

No More Car Wash Blues

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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On their debut album, *Roughhousin'*, Lil' Ed & the Blues Imperials performed a song called "Car Wash Blues," in which Lil' Ed Williams referred to the "mean old Jew" who was his boss. There was one problem: Ed still worked at the car wash, and he was petrified about what might happen to him when his boss heard it.

He needn't have worried. "My boss was so crazy about the song," Lil' Ed told the *River Cities' Reader*

"That just tickled his gizzards." At the car-wash Christmas party, his boss "played 'Car Wash Blues' about 17 times," he added.

That was after Lil' Ed and his band had so impressed legendary Alligator Records President Bruce Iglauer that he offered them a recording contract after their first session ever in a studio. Ed, still in his car-wash overalls, and his players treated it as just another live gig. "I started to do my actual show," Lil' Ed recalled.

But Lil' Ed hadn't yet made a name for himself, and there was friction between trying to establish himself as a musician and paying the bills. "I was traveling more than I was working," he said.

Yet it was the "mean old Jew" who set the slide guitarist on the right path; he told Lil' Ed to follow his musical muse and not worry about his car-wash job. "You've got a day job as long as you want," his boss told him.

In the nearly two decades since then, Lil' Ed has kept in contact with his old employer, and even worked at the car wash every once in a while – but not because he needed the money. Lil' Ed had made it as a musician.

Lil' Ed will bring his flamboyant, hard-driving stage show to the bandshell stage on Friday night. You'll have the opportunity to see the act that *Blues Revue* called "genuine house-rocking masters ... some of the hottest electric blues around. Duck-walking, back-bending, mind-blowing."

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Lil' Ed comes by his showmanship and musical acumen genetically. He's the nephew of the slide-guitar master J.B. Hutto, who taught him and his half-brother Pookie how to play music when they were growing up on Chicago's west side. "I think he was coaching us ... so we'd be able to play with him," Lil' Ed said.

Ed's mother bought Pookie a guitar. "I got the drums," Ed said. "I wanted the guitar." Once Ed proved to be a guitar fiend, though, Pookie switched to bass. "That's when the fun really began."

Actually, "taught" might not be the right word for Hutto's technique. "He wouldn't sit with us," Ed said. "He'd show us a lick and leave."

But there was a method to that approach. "He was making us learn ourselves," Lil' Ed said. "He would show us just enough to get started."

Hutto took his nephews on the road, playing at a club in South Bend, Indiana. Ed was 15 or 16 years old, he said. Hutto started "walking" off the stage, but Lil' Ed was reticent. "I was scared to come off that stage," Lil' Ed said. But his uncle "gave me one of those looks. ... I jumped off the stage."

When he hit the floor with a squat, his jeans ripped. "I sprung right back up onto the stage," Lil' Ed said. "I was hiding my butt." As you might expect, the crowd went crazy, and "it was pretty much at that moment" that Lil' Ed understood his calling as an entertainer.

Ed and his band have recorded five albums, all on Alligator, and they, along with those blistering live shows, have helped establish an international reputation for being one of the great blues party bands.

Lil' Ed & the Blues Imperials haven't put out an album since 2002's *Heads Up*, but Ed promised he'll be headed back into the studio soon. "Bruce [Iglauer] gave me the okay" to record, Lil' Ed said, adding that he has 18 songs ready to go.

Ed promises a "variety of different grooves and beats," including elements of rock, country, and soul. "I've been really digging into variations" on the blues, he said.