I can recall the exact spot where I was in my car when I first heard that voice. I can literally picture it. The radio was playing ‘Cry, Cry, Cry’, Bobby’s latest record. It was an afternoon in October, 1960. I was in high school, so I was driving my parents’ car. Although I religiously listened to the black radio in New York and Ray Charles was my favourite, I had never heard anyone like Bobby ‘Blue’ Bland.

I rushed to my local record shop and picked up that record. Soon, I saved enough money to purchase ‘Blues Consolidated’, the album he shared with Little Junior Parker. It contained their earlier material, like ‘Farther Up The Road’, but, in their own way, those were wonderful too.

Soon would come Bobby’s magnificent album, ‘Two Steps From The Blues’, a huge influence on me and some of my hipper musician friends. Singer Steve Tyrell, a native of Houston’s 5th Ward, grew up knowing Bobby, as did my drummer, Willie Ornelas, who got his start playing with Bland. The day after Bobby’s death (he died on 23rd June), Steve and I were on a show together and commiserated on the passing of the great man. After the audience left, we went over to the piano and sang a duet on ‘Share Your Love With Me’, in tribute, just for each other.

One blazing hot August afternoon in 1964, my friend, Brad Bivens, a guitarist who idolised Wayne Bennett and Clarence ‘Sweets’ Holliman, both of whom had played on Bobby’s records, suggested we go to the Apollo and see what amounted to a Duke/Peacock revue, featuring Junior Parker, Joe Hinton, Miss LaVell and starring Bobby Bland, with the Joe Scott band backing everyone.

In those days, for one dollar, you could go to the Apollo at 10 a.m. for the first show and stay all day, which is what the wows and junkees in the top balcony did, sleeping through five shows a day in air conditioned comfort. Joe Hinton’s cover of Willie Nelson’s ‘Funny (How The Time Slips Away)’ was number one in New York and the women went wild when he hit that high note at the end. Junior came on before Bland, bearing a suitcase full of harmonicas and played all my favourites. Miss LaVell was filler at best.

Bobby was astounding. That voice, caressing each note, working the lyric like a master of his craft, making us feel and believe every word he sang. To give you an idea of what a memorable experience it was, Brad, who I hadn’t heard from in over twenty years, called me the day after Bobby died, just to relive the experience.

Sadly, I never met Bobby. The Shirelles, for whom I played guitar in the early 1970s, told me of a time they were on a tour with him. After one show, a fan asked for an autograph and Bobby, who was illiterate, signed the fan’s book, looking over his shoulder at the writing on his tour bus, signing, ‘Bobby ‘Blue’ Bland, World’s Greatest Blues Singer. License #…..’

Most B&R readers will be familiar with Bland’s biographical information. Robert Calvin Bland was born on 27th January 1930 in Shelby County, Tennessee. As a youngster, he became infatuated with the singing of Reverend C.L. Franklin, Aretha’s father, so far as to go with his friend, B.B. King, to see the Rev. Franklin at his church in Detroit.

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