



BLUES TRAIL

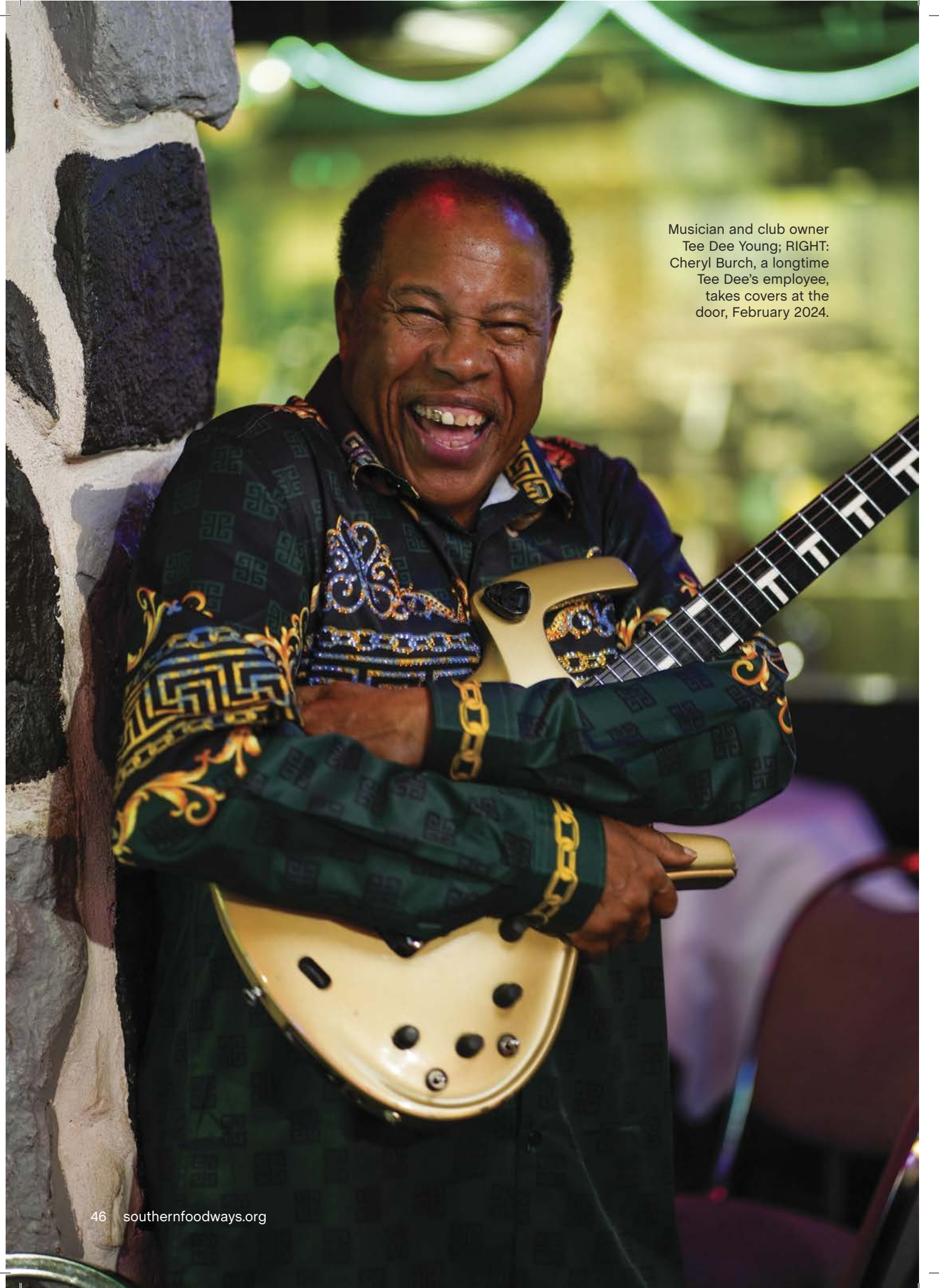
MUSIC UP FRONT, FRIED FISH OUT BACK

In summer, it's hard to leave Tee Dee's Bluegrass Progressive Club feeling empty.

BY JARRETT VAN METER

Photos by Patrick Murphy-Racey

Terrance "Tee Dee" Young leads his band at Tee Dee's, February 2024.



Musician and club owner Tee Dee Young; RIGHT: Cheryl Burch, a longtime Tee Dee's employee, takes covers at the door, February 2024.

THE MUSIC STARTS SLOW, ALMOST CREEPS up on you. First the tiptoeing blues guitar, then the organ, bass, drums, and saxophone. Once everybody is tuned up, they set off like a rolling ball of harmony into the June night. It's Monday, just after 8:40 P.M., and the music won't stop until almost midnight. The band gains speed, picking up players along the way for a song or two.

Tee Dee's Bluegrass Progressive Club is a quintessential blues bar. At the edge of downtown Lexington, Kentucky, the club occupies the bottom of a two-story brick building that looks like it was once a storefront. You can't see inside now, though, as stone mosaics have replaced the first-floor windows. Step through the front door, and your eyes adjust to the darkness. From the glow of string lights and a few colored bulbs overhead, you can make out a pool table in the corner, a stage, a bar, and smattering of tables and chairs. The place has been open nearly forty years—on Monday nights and Monday nights only.

The walls are lined with mementos bearing the name and face of the man on stage. He wields an electric guitar and flashes an effervescent smile. Back in the day, Terrance "Tee Dee" Young opened for James Brown and Aretha Franklin. He was inducted into the Kentucky Music Hall of

Fame and even earned his own official day in the city of Lexington, September 13. Now sixty-nine, the music has kept Young's spirit youthful. Sweat drips from his brow as he digs into a solo. The man is working, bending, popping, ducking, and picking. The crowd nods with him and taps their feet, some sipping from Budweiser bottles or cocktails in Solo cups. Some faces are new; others he has known for decades. Some are white; just as many are Black.

AS THE FIRST song ends, Young takes the microphone. There is no dinner menu here—but, as he reminds us, there is fried seafood, prepared under a tent on the back patio. It's available in the summer months, and some say it's the best in town. Young claims he is the only person alive who knows the recipe.

"We sell fish and shrimp out back," he says. "Is it good?!"

He grins at his question. He knows the answer.

It's Rebecca Young's recipe: his mother's. He says she taught it to him and nobody else. The Young home in Lexington's Pralltown neighborhood was filled with music and food. Tee Dee, his five brothers, and their father, Leonard Young,





were musicians. Miss Becky, as she was known, fed everybody who came through her house. She spun mouthwatering meals out of simple ingredients: gizzards and rice, chili dogs, cake, and her signature fried fish.

Today, Tee Dee Young keeps his family's traditions of food and music alive. He makes the fry meal for the fish each week from scratch. While he jams onstage, his cook, David Bingham, mans the fryer on the back patio. For more than three decades, Bingham was a cook at the iconic Max's Loudon Square Buffet on Lexington's north side. When the restaurant closed two years ago, Young, who had been a regular at Loudon Square, asked Bingham to come work for him at the club.

WEARING A TUPAC T-shirt and basketball sneakers, Bingham dredges and lays each whiting fillet into the oil like he's trying not to wake it. While Young won't share his mother's recipe, from the looks of it, a cornmeal base is involved. Everyone orders their fish at the bar, then Bingham

brings them inside, still steaming from the fryer. A basket comes with two fillets and two slices of white bread.

Young has put a lot of work into the place since buying it about forty years ago. When he decided he wanted to purchase the building, he had about 500 dollars to his name. The price tag was \$15,000, and he couldn't get a bank loan. He says he borrowed the money from a man he was doing carpentry work for and paid him back within three years. At the time, the roof let in more rain than it kept out, and weeds grew up through the floor. Today, the club occupies the ground floor, and there are a few apartments upstairs. Some people who have lived in Lexington for years don't know the place exists.

Bingham plates a few orders and shuttles them into the noise and heat and darkness of the club. Young and company are still tearing away. His loose, short sleeve, button-up shirt is a mashup of fabric swatches, like a quilt with armholes hanging from his ropey frame.

As the song ends, Young steps to the microphone.

“Is anybody in here a musician?” he asks the crowd.

A white guy with a bushy goatee, short-sleeve denim button-down, and jeans mumbles loud enough to catch Young’s attention.

“What?” Young asks the man.

“I play guitar,” the man says.

“Well, where is it?”

The room is full of tension, the good kind, as the exchange unfolds. Eyes turn back to the scruffy guest.

“In the car.”

“Well, go *get* it!” Young booms. To great laughter and applause, the man rises and shuffles toward the front door. “It’s illegal to leave your baby in the car.”

THIS IS STANDARD on Monday nights. The house band starts with a couple of songs, then Young opens the stage to whoever wants to play. People in the audience pull everything from guitars to djembes from beneath their chairs and step forward. The guests play a few notes, then Young and the band join in, urging them on regardless of style, genre, or ability.

The band takes a break to sip water and towel away sweat. Bingham darts in and out with fried seafood orders. Guests pop shrimp into their mouths and fork bites of whiting. A basket comes with two fillets and two slices of white bread. Some put the tender fillets between the bread, hit it with hot sauce, and make a sandwich. Beer or Jack and Cokes wash down each bite.

Soon, the goateed man from the crowd returns with his guitar slung over his back.

He steps to the stage and, speaking into the microphone, introduces himself as Aaron McGlone. “I’m from far northeastern Kentucky, where nobody can find me unless they have to or I want ‘em to,” he says. “Way up in the holler.”

With McGlone leading the way, the band launches into Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues.” Next, McGlone introduces an original he calls “Guitars and Wine.” He plays a few chords, allowing the band to feel it out, then everybody jumps in.

They play on; time is lost. Soon, it’s past 11:00

P.M. on a work night.

Young and the band do a rendition of The Beatles’ “Yesterday.” Near the end, the song shifts from an organ-heavy, Sunday morning–church sound to a reggae beat.

Toward the end of the night, Young introduces the house band: William “Woo” Johnson on drums, Tim Talbert on organ, William “Billy D” Linton on bass, and Jacob O’Donnell and Kirby Davis on saxophones.

AFTER THE SHOW ends, Young will head to Waffle House with some of the crew to wind down. He will sleep in late tomorrow, then make his way back to the club to finish cleaning up and begin restocking. Depending on the week, he and the band might have a few gigs lined up for the weekend ahead. But next Monday, he’ll be back in this spot, beckoning the crowd to dance and play along. And if it’s summertime, he’ll make sure no one leaves with an empty stomach. 🍷

BELOW: An order of fried fish is served with two slices of white bread, summer 2023. LEFT: A Tee Dee’s patron closes her eyes to listen to the music, February 2024.

