



If You Don't Know, Now You Know

BIG James Montgomery

by Tim HOLEK

"I swore if I ever got a chance to have a band, we were goin' [to] play different stuff," said Chicago's Big James Montgomery. Montgomery combines R&B, funk, soul, blues, and disco into his horn-drenched music, creating a sound that is completely different from today's typical blues re-hash. The Chicago-based singer, songwriter, producer, and trombone player is strongly influenced by the past (James Brown, P-Funk, Cameo, the Bar-Kays), but he is determined to take the music where it hasn't been. "I'm always tryin' to grow. I never want to get caught up into just one thing. Seems like every time I'm surprising people. They don't know what to expect."

Born in Chicago on November 4, 1961, Montgomery has become known for his funk-infused blues. Speaking with the same rasp that is present in his singing voice, he says, "People say that I just play funk. That's not all I do. I consider myself more soul blues than I would funk. I just put a dash of funk in it 'cause I love it and it gets the party goin'."

The modern blues world is full of bands and artists who feature lickety-split guitar playing. But Big James and his Chicago Playboys are unique. Trombone is

their featured instrument. "I always thought that sets me apart and made me special. Everybody a gun slinger, and with the horn that makes it a little different. People say they like the horns. I didn't want to be like everybody else. Even a couple songs that I do that are cover songs you not gonna hear nobody do."

In 2005 and 2006, Big James was voted best horn player in the *Living Blues* annual Critic's Choice Awards. He regularly gigs in Chicago at places like Buddy Guy's Legends, Kingston Mines, and House of Blues. The outstanding trombone player is also becoming an attraction on the country's blues festival circuit. Last year, he appeared at the Pocono Blues Festival and this year he is on the bill at the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival.

Big James Montgomery's musical voyage began when he witnessed a concert by the Godfather of Soul, James Brown. He remembers, "My dad took me. Man I can see it like it was yesterday. My mother was mad and said don't be taking that boy out there at that time a night. He's like woman you don't tell me what to do, this is my son."

JOSEPH A. ROSEN

and I'm taking him. My dad knew the guy who owned the Capitol Theater. It's torn down now." The Capitol was built in 1925 and was one of Chicago's finest auditoriums for both stage productions and movies.

Noticing the young boy, the owner made arrangements for him to watch the performance from the side of the stage. "When I seen that band, and they had them suits on with them capes, and they was dancin', I was like that's what I want to do. Then when the Godfather came out, I was like oh my God. I can remember him looking over at me like who's this little boy? I was blown away and I told my father I say man that's what I wanna do. He say ah boy you're crazy. So I knew at seven years old what I wanted to do. I just had to find out how I was going to do it."

Initially Montgomery wanted to play guitar. But in his first year of high school, he put the guitar down, picked up the horn, and has "been struggling with it ever since." He says, "When I got into high school, I was into the Parliament Funkadelic 'cause that was real big at that time. When I was 15, and starting to play the trombone, Fred Wesley was my idol 'cause he played with James Brown. When he left James Brown and went to Parliament, I didn't know nothin' about Parliament. All I knew was Maceo played with them so [I knew] they gotta be bad. I used to see them every time they'd come to Chicago. Over the years I got to meet these cats. It blows me away that these guys are now my friends. One night I was there, I had my horn, and they let me sit in. For some reason George [Clinton] just looked back and asked me did I want to sing. I said yeah and man I blew them away. Ever since then, he looks for me now. Where my



COURTESY: BIG JAMES MONTGOMERY X 4



man at? Where Big J at? Believe it or not, they asked me to join but I'm doin' all right now with my own band.

"Anyway, the cats I was goin' to high school with was into the jazz. They like man forget that, you gotta get in on this. So [trombonist] J.J. Johnson and [trumpeter] Maynard Ferguson, they turned me on. Wow, these cats was really playin'. I really kinda got into that." It wasn't long before Montgomery received his blues baptism. Growing up in Chicago almost guaranteed him that opportunity.

"There's a club over on 79th Street [that's been] torn down. The club was called House of 'J's and they had blues all the time. I used to walk by there every day when I got out of school. I'd a been about 15 and I just started playing trombone. Billy Branch and the Sons of Blues with Carl Weathersby and J.W. [Williams] were playing at that time. They'd be on break and I'd come by walking with my horn. They'd ask boy you know anything about the blues? I'm like no. They like ah you wanna try it? I say hey I'll try anything. They told me c'mon in. I didn't know anything about improvising or anything like that.

Billy was really the first person who took me to the side and showed me how to improvise to the beat and against the beat."

Montgomery recalls getting his first big



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Jack Vartocci/FlashPhoto.com

Singer and trombonist "BIG JAMES" MONTGOMERY leading his band, The Chicago Playboys, with CHARLES KIMBLE on tenor saxophone and CARL "C.C." COPELAND on electric bass guitar at the Route 66 Stage at the 17th Annual Chicago Blues Festival, Chicago, IL, Sunday, 06/11/2000.

break. "When I went away to college I was playin' mostly big band jazz. I had little funk bands. We played Top 40 stuff. I was workin' with my dad, who had a tavern right down the street from [the] Checkerboard [Lounge]. These two guys came in and they were like hey where the guy who plays trombone at? I said that's me. They like what's up man; you wanna go on the road? I say wanna go on the road with who? They said Little Milton. I said Little Milton?! Hey shit I listen to Little Milton every day! That's all they play on my father's juke box. The juke box was loaded with blues. I said man heck yeah. So they say O.K., we gonna rehearse tomorrow. I went to one rehearsal man and they told me go home and get my stuff. I say, what? They say we leavin' at 12 midnight. Man I went home and told my mother and she say, boy you've lost your mind."

At the time Montgomery was in college and only nineteen years old. "She told me go in there and tell your father. I never forget this man. I didn't call my father dad, I called him chief. I say, hey Chief, I got this opportunity to go on the road with Little Milton and he say, what? I say yeah and they leavin' tonight. I said I'm gonna go with them. He said what about your school? He looked at my mother and he say, you know what, let him go, I told you he was never gonna be shit."

Though his father's reaction seems

harsh, Montgomery sees it as an expression of his love. "My father, he was everything to me...He taught me how to be a man...I looked up to my father so much. Believe me, he was hard on me...He wasn't too happy about my music...Guess they thought I'd be playin' the Checkerboard all my life. They didn't see what I saw."

As Montgomery grew more successful, his father came around. "Before my father passed in 2000, he got to see me do some big stuff. He said you know what, you might not be bad after all. He would come to my shows, stand in the back, and watch the whole show. He would come down to Legends. He thought Buddy [Guy] was cool. He seen me on the Jay Leno show. The biggest thing that got him was I did a gig one time and I was hired to play trombone behind Lou Rawls. My father thought the world of Lou Rawls, and I say hey Chief I'm doin' this little gig you wanna come and check me out? He goes oh hell no. I said I was playin' with Lou Rawls. He said Lou Rawls—oh yeah, yeah I'm comin' to that."

Montgomery's relationship with his father may have been perfect preparation for working for Little Milton, a famously demanding and difficult boss. Montgomery remembers, "When I played with Little Milton he did some terrible things to us. He was hard, hard, hard. After I left his band we became friends. I told him, Milton...you were the

worst person I ever worked for. When Little Milton died, it knocked me to my knees. Because man when I looked at Little Milton he looked like the kind of person that would never die. He was a spiraling guy. When they say Little Milton past, I could not believe it.

When life on the road with Milton became unbearable, Montgomery handed in his notice due to what he described as "My own reasons." Not long after that, Albert King called and offered Big James a job in his band. "I didn't think there was anyone worse than Milton [to work for] but Albert phew! He was a good guy but I said man I can't deal with this. I come back to Chicago. I used to go out to the airport to play my horn to get money. It was like street busking. I'd go out there and just play. I was playing with a few bands but nothin' major. One night I went to the Checkerboard after being out at the airport all day. The band was playin'. I had my horn with me. I say hey, can I sit in? Johnny Christian [the featured entertainer that night] said no, we don't let nobody sit in on the weekends. The one good thing L.C. [Thurman, owner of the Checkerboard] ever did in his life for me was he told Johnny oh no no no, let him play—he played with Little Milton. So Johnny said go ahead. Charlie [Kimble] was in the band before I joined so was Chico Banks and his brother."

In fact many good musicians came

through Christian's band. In addition to Banks, there were Michael Coleman, Vance Kelly, and Willie Davis, to name a few. "So they let me up. Everything they was calling off I was hitting it right off the top because I had played all this stuff. I told Johnny, you know I sing a bit too. All the time I played with Milton, I never got a chance to sing. He asked me do you wanna sing? He let me sing. Then I started singing maybe a couple songs a night and I started doing more and more. Johnny taught me so much. Little Milton gave me my start but Johnny was the one that really let me loose to sing and do my thing."

Christian was content to play the little clubs. Many, including Little Milton and Tyrone Davis, felt he would have been huge had he branched out, but he never took that chance. He didn't know it at the time, but branching out was soon going to be Montgomery's responsibility. "I didn't know Johnny was sick. He'd get up on that stage and we'd have to beg him to stop. This one particular day he did a couple numbers and he say James you finish the show. I told Charlie something ain't right with the old man. Then I went fishing with him. He said you know something ain't right with me. I keep going to the doctor and they can't find nothin' but I know something is not right. I

want you to do me one favor. Promise me that no matter what happens to me, you keep the band goin'. Chico called me and said the old man had gone [January 27, 1993] and I thought it was an honor that we should keep the Playboys goin'."

Chico and most of the other band members had their own musical ideas. So Big James and Kimble went one direction and the rest of the band went on another. Proving to be a man of his word, Big James kept the promise of his former band leader. "I know he looking down on me and he see me doing things with the band that he probably wouldn't do. I kinda feel like I took the band places that he never had."

Montgomery had succeeded in carrying the band on, but he wasn't making enough money from his music. So he got a day job working on the docks in shipping and receiving. That's where he met Otto Dony, his manager and executive producer. Dony is a wiry character who jokingly refers to the group as the best band you've never heard. Their initial friendship quickly turned into a business relationship.

"We were bullshitting and I told him hey man you gotta come hear my band." Dony wasn't interested as he thought they were just some sorry garage band. He grew more interested when he heard that the band

had a gig opening for Buddy Guy. After seeing Montgomery live, Dony couldn't understand why he didn't have any of his own CDs out. With Dony's help, Big James Montgomery released his debut CD, **Funkin' Blues**, in 1998 on his own Jamot Music label. "I've done three CDs all 'cause of that man. He was the only one believed in me back then." All three independent discs were produced on a small budget, so the band had to record them within a couple of days. "That's what I'm trying to tell these record [company] people. If we could do this with nothin', imagine if we had a budget and time to really work some stuff up. Man we'd kill 'em on these CDs." Montgomery released **If It Wasn't For The Blues** in 2001.

Many of the songs on his most recent CD, **Now You Know** [2005], are about real events—in some cases, painful love affairs. On *Da' Blues*, Montgomery's soulful vocals drip with emotion. "I never forget a guy told me that's what the blues is. It's a person talking about their life experiences. What they go through, what they been through, how they been happy, and how they been sad. Son House said blues ain't nothin' but a man in love with a woman.

"I hate to say this man, when Johnny passed, people said we was gonna be nothin'. We wasn't gonna go nowhere. Musicians, people I thought were my friends, they tore us down. I remember that and I never forgot that. I kept on plugging away until I found the right group of cats and now we ain't lookin' back. Those same people that told me I wasn't going to be nothin', they're begging to play with me and I won't give them the time of day."

Although Montgomery has been slighted by the industry, he keeps plugging away. Big James wants people to give his music a chance and then to make up their own minds about his band. His goal is to get enough gigs so that his band members won't have to work for or with anyone else. "They love us in France. Oh my God, it's unbelievable. They have a greater appreciation for the music. They know the history. They know all the musicians. It's a beautiful thing. I'm hopin' and prayin' that something breaks for us over here. Something's got to come up because we too good to not get recognized by somebody."

As Montgomery says each night from the bandstand, "If you don't know, now you know."

Big James Montgomery is headed back in the studio in June to record his next CD, **Thank God I've Got The Blues**, due out in late 2007. For more information go to www.Bigjames.com.



Gabe Tomko