Written by Jeff Ignatius
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Nick Curran's *Reform School Girl* starts with Etta James' "Tough Lover," in which the Austin, Texas-based singer, songwriter, and guitarist breaks out his best Little Richard impression while staying true to James' performance, from the opening growl forward. The album ends with AC/DC's "Rocker." In between are 12 Curran originals that make the compelling case that the essence of rock and roll didn't change much from 1956 (when "Tough Lover" was released) to 1975 ("Rocker") to 2010 (*Reform School Girl*).

Curran, who will perform with his band the Lowlifes at RIBCO on August 30, brings punk ferocity and grit to decidedly old-school rock, rockabilly, and blues. His music is undoubtedly retro, but his treatment of classic styles is so earnest, dirty, and fiery that it's impossible to fault him.

Reform School Girl was released in February, as the 33-year-old Curran was undergoing radiation therapy for tongue cancer. He's now cancer-free, and he played his first post-treatment show in late May in Spain. In an interview last week, Curran said he didn't worry about how things would turn out."Since the beginning, I kind of took it [cancer] as a boot in the ass to get things together, kind of like a wake-up call instead of something bad happening. ... I always kind of knew I was going to get through it fine."

Confidence appears to have long been Curran's strong suit, and he's balanced his time as a bandleader with sideman gigs in a variety of genres. He began his touring career at age 19 with Ronnie Dawson, and followed that up by touring with another rockabilly artist, Kim Lenz. He won the W.C. Handy Blues Award for "best new artist debut" in 2004 (for *Doctor Velvet*), and after that year's
Player!
, he joined the Fabulous Thunderbirds and toured with blues drummer Doyle Bramhall. He also formed the punk group Degüello with bassist Ronnie James Weber.

Curran said he learned the most from Dawson, in part because that was his first experience as a touring musician: "Ronnie wanted to go out there no matter what and put on a 110-percent

show every night. That was good for me to learn right out of the box."

His Thunderbirds years, though, helped him expand his songwriting beyond blues and rockabilly. "I look at songs differently than I did then," Curran said, comparing *Reform School Girl* to *Player!*. He said he's more interested now in a good hook, and progressions outside those standard in the blues, "to keep my interest and the audience's."

That branching out is most evident on the newest album's title track, which plays by girl-group rules but reverses the gender roles; Curran said he was aiming for a Ronettes/Phil Spector sound. There's also the slowed-down blues of "Dream Girl," distinguished by a haunted howl.

But for the most part, *Reform School Girl* rocks hard through its authentically dusty sound, with Curran's vocals sometimes blown out. It's often hard to believe that the album *wasn't* recorded five decades ago, yet Curran's fervid voice provides the immediacy that makes it current.

It took some time after his cancer treatments for Curran's voice to get stretched out, as he couldn't talk because of the pain of therapy. "At first it was a little tough to hit certain notes, because I hadn't used it in six months ... ," he said.

But he never doubted that he'd be back. He said that at his first show -- at the Screamin Festival, playing at 2:30 a.m. in front of 3,000 people -- his primary emotion was relief that the wait was over: "Okay. Good. Finally. I can do it again."

Nick Curran & the Lowlifes will perform on Monday, August 30, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The show starts at 8 p.m., and the bill also includes the One Night Standards. Tickets for the general public are $10 (available at the door or from RIBCO.com); tickets for Mississippi Valley Blues Society members are $8.

For more information on Curran, visit MySpace.com/curranrock .