

Lefty Dizz interview.

In a car outside the Checkerboard Lounge, 423 E 43rd Street, Chicago.
Monday July 19, 1982, 9pm.

I need to find out some things about you. Like, where are you from, how long you've been playing...

I'm from right here in Chicago. Twenty-five years. I've got an anniversary coming up - twenty-five years in the blues. When did I start playing music professionally? Well, 1958 really. Actually I was doing it in '56. Because I was working with Sonny Thompson, and we toured all over the country - we was down in Florida, up in Seattle. We were playing rock'n'roll, rhythm and blues.

You've always got to play what people want to listen to. Of course. Only way to make a living.

People are starting to listen to the blues again now...

Again? No, not again, because people have always wanted to listen to the blues. Blues never goes through bad times, because of one thing - everybody has the blues. But the blues doesn't have the airplay that rock and punk rock, and all this has. Everybody has the blues. Little babies have the blues. You say you got a car right down the street, you go out there and somebody stole it, what have you got? Tell me the truth, don't lie to me. So the blues is not underground music. I don't know how people can classify the blues as underground music. Underground what? It's not the underground railroad, back there in the slave days. This is the truly American black music, in the purest form. So when somebody put a label on it, underground music, I resent that, to the highest. To the max, I resent that. In other words, you're saying my culture ain't shit. You understand me. And I am not amused. You can label everything, I don't mind you labelling the blues, but just tell it like it is.

I've never thought of it as underground music.

Well, I'm just saying, you know. I've seen it written in papers. Now who are these people that has the audacity to write that about the blues?

When did you stop playing rock'n'roll, and start playing blues?
1960.

Why the change?

Well, you grow older, and you get into the blues. You know what I mean? Because when you hear the blues all your life, up and down 43rd street, up and down 39th, up and down 24th street, 51st - you take it for granted. I could play it. But it's not that easy. I thought I could play it. Because blues is really not written - it's felt.

So you grew up listening to the Chicago blues.

Of course. I didn't have to be from the South; all the southern musicians came to Chicago. So that's what's happening.

You mentioned to me that you were in Korea. Was that a pretty bad time?

Of course. I was just fresh out of school.

The other night in the Kingston Mines, you came up for your last set, and someone had been playing with your instrument. You seemed pretty angry.

I wasn't angry. I was disappointed that somebody would come up and touch my instrument without being invited. If you're curious about it, ask me, and I'll hand it to you, play it. But don't just go on my show and reach and grab instruments. That's business. See, when something like that happens you have to speak out, and it won't happen again. If I'm wrong, correct me.

There weren't too many white people listening to blues in 1960, were there?

Well, they was brand new. Well, white people has listened to the blues, ever since there's been blues. But the thing was this - in the fifties, there was a station down in Nashville, Tennessee, in Galton, Tennessee, which was WLAC, which ran this record shop, that was playing the blues. Every night you could hear the blues, hour blues, half-hour blues, whatever. That station reached all over. The blues. They were selling blues albums, packages, whole bit, spirituals and blues. Through the radio station. But now the blues has no airplay at all.

Why do you think that is?

Well, you ask me why, I can't tell you why. But I talked to people that are disc jockeys, and their producers, so then they say, 'Well, we don't have a spot for it.' I can't understand why not. Why don't you have a spot for blues? You got a ten-minute spot once a week for blues, you got a twenty-three hour show for rock - what are you saying, that the blues don't exist? Then you're saying that I don't exist. And I am not amused. So there's somebody sitting back somewhere that's pulling strings, that says, 'OK, we don't want the blues.' These people sitting back up in the office, top echelon, don't come and see my concerts, or blues concerts. Yesterday afternoon, on Lincoln Avenue, from Rightwood to Fullerton, wall-to-wall people. When I started to play the blues at four o'clock, what happened? They were there. So don't tell me there's no market for the blues.

I was there. You did a good set.

No, I didn't do it, the band did it. I got a damn good band. That's not me. I mean all over the nation there's a market for blues. You can be in Albuquerque, New Mexico, put a sign outside saying Chicago blues, people come out of the woodwork. Why? But they can't hear it on the radio. You know? So that's the problem. That's what I'm saying. You can't say the blues is dead, the blues is underground. The blues is alive as I am.

These people in Albuquerque New Mexico would be white. We're on the South Side now, so your audience is going to be black...

Are you kidding? You're assuming. You don't know. Three-fourths of the University of Chicago will be here between now and 11 o'clock. So don't assume anything. Ask

questions if you're going to do this interview, otherwise I'll interview you. When did you start in this business? I'd like to know that.

You want a date? The 9th of July 1981.

Alright. And what brought you to this?

I love the blues.

You have a feeling for the blues. When did you first feel the blues? (Laughter) I'll interview you. I'm just going to tell you the truth! You're a big boy now. Have a little sip of this Granddaddy. Alright. Anything you write about me, just write the truth. I don't care. As long as you write it, if it's true, yes.

But to get back to this question of white audiences. There was a transition somewhere, because in the fifties, the audiences were black, and now they're white. This started when? About '67...

You know why? They stopped playing the blues on the radio. Lack of communication. Black kids don't hear the blues on the radio any more.

Then how do the white kids hear it? They like it.

They hear it during concerts. We work all over the world.

But you've got to have a market before you do a concert.

The market has always been there. There's never been a change, per se. It's just that black kids can't spend five, eight, ten dollars for a ticket, to see us live. Do you understand me? And they don't have airplay, to hear it on the street, or in the cars. You know, when they're out on a date, or going to this place or going to that place, they can't hear the blues, all they hear is country and western, funk rock, punk rock. They don't hear the blues, they're not exposed to it. That's the problem.

But you don't know why the radio stations stopped playing the blues.

If I knew that, I could do something about it. It's very simple. There's somebody pulling strings, saying that it's not happening. And somebody's lying. I do colleges all over, I travel all over the world. Now, hey - if these people didn't like the blues, there's something wrong somewhere.

I saw you in Paris in '79. Was that your first European trip?

No, no. Man, I was stationed in Europe in '54, '55 and '56. The first time I worked Europe was '64. I did Germany and the whole bit. Me and Junior. I was his band leader. See, I worked with Junior up until 1970, and then him and Buddy teamed up. And we did Africa, and South-East Asia, whole bit - no problem. We didn't do it just one after the other, we do it year by year. In '67 after we did Expo 67 in Montreal, we left in November, we did Africa, came back in January. Then in '69 we did South-East Asia.

And who were you with before Junior Wells?

Sonny Thompson. He was the director of King recording company, the Chicago branch, on North Michigan Avenue. And we played behind Lulu Reed, Esther Phillips, Wayne

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Fleming, Dave Clark, on Raindrops and all this stuff. We were a show band. Ten pieces, we had the whole bit.

When did you start recording under your own name?

Wow. It hasn't been too long. '72, I did a thing for CJ, Carl Jones productions, a single, Forty-five. And I did four things with Spivey records, Victoria, before she passed away. I was in New York at the time, and I did things on Spivey. That was '74. I did the bicentennial in '76. I wouldn't mind recording in the States, but why record, waste all that time, if your records are not going to be played, you know? Doesn't make sense. It's a waste of everybody's time and effort.

Your guitar style seems very much your own. Who did you used to listen to when you were learning to play?

Everybody. I had no special person, I liked everything everybody done. And I would say. I like this, and I like the way this goes, and this, and this, then maybe, I think I want to play it like this. Everybody is special, that's what I mean - Earl Hooker, John Lee Hooker, old man Muddy, the Wolf - everybody in the business I had to listen to, because I love music. So I'd say, you know, I'll do it like this, or maybe it should sound like this - I'll see if the people like it. See, I'm like a doctor. A doctor continue to practise medicine, right? I'm still learning my music. Every time I pick up my instrument, I learn something new. Believe me. It's the only approach, if you're going to play it out here

A blues purist might accuse you of not playing blues. They'd say you're playing rock'n'roll, or rock, or something.

They don't say that about me.

But if one did, what would you say?

What would I say to him? I says, 'Well, you think I'm playing rock'n'roll, then - you know - I'm playing rock'n'roll.' Simple as that. There would be no problem. You can call it what you want, right?

But to you it's blues.

If you walk out there and get hit by a car, what you got?

A headache.

And the blues. Have a little taste with me. That's enough. Well, I've got to get back inside and take care of my business...