



Walter “Wolfman” Washington Bio

WALTER “WOLFMAN” WASHINGTON has been a mainstay on the New Orleans music scene. He cut his teeth backing up some of the best singers and performers in New Orleans history before putting together his long time band The Roadmasters who have been burning down and burning up local and national stages since their first gigs in the 1980s. His guitar style combines both rhythm and blues, blues, New Orleans funk, and modern jazz into a way of playing that is uniquely his. His singing is emotional and heartfelt. His guitar work is intricate, intimate, and full. There is a little Bobby Blue Bland, a little Kenny Burrell, a little George Benson, a little church, and a lot of New Orleans charm and experience in a Walter Wolfman Washington performance. They are known for doing their own soulful originals and then tackling some great unsung covers such as Johnny Guitar Watson's “You Can Stay But That Noise Got To Go,” Otis Redding's “Nobody's Fault But Mine,” and Bill Withers' “Use Me.” And in this day and age of musicians imitating the past or trying to recreate it, The Wolfman stands out as a musician steeped in the history but completely contemporary. Few musical acts, if any, do what he does. He is real, authentic, and unique.

Like many African-American musicians in the South, Washington started singing in school and the church. He had just hit double digits when he formed an acapella spirituals group in his neighborhood called the True Love And Gospel Singers. One Sunday they went on the local gospel show on WBOK to sing, and Washington noticed the guitar player in the studio who was playing behind them. “I just sat there and watched him,” Washington recalls, “He was playing with all his fingers.” When Washington got home and made his own guitar from a cigar box, rubber bands, and a clothes hanger. One of his uncles saw this and gave him a real guitar, and Washington started practicing guitar. His dad supported his music, and took him to see a musician he knew across the river from New Orleans, and those two played his first gig in Gretna, LA.. Even though his parents were not musicians, “I had lots of uncles who played guitar. Guitar Slim and Lightnin' Slim were my uncles. And Ernie K-Doe (renown New Orleans performer and singer of international hit “Mother In Law.”) was his cousin. “One of the reasons I got interested in music was because of my cousin Ernie K-Doe,” laughs Washington, “He was out there playing music and bringing home money and taking care of my auntie.”

Washington continued playing with different musicians around New Orleans. Another one of Washington's uncles sang with the Zion Harmonizers, and he would invite many of the gospel singers over for Sunday breakfast. One of those singers was Johnny Adams who befriended Washington. When Washington decided that he wanted to play music and not go to school in his later high school years, Adams helped convince Washington's mother by saying Adams would take care of Walter.

Adams got Walter a room in the Dew Drop Inn on LaSalle Street in Central City for 7 dollars per week. The Dew Drop Inn was a combination nightclub, hotel, barbershop, and restaurant. Every African-American musician in New Orleans and passing through came and played and hung out there from Big Joe Turner to Duke Ellington to Allen Toussaint. Washington played with house band where he met bassist Richard Dixon who told Lee Dorsey about Washington. Dorsey was a New Orleans singer with a couple big hits, “Ride Your Pony” and “Working in a Coal Mine” under his belt. Dorsey hired the 19 year old Washington to go on the road with him. “The furthest I'd ever been from home was Mississippi or Baton Rouge,” chuckled Washington, “Our first gig was at the Apollo Theatre in New York, and we drove straight there in a red Cadillac.”

Wolfman stayed on the road with Dorsey for two years and 6 months before coming home. When he returned, he helped singer Irma Thomas start her own band. The two of them and the band worked the Southern chitlin' circuit for two years. He then moved on to splitting time between band swith saxophonist David Lastie and another with the Tick Tocks. Lastie gave Washington the nickname “Wolfman” due to his lack of front teeth and the fact that, as Walter remembers, “I would challenge anyone onstage. No matter who or

what or what style they would play, I would challenge them. David used to say, 'You sure know how to wolf them.'"

After 5 years of those two bands, Johnny Adams came back into the picture and asked Walter to be his personal guitar player. Wolfman had also started playing with his long time onstage foil drummer Wilbur "The Junk Yard Dog" Arnold. They went on the road with Adams, and also backed him up at a gig that has become infamous at Dorothy's Medallion on Orleans Avenue in Mid City. Washington says, "The gig started at 3 AM, and they had shake dancers who would be dancing and stuff. The place would packed until daylight. You go in there, and you come out and it's daylight."

Wolfman also started recording with Adams. He backed him on his long run of acclaimed albums on the Rounder label. He also formed his current band in the mid 1980s, the Roadmasters, with drummer Arnold and singer Timothea. The band recorded 3 albums for Rounder, *Wolf Tracks (1986)*, *Out of the Dark (1988)*, *Wolf at the Door (1991)*, and one for Rounder's subsidiary Bullseye Blues *Funk is in the House (1998)*. The Roadmasters have proven to be Washington's longest lasting band, lasting 28 years. Their steady Saturday night gig at the Maple Leaf Bar on Oak Street in Carrollton entertained legions of Tulane students and rhythm and blues fans until the wee hours of Sunday morning for over a decade. Such gigs led to several tours of Europe where his style and smoothness have made him one of the more popular acts on the European circuit. "I love that band," says Washington with a smile, "I stress to them to play an listen to one another like it's a conversation. If you can listen to one another and respect one another, you can have that conversation." It is that conversation that keeps people coming back as well as the soulful vocals, fluid guitar, and tight band interplay.

The Roadmasters at the Maple Leaf on Saturdays has moved to DBA on Frenchmen Street on Wednesdays, but he still holds court there on Sunday nights with Joe Krown on organ and Russell Batiste on drums. "I enjoy playing with Joe. He's rarely stuck in one thing. And Russell tries to keep it all moving and going." These gigs have a wide ranging repertoire from groove jazz to funk to organ rave ups, all with the voice of Walter Wolfman Washington that often freezes listeners in their tracks.