

...only been since joining Jimmy Johnson's blues band that he's begun to get some outside recognition. At age 34, he's old enough to recall and to have been influenced by such legendary blues drummers as Fred Below and S.P. Leary. Yet, he's young enough to be considered part of the new generation of blues players. He brings to the blues a keen sense of tradition and a remarkably strong respect for standard blues. However, he's never been afraid to insert fresh ideas into his drumming.

For this reason, Grady is a good choice to represent Chicago's new breed of blues drummers. As he points out in the following interview, young blues drummers often borrow from rock and rhythm & blues, and in the process, are slowly but surely redefining the role of a blues drummer. Grady's drum style can be summed up this way: cool, crisp, a touch of funk here, a dash of rock there—but always mindful, as he says, "to keep my job of laying down the beat in front of everything else I do."

RS: You weren't always a blues drummer. You crossed over from

funk and Top 40, correct?

FG: That's true. In the '70s, I played in mostly funk groups around Chicago. But in 1979, I switched over to the blues. I started out free-lancing around the city, and I played with a bunch of different blues artists. I'd work four or five nights a week with pretty much everyone around town. I did that until I met Jimmy Johnson. He was working steady enough to keep everything happening, so I hung around.

RS: But why the change to the blues?

FG: Two reasons: first, because I always loved the blues and, second, because I had friends who actually found a way to make a decent living as blues musicians. It used to be that you couldn't make any money playing the blues, and that kept a good many players away from playing it regularly. Blues musicians have to eat just like anyone else, you see. So when I saw that I could make a decent living, plus get to travel to places like Europe and still have a couple of dollars in my pocket, well, I made the switch.

RS: Did you grow up listening to the blues?

FG: Yeah, I did. I came up listening to the blues and hung out at blues clubs. I knew the music. I was born and raised in Chicago, so there was no getting away from the blues even if I wanted to.

RS: What neighborhood of Chicago did you grow up in?

FG: I grew up pretty close to the Checkerboard Lounge. Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Muddy Waters—they all played there. I'd hang out there and listen to these players, and I'd be torn between playing the blues and playing funk. I loved the earthiness of the blues, but I also dug the rhythms heard in funk music.

RS: When did you begin playing the drums?

FG: Oh, when I was about 16. So I've been playing for about 18 years now, although it doesn't seem that long. I always loved the drums—always loved the way they sounded in a band. As a kid, I'd beat pots and pans, and then I went out and got some real drums. I went down in the basement and learned how to play them, and a year later, I was in my first band.

RS: Did you take drum lessons?

FG: No, but I had friends who took lessons, and I would learn what they learned.

RS: From a drummer's point of view, was it difficult for you to make the transition from funk to the blues?

FG: No, not really. When I was playing in funk bands, I'd still make it to the blues clubs and sit in whenever I could. I'd play with local bands. But in order to sit in, you had to know how to play the blues. You couldn't play like you were stuck in a funk groove. They'd throw you off the stage.

RS: It seems that a number of young blues musicians did, and still do, the very same thing. They play in contemporary soul or funk bands around the city, and jam with blues musicians until they make the change. Would you say that's a fairly accurate state-

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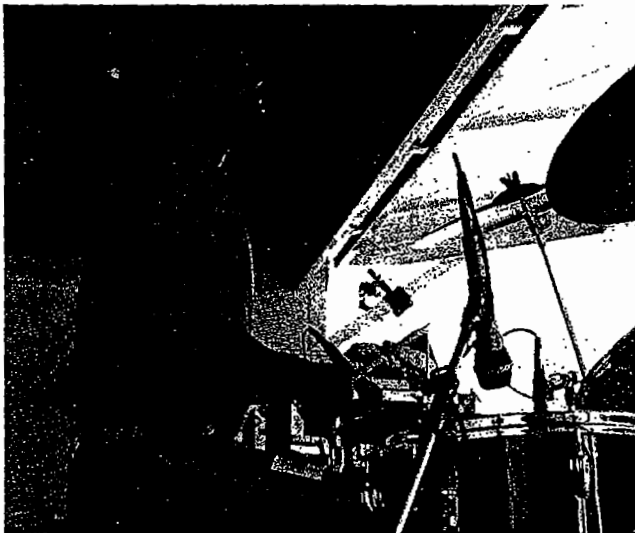


Photo by Robert Santelli

FRED GRADY

Although Fred Grady is well known in Chicago blues circles, it's

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ment?
FG: I think so, yeah. A lot of young black musicians don't like to play the blues full-time, because that's the music of their parents and grandparents—that sort of thing. But once they get the need to

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discover their roots, they take the blues more seriously. Then, sometimes you have to get the blues before you start to understand the blues and want to play it.

RS: What blues drummers did you especially admire when you were learning to play?

FG: Fred Below. When it comes to the blues and blues drumming, he's the master. There ain't no better than Fred Below. I'd listen to him all the time. He was an inspiration.

RS: Describe, if you can, the changes you had to make as a drummer when you went from playing funk to blues.

FG: When I was playing funk, I'd play more upbeat stuff and maybe a little more all the way around. But funk is derived from the blues, so I don't think it's all that difficult for anyone with a good knowledge of both music forms to make the change. A blues drummer is also less showy. He's there, but he's not, if you know what I mean. Blues musicians don't like drummers who go around proving they can play this or that and being fancy. You might get away with that in other forms of music, especially in rock, but not in the blues. You'd be out of a job.

RS: Yet, when you play with Jimmy Johnson, you seem to blend together a blues-funk feel so that your playing is sharper and more robust than the average blues drummer.

FG: Well, that's because I'm not from the old school of blues drummers. I listened to the greats—people like Fred Below, Odie Payne, and S.P. Leary—but then I developed my own style. In the old days, before electric instruments, you had to play soft, so everyone else in the band could be heard. But these days, I think it's okay to play a little harder—a little heavier—providing you're not too flashy or playing with one of the greats. When you play with them, you play drums the way they're used to hearing them, mostly because that's the way they know the blues to be and also out of respect.

RS: Would you say that blues drumming is evolving into some-

thing more dynamic than the styles heard 30 years ago?

FG: Yeah, I think so. Blues drummers are influenced today by drummers in rock and R&B, and they're sneaking a little more into their fills along with a little more volume. There's a little mixing up going on with the younger blues drummers.

RS: What kind of drumset do you currently play?

FG: I use Ludwig drums. I have two kits. My fiberglass kit is the one I'm using now. It has four toms: 13", 14", 16", and 18", a 24" bass, and a 14" snare. I also use a 16" crash cymbal, a 20" ride, and a 14" hi-hat. My other kit is a wooden one.

RS: Do you ever use electronic drums?

FG: No. Now you're really putting me off the blues stage. That's going too far. That would definitely change the sound of the blues.

RS: I know Jimmy Johnson is quite popular in Europe. Do you enjoy playing there?

FG: Oh yeah. They love the blues over there. Blues acts from America don't get over there as regularly as they'd like, so when they do come, thousands of people turn out. Some blues artists have even moved over there. I saw Memphis Slim in Paris, and the cat was driving a Rolls Royce. He's going good. I've been to Europe on seven different tours. The money is four times what you make here in the States.

RS: What's the current Chicago blues scene like?

FG: It's pretty good, you know. There are a bunch of good clubs around to play. People who dig rock 'n' roll seem to be searching out the music's roots, so they go looking for the blues.

RS: Is there enough happening in town to keep most blues players working?

FG: If you're good, there's always a gig for you. I made a good living free-lancing. Others are doing the same.

