

# living blues interview:

## CHAMPION JACK DUPREE

CHAMPION JACK DUPREE  
(Blues Singer with Inst. Acc.)



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- 05713 Black Woman Swing
- 05713 Cabbage Greens No. 1
- 05823 Cabbage Greens No. 2

OKeh Records 1941-42 catalogue photo

*Bollerup, a little village in the southern part of Sweden, has been, for the last couple of years, the home for Champion Jack Dupree. After Jack left America in 1959, he lived in England and Switzerland before moving to Sweden. Champion Jack is now 66 years old, but still tours Europe two or three months every year and has many fans, especially in Germany. This great following has made it possible for him to record and sell new albums and even to start his own label and open a soul food restaurant in Hanover, Germany. Jack expresses himself not only in music: at home, together with his friend, artist Eva Aking, he has started to put down his thoughts on canvas. This spring Stockholm had the honor to be the first city to exhibit his works.*

—Staffan Solding

Interviewed by Staffan Solding, Bollerup, Sweden, June 6 and Sept. 30, 1976.

LIVING BLUES: Where and when did you learn to play piano?

CHAMPION JACK DUPREE: My parents died when I was very young, so I stayed with a guy called Drive 'em Down. He played piano. Drive 'Em Down taught me to play and I went with him to different barrelhouses. I myself couldn't come in, but with Drive 'Em Down it was no problem. He was my father, in a way. He played piano on these places and I stood beside him and sang. Drive 'Em Down meant a lot to me. I have a feeling that he is with me, is inside of me. When Drive 'Em Down died (in 1930) I were on the train down from Indiana. I was asleep, but in my dream I heard, "Jack," and I sat up and wondered, "Jack, you shall take over now." I still feel it when I sit down and play. I feel Drive 'Em Down inside of me.

LB: Did Drive 'Em Down do any touring outside New Orleans?

CJD: No. He didn't go no place but New Orleans, because he had all the work he needed in one place. He used to be at a place called Noonie's and you could get in there every night and it was a crowded place every night, I'll tell you. He never wanted to go nowhere and he never wanted to record. Which was the best, 'cause they take your talent and put it over the world and you die poor. He was right, just like Cow Cow Davenport. They took his numbers and bands got rich on them. Cow Cow Davenport died picking up things in the street. He predicted it when I were young. I've seen it when I were growing up in Chicago. That's why he didn't wanted to record. There were only three barrelhouse piano players in the world then. That was Drive 'Em Down, Don Barry and Bill Fogus, and I were the fourth, the youngest. All the others are dead now and I'm the only barrelhouse piano player living today.

Little Brother Montgomery is not a barrel-house piano player, he is not a blues player. He is a kind of mixture, because he like to do it classified. Roosevelt Sykes is a real bluesman, and there is nobody beating Roosevelt Sykes in his style of playing and his voice is still powerful today. Big Chief Ellis. Apollo started him up and he recorded with me once too. He's a big, fat fellow. I've not seen him since '45, '47, I think. Sunnyland Slim, Roosevelt Sykes and my best friend, him and me played most alike, were Otis Spann. There were none better than Otis Spann. I can't play all the runs that Otis, Roosevelt and Sunnyland can play. I can play note for note when I sing. I just played what I learnt myself and that's my way. I learnt a lot from Drive 'Em Down but I learnt a lot as I went along. When Drive 'Em Down died and I went to Chicago I met Blind John Davis. I played there and Blind John Davis didn't like the way I used my hand for bass and he showed me the bass and told me to play. I thought he was real cruel but after two hours trying to use my hands like he wanted me to do I were glad. When I left there I began to see that the bass began to sound good and went back again to him. Then he said you're playing a little better, but keep trying.

LB: Where did you go when you left New Orleans?

CJD: As a boxer I had traveled a lot and as I piano player I traveled in the South. But I came to Indiana—Indianapolis. I started out playing music in Indianapolis in a place called the Astoria and in a place Cornelius Washington was running called the Cotton Club. I used to have a show together with Ophelia Hoy and Toots Hoy. It was when I was working in the Cotton Club for Sid Ferguson when (Chicago record producer Lester) Melrose, the louse, came down and heard me sing and play. And then he asked me how I'd like to record some records for Okeh. I hadn't did that before and I said yes and he said I'll send for you and how much he would pay. But he never said anything about royalties, which we didn't know about then. Gave me \$50 and that was more than I ever have had in my life and I said I'll record. He came and bought me. Then when I went to Chicago, he gave me \$300 for making the records (in 1940-41) and that's the last I've seen of that. He was taking all the royalties, not just from me, from everybody. No one was getting no royalties 'cause we have signed the contract, said he got everything. He gave us the contract and said sign, and me couldn't read and I just put my "X" on the contract. We got no composers, no royalties, no nothing.

LB: In the Cotton Club, did you have a whole show for yourself?

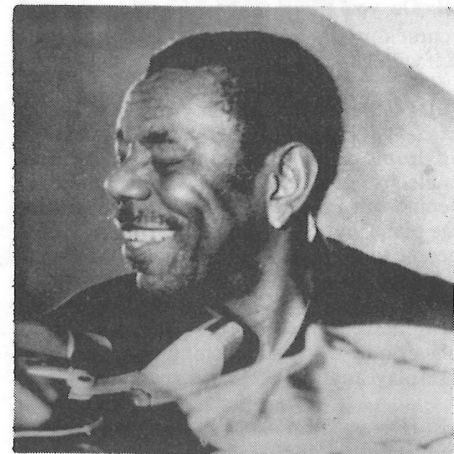
CJD: I had five girls dancing. I had Ophelia. She was a good singer and a comedian, and her husband and then me. And I had Thelma, who was a good dancer. I had good people from the minstrel shows, when they broke up. At the Lincoln Theater we gave five shows a day. In the club we go on at 12:00 and run for about an hour. We stop and go home about 4-5 in the morning. And with the girls I were paying them 75¢ a night and Cousin Joe, extra singer, he got a dollar a night. Cousin Joe came up from New Orleans and recorded for everybody and got his money and get back and they couldn't sue him 'cause he hadn't nothing. So the record companies had to fight with one another. He didn't care for whom he recorded. That's why we don't see too many of his records.

LB: Any other artists from New Orleans?

CJD: No, 'cause there were good musicians about Indianapolis, a band called Socks, Scrapper Blackwell, Leroy Carr, Honey Hill and all of them were there already so I didn't need nobody. Leroy I met once in a place. We sat and Leroy was drinking and playing a tune "In The Wee Wee Hours" for me. Leroy went and took another drink and I sat down by the piano and played the tune. When Leroy heard me play it he said, "It's fine, you got the tune." I sat to five in the morning trying to play the song in my way. When Leroy died I took his place and started playing with Scrapper Blackwell and he worked quite a while with me in the Cotton Club in Indianapolis. Leroy worked with me. Leroy's Buddy, Little Bill Gaither, worked with me. It was me, him, Wilson Swain who went to Chicago and recorded this "Warehouse Man Blues." There I met Big Bill Broonzy, and (Arthur) Crudup, and Brownie (McGhee). He told me he was living in New York and he gave me the idea to come to New York.

LB: Did you get back to Indianapolis after the recordings in Chicago?

CJD: Yes, he gave us enough money to go back, but they don't pay 'fore the union have taken theirs and the union send you the money. I came to New York 1939 and started to record in 1942. When Atlantic started, these two guys were running around town to get talents and we run into them in Harlem and they said to me they had started a record company—"How would you like to record?" 'Cause I was working at the 125th Street Club and we said yes. And he had a place just as big as this room (25 square meters) where they had everything in. We went down there and got things together. I was first with Pete Brown. I had all the best guys when I recorded for Atlantic. They made "Walking The Blues" with me and Ted McRae. From that everything them people got was a hit. Big Joe Turner—"Shake, Rattle And



CHAMPION JACK DUPREE

Roll." Ray Charles—"What Did I Say," Ruth Brown with "Every Time It Rain." Everybody they got was a hit because they paid. That's the only company that I have no trouble with.

[Jack Dupree & Teddy "Mr. Bear" McRae recorded the hit version of "Walking The Blues" for King in 1955. Jack also recorded "Walking The Blues" and a similar song, "Strollin'," for Atlantic in 1958. —Ed.]

LB: Before Atlantic you recorded for Folkways?

CJD: I don't count that. He didn't pay either. I recorded with Brownie for Savoy, Continental, Joe Brown (Joe Davis) and then King. For some of the record companies I recorded I had to use another name. I recorded as Blind Willie, Willie Jordan and his Swingin' Five. Also Brownie was called Brother George. That was the only way we could get money. So we changed name and recorded for many different companies. I did this Jordan thing and then I made "Shim Sham Shimmy" with Red Robin in New York, Fire Records, (Bobby Robinson) made a big hit out of that. And right behind me Wilbert Harrison did "Kansas City." But he couldn't press the records fast enough.

LB: Have you played with a lot of musicians in New York?

CJD: Pete Brown was good, Lucky Christian on bass and Willie Jones on drums, they couldn't get no better for the blues band. The two best guitar players I recorded with were Ennis Lowery (Larry Dale) and Mickey Baker. And Scrapper Blackwell back then. They knew my music, I didn't know my music. That's the only way you can have good records. You must have folk now that have sense to know what key to play in when you don't know yourself.

LB: Do you think that you could express yourself just as good in a group as by yourself with a piano?

CJD: It depends on who you are playing with. With Mickey Baker or Walter Bishop on drums it don't make no difference if it is electric guitars as long as they play so people can hear it and don't try to drown the piano and drown yourself. But for some people there is no feeling at all. That's why I rather play alone. That's better 'cause people want to listen, they don't want to hear noise. I got a little German guitar player now who I'm teaching along and he can play anything. He's a real bluesman.

LB: How was the music life in New York in the '40s and '50s?

CJD: It didn't look good at all for blues people. It was all the jive with Dizzy Gillespie. They were not interested in blues at all. There were a few places where you could work, and all them guys in these bands said: "I don't play no blues. I don't play that." And now every one of them want to come to blues festivals and play blues 'cause they are starving. I have seen them stand outside the employees' office where you get the musicians' job. 125th Street Club and the Baby Grand. My blues were still going and all the others who got into this Dizzy Gillespie thing, half of them went crazy. The only places for blues was Chicago and the South. People said, "I come from New York," that's better than say, "I come from the South." It's a complete difference between Indianapolis and

New York. I didn't do much entertainment in New York. Only played Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York, after my record was out, "Walking The Blues." Not much entertainment from me 'cause I were a bluesman from the South. People tried to be society. It's hard for a person to go from the South to New York. They try to make fun out of you. This guy, Ralph Cooper, he had a show at the Elks Rendezvous and was picking some talents and when you go up to him, he was half white, and he said, "Where you from?" And you say, "New Orleans." "How are things down there?" and I told him, "Now, look, I don't know where the hell you come from, but don't think because you're a New Yorker you can go low-rating me because I come from New Orleans. I come from a place where you like to come from yourself, 'cause that's where the music comes from and you ain't doing nothing. You want to make your people laugh at me because I come from the South." The blues in New Orleans is like the one in Chicago. I tell you how this works. All the people, Southern people and the blues people, from New Orleans, goes to Chicago, and from Mississippi to Chicago and California. And all the people from Florida goes to New York and Detroit. It's a different category people. All together the way it's mixed around. Most all the Deep South people lands in Chicago and California.

LB: Do you think your blues would have been different if you had come to stay in Chicago instead?

CJD: No, because you can play my records now and you don't see no difference. I'm 66 years old and there is no difference, no change. Because I play my music. I play what I've learnt myself and I can never forget what I've learnt. I don't try to play other people's music. Only one man, I try to play his music and directly like him is Fats Waller. My way of playing like Fats Waller.

LB: In 1947-48, you didn't do any recordings?

CJD: I was working as a cook at a university. I didn't play. You couldn't go no place. Just once in a while go on a job at night. There was only one or two nightwork in New York for any swing band for Negroes. You couldn't live off it. You had to work. But through Ringside Boy in New York's Madison Square Garden I got in touch with Henry Glover of King. I made one session in New York and another in Cincinnati. The company belongs to Cincinnati but they use a studio in New York. But it was Henry Glover all the same. He lived in New York and did the session there. The next one we were on the road traveling, so Henry Glover came to Cincinnati. It was close to meet in Cincinnati. I had George Smith on harp on that one.

LB: Then Europe?

CJD: 1959, and the Atlantic were big then, and is still selling today. **BLUES FROM THE GUTTER**, nothing beat that one. That's the way I have seen life with people, the junker, the hustler, she would kick the habit but couldn't. Blues is experience, it's what you go through.

LB: You played with white English rhythm & blues artists.

CJD: After I learn them! I did recordings with Eric Clapton, Mick Jagger from the Rolling Stones, when they were only getting 19 pounds a night and I worked with the Beatles in the Cavern when they were only getting 15 pounds a night. Alexis Korner was a disc jockey in England and then he wanted to play blues, so I started him out. When I came to England there were no blues players at all. Big Bill Broonzy had been there but he was not there for long, but I were the first to live there. I gave John Mayall his first hit, **RAW BLUES**, and he made a big man, but I'm still a little fellow, nothing.

LB: How did you come in contact with Storyville?

CJD: When I first came here and had to play in Copenhagen with Papa Bue. He (Karl Emil Knudsen) got me to record and I recorded for him there and I made 60 numbers one day. At the time Piano Red was there and he recorded for him, too. Knud-

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sen gave me a contract, said, "I pay royalties to him." Then afterwards he came up and said I owed him some money. It was all right, but I don't owe him money in 20 years and he is still putting them records out and sell and never pay you a cent. Then he said I signed a paper saying I didn't want no money, but I didn't sign no paper saying I didn't want no money, 'cause I ain't no millionaire. He went off to the States and saw how they were beating up poor musicians there and tried to do the same thing in Denmark. And it worked. When you try to sue them, they have so many lawyers, so they are pushing it in front of them all the time. I hope people stop buying the damned records, 'cause he's a dirty man, Knudsen.

LB: You did a lot of recordings for Storyville: Is it because of the Storyville thing that you have started your own record label?

CJD: I did about 180 numbers for Storyville but it is not mostly on account of Storyville I started Friendship. I decided myself that, if I can put it out for them and don't get paid, I can take it out myself and don't get paid and it don't hurt me as hard as if I do it for somebody else and don't get paid. But I sell this Friendship label. I sell in Europe and I try to get it published in America. They'll see it's a great record.

LB: Do you think you have developed your songs, style and texts since the '40s?

CJD: Yes, I see life different. From myself and how I have seen other people's life. I don't know anything about politics and that thing but I have seen the mess they have done out of people's life. I've seen these things so when I sing I can really sing what's going on. If I stand on a box and tell

people of all the wrong in the world, people wouldn't listen. But if I sing it on records all around the world everybody will know. That's the way we have to get our message out in the world to the people. That's why the people around the world know so much about us and our living. We couldn't stand up like the white man and speak. If we did that we would be killed or put in jail. But we could do it in singing. When we sing they listen.

LB: Do you think that your songs have changed from being centered around yourself to involve the whole world?

CJD: I have taken the world in the texts when I started out in life. My mother and father were killed by the Ku Klux Klan and as I were in that home for 15 years. And when I came out to take care of myself it was another world and I can't change it. I had to take it.

LB: I was thinking of the "Angola Blues" you did in 1940 about the prison and the "Angola Blues" you're doing now about Angola in Africa?

CJD: You see, I have seen so many things and I sing about them. About the Angola prison then and about Angola now. Those Englishmen who went over to Angola Africa just to fight for money, they were hired killers. They can fight for their own thing and not involve in the Africans' things. Then when they were caught, people over here said that they were bad people, the Africans, 'cause they were going to kill these guys and they all wanted pardon for them. But if it had been a black man there wouldn't be any pardon for him.

LB: So you say that there's always been politics in the blues?

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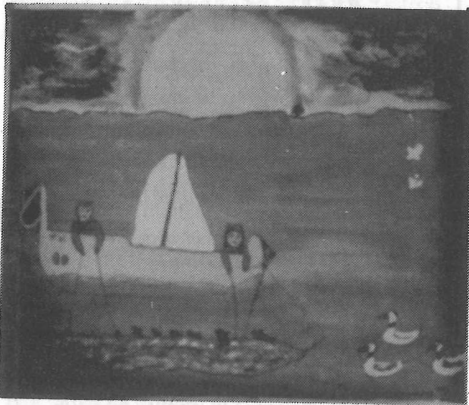
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Champion Jack Dupree



CJD: Yes, mostly. Blues was built on ill treatment, politics, and today it's the same and as long as black people live it will always be the same. As long as the white will govern the South. You say things have changed. But if you'll go there yourself you see on the other side of the railroad tracks the black people's houses is falling down. They are living in muddy roads and right across from the street people got fine houses, playgrounds, and all that. There is only some small changes on the outside. You can go to some restaurants and talk to some whites, but it's no confidence in each other. I think about children growing up. How do they want children to be people and to be strong people like the white people if you don't give them the education, and don't want them to go to school to learn each other. It's here the change is supposed to be. You learn something and I learn something else. Education is a very great thing for everybody. But the white people is afraid the black children are gonna get ahead of the white children. It have changed in some way by law. They have taken down the signs, "colored toilet—white toilet." No difference on the train, where you had to ride in the back. But for living no, and for feeling no. Don't depend on God, don't depend in Jesus for no change. You have to work for it yourself.

LB: You express yourself in paintings, too. What's the difference between playing the piano and paint?

CJD: To me it's a great difference. There are colors on my paintings, but there are no colors in the music. I feel when I'm painting the expression of what I like to do and what I want people to see. When I play the piano I play the way the people know and the feelings I feel. I got all kinds of colors in these paintings. There is not one color. In paintings you'll see what I'm do-

ing. When I'm playing you feel what I'm doing, because of the harmony.

LB: If you had had the opportunity to paint when you were young, do you think you'd have done that instead of playing piano?

CJD: No, I don't think so. I was born with the blues. They used to say that I played instead of going to bed when I was a kid. When I was nine months old I used to sit in my chair and rock. I think music was a gift for me I had to do.

LB: Now you have an exhibition in Stockholm.

CJD: Yes, and I would like that all my haters in America and all that thought that I was nothing to see my paintings. I came out of an orphan home and I was nothing but a blues singer and a barrelhouse piano player. I want all them society and high-tone people to see my paintings. I want them to see what this stupid man can do, that they can't do. My paintings have made me stronger for (getting) my feelings out.

LB: Do you think you're a good storyteller?

CJD: Yes, I'm a comedian, I'm a entertainer and that's our life. Always have a answer, always have a way to fix it. I'm a good truth-teller, too. When I want to make jokes, like on Shakespeare, I do it. If I want to be serious, I'll be that. I was always funny, 'cause I could make people laugh. But it is also something that I built up in Indianapolis. The best comedians in the world were Butterbeans and Susie, they were great.

LB: You're popular in Germany and you have done some records there, too.

CJD: Yes, I have done the HAMBURG

SESSION (for Happy Bird) and the live LP (for Chrischaa). There are a lot of people who go to my concerts. I have a place in Berlin. It's full every time I'm there. Just by myself. I have plans to do a second Friendship record. I have a master tape with songs I have recorded here in Tomelilla I want to put on that label. But I want somebody to publish the first one in America. I'll be happy. But this next one is gonna be much better. I'm interested to tour America again and bring back memories to a lot of people everywhere I'll go. If I'll go back to New Orleans I want to go with a good group and go to the Coliseum or some big place where all the people can come. I'll play "Cottonfields," "Rocky Mountain," "Suzie Q" and all the other good old songs.

LB: Many of your songs are about food and cooking.

CJD: Yes, about the creole way of cooking. I've been cooking all my life. At the university, in the army, at festivals and now I have plans on opening a soul food restaurant in Hanover, Germany. We'll have cabbage greens, ham hocks, pig snouts and sauerkraut. That's what they eat on Saturday nights. We'll have Southern fried chicken, red beans and rice, chittlin and rice as in New York, chittlin and greens as in the South, and chittlin and cornbread as in New Orleans. But before we sit down and eat some Louisiana gumbo let them have my address. Champion Jack Dupree, Bollerup 35, S-273 00 Tomelilla, Sweden, and to my manager: Jens Plotz, Bodererstrasse 47, D-3000 Hanover, Germany. Telephone Germany 0511-313278. I'll be glad to hear from you.