



May 23, 1993--

The last-minute booking of the inestimable Johnny Otis signifies the many hues of the blues of the 10th annual Chicago Blues Festival in Grant Park.

Otis, best known for his minstrel-inspired road shows that included Big Joe Turner, T-Bone Walker and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, has replaced the ailing Katie Webster in the Saturday slot on the Petrillo Music Shell mainstage.

An ordained minister and organic farmer, Otis hasn't appeared in Chicago since the 1950s. He will bring an 11-piece blues swing band that features a rare appearance by his son Shuggie on a juicy T-Bone-flavored guitar.

"When they say Chicago Blues Festival today, they mean a diverse collection of different music, don't they?" said the 71-year-old bandleader from the organic influenced Johnny Otis Market & Deli in Sebastopol, Calif., near San Francisco. "We, of course, are blues-based. But we've always blurred the distinction between blues, gospel and rhythm and blues."

In 1970, the Otis posse even crashed the Monterey Jazz Festival.

Otis recently perused the blues festival schedule, whose other highlights include the Staple Singers; the post-modern Piedmont blues of Bowling Green John Cephas & Harmonica Phil Wiggins; folk-blues mandolinist Yank Rachell with Jimmy Walker and Homesick James; the Junior Wells Blues Band; and blues-jazz organist Jimmy McGriff with former Ray Charles alto saxophonist Hank Crawford and his quartet.

The ingredient that bonds these musical forms is the respect of tradition. Barry Dolins, festival director for the Mayor's Office of Special Events, said, "Our (24-member) advisory committee (has a goal of bringing) in more traditional players. To me, that is a civic function in using public dollars to promote the tradition of the blues."

Dolins said the festival attempts to illustrate what's current in the Chicago tradition (as in the bookings of youngbloods such as Zora Young and Her Blues Posse and Dave Specter with Jesse Fortune, Robert Jr. Lockwood and Mighty Joe Young, as well as depicting the blues community "way before Muddy Waters was helped off the truck by Sunnyland Slim."

Johnny Otis' arrival doesn't go back quite that far.

The son of Greek immigrants, Otis grew up in a black section of Berkeley, Calif., where his father was a grocer. Otis got hip to music after hearing Count Basie's band at the 1939 World's Fair in San Francisco. Otis zeroed in on the larger-than-life cross-rhythmic style of Basie drummer Jo Jones.

Otis' first job came in the late 1930s, playing drums for Count Otis Matthews, a barrelhouse piano player who had migrated to Oakland from the Mississippi Delta. Matthews used a West African "shave-and-a-haircut-six-bit beat" that became the cornerstone of the Bo Diddley groove, as well as for Count Otis standards such as "Willie and the Hand Jive" and "Crazy Country Hop."

"I had never played drums before," Otis said. "The Count told me not to worry about it. He said, 'All you have to do is go shave and a haircut, six bits, when I play my featured number.' We got a little raggedy drum set together. When the time was right, he would start the beat, look at me and smile and call up a couple of girls from the audience. He'd give them tin cans with rocks inside to shake like maracas. That enabled us to get the girls up close where we could hit on them."

Otis polished the primitive sound after hooking up with rhythm and swing king Louis Jordan, whose music is the hook of "Five Guys Named Moe" (currently running at the Candlelight Dinner Playhouse in Summit). Otis will host an upcoming National Public Radio special on Jordan.

"I idolized him," Otis said. "I watched him as a kid. First, he was a great musician. He really was. He was a fine showman, entertainer, singer and dancer. He was a complete delight to see. He came by the Club Alabam in Los Angeles when I had my first

(16-piece) big band. We weren't running buddies or anything, but he did give me encouragement, and I was flattered."

Jordan later took Otis to the Apollo Theater in New York City, where their friendship blossomed. Toward the end of Jordan's life, Otis and Jordan re-recorded Jordan's classics in a studio Otis had built in the backyard of his home in Los Angeles.

"That started a series of albums I produced called 'Great Rhythm & Blues Oldies,' " Otis said. (On Blues Spectrum Records, the series also included Charles Brown, Pee Wee Crayton and Joe Liggins.) "Here's how we did it: Shuggie was just a kid then, but he was very talented. He played bass and guitar. I played drums and piano. And Louis played sax. We did faithful reproductions of the originals. The only change was that Shuggie played Fender (bass) instead of upright bass." Otis produced the records and even did the album design and photography.

Jordan's effervescent spirit left a lasting impression on Otis. The playful but intrepid approach to rhythm and blues and jazz was the impetus of the Johnny Otis Show, a traveling revue in which the bandleader developed the talents of Little Esther Phillips and the Robins (who became the Coasters).

One night in 1951, after the caravan stopped at the Paradise Theater in Detroit, Otis recommended Jackie Wilson, Little Willie John and Hank Ballard & the Midnighters to King Records - all in a few hours' respite from the wandering rhythm and blues show.

"Early in my life, when I was with the territory bands, I'd see signs for 'The Silas Green from New Orleans Show' and 'The Rabbit Foot Minstrels,'" Otis said. "These often were oversized posters done in black, orange and yellow. You could see them three blocks away. Then, the other influence was the Count Basie-type stage revues that would play the Regal and Apollo theaters and not only feature the band, but a song-and-dance team, a contortionist, a blues singer. So I thought I'd try to combine the two."

Otis made colorful placards and drew fancy stars next to the names of band members. "Man, it looked like the whole carnival was coming to town," he said. "We played San Diego, and the place was jammed. A lot of the crowd was white, and that was the first evidence of any real numbers showing up for a rhythm and blues band."

Of course, this was before corporate sponsorship.

There was little time for shop talk on the Johnny Otis Show. "Rhythm and blues

developed so naturally," he said. "We did talk about how the styles we drew from - country blues, swing, jazz, bebop and gospel - all found their way into our music. It's just part of the way African-American musical artistry develops. It develops very spontaneously."

By the late 1950s, R&B artists were migrating to the pop market. The Johnny Otis road show kept them in touch with their audience as it cultivated new listeners.

Phil Walden, president of Capricorn Records, is spearheading an effort to get Otis into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. "Johnny Otis discovered everybody in his era," Walden said from Capricorn headquarters in Nashville. "Johnny Ace. Hank Ballard. Little Richard. His list is endless. It's forgotten how many people Johnny Otis recorded for." Walden said Capricorn is discussing a Johnny Otis box set as part of its ambitious reissue series (see related story on Cobra Records).

Otis has slowed down somewhat in the twilight. Last year, he suffered a blood clot in his leg. "Like a fool, I sat at a computer for hours, without getting up, to finish a book (Upside Your Head, a sociopolitical view of Los Angeles rhythm and blues) that will be out (on Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn.) in September," he said. "That developed into pneumonia, and I had a hell of a time."

Otis, who said he is now 90 percent healthy, also helps his son Nick (the drummer in his band) run the five-acre organic farm. Otis soon will be doing a weekly radio show from Sebastopol.

Otis' thoughts drifted out the back window of a bedroom and landed in Nellie Belle XIII, the last of the Johnny Otis touring buses.

"I'm lying in bed, but if I stand up, I could look out the window on the farm and see it," he said. "It's sitting out there on blocks. We don't use it, but it's in perfect condition. It's an old Greyhound-type bus from 1961. It has hundreds of thousands of miles on it."

And each mile is a distinct memory for Johnny Otis.

For the views of the blues were never the same.