

Chicago Life



BUDDY GUY
INTERVIEW

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Buddy Guy

It's only 7 a.m., but legendary bluesman Buddy Guy has already been up for hours. Raised on a plantation near Lettsworth, Louisiana, 140 miles northwest of New Orleans, Guy, one of five children whose parents were sharecroppers, was used to getting up before dawn to get his chores done before school. It's been more than five decades, but Guy says he's never lost his country way of being an early riser. Guy also didn't lose at least two other defining traits of his youth—hardworking nature and musical prowess. As owner of

Buddy Guy's Legends, a Chicago blues club that's celebrating its 20th anniversary this year (for those who want to stop by, the official anniversary party is June 16), the 72-year-old Guy spends most of his evenings at the club.

"When people walk in hoping to see Buddy Guy, they're probably going to see him," says Guy in his deep voice with its soft Southern accent. And, of course, he is still playing the blues. His latest CD, *Skin Deep*, featuring all original material, was recently released. While some of his rural ways remain, Guy has made Chicago his

By Jane Ammeson

home since 1957. This July, his adopted hometown is presenting him with the first Annual Great Performer of Illinois award. He adds that to a long list of honors, including five Grammys and 23 W.C. Handy Blues Awards (the most any artist has received). He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by Eric Clapton and B.B. King and was ranked 30th in Rolling Stone magazine's list of the "100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time."

"Chicago is a special place for me," says Guy. "It's a city that's treated me well."

Talking about his early years, Guy reflects on working with Muddy Waters, Magic Sam and Otis Rush. In those days, blues clubs dotted the Chicago landscape, many of them small places producing great sounds. It was during the Chicago Blues Festival on June 9, 1989, when Guy, after his performance, invited the crowd to what he calls his "new home of the blues."

Just a few blocks away from the park, the club was located in a building with other businesses, which included an adult bookstore, a place of worship and a flower shop. Now there are luxury condos and several Starbucks. And though the competition was fierce, Guy got more than a little help from his friends. The list of those performing at Buddy Guy's Legends includes B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughn, the Rolling Stones,

music stands.

"Even if they couldn't read music, they wanted to look serious," he recalls. "Then Guitar Slim got wild and kicked the stands off the stage, and I got wild like that, too."

There were also guitar battles with musicians such as Otis Rush and Magic Sam.

"It was like watching two tennis players or boxers at it, but it was just their way to make a living," says Guy.

Despite the hard times, Guy says he never thought about doing anything except playing the blues. After all, he'd been doing it since he was just a little kid. Growing up poor in Louisiana, he learned to play on what is called a two-string diddley bow, which he made using two strings, a piece of wood and his mother's hairpins.

"The first guitar player I saw putting on a show was Guitar Slim," says Guy. "I must've been 13-years-old. He came out riding that guitar, wearing a bright red suit. I thought that I wanted to sound like B.B. King, but I wanted to play guitar like him."

But eventually, Guy would play guitar only like Buddy Guy, and that's why he's excited about his latest CD, which features appearances from fellow musicians such as Susan Tedeschi, Eric Clapton, Robert Randolph and Derek Trucks.

"It's all new material," he says. "This is the first time I ever really had control. Everything in here is new. Most of the other albums I've made have been a few new songs and then back to the older stuff or the covers, which is fine, but you gotta be creative. When I was in Europe, they used to say let him play. I'm a good listener, and years ago they would teach me how to play like Muddy Waters. I would talk to Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck when they were all making records, and they would tell me that they would go in the studio with the freedom to play what they wanted. This time, I had that."

Guy took the CD's title from the saying "beauty is only skin deep," one of his mother's favorites, but also reflects the racism that he faced in the South, where discrimination meant white-only drinking fountains, restaurants and public restrooms. It also meant that the young boy who lived in the plantation house where the Guys share-cropped couldn't play with Buddy Guy after a certain age, even though they had long been best friends.

"They said he had white blood and I had black blood," says Guy. "We took a flashlight and held it to our skin and all we could see was red blood, and that's what I mean by skin deep."

But that is long behind him, and he and his childhood pal recently met when the friend came backstage, and they became reacquainted.

Guy is now far from that hardscrabble life, and though he might have been wild as a young bluesman in the big city, he's much quieter these days. He spends time with his granddaughter and loves to shop and cook for himself, making a mean gumbo. He takes his blood pressure medication and watches what he eats. Guy reads the paper, takes a nap in the afternoon to be ready to go to work and plays and promotes the blues.

"I think Chicago is the blues capitol of the world—you can ask the Rolling Stones, B.B. King, any of them," says Guy. "I've been fighting to get Chicago to build some type of blues hall of fame like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame they have in Cleveland. We owe that to the city because the city has been great to blues people like Muddy Waters and me." □

David Bowie and Eric Clapton.

Grammy-nominated Derek Trucks, who would later become a member of the Allman Brothers, played with Guy at the club starting when he was 13 years old.

"Those early days in Chicago were heydays," says Guy, noting that he was paid a dollar or so to play at 708, at that time a famous Chicago blues club. "You could walk along the streets and hear Muddy Waters playing in one club and Little Walter playing in the other. There was music all the time, day and night."

But though there was music, there wasn't much money. Broke and hungry, Guy was performing at the 708 and thinking about returning to Louisiana. It was Muddy Waters, arriving at the club in a red Chevrolet, who provided salami sandwiches and encouragement to the young bluesman. Even Buddy Guy's Legends was a blues club that was in the red for several years.

"I would go to the bank and borrow money so I could pay the people who worked for me and pay the bills," he says. "That changed. But there was a time when the club wasn't making money, and the Chicago winters were so cold that I thought the birds had more sense than me because they go South."

The Chicago blues scene was different in other ways, too. Guy says that when he first arrived, most of the musicians sat in front of