



My Story...

WAS BORN THESSEX JOHNS, March 1, 1938 in a small town called Alligator, Mississippi, on Highway 61 twelve miles south of Clarksdale, in the heart of the Delta. My stepfather and his three brothers they all played guitar, hollow box guitars. On a summer night you could hear em' from miles away. That was my first remembrance. I was about four or five, I knew all the songs. They used to play their guitars and make me sing. When I was about seven, I was singing with the Kelly Brothers Band at Pleasant Valley Church in Alligator.

I lived with my great grandmother Betty Patterson on my mother's side. I used to see musicians like Little Milton, Ike Turner, Clayton Love, Raymond Hill every weekend. In 1954 I came to Chicago by myself and lived with my mother about eight months, then I went back south at 17. I started living on my own in Shelby, and went in the military at age 18 for three years. While I was in the military that's where I learned to play drums. I used to sit in on drums when bands came around. I'd play one or two songs and that was about it.

When I got out of the Army in 1959, I was living at 62nd and May in Chicago, and on the corner Lovie Lee, Big Walter Horton, Carey Bell, Nathaniel Applewhite, and another guitar player named Sam were playing. I used to sit down and watch 'em play. I started playing the drums in Lovie's band. The only way I got a chance to play was 'cause I was the only one who had a car. After a while, I started playing with Eddie King. He had a little record out then and was doing pretty good. I played with Eddie

from 1961-62, with Willie Black on bass and Willie Young on saxophone. I played with these guys off and on through the '60s. From 1962 through 1964, I also held a job at the Chicago Board of Education. I gave it up to play music.

Around 1962 I cut a record for Wonderful Records. The songs I recorded were Lookin' For My Baby and I Can't Stop Twisting. They wanted me to come back with another song, but I didn't have another song! So the record never came out. On that session, I had Eddie King, Willie Black, Roy Johnson, Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, and Otis Spann. Monk Higgins produced it. I also recorded in 1965 for Billy "the Kid" Emerson, with me overdubbing some Lonnie Brooks vocals on two tracks called Conjured and Never Get Enough. But the records never got issued. I also played drums on a few Eddie King singles.

Other musicians I had in my band at various times during the 1960s included Sammy Lawhorn, Johnny Twist, Lefty Dizz or Roy Hightower on guitar, Odell Campbell or Nick Charles on bass, and Eddie Shaw on saxophone. I used the name Johnny Drummer from day one with Lovie Lee. The way I picked that name, I was watching the Sterling Hayden movie Johnny Guitar, and I said, "Hey that's hip. Johnny Guitar, Johnny Drummer." I don't even know how I got the band name the Starlighters. I just started using it.

I got a chance to play with B.B. King in 1965, at a club called Lee's. It was B.B.'s birthday and his drummer didn't show up. Then in 1966, I went to see Muddy Waters in downtown

Chicago, and he asked me to sit in on bass. Muddy wanted me to go on the road with him. But I was making more money than he was offering, so I turned him down. It was an honor though. He had Mojo Buford on harmonica, Otis Spann on piano, Willie Smith on drums, and Luther (Georgia Boy) Johnson on guitar.

In the '60s my band worked just about everywhere they hired a band on the South and West sides. I really started to leave the drums alone when we were playing at a nightclub on a show with Syl Johnson and Jimmy Witherspoon. The club owner put me out front as a singer, opening the shows. We just started hitting the bigger clubs then, like Waltons Corner, the Bonanza, High Chapparel, Guys and Gals and Beale Street. My band, during the time, backed everybody—Z.Z. Hill, Denise LaSalle, Willie Mabon, Junior Wells. We backed a lot of the Brunswick recording artists on shows.

I was doing great, until I had a string of bad luck in 1971. All in about a week, I had a fire on a Wednesday and lost everything but my drums. They was in my car. That Friday my car was stolen. I had a wife and three kids, I picked up the phone and got my old job at the Board of Education. I took a job with the Police department in 1974, and retired from there in 1994. I never stopped making music.

Though I kept gigging, I didn't record again until I recorded with the Aces and Bobby King in 1975 for the French label MCM—Someday Baby (Worried Life Blues), Sweet Home Chicago, and Yonders Wall. By the mid '70s, I had cut my band

loose, and was sitting in with the Aces—Louis and Dave Myers and Fred Below—at Louise's South Park Liquors at 69th and King Drive, as a singer, on Blue Mondays 1974-76. I also worked at the Launching Pad and at Queen Bee's Lounge around that time, with T.J. on bass and Luther Adams on guitar, sometimes Son Seals on guitar and Snapper Mitchum on bass. In the late '70s I cut two of my songs The Fire is Gone and I'll Find a Way on the Abco label.

I first started playing keyboards when I was about 12, playing the boogie woogie. But I first started to get serious with it, was around 1985. The reason I changed over from drums, was that I started to look out for my future. There are a lot of 75-year-old keyboard players around, but not too many old drummers, so I saw I'd better switch. I really got the keyboard, because nobody remembered my songs, my keys, nothing. I got it just to lay out my recordings, not to put it on the bandstand. But after a while I found out that I was playing better than some of the guys I was hiring. I've been playing keyboards ever since.

Junior Wells started me on harmonica. First in 1965, then in 1974 he got me another one, and told me, "You're gonna blow it." Junior taught me a few things, so now I just throw it in as a gimmick. Ever since I sat in on drums that first time in 1959, and got hired by Lovie Lee, I've been into music. I have always been hard on my band, making them sound good and tight. I never intended on getting out front. — **JOHNNY DRUMMER**

by **MICHAEL FRANK**

JOHNNY DRUMMER

Earwig Music RECORDING ARTIST

It's So Nice EARWIG CD 4944 RELEASED IN 1998

"Earwig is touting this set as its entry into the soul age, and it's an auspicious debut —Drummer has managed a distinctive sound in a sound-alike idiom..."

— JIM DEKOSTER / LIVING BLUES MAGAZINE

"This soul-packed effort is urban blues, yet it is resoundingly also modern soulful R&B. ...great music filled with songs of love, romance, and the volatility of those relationships. Good material...clever instrumental mixes and powerful keyboard sounds."

— MARK A. COLE / BIG CITY BLUES

Unleaded Blues EARWIG CD 4948 RELEASED IN 2000

"Drummer sings some impassioned vocals. The band gives a solid dimension to the pleasant blues and R&B tunes and ballads." — MARIA BAINER / BLUES NEWS

"Johnny can rock the house with his own distinctive Chicago style blues; his ballads and duets with other artists are beyond description—beautiful and sexy—oh yes! It's all there." — DICK HOUFF / TWIN CITIES BLUES NEWS



- You can purchase JOHNNY DRUMMER CDs at finer record stores or direct from EARWIG MUSIC COMPANY online at www.earwigmusic.com
- JOHNNY DRUMMER can be seen regularly at LEE'S UNLEADED BLUES, 7401 S. Chicago Ave. in Chicago.
- For booking information please contact MICHAEL FRANK at EARWIG MUSIC COMPANY.

Songwriter Under a Groove

I FIRST MET JOHNNY DRUMMER AROUND 1974, at Louise's South Park Liquors, on Chicago's South Side, where he and The Aces—Louis and Dave Myers and Fred Below, along with guitarist Left hand Frank, Joe Carter (an Elmore James imitator), and the jazzily soulful Bobby King—had a fabulous Blue Monday party. Johnny was just singing then, making the ladies swoon with his charming smile and killer version of Latimore's hit "Let's Straighten It out." In those days, Theresa's Tavern, the Checkerboard Lounge, Louise's, and the Queen Bee Lounge all had Blue Monday sets. Musicians Junior Wells, Lefty Dizz, Johnny Dollar, and numerous others would make the rounds sitting in on their nights off.

I often heard Johnny in those days, and ran into him occasionally over the twenty-six years since. He always had a very tight band who followed his every cue. For the past five years he has worked most weekends at Lee's Unleaded Blues, formerly the Queen Bee Lounge, 7401 S. South Chicago Avenue, my favorite blues club

in Chicago for atmosphere, friendliness and a changing revue of musical characters. Every so often Johnny Drummer would ask me about doing a record on Earwig. When he handed me a cassette in September 1998, I was amazed at the creativity of his compositions, which he rarely played on gigs. Though Earwig has been known mostly for traditional blues, and Johnny's tape of smooth soul was done on an electronic keyboard, I leapt at the chance to put it out ("It's So Nice," CD 4944). Earwig had entered the soul age and was proud to have Johnny Drummer, a great songwriter-in-a-groove, on the label.

Now that I have had a chance to work with him on a second album for Earwig, I have an even greater appreciation for Johnny's array of talents. This new album is mostly soulful original tunes with a rhythmic groove and a hook, love ballads, blues and songs in the key of life.

Like all great artists, Johnny thinks, eats, sleeps and breathes music—hearing ideas and sounds in the air and filing them in his

brain and on paper for song ideas. Like Duke Ellington, he has been known to awaken in the middle of the night and write. He has notebooks full of lyrics and tapes full of music. After two nights of gigging followed by a full day of recording on the new Earwig album, Johnny stayed up until 6:00 a.m. writing another song, which he then brought in to the studio. Vocalists often ask him to write a tune for them for their next project. No sooner had his "It's So Nice" CD come out, than Bobby Jonz covered Johnny's swaggering "Tag On Your Toe."

Johnny also knows arranging. Though self-taught, he hears and feels all the instrumental parts, including background vocals and horns. On the bandstand and in the studio Johnny roams around the room directing the sounds with his arms and his foot. Rhythm sections especially know that he is quite capable of grabbing their instruments and playing the parts that he wants. As a performer, he understands his audience and adapts his performance and repertoire to the mood and occasion.

People relate to his songs, as evidenced by the cries, head bobs, laughs, smiles, dancing shoulders and tapping feet from the audience call-and-response he generates.

Bandleading is a tough job, but Johnny always rises to the occasion, coaxing the best out of his musicians without verbally abusing them in the process. Singers hired with his backing band or sitting in on his sets know that his band is tight and won't crowd their vocals, and that Johnny does not get jealous of the audience response they garner. Johnny exudes self-confidence without cockiness; his dapper attire, understated good looks and bright smile charm the ladies—and the men too. So what if his song "I Want to Get In Your Head Before I Get In Your Bed" is a pickup line? Ladies love it and men wish they had thought of it!

As a record producer and artist manager I always try to convey to the audience the essence of what a musician's sound and personality is all about. That's why I call Johnny Drummer "Songwriter under a groove."

WHEN THE BLUES BUG BITES...



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