



The Life of Riley

B.B. King
(**Jon Brewer**, director)

MVD Visual - MVD6345D (DVD)

Available from [MVD Entertainment Group](#).

A review written for the Folk & Acoustic Music Exchange
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B.B. King has had honors accorded him that only the rare few on this planet will ever come to enjoy. He's also had his ass kicked upside-down and sideways because he was born into Black skin and thus came to know the all too prevalent underside of basic human nature from birth. *The Life of Riley* spares no commentary on both sides of the equation and thus proves to be a very informative and balanced look at one of America's foremost bluesmen. Somehow, amid all tumult and misfortunes, King has retained his drive, his humility, his integrity, and his creativity. I have no clue how anyone who had to go through what he endured, what so many Black Americans endured (and still all too largely do), can manage to accomplish that. Had I been born Black, I'd've been a Stokeley Carmichael type, non-stop vocally blasting the bejeezus out of the gawdawful proliferation of asshole Whites and probably soon dead because of it. I guess I can count my fortunes in that. So can a lot of us.

Riley, which is King's true first name (Riley B. King), spares few grimaces as it documents the times in which B.B., born to plantation worker parents little more than slaves, came up. At age 5, he saw his parents split apart, neither claiming him as he went to be raised by his maternal grandmother, bless her soul. The documentary, however, does not lightly skip over the country's malignantly bigoted ways, ensuring the viewer gets an eyeeful and understands just how indomitable a personality King truly has been and still is. One of the main points of illustration is the guitar player's inexhaustible energy and work ethic.

The hardest working man in rock 'n roll was James Brown? **Bullshit.** It was and still is B.B. King. All honor to James for his outrageous self, but the proof is in the truth, and that's plainly laid out here. King would literally tour 365 days a year. How in hell he managed that, I don't know. I'd'a pulled a damn heart attack and croaked standing up in my shoes, but this guy just kept at it and at it and at it. And pretty please, y'all, do not give me that "Welllllll, James was rock 'n roll and B.B. was blues!" nonsense 'cause Brother James was hardbitten soul and driving funk, and no rock and roller was doing what he was doing, not even close. Thus, nitpicking semantics will avail thee naught. B.B. King, as far as I've been able to determine, holds the record as the hardest working man in music, period, any music, bar none. Riley's just always been too humble and respectful to contend with any of the mercantile gibbering frantically placing the crown on others' heads.

Go ahead, try to disprove me. I dare ya.

The bulk of this film is indeed documentary. You get precious little in the way of performance footage, and that was a very wise decision by director Jon Brewer. The backstory to the catalogue of King's prolific career is of main import here, and the panoply of biggies providing commentary couldn't agree more: Eric Clapton, John Mayall, Joe Walsh, Bonnie Raitt, Bono, Leon Russell, Carlos Santana, Bobby Bland, Bruce Willis, Ringo Starr, Buddy Guy, narrator Morgan Freeman, and many others. From 1948, when King first commenced performing, to this very day, over SIX decades of hard work, King has provided inspiration, grooves, fun, git-down, and a unique blues sound to legions upon legions upon legions of fans world-wide.

The film also makes evident something that I learned a couple decades ago, but which floored me when I heard it straight out of King's mouth: he doesn't play chords, only lead lines. Upon hearing that, my face went pale—and it's difficult for an Irish guy's mug to go even more lily white than it already is—as my mind raced back over the many songs I'd heard of his, realizing I'd never tumbled to the fact yet it had been right there in front of me all the while. It was a revelation and simultaneously doubled my respect for a man always honest about himself but also clever as hell in overcoming creative shortcomings.

B.B. also confesses with a small smile to his long-term womanizing and other "defects" (hmmm, digging wimmens with a voracious appetite is a foible???; where do I sign up for that flaw?) but, like Andres Segovia, never fails to minimize his artfulness, wishing he'd done more in his life (as if that's even possible!) and advanced his craft yet further. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a true artist. You can forget all the howling, chestbeating, caterwauling media figures strutting and posturing their hour on the stage, that's all mercantilist hype. Instead, in that one brief humble moment, King revealed what it is to be a real artist, for the creative mind that becomes even just a little too satisfied with its own product begins to cease to be artistic.

The film is two full hours long and then you get a couple of recent (2011) concert clips (a Royal Albert Hall gig) as well as a number of extended interviews as bonuses. In other words, Mr. Brewer made sure he packed everything in that he could, and you get your money's worth (hey, it's a goddamned capitalist world, ain't it?, so I laud those who do it right). But if you think you knew

B.B. King before ***Life of Riley***, well I'm here to tell you there's even more you didn't, and there's only one way to cure that deficit. I've already taken the remedy. Now it's your turn.

Oh, and Matt Greenham did a killer job editing: 100%, dead nuts, picture perfect, on the money pacing, just like a masterfully arranged song.

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