

Mike Wilgar – Swimming With Sharks (2011)

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01. Party All Night 02. Down Today 03. Checking On My Baby 04. Real Bad Woman 05. Eyesight To The Blind [play](#) 06. The Thrill Is Gone 07. Dirty Mama [play](#) 08. Put You In A Fine House 09. Messed Around 10. Swimming With Sharks 11. Crying Shame (feat. Andy Finlay)

Mike

Wilgar Band: Mike Wilgar (Vocals, Harmonica) Davey Turley (Lead guitar) Gary Strain (Rhythm guitar) Dave Thompson (Bass) Ron Dillon (Drums)

It took nearly 30 years for blues musician Mike Wilgar to get his first chance to perform on stage, thrilling his audience with his storming harmonica playing. Wilgar, who began playing the harmonica at the age of nine, only had the opportunity to launch his musical career at the age of 38. A late bloomer, some might say, but it was never too late for him to steal the hearts of the many blues lovers in his native Northern Ireland. "There were not many opportunities for me to expand my music career in Northern Ireland," says Wilgar, born in Belfast 44 years ago. "There were just too many conflicts - bombs and explosions all." Concealing his talent even deeper was his shyness and lack of courage to take his musical skill to the next level, he confesses. "So I grew up to be someone with no confidence at all," says Wilgar, who held his maiden Indonesian performance at the Djarum Super Jakarta International Blues Festival this year.

Despite his lack of confidence, the young Wilgar had long believed music had a place in his life. His first experience with the harmonica, after all, was a sign of things to come. "When I was nine, you know, I saved my pocket money to buy some toys," he recalls. "So I was in this bus going to Belfast to buy toys, and I saw an old tramp - drunk and playing the harmonica. "The way he played it was just so lovely," Wilgar goes on. "I was so impressed and thought, *Hey, I want to do that!""

And so without a second thought, "I went to a music shop to buy a harmonica instead of going

to the toy shop," he laughs. And that is how his musical experience began. From then on, he kept practicing on his harmonica. Although his grandfather and uncle also used to play, Wilgar says no one taught him how to play the instrument. He just listened to songs on the radio and figured out how to play them himself. And it was also from the radio that the young Wilgar was first introduced to the rollicking blues music. "One day, I heard The Rolling Stones' 'Little Red Rooster'. It just moved me, it made me melt," he says. "Of course I didn't know it was blues; I just somehow felt connected to it."

But it wasn't just the blues that charmed him. In fact, he says, all kinds of music have inspired him to some degree. However, when listening to other music, Wilgar always seeks a link to the blues. "The philosophy of the blues has to do with the feeling within us. It makes you calm, and always makes you happy and relaxed," he says. "It has some kind of connection to our heart." And for Wilgar, the blues connects not just to his heart, but also to his entire life. When his first chance to perform blues-based tunes with his harmonica arrived in 2003, Wilgar's gloomy life changed. "I had many personal problems back then. My life was about battling drugs and alcohol," he says.

The change came with a call from a friend offering Wilgar the chance to share the stage with some local blues musicians and folk legend Murray McDowell at a music festival. Although he was only a guest star, his harmonica playing attracted so many people that barely one week later, he was offered a second chance, this time with the country's top guitarist, Rob McCullough. News of Wilgar's talent spread like wildfire across the country's blues community, leading to many blues bands offering him a spot on their lineup. He joined bands like Legal Tender and Keep Err Lit to get some stage experience, afterward forming his own band, Ten Feet Deep, with McDowell, which surprised the local music scene by recruiting UK Pop Idol winner Keith Semple as the band's second vocalist and drummer. The band did not pan out, though. Semple embarked on his own career in Chicago, effectively breaking up the band. Wilgar took on a few part-time gigs with The Rab McCullough Band and had some success after topping the French blues chart and winning awards States-side. "I later formed my own band called The Fun_Da_Mentals, but it lasted for only like one year," says Wilgar, who finally formed the eponymous Mike Wilgar Band. "I wanted to concentrate on my own brand of blues and rock . something with hard driven blues harp and guitar." Wilgar finally released his own album, *Swimming with Sharks*, which mainly relates his battle against drugs and alcohol for years. "The album is about how I came through all of that," he says, smiling. After all, he continues, "Music clears your head and helps you think clearly. It takes you to another level."

Having found a savior in the blues, Wilgar admits he finally feels complete after living a life as a blues musician. Apart from his unique musical performances, it's not hard to recognize him among the many bluesmen: Wilgar always wears his trademark porkpie hat and hangs his 5-centimeter mini harmonica around his neck. He even has his own nickname: The Funky

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Harpman. "In music, I'm not competitive. I don't try to be better than anybody," he says. "I just do what I do. I don't like to follow others." Nor does Wilgar have high expectations. He's simply happy his music can move people and give them some balance. "I'm happy when my music moves people the way it moves me," says the father of three. "Although if my music makes other people feel mellow, that makes me happy anyway." And that was just what he did when he entertained thousands of blues lovers in Jakarta. His winning stage performance, especially "Jakarta City Here I Come", his local twist on the Janis Joplin classic "Kansas City Blues", was a hit among the audience. "I truly enjoyed my visit to Indonesia. It's beyond belief," he says, adding Indonesia is the first Asian country he has ever visited. "Last time, I went to Taman Puring Market *in South Jakarta*. It was scary. so many people," he laughs. "I wanted to buy a *branded* guitar there, but didn't do it because I found it was fake." Will he come to Indonesia again? Definitely, he says. But more than that, Wilgar wants to visit more places, hoping to officially represent Northern Ireland as a blues ambassador. "It doesn't matter if I started late *as a blues musician*," says Wilgar, who now teaches harmonica in Belfast. "The most important thing is I play blues from my heart. And after going through the hardship in life, I think I raised my appreciation for blues higher than before." --- Dian Kuswandini, The Jakarta Post

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