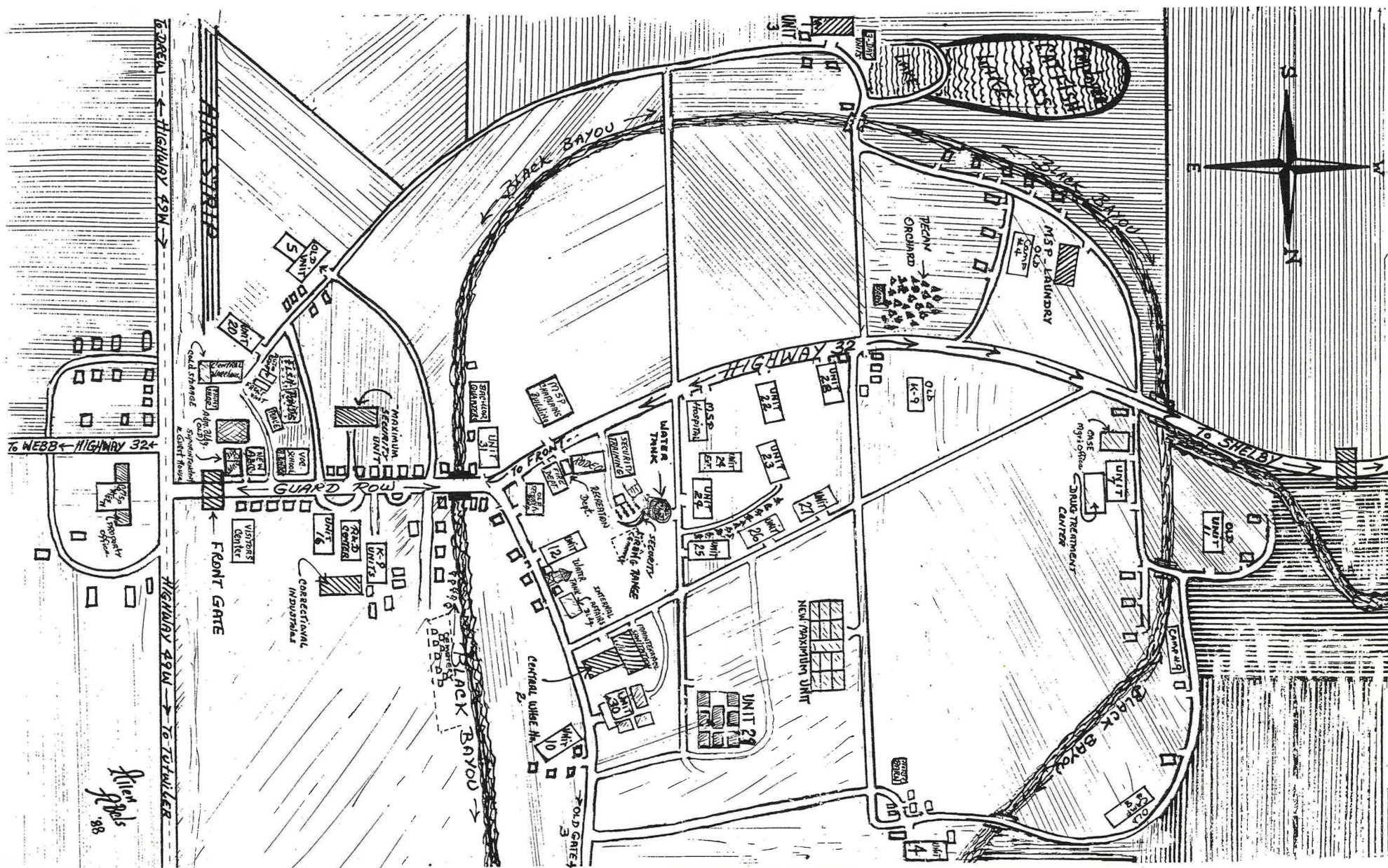


THE PARCHMAN BAND

EDITED BY HOUSTON JONES
TINTYPES BY TIM DUFFY

THE PARCHMAN BAND

EDITED BY HOUSTON JONES
TINTYPES BY TIM DUFFY



THE PARCHMAN BAND

EDITED BY HOUSTON JONES

TINTYPES BY TIM DUFFY



MUSIC MAKER
FOUNDATION

First Edition, 2026.

Edited by Houston Jones

Tintypes and Photographs © 2026 Tim Duffy

Book design by Bill Moore

“Prison band” by Martha Alice Stewart used with permission from Special Collections, University of Mississippi Library.

Copyright © 2026 Music Maker Foundation.

All songs © 2026 by listed authors

ISBN 979-8-9967522-1-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

To the living spirit of Parchman’s first laborers, field hands, and legendary bluesmen—like Son House and Bukka White—who faced the darkest reality with work songs, field hollers, and raw rhythm. Your music kept humanity alive in a place and time designed to strip it away.

To the men of the revived Parchman Band. You are nurturing the best of Parchman’s history, proving that no matter how deep the shadow of suffering, music will still transcend to foster healing, growth, and true change.

And to those who have committed themselves today to the inherent dignity of Parchman and its inmates. The work you have done, and continue to do, has made humanity, grace, and redemption central to a place that, for over a hundred years, has struggled to openly embrace its better angels, its best self.

—Houston Jones & Tim Duffy



CONTENTS

The History of Parchman Band	1
Redemption in Real Time	7
Charles Glassco IV	18
Streets of Memphis	20
Jakellsey Hollis	22
Freedom	24
Michael Snell	26
Str8line	28
Steven Chambers	30
Let Me Know	32
Lee Smith	34
You & I	36
Love You Out Loud.....	38
Leonard Stevenson, Jr.	40
Nostalgia	42
Houston Jones	44
Next to Me	46
Perfect Man	48
Acknowledgements	53

“Discovering the revived Parchman Band has given me hope and inspiration to be a part of a unique musical ministry and to see the changes possible inside a place like Parchman, long noted as perhaps the most infamous of prisons. It is proof that music—if and where it exists—can foster healing, forgiveness and, yes, redemption.”

—Jimbo Mathus

FOREWORD

Mississippi is a place of stories. Few places on Earth can match our legacy of turning life into a spellbinding tale. Stories are as much a part of Mississippi as are the turbulent waters of the river that gave our state her name.

Everything essential to the Mississippi story—the way the land and the people shape one another, the eternal battle between justice and injustice, the power and beauty of art created in spite of struggle—is a part of the Parchman story.

For too long, the Parchman story—like the Mississippi story—has been one of tragedy, atrocity, and dreams abandoned. Yet from the deepest, darkest, most notorious corner of the Delta, the men in the Parchman Band are authoring a new chapter, one of grace, groove, hope, and redemption.

In May of 2026, I had the privilege of spending a week with the Parchman Band, performing together across the state. We sang at The MAX in Meridian, home of the Mississippi Hall of Fame. We raised the roof at Marty Stuart’s Congress of Country Music in Philadelphia. We broke the attendance record at Cleveland’s GRAMMY Museum. And we provided entertainment for Parchman Family Day, the sweetest gig of all.

Every time we took the stage, I witnessed a miracle. I watched in real time as audience members of all stripes began to see beyond the stripes of the incarcerated. And I’ve never been prouder to be a Mississippian.

My time with the Parchman Band transformed me. My hope is that you will experience a similar transformation as you come to know these men through the pages of this book.

Each of the men in the Parchman Band is as good a storyteller as an Oprah Winfrey or a Muddy Waters. And theirs is the story that Mississippi—and the world—so desperately needs.

Myrlie Evers famously pronounced, “Yes, Mississippi was. But Mississippi is.”

I say, yes, Parchman was. But Parchman is.

—Charlie Worsham



THE HISTORY OF PARCHMAN BAND

Mississippi State Penitentiary (better known as Parchman Farm or, simply, Parchman) is rooted in a rich musical history. The Mississippi Delta is the undisputed birthplace of the blues—and in the heart of the Delta lies Parchman.

Opened in 1901, Parchman was a desolate and unforgiving place of incarceration. Through adversity and hardship, Parchman's inmates found comfort in music. Photographic documentation shows that the prison had a formal music group as far back as 1930. But it is also true that work gangs—who were a band of their own—were singing work songs and hollers since the prison's founding.

In 1933, John Avery Lomax and his son Alan Lomax made the first of many visits to Parchman with the mission of documenting music on the farm. Alan returned in 1947 to record the inmates singing as they labored in the fields. The laborers would sustain themselves with haunting melodies, often keeping time with whatever field implements they were working with. Alan would later

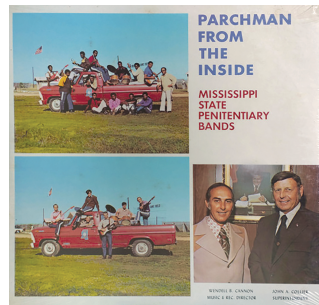
write that their music “testified to the love of truth and beauty which is a universal human trait.” The Lomax Recordings, which were made periodically from 1933 through 1959, currently reside in the Library of Congress.

Several prominent Delta blues musicians spent time incarcerated at Parchman. Bukka White, who recorded “Parchman Farm Blues,” took inspiration from his time there that was reflected in his music. Son House, another significant bluesman, spent time at Parchman for murder. Bluesman R.L. Burnside also spent time on the Farm, during which he participated in the inmate band. Decades later, this grim history inspired Mose Allison to write his 1957 blues-jazz standard “Parchman Farm,” a song that drew directly on the legacy of the notorious Mississippi State Penitentiary to tell the story of an inmate doing hard labor.

A more modern band was established in 1952 and grew through the decades. Always adapting to the changing times, the band performed and recorded chart-topping tunes. Vinyl recordings still exist from the band’s time at Malaco Records in Jackson, Mississippi. Through the 1960s, two different recording groups were active at Parchman: an all-white group called The Insiders who performed mostly country and western, and an all African American band known as The Stardusters who performed soul and R&B.

From 1960 through the mid-1990s, the band program was led by Wendell Cannon. Cannon, who was raised in a musical family and had regional musical success, was appointed to the bandleader’s position by Mississippi’s newly elected governor Ross Barnett. Then-superintendent Fred Jones saw the need for change and, shortly before Cannon’s appointment as bandleader, officially launched a formal band program as an initiative for change and self-betterment.

The band program became racially integrated in the early 1970s, and was a co-ed group through the mid-1980s. Parch-



man housed women until 1986, and they were permitted to participate in the group. Although there is no evidence that there were ever female instrumentalists in the group, the women who performed with them served as lead and backing vocalists.

The Parchman Band was widely celebrated throughout the state, playing at schools, community events, and legislative gatherings. According to an annual report from 1986, they performed 48 off-grounds shows that year for public audiences. The band was a staple at the annual Parchman Rodeo and was a highly sought after music group.

With the passing of Wendell Cannon in 1996, the iconic Parchman Band fell silent. The prison music program didn’t just lose its leader, it collided with a changing era. A sweeping nationwide political shift toward “tough on crime” policies, coupled with shifting prison administrations and lack of interest in the continuation of self-betterment programs, effectively gutted rehabilitation efforts. As structured funding dried up, Parchman’s organized musical legacy dissolved, leaving musicians few formal opportunities to express their talent.

* * * REVIVAL * * *

When Commissioner Nathan Burl Cain assumed office in 2020, music was a part of his vision for the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC)—and in 2023, Parchman superintendent Marc McClure encouraged the revival of the prison’s once famous band.

The first round of auditions were held in September 2023, and the newly reformed group performed its first show for their fellow inmates in November 2023. Another round of auditions were held in January 2024. Finally, in April 2024, the revived Parchman Band left Parchman grounds for the first time in three decades to play a show at the Marshall County Correctional Facility.

The band has a rotating facility schedule which allows them to play for every housing unit at Parchman on a regular basis. They also travel throughout the state to other MDOC facilities, bringing the music, showmanship, and history that the Parchman Band is

known for. Each year, the band plays 60-80 shows for incarcerated audiences.

In April 2025, the new band played their first public performance to a standing room only crowd at the B.B. King Museum in Indianola, Mississippi. They went on to perform six public shows in 2025, and recorded their debut studio album in March 2026. Produced by Jimbo Mathus in coordination with Music Maker Foundation, the album's tracks are entirely original material written by the band members themselves.

*** * * THE POWER OF CHANGE * * ***

Currently, the Parchman Band is made up of four instrumentalists and three vocalists: Houston Jones (keys/lead guitar), Leonard Stevenson, Jr. (bass/vocals), Lee Smith (lead guitar/vocals), Jakellsey Hollis (drums), Michael Snell (vocals), Charles Glassco IV (vocals), and Steven Chambers (vocals).

The band's mission is to show the positive changes that have been made at Parchman and throughout MDOC. The group wishes to demonstrate that sincere change, and even redemption, is possible for anyone who wants to turn their life around. Members aim to share with others the gifts that they have been given while serving as an inspiration to other inmates. Leading by example, they consistently act as demonstrators of good behavior and morality, showing the population of Parchman the possibilities, and power, of change.

"The revival of this once legendary group has been an avenue for us to do something positive for our peers, for MDOC, and most importantly, for Parchman and its inmates," the band members recently said in a public statement. "We are blessed to be able to use the talents that we have in such an impactful way. We have watched each other grow, and have grown as a family. Thanks go out to all the staff supporters, our peers, and to you. We couldn't do this without you!"

Houston Jones
Clerk, Parchman Community & Culture Department

“Parchman has a storied musical history, and through the hard work, dedication, and diligence of these men, the torch that will ensure the survival of Parchman’s musical legacy remains lit.”

—Marc McClure
Chief of Institutional Operations
Mississippi Department of Corrections



REDEMPTION IN REAL TIME

by Tim Duffy

I first traveled to Parchman in early March of 2026 with fellow Music Maker Foundation board member David Jones, Jr., expecting to learn more about the prison’s musical legacy. What I did not expect was to witness one of the most hopeful places in the United States today.

Thanks to the generosity of Superintendent Marc McClure and his wife, Lee Ann McClure, we were given a full day to see the remarkable transformation underway at this once notorious institution. As Marc walked us through the grounds, it became clear that Parchman is no longer defined by its past. Instead, it is becoming a model for what prison reform can look like when dignity, faith, and purpose are placed at the center. David and I left that day deeply moved, convinced we had seen something rare and urgently needed in America.

* * * A NEW CHAPTER * * *

Our visit coincided with the recording of the new Parchman Band's debut album, a project made possible through our partnership with the Parchman Community and Culture Foundation. The group was to embark on two intense days of recording with producer Jimbo Mathus at Dial Back Sound, a studio an hour away in Water Valley. The result is a raw, emotional collection of all-original material.

Listening to the early cuts of the album, I was deeply moved by the honesty, faith, and optimism the men poured into their lyrics. These are not down-and-out songs about prison life; they are declarations of transformation. Band member Michael Snell writes about staying on the "str8line" for his family. Lee Smith and Charles Glassco IV describe incarceration as a crucible where divine intervention reshapes the self. Jakellsey Hollis' song speaks of "putting away the old me" to embrace a future rooted in moral clarity. Together, these songs are a collective roadmap for renewal. I can't wait for you to hear them.

During our visit, Dave and I learned that the band needed new gear for their upcoming performances. I promised them we would help, and soon after I left, Music Maker donated high quality guitars, sound gear, and photography equipment to the band. We sent them all they needed to get started for a recording studio inside the prison. This will mark the first time in Parchman's history that incarcerated musicians can control how their music is recorded, documented, and preserved.

* * * BUILDING THE SONGBOOK * * *

Struck by the depth of the lyrics and by Houston Jones' beautifully written history of the Parchman Band, I asked him if he would consider editing a songbook to accompany the upcoming album. He immediately agreed. His vision was ambitious: each song would include lyrics, a band member biography, and the story behind the song's creation. Houston shaped this material into the first Parchman Band Songbook.



Tim Duffy, Lee Smith. Parchman, Mississippi, 2026. Photo by Houston Jones.

To support this effort, I returned to Parchman on April 6, 2026 with my wet-plate wagon (a mobile darkroom built into a trailer) to create tintype portraits of every member of the band. It took me a day to break down my studio in North Carolina and another to load all the gear up. My Suburban was completely full of 1940s-era steel light stands, a bank of heavy Speedotron power packs, and every other piece of gear I use in my complicated photo studio setup. The trailer can easily hold up to four people to stand in, with two long workbenches and a sink; it, too, was full of thirty years' worth of carefully chosen studio gear.

I have a true affinity for tintype photography. These images capture the deep musical history each performer carries, drawing the viewer into the artist's emotional world and inviting us to inhabit their reality. These images suspend us in a timeless realm, one that could be today or a century ago, offering a fresh perspective as both the subject and the viewer drift together across the boundaries of time.

I left North Carolina at four in the morning and drove thirteen hours over to Mississippi. The next day, Houston and I spent four hours transforming the prison's Visitors Center into a full studio,

complete with flash packs, stands, backdrops, and all the equipment I use at our photo studio in Fountain, North Carolina.

For three days, the band members sat patiently as I made three to four tintypes of each of them. Wet-plate photography is slow, deliberate work, each image taking up to half an hour to create. The men embraced the process, writing their stories and inspirations, playing dominoes while they waited their turn. Houston and Lee documented everything with my digital camera, capturing the sessions' joyful, quiet intensity.

On the second day, writer James McWilliams arrived to interview the band, volunteering his time to help Houston with the songbook. On day three, we reviewed the tintypes and the band members selected which image they wanted in this book. Their openness, curiosity, and pride in the project were palpable.

That Saturday, I joined the band on a bus to Clarksdale for their performance at the annual Juke Joint Festival. Houston and Leonard gathered the musicians, secured the driver, and shepherd-ed everyone into town. The band delivered a powerful set. Jimbo Mathus introduced them, and Music Maker artist Rachel Ammons (who had played in town the night before) stopped by to visit and gave the men small rubber chickens, which delighted them. After they played, the band members even visited with their children and families, who had traveled to Clarksdale to watch them perform.

It was a morning full of joy, camaraderie, and purpose. Watching them perform, I was convinced that these men are more than musicians. They are ambassadors of the McClures' vision of faith and redemption.

* * * LIFE INSIDE PARCHMAN * * *

During my stay at the prison, I was housed in the Burl Cain Suite, named for the Commissioner of the Mississippi Prison System. Cain's reform work at Angola Prison in Louisiana laid the groundwork for Parchman's transformation. Being welcomed into this space was an honor.

My second trip also included a visit to Unit 17: death row. I had previously sent the men there several Music Maker books, and they greeted me with warmth, asking me to sign them. Some are



The Parchman Band. Clarksdale, Mississippi, 2026. Photo by Marc McClure.

gifted songwriters, and Houston and I were able to sing and play with them. Many had spent years locked up twenty-three hours a day, shackled during their single hour outside their cell, living with inadequate heat, no air conditioning, and failing plumbing. Now, thanks to the efforts of reformers like Cain and the McClures, those conditions have changed dramatically.

As Marc often says, "The punishment is the sentence." Everything else should be humane.

The goal of these reforms isn't just to improve life behind bars. Many of the men incarcerated at Parchman come from the roughest neighborhoods in Mississippi. Focusing on rehabilitation means that, whether on the outside or the inside, they can be a force for good in their own communities—and maybe help others escape the cycle of violence and crime.

"If we don't change the heart, we don't change the man," Cain once said. "And if we don't change the man, he's coming right back."

* * * **JUST THE BEGINNING** * * *

Spending a week moving through Parchman—meeting the men, hearing their stories, and witnessing their work—was life-changing.

This is just the beginning of Music Maker’s collaboration with the Parchman Band. At the end of May, I returned with director Ethan Payne to create a short film about the band and their upcoming album. Our trip coincided with Parchman’s Family Day, a cherished biannual event where incarcerated men, staff, and their families gather for a picnic with minimal guard presence. This celebration, the first of its kind in Mississippi, is the brainchild of Marc McClure and is now being replicated in other prisons across the state.

Marc and Lee Ann describe Family Day as their favorite time of the year, a rare time when fathers can throw a football with sons they haven’t seen grow up. It is an event that embodies the spirit of Parchman’s reforms.

During the picnic, the Parchman Band took the stage to play for their loved ones, joined by country singer and songwriter Charlie Worsham. They were also joined by the band from Marshall County Correctional Facility in Holly Springs, whose superintendent had asked if Marshall’s gospel group could eventually do their own recording session at Parchman. At the end of the day, I passed out museum-quality plates of the portraits in this book for the band members to give to their families.

With no formal music programming in the Mississippi prison system in over thirty years, inmates have a massive hunger to form bands and create. The McClures envision a future where Parchman is the heart of a statewide prison music program, one that nurtures inmates’ creativity and gives them control over how their voices are heard. Marc has approved my proposal for Houston to produce musical recordings at the Mississippi State Penitentiary.

Music Maker Foundation is doing everything we can to support this vision. We have spent more than 30 years shining light on unseen artists, and this project fits perfectly with our mission. The extraordinary talent documented here since John and Alan



Family Day. Parchman, Mississippi, 2026.



Fantasya Allen with tintype of Leonard Stevenson. Parchman, Mississippi, 2026.

Lomax's first visit in 1933 is spellbinding. Imagine how many more voices were lost.

The Parchman Band have embarked on a righteous, inspirational project that fully realizes Parchman's new direction. The depth of future projects here is infinite. This initiative is the living embodiment of the power of music, and it deserves our nation's full support.

Parchman is no longer the symbol of brutality it once was. It is becoming a place where music, faith, work, and community can be tools of transformation. And while not every inmate can perform in the band, the spirit within this group—and within those who stand behind them—reaches deep into the prison population, signaling something larger stirring in the heart of Parchman. The band members' courage, their hunger to create, and their belief in one another reveal a shift that is slowly spreading through the prison, a quiet but powerful change that suggests healing is possible even in a place long defined by suffering.

The men of the Parchman Band are living proof of what can happen when people are offered purpose and dignity. As Charles Glassco IV told me, "Parchman saved my life. It gave me a purpose. I got sober, and it provided me a marketable skill: learning to be a welder." I am grateful to be part of their story—and to witness redemption not as an abstract idea, but as something unfolding in real time.

Tim Duffy
Executive Director & Co-Founder
Music Maker Foundation



Parchman Band, Marc McClure. Parchman, Mississippi, 2026.

THE PARCHMAN BAND



CHARLES GLASSCO IV

I grew up in Horn Lake, Mississippi. With my mother as my biggest supporter, I spent my childhood playing sports and focused on college scholarships. I went on to play college football at Northeast Community College in Booneville, Mississippi and then at the University of Central Arkansas. My musical journey did not begin until I joined the Parchman Band after an audition process in 2023. I took a brief sabbatical from the band to finish my Industrial Electricity Certification and rejoined the band in 2024.

After rejoining the band as a vocalist, I realized there was much more to learn than just how to sing a song. Never having done music before coming to Parchman, and then joining a band filled with seasoned musicians, there was much work to be done. I began working on my vocal range, pitch, and, most of all, my timing.

As one of the few band members without a life sentence, my main focus is to contribute in ways that will create longevity for The Parchman Band and my brothers who will be here after I leave prison. I have been inspired by Lee Smith, who has a real talent for writing music. He views his experience as a once in a lifetime opportunity to impact people in a positive way. I enjoy showing other inmates that proper conduct leads to growth and reshaping the public view of inmates across the country.

CKG



Streets of Memphis

Words and music by Charles Glassco IV

Chorus:

I was out there running 'round them streets of Memphis
Selling my soul with dope and a bag of lies
Chasing money, sin, and women
Yeah, that's how I was living
But all that ever got me was some time
Oh, but now I've set on back
I've had some time to reflect
And I just thank God that I didn't lose my mind

I couldn't wake up in the morning
'Cause I'd never been to sleep
Yeah, I was out there running around staying up for weeks
I never had nowhere to be
But I was always on the go
And the cops were on my trail but I didn't know

Pre-Chorus:

Well it didn't take too long
'Til I was way too far past gone
And that's why I'm in here singing with all of y'all

(Chorus)

I was out there in the darkness
My mind always in a haze
I was watching my whole life go up in flames
Living only for myself
Taking all that I could get
I was out there racking up all my regrets

(Pre-Chorus)

(Chorus)

Now I close my eyes and think
I'm glad the law caught up with me y'all
'Cause I was gonna wind up buried six feet deep.

(Chorus)

INSPIRATION

"Streets of Memphis" was the first song I ever wrote. My brother and bandmate Lee Smith had written a couple of songs for the band, and it made me think that maybe I could write an original song. As I started brainstorming about what to write, I remembered that every artist I had ever seen in an interview always said they write about life experiences. Then the first line hit me right in the face: "I was out there running 'round them streets of Memphis." When that line came to my mind, it took me down a road of memories. I began to think about how I ended up in prison and all of the things that I was doing in my life that led me here. I was battling addiction, selling drugs, lying, cheating. (I guess I couldn't really say I was battling addiction because it wasn't much of a fight.) To be honest, addiction and the lifestyle I was living had me completely beaten.

As I began to write the song, I just began thinking about specific things I had done. I was staying up for days at a time. I was running the roads with absolutely nothing in particular to do. I was living a completely self-absorbed life. I was taking and taking and never giving anything back. I felt such a sense of relief when I was finally locked up because I knew in my heart that the end for me, if not prison, was death. Then I started thinking about all the people I have witnessed in the grips of addiction who didn't get a second chance. Most of them either died or are still in active addiction. I thank God that he gave me a second chance and let me regain my mind, body, and spirit. So in a nutshell, the song is about how I was living, how I came to prison, and how thankful I am to have a second chance at life.

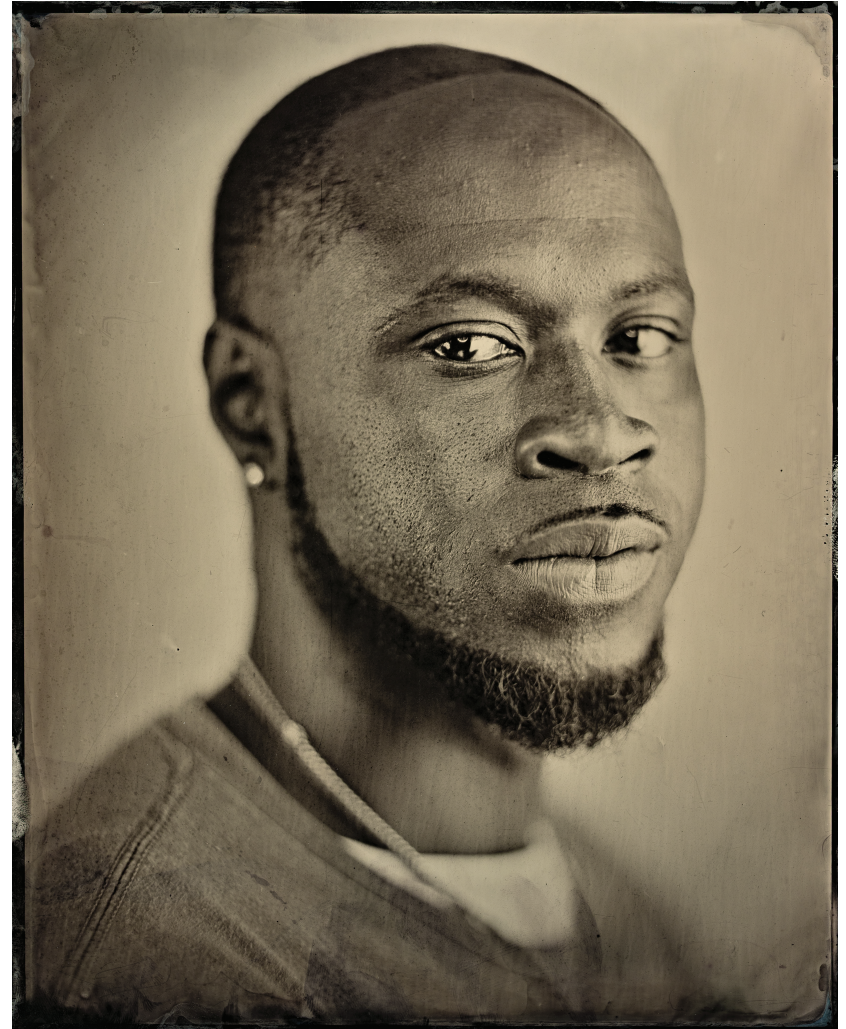


JAKELLSEY HOLLIS

I am from Morton, Mississippi. At three years old, I was tapping pots and pans to the music on the radio. My mom and dad saw that I had rhythm. When I was five, they purchased me a real, all-white Pearl 5-piece drum set. Every day I would practice gospel and rock 'n' roll music. I always wanted to be a rock star. My favorite performers were Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley, and a rock 'n' roll band called Mars Volta. My favorite drummers were Dennis Chambers, Travis Barker, Thomas Pridgen, David Dee Curry III, and Tony Royster, Jr.

I grew up playing for many different groups, and even played my first live recording for the Scott County Youth Mass Choir. The album title is *You Made the Difference*. Now, at the age of thirty-two, I play with the Parchman Band and just recorded my second album of my young life. I have found that music brings me peace and I am most happy when I am behind my drum set. Getting to go out and play music enables me to enjoy my life regardless of my circumstances.

JH



Freedom

*Words by Jakellsey Hollis. Music by Leonard Stevenson, Jr.,
Houston Jones and Lee Smith.*

Woke up this morning, thought it was a dream
Dazed and confused at this horrible scene, oh
Mama always told me to use my eyes
The grass ain't always greener on the other side

Chorus:

Oh freedom, freedom, I want to be free
Oh freedom, freedom, I want to be free

Long days of darkness, now I'm looking for the light
Thinking about the past, rewriting my wrongs into right
Oh mama always told me to use my eyes
The grass ain't always greener on the other side

(Chorus)

Can't change the past but I control where it ends
Put away the old me, let the new me begin
Mama always told me to use my eyes
The grass ain't always greener on the other side

(Chorus)

INSPIRATION

The song “Freedom” comes from a lot of different things. Soon after I started my sentence, I woke up one morning and reality had set in. At that moment, I realized that I had lost all freedom. Freedom has had different meanings in my life: at peace, relaxed, comfortable, and being really who I am.

My mom always told me you will never find yourself until you're able to be free. So I woke up in lockdown one morning and was sick and tired of being locked up. I wanted to be free. Not just from prison, but from all things. In order to do that, you have to put away your old self and the things that keep you troubled: friends, habits, or anything else that may make you feel confined. The moment I did that, I realized that I was free—not yet from prison, but the closest thing to actual freedom. That gave me peace, and peace of mind. So I decided to write the song “Freedom.”



MICHAEL SNELL

I grew up in the Jackson, Mississippi area. Growing up, I had the chance to experience music firsthand from my father, uncles, cousins, and grandfather, with whom I played and sang in various gospel groups. Afterwards, all the children would be asked to get around the lead, bass, and drums and play “Showtime at the Apollo,” displaying whatever talents we brought to the table. I began to experience tragedy and turmoil at a young age with the passing of my brother at the age of nine and losing my father six years later.

While being housed at Issaquena County Correctional Facility, music found me again in the form of a gospel group formed by the inmates. I was recognized by Houston Jones and other members of the Parchman Band at a singing event held by Issaquena County Correctional Facility. Shortly after meeting with the band, I was welcomed with open arms to join the Parchman Band. I have made endless memories, with more in store.

MS



Str8line

*Words by Michael Snell. Music by Lee Smith and
Leonard Stevenson, Jr.*

These razor wires sing low every morning, y'all
Cold concrete got a story to tell
I wake up slow, lace my shoes tight
Tell myself, "Snell, just do right"

I messed up once, yeah, I know that's true
Paid for it hard, like a man's got to do
But my kid's name keeps me standing tall
I made a promise and I can't fall

Pre-Chorus:

Every clean choice is a step towards home
Every quiet night, I ain't alone
This cell can't hold my better days
I'm learning patience, learning grace

Chorus:

Walking a straight line, day by day
Keeping my soul from drifting away
I got little hands waiting on me outside
So I stay on the right path and I swallow my pride

I hear freedom hum in a low down key
Like a worn out guitar sitting, waiting on me
When that gate swings wide someday
I'll walk out, ready to stay that way

(Pre-Chorus)

(Chorus)

Walking a straight line, slow and true
Doing what a man's got to do
I'll raise these children with these same hands
Teaching 'em how to stand like a man
Like a man.... learning grace

INSPIRATION

The story behind "Str8line" basically speaks for itself. My mother always told me if you do right then right will certainly follow; so there it is. While doing this time, I tell myself every day to just do right, and when the time comes there will be nothing holding me back. There's no room for error, nor is raising my children up for debate.

At the end of the day, I'll have my soul, my conscience, and, most of all, my children! I wrote this song with the intention of letting everybody know that being in prison is not the end of the line, nor the end of your hopes and dreams. God has a mysterious way of showing love, mercy, and grace. So without further ado: I pray we can all tackle this "str8line" together one step at a time with peace and love!



STEVEN CHAMBERS

I grew up in Waynesboro, Mississippi. I started singing at a very young age with my grandmother in church. The more I sang with her, the more inspired I became. My uncle also had a group in which he performed songs.

As I got older, my uncle began to let me lead the songs. I began with gospel songs, then began listening to the radio. Soon I carried a radio with me everywhere I went. Music became my life. I would listen to the radio all day and learn every song that came on. Music became so serious to me that whatever I did, it had to involve music. I learned to love everything from the 70's through the 90's. I began with learning voices, tempos, instrumentals, and lyrics.

In school, I began to join talent shows, singing and seeing the joy that I brought other people. My voice became better and better and I learned that I could adapt my voice to do anything I wanted it to do. I began learning every type of music, but focused on creating my own style of singing. I continued singing, never thinking of ever stopping. In my early years, people would ask me to sing and I enjoyed singing for anyone who would ask.

I was incarcerated at the age of eighteen and have been singing the whole time. I continue to learn more music while teaching others. I have sung with many groups and am now with the Parchman Band. I see the Parchman Band as a brotherhood full of love. We enjoy teaching each other and being creative together. I have written songs with the band and recorded an album with my brothers. The thing that brings me the greatest joy is that we have done it together as a family.

SC



Let Me Know

*Words by Steven Chambers. Music by
Leonard Stevenson, Jr. and Lee Smith.*

Let me know, let me know

Chorus:

Baby, let me know what's on your mind
Baby, you can go, so stop wasting time
Baby, let me know what's on your mind
Baby, you can go, so stop wasting time

Baby, you been playing games for so long
You know it ain't right
But you still doing wrong

I let you get away with it for far too long
I think it's time you packed your bags and move on

(Chorus)

Baby, this whole time, I was on to you
But I just laughed about your silliness
And play the same games if I wanted to

See lately, baby, things ain't been the same
Changing in ways that's puzzling my brain

(Chorus)

I let you get away with it for far too long
I think it's time you packed your bags and move on

Let me know, let me know
Let me know, let me know, let me know

INSPIRATION

Well, it all comes down from dealing with a woman whom I was great to, but she was out playing games, cheating, lying, doing all the above. And I know all this because I paid attention to small details, and the so-called friends she had weren't friends at all. Being messy, telling everything she was doing. I remained calm like I didn't know anything. She walked around like there was something on her mind that she wanted to let me know. But the fact was I already knew. So I told her to get her things and move on. Because I let her get away with it too long.

*Steven
Dro
Chambers*

LEE SMITH

An 80's baby born to a man with soul and a lady with a positive vibe. Mom was rooted in gospel music while dad was rooted in soul music. I just found a love for music. After my parents' divorce, mom met a guy who was in a gospel quartet group (The Spiritual Kings) and I was in the music atmosphere plenty. By the age of nine, I developed a love for the beat of the drums. I sat around the drums every chance I could and hopped on the seat whenever it was empty. I picked up the beat and grew from it.

By the age of eleven, I wanted to learn another instrument. The guitar was my choice and I watched all the guitar players I was around. I began picking up the sound of what I heard and mimicked them. Nobody ever taught me the ropes. I learned to play by being told the truth when I didn't sound good. The bass player told me simply, "Turn that down. That don't sound good." I didn't let it hurt my feelings. I just made sure I didn't give anyone else a reason to tell me that again. I bet you won't embarrass me!

By thirteen, I picked up the bass and slid my fingers up and down the neck. It was simpler than the guitar, so I added a little flavor and it worked. I was rooted in gospel music and over the years found out music fits music. I experiment when I play any genre so I don't become the musician before me. One thing I hate is trying to play the exact way someone else has on a song, regardless of how great they may be. I just wanna be me.

By the age of twenty-five, I was sentenced to an extreme amount of time in prison and the only thing I had to keep me sane was music. It made me start singing more on top of playing. It opened me up to not being normal, but outside the box. Maybe at some point, the music that drives me will be the music that sets me free. I go to my own world to make it the world I want it to be. That's why I put my soul in everything I do.

LS



You & I

Words and music by Lee Smith.

It's like we're in a movie, and this is the best part
As it all comes together, you're treasured forever in my heart
I'm enraptured with your beauty, from the inside out and in
When I lay down at night and you're on my mind, I fall in
love again

Chorus:

Every time I hear a love song, I'm caught up in a love scene
Nobody but you and I, nobody but you and I
Nobody but you and I, nobody but you and I

We have the perfect storyline, we're rocking with a good thing
How could it be that you're loving me, and I'm loving you the same
Me gonna love you long time, siempre te amo
Because I need to hug you and squeeze you, in my arms

We're walking in the rain, I'm holding you in my arms
Let's toast the champagne, nobody but you and I

(Chorus)

Nadie más que tú y yo, nadie más que tú y yo
Siempre te amo, siempre te amo
Nadie más que tú y yo, nadie más que tú y yo
Siempre te amo

INSPIRATION

Throughout the most impactful years of my life, I've had a woman beside me who was, by design, for me. If I could make an A.I. version of what I want in a woman, she'd be exactly like the woman I had. Her name's Joan.

She was the woman who came when I was searching for God. What I was looking for was in her. I was so in love and this isn't past tense—I'm still in love. She's the woman I think about whenever I hear a love song playing. She had me writing song after song. I've written more songs about her than anyone or anything. I don't even like watching movies that don't have a love story inside and a happy ending. When I watch those movies and hear those songs, I think about her. When I think about her, I think about us. I found myself writing a book because of her, and it was based on a guy being in love with his best friend. My wife's definitely my best friend.

They say marriage has ups and downs, but that's not how I see it. Life has downs, and it feels so good to have someone to lift you up. I've seen so many beautiful women and continue to, but I'm happy in this love story I have with this woman God gave me. It's always US. When I have my feel-good moments, it's because that woman made me feel good. Nothing is without God, and many times, I feel as if being with her is just me showing God how much I love Him. That's what made me faithful in the midst of a world of beautiful women. When I think of her in a godly aspect, we're one. It's nobody but "You & I."



Love You Out Loud

Words by Charles Glassco IV. Music by Leonard Stevenson, Jr., Houston Jones and Lee Smith.

Baby, I know we're out in public, but you don't have to say,
"Honey, you remember last time, so just try to behave"
Well, I seem to recall your cheeks turning red
But I won't take it back girl, 'cause I meant what I said

Well, I told the whole world and I'll tell 'em again
That you're my woman and I'm your man

(Chorus)

Girl, you give my volume knob a hard right turn
And when the speakers catch on fire, baby, let 'em burn
And when people stop and stare, well honey, I don't care
They can't turn me down, I'm trying to love you out loud
Oh no, I'm never turning down, I'm gonna love you out loud

It was a few weeks back, down at the KFC
Yeah, my baby knows how to satisfy me
Well, we were standing in line but I couldn't contain
So I shouted out and everybody complained

No it doesn't matter where we are at the time
She knows what's going down when I get that look in my eyes

(Chorus)

Whether we're out in a crowd or home on the couch
It won't take much for me to open my mouth
And tell the whole world just where I stand
And that's right next to you, baby, just holding your hand

Oh, I lay all the blame straight at your feet
'Cause there's something in those eyes that does something to me
I said, I lay all the blame straight at your feet
'Cause there's something in those eyes that does something to me

(Chorus)

INSPIRATION

Once again I found myself inspired by my brothers in the Parchman Band. I would hear all of these smooth, slow, dare I say sexy songs. It made me want to write a love song for my wife Leah. I have always joked around with her about us being in a public place and me just shouting out "I love you baby" in the middle of a crowd. I know that she will get embarrassed, but I also don't care. I have told her that I am just that kind of goofy guy. I think she secretly loves me for it. So as I thought about what to write I thought about how I love my wife. I came up with a general thought that I never want to be quiet or reserved when it comes to loving her. I want to love her out loud all the time.

So, there was my song title. As I began to write the song, I just really played out imaginary scenarios in my head of being home with her at various places and not being able to control an outburst of love. Yes, people will likely stop and stare or perhaps even complain about the loud man shouting "I love you" at the top of his lungs. There is just something about her that turns me all the way up. It is like my love is a radio and she has turned the volume knob all the way to the right. I just can't help it. It's just something about her beautiful green eyes. Honestly, I blame it on her. If she didn't look at me the way she does maybe it would be different, but for me, she's it. She is my person, and I want anyone that ever sees us to know exactly that.

Now, let me be clear and backtrack for a second. Once I wrote the song I realized it is not smooth, slow, or sexy. It is an absolute rock and roll song. I should have known that the minute I titled it because everything about this song is out loud. It is a perfectly fitting song for the absolutely uncontrollable, unwavering, and unconditional love I have for my wife, Leah.



LEONARD STEVENSON, JR.

I remember hearing a bass guitar for the first time at age ten. At first, I thought it was the speakers in the back of my brother's Box Chevrolet. I would normally hear him coming from blocks away, but this was different.

I left my room to investigate, the walls vibrating from the bass line, and peeked into my mother and stepfather's room. Little did I know, my stepfather was laying down some bass lines for my mom with a weird expression on his face. At that time, I did not know the term "Stank Face." In that moment, my stepfather was the coolest guy in the world.

When he finished playing, I did not let him set the guitar down before asking, "Can I touch it?" He smiled, and asked if I wanted to learn how to play it. The question made me the happiest kid ever.

I did not know my stepfather had an entire blues band. When he came in late, I thought he was coming in from work, but he was out performing at nightclubs. He put a lot of time into teaching me how to play the bass. However, he felt that I could learn more from his fellow musicians. The first time I heard live music was when my stepfather's band performed at The Oil Mill in Greenville, Mississippi. His friends were excited to see an enthused little kid wanting to learn their craft, so they did not hesitate to pour into me. They told me it had been a while since they had witnessed that kind of love for the music. That love is still burning strong in my heart today, and I thank God for everyone who contributed to making this love concrete.

LS Jr.



Nostalgia

Words and music by Leonard Stevenson, Jr.

I remember when days were easy
And I didn't know what problems was
Family nights with movies
To get together was always fun
I always think of you
When I'm looking back on all you've done
There were so many sacrifices
You put my needs as number one

Chorus:

Not too many complications
There was never any hesitation
You always thought about me daily
That's why you hold my heart
There were sacrifices made
We never went without a plate
Somehow the bills were always paid
That's why you hold my heart

When we departed
I thought I had life all figured out
Then the misery started
I knew my life was on the wrong route
There was wild nights and parties
I thought I could cover up the pain
The lonely nights were the hardest
But to go back home would be a shame

(Chorus)

You hold my heart
You hold my heart

(Chorus)

INSPIRATION

I wrote the song "Nostalgia" in remembrance of my late mother, Mia Michelle Ambrew Stevenson (1969-2019). As a carefree kid, I did not realize all she sacrificed to make sure my siblings and I were provided for. When I went off to play college football, I remember thinking I was a grown man because I could provide for myself. I took my mother's support for granted.

Three semesters in, I dropped out of college after getting red-shirted for being late to practice. I remember the fight I had with my mother about that decision. I told her I would never come back to live in her house, that I would figure life out on my own. I often think of the benign tone in her voice when she replied, "Fine." Looking back, she knew I would be back at her doorstep.

After reconciling, my mother and I were almost inseparable. She would come to my first apartment just to make sure I had everything I needed. She was there when I decided to get a couple trades in Job Corps. She was extremely helpful when my son was born. And when society saw me as a monster for the crimes I committed, she still saw me as her baby boy.

In November of 2019, my biggest fear was realized. I did not know how I would survive without the first lady I ever loved. My mother's death led me into a downward spiral. It took God and all that my mother instilled in me to do a complete 180. I remember reading the very last letter she wrote me after suffering a stroke. She said that God is not done with me yet, and that He is going to use me so that others may glorify Him. My mother's words echo through my head daily. A mother's love is the closest thing to God's love we are ever going to experience on Earth.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leonard Stevenson Jr." with a stylized "LJ" above the name.

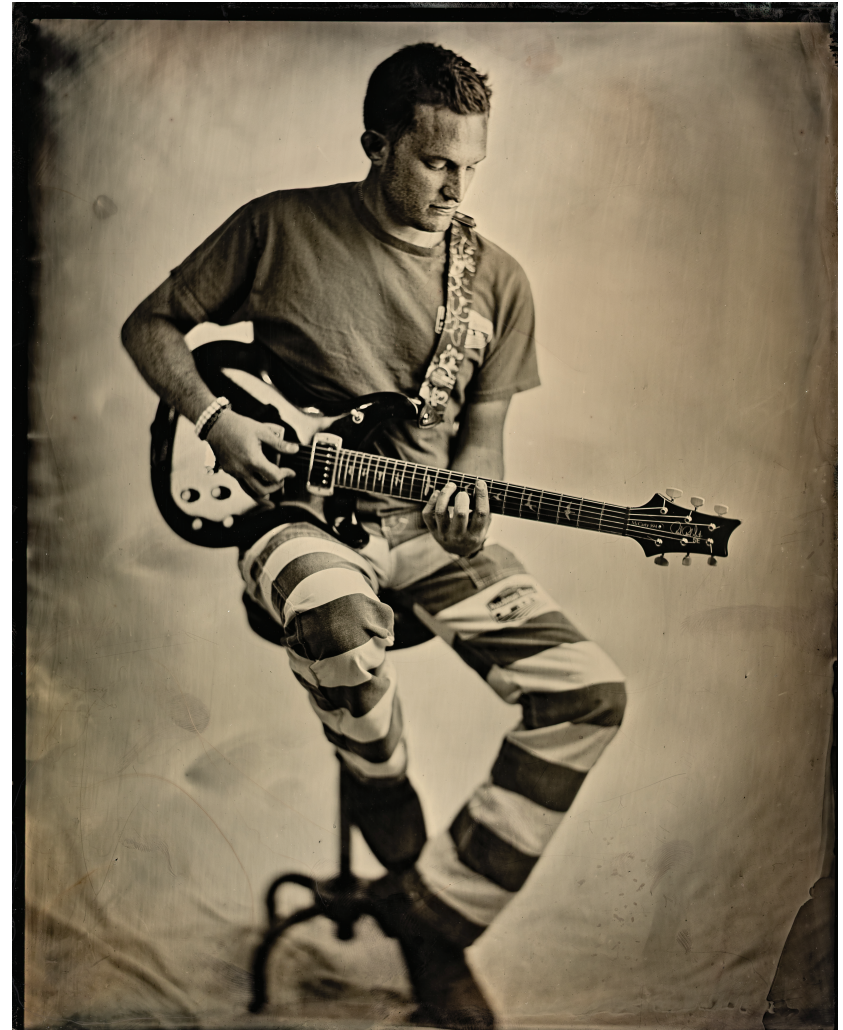
HOUSTON JONES

I am one of the three original founding members of the revived Parchman Band. I grew up on the Alabama/Mississippi Gulf Coast, and began playing piano at the age of six. Growing up in a small Baptist church, and at the insistence of my grandmother, I rooted my piano playing in traditional hymns. I entered the prison system at the age of twenty-two, and was afforded an opportunity to play piano for the prison's church when the regular pianist was out. From then on, I have played almost every day for the last twelve years.

In 2023, I transferred to Parchman where, under the leadership of Superintendent Marc McClure, I helped reestablish the once legendary Parchman Band, with whom I now play keys and lead guitar. I attribute the expansion of my musical horizon to my involvement in the Parchman Band. My repertoire has expanded exponentially. Playing side by side with the talent that is in this group has pushed me to be a better musician.

Serving a life sentence, I see the band program as a way to positively impact not only the public but the people of Parchman in particular. The morale seems to be up when we go into a unit to play. Before we go out to do a public show, guys at the prison tell us to make sure we represent them well, and that says a lot to me. Our peers trust us with their representation to the public. That's something special. I use this musical platform to show others that good behavior and morality can open the doors to just about anything, and that sincere change is absolutely possible in everyone.

HJ



Next to Me

Words and music by Houston Jones.

Long days and even longer nights
I faded as the years passed us by
Time spent apart, never knowing where to start
You didn't know, but you were always in my heart

The miles, oh, they only grew
I tried my best, just couldn't give it all to you
I couldn't be who you needed me to be
But I just wanted you to see

Chorus:

I would walk through fields of fire
Just to see your smile
Though the distance is great between us
It's nothing more than miles
I would climb the coldest mountain
And cross the roughest sea
Just to have you right here next to me
Next to me

(Chorus)

I would climb the coldest mountain
And cross the roughest sea
Just to have you right here next to me
Next to me

INSPIRATION

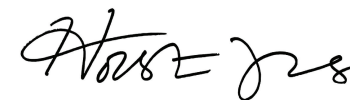
I had laid down one night when six words came to mind: "Long days and even longer nights." I grabbed a pen and notepad and quickly wrote them down. Fifteen minutes later, I had the full song written and arranged.

"Next to Me" is written from the viewpoint of an incarcerated parent. While we are incarcerated, no prison fence will limit what we would do for our children. I would, as the song says, "walk through fields of fire" for my daughter. There is no mountain too cold, nor sea too rough to keep me from her.

I wanted to give Ryleigh something that would outlive me. She is my sole source of inspiration, my motivator to make good decisions every day. For the years we have been apart, I have always wanted her to be proud of me—even though I am just an inmate. I credit Ryleigh with every privilege and opportunity that I have been afforded, and with all the great things I get to do each day. She truly is the best person I have ever met or ever will meet. We all want our children to look up to us, but I look up to my child. She is brave, compassionate and forgiving, even when I least deserve it.

The line that means the most to me, and is deliberately written to her as my immortal apology, is, "I tried my best, just couldn't give it all to you, I couldn't be who you needed me to be, but I just wanted you to see..."

I remember the first time Ryleigh heard her song. She came to see the band play a live show, and we played it for her. When the time for my solo came, I walked into the audience and played to her—just to her. In that moment, it was just me and her. She was "Next to Me." I will never be able to give my daughter as much as she has given me, but I always tell her what she means to me and how grateful I am to be her dad. My hope is that, long after I am gone, she will hear these words and feel my love for her.



Perfect Man

Words and music by Lee Smith.

Hypocrites will give advice they're not living on
Narcissists try to tell everybody that they're living wrong
Religious folks say it's evil to listen to a love song
Deceivers will make you feel bad until you're dead and gone

Chorus:

But when I look in the mirror, I see a perfect man
And when I lay down to sleep, I'm not a worried man
I have nothing, nothing to prove to you

Liars want everybody to believe their every word
Cheaters believe in cheating, until they're the ones that hurt
If you lose weight, you must be stressed
If you gain a pound, you let go of yourself
If you don't go to church as much as the next man, somebody
gonna say you're going to hell

(Chorus)

You don't know what God is doing in me
I don't treat anybody wrong, and I know it's not hard to see
All I do is try to help everybody, and all I want is some good
people free
When you see me I'm always the same, 'cause I practice just
what I preach
And I have nothing, nothing to prove to you

(Chorus)

I have nothing, nothing to prove to you
I have nothing, nothing to prove to you

INSPIRATION

In 2024, I was working like a dog in prison and for a very low price: free. Every time I turned around, someone had an opinion about what and how I did things. I was working in the gym with recreations, coaching the basketball team, changing diapers in the infirmary, driving the ambulance, performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation on inmates who were in life or death situations (thank God many of them lived), singing in the choir, cooking for a food club, being a go-to guy for the Superintendent in a Big Brothers Club, and the list goes on.

Time and time again, I found myself hearing the opinions of people who weren't doing at least half of what I was. It got old, and what frustrated me the most was hearing so-called church folks say what Christians aren't supposed to do. I had to think about what God expected from me and I examined myself. Since I don't curse like a sailor, I told myself, "To hell with them folks. I'm perfect as I am." Everything I was doing was what I needed to do. Sometimes people try to get you to do what they're supposed to be doing. Many times people tell you to do what they're not willing to do themselves. People say nobody's perfect, but I open my Bible and it clearly says, "BE PERFECT." It wouldn't tell me to do it if it wasn't possible. I realized, I'm not living to be perfect for man's approval. This is between God and me. I'm a Perfect Man!





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Parchman Band would like to acknowledge the following people, without whose dedication and support this project, book, film, and album would not have been possible:

Marc and Lee Ann McClure

Music Maker Foundation: Tim Duffy, Denise Duffy, Sam Horn, Lucas Duffy, Taylor Kennedy, Bill Moore, and Kim Anderson, and their Board of Directors

The generous supporters of Music Maker Foundation and their families

John Price, friend and philanthropist

James McWilliams, a friend who is dedicated to the truth and facts

Jimbo Mathus, our friend, producer, and musical genius/madman

To every inmate in our nation: we hope this encourages you to live a life you can be proud of. Prison fences may keep life locked inside, but they do not cause life to stop. Find a purpose, just as we have, and live each day in decency, morality, and faith. Become who you want your children to be. Be a living example that change starts within and can then be shared. Good things are infectious, and they start with all of us.

To our daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, and families: Your love, support, and courage inspire us daily. It is for you that we do all things good, choose to make good decisions, and live our lives in the best possible ways. You are with us when you do not have to be, you stick by our sides even when it is difficult, and we owe a debt to you that we could never repay. We are grateful for your love, your friendship, and your presence in our lives.

Special thanks to our partners



Music Maker Editions
Tiny Books. Deep Roots.

This series presents curated selections from Music Maker Foundation's vast photographic and musical archive. Each volume documents a single artist, theme or body of work.

Created in small, collectible runs, these books preserve the stories of the musicians and the communities who shape the sound of the South.

Books & music available at musicmaker.org

Lamont Lane

Hanging Tree Guitars

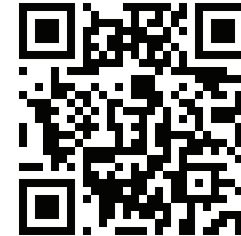
Deep in the South Songbook

Song Keepers: A Music Maker Anthology

We Are the Music Makers!

Music Makers: Portraits & Songs of the Roots of America

Blues Muse: Timothy Duffy's Southern Photographs



To hear the album and access bonus content, including the Parchman Band film, scan the QR code or visit

musicmaker.org/bonus-parchman

Redemption is not an abstract concept; it is a concrete reality, and sometimes we can see it unfold in real time. From the historic, troubled grounds of the Mississippi State Penitentiary comes a testament to the transformative power of music. Through the lens of the Music Maker Foundation and the expertise of producer Jimbo Mathus, this book chronicles the revival of the Parchman Band, an inspirational musical ministry bringing hope to one of America's most infamous prisons, and beyond. Featuring intimate stories and striking imagery from deeply personal recordings and tintype sessions, this volume offers a front-row seat to a quiet revolution of faith, work, and community. It is living proof that even in a place long defined by suffering, music can foster profound healing, forgiveness, and human dignity.

Music Maker Foundation is a nonprofit organization that meets the day-to-day needs of the artists who create traditional American music, ensures their voices are heard, and gives all people access to our nation's hidden musical treasures.



MUSIC MAKER
FOUNDATION

musicmaker.org

