I know all aesthetic generalizations are open to perpetual debate, but try these on for size: Al Green isn’t just the last soulman — except for James Brown, he’s the greatest; and except for Aretha Franklin, he’s also the most gifted singer ever to work the turf. In fact he may even be the finest vocalist rock & roll has ever known — even though he retired from secular music 15 years ago.

Green was a major star in his brief heyday, putting six consecutive singles in Billboard’s Top 10 between 1972 and 1973. But his artistry has often been undervalued by people who should know better; he gets barely a sentence in the only history of soul to grant equal weight to the Stax/Volt and Motown sensibilities that he synthesized and transcended, and he rates a mere three pages in the book based in Memphis, where he has lived and worked as a recording artist for the last quarter of a century. This neglect is partly an accident of timing; because he

Green was born on a sharecropped Arkansas farm in ’46 and grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He had sung in a family gospel quartet and formed his own pop group before soul music knew its name, but only in 1970, with one minor hit all too far behind him, did a 1969 encounter with Willie Mitchell in Midland, Texas, induce him to seek his fortune in Memphis. There was chart action by early 1970, but not until late that year, when a cover of the Temptations’ “I Can’t Get Next to You” was a major R&B hit, did Green and Mitchell feel they were on the way. And not until the end of 1972, with “Tired of Being Alone” and its No. 1 follow-up, “Let’s Stay Together,” did they perfect their formula — a shifting amalgam of cream and grit, fluffy and gutsy, feathery strings and power-packed beats, wayward promises and passionate truths.

Although Green remained a supernatural cover artist — eventually the Doors, the Bee Gees, Hank Williams, Willie Nelson, Roy Orbison and “Unchained Melody” would all get the treatment — by this time he was writing most of his own material, often with Mitchell and sometimes with drummer Al Jackson Jr. or organist Teenie Hodges. Although he was always marketed as a singles artist, his groove — as well as his song sense — insured that all his albums cut between 1970 and 1979 would sustain start to finish. His greatest-hits collections make sure-fire gifts.

Most of Green’s Christian albums aren’t as readily accessible to nonbelievers as his secular work (try 1982’s fervid Higher Plane or 1987’s pop-tinged Soul Survivor first) or as musically inspired. But they’re never less than solid, and eventually, Green began to broaden his interpretation of what might constitute musical service to the Lord, even cutting a pop album with Fine Young Cannibals David Steele and Andy Cox. As Green approaches 50, his voice is showing a few rough spots, as voices will. Yet it remains surpassingly youthful even so, still passionate truths.

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But Green lovers should just collect the whole set — starting, I suppose, with Call Me (1973), Linnin’ for You (1973), I’m Still in Love With You (1972), Al Green Gets Next to You (1970) and The Belle Album (1977).

The Belle Album signaled a departure. Green’s first self-production, it got an airier sound from the same musicians featured on his Mitchell recordings. And because many of Green’s songs implied religious themes, The Belle Album was where his spiritual balancing act — earlier captured in all its precarious brilliance by the likes of “Jesus Is Waiting” and his universally acknowledged masterpiece, “Take Me to the River” — negotiated a turn that would become official in 1980, when Green cut the first of many gospel albums. Already pastor and proprietor of Memphis’ Full Gospel Tabernacle, he dedicated himself solely to devotional music and immediately became the sensation of the gospel circuit.

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— ROBERT CHRISTGAU

Al Green: Unmoored, unconventional, unpredictable