

Cutting Time

Robert Dunn

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Willie Lee Reed is eleven when he finds God in his fingers. He has just left the Detroit orphanage and come into the home of Reverend Stockton, a cruel man who nonetheless has the sense to recognize Willie Lee's gift and present him with a Sears & Roebuck student guitar. That guitar leads him to the safe, secret place within himself that will provide the comfort and security that others find in love or money.

At nineteen, wearing a threadbare suit and carrying a no-name electric guitar without a case, he ducks out of a snowstorm into the 6-Eye, maybe the best blues club in Chicago, to take on the recording star, Heddy Days, in that evening's "cutting" session, a competition where a brash new guitar slinger can try to knock off the King of the Blues. When Willie Lee's turn comes, he tears down the house, deftly imitating the master's style before adding his own distinctive stylistic wrinkles, playing behind his back and between his legs, convincing the audience that he is the real deal. But the judges declare that Heddy is still king, and Willie Lee slinks back into the shadows to wait for his turn.

The author is the founder, guitar player, and principal songwriter of the musical group Thin Wild Mercury, which often plays around New York City. He has also published widely, including an O. Henry Prize-winning story; fiction in *The Atlantic*, *Redbook*, *Omni*, and numerous literary journals; poetry in *The New Yorker*; and an essay in *The New York Times Book Review*. Currently, Dunn works for *Sports Illustrated* and teaches fiction writing at The New School in New York City.

Willie Lee is soon waylaid by a talent scout who convinces him of his own electrifying talent and sets up a unthreatening appearance away from the city, at a Gary, Indiana bowling alley, where Willie Lee not only regains his confidence and desire to compete again with Heddy Days, but also catches the eye of a rival record company man and his exotic associate, a beauty named Silver with electrifying talents of her own. As in any good blues song, a man must overcome temptation and the devil before entering the Promised Land.

Dunn is an obvious fan of the blues, and bases his characters on icons like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, sprinkling his narrative with the mythology of the blues. The most vivid writing comes in the descriptions of the music itself, its sound and the feelings it invokes, but the characters remain largely archetypes, without much depth compared to the individuals upon which they were based. Perhaps it's just that the story of the blues must best be told by the music itself.

DAN BOGEY (January / February 2004)

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