

"Don't Feel Sorry For Me"

THE JIMMY BEASLEY STORY



- by Opal Louis Nations

On a bad weather day, when the wind blows, the gray clouds roll, and the heavy rain falls unceasingly, the first thing I do is whip out my **Jimmy Beasley** album entitled "Twist With Jimmy Beasley" (Crown 5247). Five minutes of Beasley's pumping piano (once described by one of his fans as "good old funky Southern boogie-woogie") coupled with vocal refrains that borrow both from the **Fats Domino** and **Charles Brown** school of music, all cares and concerns are magically spirited away. By all accounts, he would not want it any other way.

Beasley, who strangely considers himself a country & western singer, is a superb all-around entertainer who, apart from singing and punishing his instrument, throws in a few little

comedy routines to round out his act. Born the last day of September 1929 in Kansas City, Beasley was the first of seven children (he has three younger brothers and sisters). His parents, who had not the slightest interest in music, were **Carrie** from Kilgore, Texas and **Roy Beasley** from Tyler, Texas. The couple had moved from Tyler to Kansas City the year Jimmy was born. Beasley recalls growing up listening to the old blues singers and graduated later on to picking up pointers from **Nat Cole** and **Charles Brown** with **Johnny Moore's Three Blazers**.

In school at Lincoln High, he sang with a couple of friends calling themselves **The Aces Quintet**, but his real aspiration at that time was to some day become an amateur prize fighter. Also at Lincoln he formed his own band which

he fronted as vocalist. At the tender age of 17, Beasley married his childhood sweetheart, **Geraldine**, who encouraged him with his music but was not so sure about the boxing side of his life. Beasley did well with his combo, and **John Barrett**, his personal manager, had no trouble finding the group work throughout the mid-West. But he also excelled pugilistically, entering the Kansas City heats for the Golden Glove amateur boxing competitions three years in a row (1948, 1949 and 1950) and won 59 fights out of 65.

Just before moving to Los Angeles in 1954, Beasley joined **The Sonny Kenner Trio** with Kenner on guitar, **Oscar Minor** on bass, and Beasley on vocals and piano, or I should say learner-piano as he could play only two or three songs and had to enact heavy comedy routines to cover up the fact he could only render a tune in the key of C. (Later efforts were performed in G.) Beasley says he has since written comedy routines for a host of comedians throughout the country.

Kenner's combo was fortunate enough to secure a house band tenure at The El Capitan Club on Eighteenth Street, and amazingly enough, people came to hear Beasley sing and play. One day, **Billie Holiday** showed up at the club and was asked to sing with **The Kenner Trio** backing her up. Although both Kenner and Minor were familiar with Holiday's material, Beasley was not and had to pretend to know the arrangements. He managed awkwardly by overly sustaining the few chord changes he was able to pick up.

The club was often in the habit of hiring jazz musicians. On one occasion, The Sonny Kenner Trio played two songs behind **Charlie Parker**, but when **Miles Davis** played, he had his own pianist sit in. This did not mean that Beasley was out of a job. The trio resumed house band duties with Beasley at the keys. In 1954, John Barrett moved out to Los Angeles where he met **King Perry** who was in need of a piano player for weekend gigs. Oliver King Perry was born in Gary, Indiana and learned to play bass violin, trumpet, drums, and piano beside his instrument of choice, the alto sax. He waxed for Melodisc, Excelsior, United Artists, De Luxe, Specialty and Lucky over a span of eight years. Perry liked Beasley's rollicking style and took him on.

During the week, Beasley attended Pepperdine College to study theology, but he left before the end of his freshman year. His heart was just not in it. He then started writing songs and painting houses to make ends meet. Perry signed a limited contract with Don F. Pierce of Hollywood Records on South Berendo. A studio date was set up in December 1954 with **Maxie Ward** on trumpet, **Ralph Bowden**, trombone, **King Perry**, alto and vocals, **Chuck Norris**, guitar, **Vic Greenwood**, bass, **Al "Cake" Wichard**, drums, and **Beasley** on piano. A vocal group called **The Riders** (probably made up of band members) added blended harmonies. Vocal groups were a ne-

cessity during this time, and every self-respecting A&R man kept one on hand.

The session resulted in two single releases. The first, "Pitching A Party" backed with "(Back To) Kansas City" (a song written by Beasley - Hollywood 1030), was issued in February 1955. "Get Out Of My Face" sliced with "Till You're In My Arms Again" (Hollywood 1035 and also Look 104) hit the streets three months later. "Pitching A Party" is a riotous rocker with a fun, party-like atmosphere. "(Back To) Kansas City" again exudes a party-like **Trenier Twins** atmosphere on which Perry and vocal group wail along to a solid beat. The songs on the second release have not seen re-issue, and this writer has not heard them.

In 1986, Krazy Kat Records of West Sussex, England, reissued Hollywood 1030 along with two previously unissued tunes from the December 1954 session, "Wait Now" and "Fat Mama" (Krazy Kat LP 7438). "Wait Now" is a Latin-tinged Longhair vehicle, an excuse for the band to wail for all it was worth. Perry shouts the blues over a solid rhythm section, and when he does not sing, he blows like a man possessed. "Fat Mama" is another jumping Trenier-like chart with vocal doo-wahs and searing sax licks on the breaks.

Some of the members of Perry's band sat in as sessions personnel for Modern Records, a major independent run by the Bihari brothers from offices in Beverly Hills, which segs nicely with the ensuing events in Beasley's career. Beasley was smart enough to make good friends of two key figures on the L.A. scene. Both were instrumental in furthering his career. One was **Johnny Otis**, with whom Beasley worked, the other was **Maxwell Davis**. During 1955, Otis was recording for Don Robey's Peacock label out of Houston, Texas.

Otis had served both as scout and recording talent for Peacock for three years. Otis met Beasley the summer of 1955 and was immediately struck by this thunderous use of the piano. Bestowing upon him the sobriquet of **Hurricane Edwards**, Otis took Beasley along with him on his "Butterball"/"Sandy's Boogie" session for Peacock in Los Angeles.

The **Otis Band** at this juncture was composed of **James Von Streeter**, tenor sax, **Pete Lewis**, guitar, **Albert Winston**, bass, **Leard Bell** on drums plus **Devonia Williams** on piano. "I sat on Devonia's stool," said Beasley, "and the Otis Band and I recorded about eight piano instrumentals." Four of these, "Cattle Train" (the best remembered of the songs), "Come On Down," "Nobody Loves Me," and "Where Is My Baby" were all slated for issue, but in the end Robey chose not to release anything.

Beasley also befriended tenor sax player **Maxwell Davis** who by 1955 was writing, arranging, producing, and conducting the in-house band at Modern Records, headquartered at 9317 West Washington Blvd. in Culver City. During this time, Beasley was writing songs himself and over the course of a long relationship with Davis sold many charts to him. Beasley and his wife Geraldine had seven kids to raise, so every penny he could make with the sale of his songs helped a great deal. Beasley was paid various amounts for his efforts, sometimes fifty dollars, sometimes twice that amount.

One day in early 1956, Beasley composed a song loosely dedicated to an old girlfriend he once knew named Ellen. Beasley took the song, "Ella Jane," to Davis in the hope of a sale. After Beasley ran through the song on the piano in the studio, Davis asked if Beasley

could record the song himself. Beasley did such a good job on it that Davis offered to pay one hundred dollars up front to cut the number with his studio band. The Maxwell Davis sessions unit was composed of **Davis**, tenor/baritone sax, **Plas Johnson**, tenor sax, **Willard McDaniel**, piano, **Ralph Hamilton**, bass, **René Hall**, guitar, and **Jesse Sailes**, drums. At last, Beasley's first waxing "Ella Jane"/"No Love For Me" hit the streets in June 1956 (Modern 991, also Crown LP 5014 and LP 5247 - "Twist With Jimmy Beasley"). The June 9th, 1956 issue of *Billboard* awarded both songs a three-star rating.

Beasley was knocking them dead at The Casino Club in Gardena at the time. "Ella Jane" is a **Fats Domino**-inspired rocker full of verve and sparkle. "No Love For Me" is a mid-tempo rocker with nice René Hall guitar filler and a good, solid, chunky feel. Beasley's initial release sold promisingly. The music of Fats Domino and the sound coming out of New Orleans dominated the R&B scene at the time, and labels like Specialty and Aladdin wasted no time capitalizing on this. Both sent many a star talent down to the J&M studios in The Crescent City to make tape at the Cosimo Studios on North Rampart Street. The Bihari brothers at Modern Records did not want to be the exception. Modern, which was "trailing behind" the other major independents in sales at the time, made a last ditch effort at reinvigorating the label. **Etta James**, in her book "*Rage To Survive*," describes the situation at the foot of page 78. "Modern had me go to New Orleans where I recorded in Cosimo Matassa's famous studio. The Biharis also sent along Jimmy Beasley to play piano and Maxwell Davis to supervise. They wanted to capitalize on Fats' success and sound."

At Cosimo's, the Modern entourage was set up with **The Dave Bartholomew Band** made up of Bartholomew, trumpet, **Lee Allen** and **Herb Hardesty**, tenor saxes, **Justin Adams** and **Ernest McLean**, guitars, **Frank Fields**, bass, and **Charles Williams**, drums. Beasley cut four songs on the July 1956 session: "Don't Feel Sorry For Me"/"Little Coquette" (Modern 996 and various album reissues), "Jambalaya"/"My Happiness" (Modern 1009, plus later album reissues). Modern 996 was issued in August 1956. Both sides garnered a three-star rating in that month's *Billboard*.

A month later, *Billboard* noted that "Don't Feel Sorry For Me" was being given tremendous airplay by deejays around L.A. Based on Domino's "Don't Blame It On Me" (Imperial 5375, 1955), "Don't Feel Sorry For Me" is a steady rocking opus with a tough **Lee Allen** sax break and frantic one-note piano playing. The unmistakable **Bartholomew** sound prevails, as it does on all four charts. "Little Coquette" is the song Domino took from Beasley. Domino recorded his version in July 1958 (Imperial 5553). The Beasley version is extremely lively, with a vocal track far more interesting than Domino's. However, it was Domino's version, of course, that prevailed, peaking at number 26 in the January 1959 *Billboard* R&B chart.

The same can be said for **Hank Williams'** party-pleaser, "Jambalaya" (on the bayou) (Imperial 5796, 1961), first recorded for the blues and rhythm market by **Titus Turner** on Okeh Records in 1952. Beasley's fabulous "My Happiness" (awarded a four-star rating in December 15th's *Billboard*) generated a lot of airplay at the time and was considered a White recording in Massachusetts. "When I toured that state," says Beasley, "people were expecting to see a White guy come out and play it." The arrangement, which is **Fats Domino** down to the last note, was used intact on the fat-man's cover version of January 1957 (Imperial EP 147).

Beasley, now with his own band, worked in New York for **Alan Freed**, a gig that stretched three years. He performed alongside **Ray Charles**, **Fats Domino**, **Elvis Presley**, **Ruth Brown**, and **Big Jay McNeely** and continued to write songs for Fats Domino and others. Beasley appeared on numerous TV shows, including **Al Jarvis** in L.A. and **Steve Allen's** late show in New York. Beasley remembers one occasion when he and his family were on their way to see Maxwell Davis at the studio. "We set out and when we got half way, we ran out of gas. We had no money, so I had to walk the rest of the way, leaving my wife and kids in the car. When I got to the studio, I sold a few songs to Davis. Then, with the money, I bought some gas in a can and walked back to my wife and kids who were still waiting in the car. It was a life and death struggle in those days." Because Beasley had to take care of a large family, he was unable to travel very far or go on extensive tours for long periods of time to promote his recordings. As a consequence, the sales of his sides suffered.

Beasley's next recording session took place at Modern Records in January 1957 with "**Big**" **Jim Wynn's** band replicating the Cosimo sound. The lineup included **Eldee Williams** and **Jimmy Woods**, tenor saxes, "**Big**" **Jim**, baritone sax, **Lloyd Rowe**, guitar, **Vonnie Hold**, drums, and **Kenny Primus**, drums. Two



photo: Chris Millar/Last Chance Archives

The late Kenny Primus/Primus

single releases emerged, "Near You"/"I'm So Blue" (Modern 1014) issued in February 1957 and "Thinking Of You"/"You Were Only Fooling" (Modern 1018) issued three months later. "Near You," here given the fat-man treatment, dates back to 1947 when the pianist/song-writer **Francis Craig** wrote and recorded it with his orchestra for Bullet Records. Craig's version hit number one and stayed on the peak of *Billboard's* charts for seventeen weeks. Beasley's version sounds monotonous and uninspiring. "I'm So Blue," a Beasley song, is a bright, cheery tune of little distinction. On the other hand, Beasley's "Thinking Of You" is made of solid stuff and really rocks. Lots of cymbals, solid drum patterns and tight sax riffs.

"You Were Only Fooling," a slower, back-beat driven song, encompasses all the same ingredients. **Kay Starr's** original 1948 Capitol recording sounds so different in every respect you could almost say that the Beasley vehicle is a different song altogether. (My personal favorite version is that made by **The Ink Spots** for Decca in 1948.) None of the four aforementioned songs do any justice to Beasley's superb boogie-woogie piano or organ playing, but that was to change.

May 1957 saw the release and meteoric success of **Johnny Heartsman's** "Johnnie's House Party," a relentless two-part party-rocking instrumental on Ray Dobard's Music City label on Alcatraz Avenue in Berkeley, California. Guitarist, pianist, song-writer, arranger Johnny Heartsman led the Music City house band. A slew of cover records sprang up almost immediately. The May 1957 *Billboard* reports "HOLLYWOOD: - Hottest new R&B tune the past two weeks has been "Johnnie's House Party," with versions out by **Jimmy Beasley** on Modern (1021), **Johnny Heartsman and The Gaylarks** on Music City (807), one on Aladdin by **Earl Palmer's Party Rockers** (3379), and **The Jay Hawks**, with more due out soon."

The Beasley version, supported by **The Rockers (Maxwell Davis Combo** and vocal ensemble), hit the streets only weeks after the original. Beasley's version replicates the original and has Beasley in good form on organ and Plas wailing away on tenor. Beasley's next issue, "We Three"/"I Want My Baby" (Modern 1023) dates from the same session and was released on the heels of "Johnnie's House Party." Once more, we find Beasley in a sentimental mood. The Beasley version of "We Three" (awarded four stars in *Billboard*) is given a fat-man arrangement and is far removed from **The Ink Spots'** Decca rendition of 1940

and really little more than warmed-over lunch. It is difficult to figure out why Beasley was given so much revamped, ill-suited material to record after he had proven to the world how fine a writer and piano player he was. "I Want My Baby" is a chirpy **Ernie K. Doe**-sounding ditty with little going for it except a fine sax solo on the bridge.

Beasley's next effort on wax came about through a recommendation from **Johnny Otis**. Aladdin Records needed a good, solid, pumping piano player for their cover version of **Bobby Day's** heavy selling "Little Bitty Pretty One." **Thurston Harris** was to lead, and **The Sharps** vocal group, composed of **Carl White**, lead tenor, **Al Frazier**, **John "Sonny" Harris**, and **Turner Wilson Jr.**, filled in on background. The session was conducted at Radio Recorders in L.A. on August 27, 1957. The Harris version seemed to meet with better sales, peaking at number two on the *Billboard* R&B charts in October.

Some time during the late 1950s, Modern Records issued a Jimmy Beasley Crown album entitled "Jimmy's House Party" (Crown 5014). The album was a mish-mash of previously unreleased songs from earlier sessions, including one dating back before the Spring 1956 date, which leads me to suspect that Beasley was signed to Modern before the Otis/Peacock session. The Crown album contains a number of gems, many of which out-shine the selections on some of the previous single releases, for instance, the mid-tempo rocker "She's Good To Me," the wailing "Don't Break This Heart Of Mine" with Beasley's frantic piano figures, the breakneck "Good Lovin'," the easy rocking "Once More," and the soulfully plaintive "I'm Not Free."

In 1961, Modern repackaged the Crown album, re-titling it to meet current trends. This new collection (Crown LP 5247, "Twist With Jimmy Beasley") differed from the first with the exclusion of Modern single 1009 and the addition of two stunning, never-before-issued instrumentals "Rhumba Twist," a **Prof. Longhair**-type dance number, and "Slow Twist," a beautiful, moody, down-in-the-alley piece used as backing track for **Young Obediah Jessie's** vocal arrangement of "Nothing Seems Right" (Modern 973) issued in November 1955, thus establishing the fact that Beasley sessioned for **Maxwell Davis** before the recording of "Ella Jane."

In 1965, Modern Records, under its United Modern imprint, issued "Ready To Go"/"My Baby's Gone" on 45 rpm. "Ready To Go" is a beautiful, rocking song with a good-time feel to it. "My Baby's Gone" is a soulful blues-ballad with stunning guitar licks and pretty chord changes, certainly one of Beasley's best efforts.

In 1970, Beasley ventured onto the Nevada nightclub circuit with its gambling, easy living, and glitzy nightlife. He played Reno and Vegas, interspersed with bookings at a nightery in Laughlin across from Bullhead City, Arizona. The people of Laughlin liked Beasley so well they would have erected a monument in his honor had he stayed. Having burned himself out on the Nevada club scene, Beasley became part owner of The Lama Room in Torrence where he entertained nightly for a decade before committing to semi-retirement.

Beasley played the occasional blues festival, the Fresno and Sacramento annual events, among others. On October 17, 1989, Beasley was on his way from San Francisco to Albany where, as an avid fan of the nag, he was going to visit Golden Gate Fields racetrack for the first time. Stopping just two blocks from the on-ramp to the Bay Bridge to inquire after directions, Beasley was caught in the Loma Prieta earthquake. "Had I not stopped for directions," says Beasley, "I would have been stuck on the bridge with all those automobiles that had slid down the collapsed section of roadway and couldn't make it across."

Beasley recently flew to Holland on a music festival package where he was royally received by fans. Beasley's latest recording venture is a self-produced cassette tape entitled "Simply The Best." On it he takes us back to the good old golden days with rocking renditions of "What Did I Do Wrong," "Don't Know Enough About You," and "Don't The Moon Look Lonesome," a sassy jazz arrangement of "Early In The Morning," and deep, tasty, blues-tinged versions of "Goin' Home," "I'm A Fool To Care," and "Goin' Down Slow." The music demonstrates that Beasley still has what it takes, a strong voice and a fine musical wizardry.

His advance publicity describes him as an entertainer's entertainer, someone who has the ability to walk on cold and bring almost any audience to bubbling exuberance in minutes, surprise you with laughter, charm you with his warm and real personality, then sit down at the piano and play a fine boogie beat or sing beautiful ballads, then astound you with a rendition of the blues that will leave you breathless, and warble you a country song which places you right in the middle of Nashville. Come rain or shine, Jimmy Beasley can do it all.