

OTIS TAYLOR

Blues singer/composer/multi-instrumentalist **Otis Taylor** is capable of exploring any musical mood at any given time, and it's an important reason why he is considered one of the most talented artists to emerge in recent years. "Sometimes pigeonholed as a bluesman, Otis Taylor can't be defined by any single category," proclaims Spin magazine. According to Ann Powers at the Los Angeles Times, "Gentle upon first listen, blending the austerity of Delta blues with the expansiveness of free jazz, Taylor's ancient-sounding, avant-garde 'trance blues' has a dangerous pull." The Oxford American raves, "It might not be too early to call Otis Taylor a major talent."

On Taylor's new recording, **Clovis People, Vol. 3**, he explores his own history. (The album is set for May 11, 2010 release on Telarc International, a division of Concord Music Group.) The title was inspired by a recent discovery of a cache of Stone Age tools close to Taylor's home in Boulder, Colorado. "I thought it was cool that there were ancient people walking on my land," he says. "So I went back to my musical past with these songs." In addition to Taylor's trademark haunting singing and evocative guitar riffs, the album features guest appearances by Irish blues-rock guitarist Gary Moore, pedal steel guitarist Chuck Campbell (of the Campbell Brothers Sacred Steel Guitars), cornetist Ron Miles and bassist Cassie Taylor (Otis' daughter).

Otis Mark Taylor was born in Chicago in 1948. After his uncle was shot to death, his family moved to Denver, where an adolescent's interest in blues and folk was cultivated. Both his parents were big music fans: "I was raised around jazz musicians," Taylor relates. "My dad worked for the railroad and knew a lot of jazz people. He was a socialist and real bebopper." His mother, Sarah, a tough-as-nails woman with liberal leanings, had a penchant for Etta James and Pat Boone. Young Otis spent time at the Denver Folklore Center, where he bought his first instrument, a banjo. He used to play it while riding his unicycle to high school. The Folklore Center was also the place where he first heard Mississippi John Hurt and country blues. He learned to play guitar and harmonica, and by his mid-teens, he formed his first groups — the Butterscotch Fire Department Blues Band and later the Otis Taylor Blues Band. He ventured overseas to London, where he performed for a brief time until he returned to the U.S. in the late '60s. His next project became the T&O Short Line with legendary Deep Purple singer/guitarist Tommy Bolin. Stints with the 4-Nikators and Zephyr followed before he decided to take a hiatus from the music business in 1977. During this time he established a successful career as an antiques dealer and also began coaching an amateur bicycling team. The team included two African-American riders, and was ranked fourth in the nation. But with much prodding from Kenny Passarelli and associates, the reluctant Taylor returned to music in 1995.

Two years later, he released *Blue Eyed Monster* (Shoelace Music), which marked the emergence of a singer/songwriter who has, in his own words, "a way of saying something that seems to be more intense." Further, he says, "You can definitely see how I was forming. There was the Christmas song about a guy that killed his parents. Definitely getting ready to go that way, you know?" In 1998, he raised more eyebrows with *When Negroes Walked the Earth* (Shoelace), an album replete with unapologetic lyrics, stark instrumentation and a gut-wrenching delivery. *Playboy* described it as "minimalist blues in the John Lee Hooker mode." Critics and music fans took notice and Taylor's talents as a vivid storyteller and accomplished guitar player were solidified. His gifts were further recognized in summer 2000, with a composition fellowship from the Sundance Institute in Park City, UT.

If Taylor's first two recordings cast a spell on the music world, listeners were officially entranced by *White African* (2001, NorthernBlues Music), his most direct and personal statement about the experiences of African-Americans. He addressed the lynching of his great-grandfather and the death of his uncle. Brutality became his concern in songs that fearlessly explored the history of race relations and social injustices. With this disc Taylor was officially blazing a trail. He earned four W.C. Handy nominations and won the award for Best New Artist Debut.

White African was barely in record stores when he began writing the songs that would comprise *Respect the Dead*. Released in 2002, it made him a contender for two Handys in 2003 — Best Acoustic Artist and Contemporary Blues Album. The following year, he bent conventions again with his debut effort for Telarc Records, **Truth Is Not Fiction**. Here, Taylor took a decidedly electric, almost psychedelic path, forging a sound that he describes as "trance-blues." Music critics were indeed captivated as the disc received lavish praise from USA Today, The New York Times, Washington Post, NPR, and a nod from the DownBeat Critics Poll for "Blues Album of the Year." The Mark Wahlberg movie *Shooter* featured the track "Nasty Letter."

He quickly followed up *Truth* with **Double V**, which marked his entrance as a producer and a collaborator with his daughter Cassie, who sings and plays bass. The album scored him a DownBeat Critics Poll win for an unheard-of

second consecutive year, while Rolling Stone, The New Yorker, Blender, and CNN all gave their thumbs-up. But perhaps the most meaningful accolade came from Living Blues' Readers Poll, which awarded Taylor (along with Etta James) with the Best Blues Entertainer title in 2004.

Telarc released **Below the Fold**, Taylor's seventh CD, in the summer of 2005. The album is a set of stylistically varied songs that point to a blues-based center but are awash with Appalachian country overtones and moody, psychedelic rock. Once again, the critics raved. DownBeat gave the album four stars, noting that Taylor "has a poet's soul, with a deep respect for the history of blacks in America and an unshakable curiosity about the human condition." Paste called him "a country-folk version of spontaneous, talking-blues master John Lee Hooker." The New Yorker dubbed his sound "Velvet Underground Railroad," and went on to proclaim that "he may drone but he never stays still, and when he moves he's always heading toward places you haven't seen." At year's end, *Below the Fold* landed in the 12 slot on the Chicago Tribune's Top 20 album list.

In February 2007, Taylor released **Definition of a Circle**, a stirring 12-song set that covers a wide cross-section of emotionally charged themes ranging from the personal to the political, and includes a diverse and outstanding cast of session players: guitarist Gary Moore, blues harpist Charlie Musselwhite and jazz pianist Hiromi. As always, Otis' daughter, Cassie, adds a stunning layer of vocals and incredible bass work to the set.

Truth and history were at the heart of **Recapturing the Banjo**, Taylor's fifth recording for Telarc. Released in February 2008, the album explores the deepest roots of the banjo — an instrument that, despite its common associations with American folk and bluegrass, actually originated in Africa and made its way to the fledgling American colonies in the 1700s via the influx of African slaves. Entertaining and enlightening at the same time, *Recapturing the Banjo* includes performances by some of the most accomplished African-American banjo players on the current roots music scene: Guy Davis, Corey Harris, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Keb' Mo' and Don Vappie. Taylor has proven his banjo chops with two consecutive Blues Music Awards nominations (2005 and 2006) for Best Instrumentalist in the banjo category. The CD was DownBeat's 1 Blues Album in 2008's Critics Poll and one of their only five 5-star reviews for the entire year. The track "Ten Million Slaves" is still a consistent seller, in and out of the top five digital blues tracks.

Taylor's 2009 recording, **Pentatonic Wars and Love Songs**, throws a light on the complexities of love in all of its forms. The album also features guest appearances by guitarist Gary Moore and jazz/hip-hop pianist Jason Moran. *Pentatonic Wars and Love Songs* was released in the same week that two of Otis' songs were heard by millions in Michael Mann's blockbuster movie *Public Enemies* starring Johnny Depp and Christian Bale.

In addition to touring and recording, Taylor spearheads a Blues in the Schools program called "Writing the Blues." Created with his wife, Carol Taylor, the program includes visits by Otis to elementary schools and universities around the country to offer advice, enlighten, and mentor students about the blues. "I start by asking them to write down what makes them sad: fears, disappointments, losses, whatever. It is just amazing to see some of these nuggets, these incredible thoughts. They are often simple sentences but so real, so sad, so true, so pure." For Taylor, it's an opportunity to connect with others and help others to connect with themselves and tap into their own creative ideas. It allows him to do his part in ensuring that the blues, and the ability to share life experiences, will continue in the next generation.

Taylor resides in Boulder, Colorado, with his wife and two daughters.

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