

JOE LIGGINS & ROY MILTON

By Dick Lillard



Joe Liggins publicity photo. Courtesy Billy Vera.

In the early 1970s Dick Lillard was working as the News Director for WOL-AM, the leading Black interest radio station in Washington, D.C.

Having served as the station's Music Director from 1966 through 1968, Dick, a long-time r&b aficionado, decided to insert some music history into the WOL news and music rotation. He produced a series of short segments called 'Blacks And Blues'. Some were only two or three minutes long. Others were thirty-minute features.

The best segments had interviews with the artists themselves. At a time when a long-distance call was still a special event, Dick decided to call the long-distance operator in Los Angeles and ask for John Veliotis (Johnny Otis).

To his delight she connected him. Lillard found Johnny Otis most receptive to an interview. It didn't hurt that Dick could drop the name of one of the biggest soul stations in the country, but it was Lillard's encyclopedic knowledge of Rhythm and Blues that quickly put Otis at ease.

Sadly, that interview is now lost, but many others did talk to Otis. At the end of the call Otis again surprised Dick by offering up phone numbers for other Los Angeles-based artists such as Joe Liggins and Roy Milton which we include here. Dick Lillard interviewed Joe Liggins in July 1973 and Roy Milton on 10th June 1973 for on MONO WOL News Presents.

In 1993 *B&R* published Dick's three-part analysis of the *Cash Box* Regional Rhythm and Blues Chart (see *B&R* 80, 81, 82)

DL: In 1945, a black man by the name of Joe Liggins recorded a song on the West Coast called 'The Honeydripper'. It became a phenomenal hit and tonight we're going to talk to Joe Liggins about that hit and his career and how a black man fared in the music business in the late 1940s. First, a taste of 'The Honeydripper' [song plays].

'The Honeydripper' was a huge hit and it spawned a number of cover versions in that same year and it has been done by many

artists since. Because of the fact that 'The Honeydripper' was such a classic recording, and so many people have recorded it since and it has also been a recording that many people say it stimulated rock and roll, or rock and roll derived from it, do you have that point of view, do you feel that?

Well, in a way I do. I feel that 'The Honeydripper' made quite a contribution to the field. I don't know, but I always say that maybe it didn't get quite the lasting praise that say, from the people who had something to do with the record, you know it being lasting fame, or whatever you want to call it.

I feel that these guys in this particular era, are not getting the shot that they should have got. I think that they made a greater contribution than they are recognised for.

Let me ask you about the record and its conception. First of all, was that your first record?

Yeah, believe it or not, I had never recorded before. We went into the studio and we cut 'The Honeydripper', one time. We cut side one, the guy said that was great, and we did the other side and that was it: we only played it twice.

Now, it had a definite almost rock type beat in it. And of course, you didn't have the electrified instruments that you have today in rock and the beat was probably a little simpler than what you have today, but nevertheless, the obvious feeling is there. Now, what was the music like in those days that surrounded you. Where were you at musically in those days?

I don't know, I would say that 'The Honeydripper' was in the making, inside me for a long time. I played for a holiness church for a long time and they had this pronounced beat on two and four and it gets to be a part of you if you play it long enough as I did for eight years.

When you say play, do you mean piano?

Yeah. I didn't belong, but my momma did, she yanked me off when I was nine years old and she put me on a piano stool and I started playing there, you know. This was in Oklahoma. I'm from a little town called Bristow, Oklahoma.

That's a coincidence, Roy Milton also came from Oklahoma.

He came from Tulsa, and we were only about thirty-nine miles apart, but we didn't know each other then — one of those things.

So, I don't know, but this beat kinda stayed with me and I would kinda use it in almost anything that I played and like that heavy two and four, I like to hear it pronounced. So, it got to be a part of me and when I was doing 'The Honeydripper', it's actually a five part song, and I did the part about a week or two before I got the whole song together. I was fooling around one day at home on the piano with a tune called 'Lady Be Good', and what I was trying to do was a little imitation of Art Tatum who had done 'Lady Be Good', and he had this hard beat on the left hand and he can do some really wild stuff, man, it sounded like he had three hands. He had this hard beat in the left hand along with a regular bass and I'm trying to get this thing going and improvise 'Lady Be Good', on the right hand.

Now, I knew that I wasn't playing 'Lady Be Good', — I was playing something else, but it sounded good, so I kept it in (laughs). I started working with this thing and finally about a month, a month and a half, I came up with all the music to 'The Honeydripper', but at that time I didn't call it 'The Honeydripper'. I had joined a baseball team and one day I played and wrecked my right foot. I was walking around with my foot in a cast around the time that I wrote this tune, so I called the thing for a better name 'Cripple Joe' (both men laugh).

Were you performing this in clubs?

No, at that time I was playing with a band called Sammy Franklin & His

From the *B&R* Archive.

California Rhythm Rascals, and we were playing mostly Sunday nights at the Elks in Los Angeles. It was a twelve-piece band, and I made a musical arrangement for them and we would play this thing and believe it or not, the kids would just love this thing.

At that time, the kids were doing a dance called 'The Texas Hop', and we didn't have anything else in the book that fitted 'The Texas Hop'.

But we had this 'Cripple Joe', and the kids would come up and say, "Play that Cripple Joe," and so we would sound off on that and it began to draw people. So, I went home one day and tried to write some lyrics for 'Cripple Joe', but no lyrics would come. In the meantime, the drummer in the band, he started calling me for some reason, I don't know why, he started calling me Honeydripper. He said that I played a sweet style piano and that the girls all liked me and that I was just dripping honey (both men laugh)!

So, every time I walked in, usually two minutes to nine, he would say; "I bet you a dollar that the Honeydripper is going to be here on time; that's just the way he does it!"

Well, at that particular time, I was running a sewing machine shop in 1940, 1941, on Central Avenue. I had to close up my shop before I could come to the dance and I would time it, I would leave the shop about ten minutes before and I was always on time. So, when I was trying to make these lyrics to 'Cripple Joe', I got nothing, so finally I said why don't you just mimic yourself and call this thing 'Honeydripper', and I was humming the tune and I thought, yeah that fits! And I thought that this is good and "he's a killer," and at that time I was weighing about 245 and so it was easier to say that he's "a mellow hip fat," (both men laugh).

So that song was really about you?

Yeah, mimicking myself! And this is how it happened, actually about thirty minutes I had all the lyrics to 'Honeydripper'. So I wrote all the lyrics out on a piece of paper for every guy in the band and I said, look we're going to knock this thing off with the regular introduction that I do on the piano, but instead of playing it we're gonna stand up and sing it first, then we'll sit down and play it.

And we did that, and it was an immediate hit and that started attracting people. So, I asked Sam if we should record this as we really had a thing going on. So, Sam said that he would talk to Vera who was his wife, she was the only one who had a real steady job, she was working at the hospital and Vera said "No, I've gotta get me a washing machine and a dryer and I can't see putting \$500 into a session."

Is that what it would cost for a recording session?

Yeah, \$500. So, I told Sam that I was going to leave his band and form my own because I wanted to record this 'Honeydripper'. I went over to a friend of mine, Little Willie Jackson, he plays alto sax, and I went to his home and talked to him and he said that he knew a guy called Jimmy Jackson, a young kid about seventeen years old, who plays pretty good tenor sax.

So, I said, "good, let's get him over here." So, we got Jimmy over and we added Eddie Davis, a bass player, and believe it or not, we started to rehearse this thing with a four-piece band, no drums, no guitar, just a bass, a piano and the two saxes. And that's how we organised 'The Honeydrippers'.

So, it was a sort of a head arrangement, even although in time it became a part of you?

Right, it was a head arrangement and that's why you hear the little thing "Rachel, Rachel, I've been thinking," that was Willie Jackson's idea for when the sax first breaks in, he was just ad-libbing, he has a tremendous mind, he just thinks of some funny, odd things to play.

When you got with the Exclusive record company, was that company black owned or was it a white-owned company?

That was black owned, it was owned by a fellow of the name Leon René. He was prolific songwriter in his own right.

You are listening to WOL News Presents and this is Dick Lillard with the entertainment portion of July 1973. We are talking to Joe Liggins, a conversation that we recorded several days ago; Joe lives in Los Angeles. Joe was not a one hit man; he had many hits and one of his biggest was 'I've Got A Right To Cry' (song plays).

Now when you scored a huge success on both coasts, that wasn't the only hit that you had – you had 'Tanya'?

The same day that we cut 'The Honeydripper', parts one and two, we cut 'I've Got A Right To Cry', which is still the biggest song and we did 'Left A Good Deal In Mobile', 'Lovers Lament', and 'Got Your Love In My Heart'. Now 'Got Your Love In My Heart' was sung by Herb Jeffries, as was 'Left A Good Deal In Mobile'.

Did you ever back up Charles Brown?

No, I didn't, they were separate from us. We were very good friends; they had their own group, Johnny Moore's 'The Three Blazers'.

The Exclusive label was really a fantastic label when you think of the number of artists they had, Herb Jeffries, Johnny Otis also recorded on there or at least had some of his artists on it and there was the subordinate label, 'Excelsior', and...

And he missed the boat with Ray Charles. He had Ray Charles, but at that time Ray Charles sounded exactly like Nat King Cole. So, Leon René is thinking what am I going to do with this guy? He sounds too much like Nat King Cole and nobody is going to buy him, so he let him go.

Well, you could blame him really. No! so, but a year later this guy decides he's gonna sing like himself! (laughs).

Now, you mentioned that 'Got A Right To Cry' was bigger than 'Honeydripper', in terms of sales?

Well, in terms of *lasting* sales over the years...well, 'Honeydripper', is still popular but 'Got A Right To Cry', is bigger in this sense. The 'Honeydripper', was I'd say, 75% race records and the other 25% crossed over to the pop field.

I heard a guy about two weeks ago, in one of the radio stations, playing another version that I didn't know existed that was out about the same time as yours. I don't know whether it was Jimmie Lunceford's band or who it was. It was Erskine Hawkins, it was a good record, it was.

Now, I don't want to take all your time as this is so fascinating: now, then you switched because Exclusive fell?

Yes, so he decided he wanted to declare bankruptcy and I went to Specialty.

And within a year you had the biggest hit of 1950, 'Pink Champagne'?

Well, you know, for three weeks 'Pink Champagne', it did nothing, they pushed it, but nothing happened.

I was in Pittsburgh and we played a theatre called The Roseville Theater and I told the guys that I think that I'll open up with this 'Pink Champagne' number.

So, they thought that was a good idea, we knew that it was a good solid number, so, we opened with 'Pink Champagne', and nothing happened, no hands, nothing, and we went into 'Tanya', and we got some hands and went into something else and 'The Honeydripper', and that went off pretty good. Now, the second show I said that we'll keep it in for one more number and if nothing happens then we'll pull it.

So, this particular show, we kick it off again and believe it or not, all these kids, I'd say about three or four hundred of them start singing it along with me! So, what had happened is that they hadn't heard the song before, but they went to a record shop and the found one record, the only one in the city (laughs), and they all got together and played it and they even went up to the radio station and they had this girl, I forget her name, Willie Dee or something like that, she was a disc jockey at that time. They gave it to her, and she started playing it on the air, and the kids all came back down and they had written the words out and when I started singing 'Pink Champagne', the kids would start answering me and the whole theatre would join them (laughs). It was a smash thing and that's where it kicked off, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Now, you brought up some interesting points there: in those days, music recorded for the black listener was a lot more difficult to get across than it is these days, I would imagine, because radio play was virtually nil, wasn't it? There just weren't many radio stations that would play rhythm & blues records?

Right: they had to have a special DJ to play rhythm & blues records and if you didn't get that guy then the records wouldn't be played. Now, numbers like 'Got A Right To Cry' was accepted by Sears Roebuck here in Los Angeles as the first rhythm & blues artist to be placed in their store. But they got so many requests for 'Got A Right To Cry' ...

How did the people know about the song?

Joe Adams was one of the first black disc jockeys, he had a big show out here and Joe played it on his show, so did Hunter Hancock and we had Al Jarvis, he had 'Make Believe Ballroom', and I think I was the first race artist to be interviewed on his show, if I'm not mistaken.

He played the number so I had enough going in the area for people who accepted my music to play it, I don't know if they were getting paid or not, but they did like the music and they played it and this is how it kicked off.

For the most part, you'll find that these days as many white kids buying the records of a black group as black kids.

Not only that, but you'll find as many of them playing that kind of music (laughs).

Exactly! Dick plays The 'Honeydripper'....

So, there you've heard it – a conversation with the man who is the Honeydripper, in living colour, Joe Liggins from California, now retired, he made his last road trip 21 years ago.

From the B&R Archive.



From The Cash Box, 1950. Courtesy of the B&R Archive.

Next, we talk to a gentleman by the name of Roy Milton. We had a chance to speak to him on phone, he lives in Los Angeles and Roy Milton is now retired in a way, although he still appears once in a while. Roy at one time was a top hit maker in the days when the music was termed rhythm & blues or race records, as they were called back in the late 1940s.

Roy, one of the first things we wanted to tell you is how very much we have enjoyed your music over the past 25 or 30 years that we have been fans of yours, at least some of us have, and those of us who picked you up in later years also want to congratulate you on a fine career. And that reminds us, are any members of your old band still with you, we remember particularly the young lady Camille Howard who played piano in the Roy Milton Band of the 1940s and 1950s? Are any of these people still playing in your band.

Well, no: I have a new group altogether now. My band has the same flavour as in the '40s and '50s, however we try to modernise it somewhat, you know, in order to keep up with the trend.

Right; you still play drums?

Yes, sometimes I do and sometimes I hire a drummer.

Roy, you have been through two or three different types of music, how has the music changed over the past two or three decades?
It depends more or less on the rhythm section.

Yes, I was going to say, like in the drummer and what the guitar is doing.

It's the beat. You can do the same thing that we were doing then and if you don't mind me mentioning B.B. King, he's doing the same thing that he did twenty years ago, but his band has a different flavour to it because of the rhythm section. It has changed somewhat to the modern beat, but as far as his singing and playing and what have you, it's the same thing.

Roy, in 1946 you had a record that was one of the top selling rhythm & blues records of that year, called 'R.M. Blues', it was your first big hit, and in it you had a repeating riff throughout the recording. In a sense this recording was one of the first rock 'n' roll records. How did the record come about in the first place?

I did this in about fifteen minutes, I just set a riff with the band (hums the riff) and I told them to continue to do this all the way through and they did: I sang the verses to it and we did solos between and it came up as 'R.M. Blues', it was as simple as that.

Roy, I am one of those lucky people who has quite a few Roy Milton 78s in my collection and I wonder if someday they might reissue a few of those recordings?

You see, the younger generation is not that familiar with that type of scene than they are with what they're doing, and so this would be something new, because music is now leaning toward the blues. This would be very inspirational to the new, so to speak...

Right, and also you were not strictly a blues singer, you sang all types of songs and you still do?

All types, yes, but most of my soul came from ballads and blues because of my church background.

Now see, this is something new to me, I didn't know that you had a church music background: where were you raised, Roy?

I was born in Wynnewood, Oklahoma and I moved to Tulsa when I was four. My father was a gospel singer and that's where I got my background from, because I used to sing with him in church and in the choir. That inspired me more than anything else as far as my music is concerned, because this thing I could feel in the blues and ballads and so I related so closely to gospel and I feel that more than the rock 'n' roll and things of that sort and country music and what have you. I can do all types of music because I like music.

In case you have just tuned in, you are listening to WOL News Presents, my name is Dick Lillard and I am talking right now to Roy Milton and if you are anywhere around the thirties or forties, you



Signed publicity photo. Courtesy of the B&R Archive.

THE CASH BOX

Jazz 'n Blues Reviews

★ AWARD O' THE WEEK ★

"THE NUMBERS BLUES" (2:34)
"IT'S LATER THAN YOU THINK" (2:38)

ROY MILTON
(Specialty 403)

ROY MILTON

● Roy Milton, who has them flying fast these days, comes up with another top disk called "The Num-

bers Blues." This one is due for a tremendous play and ops will be playing smart if they listen in real soon. Roy has a terrific lyric to work with here and he socks it out with great power. This is a jumpy, driving number that keeps you listening all the way through and, as a matter of fact, makes you listen in again. The second side too is a likely item offering the same kind of tune that's so effective on the upper level. Roy again takes a blues number and gives it a fast, pounding going over. These are two sides which ops are gonna find as money makers. In particular, the top deck stands out and is right for a serious look.

From The Cash Box, 1951. Courtesy of the B&R Archive.

remember Roy Milton in the 1940s and 1950s with many big hits and Roy, it is a real pleasure to be speaking to you. Roy is now living in Los Angeles.

Roy, we were talking a moment ago about your earlier days, was there any one artist that influenced you? You were a great influence on many of the artists who came up in the '50s, is there anybody who influenced you when you first started out?

Louis Armstrong, for one. He was my idol. The way he used to scat, and I ran the chords with my voice the way he did ... he was very instrumental in my career, the way I trained myself and the way I felt and the way I did my tunes because I just loved him.

Roy, thank you so very, very much for taking time out: I know it has been a problem, just getting out of the hospital and getting back around again, and getting ready to record again, seeing your friends out in Los Angeles and say hello to everybody from us out there. We'll see you again soon and thank you very much for talking to us.

Thanks to Jay Bruder, who was instrumental in obtaining the interviews from Dick Lillard, and also Paul Mooney who transcribed the original interviews.