

## AL GREEN

**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 concocted his style just as black pop's visionary young bloods were figuring out funk and arriving at disco, he had few advocates and, in the secular realm, no heirs. And partly it's due to his singular musical ideas. Soul goes nowhere without a bottom, and when Green worked with his greatest producer, Willie Mitchell, his records boasted an exceptionally fat and propulsive low range. He could and can belt off that bottom — that's why we treasure *Al Green Gets Next to You*, cut before his style was finalized. But his genius truly breaks free at — and over the top of — a register that darts and floats and soars into falsetto with startling frequency and beguiling ease. Green's brashly feminine and seductively woman-friendly signature sound was his ticket to stardom. Among soul's traditionalists already suspicious of his pop success, however, it cost him credibility.

The main reason Green's music endured these cavils so spectacularly — the main reason it has long been viewed as classic and the main reason he's now in the Hall of Fame — is that it's beautiful. It's so gorgeous, so sexy, so physically attractive that denying its pleasures proved a deprivation that few who loved any kind of rock & roll were willing to live with. But Green's acute musical intelligence also helped. He's a structurally unconventional composer whose lyrics veer savvily between stone-simple romantic vows and tormented reveries on the heaven-and-earth split that infuses and haunts all soul music.

But Green's best-remembered recorded performances aren't just love-pop songs; they showcase an almost jazzlike filigree that only Marvin Gaye and Aretha have ever approached. Although it's been reported that Green can spend hundreds of hours perfecting one vocal, often his music sounds off the cuff, if not out of left field, and anyone who's seen him onstage knows how unpredictable his live flights can be. The miracle is that once you're aware of this contradiction, it disappears. Fabricated or improvised? You can't tell, and it doesn't matter — he seems to inhabit a state of late-night hyperconsciousness in which obsessive calculation and unmoored inspiration meet on the other side of the moon.

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 1967 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 pop formula — a shifting amalgam of cream and grit, fluff and guts, 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 11 albums he cut between 1970 and 1979 would sustain start to finish. His greatest-hits collections make sure-fire gifts. But Green lovers should just collect the whole set — starting, I suppose, with *Call Me* (1973), *Living 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.

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 pure 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 hinting at the access to eternity that has been the goal of his art in all its guises. And after all, defining mortality is what rock & rollers have been doing since the first rush wore off around 1958 or so. We know we're not going to get away with it forever, but we intend to put our time in trying.

— ROBERT CHRISTGAU

*Al Green: Unmoored, unconventional, unpredictable*



