

The keys to King: B.B. King - 'The Life of Riley' (review)



Kent



Marcus Singletary

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The B.B. King documentary film 'The Life of Riley' seeks to portray the musician as something other than a blues legend, and when Bono, for all practical purposes, calls King a 'shaman,' the purification is complete.

In the 21st Century, the effectiveness of B.B. King's performances has veered all over the map, and critics have panned his appearances as incoherent

- an observation that conflicts with the reputation King has built, over nine decades of non-stop road work. His first hit, '3 O' Clock Blues,' appeared in 1951, 'The Thrill is Gone' in 1969 and, by 2006, few peers remained to tell the tale. Willing participants, though, include Robert Jr. Lockwood, drummer Bernard Purdie, and Rufus 'Walking the Dog' Thomas; each watched King grow into the 'King of the Blues' from his humble beginnings as someone who, according to Thomas, could barely comprehend the importance of the bass instrument to the overall scheme of music.

King marvels at the recognition of rudimentary musical skills, but his wonderment is tempered by awe from the likes of Eric Clapton, Jonny Lang, Susan Tedeschi, and both Mick Taylor and Bill Wyman of the Rolling Stones; each attests to the simplicity of King's approach and, while the white musicians that turn up in King's honor focus squarely on his single-note guitar leads (with the lone exception of former Bad Company/Free frontman

Paul Rodgers), nearly all African-Americans who appear are in general agreement that his voice remains his main asset. They could be right, as one of King's early album titles, *B.B. King Wails*, clearly attempts to capitalize upon that sole facet of his presentation. Key to King's vocalizations is an approach most suitable for gospel music - ironic, in that King's career trajectory was built around the struggle of African-Americans to infuse secular music (shunned by the religious community of the era) with traditionalist gospel overtones.

Even though B.B. King is revered as a highly influential musician - mostly due to the recognizability of the vibrato of his lead guitar lines, he is admittedly a limited one, and that is the ultimate dichotomy of King's legend. He informs the members of U2, before recording 'When Love Comes to Town,' that he cannot play any actual guitar chords, and it becomes clear that King was able, through the sheer force of both hard work and an affable personality, to latch onto the right agents, managers, and record producers once mainstream America was more accepting of black entertainers. As one of the very few African-American performers featured on television during the era of 'I-Spy' and 'Julia,' King deserves to be remembered as a true American success story - albeit one whose myth is not quite as 'self-made' as many may assume.

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