

Guitar Red

'Guitar Red' cuts debut blues CD, August 1, 2008

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On the streets of downtown Decatur, Guitar Red is a familiar fixture to the regulars who travel about Decatur's square.

He strums his guitar singing songs of women, drinking and hard times in the unvarnished tradition of the blues.

Most mornings he hangs out on E. Court Square—sometimes in front of the Brick Store Pub (the management of which is particularly kind to him, he reports) and frequently plays for hours.

On a good day, he walks away with a pocketful of tips. But not every day is a good day.

On this Monday in late June, he takes his guitar from its black case and begins playing a tune he wrote called *Lips Poked Out*. Someone passing by shouts "Red" and he calls back "Hey family." Turns out that someone is an artist he hasn't seen in a while. "I'm still cranking...still cranking," he shouts exuberantly. A woman approaches extending a greeting of "Hey there" and a handful of singles.

Guitar Red, whose given name is **Billy Christian Walls**, has an unpretentious style—showing up this day for this street gig in long baggy shorts, a white T-shirt and blue work shirt and a vibrant blue bandana.

"I love it, playing on the streets, gives me a chance to interact with people. I am on my schedule," said Red. "When you're a blues musician you're not only a street musician, you're a big brother, psychiatrist, security and a friend.

"Sometime when I play people pass me not smiling, then they come back [and say] I really needed that," he explained. "They might tip me some."

After 38 years of making music on the street and on the stage, Red is releasing his first album, *Light'nin' in a Bottle*. The CD features such songs as *Box Car No. 9*, *Lips Poked Out*, *Aints Got Nobody but Myself* and *Decatur Boy Blues*.

Asked how the album came about, he related being approached by **Ben Rowell**, the owner and producer at Backspace Records. Rowell was encouraged

by his colleague who heads artist management to check out Red after Rowell remarked that he didn't think the "real deal" blues musician existed anymore.

"Within the first 30 seconds I realized Red was more of the real thing than a bottle of Coke," states Rowell in an e-mail about his introduction to the blues man. "His songs, though difficult to understand at times, are fresh and traditional all at once. We sat down to chat and he told me about his hardships and life in general."

According to Red, over the past few decades he cranked out studio work for a long list of well known artists such as **Andre "3000" Benjamin** of OutKast and was a member of the funk, hip hop and blues band The Positive Force. Many of those associations were predatory, according to Red who said artists would use him for his guitar work and "pay" him with a bottle of liquor.

"It really hurts me when somebody takes my music, it's like stealing a part of a person" said Red.

Now when he gives street performances, he totes a handful of his CDs which he hopes will leave his possession in exchange for \$10 from admirers of his music. Red said he's hoping to generate enough sales to lift himself out of a "financial situation" that is just a few degrees away from homelessness.