

B. B. KING



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1949-2008</i>	<i>Blues</i>	<i><u>3 O'Clock Blues</u> (1951)</i>

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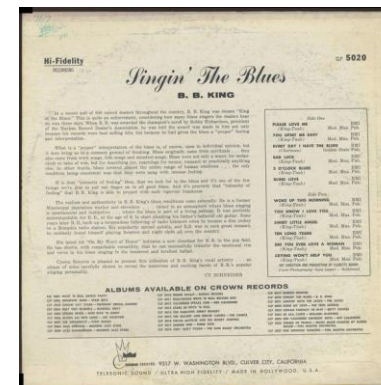
SINGIN' THE BLUES

Compilation released:

Feb. 1957

V A L U E
2 3 4 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Please Love Me; 2) You Upset Me Baby; 3) Everyday I Have The Blues; 4) Bad Luck; 5) 3 O'Clock Blues; 6) Blind Love; 7) Woke Up This Morning; 8) You Know I Love You; 9) Sweet Little Angel; 10) Ten Long Years; 11) Did You Ever Love A Woman; 12) Crying Won't Help You.

REVIEW

B. B. King's singles on RPM records started flowing as early as 1949, but since most of his long and prolific career was LP-oriented, it makes sense to choose as our point of departure this 1956 collection, which puts together the majority of his best singles from 1951 to 1955 (a more comprehensive overview of the early years can probably be found on some later anthologies, but, as far as I am able to tell, there is no single collection that puts together all of his early material).

Many of these songs were huge hits on the blues and R&B charts — but, for some curious reason, missed attracting white audiences, who were usually far more enthralled with the likes of Muddy Waters and Elmore James in the 1950s. If you look up any random biographies of blues/R&B-enthralled British Invaders, for instance, you will rarely see B. B. mentioned as a serious influence — except by just a few oddjobs such as Eric Clapton, and even then, usually in retrospect rather than in any interviews from the 1960s. The reason? My best guess — too *clean*.

The thing is that already from the very early days, B. B. King positioned himself as, or, rather, was marketed as a sort of king of «Blues-de-Luxe»: clean, dazzling, respectable playing for respectable gentlemen. Just take a look at the album cover: with that big fat Gibson, that neat pin-striped suit and that handsome bowtie, he looks much more like the black equivalent of Bill Haley than Muddy Waters' lost brother. The exact same association applies to the music: smooth, mid-tempo, backed



by professional jazz musicians with their big brass arrangements. And, to make matters «worse», the guy puts as much emphasis on his *singing* as he does on his playing — the album isn't called **Singin'**, not **Playin' The Blues** for no reason — really, the most tasteless thing in blues music since the day Lonnie Johnson sold out to all them ballad-lovin' posh people! Then again: what do you *really* expect from a guy one of whose primary idols in life has been Frank Sinatra? Can you even imagine Muddy or Elmore naming Frank as a major influence?

All of this is enough to explain precisely why B. B. King did not become a household name among white audiences until the late Sixties — or maybe even the early Seventies. It also explains why these early singles are not *really* the «milestones» they are sometimes pronounced to be. Thus, for traditional blues lovers, 'Every Day I Have The Blues' is one of the cornerstones of the genre, but definitely *not* because of this original version, a measly 2:49 in length and only featuring a simple, brief solo, thoroughly *not* outstanding in the context of all the other great blues heroes of the time — it took King quite a long time, at least ten years or so, to properly popularize it, along with a dozen other big hits, in the live context.

Indeed, **Singin' The Blues** is no more of a milestone in the evolution of electric blues than contemporary records by the other King (Albert) — or, for that matter, even earlier records by T-Bone Walker. Most of the time, B. B. King plays relatively standard, predictable licks which do not differ all that much from the regular techniques of the epoch; more importantly, the compact form of the 45"-tailored ditty does not allow him the slightest opportunity to stretch out, improvise, or develop a theme.

So in the end, if there is *one* reason to listen to these singles at all, it is truly and verily the singing. Unquestionably, at this point B. B. King was the most vocally-endowed blues performer in the business (and would remain so until the emergence of a strong competitor in Freddie King), and his manner of phrasing and vocalizing owes much more to urban semi-crooners like Leroy Carr and Lonnie Johnson, not to mention white lounge performers (to whom the man must have lent quite a serious ear), than to hoarse growlers from the Delta. This makes it hard to associate his music with the devil, who, as I have heard, is gravely allergic to falsetto, and prefers to make serious deals with the likes of John Lee Hooker. But, when dealing with B. B. King, it is wise to remember that blues had been alternately serving as a genre of lounge entertainment since the day it was born, and to try and approach him from the same perspective one would approach Sinatra or Neil Diamond: *prima facie* a respectable entertainer who will try to stir up — gracefully and cautiously to some, blandly and boringly to others — the *human* parts of your soul rather than the *animal* parts.

In fact, I think I «got» this record — and B. B.'s studio style in general — when I thought of it as sort of a Clyde McPhatter

album with the doo-wop harmonies and strings replaced by soaring electric guitar. Many people, I think, would share this dream: to hear Clyde McPhatter with an atmosphere of true bluesy grit instead of sentimental sap. If so, you need not look further than the original versions of 'Three O'Clock Blues' or 'Did You Ever Love A Woman' to get what you want, except you gotta be prepared that most of the hooks will be your average generic 12-bar blues. Not that this is the most tasteful combination in the world, and, honestly, even after getting it I still much prefer the period when B. B. properly reallocated the majority of his talent to his guitar playing. But there is something to be said about the art of «blues crooning» as well, though not much, and now that I've said it, we might as well bring the review to a close.





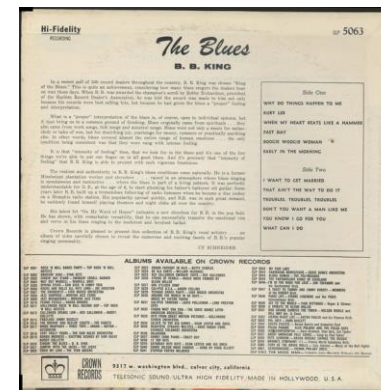
THE BLUES

Compilation released:

1958

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Why Do Things Happen To Me; 2) Ruby Lee; 3) When My Heart Beats Like A Hammer; 4) Past Day; 5) Boogie Woogie Woman; 6) Early In The Morning; 7) I Want To Get Married; 8) That Ain't The Way To Do It; 9) Troubles, Troubles, Troubles; 10) Don't You Want A Man Like Me; 11) You Know I Go For You; 12) What Can I Do.

REVIEW

Perhaps Crown Records made a small marketing mistake when they placed the absolute majority of King's hit singles on one and the same LP: **Singin' The Blues** did become the definitive sample of the man's 1950s studio sound, but it also squeezed most of the golden eggs from the hen in one go. And with the LP format steadily gaining in popularity, the Bihari brothers, who were in charge of Modern Records and all its subsidiaries, had no choice but to go back to the stockpiles and load the subsequent albums with former commercial flops, obscure B-sides and generally stuff of uneven quality — as usual, paying no attention whatsoever to proper chronological sequencing and making us guess about the specific motives behind each single inclusion.

Ironically, this sweep across the vaults means that **The Blues** ends up being somewhat more than just the blues — because while the record-buying public knew very well what it wanted from B. B. King (scorching electric blues leads), B. B. King himself did not particularly fancy the status of a one-trick pony. With this selection, it is easier to see traces of stylistic versatility and occasional adaptation to the times — a rather far cry from the strictly hardcore blues, blues-de-luxe, and blues ballad program on the debut LP. It's not necessarily *good* adaptation, and you cannot always blame the public for wanting to stick to the tried and true, but it is one thing to purchase a new 12-bar blues single every few months, and quite another to go through an entire album of rigid 12-bar blues in one go, right?

So, from as early as 1950 we feature 'Don't You Want A Man Like Me', with a danceable, mambo-influenced, percussion-drenched rhythm which B. B. then skillfully converts into jump-blues for the bridge section — an innovative as heck approach for the time; but since the song does not even have a guitar solo, letting the rhythm and the brass sections take over completely, nobody cared, patiently waiting for the much more predictable, but much more guitar-ish '3 O'Clock Blues' to bring the young showman his first bout of fame. Five years later, in 1955, the B-side 'Ruby Lee' repeated the mambo trick with the same change in tempo midway through the song — this time, the song had much more guitar in it, but the public still did not want their boy going all Cuban on their asses.

Elsewhere, we see B. B. try out the classic boogie sound: 'Boogie Woogie Woman', a B-side from late 1952, also features no lead guitar, ceding its place to Amos Milburn-style barrelhouse piano rolls and a loud sax solo. 'That Ain't The Way To Do It', which was actually the B-side to '3 O'Clock Blues', is a bit more agreeable, with King finally playing a rather laconic solo at the end of the song, but here, too, the emphasis is clearly on getting the crowd up on its feet and dancing, rather than admiring the guitar player's nimble fingers.

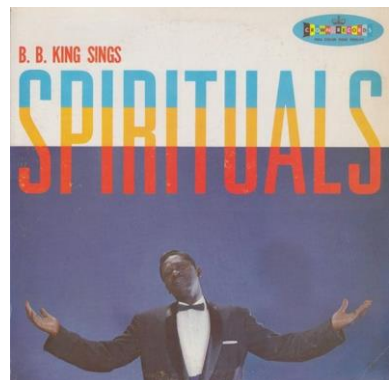
By 1956, that old-fashioned boogie sound is seen morphing into something more closely resembling modern Chuck Berry-style rock'n'roll, specifically on 'Early Every Morning' (sometimes titled 'Early In The Morning') — although the song is still structured as a fast 12-bar blues, King's licks on here have more points of connection to Chuck Berry's soloing style than before (of course, Chuck's guitar playing itself grew out of mastering blues licks); basically, this is as rock'n'roll as the man would ever get in his life, which is not saying much — B. B. King was always too conservative and laid-back to allow the true fires of rock'n'roll to contaminate his spirit — but there is something to be appreciated about the god of blues de-luxe speeding up and showering you with a flurry of happy-agitated notes. These solos certainly kick less ass than Chuck, but this is mainly because they are far more complex and disciplined, and that can at least be respected.

'Early In The Morning' was actually an A-side, but it did not chart. In order to chart, a B. B. King song had to be a slow blues, so the only classic-commercial hit on **The Blues** is, understandably, the very slow blues-de-luxe 'When My Heart Beats Like A Hammer' (from 1954), a classic King number which is simply not too interesting in its original three-minute studio version; seek out various live performances to see which ways it could go when properly let out of the bottle. Two more slightly less famous chart successes are from 1957: 'I Want To Get Married' has a beautifully sharp and wobbly guitar tone, the exact kind that Eric Clapton would be elevating further around 1965, and 'Troubles, Troubles, Troubles' opens with a funny New Orleanian blast of brass which makes me wonder if this recording could in any way influence Elvis' own

'Trouble' (a vastly different song altogether) in **King Creole** one year later. (This would require Leiber and Stoller listening to B. B. King, but why the hell not?).

On the whole, however, do not expect too many strong surprises: even the «different» styles that I tried to describe are really just subtle nuances. Given, however, just how many songs here feature next to no lead guitar, I would think that the titles of **Singin' The Blues** and **The Blues** should probably have been reversed — I mean, B. B. King in his younger days always had as strong aspirations about being an expressive singer as about being a guitar player, but it is only on this LP that you begin to understand just how important that aspect of his showmanship was to his blossoming ego.





B. B. KING SINGS SPIRITUALS

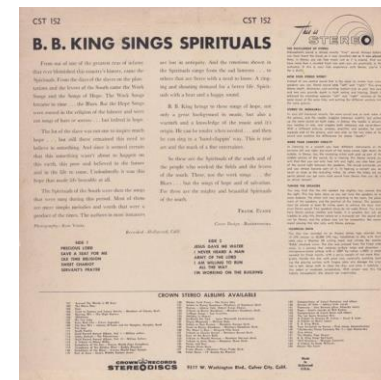
Album released:

October 1959

V A L U E

1 2 3 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Precious Lord; 2) Save A Seat For Me; 3) Ole Time Religion; 4) Sweet Chariot; 5) Servant's Prayer; 6) Jesus Gave Me Water; 7) I Never Heard A Man; 8) Army Of The Lord; 9) I Am Willing To Run All The Way; 10) I'm Working On The Building; 11*) A Lonely Lover's Plea; 12*) I Am; 13*) The Key To My Kingdom; 14*) Story From My Heart And Soul; 15*) In The Middle Of An Island; 16*) Sixteen Tons.

REVIEW

I kind of like (and still mostly agree with) my old, short, crude, irreverent review of this album (from 2015 – seems like a lifetime ago already), so let me first reproduce it here with minimal edits, then I'll throw in a few extra comments on the Old-and-Wise side of the story.

«Far be it from us to say that B. B. King is a poor singer — he has a nice, endearing, sometimes almost silky tone that never grates or annoys.

Further be it from us to say that B. B. King is not a spiritually sensible man — regardless of how much money he has made and how much of it he has not given away to the poor, there is little reason to doubt his sincere faith in the Lord (who has, among other things, provided him with all that money).

Still further be it from us to say that B. B. King has no right, or reason, or business recording an entire album of gospel tunes if he feels like it — especially considering that, every once in a while, everyone deserves at least a brief change from the 12-bar mold, and going into gospel is nowhere near as cringeworthy as, say, going into crooning.

And be it as furthest of the furthest from us as possible to say that **B. B. King Sings Spirituals** is a proverbially bad album. If you have not suffered priest abuse, be it Catholic or Protestant; if you have no 19th century-style racial prejudices; and if you can stand a little musical take on «ol' time religion» propelled by good singing and good organ playing, the record

cannot be put down on its own merits.

None of which, however, prevents me from stating the obvious: I cannot think of a reason why anyone would want to hear, much less own, a B. B. King album with no guitar on it whatsoever. B. B. King is a guitar player, period. If he does not want to play his guitar, let him not play his guitar in front of his parents, his children, his close friends, or his mirror. In this life, B. B. King has one and only one social purpose (that matters, anyway), and that is playing his guitar. I can understand that he did not want to be pigeonholed. But I can do nothing about it — I *want* to pigeonhole him, and I *will* pigeonhole him.»

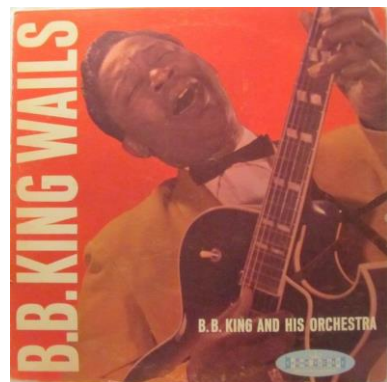
Now for some moments of saving grace. From a historical perspective, **Sings Spirituals** has some importance. As a conceptual project, it was B. B. King's very first album to be released as an *album* rather than a randomized collection of singles — all the recordings were freshly produced over one session in April 1959. It was also his first *and* last album that very explicitly paid tribute to the old musical tradition of spirituals on which he was born and raised — certainly not the only time that King so explicitly acknowledged his racial and social roots, but the only time he focused *entirely* on the matter. And finally, it was one of the first, if not *the* first time ever in the world of the blues, when an entertainer primarily known and revered for one certain skill (guitar playing), would defiantly and single-mindedly attempt to reinvent himself as a major practitioner of a different skill. It's kind of in-*yer-face* here: "You only want me to shut up and play my guitar? Well, this time you have no choice whatsoever but to accept me as a singer!" Which makes this a completely different move from Nat King Cole, for instance — whose gradual transition from piano playing to crooning was clearly motivated by factors of fan response and popularity.

All of this provides ground for respect rather than ridicule; yet even after a few additional listens to the record I am unable to convert that formal respect to genuine emotional impression. Technically, B. B. King, particularly in his younger days, had a solid singing voice, with decent range and capable of nuanced overtones, but it didn't really have enough depth and power for this kind of material, not even reaching the level of an Elvis, let alone a Mahalia Jackson. Nor do you ever get the feeling of all this spirituality flowing through the heart of a «troubled man» — this is more like the spirituality of a content, generally satisfied person, reverent and cautious enough so as to not forget to regularly thank the Lord for his well-being. It might, in fact, have worked better if he'd come up with this idea in his later years rather than in his youth; maybe then all the accumulated baggage of old age and «troubles I've seen» would have automatically added an extra layer of depth and authenticity. Here, even the more personal and intimate prayer-type spirituals such as 'Save A Seat For Me' and 'I Am Willing To Run All The Way' fail to rally me to the Lord's rewarding side.

It is certainly telling that among the bonus tracks on the 2006 CD reissue, even if most of them naturally belong to the same category of spirituals, one finds embedded a loud, exuberant, brass-heavy, and utterly corny cover of Tony Bennett's 'In The Middle Of An Island' — I am not entirely sure if this was recorded during the exact same period, yet it does not feel like it's *totally* out of place on an album like this, cozily nestled in between 'Story From My Heart And Soul' and 'Sixteen Tons'. With his blues-de-luxe approach to everything he ever did, B. B. King managed to cross-breed cotton fields and Las Vegas time and time again; I'm sure *his* Jesus always paid sufficient attention to his silk suit and black tie before giving his servant water, 'cause every bluesman crazy 'bout a sharp-dressed Lord and suchlike.

Even so, I bear no instinctive or intellectually synthesized hatred towards the record; all of these considerations merely try to explain why B. B. King, no matter how deeply he may have wanted to, is never really counted among the great gospel singers of our time. But it does add at least a formally interesting page to his story, explicitly reminding us of the influences that were quite important not just to his singing, but to his playing as well — think of it as his equivalent of David Bowie's **Pin-Ups** or The Band's **Moondog Matinee**, albums that very few people would list among their favorites but do a good job of reminding us that individual artistry does not simply appear out of nothing within a vacuum.





B. B. KING WAILES

Album released:

1959

V A L U E
2 1 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Sweet Thing; 2) I've Got Papers On You, Baby; 3) Tomorrow Is Another Day; 4) Come By Here; 5) The Fool; 6) I Love You So; 7) The Woman I Love (Moonshine Woman Blues); 8) We Can't Make It; 9) Treat Me Right; 10) Time To Say Goodbye.

REVIEW

The first of several LPs credited to «B. B. King And His Orchestra», **B. B. King Wails** could easily get lost in the altogether overwhelming pool of King's interchangeable LPs released in the Crown years, but there are at least two significant nuances. *One*: this is his first record, not counting the made-to-be-different experiment of **Sings Spirituals**, to have been released as a proper album, not a mish-mash of contemporary and obsolete singles. Some of the songs were indeed released as singles at about the same time as the LP, and some, like 'Sweet Thing', would continue to be released as singles years later, but none of this is relevant: **B. B. King Wails** is the man's first attempt to prove that he is capable of building up and releasing a 26-minute dissertation on the blues in a single sitting, after a decade of thriving on tiny singles.



Two: the «His Orchestra» thing is no joke, as this session does indeed feature B. B. King at his brassiest, with a huge big band sound — huger than ever before, for sure — supporting his playing and singing. The difference from the earlier years is, of course, mainly one of scope, since King had always favored a big mess of pianos, horns, and (to a lesser extent) strings

behind his back, but this time he clearly wants to establish himself as some sort of spiritual competitor for both Count Basie *and* Tommy Dorsey, with both of whose orchestras he also cut several recordings that year, available as bonus tracks on the album's expanded CD edition. What can we say? «One of the most polished Negro entertainers in the business», as he is called in Bill Parker's original liner notes¹, really loved for his grit and jagged edges to be counterbalanced by glitz and flash, the more the merrier. The problem is, the glitzier it gets, the less convincing it becomes — for the most part, King continues to stick to the classic vibe and feel of post-war electric blues, while His Orchestra, at the very same time, tries to take him into a completely different direction.

Incidentally, the contrast begins already on the very first track, 'Sweet Thing', which opens as a dialog between King's blues phrasing and a lively, blasting response from his brass section. Like most of the tracks here, it ends up sounding like «Big Joe Turner with Virtuoso Blues Guitar On Top», not necessarily a great combination. When it comes to the soloing part, you'd think the horns might step back a bit, but they actually get louder simultaneously with the guitar, muffling its sharpness and smoothing out the edges. The two approaches simply do not mesh all that well, which is altogether not surprising considering that what we're hearing is «Mississippi Country Boy Going Vegas».

It gets even less convincing on the second track ('I've Got Papers On You, Baby'), where the «Orchestra» does most of the work — this time, there's a part of the horns responsible for rhythm work and another part responsible for lead melody — and B. B. King starts to feel like a guest star on his own recording, playing a short, nicely flowing solo that is immediately lost in the surrounding sea of brass. Maybe he just wanted it to be different; maybe he was sensing his own limitations and thought that a big band like that would be a nice way to overcome them — but I suspect that's taking the art of positive thinking onto a level where it simply does not belong. Far more likely, he just wanted to put on a show. Which he did, but at the expense of nearly dissolving his own personality inside it.

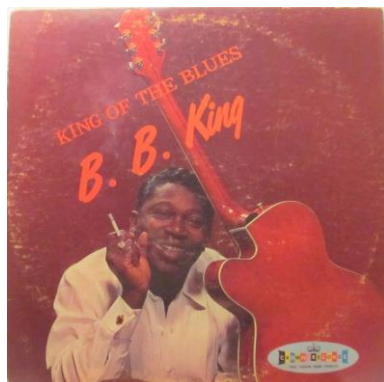
Amusingly, there is *one* track on the album with a wholly different feel from the rest — you can sense some slightly inferior production quality on 'The Woman I Love' (the guitar almost seems like it's coming from an adjoining room), and, indeed, this is a B-side from 1954 that somehow ended up here. There's a brass section on it, too, but a small one, acting as modest support to the lead guitar and the rhythm section, and King's exuberant falsetto makes a great love duet with the lead melody, as the artist bends, vibrates, and stings like a man possessed. It just feels like such a natural style for him.

¹ On a predictably «modern» note, the latest re-release of the LP, claiming to reproduce **Original Liner Notes**, politely replaces 'Negro' with 'African-American'. I do appreciate the sentiment, but couldn't they at least have filed this under **Not Quite Original Liner Notes**?

Returning to the gone-glitzin' modern era, **B. B. King Wails**, in addition to regular slow and mid-tempo blues, also offers a couple of overtly sentimental blues ballads, such as 'The Fool', and even an exercise in old-fashioned doo-wop ('I Love You So'), as well as a crude secularization of 'Kumbaya', retitled 'Come By Here' and turned into a celebration of lust, love, and traditional family values. Considering that for B. B. King, the most traditional of all family values was playing his guitar (the second was making lots of babies), we probably have little interest in hearing him «wail» his way through the minimal vocal requirements of "come by here, baby, come by here" without once touching the strings, while His Orchestra is just pumping away monotonously for two minutes and fifteen seconds.

The later-day expanded editions of the album throw in a couple more salvageable tracks, like a relatively vicious take on a song called 'You've Been An Angel', or the original take on King's «confessional» number 'Why I Sing The Blues', or, most importantly, his collaboration with the Count Basie Orchestra on a five-minute long slowed-down version of 'Everyday I Have The Blues' — again, King prefers to simply sing here without touching his guitar, but at least he gets to see what a truly *tasteful* jazz orchestra sounds like: graceful, giving ample space to individual players while never trying to drown out the singer and keeping the flash'n'glitz factor to a minimum. Perhaps if he'd recorded the entire album with Count Basie rather than his *own* «orchestra», things would be different. As it is, this period in B. B.'s career seems more important from a purely historical perspective than in terms of general enjoyment.





KING OF THE BLUES

Album released:

March 1960

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) I've Got A Right To Love My Baby; 2) What Way To Go; 3) Long Nights; 4) Feel Like A Million; 5) I'll Survive; 6) Good Man Gone Bad; 7) If I Lost You; 8) You're On The Top; 9) Partin' Time; 10) I'm King.

REVIEW

Not to be confused with the sprawling 4-CD anthology of the same title, spanning B. B. King's entire career from 1949 to 1991 that MCA released in the 1990s, **King Of The Blues** is originally just another of the many, generally interchangeable, LPs from the man's Crown catalog. Just like **B. B. King Wails**, it was also released as a proper *album*, largely consisting of takes from fresh recording sessions — and although the album as such is no longer officially credited to «B. B. King And His Orchestra», the large brass band presence is still carried over from previous sessions. Other than that, it is hard to find any general features that would somehow distinguish *this* particular collection from its surroundings, so instead I'll just offer a few observations on individual songs.



'I've Got A Right To Love My Baby', opening the album, would also become the first single to be taken off it; I do believe that the pompously «winding» brass riff of the intro (it also regularly announces the transition to a new verse throughout) makes it instantaneously more memorable than anything else on here — but I am not quite as sure if, mood-wise, it really fits the standard 12-bar blues pattern of the number. Few songs in B. B.'s catalog have this «Vegas fanfare» and «Chicago blues» idioms coming together in a more explicit fashion — and *maybe* this is precisely because the result feels a little

clumsy, as if that brass department were trying to hijack the song and turn it into a different direction from the will of the vocals and the sharp-as-usual guitar solo. Still, with all of King's songwriting limitations, even an odd fit of a brass riff is enough to give a song of his extra personality, something that he always finds himself in need of.

Conversely, although 'Long Nights (The Feeling They Call The Blues)' is nothing special in terms of structure, it is one of King's most soulful early performances — no, still nowhere near the Otis Rush level of emotion, but with just enough wobbling and trepidation in the voice to suggest that here, B. B. goes slightly beyond formula and really, *really* tries to convey the "feeling they call the blues" to the listener. It also contains one of his most expressive solo breaks to date, where he rises to new heights in the art of sustaining his blue notes as he slowly, but steadily tries to expand the lexicon of his «talking guitar». It's all just transitional, really, from the earlier, dryer style of the 1950s to the development of the super-smooth B. B. King guitar idiom in the late 1960s, but if you just go through this particular period album by album, life itself will eventually teach you to notice all those subtlest of nuances.

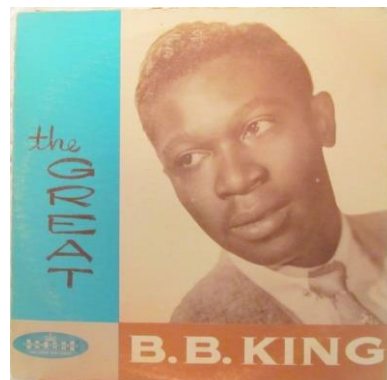
Arguably the most important song on the album in terms of King's overall career is 'I'll Survive', a relaxed and confident blues, generally based on the old pattern of 'Sittin' On Top Of The World' — not coincidentally, the lyrics in this one, too, are all about coming to terms with a painful breakup and convincing oneself that life still goes on, at least as long as your favorite burger joint on the corner is still open. This one seems to be such an important mission statement for King that he even reduces his guitar playing to a minimum number of licks, letting the piano player do most of the instrumental work as he gets busy convincing the woman who walked out on him that "I've got too much pride, but I'll survive". Compared to 'Sittin' On Top Of The World', a song all about the masking of one's true feelings with fake bravado, 'I'll Survive' shows more soul and vulnerability, but the end result is more smooth and optimistic — the thing is, for B. B. King the blues is actually a bitter medicine for survival, a seance of personal psychotherapy to get you back on your feet, and most of his big anthems, be it 'I'll Survive' or 'The Thrill Is Gone', are supposed to leave you uplifted in the end. Hey, no wonder the guy ended up living a good life of 90 years.

One might, in fact, argue that B. B. King has his own definition of the «blues», as seen from the final track on the album, the aptly titled 'I'm King': "I've been around the world, seen everything / And if it's love you want baby just give me a ring / I can't lose with the stuff I use / I'm the king of the blues" (sung to pretty much the same melody as 'I'll Survive'). Judging by this logic, «to have the blues» = «to move from one woman to another», a practice to which Mr. King has indeed held true for most of his life, and not feeling any particular guilt about it, which makes guys like Don Giovanni and Casanova into

arguably the greatest bluesmen of them all. (*Unless*, of course, the actual implication is that B. B. King simply uses his Level 80+ blues-playing skills — "I can't lose with the stuff I use" — to win over the ladies, which should make us doubt his moral qualities even more). But we are not here to judge, certainly not situations of which we know fairly little; we are here to take or leave B. B. King's conception of «smooth blues», and my main problem with it is that it seems to go down much better with a healthy meal than a broken heart. Which is why B. B. King will probably never be my best friend in times when I'm in trouble — but when I'm in a fairly upbeat mood, an album like this is a good reminder that you always have to be ready to whack that bit of upcoming trouble on the corner on the head with a nice, juicy cheeseburger.

Technical fact: be aware that the album, with a slightly different track list ('Partin' Time' replaced by 'That Evil Child'), would later be reissued on the Kent label in 1971 as **Better Than Ever** (not really!), and that there are even occasional CD versions of it floating around. Also, B. B. seems to remember the record rather fondly, since no fewer than three numbers off it ('I'll Survive', 'If I Lost You', and 'Good Man Gone Bad') would later be re-recorded for his **Blues On The Bayou** album, as late as 1998 — in similar, but longer and more guitar-heavy versions, making the earlier takes only preferable if you really enjoy the man's younger, less croaky voice.





THE GREAT B. B. KING

Album released:

1960

V A L U E

2 3 3 2 2

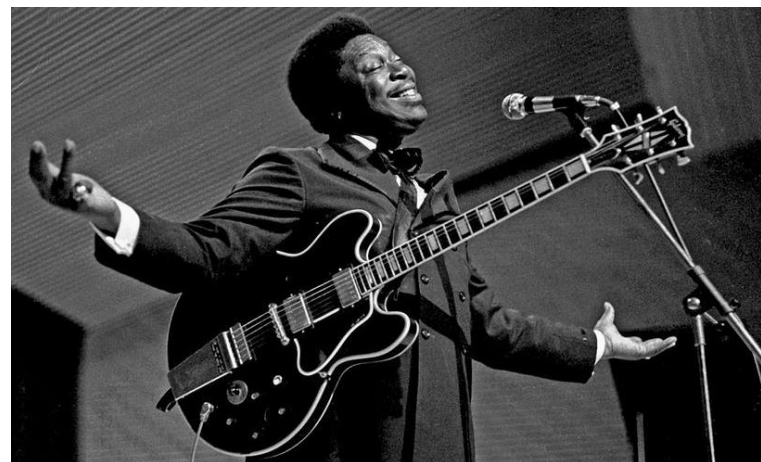
More info:



Tracks: 1) *Sweet Sixteen*; 2) *I'm Gonna Quit My Baby*; 3) *I Was Blind*; 4) *Just Sing The Blues (What Can I Do)*; 5) *Someday Baby (Some Day Somewhere)*; 6) *Sneakin' Around*; 7) *I Had A Woman (Ten Long Years)*; 8) *Be Careful With A Fool*; 9) *Whole Lot Of Lovin' (Whole Lotta' Love)*; 10) *Days Of Old*.

REVIEW

This one may actually have been released earlier than **King Of The Blues** — sources are somewhat conflicting and contradictory — but arranging all those Crown releases in strict chronological order is a time-wasting affair even for the diehard B. B. King fan, because the songs on them are always taken from a messy mix of sessions, sometimes stretching across half a decade or more. If there is anything that *does* matter, it is the chronological sequencing of King's singles — and understanding which of the more recent ones serve as the pivot of this or that particular LP. The rest were, in fact, so hastily selected from the backlog that Crown executives sometimes put the same song on more than one LP by mistake, and often messed up the titles as well (for instance, 'Ten Long Years' was titled 'I Had A Woman' on the original issue, and 'What Can I Do' was titled 'Just Sing The Blues' — apparently, some of the guys were just listening to the lyrics and figuring out for themselves what could be the best title for song so-and-so, just like us Soviet kids in happy innocent times when we could lay our hands on an un-annotated second-hand cassette recording of some US or UK LP and had to invent our own titles...).



Anyway, at least for **The Great B. B. King** the situation is clear: this LP was built up from the ground around B. B. King's biggest R&B hit in six years — the two-part 'Sweet Sixteen', released in January 1960 and making it all the way to #2. This was not the first time King had split a single song across both sides of the single: the first such endeavor dates back to May 1956, with the upbeat jump-blues 'Dark Is The Night' — however, in that particular case the two parts were actually separate recordings, with a decisive coda to each of the two. 'Sweet Sixteen', on the other hand, is a slow, ponderous six-minute blues that originally faded away at the end of Side A and faded back in at the beginning of Side B — signaling that this was indeed the first time when King thought so much of one of his songs that he insisted it would be given the full-length treatment. (Of course, there are no fade-outs on the LP itself).

Not that 'Sweet Sixteen' was really one of *his* songs; it had first been made into [a hit by Big Joe Turner](#) as early as 1952, and for many, it is Big Joe's version on the Atlantic label that remains the definitive one. B. B. does not stray too far away from the original tempo or arrangement (although he does throw in a couple of extra verses), and, surprisingly, after the short instrumental introduction there is not a single guitar solo break during the song's six minutes — the only lead guitar work is supplied in between B. B.'s vocal lines. Clearly, the song meant a lot to him (it would also become a regular element of his concert setlists), and he does turn in a great vocal performance, even if that line about how "*my brother, he's in Korea*" probably did not resonate as deeply with audiences in 1960 as it did back in 1952. (I do wonder a little about the implications of the follow-up of "*and my sister, she's down in New Orleans*" — is this supposed to be a veiled reference to the House Of The Rising Sun? because otherwise, what harm could there be in the protagonist's sister ending up down in New Orleans?). When it gets to the grand finale of "*baby I wonder, yes I wonder, baby I wonder... what in the world is gonna happen to me?*", B. B. really proves his worth as a singer, almost exploding in an orgasm of delirious self-pity toward which he'd been steadily building up for all of those six minutes.

And thus, **The Great B. B. King** is really just 'Sweet Sixteen' and... all those *other* songs. Oh no, they're not half bad: it's just that the most chronologically recent of those dates back to July 1958 ('Days Of Old' indeed!), and the one that is the most chronologically distant is 'Some Day Somewhere' from July 1952. Basically, the label people just went through their archives and stuffed the album full of songs they hadn't previously put on LPs — naturally, they made at least two mistakes, because 'What Can I Do?' had already been released on **The Blues**, and 'Ten Long Years' was originally included on **Singin' The Blues**, but who's gonna remember that, right? If they don't remember it on B. B. King's own record label, surely all those people who bought the album two years ago won't remember it, either.

Anyway, just some brief observations on some of these numbers to boost their individuality just a little. 'Whole Lotta' Love', the B-side to 'You Upset Me Baby' from October 1954 — funny how the song begins with the 'Dust My Broom' riff, as if B. B. King is telling us that he can out-Elmore James the real Elmore James like a little kid, and he doesn't even need to come back to the 'Dust My Broom' riff in the mid-song instrumental break like the real Elmore James always does. Unfortunately, the difference is that B. B. King still sounds bowtie-suave, where Elmore James always sounded down-to-earth.

'Sneakin' Around', the B-side to 'Every Day I Have The Blues' from December 1954 — it's incredible how sleazy this guy can sound when crooning about his covert love affair with an (apparently) married woman. At the end of the song, he just melts away in a doo-woppy falsetto, with such pervy delicacy that it is *highly* likely all the hearts of all the married women in the audience would be his by this point. If you listen *deep* and *hard* enough to this performance, it's difficult not to walk away feeling a little... dirty. Yet the immaculate bowtie still stays on for the entire duration of the suave blues ballad.

Finally, 'Days Of Old', released in July 1958, actually sounds like a very retro-oriented jump-blues number — I am not sure if it is actually an outtake from a much earlier recording session or was deliberately recorded to evoke the feeling of a late 1940s night club with Wynonie Harris at the wheel. In any case, the song's message — "*there's no use to break the rules because every man is some woman's fool*" — is one of those classic bits of pseudo-wisdom that can have a feminist or a misogynistic interpretation depending on which side of the bed you got out of this morning, and it's nice to have the album finish on a fast number after way too many slow blues and ballads.

(If you own the Rhino re-release of the record with all of the bonus tracks, the fastest number is actually '[Bim Bam](#)', a very odd B-side from mid-'56 on which B. B. King seems to imitate a hybrid of Little Richard and LaVern Baker, singing a non-sensical kiddie rock'n'roll melody at breakneck speed. It's technically fun, but it also makes clear that the one genre that B. B. King has absolutely no voice for is high-tempo rock'n'roll — he feels stilted and embarrassed, almost afraid to truly «let it all hang out» as if the worst thing that could happen would be for him to be taken for a «teenage idol»).





MY KIND OF BLUES

Album released:

1960

V A L U E
1 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) You Done Lost Your Good Thing Now; 2) Mr. Pawn Broker; 3) Understand; 4) Someday Baby; 5) Driving Wheel; 6) Walking Dr. Bill; 7) My Own Fault, Baby; 8) Cat Fish Blues; 9) Hold That Train; 10) Please Set The Date.

REVIEW

I think that this was, chronologically, the last of B. B. King's three LPs for Crown Records in 1960; at least, the release date on the CD reissue says «c. August 1960», and the singles that were either incorporated into the album or culled from it are mostly dated to the fall of 1960 or early 1961. Not that the precise date makes a lot of difference, of course. What *does* make a bit of difference is that the material is mostly new and cohesive; the new liner notes state that the songs were mainly recorded around March 3, 1960, with a small blues combo heavily featuring Lloyd Glenn on piano, as opposed to the brass-heavy «B. B. King Orchestra» on previous releases from the same year. (The *old* liner notes, written by a guy called John Marlo, are, in comparison, completely uninformative — for some reason, the guy spends half of the allocated space on a description of what is *jazz*, including a folk etymology for the word. Hello? Maybe he thought he was writing a blurb for the Kings of Dixieland, then decided it would be a waste to scrap whatever he'd just concocted).



Anyway, if you had been pining all this time for a 30 minute-long set of just B. B. King and his blues guitar — no strings, no horns, no mushy ballads, no spirituals, just raw blues — this record is certainly for you. And given its title, we must suppose that it must have been for B. B. as well, although this immediately begs the question — are all those strings and horns on all those other records supposed to be mere commercial bait for B. B. King's polite middle-class audiences, then? Probably not. My guess is that B. B. just likes to play the king-of-the-mountain game, and the more people you can get into the studio or onto the stage with him, the more impressive of an impression he can give. It's one thing when your mountain is just you and a small rhythm section, and an entirely different one when there's a trumpet or a violin player standing on each slope; then, when you crank up the volume on Lucille, you can truly feel like the head of the Pantheon.

The downside is that there is very little to be said about the individual tracks on the album. It's just ten cuts of solid, decent 12-bar blues, well played, well sung, and mostly interchangeable. Like **The Great B. B. King**, this record also kicks off with an extended cut — the five minute-long 'You Done Lost Your Good Thing Now' — but it fails to produce the same effect of a serious personal confession that 'Sweet Sixteen' did, and although the guitar-piano duet in the middle section is pleasant to the ear, there is nothing in King's tone or phrasing here that we have not already heard dozens of times.

That much of the record passes by in the same way — as tasteful, but forgettable background music — is all the more sad to realize, given a certain conceptual angle to the album: most of the songs are covers by a variety of King's predecessors and contemporaries, all the way from Roosevelt Sykes ('Driving Wheel'), Sleepy John Estes ('Someday Baby'), and Memphis Minnie ('Please Set A Date', misspelled here with the definite rather than indefinite article) to Muddy Waters ('My Own Fault') and lesser known figures like Peter Joe Clayton ('Walking Dr. Bill'). With most of these covers originally recorded in the 1930s and 1940s, **My Kind Of Blues** is sort of an early predecessor to Eric Clapton's **From The Cradle** — but where Eric would at least ensure a certain degree of variety in his styles and moods, B. B. King here just puts everything through the same B. B. King grinder. Most of those songs were set to the same two or three melodies anyway, and the only thing that made them distinct was their relative performer's personality — but no matter whether it is the legacy of Memphis Minnie or Peter Joe Clayton that is being processed, the end result is always predictable.

Some of these numbers would end up firmly wedged in King's live sets (both 'My Own Fault' and 'You Done Lost Your Good Thing Now' ended up on **Live At The Regal**), but that's more because they are decent landing pads from where he could lift off into the realm of musical improvisation and verbal ad-libbing. As it is, the only song from here I could perhaps recommend as a *song* is 'Understand' — which is not really 'Understand' (again, some Crown executive probably thought it

a waste of his time to ask the artist for a proper name), but Cecil Gant's '[I'm A Good Man But A Poor Man](#)', which King performs with minimal emphasis on the guitar and maximum on the piano, as per the original; his natural charisma helps him make the line "*I'm a good man, but a poor man, understand*" quite believable, even if there is hardly any doubt in my mind that it is only in a most relative way that B. B. King could call himself «poor» back in 1960.

The bonus tracks on the CD re-issue, selected by Ace Records executives in 2003, prolong the experience but do not really enhance it — just a few more (mostly previously unissued) generic blues performances from the same sessions, including well-known titles like 'Blues At Sunrise' and 'Drifting Blues' that all follow the same musical formula. Only a deep, nuanced aficionado of electric blues could be wooed by the challenge of differentiating between all these interchangeable solos; to me, it's just B. B. King in generic workaholic mode, and the most impressive thing about it is to realize that he *would* eventually rise to the challenge of making his Lucille speak with a whole new voice in the coming decades. Had he forever remained at *this* stuck-in-the-Fifties level, what would be the chances of B. B. King Blues Club & Grill opening in Times Square? (Sure it closed down in 2018, but eighteen years of first-rate catfish and jambalaya are nothing to shake a stick at!)





MORE B. B. KING (BLUES FOR ME)

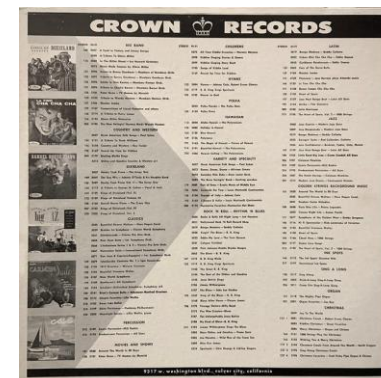
Album released:

1961

V A L U E

2 3 3 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Bad Case Of Love; 2) Get Out Of Here; 3) Bad Luck Soul; 4) Shut Your Mouth; 5) Baby Look At You; 6) You're Breaking My Heart; 7) My Reward; 8) Don't Cry Anymore; 9) Blues For Me; 10) Just Like A Woman.

REVIEW

By the end of 1961, B. B. King was finally fed up with what he saw as the Bihari Brothers' disdain for his talents — the singles were not promoted, the albums were intentionally designed as bargain bin fodder, and the recording sessions had largely turned into repetitive routine with little chance of artistic development. Not that, admittedly, «artistic development» was a major concern for Mr. King — for the most part, he just loved to play his guitar, sing the blues, and be admired for both of those qualities — but still, there's only so much even an artistically unambitious person can take before he feels it might be time for a change.

I do not think that this particular LP, released in the fall of 1961 and originally titled **More B. B. King** (later rebranded as the only marginally more exciting **Blues For Me**), exactly counts as the «last straw»: it is no better and no worse than the «average» B. B. King album on Kent Records, containing a little bit of everything — some small-combo blues, some big-band blues, some ballads, some dancey numbers, some strings, etc. — and adding absolutely nothing to what we already knew about King. Oddly enough, it did not include B. B.'s most successful single from 1961, the double-sided 'Peace Of Mind' / 'Someday', which went all the way to #7 on the charts — his highest position since 'Sweet Sixteen', though I am not exactly sure why; I have a serious suspicion that the opening Disney-esque strings of 'Peace Of Mind' were so *en vogue* around 1961 that they alone triggered the buying stimulus. 'Someday' adds a nice guitar solo to the strings, but is just as conventional in its basic structure — that said, King's vocal performance on 'Peace Of Mind' is indeed one of his strongest

from that entire period, and somehow he almost manages to sound believable when delivering the message of "*I've had everything that money can buy / But still I'm so unhappy darling that I could cry*", even if *neither* of these lines was probably very true back in 1961 — at that point, with the Bihari Brothers to blame at least partially, B. B. definitely did not yet have *everything* that money could buy, but neither was he really so unhappy that he could cry. In fact, it takes quite a bit of imagination to picture B. B. King so unhappy that he could really cry, even though his personal life hasn't exactly been a smooth train ride all the time.

Most of the other singles from 1961 *are* on this record, though. In approximate chronological order, these are: 'Get Out Of Here', a solid mid-tempo dialog between Lucille and the horn section with a beautifully clear and clean guitar solo, as slowly but steadily B. B. King is beginning to get rewarded with the benefits of modern production values; and 'Bad Case Of Love', a generic and already deeply clichéd (even for 1961) love-as-disease metaphor which is, however, set to a danceable beat and tempo, so that the guitar break, when it comes in, almost ends up being playful in a Chuck Berry way — well, for a few bars, at least, before it reverts to the usual blues paradigm. (King would record a much longer version on 1998's **Blues On The Bayou**, but I prefer the short original without all the excessive soloing). The B-side to 'Bad Case Of Love' was 'You're Breaking My Heart', a long, slow 'Five Long Years'-style blues dirge that does not stand out particularly well in the catalog but certainly stands out on this generally more upbeat and «body-oriented» record.

It is a little odd that songs tend to be grouped together «thematically», particularly on the second side of the LP: after 'You're Breaking My Heart' (the only piece of slow angry blues on the record), we suddenly find two orchestrated pop ballads in a row — 'My Reward' opens with a string flourish that would be right up the alley of Atlantic R&B in those years, but I do admit that both on that song and on the following 'Don't Cry Anymore', the string melodies are fairly creative and engage in cool dialog with King's vocals. King himself seems to feel quite happy about it, too, since he does not even pick up his guitar while the sweet violins lift our big guy up in the clouds.

And then, right after these two, come two instrumentals: 'Blues For Me' (later re-used as a new title for the entire LP) is a quirky mix between John Lee Hooker and hot Latin dance music, while 'Just Like A Woman' is a wordless (apart from faraway backing vocals chanting the title) recreation of the classic Louis Jordan jump blues number. Both are mainly just vehicles for more soloing, but their placement next to the string ballads is like a veiled advertisement: «Look! This guy can do anything, *and* he's got mad organizational skills, too!» Well, yes — throw in two more crackly, croaky outtakes from the mid-1950s ('Shut Your Mouth' and 'Baby, Look At You' on Side A), with a seriously different guitar sound from 1961, and

More B. B. King emerges as an unintentionally apt celebration of the man's diversity. As long as it's got a nominal blues vibe to it, B. B. King can do pretty much everything.

Unfortunately, diversity alone cannot hide the fact that there is not a single truly outstanding number here, though there is not one openly embarrassing or tasteless cut, either. Somewhat to B. B.'s honor, in the year when it was all about softness, sap, and sentiment, he did *not* emerge with a **More Mantovani For Me** kind of record — sure, the man loved glitz, romance, and fan adoration, but not to the extent of drowning out his personality or betraying his trust to Lucille. (Well, "*give or take a night or two*", as Leonard Cohen would say, given the inclusion of those two string ballads so as to pay proper tribute to the world of Ben E. King and Jackie Wilson in which most black performers were living in 1961.) In this case, though, the stern conservatism does not pay off, at least not for future generations who wouldn't really give a damn about trying to listen to the album in the overall imaginary context of the early Sixties.

