

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING JOCKEY

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Archival photos courtesy of Clarence "Jockey" Etienne

Clarence "Jockey" Etienne didn't own a drum kit when he made his first trip to Crowley, Louisiana, in the mid 1950s - not that he needed one. Taking a brush to a box or a rolled-up newspaper, beating an upright bass with his hands, Jockey joined the early masters of what's now known as Swamp Blues.

The chief practitioners were Lightnin' Slim, Slim Harpo, Lonesome Sundown and Lazy Lester. Their most appreciated works appeared under the orange and blue banner of Excello Records, based in Nashville, but all of these men recorded in Crowley, a small town located along the corridor of today's I-10, at the midpoint between Baton Rouge and the Texas border.

Crowley was the home of J.D. "Jay" Miller (d. 1996), the songwriter, entrepreneur and engineer/producer who became the architect of Swamp Blues. One of the homegrown visionaries of early rock recording, he produced in his finest works the sound of rust and thick wood, if such sound could exist between extra-orbital spheres. For his original Crowley house band, Miller assembled Gabriel "Guitar Gable" Perrodin, his bassist brother Fats Perrodin, and drummer Clarence "Jockey" Etienne, who elevated the more conventional approach of the shuffling blues drummer.

Classic Drummer: Do people call you The Jockey or Clarence?

Clarence "Jockey" Etienne: Let me tell you something, I'm so used to hearing Jockey, I was at the doctor's office, and they called me about ten times, "Clarence!" And I didn't hear them. I hear one of them say, "Ain't that you?" I'm so used to Jockey.

CD: Were you born in Louisiana?

CJE: Yeah, about 50 miles east of Lafayette, in St. Martinville, Louisiana. It's where that girl Evangeline was waiting for her boyfriend, and he never showed up. She died by that river...The boat never did show up.

CD: You grew up there?

CJE: You could say. Daddy was a Sharecropper. He blow, what you call it, them harps. Daddy used to play that a lot...But I left pretty early. I was a horserider, a jockey.

CD: When did you start playing drums?

CJE: Let's see to that...I used to play bugle in the school band. And my cousin, she used to be on the drums. And at the Easter

In his pre-teen years, Jockey raced horses at the Evangeline Downs track near his Louisiana home. His early mastery of man's equine helpers makes its way into his galloping rhythms: forward moving; tightly reined; unrelenting in authority for one so young.

Certainly this is so with Slim Harpo's masterpiece, "I'm a King Bee," on which Swamp Blues as an enduring form suddenly collapses into perfection. The ambiance of "Bee" remains vastly haunting and utterly beyond attempts at contemporary recreation, its alchemy a secret sealed forever in the amber of a 1957 Crowley control room. But, of course, just that impossibility lends the quest even greater allure, which is why one must approach the revelation still, stepping lightly within the chambers of that astute cranium known to the world as Clarence "Jockey" Etienne.

Jockey lives in Lafayette, Louisiana. He survived Hurricane Katrina, and he remains an active drummer, performing with his band the Creole Zydeco Farmers.

parade, coming back to where we started, I'd help her with the drums. And I'd grab a stick and bing-bang bing-bang until one day I went to Opelousas. This is about 25 miles north. I had two races that day. And we got to that old club named the Cotton Club. And Daddy and them stopped there to get a beer. And there were a lot of people there, you know. Ray Charles was playing. So I was too young to get into the club and attend, so Daddy got the manager, and they put me on the bandstand. Right close to the drummer. And I kept looking at him. He had one leg all this way, and one leg all that way—all different—and I thought he gone 'flicted [afflicted]. I said, "Got to learn this." And I kept that in mind. And I thought that whenever I'd see a set, I'd have to get an old 3-piece set. No one taught me.

CD: How old were you then?

CJE: I'd say about nine. I'd play around with, like, the family, and stuff like that. You know, a little get-together deal. Until I went to Crowley. With Jay Miller. [He] was recording over there. Inside the studio, they didn't have any drums. And so the guy was

trying to cut something, and, at that time, they didn't have the stuff they have right now. They had four-track machines. So I grab a box, and I start hittin' on the box, with the backbeat ...

CD: Well, it sounded great...

CJE: Well, he didn't have any drums. I didn't know that much then, but right now, you don't go into the studio and there's no drums! So I did Carol Fran on that, I did Lonesome Sundown, Lazy Lester and Slim Harpo all on a box. He was paying a little for the 45's at that time. He was paying like \$40 a side.

CD: Probably a lot of money then...

CJE: Oh yeah, and then I saved up. I finally went and got a set. I bought me some Slingerlands.

CD: So, why did you go to Crowley?

CJE: Well, you see, I knew this guy over here, he was a good friend of my Daddy, and he was doing some work. He used to be a musician, and he went to Crowley to talk to Miller to work something out. And when we get back there, Miller was



recording. He was a white guy from Baton Rouge, and he talked with the blah-blah-blah, and while they were doing that, the guy was working on some number, and I just pick up that box and start hitting it, keeping the back beat. So he felt it, and it was like, "Sound good, keep it up." First thing you know I'm the studio drummer. I used to sleep in that thing, man...I had a couch especially made to sleep.

CD: It sounds like there's just one mic in the room, and you guys are all the way across the room.

CJE: There you go! One big mic, right in the center of the building...We all set up there were like three on one side, and two or three on the other side. Big mic right in the center.

CD: Is the bass player on "King Bee" Fats Perrodin?

CJE: Yeah, that was Guitar Gable's brother. Let me tell you something. He was 13 years old when he was doing that. He was big and fat, we used to call him Andy Devine.

CD: So, when you were doing that, how would you play the bass drum? On another box?

CJE: You see, you get a bigger box. And you get that pop. You kick it with your foot. He had a mic there. And I don't know how he did it, but it sounded like good drums to me.

CD: When you played drums in the studio on boxes, would you hit them with a stick?

CJE: We'd use some rods, them brushes. You know them little wire brushes?

CD: You'd bang them...

CJE: They'd be open all the way across you, and then you'd have to tune that up, man.

CD: Tune the box up? How would you do that?

CJE: With paper. Newspaper. You know how sometimes you buy them, and they are wrapped in that white cloth? Something like that hospital junk [adhesive tape]. You get that, to stay down there in the B flat. Then you have to tune that up, and get to the mic, and, "Alright, let's check it. How does it sound?" Bam. "Perfect! Good, now let's go to work."

CD: Would it be a big box or like a shoe box?

CJE: I don't know if you remember them little 45 records would come in there.

CD: That's a pretty small box

CJE: Like 8 X 12 or something. Something like that.

CD: And that would be your snare drum?

CJE: Yeah. And a bigger box for the foot.

CD: On "I've Got Love if You Want It," it sounds like someone is also playing some jangles or some spoons.

CJE: Miller would come up with anything. He had weird ideas. And at that time, the damn thing was selling...As a matter of fact, on "Congo Mambo"—Guitar Gable, he was a big hit—I played with paper on it.

CD: Paper?

CJE: A newspaper. I played like a "tack-tack-tack" to keep rhythm, then I came back, and I played the drums on it.

CD: So, you could play the drums again, on top of it?

CJE: And you come up with that guitar over that, and that thing, that sound, and it sound like a bongo, but it ain't no bongo. Hittin' on an upright bass.

CD: With brushes or something?

CJE: No, no! With my hands!

CD: So, after the songs you did with Lightnin' Slim, Slim Harpo, and Lazy Lester, did you start playing as a live performer at that point?

CJE: Yeah, by that time groups was coming through there, and they liked the style I was playing. Solomon Burke, Joe Simon,

Johnny Adams, and that guy—a singing son-of-a-gun, too—out of Baton Rouge, Bobby Powell. Some singing suckers, man! And then, way back in 1975, we used to leave for something like 3 months. I got tired of the road a little bit, so I joined Fernest Arceneaux [a Zydeco artist], and that's when we started going to Europe. I had to start drumming all over again.

CD: How many years were you in Crowley?

CJE: 10, 12, 13...Right above the street, from the studio, there was a liquor store. Well, [Jay Miller] say, "Seeing that we're going to be here until eight o'clock tomorrow morning"—we'd all be there, and the liquor store opened at nine—"Go over there and get ya'll a little warm up deal here!" They'd go and get two fifths. "Ya'll boys go ahead and have ya'll a little fun now." And we asked him why do you always want us to drink? "Because if you don't drink, you try not to make a mistake. And that's when your mistakes come through. You ever notice that? You're trying too hard not to make a mistake and that's when they come. So when you're drinking, you don't give a damn what you play, that's how you play it." That's exactly what he told us. That's why I told you anytime Lightnin' Slim would pull up with his old lady, and he'd be, "Let me go get my bottle." Give him a drink and he don't know what he saying, he's talking to the old lady, you know. And when the record come out, now you got to learn the words.

CD: "King Bee" is phenomenal. Is that one take?

CJE: Yeah. You know what I really enjoyed?



The "Scratch My Back." I was playing the snare, and I had the double on the kick, and that ca-ca-cack, that's Lazy Lester hitting on some skeleton heads.

CD: Skeleton heads?

CJE: Yeah, there's five skeleton heads on the stand. Can you imagine you come over there? About the middle part of it [2:00], where you hear them little chop-chop, he had some little skeleton head he was hitting on the stand in the studio. I say, "Man, what are you hitting them people for? They didn't do a damn thing, man."

CD: There's something timeless about your playing that's appealing to people, that's very different from other drummers from that era.

CJE: Remember Otis Redding? Ok, I was with Joe Simon at the time, and Friday night we was in Baytown, Texas, not far from Houston. And a guy who used to play with Bobby [Powell] was a drummer, too. We knew one another tight. He came up to me, and he say, "Jockey. Say, man, you want to work with Otis? He looking for a little



A rare photo of the Crowley studio environs with Clinton "Fats" Perrodin, a mere teenager who played bass on "King Bee", and the Jockey.

Louisiana drummer." Because Louisiana playing and Texas [playing] be different. Louisiana would use a lot of foot, Texas use a lot of wrist. He say to me, "Hey man, go check with the office." I said, "Well, okay." By the time I'd got to the office, they'd just left. They left for their tour, and that's when they got killed.

CD: So when you shifted from playing

more blues oriented material to Zydeco, what was different about it?

CJE: Like I say, the beat is just a beat. And you got to stay on it. You can't give it up. It's your job. Well, you know when you start something, you know how it go. And the rest start happening, and you stay in that same pattern. And you can't do too much in some of that thing, cause you might play a whole song and never change the note, on the same note all the way.

CD: You must have played on "Sugar Coated Love" and "Lover Not A Fighter," and all of those tracks by Lazy Lester.

CJE: And "Call Me Lazy", I played a box on it!

CD: Can you still play in the old style?

CJE: What I used to do then? In the studio like? Well, give me a couple of days. It's like when you tour with Zydeco, you have to be twisted, but it wouldn't take me long to do it again. I still have the patterns in mind, you know.



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