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Albert King
Guitar Man
An Essential Collection





Albert King, guitar man [sound recording].

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| 1. | <i>Cadillac Assembly Line</i> | 4:21 |
| 2. | <i>Nobody Wants A Loser</i> | 4:55 |
| 3. | <i>Truckload of Lovin'</i> | 4:32 |
| 4. | <i>Cold Women With Warm Hearts</i> | 4:07 |
| 5. | <i>Sensation, Communication Together</i> | 7:20 |
| 6. | <i>Guitar Man</i> | 5:05 |
| 7. | <i>Ain't Nothing You Can Do</i> | 7:10 |
| 8. | <i>Running Out Of Steam</i> | 3:48 |
| 9. | <i>Call My Job</i> | 4:25 |
| 10. | <i>Love Shock</i> | 4:00 |
| 11. | <i>Chump Change</i> | 3:39 |
| 12. | <i>Good Time Charlie</i> | 4:43 |
| 13. | <i>The Feeling</i> | 4:57 |
| 14. | <i>I Got The Blues</i> | 9:05 |

Albert King Guitar Man An Essential Collection

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Liner Notes by Bill Dahl

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Art Direction & Graphic Design: Richard Lockett for RL Design, Austin, Texas

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|-----|---|------|
| 1. | <i>Cadillac Assembly Line (Rice)</i> | 4:21 |
| | © 1976 Tomato | |
| 2. | <i>Nobody Wants A Loser (Kelly)</i> | 4:55 |
| | © 1976 Tomato | |
| 3. | <i>Truckload of Lovin' (Lewis)</i> | 4:32 |
| | © 1975 Tomato | |
| 4. | <i>Cold Women With Warm Hearts (Rice)</i> | 4:07 |
| | © 1976 Tomato | |
| 5. | <i>Sensation, Communication Together (Rice/Davis)</i> | 7:20 |
| | © 1975 Tomato | |
| 6. | <i>Guitar Man (De Coteaux/Cherry)</i> | 5:05 |
| | © 1976 Tomato | |
| 7. | <i>Ain't Nothing You Can Do (Brooks)</i> | 7:10 |
| | © 1976 Tomato | |
| 8. | <i>Running Out Of Steam (Thomas)</i> | 3:48 |
| | © 1976 Tomato | |
| 9. | <i>Call My Job (Perkins/Detroit Jr.)</i> | 4:25 |
| | © 1977 Tomato | |
| 10. | <i>Love Shock (Willis)</i> | 4:00 |
| | © 1978 Tomato | |
| 11. | <i>Chump Change (Murphy/Morgenson)</i> | 3:39 |
| | © 1978 Tomato | |
| 12. | <i>Good Time Charlie (Shofield)</i> | 4:43 |
| | © 1978 Tomato | |
| 13. | <i>The Feeling (Hamilton)</i> | 4:57 |
| | © 1978 Tomato | |
| 14. | <i>I Got The Blues (Nocentelli)</i> | 9:06 |
| | © 1978 Tomato | |

When Stax Records foundered amidst a sea of devastating litigation in 1975, Albert King found himself without a label affiliation for the first time in a decade.

At Memphis-based Stax, Booker T. & the MG's had provided many of the immaculate grooves that perfectly complimented the deep blues he had honed in Arkansas and St. Louis during the 1950s. Born Albert Nelson in Indianola, Mississippi on April 25, 1923, King went from being a journeyman artist with a series of fine but mostly overlooked singles for Chicago deejay Al Benson's Parrot label (his '53 debut "Be On Your Merry Way" b/w "Bad Luck Blues"), St. Louis-based Bobbin (the sturdy '59 shuffle "I've Made Nights By Myself" and the torrid '60 swinger "Let's Have A Natural Ball" were among his best), and King (his first R&B chart entry in 1961, the exultant downbeat effort "Don't Throw Your Love On Me So Strong") under his expansive belt to coronation as a full-fledged ruler of the idiom, thanks to his seminal "Crosscut Saw" (1966), "Born Under A Bad Sign" (1967), "I'll Play The Blues For You" (1972), and his biggest seller for the company, "That's What The Blues Is All About" in 1974.

His mile-wide upside-down string bends—which seemed to hang suspended in mid-air like frozen clotheslines—were partially the result of King being fascinated by Hawaiian music early in his development. He also listened to and learned from the waxings of blues guitarists Lonnie Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and T-Bone Walker. King was no overnight sensation; he even switched over to playing drums behind Jimmy Reed in 1953 around Gary, Indiana before reverting to his axe. Albert had formed his first pro outfit, the In the Groove Band, the year before, gigging around Osceola, Arkansas. But it wasn't until he challenged Ike Turner and Little Milton for Gateway City guitar supremacy later in the decade that his gut-grabbing sound (King tuned to an E-minor chord, making rhythm comping a chore but giving him a sound all his own) finally neared maturity.

Once he signed with Stax and cut his first hit for the label, "Laundromat Blues," in '66, veneration from a posse of worshipful blues-rockers commenced. Eric Clapton had his ears wide-open to what Albert was putting down (as his solo on Cream's "Strange Brew" readily attests), and later Texas titan Stevie Ray Vaughan pledged his allegiance time and again. Albert's massive fan base spanned all generational restrictions and racial boundaries; he was one of the first electric bluesmen to successfully crash the psychedelically informed late '60s rock circuit.

But what would the massively constructed bluesman decide regarding his next record contract? Instead of investigating other R&B-oriented companies with easily traceable track records, King quickly signed a pact with Utopia Records, a new RCA Victor-affiliated imprint that eventually reincarnated itself under the Tomato banner. Neither the MG's nor the Bar-Kays, both of which had provided stellar support during King's Stax heyday, were available for studio duty. Albert coped handily nevertheless, utilizing ace session players wherever he happened to be recording at any given moment. His guitar sound had changed too: instead of the sizzling barbed-wire attack he'd employed during the '60s and early '70s at Stax, he was now pumping his trademark Gibson Flying V model (nicknamed Lucy, ostensibly in response to his unrelated namesake B.B.'s Lucille) through some sort of phase-shifting device that softened its bite yet never disguised his identity.

And the hits kept right on coming. "Cadillac Assembly Line," his first for Utopia in the spring of '76, climbed to #40 on Billboard's R&B charts on the strength of an elegant minor-key arrangement by Bert de Coteaux that boasted one of the most tasteful utilizations of violins in the blues since B.B.'s "The Thrill Is Gone," Albert's thoroughly convincing vocal and stinging, finger-pulled axe (he never employed a pick), and a tough working-class lyric. The latter was supplied by Sir Mack Rice, the Detroit singer responsible for "Mustang Sally" (which he cut himself for Mercury's Blue Rock logo prior to Wilson Pickett torching it), the Staple Singers' "Respect Yourself," and Johnnie Taylor's "Cheaper To Keep Her." Rice and Mary Davis co-wrote King's next Utopia hit that summer (#80 R&B), the easy-grooving "Sensation, Communication Together"; Albert's seductive singing strikes precisely the right tone as the sophisticated strings dress up what's basically a mid-tempo grinder.

Both tracks hailed from King's first Utopia album *Truckload of Lovin'*, probably his most consistent long-player for the company. Produced by de Coteaux and Tony Silvestre at Hollywood's Total Experience Studios, the project involved some of L.A.'s top sessioners: drummer James Gadson (a prominent member of Charles Wright & the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band), bassist Chuck Rainey, ex-Motown house guitarist Melvin "Wah Wah Watson" Ragin, Crusaders keyboardist Joe Sample, and an all-star complement of background singers including Lani Groves, Maxine Willard, Deniece Williams, and Dee Ervin (as Big Dee Irwin, he made some nice early '60s pop-slanted R&B for Dimension Records).

The choppy title track, a veritable fountainhead of double entendres delivered by King as though he meant every last one, hailed from the pen of Jimmy Lewis, who performed similar scribing duties for Ray Charles and cut some solid soul senders under his own moniker. Tight horns urge on King's aggressive string-bending; no official credits as to their identities, though a "special thanks" line to Jerome Richardson and Ernie Fields, Jr. may offer a partial clue. Rice also contributed the sly, strutting "Cold Women With Warm Hearts," one of the set's unmitigated highlights with punchy horns and rolling 88s buttressing a walking bass line that elicits some savage licks from King. Herman Kelley, a longtime collaborator of New York producer Clyde Otis, came up with the irrefutable "Nobody Wants A Loser"; the witty number sports some of the same relentless roadhouse drive distinguishing "Cold Women," with Albert once again peeling off some vicious bends.

Disco was running rampant across the R&B firmament with no relief in sight, and even old guard bluesmen like King had to pay some heed if they wanted to sell wax. There were discernible tinges of disco ambiance within Albert's "Guitar Man," a #79 R&B seller near year's end in the sassy "Let's get it on, guitar man" chants from the female vocal backing contingent and the resolutely funky bass line. Yet King does get it on—with Lucy, during the extended vamp out.

"Ain't Nothing You Can Do," on the other hand, is relaxed, horn-fueled blues from the old school with some steaming solos from the big man (the tune was penned by Malaco-affiliated soul-blues singer Chuck Brooks), and his legion of longtime fans made it a #95 R&B entry during the spring of '77.

"Guitar Man" and "Ain't Nothing You Can Do" came from King's encore Utopia LP *Albert*, which reunited the burly guitarist with much the same support staff as *Truckload of Lovin'*: de Coteaux was flying solo behind the glass at Total Experience this time as producer and arranger, with Sample back on keys, Fields on sax, and most of the same responsorial voices on hand. Drummers Harold Mason and Paul Humphrey, rhythm guitarist Roy Gaines (a legendary Texas-born bluesman himself), ex-Temptations road bassist William Upchurch, and former Motown house trombonist George Bohanon were among the background notables. "Running Out Of Steam" was one of the set's highlights—its percolating groove and skin-tight horns brought out the teasing qualities in Albert's vocal delivery.

Ebullient Chicago blues pianist Detroit Junior—real name Emery Williams, Jr.—had written and cut the amusing "Call My Job" for USA Records in 1965, but Albert brought plenty new to his playful rendition for Tomato, including a chunky, up-to-date rhythmic thrust devised by P-Funk keyboard whiz Bernie Worrell, and it proved a #72 R&B hit in early 1978. This time, King was being produced by Don Davis, best-known for his long association with Johnnie Taylor (Davis supervised Taylor's '68 Stax breakthrough "Who's Making Love" and his '76 platinum single for Columbia, "Disco Lady").

An intriguing cadre of Detroit veterans was rounded up for King *Albert*, the southpaw axeman's first album to appear on the Tomato logo (*Truckload of Lovin'* and *Albert* were repressed with a spiffy Tomato logo adorning their labels). Motown house guitarist Eddie Willis and Rudy Robinson (blues harpist Little Sonny's keyboardist) adorned most of its eight tracks, cut at United Sound in the Motor City. Along with "Call My Job," King *Albert* spawned a second hit, the Robinson-arranged funkfest "Chump Change," which slipped up to #72 R&B that spring and forced King to sing harder and higher than usual with impressive results.

"Love Shock," one of the LP's toughest workouts, had been introduced by its writer, Detroit blues harpist Aaron "Little Sonny" Willis, in 1959 on Excello; though he's credited as one of the rhythm guitarists on King's remake, his son, Aaron Willis, Jr., plays guitar on several other cuts, so it could have been a Tomato typo. The soul-oriented "Good Time Charlie" was contributed by Willie Schofield, the former bass singer of the Falcons, a revered Detroit vocal group whose ranks also included Eddie Floyd, Sir Mack Rice, Joe Stubbs, and Wilson Pickett (but not quite all at once), and King handles it with delightful ease.

Tomato kept Albert on the go when it came to choosing recording sites. They dispatched him to Allen Toussaint's Sea-Saint Studio in the Crescent City for his 1978 album *New Orleans Heat*, recouping a little of the studio cost by recycling a leftover photo from the Albert shoot for its cover. When asked about working with the brilliant pianist/composer/arranger/producer in 1979, King was effusive in his praise. "The session was nice. I was very, very pleased with the album. I did some old stuff, some new," said King. "Allen is really an amazing guy. He's a hell of a guy on that piano."

Truthfully, straightahead blues wasn't really Toussaint's forte, and he played it a little too safe by revisiting Albert's past triumphs on the album: five of its nine tracks were tepid remakes, none of them approaching his classic originals. Despite the presence of guitarist Leo Nocentelli and bassist George Porter, Jr. of the Meters, drummers June Gardner and Charles Williams, and Wardell Quezergue pitching in on electric piano, the LP's high points were largely limited to "The Feeling," a kissing cousin to "The Thrill Is Gone" that was the work of local singer Larry Hamilton, and Nocentelli's epic "I Got The Blues," wrapped around a bass line so sturdy and unshakable that the song trampled everything else on the LP.

New Orleans Heat marked the end of King's tenure with Tomato, and very nearly the end of his recording career. After a long and baffling studio hiatus, the mountainous southpaw finally surfaced on the Fantasy label with the self-explanatory *San Francisco '83* and *I'm in a Phone Booth, Baby* the following year. He'd been halfheartedly threatening to retire for years but never really succeeded in leaving the road behind entirely; his pipe inevitably clenched between his teeth onstage, puffing away with a detached calmness, he could wither an errant band member with one steely gaze until the very end—which came December 21, 1992 in Memphis.

Fitting, since the Bluff City was where Albert King's career fully ignited. If his Utopia/ Tomato catalog wasn't quite as uniformly spectacular as the massive legacy he built at Stax, this collection shows it contained more than its share of overlooked gems.

— Bill Dahl

SOURCES

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