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King at last

When Freddie King enters the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, a founder of the lead-guitar-as-hero will finally get his due

By Kirby F. Warnock

FOR ANY “OLD SCHOOL” FOLLOWERS OF rock ‘n’ roll, Freddie King is the root of the family tree for all of the great guitar players. Eric Clapton lists Freddie as his major influence, and the names of all of the young men who ever picked up a guitar and tried to imitate Slowhand could fill Cowboys Stadium.

While Clapton garnered the fame, Freddie was the genesis, the beginning. Every great guitarist who passed through this city did not miss a chance to pay homage to the man who made Dallas “the palace of the King.” When the newest guitar hero to hit the scene, a guy named Peter Frampton, came through Dallas he asked to meet Freddie. *BUDDY* correspondent Ben Ferguson was backstage with Ron McKeown when the two men met and shook hands, Freddie a towering presence over the Englishman. Eric Clapton always had Freddie join him onstage whenever he came through town. In a 1979 interview with Clapton, he told of playing with a man “who could make that guitar look like a ukulele.”

While the Brits admired Freddie from across the pond, he cast an even larger shadow here in Texas. It is still hard to believe that all through the 1970s, you could go see Freddie play regularly in Dallas at Mother Blues, or in Austin where he was a steady headliner at the famed Armadillo World Headquarters. King had a band of followers who sought him out for advice and guitar licks that included Steve Miller, John Nitzinger, Jimmie Vaughan, and Bugs Henderson.

“One thing he always told me was to never play for free,” recalled Bugs Henderson. “He said have people pay something, but don’t ever play for free.”

It wasn’t just business advice that Freddie dispensed, but guitar licks that became standards for many rock songs. There are probably more riffs “borrowed” from his 1960 hit, “Hide Away,” than any single tune before or since. Today they call it “sampling” or a “mash up,” but back

in the ‘60s and ‘70s it was just old fashioned copying. Listen to the opening licks of Ted Nugent’s “Hey Baby,” or “Theme to Peter Gunn” and you can hear them in “Hideaway.”

But it wasn’t just guitar riffs that the rock guitarists of the 60s and ‘70s copied, it was Freddie’s entire approach to playing the electric guitar. While everyone else was using a Vox Wah pedal or a fuzz tone, Freddie was bending the strings to get his sound, making new tones with his hands, not electronics, in an upbeat version of the blues. Clapton copied Freddie so much that he even did cover versions of his songs when he was with John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers. Imitation was indeed the sincerest form of flattery.

It was Freddie King who set the stage for the lead guitar front man: Eric Clapton with Cream, Jimmie Page with Led Zeppelin and Jeff Beck with the Yardbirds (and later the Jeff Beck Group.) Before then, the leader of any rock and roll band was a singer first, and guitar player second. Elvis Presley barely played his guitar, deferring to Scotty Moore to play the licks on “Heartbreak Hotel” without any credit. John Lennon was adequate, but let George Harrison carry the lead guitar load.

Yet today, most people have no idea who Freddie King was. They’ve heard of B. B. King (no relation) who plays a slower, Delta blues, but have no idea that when they hear many of the classic rock guitar licks, they are hearing the next generation of Freddie King. He was also one of the last great, black blues guitar players. For some reason a truly black art form, the blues, are today played almost exclusively by white men. Save for a few



He was a fan favorite here in Dallas: Freddie King

players (Robert Cray) black music has moved away from the blues and on to rap and hip hop. In an ironic twist, it is white musicians who have kept the blues alive.

Give credit to the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame for finally recognizing a major force behind the emergence of the rock guitar, but just as a prophet is not recognized in his own country, Dallas has been slow to hitch its wagon to Freddie’s star. Austin has a

statue of Stevie Ray Vaughan, but there is no statue of Freddie in his adopted hometown (he was born in Gilmer), nor a street named in his honor. Even Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, two men who never lived in Dallas, have roadways bearing their names.

What I would like to respectfully suggest is that the City of Dallas name “Palace of the King” the official song for this city. It sings the praises of Big D in a

manner unlike any other songs about our town, and it has a great beat you can dance to.

All that we need is for some knowledgeable city council member to put it out on the table. It would be a fitting tribute to a man who never hid his affection for his hometown. If Freddie King is good enough for the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame, then he’s good enough for Dallas.

I’ll be contacting my city council person tomorrow.

*I was born down in Dallas,
raised up in the city of the wind
Yeah, I could spend a month of
Sundays, talkin’ about the places
I’ve been*

*Yeah, I played the blues in England,
I visit with the queen
She really dug my style, but
queen is not my thing
I’m goin’ back to Dallas, living
in the palace of the king*

For more photos of Freddie King, go to Buddymagazine.com

“Instead of bringing in some dirt from the Mississippi Delta, the House of Blues should have built a statue of Freddie King.”

—BUGS HENDERSON