



The star is rising for the man with the polka dot guitar.

Photo by Paul Natkin

# AT 74-YEARS-YOUNG, BUDDY GUY IS IN HIS PRIME

By Tim Parsons  
Lake Tahoe Action

Buddy Guy is the definitive bluesman because of the emotion that resonates from his guitar and his voice.

"Sad, happy, mad, dirty, pissed off, whatever," said producer Tom Hambridge, "He can just give you that, and it's almost like you can see him grinnin' through the audio. When you're listening, you know when that gold tooth's coming out."

Tears flowed in the studio in 2008 when Guy and Hambridge recorded the album "Skin Deep." Guy's recording career goes back 53 years to the days with Chess Records, and only in the last three have the songs been about the artist playing them. Be it Willie Dixon or some other producer, "they just throw a piece of paper in front of me and say here's the next song we're gonna record," Guy told Hambridge. "It's written by somebody somewhere and you've never heard it and it goes like this. He felt detached from it."

Hambridge told him he wanted to make a Buddy Guy record that was 100 percent about Buddy Guy. He did just that with "Skin Deep" and again with "Living Proof," released Oct. 26.

"You know my friends, (Carlos) Santana, Eric Clapton, (Jeff) Beck and all them, they said 'Man, we made all them hit records.'" Guy said. "Didn't nobody tell them what to do, but I was told how to play. I was sounding too much like Tom, Dick and Harry."

Guy employed distortion and feedback with his electric guitar playing in the early 1960s. But Chess wouldn't record it, allowing Jimi Hendrix to come along later to much acclaim as the innovator.

"I didn't blame them because they had been successful with the stuff Muddy (Waters) and them had been playing," Guy said. "I can't complain about that. If you've got

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—Buddy Guy

a good menu at your restaurant and somebody brings you something else, you say, 'Well, I don't know. I'm not going to put that on my menu because my gumbo with just the chicken and sausage is going pretty good, I'm not gonna add no crabs in it.'

Guy of course finally left the Chicago record company and was given more freedom with his style. He's outlived most of his peers, and, along with his friend B.B. King, has living legend status with five Grammys and a record 23 Blues Music Awards. But until he collaborated with Hambridge, he played other people's songs.

"I thought, 'Here's your chance, Buddy. What in the hell are you waiting on?'" Guy said. "Let it go, man. Do what you know you can do, and try to make somebody happy with your guitar playing and your own little singing,' and that's what I did. I had the freedom on these two albums more than I ever had in my whole life."

#### INSPIRATION IN THE STUDIO

Hambridge is one of Nashville's most sought-after producers. He only agrees to work on projects that he can spend the proper amount of time on to make them great. He was making an album for George Thorogood and one with his own band when he took an hour break to speak with Lake Tahoe Action. He's worked with many artists with a wide range of styles: Hank



Buddy Guy says producer Tom Hambridge has given him the most recording freedom he's ever had. Hambridge produced Guy's last two albums, "Skin Deep" and "Living Proof."

Williams Jr., Johnny Winter, Taylor Hicks, Billy Ray Cyrus, Delbert McClinton and Susan Tedeschi.

When he talks about working with Guy, he often breaks into laughter, giddy to have such an opportunity.

"He's in his prime," Hambridge said. "I have never heard him playing with this much fire and emotion ever on a record. ... I have the assistant engineers and I try to get different guys on different days. In five days we'll knock out ('Living Proof'). I've been working with (an unnamed artist) for three months and he still hasn't got the vocals done, and I'll go, 'Watch this.' And (Buddy) will just go in and sing it in one take. Then you'll go, 'Just sing it one more time, just in case.' And it's even better. (The assistant engineers) are like, 'This can't be real.' I'll go, 'Yeah, this is the way real dudes — legends — do this.'

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#### IF YOU GO

**Who:** Buddy Guy

**When:** 9 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 27. Doors open at 8

**Where:** MontBleu Theatre

**Tickets:** \$30, \$45 and \$50

## GUY

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(Engineers) are so busy trying to get the right pitch on somebody's vocals and with Buddy it doesn't matter. It has nothing to do with pitch. It's emotion. All the notes are there."

Hambridge told how the final track on "Living Proof" was recorded.

"In the studio I've worked with young artists that won't work half as hard," he said. "Buddy comes to work, man. He comes to the studio with like a lunch pail and a hammer. He comes to do it, and that is totally inspiring to everybody in the room.

"He just shows up. And I go, 'This is what I'm thinking: Let's just get out there and just start rocking. I've got this instrumental thing I wrote called "Skanky," and I want to get you involved in this.' And he's just like a little kid. All of a sudden he becomes a little kid and says 'How's it go?' The guys get on the floor and we just start slamming. And we might go one take, and he'll go, 'I think I've got it down. I think I've learned it.' And I'll go, 'I think it's done.' He'll go, 'Really?' And I'll go, 'Let's go listen to it in the control room.'"

## DAMN RIGHT AND DAMN WRONG

Guy says his religion helps him overcome bitterness. But he doesn't forget anything.

He has plenty of stories about how others have been given his songwriting credits. And he laments how artists and their heirs are still getting ripped off by managers.

"I don't have a high school education, but my education came from seeing what'd been done to other people," he said. "I don't sign no contracts with no managers or nothing, and I still had to go to court and spend over \$100,000 to protect myself from a manager. I don't have no contract or nothing. He claimed he made my career and I don't know if you've noticed but no manager look for nobody unless they got something to offer. That's when they show up.

"They don't show up when I was on 47th Street breaking a hot dog in three between me and Etta James and Tyrone Davis. A manager don't want you then. When I came out with 'Damn Right I Got the Blues,' the biggest record I ever had, managers was coming from all directions, and you don't need 'em then because the promoters are going to find you.



Buddy Guy wears his emotion on pinstriped sleeves.

"So I'm working with young people now trying to educate them. Don't let nobody come in there. If you get a little break, they sign you up and tell you what they done did for you. They ain't did a damn thing for you but take your money if you sign a piece of paper with 'em, and they tell you they are the cause (that) you had a hit record."

## MUDDY'S DYING REQUEST: KEEP THE BLUES ALIVE

After the success of "Skin Deep," Hambridge was hired to write songs for a follow-up album. Vowing to dig even deeper, the producer spent hours with Guy, writing down his stories. His band opened for Guy's, and the two would talk on a tour bus.

"You talk with Buddy 20 minutes and you've got stuff for an entire book," he said. "So it's not like I have to live with him. We'll have a two-hour ride. I'll just listen to him talk. My mind goes crazy. The way he said it was cooler than the way anyone else would have said that. The way he says certain things. Everybody says that, but nobody says it *like* that. That's what I try to capture.

"He told me that story (for the song "Thank Me

Someday') about how he had a two-string wood guitar. He told me that story in the back of a bus as we were riding through cotton fields. 'Living in a tin-roof shack.' For real. 'Used to tell me turn it down. They're thanking me now.' That's all he had to say, and I went back to my bunk. I brought it back to him and said, 'Can you sing this?' And he just tore it up. My job is to write the songs and put a team around him."

"(Tom) and me just clicked so well," Guy said. "He always had a pencil and pad and said, 'You don't know it but just talking to you is like writing songs.' All of the songs on these two albums is true life history. We were just talking. I was just telling him what I've been through and what I've come through, and he was just writing these things down."

Eleven of the 12 songs on "Living Proof" are soulful and upbeat songs. The lone tear-jerker, "Everybody's Got to Go," is Hambridge's favorite. The song was inspired by the passing of Guy's brother, Phil. And its main verse was coined by Buddy's and Phil's mother.

"I lost my younger brother two years ago this past August, and that had a lot to do with writing this song," Guy said. "That lyric in there by my mother ... That kind of gets to me to because you don't not only want to hear it from your friends, you don't want to hear it from nobody. We all got to go. It's true."

At 74, Guy has lost a great many friends.

"Forty, 50 years ago you had all these great singers and to be honest with you, if you were interviewing Muddy or (Howlin') Wolf, you'd be tapping your feet because they talk," Guy said. "I'm not that good. I'm just trying to carry on. You wouldn't believe, we called Muddy. We didn't know he was that sick, and I called and said, 'Man, I heard you was sick,' and me and Jennifer (Guy's wife) was going to go to his house. And he used the profane, he called us the 'M.F.' and said 'As long as you keep the blues alive for me, I'm happy with that.' And the next day or two, he was gone. So what I'm trying to do, I'm just trying to keep it alive."

## STILL PROVING IT EVERY NIGHT

For as brash and showy as he is on the stage, Guy is self-effacing off of it. Upon speaking with him on a few occasions, it's easy to wonder, does he know how great he is?

"I keep thinking he must, but honestly, since you're asking me that question, I don't think he does," Hambridge said. "I think what keeps him so humble and keeps him so ready and willing to get on stage and from the first note to the last note, kick everyone's ass every night and travel to another town to do it, is because I think he needs to prove to everybody that he's OK, that he's good.

"He's just got a great work ethic and I don't think he ever thinks, 'I'm the greatest.' He lets everyone else think that."

Guy has played at Harrah's Lake Tahoe several times, but on Saturday he will perform in the larger MontBleu Theatre. He is well known for walking through the crowd playing his wireless polka dot Fender guitar. He'll have to walk farther for this Tahoe show.

"If I don't go down that aisle, people will look at me and say he's not feeling well," he said. "I don't know why I can't just stay on the stage. But I get happy, man, and when I come to play there, I play for the people — I didn't come to play for Buddy Guy. So I get all hyped up when I look out there and see somebody smiling, and the fans think enough to come out and watch you play. I think you should come out and you should give them 120 percent and I try that every night I plug that guitar up. If I get so I don't feel like that, then I'm not gonna plug it up. I'd like to give 125 percent this time."

## BUDDY AND B.B. 'STAY AROUND A LITTLE LONGER'

Guy performed on a 1993 B.B. King album, "Blues Summit." King appears on "Living Proof" for a song called "Stay Around a Little Longer," on which the greatest living bluesmen contemplate death.

"I'm like saying, 'Man, we got to get B.B. to sing on it,' and he heard it and he just flipped out on it, man," Guy said. "He's 85 this year. I had to laugh. I said, 'Man, I can't even keep up with you.' If I go another 10 years and be able to just walk on the stage, I'm going to be thankful, and actually I'm thankful now at 74 years young."

"They both have the utmost respect for each other," Hambridge said. "B.B. being the elder statesman, Buddy just looks at B.B. and goes 'He's the guy.' It's beautiful to witness that they truly love each other. Two guys who are the last two remaining guys in the same field doing the same deal but they love each other."

As the song ends, Guy and King talk to each other about their friendship and when the day comes when King said he will be "pushing up daisies."

"I wasn't expecting that out of him," Guy said. "He comes on and says, 'You're nickname is Buddy and don't forget you always will be my buddy,' and I just had to cry."

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