

Well, I've been around a long time,
I've really paid my dues.

B.B. KING



His Gibson guitar is red, he's black, and his love is the blues. B.B. King is his name, and people today run out of words in trying to describe him and the level of his art. He's called "Bossman of the Blues" and "King of the Blues" and "A Living Legend" and "The Idol of the 'Now' Generation" and on and on.

Sell-out crowds give him standing ovations at performances all over the country. College-age audiences seem particularly captivated by the honesty and clarity of his message. A lot of them are curious about what B.B. was doing before his zoom to success.



He was doing the same thing then as now—playing the blues as no other man ever has. B.B. King's long overdue general recognition came "overnight," after a "day before" which was about 20 years long. A new generation of black and white youngsters discovered him in late 1968 and 1969. Before that he had been keeping up a gruelling pace of one-nighters, mostly in urban ghetto

clubs and theaters and in smoky southern roadhouses. In 1956 he somehow managed to survive 342 one-night stands.

The big wave rolled for B.B. when people started getting round-about exposure to his guitar style through the playing of artists like Larry Coryell, Eric Clapton and Mike Bloomfield. B.B.'s "debut" came in 1966 at San Francisco's Fillmore Auditorium. The enthusiasm he generated there propelled him to Europe and a full schedule of festival and college concert dates. The environment had changed, the complexion of audiences was different—but B.B.'s blues remained as pure as ever.

Interviewed by *Time Magazine* in 1969, B.B. said, "People are starting to go with me. I think it's because they know I'm not kidding out there. Blues is the message, and they're getting it."

His message in blues is bold and in language not meant to be misunderstood. He writes the words for about 60 per cent of his songs.

B.B. was born as Riley King 45 years ago on a plantation between Indianola and Itta Bena, Mississippi. When he was four years old his parents separated; at nine his mother was dead and he lived on a farm where he worked as a milkboy and general hand. His employers let him go to school during the rainy season or when work was slack, and B.B. managed to get through the ninth grade.

A preacher uncle taught him to sing and play the guitar for church services when B.B. was about 14 years old. Soon after that he bought his first guitar (a red one) for \$8. In 1947 he headed for Memphis ("to a Mississippian like me, it was like going to Europe"), where he landed a job as a disk jockey and singer on the Negro-staffed radio station WDIA. He announced himself to his listeners as "The Boy from Beale Street." That quickly changed to "The Beale Street Blues Boy," then to "Blues Boy"—and finally to B.B. People listened to him and liked what they heard. His radio show expanded to 2¼ hours daily, and he began playing one-nighters in the Memphis area.

But the blues had a stigma. Blacks and whites alike considered it to be "dirty" music, and many wouldn't give it or the people who played and sang it a chance. The blues performers were touchy, too.

In 1949, B.B. recorded Lowell Fulson's "Three O'Clock Blues" for RPM Records. It was his first hit and climbed to the top of the rhythm and blues charts in 1950, and stayed there for 18 weeks. For the next few years he traveled, stopping first in Little Rock and later in Nashville. He also continued to cut records, took on a heavy load of one-night stands and attained a high artistic standing (largely among blacks) during the so-called "blues revival" of the late 1940's and early 1950's.

It was during one of his one-night stands in the sticks—in Twist, Arkansas—that B.B. found his first Lucille (the name he's given to all of his guitars since then). It all started when two men

started fighting in the club in which B.B. was playing and singing. A kerosene stove was knocked over, fire started spreading in the frame structure and everyone made fast steps for the nearest door. Safely outside, B.B. suddenly remembered that he'd left his guitar behind, and dashed back. He grabbed the guitar and made it out again just as the place caved in (killing two other men). He later learned that the fight was started over a woman named Lucille, and decided to give that name to his guitar—to remind myself never to do anything that foolish again."

Just as many younger performers today look to B.B. King for inspiration and style, B.B. doesn't hesitate to acknowledge the influences that other, older musicians have had on him.

"The blues became a part of me early on from Blind Lemon Jefferson and Leroy Carr. I heard them on records. I heard Lonnie Johnson, too, and I idolized him.

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