



PAUL HEATON "COLLECTIONS? I'VE GOT HUNDREDS"

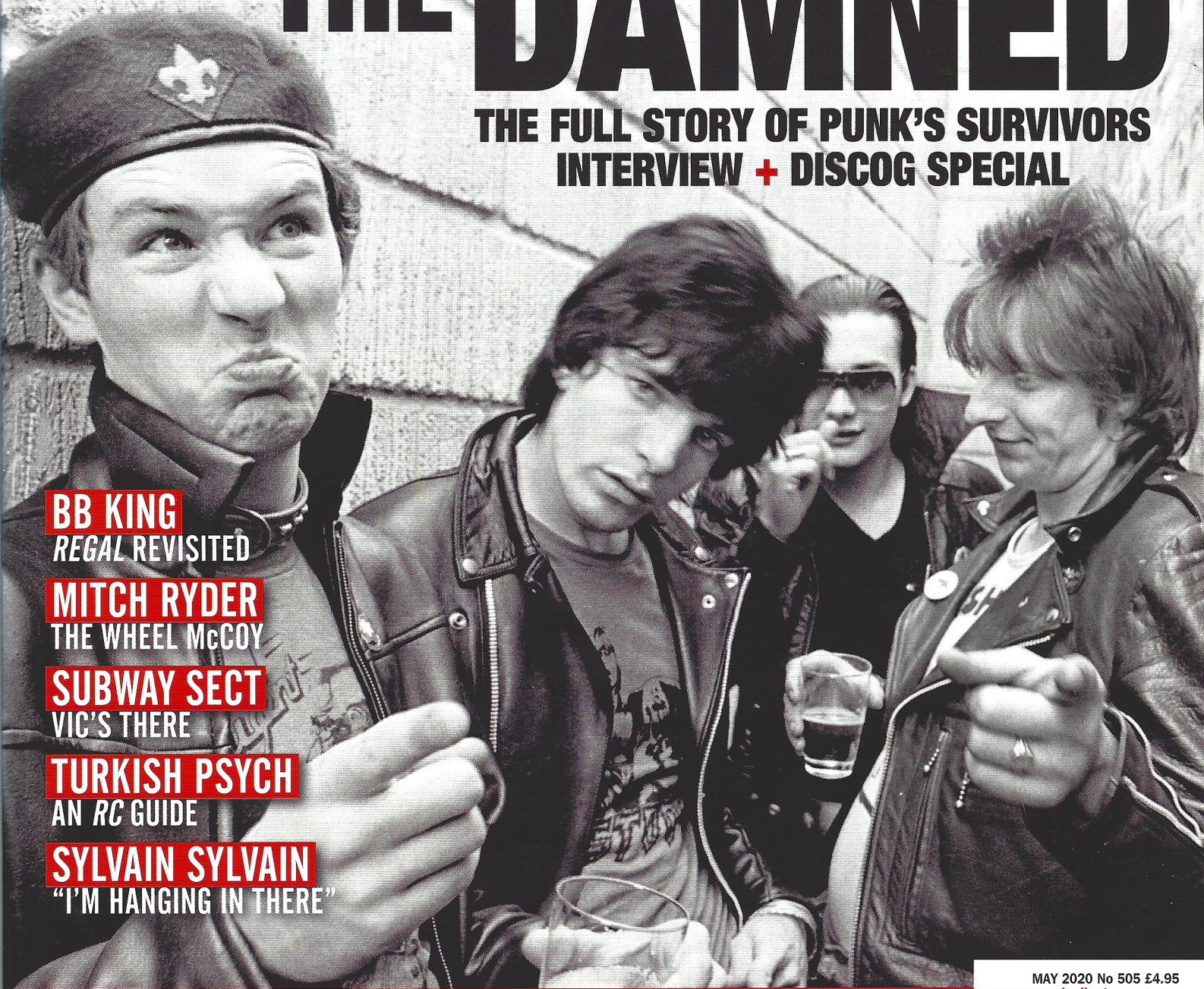


RECORD COLLECTOR

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"I'M HANGING IN THERE"

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BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT



It has lately become fashionable among aficionados to question the status of **BB King's** *Live At The Regal* album as a work of transcendent and unimprovable artistic genius: "Yeah, but is it really his best? What about...?" they mutter.

Alan Harper has had enough. Yes, it is. Just sit, listen, and believe



BB King and his band at the Regal Theater, Chicago, in 1964. Photo by Raeburn Flerlage

It sold modestly at first, entering the US *Billboard* charts in May 1965, two months after its release, and spending just five weeks in the R&B album Top 10, peaking at No 6. It was up against some stiff competition – Sam Cooke, The Temptations, Otis Redding – but as the decades passed, it continued to sell. Today, 55 years on, the record's reputation is unchallenged. Like *Kind Of Blue*, *Sgt Pepper's* or *Exile On Main Street*, it has attained the status of cultural touchstone – one of those artistic monuments that define the 20th Century.

BB King's *Live At The Regal*, says Carlos Santana, is "required listening". Eric Clapton reportedly uses it for inspiration before a performance. The American guitarist John Mayer calls it "transportive: I feel like I'm in that room, I'm on that stage."

The story begins on 21 November 1964, as sound engineers from ABC Paramount check the levels on their recording equipment beneath the stage of the Chicago Regal Theater, and the show's master of ceremonies, disc jockey, Pervis Spann, gives King an unforgettable introduction: "Ladies and gentlemen, how about a nice, warm round of applause, to welcome the world's greatest blues singer, the King Of The Blues – B! B! King!"

The band – trumpet, piano, two saxophones, bass and drums – snaps to attention with an up-tempo introduction, and the crowd's enthusiasm intensifies as King strides to centre-stage. His guitar comes in half-way through the first bar of the second chorus: combative and questioning, the disagreement resolved before he starts singing. It's *Every Day I Have The Blues*. Two verses, and then the guitar takes up the argument again with a longer solo, this time with more urgency. Twelve bars in, he flicks a switch and the instrument's tone becomes shrill and insistent, ratcheting up the emotion, before reverting, and relaxing, to a rounder, fuller, more conciliatory sound.

Tension, resolution – the key to all great drama. It's a piece of musical perfection. He was just warming up.

Having acquired the 'BB' nickname as a young Memphis DJ, the 'Beale Street Blues Boy', Riley B King, had earned a reputation as one of the hardest-working artists in the business, regularly fulfilling more than 300 engagements a year. He made his name at the Bihari brothers' Modern Records in LA and scored 16 R&B Top 10 singles on their RPM and Kent labels, including five No 1s, starting with *Three O'Clock Blues* (RPM 339) in 1952.

"The first few RPM 78s will bring \$300 or more in Mint condition," suggests rare record dealer John Tefeller. "Then there are the 45s – the very early RPM titles, original first pressings, will bring \$1,000 to \$2,000. When you get to the later ones, say, after RPM 355, they are still collectable, but

BB King in a publicity shot from the 50s, when he established himself as one of the hardest-working artists in the business, and (opposite) with his Fender Esquire guitar, circa 1951

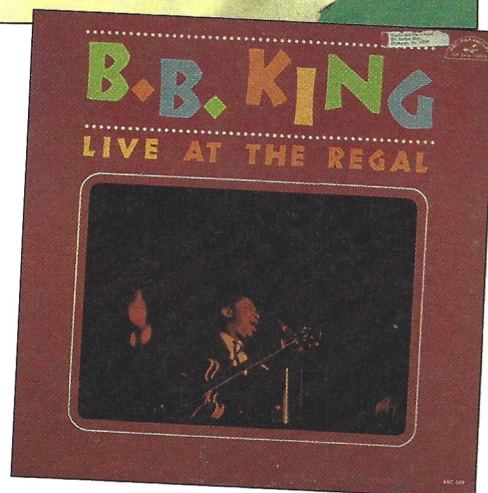


the price will be down to \$200 or less. Once you get past RPM 400, it's down in the \$50 or less range." Condition, he stresses, is everything.

King's first recordings date back even further, to 1949: four sides that he made for Bullet in Nashville. *Miss Martha King* (Bullet 309) and *Got The Blues* (Bullet 315) were not hits, and according to Tefeller are exceedingly rare: "The first one can bring as much as \$6,000, the second \$3,000 – in Mint condition," he says. King had never heard himself before. "When they played back the recordings, I didn't know who it was," he recalled in 1989. "I asked one of the guys, 'Who's that?' They said, 'That's you, fool.'" For the young singer this first session was a brutal reality check. "I thought I was big stuff, but we didn't sell no records. I thought if you made a record, that was it. I found out that was not it."

The *King Of The Blues* was the ruler of a shrinking domain by 1964. Black music was enjoying unprecedented commercial success in the US, but it was soul singers, not blues artists, who were making the running. Groups like The Impressions and The Drifters were scoring hit after hit, alongside Marvin Gaye and James Brown. As the ABC sound men rigged their microphones, The Supremes' smash, *Baby Love*, not only topped the R&B chart, it had shouldered aside The Beatles to reach No 1 in the *Billboard* pop chart, too. These groups and others like them regularly played at the Regal, where audiences were accustomed to hearing their favourite stars. But no BB King single had made it into the R&B Top 10 for three years.

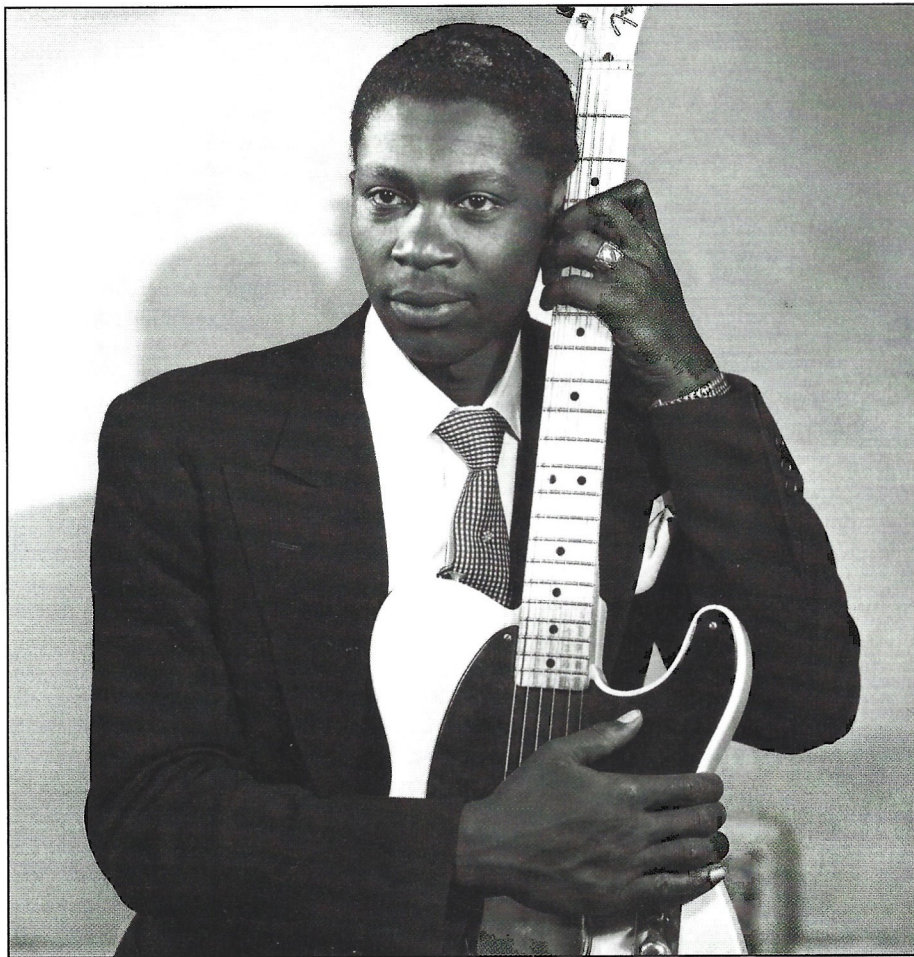
There was an irony there for the 39-year-old, Mississippi-born bluesman. Though known as a supreme instrumentalist, King, nevertheless, regarded himself primarily as a singer, and as music



historian Elijah Wald has observed: "What made him a star were his passionate, church-inflected vocals. Bringing the innovations of gospel quartet leads into the blues world, King not only reshaped blues but also helped lay the foundation of the soul revolution."

King had changed labels in 1962, moving to ABC-Paramount, whose Chicago A&R man, Johnny Pate, had produced and recorded The Impressions' recent hits. It was Pate's idea to do a live BB King album at the Regal Theater.

The grand 3,000-seat venue was on the corner of 47th Street and South Parkway. Like the Apollo in Harlem, the Royal in Baltimore, the Howard in Washington and the other major theatres on the so-called "chitlin circuit" of black entertainment venues, it put on several shows a day, interspersing them with B-movies in an effort to clear the auditorium between shows. "They had 12 or 14 stars – everybody who was anybody played at the Regal," remembered Lee 'Shot' Williams when I spoke to him in 1982. In 1964, he was 26, and an up-and-coming soul singer. "A dollar and 80 cents to go in, and you



could stay all day and all night. You could tell when there was a superstar there: they had lines from the middle of the block all the way back round 47th, down to Vincennes, three-deep."

King was the headliner, booked for a week's residency. A contemporary newspaper notice said: "The new Regal show will also headline Mary Wells, Junior Parker, Joe Hinton, The 5 Du-Tones, Clay Tyson, The Dells and The Drew-Vels." An ad announced: "38 TOP favourites in a SENSATIONAL new stage show! Plus on screen! *Iron Angel*, first run war thriller!"

King's organist, Duke Jethro, remembered these engagements as especially taxing: "It was hard work. It was the equivalent to playing three, four gigs in one day." This particular gig was harder than most – Jethro's Hammond B3 was in for repair, so King told him that he'd have to play the house piano. "I said, 'Heck, I can't play piano'. He said, 'Well, just sit there and pretend – that's what you do most of the time anyway.'"

Lee 'Shot' Williams also had a reason to remember this BB King date. He was on the bill, too, because he'd had a local hit record: *You're Welcome To The Club*, on Federal, written by Sonny Thompson, and released in August 1964. It was covered the following year on Checker by Little Milton. "I was there, backstage," he told me. He saw how anxious King was before one of the early shows: "It was five or six-thirty in the evening, there were kids still there. BB said,

"I'm afraid to go out there, those kids won't like the blues"

"I'm afraid to go out to them kids out there, they probably won't like the blues."

This wasn't false modesty. Since 1960, when King moved his business from Buffalo Booking in Houston to The Shaw Booking Agency in New York, he had been trying to break into the crossover market created by the rise of rock'n'roll, which had allowed artists like Fats Domino, Little Richard and Chuck Berry to shake off the "race music" label and play to mixed or predominantly white audiences.

"But there still remained an isolated, cultural island in the mainstream of black American music, and BB King was marooned on it," wrote Charles Sawyer in his 1980 biography, *The Arrival Of BB King*. Though King did get booked to open for people like Lloyd Price and Sam Cooke, and often made more money than he had as a star on the chitlin circuit, things hadn't gone entirely to plan: "The young fans, eager to see the stars, were impatient with his slow tempos and mournful lyrics. They wanted the jump and jive, the razzle-dazzle choreography, the chorus of slinky back-up vocalists singing the shoop-shoops and doo-



Theresa Needham: "He told Buddy Guy to change his style of music"



Steve Freund: "Everything Clapton could do, BB did better"

wahs. Sometimes he was booed." According to Sawyer the booing came more from black teenagers than white, which King felt reflected their view that the blues was backward-looking. The rejection affected him deeply.

The singer and guitarist could see that the popular tide was turning, but he was nothing if not professional. He knew he had to get out onto that Regal stage and nail it. Besides, this was Chicago, in the middle of the South Side, a few blocks from the 708 Club, Pepper's Lounge, Theresa's Tavern and numerous other blues clubs. King would often drop in on them after a show at the Regal or the Trianon Ballroom. Theresa Needham herself remembered a visit one evening in the late 50s, as a youthful Buddy Guy was playing his first few gigs. The older man offered him some career advice. "BB King came in here one Monday," she told me in 1982, just a year before the Tavern closed its doors. "When Buddy came down off the bandstand, BB told him that if he didn't change his style of music, he'd never

get anywhere. Him and Buddy went up on the bandstand together; you didn't know one from the other."

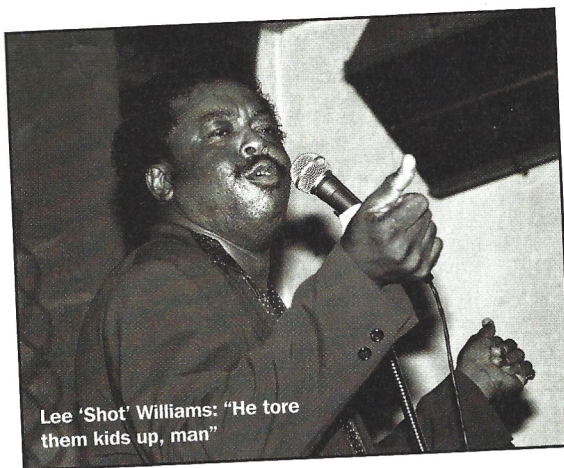
It was a neighbourhood steeped in the music, as King well knew, and even if some members of his Regal crowd were too young to have spent much time in Theresa's, they would have absorbed the music osmotically through their parents' 78s.

He certainly had no shortage of material. "He would open up with Every Day I Have The Blues – that was a given," recalled Duke Jethro, who was in King's band from 1963 to 1968.

"After that, we had no idea what we were playing the rest of the night.

And we never knew what he was going to play next. Plus we never knew what key he was going to play it in. But we always managed."

Having got the young crowd's attention with the opener, King focuses on building the emotional pitch in a Regal auditorium that was already humming with the fervour of a religious meeting. Sweet Little Angel both kicks off and winds down with a solo – one 12-bar chorus at the start of the song and one at the end; two instances of extraordinarily expressive, virtuoso musicianship bracketing a vocal so shamelessly fraught and manipulative that it would be the envy of the most incendiary Southern preacher. He breaks off between



Lee 'Shot' Williams: "He tore them kids up, man"

songs to talk to his audience like a hip uncle, but the relief offered by such pauses is temporary. With each new number, King keeps up the pressure. On Side Two, the introductory solo to Worry, Worry, underpinned first by Duke Jethro and then by drummer Sonny Freeman, builds to a cathartic climax from which King

"BB King defines blues-rock guitar. He could do anything"

launches into the vocal. Ron Steele, the ABC sound engineer, had rigged two microphones above the aisles of the auditorium, and the joyful hysteria of the crowd is as much a part of the success of the recording as the dynamic interplay between the band and its leader.

Lee 'Shot' Williams watched this masterclass from the wings, and never forgot it: "He tore them kids up, man. You hear the audience, how they's howling? I was there."

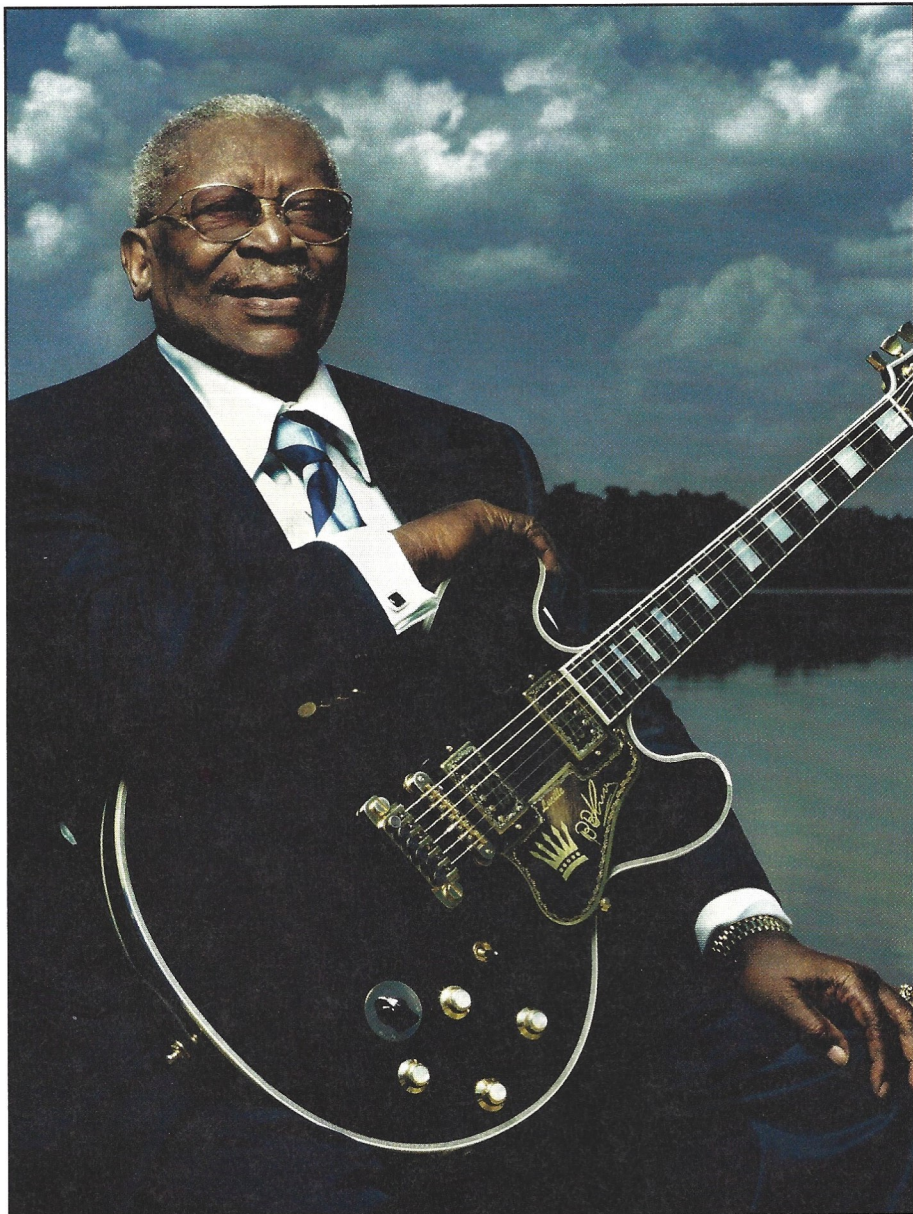
No doubt King made a lot of new fans at the Regal that night, but even a king cannot hold back the tide.

In 1964, the blues seemed destined to play out its time with an older and dwindling black fanbase, as the new soul stars swept all before them. But, of course, help was at hand. The Beatles had already begun to colonise the US charts. The Rolling Stones and the rest of the "British Invasion" weren't far behind. These young rock'n'roll bands knew the blues a lot better than many of their transatlantic cousins did, but it didn't take long for white America to catch on. *Live At The Regal* became one of their set texts. For King's career and reputation among this new generation of fans, the only way was up.

San Francisco-based guitarist Steve Freund grew up in New York, before moving to Chicago in the 70s and carving



Pervis Spann, in his Chicago radio studio, in 1982



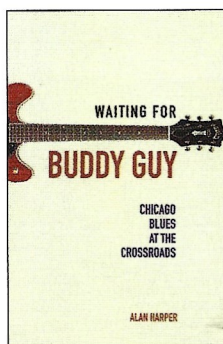
out a career in the bands of bluesmen like Sunnyland Slim and Big Walter Horton. His first taste of blues was in the basement of his family's Brooklyn apartment building, where the janitor kept chickens and played 78s by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. Freund was a teenager when he first saw King in the late 60s. "BB King was the main man who turned everybody on," he told me. "He defines blues-rock guitar. He rocks – he turned up the volume, he bent those notes, he played fast when he wanted to – he did everything. Everything Clapton and all those guys do, BB could do it better – I've seen him and heard him do it. He could play like Django Reinhardt; he could play like Wes Montgomery – he could do anything."

The first time BB King was booked at a rock venue – the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco, in February 1967, with Moby Grape and the Steve Miller Blues Band in support – he wondered if he was in the right place. He had played the hall before, but since his last appearance, Bill Graham had started booking shows there. "It used to be 90 to 95 per cent black," King recalled in a 1989 interview. "This

time it seemed to be 98 per cent white. I was very nervous – very, very nervous."

It was barely two years since the Regal gig, in the heart of Chicago's South Side. He had been nervous then, too. Engagements like that were coming to an end, but for the King Of The Blues the Fillmore gig was a new beginning. "Bill Graham introduced me himself. He said, 'Now ladies and gentlemen,' shortly, just like that, 'I bring you the chairman of the board, BB King.' That was the first time I heard that. And at that time, when everybody stood up, it was the first standing ovation I ever had in my life." **RC**

*Alan Harper is the author of **Waiting For Buddy Guy – Chicago Blues at the Crossroads**, published by the University of Illinois Press and available from all good bookshops.*



HE'S DYNAMITE BB live – on record

BB King made 14 live albums, if you include the live side of *Live And Well*, and his two co-productions with Bobby Bland. *Live At The Regal* (ABC 509) was the first. It has been reissued on vinyl, eight-track, cassette and CD, and there are variant versions. Some have a second introduction on Side Two by Chicago DJ, E Rodney Jones. Others have nine tracks instead of 10: on Side Two, *Woke Up This Morning* (short but punchy, at 1:44) is missing. Some of King's most interesting live cuts never made it to vinyl – his set at the 1967 Monterey Jazz Festival, and his support slot later the same year at the Winterland. Both are worth tracking down online. These are his other essential live albums:

BLUES IS KING

(His Master's Voice CSD 3608, LP, UK, 1967)

£30

Recorded at the International Club in Chicago, with a small band, in 1966. No horns, but Duke Jethro has got his Hammond B3 back and sounds wonderful. It was a bad year for King – taxes, divorce, and his stolen tour bus was uninsured – and you can tell by the hard edge to his singing and playing.



LIVE IN JAPAN

(ABC GW 1312, 2LP, Japan, 1971) **£35**

Recorded and released as a 2LP set in Japan in 1971 by ABC, but unavailable in Europe until 1999 (MCA 1118102, CD, £6). Thirteen tracks including hits, stupendous backing by Sonny Freeman & The Unusuals, and some extended jams.



LIVE IN COOK COUNTY JAIL

(Probe SPB 1032, LP, UK, 1971) **£30**

Back to Chicago for a seminal 1971 show, featuring almost the same band as the Japanese sides – two saxes, trumpet, bass, drums and piano – and a similar set to the *Regal* LP, with the addition of a fine *The Thrill Is Gone*, King's 1970 hit.



BB KING & BOBBY BLAND TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME ... LIVE

(ABC ABCD 605, 2LP, UK, 1974) **£20**

Relaxed, with showbiz banter, this isn't aimed at a rock audience. But it showcases two of the biggest stars of the pre-soul era.

