

Roy Brown's Scandinavian Tour – 1978

By Jonas Bernholm



On stage in Gothenburg, Sweden, 1978. Photo: Hans Ekestang.

Soon after the release of the first Roy Brown album (Route 66 Kix 2), I got a phone call. It was Roy. We were lucky having Floyd Dixon on the first Route 66 album. Not only was he still performing, he also knew everybody. I had sent him a list of artists that we wanted to contact. The fact that Floyd could confirm that we paid in advance helped a lot.

Artist payment for reissues of old recordings was something unheard of at the time. Soon Charles Brown and Roy Brown had made contact, followed by Joe Liggins and others. At this time Roy was selling encyclopedias as a door to door salesman while Charles Brown spent most of his time at the racetrack and selling antiques at a lady friend's shop. Very few of the bestselling rhythm and blues artists of the 1940s and 1950s were then able to make a living in the music business.

Roy suggested a tour. His terms were simple and modest. He wanted \$1000 for one week's work and all expenses paid. I booked him immediately on the phone. It was amazing to be able to book perhaps the most exciting r&b performer of the late 1940s (alongside Wynonie Harris) that cheap.

Per 'Slim' Notini had played piano as Stockholm Slim on Magic Sam's first Delmark album in 1967, and had his own group in the early 1970s. Sam Charters had produced an album with Slim's Blues Gang and he was working with his former guitarist Rolf Wikström and Hjärtslag. Slim suggested that we use that group and augment them with two saxophones. Slim had many contacts with leading Scandinavian music clubs.

Nils 'Cannonball' Rehman volunteered. He was the bass player with jazz group Sumpen's Swingsters. He was a mid level executive with a telecom company and also had many music business contacts. We met regularly during preparations. Cannonball, then unmarried, had an extra room in his flat, a place where Roy would stay during his time in Stockholm.

In Sweden there were blues societies in Stockholm and Gothenburg, run by Nils Hansen, a writer at the leading Gothenburg newspaper, and he booked the first gig in Sweden in Gothenburg, where Roy was due to arrive by ferry. Nils had also done a big article about the Route 66 label. Immediately after the first show he booked Roy for a second performance the night before going back to the USA.

Roy's first gig in London had not been well received. The band had not really rehearsed the Roy Brown repertoire according to the English music press. Technical problems had also occurred.

I had been in constant contact with Roy before the tour. A repertoire had been selected and the band was well rehearsed by Slim Notini. And despite that fact that Roy arrived late in Sweden (due to circumstances outside his

control) and had not rehearsed with the band, it all went well and he was immediately booked back to Gothenburg.

I had not been able to see the first shows in Gothenburg and Malmö/Lund in the south of Sweden. While in Stockholm he did three shows there and then went to Uppsala, immediately north of Stockholm. Then he went to Karlstad and also did a radio recording there. Then followed a couple of days in Norway before coming back to Gothenburg.

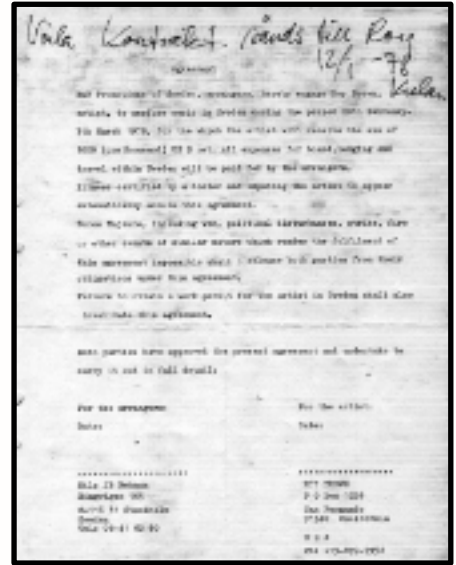
Roy was supposed to arrive by ferry from London to Gothenburg but due to circumstances beyond his control he missed the boat and arrived by plane to Stockholm (450 kilometres away) instead.

I called frantically to hotels during the night but he was nowhere to be found. It was foggy at the airport but in the morning an attendant found Roy sleeping on a bench.

Then he came by bus to Stockholm and I met him at the railway station and put him on the train to Gothenburg. He arrived only a few minutes before showtime.

There was no time for rehearsals but the band knew his repertoire well.

The first show, as all others, were extremely satisfying. Roy was very happy to be here. The only complaint he had was that during the weekend he had two shows per day at different places. It put a strain on his voice. He did a total of nine shows in Sweden



Contract for 1978 tour, courtesy Jonas Bernholm.



On stage in Gothenburg, Sweden, 1978. Photo: Hans Ekestang.

at \$111 each. I also made a small compensation to Roy by raising his royalty rate from 0.40 cents per album sold to 0.50 cents on his forthcoming 'Good Rocking Tonight' Route 66 (KIX 6) album. (It sold over 7000 copies eventually).

Roy was larger than life. The stories he told us backstage about the rhythm and blues scene way back was absolutely fascinating. He also really liked the band and wanted to tour in USA with them. But we could not agree upon doing a live recording, I couldn't convince him that a live recording from Sweden would make everybody understand that he was still in top form. It would help his career immensely.

Instead he felt that his 'Cheapest Price In Town' album on Faith Records – a risqué comedy album he had recorded in the USA earlier was best for him. He later started working with Roomful Of Blues – the best rhythm and blues revival outfit in USA.

In a letter just a few months before his untimely death Roy wrote:
'Looking back retroactively I am now fully aware of what my record-buying public expects of me. I am now prepared to give it to them'
 (Which I interpreted that we were now in total agreement).

He continued: *'I listened to the new Charles Brown album (Stockholm RJ200) but I was not impressed. Charles can do a much better job than what I heard. I called him and told him so. He readily agreed that the album leaves a lot to be desired. What happened to the arrangements? He also explained that he was quite hoarse and that his voice was not up to par'*.

'In closing, let me say, I am so damn excited. I have just landed a singing part in the new Burt Reynolds movie, 'Sharkey's Landing'. This will do so very much to stimulate record sales. We start casting in about twenty days. I understand my night club scenes will be shot on location down south in Atlanta, Georgia.'

Sincerely yours
 Roy Brown.

Roy always used capital letters when writing. Maybe his typewriter was faulty but more likely he felt he had something important to say – which he always had.

The Burt Reynolds' detective story filmed in Atlanta was called 'Sharkey's Machine'. In the final film Roy does not appear, only a group of blues musicians having a rehearsal in a night club.

Roy was also surprised that in the U.K. everybody wanted to hear him sing 'Saturday Night'. After recording it he had never sung it on stage or even heard it on the radio. My last memory of Roy was when I knocked on his hotel room door in Gothenburg to say goodbye. He opened and was wearing nice pyjamas and reading glasses. He was also very much a family man and much devoted to them. He didn't smoke and drank very little.

ROY BROWN, Gothenburg, Sweden, March 1978

Following Roy Brown's 1978 tour, Jonas Bernholm penned a report of Roy's Gothenburg, Sweden show and circulated it to music magazines. Jonas is not sure how many publications ever used the report. Forty two years later Tony Russell sent B&R a bundle of files and in amongst them was the report which we are delighted to re-publish (perhaps for the first time) in B&R.

Preface: For those of you who couldn't make it, or who live too far away, here is a summary. This text can be used in any rhythm and blues, blues or rock and roll magazine around the world; you don't have to ask for permission. If you need some action shots for this article, just write and I will be happy to lend a few.

Roy Brown is the biggest r&b star ever to visit these shores, with the exception of B.B. King and Fats Domino. But while B.B. King's once beautiful Roy Brown styled voice is long gone, and only a hoarse shriek remains, and Fats Domino can no longer perform his high pitched singing on 'The Fat Man', the way he did in 1949, Roy Brown still has the same beautiful voice as he did thirty years ago.

Showtime: Roy came out on stage yelling "I'm here for one purpose only and that is to rock this house!" and bang, he launched into 'Hard Luck Blues'. The audience was flabbergasted and the Swedish backing group, Rolf Wikström's Hjärtslag, played exactly like the Griffin Brothers did on Roy's tremendous hit of 1950. Hjärtslag's performance was as close to a reunion of Roy Brown with his Mighty Men and even Roy was puzzled as he confused Slim Notini with his former piano player, Santini, calling Slim 'Nontini'.



Backstage at Studentkåren, Sweden. March 1st 1978. Photo: Erik Lindahl.

After this tremendous opening, Roy's mind was obviously set on killing the crowd completely. He chose 'Let The Four Winds Blow', and for this song Rolf Wikström had closely studied the guitar playing of Justin Adams.

Pure New Orleans r&b fifteen weeks on the Hot 100 in 1957, but this stage version was much better. On the record Roy is simply jogging along, never really getting off the ground, but on stage Roy built this song into a couple of really heavy climaxes. In fact at one point he got so carried away that he fell off stage still hitting those incredible high notes and although 52 years old, his prize fighting experience is still evident in his rapid footwork.



At Sprängkullen Göteborg, March 8th 1978, with Rolf Wikström on guitar and Ali Lundbohm on drums. Photo: Erik Lindahl.

Roy introduced the next tune as one he had been trying to record for 25 years, but the record companies would not let him do so.

The song is called 'Round The Clock' – the story of a boy meets girl and what happens during the night in great detail. A very fine risqué blues number where the sax men Leif Rundquist and Peter Caudwell laid a solid backing that made the song similar to the Coasters' classic 'Shopping For Clothes'.

Roy then introduced the band members, all of whom played solos during an instrumental number. That was followed by 'Good Rocking Tonight', with the introduction based on the Wynonie Harris version, but after a few bars Roy took command again and all systems were go – 'Hoy, Hoy, Hoy Hoy!' When one compares Roy's version (available soon on the Route 66 album 'Roy Brown: Good Rocking Tonight') to Elvis, it is easy to see that Elvis based his vocal style a lot on Roy's singing.

Roy told me backstage that Elvis used to follow his (Roy's) band around in 1953 and 1954 in Memphis and Mississippi. That was when Roy's outfit was the most frequently booked black band. Elvis used to buy the band members wine and he was very friendly, so they would let him up on stage during intermission, however Roy being the King of r&b, he would not allow the young farmer boy on stage whilst he (Roy) was present. Elvis, however, was not bitter about this and he gave Roy \$1,000 during the early 1960s when the Inland Revenue Service was hunting Roy for some overdue taxes. Roy drove to Memphis and knocked on Elvis's door; Elvis's bodyguards would not let him in but they finally told Elvis that someone called Roy Brown was at the door. In no time Elvis was there asking Roy what was the matter as he had not forgotten his old idol. Elvis wrote his name, bank account number and sum of money on an ordinary piece of paper and gave that to Roy. That was good enough for the Memphis bank to cash the next morning.

Well, back to the show. Roy did some requests on the basis that the band knew them. One could hear numbers like 'Love Don't Love Nobody' (a really tight and great version), 'Hurry, Hurry, Baby', and 'Letter From Home' (not so well rehearsed).

Roy also did 'Boogie At Midnight – Sometimes', and that was magnificent with the band really knowing how to handle these fast boogies, much helped of course, by Slim Notini's dominating and heavy left hand, who was responsible for arranging and conducting the band.

'Roy Brown's Boogie', was another high point of the show and this was r&b the way it should be played, but which so far had not been heard in this part of the world. For an encore, as per usual, it was 'Let The Four Winds Blow'.

Frankly, this was the best show seen in Sweden for a long time (and I am not the only one to think so!). The only equivalent must have been when Joe Tex was here in 1969. He is another 100% showman who has written all his own hits too. Tex was much helped by a fantastic band that played behind him for five years. Roy was very pleased with his band too; in fact he was seriously discussing taking them over to the States as his group. They were, he stated, as good as any band he could hope to find over there, and the combination of the band and him would generate some heavy publicity.

After the show, there were long lines waiting for Roy to autograph his Route 66 LP, just like thirty years ago.

The best show I saw was at Sthlms Glädjehuset (House Of Joy). It took Roy only a few minutes to turn this big dance hall for teenagers into Harlem's Savoy Ballroom. Everybody was bopping the blues like crazy. The music critics at Sweden's second Evening Daily jumped up and down shouting "This is great!" After two hours the MC had to drag Roy off stage and he closed the show by proclaiming "The best show I've ever seen on this stage!" I agree. Still, B.B. King and Muddy Waters have been there...

Roy Brown Scandinavian Tour dates, March 1978: Sweden: 1st – Gothenburg; 2nd – Lund; 3rd, - Stockholm Mariahissen (8pm) (midnight)and Stockholm Glädjehuset; 4th Stockholm, Kulturhuset (3pm), Uppsala, Musikforum; 5th Karlstad, Biblioteket. Norway: 6th – Arvika, Ingesunds Musikskola ;7th - Oslo; Sweden: 8th – Gothenburg, Sprängkullen, 9th Vognporten Jazz Club, Copenhagen, Denmark and then to London. Information from flyer for the tour courtesy Jonas Bernholm.

Special thanks for transcriptions to Paul Mooney.