

Any discussion of Buddy Guy invariably involves a recitation of his colossal musical resume and hard-earned accolades. He's a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, a chief guitar influence to rock titans like Hendrix, Clapton, Beck, and Vaughan, a pioneer of Chicago's fabled West Side sound, and a living link to that city's halcyon days of electric blues.

Buddy has received five Grammy Awards, 23 W.C. Handy Blues Awards (the most any artist has received), the Billboard Magazine Century Award for distinguished artistic achievement, and the Presidential National Medal of Arts.

Yet despite this long list of achievements, Buddy Guy and his music remain as vital as ever. Just this year, Buddy appeared on the big screen nationwide with a show-stopping performance in Martin Scorsese's Rolling Stones concert film, *Shine A Light*. At the age of 72, he appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* for the first time, as part of the magazine's "100 Greatest Guitar Songs" package (his cataclysmic 1961 recording of "Stone Crazy" made the list). And now, the release of *Skin Deep*—an album of all original material, with guest appearances from fellow guitar wizards Eric Clapton, Robert Randolph, Susan Tedeschi, and Derek Trucks—adds yet another dimension to this master's legendary career.

"This is the first time I really had more control," Guy says. "Everything in here is new. Most of the other albums have been a few new songs and then back to the older stuff or the covers—which is fine, but you gotta be creative. I would talk to Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck when they were all making records, and they would tell me that they would go in the studio with the freedom to play what they wanted. This time, I had that."

Though Buddy Guy will forever be associated with Chicago, his incredible story actually begins in Louisiana. Born in 1936 to a sharecropper's family and raised on a plantation near the small town of Lettsworth, located some 140 miles northwest of New Orleans, George "Buddy" Guy was one of five children born to Sam and Isabel Guy. *Skin Deep*'s "Out in the Woods" hearkens back to those early years—and to one of his signature songs, "The First Time I Met the Blues," with its unforgettable opening lines, "The first time I met the blues/I was walking through the woods." ("I was born in the woods, that's the facts of life," says Guy, "but people don't know about that.")

His earliest years were marked by the all-too-familiar characteristics of the Jim Crow South: separate seating on public busses, whites-only drinking fountains, and restaurants where blacks—if served at all—were sent around back. But the social order of the day notwithstanding, it was tolerance, not bitterness, instilled in the young Buddy Guy.

He addresses the issue of racism on the soulful title song of the new album, getting right to heart of the matter with a powerful series of personal memories and observations on the ways in which "underneath, we're all the same." Guy elaborates on his inspiration for "Skin Deep" with a story.

"I used to play with this boy, ride horses, down close to where I was born," he says. "Then when we were 13, his parents made us stop. They used to say you had black blood or white blood, but we'd get a flashlight and hold it up to our skin and we'd just see red blood. That's what I mean by 'skin deep.'" (He and that childhood friend recently reunited, backstage at one of Buddy's shows in Louisiana.)

Buddy was all of seven years old, he recalls, when he fashioned his first makeshift "guitar" — a two-string contraption attached to a piece of wood and secured with his mother's hairpins. There was usually no work to be done on the plantation on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, and the precious free time helped Buddy to develop the very skills that would one day bring him fame. It would be nearly a decade, however, before Buddy would own an actual guitar — a Harmony acoustic that now proudly sits on display at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland.

By late 1955, following a stint pumping gas, the 19-year-old Guy was working as a custodian at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, and earning the princely sum of \$28 per week. His heart and mind were already firmly attached to the guitar and the blues sounds he heard emanating from the radio, but at that point in his young life, Guy had never even been out of Louisiana.

It was September 25, 1957 — a date Guy would cite countless times in interviews over the ensuing decades — when he boarded the 8:14 a.m. train in Hammond, Louisiana, arriving in Chicago just before midnight. In an instant, his world had changed. Gone was the rural landscape of Louisiana; in its place was the thriving urban sprawl of a metropolis. It may as well have been a foreign country.

Within months, though, Guy had taken up residency in Chicago's fabled 708 Club. His first appearance followed a set by Otis Rush and an oft-repeated story about a hungry Guy, broke and on the cusp of returning to Louisiana, getting salami sandwiches from none other than Muddy Waters himself, who'd arrived at the club in a red Chevrolet. It was the first time Guy had ever seen the blues giant, who happened to live nearby.

"When I first came to Chicago," says Guy, "most musicians were still sitting down in front of music stands — even if they couldn't read music, they did it just to look more serious. Then Guitar Slim got wild and kicked them all off stage, and I was wild like that, too.

"We used to have guitar battles every Sunday and Monday, with guys like Otis Rush and Magic Sam," he continues. "It was like watching two tennis players or two boxers, they'd go at each other, but it was just making a living. One time, I came in with a 150 foot cord, walked in the door playing, and they just put their guitars down. And even now, if I don't go off the stage, people ask if I'm feeling alright!"

By the early 1960s, Guy was a first-call session man at Chess Records. In that role, he backed the likes of Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, and Sonny Boy Williamson. One landmark recording with Waters, Folk Singer, was cut in September of 1963 and released in the spring of 1964.

Wrote producer Ralph Bass in the album's original liner notes of the "search" for a second guitarist to back Waters: "Buddy Guy, a young blues singer in his own right, was first choice and it is amazing for so young a musician as Buddy to be able to fit in with Muddy."

In addition, Guy began to cut a considerable catalog of sides under his own name. By the end of the 1960s, he was staking out new creative territory, cutting albums like 1967's *I Left My Blues in San Francisco*, his last effort for Chess, and 1968's *A Man and the Blues* for Vanguard. In the process, Guy, the purveyor of a stinging, attacking electric guitar style and wild, impassioned vocals, was capturing the minds of a growing number of rock musicians.

"He was for me what Elvis was probably like for other people," Clapton remembered at Guy's Rock

and Roll Hall of Fame induction in 2005. "My course was set, and he was my pilot."

There were no fewer than 20 releases under Guy's name during the 1970s and '80s, the best of them collaborations with the late harp master Junior Wells. But by the time the Eighties became the Nineties, Guy amazingly didn't even have a domestic record deal.

But life, as Buddy has long since learned, is loaded with unpredictable twists and turns. And Guy's life was about to enter a new stratosphere of commercial success. His first three albums for Silvertone—the 1991 comeback smash *Damn Right, I've Got the Blues* (reissued in 2005), 1993's *Feels Like Rain*, and 1994's *Slippin' In*—all earned Grammy Awards. Suddenly, it was cool to like Buddy Guy. And for Guy, it was like being a new artist again.

Subsequent releases like the eminently satisfying *Live: The Real Deal* (1996), the daring *Heavy Love* (1998) and 2001's *Sweet Tea* have demonstrated that Guy, while firmly ensconced in his blues roots, has always tried to keep his music looking forward. Even at the risk of alienating lovers of traditional blues sounds. His last album, *Bring 'Em In*, found Guy trading licks with the likes of Carlos Santana and John Mayer (a huge Buddy Guy fan, who has done much to spotlight the older artist in recent years) on a set of songs featuring covers of classic soul songs.

On *Skin Deep*, Guy offers an endorsement to such younger players as pedal steel virtuoso Robert Randolph and husband-and-wife guitar slingers Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks. These musicians serve as a living response to the question Guy raises on the song "Who's Gonna Fill Those Shoes," featuring pre-teen guitar whiz Quinn Sullivan, in which he reflects on the future of the blues beyond his revolutionary generation.

"I just try to get the best players, and hope I can pop the top off this can and show that the blues are back," he says. "I learn from them—bring them in and see what they can do. And these guys got me feeling like when I was 22 years old and went into the studio with Muddy Waters."

Buddy Guy says he's excited about the new ground broken on *Skin Deep*, and about continuing to find new challenges to set for himself. "If you get too old to learn, you might as well go out of this world backwards," he says. "It's like being a prizefighter—if you lay down, you never have a chance to win. But if you keep punching, you might hit 'em with the one that lays 'em down."

"My eyes and ears are wide open," he concludes. "You never know what's gonna happen."