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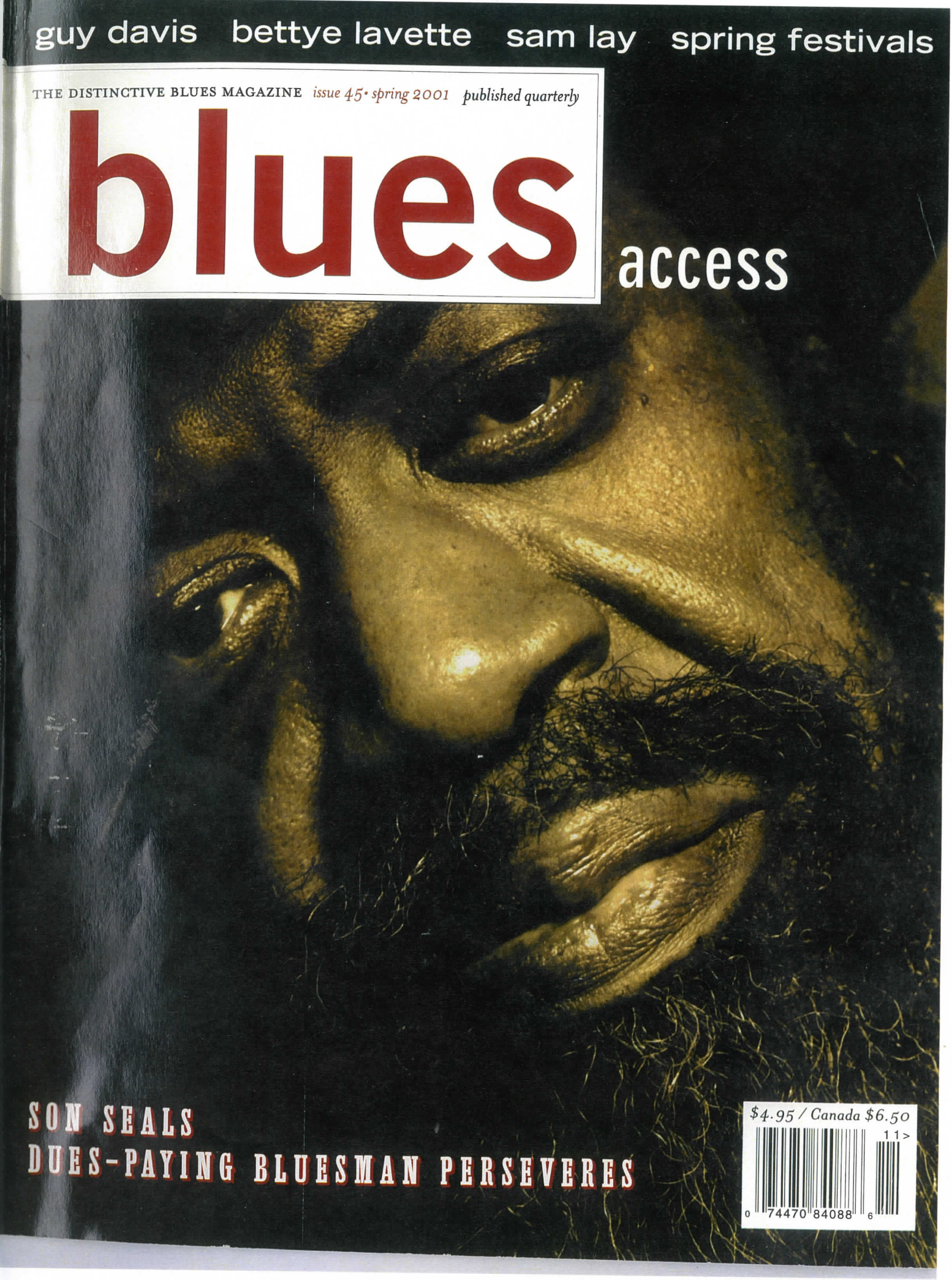

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GUY DAVIS HAS IT ALL ... OR

BY FRANK MATHEIS PHOTOS: BIBIANA H. MATHEIS

Harlem bluesman Guy Davis is sort of a walking contradiction: An outstanding member of the new generation of acoustic and traditional blues practitioners who represent the continuing vitality and relevance of the genre, he's also a complete odd-ball. He's one of the most promising talents in this idiom, yet he's entirely unlike anyone else on the scene.

While Guy Davis portrays the essence of the itinerant country blues players of the '30s, his life experience is something else altogether. Born into one of the most prominent African-American families in the United States — Guy's parents are Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, noted actors, directors, civil rights and social activists — Guy was blessed with the birth-privileges of class, culture and education.

An affable man of evident intellect, Davis is not only articulate and worldly — he symbolizes the black elite and masterfully carries on the artistic tradition of his family. It would be easy to make the case that the family genes live on in Guy Davis, whose genial charm, style and musical sophistication are extended with a deep smile and a hard foot-stomping beat.

The in-bred sense of responsibility which extends beyond the immediate family to assume the role of an ambassador for all of black America could be difficult for anyone to live up to. But seemingly, on the surface, Guy Davis has managed to accomplish just that. And he is a virtual renaissance man in his own right.

A singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist, Davis is also an actor, director and composer. He had principal roles on the daytime TV soap *One Life to Live* and the 1984 hip-hop film *Beat Street*. As the lead in the Broadway show *Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil*, Guy amazed audiences and critics with his portrayal of the late Delta blues master — indeed, to the point where some openly contemplated whether Davis might indeed be the very incarnation of the legendary bluesman. This performance earned him a "Keeping the Blues Alive" award from the Blues Foundation.

Davis left audiences gasping and garnered rave reviews for his starring role in *Mulebone*, the Broadway production of the historic collaboration between Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes which featured a musical score by Taj Mahal. He also starred in *Bed With the Blues: The Adventures of Fishy Waters* and collaborated with his parents in *Two Hah Haha and a Homeboy*, a testament to African-American folklore and heritage. He also composed the music for the Public Television series *The American Promise* and won an

DOES HE?

Emmy for his score for the television film *To Be a Man*. And an entire column could be dedicated to Davis' long list of accolades, awards and public recognition.

"That don't make no bluesman," skeptics might say, and indeed I was surprised to hear unexpected disparagement from one of Guy Davis' high-profile black blues compatriots. "Man, there is one guy, he got into the blues by playing Broadway shows," he condescended, as if this were somehow an illegitimate path.

But while Broadway is perhaps an unconventional entrance into the blues scene, Guy Davis stands on his own feet and on his own merit. One listen is sure to convince even the greatest skeptic that the country blues, acoustic and ancient, are not just valid but totally alive today in the talented hands of Guy Davis. The man deserves a little respect.

Guy Davis' buoyant and engaging "stomp and holler blues" are gritty and soulful, totally authentic with a harrowing, down-home essence. He approaches the music with a distinct sense of originality, adding interesting and superbly crafted new songs to the canon while keeping close to the traditional lyrical and structural framework of the acoustic blues. Davis has gained international acclaim because he's a superb songwriter whose lyrics evoke the poetic story-telling traditions of the blues — always simple, yet poignant and evocative. And Davis adds a level of intelligence and insight that reflects his rich literary tradition.

All that is well and good, but when Davis starts to wail, explanatory words become superfluous. A fierce multi-instrumentalist, Guy Davis alternates steamin' hot slide guitar with virtuoso finger-picking. When setting up his sound, you'd better mic the floor, because his foot-pounding beat shakes and rattles down the house like he's playing a deep Mississippi barrelhouse party.

An expressive, raspy-voiced singer with a fiery, fury-spitting blues voice, Davis plays the six- and 12-string guitars and a steel-bodied Dobro. He is perhaps under-recognized as a harmonica ace with a rich tone and exquisite phrasing, playing tastefully in a country style reminiscent of Hammie Nixon. His harmonica rises vertically with such a painful and moving moan that it penetrates even deeper and sadder than the lyrics themselves.

Offstage, Davis is a loving and dedicated father who spends every available moment with his son Martial; fatherhood is a primary determinant in his career decisions. "I'm always going to be here for my son. He's the most important thing in my life," Guy told me verbatim in each of two separate interviews conducted more than a year apart. Each time Davis brought his young son along to the gig,

In fact, Martial actually named Guy's new Red House album, *Butt Naked Free*. When he heard his dad's new tape, he jumped up and down and ran through their Harlem apartment shouting "Butt naked free!" That's just how it made him feel.

In both interviews Davis spoke of recurrent themes and dealt with issues that obviously occupy his mind: "The state of the blues artistically is nice. I'm glad to see as many performers getting up and out as they are — I mean folks like Eric Bibb. But still, the industry is not taking care of the people for whom this music was designed. When the blues was originally sung, it was by black people for black people. And here I am, the beginning of the 21st Century and I'm singing almost exclusively for white people.

"I don't mind — when I'm singing for an audience, it's the audience I'm singing for. But in retrospect, I look out and the music I'm singing there is something very different from here. Back in the earliest part of the 20th Century, Ma Rainey would ride her wagon out in the middle of a field and set up a tent show. People would come from miles around in their wagons, on foot and on horseback, in their buggies. They'd stand around, sit around the field and listen to her sing about them — about their troubles, their problems and their trials, and the floods and the crops that failed. [She'd sing] the 'Backwater Blues,' and the people would stand there and tears would run down their faces.

"But now I sing maybe some of those same songs, and I sing my own songs, and it is not very often that I get to see any black faces, let alone one black face in the audience. I love the audiences I play for and sing for. I love singing. I give them everything I have. But I am telling you, it would give me no end of a thrill, of a joy to see black faces out there — because I am singing music that is ours. It is ours ancestrally — by blood, by birthright, by heritage.

"I once was talking to a couple of bluesmen — Caucasian bluesmen, older, more established Caucasian bluesmen — and they said, 'You know, Guy, some day we're going to play guitars on the porch, playing the blues, and some black kid is going to come up to this porch and ask us how to play the blues.'

"Even though I should feel very grateful and happy that the blues is alive at all, that there is an audience for

HIS FOOT-POUNDING BEAT SHAKES AND RATTLES DOWN THE HOUSE

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it who loves it, I was a little bit chagrined. I said 'Damn. If black kids are going to learn how to play th blues, I wish they could learn it from black people – from black-skinned people.'

"In a way, this is a contradiction, because I don' judge people by their skin. But yet, at the same time there is a personal pride I would take from learnin from a black master, from a black American master

"The only thing that is not resolved with blac people in this country is the advent of slavery. Th hurt has never been healed. Not really. It's been cov ered over, and time has taken the edge off some of it But some of us can still remember stories of castra tions and hurt."

Guy's romantic longing for the good old days i perhaps more a manifestation of his ingrained sense o pride in black culture and a lack of fulfillment for no being appreciated or celebrated within the black com munity, as his family has always been. His many artis tic and musical accomplishments are recognized pre dominately by white people, and his longing for black audience is shared by his black blues compatriot

But they are obviously wrestling with a proble that seems insurmountable: The course of histor cannot be reversed, and the blues are almost equall unlikely to make a comeback with black audiences wh now live in a world of slick R&B, rap and hip-ho sounds. Blues record sales to black American audi ences are minuscule, and if blues performers had t depend on black audiences, economic survival woul prove virtually impossible.

With all his accomplishments as an actor, musi cian and director — and as a man — Guy Davis ma never truly find peace with himself. He is just look ing for love and acceptance where we all need it fir and foremost: at home, with our own. Until he gets i his international fame and acclaim may ever increas but inner peace and self-satisfaction will likely con tinue to elude him.