

As powerful as it sounds, tenacity is only a word until you see and hear it personified in the person of gifted singer/songwriter WILLIE NILE. Nearly 30 years after his much-heralded debut and two years after his astonishing re-emergence on Streets of New York, Nile is ready to push his career into high gear with the release of House of a Thousand Guitars.

For some, stardom comes early - and is often over very quickly. For others, like WILLIE NILE, having a career in music has meant growing wise, not adhering to fads, and learning from the cards life's dealt you. It's meant building, song by song, an integrity and artistry that attracts a zealous fan base and leads musical peers like Lucinda Williams to call Nile "a great artist" and inspires U2's Bono to sum up Streets of New York in one joyous burst: "Great Album!"

That same short endorsement describes Nile's new project, House of a Thousand Guitars. Recorded in the autumn of 2008, it's a tour de force of the kind of rock troubadour craftsmanship that makes Nile such a refreshing, honest and rockin' presence. House of a Thousand Guitars is the realization of all the promise that Nile's earlier work had suggested and that had been predicted by many since his debut album years ago. From meaty all-out rockers like the title track and "Doomsday Dance" to the chilling portrait of war's aftermath in "Now That The War Is Over" to the heartbreakng beauty of "Her Love Falls Like Rain" and "Touch Me," Willie Nile has likely made the best album of his career.

"When I think about this collection," Nile says of House of a Thousand Guitars, "the songs strike me as reflections of a traveler on a journey, things I've seen, heard and felt along the way. The musicians on the album played their hearts out and I think you can hear that in the recordings. I'm lucky to be able to draw on such talented people to help bring the songs to life."

The new album was recorded with two distinctly different groups of musicians. Half of the record, six songs, was recorded with Nile's all-star, A-list band, the Worry Dolls: guitarist Andy York (John Mellencamp), bassist Brad Albertta (Teddy Thompson, Sean Lennon, Martha Wainwright) and drummer Rich Pagano (Fab Faux, Rosanne Cash, Patty Smith). The Dolls are, like another New York band with Dolls in the title, a powerhouse unit, with guts and ambition and the need to rock. Their sleek, muscular playing on tunes like the upbeat "Run," the anthemic "Little Light" and the driving, hard-edged, Stonesy, "Doomsday Dance" are the record's grit and backbone. "Doomsday," in particular, is a classic, witty Nile socio-politico commentary, one that casts a wry eye on humanity's sad penchant for self-destruction.

"I'll take your bony hand/you're gonna shake your hips/I'm gonna squeeze you tight/Kiss your apocalypse/There'll be a body count/We're gonna watch it rise/the folks at CNN/They won't believe their eyes/We'll do the dead man's twist/This is our last chance/Down at the doomsday dance."

The subject of war returns in "Now That the War Is Over," an older song that Nile says "just fit" in this collection, albeit with one critical and timely word change: "Vietnam" was replaced by "Pakistan." Nile says, "The horrors that occur during a war, any war, are unimaginable and unfathomable. I was focusing on the aftermath of these sad events when I wrote this song. The frequency and depth of man's inhumanity to man is incomprehensible to me."

House of a Thousand Guitars even has a connection to the recent election and this country's long overdue change of direction. The song, "Give Me Tomorrow," was written and recorded right before the election and though not inspired by the campaign, many who heard it suggested that Nile send it to Obama's people, which he eventually did. "With less than two weeks to go in the campaign, the Obama people heard it and loved it and were going to try to make use of it," Nile says. The song is something right out of the Obama playbook with a driving backbeat and roaring guitars.

At the center of every Willie Nile record are the songs of the heart, with sweet melodies and lyrics about hope and love. The tune here closest to Nile's heart is "Touch Me," a song of remembrance and also a celebration of the life of his brother John, who passed away exactly a year before Nile laid down the basic tracks for the song with the album's other band, one consisting of longtime Nile friend and collaborator Frankie Lee, guitarist Steuart Smith (The Eagles, Rodney Crowell) and Stewart Lerman (Loudon Wainwright, Jules Shear, The Roches, co-producer of Places I Have Never Been).

Blending tragedy and comedy of the human condition with Nile's usual crystalline lyrics and flush melodies, House of a Thousand Guitars has even managed to please its self-critical creator.

"Beauty can bring tears and wonder and music can do that as well. It can reach deep into places where words can't go. We were able to do that with this record. Recording it was a great experience, and I couldn't be happier with how it turned out."

The album is perhaps best seen through the prism of the title track, a hook-driven song about an imaginary place where great musicians dwell and can make their music in peace. "You can spread your fingers 'cross the universe . . . in the House of a Thousand Guitars," sings Nile, while naming House denizens Jimi Hendrix, Robert Johnson, Hank Williams, Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, John Lennon, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker, who, as the lyric says, is "gonna kick your ass." Like the album itself, it's a magical place to visit.