

Bill Withers

BY ROB BOWMAN

He was the leading figure in the nascent black singer-songwriter movement of the early 1970s.

BILL WITHERS WAS SIMPLY NOT BORN TO PLAY THE record industry game. His oft-repeated descriptor for A&R men is “antagonistic and redundant.” Not surprisingly, most A&R men at Columbia Records, the label he recorded for beginning in 1975, considered him “difficult.” Yet when given the freedom to follow his muse, Withers wrote, sang, and in many cases produced some of our most enduring classics, including “Ain’t No Sunshine,” “Lean on Me,” “Use Me,” “Lovely Day,” “Grandma’s Hands,” and “Who Is He (and What Is He to You).” ❀ “Not a lot of people got me,” Withers recently mused. “Here I was, this black guy playing an acoustic guitar, and I wasn’t playing the gut-bucket blues. People had a certain slot that they expected you to fit in to.” ❀ Withers’ story is about as improbable as it could get. His first hit, “Ain’t No Sunshine,” recorded in 1971 when he was 33, broke nearly every pop music rule. Instead of writing words for a bridge, Withers audaciously repeated “I know” twenty-six times in a row. Moreover, the two-minute song had no introduction and was released as a throwaway B-side. Produced by Stax alumni Booker T. Jones for Sussex Records, the single’s structure, sound, and sentiment were completely unprecedented and possessed a melody and lyric that tapped into the zeitgeist of the era. Like much of Withers’ work, it would ultimately prove to be timeless. Reaching Number Three pop and Number Six R&B, “Ain’t No Sunshine” would go on to win the Grammy for Best R&B Song of the year. The song has since been covered more than 250 times, sampled by a bevy of rappers, and is routinely featured in movies and TV shows. ❀ Born in 1938 in Slab Fork, West Virginia, one of thirteen children (only six survived past infancy), Withers spent much of his childhood

shuttling between his mother's home in nearby Beckley and his father's home in Slab Fork. For African-American males growing up in that part of West Virginia, working in the coal mines was about the only option available. In fact, Bill was the first male in his family to not work in the mines, opting instead to join the navy at the age of 17. Slowly learning to overcome a debilitating stammer under the employ of Uncle Sam, Withers elected to stay in the navy for nine years.

While serving overseas, Withers arranged for his mother to move from West Virginia to San Jose, California, where he joined her upon being decommissioned in 1965. For the next two years, Withers worked a variety of jobs, while cruising the local music clubs most evenings. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, he would sit in, singing blues standards with such West Coast stalwarts as Clifford Coulter and Johnny Heartsman.

His then-girlfriend bought him a plane ticket to New York, where he stayed with his sister, whose landlord happened to be Clarence "C. B." Bullard, Atlantic A&R man and manager of Harlem's legendary Record Shack. Bullard arranged for Withers to record a single for a short-lived West Coast label owned by Hy and Sam Weiss and Mort Garson. Chasing the dream, in 1967, Withers moved to Los Ange-

les to work with Garson, who produced and arranged Withers' first single, "Three Nights and a Morning," the only release on the obscure Lotus Records.

When "Three Nights and a Morning" sank without a trace, Garson introduced Withers to jazz pianist Mike Melvoin, who then recommended him to Charles Wright ("Express Yourself"); Wright, in turn, connected Withers with keyboardist Ray Jackson, then a member of Wright's Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band. Withers was working for McDonnell Douglas, and then Weber Aircraft, assembling washrooms and air stairs; he used his earnings to record demos with Jackson of "Justified" (later recorded by Esther Phillips), "The Same Love That Made Me Laugh" (subsequently cut by Diana Ross), and a couple of other songs. After being rejected by several labels and industry moguls, the tape eventually landed in the hands of Clarence Avant, founder of Sussex Records.

Liking what he heard, Avant wanted Bones Howe, who'd just produced several Fifth Dimension hits, to produce Withers' first record. Avant's friend, Stax VP Al Bell, had a stroke of genius and suggested that Booker T. Jones produce the record. Jones opted for a stripped-down ensemble, employing Booker T. & the MG's bassist Duck Dunn and drummer Al Jackson, with Jones himself handling keyboards and guitar. On a couple of tracks, including "Grandma's Hands,"

Winning the Grammy for "Ain't No Sunshine," with Isaac Hayes looking on, 1972





Performing on a British television program, 1972

Stephen Stills sat in on piano. During a third session, held six months later, Chris Ethridge and Jim Keltner replaced Dunn and Jackson. Jones crafted the ethereal string arrangement for "Ain't No Sunshine" and suggested that Withers bring his carpet-covered drafting board to the studio - it was the same board Withers used at home to stomp out the beat while playing acoustic guitar. It was also Jones who convinced Withers that repeating "I know" over and over again would increase the tension in the song exponentially.

In 1972, by the time Withers was ready to record his second album, *Still Bill*, Jones had relocated to Northern California. Charles Wright and the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band had recently split up, and Ray Jackson, drummer James Gadson, guitarist Benorce Blackmon, and bass player Melvin Dunlap had joined forces with Withers, creating one of the greatest unsung ensembles in R&B history. Rehearsing the new material in Gadson's garage, Withers - with the help of Al Bell - persuaded Avant to let him produce himself. "Al Bell is my guardian angel," asserts Withers. "Clarence is a business guy. Al Bell is a music guy who did business. Al Bell got me!"

The result was an extraordinary sophomore effort that includes both "Use Me" (Number Two pop and R&B) and "Lean on Me" (Number One pop and R&B). Heavily in demand, Withers then wrote songs

for both José Feliciano and Gladys Knight, while turning down opportunities to write soundtracks for what he considered to be degrading blaxploitation flicks.

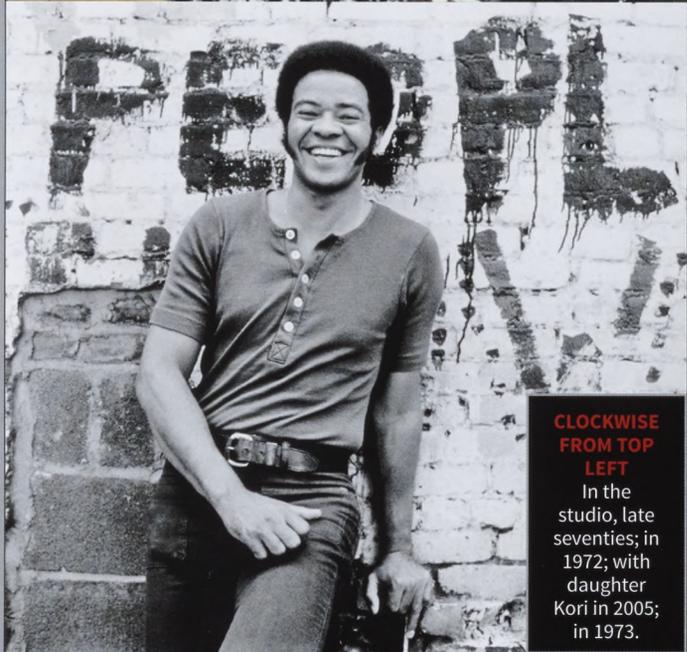
Bill Withers Live at Carnegie Hall and *Justments* followed, the latter producing three R&B hits, before Sussex Records went bankrupt in 1975. Columbia bought the company's tapes at auction and, in a separate deal, signed Withers to a long-term contract. Four albums, *Making Music*, *Naked and Warm*, *Menagerie*, and *'Bout Love* appeared on Columbia in 1975, 1976, 1977, and 1979, each album getting further and further away from the funky, sparse sound that had originally made Withers such a success.

When Withers blanched at a Columbia A&R man's suggestion that he record a cover of "In the Ghetto," his career was placed on hold. "I couldn't get into the studio from 1979 to 1985," he says. Unable to record for his own label, Withers cut "Soul Shadows" with the Crusaders in 1980 and then the Top Five

hit "Just the Two of Us" with Grover Washington Jr. in 1981. The latter appeared on Washington's label, Elektra, and won Withers his second Grammy for Best R&B Song.

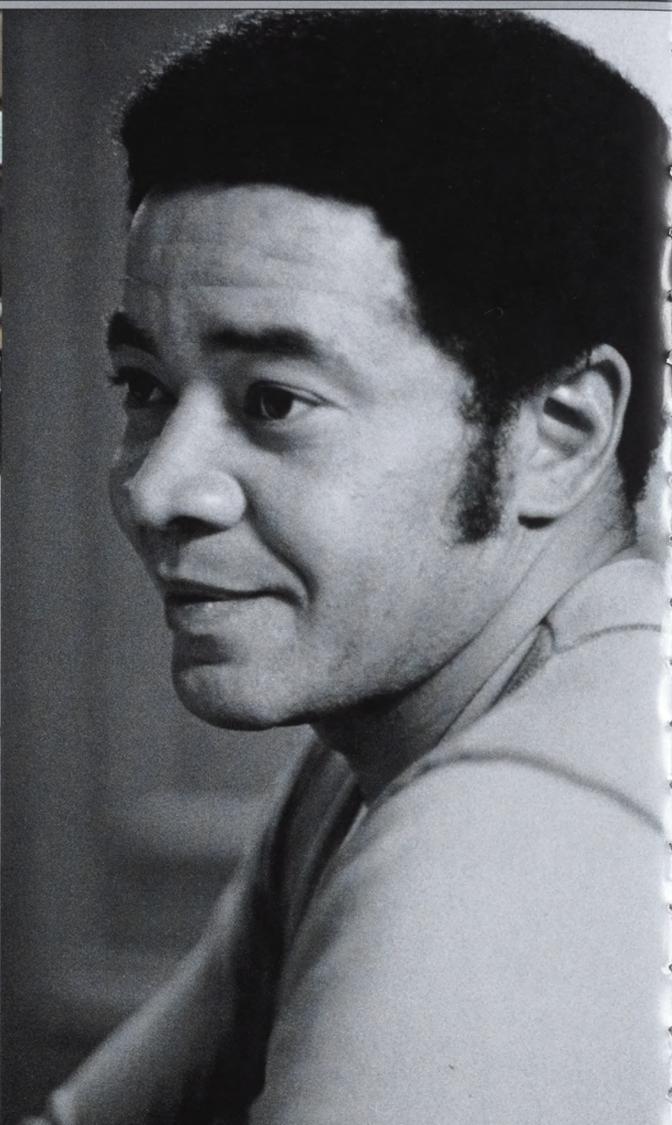
Staying on the jazz-pop tip that had worked so well with the Crusaders and Grover Washington Jr., Withers recorded a Number Thirteen R&B hit with Ralph MacDonald, "In the Name of Love," released on Polydor in 1984, and in 1985 recorded - under his

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**CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP
LEFT**

In the
studio, late
seventies; in
1972; with
daughter
Kori in 2005;
in 1973.



own name – a final album for Columbia, *Watching You, Watching Me*. “I didn’t navigate that corporate thing well,” explains Withers. “They would have some A&R guy that had nothing to do [with me] culturally, didn’t understand at all where I was from, or what I was doing or why. . . . That’s when it ended for me.”

SINCE 1985, WITHERS HAS SPENT HIS TIME raising a family, living off his considerable songwriting royalties, and enjoying life out of the spotlight. On occasion, he will write a song at the request of a friend, contributing two such compositions to Jimmy Buffett’s 2004 album *License to Chill*, one to George Benson’s 2009 CD *Songs and Stories*, and most recently, in 2013, penning “I Am My Father’s Son” for the unveiling of a statue of basketball great and Withers’ friend Bill Russell.

Bill Withers’ gifts are many and varied. His ability to address fundamental aspects of the human condition not commonly considered in popular music, such as friendship (“Lean on Me”), the importance of one’s grandparents (“Grandma’s Hands”), and male vulnerability (“Ain’t No Sunshine,” “Let Me in Your Life,” “I Hope She’ll Be Happier,” and “Better Off Dead”) sets him squarely apart from most rock and R&B artists. His knack for simple, memorable, yet poignant turns-of-phrase is equally remarkable, and his melodic gifts are extraordinary.

Alongside Roberta Flack, Donny Hathaway, and Gil Scott-Heron, Withers was the leading figure in the nascent black singer-songwriter movement of the early 1970s. In addition to his quintessential ballads, he also crafted funky groove-based songs such as “Who Is He (And What Is He to You)?,” “Use Me,” and “Railroad Man,” situating himself squarely within current and past African-American traditions. He penned a number of songs addressing social issues specific to black culture, history, and living conditions, including “Harlem,” “Cold Baloney,” and “I Can’t Write Left Handed,” all featured on the superb 1973 set, *Bill Withers Live at Carnegie Hall*. The latter track may be his finest moment on record, with Withers masterfully articulating the incredibly moving lyric with a variety of blues and gospel vocal devices.

Withers’ songs have proved to have a life of their own. In 1987, Club Nouveau cut a dance version of “Lean on Me” that topped the pop charts, settled at Number Two R&B, and garnered Withers his third Grammy for Best R&B Song. Originally a Number Six R&B hit for Withers in 1977, a 1988 remix of “Lovely Day” by Dutch DJ Ben Liebrand reached the UK Top Ten. Eight years later, Meshell Ndegeocello had a Number One dance hit with a cover of “Who Is He (And What Is He to You)?” That same year, Blackstreet, featuring Dr. Dre, hit the top of the charts with “No Diggity,” featuring a prominent sample from “Grandma’s Hands.” Other artists who have sampled Withers’ recordings include DMX, Jay Z, Akon, Kanye West, Tupac Shakur, Fatboy Slim, and R. Kelly. In addition, Withers’ songs have been covered by a staggeringly diverse array of artists, ranging from Michael Jackson, the Temptations, Al Green, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Isaac Hayes, Mary J. Blige, Jill Scott, and Gil Scott-Heron to Garth Brooks, Willie Nelson, Barbra Streisand, Paul McCartney, Mick Jagger, Maroon 5, Brian Eno, Michael Stipe, Alt-j, and the cast of *Glee*.

In 2005, Withers was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Two years later, “Lean on Me” was enshrined in the Grammy Hall of Fame. And tonight, Bill Withers takes his rightful place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. 🍷

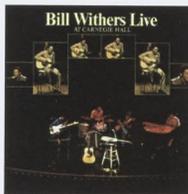
SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



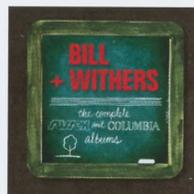
JUST AS I AM
Sussex 1971



STILL BILL
Sussex 1972



BILL WITHERS LIVE AT CARNEGIE HALL
Sussex 1973



THE COMPLETE SUSSEX AND COLUMBIA ALBUMS
Sony 2012

Withers in 2012

