

Dealing with the "3 O'Clock Blues"

B.B. King is the answer
by Tim Schuller

INSOMNIA. ALONE. DEPRESSED ABOUT, both I opened one eye. The digital clock read "3:00." A bell tolled.

B.B. King benighted that lonely hour with "3 O'Clock Blues" in 1952. No one touched by the blues experience can be alone at 3 AM without hearing that song in their head.

Before 3:01 before I was up and at the Mac. Had he died, and some nocturnal whisper line sought me out to tell me so? Jeez, please no. Got online and found, not only was he quite alive — but in Texas! Playing dates, mere miles from me, with gigs in Grand Prairie and New Braunfels! In interviews he'd always said he'd never retire and man, he wasn't kidding.

B.B. has not defied biology. He looks his age. Another reason to respect him. He's eschewed the cosmetic surgery lesser stars often get.

Probably could've scraped up the \$\$ to go hear him, but what blues was to me, for so many years, makes it unsafe ground for me to revisit in my present state. Might be the last op to see him? Fuck that. ANYtime you see ANYone might be the last time you see them.

I doubt the present, frail-looking B. would sound as strong as he did in the years he was hale and roly-poly. But physicality mirrors the aural in his career. If you've done one of the greatest albums in blues history — the mighty *Live at the Regal* (1965) — unlikely you're going to many more Greatest Albums in Blues History. *Blues In Cook County Jail* (1971), which has the version of "Three O'clock in the Morning" that resonated when I eyed the clock on the aforementioned, sleepless night, pales next to the Regal landmark — but it's still FAR better than a majority of blues LPs ever made and anyone who says different is simply fucking wrong.

And there were other masterworks in his career, some made ages before his lionization. I haven't bought his latter-day records because I know that it's simply impossible to do great albums for as many years as he's been at it, and I chose not to see him gig again for the same reason.

I'm content to have, like a precious gem in a secret drawer you examine when you want an uplift, my perceptions of B. remain those I got when he was at his peak. And what a peak that was, for SO many years. I met him before I ever saw him gig.

Meeting B.B.

B.B. King was directly responsible for expediting the sale of

one the first stories I ever got paid for.

I was endeavoring to peddle an article about Robert Lockwood to *Cleveland* magazine. Lockwood had mentored King, said so in the story, and the editor — Irish guy, name of Dooley — said the story was a shoe-in if I got a corroborative quote from King. Happened to be, B. was playing the Stambaugh Auditorium in nearby Youngstown right around then.

So, I got in my Vega, went to the Stambaugh on a rainy afternoon and there was B's bandbus, parked in back of the building. I parked, mulling whether he was inside Stambaugh, doing a soundcheck or something, or maybe at a restaurant, and I'd heard him as he returned — when I looked in the rearview and There He Was. He was in the doorway of the bus, seemingly eyeing egress — remember, it was rainy.

So I went caroming up to him, hoping to get my quote — and I got it. For which I'll forever be appreciative and respectful. Even at this early stage of my game I'd known musicians with a smidgen of hometown renown who'd barely deign to acknowledge the proletariat. But here was this legend, this internationally famous star — who took time to greet me politely, and give me a perfectly adequate quote about Lockwood.

My story sold. (BTW, magazines pay about the same now as they did back then.)

B.B. In Action

DALLAS BLUESGUY BRIAN "Hash Brown" Calway saw the King troupe back in those days, and says it was "like a freight train coming at you." I could hardly improve on that description.

The Stambaugh specialized in symphonies and whitebread gospel stars, and its audience for B. might have been a mite on the staid side. But man, B.B. sure played good! This was in the days when he had a horn section, and Sonny Freeman on drums and Calvin Owens on guitar.

I remember Freeman's power! He propelled a band, like Art Blakey did his Jazz Messengers. B. sang his lungs out and as far as guitar playing went, I recalled all the lauding and worshipping rock stars had been doing about him and thinking he's even better than they would've had me believe!

Might've been that same year I saw B. in the Cleveland Arena. If the Stambaugh was a fairly sedate venue, the Arena was any-



He is scheduled to perform at Billy Bob's Texas on February 25: B.B. King

thing but. We all know about the famed rock 'n' roll riot there in 1952. Well, the Arena'd been built mainly as a hockey stadium and there'd been probably half a dozen or so riots a year there since the 1930s.

But back to B.B. King!

Opening the show was Robert Lockwood's quintet. Many bluesmen were playing anglo venues at this time but B. was still playing primarily to black audiences. So blacks galore showed up, middle-aged and beyond, dressed as nicely as they might have for church. Out tromps Lockwood's band, his saxist Maurice Reedus in an undershirt and Sonny Bono vest. Maurice takes the mike, says "Evening folks, tonight we want you to get drunk and uuhhh — PUKE ALL OVER THE PLACE!"

Silence.

IN THE HIPPIE JOINTS Lockwood was then specializing in, this would've undoubtedly

been greeted by guffaws. To this audience it went over like a lead bubble. Lockwood did a cursory set. Then out barreled B. and this time it was like TWO freight trains! I can picture his jacket, it was red plaid.

Maybe not exactly sartorial splendor but music-wise, man, he stormed through a set of his hits like B-17s over Germany. I've seen Joe Pass, Barnie Kessel, Charlie Byrd — all EXTREMELY revered jazz guitarists and, OK, way more chordally evolved than B. but no way were/are they "better."

NO ONE is or will ever be a BETTER guitarist than B.B. King. This night he ripped, tore, romped, stomped — and that's about as eloquent as I can get about it. His technique, tone and — perhaps most importantly — his expressiveness just boggled me.

And yes, he asked for a round of applause for his ol' bud Lockwood.

Both Lockwood and, some years later (in Chicago), Home-sick James recalled to me that B. had used to attend their gigs barefoot.

Now, OK, it's down south, in the country, not a lot of concrete to sear your soles, but going around frigging barefoot — I mean that's living lean!

Appreciating B.B.

I'VE RUN INTO A LOT OF people who've met B.B. since I did, that rainy day in Youngstown, and every one has remarked on his niceness, generosity with time (journalists particularly dig that), and graciousness. The only one I know who had a negative thing to say about him was a guy I'll not name who was hugely talented but also an egotistical prick.

I transcribed an interview blues researcher Alan Govanar did with B.B. some years back, and although it was done under

some time constraint, B. gave Govanar every possible minute he could. Somewhat before then I saw B.B. and Bobby Bland nuke the Longhorn Ballroom. Also saw him, sans the sizeable band he was most associated with, with a combo, at Nick's Uptown (a lamented club on Greenville Ave.).

I've seen a vid of the show and it's damn good, but strangely my memory of the show surpasses it. Or maybe not so strangely. The sense of the moment — all that. And I've seen B. at this or that outdoor mega-bill a few times since and he was good then, too. A bit more of a "by rote" sense to his sets, but he still was top of the line.

It's dark now and I have medicine to quell the insomnia that was with me on the night (day, actually) I de-

scribed at the start of this story. Think maybe I'll nod with some B.B. King on the box. Maybe *Confessin' The Blues*, first released in 1956 (I was seven then). It's got so many great songs, including "Sweet Little Angel" and, yes, "3 O'Clock Blues."

B.B. King has been with us when we've whooped, cheered, laughed, and danced. But he's been with us in the dark place, too.

I'll have nodded by 3 AM tonight (can feel it coming) but in many apartments like mine, as well as cheap motels, alleyways, ERs, jails, and bygod palaces there are those who'll be awake, alone, and glum about it. Attention, all of you — squint your eyes, shut out the din, and hear in your head the music of B.B. King, who stands between us and our hell. ■

B.B. King will perform at Billy Bob's Texas on February 25