

# Johnny "Guitar" Watson

---

**John Watson Jr.** (February 3, 1935 – May 17, 1996), known professionally as "**Johnny Guitar**" **Watson**, was an American musician and singer-songwriter. A flamboyant showman and electric guitarist in the style of T-Bone Walker, his recording career spanned forty years, and encompassed rhythm and blues, funk and soul music.

Watson recorded throughout the 1950s and 1960s with some success. His creative reinvention in the 1970s with funk overtones, saw Watson have hits with "Ain't That a Bitch" and "Superman Lover". His highest charting single was 1977's "A Real Mother for Ya"

## Early life

---

Watson was born in Houston, Texas. His father John Sr. was a pianist, and taught his son the instrument. But young Watson was immediately attracted to the sound of the guitar, in particular the electric guitar as played by T-Bone Walker and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown.

His grandfather, a preacher, was also musical. "My grandfather used to sing while he'd play guitar in church, man," Watson reflected many years later. When Johnny was 11, his grandfather offered to give him a guitar if, and only if, the boy didn't play any of the "devil's music". His parents separated in 1950, when he was 15. His mother moved to Los Angeles, and took Watson with her.

## Early career

---

In his new city, Watson won several local talent shows. This led to his employment, while still a teenager, with jump blues-style bands such as Chuck Higgins's Mellotones and Amos Milburn. He worked as a vocalist, pianist, and guitarist. He quickly made a name for himself in the African-American juke joints of the West Coast, where he first recorded for Federal Records in 1952. He was billed as **Young John Watson** until 1954. That year, he saw the Joan Crawford film *Johnny Guitar*, and a new stage name was born.

In 1953, Shorty Rogers had Watson as part of his Orchestra perform for the famed ninth Cavalcade of Jazz concert held at Wrigley Field in Los Angeles which was produced by Leon Hefflin, Sr. on June 7. Also featured that day were Roy Brown and his Orchestra, Don Tosti and His Mexican Jazzmen, Earl Bostic, Nat "King" Cole, and Louis Armstrong and his All Stars with Velma Middleton.

Watson affected a swaggering, yet humorous personality, indulging a taste for flashy clothes and wild showmanship on stage. His "attacking" style of playing, without a plectrum, resulted in him often needing to change the strings on his guitar once or twice a show, because he "stressified on them" so much, as he put it. Watson's 1954 instrumental "Space Guitar" was his first recording to show his "sheer off-the-wall madness" on electric guitar. Watson would later influence a subsequent generation of guitarists. His song "Gangster of Love" was first released on Keen Records in 1957. It did not appear in the charts at the time, but was later re-recorded and became a hit in 1978, becoming Watson's "most famous song".

He toured and recorded with his friend Larry Williams, as well as Little Richard, Don and Dewey, the Olympics, Johnny Otis and, in the mid-1970s with David Axelrod. In

1975 he was a guest performer on two tracks (flambe vocals on the out-choruses of "San Ber'dino" and "Andy") on the Frank Zappa album *One Size Fits All*. He also played with Herb Alpert and George Duke. But as the popularity of blues declined and the era of soul music dawned in the 1960s, Watson transformed himself from southern blues singer with pompadour into urban soul singer in a pimp hat. His new style was emphatic – wearing the gold teeth, broad-brimmed hats, flashy suits, fashionable outsized sunglasses and ostentatious jewelry.

He modified his music accordingly. His albums *Ain't That a Bitch* (included funk blues singles "Superman Lover" and "I Need It") and *Real Mother For Ya* (1977) fused funk and blues. Watson's album *Love Jones* was released in 1980. Reviewing Watson's 1977 album *A Real Mother for Ya*, Robert Christgau wrote in *Christgau's Record Guide: Rock Albums of the Seventies* (1981): "Watson has been perfecting his own brand of easy-listening funk for years, and this time he's finally gone into the studio with his guitar Freddie and his drummer Emry and a bunch of electric keyboards and come up with a whole album of good stuff. The riff-based tracks go on too long but go down easy and the lyrics have an edge. Granted, Watson can't match George Benson's chops, but this is dance music, chops would just get in the way. And I prefer his Lou-Rawls-without-pipes to Benson's Stevie-Wonder-ditto."

## Later career

---

The shooting death of his friend Larry Williams in 1980 and other personal setbacks led to Watson briefly withdrawing from the spotlight in the 1980s. "I got caught up with the wrong people doing the wrong things", he was quoted as saying by *The New York Times*.

The release of his album *Bow Wow* in 1994 brought Watson more visibility and chart success than he had ever known. The album received a Grammy Award nomination. In a 1994 interview with David Ritz for liner notes to *The Funk Anthology*, Watson was asked if his 1980 song "Telephone Bill" anticipated rap music. "Anticipated?" Watson replied. "I damn well invented it! ... And I wasn't the only one. Talking rhyiming lyrics to a groove is something you'd hear in the clubs everywhere from Macon to Memphis. Man, talking has always been the name of the game. When I sing, I'm talking in melody. When I play, I'm talking with my guitar. I may be talking trash, baby, but I'm talking".

In 1995, he was given a Pioneer Award from the Rhythm and Blues Foundation in a presentation and performance ceremony at the Hollywood Palladium. In February 1995, Watson was interviewed by Tomcat Mahoney for his Brooklyn, New York-based blues radio show *The Other Half*. Watson discussed at length his influences and those he had influenced, referencing Guitar Slim, Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa and Stevie Ray Vaughan. He made a special guest appearance on Bo Diddley's 1996 album *A Man Amongst Men*, playing vocoder on the track "I Can't Stand It" and singing on the track "Bo Diddley Is Crazy".

"Johnny was always aware of what was going on around him", recalled Susan Maier Watson (later to become the musician's wife) in an interview printed in the liner notes to the album *The Very Best of Johnny 'Guitar' Watson*. "He was proud that he could change with the times and not get stuck in the past".

## Death

---

Watson died of a heart attack on May 17, 1996, collapsing on stage while on tour in Yokohama, Japan. His remains were brought home for interment at Forest Lawn Memorial Park Cemetery in Glendale, California and buried in the Great Mausoleum, Sanctuary of Enduring Honor, Holly Terrace entrance.

## Influence

---

When compared to Jimi Hendrix, Watson allegedly became irritated, supposedly stating: "I used to play the guitar standing on my hands. I had a 150-foot cord and I could get on top of the auditorium – those things Jimi Hendrix was doing, I started that shit."

Frank Zappa stated that "Watson's 1956 song 'Three Hours Past Midnight' inspired me to become a guitarist". Watson contributed to Zappa's albums *One Size Fits All* (1975), *Them or Us* (1984), *Thing-Fish* (1984) and *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention* (1985). Zappa also named "Three Hours Past Midnight" his favorite record in a 1979 interview.

Steve Miller not only recorded "Gangster of Love" for his 1968 album *Sailor* (substituting "Is your name 'Stevie 'Guitar' Miller?" for the same line with Watson's name), he made a reference to it in his 1969 song "Space Cowboy" ("And you know that I'm a gangster of love") as well as in his 1973 hit song "The Joker" ("Some call me the gangster of love"). Miller had also borrowed the sobriquet for his own "The Gangster Is Back", on his 1971 album *Rock Love*.

Jimmie Vaughan, brother of Stevie Ray Vaughan, is quoted as saying: "When my brother Stevie and I were growing up in Dallas, we idolized very few guitarists. We were highly selective and highly critical. Johnny 'Guitar' Watson was at the top of the list, along with Freddie, Albert and B.B. King. Watson influenced Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, Etta James, and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Bobby Womack said: "Music-wise, he (Watson) was the most dangerous gunslinger out there, even when others made a lot of noise in the charts – I'm thinking of Sly Stone or George Clinton".

Etta James stated, in an interview at the 2006 Rochester International Jazz Festival: "Johnny 'Guitar' Watson ... Just one of my favorite singers of all time. I first met him when we were both on the road with Johnny Otis in the '50s, when I was a teenager. We traveled the country in a car together so I would hear him sing every night. His singing style was the one I took on when I was 17 – people used to call me the female Johnny 'Guitar' Watson and him the male Etta James ... He knew what the blues was all about".

James is also quoted as saying: "I got everything from Johnny ... He was my main model ... My whole ballad style comes from my imitating Johnny's style... He was the baddest and the best ... Johnny Guitar Watson was not just a guitarist: the man was a master musician. He could call out charts; he could write a beautiful melody or a nasty groove at the drop of a hat; he could lay on the harmonies and he could come up with a whole sound."