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# Doing Time in Waltz Time

A Memoir of Ten Years in Prison  
Playing and Teaching Music

by Jailhouse Guitar Willie

This is a work of nonfiction. All people, places  
and incidents described in it are real.

However, the names of some  
individuals have been changed to either protect  
the good or prevent the glorification of the bad.

To **Helen** and **Dona**,  
may your wisdom and  
compassion spread to others

## DOING TIME IN WALTZ TIME

### Part One: The Present

1

“Hi, Willie! How you be?”

“I be good,” I answered without thinking.

Moments later when this large inmate who had passed me moved beyond my vision to another part of the Federal Correctional Institution in Petersburg, Virginia—known unofficially as well as officially as FCI Petersburg—I tossed the words around in my head.

I don’t speak like that. My name isn’t even Willie.

Or do I? And is it?

It was then that I decided to keep the name, though not the words. Why not the name? The one given me at birth didn’t mean much anymore. My political enemies had dragged it though the sewers. Simply because they had more clout than I did. If the tables had been reversed, I could have been the one doing the dragging.

Of course I would have opposed the urge. Would have resisted as best I could. And I think I would have succeeded, if only because music had been a big part of my life. Yes, even then. And when you’ve got music—the ability to make it and to draw listeners—you don’t need other crutches. You’ve already proved your worth to the world as someone to be reckoned with. You’ve touched people. Caused a reaction in them. In their emotions.

You don’t have to pass ridiculous laws and then keep building prisons to put people in who have the good sense to ignore them. Not when people want your music. Not when they respect you for who you are rather than for what you do.

By saying I had followers in my pre-prison days, I don’t mean to imply that it reached big numbers. Obviously it didn’t or I would never have had to

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endure this “correctional” treatment that’s been going on for ten years.

A decade.

A fin.

And for what? Because my music—and granted my manners—were different from others? Aren’t we supposed to live in a pluralistic society? Why should I step to the rhythm of other people? Just because they like four-quarter time and I like three-quarter waltz time? If it’s good enough for Chopin, it’s good enough for me.

People move too quickly. Their brains get jumbled. Their feet twisted. Their guitar strings broken.

Not before prison and not during prison did I conform musically. Nor will I after. About other areas of my life I won’t comment. How do I know who you are and that you don’t want to keep me in prison longer?

Just as importantly, *you* don’t know who I am. Why would you trust what I have to say if I told you I’d “gone straight”? That prison had actually been *good* for me.

One thing I will tell you: my has music improved a lot during my ten-year prison stay. As you read this account you’ll see how that occurred. Who influenced me; under what circumstances. How I turned prison into a music college with good professors. They wore stripes like me. Sometimes literally because the striped uniform is coming back in some areas. Such were the harsh get-tough-on-convicts 1990s. I lived through them and am now ready to sing about it. Why just talk when I have an instrument handy. It’s something I got used to doing behind bars. And something I’ll continue to do

So how does someone who has never purposely hurt anyone in his life—neither physically nor financially—wind up in prison? I’m the last person to ask if you want a rational answer. Not that I don’t want to give it but I’m not sure I can. Self-analysis is like performing surgery on yourself, or representing yourself at trial, or trying to convince yourself that what you’ve known to be true is false. I just don’t know how to do that. And I don’t think I have the stomach to try.

On top of this, my experience of being hit over the head by the heavy hand of government—a hand that resembles a sledgehammer— is not unique. I’ve run into many people on the inside who’d been similarly bludgeoned. Some worse than I.

Most of the guys I met there didn’t even have a trial. Too scared. Not of the truth but of the judge. Knew what could happen if they dared exercise their

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constitutional right to their day in court before their *peers*. A jury is as reliable in finding facts from fiction as a mob. Lawyers on both sides understand that juries act on emotions more than anything else. Touch the right ones in your opening or closing and you can sleep through the rest of the trial. Some lawyers have.

It's a fallacy to think that juries believe that people brought before them are innocent until proven guilty. More likely they believe the opposite. That where there's smoke there's fire. How can people be arrested for nothing? Hauled in front of judges for no legitimate reason.

Rarely do people stop to think that the laws themselves are often wrong. Or that the accused did something to piss someone off. Someone in a position to piss on them. Someone who has the power, as my political enemies did, to piss away ten years of my life.

During the course of this book I'll cover the injustice done to me as well as to other men I got to know in prison. They're fine musicians, and didn't deserve incarceration. I know that because I knew them. Saw their legal papers. Grilled them over long periods of time. Understood from my own plight how screwing en masse can happen.

You'll see me being objective about them. Easier than I can with myself. Pain can blunt your perceptions. That's why my goal is to sing songs instead of talking. Maybe then the pain will start to subside.

Don't think I'm ungrateful for the pain. It's improved my playing enormously. Particularly the blues. I'll go so far as to say that whoever sings the blues without going to prison has a big handicap.

The moment that Ronald heard me singing on the compound, he saw me as the genuine article. That's why he didn't ask me my name but crowned me with what he believed to be the ultimate compliment.

"Willie?" I had asked him when he first hit me with it.

"Sure," he said. "That be you. Willie like Willie Nelson."

Those be strong words. I didn't want to risk losing the glow I got from them by asking anything further. That be silly. So I just smiled and accepted. After all, Willie Nelson is a damned good guitarist. So be it.

Ronald proved to be on the level. He believed that I was really *that* good. One thing you learn as a performer: never argue with a fan. Particularly when you're both in prison. They know where you live. More, where your guitar is stored. If you're Jailhouse Guitar Willie, losing your ax is like parting with your life.

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Willie Nelson has a name for his guitar. Trigger. He and that nylon-string Martin have been together for many decades. The guitar is so battered and worn, it has a hole in it. But when the IRS came a-calling in the early 1990s, he wouldn't give it up. Everything else could go—including the profits from his next album—but not Trigger. He'd rather die or, the modern equivalent, go to jail first.

### 2

I'm in the chow hall and the line is moving swiftly. Good thing it's not fried chicken day or the wait would be much longer. But today—when the prison is serving its “mystery” meatloaf—there's hardly a wait. On liver days the line is even shorter.

The worst part of waiting for food here is hearing the complaining of the guys around you.

“This motherfucking chow hall needs to be condemned,” one says.

“I've been down 15 years and I've never seen such shit,” says another.

“The motherfucking motherfucker who runs it ought to be motherfucking shot,” says a third.

This is the worst thing about being on a prison chow line. Hearing the negative talk. Waiting in itself presents no problem since I always come prepared.

I pull out some pages from *Guitar World Acoustic*. I hated to cut up such a good magazine but what choice did I have? Books and magazines aren't allowed in the chow hall, so such a move is necessary. Another thing I do is bring lyrics of songs I'm trying to memorize. But today I'm in no mood to do that. Your head has to be right to fill it with song, and mine isn't at the moment.

That's because a correctional officer—a CO or, in old days, a guard—on duty in the prison housing building where I sleep had a bad attitude this morning. There's nothing like getting harassed first thing in the day to put you in a sour mood. It's like getting woken up with a pale of cold feces.

I'm now coming to the front of the line and the daily catch doesn't turn out to be mystery meatloaf after all. Nothing new about advertising one thing here and presenting something different. Fortunately it turns out to be a favorite of mine. I happily accept my slice of pizza.

It's a cardboard imitation of what you get on the outside. And it's cold. But for prison pizza, it's not bad. I've had worse.

I started out in Lorton in this 10-year bit. There I did a year. At Lorton they didn't know the meaning of the word pizza.

From Lorton, I entered the Florida prison system, my home for the next

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five years. There they served pizza, but it was their means of inflicting abuse on inmates. Since you, hungry reader, may be having a meal shortly, I won't spoil it by giving you a detailed description of the Florida concoction.

From Florida, the feds got me. And kept me for the next four years.

Picture yourself moving from a dumpster to a badly managed Motel 6 and you'll appreciate the improvement I experienced in going to the superior feds. It was a big one.

Here in this federal "correctional" facility there's even a choice of soft drinks, all of which I avoid. A performer has to watch his waist. And his teeth, especially when in prison. It can take a year to get a dental appointment here.

With pizza on my green plastic tray, I go to the salad bar. I'd heard rumors while in Florida prison that the feds had such a thing but I didn't believe it. I didn't want to get my hopes up. Like relying on a family member who promises to visit. Maybe she'll come and maybe she won't

I pile the lettuce high as I look around for a place to sit. I've had enough negativism on the line without sitting with men who don't appreciate what life has to offer, even prison life. The last thing I want to hear is someone calling the food crap. It's like a friend saying your shit stinks and wondering how you can be in the same room—presumably the bathroom—with it. Never realizing that you have to take life as it comes. Such as it is.

Happily, I spot Ronald, see a vacant seat at his table. I don't care who the other two seated there are. With the president of my fan club at hand, I know this won't be bad.

"You be expecting someone?" I say as I Hoover protectively over the empty chair.

"Year," Ronald says as he digs into one of the three slices of pizza on his plate, the result of having friends in the kitchen who tripled his portion, "that be you."

It's his way of saying a pal is always welcome. A guitar hero like me, especially.

We eat in silence. No sense trading spit at the table. The other two guys especially might not like it.

Soon they leave, allowing Ronald and I to be alone. Not that there's any intimacy in this setting. Few train stations are a noisy. Men on line that snakes around the hall yell to friends at tables.

"Where were you at the motherfucking baseball game we played last night?"

"Did you catch that new joint on TV?"

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“Guess what motherfucker got locked up in our dorm and went to the hole?”

This last question is directed at Ronald, who’s trying to be civilized by not answering. But the guy on the line raises his voice. He won’t be ignored.

Keep in mind that some of these men have known each other forever. And I don’t mean only during the zillion years they’ve spent in prison. They come from communities where getting incarcerated is more common than going to college. A *lot* more. So they travel, arrive and settle into their new higher education abodes called prison together.

Ronald finally answers the man, using a nickname for him that shows familiarity if not necessarily respect. The answer is so bland, so noncommittal I forget it instantly. But it does the job of shutting the guy up. I turn to Ronald.

“How long before you get out of here?”

Even as the words fill the air I know I’ve made a mistake asking.

This is not proper etiquette among inmates. For one thing, you’re not minding your own business. For another, if the person has a long time to go, you’re inflicting needless pain.

I remember during one of my stays in the hole how a guy asked my friend Terry that question. Why the questioner breached this code of prison ethics I can only ascribe to Terry’s fine singing voice. Which he used a lot to entertain us in the hole. Terry aimed to take advantage of his captive audience there.

He showed his boundless energy in belting out one song after the other. Though unaccompanied, you could almost hear the band, orchestra and strings behind him. Morning, noon and night in the hole he gave his concerts. You didn’t have a choice but to attend.

But no one complained. The guy sang without stopping. Singing everything he knew. A wide repertoire indeed. Each number propelled by force and emotion.

The man who asked him about the length of his sentence felt Terry needed to share his talent with the outside world as soon as possible. Surely someone this good didn’t deserve to be kept out of circulation much longer.

Then came Terry’s shocking answer. He had a number of years remaining on his sentence that seemed almost beyond belief.

Keep in mind that this man is harmless, sedate, and personable. A singer, for Christ’s sake!

After Terry’s answer echoed on the tier, there was silence. Terry didn’t like that because it served to let the years sink in.

“But it ain’t so bad,” he said. “At least not until some motherfucker asks

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me about it.”

When we heard Terry laugh we knew the time had come to breathe again. We did that even if we couldn't join him in his lightness.

So many songs he knows. He doesn't need all that time to learn more.

### 3

When Ronald answers by telling me of his own incredible sentence, I follow his lead by taking it in stride. Not even blinking. Chewing my food evenly and forcing myself to swallow normally.

He's not a young man so he knows not to let something this trivial item upset him. I say trivial because I've discovered that there's little—if any—physical torture involved in incarceration. It's all mental.

And that means an antidote can be found if you search in the same place. The key is to condition your mind to be unaffected by the limitations of confinement, the rigors of daily routine, the separation from loved ones. To find a way to make these hardships work for you.

Some do it with art. Others through writing and poetry. Some through religion. Many with books. An equal number at least through exercise and working out.

And some with music.

You make the isolation, separation and treadmill work for you. Once you get past the pain, you see that you're circumstances are ideal for concentration. To plan, study and execute what you want to achieve.

You only have to make up your mind about what it will be.

John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrims Progress*, became a great writer in prison.

Chuck Colson, head of Prison Fellowship Ministries, turned into an important religious leader.

Jimmy Santiago Baca wrote poetry, eventually published as books.

John Attner, my cellmate for a time at Petersburg, became a Charles Atlas lookalike.

And Merle Haggard—several of whose prison songs I perform—morphed into an outstanding songwriter.

You'd think that having your loved ones around would help achieve your most ambitious goals. But you'd be wrong. Contentment breeds mediocrity. And distraction affects productivity.

Surprisingly, routine doesn't hurt creativity. It helps because your mind isn't occupied with such mundane things as meals, rent, clothing and

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transportation.

All necessities are given to you in prison. You're handed them on a tin or plastic platter though not a silver one.

This leaves your mind free to travel anywhere your imagination can go. Books help. Some people start reading for the first time in prison.

I don't mean becoming literate, although that also happens. I'm talking about focusing on books. Really getting into them. Either a select few or one after the other. Whether the Bible, the encyclopedia or a certain category of fiction or nonfiction. I've never met so many well-read, intellectual motherfuckers in my life.

Some may have been rough around the edges before prison. Indeed, I put myself in that category. But in prison the process of shaping formed them into polished diamonds.

This brings me to my own story, of which I am heartily proud.

I'm one of those who became literate in prison.

Started to read for the first time.

First gradually, timidly. Then more smoothly. Finally I came to read like a whirlwind.

Now for the kicker.

I'm not talking about reading words, sentences and books, which I knew how to do before prison, although I doubled my speed and quadrupled my comprehension in prison.

I'm talking about reading music. The stuff that Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin wrote, sometimes played. That George Gershwin, Richard Rogers and Cole Porter penned. That Bob Marley, Bob Dylan and Bob Commory, this last Bob having sung with me in the Petersburg prison choir, created.

I now read them all. And read them well.

Put some sheet music in front of me and a guitar in my hand and I'll play the piece exactly. Note for note. Whether written hundreds of years ago or this morning.

Since learning to read music many new worlds have opened to me. Specifically, the worlds of show music, pop, R and B, Christian music, Jewish music, and the list goes on. You don't have to sing a song for me to learn it. Just show me the music. I'll play it more accurately than you can sing it, unless you're one of those super-professional singers with perfect pitch. Then I'll match you.

I'm like my friend Robert "Bo" Ayers who spent a whopping four months in prison shortly after I arrived at Petersburg. He got a light sentence because he got lucky. Got a decent judge, a compassionate prosecutor, a capable defense

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lawyer. In short, a break; something that's becoming increasingly rare.

In truth, Bo never deserved to be in prison at all. He belonged in an orchestra where he'd have a chance to make money and pay back those he pilfered from.

I didn't get the whole story from him about his conviction. It had something to do with embezzlement. He'd apparently been a trusted member of a production company. But that trust wasn't warranted. Bo took more than his share. His wife, he told me, needed things that Bo couldn't give her. He felt pressured to provide.

When the offense was discovered he lost everything: his position, his freedom and, ironically, his wife.

When I say Bo got a break by spending only four months in prison, I don't mean to diminish that punishment. It proved traumatic to him. I only hope he's recovered by now. Indeed, that he's still alive.

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