

"Real Musicians Have Day Jobs" The Curtis "Jack" Griffin Story

by Opal Louis Nations

Photos & Illustrations courtesy of: Mel Alexander, Curtis Griffin,
Ellen & Opal Louis Nations, Victor Pearlin, John Phillips and Betty Washington

For over twenty-five years now the bumper sticker proclaiming «Real Musicians Have Day Jobs» has flashed around in traffic. Conjured up by Artist/Musician/Music Teacher Dix Bruce to put over the fact that some musicians enjoy playing music so much they make the sacrifice of spending valuable rehearsal time in a job to support their music. One of the strongest adherents of this maxim is Curtis "Jack" Griffin who wanted both to be a blues "axeman" and a good family man. In his case, being a responsible, drug-free, booze-free family man came first.

Curtis Griffin was born C.C. Griffin into a hard-laboring family of sharecroppers on March 17, 1930 on a plantation in Poole, just thirty-five miles from Shreveport, Louisiana. Curtis «Jack» Griffin, the name C.C. adopted during the 1960s, was his father's name. His mother was Willie Mae Griffin whose father was named Fletcher. Fletcher was married to one of the largest bootleggers in the county. C.C.'s grandfather on Curtis «Jack's» side spoke fluent Cherokee. The bootlegging business drew local musicians and ne'er-do-wells from all over the country.

Musicians included kazoo and washboard players who showed up to buy and «sample» the new brews of whiskey and wine. Young C.C. often got caught up in the shenanigans. The family owned a radio on which they tuned into blues on KWKH and to Ernest Tubb singing on the Grand Ole Opry. He will always remember the tiny radio illuminated by a bare lamp in a tiny kitchen. C.C. chopped cotton and pulled corn out in the fields, all the while singing the blues he had heard in the kitchen. Whenever his great grandmother passed he would switch to spirituals, knowing that the old lady frowned on them dirty ole' blues. He built his first home-made drum kit out of a washtub, gas can, milk can, old bed springs and sticks to play along with others at «brew party» time.

By 1945, C.C. was out traveling and looking for work. One of his first jobs was hauling ice for the Consumer Ice Company in Shreveport. He took a trip to Houston and worked around Harrisburg. Back in Haines, Louisiana, he installed septic tanks. In 1948, C.C. headed out for Lufkin, East Texas to become a cowboy. Tough as he was, he just could not cut it and became a lumberjack instead. That did not last too long either. His desire to become an entertainer drew him to Los Angeles, California in June 1950.

The amplified work of T-Bone Walker and Gatemouth Brown had made a deep and lasting impression on him. Other inspirations were Lightnin' Hopkins, the Houston axe-master who reminded him of his boyhood growing up in the country. More so when working in Texas and seeing him play. Then there was Charles Brown who he saw in Shreveport and later in L.A. His closest and dearest friend, Lowell Fulson, shared some good times with him in L.A. Lowell hired C.C. to put bands together for him.

C.C.'s first public appearance was with Joe Liggins at the Barrelhouse in Watts on a talent

show playing an old Jimmy McCracklin song. Later on, McCracklin let him sit in with his band at the Elks Club. It was at the Elks that C.C. saw Gatemouth Brown for the first time. Inspired by «Gate's» performance, C.C. went out and bought a guitar. This was when he still devoted his attention to playing the drums. But now he tried teaching himself guitar. He came to conclude that to be a success at it, he had to work long and hard. He was a broad, heavy-set man with fingers the size of expensive Cuban cigars. Not having cash enough to devote enough time to guitar lessons, he opted to join the Army Infantry and served in Korea. When on leave in the U.S., he billeted in San Francisco's Fillmore

District.

After the Service he returned to L.A. And with the pay he had saved opened a butchering shop he called Curtis Meats. However, serious domestic problems soon doomed the business to failure. He had a penchant for acting and a talent for picking up voices and colorful characterizations. He spent evenings at drama school and did well at it, landing a few bit parts. C.C. kept it up for some while. Then in 1970 he came close to a big break. He was offered the leading role opposite James Garner in Paul Bogart's «Skin Game.» Unfortunately, unforeseen circumstances intervened and the role went to Lou Gossett.

Other minor setbacks took place before the acting bug took hold. He tried his hand at heavy-weight boxing but could not make the cut. For a while he got a job working for an auto tire supply and brake repair shop. But he never quit entering talent shows. He remembers one at the Rutland Inn at Washington and Main with Johnny Otis. C.C. won second place behind a girl singer/dancer who put on a demonstration of the Booty Green. «Who could resist all that twisting and hip shaking?» he said.

His first gig, with his name appearing on the handbill, was at the Tiki on Western Avenue. Percy Mayfield played on the same program. One of his other early gigs took him to San Pedro where he backed the young James Brown for little more than ten dollars a night.

He met B.B. King in 1955. King helped C.C. and encouraged him to use his musical talent. By now, he had acquired some skill with the guitar.



He cut a demo and took it to B.B. King. King advised C.C. to go look up his arranger at Modern Records, Maxwell Davis. The idea was to sell the song to Davis to arrange for King to record. C.C. was rejected. It was then he decided to produce himself. He set up Lois Jean Publishing (named after a current girlfriend) and used his daughter's name, Joyce, as a logo for his record label. He cut two hundred advance copies in North Hollywood and took them along to a string of distributors on «Record Row» (Pico Boulevard.) He also dropped some off with Rudy Robinson at Dolphins of Hollywood. Dolphins was the only retail outfit to give his Joyce single a good measure of exposure.

C.C. had recorded the beautiful B.B. King-influenced «Storm Clouds,» a moody ballad, coupled with «I Want To Be With You» (Joyce 1001, 1961.) «Storm Clouds» would have been a winner had C.C. had the money to push it. Today a copy of the record is almost impossible to find.

By this time C.C. had started a long and successful career in the meat processing industry. He first got a job at Kerman Food Products making meat pies (Kerman was later swallowed up by Swanson.) In the evenings he would go out playing the blues at «socials.» Kerman was followed by jobs at a variety of meat packing plants. Starting at entry level, C.C. made the packing boxes; moving up a notch, he carried meat. Then he learned how to use a knife. Broken fingers and lacerations were a part of the job, even when working in the ice house. He wound up after fifty years' service in the industry as a supervisor of over seventy employees for the Right Way Meat Company.

At work, C.C. met up with Dunlap J. Cawthron, a traveling government meat inspector. Cawthron, born in Chicago in August 1914, was the son of Janie M. Cawthron, a noted gospel song composer. Dunlap was a big fan of gos-

pel music and was also taken by progressive jazz. Not long after C.C.'s release of «Storm Clouds,» Cawthron set his mind on recording C.C. for Allegro, a record company he had set up in 1955 with an office on Sunset Boulevard. (He also recorded jazzman Sam Laar on his fly-by-night Cawthron imprint.)

Cawthron was new to the blues but liked «Storm Clouds» well enough to give C.C. a second shot. Discographies show that Cawthron recorded C.C. in 1965 after issuing gospel singles and albums by various local artists and singles by his old friend from Chicago, tenor saxophonist Claude McLinn. My belief is that Cawthron recorded C.C. not long after his alleged single for Alley in 1961. Mystery surrounds the Alley release. Here again we have a situation in which only a handful of preview pressings were put out.

C.C.'s Cawthron recording of «I Do Believe» undersided with «Sitting Here Waiting» (Allegro 2001, on gorgeous red and yellow vinyl) suffered from little or no exposure. Quality-wise it was probably as fine a blues record as «Storm Clouds,» but it did not seem to matter to C.C. All that concerned him was to be able to go and play for the people, a true artist in the purest sense of the word. (For more fascinating info on Allegro, go to Armin Büttner's website, www.jazzdocumentation.ch/allegro/allegro.html where you will find label shots and texts by Büttner and myself from recent research.)

Cawthron's partner on Allegro's release projects was long-time L.A. gospel deejay, John Phillips who enjoyed a lengthy and close relationship with Fats Washington and Mel Alexander of Movin' Records. The celebrated Ferdinand «Fats»



DUNLAP J. CAWTHRON, Pres.
Allegro Recording & Music Studio

Washington hails from Shreveport where he started out as a newspaper columnist and disc jockey. Fats, a chair-bound infantile paralysis victim, turned to songwriting in the 1950s and for starters wrote «Pledging my love» for Johnny Ace. He later worked with Lowell Fulson and B.B. King, among others, on many of their most successful recordings. Fats built strong relationships with both Stan Lewis at Jewel Records in Shreveport and The Bihari Brothers at Kent Records in Culver City, Calif. Fats left a catalog (recently sold to the Spirit Music Group) of over 150 songs when he passed in 1970.

Changing his name to Curtis Griffin, C.C. recorded for Fats' and Mel's Movin' in 1965. One single emerged, the New Orleans-tinged «I Gotta Lump,» a pleasant, mid-tempo dance stepper, matched with the fierce soul ballad «Move (Movin) On.» Curtis's vocals on this have never been better and the joy of it is that he had stepped away from imitation and had developed a vocal style all of his own.

Encouraged by Fats and Lowell Fulson to try a nationally distributed label, Curtis was introduced to Stan Lewis at Jewel Records who was so impressed by what he heard that he bought Curtis's contract. Jewel reissued the Movin single on its own imprint and «Move (Movin) On» looked like it might take off. «Move (Movin) On» sold well enough for Stan to try a second shot. After a session with the Carter Brothers, Stan recorded Curtis singing the muscular «I found something better» and the deep soul opus «Baby have your way» arranged by J.G. Hutchinson, utilizing the services of Big Jim Wynn and Freddie Clark on saxophones.





ABOVE: Lowell Fulson (standing w/ guitar) and Curtis Griffin (sitting).

LEFT BELOW: Fats Washington.

«Baby Have Your Way» was a winner but could not beat out the stiff competition that prevailed. To my mind, the above two single releases were Curtis's best work, both vocally and instrumentally. The soul blues idiom was changing rapidly and Curtis did not have enough recorded work to rush out an album to capitalize on how well he had come along in the blues.



Curtis spent a decade off wax before returning to Mel Alexander, Fats Washington's old partner, who had continued on after Fats' death in 1970 with the Kris Records imprint they had co-founded in the mid-Sixties. Mel had kept the faith in Curtis and wanted to try cutting some songs with him again. His first shot was «Disco Blues,» coupled with «Something's Wrong (Around Here.)» «Something's Wrong» is an anguished blues with stinging guitar and full brass support. Curtis's guitar work is impressive and has broadened in complexity since he last recorded.

The follow-up brought us «Your Love Is Dying» on a Kris various artists collection released in 1992. «Your Love Is Dying» is another alley blues centering on spousal rejection. Curtis turned up again on a multiple artists CD collection (Kris CD 8149.) Here we get two songs, the foot-dragging «Wake Up Baby,» and a leaving blues entitled «Ain't Never Coming Back.» Curtis's records always seem to please. This writer has not heard a song of his he did not like. Either

the voice comes over strong or he shows imagination on the frets, or both.

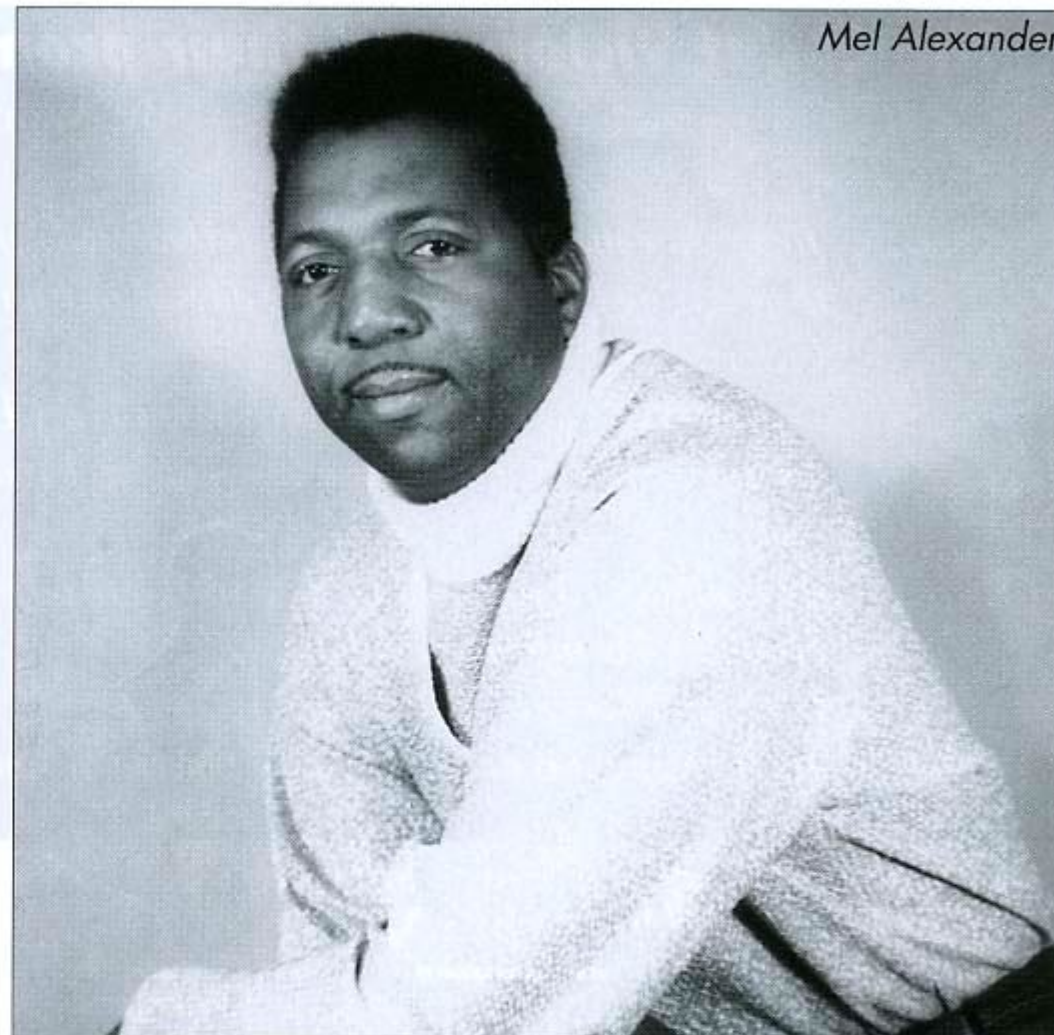
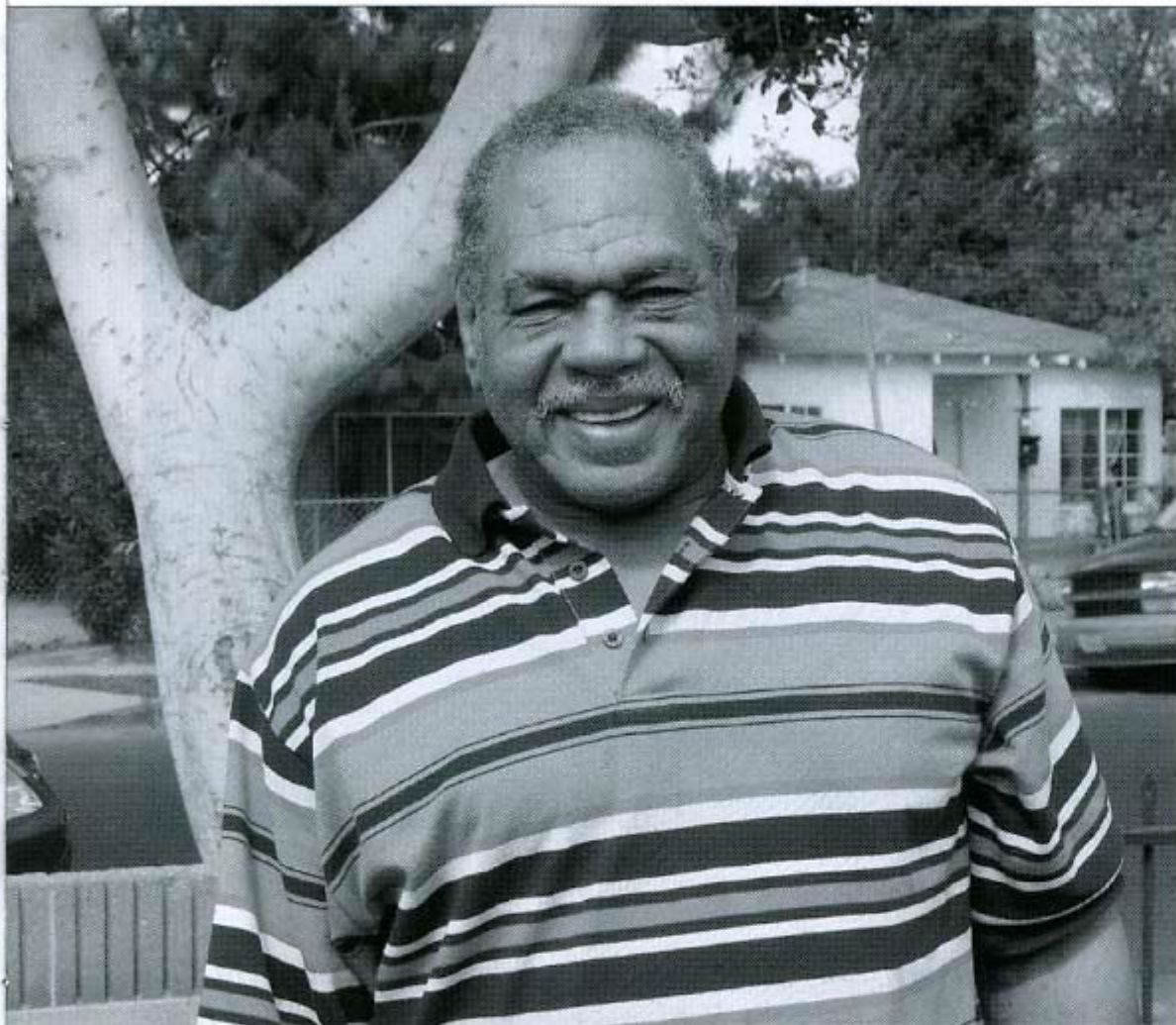
Curtis opened for B.B. King three times during the 1980s and five for Bobby Bland. He was one of the first people to play for The Long Beach Blues Festival in 1980. In 1997 he appeared on a Dutch Black Magic Records blues CD collection called «LA Blues Anthology - Hard Times» (Black Magic 9016) with harpist William Clarke and Harmonica George Smith. He renders only one song, «I Get So Lonesome,» accompanied by guitarist Zack Zunis. He probably got broader public attention from this album than anything he had previously recorded.

Curtis also guested on William Clarke and the Night Owls' «Blues From Los Angeles (The 1980's)» on the Hittin-Heavy label (HH-1002.)

Eighteen months ago, he taped a bunch of blues demos with just his voice and guitar out in North Hollywood for a new CD collection. Tunes included «I ain't gonna be your spare,» «Nervous Breakdown,» «I'm Tied Down Like A Dog,» «Hoodoo Woman,» «My Starter Won't Start,» «Go Grandma Go» and others.

It is not for nothing that Curtis «Jack» Griffin has a reputation for being the gutsiest blues man in Los Angeles. Watch out for new releases, or check out his page on MySpace: www.myspace.com/curtisjackgriffin where you can sample his singing and guitar-playing.





Mel Alexander

CURTIS GRIFFIN RECORD DISCOGRAPHY

JOYCE RECORDS

1001 Storm Clouds/I Want To Be With You 1961

Note: Released as by C.C. Griffin

ALLEGRO RECORDS

2001 I Do Believe/Sitting Here Waiting 1963-64

Note: Released as by C.C. Griffin

MOVIN RECORDS

128 Move (Movin') On/I Gotta Lump 1965

Note: Released as by Curtis Griffin & His Band

JEWEL RECORDS

755 Love (Movin') On/I Gotta Lump 1965

767 I Found Something Better/Baby Have Your Way 1965

Note: Released as by Curtis Griffin & His Band

KRIS RECORDS

8107 Som ething's Wrong (Around Here)/Disco Blues 1975

Note: Released as by Curtis Griffin & His Band

Appearances on LP and CD including «Your Love Is Dying» on a scarce Kris various artists collection, «Wake Up Baby»/»Ain't Never Coming Back» on Kris CD 8149, «I Get So Lonesome» on Hard Times, Black Magic 9016 (1991) collection and as guest with William Clarke & The Night Owls on Hittin-Heavy 1002 (1980.)