

FREDDIE KING

T E D D R O Z D O W S K I

AN INGENIOUS GIFT FOR  
HOOKS AND MELODIES

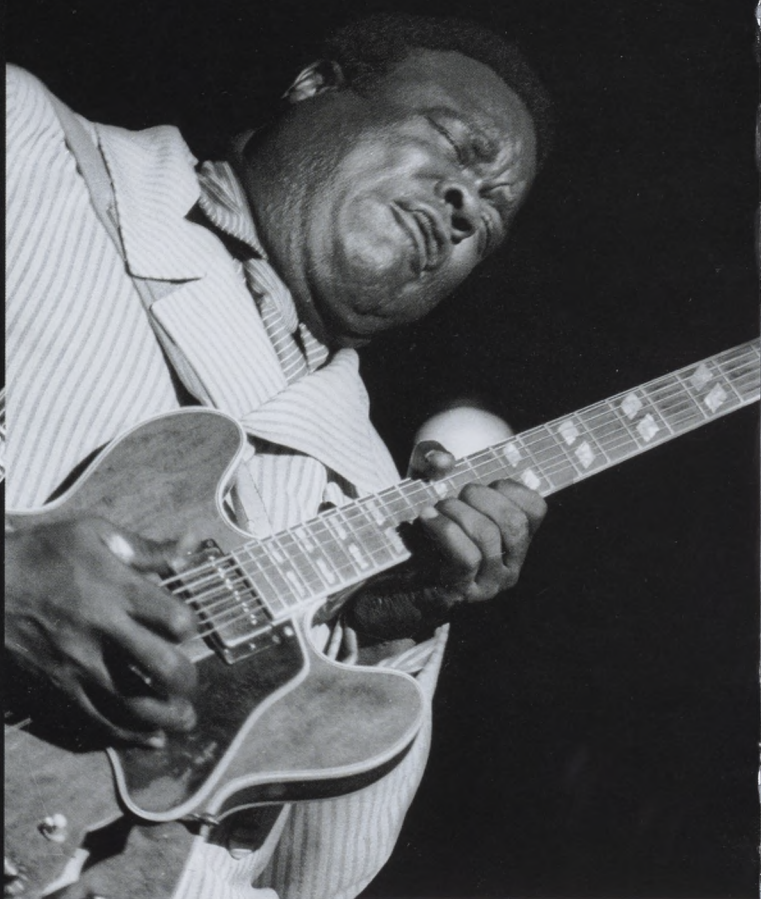
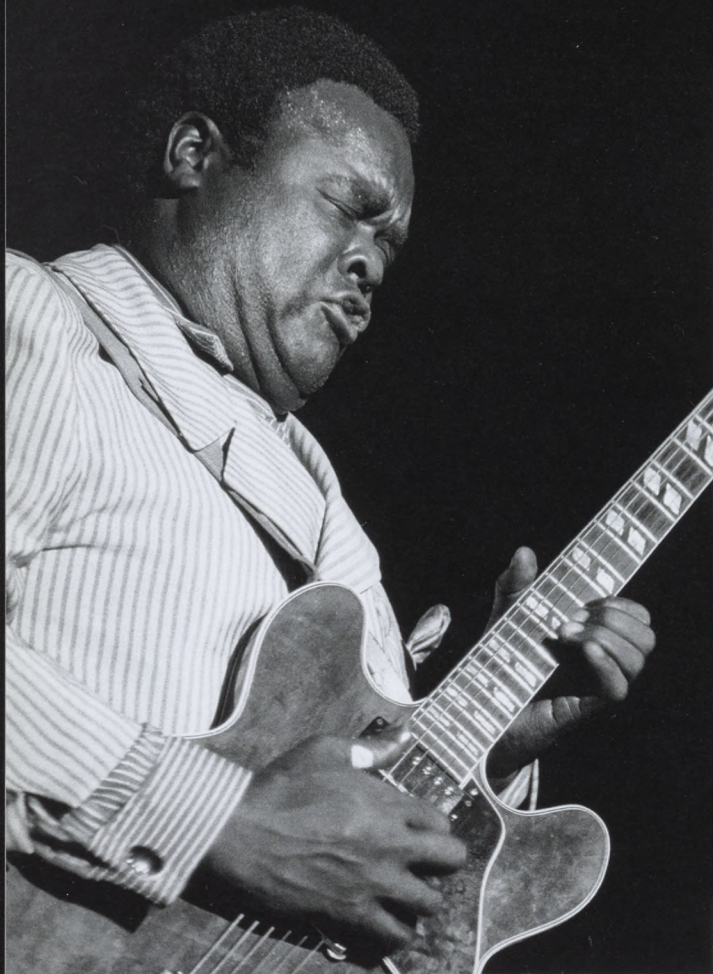
**B**lues innovator Freddie King sang like a lion and struck his guitar's strings with rattlesnake intensity. Those talents, along with his compositional brilliance, took King to the pinnacle of success in the blues world of the sixties and seventies. Thanks to his ingenious gift for hooks and melodies, his 1961 instrumental hits, "Hide Away" and "San-Ho-Zay," shattered the race-music barrier and crashed the pop charts. King's songs, like his 1960 Federal Records single "You've Got to Love Her With a Feeling," backed with "Have You Ever Loved a Woman," carry an emotional charge that still showers sparks across the decades.

Eric Clapton, Duane Allman, Jeff Beck, Keith Richards, and Stevie Ray Vaughan are among the numerous guitar heroes influenced by King's conflagrant style: an entwining of the roots of Texas and Chicago blues, resulting in a swinging hybrid that also tapped the molten energy of

rock & roll. His signature picking technique involved terse, biting, almost belligerent phrases, torn from his Les Paul Goldtop and various Gibson ES-345s by means of a plastic thumbpick and a metal fingerpick on his index finger. And his juggernaut performances—along with his six-and-a-half-foot-tall, 250-plus-pound frame—won him the nickname "Texas Cannonball." The only thing that could stop King was death, in 1976 at age 42, by complications from the acute ulcers and pancreatitis that came with his hard-core, road-bound lifestyle. Nonetheless, the momentum of King's legacy has continued, propelling him tonight into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

King was born on September 3, 1934, in the small East Texas town of Gilmer, to Ella Mae King and J.T. Christian. Ella Mae and her brother Leon began teaching Freddie guitar when he was 6, in a country-blues style similar to Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins, whom King would later credit

## HIS JUGGERNAUT PERFORMANCES



for his own approach to picking. The youngster also fell under the spell of Louis Jordan (a 1987 Rock and Roll Hall of Famer). King played along to the recordings of Jordan and his Tympany Five jump-blues band, learning the pleasures of swinging rhythms and modeling his blunt, supremely confident six-string phrasing on Jordan's saxophone.

In 1949, King's family moved to Chicago in pursuit of the better opportunities that the North then afforded African-Americans. Soon he began sneaking into the Windy City's blues clubs, which stayed open 'round the clock and offered the spectacle of Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Little Walter, and other giants at the height of their powers. Wolf took King under his wing after hearing the 16-year-old sit in with a local band, and soon Waters, guitarists Eddie Taylor, Jimmy Rogers, and Robert Lockwood Jr., and harmonica virtuoso Little Walter were also tutoring the brawny youngster on the secrets of the sounds and the streets of the South Side.

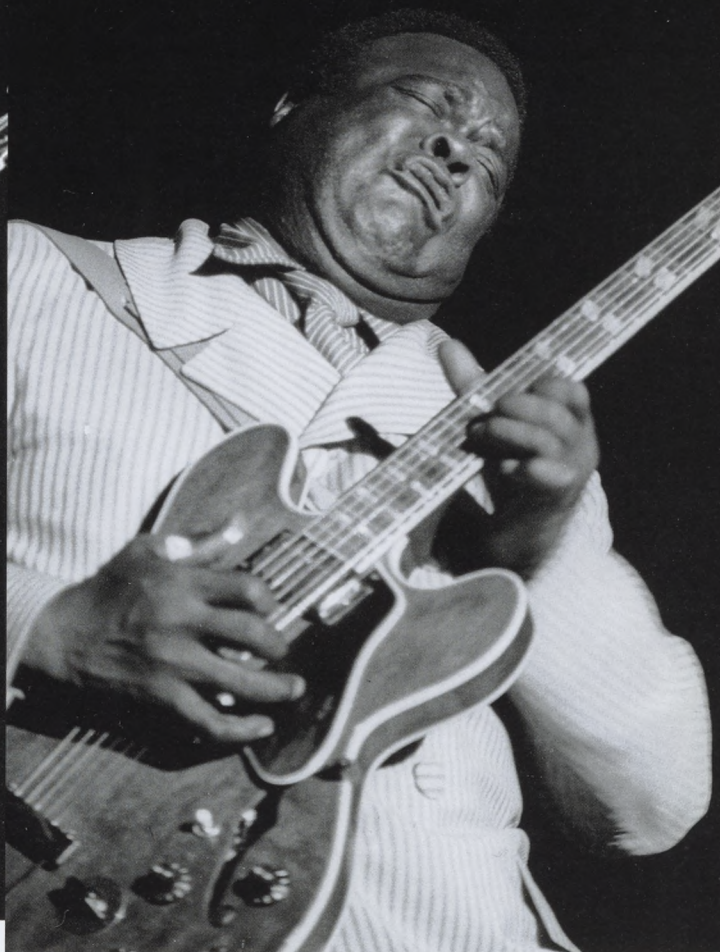
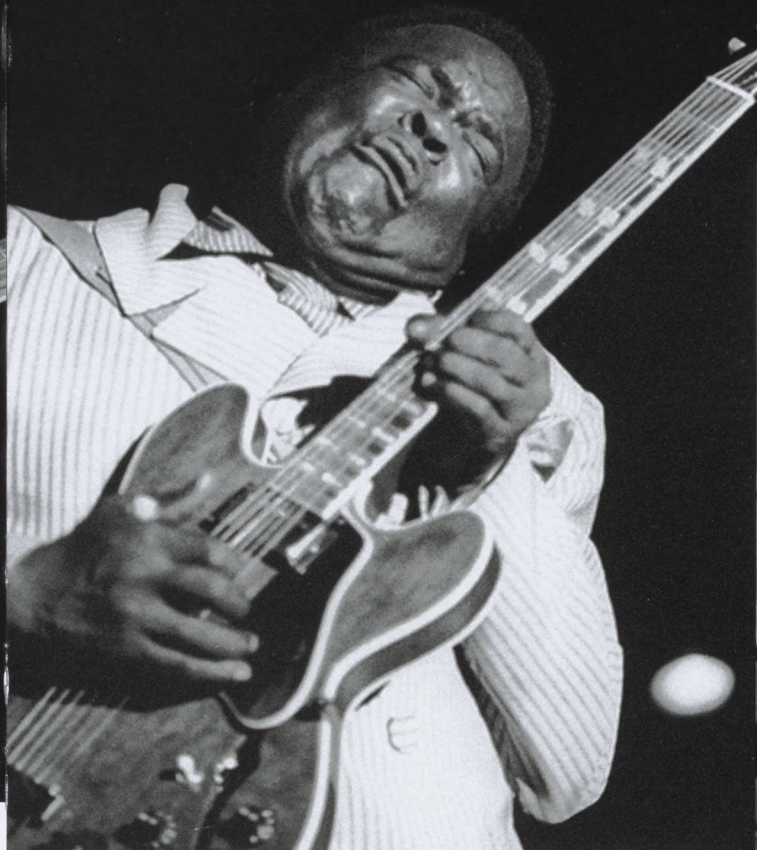
At age 18, King married another Texas expatriate, Jessie Burnett. He spent his days working in a steel mill and his nights playing blues—often with Rogers, a key figure in defining the Chicago electric-blues-ensemble sound with Waters' band, and with Taylor, who helped Jimmy Reed

perfect the "chunking" rhythm essential to his crossover hits. King found his own opportunities in the small taverns of Chicago's West Side and formed his first band, the Every Hour Blues Boys, with guitarist Jimmy Lee Robinson and drummer Frank "Sonny" Scott in 1952.

It took most of the fifties for King to stake his claim as a recording artist. Several sides he cut for Chicago DJ Al Benson's Parrot Records in 1953 went unreleased. His late-fifties sessions with Willie Dixon at Cobra Records were similarly ill-fated. And Leonard Chess refused to sign King to his label despite multiple auditions, complaining that Freddie sang too much like B.B. King. His only luck was with the obscure local label El-Bee, which released Freddie's debut single in 1956. Side A, "Country Boy," was a duet with singer-songwriter Margaret Whitfield, backed by King's own uptempo shuffle, "That's What You Think." Both songs failed to chart, but King caught the attention of Alfonso "Sonny" Thompson, a jazz and R&B bandleader who doubled as an A&R man for Cincinnati's King and Federal labels.

Freddie signed with Federal in 1960 and began cutting a string of influential records produced by label owner Syd Nathan. His first single was "You've Got to Love

## WON HIM THE NICKNAME TEXAS CANNONBALL



Her With a Feeling” backed with “Have You Ever Loved a Woman.” The former reached only Number 93 on the pop chart, but both performances have become part of the fabric of blues and rock history. “Have You Ever Loved a Woman,” in particular, has been reinterpreted by a slew of King’s torchbearers—most notably Eric Clapton, who first cut the song in 1970 with fellow guitar virtuoso Duane Allman for Derek and the Dominos’ *Layla (and Other Assorted Love Songs)* and has since included the tune on five live recordings.

The next Federal single, 1961’s “Hide Away,” defined King’s early-sixties career. “Hide Away” hit Number Five on the R&B chart and cracked pop’s Top Forty at Number Twenty-nine. The instrumental was inspired by fellow Chicagoan Hound Dog Taylor’s “Taylor’s Boogie,” a slide guitar romp. King couldn’t play slide, so he created a passage in the tune that featured sliding chords. The title was a nod to a West Side dive called Mel’s Hide Away Lounge, and King’s own innate sense of swing was reinforced by the jazz-honed Federal house band, which featured Sonny Thompson on piano, bassist Bill Willis, and drummer Philip Paul.

Smelling green, Nathan encouraged King and

Thompson to cowrite more instrumentals. They recorded thirty in Federal’s Cincinnati studios over the next three years, including “San-Ho-Zay,” “The Stumble,” “The Sad Nite Owl,” “Sen-Sa-Shun,” and “Side Tracked.” Titles like “Low Tide,” “Wash Out,” and the 1963 album *Freddie King Goes Surfin’*—reflecting the spelling he used for his first name until 1965—aimed to cash in on the burgeoning surf-rock instrumental craze, and they did. Although King never placed another single on the Top Forty pop chart, he was a fixture in sixties R&B, and made enough white teenaged fans to reportedly sell more albums than any other blues artist from 1961 to 1963.

King’s instrumentals crossed over more effectively than those of his blues contemporaries because of his compositional intellect. He wove a sophisticated sonic tale into the twelve-bar form, employing arrangements—rather than jams—with hooks, melodies, bridges, and distinct movements. And as blues crossed the color line to reach an emerging generation of white players, negotiating the turns of King’s deftly performed instrumentals became a rite of passage.

By the time King’s contract with Federal lapsed in 1966, he’d relocated to Dallas with Jessie and their six children.

HE WOVE A  
SOPHISTICATED  
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In the absence of new recordings, King relentlessly toured the chitlin circuit to keep his family fed, but a series of appearances on the Nashville-based syndicated R&B television show *The !!!! Beat*, which featured a house band fronted by Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, led to his next record deal. The great King Curtis, who had recorded a version of "Hide Away" in 1962, saw King's visceral performances on *The !!!! Beat*, and signed him to Atlantic Records' Cotillion subsidiary. The two resulting albums, 1969's *Freddie King Is a Blues Master* and 1970's *My Feeling for the Blues*, elevated King's profile to make him a living nexus of blues and rock.

Jack Calmes became King's first professional manager in 1969 and immediately booked him for the Texas International Pop Festival, where King shared the bill with Led Zeppelin, Sly and the Family Stone, Ten Years After, and others. His incendiary performance there resonated throughout rock's counterculture, and ultimately led to his signing with Leon Russell's Shelter Records.

*Getting Ready*, released in 1971, would define the rest of King's musical life much as "Hide Away" had cast his early career. In a delicious twist of fate, the disc was recorded in Chicago at the former Chess studio with a team of crack session players, including Stax bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn and Russell on piano and guitar. King's muscular take on "Going Down," by Memphis songwriter Don Nix, became a blues-rock anthem that would be faithfully recorded by the Jeff Beck Group a year later and remains a staple of the genre today. King also recut a definitive version of his 1961 Federal single "I'm Tore Down" and a rendition of Big Bill Broonzy's "Key to the Highway" that became cornerstones of his subsequent live performances. King made two more albums for Shelter as he became a fixture on the American and European rock concert circuits. He shared stages with Clapton and Grand Funk Railroad (who name-checked him in "We're an American Band"), and was a regular at the Fillmores East and West. By 1974, when he signed with RSO Records, an affiliation shared with his friend and acolyte Clapton, his days on the chitlin circuit were unquestionably in the past. His RSO debut, *Burglar*, named for the Jerry Ragovoy-penned song, "She's a Burglar," featured Clapton and his touring band on the Tom Dowd-produced track "Sugar Sweet."

As he reached the zenith of his popularity, King continued to deliver, 300 nights a year. His rocket-fueled performances gave no indication that his health was failing. Yet nearly two decades of relentless touring and hard living had taken their toll. On December 28, 1976, he died in Dallas, leaving behind a catalog of recordings that continues to enshrine his legend, and inspire new generations with his nearly incomparable energy, originality, and artistry.

