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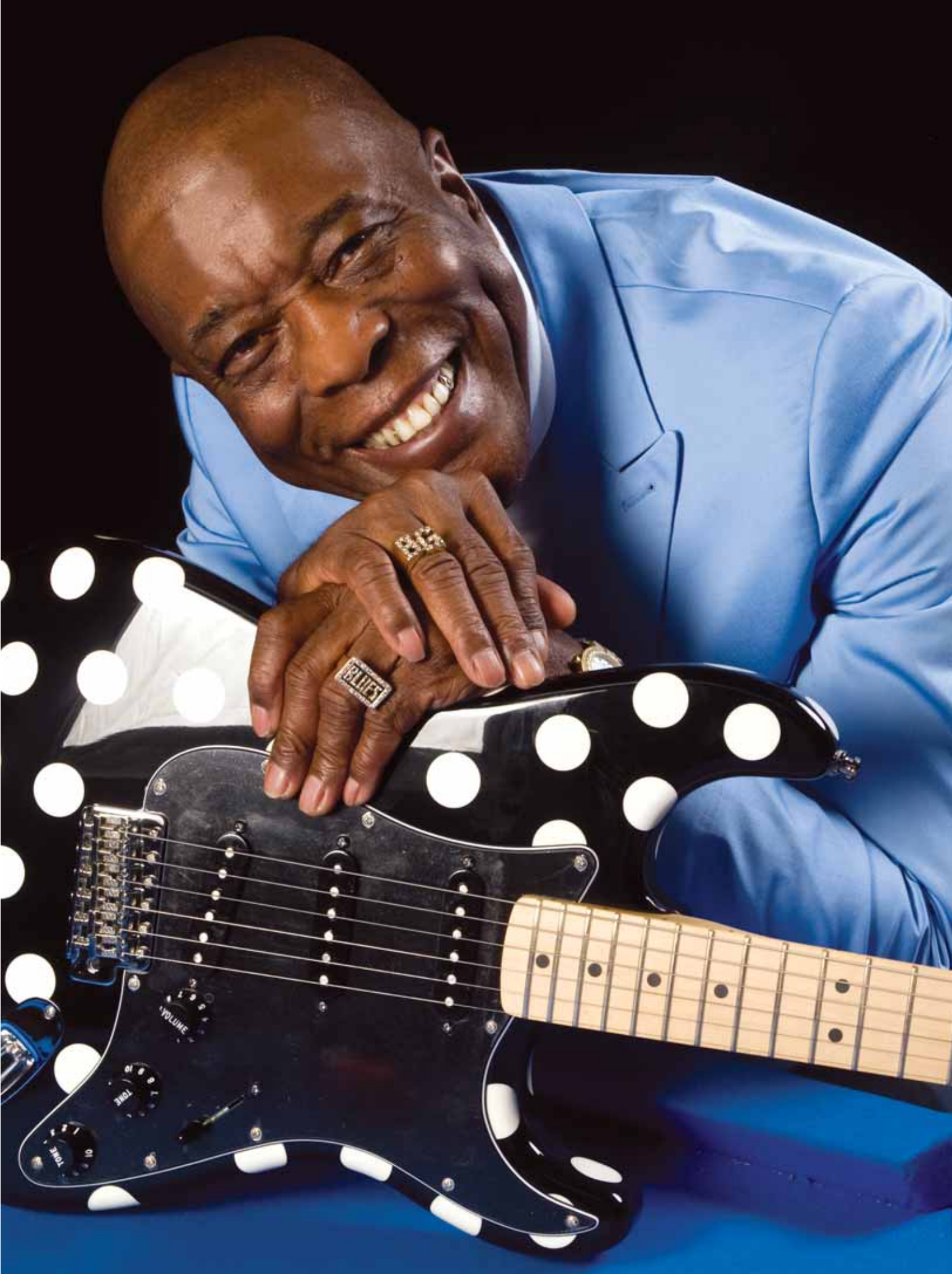
BUDDY GUY

KEEPS THE BLUES EXPANSIVE

By Aaron Cohen // Photos by Paul Natkin

REBUILDING

While Chicago bundles up and hunkers down in the middle of winter, January recharges Buddy Guy. Every year, the blues hero sets this month aside for a series of gigs at his club, Buddy Guy's Legends. These performance nights are billed as intimate, and they do bring him closer to audiences than his usual appearances at theaters and outdoor pavilions. But Guy also makes the venue seem larger than it is, since he never believed that the usual sort of performer/audience, stage/rest-of-the-room divisions actually exist.



This January, like Januaries past, Guy's guitar—voluminous, distorted—and his voice—disarmingly gentle—will envelope the club. As band leader, he'll direct his rhythm section and the audience while playing a custom-made Fender around the stage, at patrons' tables and booths, out on the ice-covered sidewalk and in the washrooms (either one). As a demonstration of physical improvisation, the moves are solidly in the moment yet infused with episodes from way back in the 73-year-old blues hero's personal history.

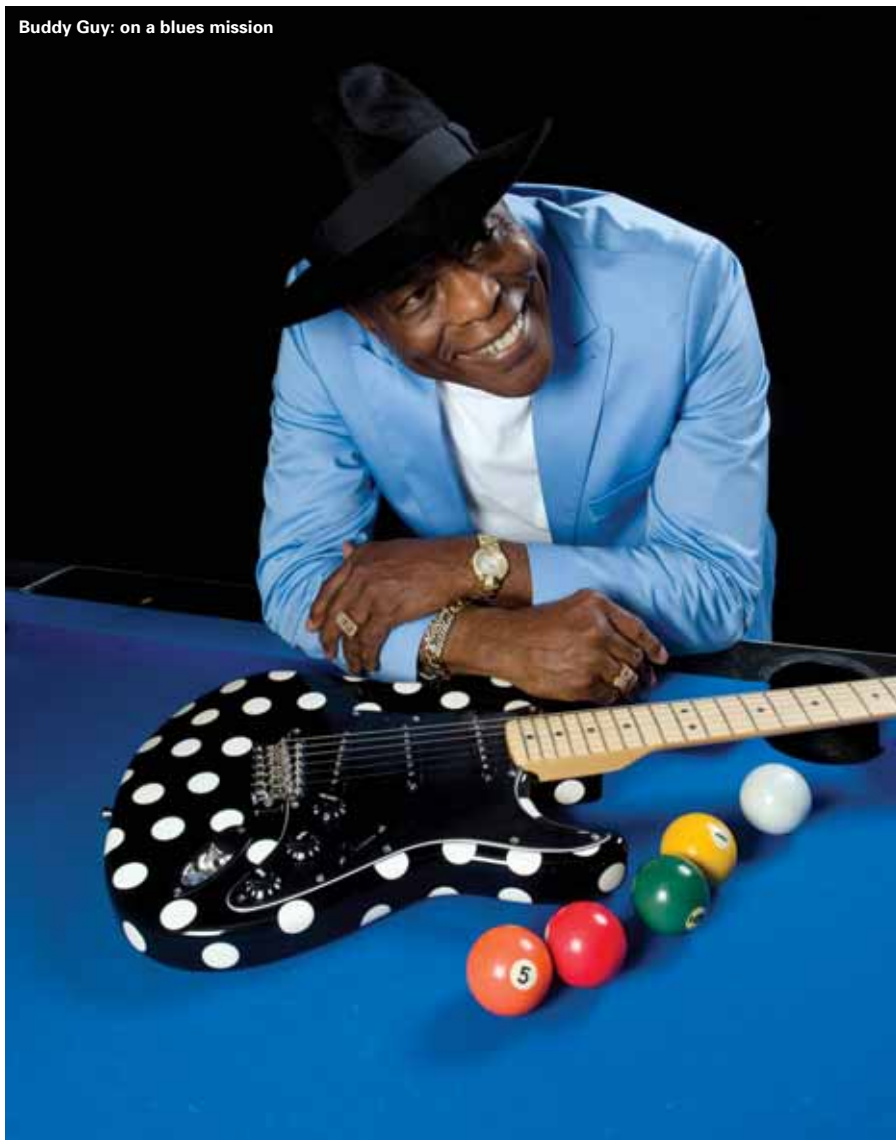
"We used to have the battle of the guitars on Sunday afternoons with the late great Magic Sam, Otis Rush, Matt Murphy," Guy said, as he sat warm and relaxed in his upstairs office at Legends. "The winner would win a bottle of whiskey, and at that time I didn't even drink. They would outplay me in all kinds of ways, but every time they got ready for Buddy Guy, I had to do something different to get some attention."

Two feet of snow on the ground and a 100-foot guitar cable in those pre-wireless years helped Guy beat his friendly rivals. He recalled telling someone to "plug this cord and amplifier in, and bring my guitar to the car in the snow." I came in the door playing solo and I had snow up to the top of my boots. Whoever had the whiskey said, "Give it to him."

Guy hardly raised his voice as he related this story, one of many that marked his path from sharecropping in Lettsworth, La., to international acclaim. That whiskey prize speaks loudly enough: recalling a long-ago community of musicians that he's determined to keep rebuilding; combining technology with showmanship and, perhaps most importantly, Guy's determination—which includes making the most from 24 inches of the cold white stuff.

Nowadays, Guy's tenacity and spirited originality have led to musical accolades along with more palpable bounties, slightly more than 50 years after he cut his first record ("Sit And Cry" on Artistic). His 1993 memoirs (written with Donald E. Wilcock), *Damn Right I've Got The Blues: Buddy Guy And The Blues Roots Of Rock-And-Roll*, narrates the challenges that shaped these scores. There was also his 2005 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, as that institution cited his ties to Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf alongside his influence on Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton. Three years after that, Guy released what may be his most personal album, *Skin Deep* (Silvertone), which delves into his thoughts on race and not-so-secret affinity for a deep groove. In a couple months, he'll hit the recording studio again. This spring, he'll move his club in Chicago's South Loop a few blocks north to a building he purchased. The new Legends will be slightly bigger than its present location, enough to fulfill Guy's ongoing mission: keeping the meaning of "blues" expansive and continually showing new generations how much there is to learn throughout a lifetime.

Buddy Guy: on a blues mission



"You can watch someone and see how they work and run their business," singer Shemekia Copeland said eight days before marrying Guy's bassist, Orlando Wright. "In blues you have to be patient to wait for your time to come around. Buddy's done that—a lot of times people get frustrated and walk away, and that's what he told me not to do."

For Guy's new venture, that business plan includes jazz, which he'll feature in early evening sets on Sundays. It's a music that he's investigated for a long time—going back to his rendition of Bobby Timmons' standard "Moanin'" for Chess in the mid-'60s.

"In Europe, George Benson and I would go on the same stage," Guy said. "Count Basie, Lionel Hampton—we'd be on the same stage a lot of times. George would come by here and we'd jam. Jazz is being treated just like blues: We had a jazz radio station here and it went out. So I'm saying, 'Wait a minute, I got to throw something the other way if I can.'"

That Guy's musical vision remains far more comprehensive than rote 12- and 16-bar shuf-

files should be as recognized as his signature single-note feedback-driven guitar screams. Live and on disc, he'll cover Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye (including the latter's "Trouble Man" on *Feels Like Rain* in 1993). Over the years, Legends has hosted such singers as Johnny Adams and Syl Johnson, both of whom felt more than comfortable in r&b. At the same time, Guy is also aware that there has always been a number of self-identified purists who expect blues musicians to adhere to set boundaries. Soft-spoken, Guy clearly called out that contingent, in part, for being far removed from the culture that gave rise to the blues.

"Well, that came on us," Guy said about being pegged as a blues, or anything, artist. "[Before that] we didn't have anything written about us, we just had the word of mouth in this circle we had back here. Then the British got it, the whites started coming and the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton had to tell white America who we were—that's when we started getting questions and answers. Then they started 'Chicago blues.' Then it got to the point it

was Chicago blues, Motown, Memphis. It was called West Side and South Side blues, and I never saw that. I was playing the West Side as much as the South Side. To get a job in one of these blues clubs where they didn't know who you were, you had to do an audition, and they would ask you if you could play these top ten songs on their jukeboxes. You had to play a Fats Domino, Jimmy Reed, Guitar Slim, B.B. King, whoever had a hit record. If you didn't play them, you wouldn't get that gig for \$2 a night. So I had to play Jackie Wilson, Eugene Church's 'Kansas City,' Big Joe Turner. You had to do all that. [You] couldn't be branded as a blues player back then.

A lot of people danced when we played back then," Guy continued. "In the '60s they started branding us as this or that. I still like to do everything. Marvin Gaye did some great songs, James Brown did some great songs. How could you go to a blues club when James Brown was coming out with 'Papa's Got A Brand New Bag'? You had to do that. And then they started taking that from us. I can go out and play my gig right now and do a Marvin Gaye song and they'd accept me. But then they'd say, 'OK, now I want to hear blues.'"

Meanwhile, Guy surrounds himself with colleagues who know that his art is multi-dimensional. His primary collaborator on *Skin Deep*, drummer/producer Tom Hambridge, worked with him in crafting the all-original material on the album. Considering how the title track in particular called for looking beyond such perceptions as race, the music itself had to show more than one face, like adding in veteran r&b bassist Willie Weeks. Hambridge said he always recognized Guy's inclinations.

"Buddy Guy is a legend because he can play anything," Hambridge said. "You're not limited. He's not even thinking in that zone. That's why he can jump onstage with Jeff Beck, they're playing fusion and he just plays what he plays and it fits. He plays Buddy Guy and it works."

Guitarist Derek Trucks, who also worked on *Skin Deep*, adds that a big part of what makes it all work is that in Guy's earlier years collaborating with Junior Wells on such albums as *Hoodoo Man Blues* (Delmark), he experienced how crucial a secondary guitar role should be. It's as important as the sparse staccato attack on Guy's own '60s records for Chess that inspired Hendrix and initially drove Leonard Chess bonkers.

"Back in the day, Buddy knew what part was needed where, and it was so funky, so rhythmic," Trucks said. "Not flashy, not over the top, you really have to listen to it. I don't know anybody else who could, or would, put those notes there. The Chess records had a grime, a sophistication, but also this total gangster street element that's so profound and such a wild combination."

But it's not too wild to lack generosity,

according to Trucks' wife, singer Susan Tedeschi, who also appears on *Skin Deep* and first performed onstage with Guy about a dozen years ago (on a version of his friend Bill Withers' "Use Me"). After she mentions the singer-guitarist charisma that he gleaned from Muddy Waters and B.B. King, Tedeschi adds that Guy can use all that to highlight her own leads.

"He's very dynamic, gets real quiet, and his voice is so rich—it's an extension of his guitar playing," Tedeschi said. "I love singing with

him, because I can sing real pretty and do these little nuances where we'll get real quiet, and then build it up and get real crazy."

This spring, Guy will return to the recording studio with Hambridge. He intends to focus on another avenue of the blues tradition, particularly the lesser-known songs of Jimmy Reed.

"Some of the songs Jimmy played were some of the first rhythm-type stuff I learned," Guy said. "There weren't a lot of lead guitar on his records. I had a horn player who called

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Mr. B assembles a group of nine noted Ann Arbor-area pianists for this benefit album to support youth in the arts and athletics. Listeners are also beneficiaries, as the players deliver the goods, whether through their original compositions or fresh takes on piano standards.

This audio CD is the original studio recording, which first captured their back-to-back concept and motivated them to commit to the newly-released DVD of their live show. The disc also contains two bonus tracks, where each contributes an additional favorite, not to be missed.



Mr. B performs a collection of originals inspired by his love for the work of other pianists. He's joined in a trio setting with some of his favorite sidemen, bassist Paul Keller (Bird of Paradise/Paul Keller Orchestra) and drummer Pete Siers (Frank Morgan, Doc Cheetham, Mulgrew Miller, James Moody, Russell Malone).



Hallelujah Train is a collaboration of Mr. B and the Bird of Paradise Orchestra, now known as the Paul Keller Orchestra, where B's compositions and favorites are fleshed out by the big band sound, and the BOPO moves towards a bluesier take on hard swing.



Blues and boogie-woogie pianist Mark Lincoln Braun (Mr. B) learned his craft first-hand from the early masters. On *My Sunday Best*, his fifth album, B is joined by drummer Roy Brooks and bassist Kurt Krahnke.



it 'lump-de-lump' music. And it was such a good rhythm. I tell people now, we can't play it like that. They were born with that."

In earlier conversations, Guy has said that he'd also like to make a gospel album and is considering adding a gospel song, or spiritual, to his recording this spring. It doesn't take much of a stretch to trace how the blues and gospel are historically intertwined, especially in the time and place where Guy was growing up. His friend King began singing gospel on a Mississippi town corner until he realized he got more coins when he sang blues. For Guy, singing the religious songs would be a way of coming full circle, even though he's also aware of the music's universal role.

"The spiritual groups didn't have instruments," Guy said. "You'd hear the Five Blind Boys and it was just five voices and their feet. Pilgrim Travelers, I could go on and on. Brother Joe May, Mahalia Jackson—she finally got a keyboard player, but it was all just beautiful singing back then. There was an old country church that my mother used to take me to. They couldn't afford a piano; you just had to get together and make the voices do like a big band where all the voices had a part. There was tenor, baritone, alto and the lead singer. That's how we learned voicing the horns and things—that kind of singing made music what it is today."

Although Guy became aware of how those different voices corresponded to horn players' roles later on, he says it took him a while to learn how to best adjust his choices of key while playing lead.

"I play mostly natural keys, but when you play with a lot of horns, you get a better horn voice from flat keys. B.B. King, T-Bone Walker and Albert King taught me that. I made a couple big band records at Chess, but I didn't know all that then. I'm in class every time I talk to B.B., anyway."

Guy's signature derives from blending such lessons with his notion of personal limitations. The resulting fragmented sound reverberates throughout his solos—from such mid-'60s Chess gems as "Stone Crazy" to his upper-register pyrotechnics on, and around, the stage at Legends nowadays.

"When enough audience gets between me and the band and I can hardly hear what the band is doing, I'll play a crazy lick and I'll stop—like it's on purpose," Guy said. "But it's not on purpose. It's where I'm at with the band, and you can hear I should be here, or should be there. Because I don't read music, I play by ear and I got to hear what the band is doing. Or, in the early days, a lot of us played by ourselves. A lot of the great old blues players—Son House, Fred McDowell, Johnny Shines—played by themselves with a rhythm with their thumb and their finger pick. So you have to keep your own rhythm, just had an acoustic guitar player playing for the Saturday night fish fry. John Lee Hooker did that. A lot of people couldn't play with him because you had to watch him—he didn't play four bars. He might play four, six, eight, 12 bars before he made a change, and he came in wherever he wanted. So the way I learned how to play was the same way. I didn't know I'd have a drummer or bass player keeping me in time. You had to keep that yourself, and you played half time, full time, four bars or three bars."

Along with the upcoming recording, Guy will tour for the first few months of the year with King. He declares they're both healthy enough to keep their living blues school up and running. Meanwhile, he's promoting pre-adolescent guitarist Quinn Sullivan: Guy said, "I first met him at 8, and the way he can play guitar and sing the blues, you would think he's 80." He's aware of mortality—having lost his friend Koko Taylor and his brother, guitarist Phil Guy, in recent years. But it's also the memory of his mentors that sustains him.

"Every award I get, every one I have ever received should have gone to the people I learned everything I know from," Guy said. "Lightnin' Slim in Baton Rouge was the first one. I saw him for the first time when my dad and I were sharecropping in Lettsworth. Every award I accept should have gone to Big Joe Turner, Gatemouth Brown, Lightnin' Hopkins. All those people playing guitar just for a drink of whiskey and a good looking woman. That was their pay. Every award I ever got should have went to those people. And then if there's anything left, give it to me." **DB**

For audio selections from this interview with Buddy Guy go to downbeat.com