

Blues Artist of the Month: Freddie King

Written by Pat Graham

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Born: September 3, 1934 in Gilmer TX

Died: December 28, 1976 in Dallas TX

Blues guitarist Freddie King came up through the ranks of Chicago blues players during the 1950s, but it was during the '60s that King's inspired blend of electric blues, roots rock, and R&B would allow him to outgrow the West Side scene. King's classic instrumental "Hide Away" would be a de facto standard for fledgling blues players for decades. An innovative instrumentalist and underrated singer, King would move beyond blues and soul to make commercial inroads into funk and even soul music. Along the way, he would influence string-benders like Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and George Thorogood, among others.

The Texas Cannonball

Freddie King (also known as "Freddy" early in his career) was born in Gilmer, a rural town near Longview and east of Dallas, Texas. No relation to either B.B. or Albert King, Freddie was taught the guitar by his mother and an Uncle while he was still a child. Originally an acoustic, country blues-styled guitarist in the style of Lightnin' Hopkins and Blind Lemon Jefferson, King became enamored of the electrified Chicago blues sound of artists like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf as a teen.

In 1950, King moved with his family to Chicago, where he began hanging around clubs and absorbing the sounds of popular bluesmen like Elmore James and Sonny Boy Williamson. King was married in 1952, and worked in a steel mill during the day while playing with notable sidemen like Jimmy Rogers and Robert Junior Lockwood at night.

The Federal Years

During the mid-1950s, King played around the Chicago area with bands like The Sonny Cooper Band and Earlee Payton's Blues Cats while also playing recording sessions for labels like Parrot and Chess Records. King formed his first band, the Every Hour Blues Boys, with guitarist Jimmy Lee Robinson and drummer Sonny Scott. King recorded his first single, "Country Boy," for the little independent El-Bee Records label in 1957, with Robert Junior Lockwood adding guitar to King's duet with Margaret Whitfield.

King's breakthrough came after he signed with Federal Records, a subsidiary of Cincinnati's King Records label, in 1960. Working with the label's A&R genius Sonny Thompson, King recorded a string of well-received songs like "Have You Ever Loved A Woman" and "Hide Away," which hit number five on the R&B chart and #29 on the pop chart.

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After the success of "Hide Away," King and Thompson reeled off thirty instrumentals to capitalize on the guitarist's newfound popularity. Songs like "San-Ho-Zay," "The Stumble," "Surf Monkey," and "I'm Tore Down" found various levels of success with record buyers as King explored blues, R&B, rock and surf music sounds.

The Houserockin' Blues

During the mid-to-late-1960s, King toured with some of the monster R&B acts of the era, opening for legends like James Brown, Sam Cooke, and Jackie Wilson, among others. By the end of the decade, however, his influence on a generation of rock and blues-rock guitarists led to his growing popularity with young, white rock audiences. King played the 1969 Texas Pop Festival alongside Led Zeppelin, and also toured during this period with Eric Clapton.

From the end of his contract with Federal/King in 1968 until his death in 1976, King recorded for the Atlantic Records subsidiary Cotillion, Leon Russell's Shelter Records label, and RSO Records, also Clapton's label. These relationships resulted in a number of critically-acclaimed albums, including two produced by saxophonist King Curtis; three albums for Shelter that mixed blues standards with soulful originals penned by Russell and Memphis soul legend Don Nix; and a pair of albums for RSO. King died in 1976 of heart failure.

Recommended Albums: Like too many blues artists from the 1950s and '60s, Freddie King's back catalog is scattered and sadly much is out-of-print. *The Best of Freddie King: The Shelter Records Years* is an eighteen-track collection that document's the guitarist's 1970s-era recordings. If you can find a copy, *Hip-O's Ultimate Collection* is a cross-label compilation that features eighteen tracks ranging from across the 20 years of King's short, but sweet career while *The Complete King Federal Singles* is a two-disc, 54-track compilation of King's essential 1960s work for the legendary R&B label.