



Living Legend: Beverly "Guitar" Watkins

By Jed Finley

Beverly "Guitar" Watkins. Photo by Tim Duffy

Though she has captured the rapt attention of audiences across the U.S. since the 1950s, the story of Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, the 80-year-old guitar-slinging grandma, actually begins in the early 1920s when a nationwide "blues craze" swept across the African American community. When we talk about the blues, usually we talk about bluesmen: electric guitar slingers, acoustic pickers, harp-blowers and the list goes on. But blueswomen have numbered among the ranks of blues greats since the very first proper blues song, "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith.

"Crazy Blues" was the first popular "race record," a turn-of-the-20th-century designation for any music recorded for African American audiences. For a long time, however, the blues weren't just segregated, they were also divided by gender. There were urban blues, which were sung by women in a kind of jazzier style in the tradition of vaudeville, and there were downhome blues, acoustic blues performed by men, accompanying themselves on acoustic guitar.

In the 1950s, these racial and gendered fissures in the blues music scene began to crack. Artists like Big Mama Thornton and Sister Rosetta Tharpe broke down these barriers, performing more masculine styles for more white audiences. These women, like Mamie Smith before them, paved the way for Beverly "Guitar" Watkins and a whole new generation of women in blues.

Born in 1939 in Atlanta, GA, Beverly's affinity for music was in her blood, in her bones. Her grandfather, Luke Hayes, was a proficient banjo picker, while her aunts sang in the Hayes Family quartet. Family gatherings were a time for playing and sharing music. As a sophomore at Archer High School in Atlanta, Beverly studied with Count Basie's trumpeter, Clark Terry, who purchased her first real guitar for her and taught her the fundamentals of playing. However, Beverly's musical education truly began when

she was introduced to Piano Red, with whom she later toured during the 1950s and '60s as a part of Piano Red and the Meter-tones (later also known as Piano Red & the Interns, Dr. Feelgood & the Interns, and The Interns & the Nurse). It was as a guitar player with Doctor Feelgood & the Interns that Beverly cut her teeth, honing her guitar skills by playing powerful solos with the instrument hoisted behind her head or suspended like a machine gun between her knees.

The band carried on in various forms through the mid-1970s. After it broke up, Beverly was forced to take on various odd jobs to supplement her income: "I worked at car washes, I worked at office buildings, I cleaned people's houses," Watkins says, but, "I never did let my music go. I always found somewhere that I could go out and play."

After working multiple jobs for years, Watkins joined the Atlanta-based group Leroy Redding & the Houserockers until



Beverly in Piano Red's band, Dr. Feelgood & the Interns.
Photo from booklet "Piano Red, Dr. Feelgood," by Norbert Hess



Beverly sure plays a mean guitar.
Photo by Tim Duffy

the 1980s. Then, Beverly got connected with Eddie Tigner, an original member of the Ink Spots and a mainstay of the Atlanta music scene. By the late '80s, in addition to her domestic jobs during the day, Beverly played the night clubs, especially the Atlanta Underground. "I paid my dues in the Underground,"

Watkins remembers.. "Sometimes I would go down there and I would only make \$30 or \$40, but I didn't stop."

In spite of all of her crowd-pleasing antics, Beverly had a hard time breaking into the mainstream until she was re-discovered by the folks at the Music Maker Relief Foundation. From 1997 to 1999, Music Maker Relief Foundation founder and photographer Timothy Duffy booked Beverly on the 42-city Winston Blues Revival Tour alongside blues heroes like Taj Mahal, along with other unseen and under-appreciated blues acts like the blind bluesman Cootie Stark, and the one-armed harmonica player Neal Pattman. Through Beverly, Music Maker was introduced to an entire community of blues legends from Atlanta, of which many partnerships still exist today.

"I met Beverly playing on the streets of the Atlanta underground and have seen her receive standing ovations at Lincoln Center and festivals throughout Europe and Australia," says Duffy. "She's the greatest guitar-pickin' grandma alive and exemplifies a critical and all-too-hidden part of our musical history – the fact that women shaped the sound of the blues just as much as men did."

In addition to the Winston Blues Revival, Music Maker has booked hundreds of performances for Beverly in Europe and Australia to share her unique style with an international audience. The Foundation also released her four albums, capturing the breadth of her style, from gospel to hard blues. Her W.C. Handy Award-winning debut album, *Back in Business*, was released in 1999, featuring a sound Watkins refers to as "hard classic blues, hard stompin' blues, you know... railroad smokin' blues." Since then, she has also released *The Feelings of Beverly "Guitar" Watkins* (2005), *Don't Mess With Miss Watkins* (2007) and *The Spiritual Expressions of Beverly "Guitar" Watkins* (2009).

Recently the spotlight on this American musical gem has shined even more brightly through a CNN Great Big Story piece that ran in 2017 and a recent viral video of Miss Watkins shredding at a school in Atlanta – both videos have several million views!

Today, at 80 years old, Beverly enjoys a revitalized career, playing with her band and teaching young women around the world how to rock better than any man. She remains a force to be reckoned with on and off the stage, demonstrating her mastery



Beverly on tour with fellow Music Maker artists Cootie Stark (lt) and Neal Pattman (rt).
Photo by Tim Duffy

of the blues with her unmatched charisma and technical prowess on her guitar night after night. If you have the opportunity to catch Beverly on stage this summer, you won't be disappointed.



Jed Finley first joined Music Maker as an intern in the summer of 2017. After earning his bachelor's degree at Yale University in 2018, Jed returned to Music Maker to coordinate performance and exhibition programming.



Beverly "Guitar" Watkins is known for her crowd-pleasing antics. Photo by Tim Duffy