MEMPHIS SLIM IN PARIS

By Alan Swyer

No matter what song was being played, whenever I entered a Parisian club called Aux Trois Mailletz, I would immediately hear a booming laugh, followed by an instantaneous segue. “If you see Kay”, is what would suddenly fill the air, each word carefully enunciated so as to underscore the double entendre that eluded most of the French patrons and staffers, followed by: “Tell her that I’m not around”.

In keeping with what had become a running joke, I would chuckle, then stand against the wall until the set was over before making my way toward the piano. “I hear musicians get thirsty”, I would say each and every time. “Buy you a drink?” “Not two or three?” the man known as Memphis Slim would tease.

Then the two of us would chat, usually about America, until it was time for him to resume playing. Thanks to a combination of persistence, conniving, and luck, I was in a privileged position in Paris: writing the Paris section of a travel guide intended for the youth market while being allowed those who would soon be the movers and shakers of the European phenomenon that would become rock’n’roll, had made life tough for blues musicians, even giants like Muddy and Wolf. Instead of being forced to scuffle through the fall and winter in the States while waiting to pack his bags for summer festivals, he had discovered that rarest of combinations for an artist: continuity and respect. “Back home I’d either be sitting around or hustling,” he said with a shrug one evening. “But here I work all I want, eat tons of great food, and keep on having fun.”

“You’re a living legend,” I said playfully. “Maybe. But to some folks it’s a legend I’m still living!”, he countered with a laugh. It was that same evening that Slim starting filling me in on the latest in the life of a guy he termed “our old bus driver”, meaning, I came to realise, Willie Dixon.

Not wanting to hurt his feelings by letting on that I’d never met - or even set eyes on - the great Chess Records songwriter, I simply nodded, assuming that was that.

To my dismay, however, it was only the beginning. From that point on, virtually every night I came in, Slim would either give me regards from Willie or let me in on what he had been asking about me, which I took to be strange, amusing and in a funny way flattering.

Feeling awkward, but not wanting to cause any embarrassment, I starting responding in kind, asking to be remembered to a man I assumed I would never have the chance to meet. Unlike Slim, my time in Paris was finite. Though I did my best to follow him in those pre-internet days, and was thrilled when the French Ministry Of Culture bestowed upon him its highest honour, Commandeur dans L’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, it was hard for me to keep in touch from New York, then even harder when I relocated to Los Angeles. But my move to the Coast provided me with unexpected opportunities when my friend Ian Whitcomb got money from the BBC to stage and film a series of blues concerts, which enabled me to meet artists I’d long idolised.

First up was Big Mama Thornton, who, though frail, put on a wonderful show. The same was true of the singer who followed, Big Joe Turner. But the real thrill for me was the star of the third concert - the great Willie Dixon - who was gracious when I late introduced me to him: “A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said warmly. “Actually,” I replied, “the two of us kind of know each other.” “How so?” he asked, surprised, yet clearly dubious. “Through a mutual friend in Paris named Memphis Slim who used to give us both updates.” Stunned, Willie eyed me strangely, then burst into laughter. “You’re the motherfucker?”, he bellowed, lifting me off my feet in a bear hug. “Well all right!” That was an evening I’ll never forget.