MUSIC THEORY TECHNICAL GUITAR STUDY

B.B. King: King of the Blues – A Technical Analysis of Guitar Phrasing, Equipment, and Historical Pedagogy

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The legacy of Riley B. King, universally recognized as **B.B. King**, represents a foundational pillar in the architecture of modern blues and rock guitar. His influence is not merely stylistic but technical, characterized by a sophisticated economy of motion, a unique harmonic vocabulary, and a mechanical approach to the instrument that redefined the expressive potential of the electric guitar. This analysis explores the technical depths of B.B. King's methodology, with a specific focus on the definitive transcriptions found in the **King of the Blues: Guitar TAB** anthology (ISBN 9780898987195), a monumental 77-track collection that serves as a primary source for understanding the "King of the Blues."

Introduction: The Significance of the King of the Blues Anthology

In the realm of musicology and technical guitar study, the 1993 Alfred Music publication **King of the Blues: Guitar TAB** stands as a critical documentation of B.B. King's mid-to-late career mastery. Containing 77 titles, this folio provides more than just notes; it offers a blueprint of King's phrasing, his use of spatial dynamics, and his rejection of the speed-centric virtuosity that dominated his era. To study B.B. King is to study the physics of the string and the psychological impact of timing. His approach was built upon the **Mississippi Blues Trail** traditions, yet it integrated a sophisticated jazz-inflected harmonic sensibility that separated him from his delta-blues predecessors.

The Theoretical Framework of the 'B.B. Box'

One cannot discuss the technical execution of B.B. King without referencing the **"B.B. Box."** This is a specific scale pattern located on the top three strings, typically centered around the root note on the second (B) string. Unlike the standard minor pentatonic scale (Box 1) used by most blues players, King's box shifts the hand position to incorporate the major 6th and the major 2nd (or 9th), creating a sweeter, more melodic sound that avoids the starkness of the pure minor blues scale.

- Root Position: The index finger typically anchors the root note on the B-string.
- Intervalic Reach: The ring finger handles the whole-step bend to the root on the G-string and the whole-step bend on the high-E string.
- The Major 6th: By incorporating the major 6th, King creates a Dorian-lite or Mixolydian feel that aligns perfectly with dominant 7th chords.

Technical Analysis: Mechanics of Phrasing and Vibrato

B.B. King's technical prowess was centered on two mechanical pillars: **vibrato** and **phrasing**. While many guitarists use a vertical vibrato (pulling the string up and down), King utilized a horizontal/butterfly vibrato that relied on a rapid, oscillating movement of the wrist and hand, independent of the arm's weight.

The Physics of the Butterfly Vibrato

The "Butterfly Vibrato" is characterized by the following mechanical components:

1. Pivot Point: The thumb is often lifted off the back of the neck, allowing the hand to swing freely around the index finger's contact point with the fret.

2. Frequency and Amplitude: King’s vibrato was remarkably consistent, typically oscillating at a frequency of 5 to 7 Hz. The amplitude was narrow, usually staying within a quarter-tone range, which provided a vocal-like shimmer rather than a pitch-shifting wobble.

3. Decay Control: By varying the pressure and speed, King could sustain a note while maintaining its harmonic integrity, a technique essential for the long, mournful notes found in pieces like "Sweet Little Angel."

Mathematical Analysis of Call-and-Response Phrasing

King’s solos are structured using a **Call-and-Response (C&R)**mathematical model. In a standard 12-bar blues progression, King rarely played over the entire bar. Instead, he utilized the following rhythmic distribution:

Bar Segment	Musical Function	Technical Execution
Bar 1-2	The Call	A short, 3-5 note motif ending on the root or 5th.
Bar 3-4	The Space	Total silence or light rhythmic scratching (raking).
Bar 5-6	The Response	An ornamental variation of the call, often utilizing higher register bends.
Bar 7-8	The Space	Reiteration of the silence to allow the vocal line to breathe.
Bar 9-12	The Resolution	A descending run using the B.B. Box, resolving to the root via the major 6th.

Equipment and Signal Chain: The 'Lucille' Specification

A significant portion of B.B. King's tone was derived from his refusal to use effects pedals, a fact noted in technical studies of 10 guitarists who avoid pedals. His signal chain was a study in **subtraction and purity**. The core of his sound was "Lucille," a customized **Gibson ES-355**. Unlike standard semi-hollow bodies, Lucille featured no f-holes, a design choice specifically requested by King to reduce 60Hz hum and low-frequency feedback at high stage volumes.

The Varitone Circuit

The technical heart of Lucille is the **Varitone switch**, a multi-position rotary switch that engages different capacitors in a notch filter circuit. This allows the player to scoop specific frequencies:

- Position 1: Bypass (Full frequency response).
- Position 2-3: Slight mid-scoop (Typical for King’s rhythm work).
- Position 4-5: Heavy compression of mids and highs (Creating the "honking" nasal tone used in his lead lines).

The Lab Series L5 Amplifier

In a surprising departure from the tube-saturated tone of his peers, King famously used the **Lab Series L5**, a solid-state amplifier designed by Moog and Gibson. The L5 offered a "compressor" circuit and a unique "multifilter" that mimicked the harmonic overtones of a vacuum tube without the unpredictable breakup. This provided King with a high-headroom, ultra-clean canvas that allowed the nuances of his finger-touch to be the primary modulator of tone.

Practical Implementation: A Field Guide for Students

Using the **King of the Blues: Guitar TAB** edition effectively requires more than just reading the notation. Students must approach the transcriptions as a study in **micro-tonality**. Many of the bends in the Alfred Music folio are marked with a "1/4" or "1/2" symbol, indicating that the note should not reach the next fret's pitch but should instead exist in the "blue note" space between.

Step-by-Step Study Procedure

1. Isolate the Index Finger: Practice the B.B. Box by keeping the index finger fixed on the root note (e.g., 10th fret, B string for D Major).
2. The Rake: Before hitting a sustained note, drag the pick across the muted G and D strings. This adds a

percussive "thump" that simulates the attack of a brass instrument.

3. Dynamics Mapping: Analyze the TAB for volume swells. King rarely picked every note with the same intensity. Use a light touch for the start of a phrase and increase pick velocity toward the climax of the bend.

Case Study: Comparison of 'The Thrill is Gone' (1969) vs. Later Interpretations

By comparing the transcriptions in the *Anthology* to early recordings, we can see the evolution of King's technical economy. In the 1960s, his playing was more frantic, influenced by T-Bone Walker. By the 1990s (the era of the 9780898987195 publication), his style had distilled into what clinicians call **"The One Note Philosophy."**

Feature	Early Style (Pre-1970)	Mature Style (Post-1980)
Note Density	High (12-16 notes per phrase)	Low (3-6 notes per phrase)
Vibrato Speed	Variable / Fast	Controlled / Consistent
Scale Choice	Pure Minor Pentatonic	B.B. Box (Mixolydian/Major)
Amplification	Fender Twin Reverb (Tube)	Lab Series L5 (Solid State)

Troubleshooting Common Errors in Replicating B.B. King's Style

Many advanced guitarists fail to capture the B.B. King sound because of **over-playing**. Technical failures usually fall into three categories:

- Rushing the Pocket: King often played "behind the beat." Students tend to play exactly on the metronome click, which destroys the relaxed, conversational feel of the blues.
- Inconsistent Pitch on Bends: King's bends were mathematically precise. If a TAB calls for a 1/4 tone bend, over-bending to a 1/2 tone changes the harmonic context from "uncertain/blue" to "resolved/major," stripping the phrase of its tension.
- Lack of Wrist Pivot: Attempting the B.B. King vibrato with finger strength alone leads to muscle fatigue and a jagged sound. The motion must originate from the wrist's rotational axis.

The Broader Implications of King's Technical Methodology

The technical study of B.B. King reveals a musician who understood the guitar as a vocal surrogate. His rejection of pedals was not a sign of technological illiteracy but a deliberate engineering choice to maximize the signal-to-noise ratio of his emotional expression. By focusing on the **Guitar TAB Anthology**, students gain access to a codified system of blues communication that transcends simple scales.

King's influence on figures like Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Peter Green is well-documented, but his true legacy lies in the democratization of the guitar. He proved that complexity is not a prerequisite for depth. The 77 tracks in the **King of the Blues**folio serve as a definitive curriculum for any guitarist seeking to master the art of the "singing" guitar. His use of the Varitone circuit, his specific bridge-pickup selection, and his unique wrist mechanics remain the gold standard for electric blues performance. Ultimately, the King of the Blues is not just a title; it is a technical standard of excellence that continues to challenge and inspire the modern musician.

Tags: #B.B. King #Blues Guitar #Guitar TAB #Music Pedagogy #Guitar Techniques