

## Chainsaw's 'Lullaby'

Blues guitarist Chainsaw DuPont turns hard times to good music

BY BRUCE INGRAM  
ASSISTANT EDITOR

**D**espite the early hour, there's a small but friendly crowd at Bill's Blues in Evanston, a sign that owner Bill Gilmore's promotional scheme to make Wednesdays in February "Sweet Home Evanston" night is paying off.

David "Chainsaw" DuPont and his Blues Warriors have just started the first set, and Chainsaw ("Lots of guys call their guitar an ax but it takes a long time to cut down a tree with an ax") greets every new arrival with a smile and a nod. He knows most of them by name. Everyone returns the greeting.

A half hour earlier, the 48-year-old Evanston guitarist and his trio had been warming up with a raucous rendition of "God Bless America" that gradually shifted into a bombastic cover of Jimi Hendrix's "Machine Gun." It was too loud for club co-owner Debbie Gilmore. "Turn it down," she shouted. "We'll have the cops here before you finish your first song."

If the suggestion bothered Chainsaw, the most mild-mannered man imaginable with a portable power saw for a nickname, he shows no sign. He keeps playing what he calls "Delta Crush."

"It's basic blues principals but crushed down to the essentials," he'll tell you. "We play the blues but it doesn't come off like Muddy Waters. It comes off more like Stevie Ray Vaughan."

Chainsaw and the band wind up a potent but politely decibel-leveled rendition of "Sweet as a Queen Bee's Honeycomb," written for wife No. 2, or possibly No. 3, from his new CD, "Lake St. Lullaby."

Now it's cover time, so Chainsaw steps up to announce Junior Wells' "Hoodoo Man Blues" ("in A," he reminds the band), noting that he toured with Wells back in 1995, so he definitely knows how it goes.

"Let's see if we can get a groove going," he murmurs to the crowd.

### Sweet home Mississippi

Chainsaw's acquaintance with the



Joe Ciganowski/Pioneer Press

**Ripping it up:** Evanston blues musician David "Chainsaw" DuPont relives a lifetime of blues on "Lake St. Lullaby."

Chicago blues legend goes way farther back than 1995. All the way back to his childhood home on a cotton plantation in Swan Lake, Miss., where Wells was a favorite on the old Seeburg jukebox his mother kept in the house.

"Our house used to double as a roadhouse," DuPont recalls the day after his Wednesday night gig. Setting the record straight about proper form of address, he says he's only Chainsaw during working hours.

DuPont also used to play under the name Whip Jr., in honor of his father, currently a Muslim imam, previously a pro boxer in New Orleans known as Kid Dupas, a.k.a. "The Whip" — but that's another chapter in a long story. The story of "Lake St. Lullaby," in essence, which is also the life and hard times of a Delta blues musician who comes north and doesn't make it big. At least, not so far.

It's early afternoon his comfortable south Evanston apartment, where he lives with his third wife Norma and his niece Deidra Hill. The Gibson

Flying V he played at Bill's is propped up on a stand in the living room next to two more electric guitars and an electric piano, where he works on his original songs. Leaning back in a chair at the kitchen table, he remembers growing up in a juke joint.

"We worked hard all week and we'd dance all weekend," he says. "My mother got to keep whatever people put in the Seeburg. That was the deal."

It was the early 1960s and 6-year-old David was picking cotton on the Flautt plantation for two cents a pound. His mother chopped cotton for \$3.50 a day.

One day, when David was around 8, he saw a man named Fate "blow the heart out" of a man named Tom Powell after they had been playing the dozens and the insult-swapping got out of hand. He recalls the plantation owner looking down at Powell after workers asked him to call a doctor, spitting on him and saying he wasn't worth the trouble. Fate went to jail and was released the next day

— the plantation needed workers and it didn't make sense to lose two. Forty years later, the story appears as "Fate," track 7 on "Lake St. Lullaby."

"I've seen some bad things since I left Mississippi but I never saw anything like the stuff I saw on that plantation," DuPont says.

That even includes the time DuPont himself was shot during a stint playing guitar for a reggae band in Houston. The robber took 15 pounds of ganja from the band's stash and shot DuPont just for meanness, apparently, even though he was already lying face down on the floor.

## A bad sign

DuPont was born on Friday the 13th of August 1956 in Macomb, Miss. Bo Diddley was born there too. He'll smile if you note that he was born under a bad sign but he'll also point out that he's never allowed hard times to get him down for too long — "in fact, it's probably inspired me even more."

His mother bought him a Lone Ranger guitar when he was 6 or 7 and he proceeded to teach himself with the aid of a booklet titled "How to Play Guitar in Seven Days."

"It only showed you how to play 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' so I wasn't entirely satisfied," he laughs. "But it got me started."

DuPont was particularly fond of B.B. King, but the guys who really inspired young David were a couple of guitar-playing brothers on the plantation named Son Sausage and Bob Sausage.

"Sometimes they didn't even have enough strings for two guitars between them, but they had the feeling," DuPont recalls. "They taught me to play by feel."

In 1971, DuPont's mother died in a car accident and his big brother Johnny, a factory worker in Chicago, invited him to move up north.

DuPont spent a couple of years in Sullivan High School but by that time he was fronting his first group, a cover band called the Drifting Soul, after acquiring a taste for Band of

Gypsies-era Hendrix. He dropped out in 1973, got married and devoted himself to music full-time.

"That's all I wanted to do," he says. "When I dropped out of school I played sunup to sundown. That's all I did — play guitar."

## The hard road

Roughly 10 years went by with DuPont drifting from New Orleans to Memphis to Houston, wherever he could make a living with his guitar. When he couldn't make music pay, he worked day jobs as a laborer. Sometimes he slept where he worked. Sometimes he was homeless. He never stopped playing the guitar, though — unless he'd hocked his equipment — even if all he could find was a band willing to let him sit in for free.

It was during one of those lean stretches in New Orleans in 1981 when DuPont jammed with Stevie Ray Vaughan.

"I was playing at Tipitina's with Jimmy Thackery and the Nighthawks," he recalls. "Jimmy said, 'Man you've got to check out this cat; he's the closest thing you'll ever hear to Hendrix.' So I went over there and he blew me away, man. Later we talked in his dressing room and he asked me to come up on stage and we played 'Voodoo Child' and 'Superstition.'"

More than 20 years later, DuPont still pauses when he thinks of that night.

"It was one of the most profound moments I've ever had in music, playing with Stevie," he says. "It was a spiritual experience. When he died, man, I was messed up inside. I couldn't even touch my guitar for days. That's how much it meant to me."

DuPont had a few more years of drifting to do before he returned to Evanston in the mid-1980s. During that time, he played with just about every kind of band imaginable, said manager and "Lake St. Lullaby" producer/collaborator Steve Pacek.

"Everything but country," laughs Pacek, who also teaches the history of the blues at institutions such as the Newberry Library. "Did he tell you about the time he backed up a black Elvis impersonator?"

All of these dues, Pacek said, are what makes DuPont the seasoned player he is today — and give him the life

experience to pull off an ambitious effort like "Lake St.," a rare album of entirely original blues material.

"It's not a glamorous lifestyle, the one David lived during the '70s and '80s, but it's certainly rich in experience," he says. "Playing the blues well requires that kind of experience."

"It's also very reminiscent of the stories you hear from old-timers like Honeyboy Edwards, who hitchhiked around the South for years before settling down. David chose the same lifestyle a lot of his predecessors chose and you can hear that when he plays. You can hear that authenticity."

*David "Chainsaw" DuPont and the Blues Warriors continue to host Sweet Home Evanston nights Wednesday and March 10, 24 and 31, featuring two-for-one admission for Evanston residents, at Bill's Blues, 1029 Davis, Evanston. Call (847) 424-9800 or visit [www.billsbluesbar.com](http://www.billsbluesbar.com). For more information on DuPont visit [www.chainsawdupont.com](http://www.chainsawdupont.com).*

## DIVERSIONS

Blues artist "Chainsaw" DuPont traces his long path from Mississippi to Evanston.

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