

CHRIS THOMAS KING

"It's A Cold Ass World - The Beginning"



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All songs composed and © by Chris Thomas King and published by Tradition Music Co. (BMI) administered by BUG Music Co., except "You'll Be Sorry, Baby" & "Soon This Morning" which are published by Blues Box Publishing Co. (BMI).

Chris Strachwitz - executive producer
Recorded at Reel to Reel Sound Factory -
Baton Rouge, LA

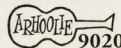
Engineered by Randy & Wes
Mixed by Marin Sound Recording -
San Rafael, CA
Engineered by Fred Waxler
Kevin Famous - the other voice
Tammy Thomas - drums & Joe Hunter - bass
on "Soon This Morning Blues"
Cover photo by Philip Gould

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10341 San Pablo Ave, El Cerrito, CA 94530, USA

CHRIS THOMAS KING



It's A Cold Ass World
The Beginning



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On the southside of Baton Rouge's downtown — the old-line African-American business district — stands the empty shell of a once active nightclub called Tabby's Blues Box. A dilapidated brick structure that previously also served as a drugstore, the Blues Box is located diagonally across the street and from the multi-story Mason's Hall where the heroes of jazz from swing to cool once held forth. The railroad tracks pass close by and Highway 61 a few miles east circles this capital city of Louisiana that is at once suburban Sunbelt and strip mall, refinery and college town (LSU and Southern Universities). Highway 61, "Airline Highway" as locals call it, connects Baton Rouge with New Orleans to the southeast and with the Mississippi Delta to the north. Baton Rouge's essence is

somewhere between big industrial city and rural agrarian hamlet — all overlaid by the pretensions of politics and provincial sophistication. The blues scene in this big country town of Baton Rouge, named for the bloody red stick that once marked Indian hunting grounds, has likewise been a bit of country in the city with the worksong-like blues of the late Silas Hogan, the rooster pep of Guitar Kelly's boogies, the barrelhouse roll of pianist Henry Gray, and the booming existential moans of the late Moses "Whispering" Smith (Arhoolie CD 9004) among others.

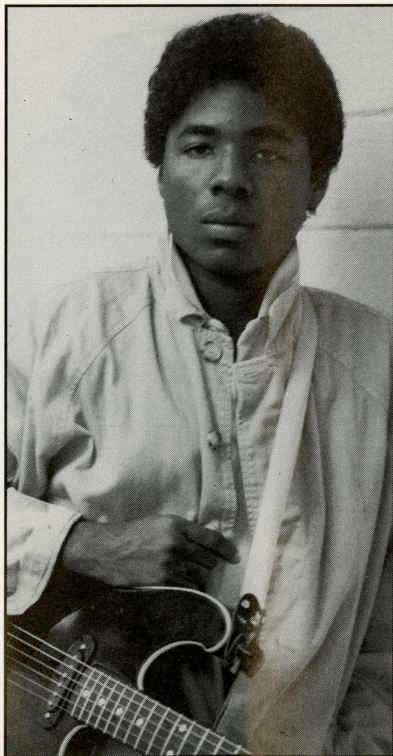
All these men were alive and performing at the Blues Box in 1979 when I first met Chris Thomas King. Then an earnest young teenager, Chris came out to help his father guitarist "Tabby" Thomas who



(l to r) Chris Thomas King, Tammy Thomas, Tabby Thomas. © by 21st Century Blues.

operated the juke with his other son Tammy Thomas. Tabby was (and is) a local legend for his regional swamp pop blues hits like "Hoodoo Party" and "Candy." Chris, who had been playing guitar from an early age, was now stepping up with the older men and adding licks that ranged from

Buddy Guy, who had long since left Baton Rouge for a career based on the southside of Chicago, to the late rock hero Jimi Hendrix. From Buddy Guy, he had absorbed the searing single string work of the country blues gone electric as well as the power chords of emerging blues-funk. From Hendrix's



Chris Thomas King. © by 21st Century Blues.

records, Chris had gleaned the meditative qualities of slow improvisatory runs and bluesy jazz chords as well as the screaming lines of psychedelic blues rock. He also loved the Sugar Hill Gang.

It was a big musical synthesis for a young man to be attempting — even such an eerily precocious individual — in a place where blues tradition was held up as the highest order of the night in the dim smoky bar atmosphere of red and blue spotlights. Chris was mindful of the local legacy, telling me, “Why should I be following Mick Jagger or even B.B. King when I’ve got Silas Hogan, Guitar Kelly, my daddy, and all the rest right here to learn from.” Still he was concerned about a future in the blues as an antiquarian pursuit. “I don’t want to have to wait until someone puts a crutch under my ass to make it in the music business. I want to show that you can be young

and play the blues in a current way.”

The kids in high school, raised on a diet of boombox disco and commercial funk at best, were putting Chris down for loving the blues and hanging with his dad at the Blues Box. He asked me what he should say to them. I said, “Chris, just tell them that the blues was around a longtime before what they are listening to and will be here after it’s gone...and that you plan to be there then too playing the blues.” It’s a hard message to hear for a talented kid caught on the wrong side of teenage style wars.

I suggested to Chris if he could make a record, it would level the playing field of youthful status games. Eventually, I put him in touch with Chris Strachwitz’s Arhoolie label, who in 1986 issued the LP (now a CD you are holding) Chris Thomas: The Beginning.

In the intervening years Chris would leave and return to Baton

Rouge, move restlessly to Austin, try Los Angeles, spend time in Denmark, add “King” to his last name — Chris Thomas King — and be touted as the next Robert Cray, Hendrix, or Howlin’ Wolf by critics. At great personal cost, he experimented — often brilliantly — mixing blues, rock and rap. In the end he found the high dollar hustle music industry world devoid of the one thing the Blues Box had in car loads: a sense of blues community culture.

In 1996 Chris began turning his attention back to Louisiana, settling in New Orleans, just far enough from his father’s turf to remain inspired but not so close as to be suffocated. Don’t get me wrong, Chris loves his father and admires all Tabby has done for the Baton Rouge blues and for him — indeed, Chris regularly features Tabby Thomas on his own shows and recordings. But he was still searching musically,

looking for new ways to sing the blues and new song topics, learning earlier acoustic guitar styles. With impressive perfectly coifed dreads, he was seeking that place where old blues and hip-hop could not only co-exist, but thrive in one stage set — even in a single song.

All this musical introspection was interrupted when movie makers, the Coen brothers, working with music producer T-Bone Burnett, cast Chris in the role of Depression-era Delta bluesman Tommy Johnson in their quirky film “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” For the part, King cut his long potent dreads and dressed in the floppy hat and dandy’s vest of the 1930s country bluesman. More important, he was the only musician who played live in a film of masterful lip syncing by actors. It was a part he relished — a reinforcement of his choice to return to his homeland and the blues he

grew up with. That this success came as a result of discovery by America’s leading independent filmmakers of a man who could act the part of a country bluesman in addition to “playing,” it may be the sweetest irony along Chris Thomas King’s own personal blues highway. Now for an aural portrait of the artist as a young man before his successes in music...and film...listen to Chris Thomas: The Beginning.

– Nick Spitzer, April 2001

Folklorist Nick Spitzer is host and producer of American Routes, his weekly program devoted to the roots of popular music and popular roots music, distributed by Public Radio International. He met Chris Thomas while serving as director of the Louisiana State Folklife Program.

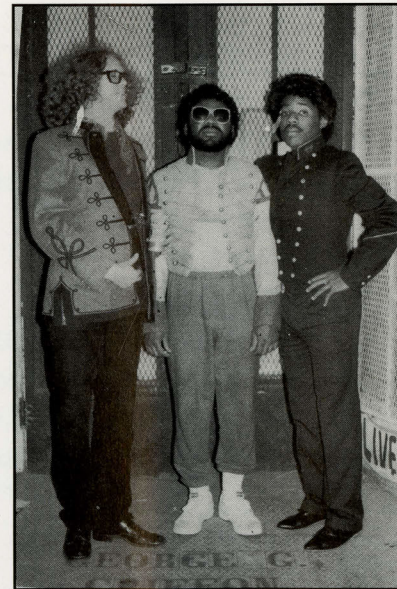
Thank you Chris Strachwitz for receiving me; Nick Spitzer because without you? E. Rodney Jones for believing in my songs; Famous for being my friend; Tabby for bringing the Blues back to Baton Rouge to stay; Dan for support; All my friends at the Box, God bless you all!

– Chris Thomas King

Fan Mail: write to

Chris Thomas King
Tabby's Blues Box
1314 North Blvd.
Baton Rouge, La. 70802

photo: (l to r) Joe Hunter, Tammy Thomas, and
Chris Thomas King, outside of the Blues Box.
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Chris Thomas King, who recently delivered a stellar performance as Tommy Johnson in the Cohen Brothers' film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?", started his career playing guitar at his father's nightclub, Tabby's Blues Box in Baton Rouge, La. His contemporaries could not understand why he was playing "anachronistic" blues in the days of disco. Folklorist Nick Spitzer suggested that he make a record to show his friends that there was prestige in the blues. These are his first recordings, the result of that urging – thus the title "The Beginning!"

File Under:
BLUES

