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## BLUES PREVIEW

# Guy deeply rooted in 'Skin Deep'

For years he sang others' songs, but this disc all his

By Mark Guarino  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Buddy Guy the blues guitarist travels the world's stages playing concerts before thousands of fans.

Buddy Guy the songwriter doesn't get out of the house much.

Despite a playful demeanor in conversation, Guy's voice stiffens when talking about the years he spent entering studios with batches of his own songs only to confront producers who told him they'd rather have him sing someone else's.

"I was always told, 'It wasn't a good song,' and somebody else would say, 'I wrote a song,'" he says. "The songwriter was stolen from me."

From the earliest days of recorded blues, songwriting credits were a shadowy area where label owners, producers, even family members routinely claimed ownership of songs, reducing the musician to diminishing dividends and a secondary role in the creative process. The idea that blues singers can moan the blues, not compose and arrange them, is a stereotype that continues to this day.

Despite nearly 50 years as a trailblazing guitarist and multiple Grammy winner, Guy set a goal that "Skin Deep" (Zomba/Silver-tone), his new album, would be all his. Every song, whether somber or swaggering, would be rooted in his past and grown from his perspective.

"I have so much to say!" album producer Tom Hambridge remembers Guy telling him the first time they met. "He knows he's one of the few remaining guys, him and B.B. [King]. ... I think he wanted to make a statement that 'I'm as relevant and vibrant and as great as ever.'"

It's doubtful he needs to make the claim. Guy is 72, an age when many people crank back the La-Z-Boy to let the world pass by. Yet, for Guy, this year alone has resulted in more awards (the inaugural Great Performers of Illinois Award), celebrity accolades (a guest spot in the Martin Scorsese concert film "Shine a Light" starring the Rolling Stones) and an unusual new role: actor in a film, "In the Electric Mist," based on a James Lee Burke novel and starring Tommy Lee Jones and Peter



Don't let the big grin fool you, Chicago hero Buddy Guy has got the blues. Good thing for us he does. He will be at Ravinia on Thursday.

### BUDDY GUY, WITH JONNY LANG

72, not slowing down

When: 8 p.m. Thursday

Where: Ravinia Festival, Highland Park

Price: \$20-\$60; [www.ravinia.org](http://www.ravinia.org)

Sarsgaard.

The stocked calendar has not prevented him from thinking about his childhood "every night and every morning," he says. Guy grew up on a plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish in central Louisiana and the heart of the Jim Crow South. "You could look for miles and you wouldn't see nothing," he says. "There weren't that many cars."

That eerie isolation combined with institutional racism left wounds, except Guy did not let them turn into scars. The title song offers a utopian response to his past: "Man in Louisiana, he never called me by my name. ... I knew he had a good heart but he just didn't understand/that I needed to be treated like any other man," he sings. To contrast, on "Out in the Woods," he warns of having "wolf blood" in his veins while Robert Randolph's slide playing smears notes in the background.

As much as he is referenced for his guitar, Guy always has been one of the most sensitive singers of the blues. His honeyed, high vocals of the title song is one of his best performances of his career;

on other songs like "That's My Home," he climbs the octaves with exaltation while also digging into it with a growl, a true gospel shouter who is also rooted to the soil.

Living in Orland Park, Guy is playing music at an age long past his heroes—Little Walter, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf—whose music drew him to Chicago in 1957. Throughout the periods of his career, as a session guitarist who raised volume levels at Chess Records, the older brother to British rock royalty, a duo partner with harp master Junior Wells and a solo artist playing stadiums, his guitar style has remained reckless and always of the moment.

On "Skin Deep," he continues to play as if just jolted awake from a nightmare, with frenetic bursts of notes and unusual harmonics violently twisting the song off course then back again.

"It's him being emotional," says Hambridge. "I'm sure if he played trumpet he'd be [appreciated] like Miles Davis or if he played sax, he would be like [John] Coltrane."

But being taken for granted is the danger of living a long life. Guy plays the electric sitar on "Skin Deep," not just to alter the sound, but also expectations.

"A lot of people say blues is the same, which I disagree. I said, 'I'm going to change somebody's mind.'"

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