How a 23-Year-Old Phenom Named Kingfish Became the Future of the Blues

Christone ‘Kingfish’ Ingram is a generational talent — and the ideal bridge between different factions of the blues world

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By Carlo Rotella

Christone “Kingfish” Ingram was wailing on guitar. Eyes shut and head thrown back in the emblematic pose of the guitar hero in ecstasy, he wrung screaming bent high notes and dense, fluid runs from his purple-and-black prototype Kingfish-model Fender. Just seconds

into “She Calls Me Kingfish,” the opening song of his set at the Berklee Performance Center in Boston in March, fans were already well on their way up the stairway to guitar-solo heaven, nodding and smiling and shaking their heads in that *mmh-mmh-mmm* way that guitar freaks fall into when potent stuff starts flowing into their systems through their ears. The Berklee College of Music houses one of the planet’s greatest concentrations of high-end guitar freaks, and they were out in force to hear the 23-year-old phenom from the Mississippi Delta widely hailed as “the future of the blues.” The students in attendance made for a considerably younger turnout than a blues show typically draws. Out in the lobby before the show, I had overheard one long-haired dude saying to a fellow cool-nerd, “He’s, like, *my* age. It’s nuts.”

Kingfish, who wore faded jeans with colorful patches, a black jacket over a red Big Mad T-shirt, and untied buff-colored work boots, has a round, open face and a disarming stage presence, modest and earnest. The visible pleasure he takes in making music for a living offsets a deep substrate of melancholy, a quality of hurt, in that music. Though guitar heroism often feels cold and self-regarding, obsessed with its own intent to blow you away, Kingfish's command of tone, touch and phrasing comes across as not just confident but also confiding. Humane emotion suffuses his playing even at its most musically acrobatic, and he's almost always telling you a story derived from the song's lyrics, his own love affair with music, the trials and joys of his young life.

Kingfish is not tall, but he's big, and just a couple of years ago he was even bigger — at least 440 pounds — to the point that it was easy to fear for his well-being when he walked onstage. Hanging by a strap from his shoulder, his guitar looks like a toy. He favors physically heavy guitars and the warm sound of humbucker pickups, but the gear doesn't matter nearly as much as his pillowy hands, mesmerizingly nimble and strong, which seem to engulf the instrument as they extract an astonishing sound from it.

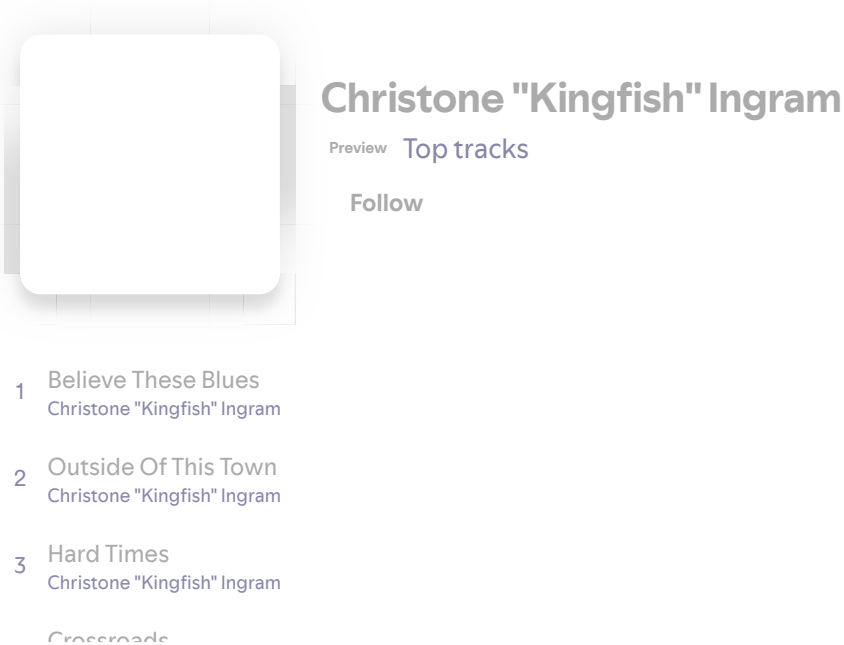
He showed versatility as the set went on, working in jazzy chromatic flourishes and switching for a couple of songs to Delta-style acoustic guitar, but the crowd went wildest whenever he built to a climax of blues-rock wailing. This happened a dozen or more times over the course of the evening, a recurring sequence that began with him playing straight-up blues, churning out a shuffle groove or picking out sweet single-note licks — his own volume down low, the band on simmer. Then, as the band swelled to full strength behind him, he would step on a pedal and chuck the damped strings with his pick to make a preparatory *shooka* sound, as if chambering a sonic round, and cut loose at high volume with a barrage of distorted bent notes way up high and spectacular runs up and down the neck. After an extended paroxysm on a cover of Michael Burks's "Empty Promises," which at some point stopped being a song and became just an excuse to throw down chorus after chorus of guitar solo while he walked into the crowd and took a seat among them, Kingfish returned to the stage and said, "I'd like to apologize for the flurry of notes on that last one." This drew a laugh from the audience, most of whom were there for the flurry of notes.

There's no shortage of guitar hotshots who can blaze in blues-rock fashion. Go to a jam in Boston or Chiang Mai or Sarajevo, call for "Sweet Home Chicago," and chances are good that somebody can step

up and let it rip in blues-rock style: the dramatic high bends, the soaring and plunging runs, the nasty rhythmic figures crunchingly repeated until you give in and go “Whoo!” That style of playing has a specific history, beginning with electric blues virtuosos like Buddy Guy and Albert King and B.B. King, then the classic-rock guitar heroes like Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page and Eric Clapton who idolized them, then inheritors from Stevie Ray Vaughan to Prince. But at this point it’s practically a human universal.

So why is Kingfish — who has been described by Guy as “the next explosion of the blues” and by Rolling Stone as “one of the most exciting young guitarists in years,” and who appeared simultaneously on the covers of both Guitar World and Downbeat in February 2021 — such a big deal? Why is he already taking on the role of a generational blues talent who will accept the torch from his elders and represent the genre in the mainstream — the anointed ambassador of the blues who, like B.B. King before him, will be showing up everywhere from the White House to “Sesame Street” for decades to come?

First, he’s a bluesman in full, not just another amazing guitar player who can sing a little. He has a deep, soulful voice, a powerful instrument in its own right, which these days he’s working hard to make as limber and expressive as his guitar playing. “I didn’t really work on my singing enough before,” he told me backstage before the show at Berklee. “It was always playing, practicing” — he played air guitar to illustrate — “and I just sang, like, however it came out. But now I’m to the point where I’m concentrating on my voice: increase my range, stay hydrated, do vocal exercises.” He knows that if he’s going to end up as more than just another guitar hero it will be largely on the strength of his singing. He’s also coming along as a songwriter, with a growing feel for overlaying moves borrowed from soul, gospel and other genres onto sure-footed blues grinds.



And, second, as a young Black bluesman from the Mississippi Delta, cradle of the most myth-encrusted and generative blues style, Kingfish is an ideal standard-bearer for the tradition. He can tear it up on guitar in ways that thrill those whose ears were trained by Led Zeppelin and ZZ Top, and yet he has the range to speak to those more inclined to acoustic blues on the order of Son House, gospel a la Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the soul blues of Tyrone Davis, the classic soul of the Isleys, or the lush ballads of Luther Vandross. Because he's the one getting invited to play on "CBS Saturday Morning" and open for the Rolling Stones, Kingfish makes a point of using his growing celebrity to get other members of his

generation of Black blues musicians onstage with him in venues they might not otherwise have a chance to play.

All of this suggests that Kingfish, whose second album, “662,” came out last year, can perhaps become a bridge between blues-rock and the rest of the tradition. And there’s need for such a bridge, because for decades blues-rock has hogged center stage and shoved the rest of the blues to the margins. There are plenty of other styles of blues guitar — Delta, fingerstyle, ragtime, jazz and soul subvariants — and blues doesn’t have to involve a guitar at all, but guitar-based blues-rock has achieved outsize market and aesthetic dominance because it’s favored by the sizable proportion of the blues industry’s paying audience and gatekeepers recruited since the 1960s by classic rock. Rock-trained blues enthusiasts may earnestly want to “keep the blues alive,” an often-repeated preservationist sentiment, but at the same time they’re loving the blues to death by contributing to the guitar’s eclipse of the singer’s voice that has given the genre much of its storytelling power, emotional depth and social insight.

Many of Kingfish’s most ardent admirers love to hear him wail, and he’s great at it. If it makes them and him feel good, satisfies the base and gets him reelected, why not wail all the time? Because this highly specific kind of virtuosity can also become a velvet-lined trap, an ornate dead end that Kingfish is too young and artistically ambitious to accept as the destination toward which he and the blues are heading.

Christone Ingram grew up in Clarksdale, Miss. He told me that his mother, Princess Pride, “listened to the Spinners, the Manhattans, Albert King — she *loved* Albert King. She was into Bon Jovi and Chicago and Luther Vandross, the Isleys, definitely, and funky gospel groups like the Sensational Skylarks and the Supreme Angels.” She was a cousin of Charley Pride, the country star from the Delta, and there were gospel musicians on her side of the family. Her church, St. Peter Missionary Baptist in Sardis, Miss., provided an early musical crucible for Christone as a singer. Learning to sing in Southern Black church style, which features extensive practice in holding and bending notes with both passion and control, is optimal training for a blues singer. “Church music has always been a big part of my music, part of the flavor of what I do,” he said. “I still take quartet gospel licks and put them on my songs.” His father, Christopher Ingram, also helped build his son’s awareness of both the blues and the cultural reach of Delta musicians by showing him a PBS documentary on Muddy Waters and the “Sanford and Son” episode in which B.B. King appeared.

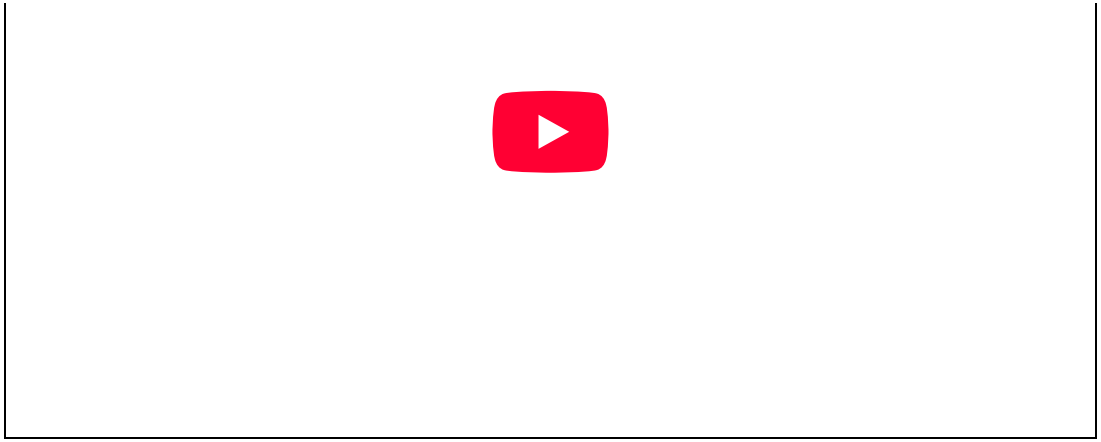
At the age of 8, Christone found his way to the Delta Blues Museum, a Clarksdale institution dedicated to preserving the local blues tradition that lies at the root of so much rock, pop, R&B, soul and other

to preserving the local blues tradition that lies at the root of so much rock, pop, R&B, soul and other music, especially via its direct influence on the electric blues that migrants from the Delta like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf created in Chicago. Around the same time, his parents divorced. He told me, "I was dealing with people talking about my parents, and my mother and I had some hard times," including a brief period of homelessness, "and being at the museum helped me with s---." His instructors there included Richard "Daddy Rich" Crisman, Anthony "Big A" Sherrod, Lucious Spiller and Bill "Howl-N-Madd" Perry, who nicknamed the boy Kingfish after a character on "The Amos 'n Andy Show." The name stuck despite the fact that the near-guileless Christone did not remotely resemble the ever-scheming operator on the 1950s TV show. Even more than home and church, the museum was the decisive container into which he poured his music-making impulses. "They weren't the most technical guys, but they pushed me to play and sing," he said, "and they taught me the history of the city, the music going back to Big Jack Johnson, the Jelly Roll Kings."

Kingfish, who had started at the age of 5 as a drummer, wanted to play another instrument but worried that his hands were too big for the guitar, so he took up the bass. He made rapid progress, becoming known around Clarksdale as a reliable gig player when he was still in middle school, but he grew restless with being a sideman-in-training. When he turned to guitar at the age of 12, he proved to be a phenomenally quick study, gaining a reputation in his teens as a blues prodigy. "As time went on and videos got viral," he said, his peers at school "were like 'Hey, that's Kingfish!' It's not like I was a rapper or anything, but they were intrigued by the blues part. They saw it as a little weird I was playing grown-up music, so I would be telling them about how it was part of our heritage."

His mother stepped into the managerial role, booking church and juke joint gigs, calling news outlets. "She would drive us to gigs, she got me on 'Rachael Ray,' 'The Steve Harvey Show,' " he said. (His appearance on Harvey's show featured a health intervention in which a terrifyingly serene motivational expert exhorted him to commit to a weight-loss program.) Princess Pride was a fierce advocate, and the bond between son and mother, who died in 2019 at the age of 49 after an illness, was exceptionally strong. "There was times when she played bodyguard," he said. "She would go Mama Bear on a club owner or a booker. People in the blues world knew Princess don't play about Kingfish."

Christone "Kingfish" Ingram - Live At The Ground Zero Blues Club (Full...



Kingfish experiences colors when he hears or plays music, a variety of associative synesthesia — when the stimulation of one sense involuntarily inspires a strong feeling related to another sense — known as chromesthesia. An E minor chord may have a “darkish blue” feel for him, “or a major chord might be yellow.” Because of this, his mother accepted as medical fact the suggestion made by a doctor that Christone might have Asperger’s syndrome, which is no longer officially recognized as a diagnosis separate from autism. She regarded Asperger’s as “more positive than negative” in his case because she believed it gave him a special gift for music, and she talked about it freely. As a result, it has been widely reported that he’s on the autism spectrum. When I asked him about it, he said, “No, there was never, like, an official diagnosis from a doctor, but I don’t make a big deal out of it. I *can* say that’s what opened doors for me to work with organizations for musicians who have special needs, like United by Music North America, to be a mentor.”

When Kingfish first gained fame, his youth and size tended to lower the expectations and win the sympathies of audiences, who would then be floored by his fast, flashy guitar chops. YouTube videos and competition shows like “America’s Got Talent” have turned this species of musical spectacle into a melodramatic trope, rewarding the sort of showing off that causes jaws to drop. Bruce Iglauer, founder and head of Alligator Records, the premier blues label that has put out Kingfish’s two records, says he first saw Kingfish play “when he was probably 14 or 15, on a small stage at the King Biscuit Blues Festival in Helena, Arkansas. I could tell he had talent, but he was playing lots and lots of notes, very busy, and he was playing standards.” While Kingfish had potential as a singer and songwriter, he was developing much faster as a guitar player. Down that path lay a fate as just another guy who could wail on endless choruses of “The Thrill Is Gone.”

But even as a rising guitar whiz, Kingfish knew that singing is the key to being a bluesman. When I asked about the deep urge that drove him to practice long hours and get up in front of people to perform, the inchoate impulse that had to develop and take defined shape for him to become a virtuoso, he said, “I just wanted to be able to do the call and response with the guitar and my voice.” That’s a very Clarksdale version of an inchoate impulse — actually, an already-pretty-choate one — because it describes the crucial dynamic at the center of the blues tradition. Despite the best efforts of rock-influenced guitar heroes to drown out singers, in its essence the blues still takes form around the storytelling human voice raised in song. That’s the genre’s ground line, to which all the other instruments should respond. “For blues you have to have that voice,” Kingfish told me, “so I had to learn how to project, put dynamics in my words,” an effort to make his singing more melodic and less monotonic that continues to this day.

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copy of "Music Theory for Dummies," and you can hear it in his playing.

In our conversations, Kingfish cited a dizzying range of influences extending well beyond the blues. As a teenager, in addition to copping licks on YouTube from classic blues players, he studied not only a century's worth of blues singers but also soul singers like Patti LaBelle, Erykah Badu and the plus-size quiet-storm love god Barry White. "I love heavy vibrato, low, shaky vibrato," he said. At the same time, as was almost inevitable for a guitar freak, he was exploring the vast cosmic realm of rock guitar, expanding his range of influences to include Hendrix, Ernie Isley, Gary Moore, Prince, Bad Brains, Fishbone, Vernon Reid, Eddie Van Halen and the profoundly unbluesy Swedish metallurge Yngwie Malmsteen. Later he got into the neo-soul jazz pianist Robert Glasper, the gospel guitar sensei Kevin Wilson and Thundercat, the Los Angeles session bassist who used to be in the punk band Suicidal Tendencies. Kingfish also listens to a lot of hip-hop, which he calls "the grandchild of the blues."

His open-eared curiosity had good effects. Iglauer says that when he saw Kingfish perform again a few years later at the Chicago Blues Festival, in 2018, "I was immediately struck by the maturity of his music. He was still a teenager, but he knew how to sing the story and how to tell the story and touch people with his soloing, and he was starting to play his own songs." Most important, Iglauer concluded, "You could tell that he knows what the important notes are. Occasionally he'd shred, but he was already choosing not to. He knows that the music isn't just exciting and technically impressive, that the goal of this music is to communicate to the soul. When I closed my eyes, I heard an old soul."

On April 2, a few days after he played at Berklee and the day before he would fly to Las Vegas to pick up the best contemporary blues album Grammy Award for "662," Kingfish opened for Buddy Guy at Capital One Hall in Tysons, Va. Kingfish is already used to headlining, but on this night he ceded primacy to Guy, then 85, the reigning grandmaster of electric blues. Copied by the rock guitar heroes of the British Invasion and venerated by their acolytes, Guy is not only one of the last surviving blues virtuosos of his generation, he's just about the last surviving major figure on the blues side of the aisle in the marriage of blues and rock. The credentials listed on the back of a T-shirt

blues side of the aisle in the marriage of blues and rock. The credentials listed on the back of a T-shirt worn by Guy's guitar tech as he prepared the great man's hallowed axes backstage summed up Guy's status: "8 Time Grammy Winner; Lifetime Achievement Award Winner; Kennedy Center Award Winner; Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Famer; Blues Legend."

Guy, who in recent years has become active in mentoring young blues talent, played a pivotal role in advancing Kingfish's career. Taking notice of the teenage Kingfish when they crossed paths at a blues festival, Guy asked Tom Hambridge, the prolific Nashville-based songwriter and producer who plays drums in Guy's band, to make sure the young bluesman got into the studio to record. "Write the songs with him, get him in the studio, get musicians, I'll pay for it," Guy told Hambridge. The result was Kingfish's eponymous first album, which won blues awards, was nominated for a Grammy and established him at the tender age of 20 as the next big thing in the blues.

At Capital One Hall, the crowd was dominated by silver-haired boomers, par for the course on the blues concert circuit. After Kingfish played an abbreviated set, Guy took the stage and deployed himself well forward of his band. He didn't really play with them; rather, they comped along dutifully behind him while he played a lot of fearsomely noisy guitar: jagged licks, crackling thickets of staticky chording, atonal bonks and roars, all of it couched in his distinctively angular and slightly-out-of-time guitar diction. He doesn't so much play a song as take it apart. He sings maybe a verse and the chorus, enough so that the crowd reacts and starts getting into it, but then he starts messing around with the song, breaking it down and reducing it to a frame to solo and talk over before cutting it off and moving to the next one.

Guy's set, which mostly consisted of a medley of slow blues tunes and another of up-tempo shuffles, wasn't all that different from those I heard him play back in the late 1970s and early 1980s at the Checkerboard Lounge, the blues club he used to own on 43rd Street on the South Side of Chicago. But the larger-than-life maestro at the top of his game I encountered back then is now an old man. Occasionally during his set he walked back to an amplifier, on top of which were a mug of hot tea from which he sipped to sustain his voice and a box of tissues he used to wipe his eyes.

While Guy was playing "She's Nineteen Years Old," a Muddy Waters tune, Kingfish took up a position off to the side of the stage, a bulky silhouette in the dark. Kingfish takes every opportunity he can to study Guy, who has been a professional bluesman since the 1950s. "Every time I see him play live I learn something new about singing, the dynamics, how he holds a crowd," Kingfish had told me earlier. "There are certain noises he makes that cue the band, bring in the crowd, just *control*." When I

mentioned that for 40-plus years I've watched Guy execute the rousing shift from muted straight-blues licks down low to cranked-up distorted wailing up high, Kingfish nodded and said, "Oh, yeah, you build and tell a story" — a story that thrills crowds by restaging in capsule form the evolution of blues-rock.

He likes to listen to Guy talk about the old days, bad as well as good. "He'll talk about what not to do, how to be smart about the business, how they would pay almost nothing for the work." Kingfish also told me a parable about the relative importance of singing and guitar in the blues today in the form of a story about playing a tribute show for B.B. King with Guy: "They called us all up onstage, and I went up without my guitar. I thought there was enough guitar players up there already and I'd just sing. And Buddy was like, 'Where's your guitar? Your guitar is like your American Express card. Don't leave home without it.' "

When Guy called for Kingfish to join him onstage at Capital One Hall, the younger man stepped from the wings with guitar in hand. Guy cued the band to kick off the loping groove of Albert King's "Drowning on Dry Land," over which he played some prickly, pointillistic guitar with his volume way down. Then he nodded to Kingfish, who crushed it in familiar fashion. Starting with muted classical blues licks akin to those Guy had just played, but flowingly lyrical in contrast to Guy's abrupt squiggles of sound, Kingfish built to magisterial full-on wailing, muscular and agile, shot through with references to his mother's old favorite Albert King as well as surprising tone colors and melodic threads that exploited the minor-blues chord changes of the song. Over the past couple of years Kingfish has taken advantage of the downtime from touring forced by the pandemic to absorb lessons from a copy of "Music Theory for Dummies," and you can hear it in his playing.

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shredding guitar, but I also want to do like Barry White, Luther Vandross."

Guy let Kingfish go long on "Drowning on Dry Land," and the younger man made clear to all that he can already more than hold his own with Guy as a guitar player. While these days Guy is often running through licks that he's played 10,000 times before, you can hear Kingfish trying new things, reaching for more, his command of harmony and melody and style growing right there onstage from one chorus to the next. He takes chances in performance, but he's so fast and precise and resourceful that he never seems to corner himself in a way he can't elegantly escape. Kingfish has many more musical ideas than Guy, and he's much more excited about those ideas.

But when Guy stepped to the mic to sing the song, a cautionary tale in which parents advise their son not to rush to be a man, it was also clear that he's still by far the better blues singer. Though he's primarily celebrated as a guitar hero, he habitually enlists an audience's patience and sympathy by singing the hell out of a song before using his guitar to unravel it, and his voice is a wonder: mobile and strident and aggrieved, piercing in its upper registers, grainy and dark when he goes low. There's a lot Kingfish can learn from Guy about how to be a bluesman.

After Guy finished singing he handed his guitar to an underling and started tossing picks into the first rows like a retiree feeding guitar-freak ducks. That left Kingfish to bring the song home with the band, cleanup duty that allowed him to soak up the end-of-show applause as if he were the true star of the evening. Guy's gesture felt valedictory: *That's just about it from me; the kid will take it from here.*

In 1957, when George "Buddy" Guy was 21 and living in Baton Rouge, there was an obvious move he could make to pursue his burning ambition to play the blues: go to Chicago. That's where the

action was hottest and densest, where he could find all manner of blues-shaped containers into which he could pour his urge: a booming community of fellow migrants from the South with shared musical habits and interests; collaborations with more-seasoned musicians like Muddy Waters and Junior Wells; local labels like Chess and Cobra; a score of clubs, packed with like-minded talent and discerning listeners, in which to hone his craft. In 2022, there's no analogous well-trodden path of musical development stretching out before Christone "Kingfish" Ingram. He's going to have to map his own journey, recruit his own models and mentors and peers from all over the place, assemble his own idiosyncratic assortment of containers as he goes along.

Part of that self-fashioning is the time-honored apprentice-work of absorbing lessons from blues elders like Guy. For instance, Kingfish wants to learn everything he can about songwriting and singing from the neotraditionalist Keb' Mo', who has won five Grammys himself. "On the song 'Listen' on my debut record, listen to Keb' come in after me," Kingfish said. "I'm staying on one note, and he's [singing], 'I can't wait for Sunday' " — dropping stairstep-fashion in pitch from syllable to syllable. "That's what I should be doing."

When I talked to Keb' Mo' about the interest he's taken in Kingfish, he said, "I just wanted to be there for his first album. I crashed the party, wasn't even invited." When I asked him if he worried that Kingfish might feel pressured to show off on guitar in ways that would inhibit his development as a bluesman, he said, "Nah, he's a genius, and he'll figure it out. He sings, he's got perfect pitch, he's got a big vocabulary of styles in his playing. He's got the real gift of being born on the right dirt, the right amount of church, the right amount of souls around him. Some people you just don't worry about."

In questing for a way forward, Kingfish walks the line between figuring out what he wants to become and giving audiences what they want from him right now. "The blues purists will hate you if you play more blues-rock," he told me, "but the blues-rock people might hate you if you do some smooth R&B." He can't please all of them all the time, and he'll paralyze himself if he tries to.

Instead, he tries to be as musically promiscuous as he can. He has played with the veteran rapper Rakim, the fey rockers Vampire Weekend, the funk bass icon Bootsy Collins, the alt-rock Americana star Jason Isbell. He recently opened for the Rolling Stones in London, he's made a guest appearance

star Jason Isbell. He recently opened for the Rolling Stones in London, he's made a guest appearance on the superhero show "Luke Cage" and voiced a bluesman character in the video game Red Dead Redemption, and he's played the national anthem at a Memphis Grizzlies playoff game. He's on the lookout for more opportunities to team with hip-hop artists, and he has also gone out of his way to make common cause with other Black blues musicians of his generation who don't share his tendency to rock out, like Jontavious Willis and Marquise Knox. When I asked Willis about Kingfish, he said, "He's a rocker, but he's a sensitive rocker. He does everything well. He can play in more traditional styles, he can play soul stuff for a Black audience."

When I asked Kingfish how he envisions his musical future, he said, "I just want to do more *smoothness*, you know, but with an unexpected edge," making a gesture with his hands somewhere between an umpire calling a runner safe and a conductor calling for more from the violins. "I want to do more things that showcase my voice. People come to hear shredding guitar, but I also want to do like Barry White, Luther Vandross."

One taste of what that might sound like is the recording of Screamin' Jay Hawkins's "I Put a Spell on You" Kingfish made last year, which you can find on YouTube. The Fender guitar company put together the session, and he plays a lovely 1950s-vintage seafoam-green Stratocaster, but it's a vocal showcase more than a guitar workout. Wearing a suit, fronting an understated rhythm section, he delivers an affectingly subdued take on the song, the rough edges of his Delta-style delivery smoothed by lounge and soul touches. Hawkins sang the song as a foaming monster who can't accept the thwarting of his will, but Kingfish just seems sad that it's not working out despite his best efforts. He takes an extended solo, but tasteful restraint prevails over the imperative to cut loose, producing a grown-up-sounding balance of tension and release that makes a refreshing change of pace from the orgy of release-and-more-release that blues-rock wailing can become. It may be Kingfish's finest recorded performance as a singer to date.

When I consider his future, I come back to a moment during sound check before his show at the Berklee Performance Center. As he warmed up, he was talking to a luthier about his need for a versatile instrument that can shift between different kinds of sound. "I can do this s--- all day," Kingfish said, stepping on a pedal and launching into a blizzard of cranked-up distorted high notes. "But I wanted

something that can also be like …" and, stepping on the pedal again to restore a clean, clear sound, he went back to weaving a quieter mix of jazzy chords and supple little soul-inflected phrases — an enticing texture of smoothness with here and there an unexpected edge, just waiting for the Barry White of the 21st-century blues to sing over it.

Carlo Rotella is a professor of English, American studies and journalism at Boston College. His most recent book is "The World Is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood.

What readers are saying

The comments on the article about Kingfish are overwhelmingly positive, with many readers expressing admiration for his talent and musical prowess. Commenters appreciate his guitar skills, soulful voice, and the fresh energy he brings to the blues genre. However, some express… Show more

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