

*Special Issue: Guitar Month 2008*

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CHICAGOLAND'S MUSIC MONTHLY  
APRIL 2008  
FREE

**The  
20  
Greatest  
Chicago  
Guitarists**

*Buddy & Muddy Lead  
The Way, But Who Else  
Made The List?*

*Plus:*

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*CDs Reviewed*

***The Black Keys**  
On Danger Mouse  
And Ike Turner*

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Goes Through Some  
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# The 20 All-Time Greatest Chicago Guitarists

**P**erpetually under siege by synthesizers, jealous bandmates, "Guitar Hero," and its own practitioners, it's almost as if the guitar can't exist without more tension than what's going on between the neck and the bridge. So at *IE* we figured why not spray some gasoline on the fire and, for our annual Guitar Month, debate who Chicago's greats have been. "You mean like Terry Kath and Peter Cetera?" Kath = yes. Cetera's just the man who'll fight for our honor. *Anyway.*

You, our critic, are bound to pin us to the wall by the ass-end of your flying V and demand "What does *greatest* mean?" (At least, that's what our writers did when we posed the idea.) We didn't weigh much other than gut reaction, though in truth there was *some* element of popularity involved. My neighbor blasted such a sick power chord the other day it blistered paint in my kitchen; suffice it to say, Tony still isn't on this list. (Though he almost made Beverly Zeldin-Palmer's – see sidebar.)

But here, in its imminently denounced glory, is *Illinois Entertainer's* list of The 20 All-Time Greatest Chicago Guitarists.



## Buddy Guy

Naysayers will think Buddy Guy tops our list in some glad-handing tribute to Chicago's most prominent living bluesman. *Sheeeeit.* Early in his prime he was muzzled by Leonard Chess and the Muddy Waters/Willie Dixon machine. But once loose, Guy not only co-sparked a revolution within West Side blues but owned his instrument and the eyes of anyone who saw him play it. "All-time" scrolls like this are notoriously subjective, but few could match Guy's combination of stylistic fusion, wrenching soul, technical brilliance, staggering influence (Hendrix, Clapton, Beck), and dazzling showmanship. Subtlety's not his strong suit, but if you wanna play bridge, get out your ballgown – this is a guitar list.

As little as 20 years ago his inclusion on (much less towering over) such a list was cast in murk. From the late '60s to late '80s he was in the wilderness, neglected by rock fans and still polarizing to trad blues snobs. But Guy's resurgence – begun with 1991's blistering *Damn Right, I've Got The Blues* and emboldened by 2001's brave, dynamic *Sweet Tea* – resuscitated him from artifact to restless ambassador. His place in history assured, Guy has turned his eye to making sure the city doesn't bury its crucial past the way it almost forgot him.

Steve Forstneger

## Muddy Waters

When future Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame inductee and Grammy winner Muddy Waters (aka McKinley Morganfield) came to Chicago in 1943 from Clarksdale, Mississippi, he had no idea he would alter the American musical landscape irrevocably, paving the way for a musical revolution.

Waters was the first Delta bluesman to make the successful transition from acoustic to electric blues guitar. He added other textures to the Delta moan of the lone blues guitarist, employing a four-piece band that would become the prototype for future blues and rock bands worldwide. Waters' heavily amplified slide guitar, his rich and powerful vocals, and his churchified delivery influenced generations of musicians from Otis Rush and Buddy Guy to Michael Bloomfield and Keith Richards. His sidemen were equally ferocious musicians like Little Walter, Otis Spann, James Cotton, and Pinetop Perkins. This new sound was captured masterfully by Chess Records in the '50s, with a string of hits such as "Louisiana Blues," "Long Distance Call," "Honey Bee," "I Can't Be Satisfied," "Rollin' Stone," and so many others.

In the 1972 documentary *Chicago Blues*, Waters matter-of-factly summed up his importance, stating "I think I'm responsible for Chicago Blues. I think I'm the man that set Chicago up for the real blues."

Beverly Zeldin-Palmer



## Bo Diddley



Bo Diddley was one of those who took blues by the hand and led it into rock. Diddley's music includes every aspect of rock: the fuzzy, effect-wielding guitar, humor, volume (Diddley didn't necessarily play loud, but he always sounds like he was), sex, DIY aesthetic (the man built his first guitar, for heaven's sake), song-writing, rebellion, and – of course – rhythm. Not just any rhythm, either: *that* rhythm. His songs from the late '50s/early '60s are indelible moments of rock: "I'm A Man," "Bo Diddley," "Bring It To Jerome," "Who Do You Love." There wasn't a British Invasion band worth their name who didn't cover a Bo Diddley track, and there has not been a rocker since who hasn't used the Bo Diddley beat. *Rolling Stone's* list of the 100 Greatest Artists Of All Time put the former Ellas Otha Bates at 20, but his influence is so wide and deep that *Uncut* magazine ranked the 1958 release of Diddley's self-titled debut album as one of the "100 Music, Movie & TV Moments That Changed the World."

M.S. Dodds

## Otis Rush



Revered by blues and rock musicians alike, legendary guitarist/vocalist Otis Rush is perhaps the most intense, soulful bluesman of his era. Since the '50s, when he had his first chart-topping hit on Cobra Records, "I Can't Quit You Baby," Rush has gone on to influence musicians such as Michael Bloomfield, Peter Green, Eric Clapton, Santana, Luther Allison, Jeff Beck, and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Rush, along with Buddy Guy and Magic Sam, pioneered the West Side sound, a minor-key variation characterized by impassioned gospel-tinged vocals and bursts of arpeggio guitar riffs. His unique approach is offset by his left-hand technique – playing the guitar upside-down and backwards, Rush bent the strings downward for dramatic effect.

He moved to Chicago from Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1949 and made the decision to become a performer after seeing Muddy Waters. Waters, who brought the deep blues to Chicago, later cited Rush as being one of the deepest of deep bluesmen.

Beverly Zeldin-Palmer

## Magic Sam



One of the great what-ifs of blues history. Many a musician met a premature demise (frequently at their own hands), but fate was especially cruel to Samuel Gene Maghett. Struck down by a heart attack just months after a star turn at the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival, the 32-year-old trailblazer passed just as he had shaken off an uneven youth. Along with Otis Rush and Buddy Guy, Magic Sam turned the West Side upside down, engraving a new sound – elegant, wild, everything – on two albums frequently ranked among the blues' all-time greats, *West Side Soul* and *Black Magic*. What he had wasn't necessarily flash (though he had that in spades, too), but a concoction massaging the silk that would flow out of Curtis Mayfield's fingers up in Cabrini into the hard electric sound that made Chicago the blues' epicenter. Few artists ever come up with two masterworks like *West Side Soul* and *Black Magic*. That Sam was undeniably on the cusp of something even greater makes our loss all the more gutting.

Steve Forstneger

## Mike Bloomfield



According to the site's stats, Mikebloomfield.com has averaged 60 visits a day for the last six years – not bad for a white, Jewish blues guitarist who died in 1981 and is best known for his performances on other people's albums. Mike Bloomfield crammed a lot of playing into his brief life. As a precocious Chicago teenager in the 1950s, he was sitting in with Muddy Waters. While a member of The Paul Butterfield Blues Band in the mid-'60s, he helped Bob Dylan go electric. He'd been a legend for almost half his life when heroin got him at 37.

Arsenio Orteza

## Elmore James

All electric slide-guitar playing starts with Elmore James. Argue all you want whether he stole his songs from Robert Johnson or Tampa Red or whoever, because back in the day he was playing with them all and such didn't matter. What does matter is that in 1952 his "changety changety chang chang" slide riff on "Dust My Broom" changed everything – James electrified the blues in a way no one had heard before. It was not just electric. It was *loud*. It was a sound Les Paul was trying to achieve with his solid-body prototypes; a style that every kid who picks up a guitar for the first time is after; the holy grail that has been pursued by any rock guitar god worth his/her salt; and one for which it's a damn shame that there are no known live recordings of Elmore James to serve as final testament.

David C. Eldredge



## Rick Nielsen



Rick Nielsen deserves a spot on this list for his guitar collection alone; he has reportedly owned more than 2,000 sweet axes, including at least one custom five-neck Hamer with 38 strings. (Storage space must be *cheap* in Rockford.) Equally impressive is his contribution to power pop. Nielsen is a master of sustain (how he stretches those chords on "Surrender") and showboating (as a white Chuck Berry on "I Want You To Want Me"). So what if he's self-taught? Without Nielsen, Robin Zander's vocals wouldn't have been so dreamy, and rock 'n' roll wouldn't be so fun. *At Budokan* knows best.

Mike Meyer

## Curtis Mayfield

It's easy to forget what a guitarist Curtis Mayfield was. Obscured beneath forming The Impressions, helping give voice to the Civil Rights movement, recording one of the greatest soundtracks of all-time, and his nearly fatal accident was an ace. Blurring his skill further was the fact his big solo hits ("Superfly," "If There's A Hell Below") were bass-driven. But his style wasn't so subtle to be unnoticeable. Self-taught, Mayfield often tuned to a piano's black keys, though Vee-Jay Records' Calvin Carter explained it best in a 1981 interview: "I never met a guitar player who played the guitar the way Curtis did. Everything was on open strings, and it sounded very unusual. I don't care where you'd go, you'd always hear people say, 'Play me some Curtis Mayfield-type guitar,' and they'd know what you were talking about."

Steve Forstneger



## Tom Morello



Tom Morello endured 18 years in Libertyville and graduated with honors from Harvard in 1986. Neither, though, had much to do with his greatest achievement: Rage Against The Machine (sorry Audioslave, your name fit your confined music). Rage ignited Molotov cocktails of post-"Bring The Noize" rap-metal, burning up the *Billboard* charts and dreaming of larger targets to torch. "I eagerly await the day the United States government goes down in flames," Morello told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1993. *Evil Empire* remains alt-rock's most volatile success – down with tradition, up with invention. Morello's molten guitar techniques evoked turntable scratches and Public Enemy's noise-effect cacophony. No DJ or PE required.

Mike Meyer

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