

Monday, July 31, 2006

Blues
legend
looking
goodBuddy Guy
turns 70,
3D

By John Zich for USA TODAY



By Joe Brier for USA TODAY

A letter to
The EditorsBritish band
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Music

Buddy Guy: A straight shooter at 70

Just scratch any talk
of this blues legend
hanging up his axBy Judy Keen
USA TODAY

CHICAGO — Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Junior Wells have been gone for years. But Buddy Guy, who performed with them all, is still playing the blues.

Sitting on a black leather couch in his office up a steep staircase from his club, Buddy Guy's Legends, Guy is spry and reflective despite having returned home just a couple of days ago from touring Europe and Japan.

He's on the road constantly — 30 shows in July and August alone — and plays with the fervor of a man half his age, his fingers racing across the frets as he strolls right into his audiences. He likes coming home to tend the tomatoes he grows in the yard of his big suburban house, but retirement? Not yet.

For him, music is a way to communicate and heal. "I think music speaks in all languages, and I think everybody who's breathing breath out of their body has had a problem in one way or the other," he says. "You come see me, I'll make you forget about it for an hour and a half or two."

A bottle of cognac sits on a table in front of him.

Nearby are an array of guitars, including one with polka dots. The red walls are almost covered with memorabilia: Stevie Ray Vaughan's guitar and a white one signed by Bon Jovi's Ritchie Sambora, photos of Guy with Waters and Wells, a proclamation for his 2003 National Medal of the Arts.

Guy turned 70 on Sunday and celebrates Tuesday by performing at a party at his club. Then he'll be right back out on the road.

"I didn't ever think I would see this birthday," he says. When he came to Chicago in 1957 from Louisiana, he says, he saw plenty of knife fights in the clubs on the South Side and worried he'd end up in one of them. "I was much wilder than I am now," he says.

"I'm just like an old car. Every time you screw one bolt, another rattles," he says. "I can't jump out the second floor anymore" — something he did in New York in 1969 in an escapade he won't describe further.

He enjoys wandering through the past, describing his sharecropper parents, trying to find work after taking a train here from home, meeting his idol and mentor. Shortly

after arriving in Chicago and having not eaten for three days, someone took him to the 708 Club, where he waited on the guitar until somebody alerted Waters that a hot new player had hit town.

"Muddy came and brought a loaf of bread and some salami," Guy says. "He made me a sandwich and said, 'Don't think about going back to Louisiana. I'm Mud.' I told him, 'I met you, I ain't even hungry now.'"

The 708 is gone now. So are the Blue Flame, the Squeeze Club and dozens of other clubs that were once crammed in four or five to a block on the South and West sides.

Many of the blues clubs are on the North Side now. Most are filled with tourists and white locals. At the House of Blues, blues isn't on the marquee very often.

"Those are the clubs that attract the most business, so people want to play there," says David Grazian, author of the 2003 book *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*. "They wind up sucking up all of the talent from the rest of the city."

Singer Shirley King, B.B. King's daughter, says it's harder to find work now than it probably was when Guy arrived. "You have to fight to use the blues as a way of becoming somebody," she says.

Guy feels that, too: "Blues is beginning to make me feel like an endangered species." It doesn't get enough radio play, so it doesn't sell, he says. "Thirty years ago I would tell you there was a handful of us left. The hand is not even full now."

He isn't slowing down.

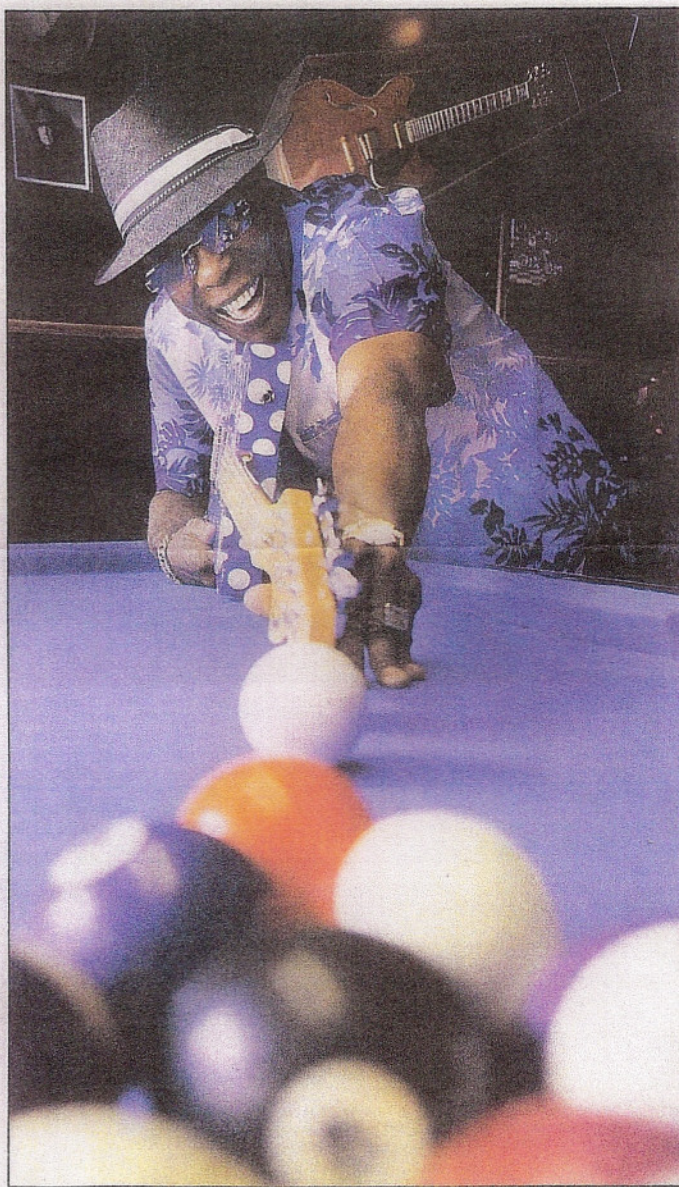
He has been taking hypertension medication for 30 years, but he's fit and energetic. He plays every January at his club in the Loop. His 2005 album, *Bring 'Em In*, paired him with John Mayer and Carlos Santana and earned a Grammy nomination.

Can't Quit the Blues, a three-CD box set with a DVD documentary, will be released Oct. 31 by Silverstone/Legacy. Guy will appear soon on MTV for the first time to talk about his daughter, rapper Shawanna.

Guy inspired Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Vaughan and Eric Clapton. When Clapton inducted Guy into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last year, he described seeing Guy play in London in 1965: "He was for me what Elvis was for most other people. My course was set, and he was my pilot."

Guy says he's still learning. After gigs in Japan with Beck and Santana, he says, "I'm saying, 'Wow, how come I couldn't find that note?' Then I've got to go home and figure out" how they had done it.

He reaches for that cognac only when about to play. "I still get the jitters," he says. "I still don't think I'm as good as I should be."



By John Zich, USA TODAY

Inspiration to a generation: Buddy Guy, who turned 70 Sunday, takes aim at Buddy Guy's Legends, his club in Chicago. Guy influenced Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck, among others.

Music
found;
love lost

Buddy Guy on love (he's been divorced twice and has eight children), music and performing:

"Before I knew what a guitar was, I used to dream I was in front of an audience. I saw this audience just appreciating whatever it was I was doing, and finally when I learned how to play guitar and looked out there and saw it, it was a flashback to that dream I had when I was like 9 years old."

"I'm happy every time I go play and look out there and see some people think enough of you to pay a fee. What really gets me emotional is sometimes we're playing and it's raining and they're still standing there. If I can see you when I play my first note, I can tell if I'm going to make you happy or not."

"At one time in life I thought the blues lyrics were unfit for the kids — until the hip-hop came out."

"You wouldn't believe it, but I'm single. My love life, well, evidently it just wasn't for me. The first wife told me it's me or the guitar. I just said, 'Where's the guitar?' and that's it. I dedicated my life to the music."