

# King of the Thames Delta Blues Wilko Johnson Returns

There is no doubt that Wilko Johnson is addicted to his "rhythm and booze" music. But it seems he can't leave New Zealand alone, either.

As the frenetic singing guitarist in Dr Feelgood, Johnson was perhaps the most visible member of the leading group of Britain's mid-70s pub-rock movement. Later he would have a spell in the other major group to spring from that era, Ian Dury and the Blockheads, and tour New Zealand. Two years ago Johnson returned, joining Stevie Ray Vaughan and Midge Marsden on stage at Mainstreet at a memorable All Stars Sing the Blues bash. And this month, Wilko is back with his own trio — a band that includes the legendary Blockheads' bassplayer Norman Watt Roy.

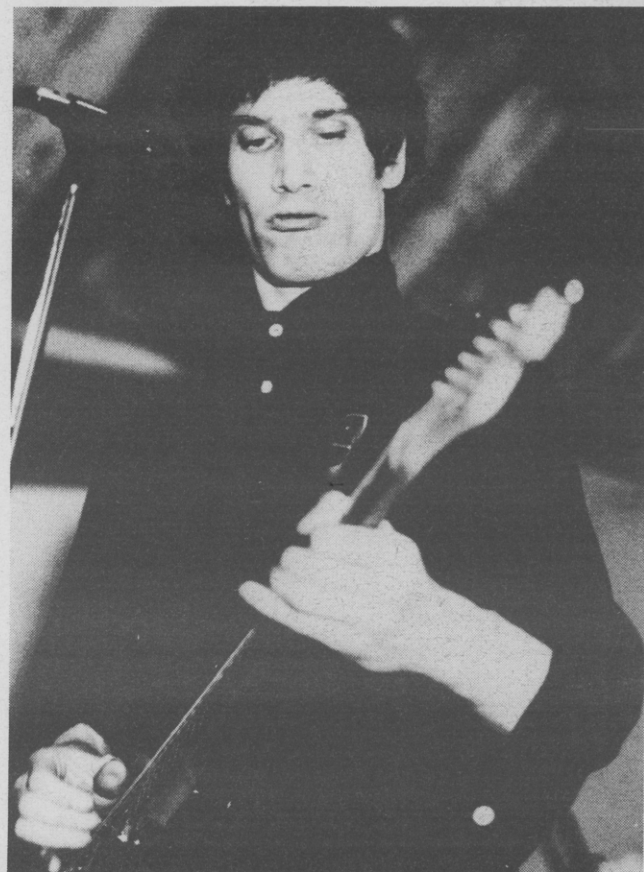
Johnson formed his current trio shortly after returning from his last visit to New Zealand. It was that concert with the All Stars which gave the R&B trooper a refreshing shot in the arm.

"Coming over at that time was a really good thing for me," says Johnson from his home in England. "I must admit that the year before that had been pretty slack, I was beginning to lose heart with things a bit. And I didn't know what to expect going to New Zealand to play with people I'd never met before. But it all worked out wonderfully — I was impressed by the musicians I worked with there, both as players and people. Everybody's attitude seemed to be so good. Also it was great getting in front of an audience that knew virtually nothing about me and

managing to communicate with them. It kind of gave me a lot of fresh hope."

Upon his return to England, Johnson formed a new band; it's this trio he will tour New Zealand with this month. On drums is Salvatore Ramundo, an Italian who grew up in England, and completing the rhythm section is Johnson's "favourite bassplayer in all the world," Norman Watt Roy.

Although Johnson had known Ian Dury since the early days of London pub-rock, it was watching the Blockheads on television that he first saw Watt Roy. "I remember being absolutely knocked out by the bassplayer, and saying to a friend, 'Didya see Ian Dury and the Blockheads, didya see that bassplayer? I wish I could have a bassplayer like that!'" Later,



Johnson joined the Blockheads, where he got to know Watt Roy. When Johnson was forming his trio, Watt Roy was the first person he approached:

"Norman's been well known as a funk player. Why I've always liked him is there's always something strange and original in the way he plays. It's currently fashionable for bassplayers to do all this *slapping*, or whatever they call it. Well Norman doesn't do that, he's given all that up — he's somewhere else now. He's adapted his own funk style to work with my material, so I'm playing it in a way that it's never been done before, and it's great — I can't think why I haven't always been doing it like this!"

Johnson says he feels especially suited to playing in a trio: his rhythm-and-lead guitar style which makes it possible has often been compared to John Lee Hooker. What other influences were there?

"I think the main influence was Mick Green of Johnny Kidd and the Pirates. That's who I tried to copy, with the rhythm and lead combined thing. When I say people like John Lee Hooker or Bo Diddley, say, they tend to be people that have got a *feeling* within simplicity, which I like. To me, feeling is the most important thing in any kind of playing. I'm never impressed by flashy technique, although there's nothing to say someone with a brilliant technique can't have feeling — BB King for example. I think all the players that have got to me, like John Lee Hooker, who some people might look upon as a primitive player, to me what they can put across within that simplicity is something that's very rare."

In America, bar bands such as the Fabulous Thunderbirds are riding a wave of popularity. Is there a similar appetite for rootsy bands in Britain?

"I must say I've had a great year with this band; I think it's the best band I've ever had. I don't know whether it's coincidence or changing trends, but certainly since we started in London we've been building up a very big audience and a lot of it is a new audience. I've always had the old faithfuls who've been into what I've been doing for years, but also we're getting a lot of new faces along to the gigs, and lots of people who are far too young to remember all the other boring things I've done, and are just looking on it as a new thing."

"Also I've noticed a lot of young bands that are starting to play in

rhythm and blues styles. I think perhaps a lot of them are fed up with the current one-finger-on-the-synthesiser trip."

Do you notice any difference in the approach of American players like Stevie Ray Vaughan, and their British counterparts?

"I think that in a lot of ways they seem to have a better grasp of the music that they're drawing from than perhaps a lot of the British groups have. Personally, I've never really tried to play 'da blooze' — I love blues music, but I've never tried to play it. To me it seems to be a black American phenomenon. I'm a white Englishman, so I just like to take that understanding or feeling and somehow use it to reflect my own circumstances and surroundings. That's the kind of R&B I like, where something original is being made. In my own humble way I like to do something original."

Do you see any of the other people from the pub-rock era these days?

"Now and again I see people drifting around town, but naah, I don't sit in with them. When I'm not working, I'm sitting at home getting miserable! (Laughs) I live in South End — it's near London, at the mouth of the Thames estuary, among the oil refineries and that."

The Thames delta blues maybe ...  
"Yeah, I think, delta, swamp ... youknowarramean?"

"We're certainly looking forward to coming. I'm looking forward to renewing friendships that I made last time, and of course Norman remembers New Zealand from the time we were there with Ian Dury."

(As well he might. A few stories have been told about prima donna antics on that tour — Ian Dury is said to have sent his sound engineer home; according to the legend an harrassed New Zealand roadie got his revenge by pushing Lord Upminster fully clothed into a hotel swimming pool.)

"Yes, a few things happened ..." laughs Wilko. "There were all sorts of goings on. One of the glorious things for me about working with Ian Dury and the Blockheads was that as I was a sort of outsider. I could sit and watch the tantrums and hysterics — which usually ended up in a superbly friendly fashion — but I could just look on them as part of a travelling circus. Which became highly amusing ... New Zealand was quite a memory."

Chris Bourke

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