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Pat St.John

Rock

Johnnie Johnson *Johnnie B. Bad*
Elektra Nonesuch 9 61149-2

JOHNNIE B. BAD IS Johnny B. Goode

I have been trying to decide how to begin this article. By telling you how truly great this album is, or explaining who this gentleman is in the first place. I guess I'll start there.

Johnnie Johnson should be a household name. Johnnie Johnson should be regarded as one of the greatest songwriters of all time. He is regarded as one of the greatest piano players of all time by the likes of Eric Clapton, The Rolling Stones, The Grateful Dead, and B.B. King. You see, it was Johnnie Johnson who first

Pat St.John began his broadcasting career in The Motor City at stations CKLW and WKNR, and since 1973 has been one of New York City's most popular on-air personalities, working at WPLJ for 15 years and WNEW FM for 11. He's currently heard on "America's Number One Oldies Station", WCBS FM 101.1, and it's Pat's voice you hear yearly as the announcer on "Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve" on ABC-TV. Stay tuned for more reviews of some of the greatest music ever recorded.

decided to hire a young Chuck Berry to join *his* band when Johnson needed a singer. Yes, it was Johnnie Johnson's band that was creating "rock'n'roll" before anyone had ever heard of Mr. Berry.

Now, to make a long story short (and you can and should read the long story in the book *Father Of Rock and Roll* by Travis Fitzpatrick, published by Thomas, Cooke and Co.), here's how "Nadine," "Maybelline," "Rock and Roll Music," "Back In The U.S.A.," "Reelin' and Rockin'," and all those other hits were created. The "poet" Chuck Berry would walk in with his wonderful words. Those words became songs that generation after generation would sing, and almost every rock band in existence would need to learn even to begin. Chuck would then show those words to Johnnie and ask what to do with them. Johnnie would say "how about this?" and start playing.

By the time those classic songs made it to vinyl, you'd hear Chuck's guitar duplicating what Johnnie Johnson was playing on his left hand, yet the piano was somehow buried in the final mix. Now Johnnie, because he never formally learned how to "write" music, didn't

realize he was "writing" music. He thought he was just playing the music he made up. Chuck never credited Johnnie. Johnnie was always paid scale. For his recording and his concerts, he was paid scale, but for his melodies, he was paid nothing. He'd ride the bus with the other band members, while Chuck drove ahead in his Cadillac. Johnson never complained. He was making music, but just barely a living. His only "nod" came when Chuck wrote *Johnny B. Goode* for his "friend" Johnnie Johnson. The "piano" though had been changed to a "guitar," and Johnnie's name was misspelled. When it comes down to it, the greatest songwriting teams of our time are Lennon & McCartney, Jagger & Richards, Lieber & Stoller, and, without a doubt, Berry & Johnson. The only problem is that Johnnie was never credited. Chuck took it all: The accolades, the solo songwriting credits, and the royalties. After all this time, steps are finally being taken to correct this injustice. As I'm writing this piece, a lawsuit has been filed on Johnnie's behalf to give credit where it's due, and to have back royalties paid. Perhaps by the time you're reading this, a decision will have been made



Pat St. John talking with Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones about Johnnie Johnson.

in Johnnie's favor. I hope so, because Johnnie Johnson (who's been finally inducted into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a *sideman*) should truly be considered what he is, the Father of Rock and Roll!

In the late eighties, Keith Richards wanted Johnnie for the Chuck Berry bio-movie "Hail, Hail Rock and Roll." If you haven't seen that movie, rent it. It's quite entertaining to see what Chuck's really like. In 1991, Keith talked Johnnie into doing a solo album. With Johnnie sitting at the keyboard just "fooling around," Keith said, "What is that? We've got to turn that into a song, and *you've* got to sing it!" something Johnnie had never done before. The result is the leadoff track on this CD, "Tanqueray," written by the super songwriting team of Johnson & Richards (that's the way it's credited on the album). It's the happiest, rockin'est, hippest song you might ever hear. The mix on this song is so phenomenal, about four minutes into it, you can even hear the clink of two glasses meeting, and you can feel the chill of the ice cubes!

I met Keith Richards shortly after this album came out, and I was so excited about it, I never bothered asking him any questions about the Stones, I just wanted to talk about Johnnie. Keith was thrilled (and I think quite surprised) because he really came alive talking about his hero, Mr. Johnson. This entire album just *rocks*, with the kind of blues that makes you want to get up off your seat and move! Guests on this album include Eric Clapton, Al Anderson

and NRBQ, Steve Jordan, Bernard Fowler, and Keith himself singing Muddy's "Key To The Highway." They're all masters in their own right and they're all centered on this CD around the incredible keyboard mastery of Johnnie Johnson. They're in awe of Johnnie, and you will be too, as you listen to a guy who helped create and shape what we know as rock'n'roll. The CD includes some instrumentals, some with Johnnie's vocals, the one I mentioned with Keith out front, and others featuring Steve Ferguson or Bernie Worrell. What you'll enjoy most on each and every song, is the best boogie piano playing you've ever heard; the piano playing of a talented, humble man, a true gentleman, the fabulous Johnnie Johnson.

Over the years, Johnnie's been sought out by some of the greatest performers of all time to play on their albums. You'll hear him on tunes by John Lee Hooker, Albert King, and Jimmy Rogers. You'll hear him on LPs by Buddy Guy, George Thorogood, and the Kentucky Headhunters. He's on Keith Richards' *Talk is Cheap*, and Eric Clapton's *24 Nights* collections, and of course, on virtually all of those classic Chuck Berry songs ... oops, I mean Berry & *Johnson* songs. Funny, I can't think of one Chuck Berry appearance on another artist's record. Not one.

These days Johnnie is probably at his happiest. He's doing gigs, he's still recording, and he's finally getting the recognition he's deserved for so long. If he comes to your town, do not pass up the opportunity to see him. Visit him on his website, www.johnnie.com. And by all means, pick up *Johnnie B. Bad*. I'm telling you, it B. Goode!