

## Looking for the Good Life *continued from front page*

struggle. Joy and exhaustion, satisfaction and disappointment, poor choices and the consequences of them.”

Stuart, who's day job is working for a cable company, has found musical inspiration in the story of the timber industry and the men and women who made their living here in the Pacific Northwest. RootJack's first album, *In the Pines* is scattered with references to working men and the woods.

When he first started looking

Stuart, who's in his forties, lives in Portland with his family, but has found a second home, of sorts, out here towards the Coast Range. He has traveled to Vernonia and Birkenfeld numerous times over the last several years to play with both The John Brown Band and with RootJack. The John Brown Band has performed at both the Friendship Jamboree and the Salmon Festival as well a private party in the old fuel house at Vernonia Lake; RootJack has

an old folks home or in a coffee shop or anywhere.”

Stuart says the group of John Brown songs he has now is just the first batch. “The family gave me a CD ROM with well over a hundred other poems on it, which I've quickly skimmed through and pulled out at least twenty more that are ready to go as songs. RootJack has just gotten busier and busier and that's great and I'm having a blast. But I'm not putting John Brown away.”

RootJack is a different sound altogether. Having spent a lot of his early life in Georgia, you can see and hear that southern rock influence in Stuart's look and in his music - a bit of Lynyrd Skynyrd here, some Allman Brothers there. When RootJack takes the stage they sound more like Neil Young when he performs with his sometime-band Crazy Horse, just sped up a couple notches; raw and powerful guitar chords on top of the strong rhythm of bass player Kevin Cowen and the drum beat of Chris Hutton. Stuart's blues vocals with a southern twang complete the package. RootJack's Facebook page describes it as, ‘If Cream had been listening to the Carter Family, instead of Robert Johnson, it might have come off like this.’

In fact, Stuart joined up last

we won't do Neil Young again, we'll do something different. It takes months to learn and it's a lot of work, and then we go do it once. But it's worth it. And we make some great connections with musicians from other parts of the country.”

Stuart says RootJack will be playing several festivals and will be really busy this summer. He says he likes traveling away from Portland to perform because the city is so crowded with music that it's hard to compete. “We're real happy to go where somebody wants to hear our songs,” he says.

Stuart has strengthened his connection to the Vernonia area through the RootJack shows at The Birk. The ‘Old House of Music’ seems to be a good fit for RootJack and Stuart. “There are lots of roadhouses up and down I5 that have live music. But they also have video poker and sports on the TV-whatever is going to get people in the door,” says Stuart. “This place is a place that's about music, which makes it very special for us. We get treated really well out here. Tonight there are a lot of people here who aren't going to come to Portland to see us. So we're happy to come out and see them.”

Stuart added that several musician friends have been booked at The Birk this last year. “They come back and say, ‘That is the best venue we play-the best spot for music we get to play in.’ It's a serious room. I don't know that the patrons know it, but the bands that play here sure know it.”

Meanwhile, RootJack recently released their second CD, *Oasis Motel*. In a departure from his northwest themed music, Stuart tackled a different subject matter this time around, but one which sticks to his thesis of place and working and doing what you have to do to get by. “My wife and I lived in and ran an adult motel on the strip in Las Vegas,” explains Stuart. “They rented rooms by the hour and had dirty movies on the TV. It was a nasty place full of hookers and pimps and people on the grift. We lived there for less than a year. All these songs are about that time and tells a story of excess and, hopefully, redemption.”

Stuart says following the release of *Oasis Motel* he is right back to work on new material. “We weren't off the stage for ten minutes from our record release party when Chris our drummer says, ‘So... new songs?’ So, no rest for the weary.”

Stuart's connection to Vernonia is real. “I'm thrilled with this area,” said Stuart as he got ready to take the stage again at The Birk last month. “Every time I've played, whether it's John Brown songs or RootJack music, I feel really appreciated here. We've played in lots of places around Portland, and what we learned was there are places that have music and there are places that dig music. We want to go to places that dig music and this is one of those places.”

To learn more about Kris Stuart and Rootjack go to: [www.rootjack.us](http://www.rootjack.us)



into logging he discovered that loggers spoke their own language. “When most people are on a job site and they need a piece of equipment to get the job done, they look into a catalogue and order the part they need,” explains Stuart. But when loggers came out here, there were no parts and no catalogues. They had to make everything themselves - which means they got to name it too! So they have this really rich, colorful language that they used.”

Stuart says when he started learning about logging and needed a name for the band, he wrote down a list of about forty logging terms. “We're not ‘Jim Pole,’ but we thought about it,” says Stuart with a laugh. “We're not ‘Bull Bucker’ or ‘Widow Maker,’ but we thought about it. ‘RootJack’ was one that was on the list that we kept coming back to.” A root jack is a tool for pulling small trees. Stuart added that, after they chose the name and started using it, the name RootJack is short enough that on concert posters it often ends up in a larger font and stands out from other band names. “We didn't plan on that, but it worked out well!” says Stuart with a grin.

played The Birk several times and Stuart also played as part of a trio of solo artists who shared The Birk stage one evening last year.

The John Brown music came about sort of by accident back in 2010. A fellow musician, drummer Eric Kotilla, is the grandson of John Brown. Kotilla had passed along a collection of Brown's poems about Vernonia to Stuart, knowing Stuart, who had recently formed RootJack, was interested in logging culture. Stuart was definitely inspired, setting a dozen of the poems to music for acoustic instruments in a short ten hours. The collaboration, with the blessing of Brown's relatives, led to a CD recording, several live performances in Vernonia, and numerous more in the Portland area.

“I had never been out here; I had never even heard of Vernonia before I read the poems of John Brown,” says Stuart. The project, which found a somewhat limited audience, has lost some steam as Stuart has focused more on RootJack. “Honestly, I think it could be my retirement,” says Stuart. “You can play those songs when you're seventy. And the stories in them will translate from eight year olds to eighty year olds. I can make them work in a bar, but you can also make them work in a classroom, or in



summer and performed several times with “Brothers and Sisters,” an Allman Brothers tribute band, something he says was a lot of fun. Members of the band are spread out all over the country and, according to Stuart, are in serious and original bands of their own, but he says there are opportunities this summer for that band to play together again.

Stuart also says the members of RootJack played a summer festival last year and performed Neil Young's album *Harvest* in its entirety, acting as the backing band and having other performers from the festival join them for certain songs (think The Band's *The Last Waltz*). Stuart says RootJack has been asked to do the festival again this year. “We're going to do a different program,

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