

# Houston Jones



Tim Konrad Photography

## Rebellious Children or Triumphant Lions?

by Michael Parrish

It's a familiar story: a group of hot young musicians get together, slam out a brilliant album and then begin a long creative slide as their talents and creative energies wane over the years. For Bay Area quintet Houston Jones, this process has worked in reverse: A group of road-tested musicians came together in their middle years, found a collective songwriting muse, and forged a unique and energetic chemistry. As lead singer and rhythm guitarist Travis Jones explained, "Thank God there is a term, 'Americana,' that we can lump ourselves into, or we'd have to call it bluegrass-gospel-folk-blues-jazz-rock. The whole point is, we all have a varied background. We're all in our 50s; none of us are kids. We all just went through the program and, finally, we got to the point where we synthesized all of our experiences, so we can bring in all our influences to create this unique thing."



Chris Kee

Onstage, the band is a study in contrasts. Bespectacled lead guitarist Glenn Houston (a stage name — his real surname is Pomianek), the only band member that does not sing, displays an almost Zen-like focus as he spins out tasty electric, acoustic, or slide guitar licks. Houston confounds aspiring guitarists in the audience with his technique, which involves playing a conventionally strung guitar left-handed, and thus upside-down. Jones is a commanding presence at midstage, his extroverted demeanor and powerful pipes attesting to his years in musical theater and as a gospel preacher. Behind them, hirsute drummer Peter Tucker resembles a benevolent Buddha, with his relaxed posture a sharp contrast to his powerful, on-the-money rolls and fills. The conservative demeanor of white-haired bassist and principal songwriter Chris Kee, seated cradling his upright bass, is consistent with his day job as an attorney, but his skill on his instrument readily demonstrates why he is bassist of choice for musicians such as Peter Rowan and Buddy Miller. One can easily imagine bespectacled, long-haired Henry Salvia, who is crouched over his keyboards like a mad scientist, in his daytime role as a Silicon Valley software engineer.

After an afternoon gig, the group members took time to meet with me at Houston's home studio. We started with their convoluted history, which is inextricably intertwined with another Bay Area institution, the Waybacks. However, unraveling the complex genealogy required going even further back, before either current band existed.

Jones began the story. "There was a band called *Large and in the Way* that included Peter, Glenn, myself, and another bass player — Paul Olguin — and violinist Chojo Jacques. I was

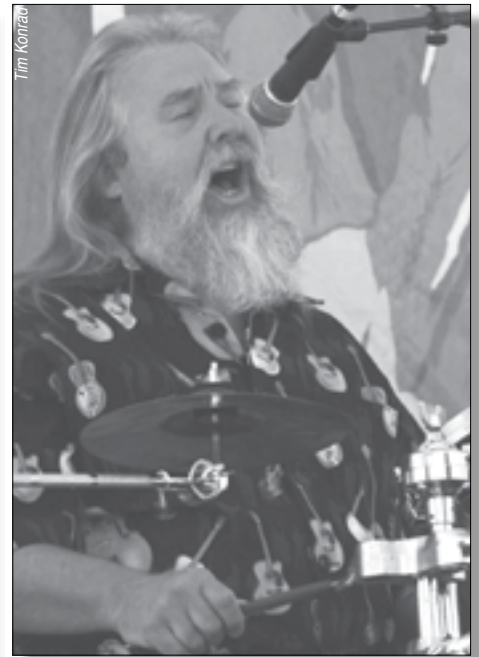


Glenn Houston

doing a lot of musical theater back then, and I had a theater project coming up, *Pub Boys and Dinettes*. We were playing down at Jumpin' Java [now the Dana Street Coffee House] in Mountain View. Stevie Coyle had called a few weeks before, because his partner was sick. He asked, 'Would you guys like to fill in for us on a Friday night as *Large and in the Way*? I have one caveat, which is that I want to sit in with you guys.' So Stevie did some of his material from the *Frontmen*, some stuff with us singing lead, and great background vocals. Within a month or so, I was scheduled to take a hiatus from *Large and in the Way* for about four months — I think I was touring up in Idaho for the Shakespeare Festival. Steve said, 'Gosh, this worked out so well, maybe I could do some gigs sitting in with *Large and in the Way* while you're touring.'

At this point Houston took up the narrative. "I got a call from Chojo, and he and Stevie and I began as a trio. We would play at the Plough and Stars in San Francisco. Before one of those gigs, we went across the street to Giorgio's and had pizza, and we are sitting there thinking of ideas for a name. [Glenn's wife and band manager] Kathy was there, along with me and Stevie and Chojo. We ended up on 'The Rocky and Bullwinkle' show. We got to the Wayback machine, and Chojo said, "That's it — the Waybacks!" There was another band that had that name, and we decided to roundly ignore that fact." The group shortly recruited Tucker on drums and Kee, who was also working in guitarist Jim Campilongo's Western swing band, the *Ten Gallon Hats*, on bass.

"Yeah," said Tucker, "essentially the original Waybacks was *Large and in the Way* with Stevie as lead singer, instead of Travis."



Peter Tucker

Houston continued. "In the summer of 1999, we had Dick Brundle [of *Fiddling Cricket Productions*] interested in financing a CD for the Waybacks, and we began recording, getting our arrangements together. You know that really strange piece where 'The Witch of Westmoreland' goes into the other tune? We worked that out here. A lot of the songs that were on the first CD were arranged right here. We were doing some of Chojo's tunes in *Large and in the Way*. 'Likkus Interruptus' and his arrangement of Charlie Parker's 'Scrapple From the Apple.'"

Just as the band was about to record, Houston decided to leave the Waybacks. "It wasn't because the music wasn't great — it was a great band. I wanted to do something a bit different. So James Nash came in and they recorded *Devolver*, which I named." He lived to regret his decision. "Fast forward to 2000. The Waybacks were incredibly successful, and I was disgusted with myself because I used to have this great band."

Jones was in a similar frame of mind. "I was pissed off with everybody, because I used to have this great band called *Large and in the Way*."

Houston crossed paths again with Jones in the Sierra Nevada gold country. "Travis had this gig playing at the Josephine room in the Gunn House in Sonora, basically playing for people in a bar waiting for their table to be ready. He'd play things like 'Leaving on a Jet Plane.'"

"But the money was good!" Jones interjected.

"I went up and stayed at Travis' house in Columbia," Houston continued, "and I said, 'I just quit this great band, and I feel really awful about it, and the only way I can feel good



Henry Salvia

about it is if we put a band together and make that band really good.' I asked him if I could join him at his gig, and he said there wasn't enough money to pay two people. He was playing Friday and Saturday nights in Sonora, so I offered to play for nothing." Jones said that Houston ended up getting paid anyway.

Houston and Jones began gigging as a duo, and recorded an album in 2001. When Jones moved back to the Bay Area, he and Houston played at a place called the Bistro in Hayward. "They liked us, so they hired us," Houston said, "and we played there pretty regularly through 2001. Beginning in August of 2001, we needed a rhythm section, and we needed someone to sing background vocals who didn't sing like me. [Everyone laughed.] So we added Peter on drums in August of 2001, and Bob Trevorrow on bass. Bob was the bass player from my band from the 70s and 80s, Hearts on Fire. We went way back."

Tucker explained why he left the Waybacks to rejoin Houston and Jones. "When the Waybacks got really big and started doing a lot of touring, Chris and I both realized that our lifestyles weren't set up so we could do that."

Kee's decision to leave the Waybacks was more complex. "I was playing with the Waybacks. I was also playing with Jim Campi- longo, and I was also in a fabulous band with my wife, Jane Selkie, as a trio with drummer Scott Amendola. So I had an interesting choice between a great Americana band — the Waybacks — the Ten Gallon Hats, and this fabulous sort of indie-pop band with my wife and Amendola. The Waybacks was actually the least interesting of those choices for me, which was one of the reasons why I bailed out. The Waybacks got the great Joe Kyle, who is their current bass player instead of me."



Travis Jones

Faced once again with the quandary of a band name, the group decided to keep it simple. "We went from Houston and Jones to Houston Jones," said Houston. "It was just basically being lazy, but it worked fine. We did our first gig as Houston Jones on the radio (Cupertino public radio station KKUP), and DJ Dick Stafford said Houston Jones sounded like the name of a porn star. So I'm on the phone on the way home saying, 'Maybe we should change the name.' But the name has otherwise been well received."

"We thought if it worked for Fleetwood Mac, it could work for us," Jones chimed in. "There is some confusion sometimes. People will come in and say to me 'Are you Houston Jones?' I'll say 'I'm Jones, that's Houston over there.' That lineup [Houston-Jones-Trevorrow-Tucker] continued for the first album, and even though Chojo was very busy, he would come and sit in with us whenever he was available. Well before he left the Waybacks he was coming and sitting in with us. He joined us on our second effort, which was a live album recorded at the Freight and Salvage, at KPIG, at Henflings in the Santa Cruz mountains, and at the Bistro. It was entitled *Hojo Mojo with Chojo*. Glenn named it, of course."

"I got a large order from a distributor in Japan," said Houston. "And it turns out that 'Chojo' is very closely related to a word in Japanese that means 'eldest daughter.' We don't even want to know what 'Hojo Mojo with Chojo' was translated into in Japanese."

At that point, the band was still doing mostly cover tunes, but the members realized they would need to have more original material in order to grow as a band. In April 2004, Houston Jones changed bass players

and picked up its principal songwriter. Bob Trevorrow wanted to devote more time to his main avocation, raising paso fino horses, so the group approached Kee, who had recently left the Waybacks.

"He came over and did a sit in," said Jones, "and was pretty much offered the gig on the spot. He didn't take it right away."

Kee elaborated. "Well, as Bob explained it to me, he didn't want to play the local gigs, but he wanted to do the high-profile shows. That was fine with me, because I was a busy boy at the time."

"We realized very quickly that Chris was going to be the bass player," said Jones, "no matter what the gig. We were going to have to beat him into submission and would just have to tell Bob that we really wanted to start branding Houston Jones, to have a particular sound, a particular look, and so on."

According to Houston, "It was a better fit all around, because Bob played an acoustic bass guitar, and Chris, of course, is a master of the upright. Adding the upright bass to the sound kind of elevated it."

Kee added, "Plus Peter and I had played together for the better part of 20 years. It is a very incestuous musical community here in the Bay Area, so Peter and I both had a sense of — to use George Clinton's term — where 'the One' was. We could live in 'the One' together. So that helped, I think, to solidify the rhythm section."

Provisionally, Kee had also just found his muse as a songwriter. "My wife and I went on a trip across country in like June of 2004," he explained. "We went to this little town where she had gone every summer as a child. The grandparents grew up there, had a house, raised a family, and were buried there. I had written maybe half a dozen songs in the



Houston Jones with Joe Craven at the Millpond Music Festival in Bishop, California, September 2009

30 years I had been a performing musician; I had never been a songwriter. We went to this town. We were driving back on Interstate 70 and it was like someone opened the top of my head and poured in a song. That was ‘Three Crow Town,’ which became the title song of the next record.

“The top of my head stayed open,” he continued. “These floodgates started opening and songs started pouring out of me. It was this unusual sort of synchronicity, where these guys were looking to add a new bass player and wanting to add original material, and all of a sudden there is this seemingly endless stream of original material. So we were sort of off and running at that point.”

The catalyst to Kee’s songwriting may well have been a life-changing event three years earlier. “I was back in New York to play some shows with Campilongo. I guess I had my day job at the time, so I thought to stay at a nice hotel in walking distance to the gigs. The gigs were at the Knitting Factory and at the 55 Bar — a little hole in the wall where Mike Stern, the jazz guitar player, is a regular. So I booked a room at the World Trade Center Marriott.

“Our gig at the Knitting Factory was September 10, 2001. I was in the World Trade Center Marriott, which was between the two towers. I was in the room when the planes hit. I actually got out of the building when the second plane hit, so I had to run from falling debris from the building. I couldn’t get out of Manhattan — it was like the movie *Escape From New York*; you couldn’t get out or in. So they finally opened up the tunnels and the bridges, and I was able to rent a car and drive it back.

“My wife was out of her mind. I rented a car and drove back — it took me, like, 2 1/2 days to get across the country. I had something of a mystical experience where western Nebraska turns into Wyoming. You’re driving along, and you’re on the plains forever, and the topography starts to break up. You’re in this butte country, and then suddenly you’re in the West with all this windblown sandstone and stuff. I wrote a song that came from this very dark frame of mind I was in. The narra-

tive was made up — it’s nothing that actually happened, as far as I know, but the sensibility of it came out of that experience.

“I guess that was really the first straw, but the floodgates really opened after ‘Three Crow Town.’ That [2004] trip across the country was really intended to be a healing experience for Jane and me — we took five weeks and drove back roads across the country and back.”

“Chris’ writing of ‘Three Crow Town’ inspired the rest of us,” said Jones. “I wrote a couple of songs. Glenn wrote a couple of instrumentals, and he pulled out a couple of songs he had sitting around, and we finished them up together. All of a sudden we found ourselves, as a collective, with a wealth of material.”

Houston added, “It was a turning of a corner for us because it was all original, except for one song. Travis had this one song, ‘All I Want Is You,’ and it really needed sort of a jazzy piano part, so we brought in Henry, who was responsible for that.”

“At this point Henry is sitting peacefully at home,” said Jones, “and these two guys [Kee and Tucker] said, ‘Boy, do we know a piano player!’”

“We had an electric blues tune that needed piano,” Houston said. “We had another tune that needed accordion, and Henry comes in and nails it all.”

Salvia contributed his own perspective. “I had an accordion because I had been playing in a local zydeco band as a substitute guy. I mostly did sub work for people at the time. These guys called me up and asked me to do a couple of things on their album, so I said, ‘Great!’ I knew Peter forever and Chris for almost ever. I had no idea who these other

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Jericho Road*  
Summerhill (2009)

*Calico Heart*  
Summerhill (2007)

*Three Crow Town*  
Summerhill (2004)

*Hoyo Mojo with Chojo*  
Summerhill (2003)

*Houston Jones*  
Summerhill Records (2001)





two guys were. Towards the end they played ‘Three Crow Town’ for me, and I had never reacted to a song the way I did to that one.

“I told myself at some point in the middle of the sessions, ‘I don’t know how I’m going to do it, but I have to con these guys into letting me play with them,’” Salvia continued. “So I subtly begged them to let me play with them when they needed a keyboard player and started sitting in with them. It’s happened to me maybe a handful of times in 35 years of playing, when you are inspired to do things you don’t normally do, and you are inspired to sound better than you are. Now I’m old enough to realize that it’s not going to happen that often, so I realize you’ve gotta grab it, be shameless about it, while you can. So I sort of weaseled my way in.”

“Chojo Jacques produced *Three Crow Town* and played on just about all of it,” said Houston. “By then he had left the Waybacks and was playing every gig with us. If not an official band member, [he was] effectively. If you went to a Houston Jones gig, you were expecting to see Chojo. We reached the point quickly where we realized that we needed to make a personnel change. We were evolving a sound that was less like a string band, and Chojo began playing with us less frequently as we continued to develop in a different direction. It got to where he was playing with us, maybe, once in a while. We really liked Henry’s work. We invited him in, and without any conditions, he joined us.”

“Part of that had to do with the direction of the material,” Tucker said. “We were getting

away from the acoustic string band thing and the material was getting more urban; I think that’s the term Chris used. The material also helped guide this transition.”

Keel added a comment that someone made after a gig. “This girl came up and said, ‘That keyboard player — he makes you guys sound more intelligent.’ And in her way, that was absolutely right. That kind of sums up Henry’s contribution.”

In 2007, the group recorded *Calico Heart*, another album that featured Salvia as a full member and Jacques as a “featured guest.” Again, the material was all original and included some audacious pieces, notably the 10½-minute, Celtic-tinged closing tune, “Roads to Dominion.”

The group’s prolific streak continues, and it just finished up a new album. Keel explained its conceptual framework. “The initial thinking was that we would do a gospel album. When we do festivals, we often do the gospel stage, and given Travis’ and my background, we have a lot of experience with that kind of music. We were thinking we would do a whole album of that, but then Travis had some new material of his own, and some of the songs I was writing were either gospel-based, or they had a road theme either about journeys or spiritual quests. My original idea was that we would call it ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ but that fell by the wayside. We are going to call it ‘Jericho Road,’ and the songs do mix those themes. When I was a kid and I would get an album, I would listen to every cut intensely, and albums were constructed in a certain way.

This album is kind of sequenced that way. We’re even considering putting a version out on vinyl with a bonus track or two.”

“I found a map of Jerusalem,” said Houston, “which included Jericho to the northeast, circa 1200 A.D., and did some editing of it so it no longer showed a Christian spearing a Muslim. That’s going to be our cover.”

“With the original tunes that these guys are coming up with, we have something that is really unique,” said Jones. “And that’s why I’m so proud of this band. We’re not just a real good cover band. We actually developed a unique original thing that’s really hard to pigeonhole.”

Said Houston, “I think that brings up another important point, that all of us have been professional musicians for a long time. We have varied backgrounds and have a lot of different experiences to bring to the music.” He then waxed philosophic: “I think the most important thing I learned in college was the three creative stages that Nietzsche defined:

the beast of burden, the rebellious child, and the triumphant lion. In the beast of burden you play all the cover material, and you learn it well enough to nail it. As a rebellious child, you start developing your own style, your own arrangements and parts, and the synthesis of that is where we are at — writing our own material. I say that because I was in a really good band in New York, which played almost all original material, but if they asked us to play some cover stuff, it showed some real gaps in our experience.

“This band can get excited in a bar,” he continued, “and you should hear us play ‘Down in Hollywood!’ [nodding at Salvia]. This guy can play every song that’s been written since the year 1742.”

Kee agreed. “Henry knows every song ever written. He knows the B sides, he knows who was playing tenor on any particular cut. Henry has the perfect eye and ear for arrangements, for hooks, for those kinds of things. When we are putting together arrangements of songs, that background is invaluable.

“Glenn,” Kee continued, “has a pretty strong theory background. He sang in a chorus that performed at Carnegie Hall when he was younger. I had an incredibly fortunate childhood, in that my parents took me to performances of the great classical soloists and orchestras of the 20th century. My uncle was a cellist, and then in college I studied world music. Travis has a background in gospel music and in the church.”

“Travis has done a lot of musical theater,” said Tucker. “Not just acting, but as musical



director, and that has really helped in some of the vocal arrangements. I think it’s both the church background and the theater background. He knows how to utilize harmonies and how to utilize the talent that he has to work with. Because we have this foundation, we know about country, folk, and gospel music, so somehow that is just synthesized into what we do.”

When asked to characterize the group’s audience, Salvia summed it up concisely. “They are mostly our peers who have lived life for a little while. They see something in us that represents them.”

The group is making an effort to expand its sphere of touring. A marathon residency at the national Folk Alliance conference a couple of years back garnered many offers for gigs, and promotion campaigns for the last two albums have resulted in a lot of airplay — even in areas where Houston Jones has not played, such as the strong northeast folk market. Still, they face some challenges in entering new markets.

“We encounter that ‘What kind of music do you play?’ situation,” said Tucker, “because we’re such a unique kind of band. When we do play somewhere, they always love us. They say, ‘Why aren’t you guys famous?’”

Houston is retired from his job as the director of engineering for a major Silicon Valley IT firm, and Jones has a relatively flexible schedule. However, the three remaining band members have to schedule touring around their work schedules. “When we do play out of town, we do these sprints,” Kee

explained. “Our days of spending two months in a van are long gone. The appeal of that has worn out.” The group is starting to tour more frequently, with a northwest tour booked for the fall and an excursion to the East Coast planned sometime in 2010.

“We made a conscious decision about a year ago,” said Kee, “to cut back on local bar and coffeehouse gigs, which, when we were around town, had been the mainstay of our performance schedule. We are doing our best to segue into small theaters and festivals as best we can. We’re trying to work our way up the food chain. Where we’re at now is the smaller theater, small festival thing.”

“Just recently we had a gig at the Freight and Salvage that was supposed to be our CD release party,” Houston noted. “It was the weekend of the Kate Wolf Festival, so we were worried about attendance.” It turns out their worries were unjustified; the group’s local fan base is strong and growing. “The place was nearly sold out!”



## HOUSTON JONES

### *Jericho Road*

Summerhill CD 005 (2009)

Houston Jones’ fourth studio CD isn’t quite a concept album, but it does contain a number of original tunes dealing with spiritual themes, most penned either bassist Chris Kee or lead vocalist-guitarist Travis Jones. Jones’ tunes include the rousing sing-along hymn “Still Waters” and the ominous Pentecostal-themed rocker, “Pick Up the Snake.”

Kee’s contributions are a diverse lot, including the soaring “Some Sweet Day,” the languid, contemplative “Ascension Day,” and the album’s title tune, a slow, gritty blues featuring some great barrelhouse piano from Henry Salvia. Kee also contributed “Where the Sea Meets the Sun,” in which the sunny

acoustic melody contrasts starkly with the film-noir narrative, as well as the bouncy basin-and-range road blues “Ghosts of the Inland Sea.” Jones penned a couple of love songs, the Memphis-style soul ballad “It’s the Way You Love Me,” and the driving breakup tune, “Next Time, This Time.” The group’s ensemble playing is impeccable throughout, with lead guitarist Glenn Houston and keyboardist Salvia given plenty of room to strut their chops and display their versatility in the vocabularies of rock, gospel, blues, and jazz, notably on the convoluted be-bop instrumental “Ornithopathy,” written by the pair.

— Michael Parrish (Santa Cruz, CA)

