

## INDIE SCENE



## MICHAEL WILLIAMS

Neither Hendrix nor his heritage keeps this guitar hero from reaching beyond the blues



MICHAEL WILLIAMS IS WELL AWARE that he seems unusually cheery for a man who claims the blues as a birthright. "At first, I just wanted to be a guitar player," he explains. "I never wanted to be a singer or a songwriter. But I found myself being pigeonholed and strictly defined as a blues player. That wasn't intriguing to me. I wanted to be able to display more aspects of what I do other than the blues." Contributing to Williams' buoyancy at the moment is the fact that he's currently tending to his two small children at home in Los Angeles. "I try to keep my music toned down so as not to disturb the neighbors," he notes with a chuckle. "Sometimes we've had a couple of complaints that it's too loud. I'm thinking of moving out to the hills so I don't have to worry anymore."

Truth be told, L.A. is one of two places Williams calls home. The other is Seattle, where he migrated over a decade ago to pursue his career and find his muse. "I headed off to Seattle to free myself from narrow typecasting and open up my perspective to larger possibilities," he says. The fact that Seattle was the hometown of Williams' hero, Jimi Hendrix, didn't hurt.

After connecting with Hendrix's most trusted studio collaborator, producer and engineer Eddie Kramer, the formula for Williams' new *Fire Red* album was complete. "We sent him a couple of tracks and he liked them," Williams says. "Next thing we knew, we were in the studio recording this album with him. It was like we were wish-listed off our feet. Eddie is an amazing guy—he's the ear of a rock 'n' roll god."

For his part, Williams has an impeccable blues pedigree. His father was guitarist Larry "Junior Medlow" Williams, an indelible part of the Texas music circuit throughout the '70s and '80s—although the younger Williams grew up surfing on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. "You can say part of the reason I sing the blues is because I no longer live there," he acknowledges with a laugh. Williams' debut, 2008's *King of the Dead*, was a no-holds-barred blues album. But for *Fire Red*, he and his Michael Williams Band—including keyboardist Ryan Shea Smith, bassist Gerald "Tugboat" Turner II and drummer Darin Watkins—opted to incorporate elements including rock and R&B, and even record a track ("Entre Tus Ojos") in

Spanish. "All music comes from a root, and blues is the root that we all were spawned from," Williams figures. "So I try to explore different sounds while still focusing on where it all came from."

Consequently, Williams' approach has evolved over time. "I was drawn to the blues initially because I had so many emotions to release," he says. "At first playing the blues felt like an outlet to get things off my chest, a way to empty my trash from time to time." Nevertheless, he felt limited sticking to just one style. "Growing up as a child of a blues musician exposed me to the pitfalls of pursuing that very narrow approach," he says. "Plus, there wasn't much money in that scene. My dad had to play four gigs a day to make ends meet. I also observed poor career decisions that were made on my father's behalf and poor decisions that he himself made. I knew if I wanted to do something with my career, it had to be bigger than the blues." Just another reason Williams keeps his goals broad and his mind open. "I hope it comes across that I'm not just a blues artist," he says. "That's my mission statement."

—Lee Zimmerman