

“Live at the Regal”--B.B. King (1965)

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Essay by Ed Komara (guest post)*



B.B. King

In his 1996 autobiography “Blues All Around Me,” B.B. King (1925-2015) said that the four most prestigious theaters on the African-American entertainment circuit in the 1950s were the Apollo Theater in New York City, the Royal Theater in Baltimore, the Howard Theater in Washington, DC, and the Regal Theater in Chicago. Getting booked in those venues was half the effort. Getting enough acclaim from the audiences to be invited back was the other half. Since the audiences paid for their tickets with their own hard-earned money, they expected the most bang for their buck. When they didn’t get back what they felt they invested, they jeered. But when they felt they were recompensed, they hollered joyously.

The Regal Theater was built in 1928. For the next 40 years, it was one of the main showplaces in Chicago for African-Americans, presenting movies and live entertainment. It was closed in 1968, and demolished in 1973. B.B. King first played the Regal in 1952. By the time he taped the sets for “Live at the Regal” in 1964, he knew how to play its audiences as skillfully as he played his guitar named “Lucille.”

That King did so with such a demanding audience showed how seasoned he was as a performer. He had started out in 1948 as a bluesman from Mississippi, which meant he came “from the farm” biographically, musically, geographically, and socially. He secured his initial foothold in the entertainment world in 1948 as a guitar-playing radio personality on WDIA in Memphis. He continued playing the blues, but he updated its image by playing electric guitars and gleaning tips in music and dress from the leading rhythm and blues stars of the era. His first hit, “Three O’Clock in the Morning Blues” (1951), brought him to the northern theater circuit. Long-term successes like “You Upset Me Baby (1954)” and “Sweet Little Angel” (1956) gave him enough resources to hire his own band and to transport them on performing tours in his own bus. Keeping the band and the bus meant taking as many gigs as were offered, which in some years amounted to between 250 to 300 nights. It was a grind, “monotonous but steady” as he put it in his autobiography, and “the road never stopped.”

Which may explain why in his later years King seemed indifferent about “Live at the Regal,” saying in his autobiography, “I’ve probably played hundreds of better concerts than the one taped at the Regal.” Considering that it was his first gig taped live on-location, he made a good point about all those nights before then that are now lost to time because they went unrecorded. Some artists found the Regal Theater to be great for recording live concerts. Stevie Wonder’s live version of “Fingertips” recorded at the Regal in June 1962 reached no. 1 on “Billboard’s” pop singles chart in 1963. Gene Chandler’s “Live On Stage in ‘65” features a performance of “Rainbow” in which, after six minutes of unrelenting pleading, Chandler has the young women in the front row gurgling “baby, baby, baby, baby” with him. It was the idea of ABC-Paramount

producer Johnny Pate to record King at the Regal. So, on November 21, 1964, King took another turn on the Regal stage, this time for posterity, on his own terms.

The first LP side (tracks 1-5 on CD) begins with the enthusiastic introduction by Chicago DJ Pervis Spann, and King hitting the stage with a breathless cover of the longtime blues standard “Everyday I Have The Blues.” Then he proceeds with a barrage of hit tunes: “Sweet Little Angel,” “It’s My Own Fault,” “How Blue Can You Get,” and “Please Love Me.” The Regal audience is tough, becoming energized with each song until it roars with delight during “How Blue Can You Get,” when King accuses boldly, “I gave you seven children, and now you want to give them back!”

Yet the greatest moments on “Live at the Regal,” in my opinion, happen during side two (tracks 6-10 on CD), which begins with a respectful introduction by another Chicago DJ, E. Rodney Jones, and a genial version of “You Upset Me Baby.” Maintaining the subdued mood, King sneaks into the introductory guitar solo for “Worry, Worry,” speaking a few words to the audience at the beginning of the first 12-bar chorus and proceeding to play Lucille for three choruses. During the second chorus, his pianist’s accompaniment matches the heartbeats of the audience. Then, in the third chorus, King and his drummer ring out the conclusion to his solo and, without breaking musical stride, he starts the fourth chorus by bellowing “Worry, worry!” The crowd erupts! While singing the lyrics (choruses 4 and 5), King gradually returns to the low volume so that, in choruses 6,7, and 8, he can unabashedly and vulnerably repeat in falsetto the words “Someday, baby” and tell a little joke. During the final chorus of “Worry, Worry,” the band presses its volume hard on King, forcing him to switch from falsetto to full voice--a remarkable moment on King’s records as his later bands tended to be tight but polite. The remainder of the album--“Woke Up This Mornin’,” “You Done Lost Your Good Thing Now,” and “Help The Poor”--is excellent, but those songs seems anticlimactic when heard after the superb performance of “Worry, Worry.”

Other live albums were taped during the rest of King’s long career. His 1966 sets in a Chicago club that were released as “Blues Is King” (1967) and the B.B. King box set “King of the Blues” (1992) are on the same accomplished level as “Regal.” On the other hand, “Live in Cook County Jail” (1971) seems pale by comparison, partly because nearly all of the band members (except for drummer Sonny Freeman) had been replaced since the earlier 1966 club recordings.

The marketing of “Live at the Regal” in 1965 to black and white record buyers sparked a crossing-over transition in King’s career to white audiences, with the mainstream breakthrough coming with his concerts at the Fillmore in San Francisco in 1968.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.