

# “I Got A Record Out”

## THE CURTIS GRIFFIN STORY

*By Steve Propes*



Lowell Fulson (with guitar), Curtis Griffin sitting, rest unknown. Circa late 1960s. Photo courtesy Curtis Griffin.

**O**ne thing about guitar player, vocalist, songwriter and record label entrepreneur Curtis ‘Jack’ Griffin, who also recorded in the early 1960s as C.C. Griffin, is that he’s a patient man, seemingly never in a big rush. To this day, he practices daily and continues to perform a limited number of Los Angeles engagements, often with his friend Cadillac Zack.

Born in Poole, Louisiana, about 35 miles from Shreveport on 17th March 1930, he was working in the fields when very young. “I was born on a cotton plantation, three or four years old I was working in the fields. I was picking cotton then. I had a real small sack, a 25 pound sack. I got 35 cents a day. I started going to school at four and five, still worked in the field. I got big enough to drive the mules, the plough and the tractors. I guess it was fun to handle the mules. You had a few whites who had little farms of their own, but it was just about all black. Now, they don’t raise cotton like they used to. They have cotton pickers now.

When I was in Louisiana, we didn’t have artists living in Shreveport. Sometimes people like Charles Brown, Roy Brown, Louis Jordan would come through. There was a place called the Palace Ballroom, the only place for those people to perform. We had Gatemouth Brown, Big Joe Turner, Lowell Fulson, T-Bone Walker. We didn’t have too many blues people coming in. I listened to them on the radio station KWKH. When I first heard radio, I was about seven years old, we had those Victrolas. I remember hearing T-Bone Walker, playing his guitar behind his head, Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red – I didn’t see those guys, but you could hear them on the radio.

Even so, Curtis would encounter some musicians. My grandmother was a bootlegger. The guys would come around, unheard-of guys,

play washboards, spoons and forks or guitars they built on their own. They were there to patronise my grandmother’s spirits. It was an encouragement, those guys who would take things and play them.

I started out as a drummer. I had a homemade drum set. I didn’t do anything musically, I had invented a drum set I made myself and I amused myself musically with that. I would listen to all the people on KWKH. In high school, I would sing, my teacher would request I sing. I would always sing country and western. I liked Hank Williams, my favorite guy was Ernest Tubbs.

I came to L.A. in 1950. I was in Texas a little while before 1950, went back to Shreveport, then I came out here. I had a close friend in California, who sent me a ticket and I came. When I came here, I went into my dad’s and grandfather’s profession, that was meat packing.

Music was secondary. I was plant boss for a number of companies. I worked beef. I worked all over Vernon, a town that had 36 kill floors at the time. I worked the kill floor and then into supervision.”

For a few years, Curtis had his own meat market in South Los Angeles but he never lost interest in the blues. “I was at the Elks at Central Avenue. I saw a Gatemouth Brown show and saw his guitar. I was so impressed – Monday I was downtown, bought me a guitar just like his. Gatemouth, used a clamp, so did Johnny Guitar Watson, I started playing with a clamp, plays the part of a finger as a choke, slide it up and down the guitar.

Jimmy McCracklin was playing on the Elks at Central Avenue and I asked him if I could sit in on the drums. I had played my tin tubs and he let me play. I played behind Smokey Hogg. They were both doing the show. It was okay, the audience wasn’t complaining. I remember Smokey looking back at me frowning. It was a fairly big show and was kind of popular.”



**CURTIS "JACK" GRIFFIN AND THE CONFESSORS**

BOOKINGS: (213) 408-6261

*Curtis Griffin And The Confessors. Possibly 1970s. Photo courtesy Curtis Griffin.*

**A SOLID CONNECTION WITH LOWELL FULSON**

Curtis's first solid connection with the Los Angeles blues community came in the early 1950s. "I met Lowell Fulson. I used to follow him everywhere he played, even before I started playing. I liked his singing, the music, something about the way he played. He wasn't the greatest picker in the world, he played with his thumb. I was playing club socials at the time this lady was booking. Lowell was kind of warm at that time. My girlfriend's friend, Johnny Wright, a guitar player, knew Lowell, met him through Johnny and through Tommy Jones, an agent.

Lowell and I got closer and closer and in the latter times. He called me and asked me about putting a band together for him, but I was always following him around. I had a small name at that time. I always got him top guys. I put a band behind him at the time, he liked it. We used Joe Kincaid, whoever else was in town, Curtis Tillman on bass, Freddy Clark on tenor sax, Bill Clark on tenor, Big Terry DeRoune played with Lowell sometimes and Arthur Adams.

Curtis also brought in the baritone sax player Big Jim Wynn. The baritone made his horn a little different. You mix your horns together and have a baritone with tenor, trumpet, alto, the baritone will sound like a bass sound in the band. And Wynn puts a heavy tone to it. Big Jim Wynn was a studio musician, you could always get him to play with you. He reminded me of a prancing horse when he blew his horn, he'd kick like a prancing horse, and he'd draw attention from the audience when he did that. He was a big guy. He was a gentleman, never said anything to offend anybody.

When Guitar Slim died in 1959, Lowell got with (his widow) Sadie, shortly after he died. Sadie helped push his career. Lowell was living on 98th near Main. Sadie died shortly after Percy Mayfield died.

Guitar Slim was a fun loving guy. J.J. 'Bad Boy' Jones was Guitar Slim's cousin. I knew him for a long, long time. I remember Shakey Jake. They was over there at the place at the Sahara at 54th St. and Vermont Ave.

Lowell recorded the original 'Three O'Clock In The Morning.' When B. B. King did the song, I didn't know him yet. I was in the Korean conflict. This was when Ray Charles was playing keyboard for Lowell. Lowell was a quiet man, if there was some place he could go and hide out, that's what he did. He was mixed Cherokee Indian, never saw him drink or smoke. When he hit with 'Tramp,' that picked him up a little. He made a statement that it was going to be a hit.

In about 1956, Curtis put together a club combo that appeared at the Thunderbird in San Pedro, with Cardelle Boyette on keyboards, Jimmy Huff at drums and Cowboy on bass. About Huff, Griffin recalled "Jimmy was disabled, the side of his body wasn't developed, not a hunchback, the upper part of his body wasn't correctly focused. He might have had polio where your body doesn't develop. Huff lived at Compton and Nadeau."

On one memorable occasion, Curtis recalled: "James Brown sang with us. James Brown had a band with him, even at the beginning, he was kind of cranky about his sound. I remember seeing him when he had two drummers, worked them so hard, another one had to come in. All of a sudden, pow! He'd make his little moves, a little footwork, like a quick moving fighter. It's his major thing that attracts attention and he'd do the splits. Right after that gig, he came out with 'Please Please Please', one of the songs he was singing.

In 1956, I had made a demo at Dootone at 97th and Central for a dollar and a half or two dollars. B.B. King was playing at the 5/4 Ballroom and I met him there. He sent me to Maxwell Davis who was heavy with Modern Records. I contacted him, and I ended up at the record company, but I didn't have what I needed to be noticed or accepted. They thought I wasn't ready to record."

**I HAD FOURTEEN FIGHTS – LOST ONE**

After his Modern turn down, Curtis sat in with different groups at the city. At about the same time, he took up another vocation. "Many, many days I'd ride the red car to the gym. I didn't have a car, I was boxing at the time. I fought amateur in the heavyweight division, I was 215 or 220 lbs. I had fourteen fights, lost one."

The only opponent he recalls was Terry Surrell. "I can't remember all the guys' names. One fight was at Hollywood Legion Stadium off Gower. I was working for this food company, guy thought I'd be a good fighter, let him talk me into the gym. I didn't have to lose that, I made a mistake, I dropped my hands and got hit, I knew better. I had a guitar then."

Curtis also played with Gus Jenkins on one session in early 1958. "We were doing a recording with him at Ted Brinson's the night John Dolphin was murdered. That's me on the guitar doing the hit on the heavy strings on 'Hit The Road' and 'Road Runner', (Flash 128). I wasn't a session person. I played a couple of gigs with Gus at Elks on Central.

Gus was a quiet, good tempered guy.

Last time I saw him was at Rite Way, the area of meat companies like Rose and Schorr and RBM at 24th near where Adams runs out east before Vernon. His session harmonica man Ace Holder used to fall down on



*Label shots courtesy Steve Propes, Victor Pearlín, Opal Louis Nations.*



Curtis Griffin, circa late 1960s/early 1970s. Photo courtesy Curtis Griffin.

the floor, roll on the floor, worse than Guitar Shorty. His guitar player, Frank Patt was okay, just an average guitar player.

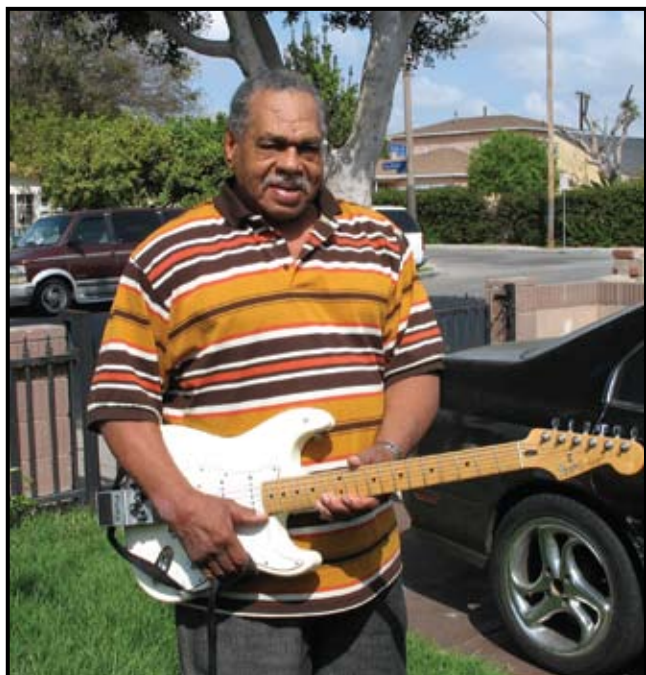
Little Blues Slim never did do anything. He would sit in. He would work in the meat house also. Worked on the kill floor at the Quality Meat Company. He had a Fender guitar, he would take good care of his guitar. He'd come in to sit in, wipe it off, put it in the case. Only did two numbers, Guitar Slim's 'The Things I Used To Do' and 'I Done Got

Over'."

In 1961, 'Storm Clouds' hit Los Angeles on Curtis's own Joyce label. It was released as by C. C. Griffin. "I wrote a song and recorded it", Griffin recalled. "Big Jim Wynn, sax, Curtis Tillman or Prince or Jimmy Norris, bass, G.G. Hutchinson, horns, second guitar was Pee Wee Crayton on the session. I became friends with all of them. It was recorded at Austin McCoy's studio. Joyce was my daughter, my girl friend was Lois Jean, the name of my publishing company. I got local play, it wasn't the first one, Dolphin's of Hollywood stocked it, didn't do anything to cause any damage, on Pico or Venice, everybody distributed records along there. I never made any money.

There was only one place it was played. That was at Dolphin's of Hollywood. They had a broadcast system in the store. At the time, the DJ was Ray Robinson, when Dolphin passed, Miss Ruth took over for him. Many people lose their life over music, over records.

I had the label and company. I took it over to record row and a few records sold. I didn't follow it up too much. I pressed up 200 or something like that. I didn't have the knowledge or ability to push it. I got a record out, no one else would pick me up and do it. I did it myself. I got quite a few gigs here in the city, at the time we had club socials in the city, I was picked up on those. I would do some of everybody who was out there,



Curtis Griffin, circa 2009. Photo: Ellen Nations.

B.B., Bobby Bland. I never played the thing at a gig, I just practised on it. I tried to stay away from sounding like Bobby Bland. I never played the thing, just practised on it. I've played so many times, never played the song.

To me music was a hobby, it was secondary, my main thing was meat packing. I always paid for my own records. Never went to a record company, I was sort of hard headed. Somebody wants to tell me to do something, I'll just pay to do things my way."

Griffin's next release, 'I Do Believe' b/w 'Sitting Here Waiting' was recorded for Allegro also as C.C. Griffin. "The owner of that label was an inspector in meat packing, we got hooked up, he heard me play." Backing him were "most of the same people. That had to be around 1965."

Curtis met Fats Washington co-owner of Movin' through Lowell Fulson and he recorded for the label, 'Moving On' b/w 'I Gotta Lump' (as in 'a lump in my throat') with Al Garrett on bass and Jim Wynn on horns. It was "recorded at Dot Records at Normandie and Slauson. Jules Bihari was there. I was upstairs at a place called Dot."

"When Lowell took me to Fats' house, he told Fats about my qualifications. Fats called Stan Lewis, who answered, 'if I was as good as Lowell said, go ahead and record me.' Stan had a record store, played his music on KWKH. B.B. Davis was his DJ and my cousin. I guess due to the fact, he was easier to get to, he made sure my product got played. In just a few days, I heard my records played five times a day. When I was first hanging around the record store on Texas Avenue, he'd have pictures like T-Bone Walker around his head. I wasn't familiar with that thing, music or where it came from."

Curtis next recorded for Jewel on 'Baby Have Your Way' b/w 'I Found Something Better' in 1966. "The only record I didn't pay for was for Jewel" said Curtis.

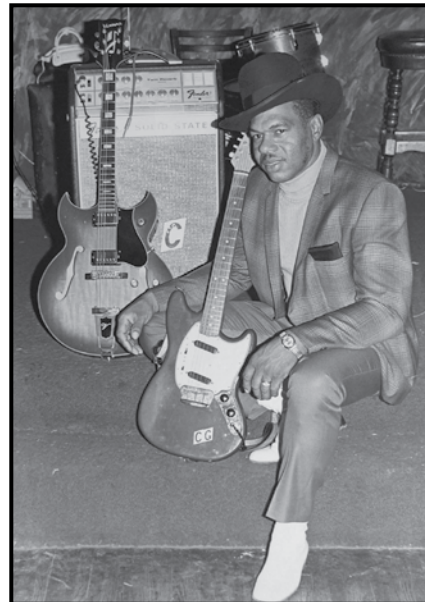
"I had stopped recording, after I did other numbers for Fats. The last one when I did something for Mel Alexander, on Kris called 'Disco Blues' b/w 'Something's Wrong' in 1976. I didn't make any money off the records, I was still playing." The Movin', Allegro and Kris sides were issued as by Curtis Griffin And His Band.

The blues was being played regularly on the radio. "The critics say I'm about the heaviest blues guy." In the mid-1980s, everything changed: rap supplanted the blues. "Radio stopped playing the blues. It wasn't as popular, younger people went to rap, lost a lot of players to death.

I was one of the first to play the Long Beach Blues Festival in 1980. I was backed by William Clarke. I recorded with William Clarke for his Hittin' Heavy label."

*NB: Curtis has had tracks released on the Black Magic blues anthology album 'Hard Times' and on William Clarke And The Night Owl's 'Blues From Los Angeles' released in 1980. He also had tracks on Kris CDs and albums.*

In 2010, Opal Louis Nations reported Curtis had been back in the studio eighteen months earlier and cut tracks for "a new CD collection". Finally Curtis says: "Right now, if you're going to look for really good blues, you'll find the white boys are doing it. The white boys can play to death, but they don't have the guts to do the singing, most of the black guys can sing with the feeling. It doesn't get the blood, guts and bottom. I tell stories, sometimes, someone in the audience is going through that."



Curtis Griffin, circa late 1960s/early 1970s. Photo courtesy Curtis Griffin.