

Mose Allison Bio

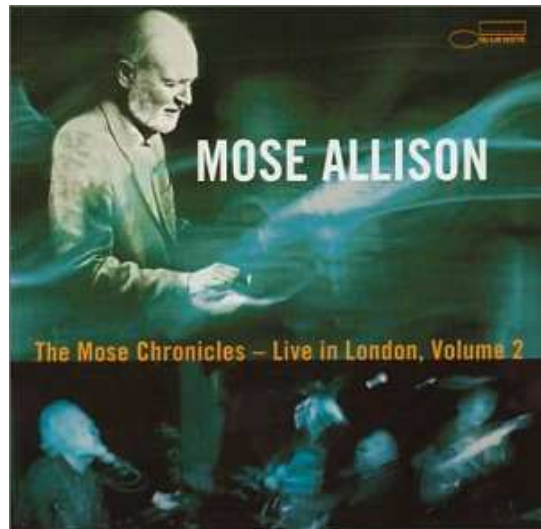


Mose Allison is one of the great American songwriters. By his own estimate, he's written over 150 songs, several of which have been covered by such pop artists as Bonnie Raitt, Van Morrison, Tracy Nelson, the Who, the Yardbirds, Elvis Costello and Merlin Factor. And while wide-scale attention has eluded the 73-year-old jazz pianist/singer, Allison continues to perform 125 gigs a year, including two annual three-week stints at The Pizza Express in London—which is where he and his trio of bassist Roy Babbington and drummer Mark Taylor were captured live for *The Mose Chronicles: Live in London, Volume 1*. Recorded in January 2000, the album is produced by longtime associate Ben Sidran who has not only piloted all of Allison's Blue Note recordings but also paid tribute to him with Morrison and Georgie Fame on the 1996 CD *Tell Me Something: The Songs of Mose Allison*.

"For this record I wanted to concentrate on some of my older material that other people have covered rather than do newer tunes from my recent albums," says Allison, a Blue Note recording artist since 1987 whose last album *Gimcracks and Gewgaws* was released in January 1998. "We recorded for three nights and came up with enough material for two albums." (A second volume of *The Mose Chronicles* will be released by Blue Note in the future.)

The album features some of the witty, idiosyncratic songwriter's best known material, including "Everybody's Cryin' Mercy" (covered by both Raitt and Costello), "I'm Not Talking" (recorded in the early '60s by the Yardbirds when Eric Clapton was in the group), "Hello There Universe" (covered by Merlin Factor), "How Much Truth" (recorded by Tracy Nelson), "Top 40" (covered by Robert Palmer) and "If You Only Knew" (covered by Van Morrison). Allison also covers a wealth of tunes written by other songwriters, including Duke Ellington's "I Ain't Got Nothing But the Blues," John D. Loudermilk's "You Call It Jogging," New Orleans pianist Richard M. Jones' "Trouble In Mind," two gems by blues bassist Willie Dixon ("Seventh Son" and "I Love the Life I Live"), and a show-stopping bluesy take on the sunny tune "You Are My Sunshine," rendered in a minor key.

The Mississippi-born Allison celebrated his 50th anniversary of performing last year. His first gig was playing six nights a week at a club in Lake Charles, Louisiana in 1950. Influenced by a range of jazz musicians including Nat Cole, Bud Powell, John Lewis and Al Haig, Allison moved to New York in 1956 and found work in the bands of such jazz artists as Stan Getz, Zoot Sims and Gerry Mulligan before launching his own trio in the late '50s. With swinging piano lines reminiscent of Lester Young's saxophone style and down-home lyrics teeming with irony and wisdom, Allison recorded his cabaret-from-the-



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backwoods brand of folk jazz for several major labels. (For more background information on Allison, consult the biography on his life, *One Man's Blues* by Patti Jones.)

As for his piano playing, Allison says that once he began to focus on singing his keyboard prowess began to be overlooked. "Yeah, in the '50s I was known as a jazz pianist. Today the musicians I work with call me a secret piano player." Allison, who opens *The Mose Chronicles* with a rollicking seven-minute instrumental excursion with his trio, laughs when talking about his trademark rolling/tumbling/bouncing pianistic jaunts: "My style is the result of playing 50 years with no technique. I never studied the instrument beyond elementary school, so I'm not trained. But I do have a great feeling of the time, which to me is the basic, most essential but most overlooked element of jazz."

Regarding his lyrics, Allison says, "People call me a cynic, but really my songs are almost always jokes. The idea of the ironic couplet appeals to me. That's from my childhood in Mississippi, where I also learned the value of exaggeration and understatement. People try to take my songs too literally when all I'm doing is playing around with implied satirical notions."

A few years ago Allison was asked in an interview how he wrote songs. He replied, "Most of them start with a phrase I hear or read in the newspaper. That's what happened with 'Everybody's Cryin' Mercy,' but no one knows the meaning of the word.' That became a trigger to get me thinking on a more universal level." As for his personal favorites, Allison singled out "Hello There Universe," calling it his hymn: "We don't know what the universe has in mind yet. So it's hello, universe? That's the main question. If the universe knows what it's doing, then everything's okay. If it doesn't, we're all in trouble."

One of Allison's favorite songwriters for material to cover is Willie Dixon. "Singing one of Willie's songs is like taking a bath in the primal stream." As for the *Loudermilk* number with its jocular chorus line, "You call it jogging, I call it running around," Allison notes that he loves singing it because audience members always laugh. "Of course, the first time I played it in Sweden, no one cracked up because the people didn't understand the meaning of the saying. The nightclub owner had to explain it to the crowd."

Given his huge repertoire of songs, Allison says that these days he only plays live those tunes that still have relevance. "I write all my songs with the intention of lasting. But some are no longer pertinent to me, such as my cottonsack songs that were inspired by growing up in the rural South. I've been told that my other songs are really holding up. I hope they're right."

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