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# A Distinctly Bluesy Condition

CARLO ROTELLA

*Chicago blues is the music of an industrial city, and it has an industrial sense about it. It's also a cold city, and Chicago blues has a sense of fighting the cold, and it's an angry city, and the Chicago blues has Chicago's anger in it.*

—Bruce Iglauer, founder of Alligator Records

*And, to get to the bottom of it, everything I sing I haven't experienced it. You know, people look at a blues player sing, "I worked five long years in a steel mill." I never been in a steel mill. But they look at me and they say, "Wow, man, you must have been catching hell in that steel mill. . . ."*

—Buddy Guy

**B**uddy Guy was playing slow blues at the Trump Marina casino in Atlantic City. The second song in a Buddy Guy set is almost always a slow blues. This time he was doing one of the core tunes of his repertoire, Eddie Boyd's "Five Long Years," which begins, "If you ever been mistreated, well you know just what I'm talking about." This early in the set, before guitar-induced brain fatigue had set in, the crowd responded vigorously to every line and every guitar fill. The majority of those present, casino patrons with no particular investment in Guy, seemed to regard his performance as a choice service provided by The Donald. Many of them had been comped for tickets by the casino. They had not been away from the gambling tables and machines for very long yet, and they were in an expansive mood. They did not even seem to mind that the first verse's kicker—"I worked five long years for one woman, and she had the nerve to put me out"—committed the double *gaucherie* of mentioning hard work and domestic troubles at the Trump Marina. The distractive poetics of casino gambling is supposed to erase such prosaic matters from one's

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~ Carlo Rotella is Assistant Professor of English at Boston College. This essay is adapted from *Good with Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt*, which will be published by the University of California Press in October. His essay "Cut Time" was the co-winner of the 2000 American Scholar Best Essay Award.

consciousness. Mixed in with casino tourists and committed gamblers on break were people who were there primarily to hear Guy, blues fans who had penetrated layers of Trumpismo to get to the music. They were pleased to find their man in fine voice and playing in New Jersey, near their suburban homes, rather than in New York or Philadelphia. Everybody was in a good mood, Guy included. He was almost sixty-two years old, trim and prosperous; he had a new CD, *Heavy Love*, on the shelves and a long-term recording deal with Silvertone; and he owned Buddy Guy's Legends, a thriving blues club in downtown Chicago. He wore crisp denim overalls (with a certain cosmopolitan irony) and played a customized black Buddy Guy model Fender Stratocaster guitar with white polka dots all over it.

The composer of "Five Long Years," pianist Eddie Boyd, died in 1994, but Buddy Guy is taking good care of his song. Guy sings the hell out of "Five Long Years," making it the most powerful song of his set on the nights he performs it. He turns Boyd's tight midtempo tale into a showstopping slow blues, sometimes singing its three-verse narrative twice as he works through the song's shadings of sound and meaning. Guy has just the voice for singing "Five Long Years." His lower register has a dark pulse suited to brooding or threatening; in his midrange he eagerly bends and jumps notes as the spirit moves him; and when his voice sails into its piercing upper register, it acquires an unsettling conviction that manages to be aggrieved and joyful at the same time. It is a voice that sounds as if it started out to be churchy but got mixed up with a faster crowd.

He also plays guitar. Guy's playing, as instantly recognizable as his voice, can be shrewdly pent up, but when he lets himself go—which is most of the time—it soars wildly over the top in a torrent of fast, loud, often distorted notes that regain their purity when sustained on a bent string pinned to the fingerboard. He has a strangler's touch, squeezing strings to produce vertiginous dissonances that resolve themselves and pass into dissonance again as he lets up and reapplies the tension. Especially in live performances, he favors a variety of staticky, clangorous tones that evoke a giant turbine's whine, a downed power line whipping back and forth in a thunderstorm, or a thousand horns played in loose unison through a bad long-distance telephone connection. Guy's playing often feels more than a little out of time and out of tune, but never unmusical; he does not rest easily within the confines of a song or a style, instead machining the music into his own jagged diction.

On "Five Long Years," Guy's solo escalated rapidly from a few scattered notes into an unbroken fusillade. Furious runs up and down the guitar's neck, punctuated with the startlingly human-sounding groans he wrenched from the strings, produced a nearly solid, thickly textured block of music that expanded until it filled the room. Members of the audience—those who had known what to expect, as well as those who had been expecting either a younger Muddy Waters or a blacker Eric Clapton—were exchange-

ing glances: some shocked, some deeply satisfied, some suggesting a headache was on the way. It was as if they were realizing that the drinks were dosed. Some were going to enjoy the trip, some sensed a rough night ahead, everybody felt the strong medicine.

As Guy has admitted over the years, he is anxious to please, to a fault. Extraordinarily sensitive by nature and fixated on bringing joy to an audience at all costs, he fears his listeners will be put off, unmoved, or—to raise the bar higher—thrilled but not quite thrilled enough. He therefore regards a live show as a do-or-die matter of scaling to ecstasy, a more delicate operation than his penchant for exaggerated volumes and guitar-heroic grimaces might lead one to believe. Inevitably, he does not always manage to sustain the balance between establishing a structure and transcending it. Especially in recent years, since he became a minor rock star in addition to being a major figure in the blues, he has tended to sacrifice structure in pursuit of transcendence. As the set develops, one can begin to feel bludgeoned, not so much by the impressive volume of guitar playing (measured in both decibels and notes to the bar) as by the sense that Guy's determination to take us all up one ecstatic peak after another becomes oppressive.

Guy, who reads crowds attentively, is not unaware of the need for solid grounding occasioned by his flights into abstraction. At some point in almost every set, after he has done the slow blues and perhaps two or three other songs, he will gesture at establishing that ground by offering a thumbnail history of the blues in a series of imitations and homages. Guy initiates the set's midgame, bringing the crowd to heel, with a little speech about the importance of recognizing the leading lights of the blues, many of whom have passed and did not receive their due when they were alive. Then he offers a musical genealogy of his style—what he believes his audience knows and ought to know about his blues. When I started going to hear him play live in the late 1970s, he would do Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Jimmy Reed, and perhaps a few notes of Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love" to tease the rock fans in the audience.

At the Trump Marina, a typical late-1990s show, Guy did Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker, but he also did Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix, and at the end of the show he explained to the crowd that he had forgotten to do Stevie Ray Vaughan, so he played "Cold Shot," too. Guy's place in the world had changed. It was the summer of 1998, and his fifth Silvertone CD had recently arrived in stores. He could reasonably expect to make some money from it, thanks in great part to the rock stars in his musical debt who had helped secure the Silvertone contract, boosting his career. A marketing push had cast Guy as a gray eminence stepping forward to claim long-overdue credit for fathering classic rock. Jonny Lang, a teenage blues-rock phenom whose first major CD had sold a million copies, toured with Guy as a co-headliner. The blues-rock synthesis was much in evidence. One

could hear Guy's influence in Lang's playing and singing, and Guy demonstrated the reflexive influence on him of Lang's predecessors, a long train of rock guitar heroes who had worshiped and studied Guy in their youth. Guy was not, precisely speaking, doing any of them in the sense that a mimic does someone. Rather, he invoked them. He would call out a name from the pantheon, launch into a recognizable riff, and either perform the song as pure Buddy Guy or cut it off and move to the next one. The audience roared approval for each and all.

**B**uddy Guy, abstractionist guitar hero, is certainly not today's most classically orthodox exemplar of Chicago blues style—Morris Holt, a nonsense fellow who answers to the stage name Magic Slim, probably is—but Guy enjoys the highest commercial and artistic profile in Chicago blues. That disjunction has made his playing a battleground in a public struggle over the state of the music. One side in the struggle, whose most forceful spokesmen are the critic Bill Dahl and the harmonica player Billy Branch, believes Chicago blues has suffered an extended artistic crisis since its golden age in the 1950s. These prophets of decline see a once-vital genre reduced to a hot-licks subset of guitar rock, a new Dixieland (with "Sweet Home Chicago" in the role of "When the Saints Come Marching In") designed to satisfy tourists seeking the rock aesthetic's equivalent of the source of the Nile. Stasis and then the genre's slow death ensue. Dahl told me, "I think the writing of the Chicago scene's artistic obituary is not far down the road," and he has been publishing rough drafts of that obituary for years. The other side—the boosters, a sort of Benetton universalist coalition led by, among others, Buddy Guy and Lois Weisberg, Chicago's commissioner of cultural affairs—sees Chicago blues enjoying an era of unprecedented success that began in the 1990s. Celebrated as great art and party music around the world and especially on its home turf, Chicago blues has been thoroughly mainstreamed in everything from PBS documentaries to advertising to sports talk radio.

Buddy Guy offers the decline faction and the boosters much about which to disagree. Increases over the last forty years in the density and frenzy of his guitar playing, accompanied by verbal and musical homage from rock-star acolytes like Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, the Rolling Stones, Carlos Santana, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and most recently Jonny Lang, have turned Guy into an ur-guitar hero and also made him the decline faction's Exhibit A. Purists dismiss his mature guitar style with recurring, resonant phrases. They say that "he plays too many notes," which is shorthand for too much flash and not enough substance and is usually applied to young white guitar wizards with weak blues sensibilities and no singing chops (the kind of whiz kids who usually list Guy among their influences). Decline-minded critics also call his music "white noise," a pejorative reference to what they hear as rock influences.

The “noisiness” of his playing—the ratio of sounds regarded by critics as extraneous or even antithetical to whatever orthodox blues signal they hear in his music—has become more pronounced, and more lavishly recorded and circulated, since Guy achieved long-delayed commercial success in the 1990s. Finally, after a lifetime of striving in relative obscurity, he had a profitable club and a long-term recording contract with a label that could put some resources behind him; he began to turn up on rock radio, the David Letterman show, and *Saturday Night Live*; he appeared in a Gap ad; his likeness presided over the music sections of Borders stores; Amazon.com pushed his CDs; the city of Chicago began to feature him in its tourism campaigns; and both the city’s convention bureau and its office of cultural affairs made a practice of steering business travelers, tourists, and visiting dignitaries to his club. According to extremists in the decline faction, the price of this success has been steep: Guy is not playing Chicago blues—or blues at all—any more.

Seen from one angle, the opposing factions, both of them interracial coalitions, disagree about the relationship between race and aesthetics. The argument for decline comes close to saying, and sometimes flat out says, that the problem is one of people not knowing their place: black musicians inauthentically playing in a “white” way to satisfy audience demand for the roots of rock, white musicians inauthentically trying and failing to “sound black,” white audiences inauthentically “acting black” in the cheapest kind of Saturday-night appropriation rituals—a mutually degrading round of bad-faith love and theft. The boosters make a countervailing universalist argument about the declining musical significance of race: Chicago blues was invented by southern blacks but now belongs to everybody because it speaks to everybody. This “everybody gets the blues” argument often has its heart in the right place, but it can perform curious contortions to avoid the possibility that the social and cultural history of race in America does indeed inflect how the music is made and received.

Seen from another angle, the battle over Chicago blues is about change over time in generic orthodoxy. How much can a cultural form adapt without becoming fundamentally something else? What is still “Chicago” about an eminently portable blues style circulated around the world, a style mutating in a million suburban basements and ten thousand Blue Monday open-mike jams far from the South Side, a style whose primary financial supporters encounter it at theme-park chain clubs like the House of Blues or on car stereos as they tool from subdivision to office park?

The blues is many things to many people—a foundational African-American cultural tradition, a way of being in the world, a philosophical system—but it is also a skilled artistic trade, a *how* and a *what* of music-making that needs to be learned and practiced, and it has taken shape when poured into the vessels of business institutions like clubs and record companies. The transformation of the blues industry in Chicago, and of its product,

partakes of a larger transformation of all kinds of businesses and of the city itself. The often ungenerous and tautologically deadlocked controversies over the relative blackness, whiteness, and Chicago-ness of Chicago blues tell fragments of this story, which is as simple and as complicated as the explanation offered by Otis Rush, one of Guy's contemporaries, for why he began playing North Side clubs where the blues-rock constituency held sway: "It doesn't matter where I play as long as I got a good guitar and an amplifier. It was jobs up there, they called me, I went."

George "Buddy" Guy grew up in Lettsworth, Louisiana, a small town near Baton Rouge, and came to Chicago in 1957 on the train called the City of New Orleans. He was part of the second and larger phase of the Great Migration, the movement of black southerners to the urban North in the years between the Great Depression and the urban crisis of the 1960s. Guy, a son of sharecroppers, did not come to Chicago to work in a factory, but plenty of his blues-playing colleagues did—and, more generally, factory work made the larger movement possible. Chicago blues can be described as the product of an industrial migration.

This chapter of the story is familiar. The strongest forces guiding black migration to the North included manufacturing booms and labor markets associated with the world wars—especially the second, and the surge in consumer goods that followed it. Add to that the mechanization of southern agriculture and the enabling function of railroads—the paradigmatic high-industrial transport technology, which still pervades the blues soundscape. These industrial pushes and pulls were essential to delivering a critical mass of southern blacks to Chicago by the 1950s, including the musicians, the initial audience, and many of the businesspeople who shaped the Chicago style.

That critical mass produced the golden age of Chicago blues in the 1950s and early 1960s. Among the many blues styles in Chicago, ranging from hokum to jump, the label "Chicago blues" became attached to the adaptation of Mississippi Delta style effected in the 1950s by codifiers, especially Muddy Waters and his circle, and the cohort of immediate second-wave successors who extended their formulas, especially Otis Rush, Magic Sam, and Buddy Guy. These emblematic Chicago stylists made the most of electric amplification, a hard regularization of an often irregular country beat, and the tension between acrobatically lyrical lines of voice or guitar and a dense, grounded, driving ensemble sound. Of all the blues genres, Chicago style may grind the hardest and soar the highest over that grind, producing a peculiarly sharp dynamic of tension and release that generates terrific emotional force. The most important base for the Chicago blues synthesis was Bronzeville, the relatively self-contained Black Metropolis on the near South Side, which was given cohesion by the dynamics of migration and segregation. The near South Side—and then the West Side, as the city's black population overspilled Bronzeville's boundaries—housed not only

inspired musicians and enthusiastic audiences but also institutions: the independent record companies, the record distributors and retailers, the dance halls, and especially the blues clubs that nurtured and circulated the music.

Although Guy had won some local notoriety as an up-and-coming bluesman in Louisiana, he has said he “felt like a ball in high weeds” when he got to Chicago in 1957. After a period of scuffling and doing manual work, he entered and began to rise in the blues hierarchy by plugging himself into existing institutional structures: the South Side and West Side club circuits, where he was discovered, then the Muddy Waters band, Chess Records, Cobra, and other independent labels. Accounts of Guy’s career tend to dwell on an epic cutting contest held at the Blue Flame Club in 1958, a clash of young titans in which Guy did much to make his name by besting Otis Rush and Magic Sam. That night did not make Guy’s fortune all by itself, but it renders in shorthand the larger, more diffuse process of finding his way into a richly developed blues scene.

Rush and Magic Sam were, like Guy, southern transplants in their early twenties, but they were already established on the Chicago scene as accomplished young bluesmen with big, supple, gospel-style voices and strong musical personas. Rush was a master of chilling slow blues in a minor key. He squeezed strings with the best of them, bending single notes into affecting microtones and running them down into jazzy, pianistic chords. Everything Magic Sam played, even songs with mournful lyrics, had an infectious good-times quality; his propulsive, meaty picking style made people want to dance. Guy had the good sense to be scared of confronting them in the Blue Flame’s competitive atmosphere.

Fueled by strong drink, Guy went crazy. The details of his performance that night, establishing the pattern for decades of future performances, have taken on a stations-of-the-cross quality in frequent retellings. A long-cord gimmick allowed Guy to make his entrance, already playing, out of the bathroom and to exit the front door of the club, still playing, and head down the block in the snow. He played “Sweet Little Angel,” a slow blues, in the second-tune slot, during which he threw his guitar on the floor and stomped it, as well as hung it from the rafters and played it there. He parodied both Rush’s and Magic Sam’s guitar styles, running them through the blender of distortion effects until it all sounded like Buddy Guy. The crowd was agog; Guy was declared the winner. Rush, who did not go in for such hotdogging, and Magic Sam, who was by all reports an easygoing guy, did not dispute the verdict—although they took the liberty of drinking the bottle of whiskey awarded as first prize. Guy got the empty bottle, anyway, and the satisfaction of knowing he was launched.

But the scene as he found it, the scene epitomized by that legend-encrusted night at the Blue Flame, would not last. By the 1960s, as Guy came into his own, the institutional structure of clubs and record labels was

losing coherence as an enabling framework for the industrial blues synthesis. That process, manifested as weak sales for traditional Chicago blues, loosened up the field of musical possibility but also deprived Guy of a straight-and-narrow generic path. Chicago blues passed through a period of overlap and adjustment in the late 1960s and 1970s until it stabilized in postindustrial form in the 1980s and 1990s.

What happened to the blues business in the 1960s? The answer has several parts. In the record industry, corporate consolidation put the squeeze on independents like Chess, while at the same time major labels attracted by the successes of various R & B forms moved into the independents' former territory. Rock and soul, both pitched to the teenage consumer who emerged from the 1950s as a decisive force shaping popular dance music, drew freely upon blues and largely supplanted it among young people. Blues, with its adult point of view and "country" associations, did not address itself as successfully to that all-important segment of the market. Among black audiences, the shock of the encounter with industrial urbanism began to wane, and the postmigrant generation began to turn from down-home ways—a domestic, African-American version of the second-generation cultural crisis familiar among immigrants. As South-to-North migration slowed, stopped, and eventually reversed, the transplanted southerners who had invented and supported Chicago blues began to age out in earnest. Finally, and crucially, the social landscape of the inner city in which Chicago blues was rooted was in violent motion. Already under a variety of pressures, the institutions that housed Chicago blues were cut loose from their underpinnings during Chicago's transformation from an industrial city of urban villages to a suburbanized postindustrial metropolis.

Two elements of this story have special importance for Chicago blues, because they contributed to the dismantling of the industrial blues synthesis and the emergence of a postindustrial blues synthesis. One is the breakup of the Black Metropolis and the formation of the second ghetto on the South and West Sides. The departure of factory jobs, capital flight, the partial departure of the black middle class, the bulldozing of neighborhoods, the siting of high-rise housing projects, and the subsequent depopulation all contributed to the destruction of Bronzeville's small-business sector. That included blues institutions, which were also reeling from all the other shocks associated with changes in popular music and the record business.

The other principal element of the story is the growth, especially on the North Side lakefront, of redeveloped districts that housed the city's growing numbers of information handlers, symbolic analysts, professionals, and higher-end service workers. They invested in a new set of cultural and economic institutions, including not only places to buy arugula but also the clubs and record labels that now constitute the institutional home of Chicago blues. Most of these new supporters and institution builders were—and are—white.

The members of the new core blues audience encountered the music most often on college campuses, where they were in training to be postindustrial workers and managers. As they entered the high-consumption period of their lives, they invested in Chicago blues, a style that appealed to them not only because it is good music but also because it scratches an itch for authenticity. Chicago blues answers a demand for “roots” as an aesthetic quality rather than as a social reality. Chicago blues is a real Chicago thing that makes people feel they are getting way down into the texture of neighborhoods, the history of peoples and place, and the logic of hard knocks. Buddy Guy has never set foot in a steel mill, but when in “Five Long Years” he sings, “Got a job in a steel mill, trucking steel like a slave,” his fans feel—for better or worse—a satisfying closeness, a sense of access, to a history of folk migration and hard labor associated with Chicago blues that extends all the way back to slavery days.

**B**uddy Guy was taking a break in a dark, cluttered upstairs room at his club, Legends. This was shortly before he began the summer’s touring that would bring him to the Trump Marina. As on almost every evening he spends in Chicago, he had been downstairs at the bar, handling the usual stream of handshakes, praise, and requests from grinning, nodding patrons. The place was crowded, and the surprisingly large operation—he had forty-five employees—was running smoothly. Guy slumped way down in a sprung chair, one leg over the other, knees as high as his chin. He had flown up to Minneapolis earlier in the day to do a photo session with Jonny Lang, whose guest shot on *Heavy Love* was advertised by a prominent orange sticker on the disc’s wrapper.

At sixty-one, Guy was more than three times Lang’s age, although he did not look it. In fact, he looked less careworn that night than he did when I first encountered him in the late 1970s, a period in which he was frustrated by a stalled career and by owning and running a South Side club, the Checkerboard Lounge, that ate up his money. Now, well set up at Legends and with Silvertone, he had enough money and celebrity to satisfy him. A lean, dark-skinned, well-made man, he has an expressively flexible face. Sometimes when he smiles, a deep, chuckling laugh works up from inside him. A quality of stern passion resides in the laugh—and in his face, too—and he summons it when the conversation warrants a little extra feeling. He was in a mellow mood that night, perhaps feeling his years after a day of traveling.

We were talking about the blues business, specifically about the difference between owning Legends and owning the Checkerboard. Guy took great pride in the Checkerboard. He has long argued for the institutional importance of clubs as the vital training ground for blues talent. “A club is for the young people to have a place to play, be seen, and be heard, be talked about, so record companies will come,” he told me. Guy enjoyed the way that black and white blues fans rubbed elbows at the Checkerboard,

and he was crazy about the way music sounded in the narrow, smoky room. But the Checkerboard also caused him a great deal of pain; it was hard to run a business on Forty-third Street.

"Yeah, I loved that place," he said, smiling at the thought of it, but then his face got harder. "But if they didn't break in there twice a week and rip me off everything I got—and the help I had, I never went in the Checkerboard and they told me, said, 'Well, you made some money, why don't you go buy a steak?' It was always when I went in there I had to go in my pocket. They'd say, 'Send out and get a hundred cases of beer,' or 'The rent ain't been paid since you been gone.'" Besides being ripped off from all sides, he had to protect his customers from neighborhood operators intent on robbing them. Guy said, "I used to have to stand out there at night like a security guard or something. All these people who was doing that was the neighbors who was glad I brought people around to mess with."

Discussing the problem of fear and crime, Americans' favorite reductive shorthand for complicated urban transformations, made Guy angry. "I *don't* like to lie," he said, his voice rising and finding two notes in the last word. "Those are my people who was doing that. I don't like to lie. They did *me* that. And I didn't want nobody white to think that they got ripped off because they was white. They was rippin' off *anybody*. They got my car down there too. They broke in my joint all the time. *I* wasn't white." As he tells it, in the end, in 1985, he was robbed of the Checkerboard itself. He was on tour in Europe when trusted associates got together with his landlady to take over the club's lease. He said, "It was like—what do you call that in those countries? Yeah, a coup."

Losing the Checkerboard freed Guy to follow the money and action out of Bronzeville. In 1989, after four years without a club, Guy opened Legends, a much larger and more profitable place in the South Loop, a section of downtown that was once a light manufacturing and flophouse district but in the 1990s became one of Chicago's many fast-growing loft-conversion zones. Legends is across the street from the Hilton and near the city's (and the northern Midwest's) central highway nexus, perfectly positioned where the full range of blues consumers can get to it.

Guy has been especially shrewd and forward-looking in exploiting the tourist trade. Having moved to the North Side and then downtown, the blues business more and more depends on and has a significant role in the city's increasingly important tourist economy. At the time we talked, the city's latest numbers showed that business travelers had spent \$5 billion in Chicago the previous year, and pleasure travelers had spent another \$2.8 billion—together generating 110,000 jobs. Add to that the vital importance of the culture business to attracting and retaining taxpaying property owners and money-spending renters.

Chicago continues to mature as a city that sells services, atmosphere, and experiences rather than locally manufactured goods or animal parts, and

blues enjoys a corresponding new importance in the packaging of Chicago-ness. The most readily consumed packages condense Chicago-ness into images and atmospheres with familiar associations: the view from the Michigan Avenue bridge; the historical charge of big shoulders and hog butchers; the nostalgic appeal of robber-baron swankiness and the salt-of-the-earth charm of the urban village; a smokestack city rising from the prairie grass, a city of skyscrapers and high-end chain stores rising from the ruins of the smokestack city; sports, lots of sports; ethnic foods and ethnic music. Urban blues serves as one of the most effective and recognizable packages, one of the best ways to brand black Chicago in particular and Chicago in general. Warner Hedrick III, who was then managing the Chicago House of Blues, might have been talking about the whole city when he told me, "Blues by itself doesn't pay the bills, but blues is a hook for the resell."

I paid Hedrick a visit at the House of Blues the day after I talked to Guy. We sat in a windowless office deep within a low, curvaceous building—which once housed a bowling alley and resembles nothing so much as a whale—sited between the two corn-cob-shaped high-rises of Marina City. The Marina City complex fronts the Chicago River where the Loop meets the city's showcase district, the Near North Side. One cannot call the House of Blues a club; it is a small theme park, with a state-of-the-art main music hall, a restaurant, bars, private party rooms, a gift shop that does a brisk business, and, next door, the House of Blues Hotel, which was under construction at the time we talked. "It's an entertainment complex," said Hedrick. Youngish and tanned, outfitted in black clothes and a good haircut, fluent in business-speak, he was a poster boy for corporate hipness. "Ten, fifteen thousand people a week come through the doors. Our issues are hospitality issues. It's very similar to a hotel environment; hotels sell rooms, we sell entertainment. We have auxiliary venues in the building that service the guests, same as in a hotel where the rooms division brings in the folks and the restaurant and room service provide the resell. Initially, the sell here is the talent—that's what brings people in the door. Then if we make an impact at the individual level, they'll come back."

Business was good. Tourists from outside the metropolis and locals in tourist mode feel drawn to the House of Blues's clean, safe environment (with parking nearby), which features near-perfect insulation from the messiness of public space and the public life it harbors. People who have learned to value the sense of consuming under the tightly controlled conditions offered by television can find that state incarnated in Disney's venues, in casinos, or in the House of Blues. "I think our success is that we create a whole different vibe," Hedrick said. "Being in this building, I don't think you're going to know in any way that you're in Chicago till you step outside the door. It's like you're stepping into a whole different environment."

The House of Blues company already operated venues in cities across the country (including, at this writing, clubs in the theme-park cities of

Orlando, Anaheim, and Las Vegas), a record label, a radio division, and a national concert tour, with digital media next on the agenda. A business that big cannot rely on the relatively esoteric appeal of blues to pay the bills. "When we came into Chicago," said Hedrick, "we offended some people who misunderstood and thought we were saying we were *the* house of blues in Chicago. That's not what we're about, though. We're into the entertainment industry, and we're into music in all facets and capacities. We're not about blues. Blues is what we come from, as all music comes from, and we're a spin-off of the blues environment, because that's, you know, the foundation of most music in America." As a distinctive hook that helps bring in people for the resell, the blues content of the House of Blues has to feel like the real thing to a variety of customers, including—and here is the tricky part—a majority whose notion of the real thing derives from blues-derived rock, the Blues Brothers, and similarly second- or third-order sources. This state of affairs gave Hedrick a case of authenticity anxiety. "We try to maintain the integrity of the concept," he told me. "We're trying to balance the business with the philosophy of the company. I don't want it to be strictly business, strictly corporation, because it loses its edge and becomes corporate and you get all these suits, you know, you get all your ya-yas coming in here. We want to maintain our edge, being a little funky."

"Funky" was clearly a corporate buzzword at the House of Blues. So was "cool." The theme for the next House of Blues tour had not been chosen yet, but, Hedrick assured me, "They will have a cool name for it. It *will* be cool." In the company's in-house culture, "cool" means "cool," but it also means "in keeping with the brand, therefore conducive to profit."

The Chicago House of Blues forms a link in a corporate chain, but everyone I spoke to there insisted that it was not like the Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood, and similar enterprises. Hedrick had to leave to meet with an alderman, but on his way out he said, "That's what I'll leave you with. We make sure we don't cross that boundary where we become cookie-cutter—what's the word? I say it all the time." Adell O'Bryant, the young black public relations officer who was shepherding me around the House of Blues (and whose voice mail message ended, "Have a blessed day"), helped him out. "We're not themed," she said, with sweet conviction. "Yeah," said Hedrick, "we're not themed, and we're not a theme-branded entity, because then we'd fall into . . ." He let the sentence trail off, leaving me to imagine an unspeakably uncool fate.

**B**uddy Guy has led the way in effecting the genre's single most important formal mutation: the rising proportional importance of guitar and the corresponding decline in the importance of singing. This is what people mean, often imprecisely, when they say that Chicago blues is turning into guitar rock. Guy can sing blues masterfully, but mostly he plays a lot of loud, fast, often very unvocal electric guitar, and that goes a long way

toward defining the generic standard to which younger musicians now aspire. When I talked about the dominance of guitar with Bruce Iglauer, the schizophrenically decline-minded booster who founded Alligator Records, he gestured at a pile of packages against one wall of his office and said, “See that? Those are audition recordings. I guarantee you that for 70 percent of those my letter back will say, ‘If you had taken as much time thinking about your singing as your guitar playing, you would have a tape that I might want to listen to.’ Singing is the *one* most important thing in Chicago blues, and it’s getting hard to find people—any people, black or white—who can sing in this style.”

It is no longer possible to say that most of the hot guitar playing in Chicago blues advertises itself as an extension of the human voice raised in song. That identity between voice and instrument was once a fundamental element of Delta style and early Chicago style. It helped to define the Delta and Chicago blues signal, an indicator that musician and audience were communicating on a blues frequency. The rebalancing of that relationship has produced much of what purists hear as interference and dismiss as “too many notes” or “noise.”

Given the concatenation of circumstances driving the swing from voice to guitar, it should come as no surprise that Buddy Guy—a guitar freak who listens to a variety of other guitar players, who remains perpetually eager to lead a willing audience toward ecstasy, who is always happy to take thirty or forty exploratory choruses of guitar solo—comes at least halfway to his rock-trained audience’s aesthetic ground by playing in ways that depart significantly from blues orthodoxy as defined in the 1950s.

But, in keeping with a policy of constructive skepticism toward any decline or booster narrative, I hesitate to accept the characterization of Guy’s stylistic evolution as a simple case of focus-group musicianship. With twenty-plus years of close attention to Buddy Guy’s live and recorded music to back me up, I can say with confidence that his will to abstraction forms a potent artistic impulse that was going to find expression one way or another.

Guy has always tried to push past the conventional boundaries of blues sound. In the 1950s, before he even came to Chicago, he was already experimenting with feedback, distortion, and other effects that injured the sensibilities of some of his elders. The blues, of course, has a distinguished tradition of noisemaking and experimentation, but that tradition often produces tension where it encounters generic orthodoxies. In the early 1960s, as a respected Chicago sideman, Guy tried to introduce some of these effects at the Chess Records studios, only to be curbed by Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, and especially Leonard Chess. “Actually,” he told an interviewer in the early 1990s, “a lot of sustained notes that you hear us all doing now—and Hendrix said he was getting this from me—I was doing out in the public early on. Chess Records called it *noise*, they wouldn’t let me cut it. They was telling me, ‘Who’s going to listen to that noise?’”

Even when restrained by senior bluesmen or blues formula—perhaps especially *because* he so manifestly came up against those restraints—Guy’s pressing at the boundaries of blues genre made him a mentor to the founding generation of rock-guitar heroes. These men, most of them younger than Guy and many of them British, listened to and emulated the exciting music he made as a young man in the 1950s and 1960s. Guy was not playing rock (even though some of his peers in Chicago thought he was), but he was attempting explorations rooted in and extending beyond Chicago blues norms, a model for the rockers. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Guy led the way in redefining Chicago orthodoxy in partnership with fans who had built their musical intelligence around just those rock-guitar heroes who had imitated him in the 1960s. He has put himself in a position to let himself go, unpoliced, where he always wanted to go, while pleasing his core audience by broadcasting a signal they are equipped to receive, satisfying their demand for blues that rocks. Scott Holt, the young white Tennessean with astounding guitar chops and modest singing skills who has backed Guy for more than a decade, says that Guy’s detractors “miss the point of Buddy playing a Clapton tune or a Hendrix tune. He’s not being lazy, he’s not pandering. He’s showing how that stuff *liberated* him to play the way he always felt.”

I first encountered Buddy Guy in the late 1970s, when I was entering high school and trying to find a way between the two popular musical monoliths that dominated teen culture. On one side, looming up like Stonehenge, was classic rock, the unremitting bombast of which had already worn out my patience. On the other side, perhaps even more imposing (on the South Side of Chicago, anyway), was the soul-funk combine, which I liked as music but which made what I regarded as unreasonable social demands regarding dance, dress, and comportment. New wave and punk rock made even more unreasonable demands. Expressing a desire to listen to them felt like rushing a fraternity. Blues, like jazz, offered an alternative world that came with a history to explore, opportunities for both connoisseurship and instrumental dabbling, and a social climate dominated by adults uninterested in adolescent melodrama—which encouraged me to take a welcome break from such melodrama myself. And unlike jazz, blues commanded a good view of both rock and soul; well-worn aesthetic paths led back and forth from blues to the other genres.

So I found my way to the Checkerboard Lounge on Forty-third Street, where a thirteen-year-old could get in and order drinks, no questions asked, and where Buddy Guy presided over a remarkable collection of musical talent spanning the postwar period. From time to time you could catch first-wave postwar codifiers like Muddy Waters or Willie Dixon. There were representatives of Guy’s generation, the second wave that refined Chicago blues, like Junior Wells, the subtle guitar master Sammy Lawhorn,

and the impassioned Texas transplant Fenton Robinson (whose spare, elegant version of “I’m Going to Chicago” was being piped in to welcome travelers at O’Hare Airport in the late 1990s). Magic Slim exemplified the third wave. His band, the Teardrops, played weeknights at the Checkerboard for years. There were younger apprentices, ranging from new traditionalists like John Primer and Valerie Wellington to progressive revisionists like Dion Payton and the 43rd Street Blues Band. There were local characters like the half brothers Lefty Dizz and Johnny Dollar, respectively the gentlest and most ill-tempered musicians around. Lefty Dizz, who resembled the Cat in the Hat both in appearance and in his gift for turning a dull evening into a chaotic good time, ran the Monday night jam. (He also played my senior prom.) Touring blues stars and Guy’s rock-star disciples would drop in late after playing shows on the North Side or at suburban arenas. And, often enough, there was Buddy Guy, who kept a guitar behind the bar and would get it out and plug in when somebody else played well enough to be considered a challenge. He was at the height of his powers and of his career frustration back then, the moment when he recorded his masterpiece, *Stone Crazy*, and that made for supercharged music. Unlike arena-sized musical scenes, the Checkerboard happened on a human scale. It cost two dollars to get in most nights; drinks were a buck and change; and during set breaks, when the weather allowed, musicians and audience alike went outside and stood around on the sidewalk talking shop, a living portrait of the overlap between industrial and postindustrial blues syntheses.

Late one winter night in 1979, after an evening at the Checkerboard, I got a ride back as far as Hyde Park and set out to walk the rest of the way home to South Shore through Jackson Park. It was one of my favorite walks; plus, as usual, I had spent all my money at the club. Too cold to bother with my regular cautious practice of keeping to the shadows of the tree line, I walked briskly down the median strip of the park drive, alone under the lights except for sparse late traffic. After a while, a black cab driver in a giant red-and-white American cruiser of late 1960s vintage, pulled over and generously offered to take me home free of charge. I was chilled, despite ingesting antifreeze in various forms earlier in the evening, so I accepted his offer.

We rolled through the Olmstedian reaches of Jackson Park, the South Side’s grandest park, which had been the site of the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. It occurs to me now (and certainly did not then) that the exposition of 1893 was all about the profound cultural consequences of economic and social transformation—not the postindustrial but an earlier version, the industrial transformation of culture, complete with its own racial and musical valences mapped on a schematic urban landscape. To our left were lagoons on the site of the White City, the exposition’s model in plaster of the beautiful life that factory machines would produce. To the

right was the Midway, along which had been arranged an exotic display of the exploitable peoples of the world. The young Edgar Rice Burroughs drove up and down the Midway, demonstrating a prototype automobile; Buffalo Bill made theater of the exposition's racial politics, and the aging Frederick Douglass made a speech in protest of them. There were musical performers, too: Scott Joplin, for instance, and Little Egypt, who either did or did not dance the Hootchy Kootchy to beguiling tunes, but became famous for it in any case. (Generations later, Chicago bluesmen would be singing a new, regendered set of beguiling tunes about Hoochie Koochie, as it was now spelled.) It was all long gone. The Golden Lady, a reduced replica of the statue that had presided over the exposition, oxidized peacefully with arms upraised in a landscape of groves and water, her back turned to a parking lot where rough customers in the sex and drug businesses circled all night in their cars.

The cabbie and I got to talking about where I had been that night. He became animated as he talked about young people taking up and extending blues traditions. A sixtyish black working man of southern birth (as he told me) and a young white information-handler-to-be, we were, after all, representatives of Chicago's two principal blues constituencies. He said, "There's a lot of good new blues out there," and I agreed, thinking of several up-and-coming musicians who frequented the Checkerboard and hoped to be discovered there as Buddy Guy once had been at the Blue Flame, but the cabbie was headed in another direction. He said, "People don't realize it, but Aerosmith and Steve Miller and Foghat—that's *blues*. That's some good blues." From my position of authority—a teenaged genre purist stretched out on the backseat, looking up at the rose-colored urban night sky through the cab's rear window—I remonstrated with him. I told him that wasn't blues, not even close, and to think of it as blues was an insult to Magic Slim, Otis Rush, and the rest of the hardcore Chicago stylists. "You got to *listen*," he urged me. "Aerosmith and them are playing some serious blues. They change it around some, that's all, so the young people will like it." I thought at first that he was simply going out of his way to establish common ground by extolling music he assumed I liked, but he convinced me that he truly heard classic rock as blues—that he regarded the blues-rock synthesis as a viable aesthetic enlivened by the two-way traffic of influence, not as an artistic catastrophe arcing ever-downward. I was having none of it, but he was doing me a favor, and I thought it would be churlish to argue further. Also, I felt awkward telling a black southerner of a certain age what was and was not blues. When we got through the park and into South Shore, I asked him to drop me up the block from my house to facilitate my skulking in undetected. When I got out, I thanked him, and he entreated me to abandon my doctrinaire position. His parting words were "Give those white boys a chance."

I was reminded of him when I talked to Buddy Guy about the changing

situation of Chicago blues, specifically when I asked Guy about playing for the rock-trained audiences he commands these days. He took my question to be about playing for white people, and he asserted, as he usually does, a universalist truism. "Music has no color," he said. "I never think of music like that." But then he fixed me with an odd look, serious around the mouth but less so around the eyes, and said, "I was born and raised in the South. My mama and daddy told me before they died, they said, 'Son, you're grown. If you marry a *elephant* and bring her home—if you love her, we like her. *You* got to sleep with her, *I ain't*.'" There was, to say the least, a double edge to the anecdote. His parents urged him, as the cabbie urged me, to be tolerant and open-minded, and Guy has prospered in the end by being tolerant and open-minded about the parameters of blues genre and the aesthetic, racial, and class politics of the blues business. But Guy's rendering of his parents' advice also suggests a warning that any resulting alliances he might make, with amorous elephants or adoring blues-rock fans, would constitute making his own bed, in which he would then have to lie.

His music reposes in a bed of changes and contradictions—a complicated situation, both decline and renaissance and also neither. You can hear it in the music.

Chicago blues is the urgently immediate music it always was; Chicago blues has become something new, strange, and nostalgic.

Chicago blues is a local art form; Chicago blues is music for tourists.

Chicago blues does not pay the bills; Chicago blues is a vital hook for the big-time resell of culture.

Chicago blues is an atavistic industrial art form; Chicago blues is a revitalized postindustrial art form.

Chicago blues is black music; Chicago blues is not black music.

Chicago blues is in decline; Chicago blues is booming.

Chicago blues is all right; Chicago blues is not all right; it's in a distinctly bluesy condition.