

His Fingers Do the Talking

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Junior Brown is about as matter-of-fact as people get. On record and in interview, he sounds as excitable as a corpse. About his upcoming live record, due in September? He says it's "just to answer some requests. " About his role as narrator in the new *Dukes of Hazzard* movie, taking over where Waylon Jennings left off on the TV series? "They just offered it to me." About the instrument he invented, the double-necked guit-steel? "I'd been thinking about something like that."

And based on his publicity photos, he appears to be someone incapable of a smile; his eyes are squinty, his lips are twisted into a grimace, and the expression is as welcoming as most people's snarls.

I imagined Brown could tell me that his cat died, his wife left him, and the bank took his house and car, all without a trace of emotion or trouble in his voice.

But don't mistake his cool for dull or pedestrian. When Junior Brown performs at River Roots Live on August 20, you'll have the opportunity to see one of country music's finest wits and instrumentalists, a man who fuses country motifs with rock-star skills.

You can hear some of that on his half-dozen albums, on the blistering solo for "Hill Country Hot Rod Man," for example. The calm, seemingly ever-even-tempered man is a monster on the guitar who lets his fingers do the talking.

The headline on a press release from his label calls Brown a "guit-steel legend," but that's at best a humorous understatement; he's the *only* person to play the instrument, as well as its creator.

Brown began playing professionally in the late 1960s, while still in his teens, but his musical career didn't take off until the 1980s. It was in 1980 that a dream showed him how to combine an electric and steel guitar. He had considered gluing the two instruments together, but in his sleep he recognized he needed a double-necked instrument, with the electric on the top and the steel on the bottom. "Sometimes your subconscious will tell you something you already know but you don't know you know it," the Oklahoma-based Brown said.

And the guit-steel was born, even though it took five years to get the first model built. His current model, "Big Red," was built in 1996.

In the early '80s, Brown also started hanging out with songwriters, recognizing that he'd have a better chance of success if he could craft songs and not just play them. He made his solo debut in 1993, with *12 Shades of Brown*.

A few things jump out about Brown's songs. His deadpan, old-school-country voice serves him well, a symbol of a modesty both in person and in his music. He undersells his clever lyrics with his deep but affectation-less baritone, and that in turn sets the stage for his guitar playing, which is spectacular yet rarely showy.

But there is little doubt that Brown is a guitar hero the likes of which country music rarely sees.

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The *Village Voice* compared him to Jimi Hendrix, and intended that analogy to be taken seriously: “His Hendrix fixation, it’s now obvious, is not a slacker-grabbing gimmick, but an honorable exploration of the highways and byways Jimi opened, and a journey, moreover, wherein Junior’s loose-as-a-geese wringing, combined with his guitar-steel’s unique and extraordinary range, actually elevates him into the class of musical humans going where no man, Hendrix not excepted, has gone before.”

In spite of that pronouncement, Brown is no country heretic. He works within the genre’s rules, and he doesn’t skimp on the twang or the tales of woe. But every now and again, he can’t help himself, and he forgoes tasteful licks and ringing slide in favor of fiery leads that would, indeed, make Hendrix proud. On his latest record, 2004’s *Down Home Chrome*, he even rips through “Foxy Lady.”

But Brown stressed, in his casual, unemphatic way, that he’s no Hendrix worshipper. “I just did it for fun,” he said of “Foxy Lady.” “I always sort of liked it.”

What I hear in Brown, both in style and humor, is a country elder of the Reverend Horton Heat, who sounds like Junior’s bratty, punkish offspring. Strip the Reverend’s music of its speed, volume, cockiness, and grin and you’re left with Brown.

On *Down Home Chrome*’s opening track, “Little Rivi-Airhead,” Brown finds a dozen ways to describe a woman whose primary skill is driving fast, from “She’s got a head full of air and foot full of lead” to “She’s got more under the hood than she’s got upstairs.”

And you only need to look at one of the album’s song titles – “Two Rons Don’t Make It Right” – to understand that Brown knows how to write country music. The joke’s even better when you find out it’s essentially a country-comedy version of the movie *Dead Ringers*, with identical twins, mistaken identity, and cruel practical jokes.

But if you like Brown’s records, wait to see him in person. That’s something even Brown admits, in his inimitable, self-deprecating, and heavily qualified way: “My live shows are pretty much what people talk about.”