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Undercover Black Man

Tuesday, January 2, 2007

Remembering Curtis Mayfield (pt. 1)

The passing of James Brown reminds me how fortunate I was, during my newspaper days, to interview some of my cultural heroes. James, [Curtis Mayfield](#), Richard Pryor & people whose creative work defined the spirit of this country. Bold, trail-blazing, distinctly individual. And a light unto the world. These men are gone, but will never be gone.

I interviewed Curtis Mayfield in 1992 for the Washington Post. He welcomed me into his Georgia home. He spoke to me from his bed, where he lay paralyzed following a horrible on-stage accident in 1990. Here is some of our conversation:

DAVID MILLS: Who planted the musical seed in you? Was it a family thing?

CURTIS MAYFIELD: My mother was quite fond of music and poems. She used to recite a lot of the old [\[Paul Laurence\] Dunbar](#) poems. And my grandmother was a minister. And coming up in Chicago, we heard a lot of blues.

My grandmother, we followed her as young children, as she was out to gain her ministries. She became a preacher and had her own church, Traveling Souls Spiritualist Church. So I think I picked up a whole lot of sermons in there while I was asleep, you know. (smiles)

MILLS: You began to sing and perform as a youngster. That was with the choir, I guess?

MAYFIELD: My introduction vocally was with a group most of them were my cousins and we were known as the Northern Jubilees. That was really my introduction into harmonizing and singing around with different churches and being welcome to sing in our own church. And of course, those were the years of [Sam Cooke](#), the [Nightingales](#). There were quite a few good gospel singers from Chicago. &

[Jerry Butler](#), I met him in that time and era. We used to have a lot of kids come to my grandmother's church. And Jerry came to the church, and obviously he enjoyed himself, and he saw that we were singing and he came to the house and asked if he could sing with us. So I met Jerry when I was about 8 years old. One member dropped out and Jerry came and filled his shoes and became one of the lead singers.

MILLS: Were you listening to a lot of popular music at the time?

MAYFIELD: Well, I listened to a lot of radio. Radio was definitely "in" during them years, so we did hear all the popular songs. All the blues things, you know, [Little Walter](#), they were real big in Chicago. But I heard most of my gospel music on records, because my Uncle Charles would [bring] 'em over to my grandmother's, and they had a big Victrola. Things were 78 r.p.m. then. And of course we would rehearse to those songs we liked, as a starting gospel group. And we kind of got it together.

MILLS: Did there come a time when you realized that your life would be in music?

MAYFIELD: I think I really began to understand that I had a gift, or I had found myself as a musician, when I was about 12 or 13. Because then, the gospel group had kind of broken up, and I was singing some of the popular music. I began writing around 12 years old. Then Jerry came and found me when I lived in [Cabrini-Green](#) and had me come join a group he was singing with. They were singing popular songs and songs that some of the fellas had written. And by then I had picked up a guitar and I was learning to play fairly well.

Come 13 years old, we had a recording of "For Your Precious Love," which Jerry and the Brooks brothers [Richard and Arthur] wrote. And we shopped around. There was [Vee-Jay](#) Records and Chess Records on Michigan Avenue, and we went out there one day and got a shot to go in Vee-Jay Records, sing the song. And Calvin Carter, who was the A&R man, liked it right off. And the next week we were in a studio recording. That was the beginning of the Impressions, which was Jerry, myself, Sam Gooden and the Brooks brothers.

MILLS: How did you all come to be discovered? How did the label know about you?

MAYFIELD: That was through a guy we used to know still know [Eddie Thomas](#). He sort of picked us up singing in a little place, singing for the kids. We were then known as the Roosters. Most of the fellas, other than Jerry, were from Chattanooga, Tenn., and they were known as the Roosters, so we had joined their group.

So Eddie Thomas picked us up at a talent show, and he said he wanted to manage us. He decided to rename us. He said we had to get rid of that "Roosters," you know. (smiles) Somehow, he was just talking to us and saying how he wanted us to make an impression on the people, and that of course stood out. So we became the Impressions.

MILLS: Once you're out doing gigs and dealing with a record label, that's serious stuff. Did your family encourage you along those lines?

MAYFIELD: Oh yeah. I was a good kid back during those days. And Cabrini-Green wasn't as bad as it is now. And we got that break. Only thing that did happen was, I left high school at a very early age. Which for me was a blessing in disguise. I wouldn't say all kids [should] do that, but that's when I got out in the world. That's when I began to learn and really find myself. I was a writer. I lived with my guitar. I actually slept with my guitar.

A whole lot of things, of course, happened. Jerry went on to become a single vocalist.

Which, in those years, '58 and '59 and prior to that, much of the lead singers came from vocal groups. So that wasn't surprising. It was a hurtful thing for the group, but those things happen. There again, it allowed me to become I was already writing songs, and I became the lead singer of the Impressions.

MILLS: You say it was hurtful. Did the rest of you guys worry that you'd have to start all over again in the business? Prove yourselves all over again?

MAYFIELD: When the record "For Your Precious Love" came out, the record company had already put "Jerry Butler & the Impressions" on it. So of course when the deejay picked up the single to spin it, they'd just say, "Here's Jerry Butler." So that kind of crushed the fellas a little bit. And when we began to get lots and lots of mail, it was to Jerry Butler, you know? (laughs)

MILLS: What's amazing to think about is, while you were still a teenager you wrote "He Will Break Your Heart" and "Gypsy Woman" huge hits. That doesn't even happen today where people that young write songs that popular. What do you think your knack was as a writer? Did you analyze it much?

MAYFIELD: It's funny how songs come about. If you read plenty Dr. Suess, and read your limericks, you know, and just different things that break down lyrics If you know how to catch those little different steps, or those rhythmic movements, that's half of it. Then if you have an observant mind, and if you learn to speak from the heart, that's probably the other half. Many conversations become songs, in all honesty. It might be love, it may be current events. But I was a very observant child. Almost anything could become a song to me.

MILLS: In those days, your songs were very romantic. A kid growing up in Cabrini-Green today would probably write a rap song. Were those just sweeter, more romantic times back then?

MAYFIELD: Well, you've got to remember that what I was writing was not considered rock 'n' roll. It wasn't Clyde McPhatter, it wasn't Fats Domino, it wasn't even Little Richard. My songs usually had a different edge. A lot of my lyrics were things you might pick up in church. A lot of my songs lent food for thought. A lot of my songs would pick up on current events, like "If There's a Hell Below, We're All Gonna Go," you know? "We're a Winner." A lot of my songs [tied] into a people trying to gain equal rights in the country. & Every generation has a different edge. So here we are in the '90s, and the kids, they've got hip-hop.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

Posted by Undercover Black Man at [12:11 PM](#)  

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Rock and Roll Hall of Fame
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Support the
Rock

Curtis Mayfield

Induction Year: 1999

Induction Category: Performer

"Inductee: Curtis Mayfield (vocals, guitar; born 6/3/42, died 12/26/99)

Curtis Mayfield is among an elite few members of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame who have been inducted more than once. Mayfield was first inducted with [the Impressions](#) in 1991 and then as a solo artist in 1999. His solo career, which began in 1970, is significant for the forthright way in which he addressed issues of black identity and self-awareness. He has been cited as an influence by such latter-day performers as Lenny Kravitz, Ice-T, Public Enemy and Arrested Development. Mayfield's ability to voice hard truths through funky, uplifting music has rendered him one of the great soul icons.

In 1968, while still with [the Impressions](#), Mayfield launched the Curtom label (his third, after the Mayfield and Windy C imprints). Two years later, his solo debut, *Curtis*, appeared. It contained one of his most forthright message songs, "Don't Worry (If There's a Hell Below We're All Going to Go)", and was the first of eleven albums that he released in the Seventies. Whereas his Sixties work both with [the Impressions](#) and as a songwriter-producer defined Chicago soul—a regional scene comparable to Motown in Detroit and Stax in Memphis—Mayfield left his imprint on the Seventies by couching social commentary and keenly observed black-culture archetypes in funky, danceable rhythms. He explained the shift in subject matter as "a feeling in me that there need to be songs that relate not so much to civil rights but to the way we as all people deal with our lives."

Working on a seemingly parallel track with [Marvin Gaye](#) circa *What's Going On*, Mayfield's second solo album, *Roots* (1971), sounded urgent pleas for peace and brotherhood over extended, cinematic soul-funk tracks that laid out a fresh musical agenda for the new decade. Mayfield's solo career found him giving freer rein to his guitar playing, a choppy, rhythm-based style that owed much to his Chicago blues heritage and a self-devised tuning based on the black keys of the piano. His most popular and lasting work was *Superfly*, a film soundtrack in which he painted a gritty portrait of black life in America's inner cities. Mayfield struck a creative and commercial motherlode with *Superfly*'s smoldering rock-disco grooves and pointed social commentary. The soundtrack album yielded massive crossover hits in "Freddie's Dead" and "Superfly." Against a hypnotic backdrop of conga drums, strings and wah-wah guitar, Mayfield sang of a high-rolling ghetto drug dealer's lifestyle in a sweet, stinging falsetto. As an aural document, Mayfield's music for this classic blaxploitation film anticipated the reality-based rap and hip-hop of the Nineties.

Throughout his career Mayfield also shone brightly as a producer and songwriter for other artists, including soul and R&B giants like Jerry Butler and Major Lance (in the Sixties) and [Aretha Franklin](#), [the Staple Singers](#), and [Gladys Knight and the Pips](#) (in the Seventies). As a solo artist, he continued to score R&B hits into the mid-Eighties, many of them in a disco vein. Getting back to his roots, Mayfield joined [the Impressions](#) in 1983 for a reunion tour and revived his dormant Curtom label in 1990.

A freakish onstage accident in August 1990 left Mayfield paralyzed from the neck down. However, this tragedy did not diminish his spirit or end his career. In 1996, he released

Curtis Mayfield

his 25th solo album, *New World Order*. In his own words: How many 54-year-old quadriplegics are putting albums out? You just have to deal with what you got, try to sustain yourself as best you can, and look to the things that you can do. Despite his positive attitude, Mayfield's health steadily deteriorated. He lost a leg to diabetes in 1998 and died a year later at age 57. On that day, the music world lost a man of great talent and conscience. In the words of [Aretha Franklin](#), Curtis Mayfield is to soul music what Bach was to the classics and Gershwin and Irving Berlin were to pop music.

TIMELINE

June 3, 1942: Curtis Mayfield is born in Chicago, Illinois.

1958: Curtis Mayfield joins [the Impressions](#), a gospel-influenced R&B vocal group that enjoys great success in the Sixties with such groundbreaking singles as Gypsy Woman, It's All Right, Amen, People Get Ready, Woman's Got Soul, We're a Winner and This is My Country.

December 4, 1961: Curtis Mayfield hits #2 on the R&B chart and #20 on the pop chart with Gypsy Woman.

November 9, 1963: Curtis Mayfield hits #1 on the R&B chart and #4 on the pop chart with It's All Right.

1970: Curtis Mayfield leaves [the Impressions](#) to launch a solo career. His debut album, Curtis "released on his own Curtom label" enters the charts in October. It contains frank, topical songs like (Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below We're All Going to Go and We People Who Are Darker Than Blue.

1972: Curtis Mayfield hits #4 with Freddie's Dead (Theme from Superfly).

October 21, 1972: Superfly tops the Billboard's album chart for the first of four weeks. This soundtrack to a film about a Harlem drug dealer's attempt at a final big score delivers two major hits: Freddie's Dead (#2 R&B, #4 pop) and Superfly (#5 R&B, #8 pop).

August 1, 1974: Curtis Mayfield makes the pop Top Forty for the last time with Kung Fu, which precedes Carl Douglas's Kung Fu Fighting by two months. However, he'll crack the R&B Top Forty a dozen more times between 1974 and 1981.

July 1, 1975: One of Curtis Mayfield's most unflinchingly realistic and downbeat message albums, There's No Place Like America Today, is released.

October 1, 1982: Honesty, Curtis Mayfield's strongest album in years, appears to positive reviews.

August 13, 1990: Curtis Mayfield is paralyzed from the neck down after high winds cause a lighting rig to fall on him at a concert in Brooklyn, New York.

March 1, 1993: People Get Ready: A Tribute to Curtis Mayfield (Shanachie Records) is released. Mayfield favorites are covered by Jerry Butler, Don Covay, Steve Cropper (of Booker T and the M.G.s) and others.

March 1, 1994: Curtis Mayfield is given the Grammy Legend Award at a ceremony in New York. This same month, All Men Are Brothers: A Tribute to Curtis Mayfield (Warner Bros.) "featuring covers by [Aretha Franklin](#), [Stevie Wonder](#), B.B. King, [the Isley Brothers](#), [Bruce Springsteen](#) and Eric Clapton" is issued.

March 15, 1999: Curtis Mayfield is inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at the fourteenth annual induction dinner.

December 26, 1999: Curtis Mayfield dies in Roswell, Georgia.

Essential Songs

Superfly
Freddie's Dead
Move On Up
Don't Worry (If There's a Hell Below We're All Going to Go)
We People Who Are Darker Than Blue

Curtis Mayfield

Mighty Mighty (Spade and Whitey)
Pusherman
The Makings of You
Between You Baby and Me
Baby It s You

Recommended Reading

People Get Ready: The Curtis Mayfield Story

Curtis Mayfield. Rhino Records, 1996. (Note: The booklet included with this box set contains biographical and discographical information.)

Poetic License in Poem and Song

Curtis Mayfield with David Soto. New York: Newstar Press, 1996.

Curtis Mayfield: A Deeper Shade of Soul

Craig Werner. Goldmine (July 4, 1997): 16-19+.



Jeff Beck's (The Yardbirds) Fender Esquire Electric Guitar

Photo by Design Photography

Collection of Seymour W. Duncan. Chairman Seymour Duncan Pick-ups, Santa Barbara

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