

MIDNIGHT AT THE BARRELHOUSE
The Johnny Otis Story
George Lipsitz
(University of Minnesota Press)

This is an extremely interesting book, but probably not as interesting to NDT readers as it could have been. Johnny Otis' story is certainly a fascinating one. Born in northern California to Greek immigrant parents, he decided fairly early in life that he was 'Black by persuasion'. He changed his name from Veliotis to Otis to make it sound more black (in contrast to all the Cassattos and Valenzuelas whose names were changed to sound less ethnic), he married a black woman, his band was almost entirely black, he wrote a column in a black newspaper, he attended a black church, and he worked for a black congressman. (In contrast, his younger brother Nick took the conventional route, was the US ambassador to Egypt and, incidentally, my daughter's godfather!). And Johnny's role in the black struggle, rather than his musical career, is what really interests George Lipsitz, who is a professor of black studies and sociology at the University of California, and the child of Jewish and African-American parents.

Johnny grew up speaking Greek before he spoke English, and went to clubs with his black friends. Jo Jones, Count Basie's drummer, was his first influence. Johnny arrived in Los Angeles in 1943, to play with Harlan Leonard's Rockets, and within a few years he played with Basie and with Johnny Moore and Charles Brown, had a hit with 'Harlem Nocturne', opened the Barrelhouse club, and had his own radio show on KFOX. For him the late '40s and '50s were really the golden years: he speaks nostalgically of the culture of black LA, centered around Central Avenue, and of touring the US with his band, scouting out and producing new talent. Among those who sang with his band were Big Mama Thornton, Jimmy Reed, Chris Kenner, Johnny Watson, Amos Milburn and Big Jay McNeely. He judged a talent show in Detroit that included Jackie Wilson, Hank Ballard and Little

Willie John (none of whom won - he can't remember who did). According to Etta James (another discovery), Little Willie would "pour lemonade over your head, pick your dress up, and slick his finger up your booty". And he once reprimanded another discovery, Little Esther, for calling Hank Williams "some cowboy".

He produced tracks - including Johnny Ace's 'Pledging My Love' and Big Mama's 'Hound Dog' - for Don Robey (of Duke and Peacock Records), with whom he had a good relationship, and also for Syd Nathan of King and

Federal, whom he didn't get along with. Syd didn't appreciate Jackie Wilson, referred to Ray Charles as "a poor man's Charles Brown", said of James Brown's first demos "nobody wants to hear that noise", and did not pay royalties (though, interestingly, Hank Ballard did receive royalties from Dick Clark for Chubby Checker's lame version of 'The Twist'). By Johnny's account, Herman "The Vermin" Lubinsky of Savoy Records was the absolute worst. Along the way Johnny opened his own recording studio, which he hired Jackie Kelso to manage, played drums on Etta James' 'Roll With Me Henry', and turned down three offers to appear on 'American Bandstand'. He also achieved great commercial success in the late '50s on the

Capitol label, with the material for which he is best known - 'Ma! He's Making Eyes at Me' (big in the UK but not in the US), 'Mumblin' Mose', 'Crazy Country Hop' and, of course, 'Willie And The Hand Jive' (which some tried to censor on the grounds that it was about masturbation. Johnny: "Can't you understand the lyrics? It's about dancing!") But sadly it seems that Johnny was not happy with these recordings: "My Capitol Records time was very lucrative in dollars and cents, but very negative creatively."

All of this sounds as though it should be of great interest to us fans of '50s West Coast music, but sadly these musical references are about as deep as the book goes. The writer is plainly not really interested in the details of the music and the recordings - for example, there is no discography, and no proper listings of the musicians who played with Johnny (though there are some cool photos of Johnny with Sam Cooke, Big Mama, Little Willie and Little Esther). Lipsitz's real interest is in race relations and racial identity. He writes powerfully about racism in the South (in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Johnny was turned away from both black and white hotels), and also in Los Angeles. Both Johnny and Nat 'King' Cole had crosses burned on their lawns. Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson asked him to back him, providing he fired the black members of his band (Johnny refused). An FBI agent asked him "Do you have a mixed band?" His reply: "Yeah, I got men and women."

In the '60s, despite his commercial success, Johnny became disillusioned not only with his own recordings, but with the whole music business and its lack of recognition of black musicians, the "national treasures", as he refers to them. Along with so many of the early r&b musicians he complains, "The black audience was no longer interested in us, and the white audience had moved onto The Beatles and things." He started to focus his energies on his art (paintings and sculpture), the Landmark Community Church that he founded, his political writing (after the 1965 Watts riots he wrote 'Listen To The Lambs', a passionate defence of the rioters which pretty much put paid to future commercial success), and his tireless campaign - mainly through 'The Johnny Otis Show' radio program, which ran from the '70s through the '90s - to get recognition for those black musicians whose contributions had been virtually ignored. It is Johnny's political activism, and his writings about race and racism, that interest Lipsitz, not the details of his song-writing, his productions, and his own recordings.

Lipsitz give us a taste of what this book could have been. He talks about some of the guests who appeared on Johnny's radio show, people like Richard Berry, Don & Dewey, Earl Palmer and Bumps Blackwell, and lets slip just a little of the information that would be of great interest to us fans. For example, after Bumps Blackwell bought Little Richard's contract from Don Robey in 1953, he could not record him for a year, because Art Rupe had serious doubts about Penniman's commercial potential.

The book makes the point that unlike Nathan and Lubinsky, Johnny Otis never exploited his musicians or cheated them out of their royalties. Unlike Dick Clark, he never watered down the music, and unlike Sonny Bono he never sided with its enemies. However, the author's background in sociology means that he prefers to write sentences such as "Johnny Otis has drawn deeply on the West African epistemology and cosmology of the crossroads throughout his life", rather than take us into the studio - as, say, Peter Guralnick would have done - and analyze and explain how it was that "Way out Willie gave them all a treat".

Colin Davies has a weekly radio show that can be heard through his web-site www.theprofessorrocks.com

