

AT THE CORNER
OF...



" JIMMY WITHERSPOON "

When a cultural icon of the masses dies, such as John Lennon, Elvis Presley, or Jerry Garcia, the multitudes are stunned and saddened by the giant newspaper headlines comparable in size to the Kennedy assassination. The media, lead by the all-wise teacher of the children, the institution of television, trumpets their alleged genius, then follows the endless tributes and rationalizations of their titanic egos, sexually deviate behavior, and drug abuse, with the final epilogue a note of sadness of how much their fallen hero will be missed. Of course two central points are ignored in all this; one, that this avalanche of corny hoopla is executed to compete with other networks for ratings and the extraction of commercial advertising revenues; and two, that it was the humanoid masses that sup-

ported and created their cultural gods in the first place, naturally to justify and give some meaning to their own lives. This, in itself is frustrating to a veteran Hank Mobley fan like myself, though certainly not surprising after having committed my own troops for a third of a century to this nasty music war undertaking. But what does bust my Chom and irritate an already aggravated brain, is trying to get official confirmation of the death of an obscure artist who I and a few others were moved by, but to the masses, was as popular as baked beans on a bus trip. I recall the frustration years ago attempting to clarify the reported deaths of Grant Green and Larry Young, and more recently, Red Prysock. But when R.J. Spangler, Detroit's best Agency Intelligence Asset, heard of the death of Blues Vocalist Jimmy Witherspoon from another reliable source, Blues woman Alberta Adams, the sad news I suppose cannot be denied. "Spoon" was the last living member of the "Big Five" blues singers, along with Wynonie Harris, Roy Brown, Roy Milton, and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, the greatest blues singers who were recorded often. I had the honor of playing behind "Spoon" in Chicago in 1978, and in Toledo in 1985, and my favorite of the three hits, at last year's 1996 Montreaux Festival, thanks to R.J. Spangler suggesting I be the most qualified to put together a good band having worked with him a couple times before. With bassist Ken "tough guy" Kellett, drummer John Knust, and saxophonist Russ Miller, we succeeded in giving him an acoustic-jazzy type backup band, knowing in the past, he was often at the mercy of pick-up band rock midgets that only twinkled on the memory of the great sides he cut in the old days with Bed Webster, The Maxwell Davis Orchestra, and other monumental dolls. Knowing how cranky and ornery he could be, I "softened him up" a bit by giving him a cassette of many of his late 40's works of art from SUPREME and MODERN labels, then trying to assure him that despite having no rehearsal, we knew his material and wouldn't let him down. And it all paid off from the slow, soft, and sensuous intro we played on his opening number, "Gee, Baby, Ain't I Good To You", to his last song. Afterwards, he took the time to tell us all individually how much he enjoyed singing with our group. He remembered six weeks later when I was in L.A. and called him at his home in Baldwin Hills, a cozy southwest suburb of Los Angeles, to thank us yet again. It was to be the last contact we had. Yet another monument of the past is gone, but certainly not forgotten by the few of us who can comprehend the depth of one such as

Jimmy Witherspoon. Now we'll have more blues stories, but first let's tune in on these words.

Bill Heid ... Contributing writer



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**DBS Board Meeting:
Wed., October 8
Holbrook Cafe, 7:00 p.m.**

**THE DETROIT BLUES SOCIETY
PRESENTS**

**Sunday, October 5, 1997 at the Attic
Bar in Hamtramck**

**1 p.m. - 2 p.m. The Listening hour
2 p.m. - 3 p.m. Circle Jam
3:00-4:30 p.m. Acoustic Jam
5:00-6:00 p.m. Tommy D. Blues Band
6:30-7:30 p.m. Diamond Dukes**