

# Reddog, Blues Guitarist

Reddog's soul is intact, even after decades of playing blues in clubs and bars across the South... even after 35 years of spending nights in front of tipsy party people, and true-blue music fans, never diverging from his passion to play and sing, remaining a gentle, quiet, observant man.

Retirement hasn't stopped Reddog from playing for appreciative Florida crowds

Although known since the late 80s, Reddog still appears a little fuzzy around the edges, his origins and family, even his age, are vague. But recently Reddog opened up about his love of music and how he managed to make a living heading up his Band, Reddog and Friends, with Chris Long on bass and Donnie McCormick on drums.

The first mystery about Reddog is the origin of his stage name. "I spotted an advertisement for a vintage clothing store named Reddog, and the ad had beautiful, long, lean, red dogs," Reddog explains. "I thought it would be a good band name. As band personnel changed over the years, everyone just started calling me Reddog."

The second mystery we encounter is how he was able to make a living as a musician. Having to build his own career, and lacking 401ks and employee-sponsored pension plans, means Reddog had to be financially creative and astute. Brave souls like Reddog who attempt making a living doing what they love are investing in their self-expression and way of life, not just earning to pay for shelter and food. Sometimes saving for the future takes a backseat, but not with Reddog.

Reddog tells the story of how a very well-dressed gentleman approached him years ago between sets at Fuzzy's Place, a bar/restaurant in Atlanta. The man had seen the joy and fun Reddog and Friends were having on stage.

"I've amassed a sizable fortune," the man said to Reddog, "and I would trade my fortune with you any day to be able to do what you do."

"The conversation made me see how fortunate I was to do what I love in life," Reddog says. "I felt thankful. Work has always been pure pleasure."

Reddog learned to play the guitar after high school. His step Dad noticed how much time he was spending playing guitar and suggested he take lessons... or not play so much.

"Within a couple weeks," Reddog says, "I had packed a bag and caught a bus to a guitar workshop outside of New York City that I had seen advertised in *Guitar Player* magazine."

His teacher was an excellent young guitarist who recognized Reddog's talent and interest in music and gave him special attention.

"I got off the bus in Planting Fields Arboretum, Long Island," Reddog says, "with no place to stay, a rather broken-down guitar, a suitcase and little money. Believe me, I stood out. My fellow students arrived each day in shiny new Cadillacs carrying expensive Martin acoustics."

Reddog originally owned an inexpensive Japanese acoustic for about a year, but he soon acquired a Gold Top Gibson Les Paul Deluxe and a Fender Twin Reverb amp.

Early on, Reddog noticed all the great British guitar players like Clapton, Beck and Page had blues roots. "Duane Allman, Freddie King, B.B. King, Ray Charles... that was what was moving me!" Reddog says. "Duane Allman is the reason I picked up the guitar. He created a new musical style and was just a burnin' guitar player!"

Reddog's blues destiny was set.

Although Reddog has written, performed and recorded original songs, he has always performed blues standards in his sets.

"Many blues clubs have kept me working through the years," Reddog says, "because they know I revere the original artists who made the music, like Howlin' Wolf, Freddie King and Muddy Waters."

Much of Reddog's childhood was spent in Virginia and coastal North Carolina where his mother dabbled with the piano and continues to play out of the Methodist hymnal.

"The South just makes me feel like I'm home. That's why I headed for the great state of Georgia as soon as the time was right. "

The Allman Brothers, headquartered in Macon, Georgia, influenced Reddog a great deal, with Duane Allman, Freddie King and Otis Rush standing out as his biggest guitar influences.

Reddog attributes his successful musical career to being in the right place at the right time.

"I moved to the vibrant big city of Atlanta, a city with a strong economy and lots of live music venues. The norm for clubs was to hire a band for one night a month. Instead, I convinced club owners to book me one day a week (like every Thursday) and if their Thursday business picked up, my band remained the Thursday night house band. If business went down, they could fire me. Business usually picked up so we had lots of steady work. My trio had four or five steady gigs; Sunday on the North side of Atlanta, Monday in Underground Atlanta, etc. Many of our Atlanta gigs lasted years."

Reddog kept his overhead low with a simple trio of guitar, bass and drums. All three players also sang.

Current Reddog and Friends band members are Michael D on bass and TJ Jackson on drums. Infamous musicians who have been a part of Reddog's trio over the decades include the late, great Donnie McCormick on drums from the Capricorn Record band, Eric Quincy Tate and Chris Long on bass, formerly with the King Johnson Band. Steve Hawkins, a powerful, talented drummer and vocalist, performed with Reddog in the late 90s and currently plays with Daryle Singletary. Bill Stewart, session drummer from the Capricorn Rhythm Section, recorded and performed live with Reddog in the late 80's.

Selecting the right mix of musicians is essential to a good sound and future gigs. Equally important, Reddog paid close attention to where his money went while managing the band and growing his career,

“If you are a creative soul,” Reddog advises, “it is so important to save and invest for your future. Being a creative soul means you’ll likely have less, so you have to invest! It makes me sad to see elderly musicians in need. So many classic blues artists live in poverty, it pains me. I have influenced many around me to invest, especially in well-diversified, low cost index mutual funds, Vanguard, Fidelity, etc.”

### **Reddog’s Creative Space**

Reddog’s favorite place to create is a perch in his hallway, where he has stacks of CD’s to choose from, a good sounding CD player, an electric keyboard and a guitar close at hand. He thinks it’s nothing fancy, but finds it peaceful. Like playing in a club, Reddog has a hard time telling if it’s night or day in his hallway perch, making it easier to shut out the world and focus on his music.

“Music still burns in my veins,” Reddog says, “and I practice singing and playing guitar every day.”

Reddog’s discipline comes from his teenage years when he trained in Chinese Martial Arts, and he hasn’t just managed to preserve his voice, it has actually improved over the years.

In his prime, Reddog played nonstop. Reddog and Friends loved to perform and they often laughed about how many nights they were booked back-to-back. These days, in retirement, Reddog performs once every month or two at the local blues society.

“I love to sing and am so moved by that big, airy gospel sound of Reverend James Cleveland, Lee Williams and James Bignon,” Reddog says. “Practicing singing is so important to me. I practice ear training with a piano almost daily and sing along with some of my favorite gospel artists on CD. Just constantly in search of a bigger, warmer vocal tone! When you are singing, you are telling a story, trying to make every word believable and full of emotion. It takes work on my part.”

“The night after the Centennial Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta in 1996,” Reddog says, “we performed on a House of Blues Buckhead stage to a sea of people. There was some tension in the air, people hoping it would be a safe evening. It was hot and humid and the audience was just incredible.”

Another memorable gig was in 1991 when Reddog opened for Garth Hudson and Rick Danko from “The Band” in Stone Mountain Park. “Rick Danko could not have been any nicer! He made sure we joined him on stage.”

One of Reddog’s favorite gigs was at Fuzzy’s Place in Atlanta on North Druid Hills. Fuzzy’s is now closed, but it had a reputation as the place to go for live blues and jazz. Fuzzy was a nice guy who cooked up fine Southern fare (Rib eye steak with green beans and mashed potatoes) but more than a restaurant, Fuzzy’s Place was a magical music venue.

“We were the Tuesday night house band at Fuzzy’s,” says Reddog, “and because many musicians were off that night, they would come sit in. When I saw Gatemouth Brown’s tour bus pull into the parking lot one night while we were playing, I thought, ‘We’re going to have a great night.’ Billy Preston was in the audience on another night. That was one fun gig!”

Early on, Reddog had a gig in Sandy Springs at JP's Paradise.

"JP's was wide open!" Reddog recalls. "We performed every Thursday, Friday and Saturday night until 3 a.m. to great crowds, including strippers, drug dealers and musicians. Warren Haynes and Allen Woody from Gov't Mule were among the many musicians who stopped by to jam with us. Before long, though, the authorities padlocked the place."

Many other favorite musicians would show up to perform with Reddog, including guitar greats Oliver Wood and Barry Richman. "They were both world-class musicians," Reddog says, "and really knew when to lay back and when to step it up and be aggressive. What an honor to have them sit in with our band."

Other gifted artists that stopped by to share the stage with Reddog include Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson, Jimmy Thackery, Tom Principato, Tinsley Ellis, Sax Gordon Beadle, Bob Margolin, and Jai Johanny Johanson. Johnny Neel and Duke Robillard stopped by to listen.

Now, a special note about Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson, who jammed with Reddog on stage at Blues Harbor in Underground Atlanta and then autographed Reddog's black Stratocaster:

"Luther is the real deal," says Reddog. "He performed with both Magic Sam and Muddy Waters and was in the *Blues Brothers* Movie. Luther is still performing. A few Luther Johnsons are running around, including one from Atlanta who regularly performed at Blind Willie's in Atlanta. Be sure to look for Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson to avoid confusion. One night, after playing on stage at Blues Harbor with Luther, I asked if he would sign my guitar. We went into the kitchen and I handed him my guitar, which he had been playing, and went to get a marker. When I got back, Luther had carved his name into my black Fender Strat as "Luter," misspelling "Luther." He was a nice Cat. Anyway, that's how you can tell the autograph is authentic, because he misspelled his name!"

With the release of his first record in 1986, Reddog gained widespread recognition and positive press.

Music publicist Mark Pucci helped Reddog spread the word. Reddog was in good company. Pucci had worked at Capricorn records in Macon, Georgia, for most of the 70s working to promote Southern hitmakers of the day, including The Allman Brothers Band, The Marshall Tucker Band, Sea Level, Wet Willie, Delbert McClinton, Dickey Betts, Elvin Bishop, Bonnie Bramlett, Percy Sledge, Dixie Dregs and Martin Mull. In the 90s, Pucci was back with Capricorn in Nashville working with the likes of Hank Williams, Jr., Lynyrd Skynyrd and Kenny Chesney.

"The press coverage of my first album release was unexpected and earth shattering for me," says Reddog. "*Tower Pulse Magazine* from Sacramento was the first publication to give me an incredibly nice write up."

*Tower Pulse* wrote, "At his worst Reddog sounds like a pre-pop-star Clapton filtered through southern sensibilities. At his best, he sounds purely like himself."

“I was also honored to be featured in a cover article in *Guitar World*, in 1988, entitled *Who’s Who of the Blues/50 Bluesmen Who Matter*. Stevie Ray Vaughan was on the cover with a headline reading, *Special Issue Blues Power*. That was a big deal for me! It was funny, guitar players would come into Atlanta for a gig and would ask about me. You know, it’s ironic because I’ve always been a musician who pays homage, respect to the originators like Albert Collins, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, etc.”

Jim Trageser, syndicated music critic, described Reddog’s guitar works when he wrote, “His playing is impassioned; his deftness at picking quickly is matched only by the smoldering intensity of his playing. In short, Reddog is one of the absolute best blues guitarists in the country today.”

Over the years, as his reputation grew, Reddog was featured in a 1993 *Guitar School* article entitled, *The Next Generation of Guitar Heroes*. During that time, he also worked hard to win an 18-month Anheuser-Busch corporate sponsorship which helped update his band’s equipment.

In 2009, Reddog and Friends won “Best Blues Band” from the Blues Society of Northwest Florida. “We went on to participate in the International Blues Challenge in Memphis, Tennessee,” Reddog says.

Reddog’s favorite song to perform is Freddie King’s *Yonder Wall*. “It’s a powerful groove and I love delivering the verse: ‘I hear your old man has been to Vietnam, I heard he had it kind of rough, I don’t know how many men he’s killed, but I think he’s done killed enough.’”

Watch Reddog and Friends perform *Yonder Wall*:

Reddog’s dream is to record in the legendary Muscle Shoals area of Alabama. He came close in 1998 when he recorded for a CD produced at Johnny Sandlin’s Duck Tape Studios in Decatur, Alabama.

“What an honor to work with Johnny,” Reddog says. “He was so gifted and generous to work with me. He brought some of my favorite players to the session, including Bill Stewart on drums, David Hood on bass and Clayton Ivey on keyboards. Gregg Allman, Bonnie Bramlett, and Jimmy Hall are among the gifted artists to record with Johnny at his Duck Tape Studios.”

Sadly, Johnny passed away in September 2017, before the CD was finished.

Reddog recorded at other Atlanta studios, including:

- Studio One in Doraville, Georgia (where Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Atlanta Rhythm Section recorded)
- Web IV (also where Lynyrd Skynyrd and Irma Thomas recorded)

## **Memories**

As a musician, Reddog has many experiences and lots of stories to tell, not all of them pretty.

“I performed in a lot of biker bars, truck stops, country music halls and some seedy Southside Atlanta bars. One night after a gig in Tennessee, I was about to walk half a mile up the road to get some late night fast food. The club owner said, “Reddog, it’s not safe to walk late at night. Here, take this 9 mm

handgun with you.” I listened, but didn’t take the handgun. I walked up the road and as I approached the fast food restaurant two police cars came speeding toward me, threw me on the hood of the car and yelled, “where’s the gun?” The police told me they just received a call that someone had a gun and was going to rob the restaurant. Like I said, it’s not always pretty.”

A sweeter story:

“We performed in Gray, Georgia, quite a bit. On one of our gigs there, Derek Trucks and his band were hanging out on the front porch listening to us play between their rehearsals in another building on the property. Later, the club owner suggested I go with Derek to see where they were rehearsing. It was just Derek and me in their rehearsal hall. Derek, in his late teens at the time, strapped on his guitar and played some slide for me. Let me tell you, the world shook. Derek had a big, big tone when he played slide. He played just a few notes, but what an earth shaking, incredible tone he had, even as a teenager.”

## **Support**

Club owners gave Reddog the boost his career needed and he gives them credit for being some of his biggest supporters over the years.

“Man, I’ve had quite a few club owners who said, ‘Reddog, I own a club, the stage is yours, I got faith in you. Come play my room, do your thing, pack the house, you’re in charge!’ As I was slowing down and semi-retired, I got to meet and work with music industry people and club owners who took an interest in my music. That meant the world to me.”

Reddog may be retired, but he still has some things he’d like to accomplish musically. He performs intermittently at the Blues Society of NWFL (and an occasional wedding, when asked by friends), and hopes to complete the CD started with Sandlin in 1998.

“During a recent set at the Society,” Reddog says, “I worked up an arrangement of *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* in tribute to Gregg Allman, and performed it for the first time on stage. Gregg sang it on his moving *Laid Back* CD. Love that song and his version. My old drummer and bass player were with me so we could just closed our eyes and let it flow. It felt so good.”

When he’s not practicing or performing, Reddog has fun tending to the grapefruit, orange and lemon trees in his yard, and harvesting his blueberry bushes. He also relishes beautiful weather, the art, people, food and, of course, live music in his Florida neighborhood!

Another pastime that kept him going was tooling around on his motorcycle.

“I’ve had the motorcycle jones forever and am so relaxed on two wheels. A late night ride in the deep South when it is hot and humid is indescribable. I had a thunderous, head-turning, black and chrome V twin for 17 years. Unfortunately, my motorcycle days ended about a year ago.”

Reddog is still a big believer in the stock market and investing to provide additional income, even something as simple as the Vanguard Total Stock Market Index Fund. His knack for investing will carry

him securely through his retirement years. So will the knowledge that he'll continue to perform and give back to his community.

"Someone once said the Blues are a Healing Power," Reddog says. "I believe it's true. To be creative, and get on stage with your band mates to entertain, have fun and get paid is incredible! But the music does heal. I lost count of the times someone in the audience had lost a wife or child, or was lonely, depressed, and somehow they found relief through the band and the music. It floors me. To see a listener leave a venue feeling better, even smiling, after you've performed makes it all worthwhile."

Reddog playing in Germany with Chris Long and Spider Webb (c. 1990s)

## References

### Reddog's Eight Guitars

- **Fender Stratocaster Black 1962 reissue:** My main guitar. The strat is my instrument of choice. Sold to me as a parts guitar because a band threw it through a window and broke the neck. I had it repaired and brought back to life. It is a workhorse.
- **Fender Stratocaster 1960 White:** I talked my brother into buying this guitar and he was nice enough to let me have it; he knew it should be with me. Holding a Fender Strat just feels natural and the Strat can make so many different tones.
- **Flying Finn Electric Guitar:** A prototype guitar from Finland. We did a tour of Scandinavia which included a blues festival at the Arctic Circle in Finland. The Flying Finn guitar made it to me in that tour. A beautiful instrument!
- **Gibson Hummingbird 1968 acoustic:** My acoustic guitar that's been with me for years is beautiful and has a big, warm tone.
- **Sunburst Gibson 1959 ES-175:** My jazz guitar. Easy to play while sitting and reading a chord chart.
- **Gibson SG Jr.:** My guitar for playing electric slide.
- **Guild 12 string acoustic:** Guild makes great acoustics!
- **Dobro:** Old wooden body, great for acoustic slide guitar.

### Reddog's Five All-Time Favorite Albums

- John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*
- Allman Brothers, *Eat a Peach* and *Mountain Jam*
- Jeff Beck, *Blow by Blow*
- Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*
- Robert Johnson, *The Complete Recordings*

### Reddog's Albums

- Reddog, 1986
- Reincarnation, 1988
- Standing in the Shadows, 1989
- Broken Dreams, 1992
- After the Rain, 1993