

# For Norman Jackson, blues, gospel mix

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Norman Jackson says he occasionally sits on his front porch and plays and sings. / Ed Peaco/for the News-Leader

Written by  
Ed Peaco  
For the News-Leader

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On a recent Friday night at Jalen's, as Norman Jackson and three cohorts were wailing on "Every Day I Have the Blues," he raised his hand, and the band hushed.

Jackson, on guitar, played several runs of softly plucked crinkles that gradually aligned themselves into blues riffs — just as intense as before, but more dramatic for being quiet.

"If you want people to hear you, bring it down. They'll stop talking to hear you," Jackson said later.

Jackson is not alone in using dynamics to create powerful contrasts in music, but he seems to use dynamics as a way of life, combining things that don't seem to go together.

Hear Norman Jackson

- Saturday: Feat of Clay at Cartoons, 1614 S. Glenstone Ave., 417-889-6500
- Aug. 25: Jackson's band plus the Trash Angels, Murphy's, 218 S. Campbell Ave., 417-863-1909
- First Fridays: Jalen's, 1611 N. Campbell Ave., 417-862-5033; Mondays: Cravin Pizza, 3641 E. Sunshine St., 417-890-8255; Occasionally: Howard Johnson's, 3333 S. Glenstone Ave., 417-883-6550

For some, blues and gospel music don't mix, but Jackson sings both on the same gig.

Some people say those who attend church should stay out of bars, but Jackson said he occasionally drops moments of ministry on his imbibing listeners. The blues can — and should — be happy, he insists.

Jackson grew up on the south side of in Chicago, singing in the church where his father was minister, hearing blues, R&B and rock, meeting Sam Cooke and B.B. King, and immersing himself in the city's rich blues scene. Jackson said he was ordained as a minister at age 22 and began singing and traveling widely in gospel groups. He moved to Springfield around 1990 and joined Don Shipp's Titanic Blues Band.

Saturday at Cartoons, Jackson will join old friends who regroup occasionally under the name Feat of Clay. They are veterans of bands led by Shipp, the beloved Springfield blues artist who died in 2004.

Feat of Clay will perform in a range of styles mainly for the joy of playing together again, said Clay Goldstein, the group's leader who plays harmonica and sings. The other musicians are guitarist Dave Painter of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils; B.J. Rossi on drums; and Richard Kittleman on bass, the only member without a direct link to Shipp. Most members will contribute vocals, but Goldstein said the voice that stands out will be Jackson's, extending smoothly from low to midrange with falsetto accents. Goldstein also praised Jackson's guitar work and his artistry across genres.

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“Norman is without a doubt the most soulful musician I’ve ever known,” Goldstein said. “Every note he plays is the right note. Even if it’s the wrong note, it’s the right note.”

Jackson said he’s trying to spread the blues to young people, especially younger musicians — a personal commitment to a musical form that he views as an endangered species. “With Don gone, I’m just trying to keep the blues alive in Springfield,” he said.

Among those young musicians, Tiffany Renè, lead singer with the Trash Angels, said she regained confidence after a musical hiatus several years ago by singing at blues jams held by Jackson and Goldstein, who encouraged her.

Jackson plays regularly around town with his band that includes Hardy Murphy on bass and guitar, Danny Williams on bass, Ron “Boogiemán” Brown on drums and others. Jackson also performs blues music at the nursing home where his wife Darla lives.

The message is simple: The blues is part of all our lives, no matter what background or level of means.

“If you pay the light bill, gas bill and telephone bill, that’s nothin’ but the blues,” he said.

“If your child is going to college, and you get your credit card statement and find out he went \$1,000 over — that’s the blues,” he added, laughing.

The message is also serious: Jackson said he’s a recovering addict, and he tells younger musicians that they can achieve more in music and life by avoiding alcohol and drugs.

Jackson said he encounters skeptics among people of faith who say he should not be singing blues and playing in clubs. However, he insisted that his music, in whatever style or venue, offers comfort and redemption:

- He said listeners have told him that after hearing him evoke the murkiest depths of misery (nobody loves me; nobody seems to care ... ), they discover that their lives are not so bad, after all.
- He conveys his faith directly when, at the end of his sets, he sings Gospel songs and spirituals. He mentioned a recent performance at which he moved one listener to tears when he sang “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

“As long as my songs can minister to someone, it’s all right,” he said.