

B.B. King

Essential Question: How did B.B. King influence the development of the Blues?

Legendary blues musician B.B. King was born Riley King in 1925 in the small town of Berclair, Mississippi in the central Mississippi Delta. King's parents separated when he was young. King and his mother moved to Kilmichael, Mississippi to be closer to her family. In 1935, King's mother, Nora Ella, died at the age of thirty-one. For the next five years King lived with his grandmother, and it was during this period that King played guitar for the first time. In January 1940, King's grandmother died owing twenty-one dollars and seventy-five cents to Edwayne Henderson whose land she sharecropped.

Though he was only fourteen years old, King had to assume his grandmother's debt and work the fields alone. That fall, King's estranged father brought his son to live with him and his family in Lexington, Mississippi. King's time in Lexington was short-lived. He witnessed the lynching and castration of an African American youth whose so-called "crime" was wolf-whistling at a white girl. The horror of that dramatic event, combined with feeling like a stranger in his father's home, led King to return to the only home he had known in Kilmichael. He rode his bicycle for two days only to find that his relatives had moved away in his absence. King moved in with a white family until he joined a cousin working as a tractor driver on a plantation in Indianola.

Between 1944 and 1948 King married for the first time, was inducted in the military and discharged because he was deemed essential to the war economy, and went to Memphis for the first time. King temporarily moved back to Indianola to work off a debt, but returned to Memphis in late 1948. He began playing music at local clubs and was soon hired by WDIA, an African American radio station, to promote an alcohol-based health tonic called Peptikon. King's fifteen minute advertising spot expanded into a full-fledged show. King first used the name "Beale Street Blues Boy King," which was shortened to "Blues Boy King" and eventually became "B.B. King."

In early 1949, King was playing at a dance hall in Twist, Arkansas when a fight broke out. The men knocked over a bucket of burning kerosene that looked like a "river of fire," as it ran across the floor. King ran outside only to realize that he had left his guitar inside. He ran back inside to get it as "the building started to fall in around [him.]" The next day King learned that two people had died in the fire, and that the fight had started over a woman named Lucille. He decided to name his guitar "Lucille" to remind himself not to do something that dangerous again. It was also during the late 1940s that King began to develop his own distinctive style. His uncle, the bluesman Bukka White, used a bottleneck to play a slide. King wanted to copy the move, but

could not master the technique. Instead, he developed “the butterfly,” his own signature technique for creating a vibrato that is so distinctive that other musicians could identify it as King’s after hearing only a single note.

King’s career took off in 1952, and by 1955 King was touring the country on his own bus. He toured almost non-stop for several years. In 1963, he recorded one of his signature songs, “How Blue Can You Get?,” and in 1964 recorded the Live at the Regal album which cemented his status as the “King of the Blues.” In 1968, King played the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco for a predominately white audience for the first time; the crowd gave him a standing ovation when he walked onto the stage. The following year, King had a crossover hit with “The Thrill is Gone” which reached number fifteen on the pop chart. In the 1970s, King opened eighteen concerts for the Rolling Stones and appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show. In the 1980s, he was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and was given a Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award.

A whole new generation discovered King’s music in 1988 when he recorded “When Love Comes to Town” with U2. In 1995, King received Kennedy Center Honors and in 2000 he had his first blockbuster hit record, Riding with the King with Eric Clapton. The State of Mississippi declared February 15 to be “B.B. King Day” in 2005, and in 2006 President George W. Bush presented King with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2008, a museum honoring King opened in Indianola with the mission to “inspire hope, creativity and greatness.” B.B. King died peacefully in his sleep at the age of eighty-nine on May 14, 2015.

Sources:

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<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/b-b-king-life-timeline/6306/> Accessed 19 July 2018.

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Richard Bienstock. “The Legacy of Lucille: The Surprising Story Behind B.B. King’s Guitar,” Rolling Stone, 15 May 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-legacy-of-lucille-the-surprisingstory-behind-b-b-kings-guitar-63896/>.

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Design a postage stamp in honor of B.B. King. Afterwards, provide a brief explanation for why B.B. King deserves to have a stamp made in his honor.


