

The World of Jimmy.....by deborah fagan carpenter

Actor, poet, writer, puppeteer, artist and blues musician. Jimmy Crosthwait, is a Memphis, TN artistic and musical icon, whose art and performing style are as recognizable as is he. **Welcome to the World of Jimmy!**

“Look, he isn’t wearing any cloths!” Awareness that he had been given the punch line in his first play, “*The Emperor’s New Clothes*,” had a significant impact on the early little Stage Hound. The reward of performance had come early to Crosthwait, who had been entertaining relatives since about age three by conjuring up make-believe items, while using dialogue to support their magical appearance. His stage presence found a home at the Memphis Children’s Theatre, where he performed the lead in *Rumpelstiltskin*, and held the role of “Doc” in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the only major speaking part in the production. There would also be a part in a made-for-television production which recounted the facts of the infamous black market baby selling scheme that was executed out of The Tennessee Children’s Home. The series however, was never released, and Jimmy’s acting career came to a disappointing end, but the love of performance was by now a visceral part of him.

Young Jimmy’s full musical and artistic talent would soon emerge. Although he was selling magical tricks at a “fun shop” in downtown Memphis at age 12, by teenage years, his musical interest had been piqued and he began playing the drums in a variety of garage-born rock ‘n roll bands. Simultaneously, he began dabbling in poetry, writing and experimenting with painting. Although painting wasn’t a medium at which he considered himself expert, he created “assemblages,” and in 1962 at 17, he decided to take his artistic

creations to New Orleans, where he would set-up and sell his wares at Jackson Square. His parents gave him \$50, bought him 2 shirts and a train ticket, and sent him on his way. Sadly, the Cuban Missile Crisis was at its height at this same time, so his ill-fated trip ended abruptly and he returned to Memphis, where he enrolled in the University of Memphis to actually study art and sculpture.

For a guy who could never stop moving, the artistry and movement of puppetry was a natural next step. After reading about Florida puppeteers Ken and Vera Hodge, and subsequent correspondence with the couple, Crosthwait learned that there was an opening for a husband and wife team needed to take one of their shows on the road. After marrying his college sweetheart, Jimmy and his new bride traveled to Florida in 1965 to become Puppeteers and to make their fortune on the road. The couple learned the Hodge's version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and they mimicked 14 voices per show and performed the production nearly 300 times in schools from Florida to Virginia during that year.

By 1966 Jimmy had become aware of George Cole, who had trained Hodge 20 years earlier, so he and his wife went to Chicago, where they performed Cole's version of a Marionette Circus during the '66-'67 school year. At the end of that job, Jimmy was competent at performing string puppets, had made note of Jim Henson's hand puppets and had begun to create his own versions. In the spring of 1967 he built a "theatre of the absurd black comedy" that he called "*Iom Dode*," and an ad in the *Village Voice*, which read, "hippie puppet show wanted," sent the couple to New York City, where they opened the *Electric Circus* during the "Summer of Love" with that production. Before the puppet room was completed at the *Electric Circus*, Jimmy, dressed as a clown, would slide down a wire cable spraying confetti over the audience, and

when asked what his favorite part of his American tour was, Jimi Hendrix replied, "A little guy in a yellow clown suit sliding down a cable at the *Electric Circus!*" In the spring of '68 the couple returned to Memphis, where they continued performing the puppet shows at schools and art festivals.

Before his departure to join the traveling puppet shows, Crosthwait had often performed music with lifelong friend, Jim Dickinson. The first record he recorded with Dickinson was in 1964, as part of a jug band under the name *The New Beale Street Sheiks*. Just as the group was beginning to get positive reviews in *Billboard Magazine*, the Beatles appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, and the "British Invasion" caused American music to take a nose dive for almost a decade. But during that time the group performed at local spots, and Dickinson put together a folk festival that opened the Memphis Overton Park Shell in 1965. Jimmy was on the road during the beginning years of the Memphis Country/Blues Festival, but was back for the 1968 Festival, where he played washboard with Bukka White, a giant in the blues world. Jimmy also emceed that show, a skill for which he is also quite adept, and it was recorded by Sire Records, a division of London Records. The dance between, music, puppets and artwork went on for years, but his full blown career as a professional artist, showing and selling work would be yet to come. In the '60s there were few, if any art galleries in Memphis.

By 1972 he and his wife had reached a parting of the ways, and he abandoned his puppet act for a while and began playing more and more music. Early on, he performed not with Dickinson, but with a group called *Crawdads*, later to become *Briarpatch*, which evolved into *Crawpatch*, recording an album in the late '70s. In 1972 he and Jim Dickinson, Lee Baker and Sid Selvidge formed a blues/rock group called *Mud Boy and the Neutrons*. Because the group began on Halloween Night, costumes were a part of the

performances, and initially the group only played small venues such as parties and anniversaries. Over a 20 year period however, they produced 3 albums. Dickinson recorded with Bob Dylan in 1997 on a Grammy winning CD called, "Time out of Mind," and Dylan remarked that "*Mud Boy and the Neutrons* was that great band that nobody can find."

Although he had always kept his musical endeavors separate from his other creative work, the music and the art was almost always happening simultaneously. His art went from collages to sculpture to mobiles, which he calls *Zen Chimes*, and to "spread-out" wall pieces he calls *Equations*, to free-standing pieces which are often 6 or 8 feet tall. His most recent series are floral sculptures he calls *Wall Flowers*, and arrangements in vases called *Bottle Sculptures*.

Crosthwait owned his own gallery in Eads Tennessee for a period of 3 years, beginning in 1988, during which time he showed mostly other artist's work. While creating metal cut out designs to form posts in front of Eads Pottery Gallery, he was inspired to use cut-out metal in his own sculpture. What began as an architectural feature evolved into his well-known *Zen Chimes* and wall pieces. His and wife Ulla's current home employs a variety of that cut-out metal in railings and windows. Robert Gordon, in his book, *It came from Memphis* says of Crosthwait, "he became a puppeteer because he was a sculptor and he wanted to see his sculpture move, he went on to build a house which was a work of art that he could move into." Combining found objects, clay pieces and cut-out metal, he continues to create puppet-like art. He essentially weds strength and delicacy, and the ceramic work, mixed with the steel, is the epitome of that and is present in every form of the work. Because his work incorporates examples of other cultures, including Native American and/or Eastern influences, it has a feeling of universality and timelessness. One of his early Maze drawings has a decided

Mayan influence and is the cover of a recent Luther Dickinson Album, *Hambone's Meditations*.

Crosthwait is now the only living member of *Mudboy and the Neutrons*, but before Jim Dickinson and Sid Selvidge died, the three were asked to perform at the *Barbacon* in London as part of a series organized to honor Memphis Music. The trio was joined by Dickinson's sons, Luther and Cody, along with Chris Chew, who were well known in their own rite as the *North Mississippi Allstars*. Shortly after Dickinson's death, son Luther Dickinson organized a recording session with the surviving sons of *Mudboy* and the two surviving original members, Crosthwait and Selvidge, to form the *Sons of Mudboy*. The informal group sat around one microphone at the Dickinson family farm and recorded a live album to honor Dickinson that became a Grammy nominated CD. Recorded almost entirely in one take, it has a real sense of authenticity and was a genuine tribute to Jim Dickinson. Shortly after that recording, the group went to New York and played at Lincoln Center under the same name, and after Sid Selvidge's recent death, the group performed at a memorial to him at the Levitt Shell, formerly the Memphis Overton Shell.

In spite of the loss of good friends and his own health issues, Jimmy Crosthwait's music and art continue to bring him and those who witness it great pleasure. His zest for life is clearly evident when his long gray hair is blowing in the wind while he plays his washboard, and is certainly present in his colorful, dancing artwork. Jimmy Crosthwait himself is a work of art. (Or is that a piece of work?)

Jimmy Crosthwait's sculptural work can be found at Art Reach Gallery in Germantown, TN, www.artreachgallery.com, Southside Gallery, Oxford, MS, www.southsideartgallery.com, and at the Fagan-Carpenter Studio, Lakeland, TN, www.faganart.com