

Upon Meeting Luther Allison in 1970
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It was a sunny and clear afternoon in the spring of 1970. I was sitting with my guitar in my lap in Sproul Plaza of the University of California at Berkeley campus. I often came here to play music for the lunchtime college crowd. This was one of my favorite spots to perform on the street in the San Francisco Bay area. The atmosphere there has always been bazaar/bizarre, and street artists of all kinds have found appreciative audiences in, and around, the campus area.

I had a special reason for being on the Berkeley campus on that day. Yes, I had brought my guitar along, but not to perform. The Berkeley Blues Festival was taking place and many well- and lesser-known blues artists would be performing and presenting instructional workshops here. Maybe I'd get a chance to pick up a few pointers.

I was very excited to have the opportunity to see and hear live for the first time, in a free lunch-time concert, one of my favorite blues guitarists, T-Bone Walker. Truly, he was one of the most famous and influential blues artists of all time. As an added amazing bonus, T-Bone would be backed up by the truly great, Luther Allison, and his band.

The 1-hour concert was excellent. T-Bone was in fine form on both guitar and vocals. The show was super. T-Bone was mesmerizing. His larger than life stage presence betrayed his diminutive 5'5", or so, frame. He was dressed 'to the nines' in an iridescent green suit with thin yellow stripes running through it and fancy dress shoes dyed light green to match. He played the jumbo f-hole Super 400 Gibson guitar with that classic "T-Bone sound" that so many have tried to duplicate and emulate. When taking a solo, he held the guitar flat, out in front of him, the back parallel to the ground. It was great to see and hear this legendary master of modern blues. The music filled the open plaza area.

Luther Allison, sporting a huge Afro hair-style, and with a constant and contagiously wide grin on his face, did a superb, excitingly dynamic, and sensitive job of backing T-Bone up. This was also my first experience seeing and hearing Luther Allison live. Luther was obviously having a great time. The crowd loved it all.

After the performance, I went backstage in hopes of meeting T-Bone and Luther. While I was waiting patiently for an opportunity to meet them, Luther came over to me, and cordially introduced himself. He asked me about the guitar I was holding, and asked me if I was a guitar player. I nodded, nervously introduced myself, and said, "Yes, I try." Luther enthusiastically shook my hand and said, "Would you like to meet the great T-Bone Walker?"

It was all I could do to excitedly respond, "That would be great!" Luther then took me by the arm and ushered me over to T-Bone, who was standing nearby. He introduced me as, "A young guitar player and big fan of T-Bone's." I nervously shook hands with T-Bone and told him how much I enjoyed his music and his performance. T-Bone expressed his appreciation, and then asked me if I'd like to accompany him, Luther, the band, and his entourage, on a walking tour of the UC Berkeley campus that had been arranged by the festival producer. "Yes, thanks so much!" I responded.

So, for the next hour or so, I found myself accompanying T-Bone, Luther, and the band/entourage on the walking tour of the campus. Along the way I asked Luther some questions about blues guitar playing and performing. Luther kindly and patiently answered my questions, and included his most valuable advice for a musician, in regard to "Leave Your Ego, Play the Music, Love The People." Luther also expressed to me that as a blues musician one should, "Always be yourself within the music."

After the one-hour walking tour of the campus, it was time for T-Bone, Luther, and the band to get ready for their evening performance. We shook hands all around, said our good-bye's, and I profusely thanked

T-bone and Luther for allowing me to spend a bit of time with them. I was definitely on 'Cloud Nine' as I left the UCB campus and walked home, anxious to put into practice all that I'd absorbed and learned.

The live music that I heard that afternoon, and the friendly advice that I received from Luther, made a huge and lasting impression on me. And I have embraced that advice throughout my almost 50-year career as a professional blues musician and blues educator. I'll never forget that wonderful day and the lessons I learned. It was the experience of a lifetime.

Happily, I heard and saw Luther Allison perform and crossed paths with him a number of times at blues festivals and concerts over the years. Luther always remembered me, shook my hand, greeted me by name, and he always recalled our first meeting on that sunny afternoon when he and his band backed up T-Bone Walker at the 1970 Berkeley Blues Festival. Each time we crossed paths I made sure to tell Luther what a 'special day' that was for me, and how much I appreciated his friendship, and had embraced his kind and helpful advice.

Ever positive in attitude and ever humble in demeanor, Luther Allison never failed to express to me that, "It was a special and memorable day for me, as well, my having the opportunity to make music with the great T-Bone Walker."



Hawkeye diggin' Luther Allison at '97 Handy Awards in Memphis.

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