

On the Road Again: Southside Johnny talks touring in advance of his PPAC show

Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes will be at Providence Performing Arts Center on August 20. I recently spoke with John Lyon, aka Southside Johnny, about touring post pandemic, porch performances and how it all started.

John Fuzek (Motif): So, are you in New Jersey now?

Southside Johnny: Yes, I am about a five minute walk from the Atlantic Ocean.

JF: How does it feel to be back out performing after the pandemic?

SJ: It was odd at first. We played a couple of shows. We had a rehearsal, which we never do because we've been playing for so long. It all felt great, seeing people's actual faces! It's a wonderful thing. Every show's been fun. Being off for that long you wonder what kind of shape you're in. It's like riding a bike, I guess. You get back on and you fall over a couple of times and then you're good.

JF: Yeah, I am kind of in the same boat. I am just getting back to performing again, it's been a tough year.

SJ: I was lucky that I have some neighbors that play guitar. I play harmonica and we would sit on the porch just like it was 1922 or something like that before radio became big and sing and have cocktails, of course, and people would come around. It was really a small town enjoyment.

JF: Did you do any recordings of it?

SJ: No, but someone filmed a bit of it once. It was very informal, you know three verses of a song where there are four verses and you get to the fourth and you and you start humming or whistling the last one.

JF: I do that on a good day!

SJ: I do that on stage with my band. I get the words all screwed up sometimes. The audience knows me and they laugh they say, "There he goes again."

JF: Maybe you should do a porch recording album. It might be a fun thing to do.

SJ: it might be, I'd have to have a few more musicians to make it, well, who knows, I've thought about it, but I just enjoy the spontaneity of it, so I don't want to make it any formal thing.

JF: That's true. You had a guy in your band a while back Joel (Cage) Gramolini, I did some gigs with him way back and he used to tell me he had been in your band.

SJ: Yeah, he was great. He decided to go solo...he was a terrific player, great singer, we had a lot of fun.

JF: He's Gary's brother from Beaver Brown but you know that already!

SJ: Yes (laughs).

JF: Who is in the band these days?

SJ: It's the same band I have had for five or six years. The drummer is probably the newest guy, and he's been around for quite a while. It's people that have been with me for a long, long time and we are a well oiled machine, and it's probably the best band that I've ever had so I am really enjoying it, I can relax and let them play and not have to worry about anything and it makes it a joy for me on stage and they can all solo, they can all improvise, and they all get along which is a blessing, believe me, you ride on the bus for 10 hours!

JF: I have a band, I KNOW!

SJ: You don't want any conflicts, a little bit of sniping here and there is okay, but no real conflicts or the tension ratchets up and everybody's miserable.

JF: How long will you be out for with this tour or is it just a one up for this show?

SJ: We have lots of make-up dates, we were in Florida and we got shut down in March last year when we were on the road so we have a lot of those dates to make up where we promised that we'd play and we've got other gigs coming in so it's going to be a very busy second half of the year. I'm grateful for it, but I look at schedule and I think "Oh, boy, I hope we can make it through this one."

JF: I have a little bit of a concern that we might go through a shut down again in the fall. What do you think?

SJ: I haven't really kept up with it as much as I used to, I know there's the Delta variant and now there's another one. I don't know, I'll take it as it comes. I've been vaccinated and the band's been vaccinated, so we're not too concerned about catching it but we certainly don't want to carry it to anybody. You know with large gatherings you have to worry about those things these days, things will develop, I can't control it, so whatever happens, happens, just like the weather. We played outdoors the other day and it rained during the day, but it cleared up at night and it was beautiful. I had a great time so you can't really worry about things that you can't control.

JF: Beaver Brown is playing with you at PPAC. Are they on tour with you or is the only show you are doing together?

SJ: I think that it's one of a few that they are playing with us, usually when we come up that way they join us, we are going all over the country but we are not going to Europe this year, which I am kind of miffed about, but I guess it's a little bit more restrictive over there. Maybe next year, if I am still playing next year (laughs).

JF: How old are you now?

SJ: 72. The years on the road takes its toll on you, but I still love being in front of the audience and singing, just closing my eyes and singing makes me feel, it's just a satisfying thing to do, it's like a great gift has been given to you.

JF: That's great! One of the things that I like to hear from musicians they're grateful for the gift of

music and they don't take it for granted. I know I certainly appreciate being a musician all of my life. I've been doing this for almost 50 years.

SJ: Yeah, you have to be. Especially if you've done it for a long time you start to realize that in the arrogance of youth you think, "Yeah, I can do this, this is cool." But you get a perspective on it you are being ALLOWED to do it. People actually come and see you play, and it doesn't always work that way. There are plenty of people that are better than I am that don't get out to play as much as I do.

JF: So where did Southside come from?

SJ: Chicago, where a lot of blues players come from. One time someone said, "Here's Southside Johnny." I don't remember who said it. IT might have been Gary Tallent, we all had to have nicknames for this one band and that became mine and I can't get rid of it now.

JF: Tell me a little bit about the beginnings with Springsteen and Steve Van Zandt.

SJ: Well, there was a club called the Upstage Club. It was open to teenagers, no alcohol served and it was open until 5 o'clock in the morning in the summer. Of course all the musicians gravitated there. They had a stage, drum kit, keyboard, guitar amps, and all you to do was bring your instruments and jam and form bands and do things like that and that's where I met most of those people. Gary I went to school with, then when Steven and Bruce came down and played we were all in little jam bands and someone conned a bar owner into letting us play, maybe even paying us some money. We put together a band, we all knew every Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, a lot of Rolling Stones, so we knew lot of songs and we had rehearsals, then we's go and play and try to make some money.

JF: Having a place to play and making money is always a good thing!

SJ: It was. It was a wild club, it used to Show silent movies and we played music behind them, WC Fields shorts and things like that. It was the '60s and it was a crazy time. We were very fortunate to have it. It was our education.

JF: When did the Jukes formerly form or did they just evolve out of something?

SJ: They evolved out of a band called the Blackberry Blues Band and it's a long history, Steven (Van Zandt) and I wanted to add horns, it was really tough to get three different horn players but eventually we did and it became Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes and we played at the Stone Pony for about four years, maybe more, we still play there in the summer at the outdoors thing, but we didn't get to do this last year but we will in September this year, so, it's very fortunate to have places to matriculate I guess you could say.

JF: I have not seen you band in a long time, my brother was a huge fan of yours, I think I saw you last at an amusement park called Rocky Point.

SJ: Hopefully you will get to see us when we come to Providence!

JF: I put it on the calendar, but a lot of times I have my own gigs and cannot go. It's a good thing to have gigs but it's a drag not to be able see people I want to see.

SJ: The same thing happens with us, so many people are playing the same nights as we are and we want

to see them and you just can't if you're working, it was like watching a television series that was on Friday nights, we never saw them, we played every Friday night.

JF: Now all you have to do is stream it!

SJ: It's not a problem anymore but it used to be funny to hear people talk about that they just saw this and we just saw that and we would say no, we didn't see any of it

JF: Did you do any live streaming while you were on the pandemic break?

SJ: No, Jeff did, my keyboard player, and a couple of the other guys, I am not proficient enough on that kind of thing, besides, I need an audience, I need people around me, I am much better live than just sitting around playing

JF: I am right with you on that, I did one live stream with the band, there was a little bit of an audience there but that was it, I kind of feel the same way as you do, it's kind of sterile. So, what are your live shows like nowadays?

SJ: We try to do two hours, we do a lot of the songs from the past, but we haven't had an album in a few years, but we try to hit every album, we improvise everything on stage, there's no real set list, I make a set list but they just laugh, and you know, we're open to anything, the other night people called out a couple of requests and we did them, it's easy to do with this band, they're so good

JF: It's great that you can do that, not everyone can do that nowadays, they are so set in a format, and newer bands don't have the performing legacy to pull stuff like that off

SJ: Yes, and also it's just the years of being a musician, you know a million songs, just by osmosis almost, and if I start singing a song that they don't know they can fake it, it makes for an exciting moment for us on stage and I think it translates to the audience, they love to see us stumble and fall (laughs)

JF: it's REAL! Being a musician as long as I have I have watched things go and when I see a band play and hear music I LIKE the imperfections in performances but now musicians try to make everything so clinically perfect it has no personality., I like the cracks in people's voices, the forgetting of the words, the blown notes, that makes it real

SJ: You won't find any perfection in a Juke's show I'll tell you that right away. (laughs)
Some bands will play the same set every night, I don't want to work in an office where everything is the same, I always want it to be a little bit challenging, I always want it to be a little bit what's going to happen next? I don't know what's going to happen I want to be surprised by some moment in the show

JF: that's what makes performing fun and what makes a concert experience good for an audience member, I have been to multiple night shows where it has been the exact show including between song banter, whereas I have been to others where it has been a totally different show each night and that is more exciting

SJ: it's more exciting for the musicians too, anyone can get complacent doing the same thing over and over, I don't want complacent musicians, I don't want to be complacent myself, i want to be challenged and i want to carer about what I am doing, if i just go through the motions that's not healthy for me

JF: It keeps you young, too!

SJ: Well I don't know about that (laughs) But it keeps you interested, and I'm going to do what I want to do on stage and that's the way it is

JF: that's the good thing about music, you're the boss, well, Springsteen's the boss, but you're in charge!

SJ: (laughs) I am in charge, I am the officer in charge

JF: and I am sure it shows and hopefully it will for years to come! Bands like the Jukes are a rarity and there aren't new ones coming along, everyone is so American Idol-ized... they don't understand the music business, they look at it completely different, you happened organically, you worked your ass off over the years, now people just want to plug in and be famous

SJ: There's always an audience for live music, there's a lot of good bands...and there are lots bands that matured playing live, it's just, as you say, there is a lot of manufactured stuff, but there always was, there are always producers and record companies dictating who sings what and all that, that's not what we do, I don't worry about that, I don't think about it that much, people come to see us because they know they're going to have a good time, we have a good time, the audience has a good time, and that's all it's really about

JF: "We're Having a Party" that's your song so...

SJ: That's right!

JF: When I was growing up that was a great song to come on and sing along to while you're drinking at a party, that was it

SJ: We do have some songs that are a little more thoughtful but basically when we're onstage we're just having a good time and I think that's all people really want from us, I've written some political songs, I've written some angry songs, but in the long run they come to see us and they want to forget what's going on in their world and be reminded that there's some fun to be had and joy in life and that's what we do.

JF: and you have horns which is great, not a lot of folks have that anymore...

SJ: No and there's a reason for that (laughs)

JF: why is that?

SJ: All horn players are crazy! (lots of laughter) I love my guys, it elevates music to another level, when they kick in everybody gets a jolt and I think that's great

JF: I love horn bands, the power of the horns and the arrangements, that adds a layer to music that you just can't get with synths, and like you said the horn players are usually crazy and the antics on stage are always interesting to watch as well

SJ: Luckily for me I've got my back turned to them! (laughs)

JF: So you get all the spit from the horn section on you?

SJ: That's exactly right!

JF: Anything else you want to throw in before we wrap this up?

SJ: Just if anyone is looking for a good time they certainly should come to the show

On Friday, August 20, Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes will be having a party and you're invited! They are famously known for their horn driven renditions of "The Fever," "Walk Away Renee," "Talk To Me" and, of course, "Havin' a Party." Their shows are always a lot of fun, and they are bringing along Jon Cafferty and the Beaver Brown Band to make it even more so! For more, toot over to PPACRI.org

That's it for now, thanks for reading. www.JohnFuzek.com