



Monday, February 23rd, 2015

Southside Johnny: Upcoming Pony shows 'a lot of work' but 'worth it'



It's the most highly anticipated Southside Johnny concert in years: On Saturday at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park, he and his Asbury Jukes will devote an entire evening to the songs of Bruce Springsteen — both songs they've played before, and material they've never previously attempted. The mix will be about 50/50, Southside said in an interview with NJArts.net, Monday morning.

"I'm just assuming Bruce won't be upset. After all, he's given me some of his best songs. If I butcher some more of his songs, I'm sure he's used to it by now," Southside joked.

Saturday's show follows another special show, Friday, devoted to rarely played Jukes material, including some songs he says he had forgotten about before starting to prepare for the show. (Saturday is sold out, but as of 3 p.m. Monday, at least, there were still tickets available for Friday. For information, click [here](#).)

Other interview topics included the first time he heard Springsteen's "The Fever," his next studio album, and the influence of Joe Cocker and Iggy Pop on his stage show.

Q: I'm really looking forward to these shows, this weekend. I assume it takes a lot of work to prepare for them.

A: It's unbelievable. *(laughs)* You don't realize how many lyrics there are to some of Bruce's songs until you sit down to actually learn them. And of course I've heard them a million times, but I never listened to them, to learn them. It's a different discipline, completely.

But we had a good rehearsal yesterday, and I got most of it. So, I'm hoping to hit around 80 percent. *(laughs)*

Q: So will you have lyric sheets, or some kind of backup?

A: Yeah, I'm gonna have one of those little monitors onstage. I hate looking at 'em. I've been onstage with people who had them. You tend to look down ... I mean, with Bruce one time, we were doing "I Don't Want to Go Home," and I'm looking at the monitor like I needed the lyrics! It's just one of those things where your eye goes right to it. It's distracting. But I'll try not to use them.

Q: So obviously you'll be doing songs that you've never done before. What percentage of the show do you think that will be?

A: I would say about half. I mean, we're gonna do the songs that we've done, too. Because to learn 25 brand new songs — and also, for the night before, I've had to relearn eight songs, or more than that, but that's not as hard, because you've done them before. But still, some of those songs are 20 or 30 years old.

It's been a wild month, I must say. It's been a lot of work. But it's going to be worth it. It's going to be a real fun night.

Q: Can you tell me one or two songs that you've never done before, or do you want to keep that a surprise?

A: I kind of want to keep it secret, but I can say we're going to do an extremely different version of "Johnny 99." We rearranged it, kind of. And we've done that to a couple of things. We've also added horns and things, stuff like that.

Really, it's more for the fans than it is for us. This has been a tough winter, a lot of cold weather. So I thought, "Let's do something fun." I thought I'd do English ... Kinks, and some of the different English things. And everybody said, "That's been done." So I said, "Let's do some Bruce songs," and it built some momentum. And it's become a real project. In the end, I think the audience is really going to enjoy it, and that's what these nights are really about.

Q: Is this the kind of show that, early in your career, you might not have done, because you might have been worried about seeming to be in Bruce's shadow, or something like that?

A: That's exactly right. Absolutely. Years ago I would never have done this. But I'm 66 years old, I've been doing this for almost half a century. I've made my own way in the world. Besides, who

gives a shit? *(laughs)* There is some trepidation early on. You think, "I don't want to ride on the guy's coattails. He's done great things for me." You also have to forge your own identity. But now, after all this time, who would care about that? Anybody who cares about that is living in the past.

And they're great songs. We picked up some very interesting things. Some fairly obscure things. And some that I never heard, because they were on the compilation.

Q: You mean the *Tracks* boxed set?

A: Right. And I don't have that. I mean, I never listened to all of that. Anytime there's more than 10 songs on an album, I probably won't listen to it. *(laughs)*

Q: Have you talked to Bruce about this?

A: No, I meant to call him and I never did. Maybe I'll call today. But you know, when we did Steven's thing, *Men Without Women* (a concert version of Steven Van Zandt's 1982 *Men Without Women* album at the Stone Pony in 2011), I called (Van Zandt) and said, "Look, I'm gonna do this. Is it okay?" And he said, "Yeah, great," and he came down. So, I'm just assuming Bruce won't be upset. After all, he's given me some of his best songs. If I butcher some more of his songs, I'm sure he's used to it by now.

Q: Looking back on some of those songs, like "Talk to Me" ... that's such a great song, how did he end up giving it to you?

A: Well, I think it's like with "Fever," and "Hearts of Stone" and all that, he didn't want to do them on his album. They didn't fit on his album. There's a certain ... I don't want to say "concept," to his albums. Of course there is, obviously, on *Darkness*, and *The River*, and *Nebraska* — those are real concept albums. But he heard an album a certain way, and he had some leftover songs. It just so happened that some of the songs are great songs.

He gave me "The Fever" when he came into the Stone Pony and played it on the piano. I had seen him do it a week or two before, in Princeton, and it was killer. It was a knockout song, and it was brand new. And he sits down (at the Pony) and starts playing it. And I went, "You're out of your mind. This is a great hit song." And he goes, "It doesn't fit on the album. I want you to do it." And I went, "Okay, I'm not going to fight you about that."

He's always been generous with that kind of stuff. With "Light of Day" (recorded by Joan Jett), and Patti Smith, he gave her "Because the Night." He's generous with those things. But then again, he's had a billion hit records, so I guess he can afford to be. But songs like "The Fever" are such classics, you can't imagine giving them away. But he does.

"Fever" ... it's one of the great rock 'n' roll songs. It's a really R&B rock 'n' roll song. To me, it's a mind-boggling thing to let someone else sing that.

Q: The other show ... does that kind of come from ... I imagine people come up to you all the time and say, "I heard you do this song 10 years ago, why don't you do it anymore?," and that kind of thing? There are certain songs people always ask for, and you can't fit them all into the set.

A: Yes, that's true. And I forget them, too. We're gonna do "Ride the Night Away," which is a great song. And I just forgot about it — that's all. And once a couple of people say, why don't you do "Ride the Night Away" ... I remember making that song, and recording it, and loving it. And then Flo and Eddie came in and sang the background vocals, and we had a great time with them. And it all kind of came flooding back, how much fun it was, making that song. So I said, "Let's do that." And once you get one, you start thinking about all the other songs people want to hear. But we'll really go for some fairly obscure things, things that were not on albums, but only were on ... movie things ... I don't even remember what they were on, half of them.

Q: You mean things from different movie soundtracks?

A: Yeah. We're doing "Expressway to Your Heart," which I don't think was ever on one of our records. (*Note: It's was on the Adventures in Babysitting soundtrack*). But I'm not the guy to ask that, 'cause I don't look back. I don't want to remember everything. (*laughs*)

Q: So what else is going on? Are you working on another album?

A: Last night we had a rehearsal (for the Pony shows). This is with the horns, and they had to learn all of these songs. There's got to be 25 new songs, with charts, and all this stuff. And while they're learning, I say, here's your reward for learning all these new songs to play, in one night — or two nights, actually. Jeff (Kazee) and I have written a whole new album, it's 13 songs, that's what you're getting next to learn. (*laughs*) But that's the kind of thing where they'll go, "Yeah!," 'cause they know they're gonna play on in, and it's really material I think they'll all get off on, too.

Q: I also wanted to ask you: I saw the Hope Concert (at the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank in December), and you did that great version of "With a Little Help From My Friends" as a tribute to Joe Cocker, and you talked about him a little, too. I didn't really think of him as a big influence on you, but obviously, that makes sense. Do you consider him one of your primary influences?

A: I don't know about "primary," because he and I were both Ray Charles nuts. But his demeanor onstage, and his open-heartedness, the way he let it all hang out ... yeah, I got a lot from that. I saw him play three times with Mad Dogs and Englishmen; I saw him here in Asbury Park, as a matter of fact. It was such a great tour. Freddie King opened up, which was just fantastic. It was just one of those circuses onstage, and he obviously just really loved singing, and loved the whole aspect of chaos. ... (Chaos) makes it feel like you don't feel like you're doing work. It makes it more like fun and survival, at the same time.

I remember seeing Iggy Stooze, with the Stooges, and I got a lot from him, too. He just let it fly, and didn't give a damn about anybody. And that's the kind of thing that I really needed. I liked Otis Redding and Jackie Wilson and Ray Charles, and there's a lot of freedom there, but it's kind of that "cool" freedom. And with Iggy and Joe, there's no cool there, it's just pure emotion, and just letting loose. I think I needed that in my life. I needed somebody to say, "You don't have to be anything. Just let it go onstage."

When we first saw the Stones, Mike Jagger danced around, and he was kind of free. But we're from New Jersey. That kind of thing was not in our genetic coding. But when you see people like Jackie Wilson doing all his stuff onstage, and then you see Iggy Stooze, and you go to CBGB's and you see the Ramones, and Tuff Darts, and all of these other great bands ... they're crazy. And you go, "Yeah, there's a part of me that's that." And that frees up that crazy part of you, where you call out songs, and do things differently, and say whatever you want to say.