

Two blues greats, headed this way

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ABSTRACT

Magic Slim's kind of greatness, the kind that comes of operating within chosen limits, exemplifies what the Hollywood historian Thomas Schatz called "the genius of the system" - the system, in this case, being the golden-age Chicago blues order created by black southern Protestant migrants to the big city.

FULL TEXT

MAGIC SLIM and Buddy Guy, the last two great Chicago bluesmen who still tour regularly, will each be coming to the Boston area in the next few weeks. On Sept. 26, Magic Slim will return to Chan's, a supper club in Woonsocket, R.I.; Guy will play the Boston House of Blues on Oct. 1. If you catch them both, you'll hear some terrific and profoundly influential music, and you'll have a chance to compare two polar opposite kinds of creative greatness.

George "Buddy" Guy, 74, conforms to the standard model of a major figure in a popular art form: He took his genre in new directions, redefining its boundaries. He's a powerful singer, with a piercing voice that manages to sound aggrieved and ecstatic at the same time, but he's made his name primarily as a guitar virtuoso who pushed Chicago blues toward the rock styles that grew out of it. At a Buddy Guy show you will hear a whole lot of guitar playing animated by a deep tension between wanting to stay within the limits defined by blues convention and wanting to overleap the stylistic fences around the genre and explore the fields of noise beyond. It can be thrilling, it can be tiring, but you always feel as if Guy has taken you somewhere.

He's a virtuoso in the way that Orson Welles or Muhammad Ali were virtuosos - a breaker of rules whose work is so strong that it obliges the rules to change. Some blues people around Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s heard Guy's playing as too wild, too undisciplined for their orthodox taste. But his tendency toward escape velocity attracted bluesy rockers - Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, and company - who cited him as a major influence and whose return influence you can hear in Guy's playing. And classic rock has recruited a lot of Guy's current fans, who come to blues with rock-trained ears and are happy to go where he leads them.

The best way to appreciate Guy has been to see him on an especially inspired night, which might just change your life, and to get it you will put up with a sub-par night or two. But the best way to appreciate Magic Slim, born Morris Holt, is to see him every night for a month. No single one of those nights will change your life, and his musical athleticism is not in Guy's league, but that month will bring you just as close to the genre's vital ideal as could Guy at his terrifyingly impressive best.

No matter who's in the Teardrops, Magic Slim's band, they always sound the same - a spare, straight-ahead, churning and clanking sound lacking entirely in fuss or flash. They play most everything as a shuffle, the familiar rhythm that some people call "lump-de-lump," but they make shuffles sound fresh and functional, never dutifully folkloric or simply there to solo over. They play substantive party music, and they never disappoint.

Magic Slim, 73, exemplifies a quieter, less-often lionized set of virtues: competence, consistency, fidelity to tradition. He colors entirely inside the lines as they were laid down in the 1950s by Muddy Waters and other migrants from the Delta, and that makes him Guy's polar opposite.

If Guy is like Ali (and Muddy Waters like Joe Louis), then Magic Slim is the Larry Holmes of Chicago blues - adept, but not wildly gifted, and wise enough to have invested himself not in displays of pure talent but rather in his trade, in playing it right as that was defined in Chicago back in the day. Magic Slim's kind of greatness, the kind that comes of operating within chosen limits, exemplifies what the Hollywood historian Thomas Schatz called "the genius of the system" - the system, in this case, being the golden-age Chicago blues order created by black southern Protestant migrants to the big city. So if Guy is the Orson Welles of Chicago blues, then Magic Slim is like Michael Curtiz, who directed "Casablanca," "Mildred Pierce," and other examples of the Hollywood studio style at its best. At some point a master journeyman raises competence and consistency and fidelity to his trade to such a high level that it crosses into significant artistic achievement.

In order to thrive, every genre or style needs both visionary innovators and orthodox practitioners. Without the former, it becomes hidebound. Without the latter, it drifts and loses its center. Chicago blues has been fading slowly for a couple of generations. It will never disappear, not when it's so entwined in the DNA of rock and R&B and so many other genres, but its golden age and silver age are long gone. It could use another half-dozen Buddy Guys and another half-dozen Magic Slims to revive it, but instead it has one of each to hold the line while he lasts. So go see them both, if you can; they're still going strong, but they're not getting any younger.

See them not only because you'll have a good time and hear some fine music, but because the two of them, together, provide an important lesson in the range of forms that creative greatness can take.

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Illustration

Caption: Miguel Vidal/Reuters (above); and Rick Diamond/Getty Images; Magic Slim (below) and Buddy Guy are the last two great Chicago bluesmen who still tour on a regular basis. Miguel Vidal/Reuters (above); and Rick Diamond/Getty Images

DETAILS

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