

June 28, 1992—

One of the first times that Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes played Chicago was in May, 1977, at a private party thrown in a South Side restaurant by the Chicago Reader.

Jukes' lead singer and harmonica player Johnny Lyon was in rare form, twisting, shouting and taunting the audience. His nickname was born of his passion for Chicago blues, so he really went chromatic when harp legend Junior Wells walked in with a woman on each arm.

Between the jungle rhythms of "When You Dance," which Bruce Springsteen and Steven Van Zandt wrote for Lyon, and the updated doo-wop of "Check Mr. Popeye," a rock writer for the Chicago Daily News lovingly threw a hot dog toward the stage. It hit Lyon by mistake. Lyon and the Jukes, being no weenies, shouted back at the writer. The juke joint was jumping.

Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes are still swinging. Over the July 4 weekend the band will be at the Star Plaza Theatre in Merrillville, followed by an appearance at Summerfest in Milwaukee.

"That party in Chicago was a berserk night," Lyon recalled this week from his new home in Connecticut. "They ended up chasing us out. (Considerable damage had been done to the dressing room.) It was a good show. But it's hard for other people to understand. There's a lot of raw emotion that goes into playing this kind of (rhythm and blues) music. If you're going to do it, and not do the show-biz, stylized bullshit-, you really have to dig down in yourself and let those real emotions flow.

"But when you do that, there's other emotions in there, too. Like anger and frustration. Sometimes they come out - not so much onstage, but backstage or offstage. It's a volatile situation, and I'm a volatile guy, anyway."

Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes have made one of the most underappreciated musical rebounds of recent years. The band's latest album, "Better Days," reunites Lyon with Van Zandt, who produced the Jukes' glorious first three albums on Epic Records. Van Zandt produced and arranged "Better Days," and was writer or co-writer of nine of the album's 11 tunes. Springsteen, Van Zandt and Lyon trade vocals on the bonding ballad "It's Been a Long Time," and the Boss provides backing vocals on his own composition, "All the Way Home."

"Better Days" was recorded with the passion of early Jukes albums, with the rhythm section facing each other and Lyon singing along with every take. With its layers of guitars and horns over uptempo rhythms, the album indeed recalls the glory days of the Jukes.

The nine-piece touring band includes original Jukes trombonist Richie "La Bamba" Rosenberg, who writes the band's lilting charts, and guitarist Bobby Bandiera, who has been with Lyon for the past seven years.

Despite the original sound, the Jukes are shoehorned onto an oldies bill with Bachman-Turner Overdrive, and John Kay and Steppenwolf at the Star Plaza. And Chicago clubs have completely passed on the tour.

"The oldies (booking) is fairly rare," Lyon said. "We have done six or seven dates with the Beach Boys, and we may do more. Those acts get caught in a strange place. Promoters want someone who can sell tickets to an audience a little bit younger - not that our audience is that much younger, maybe 10 years - but they also want someone who is compatible. They don't want to hook the Beach Boys up with Nirvana."

Ironically, Lyon and wife Jill just moved from the Beach Boys' beloved Southern California to Connecticut. In 1988, they bought a house 70 miles south of Los Angeles after Jill obtained a degree in ecology from Rutgers University. While in Southern California, Lyon worked on a solo ballad album called "Slow Dance" (adapted from the dreamy Springsteen melody on "Walking Through Midnight"), which was dedicated to Jill. He also played in a pickup band called Blues De Luxe and took some time off. "I was not motivated to do a lot of things," Lyon said.

Lyon, however, always has had the motivation for the annual Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes alumni show in New Jersey. Lyon invited Van Zandt to the 1990 concert, and they talked. "We felt like we were clicking again," Lyon said.

The next step came in 1991, when Van Zandt was in Los Angeles to produce Nigerian reggae artist Majek Fashek. Van Zandt came to see Blues De Luxe. "After the show, we toiled around in my car, and we listened to a lot of music," Lyon said. "We had the same songs on both our tapes. We were listening to Bobby Bland, Junior Parker and Otis Redding. We started the Jukes to play that kind of music. Steven had gone on his tangent, and I had gone off on mine, but we came back to the same roots exploration at the same time."

The more they talked, the more they realized they wanted to navigate similar musical paths. Concepts of a straight blues, acoustic blues or a five-piece Chicago blues album emerged from their conversations. "We still want to do that," Lyon said. "But as we went along, we realized what we really wanted to do was jump back into the Jukes' kick-ass rhythm and blues. That's the music we love the most."

Lyon and Van Zandt always have had the ability to take a raw rhythm and blues sway and amplify the sound to make it accessible to a larger audience. Southside Johnny's first two albums featured guest appearances from rhythm and blues legends like the late Lee Dorsey, Ronnie Spector, the Coasters, the Drifters and the Five Satins.

"We always tried to record everything live, especially on the first album (1976's 'I Don't Want to Go Home')," Lyon said. "We tried to have everyone in at the same time, we wanted to capture the idea that people play together and excite each other musically, instead of layering things."

"But we also wanted to make modern sounds. We wanted the drums to snap, the bass to be solid. We wanted the sounds to be as good as today. I listen to the sounds people get on records now, and I want to remix those things. Because there are better drum sounds, better compressions and all the other ways to make things sound so vibrant and alive."

That's the magic of Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes, going back to the days of flying hot dogs, pickled writers and relished emotion.