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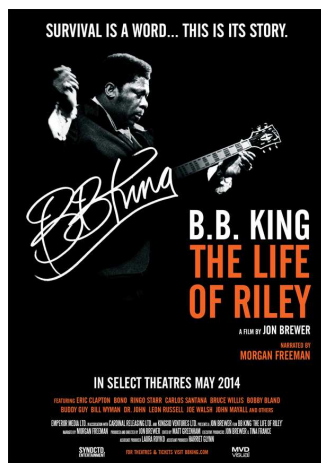
Columns

Monday, May 26, 2014

B.B. King: The Life of Riley (May 27th at Tower City Cinemas)

[B. B. KING: THE LIFE OF RILEY screens Tuesday May 27th at 7:30 pm at Tower City Cinemas - 1 showing only!.]

Review by Pete Roche



We've all seen pauper-to-prince tales of rock and roll glory depicted in documentaries and concert films on the big screen, but few guitarists boast more humble beginnings than B.B. King.

Born in 1948 in a rickety plantation cabin outside Berclair, Mississippi, the man now known as The King of Blues first had to overcome poverty and racism before conquering the world with his booming voice and signature guitar style. Now, for the first time ever, B.B. gets the "behind the music" treatment in a new film by director Jon Brewer, who helmed similar features about British rockers like Yes and Moody Blues.

Narrated by *The Electric Company's* uber-cool "Easy Reader" Morgan Freeman, the biopic traces the life of the man born Riley B. King from humble beginnings in a segregated post-war South to his domination in both

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blues and pop music. Struggle, survival, and salvation emerge as recurring themes as Brewer calls on eyewitness testimony from B.B.'s friends, family members, and former band mates about the oppression the entertainer faced coming up in an America where blacks and whites just didn't mix. Also chiming in are dozens of white rockers who attest to King's brilliance and note how second-generation musicians in the United States got received their first blues lessons vis-à-vis their British counterparts in the 1960's.

Complementing Freeman's discourse and B.B.'s first-hand accounts are a slew of old images, archive footage, and sepia-tone recreations of young Riley's days growing up in the Delta. We learn how the boy shuffled from one shack to the next under his grandmother's care, and how he toiled six days a week (for eighteen long years) plowing fields and picking cotton on Cartledge Farm. He gravitated toward music as a church choirboy, taking to heart Professor Luther H. Henson's lessons on treating one's body like a temple. And when a benevolent boss fronted the \$15.00 needed to purchase his first guitar, B.B. dutifully paid the money back.

After spending some time with his father (who called him "Jack") and his step-siblings, B.B. started busking in town on Saturday nights, earning the nickname "Blues Boy." Undeterred by naysayers, he frequently entered talent contests in hopes of winning the \$1 cash prize, which would get him through the week.

Sisters and second cousins report that the guitarist never held racism's institutionalism against any one white man. Despite having seen a lynching himself, B.B. was blessed by having a black "rider" supervise his work on the farms. And when a freak tractor accident prompted flight to Memphis, B.B. eventually returned "with his tail between his legs" to his white employer, who forgave him.

B.B. makes a name for himself as a singer and guitarist in the Famous St. John's Gospel Singers and tested his first marriage to Martha King with his tour schedule. In a stroke of luck, he played a gig originally meant for Sonny Boy Williamson—who encouraged him to get a job in radio. While working as a disc jockey at the black-operated WDIA, B.B. cut his first jingle for Pep-Ti-Kon tonic and sharpened his skills in Robert Lockwood Jr.'s band. A fortuitous arrangement between Nashville's Bullet Records and Chicago's famous Chess label enabled B.B. to record his first single, "3 O'Clock Blues."

The middle of the film follows B.B. and friends on the "chitlin circuit" in a custom bus. B.B.'s record deal afforded new equipment and guitars—one of which King nicknamed "Lucille," after the woman who prompted an incendiary bar fight between two men (who died in the blaze). B.B. couldn't quite master the slide guitar technique practiced by his heroes, but his efforts lent his notes a distinct twang. That trebly vibrato would define B.B.'s sound, and the cast of rockers appearing in the film repeatedly swear they can identify B.B. after hearing "just one note."

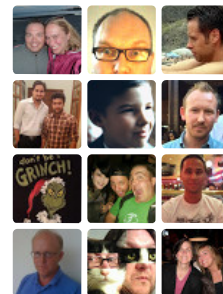
As the '50s give way to the '60s, B.B. is nearly killed in a Birmingham hotel bombing meant for Dr. Martin Luther King. His band often eats boxed lunches on the bus because they're not allowed inside most restaurants. One failed marriage gives way to the next, with King making a tour stop in Detroit so Reverend Franklin (Aretha's father) could officiate (then, on to Cleveland!). In hindsight, B.B. recognizes women—the "angels of the Earth"—as his kryptonite:

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Why So Blu? (Cleveland based blu ray reviews and more)

"I've been called a womanizer and other things," he reflects. "I guess most of it is true."

Unable to fork up the \$25,000 needed to keep the burgeoning star on his label, entrepreneur Joe Bihari loses B.B. to ABC Paramount, where he tracks his first successful albums. Before long, young white boys across the pond are singing the praises of the guys who inspired B.B.—bluesmen like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf—and reinterpret their 12-bar brilliance in an amplified rock context.

"Freddie King inspired Eric Clapton, Albert King inspired Mick Taylor, and B.B. King inspired Peter Green," says Bluesbreakers founder John Mayall.

Receiving an unexpected push from the likes of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Cream, Jimi Hendrix, and Led Zeppelin, B.B. and his black contemporaries are suddenly able to play in swanky venues for predominantly white audiences. Rolling Stones bassist Bill Wyman recounts telling a U.S. taxi driver to take the band into "bad" neighborhoods just so they could snatch up the blues records they'd been missing out on back home.

Sensing magic in the air, producer Bill Szymczyk convinced B.B. to record a couple albums with a studio band, and then took the unprecedented step of adding orchestral strings on the finished product. "The Thrill Is Gone" thrust B.B. squarely into the mainstream—and he's been touring even since.

The film leapfrogs through the '70s, '80s, and '90s, glossing over highlights like London sessions (with Ringo Starr and Joe Sample) and a tour with U2 (behind their "When Love Comes to Town" collaboration) simply because there's too much ground for Brewer (or anyone) to cover in a single film. Irish superstar Bono confesses he felt "like a girl" singing alongside beefy B.B., and that the more U2 tried emulating the bluesman, the less convincing they were.

The bevy of notable commentators includes Joe Walsh, Carlos Santana, Peter Green, Walter Trout, Bonnie Raitt, Derek Trucks, Susan Tedeschi, Jonny Lang, George Benson, Buddy Guy, John Mayer, Joe Bonamassa, Johnny Winter, Bruce Willis (!?), Keith Richards, Mick Taylor, and Eric Clapton—with whom B.B. recorded in 2000. We check in on major concert events and special appearances at Royal Albert Hall and The White House, watch as B.B. gifts a guitar to the Holy Pontiff, and tag along for an annual "homecoming" at Indianola, Mississippi, where The B.B. King Museum now stands. We get the business end from managers and accountants, but the heart and soul of the film derives from talk of B.B.'s nine-decade journey, from shanty digs and a broken bicycle to silk suits and global recognition—Rock and Roll Hall of Fame honors, and multiple Grammy nods.

The vicarious lessons and total immersion into the man behind the music make **LIFE OF RILEY** a must-see documentary for all blues aficionados and self-respecting rock connoisseurs.

3 out of 4 stars.

View the **LIFE OF RILEY** trailer here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=IQhkpmEd3Fo

Posted by [Peter M. Roche](#) at 12:00 AM



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