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Walkin' the Dog

BY BENJAMIN GLEISSEE

Even his dog's got the blues — it howls in the key of E.

"Just like me, he's dirty and nasty, and walks with a limp," Cleveland blues guitarist Austin "Walkin' Cane" Charanghat says with a laugh. He tucks a lock of thick, dark hair beneath his Che beret. "We're both stray dogs."

Charanghat felt an affinity for the golden retriever that had been wandering the neighborhood and took the sickly dog to the pound, because his landlord wouldn't let him keep it. The landlord later relented, and Charanghat adopted the howlin' wolf, naming him "Booker T."

Compact in stature, Charanghat often uses a walking cane to get around — his left leg was amputated in 1996 due to blood circulation problems — but that doesn't stop the guitarist from raising cane at area nightclubs with his band's electric style of Chicago blues.

The Walkin' Cane Band releases its third CD *Radio Cafe* on its Lazy-Eye Records label July 21. The album features Michael Bay on lead guitar, Michael Barrick on bass, Jim Wall on drums and Cane man on slow-hand guitar and vocals. Not quite a growl, Charanghat's gritty voice can be best described as Tom Waits minus 2,000 cigarettes.

Charanghat, 31, calls his shade of blues "sleazy, greasy, swampy blues." Then an easy grin spreads across his face, and he laughs. "No, it's damn fine blues. Blues for a blue-collar town."

THE ROCKY RIVER native bought a guitar in the sixth grade and dreamed of being the next — who else? — Pete Townsend. His best friends bought a bass and a drum set and the group Stoned Free was born.

"I was fifteen years old, playing 'Free Bird' at a church festival and seeing my parents in the audience holding up lighters," Charanghat says. "Man, was that weird."

Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton were his first heroes, but the musicians who moved him most were D minor masters B.B. King, Albert King, Robert Johnson and Robert Lockwood, Jr., among others. "Their music just felt like it was part of me," he says. "The blues was the way I felt, the way I walked, the way I thought, the way I talked."

By day, he pays the bills as a computer graphics designer. At night, he pays his dues playing area bars like Brothers Lounge, Around the Comer and JB's. He recorded two CDs on his label (*And Then*, 1994; *Help Yourself*, 1996), lost a leg, found a manager and a new band, then started touring. They drank whiskey and gin in Memphis and

throughout Georgia ("It coats the throat when you're singing"), jammed with Allman Brothers drummer Jaimoe Johanson in Ft. Lauderdale and played a Halloween party in New Orleans with many couples coming as Adam and Eve — in other words, they lived a blues-band life.

"We've been traveling for five years," Charanghat says. "It can be lonely. Four or five guys living together away from home in a conversion van — things can get stinky. And you miss your lady.

"But hey, bars are our lifeblood. We've played great gigs where people really dig us, and we've played before ten people sitting at the bar. You just gotta go out there hoping to move them every time."