

The Duke Who Could've Been A King

New documentary reveals the compelling story of Elvis Presley's former bass player

"He wasn't happy with me, and I wasn't happy with him."
— Duke Bardwell

For most Elvis Presley fans, Duke Bardwell is something of an enigma...if they've heard of him at all. Searches on Elvis fan sites for Bardwell, who replaced Emory Gordy as bass player in Elvis' famed TCB Band in 1974, reveal either a belief that Bardwell's playing resulted in his release from the band in 1975 or loose theories and mumblings about a rift between the musician and his famous boss.

A search on the official Elvis Presley Enterprises site returns no results at all. Zero.

So how did a man who played more than 180 shows with Elvis simply disappear from the official history? Why has he rarely been seen by Elvis fans in intervening years and never at EPE events? And what exactly was the reason for his sudden dismissal in April 1975?

Filmmakers Kris Wheeler and Wayne Franklin hope to answer those questions in their new documentary, *Duke & The King*. Further, they hope to introduce Bardwell — whom many consider one of the great unheralded voices in American music — not only to Elvis fans who may never have heard of him but to music fans the world over.

The pair, through their Atlanta, Georgia-based production company, Self-Proclaimed Entertainment, are launching a "crowd-funding" campaign for the film on Kickstarter.com. Increasingly, independents like Self-Proclaimed are turning to crowd funding to finance all or part of their films. In the case of *Duke & The King*, the filmmakers are seeking \$15,000 in "finishing funds" to complete the film.

"We decided to take it to the people," says director/producer Wheeler, describing the decision to fund the film in this unconventional, but increasingly popular, manner.

"We knew we had a compelling film with some great musical performances," adds co-director/producer Franklin. Kickstarter seemed like the best way to engage our audience and make them part of the filmmaking process - without having to wait for the slow wheels of the industry machine to turn."

Kickstarter hosts a project's fundraising campaign, processes payments and, along with Amazon, takes a fee for their services. However, if the campaign fails to reach its goal within the allotted campaign duration, no one is out their money. Kickstarter designed the process to better ensure backer's funds aren't wasted on untenable projects. Backers are not merely donating funds to the creative projects on Kickstarter, but receive rewards based upon their level of backing.

"The key is offering good rewards, and we think we have some great rewards" says Wheeler.

The filmmakers are offering everything from pre-sales of DVDs of the film and CDs of its soundtrack to private concerts by Bardwell, dinners with Bardwell and filmmakers, autographed guitars and other memorabilia.

Beyond a small, loyal following of Duke Bardwell fans, the filmmakers are counting on the backing of the still-massive army of Elvis Presley fans around the world.

“Duke is something of an undiscovered gem in the mainstream music world,” Franklin notes, “but we think once Elvis fans hear a little of his story and his music, they’ll want more.”

The film’s Kickstarter campaign promotes Duke as one of the great unheralded voices in American music.

Woven into the narrative of Bardwell’s time with Elvis will be performances recorded live at WorkPlay Theater in Birmingham, Alabama. The musician, now in his 60s, captivates with both his storytelling ability and his soulful, charismatic performances. The filmmakers hope the film will demonstrate why so many musicians thought Bardwell could have been a star in his own right.

Among those testifying to Bardwell’s greatness is pop-music icon Kenny Loggins.

“Fame is not the goal,” Loggins says of Bardwell, “It’s part of the path that you’re on. And where he was going, fame didn’t have much to do with.”

Loggins and Bardwell became friends in the early 70s when they shared a duplex in Los Angeles. Bardwell and fellow Baton Rouge native Casey Kelly formed an opening act for Loggins and Messina.

Bardwell’s path was that of a man often an arm’s length from the glaring spotlight of fame, but forever stuck in the shadows. And no shadow loomed larger than that of The King. Like many musicians of his era, Bardwell idolized Elvis as a child. When destiny lead him to Elvis’ famed TCB Band — named by Presley for his catchphrase, “Taking Care of Business” — it seemed a dream come true. But sometimes destiny has a cruel sense of humor.

After 181 shows with The King, Bardwell’s time with Elvis had ended, leaving him disillusioned with a music career that was quickly spiraling to an end. Duke eventually walked away from his dream of playing music for a living.

Through Duke’s stories, interviews with Elvis superfans who saw Duke’s interaction with Elvis and interviews with other members of the Elvis organization at the time, including pianist Glen D. Hardin, Duke & The King will attempt to uncover just what went wrong.

As the film’s publicity materials state, “There’s danger in meeting your heroes, but what if your hero becomes your boss, and your boss is the King of Rock & Roll?”

The film’s Kickstarter campaign launched on August 23rd and will run for 45 days with a goal of \$15,000. These “finishing funds” will be used to shoot additional interviews, complete editing, graphics, color grading and sound mixing.

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