

Luther Kent

The Bobby Blue Bland Songbook – Liner Notes by Cyril E. Vetter

With his new album, Luther Kent comes full circle. Luther Kent Sings The Bobby Bland Songbook brings the dyed-in-the-wool New Orleans music advocate—he’s in both the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame and the Louisiana Blues Hall of Fame—back to the important life experience that launched his 46 years-and-counting career as a roots artist whose special mix of blues and soul has thrilled audiences in bayou country, elsewhere in the States, and in more distant places like Norway, Switzerland, Italy, Great Britain, and Japan.

Luther’s main man is a storied patriarch of soul and blues. “The first time I saw Bobby Bland I was 13,” Kent says with the charm and friendliness of a born New Orleanian. “I was in a night club in Baton Rouge. Bobby was with the Joe Scott Orchestra. I was completely blown away.” The memory is apparently so vivid Luther pauses to collect his thoughts before he continues. “Al “TNT” Braggs, opening up for Bobby, was a real showman and got the audience really going—Al and I wound up singing together years later with the Chicken Hawks—then Bobby walked out there and grabbed the microphone and didn’t have to move a muscle because his voice did all the work!”

On this tribute album, supported by a crackerjack big band playing arrangements by local legend Wardell Quezergue, Luther uses his big, well-deep, and vigorous voice to excellent advantage. His singing has the spark of honesty, a rare quality these days. An authoritative presence, Luther concentrates full-blown or modulated feeling in his melodies, and he fully grasps the narrative and rhythmic challenges of the Bland language. Interpreting a dozen warhorses identified with Bland, the singer avoids the sticky sentiment, the hazy focus, and all the other drawbacks that make the majority of musical salutes give off the moldy reek associated with compost heaps in the hot summer sun. Too smart and respectful to mimic his hero’s churchy melismas or squalls, he uses his own inflections and intimations to interpret “I Pity the Fool,” “Stormy Monday Blues” and other songs that he’s selected with care from the Bobby Bland treasure trove of recordings cut in the late-1950s and early-1960s for Don Robey’s Duke label.

Luther definitely displays great empathy for the songs. Without fail, he’s raised each of the dozen to a new, fresh, even unbelievable, level of intensity. Best performance here? It may be “Cry, Cry, Cry,” his indignation over fractured love turns into something tragic and heroic. Or “St. James Infirmary,” his blues feeling has considerable depth. Sure, Bobby Bland owns these songs but probably no other singer has ever leased and invested them with such convictive power—no small compliment.

Clear about his intentions, Luther says he doesn’t think the album’s about “trying to fit into Bobby’s shoes as much as it paying tribute to him and the songs.” He says with a quiet emphasis: “I wouldn’t for one minute ever try to be him, because there’s only one Bobby Bland.” About the influence of Bland, and others, on his singing, he comments: “It takes many years to develop a vocal style. I think you grab little bits and pieces of people who really inspire you over the years, and then you mold that into what

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you sound like and what you do.” Ray Charles and Etta James are also part of his sound and what he does.

But it’s Bland all right whose music has seemingly coursed through his veins as lifeblood for decades. Luther dates the joy and sense of purpose that has drives his singing to the start of the 1960s, when teenager Chubby Checker was dancing the Twist and Ray Charles and the Shirelles were fresh on the pop radio chart. “When I was a young kid, man, I was walking down the street and I heard “Don’t Cry No More” and it just completely grabbed me. I’d never heard Bobby’s voice before, and his voice was so lush to me. There is nobody that sings like him.”

“Then I got a copy of his Two Steps from the Blues album [issued in 1961], which was with the Joe Scott Orchestra, and I literally wore out three of those records. My mom knocked on my bedroom door one day and said, ‘Son, can’t you find something else to play?’ I said, Mom, look, I’d love to find something better than this record but until I do I’ll continue to play this.”

Luther still hasn’t found anything better than Two Steps (currently available as a MCA compact disc). “You know, every song on that record was a blues classic, which I don’t think has ever been done before or since. I thought it was the greatest record of its time. To this day, when I play it, the vibe of the musicians is still there.” He covers six songs from a recording that is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest in the annals of recorded African-American music.

Luther’s most fortunate to have arranger-conductor Wardell Quezergue and some of the finest musicians in the Crescent City helping him out on the session. They’re crucial, not ancillary, to the artistic success of Luther Kent Sings The Bobby Bland Songbook. “Wardell?” says Luther with mock surprise when asked about his neighbor. “He’s one of the greatest arrangers-conductors to ever come out of New Orleans. I called him up and told him what we were doing and he said to me, ‘Pops, what you want me to do? Copy these old charts?’ ‘No, Wardell, I want you to capture the essence of what’s there. I think that’s very important, but at the same time, I want your stamp on it.’” Luther continues, “I thought that it was important too to put the New Orleans thing, certain nuances, on the record. So, there’s definitely a New Orleans thing going on here. It’s like a New Orleans tribute because everyone was from New Orleans.”

Luther recalls Quezergue having said something special to him in the Big Easy recording studio. He repeats the direct quote: “Luther, I always like to put little signature things somewhere on the record, and I really found myself putting more on this CD than any one I can remember in a while.” Luther gives his interpretation: “I can’t actually point to [what are his] signature things in the music, but Wardell saying that meant to me that he was really into working on this project and that he wound up putting a whole lot extra on it.” He adds this about the “Creole Beethoven,” once a confidant to Fats Domino,

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Professor Longhair, and so many other notables: “Wardell is so beautiful in a studio, man. He really knows how to communicate with the guys really well. He puts everybody at ease. If something’s not exactly right, he knows how to approach musicians and not ruffle their egos.”

Those musicians, nineteen in all, handpicked for the album by Luther, respond extremely well to the vocals and charts. The singer knew going in that guys like that would deliver the goods—sight-read expertly without rehearsal, provide passion and spontaneity, nail everything in one or two or three takes—because he had worked with them before. Kent and a couple of them, in fact, had had previous experience playing Bobby Bland tunes together in a big band Luther fronted at the Old Absinthe Bar from the late-1970s into the 1990s, an amazing run of fourteen years. This Bourbon Street gig was no less than the after-hours event in N’awlins during that time period, attracting players from the many touring bands that came to the city, like sidemen with B. B. King and Ray Charles, respectively. No, Bland himself didn’t come by, but Luther has shared the stage with him two times elsewhere down the years.

Luther loves to talk about all the many happenings in his long and successful singing career. But there’s nothing that fires him up more than the mention of Mr. Bland, not even, mind you, a query about the fine cuisine over at Tujague’s in the French Quarter. Kent’s mighty proud of Luther Kent Sings The Bobby Bland Songbook—and he has every right to be. “I feel very, very good about the outcome of what we did because to me that was stepping on sacred ground. It really was, and I seriously wanted to make sure that we did it right and not only did we get it right, we added a little bit of a New Orleans vibe to it.” Amen to that. Frank-John Hadley, DownBeat

Bob Putignano, a man who has devoted his professional life to blues and cultural preservation, first came up with the idea that Luther do an album of Bobby Bland songs. Bob suggested it to Luther and he loved the idea. After Luther and Don thought about it and discussed it they told me that they wanted to re-imagine the Bobby Bland canon into blues tinged big band standards with Wardells' charts. I understood and believed their pitch and they executed that concept with this album. They wanted to make a record that Bobby Bland could listen to and enjoy. I hope they did.

Cyril E. Vetter
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