



RABBIT JOHNSON



Bobo Jenkins and Rabbit Johnson, Detroit 1979. Photo: Mike Rowe.

Way back in *B&R* 117 we published an interview with Detroit bluesman James 'Rabbit Johnson' (aka 'Brer Rabbit') by the late George Paulus under the title of 'Old Detroit' in which Rabbit talked about his days in Memphis and his recollections of the Detroit music scene in the 1950s and 1960s. In August 1979 Mike Rowe met Rabbit (along with Bobo Jenkins) part of their conversation was recorded. The tape commenced with Rabbit talking about a Memphis sax player called Gilmore Daniels.

RJ: This saxophone player, name of Gilmore Daniels, he was with the original Rufus Thomas and The Bearcats. And he played with B.B. King, and all the guys in the neighbourhood, they were interested in playing music, you know, like George Coleman and Lucius Coleman, brothers, and Gilmore Daniels, they were sax players and another girl named Evelyn, I forgot what her last name was.

They lived right in the neighbourhood with me, you know, and all of them blew saxophones. They was interested in music; I wanted to be a baseball player! And B.B., on Sunday, we'd play over in Arkansas. We'd play baseball in Arkansas, and this little dude used to get on, you know, back of the truck all the time. I noticed – didn't know who he was, you know.

NB: Rabbit is probably referring to sax player Evelyn Young who played behind B.B. King and Rufus Thomas. Gilmore Daniels played tenor sax behind drummer and vocalist Houston Stokes on his 1952 Sun recordings. There are no references in the B.B. King discographies to Gilmore Daniels recording with B.B. King.

RJ: Gilmore still living today, still blowing saxophone there. He kinda famous anyway for certain you know. You probably see his name on the back of

some LP with B.B. a long time ago. But anyway, one time I remember with B.B. was when he made his record 'Three O'Clock In The Morning'. He was showing me this big old wide disc, you know, and I looked at it, you know, 'so what?' (laughs).

I wasn't interested in no music at the time, you know. But I ran into him on numerous occasions after then. I'd never get to really sit down and talk to him, 'cause I used to try to sing with a little group called The Teen Towners, in Memphis at WDIA radio station. And every year at The Veterans' Hall they'd give a benefit, you know. They would have guys like B.B. King, Ford Nelson, or Nelson Ford.

NB: The Teen Towners were under eighteen years old singers selected from school choirs in Memphis to appear on WDIA and perform popular r&b, pop, and jazz hits on the air and at benefit concerts.

MR: Joe Hill Louis?

RJ: Yeah, Joe Hill Louis and Rufus Thomas – and all them and MC of the show was A.C. Williams, they called him 'Moohah'. Yeah, Moohah at the time he was my teacher, school teacher.

You know that was the thing and I'd run into B.B. like that, but I never did sit down and say: "Hey man, you know, let me see your guitar", or something like that. Because I wasn't interested too much in playing the guitar until, maybe, seven or eight years later, after I found out I wasn't going to be a baseball player at the age of nineteen years old, weighing one hundred pounds you know (laughs).

When I gave up playing baseball, I grabbed the old guitar, you know, and there was a guy down there named Ralph Davis. I think he's in Milwaukee, somewhere, playing. And he was the first one that started teaching me how to play a guitar. And then, you know, learning, it wasn't hard learning

'cause I had an aunt play a banjo and a great uncle he played a guitar and a mandolin, so I was used to strings, you know, but my people were on the religious side, and they didn't dig (me) playing blues around the house, you know, so I had to go way out in the back yard (to) try to learn how to play blues, you know. They had a piano (player), they used to give me piano lessons, and I learned how to play 'St. Louis Blues', and they said that was the end of the piano lessons. And that's the truth. After that, shoot! After that I left Memphis.

I appeared one time, no twice, down in Memphis. Played in a nightclub over in West Memphis, Arkansas. I can't remember the name – the name of it was The Cotton Club, but I don't know who I was playing with. And then after I did that, I played or I filled in, before I knew I could really do a little something, I played on an amateur show. Rufus Thomas had an amateur show then, called 'Rufus and Bones' at the Palace Theatre down on Beale Street. And I played on that show and I won second prize, the first prize went to a broad there, she didn't have on too many clothes. Everybody go for that (laughs). You know, well that's what got me started, and then I moved up here, came up here and started staying around and I found out.

MR: When did you come up here to Detroit.

RJ: I come up here in 1950, you know – permanent in 1950. I'd been coming up here for years. In 1950 I came here to stay, 'cause I was sitting on my porch, you know, playing my old guitar one day. A guy walked by and asked me, said, "Hey, you can play that old guitar can't you?" I said, "Yeah, man." He said: "Why don't you come over my house? Man, you can practice there, you know." I said, "OK then, that's cool, you know." I was still going to school then. So he said: "I wanna teach you how to play that thing so: you fretting a little bit too much on it." I think he wanted to know what I was playing you know. I went over to the guy's house – it was Baby Boy Warren.

So then, Baby Boy found out I didn't really know any songs that he was playing, but I could play anything that he wanted played, so he had me playing second guitar with him, and I didn't know it, you know. So one day he come by and said, "Come on, let's go down to the bar, and play with me. We're gonna have some fun, you know." I played with him, having fun, for about a year – no money! (laughs), til I got hip to what was going on, you know, then I just gradually got absorbed into the business like that. I went from one thing to another, I tried rock n'roll, recorded with a few of the local Detroit groups.

MR: Who with?

RJ: I recorded with a group called The Martiniques in Detroit. At the time they called themselves The Four Kings. We did a thing, 'I Can't Trust A Woman', a very big seller around Detroit. Plus, I recorded with another group, a well known group in Detroit, called The Diablos.

MR: Was that for Fortune?

RJ: Yeah, Fortune.

MR: With Nolan Strong?

RJ: Yeah, Nolan Strong and I went to school together, you know, here in Detroit. Came home on furlough, asked me to do a thing with him, a record with him, called 'My Heart Belongs To You'. He's passed now, he's dead now. I did a few things with Andre Williams. I guess you know him?

MR: 'Bacon Fat'?

RJ: No, I didn't do 'Bacon Fat', but I did a few things after that. I can't remember all them. There is some more things I was on, I did 'em but I can't remember them all. Plus, I played in the house band at Fortune too. I played other blues at the time, you know, but I got drafted into the Army. I got drafted into the Army and when I got out, I just forgot about it. Yeah, I played it. 'Til the blues festivals came back, and I started playing round. So I played on the first blues festival and I, one thing led to another and he (Bobo Jenkins) kept on bugging me to come, 'We want to do this, we want to do that,' you know. 'Oh yes you'll like it.' All we did was play around the house to ourselves, you know. Got

so far as to going out and really trying to play professional. I must admit I didn't really make a big stab at it. Could never sing. No two ways about it. I never would have given it up, but if you're not a singer, just a guitar player, you know. Oh you can be good, but it's always somebody can say, 'You and you,



Rabbit Johnson played on the Little Sonny classic 'Love Shock' issued on JVB and Excello. Labels courtesy Chris Bentley



Rabbit Johnson circa mid 1950s. From the Mike Rowe Collection.

instead of 'you,' you know. So I played with Little Sonny for about two years. I recorded his first record with him too. What was the name of the record, ooh?

MR: 'Hear Me Calling'?

RJ: 'I Gotta Find My Baby Before I Do Something Wrong'.

MR: For Duke Records?

RJ: Duke, yeah. That was me, him and Chuck Smith and another guy named Jim 'Due' Crawford.

MR: He's a drummer?

RJ: Yeah, we did it for a test, you know. And Duke recorded it. I don't know what was on the other side

MR: 'Hear Me Calling You'?

RJ: You remember all that? Well, you've got a better memory than me (laughs). And I'm the one that did it, yeah we did that, we recorded it over at old Chuck's house on an old tape recorder.

BBJ: it was a remote...

RJ: And the next thing we know, Don Robey had pressed it. Then, you know, I did a lot – about 85% of Bobo's songs some of them good, some bad.

NB: The Blues Discography has Eddie Burns playing guitar on the 1958 Duke sides. Johnson did play on Little Sonny's 'Love Shock' / 'I Love You Baby' cut in 1959 for JVB.

MR: I was asking Bobo about a guitarist earlier, and he said: 'Oh, you might know him, where he was now.' This was Henry Smith?

RJ: Henry Smith? I don't know a Henry Smith.

MR: He said you all used to play together.

RJ: Umm, no. I haven't seen him in. I don't see too many of them guys anyway, period. It's a 24-hour job, keeping up with that dude (pointing at Bobo!), trying to make sure I know where he is, sometime! That's a 24-hour job trying to find him, sometime, not all the time, but I done tracked him down to Helen Street. I know he was on Helen, and this woman he was staying with, she was over to another one of her sisters' house, so I didn't want to go over there, 'cause they'd get drunk. I didn't want to go there, you know, they bad folks. Bad whiskey and beer and stuff and they weren't worth having, you know.

They was pretty nice looking women, you know; weren't married, one of those spinster who could spend a couple of dollars, you know, laughing and talking. I don't drink myself, you know; I'm a half Christian (laughs). If you don't drink you're half a Christian you know (laughs). You'd be like Bobo – Bobo don't drink! Bobo been in a halfway house now going on forty years (almost always one day, one thing), he'd come by your house and he'd say: 'Well, Rabbit,' he'd say: 'I've turned the studio into a church now, come on down!' (laughs)

BBJ: Rabbit, you've been in a halfway house since nineteen (laughs)

RJ: Well, you've got to pay for what you get nowadays.

BBJ: Some of that you don't get.

RJ: Hhmmm....You've got a pencil? Let me give you my telephone number. So you give me a call if you run in to any problem cause I won't go to work until late Monday.

BBJ: Rabbit, we ought to go down to the studio and do that record. We want to put that record out by ourselves...He ain't saying 'o' in there. To get us some money, but he ain't got no

italic please

Thanks go to Byron Foulger who typed Chris Bentley's original handwritten transcription.