

“B.B. Was In Tears At The End”

Royal Albert Hall 1969

On 22nd April 1969 B.B. King made his debut in the U.K. – appearing at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Sharing the bill on a tour promoted by Peter Walsh and Clifford Davis were Fleetwood Mac, (the then hottest blues band around), Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and Duster Bennett.

The tour played the following night in Newcastle on the 23rd; Cambridge 24th; Portsmouth on the 25th; Cardiff on the 26th; Bristol on the 27th; Birmingham on the 28th and closed at Manchester’s Free Trade

Hall on the 29th. B.B. was critically acclaimed, so much so he was overwhelmed at the reception he received from young white blues fans (remember this was the height of the late 1960s blues boom).

Top Topham, a former member of The Yardbirds, had signed for Blue Horizon Records and was a dedicated blues fan. He told *B&R*: “My first discovery of B.B. had been four boxes of 78s delivered from Chicago to London. On opening them there were about thirteen RPMs of his, all pretty brand new. Who was this guy no one knew?”

Top was on hand to meet B.B. King at London’s Heathrow Airport when he landed to play his U.K. tour. “B.B. arrived on his own at Heathrow. I went to meet him with Duster Bennett – we were both with Blue Horizon Records at the time. I took my 78s, singles and albums to be signed by him. B.B. invited us to come over in the afternoon to the Royal Albert Hall. We arrived in the afternoon and told the doorman we had been invited over by B.B.

When we got into the hall he was playing the piano on his own on the stage. I sat with him and we talked for about half an hour; my wife to be, Julia was with me. He talked about the blues singers he had listened to and still did – one being one of my favourites, Lonnie Johnson, who I’d met in London in 1963.

The night of the show was so special. He was in tears at the end – as were many of us. This was his first visit to England plus he played to an all white audience, many well known musicians were present – Janis Joplin was sitting next to me, plus Peter Green’s parents. It was a performance that has stayed with me all of my life.”

B.B.’s debut was reported in the *London Evening Standard* by Ray Connolly four days later – on 26th April, who reported: “B.B. King, now reckoned by some to be the greatest blues guitarist alive, gave his first concert in London last Tuesday night (22nd).

This is the moment for all blues men. B.B. King on stage under the Albert Hall’s petrified dome hung with its acoustical stalactites: He’s working away in his own public agony, his face feeling every note, sweat hidden but seeping, we know across pale blue cotton ruffled shirt, neat, dark worsted suit still crisp from the steam iron, shoes laced up and well shone, and colour – Cadburys plain.

Suddenly he hollers a piece of high camp earthy blues, sashaying his thighs to the retort lines; and we break up in the moment’s relief.

The audience is hysterical with gratification, and B.B. is to say after the show that tonight was his best reception ever, but right now out there living up to his own legend, he’s nervous.

Before his spot he’s been edgy and fast talking and rubbing his hands together: ‘If we go down well we’ll go out on the town – I’ll go anywhere you want. But if we don’t do too well I’ll just make like the little puppy dog who’s had a spanking, and I’ll go down in my room.’

He’s putting down riff after riff of those long winding electric notes and his tenor and trumpet are honking round the corners. Suddenly, with a shrill little electric shriek that fades into an echoed whine, a string snaps – the first string.

Tracing the remaining length of the string between first finger and thumb B.B. faces the people: ‘that shows Lucille just like a woman – she has to go break a string on a night like this.’ And he strokes his bright red guitar as though he were trying to pacify her. Most great musicians



Top Topham with B.B. King, (with Top’s first wife Julia) at The Royal Albert Hall, 22nd April 1969. Photo: Bill Greensmith.

treat their instruments like some treasured craftsman’s tool, tending to them and all that. B.B.’s relationship with Lucille is personal, as a man to his woman.

An aide steps forward with another string and while his five-piece group play a slow and soft blues accompaniment, B.B. sets about restringing, talking all the time: ‘Let me tell you about how I came to, call my guitar Lucille’ he says half apology, but possibly glad of the chance to talk to his people. ‘I was playing down in a place called Twist, Alabama, in ‘49 I guess, and two men started to fighting. There was a tin of kerosene which was being used for heating and in the course of the fight one of the men knocked it over so that the whole building caught fire. Course everybody made a rush for the door, including B.B., but when I’d got outside I realised I’d left my guitar inside. So I rushed back in and just as I got safe again the roof fell in. Well, we found out the next day that two men had died in that fire and that the fight had been started over a chick. And her name was Lucille. So I called my guitar Lucille to remind me never to do a fool thing like that any more.’

With theatrical precision he’s timed it so that the end of his story coincides exactly with a run on the repaired Lucille, but the mishap has not helped his nerves: ‘Just show how nervous I got’ he says later. ‘I haven’t broken a string in years. And I know they were good because they were a new set.’”

Forty-six years on, memories are a little hazy. Some of the fans who attended the London gig say they had forgotten that Sonny and Brownie were on the bill! Bill Greensmith recalled that B.B. returned to the UK the following month – and joined Lowell Fulson on stage at the 100 Club in Oxford Street and ‘blew the place apart!’

Thanks to: Top Topham, Alan Balfour (for Evening Standard review), Byron Foulger, Phil Wight, Pat Hurley and Bill Greensmith. There is a clip of Top Topham talking on the BBC about the gig on You Tube.



Duster Bennett watches B.B. King at the Royal Albert Hall, 22nd April 1969. Photo: Bill Greensmith.



Poster for 22nd April 1969 Royal Albert Hall show. From the B&R Archive.