

“Born Under A Bad Sign”--Albert King (1967)

Added to the National Registry: 2020

Essay by Thomas Fine (guest post)*



Albert King

Blues guitarist/singer Albert King's first album for Stax Records, an anthology of singles recorded and released between March 1966 and June 1967, didn't chart when it came out toward the end of the Summer of Love. However, its influence on popular music and musicians--particularly electric guitar players—was immediate and long-lasting.

The songs on “Born Under A Bad Sign” fused electrified urban blues with Southern soul music. Backed by Stax's house musicians--Booker T. and the MG's and the Memphis Horns--King's full spectrum of musical taste and ability was on full display. He roared through the first side's up-tempo contemporary blues, slowed it down on side two and ended with a greasy-sweet cover of the 1934 Ray Noble pop standard “The Very Thought Of You.”

The album likely has influenced every budding rock or blues guitarist who ever took it for a few spins. Specifically, among the bona fide guitar heroes who directly cite it as an influence have been: Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Mick Taylor, Michael Bloomfield, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Derek Trucks, Warren Haynes, Albert Collins, Otis Rush and Joe Walsh (who spoke at King's funeral). The title track has been covered in recordings by Cream and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, among others. “Oh, Pretty Woman,” the fourth track on side A, was covered by John Mayall's Bluesbreakers with Mick Taylor on guitar, and parts of its solo were quoted by Clapton in Cream's “Strange Brew.” Led Zeppelin quoted King's “The Hunter” in their hit, “How Many More Times.”

Over the years, the album grew in stature. It was an early CD release by Fantasy Group, which acquired the Stax catalog after the Memphis label's 1970s demise. It has been reissued several times on CD and, in 2023, it was newly remastered and issued on vinyl, HD and SD streaming and SACD.

Albert King was born in April 25, 1923, likely in Indianola, MS. His original surname is unknown, but from mid-childhood, he went by his mother's second husband's last name,

Nelson. Young Albert Nelson made his first guitar out of a cigar box and a tree branch for a neck, with nails for tuning pegs. Eventually, he acquired an Epiphone electric guitar. He taught himself by playing along with recordings of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lonnie Johnson, and T-Bone Walker. But he also enjoyed hearing Big Band jazz by Woody Herman and others, and Western Swing music, all broadcast on the radio stations of his youth. Part of his self-education was adopting a standard right-handed guitar to his lefty playing. He flipped the guitar around and played it upside-down, pushing down on strings a right-handed player would pull up in the “note-bending” effect common in blues solos. He also adopted his own “dropped-minor” tuning, which resulted in a distinct and unique intonation.

In 1991, King told “Guitar Player” magazine's Alan Paul: “I rehearsed to myself for five years before I played with another soul. That may account for some of my style. I knew that playing the blues was a life I chose to lead. And, when I started, there were three things I decided to do: play the blues, play ’em right, and make all the gigs. And I have.”

King first started playing with bands in 1950 in Arkansas. The Albert Nelson of those days did music as a side-gig. His day jobs included driving a tractor-trailer and a bulldozer, and working as a heavy equipment mechanic.

He moved to Gary, IN, in 1953 and joined Jimmy Reed's band as a drummer (also self-taught). That same year, as Albert King, he cut his first record for the little Chicago-based Parrot label. It went nowhere beyond local jukeboxes, but King kept playing and growing as a musician.

In 1956, at the age of 33, he relocated to St. Louis and became a full-time musician, playing clubs with names like the Dynaflo and the Moonlight Lounge. He signed with local label Bobbin Records in 1959 and one of those recordings, “Don't Throw Your Love On Me So Strong,” was picked up by King Records out of Cincinnati, receiving national distribution. It peaked at #14 and spent nine weeks on the “Billboard” R&B chart in 1961. Three years later, King cut an “answer” single, “You Threw Your Love On Me Too Strong,” which got some radio play but wasn't a hit.

King was recruited to Stax Records by co-owner Estelle Axton. According to Rob Bowman's book, “Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records,” King walked into her Satellite Records store (located next to the Stax studio and her hub to keep an ear out for new talent) just weeks after a visit by Indiana songwriter Sandy Jones, who dropped off the soon-to-be classic “Laundromat Blues.” Axton told King, “it's gonna take some convincing” of her brother and label-co-owner Jim Stewart, to sign a pure blues act. But she gave King the song and told him to use it for his audition. It became his first single with the label, released in March 1966 and reaching #29 on the R&B charts; it was parked in the middle of side B of “Born Under A Bad Sign.”

Finally, with Stax Records, he found widespread fame. He toured extensively behind the singles on “Born Under A Bad Sign.” Rock promoter Bill Graham saw one of his shows and engaged him to play the Fillmore East and Fillmore West venues, temples of hippie culture, psychedelia and rock music. King made an immediate impression on “the Love Crowd” as Otis Redding called young white audiences. At the Fillmore West, King's performances were recorded, including the classic Stax album “Live Wire/Blues Power.”

Never again in his long career at Stax did King make a whole album with Booker T. Jones and the MG's (Steve Cropper, Donald “Duck” Dunn and Al Jackson, Jr.) along with the Memphis Horns (Wayne Jackson, Andrew Love and Joe Arnold). But he continued along the road of blending electric blues with soul/R&B and reaping success from what Andy Schwartz described as a “combination of absolute authenticity and unforced crossover appeal” in the booklet essay accompanying King's 2013 induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

The foundation was laid in 43 years of hard work and growth, but Albert King's life as music star began in the Stax studio in Memphis during those 1966-67 sessions collected on “Born Under A Bad Sign.” King continued to perform and record up to two days before his death from a heart attack on December 21, 1992.

Thomas Fine is an audio transfer and mastering engineer based in New York. He is also an author and student of recording and music history. Fine is a member of the Audio Engineering Society, Association of Recorded Sound Collections and the Adirondack 46ers.

Sources:

Bowman, Rob: *Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records*, New York: Schirmer Books, 1997

Paul, Alan: interview with Albert King in *Guitar World* magazine, July 1991, reprinted at: <http://alanpaul.net/2006/11/from-the-vaults-albert-king-2/>

Point, Michael: liner notes for 2002 CD reissue of Albert King: *Born Under A Bad Sign*, Stax/Fantasy Inc. SCD-8606-2

Schwartz, Andy: “Albert King” essay in 2013 Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame induction ceremony book (<https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/albert-king>)

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.