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Please Accept My Love: Race, Culture, and B.B. King's *Live in Cook County Jail*

by: Tre Polk

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford May 2017

Approved by:

Advisor: Professor Darren Grem

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate to this thesis to my late aunt, Julie Walker, who passed away during the process of writing of this work. I hope you understood how much we all loved you. You will, forever, be missed.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank Dr. Grem for advising me throughout the entire process of creating, organizing, and drafting this thesis. Under your guidance, my ability to write and research has grown exponentially. This thesis, as it stands today, would not exist without your help and input.

Second, I would like to thank all of the individuals who helped proofread my work throughout the writing process including: Brooke Thomas, my mother, Cheryl Sullivan, Mrs. Sherri Blankenship, and all of the unlucky souls that helped me at the Writing Center in my hours of need. Specifically, I would like to thank Jordan Walker who, despite recently losing her mother and returning from mission work in Haiti, took the time to edit and review my second chapter. You are the best.

I would also like to thank Jarrod Lee who, while not influencing this thesis directly, introduced me to the blues when I was a kid. While I did not know it then, all of those guitar lessons and stories of blues and rock-n-roll legends have had a positive impact on my personal and academic life. “The Dude Abides Man.”

Abstract

This thesis uses a specific event, B.B. King's performance in 1970 and subsequent album from Chicago's Cook County Jail, to study the intersections of race, music, and American culture. First, I trace the events leading up to the performance and album and contextualize both within King's career and the history of race relations in the South and in Chicago. Second, I detail the history of Cook County Jail and King's subsequent prison activism. All in all, this thesis argues that the sense of racial bondage shared between the blues, King, and the inmates at Cook County Jail, is the primary reason Live in Cook County Jail became the most successful prison blues ever recorded. This thesis also concludes that, while King's performance occurred nearly a half a century ago, what it had to say about racial inequality in correctional facilities remains relevant.

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Introduction:

The decision of B.B. King to perform at Chicago's Cook County Jail in 1970 proved to be a historic choice. Born in similar conditions as his fellow Delta bluesmen in Mississippi and many of the jail's black inmates, King had for decades forged a unique type of blues, one that made him both popular and revered. He brought his brand of blues to Cook County Jail, an institution famously labeled a "jungle" by a federal prison advisory group in 1968. Two years before King arrived, Cook County Jail had hired the United States's first black jail warden. At the time, it was the largest county correctional facility in the country with nearly twenty-five hundred inmates, 80 percent of whom were black. In front of an audience of many second and third generation migrants out of Jim Crow Mississippi, King "swapped blues" with the inmates, creating a performance and record that captured the quintessential bond between blues, correctional facilities, and African-American identity.

This thesis argues that the ultimate success of the Cook County Jail performance and album is due to the sense of racial "control" shared between the blues, King, and the Cook County Jail inmates. King, like the blues, originated in the Jim Crow South, an environment that was built upon the control of African American identity and autonomy, similar to Chicago before and after the implementation of the "War on Drugs" and the jail itself. This shared connection not only created a performance environment that was so emotional that it brought some who witnessed it to tears, but it also created a "vibe" that

appealed to white record buyers who wanted their blues to be as “authentic” or as “black” as possible. While the sole fact that King was a black blues musician playing in a jail boosted the album’s sales, it was not the primary reason that album was successful. The level of emotion, a product of the personal and racial connection between King and the inmates, transmitted through King’s spectacular musicianship is what turned his performance into the most successful prison blues album ever recorded.

As the first blues album in history recorded in a correctional facility by a non-inmate, *Live in Cook County Jail* brought national awareness to both the blues and life in jail. In a broader sense, *Live in Cook County Jail* had a direct connection to King’s seventy or so jail and prison performances that followed, and to the establishment of a prison activism group known as FAIRR (The Foundation for the Advancement of Inmate Rehabilitation and Recreation.) Hence, King’s performance at Cook County Jail not only brought the blues to Chicago’s inmates but to inmates across the country and around the world.

This thesis analyzes King’s performance and album in three parts. The first chapter provides the necessary historical context for understanding the album and performance. The second chapter examines the concert itself as well as the work of those involved in the planning and executing of the event. The third chapter details the effects of the concert on King’s subsequent prison and jail activism, Cook County Jail, and on jails and prisons in general.

Chapter 1

How Blue Can You Get: The story of King, the Blues, and the Great Migration prior to *Live in Cook County Jail*

The Blues Roots in the South

To understand Riley “B.B.” King, one must first understand the blues. Blues music does not have a particular starting place or point, so it is difficult to discuss its formation with clarity and precision. Blues also has many varying genres and sub-genres that can sound quite different from one another. What we do know is musicians played some form of blues in the 1890s and early 1900s in places like St. Louis, Missouri, Clarksdale, Mississippi, and most famously in Tutwiler, Mississippi in 1903.¹ Regardless of its exact origins, the blues stems from two hundred and fifty years of slave work songs which influenced the black musical community that formed after the Civil War and emancipation.

The period that bred the expansion of the blues in the South was also known by another name: Jim Crow. Racial segregation started after Reconstruction and was for the most part cemented as a political, social, and economic system to restore white superiority by the turn of the century.² This system, which ruled the rural and urban South

¹Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 37-49.

²Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. (New Press, 2012), 30-32.

up until the 1960s, ensured that many African Americans were confined mostly to backbreaking field or menial labor, a role similar to the years of slavery.³ The Delta region of Mississippi became both the center of African American labor and, therefore, blues music.

Until the end of the Civil War, the Delta remained a vastly uncharted territory filled with thick forests and swamps and, along with Florida's wetlands, was one of the last unsettled regions east of the Mississippi River.⁴ It was not until after the Civil War that southern landowners made a large effort to clear the forest for farmland and build levees to harness the flood of the Mississippi River that led the Delta to becoming a landscape for King Cotton, around 1880 with the construction of a rail line in the region.⁵ Migrant African Americans filled the levee camp, forest clearing, and field laborer positions in the Delta.⁶ In these jobs, African Americans toiled for years only to generate wealth for an elite class that they had no hope to be a part of, differing little from the state of bondage that held them a generation before.

The backbreaking, menial work in the Delta was an extension of slave labor and helped to keep alive musical traditions that developed during slavery. The work song and field holler were primary examples of slave musical traditions that continued into the Jim

³ Leroi Jones, "Slave and Post-Slave," Tracy Reader: Ole Miss-Blackboard, 86.

⁴ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 10.

⁵ James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁶ Ibid.

Crow era.⁷ The work song and field holler were used to keep rhythm when working individually and in unison, as well as to distract the mind from fatigue. A song's content could describe anything from the actions of work being performed, like swinging an ax or a hammer, to “bad men” like cruel bosses, late workers, and famous outlaws.⁸ As time passed, many of the songs’ themes began to focus more on the problems blacks had in understanding their role in the new Jim Crow South rather than problems they faced as slaves.⁹ Leroi Jones points out that the new problems demonstrated in post slave work-songs centered around the creation of black individuality, a concept that many slaves never possessed in full.¹⁰ The creation of black individuality helps to explain why the blues formed after emancipation instead of during slavery.¹¹

Along with the musical traditions that formed during field labor, recreational activities allowed on off days, like drinking and dancing, were also key contributors to the blues. The gathering place for mischief on Saturday night became known as the juke joint, a place where hard workers came to play even harder in their free time.¹² For the festivities to be complete, there needed to be music, and the songs that developed at juke joint performances came to be known as blues. Many famous bluesmen got their starts in

⁷ Jones, “Slave and Post Slave,” 88.

⁸ Leroi Jones, “Primitive Blues and Primitive Jazz,” Tracy Reader: Ole Miss-Blackboard. 89-92.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 10.

the Delta from traveling around different plantations and playing different "jukes."¹³ For the pioneer bluesman, traveling from juke to juke was a way to make a living and to escape daunting fieldwork, but it was a fairly tedious craft. A mobile African American with the ability to earn money outside of agricultural labor directly defied the laws and customs that whites had prescribed via Jim Crow.¹⁴

The black codes, enacted after the end of the Civil War, became infamous for their adaptations of earlier rules known as vagrancy laws that made loitering or not possessing proof of employment a felony.¹⁵ While the black codes as a legal doctrine ended after Reconstruction, vagrancy laws, and other petty crimes used to control blacks, continued to be enforced into the 20th century.¹⁶ As a result, many African Americans in the South were arrested and leased out via a convict-leasing system.¹⁷ The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified to end slavery, did not protect prisoners regarding forced labor. In many ways, "convict leasing" was worse than slavery. Unlike slaveholders, contractors had no stake in the health or well-being of the prisoners.¹⁸ Contractors could work prisoners to death. If death occurred, contractors went back the next day and brought out the newest convict to the fields and continued the process.¹⁹ Convict leasing

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 28-30.

¹⁵ David Oshinsky. *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 31-53.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

was so profitable for southern governments and businesses that law enforcement sought to provide an excess supply of prisoners to sustain the system.²⁰ By the turn of the century, convict-leasing gave way to prison plantations.²¹ And, unsurprisingly, the first prison plantation was established in the Mississippi Delta in Sunflower County. It was known as Parchman Farm.²²

Borrowing from the convict leasing system, prison farms like Parchman became profitable for the Mississippi state government. Instead of leasing out prisoners to different companies, prisoners at Parchman Farm harvested cotton for sale.²³ Given the profit incentive, law enforcement continued to arrest blacks in the Delta for vagrancy and other charges for the sole purpose of placing them in the state's prison farm.²⁴ Several Delta bluesmen spent time at Parchman Farm, including David "Honeyboy" Edwards, and Bukka White, B.B. King's cousin. The convict lease system, along with Parchman Farm, influenced not only the blues but African American culture in the Delta as a whole. Moreover, as the Delta blues moved to Chicago along with droves of blacks who left Mississippi in the Great Migration, it transformed into a popular form of music.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid. 55-84.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Oshinsky. *Worse Than Slavery*, 55-84; Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 32-33.

²⁵ James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 277-299.

The Great Migration

The Great Migration began in large numbers in 1914-17 and did not start to decline until the 1970s.²⁶ During this roughly fifty-five year period, nearly six million African-Americans fled the South for northern cities in search of new freedoms and opportunities they did not enjoy in their home region.²⁷ The Great Migration changed the course of history for African Americans who both left and stayed. The six million who left for the strange new places they would eventually call home did not abandon their southern heritage.²⁸ Instead, the migrants attempted to keep as many of their cultural traditions alive as possible, effectively bringing the blues greater national and international fame.

During the first decade of the Migration, beginning with World War I, 555,000 African-Americans left the South, a number totaling more than all those who left the South during the five decades following emancipation.²⁹ As northern factories saw shortages of labor due to the war, they sent recruiters to the South in an attempt to persuade blacks to fill the void.³⁰ Along with northern factories, *The Chicago Defender*, the most powerful African-American news organization in the country, attempted to urge

²⁶ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 216-218

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 527-530

²⁹ Ibid, 160-164

³⁰ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life In a Northern City*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 58

migration to northern cities.³¹ *The Chicago Defender* published ads and articles to glamorize the cities and lifestyles of African Americans in the North to serve as contrast for African Americans in the rural South.³² Such information spread with ease due to the expansion of large national rail lines into the South.³³ Many land-owning Southerners were aware of the North's economic interest in the region, and they did not accept the intrusions on their soil lightly. White-run state governments and businesses attempted to block industrial recruiters and intercept northern media, primarily to retain the majority of its agricultural workers.³⁴ As the South increased its attempts to halt the Migration, the greater the Migration grew.³⁵ Having lived in an impoverished caste similar to slavery their entire lives, the African American population of the South was primed to accept even the slightest opportunities offered by northern cities and factories.

The second decade of the Great Migration witnessed 903,000 blacks, nearly double those who left in the 1910s, leave the agricultural South for the industrial North.³⁶ The second decade proved to skeptics that the Great Migration was a far greater phenomenon than initially believed.³⁷ With wartime labor shortages ending, the majority of the next wave of migrants were friends and families of those who had been

³¹ Ibid, 58-60.

³² Ibid.

³³ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 191.

³⁴ Ibid, 160-164.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 217-218.

³⁷ Ibid, 217-218, 238-239.

transplanted during the Migration's first decade.³⁸ Family members sent word back about city life and offered to kin initial living quarters, which were crucial to survival once migrants arrived in the North.³⁹ While the Migration's numbers rose in the 1920s, the economic depression after 1929 caused the third decade's total migration to fall below the marks of the previous two. Even while the country faced an economic depression, 480,000 African Americans gathered what meager belongings they had and fled north.⁴⁰ By World War II, nearly 1.5 million African Americans had fled the South.⁴¹ Such a massive transfer of people from one region to another had notable effects on both the areas they emigrated from and the places they settled in.

Given the jobs created by the Second World War, the invention of the mechanical cotton reaper, and the nation's emergence out of the Great Depression, it is easy to see why the 1940s brought the largest exodus of African Americans from the South, totaling 1.6 million people.⁴² Historians refer to the 1940s as the beginning of the "Second Great Migration" because of the slowdown of migration in the 1930s. More contemporary studies cast the "first" and "second" migrations as having more in common than previously understood.⁴³ The spike in the 1940s does not constitute a new migration; rather, it is only a peak in the original migration. In the following decades, the black

³⁸ Ibid, 238-239.

³⁹ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 58.

⁴⁰ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 217-218.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid, 218

⁴³ Ibid, 8-11

population exodus from the South, while still very high, declined from 1.6 million in the 1940s to 1.4 million in the 1950s to 1 million in the 1960s.⁴⁴ From 1940 to 1970, around four million blacks left the South for a new home, more than double the amount who left in the first three decades.⁴⁵ Such migrations dramatically reshaped northern cities like Chicago.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, 1.8% of Chicago was black.⁴⁶ By 1950, fourteen percent of Chicago was black.⁴⁷ By 1970, Chicago was thirty-three percent black.⁴⁸ It was estimated that, as of 1950, half of African Americans in Chicago were from Mississippi.⁴⁹ While African Americans found that their migration to Chicago resulted in escaping the legal inequality of Jim Crow, they realized that they had not escaped inequality for good. In Chicago, blacks paid higher rents, held the worst jobs, earned lower wages, and lived in poorer housing than whites.⁵⁰ The Southside of Chicago, known as Bronzeville, and (eventually) the West Side of Chicago, were the only areas in the city that African Americans were allowed to live.⁵¹ The Southside, stretching seven miles in length and one-half miles in width, crammed a quarter of a million African

⁴⁴ Ibid, 218

⁴⁵ Ibid, 218

⁴⁶ Mike Rowe. *Chicago Blues: The City and the Music*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1981, 211.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 211-212.

⁵⁰ Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns* 317-318, 372-373.

⁵¹ Ibid, 268-269.

Americans on top of one another by the late 1930s.⁵² It became apparent during the Great Migration that overcrowding was a massive issue, as the city restricted blacks with unfair housing regulations and residential segregation.⁵³ The longer the Great Migration lasted, the more whites, native blacks, and first generation migrants began to wish to halt the massive influx of people that brought more competition for fewer resources.⁵⁴ The Great Migration pitted the native against the migrant in Chicago, as the city formed even clearer divisions between its social and racial groups. While many African American families who fled during the Great Migration witnessed the problems of the urban North, some remained in the South, either by choice or circumstance.

B.B. King and the Mississippi Blues

Among those African American families who remained in the South during the Migration was the family of Riley B. King. On September 16, 1925, Albert and Nora Ella King gave birth to Riley B. King in Berclair, Mississippi, (near the larger Delta towns of Indianola and Greenwood). Coincidentally, Delta blues greats like Charley Patton, Son House, Tommy Johnson and Robert Johnson cut their first recordings in the same period and region as King's birth, creating the first records of Delta blues.⁵⁵ Though King was born in the Delta, he was raised in Kilmichael, Mississippi, located in the southern Hill

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁵⁴ Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns*, 285-289.

⁵⁵ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 2-11.

Country region of Mississippi directly east from the place of his birth.⁵⁶ Contrary to popular belief, King was not primarily influenced by the Delta blues at an early age; rather, the music he grew up performing was gospel.⁵⁷ His preacher in Kilmichael, Reverend Archie Fair, first taught guitar to King.⁵⁸ While King stated that he recalled hearing the blues when he was as early as seven or eight years old, he did not attempt to play it until much later in his life.⁵⁹

King's childhood was difficult. His father and mother split up when he was only four, leaving him to live with his mother and grandmother in Kilmichael.⁶⁰ In 1935, at the age of nine, his mother died. His grandmother then raised him until her death in 1940.⁶¹ Left without his mother or grandmother, his father ventured to Kilmichael to pick up his son and take him back to live with him in Lexington.⁶² Although King liked his father's new home and family, he only stayed two months in Lexington before he hopped on his bicycle and rode nearly sixty miles back to Kilmichael to reunite himself with school friends, including his cousin Birkett Davis.⁶³

⁵⁶ Sebastian Danchin, *Blues Boy: The Life and Music of B.B. King* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 4

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 7-8.

⁵⁸ B.B. King, and David Ritz, *Blues All Around Me: The Autobiography of B.B. King* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 18

⁵⁹ Danchin, *Bluesboy* 7-8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 3-4

⁶¹ King and Ritz, *Blues All Around Me*, 32-33.

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 7-8.

Up until the death of his grandmother, King primarily worked in the field, went to school, and sang in a newly formed gospel quartet modeled after groups he and Birkett heard on a relative's phonographs.⁶⁴ On his return to Kilmichael, King also worked on a farm that paid him enough wages to afford a guitar.⁶⁵ He mastered the three chords his pastor had originally taught him and played in a gospel quartet until his cousin Birkett left for Indianola to find work.⁶⁶ After Birkett arrived in Indianola, he wrote to King, trying to convince King to join him in Indianola.⁶⁷ Eventually, after Birkett illustrated the better opportunities of work and music that existed in the Delta, King followed his cousin back to his birthplace in the spring of 1943.⁶⁸

On the Barrett Plantation, near Indianola, King and his cousin Birkett worked the farm by day and practiced gospel tunes by night.⁶⁹ In the early 1940s, the primary African-American music broadcast over the radio was gospel. King's gospel group played for free on WGRM of Greenwood and WGVM of Greenville to promote their shows.⁷⁰ While King enjoyed receiving the most attention he had ever received as a musician, the rest of the group's interests in family and children started to get in the way of their

⁶⁴ Ibid, 5-6

⁶⁵ King and Ritz, *Blues All Around Me*, 41

⁶⁶ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 8-9.

⁶⁷ *ibid*

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 9

⁶⁹ *Ibid*

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 10

performances and success.⁷¹ King realized this shift just before he was drafted into the U.S. Army and summoned to serve at Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg on his eighteenth birthday.⁷² While in the service, King discovered two guitar players who influenced his career for years to come.

While King served a brief stint at Camp Shelby before being sent back to his farm in Indianola on conscript to help the war effort from home, his friend, who was serving in the Army in France, brought back some jazz records from the Hot Club of Paris.⁷³ King's life would never be the same. The record featured Django Reinhardt, a guitar player with a style that King had never heard before.⁷⁴ Reinhardt became one of the chief influences on King's playing style.⁷⁵ Along with Reinhardt, King discovered another jazz musician named Charlie Christian while in the military.⁷⁶ Along with his gospel stylings, King used both Reinhardt and Christian's style of jazz to set his playing apart from his fellow Mississippi bluesman.⁷⁷

With his gospel bandmates losing interest in the the band's music, combined with his new found influence of Reinhardt and Christian, King returned to Indianola and started to learn how to play the blues. King remarked later in life that: "I was listening to

⁷¹ King and Ritz, *Blues All Around Me*, 76-78.

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Danchin, *Bluesboy* 12.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 12-13

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the blues from the time I guess I was seven or eight years old. But I didn't really start trying to play the blues until I was old enough to go into the service.”⁷⁸ He began playing on the streets of Indianola on weekends and realized that he could make more money in one night than he could all week on the farm.⁷⁹ The increased financial rewards King received from playing the blues made him realize that he had a future in music. After the war ended in September of 1945, King was no longer conscripted by the federal government to stay on the Barrett plantation but settlement issues with the landowner held him there, a problem that typically plagued the rural black farm worker in the Jim Crow system.⁸⁰ It was not until 1946, when King damaged the Barrett’s barn with the tractor he operated for a living, that King fled the plantation.⁸¹ Despite planning for more than a year to leave in a reputable fashion, King became so scared that he bolted home and grabbed his guitar and \$2.50 in cash and left.⁸² By night fall, he had left for Memphis without telling a soul, including his wife.⁸³

The Blues Migration and King in Chicago in the 1950s

The Great Migration from Mississippi to Chicago brought Delta blues and electrification together to produce a raw, rural-urban blues that became popular on a world stage. Along with many other African Americans, blues musicians left the Delta in

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ King and Ritz, *Blues All Around Me*, 84-85.

⁸⁰ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 13.

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Ibid, 13-14

search of better opportunity as early as World War I.⁸⁴ Chicago, the biggest city connected to the South by rail, was an obvious stopping point for early Delta musicians.⁸⁵ Early Delta musicians, along with other blacks settling in Chicago, laid the framework for the future of the blues in the city. By 1940, twenty-five years after the beginning of the Migration, a U.S. Census report revealed that whites outnumbered blacks in the state of Mississippi for the first time in nearly a hundred years.⁸⁶ Between 1940 and 1950, more than twenty-five percent of the black population of Mississippi left and during the same period Chicago's black population had increased by seventy-seven percent.⁸⁷ As more and more African Americans from Mississippi poured into Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s, the city emerged as a blues capital.

Entering Chicago in 1943, Mckinley Morganfield — known by his peers as Muddy Waters — pioneered the electrification of Delta blues and effectively created Chicago blues.⁸⁸ Born on the Stovall Plantation in the Mississippi Delta, Waters was a product of the Patton, House, and Johnson tree from Dockery's plantation, departing little from the Delta style of guitar and harmonica in his playing.⁸⁹ As Waters' sister noted, Delta blues was “out of style” in the big city and folks in Chicago did not listen to it

⁸⁴ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 138-139.

⁸⁵ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 189

⁸⁶ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 140.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 277-299.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

anymore.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, upon Waters' arrival, he found many who invited him to play the blues from "back home."⁹¹ As Waters continued to play the Delta blues in Chicago, he began to incorporate the electric guitar and harmonica into his music.⁹² Adding bass and drums for the back beat, Waters created a fusion between big band and Delta blues.⁹³ It was known as "Chicago Blues."

As Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, and Howlin' Wolf forged the new Delta blues in Chicago, the city's racial transformation became headline news.⁹⁴ In 1950, Chicago began to discourage migration to the city.⁹⁵ More people coming in meant more space was needed for them to live, and Chicago's Southside or "black belt" had run out of space.⁹⁶ As a result, blacks expanded into other areas of Chicago to find places to live. This frightened many white residents.⁹⁷ Sensing the demise of their exclusively white communities, many whites used terrorism to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods. On average, in the 1950s, Racially-motivated bombings or arson occurred every twenty days.⁹⁸ In 1951, a riot in Cicero, a white neighborhood, gained international attention

⁹⁰ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 136-137.

⁹¹ Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 277-299.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 5.

⁹⁵ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 368.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 368-372

⁹⁷ Hirsch, *Making of the Second Ghetto*, 14-29.

⁹⁸ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 372.

when a black family was forced out of buying a home by an angry white mob. While 118 people were arrested, none were indicted by a Cook County grand jury.⁹⁹ Many similar events occurred across Chicago throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as whites resisted black encroachment into their neighborhoods at every turn. With so much civil unrest, blacks and whites began pushing for larger police forces to protect against future riots and violence.¹⁰⁰

While African Americans from Mississippi, along with their Delta blues music, had transformed Chicago by the 1950s, Riley King had exploded in Memphis after his “3 O’Clock Blues” became a number one hit on the R&B charts.¹⁰¹ Riley B. King, known as the “Blues Boy of Memphis,” was now called “B.B.” for short. After King initially fled from Indianola to Memphis, he returned to Indianola to pay back his debt and bring his wife to Memphis with him in 1948.¹⁰² He worked his way up the music ranks in West Memphis, Arkansas, by disc jockeying and playing with influences like Robert Lockwood Jr. on Beale Street in Memphis.¹⁰³ While the Delta influence is easily identifiable in King’s early recordings, King’s strong use of the jazzier styles of T-Bone Walker and other western bluesmen helped make King’s blues stand out from Waters’ Chicago blues. King’s divergence from the roots of Delta blues into “big band blues” only grew as his career developed, leading him to form a unique sound.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 375

¹⁰⁰ Hirsch, *Making of the Second Ghetto*, 62-64.

¹⁰¹ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 32.

¹⁰² King and Ritz, *Blues All Around Me*, 103-107.

¹⁰³ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 207.

After the success of his early recordings in Memphis, King set out to tour the “chitlin circuit” — venues across the country that were dedicated to black music for black audiences.¹⁰⁴ Throughout the 1950s, King toured approximately three hundred days a year on the chitlin circuit, breaking only to record periodically.¹⁰⁵ As the initial zeal for Chicago blues began to die out in the late 1950s, it signaled a change in the demographic that the blues reached.¹⁰⁶ While many black adults still enjoyed the blues, soul emerged as the music of black youth.¹⁰⁷ Suddenly, after experiencing a great start in the beginning of the 1950s, the blues was declining in popularity by the end of the decade.¹⁰⁸ While many bluesmen never recovered from the decline in popularity of Chicago blues in the late 1950s and early 1960s, those who were willing to change their marketing demographic had chances of success. B.B. King was willing, and, eventually, it would pay off.

The Blues Migration and King in Chicago the 1960s

The 1960s were a decade of transition and change for Chicago and America in general, highlighted by the force of a civil rights movement that brought the topic of racial inequality to the forefront of national conversations and politics. Chicago was central to the discussion of civil rights outside of the South. Due to the fear of race riots,

¹⁰⁴ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 35.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Rowe, *Chicago Blues*, 165-166.

¹⁰⁷ Ulrich Adelt, *Being Black Twice: Crossover Politics in B.B. King's Music of the Late 1960s. In Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 2010), 14-15

¹⁰⁸ Rowe, *Chicago Blues*, 165-166

city police continued to step up their presence in black neighborhoods to protect residents and to halt the budding gang violence that had developed in Chicago's Southside.¹⁰⁹ Black families were locked into neighborhoods that had drastically declining market value — simply because they were black— well into the 1960s.¹¹⁰ Chicago's black residents were trapped in urban poverty. The effects of migrant parents taking multiple jobs through the 1930s and 1940s, left many children in poor neighborhoods to grow up on the streets, causing the rise of gang violence in the 1960s. The combination of racial protests, amplified police presence in black neighborhoods, and the rise of gang violence throughout the 1950s and 1960s, also led to an estimated seventy to ninety percent black inmate population in Chicago's main penitentiary, Cook County Jail.¹¹¹

In 1966, the arrival of Martin Luther King Jr. to protest Chicago's housing crisis, ushered in the mass black protest that white Chicago feared most.¹¹² King remarked that Chicago was the most racist city he had ever visited, and the white protesters who confronted his marches with violence were “worse” than those in the South.¹¹³ During one of King's Chicago marches, a protester threw a brick and struck King in the face, creating a scene of mass chaos between marchers and protesters who had to be separated

¹⁰⁹ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 388, 408, 409, 418.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Les Bock. “How Blue Can You Get? B.B. King, Planetary Humanism and the Blues Behind Bars,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32, no. 7-8 (2015), 276.

¹¹² Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 388-389.

¹¹³ Ibid.

by police.¹¹⁴ While progress was hard to come by in Chicago, King's movement in the city in 1966 helped persuade Congress to pass the Fair Housing Act in 1968.¹¹⁵

Martin Luther King Jr.'s death on April 4, 1968, set off a wave of national riots that also reshaped race relations in Chicago. For many African Americans, King's assassination represented the last straw of dealing peacefully with the system.¹¹⁶ Many turned to Black Power movements, which stressed victory, not compromise, while others gave up activism entirely.¹¹⁷ For whites in neighborhoods near black ones, the violent riots seemed to prove to them that they were not safe. As a result, massive "white flight" out of Chicago occurred.¹¹⁸ King's death in 1968 and the riots that came after it made many white Chicagoans, along with many other Americans, warm to the politics of "law and order."¹¹⁹ Seizing on this racially-based fear of urban crime, Richard M. Nixon centered his campaign around the theme of "law and order," stating that, if he was elected to the presidency, he would push for legislation that would "clean up" America's streets.¹²⁰ By the end of the 1960s, America was in a war against drugs and crime, which in conservative circles was taken out on urban black youth.¹²¹ Lawmakers in major cities

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 385-387, 412

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ *13th: From Slave to Criminal With One Amendment*. Directed by Ava DuVernay. Netflix. September 30, 2016.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 408,409.

¹¹⁹ *13th: From Slave to Criminal With One Amendment*.

¹²⁰ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 46-47.

¹²¹ Ibid

tasked law enforcement to control the movement of African Americans — just as they did in the Jim Crow South — to accomplish the aspirations laid out by Nixon’s “law and order” political platform.¹²²

As the fervor for civil rights transformed many black communities during the 1960s, the popularity of blues in the black community changed as well. After its peak in popularity during 1954, Chess Records and the rest of Chicago blues faded into the 1960s.¹²³ Black youths in the 1960s saw the blues as the sound of an older generation that no longer applied to black culture in the decade.¹²⁴ The choice was left to the many Chicago blues players to continue to play for a shrinking crowd of black adults or attempt to find a new market. Simultaneously, as Chicago blues declined in popularity, a direct beneficiary of its musical stylings — rock-n-roll — surged in popularity in America and Europe.¹²⁵ While rock-n-roll borrowed much from Chicago blues, especially in England, the demographic that rock-n-roll attracted was entirely different from the demographic that made Chicago blues famous. White youth became the primary demographic that Chicago blues players, and blues players in general, would have to attract in the 1960s to continue the success they had with blacks in the 1950s.¹²⁶ The 1960s, therefore, marked the decade in which the blues —that began in the Delta of Mississippi as the blackest

¹²² *13th: From Slave to Criminal With One Amendment.*

¹²³ Rowe, *Chicago Blues*, 165-166.

¹²⁴ Adelt, *Blues in the Sixties*, 14-15.

¹²⁵ Rowe, *Chicago Blues*, 165-166.

¹²⁶ Adelt, *Blues in the Sixties*, 13-14.

music in America — transitioned into a music seeking the attention of white youth.¹²⁷ As the original Chicago blues peaked and declined in popularity during the 1950s, “crossing over” became the only way for the music to survive in the 1960s.¹²⁸

By the end of the 1960s, the unquestioned leader of the “crossover movement” for the blues was B.B. King. At the beginning of the 1960s, King suffered from the same slide that his counterparts in Chicago felt in the latter half of the 1950s.¹²⁹ Continuing on the all-black chitlin circuit tour, King started to hear boos from young blacks who saw him as an Uncle Tom.¹³⁰ When his black crowds were not booing him, they were just not showing up.¹³¹ He was not having much success in the studio, as many of his studio albums in the early 1960s that were meant for blues, rock-n-roll, and even jazz audiences, flopped.¹³² While King had success with *Live at the Regal* in 1964 with black audiences, by the end of 1968 he decided to hire new management.¹³³ With the advice of his new manager, Sid Seidenberg of ABC, King’s crossover to white rock-n-roll audiences had begun.

The Fillmore West in San Francisco in 1968, a venue dedicated to the “hippie” rock movement, was the stage on which King’s crossover officially began. He was well

¹²⁷ Ibid, 15

¹²⁸ Ibid, 13-15.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 13-15.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 15

¹³¹ Ibid, 17

¹³² Ibid, 17

¹³³ Danchen, *Bluesboy*, 73.

received by a packed house of mostly white youth.¹³⁴ King was shocked at the several ovations he received, and he and his managers believed that they had found King's niche in the white rock movement.¹³⁵ From the Fillmore, King went on to record several studio albums that were much more rock based and several that were in front of live audiences. The most successful of the crossover material was the *Indianola Seeds* album in 1969, "The Thrill is Gone" single in 1970, and the live recording of his performance at Cook County Jail in 1970.¹³⁶ Each of the recording had the specific purpose of making King's music more acceptable to rock audiences and white people in general, and the most successful on the pop Billboard charts was *Live at Cook County Jail*.¹³⁷ It, in particular, demonstrated the peculiar notion that white audiences wanted a whiter style of blues music but also wanted the black artist to be as true to his black roots as possible.¹³⁸ The reactions from the seventy to ninety percent black crowd to King's classic tunes, as well as his new crossover material at Cook County Jail, proved to white audiences the authenticity of King's blues.¹³⁹ While King had other reasons for playing at Cook County Jail, manager, Seidenberg, and producer, Szymczyk, intentionally geared the recording of King's Cook County performance to sell King to a new generation of listeners, namely white audiences.

¹³⁴ Adelt, *Blues in the Sixties*, 17-18.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 19.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 21-27.

¹³⁷ Danchen, *Bluesboy* 73.

¹³⁸ Adelt, *Blues in the Sixties*, 27-28.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 28

Cook County Jail

Cook County Jail is located at 26th Street and California Ave in Chicago. It opened in 1929.¹⁴⁰ The institution is currently the largest county detention facility in the United States.¹⁴¹ From its inception in 1929 through the 1950s, the jail only deteriorated and declined. As political patronage systems in the 1950s forced the jail to use underpaid and under-experienced guards and staff, county officials shifted towards the convenient “barn boss” system that allowed the more intimidating inmates to assume some guard functions and authority over the rest of the jail population.¹⁴² The “barn boss” system quickly created a jail that was rampant with drugs and violence.¹⁴³ For the most part, gang affiliation and brute strength dictated the ebb and flow of jail operations.

Overcrowding was the problem that led to the implementation of the “barn boss system” in Cook County Jail.¹⁴⁴ As the demographics of the city changed rapidly during the Great Migration, so did the jail’s population. The escalation of racially-motivated crimes during the 1940s and 1950s led to the escalation of police presence in black neighborhoods.¹⁴⁵ While the order was given from the city government to protect black neighborhoods from white mobs, the individual biases of many police officers created

¹⁴⁰ Anne Sweeny, “History of Neglect and Abuse at Cook County Jail.” *Chicago Tribune*, November 13, 2014

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ King, *Live In Cook County Jail*, LP Liner.

¹⁴⁴ Bernard Judge, “Heat’s Been on Jail Since Opening,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 16, 1968, sec 1D.

¹⁴⁵ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 97-99, 197.

different results than those intended by city officials.¹⁴⁶ Police arrested both whites and blacks during these riots, although the justice system rarely indicted whites who were arrested. The result was the opposite for blacks; therefore, more blacks actually served jail time.¹⁴⁷ With the police force ramped up, the Cook County Jail inmate population grew while the facilities and staff did not. Inducted in 1955, Warden Jack Johnson immediately begged for an increase in staff but was largely ignored by the Circuit Court committee and Sheriff Joseph Woods.¹⁴⁸ Johnson cited that the jail operated with a 100 to 1 inmate to guard ratio from 4pm to 8am every day, a skeleton staff in comparison to many other maximum security institutions across the country at the time.¹⁴⁹ Without assistance from any higher up officials, Johnson slowly watched the “barn boss” system consume the jail.

A lack of administrative control continued at Cook County Jail into the late 1960s, finally coming to a head in 1968, forcing Sheriff Woods to fire Warden Johnson on March 6, 1968.¹⁵⁰ Johnson’s replacement was a child psychologist by the name of Winston Moore.¹⁵¹ Winston Moore became the first African-American warden in American history as he inherited a jail that the Illinois Crime Commission and the John Howard

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 368-369.

¹⁴⁸ William Jones, “Weigh Indictments in County Jail Probe,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 9, 1967. sec 1.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Judge, “Heat’s Been on Jail...” *Chicago Tribune*.

¹⁵¹ C. Richard English, *Cook County Jail Barn Boss: Memoirs of a Former Jail Warden*. Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 2007. ix-xi

Association — a prison reform group — called a “jungle” after an intensive and critical 1968 investigation.¹⁵² In his first day on the job in March of 1968, Moore began dismantling the “barn boss” system. Reporter Geoffrey Harding, the author of the *Live at Cook County Jail*’s liner notes, wrote, “... he [Moore] moved out three refrigerators from Mafia-occupied cells, collected over 200 weapons from inmates and confiscated an undetermined amount of drugs.”¹⁵³ While Moore made quick strides in institutional reform, the former “barn bosses” were hardly willing to relinquish their control over the jail. C. Richard English, Moore’s new Chief Jail Officer, stated in his book, *Cook County Jail Barn Boss*, that the new officers definitely had to “crack heads” and use physical force to take back the power of the jail.¹⁵⁴ One of English’s methods was to hire more African-American guards from urban neighborhoods who were not only physically intimidating enough to demand respect but could relate to the inmates’ background and understand “when to stand down and make sure the inmates got what they needed to survive.”¹⁵⁵ Through English and Moore’s efforts, Cook County Jail gradually got on the right path; however, the new leadership of the jail knew that heavy-handed order was only part of the solution to the problems of Cook County Jail. The other part of the solution was music.

¹⁵² King, *Live In Cook County Jail*, LP Liner.

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ English, *Cook County Jail Barn Boss*, 18.

¹⁵⁵ Bock, 276

Chief English, along with Warden Moore, believed that “music soothes the soul” and that it was key to solving the problems they faced in reforming Cook County Jail.¹⁵⁶ To carry out his plan, English created a classification system that separated the “hardest” inmates away from the majority of the population and formed an entire tier of the jail dedicated to inmates who were also musicians.¹⁵⁷ Approximately sixty inmates vouched as musicians and were placed in this section of the jail.¹⁵⁸ They immediately formed several different jail bands of various musical stylings, from rock-n-roll to spirituals to jazz.¹⁵⁹ In addition to the jail providing a music section for the inmates to reduce tension amongst themselves, English invited live acts to play. English started with street entertainers before convincing jazz singer Ester Phillips to perform.¹⁶⁰

But the crown jewel still awaited him. Through the work of English, along with Winston Moore and Geoffrey Harding, the jail was able to persuade B.B. King to come and perform live before the inmates on September 10, 1970.¹⁶¹ The event would be a defining moment in both the history of the jail and the history of the blues.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ English, *Cook County Jail Barn Boss*, 69-74.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

¹⁵⁹ Ibid

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

¹⁶¹ King, *Live in Cook County Jail*, LP Liner.

Chapter 2

Darlin' You Know I Love You: King's arrival and performance at Cook County Jail.

Cook County Jail Attracts King

After taking up their administrative posts at Cook County Jail in 1968, Warden Winston Moore and Chief Jail Officer Richard C. English had accomplished a considerable amount of their mission to correct Cook County Jail's "barn boss" issues by 1970. Moore and English overcame many of the jail's obstacles through processes of classifying and dividing the inmates to limit the inmates' control.¹⁶² Going forward, Moore and English believed that steps needed to be taken to unify the jail around positive events. First on Moore and English's agenda was music.¹⁶³ In a combined effort between Moore, English, and newly appointed jail impresario Geoffrey Harding, Cook County Jail set out to attract musicians and entertainers to perform for inmates. The relationship between Moore, English, and Harding would play a significant role in facilitating King's performance at the jail.

Moore's experiences as an African American and juvenile gang psychologist gave him insight into the mentality of individual gang members and a thorough

¹⁶² Les Back, "How Blue Can You Get? B.B. King, Planetary Humanism and the Blues Behind Bars," *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no. 7-8 (2015): 274-85.

¹⁶³ Back, "How Blue Can You Get?"

understanding of the world of gangs in Chicago.¹⁶⁴ Moore seemed the perfect fit for a jail that was roughly seventy-five to ninety percent black and heavily influenced by gang culture.¹⁶⁵ Due to the jail's uneven racial makeup, Moore understood that attracting just any entertainer to the jail would not be enough to achieve his objective of creating a sense of community in the jail. Moore knew the entertainment needed to be specifically organized to fit the jail's unique situation.¹⁶⁶ Hence, he decided to recruit an expert in the entertainment field.¹⁶⁷

Moore set his eyes on Geoffrey Harding, a twenty-five-year-old social worker and news reporter, to be the organizer of entertainment at the jail.¹⁶⁸ When Harding interviewed Moore for Chicago's *Newsweek* in 1969, Moore learned Harding had connections in the entertainment industry, including Nancy Wilson, T-Bone Walker, and B.B. King.¹⁶⁹ Harding accepted Moore's offer and became the first jail impresario — an unpaid position at the time — in June of 1970.¹⁷⁰ Harding exemplified his understanding of correctional facilities by stating, "Entertainment brings in the community. It is just as

¹⁶⁴ Melanie Newport, "When a Psychologist Was in Charge of a Jail," The Marshall Project, 2016, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/05/21/when-a-psychologist-was-in-charge-of-jail#.U89qsI0kK>.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Jerry Crimmins, "Talk about captive audiences..." *Chicago Daily Defender* (Chicago), January 9, 1972, sec. 11.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid

¹⁶⁹ Ibid

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

important in correcting anti-social behavior as educational and spiritual behaviors.”¹⁷¹

Harding, realizing the importance of a sense of community in jails, focused on recruiting African-American entertainers to perform at the jail.¹⁷² Moore believed bringing black entertainers into the jail was one of Harding’s major accomplishments and credited him in an interview with the *Chicago Daily Defender*: “regular, legitimate entertainment in prisons, a concept spreading throughout the country, was started by Geoffrey Harding.”¹⁷³ By contrast, Harding credited the success to a “team effort.”¹⁷⁴

While Harding was the only jail staff member listed as an entertainment manager, Warden English shared Moore and Harding’s understanding of the importance of music for the jail and helped to organize entertainers and events as well. “The prisoners appreciate a concert,” English told the *Chicago Tribune*, “because it gives them a feeling there’s somebody who cares about them... and to be part of an album really lift[s] morale.”¹⁷⁵ English believed in a strong sense of give-and-take between the staff and the prisoners. He understood the prisoners needed toughness from the guards in some situations, but love and understanding in others.¹⁷⁶ English also understood that concerts could provide “inmates with a shared experience,” which would positively affect the

¹⁷¹ Ibid

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Ibid

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

¹⁷⁵ Thomas Popson, “B.B. King: Singing the Blues on 'Live from Cook County Jail,’” *Chicago Tribune*, February 21, 1971, sec. 5.

¹⁷⁶ Back, “How Blue Can You Get?” 277-278.

overall jail community.¹⁷⁷ As English combined his ideas with Moore and Harding's, each member of the group contributed to persuading King to perform at the jail in September of 1970.

With the combined efforts of Moore, Harding, and English, the trio was able to reach King in 1970 to facilitate his performance in the jail. In 1965, English introduced himself to King after one of King's shows in Memphis.¹⁷⁸ Harding developed a relationship with King during a summer job that Harding had held as a teenager at the Paradise Club in Idlewild, Michigan.¹⁷⁹ Sources differ on who contacted King first, but all agree that the offer was expressed to King at Mister Kelly's Jazz Club in Chicago. King stated in his autobiography *Blues All Around Me* that Moore and Harding approached him at Mister Kelly's and asked him to play at the jail.¹⁸⁰ English released one statement that placed he and Moore at Mister Kelly's to offer King, but later released another statement in which he offered King, individually, over the phone.¹⁸¹

Despite the differences in accounts, most agree that Moore officially offered King in person in Mister Kelly's. King stated that Moore approached him after his show at Mister Kelly's and asked, "B... it's a first for you playing Mister Kelly's and a first for

¹⁷⁷ Popson, "B.B. King: Singing the Blues on 'Live from Cook County Jail.'"

¹⁷⁸ Shia Kapos, "Retired Warden Remembers Day B.B. King Played Cook County Jail." *Crain's Chicago Business*, May 15, 2015. <http://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20150515/BLOGS03/150519846/retired-warden-remembers-day-b-b-king-played-cook-county-jail>

¹⁷⁹ Crimmins, "Talk about captive audiences..."

¹⁸⁰ B.B. King, David Ritz, *Blues All Around Me: The Autobiography of B.B. King*. New York: Avon Books, 1996. 257-258.

¹⁸¹ Kapos, "Retired Warden Remembers Day B.B. King Played Cook County Jail."

me supervising prisons. Now I'd like for the two of us to do another first. Would you come play for our inmates?"¹⁸² King later recalled that he paused and "thought how the inmates could use the blues in a good way," then accepted Moore's offer with the simple reply of "When do you want me?"¹⁸³ King never requested any payment from the jail for his services, agreeing to play the concert out of compassion for the inmates. King believed his performance could provide the prisoners "something to get positive about, a way to show them the outside world cares."¹⁸⁴ English attested to King's caring nature, stating, "[King] wanted to do something for these guys. He wanted to help guys with problems."¹⁸⁵

While King saw the concert as a way to lift inmate spirits, his management saw a marketing opportunity. After King had informed his manager Sid Seidenberg of his intentions to play the jail, Seidenberg gathered an ABC recording crew to capture the entire performance on tape and some members of the press to promote King's brand further.¹⁸⁶ After King got Seidenberg on board with the "jail concert" idea, King's date at Cook County Jail was set.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² James Mayock, "And That is Why I Chose to Sing the Blues," *The Independent* (London, England), September 11, 1998, Features sec.

¹⁸³ King and Ritz, "Blues All Around Me," 257-258

¹⁸⁴ DNAinfoStaff, "The Block Club." *The Block Club: A Blog About Chicago Neighborhoods*, May 16, 2015. <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20150515/little-village/bb-kings-live-at-cook-county-jail-he-moaned-of-betrayed-love>.

¹⁸⁵ Kapos, "Retired Warden Remembers Day B.B. King Played Cook County Jail."

¹⁸⁶ Sebastian Danchin, *Blues Boy: The Life and Music of B.B. King*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.,87-88

¹⁸⁷ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 88.

King Arrives at the Jail

It was a hot eighty-seven degrees on September 10, 1970, when King arrived at Cook County Jail to perform for its inmates.¹⁸⁸ While the jail had hosted several performances in the two years before King’s arrival, it had never attracted an artist as famous as King. A lingering tension was present throughout the jail as many officers questioned how well such a performance would work.¹⁸⁹ Officer Zurek, a jail guard present the day of the concert, said, “Inmates knew, number one, if they acted up that was the end of the entertainment. And two, whoever acted up would have to face the other inmates.”¹⁹⁰ With twenty-five extra off-duty guards present to monitor the event, the jail had around 125 guards — most on the ground, and a few in guard towers with high caliber rifles — to keep the peace throughout the event.¹⁹¹ Ed Curtis, another jail guard, was in charge of ushering King’s entry through the tunnels and iron-barred doors into the jail.¹⁹² Curtis admitted he was scared a fight might break out after witnessing the energy surrounding the jail once King arrived.¹⁹³ “If the inmates wanted to do something they could have. Those rifles (in the guard towers) were for show. They weren't going to shoot into the crowd,” said Curtis.¹⁹⁴ Recounting his entry into the jail, King said, “Maybe it’s

¹⁸⁸ Mark Konkol. "Cook County Jail Officials Recall B.B. King Concert: ‘A Hell of a Show’" *Chicago Sun-Times* (Chicago), May 15, 2015.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Back, “How Blue Can You Get? 278.

¹⁹² Konkol, "Cook County Jail Officials Recall B.B. King Concert.”

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

the stone walls, maybe it's the electric fences or the guard towers or the sound of those iron doors slamming behind you. There's something final and scary and rock-hard about being inside of a prison [jail]."¹⁹⁵ Before King had even taken the stage in Cook County Jail, the jail's environment had already changed his perspective of what life was like behind bars.

Inside the yard's twenty-five-foot walls, the jail's immense recreational yard was the venue for the concert.¹⁹⁶ The inmates sat on the ground in the yard, facing the stage, a large concrete block where inmates were once hanged for executions.¹⁹⁷ Eighty percent of the inmate population (approximately 2,800 inmates) attended the event.¹⁹⁸ All two hundred female inmates were present and sat up front on wooden benches; one was close enough to receive a kiss on the hand from King.¹⁹⁹ The majority of the male population sat on the grass in roped off sections behind the women.²⁰⁰ A few male inmates who wished to dance were allowed to stand at the back.²⁰¹ The only inmates that were not allowed in the jail yard during the event were the ones King said, "they couldn't control very well [death-row inmates]," but they were allowed to listen through windows in cells

¹⁹⁵ Back, "How Blue Can You Get?" 278.

¹⁹⁶ Crimmins, "Talk about captive audiences..."

¹⁹⁷ Earl Calloway. "B.B. King Sings to Cheering Fans While Recording In Cook County Jail ." *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 17, 1970, Daily ed. Photograph, George Jones: Konkol, "Cook County Jail Officials Recall B.B. King Concert."

¹⁹⁸ Mayock, "And That is Why I Chose to Sing the Blues."

¹⁹⁹ Konkol, "Cook County Jail Officials Recall B.B. King Concert."

²⁰⁰ Kapos, "Retired Warden Remembers Day B.B. King played Cook County Jail."

²⁰¹ Ibid

that surrounded the yard.²⁰² With 2,117 excited inmates sitting in the recreation yard of what *Ebony* magazine called “The World’s Worst Jail,” King was set to take the stage and give an electrifying performance.²⁰³

To add to the pressure of playing the first performance of his life behind bars, King also had to worry about producing a sellable record for ABC. Bill Szymczyk, King’s studio producer, led the Cook County jail recording team as they recorded what would be the last collaboration between King and Szymczyk on record. Harding — whom the *Chicago Tribune* attributed as the organizer of the entire event — mentioned in an interview that recording the performance was, at best, a “gamble.”²⁰⁴ King and his management spent around \$10,000 on transportation fees, salaries, and other expenses for the recording crew.²⁰⁵ If inclement weather had materialized above the yard that day, or if an unexpected issue had arisen with a prisoner, the entire recording investment would have been lost.²⁰⁶ Fortunately, the weather remained calm, and the recording proceeded as planned.

The Cook County Jail Jazz Band played a few tunes to warm up the stage as King walked through the crowd, shaking inmates’ hands and giving out autographs.²⁰⁷ As King climbed the stage once used as a gallows, he remained calm and cool in the face of an

²⁰² Mayock, “And That is Why I Chose to Sing the Blues.”

²⁰³ Konkol, “Cook County Jail Officials Recall B.B. King Concert.”

²⁰⁴ Popson, “B.B. King: Singing the Blues on ‘Live from Cook County Jail.’”

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Back, “How Blue Can You Get?” 278.

unpredictable crowd.²⁰⁸ Once King and all of the members of his six-piece band arrived on stage, King and the band allowed the jail band to play along with them on a couple of tunes for roughly thirty minutes before the tape started rolling.²⁰⁹ While the tunes played by King and the jail band were not recorded, the gesture illustrated that the connection that developed between King and the inmates exceeded what is on record. After the jail band left the stage, King, wearing a bright-green plaid suit and already sweating from the Chicago heat, began to record one of the greatest live albums in American history.²¹⁰

Live In Cook County Jail: Performance and Recording

The album began with an introduction as its first track.²¹¹ The sounds of broken warm-ups from several different musicians in King's band filled the air, as King asked for "Bill," presumably Bill Szymczyk, before the show began.²¹² As the band continued to warm up, Jewel Lafontant, a member of the Cook County Department of Corrections Board — and later a member of Richard Nixon's cabinet — introduced King and the band.²¹³ She began by stating, "We are about ready to begin our program. It's a beautiful day in Chicago, and we are going to have a wonderful time this afternoon."²¹⁴ Lafontant then acknowledged the presence of "The man who named Winston Moore our director

²⁰⁸ Konkol, "Cook County Jail Officials Recall B.B. King Concert."

²⁰⁹ Back, "How Blue Can You Get?"

²¹⁰ Popson, "B.B. King: Singing the Blues on 'Live from Cook County Jail.'"

²¹¹ B.B. King. *Live in Cook County Jail*. LP. Rec. 10 Sept. 1970. Bill Szymczyk, 1971.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Popson, "B.B. King singing the Blues "Live from Cook County Jail."

²¹⁴ King, "Introduction," *Live in Cook County Jail*.

[of the jail]... our beloved, Sheriff Woods.”²¹⁵ A chorus of boos met Woods’ announcement, but the boos quickly subsided to laughter.²¹⁶ Lafontant then announced that, “another dear friend of all of yours out there [the prisoners] is the Chief Justice of the Criminal Court, Judge Joseph Power who is present.”²¹⁷ Power’s announcement was met with a harder cry of boos along with chants of “Get him out” and “Get him out of here” from the inmates.²¹⁸ The boos subsided to mild laughter again as Lafontant even chuckled at the outbursts to her ironic and sarcastic introductions.²¹⁹ Finally, as the band continued to play nonchalantly in the background, Lafontant introduced B.B. King, “who is known to everyone as The King of the Blues... the Chairman of the Board of all blues singers... The Man... but whatever we call him, I know him to be just a fine, warm human being, full of humility.”²²⁰ After Lafontant finished introducing King to the audience, she asked, “Would you please come forth, Mr. King?”²²¹ King obliged and stepped forth to begin the first song of the performance.

King ripped right into “Every Day I Have the Blues,” with a tone both sweet and raw, made possible by his Gibson ES-335 “Lucille,” his unique vibrato skill, and his Lab

²¹⁵ Ibid

²¹⁶ Ibid

²¹⁷ Ibid

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

Series L5 amplifier.²²² "Every Day I Have the Blues," was a classic King single from the early 1950s. In 1954, King pulled from previous versions of the song performed by Memphis Slim, Lowell Fulson, and Count Basie, to arrange his version with the help of bandleader Maxwell Davis.²²³ King stated that Davis was "the man most responsible for my best work," and that "he [Davis] wrote a chart for 'Everyday I Have the Blues' with a crisp and relaxed sound I'd never heard before. I liked it so well, I made it my theme."²²⁴ King's version of "Every Day I Have the Blues" peaked at No. 8 on the R&B chart in 1955.²²⁵

David Mcgee, author of, *B.B. King: There is Always One More Time*, argued that "Every Day I Have the Blues" is a perfect case study of Maxwell's entire career with King, which lasted from 1954 until the early 1960s.²²⁶ The relaxed style Maxwell demonstrated with King in the 1954 single of "Every Day I Have the Blues" was not present on the *Live in Cook County Jail* version.²²⁷ King belted out his unique "B.B. style" licks one after the other at Cook County Jail, but displayed a strict imitation of T-Bone Walker on the 1954 original single.²²⁸ The first song of the *Live in Cook County*

²²² Joe Rosenthal, "Get Inside the Blues with B.B.," <https://www.guitar.com/articles/get-inside-blues-bb-king-interview>; King, "Every Day I Have the Blues," *Live in Cook County*.

²²³ David Mcgee, *B.B. King: There is Always One More Time*, Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005. 82, 83-84.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid, 82-84

²²⁶ Ibid, 82-84.

²²⁷ King, "Every Day I Have the Blues," *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²²⁸ B.B. King, "Every Day I Have the Blues," RPM, 1955.

album provided an excellent example of King's development as a musician since his early years in Memphis. While the song's tempo was rushed, likely due to the nervousness of their first performance in a jail, King and the band related to the inmates with the lyrics of "Everyday I Have The Blues."

After finishing "Every Day I Have the Blues," the album seems to skip, possibly to erase some of the live material, going straight into the second recorded song on the album — "How Blue Can You Get?"²²⁹ The third track of the album then thrust right into King's climactic two-and-a-half minute guitar solo that builds up and dies down in dramatic fashion. "How Blue Can You Get?" was initially released as "Downhearted" on King's eleventh LP, *Blues in My Heart*, in 1963.²³⁰ "Downhearted" was written by Jane Feather and originally performed by Johnny Moore's Three Blazers, but King was most influenced by his idol Louis Jordan's version.²³¹ King's version did not differ much from Jordan's in tempo and pace, differentiating itself only by the addition of King's guitar and Plas Johnson's saxophone.²³² King re-recorded the song in 1964 with ABC-Paramount as "How Blue Can You Get," with Maxwell Davis adding more propulsion to the horn section, and King adding more emphasis to his vocals.²³³

²²⁹ King, "Every Day I Have the Blues," *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²³⁰ Mcgee, *B.B. King: There is Always One More Time*, 105.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

“How Blue Can You Get” became a recurring number in King’s live shows due to its ability to gain audience response.²³⁴ The most attention-grabbing section of the song was King’s frustrated conversation with his woman, as King repeated his woman’s response to his statements in a pesky tone. He sang, “I gave you a brand new Ford, but you said: I want a Cadillac. I bought you a ten dollar dinner, and you said: thanks for the snack. I let you live in my penthouse, you said: it just a shack. I gave you seven children and now you want to give them back.”²³⁵ On the *Live in Cook County Jail* album, the inmates erupted with applause as King and the band finished the previous section and moved into the final chorus.²³⁶ The *Live in Cook County* version of “How Blue Can You Get,” like “Every Day I Have the Blues,” was faster, louder, and had an overall rawness that was not present on the studio version.²³⁷ With the story of a man who could never seem to catch a break in life relating to the prisoners, “How Blue Can You Get,” was one of the best-received songs by the inmates, and is one of best performances by King and the band on the entire album.

The third song of the performance and fourth track of the album was, “Worry, Worry, Worry.”²³⁸ King began “Worry, Worry, Worry” in the same fashion he started “How Blue Can You Get,” with a two-and-a-half minute long, slow, blues guitar solo that rivaled the best guitar work of his career. King first recorded this song as “Worry, Worry”

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ King, “How Blue Can You Get?” *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ B.B. King, “Downhearted,” *Blues in my Heart*, Crown, 1963.

²³⁸ King, “Worry, Worry, Worry,” *Live in Cook County Jail*.

in 1959, but the original tune never made it onto one of King's many albums though it did become a staple on his live tours.²³⁹ The *Live in Cook County* version of "Worry, Worry, Worry," continued the album's trend to push the songs faster, harder, and louder than their originals.²⁴⁰ King's emotion was bleeding through his guitar throughout the A-side of the album, as he was reaching out to connect with the many captured souls in his audience.

In the middle of "Worry, Worry, Worry" King broke into a call and response prose with the audience about male-female relationships.²⁴¹ King taught the men that, "women are God's gift to men," and vice versa as he spoke to the women in the audience. This part of "Worry, Worry, Worry" elicited jeers, accords, and laughs as King spoke candidly about domestic violence and cheating, both of which some of the inmates seemed to applaud.²⁴² While King talked of some of the dark sides of male-female relationships in a comedic fashion, his main point was to warn against reciprocating them. King's brilliant performance of "Worry, Worry, Worry" lasted nearly nine minutes and ended the A-side of the album.²⁴³

Side B started with King informing the audience that, "up until now I have played to you the same I would play to the audience at Mister Kelly's (the Jazz club in Chicago

²³⁹ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 131.

²⁴⁰ B.B. King, "Worry, Worry," Kent, 1959.

²⁴¹ King, "Worry, Worry, Worry," *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ King, *Live in Cook County Jail*.

where King met Moore)... but I am going to tell you what we're going to do now."²⁴⁴ As King rolled out a sweet major pentatonic "B.B. style" lick and the band started up the next song, he informed the audience that, "were gonna reminisce a little bit and I'll tell you why."²⁴⁵ King told the audience that he and his band had recorded "something like three hundred and eight (single) records, about thirty-two or thirty-three LPs.... So, a lot of them we don't get to play too often, so here's what were going to do. We are going to reach way back... and pull out quite a few of them real old ones, is that all right with you?"²⁴⁶ The audience responded with a loud shout of approval, and one woman screamed, "Don't forget 'Sweet Sixteen.'"²⁴⁷ King acknowledged her request by repeating it, then he said, "The first one we want to do... this one is the first tune that made people know about B.B. King."²⁴⁸

After a quick strike on his guitar, King began singing "Three O'Clock Blues," his first number one hit from 1951.²⁴⁹ It stayed at number one in the *Billboard* R&B charts for five weeks and lasted seventeen weeks in total before falling off the chart.²⁵⁰ "Three O'Clock Blues" was another tune borrowed from the western bluesman Lowell Fulson,

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Mcgee, *B.B. King: There is Always One More Time*, 80.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 76.

who was also heavily influenced by T-Bone Walker.²⁵¹ King's studio version of "Three O'Clock Blues," like "Every Day I Have the Blues," illustrated the distinctions between King's guitar playing in his early and later years.²⁵² At Cook County Jail, King's "Three O'Clock Blues" was emotional, yet steady, displaying King's transformation from an imitator in 1951 to an innovator in 1970.

"Three O'Clock Blues" only received a mild response from the crowd.²⁵³ After hearing the first three emotional, driving tunes, one could only expect that a laid back tune would draw a similar reaction. King, not playing a guitar solo and only singing a couple of lines from "Three O'Clock Blues," wrapped up the song in just over a minute.²⁵⁴ As King struck his guitar a final time, the band stopped momentarily then proceeded to pick up the same beat as King began to talk to the crowd again.²⁵⁵ "Three O'Clock Blues" was only the first half of a blues medley King performed on track B1 of *Live In Cook County Jail*.²⁵⁶

With the band continuing a blues tune behind him, King thanked the audience for their applause and then said, "Now we are gonna reminisce a little bit further."²⁵⁷ King played a minor lick on his guitar, indicating the shift in tone, then began to introduce the

²⁵¹ Ibid, 74.

²⁵² B.B. King, "Three O'Clock Blues," RPM, 1951.

²⁵³ King, "Blues Medley," *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ King, *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

next half of the medley by saying, "...this is one of the next big records we had, about [19]52."²⁵⁸ He played another minor guitar lick, then continued his introduction by saying, "...this was somewhat what we call a blues ballad like. People don't do many of this kind today, but I think a lot of things that we let go sometimes, are the things we cherish the most later on."²⁵⁹ Immediately after King's final word, the band changed key, and King played a short four-bar solo before stating, "This is called 'Darlin, You Know I Love You.'"²⁶⁰

King released "Darlin, You Know I Love You" as a single as "You Know I Love You," in 1952.²⁶¹ It became King's next number one *Billboard* hit after "Three O'Clock Blues."²⁶² King's "You Know I Love You," was influenced by the ballads of western bluesman Ivory Joe Hunter.²⁶³ "You Know I Love You," represented two unique attributes of King's early career. First, its ballad style—which King later turned into the blues ballad—was unlike anything his fellow bluesman from the Mississippi Delta were releasing at the time.²⁶⁴ It illustrated the distance from the Delta blues, and even the blues in general, that aspects of his music could traverse.²⁶⁵ Second, in this single, there is no

²⁵⁸ King, "Blues Medley," *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Mcgee, *B.B. King: There is Always One More Time*, 239.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 108.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 35

²⁶⁵ B.B. King, "You Know I Love You," RPM, 1952.

evidence of King playing guitar at any point on the record.²⁶⁶ Along with nearly being outside the realm of blues, “You Know I Love You,” suggested that King’s audience perceived him as a popular singer, rather than guitar player, in his early years.²⁶⁷ By 1970, King had added a plethora of his famed guitar licks to the song, along with an emotionally-driven solo to bring the song to its climax as it ended.²⁶⁸ The crowd erupted as King and the band were still adding improvisational runs on their instruments before coming together after a snare drum roll to end the “Three O’Clock Blues/Darlin, You Know I Love You” medley with a loud, single note burst from the horns.²⁶⁹

While the end of the “Three O’Clock Blues/Darlin, You Know I Love You” medley was dying down, King said, “Thank you, thank you very much,” in response to the applause from the audience.²⁷⁰ “Darlin You Know I Love You” was the first example of King changing the direction of his song’s audience from women to inmates to relate with the prisoners. After the medley ended King quickly stated, “Here’s another one,” moving to the next tune “Sweet Sixteen,” which fulfilled the earlier request for the song.²⁷¹ Immediately after King sang the first line, “When I first met you babe,” the inmates responded with applause.²⁷² “Sweet Sixteen,” was originally recorded by King in

²⁶⁶ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 35.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ King, “Blues Medley,” *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ King, “Sweet Sixteen,” *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

1958 and entered *Billboard's* black charts in early 1960.²⁷³ “Sweet Sixteen” stayed in the charts for fourteen weeks and rose as high as the number two spot in January of 1960.²⁷⁴

Adapted from vocalist Big Joe Turner’s song with the same title, “Sweet Sixteen” resurrected King’s career as a bluesman in 1960.²⁷⁵ Shifting his style away from blues and into the influence of easy listening band singers like Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole, King’s popularity fell in the mid and late 1950s.²⁷⁶ The “Sweet Sixteen,” single was a perfect example of King’s intentional shift back to his blues roots, as his iconic guitar licks returned to the forefront of the song, and his voice was as loud and emotionally intense as any single he had recorded in the studio to date.²⁷⁷ With the added fire King placed on his voice and instrument in the studio version of “Sweet Sixteen,” his *Live in Cook County Jail* version did not deviate as much from the original as the previous songs on the album did. Though his performance on the single possessed a strong, emotional voice and guitar, at Cook County Jail, King raised the intensity as he felt the song resonating with his audience. After the powerful outro in which King screamed, “Baby I wonder... Baby I wonder... Baby I wonder.... what is going to happen to me!” in a high-pitched tone, the crowd of inmates exploded with applause.²⁷⁸

²⁷³ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 50.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 50

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 50

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 50

²⁷⁷ B.B. King, “Sweet Sixteen,” Kent, 1958.

²⁷⁸ King, “Sweet Sixteen,” *Live in Cook County Jail*.

After “Sweet Sixteen” brought the audience alive again, King chose to perform a more recently recorded song. Recorded only a year before the Cook County Jail concert, “The Thrill is Gone” was arguably the best performance of the entire album and the best rendition of the song King ever recorded. “The Thrill is Gone” was originally released in 1951 by Roy Hawkins, a colleague of King’s at Modern/Crown Records, and peaked at six on the *Billboard* R&B charts.²⁷⁹ Maxwell Davis, King’s bandleader at the time, arranged the song for Hawkins, giving King a sense of familiarity to the tune from the day it was created.²⁸⁰ King’s studio version of “The Thrill is Gone” displayed the producing prowess of the young Bill Szymczyk.²⁸¹ Szymczyk mixed the song to include string pieces from cellos and violins which intensified the song’s melancholy mood, as King and Lucille skillfully sang of rejection and despair behind the strings.²⁸² “The Thrill is Gone” became the most popular song King ever recorded in his career.²⁸³ It reached the top of the *Billboard* best-seller lists in January of 1970, peaked at number three in the Soul charts, and went as high as fifteen in the US Top 100, becoming King’s first song to reach mainstream audiences.²⁸⁴ King received his first Grammy in 1970 with “The Thrill is Gone,” which represented an important turning point in his career, elevating him from bluesman to international pop star.

²⁷⁹ Mcgee, *B.B. King: There Is Always One More Time*. 164.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 79.

²⁸² Mcgee, *B.B. King: There Is Always One More Time*. 165.

²⁸³ B.B. King, “The Thrill is Gone,” *Completely Well*, ABC, 1969.

²⁸⁴ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 79.

In his performance of “The Thrill is Gone” at Cook County Jail, King varied his opening guitar solo from the original with well-placed riffs to accompany the faster tempo.²⁸⁵ The musical characteristics of “The Thrill is Gone” differ considerably from the characteristics of the songs King played earlier in the set. All of the previous numbers possessed fairly prototypical “big band” blues musical stylings, while the “The Thrill is Gone” was rooted in King’s rock-n-roll crossover effort. The differences were easily discernible. After the guitar intro placed the audience on their heels, King sang the first line and the audience immediately reacted; expressing their approval of King’s shift in style.²⁸⁶ The band seemed to be tighter on “The Thrill is Gone,” with King emphasizing his vocals with the sound of personal anguish, as well as rattling off head-scratching guitar licks right and left while he grunted and shouted to Lucille to coax-out a certain sound.²⁸⁷ After the fourth verse, King and the band added to the stunning performance by slowing the song’s tempo in perfect unison as King repeated a guitar lick over the top of the horns.²⁸⁸ As the tempo approached a slow crawl, King and the band began to speed up the tempo and raise the volume until it crescendoed then died again, ending slowly and sweetly.

The inmates erupted after witnessing such an amazing rendition of King’s most popular tune. After the applause died down, King said, “Thank you so much. We hope

²⁸⁵ King, “The Thrill is Gone,” *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

you have been enjoying yourselves up until now.”²⁸⁹ King then asked, “Have you been having a little fun?”²⁹⁰ The inmates responded with a resounding, “Yes!”²⁹¹ King continued on to say, “I want to thank all the people from the board and everybody that helped to make this possible.”²⁹² He then thanked the inmates for requesting him and the band, stating, “I would like to do it again sometime if you’d like to have us back.”²⁹³ The inmates cheered again, and King thanked them again before he moved to his last number of the album.

King introduced the final song on the *Live in Cook County* album by saying, “Lucille, that’s my guitar here, you know we feel very good today, very, very good... very, very good. So we have a little tune, one last little tune we’d like to do for you. It’s called, “Please Accept My Love.”²⁹⁴ In 1959, King’s “Please Accept My Love” reached number nine on the *Billboard* R&B charts and was the only successful single of King’s “Sinatra/Nat King Cole” ballad period.²⁹⁵ While King’s overall crossover effort to the ballad genre of Sinatra and King Cole was unsuccessful, “Please Accept My Love,” proved that King’s failures in the genre were not due to his inabilities as a vocalist. Lucille plays second fiddle to King’s voice in the original “Please Accept My Love” as

²⁸⁹ King, *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ King, *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁹⁴ King, “Please Accept My Love,” *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁹⁵ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 50.

King commanded his singing to fit the tune perfectly.²⁹⁶ “Please Accept My Love” represented King’s ability to sing well with passion and intensity, which drew similar emotional evocations out of his listeners. King’s live rendition of “Please Accept My Love” at Cook County Jail differed little from the original; however, the passion King directed to a woman in the studio version was now directed to an audience full of inmates.

While in other songs in his performance like “Darlin’ You Know I Love You” and “Sweet Sixteen” King altered the song’s intended audience from women to inmates, the title and lyrical message of “Please Accept My Love” served to clearly vocalize King’s compassion for the prisoners in his audience. Through “Please Accept My Love,” King asked the inmates to literally “accept his love” and to understand that he cared for them and their troubles. King did not touch his instrument throughout the entirety of the song; instead, he focused strictly on driving the song with his powerful voice.²⁹⁷ “Please Accept My Love” was the most emotional song on the record, and the listener can hear the sympathy pouring out of King as he attempted to make sure the prisoners understood how much he cared for them. King accentuated some already emotional phrases from the tune like the first line, “I don’t even know your name... but I love you just the same,” and the last one “If you were to die before I do... I’ll end my life to be with you,” with loud trills to further prove his point to the inmates.²⁹⁸ After singing the final line of the song, the

²⁹⁶ B.B. King, “Please Accept My Love,” Kent, 1958.

²⁹⁷ King, “Please Accept My Love,” *Live in Cook County Jail*.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

band brought “Please Accept My Love” and King’s performance at Cook County Jail to a close.

ABC Records released *Live in Cook County Jail* as an LP in February of 1971, and some avid blues listeners call it one of the greatest live albums ever created.²⁹⁹ The album spent three weeks atop the *Billboard* R&B and Soul charts and sold over one million copies.³⁰⁰ The LP cover was a light denim blue color, with a dark black text.³⁰¹ The front of the cover featured a faded image of King playing Lucille in front of the barred windows of the jail with text above him reading, “B.B. KING LIVE IN COOK COUNTY JAIL.”³⁰² The album’s color, font style, and imagery were all used to add to the prison vibe of the album to increase its marketability as an “authentic” blues and prison album.³⁰³ ABC designed the black text to resemble a prison office stamp, and the denim background to resemble a prison jumpsuit.³⁰⁴ A picture taken of King while he was facing the inmates during the concert served as the back of the album cover.³⁰⁵ Written over the picture, in the top left, was the list of tracks on the album. To the right was the

²⁹⁹ Paul Ackerman, ed., “Live in Cook County Jail review,” *Billboard*, February 6, 1971, 58; Keith Harris and Douglas Wolk, “B.B. King’s 5 Greatest Live Performances.” *Rolling Stone*. May 15, 2015.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ King, *Live in Cook County Jail*, LP.

³⁰² King, *Live in Cook County Jail*, LP.

³⁰³ Adelt, “Being Black Twice,” 21-28

³⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 21-28.

³⁰⁵ King, *Live in Cook County*, LP.

liner notes, written by Harding to introduce the listener to the context surrounding the performance.³⁰⁶

Because the story of the relationship between King and the jail painted such an interesting scene, Harding’s liner notes played a significant role in legitimizing the album. The liner notes began bluntly with “Jail, very simply, is one helluva place to be.”³⁰⁷ To illustrate the volatility of the jail prior to the arrival of Moore to the listener, Harding quoted a former inmate who said, “Any-and-everything went, anything from heroin to whiskey... to homosexual rape, bribery and murder.”³⁰⁸ The former inmate added that “not one [jail official] seemed to give a damn.” Harding went onto mention the struggles that Moore and English had to go through to take back the jail from the “barn bosses,” and mentioned how important music was to soothing the relationship between the new administration and the jail’s inmates once the violent fight for power was over.³⁰⁹ Harding also compared the similarity between Moore’s two-year fight to take control of the jail to King’s twenty-five-year fight to overcome racial inequality and segregation in the entertainment industry.³¹⁰ In closing, Harding praised King’s character for putting on a free concert for a jail known as a “jungle” by stating, “B.B.’s performance will forever be a memory to all of us. From 2,117 of your fans, thank you B.B. King, for your

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Harding, *Live in Cook County Jail*, LP Liner, ABC, 1971.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

generosity and kindness; and most of all for not forgetting us.”³¹¹ ³¹² He signed off the liner notes as “Geoffrey Harding and 2,117.”³¹³

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid.

Chapter 3

Every Day I Have the Blues: King and Cook County Jail after *Live in Cook County Jail*.

Response to the *Live in Cook County Jail* Performance and Record

Warden English summed up King's first appearance at Cook County Jail as simply, "One helluva day, and one helluva performance."³¹⁴ Director Moore called it the greatest performance ever at Cook County Jail.³¹⁵ King stated proudly, "This was one the greatest performances and most appreciative audiences I have ever heard."³¹⁶ King remembered his performance, starting with the prisoners booing him — though they were actually booing the sheriff and chief justice— and ending with a raucous yet gracious standing ovation from the inmates.³¹⁷ King's high level of performance can be attributed to his extreme emotional state after witnessing the raw feeling of "oppression" the jail exuded.³¹⁸ Due to the context surrounding the jail, some critics have claimed that Cook

³¹⁴ Mark Konkol. "Cook County Jail Officials Recall B.B. King Concert: 'A Hell of a Show,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 15, 2015.

³¹⁵ "The Block Club," <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20150515/little-village/bb-kings-live-at-cook-county-jail-he-moaned-of-betrayed-love>.

³¹⁶ Earl Calloway. "B.B. King Sings to Cheering Fans While Recording In Cook County Jail." *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 17, 1970, Daily ed. Photograph, George Jones.

³¹⁷ Konkol, "Cook County Jail Officials Recall B.B. King Concert."

³¹⁸ Back, "How Blue Can You Get?," 274-85.

County Jail represented one of the “bluest” places to record an album.³¹⁹ This setting propelled King to reach beyond himself to give a performance that matched the jail’s “blue” environment.

English remembered seeing tears in the eyes of both guards and inmates during the performance, “You have to remember the time,” he recalled, “We were in there to bust heads.”³²⁰ After the two-year war English and Moore had waged with the inmates to take the jail back, King’s concert was the beginning of the reformation process, and it became an emotional scene for everyone involved. English noticed that King seemed to be communicating to the prisoners through his guitar playing, specifically pointing to King’s performance of “The Thrill is Gone” as the emotional climax of the entire event.³²¹ English understood the feelings that King was expressing with his sounds and remembered looking across the inmate population and seeing inmates who were similarly moved.³²² While English specifically remembered King’s playing, Earl Calloway, of the *Chicago Defender*, mentioned how the inmates “listened intently and responded with enthusiasm to the emotional impact when he sang.”³²³ *Jet* magazine also mentioned how intense King’s voice was during the performance, writing, “King, hummed, cajoled and wailed” on stage while the inmates “whooped, hollered, stomped and clapped their

³¹⁹ John Johnson ed., “B.B. King Sends Huge Throng At Cook County Jail.” *Jet*, October 1, 1970, 58.

³²⁰ Kapos, “Retired Warden Remembers Day B.B. King Played Cook County Jail.”

³²¹ Back, “How Blue Can You Get?” 279.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ Calloway, “B.B. King Sings to Cheering Fans While Recording In Cook County Jail.”

hands” in response.³²⁴ King performed several songs with lyrics of particular meaning for the that the prisoners. These songs included: “How Blue Can You Get?” “Every Day I Have the Blues,” and “The Thrill is Gone.” According to the *Chicago Defender*, the passion in each word King sang and in each note he played, convinced the inmates of how much he cared for them.³²⁵ This is what connected King to the inmates on an intimate level and made the performance legendary.

Of all the media outlets that reviewed the Cook County Jail performance and album, *Rolling Stone* magazine was the most critical. *Live in Cook County Jail* narrowly made the *Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Album's of all Time* list, finishing 499th, two spots away from not being recognized at all.³²⁶ Jon Landau, of *Rolling Stone*, wrote a critique of the *Live in Cook County Jail* album that theorized why the album did not achieve wider, mainstream popularity.³²⁷ Landau began by praising King’s ability to crossover in the late 1960s while still keeping his trademark sound, a contrast to other bluesmen like Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry.³²⁸ After praising King’s crossover success, Landau criticized King by pointing out the irony between a statement King made in an interview with the *L.A. Free Press* and King’s performance at Cook County Jail. In the *L.A. Free Press* interview, King explained that he believed bluesmen did not have to stick to the

³²⁴ Johnson, “B.B. King Sends Huge Throng At Cook County Jail,” 58.

³²⁵ Calloway, “B.B. King Sings to Cheering Fans While Recording In Cook County Jail.”

³²⁶ John Landau. "Live In Cook County Jail." *Rolling Stone*, March 18, 1971.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Ibid.

general stereotype of a poor, low-down rambling, black man.³²⁹ While King believed that he had surpassed the general bluesman stereotype, Landau argued that *Live in Cook County Jail* was King's attempt to sell himself as a "low-down" bluesman, adding, "You can't get much more down than the Cook County Jail."³³⁰ While Landau's observation of the reasoning behind the production of the *Live in Cook County* album was correct, attaching the reasoning for the album to the reasoning behind the entire performance was misguided. Seidenberg, King's agent, created the *Live in Cook County Jail* "album" to verify King's blackness to his growing white crowd, but King agreed to the Cook County Jail performance because he wanted to share his compassion to its inmates through a common black culture experience and identity. Landau's critique is more accurately directed at Seidenberg rather than King.

With the King interview paradox aside, Landau's major problem with the album was the lack of crowd participation by the inmates. He argued that Cash's prison albums and King's *Live at The Regal*, had much better reactions from their audiences.³³¹ He stated, "King has to cajole, argue, and beg them [the inmates] into responding at some points."³³² While Landau may be right in his comparison of the crowd volume of *Live in Cook County Jail* to the crowd volumes of the other live albums, he misses a critical fact. The inmates were forced to be quiet throughout the *Live in Cook County Jail* album.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

English said most of the inmates were not only required to sit down but “the inmates were also told to keep quiet.”³³³ By contrast, on *At Folsom Prison (Legacy Edition)*’s first track there is evidence of prisoners being coached on how, and when, to yell while Cash was recording his iconic record.³³⁴ There is no evidence, however, of Seidenberg or Szymczyk attempting to excite the inmates at Cook County Jail because it was not allowed, most likely due to the jail’s history of violence and its large African-American population. Even if the inmates at Cook County Jail were not instructed on when to yell and were only allowed to express themselves fully during King’s performance, *Live in Cook County Jail*’s performance in popular media outlets, like the *Rolling Stone*, would have almost certainly improved.

After his misguided critique of the inmate response, Landau also picked apart several of the songs performed at Cook County Jail, such as “Worry, Worry, Worry,” which he incorrectly titles “Someday Baby.” He highlighted the deficiencies between the *Live in Cook County Jail* and *Live at the Regal* versions of “Worry, Worry, Worry” to surreptitiously argue for *Live at the Regal*’s overall superiority. Landau furthered his “lack of inmate response” argument with his critique of “Please Accept My Love,” writing it was “even worse” than the “Worry, Worry, Worry” performance because the “audience didn’t sound like it enjoyed being asked to accept it at all.”³³⁵ After critiquing the album, with little reasoning aside from crowd volume and *Live at the Regal*

³³³ Kapos, "Retired Warden Remembers Day B.B. King Played Cook County Jail."

³³⁴ Johnny Cash, “Opening Announcements From Hugh Cherry,” *At Folsom Prison (Legacy Edition)*, Columbia, 1968.

³³⁵ Landeau, “Live in Cook County Jail.”

comparisons and idolatry, Landau credited King's guitar playing, writing, "it is as good as the man ever plays; he is in top form from beginning to end."³³⁶ Landau's review was a perfect example of why some pop culture mediators perceived King's Cook County Jail performance in a lesser light than his performance at the Regal and the Cash's prison performances. If factors outside of King's music (control) were not allowed to dictate the discussion, King's Cook County Jail performance was far and away a better example of his abilities as a musician than any album he had released, including *Live at the Regal*. King even said in a later interview, "I've probably played hundreds of better concerts than the one taped at the Regal," and the performance taped at Cook County Jail was one of them.³³⁷ An article released by *Rolling Stone* in 2015, rating King's top live albums of all time, overturned Landau's critiques by placing *Live in Cook County Jail* at the top of its list.³³⁸

Cook County Jail After King's Performance

Before King performed and recorded *Live in Cook County Jail*, Moore was unsuccessful in attracting any top-tier entertainment to the jail. Moore said, "I made a long list of performers who would appeal to the inmates. B.B. King's name was quite a way down the list. I went through every performer... All of them turned me down until I

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Back, "How Blue Can You Get?" 278.

³³⁸ Keith Harris and Douglas Wolk, "B.B. King's 5 Greatest Live Performances," *Rolling Stone*, May 15, 2015. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/b-b-kings-5-greatest-live-performances-20150515/live-in-cook-county-jail-1971-20150515>.

spoke to B.B. King.”³³⁹ King’s successful performance and album convinced many entertainers that performing in Cook County Jail, and jails in general, was a safe and noble act. After King, Moore and Harding were able to convince top-level entertainers like Joan Baez, Roberta Flack, Redd Foxx, Aretha Franklin, Isaac Hayes, Dick Gregory, Dionne Warwick, Muddy Waters, Flip Wilson, The Temptations, and Lou Rawls to perform in the jail by the end of 1972.³⁴⁰ In an interview with *Billboard*, Harding thanked ABC Records for donating several hundred albums to the jail, most likely through FAIRR (The Foundation for the Advancement of Inmate Rehabilitation and Recreation), but insisted that, “It’s obvious that the artist appearing in person is far more important than someone just sending records.”³⁴¹ In his statement, Harding was not discrediting King or FAIRR’s album donation, knowing that King had visited the jail four times between 1970 and 1973. Rather, Harding’s comments were directed at artists who had not visited the jail and were content with only sending albums. While King’s visits and donations after his performance were great for the jail and its inmates, his initial performance and record’s ability to open Cook County’s doors up to other entertainers may have been the most important, long-lasting impact King had on the jail.

King also prided himself on helping uncover the excessive pre-trial detainee wait problem Cook County Jail had in 1970. In many interviews, King insisted that several

³³⁹ Henry Shernoff, “B.B. King Not Too Big To Care,” Seidenberg SAS Inc. October 1, 1971. 3-4.

³⁴⁰ Dan Bottistein, “Seeks Artists to Perform In Cook County Jail,” *Billboard*, August 5, 1972, 10.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Chicago press outlets ran the “Cook County Jail pre-trial detainee” story the next day and that the reporting led to a TV network special on the issue.³⁴² There was little evidence of the widespread press coverage that King remembered, but there were a few articles on the subject that suggest the timing of King’s performance made a difference. Stanley Ziemba, of the *Chicago Tribune*, reported on November 11, 1970, that the Bureau of Detention Facilities and Jail Standards was in the midst of an investigation into Cook County Jail’s overcrowding and pre-trial detainee problem.³⁴³ He stated that the investigation would end on November 20 of 1970, and that they would publish a report two weeks after they had finished.³⁴⁴ After the report was published, Sara Goodyear, also of the *Chicago Tribune*, reported that the investigation found that “250 inmates [had] been in jail more than six months and still [were] awaiting final court action.”³⁴⁵ Goodyear also reported that “more than 60 [had] been there more than a year and some [had] been there more than two years [awaiting trial].”³⁴⁶ While it is not clear when the investigation started, we know that it ended only two months after King’s performance in the jail. Even if the timing of the investigation was merely coincidental, it is reasonable to believe that King’s performance helped to bring legitimate awareness to the Cook County Jail pre-trial detainee problem.

³⁴² Danchin, *Blues Boy*, 88.

³⁴³ Stanley Ziemba. “County Jail Improving, Jail Finds.” *Chicago Tribune*, November 17, 1970, 10.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ Sara Goodyear. “State Report Hits Pre-Trial Waits, Crowding at County Jail,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 5, 1970, 3.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

While King's performance and other entertainers' performances played a role in Moore's reforms at Cook County Jail, it was not the only successful reform that occurred during Moore's tenure as Warden and Director. Though founded before Moore took over the jail, PACE (Programmed Activities for Correctional Education) multiplied while he was in office.³⁴⁷ PACE's primary goal was to provide elementary and secondary education to all inmates who had never completed school or merely wished to advance their education.³⁴⁸ At one point, PACE also provided vocational training so inmates could learn the basic skills needed to perform industrial jobs once they re-entered the workforce.³⁴⁹ PACE set out to provide prisoners with enough skills to help them re-enter society as smoothly as possible to ensure that they never returned to the facility.³⁵⁰ Moore said he spent "all [his] waking hours" thinking of ways to make sure men that walked out never walked back in again. Between 1970 and 1972, PACE helped the jail returnee rate fall from seventy percent to less than fifteen percent.³⁵¹

Moore wrote of his progressive prison ideals in an article entitled "My Cure For Prison Riots: End Prison Racism."³⁵² Written in response to the Attica Prison revolt, Moore preached that a personal connection between jail staff and its inmates was vital to

³⁴⁷ Dan Bottistein, "Seeks Artists to Perform In Cook County Jail," 10.

³⁴⁸ Melanie Newport. "It's a Crime to Not get Involved ." Exploring the History of the Jail Crisis. <https://melanienewport.com/2013/12/17/its-a-crime-not-to-get-involved>, December 17, 2013.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Dan Bottistein, "Seeks Artists to Perform In Cook County Jail," 10.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Winston E. Moore, "My Cure for Prison Riots: End Prison Racism," *Ebony*, December, 1971.

maintaining a safe and rehabilitating environment for the inmates.³⁵³ He added that mutuality was not possible when less than five percent of the jail's guards were white, and eighty-five percent of the prison population was black, as was the case at Attica.³⁵⁴ Prior to the Attica and San Quentin revolts, many would have discredited Moore's progressive ideals, but after the revolts, everyone involved in the prison and corrections community was open to reformist solutions.³⁵⁵

While Moore had great success in cleaning up the jail's barn-boss system and implementing other measures early in his tenure as Warden and Director, the massive influx of prisoners and lack of appropriate staff eventually ended his career in the jail in 1977. As soon as Moore brought the jail some optimism in the early 1970s, Nixon's "War on Drugs" halted the jail's progress. When Moore took over the jail in 1968, the jail's population was at 1,300. When he was fired in 1977, the jail's population had grown to 4,000.³⁵⁶ With the federal and state government withholding needed funds to hire more staff and provide more resources, the jail relapsed into its former pre-Moore state.³⁵⁷ Under Moore's watch, nearly forty inmates escaped, suicides increased, and there was a significant amount of evidence that guards had (often) abused inmates.³⁵⁸ Though Moore

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 84.

³⁵⁵ F. Lee Bailey, "Oversight Hearings on the Nature and Effectiveness of the Rehabilitation Programs of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons." United States Congressionale Subcommittee on National Penitentiaries, 52-65.

³⁵⁶ Newport, "When a Psychologist Was in Charge of a Jail."

³⁵⁷ "Jail Breaks Aren't Just Bad Luck," *Chicago Tribune*. May 19, 1975. Sec 2. pg 1.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

was not directly at fault, someone had to be blamed. In 1975, after Sheriff Richard Elrod suggested that Moore be relieved of his duties, one observer proclaimed that “dunking the Darkie’ is making a comeback in Chicago.”³⁵⁹ No matter how hard Moore worked to save reform at the jail, it was only a matter of time before the jail was too large to control. Moore was officially let go after being indicted for beating a prisoner. All charges were eventually dropped due to lack of evidence.³⁶⁰

Despite the way Moore left his post in 1977, what he was able to provide the inmates of Cook County Jail through his progressive reform was nothing short of spectacular. Even if Cook County Jail could not be completely transformed for the long term, Moore personally uplifted the spirits of the inmates he was able to contact during his tenure. Moore’s progressive actions had a lasting effect on Cook County Jail and, through B.B. King, prisons and jails across the United States. Without Moore’s invitation to Cook County Jail, King may have never embarked upon his subsequent prison crusade, leaving approximately seventy prisons and other correctional facilities untouched by King’s performances and activist group. While Moore and King could not control the overall movement in American prison policy, they were able to create a positive influence on the inmates they interacted with firsthand.

Cook County Jail and King’s Prison Activism

King’s experiences in Cook County Jail changed his perspective on correctional facilities. He felt a significant amount of sympathy for prisoners before heading into

³⁵⁹ Melanie Newport, "When a Psychologist Was in Charge of a Jail."

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

Cook County Jail, but after witnessing their plight first hand, he became an activist.³⁶¹ King stated, “My heart was heavy for the guys behind bars,” because he worried about “the correctional facilities and their capacity to help rebuild souls, rather than destroy them.”³⁶² He specifically noticed the disproportionate amount of young black men locked up in Cook County Jail, and was saddened by the underlying racist conditions that caused the demographic difference.³⁶³

A year after the album’s release, King recalled that while he was talking to some of the inmates before and after his performance he came to the realization that “their lives [were] completely controlled” and this triggered “[his] childhood on that plantation to come back to [him].”³⁶⁴ King said, “I’ve never been in trouble, but it’s not because I have a halo. My environment made me what I am. I’m just lucky.”³⁶⁵ While King stated in some interviews that he had never been in any “criminal” trouble himself; in other interviews, such as the one he gave to Bruce Cook of the *National Observer*, King stated, “Well, I’ve only been locked up one night in my life, and that was for speeding down in Mississippi, just waiting for the judge.”³⁶⁶ While King’s night in jail taught him what it felt like to be “behind bars” for a short period of time, it did not compare to the lessons he

³⁶¹ James Maycock, "And That is Why I Chose to Sing the Blues," *The Independent* (London, England), September 11, 1998, Features sec.

³⁶² Back, “How Blue Can You Get?” 279.

³⁶³ Mayock, “And That is Why I Chose to Sing the Blues.”

³⁶⁴ Clarence Page, “B.B. King 17 Jails in 18 Months,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1972. Sec. 2, 6.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Bruce Cook, “Prisoners Dig B.B. and a Guitar Named Lucille,” *National Observer*, circa 1971.

learned from growing up in the Jim Crow South. Due to the time and place of his upbringing, King understood the overall feeling of “control” that inmates lived with in correctional facilities.³⁶⁷ King witnessed a lynching as a child, and watched as many of his friends ended up behind bars. With this knowledge, King knew that “it could have just as easily been a B.B. King [in the crowd of inmates] instead of a B.B. King going out there to play.”³⁶⁸

Since Seidenberg urged King to take the press with him to the jail, they were able to interview the prisoners and uncover that many inmates had been in the jail for up to a year without ever receiving trial.³⁶⁹ Many inmates remained in jail awaiting trial because they simply could not afford bail.³⁷⁰ Additionally, if these inmates were convicted at trial, the time served before their trial was not deducted from their sentences.³⁷¹ King said the press “really blew it up, man; they really worked with it the next day.”³⁷² King was as proud of his performance and record as he was about the prisoners being able to share their stories with the press.³⁷³ Asked about the press interviewing inmates, King stated, “I

³⁶⁷ Clarence Page, “B.B. King 17 Jails in 18 Months.”

³⁶⁸ “1990 Interview: B.B. King Performing in Prison.” *NBC*. <http://www.nbcnews.com/watch/flashback/1990-interview-b-b-king-on-performing-in-prison-446103619579>

³⁶⁹ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 88.

³⁷⁰ Mayock, “And That is Why I Chose to Sing the Blues.”

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 88.

³⁷³ *Ibid.* 87-88.

felt we had done something good,” and was happy that “the people on the outside could know what was happening behind the wall.”³⁷⁴³⁷⁵

After seeing that his jail performances could attract the press to uncover hidden problems that existed behind jail walls, King told the officials at Cook County Jail that “he would be glad to donate his services anytime they wanted them.”³⁷⁶ King felt that “the more [he] went in and played and the press went with me [him], the more we could let people out here know.”³⁷⁷ King theorized that, if he continued to play in jails accompanied by the press, law enforcement and lawmakers who had never seen the inside of a jail would eventually be invited in to see the facilities themselves.³⁷⁸ King believed this would transform their perspective on correctional facilities and inmates.³⁷⁹ King’s desire to make correctional facilities more transparent to officials and civilians led him to organize a series of jail and prison concerts across the country.

Before he began reaching out to other jails and prisons, King returned to Cook County Jail in October of 1970, a month after his initial performance.³⁸⁰ For this appearance, King did not bring his guitar or his band; he made the appearance only to

³⁷⁴ Mayock, “And That is Why I Chose to Sing the Blues.”

³⁷⁵ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 88.

³⁷⁶ Tom Wheeler, “B.B. King: Playing the Guitar is like Telling the Truth,” *Guitar Player*. September 1980. 76

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ Back, “How Blue Can You Get?” 279.

visit with the inmates.³⁸¹ Warden English allowed King to roam freely throughout the jail.³⁸² King spent three hours in the jail yard speaking with every inmate he had the chance to meet, including members of the jail's band.³⁸³ King's desire to visit and chat with inmates he had performed for a month earlier displays the sincerity of his initial visit and serves as a springboard for what would follow.

After ABC Records released *Live in Cook County Jail* in February of 1971, a series of prisons contacted Seidenberg, asking for King to perform at their institutions.³⁸⁴ King jumped at the opportunity to spread the success he had at Cook County Jail to other prisons. The first stop on King's 1971 jail and prison tour was Lorton Penitentiary, located outside of Washington D.C., where he performed on August 23, 1971.³⁸⁵ Between the ninth and thirteenth of September of 1971, the Attica prison revolt occurred, sending shockwaves throughout the country.³⁸⁶ The Attica revolt pushed discussions of prisons and prison reform into the mainstream media of America, causing others to join in King's pursuit to bring more transparency to prison life.³⁸⁷ King continued his tour to Miami-Dade County Prison, where he played his third prison concert on September 23, 1971.³⁸⁸

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Back, "How Blue Can You Get?" 279.

³⁸⁴ Shernoff, "B.B. King Not Too Big To Care."

³⁸⁵ Hollie West, "Singing Those Prison Blues," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 1971.

³⁸⁶ Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2016).

³⁸⁷ Page, "B.B. King 17 Jails in 18 Months."

³⁸⁸ Joe Rimkus, "B.B. King Sings at Dade's Stockade," *Miami News*, Dade Report.

After playing three prisons between September of 1970 and September of 1971, King followed with five prison performances in October of 1971: Richmond Prison in Virginia, Wisconsin's Fox Prison, Tennessee State Prison, Rikers Island's female prison, and Kansas' Leavenworth Prison.³⁸⁹ King then decided to take his prison activism a step further after his performance at Walpole Prison in Boston on November 2, 1971.³⁹⁰

F. Lee Bailey, Head of American Trial Lawyers Penal Activism group, organized and led the event at Walpole.³⁹¹ While it is unclear if Bailey had met and helped organize King's prison performances before Walpole, it is certain that they worked together to make a Walpole concert happen. Also at Walpole, King recognized some of his friends in the crowd while he was performing and spoke with them after he finished playing.³⁹² In an interview with Tom Wheeler, King said his friends pleaded with him saying, "it wouldn't be so bad to spend ten of fifteen years some place if they knew they would have something to depend on when they got out." King told Wheeler his friends had asked for help: "B.B., if we could get guitars, if we could get books, if we could just get something we could work with."³⁹³ King said his friends' call for help discouraged him. He realized that they had little to look forward to once they got out because they had little to better themselves with while they were serving time. King's conversation with his friends at

³⁸⁹ Shernoff, "B.B. King Not Too Big To Care,": Cook, "Prisoners Dig B.B. and a Guitar Named Lucille,": Leonard Feather, "Blues Singer, a Barrister and a Cause."

³⁹⁰ Henry Shernoff, "B.B. King Not Too Big To Care," Seidenberg SAS Inc. October 1, 1971, 3-4

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Wheeler, "B.B. King: Playing the Guitar is like Telling the Truth." 76.

³⁹³ Ibid.

Walpole pushed him to team up with F. Lee Bailey and do more for prisoners than just performances.³⁹⁴

To bring his 1971 jail and prison performance tour to an end, King and F. Lee Bailey again partnered to host a weeklong television series inside Ohio State Penitentiary with Phil Donahue.³⁹⁵ Somewhere between this event and February of 1972, King and Bailey, along with Wayne Smith, US Senator John V. Tunney and US Representative John Conyers Jr., officially founded the prison activism group, FAIRR.³⁹⁶ FAIRR's mission was to "solicit entertainers, sports stars writers, musicians, and lawyers to appear in prison concerts, discussion groups, and training programs. Also to provide musical instruments and other creative tools as well as books for prison libraries."³⁹⁷ In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, King said, "I believe that if a man commits a crime he should pay. But he should pay as a human being. If you want to reform a man, give him something he can do while he's behind the wall."³⁹⁸ King reflected his belief in prisoner rehabilitation in his personal life, hiring several ex-convicts to be a part of his staff and band, stating, "I try to practice what I preach."³⁹⁹ King organized the rest of his jail and prison performances through the FAIRR foundation, assisted the group in setting

³⁹⁴ Danchin. *Bluesboy*, 88.

³⁹⁵ Dennis Cusick, "B.B.'s Blues Rock Prison's Wall," *The Ohio State Lantern*, November 11, 1971

³⁹⁶ F. Lee Bailey, "Oversight Hearings on the Nature and Effectiveness of the Rehabilitation Programs of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons," 52-65.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Page, "B.B. King 17 Jails in 18 Months."

³⁹⁹ Leonard Feather, "Blues Singer, a Barrister and a Cause," *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1972.

up other events that did not involve music, and played other free concerts to raise money to support FAIRR's prison work.⁴⁰⁰

After officially creating FAIRR in 1972, King played nine jail and prison concerts in the same year. In March, King returned to Cook County Jail to fulfill his promise of performing again for its inmates and to announce the creation of FAIRR.⁴⁰¹ In June, he returned to the Mississippi Delta to perform at Parchman Farm— a place he first visited around 1940 to see his cousin Bukka White — where Governor Bill Waller honored King's charity by declaring the day "B.B. King Day."⁴⁰² To mark his twentieth prison performance in August, King played at Chino Prison in California.⁴⁰³ King and FAIRR then partnered with Sansui Corp to donate a \$2,000 Am-Fm stereo receiver to the inmates at Chino.⁴⁰⁴ While touring abroad in September, King performed in England's Dartmoor Prison and in an Israeli prison, illustrating that his passion for those behind bars exceeded national borders.⁴⁰⁵

On Thanksgiving Day of 1972, King teamed up with Joan Baez, the Voices of East Harlem, and comedian Jimmy Walker to perform at Sing Sing Prison in New York.⁴⁰⁶ This was King's most memorable jail or prison performance outside of Cook

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Clarence Page, "B.B. King Returns to Jail, Draws Enthusiastic Response," *Chicago Tribune*, March, 9, 1972.

⁴⁰² "Touglaloo Honors B.B. King" *Seidenberg Press Release*. 2

⁴⁰³ A.P. "King Gifts Prison," *Daily Telegraph*, August 13-19, 1972.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ "Tour Dates," *Seidenberg News Release*, September, 1972.

⁴⁰⁶ Back, "How Blue Can you Get?" 282-283.

County Jail, primarily due to the documentation provided by David Hoffman’s volunteer prison film and arts class.⁴⁰⁷ The inmates used the event to combine everything they had learned in the class to produce a final project under Hoffman’s direction.⁴⁰⁸ In the documentary, King jokingly talks to the inmates about a member of his band, implying that he had done time at Sing Sing before.⁴⁰⁹ One of the inmates asked King, “How does that make you feel?” and King responded, “makes me feel good because he works with me.”⁴¹⁰

While the performance and production of the Sing Sing concert played a large role in further illustrating King’s prison advocacy to the public, nine days prior to the concert Norman A. Carlson — Director of the United States Bureau of Prisons — sent a letter to King thanking him for the contributions he had made in the United States prison community.⁴¹¹ Carlson wrote, “The work of people like yourself in bringing the outside world into these institutions is an important contribution. We hope you will continue to share your talents with us.”⁴¹² Carlson offered King the Humanitarian Award for his work.⁴¹³ With twenty-six prison performances in the two years since he became involved in prison activism, King had already accomplished much in his fight to bring

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ John A. Carlson, “Letter,” Received by B.B. King. November 14, 1972.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Eric Garcia, “B.B. King Advocate for Prisoners,” *National Journal*, May 15, 2015.

transparency to correctional facilities and a measure of humanity and entertainment to inmates.

King's prison performance schedule slowed down after 1972 along with his commercial popularity, but he never stopped playing in prisons and always remained involved in FAIRR. At the beginning of 1973, King had performed twenty-six separate events for inmates, and by 1975, he had played at more than thirty different prisons.⁴¹⁴ In 1973, King returned to Cook County Jail for the fourth time, accompanied by Gladys Knight and the Pips, and according to Seidenberg, the concert was filmed for use in a documentary.⁴¹⁵ In 1978, Seidenberg claimed that Bailey and King were starting a TV project that would film themselves inside prisons, but there is no evidence that this project worked out.⁴¹⁶ By the time King played to 3,000 inmates at the world's largest walled prison in Michigan in 1981, he had performed in thirty-eight different prisons.⁴¹⁷ King returned to Parchman Prison in 1981 and 1984 to perform for its inmates, and Mississippi ETV and Public Radio in Mississippi broadcasted his 1984 concert there.⁴¹⁸ In 1990, King recorded his second live prison album in California's San Quentin prison; the same prison Cash recorded a live album in 1969.⁴¹⁹ While it is not comparable to *Live*

⁴¹⁴ George E. Sewell, Margaret L. Dwight, *Mississippi Black History Makers*, 308.

⁴¹⁵ Pearl Seidenberg, "Television and Film Production Company, TAPSCO, A Division of SA, INC... is Formed." *SAS News Release*, November 19, 1974.

⁴¹⁶ "Seidenberg Packaging TV Project Aimed at Home Box Office TV." *Seidenberg News Release*, February, 14, 1978.

⁴¹⁷ "B.B. King Performs for 3,000 inmates," *Jet*, March, 26, 1981.

⁴¹⁸ "B.B. at Parchman Farm," *Clarion Ledger*, 1984.

⁴¹⁹ Danchin, *Bluesboy*, 97.

in Cook County Jail, Live at San Quentin won a Grammy for Best Traditional Blues Recording and showed that, even after twenty years, King had not stopped playing for prisoners.⁴²⁰

The irony that existed in King's incessant wish to play as much as possible for inmates around the world revealed itself at his 1993 concert in Gainesville, Florida. In an interview with *People*, King said that he dedicated his sixty-ninth prison performance of his career — his fifty-third was in 1991 — to his daughter Patty King.⁴²¹ Patty, one of King's fifteen children, did not see her dad much growing up and, at a young age, ended up imprisoned on drug charges and several other related actions.⁴²² King said, "There's nothin' to do but to support her. I love her, and I don't turn my back on a person when they're down. She's my daughter, so doubly so."⁴²³ While King's choices to tour constantly may have had an adverse effect on his daughter's life, he continued to support her after she was locked up, just as he had supported inmates in jails all over the world the past two decades through FAIRR and other efforts.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Craig Horowitz, "Blues for B.B.'s Baby," *People*, March 22, 1993.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

Afterword

It is clear that King's performance in Cook County Jail affected far more than those in attendance. The album sold over a million copies and propelled the blues, King's career, and discussions of prison and jail life into the national spotlight. It was also the springboard that led to King performing in more than seventy correctional facilities across the United States and forming FAIRR. Moreover, the album, and King's subsequent prison tour and activism, inspired many other entertainers to take their talents into correctional facilities to both perform for the inmates and bring transparency to inmates' lives. The impact of the performance and album was significant during the period, and it is still being felt today.

In August of 2015, residents of Little Village, the jail's surrounding neighborhood, created an event to bring awareness to the racial inequality that still exists at Cook County Jail. The group parked one hundred cars of different colors in front of the jail, sixty-seven black, nineteen brown, and fourteen white, to represent the unequal percentage of minorities that inhabited the jail. In contrast to the jail's racial demographic, a 2013 Census report of Cook County provided that 43 percent of the county's general population was white, while 25 percent was black, and 25 percent was Latino. During the event each car radio was tuned to a local radio station's special broadcast of King's *Live in Cook County Jail*. With their windows rolled down, one

hundred car speakers blared *Live in Cook County Jail* to demonstrate that issues of race and control still affected the jail in 2015.⁴²⁴

The gesture illustrated that, while King’s concert had a positive effect on the jail, many of the problems in Cook County Jail, and in many of the nation’s correctional facilities, had not progressed or, in many ways, had become worse since 1970. The inmate population at Cook County Jail had grown from 2,800 in 1970 to 9,000 by 2015. Cook County’s massive increase in inmate population corresponds with imprisonment statistics nationwide. The United States— home to 5 percent of world’s population but 25 percent of the world’s prisoners — has grown from 300,000 in 1972 to 2.3 million in 2015. Of this 2.3 million, 40 percent are black, leading some academics to project that one-out-of-every-three young, black males will serve time in a correctional facility.⁴²⁵ Lately, awareness of the current problem within the prison-industrial complex has increased, bringing scholars to discuss the topic and propose possible solutions. For the most part, however, the prison system still functions as it has for the last forty years.

While King’s impact on correctional facilities may have been minimized by the “law and order” agenda of countless politicians since the 1970s, King’s prison activism set a precedent for future entertainers to follow. For any positive change to come to the U.S. prison system, it should begin with inmates understanding that the outside world

⁴²⁴ Erica Demarest, “100 Cars Will Line Cook County Jail to Show Racial Makeup, Community Impact,” DNAinfo Chicago. August 13, 2015. Accessed March 27, 2017. <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20150813/little-village/100-cars-will-line-cook-county-jail-show-racial-makeup-community-impact>.

⁴²⁵ *13th: From Slave to Criminal With One Amendment*. Directed by Ava DuVernay. Netflix. September 30, 2016.

cares about them. For the public to become aware of the problems plaguing inmates, transparency regarding prison life must also occur. Making inmates feel that they matter to the public and increasing the transparency of prisons can both be accomplished by entertainers performing in correctional facilities as King did. Following King's words, future entertainers should understand that the more they perform in correctional facilities, the more transparent correctional facilities may become, and the more the prisoners will believe that they matter to society. King died in May of 2015. But he has left a legacy of prison activism that entertainers and other public figures might follow in order to bring about change to the nation's correctional facilities.

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