

# Bobby “Blue” Bland (1930-2013): An appreciation

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Bobby “Blue” Bland, one of the more remarkable rhythm and blues (R&B) singers active in the 1950s and 1960s, died on June 23 at the age of 83. While never quite the household name that contemporaries like Ray Charles or Aretha Franklin were, Bland nevertheless made some outstanding contributions to popular music.

Bland was a gifted and expressive singer, well-known for the guttural wails with which he often punctuated his phrasing. His singing also possessed very refined and sensitive qualities. He was an exceptional singer of ballads, in particular, earning himself the nick name “Sinatra of the Blues.”

Bobby “Blue” Bland was born Robert Calvin Brooks on January 27, 1930 in the town of Rosemark in southwestern Tennessee, near Memphis. As a child, Bland missed out on a formal education as he left school to work in the cotton fields with his mother. He reportedly never attended school beyond the third grade, never learned to read and would remain mostly illiterate for the duration of his life. He knew all too well what he was singing about when he recorded the wonderful song “Poverty” years later in 1966.

Like so many R&B singers of his generation, Bland first developed his passion for music in a church. His singing style owes a particular debt to the oratorical flourishes heard in the recorded sermons of the Reverend C.L. Franklin, a civil rights activist and the father of singer Aretha Franklin.

Memphis, Tennessee, where Bland would make his home, was also fertile ground for musical creativity in the 1950s as blues and early rock ‘n’ roll thrived in the mid-Southern city. Young, mostly working class musicians in the region blended and adapted various styles of rural music, as well as pop, with little regard for distinctions between music that was classified as

“black” or “white.” The young truck driver Elvis Presley sang the songs of R&B singer Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup, while Bland admired Sinatra and Tony Bennett.

Bland became part of a renowned collective of musicians known as the Beale Streeters, named for Memphis’s famed Beale Street, where they often performed. This group of artists included singer Johnny Ace and future blues legend B.B. King, with whom Bland would strike up a lifelong friendship. Prior to his own successful career, Bland also worked as King’s chauffeur.

Bland struggled to land a hit record early on and his career would be interrupted in 1952 by the draft, when he was called up to serve in the US Army during the Korean War.

Bland finally hit his stride in the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, putting out a string of remarkable singles, including “Further on up the Road,” “Little Boy Blue,” “Cry, Cry, Cry,” “Stormy Monday Blues,” “I Pity the Fool,” and the great “Turn on Your Lovelight.” The album *Two Steps from the Blues*, released in 1961 and collecting just a few of these singles along with other recordings, proved to be an R&B landmark.

Contributing greatly to these recordings were the “big band”-inspired arrangements of trumpeter and composer Joe Scott with whom Bland would collaborate for many years.

Drummer John “Jabo” Starks, who went on to become a vital component of James Brown’s legendary band, also accompanied Bland on several of these recordings. There are wonderful and exciting moments in “Turn on Your Lovelight” and “Don’t Cry No More” when all of the other musicians on the session drop out and leave Bland to sing with only Starks’

drums backing him up.

This was a music that was absolutely full of life. A great deal of *real* passion, pain, pleasure, hope and hardship courses through Bland's best work.

Following the 1960s, Bland's output was less sure. There were strong moments on albums such as *His California Album* (1973) and *Dreamer* (1974), but these did not match the strength of his earlier recordings.

A minor success at the time of its release, "Ain't No Love in the Heart of the City," from *Dreamer*, is now among Bland's best-known recordings, thanks to its having been sampled in a 2001 song of the same title by rapper Jay-Z.

Two live albums recorded with B.B. King, *Together for the First Time Live* (1974) and *Bobby Bland and B. B. King Together Again ... Live* (1976), are also enjoyable.

Bland continued to perform until shortly before his death and recorded music as recently as 2003. In the end, his career spanned more than half a century. He was widely respected by his peers and his best music will no doubt continue to move audiences for a many years to come.



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