

ENTERTAINMENT

HAPPENINGS

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B.B. KING

The legendary B.B. King returns to Portland for a one night performance on Friday, January 25, 1980, at 8:00 p.m. in the Paramount Theatre.

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

B.B. was born as Riley King 53 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 2 1/4 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. "It was like a practice they used to have in the South," said B.B., "if a family had a child born with something wrong with it. They would build a little shack out back behind the house and that person would live out his whole life there, being fed and taken care of, but never being seen by anybody else. It wasn't that they didn't love him, but that they were afraid other people might not understand or make fun of him. That's the way it was with the blues."

"The things people used to say about those I thought of as greats in the business, the blues singers, used to hurt me. A few whites gave me the blah-blah about blues singers, but mostly it was the Negro people, and that was why it hurt. They just didn't want to be associated with the blues because they thought it was something still 'back there.'"

"To me it wasn't like that. If Nat Cole could sing in night clubs and be a great popular singer; if Frank Sinatra could sing his songs and be a great person; if Mahalia Jackson could sing spirituals and be great—why couldn't I be a blues singer and be great?"

In 1949 B.B. recorded Lowell Fulson's "Three O'Clock Blues" for FPM 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 1940s and early 1950s.

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. Bukka White was another influence on me when I was a boy."

B.B. also remembers the many Chicago-based blues singers who toured the South. "The blues-minded people were mostly those who were born and raised down there," reflected B.B., "and they did more for the artist than the northern cities."

Among his favorite musicians, B.B. puts Kenny Burrell and George Benson ("He made me feel like throwing the guitar away.") In jazz he talks most about Django Reinhardt and Charlie Christian. Back with the blues, he's with T-Bone Walker.

B.B. feels that he can play the blues anytime, in spite of or because of whatever mood he happens to be in. "I have my good and bad nights. Maybe my guitar doesn't sound good to me or the auditorium has bad acoustics. But I love to play, and I give it everything I've got every time I'm on stage."

When he's on stage he also thinks of himself as something of a proselytizer. "I'm trying my best to get people who don't like the blues not to hate them. Maybe I'm just defending what I'm doing, but when I sing and sing—and people don't seem to understand what I'm doing—I almost cry."

Through his chosen art form, B.B. tries to tell people about people as they really are—with their love and hate, hopes and failures, wisdom and folly. Here's what he says in "Paying the Cost to be the Boss:"

I'll drink if I want to, and play a little poker, too,
Don't you say nothing to me, baby, as long as I'm taking care of you,
As long as I'm working and paying all the bills,
I don't want no mouth from you, about the I'm supposed to live.
You must be crazy, woman, you just got to be out of your mind,
As long as I'm footing the bills, I'm paying the cost
to be the boss.

Young whites who have followed rock as far as repetition and volume can take them are looking to blues for freshness. Jerry Greenberg of *Rock Magazine* puts it this way: "Many of them identify with the blacks as an out-group, and many of the blues are direct and personal messages—much more relevant and meaningful than popular songs. They like the way the blues tells it like it is, dealing with recognizable situations in everyday language."

In what ways does B.B. consider his own style distinctive?
"I would think that it would be my vibrato and the way I phrase. My phrasing and using a trill on the left hand are the things I have developed. There weren't many people doing that when I started. My style is from a mixture of people I have idolized, like Blind Lemon, Robert Johnson, T-Bone Walker, Elmore James and Bukka White. Some of them used a slide, but I could never do that. The closest I could get to that sound was through trilling with my hand. That would make the notes sustain."



Tickets for *An Evening with B.B. King* are \$7, \$8, and \$9; all seats are reserved. Tickets can be purchased at: the Paramount Theatre, Meier and Frank (Downtown), Everybodys Records, Budget Tapes and Records, Frederick and Nelson (Downtown), and Stevens and Son (Lloyd Center).

In the late 1950s he also began punctuating phrases by "bending" notes. He would hit a note, press the string across the frets with his fingers to raise its pitch, and hang on. Other guitarists had done this before him—Lonnie Johnson comes to mind—but the frequent use of bent notes has become one of his trademarks.

B.B.'s advice to electric guitar students is pointed and potent. "Get yourself a teacher and learn everything you can about your instrument. Even though a guy may want to play the blues just like me, he shouldn't start out just playing. He should take lessons and learn to read music. I can read, but only very slowly. I never had any music in school, but ever since then I've really studied. Cats shouldn't just try to play—they should try to learn as much as they can." B.B. King should know. He's done a world of playing and studying since the day he bought his first red guitar in Mississippi.

And everybody want to know, why I sing the blues,
Well, I've been around a long time, I've really paid my dues.

When B.B. King sings it, you believe it.

Community Calendar

Incident at Brown's Ferry, a film on nuclear power, and **Linus Pauling, Crusading Scientist**, will be shown at Reed College, Eliot Hall Chapel, January 14th and 19th at 7:00 p.m.

Humboldt Neighborhood Improvement Organization will meet at Humboldt school on January 14th at 7:30 p.m.

Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods will meet at King Neighborhood facility, 4815 N.E. 7th Avenue.

Dr. Robert Blanchard, Superintendent of Schools, will speak on "Equal Opportunity in Education" at the January 17th meeting of the Jane Jefferson Democratic Women's Club of Multnomah County on January 17th. The no-host lunch will be held at Manning's Restaurant, Lloyd Center, in the private dining room. The public is invited.

A Workshop on Neighborhood Self Help Development Grants will be held at the Water Service Building, 510 S.W. Montgomery, on January 16th at 7:00 p.m. The workshop is sponsored by the Portland HUD office and the City's Office of Neighborhood Associations.

The Women and Mortgage Credit Project is offering free daylong workshops for women on "Everything You Need to Know to Buy a House", starting January 11th. The kick-off workshop, sponsored by the Governor's Commission for Women, will be held that day at the PCC Sylvania Campus in the Cedar Room at 9:00 a.m. To preregister call 378-6520. Workshops will include discussion of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, discrimination in lending, rights and options of home ownership.

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(Nursing Home)
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HOLLADAY PARK HOSPITAL
1225 NE 2nd Ave.
Bldg. No. 1
5th Floor Solarium
Thurs. 4:00pm

NORTHEAST PORTLAND MARANATHA CHURCH
1222 NE Skidmore
Sat. 9:30am

CARPENTERS HALL
2225 N Lombard St.
Mon. 7:00pm
Thurs. 9:30am

For information call COLLECT Portland (503) 297-1021, Weekdays—8:30-5:30

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