

This information was given to Claus Röhnisch in June, 2010 from Alan Balfour

JOHN LEE HOOKER'S FIRST RECORDING SESSION

reported by Bill Randle

Gentlemen,

Here is the information on John Lee Hooker that I mentioned in my earlier letter to you (printed in RR two issues back). BERNARD BESMAN was a record distributor in Detroit, Michigan from the mid-1940's until 1952 when he moved to California to go into the toy business. MR. BESMAN IS UNQUESTIONABLY THE FIRST PERSON TO EVER RECORD JOHN LEE HOOKER AND SHOULD RECEIVE THE CREDIT FOR SUCH A DISCOVERY IN THE JOURNALS AND DISCOGRAPHIES FROM THIS POINT ON. I was a disc jockey in Detroit at the time and wrote you some of the details earlier. Here is the resume of Hooker's first session, how it came about, the produced materials, etc.

Besman was a very successful record distributor, particularly in what was then called race records (or rhythm and blues) and jazz records. Besman also was in the record business and had recorded and released records by Todd Rhodes (former pianist with McKinneys, etc.) and Teddy Buckner (former alto player with Jimmie Lunceford). It was common knowledge among the Negro musicians' cliques that he was available to talent and wanted to record new people. One snowy day (Besman recalls it as a particularly bad day) Hooker came to Pan American Record Distributing's offices on Woodward Avenue trying to get a recording session.

Besman writes "As I approached him he started to stutter and I could barely understand anything that he was trying to say. I took his dub (he was carrying a worn out paper record) and put it on the turntable. The dub was really quite worn, and it was hard to determine what you were expected to hear. The dub had been made at a coin machine where you deposit 25 and get a paper record.

After talking to Besman for a while John Lee quieted down and stopped stuttering. And Besman admits "Frankly I don't know what prompted me to say to him that if he had four songs I would make a session with him. The session was made in Detroit at United Sound. Besman writes "John was scared, wasn't used to the mikes, and kept popping constantly. I felt there was something lacking to give him confidence. I finally located a wooden board and put it under his feet (the studio had rugs), and by hearing himself tap out the beat it gave him encouragement. I've always recorded him with a board so that he can hear himself tapping out the beat. Even now, when I saw him at a concert recently at UCLA, I wished that somebody would have put a mike near his feet and then the audience would really enjoy his music the way he portrays it.

Besman continues "Back to the session: We struggled through "Sally Mae" (which he thought was his best number) about ten times. By the time we had recorded three numbers, two hours and fifty five minutes had elapsed. I needed four numbers. The session is usually four hours and I wanted to terminate it. So I told John to play a boogie; anything as long as it sounds like a boogie. So he did, putting in some ad lib words, and we had a boogie for the fourth tune. I called it "Boogie Chillen."

Besman's letter continues "We distributed the record in Michigan and leased the master to Modern Records for the rest of the country. As it turned out the number, er, I had spent a lot of time recording got lost, and the number that I used as a fill in turned out to be the hit side. Ho'e'er, i feel that "Sallie Mae" is the best record that I've done with John Lee Hooker. He sings that number right from his heart.

With the success of John Lee Hooker's "Boogie Chillen" Besman recorded many things with him. He also served as an agent and manager for Hooker. I recall when we hired him through Besman in 1949 and 1950. Besman says he "all in all recorded 48 sides with Hooker." He says that most of them are untitled and have not ever been released. He says "I've noticed that many of the numbers out on other labels are similar to the records I have, but one thing is sure: all of my recordings are original, because John never sings the same tune twice in the same manner. It is only after the record is out that he will emulate the record. In most cases I would give John the subject matter and he would go to it and in three minutes we would have a version of a master. After the first session I would usually accept the first cut unless there were technical difficulties. The sessions were a breeze and most enjoyable."

Besman continues "I trust that the people will recognize his talent soon. It has been a hard road for him."

Besman split with John Lee for the usual reasons, other people wooed him after the initial success of Boogie Chillen and "he'd record for anyone and anytime. So I gave up."

The actual date of the first session is not available but it was in November of 1948. The sides recorded then were "Sallie Mae", "Highway 51," "Wednesday Evening Blues," and "Boogie Chillen."

Incidentally Besman, as a result of my letter, is activating his unreleased Hooker masters and is putting them out on his own label this week. The first release is "Ballad to Abraham Lincoln" and "Mojo Hand" (Louisiana Voodoo). The label is Lauren and interested people can contact Besman at 5920 Smiley Drive, Culver City, California. His telephone there is Bradshaw 2-5603. Among the other artists Besman first recorded in Detroit were Sonny Stitt, Todd Rhodes, Ted Buckner, Milt Jackson, Wild Bill Moore (tenor sax), Jack Surrell, Don Juan, Vocalaires, Spiritual Men, Doc Wiley, T. J. Fowler, Sylvester Cotton, Swing Brothers, Louis Barnett (tenor player), Andrew Dunham, Christine Randall, Chano Pozo, John Lewis, etc. 90% of these materials are pure rhythm and blues, vintage 1948-1952. He had a number of hit records, "Bell Boy Boogie" by Todd Rhodes sold three quarters of a million, Hooker, etc. were very big. None of his records were ever sold, many were leased to Modern, King, and other labels around the country.

The above materials are from several telephone calls and a long letter (dated: March 15, 1961) from Bernie Besman. The information is confirmed by my own knowledge of the Detroit scene at the time, the memo records at United Sound Studios, and conversations with John Kaplan, Mr. Besman's former partner in Pan-American Distributing (now 3. K. Distributing) in Detroit.

Sincerely yours,

Bill Randle, Station WERE, Cleveland, Ohio.

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