

Piazza on Hollywood Fats

Fats used to hang out over there at [Shakey] Jake's apartment, too. He was younger than me by about four or five years. He was a doctor's son, a rich Jewish kid from Hollywood, trying to play blues guitar. And he got over there to Jake's house, and Magic Sam was staying there for a while [Magic Sam was Jake's nephew], and he got to pick things up from Sam. And Fats really studied all these damn records, and he had a natural knack on the guitar to where he could play the shit out of it.

At that time, he was calling himself Robert Junior Jr. Shakey Jake named him Hollywood Fats 'cause he was from Hollywood and, well, he was a large guy. He looked kinda funny; he had a long ponytail. Anyway, he wanted a gig, so I gave him his first job in 1970. His first gig was with me and George Smith and The Bacon Fat band; we played at a prison. George's son was in there, and my brother was a guard there. I remember Fats comin' out to the first rehearsal we had. We were gonna do "Shake Dancer." And I asked him which guitar part he wanted to play: the chords or the walking part. So he said he'd play the chords, and Buddy Reed, our second guitarist, took the walking part. And so we started and got about a third of the way through, and I said, "Whoa. Wait a minute. You don't know it, Fats."

So we started it again, and Buddy played the right part, and we went through it. The next day we rehearsed again, and Fats said, "OK, OK, I wanna play it now." And it turned out he had went home and worked on the sucker all night till he got it down. He played it perfect. But he was something else on that guitar, man. He had a real depth to what he was playing, such a heavy depth. And he didn't get out on a limb and not get back; a lot of guys will get out on a limb, rhythmically, and not get back, but he never got out to where he couldn't get back. ... So Fats and me played a long time in Watts, backing up Shakey Jake, then Finis Tasby, then Smokey, and then whatever other gigs we could get. And then Fats had the gig with Muddy and the gig with John Lee Hooker and Witherspoon. He was kind of a frustrated guy, y'know? I think because of his weight or not having a lot of luck with chicks or whatever. He liked to get high, and that led him to a dead end there, y'know? But he was a fantastic player.

find my way on the harmonica."

In 1971, following a trip to England, Bacon Fat sizzled to a finish, though Piazza and Smith frequently performed together and remained friends until Smith's death in 1983. Piazza recorded a couple of albums on LMI under his own name, then put together The Chicago Flying Saucer Band. His future wife, Honey Alexander, came into the band in 1973. Bill Stuve was already in the band, and Junior Watson handled the guitar duties, though Hollywood Fats, who'd played with Piazza, also made frequent appearances. Things seemed to be clicking along, but then in 1975 Rod became seriously ill and was hospitalized for colon surgery. The timing couldn't have been worse.

Muddy Waters, who'd seen Piazza perform and liked what he saw, suddenly had a vacancy to fill when harpist Paul Oscher split the band. "Muddy called George Smith and said, 'Hey, uh, I know you ain't gonna stay for very long. Where's Rod?'" Cause George had been in Muddy's band twice already, y'know? And George said, "Well, Rod ain't gonna stay either, 'cause he's in the hospital and can't play. So I missed that opportunity." It was a crushing blow, losing this opportunity to play first chair for the instrument, for that's what the harp spot in Muddy's band was acknowledged to be.

To make matters worse, many of Piazza's bandmates, including Hollywood Fats and drummer Richard Innes, left to play with Al Blake. "All them cats went with Al Blake, and soon after that they came out with that Hollywood Fats record. Actually, they started recording that thing in '76, and it didn't come out 'til '79. All that time, Al was paying those guys to record and rehearse, so I had to make it with whatever cats I could get. There

weren't many cats back then, either. It was pretty tough there, and it was tougher to get blues gigs on top of it all."

Still, Piazza did manage to get a band together, and he's kept it together, albeit through some personnel changes on guitar and drums, ever since. Along the way he learned a lot about directing a band and keeping it on track. The key task was to get a better understanding of what the other instruments were supposed to do, something he learned the hard way, having to work with musicians unfamiliar with the blues dialect. "If you learn their parts in the type of tune you're doing, then you can talk to 'em with some type of intelligence and common terminology so they can understand what you want. But if you're just telling them, 'No, that's not it, but I don't know what it is,' then they're gonna lose a lotta respect for you."

The second lesson he had to learn was to treat his band members respectfully. Honey Piazza recalled that Piazza wasn't the most amiable of bandleaders when she

