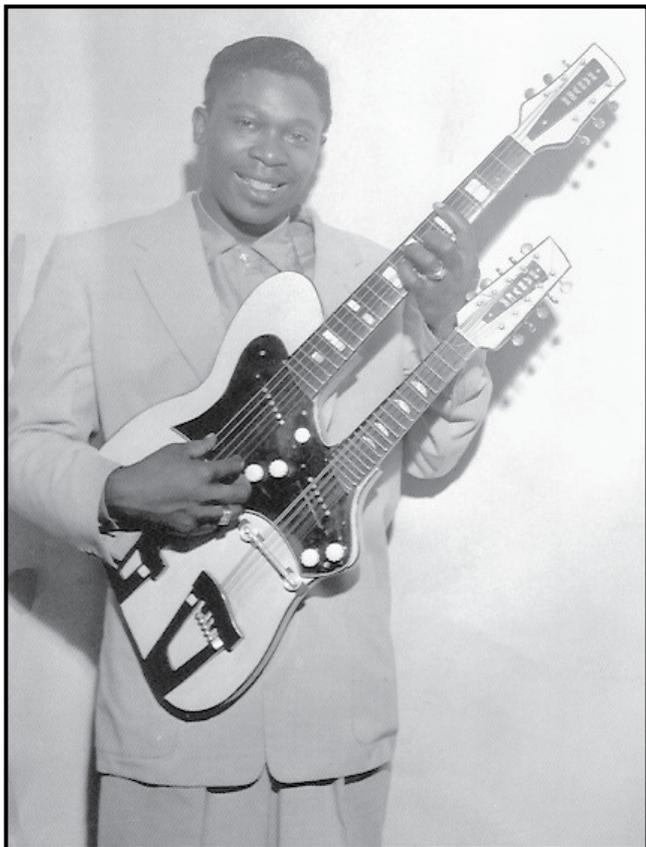


B.B.'s Box Set Blues

By Tony Burke



B.B. King with double necked guitar. Circa mid 1950s. Courtesy P-Vine Records.

In *B&R* 307 in reviewing the recent Ace Records B. B. King compilation, 'Here's One You Didn't Know About', I referred to producer Dick Shurman mentioning in his notes that P-Vine would be issuing an eighteen-disc box set of B.B.'s RPM and Kent sides. Searching the web for more information I learned that this set was more imminent than expected.

It is impossible in a single page to produce a detailed review of eighteen compact discs of B.B.'s recordings from his twelve year tenure with the Bihari brothers' RPM and Kent labels. He recorded for the Biharis from 1950 (one year after his recording debut on Bullet) through to 1962 when he switched to ABC Paramount in search of rewards that he felt were eluding him. The Biharis continued to release B.B. King sides on Kent until 1965.

Bee correctly wondered why other rhythm and blues artists were on sale in record stores with fancy album covers and his were on sale in gas stations and dime stores. The fact was that B.B. was the backbone and mainstay of RPM and later Kent - a cash cow for the Biharis - with a large back catalogue, and lots of unissued material that could fill out LPs on Kent and their budget outlets Crown and United.

B.B.'s body of work from these twelve years is almost unsurpassable. His RPM sides are among the cream of post-war

blues recordings and many of his later sides on 45rpms and albums on Kent, Crown and United are fine blues albums - despite their lowbrow production quality. Not content with sweating every dime out of B.B.'s recordings during the latter part of his RPM/Kent career they had B.B. follow popular trends with albums cashing in on the Twist craze and religious sides - an album dubbed 'Sings Spirituals'.

During the 1950s and into early 1960s B.B. toured the USA's chitlin' circuit, grinding out well over 300 gigs a year - and he was the number one attraction among the black community - but international stardom beckoned - and after a fallow start at ABC, it eventually came his way. When he passed away last year he had a world-renowned reputation and was feted by rock stars and the media.

So why would even the most dedicated B.B. King fan want to consider shelling out a big wedge of the hard earned stuff for this set, after Ace have done such a brilliant job of searching every nook and cranny of the RPM and Kent vaults for B.B. King material?

Two reasons - not only is this a de-luxe collectors product, it contains enough unissued and rare material to make it very worthwhile.

There are seventeen compact discs split into chronological order and into themes kicking off with CD One, 'Life' - songs about just that - including plenty of alternate takes covering B.B.'s period with RPM and Kent. Then we move into the chronological stuff: CD Two: '3 O'Clock Blues' RPM 304 - 386; CD Three: 'You Upset Me Baby' RPM 391 - 450; CD Four: 'Sweet Little Angel' RPM 451 - Kent 307; CD Five: 'Please Accept My Love', Kent 315 - 353; CD Six 'My Sometime Baby' Kent 358 - 391; CD Seven: 'Rock Me Baby', Kent 392 - 458; CD Eight: 'The Jungle', Kent 462 - 4572. Then it's back to 'themes' with CD Nine - 'Dancin' The Blues Away'; CD Ten: 'My Love'; CD Eleven: 'Cover Songs And Beyond'; CD Twelve: 'Talkin' The Blues'; CD Thirteen: 'B. B. At The Recording Studio' - which features seven songs such as 'Going Down Slow', 'Confessin' The Blues' etc across 32 tracks in production with incomplete takes, false starts and in different workings; CDs Fourteen to Seventeen are listed as 'B.B.'s Blues Revolution Phases 1 to 1V' and feature incomplete takes, false starts and differing versions of classics such as 'Eyesight To The Blind', 'B.B. Blues' and 'Everyday I Have The Blues' peppered with historical radio spots - one of the best for Radio WOKJ in Jackson, Mississippi, selling B.B. King discs at discount prices. And as is now almost obligatory - disc eighteen is a vinyl album dubbed 'Treasures Untold' with fourteen more rarities.

Each CD is housed in a replica record card case with inner sleeves, each with a track listing on the reverse. The booklet is a work of art, with much of the text in Japanese. However, the track listings are in English, as is a short interview with B.B., an introduction by Bobby Rush, recollections of noted blues personalities and critics of when they first heard B.B. King, including John Broven, David Evans, Ace Records' Roger Armstrong, and many others; four excellent essays on the great man by Japanese writers Yasufumi Higurashi, Mitsuyoshi Azuma, Toshio Imazawa and Akria Kochi; lyric

transcriptions (updated and corrected from earlier releases) by *B&R* writer Chris Smith; an alphabetical list of titles in the set; plenty of great vintage photos, album covers and label shots, adverts and memorabilia and Charles Sawyer's B.B. biography - in Japanese.

All of this is housed in a sturdy box, with the CD holders constructed for ease of access. This is a fantastic set, with a limited edition run reputedly of 400 box sets. A collector's item of rare quality.

B.B. King - 'The Complete RPM and Kent Recording Box; The Life, Times And The Blues of B. B. In All His Glory' is available as a limited edition box set and issued on P-Vine PCD LP 3/20 (see advert in this issue).

Album covers from the *B&R* Archive. A full track listing will be posted on *B&R*'s website: www.bluesandrhythm.co.uk

