

ANDRE WILLIAMS' 60th Birthday Party

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Some people fall through the cracks.

But Chicago soul singer Andre Williams broke off and blew away, like the last leaf of autumn in a bitter wind. A jive-talking songwriter-producer during the Chicago soul music renaissance of the mid-1960s, Williams had his own dance hits like "Jail Bait" and "Bacon Fat." He also discovered Alvin Cash, who in 1963 had a national hit with "Twine Time."

In the fall of 1994, I tried to help songwriter-producer Ben Vaughn find Williams, a.k.a. "Mr. Rhythm." Vaughn wanted to include Williams in the critically acclaimed Elektra/Nonesuch American Explorer Series. The records championed overlooked taproot artists like Jimmie Dale Gilmore and zydeco star Boozoo Chavis. In 1993 Vaughn lovingly produced the late soul singer Arthur Alexander's "Lonely Just Like Me" for the series, and he wanted to produce Williams. The trail dried up with Cash, who said Williams was "in a hospital somewhere."

On a recent Sunday, Williams sat alone at Beat Kitchen on the north side of Chicago, where he will front a five-piece band to celebrate his 60th birthday. Opening acts include Chicago doo-wop group legends the El Dorados and former Chess Records vocalist Jo Ann Garrett. Current El Dorados include lead vocalist Pirkle Lee Moses Jr., who founded the group in 1952, and second tenor Larry Johnson of the Moroccos.

"I knew you were looking for me," Williams said as a sly smile crept out from under his tan wide-brim hat. "I was in drug rehabilitation and a super depression. I was living with my wife. I had just come out of every misery you can name.

"I'd been at the Olive Branch (Mission for the homeless). The richest black woman in the world would drive by and we'd be picking up cigarette butts from the sidewalk. I was completely out of it."

Williams got back into it in a big way. Saturday he'll be singing tunes from his remarkable comeback CD, "Fat Back & Corn Liquor" (St. George Records, 1202N-W. 75th St., Unit 277, Downers Grove 60516; \$17 includes postage). The record includes smooth harmonies from the El Dorados, Studebaker John on harmonica and a real ringer in lead guitarist Dick Taylor, a founding member of the British band Pretty Things, who played in early incarnations of the Rolling Stones.

"Fat Back & Corn Liquor" is the original source for fans of '40s jumpin', jive-influenced groups like the Mighty Blue Kings. The title track is a tribute to swingmeister Louis Jordan, the operatic vocal stretch of "Gin" is reminiscent of

Screamin' Jay Hawkins, and "I'm So High" features Williams' wordplay at its improvisational best: "I'm trippin' from sippin'. . . I'm skunked out of my mind"

At age 60, Williams is starting to mature.

"I realized how I never finish what I started," he said. "I'd run. When the pressure came down, I'd throw the pressure on somebody else. I knew I was creative. I worked (as an A & R man) for everyone from Leonard Chess to Don Robey (Peacock label owner, the original home of Bobby 'Blue' Bland and Little Richard). I knew I couldn't sing. But I could talk-the-story."

"Andre Williams is a very complex person," said George Paulus, the 48-year-old Downers Grove blues music collector who discovered and then recorded Williams in 1995.

"I put out the word among all the black people I knew who would have contact with Andre. The answer always was, Oh, are you in for trouble.' Everybody. Finally one guy called and I got him through a trail of phone numbers. He was down and out. He didn't have a phone; I had to contact him at a friend's house. He didn't even have a set of teeth."

Williams will run through all his chewy hits on Saturday, like "The Greasy Chicken" and "Do the Popcorn." But it is "Bacon Fat" that put him on the map in 1957, sharing midnight bills with John Lee Hooker and Otis Rush at the Central Park Theater.

"I was driving down to Memphis, Tenn.," Williams recalls. "I got my little group in a 1952 station wagon, hand-painted on the side: Andre Williams & the Houserockers. We'd done the trip several times. Once you get past Missouri, you start seeing cotton pickers. Goin' back and forth, we'd always stop and ask them for some water and they'd take us to their house."

"After I signed with Fortune Records, I'm driving this station wagon with a ham and bacon sandwich in my lap - no power steering! I pulled over to see the cotton pickers. They always had these hums they would do, and in precise rhythm, Williams sings: "A hum/pick two . . . A hum/pick three . . ." I'm talking to them. I'm eating this sandwich and I say, 'I'm going to write this song.' " There is a new glow about Williams as he tells the old stories.

Mr. Rhythm still sizzles.