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Blues Run the Game

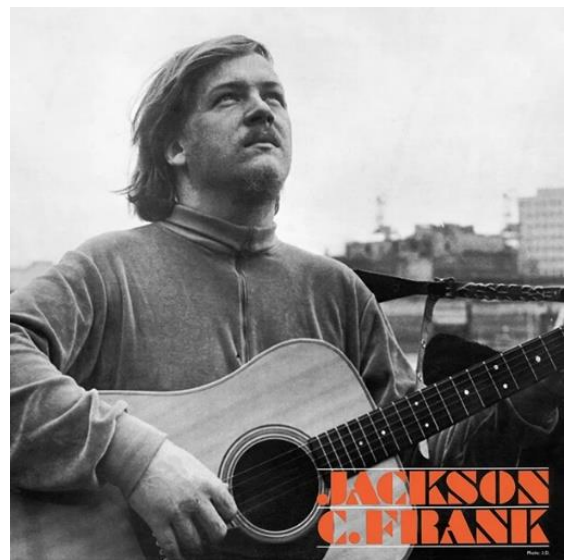
A Look at the Tragic Life of Jackson C. Frank, the disregarded folk talent whose gorgeous music was undermined by childhood trauma, poverty, and schizophrenia

Growing up in a small town, you often think that life is happening somewhere else. As you live a quiet, easygoing life in the laid-back country, you start to develop the notion that you're missing out on the fun and excitement of city life, which you envision being filled with different kinds of people, different places to go and hang out, and other exciting things.

It was this notion of missing out on the fun and excitement of city life that I held in my mind during my first year of college, which spanned from the fall of 2016 to the spring of 2017. From the floor-to-ceiling window on the top floor of the Northeast State Community College library, I would look out over the flat, rural landscape of Blountville, Tennessee – a town whose rolling hills bear more parcels of bare, rustic land than they do buildings – and feel an intense rejection towards it all. Then, in the fall of 2017, I abruptly decided to do away with this notion that life was happening somewhere else and I was missing out on it. I realized – as a young man born and raised in the rural surroundings of Kingsport, Tennessee – that I shouldn't reject my rural and natural surroundings – which had encompassed me since I was born and were not going

away anytime soon – and instead begin to embrace and celebrate them. One of the things I started to do to celebrate my surroundings was to actively listen to a genre of music I had failed to recognize the intense beauty of before: folk music. With lyrics deeply rooted in nature and rustic life, coupled with an elegant, calming sound that mirrors the gentle atmosphere of rural life, I developed a profound relationship to folk music, especially artists such as Fleet Foxes, Laura Marling, and Heather Woods Broderick. As I listened to these artists more and more, I noticed how some of the most powerful and emotional folk music comes from musicians whose lyrics act as a form of confessional poetry that reveals intimate details about their personal struggles and experiences. Examples of such musicians include Nick Drake, Dave Bixby, and Robin Pecknold. Though these artists have written considerably powerful lyrics, to this day, some of the most moving and haunting lyrics that I have heard are the lyrics of Jackson C. Frank.

I discovered Jackson C. Frank’s 1965 self-titled album in November 2017 while reading a Wikipedia article about him. I was taken in by the article mentioning how the album “has been cited as an influence by many singer-songwriters, including Paul Simon, Bert Jansch, and Nick Drake” (Wikipedia). Also, I was drawn to the album’s cover: a black and white photograph of Frank – who has a chubby and rounded face, long light-colored hair, squinty eyes, and a moustache – holding his guitar. This simple image gave me the impression that the album would be a gentle, conventional folk album. After listening to the album, I realized that it was not gentle or conventional at all. “No one knows me / in the morning



Cover of Frank’s 1965 self-titled album

/ no one sees me go walking by / and if I listen while no one answers / the winds can only echo a goodbye,” Frank sings on the song “Yellow Walls.” “I want to be alone / face the grave that I have grown / I want to be alone,” Frank sings on the song “Dialogue.”

Shocked by Frank’s bleak and melancholy lyrics, I immediately searched the Internet for information on Frank himself, anticipating that a man who writes lyrics that are this troubled must have lived through some unfortunate experiences. Prior to starting my research into Frank’s life, I looked again at the image of Frank on the cover of his album, this time noticing something about Frank’s appearance that I hadn’t noticed before listening to the album. Looking closely, I noticed that there was a large patch of scar tissue on Frank’s forehead. The patch extended from his hairline down to just above his eyebrows, signifying that he had, at some point, been badly burned. It was my determination to uncover the story behind this scar – as well as the emotional scars conveyed in the album – that led me to discover the tragic life story of Jackson C. Frank.

“Marlene”

Jackson Carey Jones was born on March 2nd, 1943, in Buffalo, New York (Abbott 21). He was born into a household that was imbued with constant conflict; conflict which typically arose out of the self-destructive behavior of Frank’s father. Though Frank’s father, Jack Jones, was a successful test pilot for the Boeing Aircraft Company, according to Jim Abbott, “he may well have been an alcoholic. He also seemed to have a dislike for income producing activity, other than flying, and justly earned his reputation as a philanderer” (Abbott 22). For these reasons, Frank’s mother, Marilyn Rochefort Jones, eventually divorced Jack. Given that it was the middle of WWII when the divorce was finalized, Frank’s mother secured a job in one of the many

secretarial pools for women. Shortly after securing the job, Frank's mother met a man named Elmer Frank, "a military man" who occupied a "civilian position as a cereal chemist" (Abbott 23). Frank's mother would eventually marry Elmer and Frank's name would be legally changed from Jackson Carey Jones to Jackson Carey Frank.

"Everything was going fine and the picture was a happy one, until one fateful spring morning in late March of 1954" (Abbott 23). On the morning of March 31, Frank, who had recently turned eleven years old, was sitting among his sixth-grade classmates in Mrs. Siebold's music class at Cleveland Hill Elementary School in Buffalo, New York. It was a cold, snowy morning and the school furnace – located in the basement boiler room of the school – was keeping the inside of the school warm. Unbeknownst to the students and the teachers, multiple holes, "some the size of a child's hand", had formed on the side of the furnace, "allowing gasses and coal dust fumes to leak out" and slowly "build up in the hollow areas of the school, in the rafters, and near the ceiling" (Abbott 14).

The music room that Frank was in was a new extension to the school; a small, square-shaped annex that was connected to the rest of the school by a long hallway. The music room had no exits except for this hallway and a couple of small, narrow windows in the back (Pollard). At 11:22 a.m., the fumes that leaked from the furnace ignited, engulfing the hallway leading to the music room in flames. With its only exit engulfed in flames, the class was, essentially, in a cage. Cutting their hands and arms in the process, the three faculty members in the room – Mrs. Siebold, Mrs. Muhaney, and Robert Winters – rushed to the windows at the back of the classroom and smashed the small windowpanes with their fists. Once the glass was broken out, some of the students were lifted up and pushed through the openings. Frank was one of these students. Though he was pushed out of a window and the snow on the ground helped put out the

flames that were on his back, Frank ultimately suffered severe burns that covered “over 50 per cent of his body” (Pollard).

Ultimately, the final death toll was fifteen students (Miers). This number was composed of five students who would die of their injuries over the next eight days and ten students who died in the annex while helping their classmates escape. Among the group of ten students who died in the annex was eleven-year-old Marlene Dupont, Frank’s first girlfriend (Pollard). She would eventually become the subject of Frank’s song “Marlene”, which appears on his self-titled album. In the song, Frank sings, “And though the fire had burned her life out / it left me little more / I am a crippled singer / and it evens up the score.”

“Blues Run the Game”

You would be forgiven for thinking that the physical pain that was inflicted on Frank by the fire reached its peak in those moments where he was shifting and writhing in the snow outside of the classroom as a way to put out the remainder of the flames that enveloped him. In truth, however, the day of the fire was only the beginning of an eight-and-a-half-month period for Frank; a period filled with horrendous and unspeakably painful side effects of the fire. Recovering in Meyer Memorial Hospital in Buffalo, New York, the first two side effects that Frank encountered were “swelling which caused his face to swell so much his eyes were swollen shut” and his body temperature “rising to 108 degrees and staying there for a long period of time” (Abbott 25). If this weren’t enough, the fire also caused significant damage to Frank’s parathyroid glands; glands in the neck that tell the body where to send calcium. Since Frank’s parathyroid glands were damaged, excess calcium “began to settle in his elbows, shoulders, and

hip joints” and “those joints began to fuse together” causing unimaginable pain at the slightest movement (Abbott 27).

There was one aspect of Frank’s days in the hospital that was not marred by inconceivable pain: the relationship he formed with a teacher. In the aftermath of the fire, a teacher named Charlie Castelli was assigned by the state of New York to work with Frank to keep him up on his studies while he was recovering. When meeting with Frank, Castelli often “brought his guitar and, accompanying a slide presentation of various historical eras, sang songs pertinent to each era,” which ultimately inspired Frank to teach himself how to play guitar and start writing songs (Abbott 28). After eight-and-a-half months of recovery, Frank left the hospital in mid-December 1954, returning home fully recovered save for a severe limp – which was caused by joint damage – and patches of scar tissue that spread across Frank’s forehead as well as the backs of his hands. This limp and scar tissue would accompany Frank for the rest of his life.

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After dropping out of Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in the spring of 1962 – a little less than two years after he began his pursuit of a bachelor’s degree in English – Frank returned to Buffalo in September 1962. After working as a copy boy at the Buffalo Evening News for less than a year, on March 2, 1964 – Frank’s twenty-first birthday – the insurance claim for his fire injuries was finally settled and he received “\$80,000 in 1964 dollars, which would be worth around \$640,000 today” (Miers). Interested in buying expensive cars, Frank boarded the Queen Elizabeth in New York City in February 1965 and set sail for London, England, intent on purchasing a car such as an Aston Martin or a Rolls Royce. Though car

buying was Frank's original reason for travelling to London, his focus gradually shifted into getting involved in the local folk music scene.

In March 1965, Frank began performing at Les Cousins; a prominent folk and blues club located on Greek Street in the Soho district of London. The club was a spawning ground for musicians such as Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Al Stewart. Intrigued by the fact that Frank "seemed reserved and even a bit cold" during his performances – which made him different from the average "loud American" and average "Cousins clientele" – Sandy Denny, the leader singer of the folk band Fairport Convention, introduced Frank to Paul Simon (Stanley). Simon, who was in the midst of recording *Paul Simon Songbook* at Levy's Recording Studio at 103 New Bond Street in London, was allegedly so impressed by Frank's voice and unique fingerpicking patterns that he personally paid the fifty pounds needed to book Frank for a six hour recording session at Levy's in July 1965. Frank was allegedly so shy during the recording session that he requested to be completely surrounded and shielded by large screens so that no one could see him while he played, explaining "I can't play. You're looking at me." (Pollard). What emerged from the man behind the screens on that day was a 32-minute, 10-track self-titled album whose songs would not only go on to be covered by folk music giants like Nick Drake, Joni Mitchell, and Laura Marling, but would also be featured in the renowned 2018 film *The Old Man and the Gun* as well as the popular 2019 film *Joker* (Wikipedia). The album was released in December 1965 to acclaim from the British press as well as from Frank's peers in the London folk scene. However, this career peak turned out to be short-lived. The album, never given an American release, ultimately sold less than 1,000 copies in England (Abbott 172). With little money coming in and his insurance money supply running low, Frank moved back to the United States

in July 1966. This move was the first stage of a dreadful downward spiral that Frank would endure for the rest of his life.

“I Want to Be Alone”

Accompanying Frank on his move back to the United States was his girlfriend Elaine Sedgwick, a British fashion designer who was a “beautiful blonde” (Abbott 103). Frank married Sedgwick on February 4, 1967 in Elma, New York and moved with her to Woodstock, New York shortly after. Moving from Buffalo to Woodstock, Frank and Sedgwick felt freed from the control of Frank’s parents – whom they had been living with since Frank moved back from England – and rejoiced in the beauty of the Catskill Mountains that encircle Woodstock. However, in 1968, a tragedy would abruptly befall the couple, shattering their brief marriage as well as whatever remained of Frank’s frail psyche in the aftermath of the childhood fire tragedy.

In early 1968, Elaine gave birth to a baby boy who “only managed to hang on for ten hours before succumbing to the cruelty of nature” (Abbott 119). The baby boy’s cause of death was eventually determined to be cystic fibrosis (Stanley). Given that Elaine had already miscarried one baby the previous year, the baby boy’s sudden death caused Frank’s mental health to slowly deteriorate. From 1968 into 1969, Elaine noted how Frank would get into screaming fights with the microphone during open mic performances at local Woodstock venues; fights that involved Frank accusing the microphone of mocking and taunting him (Abbott 137). Elaine also noted how Frank would often go into long, paranoid rants about people conspiring together to steal his insurance money – even though he had already spent the last of it more than two years prior – as well as rants about audience members plotting to stab him during one of his

performances. Eventually, when Frank started to complain about hearing voices that were trying to convince him that he was Lochinvar – a character from Sir Walter Scott’s poem of the same name – Elaine divorced Frank, leaving him homeless (Abbott 140).

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Little more is known about Frank’s life during the period of the seventies and early 1980’s other than he was, for most of the period, in and out of the Hudson River State Hospital in Hyde Park, New York; the first hospital to officially diagnose Frank with paranoid schizophrenia (Abbott 146). He was in and out of this hospital in a vicious cycle wherein he would be taken in to the hospital and put on medications such as Thorazine, be so impressed by positive effects of the medication that he would deem himself “cured” and stop taking it, be released from the hospital, relapse back into mentally ill behavior, and start the cycle all over again. Facing the risk of remaining completely unknown and undiscovered forever, several of the events of Frank’s obscure later life were uncovered by writer Jim Abbott through his contact with eyewitnesses in Woodstock, Frank’s family, and health care professionals as well as through the personal relationship he formed with Frank. Abbott learned how Frank left Woodstock and travelled to New York City in 1985 in search of Paul Simon (Abbott 174). Frank allegedly believed that Simon was withholding money from him; money that was rightfully his since it came from the sales of his self-titled album.

In New York City, Frank was apprehended by police in early 1986 as part of a new city-wide initiative that required that large swaths of the homeless population of New York City be put in homeless shelters. Frank was placed in Leben Home for Adults in Queens, New York. Leben Home for Adults was, according to Abbott, “a type of halfway house” (Abbott 190). In

1989, Frank was relocated to a place called Woodstock Manor, located in Lake Hill, just a few miles outside Woodstock. Woodstock manor was a boarding house where “basically, if someone followed the rules and took their medication as they were told to, they had a home for as long as they wanted or needed” (Abbott 211). Frank would reside at Woodstock Manor until 1998, the year he began to face health problems such as obesity and respiratory issues. Because of his health problems, Frank was transferred to a nursing home called Timberlyn Heights in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in June 1998. It was at Timberlyn Heights that a little less than a year later, and one day after his March 2 birthday, Frank passed away from pneumonia. He was 56 years old.

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Thinking back to the moment when I completed my full, comprehensive research on Frank’s life, I remember realizing that the moral of Frank’s story turned out to be something entirely different than what I thought it would be. Moving through my preliminary research on Frank and uncovering instance after instance of appalling adversity, I remember thinking that the moral of Frank’s story is that we can overcome any misfortune and not let misfortune get in the way of us expressing ourselves and sharing our talents. After completing my full research on Frank, I realized that this moral only partially applies to Frank’s tragic story. Yes, while Frank may have overcome the misfortune inflicted upon him by the fire at Cleveland Hill Elementary to record his masterful album, he spent the rest of his life not overcoming misfortune but being overcome by it. Frank’s life following the release of his album is not a story of redemption meant to be glamourized into an uplifting message; it’s a story of immense hardship and tragedy that should be empathized with.

Perhaps the moral of Frank's story is not that we should overcome adversity to create art, but rather is that we should create art before adversity strikes us. Frank's story revealed to me just how fragile our identities are and just how susceptible they are to change. The fact that there is a chance that a random homeless man you see in New York City was once a young, handsome, passionate folk singer that wrote beautiful music shows how much we change over the course of our lives. Art can be used to capture our identity at any given moment and preserve this identity even as we begin to change. In other words, though we eventually change into something else entirely, art captures and preserves who we once were. I will always be thankful that Frank's self-titled album captures and presents who he once was because who he was – before the world turned him into a helpless and confused man – was a truly special talent.

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