

Written by Mike Schulz

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"I started gravitating toward the blues in about 1969," says 60-year-old vocalist Shirley King. "What happened was I'd moved to Chicago from California -- I'd been staying with my dad and came back to stay with my mom -- and I was supposed to be getting married to a boyfriend I'd been liking ever since I was small. So I pretty much followed him here to Chicago to get married ... and he decided he'd had a change of mind, and wanted to marry my *girlfriend*."

"So I think that must've pushed me over to the blues!" exclaims King, with a deep laugh, during our recent phone interview. "Because, man, I got it then!"

Did she *ever*. For nearly 20 years now, the Chicago-based King has been a staple at area blues clubs; a popular touring artist who has performed in Canada, Italy, France, and even Iceland; and a darling of blues fans and critics, with *Prevue* magazine describing her as "a musical gem" and the Web site MNBlues.com lauding, "King sings with passion, energy, and power."

But what's surprising about King's reminiscence is that she didn't get the blues *before* that heartbreak of her youth, considering that her dad is the King of the Blues himself -- B.B. King.

2010 Blues Fest -- Daughter of the Blues: Shirley King (Friday, 10:30 p.m., Tent Stage)

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"I was like most kids," says Shirley, who was born and raised in West Memphis, Arkansas. "I didn't like the blues. It was a music that I felt had nothing to do with me. For young people, we thought blues was old-folks music, and when you heard your parents listening to it, you were like, 'Ye-e-e-ech!'

"And I *doubly* hated it," she continues, "because it kept taking my father away from me" whenever the legendary musician was called on tour. "So I didn't have *any* attachment to the blues. At all.

None

."

That changed, however, both with the loss of King's beau (and, one presumes, her girlfriend), and with her gradual immersion in Chicago's blues scene, following her late-teen years spent pursuing an acting career in California.

"Here in Chicago, there were blues clubs all over the freaking place," says King, "and that was the way to work if you wanted to make some money. So I stayed on in Chicago, and started making friends, and started getting involved in the nightlife."

Yet despite her lineage and musical talents -- "All growing up," she says, "I always knew how to sing" -- King didn't initially set out to become a blues vocalist. Instead, "I started dancing professionally. I was a regular dancer for show clubs and everything all over the city of Chicago. In those days, every cabaret club, every social club, did their own shows.

"And I had a bomb of a body," says King with a chuckle, "and people *liked* that, so I was able to do pretty good."

While dancing in blues and R&B clubs, King says she "got the chance to meet all the bigger stars that I *hadn't* met" via her famous father. "Joe Tex, Little Milton, Bobby Bland I mean, during those days, *everybody* was here in Chicago, coming through to perform, and I'd always be one of the regular dancers."

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Laughing, she continues, "I was even part of the little go-go team that was the opening act along with another warm-up act -- the Jackson 5. When they took off and became that famous, I was like, 'How did *that* happen?! We was on the stage side by side!'"

Realizing, though, that show dancing was "nothing you can do for a lifetime," King says that "after 21 years, I figured, 'Hey, I'm ready to do something else now,'" and began considering a career as a vocalist in the genre she had previously shied away from.

"I went to clubs," she says, "just watching different blues people. And I saw that you can do the blues 'til you pass on away. I would follow Koko Taylor around, I would be up with Lonnie Brooks, Buddy Guy ... you know, all the blues people. I just hung around clubs seven nights a week -- just sit there until the clubs closed -- just to figure out what to *do*."

"Because I wasn't developed as a blues singer," King continues. "I didn't know a lot of words to different blues songs, I didn't know how to *end* songs, I didn't know how to tell people my key ...
. Man, I didn't know a *lot* of stuff. I was very
much learning."

And most of her blues education, she says, came from the famed Chicago nightclub Kingston Mines. "That was a late-night place where everybody was at that time," says King. "All of the people that were trying to make a name for themselves, they would work the Kingston Mines. And the crowds were just *fantastic* in those days. They *loved* the entertainment."

After months of soaking in the styles of Kingston Mines performers -- months spent, says the vocalist, "like a little hungry dog with his tongue stuck out: 'Can I sit in and sing a song? Can I?'"

Can I

?!"

Lemme

!!!" -- King was finally given her chance on the venue's stage in 1990, and chose, as her debut, to cover Muddy Waters' blues classic "Got My Mojo Working."

"It was this basic song that I had heard them playing there over and over," she says, "and so I kind of felt like, 'Okay, I can *do* this.' And I busted up there -- I was so happy to be on the stage -- and all I could do was see the way people were looking at me. They told them who I was, and

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that really made 'em ready for me. 'B.B. King's daughter?! Oh,
ord
! Yeah! I bet she can
get
down!

L

"And I got up there on the stage, and I couldn't remember no *words*," King continues, laughing. "I just kept singing, 'Got my mojo working, but it just don't work on you!' over and over. And then, when I was just *too far* from getting the song, I just started dancing and shaking my hips and moving fast. And the crowd went *crazy*! I don't know what I did right!"

Clearly, though, she did *something* right. "When I got through," says King, "people told the owner, 'Doc' Pellegrino, 'You've got to hire her. This woman is *good*.' And of course, people saw the advantage of having me there, what with the name and stuff. So he came over and talked to me, and he said, 'Well, I don't fire nobody to hire nobody -- that's not my rules here -- but if somebody leaves or something, I will call you.'

"Well, somebody must've wanted to leave," she adds with a laugh, "because I got a call maybe a month or two later to come to work. And I pretty much had a steady gig there for about three years."

That gig subsequently led to many, many more. "In those days, anybody who was anybody would come to the Kingston Mines. So by me working there, I was getting exposure almost like a booking-agent set. I was able to go to Europe, get a record deal, and do a CD [*Jump Through My Keyhole*] all in my first year of singing, you know?"

And while King acknowledges that having B.B. King as a father certainly hasn't hurt her career any ("With the Kingston Mines situation," she admits, "it helped like *crazy*"), she believes that what audiences respond to in her blues performances isn't heritage so much as presence.

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"I'm able to maintain a stage like nobody's business," says King with a laugh. "I *control* the stage. And people

like

that, you know? They're used to people getting up there singing, but when you can actually *perform*

on that stage -- dancing, shaking it -- that tells people, 'Hey, I'm here for you to

watch

.'

"I wasn't a seasoned singer when I started," she continues. "I was very new to it. But I was able to be an *entertainer*. And that's what I still am today. I tell people all the time, 'If you come to see me, you're not coming to hear a record. You're coming to see a *show*."

So buckle your seats, 'cause I'm gonna take you for a

ride

."