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Buddy Guy starts a new Legends

Blues club opens with improved sights and sounds



Buddy Guy joins Carl Weathersby for a song during the grand opening of Buddy Guy's Legends at its new location, 700 S. Wabash Ave. (Tribune photo by E. Jason Wambagsian / June 15, 2010)

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By Bob Gendron
Special to the Tribune
8:57 a.m. CDT, June 16, 2010

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Ever since he began recording for local label Chess Records five decades ago, Buddy Guy's contributions to Chicago's music scene have been legion. Yet the iconic guitarist's greatest gift to the city might be his newest creation: A brand-new Legends club that, after years of planning, celebrated its official grand opening party Tuesday. Located less than a block away from Guy's former namesake venue, the massive space stakes an immediate claim on being the best blues spot in town.

Longtime patrons will recognize aspects carried over from the original Legends. The blue color scheme is preserved, as is the checkered-tile ground floor, a subtle homage to Guy's first Chicago joint, the Checkerboard Lounge. A merchandise table still greets visitors at the entrance, and Southern soul food continues to define the menu. But improvements are myriad, resulting in enhanced sightlines, sound, spaciousness, and entertainment opportunities.

View pictures of the new Buddy Guy's Legends.

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Visually, the intrusive pole that once hindered the stage is gone. So are the odd dimensions and protruding nooks that made navigation and viewing a challenge. One has to actually seek out an obstructed view. Openness prevails. Even amidst a good crowd, fans at one end of the club can see entirely across to the other side. In addition to providing ample standing room, the main floor accommodates dozens of tables in front of the stage. The bar area has also expanded in size and quantity, with a pair of "L"-shaped bars flanking the Southern corners. For those accustomed to the previous venue's cramped quarters, the increase in capacity (more than 500 people downstairs) is equivalent to enjoying extra legroom on an international flight. Couples even found space to dance.

A second floor contains pool tables, a party room and another bar. One could conceivably imagine a duo or trio performing a quieter set upstairs while a main act plays below. However, sound bleed could be problematic. On the walls, flat-screen televisions reside by abundant memorabilia ranging from autographed instruments to concert posters. The thematic décor contributes to a warm, inviting atmosphere that's neither glitzy nor gritty. Legends feels cozy and homey, and encourages listeners to relax. Nothing is overdone, and, aside from the smell of fresh paint, it already seems lived-in.

And who better to christen the place than Guy, who joined headliner Carl Weathersby for a surprise medley. With directional speakers perched overhead, the sound system impressed with a hearty midrange and dynamic clarity. Volume levels drowned out random conversation but never became oppressive. Akin to the clear sightlines, amplification remained consistently excellent from all angles. Plus, the speakers weren't even being pushed; bring earplugs when Guy's annual residency starts next January. It's all enough to make Legends a destination no matter who is on the bill.

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