



JOHNNY 'GUITAR' WATSON

Live in Concert - 1993
North Sea Jazz Festival
CHARLY DVD

Johnny 'Guitar' Watson was one of the most versatile, innovative performers of the past five decades. He was a multi-instrumentalist who first recorded as a rollicking Amos Milburn styled pianist before picking up from the late Guitar Slim to become a highly influential guitarist and showman whose impact was evident on the likes of Jimi Hendrix and even Etta James (listen to some of her vocals and Watson's vocal on his single, "Cuttin' In.'). Besides hard blues classics like "Three Hours Past Midnight" and "Too Hot," he recorded jazz piano for Chess, duets with Larry Williams for Okeh, and then his proto-type rap and funk records that got labeled disco-blues in the seventies, which inspired, and got sampled by, many hip hop artists. His last studio album "Bow Wow" was even nominated for a Grammy, and at last he had started performing in venues like the House of Blues.

He had been touring overseas in Europe through the good times and bad, and died while performing in Japan. Shout Factory's relatively recent reissue of his DJM recordings fortunately has led to a recognition of the fact that that he continued to stay contemporary and not simply rehash his older music.

There have previously been a couple of fine DVDs of his European performances (from TV shows) available. The British Charly Films has just issued "Live in Concert -1993," centered on his North Sea Jazz Festival performance. It's a performance not that different from the other DVDs I have seen by him. This is Watson the funkster whose blues roots are always evident. The band kicks off with a funk number "Booty Ooty" before bringing him up for "Strike on Computers," mistitled here as "Jam," with his complaints of how computers are replacing human beings even in the musical realm.

I suspect that those expecting to see him rip things up on guitar will be disappointed, as he only plays guitar at length on a couple of numbers as well as on keyboards, focusing on his singing and interacting with the audience. The songs here are typical, including "I Need It," "Superman Lover," "Ain't It a Bitch," and the long extended "A Real Mother For Ya." His funky version of "Gangster5 of Love," displays how his music evolved from the original recordings which adapted the "Hootchie Kootchie Man"/"I'm a Man" melody, whereas "Three Hours Past Midnight" is his longest exploration in the blues here, with his playing focusing as much on musical textures as on blister-

• Issue 309

jazz
& blues

ing guitar runs. And he plays the band like he plays guitar, evoking sounds from them, bringing up his saxophone player to wail or play some harp and letting his keyboard players loose.

What sets this apart from the other Watson DVDs are the included extras. These include three numbers from a 1996 German blues festival including a marvelous blues "Wrong Doing Woman" which incorporates "Three Hours Past Midnight"; a 14 odd minute memorial from German TV that includes interviews with Watson a clip of him performing "Bow Wow," as well clips of the video he did to promote that song; a radio interview from 1987; footage of a young Watson on British TV including a snippet of his wild guitar, a piano boogie and playing rhythm guitar behind Bo Diddley; another video performance, this time from 1980 and a biography and discography.

Bill Dahl provides a concise overview of his life in the booklet that accompanies this which includes a listing of his recordings and recordings he appeared on including those with Larry Williams, George Duke, Frank Zappa, Frankie Lee and Herb Albert.

These extras are as valuable as the North Sea Jazz Festival performance and make this clearly the Johnny 'Guitar' Watson DVD to pick up. *Ron Weinstock*