



/continued from back cover/

broke the spell and people began screamin' and hollerin'. People from downstairs came upstairs and we packed the place. After that night I thought, 'I'm gonna try that again', and it worked everywhere, all through Tennessee and Texas. I bought lots of beautiful suits, bright canary yellow and so on. I'd be walking outside in the mud, lying down in all the dirt and people would say, 'Oh please, don't lie down in that pretty suit!' This was for the blacks first, of course, but when I got back to the West Coast and began doing it with the kids... Wow!!

In 1949, McNeely's booking agency introduced him to Leon Rene, owner of Exclusive, for whom he made a brace of remarkably fine singles at Radio Recorders. Although McNeely's powers of recollection do not fully extend to the Exclusive sessions ("I don't recall half the tracks even tho' I produced them myself") many listeners will prefer these recordings to the one-paced Savoy material. Indeed, their variety undermines the sterility associated with a good deal of archetypal honking. Witness BLOW BIG JAY, an April 1949 heart-stopper on which McNeely's relentless, roller-coasting tenor is uplifted by a latin lilt. Hear too TONDALAYO which begins like an Oriental-flavoured tone poem and features Bob McNeely on alto or K & H BOOGIE, a showcase for sublime piano-playing authored by Jimmie O'Brien, WILLIE THE COOL CAT (which stroked the ego of New York WHOM deejay, Willie Bryant) does little to disguise McNeely's reverence for Charlie Parker while GINGERCAKE, BOOGIE IN FRONT and HOPPIN' WITH HUNTER (dedicated to KFVD's deejay Hunter Hancock) illustrate his command of all the techniques associated with the honker's art. The blues-ballad, MIDNIGHT DREAMS, was written and performed by Clifford Blivens, a young singer from Dawson, Texas whom McNeely first engaged as a chauffeur. Blivens cut solo discs for Exclusive including "Hobo Boogie" and "Unhappy Woman Blues". His plummy voice also adorned JUNIE FLIP while bass-player Theodore "Ted" Shirley sang on the humorous and wildly exciting ROADHOUSE BOOGIE. (Thirteen years later, Shirley's son, Everett, played trumpet on McNeely's "Live At Cisco's" album).



Covered with perspiration, Big Jay plays sax with one hand as he kneels on night club floor. Big Jay starts with coat on, removes coat without stopping playing. He carries 15 suits with him to each date, usually has to change after each set.

(Courtesy Martin Brown)

Shouting and pounding on stage, two T-shirted fans let themselves go as Big Jay McNeely blows strong and loud while lying flat on his back at Los Angeles concert. (Picture is important. It points up a facet in the psychology of post-war youth. And it does so with power. Teen-agers need an outlet for their emotions which is not easily found in the crevices of everyday life. Music is accepted socially. Many ready forms of release are not. And today it is music. If it's not Big Jay, it will be another unknown elevated to fame by rabid fandom). Quotations from *Ebony* and *Readers Digest*-type magazine. (Courtesy Martin Brown)

Nineteen-fifty brought a swift four-track session for Aladdin whose titles — JAYSFRANTIC, LET'S SPLIT, REAL CRAZY COOL and DEAC'S BLOWOUT — presaged the brainbending excitement of rock'n' roll by half a decade. Ironically, LET'S SPLIT (not issued until May 1954) was based on an elderly music hall tune, "One Of The Ruins That Oliver Cromwell Knocked About A Bit". All four tracks conform to the wildest traditions of McNeely's chosen genre; as a blue-print for honking at its most mantra-like there is little to compare with JAYSFRANTIC or REAL CRAZY COOL actually one long performance split up. Midway between a desperate, chaotic mess and a marvellously invigorating noise, they did not sell well; as Jay himself concedes: — "the saxophone was a little too black for most white kids comin' on".

The following year, McNeely joined Imperial where the band featured a slew of vocalists including 17 year old Jesse Belvin whom McNeely had met at a gig in L. A. "Jesse was a fantastic artist", Jay eulogised, "a very, very handsome fellow and a wonderful person. He came out to my house in Watts and we broke bread together. He was always writing songs, he could sit down and write a tune in five minutes. And he gave them away. Of course, we really didn't know anything about publishing — nobody would tell the blacks anything and you were blackballed if you tried to learn. Jesse's mother didn't really want him to go on the road but I was the first one to carry him around. Jesse and Jimmy Huff — another singer who used to play drums in his own band until he joined mine — they were over at my house all the time".

Belvin sang as a single ("Sad Story") and as part of a group, Three Dots And A Dash, namely Jimmy Huff, Marvin Phillips and a girl remembered only as Betty. Their half-dozen cuts have been reissued on *Big Jay Rides Again* (Pathe-Marconi 1546691) together with instrumentals from the band and one song, "Insect Ball", by the comedians, Dope and Skillet, alias Little Arthur Matthews and Ernest Mayhand. Matthews recorded for Johnny Otis while Mayhand had appeared during the Forties as part of Pan, Pot and Skillet with Jimmie Lunceford's Orchestra. He spent the Sixties creating a wealth of smutty comedy routines as half of Leroy (Daniels) and Skillet on Laff Records.

Before leaving the Imperial sides, we should incorporate a note of caution for those who want every McNeely disc. "Blow Blow Blow" (Imperial 5170) plus dubbed audience noise equals "Deacon's Express" (5219) which was re-titled "Hometown Jamboree" (Bayou 014). "Teenage Hop" (the reverse of Bayou 014) is a re-titled "Night Ride". McNeely's second Bayou coupling (018) is more complicated: "Calamity" equals "Night Ride" but with an ending spliced on "Deacon Rides Again" while "Catastrophe" is a mixture of several records spliced together, the longest segment being "Deacon's Express".

By the early Fifties, McNeely was a huge draw, primarily because of his onstage antics and spectacular walks. He talks proudly of a concert with Lionel Hampton circa 1950: — "Wrigley Field in Los Angeles, a baseball stadium, a black promoter and 25-30,000 people. Jesse Belvin sang his stuff and I went on. I did one number and Hamp's wife pulled me offstage — she didn't want anyone else to steal the show and wouldn't let me go on. When Hamp marched his band down to the front, I ran out past third base and right on up into the audience and I started blowing. Hamp's wife was mad but there wasn't nothin' she could do. I was up in the audience and all the kids were hollerin' and screamin' for me, the hometown boy. I marched all the way around the stadium... Hamp wasn't gonna be outdone though... he took his whole band off-stage and marched right round the stadium to where home plate is. When I saw that, I started crawling on my back from second base all through the dugouts. And he still had to follow me... we all ended up in the dugouts and I got big write-ups in the papers after that".

McNeely's walks were nothing if not photogenic. *Ebony* carried a spread of him blowing in the street outside Los Angeles' Club Oasis; he would honk at passers-by

and compete with car drivers who honked at him. He'd cakewalk to the dressing room in a green suit and emerge in a purple one. At the Band Box on New York's 51st Street he would blast his way next door to Birdland, go walkabout amongst the customers and then leave with a dozen or more people jiggling along in his wake. On one occasion, in San Diego, he was detained for disturbing the peace: — "I was working with Hunter Hancock at the Eagle Ballroom and I start to march around and entertain the people. Bob, on baritone, and the trombone player are following behind me. I manage to get past the policeman on the door — he's clapping his hands and enjoying himself — but the crowd is packed tight and Bob couldn't follow me. I'm playing in the street when an off-duty policeman comes up and arrests me. He called in and a police car came and picked me up. I was in the cells for half an hour before my brother came down and bailed me out. The rest of the band was still inside the club playing when I got back".

"We used to have Battles Of The Saxes", McNeely continued. "Myself, Vinny (Vido) Musso, Chuck Higgins, Joe Houston... I introduced Joe to the West Coast and put him on a lot of sessions... all those guys. That was like a constant happening when the sax was the thing before the guitar took over. They'd be advertised like a boxing show. I'd created a lot of excitement by lying on the floor and stuff and other saxophonists began to copy my act. There were dozens of 'em doing it."

In 1954, *Downbeat* listed a string of McNeely imitators including Wild Bill Boone, Frank Lewis and Eugene Jackson; "Lewis", wrote *Downbeat's* reporter, "arranger and saxman with Bruce Dybrig's Royalaires, turns into a Big Jay at 11.45 pm nightly upon instructions from the boss".

I thought, 'I'm gonna have to come up with something a little different'... I was in an after-hours club, The Nitecap, they had a strip-tease show and one girl came out... they turned off all the lights... she just had panties on and they were fluorescent. I thought that's what I'll do. I stripped the horn, painted it with gold leaf, and then put on the real vivid transparent paint. When the lights go out, it just glows, all you see is the horn moving".

In 1952, Ralph Bass signed McNeely to Federal and, over the following two years, his normal working band cut 17 titles.

The first session produced a schizophrenic pairing in JUST CRAZY, a ferocious honker, and PENTHOUSE SERENADE, a warm, grainy jazz ballad. "The Goof", another track from the same session (but not heard here) featured "Porkie" Harris, a white guitarist from a hillbilly band. "He was a fat little kid", said Jay. "When I first saw him he was working with Roy Rogers. Y'see, the Mexicans were now into R & B and the white kids too. I used to play at all the highschools in L. A. and often had a mixture of a band with different lead singers. Johnny Torres, he was a kid from Philadelphia, a mix of Italian and black. I used Smokey Lands, a black stand-up singer from L. A. and Duke Thomas, a white kid from Eagle Rock, he sang just like Frankie Laine". William "Buddy" Woodson, who stood in for Dillard McNeely, had attended Jordan High School: "He was a quiet, reserved sort of fellow who played upright bass. He went off and played with good single acts at cabaret and supper clubs. I replaced him with one Texan after another including Ike Brown and Cecil Harris who worked with me quite a while, in the band as well as on sessions. He was out of Denver". Other stalwarts of the McNeely band circa 1952-1954 included pianist Boyd Dunlop, drummer Darnell Cole (Hardiman's cousin who came from Fort Worth) and organist Dwight David (he wrote the Federal track, "Rock Candy"). Uncharacteristically, King-Federal owner Syd Nathan paid McNeely for each session ("\$1000 a date — that was my share") but one disappointment still rankles: — "I was supposed to record "Fever" with my singer, Johnny Torres, but he was fooling around with some chick in Providence and wouldn't come down to New York for the session. They gave the tune to Little Willie John".

By then McNeely had recorded "Jay's Rock" and "Big Jay's Hop" for Vee-Jay, backed by two new sidemen, Earl De Witt (piano) and Johnny Walker (drums) — ignore, incidentally, the Vee-Jay session files which reverse those roles. "Johnny was a fabulous drummer from Chicago", recalled McNeely. "We played with Gene Krupa in Philadelphia and, after Johnny took a solo, Krupa wouldn't let him take any more. He was tremendous... but he died of heart trouble, his heart never developed. I picked up Earl De Witt in San Bernardino. I used to have an organa, a small organ which Earl tried out with us on the road. I think he's now in Las Vegas playing a Hammond organ and making a living at it".

The mid-fifties brought numerous tours including the Top Ten Revue, a series of Southern one-nighters with The Moonglows, Joe Turner ("I accompanied the performers but Joe tried to act like we couldn't read his music; really he just wanted Choker Campbell to back him 'cos that's who he was used to"), The Five Keys, Bill Doggett and headliner Little Richard who once told McNeely "You're the only cat who can warm 'em up for something like me". Other performers were less magnanimous; according to McNeely he was cut out of tours with Ray Anthony, Kay Starr and Johnnie Ray. One *Downbeat* feature ("Big Noise in R & B: McNeely, McSqually — Either Way You Pronounce It, Means Box Office") explained why a number of established acts refused to appear with him at his peak: — "McNeely has been busy hereabouts since 1949, both in clubs and on records, but he came into his own with the big boom in rhythm and blues business. He started doing concerts in outlying communities where he caught the high school and junior college set (both white and coloured). Then things started to happen. Last fall Big Jay and his boys were engaged to bolster the bill on the Eckstine - Basie - Shearing concert here, and Big Jay stole the show."



With feet raised high in the air, Big Jay McNeely blows a hot horn for night club patrons. Sax player behind him is his brother Robert who follows Big Jay around floor. A third brother, Dillard, is manager of band. Big Jay is youngest brother.

(Courtesy Martin Brown)

Big Jay McNeely Big Noise In R&B



BIG JAY MCNEELY, who is blowing up a storm of publicity on the west coast, heads eastward soon, is hardly a static tenor man, as is shown by these photos—he gets around a little. Some of his various maneuvers are the thrust, the leap, and the sprawl. The latter appears to be giving Johnnie Ray moments of sheer ecstasy at right. Pics were taken at a recent concert in Los Angeles.

He was engaged as one of the subsidiary acts to appear on the Johnnie Ray show here at the Shrine Auditorium last month. Not only did he steal the show again, but it was obvious that of the crowd that turned out a larger number had paid to hear Big Jay rather than Johnnie Ray or his other supporting attraction, Harry James.

McNeely encountered similar hostility from Nat King Cole: — "Kinda sad, that. My drummer's wife knew Nat's first wife, Nadine, and he came by the little garage where we used to rehearse. 'Keep up the good work', he told us. 'You gonna make it.' I always respected him for that, but later we played a gig together in Oakland. I really got the people built up, I'm really walkin'. I got the crowd in such a frenzy they didn't want to hear no singing. Nat came over and told me, 'You'll never work with me again'. I thought he was kidding but I was all set up for GAC tour with Nat Cole and Sarah Vaughan and they ended up putting Louis Jordan in there. It hurt me, but I've always had the highest respect for the guy."

In 1956, while appearing at Birdland with Bill Doggett, McNeely recorded for Atlantic. He doesn't think he signed a contract and British efforts to liberate all 14 titles have met with a "can't-find-the-tapes" response. Two years elapsed before McNeely recorded again and then, with Little Sonny Warner, he enjoyed the biggest hit of his long career.

Little Sonny's version of "There Is Something On Your Mind" entered the Hot Hundred on 31 May 1959, peaked at No. 44 in July and remained on the chart for 16 weeks. The tune reached No. 5 on the R & B chart and remained in the Top Thirty for six months. One year later Bobby Marchan's version topped the R & B list and climbed to No. 31 on the Hot Hundred. Baby Ray (No. 69 pop in 1966), the Jolly-Jax, Tommy Ridgley, Little Johnny Taylor, the Cupcakes and Professor Longhair have all helped to increase the popularity of one of R & B's most valuable copyrights. Ironically, McNeely didn't write the song: — "I bought 'There Is Something On Your Mind' from Rocky Wilson, the guy who sang with the Rivingtons. He wrote the tune in San Francisco and we had jammed around doing sessions so I had heard it for some time. Rocky liked Fats Domino and had the tune going like Fats... I told him, 'What you need to do is cut everything in half', and I slowed everything down and re-arranged the tune. I knew it was gonna be a hit. We were playing in Seattle. I wanted to record it with Rocky but he was in a hurry to get back South and needed the money to get there. He said, 'I'll sell you the tune for 25 dollars', and so I bought it. Then I recorded it



At El Monte Legion Stadium April 1958. Left to right (top row): Wendell Johnson, Big Jay, Dillard McNeely, (bottom row): Leonard Hardiman, Little Sonny, Bob McNeely. (Courtesy Johnny Otis)

with Little Sonny who I'd met around 1955. He came up to us when we were playing a little town out of Washington D. C. He sang with us that night and I thought he sounded exactly like Ray Charles. I was so impressed, he reminded me of a Baptist preacher, he could just tear a house up, he had that enthusiasm. A tremendous entertainer too, he was about 21 when we cut "There Is Something On Your Mind" — we recorded it in a guy's basement in Seattle after we got off work one night. It was the regular band, Bob and Dillard, Leonard Hardiman and my new guitarist, Wendell Johnson. He was a tall, nice-looking kid who played so loud I had to go turn the switch down on the back of his guitar. He quit because of that but he's on "Something On Your Mind" I told Sonny, 'Sing the song exactly like it is here on Rocky's tape, no Ray Charles or nothing, just like this.' That's what he did. I took the tape to Hal Zeigler, a promoter in L. A., but he didn't like it. Then Hunter Hancock was getting ready to open a label, Swingin' Records, and I took it out there and he said 'O.K. we'll try it'. Now at that time I wasn't making but maybe \$150 a night. I was playing behind Bobby Darin and Chuck Berry and trying to support a six-piece band. After I had paid my musicians, gas and 10 per cent travelling tax, I was down to four or five dollars. We went up to Frisco where I knew a guy named Rocky Lucky who played the dub on his show, The Midnight Shift. He put the dub on the air and, with no records in the stores, everybody started clamouring for it. Eventually, the record broke all over the country and when I came back to the Oakland Auditorium with B. B. King I was getting \$1000 a night."

(The story has a further twist. In 1957 Rocky Wilson was singing with Jacqueline Baldwin aka Jackie Day, and he wrote "There Is Something On Your Mind" at her home in San Francisco. When Jackie heard the record over the air she called McNeely and politely enquired as to how he'd got hold of the song. They corresponded back and forth, met up and, eventually, in 1960, they were married).

Between Swingin' singles, Warner and McNeely recorded for Liberty who issued "Riff Runner" c/w "San Antonio Rose" on their Freedom subsidiary. Both sides were produced by Billy Ward, vocal coach behind the Dominoes. In 1960 Warner left the band to pursue a solo career. He recorded "My Love For You" (Concertone 200) with Jesse Herring's Orchestra in 1961 and a couple of duets with Marie Allen for the Bee Bee label in 1962. "Bell Bottom Blue Jeans" and a revival of The Pastels' "Been So Long" (Checker 1151) constitutes his last generally known coupling in 1966. Although little has been heard of Warner since then, the Imperial vaults contain an unissued four-track session (including "My Love For You") which dates from 1955, adding credence to McNeely's final recollection on the subject: — "I carried Sonny around for four or five years before I could get him on wax. He sounded so much like Ray Charles that nobody would record him."

Little Sonny Warner was replaced by Leon Haywood, a top soul star during the Seventies: — "Leon came out to my house from Houston. Somebody had told him about me and he asked for a job as a singer and organist. I was the first one to carry him on the road". In 1961 Haywood sang and played on McNeely's last Swingin' single, "Without A Love" c/w "The Squat". He also wrote the top side. McNeely himself played on Little Johnny Taylor's "One More Chance" (Swingin' 639). Thereafter the company collapsed in a welter of legal proceedings. Hunter Hancock was accused on three counts of tax evasion (i.e. neglecting to report payola received during 1956-1958) and eventually placed on probation and made subject to a suspended term of 4 years imprisonment.

In 1962, McNeely joined Warner Brothers for a celebrated live album recorded at Cisco's on Hermosa Beach. He and his brothers were joined by trumpeter Everett Shirley and guitarist Arthur Wright: "We're all of the same faith, Jehovah's Witnesses. Everett has played on a lot of L. A. sessions — he's a teacher in electronics. Arthur Wright worked for John Dolphin as an A & R man but now has his own recording studio and produces many albums". Fred Thompson (organ), Ramon Martinez (drums) and "Little Walter" (harmonica) completed the personnel. While McNeely had no reason to suppose that the harmonica player was not the Little Walter, his description of the man ("a very big, tall guy") confirms the identity of the late George Smith who used to bill himself as Little Walter Jr. Smith played on three tracks only: "You Don't Have To Go", "Cisco's" and "Farther On Up The Road".

All three McNeely brothers left the music business during the early Sixties. Bob, who suffered from poor health, retired altogether while Dillard now operates a one-man custodial business. Jay McNeely took jobs with Alfa Car Wash and the National Cash Register. Now and again, Maxwell Davis would use him as a session-man, dubbing his horn parts on to tracks for records by Lowell Fulson and B. B. King. McNeely also recorded the backing track for his wife's revival of the Leon Haywood song, "Without A Love", in 1965. "She's a tremendous singer", he says, "good on soul stuff like 'Knock On Wood' and 'Land of a Thousand Dances' — 'Without a Love' was a big tune on Modern". Mrs Jay McNeely, whose records were issued under the name of Jackie Day, recorded "What Kind Of Man Are You?" (Modern 1037) in 1967 and se-



Crowding close to blaring sax, teenagers almost mob Big Jay as he blows near edge of stage. (Courtesy Martin Brown)

veral sides for Specialty including "Free At Last" in 1969. By then McNeely himself was an infrequent visitor to the studios. Modern issued a re-recording of "Deacon's Hop" with Maxwell Davis on piano and Davis supervised a blues record by Roscoe Holland with Big Jay McNeely playing tenor ("Endlessly" c/w "Troubles, Troubles, Troubles" — Rand 3143). McNeely has no recollection of the session but could have helped to provide a backing track for a singer he has never met. In 1965 McNeely formed his own label, Ammonia, after his mother's name, and issued one record, a Coasters type novelty by the Sonics.

When R & B historian Norbert Hess interviewed McNeely in 1973, he was playing weekends at Tiki's in Monterey Park and making his living as a postman. "I joined the Post Office in 1971", he recalled "I also became very active as a Jehovah's Witness. I didn't have the incentive to record and didn't want to go into the studio with just anything. But I never stopped playing. For a long time I played five nights a week; now it's just two club dates a week and the occasional concert."

McNeely remained with the Post Office for twelve years and was filmed there by Geoff Hayden in 1983: — "The film opens up in my apartment with me playing flute and then they came down to the Post Office and shot a scene on me putting mail in the hamper and delivering my first stop. And then they come out to a club in Santa Fe Springs and shot 'The Big Jay Shuffle'. We ended up at the Variety Arts Center on Figueroa with Charles Brown, Margie Evans, Lowell Fulson and Mama Thornton. Joe Liggins opened the show and I closed it. I had a black suit and they dropped a black curtain... so all you could see was a gold horn. That's the movie!"

1983-1984 were Big Jay's busiest years in quite a while. He formed an organ trio with "Moments" hitmaker Jennell Hawkins ("She can play like Jimmy Smith, she can outplay Shirley Scott, she's bad..."), he signed a four-man soul group, the New Creations, to his own production company, and his performance at The Penguins' 30th Anniversary was recorded and issued in Britain (*Big Jay Meets The Penguins: Ace 101*) and America (*Jay's Loose On Sunset: Big Jay 101*). During a second European tour, he played a string of dates in London including the 100 Club ("the best live gig of any kind in two years or more" — *Black Echoes*, 28 April 1984) and the Caister Rock'n Roll Festival: "We had all the little pink-haired kids. The man said 'You gonna be a total success or a total flop'. He was really afraid. We came out screamin' on 'Night Train' and we stood 'em up, no problem. I had to go back three times". McNeely's Swingin' records were released as an album (*Big Jay 103*) and Ace Records issued "From Harlem to Camden", his first studio session in over 15 years.

Big Jay McNeely still believes the best is yet to come. He plans to manage a nightclub on Catalina Island (a summer resort 20 miles off Long Beach), persevere with the Big Jay Production Co., and alternate those honks and screeches for as long as his lungs can take the strain. He told Jim Dawson: — "Heck, there's a lot of kids that don't know who I am but as far as I'm concerned they ain't nothing but Big Jay fans I ain't blowed my horn for yet".

BILL MILLAR

Sources

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At Birdland circa 1958. Boyd Dunlop (piano), James Pleasant (bass), Big Jay. (Photo by A. James Greene, courtesy Bill Millar)