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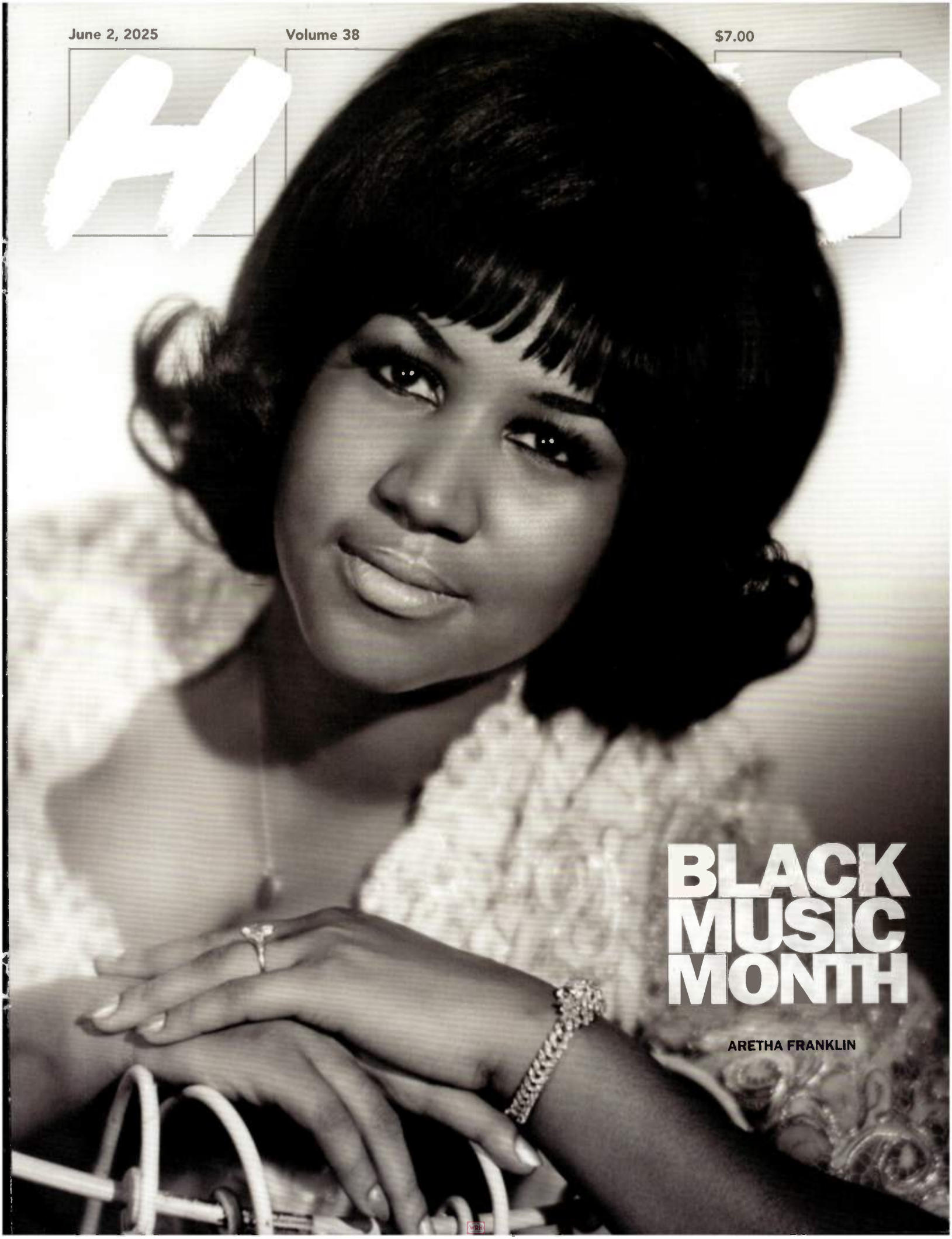
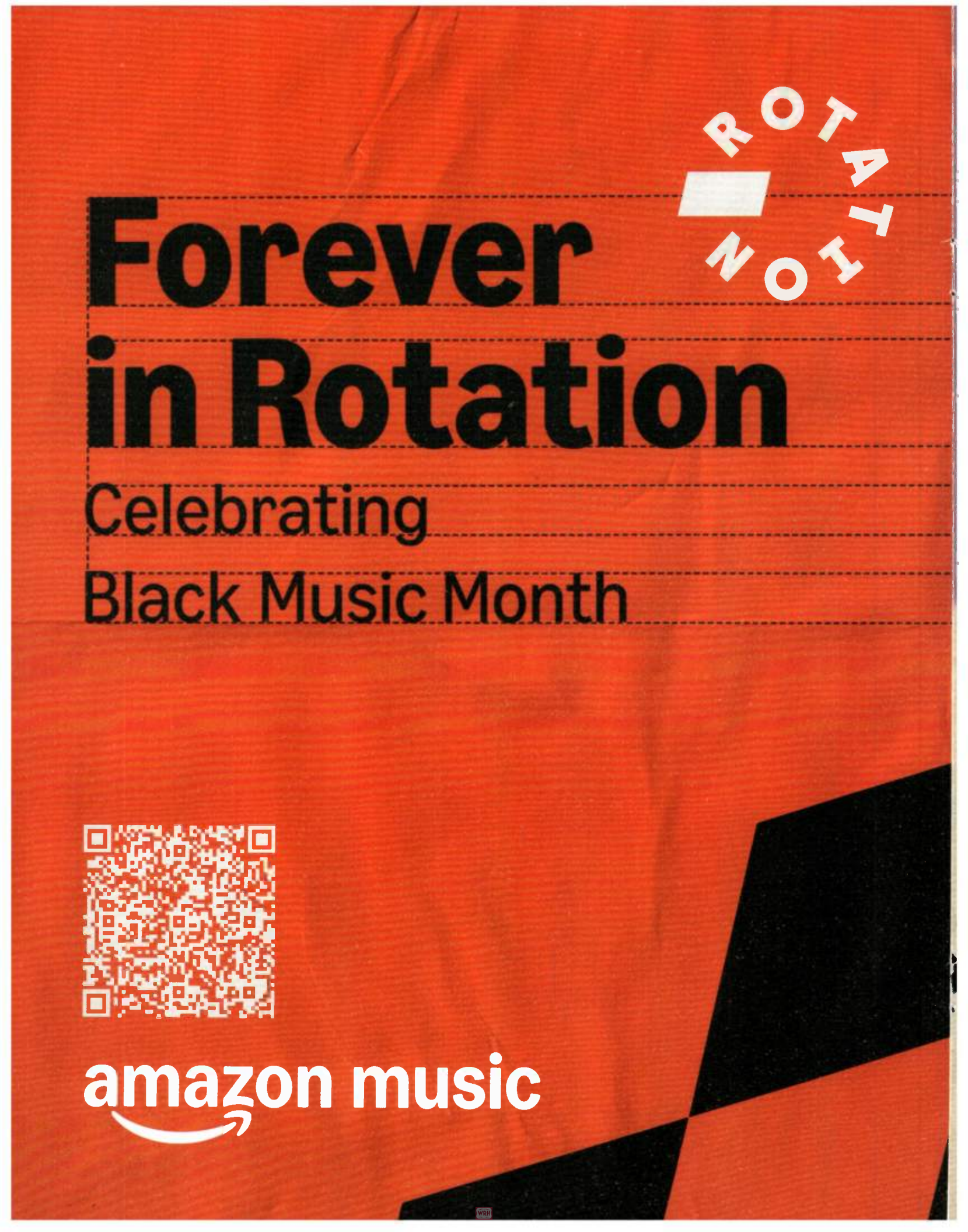


BLACK MUSIC MONTH

ARETHA FRANKLIN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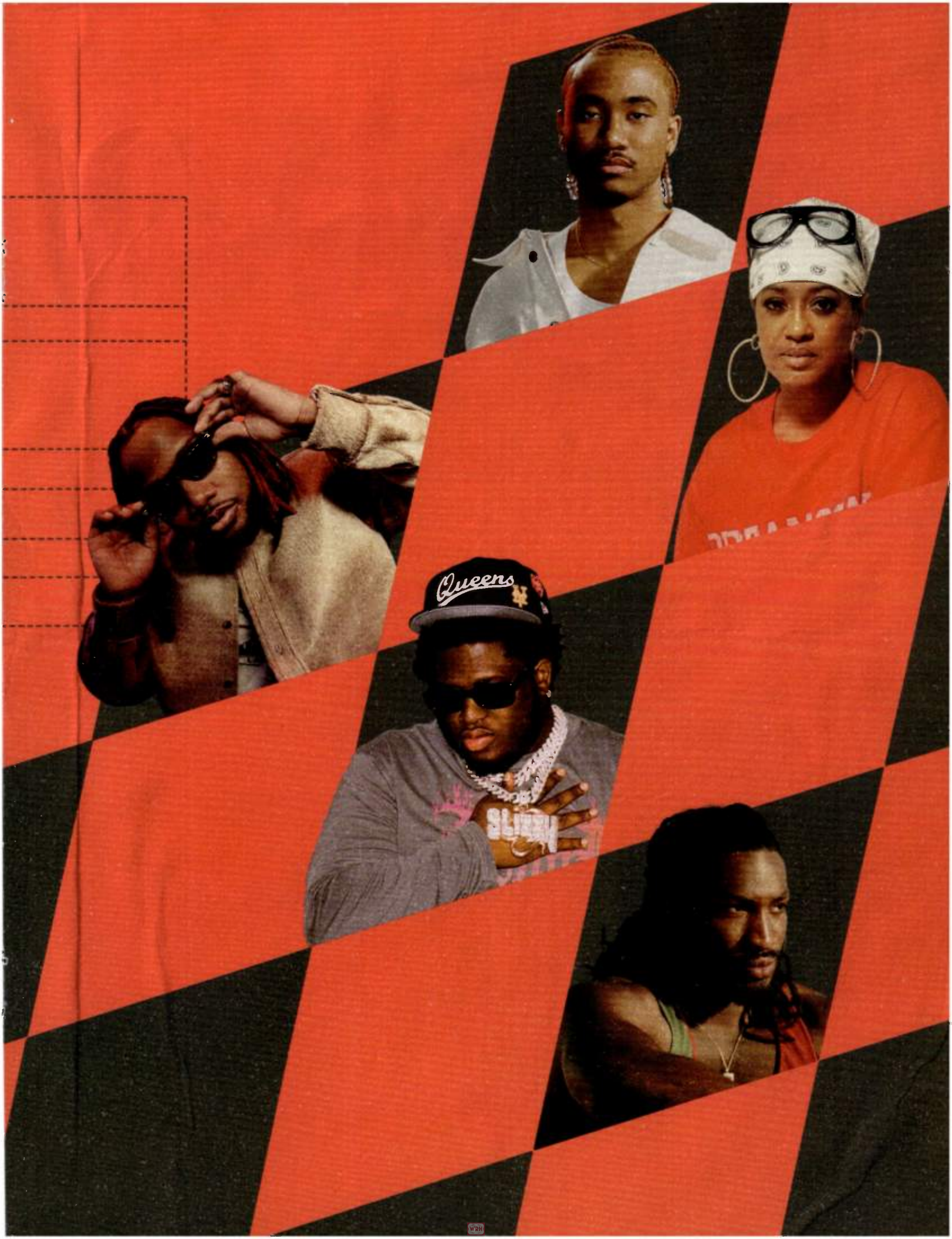
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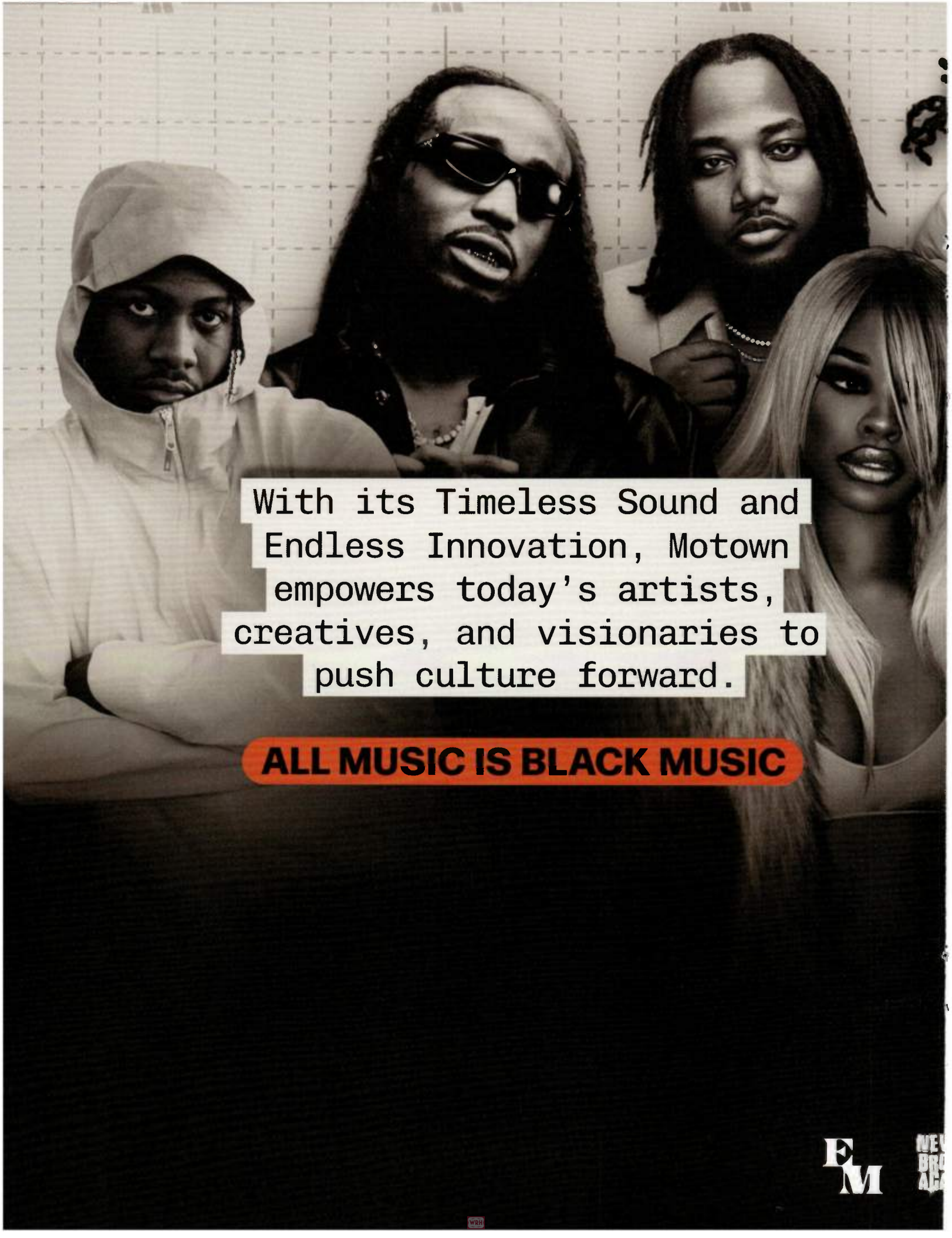
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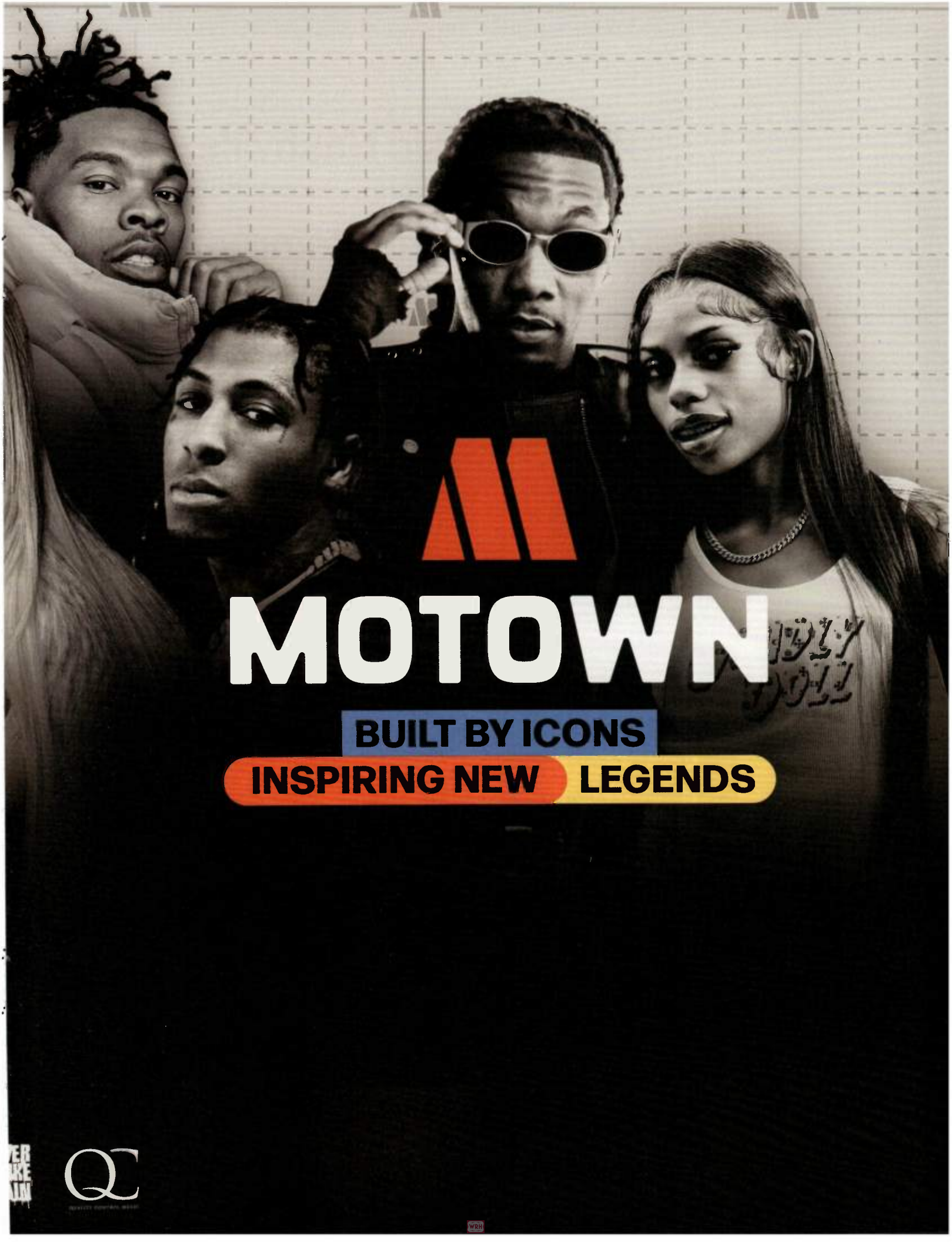
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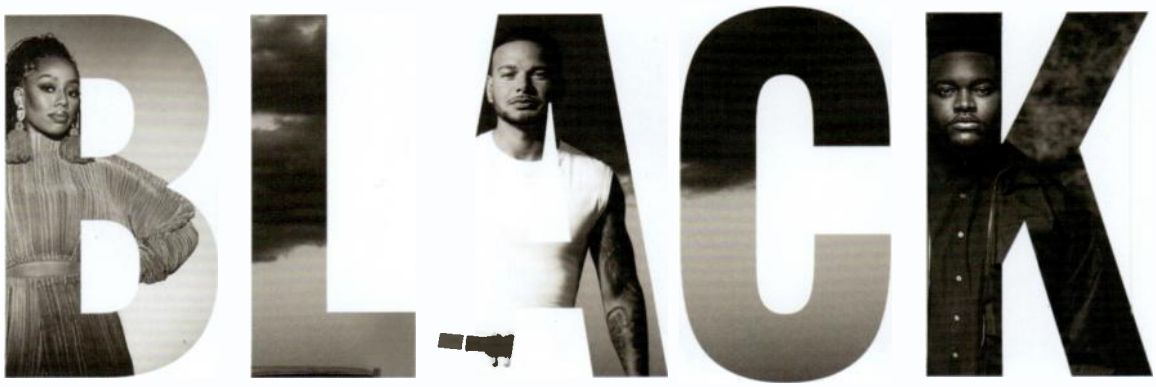

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THE MOTHER OF BLACK MUSIC MONTH: DYANA WILLIAMS

There *is* no "Black Music Month" without Dyana Williams. The author, broadcast personality, mentor and occasional *HITS* contributor played a key role in the solemnizing of BMM in the '70s and has been instrumental in expanding the cultural recognition of Black music ever since. She's also been a key booster and advisor for the gamechanging National **Museum of African American Music** in Nashville. So, in what's become a much-deserved annual tradition, we're delighted to feature her here—she's the reason for the season.

ON THE COVER: ARETHA FRANKLIN

The greatest singer of our lifetime, Aretha Franklin was more than just the Queen of Soul, although she was certainly that: She remains the embodiment of the healing power of music, of the joy of the human voice and of Black excellence. She was also one helluva songwriter, a brilliant piano player and an incomparable interpreter of song. Oh, and a civil rights icon, too. For Black Music Month, all r-e-s-p-e-c-t is due to Ms. Franklin.

Photo: Bettmann/Contributor/Getty Images

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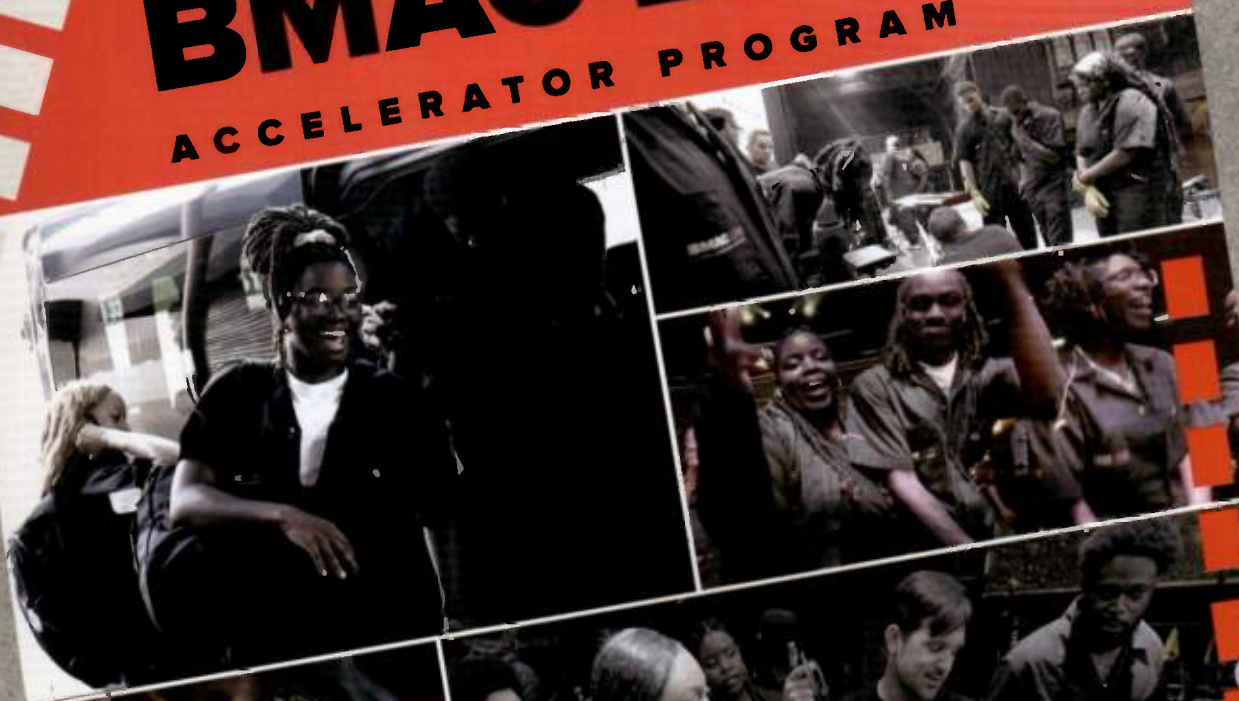
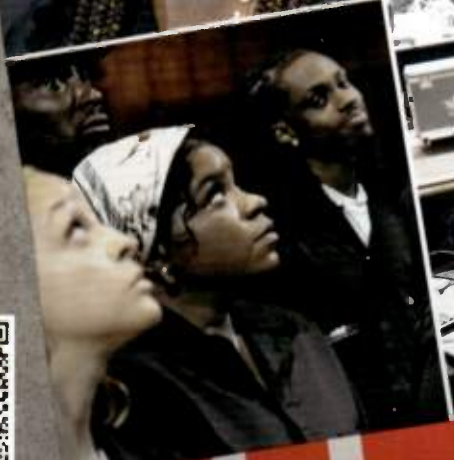
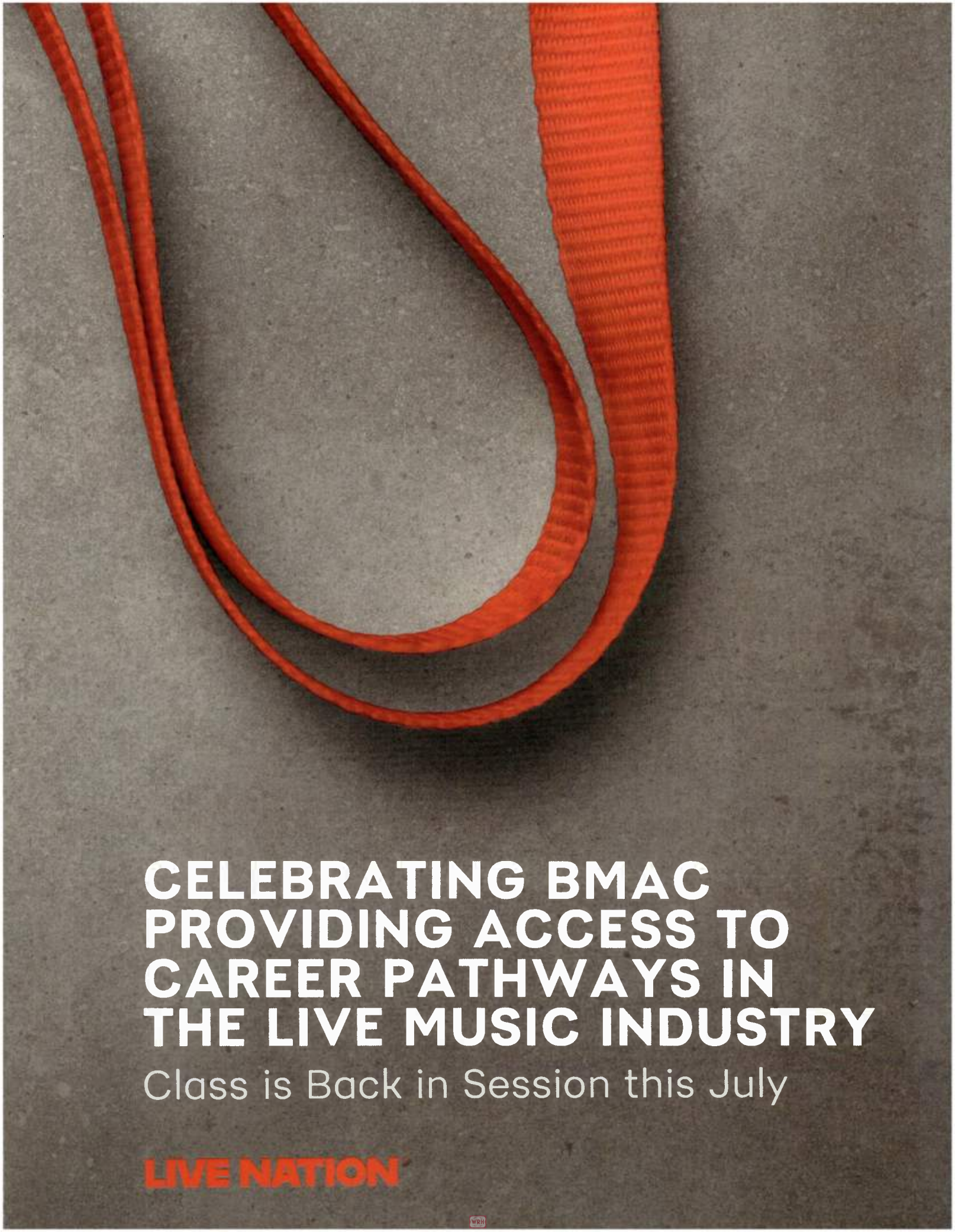




ALL ACCESS

FOLLOW THEIR JOURNEY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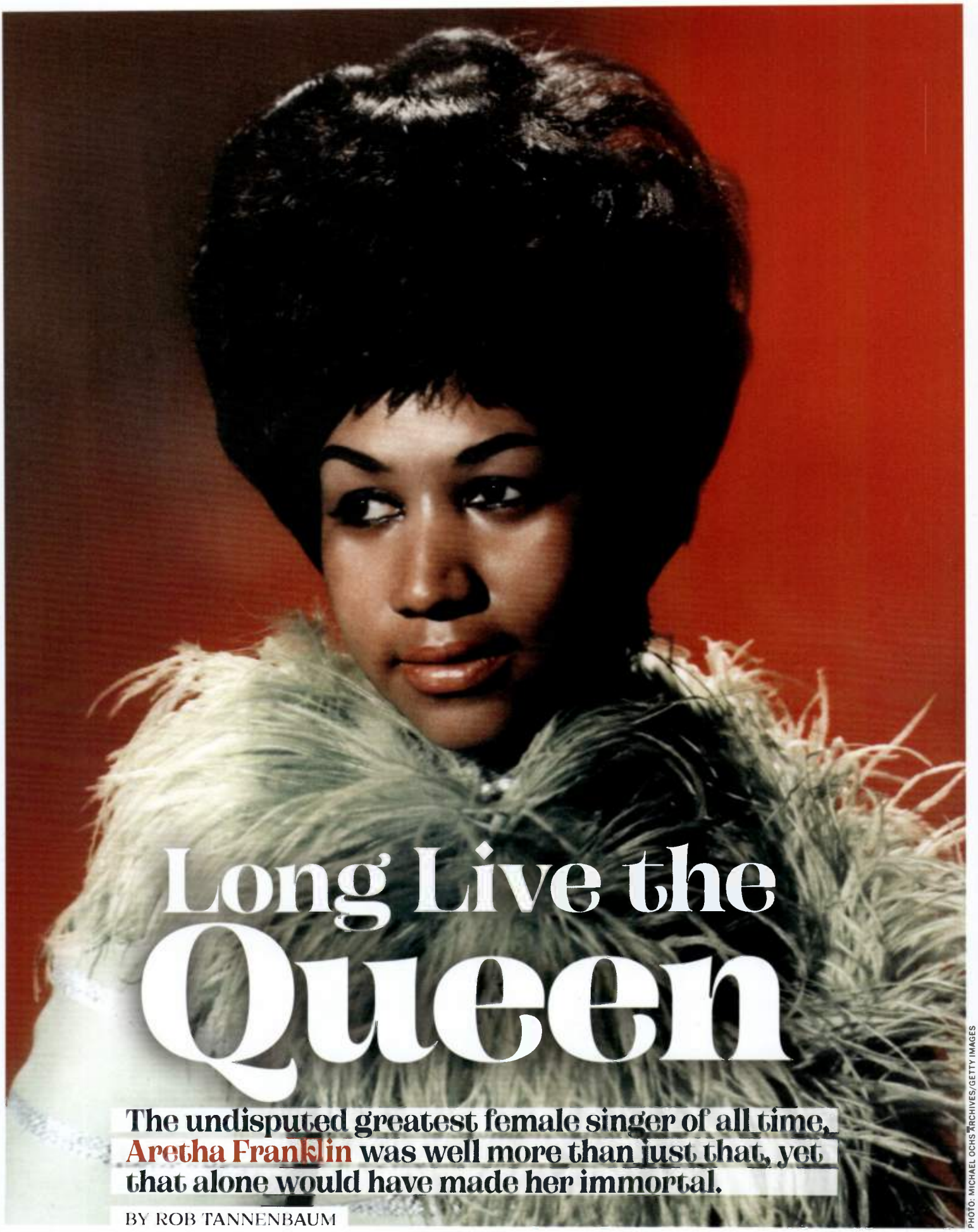


Long Live the Queen

The undisputed greatest female singer of all time, Aretha Franklin was well more than just that, yet that alone would have made her immortal.

BY ROB TANNENBAUM

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

We could argue for days about the best male vocalist of all time, and after hearing reasonable arguments for each of them, we'd adjourn in a deadlock. But when it comes to the best female vocalist of all time, there's a consensus that only a fool would dispute: **Aretha Franklin**, the Queen of Soul.

If Miss Franklin didn't invent the role of the single-named diva, she sure perfected it: the spectacular voice, the regal bearing, the messy personal drama. Even if she isn't your favorite singer, she might be your favorite singer's favorite singer. A roll call of her admirers includes **Elton John, Diana Ross, Josh Groban, Eric Church, Bono, Chris Stapleton, Adele, U2, Philip Bailey, Donna Summer, Alice Cooper, Ray Charles, Miles Davis, Brian Wilson** and **Keith Richards**—and that's not even close to a full list.

The great A&R man **John Hammond**, who signed **Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan, Count Basie** and **Bruce Springsteen**, among others, recalled his reaction the first time he heard Franklin's voice: "I screamed! I said, 'For Christ's sake, who is this?'"

"What can I say about Aretha?" Richards asked in 1987 when he inducted her as the first female member of the **Rock & Roll Hall of Fame**. "The dictionary's been used up. There are no superlatives left."

"WHAT CAN I SAY ABOUT ARETHA? THE DICTIONARY'S BEEN USED UP. THERE ARE NO SUPERLATIVES LEFT."

—KEITH RICHARDS

Because she is a singer of such magnificence and dexterity, it's easy to overlook that she's also a top-notch songwriter, piano player and producer. Even if she sang like a wounded animal, *Dayenu*, her other talents would've been enough.

Her voice was grounded and familiar, almost as if she were a neighbor confiding in you while she hung up laundry in the backyard. Yet her singing was eccentric, full of what writer **Peter Guralnick** called "unprompted leaps of notes and faith." She sang ahead of or, more often, behind the beat, as though she was struggling to find her place, but it was a trick. Her flow overruled the great rhythm sections she hired—wherever she sang, that's where the pocket was. Bass and drums were there to steady the music while she was guided by the spirit. Her voice is the embodiment of a freedom from restrictions.

Franklin's early life was like something **Charles Dickens** might've written. She was six when her mother deserted the family, and 10 when her mother died of a heart attack, at which point Aretha went weeks without speaking. She adored her father, the **Rev. C.L. Franklin**, who ministered at the **New Bethel Baptist Church** in Detroit. Franklin was the most famous minister of his day, and his sermons and singing were so enthralling that nurses sat by in the audience, waiting to assist anyone who was overcome.

Franklin was one of a handful of Detroit preachers who used Scripture "to center Black self-determination," **dream hampton** wrote in 2018, and "to help a growing Black city to imagine itself powerful." He opened his church to Black auto workers who were fighting a union that wouldn't treat them equally and gave shelter to Black Panthers sought by the F.B.I.

Rev. Franklin's public magnetism, political daring and close friendship with **Martin Luther King Jr.** hid a number of secrets. The reverend impregnated a 12-year-old girl while married to Aretha's mother, had a "violent temper," according to older sister **Erma**, and physically abused gospel great **Clara Ward**.

Gospel icons like Ward, **Mahalia Jackson** and **Rev. James Cleveland** often visited Rev. Franklin. At a funeral for one of Aretha's aunts, Ward sang "Peace in the Valley" and, in a state of excitement, threw her hat on the ground. "That was when I wanted to become a singer," Aretha remarked.

She began her recording career, in gospel music, at 14, recording for **Chess Records**, as her father had also done. She was precocious in other ways, too—pregnant at 12, then again at 15 by a different person.

Hammond signed her to **Columbia Records** in 1960, when she was still in her teens, and steered her from gospel to jazz. Her Columbia work is widely dismissed, both by her ("It wasn't really me") and others (Miles Davis: "They never did know what to do with her"), and Lord knows the world didn't need another version of "Over the Rainbow." Franklin wasn't alone—plenty of other great Black singers were recording standards, whether it was **Etta James** doing **Glenn Miller**'s "At Last" and **Johnny Mercer**'s "Dream," or **Sam Cooke** recording "Tennessee Waltz" and "Bill Bailey Won't You Please Come Home."

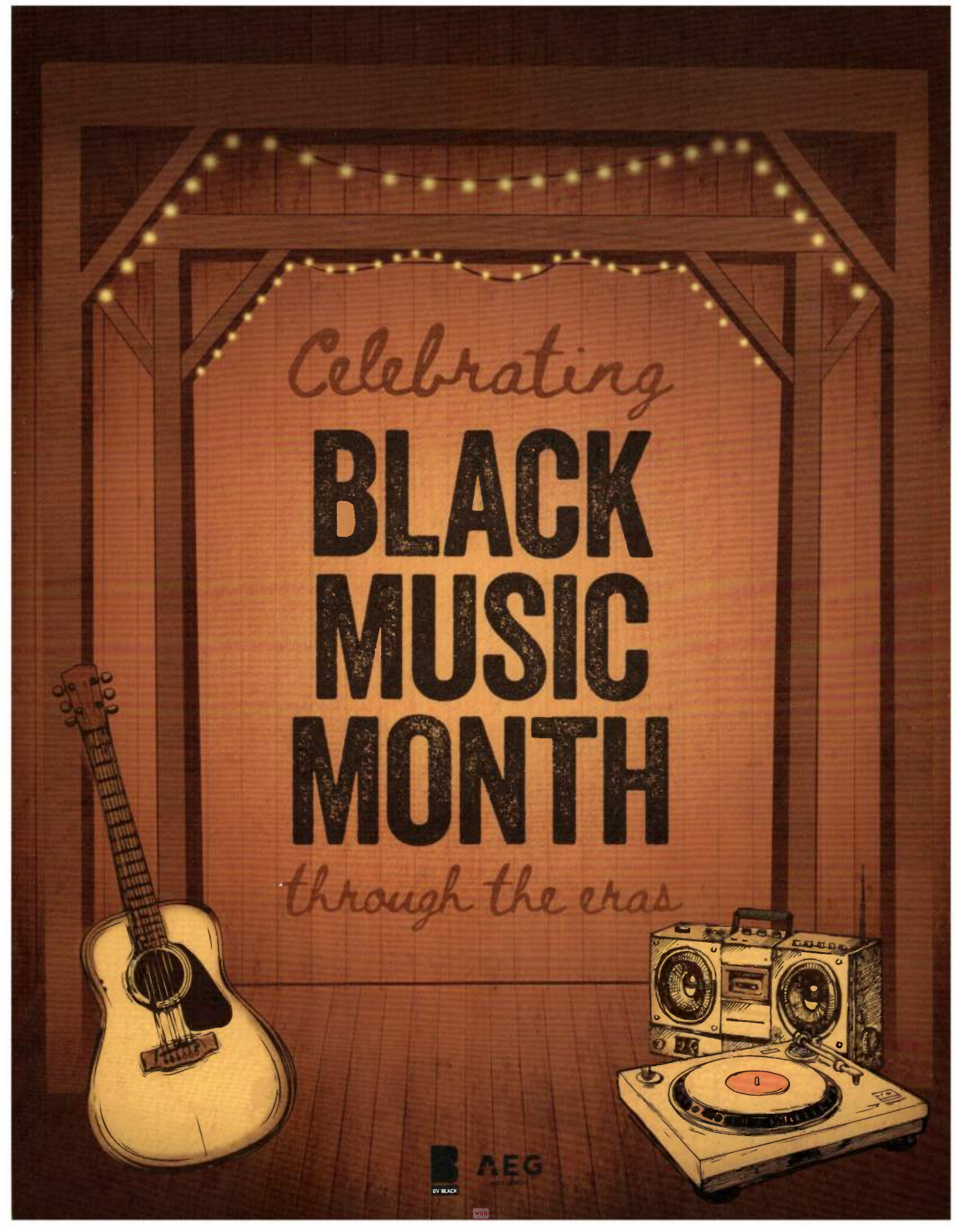
"We were all trying to be so middle class. It was the beginning of the bougie Black thing," James said. Ironically, while white artists were covering Black songs in a bid for authenticity, many black artists were covering Broadway and pop standards in a bid for acceptance and gigs at the **Copacabana** in Midtown Manhattan. The politics of the moment was to strive for crossover acknowledgement.

Even though Aretha was miscast as an ingenue, she recorded some great music at Columbia, especially in songs with more worldly themes. She'd already mastered the irregular phrasing that marked her later work. "Nights ARE so lonely," she sings in "Nobody Like You" (a blues written by Rev. Cleveland), flitting around and in front of the tempo like she was hearing the song for the first time. In the swinging "Rough Lover," she uses percussive emphases ("Don't want a MEAN daddy/I want a BOSS") to dramatic, emphatic effect. And in her version of the Johnny Mercer/**Hoagy Carmichael** standard "Skylark," she makes an octave leap in the second chorus that staggered pros like James, who called it "her best performance ever," and **Sarah Vaughan**, who reportedly announced, "I'm never singing that song again."

After nine albums at Columbia, she signed to **Atlantic Records**, hired the **Muscle Shoals** rhythm section and focused her career on R&B. Her Atlantic debut, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You*, was as loaded as a greatest hits record: The title track, "Dr. Feelgood (Love Is a Serious Business)" and "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man" are classics, and the powerful, irreducible "Respect" became an anthem of both the Civil Rights and women's liberation movements. When "Respect" writer **Otis Redding** heard how Franklin had restyled and redefined his song, he was awed. "The girl has taken that song from me," he said, according to producer **Jerry Wexler**. "Ain't no longer my song. From now on, it belongs to her."

While no one could have credibly called Franklin a radical, and Wexler described her as "neither a sloganeer nor a polemicist," she was a reliable ally of Dr. King. She made appearances on King's behalf, even turning down paid gigs to sing at one of his benefits. When the mayor of Detroit declared Aretha Franklin Day in February 1968, King flew in for the event. After he was murdered a few weeks later, she sang "Precious Lord," King's favorite hymn, at his memorial service. She also vowed to pay bail for **Angela Davis**, an academic who was wanted for her alleged role in a courtroom kidnapping. "I have the money; I got it from Black people," she said. "They've made me finan-

PHOTO: EXPRESS NEWSPAPERS/GETTY IMAGES


Celebrating
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through the eras
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BY BLACK

"I THINK OF ARETHA AS OUR LADY OF MYSTERIOUS SORROWS. I DON'T PRETEND TO KNOW THE SOURCES OF HER ANGUISH, BUT ANGUISH SURROUNDS ARETHA AS SURELY AS THE GLORY OF HER MUSICAL AURA."
—JERRY WEXLER

PHOTO BY POPSIE RANDOLPH/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

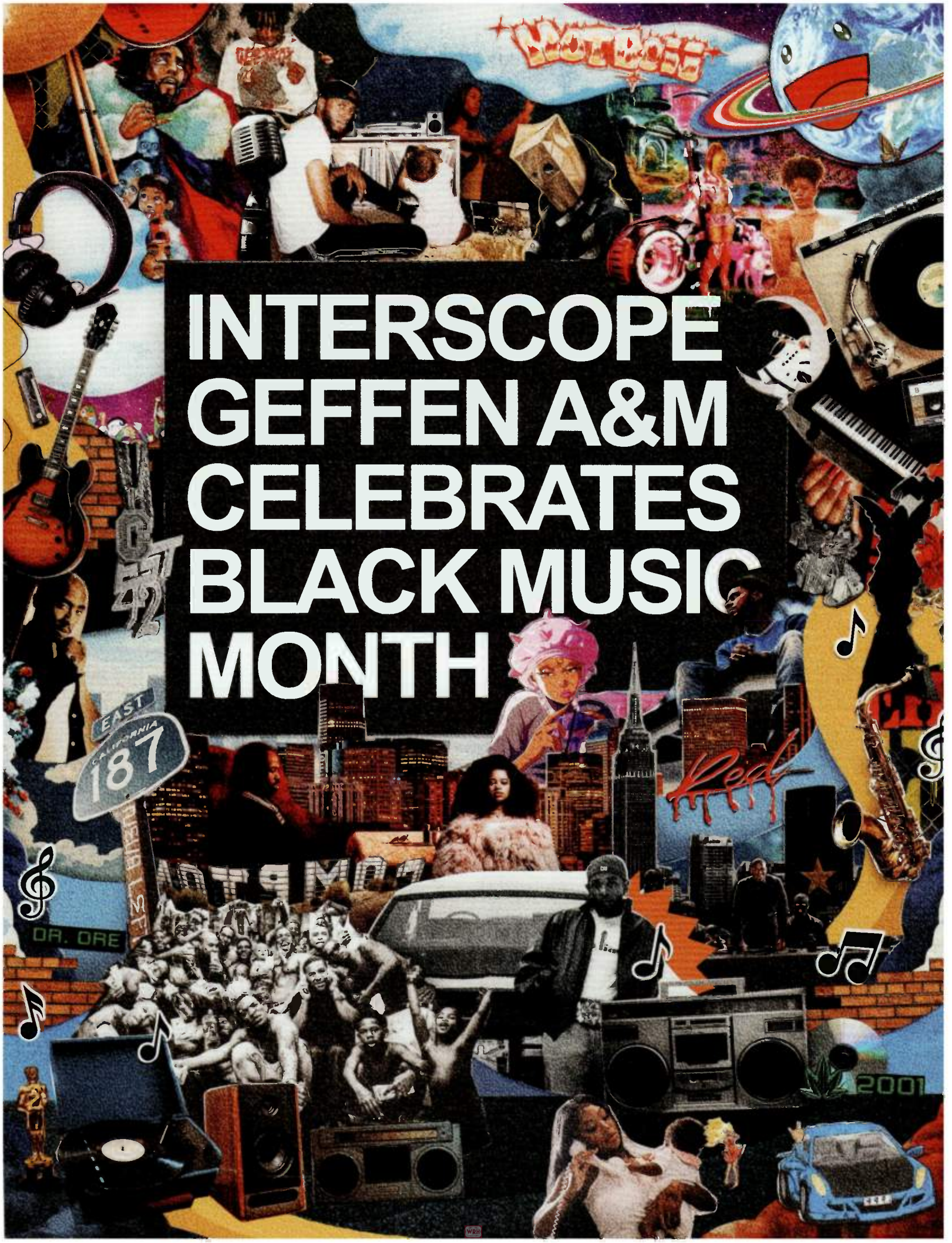
PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Top: Franklin, with Jerry Wexler and husband/manager Ted White, signing her Atlantic contract, 1966; bottom: in the studio, 1969

cially able to have it and I want to use it in ways that will help our people." Beyond even her explicit support for Black freedom and equal rights, her voice seemed to sum up the entire movement—it was the voice of freedom and resolve.

During her golden era, Franklin routinely released two albums a year. There were songs of nurture and betrayal, songs that demand and songs that offer, and plenty of songs full of what critic **Ellen Willis** called "her warm, non-femme fatale sexuality." There were great songs she wrote, especially "Dr. Feelgood," "Rock Steady," "Think" and "Day Dreaming," and great songs she covered, including "I Say a Little Prayer," "Chain of Fools," "Don't Play That Song," "Baby I Love You," "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" and "Respect." She had a run few have ever equaled.

By 1979, R&B had mutated into disco and Franklin's golden era had ended. Like many soul stars of her era, she wasn't sure whether to adapt or persist with her own style. She met with **Nile Rodgers** and **Bernard Edwards** of the great dance group **Chic**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With Clive Davis at the 2015 Kennedy Center Honors gala dinner, Washington, D.C., 2015

PHOTO: TIM BOXER/GETTY IMAGES

From top: side-by-side portraits, 1960s and '80s; with Grammy, 1970; with Alicia Keys

and played them a disco song she'd written. But Rodgers didn't like the song and said so, which ended the possible collaboration.

Her career needed a restart, which it got with help from **Clive Davis** and **Arista Records**. **Luther Vandross** proved to be an inspired producer, and then *Who's Zoomin' Who?* in 1985 gave her a multi-format hit for the **MTV** era, thanks to "Freeway of Love" and a collaboration with British synth duo **Eurythmics**, "Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves." The next year, a duet with **George Michael**, "I Knew You Were Waiting (For Me)" became her first pop #1 since "Respect."

There were a few other artistic successes: the live gospel showcase *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* (1988) and *A Rose Is Still a Rose* (1998), with modernizing touches from **Lauryn Hill** and **Jermaine Dupri**. That same year, she startled the world (but not herself) by stepping in for an ailing **Luciano Pavarotti** at the **Grammys** and singing a spectacular version of the **Puccini** aria "Nessun Dorma."

Franklin's icon phase was sometimes puzzling: She acted and sang "Think" in the 1980 comedy *The Blues Brothers* and performed at the **WrestleMania III** event in 1987. When she played **City Center** in 1981, *New York Times* critic **Robert Palmer** bemoaned her "unerring instinct for picking the most inappropriate material" and her "gimmicky, utterly banal stage routines."

But she was also a living link to the Civil Rights movement and to an era when soul reigned supreme. **Barack Obama** picked her to sing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" at his first inaugural swearing-in. When she did "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" at the **Kennedy Center Honors** in 2015, she brought Obama to tears. And when she died in 2018, he called her voice "a glimpse of the divine." In her singing, he added, "we could feel our history, all of it and in every shade—our power and our pain, our darkness and our light, our quest for redemption and our hard-won respect."

With everyone but family, Franklin worked to remain opaque. She came from a generation and a milieu in which secrets were dismissed and denied. "I think of Aretha as Our Lady of Mysterious Sorrows," said Wexler, who made 14

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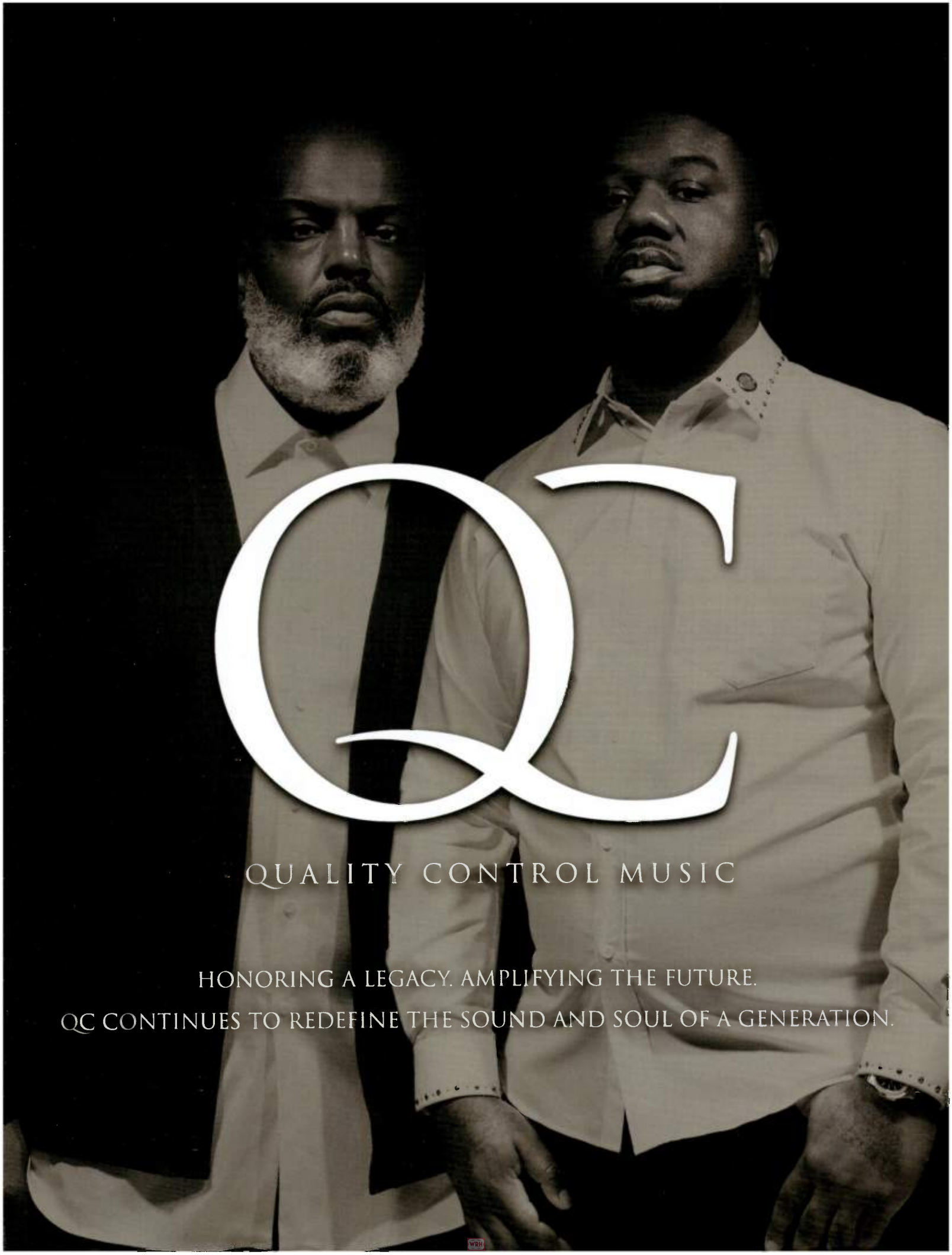
Aretha performs at Barack Obama's inauguration, 2009

"IN HER VOICE, WE COULD FEEL OUR HISTORY, ALL OF IT AND IN EVERY SHADE—OUR POWER AND OUR PAIN, OUR DARKNESS AND OUR LIGHT, OUR QUEST FOR REDEMPTION AND OUR HARD-WON RESPECT." —BARACK OBAMA

albums with her. "I don't pretend to know the sources of her anguish, but anguish surrounds Aretha as surely as the glory of her musical aura."

Soon after signing to Columbia, she'd married **Ted White**, a stylish Detroit pimp who managed her career and her life "with a forceful hand," according to biographer **David Ritz**. White brought more violence and drama into her life. She published a memoir in 1999 titled *Aretha: From These Roots*, and fans hated the way she glossed over her early pregnancies, philandering father, violent husband and addiction issues. "She's built a wall around herself," her sister Erma told Ritz.

In a way, the book was redundant—Aretha had already sung her autobiography. When *TIME* profiled her in June 1968 (she was only the second Black woman to make the magazine's cover), an anonymous friend confided, "Aretha comes alive only when she's singing." If you know her music, if you hear the ache and resilience in her voice, you know all you need to know about Franklin.■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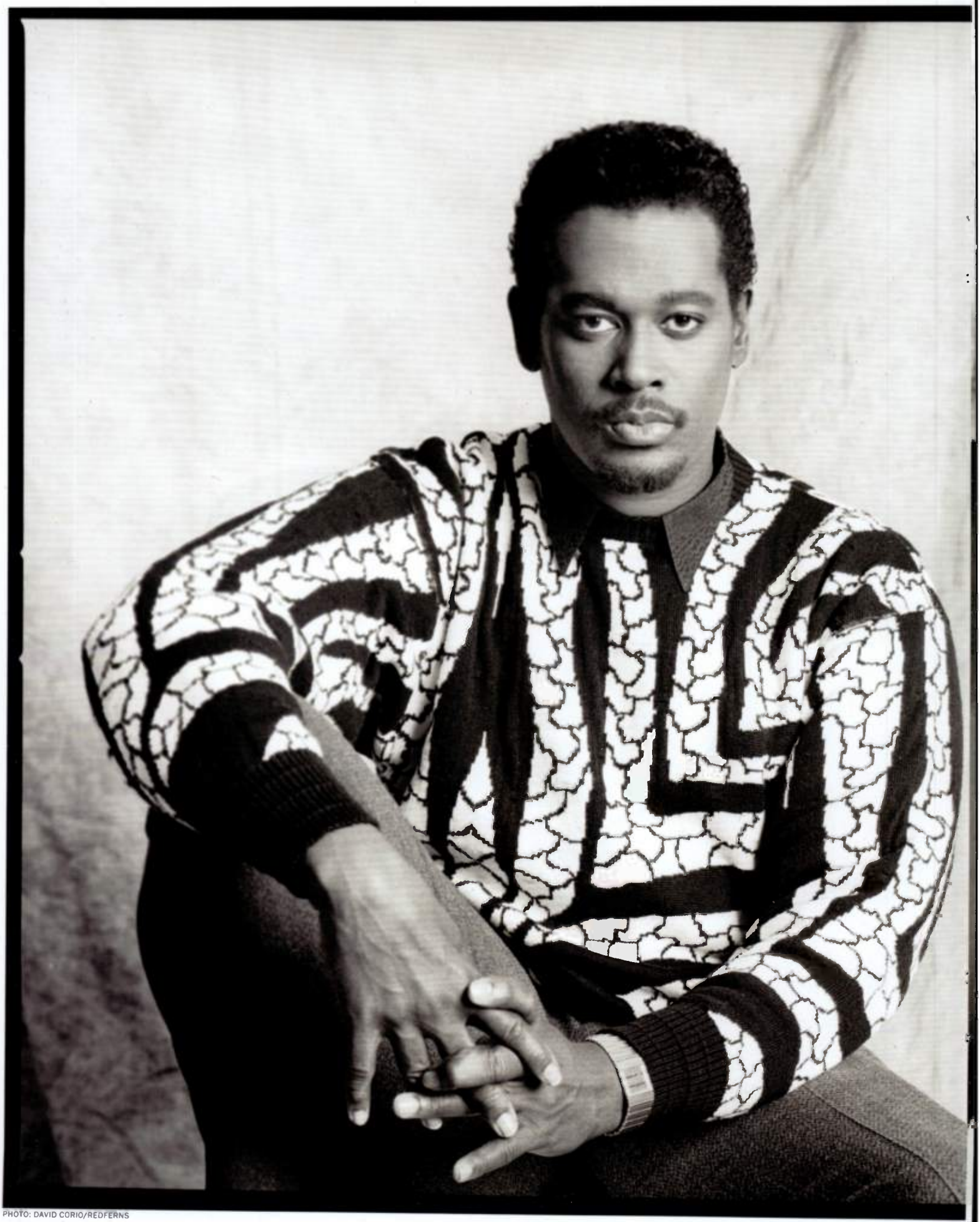


PHOTO: DAVID CORIO/REDFERNS

Never Too Much

A vocalist of unsurpassed emotional range and sophistication, Luther Vandross is enjoying a much-deserved renaissance, thanks to an acclaimed documentary and a namesake #1 song.

By Miles Marshall Lewis

In September 1985, **Luther Vandross** strolled across the stage of **Radio City Music Hall,** forehead beading with sweat, wet curls glistening under the stage lights. Touring in support of his platinum-selling fourth album, *The Night I Fell in Love*, the Bronx native was on the crest of superstardom, and the sold-out, predominantly African American crowd sang along with every song, all of them familiar to listeners of Black radio: "The Glow of Love," "Searching," "Since I Lost My Baby," "Never Too Much," "If Only for One Night."

During a beautifully rearranged cover of **Dionne Warwick's** "A House Is Not a Home," Vandross teased the largely female audience with his signature fluttering vocal riff. Applause rang out. The 1964 ballad, like R&B lovers nationwide, now belonged to him.

Many fans consider this the purest period of Vandross's longstanding artistry. Before Pop radio belatedly caught on

PHOTO: JIM SMEAL/RON GALELLA COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

From top: Vandross with Dionne Warwick; with Aretha Franklin

to his genius, his core African American following crowned him an undisputed king of sophisticated R&B. At this moment, this master of the slow jam felt like our best-kept secret; we held his music close. Given his outsized talent, our secret wouldn't stay "for us, by us" for much longer.

Ask any urban Gen X-er and they'll say their earliest exposure to Luther Vandross came from commercial jingles that aired incessantly during shows like *Happy Days* or *Laverne & Shirley*, his velvet voice singing "There's nothing like the flavor of **Juicy Fruit** gum," or "Let it be **Lowenbrau**." Some may even remember learning to count on *Sesame Street* from the singing troupe **Listen My Brother**, featuring a teenage Vandross on the show's first season. For sure these kids all saw *The Wiz* in 1978, with a major dance scene set to the tune of "A Brand New Day," written by Vandross.

Born Luther Ronzoni Vandross Jr. in 1951, the son of an upholsterer father and a nurse mother, he was his mom's fourth and youngest child. By the time his family moved to the Bronx from public housing projects on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, young Luther had taught himself the piano by ear. As a child of the '60s, he was glued to the family TV whenever *The Ed Sullivan Show* featured **The Supremes**, **Patti LaBelle and the Bluebells**, **Aretha Franklin** or Warwick—many of whom he'd later work with as a songwriter and producer. During those days, he'd critique their vocal delivery, choreography and, of course, wardrobes over the phone with close friend **Alfonso "Fonzi" Thornton**—also his singing partner in a neighborhood vocal group called **Shades of Jade**.

In addition to his velveteen voice and songwriting-producing talents, Vandross was a master interpreter of song. The Sinatra of smooth soul, he could reimagine R&B standards through his own vocal alchemy in ways that brought tears to the original interpreter's eyes.

Becoming a staple in the crowd of the **Apollo Theater** with his older sisters, Vandross was elated to perform there onstage with Shades of Jade, as well as an aspiring singer on the venue's infamous amateur night. Shades of Jade begat the Apollo's 16-member artist-development workshop called Listen My Brother, a collective so impressive they were given a spot on the bill of 1969's **Harlem Cultural Festival** (immortalized in **Questlove**'s celebrated documentary *Summer of Soul*) alongside **Gladys Knight & the Pips**, **Stevie Wonder** and **Nina Simone**.

As disco swept urban nightlife and R&B radio, Vandross eased into work as a background vocalist through his connection to Fonzi, who was heavily tied into session work while continuing to pursue a recording career. An early opportunity included

NOT
A GENRE
NOT
A MONTH
NOT
A MONOLITH

adding backing vocals to tracks on *Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway* in 1972. (He'd cover that duo's "The Closer I Get to You" decades later, singing with **Beyoncé** on her debut album.)

In late 1974 he crossed paths with **David Bowie** at **Sigma Sound Studios** in Philadelphia during Bowie's recording sessions for *Young Americans*, a "blue-eyed soul" departure from his glam rock. Impressed by his soulful vocalese, Bowie invited Vandross to add backing vocals and arrangements on the record—even reinterpreting a Vandross composition, "Funky Music (Is a Part of Me)," as "Fascination," earning Vandross his first songwriting credit. He was even able to hone his stage presence opening some dates on Bowie's **Year of the *Diamond Dogs* Tour**.

Vandross's breakthrough with Bowie became a celebrated story in the lore of his early career. But he also amassed an enormous amount of work singing jingles (for **KFC**, **Mountain Dew**, **NBC** and others) and adding background vocals to songs by **Diana Ross**, **Bette Midler**, **Chaka Khan**, **Donna Summer** and **Barbra Streisand**. He briefly toured in a trio of background singers for **Roberta Flack**, who "fired" him as encouragement to pursue his own solo career. **Cotillion Records** signed him as lead singer of a quintet the label simply dubbed **Luther**, made up of former members of Shades of Jade. Neither

PHOTOS: PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES; GILLES PETARD/REDFERNS (GROUP)

PHOTO: RAYMOND BOYD/GETTY IMAGES

Clockwise from top left: Chicago, 1984; with Luther group members Anthony Hinton and G. Diane Sumler, 1976; with back-up singers Ava Cherry, Lisa Fischer and Kevin Owens, 1995

Celebrating Black Music Month 2025

GRUBMAN SHIRE MEISELAS & SACKS

ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA LAWYERS

PHOTOS: KMAZUR/WIREIMAGE (DIANA ROSS); AL PEREIRA/GETTY IMAGES/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES (MARIAH CAREY); PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

Clockwise from top left: With Diana Ross; with Mariah Carey; on The Oprah Winfrey Show, *1991*

Before Pop radio belatedly caught on to his genius, his core African American following crowned him an undisputed king of sophisticated R&B. At this moment, this master of the slow jam felt like our best-kept secret; we held his music close. Given his outsized talent, our secret wouldn't stay "for us, by us" for much longer.

Luther (1976) nor *This Close to You* (1977) moved the needle.

Another right-place-right-time scenario played out in the late '70s, when guitarist **Nile Rodgers** and bassist **Bernard Edwards** happened to be playing in the Luther live band and invited Vandross into the studio for a session after a Luther show. Rodgers, Edwards and other members of the disco band **Chic** were about to lay down tracks for their debut album. Vandross would appear on every album the band released in its heyday, and his vocals can be heard on classics including "Everybody Dance," "Le Freak," "I Want Your Love" "Dance, Dance, Dance (Yowsah, Yowsah, Yowsah)."

Inspired by Chic, an Italian American business exec named **Jacques Fred Petrus** concocted a studio band with a revolving door of musicians. Backing tracks recorded in Bologna were sent to the U.S., where Vandross laid down vocals on "Searching" and the title track to *The Glow of Love*. Staking out a space on R&B radio in the aftermath of disco's reign, both songs established Vandross as a voice tailor-made for Urban Contemporary playlists. ("The Glow of Love" continued its sonic allure into the 21st century, as the melody behind **Janet Jackson**'s 2001 hit, "All for You.") Vandross' assured **Epic Records** debut, *Never Too Much*—the first of many collaborative efforts with songwriter-bassist **Marcus Miller** and arranger **Nat Adderley Jr.**—arrived in August 1981.

Throughout the '80s, Luther Vandross received scores of **Grammy** nominations while being consistently shut out of a win. Simultaneously, his tours regularly filled venues like Radio City, and beloved R&B hits from *Never Too Much*, *Forever, for Always, for Love* (1982), *Busy Body* (1983), *The Night I Fell in Love* (1985), *Give Me the Reason* (1986) and *Any Love* (1988) dominated urban radio and Black households. Like **Barry White** in the '70s, Vandross was known for soundtracking

CELEBRATE

BLACK EXCELLENCE

FULL STOP MANAGEMENT

many romantic evenings. Reportedly, he coveted the success achieved by artists like **Whitney Houston** who had crossed over to white audiences thanks to heavy Top 40 and MTV airplay. Instead, he was regularly paired in the public imagination with the queen of the quiet storm, **Anita Baker**.

Along the way, Vandross produced material for three of his childhood inspirations: Franklin's *Jump to It* (1982), Warwick's *How Many Times Can We Say Goodbye* (1983) and **Diana Ross**'s "It's Hard for Me to Say" (1987). With Vandross's first Grammy win, the Best Male R&B Vocal Performance award for "Here and Now" (1991), a wider audience finally started coming around. When he began releasing duets with Jackson (1992's "The Best Things in Life Are Free") and **Mariah Carey** (a 1994 cover of "Endless Love"), the collaborations didn't feel like pop pandering at all. By the 1990s, Vandross had organically arrived at a new, more expansive fanbase.

PHOTO: EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS

PHOTO: LESTER COHEN/GETTY IMAGES

From top: With Roberta Flack, 1982; with Clive Davis, 1989

Power of Love—his first studio album of the '90s—spawned two Top 10 pop hits, including "Power of Love/Love Power." He wrote and produced for Houston on *I'm Your Baby Tonight* and scored his highest-charting pop single ever (#2) with "Endless Love."

That Mariah Carey duet made perfect sense as a pop pinnacle of his career, because in addition to his velveteen voice and songwriting-producing talents, Vandross was a master interpreter of song. The **Sinatra** of smooth soul, he could reimagine R&B standards through his own vocal alchemy in ways that brought tears to the original interpreter's eyes. (See his 1986 **NAACP Image Awards** performance of Warwick's "A House Is Not a Home," as she sits wet-eyed in the audience.)

Wonder's "Creepin' " stands as another prime example. Eighties babies unfamiliar with the original from Wonder's *Fulfillingness' First Finale* assumed the song belonged to Vandross, and after his 1985 cover version, perhaps it does. To say nothing of **Brenda Russell**'s "If Only for One Night," **The Temptations**' "Since I Lost My Baby," **Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell**'s "If This World Were Mine," **The Carpenters**' "Superstar" and many others. His powers as a vocal stylist were unparalleled.

Soon, hip-hop rebooted R&B for a new generation, often adding carnal lyricism that left far less to the imagination. In a milieu of **Jodeci**, **R. Kelly** and **D'Angelo**, new Luther music sounded a bit out of step. Still, he struck gold after signing with **Clive Davis**' **J Records**: His final hit, 2003's contemplative "Dance With My Father," earned Vandross his one and only Song of the Year Grammy. Sadly, the honor was overshadowed by tragedy: On April 16, 2003, he suffered a severe stroke at his home in New York and spent two months in a coma. Vandross would never fully recover: Two years later, he died of a heart attack at age 54. Franklin, Wonder, Warwick, LaBelle and **Cissy Houston** were among the speakers and singers at his memorial service.

Twenty years later, Vandross' reputation as one of music's greatest vocalists is undiminished. **Kanye West** sampled and **Jamie Foxx** namedropped him on "Slow Jamz," from West's debut, *The College Dropout*. An acclaimed 2024 documentary, *Luther: Never Too Much*, empathetically chronicled his life and legacy. And in 2025 he reached the top of the pop charts for the very first time, when **Kendrick Lamar** and **SZA**'s "Luther," which samples his and Cheryl Lynn's stirring version of "If This World Were Mine," spent double-digit weeks at #1. Luther, rightfully, is now a household name.■

In 2025 he reached the top of the pop charts for the very first time, when Kendrick Lamar and SZA's "Luther," which samples his and Cheryl Lynn's stirring version of "If This World Were Mine," spent double-digit weeks at #1.

RCA

BLACK MUSIC MONTH

FROM ATLANTA TO LAGOS

RCA Records Celebrates Black Music Month Worldwide

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

CHARLEY PRIDE—AND HIS INIMITABLE BARITONE—DID FOR COUNTRY MUSIC WHAT JACKIE ROBINSON DID FOR BASEBALL. SAID DOLLY PARTON, "THEM GOOD OL' WHITE BOYS, CHARLEY JUST REALLY GAVE THEM A RUN FOR THEIR MONEY."

BY KEITH MURPHY

IT WAS LATE SUMMER 1966

and Charley Pride was on the ride of his life.

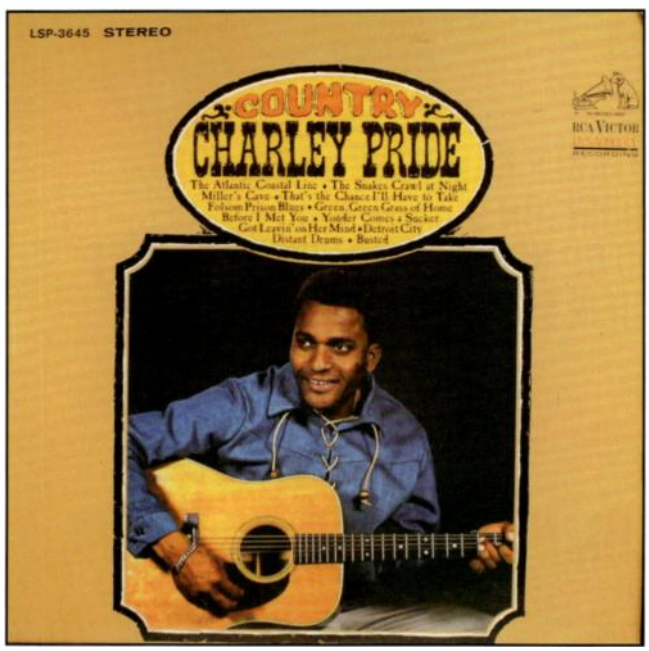
Just over a decade earlier, the Mississippi native was picking cotton on a 40-acre farm where he earned $3 per 100-pound bag. Now the smooth baritone had a hit on his hands with his debut LP, *Country Charley Pride*, which had just reached #16 on the *Billboard* Country Albums chart. The singer's melancholy breakthrough, "Just Between You and Me," was beginning its 19-week run on the Hot Country Singles chart on its way to becoming his first Top 10 record.

Pride's buzz was loud enough for him to receive an invite to perform at Detroit's **Olympia Stadium** alongside headliners **Merle Haggard**, **Buck Owens** and **Red Foley**. But there was a potential problem. Most of the 10,000 fans in attendance had no idea Pride was Black.

Beyond **Grand Ole Opry** pioneer **DeFord Bailey** and soul great **Ray Charles**, whose landmark 1962 work *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* captured the imagination of fans and critics, African Americans were a rarity in the mostly white country world. The previous year, Black folks had just been guaranteed the right to vote. Civil Rights protests dominated television news broadcasts. White America was nervous.

The poor soul tasked with defusing a potential powder keg that evening was DJ **Ralph Emery**. "We've got a young man here from down in Sledge, Mississippi, a good country singer," he said just seconds before Pride made his entrance. "The clapping

"I STOOD IN FRONT OF THE MICROPHONE, PROPPED MY ARMS ON THE GUITAR HANGING AROUND MY NECK, AND SPOKE. 'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,' I SAID, 'I REALIZE THIS IS A LITTLE UNIQUE... ME COMING OUT HERE ON A COUNTRY MUSIC SHOW WEARING THIS PERMANENT TAN.'"



and shouting erupted," Pride recalled in his 1994 memoir *Pride: The Charley Pride Story*. "The lights went up, and I stepped from the shadows. As suddenly as it had begun, the applause faded. It didn't stop—just dropped like the volume being turned down on a radio. It settled to a low murmur."

Pride would go on to sell more than 70 million albums, becoming one of country music's towering figures. But first he had to survive his Motor City debut.

"I stood in front of the microphone, propped my arms on the guitar hanging around my neck, and spoke. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' I said, 'I realize this is a little unique... me coming out here on a country music show wearing this permanent tan.'"

Pride's self-deprecating humor was no shtick. He often used his aw-shucks charm to diffuse what he perceived as apprehension or fuss over his race. During a 2014 appearance on the Canadian television talk show, *George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight*, he downplayed his pioneer status.

"I see you backstage, and what [did] you tell me?" Stroumboulopoulos prodded Pride. "I said we're not gonna talk about the first Black, the first colored," Pride answered without hesitation.

PRIDE'S CAREER STATS ARE IMPRESSIVE

even by country-legend standards: 29 #1 country singles, 31 gold and four platinum albums and three **Grammy** awards. From the late '60s to the early '80s, Pride amassed more hits than **Willie Nelson**, **Dolly Parton**, **George Jones**, **Conway Twitty**, **Loretta Lynn** and **Waylon Jennings**.

His first million-seller, "Kiss an Angel Good Mornin'," (1971), crossed over to the pop charts, landing at #21. On the cover of the accompanying album, *Charley Pride Sings Heart Songs*, a smiling Pride stands in front of a sea of white flowers, as amiable and inviting as his warm croon. He could even make an eyebrow-raising line like "And love her like the devil when you get back home" sound genteel.

In the '70s, Pride became the avatar for the smooth sound known as "Countrypolitan." These pop-friendly productions turned down the steel guitar and added floating background vocals and waves of gentle strings. Songs like "I'm Just Me" (1971), "She's Too Good to Be True" (1972), "A Shoulder to Cry On" (1973), "Hope You're Feelin' Me (Like I'm Feelin' You)" (1975) and "Someone Loves You Honey" (1978) were hits aimed beyond the loyal country contingent.

But Pride himself was far from formulaic. With an unassuming, straight-no-chaser delivery, he was a staunch traditionalist who grew up listening to foundational country stars **Roy Acuff**, **Hank Williams** and **Ernest Tubb**.

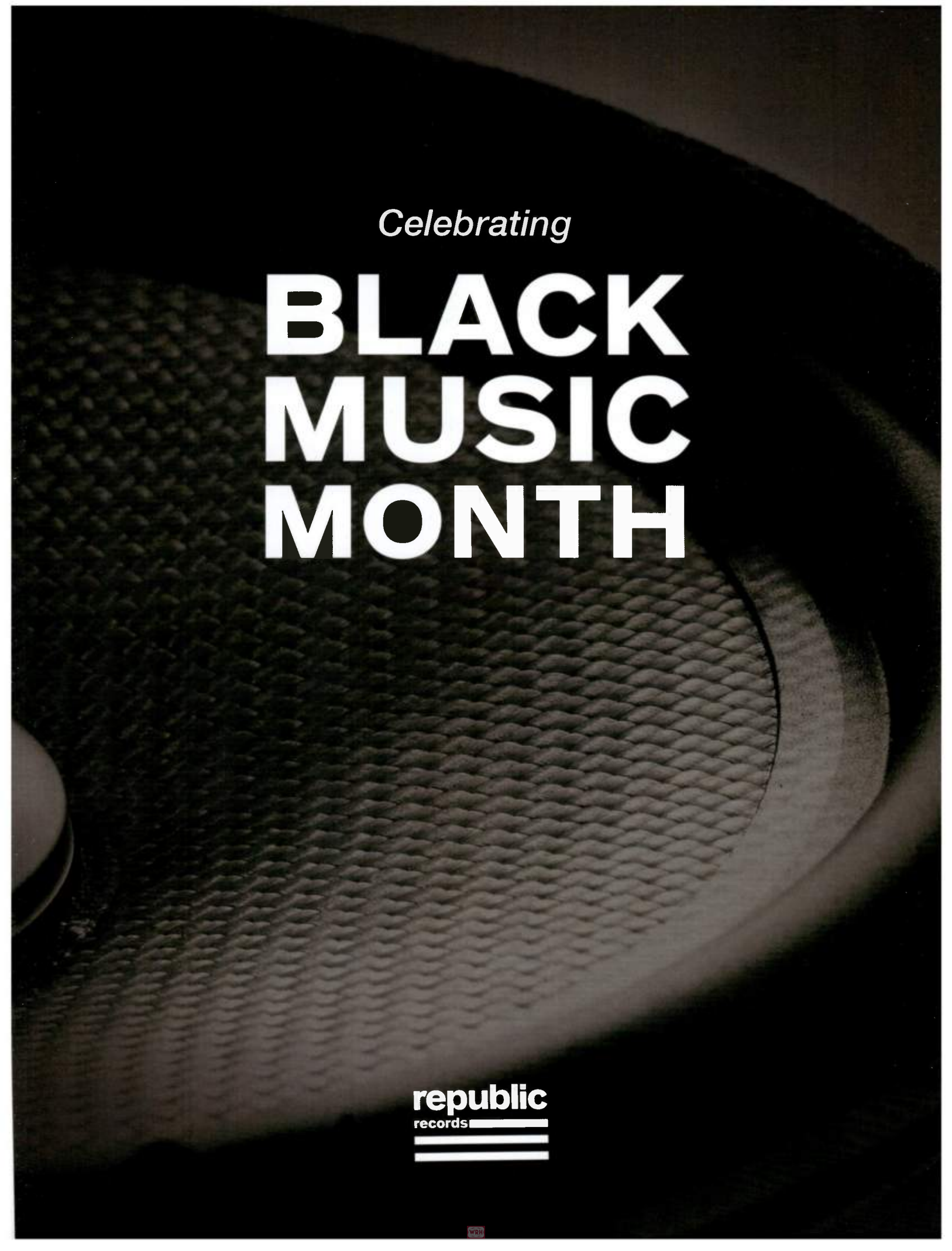
"He sang so much better than so many of the good country artists... at the time," Parton said of her friend and collaborator in the 2019 documentary *Charley Pride: I'm Just Me*. "Them good ol' white boys, Charley just really gave them a run for their money."

SINCE HIS DEATH IN 2020 AT AGE 86,

Pride has taken on a mythic status in the country music community. In 2024, **Brad Paisley** honored Pride before a performance at the **American Music Awards**, recalling how the singer gave him his phone number after seeing the then 15-year-old play. "And he said to my dad, 'Hey, I wanna help your son,'" Paisley said. "And help me he did."

Crystal Gayle called him "a cornerstone of country-music." **Luke Combs** posted on X following Pride's death that he was "in awe of his presence and his talent." And **Darius Rucker**, who has been cited as a successor to Pride, praised him in a heartfelt tribute. "I couldn't have done what I do, I don't think, if there hadn't been Charley before me," he wrote.

Since the beginnings of his career, Pride has been linked to **Jackie Robinson**, who on April 15, 1947, became the first African American to break major league baseball's racist segregation policy.


Celebrating
BLACK
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Pride, who also played in baseball's Negro Leagues, broke through the color barrier as country's first Nashville-backed Black talent, winning the first of five straight *Music City News* Male Vocalist awards in 1969.

By 1971, he had solidified his standing, picking up the CMA's Male Vocalist of the Year prize as well as the most coveted award of the night. "The Entertainer of the Year... yeah, he's due, our buddy, Mr. Charley Pride!" announced an ecstatic **Glen Campbell** as the overwhelmed singer made his way to the stage amid a standing ovation.

Pride, befitting his good nature, downplayed any notion of being an African American savior. "The difference with Jackie Robinson and Charley Pride," he said in 2016, "is [Jackie] was specifically picked to do what he basically did, to break the barriers... I'm here by choice."

Greg Gosselin, general manager at Pride's final label home, **Music City Records,** believes that the singer benefited greatly from his even-keel demeanor. "Charley had a friendly and very non-threatening disposition," he tells *HITS*. "That probably encouraged many of the gatekeepers on Nashville's Music Row to get behind him."

PRIDE BOUGHT HIS FIRST GUITAR IN 1948

with money he earned working in the back-breaking fields. He was less enamored with the blues than he was with the country & western music he grew up with. His stern father, **Fowler MacArthur Pride,** forbade Charley and his 10 siblings to turn the radio station from his beloved Grand Ole Opry broadcasts.

"Nashville was about 275 miles from where I was born down in Mississippi," Pride explained in a 2017 **NPR** interview, referring to **WSM,** the Nashville station that broadcast the Opry shows. "And it was 50,000 watts, and that's what we got every Saturday. And I just got kind of hooked on it."

By the early '60s, after struggling in baseball's minor leagues, Pride, with the unwavering support of his wife **Rozene,** got serious about music. A smelter by day, he was offered $20 bucks to play at Helena, Montana's **White Mill Bar,** where he eventually won over the all-white patrons.

While opening in Helena for Grand Ole Opry standouts **Red Foley** and **Red Sovine** in 1962, Sovine was impressed by the singer's renditions of **Guy Mitchell**'s "Heartaches by the Number" and **Hank Williams**' "Lovesick Blues," and he asked Pride to come out to Nashville. After in-demand producer **Jack Clement** heard Pride sing, he brought him to the attention of legendary country guitarist and **RCA Records** A&R man **Chet Atkins.**

"I ran into Chet one day by the Coke machine at RCA," Clement recalled in a 2008 interview. "He asked me what I had done with that colored boy, and I said I haven't done anything yet, that I'm thinking about pressing it out myself. And he said, 'Well, uh, I've been thinking about this, and we might be passing up another **Elvis Presley.**'"

Atkins signed Pride to a recording deal in 1965. By the following year he was the talk of Nashville. "Put Charley Pride on the worst P.A. system in the country, and it doesn't matter," Atkins said in a 1971 *Esquire* piece. "He'll penetrate. That's greatness. Few have it. Charley does."

But while Pride made it known that he wanted to be judged by his music and not by his race, some of his white country peers were not on the same page. In *Pride* he recounted the time George Jones painted KKK on the side of his car as a "practical joke." Willie Nelson nicknamed him "Supern***er." Often times Pride dismissed such racist incidents as jovial hazing among colleagues. But there

PHOTO: TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO: JASON DAVIS/GETTY IMAGES FOR NAMM

PHOTO: FREDERICK BREEDON IV/WIREIMAGE

From top: With Brad Paisley at the CMA Awards, 2016; with Jimmie Allen, 2017; with Darius Rucker, 2016

"I COULDN'T HAVE DONE WHAT I DO, I DON'T THINK, IF THERE HADN'T BEEN CHARLEY BEFORE ME." —DARIUS RUCKER

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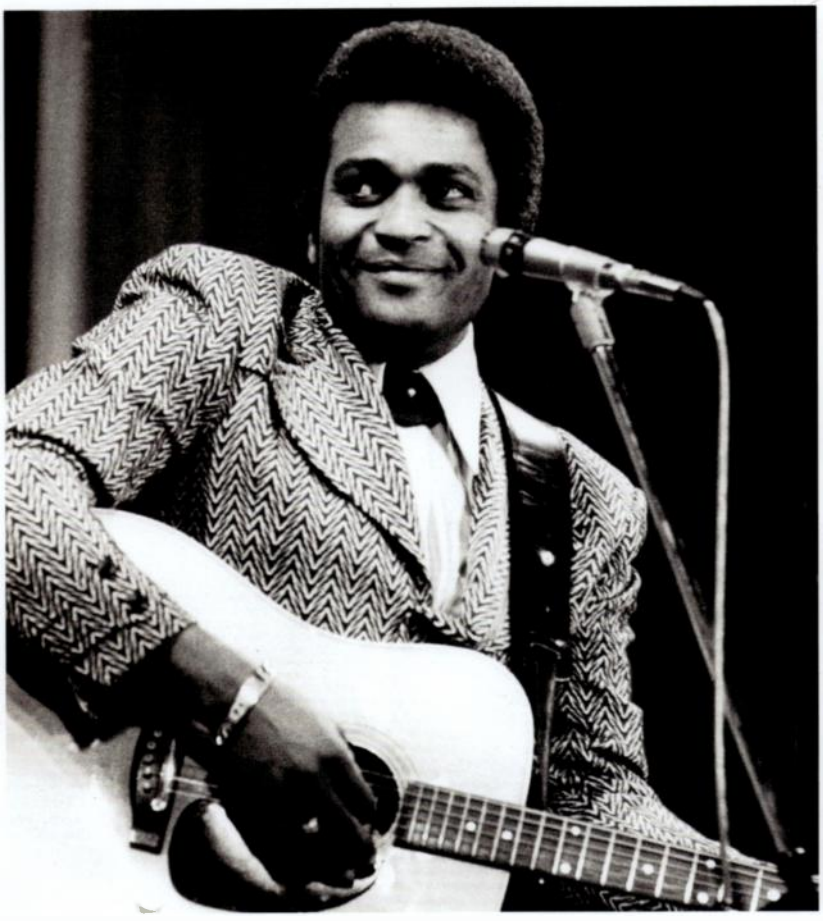


PHOTOS: MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES (FAR LEFT); MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

"CHARLEY HAD A FRIENDLY AND VERY NON-THREATENING DISPOSITION. THAT PROBABLY ENCOURAGED MANY OF THE GATEKEEPERS ON NASHVILLE'S MUSIC ROW TO GET BEHIND HIM." —GREG GOSSELIN

were the rare moments when his anger turned visceral.

"Once, someone in the industry said to me, 'I don't mean no harm'—you know, just throwing that in—'but I want to ask: How come every time we let *y'all* in, you just take over?'" Pride recalled of such an interaction in a 2016 interview. "I told him, 'See that barrel over there? Go peek in it. Oh, look, there I am, down at the bottom! Now where is there for me to go?'"

Indeed, there is an uncomfortable discussion to be had about Pride's place in the pantheon of country royalty. There were no milestone celebrations when he turned 70 as there were for **Johnny Cash** and Nelson. He did not enjoy yearlong reissues like Lynn or a late-career album resurgence produced by **Rick Rubin** or **Jack White**. Pride wasn't inducted into the Grand Ole Opry until 1993. And when he did accept the Pioneer Award at the ACMs the following year, it was the first recognition he'd received from the organization.

PRIDE'S SUCCESS, AND HIS QUIET STRUGGLE

for full acceptance, became inspiration for generations of Black country artists. **Linda Martell** became the first Black woman to appear on the *Billboard* Top Country chart in 1969. R&B artists **The Pointer Sisters** and **Lionel Richie** crossed over to country, enjoying critical and commercial acclaim in an art form that owes its early sound to the banjo brought over by West African slaves. Nowadays, an array of artists, from songwriter **Alice Randall** and instrumentalist **Rhiannon Giddens** to singers Rucker, **Kane Brown, BRELAND, Mickey Guyton** and **Shaboozey**, owe a debt to Pride.

Country music's reception of Black artists, whether homegrown or outliers, still has a way to go (witness Nashville's muted reaction to **Beyoncé**'s Grammy-winning *COWBOY CARTER*, which shined a spotlight on the aforementioned Martell). But even in the afterlife, Pride's vision for a more diverse country scene still resonates.

"Recently we came across a complete tribute album for **Brook Benton** by Charley," says Gosselin of the project slated for release later this year. "Benton was primarily known as an R&B artist, but he had number of country albums that came out in the early 1960s. We're all trying to do the best that we can to carry on Charley's legacy."■

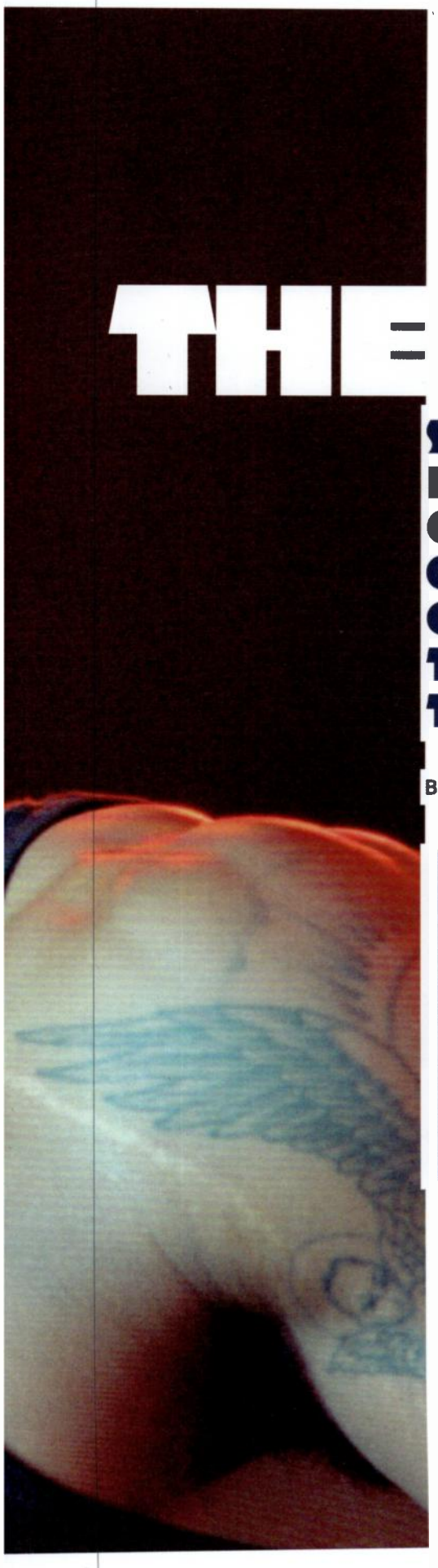
MY HUMANITY IS BOUND UP IN YOURS, FOR WE CAN ONLY BE HUMAN TOGETHER

DESMOND TUTU

Epic

SINCE 1953

PHOTO BY FRANS SCHELLEKENS/REDFERNS)



THE ENIGMA

SINGULAR TALENT D'ANGELO HAS RELEASED ONLY THREE ALBUMS OVER HIS 30-PLUS-YEAR CAREER, BUT HE CHANGED THE COURSE OF R&B IN THE PROCESS.

BY KEITH MURPHY

Bob Power could not believe what was coming out of the speakers inside his Manhattan studio. It was 1993 and the engineer had been introduced by **A Tribe Called Quest's** DJ, **Ali Shaheed Muhammad**, to a shy 19-year-old from Richmond, Virginia, who went by the name of **D'Angelo.**

"'Holy fuck' was my reaction," says Power, known for his work with Tribe, **De La Soul** and **Miles Davis,** about hearing the demo that would become D'Angelo's landmark 1995 debut, *Brown Sugar.* "D's music was real gutbucket R&B filtered through someone who grew up listening to hip-hop."

D'Angelo's seismic release launched the back-to-basics neo-soul era that produced **Erykah Badu, Maxwell, Jill Scott, Angie Stone** and **India.Arie.** His apex, as anyone with a cable subscription will remember, was the orgasmic "Untitled (How Does It Feel)" from 2000's *Voodoo* album, featuring an Adonis-chiseled, butt-naked D'Angelo in the song's infamous, one-shot music video.

He was also a chronic perfectionist who was uncomfortable in the spotlight; the capricious singer, now 51, has dropped just three albums in a 31-year span.

"He's not a big fan of rushing anything," Badu mused of D'Angelo.

Some would say it's a small miracle that D'Angelo, who was nearly crushed by an avalanche of self-doubt, drugs and booze in the '00s, is

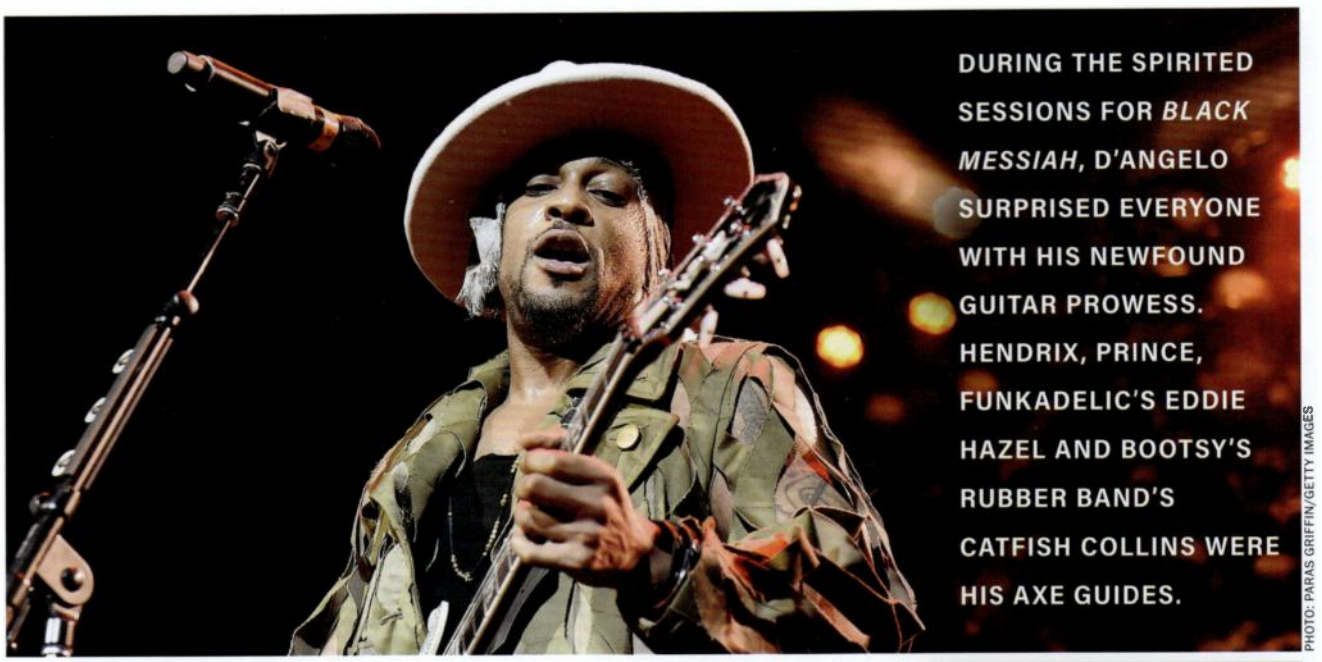


PHOTO: PARAS GRIFFIN/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTOS: VINNIE ZUFFANTE/GETTY IMAGES

Top: Live in 2015; from left: at the American Music Awards, 1997; at the MTV Movie Awards, 2000; in 2015

"I JUST SAID PLAIN AND SIMPLE, 'MAN, THERE WAS A PERIOD IN WHICH IT SEEMED LIKE YOU WERE HELL-BENT ON FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR IDOLS, AND THE ONE THING YOU HAVE YET TO FOLLOW THEM IN WAS DEATH." —QUESTLOVE

still alive and kicking. When he appeared in the recent **Hulu** documentary *Sly Lives! (aka The Burden of Black Genius)*, chronicling the turbulent career of **Sly and the Family Stone** leader **Sylvester Stewart**, he could just as easily have been discussing his own struggles with fame.

"The hang-ups, baggage, guilt and pain and shame that comes with it, you know?" D'Angelo explained. "And if you don't know how to handle it, if you don't know... have your soul centered, and people around you that you really trust, and people that really know you and that's really down for you... yeah, man, it can be unbearable... It'll turn you into an unwilling participant. And that's... that's the equivalent to hell."

Born in Richmond, Virginia, **Michael Eugene Archer** was the son of a Pentecostal preacher father and a supportive mother who played the organ. He was discovered and signed by music publisher **Jocelyn Cooper**. Local rap group **Dirty Soulz** had previously set up a meeting with Cooper to play their demo. She thought the MCs were average, but the production she heard was special. "I asked them who the producer was, and they were, like, 'our friend Michael Archer,'" Cooper once told me. "I told them the next time you are in New York, bring him up."

When D'Angelo appeared at her Manhattan office in fall

MUSIC EXPRESSES
THAT WHICH
CANNOT BE PUT
INTO WORDS
AND THAT WHICH
CANNOT REMAIN
SILENT

GRACE JONES

'92, "He had a high-top fade, two big hoop earrings and saggy pants way before everybody had them," Cooper recalled. "He looked like a hip-hop kid."

But as D'Angelo sat at the piano, what came out was extraordinary: a **Miles Davis** song, **Jodeci**, **Stevie Wonder** and **Marvin Gaye** covers, a gospel spiritual. "This kid was 17!" Cooper said. "I was, like, 'You must sign with me!'"

Much of the bones of *Brown Sugar* had already been laid down in D'Angelo's ragtag Virginia recording studio using only a low-grade mic, a prehistoric **Ensoniq EPS-16** sequencer and keyboard and a four-track.

"I didn't want to overproduce the shit," D'Angelo said about the future *Brown Sugar* tracks, two of which included lyrical contributions from his brother, **Luther Archer**. "I wanted it to sound raw, not real polished."

"I came to the realization that most of the songs did not need to be constructed," Power says.

D'Angelo blanched when Power suggested that they add some more live instrumentation to give a few of the tracks a more natural sheen. But once he heard jazz bassist **Larry Grenadier** work his bottom magic on "Smooth" and guitarist **Mark Whitfield**'s riffs on "Me and Those Dreamin' Eyes of Mine," he was sold.

Gradually the lineup of songs came together. D'Angelo collaborated with Muhammad on the swinging "Brown Sugar." A cover of **Smokey Robinson**'s 1979 quiet storm favorite "Cruisin'" was added. **Tony! Toni! Toné!**'s **Raphael Saadiq** co-produced, co-wrote and played bass on the standout "Lady," and Angie Stone co-wrote "Jonz in My Bonz." (The multiplatinum singer Stone, who died in an automobile accident in May, played an instrumental role in the making of *Brown Sugar* and shared a son with D'Angelo.)

At times it felt like D'Angelo was back at his family's small white church; he played organ on the composition "Higher," giving it a sanctified feel.

But D'Angelo also showed a penchant for profane storytelling. On the creeping blues-funk of "Shit, Damn, Motherfucker," he comes home to find his wife in the bed with his best friend. "I'm tellin' you what's on my mind/ I'm 'bout to go get my 9," he growls as if possessed by a '30s Delta bluesman. The song's narrator kills them both and is led away in handcuffs.

Fueled by the jazzy title track, a boom-bap-inflected ode to marijuana, *Brown Sugar* would go on to sell more than 2 million copies. Soon, everyone wanted to work with him.

D'Angelo backed up **Wu-Tang Clan** member **The GZA** on the haunting "Cold World" remix. He added blissful chemistry on the sultry **Lauryn Hill** duet "Nothing Even Matters." And **Prince** invited him and **Roots** drummer **Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson** to jam onstage at his July 24, 1997, gig at New York's **Tramps** nightclub, where they played "The Ballad of Dorothy Parker" and "Brown Sugar." It was a surreal moment for D'Angelo, who was first introduced to Prince's music by his older brothers.

"I felt like I knew [Prince] very well," D'Angelo said in 2021. "I've been studying him all my life. And when I met him, I felt like I'd lived my life for that moment."

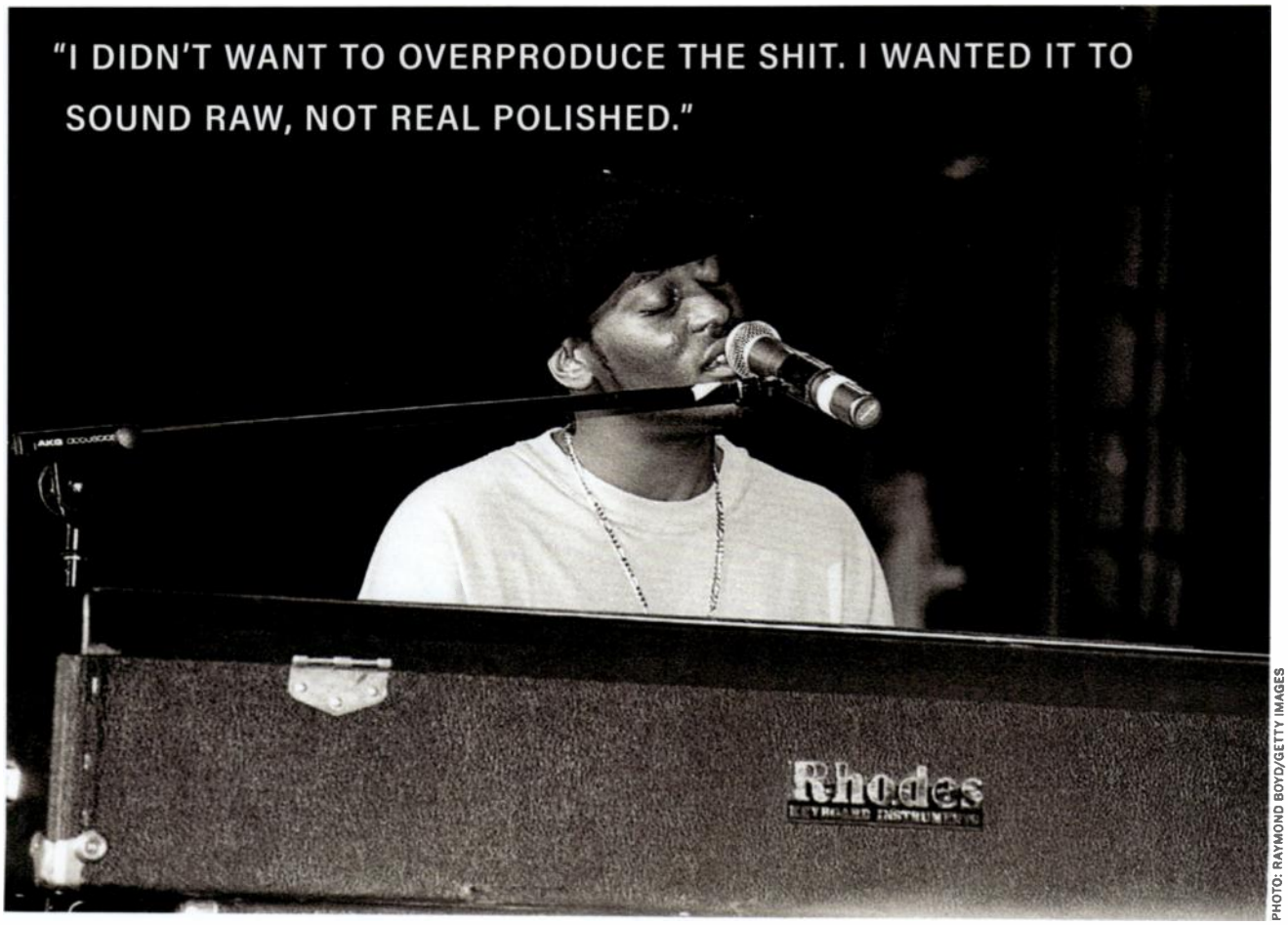
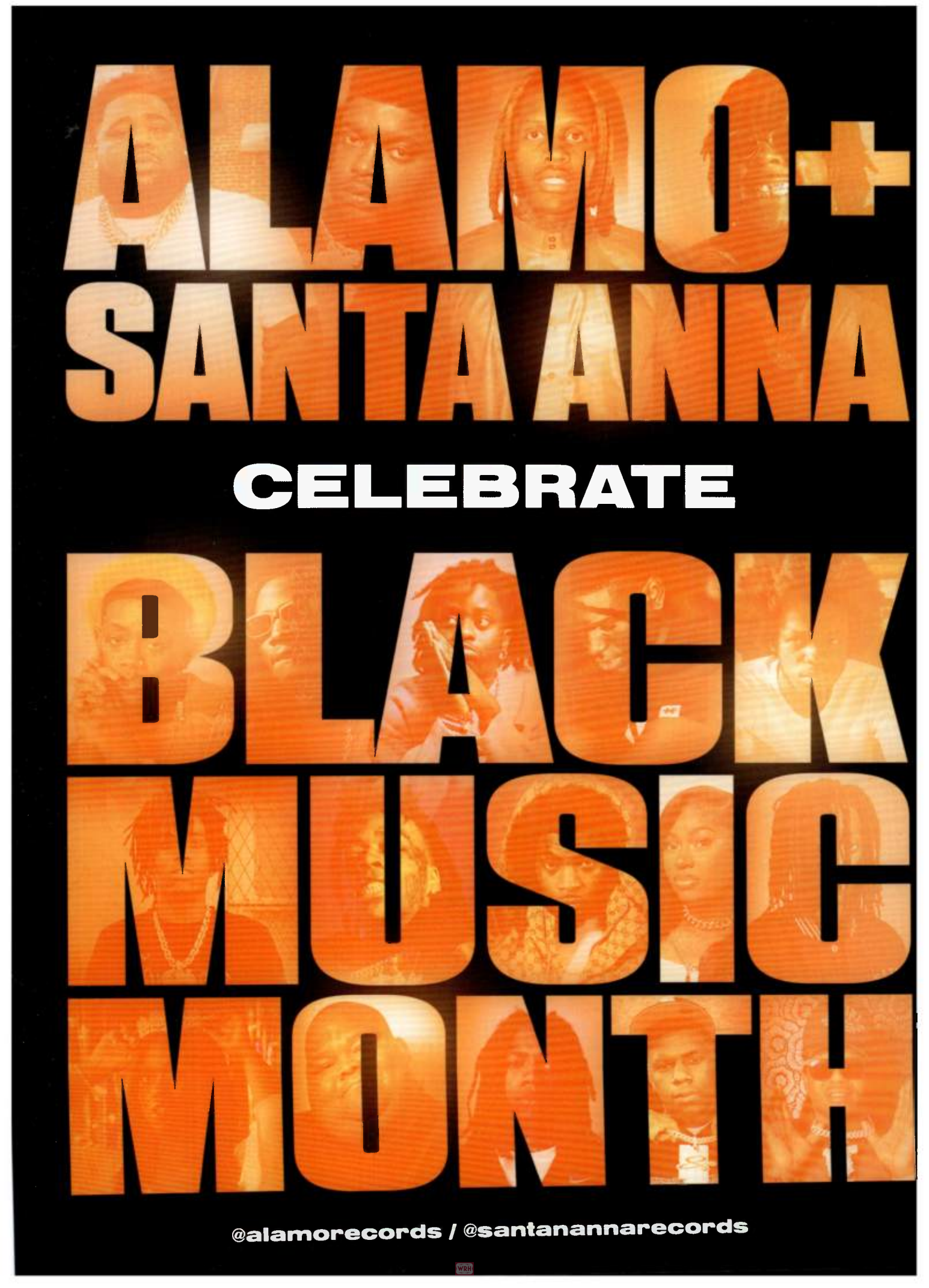


PHOTO: RAYMOND BOYD/GETTY IMAGES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"I FELT LIKE I KNEW [PRINCE] VERY WELL. I'VE BEEN STUDYING HIM ALL MY LIFE. AND WHEN I MET HIM, I FELT LIKE I'D LIVED MY LIFE FOR THAT MOMENT."

PHOTO: SKIP BOLEN/WIREIMAGE

Voodoo, the follow-up to *Brown Sugar*, was a bold curveball. Recorded between '97 and '99 at **Electric Lady Studios** in New York City, unconventional funk-laced songs like "Playa, Player," "The Root," "Spanish Joint" and "One Mo'Gin" exhibited a looser, acoustic, organic feel. D'Angelo's stripped-down vocals sounded as if he were buried in dirt.

"Untitled (How Does It Feel)" was an unabashed homage to Prince (Questlove once described it as "finding the line between parody and honesty"), a sexy slow jam written by D'Angelo and Saadiq that won a **Grammy** for Best Male R&B Vocal Performance in 2001.

When it came time to take the album out on the road, D'Angelo assembled a fierce 13-piece supergroup he dubbed **The Soultronics** featuring **The Who** bassist **Pino Palladino**, **James Poyser** on keyboards, Questlove on drums and jazz trumpeter **Roy Hargrove**. This time around, D'Angelo wasn't just content with sitting behind a piano and crooning. He danced, sweated and commanded his band like **James Brown.**

Along with rave reviews came screams from female followers begging D to "take it off" in order to get a glimpse of his new hard-bodied physique. Soon the catcalls became too much for the sensitive artist.

"One time I got mad when a female threw money at me onstage, and that made me feel fucked up, and I threw the money back at her," he recalled to GQ. "I was like, 'I'm not a stripper.'"

Following the overwhelming success of "Untitled (How Does It Feel)" and the *Voodoo* tour, D'Angelo grew increasingly withdrawn as he battled addiction and hid from the pressures wrought by fame. By 2006, he had gone into exile. Questlove worried that his friend was headed toward tragedy.

"I just said plain and simple, 'Man, there was a period in which it seemed like you were hell-bent on following the footsteps of our idols, and the one thing you have yet to follow them in was death," he recalled of a sobering conversation he had with D'Angelo.

D'Angelo certainly came close to rock & roll immortality. In a 2005 accident that occurred during a Virginia drive, he was ejected from his car, which nearly killed him. "I felt like I was going to be next," he admitted to GQ, alluding to other musical greats who died young, like **Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, Tupac Shakur, The Notorious B.I.G.** and **J Dilla**. "I ain't bullshitting. I was scared then... I was so fucked-up."

Public glimpses of D'Angelo were treated like Bigfoot sightings. After attending a **Björk** concert at the **Roseland Ballroom** in February 2012, Questlove posted about going to the show with his reclusive friend: "even d'angelo was mind blown & he leaves the house for NOBODY."

Slowly, D'Angelo began to re-emerge from isolation and plot his next recording for his new label, **RCA**. He recruited guitarist **Jesse Johnson**, formerly of the funk outfit **The Time**, and found inspiration from backup singer **Kendra Foster**, who co-wrote eight songs for his comeback album. The spark was reignited.

During the spirited sessions for *Black Messiah*, D'Angelo surprised everyone with his newfound guitar prowess. Hendrix, Prince, **Funkadelic's Eddie Hazel** and **Bootsy's Rubber Band's Catfish Collins** were his axe guides.

Black Messiah dropped unannounced in December 2014. "All we wanted was a chance to talk/ Instead our bodies got outlined in chalk," D'Angelo sang on "The Charade," a track that paid homage to both the '60s Civil Rights Movement and the 2014 Ferguson unrest over the police killing of an unarmed Black man. *Black Messiah* sold more than 117,000 copies in its first week, proof that there was still demand for this unpredictable talent.

A decade has now passed since *Black Messiah*. There have been breadcrumbs here and there hinting at a new project. "He's probably in the best mind state and condition that I've experienced in a minute," Questlove said recently.

Power, too, is excited about the future of the artist who made him a believer so many years ago. "I don't know if he's going to sell a lot of records," he says, "but it's certainly going to be earth-shattering."■

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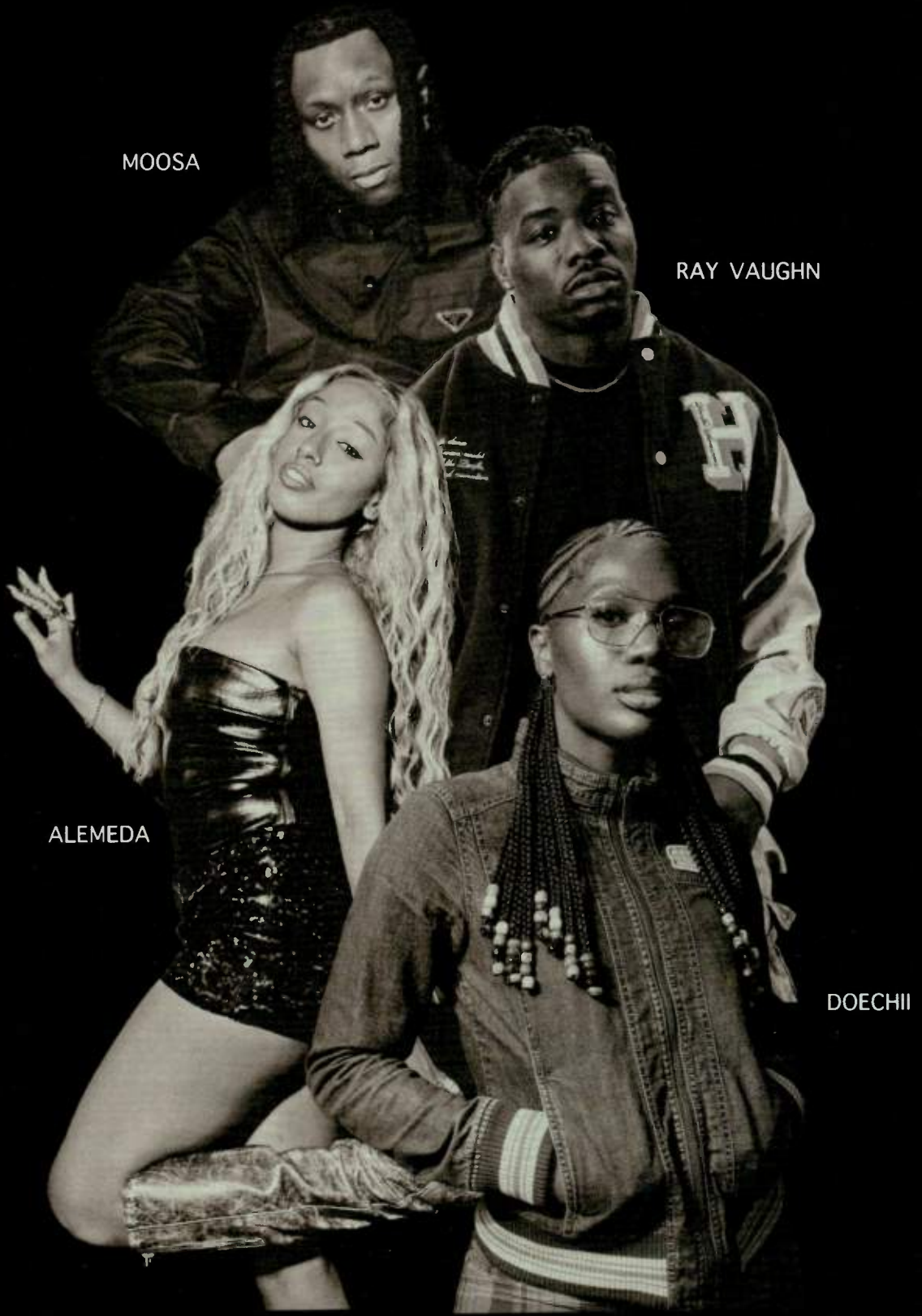

A young generation, ready to lead the next.

TOP DAWG ENTERTAINMENT. 2025.

20 Essential Vocal Performances

Out of the thousands (tens of thousands?) to choose from, here are a handful of our all-time favorites, presented chronologically.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

Irma Thomas, "It's Raining" (Minit, 1962)

When Thomas released her first record in 1959, at the age of 18, she already sounded fully grown. Maybe her preternatural poise came from having four kids and two divorces while still in her teens. Whatever the reason, her plainspoken alto has always been guided by a calm whirlwind of confidence which eschews fireworks for understatement, a discerning use of melisma and the expert syncopation associated with her New Orleans hometown. Thomas recorded mainly for independent labels—the melancholy "It's Raining," written and produced by the mighty **Allen Toussaint**, was on Minit—and never got the kind of major-label push that might've made her more famous. Although she's not a household name, she's revered in the right households. *–Rob Tannenbaum*

Sam Cooke, "A Change Is Gonna Come" (RCA Victor, 1965)

"A Change Is Gonna Come" appeared as a posthumous single weeks after Cooke's murder in December 1964, timing that made the song feel like an elegy even if it was written as a reflection of the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. A series of interlocked vignettes, "A Change Is Gonna Come" isn't a protest song so much as an inspirational anthem; the focus is not on the struggle but rather deliverance. Drawing from his roots in gospel music, Cooke delivers a stunning performance, sounding simultaneously sorrowful and hopeful; his soaring vocals leave a sense of optimism, not grief, which is why it became an enduring standard, a secular hymn that feels intensely spiritual. *–Stephen Thomas Erlewine*

Smokey Robinson & the Miracles, "Ooo Baby Baby" (Tamla/Motown, 1965)

Arriving in a swirl of strings, "Ooo Baby Baby" initially scans like the first flush of romance, an impression sustained by Robinson, whose croon immediately seems soft and comforting. This love is a mirage. The first line of the song is "I did you wrong, my heart went out to play," revealing that "Ooo Baby Baby" is an apology as a seduction: the narrator did his lover wrong, so he's pleading for forgiveness. The brilliance of Smokey's performance is that his falsetto is so supple and smooth, it camouflages his transgressions. *–STE*

Bill Withers, "Ain't No Sunshine" (Sussex, 1971)

Withers defied easy categorization. His songs blended folk and soul in a way that suited the sensitive introspection of the early 1970s; this, his breakthrough hit, epitomized his idiosyncrasies. **Stephen Stills** strummed folk chords on an acoustic guitar, leaving space for a supple groove that allowed Withers to sing with a disarming frankness. Withers' conversational delivery first seems forlorn, but the song transforms by its midpoint. During a crucial stretch, Withers builds tension by singing "I know" as a mantra, the repetition becoming warm and seductive. *–STE*

Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes,
"If You Don't Know Me by Now"
(Philadelphia International, 1972)

It seems implausible now, but there was a time when **Teddy Pendergrass** was known as just a supporting player in the singing group Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes. At least that's the way leader Melvin envisioned it. Fortunately, celebrated Philadelphia production tandem **Gamble and Huff**, who had already helped propel the **O'Jays** to international fame, saw superstar potential in the powerful Pendergrass. On "If You Don't Know Me by Now," the group's breakthrough pop hit, Teddy turns the pain of an incoming breakup into pure soulman catharsis. *–Keith Murphy*

Marvin Gaye "Distant Lover"
(Tamla/Motown, 1974)

Originally buried on the second side of *Let's Get It On*, "Distant Lover" became a signature Gaye track thanks to its live incarnation, released just a year after its parent LP. Performing in front of an Oakland crowd eager to thrill to his every gesture, Gaye milks all the carnality out of his slow groove, teasing out unexpected high notes during the verses, then climbing to ecstatic heights during an epic conclusion when he's begging his absent lover to come back home. *–STE*

Gladys Knight & the Pips,
"Midnight Train to Georgia" (Buddah, 1973)

Departing **Motown** after a long run, Gladys Knight & the Pips situated themselves at Buddah Records, an imprint known in the early '70s for bubblegum and AM pop. On "Midnight Train to Georgia," the group molds those Top 40 styles to suit its style, transforming the country crawl of the **Cissy Houston** original into snappy pop-soul. Knight wanted to give the ballad a groove reminiscent of **Al Green**, a shift in tempo that heightens the drama of the story of a woman who decided to follow her lover on his midnight trek out of Hollywood. Knight's fleet, fluid phrasing sustains the narrative tension, leaving the Pips to punctuate her plight with interjections that sweeten her sacrifice. *–STE*

Earth, Wind & Fire, "Reasons"
(Columbia, 1975)

"It's funny 'cause people say, 'We played that song at my wedding,' and I'm like, 'Did you listen to the lyrics?'" singer **Phillip Bailey** once mused to *Entertainment Weekly*, discussing the ironic one-night-stand subject matter in EW&F's timeless high-pitched single, "Reasons." Maybe the confusion lies in the delicate phrasing on the original studio recording. Luckily, the **Baltimore Civic Center** live version (which remains a Quiet Storm classic despite never being released as a single) unleashes Bailey's unvarnished, explosive passion, culminating in a riveting call-and-response with saxophonist **Don "He plays so beautiful, don't you agree" Myrick**. *–K.M.*

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David Ruffin, "Walk Away From Love" (Motown, 1975)

Ruffin struggled after leaving **The Temptations**, finally rallying in 1975 with "Walk Away From Love," a song written by **Charles Kipps** and produced by **Van McCoy** that topped the R&B charts and cracked the pop Top 10. Occupying the same nascent disco territory as many singles released on **Philadelphia International** in the mid-'70s, "Walk Away From Love" finds its insistent beat sweetened by strings and the harmonies of **Faith, Hope & Charity**. The smooth settings bring out the grain and texture in Ruffin's voice: his falsetto at the end of the chorus feels anguished, his voice cracking as he strives for the high note, an element that gives this polished dance tune some welcome grit. –*STE*

The Emotions, "Don't Ask My Neighbors" (Columbia, 1977)

While you may be tempted to choose The Emotions' enduring dancefloor smash "Best of My Love," the Chicago sisters' finest vocal moment remains the delicate R&B radio staple "Don't Ask My Neighbors." Produced by **Earth Wind & Fire** bandleader **Maurice White**, the poignant ballad finds **Sheila Hutchinson** gently assuaging a lover's self-doubt over their relationship. But as with any heart-grabbing Emotions number, the secret sauce lies in the group's sublime harmonies. Here, Sheila, **Wanda** and **Jeanette** deliver a seamless, dramatic blend that never lets you forget their gospel roots. –*K.M.*

Stevie Wonder, "As" (Tamla, 1976)

There's an embarrassment of riches throughout Wonder's 1976 opus *Songs in the Key of Life*. But if you want to experience the great man at his most urgent and dramatic, push play on "As." Wonder begins his testimony of enduring love straight by the book, as the slow, methodical buildup adds potency to his fervent commitment: "Just as hate knows love's the cure/ You can rest your mind assure/ That I'll be loving you always," he sings. By the time jazz legend **Herbie Hancock** takes off on his **Fender Rhodes**, Wonder has turned up the intensity with a guttural declaration of faithfulness that only could come from up above. –*K.M.*

Jennifer Holliday, "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" (Geffen, 1982)

The all-time diva flex, Holliday's original version of "And Am I Telling You I'm Not Going," from the Broadway musical *Dreamgirls*, is a torch song of excruciating, almost unbearable pain and desperation. "Like the sound of thunder rolling off a mountain," wrote **Stephen Holden** in the *New York Times*, as Holiday's character, Effie, pleads with her no-good manager/lover to stay with her: "And YOU/ and YOU/ and YOU/ you're gonna love me!" she wails, one (perfectly sung) operatic convulsion after another. The song became an instant standard: Holiday earned both a **Tony** and a **Grammy** for her performance, and more than two decades later, **Jennifer Hudson** won an **Oscar** for playing Effie—and belting the showstopper—in the film version. –*Craig Marks*

BLACK MUSIC MONTH

Celebrating Black songwriters and composers,
who continue to inspire music's next chapter.

SONY MUSIC
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Patti Labelle, "If You Only Knew"
(Philadelphia International, 1983)

Labelle left her namesake group in the mid-1970s, not long after the runaway success of "Lady Marmalade," but she didn't have a true solo hit until "If You Only Knew," a ballad that spent four weeks at the top of the R&B charts in 1983. "If You Only Knew" marked a change of pace for the singer, with Labelle in gleaming quiet storm territory that sharply contrasted with the kinetic energy of her girl group. The restraint is the key to the song's power: Labelle spends much of the song keeping her range under wraps, which makes her runs at the end so thrilling. *–STE*

Tina Turner, "What's Love Got to Do With It"
(Capitol, 1984)

The fulcrum of Turner's 1980s comeback, "What's Love Got to Do With It" flips the script on the accepted wisdom regarding the Queen of Rock & Roll. Known for taking things nice and rough, Turner eases into the slower tempo of the track, the relaxed gait and gilded production bringing out a sense of heartbreak. In this sleek setting, where the synths gleam but don't overpower the song, Turner's rasp seems flinty and cutting, evidence that broken hearts have turned her into a quintessential survivor. *–STE*

Anita Baker, "Sweet Love"
(Elektra, 1986)

It's fitting that, early in her career, Baker drew comparisons to such distinct song stylists as **Billie Holiday**, **Sarah Vaughan** and **Nancy Wilson**. The Toledo, Ohio, native distills a simmering intensity on this **Grammy**-winning single that in lesser hands would come off as sentimental smooth jazz. But Baker possesses too complex a voice for that. She takes her time, ensuring that you are wrapped up in every syllable and phrase. *–K.M.*

Whitney Houston, "Didn't We Almost Have It All"
(Arista, 1987)

Early in her career, Houston specialized in bright, sunny pop and immaculate soul, both performed with finesse and flair. "Didn't We Almost Have It All" opened up a new category: grandiose ballads designed to showcase her vocal pyrotechnics, a style that would define pop for decades to come. Moving the melodrama of "The Greatest Love of All" onto a personal stage, "Didn't We Almost Have It All" is a heartbreak song delivered with the intensity of opera, as Houston's precise execution gives the polite adult-contemporary pop a real emotional thrust. *–STE*

Michael Jackson, "Man in the Mirror"
(Epic, 1987)

It starts softly enough, with Jackson announcing, "I'm gonna make a change for once in my life." From there, he takes the **Siedah Garrett**- and **Glen Ballard**-written chart-topper to church. It was Jackson's idea to add gospel royalty **The Winans** and the **Andrae Crouch** choir to the song to add more emotional depth. A few days later, he suggested to producer **Quincy Jones** that they extend the bridge, which only added anticipation for what became one of Jackson's most celebrated vocal flourishes, with a soaring MJ implores listeners to "stand up!" against a world of despair, starving kids and homelessness. Who's going to say no? –K.M.

Jodeci, "Lately"
(Uptown/MCA, 1993)

Jodeci joined such illustrious company as **Donny Hathaway**, **Aretha Franklin** and **Luther Vandross** as artists who elevated a **Stevie Wonder** composition. That's no small feat. But to perform the musical giant's underrated 1980 gem "Lately" on an *MTV Unplugged* special, live, without a net, makes their cover all the more impressive. **K-Ci** and **JoJo Hailey**, the R&B quartet's co-leads, strip down Wonder's original ballad, laying bare the Charlotte-based group's Pentecostal church background. By the time the brothers wail, "'Cause this time could mean goodbye!" you're ready to pass the collection plate. –K.M.

Prince, "Adore"
(Paisley Park/Warner Bros., 1987)

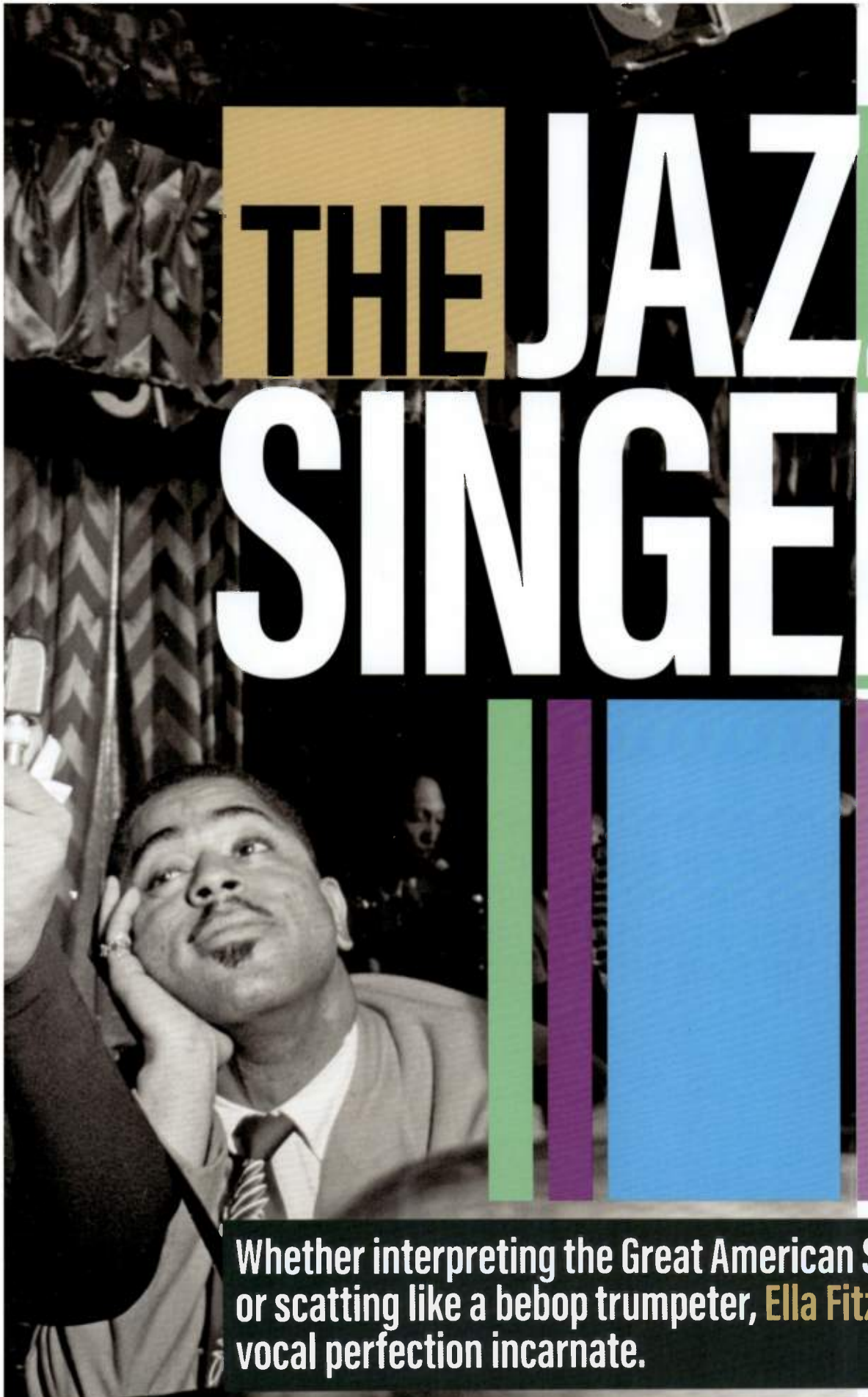
As usual, one-man-band **Prince Rogers Nelson** handled the writing and production on "Adore," the to-the-death affirmation of love that closes his double album, *Sign o' the Times*. But the real star here is Prince's majestic falsetto, which somehow keeps up the passionate stamina for six minutes and 29 seconds. "You can burn up my clothes, smash up my ride... well, maybe not the ride," he sang, playfully pledging his devotion to a paramour. –K.M.

Toni Braxton, "Un-Break My Heart"
(LaFace, 1996)

Spending an extraordinary 11 weeks at the top of the charts, "Un-Break My Heart" is textbook adult contemporary: It's produced by **David Foster**, one of the sonic architects of the format, and written by **Diane Warren**, a key songwriter in the genre. Braxton balked at recording the song, worried that it'd be a conventional heartbreak number. That initial reluctance may have helped the singer zero in on the song's emotional truths; her precisely controlled performance conveys great loss and yearning, transcending the conventions of the production and composition. –*STE*

FITZGERALD. DIZZY GILLESPIE, RAY BROWN, MILT JACKSON AND TIMMIE ROSENKRANTZ AT CLUB DOWNBEAT, NYC. 1947

PHOTO: HERITAGE ART/HERITAGE IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES



THE JAZZ SINGER

Whether interpreting the Great American Songbook or scatting like a bebop trumpeter, Ella Fitzgerald was vocal perfection incarnate.

By Willie Aron

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Ella with drummer Lee Young, bassist (and husband) Ray Brown and pianist Hank Jones, Los Angeles, 1948

IT'S A SAFE BET THAT ELLA FITZGERALD WILL FOREVER BE REMEMBERED AS, ALONGSIDE HOLIDAY AND ARMSTRONG, THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED JAZZ VOCALIST OF ALL TIME. HER STAGGERING RECORDED LEGACY IS A TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE OF THE INNOVATIVE BRILLIANCE OF THE MELDING OF THE BLACK VOCAL ART FORM ONTO THE ECONOMY AND WIT OF TIN PAN ALLEY SONGCRAFT.

Many of the greatest expressions of the human experience are housed in the rich African-American vocal traditions of gospel, blues and jazz. **Billie Holiday** used her broken, slurred, horn-like voice to communicate the fragility, honesty and pain that coursed through her short, tragic life. Take a song like "My Man," a brutally frank love song of enmeshment and violence that only "Lady Day" could capture: "But I love him/I don't know why I should/He isn't true/He beats me, too/What can I do?"

And then we have Holiday's opposite, though no less riveting, peer in the glorious form of **Ella Fitzgerald**, universally and rightfully known as "The Queen of Jazz" and "The First Lady of Song." When we think about the consummate singer of the Great American Songbook, it is tempting to cite **Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughan.** But it is safe to say that the aforementioned would (and did) bend the knee in deep reverence for Fitzgerald as "a singer's singer," one whose crystalline vocal tone, perfect diction and unerring pitch entranced generations of devotees of the Great American Songbook.

Whether Fitzgerald was tackling the works of **George** and **Ira Gershwin, Richard Rogers** and **Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen or Johnny Mercer,** listeners were treated to a supple and remarkably flexible soprano voice that scatted, soared, whispered, laughed and soothed, depending on what was required from the emotional content of the song. Fitzgerald fulfilled the highest aspirations of the Black art of jazz singing, and in one of the rare occasions where

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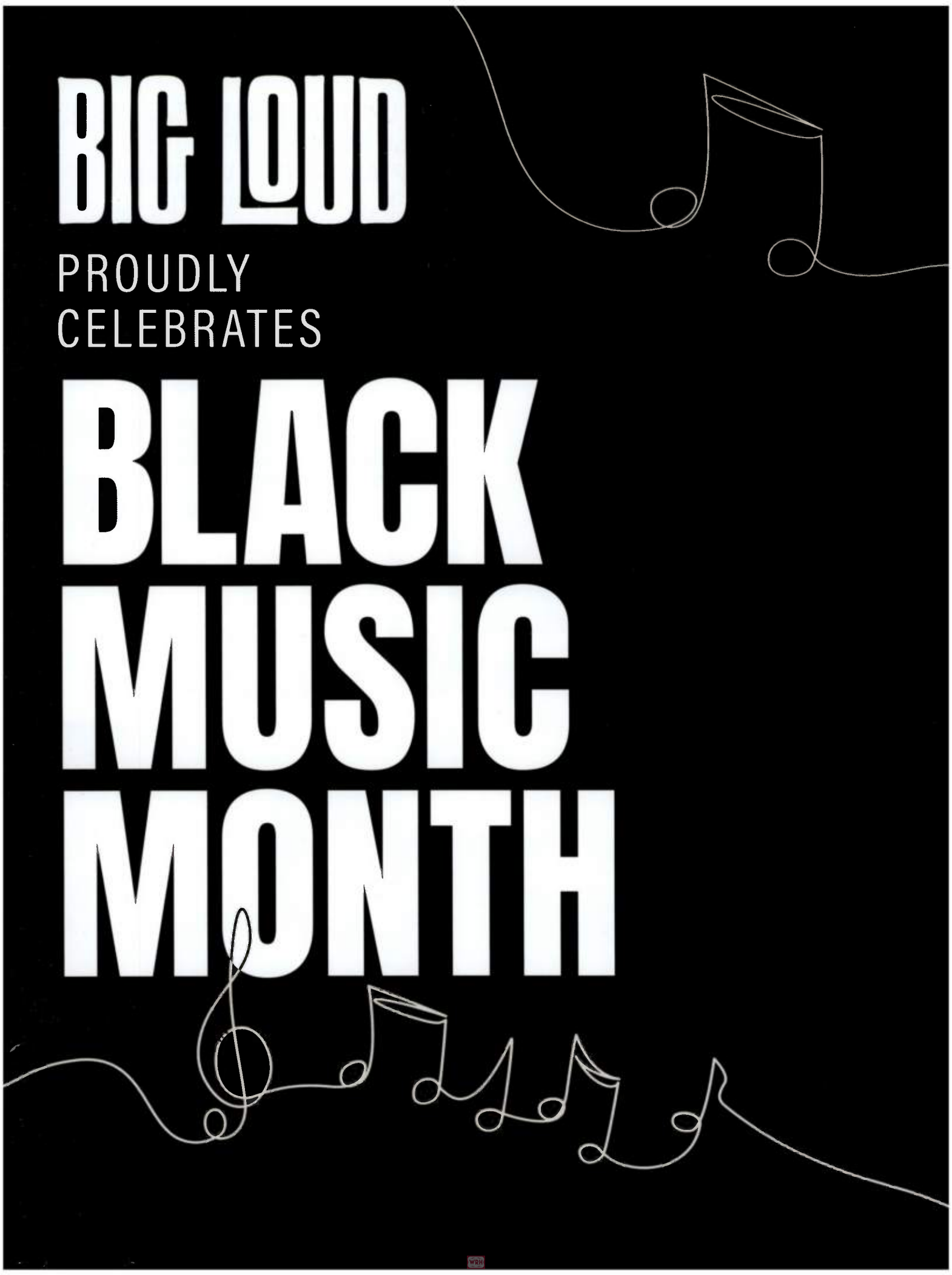

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

artistic merit dovetails with commercial success and aesthetic recognition, she was globally feted and revered for her work.

Born on April 25, 1917 in Newport News, Virginia, Ella Jane Fitzgerald was raised by her single mother, **Temperance** (a.k.a. "Tempie"), and they soon moved to Yonkers, New York to live with Tempie's boyfriend, **Joe Da Silva**. After losing her mother when she was a teen, young Ella was troubled and soon ran afoul of the law; she was placed in a reform school, where she was beaten by her caretakers. Ella escaped from the school but was now all alone.

She knew she loved to sing and dance, and she fell under the sway of the music of the swing-era harmony trio **The Boswell Sisters**. One night, Fitzgerald found herself performing at Amateur Night at the **Apollo Theater** in Harlem, winning over an initially hostile audience and wowing them with a rendition of the Boswells' "The Object of My Affections." A natural introvert, the teenaged Ella nevertheless was in her element while performing onstage. "Once up there, I felt the acceptance and love from my audience," she said. "I knew I wanted to sing before people the rest of my life."

Renowned jazz saxophonist and arranger **Benny Carter** was in the audience that night, and, impressed by Ella's talent, a lifelong friendship was formed. Fitzgerald began winning amateur singing contests everywhere Carter could find them. In another moment of serendipity, she met swing drummer and bandleader **Chick Webb**. Webb reluctantly allowed her to sing with his band at a **Yale University** dance. Winning over the crowd, Ella was invited to join Chick's band, and she began honing her craft at the band's residency

"ONCE UP THERE [ONSTAGE AT THE APOLLO THEATER], I FELT THE ACCEPTANCE AND LOVE FROM MY AUDIENCE. I KNEW I WANTED TO SING BEFORE PEOPLE THE REST OF MY LIFE."

at Harlem's famed **Savoy Ballroom**. Soon, the band began recording such songs as "(If You Can't Sing It) You Have to Swing It" and "Love and Kisses" for **Decca Records**. Although these were popular, it was clear to Fitzgerald that musical tastes were veering away from swing toward a looser, more spontaneous style. Bebop—sparse, angular, at times dissonant and defiantly Black—was just around the corner. She began utilizing the technique of "scat," or wordless, improvised singing, which she had learned from listening intently to Armstrong's seminal vocal recordings. It was a form she would come to master.

On May 2, 1938, **The Chick Webb Orchestra**, with Fitzgerald as its vocalist, recorded a rendition of the nursery rhyme "A-Tisket, A-Tasket." Ella and co-writer **Al Feldman** added new, playful lyrics to this children's tune and swung it in inimitable fashion. The release garnered Fitzgerald and band a #1 record that stayed on the charts for 17 weeks, selling over a million copies.

Webb died from spinal tuberculosis the following year, prompting Ella to take over the band and rename it **Ella Fitzgerald and Her**

PHOTO: DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS

Performing on British television, London, 1964




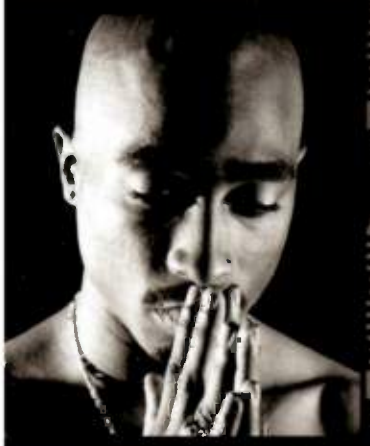


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PHOTO: GILLES PETARD/REDFERNS

With Chick Webb, 1938

Famous Orchestra. The ensemble enjoyed a successful run of hit songs and memorable performances. During the early '40s, Ella recorded with renowned acts such as **Louis Jordan**, **The Ink Spots** and **The Benny Goodman Orchestra**. But as World War II-era economics dictated a move away from big bands toward smaller ensembles, a stint with bebop pioneer **Dizzy Gillespie** influenced Ella toward vocal improvisation. "I just tried to do [with my voice] what I heard the horns in the band doing," she said.

In 1945 she recorded a vocal version of the **Lionel Hampton** classic "Flying Home" that *The New York Times* later described as "one of the most influential vocal jazz records of the decade... Where other singers, most notably Louis Armstrong, had tried similar improvisation, no one before Miss Fitzgerald employed the technique with such dazzling inventiveness."

In 1946, while on tour with Gillespie and band, Ella became romantically involved with the group's bassist, **Ray Brown**, and the couple soon married and adopted a son, **Ray Jr.** Although the marriage was to be short-lived, Ella became a client of an employer of Brown's, manager and jazz impresario **Norman Granz**, with whom she maintained a lifelong professional and personal relationship. Granz was the mastermind behind the groundbreaking **Jazz at the Philharmonic** series of concert tours, club gigs and recordings. The acclaim that the racially integrated JATP series enjoyed showcased Fitzgerald as a now-international superstar.

By 1955, though, Ella was beginning to feel creatively stifled by JATP and with Decca Records, so Granz started **Verve Records** as a showcase for her deepening interest in interpreting the Great American Songbook. Ella explained, "I had gotten to the point where I was only singing bebop. I thought bebop was 'it,' and that all I had to do was go someplace and sing bop. But it finally got to the point where I had no place to sing. I realized then that there was more to music than bop."

How right she would be. In February and March 1956, Granz took Fitzgerald and her musicians to Hollywood to record the sessions that would augur the debut release for Verve Records and the first of the "songbook" series of albums Granz and Ella had envisioned, *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole*

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Dueting with Frank Sinatra on NBC TV, late '60s

ELLA FITZGERALD SINGS THE COLE PORTER SONGBOOK... AN EARLY EXAMPLE OF A "CONCEPT" ALBUM, WAS AN INSTANT SUCCESS. FITZGERALD'S READING OF "ANYTHING GOES," "I GET A KICK OUT OF YOU," "NIGHT AND DAY," "I LOVE PARIS" AND OTHER BY-NOW STANDARDS WERE SO PERFECTLY EXECUTED, SO SKILLFULLY ARRANGED AND EMOTIONALLY NUANCED, THEY HAVE AN ALMOST SYMPHONIC GRANDEUR TO THEM.


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Clockwise from top left: In the studio with Louis Armstrong, 1957; with Duke Ellington; with Marilyn Monroe

Porter Songbook. The double LP—an early example of a "concept" album—was an instant success. Fitzgerald's reading of "Anything Goes," "I Get a Kick Out of You," "Night and Day," "I Love Paris" and other by-now standards were so perfectly executed, so skillfully arranged and emotionally nuanced, they have an almost symphonic grandeur to them.

Granz was so proud of this record that he played it for Porter while he was staying at New York's Waldorf Astoria hotel. As the album finished, Porter remarked, "My, what marvelous diction that girl has." The album's highlight, arguably, is Ella's beautifully subtle and heartbreaking reading of "Miss Otis Regrets (She's Unable to Lunch Today)," a butler's account of the lynching of a society woman who murdered her philandering lover. The sparseness of the song's arrangement—merely a vocal with piano accompaniment—rivals Sinatra's "One for My Baby (and One for the Road)" and Holiday's "Strange Fruit" as high-water marks of piano-and-vocal balladry of the Tin Pan Alley era.

"I JUST TRIED TO DO [WITH MY VOICE] WHAT I HEARD THE HORNS IN THE BAND DOING."

There would be many other highlights in Fitzgerald's storied career: more critical and commercial successes thanks to the *Songbook* series; world tours; and one of her best-selling albums, 1960's *Ella in Berlin: Mack the Knife*. The title track, written by **Bertolt Brecht** and **Kurt Weill** in 1929 for *The Threepenny Opera*, became a pop hit in 1959 by **Bobby Darin**, but Ella's version features her forgetting the lyrics about halfway through the song, forcing her to brilliantly improvise her own off-the-cuff lyrics that reference Darin and Armstrong. She even does a first-rate impression of Armstrong's gruff scat tones toward the song's conclusion.

By the 1990s, Ella Fitzgerald had recorded over 200 albums, made numerous appearances on film and television, recorded commercials and Christmas albums and continued to perform to sold-out crowds. But the grind of incessant touring took its toll on her health. The development of diabetes in her later years led to near blindness and the amputation of both legs below the knees. Fitzgerald died on June 15,1996, at 79.

Fitzgerald is arguably the most accomplished jazz vocalist of all time, and apart from Holiday and Armstrong, it's hard to think of anyone who'd even be a *contender* for that designation. Her staggering recorded legacy is a textbook example of the innovative brilliance of the melding of the Black vocal art form onto the economy and wit of Tin Pan Alley songcraft. It's also no stretch to surmise that the perfection of Ella's instrument will likely be the subject of study for generations to come.■

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OTIS REDDING
THE CONSUMMATE SOUL MAN

REDDING'S CAREER WAS BRIEF, BUT HE LEFT A LEGACY AS THE SOUL SINGER'S SOUL SINGER. BY ROB TANNENBAUM

PHOTO: SULFIATI MAGNUSON/GETTY IMAGES

Music history is full of sliding doors and coincidences of timing that in retrospect seem either propitious or predestined, depending on whether you believe in fate. Some small moments and choices turn out to be seismic shocks for the world.

What if **Mick Jagger** and **Keith Richards**, who'd known each other in childhood but hadn't seen one another for years, had not bumped into one another on platform two of the Dartford train station when they were 18? There'd be no **Rolling Stones**.

EVEN THOUGH HE DIED ONLY THREE MONTHS PAST HIS 26TH BIRTHDAY, REDDING CHANGED SOUL MUSIC, FROM A STYLE THAT EXISTED PRIMARILY ON THE SOUTHERN "CHITLIN' CIRCUIT" OF VENUES THAT CATERED TO A BLACK AUDIENCE, TO A MUSIC THAT WAS PART OF THE MAINSTREAM.

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Or what if **Andre 3000** had stayed home watching *X-Files* on a particular day in 1992, instead of going to Atlanta's Lenox Square Shopping Mall, where he first met **Big Boi**? No **Outkast**, and maybe no Southern hip-hop golden age.

In August 1962, an ambitious young singer, who had a side hustle as a driver, was hired to take blues guitarist **Johnny Jenkins** from Macon, Georgia, to a recording session in Memphis because Jenkins didn't have a driver's license. There's a second sliding door in the story: The session was a disaster and wrapped up early. The driver, **Otis Redding**, asked if he could use the remaining studio time and recorded a song he'd written, "These Arms of Mine." The fledgling label **Stax Records** heard it and gave Redding a contract. The single sold 800,000 copies.

Even though he died only three months past his 26th birthday, Redding changed soul music, from a style that existed primarily on the Southern "chitlin' circuit" of venues that catered to a Black audience, to a music that was part of the mainstream. Just as **Jerry West** is the "logo" of the **NBA**, Redding is the logo of what a soul man was expected to be, in form, style and temperament. "Many still believe he was the greatest soul man ever," the British music magazine *Mojo* noted in 2017.

Like **Aretha Franklin** and a host of notable soul singers, Redding's development began in church. His father, **Otis Redding Sr.**, was a former sharecropper and a grandson of slaves. He worked a number of low-wage jobs in Macon, sang in the Baptist church choir every Sunday with his wife **Fannie**, and later became a preacher. The younger Otis had "a strong religious background," his wife **Zelma** once said, and soon, he was in the church's junior choir and in a gospel quartet.

Jonathan Gould, in *Otis Redding: An Unfinished Life*, the definitive biography of the singer, wrote that for Black people in the South, going to church "was a cathartic experience, in which the trials and tribulations of their daily lives were transcended every Sunday by a corrective force of hellfire preaching and collective singing." Congregations responded to their ministers "with shouts, moans, screams, cries, and spontaneous embellishments of every kind." Even when Redding began singing secular material, he still brought catharsis, shouts, moans and a handbook of improvised drama.

In 1955 a manic local Macon singer named **Little Richard** had a national hit with "Tutti Frutti." To the disappointment of his parents, Redding shifted his attention from gospel to R&B. ("I don't think his daddy ever saw him perform," **Alan Walden**, one of Redding's managers, said in a 2013 **BBC** documentary, discussing Otis Sr.'s dismay.) He

CELEBRATING BLACK MUSIC MONTH.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Clockwise from top: With his guitar player Steve Cropper, 1967; with Jim Stewart, Rufus Thomas, Booker T. Jones and Carla Thomas at Stax Records, Memphis, 1967; with Jerry Wexler at the Monterey Pop Festival, 1967

dropped out of school in his sophomore year and found a variety of jobs, drilling water wells or working as a gas station attendant.

When he was 19, Redding married **Zelma Atwood**, who was pregnant with their second child. "One day, I'm gonna be rich," he told her confidently, even though he'd already released a couple of failed singles on independent labels. The direction of his career changed after a dismal Johnny Jenkins recording session, and once he had the support of Stax and its major-label distributor, **Atlantic Records**.

Starting with "These Arms of Mine," Redding's singles hit the R&B chart like they were coated with accelerant. Between 1962 and 1967 he had 17 songs in the R&B Top 20, including ones he wrote ("Respect" and "I Can't Turn You Loose") or co-wrote ("Mr. Pitiful" and "I've Been Loving You Too Long)." On the mainstream singles chart, though, he had a tougher route—even the glorious "Respect" peaked at #35.

For his third album, 1965's *Otis Blue: Otis Redding Sings Soul*, his label put a photo of a blonde woman on the cover, thinking it might help his music reach white listeners. It worked to a small degree, and regardless of the photo, *Otis Blue* is routinely considered one of the best albums of all time.

The next year, he released covers of "Day Tripper" by **The Beatles** and The Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction," partly because he took an interest in rock but also to expand his audience. And he recorded "Try a Little Tenderness," a Depression-era ballad that had been covered by **Frank Sinatra**, **Bing Crosby** and **Perry Como**, in addition to Franklin and **Sam Cooke**. Redding made a meal of the song, adding new lyrics and building to multiple peaks as he hollered avuncular advice ("*Hold* her! *Squeeze* her! Never *leave* her!"). According to Stax executive **Al Bell**, the song's publisher got a restraining order to prevent its release, on the grounds that it would "damage" the copyright. When Stax got an order for 36,000 copies in the first week, the publisher suddenly agreed to not block the release.

When Redding found a larger audience, it was partly due to his stage skills. At six foot one and 220 pounds, he looked like he was made out of bricks, and he dominated stages while appearing affable. In August 1966, **Robert Shelton** wrote a *New York Times* rave of two **Central Park** shows, calling Redding "volcanic" and "a singer of uncommon power." He concluded by saying the concerts proved that "even his best recordings give only a hint of his total impact on stage."

The next year, Redding agreed to play for free at the **Monterey**

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PHOTO: CYRUS ANDREWS/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

"IF YOU TOOK A LITTLE OF SAM COOKE AND A LITTLE OF LITTLE RICHARD, PUT IT INTO A JAR, SHOOK IT UP AND POURED IT OUT, YOU'D GET OTIS REDDING. HE COULD CROON BALLADS JUST LIKE SAM, AND HE COULD SCREAM AND JUMP AROUND WITH ALL THE ENERGY OF LITTLE RICHARD." —STEVE CROPPER

Pop Festival, backed by his redoubtable band, **Booker T. and the MGs**, and the **Mar-Keys** horn section. They were scheduled to play the festival's second night, preceding **The Beach Boys**, who canceled. The show's promoters, **Lou Adler** and **John Phillips of The Mamas & the Papas**, had seen Redding before, and quickly elevated him to a headliner.

The festival was full of hippies, both in the crowd and onstage—**Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company** and **The Grateful Dead** were among the performers. By the time Redding started his set, it was well past midnight, the temperature had dropped and rain was falling. In contrast to the other artists, who dressed in sandals, bell-bottoms and peasant blouses, Otis and most of his band were wearing double-breasted, lime-green suits made by a Memphis clothier. Atlantic Records VP **Jerry Wexler**, who was at the show, fretted that the crowd would not warm to Redding's exuberant showmanship.

Less than 20 minutes later, Redding had finished his set, which was truncated by a curfew, to clamorous applause. "I was pretty sure I'd seen God onstage," **Bob Weir** of The Grateful Dead said. Rolling Stones guitarist **Brian Jones** teared up as Redding sang.

When I interviewed Monterey Pop artists on the 50th anniversary of the festival, many were still raving about Redding. "Otis turned it into a living room," **Jerry Miller** of **Moby Grape** said. "The band was really nervous," **Electric Flag** keyboardist **Barry Goldberg** recalled. "After Otis went on, there was a vibe of *one*–like, everyone. It was the greatest thing I'd ever seen; the exhilaration, the excitement, the togetherness and how they accepted Otis, how they *felt* it. Everybody was totally entranced."

Years later, a **CBC** writer called it "the day Otis Redding became a legend," though in fairness, he was already a legend among Black fans and soul music aficionados.

Redding enjoyed his success. He bought a 400-acre spread outside of Macon, which he dubbed the **Big O Ranch**, and walked around in overalls, proud of how "country" he was. (As a kid, he'd refused to feed the chickens and hogs his parents owned, and also refused to wear overalls.) He bought a **Beechcraft Model 18** twin-engine plane for $78,000, so he could get back to the ranch more quickly after shows.

The summer after Monterey Pop, Redding had surgery to remove painful polyps from his vocal cords. When the procedure was done, he was told not to sing for a month.

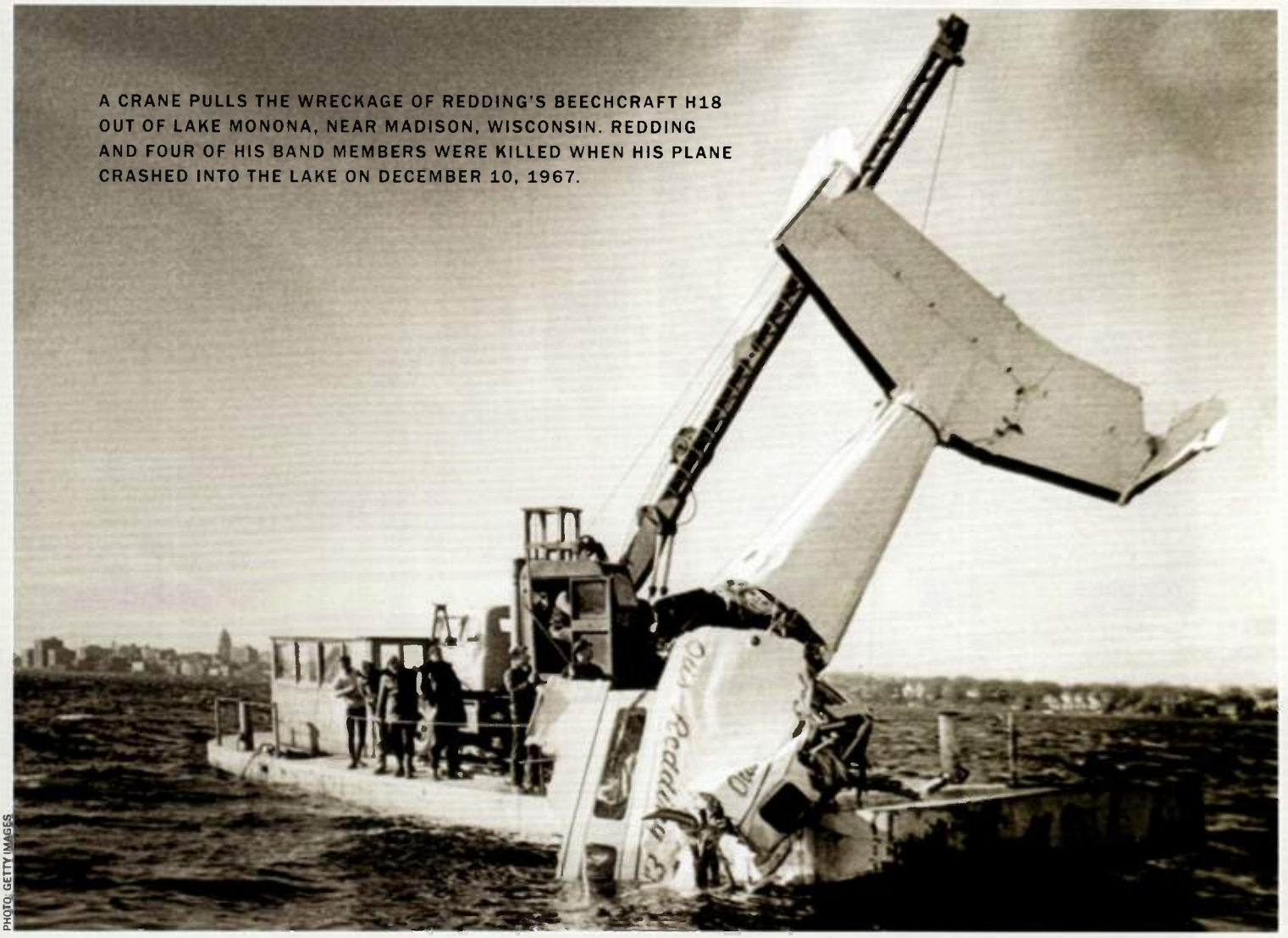
Resting made him restless, and the restlessness made him creative. "When I go back out, it's going to be the new Otis Redding," he told his wife. "I've got to change my style now. People are tired of hearing me plead and beg." Like much of the world, he was paying close attention to the new Beatles album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. He especially warmed to "A Day in the Life," which he admired for its simplicity.

In a short span of time, Redding wrote a dozen or so songs, including "Hard to Handle," a hit for **The Black Crowes** in 1990, and "(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay," which in its reflective tone and spare arrangement had a bit of resemblance to "A Day in the Life."

Phil Walden, one of Redding's managers, hated the song and thought it was "too pop." But Otis was clear-eyed. "It's my first million seller," he told Walden. He was right.

While recording a new album, Redding had a few concert dates in the Midwest. After a gig in Cleveland, he and some bandmates flew in his plane to the next show in Madison,

STARTING WITH "THESE ARMS OF MINE," REDDING'S SINGLES HIT THE R&B CHART LIKE THEY WERE COATED WITH ACCELERANT. BETWEEN 1962 AND 1967 HE HAD 17 SONGS IN THE R&B TOP 20, INCLUDING ONES HE WROTE ("RESPECT" AND "I CAN'T TURN YOU LOOSE") OR CO-WROTE ("MR. PITIFUL" AND "I'VE BEEN LOVING YOU TOO LONG)." ON THE MAINSTREAM SINGLES CHART, THOUGH, HE HAD A TOUGHER ROUTE—EVEN THE GLORIOUS "RESPECT" PEAKED AT #35.



A CRANE PULLS THE WRECKAGE OF REDDING'S BEECHCRAFT H18 OUT OF LAKE MONONA, NEAR MADISON, WISCONSIN. REDDING AND FOUR OF HIS BAND MEMBERS WERE KILLED WHEN HIS PLANE CRASHED INTO THE LAKE ON DECEMBER 10, 1967.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Wisconsin. When the pilot lowered the landing gear on approach to the runway, both engines stalled. Within seconds, the plane crashed into Lake Monona. Seven people died. The only survivor was trumpet player **Ben Cauley**, who had the foresight to unbuckle his seat belt before the crash, which prevented him from drowning when the plane disappeared into the lake.

There was a public service at Macon's ornate, copper-domed **City Auditorium**, with Redding's peers in attendance, including **James Brown** and **Wilson Pickett**. **Booker T. Jones** of the MGs played organ and backed R&B singer **Joe Simon** in a hymn, "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross." Redding had come full circle, back to gospel.

"Dock of the Bay" was the commercial breakthrough he wanted. After a January 1968 release, it hit #1 on both the R&B and Top 40 charts. In the next few years, there were other posthumous singles, including three that landed in the Top 40. Redding was more popular dead than alive.

Redding is admired even by country artists, including **Eric Church** and **Chris Stapleton**. And he seems to have kept every Baby Boomer singer in thrall. **Elton John** called him "peerless." **Tom Jones** saw Redding live and admitted he was "picking up pointers." **Bryan Ferry** said his show "blew me away." **Keith Richards** wrote that he preferred Otis' version of "Satisfaction" to the one The Stones recorded.

Rod Stewart has acknowledged that at the start of his career, he tried to sound like Otis. "Great singers always sound like they're singing just for you," he told me recently. "When I first heard Otis, I was about 17, and that's what I felt: He was singing just for me. I was a nobody."

Other singers had a broader range or a purer vocal tone. But no one had the same energy, resolve, authenticity, career vision and ability to write and cover songs that suited his voice.

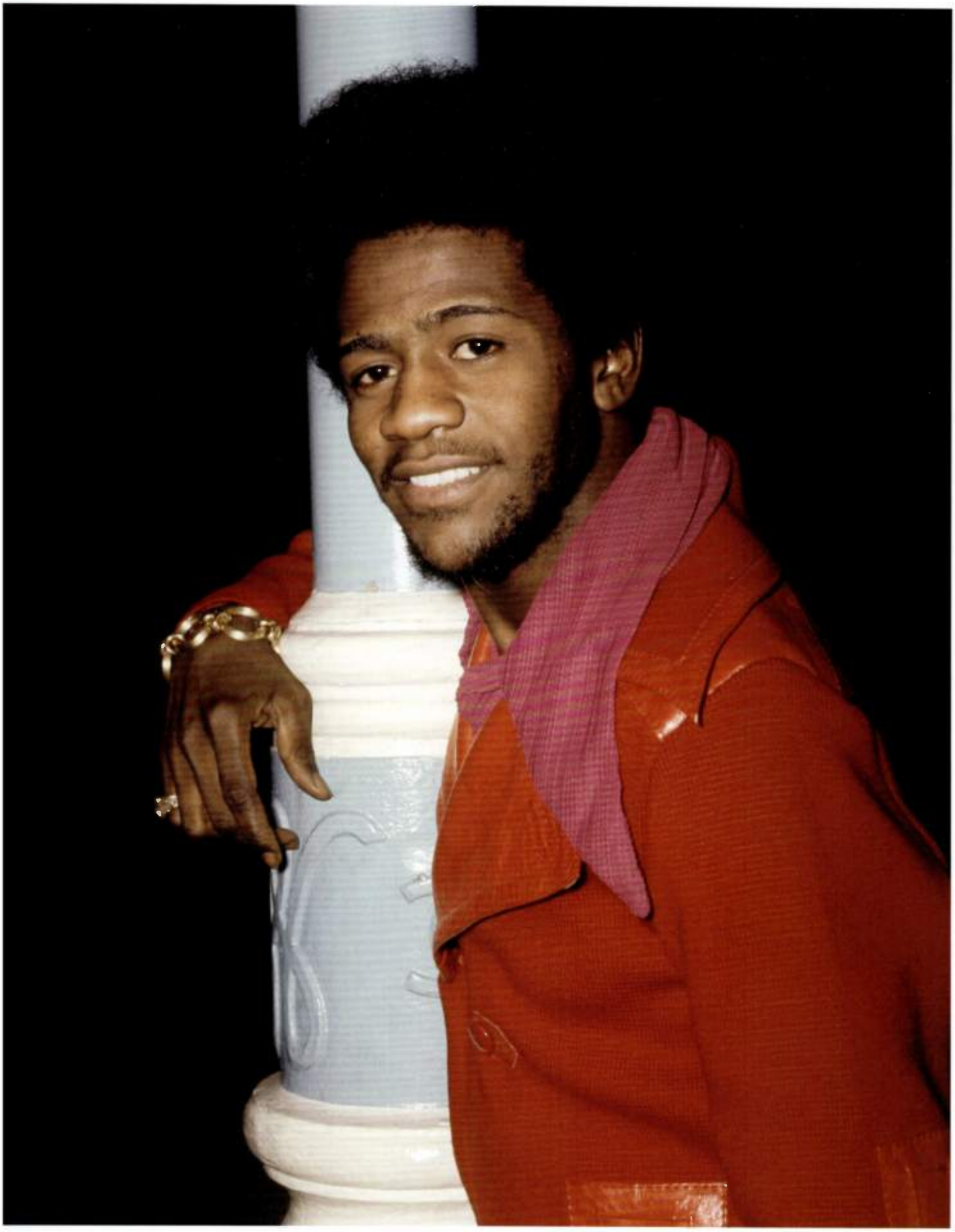
In the BBC documentary titled *Soul Ambassador*, **Steve Cropper**, Redding's guitarist and frequent co-writer, said this: "If you took a little of Sam Cooke and a little of Little Richard, put it into a jar, shook it up and poured it out, you'd get Otis Redding. He could croon ballads just like Sam, and he could scream and jump around with all the energy of Little Richard. That's what he had—that roughness, and that real softness too."■

GOD'S GREEN EARTH

Al Green may have spurned popular music for the Lord nearly 50 years ago, but his run of 1970s albums still stands as the highwater mark of soul.

By Mike Rubin

PHOTO: TPLP/GETTY IMAGES



"The good that's in me and the bad that's in me can't live peaceably side by side. I've felt pulled in two directions ever since I could walk, and there's never been a middle ground."

PHOTO BY KPA/UNITED ARCHIVES VIA GETTY IMAGES

It's tempting to think of **Al Green** strictly in the past tense. It's been nearly a half-century since the soul singer spurned secular music near the height of his fame, instead devoting his prodigious vocal talents to serving God and singing gospel. Between 1971 and 1977 Green had released a series of stunning and stirring albums, including a string of timeless singles like "Tired of Being Alone," "Love and Happiness" and "Let's Stay Together"—all more than enough to qualify him for any serious soul music fan's personal Mount Rushmore.

His voice was instantly recognizable: a smooth, almost conversational delivery, so intimate it seemed like purring, which could rise to a honeyed falsetto or a quavery plea, then dig deep for a gritty growl. He had six consecutive albums reach #1 on the R&B/Soul album charts, four of them going gold and two platinum, and was a regular presence on television; a number of those performances, available on **YouTube**, can still make one's hair stand on end. And then, as if in a flash of blinding light, his pop career was over in his early 30s, and he was gone.

Of course, Green is still very much alive, celebrating his 79th birthday in April and continuing to minister to the congregants of the **Full Gospel Tabernacle Church** in Memphis, where he's been pastor since 1976. He even sings on Sunday mornings when he's not out of town on tour. "Music has always been my clearest channel to God," wrote Green (with **Devin Seay**) in his 2000 autobiography *Take Me to the River*, "my way of touching the hem of His garment and feeling the strength of His love."

Tracing the arc of Green's career, you'll find a struggle between the sensual and the spiritual that played out over not just his song choices but his personal life. In *Take Me to the River*, Green revealed that there are actually three different Al Greens: Al, Reverend Green and Al Green, and that "most of the time, they can't even stand living in the same skin."

"The good that's in me and the bad that's in me can't live peaceably side by side," wrote Green. "I've felt pulled in two directions ever since I could walk, and there's never been a middle ground."

The man himself (or all three of them?) was born Albert Leornes Greene in 1946 outside the eastern Arkansas town of Forrest City (named after the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, Confederate General **Nathan Bedford Forrest**). The sixth of 10 children born to **Cora Lee Greene** and fourth-generation sharecropper **Robert Greene**, Al grew up in the tiny hamlet of Dansby in a two-room shotgun shack, sharing a bed with his four brothers. There were two churches in town, and the Greene family attended both.

In 1955 his father moved the family to Grand Rapids, Michigan, in search of better prospects, both for himself and his sons' gospel group **The Greene Brothers**. Al began singing around age nine, influenced by **Sam Cooke** (then of gospel's **Soul Stirrers**) and **Claude Jeter** of **The Swan Silvertones**, and eventually joined his brothers' act. His stint in The Greene Brothers ended abruptly, however, when his father caught him listening to a **Jackie Wilson** single and threw him—and his broken "devil's music" 45s—out of the house.

After graduating from Grand Rapids' **South High School** (the alma mater of future President **Gerald Ford**), Al formed a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ALEX WARREN
Every breakthrough has a beginning.
Search "Ordinary"

group called **The Creations** and played his first-ever professional gig in 1966 at the **El Grotto Lounge** in Battle Creek. After changing their name to **Al Greene & the Soul Mates**, they recorded the single "Back Up Train," which became a regional hit and led to a performance at Harlem's **Apollo Theater**. A 1968 album, *Back Up Train*, credited just to Al Greene, failed to make much of a ripple, however.

Touring on the chitlin' circuit, Al gigged in Midland, Texas, opening for trumpeter **Willie Michell**'s band. When Mitchell—also the house producer for **Hi Records** in Memphis—heard Greene sing "Back Up Train," he was impressed. "He was singing soft," Mitchell told author **Peter Guralnick** in his book *Sweet Soul Music*, "and I said, 'This guy has got the style, he got the sound to really be something.'"

Mitchell invited Greene to return to Memphis with him, but Al first wanted to know how long it would take to make him a star. When Mitchell suggested one and a half years, Al replied he couldn't wait that long. After further introspection—plus $2,000 from Mitchell to pay off Al's debts back in Michigan—the singer changed his mind, moved to Memphis and, for good measure, dropped the "e" from his last name.

Green's first album for Hi, 1969's *Green Is Blues*, consisted primarily of cover versions, including **The Temptations**' "My Girl," **The Beatles**' "Get Back" and "The Letter" by fellow Memphians **The Box Tops**. Each of his next several albums included at least a couple of covers, demonstrating his remarkable ability to transform other singers' material into something indelibly his own; notable renditions include his definitive takes on **The Bee Gees**' "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?," **Kris Kristofferson**'s "For the Good Times" and **Willie Nelson**'s "Funny How Time Slips Away." (Green's songs, in turn, would be famously covered by **Talking Heads** ("Take Me to the River") and **Tina Turner** ("Let's Stay Together"), to name but two.)

It wasn't just Green's voice that made the Hi albums so entrancing; Mitchell's production was a revelation, capable of inducing warm tingles as rapidly as a shot of bourbon. Green was surrounded and supported by **The Hi Rhythm Section**: drummers **Howard Grimes** and **Al Jackson, Jr.** (aka "The Human Time Keeper," he was also a member of **Booker T. & the M.G.s** and the **Stax Records** session band), plus the **Hodges** brothers—guitarist **Teenie**, organist **Charles** and bassist **Leroy**. Mitchell employed horn charts and backing vocalists as call-and-response punctuation and wrapped everything with sumptuous strings that were emotive without straying into schmaltz. Mitchell and Green, wrote Guralnick, "would soon take soul music—real, unabashed, wholehearted soul music—to quiet, luxuriantly appointed places it had never been before."

1971's *Al Green Gets Next to You* highlighted Green's emerging talents as a songwriter, particularly his first gold single, "Tired of Being Alone." The song was "the first full realization of Willie Mitchell's vision of soul music on a higher plane, employing a muted string section, soft sophisticated melody with a gospel twist," observed Guralnick, "and the unique coloration of Green's voice(s), given free rein for the first time in all their fragile intertwined glory, wherein falsetto interpretations meet the last refined tendrils of religious ecstasy."

In 1972 the how-to manual *The Joy of Sex* was published and became an instant bestseller; eager DIY enthusiasts soon adopted Green's oeuvre as the soundtrack to their home experiments. Countless offspring may have been conceived to the sounds of Green's two albums released that year, *Let's Stay Together* and *I'm Still in Love With You*. *Let's Stay Together* was his first album to reach **RIAA** gold status (and the first of six consecutive LPs to top the R&B/Soul album chart), while its title track was also his only #1 pop single. *I'm Still in Love With You* was his first platinum album certification and included the hit singles "Look What You Done for Me," "Love and Happiness" and the title track. Together, they marked his commercial and critical pinnacle.

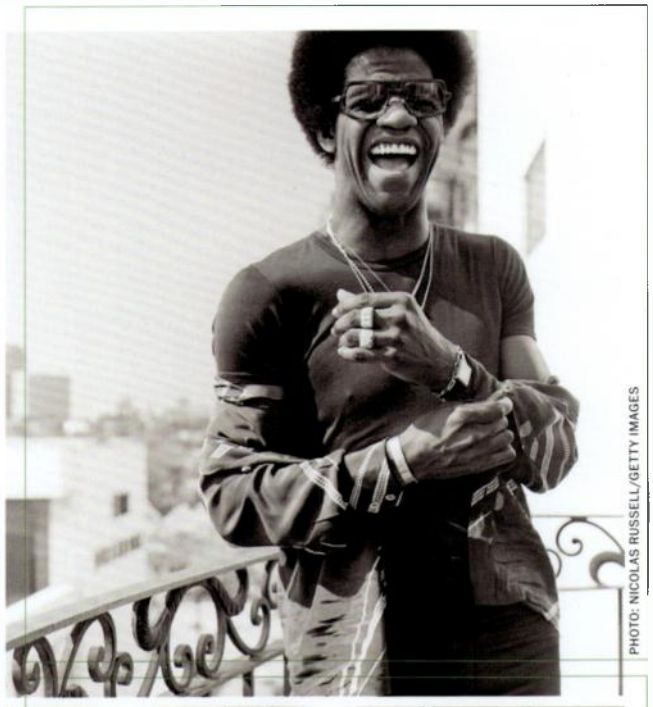
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PHOTO: AFRO AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS/GADO/GETTY IMAGES


PHOTO: CHARLIE GILLETT COLLECTION/REDFERNS


PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

But 1972 was also a career-changer in other respects. In June, after two concerts in the same day—one in San Francisco, then a midnight show at **Disneyland**—he awoke at 4:30am in the throes of a religious awakening and began testifying to

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Countless offspring may have been conceived to the sounds of Green's two albums released in 1972, Let's Stay Together and I'm Still in Love With You.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (SIGNING AUTOGRAPH); SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES (PERFORMING); VINNIE ZUFFANTE/GETTY IMAGES (PATTI LABELLE)

Clockwise from top left: With L.A. County Sheriff's Department deputies, 1974; with Patti Labelle, 1982; at an L.A. music festival, 2021

God. "I felt so good," Green told filmmaker **Robert Mugge** for his 1984 documentary *Gospel According to Al Green*, "so perfect, so uplifted, so forgiven, so clean."

From that point on, Green considered himself born again, though it was years before he fully committed to his conversion. It began revealing itself in fragments, beginning with his first gospel composition, "Jesus Is Waiting," on 1973's *Call Me*, another brilliant LP. *Livin' for You*, released later that year, included "My God Is Real," co-credited to gospel composer **Kenneth Morris**. But evidently Green was struggling with his newfound faith; the album contained both "Let's Get Married," a plea for nuptial bliss, and "Sweet Sixteen," a paean to jailbait.

But then a shocking tragedy upended everything. On the evening of October 18, 1974, **Mary Woodson**, a woman with whom Green was romantically involved, confronted him at his home. After he rejected her plea to get married, she threw a pot of boiling water and Cream of Wheat ("Memphis napalm," the writer **Stanley Booth** called it) on him, then went to another room of the house and killed herself with his .38 revolver. Green was hospitalized with severe burns to his back, and the incident was front-page news; "Naked Star Hit with Pot of Hot Grits" screamed a headline in the *New York Amsterdam News*.

The subsequent investigation ruled Woodson's death a suicide, but perhaps the public wasn't fully convinced (especially given previous accusations of assault by Green's former secretary; Green's ex-wife would later also make domestic assault charges). In 1975, *Al Green's Greatest Hits* went double platinum, but *Al Green Is Love*, released later that year, became his final LP to reach #1 on the R&B/Soul Albums chart. Tragedy struck again in October 1975 when drummer Jackson was murdered during a home invasion.

Green's internal conflicts seemed to come to a head on 1977's *The Belle Album*, his final masterpiece. The album was his first on Hi not produced by Mitchell, as well as the first not to include The Hi Rhythm Section. Green produced the album himself, recruited a new backing band and played lead guitar. On the track "Belle," Green confesses to the female object of his affections that he's found another love: the Lord. "Oh, it's you that I want," he sings, "but it's Him that I need."

Green began studying to become a pastor and purchased the Full Gospel Tabernacle Church. He released one more secular album on Hi, 1978's *Truth N' Time*, but when he was injured falling offstage in Cincinnati in 1979, he interpreted the accident as a message from God and fully devoted himself to religious music. *The Lord Will Make a Way*, the first of eight consecutive gospel albums, was released on **Myrrh** in 1980. In 1982 he joined the cast of the gospel musical *Your Arms Too Short to Box With God* on Broadway, opposite **Patti LaBelle**. His performance led to a **Tony** nomination. "Mr. Green transforms the stage into a pulpit and the play into a revival meeting," wrote *New York Times* critic **Robert Palmer**. "He proves once again, after seven years in the ministry and away from the pop limelight, that he is the consummate soul singer of our time."

But as is always the case with Green, worldly temptation beckoned. His 1988 duet with **Annie Lennox**, "Put a Little Love in Your Heart," was his first chart hit in over a decade, preceding a return to performing a few secular songs on 1989's *I Get Joy*. In 2003 he mounted a full secular comeback, reuniting with Mitchell as producer for *I Can't Stop*. Further secular recordings followed, culminating in 2008's *Lay It Down*, produced by **Questlove** and **James Poyser**.

It's now been 17 years since his last album, though Green presumably keeps himself busy between church and award ceremonies: He received the **Grammy** Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002 and was inducted into the **Rock & Roll Hall of Fame** in 1995 and both the **Gospel Music Hall of Fame** and the **Songwriters Hall of Fame** in 2004.

More recently he even made his art world debut: His searing 1974 *Soul Train* performance of "Jesus Is Waiting"—"Fifty years on, still the most soulful moment in the history of broadcast television," tweeted author **John Nichols** last year—was included in artist **Arthur Jafa**'s 2018 video installation on the transcendent power of the Black church, *akingdoncomethas*. In 2020, the **Brooklyn Museum** projected the video on the building's exterior, where I experienced my own ecstatic vision: Al Green towering over central Brooklyn, on the prowl for future souls to save or seduce.■

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FO YO SOUL RECORDINGS

Adu wasn't quite R&B, adult contemporary, jazz or pop. She was her own genre: Sade.

PHOTO: EXPRESS NEWSPAPERS/GETTY IMAGES

Black Velvet

The smoothest voice in music may belong to the enigmatic Sade Adu, frontwoman and namesake for the British soul-jazz-pop group Sade.

By Keith Murphy

The thing that struck me most in 2009 when meeting **Sade Adu** was the richness of her speaking voice. The Nigerian-born, British-raised smooth R&B singer was holding court in New York at a listening party for her namesake band's sixth studio album, *Soldier of Love*. Sporting a black silk pants suit, a slicked-back long ponytail and creamy red lipstick, she could have walked straight off a 1950s **Blue Note** album cover.

"Glad you all could make it out," she said in the same elegant contralto that has made her an enduring if elusive headliner to this day.

Sade hadn't dropped an album in nearly a decade, but *Soldier of Love* would become the group's first #1 debut on the *Billboard* 200, moving 502,000 copies its first week in America alone. Today, the 66-year-old, who earlier in her career was dismissed by some as a mere lounge singer, stands as one of music's most unlikely superstars.

To date Adu, bassist **Paul Denman**, guitarist and saxophonist **Stuart Matthewman** and keyboardist **Andrew Hale** have sold over 50 million albums worldwide. It's a head-turning feat given that Sade has only released six studio projects since its 1984 debut *Diamond Life*. The band's reclusive singer and lyricist—friends jokingly call Adu "Howie," as in **Howard Hughes**—is known for taking extended breaks from the public, only speaking to the press when there's music to promote.

"The first thing is timing for Sade," said Matthewman in

PHOTOS: DAVID WOLFF-PATRICK/GETTY IMAGES (RED); SHIRLAINE FORREST/WIREIMAGE (BLUE); TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES (YELLOW)

a 2012 interview with *Essence*. "When we hadn't done a tour in 10 years, or maybe we finished a tour a couple years later, and she won't realize that it was like a year ago. She'll think it was like a month ago."

And that's no mere hyperbole. "Young Lion," a 2024 composition featured on **The Red Hot Organization**'s *Transa* compilation album, was the first new Sade music in more than six years (Adu wrote the song for her trans son **Izaak**). The group's most recent extended tour was in 2011, an acclaimed trek that grossed $83.3 million.

When Sade released its hauntingly seductive *Love Deluxe* in fall 1992, **Nirvana** and grunge had already conquered the charts, **Mary J. Blige** was leading R&B's rebirth with *What's the 411?* and gangsta rap was on the precipice of hijacking the mainstream.

Meanwhile, Adu appeared as a mermaid pining for the sailor who got away in the video for the atmospheric heartbreaker "No Ordinary Love." *Love Deluxe* went quadruple platinum. Adu wasn't quite R&B, adult contemporary, jazz or pop. She was her own genre: Sade.

"I think we've been out of date from the start," Adu told *The Fader* in 2000.

Since the band's early-'80s inception, Denman, Matthewman and Hale have matched Adu's earthy vocals and intimate lyricism on classics like "Smooth Operator," "Hold on to Your Love," "Never as Good as the First Time," "Love Is Stronger Than Pride," "Jezebel," "Cherish the Day" and "Soldier of Love." Sade's economic grooves were classy without pretense. They made chic, teary-eyed ballads cinematic and the blues sound like life or death.

Adu and her cohorts sowed the seeds for the '90s neo-soul revival that produced **D'Angelo, Erykah Badu** and **Maxwell**, a frequent collaborator with Matthewman and the offshoot Sade band **Sweetback**. Hip-hop worships her. Rap artists from **Krayzie Bone, Queen Latifah** and the late **MF Doom** to **Snoop Dogg, Drake**, and **Lil Baby** have sampled or interpolated Sade's work.

"I grew up on soul music, but when my pops introduced me to Sade just before *Diamond Life* hit, it was a revelation," said hip-hop legend **Rakim** in a 2010 *Vulture* piece titled "Why Rappers Love Sade." "That voice and her style just took out even the hardest hood at the knees."

When Sade first hit the scene in the early '80s, it seemed far removed from the electronic pop explosion taking place in music. Funk and R&B had been stripped of its 10-piece band excesses and gone synth thanks to **Prince**. The rising New York rap scene was evolving from its Bronx roots, en route to selling out arenas led by **Run-D.M.C.** The second British Invasion had completely taken over **MTV**. And The Gloved One was everywhere.

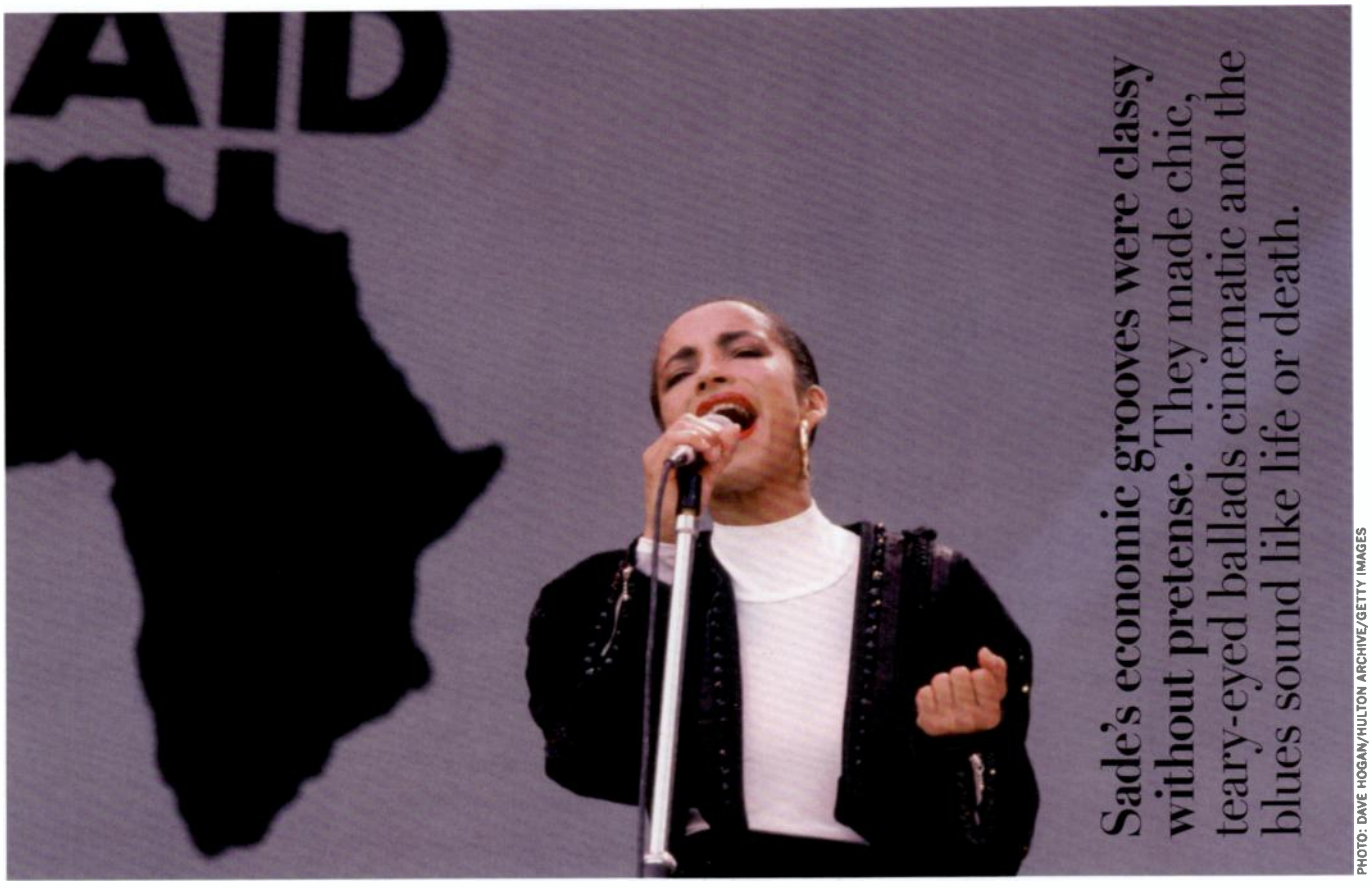
"At the time there was *Thriller* and **Michael Jackson, Duran Duran, The Eurythmics, The Police...**," session drummer **Martin Ditcham** tells *HITS*. Ditcham played percussion on *Diamond Life* and has toured with Sade. "Everything was uptempo and most of the singers were belters."

Aaron Page

Before I Go

EP • Out June 13

AWAL



Sade's economic grooves were classy without pretense. They made chic, teary-eyed ballads cinematic and the blues sound like life or death.

PHOTO: DAVE HOGAN/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Sade Adu was an oddity. She did not possess the throat-grabbing vocal presence of **Chaka Khan**, **Patti Labelle** or the emerging **Whitney Houston**. But when Ditcham walked into London's **Power Plant Studios** in November 1983, he was stopped in his tracks by the voice emanating from a young **St. Martin's School of Art** fashion design graduate.

"Sade was a breath of fresh air," says Ditcham. "There was this breathy voice coming out of this obviously stunning woman. I thought to myself, 'Bloody hell... she's different.'"

There was also an emotional intelligence to Adu's lyrics that were beyond her 24 years. "Tommy had a wife and family/But the needle came between the love and the hard times/Thank God for Sally, she was there through the misery/Just a place to lay his head, just about better off than dead," wrote Adu on *Diamond Life*'s "Sally."

Listening to early Sade breakthroughs like "Your Love Is King" and the deep cut "Frankie's First Affair," one could envision Adu sitting onstage at a 1940s cabaret in New York, holding back tears while performing a devastating torch song for the man who did her wrong.

But when Sade's manager initially shopped "Your Love Is King" and "Smooth Operator" to record companies, the band was turned down by nearly every label in town. "The comments were generally the tracks are too slow, jazzy and too long," recalled *Diamond Life* producer **Robin Millar**.

Sade remained undeterred. After executives witnessed 1,000 fans standing outside to see the band at an already sold-out London gig, they pounced. But when it was suggested that Sade should record with a certain Grammy-winning producer who had presided over the best-selling album of all-time, Adu politely pushed back.

"I don't want to go to America and work with **Quincy Jones**," she said. "I love Quincy Jones, but... I'm quite happy working with Robin."

As a teen, Adu had absorbed the music of **Billie Holiday**, **Aretha Franklin**, **Marvin Gaye**, **Nina Simone**, **Sly Stone**, **Bill Withers** and **Gil Scott-Heron**. She had little interest in chasing Top 40 radio.

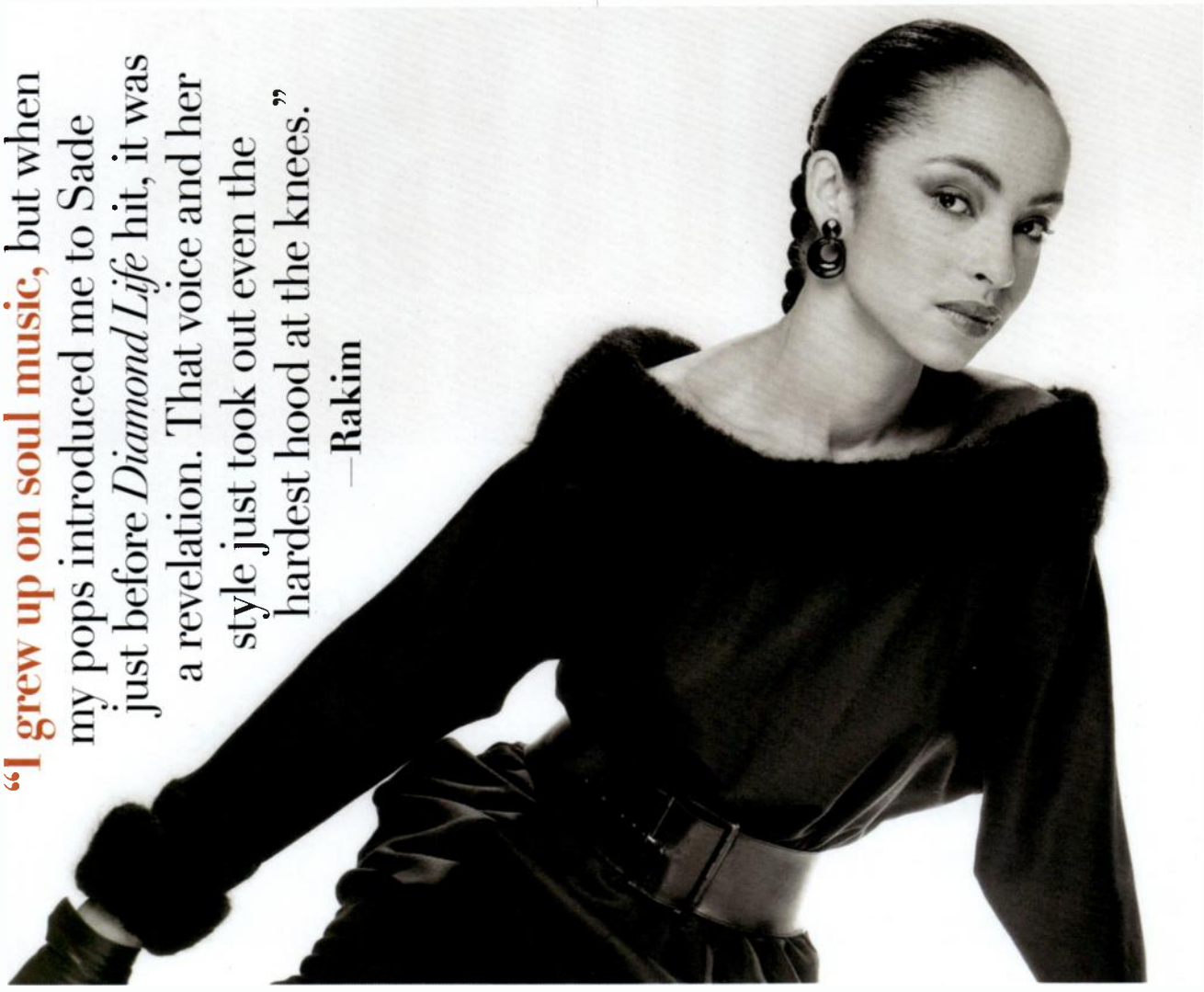
"I've always listened to Black music because I like the sound of the Black voice," Adu told *Spin* in 1985.

Epic Records gave Sade artistic carte blanche, and Adu's instincts were rewarded. *Diamond Life* became the biggest selling debut led by a British female vocalist, selling over 10 million units across the globe. Not only did Sade lead the way for the new Black British music wave that included **Loose Ends**, **Five Star**, **Mica Paris** and later **Soul II Soul**, they opened up the floodgates for white British soul and jazz-infused acts like **Simply Red**, **Swing Out Sister** and **Lisa Stansfield**.

Sade's 1985 follow-up, *Promise*, was an artistic leap. The heart-on-sleeve jazzy ballad "Is It a Crime?" is as desperate as a love song gets. But the album's anchor remains the exotic Top 5 single "The Sweetest Taboo," on which a guilty Adu admits, "You've got the biggest heart/Sometimes I think you're just too good for me."

It was Ditcham who created the basic track for "The Sweetest Taboo" with a **Linn** drum machine, **Fender Rhodes** piano, guitar and bass. "Sade put it in her **Walkman** and she absolutely loved it," he remembers. "She went away and wrote the lyrics to the melody. Sade was delivering lyrics like a Billie Holiday, **Joni Mitchell** or a **Leonard Cohen**."

By Sade's third release, *Stronger Than Pride* (1988), the band



"I grew up on soul music, but when my pops introduced me to Sade just before *Diamond Life* hit, it was a revelation. That voice and her style just took out even the hardest hood at the knees."
—Rakim

PHOTO: MIRRORPIX/GETTY IMAGES

had already become a late-night staple on the Quiet Storm radio format, in the same "slow jam" class as **Luther Vandross**, **Anita Baker** and Prince.

Helen Folssade Adu (Sade is the shortened version of her Yoruba middle name) had no intention to ever become a musician. She was born in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1959 to a Nigerian father and white English mother. At four, she moved with her mom and sister to England, where she grew up in the working-class town of Holland-on-Sea.

Adu's musical options around the house were slim but impactful: the soundtrack to the 1972 film musical *Oliver*, **Dinah Washington**'s *Greatest Hits* and *Sinatra and Basie*. Her father introduced a young Sade to soul music. **James Brown** was a revelation. The plan, however, was to conquer the fashion industry. Adu worked as a fledgling menswear designer and model while living in assisted housing. Money was tight.

At a club gig headlined by British lovers-rock group **Misty in Roots**, Adu was approached by two guys who were looking for a vocalist for their band. Despite having no professional experience, she gave it a shot.

Meanwhile, Matthewman, who had recently moved to London, saw an ad for a group called **Pride** seeking a "sax player... for fashion conscious jazz-funk band." Adu was one of the background vocalists. "It's funny, no one in that band really looked fashion-conscious, but Sade was sitting there very cool," he told Red **Bull Music Academy**. "She had her braid going down her back... and she had a studded wristband on. I thought she was the coolest person I had ever seen."

Adu and Matthewman bonded over their love of soul music, eventually forming their own writing partnership. Denman and Hale rounded out the new lineup. "It was basically Sade and three skinny white boys," joked Matthewman. But there was still the matter of choosing a new band name.

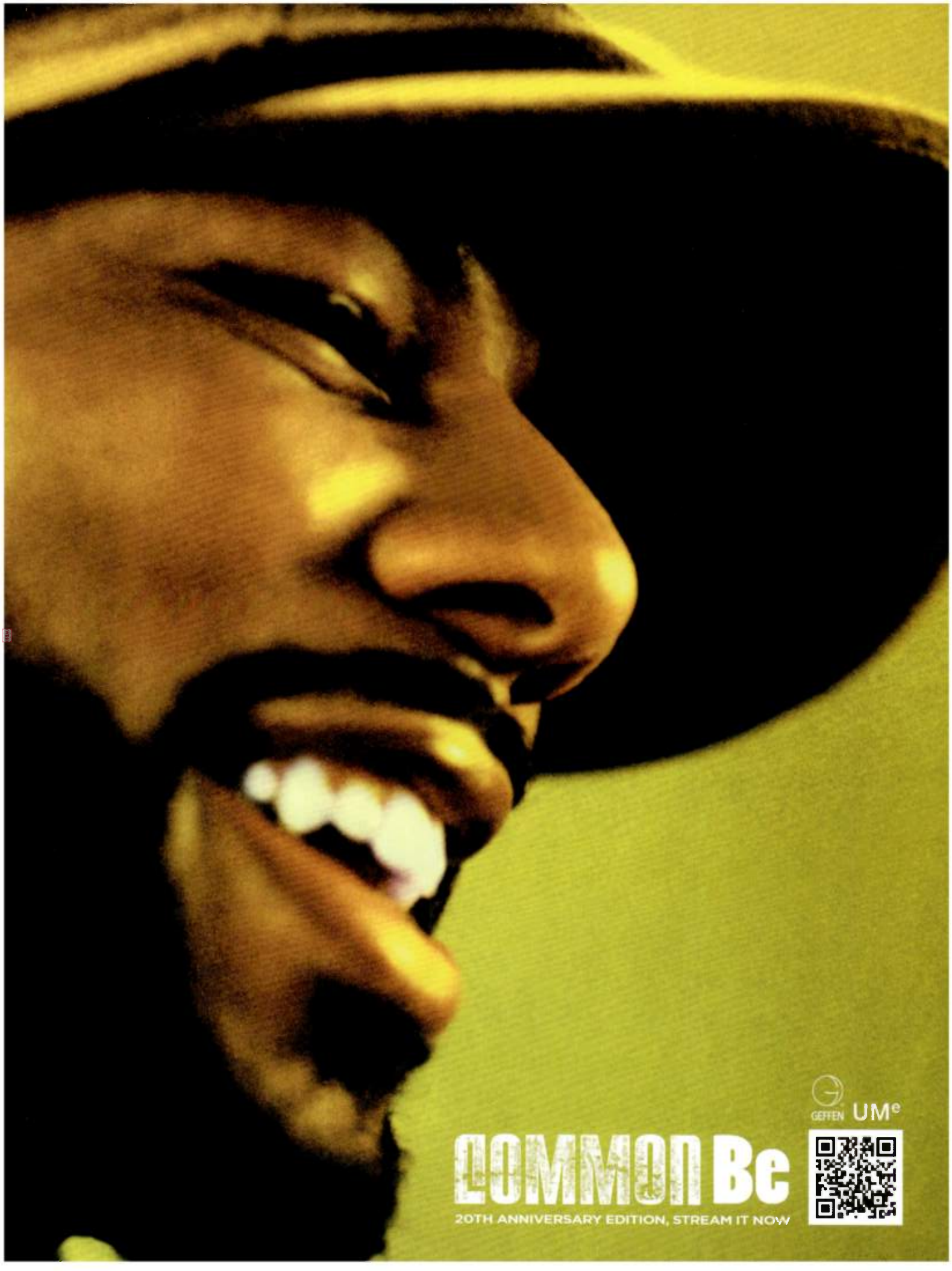
"Look, we're called Pride at the moment," she said. "I just think Sade is a better name than Pride." "The rest of the band agreed with her," Millar marveled. "I thought [to] myself, This is somebody who gets what she wants."

More than 40 years later, Sade is still unfashionably fashionable. Even during its hiatus, the band's presence permeates through music. Among Adu's children: **Corrine Bailey Rae**, **Jhené Aiko**, **Jessie Ware**, **FKA twigs**, **Frank Ocean** and **Snoh Aalegra**.

"In my head Sade is my big sister," **Alicia Keys** noted on the *Drink Champs* podcast. Keys, who performed alongside Adu in 2010, described Adu as "ethereal."

Of course, there's always wishful talk of new Sade music in the pipeline, best met with cautious optimism. Sade Adu does Sade on her own time.

"I communicated with her a couple months ago because a magazine wanted to do a story," says Ditcham. "Sade likes to stay under the radar. She's not weird or anything. She just keeps to herself."■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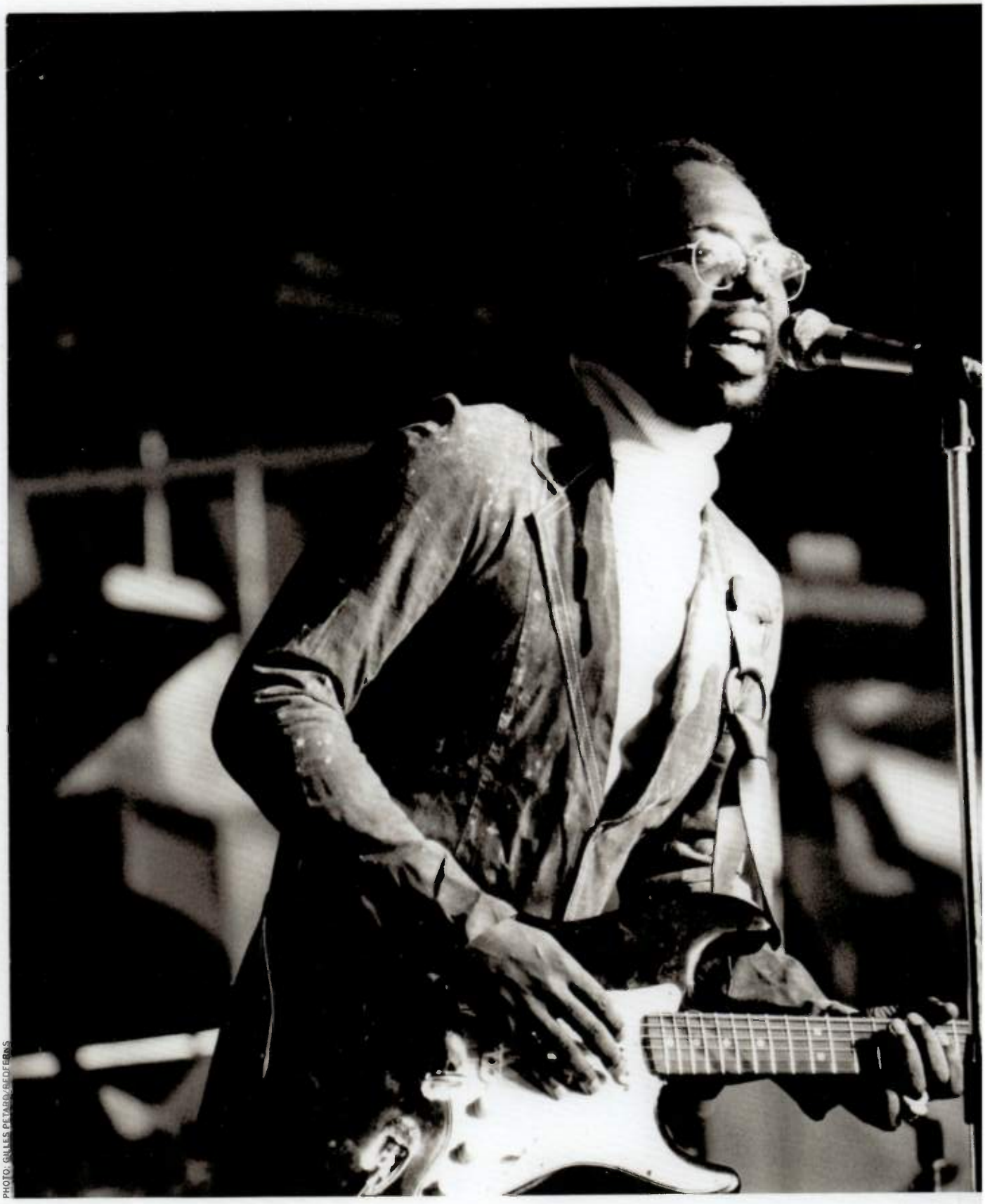
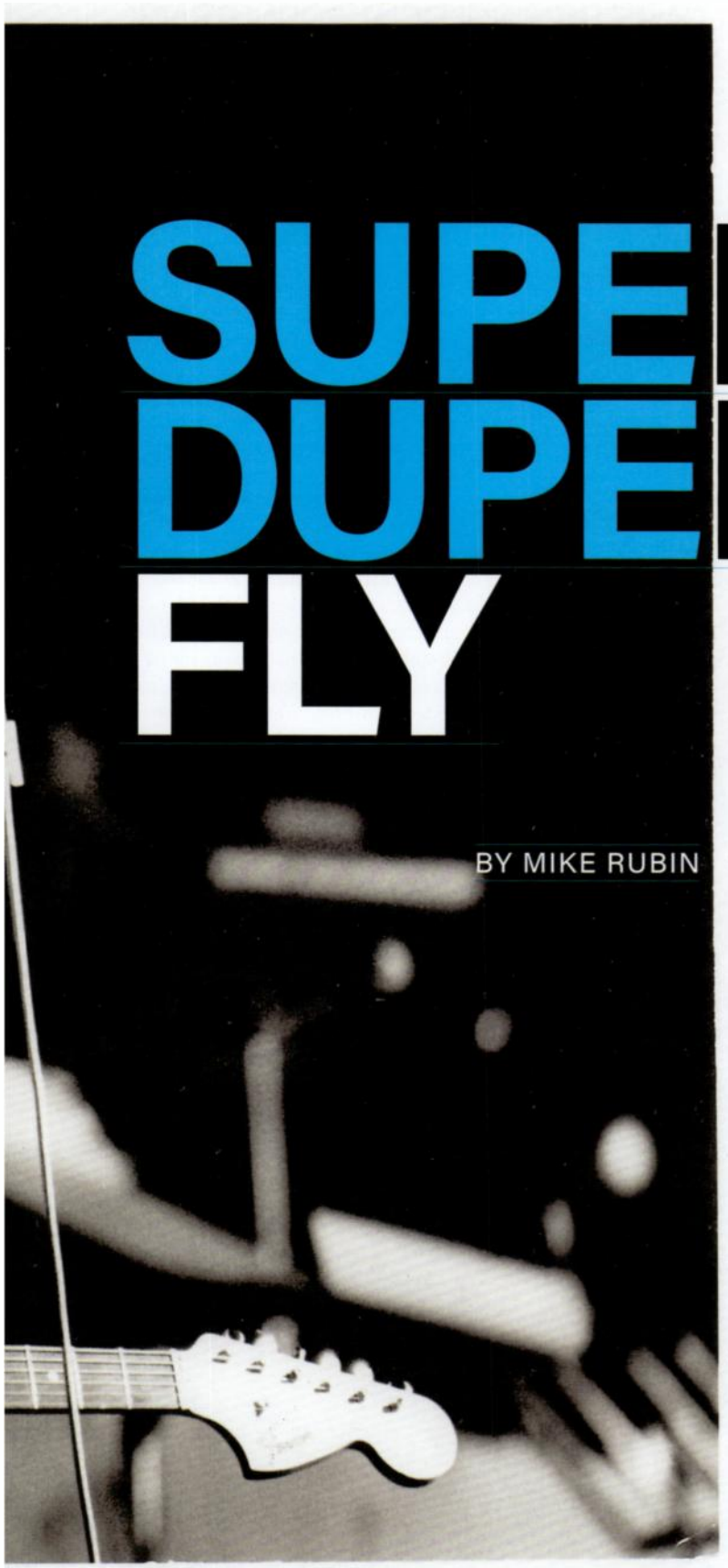


PHOTO: GILLES PETARD / REDFERNS



SUPER DUPER FLY

BOTH WITH THE VOCAL GROUP THE IMPRESSIONS AND AS A SOLO ARTIST, CURTIS MAYFIELD LIFTED BLACK AMERICA WITH HIS VOICE AND HIS PEN.

BY MIKE RUBIN

Excuse the potential blasphemy, but if God has a singing voice, He would probably sound like **Curtis Mayfield**. The Chicago soul singer and songwriter possessed a gospel-trained falsetto that was one of pop music's most angelic, an instrument that even for the secular among us seemed a manifestation of the divine.

An incisive lyricist, Mayfield was one of the first R&B artists to infuse their work with sociopolitical commentary. His blend of social consciousness and spiritual harmonies became a crucial soundtrack to the civil rights struggle throughout the 1960s, when he led the Chicago vocal trio **The Impressions**, responsible for the standards "It's Alright,"

IN THE MID-'60S, THE IMPRESSIONS BECAME THE UNOFFICIAL SOUNDTRACK TO THE BURGEONING CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. "KEEP ON PUSHING" WAS FREQUENTLY SUNG BY ACTIVISTS, WHILE PROTEST ORGANIZERS OFTEN PLAYED "PEOPLE GET READY"—WHICH MAYFIELD HAD WRITTEN IN THE WAKE OF THE 1963 MARCH ON WASHINGTON—BEFORE EVENTS, REPORTEDLY AT THE SUGGESTION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

"Keep On Pushing" and "People Get Ready." That influence carried on into the '70s, where a successful solo career was punctuated by his electrifying soundtrack to the film *Super Fly*, featuring the funk classics "Pusherman," "Freddie's Dead" and the title track. Relatively small in physical stature, he was a true musical giant who died far too young at 57 in 1999, never having fully recovered from a 1990 accident when a lighting tower fell on him during a Brooklyn concert and left him paralyzed from the neck down.

"Mayfield innovated a hybrid form of spiritual and secular soul music," cultural critic **Greg Tate** wrote in 2020, "one that spoke to the democratic idealism and aspirational foot-soldiering of the civil rights and Black Power movements in the '60s, and to the materialist upwardly mobilized ambitions of the post-revolutionary '70s."

Curtis Lee Mayfield was born into grinding poverty in Chicago in 1942. When he was five, his father abandoned the family; he and his three siblings were raised by his mother **Marion** in various public housing projects, with the family finally settling in the **Cabrini-Green Homes** on Chicago's Near North Side when Curtis was around 13. Marion's struggle to feed her children "shaped my father," wrote **Todd Mayfield** in *Traveling Soul*, a 2016 biography of his dad, "as he watched her battle to do something as simple as survive."

Curtis' paternal grandmother **Annie Bell Mayfield**—who had come north from Louisiana in the 1920s during the Great Migration—was a preacher in the **Traveling Souls Spiritualist Church.** While the spellbinding services in her basement church bestowed young Curtis with a bedrock of faith, her dogged self-sufficiency inspired him to always fight for control and independence. As he told an interviewer in 1976, "You strive to own as much of yourself as you possibly can."

Mayfield was deeply affected by the murder of **Emmett Till** in the summer of 1955. A fellow Chicago teenager, Till was just a year older than Curtis when he was abducted, tortured and

PHOTOS: DON PAULSEN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; INSET: GAB ARCHIVE/REDFERNS

Inset: The Impressions (l-r) Curtis Mayfield, Sam Gooden, Fred Cash; bottom: Apollo Theater, 1965


WE
LIVE
MUSIC
GUNPOWDER & SKY
MOVIES DOCUMENTARIES LIVE SPECIALS VR PODCASTS

PHOTO: GILLES PETARD/REDFERNS

PHOTO: RICHARD E. AARON/REDFERNS

Top: Mayfield in the studio; bottom: Inside Studio 54, NYC, 1977

lynched by two white men while visiting family in Mississippi. Till's mother **Mamie** insisted on a public funeral and an open casket in Chicago, and Mayfield saw the indelible photos of Till's mutilated face in *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*—images which awakened the nation's attention to the violence of Jim Crow—and never forgot he could have suffered a similar fate.

Music would provide his escape and salvation. Mayfield began singing publicly at age seven with **The Northern Jubilee Gospel Singers**. He taught himself to play guitar, tuning it to the black keys on a piano and creating his own idiosyncratic F-sharp style. At 16 he joined a budding doo-wop group called **The Roosters** and dropped out of high school. "My education didn't give me any background, not even any back*bone*, as a Black," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1969. "It just didn't mean anything. My whole education for whatever I do know was brought to me right here on the road."

CKay

CKay The Second

EP • Out June 13

AWAL

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

IN A TELEVISION INTERVIEW, MAYFIELD EXPRESSED HOPE THAT WHITE AUDIENCES WOULD UNDERSTAND THAT BLACK ENTERTAINERS AREN'T MERELY "PEOPLE THAT TURN FLIPS AND HOLLER 'SHAKE YOUR SHAGGY SHAGGY'" BUT ALSO "PEOPLE THAT THINK AND WANT TO PROGRESS AND HAVE CULTURE AND IDENTITY AS WELL. WHY NOT SELL THAT IN MY MUSIC?"

Top: With his band; below: at the Shrine Auditorium, Los Angeles

The Roosters changed their name to The Impressions, and after some personnel shuffles—including a brief stint with **Jerry Butler** as lead tenor—settled into the trio of Mayfield, **Sam Gooden** (bass) and **Fred Cash** (tenor). Mayfield assumed the role of lead songwriter after Butler's departure, and beginning with 1961's "Gypsy Woman," he crafted one peerless Impressions single after another throughout the decade, including "I'm So Proud" and "It's All Right" in 1963, "Keep On Pushing" and "Amen" in 1964, "People Get Ready" in 1965, "We're a Winner" in 1968 and "Choice of Colors" in 1969.

In the mid-'60s, The Impressions became the unofficial soundtrack to the burgeoning civil rights movement. "Keep On Pushing" was frequently sung by activists, while protest organizers often played "People Get Ready"—which Mayfield had written in the wake of the 1963 March on Washington—before events, reportedly at the suggestion of **Martin Luther King Jr.** In March 1968, students at **Howard University** occupied the administration building, demanding more African American history and culture courses in the curriculum. As their sit-in dragged on and shut down the school, they played The Impressions' "We're a Winner" to lift their spirits; after four days, when the university granted concessions, the demonstrators made it their victory song.

Andrew Young, leader of the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** during that period and a close MLK confidant, acknowledged Mayfield's importance in the 2008 documentary *Movin' on Up: The Music and Message of Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions*. "You have to think of Curtis Mayfield as a prophetic visionary teacher of our people and of our time," said Young. "Martin Luther King was trying to do it legally and morally, but there's a sense that the music has been more successful than the courts and the church."

In 1967, Mayfield and Impressions manager **Eddie Thomas** launched their own independent label, **Curtom Records**—with the company motto "We're a Winner"—allowing the group to leave **ABC Records**. Back in 1960 Mayfield had set up a publishing company, also called Curtom (a mashup of "Curtis" and "Thomas"), becoming one of the very few R&B artists of that era to own their own publishing and master tapes; now he would be able to oversee every element of his music, as well as mentor new talent. Singer **Donny Hathaway** would come aboard as a label songwriter, session musician and producer (though following his debut Curtom single, Hathaway departed for **Atlantic Records**).

Curtom's first album release was The Impressions' *This Is My Country*. On the title track, Mayfield sang "I've paid three hundred years or more/ Of slave driving, sweat, and welts on my

back/ This is my country." *The Young Mods' Forgotten Story* in 1969 included two more pieces of trenchant racial discourse, "Choice of Colors" ("If you had a choice of colors/Which one would you choose, my brothers?/If there was no day or night/Which would you prefer to be right?") and "Mighty Mighty (Spade & Whitey)" ("Your Black and white power/Has grown to be a crumblin' tower"). Struggling to square his desire to comment in his own voice with his responsibilities to his bandmates, and looking for a break from constant touring, Mayfield left The Impressions after 1970's *Check Out Your Mind!* to strike out on his own.

Curtis, Mayfield's solo debut, was his strongest full-length album yet. Mayfield branched beyond The Impressions' post doo-wop vocal pop towards new sounds: the driving psychedelic funk of "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Going to Go," along with the baroque orchestral blues of "The Other Side of Town" and "We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue." In a television interview, Mayfield expressed hope that white audiences would understand that Black entertainers aren't merely "people that turn flips and holler 'Shake your shaggy shaggy'" but also "people that think and want to progress and have culture and identity as well. Why not sell that in my music?"

PHOTO: MOVIE POSTER IMAGE ART/GETTY IMAGES

In late 1971, Mayfield was approached by movie producer **Sig Shore** about scoring an upcoming action film called *Super Fly*. Reading the script, Mayfield was immediately inspired; in the story of a Harlem cocaine dealer and "his plan to stick it to the Man" (as the film's poster would proclaim), Mayfield found the raw material to mold his creative and commercial zenith. Though the **NAACP** accused the film of glorifying "pimps, dope pushers, gangsters, and super males with vast physical prowess but no cognitive skills" and tried to block its distribution, Mayfield's lyrics subversively deconstructed the movie's myth-making, shining a light on the scourge of drug addiction while painting psychological portraits of the inner-city characters far deeper than the strictures of the Blaxploitation genre normally allowed. "I did the music and lyrics to be a commentary, as though someone was speaking as the movie was going on," Mayfield told *Rolling Stone* in 1993. "It was important for me to counter the visuals—to go in and explain it in a way that the kids would not read it as an infomercial for drugs."

The *Super Fly* soundtrack was released a month before the film, which wasn't industry practice at the time; its chart-topping success—a first for Mayfield—provided bonus advance publicity for the film. The buzz helped *Super Fly* briefly topple *The Godfather* from the #1 position in the weekly box office rankings, and the film ended the year as 1972's third-highest grossing movie. "Just two decades before, young Curtis had listened to his mother cry herself to sleep" after giving her last quarter to her son, wrote Todd Mayfield in *Traveling Man*. "Now, on the strength of nine songs, he'd generated eighty million quarters. Such fortune boggled the mind of a ghetto child."

Over the next few years, Mayfield did double duty, releasing solo albums annually while also creating film soundtracks for other artists to perform. (It wasn't the first time that Mayfield had outsourced hits: in the early '60s, he'd co-written "He Will Break Your Heart" for Butler, as well as penning songs for **Major Lance** including "The Monkey Time.") For the 1974 rom-com *Claudine*, he wrote and produced songs performed by **Gladys Knight & the Pips**; for the 1975 comedy *Let's Do It Again*, he wrote the music performed by **The Staple Singers**—including the title track, which hit #1 before the film's release. In 1976, he composed the soundtrack of the backstage musical *Sparkle* for **Aretha Franklin** (which included the hit "Something He Can Feel"), while in 1977 he not only created the music for the crime comedy *A Piece of the Action* for **Mavis Staples**, he performed the soundtrack of the film adaptation of **Miguel Piñero**'s prison play *Short Eyes* himself.

This intense schedule overextended him, however, and his commercial and critical fortunes suffered during the late '70s disco boom. After a distribution deal collapsed, Curtom shuttered in 1980, and Mayfield moved from Chicago to Atlanta. He spent much of the next decade away from the music industry, though he toured periodically. On August 13, 1990, as he took the stage for a free outdoor concert at **Wingate Field** in Flatbush, Brooklyn, storm winds toppled a lighting tower onto him, crushing several vertebrae and leaving him a quadriplegic. "The man who controlled everything," wrote Todd Mayfield, "now couldn't even go to the bathroom without help."

Still, he felt compelled to attempt another album. Though no longer able to play guitar or even speak loudly, he discovered he was able to sing a few lines at a time while flat on his back. The hip-hop production team **Organized Noize** spliced those snippets together to fashion 1996's *New World Order*, Mayfield's best charting album in almost two decades. His health continued to decline though—his right leg was amputated due to diabetes—and he was unable to attend his 1999 **Rock & Roll Hall of Fame** induction as a solo artist (The Impressions were previously inducted in 1991). Mayfield died of complications from diabetes on December 26, 1999.

Over a quarter century after his passing, Mayfield's music continues to inspire. Hip-hop artists widely sample his songs, while his outspoken societal critiques have influenced rappers from **Public Enemy's Chuck D** to **Kendrick Lamar**. *The Makings of Curtis Mayfield*, a documentary directed by singer-songwriter **H.E.R.**, will be released later this year. Given today's turbulent times, the moment is certainly ripe for all of us to push as hard as Mayfield did.■

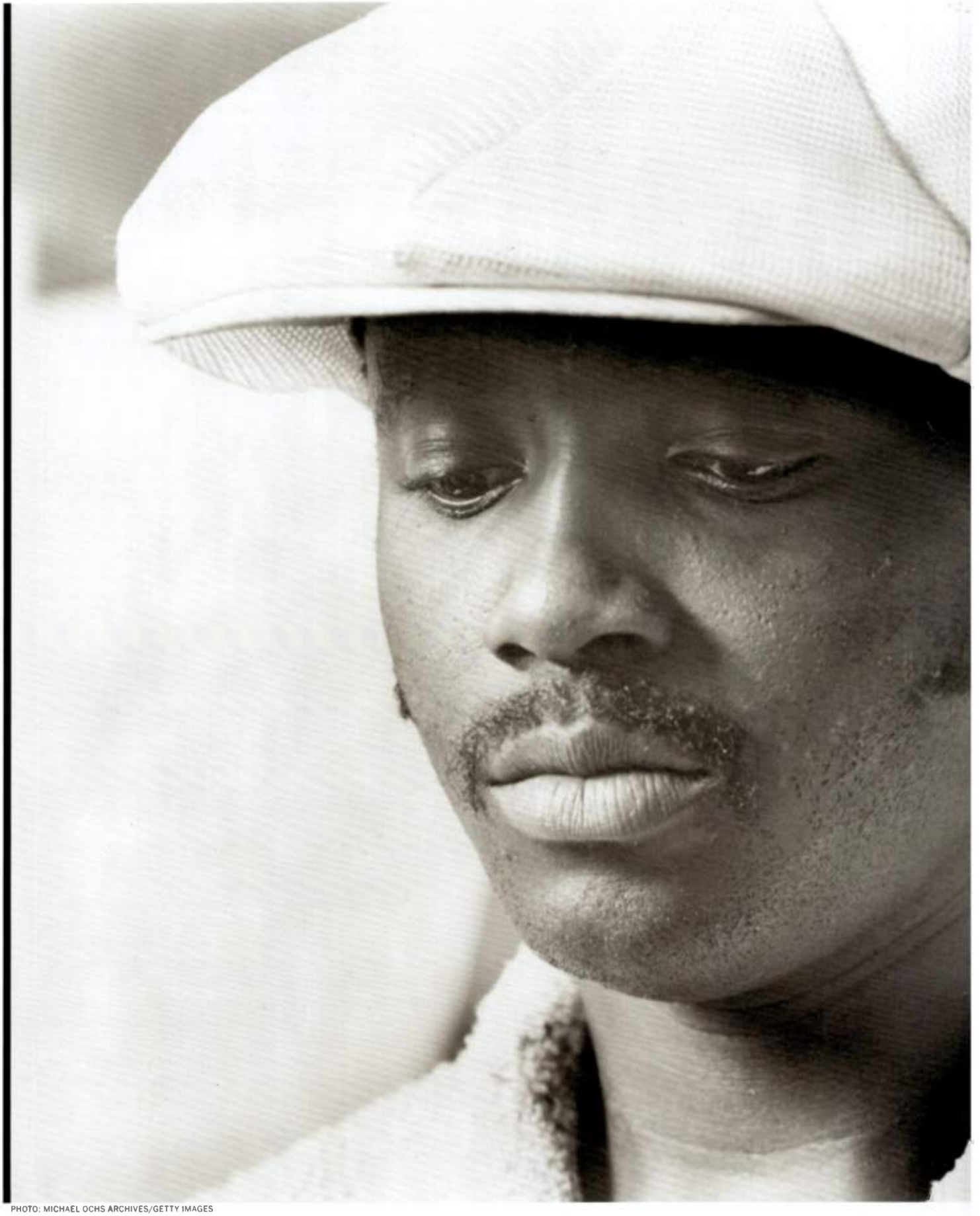


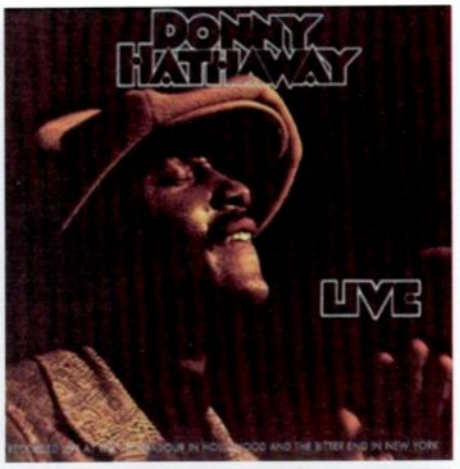
PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

DONNY HATHAWAY AND THE BLUEPRINT OF '70S SOUL

BY MILES MARSHALL LEWIS

"Who stole the soul?" often surfaces as a conversational topic in urban barbershops nationwide, as patrons get skin-faded to a backdrop of Black music that spans the decades.

Listening to sexually frank, sample-heavy modern music alongside urban oldies focused on uplift, sophisticated arrangements and L-O-V-E sometimes sparks the question. Answers might mention the encroachment of hip-hop on R&B or how each generation creates music that reflects its own time. Legends like **Stevie Wonder**, **Aretha Franklin** and **James Brown** inevitably get compared to current artists who couldn't possibly fill their pioneering shoes. But what's guaranteed to happen in such discourse about soul music is that someone eventually floats the name of the young genius in the applejack hat: the late, great **Donny Hathaway**.



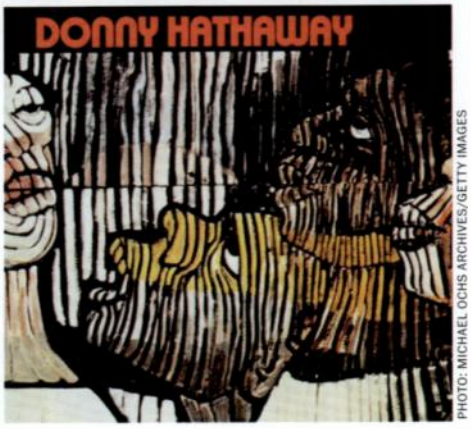


PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Hathaway with Quincy Jones

THE SOMEWHAT SHY, SELF-CONSCIOUS HATHAWAY WAS GIVEN TO HIDING UNDER HIS APPLEJACK HAT IN LIVE PERFORMANCES. HE MADE PRIVATE COMMENTS TO CONFIDANTES ABOUT HIS WEIGHT, CONCERNED ABOUT HIS MARKETABILITY AS A SEX SYMBOL.

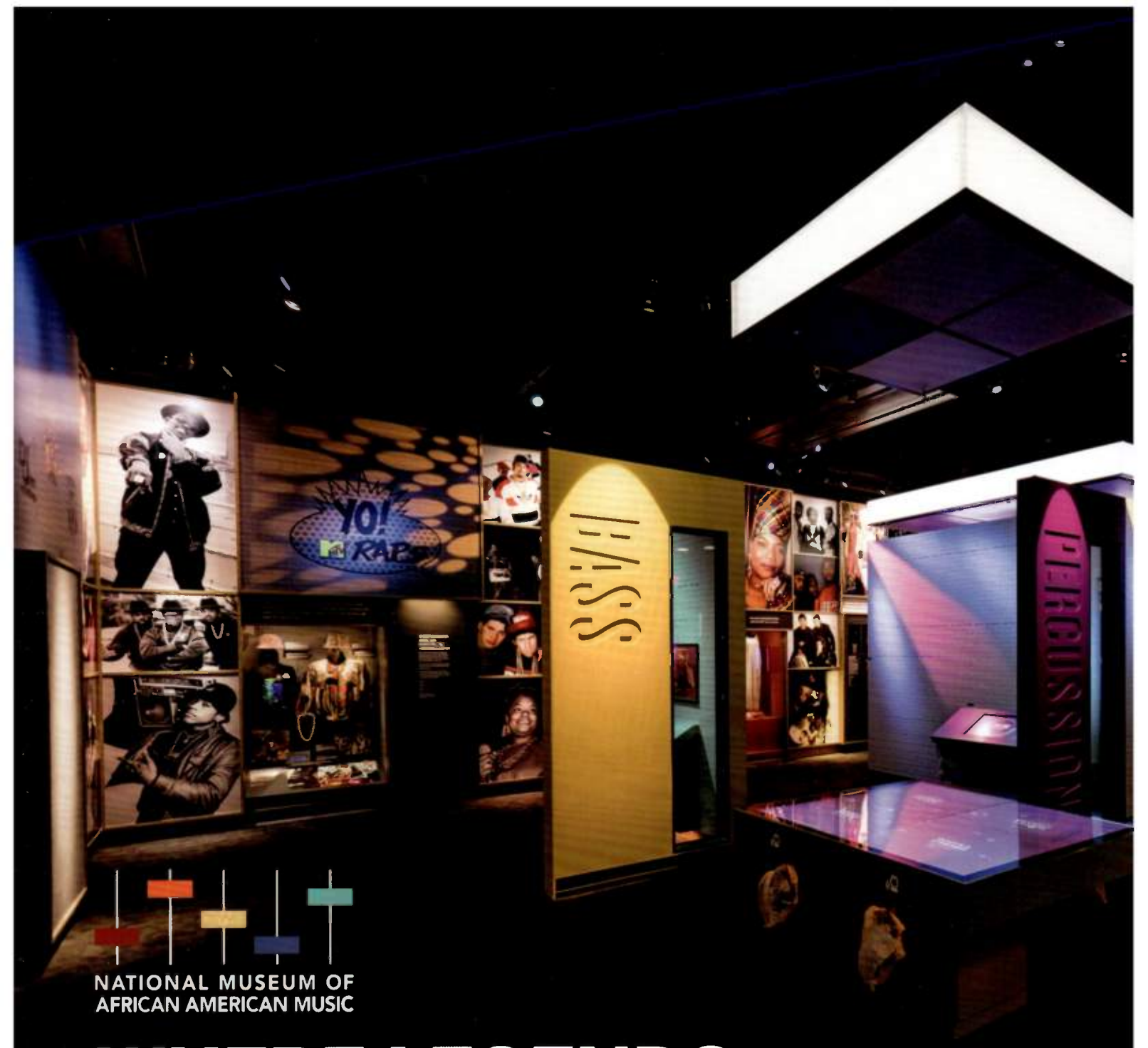
The only thing in barbershops that buzzes louder than the electric clippers is the clamor of heated discussion. Every salon has its designated playlist DJ, and the younger he is, the more he's likely to claim familiarity with Hathaway through his holiday classic "This Christmas;" "The Closer I Get to You" and "Where Is the Love" (his timeless duets with songstress **Roberta Flack**); his near-instrumental hit "The Ghetto;" and maybe his heartstring-pulling cover of **Leon Russell**'s "A Song for You." The barber-DJ may even be aware that **Lalah Hathaway**—probably best known for **The Robert Glasper Experiment**'s *Black Radio* or **Kendrick Lamar**'s *To Pimp a Butterfly*—is Donny Hathaway's daughter.

But there's much more to his story.

Born in Chicago in 1945, Donny Edward Hathaway was raised in the housing projects of St. Louis, primarily brought up by his grandmother **Martha Pitts**, a professional gospel singer. His precocious musical curiosity led him to join the choir of **Trinity Baptist Church** and start studying piano at a remarkably young age. At three years old, he performed a solo singing "How Much I Owe, Love Divine," and by four, he was touring the local gospel circuit with ads billing him as "**Little Donny Pitts**—the Nation's Youngest Gospel Singer." Classical piano instruction at **Vashon High School** followed, leading to a fine-arts scholarship to study music theory and music education at **Howard University**.

Hathaway's origin story unfolds during the era in which **Ray Charles** and **Sam Cooke** blended gospel and blues into new configurations known as rock & roll and soul music, and continues through the advent of Detroit's new **Motown** Sound. When Hathaway enrolled as a Howard freshman in 1964, R&B songs ripping up the charts included **The Impressions**' "Keep On Pushing" and **Marvin Gaye**'s "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You)." Hathaway would prematurely leave college behind, accepting a position as staff producer, arranger and session musician with the Chicago-based **Curtom Records** label, which was launched by The Impressions' **Curtis Mayfield**.

At Howard, Hathaway had shared a room with teenage drummer **Ric Powell**, who wasted no time lining up gigs around D.C. for his own **Ric Powell Trio**. The introverted Hathaway joined, swiftly becoming the group's star attraction at venues like **Ed Murphy's Supper Club** and **Mr. Henry's**. The white bassist of The Ric Powell Trio, **Steve Novosel**, shortly introduced Hathaway to his wife, Roberta Flack, a singer-songwriter (and Howard alumna) who'd been gigging around town. A jazz-influenced, classically trained pianist, Flack had already come up through the same D.C. nightclub scene that later embraced Hathaway and truly ascended to fame when "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" appeared in **Clint Eastwood**'s directorial debut, *Play Misty for Me*, in 1971. Flack



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and Hathaway would shortly become musical kindred spirits with a handful of hit duets: "Where Is the Love," "The Closer I Get to You," "Back Together Again."

At Howard, Hathaway met vocalist **Eulaulah Vann**. By 1967, the two were married; late in 1968, little Eulaulah "Lalah" Hathaway was born. "I hear a lot of my mother in his singing," Grammy winner Lalah recalled in a 2014 *Huffington Post* interview. "A lot of people don't know that 'cause they've never heard my mother sing. He would call her from the road and say, 'How do I approach this note, bae?' or 'How can I finesse this line?' And she would help him with that. So I know that there was a lot of love in those songs, and I know that my parents were in love, which is a really beautiful legacy."

After the legendary saxophonist **King Curtis** heard his unreleased, self-produced debut album and shared it posthaste with record execs **Jerry Wexler** and **Ahmet Ertegun**, Hathaway was signed to **ATCO/Atlantic**.

When heard with 2025 ears, *Everything Is Everything*'s influence on neo-soul decades down the line is immediately apparent. Without even pressing play on the first track, "Voice Inside (Everything Is Everything)," one might recall **Lauryn Hill**'s own (musically unrelated) "Everything Is Everything" from *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. The Wurlitzer electric piano Hathaway framed front and center on his debut was resurrected on D'Angelo's own first album, *Brown Sugar*. When Hill and D'Angelo layer vinyl pops and crackles into their digitally recorded work, Hathaway's *Everything Is Everything* is exactly what they're hoping to evoke.

Released in July 1970, *Everything Is Everything* spans gospel with "Thank You Master (For My Soul)", jazzy instrumentals with"Sugar Lee" and his first hit, "The Ghetto," and cover versions including **Ray Charles**' "I Believe to My Soul" and **Nina Simone**'s "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" to create a veritable blueprint of '70s soul music. Tracks like "Misty" and "Tryin' Times" dig deeply into the blues. He proves himself as a master interpreter and arranger with the aforementioned "Young, Gifted and Black" (also covered by **Aretha Franklin** two years later). Just listen to the unnamed background singers—arranged by Hathaway—harmonizing on "It's where it's at..." through the fade. The effect sounds masterful, and so does Hathaway.

Where influence is concerned, jumping ahead to neo-soul isn't even necessary. "Stevie [Wonder] was definitely influenced by Donny," noted bassist **Phil Upchurch** in liner notes to the Hathaway compilation *Never My Love: The Anthology*. "When he first heard Donny's record, he bought a zillion of them and started giving them to people, and said, 'Listen to this.' " Upon the release of *Everything Is Everything*, Wonder had yet to put out what's regarded as his first album as a mature artist, 1971's *Where I'm Coming From*. Producer **Joel Dorn** agrees: "Listen to Donny's first two albums, then listen to how Stevie Wonder sang from *Talking Book* on," biographer **Emily J. Lordi** quotes in her 33⅓ book, *Donny Hathaway Live*.

Entering the 1970s, certain Black artists started incorporating heavier jazz elements into their music. Nina Simone called her own style "Black classical music." Roberta Flack belonged to this wave too, helping give birth to Black radio's Quiet Storm format. But aside from the jazzy instrumentation of the Marvin Gaye landmark *What's Going On*, this relatively new trend didn't really have a male musical champion. After Hathaway's *Everything Is Everything* and its immediate follow-up, the self-titled *Donny Hathaway* (1971), that was no longer true. "The Ghetto" makes this case all by itself: Hathaway's soul-jazz instrumental quickly became his first signature hit.

All of 27 by 1972, the somewhat shy, self-conscious Hathaway was taking his success in stride. He was given to hiding under his applejack hat in live performances. He made private comments to confidantes about his weight, concerned about his marketability as a sex symbol.

In September of '72, at a time when America sat in front of prime-time television to watch the same three channels, CBS

PHOTO: STEPHEN VERONA/GETTYIMAGES

"LISTEN TO DONNY'S FIRST TWO ALBUMS, THEN LISTEN TO HOW STEVIE WONDER SANG FROM *TALKING BOOK* ON."
—PRODUCER JOEL DORN

Hathaway in 1972

PHOTOS: MICHAEL REZIAN/GETTY IMAGES FOR 988 LIFELINE CHARITY HEART AND SOUL (FAR LEFT); CHRISTIAN ALMINANA/FILMMAGIC

PHOTO: STEPHEN VERONA/GETTY IMAGES

Clockwise from top left: Donnita Hathaway at a 2024 tribute to her father; daughter Lalah Hathaway, 2004; with Roberta Flack, 1972

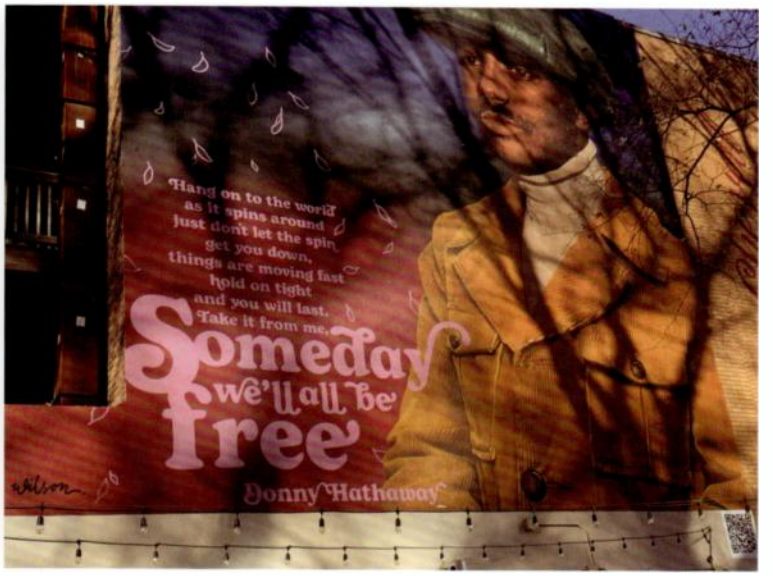
premiered *Maude*—a spinoff of producer **Norman Lea**r's ever-popular *All in the Family*—with its opening theme song "And Then There's Maude" sung by Donny Hathaway. Also gracing screens that year: *Come Back Charleston Blue*, an adaptation of **Chester Himes'** crime novel *The Heat's On*, which certainly had a Blaxploitation audience in mind—and a soundtrack courtesy of Donny Hathaway.

His sophomore album yielded "A Song for You," another classic in the Hathaway canon and a supreme example of his skill as an interpreter. With a spare piano and strings accompaniment, he finds grandeur and vast emotional range in Russell's intimate tune. It's one of the most moving performances of the era.

Atlantic released *Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway* during the spring of 1972, leading with a cover of soft-rock troubadour **James Taylor's** "You've Got a Friend" (dropped as a single prior to the release of his version). Flack had previously recorded Hathaway compositions on her debut album *First Take* ("Tryin' Times" and "Our Ages or Our Hearts") and its follow-up, *Chapter Two* ("Gone Away"). But the real magic manifested on this duet album: "You've Got a Friend," the ravishing "Be Real Black for Me" and "Where Is the Love" all received heavy urban airplay, helping the album sell over a million copies.

Recording material like "Young, Gifted and Black" and "Be Real Black for Me" in the Black Power era rightfully cast Hathaway as a socially conscious artist. Often active with **Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH** (dedicated to improving Black communities' economic and social standing), Hathaway also played shows raising money for the **National Black Political Convention** alongside Aretha Franklin, **Harry Belafonte** and **Dick Gregory.**

Mainstream media occasionally took shots at Hathaway. *Rolling Stone* found his duet album "every bit as boring as both



WHEN HEARD WITH 2025 EARS, *EVERYTHING IS EVERYTHING*'S INFLUENCE ON NEO-SOUL DECADES DOWN THE LINE IS IMMEDIATELY APPARENT.

Flack's *Quiet Fire* and *Donny Hathaway Live*, and, in some ways, worse." The magazine also considered *Donny Hathaway Live*, now a recognized soul classic, "a very hollow record," claiming Hathaway "has almost no presence as a singer." The Black community, it hardly needs saying, held him in considerably higher esteem.

Intimate concert performances at L.A.'s **Troubadour** and NYC's **The Bitter End** from 1971 make up *Donny Hathaway Live*. If you only owned one Hathaway album in the early '70s, this was it. Fast-forwarding again to the neo-soul era of the 1990s, *Live* album's "Little Ghetto Boy" instantly recalls The Chronic's "Lil' Ghetto Boy," a G-funk tag team between **Dr. Dre** and **Snoop Dogg**. (Hathaway's music has also served as source material for **Common**'s "Retrospect for Life," **Too Short**'s "The Ghetto" and dozens of other hip-hop tracks.) Rousing renditions of "The Ghetto," **John Lennon**'s "Jealous Guy" and more showcased Hathaway at the top of his game.

Out of the spotlight, meanwhile, doctors diagnosed the singer with the paranoid schizophrenia that would end his life at 33.

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Top: Mural in Chicago honoring Hathaway by Richard Wilson; bottom: in 1970

By the June 1973 release of *Extensions of a Man*, "he had peaked, period," says widow Eulaulah Hathaway on an episode of **TV One**'s *Unsung* series featuring her late husband. The album's "Someday We'll All Be Free" turned into another Black communal rallying cry. But due to meager marketing and the rise of other soul superstars, Hathaway's final studio album underperformed. Heavily medicated to stave off his mental distress, he retreated from NYC to Chicago and laid low for years—a period broken up by occasional live performances.

The duet "The Closer I Get to You," a masterclass in R&B balladry released on Flack's 1977 album *Blue Lights in the Basement*, relit their chemistry once again. Its songwriters, **James Mtume** and **Reggie Lucas** (who'd played in jazz giant **Miles Davis**' band), made lightning strike again with the uptempo "Back Together Again" two years later. But during the song's recording, a disturbed, distraught Hathaway retreated to the bathroom in tears, claiming (according to Mtume, who was present) that "White people...have my brain hooked up to a machine and they're stealing my music and my sound."

That night, the singer fatally fell from the 15th floor of the **Essex House** hotel in midtown Manhattan.

Patrons in Black barbershops debating "who stole the soul?" may not know that detail of Hathaway's end. But a sampling of modern-day soul proves that his legacy reverberates well into the 21st century.■

Genius Invents Soul

Decades before "genre" became a dirty word, Ray Charles busted down barriers through the sheer brilliance of his artistry and a determination to live life on his own terms.

By Willie Aron

In his famous warts-and-all series of interviews for *Rolling Stone* in late 1970, **John Lennon** attested, "Genius is pain." If that is indeed the case, **Ray Charles**, referred to by **Frank Sinatra** as "the only true genius in show business," communicated the pain, anguish, longing and calamity of his life through his prodigious musical talent.

Born Ray Charles Robinson in Albany, Georgia, on September 23, 1930, he was raised in Greenville, Florida, where he was taught boogie-woogie piano by musician and restaurant owner **Wylie Pitman**. When Ray was five, he watched his younger brother **George** drown in a washtub. By age six, Charles went blind, likely as a result of glaucoma.

Despite these harrowing circumstances, he was taught to be fiercely independent by his mother, **Aretha**, who despised self-pity. In the liner notes to the 1997 release of the definitive, career-spanning *Ray Charles: Genius & Soul/The 50th Anniversary Collection*, Charles says of his mother, "When I got to feeling sorry for myself, she'd get tough and say, 'You're blind, you ain't dumb; you lost your sight, not your mind.' [She would] make me see I could do almost anything anyone else could do. Didn't overprotect me until I was scared of this world. Showed me I didn't have to be scared of anything... Learned to make my own way."

PHOTO: TONY EVANS/ TIMELAPSE LIBRARY LTD., GETTY IMAGES

Sent by Aretha to the state-sponsored **Florida School for the Deaf and Blind** in St. Augustine, he began receiving formal piano instruction and was taught how to read braille. Utilizing that skill set, Charles learned classical music from his instructors, jazz from older students and country from listening to the **Grand Ole Opry** on the radio. He developed an appetite for everything from jazz piano (**Art Tatum**, a formative, lifelong influence on Charles' piano technique) to gospel to big-band swing. He told biographer **David Ritz**, "My ears were sponges. Soaked it all up... **The Dorsey Brothers, Glenn Miller, Lucky Millinder, Duke Ellington** and **Count Basie**. The singers I dug most had the most personality... I even dug hillbilly attitude when it was done right, like **Hank Willams** and **Hank Snow**." That omnivorousness would set the musical world alight.

The sudden death of Aretha when Ray was not yet 15 came as a great shock to him; after attending her funeral, he left the school and moved to Jacksonville to try his hand at being a professional musician. Falling under the sway of popular West Coast jazz piano crooners **Nat Cole** and **Charles Brown**, Charles aped their sound to connect with paying audiences. "Someone asked me if I felt bad being a copycat for so long," said Charles. "Feel bad? Honey, I feel good any time I can make good money making good music!"

Eventually moving to the thriving music scene of Seattle in the late 1940s, Charles met, and developed a lifelong friendship with, trumpeter and arranger **Quincy Jones**. Three years younger than Ray, Jones said of Charles, "He was one of my gurus. He taught me how to arrange, how to voice horns and reeds. He was this amazing spirit—strong, brilliant and completely open-minded. At a time when you were either in this camp or that camp, either a bebopper or a bluesman or a whatever, Ray was in every camp. 'It's all music, man,' he'd say. 'We can play it all.' And we did."

In a move designed to expand his musical and commercial ambitions, Charles relocated to Los Angeles in 1950. Recording for the **Swing Time** record label, Charles' first real activity on what was then called the "race music" charts (soon to be called Rhythm & Blues) was a bluesy, Charles Brown-influenced number called "Baby Let Me Hold Your Hand" that reached #8 on the R&B charts. He joined blues guitarist **Lowell Fulson's** band while in L.A., becoming its pianist, musical director and arranger. Fulson would marvel, "Ray... could write arrangements from his head, just calling out the notes to one of the cats who'd write them down. Ray heard it all in his head."

PHOTO: STEVE KAGAN/GETTY IMAGES

With Aretha Franklin, Chicago, 1980

PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTYIMAGES

With The Raelettes, clockwise from top center: Charles, Clydie King, Gwen Berry, Alex Brown and Merry Clayton

Swing Time folded, and a fledgling independent New York label called **Atlantic Records**, headed by **Ahmet Ertegun** and **Herb Abramson**—later to be augmented by **Jerry Wexler**—swooped in and signed Charles in 1952. It would prove to be a watershed moment in the history of American popular music, but not just yet. A series of singles for the label—"It Should've Been Me," "Don't You Know" and "Come Back Baby"—began moving away from the smooth delivery of Charles' Swing Time-era work towards a rawer, churchier vocal and instrumental approach, and the addition of saxophonist **David "Fathead" Newman** provided an earthier sound to his ensemble. Charles began writing arrangements for his septet—two saxes, two trumpets, bass, drums and Ray alternating between piano and alto sax—that sounded twice as big as the ensemble actually was.

Along with this instrumental revelation, Charles' singing voice finally achieved the singularity and fullness of expression he'd been searching for. He told Ritz, "Got tired of folks saying, 'Man, you sound *just like* Nat Cole; man, you sound *just like* Charles Brown.' I held onto those styles a long, long time, but after I was with Atlantic awhile... I figured I was my own man. So I sang in my own voice."

It all came together unforgettably with the recording of "I Got a Woman" on November 18, 1954. In the summer of that year, Ray and his trumpeter, **Renald Richard**, were listening to the radio while on the road, and a gospel song by **The Southern Tones**, "It Must Be Jesus," captivated them. The two essentially took the tune and added secular lyrics, cribbed the bridge from vaunted bluesman **Big Bill Broonzy's** "Living

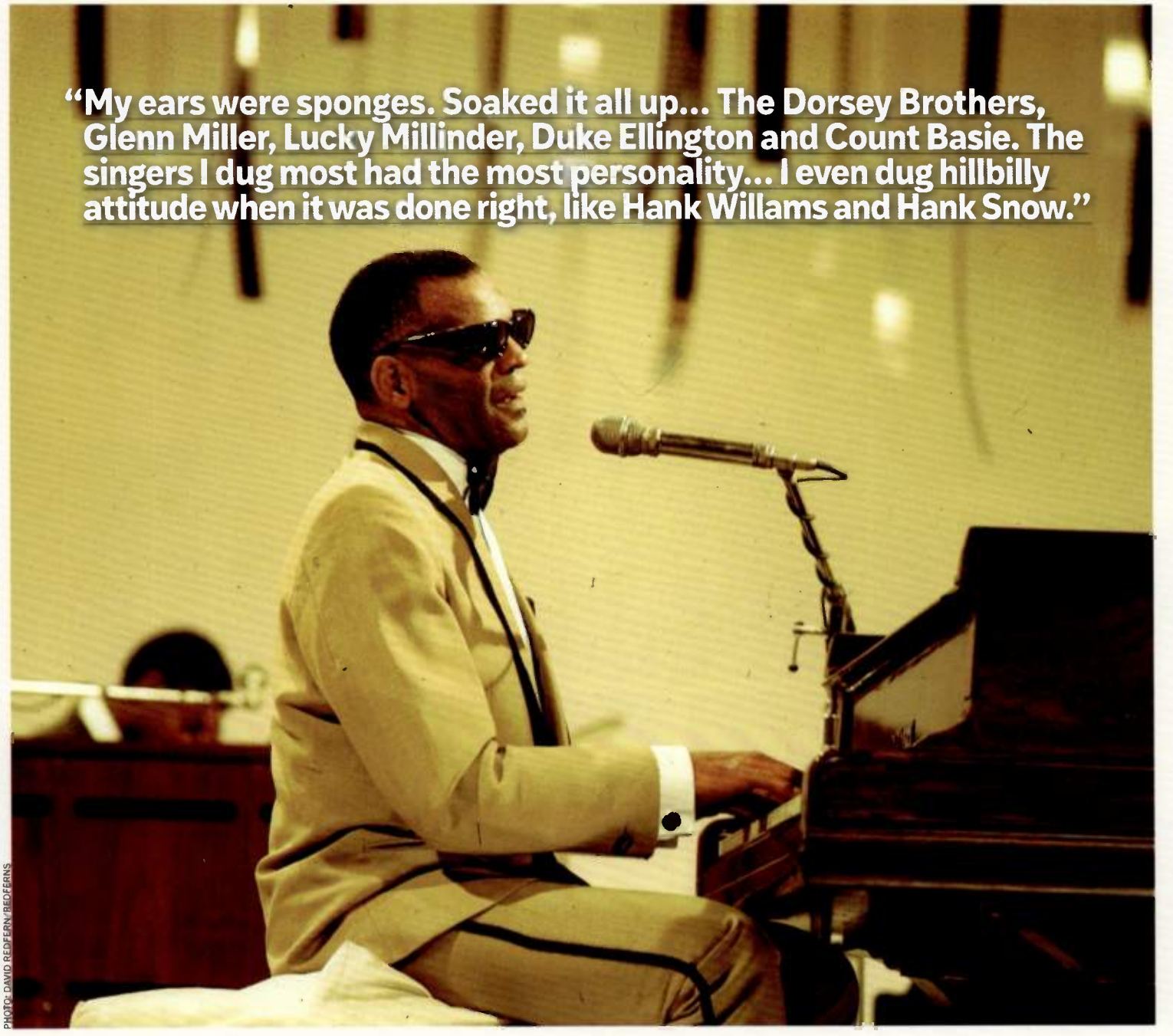


PHOTO: DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS

on Easy Street" and *voila*: Soul music—the fusion of secular lyrics (usually of sexual longing) and sanctified music—was born.

Released in December 1954, the song topped the R&B charts and inspired cover versions by **Elvis Presley**, **The Beatles**, jazz organist **Jimmy McGriff** and others. **Kanye West** sampled and looped a part of the song ("She gives me money") for his 2005 smash "Gold Digger." "I Got a Woman" initially met with some resistance, most notably from the Black religious community. Charles told Ritz, "Some preachers got on my ass. Said I was doing the devil's work. Bullshit. I was singing what I'd always sung. Keeping the spirit but changing the story so it related to the real world... I figured that the music I knew, the churchy music I grew up on, was something I could draw on and adapt. So I did."

From this point on, Charles became one of the seminal figures in music history. His Atlantic recordings from 1952-1960 include the masterpieces "Hallelujah, I Love Her So," "The Night Time Is the Right Time," "I Believe to My Soul" (which served as the musical template for **Bob Dylan**'s "Ballad of a Thin Man") and perhaps Charles' most impactful hit, 1959's call-and-response "What'd I Say." Ray's shouts, pleas, sexually ecstatic moans and exhortations sat atop a propulsive, Latin rhumba-based groove that remains irresistible today. The song found favor with artists ranging from **Jerry Lee Lewis**, **The Beatles** and **Eddie Cochran** to hundreds of budding surf and garage bands as the '50s gave way to the '60s.

Charles would once again push the boundaries of popular music when he left Atlantic for **ABC-Paramount** in November 1959. He negotiated a richer royalty rate than he received at Atlantic and was granted sole ownership of his master recordings. Charles' first offering for his new label was a themed album of old and new country songs, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*. The label feared such a risky stylistic gambit would be financially and artistically perilous, but Charles persisted. The album proved to be a smash hit with both Black and white record-buying audiences, yielding the hits "I Can't Stop Loving You" and "Born to Lose." A second album soon followed.

PHOTO: TOM BRIGLIA/FILMMAGIC

PHOTOS: SONIA MOSKOWITZ/IMAGES GETTY IMAGES ; BARRY KING/SYGMA/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES (FAR LEFT)

From left: With Quincy Jones; with Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry at the 1986 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony

"He was this amazing spirit—strong, brilliant and completely open-minded. At a time when you were either in this camp or that camp, either a bebopper or a bluesman or a whatever, Ray was in every camp. 'It's all music, man,' he'd say. 'We can play it all.' And we did." —Quincy Jones

For the remainder of the '60s, Charles' music would be less about innovation and more about consolidation. He had hits with covers of The Beatles' "Yesterday" and "Eleanor Rigby" and a soulful rendition of "America the Beautiful," and would appear on a host of variety shows with a myriad of performers, true to his nature. His influence would permeate throughout the decades as **Stevie Wonder, Steve Winwood, The Band, Leon Russell, Van Morrison, Elton John** and so many others would mine his vocal and musical style.

Charles would remain a reliable presence in the American mainstream until and following his death at 73 on June 10, 2004. That year, *Genius Loves Company*, a posthumous release featuring duets with John, **Natalie Cole, James Taylor, B. B. King, Willie Nelson, Bonnie Raitt** and more, would win eight **Grammy Awards**, including Album of the Year. Meanwhile, *Ray*, a biopic starring **Jamie Foxx**, was nominated for six **Academy Awards**, and Foxx would win the Best Actor Oscar for his unflinching portrayal of Brother Ray.

In the end, though, there was only one Ray Charles. As Ritz put it, "the voice was flexible, funny, loose enough to slide up to falsetto, fall into baritone funk, scream, whisper, shout out the good news. The voice projected a natural grace and straight-up honesty that caught and held the attention of music fans, first in America, then the world."■


Little Simz
New Album, June 6
AWAL

Minnie

PHOTOS: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Riperton:

Riperton with Rotary Connection, circa 1970

On a High Note

BY WILLIE ARON

It's the spring of 1975, and you're a dyed-in-the-wool fan of the propulsive soul and R&B music that percolates out of your AM transistor radio with reassuring regularity. You're enthralled by such earth-shaking nuggets as **The Isley Brothers**' blistering "Fight the Power," **Ohio Players**' molten "Fire" and **Labelle**'s sizzling "Lady Marmalade."

Easing between these titanic sonic blasts is something that begins with chirping birds, gently arpeggiating acoustic guitar and the rippling tones of a **Fender** Rhodes electric piano. An impossibly pure and pleading soprano voice coos, "Loving you is easy

Stevie Wonder was utterly captivated by Minnie's voice, dubbing it "the eighth wonder of the world."

'cause you're beautiful." This sonic reverie reaches its apex with the quintessential money note—a jaw-droppingly high "oooooh" that would foreshadow both **Mariah Carey** and **Ariana Grande**'s stratospheric vocal feats.

Whether because of or in spite of its marked contrast to the thundering jams cited above, "Lovin' You" became a #1 R&B hit in April 1975 as funk was peaking and disco was about to explode.

By then, the singer and co-writer of this song, **Minnie Riperton**, was already a seasoned veteran of the Chicago music scene, having made her bones in the '60s, first as a session singer and girl-group member and then as an integral part of the multi-racial, mixed-gender psych-soul ensemble **Rotary Connection**.

Blessed with a four-octave vocal range and encouraged by the band's maverick producer-arranger, the great **Charles Stepney**, Riperton thereafter embarked on a solo career that deftly eschewed the formulaic and histrionic to focus on her buttery soprano and the romance of her writing—husband **Richard Rudolph** was a frequent collaborator—to convey an earthy soulfulness not unlike that of **Stevie Wonder**, who would become her producer.

By the time of her untimely death in 1979, Minnie Riperton had generated a substantial body of work that would be rediscovered and treasured in the decades that followed by crate-digging hip-hop auteurs, music supervisors and other obsessives.

She was born in Chicago in 1947 and raised in an arts-oriented household. Her family, recognizing the uniqueness of her unusual *coloratura* soprano—which spans the astounding "whistle register," the absolute highest of the soprano range—nurtured her gifts. Minnie immersed herself in opera and show tunes, developing breathing techniques to extend her already-formidable vocal range.

A voice like Riperton's would surely have been prized in the opera world, but the fertile musical climate of 1960s Chicago, where blues, rock, jazz and R&B reigned supreme, won the battle for Riperton's musical soul.

At 15 she joined **The Gems**, an all-female act that put out a few releases but mainly served as backup singers for artists like **Song Three** and **The Starlets**. It was through this experience that Riperton met **Billy Davis**, the **Chess Records** A&R director who'd helped shape the sounds of **Etta James** and **Jackie Wilson**. Acting as an early mentor to Riperton, Davis released her first solo single, the dramatic "Lonely Girl," under the moniker **Andrea Davis**.

In 1967, immersing herself in the heady environment at Chess (where she briefly served as a receptionist) and already garnering respect for her distinctive voice, Riperton was tapped to join Rotary Connection. The brainchild of **Marshall Chess** (son of label founder and President **Leonard Chess**) and local vibraphonist-producer-arranger Stepney, Rotary boasted a rotating cast of what Chess hailed as "the hottest, most avant-garde rock guys in Chicago."

With Minnie as co-lead singer, the band recorded six albums between 1967 and 1971, each filled with imaginative originals and radically reworked covers of hits like **Otis Redding**'s "Respect" (reimagined as a distortion-drenched acid-soul opus); **The Lovin' Spoonful**'s "Didn't Want to Have to Do It" (enhanced with reverb, massed vocal layers and other psychedelic effects); and **The Band**'s "The Weight," Rotary Connection's funky, string-laden version of which could've been at home in *Hair* or *Godspell*.

Riperton's otherworldly soprano boosted the power and gravitas of the band and, on such selections as their rendition of **Jimi Hendrix**'s "Burning of the Midnight Lamp," lent it a neo-classical grandeur. While Rotary didn't score big sales or radio hits, it earned a loyal following and opened for the likes of **Led Zeppelin**, **The Rolling Stones** and **Janis Joplin**.

The band's recorded peak undoubtedly came in 1971 when,

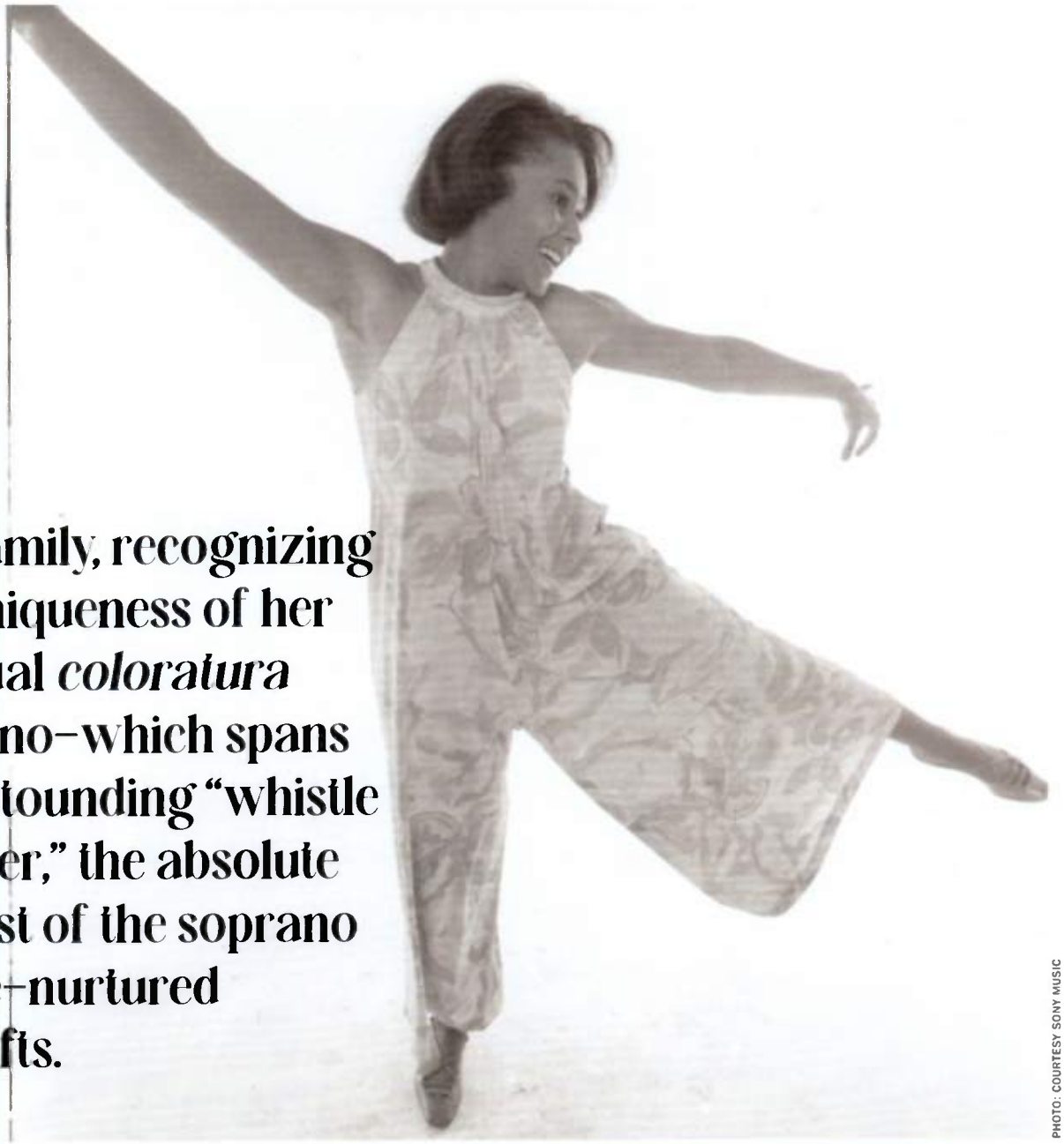
as **The New Rotary Connection**, it released the masterful "I Am the Black Gold of the Sun," a spellbinding amalgam of jazzy stacked vocal harmonies, relentless groove and fuzz-soaked guitar.

All of Rotary Connection's releases were produced and arranged by Stepney, who by all rights should be spoken of in the same reverential tones reserved for such brilliant record makers as **Quincy Jones**, **Motown's Norman Whitfield** and legendary "fifth Beatle" **George Martin**. Stepney would also produce material by **Muddy Waters**, **Howlin' Wolf**, **Ramsey Lewis** and **Earth, Wind & Fire**. His masterful arrangements, coupled with a fearless enthusiasm for the psychedelic rock of the day—an affinity not shared by many of his jazz-purist contemporaries—brought a distinctly cinematic sensibility to his body of work, which has subsequently found favor with hip-hop, R&B and EDM artists.

Stepney's career was cut short by a fatal heart attack in 1976, when he was just 45 years old.

In 1969, while still in Rotary Connection, Riperton recorded her debut album, *Come in My Garden*, with Stepney for **GRT Records**. Released in 1970—it was reissued on the **Janus** label as "Lovin' You" began ascending the charts four years later—the record opens with a true career highlight, the chamber-soul masterpiece "Les Fleurs," a trippy pastoral sung from a flower's point of view that blossoms into an anthemic chorus.

Though the album is now widely regarded as something of a landmark of psychedelic soul, it was a commercial disappointment upon release. Riperton abruptly retreated from the music business, leaving behind both Rotary Connection and her budding solo career to begin raising a family in Gainesville, Fla. (Riperton and Rudolph's son, **Marc Rudolph**, is a prominent recording engineer; daughter **Maya Rudolph** became a household name on *Saturday Night Live*). In an installment of the Riperton documentary series *Unsung*, Richard Rudolph described their Florida refuge as "a magical, enchanted bubble



Her family, recognizing the uniqueness of her unusual *coloratura* soprano–which spans the astounding "whistle register," the absolute highest of the soprano range–nurtured her gifts.

PHOTO: COURTESY SONY MUSIC

in the middle of redneck country."

The singer's story may well have ended here, but fate intervened; she'd been living a quiet life as a homemaker when a college intern for **Epic Records** who'd been stunned by a Rotary show, tracked her down. After hearing Richard and Minnie play several songs they'd written, he became their champion. A&R higher-ups heard their demos, duly signed Minnie and convinced the family to move to Los Angeles.

This time around, Riperton delivered a gold mine of breezy, acoustic-tinged ballads as well as funky, wah-wah-imbued numbers, all replete with spine-tingling "whistle register" moments. She approached none other than Stevie Wonder to helm the project (with Rudolph's vital assistance). He was utterly captivated by Minnie's voice, dubbing it "the eighth wonder of the world."

"The idea was to try to keep it organic and let people

get close to Minnie," Rudolph said of the approach to the recording during an interview with *okayplayer*. "Of course, what I would try to do was stay out of Stevie's way. That guy was a force of nature. He and Minnie were so close and loved each other so much. It was such a beautiful thing to see them together and to see them writing and working together and singing together... We never had a bad moment."

Since Wonder was under exclusive contract to Motown, he adopted the moniker "El Toro Negro"—"Black Bull"—though his famously distinctive harmonica was unmistakable. The resulting album, 1974's *Perfect Angel*, ranks as one of the eclectic gems of early '70s soul, with the producer's sonic and compositional imprint also heard distinctly on ballads like "Seeing You This Way" and "The Edge of a Dream."

But make no mistake: "Lovin' You" is 100% Minnie Riperton. Written to soothe infant daughter Maya's restlessness so Minnie and her husband could enjoy some private time together, the song nestled Minnie's incomparable voice atop a delicate bed of acoustic guitar (played by Rudolph) and Rhodes (played by Wonder).

Though the initial version was sublime in its simplicity, Riperton felt there was something missing. "We went back and listened to the demo [recorded at] our place in Gainesville," Rudolph recalled. "The window had been open and there was a bird singing outside. Stevie said, 'Get the bird.' We went out to the UCLA Botanical Garden with his Nagra tape recorder, and Minnie would sit there and try to sing these really high bird calls and get birds to sing."

Graced by the requisite chirping, the tune rose to #1 on the Pop chart and went gold. The notoriety Riperton achieved led to splashy TV appearances on *The Tonight Show*, *The Midnight Special* and *Mike Douglas*, to name a few, where she effortlessly demonstrated that those dazzling high notes were no studio effect. "She loved that spotlight," said Rotary co-lead singer Sidney

PHOTO: COLUMBIA

Her public stance was vitally important to helping destigmatize a disease that had too often been ringed by shame. Riperton became the American Cancer Society's national spokeswoman and was presented with the organization's Courage Award by President Jimmy Carter.

Barnes in the *Unsung* doc, "and the spotlight loved her."

Riperton released three more albums, *Adventures in Paradise* (1975), *Stay in Love* (1977) and *Minnie (1979)*, all featuring intimate showcases of that one-in-a-million soprano. Then, in 1976, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, after which she underwent a mastectomy. The procedure didn't improve her prognosis, however, and she was given only months to live.

She threw herself into both her music and her newfound role as an advocate for cancer research and treatment. Her public stance was vitally important to helping destigmatize a disease that had too often been ringed by shame. Riperton became the **American Cancer Society**'s national spokeswoman and was presented with the organization's Courage Award by President **Jimmy Carter**, who hailed her for "her frank approach to a problem in her own life and for the inspiration that she has provided for others who might have to face this prospect in the future."

At this point she was exhausted and unable to move her right arm. She nonetheless defied her life-expectancy odds by a couple of precious years. During that time she remained laser-focused on the things that mattered most—her family, the beauty of nature and the power of song.

Minnie Riperton died on July 12, 1979, in Los Angeles at 31. *Love Lives Forever*, her final album, was released in 1980.

Shortly after her death, Stevie Wonder performed a musical tribute to Riperton on *Soul Train*. Before playing a medley of her songs he offered some observations about his friend. "For as long as she lived," he said, "she *lived*."

Riperton's recorded work continues to inspire fans of both psychedelic soul and romantic R&B, and appreciation for her repertoire now extends well beyond "Lovin' You," with "Les Fleurs" in particular reaching a new audience; the magical song has made its way into such high-profile projects as **Jordan Peele**'s *Us* and the Watergate-themed **Julia Roberts** vehicle *Gaslit*.

And more than three decades after her death, Minnie's "whistle register" is still a thrillingly singular sound. Despite its ethereality, though, she is remembered as a flesh-and-blood woman whose enduring artistry was the flowering of a deep, adventurous and resilient spirit.■

Riperton, Rudolph, Maya and Marc at the Hollywood Christmas Parade, 1978

PHOTOS: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

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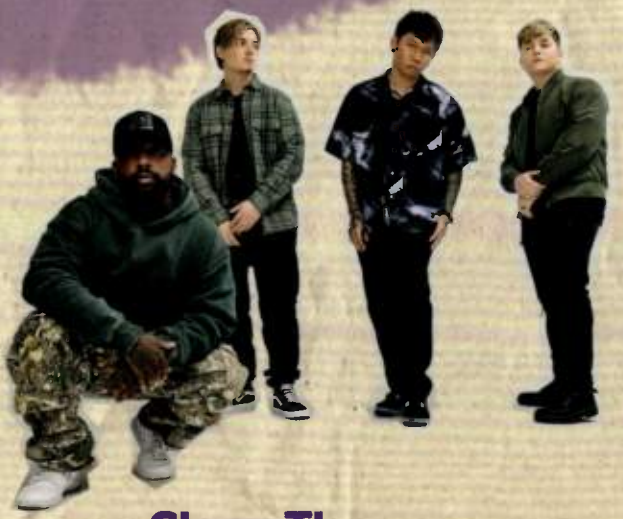

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