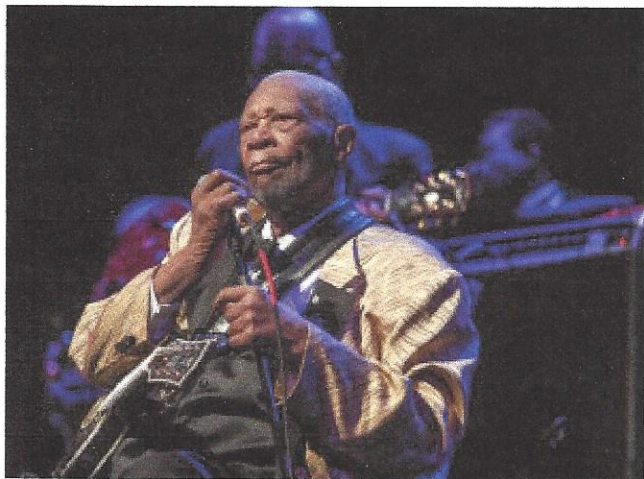


## B.B. King, 88, is heckled at an awkward St. Louis performance



10 HOURS AGO • BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

B.B. King has spent decades singing “The Thrill Is Gone.” Perhaps at long last it actually is.

Make no mistake: King is a living legend, a national treasure, and the sobriquet “king of the blues” is not mere wordplay, but a title earned. To be in the same room as him and breathe the same air is an honor and a privilege.

But for the majority of King’s concert at the Peabody Opera House on Friday night, the sizeable crowd could have been excused for

thinking that’s all they were going to get.

King’s shows in recent years have featured as much talk as playing, and the 88-year-old musician is obviously slowing down, just as anyone would. But the balance slipped way out of proportion at this show. King sat center stage and spoke, sometimes in non sequiturs, sometimes inaudibly. He flirted with women in the first few rows and made a few ribald comments, without apology. “I like to have fun,” he said. “I love who I am and what I do.”

For a while, the audience was with him, laughing at his jokes and asides. But it was 45 minutes into the show before King performed anything resembling a song. Even then, his playing was shaky. He explained that he and the band had been off for two months, causing him to lose confidence.

After a capable run-through of “Rock Me Baby,” he played “You Are My Sunshine” and asked the crowd to sing along. The house lights came up and King began noticing individuals and waving to them. As the song went around again and again, nattering on for — and this is not a misprint — 15 minutes, audience members began to heckle, yelling out requests or simply calling for King to “play some music!” Some walked out.

King sensed trouble, but he couldn’t understand the things being yelled at him. Eventually, the music stopped and the show ground to an intensely uncomfortable halt.

Finally, King realized what it would take to save the day, and his guitar sounded the clarion notes that begin his indelible hit, “The Thrill Is Gone.”

That moment provided a hint of the brilliance King’s performances can achieve. But it was the only one. He completed just two more songs.

One is loath to disparage a legend, especially one that is well into his ninth decade. But King is surrounded by a large band and a surfeit of handlers, and they are fair game.

Whoever decided the house lights should be up for almost half the show, distracting King from performing, needs to reconsider, and soon.

And when King was lost for a lyric or simply what to do next, the band seemed more than content to stand respectfully by and watch him (metaphorically) die.

It was enough to give those in attendance the blues. And not in a good way.