



Bayou Blues

*"Blues ain't football.
You don't have to retire at 30.
You can grow and play all your life."
—Elvin Bishop*

THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF LESLIE 'LAZY LESTER' JOHNSON

UP ON THE RIDGE in Paradise lives a blues music legend named Leslie 'Lazy Lester' Johnson, originally from South Louisiana, where he built his legendary music career as one of the key creators of the swamp blues sound in the '50s.

Lester crafted a style as unique as his nickname. It's a mixture of blues, swamp pop and classic country.

Born in Torras, La., in 1933 and raised outside of Baton Rouge, he became a harp player and vocalist.

As a boy, he worked as a gas station attendant, woodcutter and at a grocery store, saving money to purchase a harmonica and Little Walter's "Juke" record.

Then Lester began to blow that harp, and at the same time, he borrowed his brother's guitar and learned how to strum along with music from the radio.

During his teens, he listened to blues programs on the radio and became infatuated with harp demigods Jimmy Reed, Sonny Boy Williamson and Little Walter.

Around that time, Lester joined his first band, playing the harp in a group called the Rhythm Rockers. It was in the mid-1950s riding home on a bus in Rayne,

La., that fate turned his way. He recognized a guy named Lightnin' Slim, a recording artist who was riding on the same bus, headed to Crowley to cut a record at Jay Miller's Studio, where much of the material for the Nashville-based Excello Records was being recorded.

After establishing a friendly connection with Slim, Lester decided to stay on the bus and accompany him to the studio. When they got there, the scheduled harp player, Wild Bill Phillips, had not showed up for the session work. Lester told Slim he thought he could handle the harp parts. Remarkably, Slim and Miller gave him his big chance, and that was the moment that Lester became a mainstay on Slim's Excello recordings and his live shows.

He followed Slim's guitar licks with short, stabbing harp solos, after Slim's well-known trademark prodding of, "Blow your harmonica, son."

Miller was impressed by Lester's work, and in 1957 he debuted as a lead artist on Excello, recording "I'm Gonna Leave You Baby" backed with the instrumental "Lester's Stomp." ▶

continued on page 24



Before the record's release, Miller had decided "Lazy Lester" had more of a ring to it than "Lester Johnson." He came up with the nickname based on his slow, lazy style of talking—and as Lester says, "because I was never in a hurry to do anything."

Lester's first solo hits came in 1958 with "I'm A Lover Not A Fighter" backed with "Sugar Coated Love." Record buyers went gaga when they heard his vocals and the harp work that imitated the voice note for note.

He hit again with a follow-up record, "I Hear You Knockin'"/"Through The Goodness of My Heart," and for almost a decade, he remained a regular Excello artist.

A mainstay in Miller's studio, he served in the role of accompanying musician and arranger when he wasn't the lead artist himself. He did everything. He sang. He played the harp. He played the guitar. And he provided every conceivable kind of percussion from drums to whacking on cardboard boxes, wood blocks or saddles, tapping newspapers in his lap, or even banging on walls.

Excello was more than just a blues label, and Lester's innate talents served every type of session that Miller produced, including Cajun, country, swamp pop, rock 'n' roll, R&B and blues.

In truth, country was his favorite, having grown up listening to Hank Williams and Jimmie Rogers.

"I've always loved country music," Lester says. "I listen to all of 'em. I've always had a record collection of folks like Merle Travis, George Jones and of course, Charley Pride."

Even though Lester often taught the Excello artists arrangements before they put them to tape, it took a long time plus pressure from the musicians themselves for Miller to allow him to record country music with them. He feared that if the buying public found out that a black man was part of the session, they wouldn't buy the record.

The artists who Miller recorded (and nicknamed), Lightnin' Slim, Lazy Lester, Guitar Gable, Lonesome

Sundown, became known collectively as purveyors of "swamp blues," an electric brand of country blues that was tremendously influential, inspiring later acts like Tony Joe White, Jerry Reed, the Fabulous Thunderbirds and the Rolling Stones.

Lester and Miller parted company in 1966, with Lester quitting the music business in favor of a variety of backbreaking day jobs, ranging from truck driving to logging to road construction.

Like many African-American musicians of his era, he felt the industry was ripping him off, and for good reason. It was common practice back then that the label owner or producer would demand part of the writing credit for a song before he'd record it.

Years later, upon his return to music, he cut the record, "Lazy Lester Rides Again" for Britain's Blue Horizon label, which won him a W.C. Handy Award for Best Contemporary Blues Album when reissued stateside by Kingsnake.

He's had a dozen solo pressings to his credit on numerous labels in the United States, Japan and the United Kingdom. In 1998, he was inducted into the Louisiana Blues Hall of Fame.

His 2011 album "You Better Listen," resulted in nominations for three Blues Music Awards. Leslie "Lazy Lester" Johnson, was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 2012 for his contributions to the blues music genre. •

Lazy Lester will be Buddy Guy's special guest at the Laxson Auditorium • April 7 • 7:30 pm
www.chicoperformances.com • (530) 898-6333
www.lazylester.net



Phil Reser has written stories on major American rock and music acts for newspapers, magazines and radio stations since receiving his journalism degree from San Francisco State University. His media contributions include the New York Times, San Francisco Examiner, Chico Enterprise-Record, KCHO & KPFR Public Radio, Blues Revue, and Rolling Stone magazines.