

A Little About the Blues

Johnny Otis has modeled an amazing number of contrasting musical hats over a career spanning more than half a century. Bandleader, record producer, talent scout, label owner, nightclub impresario, disc jockey, TV variety show host, author, R&B pioneer, rock & roll star. Not bad for a Greek-American who loved jazz and R&B so fervently that he adopted the African-American culture as his own.

California-born John Veliotis changed his name to the blacker-sounding Otis when he was in his teens. Drums were his first passion -- he spent time behind the traps with the Oakland-based orchestra of Count Otis Matthews and kept time for various Midwestern swing outfits before settling in Los Angeles during the mid-'40s and joining Harlan Leonard's Rockets, then resident at the Club Alabam.

It wasn't long before the Alabam's owner entreated Otis to assemble his own orchestra for house-band duties. The group's 1945 debut sides for Excelsior were solidly in the big-band jazz vein and included an arrangement of the moody "Harlem Nocturne" that sold well. Shouter Jimmy Rushing fronted the band for two tracks at the same date. Otis's rep as a drummer was growing; he backed both Wynonie Harris and Charles Brown that same year.

The Otis outfit continued to record for Excelsior through 1947 (one date featured Big Jay McNeely on sax), but his influence on L.A.'s R&B scene soared exponentially when he and partner Bardu Ali opened the Barrelhouse Club in Watts. R&B replaced jazz in Otis' heart; he pared the big band down and discovered young talent such as the Robins, vocalists Mel Walker and Little Esther Phillips, and guitarist Pete Lewis that would serve him well in years to come.

Otis signed with Newark, NJ-based Savoy Records in 1949, and the R&B hits came in droves: "Double Crossing Blues," "Mistrustin' Blues," and "Cupid's Boogie" all hit number one that year (in all, Otis scored ten Top Ten smashes that year alone!); "Gee Baby," "Mambo Boogie," and "All Nite Long" lit the lamp in 1951, and "Sunset to Dawn" capped his amazing run in 1952 (vocals were shared by Esther, Walker, and other members of the group). By then, Otis had branched out to play vibes on many waxings.

In late 1951, Otis moved to Mercury, but apart from a Walker-led version of Floyd Dixon's "Call Operator 210," nothing found pronounced success with the public. A 1953-1955 contract with Don Robey's Peacock logo produced some nice jump blues sides but no hits (though the Otis orchestra backed one of his many discoveries, Big Mama Thornton, on her chart-topping "Hound Dog," as well as a young Little Richard while at Peacock). Otis was a masterful talent scout; among his discoveries were Jackie Wilson, Little Willie John, Hank Ballard, and Etta James (he produced her debut smash "Roll With Me Henry").

In 1955, Otis started up his own label, Dig Records, to showcase his own work as well as his latest discoveries (including Arthur Lee Maye & the Crowns, Tony Allen, and Mel Williams). Rock & roll was at its zenith in 1957, when the multi-instrumentalist signed on with Capitol Records; billed as the Johnny Otis Show, he set the R&B and pop charts ablaze in 1958 with his shave-and-a-haircut beat,

(continued on back)

Growing up in a small Wisconsin town isn't always as limiting as it sounds... an eclectic musician, **Tommy Bentz** totes history with the violin, oboe, saxophone, guitar, and bass. Putting all of this musical knowledge together to start a band for the first time in high school, Bentz's love of music would give him the flexibility to perform in rock, classical, jazz, blues and bluegrass bands. When asked for his resume, Bentz's list goes on.

His unique quality stems from the many faces and different genres of music, which have allowed him to create his own style: sound that blends ideals from many flavors of music into one (kind of like at the ice cream store he managed as a teen). The distinct movement, layering, and syncopation of his music is immediately accessible to the listener.

Some may say that Tommy Bentz's greatest asset is his confident and mature electric slide guitar style, yet others will argue that his insightful lyrics and adept layering of sound are what keep them coming back to hear him play again and again. Regardless, with three full length albums under his belt, each of them a landmark of musical growth in a coming of age fashion, Tommy bentz represents a man with spirit, drive, thoughtful journeys, and musical ability that so many musicians strive to achieve.

While reading his lyrics, one gets a snapshot of Bentz's ideals- from the strength he derives from family relationships, to the all-important issue of respect in this changing world. We read and are left with an impression of a man who learns from where he's been, uses the knowledge and presses forward into the unknown with purpose. If lyrics alone drove Bentz's work, he'd have a great product, but no one can discount the musician's technical prowess or his warm timbre and soulful vocals. There's a distinct blend of a "southern jam-style" rock and acoustic singer-songwriter flair, with his well-rounded sound being completed by his experience in jazz and classical performance.

The band has recently finished a fourth album "Every Kind of Blue", (available on CD Baby.com and iTunes) featuring some of the newer tunes from their live shows and showcasing their tightly focused jams and diverse songwriting ability.

An ever-ambitious entrepreneur, Tommy also owns and operates Brickhouse Music and is married to Broadway performer, Jen Burleigh Bentz and they keep a happy home in River Falls, WI.



Tommy Bentz Upcoming Schedule


8/26 Vino in the Valley, Maiden Rock
8/27 Johnny's Bar, River Falls
9/4 Neumann's Bar, St Paul, MN
11/12 Neumann's Bar, St Paul, MN

Visit Tommy online:
tommybentz.com

Next Week (August 31) Howard Guitar Luedtke & Blue Max

One of the most versatile band's around, Howard "Guitar" Luedtke & Blue Max is a Western Wisconsin rock blues band, that performs all over Wisconsin and Minnesota. Many who have seen Howard and Blue Max have become fans of Howard's talented slide guitar playing and the band's rockin' electric blues sound.

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Tuesday Night Blues 2010

Owen Park, Eau Claire

Shows begin at 6:30 unless noted

In case of inclement weather, shows will be held just down the street at the Grand Theater, 102 West Grand Avenue.

June 1 Left Wing Bourbon

MySpace.com/LeftWingBourbon

June 8 The Pumps

ThePumpsBand.com

MySpace.com/ThePumpsBand

June 15 The Blues Dogs

MySpace.com/SteveMeyerAndTheBluesDogs

June 22 Pete Neuman and the Real Deal

PeteNeuman.com

June 29 Code Blue with Catya & Sue

Catya.net

July 6 Mojo Lemon

MojoLemon.com

MySpace.com/MojoLemonBluesBand

July 13 Dave Lambert

DaveLambertBand.com

July 20 Deep Water Reunion

MySpace.com/DWReunion

July 27 The Nitecaps

MySpace.com/TheNitecapsBand

Aug 3 *Young Blues Night with The Love Buzzards

(show begins at 7:00pm)

LoveBuzzards.com

MySpace.com/LoveBuzzardsBluesBand

Aug 10 South Farwell

MySpace.com/FarwellOnline

Facebook.com/SouthFarwell

Aug 17 Ellen Whyte w/ The Sue Orfield Band

EllenWhyte.com / SueOrfield.com

Aug 24 The Tommy Bentz Band

MySpace.com/TommyBentzBand

Aug 31 Howard 'Guitar' Luedtke & Blue Max

HowardLuedtke.com

If you'd like to sponsor Tuesday Night Blues, just talk to one of the CV Blues members at the park.

(continued) "Willie and the Hand Jive," taking the vocal himself. During the late '50s, Otis hosted his own variety program on L.A. television, starring his entire troupe (and on one episode, Lionel Hampton), and did a guest shot in a 1958 movie, Juke Box Rhythm.

After cutting some great rock & roll for Capitol from 1957 to 1959 with only one hit to show for it, Otis dropped anchor at King Records in 1961-1962 (in addition to his own output, Otis's band also backed Johnny "Guitar" Watson on several sides). Later in the decade, Otis recorded some ribald material for Kent and watched as his young son Shuggie built an enviable reputation as a blues guitarist while recording for Columbia. Father and son cut an album together for Alligator in 1982, accurately entitled The New Johnny Otis Show.

In recent years, the multi-talented Otis added operating a California health-food emporium to his endless list of wide-ranging accomplishments. If blues boasts a renaissance man among its ranks, Otis surely fills that bill.

~ Bill Dahl, Rovi

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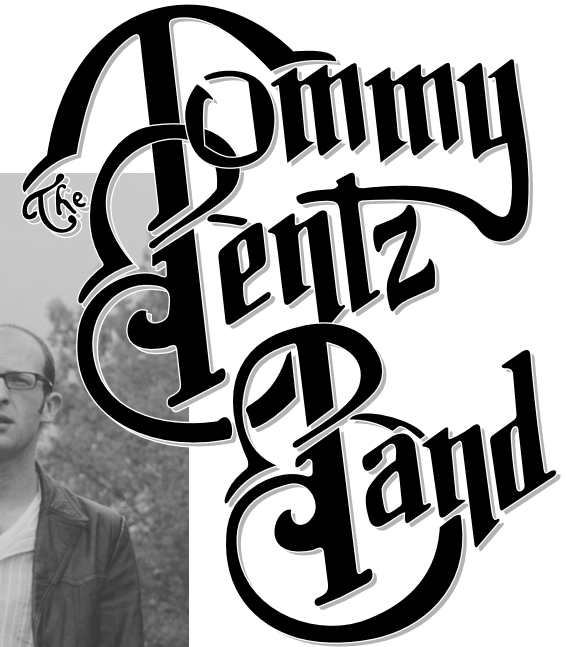
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Tuesday Night Bluesletter

Aug 24, 2010 at Owen Park



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