

SONNY KNIGHT & THE LAKERS BIO

On April 29, 2014, the debut album from Sonny Knight & The Lakers, *I'm Still Here*, was released by Secret Stash Records on LP, CD, and digitally. In person, Sonny Knight defies his 65 years of age. When he talks, his low gravelly voice betrays the roundness of his singing. His smile and gestures radiate youthful energy with the reassuring confidence of a captain or pilot; they bring a sense of ease rather than being brash. He is a natural performer, even on a cold Thursday night in Secret Stash's basement recording studio. Standing in a rehearsal room, framed by old guitar amps, instruments, and blanket covered walls, Sonny stands up to the mic to lay down the vocal track for "I'm Still Here (Pt. 2)." Despite his drab surroundings, eyes closed, he performs for an invisible audience. His body moves in rhythm, arms jabbing like a boxer before a fight. As the horns hit, he jerks his head in time then begins delivering each line. His face physically expresses the emotion of every word and as he reaches the crescendo of the chorus, knees bent, head tilted toward the ceiling, his mouth buckles to unleash the exclamation, "I'M STILL HERE!"

In reference to "I'm Still Here," Sonny relates, "That song is me giving my thoughts and ideas about what my life is about. People are trying to live too much in the future, or are stuck in the past. The idea is to focus on right now." In part one of the song, he describes the worries and doubts he experienced upon returning from Vietnam. The world was a confusing place, and he discovered childhood friends had grown up and gotten in trouble. Its message is about not losing sight of yourself while getting through difficult times. Part two stresses how paramount it is to live in the present. Knight recounts, you "never know when life's ride will come to an end. I'm still here. I know one thing's for sure, can't start it again. I'm still here." For Sonny Knight, making the album *I'm Still Here* was like pressing the reset button on his music career. The synthesizers of the 1980s and the four on the floor disco flourishes of the 1970's have been replaced by classic arrangements and production values commonplace when his career was just beginning.

He was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1948, moved to St. Paul as a youngster, and took to music. Little Sonny Knight & The Cymbals recorded their debut 45 for New Teenage Records in 1965, when he was 17. Then music took a backseat to a three year call of duty in the army. A few more years in the Bay Area followed before Sonny returned to Minnesota in the mid-1970s and joined the band Haze. Like many other groups, opportunities dried up in the 1980s and Sonny found a full time job as a truck driver. Musical work came again in the 1990s when former Valdons vocalists Monroe Wright and Maurice Young extended an invitation to join their new group, The Bachelors. In 2012, The Valdons were featured in Secret Stash Records' compilation *Twin Cities Funk & Soul*. The record spawned multiple concerts which reunited musicians and singers from the era to perform for new generations; it also revived The Valdons, for which Wright and Young tapped Knight as a new member. After six months of working together in soul revue shows, Sonny and Secret Stash's Eric Foss formed the group Sonny Knight & The Lakers.

In the spring of 2013, Sonny and the Lakers hit the ground running – playing gigs a few short weeks after their first rehearsal. Within months they had grown into their own as a band. In the fall, they spent a long weekend at a cabin in Northern Minnesota and it became a defining moment. Staying up late, listening to old 45s, learning gospel songs, and wood shedding tunes was a way for the band to develop a similar vocabulary and refine their direction. It transformed them from a group of good players into a band. When they returned home, they set up a string of performances and residencies in Minneapolis and St. Paul. As they honed the craft of putting on a great live show, they built a following of fans. By the end of their residency at the Eagles club in South Minneapolis, virtually no breaks interrupted or slowed down their live sets. Non-stop rehearsals and live performances helped The Lakers tighten up their sound. That, coupled with the inspiration found during the cabin trip, laid the ground work for recording an album.

The way *I'm Still Here* was recorded was the product of many months of thought, just as the songs on the album were developed over hours of collaborative effort for Sonny and the band. The album covers a wide range of tempos and soul forms. Since the Lakers were spearheaded by a reissue label focused on obscure music, the band encompasses more than just Motown and Stax inspired sounds. The many hours spent digging for and listening to forgotten sixties and early seventies soul and funk records have practically oozed into the rehearsal space and studio. What stands out most are the strong performances by the band and Sonny's exuberance and energy. As a listener, there's never any doubt about what feelings he wants to convey. Nearly fifty years have passed since Knight's first recording, but for the first time he feels like the center of attention. He says, "Sometimes I wonder, why me? Why are all these great things happening now? All I can say is thanks. These are dreams that I had forgotten. Only now that they are starting to come true do I remember that I had them at all."