

A GAZE FROM THE STAGE

BY CANDICE IVORY

The drive into Mississippi always excites me.

Wanderlust has and likely always will be a deep part of my artistic and creative practices. Journeys and the stories about them have been an essential part of my music, so much so that I dedicated my first three albums to the idea of the path (the first volume of the trilogy turns twenty this year). When traveling, especially to the south, I feel an extra charge and invigoration. I am always reminded of home and family—wrestling the boys after church, hot sticky summers, and fresh vegetables from the gardens. I can smell the purple hull peas on my fingers after we shell them. I can see myself on the porch drinking iced tea with my great-grandma after dinner and saying hi to all the neighbors. It is as nostalgic for me as anyone else.

Memories of a land that time forgot.

As I revisit the path and where it has led me, I get to take a journey to Bentonia, Mississippi, home of the legendary Blue Front Café.

“It is what it is.”

—Jimmy “Duck” Holmes

“The Blue Front Café opened in 1948 under the ownership of Carey and Mary Holmes, an African American couple from Bentonia. In its heyday the Blue Front was famed for its buffalo fish, blues, and moonshine whiskey. One of the couple’s sons, Jimmy Holmes, took over the café in 1970 and continued to operate it as an informal, down-home blues venue that gained international fame among blues enthusiasts.”

—Mississippi Blues Commission

In September 2022, I had the privilege of being the headline performer for the Blue Front’s 74th anniversary party. Jimmy “Duck” Holmes is one year older than the Blue Front Café, so the establishment has been with him his entire life. It is considered his living room and where he does his entertaining.

The cast of Bentonia bluesmen and the lore surrounding them has always been of interest to me. My favorite visual artist, George Hunt, painted a portrait of Bentonia blues artist Skip James called *Devil Got My Woman*. I have a signed print of the painting, which I keep in my art studio as a source of inspiration. Now I am being directly taught by the Bentonia school of musicians—the last in a long line of bluesmen. Bluesmen who are usually complaining about women



and telling somebody what they won't do. The irony is not lost on me.

My affinity for the place is not unusual—fans worldwide share the sentiment. In fact, my collaborative partnership with photographer Deke V. Rivers was rooted in our shared enthusiasm for the Blue Front Café as well as our love of family and southern culture. At the Blue Front, we recorded an episode of the podcast *Porch Talk* (hosted by Alan Aldridge) in which we discussed our upbringings and our philosophies of family. Deke and I have turned our family narratives into pilgrimages. We both have extensive pictorial histories of our families that have deeply influenced the way we view our lives and ourselves. These memories of people, places, and things that once were but no longer exist, is exactly why we partnered to give back to the Bentonia Blues Festival. Not in the lament of the passed moment but in remembrance and appreciation of a time where “it was what it was.”

Our artwork is about telling our story through the lens of a new and shifting cultural landscape. No one is living nostalgically, though some of us remember how things used to be. We see the value in being ambassadors for the places that contain the culture that we love. Places like Teddy's Juke Joint (Zachary, Louisiana), the newly reopened Club Ebony (Indianola, Mississippi), and of course the Blue Front Café. Through our artforms, we have chosen to give back to the community and in turn assist in the creation of value, beauty, and economic sustainability in the south. We are artisans for the culture, documenting important moments and ideas in otherwise overlooked places. Telling the story through a lens, a paintbrush, or microphone.

Deke and I presented our first dual art exhibition in 2022 in Columbia, Missouri. After looking through the

photographs from the exhibition we felt like the canvas print we did for Jimmy “Duck” Holmes stood out amongst the others. The original print hangs in the home of filmmaker Robert Mugge and his wife Diana Zelman, along with a painting by me entitled *Aunt Evie*. There were several great shots from the Blue Front's 50th anniversary festival, where Bobby Rush was the featured performer. The shot of Jimmy during his festival set sums up the heart and soul of the Blue Front—Jimmy “Duck” Holmes. We all come to Bentonia to spend time with him and sit at his feet.

51ST BENTONIA BLUES FESTIVAL, JUNE 2023

This year at the Bentonia Blues Festival, I am performing along with a crew of musicians reared in the traditions of Bentonia as well as newcomers and practitioners of other styles of blues. The artists for this year's festival include the Grammy-nominated guitarist R. L. Boyce, Robert Connely Farr, Ryan Lee Crosby, Lala Craig, Little Ms. Soul, Chris Gill and the Soul Shakers, Mike Munson, and Bluesman McKinney Williams Jr., to name a few. If you

JIMMY “DUCK” HOLMES



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were asked to perform at the Blue Front Café for this festival or at any other time, it is because Jimmy respects you and your work ethic. He treats both veterans and novices with the same respect. He told me that he would never want to see this festival grow to the point where the performers and the townspeople couldn't talk to each other and relate to one another. He strives to keep that respect and closeness as part of his personal mission at the Blue Front.

This is something I can relate to personally, since my great-uncle Will Roy Sanders was also the owner of a legendary juke joint, Greens Lounge (Memphis,

Tennessee). Greens Lounge would eventually be destroyed in a fire, but my uncle's band, the Fieldstones, moved on and became the house band at another Memphis juke, The Blue Worm. The true spirit of a juke joint is that everyone is welcome to be themselves.

The Blue Front Café has always felt like home. From the magical, loud whistle of the train rolling through town (often during my set) to the cook hollering at me to come and pick up my wing order, I've always felt like part of the scene at the Blue Front. Jimmy "Duck" Holmes reminds me of the Marlboro men that I knew growing up. Hard and soft at the same time. Endlessly hilarious. Full of

integrity and the unshakeable Bentonia code that you want to be on the right side of. He does not deviate from it, "it is what it is."

In my opinion, this bullheadedness or determination (depending on how you choose to look at it), is at the core of the Bentonia bluesmen's values. It takes a certain amount of grit to continue to be a Bentonia bluesman for decades. To oversee and be committed to a place and a spirit. Bentonia is for the misfits who choose their own idiosyncratic guitar tunings, and the wild men and women who can't be tamed by standard conventions. The respect and the music come first.

Candice Ivory was born near Memphis, TN, to a family steeped in the musical traditions of the Mississippi Delta. Several family members belonged to prominent gospel groups such as the Salem Harmonizers, and her great-uncle Will Roy Sanders was an internationally known blues singer. With Sanders's encouragement, she began performing professionally at 14, singing in jazz and blues bands led by Beale Street legends Billy Gibson, Calvin Newborn, and Charlie Wood. Ivory also joined the famed Memphis band CYC, whose members later worked with Justin Timberlake, Bobby "Blue" Bland, the Gamble Brothers Band, Tinsley Ellis, and the New Memphis Hepcats.

At 18, Ivory successfully auditioned for Betty Carter's Jazz Ahead residency at the Kennedy Center. Ivory continued her musical education at the New School University in New York, studying voice with Miles Griffith, Richard Harper, and Junior Mance while

taking composition lessons with Cecil Bridgewater.

By 21, Ivory had recorded her debut album, path - undefined. She composed all the music on path - undefined, a practice that she would follow on her subsequent albums, Questography and Love Music. In addition to composing and singing, she plays a wide array of instruments, from piano and organ to percussion.

Currently, Ivory is a teacher

of jazz and contemporary voice at Washington University in St. Louis. In 2021, she was named a Missouri featured artist by the Missouri Arts Council. She continues to develop her style of avant soul music and southern surrealist visual art. Ivory's forthcoming projects include her debut blues album featuring the compositions of Memphis Minnie and a reimagined version of her album path - undefined in honor of its 20th anniversary.

