

# BLUES & RHYTHM

A TRIBUTE TO  
**Neil Slaven**

1944 - 2023





**R**ecord producer, critic, researcher, author and discographer Neil Slaven, who died on December 23rd aged 79, was one of the leading lights of the 1960s British blues boom.

Born on August 6th, 1944, in Caterham, Surrey, he attended Purley County Grammar School with Mike Vernon – sharing Mike’s passion for American R&B and blues music.

Between February 1964 and February 1966 Neil and Mike published ‘R&B Monthly’, which included knowledgeable articles on R&B and blues artists and records which eventually led to the release of a highly collectable 45rpm disc sold via the magazine on Blue Horizon Records, a name suggested by Neil.

‘Across The Board’, by Howlin’ Wolf’s guitarist Hubert Sumlin, was recorded in 1965 at Mike’s parents’ house, with Neil playing second guitar. It was Blue Horizon’s first release, with 99 copies being pressed to avoid UK ‘purchase tax’. Blue Horizon went on to become the UK’s definitive homegrown blues record label.

Mike found work in record production at Decca Records while Neil got a job at Esquire Records who issued recordings by British jazz musicians and jazz and R&B recordings leased from U.S. independent record companies.

Neil eventually joined Decca working in the album sleeve department, penning his first sleeve notes for ‘The Blues Of Otis Spann’, an album by Muddy Waters’ pianist originally released in 1964.

1966 proved to be a pivotal year. Neil wrote the sleeve notes for the commercially successful ‘Blues Breakers – John Mayall with Eric Clapton’ album (aka ‘the Beano album’), produced by Mike Vernon and released on Decca in the UK and London in the USA. The album reached number 6 on the UK album chart in the first week of its release.

By the late 1960s, Neil was producing albums for Decca including sets by the Keef Hartley Band and Savoy Brown, also working with Mike Vernon’s Blue Horizon label, which had hit big with ‘Albatros’ by Fleetwood Mac and who were releasing

albums and singles by Chicken Shack, Duster Bennett, Christine Perfect and U.S. blues artists such as Champion Jack Dupree, Sunnysland Slim, Johnny Shines and Bukka White.

Neil was also present in Chicago, on the production team when Fleetwood Mac recorded the 1969 double album ‘Blues Jam At Chess’ with the likes of Willie Dixon, Otis Spann, Walter Horton and Honeyboy Edwards.

In 1968, in partnership with Mike Leadbitter – then editor of Blues Unlimited – Neil published ‘Blues Records, 1943-1966, The Complete Guide To 20 years Of Recorded Blues’, the first selective discography of thousands of U.S. blues recordings.

Dubbed ‘the blues bible’, the book was revised and later expanded to two weighty volumes covering the years 1943 to 1970 and published in 1987 (A-K) and 1995 (L-Z) although Neil was not credited on the second volume.

In the early 1970s Neil expanded his horizons producing prog rock bands for Deram Records (via a production company Gruggy Woof Productions which he jointly owned with David Hitchcock), including albums by Stray, Trapeze, Kahn, Egg, and albums with Stan Webb’s Chicken Shack, singer/songwriter Miller Anderson (formerly Keef Hartley’s lead singer), and The Henry Lowther Band. He also co-produced the Pink Fairies 1971 debut album, undertook a global tour in the mid-’70s with Deep Purple, provided production and technical support for the former Yes electronics and keyboard player Patrick Moraz for a 1978 solo album on Charisma Records and he acted as a driver/minder on a tour of Northern England for the Australian comedian and satirist Barry Humphries!

But blues was never far from his thoughts. In the early 1970s he was involved in compiling



Cover: Neil Slaven, Southampton, 1980s. Photo: Bob Pearce. Top: Neil Slaven (left) with Mike Vernon behind, at Klooks Kleeck, West Hampstead, watching Buddy Guy, 1965. Photo: John Broven. School photograph, courtesy Heather Street; R&B Monthly, February, 1965, first Blues Horizon 45 by Hubert Sumlin, Otis Spann album cover. Courtesy Blues & Rhythm.



**BLUES BREAKERS**  
**JOHN MAYALL** DERAM  
**WITH ERIC CLAPTON**



and writing the liner notes for the Blues Obscurities series featuring rare post war blues 45son the London label and reissue albums of pre-war blues from Bluebird Records featuring artists like Jazz Gillum, Big Joe Williams, Dr. Clayton and John Lee 'Sonny Boy' Williamson. He also wrote articles and reviews for Blues Unlimited and later for Juke Blues, Vox and other publications.

I first met Neil in Dobell's in London in 1987, not long after taking over as editor of Blues & Rhythm. I asked him if he would be interested in writing for us. He agreed, but with the stipulation that anything he wrote could not be altered.

Adding his name to our list of reviewers and writers added greatly to our credibility, though his stipulations led at times to disagreements. He had an acerbic wit, coupled with a stinging turn of phrase and the use of obscure words sometimes wound people up. Cilla Huggins who worked on Blues Unlimited and edited Juke Blues told me the word Neil often used to describe himself was "curmudgeonly".

The number of interviews, research articles and reviews of albums, CDs and books he penned for Blues & Rhythm is massive.

Neil had heroes: he insisted on writing an obituary/tribute to Paul Oliver, the doyen of UK blues researchers, and the pioneering Swiss jazz and blues discographer Kurt Mohr.

We would meet in London with friends - Neil who knew loads of

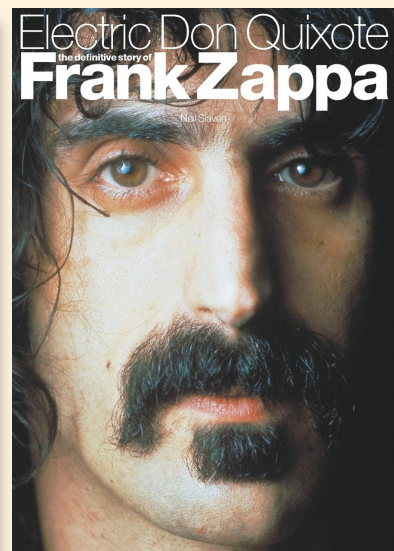
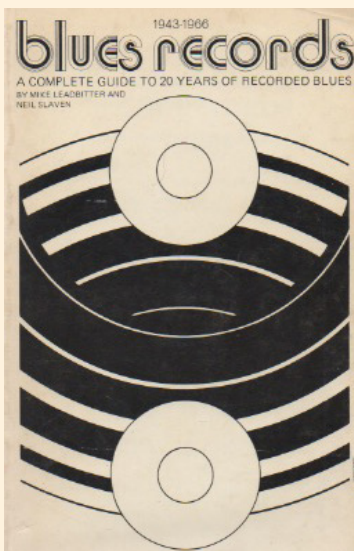
people in the music industry, was entertaining company.

In the 1980s, working for Charly Records, he compiled reissue albums from the vaults of Sun Records, Joe Banashak's Minit and Instant Records in New Orleans and Syd Nathan's King/Federal Records, visiting the USA to research their tape vaults and recording data. He also researched the vaults of



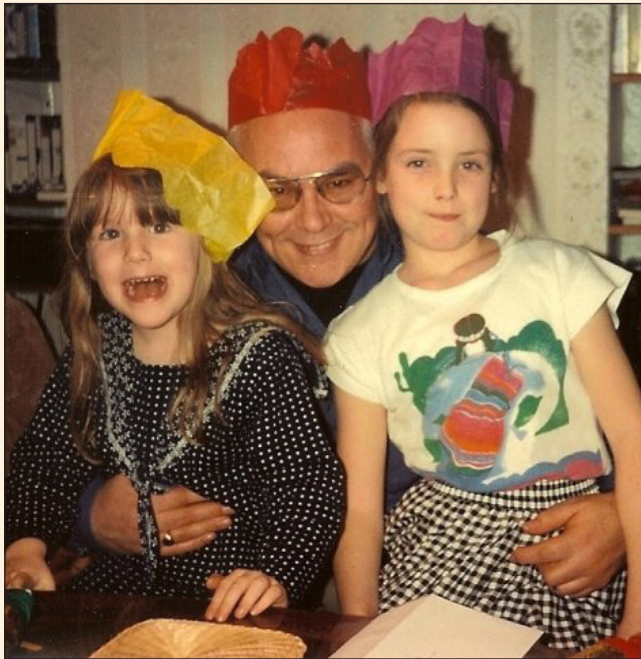
Johnny Vincent's Ace label for a reissue series on Westside.

Between 1991 and 1992 he co-owned a short lived record company Cottage Records issuing CDs by Johnny Cash's



**Top left:** John Mayall Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton 'Beano' album cover; **Top right:** Keef Hartley signs for Decca Records, with Mike Vernon (left) and Neil (right); **Centre right:** Neil at launch party for Partick Moraz album produced by Neil, September 1978. **Bottom:** Cover of the original Blues Records Discography, album cover of Pink Fairies debut album co-produced by Neil, cover of Neil's biography of Frank Zappa.





brother Tommy, Dobie Gray and Tanya Tucker.

Outside of blues and R&B in 2003 he wrote 'Electric Don Quixote', an acclaimed biography of another of his heroes Frank Zappa, interviewing Frank at his Laurel Canyon home. In 2006 Neil also contributed to the massive Penguin Guide To Blues Recordings.

For almost 50 years Neil produced, compiled and wrote sleeve notes and booklets for albums, CDs for countless labels including Indigo Records, Zircon Bleu, Castle Music, Fantastic Voyage, Boulevard Vintage, Recall, Snapper, BGO, Music Club, Proper Records and notably a large number of box sets for JSP Records.

In recent years he compiled an almost unending supply of reissue compilations of blues and R&B CDs working with the late Bob Fisher for Jasmine Records.

Around the start of the Covid pandemic Neil's health was faltering, but he kept busy transcribing interviews and compiling published and unpublished interviews and articles (which he gave to B&R).

In 2021, 'John Mayall – The First Generation 1965-1974', a 35-CD retrospective box set, was released by Madfish. Neil helped to produce the set and wrote the accompanying 168 page coffee table sized book. It was a magnificent piece of work and he was rightly proud of it.

His friend Alan Sneesby (who knew Neil via a group of Nottingham blues fans who met monthly) kept in touch with Neil and provided support - but said Neil's short-term



memory and hearing was failing.

For somebody so sharp – a man who could hold court telling music-biz anecdotes for hours – this must have been frightening. His situation eventually got worse and his illness lead to him not responding to phone calls or using email to keep contact. He was eventually taken into hospital suffering from sepsis. He passed away in hospital on December 23rd 2023.

Neil was a one-off. He left his mark on the UK music scene with an unsurpassed body of work that most of us can only dream of emulating.

Obituaries on Neil appeared in The Guardian, Blues & Rhythm, Now Dig This, Rocks Back Pages, Living Blues, Record Collector, Mojo and Blues In The South.

Thanks to: Mike Vernon, Mike Rowe, Heather Street and Neil's family, Alan Sneesby, John Broven, Cilla Huggins, Roger Dopson, John Stedman and David Hitchcock.

**Tony Burke**

*Editor Blues & Rhythm, May 2024.*



Finally we found an invoice used by Neil probably in the 1970s or 80s which reads: "Neil Slaven : Researcher – Writer – Archivist – Discographer – Legend" "Quorsum haec tam putida tendant" - which roughly translated by Chris Bentley in A level latin reads: "What is this crap all about".

**Top left:** Neil at Christmas party with Roger Dopson's daughters; **bottom left,** Neil, Mike Rowe, Jim O'Neal, Bill Greensmith, Bob Hall at Chicago Blues Festival, 1990s; **Centre:** Neil, Bill Greensmith and Mike Rowe. London, 2011. Photo: Elizabeth Woodcraft, **bottom right** John Mayall Box set annotated and co-produced by Neil.