

BOBBY 'BLUE' BLAND TRIBUTE

By Billy Vera



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 winos and junkies 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.

He came onto the Memphis scene, taking the odd jobs available to a young man who couldn't read, before joining a group called the Beale Streeters, which featured King, Rosco Gordon, Earl Forest, Willie Nix and Johnny Ace. For Sam Phillips, he made some recordings, which Sam sold to Chess ('A Letter From A Trench In Korea') and Modern ('Dry Up Baby' and 'Driftin' From Town To Town') before signing his 'X' on the dotted line for James Mattis's local Duke Records. His first record there was 'I.O.U. Blues'.

Uncle Sam drafted Bland and, by 1957, his long string of hits began with 'Farther Up The Road', a number one smash on the r&b chart and a number 43 on the pop charts. Unlike almost every blues singer, other than Jimmy Reed, almost all of Bobby's records, crudely recorded as they were, made a showing on the Billboard and Cashbox pop charts.

For a blues singer, that is unheard of and speaks reams about his broad appeal, which is less surprising, given whom his favourite vocalists were: Nat King Cole, Perry Como, Andy Williams, whom, he said, influenced his 'soft' style of singing, and, I'd say, his way with conveying the stories of the songs he sang.

His crossover appeal did not escape Duke label chief Don Robey, who, uncharacteristically, spent money on string dates for Bobby, as he did for no other act.

Of these, 'Lead Me On' failed to hit the pop chart and the beautiful 'Share Your Love With Me' reached number 42.

The rest of Bobby's hits featured horn arrangements by Joe Scott, who'd written Johnny Ace's classic, 'Never Let Me Go'. Scott's charts were adventurous and daring, forcing those Houston players to often stretch beyond their capabilities, which gave a tension to those records that was powerful.

Bobby's greatest era was the 1960s, with two chart toppers, 'I Pity The Fool' and 'Call On Me'/'That's The Way It Goes', along with the classic 'Turn On Your Love Light', which introduced the singer to America's teenagers, much as 'What'd I Say' had done for Ray Charles.

His version of 'Stormy Monday Blues' drew a new generation to T-Bone's signature tune, while 'Save Your Love For Me', was a nostalgic reminder of Buddy Johnson's 1950s hit.

Bland was a master of the finger-popping groove, as on 'Ain't Nothing You Can Do' and 'Ain't Doing Too Bad', showing he could swing like Sinatra.

When Don Robey sold his record operation to MCA, Bobby's records were released on their Dunhill, ABC and MCA labels, to continuing commercial success. In 1985, he last reached the charts on Malaco, although his older fans, mostly Southern blacks by then, purchased his albums for that label.

Probably because he didn't play guitar, white blues fans didn't gravitate to Bobby the way they did to the B.B.s, Alberts, Freddy's or Buddy Guys. But all those guys would tell you, none of them could outsing Bobby 'Blue' Bland. One of the last truly great singers is gone.

Bobby 'Blue' Bland: born, 27th January 1930 in Shelby County, Tennessee, died 23rd June, 2013 in Memphis, Tennessee.

Photos: Top left: Bobby Bland, circa late 1950s; label shot and Stax museum tribute (bottom right). All From the Billy Vera Collection.

