

by Tim HOLEK

Lil' Dave Thompson

There are no handbooks or school courses that prepare you to be a blues musician. It's a line of work that is mastered by on-the-job training and experience— And Lil' Dave Thompson has learned his profession through years of grueling work.

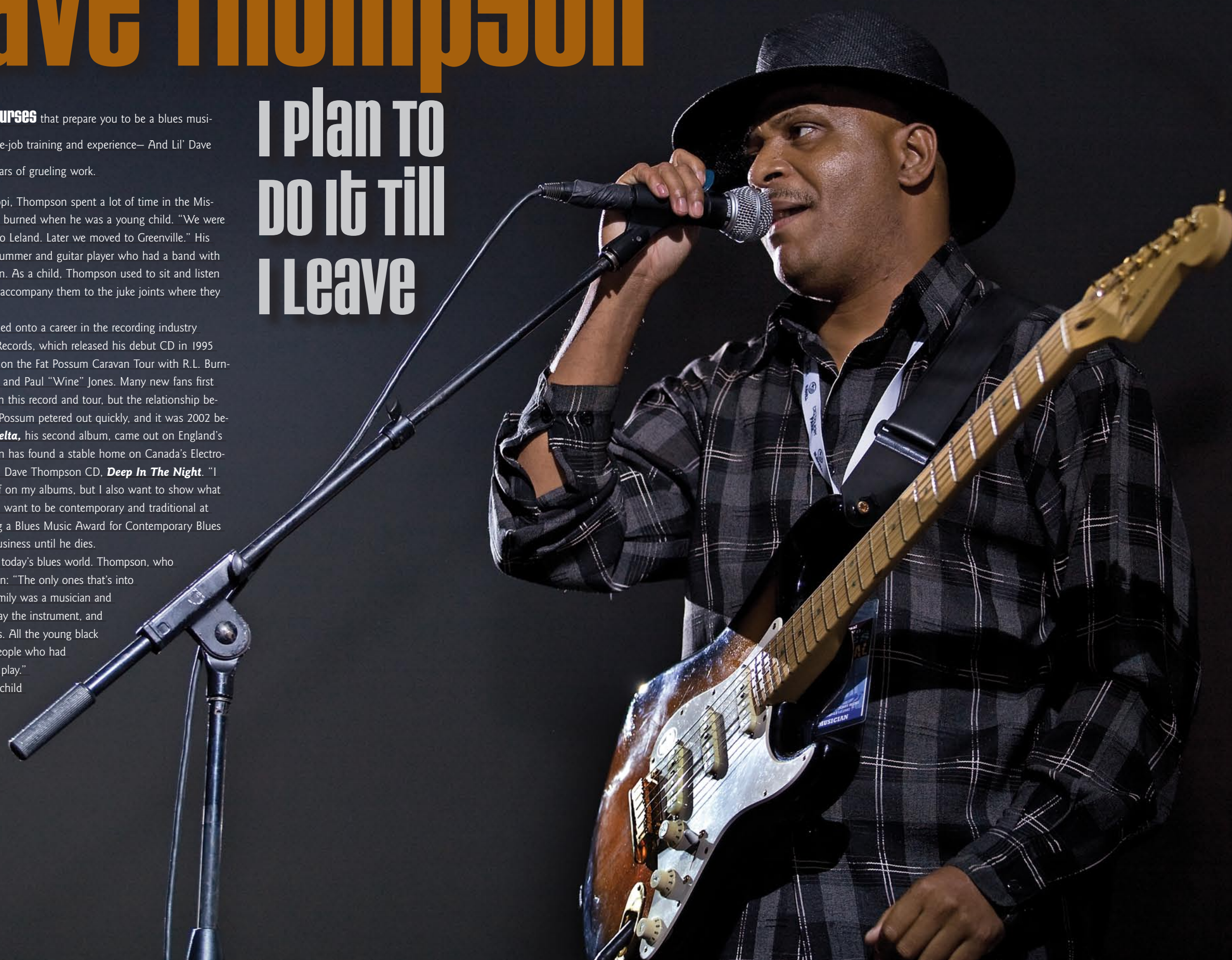
Born on May 21, 1969, in Jackson, Mississippi, Thompson spent a lot of time in the Mississippi Delta while growing up. His family home burned when he was a young child. "We were living in Moorhead, and that's when we moved to Leland. Later we moved to Greenville." His father, Sam Thompson, was a drummer and guitar player who had a band with Willie Foster and Asie Payton. As a child, Thompson used to sit and listen to them. Sometimes he'd accompany them to the juke joints where they were performing.

Thompson stumbled onto a career in the recording industry thanks to Fat Possum Records, which released his debut CD in 1995 and then sent him out on the Fat Possum Caravan Tour with R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, and Paul "Wine" Jones. Many new fans first heard Thompson through this record and tour, but the relationship between Thompson and Fat Possum petered out quickly, and it was 2002 before **C'mon Down To The Delta**, his second album, came out on England's JSP Records. Since 2006, Thompson has found a stable home on Canada's Electro-Fi Records, which has just released its second Lil' Dave Thompson CD, **Deep In The Night**. "I always try to keep some standard traditional stuff on my albums, but I also want to show what I'm really feeling [and] what I really have inside. I want to be contemporary and traditional at the same time." His career goals include receiving a Blues Music Award for Contemporary Blues Album of the Year and remaining in the music business until he dies.

Young, black musicians often seem scarce in today's blues world. Thompson, who plays all forms of roots music, offers an explanation: "The only ones that's into it—somewhere down the line, somebody in the family was a musician and turned them on to music. They learned how to play the instrument, and they come up around it, so they got into the blues. All the young black people that's coming up playing these blues are people who had musicians in their family and taught them how to play."

It's true in Thompson's case: "I'm the only child that got into it and knows how to play music. My father passed away in '83 and before he passed, I was playing guitar. I learned how to play all the old standards [like] Lightnin' Hopkins and Muddy Waters [that] he played. I started messing around with blues first and then I ended up joining a reggae band. Then I went off into gospel for a while. [I] came back up on the blues circuit and then I started playing R&B, but I fell back. The main thing was blues."

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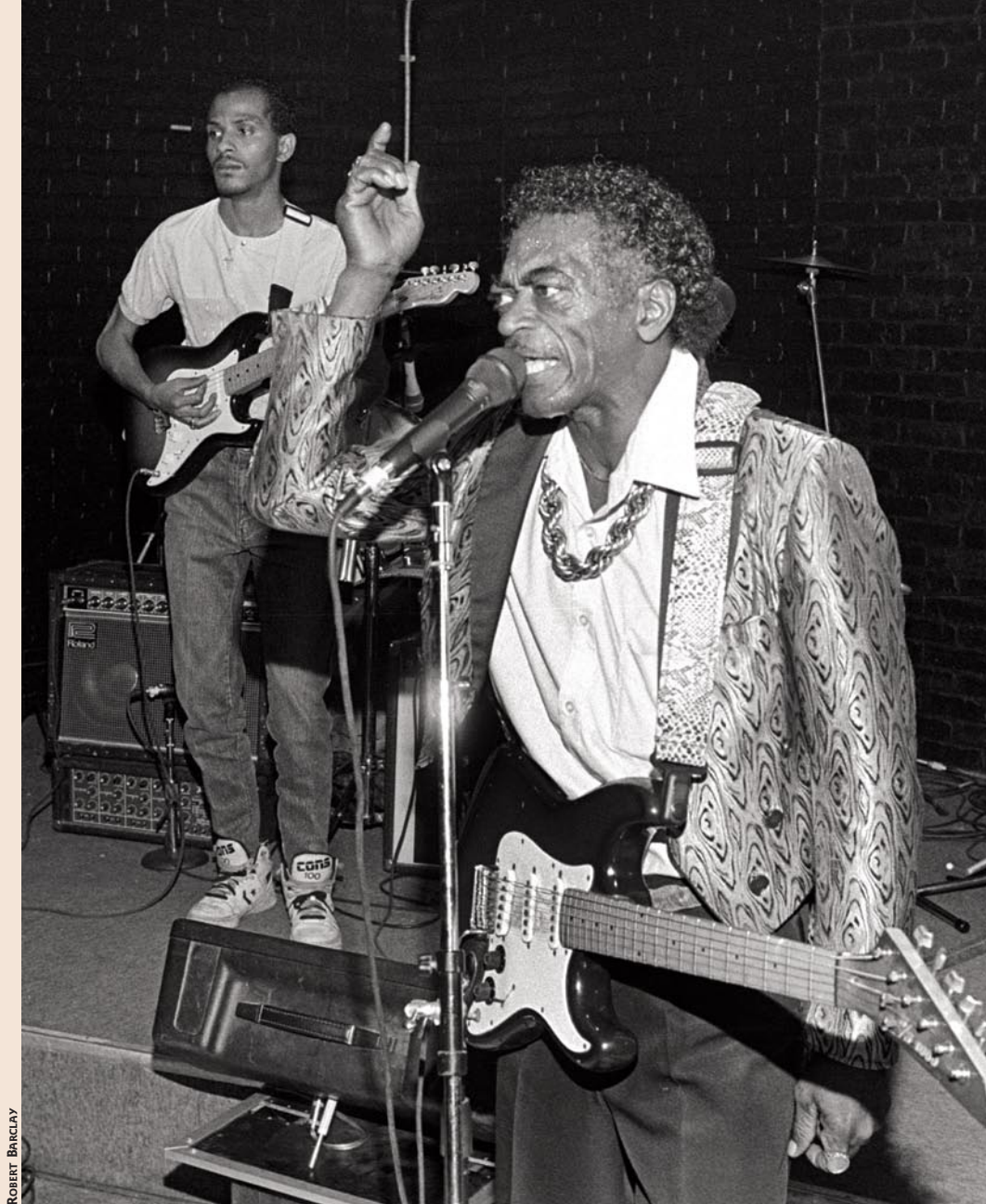
Thompson is driven by a burning desire to keep the blues alive by keeping it fresh. "I guess I'm a born natural talent person. Most guys, if they want to learn something, would actually have to have someone to sit down and show them hand to hand. I've always been the kind of person who can hear things and play by what I hear in an instant. [Playing music] is what I know how to do. This is what I want to do. I'm dedicated to it, you know? Pretty much every other day I take my guitar and play for several hours, even when I'm not on the road playing music. I'm just full-time into the music thing man. Music is my thing. That's it. I realized that I could book a gig, and some gigs I could make more money in a couple nights than in a whole week on a nine to five, so I said this is what I need to pursue. This is what I chose to do. This is how I choose to make my living—playing music. Looks like blues is going to pay the way."

Lil' Dave Thompson is a hard-working guy who is trying to make an honest living via a recording career that he admittedly "stumbled onto." He explains, "The thought never crossed my mind to write a song or to look for a record deal. I just knew I was a decent musician, and I could front a band and do local work. I discovered I could make a pay check every week playing music. I was doing well just working the local circuit [in Mississippi]. One thing led to another. I was playing around Ole Miss in Oxford [Mississippi] a whole lot and I happened to bump into these guys. Then one night they came up and introduced themselves and they told me that they was a label." It turned out to be Fat Possum, which released Thompson's debut CD while still affiliated with Capricorn Records.

"When I first recorded the first CD [*Little Dave And Big Love*] with Fat Possum, man I was totally green as far as songwriting. When these guys came to me, it was like man this is so big for me. I was so excited. To talk about recording an album! I just went home and started writing songs."

The relationship with the label only lasted for a brief period. "[There was a] dispute that went on between Fat Possum and Capricorn Records. That's what caused me to be without a record deal for a while." At the time, Thompson was still young, and he didn't know much about the recording business. To complicate matters, Thompson believed the label embellished his biography and presented him in a negative light.

After leaving Fat Possum, Thompson hooked up with JSP Records from England and released *C'mon Down To The Delta* in 2002. Thompson left JSP after this album. "[John] Stedman [founder and president of JSP Records] wanted to do another album, but I wanted to record with a label in the States."



ROBERT BARCLAY

The experiences with the two labels helped him to mature as a recording artist. With a renewed sense of self-respect, Thompson began trying to get signed with a North American label. He contacted Electro-Fi Records and two or three other labels, like Yellow Dog and Blind Pig Records. Andrew Galloway, the founder and president of Electro-Fi, was the first to show interest. "He said he knew enough about me, liked my style of music, and would love to do an album. So we had wrapped up a deal. By the time I received a call from the other guys, I had already talked with Andrew. It's been much easier to work with Electro-Fi more than the other labels. The guy [Galloway] allow me to really just be myself and do what I wanna do. The other labels had more input about what they thought you should do and the way they wanted things to go. When it gets like that, it's more the other person's way than it's your

way. It's really not you. I'd rather be more in control of the music myself."

Thompson's debut Electro-Fi disc *Got To Get Over You* was released in 2006. It was recorded with well-known Canadian blues musicians. Several of the studio band are past and present members of Mel Brown's Home-wreckers, along with Russell Jackson, who has worked with both Brown and B.B. King. Galloway felt Thompson would benefit from having a band that was used to playing with two of the greatest guitarists in blues history. The guys didn't have much opportunity to play together before they recorded the album, but it ended up sounding like they had been together for years. "Those guys [John Lee, Pat Carey, Jim Boudreau, and Jackson] were some good players, man. We didn't even get a rehearsal or nothing. I sent a demo in. Andrew sent the guys the demo. We got one show in at the Silver Dollar [a blues nightclub

in Toronto, Ontario] before the recording. That was the only night, and really we didn't perform any of the songs [on the album]. We did mostly covers. Next day we went into the studio man and knocked it out."

Thompson has seen many changes on the Mississippi club circuit. "Clubs are not booking R&B bands and reggae bands and acts like that. There is still a good bit of live music around Mississippi. There's a lot of low-key bars—they wouldn't call themselves blues venues. A lot of restaurants and bars around have bands. A lot of places like Cleveland, Clarksdale, Vicksburg, Jackson, and Indianola have bars that they rotate the local bands every week. Mostly disc jockeys are on the black circuit in the black joints. A lot of the black joints are the places [that are] not having bands any more. It's mostly disc jockeys now with hip hop and soul/blues, but most of the white venues around the Mississippi area have live bands."

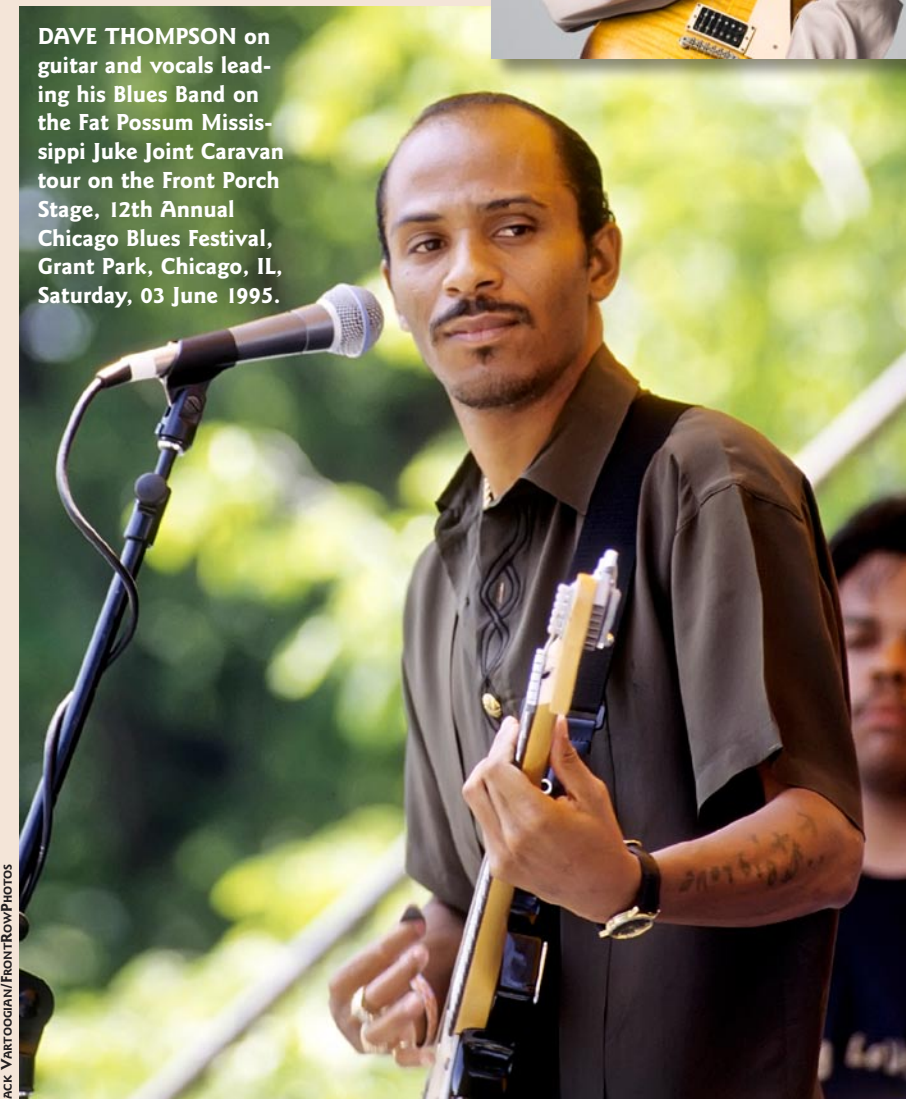
Thompson notes changes on the radio too. "Nowadays the radio stations doesn't just focus on playing a lot of traditional blues.

It's mostly southern soul or hip hop or R&B. From what I really looked at and came up with, when it comes to the black music, I think black people like more of a music they can dance to. The southern soul stuff is more dance music. A lot of the black people say traditional blues is depressing, but I don't sing the blues because I'm depressed. I just have fun doing the blues. If I'm singing my baby gone, I'm not depressed about it you know? Last night we had a good size crowd, and



GARY COLLIVER

DAVE THOMPSON on guitar and vocals leading his Blues Band on the Fat Possum Mississippi Juke Joint Caravan tour on the Front Porch Stage, 12th Annual Chicago Blues Festival, Grant Park, Chicago, IL, Saturday, 03 June 1995.



JACK VARTOGIAN/FrontRowPhotos

they danced a lot. That's what we like. That's what we look for. That's how we know they enjoying the band."

Recently, Thompson recorded and released his second disc for Electro-Fi. This time Galloway suggested using Thompson's road band but Thompson preferred to go with studio players again. So a similar formula was used, where the musicians (including John Lee and Mike Nunno) came in cold facing the challenge of performing in the studio as a cohesive unit. "The new album [*Deep In The Night*] contains ten all-original songs. I'm basically talking about everyday things like what has happened in the past, what's happening now, and in the future. [I write] things that other people can relate to and that's happening in their lives. Pretty much, that's about all you can write about.

"I like 12-bar stuff a lot, but I try to go into a different direction because I have peoples over the years say 'enough of the 12-bar stuff.' It's been around for decades. I thought, personally, when you go contemporary, it's just changing the colors and making the music more tasteful but keeping that blues touch there. That would kind of attract more people to what you're doing. To be contemporary, it's kinda like just being yourself in what you feel. I kinda did different styles of music grooves so we could catch different people other than just blues listeners. But, it's still blues. The guitar makes it bluesy, but definitely everything is not the same.

"The songs on there [the new CD] I like a lot. I been listening to them over and over trying to see which song it is that I really like the best. One thing that I realize, it's not up to me. Other people [the fans] got to decide. I took time to write things that I would be happy with when it came out. I was trying to write a good enough CD to get nominated again [*Little Dave And Big Love* received a Blues Music Award nomination for Contemporary Blues Album Of The Year in 1996] and maybe even win the award. That's the big wish."

Of all the changes that Thompson has experienced since getting into the recording industry, getting the chance to tour nationally and internationally is what surprised him the most. "When I first got started it was all new and surprising to me. Since those times I feel like I matured a lot. I've grown over the years. I became a better songwriter, a better singer and guitar player. I plan to stay in the music business and do it until I leave here."

To read more about Dave Thompson, see *Dave Thompson – The Music Will Speak For Itself* in the March/April 1997 (#132) issue of *Living Blues*.

