



JON NICHOLSON

A LIL SUMP'M SUMP'M

Biography

Born and raised in a state that reveres polka music as if it were a contemporary art form, Jon Nicholson is something of a musical revelation. The Wisconsin native grew up tuning his stereo to the middle-of-the-road rock 'n' roll and mainstream country music that permeated the airwaves of the conservative Midwest. But, given time, he eventually discovered the rhythmic soul of Otis Redding, the R&B styling of Al Green and Teddy Pendergrass, the gospel feel of Donny Hathaway and an amalgamation of others made from the same ilk.

"I think Wisconsin is a real soulful place," Nicholson pontificates. "A lot of great artists have come out of Madison or hung out there for a long time and there are a lot of those old cats still up there."

Come to think of it, he's absolutely right. Clyde Stubblefield, James Brown's original funk drummer, is just one of the many old-school musicians who still finds the time to jam every Sunday night at a small club in Madison, where Nicholson used to hang out back when he was living just south of the state capitol in the small town of Verona.

And, of course, the 31-year-old singer-songwriter would be remiss not to mention the fact that Otis Redding unfortunately perished on December 10, 1967 when the 26-year-old's charter plane crashed into a frozen Lake Monona Bay. More than a decade later Nicholson and his friends would spend many summer afternoons waterskiing on the same lake.

"Maybe I kicked up some Otis spirits on a wakeboard or something," Nicholson ponders.

In any case, music was an influence at the Nicholson household as far back as Jon can remember. In fact, at the urging of his mother, he started learning to play the piano when he was merely 3 years old. "She felt like God put me on Earth to make music for other people," Nicholson says, "and to be a flyin', singin' preacher." A year later he became a multi-instrumentalist when he picked up the violin, and before long he was playing piano during Sunday morning church services and singing for the congregation.

So it's no surprise that after only two years of college – he was a pre-Med student at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire and also a member of the football team – his family supported his decision to drop out and pursue music as a career. After all, as opposed to all night sessions with his study group or long hours of viewing game films with his teammates, Nicholson spent most of his time writing songs and jamming with his friends in the dorms.

By this time he had also begun traveling to Nashville on a rather regular basis. Though it's often referred to as the Country Music Capital, it also had been home to most of Nicholson's favorite songwriters such as Kris Kristofferson and Willie Nelson – so inevitably Music City was a natural progression.

"I think coming down here and figuring out who I was as a songwriter brought me back to that soul, gospel kind of blues roots that were already there," Nicholson explains. "No matter where you're from you need to go somewhere else to really *do* something.

"You have to move somewhere and moving to Nashville, no matter what kind of music you make, everything is focused on songs. Moving to Nashville really makes you hone your songwriting craft. That's the most important thing to everyone down here."

Nevertheless, like most newcomers Nicholson "didn't know shit" when he first arrived, got hooked up with the wrong folks and was "strapped into that for probably three or four years." Eventually, however, he found his own way, which initially was the formation of a band – Stroller. And, a rock band at that.

But, yet again, there was a yearning for a more soulful styling or as he puts it, "soul rock 'n' roll." Eventually Nicholson set about on his own path with the support of his friends John Rich, Big Kenny and Cory Gierman. The four friends, known as the Godfathers of the now infamous MuzikMafia, set out to "brown" the musical landscape, to "dirty it up a bit."

"My friends and I, in town here, we're trying to eliminate the whole category system," Nicholson says. "Good music is good music. It doesn't have to fit into a format."

Nicholson's music has the simplicity of rock 'n' roll, but it also has the movement and instrumentation of soul music. At the same time, as dynamic as it is it also has country and funk elements to it as well. It's seemingly "all over the place," but his songwriting and singing hold it all together as one cohesive sound.

"It's everything I've liked over the years thrown into myself," he describes. "All the things I've ripped off from everyone else brought into one sound."

Recorded at a studio in Upstate New York – well, a barn in Woodstock is more like it – Nicholson and his band – Elijah D.D. Holt (drummer), Jerry Navarro (bass) and Max Abrams (saxophone) – along with producer Angelo – got to recording *A Lil Sump'm Sump'm* and "did it right" without anybody telling them what to do.

"It wasn't contaminated by anybody's outside opinions," Nicholson explains. "Opinions are great, of course, but everybody is going to have a different one and it takes you away from what you honestly are trying to make, even if it's good advice."

So with that Nicholson, equipped with roughly 50 vintage analog keyboards created the 11 tracks – seventy percent of which excludes any sort of guitar parts. "I've done the guitar rock thing before, but for this record I was like 'screw a bunch of guitars', let's substitute something more funky."

Aside from the huge pallet of sound, of which pretty much everything can be covered with the keyboards in its authentic sound without the use of samples, the guys learned a lesson from Sly and the Family Stone by running the saxophone through some “old-ass effects units that look like organ patches.” After all, the Stratocaster was designed to mimic the sound of a saxophone.

“It’s a pain in the ass to carry all this shit around,” he admits. “But nothing sounds that good. You can make a pretty good sample, but nothing ever sounds as good as a real Wurlitzer ‘cause it’s fucked up. Everything is a little bit different. Everything is screwed up on it, but that’s what gives it so much character and that’s what makes it wide open.”

Be it the energized “Rock & Roll” and “Stereo” or the melodic “Grass River” and “Just A Man”, it’s evident *A Lil Sump’m Sump’m* could have just as easily been written and recorded back in 1975 as it was three decades later.

“I want people to be able to put this in at home and just chill,” says Nicholson, who also notes that people don’t take the time to listen to whole records anymore. “You have to do something to make them do that. I want people to listen to it everyday and like it more and not get annoyed with it.

“I’m trying to push the whole idea of *relaction*. I’m hoping that catches on. It’s a combination of relaxation and action, like I’m going to make a conscious effort to just chill. That’s the whole idea behind this.”

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