

Blues musician B.B. King, 1925-2015

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18 May 2015

On May 15 blues legend B.B. King died at his Las Vegas home. He was 89 when he finally succumbed to a series of strokes. A long-time sufferer from Type 2 diabetes, King was able to go on performing until last October. Until that time, he had toured and toured, averaging some 200-300 shows per year over four decades.

Performing tunes such as “Sweet Little Angel,” “Every Day I Have the Blues” and “The Thrill Is Gone” since the late 1960s made King a cultural icon. His passionate vocal style and the unique way it interplayed with his guitar work made his inimitable sound almost instantly recognizable. The impassioned, celebratory brightness of both his guitar playing and his vocals is a hallmark of King’s style.

King was born in the Jim Crow Deep South on a cotton plantation near Indianola, Mississippi in the Mississippi Delta in 1925. (The White Citizens Council, the “uptown” version of the Ku Klux Klan, was founded in Indianola in 1954.) Memphis, Tennessee was less than 150 miles to the north; New Orleans 275 miles to the south. The Kings’ farmhouse was within audio reach of the radio show “King Biscuit Time,” broadcast from radio station KFFA in Helena, Arkansas, where Sonny Boy Williamson (“Rice” Miller) held sway as blues harmonica artist. KFFA was one of the few stations that would play African American blues artists. At some point early in his youth, Riley B. King decided that playing the guitar is what he would do for the rest of life. He first played on street corners “for dimes.”

After both his parents died, he eventually made his way to Memphis and earned himself a spot on the only black-operated station, WDIA. Riley B. became Blues Boy and then B.B. King.

Most of the influences on King’s guitar style came from the older generation of bluesmen: Lonnie Johnson (1899-1970), Blind Lemon Jefferson (1893-1929), T-

Bone Walker (1910-75) and Robert Johnson (1911-38). A friend of his who served in the military in Europe during World War II told him about the Hot Club in Paris where Belgian-born Romani guitarist Django Reinhardt (1910-53) performed. The records his friend brought back impressed King with Reinhardt’s clear guitar style.

King’s mother’s first cousin was Booker (Bukka) White (1909-77), also from an earlier generation, who played slide guitar using a steel blade or bottleneck. King said his fingers were too clumsy to learn to use a slide, but he found another way to incorporate a vibrato into his sound: by shaking his hand while sustaining a note. He was not interested in learning Booker’s style, but he took what he could to make his guitar playing more eloquent and precise.

In late 1951, after initial recording efforts with legendary producer Sam Phillips were met with limited success, King recorded “Three O’Clock Blues” on the RPM Records label. By February 1952, it became his first number one hit on the Rhythm and Blues Hit Parade and thereafter King had a national audience as he began touring.

King recorded more than three dozen studio albums and as many live albums in his career. His artistic approach to music from the beginning was to communicate with people. In several interviews during his lifetime, he referred to his solitary nature and lack of ability to express himself verbally. He had to overcome a childhood stutter. His drive to express himself through his music was and continues to be felt by millions.

King maintained his integrity and humility throughout his life, yet his passion for blues burned every minute. In 2003, he was interviewed in Mike Figgis’ installment (“Red, White and Blues”) of the seven-part PBS documentary “The Blues” on the subject of what the blues was about. His sense of its

universality came across: “Life. Life as we live it today, life as we lived it in the past and life as I believe we’ll live it in the future. It has to do with people. I think that’s one of the reasons the kids picked up on it. It has to do with people, places and things.”

In another public television interview, King described the moment he felt his popularity had reached a new level. Rock promoter Bill Graham had booked him for a 1968 concert at the original Fillmore auditorium in San Francisco. When Graham introduced him to the sold-out house full of mostly young, white people, saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, I bring you the chairman of the board, B. B. King,” he received a standing ovation.

King told the interviewer, “Everybody stood up, and I cried. That was the beginning of it.”

Since that performance, King’s audiences immediately included millions of rock fans, who remained loyal to him over the years. In 1969, he opened for the Rolling Stones on their hugely successful US tour.

King influenced many artists of all genres, including, most notably, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones. Blues performer Buddy Guy paid tribute with an interactive timeline of the life of King.

Eric Clapton, who recorded the album “Riding with the King,” issued a moving tribute on hearing of King’s death: “I just wanted to express my sadness and say thank you to my dear friend B.B. King. I wanted to thank him for all the inspiration and encouragement he gave me as a player over the years and for the friendship that we enjoyed.

“He was a beacon for all of us who loved this kind of music and I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

“If you’re not familiar with his work then I would encourage you to go out and find an album called ‘B.B. King Live at the Regal’ which is where it all really started for me as a young player.”

In that same Figgis documentary, King spoke of the explosion in the popularity of the blues in England: “If it wasn’t for the British musicians and a lot of the white musicians in America we’d still be catching the hell that we caught long before. So thanks to them, thanks to all you guys, you opened doors that I don’t think would have been opened in my lifetime. Thank you very much.”

Readers can find no lack of tributes and links to the

music of B.B. King. There are some notable interviews that provide insight into his passion for the blues and his concern for humanity.

Like every great popular artist, King expressed something in his music more than his individual feelings and fate. He came from one of the most oppressed regions in the US, where he worked in cotton fields as a teenager earning 75 cents a day. That intense history and his love of life stayed with him and found deepening, expanding artistic expression throughout his career. In a 2008 interview with a Jackson, Mississippi journalist, King commented: “And to the young people who don’t think education is important, tell them this: My brain is like a sponge today. I’m interested in anything out there. I want to learn.”

In all his performances—for example, in these renditions of “The Thrill is Gone” from 1971, from the Montreux jazz festival in 1993 and in the duet with the legendary Bobby Blue Bland in 1977—the monumental, unimpeachable character of his personal and musical foundations, rooted in life and the need to express it forever, comes across.



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