Johnnie Johnson

The Real Johnny B. Goode

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By Dan McCue

While compilation albums such as the 1988 release Chuck Berry – The Chess Box are meant to represent the accomplishments of the performer whose name appears on the front and side of the box – and by extension, to provide audible bookends to an era – they inevitably also recount the stories and musical heritage of the other musicians involved in the original sessions.

What would Eric Clapton box set Crossroads be without the influence and musicianship of Jack Bruce, or the Benny Goodman box be without Lionel Hampton, Gene Krupa or Teddy Wilson, each an exceptional artist in his own right?

Much the same can be said about Johnnie Johnson, who brought to the vast majority of Berry's Chess sides not only his jangly, blues-tinged piano triplets, but also the inspiration and influence drawn from years of listening to Earl Hines, Count Basie, Meade Lux Lewis and Pinetop Smith, shaping their sounds with his own sense of rhythm and intuition.

There weren't any musicians in the family before Johnson was born in the coal mining town of Fairmont, West Virginia in 1924. IN fact, they didn't even own a piano until after Johnson's seventh birthday.

But upon its arrival it was discovered that without the benefit of a single lesson, Johnson could duplicate the sounds that he had heard around his neighborhood. It wasn't long before he was sneaking out at night to hear the blues pianists that played at local house parties. Shortly after that, he began playing some of the same parties himself, but did so cautiously so as not to raise the suspicion or ire of his God-fearing mother.

After his discharge from the Marine Corps in 1946, Johnson's career as a performer began in earnest. After settling for a time in Detroit, he moved to Chicago briefly and then on to East St. Louis, a section of the metropolis cut off from the city proper by the Mississippi River.

It was there that he would form what would come to be known as the Sir John trio and it was there, shortly after Christmas 1952, that he hired a guitar player who alternately fancied himself as either a singer in the tradition of Nat "King" Cole or a guitarist in a big band like Charlie Christian.

The newcomer filled in for the Trio's departed sax player on a New Year's Eve gig at the Cosmopolitan Club. With Chuck Berry in the band, the trio's fortunes would never be the same.

A trip to Chicago and a tip from Muddy Waters sent the trio to the offices of Leonard Chess and the record label that more his surname. By this time, early 1953, Chess had already enjoyed some moderate success with recordings by Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Jimmy Rogers, but was also looking to branch out and would shortly release records by the Moonglows and the Flamingos, sweet-voiced harmony vocal

groups. What the Trio had to offer Leonard Chess was a new kind of blues, based on a shuffle, but flavored by the country music that emanated out of Nashville.

On their second trip to Chicago, after hurriedly completing a proper demo tape, the Trio walked down the hall to the rear of the building that held the offices of Chess Records and walked into its first proper recording studio. They cut two songs that day in the 80-by-30-foot studio, for which Leonard Chess' windowed office served as the control room. The first, "Ida Red," was renamed "Maybelline" before the end of the session; the other, "Wee Wee Hours," a song destined to remain one of Johnson's favorites, is widely considered among his very best recorded performances.

As for the rest of the story… it was destined to be a cornerstone of rock and roll history and the subject of the interview that follows.

Besides his work with Berry, Johnson spent much of the early 1960s working with guitarist Albert King in the St. Louis area, and guested on a few recording sessions. He spent the bulk of the '70s fronting his own band in nightclubs.

Keith Richards inadvertently made him a movie star in 1986 by featuring him prominently in the Berry concert film *Hail! Hail! Rock and Roll*; Johnson returned the favor by guesting on "I Could Have Stood You Up" from the Rolling Stone's solo debt *Talk is Cheap*.

Late in 1987, between the movie and his third tour of Europe with the Oliver Sain Blues Band, Johnson began work on his own solo debut LP. Released last autumn on the independent Pulsar label, Blue Hand Johnnie is a collection of rhythm and blues standards, culminating in his own version of "Johnny B. Goode" (a song that Berry has said Johnson inspired). It's pure Johnnie Johnson, loose, relaxed and impossible to mistake for anybody else's sound.

Yet always more of a music enthusiast than a purest dedicated to any one genre, Johnson's the kind of musician who'll sit in with a jazz band if he thinks he's playing too much of another style of music. And he's the kind of player that makes other musicians – particularly guitar players – sound not just good, but better.

Is it any wonder that Chuck Berry exhorted him to "go, Go, Go" on his most famous song.

How did you start playing the piano?

My mother claimed it was a gift from God for this reason: She bought a piano when I was about seven years old and after the movers brought the piano in the house and left, I sat down and went to playing it. I was just playing a perfect tune, and my mother just went to crying. This is when she said it was a gift from God. So to bring it right to the point, I've been messing around and playing piano since I was about seven years old.

What kind of music were you playing as a child?

I was pretty much just playing the standards that were out at the time, like “Chopsticks” – the things that a little kid could learn by music, I was playing by ear. I could hear a piece of music and then just sit down and start playing it.

Did you ever learn how to read music?

I can read chords, but I can’t spot read, that is, note for note. Like is somebody would bring a sheet of music into a club where we were playing, I couldn’t play it right off the bat. I’d have to play the chords on the music. So I can read chords, but that’s the limit.

During your formative years as a player, was there ever any one person that you’d single out as a primary source of information?

No, I never did have a teacher; what I learned was all self-taught. There were some instances where another musician would explain a chord or two to me, like, “This is a B-flat 7^{th}” or “This is a B-flat 9,” but that was about it.

When did you start playing in clubs?

Well, I first started playing in clubs after I got out of the Marine Corps., in 1946. I started playing in clubs in Detroit. Then I left Detroit and went to Chicago, where I got a little more experience playing in clubs and was making a little more money, and then eventually I left Chicago and came to East St. Louis.

Where these primarily segregated clubs you were playing in?

No. Now, this was in mostly black neighborhoods that had these dinner clubs and things. From 1953 on up, there didn’t appear to be that much segregation going on because I played in a lot of clubs where white and colored where having dinner or whatever together. So it wasn’t real segregated, but some sections of the cities or places I went were…

I remember being on the road with the first big show that I went out with, with the Buddy Johnson Band. Sometimes we’d have to play two shows, one for the black audience and one for the white. Some places we went, we couldn’t even get a hotel; we’d have to sleep with the families, black families, that lived in the towns where we’d play. So many of them would take a different band member into their homes and that’s how we would spend the night. Lucky it’s not that way now, any where you can play you can stay.

What made you decide to move to East St. Louis?

I had a brother there and he got me a job working with him at the Pennsylvania Rail Road Freight House. In time I met a lot of musicians and then I got on a bill at a club.

This particular club was called the Cosmopolitan, where I hired Chuck Berry to work with me because I was a man short and Chuck replied by coming to work with me and we’ve been together ever since.

What kind of situation was the band in around the time you hired Berry?

We were recognized as a group and we were well liked, but adding the guitar and replacing the saxophone, it was something different, and Chuck had more of a flair for showmanship than the fellow he was replacing.

Chuck came in there clowning, and what I mean by clowning is he had this little thing he did called the "buggy ride." He would pantomime, in other words, and that held people's attention. Then he came up with the duck walk and the type of music he was starting to write and all this was different, so it went over very big.

Do you remember the first time you saw Chuck do the duck walk?

Yeah, it was at the Cosmopolitan in 1954, before "Maybelline" had come out, and he used to do this across the stage and the crowd of people in there would go wild.

What was your reaction to it?

Oh, I liked it, because it was funny to me. I had never seen anything like that, y'know? It was real comical to me.

Was the shift in emphasis in the band, from piano to a more guitar-oriented sound, a subtle one, or did it happen all at once?

Well, when I hired Chuck he was playing shuffle boogies and guitar boogies and he started this rock and roll stuff, y'know? He started providing songs almost immediately. Like there was this piece called "Ida Red." It was a western tune that Chuck wrote and we had been playing, but when we went over to see the Chess Recording Company in Chicago, and Leonard Chess heard it, he liked the song but not the name.

There was a mascara box lying on the floor in the corner of the studio and Leonard Chess said, "Well, hell, name the damn thing 'Maybelline.'" That's how "Maybelline" got its name, off a discarded mascara box. You probably know the rest of the story from there.

Were you a song writer yourself at the time?

No. I'm not a writer at all. I've got some ideas of my own on this album I've got out now, but back then I was just playing what the other people were playing and adding my own stuff to it.

How would you go about learning Chuck's songs when he'd come in with a new batch of material? How did the band assimilate it?

It was simple. It was just a shuffle, y'know? It was just playing a blues and a shuffle, a rock and roll tune and a shuffle, and they were practically patterned all the same. They would just be in different keys.

Sounds like a fairly straight-forward process. How would you develop your piano parts?

Well, I could just feel it. I mean, I almost knew what he was going to play before he played it. We had, I guess, what you'd call vibes. He could follow me when I'd take a solo and give it a background that really

made the solo stand out. And when he was taking his solo or singing, I knew just what to play behind him so that it would blend in just right. That's the best that I can explain it.

What would actually occur in the studio when you recorded songs like "Little Queenie," "Carol" or "Roll Over Beethoven"?

Okay, in the studio, when we were getting ready to record, they'd get a sound check on all this and adjust the balance for each instrument while we'd be running over the song two or three times to feel out what Chuck was saying in the tune or what he was thinking of. Then when we'd actually start recording, we'd try to take the least amount of cuts of it as we would; the idea was that they were trying to keep you from being tense.

Like with me, I remember too well how nervous I was going in to do our first record, "Maybelline" and "Wee Wee Hours." I was scared I was going to hit the wrong key and mess up the recording, but after that session, once we established that we'd have this like rehearsal before, it became very relaxed and it would take maybe three or four cuts and the record would be made.

So you don't remember anything extraordinary happening in the studio during any of those sessions?

Well, certain things would go down this time that didn't go down the last time, but generally speaking, it was just the same old routine when we'd be in recording. I mean, sometimes Chuck would call for something during the recording and that would have to be blotted out. You didn't have all this modern stuff that they've got now; back then you had to take it step by step. But no, nothing extraordinary ever happened; they were all just routine recordings.

Do you remember how your piano was miked in the studio in those days?

Uh huh. It was an old upright piano and they put the mic in back of it.

Would you do that for yourself or would someone do it for you?

Oh no, the people at the Chess Recording Company would make all the arrangements for the amplifiers and the microphones and things like that, and they would adjust the mikes to where they would get the best sound.

Do you have a particular favorite recording among all the ones you did with Chuck Berry?

[Laughs] That's got to be "Johnnie B. Goode" because he specified in his autobiography that it was written for me. So yeah, that's my favorite and "Wee Wee Hours." Now, that one is one of my pleasures.

What was it like working with Keith Richards?

Well, I only worked with Keith in the movie and then just last year, when I went to New York to record, "I could Have Stood You Up." All this was great. He didn't let me want for a thing. I enjoyed being with him; we didn't get a chance to go out anywhere, but it was fun working with him in the studio, making the recording.

Keith plays a lot like Chuck. IS there any real difference in playing with one or the other?

No, it's very similar. It's about the same. No difference; none whatsoever.

Today, the records you cut with Chuck Berry are considered classics. Do you find that you have people approaching you with their eyes wide and saying, "I can't believe you played on all those records"?

That happens quite often, especially since the movie. Like, I was n Cologne, West German and this fellow who was driving me to the studio says, "I just saw you on my video today." He said, "Oh my God, here I am with Johnnie Johnson. He's riding in my car. I'm sitting next to Johnnie Johnson." I mean, this went on, like I wanted to tell him, "Hey, y'know, there's nothing exciting about that." He had a group too – he played piano – and said he'd been copying my piano playing for years; he played a tape for me and it was just like sitting down and listening to myself play; I mean he almost copied by music note for note and I think I was more thrilled by that than he was in being in my company. To think that somebody thought enough of my playing to make a carbon copy of it. It makes you feel so good to know that your music is accepted by the younger kids.

When you look back over your career, what stands out in your mind?

Well, one of the most exciting things that happened to me was back when I first came to St. Louis. I was a great fan of Earl "Fatha" Hines, the piano player, and he had put out this W.C. Handy thing, a boogie woogies on the "St. Louis Blues." So I was sitting in the Musician's Hall one day and I was playing this piece when the manager of the hall came over and said, "Johnnie, this gentleman's band is playing at the Y tonight and they'd like you to use this piano for rehearsal." So I said sure and jumped up and turned around and found myself looking right into Earl Hines' face. He had been standing behind me for like 10 or 15 minutes while I was playing his song. He shook my hand and congratulated me on my playing and I just went out the door like I was in a trance or something. That's a memory that I'll have for the rest of my life.