



WESLEY'S SONG

Photo by Lane Hickenbottom
Story by Jeff Randall

Rock 'n' roll, if nothing else, is a bastion for eclectic rites and ceremonial madness.

But the raised hands that clutch lighters during power ballads, the encore that comes no matter how enthusiastic the crowd is, the knocked-about beach ball and the manic violence of the mosh pit pale in comparison to the twisted rock vision that appears when Wesley Willis takes the stage.

As fans file into concert halls, Willis sits silent at his electronic keyboard, pushing buttons and arranging his notebooks, stuffed full of laminated lyric sheets. When the show is ready to begin, he launches into a tirade that lasts several minutes, revealing both his intent to "rock the house like Wu-Tang" and his pleasure in being wherever he is.

Eventually, the music comes. And this music is like nothing ever recorded. Accompanied only by the programmed beeps and sound effects of his keyboard, Willis' pre-show rant evolves into a lyrical barrage of bestiality, rock anthems and anecdotes of urban life that is half-sung and half-yelled.

To his fans, it's tradition and innovation at the same time. To the uninitiated, it's nearly incomprehensible. But no matter who is near, Willis demands attention.

Willis is a lumbering giant of a man who stands well over 6 feet tall, weighs more than 300 pounds and spews forth a train of obscenities and mutated rock cliches. His greeting is not a handshake but a gentle head-butt and a loud roar. Willis suffers from chronic schizophrenia and, as former Fiasco guitarist Dale Meiners said, "several other problems that haven't even been diagnosed." Without the help of medication, the voices in his head become almost unbearable. But above all, he loves rock 'n' roll like no one else.

Willis was at Duffy's Tavern, 1412 O St., Monday night to share his love.

It had been more than 11 months since Willis was last in Lincoln. And a lot has changed since then. Willis has signed with American Recordings, becoming a major-label recording artist. He has new songs, new albums and even a video on MTV. And he has unceremoniously dropped his long-time backing band, the Wesley Willis Fiasco.

The details surrounding the breakup are unimportant to Willis. He only refers to the band members in the context of his desire to have them perform unspeakable sex acts with Doberman pinschers, so it's safe to say that the breakup wasn't pretty.

"Those were my hardcore days. Those days are over. I only play rock 'n' roll now," Willis says, refusing to comment any more on the issue.

A former street corner artist who made money by selling his elaborate cityscape drawings to passers-by in Chicago, Willis turned to the rock 'n' roll lifestyle soon after meeting Meiners, a fellow artist and musician who took Willis under his wing and helped form the Wesley Willis Fiasco.

Now Willis is nationally known and tours in spurts, always returning home to Chicago for recording sessions and other "artist work," as he calls it. When on the road, Willis' black case of for-sale CDs and his sheath of giant drawings are always near his side. And it's all for sale.

After every concert, Willis spends an hour or so seated in front of the stage, talking to fans, selling his merchandise and making connections.

"Give me your phone number," he says to a somewhat surprised fan. "I will need a ride from the airport on May 8 when I come to Lincoln, Neb., again."

She obliges, although reluctantly, and then Willis asks for his usual head-butt. She obliges again.

Fans are still approaching Willis, usually in clusters of two or three. He tries to sell something to every one of them, but is only successful about half of the time. They say they have no money, they just want to meet Willis, shake his hand and butt his head.

They talk briefly with Willis, promise that they'll return for his next concert -- and then they leave, all smiles.

As Duffy's Tavern clears out, Willis is still seated in front of the stage. He listens to his portable CD player and gathers his CDs and drawings, ready to go back to Chicago after a good night's rest.

But he'll be back.

"Rock and roll never sleeps, and it never dies," Willis says to none in particular, his eyes half-closed as he listens to other people's music through his headphones.

At least not if Wesley Willis has anything to say about it.