



# BEYOND THE RIM

*Jarekus Singleton aims high with his love of the blues*

*Jackson*— At mid-morning, Underground 119, Jarekus Singleton's favorite hometown haunt, is still full of shadows. Above, at ground level, the rest of the world hustles past on President Street. Down here, it may as well be midnight. Light from red-toned wall sconces bleeds dimly across a maze of black leather couches in U-formation in front of a cramped stage area where many of Mississippi's top blues talents perform.

It's not hard to imagine this place as general manager Matt Briggs describes it when Jarekus takes the stage a few times a year — packed with fans mingling and moving like the vibrant figures in the murals on the wall, a line of people down the block waiting for their turn to enter.

After a rapid knock at the back door next to the bar, a beam of sunlight precedes our man, positively beaming, fresh and in command of his element. No surprise: He's on his game.

Jarekus greets his manager, Peggy Brown, and shares a joke with Matt. Every few minutes a familiar face walks through, and nearly all are greeted with a laugh, a clap and a hug.

"This is where I built my following," Jarekus said. "I played at other local spots, but I've always had a special love for 119. Matt gives local people a shot — a chance to fail. ➤



And in life, that's all we really want. Give me the ball at the end of the game when the clock's running down, and if I miss the shot and we lose, I'll take the blame. But if I make that, I want it again the next game!" Jarekus laughs, but then sobers on the point that propelled him beyond the tales of struggle and determination detailed on his breakthrough album, *Refuse to Lose*.

"That someone would believe in you enough to give you the ball, that's what means everything to me. That's what I care about. I had to fight for it a lot of the time," he said.

Fighting doesn't begin to describe it. Even church, which his grandfather led five nights a week, and where Jarekus first played guitar at age 15, brought its share of challenges. But as many times as he's been down, he's also rebounded.

"My grandfather's church in Jackson was in the hood, in subdivision 2 on Dewey Street. That's a tough part of town. We used to have people sitting outside, watching the cars, because every night we'd come to church someone would break into a

car. We had to haul all the instruments in and then all the instruments out when church was over, 'cause my granddaddy didn't want to take a chance on someone breaking into the church and stealing the equipment."

Back then, basketball was Jarekus' passion, and music was just something he played at church. Many of his friends never knew he could tune a guitar, let alone play one. That all changed after working his way through college, an experience he relates in the album's title track:

"To pay the bills I had to sweat / I worked hard jobs with no regrets I scrubbed toilets to squeaky clean / And I scrubbed floors with Mr. Clean."

The Clarion-Ledger named Jarekus a Dandy Dozen athlete in high school, and he earned National Player of the Year honors while at William Carey University but he didn't find the home he wanted in the NBA. So Jarekus fought to stay on the court, traveling as far as Lebanon to

play professional ball. A freak accident during a stateside pro-am camp for scouts left him with torn cartilage and bleak prospects.

"I had no career or foundation, didn't have a place to stay so I was living at my mama's house, and my agent quit on me. That's how the world is. People don't care about you, man, it's just unfair. But you have to refuse to lose," he said.

The new idle nights took Jarekus back to the talent that now takes him to stages on both sides of the Atlantic. As his song goes, he grabbed his six-string girlfriend and tuned the world out. Now, the world is tuning in.

"When I was 20 years old, my grandfather asked if I wanted this old guitar he had at the church. And that

particular guitar, six or seven years later, when I'm lying in bed after surgery, that's the guitar I played in bed at my mama's house. "I never dreamed of being a musician. I wrote poetry a lot, just to ease my mind growing up. I felt like I had a lot of good things to say but people weren't listening to me as a child," he said, laughing. "What child do



people listen to?"

Counter to the musician stereotype, Jarekus doesn't spend a lot of time partying. He treats music like a job, waking early and keeping bankers' hours on business before cranking up and letting the notes wail.

"I feel like I'm free. I wake up every day and do what I love. Blues is a way of life," he said. "Being a musician is a way of life. It's not a job, but you have to approach it with that intensity. Every move we make is life or death."

Sudden death — it's one of many sports metaphors that weave through his language and his experience. It's how he relates to life. When he left the court, only the game changed. He traded hardwood for tone woods and kept pushing himself.

"When I was on my own, every day I was making 30 phone calls by 12 p.m., Monday through Friday," he said. "On a lot of these festivals I'm getting booked on ➤



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Blues guitarist, singer and  
songwriter Jarekus Singleton  
strums his guitar at Underground  
119. Singleton said playing at the  
Jackson restaurant and music  
venue brings back good memories.









*“You miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take.”*

*–Jarekus Singleton*

now, they wouldn’t even talk to me then. But things take time. You miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take.”

Now that he has a strong label, Alligator Records, and solid management behind him, the calls are mostly about going over new gigs, tour routing and recording sessions. He also makes them from a place in the country, now that he’s expanded on his Clinton-by-way-of-Jackson roots with a few acres outside of town, where he interrupts the quiet with nightly jams.

“It’s really peaceful. I’m not used to that. I’m used to a lot of noise. Sometimes it’s too peaceful for me, and sometimes I write best when I have a distraction.”

While Jarekus found an outlet putting his poetry to beats in college, every now and then he’d pick up the

guitar his grandfather gave him and play. He never owned an amp, never played in a band. Music was an outlet, something he kept virtually secret from everyone except a select few. Now Mississippi’s best-kept-secret bluesman is having a hard time keeping it all to himself.

“Who knew that I would be writing songs and people would be singing ‘Crime Scene’ word for word when I go to San Francisco, or Mount Tremblant in Canada? I’m just thankful.”

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