

# B.B. King: “I’m Just A Blues Singer”



...and so much more!  
Come take a virtual  
trip through the life  
and times of this  
world-class  
bluesman.



# A Lifetime Collector

The contents of this presentation, drawn from multiple sources, simulate a visit to the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, which opened in 2008 in B.B. King's "hometown" of Indianola, Mississippi.



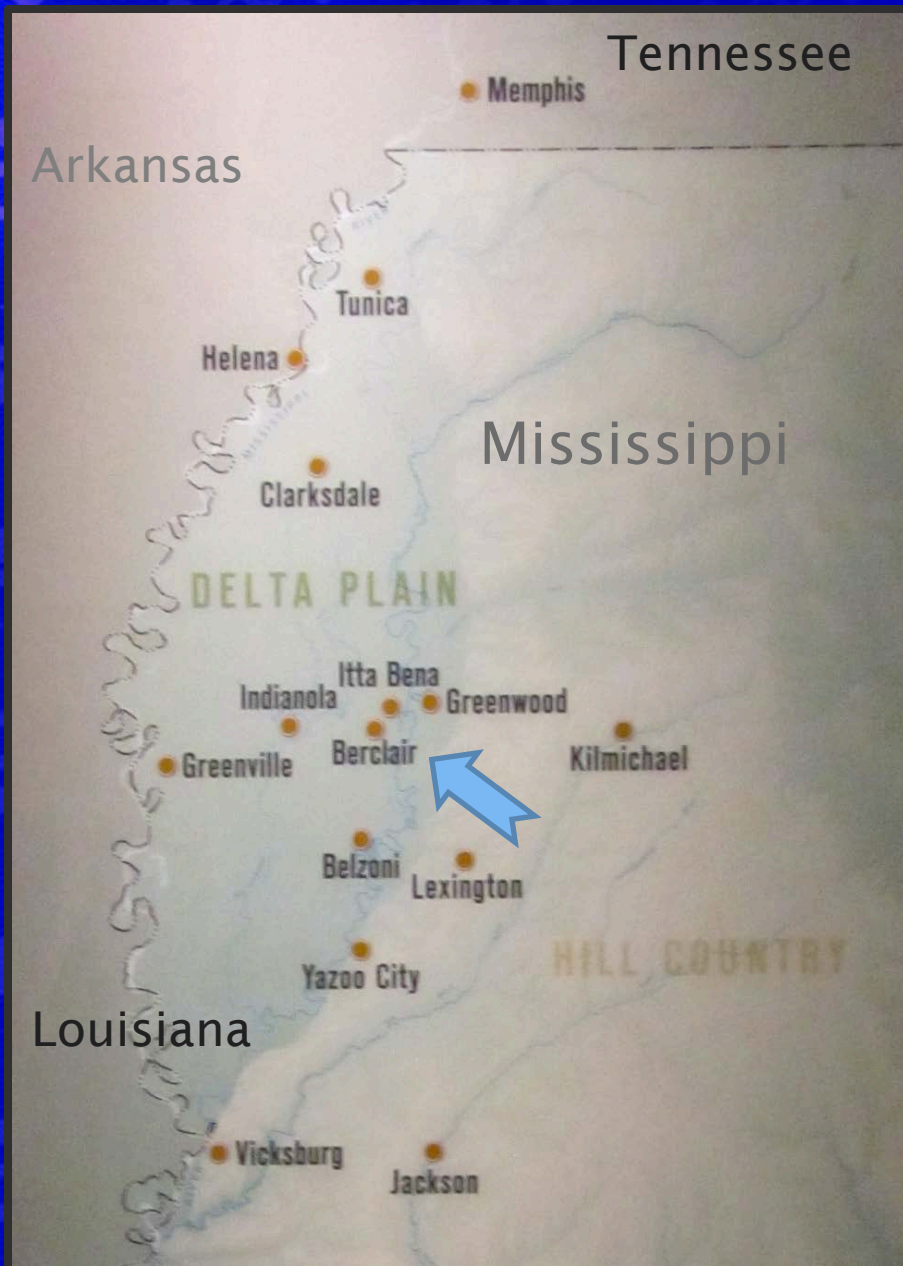
Almost all of the items exhibited in the museum were shipped to Indianola from B. B. King's Las Vegas home.

By sharing these artifacts with museum visitors, he has given us a glimpse of himself and what it's like to be the King of the Blues.



# Birthplace

Riley B. King was born on Wednesday, September 16, 1925, in a cabin on the bank of Bear Creek in the tiny town of Berclair, Mississippi. This map shows other places he lived during his childhood and into his teens: Kilmichael, Lexington, Indianola, and Memphis.



# Sharecropper's Home



Riley's parents, Albert and Nora Ella King, were sharecroppers who lived in a simple home southeast of Berclair along Bear Creek. After his parents separated when he was four, King lived in Kilmichael and Lexington before moving as a teen to Indianola, which he refers to as his hometown.



# Sharecropper's Life

Growing cotton began by breaking up the ground with hand tools like this hoe.



Workers stooped over the cotton plants to fill their bags, which they dragged along behind them. It was hot, tiring work.

# Childhood Struggles

During the 1930s young Riley's mother died. He left her home to live with his father in Lexington, MS.



After about two years, he missed his mother's relatives, so he rode his bike from Lexington to Kilmichael, about 45 miles away. The bicycle in this photo is from the 1930s.



# Farm Labor

Some workers, like Riley, drove a tractor or other farm vehicles. The photo below shows Mr. Johnson Barrett, who gave Riley King a job when he was in his teens.

In the 1940s during World War II, Riley kept his farm job, because farm labor was considered essential to the war effort.



# Listening to Blues Music

Riley's aunt Mima had a wind-up Victrola and many blues records, including those of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lonnie Johnson.

Riley became an avid fan of both artists. He also heard live blues when his mother's cousin, musician Bukka White, came to visit the family in Kilmichael.



Wind-up Victrola



# First Guitar



Young Riley King's pastor, Reverend Archie Fair, taught him how to play some guitar chords. After that, Riley started singing and playing in church.

During 1941 in Kilmichael, Riley began working for the Cartledge family. Blake Cartledge advanced Riley \$15 for him to buy his first guitar. He was sixteen years old.

After moving to Indianola in 1943, Riley joined a group called the St. John's Gospel Singers.

# Panoram Machine

This refrigerator-sized machine was popular in the 1940s. A dime would pay for a 3-minute “soundie,” a movie with a sound-track like today’s music videos.

B.B. King was able to see some of the best musicians of the time, such as Benny Goodman, who had a black electric guitar player named Charlie Christian in his band.





# The Radio

Radio, like no other previous development, provided Americans with a common cultural experience that transcended regionalism, social position, race, religion and educational background.



A 1930s Radio

*The Lone Ranger* was a popular radio program that began broadcasting in 1933. Most families did not have a television until about twenty years later.

# Making Music in Memphis

In 1947, when Riley was in his early 20s, he visited radio station WKEM in West Memphis, Arkansas. Sonny Boy Williamson played harmonica on a daily program at the station. Riley talked Sonny Boy into letting him play on the program.



Soon he had a regular job playing at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Grill.



# Another Audition

In 1949, Riley visited WDIA, a new radio station in Memphis that targeted the black community in its broadcast area. The station owner asked him to audition for a new program sponsored by a health tonic.

During the audition, he got the job when he made up an original song to advertise the tonic. For a while, he became known on the radio as the Peptikon Boy. Later, that changed to Beale Street Blues Boy, which was later shortened to B. B.



# Radio Personality

In 1949 the radio station owners increased his air time, giving him a second time slot playing records as a deejay in the afternoons.





# How Lucille Got Her Name



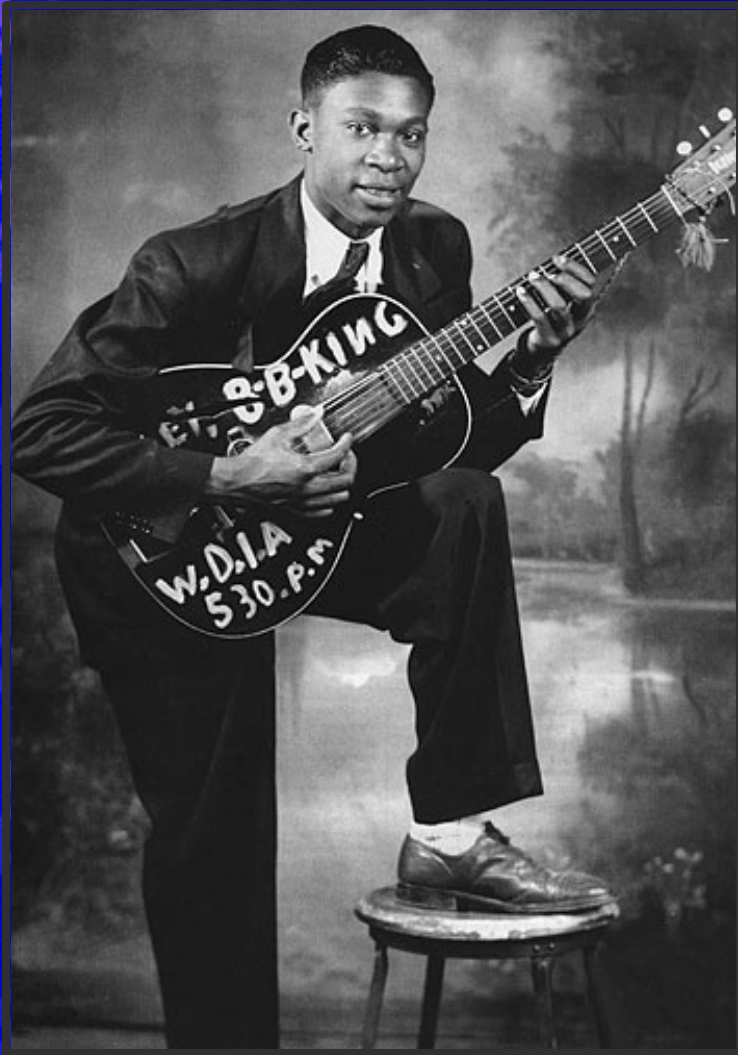
Gibson ES-355, 1980

In 1949 B.B. King was playing in a club in Twist, Arkansas when a fire started. He went outside to safety, and then ran back in the club to get his guitar. Later, he found out the fire started because two men were arguing about a girl named, Lucille.

He named his guitar Lucille to remind him to never do that again.

B. B. King says, "...Lucille is real. When I play her it's almost like hearing words, and of course, naturally I hear cries."

# Working Musician



By 1950, Riley was known around Memphis as B.B. King. He had a growing reputation as a musician.

Several early recordings were made at the studio of Sam Phillips. B.B. King's first hit record was *Three O'clock Blues*, released in 1951 when he was 26 years old.



# Three O'clock Blues

In the 1950s Memphis, Tennessee enjoyed a growing reputation as a center for live and recorded music. Modern Records of Los Angeles, scouted the area for local artists to record.

B.B. King's first hit record, a single called Three O'clock Blues, was released in 1950. The record made it to #1 on Billboard's R&B chart, changing B.B. King from a regional success to a national star.



His first national tour in 1952 took him to Washington, D.C., Baltimore and New York City.

# Big Red



B.B. King bought "Big Red," his band's first tour bus in 1955.



# The Chitlin' Circuit

Traveling on the road meant playing a black night club one evening, and driving to a different town to play in another one the next night.

B. B. King said, “I found that each time I went to a place, I could get more fans.” These night clubs were referred to as the Chitlin' Circuit.





# Club Ebony



Club Ebony is a night club that is only a short distance from the B.B. King Museum. During the 1940s and 1950s it was part of the Chitlin' Circuit.

As a teenager, Riley King would stand outside the club, so that he could hear some of the traveling musicians who played there. It remains a favorite night spot in Indianola, Mississippi.



# LP Album Success

This 1964 live album recording was made at The Regal, a Chicago night club.

Biographer, Charles Sawyer, wrote “it is the album that eventually secured his stature as King of The Blues for decades to come.”



# Grammy Award

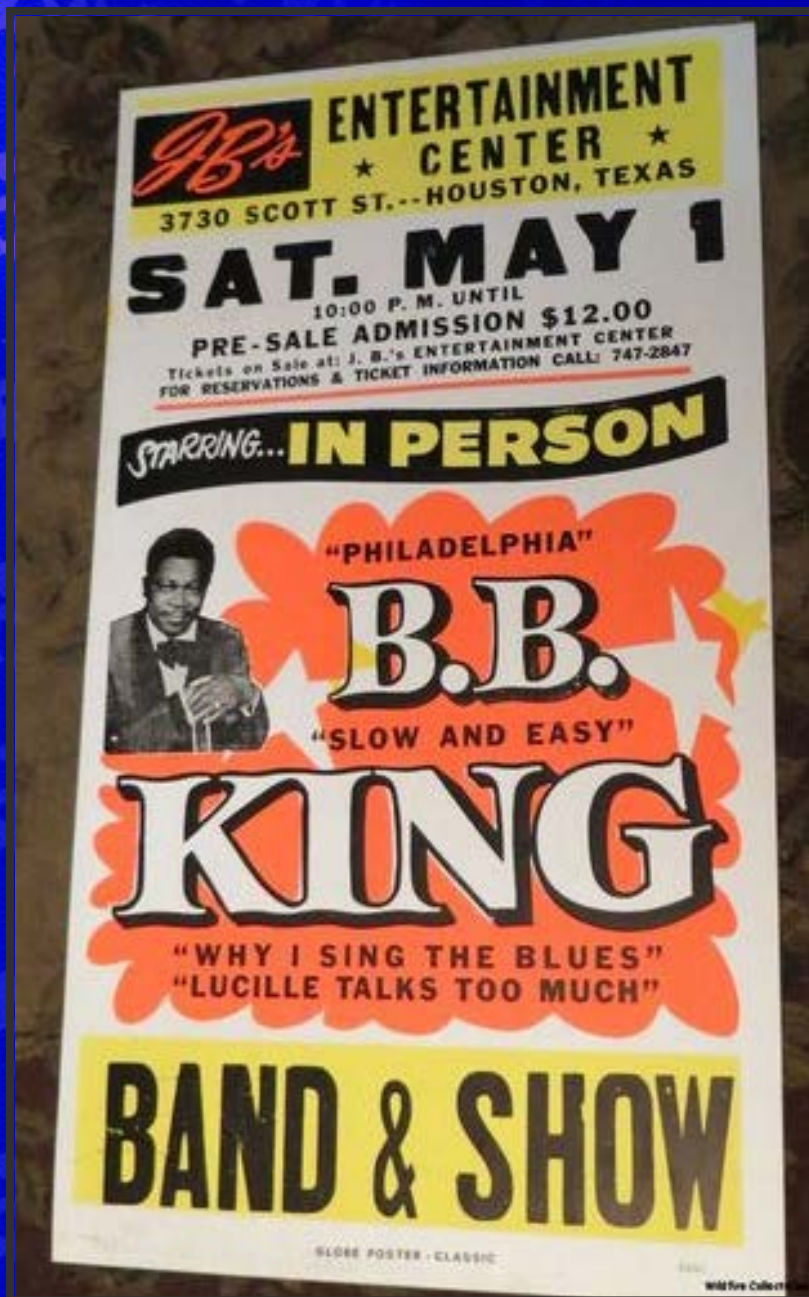
B. B. King's recording of *The Thrill is Gone* brought his first Grammy award for Best Rhythm and Blues Vocal Performance, Male, in 1970.

This recognition led to an invitation to perform on the Ed Sullivan Show for an audience of 20 million people.

These two events sealed his reputation as a general audience entertainer. He continued to tour throughout the U.S., expanding his audience along the way.







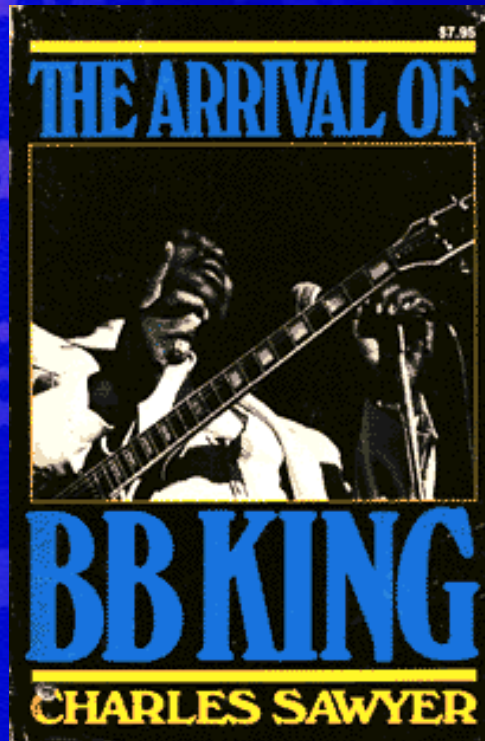
# Live Music

Posters like this one promoted performances in tour cities.

In 1970, B.B. King toured the U.S. with the British rock group, The Rolling Stones. He played before dozens of audiences that only a short time before were completely inaccessible to him.

# A Biography

B.B. King's first biography was published in 1980.



Lucille marks a spot on the road near a Delta town.



# Riding A Wave of Success

During the 1980s B.B. King toured the U.S. and foreign countries. In 1987 he was the opening act on a four-month tour with the Irish rock group, U2.



He recorded the single, *When Love Comes to Town* with the group. A film, *Rattle and Hum* also documented this collaboration.

# Rock & Roll Hall of Fame – 1987

B. B. King was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987. “B.B. King’s achievement has been to take the primordial music he heard as a kid, mix and match it with a bewildering variety of other musics, and bring it all into the digital age. There will probably never be another musical journey comparable to [King’s].”



Colin Escott, in his essay for the *King of the Blues* box set.





# Lifetime Achievement Award



The Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, received in 1987 from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences



# More Awards and Honors



President George W. Bush awards B.B. King  
the Presidential Medal of the Arts in 1990



# Collecting at Home



When plans for the B.B. King Museum were announced in 2005, his home studio in Las Vegas was packed, moved and set up as part of the exhibits.

# National Recognition

Each year, the President of the United States presents awards to individuals in the performing arts for their lifetime of contributions to American culture. In 1995, President Clinton and Mrs. Clinton paid honor to B.B. King, along with Jacques d'Amboise, Marilyn Horne, Sidney Poitier, and Neil Simon.





# A Mississippi Favorite Son



In 2005, the Mississippi Senate and House of Representatives honored B.B. King with a joint resolution saluting him as a favorite son.

"I never learned to talk very well without Lucille," said King, speaking of his black guitar. "But today, I'm trying to say only God knows how I feel. I am so happy. Thank you."



# Celebrating with the President

President Barack Obama joined in singing "Sweet Home Chicago" during the *In Performance at the White House: Red, White and Blues* concert for the Black



History Month celebration of blues music in the East Room of the White House on February 21, 2012.



# Hall of Fame: Memphis, 2012

“Despite all his success, B. B. has never forgotten his roots. Since 1973, he has participated in an annual homecoming concert in his adopted hometown of Indianola, playing a free concert and helping improve conditions for its citizens.

The B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center opened there in 2008, setting his story in the context of the region. All who know or meet B. B. speak of the giant star’s ongoing drive to educate himself, the hallmark of both his humility and his humanity.”



# Life on the Road



Today, B.B. King performs over 100 concerts per year.

He travels in a custom designed motor coach, equipped with state of the art technology.





# Celebrating B.B. King and the Blues

With his guitar "Lucille" strapped across his broad chest, King hit the road around 1946 and has not stopped since. Along the way to becoming an international icon, B.B. has heeded his mother's advice. He treats the people he encounters with honesty, civility, and compassion.

B.B. King Biography, Kennedy Center Website

