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The ambient sound of Johnny Rivers is unlike anything else that emerged from the southern California rock scene in the mid-1960s.

Rivers headlined at the famed Whisky A Go-Go club in Los Angeles, and he was perfect for the legendary club on Sunset Strip. Born in the Bronx and reared in Baton Rouge, La., his assertive vocals embraced the swamp soul of Slim Harpo, and he created new vibe for a region soaking up the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean.

On Rivers' series of "Live at the Whisky" albums, his voice is heard above the clinking of ice cubes and the chatter of hot customers. Rivers used the good time, clap-along groove of Los Angeles vocalist Trini Lopez as a template for his live covers of Willie Dixon's "Seventh Son," Chuck Berry's "Memphis" and others.

The Whisky was a shot of Vegas without the slots.

The Whisky A Go-Go opened in January 1964. It was that guy always sitting next to Jack Nicholson at disc jockey in a mini-skirt danced in a suspended owned by Elmer Valentine (a former Chicago cop) and Lou Adler, who became Rivers' producer. Adler's Los Angeles Laker games. The "Whisky" was purposely misspelled, as was its sister club in Paris. A cage as Rivers played.

"The Whisky had a balcony around it," Rivers said teeny. We could barely get bass, drums and guitar giving him tips to get through the door. Eventually I'm going to do a box set of all the six albums I did there."

during an interview from his Los Angeles home. "There were booths on one side. The bandstand was on it. It was a big party every night. The doorman was making 10 times as much as I was with people Rivers' albums had timeless names like "Here We Go-Go Again," and "Meanwhile (Back at the Whisky A Go-Go)." They were recorded by Adler on a mobile studio.

When the Whisky opened, Rivers was playing a happy-hour set with jazz drummer Eddie Rubin at a club in downtown L.A. "We'd play from 4 to 8," Rivers said. "Then we'd pack up the drums and the amp, get on the freeway, drive up to Hollywood and and play from 10 until 2 in the morning at the Whisky. I'd say my chops were pretty worn in.

We'd play six nights a week at the Whisky." J.J. Cale played on Rivers' night off. Cale came from Oklahoma to California as Johnny Cale. "Elmer said, 'We can't have two Johnny's playing,' " Rivers recalled, "and changed his name to J.J." The Whisky was full of industry connections. Adler went on to form Dunhill Records (Mamas & the Papas, the Grass Roots and others) with the late Pierre Cossette (now producer of the Grammy Awards ceremony).

The Beatles and Bob Dylan dropped in to hear Rivers.

"Bob Dylan hung out there quite a bit," Rivers said. "In those days he was known as that guy who wrote that song 'Blowin' in the Wind' for Peter, Paul and Mary. We didn't know much about the New York folk scene. I knew this agent that Bob was friends with, so he'd bring Bob in a lot. He'd come up to the dressing room and shoot some pool. We'd talk about blues guys and stuff like that. Before I knew it, he recorded 'Like a Rolling Stone' and became a sensation. Then he stole my drummer, Micky Jones, and took him off on that first 1965 tour. That was when Bob did the first part acoustic and the second part with his band."

Dylan returned the favor when he wrote "Chronicles, Vol. 1" and named Rivers' version of "Positively 4th Street" as his favorite Dylan cover. Originally on 1968's "Realization," which included the hit "Summer Rain," "Positively 4th Street" is on the new Johnny Rivers compilation.

"There's thousands of covers of Bob's stuff," Rivers said. "To have him say your version of one of his songs is his favorite is a nice complement. I just did it in my style Rivers is playing elegant electric 12-string. James Burton actually played the little dobro solo ,and we cut it with the rhythm section, Joe, Hal and Larry."

That rhythm section is the legendary "Wrecking Crew": Ricky Nelson bassist Joe Osborne,

drummer/ Phil Spector pal Hal Blaine, and keyboardist Larry Knechtel, who went on to join Bread.

Rivers' urban/Southern groove goes back to 1957 when he met disc jockey Alan Freed at the Brill Building in New York City. Freed changed Rivers name from John Henry Ramistella. Freed also got Rivers his first recording deal and snagged Otis Blackwell as producer.

"At Brill, I met Freddy Bienstock of Hill and Range Songs publishing, who was handling Elvis Presley," Rivers said. "Most of the songwriters at that time were trying to write songs for Elvis. Freddy would take them to Memphis and Nashville for Elvis' sessions. Freddy used me to cut those demos because I could sing a little like Elvis and get that southern sound. That was my introduction to the Brill Building. Guys like Bobby Darin were hanging around."

When Rivers started his Soul City label, the first person he signed was then-unknown songwriter Jimmy Webb. Rivers produced the 1968 Grammy-winning 5th Dimension single "Up, Up & Away" that was written by Webb and recorded for Soul City.

"Mark Gordon, who became the 5th Dimension's manager sent me a tape," Rivers said. "He talked about what a good writer this kid was. There were 10 songs on the tape and as I was listening to it, I'd turn it off now and then. I thought, 'It's good, but it's not my kind of stuff. It wasn't bluesy, it was sort of Broadway sounding. The last song on the tape was 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix.' So the moral of that story is never turn off a tape until you've heard all the songs."