

Interview with Paul Jones by Gianni Franchi, May 2016

SB: The first news that I've found about your career see you as a young harmonica player hangin' around London blues clubs with Brian Jones. Can you tell us something about those times?

PJ: I was more of a singer than harmonica-player in those days; I had a job singing with a dance-band. I had bought a harmonica after hearing Junior Wells playing on a T-Bone Walker track – but I couldn't get anywhere near the sounds Junior was making. Brian showed me how to play 'cross-harp', or as it's called these days, 2nd position.

SB: How did you learn to play the harmonica, how you did you passionate about blues music, and who was your favourite harp player ?

PJ: I had been a jazz enthusiast since I was 14, but after hearing Lonnie Donegan's record of 'Rock Island Line', I quickly became immersed in the blues – the more you hear, the more you love. Once Brian's lesson had sunk in to my thinking, I listened to all harmonica blues, and Muddy Waters' harpman at the time, James Cotton, became my favourite. But the more I studied, the more I loved and followed the great Little Walter – with Sonny Boy Williamson II close behind.

SB: In 1962 you became the singer and harp player of the Manfred Mann , a fantastic band that mixed blues, R & B with jazz instrumental songs. What can you tell us about that experience and why at a certain point you decided to leave the band?

PJ: People never ask why I joined those guys in the first place – only why I left. Really the answer is the same both times: because it was the next phase of my career. Actually, I was fed up with being called 'Manfred' – and also it was because, although I had controlled the repertoire from the beginning, it was now beginning to get away from me, and I didn't want to do things like 'Fox On The Run'.

SB: In your opinion, what is the reason why in the England of those years there were so many talents, so much creativity , and a music scene who later on gave birth to many famous rock bands?

PJ: Because we all listened as closely, often and long as we possibly could to American music – some of which the Americans themselves had stopped listening to, and even forgotten about. Recently Lonnie Mack died; few Americans new much about him, but Stevie Ray Vaughan certainly did, and Mack directly or indirectly influenced Clapton, Page, Beck and most guitarists who came after them.

SB: Your first solo album "My way"(1966) was a pop album without blues tunes and harmonica. Was it a choice of your record company?

PG: When I left the Manfreds, I imagined I would have far greater control over what I could do. It wasn't just the record company; by the time I'd got my career restarted, I had a manager and agent, record-producer, public relations man, musical director and arranger – more people than ever in charge of what went on!

SB: In the same years you recorded some tracks with Clapton, Winwood and Jack Bruce for Elektra. The formation, The Powerhouse, then developed in various famous bands (CREAM, Blind Faith). Why this group didn't continue?

PJ: I had put that group together at the request of Elektra records, who wanted a British input on an album they were doing called 'What's Shakin?'. It was Elektra who gave the group the name Powerhouse (or even Eric Clapton's Powerhouse). At the time, Cream were already rehearsing secretly (I had wanted Ginger Baker to be the drummer, but he felt it would be giving the game

away) and I think it was Eric who suggested we get Steve in. Maybe he had Blind Faith in the back of his mind already.

SB: In the 70's you worked mainly as an actor, until 1979 when you founded, with other veterans of the British blues, The Blues Band. How you came up with the idea to form a band that played blues in the years of punk and new wave ?

PJ: It wasn't so unusual. There were other bands already playing blues – or a kind of punk-blues, which derived to a great extent from the example of Doctor Feelgood. That's why so many of them were based in the county of Essex: The Kursaal Flyers, Eddie and The Hot-Rods, Lew Lewis, etc. Also the Pirates and even 9 Below Zero were playing punky blues in the pubs.

SB: How did you know Herbie Goins and what do you remember about him?

PJ: I met Herbie because he was singing with Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated, and Alexis was the centre of the blues world in the UK. He was 'the real thing' being both American and black, and he seemed to me to have a mixture of sophistication and 'Downhome-ness' which was really special.

SB: In Italy you have worked with Guido Toffoletti, how did you get in touch with him and what do you remember of that experience? Do you know other Italian blues players?

PJ: Guido got in touch with me rather than the other way round, but I don't remember the detail – it was a long time ago! I particularly remember the fact that it was Guido who called me from Venice to tell me that Alexis had died – in London, where I was, but nobody here in London told me. I remember some of the guys in Guido's band and on the records we made together, but the most significant of those was the one with Herbie.

SB: Your last album "Suddenly I like it" (2015) is a good mix of original tunes and some covers, you have Joe Bonamassa playing guitar in one song. What do you think about him and generally about the today young blues players?

PJ: Joe is an amazing musician, an extremely diligent and dedicated artist and a delightful friend. He deserves all his success. Many younger musicians have learned from him, and all could learn more. Couldn't we all learn more?

SB: And about today English blues scene ?

PJ: I have no arguments with what's happening today in the UK. Young talents are bursting on to the blues scene all the time, and many of the – how shall I say? – more mature ones are still out here playing regularly and making a good living. If I have any criticism at all, it would be that the media should familiarize themselves with blues history to a higher level.

SB: You have organized a benefit concert at Cranleigh Arts Center where you had guests as Van Morrison, Paul Weller, Eric Bibb. Can you tell me something about this? Do you think that music and solidarity is a combination that works?

PJ: I have been doing these Charity concerts for about 10 years now, and artists such as those you mention and Eric Clapton, Chris Barber, Imelda May, Gary Brooker, Paddy Milner, P. P. Arnold, Bernie Marsden, Andy Fairweather Low, Shakin' Stevens, Pee Wee Ellis, Robben Ford and many more have helped to raise tens of thousands of pounds for charities. Of course I think it works!

SB: Muddy said "The blues had a baby and it named rock'n'roll", do you think that the blues will have other babies ?

PJ: Gospel master Clarence Fountain of the Blind Boys once said to me "first came the gospel music, then came the blues, and then came the jazz". If his chronology was correct, the blues had another baby before rock 'n' roll, and they called it jazz. I don't foresee the future, but I'm sure there are other developments to come.

SB: Your future projects?

PJ: I'm still seeing through the ones I already have; the Blues Band, the Manfreds, my radio show on BBC Radio 2, and my commitment to the Gospel – which I believe is going to take up more and more of my time as years go by.