

‘The Lonesome Bedroom Blues’. *Jefferson* no. 124 (2000): p14-15.

*It's lonesome in my bedroom, just me an' myself alone
It's lonesome in my bedroom, just me an' myself alone
I have no one to love me, each night when I come home*

*A room without a woman, is like a heart without a beat
A room without a woman, is like a heart without a beat
Seem like every woman I get, always wants to mistreat me*

So began the plaintive lyric of a 1937 blues which was to produce from the black record buying public of the day a measure of adulation and fame for the then, unknown, Texas blues singer Curtis Jones. The song, “Lonesome Bedroom Blues”, was to remain in Columbia’s catalogue until the demise of the 78 rpm record in the late fifties eventually to become a “blues standard” in the repertoire of a new generation of bluesmen and their white copyists. The originator, despite various attempts by enthusiasts to promote and re-record him in the sixties, was to die a forgotten, sad and embittered individual.

One of seven children Curtis Jones was born on August 18, 1906 in the sharecropping community of Naples, Cass County, Texas. His early childhood was much the same as that of other black children of the day; as soon as he was able he was working in the fields, but in Curtis’s case his time came quicker due to the death of his mother in 1912. By the time he reached his teens he had suffered sufficiently from the sharecropping regime - “Sometimes you have a good year and sometimes a very bad year. In my father’s condition all of his years seemed very bad. The kind of shelter was a tumbled down log cabin where you had to stuff the walls with rags in the winter season to keep from freezing to death”(1) - and fled to the big city of Dallas. Once there he used the guitar technique he had been teaching himself as a child as a basis for playing the organ or piano at a variety of local venues. Eventually meeting up with pianist Alex Moore, with whom he claimed to have recorded “about 1925”, but this session, if indeed it took place, has yet to be identified.

In 1929, Curtis Jones left Dallas working his way through the Mid and Southwest via Kansas City, then travelling to New Orleans where, it would seem, he married a girl called Lulu Stiggers and finally joining various performing troupes en-route to Chicago. Arriving there in 1936, he formed his own group and began playing at rent parties and in Southside joints or bars. Soon he was spotted by Vocalion talent scout Lester Melrose, who had been responsible for getting recording contracts for many of the great names of the day, including Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red and Washboard Sam. Melrose arranged a recording session on Tuesday 28th September 1937, and accompanied by Willie “Bee” James on guitar and Fred Williams on drums, Jones cut four titles of which only “Lonesome Bedroom Blues” and “You Got Good Business” were released. The former title was apparently written as a eulogy for his wife, who had recently died and was an astounding race hit, so much so that another Chicago label, Bluebird, “kidnapped” him for a recording session the next month, releasing the sides under the pseudonym of “The Texas Wonder”. Over the next five years Curtis Jones was in the studio on no fewer than twenty occasions, recording some hundred

titles, the majority of which were songs concerning life's dispossessed, unique in lyricism and imagery; the entire output finally being made available on four compact discs (Document DOCD 5296-99). Little of this prolific body of work, however, was to prove as popular as "Lonesome Bedroom Blues" although he did have passable sales with "Highway 51 Blues" and "Bull And Cow Blues". The recording company even teased out of Jones a "Lonesome Bedroom Blues No.2" and "I Feel So Good In My Bedroom" in an attempt to get as much mileage out of the tune as possible. Ironically one of the unissued items from Jones's first session of 1937, "Decoration Day Blues", was recorded the following year by harmonica player John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson and became forever associated with him rather than Curtis Jones.

Outside of his studio work, he played club dates with a band which comprised tenor, trumpet and drums - a line-up which, Jones revealed in later years, he preferred to the setting of guitar and drums he was forced to work with in the studio. Ironically, the only side he cut for Melrose with a trumpet in the line-up (played by Punch Miller who had recorded with Big Bill Broonzy) was never issued. However, by 1941 Curtis Jones's record sales were on the wane and, coupled with a disagreement with Melrose, led to Jones working outside of music in unspecified day jobs. During this hiatus in Jones's recording career Texas based pianist Mercy Dee Walton made his debut on record in 1949 with "Lonesome Cabin Blues", which bore more than a passing resemblance to Jones's "Bedroom" in its opening line of, "So lonesome in my cabin, just me an' my telephone" and similar melodic structure; Walton further reworked the song for Specialty as "One Room Country Shack" three years later.

It wasn't until 1953 that Jones recorded again. Bronzeville Record Manufacturing Co., a company formed by disc jockey Al Benson, had released on the Parrot label recordings of jazz and swing musicians like Coleman Hawkins and Herbie Fields. Curtis Jones was Parrot's first bluesman (later they recorded Albert King and J.B. Lenoir) but the four titles he cut failed to bring him any renewed recognition and he had to be content with playing local club dates for the next few years whilst living in depressed and wretched circumstances.

In 1958, blues enthusiasts Bob Koester, Dave Mangurian and Don Hill located Curtis in a run down hotel in Chicago. Through their efforts and that of Jacques Demetre who traveled from France the following year to interview Jones for the French magazine "Jazz Hot", the interest of the New Jersey based record company Prestige Bluesville was aroused, and in 1960 they took him into a New York studio with a trio of jazz musicians and a blues guitarist. The resultant album, "Trouble Blues" (BVL 1022, OBCD 515), managed to capture Curtis's vocals superbly but his piano was swamped by the accompanying organist, and only the five minute instrumental title track showed anything of his old pianistic prowess. However, the recording succeeded in bringing him back to the public eye, albeit that of a white, highbrow coffee house audience, and he secured a regular Tuesday night spot at the Blind Pig in Chicago as well as a concert at Illinois University. On January 12th and 27th 1962 he was recorded by Bob Koester for his Delmark label which produced the album "Lonesome Bedroom Blues" (DL 606) that Koester's aptly described in a sympathetic liner note as, "Texas styled blues, played and sung by a desperate, almost forgotten man, writing, singing and playing for a few friends..."(2)

Three days later, at the instigation of fellow pianist Champion Jack Dupree, Curtis Jones was on a plane to Zurich, Switzerland. From that moment on he became, like Dupree, a Eurobluesman eventually making Paris, France his base. He toured France, Belgium and Germany where, at Koblenz in January 1963, he appeared in concert with a variety of other expatriate jazz and bluesmen to celebrate "Americans In Europe"; a concert which was subsequently to appear in its entirety under that title on an Impulse double album (LP 1037). Later that year Curtis was in London with the Chris Barber and his band performing at the many jazz and blues venues throughout the town, a good number supporting a very young Madeline Bell.

In November 1963 Curtis Jones, guitarist Alexis Korner, bassist Jack Fallon and drummer Eddie Taylor got together for producer Mike Vernon in Decca's West Hampstead studio to record his third album, "Curtis Jones In London" (LK 4578). The choice of material tended to reflect the music he had been playing for his European audiences, numbers like Percy Mayfield's perennial, "Please Send Me Someone To Love", or the self-penned instrumental, "Young Generation Boogie", which leant heavily on Ray Charles's instrumental "Rockhouse" and "Syl-Vous Play Blues" sung and played very much in the Memphis Slim vein; even down to Slim's habit of attempting French phraseology. At that session Jones revealed an unexpected talent with his guitar accompaniment to "Red River Blues" and "Skid Row" echoing Big Bill Broonzy's picking in his latter years.

Curtis Jones spent the next two years in North Africa, mainly Morocco, then toured Spain, Greece and France, finally settling in Paris in 1966 where he made his home. In 1968 he was part of the American Folk Blues Festival which toured Europe and when the package visited England Mike Vernon yet again took the opportunity of recording Jones. Vernon has since owned to the fact that the session was one of his most difficult due to Jones's embittered outlook on life and fickle temperament. An album was released on Blue Horizon, appropriately entitled "Now Resident in Europe" (7-63207), but it seemed to get lost in the plethora of other blues product, failing to get the promotion, sales or acclaim Jones obviously thought it worthy of, as he made clear at the time. Curtis Jones then returned to Europe, spending the following three years working concert or club dates across the continent, using Germany as his base but died unexpectedly from a heart attack at the Schwabinger Krankenhaus in Munich. He was buried nine days later in a Sozialgrab (pauper's grave) at the Perlacher Forst Cemetery. Eight years later his grave was unceremoniously sold because no one had paid for its upkeep.

Curtis Jones never did enjoy the acclaim or recording contracts that fellow pianists Memphis Slim, Jack Dupree and Willie Mabon found abroad, but even if the man himself has been forgotten by the current generation, thankfully his original compositions live on through the recordings of others.

Alan Balfour

- (1) Interview with Neil Slaven R&B Monthly 2, March 1964
- (2) Notes to "Lonesome Bedroom Blues" Delmark DL 606, 1965

Further Reading:

Demêtre, Jacques & Chauvard, Marcel: "Land Of The Blues: Chicago" Jazz Journal, August 1960

Demêtre, Jacques & Chauvard, Marcel: "Land Of The Blues", C.L.A.R.B, 1994

Demêtre, Jacques: "Curtis Jones" Soul Bag 143 & 144, Summer/Fall 1996

Hill, Don: "Curtis Jones And The Texas Blues" Cadence, May 1987

Koester, Bob: "Lonesome Bedroom Blues" Delmark DL 606, 1965

Oliver, Paul: "Curtis Jones In London" Decca LK 4587, 1964
(Reprinted as "Lonesome Bedroom: Curtis Jones"; Blues Off The Record, Baton Press, 1984)

Pearlin, Victor: "Curtis Jones: Complete Recorded Works In Chronological Order" Vols. 1-4 Document DOCD 5296-5299, 1994

Slaven, Neil: "Curtis Jones" Jazz Monthly, January 1964

Slaven, Neil: "Curtis Jones" R & B Monthly 1-6, February 1964-July 1964

Stewart-Baxter: Derrick. "Curtis Jones" Jazz Journal, March 1960

Vernon, Mick: "Those Arab Blues: Curtis Jones In Morocco" Blues Unlimited 39, December 1966

Wilmer, Valerie: "Curtis Jones In London" Jazz News And Review, December 1963