

ON THE SOUL SIDE

COMPILED WITH
THE HELP OF
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We invite soul
news, CDs for
review, photos and
profiles for this
column. So if
you've anything of
interest, please
send it in to us.

In *JB40*, Paul Harris reviewed a CD entitled 'The Soul Collection' by Billy Price where Paul quite rightly describes Billy's voice as 'sympathetic to the genre in a genuine Southern style and the backings are totally authentic'. Supported by a tight, solid band with an expressive trio of female backup singers, Pittsburgh-based Billy Price (real name William Pollack b. 1949 in Passaic, NJ) stamps his own soulful interpretation on a range of strong and varied material as well as paying homage to some of the greats of R&B and soul including Otis Clay with whom he trades lead vocals on 'That's How It Is'. It was only his fifth album release since his debut 'Is It Over' in 1979 when he recorded with the Keystone Rhythm Band at Don Garvin's Jeree studio in New Brighton, PA.

'I became tuned in to R&B, rock 'n' roll, and gospel at an early age in the 1950s. My early favorites were Little Richard, Fats Domino, and Lloyd Price. I was a big radio listener as a child, and for some reason I was always most attracted to R&B and gospel. During the '50s and '60s the doo-wop sound was particularly popular in that region, and I loved the Flamingos, Moonglows, Dubs, etc.

'As R&B evolved into soul music, there were a few great radio stations in the area - WWRL from New York, with Frankie Cracker, Enoch Hawthorne Gregory (the Dixie Drifter, who recorded some spoken records, including 'Soul Heaven'), and Hal Atkins (Happy Hal, the housewife's pal); WADO from Newark with the great Jocko Henderson, who was rapping many years before Grandmaster Flash; and WNJR from Newark with Hal Jackson and Eddie O'Jay. I began collecting records in the '60's, and it was also at this time that I started singing with bands and attending concerts. Murray the K, a popular deejay on WINS in New York, had quarterly holiday shows at the Brooklyn Fox theater, and I attended many of them with my older brother's friends. These were package shows with 15-20 artists on each show. At one of these, I saw Chuck Jackson, Ben E. King, Jackie Wilson, Patti And The Blue Belles, the O'Jays, the Spinners, the Miracles, and the Temptations!

'When I was a senior in high school, I went to a club one night called the White Birch Inn in Spring Valley, NY. The club was part of the chitlin circuit. They had a talent contest, and I sang Spyder Turner's version of 'Stand By Me' with the house band, Melvin And The Soul Messengers, impersonating Little Anthony, Smokey Robinson, and others. After I brought the house down, the emcee asked me my name, and I dubbed myself 'Billy Price' after Lloyd Price. A few months later, the owner of the White Birch Inn brought me in to perform for a weekend, and the local newspaper advertised the show as 'The Billy Price Revue'. After all that, I kept the name and have used it ever since.

The Price is right!

RAY ELLIS caught up with BILLY PRICE in Los Angeles just prior to Billy's new project with Jerry 'Swamp Dogg' Williams. Billy talked about his early interest in rhythm & blues, his meetings with John Lee Hooker and Albert Collins, and the influence of Otis Clay.



'When I was living in State College, PA and going to school at Penn State, a club owner in town gave me carte blanche to book his club every Wednesday night for a few months. It was during those months that I met John Lee Hooker, Albert Collins, AC. Reed, Koko Taylor, and Son Seals. My friend and I picked up Hooker at the airport and drove him from Harrisburg to State College. It was the night of the baseball all-star game, and it was my job to get Hooker from the motel to the gig. It was very difficult to pry him away, as he was a huge baseball fan. I remember we were talking about Jim Bibby, who pitched for the Pittsburgh Pirates and had formerly pitched for the San Francisco Giants (Hooker was by that time living in San Francisco). I think that was the year the Pirates

won the World Series, 1979. Hooker was a wonderful fellow, and we had a ball that night and the next day.

'We played often with Albert Collins in the late '70s and early '80s. On certain nights, his band was positively ferocious. This was the band with A.C. Reed, Casey Jones on drums, and Johnny B. Gayden on bass -they got into some relentless funk grooves that made you want to bang your head against the wall. One of the most exciting live bands I've ever heard!

'The songs for 'Is It Over' came from the Keystone Rhythm Band's repertoire at the time. Don Garvin was responsible for rearranging [the cc-penned] 'Eldorado Cafe' from a kind of boogaloo feel that we had in live performance to the groove that is on the record. Also in that band at the time were Kenny Blake, who is



left: **Billy and Otis Clay**, Mancini's Lounge, McKee's Rock, PA, 1982
 above: **The Billy Price Band**, 1996 photo John McWilliams



now a successful and fairly well-known jazz saxophonist, and Eric Leeds, who played sax with Prince for many years.

Jeree is special because it feels like being at home. Don Garvin built the studio himself, and it is held together with paper clips and rubber bands, and something is always breaking, but I have always been able to get the right feel there, much more so than I have ever been able to do at studios that were technically far superior. Plus, Jeree has Garvin himself and there is no one else in Pittsburgh quite like him as a guitarist and producer, although I also must say that Lenny Smith, who plays with me in the [current] band, is also a fine guitarist in the Muscle Shoals style. In fact, Lenny grew up in Muscle Shoals, and his father is a country picker and guitar instructor.

'A few years after 'Is It Over', I heard the first of Otis Clay's two live albums that he recorded in Japan, and I was absolutely blown away by it. My manager at the time and I decided that we would like to try to do some shows with Otis, so we contacted him by phone. At first he was quite reluctant to come east and perform with us, but we gradually got him to agree to do so. After some tentative moments, we put

together a show and performed two nights at Desperado's in Washington DC and two nights in Pittsburgh - that was in 1982. The chemistry was magical, and it was particularly moving for me when we sang 'Is It Over' together for the first time. After that first short tour, we performed together many times in Pittsburgh and in Chicago.

'There were lots of performance highlights, but the one that stands out more than any others was a gig at Biddy Mulligan's in Chicago during which I sang 'Turn Back The Hands Of Time' with Otis and Tyrone Davis. Otis invited Tyrone to Mulligan's to see us perform together. We coaxed Tyrone on stage, and the three of us sang 'Turn Back The Hands Of Time', backed by my band. Tyrone was dressed in a full-length fur coat with one of those big hats that were popular back then. When we got to the third verse, Otis and I were hanging back waiting for Tyrone to sing, and eventually I said, in the mike, 'Tyrone, did you forget the words?' When he heard that, Tyrone brought the band down and said, 'Billy Price, how many albums do you have out?' 'Three', I replied. 'Well I have 33', he said. 'When you have 33, you'll forget a lot of your words, too!'

'As you know if you have ever seen him live, Otis likes to 'stretch' when he is on stage - his songs can be 10-15 minutes long if he is in the right mood and

the crowd is with him. One night at Mulligan's, the plan was that we would play a set for about an hour, take a break, then my band would back Otis for a set, which would end with me and Otis singing together. This was typically the way we did things. By the time our set was ending, Otis still hadn't appeared, so the club owner asked us to keep playing until he showed up. We were on stage for about an hour and a half, and then Otis came storming in with several wrapped up packages of ribs and chicken. 'These guys can't play without barbecue,' he said. Instead of taking a break, though, he just gave the packages to me, took his coat off, and went on stage with the band. The place was packed, and he proceeded to perform with the band for somewhere between an hour and a half and two hours. By the end of the extravaganza, my horn players, who were a little older than the rest of us, were ashen and looked like they were about to drop dead!

I went into 'The Soul Collection' [recorded for Jeree in 1997] with a few things in mind. First, I keep a running list of songs I'd like to sing sometime, so I had definite ideas about wanting to sing and record certain songs. I was also determined that this would be a collection of songs that emphasized the vocal and the song with a sympathetic musical arrangement rather than a showcase for guitar and saxophone solos - so there would be very few solos, and only in places

where they made sense. And, since I was paying for all the production myself, I was able to afford ample time to allow the songs and performances to be right before declaring them finished.

We didn't invite Otis Clay to the session - I felt that that would have been presumptuous - but we had an idea that he might come, so we took along the rhythm track for 'That's How It Is' just in case. Of course, he did come to the session, and we laid down that vocal in two takes. What you hear on 'That's How It Is' is something we had done many times before - trading lead vocals on songs. He also helped us a bit with the background vocal arrangements, and in the case of 'I'm Gonna Forget About You', he jumped in and added a part himself. I could write volumes about Otis and what he has meant to me over the years. He is a tremendous inspiration, as deep a soul singer as there ever was, and he is also a generous, warm-hearted guy who has gone out of his way time and time again to help me learn the craft of singing. Without his influence and inspiration, I would be a much different singer today.

I had met [background vocalists] Theresa [Davis] and Diane [Madison] a couple of times when they accompanied Otis on his shows in Pittsburgh. Theresa was an original member of The Emotions. Diane is now singing with Aretha Franklin, and appears on her video for 'A Rose Is Still A Rose'. When our rhythm

