

## Guitar Red

Music Review: Guitar Red - Lightin' In A Bottle

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You see them on the street corners of almost every major city in the world. Some of them have elaborate set-ups including battery powered amplifiers, others are one man bands playing a kick-drum, strumming a guitar, and blowing on a harmonica. Some of them can barely play their instrument, while others are virtuosos. Yet, no matter how good or bad they may be, for one reason or another, no matter what the weather, these musicians have made the sidewalk their stage and what, or whoever passes by, their audience.

In another life time I was part of a children's theatre company that use to perform outdoors in parks and even on the occasional sidewalk. So I speak from experience when I say there is nothing more difficult for any performer to do than attract the attention of someone just passing by, unless it's holding their attention in spite of all the distractions around them. Amplifying your sound doesn't do much more than add to the overall white noise of a city street and actually increases the likelihood of people blocking you out like they attempt to block car horns and everything else around them.

The experienced street performer knows that it's force of personality that attracts people's attention. If you just stand there strumming your guitar and singing, the average person walking down the street with their mind on the day ahead or the one that just passed won't pay you any attention. When you play the streets you learn how to "sell" yourself and your music so someone catching sight of you out of the corner of their eye, or hearing just a snatch of sound coming from your direction, will be attracted and turn their attention to you. If you think it sounds difficult to do, well believe me it's even harder to accomplish in practice.

After listening to Lightin' In A Bottle, street musician Guitar Red's new release on Backspace Records, I'd lay odds that when he plays street corners not only do people stop, but traffic does too. Right from the opening notes of the discs first song, "Box Car No. 9" he reaches out and grabs your attention, and doesn't let go until the last note of track ten, "Song About A Jimi Hendrix Song" fades away. Accompanying himself with only guitar and clavinet, and helped out on bass by Chris Francisco, Guitar Red's music has more energy and vitality than most bands, and hundreds of times more personality than ninety percent of any musicians I've ever heard.

There's nothing sophisticated or polished about Guitar Red (real name Billy Christian Walls) or his music. What it does have is pure and unadulterated heart and soul, with each song sounding like he's drawing upon personal experience for inspiration. It doesn't matter whether he's singing about the woman who done him wrong or serving on a chain gang for stealing potatoes, you can't help but believe he sweated out his days under the Georgia sun breaking rocks or had his heart broken time after time. When he sings about telling the boss man not to ride him so hard because his momma just died on "Chain Gang Blues", you don't have to be prescient to know that the next line will be "now I'm serving twenty to life" because you can feel the depth of his grief and know just how close to the edge he is.

It doesn't matter whether he's playing slow or playing fast, singing sad or singing glad, because he doesn't differentiate between them when it comes to passion or intensity. He's like the best storyteller you've ever heard, in that he draws you into what he's telling you without seemingly trying. One second you're listening to the opening notes of a song, and the next you're sitting looking at the world he's created through his eyes and experiencing everything he's talking about.

A lot of people who play acoustic blues, or traditional blues music, seem to get hung up on playing the same rhythmic pattern over and over again until you're stupefied with boredom. Guitar Red on the other hand keeps things moving, so that the music fits the mood expressed by the lyrics of his song. The blues isn't about what note or chords you play on your guitar, the blues is what comes from your heart. Guitar Red knows that and his music reflects it, and listening to it you sure can feel it.

One of the things that really struck me about this recording was how he used his voice. He doesn't have what you'd call an attractive singing voice, but he has a fine ear for understanding how to make the best use of the gifts he's been given, which is a highly expressive voice. Many people who play the streets end up only knowing how to be loud and louder when they sing from years of having to compete against traffic noise. Red, on the other hand, modulates his voice according to the needs of the song and the mood he's trying to establish. Compare how he sounds on the up tempo "Lips Poked Out" where he creating a fun, teasing atmosphere, to "I Believe", a quiet and sincere declaration of his faith that has a hundred times more conviction to it than any preacher foaming at the mouth.

After years of listening to histrionic pop singers trying to prove how emotional they are by either screaming or whispering, Guitar Red comes as a welcome relief. It's like he has a direct conduit from his heart to his voice so that no matter what he says it comes out sounding like he means it with his entire being. If he's singing one of his up tempo, up beat songs you can hear the smile on his face and the twinkle in his eye coming through in his voice. When he's singing about something difficult or serious you can feel his body bending under the weight of the words.

There are thousands, if not even millions, of people who play music on the streets of our cities every day of the year, and the majority of them aren't anything special. Once in a while though there are genuine gems among the dross whose talent is so pure it shines out like a beacon for all to see. Guitar Red is one of the latter as his music is heartfelt, passionate, and full of life. He might be singing the blues, but he sure brought a smile to my face.