

# BIG DADDY RIFFS WITH 'MR LONELY' AUTHOR

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Driving in his Chrysler New Yorker towards St. Louis with the Shawnee National Forest beside him, musician Randall "Big Daddy" Webster, heard music in the hills. He recalls shanties dotting those hills overlooking where the Missouri and Mississippi rivers converged, and he pulled over to investigate the source of the sound. As he reached the crest, he saw a group of dockworkers jamming and playing the blues, and from then on he was enamored with the form.

Formerly of the Mighty Big Blues Band and Lazuli, Webster is the singer, songwriter, lead vocalist, and rhythm guitarist behind Big Daddy & Red Hot Java. The eight-piece band based in Tallahassee has toured nationally and internationally, bringing their "caffeine-infused" blues with them. Webster started out as a blues soloist, however, and will play Word of South as a two-piece with the band's lead guitarist, trumpeter, and vocalist, Adesh Balrag, in collaboration with author Brad Watson.

"My goal is really to reinforce what Brad is bringing to the table," says Webster of their upcoming performance. "The overall theme is from one of his books called 'Are You Mr. Lonely,' which is full of vignettes about guy and girl stuff. I'm in the process of narrowing down which songs I'm going to do, but he'll read while I do acoustic music underneath it, then I'll do a song that relates and weaves it all together."

Though Webster has written for movie and television productions, this will be his first time collaborating in this particular live environment. While earning his degree in broadcasting and television and radio communications at Southern Illinois University, Webster was one of the school's radio DJs and played paid gigs as part of a cover band in the dormitories' cafeterias.

He grew up in Wheaton, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, alongside notables like John Belushi and Bob Woodward. At age 10, he and his best friend would hop on a train to the city and watch the bluesmen out on the streets. He got his own start in music fairly late and was delayed by a classical guitar teacher who would rap his knuckles with a ruler. As a high school sound technician, he was overheard singing by a band that gave him a microphone so that his harmonies could be heard from the sound booth.

"In high school, I was into electronics and helped a friend's band build a huge PA system," recalls Webster. "I ended up being their sound guy in the warehouse where they'd rehearse. In the middle of a song one day they stopped playing and heard me singing harmonies with them from the sound booth, so they put a



NEAL STOUT  
Randall Webster will perform with Brad Watson at Word of South.

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## Riffs

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microphone up there, and that was the beginning of it.”

Influenced by greats like Muddy Waters at the heart of Chicago blues, Webster was especially impacted by Willie Dixon, house bass player and songwriter for Chess Records, and his tune “It Don’t Make Sense (You Can’t Make Peace).” The blues’ history of being socially active music inspires Webster in his own writing, with songs covering everything from gun control to corporate greed. In collaboration with another blues artist, he created “In the Name of the Surge,” which has lyrics addressing the physical and mental wounds of soldiers

after returning home from the Middle East.

That particular song received a standing ovation from the teary-eyed masses at a show in Ireland, where Webster has toured many times. In addition to limbering up his hands to play and giving himself a vocal warm-up prior to a performance, he will “shake the cobwebs of the lyrics,” as he’s written over 400 songs.

“I call it Randy’s mumble method,” smiles Webster. “I fiddle on the guitar until I get a progression, rhythm, feel, or a lick that seems interesting and I’ll just keep repeating it over and over until a word or a phrase pops in that fits the mood. The song typically grows from there, but, ideally, I like to boil down whatever words I sculpt into lyrics to its bare essence and have it be the truth of what I’m trying to express.”

## If you go

**What:** Brad Watson & Randall “Big Daddy” Webster at the Word of South Festival  
**When:** 1-2 p.m., Saturday, April 8

**Where:** Edison Innovation Hall Stage, 1001 South Gadsden St.

**Cost:** Free

**Contact:** For more information on the festival schedule and details please visit [www.wordofsouthfestival.com](http://www.wordofsouthfestival.com).

He jokes that though Big Daddy & Red Hot Java seem like the “Spinal Tap” of blues with nearly 28 drummers in 20 years, he feels blessed to have played two decades beside remarkable musicians like Michael Greif, Adesh Balrag, Keith Klawinski, Gabriel Landa, Bryson Wheeler, Rob Muriel and Jordan Kirkandoll. The mix of ages and experiences brings a fresh sound



that’s polyrhythmic and original.

“We’ve been playing music for 20 years now, and it’s a pretty broad net we cast, but I call it blues peppered with soul, jazz, and life,” says Webster. “We try to be impulsive to get people dancing and up and moving, so it’s not cry into your beer blues by any means.”

Whether it’s opening for the Doobie Brothers, playing a 50,000 person festival in Ireland, or sharing blues education in schools, Webster al-



KRISTIN LINDQUIST.

**Author Brad Watson will be paired with Randall Webster.**

ways wants to give back through his music. His band plays benefit concerts and teaches in schools and community centers where they tour, and Webster individually volunteers with Pyramid, Inc., leading a blues band and teaching songwrit-

ing. For the unique performance at Word of South, he’s seeking to support Watson’s words with his music.

“I got this from David Clayter, who used to own the Bradfordville Blues Club, but he used to say that ‘blues ain’t nothing but the truth,’” says Webster. “Sometimes you come in with baggage and you have to flush that all away. I try to always leave the room better than when you came.”

*Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*

