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Undercover Black Man

Wednesday, January 3, 2007

Remembering Curtis Mayfield (pt. 2)

Here s more of my 1992 interview with Curtis Mayfield, in which we discussed the high points of his career as a writer and producer, and also the state of health nearly two years after the tragedy that left him a quadriplegic.

DAVID MILLS: When the Impressions hit, early- and mid-'60s, and you were writing and producing, how did you divide your time between being a front man/vocalist and being a writer and producer for other artists?

CURTIS MAYFIELD: I enjoyed both. I was probably more shy then. It didn't bother me to be in the background. But little did I know that either way, you're being watched. And it became a success story for me to be writing for Gene Chandler and Billy Butler & the Enchanters and Walter Jackson and Major Lance.

It ventured me into another part of the business as a producer. I mean, how do you become a producer? How do you become someone in the studio who calls the shots? So that was totally another adventure. And it also introduced me to so many musicians and other people that I found respect with, even though I didn't know how to write or read music.

MILLS: It's interesting to see the people who grew out of that scene in Chicago. Donny Hathaway, Maurice White

MAYFIELD: I brought Donny Hathaway from Washington. I helped him to move to Chicago. He first signed with [Curtom Records](#), and I recorded him with June Conquest ["I Thank You Baby," 1969]. That was his first adventure. And we wrote a couple of songs together and what-have-you.

In fact, we can go further than that. Before he moved to Chicago, he was from Howard [University], and they had a group very popular and brilliant group and they were excellent singers. Of course, he was quite a genius with the piano. He could be in Washington, and I could play him songs on the phone, and he could call out the chord structure and the minors and everything as you moved along, and even tell you what key it was, from just listening.

So they used to come to the Howard Theater in Washington when I worked there, because they admired my records. And they started their group and they called it the Mayfield Singers. You might put them in the category of Take 6, the Fifth Dimension. I was quite

flattered with that. That's how far back I go with Donny Hathaway.

MILLS: Not many artists back then, I'm assuming, formed their own record labels. Or even wanted to.

MAYFIELD: That's true. During those years, very few artists thought in terms of copyrights and owning their own songs and maybe even starting a label. I guess maybe the way I came up made me want to own something, you know?

I found that in the record business you do pay a lot of dues. You give up a lot of yourself, a lot of your creativity. And if you couldn't come back strong with your mind to create something else, you actually lose out by giving yourself away. So it was always in mind for me to own myself, as much of myself as possible. That's the only way you would really be able to survive, as maybe I'm doing during these latter years. So I wouldn't say I was the first, but I was one of the first, through watching Berry Gordy and some of the younger men. There's two sides of the coin, and it totally means business.

MILLS: It's so fortunate indeed that you were wise enough to know that.

MAYFIELD: I don't know how I knew that. It was instinctive to do it. I've never been the wisest, but my instincts of following the yellow brick road, you know, sort of led me the right way. You don't have to fall into every hole you walk up to. *(laughs)*

MILLS: People my age, who grew up in the '70s, view "Super Fly" as a classic album. It sounds as current today as it did then. Do you view that as a masterpiece of yours?

MAYFIELD: Nothing I make is a masterpiece because I produced it. It comes from those who consume it, you know? Like you say, it still is a seller, and there are a lot of popular things on there. Just as popular today as it was back in the '70s. So within itself, it's proven to be what maybe some people might call a masterpiece. What's a masterpiece? I don't think it makes enough money to be a masterpiece. *(laughs)*

MILLS: But in terms of your own feelings for it If we were to play it

MAYFIELD: Yeah, I can play it right now, oh definitely, there are songs that I still like, and are still right lyrically. There are some songs that you produce, it is so right for you, you just don't care if anybody hears it. It's good for you. You love it. You created it. Of course, it's even greater when it takes on that same quality [for others] and people love it enough to buy it.

For me, there again I was being allowed to venture off into a new part of the business. I loved the idea of I guess after being a writer and having done so many things, I mean, wow, for someone to bring you a movie script and say, "Hey, I want you to do this," I was ready for it. And in spite of the controversy of the film, I could go in depth and be real about it and go right through that, never allow [the controversy] to touch me. And I think my music spoke for itself.

MILLS: As a matter of fact, I talked to a poet in D.C., [Gaston Neal](#), a revolutionary poet at that time, who led pickets of the movie "Super Fly" when it came out. You were able to keep yourself free of the controversy that swirled around that movie in the black community?

MAYFIELD: I believe I was. Lyrically it was for real. I don't care how you read it or listen to it lyrically, you would have to accept what it was saying. And it was rhythmically. It had a feel, it blended in to the style.

There were so many things about "Super Fly," in spite of him being a dope pusher, that made people love it. Especially black people. Here's a guy that comes out, he's got a brand new Cadillac, the clothes he was wearing were the fad of the year—the wide bell-bottoms, the hat, you know—he was strong, he was a good-looking guy, and in spite of what he was doing, he knew he wanted to get out. Come to find out that the police was dealing, which was a fact of life. And he still wanted to get away from 'em, you know. And at the end, he won out. He could walk away from it. And he didn't die. So he was a hero to a lot of black people.

And the music was kickin'. (*laughs*)

MILLS: In your other soundtrack work, you worked with some of the greatest female soul singers ever.

MAYFIELD: Gladys Knight and the Pips was the next with "Claudine," which was a great movie, a great movie. Then Mavis and the [Staple Singers](#) with "Let's Do It Again." And of course meeting Sidney Poitier, who was sort of a pain in the butt. (*laughs*) But he earned it, you know? But I proved to him that I could get him a winner, and I did.

MILLS: Hmm. He wasn't expecting it?

MAYFIELD: Well, when you're so big like that—Depends how much money you're making or something, I don't know. But I noticed that—not meaning any harm—but back in those years, actors had their own thing. They didn't have a great respect for a younger kid writing a song or coming from a group or something like that. They were way beyond that. But for me to come in and help him achieve his goals, you know, I was asked once again to come back. With "A Piece of the Action."

MILLS: I think ["Short Eyes"](#) is a great movie. At the end, it says "in association with Curtom Films." Were you wanting to move into film production at that time, in the late '70s?

MAYFIELD: Not really. But we kind of got hooked on this particular script. This was a theater thing they were doing out in California, and we got a chance to put some of our money into the film and do it up. We took a shot at it.

You know, I played a little part in it. I had to go to New York, and every day, about 7 o'clock, I had to make it into the jail. They called it [the Tombs](#), which was around 13th Street or something like that. It was the old jailhouse there. They got new ones now, two skyscrapers. But anyway, you spent your whole day in jail. And that went on for about four or five days. And you could write a song just from walking along the corridors, and in and out of those little rooms, and reading the graffiti on the walls. You could see it.

["Short Eyes"] was something different. But I think what our problem was, we released it during the times of "Star Wars" and all the escape films. And it didn't make any money. But it did get great reviews.

MILLS: Everyone who appreciates you and your work wants to know how you're doing. How is your health?

MAYFIELD: You have to take this a day at a time. Like yesterday, I was up, yelling and hollering at the kids. With a spinal cord injury, which most people don't really know about, it's very hard to understand, unless you're in the position or unless you're a doctor. There are many, many complications that actually lead you through your life. Sometimes you're up, sometimes you're down. I think overall, though, I'm dealing with it pretty good. But you can't help waking up every once in a while with a tear in your eye. But through my fans and my children, my wife, just good people, I'm coping.

I've been fortunate to have proper insurance, because, you know, that alone hospital could totally wipe you out. There again, a lot of my fortunes of what I did when I was a kid are helping me to survive today. So that's why I tell my kids, everybody, "Own as much of yourself as possible." The whole idea of surviving is to live to be as old as you can get, you know? (*smiles*) And have offspring. Of course, see 'em happy. That's the master plan. The rest of it, ain't nothing guaranteed to you.

This accident, or incident, happened in the most secure place I could have felt I was in. Walking onstage with my guitar, you know? You ride in so many airplanes, and so many things you do, you know you're taking a chance.

So I'm just carrying on. And I'm all right.

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