

From The Vaults.....

“You can’t find my records anywhere, not even in America”

Neil Slaven Interviews Curtis Jones

In November 1963 Neil Slaven interviewed bluesman Curtis Jones. The interview appeared in *Jazz Monthly* in January 1964. Here we reproduce the interview, edited by Neil from the original published article.



Curtis Jones In London, produced by Mike Vernon, released in 1964. From the B&R Archive.

My home? I was born near Naples, Morris County, Texas, 43 miles south west of Texicallee (Texarkana?), on 18th August, 1906. My mother died when I was one year and six months old, leaving my father with seven kids. He had to make a cross on his check you know, he couldn't read or write. My mother's name was Agnes Logan before she married my father, Willis Jones. I first started to play the guitar. My stepmother who my father married after my real mother died, her sister had a guitar. She was a guitar player, not very famous, but famous enough to give me an off-start, and I came from there on. So I fiddled with the guitar – done pretty good. Then I come to makin' callouses and things on the ends of my fingers and I decided I'd exchange it for an organ.

I don't remember how old I was. You know, I couldn't even say my ABC's when I started playing music. No, I wasn't even going to school. So I just kept myself busy doin' something, you know, and them callouses were coming on my fingers, and I kept shaking my hands and looking at them. But I wanted to play, because there's so many travellers transporting back and forth from various parts of the world, and they would give me ideas. I'd see them do things and I would try to do what I see the next person do, all sorts of things.

Somehow, I chose a musical career for my main object. Because when I did start to go to school and they'd have a recess, I'd still try to find a piano or organ or something like that, you know. I just liked it. It was a part of me and I wanted to get all I could out of it. So, the organ. I had to pump it with my feet, and I had braces that you use on your knees to get the sound comin' through. Then I had to play and I wanted to sing as well. And I said: "Well, this is too much. This is worse than the guitar, all this much work." So I grabbed the piano. I didn't know about no lessons till I come to going to school regular and I seen you had teachers down there to teach you lessons and things.

Well, even so I seen so many musicians who was famous and great, good and very good, and they wasn't even taking no lessons. And I noticed the style they used was different from what the style the teachers used. So you know how kids is about teachers, they always want to be hardheads and do things a different way from what the teacher wants to learn 'em. That happened to be the case with me. So I learned my own way, and another thing, I said I will have my own style, I won't be playing like them. You know how kids is, they don't know. So that was my case.

I like many of the famous pianists and their styles. Charlie Oliver, he was a great pianist. I don't know about his musical activities 'cause his kids was all my age. Therefore I wouldn't know about his history, his age, or how his career was, but he was very good. He learned all his kids, and quite naturally I bummed around with his kids as much as there was the possibility available, so I learned quite a bit from them. But his son, he was very terrific, his name was Jack Oliver.

We had many terrific good singers down there and musicians, pianists and all. A lot of them wouldn't record because of their American situation of life. They didn't know how to protect their royalties rights and things like that. And they couldn't stand to give up nothing. So they just stayed around one place or another, but they still made money round in there. Sometimes, not in the territory where I was, but in other parts of the country over there, the white people would take them recording machines and go down and record them out in the woods, out in the streets or any way they could get them, you know. But they still wouldn't give them no royalties. The man I recorded for, after all my explaining to him, I told him: "Well, man," I says, "many people know me, 'cause of the travelling I do." I said: "If you just let me record, my name will make you some money and sell the record, because people will buy it." And he still stood me up quite some time.

I think me and Muddy Waters had the hardest time trying to get to make records than any other artists. Well, I recorded I think, must have been 1927 or 1925 or some wheres along in there, for the same person, out in Dallas, Texas, at the Jefferson Hotel Studios. Papa Chittlin', Alexander Moore, the whistling pianist, he was playing the piano for me at the time. I wasn't good enough; I didn't think so. I like his style and that's where I gathered my piano from – Papa Chittlin', Alexander Moore. He's the best bluesman I ever saw. I don't know what label it was I made them on, 'cause I never did see the man no more. I don't know where he is today. I don't know the titles either. Many people have asked, from (Jacques) Demetre up till now, but I still don't remember them. 'Cause I never did hear them no more. It just went clean out of my memory.

So life goes on and I got older and older, and as I get older and older, I gets to travelling from place to place and gathering what I could for this particular music. I moved to Chicago in 1936, 3rd July, and I recorded for Vocalion. The saxophone player on my records was G. Gant. That's about the only one I used. He's a very good musician. I don't know what that G. Gant means because I never did get his full name, we weren't together that long. The first guitarist was Willie Bee Johnson, next was Charlie McCoy, then Joe McCoy, then Hot Box Johnson. Hot Box is the one who had the electric guitar. The harmonica was Jazz Gillum, he's the only one I ever used. Fred Williams was my first drummer, then Judge Riley. Ransom Knowling, he was mostly my bass player. Like I'd love for him to be my player today. He'd come any time I send for him but I can't send for him unless I've got work for him to do. But I can't pay him. I need the money. So I have to make it the best I know how by myself.

'Lonesome Bedroom' is my favourite, as well as being my best-seller. It's the one that brought me into the limelight as far as I am today. But you can't find my records anywhere, not even in America. That's why I told all them companies, they squabble about the price I ask but it ain't no use to squabble about that. You can go round to every record shop you can find and you can find everybody's record but mine. Well, there must be a reason. So the only reason that I can see; they bought them all out. Any time a record don't sell you'll find it on the shelf, and if it sells there ain't none there, they done bought 'em all up. Well, get some more, perhaps they'll buy more.

In the first place, when I started playing music, I knew my music wasn't going to please everybody. But I ain't going to get mad and have no ill feeling with nobody because they don't like my style, my music, or what I'm putting down. I'm just going to go out there and do my work and if they like it – I hope they do – I'm trying to make them like it. And if they don't, why I'm sorry, I'll try to do better next time. The only thing I can say, not only for myself, but any artist, if there ain't none of his records there that proves that he's selling. You can go around, you can see Ray Charles, you can see all them people everywhere, but you don't see Curtis Jones. And I couldn't understand why the people in France couldn't gather this understanding. If it ain't my records there and I've had as much success as I've had since I've been in Europe – since 31st January, 1962, up until the present moment – then why didn't they record me?

I appreciate the activities of a blues nature in England more than anywhere else I've travelled in Europe. But I just said the situation is like this, people think they dig the nature of the blues but they don't. In America it was the same situation there like it is here, when we (blues singers) get down and we ain't got no money, they often wonder what happened to him? They didn't pay him for what he do and they didn't give him no work. Well, what they expect him to do, take a gun and start sticking up, robbing or something? Well, he wouldn't be a musician, he'd be a robber, a stick-up man. If you think the artist ain't gonna sell and you think you can't use him, why consume your time and why take up his time?

When I came over to Europe I thought, well, they could at least give me one recording. Because I've explained this to many people, I says, we Americans would prefer to work for the European people if we can get a nice price and get treated right about our work. Because we have been treated so bad by the Americans until we don't care if we don't never work for them no more. That's why I went to Bob Koester (Delmark DL 605), he's a poor man like myself. I'd rather help a poor man like myself than to help somebody that's got a rich company, who'd turn round and try to take advantage of the artist. Because I haven't got no royalties from 1940 up until this present moment from the companies that I recorded for. I don't even hear from the man who recorded me. I don't know his address, I can't get in touch with him or find out if he's still claiming the tunes, where I can go ahead and claim my rights from here on.

I used to lead Blind Lemon Jefferson up and down the track before he died. I liked the way he played but I was never on one of his engagements. Whenever he'd finish, you know, I would assist him. But I still didn't want to turn back to the guitar, 'cause I had made up my mind 'Piano', you know. Because I'd seen other people play it and it sound so good. I seen it wasn't making no callouses on their fingers, not knowing that the piano was the hardest instrument to learn and play. So after I developed my style and I correspond to the lead part which is my right hand, the rhythm section, and my left, which is the bass section. So what good is your right hand without your left on piano? Well, that was what I was doing before I gathered the understanding that the bass part was the more pretty part. So, my sax player in Chicago, he explained to me how difficult it was for a horn player to play with a piano player unless he had some chords to go by. 'Cause when he used to explain chords to me, I say: "Man, I'm from Texas, give me a rope, we don't use no cords."

So I took a progressive chord study from him for about four or five years. I learned some beautiful chords from the music scores that he had. I just took those chords out of them pretty ballads and things that I got, and placed them into the blues, and that's what built up my programme and made it as powerful as it is today. So when I did get powerful and a musician, the blues artists got jealous of me and come trying to work against me. I got Big Bill Broonzy to get me acquainted over here in the music world on his first tour. So he did and he come back – every time he come back, why we'd meet and talk the situation over. So I found out that he didn't tell me a story and he didn't let me down. So that's why I was really known over here. Because all this younger generation coming along, they really don't know about me.

I know it's going to take a little time, 'cause I came over here without a booking agent. Because the booking agent wanted me to pay him 30% of all gross. I said, "Man, I've gone to the government and found out that you not supposed to take more than 10% in America and 12% out of it." But that wasn't the case with him, he turned around and cancelled the contract and went and got somebody else. So I said to myself, just let it go. One day I'll come over some way somehow. I'm here because God saw fit. So I keep praying. I ain't had very much luck so far. I didn't come to get rich, and I ain't got no ideas to get rich while I'm in the world here, but I do want to make my own living. That's why I devote all my time to music because my father always told me if you're gonna do anything . . . try to do it good. Sometimes I find success and sometimes I don't, but whenever I do find it, I give it all I got.

I have been treated nicer here through Chris Barber and his association than anywhere else in Europe. He's my heart, he's a wonderful man. People ask me, "Are you going back, you ain't working, times are hard." I say, "Yeah, I have been hungry in Europe..." but I can't even count the times I been hungry in my own country, and would have worked if I could have got it. So I don't let that 'hungry' turn me back. I'm no baby, I ain't coming over here letting nothing like that turn me back.

(Parrot 825) I had a five-piece band on that one. But the guitar player, L.C. McKinley, he played so loud until you couldn't even hear the saxophone player, and that man was the best musician in the whole outfit. He was better with his horn than I was with my piano. I'd like to record them tunes again ('Wrong Blues', 'Cool Playing Blues'), 'cause

they're good tunes. If I can't get the right musicians to make them over again, I'll bang 'em out by myself.

1961 I did two sessions with Bob Koester. He hasn't paid me yet but I understand the man ain't got much money himself. He's already sent me fifty dollars royalties on the tunes he released, and they ain't been released more than five or six months.

I can't give you too many stories about the blues players in Chicago, no more than I can about my various associates, Roosevelt Sykes and Peetie Wheatstraw. I wasn't around Big Maceo but I loved him 'cause he's such a wonderful pianist and vocalist. Peetie Wheatstraw's dead, he died in a car crash. He played both piano and guitar. I was gonna do some recording with him but the same time he got killed, he hadn't been away from me three days. When he left he said that when he come back we was gonna do some recording together, but he never did get back. A train ran into the car he was in but then he was a big drinker and I think all of them was drinking.

I knew Elmore James. I want to record one of his numbers. I want to keep him alive as much as possible because he was a personal friend of mine. I'd like to record that one that made him famous, 'Dust My Broom'. I knew he was sick, just like I was looking for the same thing to happen to

Sonny Boy Williamson, because they drink too much whiskey.

I used to drink it too but I got sick and went to the doctor a couple of times. My shakes were turning to strokes and you don't have but three. That's how it was with Big Maceo...he drank too much.

Robert Junior Lockwood played with me for quite some time back in 1946 or '47. I liked the way he played and I wished I had him over here now. He can play guitar all kinds of ways. Yes, Robert Junior plays a whole lot of guitar. He's more blues than Guitar Murphy; Murphy's a jazz musician. He tries to play blues but he's more of a jazz man. Now his boss, Memphis Slim, he has no style. He got his style from Sunnyland Slim and Roosevelt Sykes. He has been doing some terrific studying on the piano, but you can play too much of your own instrument to my mind. He plays too much in the lead.

Otis Spann, he's sweet, him and Muddy Waters both. Them's my boys, I love them. I like Slim but I don't dig him like I do Muddy Waters and Otis Spann. They're regular people, they don't try to be

no more than what they is, you know. I tell you, I prefer not to give no stories about the different musicians. I don't know who I'm hurting and the musician, he has a mouth, teeth and tongue, let him talk for himself. You can't tell how they're gonna take what you say. I would have played for J.B. Lenoir but they talked him into getting Little Brother Montgomery's brother. "Get him, don't get Curtis Jones, he can't play no piano." Just like when the blues package come over here: "Get Muddy, get Brother Montgomery, get Memphis Slim, don't get Curtis Jones."

I didn't go about much when I was in Chicago but I was always in and out of town, playing with groups and things like that, you know. But I was sick for about four years with an infected bladder. It was about to do the same thing that happened to Big Bill, it was about to cancer up on me. But taking treatments twice a week for about five years . . . it saved me. I'm free now. I'm in good health and good condition and ready for work.

I didn't know I was forgotten in England but then I haven't done no recording, there's been no releases for quite some time. But then at the time Big Bill Broonzy brought Champion Jack Dupree to my house in 1939, I had never seen Champion Jack before. And Big Bill comes to my house, he says: "Curtis, I need a favour". So I give them some food and some money and I didn't see Jack no more until 1962 when I came to Europe. Jack Dupree's the cause of me being in Europe, he helped to arrange it, because he said he always wanted to return the favour that I did him then.

There's not enough places here that cater for the blues as far as I can see. They go for that jazz or Dixieland, but then they're only copying the Americans. That's why I'm saying to you, and anyone who hears this or reads it, if you know of a bar or something where the man will accept a blues pianist or even a blues guitar player, that would be the main thing. Then you could say, "Well, we got one place in town where we got blues, nothing but blues". All the blues lovers will come and all the jazz lovers will stay away. And you know, as big as London is, you haven't got a blues place, and you should have. And look, if you have a blues place, look how many blues lovers will patronise it, because there's no other particular place for them to go. You've got to have blues six nights a week if it's going to succeed. If anyone opened a blues place over here just think, they have no competition. If people didn't like blues do you think they'd pull their money out of their pocket to buy a blues record? So if they buy the record, they'd much prefer to hear the artist.

So that's the story.

