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Son Seals interview
At Alligator records, N Magnolia Avenue, Chicago.
14 September, 1982. 4pm.

We met up at On Broadway the other night. That was an Alligator show, which is interesting...

Well, you know, it's kind of getting now to be kind of a regular thing. We did it now about three or four times. We did it a couple of times last winter, and it came off, I think, real well, because we had a good crowd, something like we had the other night, only we were doing a somewhat smaller place, but it was still a packed house. So I think, for the most part, that it's a good thing to do, once in a while, because people seem to respond real well to it, you know.

Well, it's impressive to see three big names at once.

Yeah, that's one way to look at it, but what I say, they seem to really respond to it, they come out in droves, and that's a large place, you know, and I really didn't expect it to be that packed both nights.

How do you feel about playing the same night as other acts?

Oh, good, good, I always enjoy, seem like it inspires you for some reason or another to get with other groups, you feel more like you want to get out there, and you look forward to working, you got people you enjoy working with, like Lonnie, Koko - Koko and I do quite a few shows together, you know - and sometimes we all three get together. Sometimes Albert Collins when he's around, sometimes we even get together with him, and something else I really enjoy, because he and I, we get together and play a few numbers together, when we do a show together.

Bruce and these others seem to look after their musicians very well.

Well, they do a hell of a job, man, a hell of a good job. They're more, seem like, they're more interested than the average agency would be. I don't know anybody else that would do a better job, not that I know of. They really do a hell of a job trying to look out for their artists, you know.

Apart from Alligator, I've got you down with one other record company, unknown, back in 1963.

That, probably a small label, independent operated thing, it was a guy that had got him a licence and was trying to do some things on his own down south, years back. I did a 45 or two, in fact I think we did a couple. And you know, he soon went out of business, that didn't last very long, but we did a couple of records, that's probably the label that you're speaking of.

But apart from that, it's all Alligator. No one else is like that. What's it like to be an Alligator 'product'?

Well, it's good, it's a good feeling, you know, I've been with the company a long time, practically since they started out. I think they recorded Hound Dog Taylor, and Big Walter Horton and Cary Bell did a album together, before that they got around to me. I think I'm probabbly about maybe the third artist or something like that,

that they recorded. So it's been a long time, like about '72, the last of '72. Ten years.

And in that time you've done quite a few albums.

Well, we've did four, and we did another one, the live one that was recorded at Chicagofest, with Muddy, and Willie Dixon, and Koko, and Lonnie Brooks, and all those.

How did they find you?

Well, it was through a friend of Bruce's that I guess you could say was the cause of us meeting, because we was playing at a South Side club that Hound Dog had been playing at for quite a while, I'd been playing there with him, and Hound Dog as I say had recorded for Alligator at that time, and they started to book Hound Dog out of the city, after the record was out for a while, he started to getting jobs out of town. So he told me that if I wanted to try to hold the job down there, get some guys together, you know, if I wanted to continue playing there, I was playing there with him. And I did, I got a couple of guys together, and we was playing every weekend, and this friend of Bruce's, a guy named Wesley Race, he was a big blues fan, so he would always come around and see Hound Dog, so he started to come down and see us, you know, after Hound Dog went out on the road. And this particular night, it was the first time he saw me play, so he must have been somewhat impressed I guess, so he called Bruce and let Bruce listen to us over the telephone. And Bruce asked who we was and he told him, so I don't know, it must have been another couple of weeks or so before Bruce showed up, and finally one weekend Bruce showed up and sat around and listened at us a while. And he came up and introduced himself, you know, and told us that his friend had let him listen to us a couple of weeks ago over the phone, you know, so he asked me did I do any writing, was I interested in making a record, and all this sort of jive. I said, well... yeah, you know, go along with it, you know, I thought it was just a bunch of crap. And sure enough, it was about a month before I heard from Bruce after that night, I guess he was preparing himself, getting himself together or whatever, so finally he gave me a call, say, are you about ready to do that record? And I say, well, yeah, about as ready as I ever were. So he said, well, why don't you get your guys and rehearse, and get your material together, and let me come down and take a listen at what you all got. And we rehearsed, I guess, I don't know, heck man, every day for about two weeks, and finally we told him we're ready, and he came to a rehearsal, and he listened and say he liked what he heard, and we did that first album, that Son Seals BluesBand, that was about the last of '72 they put it out, or the first of the year, the first of '73. And I been with Alligator ever since. He put the record out and started to book us, you know, and he been doing the whole thing ever since, man. And like I say, I don't think I coulda got with no better blues agent. They do the whole thing, and they do a darn good job.

They look after you on the road, as well, don't they?

Oh yeah. They take care of everything, they call ahead and make sure everything is all right, you know, about the hotels, and whatever it is that need to be done,

and all we got to do is get out there and do it, they put it in motion. So that's great.

When you're recording, how much of what Bruce says goes, and how much of what you say goes?

Well, you know, we pretty much got some kind of a mutual agreement on that, because we'll sit down and listen to things together, and make suggestions together, put our heads, you know: this need changing, or that need changing, what do you think, what do I think, it's not so much of a one-sided thing, it's not like, we're the recording company so we're going to do it like this, or I'm the artist, I'm going to do it like this. It's a thing where we work together, you know, and I like that, because I can be wrong about things that I think I'm right about, and it could be the same way this side, you know. But by us working together, I think we can all work better solutions to all the problems that we're trying to figure out, and put together. I think by working together this is a better way to do it, you know. It seem like to me it works out better. Sometimes he may make a suggestion to me and it may not make sense to me right then, and if I listen to the change, if I make a new arrangement on something, if I change it, and then once I give a listen to it, and I can hear what he was hearing, then maybe it falls into place. But if it don't, then I say I don't like that, you know, we'll try to figure something else; if we don't want to do it like it is. You don't want to do it the other way, I don't want to do it the way you want to do it, we'll just try to figure out something new. So everybody be happy. That's the way it goes.

Well, something's going right, because they've turned out some good stuff.

They put out some good stuff, real good. I think, you know, considering it's been a small company that grew, that started growing, and Bruce has got, you know, I think enough savvy to come up with good products, with good artists. You know, he search around and get the best musicians that he can for recording, the back-up guys, if he can add anything to the regular group, and so far, you know, I don't think he could do no better job.

You're forty years old, but you're one of the younger blues musicians around, with a few notable exceptions.

Right, there's quite a few guys around that's still probably in their early thirties, that just have not been discovered so to speak, outside the city or whatnot. A lot of them haven't had any chance to do any recording, only way to get out of town is maybe if somebody pick them up, like myself, but there's quite a few guys around that's youngerm that's playing. If you been around a while, maybe you had a chance to go down to Buddy's, Buddy Guy's club, on Sundays or Mondays, you'll see, they have jam session, you'll see there's quite a few guys under my age. But like I say, it's just a matter of them not having the opportunity or the break yet, to be exposed like they should, but you could probably put together a ten-piece band, and it would be among guys that's not even forty years old, you know. Like I say, they just don't get the opportunity.

Do you think the chances for discovery are the same now as when

you were in your twnties, say? Is the blues as healthy?

Well, yeah, in some respects, because like the music has been like a seesaw, it's been up and down. Right now it seem to be more up than down, from where I stand. I can remember a time, and it would be hard, I don't care who you had, to draw a crowd of people, for instance like we had the other night, just for the blues. I have seen shows put together that consisted of rock groups and jazz, and blues, and they'd draw a big crowd, because people would come for one reason or another. But just when you can put together just a blues show and draw that kind of crowd, then that's saying something good for the music. If that say anything at all about the chances being good, I say that the chances now are better or just as good as they were when I first started trying to get into it, say ten years ago as far as Chicago's concerned, I've been playing a lot longer than that, but going back to the time that I started with Alligator, for instance. Yeah. Because, like I say, judging by what you saw and what I saw the other night, man, there used to be a time like I say that you'd have to put together a mixed bag to get that kind of a crowd.

How long do you see this lasting?

Well, it really depend on the kind of support it continues to get, you know, if it can ever break that commercial market, man, and get a little bit more commercial support, it would get even better before it got worse. You got that blockage, when you don't see the blues in the top forty every day, because all the rock, the pop, all the commercial stuff is what they cater to. I don't know why, that's just the way it is. But there have been some few things that's happened that kind of give me some threads of hope about maybe we will get some of that support, you know. Things like that film that we did, a few years ago that wouldn't have happened, not for the blues. We've had some other TV entries that have come about lately, that didn't happen a few years ago, some radio stations that have took interest in the music lately, that didn't hap en, or wouldn't happen a few years ago. You know, seeing stuff like this come about makes me feel that there's a better chance of the music being more on the way up now than down, you know, for a period anyway. I think it'll go up further before it comes down.

It would be nice if it went up like country music.

Oh, man. And they're so closely related, man. Being from the country, born and raised in the country, I grew up around country and western and blues, and we had as much fun with the country and western music, you know, I played with country and western guys, we'd just get together and play, man, I had as much fun. The music seemed to have so much of the same meaning, lyric-wise especially, and it was country music just like our blues is country music. People say, how can you say that country and western and blues is closely related? Because they're both country music, both come from the same place, you know. But one just took off ahead of the other.

Listening to you the other night, you sounded a little different from your first album, which is as far back as I can go.

Well, it changes. Music changes just like cars changes, I guess, every year. If you don't up-date the music, people, they're gonna frown on it if you don't come up with some changes. Some people can get away with staying in the same bag. You take artists

like Jimmy Reed. He had a sound and a style that he could get away with, I don't know, he was just Jimmy Reed, he could do that, stay right there, and people didn't expect to hear nothing else from him but just that same sound, and that same harmonica, and that same tone, every time they hear a new record, you know. But they accepted it and they loved it. But on the other hand, they turn round and look at another artist, for instance like Elvis Presley. Now he was so versatile in his rock'n'roll, that you could hear him singing one song, you hear a record today, and you hear a record next week, and if they didn't say that was Elvis Presley you wouldn't know, because he change his voice so much, you know. And people expected that of him, and once he started to doing that he had to continue to do it, you know, because they weren't going to accept him just getting into one rut and staying there. And that's the way it's kind of been with myself I guess. After we did the first record, on the second album we tend to change a little bit, trying to update the music, the Midnight Son album, you know - like we didn't even have a horn on the first album, on the second one we did, you know. But if you get to doing things like this, people if they like it, or if they don't like it, they still expect to hear you continue to progress that way. Whether they like it or not, they expect to hear that change on every album that you do.

So do you feel some pressure to make changes?

Well, not really so much pressure, because it's something that I want to do. I don't want to be slapped with the label of, you heard one Son Seals record, you heard all of them. I want to be versatile, and be creative, and be able to write, just try to bring out whatever it is that's in me, whatever that is. So it's not so much pressure on me, it's fun to do. If I can sit down and come up with something or other new, and it makes any sense, and we build something out of it, then I feel good about it.

So it's a natural process?

Yeah, be able to do your own thing, I mean you can play, and go on like verybody else round the world for the rest of your life, and hell, nothing comes out of you, then you haven't accmplished anything, really, as far as music's concerned. You may make a million dollars, but I'm talking about you not being real, and I don't want to do that.

Not too many blues musicians take that view, I've heard a lot who seem content to sound like BB King or Jimmy Reed.

Yeah, right, that's what I'm saying, they get stuck in that rut, and they do it so long, till maybe without being conscious of it they don't know that they are stuck in that rut, and they don't do anything about trying to get out of it, you know, and then first thing they know they done played their whole life sounding like somebody else, and they still never identified them selves. Way I feel, you got to <u>your</u> thing, like BB King and Jimmy Reed do theirs.

And not many people are writing new songs these days. There's you, Lonnie...

Yeah, Lonnie is a good writer, he seem to come up with some good stuff. I think that Albert Collins' wife, well, I don't know if she still writes for him, but the last

album she did a couple of tunes for him, he writes some himself I think. They come up with some pretty good new material themselves, and that's good, but like you say, there's not too many that's doing it.

It's worrying, because if the blues is going to continue, it'll need new material.

Yeah, that's true. Like I was saying earlier, maybe some of these younger guys need a chance. I had a kid who give me a envelope, Saturday night. I haven't had a chance to listen at it, they did a dub, a 45, and also he's got some material that he wrote. Young kid, he's about seventeen, eighteen years old, I don't know how he got in the club! In fact, I don't know how he get in any of them, because he told me a few months ago at Biddy Mulligan's that he was going to bring me this material, and he wanted me to listen at it, you know, and in fact I let him sit in and play some, you know, play a couple of numbers, play guitar. Played like hell. And if he's writing as good as he's playing, this is what probably may be the take, if they ever get the chance to get some recognition, get a chance to do something with that material. Maybe that's where it's going to happen off from. Because most of the guys that are into it now so deep are guys that have already reached my age doing it, they're not really too interested in trying to write or whatever, they just want to play what they been playing, and they happy with that, you know. But these younger guys that's trying to come on, maybe they feel, if they feeling the way I felt, that they want to try to be themselves. Like this kid, he tells me, here take this envelope, it's a 45 we done cut, we ain't doing anything with it, but we done made it. Well, if he feel this way about his music, then maybe he will be something for the future, you know, people like this, that's going to try to create and write something. Maybe this is where they come from. Hope so, anyway.

Do you often let young guys sit in?

Yeah, when I'm in places where I don't think I can get some feedback from the club owners, like a lot of times if you in a certain place they don't want people sitting in, but if it's somewhere where it's all right to let 'em sit in, I'll do it, because hell, people let <u>me</u> sit in. That's one thing that's good about Buddy's place, you know, Buddy Guy, because when they have it, I think it's on a Sunday or a Monday night, one, but they have this particular night where they let everybody sit in, and all the musicians that want to try to get a little exposure or whatever, they go down there, and hell, they can play good, or they'll play bad, or whatever they've gotta play, they can play. And that's good.

How do go about writing a blues song?

Well, it's not as easy as probably you sitting down and writing an article for a magazine or a newspaper, man. Writing a song is funny. There are times when things just come to you, and sometimes I get tired of two or three songs at once, the material come to you a little at a time. Sometimes I'll be half asleep or asleep or something, you know - I get up and write it down. And then next morning I done forgot it, but if I look at it then, OK. And this is the way I have to write, because if I don't, as I say, I'll forget it. When these ideas come to you, something that

sound good to you in your head, and they come to you at the damndest times. You may be out there on the expressway, stuck in the traffic, and what can you do then? Stop, and go to writing. But I've found if I say I'm gonna sit down and write this song, I can't get it to make sense that way, it just have to come to me in bits and pieces. Now if I ever get it off the ground, good enough, yeah, I can finish it, but starting it, getting a start, is a hell of a thing. But once you get it going, I guess it's like building a house, you just go on and put it together. But getting it off the ground, I have to wait until ideas come to me, it's really different from being, like I say, a writer for a newspaper or somebody. Like if you see a accident out there happen and you a writer, well your story's already for you. You saw what happened, you know. OK, there was a accident... you got it. But trying to create something, it's a lot different. You have to just wait till ideas come to you. It's always been that way with me.

So it takes a long time.

Well, sometimes, like I say, once you get it going. If I can get past that first verse, that whole first verse, like I say, then the rest of it's going to come together a little bit easier. But getting that first paragraph, that first whole verse to make sense, then you kind of get the feeling of what you want, and it kind of fallsinto place for you. But just to sit down, OK... it don't quite work like that.

How about the music?

Well, the music is a little bit different. It's somewhat easier, because as you write a song you can just about feel, or hear, a melody in you head, how you want it to go. It's a little bit easier with the music, especially with the string section, you know, and once you get the string section down, your rhythm, your bass and all this stuff, then that makes it easier if you're going to get horns, makes it easier for you to get horn lines, because they got something to build around. You can let them hear, and tell them how you want your horn lines laid down. It's a lot easier, once you get to that part. Coming up with music is not near as much of a problem as coming up with the song.

You used to play with Earl Hooker.

Yeah, right, Earl used to come south, every year, you know, before I moved up Chicago, he would stay in that area for a couple of months. He used to play Missouri, Mississippi, and my home, Arkansas, so we would play quite a bit around my home, and he would always let me play when I was there.

Were you playing guitar then, or drums?

I was playing both. But he was taken with my guitar playing, he always wanted me to play guitar. I didn't at that time,because I had my own group, and my father was around, and me and my father were quite close, so I wasn't just ready to run off and leave there. But I did come to Chicago, and stayed a while, I think it was '62 the first time, and I joined up with him, and played with him, the whole time that I was up here, four, five, six months, something like that. We went a lot of places, he stayed out on the road, you know. And it was good, I got a lot of experience, you know. I'm glad I did it, you know, just like with Albert King,

I went on the road with him for a while, and I was glad that I did it before I got out there with my group, because I got a chance to see you know, what people were like, how they react, and talk to people; you know, it was just good, like I say, I was learning without having any responsibility of everything at that time. So I was glad I got a chance to do that.

And at your father's place, earlier than that, Sonny Boy and Robert Nighthawk used to come through.

Right, right, they were in the Memphis area, Memphis was about fifty miles further south from my home. So, hell, just about every week some of them would be over in that area, you know. And they did, they played, because a lot of them was just getting started, making a name for themselves then, so they were still playing, anywhere, small club, big club. And my father, by him being a old musician himself, he knew a lot of these old guys. Before he moved he was even closer to Memphis, he was over in West Memphis, which is just right across the river from Memphis, so all the musicians that was in the Memphis area, at one time or another, he probably had some of them over there to play. So he moved up to Osceola, and opened up a place there, where he just continues to get these same guys. And then a lot of them would come out and find him. Back then, like now, they didn't have a lot of booking agents and things booking for them, and they would get out and book jobs for themselves. You'd look up and you'd see a guy coming in, with his posters and things and all his background and stuff about himself and this and that, and he would sit down and book his own job. And a lot of them he just got in there that waym they would come to him, the ones that he didn't know, they would just be trying to find somewhere to play at. So I did get a chance to see a lot of these guys like that. At one time or another just about all of them come through there. Albert King was living there, he was living in Osceola at that time. Oh yeah, Albert didn't leave there and move to St Louis I guess until the late fifties, it must have been around '58 or '59 before he left to move to St Louis. Before that he was living right there in Osceola, and he had his band together there, you know. But he just upped one day and took off on his own, man, he had an old big black Packard, man, I'll never forget that thing, that thing would be smoking and jumping, and the darndest thing happened, man, he said when he got to St Louis, an d got right down in the middle of the city, you know, he didn't know where he was at, where he was going or nothing, and the traffic light got him, you know. And the thing went dead, and he was trying to get it started, and the police was beckoning, directing traffic, trying to get him to come on, you know. He said when he got it started, and it went to shaking and going on, the fender fell off of it, so he just got out and left it! Man, that was something else. He always laugh to tell me about that. He say, when I got to St Louis, and that damn thing put me down, I just got out and left it. Left it at the traffic light, police hollering at him. So Albert left there about '59, but when he came back, he had put together a nice band, man. He always did put together good groups, and he would always come back home and play. There was one club in particular that we played at a lot, and he would always come back there and play, and finally,

like I say, I went out and played some with him, a few years later, after he really got it going good. So I had a chance to dibble and dabble here and there.

I can hear some Albert King in your playing.

Yeah, Albert's one of the guys I really admire. More than any of them I guess, except for Earl, I guess he was my favourite. I don't know whether it's because I was around him so much, played with him so much, or something, I don't know. Course, I get to like anybody, but you got somebody that you like better than anybody else, I don't know. He and Earl Hooker - Earl, that guy man, I don't know, I could sit down and listen to him all night, man, and Albert, same with him. But Earl, he was good man, Earl was so good with his slide, that was one thing that really turned me on, when he played with that slide. I never found anybody else to top him.