

February 24, 2002----

It is late January and Buddy Guy is winding down his monthlong musical residency at Buddy Guy's Legends, 754 S. Wabash. Guy has no particular place to go on a Monday night. His stage is open for jams. The blues legend blends in with the crowd of tourists and South Loop office workers. He sits alone at a corner of the bar drinking a bottle of Heineken with his trademark glass of ice.

Guy is part of Chicago's landscape, a Picasso with a pick, a drawbridge between black and white. The son of a Louisiana sharecropper, Guy's warm yet cocksure aura has evolved into a symbol of Chicago.

A four-time Grammy Award winner, his latest album, "Sweet Tea" (Silverstone), earned him his sixth overall nomination for best contemporary blues album and Guy is odds-on favorite to win when the 44th Annual Grammy Awards are broadcast from Los Angeles.

"This June I will have had my club 13 years," Guy says. "I may have missed three nights when I'm in town and when I'm not playing. We go to Japan, Australia and Europe. Someone will always say, 'You know, with most celebrities who have a place, you only see them at grand openings.' I didn't open this for that. I remember what Dolly Parton said when she was asked if autograph seekers worry her. She said, 'No, they worry me when they don't ask.' "

Dorothy Coyle, director of the Chicago Office of Tourism, says, "Buddy Guy's fame contributes to Chicago's reputation as home of the blues. In the minds of international visitors, Chicago is synonymous with the blues. To have access to someone like Buddy Guy is tremendous and it provides a memory they won't forget."

On this cold Monday night Guy has finished talking to two blues fans from Central America. They can't believe they've come across Guy sitting at his bar on a Monday night. It's like finding a World Series ring at Wrigley Field. They shake his hand.

"See what I mean?," Guy asks. "I owe this back to them. Now if someone is intoxicated, they can make you wish you weren't sitting here." Guy takes a sly pause and smiles. He says, "I've figured that out. See, I've got my bathroom back there. And there's a back door at the kitchen. So if I get locked up in two or three drunks, I say, 'Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom,' and I don't stop. I go on out the back door, get in the car and go home. But I enjoy this. Tonight is an open house jam. I like to sit back and watch.

"I don't read music. I play by ear, so there's always something you can pick up. If you get to the point where you think you know it all, you're in the dark. I've had that

guitar in my hand for 45 years. If I haven't found that note a guy might play, I have to go home and find it."

This sense of discovery is what makes "Sweet Tea" one of the most powerful recordings in Guy's career. Guy recorded the tracks in the Sweet Tea recording studio in the hill country of North Mississippi. The area has become a mystical fountain for rural blues musicians such as T-Model Ford and Paul "Wine" Jones, who have recorded for Fat Possum Records in Oxford, Miss. These rural bluesmen move away from conventional 12-bar structures in favor of hypnotic and looping two-chord modal forms. They play off a primary riff followed by rambling in-your-face vocals. Guy soaked it all up.

"I thought I had found everybody in Mississippi who I could learn something from," Guy says. "I played with the late (slide guitarist) Son House, who taught Muddy (Waters) how to play. I played with the late (bottleneck slide guitarist Mississippi) Fred McDowell, who Bonnie Raitt learned from. I got the record company laughing. I said I had to get my shovel and go back to Mississippi and Louisiana and start digging.

"Those (Fat Possum) guys have the original beat, which is something the older guys always had. We all listened to it when we were coming up. But when I came to Chicago (in 1957), they said you have to learn how to count your bars. Fred Below (Muddy's jazz-influenced drummer and member of the Four Aces with Junior Wells), Muddy and Junior told me, 'You play all right, but you ain't got no timing'.

I said, 'What's that?'

That's why "Sweet Tea" works. Guy thunders through several songs without stopping for chord changes. "They locked me in the hall while I was doing the album," he says. "I haven't been in the studio yet. The band was in the studio. They didn't want me to get influenced by that music. At first, I said, 'I can't do this.' But by the fifth day they couldn't stop me. That cut 'I Got To Try You Girl' is over 12 minutes. They kept saying, 'Stop,' and I kept saying, 'I'm having too much fun.'"

Guy played on top of the dense, humid layers shaped by his studio musicians, which included bassist Davey Faragher, drummer Pete Thomas and most notably, T-Model Ford's drummer Spam, a.k.a. Tommy Lee Miles. Guy, locked into Spam's smoky modified stomp.

"Sweet Tea" was produced by by Dennis Herring (Counting Crows, Jars of Clay, Squirrel Nut Zippers) at his Sweet Tea studio in Oxford, Miss. Herring built Sweet Tea in a black turn-of-the-century concrete building accented by high red oak ceilings.

"I've been a fan of Buddy's for a long time and I felt that he is better live than he ever was. But to me his records had gotten really stagnant. I love old blues records. I

wished somebody would do that kind of record with him. I talked to him about his singing. He had gotten so concerned about being melodic in singing, I didn't feel him summing up the demons like I could in his early recordings," Herring says by phone from Sweet Tea.

A 44-year-old Mississippi native, Herring is immersed in Fat Possum blues, which is everywhere in the North Mississippi hill country: diners, juke joints, roadside shacks and nightclubs. "It was that limb of the blues tree that I thought would be a great limb for Buddy to be out on," Herring says. "I put together some songs I thought would be great for him. And Buddy was skeptical. He felt somebody was trying to pull him into something. But as this idea grew, we were bringing Buddy back to the south. Back to his roots."

Buddy Guy was born July 30, 1936 in Lettsworth, La, an hour north of Baton Rouge. At 13, he made his first guitar from window screens. Guy cut his chops in the Baton Rouge blues circuit before migrating to Chicago in the fall of 1957. He saw the flamboyant Guitar Slim (Eddie Jones), T-Bone Walker and B.B. King as they passed through Baton Rouge.

At several of his January shows at his club, Guy reprised Slim's scorching gospel-influenced "The Things You Used To Do." Guy says, "When you see me going in the crowd and playing the wireless (guitar) that's all Slim. That's where I learned wildness." Wearing red, yellow and green suits, Slim blew the stoplights out of his audience by wandering around nightclubs with more than 300 feet of cord between his amplifier and guitar.

"When I first got to Chicago, Earl Hooker--who was one of the greatest guitar players I ever saw--stole my wire," Guy continues. "A lot of people like Muddy were sitting in chairs. Most bandstands were behind the bar on all the old blues clubs."

Originally based on the city's west side, Guy came up with guitarists Otis Rush and the underchampioned Wayne Bennett at Cobra Records at 12th and Homan before moving to Chess Records. Bennett, who died in 1992 while awaiting a heart transplant, was best known as Bobby "Blue" Bland's sideman.

His liberal use of big chords and sweeping bends was a major influence on Duane Allman in shaping the Allman Brothers sound. Bennett played with Jimmy Reed at Chicago's Vee-Jay Records, Guy and Magic Sam at Cobra and Elmore James and Otis Spann among others at Chess. Bennett was also a member of the house band for traveling shows that hit the Regal Theatre.

"Actually, when I got off the train in Chicago on Sept. 25, 1957, Wayne Bennett was the first guitar player I met," Guy says. "I went to Chess. They were having a session with the Spainards. It was the first session I ever saw. I had a Les Paul guitar. Leonard (Chess) wouldn't even listen to me. But when he spotted the guitar he had me loan it to Wayne." "Most Chicago blues guitarists of this period played Gibsons

because they were manufactured in nearby Kalamazoo, Mich.

"At least now I don't have the Chess Brothers or the late Willie Dixon telling me I'm sounding too much like T-Bone Walker or B.B. King," Guy says. "They never let me play loud in the studio. Then along came Cream (with Eric Clapton) and the big Marshall amplifiers and they'd say, 'We saw you do this.' But I couldn't do it in the studio. If I did what (Jimi) Hendrix did and went to England, they would have recorded me with all the distortion and the wah-wah pedals. Nobody liked him either when he was hanging around New York.

"So in a way, the sound of this record is full circle. It has gotten the greatest reviews of any CD I've had. But we can't get too much airplay on it. I can't get to that answer." WXRT-FM, however, has jumped on the playful T-Model Ford composition "Look What All You Got." The jagged blues tune begins with Guy gruffly declaring, "Got somethin' on my shoulder/just waiting for you baby..."

Guy laughs and says, "Everybody asks me what he had on his shoulder when he wrote the song. I never found out." Herring says the stripped down Fat Possum arrangements and primitive songwriting can be frustrating for an urban blues man such as Guy. He explains, "When a song wasn't coming together, I'm sure Buddy was thinking, 'I've written a hundred songs better than this. This guy can't count. He doesn't know how to change chords. He's saying the same thing over and over.' You could tell deep down he was thinking that. But he's been through so much, he's also a guy who knows not to jump too quick."

But Guy does slow down when he collects the memories of Chicago, his adopted hometown, and his beloved club, his home away from home. "I'll miss this place," Guy says. "The one memory I will miss the most is Stevie Ray Vaughan. I had just opened. I didn't have enough money to buy newspaper ads. I called him. He was in Pittsburgh. I told him I needed a favor. He said, 'Tell me when and where'. I said, 'I need you to come to my club.' After that, Eric Clapton went on a blues club tour and he requested to play here."

Vaughan died in a helicopter crash after an August, 1990 concert in which he appeared with Guy, Clapton, Robert Cray and his brother Jimmie Vaughan at Alpine Valley in East Troy, Wis. Guy says, "I lost a lot of money in this place when I opened. Stevie helped put it on the map. I always kept saying to myself, 'Where's the next Muddy Waters going to be heard at? I wouldn't give up.' And the first Buddy Guy gets up and peers over at the young Chicagoans who are taking the stage. He looks good for his 65 years. He stands tall among us all.