

Jay McShann

What A Wonderful World





Jay McShann
vocal and piano

Gerald Spait
bass

Todd Strait
drums

Ahmad Alaadeen
tenor sax

Sonny Kenner
guitar

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***Special guest:
Lugman Hamza
(vocals and piano)

Todd Strait plays
Avedis Zildjian Cymbals
& Yamaha Drums





If you're the observant type, you may be lucky enough to see two mythic figures crossing the intersection of 18th and Vine in Kansas City after midnight, pulling up the collars of their coats against the cold and lonesome rain.

The one who holds out a hospitable hand to you is Piney Brown, the legendary friend to Kansas City musicians and boss of the **The Sunset Club**. In the heyday of Kansas City jazz, **The Sunset** was located at 12th and Vine, just few blocks down from the famous intersection. It was the musicians' joint of choice for after hours jams not only for Piney's big welcome but for the lightning-fingered house pianist, Pete Johnson, and a singing bartender named Joe Turner. So you reach out to shake hands with Piney Brown there in the street and, sure enough, you can hardly keep from crying.

But the other fella, the one next to Piney, he just grins up at you and lets go a giggle. That's pianist and bandleader Jay McShann. Piney left this wicked world decades ago but Jay is hale and hearty at age 83. See if you can't invite him into a place where the two of you can have "a couple of tasters". He will regale you with stories, that wonderful laugh of his punctuating each and every one.

He'll tell you about delivering victrolas across the dust-storm plagued Oklahoma flats with his father in that big red "Ferguson's Furniture Store" truck. That's how he got hold of the copy of Bessie Smith's **Backwater Blues** that impressed him so much. He'll tell you that it was

his sister Dutch, not him, who got the piano lessons. But it was Jay who ran over to the piano and played Dutch's lesson flawlessly while Miss Ayers was off getting a plate of red beans at the kitchen stove. "That's what I been tryin' to get you to do, girl!" she called back over her shoulder.

He'll tell you about playing 4th of July parties with schoolmate (and sax legend to be) Don Byas and not coming home till noon the next day. His parents were livid till he started pulling those dollar tips out of his pocket one by one and laying them carefully on the table.

But the story of his bus trip to Omaha to see his Uncle Odie during the last of '36, that one will really set the stage. At the Kansas City rest stop, he walked over to the **Club Reno** to catch a tune or two by Bus Moten and the boys. And he never went back. Good playing jobs and some good press followed. When he put his own band of upstarts together (two were 27 years old, all the rest were under 25) at **The Playmore Arena** and **The Plaza**, he lucked into a double gold mine: a teen sax sensation named Charlie Parker and a blues shouter just back from planting trees at one of Roosevelt's C.C.C. camps. That was Walter Brown. The McShann band would be known ever afterward as the cradle where Parker swung before he bopped. (McShann also weaned Parker from rough and tumble Tulsa women just before one of them got mad enough to cut his throat!). The song McShann and Walter Brown knocked together ten days before their fabled first recordings was

Decca in Dallas during 1941, **Confessin' the Blues**, would likewise stamp them forever as "blues based". Royalties from it, still rolling in after 58 years, have put McShann's daughters through college, paid off the mortgage on the Kansas City homestead and much more.

McShann will tell you about the infamous 1941 victory of his lean and hungry "western dogs" over Lucky Millinder's urban sophisticates at Harlem's "Home of Happy Feet", the Savoy Ballroom. Then he'll shake his head: if only that draft notice hadn't got in the way of his rising star! He'll tell you how he prayed that his pathetically flat feet would spare him from military duty. They didn't, but his hemorrhoids finally did! But by the time he got his discharge in 1945, his band was gone, his prize book of arrangements had been stolen and big bands themselves were on the wane.

He will tell you about trying to keep a pared down jump unit together for some California gigs in 1946. His singer, Maxie "Blues" Bailey, took off for better pay in Charlie Barnet's band. He didn't know what to do until a young merchant marine named Jimmy Witherspoon approached the bandstand in Vallejo and asked McShann if he might sing a few. Witherspoon killed the crowd there and in Barstow the next night — and another McShann era was born.

He'll tell you that forty years of European and Japanese tours, plus festivals and club work in America, have kept him "steady rolling" and enjoying himself out among the people.

When he slides off the barstool, sets his hat

on the side of his head, and dances out the door, you'll scarcely believe how much history and good natured wit just went with him.

But if you're not the observant type, or if you can't get to 18th and Vine by midnight, then pop on the disk you just bought. It's a toe-tapping tutorial to the whole deal. The first three cuts are straight out of **The Sunset Club**; indeed right off of Pete Johnson's ivories. After the opener, wistful homage to old Piney Brown himself, McShann picks things up both in tempo and jollity with **Cherry Red** which Cleanhead Vinson and The Cootie Williams Orchestra certainly squeezed for all it was worth in their 1944 cover of it. But McShann swings it pretty good here in 1999 right down to the original "*Eagle-rock me, mama, till my face turns cherry red*" finish. The lesser known **Just For You** concludes the Pete Johnson medley with instrumental flourish, Ahmad Alaadeen and Sonny Kenner chiming in tastefully on sax and guitar after McShann's has his pianistic say. Those two keep ripping it up around McShann's shouting on **Lonely Boy Blues**, one of the tunes he and Walter Brown put together with apparent ease after those band rehearsals at the **Playmore Arena** in '41. (Moreover, it was part of the monster playlist which blew down Lucky Millinder at **The Savoy** when the band went national a year later.)

The two tunes here which are attributed to Jimmy Witherspoon, **Blue Monday** and **Rain is Such a Lonely Sound** as well as **Gee, Baby, Ain't I Good to You** all appeared on **Goin' To**

Kansas City, Spoon's first album cut with McShann's help for RCA in 1957. The reading here is far more intimate and, of course, far more McShann.

And more instrumentals! **Crazy Legs and Friday Strut** was the title track to a 1976 Sackville LP McShann did with sax veteran Buddy Tate. Here he tries the infectious romp sans sax, braced only by Todd Strait's light but right cymbals and drums. Coming in on track number nine is **Hot Biscuits**, a McShann original first recorded back in 1948 for Swing Time and just oozing 18th and Vine. Eddie Heywood's **Land of Dreams** caught McShann's ear when it appeared two years ahead of his better known 1956 hit, **Canadian Sunset**. McShann leaps into its rambling bass figures here with a passion.

The whole quartet needs to take a bow — ditto with producer Joe Harley for another sensitively produced project. But an extra bow should be taken by the regrettably underappreciated Kansas City guitar legend, Sonny Kenner. Growing up in and around his dad's group, Clarence Kenner and the Big Little Band, Sonny had a chance to hear Blue Devil Lester Young, Louis Armstrong and other luminaries as they guested. McShann remembers jamming with Sonny in the early '50s in Kansas City and was quite satisfied with his backing in Bruce Ricker's celebrated 1974 documentary film, **Last of the Blue Devils**. Sonny also recorded and performed with Jimmy Witherspoon in the early '60s.

The ribbon tying this bluesy package together is the title tune, popularized by Louis Armstrong and many others. Witherspoon used to close his shows with it during his last years, come to think of it. In McShann's hands, it becomes hushed and hymn-like, a grateful prayer for all the fun and all the love he's had since stepping off the bus in Kansas City for that rest stop. It's lasted sixty-three years so far. Many more, Jay!

— by John Anthony Brisbin
Summer, 99

Audiophiles are treated to a bonus track of the evergreen **Until the Real Thing Comes Along**, sung by an old friend of McShann's, and an even older friend of Sonny Kenner's, Luqman Hamza (A.K.A. Larry Cummings). Hamza, a Chess recording artist and former Inkspots vocalist, was in the control booth listening to the session when he was urged by McShann to participate. Much surprised producer Joe Harley shrugged and agreed, and the results are an exquisitely vintage sound. Hopefully separate Hamza and Kenner recording projects will soon follow.

John Anthony Brisbin's lengthy cover interview with Jay McShann appears in the Jan Feb, 2000 issue of **LIVING BLUES MAGAZINE**. An interview with guitarist Sonny Kenner by Dawayne Gilley, transcribed and edited by John Anthony Brisbin, appears in the same Kansas City issue of **LIVING BLUES**.



Executive Production by: *Ying Tan and Sebastian Koh*

Produced by: *Joe Harley*

Recorded by: *Michael C. Ross at Airborne Audio Productions, Kansas City, MO on May 3 and 4, 1999*

Assistant Engineers: *Isaac Moreno and Don Miller*

Mastered by: *Bernie Grundman using the Sony Direct Stream Digital™ System*

Recorder: *Studer A-80 2 Track*

Tape: *BASF 900@30 ips*

Microphones: *Llomo 919A-19, Neumann M-149, U-47, TLM-70, KM-84, AKG "The Tube", RCA 44, Shure KSM 32, Shure SM 57*

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