

turntable druggist

by Andrew Gillis

If you had come into the Privateer's last Saturday morning at two, trying to get a drink on the last call at the Middle Deck, where normally Bucky Adams and his Basin Street Trio would have been packed up for half an hour and been home in Fairview until Monday night, you would have noticed the band was still playing as you came up the stairs.

You would have been surprised to hear them, with a hard-bopping drummer in the back, satisfying three previously unknown back beats, intriguing Halifax drummer Albert Resk, who watched from the side and had an unmovable grin and a stare at the drum kit, a stare which you could have driven a train on - a stare that was like rails, straight and with no bends or diversions. You would have seen Resk first thing as you came near the door.

Then you would have tried to go in the door, past Resk and the regular drummer of the Basin Street Trio, Tom Gibson, who always grins and this morning would have seemed unable to control himself. But there would have been a big man in the way, a man involved in the jam, with his back to the door and you as well, and you would have felt a bit hesitant to ask this guy to excuse you and let you past, because after all he was in the jam, and there were extra sax players with Bucky, and they were enjoying the big guy enormously. But eventually, you would have asked him "excuse me", or something.

And he would have turned around (carefully, so as not to nudge anybody with the neck of his guitar) and he would have looked you in the face, and you would have looked him in the face, and you would have been glad to see him smile and politely step aside, and he would have been B.B. King.

During the evening previous to that early-morning jam at the Middle Deck, B.B. King had done two shows at Q.E.H. auditorium, and had met the turntable druggist there. He had appeared, near me, after B.B.'s version of "Sweet Sixteen", late in the second show, a show which went until ten minutes to twelve, a continuous two hours.) The turntable druggist came down to the Middle Deck, could not stand it that B.B. King was in the same small club with him, and left. The version of "Sweet Sixteen" at Q.E.H. had been bad enough; the turntable druggist had been seen rolling in ecstasy down a side aisle, of the auditorium, jumping frantically to get on stage, trying beat incantations to transmit his astral body to Beale Street, Memphis,

Tennessee, 1954. After that, the Middle Deck simply put the turntable druggist away.

Even though the Middle Deck jam was not the most amazing musical event of the decade, one of the most amazing ever in this city. The Deck was rocking as if it were a real deck of a real ship; and as if the sea on which it rode was a psychic thing, which behaved the way everyone wanted it to behave; and as if it arrived with B.B. King, because somehow B.B. King had been sent with it.

The drummer, the very funky Caleb Emphrey, of Greenville, Mississippi, and the sax players, Cato Walker III, of Memphis (alto), and Walter King, of Nashville (tenor, B.B.'s nephew) helped B.B. out. Walker cut in on "Good Night My Love", which Sleepy Thomas was doing, and used a Benson-like vocal which was at least as clear and charming as his alto sax. His voice, like his sax, functioned only if his eyes were smoothly shut. That man, and Emphrey, and B.B. all seemed to be sent to do what they did.

The question was: who made B.B. King? What thing could create B.B. King? How could an electric guitar be played so accurately, and a voice be so careful and strong? B.B. King is one man. In that one man, how could there be talents which are so absolutely designed to be musical talents - the question struck the turntable druggist right away at Q.E.H. How could there be talent of this kind, talent which does not perform blues, but which is blues? That's what I mean by 'sent': somebody must have made B.B. King, with some idea in mind, and when that certain somebody delivered B.B. King, then there was blues. The blues seems to result from B.B. King; it doesn't occur to me that it could be the other way around. I'm not kidding. The concert was enough to make me religious.

You can find tradition all over the place. Every performer owes something to some tradition or other. With B.B. King on stage, though, it was different. All the tradition to be found on stage with him was his own tradition. In effect it was hard to say that the show was traditional at all. After all, the performer was doing what came naturally, (and uniquely for him, it has come naturally for 33 years). The show is traditional only in the historical sense. It doesn't occur to B.B. King at any moment that his show is traditional. It is just his show.

The guitar playing killed every-

body at Q.E.H. The Gibson 335 B.B. King borrowed for the night produced a fat, unidirectional tone from a Kustom stereo guitar amp which I believe contained two stock 12" speakers and 120 watts. The guitar was borrowed to replace the absent Lucille, which this year is a Gibson. Lucille once was a 335 - for about 14 years, actually - so the replacement was a familiar looking 350. Lucille was snowed in, where B.B. King had been snowed in the night before. Lucille was not sorely

tain, balls and everything any electric guitar player has ever found in any set-up I can think of. He found it on a borrowed guitar, in ten minutes.

The voice. Stunning. Portrayed through a stereo p.a. which Russell Brannon of Music Stop compiled of new Yamaha, Kustom, University and Altec equipment. The voice, delivered to the microphone from a distance of ten feet, convinced the audience that it was so strong it could be heard without the p.a. It was almost embarrassing how many people began to chat about this wicked throat when B.B. introduced it. It was wild. No such blues singing has ever been heard here before.

In the blues format, a singer is given more room for imaginative work - the room for it is given because the chord progressions of the blues are reliable. So B.B. would pause before each line, delay it a bit, while thinking up a new melodic approach for each one. Joe Williams, who cut many blues for Count Basie's big band, was here a year and a half ago, and he could in no way shout the blues like B.B. King. Stunning. Big.

The turntable druggist told me he will always remember B.B. King's left hand, resting above the fretboard, and then vibrating as if through a sudden electric shock, producing a sigh that many people have heard in their heads, but that has never been spoken in solid words.

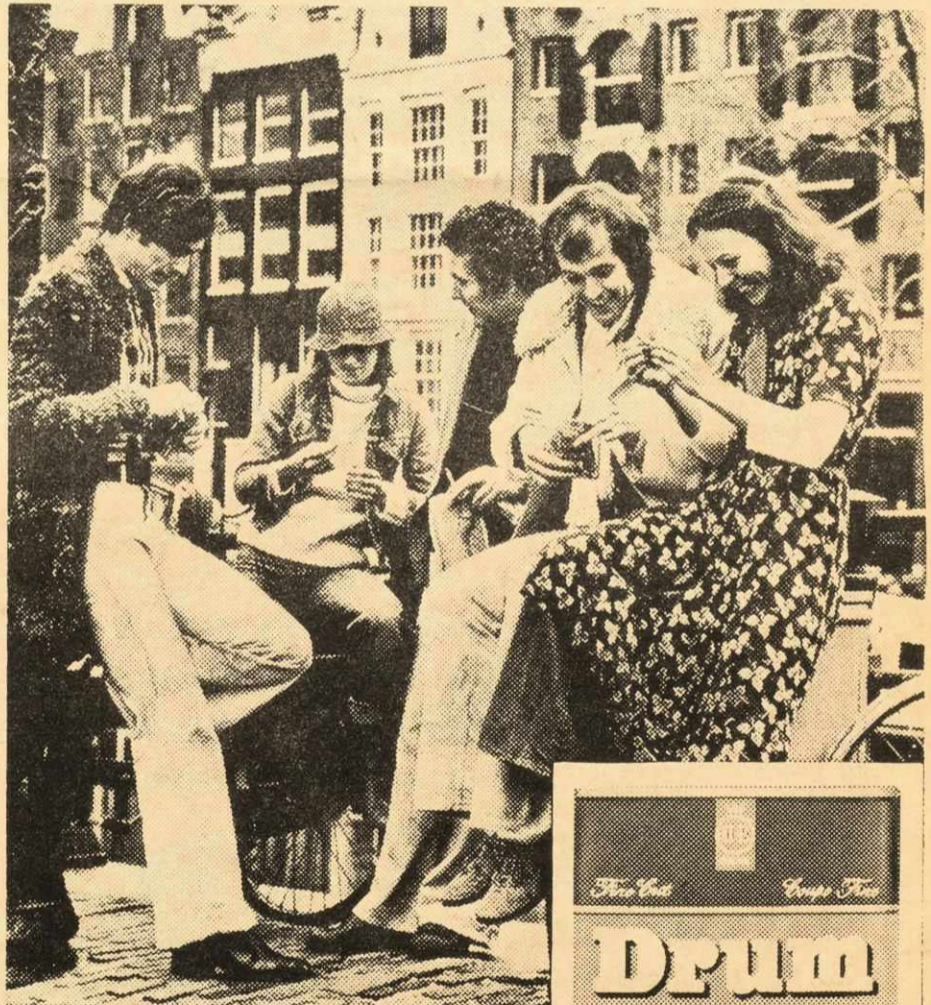
I told myself I will always remember that last Saturday, it was three o'clock in the morning, and I couldn't even close my eyes.



Andrew Gillis, your turntable druggist, after hearing B.B. King.

missed by anyone, although its owner did complain a bit. B.B. leaves his fingernails long, to support the flesh at the fingertips, and ensure the same richness from each fretted string. This seems to work on borrowed guitars as well as it does on Lucille.

The sound you think of as being B.B. King's entered the show later, as he cranked in the front pickup of the guitar with the guitar's own control. He found feedback, sus-



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