

Tony Coleman

**Former Drummer For B.B. King, Bobby Bland,
Johnnie Taylor, Albert King, & Otis Clay –
Now In The Rose City**

About six months ago, I had the pleasure to make the acquaintance of a stellar, veteran Bluesman now living right here in the Portland area. Not long after, I asked Tony Coleman (former drummer for B.B. King, Bobby Bland, Johnnie Taylor, Albert King, and Otis Clay) to sit down for an interview, and here's what he had to say.

BR (Bill Rhoades): First off, let's tell everyone who you are and where you're from and how you got into this business.

TC (Tony Coleman): I don't know how I got into this business. When I think about it, it was like all of a sudden, "bang," I was in music. Actually, when I was a little kid, I was always tapping on things all the time when I heard music. I decided this is what I wanted to do. Also, my dad was very famous at the time, but I didn't realize that he was.

He was up in New York, starting off in Tampa, Florida as a DJ and he worked at the Apollo Theatre. Everybody knew him because he was with what they called "race music." There was a radio station in Nashville, Tennessee, John R. was the guy's name at WLAC in Nashville, Tennessee, and my dad used to work with him, playing Black music late at night, because there was segregation and all that stuff. They kind of broke the barriers, getting music to the people, and the rest is history.

BR: Now your dad (King Coleman) was a performer also, right?

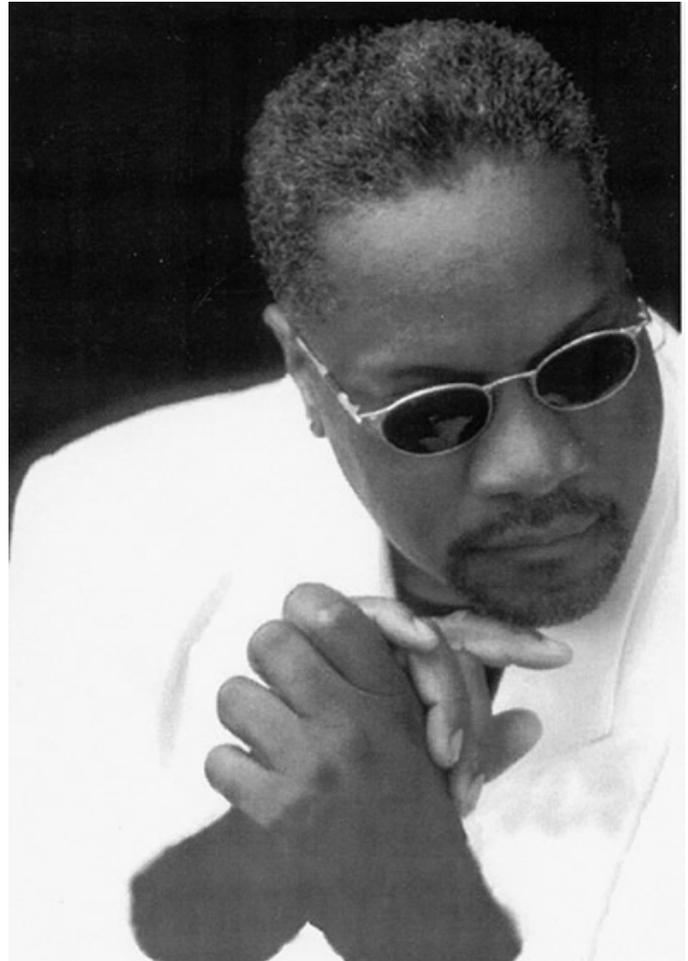
TC: Yes, he was. Actually, when I was in Europe, someone gave me a compilation of his music. It's kind of wild.

BR: What kind of stuff was it, like R&B?

TC: Well, when I listen to it now, it's funny. It's songs that don't make sense to me, like do the "Hully Gully" or "I'm A Bulldog" woof woof, but basically, they were doing things like rapping on the records, like kids are doing today, but they did it way back then.

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BR: Well, it sounds like he was right in there with all the dance craze, when there was a new dance every week.



TC: Yes, he was a well known DJ, who was flamboyant. He was also the MC for all of the shows that came to town, and he would talk to the artists and play their records, to help break the artists, and he was also a dancer and a showman, a really sharp dresser and one of the first people to have a completely bald head before it was popular. He was really a great artist!

BR: Now he has a song on the James Brown boxset, "Showtime," called, "Do The Mashed Potato" Pt 1.

TC: Yes, he helped James Brown break the "Mashed Potato," which was very popular. Before, James Brown was just a singer, but then he became the "real" James Brown when he started doing all the dancing.

BR: How did your dad get involved with James Brown?

TC: Well being at the Apollo Theatre, but he had a long history with my dad down in Miami, because my dad was a DJ in Miami, and B.B. King and all these artists would go down and do shows for a week, where you would do shows from 12:00 noon to 12:00 midnight. So, the artists would always try to outdo each other. When my dad was opening the shows and playing their records in the morning, he would try to outdo them, get the show really pumped up and jazzed up and James Brown and my dad kind of fell out about that. My dad would introduce, "Ladies and Gentlemen -- James Brown" and James would say, "Don't call me James Brown -- It's Mr. Brown". B.B. King told me a story about where my dad and James Brown got in a fight because both of their Cadillacs met at the backstage entrance and neither one of them would move. The first time I met James Brown, Bobby Bland introduced me to him, and Bobby told me that my dad beat up James Brown pretty good, but when I met James, he said "Yeah, I kicked your old man's butt". So, I said they needed to get together and tell me who really won that fight! But, they became good friends after that.

BR: But what about your start?

TC: Well, I had been playing in bands in the Kisimmi, Florida area, where I grew up, and there was just one radio station that played mostly Country, but would also play all kinds of other music, like Rock, Jazz, Classical, Blues, Reggae and Calypso. I got exposed to all kinds of music and I was playing with different bands.

BR: Were these R&B bands?

TC: I was playing Rock N' Roll, and R&B, but actually, because I grew up listening to Black music, since I happen to be Black, you grow up listening to the music that your parents were playing. That was normal for me, but I preferred to go over and listen to some Led Zeppelin or Deep Purple because it was different not knowing that those guys were copying Blues stuff and making it into Rock. So, the songs were familiar but they had the Rock thing happening.

Basically, I liked music period, but I happened to be Black, and playing Black music, and it's in my soul, and I grew up with it; I took it for granted. I used to hate the Blues really, because I heard it everyday. Then as I got older, I realized when I moved to Chicago, after joining the Army, we started a band called, Silent Funk, and we wanted to be the next Earth Wind and Fire. We became the next starving, hungry, no money, on the street corner, band.

Then we started playing around Chicago, and got to play with Buddy Guy, Junior Wells and Muddy Waters and we were on the Chicago Blues scene and Otis Clay hired me and my friends and from there we went to Japan with Otis Clay. He was really the first professional artist that I really worked with who had a really good history.

When we came back from Japan, we were on a Blues tour with B.B. King, Bobby Bland, Albert King, Tyrone Davis, Little Milton, O.V. Wright, Otis Clay and Betty Wright. And, before the Blues were really universally popular, most of the shows were all Black audiences in 1978. You know, White audiences were afraid to come over into the Black community. But, when we started doing

Blues festivals, the music started spreading out and reaching everybody. That's when we hooked up with B.B. King and that really started me. We did a tour with B.B. King and it ended in Chicago where there was an after-party with all the bands and the band that was playing didn't want to play anymore. The promoter was telling this band that there were all these stars that wanted to have a jam session and the band didn't want to play anymore unless they got paid more. So, I knew the guys in the band, and we asked if we could play their instruments. B.B. came up and he had a new song that his band wasn't playing right and we played it better than his band. B.B. was on stage playing and he turned around and was thumbs up. After that jam session, his band leader said he wanted to see us and asked how would we like to work with B.B. King. We were lucky, because we were ready and the other guys put money in front of the music. But, in Chicago we were ready because we were playing with the Soul singers and the Blues artists.

BR: This was around the late '70s?

TC: Yes, 1978.

BR: So from that point you went on and played with B.B. King?



Tony Coleman at work behind the drums.

TC: Yes, in September of '78, B.B. offered us a job, and he said he would call us. Then he said he would give me his card and I should call him every Sunday.

So, I called him every Sunday and he would say he didn't know what he was going to do yet, but to call him the next Sunday. This went on and on up until January and the guys were like, B.B. ain't going to hire us! But, he said to call him, so I kept calling him! Finally, he came to Chicago the second week of January and he and Johnnie Taylor were playing and we went to the show and kind of hung around the dressing room.

B.B.'s road guys told him that those yardbirds were out there waiting. He called us in

the dressing room and said he was going to be off in two weeks and he was ready to bring us in -- were we ready? We were like, YEAH! And, he said his bus driver lived in Chicago and we could ride with him out to Las Vegas and he would see us in two weeks.

For two weeks we were like, OH MAN! OH MAN! OH MAN! is it really going to happen? His driver called us the night before and said he would be there the next night and I remember seeing B.B.'s bus pull up. On the side, "B.B. King"! So, we were like riding on the bus and it was one of the worst winters ever in Chicago and his driver stopped everywhere he knew somebody. So, when we got to Vegas, B.B. took us on a tour of his house and the first gig was the very next day in Huntington Beach, California at a place called the Golden Bear. During dinner, I was like "Mr. King, you might know my dad - King Coleman," and he dropped his hands and said, "You're King's son?" and everything was cool.

So, I asked B.B. if we were going to rehearse and he said, "Well you know the Blues don't you?" and you know the new songs, so we don't have to rehearse". We said Okay. So, we went to the gig and started working. The tour was B.B. King, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Albert King and Johnny "Guitar" Watson. Just being on that tour was an education, watching these guys work, and the camaraderie between each band and each artist was amazing because everybody knew everybody and everybody was very friendly with each other, but when we went on stage, everyone would try to outdo each other.

Albert King was always instigating stuff. Albert was the only person who would say stuff on stage to B.B. King like, "I know he's listening, I'm going to make him burn up that guitar of his". And, B.B. would be listening and they would always try to outdo each other.

From there, B.B. decided he wanted to keep Caleb Emfry, the drummer who was already there and he said if he ever needed a drummer, he wanted me to come back and play with him. He said he thought I was great, but Caleb knew all of his moves, etc.

So, I went back to Chicago and got back with Otis Clay, went to Japan, came back and got an opportunity to go to Dallas, Texas and play with Johnnie Taylor. Now, Otis Clay has so much soul, and I've never worked with anyone who sings a love song about Blues or something that hurts him and I see a tear in his eye. That's how much he gets into the song. He's actually trying to portray the feeling of the lyrics. That's very unusual, you don't see that many artists who do that.

BR: So, you went from one great singer to another great singer.

TC: Well, there was a place called The Burning Spear in Chicago where all the Blues and Soul artists performed and Otis was opening the show for Johnnie Taylor. Johnnie's manager heard me play, and at that time I was pretty young and full of myself. Because that was the attitude, you had to have confidence and a lot of guys who didn't show that energy on stage wouldn't get the gigs. But, I knew how to play with the singers, because singers like to give signals to break it down, or keep the groove going. I could do it really well because I would watch the artists and study the artists, and I would keep my eye on Otis like radar. He'd do little things with his hands. Then I got an opportunity to work with Johnnie Taylor, so I moved to Dallas, Texas to work with him.

Now, Johnnie was one of those guys who liked to have a lot of fun. He liked to joke around and have fun with the musicians and be one of the guys. He was great, but he could be pretty temperamental sometimes. You always had to be prepared for which Johnnie you were going to be playing with that night. The happy Johnnie, the upset Johnnie, the sad Johnnie; a lot of artists are like that. You have to deal with their personalities too. But, we had a little tour with Z.Z. Hill and Millie Jackson, and then we met up with B.B. and Bobby and did a festival together. Bobby Bland needed a drummer and offered me an opportunity to work with him. So, I went and told Johnnie that I needed a raise. Because I knew if I asked for a raise, he wouldn't give it to me, so I could go play with Bobby. I asked for the raise and he wouldn't give it to me, so I went to work with Bobby "Blue" Bland. We worked out of Memphis and once again I found out that my dad and Bobby were really close friends. Once he found that out, he began treating me like I was his son. He'd stay on me, but he was teaching me a lot about music. He had a drummer from New Orleans that could really play that shuffle, but he would get drunk all the time. So, Bobby wanted me to play with him and learn the show.

BR: Now, Bobby had a really great guitar player in that band, Wayne Bennett.

TC: Yes, Wayne Bennett and Mel Brown. But, I learned so much by listening to Wayne Bennett, he was one of the most underrated players who never got his props. But, this guy had a sound and a style. It wasn't hard and loud, just beautiful. He played with a lot of feeling, and a lot of melodic tone. His style fit Bobby's singing, because Bobby is the smoothest Blues singer in the world. Wayne and Bobby were like beans and cornbread. Just perfect! He was just awesome. He taught me a lot about playing the Blues, how to listen. He had a lot of talent.

BR: So, what happened next?

TC: Well, I was in and out of all those bands and touring a lot and I got a chance to work with Albert King and he was known to be really hard to work with. But, what they didn't know was that Albert was a real funny guy, good sense of humor, he really liked to laugh. Albert really felt like he never got his due, because everybody was always talking about B.B. King. But, Albert influenced so many of us: drummers, bass players, guitar players, everybody. He was soulful and he was funky. Albert made the Blues more Soul, using the Stax (Record) guys and Albert made it more funky. I always loved the way he was on stage, the grooves he would set. And, he used to play drums, so he played the Blues "in the pocket." Funky. He would play with the rhythm.

BR: Did you find him hard to get along with?

TC: Not at all. To play with him was really fun. He played funky. His guitar playing was always hot.

BR: And after Albert King?

TC: Well we got tired of always being in the back, and as a drummer, people didn't always appreciate the rhythm section much. I got tired of being in the back. I wanted to get out and do my own thing. It was time for me to do the music the way I hear it. For me what I find hard to tolerate is when people consistently do the same songs over and over, "Stormy Monday" and "Sweet Home Chicago". For me that's the problem with the Blues, the mainstream as they call it, that's why Robert Cray is so successful, he has his own style, his own identity, writes his own music, and, of course, he can play the Blues. He's got his own way of playing music. I just wanted to sing, play the drums and be my own artist.

Mel Brown, Russell Jackson and myself decided to get together and we called ourselves The Silent Partners. The problem with that band was there were three chiefs and we used to fight and it worked out after awhile. Too many cooks. We were going to be the opener for Stevie Ray Vaughan, but then he got killed in the 'copter crash and that probably would have been our big break! We broke up.

BR: I heard you guys back up Katie Webster.

TC: Yeah, Katie was great, Katie was fun. I liked Katie, she could hang with the guys. She could cuss, she could have fun, she was a beautiful lady, a very classy lady, but she liked to have fun. She was a treat to work with. I miss Katie.

BR: How long do you think that group played together?

TC: We were together about two years. We backed up Katie, Charlie Musselwhite, Albert Collins and Matt "Guitar" Murphy, basically we tried to hire ourselves out as the "A-1 rhythm section" for the Blues, to record and to back up people like Frankie Lee and Sonny Rhodes. Everyone would hire us when we were living in the Bay Area. Then we moved down to Texas and after that we broke up.

So, I went back to B.B. after that and I stayed with B.B. for 10 years. But, then the same thing happened and I'm starting over on my career now, which is a little more difficult, but it's working. I go to Europe, people treat me like a young B.B. I'm playin' in France and Italy.

BR: How big of a group do you take over there?

TC: I have the drum kit out front and I'm singing behind the kit, and I have a Hammond B-3/piano, bass player, lead guitar and a trumpet and sax player. I'm doing Tony Coleman stuff, not too traditional, not too modern, just having a good time. I like the party atmosphere, I like to have fun.

BR: How'd you end up here?

TC: Because I'm in love. Love brought me here.

BR: You live here in Portland?

TC: Yes, and I'm ready to play with the musicians around here. Anybody that wants to play go to my e-mail tcdrummer247@hotmail.com. But, I'd like to participate here and be a part of the music scene. I want to play with people who want to have fun and respect each other.

The Tony Coleman Band will be playing every Thursday in April at Hopper's and he would like to invite people out to support and enjoy a night of Blues and hang out, and musicians are invited to play. Check it out!

- Bill Rhoades

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