Blues Sage and Guy Next Door

CHICAGO BLUES VETERAN BUDDY GUY, STILL ON THE MUSIC TRAIL AT AGE 81, RETURNS TO TOWN, AFTER HAVING TOPPED THE CHARTS WITH HIS LATEST, AND APTLY-NAMED, ALBUM, 'BORN TO PLAY GUITAR'

It was five years ago that Chicago blues veteran and still-active master Buddy Guy swung through town, or UCSB's Campbell Hall, to be exact, and showed us how it's done. He was a mere 77 years old at the time. Tonight, the now 81-year-old blues guitarist-singer returns to town, this time heading downtown to the Big House of The Granada Theatre, in a show presented by UCSB Arts & Lectures.

In some essential way, he is out to fulfill the inherent promise of the title of his latest, and chart-topping album, "Born to Play Guitar." "Born to Play Guitar" is steeped in the stuff of autobiographical references, including the compact life story of the opening title song, followed by a guitarist tête-à-tête with another blues-basted guitar hero, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons. Other guests on the album include British pop-soul singer Joss Stone and our own Santa Barbara-bred Kim "Goleta Slim" Wilson.

The album's cameo guest stars were no doubt happy to be in the presence of and in tribute to Mr. Guy, whose star in blues lore has only risen since the passing of another blues octogenarian, BB King. BB King, in fact, is paid homage on the album's tune "Flesh & Bone," on which Mr. Guy shares the vocal spotlight with Irish soul singer Van Morrison.

Guitar heroes and heirs is a subject which tends to crop up where Mr. Guy is concerned. He rubbed elbows, riffs and musical missions with fellow Chicago greats Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, who he met and worshipped upon moving from his native Louisiana to Chicago in 1957. Mr. Guy himself was one of the blues players most revered — and copied — by the British blues-fixated guitar heroes in training, such as Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton, whose respect for and self-acknowledged musical debt to Mr. Guy is especially vast. On the posthumous and American front, Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan are part of the pack which bowed down to the master.

Mr. Clapton's support and patronage has helped keep Mr. Guy's career alive and well from the '60s forward, as when he invited him to be part of the major "24 Nights" Royal Albert Hall blues gala in London, and Mr. Clapton's later Crossroads Festival. When at home in sweet Chicago, Mr. Guy regularly can be found performing at his home venue, Buddy Guy's Legends. But don't expect a reverential or purist-loving blues event tonight. Mr. Guy is a fascinating bundle of contrasts and semi-

Buddy Guy

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contradictions, as we heard in his 2014 Campbell Hall show. He can dish out the raw Chicago blues vernacular goods (a language he helped create, with his own rough-edged sense of style) but he is also happy to bask in show biz gestures, slick, rockier blues idioms, and extreme dynamics for the sake of a livelier live experience. That’s all part of the Buddy Guy package as a performer by now.
Also, at Campbell Hall, Mr. Guy demonstrated his generosity and interest in the next generations of blues players keeping the tradition alive by opening the show with then-14-year-old guitar sensation Quinn Sullivan, who wowed the crowd that night. As Mr. Guy told Rolling Stone in a 2015 interview, “parents will bring (young guitarists) around and ask, and if they can play, I’ll give them an opportunity. Because when I went to Chicago, everybody looked at me and said, ‘Who are you?’ I don’t ask, ‘Do you have any experience?’ I just say, ‘Can you play this?’ If he says, ‘Yeah,’ I say, ‘Come on up!’”
On the latest album’s final track, a slow acoustic blues with 12-string guitar, honky-tonking piano and a simmering vibe, Mr. Guy pays another tribute to blues legend and friend Muddy Waters, with “Come Back, Muddy!” On the tune, the blues, eloquently, “come back, Muddy/the blues ain’t been the same,” while regaling us with anecdotal memories of his times with the man Muddy.
As a kind of final footnote and tip of the hat to the song’s tribute, Mr. Guy says in a half-whiskey-ed cool, “I’m keeping my promise that I would keep on playing. ‘Miss you, Muddy!’ Promise kept, here and in countless other localities around the globe.

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because anywhere in the world I’m at, I get to talk about the Santa Barbara Bowl and the great things they’re doing there at their venue, and how they are at the forefront of trying to reduce the waste from their shows.
“The Bowl is the most special venue in the world for me, not only because of the way it feels being up on the stage. Also, all the best shows I’ve seen have been at the Bowl. From the time I was 18 and every year after, we’d get stoked to catch a great show there. I’ve seen so many. I feel so lucky to have seen a lot of the acts I’ve seen there. To get to see those shows and be in the audience, and know how special it is to be at that venue, and then to be up on that stage, it always gives me goosebumps when I first walk out there.”
Mr. Johnson’s latest, and seventh, album is last year’s “All the Light Above it Too,” which mixes in ecological references — especially concerning his beloved domain, the ocean. As for the title, he explained that “I like tongue-twisters. The further along I get, the more my records are sounding like Dr. Seuss titles,” he laughed softly.
“I mentioned that his earlier album, “From Here To Now To You,” is another tongue twister. “Yeah, he said, “and it rhymes with that one. I like the way it sounds if you say it back to back: “From here to now to you... all the light above it too.” It’s a reference to the first song on the album. In the chorus, it says ‘all the light under the sun, and all the light above it, too/it doesn’t shine just for you.”
In an interview back in 2003, Mr. Johnson spoke about the centrality of surfing in his life, and even in his musical work—surfing as a creative laboratory. “Riding waves,” he commented, “it’s a rhythmic thing. If the wave would stay still, you’d get all your speed from the rhythm of going up and down. You go up and gravity pulls you down, and you use the force of the bottom turn to go back up. Since the wave is constant, you have to learn to roll with it.”
“Songwriting is the same way. If you just go with the constant rhythm of lyrics, you just have the same formula every time. It seems like if you let yourself go and try different things and roll with your mind as it goes, it helps.
“But I think a lot while I’m surfing. When I grew up, we used to watch so many surf movies over and over again. We’d watch a certain point. My favorite surfer is Tom Curren, who’s from here. I’d watch his parts over and over. The songs in the movie get stuck in your head. As you’re out in the water, I’d be singing those songs in the back of my head while I was surfing, because it made me feel more like Tom Curren.”

O JAI ON THE BRAIN: Perhaps the greatest thing about the end of the annual classical concert season is the arrival of the contemporary music-minded Ojai Music Festival, alerting the calendar with its thinking person’s splendor at the tail of spring in early June, between the concert season and the onset of the summery harvest of the Music Academy of the West. This year’s milestone 70th annual festival, the tri-counties greatest classical and most internationally-recognized music event returns to a more classical mindset after last year’s intriguing jazz-flavored detour with Vijay Iyer as artistic director. This year, the rotating music director hot seat is occupied by much-heralded violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, with a pair of semi-staged concerts by the director, a festival-commissioned world premiere by Michael Hersch, the JACK Quartet in residence, a centennial celebration of Stravinsky’s landmark “L’histoire du Soldat” and much more over a long weekend of presumed delights. Ojai Music Festival, June 7-10 at Libbey Bowl and other locations. ojafestival.org

SOUNDS OF THE SCENE

BARBARA Master Chorale, on themes of Handel, Haydn and more. On April 7 and 8 at the First Presbyterian Church, the Santa Barbara Choral Society celebrates its 70th birthday as well as the 25th year with director JoAnne Wasserman at the helm, with a performance of Haydn’s “Missa in Angustiis” (“Mass for Troubled Times,” also “Lord Nelson Mass”), and music of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Ola Gjeilo and more. The following weekend, Handel’s powerful oratorio “Samson” will be the centerpiece of this spring’s Master Chorale concert, at the First United Methodist Church on April 14 and 15. Santa Barbara Choral Society; sbchoralorg. Santa Barbara Master Chorale: sbmarchorale.org

— Josef Woodard