

The King of Blues Rolls into Town

Written by Michael Richardson

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Although he won't be lounging in an open convertible with Eric Clapton at the wheel like on the cover of his new album, the legendary B.B. King will be riding into Davenport in his custom bus next week. The elder statesman of the blues is returning to the Adler Theater on Monday for a 7:30 pm stop on his 75th birthday tour.

King granted the River Cities' Reader a telephone interview from a hotel room in Las Vegas, where he was staying under an assumed name for a little privacy. Warm and friendly, he welcomed all questions.

At 75 years old, King is at the peak of his career, his name synonymous with the blues. It seemed obvious to ask when he plans to give up the rigors of the road and retire. "I wish I knew the answer to your question," he said. "I guess as long as my health holds out and people keep buying my music, I'll keep playing. It's what I like to do."

King said he has no plans besides continuing to tour in support of *Riding with the King*, a collaboration with Clapton released in June. "I like to tour," he said. "It is a way of visiting my friends. I have friends all over. Today I'm in Las Vegas, yesterday it was California. Tomorrow might be Chicago. That is just how it is. I have traveled all over the world and played in 88 countries."

That runaway success, however, is a rarity in the blues, a fact that bothers King somewhat. "I'm very happy with the blues today. I'm happy with the kids that are playing it and supporting it," he said. "The only wish I have for the music is that the blues could have more crossover hits. Aside from myself, only Stevie Ray Vaughan and to some extent Robert Cray have been able to cross over."

Probably one of B.B.'s best crossover songs is the new album's title track, which is not only playing on rock and pop radio stations, but has also invaded country-music cable channels. Crossover hits, though, irritate certain blues purists, who don't want the music to leave its roots.

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King scoffs at them. “The music has to grow. Let more people hear it,” he said. “I want more crossover songs. Let everybody have some blues.” Then, chuckling, he said, “You know, those blues purists didn’t invent the music. We did!”

Although he’s easily the most recognized blues performer in the world, King said he likes a lot of the young artists he’s hearing. “There are so many new and young musicians out there,” he said. “A lot of talent in the field today. I couldn’t give you all the names. I’ll throw out a few that come to mind: Jonny Lang, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Susan Tedeschi, and Shemekia Copeland. There are lots more.”

But blues aren’t the only things that keep King’s ears busy. “I like all [genres of] music. You name it, I like it,” he said. “I don’t like everything. I don’t even like all the blues, but I have very wide music tastes. Everything from Hooker to Pavarotti – that’s me.”

Over the years, B.B. King has established both a signature sound – with his finger-vibrato technique on the guitar and his unique vocal style – and a reputation as a sharp dresser and a class act. “You’ve got to establish an identity,” he said. “I’ve worked years at it. Without an identity you are nothing. I have always dressed up for a show. The only times I’ve worn street clothes on stage were when my luggage was still on an airplane. I think the people like it when they see someone on stage making an effort. I come from the old school, like Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway; they dressed up for the audience.” He then shifted subjects: “Thank you for recognizing my signature sound. I’m not really as good on the guitar as everyone thinks, but that is okay.”

Then there is Lucille, the most celebrated guitar in the world. “Actually there are 16 Lucilles,” he noted. “I’m on my 16th guitar. I give them away. There is a different story for each Lucille. I gave the Pope a Lucille.” Chuckling again, he said, “Yes, the Pope himself has a Lucille.”

After a career spanning half a century, 88 countries, and hundreds of performances, King still remembers his first roots, and his first gig. “I was raised in Indianola, Mississippi,” he recalled. “As a young man I got my first exposure to the blues at Club Ebony. I met Sonny Boy Williamson there. At the time I was driving a tractor for \$22.50 a week. Later I went over to West Memphis, Arkansas, where Sonny Boy had a radio show. He had left the King Biscuit Time radio show in Helena and had his own show in West Memphis. He let me on the show to play a bit,” he said.

“At the time, he had a way of telling about his evening shows on the radio program. All of a sudden he announced he was playing at the 16th Street Bar & Grill, only that he wouldn’t be there, so he was sending me in his place. I didn’t know nothing about it. He hadn’t consulted me. But you don’t say no to Sonny Boy. So I did the gig, and they paid me \$12.50 plus room and board. The most I’d ever made for a day’s work in my life. I played six nights. Well, you know the rest.”

Part of “the rest” includes a new nightclub in New York, his third. But King doesn’t have much involvement on the business end of the clubs; he provides the name and the occasional music. “I don’t have the money for the clubs; that comes from investors,” he said. “I play the clubs

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several times a year and visit them whenever I can. Whether B.B. King's nightclubs become a chain like House of Blues, that is for someone else to decide. I play music."

Even though he's on the road constantly, King isn't much for restaurants. "I don't eat out much," he said. "I've had the same management for 39 years, and they take good care of me. I've got a man that takes care of my food. I tell him what I want to eat and he gets it. Sometimes I don't know what I want and he gets it anyway!

"I'm a semi-vegetarian. Been that way for 10 years. I eat a little fish or chicken now and then, but no [red] meat. I saw a show about the needless slaughter of animals and it made me angry. The next morning, when they brought me my usual bacon and eggs, I tried to eat it but I couldn't keep it down. I haven't eaten meat since."

As accomplished as he is, however, King is pretty hard on himself when asked what advice he would give aspiring musicians. "Practice. Practice every day," he said. "I don't practice enough, but I play a lot. But only practice an hour a day. Spend the rest of your time studying. Get an education. I didn't get a high-school degree, and there hasn't been a day since that I have not regretted it. Education is the problem-solver of the world. Somebody in school right now is someday going to find a way to stop a disease. Somebody in school is going to save lives in the future. That is the power of education. So my advice is practice, but study."

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