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Time for the blues

Calgarian Donald Ray Johnson has spent a lifetime making music all over the world

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"Now it's kinda too late," he adds with a laugh. "I only know how to do this."

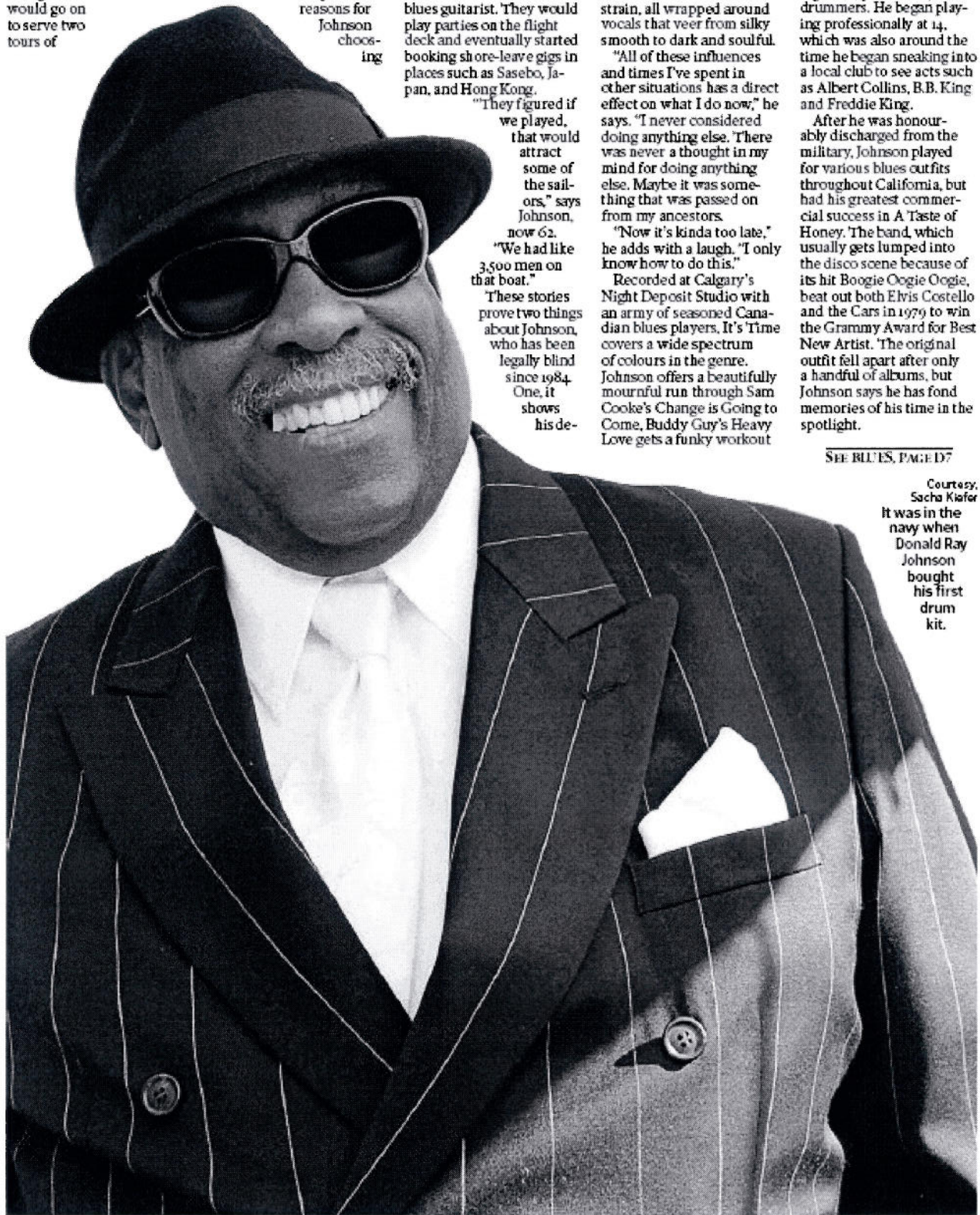
Recorded at Calgary's Night Deposit Studio with an army of seasoned Canadian blues players, It's Time covers a wide spectrum of colours in the genre. Johnson offers a beautifully mournful run through Sam Cooke's Change is Going to Come, Buddy Guy's Heavy Love gets a funky workout

drummers. He began playing professionally at 14, which was also around the time he began sneaking into a local club to see acts such as Albert Collins, B.B. King and Freddie King.

After he was honourably discharged from the military, Johnson played for various blues outfits throughout California, but had his greatest commercial success in A Taste of Honey. The band, which usually gets lumped into the disco scene because of its hit Boogie Oogie Oogie, beat out both Elvis Costello and the Cars in 1979 to win the Grammy Award for Best New Artist. The original outfit fell apart after only a handful of albums, but Johnson says he has fond memories of his time in the spotlight.

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It was in the navy when Donald Ray Johnson bought his first drum kit.

In the 1970s, he found his biggest commercial success as part of the act A Taste of Honey, which placed him in the heart of the image-conscious world of disco.

So maybe it shouldn't be too surprising to learn that he enlisted in the U.S. navy back in the 1960s based at least partially on fashion concerns.

Johnson grew up in Texas, where he often had to work summers in the cotton fields as a child to raise money for school clothes. He enlisted in the navy at the age of 18 and would go on to serve two tours of duty in Vietnam aboard the USS Bon Homme Richard. But it wasn't the prospect of serving on an aircraft carrier that initially attracted young Donald to the oceans in 1966.

"There used to be this recruiting poster for the navy that had the tall guy in bell-bottoms and the white hat," says the amiable Johnson with a laugh, in an interview from his home in Calgary. "I

thought, 'Boy, that looks good.' The naval uniform is dark navy blue, bell-bottomed pants. There was a jersey with a collar that has the white piping and the stars and the neckerchief in front. I just thought it was greatlooking." There were, of course, more practical reasons for Johnson choosing to enlist. He figured he was going to be drafted anyway, which would have had the American government putting a gun in his hand to "shoot and kill people that I wasn't even mad at."

So he joined the navy and served in the Gulf of Tonkin, where his crew was put to work launching and recovering aircraft. It was in the navy that he bought his first drum kit. He already had four years experience under his belt as a drummer, playing local juke joints and live radio shows on borrowed sets around his home in Bryan, Texas. But in the navy, he finally had enough money for his own \$100 set. There was a storeroom on the Bon Homme Richard and Johnson would rehearse with a blues guitarist. They would play parties on the flight deck and eventually started booking shore-leave gigs in places such as Sasebo, Japan, and Hong Kong. "They figured if we played, that would attract some of the sailors," says Johnson, now 62. "We had like 3,500 men on that boat."

These stories prove two things about Johnson, who has been legally blind since 1984. One, it shows his desire to perform was strong enough to overcome some pretty substantial barriers — war, poverty, illness. Two, it shows that, like many bluesmen, the Calgary veteran has a fascinating backstory that has taken him from the cotton fields of Texas, to the Gulf of Tonkin, to the glittering lights of Hollywood, where he would win a Grammy at the Shrine Auditorium in 1979 as part of that R&B-disco group A Taste of Honey.

And, like many bluesmen, he funnels all of those experiences into his music. It's Time, his fifth solo album, is a fiery, joyful and assured revue of various blues strain, all wrapped around vocals that veer from silky smooth to dark and soulful.

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"I tried to take some songs that I do in my live show that we have a lot of fun with on stage," says Johnson. "The Buddy Guy song, Heavy Love, people love dancing to that."

Like many in the South, Johnson got his first taste of music in the church, not the clubs. But he also lived across from a military academy and found himself obsessed with the marching band, particularly the drummers. He began playing professionally at 14, which was also around the time he began sneaking into a local club to see acts such as Albert Collins, B.B. King and Freddie King.

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"We just had a re-release of the two LPs we did with A Taste of Honey and I'd really forgotten how much that music from that era and my time spent with those guys influences what I do now," Johnson says. "I got a chance to hear those tracks and I had not heard them in years. And I thought they were very well done and they do have an influence on me. That's why we do a track like the Tony White song Rainy Night In Georgia as opposed to just doing a CD of straight three-change blues."

Johnson came to Calgary in 1989 as part of a tour with the Phillip Walker Band. They arrived in Calgary on a snowy night in November. They went home. Johnson decided to stay. Why?

"A woman," he said, with a booming laugh. "That's a very simple question to answer."

He's been in Calgary ever since. On Friday and Saturday, he'll hold CD release parties at the newly minted Blues Can in Inglewood. He hopes the live venue breathes some new life into the Calgary blues scene.

"Bluesmen don't retire," he says. "They'll push you out on a wheelchair and cart you off. Most people who are hanging around in our latter years, it's because we truly love it. When you come see us, you won't see the big tour bus and all the lighting. We always made it with what it is we have."