

Peoria's first "rock star"

Byron "Wild Child" Gipson played in Little Richard's shadow, but he made his own lasting music

By Chris Young

If Little Richard was "the innovator, the originator and the architect of rock 'n' roll," then central Illinois' Byron Gipson was one of his early apprentices with a front row seat to many of Richard's legendary performances and recordings.



During 1955 and 1956 Gipson traveled with Little Richard on his first American tour, acting as Richard's road manager, driver and bodyguard (possibly saving the star's life on one occasion). Gipson was also present for many of Richard's recording sessions in New Orleans that produced such hits as "Long Tall Sally," "Rip It Up," and "Ready Teddy."

During that same period, Gipson himself released two singles as Byron "Slick" Gipson and the Sliders for the same label as Richard, Specialty Records. He also helped write hit songs for Richard and Lloyd Price among others, although he was rarely credited for these efforts.

In 1958, Gipson recorded two singles with Freddie Ticken & The Rockers for Hit Records including "Uncle John," a song he had written for Little Richard as an answer to "Long Tall Sally." He continued to record sporadically throughout the 1960's.

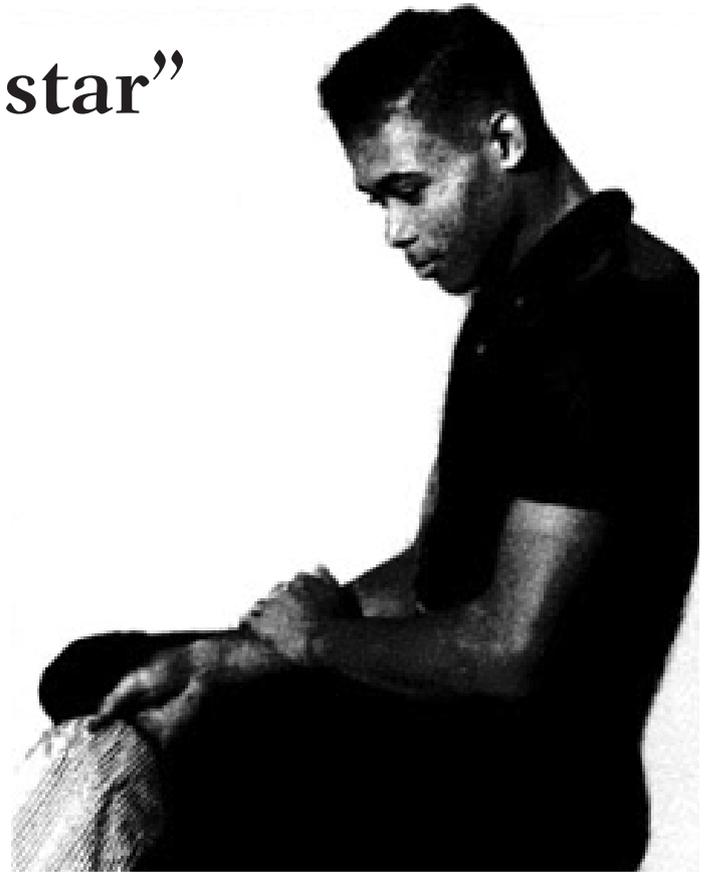
Though he never received the recognition that he deserved, Gipson remained a lifelong student and practitioner of music. In the late 1960s and early 1970s he went back to college to study music and sound production. He would continue to perform and produce music in and around Peoria for decades until his death from cancer in 1994.

Born in 1930, Byron Everett Gipson, Jr. grew up on a farm in Gulfport, Illinois. His family was just one of two black families living in a five-county area. As a teenager Gipson moved to Iowa and then to Hannibal, Missouri, to stay with relatives when his mother and sister died from tuberculosis.

In 1950 he was drafted into the army and served as a bomb expert during the Korean War. While stationed in Germany, Gipson made his first recordings which he sent back home to his family. They included a recording of Lloyd Price's "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" and an original tune called "You've Got To Work."

After the service, Gipson moved to California to pursue a professional musical career. At a popular talent show in Los Angeles, Specialty Records' A&R man Robert "Bumps" Blackwell saw Gipson perform and signed him to the label. Soon Gipson was writing songs for the label and its artists.

Gipson made his first recordings for Specialty with a group called the Sliders (*aka* The Pharoahs) which included Judge Dennis, Eugene Jackson, Clarence Alexander and Alexander Lee. Gipson was billed as Byron "Slick" Gipson.



When asked years later about the nickname, Gipson said "we wore our hair slick and my brother-in-law said I had a slick way with women, 'cause I'd steal guys' girlfriends and they wouldn't even know it."

Gipson and the group released two singles on Specialty. "The One I Love" b/w "Honey-Dew" was released in January of 1956. Early pressings of the single credit Byron Gipson as the artist whereas later pressings show it as Byron "Slick" Gipson and the Sliders.



The second single, "Footloose and Fancy-Free" b/w "Etta Mae," was released in November of 1956. On the record and in the early reviews it was credited to "Flick" Gipson and the Sliders. Later pressings corrected it to "Slick" Gipson.



Gipson and the group recorded at least two more songs for Specialty but both went unreleased until a 1993 compilation, *Golden Groups*, which included "I Want 'Cha Baby" and "My Little Girl" (*released as The Pharoahs*).

Little Richard

How Gipson came to be Little Richard's road manager was a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Gipson was already with Specialty Records before Richard joined the label. In fact, Gipson claimed to be in the office the day someone first brought a tape of Little Richard in for label owner Art Rupe to hear. Gipson contends that Rupe was not impressed with Richard initially.



Little Richard

Still the label sent Richard to New Orleans to record at Cosimo Matassa's J & M Studio. That session produced "Tutti Frutti" and the label quickly had a major hit on their hands.

When Specialty was booking Little Richard's first tour, Gipson was again in the label's office. In a 1990s interview Gipson said "The recording company was the booking agent, too, so they hired me. I guess, to get me out of their face or something. They said, 'Hey, we need a road manager, you want to be a road manager?'" Just like that, Gipson had the job.

He added "A road manager in those days was more than a road manager. He was bodyguard, chauffeur and everything else. I drove the station wagon, booked the bands in the hotels. I started with them in the mid part of '55 and was with them a little over a year."

Gipson was also in charge of counting the tickets and keeping track of the money. As a result, Gipson carried a gun on the tour though he only kept it loaded with one bullet in the last chamber. One night after a concert in New Orleans, Gipson had taken the money and the gun to Little Richard's suite at the Hotel Foster. Shortly after leaving, Gipson realized he had left his wallet in Richard's room.

"I was going down to the Dew Drop Inn. Fats Domino was there, and Ray Charles was playing there, too. I went back to the hotel to get my billfold; the Dew Drop Inn was only about three blocks away. I went in there and this kid's with Richard playing with a gun, clicking it. I opened the door and seen this kid clicking that gun and I said, 'Hey, put that gun down – there's a bullet in there!' I hollered at him, I scared him, and he turned and it went off." Gipson was shot in the leg. He carried the bullet in his leg for the rest of his life.

About the incident, Gipson said, "I wasn't hurt that bad. I still have copies of the hospital bills somewhere." In another interview he added, "I saved Little Richard's life. He wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for me hollerin' at that kid. He sure was dead. The kid clicked it right in his face."

In addition to saving Richard's life, Gipson claimed to have written his hit song "Ooh, My Soul." As to how he wrote it, Gipson said "he was always going, every time he'd see somebody, 'Ooh, my soul, honey, did you see him right there? Ooh whee!' That's why I wrote that song. I sung it to him, he didn't get it all but he got enough of it. Then he added a couple more verses to it." The song was released in 1958 and reached no. 31 on the US pop chart and was no. 15 on the R&B chart. Despite his claim, Gipson was not given any writing credit on the song.

Similarly, Gipson claimed to have written "Baby Please

Come Home" which was a hit record for Lloyd Price on Specialty Records "They added a chorus to it, wasn't no chorus when I wrote it." Again, Gipson was not credited.

Perhaps because of the poor treatment he received from his own record label, Gipson would use pseudonyms and sell songs to other labels around that same time. One example was "I Need Someone," which was released by Amos Milburn on Aladdin Records in 1956. The song was officially credited to "Junior Everett" but was really written by Gipson.

Sometime in 1956, Gipson left the tour and broke ties with Specialty Records. Years later, Gipson said he got tired of the road, especially having to deal with the extreme racism in the South. He recalled stories of police beatings as well as being chased by the Ku Klux Klan.

Gipson did not return to Los Angeles, however. Instead he first moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and then Quincy, Illinois. It was in Quincy that Gipson met local sax player Freddie Ticken and his band. The two soon hit it off and "Wild Child" Gipson with Freddie Ticken and the Rockers was born.



In addition to singing with the group, Gipson played piano and guitar. In a 1991 interview, Gipson said he took the nickname "Wild Child" as a gag to draw people to his music. Together the group performed up and down the Mississippi River and across the Midwest.



In 1958, the group made several recordings at Boulevard Studios in Chicago. The session was paid for by the group's guitarist John Moorman. The result was two singles released on Hit Records.

The first was "Uncle John" / "Sitting Here Cryin'" released in late 1958. Both songs were written by Gipson.

The single was a regional hit and was re-issued nationally on the Laurie label as well the Astra label. According to Freddie Ticken, the single made it to number 24 on Billboard's R&B chart.

The next single was “Lost Control”/“Kool” which was released sometime in 1959. Again both songs were written by Gipson.

In an interview years later Gipson stated that the group actually recorded 10-15 songs for Hit Records. It is unclear whether any of those other recordings still exist.



Before the end of 1959 Gipson parted ways with Tieken and the Rockers. Gipson moved to Peoria where he would live the rest of his life. About the move, Gipson said, “I liked Peoria because it had so many bands, the music was flourishing. I got tired of travelling, getting cheated out of your money and stuff. Hit Records, we got cheated out of that money, too. It’s a never-ending thing.”

Over the next seven years, Gipson would perform with several of his own bands around the Peoria area. First the Violators, then Katz & Jammers and finally the Soul Merchants. Some of the people that performed with Gipson during this period include John “Pops” McFarlane (brother to Elaine “Spanky” McFarlane of Spanky & The Gang) and Tim Drummond, a bass player who went on to play with Neil Young, Bob Dylan, Ry Cooder and many others.



Bryan “Wild Child” Gipson

In 1962, Gipson recorded for Chess Records in Chicago but the recordings were never released. In 1965, Gipson did release a single for IT Records out of Quincy, Illinois. The label and studio were owned by Gipson’s old bandmate Freddie Tieken and fellow Rocker Jack Inghram.

“Sweet Roll’n Stone” / “My Kinduva Blues” were both written by Gipson (aka Jr. Everett) and released in September of 1965.

In 1966 Gipson formed his last group, the Peoria Soul Merchants. They released one single sometime that year on C.A.B. Records: “Boogaloo Train To Peoria” / “Coal Mine no. 2.”

In 1967, Gipson continued to perform in clubs but he was now a one man band, billing himself as Wild Child Gipson and His Funk Machine.

At the same time, Gipson decided to go to college and study music. He first attended the newly opened Illinois Central College in East Peoria where he also joined the jazz ensemble. He continued to perform with the ensemble for



years afterward and would even go on to teach music at ICC sometime later.

Gipson continued his music studies at Illinois State University and then later attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, to study sound production.



By the mid-1970s, Gipson had set up a recording studio in his home. The Peoria *Journal Star* referred to it as “the smallest recording studio in Peoria, a one-man operation at 1506 W. First.” At the time, Gipson was producing what he called “personal interest tapes” on demand, which included anything from audio letters, original poetry, educational tapes, and Halloween special effects.

For years Gipson also produced customized soundtracks for exotic dancers and strippers across the country. At the same time he continued to perform as a one-man show in nightclubs and lounges around Peoria. In 1985, Bill Knight of the Peoria *Journal Star* wrote this about him: “Gipson was Peoria’s first local ‘rock star,’ a R&B machine who churned out hits and hot nights at local nightspots for years.”



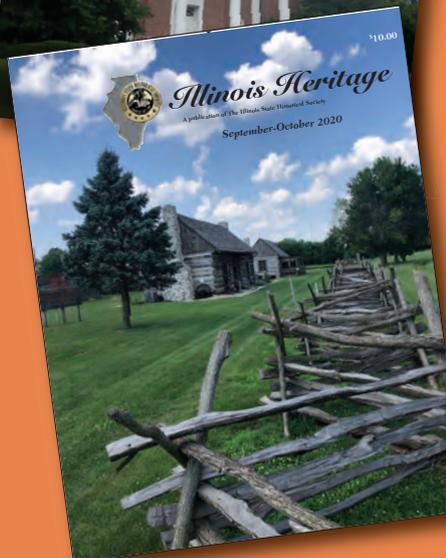
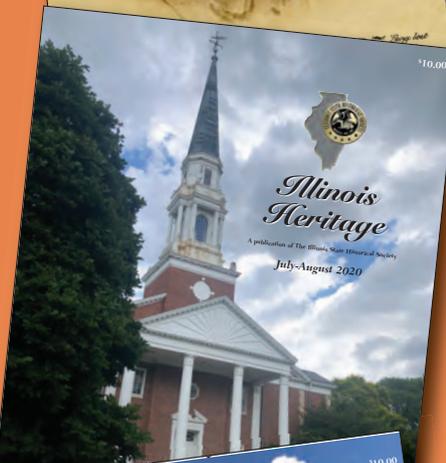
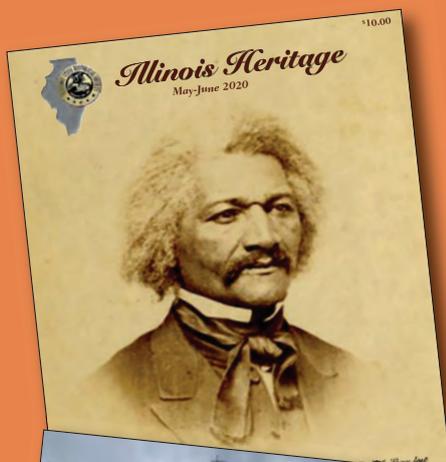
His last single of original music was released in 1989. The song "Bobby 'Kewanee' Brains" was a country & western duet with Sharon Bryant about his friend and bartender. It was released on Music 55 Records and was being distributed at the time by The Basketcase where Brains bartended.

In the early 1990s Gipson said, "I'm back playing R&B stuff now, New Orleans stuff. I finished 18 new songs. I've recorded them about ten different times, but I'm not satisfied with them." Those recordings it appears were never released. Gipson passed away from cancer on January 30, 1994. He was 64.

Shortly before his death when asked to reflect on his life and his time with Little Richard in the 1950s, Gipson said,

"I wouldn't give a million dollars for what I learned, but I wouldn't give two cents to do it again. Everything we did was nothing." He added, "We were all buddies, trying to write songs, trying make some money, get a Cadillac, get a girlfriend. Now it's all history, a big thing, but it wasn't nothing to us." 

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