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Mendenhall's style finds fan in local DJ

'Hard Times' easy to enjoy

**Mendenhall Singer Frank Mendenhall focuses on classic soul in new disc
Hard times have rarely sounded as good as they do on Frank Mendenhall's newest album.**

A Camden, Ala., native with ties to Mobile and Prichard, Mendenhall already is well known to many area listeners. His two previous albums, "Time" and "Sweet Love," have their share of fans, and "Shont Dont Dont" is something of a signature single.

But where those two albums show Mendenhall's range of influences - including soul, country, funk, blues and reggae - the new disc, "Hard Times," focuses on a classic soul sound that warms and comforts even when the subject matter is anything but warm and comfortable.

From the opening notes of "Jealous" to the bluesy "Locked Doors," the disc's new tracks are all marked by earthy bass tones and Mendenhall's own guitar work, reminiscent of the Stax catalog. His raspy voice brings a strong blues flavor to the mix. (The disc also includes "Shont Dont Dont" and "Time;" while the two tracks are clearly the product of other recording sessions, they do let the new disc serve double duty as a greatest-hits package.)

Throughout the songs on "Hard Times," Mendenhall sings with the voice of a man who's been through some stuff, as they say, and is confident he'll make it through whatever comes next.

It's an approach that already has won him one important supporter: Beverly McDowell, the air personality behind WDLT-FM 98.3's "All-Blues Saturday." The program, which runs from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. Saturdays, is a ratings juggernaut - surveys have given it a 47 share, meaning that nearly half the people listening to local radio on any given Saturday morning are tuned in to McDowell.

"I love his style," McDowell said. "He's done something phenomenal. He's blended reggae with the blues."

She plays Mendenhall nearly every Saturday. She said and while older tracks are staples. She's impressed with the new material. Her favorite tracks include "Jealous" and "Gone On Away From Here." "His gritty lyrical perspective is right on target," she said.

"His title reflects what's going on in the world," she said. "Frank has a great future. I think he's going to hit one, with this."

McDowell also praised Mendenhall as someone whose maintained strong local ties even though, like many artists, he's had to move away to mature.

"Mobile has a tendency to hold its stars to the ground," she said. "But with Frank, we see him as a star from Prichard. That's how I project him when I play his music."

Mendenhall said he left Camden for the Mobile area at age 14 and attended Mobile County Training School and Blount High School. By 1964, at age 18, he had moved on again. His travels included a 5-year stay in the United Kingdom. Nowadays he's based in Washington, D.C., though he said he still calls this area home.

He lived in Prichard from 2000 to 2002, and during that time he wrote several of the songs on "Hard Times," including the title track. In it he sings:

"They're ridin' around in black Navigators/ shoes made of lizard, alligator/ Rich get richer, poor gets poorer/ when I ask you where's mine, you say there ain't no more/ then you run around sayin' how it's so much crime/ why is that the young brothers are the only ones doing time/ dropped out of school 'cause you thought you were cool/now you realize you just actin' a fool"

"There's a lot of hard times in Prichard," Mendenhall said of his inspiration. "This CD is straight from the heart, very emotional," he said. "I really had some hard times. And when you're in the studio, in front of the mike, all that emotion comes out."

The challenge for the immediate future is to share that emotion with as many listeners as possible. Mendenhall said he's putting together tour plans and hopes to deliver a hometown show.

His touring band includes several local players - guitarist Terry Allen, drummer Greg Baxter and keyboardist Keith Johnson. Rounding out the field is Connecticut-based bassist David Grimes.

"Hard Times" is out on Mendenhall's own label, Wurst Act Records. Mendenhall said he's developing two other acts as well. And he's got another project of his own in the works.

"I'm in the process right now of putting together a whole CD of reggae," he said.

If there's an underlying message in the CD, Mendenhall said, it's one that comes from his own struggle to turn adversity into uplifting music.

"Never give up," he said.