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Wesley Willis's Joy Rides

On the streets of many American cities, it's possible to encounter artists and street musicians whose work is informed by their fragile mental health and unstable living conditions. Some of it is brilliant, even by the standards used to judge mainstream artists, while other examples are hardly worth the cost of the materials employed in their creation. Chicagoan **Wesley Willis** was the real deal. His drawings displayed an uncanny sense of perspective and devotion to minute detail. His songs caught the spirit of punk rock, with lyrics that were alternately comical and profane. And, yet, he was a chronic paranoid schizophrenic, whose outbursts occasionally found the 6-foot-5, 300-pound giant on the wrong side of the much-feared police department. As imposing a presence as Willis was, the friends, relatives, teachers and fellow musicians we meet in **Joy Rides** are unanimous in their opinion that he was as gentle and outgoing as was large. A surprisingly natural sense of humor helped Willis make friends everywhere he went. It isn't made clear in the film when Willis was on his meds and when he flying on auto pilot, although it seems as if a haircut worked wonders for his disposition. It's clear, however, that his success as an outsider musician found him on the road entirely too often for his own good. Not having someone there to remind him to take the drugs that were effective in controlling his leukemia didn't help, either. This fascinating film spans the final five years of a life that was remarkable by anyone's standards.

- Gary Dretzka