

I WAS WILD!

THE STORY OF JIMMY SPRUILL

by John Broven

with assistance from Paul Harris & Richard Tapp



Jimmy Spruill, The Bronx, New York, May 1986

All photographs by Paul Harris

For 'Wild' Jimmy Spruill the betting-odds were always stacked against him despite his great potential as a guitar hero. He was a New York session guitarist at a time when studio musicians went uncredited; his own recordings were confined to minor labels and did not sell; he was a weak vocalist; and his gigs were restricted to the New York area.

Yet at the turn of the 1960s there could have been few dens and parlours (and jukeboxes) throughout the US that were not blessed with Spruill's presence on record. Indeed he played on three million-selling No. 1 US pop hits, 'Kansas City' by Wilbert Harrison, 'The Happy Organ' by Dave 'Baby' Cortez and 'Tossin' And Turnin'' by Bobby Lewis.* Truly, he had assumed Mickey Baker's crown as the king of New York's session guitarists.

In the UK, fledgling R & B fans were introduced more formally to Jimmy's work when Guy Stevens included the absolutely stunning instrumental 'Hard Grind' on a Sue compilation, '50 Minutes 24 Seconds Of Recorded Dynamite!'. More recently Crazy Kat has released a Spruill album 'The Hard Grind Bluesman

1956-1964', a pot-pourri of Jimmy's own recordings and guitar accompaniments.

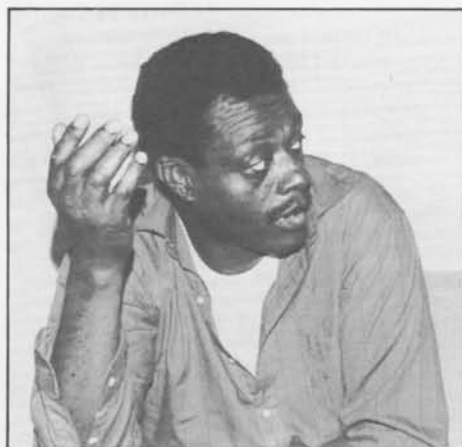
Jimmy is not the easiest of people to track down in New York, but with a little help from friends we managed to interview him at home in the Bronx on 21 May. He lives there with his wife and young-adult twins. The apartment, which overlooks a small park, is tastefully furnished and decorated, and is a fine advertisement for Jimmy's occupation as a home designer. Cheerful and forward-looking he is disarmingly ambivalent about his musical past. 'I don't look back on those times', he says without bitterness, 'I'm a Gemini, I don't look back!' Full of energy he'll work non-stop at his job before taking off for a few days at Atlantic City, 'to get a sun-tan', he jokes. More seriously he aims to beat the gaming machines, which he says he always does, so as to give his family a better standard of living. This is the story of Jimmy Spruill, master guitarist.

*There is some confusion as to the identity of the guitarist on 'Tossin' And Turnin''. Eric Gale is 'officially' listed and Calvin Newborn also claims to have played on it.

Do crazy things!

By all accounts Jimmy Spruill was a terrific performer on stage, leading to the 'Wild' prefix to his name. 'I was wild!', exclaims Jimmy. 'Because I would take the guitar and play with my butt, play with my teeth, my tongue, do crazy things! I was wild, you know I'd do the flip on the floor with the guitar, whoop, I was wild! I'd stand on the table, go into the bathroom and throw toilet rolls, lay down under the table looking at girls . . . you know, there's a lot of things I could tell you. I was wild! I didn't like bright clothes, I was a clown in mind but not with clothes. When I go off the stage I don't like to be bothered, but when I'm on the stage I'm a different thing. I'm friendly but off the stage I go and hide, you know, like Michael Jackson, shy . . . (laughs).'

Jimmy was not only a superb showman, he could really play that guitar. His style is totally unique and thus easily recognisable. According to him 'My 'scratchin'' style came about because I sat down one day, I didn't know what to play. It really came from 'Kansas City', that *chicka chick chick*. The guy who recorded me [Bobby Robinson] said 'I don't want that'. I said, 'I'm gonna play what I want to play, if you don't like it, forget about it . . . I got a name for scratchin''. Up and down strokes but I knew how to choke the strings . . . you had to choke all the way down the neck to get that



scratchin' sound. Then I bent the notes, eight notes above from where I started from . . . you know, *eeeow* back down. It's hard if you don't know how to do it (sighs) but to me it come natural. It was my own sound. I don't go behind nobody, if I can't be my own person I don't bother with it.'

It was hard times, man!

Like many New York blues and R&B performers Jimmy came from the Carolines. The family name Spruill can be traced back to a German slavemaster. 'I was born in the country in North Carolina', he says, '1934, June 9. My parents were James Spruill and Georgia Anna Spruill. He was a sharecropper, growing corn and stuff like that, watermelons, cotton. The land was so small, he shared. Then he moved into town for awhile, Washington. I had a happy childhood, we were poor but sometimes we ate cornbread, syrup and lard all mixed up together, fried, they called it home-cooked bread. It was hard times, man!

'I went up to about Grade 8 at school, but we kept moving all the time. We moved from North Carolina into Norfolk, Virginia into Maryland. We were so poor we didn't stay in one place for long. My father got hurt in a cotton gin, he couldn't work no more, my mama had to take care of everything. My mother used to clean the house, anything she could do. So we had to move back and forth.

'Where I got my music was from the movies, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry. That's where I got started from, see I play country & western also; little bit of jazz, calypso, anything but classics. I never liked the blues too much, I liked country & western. I was about twelve years old when I started to take an interest in the guitar. I made my first guitar out of a cigar box and a rubber band. It was never in tune but I made it! I made the guitar because I never had any money, I could get a kinda sound out of that, never could tune it - but I'd tighten it up as well as I could. It went *boing bing boing* - oh my god! It sounded pretty good, though. The first proper guitar I had was a Harmony with a big hollow body, an old fellow gave it to me. Nobody taught me. Like I told you I liked Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, I just like the sound of string music.'

If it be a hit record, it be a hit record

Spruill came to New York in 1955. 'I was about twenty-one, I just wanted to play music. When I first came to New York I hauled garbage, cleaned up the hallways. Then I started my things like this sofa we're sitting on, furniture for the house.'

Before long he was attracting attention playing his Fender Telecaster guitar and was recommended to record man Danny Robinson, brother of Bobby. 'I didn't have to audition for Danny, it was a word of mouth thing. He wanted a blues player and I was a blues player at the time. Danny asked me to make two or three record sessions. I can't remember the sessions, it

wasn't that exciting to me. I was thinking ahead, I could see myself getting there before I got there. It's like when you're designing something, you've got to see it [in your mind] before you design it. After you've designed it, you know how to make it, go ahead. Then I met this guy Charles Walker.'

In 1956 Charles Walker recorded the instrumental 'Driving Home' for Danny Robinson's Holiday label. The credits were to Walker's Band with 'Guitar - James Spruill'. Recording sessions for Jimmy then came thick and fast, so quick in fact that his memory of them is often blurred. 'I played behind Wilbert Harrison on 'Kansas City', Baby Cortez 'Happy Organ', Bobby Lewis 'Tossin' And Turnin'', 'Fannie Mae' Buster Brown, Elmore James I played second guitar, he played lead guitar. King Curtis 'Chicken Scratch', Shirelles 'Dedicated To The One I Love', I did one with Little Anthony a long time ago - not 'Tears On My Pillow', the one after that ['So Much']. The Channels, not 'The Closer You Are' the next one they did. Wait a minute I did 'The Closer You Are', they did it for Bobby Robinson. Noble Watts 'Hard Times', you know that one? *Da da dada da da* . . . the guitar goes *wham!* But I gummed up the



Wilbert Harrison (courtesy Michael Ochs)

solo. I introduced Noble Watts's wife June Bateman to him, she was my girl friend. I wrote 'Believe Me Darling' for her, I played a Hawaiian guitar sound on that.

'I played with a lot of vocal groups, Tarheel Slim & Little Ann 'Too Late', the first one they did and the third one they did ['Can't Stay Away?']. I don't remember the groups that well, a lot of groups . . . Bobby Robinson used to call me up, asked if I was free, I was a studio musician anyway. I recorded at Atlantic, Capitol, Universal, a lot of them, RCA Victor down on 24th Street, practically all of them. Bell Studios on 46th Street and 8th Avenue, Beltone. I don't do studio work anymore, it got on my nerves, I couldn't stand it!

'Elmore James! If I could play half as good as Elmore James I'd be all right, that guy was good. He had his own style. He could play any kind of music you could mention. It was a studio band. Paul Williams was on most sessions on baritone sax, he did 'The Hucklebuck'. We did a lot of sessions together, too. Buster Brown was over fifty years old, he liked to play his harmonica and sing. He was good, I mean darned good! Riff Ruffin was on the 'Fannie Mae' session, he played second guitar. *Der der der der der de* . . . we had two guitars playing the same part, I was playing high he was playing low. And Buster Brown was answering with the harmonica *waaa* . . .

'I was also on the Storey Sisters' 'Bad Motorcycle' that was a hit record here in the States. Lewis Lymon 'Your Last Chance', Frankie's brother. I think he has a studio downtown. He ran a little group like his brother had

done in that time . . . the Teenchords. And the Charts I played with them too. There was a white group, can't think of their name, they came from New Jersey, older guys [who?]. I did a concert over there with Frankie Lymon, young singers like Paul Anka. I played on sessions with white rock 'n' roll guys, didn't know their names some of them, I just happened to be the guitar player.

'My best solo? I did something for Bert Berns, it was a blues with strings behind it. 'Chuck Tucka' or something I don't know what it was [any ideas?]. Anyway it had strings behind it. I don't look on myself as good, never did . . .'

Life in a recording studio may seem romantic, but it is easy to understand Jimmy's frustration with the boring routine - especially as his only reward would have been union-scale rates. He continues, 'Didn't never have a rehearsal. Like you call me now to do a recording session I'll come and do it. Write it down one time and I got it. Rehearsing for what? I was playing for soul. I don't read music but I know it when I hear it. When I'm playing in the studio I don't say to myself whether it's gonna be a hit record or not, I just enjoy what I'm doing. If it be a hit record it be a hit record, if it don't it don't. I enjoyed the Baby Cortez and King Curtis sessions, I enjoyed all of them - everything I did. If I couldn't get along with the person I was playing with I wouldn't play with them. All my work I do I must enjoy, I don't enjoy it I quit it. I change. If I get tired of it I do something else.

'I didn't stop playing, I started working in the clubs. I didn't want to play [in the studios] because you go down there and I was getting older, I couldn't take the sudden pressure, I just stopped recording, period. I haven't been in the studios since 1976. It's so much headache in the studios . . .'

Hard grind

Jimmy Spruill also cut a handful of records in his own right. 'None of my recordings sold well', he says. 'You know why? I was in the studio because the people liked my playing, so they make sure your record doesn't sell so you stay in the studio. You understand? They don't want you to go out of the studio, they want you to be a studio musician. So I didn't get any play on my own because they wanted me to stay in the studio to back other people. I had a contract with Bobby Robinson once for two years. The contract today wouldn't amount to much. I didn't know then what I know now. I thought a little contract wasn't anything, just a piece of paper.'





"Hard Grind" I don't have a copy of that anymore. The piano player was Horace Cooper, John Robertson played drums, the other guys were studio musicians. (Hums) It was a long time ago, man. The flip 'Kansas City March' sounds like 'Kansas City'. We made 'Kansas City' in less than ten minutes, we just went to the bone – like we're doing now, we're getting to the bone! (laughs). Then there was 'Country Boy', I tried to sing on that (laughs), Bobby Robinson had it on Fury [actually VIM], it was a different single. All the records were Bobby's. He'd send them to another country and sell them, keep the artists from getting any money. I can laugh at it because I knew what he was doing. But he did me a great favour by putting me out there so I could make money off the gigs. I like the guy, I learned a lot from him.'

My band were the Hellraisers

Jimmy's live performances gave him the chance to break out from the strait jacket imposed by studio work. It seems his stage act was in the best extravagant tradition of blues guitarists such as T-Bone Walker, Guitar Slim, Gatemouth Brown and others. During the late 1950s he played in the bands of Charles Walker, Noble Watts and King Curtis, and also he formed his own combo.

'I had my own group for a while but I was also freelance', he says. 'King Curtis I left my band to go with him. My band were the Hellraisers! Charlie Lucas played second guitar, Horace Cooper played piano, the drummer was John Robertson, and the saxophone player was Bam Walters. We played a little rock, calypso, very little jazz, no country & western because the people didn't like that. Wild Jimmy Spruill and the Hellraisers!

'We played around Harlem, Connecticut, New Jersey. We were playing for Teddy Power, he was like a promoter, give concerts. I was, like, the intermission band. James Brown would be on the show, Sam Cooke, Fats Domino, Jackie Wilson, Brook Benton. I'd be the guy that would give the relief, my band would play the intermission for about two hours, then the names would come on. That was the Rockin' Palace on about 156th Street and 8th Avenue, it's not there anymore.

'I also played at one place called the Central Barroom a long time ago on 125th Street, it's gone now. I played the Baby Grand, Small's Paradise – it's still there on 7th Avenue, I played with King Curtis there. I played at the Apollo with Wilbert Harrison, with myself . . . two or three times. I played behind Noble Watts at the Howard Theater, Washington for a whole week. I never got to travel too much, I got a lot of offers but I was making enough money in the city. I was living on 116th Street at the time, between Madison and 5th.

'The Hellraisers lasted from 1957 to last year. We played for wedding receptions, boat rides, dinner dates, social clubs. People know me from the clubs and the Wilbert Harrison days. I can play long numbers up to twenty minutes on



The Jimmy Spruill Billboard Hits

		Date of Entry	Top 100 Position	R & B Position	Label
Deserie	The Charts	6 July 1957	88	–	Everlast 5001
Hard Times	Noble Watts	14 Dec. 1957	48	–	Baton 249
Bad Motorcycle	Storey Sisters	22 Feb. 1958	48	–	Cameo 126
So Much	Little Anthony & Imperials	28 Dec. 1958	87	24	End 1036
The Happy Organ	Dave 'Baby' Cortez	22 Mar. 1959	1	5	Clock 1009
Kansas City	Wilbert Harrison	19 April 1959	1	1	Fury 1023
Dedicated To The One I Love	Shirelles	19 July 1959 29 Jan. 1961	83 3	– 2	Scepter 1023
It's Too Late	Tarheel Slim & Little Ann	31 Aug. 1959	–	20	Fire 1000
Fannie Mae	Buster Brown	7 Feb. 1960	38	1	Fire 1008
Tossin' And Turnin'	Bobby Lewis	30 April 1961	1	1	Beltone 1002

(References mentioned in text only. Source: Joel Whitburn's *Record Research*)

stage. Because I have a lot of energy, sweating – you call it perspiring but I call it sweating (laughs). I start on stage this colour and finish up whiter than you! I've been sweating it so much I'll be frosty, know what I mean . . .'

I'm a millionaire

'Over the past ten years I've been doing home improvements, laying rugs, building furniture. I like to go down to Atlantic City, have a good time and come back. Who cares . . . could be gone tomorrow. I don't gamble, I like to play, if I do something I like to know what I'm doing. I always come back with more than I go with. Always, because I can read a machine, you all right.

'I had a tiny studio but they've remanded the building. I'm going into video now, I want to move on, I don't like to do one thing for too long. It bugs me! I've no deal lined up. More records? I may if I can get somebody that can play like I want to play. People that play with me don't seem to have enough energy to keep up so now I got to get me all electronic stuff, computers to play with me.'

Although Jimmy doesn't like looking backwards, he did manage to reflect on his musical career to date: 'I thought the New York scene in the late '50s was very exciting. All those hit records. But it didn't run me crazy, I never smoked, I never drink, I never take dope. I'm fifty-two years old June 9 next month. I was high on my music, I didn't need anything else to get high on. And I've never been late on a job, ask anybody working with me.

'I was aware that I wasn't getting any money out of the hit records except session fees, but I didn't care. I was making money out of my gigs. I thank God I have the talent, I'm a millionaire, I just don't have the money (laughs). I love money but if I don't get it I'm not gonna worry about it.

'I don't know where I got my musical style. It comes to you at the time, the first thing you know you got it. I heard artists like B.B. King but I didn't get it from them because my style is quite different, I never could follow people. I couldn't play as well as B.B. King so I do something on my own, otherwise people would compare. I like good rhythm, I don't want nobody to aggravate me, I like to play good. When some people on the guitar hit two or three notes at a time they get all gummed up but everytime you hear my playing you notice it's so clear . . . clear, crisp and chop it – *chicka chicka* – I like that sound. People say 'That's Jimmy', you know.' ■

Much of this article is written in the past tense simply because that is how Jimmy views his musical career at this point in time. Although he is not playing right now he says he would consider a European tour – in spite of his fear of flying. Any enquiries should be sent to Jimmy c/o Juke Blues.

JIMMY SPRUILL DISCOGRAPHY

by Ray Topping, with thanks to Victor Pearlin and Hideaki Takahashi

CHARLES WALKER AND BAND – GUITAR JAMES SPRUILL

Jimmy Spruill, gtr; Maurice Simon, ten; ? Johnson, ? ; Horace Cooper, pno; Charles Walker, dms.
New York City, 1956
H-2506 Driving Home Part 1 Holiday 2604, Krazy Kat KK 7429
H-2507 Driving Home Part 2 –

JAMES SPURILL AND BAND

Jimmy Spruill, rhythm gtr; unk saxes; poss Paul Williams, bari; pno; bs; dms.
New York City, 1957
EV-1006 Honky Tonk Hucklebuck Everlast 5004, Cee Jay 581
EV-1007 Jumping In –

WILD JIMMY SPRUILL

Jimmy Spruill, lead gtr; Allen Bunn, 2nd gtr; Horace Cooper, pno; poss Jimmy Lewis, bs; John Robertson, dms.
New York City, 1959
FM-111 Kansas City March Fire 1006, Krazy Kat KK 7429, P-Vine PLP-6008
FM-112 Hard Grind – Sue (UK) ILP 920, Krazy Kat KK 7429, P-Vine PLP-6008
Hully Gully Rock unissued
(Untitled) –
Jimmy's Blues –
Jimmy Spruill –

HORACE COOPER AND BAND

Poss same as above, plus King Curtis, ten.
New York City, c. 1960
DR-2009 The Squeeze – Part 1 Vest 831
DR-2010 The Squeeze – Part 2 –

JIMMY SPRUILL

Jimmy Spruill, gtr; poss Dave 'Baby' Cortez, pno/org.
New York City, 1960
Lonely Island Clock 1038
? –

WILD JIMMY SPRUILL

Jimmy Spruill, gtr; Bam Walters, ten; Horace Cooper, pno; John Robertson, dms.
New York City, 1961
EV-1032 Scratch 'N' Twist Everlast 5017, Krazy Kat KK 7429
EV-1033 Slow Draggin' –

JIMMY "WILDMAN" SPRUILL

Jimmy Spruill, gtr/vcl -1; Bam Walters, ten; Horace Cooper, pno; unk bs; John Robertson, dms; vocal group -2.
New York City, 1962
V-70, R4KM 7760 Country Boy -1, 2 VIM 521, Krazy Kat KK 7429
V-71, R4KM 7761 Scratchin' – P-Vine PLP-6008

WILD JIMMY SPRUILL

Jimmy Spruill, gtr; Irving Johnson, vcl -1; unk pno; bs; dms.
New York City, 1965
ZTSP 92720 The Rooster -1 Enjoy 2006
ZTSP 92721 Cut And Dried – Krazy Kat KK 7429, P-Vine PLP-6008

