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# JAMES "SUPER CHIKAN" JOHNSON WITH GUEST RICHARD CHRISTMAN TRADITIONAL BLUES GUITAR FROM MISSISSIPPI



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# JAMES "SUPER CHIKAN" JOHNSON

## CLARKSDALE, MS

The Mississippi Delta has been called the "birthplace of the blues." Many of the music's early pioneers, including Charley Patton, Son House, and Skip James, lived and performed throughout the region. While the music has changed considerably since its early days, the blues still plays an important role in the cultural life of the Delta. There are blues musicians living in most of the larger communities in the region. Among them, James "Super Chikan" Johnson of Clarksdale is one of the Delta's most distinctive performers.

Johnson was born in the small Delta community of Darling in 1951 and grew up in rural towns around the area. As a young boy living in the country, he developed an interest in his family's chickens and spent time trying to understand the meaning of the noises they made. His friends and family soon began calling him "the old chicken boy" or "Chicken" for short. He received the other half of his moniker during a stint working as a taxi driver in Clarksdale. His speedy driving earned him the new nickname "Super Chikan."

One of eleven children, Johnson came from a musical family. His grandfather, Ellis Johnson, played the fiddle in local string bands, and one of his uncles, "Big" Jack Johnson, is an internationally known blues musician. Johnson's first musical efforts came through building and playing a diddly bow, a one-stringed instrument popular among Delta blues musicians. When he was thirteen, he got a used guitar and was taught the basics of the instrument by friends and family members. By the time he was in his early twenties, he was playing bass in local clubs with his uncle Jack's band. Johnson went on to play bass and guitar for a number of Delta blues bandleaders, including Frank Frost, Ernest Roy, Sr., Sam Carr, and Wesley Jefferson.

Later on, while working as a truck driver, Johnson used the time while on the road to write his own songs. He recorded his first album as a bandleader, *Blues Come Home to Roost*, in 1997. On the recording, Johnson first showcased his ability to meld the blues with a number of different musical styles, including country, funk, and rock. His lyrics also came from a unique perspective, providing both humorous and serious views of contemporary life in the Delta. The record captivated the critics and blues audiences, earning him awards for Best Blues Album and Best Debut Album from the 1998 Living Blues Magazine Awards.

Since the success of his first record, Johnson has been busy performing solo and with his band, The Fighting Cocks, at festivals and clubs throughout the U.S. and

Europe. He has also continued to release recordings at a steady pace. His most recent CD, *Chikan Supe*, was released in 2005 on Clarksdale, Mississippi's Knockdown South Records.

In recent years, Johnson has also become known as a visual artist. Taking lessons learned from his grandfather, who built instruments and made fishing lures, he began building his own guitars and other instruments. Johnson combined discarded guitar parts with old Army gas cans, creating "Chikantars," fully playable guitars that he now plays at many of his performances. He also makes cigar box guitars, diddly bows, and other one-of-a-kind instruments. Johnson hand paints each of his instruments, decorating them with detailed scenes of the Delta. The instruments have become highly prized by collectors throughout the south. In 2005 he received an Artist Fellowship from the Mississippi Arts Commission in order to support this part of his artistic career.

Despite his international travel, "Super Chikan" remains dedicated to his home region and state. He still performs in Clarksdale clubs on a regular basis and is a constant presence at music festivals around Mississippi. The state has recognized Johnson's high level of artistry. In 2004, he was a recipient of Mississippi's Governors Award for Excellence in the Arts. Last year, he was prominently featured in a media campaign produced by the state tourism office that promoted Mississippi's blues attractions.

Larry Morrissey  
Heritage Program Director  
Mississippi Arts Commission

Larry Morrissey has served as the Heritage Program Director for the Mississippi Arts Commission since 1998. He has produced a number of special projects highlighting the traditional artists living and working in Mississippi, including radio programs, websites, a traveling exhibition, a series of statewide folklife conferences, and other initiatives.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife)

