

Chances are you've never heard of most of October's Music Notes artists, even though three of them are from Memphis, and one has a 70's mega-hit that everyone knows. Packy Axton played on The Mar-Keys' song Last Night, which was a # 3 hit in 1961 and sold over a million copies. The song is still heard on oldies radio and often covered by live bands today, but Last Night is only a small part of the Packy Axton story, which is well covered in the new Late Late Party release. Jack Oblivian continues to make great garage rock records and he has built up a nice audience the old fashioned way - touring and playing in small venues. He often plays around town and is well worth the effort to go out to see live. Guitarist magazine picked Memphian Eric Gales as blues player of the year in 2010, which is quite an honor. Eric recently played his record release party at the Levitt Shell, handily displaying why the magazine chose him for the award. Free was a band that never really got their due when they were a band, though they had one monster hit that is a classic rock staple 41 years after it was released. They were then, and still are, a highly influential band to countless blues rockers all over the world.

Charles 'Packy' Axton – Late Late Party 1965-67

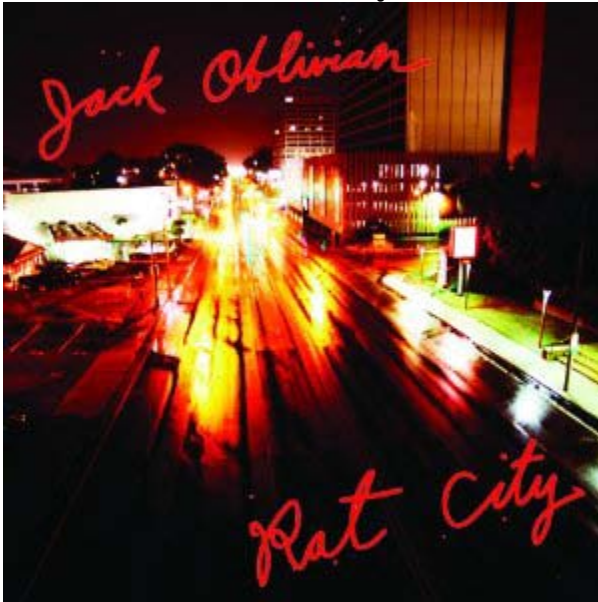


Packy Axton was the son of Estelle Axton and nephew of Jim Stewart, founders of Stax Records. He played tenor saxophone and formed The Mar-Keys with future Booker T. & The MG's guitarist Steve Cropper and bassist Donald 'Duck' Dunn along with fellow horn players Don Nix and Wayne Jackson and pianist Jerry Lee 'Smoochy' Smith. They had a #3 hit with the instrumental Last Night, but Packy was a wild party animal, partially resulting in Cropper and Dunn leaving the band shortly after Last Night became a hit. Packy remained with The Mar-Keys, which became, together with Booker T. & The MGs, the house band at Stax. Packy left Stax in 1965 after an argument with Jim Stewart over Packy's wild ways. Packy continued to record in Memphis at Ardent and Royal

studios, often with Steve Cropper, Booker T. Washington and drummer Teenie Hodges (heard on Al Green, Ann Peebles and O.V. Wright's Hi records). In late 1967, Packy wound up back at Stax, running the adjoining Satellite Record store. He passed away in January 1974 from cirrhosis of the liver at age 32.

Late Late Party 1965-67 is the first time that Packy Axton's recordings have been compiled and released in a form other than the original 45 singles, which have become highly collectable through the years. These songs were originally recorded under monikers such as The Martinis, The Pac-Keys and The Packers. They are a mixture of 17 brief instrumental and vocal tracks in the same general vein as Booker T. & The MGs and Willie Mitchell's recordings of the same era. Given the sporadic recording and various labels, the music is surprisingly consistent, and it really makes a cool album. Given Packy's partying ways, the painful groaning in Hung Over is humorous as well as heartfelt. Everything on the album is soulful and funky music that any fan of 60's Memphis soul will enjoy. Late Late Party 1965-67 is on the independent Light In In The Attic label, and is available on CD, vinyl LP (including a card for a bonus download track) and download.

Jack Oblivian – Rat City

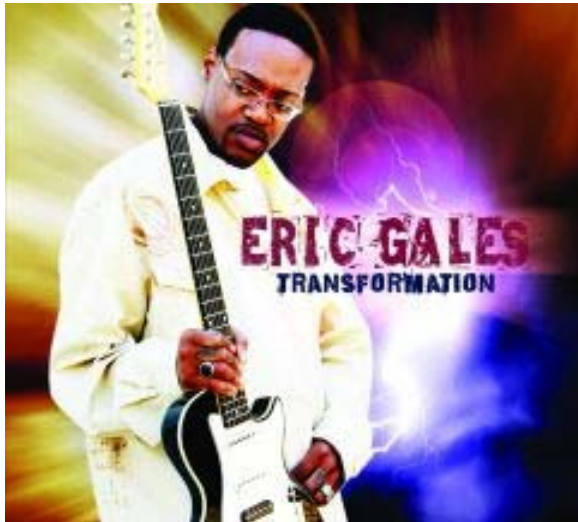


Memphian Jack Oblivian has followed up his excellent Disco Outlaw album from 2009 with the equally excellent Rat City. The album cover is a night shot of familiar buildings on Union Avenue in downtown Memphis. Rat City was approached differently from Disco Outlaw. Instead of using one band to record with as usual, Jack has a variety of Memphis musicians as guest stars, including guitarist John Paul Keith, keyboardist Adam Woodard and the Star and Micey band. The results are a very consistent album that blends Jack's gritty rock with blues, soul and a dash of punk. Jack's vocals are distorted, which may seem lo-fi to some listeners, but this is as polished as Jack Oblivian is likely

to ever get. His recordings with other bands, as well as some of his earlier solo albums are much more primitive. Jack has said that his next album will most likely be a return to his lo-fi roots.

Jack started working on the songs for *Rat City* in the spring of 2009, but his reunion tour with The Oblivians caused a delay in getting the music recorded. There are eight original songs and four well-chosen cover songs on *Rat City*. The album comes out of the gate with *Rat City* and *Mass Confusion*, two relentlessly rocking songs, and then switches gears to a punk infused blues take on *Old Folks Boogie*. Two of the best songs are Tommy James' obscure *Moses and Me* and the album closer, *Caboose Jump* with some great guitar playing by both Jack and John Paul Keith. The entire album is excellent, and a must for garage rock fans. *Rat City* is on the Big Legal Mess label, a division of the Fat Possum Label from Oxford, Mississippi. It is available on vinyl LP (which includes a free download), CD and download.

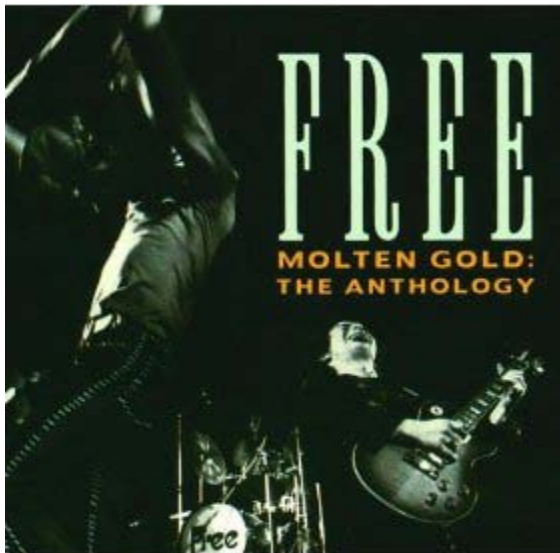
Eric Gales – Transformation



Memphian Eric Gales learned to play blues rock guitar from his older brothers Eugene and Manuel (aka Little Jimmy King) Gales. Eric is right-handed, but his brothers were left-handed, so he was taught to play left-handed style, with his guitar turned upside down. This tradition was passed down from the Gales brothers' grandfather, Dempsey Garrett, Sr., who jammed with Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. Eric's first album, *The Eric Gales Band*, with brother Eugene on bass and vocals, was released in 1991 when Eric was 16. The album was a minor success, and received some rock airplay, but a second album went unnoticed, and Eric was reportedly more interested in drugs than his guitar playing at the time. It wasn't until 2006 that Eric's music began getting attention again when he was signed to Blues Bureau International label. Teaming with producer/label owner Mike Varney has proven to be exactly what Eric needed, and he has released an album every year since 2006. Eric's new album, *Transformation*, is his best and most consistent album yet.

The songs on Transformation deal with life experiences, and some were no doubt inspired by Eric's stay in the Shelby County Detention Center. Eric was arrested for cocaine and weapon possession in 2006, and failed to check in with his probation officer while on the road as part of the Experience Hendrix tour, resulting in his imprisonment. The new songs were all co-written by Eric and Mike Varney, and possibly for the first time, are as strong as Eric's guitar playing. Eric's vocals were never his strong suit, either, but they have matured and now fit his music very well. Transformation is aptly titled, as Eric Gales has finally become focused on his music, and his past problems are hopefully behind him. Any classic rock or blues rock guitar fan will love this album, but especially Jimi Hendrix, Joe Bonamassa and Eric Johnson fans.

Free



Free was a band that never had much success in the way of record sales in the U.S. other than the huge hit All Right Now, which remains a classic rock staple to this day. Free was formed in 1968 when guitarist Paul Kossoff and drummer Simon Kirke, only 17 and 18 years old, respectively, left the band Black Cat Bones to start a new, heavier band. They found 18 year old Paul Rodgers singing for the band Brown Sugar and were impressed with his powerful, soulful voice, and asked him to join on the spot. The trio began searching for a bass player, and British blues pioneer Alexis Korner recommended 15 year old Andy Fraser, who had been in John Mayall's band. When Fraser arrived to audition, the other members were impressed that he had the money to pay for a cab and he even asked the driver for a receipt. They were even more impressed with his excellent bass playing, and he joined that day, becoming Free's bassist and business manager as well as a principal songwriter.

Free set out to be, in their words, a “heavy” band, both in a bluesy hard rocking style of music, but also lyrically. They became a popular live band right away, but their excellent first albums, *Tons Of Sobs* and *Free*, didn’t sell as well as expected. In a dressing room following a show where they received a lackluster response from the audience, the band decided that they needed some more upbeat material. Within ten minutes, Andy Fraser had written the song *All Right Now*. After a few additions made from Paul Rodgers, the band closed their next show with the song, and they were surprised at the crowd’s huge reaction. The song appeared on their next album, *Fire And Water*, released in 1970. The single and album became Free’s biggest sellers. *All Right Now* reached #2 in the UK and #4 in the US, and it still gets regular airplay. The song has been used in TV shows and ads, and has been covered many times by other artists. Ton-Loc even sampled it for his huge 1989 hit *Funky Cold Medina*. Seemingly, everyone knows and likes the song. The band, however, felt that it was a frivolous song, and it wasn’t the type of darker material that they wanted to be known for.

Free followed *Fire & Water* up with the good, but very laid back *Highway* album. The album was a flop, due in part to the fact that the band’s name was difficult to see in the album’s artwork. Only the title *Highway* was immediately readable, leading most to believe that this was the band’s name. Paul Rodgers and Andy Fraser had begun arguing while writing songs for *Highway*, feeling huge pressure to follow up *All Right Now*. Jimi Hendrix died during the recording of *Highway*, which devastated guitarist Paul Kossoff. Hendrix was Kossoff’s hero, and he became depressed and many say he never fully recovered from the blow of Hendrix’s death. The band split up briefly in 1971 after the failure of *Highway*. Kossoff and Kirke recorded the excellent, but mostly unnoticed Kossoff, Kirke, Tetsu and Rabbitt album with bassist Tetsu Yamauchi and keyboardist/singer John “Rabbit” Bundrick.

Paul Kossoff became extremely depressed about Free’s breakup, and he slid into heavy drug usage. A live Free album was rush released by Island /A&M Records to commemorate the band, and *Free Live!* sold well in the UK. The band reunited partly due to the live album’s success, but mostly to try and save Paul Kossoff from his drug addiction. The resulting album, *Free At Last* was the last Free album with the four original members. The songs were credited to all four members, though Rodgers and Fraser wrote them. They decided to add keyboards on this album instead of returning to their bluesier roots, which probably hurt them in the long run. The song *A Little Bit Of Love* from *Free At Last* was the song that would have been a nice follow up to *All Right Now*, but it was too little, too late. Kossoff became unreliable due to his drug abuse, which lead to Fraser leaving the band. Free recorded one more album without Fraser, and only partially with Kossoff, who was barely able to function at the time. Rodgers played most of the guitar for the surprisingly good *Heartbreaker* album, which contained their second most well known song, *Wishing Well*. Even though *Heartbreaker* was their second most successful album, Free broke up for good shortly after it was released.

After Free broke up, Paul Rodgers and Simon Kirke formed *Bad Company* with Mott The Hoople guitarist Mick Ralphs and King Crimson bassist Boz Burrell, and went on to huge success. Andy Fraser became a member of a band called *Sharks*, but left shortly

after their first excellent album to start a solo career that yielded two very good solo albums. Fraser sang on his two solo albums, and surprisingly, he sounded a lot like Paul Rodgers. Fraser then became a successful songwriter for others, and has rarely recorded or performed live since the 70's, though he did play with Paul Rodgers at the 1994 Woodstock. Paul Kossoff recorded a solo album called *Back Street Crawler*, and then formed a band named after that album that recorded two further albums. He never kicked the drugs, but did slow down and his health improved somewhat. He jammed with Bad Company at a couple of their concerts, and *Back Street Crawler* was set to be the opening band on the next Bad Company tour when Kossoff died from drug-related heart failure on a flight from LA to New York in 1976 at the age of 25. Kossoff's father, British actor David Kossoff, blamed the members of Free for Paul's death and established the Paul Kossoff Foundation, which educated children about drug addiction. He spent the rest of his life campaigning against drugs.

Free was a band made up of stellar musicians that should have had more success than they did. They had one of the best singers in rock history, one of the most innovative bass players, and one of the most unique guitarists. Every British rock band of the late 60s and into the 70s, and most of the American ones will attest that Free was a huge influence on them. When Free was the opening band for Blind Faith, Eric Clapton asked Paul Kossoff to show him how he got his trademark tremolo effect. Kossoff thought that Clapton was joking at first, but was more than happy to show him the technique. Clapton had been a hero of Kossoff's since he had seen him play with John Mayall's Blues Breakers in the mid-60s. Kossoff even used a trademark Gibson Les Paul like the one Clapton had used in the Blues Breakers. Wilson Pickett recorded a great version of Free's *Fire and Water*, so their influence spread all the way to soul recorded right here in Memphis. The 90s band Mr. Big named themselves after the Free song, and Joe Bonamassa cites Paul Kossoff and Free as a huge influence, covering *Walk In My Shadow* on his debut album in 2000.

Fire And Water not only has Free's biggest hit song, it's also their best album. There are several versions of the album on CD and vinyl. The US CD sounds dull and should be avoided at all costs, as the UK remastered version can be had for a few dollars more and contains some great bonus live songs recorded for the BBC. There is also a great expanded double CD deluxe version of the album with alternate takes and live material. The best introduction to the band, however, is the out-of-print Molten Gold double CD anthology. It isn't difficult to find at a reasonable price, but the reason that it is worth seeking out over all of the other Free compilations, is that it has excellent sound quality, a great booklet, and the UK anthologies use the single version of *All Right Now*. The version that is known in the US and is played every day on the radio is the album version, which has a slightly different opening riff, an extended guitar solo, and a repeated second verse. Every one of the import Free compilations all use the shorter single version, which is the version played on the radio overseas. Of course, the remastered *Fire And Water* CD has both versions of the song, so any of the UK compilations make a great companion to it.

