

# LICKS

## Raw & Beautiful; The Power of Blues

BY SHERRY LUCA

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) --- Primitive blues, country blues, front porch blues -- all names for Delta blues, the raw, plaintive songs of that flat and fertile triangle of Mississippi black land.

Those are the native notes bluesman James "Son" Thomas has just secured on record -- a personal album that, for the first time, can actually be called his. The record is named, naturally, "Gateway to the Delta."

"Well, my mind runs that way," says the thin, sly bluesman of the title.

Thomas is a native of Eden, a patch of a town just north of Yazoo City on Highway 49 where he lived and worked, hard, for more than half his 61 years.

There, with funding from the Mississippi Arts Commission and Rust College in Holly Springs, Thomas felt the memories and sang the songs -- front porch blues, literally, into a microphone for half the cuts on the album. The rest were recorded at Rust College in Holly Springs.

"I went to some of the places where I had such hard times," Thomas says of the ironically named Eden. "I wanted to record on some of the land where I was working."

The result is a music documentary -- songs that buzz with the heat, humidity and harshness of a sharecropper's life in the Delta. These are dressed-down blues -- ornamented only by the mood and skill of the player, not the voltage of his equipment.

"I makes up my own music," Thomas said. "I don't write music, and I don't play out of no book. I do my own recording -- making my own notes."

Authenticity was the goal that led the album's recording party "back in the hills" of Eden, the musician said, to the porch on the log cabin of James and Maggie Rouster, old friends of Thomas'.

"We wanted Son to have a sense of place," said Sylvester W. Oliver Jr., the album's executive producer. Oliver, a practicing ethnomusicologist, is director of institutional

advancement at Rust College.

"The music scene was in that area --- with his friends, where he grew up, where he farmed. This wasn't just an insensitive, plastic kind of production. It was one (in which) he could actually relate to the days, the times, the place . . . the events that allowed the music fervor within him to be developed," Oliver said.

"That live portion in Eden, I think, is a very significant recording event. It's outside, on a front porch and you can hear the crickets screaming, the bird flying by, the dog barking here and there. The goal was to try to catch it in a natural setting. I think we succeeded in doing just that," Oliver said.

Thomas is co-producer of "Gateway to the Delta," along with Walter Liniger, a research associate at the Blues Archives, a branch of the J.D. Williams Library at Ole Miss. Liniger provides harmonica accompaniment for Thomas on half the songs on the album. He frequently accompanies Thomas in live performances as well. Rust College has its own record label, Rustron Records and music publishing company, Rустco, both established to help preserve folk traditions of Mississippi and the Mid-South. Oliver said, "Gateway to the Delta" is the first blues album for Rustron, which usually concentrates on gospel recordings. The album was released Aug. 1.

"Gateway to the Delta" features 11 songs, some of them Thomas' own and others by Elmore James and Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup -- "Elvis Presley recorded some of his songs and made all the money. He never made none," Thomas said. It's a typical pattern of commercialization of the blues -- from source to someone else's success.

The Mississippi Arts Commission Individual Artist Grant of \$5,000 for the album's production, and the more than \$5,000 provided by Rust College, gave Thomas artistic control over this production.

"This is the first time that Son Thomas actually had artistic control over his music. Most of the other records, he didn't even know he made," Liniger said, referring to import records and



blues anthologies.

"This one, he was involved from the very first step. It was a very pain-staking experience for him . . . His proverb is, don't make your move too soon."

"I love it," Thomas said, satisfied with the freedom to control his work.

"Gateway to the Delta" has been two years in production, delayed by personal stresses on the musician, and a January 1987 accident in which he was severely burned.

The accident raised doubts whether the project could be completed, Oliver said. "With our nourishing -- calling him up, supporting him spiritually -- we nourished him back to good mental health."

Thomas said, "I'm doing a whole lot better than I thought I'd be doing. I would love to thank all the people who helped me when I was in the hospital -- some I didn't even know." About his playing, the bluesman said, "Well, I can do pretty good . . . but I never brag."

"Gateway to the Delta" represents a significant collaboration of black scholars and artists to help preserve their folk music.

Rust, an historically black private college, did the recording. Jerry W. Ward Jr., a professor of English at Tougaloo College, wrote the liner notes for Thomas' album, praising Thomas' artistry with strong and vivid

prose.

"The black community is able to reclaim its own musical heritage," Liniger says of the album. "Son has become an icon; he's an artifact."

Oliver estimated that 90 percent of interpretations and academic studies of blues music are done from a white perspective.

"I think this could be another opportunity for blacks to begin to actually have their own perspective of the music shared with people all over," he said.

"Not only is it significant, it makes a statement regarding the capability of blacks in the state to make a valuable contribution to the preservation of Mississippi culture. We've been doing it through our festivals, and through working with artists to get them jobs for their music. This opens up another avenue for us in trying to preserve the folk heritage."

Rust College is the album's distributor. "Gateway to the Delta" is not available on cassette now, but may be in the future, Oliver said.

Record stores or individuals who would like to order "Gateway to the Delta" should write to Rustron Records or James "Son" Thomas; Rust College; 150 E. Rust Ave.; Holly Springs, MS 38635. Albums are \$8, plus \$2 for shipping.

Albums also can be purchased from Thomas at his live performances, for \$11 each.

### Chamber Music Concert

Davidson, NC - A chamber music concert of music for flute and strings is scheduled for September 2 at Davidson College.

Music professor Yvonne Kendall leads a group of musicians in a program that begins at 8:15 p.m. in Hodson Hall in the Cunningham Fine Arts Building. The concert will include "Quartet" by Amadeus Mozart and "Quintet" by modern American composer Amy Beach. The concert is free and sponsored by the Department of Music.

For more information, call 704-892-2357, weekdays 8:30 a.m. - 1 p.m. and 2-5 p.m.

Kendall has a master's degree in flute from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She is joined by local musicians and the concert-mater of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra, violinist Ronald Mutchnik, who also has a degree from the New England Conservatory in violin.

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## Elaine Byrd Is A Custom Lady In Her Creations

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struct figurines is just one part of the picture. Ms. Byrd is masterful with making cushions and draperies. Her ideas come from her natural curiosity. She finds herself asking the question of herself, "What if?" Then when the notion hits her, she's off on a creative binge to satisfy her personal challenges.

She sees herself helping a few special people. "I am looking for a few good customers," says Byrd. "If a one-of-a-kind item is on the agenda then I can handle that very well." Byrd plans to offer a complete line of services to her clients. Byrd says, "Everything to do with home furnishings will be on the agenda. We're talking every thing that comes under home decorating and furnishing." Byrd's special skill seems to be the use of an airbrush to create the smooth finishes of her work with wood. When asked how she came to be so inclined, Byrd answers simply that, "It was just a matter of being curious about how this was done. I really wanted to know if I could do this."

Byrd went further than most men would go to test herself. Although she has never had any training in brick masonry, she has achieved a working knowledge of this craft as well. Her first work in this medium was a job she did for her mother. Byrd took out a brick wall to install a window.

This woman likes to work hard, and obviously hard work agrees with her. Byrd also does airbrush paintings. With so much to aspire to Byrd has plenty to be preoccupied with.

With an avid interest in her endeavors she continues to make the unusual her playthings.

Well, the proof is in the pudding. A look at the accompanying photographs gives only a partial idea of her ability. She



Ms. Byrd shows off her bark scale alligator with a smaller version riding on the topside. Photo: TONY WHITE

works out of her home, which she shares with her twelve-year old daughter, Kisha. Some would call her work a

craft, others would term it simply whimsy, but Elaine Byrd sees in her efforts the furnishings of the future.

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