

JOHNNY OTIS

**Rock & roll has gotten louder and more lucrative,
but it does not get much better than it was way back when.**

When I wrote *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll*, one of the figures that wove through several of the book's chapters was that of Johnny Otis. In the fall of 1945, when Johnny Moore's Three Blazers recorded their legendary R&B hit "Drifting Blues," Otis was the drummer who laid down the graveyard shuffle beneath Charles Brown's astounding vocal. Six years later, as a talent scout for King Records, Otis discovered the group — they were the Royals then, later the Midnighters — whose "Work With Me Annie" would be one of the enduring birth cries of classic rock & roll.

It was Otis and his orchestra who backed Johnny Ace, rock's first fallen angel, on "Pledging My Love." Many years later, in the seventies, when most of rock & roll's founders had been forgotten, Otis saw to it that their voices were still heard. He brought Roy Brown to the Monterey Festival, recorded Louis Jordan and others for his own Blues Spectrum label.

But Johnny Otis was far more than a tutelary spirit of rock & roll. He was one of its masters as well.

In the years of his glory, most of his fans thought he was black. Born John Veliotes, on December 28, 1921, he was in fact the son of Greek immigrants who ran a grocery in Vallejo, California. As he explained in a 1957 article called "I Posed as a Negro for 18 Years," he first passed for black to get into a "colored-only" Count Basie show in San Francisco with his black high-school sweetheart, Phylis, in the late thirties. While still in his teens, he drummed and played vibes in the Oakland area, with Count Matthews, in 1940 with Willard Marsh's Collegians in 1941. It was also in 1941 that Johnny married Phylis, once again passing for black to circumvent prohibitions against mixed marriage. Soon after marrying, he joined George Morrison's group. The next year, 1942, he became the drummer for Lloyd Hunter's Serenaders, in Omaha, where, late in 1943, he formed his first, eight-piece band. Back on the West Coast, in Los Angeles, he drummed in Bardu-Ali's orchestra at the Lincoln Theatre on Central Avenue and in Harlan Leonard's band at Curtis Mosby's Club Alabam.

In 1945, Otis formed a big band of his own and began recording, under his name and as a back-up artist for Otis Rene's Excelsior Records and Leon Rene's Exclusive Records. The Rene brothers had some of the most exciting talent of their time: Nat King Cole, Jimmy Rushing, Big Joe Turner, Johnny Moore's Three Blazers and others whose jazz and R&B explorations led to the breeding-ground of rock & roll. One of that breeding-ground's most startling presences was Johnny, whose 1948 Excelsior recordings of "Good Boogdi Googi" and "Barrel House Boogie" represented a daring leap toward that strange and nameless sound that would change the world. Reviewing "Barrel House Boogie" in January 1949, *Billboard*, perplexed and at a loss for words, declared it simply, "One of the loudest records ever made."

By 1950, after signing with Savoy Records in Newark, his orchestra became the biggest R&B act of the year. His stage revue and recordings featured his singing discoveries such as Little Esther and Mel Walker. (Big Mama Thornton would be a later Otis singer.) From his Number One R&B hit "Double Crossing Blues," in February of that year, through "Rockin' Blues," in December, Otis had ten Top Ten R&B hits by year's-end.

By 1952, when he signed with Mercury, his brief years of glory were for the most part through. In 1953, he signed with Peacock. In 1955, he recorded for his own Dig label. In the summer of 1958, on Capitol, he scored again with "Willie and the Hand Jive" — his first and only crossover — proving that between hep and hip lay a cool that transcended all knowing. There were three more, slight pop hits for Capitol, through 1960; one last, minor R&B hit, for Kent, in the spring of 1969.

Now, more than half a century after his long journey began, Johnny Otis, at seventy-two, is, like too few of his rock & roll contemporaries and conspirators — Jesse Stone, Charles Brown, the Treniers, who else of like stature? — going strong and kicking still. Rock & roll has gotten louder and more lucrative, bless it; but it does not get much better than it was way back when.

—Nick Tosches



Johnny Otis
doing the
crazy hand
jive, circa
mid-fifties.

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