

Lionel Richie,  
onstage at  
the Universal  
Amphitheatre,  
Los Angeles,  
July 18, 1996



# LIONEL RICHIE

THIS EFFORTLESSLY SMOOTH SINGER'S PATH TO SUPERSTARDOM WAS BUILT ON A STRING OF SELF-PENNEDED CLASSIC COMPOSITIONS.

BY HERB POWELL

**D**uring cold winters in the late 1960s, Lionel Richie would walk through the tranquil woods of Tuskegee, Alabama, seeking contemplation. He tamped down the thick but dormant underbrush, knowing his efforts would provide a clear path for him to stroll in the spring. He loved those Southern woods and inherently knew he would always return there for solace. Returning home is central to the Lionel Richie story — because he's traveled so very far.

When Lionel, then a budding saxophonist, met Floridian Thomas McClary standing in the registration line at Tuskegee Institute (now University), life was about to change. Joining other musicians, they formed a band and named themselves the Mystics. In time, with the addition of trumpeter William King, keyboardist Milan Williams, bassist Ronald LaPread, and drummer/vocalist Walter Orange, they became the Commodores. In spring 1971, their ever-faithful manager Benny Ashburn got the band signed to Motown Records. But as they worked alongside various producers, nothing broke through. Not until 1974, when paired with producer James Anthony Carmichael, did the sweat equity of the road (opening for the Jackson 5) transfer into the recording studio. By 1977, everything had gelled for the Commodores: The song "Brick House," with one of the all-time great drum fill intros, became a party anthem — and a Top Five pop smash.

Richie's evolution from Commodores saxophonist to singer of the songs he composed could reasonably be seen as an inevitable phase of his development. But all told, perhaps the most significant measure of Lionel Richie's deeply rooted progression as a songwriter is the act of songwriting itself: When Lionel was a boy, he sat on the piano bench next to his beloved grandmother Adelaide, a classically trained piano teacher who tried to pass down musical knowledge to Lionel. But much to her displeasure, the young Richie preferred to create his own little songs — abandoning his formal training of learning to read music on the page. Decades later, in his early days at Motown (Lionel called it "Motown University"), he rubbed shoulders with great composers and discovered that many, like him, couldn't read music. While that was encouraging, it was longtime producer Carmichael who emboldened Richie to "never stop developing his songs." And he never did.

There's something about a skilled storyteller from the South. And Lionel is one of the best — a natural. In 1975, he composed a song about universal love called "Sweet Love"; the next year, he wrote and sang the Commodores' Top Five pop smash "Just to Be Close to You." Significantly, his 1977 composition "Easy," about the dissolution of a relationship, found his Southern front porch style merging with his refined craftsmanship: "Why in the world would anybody put chains on me? / I've paid my dues to make it / Everybody wants me to be / What



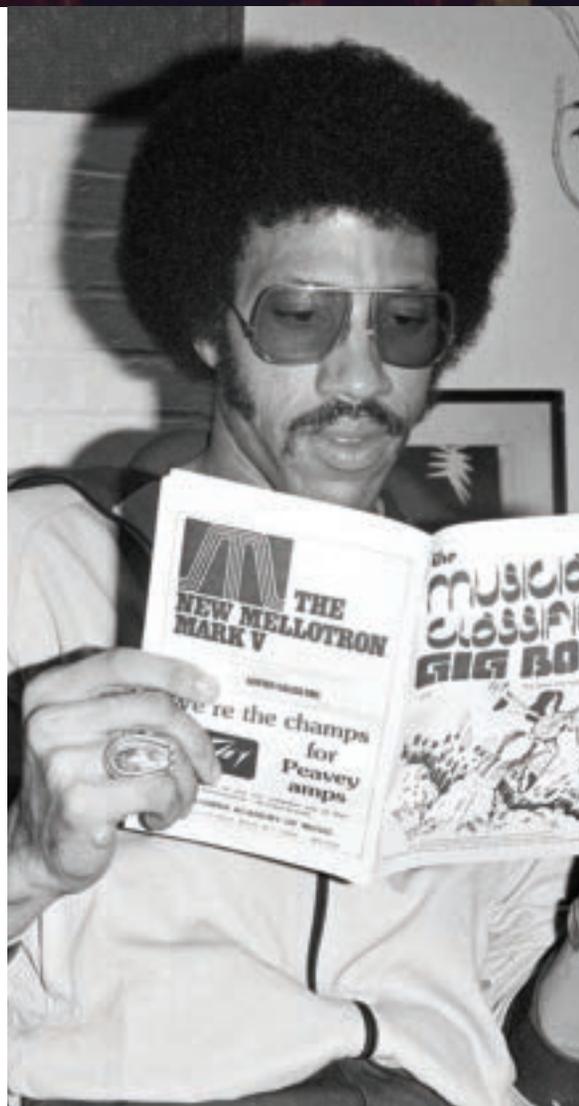
**FROM TOP:**  
Singing with the  
Commodores on  
*Soul Train*, 1976;  
keeping up with  
the trades, 1976.

they want me to be / I'm not happy when I try to fake it /  
That's why I'm easy, I'm easy like Sunday morning."

Lionel said that "Easy" was the first song where people approached him to say, "I feel the same way." Such storytelling is the essence of his masterful songwriting. After witnessing his dad raise a glass and toast Lionel's mother: "She's a great lady, she's a great mother, and she's a great friend," he let those words germinate and almost subconsciously wrote "Three Times a Lady." He didn't know the 1978 song would break through the cultural milieu of our time: Nobody was writing a delicate waltz in pop - especially Black pop. A global smash, "Three Times a Lady" hit Number One pop, R&B, and Adult Contemporary in the U.S. The song's deep-seated gentleness in tone and lyric was so refreshingly honest that young and old alike gravitated to its purity.

In the same fashion, the 1979 song "Sail On" also had purity. Hearing the delicate acoustic guitar and piano intro and Richie's legitimate country-twang vocal on Black and pop radio, many listeners thought it was a country tune. Their ears didn't know what to expect. By the time the vamp comes around, a soulful percussive track takes over. With "Sail On," Lionel had accomplished a rare feat in American music: combining pop, country, R&B, and a little funk into a palatable Top Five pop hit.

There came a time in Richie's journey where his songwriting began to eclipse his life as a Commodore. In 1979, he penned a song of great emotional warmth in "Still," a Number One pop and R&B smash for the Commodores. His consistent ability to tastefully merge styles wasn't lost on country music star Kenny Rogers, who asked Richie to



Live at  
Madison Square  
Garden, New York  
City, 1986



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”

write and produce a song for him: “Lady” became the first song in the 1980s to chart on three of *Billboard’s* singles charts. It was also Rogers’ biggest-ever solo hit and led to a lifelong friendship between the two.

Similarly, when Richie wrote and produced “Endless Love” for the film of the same name in 1981, the duet with Diana Ross continued this new trajectory of his career. A rushed composition, mostly conceived over a weekend, “Endless Love” was a Number One pop smash for over two months – the biggest hit of Ross’s career – and the most successful duet of all time. Richie’s triumphs seemed to have a life of their own, at the same time as the cohesiveness of the Commodores was fraying. As emotionally agonizing as it was, he left the brotherhood of the band to pursue a solo career.

The first single from Richie’s 1982 self-titled debut album, “Truly,” soared to Number One on the pop and adult contemporary charts. Then came yet another transformative song in the Lionel Richie songbook: “All Night Long (All Night).” The first single from *Can’t Slow Down* (1983) was not only an up-tempo calypso-flavored pop and R&B gem; it led to Richie’s global popularity. In 1984, he performed his multicultural signature song at the closing ceremony of the summer Olympics at the Los Angeles Coliseum before an audience of ninety-two thousand; this extended version of the song was viewed by 2.6 billion worldwide. *Can’t Slow Down*, spawning such memorable hits as “Running With the Night,” “Stuck on You,” and “Penny Lover,” achieved the rare feat of having every one of its singles hitting the Top Ten pop chart. The Number One hit “Hello,” with its lush orchestration and its lyrical longing for that special love, took Richie’s sophisticated sound to a new level.

In 1984, Harry Belafonte contacted Richie’s manager Ken Kragen about the urgent need to “do something” about the famine in Africa. Richie immediately signed on, followed by producer Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson. Fourteen years earlier, the Commodores had





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Leading an all-star cast in “We Are the World,” 1986; working on “Lady” with Kenny Rogers, 1980; with Tina Turner at the Grammy Awards, 1985; with Quincy Jones, Dionne Warwick, Michael Jackson, and Stevie Wonder (from left) in Los Angeles at the 1986 Grammy Awards; performing “Endless Love” with Diana Ross at the 54th Academy Awards gala, 1982.





## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**Lionel Richie**  
1982 (Motown)



**Can't Slow Down**  
1983 (Motown)



**Dancing  
on the Ceiling**  
1986 (Motown)



**Time**  
1998 (Mercury)



**The 20th Century Masters -  
The Millennium Collection:  
The Best of Lionel Richie**  
2003 (Motown/Universal)



**Tuskegee**  
2012 (Mercury)

been the opening act for the Jackson 5. Now Lionel Richie and Michael Jackson – two of the biggest stars on the planet – would sit down and write one of pop music's most important songs, the landmark “We Are the World.” Featuring superstar performances, the 1985 song became the fastest-selling single in history and ultimately raised sixty-three million dollars for the charitable cause.

The following year, “Say You, Say Me,” on the soundtrack for the film *White Nights*, contained an extraordinarily creative musical move: a radical tempo change at the bridge. And Richie made it work. “Say You, Say Me” would win him a Golden Globe and an Oscar for best song. Yet, amid all that achievement, he entered a harsh emotional winter. Polyps on his larynx threatened his singing career, his marriage ended, and his father fell terminally ill with emphysema. He returned home to Alabama. (His beloved father, Lionel Sr., died four years later, in 1990.) A decade would pass before he released another studio album, the excellent but underappreciated *Time*, in 1998.

Yet Lionel Richie's endurance reflects the strength gained via his upbringing in that Black enclave of excellence called Tuskegee Institute. The family home was right at the entrance of the campus, the Black repository of educators, pilots, lawyers, dentists, craftsmen, scientists, and more. Though he grew up amid brutal racism in Alabama and neighboring Mississippi, he also came of age believing that Black people could do absolutely anything. He became the best of what his Black tradition demanded – and that was to have the freedom to be himself.

Richie is a survivor because he knows who he is. In an era full of “edge,” he never forgot the crux of what pop music is – melody. In 2012, he released *Tuskegee*, each track a reimagined version of his songs in a duet with a contemporary country star. Of the work, he said, “This is an album of all the songs they told me would ruin my career.”

As one of the most successful songwriters in music history, Lionel Richie has received too many awards as a performer, songwriter, and humanitarian to list. But perhaps among all his many honors, a 2011 award stands out: the inaugural Harvard Humanitarian Award for his global charity efforts, including over three million dollars raised for breast cancer research. The award was named in honor of Peter J. Gomes, a former Tuskegee theologian and friend of Richie's grandmother Adelaide (who battled breast cancer). Richie has said that Gomes' work made complex sacred texts understandable, or as we would say in the African American tradition, “making it plain.” As Richie commented when receiving the Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song in May 2022, “I made a pact [with God] that if you allow me to be a lyricist and to write words that touch people, I will make sure that I get the message that love – love is the only answer to everything we are doing.”

When Lionel Richie was a child, he wanted to become an Episcopal preacher. I would argue that ultimately he became a form of that. Because the best preachers are sensitive illustrators of faith – but, most of all, love.