



Survivor: The Benny Turner Story

Benny Turner

Bill Dahl

BookBaby (Jul 20, 2017)

Hardcover \$30.99 (252pp)

978-1-5439-0128-3

Music fans will be fascinated by this very personal deep dive into the real life of the blues.

For years, Benny Turner was the slim, understated bass player who stood in the background, calmly thumping out the steady, melodically propulsive bass lines that ran beneath the searing solos of more flamboyant figures like his brother, legendary blues guitarist Freddie King.

After his brother's untimely death in 1976, Turner played in the bands of other blues headliners like Mighty Joe Young and Marva Wright. After years as a supporting player, Turner, who now headlines his own band, has stepped forward to tell his own story in words as well as music.

Although Bill Dahl is listed as coauthor, the introduction states that the book is largely in Turner's own words, and the statement rings true. Reading the book is much like sitting in on a between-shows bull session, listening to a veteran musician spin unfiltered tales of his life and work in some of the world's toughest venues.

The core of the story is Turner's relationship with his larger-than-life brother, who inspired and protected him from their boyhood in a poor but musical family in rural east Texas through their formative years in Chicago, where they encountered its burgeoning gospel and blues music scene.

Turner started his musical career playing guitar and bass for gospel groups like the Kindly Shepherds and the Soul Stirrers, but eventually left the gospel music field to play with his brother and other blues musicians.

Turner's account highlights the simultaneous interrelatedness and division between the sacred and secular music of the time: players and musical ideas flowed back and forth, but "you couldn't play gospel and blues at the same time."

Turner's account of the subsequent decades offers a lively firsthand view of life in a traveling blues band, first on the "chitlin circuit" of bars and dance halls, then in larger and more prosperous venues. There are plenty of entertaining stories about backstage life, but there is also strong evidence of Turner's personal steadiness, insight, and good judgment, which eventually made him a valued bandleader for other blues performers.

A final chapter, titled "On My Own," describes how, after Marva Wright died in 2010, the once-retiring bass player finally took center stage as the leader of his own band under his own name, releasing a tribute to his brother and two albums of his own work. They went on to win recognition from Blues Blast magazine and the Independent Music Awards.

Still playing electrifying music in 2017 despite the deaths of his brother and other musical mentors, decades of life on the road, and the ravages of Hurricane Katrina on his adopted hometown of New Orleans, Benny Turner is a true survivor. Music fans will be fascinated by this very personal deep dive into the real life of the blues.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (July 21, 2017)

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