‘A Visit With Curtis’

Neil Slaven sent us this poignant article as a follow up to our recent features on bluesman Curtis Jones

Rummaging through a sheaf of papers I’ve not seen for over twenty years, I came across a copy of Bob Koester’s Blues News from 1965 (Blues News Volume IV, Number One, February 1965 to be exact). Inside was an interesting short article about Curtis Jones written by Bob. Given that B&R recently published Bob Groom’s two-part overview of the life and recordings of Curtis (plus an original article I had written on him in London) (See B&R 302 and 303 as well as follow up letters in the magazine) B&R readers may be interested in this item – Neil Slaven.

It doesn’t really seem like two years since we cut the Curtis Jones LP. (I just checked the recording date – it’s three!) Curtis left for Paris a few days after the second session. He had asked that some of the money due him be given to a relative in Chicago. We purposely slowed up on the payment partly through a mix-up with the Local (AFM union) and partly because we expected Curtis to return to Chicago after a few months. (Curtis’s art knocks us out)

As it turned out, Curtis was leaving the next day for a few concerts in Germany. He was teasing me – not with malice – as he would have had every right – just teasing me. He had good use for the money – it would reassure his concierge (I must admit I never had the pleasure of hearing the word concierge in France), get him a good meal before the journey, and enable him to buy us all a drink (which we managed to avoid by seeing that M.O.’s didn’t get cashed that night).

Will he ever return to the States? I doubt it. He says it’s not an easy ride in Paris: strange manners and customs, a language he has given up trying to learn, not much work, etc. But he’s found something there he never had in the States. He’s an American in Paris – he was never allowed to be an American in Chicago – and he professes great love of the idea – an American – though he says things about the States that are most ‘un-American’ in the McCarthy tradition.

Sum it all up for him. From stardom on the Vocalion and Okeh ‘race’ series. An attempted comeback in the early ‘50s that fizzled. On relief. A ripple of interest by a tiny group of blues fans here. Mail from avid fans abroad. The trip overseas (arranged by fellow bluesman Champion Jack Dupree). Falling-off of interest. Poverty. Thoughts of returning. A tour with Chris Barber. An English Decca LP. Concerts – not a magnificent life at all. But far better than the defeat of return to the squalor of the South side.

I don’t sell many copies of ‘Lonesome Bedroom Blues’ (Delmark DL605). The folk crowd won’t recognise blues piano. The jazz crowd wants more of its sort. But I look forward to the opportunity of recording this giant again.

This article is republished with the permission of Bob Koester.

ERRORS IN B&R 310 REVIEW SECTION: As readers will have noticed, the review section in B&R 310 was hit by a major glitch. Several reviews from page 38 onwards were broken up by misplaced cross-headings, and the last review is incomplete.

The error occurred at the printing stage and while as yet it is not fully understood why this happened, as users of modern technology will know, when digital things go wrong – boy do they go wrong! B&R is printed digitally, rather than litho printed and an e-gremlin appears to have entered the printing system causing this error.

Sincere apologies to all readers, rest assured steps have been taken to try and ensure that this does not happen again. In the meantime, the truncated review is reprinted in this issue and the correct layout of pages 38 to 46 has been published on the magazine’s website.