

Beverly "Guitar" Watkins

FROM THE ATLANTA UNDERGROUND TO THE CONCERT STAGE AT 64

By Sandra Pointer-Jones

"You got to realize, you got to pay your dues. First you have to build your foundation, then you've got to dedicate yourself and above all you gotta like what you do."

Beverly Watkins is a 64-year-old pyrotechnic guitar maven whose searing, ballistic attacks on the guitar have become allegorical tales within the blues community. Her shows are singeing hot displays of intellectual guitar showmanship. The legendary Taj Mahal describes Watkins as, "a woman who plays a red mustang guitar behind her back like Jimi Hendrix!"

Three years ago she emerged from an obscure existence and recorded a CD that garnered her a W. C. Handy Nomination and a worldwide audience that clamors for her behind-the-back, between-the-legs guitar acrobatics.

But she still goes back to The Underground in Atlanta to play in the streets because she just has to.

"I still go down there 'cuz I

love playing. I like to play. I don't wanna get rusty. I don't want my hands to get rusty. And mainly I like meeting the people. It ain't always about the money. I have learned so much! It's just amazin'. I thank the Lord today. I thank Him every day. It's just amazin'."


Watkins grew up during the '40s and at every turn found herself surrounded by music. She was raised by grandparents. They were not in the music business as professionals but used music as an integral part of everyday life.

Three of her aunts made up the members of a female gospel trio. One of her aunts bought Watkins her first guitar when she was eight years old. She played in her high school band and eventually went on to play rhythm guitar with blues piano virtuoso Piano Red. "Down in the country, houses was about two or three miles apart. Everybody would come and help each other with their crops. Everybody would share and help each other. When they got through gatherin' their crops they would have a big event. They use to call 'em frolics. They all would

get together and have a big fish fry, barbecue and watermelon cuttin's. My grand daddy would go to the frolics and take his banjo, and I would go with him. I would always have my little guitar. I would sit beside him and be plucking my little guitar. At the time I didn't know what I was doing, I'd just be sitting and plucking. ~

"I had a cousin. His name was Sylvester Jackson, he played guitar. When I was in the eighth grade my father bought me a bicycle for Christmas. I swapped my bicycle for my cousin's guitar. We had this coal man that would come around. Come to find out he played guitar. He had a little ol' amplifier and a guitar. It was a Silvertone. He was a holiness preacher. So, I would sit down and listen to him play. Finally, he kindly started showing me some things."

While in high school Watkins began to walk with music in earnest. She began entering talent shows and joined the school marching band. As a band member, Watkins learned the fundamentals of structured music and



As a teenaged female blues guitarist in the '60s, Beverly "Guitar" Watkins surprised a lot of people. At 64, she's still turning heads with acrobatics and pyrotechnics.

