

B.B. King Does Spirit Mountain

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The legend said he has no regrets about his life. "They say the bitter (comes) with the sweet and the sweet has always been better," King said of his life over the last 50 years in the music business. "The first years was very hard, but I wouldn't trade it. If I had my life to live it over again, most of it I would let it be as it has been." King said he has never considered doing anything else. There have been many musical influences in his life and he has a list of his personal favorites that he listens to when he has time to himself. "Always on my mind" by Willie Nelson, said King. "That is my favorite tune."

King thinks of himself as more than just a blues guitarist. But, he said his motivations to play the blues came from the generosity of others. He said the only other line of work he has ever even considered was being a preacher. "Well, in the beginning, they used to call me rhythm and blues," said King of his humble beginnings. "First it was race music and then rhythm and blues. Somewhere along the line, I lost the rhythm and now it's just blues. (He gives a big laugh). I'm a blues singer by choice."

"Maybe I could have been something else, because I am jazz influenced," said King. "I'm country influenced, spiritually influenced because my first profession — I wanted to be a gospel singer. That is what I really wanted to be. My pastor in church was my hero. I wanted to be like him — play guitar, sing and preach maybe."

"I used to sit on the street corners when I was in my early teens and play," remembers King. "People would ask me to play a tune — generally if it was a gospel song they would praise me highly and say 'boy that's good' and pat me on the head. 'Keep it up you are going to be great.' But, they didn't put nothin' in the hat. People that would ask me 'play a blues song.' They would always put something in the hat. So, I think that motivated my blues playing. But, I really wanted to be a gospel singer. But now as I said to you earlier, I'm in the business that I'm in. I've got no regrets."

The question is posed as to whether or not he is still having fun on the road night after night, city after city. The legend answered without hesitation.

"Yes," said King. "I'm having fun. I'm pretty lucky, my agent, my manager — they started me out — they made investments for me and taught me how to invest. So, I'm not rich but I could have retired before my 65th birthday. Now I'm 75. I do it because I love doing it. Not only that, I think I have the best band I have ever had. And in order to keep a group together you have got to give them work and some of them have families and others have kids in college. Once you are out here and you are doing this, you notice that there is bills. (Laughs). In musician's language — 'you gotta pay for the grits.'"

If he did choose to retire, what then? "I thought about that," said King. "Die. That is the only thing I can think of at the moment. I love fishing. But, who would want to go fishing everyday? So, I'm doing what I love. Don't tell the promoter, but I would do it for free if somebody would pay my bills. To be honest with you, I think that people, after they get retirement age, shouldn't be forced to retire. I look at the airplane pilots, and I look at many people in many fields and I think to myself — if I had to retire at 65, think about how many of the young people that I could not have helped and that I think I have helped in the last 10 years."

Photos by Brent Merrill



"I know I would love to be around some of these people that have been around — at my age I would love to be around some of these people to hear some of their stories — what they have done, how they made it," said King. "God, I'd like to sit by a lot of the ones that are still in the business and moving fine like those young 65s and 70s and 80s — I love to be around them and hear their stories. And I know they can be a help to the country."

When asked about his earliest childhood memory and when music began to play a role in his life, King again recalled growing up in the church — and being inspired there.

"I grew up and I don't know when I heard music first," said King. "Grew up in the church — my mother was very religious. She used to take me to church and sing in the choir."

"I also had an aunt that like a lot of the kids around today — she was an older aunt, a great aunt — she would buy records of her favorites," said King. "Later, (they) were my favorites. 'Like Blind Lemon Jefferson, which was an acoustic guitarist. Lonnie Johnson, which was an acoustic guitarist. Lou Singer, which was one of the guys that I would love to be like him today. I had a chance to meet him before he died."

"What I think I'm trying to say — he (Singer) to me seemed to be that link between jazz and blues," said King. "A lot of the kids today would argue with you today and like rappers — like nothin' is better. But, I'm not a music major. I never had music in school. I was no 'A' student in anything, but maybe being mischievous. (Laughs). I didn't know I was going to see you this evening but just to let you know that I'm still like a sponge. I love even today trying to learn something about music — about life."

King holds up recently purchased software on how to write music. The legend is still learning and proud of it.

"I'm still trying to learn," said King. "Every day, if I don't learn something new or different I feel like it is a day lost. So, I'm still trying to learn. I'm trying to do better. I only went through the 10th grade in high school."

King ended the interview with a message for young people — never give up.

"You're not dead until you die," said King. "Try to learn everything there is to learn. I personally believe that education is the answer to our problems. Someday somebody will find the answer, the cure for AIDS. Education to me is the one something no one can take away from you. They can take your life — they can do many things — but, they cannot take what you have learned." ■



Still Learnin' After All These Years — B.B. King, whose musical career has spanned over 50 years, shows off his new music writing software to Eugene radio personality Jivin' Johnny Etheredge (above). King, who is revered worldwide as a master of his craft, said he is still learning and still striving to get better. The King held court in his tour bus before the show and shared childhood memories and how he got his start in the music industry.