

Mac Arnold

Cornbread and Collard Greens

Mac Arnold is a pleasant and cheerful southern gentleman who pronounces every syllable when he speaks. He was born June 30, 1942 in the little town of Pelzer in Greenville County, South Carolina, and became interested in music at a young age. By the time he was in high school, Arnold had a band whose regular guest piano player was James Brown. His career took off after he moved to Chicago in the 1960s and became a member of the Muddy Waters Blues Band. He spent the '70s in Hollywood, where he was the associate producer of *Soul Train* and videotape editor for the ABC television network. In the early '80s, Arnold returned to South Carolina, where he farmed, drove a truck, and dug wells. In 2004, he came back to performing and recording music. His debut CD, **Nothin' To Prove**, was released in 2005. This past April saw the inaugural Mac Arnold Cornbread and Collard Greens Blues Festival in Greenville, South Carolina. His second CD, **Backbone & Gristle**, will be released in late 2007. Mac Arnold continues to be based in South Carolina, where he divides his time between his music and his vegetable garden.

by Tim HOLEK



The earliest musical influence on Mac Arnold was the church. "My family is very religious. Playing blues was just a zero for them. You want to talk to them about music, let's go to church. [laughs] There was 13 of us, and that's how we all got started. Doing music is from the church. I started out playing music very young. Started playing professional real young. My dad didn't want us to play because back in the day of early religion, families didn't want any guitars around. Guitars were a bad little evil. My brother, in 1947, he decided he wanted a guitar but knew he couldn't tell my family about it. What he did was he took one of my father's old gasoline cans, and he fabricated it and made a guitar out of it. We had a contest at school, like a talent show. He won first place in the talent show. I thought that was really something. I started seeking to play myself. I ended up today playing on a tin can as a guitar [laughs] that we fabricated."

Arnold relocated to Chicago in the early 1960s. He soon met sax ace A.C. Reed at the Green Bunny Club. Reed was in need of a bass player, so he recruited Arnold. During his time in Chicago, Arnold recorded and toured with Reed and Otis Spann. Spann liked his bass playing style so much that he asked Arnold to play on his *Blues Is Where It's At* (Bluesway - 1966) album. That same year, Arnold also appeared on John Lee Hooker's *Live At The Café A Go Go* (Bluesway - 1966).

Toward the end of that year, at age 24, Mac Arnold joined the Muddy Waters Blues Band. According to the story, when Arnold advised Waters that he was from Greenville, South Carolina, Waters said, "Son, if you're from the South, then you can play." At the time the band's lineup consisted of Luther Johnson and Sammy Lawhorn on guitars, Frances Clay on drums, Otis Spann on piano, George "Harmonica" Smith on harp, and Mac Arnold on bass.

"Muddy, he was a guy that when he hired a musician he would take that musician under his wings just like an old hen would. He would treat you like you're a part of his family. He always made sure that you got to where you was supposed to go on time. He made sure that you had someone that would pick you up and take you there. He had a guy that drove. His name was Bo and he could drive from Chicago to San Francisco nonstop. He was an incredible driver. Muddy was overall the most influential musician I've ever played with. He was just incredible."

After touring for approximately one year with Waters, Arnold left the band, formed the Soul Invaders, and settled back in Chicago. At the time, Don Cornelius, a disc jockey on WVON radio in Chicago, was



working in the clubs, spinning records, and co-ordinating the live music. Occasionally, the Soul Invaders would be booked to perform at these events. "I found out that Don was going to do a pilot for *Soul Train*. I was there when we were doing the pilot and found out the show was going to be running out in Los Angeles. I decided I was going to move from Chicago to Los Angeles to do the show. I had been planning to move to Los Angeles anyway. It was so cold in Chicago, I didn't like it. Once I found out there was a place that I really liked for weather, from traveling with Muddy Waters, I moved to Los Angeles."

Arnold relocated to California in 1969, followed in 1970 by Cornelius, who was looking for a place to shoot *Soul Train*. The two reconnected and discussed the possibility of doing the show in Los Angeles. Arnold went to college, learned the fundamentals of television, and became the associate producer of *Soul Train* in 1971. He held the position

until 1975. "This involved making sure all the acts were in line, and that they were there on time. Me and the producer would sit down and figure out how we were gonna lay the show out. We would get with the executive producer [Cornelius] and the director and sort out the script. We would do two shows every other Saturday. If we didn't get it all done by late Saturday night, we would break down and start up in the middle of the day Sunday and finish it up."

Arnold recalls one artist from that period who changed everything. The artist was Elton John, and according to Arnold, "He broke the color barrier. That's the song that did it [*Benny And The Jets*]. The kids warned us, they said, if you all don't get Elton John on the show, we're not gonna dance any

more and they were some of our best dancers. Other artists who appeared on *Soul Train* were Barry White, the Temptations, and a slew of others. All the people that was doing R&B stuff through the era of the early '70s, we had them on there. It was an R&B-oriented show and it's still on to this day.

"In 1975 I got into videotape editing for the ABC television network. I had a chance to go on the 1976 presidential campaign with Ford. It took some time to do the editing. We had tones that we could lay on the tape wherever we wanted to edit it. You pushed a little button and tried to catch it on the fly.

Your timing had to be good. I was a musician before I got into that, so that helped me a heck of a lot."

While in Hollywood, Arnold became friends with musician and producer Quincy Jones, and in a classic case of being in the right place at the right time, ended up playing bass on the theme song for the *Sanford And Son* television program. "Louis Jordan and I were the two people that played that song, which was written by Quincy Jones. They just paid me and I let it go at that. That show was filmed before a live audience. I also played bass in the band that enter-

JOSEPH A. ROSEN



Max Hightower



Max Hightower

tained the audience. I met Redd Foxx several times. Over a couple years, we had quite a few encounters."

In the early 1980s, after nearly a decade in Hollywood, Arnold returned to South Carolina. "When I left Los Angeles, I had \$4,000 worth of cameras. There was a young man who had the opportunity to go into the media. I gave all my equipment to him and basically got away from the picture industry. I came home because my mother, she got sick. She had terminal sickness. We knew the time was coming. So I decided to hang everything up in California and sell my property out there and move home. I got a chance to stay with my mother for two years. That was wonderful. I knew her before she passed in a way I never experienced before. We could sit down and talk about old times, things that she remembered that I forgot, and it was wonderful."

With a rich entertainment-related career in his past, Arnold returned to farming. He had no intention of playing music professionally again, but through a side job he had as a truck driver for Belk department stores, he met Max Hightower, a diesel mechanic and harmonica player who was determined to lure Arnold into a band with him. Arnold recalls the time in 1993 when he took a truck into the shop and "Max were in the shop playing a song that Muddy Waters recorded. We used to do the song all the time when I was playing with Muddy. I started singing along with the song and Max looked around [and said], 'hey you know that guy?' I say 'yeah I used to play with him.' He said 'you used to play with him?! Oh man.'

"A few days later I went back to the shop and Max had something to show me. He had been researching me and had this book called **Muddy Waters: The Mojo Man**

[by Sandra Tooze] and he found my name in it. From then on, every time I see Max he'd have a story for me about trying to get a band going. I kept brushing Max around because I knew it's awful hard to try and keep musicians together. I said Max I don't know about that. It's too rough. I been through that. He said, 'Aw man, well it will work, it will work.'

Every few days he'd call me with a story about putting a band together and playing the blues. He kept on after me until one day he caught me on the right day. I said, 'I tell you what Max. I don't want different musicians at every show. I'm not for that. If you put a band together with guys who are going to stick together, I'll consider it.' We ran all over town looking for musicians. We went through everybody in town. Then after a while, Max went his own way for a minute but he was still working with musicians, try-

ing to get something together. Then he got back on me again. By that time ten years has passed. Three years ago [in 2004] Max came up with the musicians. We came up with an awesome group."

In addition to Arnold on lead vocals and bass, the band features Max Hightower (harmonica, slide guitar, piano), Austin Brashier (guitar), Mark McMakim (bass), and Mike Whitt (drums).

During the ten years that Hightower was searching for the right band members, Arnold continued to drive for Belk until the distribution center closed. In 2002, Arnold changed careers again and began working for a water well drilling company.

Farming and music are the dual focus of Arnold's life today. "The name of our group came from the love of food. We started rehearsing at my house. I'd cook every time the guys would come down. If I had sweet



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potatoes ready [from my garden], I'd cook some of those. We would cook chicken, corn, okra, beans. We had to come up with a name for the group. We decided to call it Plate Full O' Blues.

"I have a three-acre garden every year. I grow a variety of vegetables like collard greens. If someone has a club that serves food, we take the vegetables with us to the clubs. I also take my vegetables to the [local] activity center. That's where retired people go for activities during the day. We split them up among the people that's there." Arnold has always given his homegrown vegetables away. "I have not sold anything yet." Hightower is quick to praise the modest Arnold for his benevolence. "It's one thing to give someone a present you bought from Wal-Mart but when you grow something with your own time and hands, that's extra special."

All of Arnold's vegetables are home-grown organic style. "My father used to do it since we were kids. He would always just use fertilizer from the animals and from our gardens. I use steer manure and chicken manure. I go to the chicken house where they raise chickens and get a truckload of chicken manure. I bring it back, dump it on the farm, and cover it up with black plastic. If there is any type of virus in it, it will purify it right there on the ground. When you're dealing with [chemical] fertilizer you don't know what you're using so we pushed that aside."

Arnold hasn't cut down on the size of his garden since going back out on the road. "In the spring when it's chilly, we don't be on the road so much. That's when I get everything planted. If I'm home one day out of the week then I'm good to go. I use a tractor to plow. It doesn't take long to plow my acres with a tractor. It took some doing to figure out how to avoid hoeing. You know those hoe handles that's on the neck of my slide guitar? That's why they are on there. I don't use the hoe that much any more. I use a tractor. [laughs]"

Plate Full O' Blues is a band of younger musicians who love and know how to play old school blues. "We are going to attract and hang on to the very end. On our new CD [*Backbone & Gristle*], we have a taste of different styles of music but we still have some old school in there. We're gonna keep the old school alive. We have a mental status of staying with the old style more so than the rock style." Another Muddy Waters alumnus who is steeped in old school blues is Bob Margolin. He has been a staunch advocate of Arnold ever since he returned to recording and touring.

"Mac is a real blues treasure who has resurfaced and is being appreciated. His

singing, songwriting, and bass playing are very strong, and his one-string-gas-can-slide playing is funky, expressive, and eye-catching. Beyond his own music, he's doing a lot for his community in Greenville, South Carolina. He's not only playing some fine blues but keeping it alive and passing it down and making it exciting for young folks."

There is a sense of community at the Mac Arnold Cornbread and Collard Greens Blues Festival, which is advertised as a celebration of blues, food, and family. "I grow collard greens in my garden. We harvest them up. I cook them up and we take them to the vendor where we gonna have the festival and they are served while we doin' the festival. I provide 95% of the food [at the festival]. The cornbread, the beans, and the collard greens. I try to get someone around the town, in Greenville, to sponsor me in the meat because I don't have the means of providing the meat at this point. We are on the road so much; I can't have anything alive that relies on me feeding it. I just put in 400 plants of collards [in October 2007]. I'm getting ready for next spring when we do the festival again.

"For the second annual festival, we are going to be doing stuff for the children's hospital here in Greenville, South Carolina. We didn't donate to that [after the first festival] because we sponsored it all ourselves last year. Thank God we didn't owe anybody at the end. That took some doing because we've known of people that go out and fund this thing their selves and they were losing their pants. For the Collard Greens Festival, we start out at this time of the year [the fall] and we pull everything together like finding sponsors and the entertainment. What we don't pull in as sponsors, we as a group, Plate Full O' Blues, do the rest of the sponsoring."

Arnold also assists the youth of his community. "We've been quite successful with Blues In The Schools this year. Kids, they see something different and kids are looking for something different. Blues is something entirely different. Kids have not been introduced to blues. [They know] a little bit of rock and hip hop stuff. We know as adults that hip hop just leads kids to jail. I'm one of the people that very, very interested in trying to turn that around. We have to have somebody for our future. The children that's listening to all this gangbanging and talking bad about females and talking bad about themselves as a whole, that needs to change. It needs to change because we don't have a future if it doesn't.

"Our agenda is we go in and show them how to set up an instrument like the gasoline can guitar. I have one that is broken

down all the way. I showed them how to start it and how to finish the instrument. How to tune the instrument up. How to play the instrument. How to write songs. How to compose them. We go through the whole smear. We even let the kids come up, if they so desire, and play an instrument with us. We back them up. I tell you, if we get one kid per school to change their lifestyle and get with reality, we've done something."

With a small seed grant, filmmaker Stan Woodward documented Mac Arnold and the Plate Full O' Blues band for a year following the release of their first CD, *Nothin' To Prove*. The film's highlights include the band's performance at the Arkansas Blues and Heritage Festival in Helena, Arkansas, the reunion of Arnold with Chicago blues musicians Francis Clay, Eddie Shaw, Hubert Sumlin, and Arnold at home working in his vegetable garden.

"Stan came out and started to shoot us at the Handlebar in Greenville. Well, we were sitting in the dressing room and Stan started questioning me about my lifestyle. So I told him all the stuff I do and he said, 'Have you ever thought about a documentary?' It all started from there. We started shooting two years ago. We have about 250 hours. Our main objective now is to start campaigning for funds to do the editing so we can release it.

"South Carolina educational television has guaranteed us three time slots for air. As soon as we get it edited, we can present it to them and hopefully we can go nation wide. The reason why I say that is, during the first annual Mac Arnold Cornbread and Collard Greens Blues Festival we included Greer, South Carolina, high school. We had the high school marching band there. We had the middle school. We had the elementary school from Greer come up and perform the song that we wrote called *I Can Do Anything*, and it's incredible. It was a tear-jerking thing. It's all been captured on the film, including Bob Margolin and Willie "Big Eyes" Smith performing with me on stage." Arnold is working on getting Morgan Freeman to be the narrator. "I'd like to connect with him and try to get him to do that because I think that would be incredible." [To track the progress of the documentary regarding editing and sponsorship, visit www.stanwoodward.com.]

In the coming year, look for the new CD, *Backbone & Gristle*, and the completed film documentary, and be sure to attend the 2008 Mac Arnold Cornbread and Collard Greens Blues Festival.

