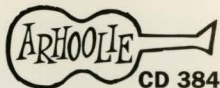


# Johnny Otis & His Orchestra

## "Spirit Of The Black Territory Bands"



1. **SWINGING THE BLUES** (Count Basie)
2. **MARGIE** (Davis/Conrad/Robinson)
3. **YOU'RE DRIVIN' ME CRAZY/MOTEN SWING**  
(Walter Donaldson/Bennie Moten/Buster Moten)
4. **THE MOOCHE** (Duke Ellington/Irving Mills)
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9. **JUMPIN' THE BLUES** (McShann/Parker/Brown)
10. **CREOLE LOVE CALL** (Duke Ellington)
11. **ROCK-A-BYE BASIE** (Count Basie)

Produced by Johnny Otis & Tom Morgan – Recorded in Los Angeles, Ca. in 1990

### Personnel:

Johnny Otis – piano/vibes (drums and vocal on *Margie*)  
Nicky Otis – drums  
Shuggie Otis – acoustic rhythm guitar  
Brad "Baba" Pie – acoustic lead and rhythm guitar  
Billy Hadnott – acoustic bass  
Paige "Ox Tail" Smith – electric bass  
Clifford Solomon – alto and soprano sax  
Tom Morgan – alto sax  
Ronald Wilson – baritone sax and clarinet  
Fred Clark – tenor sax  
Mack Johnson – trumpet and fluegalhorn  
Larry "Straw" Douglas – trumpet and fluegalhorn  
George Spencer – trumpet  
Robert "Sumo" Schofner – trombone  
John "Streamline" Ewing – trombone  
Lou McCreary – trombone (on *Margie* only)  
Barbara Morrison – vocal on *You're Drivin' Me Crazy*  
Jackie Payne – vocal on *Jumpin' the Blues*

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Total time: 49:00

# Johnny Otis

## And His Orchestra



## Spirit of the Black Territory Bands

## Spirit of The Black Territory Bands

**Johnny Otis** is an American original and a true Renaissance man. During a career that spans over half a century, Otis has distinguished himself, often simultaneously, as a drummer, pianist, vibraharpist, vocalist, bandleader, songwriter, record producer, disc jockey, television show host, preacher, political functionary, cartoonist, painter and sculptor. He is best known as one of the pioneering figures of Rhythm and Blues, the creator of such immortal R&B hits as *Double Crossing Blues*, *Cupid's Boogie* and *Willie and the Hand Jive*.

Yet the Rhythm and Blues Otis helped to turn into a national phenomenon that led to the advent of Rock'n'Roll, was forged, in part, from his experience as a big-band swing drummer. During the 1940s, he played with the Midwestern black territory bands of George Morrison, Lloyd Hunter and Harlan Leonard, then toured the country

for three years with his own mighty jazz orchestra.

Born John Veliotos to Greek immigrant parents on December 28, 1921 in Vallejo, California, he grew up in nearby Berkeley among African Americans and, as a teenager, made a conscious break with the white world. He's considered himself black ever since.

Having taken up snare drum in junior high school, he made his professional debut in 1939 as a drummer with the West Oakland Houserockers, a combo led by barrelhouse pianist Count Otis Matthews. In 1941, Johnny and Houserockers' bassist Robert Johnson headed to Denver, with prospects of landing jobs as Pullman porters, one of the better paying professions open to young black men during that era. "I came within one week of becoming a Pullman porter," Otis remembers. "I probably would have loused up

my whole musical future." Instead, he was recruited by Denver bandleader George Morrison, a vocalist and violinist whose specialty was singing and playing *Sonny Boy* in a bellhop uniform.

After a year with Morrison, Otis joined trumpeter Lloyd Hunter's Omaha-based orchestra, with which he remained for a year and a half. "There was no Uncle Tomming in that band," Otis boasts.

The Morrison and Hunter bands entertained mostly white audiences. "We had to play *Moonlight Serenade*, *String of Pearls* and all that stuff that we didn't care for," Otis recalls, "but occasionally we'd go to a bigger city and play for a black dance and we were able to go out and play *Moten Swing* and *Swinging the Blues* and have fun."

Otis moved to Los Angeles in 1943 to join saxophonist Harlan Leonard's Rockets at the Club Alabam. A legendary Kansas City outfit that was initially formed from

remnants of Bennie Moten's orchestra (Count Basie took the rest) and had briefly included Charlie Parker in its ranks, the Rockets relocated to Southern California during World War II. "That was a fine band," Otis says, "and we were playing for black audiences exclusively, so every night was wonderful."

The Morrison, Hunter and Leonard aggregations were known as "territory" bands, because, unlike "name" bands, they did not tour beyond given geographical regions. But, Otis explains, "a territory band could become a name band overnight. The minute you got a hit record, you had a national reputation. How well you did from that point on depended on how deeply you moved the crowds you played for. Some bands would get a hit and never be heard from again and others would get a hit, maybe no more than one, and be remembered forever."

In 1945, at the instigation of Club

Alabam owner Curtis Mosby, Otis organized his own big band. "We didn't stay a territory band long," he states. Having prepared one number too few for its first recording session, the Johnny Otis Orchestra cut "*Harlem Nocturne*," a stock arrangement of an Earle Hagen composition that had previously been recorded by two white bands: Ray Noble and Randy Brooks. While retaining the Ellingtonesque voicings of the chart (it had originally been titled *Duke's Mixture*), Otis altered the phrasing, making it "blacker," and with his own tom toms and Curtis Counce's bass, gave it a more pronounced lope. The tune became a hit throughout the country, outselling the earlier Noble and Brooks versions, and established Otis as a national attraction. He and his band stayed on the road for much of the next three years, appearing at major black theaters, as well as some white ones, often on package shows

with such stars as the Ink Spots and Louis Jordan. (Recordings by the Johnny Otis big band can be found on the following albums: **The Original Johnny Otis Show** on Savoy, **Barrelhouse Stomp** on Jukebox Lil and **Start to Jump Because It's Jubilee** on Swingtime.) The band lasted until 1948, when the economy forced Otis, along with countless other bandleaders, to pare down. In Otis's case, he began infusing his music with elements of country blues and, by 1950, was the biggest selling recording artist in black America.

Otis has always included some numbers from his big-band days in his smaller group's repertoire but longed to record an entire album of the music of his seminal years in the business. The opportunity came when he received a call from his old friend Tom Morgan, who suggested he do an album of Kansas City-Style swing. Otis jumped at the chance.

Although they didn't officially meet until 1957, when Morgan, then an executive at Capitol Records, signed Otis to the label and produced *Willie and the Hand Jive*, he had been aware of Otis since 1941, when Morgan was a saxophonist in Glad Olinger's Twin Cities-based white territory band. Morgan first saw Otis with Lloyd Hunter in Omaha and recalls that he was an outstanding show drummer who held the audience's attention throughout a five-minute solo.

Unlike the old Glen Gray albums that Morgan had a hand in producing for Capitol, on which crack studio musicians faithfully reproduced big-band sounds of the past, right down to the original solos, for hi-fi-generation consumers, **Spirit of the Black Territory Bands** does not attempt replication. Rather, it captures the feel of the tunes drawn from the books of name bands – Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford,

Bennie Moten, Lionel Hampton, Jay McShann, and Johnny Otis – but are rendered the way a black territory band might have at a black dance somewhere in the American heartland during the 30s and '40s, with the soloists doing their own thing. (It should be kept in mind that while territory bands played original material when given the opportunity to record, they concentrated on that of the name bands when performing for the paying public.)

The musicians on this album include several veterans of the swing era. Trombonist John "Streamline" Ewing was a member of both the Earl Hines and Otis bands in the '40s. Clarinetist and baritone saxophonist Ronald Wilson also played with Otis during that period. Kansas City bassist Billy Hadnott worked with Buster Smith and Harlan Leonard and later participated in numerous Los Angeles Rhythm and Blues sessions. And

Tom Morgan, who augmented the Otis sax section for this recording, has since become a regular member of the Otis organization, fulfilling his life-long dream of playing in a black territory band.

The nicely crafted orchestrations are the work of Johnny's oldest son Shuggie, who also lent his four-to-the-bar guitar strokes to the rhythm section driven by younger son Nicky, in the best Jo Jones-inspired family tradition. Johnny himself gave up beating his drums in public years ago in order to be in front of the band and closer to the public. Since 1949, he's concentrated on piano, vibes and an occasional vocal, all of which he contributed to this session, as well as returning to the traps for one selection.

Otis admits that the music herein "has a few little warts and blem-

ishes, but that's okay. We wanted to leave it loose. I saw a Picasso exhibit once and I saw this big painting and it had drips and splatters in it, not mistakes, but the paint had run and he just left it there. I thought, 'Hell, yeah!' The total impact is what's important, not the little piece of paint that dropped off."

With **Spirit of the Black Territory Bands**, Johnny Otis has painted a vivid, intensely swinging portrait of an era when popular music achieved a rare plateau of moving both the minds and feet of a mass audience. That it succeeds so well is a tribute to this unique American and to the many musicians, famous and forgotten, who inspired him.

*Lee Hildebrand — 1992*

### *Program with soloists in order of their appearance:*

1. **SWINGING THE BLUES** (*Count Basie*) – Otis (piano), Clark (tenor), Spencer (trumpet), Wilson (baritone), Johnson (trumpet).
2. **MARGIE** (*Davis-Conrad-Robinson*) – Morgan (alto), Otis (vocal), McCreary (trombone)
3. **YOU'RE DRIVIN' ME CRAZY/MOTEN SWING** (*Walter Donaldson -Bennie Moten -Buster Moten*) – Otis (piano), Douglas (trumpet), Morrison (vocal), Wilson (baritone), Otis (piano).
4. **THE MOOCHE** (*Duke Ellington-Irving Mills*) – Wilson (clarinet), Spencer (trumpet), Solomon (soprano), Douglas (trumpet).
5. **FLYING HOME** (*Lionel Hampton-Benny Goodman-Sid Robin*) – Otis (vibes), Clark (tenor), Solomon (alto), Wilson (baritone), Otis (vibes).
6. **HARLEM NOCTURNE** (*Earl Hagen*) – Solomon (alto)
7. **JUMPIN' AT THE WOODSIDE** (*Count Basie*) – Clark (tenor), Otis (piano), Johnson (trumpet), Clark (tenor), Wilson (clarinet), Otis (vibes).
8. **SOPHISTICATED LADY** (*Duke Ellington-Mitchell Parish-Irving Mills*) – Solomon (alto), Douglas (trumpet), Schofner (trombone).
9. **JUMPIN' THE BLUES** (*McShann/Parker/Brown*) – Otis (vibes), Pie (guitar), Payne (vocal)
10. **CREOLE LOVE CALL** (*Duke Ellington*) – Ewing (trombone), Solomon (alto), Wilson (clarinet), Otis (piano).
11. **ROCK-A-BYE BASIE** (*Collins/Young/Basie*) – Otis (piano), Clark (tenor), Wilson (baritone), Johnson (trumpet), Solomon (alto), Douglas (trumpet).

Produced by Johnny Otis & Tom Morgan

Cover painting by Johnny Otis (*from a litho available from Magnolia Editions, Oakland, Ca.*)

Cover design by Wayne Pope

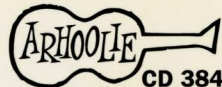
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