

Nomen est Omen

B.B. King celebrates his 80th birthday, his music, and himself

Back in the early 1940s, nobody would have dared to predict the musical future of the young black tractor driver Riley B. King who played his guitar for dimes on the corner of Church and Second Street in Indianola, Mississippi. Half a century, about 100 albums and more than 75 Billboard-noted hits later, “B.B.” King is truly the King of the Blues.

This year, the massive musical monarch is celebrating his 80th birthday with a new album – simply labeled “80” – and an extensive tour that fortunately includes the IU Auditorium on December 4th, 2005. Of course, none of the music stars co-starring the recording – Van Morrison, Elton John, Mark



Knopfler, Sheryl Crow and many others – will show up for the performance. But that should and will not belittle the excitement of being able to listen to a living legend of Blues.

King was born September 16, 1925 on a plantation near Itta Bena, Mississippi. During his childhood he had to work as a sharecropper to keep him, his mother, and his grandmother alive – not an easy life with a salary of 35 cents per 100 pounds of cotton. His first musical impression were gospels and spirituals sung in church on the one hand, and, on the other, the music of blues guitarists T-Bone Walker and Lonnie Johnson and jazz artists Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt. “I heard an electric guitar that wasn’t playing spiritual,” King recalled later. “It was T-Bone Walker doing ‘Stormy Monday,’ and that was the prettiest sound I had ever heard in my life. That’s what really started me to play the blues.”

In 1947 King hitchhiked to Memphis, Tennessee, the center that every musician in the South gravitated to. He stayed with his cousin, Country Blues legend Bukka White, who deepened King's knowledge both of playing guitar and the Blues style itself.

The breakthrough came 1948 when King got a spot the all-black Memphis radio station WDIA. King needed a catchy name and called himself "Blues Boy King," which eventually got shortened to B.B. King.

Why B.B. King calls his guitar "Lucille"

In the early 50s, King was performing in Twist, Arkansas, when two men in the audience started a fight, accidentally knocking over the kerosene barrel that heated the room. Like everybody else, King rushed outside when the hall went up in flames, but then realized he had forgotten his \$30 Gibson acoustic guitar inside and raced back into the burning building to save his instrument. When he later found out that the two men had been fighting over a woman called Lucille, he decided to name his guitar (and every guitar he played ever since) after that woman to remind him "not to do a [near fatal] thing like that again."

The fifties saw B.B. King's first record contract and a number of hits, such as "Three O'Clock Blues", "You Don't Know Me", "Please Love Me", and "You Upset Me Baby." To build his fame, B.B. King toured extensively, playing as much as 342 gigs in 1956. In 1965 he published the album "Live at the Regal" which earned him the status of a superstar.

B.B. King was inducted into the Halls of Fame both of Blues and Rock and Roll and received numerous Grammy Awards, one of which for his lifetime achievement. He holds several honorary doctorates, e.g. from Yale University, Berklee College of Music, and

the University of Mississippi. In 1991, "B.B. King's Blues Club" opened in Memphis; other clubs have been opened in Los Angeles, New York, and Connecticut.

B.B. King's style defined Blues. It relies mainly on melodic lines – no matter if these lines are sung orally or through the guitar: "When I sing, I play in my mind; the minute I stop singing orally, I start to sing by playing Lucille." King's signature is this dialogue between his voice and his guitar. Vocally, he stretches a word's syllables across a musical phrase (a melismatic style derived from Gospel singing) and uses a rough timbre and, of course, the genre-typical blue notes. The guitar equivalents of these vocal styles are techniques such as bending or an intense vibrato. King's complex single string lines are either

placed against the background of a band's brass section or piano or full-bodied guitar chords that propel a steady yet swinging beat.

B.B. King's guitar technique has dominated Blues and Rock guitarists' musical vocabulary and influenced generations of musicians. The most prominent one probably is "Mr. Slowhand" Eric Clapton, who not only adapted B.B. King's style but teamed up with him on the guitar duet album "Riding with the King" (2000).

Sidney A. Seidenberg, B.B. King's former manager, once compared King to Louis Armstrong and Frank Sinatra: "B.B.'s goals have always been to be like an American Ambassador of Blues music to the world, like Louis Armstrong and Frank Sinatra are to the Jazz world. B.B. King is still the King of the Blues."

B.B. King. Sunday, December 4th, 7:30 pm, IU Auditorium.