Buddy Guy

By Rob Bowman

In 1986, Eric Clapton emphatically declared that "[Buddy Guy is] by far and without a doubt the best guitar player alive." Over the years, Carlos Santana, Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and numerous lesser lights have similarly sung Buddy Guy's praises. The Rolling Stones requested Guy and his erstwhile partner, harmonica wizard Junior Wells, to open for them on their 1970 European tour, while everyone from Mark Knopfler to Bonnie Raitt and Jonny Lang has lined up for guest slots on Guy's string of incendiary Silvertone albums from 1991 to the present. A blues musician by trade and self-definition, Buddy Guy has had an inordinate influence on the shape and sounds of guitar-based rock for more than four decades.

Born George Guy some fifty miles north of Baton Rouge, in Lettsworth, Louisiana, in 1936, Buddy was the third of five children. His family sharecropped for a living, and disposable income was virtually nonexistent. A self-taught musician, Guy fashioned his first instruments by stretching rubber bands between two nails hammered into a wall and taking the wire from the family's screen door and attaching it to paint cans. He would be seventeen before he owned a guitar that, he said, "I really could do something with."

Obsessed with the guitar, Guy was within a few short years a familiar figure in the blues clubs around Baton Rouge. He worked as a sideman, initially with "Big Poppa" John Tilley's band and subsequently with harpist Raful Neal, before he decided to take his chances in the big city and headed north to Chicago in the fall of 1957. The Windy City was initially less than hospitable. For six months, Guy pounded the streets looking for work. Close to starving, he was about ready to give up when in March 1958 a stranger accosted him on the street and asked if he could play the guitar he was hauling around. When Guy said yes and backed up his claim by playing a bit of Guitar Slim's "Things That I Used to Do," his new friend bought him a drink and took him to the 708 Club, then one of the best-known blues joints on the South Side. That night Otis Rush commanded the bandstand. After watching Rush play a few songs, the stranger grabbed Guy by the arm and informed Rush that Guy could blow him off the stage. Rush's response was simply, "Bring him on up."

Although Guy was as down on his luck as he would ever be, his confidence was buoyed by the liquor the stranger had plied him with. Getting up on the bar, Guy proceeded to play over-the-top pyrotechnic versions of "Things That I Used to Do" and Bobby "Blue" Bland's "Farther On Up the Road." The club's owner, Ben Gold, immediately offered Guy a gig playing three nights a week. Within days, Guy had met his idol, Muddy Waters, and other up-and-coming young guitar slingers such as Earl Hooker and Magic Sam. The latter would take Guy to meet Eli Toscano, who owned a local independent blues label, Cobra Records. Before the year was out, Guy's first 45, "Sit and Cry (the Blues)," was issued on the Cobra

▶ **Louisiana-born Buddy Guy, who made his mark in Chicago after arriving in the late 1950s; live at a Windy City club, circa 1963**

subsidiary Artistic Records. A second Artistic single followed a year later.

The Artistic singles, and many of Guy's subsequent recordings for Chess Records between 1960 and 1967, were fine examples of B.B. King–influenced clean-toned, straight-ahead blues. While Chess Records had been built on the postwar blues sounds of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, and Sonny Boy Williamson, the company had made the lion's share of its fortune on the rock & roll recordings of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, and in the 1960s was having some success with soul music. Encouraged by the company's brain trust, a number of Guy's Chess outings lean toward the soul side of the equation. In the summer of 1963, he cut an instrumental version of Bobby Timmons's soul-jazz instrumental "Moanin'."

Buddy Guy's influence on Jimi Hendrix's performance style is a matter of record

Between his recordings as a leader at Chess, Guy was gainfully employed as a session musician at the company. Capable of playing creditably in a wide variety of blues styles, Guy can be heard on numerous classic blues recordings including Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor," Koko Taylor's "Wang Dang Doodle," and the Muddy Waters *Folk Singer* LP. The last of these was an all-acoustic effort featuring Guy playing in the prewar-country-blues style he had learned as a teenager.

Fine as his Artistic and Chess recordings were, none came close to capturing the propulsive intensity of his live performances. Guy had grown up in the emotionally charged musical environment of the Baptist church. His secular playing was predicated on a similar drive for emotional catharsis, reflected in the falsetto cries and extended melismata that dominated his singing and his manic, stinging, string-bending, distorted, extraordinarily loud, and often fuzz-laden guitar playing. In the 1950s and 1960s, alongside Otis Rush, Earl Hooker, and Magic Sam, Guy was part of the younger generation of Chicago blues guitarists intent on stretching the limits of the genre, both sonically and visually.

Guy's live performances were characterized by a full-on attack and take-no-prisoners guitar pyrotechnics. When he toured Europe for the first time in 1965, audiences were stunned as he played his guitar with his teeth, behind his back, lying flat on the floor, and with only his left hand. Guy's influence on Hendrix's performance style is a matter of record. One of his common routines involved "picking" the guitar with his handkerchief. He was also fond of rubbing the microphone stand against the strings of his guitar, and, at Theresa's Lounge in Chicago, he would wedge his guitar into the heating pipes above the stage and play it upside down. As a teenager, Guy had been mesmerized when he saw Eddie Jones, a.k.a. Guitar Slim, walk right through the crowd and out the front door, playing all the time, his guitar connected to his amp with a 150-foot cord. Guy would eventually get a 350-foot cord. The first time I saw him was in Toronto at Festival Express in 1970. There he rode the stage elevator and

▼ **Buddy Guy with one of his many British fans, Eric Clapton, who helped to get Guy and Junior Wells a record deal with Atco in 1970**

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played several stories above the stage. To this day, he routinely walks through the audience, sometimes out the front door of the venue, playing sheets of staccato, molten guitar licks all the while.

Fueling the sonic and kinetic frenzy that's at the core of Guy's performances is his refusal to follow any preordained program in terms of repertoire, set length, and solo structure. Like those of Al Green and George Clinton, and to a lesser degree Aretha Franklin and James Brown, Guy's performances are singular, with improvisation, unpredictability, and chaos reigning. Combined with his superior vocal and instrumental skills, the results are riveting and intoxicating.

In the late 1960s, Guy signed with Vanguard. In 1970, on Eric Clapton's insistence, he and Junior Wells recorded for Atco. Throughout the 1970s, Guy performed with Junior Wells, recording for Delmark, Blue Thumb, Isabel Records in France, and JSP Records and Red Lightnin' in London. All these recordings were live dates or one-day studio sessions. Frustrated by the conditions under which he was asked to record and the absence of meaningful royalty payments, Guy stopped recording in the 1980s, holding out for a major-label contract and national distribution.

In 1972, he bought a club called the Checkerboard Lounge on the South Side of Chicago, which often hosted rock celebrities. In 1981, after the Rolling Stones played a stadium gig downtown, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, and Ron Wood headed to the Checkerboard, a film crew in tow, and played all night with Muddy Waters and Buddy Guy. In 1986, Guy sold the Checkerboard, and opened a new club downtown, Buddy Guy's Legends, in 1989. When not working at his own clubs, Guy regularly gigged both on his own and in partnership with Junior Wells.

His recording hiatus came to an end in the early 1990s when Andrew Lauder of the BMG-affiliated Silvertone Records saw Guy play with Clapton at London's Royal Albert Hall. Lauder had been stunned when he had first seen Guy in 1965. On Guy's first Silvertone CD, *Damn Right, I've Got the Blues,* he was backed by a band that included Little Feat's Richie Hayward on drums and Pete Wingfield on keyboards. Beck and Clapton made guest appearances on a couple of tracks, while Mark Knopfler and the Memphis Horns played on another. The disc contained a well-balanced mix of classics such as Eddie Boyd's "Five Long Years" and Big Jay McNeely's "There Is Something on Your Mind" and newer tunes such as John Hiatt's "Where Is the Next One Coming From" and Guy's tribute to the recently deceased Stevie Ray Vaughan, "Rememberin' Stevie." It was the first opportunity Guy had to record under ideal circumstances. It was also his first album to go gold, break into *Billboard*'s album charts, and garner him a Grammy Award.

The fourteen years since Guy recorded *Damn Right, I've Got the Blues* have been very good ones. In 1993, he received *Billboard*'s Century Award, and four of his Silvertone albums have won Grammys, including his most recent acoustic outing, *Blues Singer*. The lot of many blues musicians is to be feted only after they have died. In Buddy Guy's case, his just rewards are blessedly coming while he is still alive. His induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is a fitting recognition of the influential role he has played in shaping the rock-guitar styles of current and future Hall of Famers such as Clapton, Beck, Hendrix, Santana, and Vaughan.

▼ **Buddy Guy, showing how it's done at an outdoor blues festival**

▼ **Buddy Guy and his longtime partner, harmonica player Junior Wells, performing at a blues festival (top) and at home in Chicago**

▲ Buddy Guy's Checkerboard Lounge in Chicago, on the night of Muddy Waters's funeral, 1983, after word got out the Stones might stop by

The Second Generation of the Chicago Blues

By Robert Santelli

After Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, and Willie Dixon, came a new crew of brilliant artists who put their own stamp on the Windy City sound

OPPOSITE PAGE AND THIS PAGE: MARC POKEMPNER

▲ **Surrounded by wanna-be blues guitarists, Buddy Guy holds class at the Blue Monday Jam Session at his Checkerboard Lounge, 1974**

Call it a passing of the torch, or simply the natural evolution of an American music form. Either way, electric blues emerged from its golden age in the 1950s with a crop of young artists eager to make their own mark on the music and take it down brand-new paths.

Mostly, they had come of age in Chicago, where they learned firsthand from the likes of such legends as Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Willie Dixon, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Howlin' Wolf. First by listening and watching, then jamming, and later occasionally recording with these seminal bluesmen, young bulls such as Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, Magic Sam, and Earl Hooker gained an education that would prove vital in carrying on the city's rich and longstanding blues tradition.

The 1950s was a decade of unprecedented advancement for the blues. With the increased use of the electric guitar and the overall amplification of the music, the blues entered an exciting new realm. Chicago became the hub of this creative thrust. A new record company, Chess, started by brothers Phil and Leonard, began recording many of the blues artists who had recently migrated to Chicago from Mississippi, Memphis, and other Southern blues centers.

In Chicago, the blues kept pace with soul in the sixties; it endured and even thrived there

McKinley Morganfield, a singer/guitarist from the Delta better known as Muddy Waters, proved to the Chess brothers he could play an electric, rather than acoustic, guitar in the studio and retain the music's authenticity. Waters's blues, while forging ahead with a new sound, was still full of Mississippi grit and deeply connected to down home. The early records Waters recorded for Chess began a new chapter in blues history.

Others followed in Waters's footsteps in reinventing the blues: harmonica masters Sonny Boy Williamson and Little Walter Jacobs, both of whom created new harp sounds by using the microphone as an extension of their instrument; guitarists Jimmie Rogers and Elmore James, whose solos soared with electrified power; singer Howlin' Wolf, who kept the edge of the blues razor sharp and its soul midnight black; and jack-of-all-trades Willie Dixon, whose songs and smart ears did more to create the "Chess sound" than anything else.

Chess and other blues-focused independent record companies in the 1950s, such as Sun, Atlantic, Modern, RPM, and Excello, carried this new electric blues beyond traditional markets, making the music more accessible than ever before. By the early sixties, the blues had made its way to England, where it influenced the decade's greatest rock musicians,

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▲ **Otis Rush performing in Chicago, 1998; Hound Dog Taylor and his bottleneck slide; Junior Wells at Theresa's Lounge, 1975 (from left).**

including Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Jeff Beck, Rod Stewart, and Jimmy Page.

But despite the popularity of electric blues, it faced a daunting challenge at home in the sixties. Although the music was richer and more exciting than ever before, its core audience – young blacks – was not embracing the music like earlier generations had. Times had changed. By the early part of the decade, the civil rights movement was in full swing, affecting almost everything in black culture, including music. Many young blacks heard echoes of Jim Crow in the blues and thought the music was too linked with a past mired in racism. A new music form, soul, which featured fresh sounds and ideas, swept through black urban areas in the North and the South. Borrowing heavily from the blues and gospel, soul music gave young blacks a sound of their own and released them from a past they'd just as soon forget.

His powerful live performances made Buddy Guy the rising blues star in Chicago

But the blues was too essential a music form in black America to be thrown onto the waste heap. In Chicago, the blues kept pace with soul in the sixties, despite the fact that death had taken Elmore James, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Little Walter. The blues endured and even thrived in clubs on the South and West Sides of the city, while many of the city's blues stalwarts looked beyond Chicago toward rock and white audiences. Most important, not all of Chicago's young and bright black musical minds jumped the blues ship for soul.

Buddy Guy was born and raised in Louisiana and played the blues in the Baton Rouge area before coming to Chicago in 1957. A guitarist with a seemingly unlimited reach and a knack for creating driving, emotionally intense solos, Guy signed with Chess in 1960 and quickly became a top session guitarist, working with Waters, Williamson, Little Walter, Dixon, and others and establishing himself as one of the hottest new talents on the Chicago blues scene.

At Chess, however, Guy was still in the shadow of his mentors. It was only after he left the label in 1967 that he became a blues star in his own right. Signing with Vanguard Records, Guy released such acclaimed albums as *A Man & the Blues, This Is Buddy Guy,* and *Hold That Plane!* These albums and his equally powerful live performances made Guy the rising blues star in Chicago.

Around the same time, Guy began teaming up with harmonica player Junior Wells, whom he had known and occasionally played with since his early days in Chicago. Wells had come to the Windy City from Tennessee in the mid-1940s and played with the Four Aces and Muddy Waters, among others. Wells and Guy quickly became a formidable blues force, with Wells's wailing harp and soulful vocals and Guy's hellbent guitar solos and equally potent voice.

An acclaimed 1966 Junior Wells song, "Hoodoo Man Blues," that featured Guy on guitar, cemented their relationship. Together, Wells and Guy crossed over into the mostly white blues-rock market, enlarging their audience and making fans out of everyone from Eric Clapton to the J. Geils Band, and especially the Rolling Stones, with whom they toured in 1970.

Buddy Guy wasn't the only blues guitarist in Chicago destined for greatness. Otis Rush played achingly expressive solos with careful attention to tone and texture that made him one of the city's best blues-guitar stylists. Hailing from Mississippi, Rush came to Chicago in 1948; by 1956, he was recording for Cobra Records, releasing a seminal version of Willie Dixon's "I Can't Quit You Baby." A short stint with Chess followed, but it resulted in little headway for Rush. It wasn't until a number of Otis Rush tracks were released on the classic mid-1960s compilation *Chicago/The Blues/Today!* that Rush began to attract serious attention outside local blues circles.

By 1970, Rush, now managed by Albert Grossman, who also handled Bob Dylan, the Band, and Janis Joplin, broadened his

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▲ **Queen of the Blues Koko Taylor, who had her first hit with "Wang Dang Doodle," performing at the Chicago Blues Festival, June 10, 1988**

appeal with white blues-rock fans. A year later, Rush recorded *Right Place, Wrong Time,* a potent work that Capitol Records oddly chose not to release. The album finally came out in 1976 on the tiny Bullfrog label, but much of the buzz around it had been lost.

If fate was cruel to Otis Rush, it was even more cruel to Magic Sam and Earl Hooker, two great blues guitarists who passed away before their time, Sam in 1969 and Hooker a year later. Born Sam Maghett in Mississippi, Magic Sam, like Buddy Guy and Otis Rush, helped form the "West Side" school of blues. Sam's impeccable phrasing on guitar and vocals made his brand of blues irresistible. Throughout the 1960s, he was a regular performer in Chicago clubs and recorded for the Chief label.

A few performances outside Chicago, particularly in San Francisco, turned young, white blues-rock fans on to Magic Sam's guitar genius. Then, in the summer of 1969, he played the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, a performance that not only set Sam up for blues stardom but also ranks as one of the most memorable blues performances of the period. Unfortunately, Sam was not able to capitalize on his new potential. Shockingly, he died of a heart attack that December at the age of thirty-three.

Yet another young bluesman born in Mississippi who had come to Chicago with his family in the 1940s, Earl Hooker was supposed to be the successor to Elmore James, the great blues guitar player who had died in 1963, leaving blues fans with an unquenched thirst for his slide-guitar brilliance. Hooker was nearly James's equal when it came to creating screeching slide solos soaked with passion. His mentor was another legendary slide guitar player, Robert Nighthawk. What Hooker lacked, though, was a strong voice to go with his obvious guitar talent, which is why many of his best songs were instrumentals.

Hooker recorded in the 1960s, sometimes playing a double-neck guitar, but his albums never really broke him out of his cult status. Tuberculosis robbed him of the chance to broaden his audience and achieve the fame most of his fans and guitar-playing colleagues thought was due him. Earl Hooker died in 1970 at just forty years old.

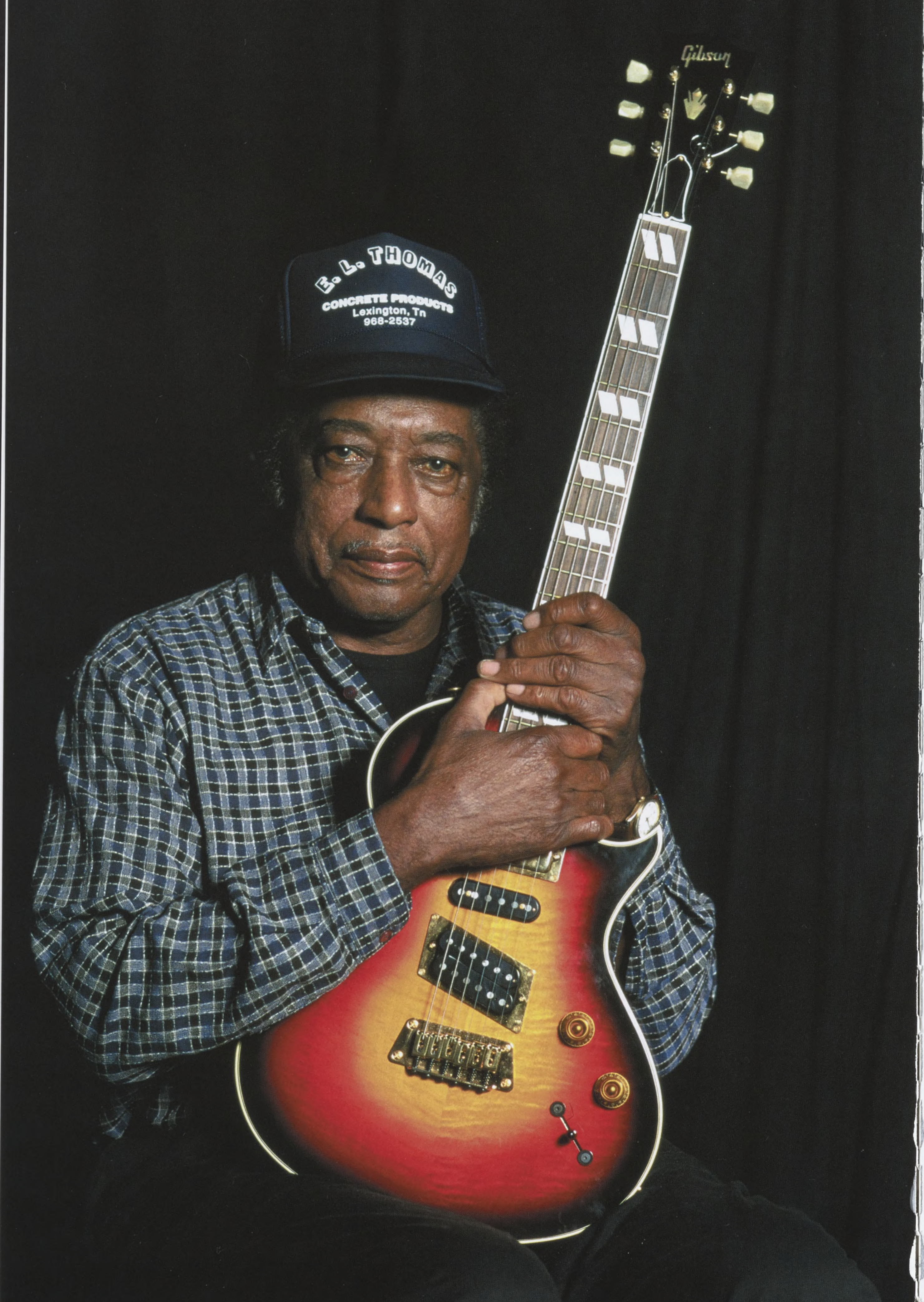
Hound Dog Taylor enjoyed even less attention outside Chicago blues circles in the 1960s, despite being a regular club performer in the city and sporting a blues sound that was noted for its raw, uncut intensity. Taylor, too, came to Chicago from Mississippi in the 1940s. He played bars and small clubs on the South Side, recording sparingly but providing slashing, wicked slide-guitar solos in front of his band, the House Rockers, to anyone who cared to listen.

One such blues fan was Bruce Iglauer, a clerk at one of the city's top blues record stores, the Jazz Record Mart. Fascinated by Taylor's riveting sound, which came in part from Taylor's having six fingers on each hand, Iglauer was moved to start his own record company, Alligator, after Bob Koester, the owner of Jazz Mart and its related label, Delmark, turned down the chance to record Taylor.

Hound Dog Taylor and the House Rockers was released in 1971; Iglauer sold most of his copies from the trunk of his car. But the album's stripped-down, bar-band sound that featured blistering solos from Taylor brought attention to Taylor, as well as to Iglauer's fledgling label. Taylor went on to put out three more albums for Alligator, gaining acclaim as one of Chicago's best slide guitarists of the 1970s and helping Iglauer's record company become one of the city's most important outlets for local music since the glory days of Chess.

It took another Taylor to bring an even brighter spotlight onto the good work of Alligator Records in the 1970s. Koko Taylor, a Memphis singer who moved to Chicago in the early 1950s, got a taste of blues fame when she recorded the Willie Dixon song "Wang Dang Doodle," turning it into a bestseller in 1966. But Taylor was little more than a blues one-hit wonder until she signed with Alligator Records in 1975. With her rough-hewn, gravelly voice and wild, unabashed delivery, in which she coaxed every possible feeling out of her heart, Taylor quickly established herself as the Queen of the Blues. Albums such as *I Got What It Takes* and *The Earthshaker* made her a genuine blues star.

Although she has been slowed down by age – she turns seventy this year – Taylor continues to celebrate her blues-royalty status in the studio and on the stage. And Chicago remains one of the most important hubs of the electric blues. ●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The Blues That Never Left

The founder of Fat Possum Records describes the unique talents of the bluesmen who stuck to their roots, forgoing the thrall of the big city

By Matthew Johnson

All the blues artists originally signed to Fat Possum had stayed in Mississippi while their friends and family migrated North in pursuit of better jobs in factories and a shot at the American dream. Although their musical personalities and styles differed, just as their temperaments varied, these guitar-playing bluesmen shared certain characteristics. R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, Asie Payton, and Johnny Farmer were all extremely charismatic, smart, and athletic – the kind of people you wanted to be around. Three of the four had sought-after jobs: Junior Kimbrough worked as a mechanic at the Holly Springs John Deere dealership. Johnny Farmer began roadwork swinging a pickax and wound up driving $150,000 bulldozers. Apparently, Asie Payton did something right – the man he drove a tractor for not only refused to give him a message to call me but told me straightout that Payton worked for him and I had no business bothering him. Burnside, always the exception, moved to Chicago with his family, but in the course of a year, his uncle was thrown out a fifth-floor window, his father and three brothers were all either shot or stabbed to death, and R.L. returned to Mississippi.

I met these musicians by spending a lot of time roaming around Mississippi. More often than not, I found myself in towns where the population had steadily declined for the past fifty years. They were isolated, desolate, lonely places – known for producing the weirdest and loudest howls. These artists were stuck in time; their musical influences went no further than the early 1960s. They were listening not just to the exact same performers – Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, and Clarence Carter – when the northern migration began, but to the exact same 45s in the exact same Seeburgs and Rock-Ola jukeboxes. Those old Chess 45s that Junior played over and over sounded like ghosts – the grooves had been worn down to nothing. I'm sure the machine didn't have the right needle on the cartridge, but what did it matter? Everybody in the joint knew the words to every song by heart and had known them decades ago.

These men also shared a purity, if you will, a complete lack of musical-career ambition, with the exception of Junior. Most of these guys had been cut off at the knees in terms of opportunities offered to them. None of them ever picked up a guitar because he thought it might lead to a career. Johnny learned to play because there were two songs he wanted to hear.

Most important was the fact that they had all practiced and played by themselves for so long that their timing was completely screwed up and none of them could play with other musicians. Junior Kimbrough's band consisted of his son, Kenny, and Burnside's son, Gary. Junior was great with Kenny, but he sounded off whenever he tried to play with anyone else.

I think a lot of the music's originality was quickly lost in the cities. I've heard guys who were good but, after going to Chicago and playing with so many different combinations, had to lower the bar and turn everything into a standard twelve-bar blues – the kind of stuff that's been imitated for so long nobody can remember who he's copying anymore. Their timing was perfect, they never played a bad note, they tried to make a living at it, and somewhere along the way compromises were made. Kimbrough, Burnside, Farmer, and Payton were playing for themselves, getting wasted at 65 and 70 years of age, with a Peavey amp turned all the way up for companionship.

> ***Burnside, Kimbrough, Payton, and Farmer were all charismatic, smart, and athletic***

Nobody at Fat Possum ever kidded himself; we all knew our mission was something of a lost cause. But for an underfinanced blues label with a roster of nontouring artists who had to be coaxed out of Mississippi, we've done okay. I failed to realize to what extent our cause was truly lost, though, until my last meeting with Johnny Farmer. We had taken a track from his record to Organized to do a remix of it, which I took to L.A. and played for Michael Mann. He loved it and used it for a scene in his movie *Ali*. My journey from the Organized Noize camp in Atlanta to the Hollywood soundstage was one of the shittiest experiences imaginable. However, back in Oxford, Mississippi, I began to feel that the whole ordeal was worth it. I made two $7,000 withdrawals from the bank and was looking forward to Farmer's reaction when he received his first installment of $14,000. We were sitting on the couch in the studio when I tried to hand it to him. "Look at me," he said. "I'm 70 years old. My life is all over. What the hell am I going to do with that at this age? When I was young and could have enjoyed it – *man, oh, man. . . .* You might as well keep it."

As I insisted he take the money, we got into the car to take him home to Greenville. Somewhere along the way, he asked if we could pull in to a BP station so he could buy beer. I watched him through the glass doors. He was half-drunk and causing the normal commotion – nothing seemed unusual. Then I noticed the customers who had been in line in front of him. They were waving to him, trying to finish their words before the doors shut behind him. Their hands were full of money. ●

◀ **R.L. Burnside is among the greatest and most well known of North Mississippi's contemporary bluesmen; photographed here in 2004.**