

OSCAR WILSON INTERVIEW

By Mike Stephenson

Oscar Wilson is currently the co-front man (with Joe Nosek) in Chicago's Cash Box Kings, a great band who play tough, 1940s and 1950s electric blues. Mike interviewed Oscar in June 2017.



Oscar Wilson at the Chicago Blues Festival, 2017. Photo: Mike Stephenson.

I was born on 4349 South Wells in Chicago - now called Muddy Waters Drive. I was the last of nine children - my great grandparents were slaves but they were music teachers and my father was a blues musician and he passed away two months before I was born. His name was H.S. Wilson, that was the name he used in Alabama but when he got to Chicago he changed it to Harvey Samuel.

My mother's name was Maxey and they changed it to Maxine. My father played guitar and he played a lot on the west side of Chicago. When I was growing up a lot of blues musicians would come by our house including Junior Wells, Little Mack Simmons, Honeyboy Edwards. Big Smokey Smothers used to come by - he is my nephew's father.

As I was coming up Smokey taught me my first guitar chord and as a little boy running around playing there was something about the music that had me. I didn't play no sports or nothing - it was always music I loved music. So while other kids were playing I was listening to the blues and absorbing it all in.

Everybody went to church but I wasn't interested in that either. I remember getting a whooping as they were singing spiritual songs and I was singing blues.

I used to hang outside Pepper's Lounge which was on 43rd Street. When I got older they moved to South Michigan. Back then there was a tavern on almost every corner or neighbourhood, mom and pop stores and restaurants and they would have bands in there and as kids before the street lights came on you could walk around and listen to the bands.

There was a tavern called The Twilight Tavern and I think someone got killed there and they closed it but it opened back up as Weezy's and started having bands in

there like Buster Benton, Johnny B. Moore, and Melvin Taylor.

They would ask me to get up and sing but my mother told me I had to go to work and take care of my family. I used to hang around with Osee Anderson, Dead Eye Norris through my brother in law Robert Peterson. His father taught Little Milton how to play in Leland, Mississippi and when Little Milton would come to Chicago he would send a limo to pick Robert up and Robert taught me a few licks.

I had a little rock band in part to attract the girls - and it served its purpose! As time went on I got with Robert Peterson's sister - around 1977 - I was introduced to a lot of

blues musicians and they were doing a lot of music on the west side of Chicago over at the Delta Fish Market. Robert played at Rosa's with Johnnie B. Moore and Melvin Taylor. I met a bunch of artists at the Delta Fish Market - I used to hang out with Boston Blackie, Shirley Johnson and Osee Anderson and others.

I met Travis Koopman from the Cash Box Kings in Janesville and he told me he had a blues jam with James Tate from the 008 Band and I told them I sang a little and they asked me if I wanted to come up.

This was in 2007. I hadn't met the rest of the Cash Box Kings then and within two weeks I was singing at Buddy Guy's Legends with them and from there we hit it and started recording.

We did a live album 'Cuttin' Heads At The Cuda Café' on Blue Midnight Records and I did a couple of songs on there. In the band back then was Joe Nosek, Kenny 'Beedy Eyes' Smith, Chris Boeger, Travis Koopman that was the main four then and then I came along and then Travis left as he was a master plumber and there was lot of work there for him.

Billy Flynn stepped in - although he was with them off and on before I came into the group. Then after Billy, Joel Patterson came in and became the main guitarist. At one time Barrelhouse Chuck came in and played on just about all of the Cash Box Kings albums apart from the last one, the 'Royal Mint' Alligator album.

I got with Sam Burckhardt and Sam asked me if I would like to go to Switzerland. At that time there wasn't much work with the Cash Box Kings so I said yes to it. So

me and Sam ended up getting together and he offered a good pot of money and I was trying to get a new place to live so it seemed to come together at the right time.

So we did a promo CD called 'One Room Blues' - it's a jazzy blues type of thing that I thought I wouldn't be able to do it but we got rolling and we did the whole album in two days.

I was initially going to do two Sunnyland Slim songs and one other song but as I said we just got rolling. I had no idea my face was going to be on the cover of the album. This was in December 2016 when we did that project. We did the album in one room so that's what we named the album.

I have done a few albums with the Cash Box Kings that includes 'I-94 Blues', 'Holding Court', 'Black Toppin' and I named that song, 'Holler And Stomp', 'Cuttin Heads At The Cuda Café' and our Alligator album 'Royal Mint'.

Being with Alligator was a big step up and will raise the profile of the band. I can do other things like James Brown and funky stuff. I've also sung doo wop in the past and my family and brothers and sisters who were older than me used to listen to The Spaniels, The Moonglows, and I have all of this music in me. We used to sing songs under the street lamps back then like The Persuasions - on the street corners. You had to have the look back then to be in r&b but I didn't have that but I had the voice that took me to blues. I was a chubby little kid and nobody paid me any attention. I knew I could sing but I didn't have the looks!!

Many thanks go to Jim Feeney for all of his help.

Poster for Chicago Blues Festival 'pre-party' at Reggie's, June 2018. From the B&R Archive.