

# FREDDIE KING



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1957-1976</i>	<i>Blues</i>	<i><u><a href="#">I'm Tore Down</a></u> (1961)</i>

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*Only Solitaire*

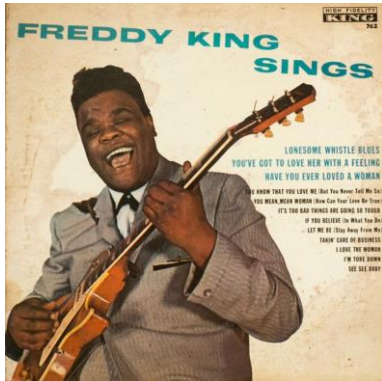
Artist: *Freddie King*

Years: *1960-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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# FREDDY KING SINGS

Album released:

V A L U E

October 1961

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More info:



**Tracks:** 1) See See Baby; 2) Lonesome Whistle Blues; 3) Takin' Care Of Business; 4) **Have You Ever Loved A Woman**; 5) You Know That You Love Me (But You Never Tell Me So); 6) I'm Tore Down; 7) I Love The Woman; 8) Let Me Be (Stay Away From Me); 9) It's Too Bad That Things Are Going So Tough; 10) You've Got To Love Her With A Feeling; 11) If You Believe (In What You Do); 12) You Mean, Mean Woman (How Can Your Love Be True).

## REVIEW

Not only was Freddie King the youngest of the three Kings of the blues world (Albert King, born 1923; B. B. King, born 1925; Freddie, born 1934, a bare four months prior to Elvis), but he also squarely missed the chance to become a «Fifties star» — legend has it that Chess Records refused to sign him because he apparently sounded too much like B. B. King, and the blues roster of Chess was sort of like an «anti-B. B. King» thing in that decade. In fact, Freddie's only preserved recorded output from the Fifties is a forgotten single put out on the short-lived El-Bee Records label in 1957 — two songs on which he does not even play lead guitar (Robert Lockwood Jr., a famous Chicago session player, is in charge of that job), just sings; neither 'Country Boy' nor 'That's What You Think' sound a lot like B. B. King, though — young Freddie had a far more gritty, rustic vibe to him that actually had more in common with the big jump-blues performers of the 1940s, like Wynonie Harris or Big Joe Turner, than with the pompous blues-de-luxe style of the other King.



Ironically, something similar would happen to Albert King as well, who, despite being the oldest of the three, struggled to get a career going and did not catch much of a public eye until signing up with Stax in 1966 and releasing classics such as

'Crosscut Saw' and 'Born Under A Bad Sign' — which turned him into a Sixties' guitar hero even if he'd been professionally playing blues guitar since at least the early Fifties. But in the end it turned out to be a good thing, simply because it was so much more rewarding to become a Sixties' guitar hero than remain a Fifties' one. With so many new open possibilities, such improved studio technologies, and — last but not least — such increased reverence from white audiences for the ancient art of the blues, the fact that both Freddie and Albert became «stars» so much later than B. B. did, I believe, contribute quite heavily to the «cooler» image of both (it would be difficult to argue that they are more popular than B. B. King, but they are definitely held in higher esteem by, let's say, the average «audiences with discerning taste»).

That's the demarcation line between Albert and Freddie, on one hand, and B. B. on the other. But there is also another, perhaps slightly less obvious demarcation line that pits Freddie against Albert and B. B. — besides age, there is also the fact that both of the latter came from the state of Mississippi, actually, both were good old country boys born on cotton plantations. Freddie King, however, was the product of urban Texas — born and raised in Dallas, then, at the age of 15, relocated with his family to Chicago, where he had to work in a steel mill for a while. Naturally, it's not as simple as just setting up a contrast between «The Steel Mill Boy» and «The Cotton Field Boys», because both Albert and B. B. King, as soon as it was possible, «urbanized» themselves to the max — you don't really hear either of them playing a whole lot of pick-a-bale-o'-cotton porch-style acoustic guitar on their records. But the difference still seeps in in subtle ways, what with Freddie, very likely, listening to much more R&B and rock'n'roll in his younger days, which could not help but color his personal style even when he was doing slow blues, let alone fast boogie.

Freddie's debut single for King Records (no, the label was *not* made in his name) might, upon the first few listens, seem just like another generic slow electric blues number. There is nothing unusual about the basic melody of 'Have You Ever Loved A Woman', or about its main topic, or about its structure — verse one, verse two, guitar solo, verse three — but when I play it next to something very very similar by B. B. King, say, 'Ten Long Years', it becomes fairly obvious that there is a serious generational and cultural gap between the two performers. Unlike the blues performers of old — and *quite* like the rock and roll performers of the new — Freddie prefers to get right in your face rather than keep a respectful distance. The very first vocal line of the song, opening it before any other instruments come in, addresses you directly, and there's an urgency and an intensity in both the artist's singing and playing that takes the heat level up a notch compared to Freddie's natural predecessor on the Texas blues scene, T-Bone Walker.

Interestingly, 'Have You Ever Loved A Woman', melodically no different from the likes of 'Stormy Monday Blues' and a

gazillion other 12-bar tunes, is officially credited not to any professional bluesman, but to Billy Myles, a 1950s R&B and doo-wop artist whose usual specialty was writing love ballads (like his only own hit '[The Joker](#)' from 1957). In fact, while the very subject of an unresolvable love triangle was no news for the blues genre, the actual lyrics — "*Have you ever loved a woman / So much you tremble in pain? / All the time you know / She bears another man's name*" — were quite unusual for traditional blues, whose protagonists were rarely prone to *trembling in pain* and even more rarely appealed to their deeply hidden moral compass along the lines of "*something deep inside you won't let you wreck your best friend's home*". This is a kind of deep-soul blues that B. B. King himself would only learn to master years later: at the time, the only bona fide bluesman who specialized in similar material was probably Otis Rush ('I Can't Quit You Baby' grips you emotionally along the same lines) — but even Otis' sound was more introverted than Freddie's.

Small wonder that a decade later, when it turned out that 'Have You Ever Loved A Woman' described the triangular situation between Eric Clapton, George Harrison, and Pattie Boyd to a tee, Derek & The Dominos made the song into a major highlight of the **Layla** album; it's as if Myles and Freddie specially concocted it for those super-rare «romantically realistic» situations that almost never really crop up in true life, at least, not since pure romanticism went out of fashion in the mid-to-late 19th century. It helps, of course, that Freddie is every bit as expressive as a singer as he is as a guitar player: although, unlike B. B. King, he never tried intentionally modeling his image as that of Soul Brother #1, he had a great natural range and, when circumstances allowed, he always took it to the max. (Note that in 1960, circumstances did not yet quite allow to take it to the max — look for various live renditions of 'Have You Ever Loved A Woman' from the early 1970s to truly appreciate Freddie's epic potential).

While it might be a bit of a stretch to insist that, with his early singles, Freddie more or less invented the «modern electric blues guitar» — let alone the fact that, whatever his innovative contributions might have been, their impact was severely diluted by their becoming so commonplace in blues music — it's pretty clear that he was among the first generation of blues players who truly and verily fell in love with the sonic sheen of the Singular Electric Blues Lick. It's easier to understand if you watch Freddie and B. B. King in live performance, one after another. B. B. King caresses his «Lucille» like a woman, extracting her undertones gently and softly; Freddie is the master of the lashing-out style, tearing at strings as if he were forcefully pinching his loved one's nipple in some rough BDSM session — or, if that metaphor's a little too crude for you, he's just sticking knives into his very soul. Again, Otis Rush could do something like that, but his was a moody, confusing, and wildly unpolished style: Freddie, on the other hand, understood very well the power of clean, sharp production, and few people contributed more to the art of appreciating that sustained high-pitched electric tone as he did. No other American

blues guitar player was more influential on Eric Clapton in his early days with the Yardbirds, John Mayall, and Cream — and thus, by extension, no American blues guitar player was more influential on the genesis of the British blues scene, period. Everybody loved B. B. King, for sure, but everybody wanted to *play* like Freddie.

Interestingly, though, for his first LP his label decided to slightly downplay the importance of his playing in favor of his singing — hence not just the title, but also the fact that the LP did not contain two of his most successful A-sides from 1961, ‘Hide Away’ and ‘San-Ho-Zay’, most likely because they were pure instrumentals (we shall return to them in the review of Freddie’s second album). This might have been done out of a vague fear that nobody would buy an electric guitar album just for the electric guitar (at least unless it was something party-like, like The Ventures) — but also out of admiration for Freddie’s capacity as a singer, which was *at least* as good as B. B. King’s own, and perhaps even better: there’s something about Freddie’s delivery that gives it a straight-from-the-heart feeling, while B. B. King’s approach is a tad more theatrical and a trifle more «calculated entertainment», with only occasional exceptions.

Admittedly, not a lot of those other songs hit as hard as ‘Have You Ever Loved A Woman’. At this point, Freddie has two preferred styles — the slow and soulful blues ballad and the mid-tempo straightforward blues rocker — and typically the songs within each of those are interchangeable, conjuring up the same moods and relying on largely the same sets of licks (there are a couple of sharply rising blues phrases that Freddie likes to insert into almost each and every solo he plays). Of the blues rocker variety, my unquestionable personal favorite is ‘I’m Tore Down’, tighter, catchier, tougher, and fiercer than any competition — the best thing about it is how it synthesizes those feelings of devotion, anger, and desperation, visible even in Sonny Thompson’s bare lyrics: "*I love you baby with all my might / Love like mine is out of sight / I'll lie for you if you want me to...*" — then finishing the verse with the defiant logical non-sequitur of "*I really don't believe that your love is true!*", not even bothering to preface it with a "*but*". Thirty-plus years later, Clapton would attempt a faithful cover of the original on his **From The Cradle** album, but while his own guitar playing on that recording is every bit Freddie’s equal, the vocal intensity of the original could not be matched.

The other blues rockers are a little underwhelming by comparison. ‘See See Baby’, a King/Thompson mash-up of ‘C. C. Rider’ and ‘Lawdy Mama’, gives a bit too much space to saxophones and pianos and does not make the best of Freddie’s vocal abilities. ‘Takin’ Care Of Business’, written by the famous jump blues songwriter Rudy Toombs, sounds antiquated, as if it came straight out of 1951 or something (that is, until it comes to the Singular Electric Blues Lick on the solo, sharper and stingier than anything we could have heard from an Ike Turner around 1951). ‘You Know That You Love Me’ feels like a

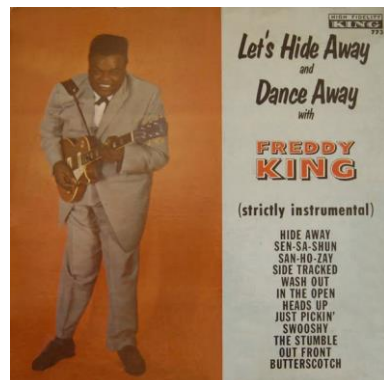


pale shadow of 'I'm Tore Down', probably written, as it often happens, on the heels of the former's commercial success but far less attention-grabbing.

The majority of the songs, though, are slow blues ballads, a few also sounding rather archaic, especially when they put an echo on Freddie's vocals, like on 'If You Believe (In What You Do)', which borrows its primary melodic hook from Jimmy Reed's 'Honest I Do' but fails to live up to the original's charming minimalism. Apparently, 'I Love The Woman', the original B-side to 'Hide Away', was the song that turned a young Clapton into Freddie's lifelong fan, but this might have been by sheer accident if it simply was the first Freddie King single that Eric laid his hands on: 'Have You Ever Loved A Woman' does all the things that 'I Love The Woman' achieves and more. More famous is the old bawdy blues tune 'You've Got To Love Her With A Feeling', earlier associated with the likes of pre-war blues mischievers like Tampa Red and Brownie McGhee; Freddie gives the song a statelier, solemn attitude, while still preserving some of the old bawdy lyrics ("*she wiggled one time for the judge / and the judge put the cops in jail*"), and the result proved even more popular with audiences than 'Have You Ever Loved A Woman' — apparently, not a lot of people could (or would) relate to being in love with your best friend's wife, but everybody loves them a gal who "*shakes all over when she walks*".

Anyway, it's really useless to try and make detailed comments on individual numbers; all that matters here, really, is whether one gets that «special vibe» from the combination of Freddie's powerful voice and red-hot lashing electric style, or not. Clearly, the task was much easier in 1960-61, when you could only compare the style of Freddie King with all the styles *before* it, not *after*; I honestly believe, for instance, that Clapton would capture both the technical side and the spiritual essence of all these licks *and* take it to the next level as early as on his album with John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers. Even Freddie himself would continue to grow and mature both as a player and as a singer, and to the majority of listeners his recordings from the last five years of his life will probably feel far more awesome than these, comparatively tame short early singles. But to anybody who does not run away at the mere mention of «12-bar electric blues» even these tame early singles may come across as tasteful, enjoyable, and relatable; and that is not to mention their sheer historical importance, which, in the minds of some people, often gets automatically translated into genuine entertainment.





## LET'S HIDE AWAY AND DANCE AWAY WITH FREDDY KING

Album released:

December 1961

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More info:



**Tracks:** 1) **Hide Away**; 2) Butterscotch; 3) Sen-Sa-Shun; 4) Side Tracked; 5) The Stumble; 6) Wash Out; 7) **San-Ho-Zay**; 8) Just Pickin'; 9) Heads Up; 10) In The Open; 11) Out Front; 12) Swooshy.

### REVIEW

Purely instrumental blues music, be it acoustic or electric, was hardly big news back in 1961: almost every singing blues guitarist would have at least a few instrumental tracks under his belt sooner or later in his career. But the usual practice had remained, for decades, to stick those tracks away as «supporting» B-sides or LP-only filler; the regular blues listeners wanted to buy their records so that they could sing along, or at least get a good tragic story for their money. Neither Muddy Waters nor B. B. King, as different as their styles could be, ever dared to put their voices in storage for their A-sides — as much as B. B. adored his Lucille, she sure needed that strong masculine presence next to her side in order to emphasize her «feminine» side. Not that the practice was completely unheard of — virtuoso guitarists such as Blind Blake or Lonnie Johnson did have instrumental records in the pre-war period, and Elmore James had ‘Country Boogie’ and a few others in 1950s’ Chicago — but it was certainly quite rare compared to the jazz genre, where pure showcases of instrumental prowess were the norm.



The most outstanding thing about Freddie King’s instrumental number ‘Hide Away’, though, is not that it was released as a single A-side, but that it actually managed to chart, rising as high as #29 in the general charts — an unprecedented success at the time. Granted, the circumstances were somewhat favorable, and the track, as such, did not fundamentally emphasize its «bluesiness» as much as it flaunted its «playfulness». With surf-rock on the rise, and such performers as Duane Eddy



and Link Wray, as well as such bands as The Ventures, already having managed to draw record buyers' attention to their fun, catchy, energetic instrumental hooks, there was no reason why a quintessential blues artist could not go ahead and try to steal some of that thunder. After all, electric blues was no longer restricted to the slow and moody 12-bar *woke-up-this-morning* form, and even an Elmore James could always follow up a 'Dust My Broom' with something like 'Shake Your Moneymaker', to which you could dance your head off just as effectively as to 'Johnny B. Goode'.

And Freddie King was not the kind of guy who was going to spend all day slowly and tragically wailing out the emotional licks to 'Have You Ever Loved A Woman'. He was a big, burly Texan who liked to kick ass almost as much, if not more so, than to bare his soul; he might, in fact, have easily switched to pure rock'n'roll, but he probably had his reasons not to do it (for instance, he might not have been the biggest fan of the «showy» vibes of rock'n'roll — and looking over his impressive body type, I do admit that he might have a bit of trouble doing the duck walk on stage). Instead, he preferred to inject some of the sharpness, playfulness, and danceability of rock'n'roll into his blues paradigm — and in the process arguably became one of the principal creators of that somewhat hard-to-define genre that we call *blues-rock*.

In fact, 'Hide Away' is probably the quintessential embodiment of early blues-rock as it is. Listening to it today will surely make most people wonder what the heck was all the fuss about — just a basic piece of blues-boogie, one out of miriads of possible blues-rock instrumentals sharing the same core properties. Freddie did not even create the main theme, borrowing it wholesale from a Hound Dog Taylor composition (you can hear the same theme on Magic Sam's '[Do The Camel Walk](#)' from the same year); and while it's a nice theme alright, there is hardly anything there that makes it more emotionally resonant than any other blues theme. The one important difference is that this was blues you could dance to — that Magic Sam recording is, by all means, a *walk*, while Freddie's is a merry trot, with the drummer reveling in his double beats and Freddie laying on a colorful, friendly tone; the guitar is bluesy in terms of notes, but pop-friendly in terms of the vibe it lays down, not too different from the atmosphere of The Ventures.

'Hide Away' was also unusual in that it was essentially three different grooves spliced into one: Freddie took elements from Jimmy McCracklin's '[The Walk](#)', Bert Weedon's cover of '[Guitar Boogie Shuffle](#)', and even the 'Peter Gunn' theme, and combined them into something that constantly shifts its shape while retaining the same cocky, taunting attitude. That way, even if the instrumental's title was rather prosaically derived from Mel's Hide Away Lounge (a blues club in Chicago), it does feel a little like a tricky game of hide-and-seek. This spirit of playfulness would completely evaporate from the number in its (arguably even more famous) version recorded by Eric Clapton with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers five years later —

like everything else he did, Eric took the message much more seriously than it was ever intended to, and turned it into a fiery anthem of rock'n'roll defiance. Which sounded awesome, no doubt about it, but had about as much to do with the original spirit of 'Hide Away' as, for instance, all those Rolling Stones covers of Chuck Berry tunes had to do with their respective sources. Freddie King does not want to blow you away; he just wants you to have fun.

Nobody at King Records probably expected the song to take off in March 1961, and, in fact, less than a month later they followed it up with 'Lonesome Whistle Blues', returning to the common vocal blues practice. However, once the song began to be played everywhere and established a firm grip on the charts (19 weeks on the Hot R&B list!), it became apparent that Freddie had unexpectedly struck oil — and from that moment, his own path in life seemed clear. Already the next single, issued in July, would be 'San-Ho-Zay' (clearly, it's just a phonetic representation of 'San José', but I am not exactly sure as to what specifically the track has in common with the future Capital of the Silicon Valley), another instrumental that would be just as successful on the R&B charts, but not nearly as efficient on the overall ranking, where it slipped down to #47 from 'Hide Away's record-setting #29.

It's not difficult to see why that is: 'San-Ho-Zay' did not attempt to faithfully recreate the formula of 'Hide Away', with all that playfulness and all those meandering, shape-shifting sections. It is simpler and more straightforward in nature, riding out a single, focused blues-rock groove from beginning to end — also, Freddie's guitar is far more brutal and aggressive here, playing sharp and nasty sets of licks in ways you might perhaps expect from rebellious white rockers at the time, like Link Wray, but typically not from crowd-pleasing African-American performers. From a purely melodic standpoint, 'San-Ho-Zay' was just a generic piece of fast blues; from a tonal / emotional standpoint, it *maybe* tried to communicate something that no other black artist in the electric blues or rock'n'roll idiom would have the guts to communicate at the time. And when you think about it that way, you become able to assess those opening bars in a different way — even the rhythm section, with the bass and the drums delivering the goods in a calm, collected, razor-sharp manner that carries the same mix of coolness and subtle threat as Booker T & The MG's 'Green Onions', except it does it one year earlier.

'San-Ho-Zay' was followed by 'Sen-Sa-Shun', which was, however, only released as the B-side to 'I'm Tore Down', and felt like a sort of averaging out the vibes of both 'Hide Away' and 'San-Ho-Zay' — it rides a mean and lean blues groove like the latter, but tries to make it a little more vivacious and danceable like the former, plus it also switches back and forth between two different sections, one dominated by high-pitched electric lead and the other one delving down into a bass-heavy funky tap-dance. The source of the tune is fairly clear this time — it takes its voice from Muddy Waters' classic rendition of 'Got

My Mojo Working', and, to some degree, this is symbolic, given how 'Mojo' itself was one of the early precursors to lively, danceable, and ecstatic blues-rock. It's a pity Freddie and Muddy never got to work together — it would have been quite interesting to see them cross their vibes, even if there's no guarantee that they wouldn't simply «cancel out» each other.

By the end of 1961, it must have become clear that carefully planning a commercially successful career based on instrumental blues-rock would be a dead end for Freddie — more precisely, that 'Hide Away' was a lucky fluke, and once its surprise aspect had worn out, he would not be able to consciously and deliberately hit even higher heights. Nevertheless, as long as the iron was hot, Freddie and his band had managed to pump out a whole load of instrumentals, and, so as not to let it all go to waste, the label put twelve of the best on an LP that simply had to have both **Hide Away** (as a blunt reminder to the public) and **Dance** (as a magic charm word) in the title. Not surprisingly, the album did not sell — but still made history as (probably) the first fully instrumental blues-rock record in the whole wide world.

Discussing all the remaining tracks separately would be overkill, especially since some of them, like 'Butterscotch' or 'Side Tracked', are similarly-sounding 12-bar grooves that will all be lovely if you love Freddie's tone and manner of phrasing, but certainly do not inspire creative writing. 'The Stumble' is sometimes singled out as a particular highlight, mainly due to its having been later adapted by Jeff Beck, Peter Green, Dave Edmunds, and others; I fail, however, to see how it is any more outstanding than the rest (a couple of chord changes do indeed differ from the typical ways in which other blues guitarists would play it, but the same could probably be spotted on most of the other tracks as well).

If there's any general praise to be offered for the album, it is how *modern* it all sounds. Sure, it's still 1961, and Freddie is not laying on tons of special effects or dazzling listeners with speed tricks or hammer-ons, but it *is* 1961, and you basically already have all your Eric Claptons, Rory Gallaghers, and Stevie Ray Vaughans ('Just Pickin' = 'Mary Had A Little Lamb') in this little package. For those reared on and accustomed to the sonic standards of the late 1960s / early 1970s — the days when blues-rock reigned supreme — **Let's Hide Away** will, I am afraid, mostly be of historic importance. But if, for some reason, you find yourself in the mood for just the core substance without all the extra juice, flash, complexity, and pomp of what the blues-rock genre would grow into, then early Sixties' Freddie King is just the man for you.

Fast forward one decade, and Freddie himself would already play the same things in typically early Seventies' blues-rock fashion — unlike some of his contemporaries, he was happy to beef up and aggrandify his sound to adapt to the spirit of the times, so that loud, sped up and extended jamming arrangements of 'Hide Away' (like [this one](#)) would become the norm for him. Yet some might argue that the «thinner», more economic sound of the original recordings, with none of that extra fat

(and no, I'm *not* making a subtle reference to Freddie's body weight here), makes a more precise point and is actually more about making a musical impact than showing off one's swagger. I think there's room for both viewpoints in the ballroom of good taste, even if, when it comes to *albums* rather than individual tracks, I'd still certainly go for Freddie's Seventies' output — at this point in history, like almost everybody else, he was still the master of a two-and-a-half-minute burst of inspiration than of filling up two long sides of an LP with music that consistently mattered.

Ironically, two years after the original release of the album, King Records re-released it «for the fans», adding fake crowd noises and retitling it as — don't laugh, please! — **Freddie King Goes Surfin'**. Although this is a good candidate for one of those «Top 100 Dumbest Decisions Made By Record Labels» lists, it does to some extent agree with my idea here — namely, that 'Hide Away' made it so big not because it was «instrumental blues», but because it was playful and danceable, which did indeed put it in the same vibe-league with The Ventures and Dick Dale. One can even imagine how Freddie's music could anger some radical blues purists at the time, though, truth be told, «blues purists» had really gone out of style the day the first bluesmen picked up their electric guitars — not to mention that even if we're talking acoustic blues, that cheerful danceable vibe was at least as old as the ragtime guitars of Blind Blake and Lonnie Johnson. Besides, apparently Eric Clapton had no problem with it — and we all know just how much of a «blues purist» young maximalist Eric was back in 1964-65 (at least, before Jack Bruce, master of all things avantgarde, taught young Eric how to *really* sell out). So, while it takes a bit of an imaginative stretch to picture Freddie on a surfboard, in a way those King Records were absolutely right. This is precisely that major point in history where electric blues «goes surfing». In the end, want it or not, everybody had that ocean across the U.S.A.

