Written by Jeff Ignatius
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Magic Slim is somebody who refuses to be denied. He started out playing piano, but in a cotton-gin accident he lost a finger on his right hand – "the main finger," he said – and couldn't manage the instrument. Also when he was a child, he built a guitar with baling wire from a broom, and "my momma beat my ass," Magic Slim said in a recent phone interview.

And when the Mississippi native moved to Chicago in the 1950s, he found it difficult to make a name for himself. Magic Sam – with whom Slim went to school – gave him a spot on bass in his band, but Slim found it impossible to break into the competitive scene. "They wouldn't let me play," Magic Slim said. "They said I wasn't good enough."

Slim preferred guitar anyway – "It got more strings on it, and it got better sound," he said – and he went home to Mississippi to hone his chops. He returned to Chicago in the 1960s, undaunted. "When I came back, I was ready for 'em," he said.

Such setbacks might deter some people, but Magic Slim didn't let them stop him. "It was in me," he said of the fire for the blues. "I wanted to play bad."

In the four decades since he returned to Chicago, Magic Slim, now 67 years old (and, his press materials note, no longer very slim), has established himself as one of the finest purveyors of the electric Chicago blues sound. His guitar playing is clean, mean, and nimble, and his voice is a drawling, throaty thing, a bit like a bluesy, somewhat slurry Louis Armstrong. He'll be closing Saturday's festivities in the tent with a 9:30 p.m. performance with his band, the Teardrops, and guitarist John Primer. Primer has worked with Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon and first hooked up with Slim in the early 1980s.

Slim started recording in the 1970s and has put out nearly 20 albums on a variety of labels, including Alligator and Blind Pig. His latest, 2002's *Blue Magic*, is a strong showcase for his gruff voice, his fine string work, and his songwriting skills; Magic Slim wrote seven of the album's 10 tracks. "Chickenheads" (written by Calvin Carter and Bobby Rush) is particularly good, with its delicate guitar flourishes, subtle production, and funky coda offering sheen and nuance not often found in blues records.

Magic has a live DVD due out in August, and he's considering making an acoustic CD – a fairly shocking development for a person many consider the last living link to true, plugged-in Chicago blues. So why do a Magic Slim Unplugged record? "I just want one," he said in his direct, simple way.

Slim is also renowned for the jukebox in his head, with hundreds of songs committed to memory. There's no set list when Magic Slim & the Teardrops take the stage, and even the leader isn't sure what will happen next. "They don't know [what will be played], and I don't know, either," he said. "My band is good enough to follow me whatever I play."

That improvisation doesn't flow from indecision, but from an effort to gauge the audience. Slim will play a few different tunes to see what the crowd responds most favorably to. "I play according to the public," he said. "That's where I go."