

Bobby Bland

It's a procession that seems to stand outside time: the Bobby "Blue" Bland Revue, criss-crossing the country through a helter-skelter schedule of one-night stands. Peter Guralnick has called it the Lost Highway, but for those who wake up wondering (or not caring) what town it is, the name is always the same: The Road. At the helm of this weary caravan is the star, Bobby "Blue" Bland.

He seems an unlikely sex symbol for black America, yet for many that's what he is and always will remain. A big, huggable man with an immediately endearing smile, he sings blues songs with a controlled intensity and slight insouciance, a style that lends even his most caustic lyrics a vulnerable softness. Others of his generation have come and gone, but Bobby "Blue" Bland remains King of The Road.

It all began for Robert Calvin Bland on January 27, 1930 in Rosemark, Tennessee, a small town near Memphis. When Bobby was 17, he and his mother moved to Memphis, where he worked at a garage and sang spirituals on weekends. He was soon appearing at a weekly amateur show and became part of a loose-knit group called the Beale Streeters, which included Billy Duncan, Johnny Ace, Roscoe Gordon, B.B. King, Earl Forrest, and Junior Parker.

Bobby Bland's first 78s, recorded at the end of other people's sessions by Sam Phillips for Chess and Ike Turner for Modern during 1951-52, were hardly auspicious. His rough and undisciplined vocal style was a pastiche of Roy Brown's cry and B.B. King's falsetto moans. Indeed, after "Drifting From Town To Town" on Modern—a cacaphony of slurs, moans and wails—it's a wonder he ever recorded again. Bobby Bland, "The Man," was nowhere in sight.

After recording for Duke Records in 1953, Bland was drafted into the Army. He returned to Memphis in 1955, a scarcely distinguished vocalist with several failed records under his belt, to find that everything had changed. Rock & roll was breaking down the old divisions between "race" and "pop" records; Duke Records—and Bland's contract—had been acquired by Don Robey. By the end of the decade, he had become Bobby "Blue" Bland, a masterful singer and an assured entertainer.

In between, and always behind the scenes, came Joe Scott: band leader and producer for Don Robey's sessions, and

Svengali to Bobby Bland. Through the late Fifties, Bland's records were rough, hard blues with intense guitar obbligatos (supplied first by Roy Gaines and later by Clarence Holliman) and jaunty shuffle grooves. Scott tempered Bland's phrasing and brought a furry edge to his voice even on the most raucous gospel-blues. It was a style that reached its peak in 1957 with the masterful "Farther On Up The Road" (#5 R&B) and, a year later, "Little Boy Blue" (#11 R&B), a record of surprising intensity and power.

The fury of "Little Boy Blue" marked the end of Bland's hard blues period. The change was abrupt and perhaps a relief to Bland, who never really liked the style. "I'll Take Care Of You," three singles later, was in sharp contrast—and marked the beginning of the Bobby Bland sound, each lyric deliberately offered with a solemn, worldly resolve. The effect was electric, and the public obviously thought so too: In early 1960, the record shot up to #2 on the R&B charts, the first of a dozen straight Top 12 R&B hits.

"Lead Me On," "I Pity The Fool," "Stormy Monday Blues," and "That's The Way Love Is" were all painstakingly crafted. Joe Scott supplied dazzling horn fanfares around supple rhythm parts and Wayne Bennett's T-Bone Walker-styled guitar fills. The quality of the records was stunning, with Bobby Bland the crown jewel of each one, and the albums that resulted (*Two Steps From The Blues*, *Here's The Man*, *Call On Me*, and *That's The Way Love Is*) contain a remarkable body of work.

Bland became adept at projecting warmth and intimacy, dropping growls and squalls like so much punctuation in a sentence. Words were stirred, gargled and pruned, laid out like markings on a highway. And the songs themselves fit together like one long paternal sermon on love and loneliness: "Cry Cry Cry Don't Cry No More I'll Take Care Of You Yield Not To Temptation Who Will The Next Fool Be You're The One (That I Adore)."

In 1971, Don Robey sold Duke to ABC-Dunhill. Though Bland's *California Album* and a series of duets with B.B. King brought him some early success, an early-Eighties coupling with Malaco Records reinforced his Southern soul connection. It is on stage, however, that the ever-charismatic Bobby Bland remains "The Man, The Sensational, The Incomparable, The Dynamic Bobby Bland." He deserves no less. —Joe McEwen

