

From Part Three of *Cutting Time*, Chapter Eight

Maurice James

The gig was in Indianapolis, and the lanky, high-coiffed backup guitarist tugged on his silver show coat, his tailored tux pants, the black shoes shined so bright he could see the club's orange, yellow, and blue overhead lights glow in their tips. He tuned his guitar barely listening to it; he was so good he could just feel his way into tune. A story his bandmates in the Little Richard band liked to tell: They were choogling through a Richard version of Tutti Frutti when the guitar solo came up. Jimmy, or Maurice James, as he was calling himself, heard his B string suddenly drop a quarter tone flat. Without missing a note of the solo he reached over and twisted the string up to pitch. This jazzed him so much that he beckoned to the band to take the solo around again, which tripped Richard up, which meant Jimmy was fined half a week's pay.

Jimmy had been on the road the last couple years, since he'd left the Army, and he was a first-call chitlin' circuit player ... and that was all he was. Now he was playing behind Little Richard, which had sounded pretty good to him—he'd loved the wild man's roof-rattling New Orleans hits back in the '50s, *Rip It Up*, *Ready Teddy*, *Oh My Soul*; had learned chops playing to 'em—but times had changed, Richard hadn't had a hit in over five years, and the job turned out to be playing the old man's hits note by note, night after grinding night. Jimmy and the rest of the band rebelled when they could, kicking the music up and out, spraying wild boogie into a suddenly aroused audience ... and then Richard would turn around and fine their ass another half a week's pay.

That man was crazy. Another favorite band story: One night Jimmy, feeling the showman bug rise up in him (as it'd been doing constantly lately), wore a fine-sheen, ruffled shirt onto the stage, and after the show Richard called a meeting. Jimmy was just standing there innocent when Richard got up in his face and began shrieking, "You, Maurice James, I want you to know I am Little Richard. Little Richard, the King, the

King of rock and rhythm. I am the only one allowed to be pretty.” Then he reached over and ripped the shirt off Jimmy’s back ... and fined his ass half a week’s pay.

Was working out, if he ever wanted to leave the band, he’d be owing the boss so much he couldn’t. He laughed to himself. He caught a glance from his pal Black Arthur. What’s so funny? I’ll tell you after the gig. All right. By the way, my man, your hair’s looking pretty sweet tonight. Another laugh from Jimmy. He had a mile-high conk that he knew made Richard crazy, but since that was the look there was nothing the boss could do about it. On the road, Jimmy kept it going with Sterno and a hot comb. It was his pride and joy—that and his guitar playing.

Not like anyone here tonight in Indianapolis, Indiana, would get it, even if Richard ever did let him break out. Lately, Jimmy was getting his own crazy ideas, the way his guitar could sound, way he could play it. Like wild notes jungle raw out his amp. Like getting down on his knees and holding his ax like it was a prayerbook. Like making sounds nobody had ever heard before.

He’d been hearing talk of a fella up in Chicago been doing some of this. Kid named Willie Lee something. They were calling him the Future of the Blues. Getting a rep on the Southside, in Gary, Indiana, too. Done some Army time, just like Jimmy had. Liked to put on a show. Played notes that ... nobody had heard.

In the last week stories been filtering down: Some sort of hoodoo connection, too, like the boy had made it to the crossroad (even if not exactly the one Robert Johnson had found). Something about a woman with a skunk stripe, and a hoodoo preacher from Mississippi. A murder in a new blues club in Gary, and the fella back in Chicago, not playing better after he’d been hoodoo’d up but worse.

Jimmy didn’t know how much of what he heard to trust, but that line kept gnawing at him: The Future of the Blues. Couldn’t be some spooked-up kid in Chicago. He, Maurice James, was the goddam Future of the Blues.

Or would be if he ever got out from behind this make-up-mad, high-heeled, yawping pansy. Jimmy looked down, saw again the show lights dancing in the shine of his boots. Then the drummer gave him the count, the bass thumped down, Jimmy jumped on

the first chord, the horns blew bright, and Richard came out wiggling and pouting and shrieking and sucking up every bit of show in the house.

Just get through it, Jimmy told himself. Play the chords. Step up, step back, step up, step back ... all in line with the bass player and the horns. Let the crazy man scream crazy. Just be the good, solid backup man. Wrap up Indianapolis. Tomorrow night ... tomorrow night we're hitting Chicago.

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Jimmy, standing under a rattling El train, was thinking about the last time he'd been in Chicago. One of the high points of his life. He'd met a lifelong hero: Heddy Days. He'd bought every all the Heddy Days records on Poker he could find while growing up in Seattle, had locked the door to his small bedroom and played the discs over and over to learn the master's notes, and then stared deep into the black-and-white photo on the cover, Heddy Days' heavy-lidded eyes, his strong chin, and tried to fit his own countenance to exactly that: a presence of daring, certainty, virtuosity, and command right there on his own thirteen-year-old face. Heddy Days was simply the only way Jimmy could see to be a man.

Then he met the master. It was six months back, the last time the band was in town, and after their show at the Mocambo, Jimmy had taxied to a club called the 6-Eye. It was a Friday night, and there was a cutting session going on. Jimmy stood in the back, but he hadn't brought his guitar, and finally he was too shy to join in. But after Heddy had outlasted all comers and was enjoying a quart beer at a table with his bandmates, Jimmy had screwed up every iota of his courage and walked up to the table.

"Sit down, son," Heddy had graciously said. "What's your name?"

"I'm called Marcus James," Jimmy had said, and he swore he'd seen a flicker of recognition in the great man's eyes; that he must've heard him some kind of rumor about this Marcus James out there backing up Richard and the others. He didn't do anything other than offer the young man a seat, though. It was thrillingly accepted.

This close to Heddy, Jimmy's shyness kicked in and he simply sat there, silent, sipping the beer Heddy's drummer had poured for him. There were a couple wide-eyed,

long-haired white boys at the table, and Heddy was expounding for them. Jimmy simply listened to the great man talk.

“It’s the beat,” Heddy said. “People got funny ideas about the blues. Think it’s sadness. Think it’s feeling end of the world. Nothing ’like that. Words ... words, they count—and I thank my friend Sweet Home Alexander for some of the best of ’em—but the thing it all comes down to is the beat.”

Nods around the table. Jimmy kept silent.

“And it ain’t the beat be straightforward. That’s what they got on that TV, with Lawrence Welk. No, the thing with the beat, you understand, it’s gotta be ... fractured. Gotta be broken up into its own pieces then put back together its own way.” Heddy’s way of speaking was slow, considered, rumbling from deep within him.

“Now take That’s Who I Am. That song all that fractured beat. The way beat gets broken up, and then you hear it before it comes, it’s like an echo—echo that ring ring rings in your soul.” He pursed his wide brow. “That’s the key, my friends: Knowing what the audience is gonna hear and knowing what you gonna play, and then moving right into the middle there, ’tween the two.” Heddy leaned back, his face wide and bright as a full moon. “You boys understand?”

Slow nods.

“You do, huh?” Heddy an raised eyebrow.

More slow, slow nods—but nothing clear on their faces. The master leaned back. That was all he was going to say on the subject. He shrugged, then turned to one of the white boys and said, “So, Paul, how’s that new band of yours comin’?”

Over the next months Jimmy kept thinking about what Heddy had said. He was right, of course: It was ultimately all the beat. But then he thought, That’s the way the blues has always been. But what if there’s more possible that Heddy Days isn’t able to get to? What if there’s something new to be found, new colors, new tones, new energy? What if there are new words: poems, word spritzes, elastic whanging syllables as wild as the notes Jimmy whirled off his guitar? And the sounds ... what if there were sounds he hadn’t heard—maybe nobody ever had—but sounds he was confident he’d recognize

when he found them? He'd been weighing these thoughts something heavy ever since that night with Heddy, and as much as he was deeply moved to have sat at the master's side, he was more emboldened to take his own way of doing things in his own direction.

He was the Future of the Blues.

And there was no chance in hell Little Richard would ever let him be that.

Jimmy had heard through the grapevine that there was going to be another cut this Friday night at the 6-Eye, and that Heddy Days was still over in Europe on a tour, which was just as well. Jimmy didn't want to go up against Heddy Days. The man he wanted, and who was said to be recovered and on his way to the 6-Eye that very evening, was that other damn Future of the Blues: Willie Lee What'shisname.

As he pushed down 48th Street he lifted up his red Stratocaster and gave its well-worn body a full-lipped kiss.

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Even with the king Heddy Days out of town it was going to be a big cut. The cream of everyone in town was there: Billy Boy Baker, Slow Hand Jackson, the big-beat boy Catfish Broulée up from New Orleans, sporting a rag over his head, and Talkin' Gus Slide, with the long scar down the side of his face—basically, everybody good who wasn't with Heddy Days on the American Folk Tour in Europe. There was also one other guy, young, muscled, who none of them had seen before; a handsome man with a tall sprout of processed black hair above a tall forehead, and a serious-looking red Fender Stratocaster folded in his large, well-muscled hands. The only judge was that rectitudinous and order-loving ex-seaman, the owner Quick. (With Heddy not around, the usual judges, Grumbling Washington, Baby Stevenson, and Pirate Jackson, weren't bothering to show up.)

Josh and Esmé stood with Willie Lee outside the club, the red glow of Quick's eyeball sign playing over their faces. Both were a little nervous for the guitar player, but Willie Lee looked unconcerned. He stood there, breathing slow into his hands, digging deep into his concentration, then blew into the joint like royalty. Some of the older guys like Billy Boy and Slow Hand paid notice, saying "Hello" to him and asking him if he

was there for the Cut.

“You old men, you can back out now,” Willie Lee called out, but with enough good humor that nobody burned him on it.

Billy Boy Baker led the night off, too old for the Cut but warming everyone up with a string of instrumentals tending toward the old jump blues. After a few tunes he ceded the stage to Slow Hand Jackson, a man with a long face and longer eyes—sleepy, smoky bedroom eyes—who was quickly joined by Raccoon Black, with his signature eye shadow looping his eyes, and the two men sent riffs at each other till the crowd’s applause made it clear that Slow Hand was more than holding his own. Down went Raccoon Black; up came Talkin’ Gus Slide, who played with a length of brass pipe he’d cut from his day job as a plumber. Talkin’ Gus could make that pipe talk, notes rising and falling like a keening woman over a fresh-dug grave; in his Spanish tuning he whinged off Robert Johnson–like demitones high up the neck. But Slow Hand was eponymous, too, and his feather touch and seductive, filigreed bends held the audience and through their applause kept him up in front of them.

“Good job, men,” called Quick from the p.a. by the bar. “Let’s hear it again, ladies and gentlemen, for your favorite so far tonight, Mr. Slow Hand ... Jackson!” Well-earned applause rang out, Josh and Esmé, too, giving him his due. From the other side of the table Willie Lee half clapped, too, but he had his eyes elsewhere in the audience.

“Next up, friends, a newcomer to the Six-Eye. Young man been out on tour with that N’awlins shouter, Mr. Little Richard—you know, the Tutti Frutti man—” a chuckle from Quick “—but he tells me he’s all ... guitarslinger. Welcome to the stage our next Cut Man, Mr. Maurice James.”

This was the object of Willie Lee’s interest, this kid, hardly older than he was, and tall, thin, sharply dressed as a musician on the road should be, but clearly and painfully shy. James ignored the smattering of applause that welcomed him to the stage. The way he shambled up there, he looked distinctly uncomfortable in his skin. He bore his blood-red Stratocaster before him like a shield and a lance; and only looked at ease when he’d strapped it to his chest. After giving the audience a furtive smile, he took the

far corner of the stage.

What everyone at their table saw right off was that this Maurice James had fingers as supernally long as Willie Lee's. And something else like Willie Lee: He held your eyes. Everyone in the 6-Eye found themselves leaning a little more toward stage, their breaths stilled with curiosity, fascination.

Slow Hand started off in a loping slow blues, throwing his whole body into it, languid and smooth, and sultry enough to get a few ladies up front to shimmy in their seats and whisper to the stage, "Hmm, hmnnn, Mr. Slow Hand, you got it. You go with it, baby...."

Slow Hand, looking pleased with himself, smiled toward his challenger. Maurice James's Stratocaster was strung normally, but curiously he was playing it backward—lefthanded. That registered with Willie Lee, too. When Slow Hand played his last note, a high E hanging up the neck, James reached out and grabbed the same note, vibratoed it slowly, then boomed a riff on the low E and A strings even as he held, then adumbrated the first note. Willie Lee leaned even farther forward: Like that this tall kid was sounding like two guitars at once.

James kept that up for a minute or so, then power-chunked some mid-fretboard chords and with a graceful nod of his guitar neck, beckoned Slow Hand back to the game.

The older man played the best he could, put his heart into it, but it was old stuff. His straight-ahead playing sounded thin and weak next to James's. When he turned the session over to Maurice James again, the newcomer blistered off a flurry of notes high up the neck, wild notes, not every one spot on, but daunting nonetheless.

Josh leaned over to Esmé and whispered, "Look at that, he's got some of Willie Lee in him." Esmé nodded. Her eyes said, Is Willie Lee better? "The way this guy's smoking Slow Hand," Josh said, "we're gonna find out."

Maurice James caught all the applause when their Cut was over. The older player bowed graciously, and then Catfish Broulée bounded onto the stage. Catfish gave James a familiar nod, like their paths had crossed somewhere, probably down South, then went

right at him with a swift, syncopated blues. It was fine, solid playing ... and halfway through James was imitating it perfectly, then taking off and shooting the moon.

That was the match: Catfish ground it out, James soared. Catfish grimaced, James lifted his chin in a cocky but warm way, then lifted his right hand off the guitar's neck and fretted the air—and yet his stayed as dramatic and note-rich as before. Back went Catfish's head: How the fuck he do that, playin' just the fuckin' air! Then, bam, James's fingers found the neck again, playing sweet, sultry, lovely riffs that wove themselves around the older man until he looked all tangled up.

O.K., Catfish finally sighed, you got me.

As Catfish walked off the stage, Quick from his booth said, "Looks like we got us a mighty new young champion up there." His gaze swept the club. "We got anybody else out there got the brass to go up against him?"

Long pause. Shuffle, shuffle in the crowd. People were turning and staring toward Willie Lee, then back at the stage, where Maurice James, a sly smile on his face, still hung back from the spotlight.

"You see any ... contenders out there?" Quick went on. "Any ... old friends? Anybody we ain't ... seen in a while."

"Hey, how 'bout Willie Lee Reed?" Esmé called out. Josh laughed. Next to them, the kid himself was simply focused on the stage, not moving yet.

"Yeah, yeah, Willie Lee Reed," more of the audience picked up. "Come on, Willie Lee!"

"Well, ain't that a co-inky-dink," Quick said. "That's just the boy, um, man I got down here on this sheet of paper." Quick had no such sheet, but he mimed peering at one nonetheless. "Says here, Willie Lee Reed. That boy be back in the room?"

Willie Lee stayed seated. Josh leaned over and whispered, "Now's the time, killer."

The kid didn't move.

"Willie Lee?" The kid was staring at the stage, but also focused inside himself,

too. good-hearted cheers were ringing out around him, but he didn't seem to notice them.

Esmé poked Willie Lee. Didn't seem to notice.

"Come on," Josh said, nervous that Willie Lee might be chickening on them. "Everybody's with you, man."

Willie Lee kept his eyes tight on the stage, and everyone in the club kept their eyes tight on him. It looked like others were worrying he wasn't going to get up there. A long, nervous sigh ran through the room, but halfway through it, the kid stood up. Relief!

"Willie Lee Reed," Quick boomed through the p.a., "good to see you, son. We missed you. Tell me, where you been?"

The kid looked startled to be addressed. Held his dead focus on the high-conked Maurice James.

"Willie Lee, where you been? Been at that White House saying hello to my friend Miss Jacqueline?"

A laugh from the crowd.

"Oh, me," Willie Lee finally said. Josh could almost read the kid's thoughts: Like that song he'd been trying out with Sweet Home at the schoolhouse, To Hell and Back. But what Willie Lee said was a mumbled, "Um, here and there."

"All right, all right. It's the Here and There Kid! You goin' up on the stage, son?"

That was the question, and the audience held its breath again. Willie Lee just stood there, his no-name ax at his side. Then a visible shudder ran through him, and he started to make his way forward.

Loud applause from the friendly crowd. "Good, good," Quick said. "The Here and There Kid up against Mr. Tutti Frutti Sideman." A loud guffaw. "Go to it, you two."

Jimmy was watching Willie Lee take the stage with the same wariness that the challenger was watching him. It was curious, but they even looked a little alike, though Willie Lee's chin stuck out farther and his eyes were more like a sleeping snake's; and

Maurice James seemed so much shyer, though his processed hair flew higher over his forehead. Both men had a regal quality about them, and both men were approaching the other with caution.

It was clear right away that they were masters of their instrument; indeed, innovators. What was fascinating was how closely they seemed to understand each other.

The two men started out with a slow blues, no words, simply a bass-drum groove and both guitars lifting off over it. On the stage each man stayed away from the center, but not hugging sides; just giving each other room. They both played with heads tipping back, chins lifted, eyes hooded—concentration so deep they seemed to be slipping deeper into their own worlds.

Maurice James ground out a slow vamp, fingers teasing notes, then slamming his B string up in a step-and-a-half bend and letting it down so easy you could hear every microtone; Willie Lee was right there miming it, and answering it in his own intricate way. James cocked an ear on the kid, his mouth moving into a moué at the occasional startling note, then he'd step in, hit that same note, hit it again, then take the riffing off in a whole other way.

It was no longer the regular kind of Cutting Session, you play a twelve bar, then I play it, then you again—these two were trading solos at virtually the same time. And each matching the other: Bet, raise, counter bet, raise, counter bet, and all in the same piece of music, Maurice James's notes leading into Willie Lee's, leading back through James, then to Willie Lee—around and around, each turn increasing intensity and invention.

It was impossible to tell who was getting the better of the other.

Josh kept his gaze tight on his young friend. He knew instinctively that this was just the test Willie Lee needed, a strong player coming right at him, no time to worry it, just kick him back on his instincts and see how he flew. He was doing great. Each thrust Maurice James threw down, Willie Lee parried; then the challenger thrust freshly back. The notes they played glinted long and sharp and bright under the stage lights.

The audience was hushed, listening intently to this battle fought solely on musi-

cal terms—fought, so far, to a dead heat.

Then Willie Lee made his move. He played off Maurice James's syncopated riffs as perfectly as before, but his guitar flew up in his hands and pirouetted over his head. Flash! Notes spiraled out as magically as they had, but now he was playing with the guitar behind his back.

James took a step away, regarding this. It was his turn to take over the galloping tune, but he demurred. Willie Lee played on. He'd lowered his guitar now and was fingering it from between his spread-apart legs. The neck stuck way out between his legs, and he kept swaying it back and forth, just like it was a ... garden hose. Yeah, the kid was watering his lawn, making a hundred scintillating notes bloom.

At this innovative flash you couldn't say that Jimmy was stunned or even bemused, but he did let a look of concern cross his tight-eyed brow. Had he seen anything like this before? Josh thought: This kid's playing with Little Richard, he must know showmanship. But Richard played the piano. Willie Lee Reed was astonishing everyone on the guitar.

The audience started coming around. That's it, that's it, Josh was thinking, keep the music going, don't give an inch there, then blow the crowd out with your flash. And that was just what the kid did. Fingering brilliant notes and shot 'em out with his flash.

And kept going. Four, five minutes longer than he should've, spraying a thick burst of notes at Maurice James if he looked like he was ready to jump in, throwing the guitar behind his back again, up in the air, then pulling back and running the neck. Willie Lee was ... crazy! Although it sounded like he was only playing the one guitar, the way it looked—well, how many were there? Look, there's one in the air, one on the ground, one halfway out toward the lake. Willie Lee was spinning and twirling like an Arabian swordsman, all flashing blades and sliced-up silvery air.

Then the dervishing halted. Willie Lee caught his ax at his chest, stepped back, raised his left eyebrow, then gestured with the guitar neck to Maurice James with all the nonchalance in the world: O.K., I'm done. Your turn, Bud.

James looked unflustered. He took his time. Stepped forward to the lip of the

stage, letting the band choogle behind him, but not playing a note, just looking into the crowd, holding their eyes, letting everyone get a good look at him. Yes, he, like Willie Lee, was beautiful, with a thick though nicely sculpted nose, heavy, soulful lips, and brown eyes that held cool, deep knowledge.

Time for Jimmy to play. He held his red Stratocaster steady before him, but his fingers were all the way up the neck and yet somehow down by the nut at the same time. He wasn't moving in any way fancy, but suddenly the club swarmed with notes—thick and sharp as a nest of riled-up honey bees. Damn! If Willie Lee had sounded like he was playing just one guitar, and before James had sounded like two guitarists at once, now he sounded closer to three.

James wasn't moving, no flash, just standing in one spot playing. It was beautiful, powerful, soul-enraptured music, but the audience, dazzled by Willie Lee, had stopped paying his challenger much attention. Jimmy threw his body into each run of notes, pushing them further and faster with his shoulders, his hips ... with everything he had. But his purely sonic show couldn't capture the crowd, and it was clear he was beginning to know it. He held a distracted look for a moment; and a second later one of great intensity. O.K., you could see him say to himself, if this kid can play the flash, why can't I? He raised his guitar and started to bring it over his head, but he was oddly tentative. His fingers slipped, and a squirl of feedback leaped from his amp.

The audience, unused to such loud, unpleasant noise, flinched.

James tried to look unconcerned, but nerves were on him now. He manipulated his Stratocaster behind his head, just like Willie Lee had. His right hand fretted well enough, but he couldn't get his left hand over the right strings, and ... more feedback blared through the amp. It was a long, keening cry, almost human. Up went Jimmy's ears—he looked fascinated by the sounds he was discovering—and like that he bent into the buzzing, rasping noise, trying to make it work for him. But it was feedback nonetheless, and out of the 6-Eye audience rose a couple of hearty boos.

Maurice James was clearly shaken. Willie Lee stood back, tamping a rhythm on his guitar, staying out of James's way, graciously trying to help his competitor, but it was

too late.

“Willie Lee Reed!” a voice cried out. “Give the Cut to Willie Lee!”

“Willie Lee! Willie Lee!”

The kid hung back. Maurice James gazed at him, shooting arrows. It was Willie Lee’s turn to solo again, and he played a few quick riffs then backed off; no, it was clear he’d already won, and why should he continue? The crowd was saying he’d outplayed Maurice James; certainly had outflashed him.

But Jimmy wasn’t letting the Cut be over. As Willie Lee stood there, Jimmy moved to the lip of the stage and took off on his red Strat. He fired a furious paroxysm of notes, screeches and scrawls, undercut by that weirdly seductive feedback—notes as bombs, notes calling up the end of the world—then in huge frustration, he lifted his guitar high and swung it down at the wooden stage floor.

The first time Maurice James crashed his Strat against the floor more feedback exploded, and a beelike buzzing swelled out of the amplifier. He didn’t look angry though; what was odd was how devotional he appeared. James lifted the guitar again, and as if it were a metal ax, he swung it again against the stage, this time cracking the body off from the neck. The beelike buzzing grew louder; so did the boos from the crowd.

When the buzzing got so loud people were covering their ears, Quick came over from behind the bar and flicked off the switch behind James’s amp. The small red light flickered out.

Like that Maurice James left the stage, leaving his busted-up Stratocaster dead on the platform, then walked straight through the club and out into the night.

When Willie Lee came back to their table, Esmé leaped up and threw her arms around him, giving him a kiss. The kid looked surprised, even a little distracted.

“Brilliant,” Josh said, patting him on the back after Esmé had let him go. “Good job!”

Willie Lee fixed his white boy friend with his gaze. There was a subtle disappointment on him.

“Did you hear him?” he said in little more than a whisper.

“He was good.” Josh shrugged. “You were better.”

“But did you hear him?”

“Yeah?”

“He was playing like three men out there. Then that feedback—did you hear his feedback? Jeez!” The kid shook his head in disbelief.

“But you held him—you held him musically.”

“I ... don’t ... know.” Willie Lee brought his hands together before him, palms flat. “I don’t think people really heard what he was doing. But I did.”

“We all heard him,” Josh said. “We heard you take him.”

Willie Lee shook his head. “And that feedback—” The kid was mostly talking to himself now. “What if he got a handle on it?”

“Just noise,” Josh said. “Another kind of flash.”

“But what if he ... he gets it? What if he makes it music?”

Josh didn’t have any answer. The feedback had just sounded like incoherent buzzing to him.

“You did great,” Esmé said into the silence. “I think you’re all the way back.”

Willie Lee smiled at her. But then he said softly, mostly to himself: “No, no, I still got me an awful lot to learn.”