

Benny Turner

Stepping Into the Spotlight

In a recent balmy June evening, the sounds of smoking electric blues drifted through the open doors of the Little Gem Saloon on South Rampart Street in New Orleans. Inside, Benny Turner and his band, Real Blues—consisting this night of keyboardist Sam Joyner and drummer Larry Williams—performed as if to a packed stadium rather than an intimate, gleaming Art Deco-style restaurant. A dynamic front man, Turner frequently stepped off of the jewel-box stage to sit at customers' tables, played bass solos behind his head, and even enlisted an enthusiastic audience member to pluck a string while he bent the note—all to the delight of the small, yet appreciative crowd, several of whom stayed for the entire three-hour set.

After witnessing his bravura performance, it's surprising to hear the brother of the late Freddie King say that he never desired to be in the spotlight. Turner and King grew up in Gilmer, Texas, where they loved listening to a radio show called *In the Groove*, as well as to Louis Jordan, Hank Williams, and members of their musically inclined family. "I was with Freddie when he bought his first guitar, and I was with Freddie when he bought his last guitar. I was with him from the beginning to the end. Freddie was into it much more than I was. He decided he wanted to be a musician, and that's what he did.

"My dad worked at a slaughterhouse, and the guy [he worked for] had a guitar, a little Roy Rogers [model]. And he said that he wanted to get rid of it, so my dad told Freddie. So Freddie went down and worked at the slaughterhouse to get that guitar."

In the early 1950s, the family relocated to Chicago, where the teenaged Turner and King would sneak around the city's famed blues clubs. When King was of age, he began sitting in with artists such as Howlin' Wolf, and in due time put together a band with drummer T. J. McNulty and bassist Robert Elem.

Once, when Elem became sick, King enlisted Turner to sit in for him, teaching him how to play the bass. Turner proved to be a quick study: "I was out playing basketball, and

Freddie came by and said, 'Hey, come on; I want you to do something.' I said, 'Okay.' So we jumped in the car and he took me to the Squeeze Club, on the West Side of Chicago, and gave me this bass. He said, 'Now, I want you to do this here' [mimes plucking a string], so I started doing that, like a one-string shuffle, in the key of E. So we played all night long in the key of E. And then the next night we moved it up, and I started playing in the key of G. So in about 30 days, I had it down!"

In 1960, King went to Cincinnati with Sonny Thompson to record for the King Records subsidiary Federal. According to Turner, *Hide Away*, King's signature instrumental, was co-written with Turner, McNulty, and Elem, who received no credit. Back in Chicago, soul singer Dee Clark approached Turner to play in his band, and he accepted. Later, Turner would back the Soul Stirrers on bass. Eventually he returned to Texas, as did his brother, who was signed to Leon Russell's Shelter Records in 1971. Turner rejoined King's band, and as his star rose they toured regularly, performing with the likes of Eric Clapton, John Fogerty, and Grand Funk Railroad, whose song *We're an American Band* mentions staying "Up all night with Freddie King."

But those nights would not last. "If I remember correctly, we were in Seattle," Turner says, "and me and Freddie had a long personal talk, and I didn't understand what he was talking about. You know, later on I [did]. Then we come on back to Texas, and we played Christmas of '76 and went on down to Florida and came back, and we played Christmas night. And then he took sick. Then a couple of days later he passed away." King was just 42 years old.

After his brother's death, Turner left Texas and went back to Chicago, where he played with Mighty Joe Young for eight years. "After Mighty Joe got sick, then I moved to New Orleans and started to play blues with Marva Wright. And Marva Wright was like



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my big sister, boy; she could sing, man! And we were friends, until she passed away. And when she passed away, then I started to be a front guy, which I wasn't crazy about. Freddie always wanted me to sing, but I never wanted to—never! But when Marva passed away, then I said, 'Okay, this is it.' So this is where we are now."

With two albums to his credit—1997's *Blue and Not So Blue* and 2011's *A Tribute to My Brother Freddie King*—Turner is currently working on a new record and performing semi-regularly at the Little Gem, where during Jazz Fest he staged for the first time a Freddie King tribute concert with sacred steel player Chuck Campbell, guitarist Walter "Wolfman" Washington, zydeco musician Rockin' Dopsie Jr., and the Marc Stone All-Star Band. He also played on one of the main stages at this year's French Quarter Festival. "[That] was really good. Man, the people went crazy! And you know, while were playing, I'm looking at the audience, and I said, 'There is a market here for [blues] music! What's wrong with these people?' But anyway, when I finished, a lot of people couldn't get up to me, they were coming to the Little Gem. So they come over there, and people come up and said, 'Saw you there and we wanted to come speak to you, and couldn't get up to you. So we come over here to speak to you.' And tell me how much they enjoyed it.

"What I do is natural. It's just natural; it's what I've always done. I enjoy it."

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To find out when Benny Turner and Real Blues will be performing at the Little Gem Saloon, visit <http://www.littlegemsaloon.com/>.