

“I WAS BORN FOR THE STORM”
THE ATROCIOUS SAINT

“I WAS BORN FOR THE STORM.” THAT’S HOW ANDREW JACKSON DESCRIBED HIMSELF IN HIS EARTHY STYLE, AND “OLD HICKORY’S” LIFE FULLY JUSTIFIED THE DESCRIPTION. WHEN HE WAS JUST THIRTEEN YEARS OLD, JACKSON FOUGHT IN THE MOST VICIOUS BATTLES OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR. BEFORE HE WAS FIFTEEN, HIS FATHER, MOTHER AND BOTH BROTHERS DIED, LEAVING HIM ALONE IN THE WORLD. AFTER READING LAW FOR THREE YEARS HE WAS ADMITTED TO THE NORTH CAROLINA BAR, AND A YEAR LATER HE JOINED THE FIRST GREAT WAVE OF AMERICANS TO HEAD WEST TO START NEW LIVES, A JOURNEY THAT TOOK HIM TO A NEW SETTLEMENT ON THE FARTHEST EDGE OF THE FRONTIER – NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE.

IN NASHVILLE JACKSON RAISED RACEHORSES, THEN BET HUGE SUMS ON THOSE HORSES IN MATCH RACES. ONE RACE LED TO A DUEL IN WHICH HIS OPPONENT SHOT JACKSON IN THE CHEST. JACKSON THEN RAISED HIS GUN AND SHOT THE MAN IN THE HEART. THIS “WILD YOUNG MAN” ALSO FOUND TIME TO BEGIN A SCANDALOUS AFFAIR WITH A MARRIED WOMAN, WHO SOME BIOGRAPHERS THINK MOVED IN WITH JACKSON BECAUSE SHE KNEW HER ABUSIVE HUSBAND WOULDN’T DARE TO CROSS HIM.

THERE WERE A LOT OF CHALLENGES IN MAKING A FILM ABOUT ANDREW JACKSON, BUT THE BIGGEST WAS THAT IT’S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE FOR MODERN AMERICANS TO REALLY UNDERSTAND THE HARDCRABBLE FRONTIER LIFE THAT SHAPED JACKSON, WHERE THE RULE OF CONDUCT WAS “DO UNTO OTHERS BEFORE THEY DO IT UNTO YOU.” WHEN IT COMES TO CREATING A GUT FEELING OF A TIME AND PLACE, MUSIC IS ESSENTIAL, BECAUSE IT COMMUNICATES MOOD AND EMOTION STRAIGHT TO THE HEART WITHOUT RELYING ON WORDS OR PICTURES OR ANYTHING ELSE. FORTUNATELY, FOR THOSE OF US INVOLVED IN THE MAKING OF “ANDREW JACKSON: GOOD, EVIL AND THE PRESIDENCY,” WE HAD A SECRET WEAPON AT OUR DISPOSAL: THE AMAZING MUSIC OF CHRISTOPHER HEDGE.

TO GET THAT MOOD AND EMOTION RIGHT, CHRIS SCOURED OLD ARCHIVES FOR SHEET MUSIC AND SONGS OF THE PERIOD, TRAVELING ACROSS THE COUNTRY TO MEET WITH EXPERTS IN THE FIELD. CHRIS DIDN’T WANT TO SIMPLY SELECT A FEW OLD SONGS FOR BACKGROUND MUSIC TO OUR DOCUMENTARY; HE WANTED TO COMPOSE MUSIC THAT WOULD CAPTURE JACKSON’S TIME – A COMPLEX WORLD OF CLASHING CULTURES COMPOSED OF NATIVE AMERICANS, FRONTIERSMEN AND SOLDIERS, MERCHANTS AND FARMERS, POLITICIANS AND SLAVES. CHRIS WENT DEEP INTO THE SCOTCH/IRISH ROOTS MUSIC THAT ANDREW JACKSON’S PEOPLE AND THEIR CONTEMPORARIES BROUGHT WITH THEM FROM THE OLD WORLD. HE FOLLOWED THOSE ROOTS TO THE NEW WORLD WHERE THEY FOUND EXPRESSION IN THE FIDDLE-DRIVEN MUSIC AND JIGS OF APPALACHIA AND THE REST OF FRONTIER AMERICA.

CHRIS SPENT MORE THAN A YEAR LISTENING AND COMPOSING AND THEN REWORKING OVER AND OVER AN INCREDIBLE ARRAY OF SONGS, AND WHEN HE WAS READY TO RECORD, HE BROUGHT IN SOME OF THE FINEST MUSICIANS IN THE WORLD TO PLAY THEM – DAVID BREWER ON IRISH INSTRUMENTS, JOE WEED (FIDDLE), EDWARD MCCLARY PLAYING REVOLUTIONARY WAR ERA FIELD DRUMS, AND THE INCOMPARABLE DAVID GRISMAN PLAYING MANDOLIN SOLO AND WITH HIS BLUEGRASS BAND, THE DAVID GRISMAN BLUEGRASS EXPERIENCE.

ONE OF MY BEST EXPERIENCES WORKING ON THE FILM WAS GETTING TO SIT IN ON ONE OF THE SESSIONS WITH GRISMAN AND HIS BAND, AND LISTEN IN AWE AS THEY RIPPED THROUGH THE TRADITIONAL “EIGHTH OF JANUARY” AND CHRIS’S ORIGINAL “WILD YOUNG MAN.” AT THE END OF A BREAKNECK VERSION OF “RICHARD’S STOMP” (CREATED FOR FILM EDITOR RICHARD KASSEBAUM), CHAD MANNING SMILED OVER HIS FIDDLE AND SAID, “IT’S SO INCREDIBLE TO ACTUALLY BE PLAYING THE ROOTS MUSIC, THE MUSIC THAT GAVE BIRTH TO WHAT WE PLAY ALL THE TIME.”

HOWEVER, CHRIS’S DAUNTING TASK WAS TO CREATE MUSIC THAT WOULD ADDRESS THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE UNDER JACKSON FROM ALL PERSPECTIVES, FROM WASHINGTON PARLOR SOCIETY TO THE FRONTIER, FROM AFRICAN SLAVES WORKING THE PLANTATIONS TO THE CLASH OF WHITE AND NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES. JACKSON’S STORMY CAREER AFFECTED THEM ALL.

DURING THE WAR OF 1812, JACKSON LED THE U.S. ARMY AGAINST CREEK WARRIORS AT THE BATTLE OF HORSESHOE BEND. THE CREEKS, ALLIED WITH THE BRITISH, BELIEVED THEY WERE MAKING A LAST STAND DEFENDING THEIR WAY OF LIFE AGAINST AN EVER-EXPANDING UNITED STATES. AND A LAST STAND IT WAS, AS MORE NATIVE AMERICANS DIED THAT DAY THAN ON ANY OTHER DAY IN THE HISTORY OF OUR COUNTRY. YET FOR NATIVE AMERICANS PERHAPS THE GREATEST TRAGEDY CAME WITH JACKSON’S POLITICAL ASCENDANCY AND HIS SIGNATURE POLICY OF “INDIAN REMOVAL,” WITH THE GOAL OF REMOVING TO THE FAR WEST NATIVE AMERICANS LIVING EAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER. THE RESULT WAS AN ALMOST ENDLESS SERIES OF HEARTBREAKS FOR NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES, INCLUDING THE CHEROKEE “TRAIL OF TEARS,” WHICH LED TO THE DEATHS OF MORE THAN 2000 CHEROKEES.

TO CAPTURE THESE EPIC EVENTS, CHRIS COLLABORATED WITH R. CARLOS NAKAI, THE FOREMOST NATIVE AMERICAN FLUTE PLAYER. BEFORE NAKAI RECORDED WITH CHRIS, HE WENT TO THE OCEAN NEAR HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA AND SPOKE TO HIM ABOUT HIS ANCESTRY AND THE SPECTRUM OF TRIBES AND TRADITIONS THAT INFORM HIS MUSIC. FROM NAVAJO TO IRISH, NAKAI REPRESENTS WHAT HE CALLS “A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS.” THEN HE WENT INTO CHRIS’ STUDIO, AND AS IMAGES EVOKING THE “TRAIL OF TEARS” PLAYED ON THE SCREEN, HE PERFORMED AN ORIGINAL, ENTIRELY SPONTANEOUS FLUTE SOLO, THAT STANDS AS A ONE-OF-A-KIND IMPROVISATION AS INSPIRED AS ANYTHING EVER PLAYED BY MILES DAVIS OR JOHN COLTRANE.

THEN CHRIS BROUGHT IN CONGOLESE MASTER DRUMMER TITOS SOMPA TO JOIN NAKAI – AND IT’S IN THAT KIND OF PAIRING THAT CHRIS’S REAL GENIUS SHOWS THROUGH. THE FILM TELLS VIEWERS THAT ONCE THE NATIVE AMERICANS HAD BEEN REMOVED, JACKSON AND OTHER SOUTHERNERS BROUGHT IN SLAVES TO WORK THE LAND THEY’D SEIZED, GIVING BIRTH TO THE SOUTHERN PLANTATION ECONOMY. BUT IT’S ONE THING TO BE TOLD IT AND ANOTHER THING TO FEEL IT, AS NAKAI’S WISTFUL FLUTE MIXES WITH AND EVENTUALLY GIVES WAY TO THE DRIVING POUNDING OF TITOS SOMPA’S DRUMS.

ANDREW JACKSON WAS THE FIRST MAN OF HUMBLE ORIGINS TO BECOME PRESIDENT, HE FOUNDED THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY TO HELP TAKE ON THE WASHINGTON ELITE, AND HE WARNED THAT THE RISE OF THE CORPORATION, IF LEFT UNCHECKED, WOULD DESTROY AMERICAN DEMOCRACY. ALL OF THAT IS HERE TOO IN CHRIS’ MUSIC, CAPTURED BY THE TENSION BETWEEN THE FRONTIER FIDDLES AND THE STRING QUARTETS OF WASHINGTON SOCIETY, BROUGHT TO LIFE WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE WONDERFUL JULIAN SMEDLEY (VIOLIN) AND JOSEPH HERBERT (CELLO).

WHEN JACKSON LEFT OFFICE IN 1836, HE SAID, “AFTER 8 YEARS AS PRESIDENT, I HAVE ONLY TWO REGRETS. THAT I HAVE NOT SHOT HENRY CLAY OR HANGED JOHN C. CALHOUN.” GIVEN THE SLICK POLITICIANS WE’RE SURROUNDED BY TODAY, IT’S HARD NOT TO ADMIRE SUCH A CONSISTENT AND ORNERY CUSSEDNESS. BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN WE SHOULD FORGET THE EVIL JACKSON DID. JUST BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR, WHEN HIS FIRST BIOGRAPHER WAS TRYING TO SUM JACKSON UP, HE WROTE: “ANDREW JACKSON WAS A PATRIOT AND A TRAITOR. HE WAS THE GREATEST OF GENERALS, AND WHOLLY IGNORANT OF THE ART OF WAR. HE WAS THE MOST CANDID OF MEN, AND CAPABLE OF THE PROFOUNDEST DISSIMULATION. HE WAS A DEMOCRATIC AUTOCRAT, AN URBANE SAVAGE, AN ATROCIOUS SAINT.”

I HOPE YOU ENJOY “THE ATROCIOUS SAINT” BY CHRISTOPHER HEDGE

CARL BYKER - PRODUCER, “ANDREW JACKSON: GOOD, EVIL AND THE PRESIDENCY”

CHRISTOPHER HEDGE

WITH DAVID GRISMAN AND R. CARLOS NAKAI