

B.B. King – Icon (2011)

Written by bluesever

Saturday, 11 February 2012 15:52 - Last Updated Saturday, 22 August 2020 17:25

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01. *How Blue Can You Get?* 02. *Every Day I Have the Blues* 03. *Don't Answer the Door* 04. *The Thrill Is Gone* 05. *Hummingbird* 06. *Ain't Nobody Home* [play](#) 07. *Chains and Things* 08. *Guess Who* 09. *I Like to Live the Love*

[play](#)

10. *Let the Good Times Roll* 11. *Playin' with My Friends* 12. *I'll Survive*

Blues legend B.B. King has been spending time this year thinking about "The B.B. King That Was." There is his bricks, mortar and memory project down in a Mississippi blues crossroads, his very own B.B. King Museum, which acknowledges his past. And then, his new Geffen Records CD *One Kind Favor* which puts the blues maestro in competition, not with other players, but. himself. "The B.B. King That Was."

The phrase comes from King in conversation with Grammy award winning producer T. Bone Burnett. They had met to discuss ideas for what became *One Kind Favor*, King's first studio recording in three years. Burnett's suggestion, the starting point for the recording, was that King revisit the music he was playing and which influenced him in the 1950s, the beginning of King's extraordinary professional journey that, literally, changed the texture of modern blues playing.

Today King is *The Lion In Winter*, approaching his 83rd birthday in September, still a force of nature with a work schedule - and ethic - that might qualify him as the country's most active senior.

But, as he admits, there has been a transformation over the decades: to his voice, his playing,

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his evolution as a musician. "The B.B. King That Was" is a different blues animal from the 2008 version, "The B.B. King That Is."

King, who first started recording in 1949, considered the idea of returning to his 1950s persona very carefully before deciding, in the end, that Yes, you could go home again. "Times and the music have changed so much but those old records still sound pretty good," he admits. To make sure the process worked, Burnett and King replicated the kind of blues band King had back in the day (Since 1955 King has always carried his own band on the road, on his payroll). Studio conditions of the time were reproduced (Burnett, as always, obsessive about how sound sounds). Recording was live in studio with King's voice and guitar up front, lots of single string runs from the master, call and response from guitar and the horn section congregation. Included were Dr. John (Mac Rebennack) night tripping away on New Orleans piano, go-to session bass player Nathan East (Eric Clapton, etc) on stand up acoustic bass and equally in-demand drummer Jim Keltner (Beatles, Stones, etc) bringing the best of his r&b chops to the occasion.

Said King afterwards: "It was one of the most relaxed sessions I've had in a long time. As I read in the Bible, one on one accord. It didn't seem like we were working, like we were creating. It was like it was already there. Everybody was ready for it. Half of us had never heard the tunes but we got right into it."

"I was surrounded by a lot of my favorite people. Dr. John is a lifelong friend. Nobody like the Doc. He seems to just read my mind. T. Bone has the know how, don't mind letting you be yourself. Like a blind man, if he's walking a straight line you don't really have to hold his arm. But if he starts to move either way, you have to straighten him out. T. Bone produces that way."

The search for King's musical genealogy actually traveled further back than the 1950s. After presenting King with a 200 song list from which to pick the final 12, Burnett noted: "We went to the beginning of the last century to find the songs he used to do. Records he loved when he was growing up." A literally true statement. The CD's title is taken from the first single, "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," recorded by Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1927. B.B. King first heard it on his Aunt Mimy Stells' console Victrola (a wind-up gramophone) when he was probably around 14 years old. Impact was immediate and lasting. As King told writer Stanley Dance: "I had a young aunt who was just like the teenagers of today - you know, buying all the popular records. And that's how I heard blues people like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lonnie Johnson and Robert Johnson. Out of her record collection, Blind Lemon came to be one of the guys who would stay with me all the time."

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Other influentials represented on One Kind Favor include virtuoso guitar player and singer, the aforementioned Lonnie Johnson and Texas musician Aaron T Bone Walker, who is most represented on the CD with four titles. "I used to try my best to play like Lonnie Johnson and T Bone Walker and I could never really make it," King once explained. "My fingers just wouldn't do it. Say I had stupid fingers. But if I could have copied them I would have. Instead I just got ideas from them."

King finds it easy to recall the moments of epiphany that changed him. T Bone Walker, for instance, the musician who truly introduced the blues to the electric guitar and electric guitarists to the blues. "I can still hear T Bone in my mind today from the first record I heard, around '43 or '44. I tried my best to get that sound, especially in the late 40s and early 50s. He made me so that I just knew I had to go out and get an electric guitar," King once remarked.

The names found within the music of One Kind Favor read like an honor roll of American blues. The Mississippi Sheiks ("Sitting On Top of the World" -1930, "The World Is Gone Wrong" -1931), unknown today but a blues/country/string/hokum band from the very early 1930s, of considerable popularity in their time. "Backwater Blues," written and recorded in 1927 by "Empress of the Blues," Bessie Smith, has King giving a nod to the version by Chicago blues singer, Big Bill Broonzy. Similarly "Blues Before Sunrise," the classic Leroy Carr composition (recorded by him in 1934) pays deference to King contemporary John Lee Hooker's version. The blues information originally obtained by King from these, and other mentors, provided him with the tools to equal and overtake them and to change the modern blues landscape.

B.B. King's trip back to the future for One Kind Favor also overlaps with events soon to take place in the small town of Indianola (pop 12,066 at last count) in Sunflower Co., Miss. where "The B.B. King That Was" will be fully on display. It is the town where he grew up. On September 10, he will officially open the B.B. King Museum and Delta

Interpretive Center, a \$12 Million, 18,000 square foot facility on 23 acres, designed to honor King's life work and the cultural heritage of Mississippi Delta blues. It houses the museum itself, full of animated, narrated exhibits including B.B. King Memorabilia and awards (such as his ES-345 Gibson guitars - Lucille! - and 14 Grammy Awards) and a theatre with a 180 degree screen. Everything is built around a "ginnery," a restored brick cotton gin mill, the last one in Mississippi, Which must be a weird feeling for King because this is the cotton mill where the very young Riley B. King worked.

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King is proud of the fact that half of the \$12 million was raised through private donation, an astonishing feat for a small Mississippi town but proof of the esteem in which its most famous native son is held. There's a B.B. King Blvd and a Lucille Str. In town. "In the Delta they think B.B. King can walk on water!" said one resident. Contributing to The B.B. King Museum are companies that have previously been involved in design and construction of the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame, the Smithsonian Institution. and the Tokyo Disneyland! The B.B. King Museum will also be a central part of a proposed Mississippi Blues Trail, Similar to the Civil War Trail, this ambitious project will highlight the many sites connected to blues history in the state. Says King: "That seems right. Mississippi gave America the blues, now the blues is giving back. in tourist dollars!"

Details of his Museum, final touches to the One Kind Favor CD, plus the release of "B.B. King Live," a Geffen/UMe DVD set (with CD) that, for the first time, documents a complete B.B. King concert performance. all have kept him busy. Nonetheless he's still doing what he has always done for 60 years. Namely, get on the bus, head down the road to the latest gig. King doesn't have to do it. His manager of 40 years Floyd Lieberman notes that, when King turned 60, he was financially secure. "He doesn't have to work," says Lieberman.

But he does work. Big time. The William Morris Agency reports that demand for B.B. King has never been stronger, all over the world. (King has performed in 90 countries during his professional lifetime). The musician who started off in the late 1940s playing juke joints, tobacco barns and any hole-in-the-wall club that would have him, all for nickels and dimes, now gets top dollar headlining festivals, huge stadiums and big city concert halls. However, at 82, he has slowed a little. This is a musician who once clocked a total of 342 one nighters. In one single year! (If today's gas prices existed then, his career would have been killed on the spot!). Today, after an estimated lifetime total of 10,000 gigs, King has slowed down a notch, to around 150 and done in some comfort. King still prefers to travel by road, but his bus does have a dressing room - allowing him to move from bus to stage door all tux'd and ready to play - and space for all King's techno and recording gadgets.

But B.B. King is The Lion In Winter. In his seventh decade as a performer, revered and idolized, having seen the blues - his blues - cross over as mainstream music. And the only Presidential Medal of Honor winner rated as one of the greatest guitarist of all time (Rolling Stone) does us all one kind favor by remaining in and at the top of his game.

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