Music

Abner Jay: One-Man Band

By Tom Zito

You've probably never heard of Abner Jay, a one-man band who plays electric six-string banjo, harmonica, bass drum, high-hat (cymbals) and bones, sings songs like "St. James Infirmary," and "Dixie," gave musical starts to such people as James Brown, Otis Redding and Little Richard, has fathered 16 children and is currently living with his seventh wife.

He's appearing at the Brickskeller, 1523 22d St. NW, on Friday and Saturday nights, performing a personalized style of blues and American music that is rapidly becoming extinct.

On stage he perches behind a bass drum dating from the Civil War with a lake scene and his name painted on the head. He plays his banjo through three amplifiers (though not terribly loud), blows a tune on his harmonica, beats out the rhythm on the drum and high-hat and sings. While the songs are mostly classics of the South, he uses them more as frameworks within which he can talk about his long life and the things he's learned. Later he puts a string of bones around his neck and taps out accompaniment to "Dem Bones."

"My philosophy," he says as he lights a cigar he's been chewing on, "is to do what I like. That's why I've never become famous. I stick to the music that I like to sing, the music I grew up with. Sometimes I'm accused of being down on my race, of appealing only to white people. You see, blacks have idea that it's bad to sing songs like 'Old Black Joe.' But I don't just sing those songs. I explain what was behind the song when it was written. Besides, it's almost impossible to survive as a bluesman unless you can appeal to a white audience. Who do you think buys all those B. B. King records?"

By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post

Abner Jay, "a one-man band who plays electric six-string banjo, harmonica, bass drum, high hat and bones . . . perches behind his drum dating from the Civil War with a lake scene and his name painted on the head."

Jay says he was born in Irwin County, Ga., 63 years ago, but hedges a bit on his age. People like to have little bits of mystery surrounding them, he says, and age —or agelessness—is a good subject for mystery. He will state emphatically, though, that his father, "the best harmonica player I ever heard," is soon to celebrate his 86th birthday.

He began performing professionally at the age of 8, when not picking peanuts and cotton on his father's sharecropper farm. He worked with two spiritual groups, Wings Over Jordan and The Southwind Singers, and moved to Macon in 1946 to begin radio work.

"I once had a band with James Brown before he became famous. We used to hang out at a place called The Two Spot on Fifth Street in Macon. When James got his first hit record with 'Please, Please, Please' he went off.

"He used to love to play the pinball machine in The Two Spot. They didn't have a liquor license, so most of us would crowd in the kitchen and drink beer there. But he'd be outside, playing pinball. A few years ago he came back to Macon, walked into the Two Spot with hundreds of nickels and just played the machine for hours."

His stories go on and on —tales about little known but influential guitarists like Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown and Johnny Jenkins, about crazy days and wild nights on the road with Little Richard and Otis Redding and about the people who formed small but important record companies like King and Peacock. Invariably he returns to talk about his race and his style of music. It's something that [illegible] on stage [illegible].

On stage he performs "Dem Bones," he asks his audience about the origins of American dance. "Do you know that the slaves brought bones with them to this country in 1619 and that's how the bugooloo and all those other dances began?" And he jumps to his feet and screams at the top of his lungs, "I challenge you on that!" He makes a lot of challenges like that in the course of a night.

Off stage his conversation and temperament become a trifle more sedate. "I'm proud of my background and my music," he says. "I think it's important to try to explain to people where these songs come from and what they meant before people got too removed from them. I'm doing important teaching—and this isn't the kind of education you'll find in books."

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