

# Arts & Entertainment

*Blues band has fanatical following*

## Lil' Ed is getting bigger and bigger

By Stew Magnuson  
Senior Reporter

**I**t's a rainy night in Berwin, a suburb outside of Chicago. In a medium-sized roadhouse called Fitzgerald's, a tiny man wearing a yacht captain's hat and a huge grin lets his silver slide slip down the neck of the guitar, hitting notes that send chills running through the body.

Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials have a loyal, nearly fanatical following in their native Chicago. A long table full of drunk college boys scream with delight as Lil' Ed Williams hops off the stage onto the dance floor, picking and duckwalking his way through the crowd during "You Don't Exist Anymore," a killer song from his debut album.

Lil' Ed slowly turns to the table of his loyal followers, as though a judge had just entered the courtroom, they all rise.

Ed climbs up on an empty chair, shaking his body to the quivering notes, squinting his eyes more and more as the slide gets lower. He climbs off the chair and duckwalks his way to some unsuspecting dufus. Ed leans back in the fan's lap, hits two killer chords, flashes his big overbite, then dashes up to the stage just in time for the chorus, never missing a beat.

Lil' Ed has a booming voice, a big, loud growl that seems unnatural for such a small man. He doesn't seem to care that the two-foot-high ledge in front of his microphone is the end of the stage. Fitzgerald's was the stage. Throughout the night he'd jump off the ledge and sing, not caring that no one but the nearby dancers could hear a word.

**I**n the early 1930s, Mississippi-delta bluesmen broke off beer-bottle necks, melted down the sharp edges and ran the slides down their Sears-catalogue acoustic guitars. Lil' Ed is

the heir apparent of the bottleneck boogie blues, the next generation in a line that included Robert Johnson, Elmore James and his late uncle, J.B. Hutto.

"He was more than an influence with the blues," Williams said about his uncle. "He was a hell of a spiritual influence too."

Backstage, Lil' Ed tugs on a pipe and talks softly while the local fanatics, each one drunker and louder than the one before, come in and heap praise on him. He greets each with a smile and a hug, flashing his two buck teeth and Bugs Bunny smile.

Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials, including David Weld on second guitar, Ed's half-brother James Young on bass, Louis Henderson on drums or bass when Pete Williams comes by to sit in on drums, have been kicking out blues boogie in the Chicago area for 11 years, rarely venturing out of the Chicago blues circuit and remaining virtually unknown to the rest of the world.

Now they have a debut LP on Alligator Records and appear on the label's "The New Bluebloods," an anthology of the new Chicago blues bands.

The story behind "Roughhousin'," the debut LP is a Chicago legend. Alligator founder and resident Bruce Iglauer was tired after a long day of recording two songs apiece for the anthology. The last band was Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials.

"I was nervous and jittery," Ed said. "We had never been in a studio before." But the band started doing what they did best and launched into a song, playing as if they were in any club.

During the songs, the band noticed the whole control room was dancing and hollering. Iglauer came out of the control room and offered the band a recording contract on the spot with a handshake deal. Someone sent for beer, the Blues Imperials ripped through an in-the-studio version of their stage per-

formance, and the bluesmen cut 30 songs in two hours.

**I**t was a big gamble for Alligator. The band was virtually unknown outside of Chicago, and Iglauer hoped to sell 4,000 copies just to break even. So far, the album has sold three times that many copies, according to Alligator, amazing since the record has received little airplay and the band had never toured outside Chicago.

Williams shrugs off the importance of the album.

"People enjoy the album," he said. "But being there is the most important thing. They have to see us to appreciate us."

The Blues Imperial's stage show is an energetic dance romp. And that energy is certainly transferred to the album.

"I don't plan (to get off the stage). It just happens. I like to shake my leg. When I practice at home, I do the same thing. So it's not an act. A lot of people stay on stage and never come off. They say, 'Why don't he move? Does he have arthritis?'" Williams said.

For more than 10 years, Lil' Ed had a full-time job as a buffer at a Westside car wash. Now, as the band starts touring, the job is only part time. He's already toured the East Coast and parts of Canada, and has one date in the Netherlands later in April. As his reputation grows, Lil' Ed should soon be jumping on roadhouse tables full time.



Courtesy of Alligator Records

Lil' Ed and the Blue Imperials

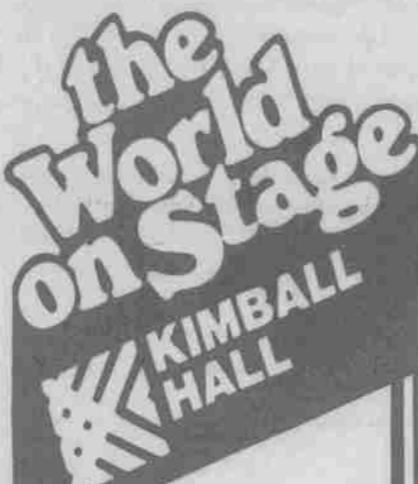
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