

"My life is complete," declared Lil' Ed Williams the morning after he and his band, the Blues Imperials, won Band of the Year at this year's 30th Blues Music Awards (BMA) in Memphis, Tennessee. He was referring not just to the award but to the comfortable position he

finds himself in both professionally and personally. His positive outlook belies the challenges he has faced in his life, just as his outrageous stage antics belie his profound musical ability.

Williams was born in Chicago, Illinois, on April 4, 1955. By the time

he was twelve years old, he was playing three musical instruments. J.B. Hutto, legendary Chicago slide guitarist, songwriter, and recording artist, was Williams's uncle. He became a musical mentor for his nephew, who honed his skills in the West Side clubs. In 1975, while working

as a buffer at the Red Carpet Car Wash, Williams formed the Blues Imperials, taking the band's name from an old Imperial margarine television commercial. Ten years later he signed with Alligator Records, an event he recalls as "the highlight of my life." Almost instantly,

the band transitioned from playing local Chicago bars to playing across the United States at clubs and festivals.

The fairy tale story temporarily ended in the early '90s when Williams broke up the band and focused on fixing the problems that had developed in his

life. He kicked his drug habit, got rid of disloyal people within his inner circle, made new friends, maintained his loyal fans, attracted new fans, and reunited his family. His fans rejoiced when Williams put the band back together—with the original band members—in 1998. Since then, he has won two BMAs for Band of the Year, recorded four more CDs for Alligator, made television appearances, and garnered international attention.

Five-foot-one-inch Lil' Ed Williams plays music that is full of joy. He and his band members (guitarist Mike Garrett, half-brother James "Pookie" Young on bass, and drummer Kelly Littleton) play raw, heavy, and raucous blues. They have been recording and performing together since Williams' second album, **Chicken, Gravy & Biscuits**, which was released in 1989. His life experiences have put him in touch with his inner self, and he expresses it via jovial melodies and tough blues. Lil' Ed Williams fully embodies Alligator's theme of Genuine Houserockin' Music.

LIL' ED WILLIAMS

My Life Is Complete



JOSEPH A. ROSEN

by Tim HOLEK

J.B. Hutto, Toledo Blues Festival, Toledo, Ohio, 1974.



John G. Beckwood

"All my family had some kind of musical thing going on," says Williams in the lobby of a downtown Memphis hotel. "They all had a fire from attending church every Sunday. [My aunts and uncles] had a singing group called the Golden Crowns. They'd sing in church. Then they'd come home and sing some more gospel stuff. After a while, J.B. [Hutto] would break out the guitar and then they'd start singing the blues. My youngest uncle would sing all the Percy Mayfield songs. My other uncle would try to sing a lot of Jimmy Reed and Howlin' Wolf songs. That's how I learned all these old songs. They would sing them and make me play them over and over. When I met Bruce [Iglauer, founder and president of Alligator Records], what amazed him was I was singing songs that was back in the '50s, like *You Don't Exist Anymore*."

Abandoned by his father, Williams found comfort and a form of male bonding by surrounding himself with his uncles. One in particular—Hutto—became his role model. Unfortunately, he died on June 12, 1983, and never had the chance to enjoy Williams' success as a recording act. "J.B. was my idol. He was the man that I adored more than my father. My father left me when I was six years old. I remember him saying, 'I'm coming back next week,' and I haven't seen him since. J.B. took kind of a fatherly role for me and my brother [Pookie]. We had a stepdad, but me and my brother always hung out with the uncles. [From them], we learnt a lot about how to survive and how to treat people. They kinda took us under their wing. After J.B. showed me how to play a little bit, I'd show Pookie some stuff. They got so excited when they seen us perform. They would holler and scream just like fans. It was just a wonderful thing."

Williams grew up in a very dangerous part of Chicago's West Side. He went to school near the corner of Madison and 5th Avenue. The Avenue Lounge used to be close to that intersection. Eventually, he seized the opportunity to learn blues in the clubs of that part of the city. "The South Side had more blues than the West Side. The South Side was into the old Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, and John Lee Hooker. The West Side was into B.B. King, Bobby Bland, and Little Milton. There were deeper clubs on the West Side that actually recognized deep blues. I had never been to them 'cause I wasn't really a big bar person. Pookie used to call me to go to the West Side clubs. Pook would come and grab me and say, 'Lets go check these guys out.'"

"Then I started to hanging out around these type of bars, and I started sitting in with people like Big Bad Ben and Willie Kent. They would make me get on stage. They'd say, 'Get on up there boy and play that thing.

You can play it.' They gave me this encouragement, and the people would just go crazy. That's what really started me into the blues. I believe if those West Side clubs hadn't been there, I wouldn't have a career."

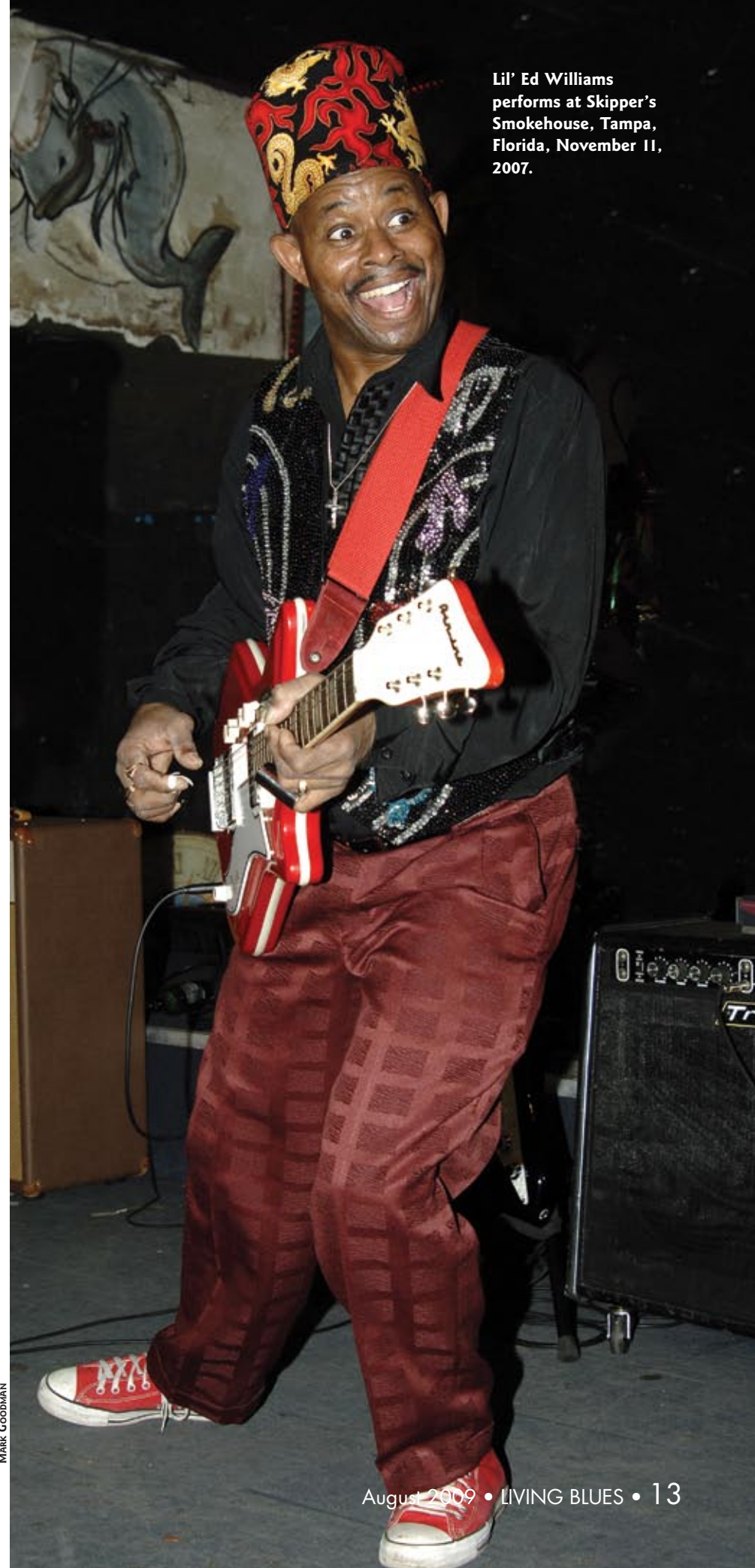
After capturing Iglauer's attention, Williams was brought into the studio to cut a song for the 1987 Alligator anthology *The New Bluebloods*. Iglauer asked Williams to prepare two originals. They were recorded so quickly that Iglauer asked him to record more in the leftover studio time. In total, 30 songs were recorded in three hours with no overdubs and no second takes. One of the songs ended up on the anthology. Ten of them became Williams' Alligator debut, *Roughhousin'*. To date, Williams has released seven records on Alligator. Each was recorded live in the studio. "I can't record any other way. You get the band together, you go to the garage to rehearse, you get yourself tight, and you go into the studio and play. A live [in the studio] record is live. If it's live you are going to hear a little glitch here and a little glitch there. So what? You gonna get up and dance anyway." [laughs]

His live performances are always memorable, thanks largely to his stage antics. The diminutive dynamo wears a colorful vest and signature fez (as a tribute to Hutto), fires notes while he is down on his knees, slides across the stage, performs toe-walks, duck walks, and back-bends, and pulls funny faces. "People like to see me act a fool you know that. And I like to act a fool 'cause I like to see people smile and I like to see expressions. I can't play with a set list. I've tried. I don't have time to look down there to figure out what I'm going to play next. I look at the people and I try to figure out which direction they want me to go."

The subject matter of his songs—overcoming defeat, resisting temptation, showing respect, loyalty, and responsibility—reveals Williams's strongest values. "The thing about my music is it's real. It's about me, my life, the life around me, the things I see, my kids, and my old exes. Every once in a while, when I'm up there playing, it takes me so far back that it brings tears to my eyes. It's amazing what the music can do for you."

Williams recorded three discs for Alligator and then took part in the label's successful 20th Anniversary Tour. (To read more about Williams' early recording career, refer to *Lil' Ed Williams* in the January/February 1991 #95 issue of *LB*). Even in the early 1990s, when he fell into drug addiction and broke up the band he continued to record. He released two CDs on another Chicago-based label, Earwig Music. "I did a pretty decent job on the one I did with [original Blues Imperials guitarist] Dave Weld [*Keep On Walkin'*]. At that time,

Mark Goodman



Lil' Ed Williams performs at Skipper's Smokehouse, Tampa, Florida, November 11, 2007.

Lil' Ed Williams toe walking at the 2008 Chicago Blues Festival while Ed Heads look on.



JOSEPH A. ROSSIN



JENNIFER WHEELER

Lil' Ed Williams performing at the Chicago Blues Festival, 2005.



JAMES FRAHER x 2

I was kinda hurtin'. All that came out within my music. I don't think it was a bad job of pickin' and playin'. It reminds me where I come from. We all have a bad period to get through to get to a good one. Every time I look at that CD I don't like the picture I'm seeing 'cause I was in bad condition. From that picture, you would think maybe I posed that way. Mike Frank [Earwig's founder and president] thought it was great. Some people think you have to look bad to have the blues. Some people think you have to go through these things to have the blues. Well, I had the blues before I went through that. [laughs] Blues is in my heart."

With deep faith and the support of the woman who would become his wife, Williams was empowered to conquer his serious drug addiction. It's an inspirational story that he tells while speaking softly and emotionally. "Wasn't nothing but God. If it had been left up to me, it wouldn't have happened. They always say when you are into alcoholism and drugism, you have to hit that down point—that ultimate low. I was there. I'm happy today that I can tell people about that. You gotta share that. That's what keeps me well. It keeps me knowing where I come from. Then it helps other people. People say, 'I can't do it. I don't know how to do it.' But you have to want to do it. You have to seek a higher

power because it takes more than you to do it. I had to talk to the man upstairs, and He showed me which path to go.

"I've got four girls and a boy. When I started to having bad times—when I got on drugs and stuff like that—I was staying with one of my daughters and my son. My other two daughters, I didn't have much to do with them. I was trying to see them more, but the drug had took its toll. I was staying at a house with a family of people. Many of them were doing drugs. I was drinkin' and druggin' every day. There was no out 'cause I didn't see an out. For one thing this family had told me that, 'You belong here' and 'You ain't gonna leave here.' I spent all this money with these people, and then they told me I wasn't nothing. It hurt me so deep down. I was already down. My daughter and her old man was in the next room, but they weren't using. God spoke to me through her. She looked at me eye to eye and said, 'You need to find somewhere else to go.' You don't expect your daughter to tell you that.

"By that time, God had allowed me to meet Pam. Pam was there for me every time that I needed her. Finally, I looked at my daughter and said, 'I'm going to leave here

and I won't be back for a long time.' That was the hurtinest thing for me to say to my daughter because I didn't want to leave. That's where I thought I was supposed to be. She hugged me and said, 'If that's what it takes Dad, do what you gotta do.' I got up and my sisters-in-law was trying to follow me because they thought I was going to get some money to get some stuff. I told them, 'Y'all wait right here.' I had already called Pam and I told Pam, 'Come pick me up.' The expressway that I was going to meet Pam at is a mile and a half away from this house. I took off and I ran all the way to that expressway. When I got to that expressway—here's how God worked—Pam was just pulling up off the ramp. She didn't even have to stop. She opened up the door, and I jumped in.

"Everything I had, I left at that house. I cried like a baby all the way to her house. When I got over to Pam's house, we talked

James "Pookie" Young, Dave Weld, Walter Louis Henderson, and Lil' Ed Williams, 1986.



SUSAN MATTES/COURTESY ALLIGATOR RECORDS

a long time. Then we found a counselor. His name was Victor and this guy was good. Every question I asked, he turned it right back on me and made me answer it. He was a teacher within a teacher. All the so-called friends I thought I had—I ain't got 'em now. I got new friends. I got my fans and I got a wonderful family.

"When I first went back out on the road, there used to be a lot of temptations. There were sometimes I wouldn't come out of the dressing room except just to play the set. Now, if somebody come up to me and tempt me, I say, 'I don't want it and I don't appreciate you offering it to me.' Now that I can say that and look them in the eye, they look at me and go, 'Man, you done changed.' I go 'Yeah, I don't want that shit.'"

Recently, Williams had the opportunity to make amends for abandoning his children. He capitalized on the situation and made his family whole. "When I left my oldest daughter and my son, I also left my other younger daughters [behind]. I was playing a festival [in Chicago] last year. I walked into the dressing room and my other younger two daughters was standing there. It had been years since I had seen them. These girls were tots when I left them. Now they are ladies. They walked

in the door and they said, 'We are here to see our daddy.' They was kinda giving me that look. You know that look like where have you been? Tears formed in their eyes and tears formed in my eyes. I said to myself, 'What am I going to tell these girls?'

"Right then I didn't say nothin' 'cause I had to go play [my set]. I come to the old master—my record producer Mr. Iglaue [who was also at the festival]. Bruce stuck with me through all these hard years. I told Bruce, 'My two daughters that I haven't seen in 20 years just walked into my life. What am I going to say?' He said, 'Tell them the truth.' That was easy for him to say. I said to myself, 'That man has got to be out of his mind.' [laughs] Later, I just grabbed them by the arms and said, 'Let's take a walk.' I said, 'I know you guys haven't seen me in a long time, and we have a lot of catching up to do.' I told them I was really sorry that I dropped out of their lives so soon, but I was messed up. 'I'm pretty sure your mama told you some things,' and they was like, 'Yeah, Mama told us.' Then they come over my house. When I got them in my house, they said, 'We really want to talk some more.' And they sat down, and I just explained myself to them. And they said, 'We understand.' That melted me. Now, I got

them all together. I throw a barbeque, man I got all my kids and even my stepkids, who are Pam's kids. Now, my life is complete."

Williams' personal life isn't the only thing going well these days. He is enjoying an exceptional period in his lengthy music career. Since getting straight, he has reformed the band in 1998 (with the original band members), released four more CDs on Alligator, appeared twice on *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*, and won two BMAs and two *Living Blues* awards for Artist of the Year. He continues to perform regularly at all the major blues clubs and festivals, such as Chicago, Pocomo, and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

In addition to giving Williams the incentive to turn his life around, his wife Pam has taken a very active role in songwriting. The two have collaborated on songs since 2002's *Heads Up!* "Ladies writing music is so different than mens. Mens write verses. Ladies write paragraphs. When they tell a story, believe me, they put all the details in. The first time my wife start writing for me, she brought me this one song, and it was three pages long. [laughs] I said, 'It's going to take me an hour and a half to finish this song.' [laughs] I got us writing lyrics. Now, she's got good at



Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials accept the Band Of The Year award at the 2009 Blues Music Awards.

Joseph A. Rossini

it. Me and her combine. She just don't write and I just make the music to it. We write together. If I get stuck on something, I come to her and say, 'See I could use this verse—what do you think good go with it?' The minute she's done writing, she comes to me and says, 'Let's put some music to that.'"

Though he is still one of the busiest artists in the blues business, Williams wisely takes some time to relax. "My band is a great band, and I know Mike can handle anything I put on him. He is pretty much the leader of the band [now]. I'm 54 years old now. I watched my uncle and a lot of the other blues musicians take it always to the limit—always to the end. Then they waited until they got way in their 60s and 70s and then they started to let the guys open up for them. I thought when I get to a certain age where I know what the old body need just a little bit more relaxation, then I'm gonna take that opportunity. I think its getting close to that time.

"I don't want to overexert myself. When you got a good backup band behind you, you don't have to work so hard. You can still give the people the enjoyment that they want. I'm not trying to take nothing from Mike or nobody and I'm not trying to give anybody any less 'cause once I get on that stage, I'm gonna do what I have to do."

Williams is focused on expanding the number of instruments used on his recordings and on the stage. "It was my idea to bring a horn player back for the most recent CD *Full Tilt*. People right now say, 'Man, where's the horns? You need that horn in there.' I really

missed Eddie McKinley [who hadn't recorded with me since 1992's *What You See Is What You Get*]. He was my sax player, and he had to leave on family reasons. It was really good to have him back in the studio. He brought a buddy of his [David Basinger] with him on baritone saxophone.

"I think the horns brings out a lot of my music. I do want to add a piano and organ in at some point. I'm thinking about gettin' me a piano player." In fact, pianist/organist Johnny Iguana can be heard on Williams' two most recent discs, *Rattleshake* and *Full Tilt*. "Technology is so good today; they don't have to have a big B3 organ out there. They got the little stuff that sounds just like a B3. I'm crazy about B3 'cause I guess it's from the church. One horn and a little piano/organ would be ideal."

Fans of Williams may be surprised to learn that blues isn't the only style of music that he performs. "I'm still drumming for my church every chance I get. I love my church 'cause I know that God is able. I don't know what other people's beliefs are and [I'm] really not that concerned 'cause I know what mine are. I'm gonna do it [a gospel CD] if I have to do it myself. Two things Bruce told me I could do. I could make me a acoustic CD and I could make me a gospel CD. That won't interfere with his stuff. I respect him for that. I'm on the verge of gettin' a bigger place to stay 'cause I got extra family members with me now, and I'm gonna get me a little studio. I'm gonna sit back and make me a couple CDs. When I'm by myself is when a lot of

that goodness come out of me. 'Cause I can think and I can feel it, and I grab that acoustic guitar and it's amazing. At some point in your life, you've got to go in a different direction because things change. Your life don't stay the same. If I can spend all these years singing this other music for myself and my fans [then] I could sing some years for the Lord."

One of Williams' strengths is his optimism. He wasn't always like that—it is something that he learned while living a life of hard knocks. "There may be a time or two where I feeling kinda a little rugged, but I'm still smiling. J.B. told me if I smile and if I'm happy all the time [then] I won't have time to be sad. He was right. I learned through my hard times that the good times always follow. I learned if I keep a positive note of living and life that it is now, I'll always come through the struggle. The struggle is the most hardest part in life. Some people take a struggle and they wanna put it out on everybody. They say, 'I'm mad. I don't like nobody to be happy.'"

On the morning this interview took place, Williams discovered his van had been broken into and his GPS had been stolen. He didn't allow the incident to get him down. "Misery loves company, but misery can't hang around you if they ain't got nothing to hold onto. I came to take life as a sign. The sun will shine and then it will rain. Then it gets cold and then it gets warm. As much as we love the warm weather, it gets so hot we can't stand it. [laughs] When it gets cold we're like, 'oh I can't stand it, it's too cold.' But we have to take life just like the weather 'cause sometimes it can be like a dream. Last night [at the 30th BMAs] was a dream. It was so perfect, and to be able to see B.B., Steven Seagal, all my fans, and all the people I love around me. People made me feel I was as big as B.B. King. There were people around B.B. and there were people around me all night long. Everywhere I went people's like, 'Ed, congratulations, we love you man,' and I'm pretty sure they told B.B. King the same thing. I thought to myself, 'I'm just like him.' We both givin' our fans love, respect, and we givin' them something they look to us to give them to be happy.

"God put us all on this Earth to do something. I'm on this Earth to share my life with you and let you know that I had hard times, but today I'm having a real good time. And tomorrow? Who knows what's going to happen tomorrow, but we ain't gonna worry about it. [laughs] When tomorrow comes, it will be today. Last night if I had been a light bulb, I would have been 100 watts. [laughs] You might see me through the week I might be 40, but last night and when I'm playing for my fans and my friends I'm 100."

