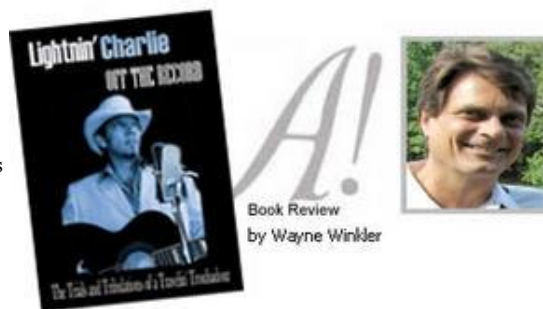


## Local Musician 'Pulls No Punches' Recalling Misadventures On The Road

### Off The Record: The Trials and Tribulations of a Travelin' Troubadour

BY WAYNE WINKLER

There are dozens of "autobiographical" books by famous entertainers describing the highs and lows of their lives in show business. But rarely do we get a glimpse of life for the journeyman entertainer, the regionally-known working musician who hasn't (yet) hit the big time, but still makes his or her living performing night after night, usually for little pay and sometimes not even that.



Charlie Dolinger, known to his fans as Lightnin' Charlie, has been a fixture of the Tri-Cities music scene for more than two decades. From April 2005 to March 2008, Charlie maintained a blog on his website (<http://www.lightnincharlie.com>). The most entertaining features of this blog were Charlie's reminiscences of various misadventures on the road, as he describes the sort of situations a working musician can get into when he is not insulated by a retinue of managers and security people.

Born in Miami, Florida in 1962, Charlie was bitten by the blues bug after seeing a performance by Stevie Ray Vaughan. Working with the Southside Sheiks and later fronting his own band, Lightnin' Charlie and the Upsetters, Charlie has built a solid regional following from the Tri-Cities to the Carolina coast and beyond.

While his act is solidly rooted in the blues (and Charlie is a serious scholar of the genre), he is a consummate entertainer and can knock out a Hank Williams song or an Elvis Presley ballad at the drop of his ever-present hat. Yet the life of a working musician is rarely glamorous; the big money doesn't come flowing in, and it takes a dedicated and business-minded person to make a living as an entertainer.

Charlie's memoir isn't like many recent rock autobiographies, filled with tales of excesses, addiction, and recovery. Charlie is a devout Christian, a devoted family man, and has recently forsaken playing in bars in favor of more sober, appreciative audiences.

You would think that an upstanding business- and family-man like Charlie would manage to stay out of trouble. But musicians are trouble magnets, and some of the most entertaining tales in *Off The Record* involve the misadventures of his bandmates, many of whom did not share Charlie's abstemious habits. Names are changed (slightly) to protect the guilty, but longtime fans, known as "Lightnin' Bugs," will have fun figuring out who was who. After reading a few of these tales, one is not surprised at the turnover in Charlie's band; one can only speculate how some band members lasted as long as they did without being fired or incarcerated.

While the post-gig altercations provide some of the loonier moments in *Off The Record*, Charlie describes a

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"Full Figure #3" from Frederick Hart's "Ex Nihilo" sculpture. This limited edition and other pieces by Hart are on display at Bristol Regional Medical Center. The exhibit is on loan from King College and the sculpture owners, Dennis and Kathy Lee Owens.

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few instances where the gig itself was memorably disastrous. A live television appearance was derailed by a malfunctioning guitar amplifier, then deteriorated completely during an interview with a female host whose make-up clearly did not cover a rather heavy mustache. Another gig with an old-time blues performer, a tiny octogenarian known as the "Snake Woman," seemed promising until someone slipped her some whiskey, which turned her into an unmanageable maniac.

Promoters and club owners are both the lifeblood and bane of a musician's existence, and Charlie pulls no punches in describing the "refrigerator with a head" who managed one local club, the recovering alcoholic club owner who "fell off the wagon" one Halloween and wound up unconscious at the end of the evening (for which the band was not paid), and the genetically-challenged daughter of a rock and roll pioneer who booked (and stiffed) the band in Memphis. Charlie has special scorn for the various organizations that exist to "preserve" the blues, and he bemoans the state of the modern blues scene.

Since the book was first a monthly blog, there is a good deal of what might be considered filler, including a few of Charlie's political rants and pet peeves (what do you have against bicyclists, Charlie?) — but these, along with the autobiographical material, give us a fuller portrait of the man behind the Stratocaster. And for all of Charlie's (mostly) good-natured griping about club owners, former bandmates, and liberals, what emerges from *Off The Record* is a portrait of a happy man who loves his family, his God, and his chosen profession. Lightnin' Charlie is a rich man indeed.

**About the reviewer: Wayne Winkler is director of public radio station WETS-FM (89.5 MHz) and host of "Blue Monday," heard Monday afternoons from 12 to 4 p.m.**

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