

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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You wouldn't know it from his discography, but 2010's *Relentless* marked a comeback for the blues-rock guitarist/singer/songwriter Eric Gales.

The Story of My Life

was released in April 2008, and its follow-up came this past July – a pretty standard interval in the music business.

But there's a hint of his troubles on *Relentless*' lead track, "Bad Lawbreaker," on which he sings: "I'm a bad lawbreaker / Three strikes ain't enough for me."

In between those two albums, Gales served 21 months of a three-year sentence for violating the probation he received in 2006 for drug and gun charges. "I was smoking weed on the road and I didn't want to risk them telling me to come home in the middle of the tour" because of a dirty urine sample, he said in a recent phone interview. "I just said to myself, 'I'll deal with it when I get home.'" So he turned himself in after the tour and was sent to prison. (He couldn't play a guitar for his first six months of incarceration but – because of the intervention of a warden who knew who he was – eventually led a prison band.)

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Gales was released in March 2010, but “I got arrested again within a month,” he said. “I got caught up on Beale Street, man. I had some cocaine and some Xanax pills on me and wound up going to jail again. ... After that I made a decision that it wasn’t conducive for me to stay any longer in Memphis, Tennessee. ... I knew too many of the wrong people, and too many of the wrong people knew me.”

If “Bad Lawbreaker” isn’t a big enough hint, other songs on *Relentless* offer a pretty clear picture of Gales’ problems with drugs and bad influences. On “Draggin’ Me Down,” he sings: “The people on the street / They heard I’m back in town / They come from everywhere / Out from the underground.” And “Block the Sun” can be read as an unvarnished self-portrait: “You sit all alone / Talk on a dead telephone / You can hide but you can’t run / ’Cause you, you block out the sun.”

That kind of self-awareness led to a change of scenery. “I pretty much went blindfolded and pointed on the map, and Minnesota was where I came to,” Gales said.

He finished rehab in November and a few days later started a European tour. “That pretty much was where my new life began,” he said. “I’ve been able to be more focused in my life than I’ve ever been.”

He promised that his renewed focus will be clear when he performs Friday at the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival – “I’m coming with a vengeance” – and it’s evident in his upcoming release schedule, too. He said a new album, *Transformation*, is due in August, and he’ll follow that with a live DVD early next year. Gales said that he’s now “doing it like I’m supposed to be doing it. ... All of this stuff has been waiting on me. It’s been me that’s been the holdup.”

Gales was a prodigy who picked up the guitar – playing left-handed on an upside-down right-handed guitar – at age four. (He’s naturally right-handed and writes right-handed.) He was signed by Elektra when he was 15, releasing *The Eric Gales Band* in 1991 – at age 16.

His race and upside-down technique led to inevitable comparisons to Hendrix, but critics saw a deeper connection. Reviewing Gales’ debut, *Entertainment Weekly* wrote: “Although he can

Call It a Comeback – Eric Gales: Friday, July 1, 7 p.m., Bandshell

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play with speed and flash ... , what's more amazing is that anyone so young has mastered something artfully done by Jimi Hendrix and countless gospel stars – establishing a sense of deep-seated frustration and then unerringly breaking free with sheer musical power.”

Gales said his early success wasn't responsible for his drug problems; those came with the layoff following 1993's *Picture of a Thousand Faces*: “That's what led me into being intrigued with the street life and getting into trouble.”

Although Gales said he was in a “dark, deep haze ... drug-wise,” that wasn't evident in his recordings. While he only released one album between *Picture ...* and 2006's *Crystal Vision*, he earned good reviews even in his drug-using years. “Featuring the guitarist's trademark blend of traditional blues and soulful, Memphis-flavored, psychedelic-tinged blues rock,” About.com wrote of 2008 release, “

The Story Of My Life

offers up a wealth of red-hot guitar play that will singe the ear hair right off your head.”

While Jimi is obviously one of Gales' heroes – he has played on several Experience Hendrix tribute tours – he cited as more-direct influences Stevie Ray Vaughan, Robin Trower, Eric Johnson, Doyle Bramhall, and Derek Trucks. “I'm not a clone, an imitation, or nothing like that,” he said. “I'm me. ... I've definitely got my own thing going on.”

And he said that he's on a mission: “It's just a blessing honestly to still be here. ... I think the reason that God hasn't chosen to take me out is because he's still got something planned for me today.”