

WEARY OF DWELLING ON HIS TROUBLED PAST, TURNER HAS FOCUSED ON THE GUITAR, THE BLUES AND HIS NEW BAND

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Special to The Examiner

Let's try a little word-association exercise: What adjective comes to mind when you see the name Ike Turner?

"Timid" probably wasn't your first choice for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame guitarist, as legendary for his violence- and drug-fueled past as his defining musical contributions to early rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues.

But Turner, in the midst of a comeback that will see him headlining the opening day of the San Francisco Blues Festival on Saturday, says shyness is one of his defining personality traits. That's why only now is he stepping out front with his own band, singing and tak-

ing center stage as an instrumentalist after years of staying out of the spotlight.

"I've always been bashful," Turner says during a telephone interview from his San Diego-area home. "That's all you know about me, is in the background. I come out onstage, I do a couple of songs and then I step in the background. Then the Ike-ettes come out, and I step further in the background.

"I've always considered myself as an organizer. I teach people to sing, I teach them the choreography and all that stuff. That's what I felt was my job, to be the critic for what we do onstage."

Acquiring a taste for the spotlight

Turner says he realized that needed to change as he started preparing to perform

live in support of "Here and Now," his first album in more than 20 years. A spirited collection of electric blues and R&B stomps, the album includes new tunes and reworkings of classics such as "Catfish Blues" and "Rocket 88," the Turner song widely credited as the first rock 'n' roll record. (Although it came out under the name of saxophonist Jackie Brentson, another example of Turner's reluctance to be the frontman.)

Turner made a rare public performance to promote the record at this year's South By Southwest music conference, and he says the raucous response there convinced him it was time to be the star of his own show. Since then, he's been hitting the road as Ike Turner and the Kings of

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THE SAN FRANCISCO BLUES FESTIVAL

Runs from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at the Great Meadow in Fort Mason, Marina Boulevard and Laguna Street. Performers Saturday include Ike Turner and the Kings of Rhythm, Hot Tuna, Billy Preston and the Hoodoo Kings. Sunday's lineup includes Los Lobos, Little Milton, Robben Ford, Jimmy Smith and Maria Muldaur. Advance tickets are \$25 per day

Trying to revitalize Turner's career

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Rhythm, singing and playing guitar and piano on tunes that harken back to his roots as a bluesman.

Turner credits San Francisco bluesman Joe Louis Walker with pushing him to go back to his blues roots.

"I thought that would be going backwards, because I'm used to keeping with the jukebox," he says. "Whatever style of music is hot, that's what I do."

"But Joe wanted to work with me, so I came home and started trying to learn to do some of the old stuff, like 'Rocket 88.' I found it not to be so easy to do. I had to learn my own self all over again. But the more I played it, the better I liked it, the better it felt."

"Now it's my mission to get this kind of music back on the radio. Our kids today don't know anything about music like this. ...We gained hip-hop music and rap, but we lost everything else we had."

A sideman's mindset

As for being the star of his own show, Turner says it's about time.

"It was a hard step for me to step forward and be out front," he says. "I had no idea I would be accepted the way I was. It's like I was being selfish all those years keeping in the background, and people kept telling me, 'Ike, man, we need to hear more of you.'"

"I just stayed in the background because that's where I was comfortable. Had I known that I would have been accepted the way I am now, there probably would never be no Tina Turner."

Which might have been better for all concerned. Through the 1950s, Turner was a successful but hardly household-name bandleader, session musician and sideman. While better known as a guitarist, Turner started out as a piano player, having learned the instrument

from neighbor and blues legend Pinetop Perkins.

Aside from 1951s "Rocket 88," a major chart hit at the time, Turner was best known as a supporting player. His bold piano runs and stinging guitar licks show up behind nearly all the major blues figures of the time, including B.B. King, Elmore James, Willie Dixon, Otis Rush, Bobby "Blue" Bland and Howlin' Wolf, one of Turner's first discoveries as a talent scout for Sun Records.

It wasn't until Turner met Annie Mae Bullock, later to be known as Tina Turner, that he started to court widespread popular attention. Starting with the 1960 single "A Fool in Love," the Ike and Tina Revue was the funkier force in the land, piling rock energy on top of an R&B core. The act enlivened the airwaves with landmark singles like "It's Gonna Work Out Fine" and "River Deep, Mountain High" and became a concert force of unequalled power. Ike developed a reputation as a recording studio magician, drawing acolytes such as the Rolling Stones and Stevie Wonder.

Slipping up

And he managed to ruin a couple of lives, starting with Tina. The singer left Turner in 1976, later detailing a harrowing history of physical and mental abuse and relentless womanizing in her autobiography "I, Tina." Ike has not publicly disputed the book's allegations and confirms a lot of the uglier episodes in his own tome, "Takin Back My Name."

It took Turner a little longer to ruin himself, thanks largely to a massive cocaine habit that resulted in a string of arrests through the 1980s. When he was convicted of drug trafficking in 1989, he was finally forced to do serious time—two years in state prison, during which Turner kicked his addictions, realized he was broke and watched on a TV in the jail room as he was

And then it got really bad. While Tina's book made Ike look like an ogre, it was nothing compared to the image of Ike that emerged from "What's Love Got to Do With It," the 1993 movie loosely based on Tina's book.

Tina herself has said the movie is somewhat loose with the facts. Ike has strongly disavowed certain scenes, particularly those that show him raping Tina and selling drugs to minors.

"I have never and would never rape nobody," he says. "If there's any person alive that sells kids drugs or rapes another person, I could pick their eyeballs out with a needle and wouldn't feel nothing, man, that's how cold I could be with a situation like that."

The three-point plan

Turner further explains that his depiction in the movie went uncontested thanks to a contract he signed with the studio in 1989, when he still had a heavy coke habit and was in no shape to parse fine points of contract law.

"I signed this contract for \$45,000," he says. "I didn't know down in the fine print that they could portray me any way they wanted to and I couldn't sue them. Man, you couldn't give me \$45 million to assassinate my career the way they did."

While Turner seldom mentions his ex-wife by name and doesn't blame her for whatever inaccuracies the movie presents, he says she benefited from the movie's portrayal of their life.

"Right at the time, that women's liberation and all this crap was coming along," he says. "They grabbed hold of this and used it to launch her career, and they assassinated my career."

And that's about as much as Turner is prepared to say about the movie, his image and related negativity. Instead, he offers something of a three-point plan for dealing with the Ike legacy:

1. The Ike Turner of today is different from the coke-fueled



the public may not be as willing to accept a statute of limitations on his misdeeds, Ike lives in the present.

"I think it's about time that was old news," he says. "Who am I? I'm a human being. And that's going to live forever. The ones who want to dip into the old news, they need to live in the past, man. I'm definitely not there at all."

2. Ike likes himself.

"I think that God has been really, really good to me," he says. "I'm just really proud of today and proud of what's happening with my career. This CD, I'm totally proud of it. If I die tomorrow, I feel like I've accomplished what God put me on this Earth for."

"I'm like 69 years old going on 30, with my energy and the way that I look. I don't look like my age at all, none. And I don't act my age at all."

3. If you've got a problem with Ike, that's your problem.

"I don't owe anybody," he says. "If you never did nothing you regret in your life, something you're not proud of... then let them talk about me. Other than that, they need to shut up."