

P.J. Proby Biography

The life of James Marcus Smith began on November 6th 1938 at Herman Hospital in Houston, Texas (USA)...

As a young boy, Jim, like many others was influenced by black Negro musicians and their music. In spite of the racism that ruled heavily in the Southern States, he listened to all the Baptist Gospel singers around his area on Sundays and sang along with them. In those days nearly everybody in the South used to sing in church. As a three year old his Uncle Dan took him to a recording booth at the nearby fairground and recorded him singing his first ever song called "Roll Out The Barrel".

Jim met and worked with Tommy Sands and Elvis Presley, George Jones, Tennessee Ernie Ford, The Collins Kids and many others while growing up in Houston at places like The Hitching Post, The Eagles Hall, The South Maine Olde Spanish Trail for the leading D.J.s at the time, Cliffie Stone & Biff Collie. Still he had to wait for fame as he had promised his parents that he would finish high school before pursuing fame and fortune. He had already been attending San Marcos Military Academy, in San Marcos, Texas since he was 9 years old and in the summer for three months in 1953, 1954 en 1955 he studied at the Culver Naval Academy in South Bend, Indiana. He graduated in 1957 from Western Military in Alton, Illinois. After this he made his way to Hollywood.

On arriving in Hollywood he contacted his old friend Tommy Sands who suggested he go and see the local leading vocal coach Lillian Goodman who trained all the Hollywood greats. She introduced Jim to song writing Oscar winner Ray Gilbert. Ray took Jim to the big agents Gaby Lutz, Heller and Lobe who had such names as Liberace, Kay Starr, Frankie Laine and many other famous names on their books. Jim was signed up and was named "Jett Powers" as they thought that "Jim Smith" was too ordinary. Jim then met up with a girl named Sharon Sheeley who had written a big hit for Ricky Nelson called "Poor Little Fool" and at the time was going with Eddie Cochran. They all became the closest of friends. Jett by now was going with Sharon's friend Dottie Harmony and began writing with Sharon, Dottie, Jackie De Shannon, Dick Glasser, Baker Knight, The Burnette Brothers, Johnny and Dorsey and many others around at the time.

At the same time Jim was introduced to Kim Fowley who used him in his new group The Hollywood Argyles who scored a big hit with the 1960 "Alley Oop". Sharon later took him to Liberty Records where they signed him to a song writing and singing contract after Sharon changed his name yet again to P.J. Proby after a boy she had dated before going with Eddie Cochran when in Junior High School. On that day a first step to world wide fame was taken.

In 1961 Liberty released the first P.J. Proby single "Try To Forget Her" and "There Stands The One" produced by Dick Glasser with vocal backing by the Johnny Mann singers. Glen Campbell on guitar, Leon Russell on keyboards, David Gates on bass, Hal Blane on drums plus a string section. Proby kept busy in the studios as a session

singer for such artists as BB King, Johnny Cash, Little Richard and Elvis Presley. But his burning desire was still to have a successful career as a solo singer.

In 1962, Sharon Sheeley and Jackie de Shannon composed a number and gave it to Proby titled "The Other Side of Town" which was coupled with "Watch Me Walk Away" composed by their friend and producer Dick Glasser ("Dickie" to Sharon and Jackie). The production was very good but the company did not do any promotion work on it for Proby. This was a pattern to be repeated until P.J. started his recording career in England. It was Sharon and Jackie who introduced Proby to the talented and charismatic producer Jack Good.

In late 1963 Jack Good travelled back to England at the request of Brian Epstein to produce the first T.V. special to be screened worldwide of the fast rising group "The Beatles". The programme was to be called "Around The Beatles", with a few newcomers at the time, Cilla Black, Long John Baldry (more famous now for discovering Elton John and Rod Stewart) and a little black girl named Millie. Jack took with him some demo tapes of P.J. which impressed Epstein and the "Boys", enough to have Jack send for him in Hollywood. Through the satellite Telstar the show was broadcast all over the world giving millions of people the chance to get to know P.J. Proby. That breakthrough led to Proby's arrangement of the old 1939 Dick Haymes ballad "Hold Me" which P.J. turned into an up tempo rocker reaching the number three spot in the British charts. This success was followed by yet another transformed oldie from the same period titled "Together" also in the same style which reached number eight in the charts, Both singles as did all of Proby releases charted high in the American Billboard charts. These first singles were released in Europe on the Decca Label; However P.J. was still under contract to Liberty Records USA, who won a successful court action against Decca in their bid to get Proby back.

In 1964 Liberty Records issued the first Proby L.P. in Britain simply titled "I am P.J. Proby" containing all the music that P.J. and Charles Blackwell had put together for Decca. Once again Liberty Records gave neither the single nor the album any P.R. work or big marketing campaign. P.J. was beginning to realise that if he was to make things happen, it was going to all be down to him and himself alone. He would have to sell himself by himself and so he did.

"P.J. Proby in Town" respectively arranged and produced by Johnny Spence, Johnny Scott and Ron Richards with songs by Les Reed and Barry Mason gave Proby more than enough opportunity to present his wide range of abilities. Highlighted on this album were such numbers as "I Will" (written by Dick Glasser for his sister), "My Prayer", "To Make A Big Man Cry", "What Kind Of Fool Am I" and P.J.'s favourite "If I Loved You" from his favourite musical "Carousel". Jim has always yearned to play Billy Bigelow since watching one of his idols Gordon MacRae in the part.

P.J. was known for his exhausting visual stage performances. It was one of these performances on January 29th. 1965 at Fairfield hall, Croydon in London that Proby who was the first male ever to wear his hair in a pony tail in the last century at least, burst out of his skin tight velvet bellbottoms doing his act based on the coloured shows he had been used to attending in the rougher areas of Downtown L.A.

He explained to the frantic press that the ripped clothing was an accident due to the weak velvet material, but when two days later the same thing again happened, the audiences were wild with excitement, as they had never witnessed such body movement onstage nor such provocative mood and they loved him. However the British systems that govern the music scene were less enthusiastic. Jim was banned from all theatres in Great Britain and not allowed to perform his recordings on the B.B.C. or A.T.V. television stations.

By February 24th Proby was unable to perform almost anywhere although he was headline news in every newspaper and paparazzi. As a counter attack to this total boycott on P.J., Liberty released a single on February 27th. The recording was "I Apologise". This was with no promotion or personal appearances permitted, yet it still reached number 11 in the charts with no radio or television promotion. Proby continued his recordings despite the door being slammed on him by the industry. In November 1965, he once again proved to his loyal fans that the "magic" was never to leave him. His recording of "Maria" from "West Side Story" was regarded along with "Somewhere" as two of the best and most exciting versions ever and are still the two of his most requested songs.

From the 70's onwards Jim appeared in concert throughout the world moving also into theatre appearances in many highly successful productions and musicals. Jack Good cast P.J. as Cassio in the Rock Musical "Catch my Soul" (an adaptation of Shakespeare's "Othello"). Other successful staging followed in particular the lead role in the musical "Elvis" that played London's West End in 1977 and for which he accepted on behalf of the play the Evening Standard Award for best production of the year. Other starring roles on stage that followed were in the Roy Orbison story "Only The Lonely" and life story of Jack Good "Good Rockin Tonight" as well as a return to the musical "Elvis".

During the early 90's P.J. got a call from some old friends, Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey, asking him to join them on a world tour of the production Pete wrote and filmed around the same time he put together "Tommy", called "Quadrophenia" in which they wanted P.J. to play "The Godfather". After a huge success with "The Who" and the Quadrophenia Tour", P.J. recorded the "Legend" album for EMI produced by another friend Marc Almond which Jim regards as some of the best work he has ever done with contemporary music. The 1997 comeback album was poorly promoted and what copies had been pressed quickly sold out from stores (EMI did however re-issue this album on CD format in 2006). Since the new millennium, Proby has found a renewed interest in his recording career and to the delight of his fans has independently released a series of new studio albums and live concert DVDs. In November 2008, the legend celebrates his 70th birthday and to mark this special occasion his former record label Liberty/EMI has released "The Best of the EMI Years 1961-1972".

To say P.J. Proby is talented is an understatement. He's a giant who has made an indelible impression upon the music and the entertainment industry. There is no dispute that P.J. Proby is one of the most exciting and talented performers of our time.

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