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Soulful tale told in ‘Lil’ Choo-Choo Johnson’

By Paul Lane

Any veteran bluesman would proclaim that in order to effectively play the blues, the performer has to have a reason to do so. If that’s the case, then Lil’ Choo-Choo has motivation in spades.

Born Earl Johnson in the pre-Depression Mississippi delta, Lil’ Choo-Choo left home before he was age 10, never attended school, rode the rails with any grown man willing to watch over him, and had his first wife walk out on him while he served during World War II.

He also recorded a blues album by age 12, played with the blues’ all-time greats, sold millions of records over his lifetime and was enshrined in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

In his debut novel, “Lil’ Choo-Choo Johnson, Bluesman,” UB graduate and Rochester resident Bryan Krull weaves a soulful, emotionally captivating tapestry of what a bluesman’s life might have been like in the 20th century. Borrowing from the legends of the likes of Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, Krull offers up a fictional tale with real-life elements braided in, creating a rhythm and blues version of “Forrest Gump.”

Born in Corfu, Miss., Lil’ Choo-Choo was sent away with his uncle Houndtooth by his father so that he wouldn’t languish on the southern farms like his dad had. Quickly left on his own after Houndtooth presumably paid a pound of flesh to some debtors during a night of gambling. Lil’ Choo-Choo got his nickname while aimlessly stowing away on rail cars with bluesman Big Choo-Choo, who let the boy play music with him as well.

Big Choo-Choo’s passing soon thereafter left his protégé in the hands of Son House, one of numerous real-life blues pioneers referenced in this text. House brought the boy with him to make a record in Wisconsin and on tours across the South, which led Lil’ Choo-Choo to meet Robert Johnson. But Robert Johnson quickly was added to the list of the prematurely dead, which led Lil’ Choo-Choo away from the blues.

But he went back. And no matter how many times he tried to stay away, he always answered the siren’s song that was the blues.

Upon returning from the war to an empty house (his wife left after finding out about his musical past), Lil’ Choo-Choo was recruited to play with Howlin’ Wolf in a band that made its way to Memphis. Lil’ Choo-Choo got remarried and had two daughters there, but Wolf wouldn’t let Lil’ Choo-Choo’s music dreams get derailed, as Wolf pulled Lil’ Choo-Choo away from his municipal job to play the club circuit in Chicago (and record a few more albums along the way).

From there, Lil’ Choo-Choo and his family eventually made their way to Cleveland, where he continued to play when not working on the railroad. The blues revival of the 1960s- spearheaded by the likes of Eric Clapton and members of the

Rolling Stones, all of whom cited Lil' Choo-Choo as an influence- led to his leaving the railroad for good to tour and record for the majority of his remaining days.

Krull's use of real-life people and events as a backdrop for his tale is expertly done. One can't help but smile upon thinking of Creedence Clearwater Revival covering a Lil' Choo-Choo song, or the elderly bluesman stumping for his adopted hometown to be the host for the rock hall- only to be enshrined a few years later.

Rather than focusing solely on the factual elements of the story, though, Krull allows the reader to primarily delve into the mind of a bluesman. Many of that era's top players likely felt as Krull's fictional protagonist did- in love with the thought of a "normal" life more than the reality that life sometimes provided, always wanting to do right by family even as bigger and better musical opportunities presented themselves. To be sure, Lil' Choo-Choo wasn't perfect, but his heart was pure and his intentions true.

Every facet of this book is captivating, from the in-depth descriptions of events factual and fictional, to the inner turmoil of a bluesman trying in vain to deny his heart, to the ultimate redemption of a human who at many points seemed destined for an early, anonymous grave. Music fans and lovers of a quality tale alike would be wise to take a ride with "Lil' Choo-Choo."

IF YOU READ

- **WHAT:** Lil' Choo-Choo Johnson, Bluesman
- **BY:** Bryan Krull
- **DETAILS:** Published by Dog Ear Publishing, 209 pages
Available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, www.bryankrull.com
- **GRADE:** A-

IF YOU GO

- **WHAT:** Book-signing by author Bryan Krull
- **WHEN:** During the Niagara Falls Blues Festival- 5 to 11 p.m. Friday, 1 to 11 p.m. Saturday
- **WHERE:** Old Falls Street, Niagara Falls
- **MORE INFORMATION:** Visit niagarafallsbluesfest.com, www.bryankrull.com