

LINSEY ALEXANDER INTERVIEW

By Mike Stephenson

Linsey's new album 'Been There, Done That' on Delmark is getting excellent reviews. He has been in Chicago since 1960 and has cut a number of fine albums which have been released on small labels or have been self released. Mike interviewed Linsey at his home in Chicago in June of this year.

I was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi maybe 1941 or 1942 and I think I stayed there until I was about twelve or thirteen. We had to sharecrop and my father lived in one place and my mother lived in another, and I'm not sure if my mother and father were ever married. I just know my father had four kids with my mother. At some stage, I don't know the year, my mother left and left me with my sister and she moved to Memphis and got a job there. One night we were in the house me and my sisters and brothers, the four of us and we looked down the road and saw some lights coming and we wondered who it could be and it was my mother and my older brother from the other side, she had seven kids that I know of.

So they took us to Memphis from Holly Springs and I had never seen such beauty in my life. They had the streetcar and it had the trolley wires and stuff, and then I grew up in Memphis, and mother died in 1958, then I had to stay with my brother. There was a guy named Otis and he would come by the house and he had a guitar, and instead of me going off to play football, I would stay there and listen to him play the guitar.

I would just listen and listen and then he asked me if I wanted to try and he taught me to play 'Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley' and he wouldn't take his guitar home at night and I used to play it and one day he came by the house, played the guitar and he told me he would see us later and he never came back, and I never saw him again. So he left me the guitar and I would take it with me when I played football, and I used to play it when I walked home and the neighbours used to know I was coming.

I got a job in a hotel in the town, right outside of the Mississippi river and my whole family used to work there. I was a porter in the laundry room. I quit that and went to work at a bike store as a bicycle technician. My brother, who is older than me, said we should get out of town and we had a brother in Chicago, so me and him relocated to Chicago between 1959 and 1960. When I got here I lived with my brother, and the brother who came to Chicago with me got sick and he went back to Memphis and I stayed in Chicago, and my brother took me out and got me a job at a car dealer, and I took one of their cars somewhere and had an accident so they fired me. My brother had five kids so I then used to babysit them. I met a guy named Robert and he had pretty cousins and later on I had two kids by one of them and me and him got a place together and we were working at a gas station on 24th Street. I then got a job as a cook and bus boy at Marlene's

Restaurant and I started hanging out, and I used to go and see Howlin' Wolf at The Playhouse at 43rd Street and we would go there every Wednesday to see him and we didn't have to pay anything to get in. Then we would go down to 39th Street and see Lefty Dizz.

Six or seven years later I met a guy and we thought we would get a band together, but I had stopped playing, so I started playing again and I was the guitarist and he was on bass. We got a drummer and we got in the garage and practised and we used to call ourselves the Hot Tomatoes. We got our first gig out in Phoenix at a place called Boots And Saddles and it was a New Years party and it was so cold, and they had us on the stage

and the drummer got drunk and the snare drum jumped off and the snare drum rolled down the aisle and the drummer got off his seat and tried to get it and everybody thought it was part of the act. I then started hanging around with the likes of Garland Green and Artie White.

There used to be a place called The Place on 63rd Street and that's where we, the Hot Tomatoes, would go there with the talent show every Sunday and play one song, and every two weeks we would come out with a new song. I got more advanced than my band and they started holding me back, so I got rid of the drummer and we got another bass player and we got a gig at a place called The Magic Touch in Brookfield. It was one of those strip joints and they made us sit back behind the curtains to play. We got rid of the drummer, as he was a weed head. I then got another guitar player so that made us a four piece and that was my brother-in-law.

We got a group and named it Equitable Blues Band and we kept that name for a while and we played a lot of gigs, and we played at a place on 75th and Stone Island called The Launching Pad and we played there for about eight years. We left there and went to 35th and Archer and played for about ten years and after that this guy who had been coming in to watch us asked us why we were playing there. We told him that there was nowhere else to play but the money wasn't that good, we got about \$150 on average to pay four guys. This guy wanted to be our agent. So he came by and took some pictures of me and the band, and we then went out to different clubs. We went to B.L.U.E.S on Halsted and the band The Rhythm King

Blues were playing and they let me sit in. The guy who wanted to be my agent told Doc from Kingston Mines to come over and watch me when I sat in and he liked me, and the agent called me up and told me that he had got me a Tuesday night at Blue Chicago.

I was now under my own name so I got this gig at Blue Chicago and they gave me every other Tuesday and I have now been working that for fourteen years and a weekend a month. I have also been working at Kingston Mines



Linsey Alexander, Chicago, June 2012. Photo: Mike Stephenson.

regular too. I was playing there on a Sunday and a Wednesday and then I was playing at B.L.U.E.S., and along with playing at Blue Chicago I was now in the business.

I then went and cut me a CD, a four track CD that had 'I'm Tired', 'Rainy Night', 'User' and 'Higher' on it. I had about \$4,000 saved up and Ric Hall had a studio and we went ahead and made that CD and printed up 1,000 of them. I was selling them for \$10 and I took 25 of them to my gig and sold them all after the first set and I thought, well this is going to be fun. I have sold about 8,000 in all of that CD at \$10 a piece.

J.W. Williams was playing Kingston Mines along with Kid Dynamite and Kid got sick and J.W. Williams had to cover the gig and that didn't work out and they then gave me that spot and I was starting to make some good money then.

I then went and made another CD called 'Someone's Cookin' In My Kitchen' with Ric Hall again, and this time we had a whole band on there including a brass section, and we released it in 2003 although we had been recording it since about 1998 as Ric was busy playing with The Dells, doing studio work and playing with me, so it took that long. I must have sold about 1,000 of that CD and it's still selling at the price of \$20. I then did another CD called 'My Days Are So Long' and I did that with Pete Galanis who played with Howard And The White Boys and it was done at DuPage College. I had Chico Banks and Carlos Showers on guitars, Andre Howard on bass who plays with Magic Slim and a girl drummer named Janet Kramer on that disc. It turned out to be pretty good as well. Then my next CD has the front cover of me sitting on my bike and that was done by Pete Galanis, and I had Mike Wheeler and Fabrizio Rodio on guitars, Stanley Banks on the keyboards and Pooky Styx on drums and two horn players, one of them being a girl named Ayako Minami, and the CD has done very well for me and it's called 'If You Ain't Got It'. I gave the CD to Bob and his wife Sue at Delmark and they liked it.

How I connected with Delmark Records was Steve Wagner was doing one of his live broadcasts and Toronzo Cannon was there, and Toronzo let me sit in and I got up and played some stuff and Steve liked it, and I gave him some of my CDs and he said he would let Bob Koester hear them and I called them back one day and I spoke with Bob and he told me that Delmark Records were going to record me. So they set up a contract with me, and what Bob wanted to do was to buy all of my CDs and maybe put them out on his label but what he wanted to do was make a CD for him and Delmark first.

For the recordings I didn't have a song ready for the sessions so I had to get busy writing and I came up with about seven numbers for the session, so I started taking songs off of my own CDs that hadn't got air play so I had then about thirteen songs. So I did some new recordings on 'Been There And Done That' and 'Going Up On The Roof'. I went and got the musicians like Mike Wheeler on guitar, Roosevelt Purifoy on the keys, Greg McDaniel on bass, and Billy Branch as special guest amongst others. We had three days to do this so I went into the studio and did most of it live right there, and I didn't have to re-dub nothing and they said it was one of the quickest recordings they have done. I wasn't in any booth in the studio, I was in the middle of the floor playing and singing with the band and all I had to do was go back in to do two guitar solos. It's all original material except for one cover, which was a Willie Kent number 'Look Like It's Going To Rain'. I had told Willie before he died that I would like to record that song one day. I had thought about recording it on one of my other CDs but they wanted a lot of money for copyright so I didn't do it, but Delmark said they would take care of it for me.

Over the years I have played with Bobby Rush, Artie 'Blues Boy' White, B.B. King, and before Buddy Guy got to be where he is today, I played with him at his club on 43rd Street, there was me and Johnny Drummer and a couple of other musicians and we were Buddy's house band and we played behind Lefty Dizz and Buddy. Buddy liked us so well that he wanted to take us to Argentina on tour but the money wasn't good enough for me to leave my day job. I've played behind Carlos Thomas, Super Chikan, and I played for a short while with Howlin' Wolf when he was with Hubert Sumlin years back.

In the past I have worked for Chicago Police Department but I can't say too much about that and I get a pension from that. I got wounded and they then sat me behind a desk, but I didn't want that so they gave me a job in expediting people, like bringing them back from say New York and then they would give me some days off which allowed me to play my music. I got tired of doing this so they told me I could get an advanced pension. I took it and then I could play my music. I took the pension in about 1999 and 2000, about the same time I made that first CD and music has been a full time thing for me since then. I'm now keeping very busy playing and last night I did an acoustic thing with another artist but I don't like doing that too much. I've been a guest on one of Toronzo Cannon's CDs and I've done some recordings with Bonnie Lee, a 45 named 'I'm Good' and I've done some work with Big Bill Collins on his label called 'I Love You But I'm Not In Love With You' and it was going to be a 45 but I don't think it came out but it would have been on Collins' label which was Big Boy Records. Another boy named Phil Loman, I did a 45 with him and he had his own label but it didn't go nowhere. No other recordings that I can think of. None of my songs have been on paper, they just come to my mind and I play and record them. That song on my Delmark CD 'My Mama Gave Me The Blues', when we recorded it that was off the top of my head, although nobody knew that at the time. I've got a twelve years old son who plays guitar and I have had him up on stage at the jam sessions at Kingston Mines and he really surprised me and it gave me a warm feeling!

Many thanks go to Jim Feeney for arranging the interview.



WALT REO

'My Obsession'/'What'Cha Want Me To Do' Round 125

Mel Alexander's story was detailed by Opal Louis Nations in B&R 232. Raised in New Orleans, Mel began in gospel/RnB groups in the Crescent City, before moving to Los Angeles in 1957 and finally becoming the owner of/partner in a bewildering number of record labels (of which the most prominent was probably Kris) in Los Angeles from the early 1960s and for many years thereafter. Some of these labels were operated with partners such as Zeke Strong and Fats Washington and Mel was able to persuade high-calibre artists such as Lowell Fulson and Big Mama Thornton to record for him.

One of Mel's more obscure imprints was Round Records (yes, I know!) that was active through the first half of the 1960s. Apart from Jimmy 'Preacher' Ellis and Faye Ross, a glance at the Round listing in 'R&B Indies' shows a group of artists that leaves you asking "who?" Amongst this group inhabiting Obscurity Gulch is one Walt Reo - a possible brother, Ray Reo, also cut for Round. As you will see from the label shot, Walt seems to have been a bit of a renaissance man, as he also arranged and produced his session.

What then is curious about Walt and his obsession? Well, only that his record has nothing of the West Coast sound about it; you'd swear that it was cut by Cosimo Matassa in New Orleans! Maybe this proves nothing other than the huge influence that Fats Domino continued to exert on black RnB/rock and roll well into the 1960s, but just maybe Walt was an old friend of Mel's from his Crescent City days. I played the 45 for New Orleans guru John Broven when he was recently visiting London and he was unable to shed any light on Walt and his works, so I guess that Mr. Reo will remain a biographical blank for the foreseeable future, or until Opal gets the chance to talk to Mel again!

Finally, a discographical note to Bob McGrath - note that the issue number is 1025 and not the 1024 listed in 'R&B Indies'.

