



Generated on: Thursday 29th January 2009 09:58:05 PM

TW	LW	Artist:	CD Title:	Label:	Weeks On:	Location:
1	0	SAFFIRE THE UPPITY BLUES WOMEN	HAVIN' THE LAST WORD	ALLIGATOR	3	VA
2	5	VARIOUS ARTIST	A TRIBUTE TO THE LEGENDARY BLUES MANDOLIN MAN JAMES 'YANK' RACHELL	YANKSVILLE RECORDS	7	

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
January 31, 2009**

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**James “Yank” Rachell Tribute Album Soars To Top of Charts**

(Indianapolis, IN) After a mere seven weeks on the Roots Music Report Top 50 “*Roots USA State Radio Airplay Charts*,” *A Tribute To The Legendary Blues Mandolin Man, James “Yank” Rachell* (Yanksville Records, 2008) has rocketed up to No. 2 for the week ending January 31, 2009. Produced in Indianapolis and this 21-track tribute CD features tracks from internationally acclaimed and award winning artists David Grisman and John Sebastian (*The Lovin’ Spoonful*) as well as folk music icon, Mike Seeger. Grammy winners Peter Rowan and Tim O’Brien (with David Grier) both provided tracks. Blues Award nominees Andra Faye (an Indianapolis native) of *Saffire – The Uppity Blues Women* and Rich DelGrosso also

appear on the CD. In total, 50 musicians played or sang on the tribute album, and Yank wrote 15 of the 21 songs.

The *Roots USA State Radio Airplay Charts* feature the top Roots/Americana artists and their new albums receiving airplay as reported by radio stations from around the globe. The albums are ranked by the number of radio “spins” as reported directly by radio DJ’s and Music Directors to RMR’s online database. RMR’s publisher states, “Our charts are NOT compiled by a record company, record promotion company or by any organization that has an interest in financial gain from any particular record or artist.”

Mike Butler, mandolinist and Executive Producer of the album explains, “Al Stone (co-producer - recording engineer) and I wanted to do something to get Yank’s name back out there – to keep his music and his memory alive; I also wanted to help his family, especially his granddaughter who is suffering with a

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very serious illness. That was the genesis of the project, and both the local and national artists who contributed to the record deserve an enormous amount credit for the album’s success!”

James “Yank” Rachell, known by fans and other musicians worldwide as the “Father of the Blues Mandolin,” and the “Blues Mandolin Man” was a first generation bluesman and songwriter. Yank was born in 1910 to a hard-working farm family from Brownsville, Tennessee. He and his family

moved to Indianapolis, Indiana in 1958 where he lived until his passing in 1997, receiving many honors including Indiana's highest citizen award, *Sagamore of the Wabash*.

Yank first recorded in 1929 as a member of the *Three J's Jug Band*. It was at this historic recording session when he cut one of his best known songs, "*Divin' Duck*." Yank recorded and played for eight decades, his last recording taking place in 1996.

Yank Rachell played mandolin on many recordings backing up a host of well-known blues players. Because of his original style on the mandolin, many famous and local musician friends say, "when it comes to country blues, Yank is the 'ultimate sideman.'" Yank, however, is best known for his musical partnerships with both Sleepy John Estes and John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson and for writing "*She Caught the Katy*" with Taj Mahal, the opening song on the first *Blues Brothers* movie and soundtrack.

In 1938, after two very successful recordings for RCA Victor, Yank had a chance to expand his musical career, but this opportunity would have forced him to be absent from his young family for long periods. Despite this and several other opportunities to "make the big time," Yank decided to forego the potential financial success to remain with his family in Indianapolis.

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The musicians who performed on this tribute CD all admired and loved Yank, and because of their devotion to the man, the producers have designated that the profits from the sale of the album go to benefit Yank's family, specifically

Yank's granddaughter Sheena. Sheena Rachell was Yank's bass player, business partner, and is executor of his estate. In December of '07 Sheena was diagnosed with a rare, life threatening lung disease, Wegener's Granulomatosis. Sheena has six young children at home and lives in the most modest of circumstances. For more information, visit [www.yankrachell.com](http://www.yankrachell.com).

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**Singout Review fall '08 issue:**

[www.singout.org](http://www.singout.org)

The late Yank Rachell was loved and respected by those fortunate enough to know him and, even more, by those who had the pleasure of making music with him. This tribute album, long in development, reflects those feelings and was well worth the wait. The musical quality and energy throughout the album make it a treasury of fine mandolin blues, and a compliment to the memory of a fine bluesman.

While he is now recognized as a giant of the blues tradition, Yank was less successful than other blues musicians of his generation. Most of his life he worked in farming and factory jobs to support his family, and so was a musician only part-time. Yet he stands with others in the center of the tradition, recognized throughout the blues world as one of its key figures. He wrote many classic country blues; his mandolin-playing is recognized as having established the mandolin as a great blues instrument. The twenty-one tribute tracks here include performances by a wide array of performers: Andra Faye, Rich DelGrosso, David Grisman, Karen Irwin, Tim O'Brien, Jim Richter, Pete Rowan, John Sebastian, Mike Seeger, and others. Songs

include Yank classics (“Divin’ Duck Blues,” “She Caught the Katy,” “Texas Tony,” “Wadie Green,” etc;) while others are classic blues like “Sitting on Top of the World” and “Deep Elem Blues.”

As deeply enjoyable as this album is, the contrast with the charm of Yank’s own recordings is significant: excellent voices (Andra Faye, Karen Irwin), tight arrangements, and recordings with mandolin out from contrast with Yank’s appealingly rough voice and relaxed arrangements, with mandolin often in the background. You can enjoy Yank himself on YouTube, playing the “Mailman Blues” with Sleepy John Estes in 1966. If you’re a mandolin player and re-inspired by this album, check out Jim Richter’s YouTube blues mandolin lessons, and thank him for his role (along with many others) in bringing out this album to benefit Yank’s family.

### **The Bluegrass Special 12-08**



#### **A TRIBUTE TO THE LEGENDARY BLUES MANDOLIN MAN**

**JAMES "YANK" RACHELL, 1910-1997**

**Various Artists**

**Yanksville Records (released 2008)**

Never a household name but revered by blues musicians and aficionados, James "Yank" Rachell was truly a rare breed of artist. A Tennessee native born in Brownsville in 1910, he began playing mandolin at age eight and while still in his teens was working dances with Sleepy John Estes, with whom he formed his first band, the Three J's Jug Band (the third J was pianist Jab Jones), and made his first recordings, for Victor in 1929 and 1930. After the J's broke up, Rachell went to work, literally, farming and for the L&N Railroad, and also managed to cut another 25 sides for the ARC label while on a stopover in New York. Next his path crossed that of another gifted Tennessee native, harmonica master John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, and the two eventually wound up in Chicago together, with Rachell sitting in on Sonny Boy's June 1938 Bluebird sessions. But that same year Rachell, now married and a father, took a full-time job and largely left music behind while he

tended to his responsibilities as the head of his household. Following his wife's death in 1961 he found himself welcome on the college and coffee house circuit, rejoining Estes harmonica player Hammie Nixon in a trio that recorded for Delmark as Yank Rachell's Tennessee Jug Busters and becoming a sensation with young audiences rediscovering the blues masters of yore. Estes passed away in 1977, leaving Rachell to work solo thereafter, which he did. Based in Indianapolis in his later years, he became a regular attraction at the Slippery Noodle. Through the years those who crossed Rachell's path spared no words in praising his exemplary mandolin work nor did they pass up the opportunity to point out how different he was from many of the musicians of his time. "My impression was that Yank lived quite a different lifestyle than other like Sleepy John Estes," said Delmark founder Bob Koester. "Yank worked all sorts of jobs for his family. He was married with kids so he was more of a family guy. He was more of a day person than the others." John Sebastian, an early and vocal supporter of Rachell's music, has referred to him as "a conduit into rock and roll because his original style is so much the same rhythmic content as the electric guitar players who started rock and roll would be playing 30 years later," but was quick to note: "Yank was a family man. This was one of the reasons for his longevity. It was sheer love, that family approval. Whether he was 86 or not, he was always the *pater familias*." Todd R.T. Edwards observed, "The music thing came second because he was pretty committed to his family. His life lesson to me was to treat people right."

The same integrity with which Yank Rachell lived his life informed his music as well. To those who have studied Rachell's technique and approach, and tried to emulate it, or incorporate facets of it into their own style, what he wrought was a thing of beauty. To the casual fan, the soul permeating his performances washed over you in an invigorating rush. Artists who loved Rachell's music and gathered to pay tribute to it on this disc invest their performances with a wealth of heart and feeling, enough, surely, to make Rachell smile from the great beyond. Many of these artists knew him personally, some only knew him by his art, but all sing it like they mean it. You can hear the commitment in the dramatic solo vocal performance by Andra Faye, who counted Rachell among her mentors as a young artist emerging in the Indianapolis scene. On "My Baby's Gone" she turns in a virtuoso performance, not only scorching the lowdown blues tune but also accompanying herself with some tough blues mandolin runs and a thumping, ominous standup bass line. As comfortable in country as he was in blues, Rachell found his tunes being easily converted from one style to the other, as

Tim O'Brien expertly demonstrates in kicking off the disc with a sprightly bluegrass rendering of "Texas Tony," spicing the arrangement with some fine, fleet-fingered mandolin picking of his own. Backed by a quintet of honking sax, B3, guitar, bass and drums, Karen Irwin turns "She Caught the Katy" into a stomping Southern soul testimony, further evidence of the adaptability of Rachell's music. For some deep Rachell blues, few do it better here than vocalist/guitarist Gordon Bonham and mandolinist Jim Richter on "Brownsville Blues," the former with his emotive, sandpapery vocals, the latter with a spectacular run of solos that strut along beside and curl all around the vocals like some spectral presence, every bit as voluble and emphatic as the singer. For gritty, downhome grind, few could top Rich DelGrosso's growling rendition of "Shotgun Blues," in an arrangement enriched by Ernie Scarbrough's feisty B3 and churchy piano as well as DelGrosso's tasty mandolin soloing in support of his hearty vocalizing. Sebastian, recorded live, stands out with a wonderful story about his first personal encounter, on the phone, with Rachell, and his first, epic recording session with the master in Indianapolis. With David Grisman on mandolin, Sebastian then breaks into a good-time, jug band-ish "Tappin' That Thing," giving Grisman wide berth along the way to add some frolicsome instrumental commentary of his own.

The Rachell family makes its mark here in other ways beyond Yank's music and spiritual presence. Sheena Rachell, Yank's granddaughter, is backed by a tight quintet playing slow, mournful blues behind her as she wrings chilling drama out of "Lake Michigan Blues" in a voice as forceful as it is pained, abetted at one point by Mike Butler-Schwab's eerie slide solo on electric five-string mandolin. The disc closes on a moving note, as Sheena joins Yank's daughters Mae Nell and Willia B. on a moving a cappella rendition of Yank's favorite gospel song, "Freedom," a minute and nine seconds' worth of respect and reverence for a life well lived and still meaningful to those who loved him.

Note: With the release of this album came news that Sheena Rachell has been diagnosed with a rare lung disease, Wegener's Granulomatosis. Net proceeds from the CD sales will be used to help offset her medical expenses.

Buy it at [www.mandolindy.com/yank](http://www.mandolindy.com/yank)

OR

Buy it as an MP3 download from [Amazon](#)

THE BLUEGRASS SPECIAL  
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### **Blues Bytes Review January '09**

A Monthly Online Magazine of Blues CD Reviews

[www.bluesbytes.net](http://www.bluesbytes.net)

**Yank Rachell** was referred to as the “Blues Mandolin Man.” He was one of only a handful of bluesmen who played the mandolin, though he also sang and played guitar, harmonica, and violin. He learned to play the mandolin before he was ten and was working as part of a jug band trio with Sleepy John Estes while in his teens and began recording for Victor in the late 1920’s.

He later teamed up with harmonica player Hammie Nixon in Chicago for a few years, but ended up recording with guitarist Dan Smith in New York for ARC Records in the early 30’s and discovered a young harmonica player in the meantime named John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson. Rachell later recorded with Williamson for Bluebird and also recorded some sides of his own in the late 30’s and early 40’s. After Williamson’s murder in 1948, Rachell dropped off the musical scene until the early 60’s, when he rejoined Nixon and Estes and ended up recording for Delmark. When Estes passed away in 1977, Rachell worked as a solo act and recorded periodically until his death in 1997 at age 87.

Rachell’s style influenced many different musicians and not just in the blues genre. Recently, a group including John Sebastian, David Grisman, Tim O’Brien, David Grier, Andra Faye, Rich DelGrosso, and Mike Seeger collaborated on *A Tribute To The Legendary Blues Mandolin Man James “Yank” Rachell* (Yanksville Records), which presents 20 songs either written by Rachell or associated with him during his career, plus a spoken-word reminiscence from Sebastian.

If you're not familiar with Rachell's music, some of these tunes may jog your memory a bit as they were recorded by other artists. "She Caught The Katy," familiar to fans of Taj Mahal and the Blues Brothers is present, with a strong vocal by Karen Irwin. "Tappin' That Thing" is given an excellent treatment by Sebastian and Grisman, and Estes' standard "Brownsville Blues" is rejuvenated by Jim Richter and Gordon Bonham.

Some other highlights include Seegar's take on "Deep Elum Blues," "Depression Blues," featuring Steve Brown on vocals and guitar and Mike Butler playing Rachell's Harmony mandolin, and Orville Johnson's interpretation of "Let Me Tangle In Your Potato Vines," but truly there's not a bad song in the bunch, including "Bluesy Little Tune," an original composition done by Stanley Smith. Rachell's daughters and granddaughter also contribute a lovely gospel tune, Rachell's favorite, called "Freedom," and his granddaughter Sheena sings on "Lake Michigan Blues." Sheena Rachell was recently diagnosed with a rare lung disease, Wegener's Granulomatosis, and net proceeds from the sale of this disc will be used to help her offset some of her medical expenses.

Blues mandolin is a style that few fans are familiar with, but *A Tribute To The Legendary Blues Mandolin Man James "Yank" Rachell* is an impressive and rewarding collection that should put listeners in search of more from these artists as well as Yank Rachell.

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<http://crossroadsreviews.blogspot.com/>

[A Tribute To James "Yank" Rachell: The Legendary Blues Mandolin Man 1910-1997 reviewed by Mark Thompson](#)



## A Tribute To James "Yank" Rachell: The Legendary Blues Mandolin

Man 1910-1997

Yanksville Records

[www.yankrachell.com](http://www.yankrachell.com)

21 tracks/77:32

The mandolin has experienced a resurgence in recent years as a number of blues musicians like Rich DelGrosso, Gerry Hundt and Billy Flynn have featured the instrument on their recordings. Yank Rachell was the first to popularize the mandolin in the jug band and blues settings. He played several other instruments and was a fine singer as well as a adept songwriter. The disc features fifteen of his tunes including classics like "She Caught the Katy" and "Divin' Duck". But his deft maneuvering on the mandolin's smaller fret board will be his legacy in the history of blues music.

Producer Mike Butler has assembled a strong cast of musicians to honor Yank, including his granddaughter Sheena, who played bass for Rachell for many years. One of the highlights of the disc is her moving vocal performance backed by Butler's electric slide mandolin on "Lake Michigan Blues". She has since been diagnosed with a rare lung disease. The net proceeds from the sale of the cd will help pay for her medical care.

Karen Irwin takes on "She Caught the Katy" backed by a full band that lacks a mandolin but features Craig Peterson on tenor sax. She alternates between a sultry and spunky tone that rides the driving beat with style. Another highlight features two masters, John Sebastian on guitar and Dave Grisman on mandolin, having fun with "Tappin' That Thing" in front of a live audience. There is also a track of Sebastian telling the audience some humorous Rachell stories. Andra Faye, a member of Saffire- the Uppity Blues Women, dazzles with "My Baby's Gone" complete with her soaring vocal and delicate mandolin picking. DelGrosso's deep, booming voice contrasts his rapid runs up and down the mandolin neck with superb backing from Ernis Scarbrough on organ.


A couple of the finest bluegrass musicians make appearance, starting with Tim O'Brien on the opening track, "Texas Tony". O'Brien is a talented multi-instrumentalist and vocalist, which he proves once again in this spirited romp. He is accompanied by David Grier, one of the top flat picking acoustic guitarists in the world. The traditional tune, "Sitting On Top Of the World", finds Peter Rowan working his magic with his pleading voice capturing the irony in the song's lyrics.

Through the magic of the recording studio, Orville Johnson becomes a one-man band, playing all the instruments including some fine mandolin work. His expressive singing adds to the magic on another Rachell tune that sports one of the great titles of all time, "Let Me Tangle in Your Potato Vines". The energy level goes way up on "Seems Like a Dream" with Bert Dievert on vocals and mandolin backed by a full band.

The only track that failed to impress was "Cigarette Blues" another multi-track effort by Jean-

Louis MahJun that sports an aggressive electric guitar that seems out of place with the rest of the tracks. The disc closes with an acapella vocal snippet of "Freedom", Rachell's favorite gospel hymn, performed by his two daughters and his granddaughter.

Butler has brought together a varied cast of musicians of varying degrees of fame to celebrate the legacy of Yank Rachell and he has succeeded admirably. The quality and variety of the performances will provide plenty of listening pleasure even after repeated plays.

Posted by Steve Jones at [6:48 PM](#) [0 comments](#) 

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