. So what happened Bob was on vacation for a few weeks and when he got back he came to see me at Rosa's and I played some of the songs I had written and when we got done on stage he told me he was going to record me. This was August and we started cutting the CD that is called 'Hey Jodie!' in November and we cut the album or the rhythm tracks in a day, which let them see I knew what I was doing. I had been writing songs for years. I don't believe in making mistakes, especially when I'm in the studio, as if it's recorded everybody will hear it.

Between that first CD and the Delmark CD, 'Hey Jodie', I was off the scene for a while, I was in jail. I was teaching school as a substitute teacher and I have a little girl, and Child Support they made a mistake. They thought I was a school teacher full time and they were taking something like \$567 out of my pay cheque and I couldn't eat and I couldn't live and I was nearly starving and when I went to court the judge told them to fix my stuff. The guy from Child Support was in court and ended up arguing about the sum. I went to pawn a gun and they wouldn't take it and I just snapped and I stole money, stuck a man up in the parking lot. I went on a spree and went home and stayed there and I decided that this wasn't how I wanted to live my life I wanted to play music so I turned myself in. They charged me with more shit than I had done and I protested and twice it all went to court and the third time in court I was under house arrest via the parole officer. Eventually I went over the parole officer's head and showed the Deputy Director my pictures of me playing in clubs, where I had been working so he would see that I was no fluke and that I am a bandleader. At this time I wasn't allowed to work as they said I couldn't be in a place that sells alcohol, so I didn't have any money coming in. I thought this parole officer was trying to be a hard task master and that's why I went over his head. He got mad and wrote that I was not checking in and I got stopped in a grocery store and I was put in a big gin with 200 other people and I was in prison for ten months and I came out and started working in late part of 2003 and 2004, and went back November 2004 and came back November 2005 and that's when I started getting back on the music scene.

I got my life and mind cleaned up and I also wrote a bunch of music when I was in prison and it made me healthier and wiser and it made me stronger.

Interview conducted for Blues & Rhythm by Mike Stephenson in Chicago, June 2010. Many thanks go to Jim Feeney for arranging the interview. Quintus McCormick's new Delmark CD, 'Put It On Me', comes out this month (May 2011).



NUMBER 72

WALLY MERCER

'Rock Around The Clock' / 'A Lover's Prayer'

Mertone 200

This 45 was buried deep in the Ray Topping collection and what a fascinating and yes, curious, record it is. To begin with, it adds a further release to the rather small number of six records cut by Mercer over the period 1947 through to 1954.

Secondly, it extends Mercer's recording career by a further six years, given that Mercer's previously known final release on Murray Nash's Ring label was originally cut by Lillian McMurry of Trumpet Records fame in late 1954, whereas this 45 dates to 1960, based on the L80W RCA custom pressed matrix numbers.

Wally Mercer was a sax player from Pensacola, Florida, who was already in his mid-thirties by the time he released his first record on the eponymous Mertone label in 1947.

The drinking song 'Looped', cut by Mercer for Dot in 1952, deserved to be a hit, but wasn't, and versions by acts such as Tommy Ridgley on Imperial saw better sales action.

This last outing by Mercer presumably also died the death, as it is scarce enough not to have been included in 'The Blues Discography'. An interesting codicil is that the flip side, 'A Lover's Prayer' gives the writer credit to 'McMurry'!

However, we may be on the verge of finding out more on the life and works of Wally Mercer as, through the good offices of Steve Gronda, ace sleuth Dan Kochakian is in contact with Wally Mercer Jr. Watch this space!

Finally, thanks to super researcher Bill Millar, who kindly points me to Martin Goggin's liner notes to the Bear Family CD16321 on Roy Lee Johnson, wherein Johnson claimed to have played the guitar on The Brassetts' 'Nobody Does Something For Nothing' (see CC number 71). No Bill, no sign of that Roy Buchanan single, I'm afraid.

