

# Slide Guitarist's Gumbo Fever

By Eve Zibart

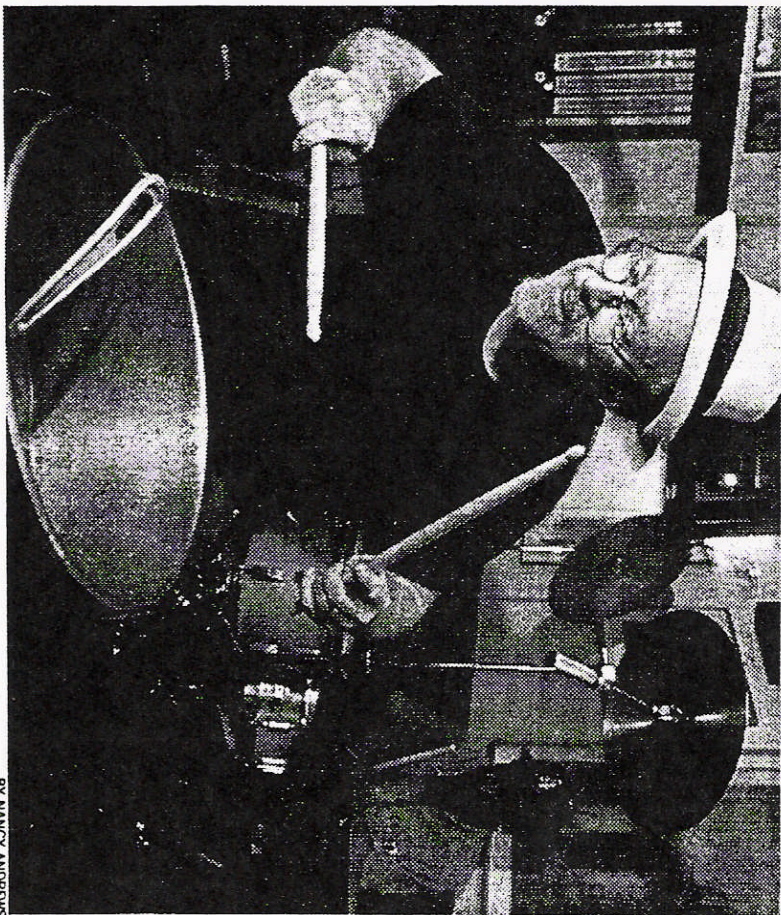
**B**ROTHERS AND SISTERS of the blues, adepts of the iron cauldron, priors of the pepper and sacred hearts of the roux, praise the laid and pass the ammunition—in this case, the hot sauce. It's the gumbo communion, a soul (and sole) revival, Brother Yum's "Travelin' Salvation Show and boogie cure: The Sauce Boss is back in town.

Almost every hotshot guitarist talks about "cookin'" on stage, but only Bill Wharton takes it literally, concocting a huge pot of gumbo to the 12-bar blues. Part circuit preacher, part faith healer and part

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snake-oil salesman, Wharton conjures up a low-country charm against urban decline. Gumbo, he says, is the bouillabaisse from hell, and "blues is the cure for the blues." In other words, clean your plate, clean your palate, lift your heart and hit the dance floor. If the vision tempts you, head to Tornado Alley on Wednesday, where Wharton and his band, the Ingredients, will be flashing spats, Strats and Panama hats.

The secret ingredient to this recipe, the Philosopher's Stone that makes gold in his iron pot, is Wharton's homemade trademark sauce, Liquid Summer, not a thin Louisiana-style pure-pepper essence but a thick, almost Caribbean chunky burnt-orange relish that packs a major punch. And it should, being distilled from the daiji pepper, a ripen-to-gold close cousin of the incendiary habanero that Wharton and his wife cultivate on their four-acre farm near Tallahassee. Wharton carries cases of the stuff around with him (\$7 a bottle, safely prepared to state health regulations), which otherwise you have to mail-order from his



Guitarist/cook Bill Wharton mixes up some gumbo while his band, the Ingredients, plays the blues.

BY NANCY ANDREWS

Florida home, so put a couple away. Buy Wharton's first album, incidentally, and you get free recipes on the sleeve.

On the other hand, you might well buy his albums for the music. Wharton is not only a fine slide guitarist (20 years ago, he walked outside to find what he calls "the guitar from God," a steel-body National, leaning against his daughter's bicycle) but serious about the blues in an almost evangelical fashion. He respects its origins as a field hand's survival kit, and looks to ease his audience's tensions and relieve their emotional starvation with a communal meal. Music and food is an old elixir, a participatory, not a spectator, event.

And with a logic perhaps peculiar to the South, Wharton treats the blues most seriously by turning them on their head. This is raucous, raunchy, finger-lickin' music,

often with lyrics about cooking and with a frehanded equal-opportunity irreverence. (Anybody who can rhyme "catfish" and "Baptist" has to be from the South.) With a scholar's devotion, he has revived not only some early Robert Johnson tunes but songs from Florida natives Tallahassee Tight ("Tallahassee Blues") and Tampa Red ("Let Me Play With Your Poodler"). With its elastic rhythms, half party, half protest, the blues offers an open frame for Wharton's stringings and seasonings and humorous homilistic sermons.

It may be a gimmick, but then, what isn't? And it makes for a good wind-up, wind-down time. As any initiate can tell you, any gumbo worth its name starts with a roux—flour cooked in oil until it darkens to a voodoo sludge. This takes a very long time (a distressed cook of our acquaintance once called

up Julia Child at home to complain that after several hours, her roux had still not achieved the full "walnut" color Child's recipe ordained; the great one replied, "Settle for mahogany"). Wharton solves the problem by packing his own giant jars of roux made back at home between tours.

Even so, Wharton is no 60-minute man. It takes a couple of sets for the gumbo to simmer, topped off periodically with guitar solos, philosophical ruminations, drum rolls on the cauldron rim, liberal doses of Liquid Summer and bowls of shrimp or sausage or chicken or oysters or whatever crustaceous creatures happen to be handy. Gumbo is one of those things that suddenly *looks* like gumbo, undergoes some mysterious transformation of texture or genetic recombination and announces its perfection. (Doctor Nightlife waits till it gets to look a little like Spanish moss, but she uses more okra than the Sauce Boss; Wharton considers that it should resemble the primordial ooze and "squooosh up between the toes of your taste buds." We get shivers just thinking about that.)

Bill Wharton & the Ingredients rock and boil Wednesday at Tornado Alley (\$6; 301/929-0795). Wheelchair access is very good.

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