



## The Epiphone Interview: Rusty Wright

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*Three steps from the blues*



*Rusty Wright grew up in a household surrounded by all forms of American music--blues, country, rockabilly, and gospel. The son of a foreman for the Chevy Truck and Bus plant in Flint, Michigan and a devout music fan Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, Rusty got his first taste of show business as a guitarist in his mother's gospel group.*

*Ten years ago with his wife Laurie at his side, Rusty decided to turn away from club dates playing covers and instead lead his own group for the first time concentrating on his true love--the blues. "We didn't want to look*

*back on our lives with regret that we didn't give it a try," said Laurie Wright. "We mapped out a loose 10-year plan for the band. Little in our original plan came to pass but many of the opportunities that have come our way were far beyond our expectations."*

*Like all great blues artists, The Rusty Wright Band makes their life on the road. They work hard and their fans love it. In 2006, Rusty and his group bested more than three dozen acts in the largest, toughest preliminary blues challenge in the world, earning the privilege of representing the Detroit Blues Society at the International Blues Challenge in Memphis.*

*Rusty stopped by Epiphone.com to talk about his ever-present Sheraton II, his new album currently in progress, and his leap from sideman to bandleader.*

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**You've doing a lot of work on the road lately, is that right?**

We're on tour, traveling through the south until the end of June then we will be off to Ohio and then out to the Rockies--Colorado, Nebraska. And then back to the south and up the east coast. We're trying to raise name awareness for the band. It's a mad pace.

**Is this a busier schedule than you've had in the past?**

I've been a sideman a lot over the years. I wasn't focused as much on my own musical expression and my own songwriting because I was always working with others. And about 10 years ago, my wife and I just decided to do what we really wanted to do and damn the torpedoes. So, we started working on the blues act and getting the material. We got the first record out in 2006 and our second show was opening for Lynyrd Skynyrd so we thought: hey, maybe we got something here.



**That doesn't happen to everyone starting out. How did you land that show?**

We were playing at an Amphitheater in Michigan and Lynyrd Skynyrd was booked. A friend of ours who was a booking agent called and said, "Hey, how would you like to open for Lynyrd Skynyrd? Wow, that's great! And then he told me the date and it happened to fall on our wedding anniversary. And that very year I had promised my wife that I wouldn't book anything on our anniversary ever again. So, I told her: Dear, I know I promised that we wouldn't book anything on our anniversary but I'm leaving it up to you. We can have a nice dinner by ourselves... or we can open for Lynyrd Skynyrd in front of a sold-out crowd. There was a moment of silence and then screaming on the other end.

**After being on the sidelines so long, how did your songwriting change when you started your own group?**

The first thing I did was turn off everything--television, radios--so that I could get inside my own head. I don't know about other people who write but outside distractions will cloud my musical judgment and I might catch a vibe that I don't even realize I've heard somewhere and I'll see things sneak in. So, I turn everything off and try to isolate myself and try to write from the emotional side of things. What am I feeling? How would I express that if I wanted to create it musically?

**How is that different than your writing style when you were working with other musicians?**

Before, people would have ideas and there would be a lot of collaboration and they would already have general thoughts and a direction they were pushing towards. I just came along to put the polish on. So, you have to put your own sensibility and your own ego aside. I have to think on what they're looking for and what they're trying to capture. But when I did my own thing, I had to isolate myself and woodshed in private. I wanted to make heart music, not head music. There are a lot of people who write great songs but it's all about

placing the notes in a certain way and it's all mathematical. I wanted to learn to write something from the heart. I wanted to capture the essence of emotion, which is what the blues is all about.

**You're a big fan of the Epiphone Sheraton II.**

Yes, I am. I can't believe the quality, diversity, and tonality of my Epiphone. I play a very traditional style set up. Just a guitar, a tube amp--I use some pedals for special effects--but that's what they are, special effects mostly. My tone comes from the guitar, the amp... and this guitar gives me such a wide range of tones--anything I want. My blues is a little more eclectic. There are times when I need to dig in and when I do, the Epiphone is always responsive. The feel is phenomenal.

**What's the story behind your Epiphone?**

I've come to realize that finding this guitar was some sort of voodoo. It was meant to be. I was searching around for a semi-hollowbody and I tried other companies. Nothing was really hitting me. I was really beginning to get frustrated. I was at a guitar shop in Flint, Michigan and out the corner of my eye behind a bunch amps where they had used equipment section in this alcove that hardly anybody goes near, I saw this headstock for the Sheraton with all the beautiful inlay. So when I dug it

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out, it actually had a layer of dust on it. The guys in the store came up to look at it and said: "wow, what's that?" And all I could think of was, "Mine!" And ever since then, I've been playing this thing religiously--rehearsals, recordings, everything. In fact, we have a new recording coming out in the fall and it will feature predominantly the Sheraton guitar on about 90% of it.



**Did your playing change when you went from being a support player to a bandleader?**

Well, the biggest thing I found since I've been working with other instruments--organ, and stuff--is I had to learn when to shut up! When you're playing in a hard rock style, the guitar is the center-piece instrument so you're playing continuously behind the vocal, across all the parts, bridges, whatever. There's never that moment when you just shut up and get out of the way. And playing this style, you have to. There are moments when the vocal has to be the center of the universe and sometimes its best for the guitar to just answer that vocal and be out of the way in-between spots.

**Do you have a favorite guitarist who you've looked towards for inspiration?**

Freddy King! He is one of my biggest influences because he plays this same style of guitar. And he was a master of knowing how to get in-between the holes and when to get out of the way. Because he sang as well so that really helps a lot. Singing makes me realize that the guitar needs to be the accompaniment. It's not the center.

**A lot of great blues guitarists--Buddy Guy, Son Seals, Duane Allman--worked in the studio before leading their own bands. Looking back, do you think being a sideman first was helpful to you?**

Yes. I found that it helps me to relate to the guys in the band musically so my ego doesn't get in the way. I know how to stand back and hear their ideas instead of taking over. I don't always know best. There are times when I might come up with something that is a good start and has a good direction but I don't really have the whole thing fleshed out. I'll bring it to the band and start throwing it back and forth and somebody will come up with something in left field that I never would have thought of on my own. And that little inflection they give can suddenly prove to be the missing piece. Sometimes someone can see something from a different angle that you just can't because you're the person up front.

**What kind of music did you hear the house when you were a child?**

Blues is where I started off because my father comes from Florence Alabama. He had a lot of blues and rhythm blues records--they called them "race records" back then. He had 78s by Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters. I got into that as a small boy. My mother sang opera in my youth and also sang gospel. So, as a boy I was surrounded by records and also harmony and piano. As soon as I heard those blues licks I just loved it. I wanted a guitar forever. But my folks were against me becoming a musician because they knew the musician scene in the gospel world and they thought: "no no, our son is gong to be responsible." They were trying to steer me away. My father had been a promoter in gospel music and my mother was a performer. In fact, that was my first gig. I finally got better at guitar and she let me be the guitar player in the band. That's how I started out, as a sideman. Thirteen years old and playing southern gospel.

**Does that sound still influence your playing today?**

There were a lot of guys on the scene who privately were country blues players. They didn't play that stuff live but when they had the chance they did. They played big hollowbody guitars. They'd get out there and do all this chicken pickin' and up-tempo stuff during sound check. It was considered too risqué to be seen playing it. For me they were unsung heroes that grew up doing it. Sometimes some of the greatest guitar players anyone could ever hear don't get heard. That's just the breaks.



I've got a lot of southern influence. My cousins and me used to sneak out at night. They lived out in a rural area not too far away the honky tonks. We'd sneak out and go listen when no one was paying attention. There was no air condition in those places. They'd keep the windows and doors open and you'd hear the band really far away. We were these little kids and we'd be outside in the dark beneath the window listening to these great juke joint bands. Having a riot, you know?

**It's hard to capture blues in the studio. Do you enjoy recording?**

I do.

**You're making progress on a new album?**

Yes, I think it will be called Wonderman. It will be a mixture--there's swing grooves, down and dirty Texas grooves, and some rust belt--melting pot blues. I like the studio. The studio doesn't antagonize me. I enjoy it. I'm not afraid to bring other things into the studio. It's another layer. It's about making good music. The blues is the foundation of western music. As Muddy Waters said, you pick up the blues wherever you find it. But then it's up to you to take it a little farther down the road. I'm just trying to do what Muddy said--find my blues and take it farther down the road.