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Night Moves

Jamming with Jimbo

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"I 'm ready to play some mo'," said James "Jimbo" Mathus in between a beer and cigarette.

Jimbo had just sealed a triumphant set with Buddy Guy and Double Trouble at the Tampa Bay Blues Festival on Saturday in Vinoy Park, St. Petersburg. The rest of the musicians backstage were content to relax and call it a night. Not Jimbo.

Jimbo is one of the architects behind the Squirrel Nut Zippers, whose 1997 jump blues album "Hot" was one of the biggest surprise successes of the decade.

In between playing guitar with Guy, Jimbo maintains a solo career with the Knockdown Society (it's released three albums). Jimbo also has a new studio, which he operates, boasting vintage equipment in his native Clarksdale, Miss. Elvis Costello and the Attractions are scheduled to visit soon.

"To get that redneck sound," Jimbo joked.

Jimbo had a solo gig the next night in New Orleans, and an early-morning flight scheduled to get him there. One would think the multi-instrumentalist/singer/songwriter could use a rest.

"Ah, man, I just can't get enough," said Jimbo with a big grin that exposed his gold-capped front tooth.

When Jimbo returned from signing autographs, a plan was hatched to hit the nearby Ringside Cafe. Jimbo needed to take care of his boogie jones. He had ride, and we walked off, planning to meet him there.

"Wade, ah, I think that's Jimbo," said my brother, Joel, as we hoofed

along the water toward our parking garage.

Sure enough, there was Jimbo. Skinny as a snake. Dressed in tight jeans, cowboy boots, Western shirt and with lamb-chop sideburns and a black guitar case in each wiry arm.

"What the heck are you doing, Jimbo?" I yelled, as he tried to talk someone into giving him a boat ride.

He shrugged his shoulders and then laughed so hard he had to lean back and catch his balance. "Well . . . I missed the van to take me, and then these people, ah, that were here."

"Come on, partner," I said. "We're parked just up here."

"Nah, man, y'all ain't gotta do that," Jimbo said, as we grabbed the guitar cases. He pulled out a can of Guinness from under his shirt - "awful" - he cried out in between gulps.

"Buddy Guy is the man. I love playing with him," Jimbo said.

"Every time you took a solo, he'd be calling out your name," I said, hoping Jimbo was not noticing we were pitifully lost.

"Really? I've known him four years now, and he's only known my name for the last two," Jimbo said with a chuckle.

Jimbo didn't know his way to our car - and didn't seem to really care. He was good for comic relief.

"Look at us," Jimbo bellowed, as we traipsed through downtown while taking turns lugging the cases. His custom electric guitar must have been made to stop kryptonite.

"We look like . . . thieves," Jimbo shouted.

Finally, we made it to the vehicle after realizing it was Third Avenue not Third Street we were seeking. My brother, the sober one, drove.

After only *kinda* getting lost in the car, we found the Ringside, brimming with bodies and high spirits. The rest of our crew - friends Aaron Lewis and Ryan Trainor - used their 45-minute waiting period wisely to secure us a corner table by the stage. The Jimmy Griswold Band, a popular local act, was working the crowd nicely, especially in

the small, dance-floor area between our table and where the musicians stood.

Jimbo muttered about three words, explaining to the band what he was going to play. Within seconds, his hands were blazing up and down the neck of that custom guitar we had been toting around, and it was all worth it. Jaws dropped, and folks rushed the stage area.

"Boogie music is *gooooood* for the *sooooooul*," howled Jimbo across a maelstrom of stomping Mississippi Hill Country blues. Jimbo jammed like a man with a hellhound on his trail. He took the whole room with him back to the kind of Clarksdale juke joints where the blues was born. He wasn't playing for a paycheck, just for the sheer joy of it. And the room responded in kind.

Jimbo played on and off until the bar closed. At our table, people came up and thanked him over and over.

The next morning, Jimbo slept through his wake-up call and missed his flight.

"Man, that was a great night, wasn't it?" Jimbo said when he called from New Orleans on Monday. He caught a flight later Sunday to make his gig.

"Don't get too crazy down there in the Crescent City, now."

Jimbo just let out a big Delta guffaw.