

*During the 1990s I saw Cordell Jackson a few times at her Scenic Hill ranch outside of Memphis. During my last visit in the fall of 1997, she was excited to tell me about her new journey into painting with watercolors. "Just like my songs, I get lots of ideas," she said as she sat by her painting of her ranch house and a 1957 Chevy. "I'm just getting started in life."*

*Cordell died in October, 2004 at the age of 81. She was eulogized as the first American woman to produce, engineer, arrange and promote music on her own rock n' roll label. Here is my report from my 1993 visit with Cordell.*

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MEMPHIS-- Only the peculiar soul of Elvis Town could produce a guitar-playing grandmother who has become one of the hottest acts in a region rich with indigenous music.

Cordell Jackson, 69, is founder of the Moon Records (a name check off of Memphis' iconic Sun Records) rockabilly label here, but last month, her career hit a celestial level when she appeared as the NOT! lady in a Super Bowl halftime commercial with former Stray Cat Brian Setzer. She's working on "The Brighter Sides, the Autobiography of Cordell Jackson." The film can't be far behind.

Jackson will make a rare Chicago appearance Friday night at the Cubby Bear, across the street from Wrigley Field. She's opening for the New Duncan Imperials' release party for "Loserville" on Pravda Records. You could say Jackson struck a Cordell struck with the Imperials.

"I don't know how to express what I do," Jackson said during an interview at her ranch home in the Scenic Hill subdivision here. "I guess I'm an entertainer. I'm a band unto itself. It's like I play three to four instruments at one time on the guitar. If I play with a band, I only use a bass and a drum. And as a rule, I burn the drummer out. I play fast and I show off."

Jackson will appear solo on Friday. Her set ranges from "classical to a barnyard disaster," and most of it will be electric instrumental. Jackson plays a surf-in' rockabilly guitar with a slap-happy right hand that sears the rhythm. On her recent instrumental, "The Split," the closest point of reference is the raunchy, melodic sound that Sun Records session player Bill Justis created from his saxophone. Jackson claims to have written between 400 and 700 songs, none of them with a similar melody.

Jackson's legend was reborn in 1980, when Alex Chilton (Box Tops, Big Star) and Tav Falco appeared with her at a benefit concert for a Sun Records taxi driver at the Western Steakhouse here. (The restaurant also is quite a sight, starting with a rock band of costumed stuffed squirrels playing an eternal riff behind the bar.)

"We started talking about music, and Tav said they were playing new wave (actually, they were part of the No Wave club scene in New York that featured acts such as James White and the Blacks and DNA)," Jackson recalled. "I said, 'Son, that's as old a wave from Memphis, Tenn., as you can get.'" He asked if I was kidding. I said no, and if they would take the time, I would be glad to show them all my old records. Tav's been singing and playing them all over the world ever since."

Falco, who appeared with his band, Panther Burns, at Metro on Friday, said, "I don't know if we

found her rather than she found us. We reminded her of Alan Page and the Big Four, a dance combo she had on her label back in the '50s. The night she saw us, it was only two guitars (Falco and Chilton) and drums (Ross Johnson). The next day, she played us all her singles. We got her performing in public, playing electric solo guitar. We took her to New York in 1988, and she brought the house down at the Lone Star. From there, her career has taken off to where she's become something of a commercial success."

In the Lone Star audience that night was filmmaker Dan Rose, who went on to shoot Jackson's first video. Last year, the folks at Budweiser's advertising agency saw the video and asked Jackson to appear with Setzer in the "Bud Bowl" commercial.

Since starting her frothy Moon label in 1956, Jackson's produced and engineered Joe Wallace's "Leopard Man," a weird jungle-beat rockabilly number about a fellow who gets mauled by a half-leopard half-man. She also produced the maudlin cowboy ballad "Sewing Buttons on the Wind" by Arno "The Smiling Cowboy" Pace, as well as Alan Page's finger-pointing rocker "She's the One That's Got It," which is still covered by Falco.

But if Jackson has a signature song, it is her composition "Dateless Night," which has been recorded by a half-dozen artists, including Falco. "Dateless Night" is a colorful bouquet of surf guitar hooks wrapped around a twangy Duane Eddy texture. (All the original Moon tunes are available on the cassette and vinyl compilation "The '50s Rock on the Moon: Plus an Oddity.")

"I never had too many dateless nights," said Jackson, who wore a "God's Timing Is Perfect" sweatshirt decorated with assorted clocks. "I was a peculiar little thing. I've always kept count of what went on. The man I married was the 73rd different boy I dated. I dated more than any girl in my hometown (Pontotoc, Miss.). At one time, I had five steadies, two of them twice a week. So I had no nights at home. That's the only time my father spoke up and asked my mother if she thought I was going out too much. So I slowed it down a little bit.

By the time she was 22, Jackson slowed it down enough to get hitched to a Memphis man, Bill Jackson, "My saying was, 'I'm old enough to know better and know if I was going to, I better,'" Jackson said as only she could say it.

The Jacksons divorced after 21 years. Jackson has two sons and 11 grandchildren. She never remarried. She has since followed her heart, delivering music from the same ranch house she designed and built with Bill in 1950. "We built it with our own hands," she recalled. "I was pregnant when the house was being born. So I was the supervisor."



There are a couple of key nerve centers in the Jackson compound.

A den to the side of her squeaky-clean kitchen features a slew of Moon '45s hanging on a wall across from a collection of guitars. Jackson's favorite guitar is one she made herself, although she has misplaced the bridge. The most unusual feature is the gold glitter Jackson has lacquer-worked across the guitar.

"I took a hammer and beat it down," she said proudly. "That's 30 something coats of lacquer. It may sound like a gourd, but it looks good."

Then there's the Brag Room, formerly called the Archive Room. The highlight of this transformed bedroom is a wall of '45s that salutes Memphis music, ranging from rare Stax and Sun singles to Hi, Satellite and the obscure Fernwood label. Elvis Presley's guitarist Scotty Moore was a co-founder of the Fernwood imprint.

The Brag Room also has pictures of Cordell Jackson with actor John Goodman, Cordell Jackson with Brian Setzer, Cordell Jackson with Sun founder Sam Phillips and Cordell Jackson with Sheriff Buford Pusser of "Walking Tall" fame. "I'm blood kin to him," she said. "His mother and my mother were first cousins."

Born Cordell Miller, Jackson grew up in a musical family. She used to watch her father's band in Pontotoc, which is 18 miles away from Tupelo, Miss., the birthplace of Elvis Presley.

"I made my first microphone out of a stick and a large bucket lid with a wooden platform at the bottom," she recalled. "I'd take it over in the pasture, and we'd put on shows. Back then, you never thought of stadiums or clubs. Everything you saw show-wise was in a tent. So we built a tent and we'd go in there and sing and play."

After graduating from high school in 1943, Jackson moved to Memphis and played stand-up bass in the Fisher Aircraft Band. She got married in 1945, and in 1948, General Motors transferred the Jacksons to Ft. Worth, Texas. The family moved back to Memphis in 1950, and Jackson cut her first demo in 1954 - the same year Presley began recording at Sun.

Jackson made one attempt to join the Sun stable.

"Sam Phillips told me to wait a year," she said. "At the time, they were focused on Jerry Lee Lewis. So I came straight home, walked in this very house and told my husband I was going to start at the top. He asked what that meant."

What that meant was a call to RCA Victor in Nashville, where Jackson spoke with Chet Atkins, who was producing for the label. Atkins put Jackson in touch with custom record sales. After a couple of visits to Nashville, Moon Records was born. Atkins mastered many of the Moon releases through 1979.

Jackson's moxie in dealing with the male-dominated record industry seems incredible by 1993 standards, but she must have encountered much stiffer resistance nearly 40 years ago.

"It still is a man's world in music," she said. "Some men have had a little respect for what I have done. Maybe not for my productions, but for the stamina I had and for being intent to do my thing. My music may be bad, good or indifferent. It is just what God gave me to deal with."

