

CHRIS COTTON

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Chris Cotton has made a career out of wandering. When the West Coast native (California born, he attended college in Washington State) decided to see the world, he started by hitching rides, working short-term jobs, and sleeping on empty rooftops and in crowded squats. After a sojourn in Colorado, Cotton decided to head south, catching rides on freight trains for a month 'til he eventually landed in New Orleans. Even in the Big Easy, Cotton refused to settle down, taking a job as a deckhand on an offshore oilrig.

The one constant in Cotton's life has been music. He was raised by a trio of women: his mother, an aunt, and his grandmother, who plied him with piano lessons at an early age. He resisted, and instead begged his aunt for \$25 to buy an electric guitar. She acquiesced, and Cotton – just ten years old at the time – was soon churning out chords on the beat-up instrument.

Although Cotton made the typical teenaged progression with music – experimenting with rock'n'roll and metal – he gravitated toward the blues after a chance encounter with a borrowed Muddy Waters album. The scratchy grooves reminded him of the dozens of concerts his stepfather had taken him to – B.B. King, Buddy Guy, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and more – in the Bay Area when he was just a kid, and, as unlikely as it might seem, an inspired Cotton fell into the role of itinerant bluesman.

Picture a young white kid, guitar strapped around his neck, playing for change in New Orleans' Jackson Square. Imagine the gritty sounds coming from an impromptu combo of gitbox, washboard, and stand-up bass. Throw in a percussive banjo lick, a punctuating horn blast, and the wail of a harmonica lament. This was Cotton's proving ground: no four walls, or a stage, just the humid streets of New Orleans. Cotton listened as much as he played, learning the Piedmont style of picking ("playing the bass line and the melody concurrently and all the chords in between – all at the same time!" he explains) from older, more talented musicians.

Cotton was a quick study, and his energetic fretwork breathed new life into the pre-war Piedmont blues. His heroes, guitarists like Big Bill Broonzy, Reverend Gary Davis, and Blind Willie McTell, hadn't walked the earth for many decades, yet Cotton was determined to decipher their ancient secrets. Cotton also channeled the jug band style used by the Mississippi Sheiks and the Depression-era hoedown technique favored by the Skillet Lickers, studied early country musicians like Jimmy Rodgers and Hank Williams, Sr., and combined their primitive, frenetic methods into a singular, rootsy approach. His own compositions, vigorous footstompers like "Morgan City, Mississippi," and "I Watched the Devil Die," manage to walk a traditional path while remaining true to his own youthful spirit, passion, and energy.

After further honing his craft, Cotton returned home to California, where he formed his first band, The Blue Eyed Devils, with harmonica player Brendan Wheatley. Rounding out the group with a fiddle player, bass man, and drummer, Cotton and Wheatley played more than six hundred shows and recorded two original albums under The Blue Eyed Devils moniker.

Then, in early 2004, Cotton decided to go it solo once more. After woodshedding at home, he ventured south to Clarksdale, Mississippi to record his solo debut at Jimbo Mathus' Delta Recording Studio. Mathus, an alumnus of the Squirrel Nut Zippers, Buddy Guy's band, and his own Knockdown Society, was an easy choice for producer: the Mississippi-via North Carolina guitarist is well-versed in Cotton's style of blues, and, in 2003, he cut The Blue Eyed Devils' second album, *The Legend of Shorty Brown*. Plus, Delta Recording had the necessary vintage equipment on hand: RCA ribbon mics and '50s era amplifiers, set up with plenty of space for guest musicians like Clarksdale native Big Jack Johnson, who dropped in to play on a few tunes.

Like most good blues records, Cotton's upcoming Yellow Dog Records debut sounds like a house party caught on tape – world-weary men effortlessly strumming their guitars and bass, while passing around a jug of whiskey for sustenance. The barrelhouse piano, is, of course, pushed up against one wall; Cotton's gravelly voice reigns over the debauchery. The scene is timeless – harkening back to the days when the distinction between blues and country was hopelessly blurred. It's an aural portrait that owes a debt to Southern bluesmen and Americana pioneers alike.

Meet Chris Cotton, rising star on the American roots scene. His solo debut, *I Watched The Devil Die*, will be released on Yellow Dog Records in March 2005. Until then, look for Cotton at festival and club dates from coast to coast.

"Chris Cotton's deep Delta drawl and expertly picked acoustic guitar lines..."
—*San Francisco Bay Guardian*

"..borders on brilliance, albeit of a very ragged sort."
—*Blues on Stage*

"..holds hope for the future of the blues as a genre. Yeah, I think its THAT good."
—*King Biscuit Time Magazine*

"Riveting, rollicking and unique is more like it."
—*Southland Blues Magazine*

"nailed country blues cold..."
—*Cozmik Debris Magazine*

"Their music's as smooth as buttah with moonshine's bite and a serious kick."
—*San Francisco Examiner*

"Familiar territory to the blues, of course, but it's sung and played with a boisterous grit."
—*All Music Guide*

"a remarkable feel for the mournful howl of the blues..."
—*Atomic Magazine*

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