


'The Way I Play Is the Way I Play'

By Aaron Cohen

HALL OF FAME & BLUES ARTIST
B.B. KING



One afternoon about nine years ago, B.B. King spent an hour speaking over the phone about his music, his career and a few of his colleagues. By that point, King had already received a wealth of accolades. Around that time, his hometown of Indianola, Mississippi, began construction of the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center. And this was after the blues icon had become a Kennedy Center honoree, regular visitor to the White House and recipient of numerous international awards. Now, he can claim another lifetime achievement prize as the most recent inductee into the DownBeat Hall of Fame.

King, 89, did not come to these honors easily. Born into a family of Delta sharecroppers, King has seen countless changes in the American social fabric. His music has influenced different idioms for generations while he has fronted orchestras and enthralled audiences with just his guitar ("Lucille," she's called) and voice. Still, as cheerfully loquacious as King is during a conversation, he'd be the last one to explain why he has become the most famous name in a genre that spans more than a century.

"I heard once that you can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy," King said in 2005. "So here I am, 79 years old, and I'm still country. But good taste is good taste."

That could sum up King's longevity and his winning formula: Think up an indelible sound, stick with it, work hard and remain cheerful. But there's much more to his enduring music and how he has refined it ever since he was growing up in the South. He looked for whatever ideas he could find from whatever environment he found himself in—whether in the rural churches that surrounded him while he was growing up, the "juke joints" of Indianola that he sneaked into as a kid, the jazz big bands he encountered on the touring circuit or legions of rock musicians who idolized him. He has considered each of these influences, seen what works and what doesn't for himself, and continues to pass these lessons on to younger students.

A wealth of narratives have chronicled King's life, such as Charles Sawyer's 1980 biography, *The Arrival of B.B. King*, and Jon Brewer's recent documentary, *B.B. King: The Life of Riley* (MVD Visual). His early years in the Sanctified church left a considerable impression—not only because that's where he received his first guitar lessons from pastor Archie Fair, but gospel elements such as call-and-response vocals and pushing a congregation toward an emotional catharsis have always been a part of his music, even if his lyrics are not so overtly devout. A 2005 collection of memorabilia, *The B.B. King Treasures* (Bullfinch), includes a 1948 photo of the guitarist with his first group, the Famous St. John Gospel Singers. While King's affinity for such jazz and blues guitarists as Charlie Christian, Lonnie Johnson and T-Bone Walker has been mentioned in numerous bios, his influences also include horn players and bandleaders dating back to the swing era.

"Benny Goodman should be praised a lot more than he is," King said. "He was one of the first to integrate his band, and one of the first to play good dance and swing music. They didn't say it wrong when they said swing, because he could sure do it."

When King moved to Memphis in 1947, he became even more open-minded. In addition to meeting up with his cousin Bukka White, King dove into work at radio stations, especially the influential WDIA, which served as a crucial voice for African Americans across the region. He played whatever he saw fit but eventually became identified with one particular idiom that earned him the nickname "Blue Boy" King. He started recording in the late 1940s, but the 2003 compilation *The Chronological B.B. King: 1949–1952* (Classics) shows that financial success was not immediate. Despite an unmistakably crisp guitar attack, surprisingly mature singing voice and a few musicians (notably Ike Turner) advocating on his behalf, it took until 1952 for King to hit it big with "3 O'Clock Blues."

That song made King an r&b star and emphasized his skills at writing succinct tunes that showed off his facility at bringing together blues and more popular idioms. But these early and mid-'50s records also established the guitar technique that he's kept up through today. His forearm stretches the strings to create a vibrato while his fingers effortlessly run through single-note lines. "I never tried to advance on [the technique]," King said. "I try to advance on progressions and stuff like that, but I never try to advance on the vibrato. It's like breathing. It comes natural. I do it whether I want to do it or not."

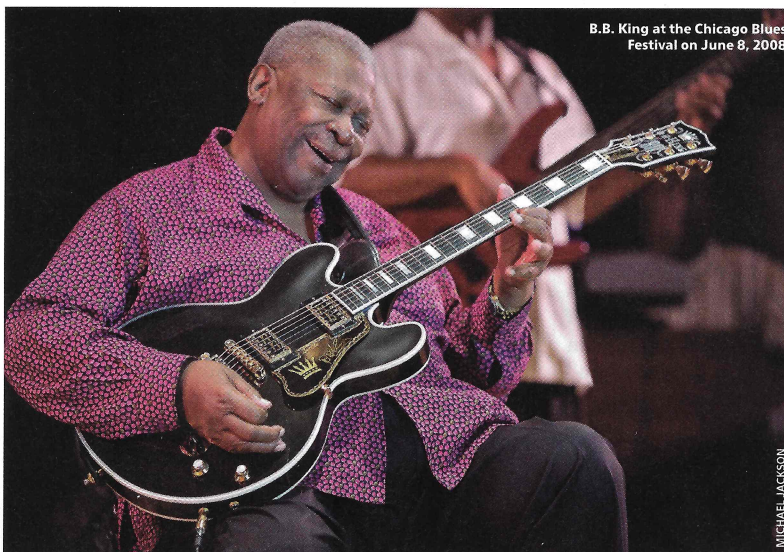
King has always had the sense to absorb from a community of talent. In 1950s Memphis, he hung out, and occasionally performed with, such legends as Bobby "Blue" Bland and Junior Parker (Elvis Presley may have been their biggest fan). But to hear the self-effacing King tell it in *The Life of Riley*, he always felt he had to look up to the artists he encountered in this musical city.

"I came to Memphis and heard those other

guys play," King said in the documentary. "I felt I was nothing, not much. I'm still like that today."

A few years later, when King began singing such big band tunes as "Everyday I Have The Blues," he enlisted members of the Count Basie Orchestra. King also worked with the brilliant, if unheralded, arranger Maxwell Davis to make his own small group swing with the force of the big bands he admired. Those late-'50s recordings are available on the disc *B.B. King Wails* (Ace, 2003). But in describing their work together, King emphasizes that simplicity made it all succeed.

"Maxwell Davis was a guy—he didn't need a piano or guitar to write music in his head," King said. "He would just tell you to play the tonic note, 'You play C, you play G,' and so on and so forth. When you'd hear it, you wouldn't believe it, and he'd be writing it down just as fast as he'd be talking about it. He was one of a kind. Most people who write blues usually jazz it up or don't put enough in it, or too much in it. But Maxwell was a recipe; he was just right."



The records created with Davis, and King's constant touring, helped make him a hero in predominantly African American communities. One landmark study in ethnomusicology, Charles Keil's 1966 book *Urban Blues*, describes how King was perceived as the voice of these communities. An equally important document remains King's classic 1964 performance recording, *B.B. King Live At The Regal*. His spoken-word intervals and the way his voice leaps above his piercing guitar lines on "Sweet Little Angel" remain a marvel—though some credit is also due to his feisty drummer back then, Sonny Freeman.

Not far from where *Live At The Regal* was recorded, white blues musicians on Chicago's South Side—especially Paul Butterfield and Michael Bloomfield—included King in their pantheon of heroes. King's more devoted followers also included many of the British rock guitarists who emerged in the mid-1960s. Music historians have written frequently about how the support of popular British rockers helped older blues players like King cross over to a large white audience. King's response to this has always been interesting. While he's appreciated the support from these

prominent artists, his own singing and guitar sound have stuck to his own elemental principles. At the same time, he also acknowledges the influence that these rockers have had on others working in the blues idiom.

"One of the things that helped the blues were the different progressions that people like John Mayall and Cream and all those groups brought from Europe," King said. "The way they were playing what they did—I never even thought you can use some of those progressions and make the blues sound good, but they did it and a lot of the guys, even Albert King, used those types of progressions in the latter parts of their career. I never used them, but they sound good."

King achieved his greatest commercial success by recording a version of Roy Hawkins' minor-key blues "The Thrill Is Gone" in 1969 with help from producer Bill Szymczyk, who suggested they add a string section (the song appears on King's album *Completely Well*). He recalls that this song's popular ascendancy resulted from his

determination, open mind, group dynamic and timing.

"I had the lyrics for a long time because I heard it from the guy who wrote it, Roy Hawkins," King said. "When I rewrote it and changed the lyrics, I could still hear the sound, the tone, from him. I kept that song around in my pocket for three or four years. Every time I tried to record it, it didn't sound right. But that night in New York, I had Gerald Jemmott on bass, Paul Harris on keyboard,

Hugh McCracken on guitar and Herbert Lovelle on drums. The minute we started, I knew it was it, then. We did that tune, several others, and finished at 4 in the morning. I told Bill that it really came out good. He said, 'Yes, it's nice, but so-and-so is better.' I said, 'I'm not going to argue with you, you're the producer, but I know it's a good record. I don't know how to make hits, but I do know how to make a good record and I know that this is a good record.' I was living in New York and I went to bed, and I got a call from Bill—he was a young guy—and said, 'B?' I said [*affects tired voice*], 'Yeah?' I didn't want to talk. He said, 'It is a good tune. If I put some strings on it, it'll go pop.' I said, 'What the hell is that?' He said, 'Well, do you mind if I put strings on?' Sure enough, he got a guy to write some parts. When he got ready to do it, I went down and it really did enhance the song. It was at the right time, and I was able to get the right people behind it. Music today is politics. If you can get them to play it across the board, you got a chance to make a hit or good-selling record. He was able to do it. He put that machine together and made it happen."

King has generally positioned himself to be

above any political or sectarian divisions (although he enthusiastically embraced Barack Obama's presidential candidacy onstage at the Chicago Blues Festival in 2008). So while America and other countries have experienced significant social turmoil since the late 1960s, King has remained beloved across a wide demographic. He sounded at home performing in prisons (recorded on his *Live In Cook County Jail* in 1971) but also became the go-to blues musician for television programs, from talk shows to *Sanford and Son*. Vintage interview clips included on *Life of Riley* reaffirm how King's knowledge and geniality made him the ideal spokesperson for the blues during the '70s and '80s. King toured the world so frequently that he still talks about being able to teach a course in geography. This included following in the footsteps of jazz ambassadors like Louis Armstrong and Dave Brubeck who brought America's music behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.

"I first thought when I went to the Soviet Union in 1979 that they would have great musicians in classical music, but I heard musicians playing jazz and one musician playing blues," King said. "I wish I could have brought him back with me, but that was a time when they wouldn't even let him get close to the airplane when we were getting on. I remember once we came through East Berlin and had a German guy who was a tour manager, and his brother was a musician in East Berlin, and the people in authority wouldn't even let him talk to his brother. I thought that was sad. That was the one thing I admire the United States for. We can't go to war without fighting some of our own people, meaning we've got people from all over the world here in the United States. And we live, we make it."

In more recent years, King's continued interactions with artists around the planet have not only kept his own profile elevated, but also lent him more avenues to examine, even while he retains the approach that has suited him for decades.

"Every one is playing something I wish I can play," King said. "They just come up with ideas that I wonder what was happening in my head. But it's a different world today. The things they sing about, a lot of them I guess are just things I never thought of. Not *guess*; I *know* it is. The world is different. I'm learning from them."

Part of what King has been learning is based in technology: "The computer is my tutor," he said. "There's a [software] company named Cakewalk. I read music, but I'm very slow. I also compose, but I'm not the best at it. The computer makes it easy for me. Whatever I pluck on my guitar, I plug it into my computer and it prints it out for me. Also, it helps with songwriting. Most of the things a general musician would try to do, the computer is a big help. Since I didn't finish high school, it's a big help. I don't use any gadgets on the guitar. I did one album, *Lucille Talks Back* [in 1975], which is the only one where I had a Cry Baby pedal type thing. I loved the sound of it, but it seemed to take away from what I was trying to do. It was too easy to make sounds of that kind, and I couldn't execute like I figured I should, so I never used another one."

While King's sound is identified with the Gibson he has played for years, he also insisted that a musician's instrument remains secondary when it comes to forming an artistic personality.

"Some people think it's the type of guitar I play," King said. "But it's not that. I could get yours, anybody else's, and still get the same sound. An

old piano can sit in the corner, and if Elton John played it, he'd sound like himself. If Ray Charles played it, he'd sound like himself. Whoever played it would sound like themselves. Same thing with the guitar. The way I play is the way I play."

That was a lesson that King shared with young students during a workshop he visited during his return to Indianola in 2005. Afterwards, the blues legend mentioned that he appreciates when students look up to him, but he suggested that through education they can find their own voice and possibly have an easier path than his own.

"We got a lot of young people, especially young black people who like rap," King said. "I've got nothing against rap. Many [rappers] are very talented. But when they talk about women in a negative way, that's the part I don't like. What I'm trying to say in so many words is, there's no kind of music that I hear where I don't like some of it. I tell a lot of the musicians, especially when I'm doing workshops, that everybody has idols. I had, still have, and I've never been able to play like any of them. But if I were going to town and looking for musicians, I wouldn't want them to play like me, Eric Clapton, or whoever. I want them to play the music. If I wanted me, I'd get me. I like for them to play, be themselves, and that's what I like."

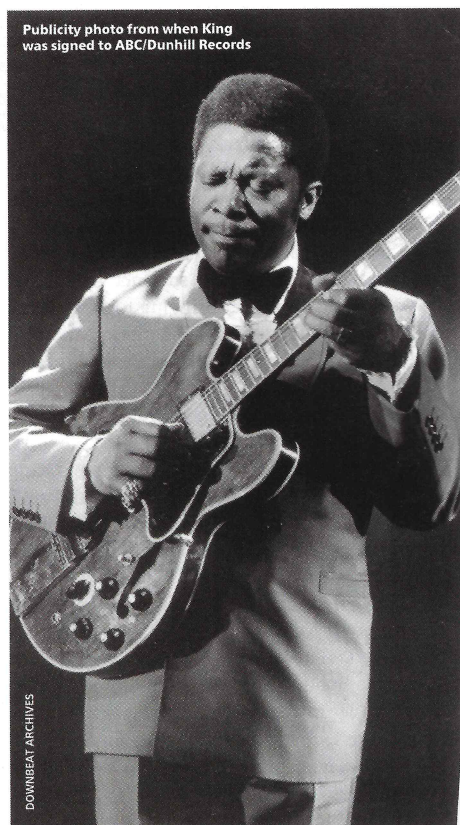
"And that's what they're doing at a lot of music schools. That's why I advise all musicians, 'Get yourself a teacher. If you can't afford to go to Berklee, get you a teacher.' Here's one thing: People who have done like I did, we made some popularity, we did pretty good, but we always had to do what I call trial and error. You try something, and if it doesn't sound right, you try something else. But it takes so long to do that. When a good teacher can tell you, it's like crossing a pond on a boat: You can go from A to B."

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Onstage in Nice, France, in 1983, the year King released *Blues 'N' Jazz*

JOS L. KNAEPEN



Publicity photo from when King was signed to ABC/Dunhill Records

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