

## Traveling Troubadour Tells Tales in New Book



Lightnin' Charlie plays at the Pickin' Porch at the Bristol Mall  
photo by David Crigger/Bristol Herald Courier



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BRISTOL, Va. – Night after night, Lightnin' Charlie Dolinger played his heart out to a flock of fans. But, in the lounge of a local hotel, the blues-rock musician wondered just how much respect

he was getting from the hotel owner – a man who consistently called him “Guitar Boy” – or from a manager who Dolinger called “a refrigerator with a head.”

“It was a lucrative situation for me,” Dolinger said.

Exhausted, still, the 47-year-old Dolinger said, he finally had to quit the gig after three years.

That’s when he turned over “A New Leaf” – what actually became the name of Dolinger’s critically acclaimed 2005 record, released on Blue Chip Records with songs including Samuel Maghett’s “You Don’t Love Me,” Freddy King’s “Takin’ Care of Business,” plus originals like “Miami Tammi.”

As it turned out, “A New Leaf” was really only the beginning of a new era for the popular Bristol-area bluesman. Within weeks, he began producing a blog on his Web site, telling fans – people the guitarist calls “Lightnin’ Bugs” – all his troubles and dreams.

After three years, he realized that blog provided enough fodder to produce a book.

“People have asked me, through the years, a very valid question: ‘What is it like to play music for a living, which I’ve done for 26 years?’ ”

Dolinger laughed.

“The answer would take 56 years to answer,” he said. “It’s a real colorful, crazy bunch of misadventures that anyone runs into. If you’re on the road, you’re privy to a real supernatural set of circumstances.”

Dolinger sums it all up with “Off the Record: The Trials and Tribulations of a Travelin’ Troubador.”

This project – published by Bristol, Tenn., -based Aaron Book Publishing – contains 328 pages of tales ranging from “Buckets, Broomsticks, Bullhorns” to “Lightnin’ and the Snake Lady” and “My Record: One’s at the CD Store, And One’s At The Police Station.”

“I started writing these blogs online,” Dolinger said. “And I quickly found out, by checking statistics on my website, the traffic increased considerably. The more outrageous the story, the better received it was. Folks would e-mail from Europe and Australia.”

A native of Miami Beach, Fla., Dolinger moved to Bristol in 1979 and soon became known as a guy who could play guitar like any professional blues-rock master. He also could play his six-string behind his head.

In “Off the Record,” Dolinger writes about what he calls “the old days in Bristol,” saying, “One of the best fights in the book is in the train station ... This was a fight between patrons and the band – it was a bass player, in particular.”

In some cases, Dolinger changed the names of people involved. But those changes, he said, chuckling, are “just slightly.”

Despite the wild tales in the book, Dolinger had a higher calling with this project.

“What I really wanted the book to be was my testimony as a Christian – as a man who has been changed from the inside out,” he said. “And I wanted to make some of the really ribald kind of stories have a meaning – a context.”

Dolinger tells about how he quit drinking.

“I used to use Jack Daniel’s at a gig like Frank Sinatra,” he said. “I was lucky to not to have been an alcoholic.”

Now a resident of Johnson City, Tenn., Dolinger lives with his wife, the former Beth Clark of Honaker, Va., and their two young sons.

Today, too, he’s still playing music. Once a month, Dolinger plays a show at the Cranberry Thistle, a small club on Main Street in Jonesborough, Tenn.

“And I do a lot of church concerts – charity fundraisers,” Dolinger said. “I do gigs for about every charity you can imagine.”

You might say “Lightnin’ Charlie” has a new spark.

“For my whole career, I wanted to play good music for good people,” Dolinger said. “I wanted to entertain – to have people to hear music played honestly, whether they were 8 or 80.”

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