

GIGS

B.B. KING - SEATTLE - 1977

People have asked me how I branched out from writing to become a photographer. I don't tell them that B.B. King was involved.

It had crossed my mind many times that shooting along with my writing would be more lucrative. But the learning curve and investment required kept me from doing anything about it. Until the King concert at the Trojan Horse, a fairly cozy Seattle venue for primarily black audiences and black musicians whose draw couldn't quite fill up the Moore or Paramount. I had lost my longtime reviewing gig at the Herald by then—a hoity-toity new A&E editor with NYC pretensions having ended my longest relationship with a daily paper ever—and was picking up bylines here and there amid the revolving door of Seattle music mags in the lean pre-Grunge days. In addition to features, I continued getting paid to hear music and see movies for the likes of the Weekly, the Daily, the Rocket, the Sun, the Argus, the Stranger, the Scroll, and even more obscure publications. When Monolith, a new slick music monthly reared its head, I was all over it. I kicked out some features for them, and saw the first concert in the new Kingdome stadium; the Eagles and Linda Ronstadt from the heights of the virtually empty press box. Leading to another feature on what lousy acoustics the Kingdome exhibited.

My next excursion for them was the Trojan Horse... and they sent a photographer with me. This tiny geek, but there's nothing wrong with that. Babbling idiotically all the way to the gig, but what the hell? Needless to say he'd never been in the Horse before: he looked like a dictionary illustration of "white boy". I had told him he wouldn't be able to get usable shots there: a fairly elegant venue largely devoted to crimson wallpaper and what you'd call "intimate" seating in plush red velvet loges, and very dark. Even the stage lights weren't all that bright, and all seats were on the same level, meaning the diminutive photobug would be shooting through a screen of other listeners, most quite given to a lot of movement when activated by music of the kind generally played on the Horse's small stage.

I was starting to figure out he had a lot more gear than experience, so I told him not to worry, we'd be able to get good shots backstage during the interview. Which was what the story was really about, not a review of the gig that would run three weeks later. He bopped around asking for access, anyway, but the response he got discouraged him greatly. I got the impression he was glad he didn't get knifed or eat or something, actually. But I managed to settle his rabbit ass down and enjoy the show.

Which I did. I was never a fan of the man, nor of blues in general. But if you wanted somebody to show you why so many people *do* like the blues, the ageless Blues Boy from Mississippi was the perfect guy to show you. I gave him heartfelt applause, but it was drowned in the shower of love, adulation, and general uproar from the crowd.

The show ended and I picked my way, smiling my butt off, through the remnants of a happy audience, to the backstage door, where Norman Matthews, King's crusty road manager, stood guard. There were a couple of guys from a radio station back there talking to The Man, so while CameraDoggie fidgeted, I waited and eyed the emptying club for hot women in outrageous outfits, of which there were several memorable examples. And in fact, one such came up to the door and stood there, also waiting for entrance, but showing no credentials and stating no media affiliation. She was in her late thirties but a major knockout who could out vogue any college girl without missing a blink. Very beautiful face in an angular urban form, like an ex-Supreme. And a heart-stopping body apparently trying an unauthorized escape from a tight sheath of what could only be called scarlet. I made no attempt to dissemble being very taken by her, and she chatted easily with a light, unselfconscious charm. I assumed she was attached to one of the guys in the backup quartet, or maybe to the club ownership. Or an NBA star or something.

As I talked to her (definitely warming to the subject) my photographer gawked. I could see him fighting the reflex to hoist his Nikon to his eye and start firing the motorwinder.

At some point the door opened, the radio guys came out, exultant with what was obviously a killer interview in the can. I knew one of them somewhat, though he'd moved up from that old Central Area FM jazz station by them. He held up a high-end recorder and pumped it twice, grinning in triumph. Matthews nodded to them, then to us, and we strolled back to the green room and the presence of the man who undoubtedly the single most known and significant practitioner of the single most seminal form of American music.

What hit me first was a strong difference between the man I shook hands with and the performer I'd just seen on stage. You see this often, generally because the performer plays a role, puffing himself up or melting himself down to fit a cultural mold. In this case, I was seeing a man whose fusion with the role was complete, but didn't buy into his own legend. The difference in presence wasn't something he had been putting on, it had been projected onto him by the audience. He had been lit up, as though by a floodlight, by a throbbing beam of adoration.

At this point, to my utter horror, PhotoBoy decided to get into the act. And there was nothing I could do to silence him. I considered several. And was even in possession of a handgun. But there was no professional way to make the little moron shut the hell up, so I had to pass on an appropriate solution.

"Mr. King," he chirped, "I saw John Lee Hooker last week and he was really awesome."

I'm sure you can grasp how much performers like to spend interview time discussing other musicians. And you could see Matthews in the background thinking, "Oh, so you now seen TWO black musicians in your life, kid?"

Worse, he followed it up with, "Is there any chance of the two of your doing a duet? Playing concerts together?" Again, I'm sure you can imagine that event. Apart from whatever awareness you have of contracts and labels and all that.

Matthews had left (wonder why?) but reappeared carrying a very distinctive black and gold Gibson ES guitar and I have to admit, he got off one question that didn't call for a belt across the lips, "Is that Lucille?"

"Lucille number five," was the answer, along with a comment on how he buys a seat on airplanes for his famous guitar, whichever vintage number. Matthews walked close in front of Mr. King and very quietly said, "Got a live one."

But my faithful boy photog was bleating out some other idiot question that blocked the transmission. Matthews had been moving towards the door but stopped and said, "I said we have a live one."

He got a nod for that, and the reply, "Well, fine. Let's have a look."

He disappeared and was almost instantly back, accompanied by the Scarlett Lady, floating in like red neon under a dandelion bloom of teased hair and radiant with expectation. She spoke to me, smiling, but I was already standing up to leave. I kind of grabbed the shooter and dragged him out since, shockingly, he didn't get it. Everybody there was very gracious in leave-taking. As was I. A totally class act always takes me by surprise and they were some classy people.

My company as I walked out on Fifth Avenue, pocketing my interview cassette and talking myself out of strangling my colleague, was less so. He was babbling and chattering about the event, crowing about the great pictures he got.

I had a well-founded suspicion that he had not included me in any of those shots, and I asked him flat out. He seemed stunned that I would so presume. "He's the star, not you," were his actual words. Which didn't get punched right back into his mouth, regrettably. Did I mention he was a friend of the publisher?

I tried to explain that you want pictures of your staff with the stars. Shots that add credibility to struggling new publications, that go good on bulletin boards. I don't think he got it, ever.

I finally said, "Cross your mind that you could have sold ME a print, you stupid little shit?" before stalking off to drive away and leave him to get back to Federal Way by himself.

The interview ran in the third and last issue of Monolith, under the title, "BB: King of the Blues." The photo credits were billed over my own writer byline. I never saw the little dickhead again, or any photo credits in his name. By the time the issue hit the streets I owned a camera, a flash set-up, and a bag of filters and other accessories. I had also, in that time, shot seven rolls of film, off which I had sold five shots to various publications, and was trying desperately to learn how to improve my craft. A year later, my main income was taking pictures. I stopped and sold my cameras because I realized that even though I had won awards and sold shots to national magazines and big color covers, I would never be really, really good at it. A lesson not everybody learns.

So there's that.