

# BOBBY JONES

**B**obby Jones likes to brag that he's still on the 90-day leave of absence he took in early 1961 from Republic Steel's Chicago plant. He'd carry his mohair suit to the mill and when his shift was over, he'd shower, put on the suit, and head straight to Pepper's Lounge to sub for Junior Wells with the Aces. Wells had gotten hot with *Messin' With The Kid* and was accepting more and more out-of-town engagements without the rhythm section he'd been using on and off locally since the late '40s. After several months, Wells had been gone so much that bassist Dave Myers hired Jones as the Aces' permanent front man. Even though he didn't blow harmonica, he sure could sing.

by Lee Hildebrand

## Long As You Can Sing It, It'll Pay You

Nearly a half century later, Jones is still earning his living as a singer, although until quite recently he hadn't garnered much acclaim for it. He's cut more than two dozen singles since 1965, first as Bobby Jones for such labels as Vee-Jay, USA, Expo, Lionel, Adam, Capri, Top Hit, Tmp-ting, Cap, and Kack, then as Bobby Jonz for Kap, Crooked Road, Expansion, S.O.L.V., Hit, and Big Bidness. With the notable exception of *I'm So Lonely (In My Apartment)* on the MGM-distributed Lionel label, an R&B hit in Chicago and Ft. Lauderdale in 1973, most of his singles were ignored at the time of their release.

"Jones was one of those myriad Chicago singers who never made it from a recording standpoint," music historian Robert Pruter noted in his 1991 book *Chicago Soul*. "It was not that he lacked anything; he had a richly expressive vocal approach with a raw timbre that proved ideal for his blues-based hard soul material. The unfortunate thing is that his records were not especially interesting."

Many of those records are now of great interest to collectors of rare soul platters and command big bucks on e-bay. A near-mint copy of *Welcome Back A Fooling Man* on Kack, for instance, was priced at \$110 on a recent "buy it now" e-bay listing. Bidding for Jones' very first record, *A Certain Feeling* on Vee-Jay (described by Pruter as "a mushy ballad"), started at \$19.99.

Other than a rendition of *Big Boss Man* recorded with Charlie Musselwhite, Barry Goldberg, and Harvey Mandel in the late '60s and currently available on an obscure CD titled *Sweet Home Chicago: An Anthology Of The Blues* on producer Morey Alexander's Las Vegas-based Kent label, Jones had not recorded straight blues until hooking up with producer and harmonica player Randy Chortkoff's Delta Groove label and his all-star band, the Mannish Boys, two years ago. Jones contributed two vocals as a guest on the group's 2007 CD *Big Plans* and was made an official member for last year's *Lowdown Feelin'*, on which he leads seven songs. Besides performing with the band at blues festivals throughout the United States and Canada, he figures they've been to Europe 15 times—to Norway, Finland, Spain, and the U.K.—during the past year.

Jones had never been to Europe prior to joining the Mannish Boys. "They're a little more perceptive," he said of European audiences. "There's something about the blues over there that really permeates. They know it. They know the history of it. They know the history of the songs, which is thrilling. It's not hard to sell 'em songs, 'cause they know what's happening."

Some of the band's English fans were even familiar with his old records.



Jones' debut CD for Delta Groove, **Comin' Back Hard**, issued under his own name but with backing by the Mannish Boys, has been getting heavy play on blues radio programs since its February 17 release. He has done around 35 gigs with the band—many of them one-nighters for which they fly in one day, perform the next, and fly home the third—since becoming a member last year. When not appearing with the band, most of its members perform in other contexts.

Lounge gigs in Nevada have been Jones' bread and butter for most of the past two decades. In late February, the week **Comin' Back Hard** was released, he was appearing for five nights in the relative anonymity of guitarist Huck Daniels' revue in the lounge at the Mojave-run Avi Resort & Casino on the banks of the Colorado River in Laughlin, Nevada, about an hour-and-a-half's drive from Jones' home in Las Vegas. Gamblers wandered into the room, to sit and drink or to dance, as Jones and Loni Clark—a former New Yorker whose house-style 12-inch singles from the early '90s on such labels as Nervous and A&M fetch nearly as much on e-bay as Jones' old records do—performed oldies with the four-man band.

The show was listed in a Laughlin entertainment magazine as "Huck Daniels Review featuring Mr. C: A Tribute to Ray Charles." The star of the show, according to Jones, looks and sounds like Charles and pretends to be blind. He was ill, however, and couldn't make the gig, and since leader Daniels doesn't play much lead guitar, Jones and Clark were the meat of the show.

After the band opened a set with *Laughing Boogie*, a brief shuffling blues instrumental featuring Daniels doing a wide variety of laughs, Clark took the stage to apply her strong alto pipes to two Aretha Franklin favorites, *Don't Play That Song* and *Chain Of Fools*, followed by a girl-group medley of *Will You Love Me Tomorrow*, *Be My Baby*, and *Da Doo Ron Ron*. Bugsy Wilcox, a world-class show drummer who played on *Got To Give It Up* and other Marvin Gaye hits and has recently toured with Lionel Richie, maintained solid time while adding accents and fills in all the right places.

Following a short instrumental interlude of Bill Doggett's *Hold It*, Jones hit the stage looking like a slick Baptist preacher in a long-tailed white suit with gold trim, a rust shirt, and orange tie. He loosened the tie as he segued from the Temptations' *My Girl* to the Rascals' *Groovin'*. Crooning in a deep, rich baritone for *It's Just A Matter Of Time*, the vocalist did an uncanny impression of Brook Benton. Jones slid back and forth sideways during a treatment of Wilson Pickett's *In The Midnight Hour* and ran sideways while singing



COURTESY BOBBY JONES

the line "I come running to you" from the Four Tops' *I Can't Help Myself*. He ended the song and the set by removing his jacket, turning his back to the audience of some 50, and wiggling his butt, rapidly, one cheek at a time. The next set found Jones doing Larry Graham's *One In A Million You*, Eddie Floyd's *Knock On Wood*, and Little Milton's *The Blues Is Alright*, all with the professionalism and pizzazz one would expect from such a seasoned entertainer.

Jones was still doing his butt-shaking routine when he appeared six Saturdays later in Warren Hall at the Earl Warren Show-ground in Santa Barbara for a two-hour concert by the Mannish Boys sponsored by the Santa Barbara Blues Society. This time, however, he was singing nothing but blues—and for an enthusiastic crowd of some 300 blues fans who'd paid \$30 each to attend.

Wearing a black suit with silver sequins and the initials "BJ" on the breast pocket, Jones split vocals at the concert with group member Finis Tasby, who, due to recent hip surgery, sat on a stool while he sang but was on his feet by the show's hard-shuffling finale featuring himself and Jones. Mannish Boys boss man Randy Chortkoff was down with the flu and sent Hook Herrera, a commanding harp blower and strong vocalist recently signed to Delta Groove, in his place. Guitarists Kirk "Eli" Fletcher and Kid Ramos, bassist Ronnie James Weber, and drummer Richard "Big Foot" Innes rounded out the band.

Jones smiled broadly as Ramos took blistering solos on Junior Parker's *These Kind Of Blues* and Hank Ballard's *She's The One*, the two upbeat tunes with which the singer began his segment of the show. As Fletcher soloed on *Dead Letter Blues*, a slow blues written by

Ike Turner, Jones rocked back and forth, then he moaned an entire chorus, partially removed his jacket to expose the right shoulder of his red shirt, and sustained the word "ooh" for two long measures at the beginning of the final chorus. A medley of *Sweet Sixteen* and (*Night Time Is*) *The Right Time* during the second set was similarly powerful. After scatting two choruses of slow blues, he interjected, "Oh, baby, it's drivin' me crazy 'cause you're not here with me." While on his knees at the edge of the stage for the "baby" chorus, a woman from the crowd came forward and attempted to touch him, but he rebuffed her. Finally, when it was time to rise to his feet, Jones accepted her hand.

"I forgot I was this damn old," he quipped as Ramos and Fletcher began a phrase-swapping guitar duel.

Bobby Jones was born on January 2, 1940, on a farm near Farmerville, Louisiana, the son of Roberta and John Henry Jones. "I was born on the ground in a cotton house with no floor," he said over lunch at the Nevada casino. "My mother was picking cotton, and she lay down in the cotton house on the ground and had a baby and tried to go back to picking cotton."

His mother gave him to a white family named Duster when he was three-months old. "I guess she didn't want me," he stated. The Dusters, he said, treated him "like I was their kid. There was a little boy and a little girl. We were all around the same age. We were like sister and brothers. We had a good time."

The Dusters' adult cousins had an amateur county band, and Jones would sing with them at barbecues and other family gatherings. "I was a little boy," he explained. "They played fiddles and guitars. Man, you're talking about nice."

Jones broke into song, doing an impression of Ernest Tubb's nasal drawl on the opening lines of *Walkin' The Floor Over You*. He followed with a few bars of *My Bucket's Got A Hole In It* in dead-on Hank Williams style. His other favorite singers at the time included Roy Acuff, Eddy Arnold, and Little Jimmy Dickens.

The good times came to an end when Jones was seven and his paternal grandfather, Will Jones, came to take him to his 60-acre farm. "When the black people came to get me, I pitched a fit," Jones recalled. "I thought, 'Where the hell did these people come from? What do you mean I've got to go with these black people?'"

Life was hell for Jones for the next seven years. "I worked like a dog," he explained. "I worked like a slave, night and day, most of the time. My granddaddy was very abusive. He would knock you down just for looking at him. He'd kick my butt—I mean literally."



COURTESY BOBBY JONES x 2

Jones attended school only when rain prevented work in the fields. He dropped out during the eighth grade.

He saw little of his parents while growing up. "My father was down on a farm working for somebody else," Jones explained. "He left home when he was about 15-years old 'cause he couldn't get along with his daddy, who was my granddaddy. My mom was never around. I didn't see my mom until I was 12. My uncle took me to see my mother. She was right around me, about 15 miles away, but I had no way to get to her."

Jones attended Pleasant Hill Baptist Church regularly with his grandmother. "You'd

have to get up and go or you didn't get to eat lunch," he said. "On certain Sundays they had all these tubs of food. They brought chicken, ham, greens, and cake and stuff to church. They had a feast."

He sang at the church for two years with the Zion Travelers, an cappella quartet modeled on the Fairfield Four. Jones said that the Blind Boys of Mississippi and Alabama, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, and Lee Williams and the Spiritual QC's are his favorite quartets.



"Sam Cooke was my favorite gospel singer when he was singing gospel," Jones said, adding that Rance Allen is his current favorite. "I've started working on a gospel album," Jones offered. "I'm doing that on my own."

When there was time, he listened to a variety of radio stations. "That's where my versatility came from," he explained. "I learned everything I heard." He listened to blues and R&B at night on WLAC from Nashville. During the day he heard pop songs on KWKH in Shreveport. He was fond of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and especially Sammy Davis Jr.

"I wanted to be like Sammy," he remembered. "He was my idol at the time. He had that thing *Falling In Love Again*." Jones began singing the opening line, then said, "That thrilled my soul."

"They always had so much fun," he said of Sinatra, Martin, and Davis, who became known as the Rat Pack. "That's how try to perform now—put fun in the show. Some people want you to be so serious, but I say, 'Hey, this is show business.' People come to be happy."

When he was 14, Jones left his grandfather's farm and moved in with an aunt in Farmerville. "She told me," he explained, "'come on away from there,' 'cause I started taking about killing him. They started worrying about it. They knew I was serious."

He did construction work and logging for a while, then, with help from his future father-in-law, landed a job driving a delivery truck for the local grocery store. "Oh, man," Jones said, "that was heavenly."

Jones joined the army at 16 and spent most of his two-year hitch in Hackensack, New Jersey. "When I got in the service," he recalled, "they checked my records and found out I had a chauffeur's license. They put me in the motor pool. They

found out that I was pretty cool—didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't get high or nothing. I always minded my own business and kept my mouth shut, so it wasn't long before I became the colonel's driver. I drove a new Chevrolet. I'd go pick his wife up, his daughter, him. And then, one night we had a USO show, and the singer didn't come. Something hap-

pened. He said, 'Somebody needs to come up here and sing.' It was a big band. It must have been 15 pieces.

"I said, 'I can't sing with that big old band, man,' but I want up there and they said, 'What you wanna sing?' I didn't know what to sing. So the guy said, 'Just sing. We'll pick you up.'"

Jones sang *Undecided* a huge hit for the Ames Brothers in 1951, then Pee Wee King's *Slow Poke*, another pop hit from the same year. "We had a time," he recalled. "We did *Coming Around The Mountain*, and everybody was up shouting and dancing. From then on, I was a USO band singer and the driver for the colonel, so I wasn't doin' nothin' in the army. I had it made.

"I had a good army life," he added. "If I'd had any sense, I'd have re-upped and stayed 20 years."

Back in Farmerville after his army stint, Jones studied cabinetmaking at a trade school in order to collect G.I. Bill money. "I knew I was never gonna make cabinets," he admitted.

He moved to Chicago one

day shy of his 19th birthday. "I went to Chicago 'cause my dad and my two uncles were living there," he explained. "I did a lot of work in restaurants as a busboy and dishwasher, and then I got a job at Republic Steel. I was a hooker for cranes. It was dangerous. The steel would be up over your head. If the chain breaks, you're gone. I did that for two years. Great money. It wasn't hard work; it was just strange times. I had gotten a taste of singing with the bands, but I had a wife. I had to work."

He married his Farmerville sweetheart, Joann West, when he was 20. They had one child. "Got a big old son now, Joe Jones," the singer boasted. "He's in Farmerville. He was a sheriff. Now he's an alderman."

The marriage lasted two years. "She used to follow me to the clubs," he explained. "She couldn't stand it. She would be way back. I would look around every once in a while, and she would dart behind a light post or something. I found out later that a lot of nights she had slipped in the club and sat way back in the corner.

JOHN TEMKIN X 2



"That's when I knew that the marriage and the show business didn't go together," Jones said. He never remarried.

After getting off work at the steel plant, Jones would perform on talent shows, at first doing Ray

Charles songs at Frata's Juke Box Lounge with jazz organist Baby Face Willette, then singing Nappy Brown and Brook Benton hits with the Ace's at Pepper's Lounge.

"At first," he remembered, "I was singing like Nappy Brown—I *Cried Like A Baby*. That's what I won all my talent shows with. Then Brook Benton came out with *Kiddio* and *It's Just A Matter Of Time*. I started singing that, and, oh man, I was hot.

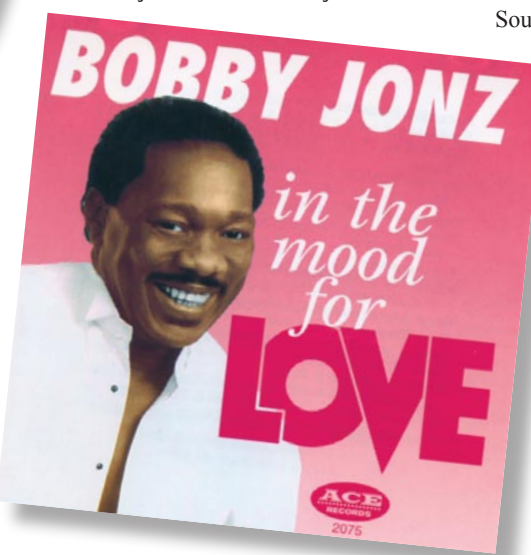
"That's when I was around Muddy and Walter and all of 'em. I was kissing up to them and hanging with 'em whenever they would let me. Sometimes they'd say, 'Youngblood, you get outta here. It's too much nasty talk goin' on in here.'

"Junior Wells and I became kinda good friends. Dave Myers befriended me. What he liked about me was I was clean. Dave was clean-cut and clean-minded. He fell in love with me because I was a young boy who didn't drink and didn't smoke. He said, 'That's unheard of!' I had silk suits, white shirt, necktie, alligator shoes. I took those to the steel mill with me. When I left work, I took a shower and got dressed and went to the clubs."

Jones spent seven years as the Aces' vocalist. Besides the Myers broth-



ers—bassist Dave and guitarist Louis—the band included alternating drummers Fred Below, Odie Payne, and Fred Kidwell and alternating saxophonists John Cameron and Little Wash. The group stayed at Pepper's for about six months, then began playing white clubs on Chicago's West Side due to Jones' ability to sing pop hits of the period by such artists as Benton, Charles, Jerry Butler, and Chubby Checker. "I was the king of the twist on Rush Street," he bragged.



Details of Jones' career over the next three decades are spotty. He has no memory of his first single, *A Certain Feeling*, issued in 1965 on Vee-Jay, although it was produced by Morey Alexander, who he still sees in Las Vegas, where both men currently live. He does remember *Talkin' 'Bout Jone's* from the late '60s on producer Bill Lasley's Expo label. The label credits Detroit session keyboardist Joe Hunter as arranger and conductor. Jones explained that the soul-socking instrumental track was cut in Detroit and sold to Lasley by Motown executive Ewart Abner. "We added to 'em," Jones said of his overdubbed vocals.

The failure of *I'm So Lonely (In My Bedroom)*, produced by Lasley and Bill "Bunky" Sheppard, to become a national hit was a big disappointment. "The record was No. 3 on WVON in Chicago," Jones said. "It stayed No. 1 in Ft. Lauderdale for six weeks. Remember when Marvin Gaye's *Let's Get It On* came out? It knocked me to No. 2."

After leaving the Aces, Jones performed for a period with a band that included guitarist Phil Upchurch. He then appeared around Florida at "upscale white folks' clubs were they had all that good food" and spent time in Hollywood working as an extra on the TV sitcoms *Sanford And Son* and *It's A Living*. At some point, probably around 1980, he changed the spelling of his last name in order to avoid confusion with gospel singer and television host Dr. Bobby Jones.

"I was sitting at my desk," he explained, "and I said, 'I know what I'm gonna do. I'll change the spelling of my last name. I wrote 'Jonez.' I said, 'That's Jo-nez. That

sounds Mexican or something.' I finally came up with 'Jonz.'"

Jones settled in Vegas in 1988, and singing R&B oldies in lounges has been his primary occupation ever since. He also does occasional gigs singing pop standards with a jazz group led by pianist-arranger Woody Woods.

"It's all just work—you know, survival," he said. "Thank God I'm versatile enough to do all of it. I can put on a tux and do a dinner show and do Sinatra, Bennett, and them."

Prior to joining the Mannish Boys and signing with Delta Groove, Jones had a streak of luck on record with *In The Mood For Love*. Written by Jones and recorded in Las Vegas with producer Billy Ray Charles, the song is a simmering mid-tempo ballad reminiscent of Tyrone Davis. It came to the attention of veteran record man Johnny Vincent, who brought the vocalist to Jackson, Mississippi, to record a whole CD of that title for his Ace label with X. Parker and Ron Evans serving as co-producers with Jones.

*In The Mood For Love*, along with other self-penned CD tracks like *Sneaking & Freaking* and *Baby You Baby*, made Bobby Jonz something of a southern soul sensation. He followed it with a self-produced disc of even more salacious songs titled *Your Freak Is Here* for Warren Hildebrand's Big Bidness label in New Orleans.

"I was hot as fire down though the South," said Jones, who pulled up stakes in 1998, moved to Jackson, and began appearing Fridays and Saturdays, and sometimes on Sundays, throughout the South. "All them nasty people love it," he said of tunes like *Baby You Baby*, which contains the line "I don't want you with nothin' on—nothin' on your mind but me, baby," which is perhaps the singer's most clever use of word play. "That's what you better sing down through there or they'll leave you alone."

By 2000, Jones was back in Vegas. "I ran out of juice down there," he said of the South. "That's why I don't like southern soul: It don't last long. You're only as good as your last record."

As a member of the Mannish Boys and on his own Delta Groove CD, Jones is for the first time in his career singing nothing but what he calls "straight-up blues." And with the enthusiastic reception he's been getting from concert and blues festival audiences and from radio programmers and record reviewers, it appears that Jones, at age 69, is finally finding the wide acclaim that for so long had largely eluded him.

"In the blues," he observed, "you can stand forever. Long as you can sing it, it'll pay you."

