



Larry Jaffee

Blues

**Buddy Guy *A Man & The Blues*
 Craft Recordings CR00091
 Junior Wells and His Chicago Blues Band
 with Buddy Guy *Coming At You*
 Craft Recordings CR00095**

DESPITE LONG discographies with various groups of musicians, guitarist Buddy Guy and harmonica player Junior Wells are forever linked as a result of several incendiary recordings they made in the mid-1960s. In particular, Wells's 1965 album *Hoodoo Blues*, which aficionados of the form will agree capsulizes the unmatched ability of the genre to capture less-than-ideal states of the human condition. Both musicians had migrated from the South to Chicago, where they found their biggest fame and recorded periodically together over the next two decades. These recordings quickly became revered by rock's leading musicians, and later were considered "must have's" by both those playing the blues and by fans.

At 82 years old, Guy is still going strong as a performer and recording artist, witness 2018's *The Blues is Alive and Well*, featuring special guests Jeff Beck, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger on mouth harp; remember his workout on "Midnight Rambler." Sadly, we lost Wells 20 years ago at 63, succumbing to cancer and a heart attack.

We modern fans of blues should give thanks to Craft Recordings, the catalog arm of indie powerhouse Concord Music, for these two 50-year-old albums, spruced up on 180-gram vinyl with lacquers originally cut from master tapes by Ron McMaster at Capitol

Mastering in Hollywood. Both records were recorded in Chicago in 1968, produced by Samuel Charters, and originally released on Vanguard Records, whose catalog is now under the care of Concord.

Guy's *A Man & The Blues* is the stronger of these two LPs, crisply mixed with clear separation of instruments, but with plenty of room for his trademark, fluid guitar solos. Listening to this album, you hear how much of an influence Guy's playing was on Eric Clapton (who inducted him into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame) and Robert Cray, especially on the quieter, less frenetic moments.

Guy wrote five of the nine tracks on *A Man & The Blues*. But its standout, must-hear song is "One Room Country Shack." Guy pleads "People you don't know how I feel down in this cotton field" ... where he explains, "you ain't got nothing to lose." The protagonist talks of his loneliness and promises to find himself "a woman even if 'she's dumb, deaf, crippled and blind,'" not the most PC lyrics in this #metoo era, but we get his point. Penned originally by Mercy Dee Walton in the early 1950s, "One Room Country Shack" was recorded in 1957 by jazz pianist/vocalist Mose Allison. Both Walton and Allison sang "companion" instead of "woman," but used the "she's" pronoun. (There are dozens of ver-

sions of the song on Spotify including Walton's original and Allison's, as well as covers by Blood, Sweat & Tears, Al Kooper, and Shuggie Otis, among others.)

A Man & The Blues features a crack band, including Otis Spann on piano. Guy's choice of covering a guitar-heavy version of Berry Gordy's "Money, That's What I

vocalist, and there's no doubt that Wells was the band-leader during these sessions.

Wells' harp stands out especially on a funereal, deliberate take on the blues standard "Tobacco Road," on which Guy's guitar especially shines. The first notes you hear on "Worried Life Blues" are from Wells's harmonica and he repeats the riff during the chorus.

They may be 50 years old, but these two blues recordings are as good as they get.

Want" indicates he was envious of Motown's success at the time. While on his own composition opening side 2, "Just Playing My Axe," the listener wonders why he usurps the melody of the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" in 1968, three years after it was a hit. Jagger & Richards often cite Guy as an overlooked genius of Chicago blues, and occasionally played with him over the decades.

The aural fidelity of Wells's *Coming at You* slightly pales next to the "in-the-studio sound" of the Guy record, and that has nothing to do with either's performances, which are first rate all around. Billed as "Junior Wells and His Chicago Blues Band with Buddy Guy," the band's front man was an A-list harpist and blues

On "Five Long Years," Wells, caught in the studio moment, gives his lead guitarist a shout-out, "That's a Buddy Guy solo." Fine!

The track list of *Coming At You*, relies on familiar blues chestnuts like "Stop Breakin' Down" (popularized by the Rolling Stones on *Exile On Main Street*); John Lee Hooker's "Five Long Years" (among the Yardbirds' repertoire); "Mystery Train;" Willie Dixon's "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man;" and "You Don't Love Me" (covered by the Allman Brothers on *Live at the Fillmore East*).

I love the line that Wells tacks on at the end of "Hoochie Coochie": "The United States knows I'm here," which prompted me to go fetch Dixon's *I Am The Blues* (Columbia/1970) to see if it was there; it wasn't.

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