In the late 1940s in Indianola, Mississippi, a young man named Riley King was singing and playing guitar with his friends in a group called the “Famous St. John’s Gospel Singers.” They played in churches around the Delta and even went to the stations in Greenwood and Greenville and sang on the radio – they were that good.

At night Riley King changed hats and played blues on Indianola street corners for tips. He said later that when he played gospel music he got a pat on the head, but when he played the blues he got a dime. He didn’t have much money, and dimes were worth a lot more in the 1940s in Indianola than they are now. (He made only $15 driving a farm tractor all day.)

In 1946 King tried to convince the Singers to leave Indianola and seek their fortune together as a professional group. When they refused, he packed his bags and took off for the music town of Memphis, Tennessee, to live with his cousin, bluesman Bukka White. Musicians gravitated to Memphis from small towns all around. Beale Street – “the Home of the Blues” – was there, and Sam Phillips, of later Sun Records fame, had just arrived in 1945 and set up a recording studio.

Radio station WDIA

King immediately began playing around town, but his luck wasn’t running right, and later that year he went back to Indianola to his tractor job to make some money.
After two years at home he was ready to try again and headed back to Memphis. This time he got a break: Sonny Boy Williamson let him play a song on his legendary radio show out of West Memphis. It led to his landing a ten-minute spot on the black-staffed radio station WDIA in Memphis, a spot that was so popular King got his own show, sponsored by Peptikon Tonic. (King wrote the jingle: “Peptikon sure is good/ You can get it anywhere in your neighborhood.”) Now that he was the hot new disc jockey in town, he needed a catchy name: “Beale Street Blues Boy” was shortened to “Blues Boy King” and finally to B.B. King. His close friends called him “B.”

King played all the great blues on his show, naturally – including the “jump blues” by boogie pianists and shouters like Wynonie Harris and Louis Jordan and the Texas-style blues of Lowell Fulson and T-Bone Walker. He played other music, too: jazz, especially jazz featuring inventive guitarists like Charley Christian and the French Django Reinhardt, whom King had heard about from friends just back home from overseas military service.

The biggest fan of B.B. King’s radio show was, of course, King himself. The music was the most important thing in his life – the blues, the jazz, the gospel, and all the music in between – and he was determined to find a way to play his music for all those fans tuning in to his show.

**A string of hits**

King started to make some money at the talent shows held between movies at the downtown Palace Theatre. In 1949 he cut several records for Nashville’s Bullet label and then several in Sam Phillips’s studio for Modern Records on the RPM label. In 1951 he recorded “Three O’clock Blues” for RPM on a portable tape recorder in the Memphis YMCA. By the end of that year it was at the top of the rhythm and blues charts and stayed there for fifteen weeks. “Three O’clock Blues” proved to be a turning point of B.B. King’s career.

With deep roots in the Delta blues and gospel music, King admired the bottleneck guitar sounds he heard his cousin Bukka White coaxing from his guitar back around the
apartment. So he used his fingers – large, strong fingers – to stretch the strings, developing a technique that would become the basis of the B.B. King style.

He had a solid string of hits during the next few years. While King’s voice had carried his early music, now there was another voice in the music. He had taught his guitar to sing. His music began to be marked by strong guitar solos of clean, biting, single notes and left-hand vibratos. He was backed up by large bands with full horn sections (saxophones, trumpets, trombones), but that single plucked note and King’s voice pulled you back in close, underlining the power of such slow blues songs as “Every Day I Have the Blues,” “The Thrill is Gone,” and “Sweet Little Angel.”

**Essence of the blues**

That soulful, wailing guitar was grounded by King’s voice: one that had been in pain, but had survived it – survived all those stormy Mondays, his sweet angel’s flying away, the loss of the thrill. It was, after all, the voice of a man who had survived growing up poor in the Mississippi Delta, who had survived the death of his brother and his mother before he had reached the age of ten and had lived alone until he was fourteen.

Like others, B.B. King earned the right to sing the blues, and he enunciates every word because he wants to be heard and understood: “Every day, every day I have the blues.” Perhaps he communicates the essence of the blues, defined by jazz musician Branford Marsalis as “the consummate state of optimism: I got the blues, but it’s all right.” Or, as King himself says, “The blues is pain, but it’s pain that brings joy.”

The story of Lucille illustrates B.B. King’s down-to-earth attitude about the blues and about life in general. In the mid-1950s he was performing at a dance in Twist, Arkansas, when some men began fighting and knocked over a kerosene stove, starting a fire. The crowd got out safely, including King. But then he realized that he’d left his beloved $30 acoustic guitar inside and rushed back inside the burning building to retrieve it. He narrowly
survived the ordeal. He later learned the men had been fighting over a woman named Lucille, and he named his guitar Lucille as a kind of lesson, to never do anything such as that again. Ever since, King’s trademark Gibson guitars have all been called Lucille.

In 1968, King played at the Newport Folk Festival and at the Fillmore West in San Francisco with top rock musicians. He gradually found himself playing to white audiences as often as black, if not more. In 1969, King was chosen by the Rolling Stones to open for them on an American tour.

Part of B.B. King’s appeal is his endearing onstage presence. He wrestles with Lucille to pull out those heart-breaking notes, showing his anguish in his distorted expressions. “My eyes are closed. I forget what I look like,” he says. “In fact, I don’t care what I look like because the feeling that I got through what I’m doin’ is so important.”

King kept on touring over the years to become probably the most widely known blues singer in history. For more than fifty years he has played to audiences across the United States and the world. He was the first to introduce blues to Japanese, Russian, and Chinese audiences. King has released over fifty albums, many of them classics. He continues to tour, playing over 200 concerts a year around the world.

B.B. King was inducted into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 1984 and into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987. In 1991 B.B. King’s Blues Club opened on Beale Street in Memphis, and in 1994, a second club opened in Los Angeles. Now there is a club on Times Square in New York City.

Hear B.B. King sing "The Thrill is Gone".

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