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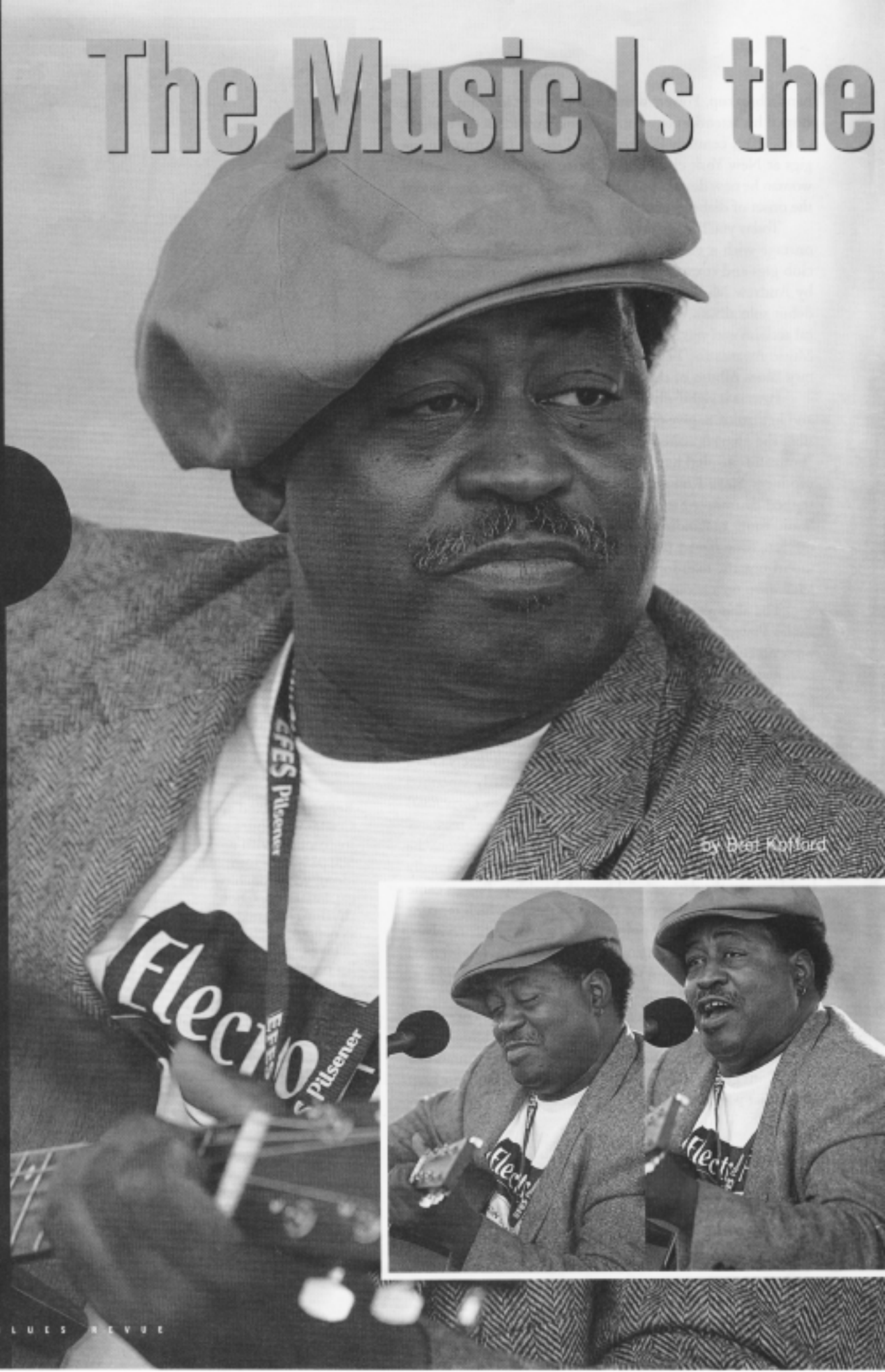
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The Music Is the



by Bret Kofford



It took moving back to his childhood home

of Mississippi — and having his business destroyed by a hurricane — for the blues to consume Fruteland Jackson.

As a young man living in Chicago, Jackson was more interested in soul and R&B music — “love songs, dance music, the Temptations, the Main Ingredient, the Motown sound,” he says.

“I also was into jazz as a teenager, so I always loved music,” says Jackson, who grew up traveling back and forth between Chicago and Mississippi. “Blues was OK, but it was my mommy and daddy’s music. I knew about it, but it wasn’t a big deal.”

Jackson, whose first name came from a friend of his father (he once recorded a humorous song called “Is That Your Real Name?” that focused on the jokes he’s endured regarding his unusual moniker), returned to Mississippi to start a shrimp business. There he felt an attraction to blues, the music his relatives had played as he was growing up. Hearing blues historian Dr. William Ferris play traditional forms of the genre on the radio in Mississippi “stung me,” he says. “I had heard blues all of my life, but that’s when it hit me hard. It just took me over.”

In 1985, Hurricane Elena hit Jackson even harder and wiped out his Biloxi-based business. He returned to Chicago and took a job building missiles with McDonnell Douglas, only to be laid off in 1991. He was relieved by that turn of events, he says, because it allowed him to pursue his passion.

“When the layoffs happened, I was happy,” Jackson says. “My life was ruled by bells. They told me what to do. ‘Blues 2.0’ [the opening track to Jackson’s 2003 album of the same name]

grew out of that, going to work every day and [having] a bell tell me when to eat, when to go home.”

By that time, Jackson had realized that his life wasn’t fulfilled by a nine-to-five job. “I just dived into blues, and I’ve been moving forward ever since. I call [factory work] the last plantation job I ever had,” he says.

After raising a family and working as a private investigator and a human rights investigator for the state of Illinois, Jackson settled into a career of playing and teaching about blues. He has since released a handful of albums, the latest of which is due in March

on Electro-Fi Records and was still untitled at press time. Like his earlier recordings, which have featured field hollers, calypso-tinged numbers, Cab Calloway raveups, and even minstrel songs, the new album touches on various genres. One standout cut is “Blues Over Baghdad,” a protest song about the war in Iraq that features a viola and a muted trumpet.

Jackson says he didn’t set out to write something overtly political with “Blues Over Baghdad,” despite lyrics about the plight of soldiers: “You will learn that life ain’t fair/When you see the rockets’ red glare.”

“I didn’t want it to be [protest music],” Jackson says of the song. “I just called it observational. But Andrew [Galloway, who owns the Toronto-based Electro-Fi label] says, ‘Well, it’s still a protest song.’”

The song was inspired by the faces of those who had died in the war, Jackson says. “What caused it was watching public television every night and seeing these silent moments with these young men, with their ears sticking out from their heads and looking green — 18, 19 years old. I said, *Who’s going to speak for them?* They’re young enough to buy into a lot of things, and there they are.”

Jackson hasn’t seen as much activism with this war as occurred during Vietnam. “The baby boomers, the old soldiers, we did get out there (to protest the current war), but our feet hurt. We’ve got to go to work tomorrow. It just seems like everybody’s intimidated right now, and they don’t really know what to do. Regardless of the politics, which I was trying to stay away from, I just wanted to look at war and what is it good for.”

Another highlight of the new album is an a cappella version of Keith B. Brown’s “Tell Me What You Say.” “Sometimes when you hear the blues,” says Jackson, “there is no music. It’s not like B.B. King is outside your window hitting some licks while you’re getting your heart torn out. It’s like the old field holler.”

Jackson also recorded a jaunty, jangling, robust version of “You Are My Sunshine,” a song he’s long performed live. “The first time I heard it, it was by Big Jack Johnson in a club in Fort Lauderdale,” Jackson says. “I thought it was cool that he would come from that direction. He started off doing the version that everybody knows, and he made it more and more bluesy. Then he took the song over completely.”

Jackson added the song to his live repertoire as a transitional piece. “Sometimes when I’m coming out of a heavy song, say ‘Blues Over Baghdad,’ I’ll strike up ‘You Are My Sunshine’ to change the atmosphere, to reboot the computer. It prepares me to go in a different direction.”



Two things you won't find in Jackson's music are extended guitar solos and vocal histrionics. "I'm sure I did some of that when I was younger, when I was trying to get my sea legs and figure out exactly where I was," he says. "As I've grown older, I've concluded that less is more. I call myself a brethren of the wood, so I stand on the shoulders of a lot of men where the blues was not a 'festival.' And since I'm a solo player, it's difficult for me to do five- and 10-minute solos, because someone has to hold the line down. It's hard to create that with just a foot stomp or playing a little harmonica."

And Jackson's decision to go it alone, to play solo acoustic guitar in a blues landscape where bands dominate? "I believe you have to strike a balance between just pure entertainment and delivering messages," he says. "In the acoustic format we can certainly deliver the message. Sometimes the only time I can feel a message from a band is when they do a slow-burn blues. When it's triple pull-offs and facial contortions, it's more [about] performing [than about] blues."

Jackson, 53, believes excessive showmanship can often be attributed to youthful exuberance. "In the blues, you don't vintage until you get on the other side of 50. What happens with a lot of young players is that they don't have the life experience for older people to believe. You're 24 years old. How are you going to talk to me about my 'woman'? You just left your mother's house."

Jackson writes or co-writes most of what he records, but he does mix in songs by others. "Being a solo player, I worry about becoming inbred," he says. "I tend to mix a few things up from other people so that it has a freshness."

And don't think Jackson's one-man-band status means he won't accept help in the studio. He has frequently relied upon Canadian multi-instrumentalist Chris Whiteley, who appeared on Jackson's *Blues 2.0* and who plays the haunting muted trumpet on the new album's "Blues Over Baghdad."

"Producers like [Whiteley] because it keeps things cheaper; you have one guy who can play everything," Jackson says. "I like him because he can think on his feet. I'm open for ideas. It's not like, *This is my show, and here's how it's going to be.*"

As for Galloway, he's happy to have Jackson on his label. "I think Fruteland is one of the leading acoustic blues artists of his generation," says the record-company owner. "He arrived on the scene at roughly the same time as Alvin Youngblood Hart, Guy Davis, Corey Harris, and Keb' Mo', and it's important to note the lasting contribution of that group of African-American artists. They not only paid tribute to their roots but basically reinvented the acoustic blues genre for a whole new generation. I've never known an artist who can communicate with an audience on the level that Fruteland can, and I've seen him work some pretty tough rooms."

Jackson completed a 19-day tour of England in 2006 and plans to tour again in support of his new album. He also spends a considerable portion of his time teaching about blues. This year alone, the Blues in the Schools program has taken Jackson, who currently lives in Crown Point, Indiana, to locations ranging from Kentucky to Saskatchewan. When teaching, he tries to set up a club date in the same town. And he sells his blues instructional book and DVD during appearances.

Jackson considers himself a storyteller. For Blues in the Schools, his stories involve blues-related themes. "Where there are obstacles to overcome, I believe there's blues in there somewhere," he says. He appears before approximately 50,000 people a year through Blues in the Schools. "We can't make 'em like it, but we can expose 'em to it," he says. "Without that, it would have been difficult for me, because there aren't that many acoustic venues to play."

He also calls himself a "blues activist." In other words, says Jackson, "I think the blues can heal you. I think it has an effect on the psychic state and emotional health. It's a good way to vent, so when I go into Blues in the Schools programs, which create a deeper appreciation and a greater awareness of the music, I pitch it as something to have if you get stressed out. You can't listen to the blues and make bombs. They don't have mosh pits at blues festivals."

To further illustrate his point, Jackson points out that the blues once served as an emotional outlet for an entire population. "The only thing people had at the turn of the century — especially many blacks in the '20s and '30s — was a song," he says. "Just to be able to do a field holler and sing about what's going on, it was a poor man's psychologist. It helped him heal."

In his lectures, Jackson likes to show audiences how blues was the jumping-off point for other styles of modern popular music. "There's a point in my lecture where I do the tree," he says. "I do country, and I do rhythm and blues, which is blues mixed with jazz, and I show them how we get the mix. I take a Jimmy Reed shuffle and speed it up, and then I sing a rock 'n' roll song, and they can see. Even the alternative boys, I'll show them a shuffle and then I'll do half a shuffle, which is a power chord, and I'll say, 'Just wear your sister's clothes and act like you've got an attitude.'"

There was a time, he recalls, when his grandmother wanted the young Fruteland to grow up to be a minister. "Preachers and teachers were about all they produced in Mississippi. Otherwise you were a sharecropper," he says. Later in life, having spent time spreading the gospel of the blues, Jackson had a conversation with his grandmother.

"I told her I had my own pulpit, and in a way I am getting the word out. I'm just trying to provide a type of music that has holistic powers. It can provide repose for the soul and serenity for the troubled mind," he says. "To me, that's my contribution to the world." ❧

Discography

- Being Free* (1993, cassette only) IT Records 001
Fruteland Jackson Plays Robert Johnson and Others (1994, cassette only) IT Records 002
Fruteland Jackson ... Is All I Crave (1996) IT Records 003
I Claim Nothing but the Blues (2000) Electro-Fi 3364
Blues 2.0 (2003) Electro-Fi 3380
title TBA (2007) Electro-Fi 3401