

Blues Time Traveler

Chicago blues pioneer Francis Clay still

By Mark Hedin

Sitting in a small, cluttered South of Market apartment where he's lived for the past eight years, Francis Clay looks back on his career as a drummer backing some of America's most acclaimed musicians.

Clay's claim to fame is as a drummer in the Muddy Waters band, which established the canon of work known as the Chicago blues style, and introduced the world to an all-star cast of blues musicians, including James Cotton, Little Walter and Junior Wells on harmonica, Otis Spann on

Tank," "Bittersweet" and "19 Years Old," to name a few.

Most of his songs, he says, were written to accompany lyrics by Willie Dixon, the famous bassist and lyricist credited for so many of the best-known blues titles – "Ain't Superstitious," "Spoonful," "My Babe," "Red Rooster," "Wang Dang Doodle," "Backdoor Man," "Hidden Charms" and many more.

"Big Dixon'd bring the lyrics in, Muddy'd hand 'em to me, say 'hey, this is your department. I'd get some ideas, teach 'em to

the cats."

"She's Into Something," which Robert Cray, Albert Collins and Johnny Copeland recorded in 1985 on their Grammy Award-winning "Summit" album – the best-selling blues album of all time -- is copyrighted in the name of one Carl C. Wright.

"I have no idea" who he is, Clay says. But "Walking in the Park," which is credited to harmonica player Harrington Carey Bell – "I taught him that," Clay says – has been used repeatedly on TV commercials, including one for Timberline boots. "I'm proud of it, glad it's being played, but where's my cut?"

Kenneth Higney, of Arc Music Corporation in New York, which hold the rights to "She's Into Something," won't say what the royalties are worth. "I'm not gonna tell you," he said. "We know how much, but I would never do that. Why would I?"

Mike Kappus of San Francisco's Rosebud Agency cautions that a blues album, for example, one sitting at No. 15 on the blues chart, is probably selling only about 300 copies per week. At that rate, the royalties for one song, at eight cents per sale, which are then split between the writer and publisher, aren't going to produce a lot of income for anybody.

"Of course, if it's used in a commercial," he said, that's a different story.

"All I know is, musicians are playing 'em all over the world," Clay says. "It's a shame (Chicago record company) Chess didn't keep better records. All they cared about was the name on the marquee. I'd make the money, but I wouldn't get it. Any money you got in advance, that was all you got. If it wasn't for Social

Security, I'd be starving."

A resident of California since the '60s, Clay has become a bit more reclusive with the passing of his wife of 50 years, Connie Zia, in April. But "I'm going to be spreading my wings," he said.

Clay, who is managed by Michael James' American Legends firm, says he expects to be playing some festivals next year. He's appeared annually on Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations at the Yerba Buena Gardens, and when he does work, he's accompanied by local musicians Jules Broussard on sax, Kevin Keyes on alto, Sandy Poindexter on violin, trumpeter John Middleton, vocalist Myra Del Rio and piano player J.J. Malone.

"I've got all the best musicians in the Bay Area," he chuckles, "Cause all their gigs are at night, and mine are in the afternoon."

He's also writing a book "so I can enlighten people" and doing poetry, some of which can be found on the Web site bluespower.com.

On the last weekend of September, for example, he attended the 30th San Francisco Blues Festival at Fort Mason, where he renewed acquaintances with old friends such as Cray and Otis Rush.

"I'm the ambassador, I've got to go," he laughed.

Clay recently recorded on albums such as guitarist Roy Rogers' "Slideways," harmonica player Red Archibald's "West Coast Soul Stew" and on onetime Jefferson Starship keyboard player Pete Sears' "Long Haul."

On "Long Haul," he does a vocal on the autobiographical track "Mississippi," in which he recounts childhood memories from Rock Island, Ill.; the inspiration of gospel music; and early influences Percy Walker, Speck Red, Pat Patrick, Charlie Shavers, Boyd Atkins and "oh so many" others. Also mentioned are cohorts Waters, John Lee Hooker, Big Mama Thornton and Jimmy Reed.

"I tried to make it sound like an old man," he smiles as he plays the

recording. "Even though I'm still young – 39 on both sides."



PHOTO: JEFF DIAMOND

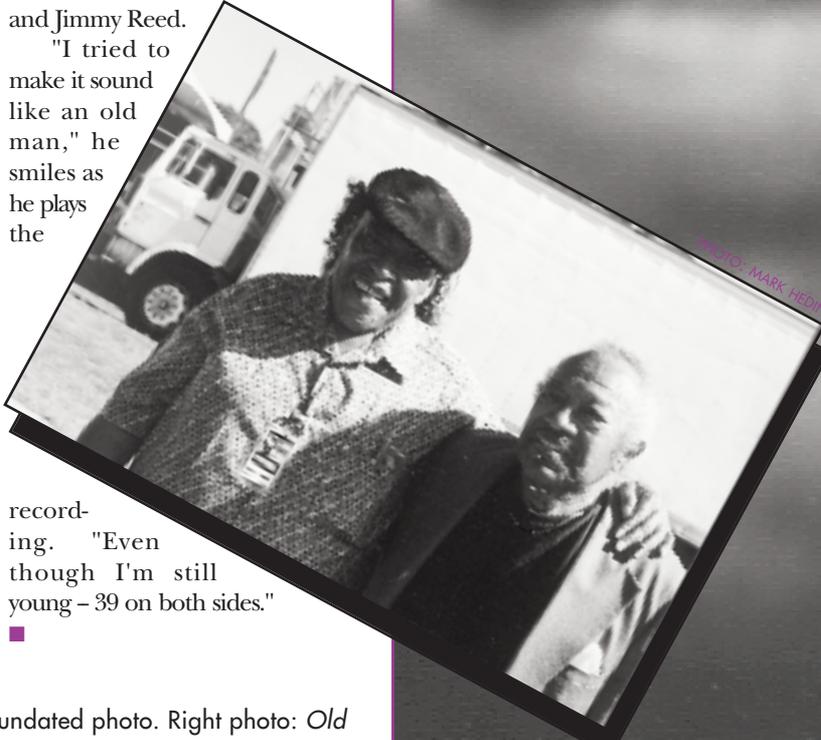


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Top photo: Clay appeared onstage at Biscuits and Blues in this undated photo. Right photo: Old friends: Chicago blues great James Cotton, left, with Francis Clay during the S.F. Blues Festival.