

# Sam in the Studio

Last week, as the remnants of hurricane Katrina descended on Memphis, *Black Snake Moan* screenwriter/director **Craig Brewer**, music supervisor **Scott Bomar**, editor/engineer **Kevin Houston**, studio engineer **Matt Martone**, assistant **Curry Weber**, and actor **Samuel L. Jackson**, who stars as "Laz," the movie's central character, holed up at Midtown's **Ardent Studios** to produce several songs for the movie, which begins production later this month.



**SAMUEL L. JACKSON**

The rural atmosphere of *Black Snake Moan* marks a departure for Brewer, whose first two projects, *The Poor and Hungry* and *Hustle & Flow*, were based in contemporary Memphis. While its story also takes place in the present, *Black Snake Moan* is staged in the shadows of the big city, in some anonymous, outlying town where juke joints and honky-tonks still reign supreme for weekend partygoers.

As Laz, an out-of-practice bluesman, Jackson performs a handful of acoustic and electric songs within the movie. He has spent more than a month preparing for the role: In late July, he traveled to north Mississippi's hill country and the Delta, where he spent a day at **Fat Possum Records** in Water Valley and an evening watching **Robert Belfour** bend the strings at **Messenger's Café** in Clarksdale, before staying at the **Shack Up Inn** just outside of town.



**CRAIG BREWER**

In August, Bomar and musician **Alvin Youngblood Hart** flew to Vancouver, where Jackson was completing another project, the upcoming *Pacific Air Flight 121*, for practice sessions. By the time he walked into Ardent's Studio C with his brand-new, purple ES-335 guitar in hand (custom-painted by the crew at the **Gibson Guitar Factory** in downtown Memphis), he had his moves down pat.

While a pair of homegrown pop stars — Memphis' own **Justin Timberlake** and Mississippi-based rapper **David Banner** — have also been cast in leading roles, Jackson portrays the only musician in the bunch.

He sang a handful of songs during

the three-day sessions, including a riveting version of the title track, which was originally made famous by **Blind Lemon Jefferson**. Here, local guitarist **Jason Freeman** — who pulls double-duty in *Amy & the Tramps* and *The Bluff City Backsliders* — laid down a series of raw and haunting riffs, while Jackson howled ominously. Outside the studio, the storm clouds rose on the horizon.

Hill-country musicians **Kenny Brown** and **Cedric Burnside** collaborated with Jackson on a number of tunes including a variation on "Stagger Lee" that Bomar penned for the film. **North Mississippi Allstars** guitarist **Luther Dickinson** came in to play a mean solo, while Hart laid down an acoustic guitar track for another song, which features vocals by Jackson and co-star **Christina Ricci**.

After an eight-hour session, Jackson himself sat down in the main room to cut his own version of **R.L. Burnside's** "Bird Without a Feather." (Burnside would pass away only a few days later.) Jackson's practicing had clearly paid off. The actor delivered an emotional take that had even Cedric Burnside, R.L.'s grandson, nodding in approval.

When he wasn't sequestered in the vocal booth or comparing notes with Brewer and Bomar, Jackson told jokes, visited with Stax songwriter **David Porter**, and delivered a dead-on impersonation of Clarksdale guitarist **Big Jack Johnson**, who arrived on Tuesday to play a frenzied arrangement of "Catfish Blues" for the sessions.

Portraying Laz in the studio proved to be an easy transition for Jackson, who has played characters such as spies, detectives, hit men, drug addicts, lotharios, and Jedi knights but only one musician: classical connoisseur Charles Morritz in the '98 Canadian drama *The Red Violin*.

His voice would slip down into a lower register as some syllables would bend and stretch and others would entirely disappear, Brewer instructing Jackson to "watch his diphthongs." After a take, he would quickly revert back to "Sam," checking his BlackBerry for messages and cracking up the control-room crew with anecdotes about the movie biz.

"Samuel makes it easy," Bomar remarked after the sessions ended. "He's a consummate professional, the easiest person I've ever worked with." □

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