SJB SELECTION

REVIEW · BLUES

The Thrill Is Gone | B.B. King

The blues was already there. The strings came later… and changed everything.

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First curiosity: *The Thrill Is Gone* wasn't even a B.B. King song. Roy Hawkins had recorded it back in 1951, and King knew it well. Years earlier, when he was working as a DJ in Memphis, he used to play Hawkins' version on the radio. Nearly twenty years later, King would turn it into the most recognizable song of his career.

Not bad for a cover…

In 1969, King goes into the studio with Gerald Jemmott on bass, Herbie Lovelle on drums, Paul Harris on Wurlitzer and Hugh McCracken on guitar. After three or four run-throughs, the tape starts rolling, and take three is the one.

King sings live with the band. No vocal pieced together afterward. Lucille runs through a Fender Twin Reverb miked with a Shure 57, while King's voice is captured by a Neumann U67. The band even keeps the final vamp going for around eight minutes because the groove is working and nobody wants to stop it.

Eight minutes… because once the train gets rolling, pulling the brake isn't always such a good idea.

There are no corrective overdubs. There's some bleed between the voice and the instruments, but that's part of it. The track breathes like a room full of musicians, not something assembled in a laboratory.

And then there's that guitar sound.

Clean, full, precise. Smooth without going soft. Polished without ever turning cold.

There’s no wall of distortion to hide behind. You hear the touch, the attack, the bends and, above all, that fast vibrato that makes the note tremble without breaking it. Lucille doesn’t scream: she whispers, weeps, and sighs.

King plays very few notes, but gives each one enough time to become a sentence. The guitar moves in and out of the song like a second singer. He says something, Lucille answers. He stops, and she seems to add, "Yeah... but that’s not quite the whole story."

Then producer Bill Szymczyk has an almost sacrilegious idea: put twelve strings on top of a blues record.

Bert de Coteaux writes the arrangement and suddenly the room gets bigger. The rhythm section walks through the shadows while the strings drift in like fog through an open window. They don’t cover the blues. They build a wider sky around it.

It was an unusual choice, designed in part to carry the song beyond the boundaries of the blues and bring it closer to a pop audience.

And it worked.

Released as a single in December 1969, *The Thrill Is Gone* reached No. 3 on Billboard’s soul/R&B chart and No. 15 on the Hot 100. It earned King the Grammy for Best Male R&B Vocal Performance, and in 1998 the recording entered the Grammy Hall of Fame.

From that point on, the song never really stopped living.

King kept reinventing it onstage. There are versions on *Live in Cook County Jail*, on his 1976 live album with Bobby Bland, and on *Live at San Quentin*. In 1997, he also recorded it with Tracy Chapman for *Deuces Wild*.

And there’s something fascinating about the fact that the song that became inseparable from B.B. King had already been a hit for someone else nearly twenty years earlier. But maybe that’s what the blues is all about: a story passes from one pair of hands to another until somebody finds a way to tell it as though it had always been their own.

Technically, it’s a slow blues in B minor, in 4/4, built around the 12-bar blues form. But King’s real technique isn’t about how many notes he can play.

It’s about space.

Few notes. Huge pauses. A bend can last longer than a sentence. His vibrato sounds like the voice of someone who already knows how the story is going to end... but needs a few more seconds before admitting it.

Touch, tension, tremble.
Bends, beats, blues.
Silence, space, solitude.

King doesn’t play to fill the silence…

He lets the silence play with him.

> ***The thrill is gone. The space it left behind became music.***

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