

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