



# Ike & Tina Turner

BY MICHAEL HILL

## I KE AND TINA TURNER'S STORY

is really one about the blues. The blues were in the way they lived—a life that mirrored the rough-and-tumble songs they played like “Stagger Lee” and “A Fool In Love,” a life of never-ending one-night stands, frustrating brushes with serious fame and fortune, and a stormy relationship that did not (in the words of one of their most popular numbers) work out fine.

Their story begins in the musically fertile Mississippi Delta. Ike Turner, born Izear Luster Turner in Clarksdale, Mississippi on November 5, 1931, formed his first blues band, the Top Hatters, with some high school buddies. When a few members split off to become the Dukes of Swing, Ike (who doubled on guitar and piano) and the remaining Top Hatters created the Kings of Rhythm. This blues-and-rhythm combo struggled financially but thrived artistically in the Delta juke joints.

In 1951 at Sam Phillips's Sun Records in Memphis, the Kings of Rhythm with Jackie Brenston on lead vocal cut “Rocket '88,” a paean to a popular new model Oldsmobile and one of the earliest songs to prefigure the coming rock & roll explosion. Phillips licensed the track to Chess in Chicago, and “Rocket '88” topped the R&B chart that summer. But the name on the record was not “Ike Turner & the Kings of Rhythm,” but “Jackie Brenston & the Delta Cats.” Brenston promptly quit the group to chase his personal fortune, and the Kings lost their hard-won momentum.

Ike briefly traded in his duties as bandleader for those of an itinerant A&R scout for Modern Records of Los Angeles. Modern chief Joe Bihari had spotted Turner playing piano on a B.B. King session in Memphis; he offered a salary, a car, and a tape recorder, and Ike began hunting down the best in blues. For Modern, he recorded B.B. King, Elmore James, and Bobby “Blue” Bland, among others; he later brought Howlin' Wolf to Sam Phillips at Sun for Wolf's first sessions, and organized the 1957 Cobra Records date which produced Otis Rush's “All Your Love” and

“Double Trouble”—two of the greatest blues recordings of the post-war era.

In the mid-'50s, Ike relocated to St. Louis, where he reconstituted the Kings of Rhythm as the club band to beat on the local circuit, with a wild after-hours joint called Club Manhattan as their home base. “Ike Turner & the Kings of

Rhythm were what was happening,” Tina Turner would later recall in her autobiography, *I, Tina*. “In St. Louis, they were as big as the Beatles would be later on.” Kings of Rhythm recordings of the period captured the band's untamed energy and Ike's stunning guitar work, with its crazed runs and whammy-bar accents.

Tina was born Anna Mae Bullock on November 26, 1939 in Brownsville, Tennessee. Raised in the nearby hamlet of Nutbush, she moved to St. Louis as a teenager. Anna Mae was a precocious adolescent who sought to follow in the more worldly footsteps of her older sister Alline. Alline was a regular at Club Manhattan and Club D'Lisa, and sometimes dated the musicians she met there. Tina tagged along one night, and was smitten—with the scene, with the sound of the Kings of Rhythm, and finally with Ike himself. Kings drummer Gene

Washington first noticed Tina's innate vocal talent as she sang along from a stageside table; he sometimes let a microphone hang near enough to pick up her voice during the set. Tina finally got up the nerve to approach Ike during an intermission as he played organ onstage; he couldn't leave the stage, she recalls, for fear of having to face the various girlfriends

### I WAS A TEENAGE IKETTE

*Bonnie Sheridan nee Bonnie Bramlett rose to prominence in the early '70s with the rock-and-soul duo Delaney & Bonnie. After an esteemed solo career, she is now working with a new group, Randaloo Doctors. But her very first professional experience came as the only Caucasian member of the Ikettes, the female vocal trio which was an integral part of the Ike & Tina Turner Revue. Bonnie is now at work on an autobiography from which the following anecdote is taken.*

AS A KID, I really looked forward to the Ike & Tina Turner Revue's hometown shows. I would go with my friend Punkin', who was only a couple years older than me but was already so good on guitar that Ike taught him stuff whenever the Revue was home in East St. Louis. I went to Ike's house with Punkin' to meet them for the first time.

The Ikettes were rehearsing “I'm Blue” and were having trouble getting it, so Ike called Tina in from the kitchen to show them a part. She came in wiping her hands on a dish towel—and cut loose with some of the most soulful shit I had ever heard in my life. Right then and there, with absolutely no hesitation and *the dish towel still in her hand*.

That night, with Tina's encouragement, was the first time Ike heard me sing. I later found out that they were replacing an Ikette. I would have done just about anything to get that gig, so Punkin' took me over to Ike's to ask him. We all knew it would be temporary, because I had too many things going against me—like being underage, blonde, and white. But I knew their whole damned show by heart, so Ike took the chance. I wondered how the hell I was going to ask my mother let me go on the road with twenty-five black people for no telling how long. At the time, blacks were not allowed to live in my part of St. Louis or even to be on the streets after dark.

Ike was such a gentleman, he drove right to my parents' house and asked Mom's permission. She was shocked, but knew how much this meant to me. That very night, I was off to Kentucky with the Ike & Tina Turner Revue—and Mom's blessing.

On tour we ran into so much prejudice from both whites and blacks that Tina suggested a dark wig and some tanning makeup “to tone Bonnie down a little.” My sweat streaked the tan off my face, and soon I was on my way back home, crying my eyes out.





waiting for him. Ike was instantly impressed by Tina's voice and offered her a spot with his revue.

In 1960, the world at last heard what Ike had heard: a raw, powerful voice of undiluted emotional fervor. The song was "A Fool In Love," with Tina taking the lead on what was to have been a mere demo. But when a St. Louis DJ sent the tape to Juggy Murray at Sue Records in New York, he offered to release the song just as it was—and told Ike he had a star on his hands. Sue put out "A Fool In Love" under the Ike-approved duo name, Ike & Tina Turner. That came as a surprise to young Anna Mae, who wasn't yet married to Ike (although they were about to have a baby together) and hadn't considered changing her given name.

"A Fool In Love" was an R&B smash, and even crossed over to the pop chart. Tina may have been singing the part of a lovesick fool, but she swaggered where another might have swooned, testifying to her lust while pledging her love. Despite Tina's pregnancy, the newly-christened Ike & Tina Turner Revue hit the road with Ike, Tina, and the first in a long line of backing vocal groups dubbed the Ikettes. In the final weeks of Tina's pregnancy, "A Fool In Love" was at the top of the charts and the Revue was still working everywhere from the Apollo Theatre to *American Bandstand*. A follow-up single, "It's Gonna Work Out Fine," struck a more relaxed groove, with teasing romantic repartee between a deadpan Ike and a hot-to-trot Tina. The Turners had a new son now, but were still touring nearly nonstop.

In 1962, Ike and Tina moved to Los Angeles, were married perfunctorily in Tijuana, and kept up their grueling roadwork. Though subsequent Sue singles failed to match the initial hits, Tina bolstered her reputation as a vocalist and live entertainer fronting Ike's razor-sharp, road-hardened band. Phil Spector recognized her potential after he booked the Revue to appear in his 1965 concert movie, *The Big TNT Show*. In 1966, Spector borrowed Tina from the Turners' then-current label, Loma Records, and banned Ike from the Hollywood sessions that would bring forth one final Phyllis roar: a costly, grandiose record combining the symphonic romance of *West Side Story* and the soul-shaking power of R&B. Atop a wall of sound so high and dense it seemed ready to collapse on itself stood Tina Turner, and "River Deep, Mountain High" remains her greatest recorded vocal performance.

It is also one largely lost to American musical history: The record peaked at Number Eighty-eight in May, 1966,

although it reached the Top Ten in England and was hailed as a pop masterpiece without parallel. On the strength of the single and the subsequent *River Deep, Mountain High* album awkwardly combining both high-gloss Spector and low-





down Ike Turner productions, the Revue toured England as an opener for the Rolling Stones. Mick Jagger took dancing lessons from Tina and her Ikettes, Keith Richard lusted after Tina from afar, and the entire group grilled Ike on his deep



blues background.

The Stones' admiration endured. Their landmark 1969 U.S. tour once again featured the Revue as an opening act, and Tina's unforgettably erotic rendition of "I've Been Loving You Too Long" is a showstopper in the otherwise grim tour documentary, *Gimme Shelter*. Bob Krasnow, the Turners' former label boss at Loma, re-signed them to his hip new Blue Thumb label. He encouraged Ike and Tina to explore their blues roots on the 1969 album *Outta Season* (with its controversial cover photo of the Turners, in whiteface, eating watermelon) and on a well-received follow-up, *The Hunter*, featuring the Albert King title tune.

The Stones tour transformed Tina into a rock & roll icon, and more rock-oriented material made its way into the Revue's repertoire. Tina's unfettered approach galvanized "Honky Tonk Women," "Come Together," and Sly Stone's "I Want To Take You Higher." An audacious 1971 reworking of "Proud Mary" became a Top Five pop smash, a million-selling single, and a bona fide piece of classic rock. Tina's new celebrity was reaffirmed in 1974 when she joined the cavalcade of pop stars assembled for Ken Russell's outlandish film version of *Tommy*; her turn as the Acid Queen is unquestionably the most spectacular moment in Russell's tableau.

By the time *Tommy* appeared in 1975, Ike and Tina's personal and professional relationship was nearly unraveled. Their last major hit together had been "Nutbush City Limits," a fierce dance number penned by Tina that glanced back at her Tennessee childhood. "Nutbush" was particularly successful in Europe, where the solo Tina would later find her largest and most loyal audience.

In the end, it was as if all those hard-living, hard-luck stories of the blues had overtaken their very lives. The comforts of fame were always just out of reach; the struggle to get there was never quite behind them.

For Tina, there was a bitterly fought-for happy ending. Her arduous climb to the top on her own was perhaps the most remarkable and inspiring success story of the '80s. The music she made on the 1984 Number One hit "What's Love Got To Do With It" and her multi-platinum *Private Dancer* album was as impressive as the real-life story behind the songs. In music and temperament, Ike remained the tough, solitary Delta bluesman. He leaves behind a legacy of seminal performances with the Kings of Rhythm, available today primarily as British imports and prized by devotees of hardcore blues and R&B music.

