

# **THE CLAUDETTES INFERNAL PIANO PLOT...HATCHED!**

**IN-DEMAND PIANO MAN JOHNNY IGUANA AND OUT-OF-HIS-HEAD  
DRUMMER MICHAEL CASKEY CHURN OUT ONE KILLER INSTRUMENTAL  
AFTER ANOTHER ON THEIR INTREPID YELLOW DOG RECORDS DEBUT**

**First album by Claudette's notorious house band is a roller coaster through  
Otis Spann Chicago blues, Bobby Timmons soul-jazz, Vince Guaraldi impressionism  
and Minutemen punk energy**

## ***HOW THE CLAUDETTES CAME TO BE***

The piano-drums duo of **Johnny Iguana** and **Michael Caskey** didn't know what they were getting themselves into when they called a place called Claudette's Bar in 2010 looking for a gig in between Chicago and St. Louis. Not only did Claudette book them into her bar in Oglesby, IL (an hour and a half southwest of Chicago's South Side), but she made them her house band and put them on salary.

"Claudette's was just a dive, not a venue, but we played to packed rooms because it's where everyone within 30 miles went to drink," Johnny says. "And Claudette started paying us weekly, even when she decided to have karaoke on Saturday instead of live music. Maybe that's just what she thought a bar owner does — she really knew nothing about bands or music. These days, as a musician, if you've got a chance to have regular money coming in, you take it."

Johnny and Michael — named "**The Claudettes**" by Claudette — quickly won over the astonished locals with their epic sets of spasmodic instrumentals, deftly melding blues, jazz and deep soul with frenzied joy and infectious energy.

What Johnny and Michael didn't see coming was Claudette losing her lease in 2011 — but continuing to pay them weekly to be her house band at other bars. "She'd work out deals with the owners to set up her own portable bar inside their bar, and have us play while she sold drinks."

Claudette didn't even know that Johnny and Michael were both highly respected musicians in Chicago and around the world. Johnny had been in the Junior Wells band for years (starting at age 23) and had toured with Otis Rush and recorded with Carey Bell and Lil' Ed (he's since become the piano player in the Grammy-nominated *Chicago Blues: A Living History* featuring Billy Boy Arnold, John Primer, Lurrie Bell, Billy Branch and Carlos Johnson). He also co-founded the prog-pop band *oh my god*, whose organ-bass-drums madness was profiled on MTV and featured at SXSW, CMJ and festivals and clubs all around the U.S. and the UK throughout the 2000s.

And Michael, a *Downbeat* magazine award winner and five-time Detroit Music Awards recipient, had played with everyone from Koko Taylor to Chuck Mangione to Marvin Hamlisch to John Sinclair and is a member of Balkan fusion group Eastern Blok (recently, Michael toured Europe with Grammy nominees the Heritage Blues Orchestra).

“We talked a lot about parting ways with Claudette after she moved to Chicago and started embarrassing us here,” Michael says. “But, again, she was paying us every week and our shows started generating a lot of buzz because she’s always yelling at us in Korean and offering these really out-there drink specials.” Sometimes, Claudette sends her assistant Tatyana in her place — but still interrupts the set with phone calls to Tatyana.

Adding to the buzz is the fact that Claudette has started booking her band into places like Blockbuster Video and Staples (with YouTube footage to attest). While the band prefers legitimate Chicago venues like the Hideout, Claudette excoriates these as “dumps” and strongly favors chain stores. Despite this ongoing quarrel, The Claudettes are making waves in Chicago and beyond.

### ***THE CLAUDETTES SOUND***

The White Stripes and Black Keys rock the blues with a guitar attack. Like the Bad Plus, The Claudettes brandish a piano instead. But The Claudettes have created their own fanatical fusion of blues and soul-jazz — like Ray Charles on a punk kick. Imagine an amped-up piano hybrid of Otis Spann, Ray Charles and Mose Allison, joined by a jolly madman drummer and conducted in gonzo fashion by Raymond Scott. File under: post-burlesque? Neo-vaudeville? Cosmic cartoon music? You’ve never seen an instrumental duo like this.

Inspired by the ‘60s piano-drums blues recordings of Otis Spann & S.P. Leary, Johnny and Michael formed their duo — but a wealth of influences and passions entered their quickly evolving instrumental sound. Witness the one-two punch of “New Orleans Yard Sale” (with its stomping Crescent City sound) and “Infernal Piano Plot...HATCHED!” (a breakneck blues that *Looney Tunes* surely would have copped). Listen to Ray Charles go off the rails on “Deep Soul for High Society,” then stand back as all hell breaks loose on another dynamic double-shot of creative composition and wicked improvisation: “Motörhome/Land of Precisely Three Dances.”

“Since age 15, I’ve always had my own blues band, wearing ties and blazers and playing Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Ray Charles, Freddie King and Howlin’ Wolf — and also a rock band or punk band. I always tried to keep those two scenes and sounds separate,” Johnny says. “This time, I decided to cram it all together into one band: the thousands of hours listening to the blues masters and figuring it all out on the piano, the amphetamine rush of punk, the classical piano lessons — and, first and foremost, the desire to make something new and personally expressive out of it all.”

That’s why The Claudettes’ debut is peppered with time-capsule blues like album opener “Stumblin’ Home Satisfied” and their spin on Little Brother Montgomery’s classic “Tremblin’ Blues” — but also a schizoid trip like “Chin-Up Tango” and the positively Schumann-esque album closer “Do You See It Too?” There is something antique and nostalgic about The Claudettes, with shadows of Tin Pan Alley lurking in the chord changes... and yet something altogether fresh, alive, excited and exciting.

On stage, Claudette’s drink specials scroll across LED displays pinned to the band’s shirts (e.g. “\$5 domestics on Sunday with dinner and Champagne purchase,” “MONDAY NIGHT: DESIGNER NIGHT! You design shot, I design price”). Like everyone else here, Johnny and Michael live and work in the age of distraction in today’s America. How degrading it feels to hone one’s craft for years and tour the great festivals and concert halls of the world only to wind up competing with flashing beer promotions, 10-cent chicken-wing offers, sports on 20 TVs and a room full of faces illuminated by iPhones. And yet, The Claudettes still get out there and tear it up nightly, because they love this music — and because they will receive \$50 fines from Claudette if they are late or complain.