

B. B. King

Universally hailed as the reigning king of the blues, the legendary B.B. King is without a doubt the single most important electric guitarist of the last half century. A contemporary blues guitar solo without at least a couple of recognizable King-inspired bent notes is all but unimaginable, and he remains a supremely confident singer capable of wringing every nuance from any lyric (and he's tried his hand at many an unlikely song, anybody recall his version of "Love Me Tender?").

Yet B.B. King remains an intrinsically humble superstar, an utterly accessible icon who welcomes visitors into his dressing room with self-effacing graciousness. Between 1951 and 1985, King notched an amazing 74 entries on Billboard's R&B charts, and he was one of the few full-fledged blues artists to score a major pop hit when his 1970 smash "The Thrill Is Gone" crossed over to mainstream success (engendering memorable appearances on The Ed Sullivan Show and American Bandstand).

Born: 16 September 1925

Birthplace: Itta Bena, Mississippi

Best Known As: Blues guitarist who did "The Thrill Is Gone"

Name at birth: Riley B. King

Known as the King of the Blues, guitarist B.B. King has been performing and recording since the 1940s. He grew up sharecropping in Mississippi and learned to play gospel music on the guitar when he was a teenager. In the late 1940s he turned to playing blues and moved to Memphis, Tennessee to start a music career. After popular performances in clubs and on radio, he kicked off his recording career with "Three O'Clock Blues" (1951), a top hit on the R&B charts. King's early records in the '50s produced some R&B hits, but mainstream success eluded him. He and his band toured almost non-stop, performing hundreds of shows a year and building an audience.

