



## Texas Hall Of Musical Excellence (H.O.M.E.)

*The Texas Hall Of Musical Excellence honors excellence in music right here in the Lone Star State*

*This month we induct our 72nd member, Johnny "Guitar" Watson*

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### ***Johnny "Guitar" Watson – five decades of excellence***

Johnny Watson was born in Houston on February 3rd, 1935. His father was a piano player who could reportedly play some of the best ragtime music ever heard in the fifth ward, and the piano became Johnny's first instrument.

As a teenager, Johnny met and performed with some of the great artists who appeared in Houston, including Johnny Copeland, and Albert Collins. When he was 15 years old, Johnny moved with his family to Los Angeles. "Young John Watson," as he was billed on a 1953 single record, soon developed his own gift for showmanship, entering and winning a variety of talent contests and shows. This exposure led to work as a sideman in various West Coast jump blues and jazz bands of the time, including those led by Chuck Higgins and Amos Milburn. He played piano and sang vocals with Higgins band on 'Motorhead Baby' for the Combo label in 1952. The song was a minor hit, and the band was invited to perform with Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. When young Johnny saw Brown perform, he immediately took up the guitar full time.

Incidentally, Johnny's first guitar was an old handmade guitar built by a legendary Mexican-American guitar maker in Houston that had been passed on to Johnny from his grandfather, a preacher, on the condition that he promise not to play the blues on it. Johnny later admitted that 'that was the first thing I played'.

Watson signed with Federal Records in 1953. There he recorded 'Space Guitar', utilizing reverb and feedback, an unusual technique at the time. Although the song wasn't a big hit, it was later recognized as one of the most influential songs in the history of modern music. In 1954, a movie called "Johnny Guitar" was released, and show promoters started calling him "Johnny Guitar Watson".

Watson toured in the 50s and 60s with such luminaries as Guitar Slim and Little Richard and acquired a reputation for exciting stage theatrics. "I used to play the guitar standing on my hands," he recalled, "I had a 150-foot cord and I could get on top of the auditorium – those things Jimi Hendrix was doing, I started that shit." It is entirely possible that Hendrix followed Watson's example, for the two musicians shared similar backgrounds. Watson had taken the possibilities of the blues guitar to the edge, and this edge was Hendrix's starting point. Both guitarists were active as sidemen and session players during the early and middle 1960s, backing leading soul-music acts of the day in California.

Watson scored a number six rhythm-and-blues hit with "Cuttin' In" on the King label in 1962. During the 1960s he also teamed frequently with vocalist Larry Williams, with whom he toured successfully and recorded the much-covered "Mercy Mercy Mercy" in 1967. In 1972, once again showing a knack for identifying the top marketing talent on the West Coast, Watson signed with the Berkeley, California-based Fantasy Records, which featured an impressive roster of soul musicians. He notched some minor hits for the label, produced recordings by other artists, and continued to find his services as a guitarist in demand, appearing on Frank Zappa's 1975 release, *One Size Fits All*. Zappa cited Watson's 1956 single "Three Hours Past Midnight" as the piece of music that had inspired him to become a guitarist himself.

Watson scored numerous chart successes in the 1970s with a unique guitar-based sound that mixed the feel and instrumental technique of the blues with the bass-heavy sound of funk. Admired by guitarists specializing in various styles of music, Watson also excelled as a vocalist. His singing was by turns sexy, humorous, and political; his guitar playing exploited the full range of the instrument's powers. He was also a prolific songwriter.

Full-scale chart success finally came Watson's way when he signed with the British-owned DJM label in 1976. Given complete creative control, Watson rose to the challenge with a series of recordings that merged his blues guitar skills with the emerging funk style, which was rhythmic, laid-back, and bass-heavy.

Popular music is often dominated by young people, and Watson's emergence into the spotlight at the age of 41 was remarkable. His first two albums for DJM, *Ain't That a Bitch* (1976) and *A Real Mother for Ya* (1977) both were certified as gold records for sales of over 500,000 copies each. The title track of the latter album was a major hit and provides an excellent illustration of Watson's style on the DJM recordings. Handling vocals, guitar, and bass, he topped off his blues-funk fusion with a tense, sardonic rendition of lyrics that described a set of difficult circumstances; Watson beautifully delivered such fine rhymes as "That's a real mother for ya/Make you wanna run for cover."

Two other aspects of Watson's style seemed to point the way to the incipient rap movement: Lengthy spoken interludes in such recordings as the 1978 "Gangster of Love", and a group of songs that dealt frankly with poverty and the ghetto.

In the 80s, Johnny got lost and wandered around. Some say he got all fucked up on drugs, others say he had his heart broke by some evil woman. He was running with gangsters, and his closest friend at the time died in a homicide that was initially ruled a suicide. Whatever it was, Johnny's career dried up for a whole decade, then suddenly bloomed again after a long hiatus.

The 1990s brought a creative resurgence for Watson with the release of the album *Bow Wow* in 1994, which was nominated for a Grammy. In March of 1996 he was honored with a Pioneer Award from the Rhythm & Blues Foundation, and his performing career appeared fully reinvigorated. His phone rang nonstop with offers.

Jet magazine called Johnny "Guitar" Watson "one of rhythm and blues' most influential musicians." Watson was a true musical chameleon, tackling blues, R&B, jazz, soul, and funk, often combining genres in novel ways. Watson won the admiration of everyone from Lightnin' Hopkins to Jimi Hendrix to Prince, his influence pervading five decades of American music. Though he had hits in all genres, his greatest commercial success came with the series of funk albums he released in the late '70s and early '80s. Apart from chart action and strong sales, his recordings from that period have also been extremely influential in hip-hop world. Countless rap songs—featuring Dr. Dre, Jay-Z, Mary J. Blige, Redman, Montell Jordan, and many others—have sampled such funk classics as "Superman Lover" and "Ain't That a Bitch."

When Watson died at the age of 61, he was receiving the most modern form of musical homage: rappers and hip-hoppers such as Ice Cube and Snoop Dogg were "sampling" his recordings. Johnny had a heart attack onstage and died a bluesman's death onstage while performing at the Yokohama Blues Cafe in Japan on May 17, 1996.

**GATOR**