

## Guitar Red

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He's been a fixture for years on the Decatur Square and a few other corners around town, a homeless street musician recognized for his bluesy warbles, his wide grin with the missing teeth, his insistent personality, his messy arrests for public drunkenness. He's the guy folks smile at, say hey to, jaw with, barely tolerate, avoid. Billy Christian 'Guitar Red' Walls has a CD out thanks to a local record-label founder who about a year ago heard the bluesman playing on a town square sidewalk. Walls is a fixture on the streets of the Decatur Square, and he's familiar with the inside of a jail. People who know the homeless musician give him odd jobs or money to stay at a hotel, and some open their homes to him. Yet when Ben Rowell, a 36-year-old rock musician who founded a record label out of his Suwanee house, stood on a Decatur sidewalk about a year ago to watch Guitar Red play, he saw something he thought no longer existed: a real-deal bluesman. To Rowell, Guitar Red and his blues-worthy story was the sort of find that musicologists once searched the South's backwoods for: a locally grown product valued more for its flawed authenticity than polished mass appeal. "I knew within 30 seconds," Rowell says. "We shook hands, and I said, 'Let's do a record.' I told him, 'You've got this back-porch vibe I want to capture.' And then we made a record." The result: "Lightnin' in a Bottle," a CD of 10 blues tunes written or co-written by Billy Christian Walls, aka Guitar Red, and recorded over two days in Backspace Records' basement studio. With songs like "Ain't Got Nobody But Myself," "Lips Poked Out" and "Decatur Boy Blues," the CD has an unrehearsed, at times unhinged feel that hovers somewhere between an open mic night curiosity and found art. Released three months ago, it has generated enthusiastic buzz on the blogosphere. It's been called "raw, but refreshing at the same time" (bluesblogger.com) and a throwback to when buskers were found "on nearly every street corner in these Southern towns" (bluenight.com). Real Blues magazine gives it a rave review in its November issue, calling Walls "one of the best blues 'discoveries' of at least the last decade." "It's a real interesting project," says Warren Hudson, owner of Decatur CD, where "Lightnin' " is on the listening board and has become one of the store's best-selling albums by a local artist. "So many people in Decatur are curious because they've seen him play on the street. They'll ask, 'Is it any good?' And I'll say, 'Just listen.' They put the [sample CD] on and invariably they buy it." Seated one weekday morning at an empty sidewalk table on the square, Walls is

greeted by a steady stream of passing locals — from courthouse lawyers to the meter maid — and he seems to know them all by name. The CD hasn't changed his circumstances. He slept on somebody's couch the night before and doesn't know where he'll sleep next. Of the 1,000 CDs Backspace printed, Walls was given about 400 to sell on his own. There aren't any left. But he says the CD has made his circumstances more bearable. "It's what's kept me going the last few months," says Walls, 45. "It's helped people start realizing I'm a human being. When they look at me now, they look at me as a musician, not just somebody playing for money on the street." Still, Walls hasn't played on the street in about two months. His guitar was cracked during a recent scuffle, he says, after he mouthed off to a cop who'd told him to move along. That came about a month after he was arrested for a drunken dustup with a waiter who asked him to leave a Decatur Square restaurant. The guitar is being repaired at a nearby music shop that has worked on his instruments for years. "Right now," observes Walls, grinning his jack-o'-lantern grin in the clear, late-morning light, "I'm on vacation." Bluesman 'the real thing' Walls' personal history reads like an extended blues lyric. His retelling can be inexact or contradictory, but much of it was verified or filled in by relatives and a man who once mentored him as a kid in the Big Brother program and later became his legal guardian. Walls' entire immediate family is dead: mother from cancer, brother from AIDS, sister shot in her bed by an ex-boyfriend. He never knew his father and was raised by aunts, uncles and friends in Georgia, the Carolinas, California and New Jersey, giving him a road-worn résumé by his teens. He picked up a guitar as a kid and has hardly put it down since, sometimes surrendering it when headed to jail, usually for nuisance street crimes, then collecting it on his release. "He's the real thing in terms of the image of a blues player," says Larry Nodine, an intellectual property lawyer in Atlanta who met Walls on the square years ago and sometimes advises him about legal concerns. "He's Mr. Bojangles." Walls was born in Morristown, N.J., to a single mother from Georgia with two children from a previous marriage. His mother moved there to work as a domestic — "She was a roamer herself," says her brother, Louis Harris, a retired truck driver in East Point — but was sick for years with what turned out to be cancer. Ron Sanders, a retired electrical engineer now living in Stone Mountain, met Walls in New Jersey through Big Brother. He says Walls was 8 years old. His mother, by then "skin and bones," brought him to the program "looking for a male role model for Chris [as she called him]. I remember her saying she was trying to live long enough for Chris to grow up. She didn't succeed at that." The circumstances surrounding the death of Walls' mother aren't clear. But her sister, Elizabeth Stinchcomb, says she wandered outside one night from the hotel where she and Walls lived at the time, laid down in a field and died. "She was a sweet, giving woman," says Stinchcomb, 76, of Fayetteville. "But I don't know. Her mind just lost faith." Walls sums it up: "I came from a dysfunctional family. I mean, c'mon, that's what it was." Playing in funk bands, working a security job in Atlanta and living with a woman and her children for several years, Walls says he lived well for a while. Then his relationship with the woman soured, he drank and took drugs, and soon lived on the streets or scrambled every day to put a temporary roof over his head. "A lot of people say it could never happen to them," he says. "That's a

damn lie. Just like people are one step away from losing their mortgage, God can take your mental capacity away and tomorrow you can be over there talking to that damn pigeon." Yet even at his lowest, Walls always played his guitar and sang. "It keeps my sanity," he says. "It's who I am. I'm Guitar Red." Cool musical experience Rowell didn't know what to expect when he brought Walls into his studio. Neither did Walls. He says he's sometimes picked up on the square, like the musical equivalent of an immigrant laborer, and driven to one of metro Atlanta's many hip-hop studios. He says he lays down guitar tracks in exchange for a few dollars, a few drinks and a little reefer. He has no idea how his work is used. Rowell, who played on the road for eight years with a Gainesville, Fla., band, wanted Walls' sound to be "as organic as possible." "We sat down and I said, 'Red, what do you want to play first??' Then we went straight through the day." Walls came to the studio prepared to play about seven songs. The rest, he worked out on the spot. There were few overdubs. Rowell mostly just recorded everything, then went back later and replaced parts of some takes with parts of others. Walls later added clavinet and guitar solo tracks. "It was one of the coolest musical experiences of my life," Rowell says. Though Walls hopes the CD leads to another record and live gigs, few who know him expect music to turn his life around. It never has before. People who know him from the square give him odd jobs, hand him money to stay at a hotel, open their homes to him. "In the process of reaching out to someone like that, you don't always get the Hollywood ending," says Jerry Burns, a photographer for whom Walls sometimes does odd jobs around his Inman Park studio. "What he has is spontaneous and authentic. We all walk around in our shrouds and politically correct skins. He doesn't live in that world." Some days in that world are better than others. Today, lunch is paid for by Rowell, who let Walls keep whatever money he made from selling the CDs. For later, Walls totes a plastic bag filled with random food items: a can of spinach, a packet of egg drop soup, strawberry daiquiri mix. "Have to find some liquor," he says. Rowell says maybe that's not such a hot idea. Drinks rarely end well for Walls. Walls smiles. "I'm a bluesman," he says. "Not a saint."