



J.J. MALONE

The Charles Banks / J.J. Malone Story
– History of the Bay Area’s Rhythm Rockers
by Opal Louis Nations

Jovial, conversational, erudite and charismatic are all words to describe the irrepressible character of Charles Banks, a scholar with a penchant for geography and history in his formative years who turned to music during midlife and wound up a poet and painter of some note. His fish series watercolors and acrylics was shown at galleries like the Jack Wold Fine Arts in Minneapolis. Described as a Bay Area blues bassist with “a heart of gold,” Charles is best remembered as long serving stalwart with the original Rhythm Rockers, originator of Blues on Tap, and regular feature in the Sonny Rhodes and Clarence “Guitar” Sims blues bands. A veteran of thirty-five years in the blues biz, Charles played alongside such greats as Lowell Fulson, Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson and Lightnin’ Hopkins.

Born December 4, 1938 in Taylorville, Illinois, southeast of Springfield, Charles grew up in a reasonably happy country environment. His mother, Grace Drasdale, played piano at the local Baptist church, and his father, a day laborer who held to stringent disciplinary standards, sang in the church choir. Charles had two younger brothers but no sisters. He always had a passion for music and began as a small child

blowing on tubes. He sang in church with his brothers, tested his skills on various harmonicas, and wound up plucking the ukulele (he once owned eleven of them.)

Few radio stations broadcast African American music in his general vicinity. Consequently he grew up listening to country music with a fondness for Gene Autrey. However, through friends, he was introduced to and grew affection for the music of Earl Bostic. In his junior high school band he excelled as marching drummer. At age fourteen he switched from ukulele to guitar which cost him the grand sum of twenty dollars. Grace's death in 1950 took a terrible toll on the lad. After his mother's demise he was forced into earning spare cash after school to help out the family. To escape the drudgery of manual work, he enlisted early in the Air Force and The Strategic Air Command. As he was short of eighteen years, his father had to sign for him on his enlistment papers. Charles was sent to Parker Air Force Base in California for basic training.

His skills on guitar at this point amounted to a few basic chords which he would try and hammer out unsparingly at the barracks. Luckily, his drill sergeant, who had expressed an interest in playing the instrument, had Charles show him a few changes. This, apparently, got Charles excused from the physical rigors of running obstacle courses during basic training. After a transfer back to Illinois to take in a few hydraulics courses, he was sent out to Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington to work on air tankers and B52s. Although Charles practiced playing his guitar frequently, he needed a few lessons to get him past the rudiments. Besides, his barrack mates were making all kinds of threats which climaxed when the irate fellas ganged up on him. They pointed up to Charles a guy across the flight line who could teach him a few tricks so that he would no longer torture them with his practice.

Charles took their advice. His new mentor turned out to be Jacob Malone, a.k.a. J.J. Malone. Charles seems to have told more than one account of how the two of them met up. In Andy Grigg's article published in his own magazine, *Westcoast Blues* (#14, January 1996), Charles stated he met up with J.J. just outside of Spokane in a town called Peaceful Valley.

J.J. was born in Decatur, Alabama near the Tennessee River and is three years older than Charles. When he was a child, J.J. bought an old, beat-up acoustic guitar from a second cousin for \$7.60. While recovering from an appendix operation in Decatur, he tried picking up a few rudimentary chords. His father, Charlie Malone, was quite an accomplished bottleneck guitarist himself and although a staunch Christian, would often show J.J. a few bluesy things on the instrument. But J.J. did not take to bottleneck very well. The thirteen-year-old J.J. stayed up late nights to master the instrument.

He also took up the Marine Band harmonica at this time. Every Christmas he would get a plastic model as a gift. J.J. picked and chopped cotton for awhile but was too shy to go out playing his guitar. Gradually he was seduced by family members to play at chitlin' parties, fish fries and family gatherings. By then he had mustered enough nerve to join a small band with Robert Lee White, as an extra. They already had a guitar player. J.J. was taken on mainly because he was the only musician to own a car. The group played R & B at teen parties and cousin Tommy Malone's Roadhouse at Pete's Corner with a little bit of J.J.'s country blues pickings thrown in. By now J.J. was playing with a clamp on Duaron pick-up.

At seventeen he moved to his brother's place in Indiana where at first he worked mules and chopped cotton. He then started working for the Veterans' Canteen Services as a busboy. Soon he was working two jobs when his older brother got him a job at a local hospital. J.J. was inspired by Cecil Gant and most of all the Chicago electric blues players. J.J. learned Spanish tuning from T.H. Riddick and almost immediately altered his style. Still rather shy, J.J. graduated from private practice sessions in his own back yard to working local live gigs with Robert Lee White every Sunday night. J.J. joined the Air Force in 1958 and was stationed, like Charles Banks, at Fairchild Air Force Base.

Just before J.J. and Charles hooked up, J.J. was venturing out to play clubs and had rented a piano on which he taught himself a few things. After the two met, Charles was given a bunk at J.J.'s place and would take guitar lessons from him on weekends. An unidentified pianist began coming around to J.J.'s house and the three started to jam together. The trio got a gig at a burger joint on the East side of Spokane called Virgil's. The threesome played with handmade, makeshift equipment like radio store amps built into suitcases and paste-board cabinets. Even then J.J. had adopted the Rhythm Rockers band name.

As the group built their reputation they bought better amps and added piano, bass and Junior Brown on drums. The Rhythm Rockers started playing radio stations and hospital wards where they signed kids' casts. To supplement his income, Charles started playing for strippers at Algie's Club. The Rhythm Rockers traveled to Lewiston, Idaho to play at a Nez Percé Indian tavern for Chief Joseph's tribe. Then when favorable word got around they were hired to play a country & western club. By now the lineup had evolved into Charles and J.J. on guitars, "Crying" Aaron Carroll from South Carolina, piano and vocals, and Calvin "Grandpa" Peale on drums. Peale replaced Junior Brown, as Brown was in the habit of falling asleep and slumping over his drum kit during gigs.

Then the Air Force shipped J.J. out to a base at Goose Bay, Labrador, and the band got reduced down to three pieces – Charles, Aaron and Calvin. By now Charles was also playing bass out of necessity. The trio went to play on the Idaho Indian reservations for several months. Whole tribal families, who had never seen black people before, came out to see them. Spokane was segregated at the time, and this affected the black and white servicemen at the Fairchild Air Force Base who often got into fist fights and set off race riots.

When J.J. returned to base he joined a band called "Tops in Blues." During J.J.'s final year in the Service, the group traversed the country, often winning talent shows and hob-knobbing with Hollywood movie stars. When Charles and J.J. left the service they decided to head for Southern California. They had had enough of Spokane's cold, icy winters. The group, made up of Charles, J.J., Aaron and Calvin, wound up auditioning at Johnny Otis's Eldo Hollywood studios where they were heard by Gary Paxton of the Hollywood Argyles. Paxton introduced the group to Little Julian Herrera, a.k.a. Ray Estrada, a Hungarian Jew. Little Julian had by now quit his group, the Tigers, who had recorded for Johnny Otis, and was going out as a solo. He desperately needed an outfit to back him on a gig he had in Tijuana, and the Rhythm Rockers were more than willing to foot the bill for thirty dollars, as they were almost penniless at the time.

The engagement lasted several weeks, after which the group, having been shorted by ten dollars' pay, headed for Aaron's sister's house in San Bernardino. They hooked up with T-Bone Walker's son, R.S. Rankin, and made an effort to get in touch with T-Bone for work but were unsuccessful. They left San Bernardino and headed for Fresno via Bakersfield. In Fresno they ran out of gas. Thinking that a healthy blues music scene thrived in Fresno (unlike Bakersfield which turned out to be too country), they were disappointed to find that the town was full of working Mexican bands. They were befriended by an elderly black man, Willie Wyatt, who fed them and took them to audition at the Seven Seas Mexican club. After they were rejected (the club already had a band), Wyatt took them to Rosa Lee's Chicken Shack, a black barbeque joint. They were hired on the spot to play rock & roll and R & B. Willie Wyatt was the father of Johnny Wyatt, lead and first tenor lead with Rochell and the Candles. The group put a few dance routines together, added J.J.'s mock T-Bone Walker guitar playing antics plus some dangerous-looking acrobatics and became an instant success. They rented rooms upstairs and were paid eight dollars a night apiece. The Rhythm Rockers popularity increased and they were able to get a professional agent who put them in swank, white Fresno clubs.

In late 1960 they were approached by an anxious tenor sax player by the name of C.A. Carr. He had played with Lionel Hampton when he was sixteen. C.A. also played with blues singer / pianist Mercy Dee Walton before joining saxophonist Kirk Kirkland's jazz group for four and a half years. C.A. played drums with Kirkland. One night he took with him and introduced a white guitarist friend of his by the name of Troyce Key.

Troyce was born in Louisiana back country in 1937, the son of a white sharecropper. His family was dirt poor. When his father at one time worked on the railroad, the family lived in a box-car. When Troyce was eight months old he and his parents, along with four neighboring families, left Louisiana and headed north for Oregon. It was like a scene out of the Grapes of Wrath. The Key family traveled in a beat-up Model A flatbed truck. The convoy wound up in Kerman, fifteen miles west of Fresno, where they scratched a living picking cotton and tying vines. Fresno had a C&W bar called the Do Drop Inn.

In the early 1950s, Troyce took in the music of the black Swing bands plus the popular white artists of the time. As a young teenager, inspired by his father (Verdell) who played guitar and sang like Jimmie Rogers in Floyd Hodges and his Texas Tornadoes, he moved to Mississippi and absorbed the country music and blues playing of local recording artists as well as those from Texas. Troyce also had a couple of uncles who played guitar. In Mississippi he contracted tuberculosis and spent a considerable amount of time in hospital which culminated in having a lung and some ribs removed. While recuperating at a sanatorium in the Sierras, he listened to donated rhythm and blues recordings played by staff for the benefit of the patients. He became hooked on the music and bought a guitar. One of the songs he heard at that time was Big Boy Grove's rendition of Lieber & Stoller's "I've gotta new car," a song he later recorded at the Blossom Studios in San Francisco in 1978 with the Rhythm Rockers (see Red Lightnin' LP 0028, 1980.)

Troyce befriended teenage patient R.C. Gardner, and the pair tried to copy the songs they were played. Discharged in 1956, Troyce and R.C. began gigging around

Fresno, playing R & B and Presley music. They guested on Al Radka's House Party, a local T.V. program. Female viewer fans wrote admiring letters of Troyce's Elvis impersonations. Other fans called Troyce the "mad coon." By 1958 he was traveling to the Bay Area to perform at rock & roll dances with a group called the Campus Kings. Hustler / promoter Walt Cohn posted bills which indicated that the Campus Kings had come directly from the All American Bandstand. (All was printed in fine print to cover the fact the group had never appeared on the Dick Clark Show.)

That same year, Troyce cut a demo which Walt took to Warner Brothers Records in Burbank. Warner liked the demo and signed the group who bragged of being the first rock & roll artists to sign with Warner Brothers. In September 1958 the label issued Troyce's cover of Lula Reed's "Drown in my own tears," backed by an arrangement of Big Joe Williams' blues-shaded "Baby please don't go." An all star studio band made up of Eddie Cochran on lead guitar, Howard Roberts on rhythm, Red Callender, bass, Earl Palmer on drums plus the great Carl White and the Four Sharps supplying the background harmonies crowned the proceedings. The Four Sharps later evolved into the Rivingtons of "Papa oom mow mow" fame.

Troyce's nasal tenor wailing on "Drown in my own tears" must have proved to have a winning effect as the record started to sell and looked very promising. Warner sent Troyce on a whirlwind promotional tour of the country. He made the usual rounds of radio stations and T.V. record hops in many major cities. Troyce traveled in style. At the end of every runway, a Warner official met and greeted the musical celebrity. At a hotel in Little Rock he was offered a female companion and told that she had performed the usual services for Tommy Sands the previous week. Troyce found all this amusing.

When Troyce's record was given airtime in Little Rock, complements from listeners rolled in. It was thought that Troyce was black and only black stations played black music at the time. In 1959 Troyce finally appeared on Dick Clark's American Bandstand. "Drown in my own tears" stopped short of becoming a national hit, but it did make the upper echelons of the regional charts in New York City, Fresno, Tulsa and in Dallas-Fort Worth (a black station at that.) Two more Warner singles followed but they stalled at the gate, and Troyce was dropped.

Back in Fresno, Troyce continued performing on weekends and kept himself well dressed. He drove a shiny new '58 Cadillac but outside of music labored in the fields like his folks had done. When Troyce auditioned for the Rhythm Rockers he was criticized for not playing his glitzy new Gretsch guitar very well. But he was persistent and to his advantage possessed considerable knowledge of the club scene in that area. Although Troyce was quite a celebrity in the Fresno region, white clubs were reluctant to hire a black band with a white boy. But of course they could always play the joints on the West Side. The Rhythm Rockers played the top forty when called upon to gig at outlying towns like Visalia, Merced and Porterville.

When Troyce came aboard, Aaron Carroll up and quit. Re-enlisting in the Service, Aaron was shipped straight out to the Air Force base in Santa Rosa. The Rhythm Rockers ended up in Monterey with ample sets of uniforms and a nine-passenger limo. There are conflicting accounts of the momentous event that took place after this. Charles recalls in his interview with Rick Mansfield in Bay Blues Magazine (Vol. 2, February 1989) that once back in Fresno, the band had difficulty finding work. Troyce got the idea of hitching a trailer to the car and traveling the state for gigs. They

had reached Moffitt Field AFB near Fresno and were expecting to find work, only to discover that Johnny Heartsman and his group, the Rhythm Rockers, were playing at a club across the way called The Brass Rail.

In Andy Grigg's telling of the story in *Westcoast Blues Review* (#16, February/March 1996), Charles states that The Brass Rail was in San Jose and that they found that Johnny Heartsman was billed to play when they got there. Troyce had hit upon the idea of going to The Brass Rail for work as it turned out, although the club had hired Heartsman. Charles and the group had persuaded the proprietor to listen to them perform a twenty-minute audition. After listening and watching C.A. perfect his bar walk, Troyce do his running forward flips while playing guitar, and the whole band dancing can-can steps the likes of which the proprietor had never witnessed before, he fired Heartsman's outfit and hired them in their stead. The band never intended to get Heartsman fired and felt bad that they had lost him his gig.

The interloping group was well liked at The Brass Rail. On weekends they would play other clubs. The Brass Rail gig lasted a year. During this time they hooked up with Grady O'Neil who ran the tiny Chance label. The group, billed as The 5 Rhythm Rockers, cut "Sail on" and "Does she love me" for Chance (Chance 110), and the record sunk without trace. Today the single is a highly prized collectors' item fetching a hefty sum. The group recorded other songs for Chance but nothing surfaced. It is supposed that the group changed their name slightly to avoid confusion with Heartsman's group, although there were a handful of other Rhythm Rockers groups scattered about the country.

Some time during 1964, J.J. Troyce and Charles recorded with the Daylighters, a group put together in the late 1950s by Clarence Edward Smith, a.k.a. Sonny Rhodes. Other Daylighters included Frank Revis and Bobby Logan on saxes, Tyrone Pitts on organ and Clyde Jones on drums. "What's wrong with me" coupled with "Forever and a day" was cut for Deboise Stevens' Boise label. Stevens founded the tiny Esobud label in 1969 and issued "Finding out for myself" backed by "Half smart woman" under the Sonny Rhodes moniker. It is thought that J.J. and Charles played guitar and bass on the session.

Times were tough and the Rhythm Rockers were reduced to going out in Beatles wigs and playing the music on the pop charts. James Brown came to Fresno when the Rhythm Rockers were scraping to find work in 1966. C.A. auditioned for Brown and won a place in his band. Shortly after this, Troyce quit to find work in L.A. Charles, J.J. and Calvin formed a trio and played in a little town called Sanger for a year, after which J.J. left for Oakland. In 1967, J.J. acquired full-time employment as a mechanic at the Alameda Naval Air Station. In 1968, J.J. journeyed to Fresno to fetch Charles and take him to Oakland. Charles was then working odd jobs to pay the bills.

By now, a strong following for the blues had blossomed in the Bay Area, and J.J. slid right into it. By 1969 J.J. had signed with Fantasy Records. Charles, on the other hand, went to college and got his Bachelor's degree in geography. (He graduated from Hayward in 1975.) His spare time was divided between his job, that of being a health worker for the City of Berkeley, and playing the occasional gig with J.J. Malone. While visiting his brother in Chicago, Charles, while asleep in his bed, slipped into a coma. He woke up three days later at Veterans Hospital. He was eventually diagnosed as having spinal stenosis. Days earlier he had experienced the sensation of having been jabbed

with pins and needles in his left arm while playing his bass. After a surgical procedure on his back, he grew steadily worse. He refused superior care at Kaiser and opted to return to the Veterans Hospital for more surgery.

After Charles' second session under the knife, he remained in the hospital for eighteen months. He ended up with an Indian back specialist who promised improved results, but Charles got steadily worse until he eventually had to resort to a wheelchair.

In Charles's absence, J.J. Malone, now living at 832 Parkway in Oakland, hooked up with the Clarence Smith, a.k.a. Sonny Rhodes, band. His first Galaxy session for Rhodes took place in L.A. in June 1968. "Country boy" emerged shortly thereafter. A second date was held in San Francisco a year later for the aforementioned Deboise Stevens' short-lived Fresno-based Esobud label. Charles also played on the session.

Starting in February 1970, J.J. cut three sessions for Galaxy under his own name. The last was in January 1973. One single emerged from each session. The music was good and his self-penned "It's a crying shame" became a hit around the Bay Area. J.J. was ledgered as receiving only one advance of five hundred dollars in September 1972. Troyce, who had spent some time tending a bar in L.A., moved to Oakland, and the three (Charles, J.J. and Troyce), billed as "The Over The Hill Blues Band," began gigging at Minnie Lue's in North Richmond

In 1977 Charles got a chance to play on Sonny Rhodes' "I don't want my blues colored bright" album on the European Advent label (Advent 2808.) His strident bass is heard on "All night long they play the blues" and "I'm so lonely." J.J. went on to record for Don Lindenau's Blues Connoisseur label in Pleasant Hill and with Sonny Rhodes on Cherrie Records.

At around this time, "The Over The Hill Blues Band" also played at Eli's Mile High Club and restaurant. That same year, Eli and Alberta Thornton, proprietors of Eli's, purchased the Grove St. Beer Joint. In 1978, Troyce Key, J.J. Malone and the Rhythm Rockers recorded two fine albums' worth of blues material at San Francisco's Blossom Studio for Red Lightnin' Records in Norfolk, England. The first collection, called "I've Got a New Car," included a righteous version of Lightnin' Hopkins' early nugget "Katy May" (*sic.*), a fine interpretation of "Crawdada hole," J.J.'s own "I know you love me" plus a stone cool reading of Big Boy Grove's (I gotta) "New car" with Troyce at the mike.

For the set J.J., Troyce and Charles were joined by a fat brass section that included Willie Wait and Bob Klein on altos, Paul Green and C.A. Carr on tenors, with Mike Marcus on baritone. Add into the mix Carlos Hill on congas and Zak Hanson on drums and you have a band on fire. The second set appeared on Red Lightnin' in 1981 and was entitled "Younger Than Yesterday." More blues emerged to which were added fine covers of Joe Turner's "Flip flop & fly," Otis Blackwell's "Daddy rolling stone," Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti," and Ray Charles' "It should have been me."

On Friday May 18, 1979, when "The Over The Hill Blues Band" was playing in Eugene, Oregon, Eli was shot to death while tending bar by blues vocalist Frankie Williams. Both Eli and Frankie were having an affair at the time. Nine months later, Troyce, in search of a club of his own, set up a rental deal with Eli's with surviving owner Alberta Thornton. Troyce's musical companions were elected house band, and the group changed names to the J.J. Malone Blues Band with Troyce Key.

The band was now augmented to include drummer Chris Daniels who had played with J.J. before (Chris hailed from Ville Platte, Louisiana), electric keyboardist Bobby Hunt (who had played in the Merced Blue Notes after Roddy Jackson quit), C.A. Carr and Geno Landry on saxes plus Oscar Meyers on trumpet. With a strong horn section in place the band was able to effectively play any funk-based instrumental thrown at them by a listening audience. When Troyce and J.J. returned from playing in Europe with the touring S.F. Blues Festival in 1982, guitarist Paris Slim, a.k.a. Frank Goldwasser, was firmly established as the leader of Eli's house band.

That same year, Charles formed the band called "Blues On Tap." Core members included Chicago-born Bernard Anderson who blew tenor and alto sax as well as flute (he also shared lead vocals), stalwart drummer Chris "Trap" Daniels, Carl "Good Rockin" Robinson on lead guitar and vocals, and of course Charles, the leader, who played bass and sang both lead and background vocals. "Blues On Tap" found work through Myra Gooday. They jammed at Eli's for no pay. "Blues On Tap" was a 1940s-50s-sounding jump band in the Louis Jordan style. When the club became filled with "Blues On Tap" fans, Charles made sure the band was paid a living wage. To supplement his income, Charles set up a second outfit called "The Blues Men" with Carr, Daniels or David Boyett, Cool Papa Sadler on guitar and Birdlegg Pittman on harmonica. At one point "Blues On Tap" was composed of Charles, Robinson and Daniels with female lead singer Alexandria Runette and husband Erroll Black on keyboards.

"Blues On Tap" played Eli's, Your Place Too on M.L.K. Jr. Way, and The 5th Amendment on Lakeshore in Oakland. They also played at The Devil Mountain Brewery in Walnut Creek.

Over the years the Rhythm Rockers came together for once only appearances. In February 1987 Charles got together with Clarence Guitar Sims for one album on the Eli Mile High label. The collection was entitled "Born to Sing the Blues." Charles holds forth on both "She's gone" and "Third rate love affair." J.J. cut three albums for School Boy Cleve's Cherrie label and later two for Fedora.

After J.J. quit his mechanic's job in Alameda, Rhythm Rockers Calvin Peele, C.A. Carr, Troyce Key, J.J. Malone and Charles Banks got together for a series of concerts. This was the last real meaningful reunion. Of course, they would infrequently jam with each other at later dates. Charles' physical condition was getting steadily worse. He had had two operations. Now it became critical for Charles to stem the onset of crippling spinal stenosis before becoming a complete dependent on the Welfare State. While in hospital, Charles embarked on his second career, that of drawing and painting in acrylics or watercolors. He began a series of ocean-going shoals, fish as seen through a fish lens. His work started to sell and their worth escalated. His brother Joe helped with sales and shows in Minnesota.

On the music front Charles was awarded the bass player of the year accolade by the Bay Area Blues Society. Joe entered Charles' paintings for the Sister Kinney International Art Contest for Disabled Artists in the watercolor division. Charles won an award. A seven-window display of his art in San Francisco's Financial District helped sell a lot of work. A second career was well under way.

In 1989 Troyce was hospitalized, battling a bout of pneumonia. He finally succumbed to leukemia and passed away on November 9, 1992.

In early 2000 Charles suffered a heart attack while convalescing at a nursing home in Pleasant Hill. This was followed three weeks later by a stroke. He died after a bout of pneumonia at a San Leandro nursing home on February 20, 2000.

In January 2001, J.J. cut his ninth album as featured performer for Blues Express Inc. on Hayes Street in San Francisco. This was, after all this time, his first solo album to spotlight his working band. J.J. played piano, Hammond B3, guitar, harp, keyboards and sang vocals, supported by harpist Jill Baxter, David Vega, guitar, Jason Kantarakis, bass, and Steve Vega on drums. Standout charts included a back-alley reading of Joe Turner's "Crawdada hole," a loose, easy rendition of "Down that lonesome road," a churchy "Love song for you" and a soulful, loping version of Jimmy Reed's "Honest I do."

J.J. Malone, who was based in Fairfax, played blues in Luther Tucker's ex-harp players band in Hawaii. He was in remission for lymph-node cancer but succumbed to its unmerciful ravages on Friday February 27, 2004.

--- Opal Louis Nations

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