

ENTERTAINMENT

James Cotton keeps on harpin'

Q: Can a black man sing the blues?



Roman Pawlyszyn

He's short, well-fed, and he's sitting in the front row. With the beard, the long blonde hair draping over his denim jacket, he looks like a refugee from a Black Oak Arkansas concert. "Yeah, James Cotton, awright!" he gruffly howls, throwing his beer bottle from hand to hand in time to the music. He gets up, shakes his profusion of hair frenetically, and proceeds to dance his way to the stage. Huge inebruous grin on his face, he offers James Cotton his bottle. Without flinching, Cotton raises his palm, smiles

politely, and shakes his head—"I'd love to, but I'm busy right now" his look seems to say. The drunken yahoo shrugs, dances his way back to his chair and yells, "James Cotton!"

The road goes ever on. Or at least it does for James Cotton. The 46-year-old singer and blues-harp blower is a veteran of the road, an old hand at playing a juke-joint or bar in one town, packing up, and driving all night to get to the next. "For the last 17 years, I pretty much been on the road 40, 45 weeks out of the year," says Cotton. "But if you know what you gotta do you gotta do it.

I feel like the people and me go together. I love playing for the people." He'd better. He's been doing it since he was nine.

On Cotton's current Canadian tour, which brought him to the Rondun Tavern last weekend, he is promoting his first record in nearly six years, *My Foundation*. For this album, Cotton put together an all-star band of some of Chicago's most experienced bluesmen and recorded an album of uncompromising blues—no overdubs, no wah-wah pedals, no disco. The trouble is, it's so uncompromising no record company would touch it. Cotton had to finance the project himself and as of now, the album is available only in Canada.

"I'm tryin' to get the album to move so I can get into other things around Chicago," says Cotton in his thick Southern accent. "We're going to try to keep the blues a'bums coming and also do something (a'bum-wise) with the current band we have now.

"The blues music don't get heard too much no more, y'know. Radio stations don't pick it up all the time and what I'm tryin' to do, it ain't but handful—but I don't want to let the music down."

It was on the radio, in fact, that Cotton first became exposed to the blues. As a child, he would listen to the legendary Sonny Boy Williamson II and try to imitate his playing, despite the fact that blues was not allowed in the Cotton household owing to its being such a sinful genre. At the age of nine, Cotton ran away from his parents' home in Mississippi to stay with Williamson. "I was a little different boy from what I was

raised up as, you know," recalls Cotton. "I always played music—there wasn't too many little boys like me. But I never thought I'd ever make a living out of it."

Cotton lived with Williamson, playing gigs with him and learning harmonica from him, until he was about 16. Then, one day, Williamson announced that he was handing the young Cotton his entire band—he was leaving. "Everybody in the band was older and I was scared. I just went crazy and the band fell apart in four or five months."

A job as second harmonica to Howlin' Wolf led to a 12-year stint with Muddy Waters, a position that Cotton gave up to form his own band. Since '66, he's played with Joplin, Johnny Winter, J. Gells, Steve Miller... "You name 'em," challenges Cotton.

Judging from Friday's show at the Rondun, Cotton has certainly got some friends out there in the audience. But the glue that bonds that friendship is a mystery to me. What with the warm-up band, a 90-minute intermission, and a warm-up set from his own band, it was 11:45 before Cotton finally made his appearance. "Here's the blues, can you dig it?" he asked, and a steamy clubload of people responded affirmatively, getting up and dancing in front of the stage.

Cotton ran through barely an hour's worth of material, singing such standards as "Born Under a Bad Sign", "Kansas City", and "Take Out Some Insurance On Me, Baby", and then refused to do an encore for the boisterous house. The charisma was there—the sweat dripping from those patented bushy sideburns, the

facial contortions, the audience-teasing. What was missing was momentum. And, throughout the set, he played surprisingly little harmonica.

It's surprising that Cotton would be so sparing with the harp because he himself insists he is an instrumentalist before a vocalist. "You see, I weigh 240 pounds and I got a big stomach—that's the air tank. I'm a harmonica player—I ain't no singer."

How does Cotton, who has never had a chart hit, feel about the young white bands who came along in the '60's, recorded tunes by Elmore James and Muddy Waters, sold them to mostly white kids and made their fortunes doing it? "I wish I some of it," he says. But then he swallows his bitterness: "I don't get into colours, man. Colours don't make no difference. I figure if a man make it, he make it, regardless of his skin colour, and I'm proud of him."

Cotton ends the interview on a note somewhere between laughter and uneasiness: "Y'know, if I wasn't singin' the blues, I'd probably be goin' crazy. I hate to think about it...I just want to keep on going."

James Cotton produces a copy of his new album, holds it up to the audience, and mentions that it's available only in Canada. The crowd obviously approves. Then he throws the record into the crowd and blows a few wailing notes on the harp. Later, after the band is gone, the pimple-infested kid who caught it jumps on stage in front of the mike, fondling the record over his chest, yells, "I got the record! All right! It was me!" □

Outlaw goes psycho

Mark Lewis

Adelaide Court Theatre's production of *Jessie and The Bandit Queen* retells the legends of outlaws Jesse James and Belle Starr. We get a few facts about them, but facts aren't what they, or the play, are about. Playwright David Freeman (*Creeps*) is more concerned with the making of legends, and whether legends aren't best made by people who don't know who they really are. The play is also about whether folk heroes and media stars can live with what is said and written about them.

In the service of these themes we have portraits of Jesse James as an immature, psychotic hero-worshiper, first of mercenary leader William Quantrill, and then of his own media image. For Belle Starr, her wish was to be Jesse James, to have the fame and freedom his manhood allowed him in the Old West. At first embarrassed by the way the *Police Gazette* (the *National Enquirer* of the late 1800's) por-

trayed them, both Jesse and Belle end up supplying the *Gazette* with made-up stories about themselves, and actually believing in them once the articles are printed. All through the play the two search for their true identities, only to be fully consumed by their media and self-created mythologies.

Both Booth Savage as Jesse and Kate Lynch as Belle Starr skillfully portray their characters, letting us glimpse and feel for the confused persons who are both victims and beneficiaries of their folk hero status. Director Richard Sholchet keeps the pace quick and the play's focus sharp. Designer Paul Stoesser deserves special mention for his stage concept, a subtle and economical statement of the play's themes. On all counts, *Jessie and The Bandit Queen* is a production to be highly recommended.

(For ticket information, call the Adelaide Court Theatre at 416-363-6401.) □

No lac in Et Cric et Crac

Robert Fabes

The Paris-based Theatre Noir proved itself last Friday. *Et Cric et Crac*, a play about the life of the people of les Antilles told through their legends, was a great success, entirely *en francats*.

The matinee show that I saw was geared towards a young audience as there were two high school classes present. The company used this to their advantage, getting the young students to clap and yell back answers to the storyteller. This created an atmosphere of casual happiness, though we were constantly reminded of the poverty present in the characters' lives. This was one of the strong points of the play. We were never allowed to feel sorry for the characters' plight because the tales were told so joyfully. The strong spirit of the poor of the Antilles was wonderfully portrayed on stage and projected into the audience.

The language barrier posed no major problems. The actors' performances were such that the audience knew what was happening without having to understand what was being said.

The use of music and dance throughout a performance is something not commonly found in North American theatre. In *Et Cric et Crac* it was used not as in our musical comedies but as a means of showing the spirit of the people. Though at the beginning there seemed to be some confusion, as the performance progressed the cast pulled things together and attained the desired effect.

The Theatre Noir gave us a new experience in theatre — one which was welcomed and enjoyed. □

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Caligula: Delusions of grandeur

Lloyd Wasser

Penthouse publisher Bob Guccione had a wonderful vision back in 1975. He was going to create a film spectacular that would combine the splendor of the great Hollywood epics with the finest in acting and cinematic talent and the ultimate in celluloid erotica. What he came up with instead was *Caligula* (now playing to capacity crowds at selected Odeon theatres), a lush, visually splendid examination of Pagan Rome and the bloody reign of its most decadent citizen, Galus Caligula Caesar. *Caligula* looks good, but despite all its beauty and epic opulence and its first rate British cast (Helen Mirren, Sir John Gielgud, Peter O'Toole and others), it's a vacuum of a film, lacking guidance and purpose.

Caligula Caesar was Rome's fourth Emperor, and ruled from AD 37 until AD 41. After he was appointed to the Senate he attempted to marry his sister, Drusilla without success. Undaunted, Caligula settled for Caesonia, the most promiscuous woman in Rome, who bore him a daughter a year later.

As the years passed, Caligula began to go mad. Half-crazed over the death of his sister, he sank deeper into the pit of his own decadence. He began to indulge in the most lascivious of sexual pleasures and, when his coffers started to show the strain of his revelry, he enlisted the wives of Roman Senators as prostitutes aboard his boat, where they serviced Roman citizens in exchange for coins.

At one point, Caligula ordered his troops to attack and destroy a swamp of papyrus reeds, and he rode his horse into the Senate and had it appointed a Senator. Finally the populace could put up with his perversities no longer—Caligula and his entire family were slaughtered on the steps of the Senate by Chaerea and his own Praetorian Guard.

Caligula is remembered by historians primarily for the brutality and perversity of his reign, for he indulged

The limits of bad fun and bad taste



"Perrier for me and a hot-dog for the kid."

In pleasures few have matched since, including such niceties as castration, sado-masochism, bestiality and mass murder—all of which make an appearance in Guccione's epic.

The problems the film had in obtaining Canadian distribution were minor compared to those faced by Guccione during the actual filming. Screenwriter Gore Vidal was the first to quit, stating that his 'vision' had been tampered with, and cinematographer Tinto Brass quickly followed when he was refused control. In the end, it was Guccione who took over total production of the picture, including the rewriting and editing processes. To add even more fuel to the fire of lawsuits and rumours, Guccione went back into the studio and shot additional insert hardcore footage to fill out the picture, including the by-now infamous lesbian love scene between Annetta Di Lorenzo and Lori Wagner (this scene has been totally cut from the Canadian edition, as well as many of the more torrid moments of the film). Whatever action remains is quite lush and erotic, and adds a unique touch to an otherwise mediocre production.

Guccione staffed his production with some fine actors, including the superb Guido Mannari, Sir John Gielgud, Teresa Ann Savoy, and Malcolm McDowell in the title role. Of the four, only McDowell fails to do justice to his role. His portrayal is shallow and frenzied, without any room for character maturation.

Guccione seems often to be comparing the world of pagan Rome with our own disjointed lifestyle. The similarities are there, of course, but nothing new is examined. *Caligula* is the 1980's, complete with governmental decay and the dark ages. There is no Rome in this picture, just Guccione's vision of what Rome might have been if he'd been Emperor.

So what we're left with when the film has come to an end and the lights flipped on is a cut-up porn flick with delusions of grandeur. That and a feeling of emptiness—of futility.

There's a scene where one character proclaims: "It doesn't matter, it's only a show." One suspects that within those words lies Bob Guccione's philosophy of *Caligula*.

But it does matter. For seven dollars a seat, it matters a lot. □