



Hall of Fame Inductee

Name: WILLIE JAMES SHAY

Instrument: Guitar

Year Inducted: 2025

Born in 1949 in Mount Vernon, New York, Willie James Shay is a masterful finger-style guitarist whose eclectic career spans jazz, blues, Latin, and classical genres. Starting on harmonica at age seven and guitar by thirteen, Shay developed a distinctive hybrid fingerpicking technique influenced by legends such as Rev. Gary Davis, Joe Pass, John Coltrane, and Wes Montgomery. In the late 1960s, he played lead guitar and harmonica with the horn band Ambergris, produced by Steve Cropper, opening for acts like Rod Stewart and James Taylor. His musical journey led him from New York to California—touring England and Ireland with Gene Clark of The Byrds.

In 1992, Willie landed in Des Moines to manage a shoe store, but it didn't take him long to make connections with the local jazz community. Within a year he met Vern Hansen and became a member of Freestyle. Soon other musicians began to call him to play in their bands. He played gypsy jazz with the Hot Club of Des Moines, straight ahead jazz with Don Jaques, Tanner Taylor and Steve Charlson and regular solo performances throughout the area. He recorded an album of original compositions in 1998 that received national college radio airplay. In addition to his jazz performances, Willie won the 1998 Iowa Blues Championship and was an opening act for Pat Benatar and Eric Johnson.

A respected soloist, Willie has also authored four instructional books on fingerpicking technique, contributing richly to the American jazz and blues tradition.

