

'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 but we were afraid it would not enable him to keep busy enough in Europe.

There were frantic letters from Curtis in a few months and arrangements were made to get some bread to him from Paul Garon in Louisville and a guy in France - who owed us some money for some 78s. A small balance remained and with a few American Express travellers checks in my pocket I made my way to the Hotel La Louisianne on the left bank in Paris.

Yes, Curtis knew me in spite of the beard. (I then remembered that I had only recently shorn an earlier attempt when he left Chicago.) He was hip that I would be dropping by, acted so casually that I might have been returning with the beer or something.

"How are things Curtis?"

"Not too good," he said as he packed his suitcase. "I got to get out of here or pay some rent." No mention of the sum due or the time-lag in payment. That is not the way Curtis Jones is - he's probably the best-mannered bluesman of all time - which makes one squirm a bit when in a situation like this.

I knew things were better than they had been in Chicago - even at the height of his short re-appearance on the scene (recording sessions, bi-weekly appearances at the Blind Pig, concerts at the

University of Chicago; University of Illinois, etc, and a steady job at Hooley's until some bastard fire-bombed the place - probably the last straw as far as Chicago and the U.S.).

I could tell by my not-too-sharp instincts: the smell of urine was left behind at the Brookmont Hotel. The hallway was not at all trash-strewn and scribbled-on. The nearest 'L' train was several thousand miles away - not a dozen feet. Fifteen centimes (about 3c) would buy a loaf of magnificent French bread if he got hungry. People listened to his piano, were proud to converse with him. The man in the neat little room was a man who had regained his pride, a man who was no longer on relief. The man who had left Chicago a few years before at the age of 54 (looking 64) was now 57.

He looked and acted half his age. He had dyed his hair but this only enhanced a face that no longer reflected the strain and the pain and the anguish of being a has-been Negro blues singer living in a hotel far past its prime and a constant reminder of how the mighty had fallen. Don't get me wrong! Curtis Jones is not getting his share of worldly goods. He's living in a nice hotel (mine cost 7 francs [\$1.40] - his perhaps twice as much) because the manager knows he is a good credit risk who will pay his bill when he gets a gig. He works perhaps one or two major concerts a month, for a fee of perhaps \$100.00 each plus expenses. Sometimes it's months between concerts. He gets some of the snubbing that an American in France gets if he doesn't speak the language - but he's an American in France - not an American Negro in France.

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 accuracy. But I look forward to the opportunity of recording this giant again'.

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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.