

Blues Reviews

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Buddy Guy

Can't Quit The Blues

Silvertone/Legacy (BMK 82876 81125 2)

(Three CDs, one DVD)

Grade: B+

Before his passing in 1983, Muddy Waters reportedly said to Buddy Guy, "Don't let the blues die." This boxed set shows that Guy more than held up his end of the death-bed bargain.

Released to commemorate the 70th birthday of the blues legend, *Can't Quit The Blues* is stuffed to the gills with 47 classic songs — including five previously unreleased tracks and a smattering of live cuts — on three CDs, plus a DVD that features a 90-minute documentary and 11 never-before-seen live performances from 1974 to 2004.

Every era is covered, from Guy's early work with the Chess and Vanguard record labels to his '90s resurgence to his deeply personal study of north Mississippi hill country blues. More of an overview than an exhaustive collection, *Can't Quit The Blues* starts at the beginning, going all the way back to Guy's B.B. King-inspired first demo, "The Way You Been Treating Me." A smoldering low-fi effort that shows Guy's early mastery of King's single-note phrasing, the track was recorded in 1957 in Baton Rouge, La., with guitar help from his brother Phil. Scratchy and raw, it provided a rough glimpse of Guy's burgeoning talent as a fluid, if somewhat manic, lead guitarist. The historical significance of this torch-passing moment should not be lost on blues devotees.

In the collection's colorfully illustrated booklet, complete with 3,000-word liner notes, *Rolling Stone's* Anthony DeCurtis quotes Robert Cray as saying, "I like to call [Guy] maniacal in a way, because ... when his his solos start off, they just seem to laugh from outer space." Disc one documents Guy's transmissions to earth from the late-50s through 1981, a period of growth that saw him abandon his role as a Chess Records session man to become a band leader with Vanguard. It was during this time that he made the seminal *Hoodoo Man Blues* record — represented here by "In the Wee Hours" and the album's Sonny Boy Williamson I title track — with harmonica player Junior Wells for the Delmark label.

They say every genius has a touch of madness; that's true of Guy as well. A wizard with the guitar, whose crazed solos



Courtesy of Don Bronstein / Chess files

seem inspired by bouts of momentary insanity, Guy is just as animated with his voice. His howling vocals in Willie Dixon's creeping "Sit And Cry (The Blues)" and the horn-aded, Ike Turner remake "This Is The End" — two of the first tracks Guy recorded for the Cobra Records imprint, Artistic, in 1958 — are pure primal therapy for the broken-hearted. What follows is a parade of simmering, rough-and-tumble recordings like "First Time I Met The Blues," "Ten Years Ago" and "Let Me Love You" that seem to crawl from the backwoods shacks and juke-joints of the Deep South into Chess Records' bright studios.

From his days with Vanguard comes the box set's sweat-drenched title track, off the album *A Man & The Blues*. With its rolling piano and smooth sax, the song's thick R&B grooves seem born of James Brown's loins. "One Room Country Shack," also from *A Man & The Blues*, is something altogether different, a quiet, jazzy number with brushed drums and deliberate piano that's a late-night meditation on Guy's sharecropper upbringing. Striding more confidently is the jump-blues toe-tapper "T-Bone Shuffle," a 1970 Guy-Wells collaboration with guest Eric Clapton. Guy didn't know it then, but he was about to be pushed aside by disco, new wave and punk rock for the next two decades.

The 80s were Guy's lost years; then came a rebirth in the 90s, with Guy recording some of the most euphoric music of his career. Sick of disco, the public seemed to be thirsting for roots-oriented music. When the 1990 release of *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* went platinum, Guy picked up where that boxed set left off. Disc two captures Guy's

comeback, opening with "Damn Right, I've Got The Blues." The Grammy-winning album of the same name is rife with big-name contributors, including Jeff Beck, who appears on Disc two's searing, virile cover of "Mustang Sally." Guy's lightning-struck leads on "Damn Right, I've Got The Blues," amplified by improved recording technology, are positively electric. A dynamic reworking of Ray Charles' "Mary Ann," complete with Guy's muscular soloing, is included here, along with a savory version of Muddy Waters' "She's Nineteen Years Old."

Trading in glitzy all-star revues for a return to more traditional blues, Disc three visits Mississippi to plunder the catalog of Fat Possum label heavyweight Junior Kimbrough. Guy's spare, almost skeletal acoustic reading of Kimbrough's "Done Got Old," complete with tricky arpeggios, is a revelation. Lowdown and mean, Guy's version of Kimbrough's "Baby Please Don't Leave Me" comes from a dark place of desperation and sorrow, and his climbing solos, more distorted and angry than in the past, are chilling — White Stripes, eat your heart out.

In the new millennium, Guy is more aware of his age and his mortality than ever before, and those concerns manifest themselves in work that's not as easy to love, but ultimately, more rewarding — though 2001's magnificent *Sweet Tea* did earn Guy his first No. 1 album on the Blues chart. That doesn't mean he can't have a little fun, like in the previously unreleased version of Muddy Waters' "Honey Bee" included here. Another Disc three highlight: the reverential re-make of John Lee Hooker's "Crawlin' Kingsnake" lovingly rendered by Guy, Clapton and B.B. King.

Save room for this set if you're on a blues kick. It's hard to digest in one sitting. — Peter Lindblad

Bernard Allison

Energized: Live in Europe

Ruf Records (CD: RUF 1113; DVD: RUF 3010)

Grade: A-

No Mercy

in-akustik (INAK: 9029 CD)

Grade: B+

By the time he was 10 years old, Bernard Allison — son of the late Chicago-blues great Luther Allison — could play guitar along with his father's first album; three years later, he played on

Dad's 1978's concert album, *Gonna Be A Live One in Here Tonight*. The younger Allison later went on to jam with Stevie Ray Vaughan, Koko Taylor and Willie Dixon en route to a diverse solo career in which he refuses to be pigeonholed by his pedigree. Indeed, Bernard Allison (now in his early 40s) makes an electrifying blend of guitar-fueled rock, funk, gospel, R&B, soul and straightforward blues.

Energized: Live in Europe presents Allison in all his stylistically diverse glory with a performance at the friendly Musa club in Göttingen, Germany, on Oct. 20, 2005. The two-CD, 16-song set showcases Allison and his fiery trio blazing (and sometimes smoldering) through his father's back-catalog, as well as material culled from Allison's own albums released by a handful of labels over the years. Allison's ubiquitous guitar and Mike Vlahakis' bouncy keyboards fuel the flames, and can be enjoyed even more on the companion DVD, which inexplicably eliminates the instrumentals "Step Down" and "Talking Guitar." The 109-minute video shows Allison seeming more and more like his father in appearance, mannerisms and performance style. He even parades into the crowd and climbs atop a bar during the wildly manic instrumental "The Walk" — one of *Energized's* best performances.

Allison's first live album, *No Mercy*, recorded in France in 1994 and originally issued as a European import two years later, is now available domestically. Unlike *Energized*, all but one of the tunes in this nine-song set were written by others — including his father's "Change Your Way of Living" and "Help," B.B. King's "Rock Me Baby" and Jimmy Reed's "Tin Pan Alley." Allison was complemented by a loose and heavier-than-expected four-piece band of players completely different from the *Energized* lineup, and his voice seemed rougher than it does today. But even back then, more than a decade before Allison would record *Energized*, Allison sounded at ease and in control — a chip off the old man's block.

Both albums lack decent liner notes and packaging, never a strong element of Allison's material. But musically, it's as easy to hear why this guy should have been a star as it is discouraging to realize that he's not yet made it quite that far.

— Michael Popke

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