

## The King Only Improves with Age

Written by Michael Richardson  
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B.B. King proved that while he might be older, he's also better. The legendary "King of the Blues" played to a packed house at the Adler Theatre on Monday night as part of his 75th birthday tour, and the crowd was appreciative to have him.

King's eight-piece band took the stage first and played a couple of instrumentals. Dressed in magenta tuxedo jackets with black dress pants, the band looked sharp and polished. The keyboard player switched back and forth between a grand piano and a Hammond organ, while the four brass players gave the group a nice big-band sound.

B.B. came on-stage to a standing ovation, dressed in a flashy, iridescent tuxedo, and seated himself on a chair front and center. With no sound-effects board or foot pedals to play with, the King coaxed his music out of Lucille, the celebrated guitar, with only the finesse of his fingers. King opened with a snappy rendition of "Let the Good Times Roll," while the crowd clapped along. During a break in the song, he announced to the delight of all, "B.B. King is in town."

The second song, titled "I'll Survive," was a true blues song and seemed almost like an extended medley of blue themes. Every so often, when the music would soften and quiet, B.B. would wish the crowd a "good evening" or "thank you for coming out tonight" message of good cheer.

The crowd got to sing the chorus of the third song, "Bad Case of Love," and afterward King said he didn't understand new dance styles in which partners are far apart. He said that he came from the old school and demonstrated his preferred dance technique, hugging the microphone stand close to him.

Then it was time for an old favorite, "Caledonia," which turned into a yelling duel, with the audience at the end seeing whether they could shout the song title louder than King with his PA system.

Following that display of energy, the four horn players left the stage for some stripped-down

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blues, starting with a sweet instrumental that proved that B.B. is not only a showman, but a musician, too. Next came the bouncy “Early in the Morning,” which left me thinking about some of my own early-morning blues.

The audience again joined in for “Just Like a Woman” – at least part of the audience. King said he noticed that men with dates didn’t sing along, and added with a laugh that he would sing a song that would help put them back in the women’s good graces. Although he’s never had a reputation as cute, B.B. nonetheless did a cute version of “You Are My Sunshine” for the women.

At that point, a woman in a black coat approached the stage and laid a bouquet of red roses at B.B.’s feet. Stopping the show, the King had the house lights turned up so he could see his benefactor. The woman returned to the stage, the crowd in rapt silence, and B.B. got out of his chair to touch her outreached fingertips. He then took his picks and passed them to her. As the woman left the stage, she wiped tears from her eyes. On the stage, B.B. was working his face with a handkerchief.

King then gave an extended treatment to his 1950 hit “Three O’Clock in the Morning,” and performed “Key to the Highway” with a nod to Eric Clapton and their collaboration, Riding with the King. Following that was his most famous hit of all, “The Thrill Is Gone.”

After a couple of love songs, King announced that the Quad Cities crowd made it hard to leave the stage. Asking the audience’s permission to return – which judging from the applause was a request granted – B.B. did an extended goodbye and thank you. The 90-minute set ended with the strains of “Just How Much I Love You” in the air. Opening the show was the man King called his “co-star,” Bernard Allison. Bernard, son of the late guitar great Luther Allison, has built his own local following and got fans in the mood for some blues.

Allison and his band played for an hour and got the audience on its feet when he left the stage and went up and down the aisles while playing blistering licks on his guitar. The tearjerker moment of his show came when he played “Tribute to Luther,” dedicated to his father. Another crowd-pleasing moment came when Bernard gave his guitar strings some real licks – with his tongue. His closing song was a Stevie Ray Vaughan tune, “Leave My Little Girl Alone,” and was definitely an audience favorite.

In one of those curious twists of fate in life, Bernard’s own music career did not catch fire until the death of his father. Bernard then inherited his father’s fans, who were curious to know what the son could do. He showed them Monday night.

*Michael Richardson is a contributing writer for Big City Blues magazine.*