

JJ Grey: JJ's METAL the natch 'l blues

by Rob Johnson

For almost a decade, JJ Grey and Mofro have been creating some of the best music in America. Made of equal parts blues, funk and soul, the Mofro sound validates their slogan – “front porch soul” – and the new album Georgia Warhorse may be their finest work yet.

JJ Grey is one of the best frontmen around today, and all of his many talents are on display on the new CD. His electrifying vocals, ripping blues harmonica blasts and tasty keyboard playing are at the heart of every song, and his charismatic personality bleeds into every note.

It's only fitting that Grey is very resistant to labels and categories, because it is virtually impossible to fit him into a convenient box. At times he seems like a good old Southern boy, at others like a wizened 70-year-old blues singer, and at others like the prophet of a new Swamp Zen religion.

Like some William Blake of the North Florida swamp, Grey rejects the “mind-forg'd manacles” that “bind with briars our joys and desires.” Any topic is likely to end up on some variation on the dangers of thinking too much, and the importance of trusting your instincts. JJ comes across like a natural mystic, as Bob Marley would say, singing what Taj Mahal once called The Natch'l Blues.



photo: Tobin Voggeser

Mofro Is Just a Word

JJ Grey isn't the type to fix things if they aren't broken. He has recorded only at one studio, and for *Georgia Warhorse* he returned to the comfortable environs of Retrophonic studios in St. Augustine, FL.

“The first time I recorded there was probably around 1988,” Grey says fondly about the place he describes as a “work of art” in the *Georgia Warhorse* liner notes. “My buddy Jim DeVito owns it, and I've slept on the floor there overnight, doing sessions. It's so funny, because way back in the day I barely had enough money to pay him to do the sessions, and at one point I ran out of money and he said, ‘We'll finish it for free; don't worry about it.’ He did me a favor, so when the time came that I could actually afford to pay him for the studio time, it's been nice.”

Besides the comfort level that comes from recording in the same place for over 20 years, Retrophonic has a museum-level collection of vintage instruments and equipment. All that comes through on the new album, which, among other virtues, is mixed beautifully. From the moment the album kicks off with the funky guitar riff of “Diyo Dayo,” it sucks you in. Grey's harp solo halfway in sounds like it's coming across a telephone line from another world, one much funkier and bluesier than the one we live in.

“You've got an unbelievable amount of gear that he has acquired over the years,” Grey says admiringly about DeVito's stash. “Most of the stuff he bought brand new, like a '61 P-Bass.”

Grey has been coming to Retrophonic since before Mofro even existed, but he is quick to say that he sees all of his music as one continuous journey.

“I've been writing tunes and recording stuff since I was 18 years old. A name is just a name – it's all the same project,” Grey explains. “The only thing that has really changed over the years is the instrumentation. If I buy a Wurlitzer or an old electric piano, it will find its way into the music. It's always expanding.”

At this point JJ pauses reflectively, gathering his thoughts before moving on. Grey is one of the world's leading front porch philosophers, and a simple question often expands into thoughtful tangents on related subjects.

“Most people slice life up into moments, sort of like a linear line that we gauge our life across, but I lost the ability to do that or the interest in doing that a long time ago,” Grey remarks dismissively. “I don't dwell on the past too much or worry about the future too much, so what happens is that all of it seems like one continuous thing to me; it doesn't seem like ‘at this point I was this, and at this point I was that...’ Mofro was just a word I used to describe a sound, and as far as the essence of something, that has always been a continuous

thing. I made friends with some of the stuff I recorded under a different name years ago... One of the tracks is on *Blackwater*, for instance.”

Georgia Warhorse

One constant theme in JJ Grey's life and music is his passionate love of nature, especially the plants and animals of his native Florida, and *Georgia Warhorse* is no exception.

“I spend a lot of time in nature, or I did as a kid growing up,” Grey says fondly. “All you had to play with was your imagination and a stick, you know what I mean, out in the woods or something. Instead of like, video games, Ipods, and all that kind of thing... The natural world is just the stuff I grew up around; I wound up singing about it, and I have a deep love for all that. It sort of accidentally on purpose ends up being in there, a lot of the time.”

Examples of the natural world having an influence on JJ Grey and Mofro include the title tracks to *Lochloosa* (a homesick-for-the-swamp torch song) and *Orange Blossoms* (celebrating one of Florida's most famous plants). Even though it has always

been there, *Georgia Warhorse* is arguably the most nature-themed album yet from JJ Grey and Mofro, with several songs in that vein. Grey titled the CD after an insect, and in the liner notes admits to a grudging respect for the creature.

“It's a big grasshopper, a yellow and black one with a little red on his wings, and they get real big... They call them a Southeastern lubber, but I've always just known them as

Georgia warhorses,” Grey explains. “How do I put it without sounding too crazy? It is almost like the voice of life itself speaking through the grasshopper to all of us.”

The message the grasshopper carries is basically one of tenacity and the overwhelming power of nature. He may be just a small insect, but he “ain't easy to kill” and will persevere. The more Grey talks about it, the more his fondness for the creature comes through.

“Just the other day, I had to get one off of my plants. He turned around to face me; he didn't run. Even if somebody stepped on him, he dies with dignity, so to speak, not screaming and crying. He's not perturbed. You're not going to make him worry... I look at that grasshopper, and he's at peace,” Grey says, before admitting that the little beasts can be troublesome to humans. “They can eat you out of house and home! But the grasshopper has no grudge against people; they just do what they do. Are you going to stand on the beach and argue with a hurricane? There is no need to stand in the yard and argue with that grasshopper.”

“Georgia Warhorse” is the epitome of the Mofro

You preach best
what you most need to
learn.



photo: Spookie Daly

sound. Greasy slide guitar, slow-motion backbeat, wailing harp and drawled vocals combine to make an irresistible groove. Much like that grasshopper, JJ just does what he does. Things happen to him, he writes songs about them, and records and performs those songs, all in one continuous loop. You get the impression that music and life are inseparable to Grey.

“King Hummingbird” is another touching paean to all creatures great and small, with Grey expressing regret over killing a beautiful living thing, in a Southern gothic scene straight out of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. “I’ll fall down on my knees and beg/For the life I took from you, my king/Oh this empty thing I’ve done.” JJ sings those lines with such passion you could think he was singing about a lost lover.

While Grey is very passionate about the environment, he isn’t so much an activist on the political level as he is a believer that nature always wins in the end.

“The faster the system moves to encapsulate everything and cast a net around every aspect of this planet, the faster they work to do it, the faster it falls apart. And it will fall apart again,” Grey states with firm conviction.

The Nature of Things

“It’s just the nature of things,” Grey states about the influence his surroundings have on the music he plays. “When *Blackwater* came out, people that liked it had a clear, concise idea why they liked it. It was swampy...or what they thought of as swampy. But to me, if you’re born and raised in the swamp, you are what you are. As long as you’re not trying to be something different, and I certainly haven’t...It’s just going to be part of it, you know what I mean? You say it’s

swamp music; well hell, I’m from the swamp, so it’s kind of like saying Bob Marley’s music is Jamaican...How could it not be? – he’s from Jamaica!”

Speaking of Jamaica, *Georgia Warhorse* features a guest appearance from reggae legend Toots Hibbert on the upbeat “The Sweetest Thing.” The pairing might seem odd at first glance, but keep in mind that Hibbert was heavily influenced by the same classic soul singers, like Otis Redding, that left a mark on young JJ Grey.

“We crossed paths at a couple festivals, and I sat in with him once or twice,” Grey says about how the two joined forces. “I ran into his manager at one of our shows in San Diego, and he said, ‘Hey, Toots really likes the stuff on your new record, and he wants you to do something on his.’ I’m like ‘Let’s do it; I’ve got a tune that would be perfect for it.’ Obviously I was thrilled, because he is my favorite singer alive, and one of the best soul singers ever.”

Grey is quick to point out the influence of soul music on reggae, and Hibbert’s cover of John Denver’s “Take Me Home, Country Roads” points out the influence of country music on artists from the Caribbean.

“A lot of West Indians – half of my family is West Indian – they have Jim Reeves albums. There is a lot of old-school country music there,” Grey explains. “West Indian music is so similar to bluegrass in some ways, in terms of where the rhythm falls, especially ska, early ska music. You just replace the washboard from bluegrass with a guitar skank, and you’ve got reggae/ska.”

The result is one of the strongest tracks on the album. Hibbert and Grey swap verses like Sam and Dave on “The Sweetest Thing,” with their voices complementing each other perfectly. When Hibbert comes in during the bridge wailing “Tell me what is this lament?” like Wilson Pickett, you realize

why he is a living legend.

Toots Hibbert isn’t the only iconic musician who makes a guest appearance on *Georgia Warhorse*. Fellow Floridian Derek Trucks adds his unique slide guitar sound to “Lullaby,” an ominous and foreboding tune that belies the peaceful title. While Grey sings “Let me rock you to sleep” with unsettling urgency, Derek’s ghostly playing has a sense of yearning and loss that elevates the album-closing tune to another level.

“Derek Trucks is one of the greatest musicians I’ve ever seen,” Grey says with awe in his voice. “It always feels like conversation when he’s playing, and it never feels like ‘I’m clever, and I’m going to show you just how clever I am.’ He has such a command of the instrument, it’s like Michael Jordan’s command of basketball. When they are in the zone, time no longer exists and you’re wide open to what is going on. At that point, every decision is the right decision, and every thing that is done is the right thing to do, because it’s coming from a deeper spot. Some people live in that zone; they just live there. Hell, I wouldn’t mind living there, but I ain’t there yet.”

At this point, Grey is good and warmed up, talking about Ray Charles, one of those rare humans who set up permanent residence “in the zone.”

“The same thing goes for Ray Charles. He was to the point where he could let some notes just die on the vine, to the point where it actually IS out of key, but no one even noticed it, because there is a bigger thing going on that makes that note doing that just a part of it. It’s great and it’s wonderful and it’s not a mistake anymore. The reason why is because it ain’t even about the note.”

JJ then comes back from his rhapsodic vision of Brother Ray, bemoaning the fact that his kind of outside-the-box genius doesn’t have much of a place in the modern mainstream scene.

“Most mainstream music is so sifted and filtered as it’s made, that there is no room for any of that kind of stuff,” Grey laments. “There is still plenty of good music out there, but I’m talking about the upper echelon of the mainstream world. By the time you get there, it’s so boiled down, it’s like there is nothing left.”

Soul Deep

“Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream.” – the Beatles

“To seek is to deny.” – Bruce Hampton

From recording at Retrophonic to avoiding over-analysis of the lyrics that seem to come to him unbidden from some outside source, Grey strives to keep the rough edges to his music.

He has no interest in the slick world of mainstream music.

“I just want it to be natural and normal. I want the music to be that way, so how I go about it is I don’t try to stop that. I don’t try to seek anything,” JJ states flatly. “Matter of fact, Ted Pecchio, this guy who is playing bass with me, he played with Col. Bruce Hampton for years. He said that Col. Bruce used to say ‘If you seek, you’re actually denying it, because it’s already there.’ You’ve got to feel the same way about music and about life. Shit just makes itself up in front of my eyes, and I just try to roll with it.”

Soul music originated from gospel, and it’s easy to forget the spiritual implications of the term “soul music.” Grey’s music springs from the soul, without any meddling from the conscious mind. At least, that’s how he tries to keep it.

“It’s funny, because singing requires no thought. In fact, thinking hampers it,” Grey says emphatically. “The mind is always stuck at the surface, whereas the soul, the indefinable, the essence is different, because when things come from there, then you go to a whole other depth, a whole other world. It is so deep, it’s unfathomable.”

Another thoughtful pause, then JJ comes back with this: “Consequently, I think that is why so many musicians have done so many drugs over the years, because there are so many different things like that that actually help people get to reality, not escape from it. It’s almost like escaping from the non-reality of thinking too much.”

The *Georgia Warhorse* track “Gotta Know” is Grey’s ultimate rejoinder to those who prize knowledge over the true wisdom that comes from experience. Like William Blake condemning science as “single vision

and Newton’s sleep,” Grey sings “I know more than any scientist in the world.”

“I actually wrote that song a long time ago,” Grey reveals. “I finally figured that out, that it needed to say ‘I finally understand/it can’t be understood.’ It was like I was preaching to myself about something that I had no idea about as I was walking around day to day. It just goes right over my head, my own words. Then a few things happen in your life, you get slapped in the face, you wake up and suddenly all those words make total sense. All this time I’ve been trying to wake myself up, for lack of a better way of putting it.

“Same way with ‘Hottest Spot In Hell’; I was like ‘rant, rant, rant’ and came to realize ‘I’m in the hottest spot in Hell, ranting all the time.’ I’m killing myself, I’m in Hell, because all I see is Hell, in everyone else and everything else. I finally realized that all my anger, while I wouldn’t say that it was misplaced, wasn’t doing me any good. In fact, I was guilty of everything I had been accusing everybody else of.

i don't dwell on
the past too much.



You preach best what you most need to learn.”

“Beautiful World” is perhaps the most classic soul number Grey has recorded, the closest he has come to his heroes like Otis Redding. Understated horns punctuate the spare track, which hangs on one of JJ’s best vocal performances to date. “Listen to the birds sing their song/listen to my heart beating strong/I just want to feel like I do/When I’m with you, it’s a beautiful world,” Grey sings, and you believe him.

“Slow, Hot and Sweaty” lives up to its name – the acid jazz trumpet flourishes show Grey stretching his sound in new ways, adding another color to his palette. The sensual nature of the song caught some people off guard.

“I didn’t realize the song was so dirty until people started listening to it and saying ‘Man, that song is Rated X!’ And I’m like ‘Are you kidding me? I didn’t use one cuss-word,’” Grey protests, incredulous. “It wound up coming out even better than I ever dreamed of, lyrically and everything, in terms of painting a pretty steamy, sultry picture, but with...well, I don’t want to say with class – I don’t want to go that far!”

Even if the song isn’t overtly vulgar, there isn’t much doubt what JJ is talking about, with lines like “You’re sweet as a mango/steamy like the Congo” sung over stop-start funk of the sweatiest variety. The song is a good example of Grey’s philosophy, which is that music is to be felt, not analyzed. There is no better way to end this article than with JJ’s own words:

“And that is about as much as one can say about it, and that is about as deep as one can talk about it, and from there, you’ve got to either feel it or not.”

(www.mofro.net)

photo: Ian Rawn