



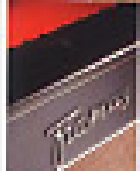
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May 2008
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Guitar

& BASS MAGAZINE

Guitar
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INTERVIEW

JOE SATRIANI

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Friendly Fire

Still going strong in his seventies, the incomparable guitar showman Buddy Guy shoots the breeze with Julian Piper about his first visit to a blues-famished England, vintage Strats and the future of the genre

It gets cold in Chicago in January – back in the 1920s, Blind Lemon Jefferson even froze to death here on the streets. The polar winds sweep in across Lake Michigan, funnelling an icy blast with windtunnel intensity between the high rises and the projects that ring the shores; certainly anyone with any sense stays indoors. And for Buddy Guy, arguably the city's most famous adopted son, it's a rare opportunity to stay at home and spend the whole month gigging at his downtown club Legends.

'Yeah, it's cold,' he chuckles. 'But it don't do me no good to complain, so I don't bother. I was born and raised on the farm and I haven't lost that yet; can't stop myself getting up early, either. It's been up and down, but that's Chicago: good today, bad tomorrow.'

Bluesmen have always tried their hands at running clubs; at least if you're the owner, you know you'll always have a gig. Over the years, although it's had its problems – and even now is awaiting forcible relocation – for Buddy Guy, his Legends nightclub is a tangible sign of having made it, and over the years his annual January homecoming has become something of a Chi town institution. 'I've been doing it the last eight or 10 years, I guess. I don't want to wear my welcome out, but as long as they force me I'll keep on doing it.'

It was 25 September 1957 when the man christened George Guy boarded the 8.14am from rural Hammond, Louisiana, and arrived in Chicago just before midnight, carrying only his Les Paul and a cardboard suitcase containing a few clothes.



'The next thing I know, Clapton and Hendrix are out there using the same tricks and selling millions of albums'

'I never forget, and one of the main reasons I enjoy having the club is that when I first came up to Chicago it was the heyday of the blues,' he recalls. 'Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and all the others were here and there were so many blues clubs that I never had time to see them all.'

'But I've been here 51 years and all that has changed; now we've got only maybe four blues clubs in the whole city, and mine is the largest,' he says. 'It's very hard for blues clubs to make it; Boston, New York, California... it's

the same everywhere you go. I've had Legends for 19 years and when I first opened up I had people come to me and say that it wasn't a real blues club because it was too large. But I'm glad it was big – all the small ones have gone out of business!'

Shortly to tour here – his last shows were in 2006 with Jeff Beck – England has always figured highly in Buddy Guy's affections. He first came here in February 1965 with one of the American Folk Blues Festival package shows brought over to Europe by the

Catalogue

BUDDY GUY: DAMN RIGHT I'VE GOT THE BLUES

With stellar contributions from Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton, this album blasted Buddy Guy straight into the first division of the blues



BUDDY GUY: LIVE AT THE CHECKERBOARD LOUNGE

Recorded at one of his favourite Chicago gigs with brother Phil on second guitar, Buddy shows how good he is at working a hometown crowd



BUDDY GUY: FOLK FESTIVAL OF THE BLUES

No folk, but some of the rawest blues on record. Buddy's spiky Strat on Worried Blues steals the show



Gear

GUITARS
Fender Signature Stratocaster

AMPS
Fender Bassman, Fender Cyber Twin, Victoria Custom Amp

EFFECTS
Lots of wah



enterprising German promoters and blues fanatics, Horst Lippman and Fritz Rau. His arrival on the blues-hungry UK scene could not have been better timed, predating the whirlwind that was Jimi Hendrix by more than a year. Buddy's incendiary performances in amphetamine-fuelled clubs like Kloooks Kleek and the Marquee, backed by aspirant UK blues bands like the Soul Agents and even Chris Barber's Jazz Band, have become the stuff of legend. The British blues mafia was ecstatic; Rod Stewart acted as Buddy's valet, and upon first hearing him play Eric Clapton famously broke down in tears.

'I was just overjoyed,' says Guy with a grin. 'I knew Muddy had been over there but I never thought that it would happen to me. It was also the first time that I got to see T-Bone Walker because he was on the same show. Now I know Eric and Jeff

'Jeff Beck told me he didn't know blues could be played on a Strat. He thought it was for country and western'

Beck as my best friends, but at the time they both told me that they slept in a van just to see me play. Back then I didn't know who they were - I hardly knew who I was! Jeff Beck told me that before he heard me play he didn't know that blues could be played on a Strat; he thought that it was just for country and western.

'Of course, I had a lot more energy back then than I have now. I was playing the guitar with my feet and throwing it up in the air... crazy stuff. But although I was getting to play overseas, back home I still didn't have a record. I thought that maybe it was because I played too loud and with too much feedback... then the next thing I know, Clapton and Hendrix are out there using the same tricks and selling millions of albums.'

Even after all these years it's obviously a topic that still rankles the phlegmatic Mr Guy, and with some justification. Long after BB King, Albert King and Freddie King had become household names within the blues fraternity, Buddy was bizarrely still without a record contract. Apart from occasional European tours alongside his old sparring partner Junior Wells, he was usually to be found tearing

up the floorboards in Chicago clubs like the Checkerboard.

'They was playing exactly the same thing that we was, but because we were doing the Folk Blues tours, they wouldn't let us turn it up like all the British bands,' Guy points out. 'The audiences wanted it to be right back in that old deep blues feel like Little Walter, Muddy and Sonny Boy Williamson.'

Apart from a brief flirtation with Guild guitars in the '60s (Buddy received his first ever endorsement from the company) these days his polka dot Stratocaster is as much a part of his act as his customary audience walkabout. His relationship with Leo Fender's creation goes back a long way, and the guitar he played at the Marquee club in 1965 was a battered but much cherished '58 sunburst Strat, with which he recorded the legendary *Folk Festival Of The Blues* album.

'It used to be that you could go down to the store and buy an original Stratocaster with the case for \$179. If I had known then what I know now I would have bought a whole warehouse full and just kept them,' he laughs.

Whadda Guy!

'Buddy Guy's *Folk Festival Of The Blues* is my favourite album in the whole world. That's the wildest Stratocaster I've ever heard'

- Jimmie Vaughan

'He was for me what Elvis was for most other people. My course was set, and he was my pilot'

- Eric Clapton

Photos: Steve Gilllett / Live



The roll call of the blues giants who've passed onto that great jam session in the sky - Stevie Ray Vaughan, Albert King, Albert Collins, Luther Allison, Jimmie Rogers are just a few that come immediately to mind - has meant that there's even more reason to honour the few first division guitar legends like Buddy Guy. But with blues becoming increasingly marginalised by FM radio, what are the hopes for its survival?

'Well, you can't win,' he sighs. 'But that's how it's always been with the blues - there are still some great blues players around but you never hear their records on the radio anymore. I wish we could go back to the old AM radio where everyone's records got a chance to be played, keeping the music alive. You take anyone 16 years old, and they don't know what it is. But I've just finished a new album that we recorded in Nashville last November,' he adds, 'and I think it's pretty special. Eric's on a track, plus Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks, and apart from a song by Jimmy Reed and

'If I can get a few young people to get up and play, people will think there's more to this blues music than they thought'

one by Sonny Boy Williamson, I wrote all the songs - for the first time. I'm also co-producing, and there's some really good blues on there. Who knows? We might get lucky, make someone listen.'

Buddy and Stevie Ray Vaughan met when Buddy played at Antone's club in Austin, and forged a friendship that lasted until that last fateful gig in Alpine Valley. Since that time there have been numerous pretenders to the white blues crown - Jonny Lang, Chris Duarte, Kenny Wayne Shepherd - but none have gone the distance.

'I think that the blues scene has suffered since Stevie passed. But I believe that if they only get a chance to hear it, the kids will still like the music,' declares Buddy. 'There's still hope, too. A little

while back they brought this eight-year-old out to sing with me and he was so amazing that I've got him on my new album. At this stage in my life I think that if I can only get a few young people to get up and play, then people will start to think that there's more to this blues music than they thought. And that's one reason that I like playing outdoor venues, at least I get a chance to play for 12 or 13-year old kids as well as their parents. They say: 'Man - I read what Eric Clapton said about you, and I like what you did!'

Buddy Guy will be touring the UK in June: London on the 24th, Manchester on the 25th, Birmingham on the 27th. For tickets call 0870 735 5000, or go to www.bookingsdirect.com

AND ANOTHER THING Buddy Guy's influences: BB King's single-string work, Muddy Waters for slide, T-Bone Walker for his chords and John Lee Hooker for the boogie