

LITTLE JUNIOR PARKER: Ride With Me Baby, The Singles 1952-1961

Fantastic Voyage FVDD138 (Two CDs: 73:36, 70:30)

CD One: You're My Angel/ Bad Women, Bad Whiskey/ Love My Baby (with Bobby Bland)/ Feelin' Good/ Fussin' And Fightin' Blues/ Love My Baby/ Mystery Train/ Feelin' Bad/ Dirty Friend Blues/ Can't Understand/ Please Baby Blues/ Sittin', Drinkin' And Thinkin' (Sun)/ Sittin' At The Bar/ Sittin' At The Window/ Sittin', Drinkin' And Thinkin' (Duke)/ Love My Baby (alt)/ Backtracking/ I Wanna Ramble/ Can You Tell Me Baby/ Driving Me Mad/ There Better Be No Feet (In Them Shoes)/ I'm Tender/ Pretty Baby/ Mother-In-Law Blues/ That's My Baby/ My Dolly Bee/ Next Time You See Me
CD Two: That's Alright/ Pretty Baby/ Peaches/ Pretty Little Doll/ Wondering/ Sitting And Thinking/ Barefoot Rock/ What Did I Do/ Sometimes/ Sweet Home Chicago/ I'm Holding On/ Five Long Years/ Blue Letter/ Stranded/ Dangerous Woman/ Belinda Marie/ You're On My Mind/ The Next Time/ That's Just Alright/ I'll Learn To Love Again/ Stand By Me/ I'll Forget About You/ Driving Wheel/ Seven Days/ How Long Can This Go On/ In The Dark/ Mary Jo/ Annie Get Your Yo Yo



Herman 'Little Junior' Parker's seminal 'Feelin' Good' has been one of the most widely-covered tunes of the last near sixty years, being covered (or adapted) by such blues and r&b figures as Ike Turner, James Cotton and Magic Sam, as well as becoming a show-closer of every good-time pub-rock boogie band's repertoire to this day. Parker's version, by comparison to most, is quite restrained, but still deliciously impossible not to boogie along to. The closely related 'Mystery Train', that followed, is possibly better known for its cover by a certain Mr. Elvis Presley, whose Sun recording gave him his first national hit (and sealed his move from Sun to RCA) and is often hailed as a rockabilly classic. Parker himself though, despite a multitude of recordings for Modern, Sun, Duke, Mercury, Blue Rock, Capitol and others up until his death in 1971, generally remained one of the blues world's lesser-known figures.

Parker's recordings haven't seen too much reissue on the CD front and Fantastic Voyage set out to redress the balance with this new 55-track set. All his singles (and a few that weren't issued at the time) for Modern, Sun (1951-1953) and Duke (1953-1966) up to 1961 are included, giving an opportunity to assess the development of his work from the early rather primitive Memphis sides with such as Ike Turner and Matt Murphy, to the later Duke recordings and a switch in recording locations, first to Houston, then to Chicago in the late 1950s with larger bands including such luminaries as Red Holloway and Arnett Cobb on saxes, Clarence Hollimon, Lefty Bates or Wayne Bennett on guitar and pianists such as James Booker added for one 1960 session.

Born in West Memphis in 1932, it would seem inevitable that he would gravitate towards the blues, taking up harmonica after hearing the likes of Sonny Boy Williamson (both of them). He joined Rice Miller when Sonny Boy visited West Memphis and even stood in for him (at the age of sixteen), when Sonny Boy couldn't make his slot on his King Biscuit show. Sonny Boy was allegedly responsible for giving him the 'Little Junior' nametag that stuck with him all his life.

His first recording, 'Love My Baby', a rather crude duet with another emerging bluesman, Bobby Bland, was cut under the supervision of Ike Turner in early 1952. This was followed by his first recordings under his own name, with the driving 'You're My Angel' c/w the slow blues 'Bad Women, Bad Whiskey' (Modern 864). These were billed as by 'Little Junior Parker and The Blue Flames', although it was the nucleus of Ike Turner's Kings of Rhythm who provided the backing, along with Matt 'Guitar' Murphy, who'd been retained from the earlier Bland session. It was his next release (on Sun 187) that established the Parker 'sound' with 'Feelin' Good', which contained a devastating guitar riff courtesy of Floyd Murphy (Matt's brother).

Parker's light tenor voice wasn't really suited to the down in the alley, gutbucket blues sound and he generally recorded in a sophisticated urban style from then on. Following his signing to Duke Records in 1953 and the switch in recording locations to Houston in 1954, his recordings developed into the tough jump style (as did those of his contemporary Bobby Bland), and he started to use larger 'orchestras' under the aegis of such as Bill Harvey and Joe Scott. Guitar players such as Pat Hare, Roy Gaines and Floyd

Murphy, pianists such as Connie McBooker and Donnie McGowan and horn men such as Joe Fritz, Jimmy Johnson and the afore-mentioned Bill Harvey were utilised to merge Junior's smooth vocal with the slick Houston sound.

From the late 1950s on, Parker would score respectable hits with the likes of 'Next Time You See Me' (1957), 'Sweet Home Chicago' (1958), 'Five Long Years' and 'Driving Wheel' (1961), but most of these were covers and perhaps it was this, along with his propensity to combine his down-home harmonica playing with sophisticated band arrangements that limited his appeal by alienating both the camps of country blues purists and fans of modern soul-based blues? Whatever, despite further mid-chart placings throughout most of the 1960s, his recording career continued to spiral downhill despite switches to major labels such as Mercury and Capitol and he died, of a brain tumor, in relative obscurity in 1971, ironically having just made his finest recording for some time with 'Drowning On Dry Land' (not included here), for Groove Merchant.

This attractively-packaged 55-track set, in excellent sound, from Fantastic Voyage, with notes and discography by Dave Penny, is most welcome and should be high on the list of essential additions to any blues collection.

Tony Watson