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B. B. King: Analysis of the Artist's Evolving Guitar Technique

B. B. King is the world's preeminent electric blues guitarist. His style has influenced guitarists and contemporary rock stars throughout the world. It is the purpose of this article to examine the development of King's guitar technique from his earliest recordings up through the 1980s.

The development of B. B. King's guitar technique has been gradual yet continuous and deliberate. In fact, the artist has always been motivated toward self-improvement, which accounts for his great penchant for listening to a variety of musical styles. His early reluctance to use his instrument as an accompanying medium, borne out in his statement: "I've never been able to actually accompany myself with chords like a guitarist would do,"¹ has only served to increase his capacity for inventiveness and creativity in effecting single string solos. It can be shown that King's guitar technique has advanced over the years with respect to dexterity, facility and the gradual acquisition and development of certain idiomatic or stylistic devices such as hand slides or hand-position shifts, note embellishments, tremolos, and pull-offs.

B. B. King had not developed an impressive guitar technique by the time he did his first recording session for the Bullet label in 1949. In these earliest recordings (four altogether), King can be seen as a crude unrefined soloist relying on a limited set of skills. He adhered to a single guitar position and played only descending blues scales. These early recording sessions displayed loose arrangements without much continuity or direction, always staying close to the key of C major, the tonality used on his first four sides.

B. B. King played two separate sessions for Bullet in 1949, one in July and one in November. In the July session he recorded "Miss Martha King" (Bullet 309) and "When Your Baby Packs Up and Goes" (Bullet 309), both up-tempo, boogie-woogie jump tunes. His only solo work on both songs was confined to the introduction, which in the former was manifested by two short descending blues scales and a brief statement of a "T-Bone" Walker-derived motif (Figure 1). In fact, this motif was to become one of King's signature "licks" during his early style development and is still identifiable in a few cases in more recent examples.



Figure 1. "Miss Martha King"

He begins the introduction to "When Your Baby Packs Up and Goes" with the same descending scale, only differing from the former in his contracting the eighth-note triplet ♩_3 to the quarter-eighth figure $\text{♩}_3\text{♩}$. In both previously mentioned songs we find short solo choruses by the tenor saxophonist and the trombonist. Novice guitar improvisers often confine themselves to a single key and a single position. King was no exception in both Bullet sessions.

On the November 1949 session, King recorded two sides, a fast boogie-woogie entitled "Take a Swing With Me" (Bullet 315) and a slower twelve-bar blues called "Got the Blues" (Bullet 315). In both renditions very little guitar is heard. In fact, one has to listen carefully to detect a few disjointed guitar responses to several vocal lines. Thus we can conclude that in these earliest King sessions the artist possessed minimal dexterity for soloing, limiting himself to several memorized blues scale patterns in one position (at the eighth fret) and a "lick" or motif borrowed from his idol, Aaron "T-Bone" Walker.

On entering the modest studio of Sam Phillips in the early part of 1950, it appears that B. B. King had made some strides as a soloist. Prior to his sessions for Phillips in the early 1950s, King apparently devoted much of his time to practice and to the scrutiny of his guitar idols. Many of his early recordings for Phillips reflect the strong influence from "T-Bone" Walker once again; in fact, they are almost imitations. This influence can be detected by comparing Walker's solo in "I Got a Break Baby" (Capitol 10033, 1942) with B. B. King's "Questionnaire Blues" (KST 539) recorded in January, 1951 (Figures 2 and 3).

SIGNS USED IN TRANSCRIPTIONS



circled numbers indicates string numbers
(① = highest sounding string)



pitch slightly higher than notated



pitch slightly lower than notated

T

finger vibrato (tremolo) employed



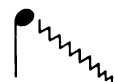
string bend upward



downward release of previous upward bend



a slide into a note from several frets lower



fall-off or downward glissando

P.O.

pull-off

D7

chord symbols

W.S.

whole-step bend

H.S.

half-step bend



ghosted note



upward glissando



Figure 2. “T-Bone” Walker, “I Got a Break Baby”

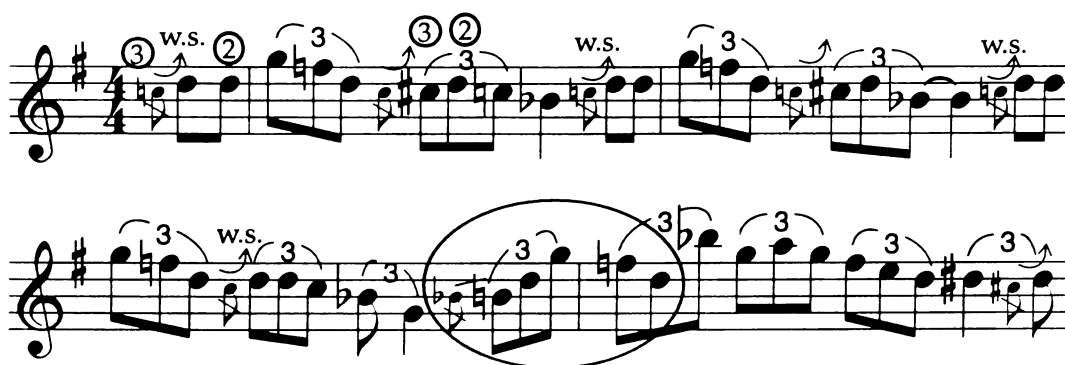


Figure 3. B. B. King, “Questionnaire Blues”

It is also interesting to note that in a few of his early sessions for Phillips, King functions merely as a blues vocalist, as is evidenced by the overlapping guitar lines. The side musicians in these sessions consisted of several young Memphis jazz players, including Phineas Newborn on piano, Hank Crawford on tenor saxophone, and apparently Calvin Newborn on lead guitar. Upon first hearing “B. B. Boogie” (RPM 304), one might mistakenly attribute the guitar solo to B. B. King himself (no clear documentation of the sidemen’s identities could be found). However, given the fact that King’s solo development had not reached the inventiveness and jazz-like quality demonstrated in this rendition elsewhere, the guitarist most likely to have been capable of it was Phineas’ brother Calvin, who played on several of King’s early sessions (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Calvin Newborn [?], “B. B. Boogie”

One of the first stylistic elements incorporated into B. B. King’s developing technique was his repetition of the same pitch played consecutively on adjacent strings. Probably used as a means to achieve tonal contrast, this same technique was utilized by “T-Bone” Walker, as well as by many rockabilly guitarists. It is effected by playing a given note on a higher string, then immediately sliding on the next lower adjacent string up to the same pitch. It is also a reliable method of going from a lower to a higher position. This gesture is evident in many of King’s recordings of the early 1950s. A case in point can be found in the ninth bar of his improvised guitar solo in “She Don’t Love Me No More” (RPM 348, 1952), (Figure 5).

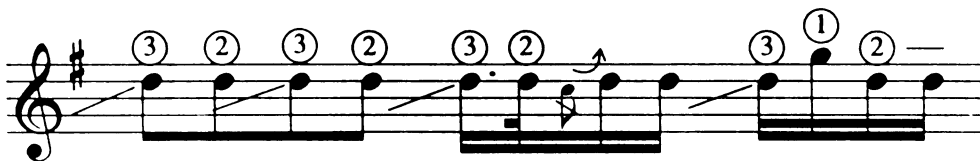


Figure 5. “She Don’t Love Me No More”

Another example can be detected in his first national hit, “Three O’Clock Blues” (RPM 339), which was released in 1951 (Figure 6).

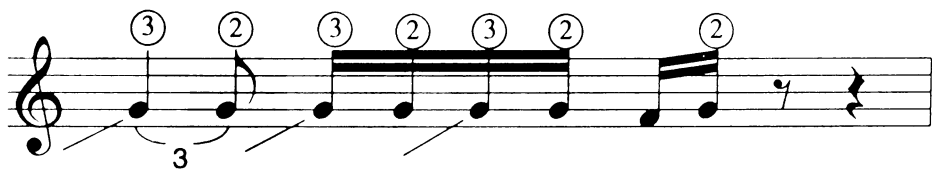


Figure 6. “Three O’Clock Blues”

Significantly both repetitions occur on the dominant harmony and in the same measure of this twelve-bar blues song. This repetitive note-sliding technique can be found in “T-Bone” Walker’s solos as well as in Chuck Berry’s guitar solos of the mid- to late 1950s. A typical example occurs in the latter’s introduction to “Johnny B. Goode” (Chess 1691, 1958). King has continued to use this technique throughout his career, although not in the same manner as has been already demonstrated. In the mid-1950s and later he contracted the technique into one single repetition. King’s guitar solo in “Boogie Rock” (RPM 435), a 1955 instrumental, illustrates the point, in both the second and seventh measures (Figure 7).



Figure 7 “Boogie Rock”

As can be seen in the preceding examples, King bends up to the first note on a lower string, then plays the same note on the adjacent higher string (Figure 8).

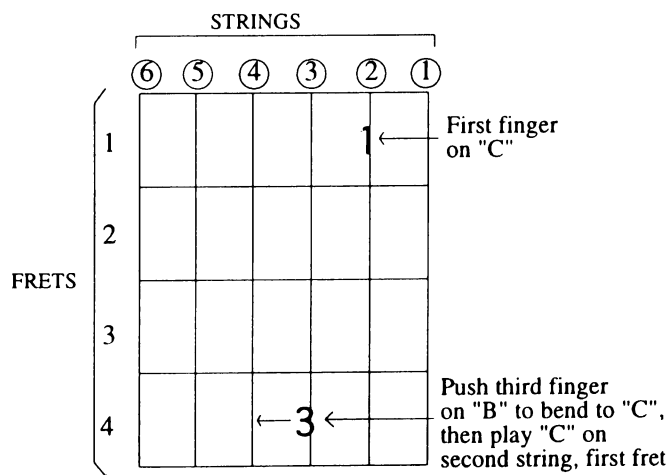


Figure 8. Method of executing mm. 2 and 7 of "Boogie Rock."

This same technique is employed in “Gambler’s Blues” (BL 6001, reissued later on MCA 27010 and ABC 509, 1965) in m. 8 of King’s guitar introduction (Figure 9).

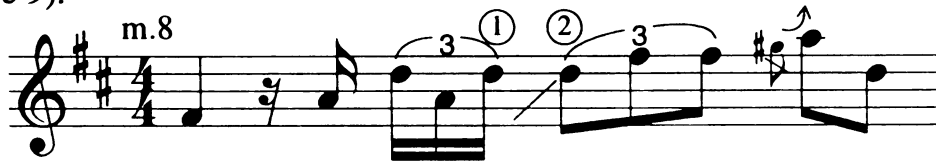


Figure 9. “Gambler’s Blues”

Other examples can be found in “Don’t Answer The Door” (ABC 10856, 1966) and in “Sweet Little Angel” (ABC 509, 1965). Slides like these not only gave King a tonal contrast but also helped him extend his range on the instrument. In the mid- to late 1950s, B. B. King confined his soloing range to one or two close positions, only occasionally moving into distant positions, and then with some uncertainty and uneasiness. In listening to King’s second twelve-bar solo chorus in “Days of Old” (Kent 307, 1958/59), one can detect a certain amount of apprehension and awkwardness in his attempt to go from the fourth position to the sixteenth fret to play an A-flat. To do this, he slides on the first string to the sixteenth fret. He barely executes the note intended, and that in a muddled fashion; then he quickly returns to the fourth position where he regains his security. Through the 1960s, with much practice, King became more proficient in moving into and out of various positions on his guitar. The results are evident in his live recording, “My Mood” (Bluesway 6031, 1969), an instrumental using the same chord progression as Claude Gray’s “Night Life” (Decca, 1968). In his second solo chorus he is able to go from the seventh to the fourteenth position (Figure 10) within four measures, a procedure which takes considerable dexterity.

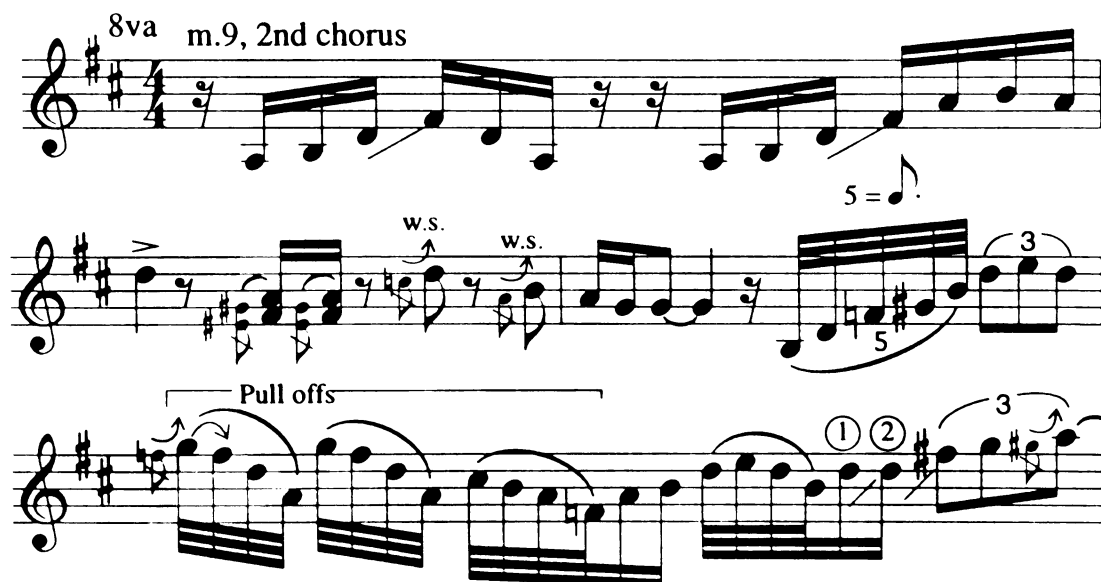


Figure 10. “My Mood”

A technique which gradually appears in King's guitar solos in the mid-fifties is his use of grace-notes, embellishments, turns, and mordants. This technique stems from his initial listening to Lonnie Johnson and later to such jazz guitarists as Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, and Bill Jennings, who played guitar in Louis Jordan's Tympani Five. An early example of such embellishment can be heard in m. 5 of a recording previously mentioned, "Boogie Rock" (RPM 435) (Figure 11). His models can be observed in Lonnie Johnson's "Stompin' 'Em Along Slow" (OKEH 8558, 1928) in m. 6 of the third chorus and again in mm. 8 and 9 (Figure 12).



Figure 11. "Boogie Rock"

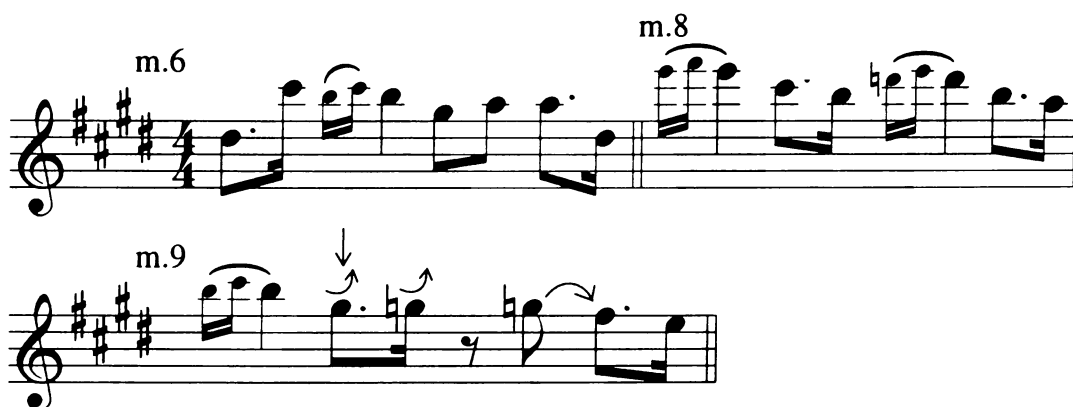


Figure 12. Lonnie Johnson, "Stompin' 'Em Along Slow"

One of B. B. King's favorite jump bands of the 1940s was Louis Jordan's Tympani Five whose song "Salt Pork, West Virginia" (Decca 18761, 1946) left a strong impression on him.² In Bill Jennings' guitar solo one can hear a similar embellishment at the end of m. 10 of this twelve-bar blues (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Bill Jennings, "Salt Port, West Virginia"

This example is a rhythmic retrograde of the embellishment found in King's "Boogie Rock." However, it can also be compared with King's "Days of Old" (Kent 307, 1958/59). King's entire solo here is based on a similar embellishment figure occurring in mm. 4, 6, 10 and 12 (Figure 14).



Figure 14. "Days of Old"

During the time B. B. King was living in Indianola, Mississippi, in the mid-1940s, a close friend, Willie Dotson, on home leave from the army in France, brought him several of Django Reinhardt's records from Paris.³ King was immediately intrigued with the Gypsy guitarist's innovative technique and mode of phrasing. It is obvious that B. B. King absorbed some of these techniques, especially those involved with note bending and the use of embellishments (Figure 15).

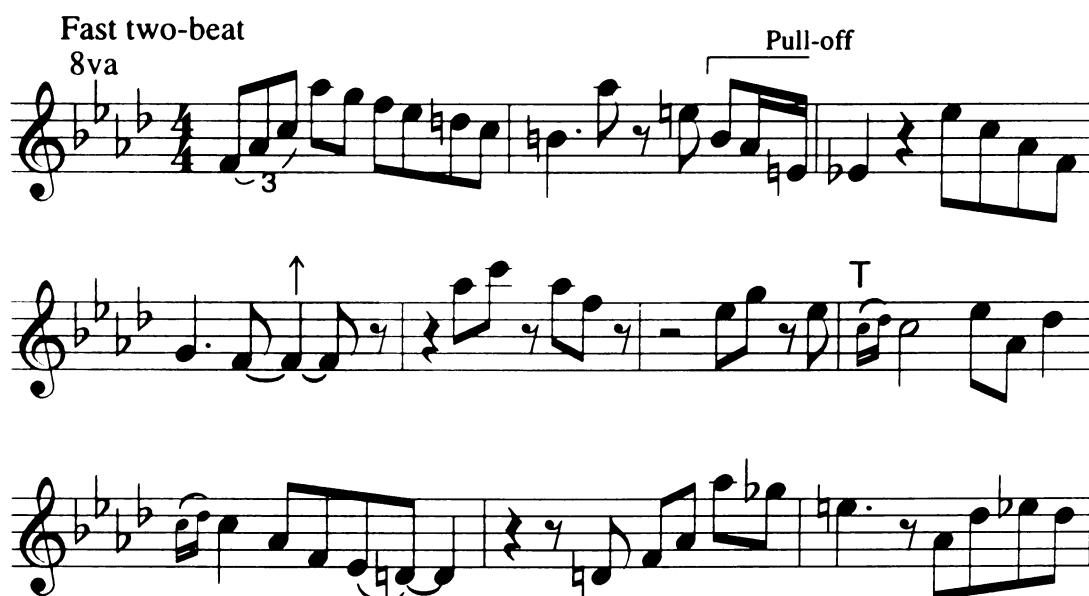


Figure 15. Django Reinhardt, "Djangology"

B. B. King was also impressed with Charlie Christian's style, having first heard him on a moviola located at Jones' Night Spot in Indianola.⁴ It is difficult to trace details of Christian's style in King's solos, especially through brief ornaments. However, in the tune "Wholly Cats" (Columbia, CL 642) the jazz guitarist employs an embellishing figure in the sixth bar of his second solo break which resembles several of King's (Figure 16).

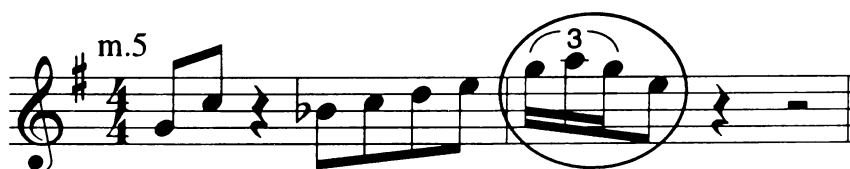


Figure 16. Charlie Christian, "Wholly Cats"

It must be pointed out that considerable practice over a period of time is required to effect a good grasp of embellishment technique on any instrument. Embellishments such as mordants present more complex problems of execution on the guitar because of the need to use a pull-off technique in order to sound the upper neighboring tone before returning to the original note.

King's use of embellishing notes diminished somewhat after the 1950s, at which time a noticeable development of other techniques became apparent, especially the refinement of his left-hand finger tremolo. King fancied the bottleneck style of Delta blues guitarists, notably that of his cousin Bukka White. But he was not sure how to transfer White's idiomatic vibrato sound to his own instrument. In fact, it took him nearly a decade to fully develop the technique,

instrument. In fact, it took him nearly a decade to fully develop the technique, which appears to have entered his guitar improvisations between 1958 and 1960. In “Days of Old” (Figure 14), a slight amount of tremolo is utilized on notes held longer than a beat, but the frequency of oscillation is much slower compared to his solos of the mid-1960s where his tremolo speed is increased considerably. In his guitar solo choruses found in “Please Love Me” (Kent 336, 1960) and “Crying Won’t Help You” (Kent 336, 1960) we see this tremolo development manifested both in the speed and in the frequency of usage. His employment of the technique is fully developed in his solos found in “Sweet Little Angel” (1965) and “Gambler’s Blues” (1967), both on the album *B. B. King: Back in the Alley* (ABCD 878), (Figure 17 and Figure 18).



Figure 17. “Sweet Little Angel”

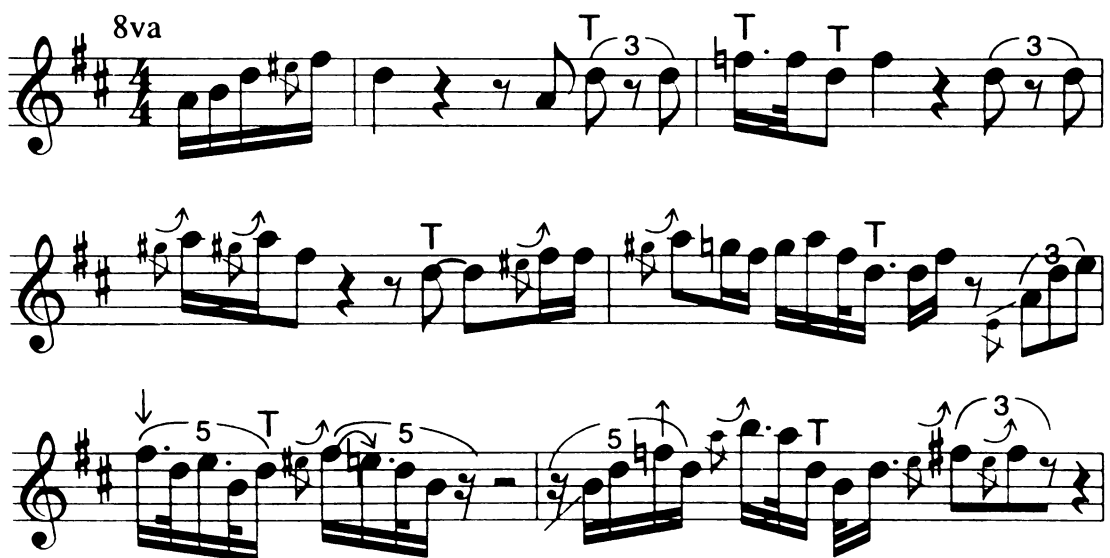


Figure 18. “Gambler’s Blues”

It is significant that both of these songs are slower in tempo than the previously mentioned “Please Love Me.” In general King more frequently uses the tremolo technique in slower twelve-bar blues tunes, although even in a faster shuffle tune like “Paying the Cost To Be the Boss” (BL 61015, 1967), we find King’s tremolo employed on most quarter notes and notes of longer duration (Figure 19).

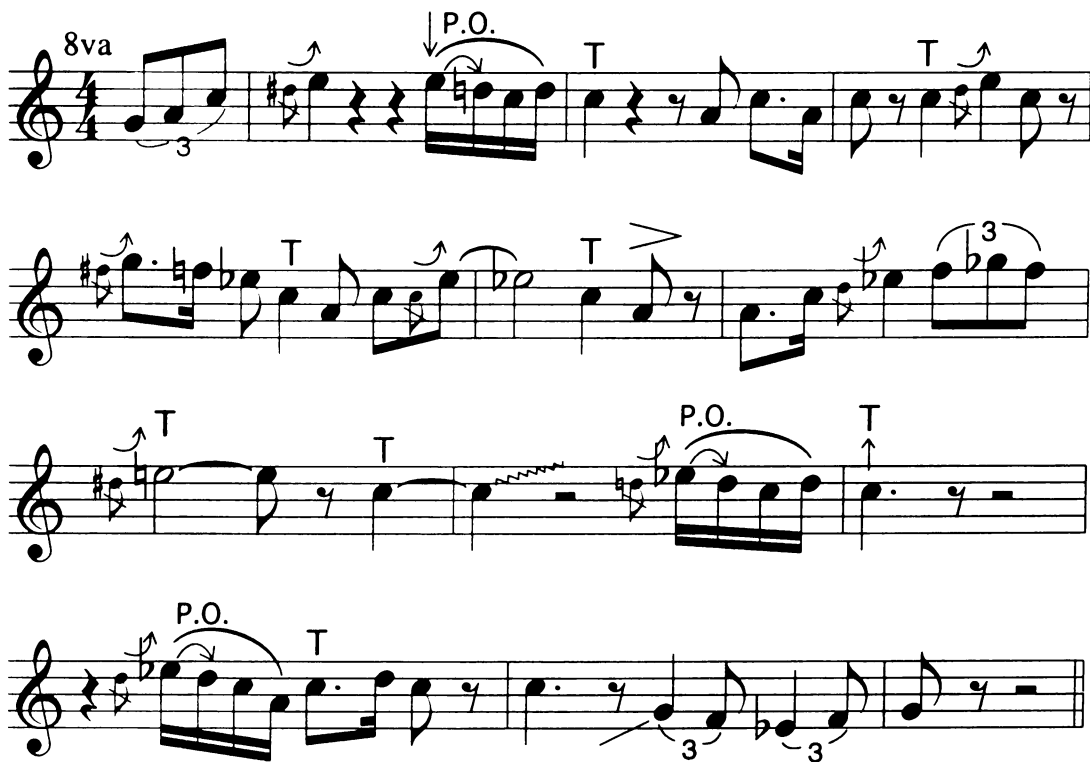


Figure 19. “Paying the Cost to Be the Boss”

B. B. King executed his fully developed tremolos with the utmost speed and agility, a feat he accomplished by lifting his left thumb completely off the back of the neck while fanning his index finger as fast as possible. Most jazz guitarists play their vibrato with the thumb supported behind the neck using slower motion. The fanning technique of B. B. King is both revolutionary and unique. The continuation of King’s tremolo technique into the 1980s is illustrated in Figure 20.

Medium Shuffle, 12-Bar Blues (Introduction)



Figure 20. "Broken Heart" (MCA-5413, 1983)

Still another device that B. B. King employs, though in moderation, is the pull-off, a technique usually reserved for jazz guitarists and some folk blues players. There are two types of pull-off, the single string pull-off and the chord pull-off. The former can be diatonic or chromatic. It is played by initially putting down from two to four left-hand fingers on a single string on consecutive frets (Figure 21).

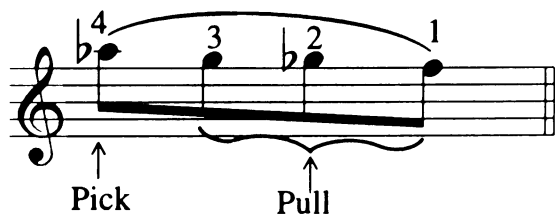


Figure 21. The single string pull-off

The highest note is sounded with the pick and the remaining notes are sounded consecutively by pulling (plucking) off the remaining fingers. The second type is played by placing three or four fingers on a given chord position and beginning with the lowest note (lowest string), playing each string consecutively, picking in one direction, and lifting each finger from the chord position after playing each note. This gives the aural illusion—to the uninitiated listener—of a virtuosic picking technique (Figure 22).

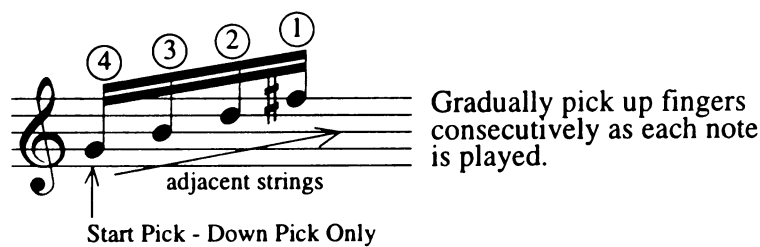


Figure 22. The chord pull-off

Both types are very difficult to master. B. B. King plays the second type only from a lower string to a higher, whereas some jazz guitarists like Barney Kessel or George Benson (both of whom King acknowledges and respects) will play from a higher to a lower string. This technique necessitates putting the chord fingers down and then immediately releasing them after they have been played, a device requiring extreme dexterity and diligent practice. B. B. King incorporated the single string pull-off into his solos early in his career. In the song “Bad Luck” (RPM 468), recorded in 1956, he employs a repeated pull-off riff starting on the flat seventh of the tonic D (Figure 23).

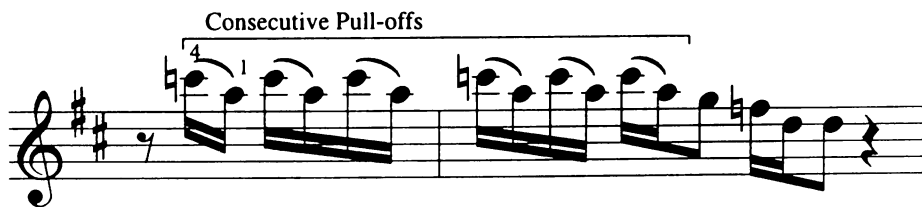


Figure 23. “Bad Luck”

In a later album, entitled *Live and Well* (Bluesway 6031, 1969), King plays a three-chorus introduction to “Sweet Little Angel,” where he displays an exceptionally high number of pull-offs, mainly of the first type. However, in the eighth and ninth bars of the first solo chorus he employs both types (Figure 27).

The musical score for "Sweet Little Angel" by B.B. King is presented across seven staves of guitar notation. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 4/4. The notation includes various guitar-specific techniques and chord markings:

- Staff 1:** Features a triplet of eighth notes (3), a D major chord (D), a trill (T), and a G7 chord. It concludes with a triplet of eighth notes (3).
- Staff 2:** Starts with a D major chord (D), a triplet of eighth notes (3), a trill (T), and a D7 chord. It ends with a triplet of eighth notes (3).
- Staff 3:** Begins with a G7 chord and a "w.s." (with sustain) marking. It contains a triplet of eighth notes (3) and another triplet of eighth notes (3) later in the staff.
- Staff 4:** Starts with a G7 chord. It includes a triplet of eighth notes (3), a sixteenth-note run (6), and a "Pull-off" technique over a triplet of eighth notes (3).
- Staff 5:** Features a D major chord (D) and three triplet markings (3) over eighth notes.
- Staff 6:** Starts with a D major chord (D). It includes a "P.O." (pull-off) marking over a sixteenth-note run (6).
- Staff 7:** Begins with an A7 chord. It features a "Pull-off" technique over a sixteenth-note run (5), followed by runs marked with 6 and 7.

Figure 27. “Sweet Little Angel”

In this solo, King sounds amazingly like the Gypsy master Django Reinhardt by straying from his normal blues style, adding more chromaticism and creative jazz-like lyrical lines.

Pull-offs are also exemplified in his later recordings: “Three O’Clock Blues” from his album *Together For the First Time* (DHL 6-50190, 1976), “Don’t You Lie to Me” on *King Size* (ABC 977, 1977), and in “Big Boss Man” from *Six Silver Strings* (MCA 2675, 1985).

In summary, it is apparent that King’s guitar technique has evolved from a myriad of sources, both direct and indirect, and that these sources have had a substantial impact upon his stylistic development. His unabating desire for self-improvement is shown by his continued listening to other musicians, especially guitarists, both in live settings and on recordings.

In his early recordings, King functioned primarily as a vocalist, exhibiting little idiomatic guitar technique. In subsequent releases, one notices considerable development and the assimilation of a guitar style like that of his idol, “T-Bone” Walker. Gradually King manifested increasing dexterity and facility by expanding his soloing range to include the entire guitar fingerboard. Over time he progressively adopted other techniques—and occasionally invented his own—incorporating all into a unique blues style.

He has claimed for himself embellishments used by earlier blues guitarists, such as Lonnie Johnson, as well as jazz guitarists like Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, and Bill Jennings. His distinctive use of finger tremolo was initially inspired by the careful scrutiny of Bukka White’s bottleneck style.

B. B. King summed up his guitar technique in his own words: “I’ve always been, if there is any such thing, an original.”⁵ Although one senses a bit of myth-making here, his is a modest enough claim if we deem a brilliant and powerful synthesis such as his music represents “original.” At the same time, it is evident that B. B. King has absorbed much of what he has listened to over the span of a lifetime, elements that originated elsewhere, but which were shaped, intensified, and integrated by his own hands for his own performances. He is indeed an “original” in the sense that he has put it all together, as only B. B. King could.

NOTES

¹ B. B. King, personal interview, 7 June 1986.

² Charles Sawyer, *The Arrival of B. B. King: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 23.

³ Sawyer, 157.

⁴ Sawyer, 53.

⁵ B. B. King, personal interview, 7 June 1986.

TABLE OF RECORDINGS CITED

<u>Date</u>	<u>Label/Number</u>	<u>Performer</u>	<u>Album/Song Title</u>
1928	OKEH 8558	Lonnie Johnson	"Stompin' 'Em Along Slow"
[c. 1940]	CL 642	Charlie Christian	"Wholly Cats"
1942	Capitol 10033	"T-Bone" Walker	"I Got a Break Baby"
1946	Decca 18761	Louis Jordan's Tympani Five	"Salt Pork, West Virginia"
1949	Bullet 309	B. B. King	"Miss Martha King" "When Your Baby Packs Up and Goes"
1949	Bullett 315	B. B. King	"Take a Swing With Me" "Got the Blues"
1950/51	RPM 304	B. B. King	"B. B. Boogie"
1951	KST 539	B. B. King	"Questionnaire Blues"
1951	RPM 339	B. B. King	"Three O'Clock Blues"
1952	RPM 348	B. B. King	"She Don't Love Me No More"
1955	RPM 435	B. B. King	"Boogie Rock"
1956	RPM 468	B. B. King	"Bad Luck"
1958	Chess 1691	Chuck Berry	"Johnny B. Goode"
1958/59	Kent 307	B. B. King	"Days of Old"
1958/59	Kent 327	B. B. King	"Time to Say Goodbye"
1960	Kent 330	B. B. King	"Sweet Sixteen"
1960	Kent 336	B. B. King	"Please Love Me" "Crying Won't Help You"
1965	ABC 509	B. B. King	<i>Live At The Regal</i> "Sweet Little Angel"
1966	ABC 10856	B. B. King	"Don't Answer the Door"
1967	BL 6001	B. B. King	<i>Blues Is King</i> "Gambler's Blues"
1967	BL 61015	B. B. King	"Paying the Cost To Be the Boss"
1968	Decca	Claude Gray	"Night Life"
1969	Bluesway 6031	B. B. King	<i>Live and Well</i> "My Mood"

<u>Date</u>	<u>Label/Number</u>	<u>Performer</u>	<u>Album/Song Title</u>
1972	ABCD 878	B.B. King	<i>B.B. King: Back in the Alley</i> "Gambler's Blues" "Sweet Little Angel"
1976	DHL 6-50190	B. B. King	<i>Together For the First Time</i> "Three O'Clock Blues"
1977	ABC 977	B. B. King	<i>King Size</i> "Don't You Lie to Me"
1979	Camden QJ-25221	Django Reinhardt	"Djangology"
1985	MCA 2675	B. B. King	<i>Six Silver Strings</i> "Big Boss Man"