

# Patricia Wilder

by Lee Hildebrand

Patricia Wilder cuts a striking image with black Stratocaster strapped over the shoulders of her sapphire satin suit, her blonde locks pulled tightly to the back of her head—yet she stood on stage rather stiffly at the beginning of her March 18 performance at Biscuits & Blues in San Francisco. Perhaps she was nervous, which is understandable. Wilder had been playing around town as a sideperson with various blues and funk bands since she was in junior high school, but at age 47 she was finally stepping out on her own—doing her own thing, with her own band and her own songs—and this was the second gig of her solo career and her first as a headliner.

Whatever butterflies might have been present quickly disappeared. Soon, Wilder was moving her shoulders in time to her biting, rhythmically assertive guitar lines. Later, she stepped off the stage and strutted into the crowd, hunched in a gunslinger stance as she played brittle shards of fast-fingered blue notes with a pick, and then put the Fender to her face and continued picking with her teeth. And before the set was over Wilder was shaking her whole body to her band's throbbing funk groove, turning as she trembled, then bending over and wiggling her ample derrière at the audience, using a towel as a tail.

Wilder knows how to shake her money-maker, as Elmore James used to put it. She's also a commanding soul-blues vocalist, with a husky contralto that she uses to alternately tough and tender effect, and a strikingly accomplished guitar stylist. She has a percussive touch that suggests a Texas upbringing, though she's a San Francisco native. Striking a string simultaneously with her pick and the tip of her index finger, she at times creates a snapping effect reminiscent of Johnny "Guitar" Watson and Albert Collins, but her

approach is subtler than those of the two late guitar-slingers. *Miss Your Groove*, the strongest track on her debut CD, *Sweet Love*, even finds her playing Wes Montgomery-like octaves.

Wilder produced the disc in tandem with electric bass dynamo Tony Saunders and drummer Larry Vann for Vann's San Rafael, California-based Rusty Key label. All 11 songs on the disc are Wilder originals, some written in collaboration with Saunders, Vann, Larry Batiste, or Arnold Gellispie. Saunders (son of keyboardist Merl Saunders) also serves as Wilder's musical director and has put together a tight unit of players well versed in blues, funk, and jazz to showcase her talent. Vann plays on the disc, but he's not in the band due to commitments to Ron Thompson and the Resistors and his own group. For gigs, his place has been taken by David Rokeach, who is perhaps the best all-around drummer in the San Francisco/Oakland area, with a resume that includes road duty with Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin. Rounding out the band are tenor saxophonist Alex Murzyn, keyboardist Mike Emerson, rhythm guitarist Bill Hampton, and mother-son harmony vocalists Lissa and Von Price.

Wilder's distinctive style is in some ways the result of her highly eclectic listening habits as a child growing up in San Francisco. "I was hearing a lot of jazz," she recalls. "I was totally into Stan Getz. My mom was playing Chick Corea and Wes Montgomery at home, but my feeling was more with the funk. I was totally into Parliament-Funkadelic and Rufus and Chaka Khan back in the day. The *Soul Train* thing was happening and James Brown. A lot of my [rhythm guitar] patterns came from that area. And I kinda liked disco a lot."

She studied classical piano and clarinet and, at age 11, began experimenting with a plastic guitar her mother had bought at Woolworth's. Soon she was participating in

freeform jazz jam sessions on clarinet and plastic guitar with a bassist friend of her mother's and Eddie Moore, the legendary jazz drummer noted for his associations with saxophonists Stanley Turrentine and Dewey



Redman. And, at her Texas-born grandmother's house, Wilder played her first blues, with grandma blowing harmonica. "The blues is gonna be your meal ticket," her grandmother would tell her.

When she was in junior high school, Wilder graduated from toy guitar to a real one—courtesy of Taj Mahal. Her mom was dating the bluesman, and he gave Patricia one of his electric guitars and a Fender Bassman amp. "It's was so big," she says of the guitar. "It was a copy of, like, a George Benson guitar. It was fat and wide, and by me being a little girl, it was so heavy for me." Taj also taught her the song *Ain't Whistlin' Dixie*.

Wilder's earliest guitarist influence was Larry White, whom she'd known since junior high and who later toured as a member of the Whispers' backup band. "Larry was a very funky guitar player," she recalls, "but he would not teach me nothing because I was a girl."

She spent much of the past 30 some years working as a guitar player in a series of

funk, rock, and blues bands around the Bay Area. Her first blues gig was with veteran San Francisco tenor saxophonist Bobbie Webb. Later blues associations included stints with keyboardist Billy Dunn and singers Curtis Lawson and Zakiya Hooker, one night with Jimmy McCracklin, and two months with Luther Tucker, who taught her how to play 16<sup>th</sup>-note trills on the guitar's high string.

It wasn't until she started working with Dunn five years ago that Wilder began signing in public. "Being a female guitarist, I think that was enough for them," she explains. "If they wanted me to go up front, I could do that, but I was O.K. just being in the back."

Wilder's vocal influences are as wide-ranging as her guitar influences. She cites Koko Taylor, Tina Turner, Esther Phillips, and '70s funk singer (and Miles Davis ex-spouse) Betty Davis as favorites. "And I do love me some Stevie Ray Vaughan," she adds. "I love the man's voice. Bob Dylan was another one I really enjoyed listening to."

Over the past two decades, Wilder made several attempts at recording, including one with members of the San Francisco rock band 4 Non Blondes, but none reached fruition. "I wasn't satisfied with the sound or it never got finished," she explains. "There was always some type of black cloud going on."

"I was trying to get something going," she adds. "I kept believing in myself and my original music. I refused to stop. It's my passion. I just couldn't let that go."

Two years ago, while working with another producer on a project that was never completed, Wilder met Tony Saunders. The two hit it off musically, and with Larry Vann, whom she had known from gigs with Curtis Lawson, they began the sessions that yielded ***Sweet Love***. She was surprised when the much-in-demand Saunders offered to become her musical director and assemble such first-call players to back her. "The guy is awesome," she says of the bassist. "I'm still pinching myself."

LB

TONY SAUNDERS

