

## ROBERT LEWIS “GUITAR GABRIEL” JONES

**Born:** October 12, 1925, Decatur, Ga

**Died:** April 2, 1996, Winston-Salem

**Known as:** a blues and gospel musician and songwriter with a unique blend of Chicago and Piedmont blues styles

Robert Lewis Jones grew up surrounded by music and people who made it. Like his father, he performed on the streets and in clubs and recorded several records. But Jones also worked as a sharecropper and took up other odd jobs to make a living.

Jones picked up the stage name Guitar Gabriel as he traveled the country from the 1940s to the 60s. Among the luminaries he accompanied onstage were Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, B.B. King, and Chuck Berry as they performed at medicine shows, clubs, and the Grand Ole Opry.

After being cheated out of royalties for his regional hit “Welfare Blues,” which topped the charts in Pittsburgh and Cleveland in 1970, he turned his back on the music industry, playing only locally in Winston-Salem. He and his wife struggled to make ends meet.

In 1989, Tim Duffy, a musician and folklorist, raced to find, catalogue, and record influential but unknown blues artists while they still lived. He tracked down Gabriel, whose virtuosity with blues guitar, cutting lyrics, and soul-wrenching vocals compelled many fans to consider him “the best blues player you’ve never heard of.”

He was, Duffy said, “an authentic blues troubadour and walking encyclopedia of blues and gospel,” who knew thousands of songs and could create new songs on the fly.

Born to Robert “Sonny” Jones, a sharecropper in Gwinnet County, Ga., young Gabriel was cared for by his great-grandmother. Formerly enslaved, she played banjo, as did her son. Many in the family had a talent for music and Gabriel learned from them all. Sonny played guitar, something Gabriel worked to master from a



MARK AUSTIN

Robert Lewis “Guitar Gabriel” Jones, 1992.

young age, often falling asleep with the instrument on his chest.

“I started messing with the guitar every day when I came from school,” he said in an interview with the Music Maker Foundation, founded by Duffy and his wife to support artists making traditional American music. While Gabriel’s siblings and friends were playing outside shooting marbles, he practiced until he could reproduce his father’s sounds.

When Gabriel was a boy, his family moved to Winston-Salem, then Durham, where he started busking on the street. By age 15, he was riding the rails with traveling medicine shows and Black circuses where he developed a keen stage presence.

The family eventually moved back to

Winston-Salem, and even though Gabriel traveled extensively to perform and record, the Twin City would remain his home base the rest of his life, despite the difficulty of making a musical living here.

“Winston-Salem is different (than musically-inclined Nashville),” he said in the *Twin-City Sentinel* in 1977. “It’s really hard for an entertainer to make it here. There’s no excitement to draw people out of state here – there’s nothing here except tobacco factories.”

Gabriel’s legacy is a rich collection of songs, sometimes recorded under the pseudonym Nyles Jones, in the best traditions of blues and gospel. Albums such as his “Welfare Blues” told sometimes brutal truths about life, love, and hard times that ring as true today as when he recorded them.