



© Kenji Oda

# DAMN RIGHT, HE'S STILL GOT THE BLUES

**Buddy Guy's  
legendary career  
has spanned nearly  
seven decades, yet the  
consummate guitarist still  
has more vigor and zeal for  
the blues than players half his age.**

**By Dave Rubin**

**W**hen Lonnie Johnson, the first bona fide blues guitar hero, recorded a series of amazing duets with Eddie Lang in 1927, the gauntlet was thrown down to the tune of, "Okay, let's see *you* do this!" Ever since—from T-Bone Walker to Albert and Freddie King to Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan—there has always been an unmistakable element of machismo. Like the catfish metaphor that appears in so many classic blues songs, perhaps the virility is a symbol of strength and survival. George "Buddy" Guy has not only survived longer than many of his main inspirations (e.g., Muddy Waters) and protégés (Jimi Hendrix and SRV), he remains the baddest blues guitarist standing. And, unlike many of his peers and followers, his brutally aggressive style is tempered and intensified by dynamic, delicate passages.



© Peter Armit

Now in his seventh decade, Buddy Guy is showing no signs of slowing down. A new 15-track album, which he co-produced, is due out in the spring and features an all-star cast, including Clapton, Derek Trucks, and Robert Randolph. Also slated to appear is Aerosmith's Steven Tyler, who "freaked out" when he heard "Show Me the Money," which Guy wrote expressly for him. In January, Martin Scorsese's Rolling Stones documentary, *Shine a Light*, opened at the 58th Annual Berlin Film Festival and featured Guy in a sensational guest appearance, singing Muddy Waters' "Champagne and Reefer" with Mick Jagger. On top of that, Guy is making his dramatic cinematic debut in *In the Electric Mist*, which stars blues fan Tommy Lee Jones and is scheduled for a summer 2008 release.



**When you moved to Chicago in 1957 to meet Muddy Waters, did you ever imagine that someday you would be the idol of countless others?**

No, not at all, because when I came here, I didn't even think about being a professional musician. There were so many great ones out there in their prime, like Muddy, who had so many great guitar players around him: Howlin' Wolf, who had Hubert Sumlin, Bobby Bland with Wayne Bennett, and Memphis Slim with Matt Murphy and Earl Hooker. After I heard them, I said to myself, "What in the hell am I trying to do? There's no way I can play like that." But I was so in love with the guitar that I didn't have sense enough not to keep plucking away at it. And whatever I played, I knew it would be me.

**You first made your mark in Chicago, at a weekly jam, or "cutting session," where the winner got a bottle of whiskey.**

Yes, I think I helped create those when I came here. You know, I was talking to Syl Johnson the other night about that, and he told me, "I was playing jazz then, but someone told me I'd better check out this little guy from Louisiana, because he's running around and stomping the guitar with his feet." And Syl has been playing blues ever since.

**What compelled you to do those things?**

I got that from Guitar Slim, in Louisiana. I saw him play in Baton Rouge a couple of times before I left, and he was wild! I wanted to be able to shake my wrist like B.B. King and get

**"I wanted to be able to shake my wrist like B.B. King and get wild like Guitar Slim. I was just trying to suck them all in."**

wild like Guitar Slim. I was just trying to suck them all in. I was self-taught—I didn't learn from books—so I would say 97 or 98 percent of the stuff I learned I found by listening.

**You became an original, and now everyone wants to play like you. Who else inspired you?**

I played with Muddy and Wolf, but also Fred McDowell and Son House, and I popped the question to them that you're asking me now: "What did you do?" They said, "Hey, man, the people we learned from were not famous and did not make records, but we all learned from somebody." And that made me feel pretty good, because I was trying to play like Lightnin' Hopkins, T-Bone Walker, B.B., and others. So, one day I woke up and I was doing a few things here and there, and then somebody noticed me and said, "Wait a minute, man, he's playing a little bit." And I said, "Oh, yeah? Can I? I didn't know that." [Laughs]

**Ike Turner played on your earliest recordings.**

My first record was "Sit and Cry (the Blues)" in 1958, for Cobra records, because Chess had turned me down. Then the next one was called "This Is the End," and Ike played on it, yes.

**He always claimed he was not a guitar player, that he just did "tricks" on the guitar, and that he was really a piano player.**

I don't know about that, but I heard when he and Tina broke up that she had

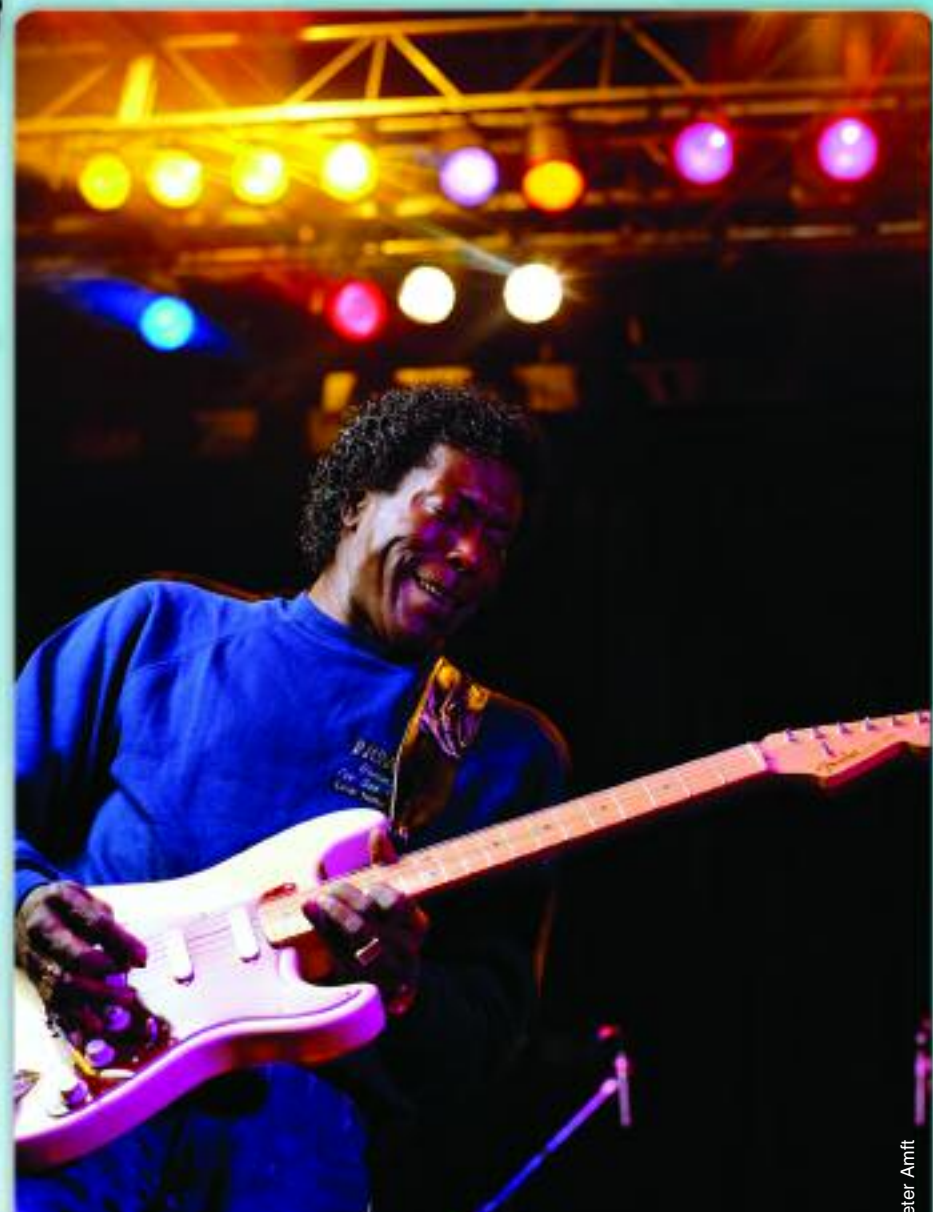


always told him, "Just go play your guitar like Eric Clapton and forget about all that other stuff."

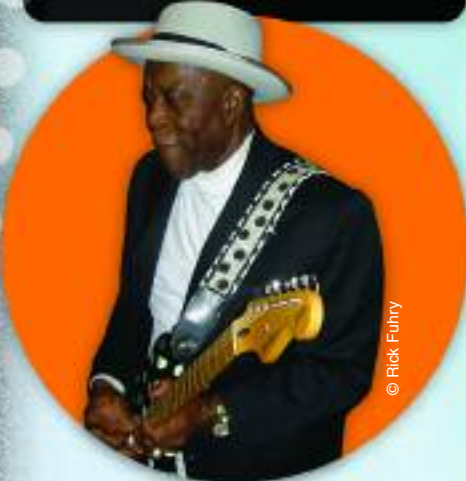
**You, Otis Rush, and Magic Sam are usually grouped together as the creators of the "West Side Sound" of the late Fifties.**

I think that the West Side and South Side are misunderstood. When I came to Chicago, there were a thousand blues clubs and we were all playing the circuit. But where you lived didn't matter—I played on the West Side as much as the South Side. Magic Sam and all of them did that. Cobra Records was on the West Side, and Chess Records

was at 21st and Michigan, on the South Side, but they didn't brand the companies as "West Side" or "South Side," just the artists. In the Sixties, I think some record companies were trying to capitalize on that West Side name, but I never did agree with that. When I came here, there was no such thing as "Chicago blues" or "Memphis blues"—it was all R&B. I mean, Ray Charles and B.B. King, they weren't "blues players"; they were R&B players. In every joint, there were jukeboxes that had the Top Ten records. If you could play them, you got the job and made \$1.50 a night. The top tunes were by Lloyd Price, Little Richard, Ray Charles... then Muddy.



**"I was so in love with the guitar that I didn't have sense enough not to keep plucking away at it."**



**As with many guitar players, B.B. King was an influence on you. When and how did you learn from his music?**

My mother had a stroke when I was in the ninth grade, so I had to drop out because I was the oldest boy. I had wanted to take music in school, so I went to the music teacher with a B.B. King 78 record and told him I wanted to learn music. He said he could teach me and gave me sheet music, but I said, "No, I want to learn this." He said he couldn't teach me that, so I said, "Then I'm not coming to your class." B.B. knows how much I stole—or whatever you want to call it—from him, but he's so modest. He said, "We all stole from somebody." Everybody should have a "B.B." on their guitars because of him.

**What is your favorite B.B. King record?**

*Live at the Regal.* When I hear him say to the audience, "We're going way back," I just think, "Bring it to me, bring it to me" [laughs], because those are the songs that turned me completely away from my music teacher. My favorite song is his first version of "Sweet Little Angel" [1956—Ed], which I think is a Robert Nighthawk song [Nighthawk recorded it as "Sweet Black Angel" in 1949—Ed] that I had on a 78.

**You are best known for playing electric guitar, but played acoustic on *Last Time Around: Live at Legends* and on *Blues Singer*, as well as on Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer* with Willie Dixon, in 1963.**

Leonard Chess told Muddy that he heard rumors that college kids were buying acoustics. So he wanted Muddy to go down to Mississippi and find an old guy who could play on that type of album and Muddy said, "Set the goddamn session up tomorrow," and he called me and asked me to show up. Now, I didn't know what's going on, and when I got there—you know, Leonard and them always cursed everybody out—he said, "What the f--k are you doing here?" Muddy just handed me the acoustic and the whole session, man, they was just standing there with their mouths wide open, not saying nothing. Finally, they said, "Motherf---r, how did you learn that?" And I said, "I learned everything I know from these guys. That's all I do is their music." [Laughs]



**Was your first guitar an acoustic?**

Yes, the first guitar I ever got a hold of was the acoustic. I think everyone my age started out with one. It's still the "father of guitars." Then Leo Fender and Les Paul made those [solid-body] electric guitars. With the amplifier, the notes could be heard longer. And that's where that squeezing [bending the strings—Ed] came from with T-Bone and B.B. But before that it was all acoustic, and the most you could do to get that sound was play the slide. That's why B.B. learned how to squeeze the strings, because he could never learn to use the slide.

**Have you ever played slide?**

I tried to play slide once, until I met the late, great Earl Hooker. When I heard him play I gave him my slide, because there was no way I could do that. I was standing outside a blues club one night and I heard someone playing Ray Charles' "What I'd Say" and I started singing along. The guys with me started laughing and said, "Wait till you see." I walked in and Earl was sitting in a chair playing the melody with the slide. He would light me up with that thing, man, and between trying to squeeze the strings like B.B., what do you do? I was like between the devil and the deep blue sea.

**You seem to have made the right choice.**

Well, sometimes I wish I had gone on and learned the slide a little more. I know one or two licks on it, but I can't handle it. See, when you play the slide, you can't get wild with the guitar. I'm from a Baptist family, and every time I play my guitar I feel like I should "shout." That's where I get that energy. People see me now and say, "Wow, man... at 70 years old!" My drummer looks at me and says, "He's got all that energy and I'm sitting back here like I'm half dead." [Laughs]



**Guitars:**

- Buddy Guy Signature Fender Strat
- Fender Custom Shop Polka Dot Strat w/ built-in preamp
- 1972-74 Fender Telecaster Deluxe

**Amp:**

Buddy Guy Signature amp made by Chicago Blues Box Amplifiers

**Effects:**

Dunlop Buddy Guy Signature wah pedal

**BLUES AMBASSADORS**

**10 Guitarists Who Are Carrying On the Blues Tradition**

**1. Michael Burks**

Big and burly, with brawny music to match, Burks is a legitimate heir of the late, great string-choker Albert King. His *Iron Man* (Alligator) is so passionate and powerful it could well turn out to be his *Born Under a Bad Sign*.

**2. Eli Cook**

As one of the young bucks committed to tilling the fertile fields of prewar acoustic blues, as well as pushing the envelope with aggressive electric blues and blues-rock, Cook sounds and plays well beyond his years on *Miss Blues' Child* (Sledgehammer Blues) and *Moonshine Mojo*.

**3. Rick Holmstrom**

Vintage gear cat "L.A. Holmes" seems to chart fresh territory every time out, whether on his own or backing R&B diva Mavis Staples. *Hydraulic Groove* (Tone-Cool) is startling in its intoxicating mix of classic postwar electric blues styles, filtered through Holmes' only slightly *bent* imagination.

**4. Davy Knowles**

Sixties British blues-rock and Hendrix continue to be a bottomless well of inspiration to each succeeding generation. Aussie Knowles brings the explosive chops and enthusiasm of youth, along with a deep feel for the blues, to his power trio Back Door Slam and their debut, *Roll Away* (Blix Street).

**5. Smokin' Joe Kubek**

A legitimate heir to Freddie King, with whom he once gigged, Kubek and his partner, Bnois King, drag raucous Texas blues bucking and kicking into the 21st century. *Blood Brothers*, their Alligator debut, adds some lowdown Chi-town grit to their boogies and shuffles.

**6. Aaron Moreland**

In Moreland & Arbuckle, Aaron Moreland, along with singer/harpist Dustin Arbuckle, whips his strings and melts the windings with his slide on *1861* (NorthernBlues). The pride of Kansas plays Hill Country stomps like his life depends on it.

**7. Ana Popovic**

Gender and purist issues go out the window when Popovic digs into her Strat and barks out snarky clusters or spins nimble, lyrical lead lines. *Still Making History* (ElectroGroove) casts a wide, arcing rainbow over the blues with rock, jazz, funk, and pop hues.

**8. Otis Taylor**

Denver's world bluesman pushes the envelope further than anyone with his electric banjo, slide guitar, and droning, hypnotic blues ragas that sear the soul. *Definition of a Circle* (Telarc) pumps it up with support from Brit bluesbuster Gary Moore.

**9. Eddie "Devilboy" Turner**

The former Otis Taylor sideman takes the voodoo blues of Jimi Hendrix and uses his background and artistry to make them palpably real. *The Turner Diaries* (NorthernBlues) moves easily from classic shuffles to chilling forays at the outer limits of the blues.

**10. Monster Mike Welch**

A wunderkind in the Nineties, Welch has matured into a veteran to reckon with at just 28. *Just Like It Is* (VizzTone) combines thundering chops with the indefinable "blues feel" to produce vital music that is both urgent and reflective.

—DR