

Riley B. King—A Timeline

By Charles Sawyer, Project Consultant, B.B. King Museum

1925: Born **Wednesday, September 16, 1925**, in a cabin on the bank of Bear Creek in the tiny town of Berclair, Mississippi, in the central Mississippi Delta. Parents: Albert King and Nora Ella King. Cabin located on the plantation of Jim O'Reilly. Named after his father's brother Riley who vanished when Albert was a boy. Original spelling of his name: "Rileigh." Birth not recorded.

1928: Brother **Curce King** born to Albert and Nora Ella King, **November 19, 1928**. Child lives about two years, dies, apparently from eating glass. Riley is devastated.

1931-33: Parents separate (~1931), mother moves to hilly part of Mississippi east of the Delta to be with her extended family. Riley goes with his mother, leaving the Delta for the next 12 years. Lives alternately with his mother and her new spouse, Elger Baskin, known as "Picaninee," his grandmother, Elnora Farr, and his aunts and uncles from the Pullian clan. Clan is centered in Kilmichael, county of Montgomery, Mississippi.

1935: Mother Nora Ella dies, blind and wasted, age 31 (approx). Probable cause of death: complications from diabetes. Riley is left with his grandmother, in grief and shock. [Date of death is unknown; no death certificate filed.] Despite the interruptions and the hardships, Nora Ella King's moral teaching and belief in the ultimate goodness of all God's creatures is the foundation of her son's outlook and way of proceeding in the world.

1936-1940: Lives with grandmother and Pullian aunts and uncles. Church, school and hard work dominate. Church is Church of God In Christ (a.k.a. "Sanctified Church"), **Reverend Archie Fair** pastor. Music is the driving force in worship and Reverend Archie plays a guitar in the services. Archie's wife and wife of uncle William Pullian are sisters. After church the sisters visit and Riley is allowed to play the Reverend's guitar. It is love at first touch.

School is the Elkhorn School, maintained by the Elkhorn Church, Primitive Baptist. Teacher **Luther Henson** teaches Riley to read and to be self-reliant, fair-minded, and devoted to self-improvement. Henson's influence is life-long. School year bounded by the growing season: when the ground is ready for cultivation, school lets out, when the crop is harvested, school reopens. All children work in the fields. Life is hard and primitive by contemporary standards: no electricity, no indoor plumbing, all that is eaten is grown by those who eat it.

1940: Grandmother Elnora Farr dies January 10th, after a brief illness. She and her grandson had been sharecroppers on farm of Edwayne Henderson. Farm record show she died owing Henderson \$21.75 (over five months' living allowance). Henderson offers Riley to stay in grandmother's cabin and raise cotton on one acre of ground for a monthly allowance of \$2.50. Riley King, alone in the world, begins adult life at age 14. Henderson farm record lists grim facts: interest charges of 8% applied quarterly; charge of 40¢ for "3 yrds cotton sack; charge of 50¢ for "wrench;" credit \$1.00 "by work." At settlement time Riley's return on his crop is \$4.18; he owes Henderson \$7.54, nearly four months' "furnish."

Fall, 1940: Albert King arrives and takes his son to live in Lexington, Mississippi (pop. 3,000 approx.), county seat of Holmes County. Riley meets half-siblings and stepmother, enrolls in colored school.

Late 1941. “Big city” ways, cruelty as a common place, the humiliations of segregation, and a feeling he is a stranger in his father’s home, compel Riley to get on his bicycle and ride two days (~ 45 miles) back to Kilmichael to be reunited with his cousins and familiar surroundings.

1942: Finding his kin gone Riley takes residence with family of white farmer Flake Cartledge, lives in shack on Cartledge farm, walks to school.

1943: Moves back to Delta to Indianola, joins cousin Birkett Davis. Gets work as tractor driver on Johnson Barrett plantation.

1944-45: Marries Martha Denton, lives with Cousin Birkett and wife Delicia. Two couples share a cabin, raise cotton on adjacent tracts. With Birkett and three others forms **St. John’s Gospel Singers**. Inducted into U.S. Army, discharged after basic training when classified as essential to war economy based on skills as a tractor driver.

1947: Flees to Memphis after damaging his tractor, leaving Martha alone and a crop in the ground. Whereabouts are closely held secret in community lest Planter Barrett send the law to fetch Riley. Lives in Memphis with cousin blues singer **Bukka White**.

1948: Returns to Indianola in the Delta, works off debt for tractor damage, resolves to return to Memphis.

Late 1948: Arrives in West Memphis, Arkansas, across the Mississippi from Memphis, goes straight to radio KWEM where Sonny Boy Williamson hosted daily radio show. Plays one song, live, on the air. Lands a gig at West Memphis’ “16th Street Grill.” Goes to Memphis station WDIA where revolutionary programming targets all-Negro audience, auditions in the lobby and lands daily 15-minute spot as “**The Peptikon Boy**,” selling alcohol-laced health tonic Peptikon.

1949-1950: Regional stardom on radio and in area joints around Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi brings him to attention of a small record label, cuts four sides for Bullett Records. Radio spot expands, Peptikon Boy becomes “**Blues Boy**”, then plain “**B.B.**” King. Survives near fatal bout of hepatitis; escapes flames of burning dance hall after rushing back into inferno to save guitar, thereafter named “Lucille” as a reminder to avoid foolish risks.

1950: California independent record company Modern Records B.B. King at Memphis Recording Service operated by Sam Phillips (soon to be home of Sun Records, first label of rising star Elvis Presley). Recordings leased on R.P.M. label get national distribution but little commercial success.

August, 1951: Modern Records set up an improvised recording space in the Memphis YMCA to record “**3 O’clock Blues**.” The song had been a minor hit for Oklahoma guitarist Lowell Fulson.

December, 1951: RPM single released “3 O’Clock Blues” b/w “That Ain’t The Way To Do It.”

February 2, 1952: “3 O’Clock Blues” hits #1 on Billboard R&B hit parade. B.B. King gets a shot at a national audience. Signs with Universal Attractions booking agency, goes on tour with stops at Washington, D.C.’s Howard Theater, Baltimore’s Royal Theater, Chicago’s Regal Theater and Harlem’s Apollo. B.B. rises to the challenge of a new kind of audience and wins wide acceptance and affection across the national network of big city theaters, southern juke joints and road houses called the **Chitlin’ Circuit**.

1952: Partners with Memphis’ most respected bandleader, Bill Harvey. The Bill Harvey Band becomes the road band for B.B. King, for the next four years. Booking agency is “Buffalo Booking Agency,” of Houston, Texas, run by Evelyn Johnson, owned by Don Robey, a growing force in R&B music.

1952: Riley King and Martha King divorce. There are no children from the marriage.

1952: Second hit “You Know I Love You” reaches #1 on the R&B charts.

1953: B.B. King leaves the roster of DJ’s at WDIA—the road has too big a claim on his time.

1952-1955: Ten more B.B. King singles reach top 20 in R&B charts, including two #1 hits:

- “Story from My Heart and Soul,” R&B #9, 1952
- “Woke Up This Morning,” R&B #3, 1953
- “Please Love Me,” R&B #1, 1953
- “Please Hurry Home,” R&B #4, 1953
- “When My Heart Beats Like A Hammer,” R&B #8, 1954
- “You Upset Me Baby,” R&B #1, 1954, b/w “Whole Lot Of Love,” R&B #8
- “Every Day I Have The Blues,” R&B #8, 1955, b/w “Sneaking Around” R&B #14
- “Ten Long Years,” R&B #9, 1955

1955: Forms first big “B.B. King Band,” buys first bus, “Big Red.” Touring compliment of 16 people, including Walker brothers (bus driver Cato, and bassist “Shinny”), Evelyn “Mama Nuts” Young, drummer Earl Forest (song writer of “Next Time You See Me”).

1956: Plays 340 one-night-stands, works every day of the year. The road has him lock stock and barrel.

1958: Marries Sue Hall, daughter of proprietress of Club Ebony, Indianola, Mississippi. Reverend C.L. Franklin presides over the ceremony in Detroit, Michigan. Sue takes up life on the road with her famous husband. In time they buy a home in Los Angeles. B.B. is rarely there.

1958: “Big Red,” B.B.’s touring bus, collides with a butane truck on a bridge in Texas. Truck driver and passenger die in the fiery wreck. All on the bus are safe. Terrible timing: the company

insuring the bus was suspended a day or two before the accident, leaving B.B. personally liable, though he was not present. Settlement puts B.B. in debt for years.

1958-1960: B.B. records (1958) his classic rendition of a Joe Turner song, “Sweet Sixteen.” Released in October 1959 it reaches #2 on the R&B charts in 1960. It becomes among the core songs identified with him as an artist.

1962: Changes record companies and booking agencies; signs with ABC-Paramount, a major label; leaves Buffalo Booking for New York based Milt Shaw Booking Agency. B.B. looks poised for a major move up in show business, perhaps reaching white audiences. He would wait six years for that change.

1963: Records “How Blue Can You Get?” written by jazz critic Leonard Feather. The song would become one of his most recognizable signature songs, with its punch line lyric “I gave you seven children/And now you wanna give ’em back.”

1964: Records “Live At The Regal,” the album that eventually secures his stature as King of The Blues for decades to come.

1962-1964: ABC-Paramount tries to refashion B.B.’s style as a black crooner like Billy Eckstine, in vain attempt to reach white audiences. Recordings are lush but overly sweet, featuring strings.

1966: Bad things come in threes: The IRS slaps a \$78,000 lien on B.B.’s income for back taxes owed, Sue King files for divorce, and his bus is stolen.

1966: ABC-Paramount begins issuing B.B. King recordings on BluesWay, the new label devoted to blues artists. Records live album in Chicago club “Blues Is King,” long to be hailed as among his finest works. B.B. is still virtually unknown to white audiences but changes are in the wind. Charles Keil publishes “Urban Blues,” a thorough study of the genre which features B.B. as a prime example. Elektra records issues “The Paul Butterfield Blues Band,” which takes off and acquaints young white fans with the likes of Elmore James and Little Walter Jacobs. Mike Bloomfield, guitarist with the band, tells countless interviewers that the master of blues guitar is B.B. King. “Who is this B.B. King,” everyone asks.

1968: Major career moves. Following a dispute over money with business manager Lou Zito, B.B. fires Zito and hires Zito’s accountant, Sidney Seidenberg, as his new manager. Seidenberg signs B.B. with Associated Booking, the powerhouse agency run by show business legend Joe Glaser. Glaser manages the likes of Louis Armstrong and Fats Domino.

1968: B.B. plays the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco, the rock palace owned by impresario Bill Graham. B.B. is introduced as the “King of the Blues” and is given his first standing ovation as he walks on stage. Coming from his first predominantly white audience it is clear that B.B. King has arrived in mainstream pop culture. In short order everyone knows who is B.B. King.

1969: BluesWay records two B.B. King albums, “Live and Well,” and “Completely Well,” both produced by Bill Szymczyk. The second includes a track recorded with strings, an adaptation of

Roy Hawkins, "The Thrill Is Gone." It reaches #3 on the R&B charts and #15 on the Pop charts. Its success on the Pop charts seals B.B.'s reputation as a general audience entertainer and the tune becomes his best known song.

1970: B.B.'s exposure and recognition expand rapidly. His first Grammy is for "Best Rhythm and Blues Vocal Performance, Male: 'Thrill Is Gone'." Rolling Stones feature him in their U.S. tour. B.B. plays before dozens of audiences that only a short time before were completely inaccessible to him.

1971: B.B. seals his new won fame with an appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show." Twenty million Americans see B.B. King perform "Thrill Is Gone."

1970's: Repeated tours abroad and regular appearances on American television shows like "The Tonight Show" and "Merv Griffin," propel B.B.'s renown steadily higher.

1980: First biography, "The Arrival of B.B. King," published by Doubleday, written by journalist Charles Sawyer. Two years later Da Capo Press releases paperback. Paperback edition stays in print for twenty years.

1987-1989: U2 records "When Love Comes To Town" with B.B., invites him to open for the band on four month world tour. Documentary film "Rattle And Hum" shows collaboration between the world's most famous pop group and the King of the Blues.

1987: Lifetime Achievement Grammy

1990: President George Bush presents B.B. with the Presidential Medal of the Arts.

1995: Kennedy Center Honors. President Clinton and Mrs. Clinton pay honor to B.B. King, along with Jacques d'Amboise, Marilyn Horne, Sidney Poitier, and Neil Simon.

1996: Avon Books publishes the autobiography "Blues All Around Me," ghosted by David Ritz.

2000: Records "Riding With The King" with Eric Clapton. Album goes double-platinum (2,000,000 in certified sales), and wins the Grammy for Best Traditional Blues Album. B.B. King has his first blockbuster hit record.

2004: King Carl XVI Gustav of Sweden presents B.B. King with the prestigious Polar Prize for Music

2005: Mississippi Senate and House of Representatives honor B.B. King with joint resolution saluting him as a favorite son. B.B. appears at a joint session of House and Senate as the proclamation is read out, Governor Haley Barbour presiding.

June 10, 2005: Ground breaking for the B.B. King Museum to be built in Indianola, Mississippi. Former governors, leaders of Mississippi House and Senate, and town officials salute him, then, together they break ground.

September 16, 2005: Riley King, known in 90 countries as “B.B. King,” King of the Blues, turns 80 Years Old.

September, 2008: The *B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center* opens its doors in Indianola, Mississippi. In its first year of operation 30,000 visitors pass through its doors.
[Ref: <http://www.bbkingmuseum.org>]

December 15, 2008: President George W. Bush awards B.B. King the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award. Nine others are so honored:

- Ruth Johnson Colvin, founder of Literacy Volunteers of America
- Norman C. Francis, president of Xavier University of Louisiana and former head of the United Negro College Fund
- Paul Johnson, historian and journalist
- Joshua Lederberg, Nobel laureate for research in bacterial genetics
- David McCullough, historian and biographer
- Norman Y. Mineta, former representative and secretary of transportation and commerce
- John (Buck) O'Neil, player and manager in the Negro League and first black coach in the Major Leagues
- William Safire, former Op-Ed columnist of The New York Times
- Natan Sharansky, Israeli politician and former imprisoned Soviet dissident

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Internet Resources related to B.B. King's life story:

B.B. King official web site: <http://www.bbking.com/>

B.B. King official biography: <http://www.bbking.com/bio/>

B.B. King Time Line, Charles Sawyer, unabridged:
<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=bbking&pageid=icb.page319115>

Brief Biography; includes a video story about how Lucille got her name:
<http://www.biography.com/people/bb-king-9364839>

B.B. King Biography, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame:
<http://www.rockhall.com/inductees/bb-king/bio/>

2003 PBS Documentary, *The Blues*: <http://www.pbs.org/theblues/index.html>