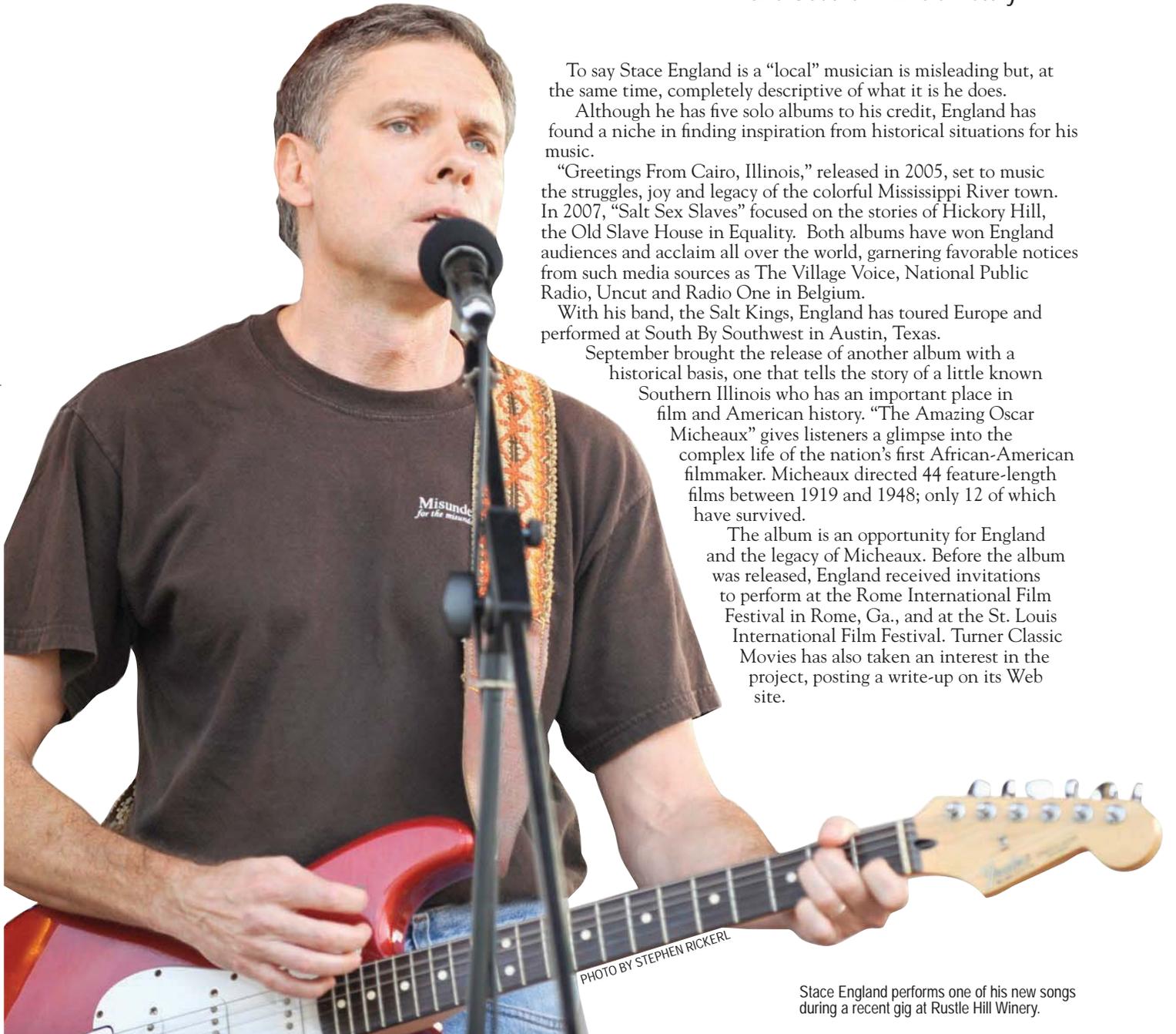


# Stace England

Giving listeners a glimpse into American and Southern Illinois history



To say Stace England is a “local” musician is misleading but, at the same time, completely descriptive of what it is he does.

Although he has five solo albums to his credit, England has found a niche in finding inspiration from historical situations for his music.

“Greetings From Cairo, Illinois,” released in 2005, set to music the struggles, joy and legacy of the colorful Mississippi River town. In 2007, “Salt Sex Slaves” focused on the stories of Hickory Hill, the Old Slave House in Equality. Both albums have won England audiences and acclaim all over the world, garnering favorable notices from such media sources as The Village Voice, National Public Radio, Uncut and Radio One in Belgium.

With his band, the Salt Kings, England has toured Europe and performed at South By Southwest in Austin, Texas.

September brought the release of another album with a historical basis, one that tells the story of a little known Southern Illinois who has an important place in film and American history. “The Amazing Oscar Micheaux” gives listeners a glimpse into the complex life of the nation’s first African-American filmmaker. Micheaux directed 44 feature-length films between 1919 and 1948; only 12 of which have survived.

The album is an opportunity for England and the legacy of Micheaux. Before the album was released, England received invitations to perform at the Rome International Film Festival in Rome, Ga., and at the St. Louis International Film Festival. Turner Classic Movies has also taken an interest in the project, posting a write-up on its Web site.

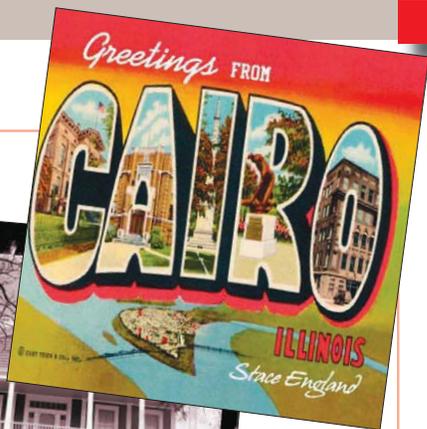
PHOTO BY STEPHEN RICKERL

Stace England performs one of his new songs during a recent gig at Rustle Hill Winery.

## THE CDS

Stace England and the Salt Kings' new album, 'The Amazing Oscar Micheaux,' as well as their past albums, is available in Carbondale at Plaza Records, 816 E Main St. D, and PMac Music, 100 N Glenview.

For information about upcoming shows or to order CDs online, go to [www.staceengland.com](http://www.staceengland.com).



England talks about the new album and how he takes these local stories and crafts them into a narrative for a worldwide audience.

### **Q** Tell me about Oscar Micheaux. Who was he?

Micheaux was a guy from Metropolis, born in 1881. He grew up in a farm community. The thing so remarkable about his life is that he had these stages; he seemed able to will himself into areas you wouldn't think he could. So, he leaves Metropolis at 17, heads for Chicago and kicks around. The first dramatic thing is he decides to be a farmer because he felt that was a way for an African-American to make a name for himself, and that was one of the few professions available. So, he looks around—Iowa, Nebraska, different places—and he sees this homestead ad for South Dakota. He goes up there and by the time he's 25, he has 500 acres up there, so he was very successful.

He then becomes a self-made author. He knows nothing about writing books, and in his isolation, begins to write a novel. In 1913, he publishes "The Conquest." He develops this technique of selling to his friends and neighbors and in 1917 writes this novel he calls "The Homesteader." These are widely successful; he's learning how to sell through mail-order. A small film company, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, approached him in 1918 about making "The Homesteader" into a film. Negotiations ensued; finally Micheaux says 'I'll do it myself.'

And he does. He raises \$25,000 and makes this sprawling, eight reel, two

and a half hour epic of "The Homesteader" and it's an absolute sensation. For the first time African-Americans see themselves in heroic, non-stereotypical roles and the public just loves it. They're expecting another uplifting story for his second film, "Within Our Gates" and what he delivers is a direct rebuke to "The Birth of a Nation," D.W. Griffith's greatest film.

For me, the fact that an African-American from Metropolis could produce a film like this and show it is a jaw-dropping thing that it actually took place. Micheaux was able to will himself into these situations and busts through anything to get his vision onto the screen.

### **Q** What were the challenges in trying to take on this project?

I acquired the films that were available and began to spend time with them. As I began to get inside the guy's head and sort of be able to see the arc of his life in front of me and see the entire picture, the songs began to come. For example, "The Homesteader" is a Neil Young and Crazy Horse kind of roar. For me there were some serious experiences on the prairie I can visualize his first child died, he had a failed romance... those experiences took place in like a 20 by 20 box, so we tried to look at the arc of his entire life and that would inspire certain songs.

**Q** Southern Illinois has been very inspiring in your work. How did you come across this subject, and what makes these local stories so compelling?

I discovered Micheaux quite by accident. I was in the Carbondale library perusing the nonfiction section, and I found this book, 'Oscar Micheaux, the Great and Only: The Life of America's First Black Filmmaker,' by Patrick Milligan. I read the first chapter and find he was born in Metropolis even more interesting, and I read the book and I was blown away by his life story.

What I find with Cairo, The Slave House, Micheaux, something grabs me by the scruff of the neck. I think 'Little Egypt' has quite a few of these 'through the looking glass type of stories,' more so than any part of the country, because of its location and position in relation to the north and the south.

We get labeled as 'historical musicians,' which we are, but for me, history is more of a vehicle to get our artistic ideas across. The Micheaux story is thrilling, exciting, but if he can do what he did with the challenges he faced, I can get past my obstacles. Don't whine about how you can't get the film made, get out there and make it so. It's an inspiring message.

### **Q** Why do you think these historical albums have resonated with the public?

I think this region's stories are very powerful. Maybe there are powerful stories other places in the country, but I think this region is very unique.

We've found this niche of people that are really seeking these experiences. It's not a universal thing, 80 percent of CD buyers are not going to go for it, but there is a pretty loyal group of people who seek it out.