Southside Johnny heads north

Southside Johnny returns to North Jersey, baring soul

Hard to believe that Southside Johnny, one of the key architects of the Jersey Shore sound, didn't always live within sight of a boardwalk. • But for the record: The surf wasn't always his turf. “I’ve lived in a lot of places — Delaware, California, Nashville,” says “Southside Johnny” Lyon, who's been living for the last 10 years in the town he grew up in, Ocean Grove. • As a matter of fact, he lived for a while in Ridgewood — don’t ask him precisely when. “You got me,” he says. “I’m trying to think of when it was. I think it was the ‘80s. Early ‘80s, late ‘80s, I don’t know.” See SOUTHSIDE, Page 2BL.
Southside

Continued from Page 18L

But it does remind him of an incident—one with relevance to his career. In 1966, Southside Johnny & The Asbury Jukes released their cover version of "Walk Away Renee," a song that's been associated with the band ever since. And it so happened that the originator of that song, harmonica-rock icon Michael Brown (he recorded it in 1966 with his band The Left Banker), became a Billboards No. 1 hit in Bergen County at the same time as Lynn. Only Brown, an Englewood Cliffs resident until he died in 2013, had a reputation as a recluse. Several years after the Jukes released their version of "Walk Away Renee," there was a curious sequel.

"One day I'm in the kitchen making stuff, and I hear someone scratching at the front door," Lyon recalls. "I get out, and a car pulls away. In the mailbox is a tape from Michael Brown of some other songs. He didn't say 'Hi' or anything like that. And there was no return address. What a strange thing that was."

In fact the songs were pretty good, Lyon remembers, though he never ended up doing them. "I would have liked to talk to him, because I really liked a lot of his songs," Lyon says. "It's strange. He was very reclusive.

Lyon and the boys will be back in this area on Saturday when they'll conjure up their portable party on the stage of Englewood's BergenPAC. Expect anything from signature tunes like "Talk to Me" and "I Don't Want to Go Home" on "The Bo Jangles" to songs from his roof-raising last album, "Southsider."" (2015). "Some of the old stuff, and some new stuff," he says. "I have no idea. You know me, I don't know what I'm going to do. It just kind of happens."

In 2017, Southside Johnny made no more introductions than Bruce Springsteen or Jon Bon Jovi, the other two big names in the triumvirate of Jersey rockers. Though Lyon, ultimately, did have the top two records of the first two, his following is in some ways more riveting: There are people who wish to tell you that one "Hearts of Stone" is worth a dozen "Born to Run" or "Bad Medicine."

And of course, by 1995, Lyon came out of the same Jersey Shore stew of the late '60s and early '70s that produced Springsteen. As a matter of fact, it was in a short-lived early '90s band with Springsteen, Dr. Zoom & The Sonic Boom (Steven Van Zandt, Garry Tallent, David Sancious and Vini Lopez were also members) that Johnny Lyon acquired the handle "Southside Johnny."" He's had a nickname, and somehow I ended up being "Southside Johnny," because I was playing Chicago blues, which is from the Southside of Chicago," he says. "Gary became 'Funky' because he was the funky low end. And Steven became — what was it? — 'Mainline Mike.'" And Bruce was Dr. Zoom. I think he gave himself that name. It's the kind of thing he would do."

His own band, Southside Johnny & The Asbury Jukes, recording since 1976, has gone through several incarnations—they've released something like 40 albums—but the basics have remained the same: Lyon's powerhouse vocals and blues harp, a rhythm section, horns (typically) and lots of party-hearty attitude. In fact, it was a little too impe- rious party — a super-smart, all-male band — that inspired his most recent release, "Southsider.""

"It was in the liquor department of the Stop & Shop in Neptune City," he says. "I was in there... and 'Superfly' came on — Curtis Mayfield, with the great bass riff and the horns. And I saw all the people dancing... And I thought, that's what I'm supposed to be doing next. I'm supposed to be doing music that people will feel that makes them want to more. That was the inspiration for that whole record."

At least because of the new album, the Jukes are working more than ever.

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SOUTHSIDE JOHNNY

Lyon says — which means that he's had to put several other projects, including a "chamber" band, "The Poor Fools, on the slow track. "It's mostly the Jukes right now," he says. "We've got an enormous amount of work this year. I do want to make another album with The Poor Fools. But I'm also working on a Billie Holiday album with another band. There are so many things I want to do still. I went through periods where I had so much time I didn't know what I wanted to do. Now I want to do all these things, and I don't have time. That's the way it usually is, I guess."

The 11 tracks on "Southsider." (Lyon and keyboardist Jeff Kauze share writing honors). Jack Nicholas is credited on a couple of tracks on the album, "Southsider."