

Where Nice, Naughty Meet

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They buried Anna Jane Bradley on a recent Saturday morning at New Jericho Missionary Baptist of Doddsville, a church with her name on its cornerstone. She was 89.

They all sang "Amazing Grace" and "Precious Lord." Then Anna Jane's grandson, Fruteland Jackson, sang solo "When The Pearly Gates Unfold."

The same day, in the afternoon, Fruteland sang the song again, this time at Clarksdale's Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival. Once more he sang it for his grandmother, a woman who disliked the blues, who called it the "Devil's music."

"You better quit playing that sinful music," the old woman would say. "Play me a church song."

So he does. On Saturday afternoon, beneath a perfect Delta sky and a defunct grain elevator, by the tracks with tall grass between them, Fruteland obeys. And with his capable hands on a resonator guitar, that old church song dedicated to his dead grandmother becomes the blues.

Fruteland was born in Sunflower County 44 years ago. But his family, like so many other black families in the Delta, migrated North. He grew up in Eastside Chicago, knowing Jim Crow and cotton fields secondhand, through the tales his folks told. That's why when he describes his acoustic blues style, he qualifies it. He calls it the "baby-boomer blues," a music that uses the simple cadence of traditional Blues but more modern lyrics.

"I didn't know Jim Crow," he says, "and I wasn't run over by a bus."

Fruteland, now living in St. Louis, is dedicated to keeping the blues alive. He even won an award for that.

But Fruteland is honest. He acknowledges the difference between living the blues and playing the blues, as anyone with an e-mail address and a business card should.

Fruteland – his real name: "If I made up a name, would I pick 'Fruteland'?" – is only one of dozens of performers turning their souls inside out for a modest-sized, mostly local crowd at the annual festival, the best of all such blues festivals. There are no beautiful people, only a few Memphis day-trippers. These are good country folk, with sweet manners, smiles on their faces and Crown Royal in a back pocket. The air smells of barbecue and hot tamales and Delta dust, a luscious combination.

Everyone is eager to hear headliner Ike Turner, performing in his hometown for the first time in 30 years. The Ikettes, four women with gold jumpsuits painted onto ample bodies, warm up a crowd that doesn't need warming up on an August night. They prance and paw and talk trashy, finally break into "Proud Mary." Ike joins them with his famous bass "rolling."

But somehow, Ike's segment, with its golden-thighed women and flashiness, is anti-climactic. For these people have a couple of days, -some, a lifetime- of primal poetry under their belts. Flash is superfluous.

Honest Fruteland with his sweet voice and crisp new overalls is better. He understands the intersection of naughty and nice.

"I played my music for my grandmother the first time about a year ago," he says. "I understood why she was uncomfortable with the blues. A lot of blues was words laid across the tunes of old church songs. And those words were about drinking and women and sinning. But I know, too, she was quietly proud of me."