



# ALBERT KING

**To the sixties rock generation,  
Albert King was more than a blues singer,  
more than a guitar influence –  
he was closer to a guru.**

*By Andy Schwartz*

**E**verything about Albert King was big. He stood six feet four inches tall and weighed more than two hundred and fifty pounds. One fan who met the great blues guitarist and vocalist later recalled that “his hand was literally twice the size of mine.” He played a big guitar, a triangular Gibson Flying V shaped like a rocket ship. He named it “Lucy” and played upside-down and left-handed without reversing the order of the strings. And he could play it *loud*, especially onstage, where his searing, overdriven lead lines streaked feedback like jet trails from a 747.

Albert King placed a total of nineteen singles on the *Billboard* R&B charts between 1961 and 1979, and eight of his many albums reached the Top 200. But facts and figures don't reflect the true extent of this unique artist's popularity, or the depth of his influence on his fellow guitarists.

Eric Clapton's solo on “Strange Brew,” from Cream's *Disraeli Gears*, could have been lifted intact from Albert King. Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper paid tribute with “Albert's Shuffle,” on the 1968 album *Super Session*; John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, with Mick Taylor on guitar, did the same with “Oh, Pretty Woman,” on the 1967 album *Crusade*. Stevie Ray Vaughan “idolized Albert,” Lee Hildebrand asserted in 1998. “[He] had other musical heroes . . . but it was Albert's influence that would remain the most pervasive throughout Stevie's career.”



With fans outside the T-99 Club, Osceola, Arkansas, c. 1953

To the sixties rock generation, Albert King “was more than a blues singer, more than a guitar influence – he was closer to a guru,” wrote Dan Forte in 1994. “He was a black man in an iridescent suit who spoke the language of the tie-dyed counterculture, even though he’d never met them; he was the bridge between what I listened to on underground radio and what my father played on his hi-fi.”

**“Born under a bad sign  
I’ve been down since  
I began to crawl  
If it wasn’t for bad luck,  
I wouldn’t have no luck at all”**

– “Born Under a Bad Sign”

Alan Paul described Albert King’s style as the embodiment of “two of guitarism’s most sacred tenets: What you don’t play counts as much as what you do, and speed can be learned, but feeling must come from within . . . He could slice through a listener’s soul with a single screaming note, and play a gut-wrenching, awe-inspiring ten-minute solo without venturing above the twelfth fret.”

**A**lbert King was born in Indianola, Mississippi, on April 25, 1923. We actually don’t know his birth surname, since his father, an itinerant preacher, left his mother, Mary Blevins, a few years later. Mary then married Will Nelson, and her son grew up as Albert Nelson on a farm in Forrest City, Arkansas.

Rural life became a daily struggle for survival during the Depression, with every available hand put to work in the fields. Albert’s schooling was sporadic, and he grew up a functional illiterate. (In his memoir *Road Stories and Recipes*, Memphis producer and songwriter Don Nix recalled that King could not read a restaurant menu but could quickly memorize any lyric taught to him verbally.) King later recalled

building his first guitar from “a wooden cigar box for the body and a little tree that I cut off and shaved to make the neck. I used wooden pegs for the keys, with holes in them to wrap the wires around.”

In his late teens, he obtained a Guild acoustic guitar, and began playing along with recordings by Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lonnie Johnson, and T-Bone Walker. He also dug the big-band sounds of Woody Herman and the Western swing of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. Perhaps it was after he acquired his first electric guitar, an Epiphone, that he devised the so-called dropped minor tuning that would give his guitar its singular intonation.

“I rehearsed to myself for five years before I played with another soul,” King told Alan Paul in 1991. “That may account for some of my style. I knew that playing the blues was a life I chose to lead.”

**H**is first break came in 1950, when he joined the house band the In the Groove Boys, at the T-99 club, just off mythic Highway 61 in Osceola, Arkansas. Music was mostly weekend work, however, and the guitarist and sometime drummer – then still known as Albert Nelson – drove a tractor-trailer to make ends meet.



## Selected Discography



*The Big Blues*  
King, 1962



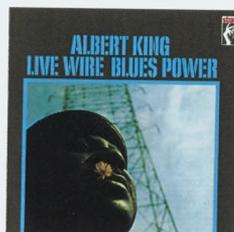
*Door to Door*  
Chess, 1969



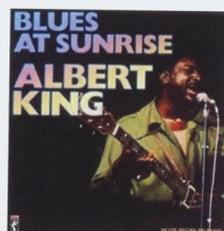
*Born Under a Bad Sign*  
Stax, 1967



*I Wanna Get Funky*  
Stax, 1974



*Live Wire/Blues Power*  
Stax, 1968



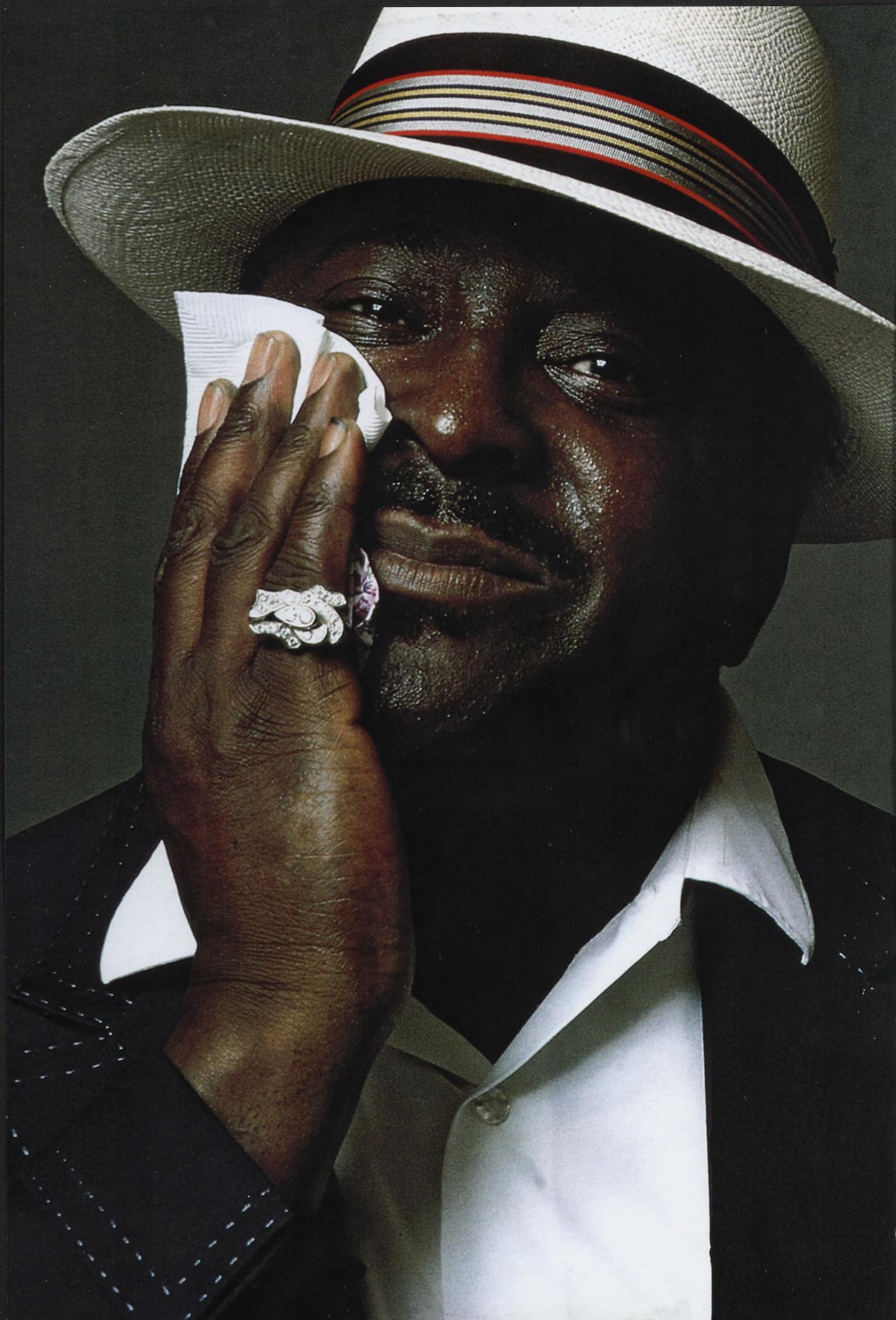
*Blues at Sunrise*  
Stax, 1988

In 1953, he migrated to Gary, Indiana, where he played drums with a band featuring Jimmy Reed and John Brim, working day jobs as a bulldozer operator and mechanic. That November, he cut his first record as a leader, “(Be on Your) Merry Way” b/w “Bad Luck Blues,” for the tiny Parrot label of Chicago. The disc went virtually unnoticed, but it bore the name of Albert King.

After a year back in northeast Arkansas, King relocated again in 1956 – this time to St. Louis, where at 33 he became a full-time musician. Gigs were plentiful at clubs like the Moonlight Lounge and the Dynaflo, and in 1959, he signed with local indie Bobbin Records. More professionally produced and arranged than his previous recordings, the Bobbin sessions displayed a new level of mastery in both his playing and singing.

“On the Bobbin stuff, I used a lot of orchestration and big-band arrangements to mix the jazz with the blues,” he told an interviewer years later. “I went for the swinging jazz arrangements and the pure blues guitar.”

King Records of Cincinnati licensed one of those Bobbin releases, “Don’t Throw Your Love on Me So Strong,” for national distribution. In December 1961, the song entered the *Billboard* R&B chart where it hung on for nine weeks, peaking at Number Fourteen. The song proved so popular that in 1964, King cut an “answer” record, “You Threw Your Love on Me Too Strong.”



When he signed with Stax in early 1966, King's career took a giant step forward. Songs like "Oh, Pretty Woman," "Personal Manager," and "Down Don't Bother Me" melded his warm "country" voice and stinging guitar with the sophisticated funk of Booker T. and the MG's and the Memphis Horns. His first Stax album, *Born Under a Bad Sign*, issued in August 1967, is one of the finest and most influential electric blues albums of all time, containing the original versions of songs later covered by Cream ("Born Under a Bad Sign"), Free ("The Hunter"), Otis Rush ("Crosscut Saw"), and many others.

In a 1977 *Guitar Player* interview, Michael Bloomfield summarized the impact of King's Stax recordings: "He was the only bluesman I know of who had a completely comfortable synthesis with modern black music – R&B, so to speak – and sold copiously to a black audience as well as the white audience. He was the only singer who had clever, modern arrangements that would fit in with the black radio market and with the white market and in no way compromised his style."

This combination of absolute authenticity and unforced crossover appeal led King to become the first African-American blues artist to play Bill Graham's Fillmore East, where he performed opening weekend in March 1968 with Tim Buckley and Big Brother and the Holding Company. In San Francisco, he appeared at the Fillmore West in February 1968 with the Jimi Hendrix Experience and John Mayall. In June, King returned to the Fillmore West and recorded his classic live album, *Live Wire/Blues Power*.

"I guess I have to say that Bill Graham, the promoter, was responsible for opening up a whole new audience to me," King told journalist David Nathan in 1976. "We played in San Francisco with people like Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix . . . All of a sudden, the West Coast just opened up to me."

**A** deep-rooted Delta musician, firmly traditional in his style and sound, Albert King was not averse to experimentation: He performed with an orchestra when a 1969 concert teamed him with the St. Louis Symphony. He released an Elvis Presley tribute album, *Blues for Elvis: King Does the King's Things*. He "jammed" with comedian Albert Brooks, trading guitar riffs for gags on "The Englishman-German-Jew Blues," a track from Brooks' 1975 release, *A Star Is Bought*.

King later recorded albums for the Utopia and Tomato labels, but "Cadillac Assembly Line" – a great minor-key blues with an evocative string arrangement – was his last Top 40 R&B entry, in 1976. By the early eighties, he'd ceased to record new material – but that barely slowed his flow of "product." *The Lost Sessions*, produced by John Mayall in 1971, finally appeared in 1986; and *Blues at Sunrise*, recorded live at the 1973 Montreux Jazz Festival, was issued in 1988.

In interviews, King periodically threatened to retire, or at least cut back on his roadwork. Yet when Alan Paul saw him headline at Tramps, the Manhattan nightclub, in early 1992, the bluesman "delivered a stirring, two-and-a-half hour performance, seeming to gain strength as the night wore on, closing the show at 3:00 a.m. with a coolly



King with his signature Flying V in 1982

**"I ain't got no big name,  
and I ain't no big star  
But I'll play the blues for you  
on my guitar**

**All your loneliness, I'll try to soothe  
I'll play the blues for you"**

– "I'll Play the Blues for You"

passionate version of "The Sky Is Crying" that will remain forever etched in my mind."

Less than a year after that performance, on December 21, 1992, Albert King died of a massive heart attack in Memphis. He was 69. At the time of his death, as Peter Watrous noted in his *New York Times* obituary, "he was planning a European tour with two other blues masters, Bobby (Blue) Bland and B.B. King." Tonight, he joins them both, as we welcome Albert King into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. 🎸