

NICK MOSS

CHICAGO BLUES. Those two words conjure up the most powerful and evocative images in the entire history of American music. Think smoke-filled taverns on the South or West Side nearly ablaze with tremendous displays of electrified Delta beats from dignitaries named Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Rogers, Little Walter, Elmore James, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells and so many more. Imagine sidewalk curbs and street corners on busy Maxwell Street where storied performers like Hound Dog Taylor and Robert Nighthawk wailed the blues for spare change.

Chicago blues is now also synonymous with guitarist Nick Moss. Though the golden era of Chicago blues is long past with many of its key players deceased or retired, this young Chicagoan stands tallest in the current generation of blues performers that honor the letter and spirit of the great urban African-American music. No less than Jimmy Rogers saw Nick as a protégé, a torchbearer, and a colleague. Leading Chicago-style guitarist Buddy Guy sanctions his talent: *"Nick Moss is one of the local favorites at my club, Legends. I always enjoy the way he plays and works hard to please our audience."* Noted Chicago-based music journalist Bill Dahl, never one for gratuitous praise, has raved over Nick's guitar playing, saying he possesses *"mastery of the classic Chicago sound,"* while acclaimed blues producer Dick Shurman numbers himself among Nick's ever-growing legion of admirers, calling his Windy City neighbor *"an increasingly centered artist who can rightly be called a master."*

A musician of consummate skill, Nick fully understands the debt he owes his predecessors and how important it is to carry on tradition in an honorable fashion. "I'm not trying to re-invent the wheel," he says with characteristic modesty, "or trying to bring things into the new millennia. I'm just playing what was handed down to me and do it justice. I have a lot of respect for the guys who taught it to me—I played with Jimmy Dawkins, I played with Willie Smith, I played with Jimmy Rogers—and in my heart I love [this music] and I don't feel it has to be changed much."

Passionate blues fans around the country gravitate to

Nick's playing in live performance and on recordings because of that stylistic link to the Chicago blues past. But Nick's music also holds enormous appeal for casual fans of blues and even novices. "I'm trying to find that fine line of not compromising the integrity of that classic music," he says, "and yet still make it a little fresher-sounding and contemporary-sounding where I can get across to the element of the crowd that isn't hard-core."

To his credit, Nick's no imitator. He has his own distinct voice on the guitar, what all musicians in all genres strive for yet very few achieve. "I've listened to just about every blues guitar player from the '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s, especially the Chicago guys, and tried to take in all of it," he offers, "but I don't consider myself a note-to-note copier. I absorbed their style and feel and timing. I try to listen and capture the essence of what they were doing."

For Nick Moss, the rise to the top tier of blues musicians out of Chicago had its beginnings right in his boyhood home. "If it wasn't for my brother Joe I wouldn't be playing. I used to watch him play guitar growing up, and still today he's one of my favorite guitarists, a musician's musician, playing blues, jazz, funk, soul, and rock. He pointed me in the right direction." Too young for legal admission into clubs, aspiring teenaged blues man Nick literally sneaked into local blues dens and soaked up the

classic ensemble sound played by the venerable elders. "My first influence was Jimmy Dawkins because he gave me my first real gig playing bass for him. I just happened to be at a blues jam when I found out he needed a bass player. I really didn't know who the guy was. I found out how heavy he was after I started playing with him and doing research." How heavy? Dawkins was one of the true stars of electric blues in the '70s, an acclaimed star in Europe but always criminally undervalued in the States.

Nick's schooling began in earnest when he hooked up with the Muddy Waters-styled Legendary Blues Band that featured Muddy Waters Blues Band alumnus Willie "Big Eyes" Smith on drums. "That was one of my favorite bands," he recalls. "I still love Willie. He is like my second father. He basically taught me two things: 1) to take pride

**"Nick's just got it
in him...The blues
feeling ain't nothing
you can teach
someone. He's just
got that feeling."**

—JIMMY ROGERS
Late, Great Guitarist

in myself right now, and 2) the timing and feel of blues, how it's suppose to be." The next deep-blues learning period for Nick, who'd switched over from bass to guitar, was in the employ of **Jimmy Rogers** for three years in the mid-'90s. From this major figure in the story of blues he learned all about the special ensemble sound of authentic Chicago blues, coming to understand the importance of listening closely to and reacting to his fellow players on the bandstand. "Listen to early Muddy Waters stuff with Jimmy and Otis Spann and Little Walter," says Nick of the original model. "It almost sounds as if they're playing on top of each other, but they're staying out of each other's way. It almost sounds like they're all soloing at the same time." When he wasn't performing as second guitarist for Rogers or listening to his mentor regale him with story after story, Nick kept busy listening hard to the recorded work of other Chicago blues players, among them Louis Myers, Robert Jr. Lockwood, Earl Hooker and Johnny Littlejohn.

With his blues graduate studies completed by the late-'90s, Moss started fronting his own band, **The Flip Tops**. Their first album, *First Offense*, was followed by second effort *Got a New Plan* in 2001 and then two years later a third album, *Count Your Blessings*—the latter two received W. C. Handy award nominations, all bear the imprint of Nick and Kate Moss's **Blue Bella Records** label. (Not incidentally, *Count Your Blessings* included ace contributions by several of his famous friends, among them **Sam Myers, Anson Funderburgh, Willie Smith, Curtis Salgado** and **Lynwood Slim**.) June 2005 saw the release of fourth album *Sadie Mae*, named after his beautiful baby daughter. Among the 16 tracks on the latest release are his wise and heartfelt interpretations of Jimmy Rogers' "Crazy Woman Blues," Earl Hooker's "You Got To Lose" and Lefty Dizz's "If I Could Get My Hands On You." Nick says of his growing discography, "I think slowly but surely with each CD I've grown a little bit more confident in the ability to add the contemporary element. If people go back and listen to all four of the CDs, they'd see a growth with each disc of more contemporary elements. My first album is straight-up '50s-style blues, and the next two are a really good mix [of classic and contemporary blues styles of the '60s and '70s]. *Sadie Mae* was a clearer picture of what we do live." The release was nominated for two **2006 Blues Music Awards**: Album of the Year and Contemporary Blues Album of the Year.

Perhaps the clearest picture of what the band does live is illustrated on the fifth release, *Live At Chan's*, recorded at Chan's Eggroll & Jazz in Woonsocket, RI in July of 2005. Nick had been approached by some blues fans from the east coast earlier that year, who had wondered when he was going to release a live record. Moss replied that he had always wanted to, but there just weren't any plans to put one out just yet. The two fans convinced Nick to let them make the necessary arrangements, and, with the help of their engineer friend (who has a recording company outfitted with a mobile recording truck), *Live At Chan's* was conceived. The set features current Flip Tops **Gerry Hundt** and **Piano Willie Oshawny**, as well as special guest **Monster Mike Welch** (Moss wanted to reciprocate after east coast native Monster Mike had asked him to record on 2005's *Cryin' Hey* on the Dixie Frog label.) Nick commented on the set

"This dude's gonna keep Chicago blues alive single-handed. A natural talent that gets better with each release."

—**JAMES NAGEL**
KPFT (Houston, TX)

in the CD's liner notes. "I wanted to make sure that the CD reflected the spontaneity of our live performances. I've been blessed with an extremely talented band; each one of us is a multi-instrumentalist and has no problem switching it up during our shows! We have had nothing but compliments from our audiences after they see how the guys and I take turns on different instruments as we did on this particular night. I never have a set list and rarely know what song I'm going to do next. Instead, I rely on my love

for this music and the knowledge that my band and I have of the genre to carry us through the night!"

Nick Moss and his Flip Tops sizzle in live performance hundreds of times a year, bringing their superior blues to clubs from Cape Cod all the way west to southern California with countless stops in between. Back home, Nick considers Buddy Guy's Legends and the House of Blues, where he and the Flip Tops were the original "House" band, his favorite haunts.

Nick Moss knows he has something special happening. "I feel like I'm one of the only bands from Chicago that's actually still playing Chicago blues the way people think of Chicago blues. I've gotten [praise] from a lot of the old-timers that have seen us play, even guys that are not from Chicago like Kim Wilson, Rod Piazza, and Charlie Baty and Rick Estrin of Little Charlie & the Nightcats. [They say] it's great to see there's actually a band from Chicago that actually plays Chicago blues." No question about it.