

In Conversation with CLIFTON JAMES and Bo Diddley

Mick Vernon

The afternoon of Friday, October 8th, found me in Bo Diddley's dressing-room at the "Ready Steady Go" studios in Wembley, talking to Clifton James.

Clifton: "Well, I was born in the year 1936, October 2nd, in Chicago, Illinois. I first started learning to play drums on chair bottoms, tin cans, and anything you know, I could find to beat on - even a few heads! Mother used to get after me all the time, because I kept on pulling the plaster off the wall. That was how I started. Then I finally got with some fellas and formed a little band, three pieces. I was around eleven - I went to all the places then - red light taverns. I played with a fella by the name of Bob Lee - I can't recall his last name, but we called him Bobby Lee. We had Willie Lee Smith, the one who used to play with Muddy. He used to work out at Robbins, Illinois, in a club called the Little Harlem. We had a nice little thing going. I don't remember the name of the band - we just had a little band you know! We were makin' quite a few jobs. Got quite well known. At Robbins we booked in J.B. Lenore for a Sunday, but soon after that everyone left and went their own separate ways. Then I started to playin' with a lot of them guys: Memphis Slim, Elmore James (did one night with him), Sunnyland Slim, Sonny Boy one night - oh I can't recall all of them cats, there's so many of them! We was doin' a night or two here and there, in every place. You know I grew up with a lot of them cats. When Bo and us got started, all of us used to be on my back porch, rehearsing every day. Bo, Billy "The Kid" Emerson, Jump Jackson and Lee Jackson, and the Miles brothers. We was all raised in the same neighbourhood. I used to work with Lorenzo Smith, the tenor-sax man, with a guy we called 'Chicken' on alto, and a boy named Andrew Brown - Andrew on guitar, Jerry on bass, Moose on piano and me on drums. Tiny Topsy used to sing with us, before she became famous. She was a great dancer and a wonderful person. Anyway, then I started to playin' with Bo Diddley here, in 1953. Frank Kirkland? Yeah, he came after me. I was in the band first: there was Bo, Jerome, Sandman, James Bradford, Billy Boy and Buttercup.

Bo: "Buttercup played guitar, I was teachin' him - and Sandman was the fella that put Billy Eckstine to shame singin'. Really.

Clifton: "He was somethin' else too. He used to clown.

Bo: "In fact, I ran into him a few days ago in Chicago, and I told him to record. What's his real name? Man, I don't know. We always called him Sandman! He has the same name as I have, McDaniels, but I can't think of his first name. I'm gonna record him in my own studio in Chicago, for BO-KAY Records. This'll be my second record. The first one was "Show Me What I Said" by a young lady, but she passed away. She died on the operating table. So that shot holes in that! I'm trying to get a young group to do what I used to do, 'cause I want to manage them. Billy Boy Arnold? Mine wasn't his first group. He'd been around Chicago for some time, and he'd been playing for a dollar and a half and car fare home, and all that stuff.

Clifton: "Hound Dog. Yeah, I worked with him. He wanted me to do some things with him, but I never did. I think he's a better guitar player than Elmore James.

Bo: "Ain't Elmore dead? "

Clifton: "Yeah, he died from a heart attack. He was gettin' dressed to go to work, and the cat just fell back dead you know. The other guys wondered why he was takin' so long, because they was runnin' late going to work. His cousin was there with him, Homesick James. And they went back to the room, and Elmore was lyin' on the bed, dead. Homesick made some of his numbers over, and I was on that session. Other records I've made? I'm on all Jessie Fortune's, along with Buddy Guy and Jack Meyers. Jessie's a young fella, about twenty-seven. We've got a lot of up-coming singers now - they're doin' well. Muddy's playin' on 43rd Street, not too far from where I live. I did some things with Magic Sam last year before I came over. I know a girl, she does a lot of pushin', and I've done some recordin' with her, that's Cocoa Taylor. Other recordings I've done. Well, a lot of spiritual things for Don Robey of the Peacock label out of Houston, Texas - Rev. Ballinger, The Clouds of Joy, the Blind Boys, all of 'em. And I recorded in the old days with the Moonglows and the Flamingos.

I left Bo in 1956 and went back in 1957. During that time I worked with different bands. I was with L.C. McKinley a long time, and Buddy Guy and Willie Mabon, and did records with them too. I was on "Bo Diddley", "Pretty Thing" which was on Bo's first session. I also did a record with a white girl who recorded "Bo Diddley": her name is Jean Gillian. She recorded it about a year after we did. Billy Boy was on it. Then I left Bo again in 1962, and now I'm back with him taking over from Jerome.

I also play trumpet and trombone I leant from my brothers. There's fourteen of us in all. 12 brothers, 2 sisters. I had a twin brother, but he died when we were very young.

Somebody stole the trombone, you know. I don't do anything with them nowadays, my lips got too soft. I used to be pretty good. Used to play in parades.

Bo's band now is me, The Duchess, a guy called Boo, the bass-guitarist, two other girls, one's name is Dee Dee and the other's is Gloria. Billy Stewart used to play piano with Bo long time ago. Bo was the first one to give him a start in Chicago.

Family? Sure. My Wife's name is Paula Dolores, and we have six children - 1 boy, Junior, and five girls, Diane, Kathy, Caroline, Gillian, Bebe and Kim. "

And then rehearsals for the show. We were all to meet again three days later in a London hotel, and the fruits of this encounter will be noted at some future date.

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