



BEHIND THE MUSIC: FORTY YEARS ON THE ROAD *with* R&B LEGENDS

THE STORY OF
SOUL-R&B GUITARIST
GENE DAIL

AND THE LEGENDS HE STOOD BESIDE—
ON STAGE, BACKSTAGE, ON THE BUS,
AND IN THE PRIVATE MOMENTS
THE AUDIENCE NEVER SAW.



A Memoir by

— **GENE DAIL** —

BEHIND THE MUSIC:

FORTY YEARS ON THE ROAD *with* R&B LEGENDS

The Story of a Soul-R&B Guitarist,

Gene Dail

A Memoir

by Gene Dail

With RE Casper

Dedicated to my Loving Mother,

Elizabeth Dail

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Introduction

Why I Decided to Write This Memoir

It started, as so many unexpected things in my life have started, with a phone call I almost didn't take.

Back in January of 2026, a friend of mine here in Vero Beach, familiar with my background and career in music, introduced me to a radio broadcaster and podcaster out of Cincinnati named Gary Jeff Walker. Gary had a late-night broadcast and wanted to interview me about my life and career. I said sure, I'd do that, though I'll be honest, I wasn't entirely certain how it would go. I'd lived a full and fast life and hadn't spent much time formally putting any of it down on paper. But on the 27th of January, Gary called, and we did the interview.

He asked me about my career as a guitarist, my relationship with Otis Redding, and what it was like to travel and tour with him during those early years before the whole world knew his name. He asked about Otis' friends, the other performers I'd encountered on the road, the places I'd been, and the things I'd seen. He asked good questions; the kind that open doors rather than close them, and something unexpected happened: the stories came back. Not vaguely, not in outline, but with a specificity and detail that surprised me as much as anyone. Names, places, conversations, moments I hadn't consciously thought about in years. It

turned out they'd all been in there the whole time, waiting for the right questions to bring them back to the surface.

The interview went well. Better than I'd expected, and afterward I found myself thinking about it, about how much had come back, and how much of it was really worth preserving.

I mentioned the interview to a friend of mine at church, Bob Casper. We both attend Trinity Episcopal Church here in Vero Beach, and Bob is one of those people you feel fortunate to know; curious, unassuming, someone who listens carefully and asks the kind of follow-up questions that push you past the surface of things. When I told him about the Gary Jeff Walker interview, Bob said he'd like to find it, listen to it, and maybe put together a transcript for me. I said that sounded fine.

Bob came back with the transcript, and reading it stopped me in my tracks. The stories were there on the page, real, specific, alive in a way I hadn't fully anticipated, and something clicked. I thought maybe there's enough here to write a story about my life. Maybe this is actually worth doing properly.

I sat with that idea for a while, going back through the transcript, making notes, thinking about the full arc of everything I'd experienced and what shape a book about it might take. Then I went to Bob and asked if he'd help me do it. His answer stuck with me. He said, "Sure, Gene. I think I'd like to do that for a couple of reasons. One, I really

think you're an interesting guy with a great story to tell, and people need to hear it. Two, I like to write and do research, and I think it'd be a lot of fun for us."

So, we got to work. Bob came prepared with a long, carefully organized list of questions divided into chapters and time periods, and the two of us went through them systematically; sometimes at his home in Vero Beach, sometimes over the phone when schedules made that more practical. I'd answer his questions, push back when something wasn't quite right, and add context and detail that the original interview hadn't captured. Bob's follow-ups jogged loose memories I didn't know I still had, and my corrections and additions shaped the direction of each chapter as it developed. Then we'd go back and forth on the drafts together, with me reviewing, revising, filling in gaps, and correcting details only I would know, and Bob refining the language and structure until we both felt it was right. It was a collaboration, built across many hours and many conversations over several months, and I mean it when I say it was one of the more satisfying things I've done.

Along the way, I was encouraged and supported by other friends at Trinity Episcopal: Paul Gallagher, Christiana Hermanas, and Father Ryan Jordan, whose quiet but consistent belief in this project and in me meant more to me than he probably knows. There is something particular about having people you respect tell you that your story is important and worth recounting. It changes how you approach the telling of it, and it kept me going on the days

when reaching back sixty years felt like more work than I'd bargained for.

So here it is.

What you're about to read is the story of a kid from Norfolk, Virginia, who bought a guitar out of a pawn shop window on a five-dollar-a-week layaway and somehow ended up spending forty years playing with and beside some of the greatest soul and R&B artists of the twentieth century. It's the story of life on the road in the 1960s and 1970s, the Southern touring circuit, the legendary theaters, the bus rides through the night, the shows that lifted a room full of people completely out of themselves, and the ones that didn't. It's the story of what it looks like, up close and from the side of the stage, when someone like Otis Redding walks out in front of a crowd and reminds everyone in the room what music is actually for.

I was never the headline act. I want to be clear about that from the beginning, because this book isn't self-promotion or exaggerated backstage gossip. It's simply what I saw and heard and experienced about people and events from my particular vantage point, close enough to the center of things to observe them, far enough from the spotlight to see them clearly. I shared stages and bus rides and recording sessions and late-night conversations with people whose names you know, during an extraordinary moment in American music history, and I paid attention the whole time. This is what I remember.

I hope reading it gives you some sense of what that era felt like from the inside, what life on the road was really like, what those artists were like as human beings when the cameras weren't rolling, what the music meant to the people making it and the people hearing it. I hope it entertains you and teaches you something about a time and a world that deserve to be remembered accurately and with the respect they earned.

Most of all, I hope it honors the people who were part of it. The ones who are gone- Otis above all, but so many others- and the ones still here. Every name in these pages is someone who shaped me, and I'm grateful for all of it.

Now let's go back to Norfolk, where it all began.

Gene Dail

Prologue

Life moves more slowly these days in Vero Beach, and I've come to love that genuinely. Most mornings I sit out on the patio with a cup of coffee and just listen to the quiet, the birds, the breeze off the water, not much else. It's a long way, in every sense, from where I started. But now and then, right in the middle of all that stillness, something finds its way back to me.

The sound of tires rolling through the night on some nameless Southern highway.

The rattle of a guitar case sliding across the back of a bus.

A band tuning up in the wings, that loose, anticipatory noise that happens just before the lights come on and everything snaps into focus.

The particular silence of a recording studio when a take has just ended, and nobody in the room is yet sure whether it was the one.

Those sounds never really leave you once music gets into your blood. I've been retired for over sixteen years, and I still hear them, and sometimes, unexpectedly, I hear something else alongside them. The hum of a document scanner running at full speed through a government archive. The click of a circuit board seating correctly into its housing. The quiet satisfaction of a system that wasn't working, working again. It turns out that all the years of

music and twenty-five years of electronics leave marks on a person in surprisingly similar ways. Both rewarded patience. Both punished shortcuts. Both required you to listen, really listen, to understand what was actually happening rather than what you assumed was happening. I didn't know any of that as a teenager in Norfolk, with a pawnshop guitar and no plan. I figured it out along the way, which is the only way most things worth knowing ever get figured out.

Looking back now, it's almost hard to believe how simply the whole thing started: a nice acoustic guitar hanging in the window of a Norfolk pawn shop, five dollars a week until it was finally mine, and a kid with no connections and no roadmap, just an overwhelming need to figure out how to play the thing. I didn't have grand dreams of fame. I wasn't trying to become a star. I just loved music, and that love turned out to be enough of a compass to carry me places I never could have imagined from that neighborhood in Norfolk.

One opportunity led to another, as it does when you keep showing up and working hard. Before I fully understood what was happening, I found myself sharing stages with some of the most gifted performers of a generation, such as Otis Redding and other musicians and singers whose records were the soundtrack of an entire era. Some of the people in these pages became legends. Some of them are gone too soon. All of them taught me something.

Then, in the early 1980s, the music stopped opening doors, and I did what I had always done on the road when

something unexpected happened: I adapted and began a 25-year career as an electronics technician with an iconic technology corporation.

But what both careers really taught me went far deeper than notes and chords or circuits and components. They taught me about people, who they are when the pressure is on, how they treat the people around them when nobody important is watching, and what separates the ones who last from the ones who don't. They taught me about perseverance, disappointment, and timing, about how quickly life can shift on you and how important it is to be ready when it does. They taught me that the most consequential moments rarely announce themselves, that a conversation backstage, a last-minute phone call, a broken amplifier on an afternoon when you had nothing else to do, can alter the entire course of a life.

This book isn't a collection of name drops or a backstage gossip column. There are famous names in here, yes, because they were part of my life. But the real story is the journey itself: the long nights and the laughter, the uncertainty and the friendships, the unexpected turns, and the lessons I only understood years later.

I was never the headline act. But I was there, right in the middle of it, for sixty-five years of working life. And this is my story.

Chapter 1

Where the Music Came from

People sometimes ask me a question that sounds simple but isn't: why did soul music sound the way it sounded, and why did it happen exactly when it happened? I've thought about that question for a long time, and the answer matters to me because it isn't really a separate story from my own. It's the same story, just starting earlier and on a wider scale.

To understand how a kid from Norfolk ended up playing guitar behind Otis Redding, you have to understand where that music actually came from, and why it landed on the East Coast, and in the South, and in my particular neighborhood, with the force that it did.

So let me back up. Way up. Before me, before Otis, before any of it.

It Started in the Church

If you want to find the deepest root of soul music, you don't start with a record label or a radio station. You start with a Sunday morning in a Black church somewhere in the American South, decades before anybody had a name for what they were doing.



The Black Church Was Where the Music Began

If you want to find the deepest root of soul music, you don't start with a record label or a radio station. You start with a Sunday morning in a Black church somewhere in the American South, decades before anybody had a name for what they were doing. Call-and-response, where the lead voice throws something out, and the congregation throws it right back. Hand-clapping that doesn't just keep time but pushes the whole room forward. A way of singing that isn't trying to be pretty so much as trying to be true.

I didn't grow up steeped in church the way some of these artists did; my mother made sure I went, mostly, I'll admit, because she made me, but I understood instinctively what I was hearing whenever I caught it. There's a particular kind of singing that comes out of the Black church tradition, and once you've heard it, you recognize it everywhere else it shows up. Call and response, where the preacher or the lead voice throws something out, and the congregation throws it right back. Hand-clapping that doesn't just keep time but pushes the whole room forward. A way of singing that isn't

trying to be pretty so much as trying to be true, emotional, unguarded, personal in a way that polished pop music of that era rarely was.

Aretha Franklin grew up in that world, the daughter of a minister. Sam Cooke came out of gospel quartets before he ever sang a secular note. Al Green came up through it. Otis Redding came up through it. And when these singers eventually moved into rhythm & blues and soul, they didn't leave that vocabulary behind; they just pointed it in new directions. The moan in the voice, the way a note could break and bend with feeling, the sense that singing was supposed to cost you something emotionally, and all of that came straight out of church on a Sunday morning. Soul music is gospel music that chooses to sing about earthly love rather than, or sometimes alongside, spiritual love. The technique never changed. Only the subject did.

Then the Blues Got Mixed In

The second ingredient came out of the Mississippi Delta, through Memphis, and into every Southern town with a juke joint and a guitar player who knew three chords and how to bend the third one.

The blues gave soul music something the church alone couldn't: a vocabulary for trouble: Heartbreak, hard luck, struggle, the particular ache of wanting something you can't have. Where gospel reached upward, the blues reached sideways, into the actual texture of people's daily lives. And the blues brought its own sound with it: that bent-note

guitar style, that storytelling structure where a singer takes you through a situation verse by verse, that emotional directness that doesn't dress anything up.

When I was learning guitar, working through records by ear, a lot of what I was absorbing without fully realizing it was blues phrasing, the way you could make a single note cry if you bent it right, the way space between notes could carry as much weight as the notes themselves. Soul guitar playing, the kind I eventually built a career on, is really blues guitar playing wearing a sharper suit.

And Rhythm & Blues Put It on the Dance Floor

By the 1940s and into the 1950s, musicians began fusing the church and the blues with something else: rhythm built specifically to move your body. That fusion is what people came to call rhythm & blues, and it's the direct ancestor of everything that came after.

Ray Charles is the name everybody points to first, and rightly so. What Ray did, taking the structure and fervor of gospel music and putting secular lyrics on top of it, scandalized some of the older church folks and thrilled everybody else. Many serious music historians will tell you that Ray Charles's recordings from the 1950s are the first true soul records, full stop. Ruth Brown and Fats Domino were doing related work, building the bridge plank by plank between the old R&B sound and what soul music was about to become.



Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, and Fats Domino Would Build Bridges Between R&B and Soul

These three artists helped build the bridge between traditional rhythm & blues and what would soon become soul music. Ray Charles took the structure and fervor of gospel music and put secular, sometimes downright scandalous, lyrics on top of it; many serious music historians consider that work the first true soul record, full stop. Ruth Brown and Fats Domino were doing related work alongside him, laying down plank after plank of that same bridge.

By the time I was a teenager listening to the radio in Norfolk, that bridge was already built. I just didn't know yet that I was about to walk across it.

Why It All Landed in Norfolk

Here's where the story gets personal for me because Norfolk wasn't an accident. The Tidewater region- Norfolk, Portsmouth, Newport News, Hampton, Virginia Beach-

was about as well-positioned as any place in America to catch every one of these musical currents at once, and I don't think I ever appreciated that as a kid the way I do now, looking back.

Norfolk was a port city, one of the busiest military and shipping centers anywhere in the country. Think about what that actually means for music. The region sat at a crossroads.

It connected New York, Washington, D.C., Richmond, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. Records, musicians, and performers were always moving through. New sounds didn't take years to arrive in Norfolk the way they might in a more isolated town. They showed up fast because the roads, rails, and shipping lanes that carried everything else through Tidewater also carried music.

And then there was the Navy. The sheer scale of the naval presence in Norfolk brought young servicemen from every corner of the country: Detroit, Chicago, New York, Memphis, New Orleans, and every one of them carried his own record collection and his own regional taste in music. All of that got dumped into the same clubs and dance halls where Norfolk's own musicians were playing. You couldn't have built a better mixing chamber for American music if you'd designed it on purpose.



For a young musician like me growing up there, Norfolk offered something special: America's changing soundtrack seemed to pass right through town.



Norfolk Was Where the Sounds Came Together

In the 1960s, Norfolk sat at a remarkable crossroads of American music. Its busy port, sprawling naval presence, and location along the East Coast corridor brought sailors, servicemen, performers, records, and radio influences from across the country into the Tidewater region. Rhythm and blues, gospel, soul, jazz, Motown, beach music, and the emerging sounds of rock 'n' roll could all be heard in Norfolk's clubs, theaters, record shops, and on local radio. With Portsmouth, Hampton, Newport News, and Virginia Beach close by, the region became a natural meeting place for musical styles moving north from the Carolinas and Deep South and south from Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York.

On top of all that, Tidewater was an important stop on a network of theaters and clubs across the country where Black performers could reliably book shows during the era of segregation. Major artists came through Norfolk, Hampton, and Newport News regularly, often years before they became famous, playing local rooms for local crowds. That meant a kid like me could stand in the back of a club and watch professionals doing the real thing without ever leaving home. I didn't have to imagine what greatness sounded like. I could hear it on a Friday night.

Why It All Exploded at Once

None of this would have reached the scale it reached without certain historical forces lining up at exactly the right moment.

The Civil Rights Movement opened doors that had been locked for generations. Desegregation, the Voting Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 suddenly gave Black artists real access to national radio, television, and touring opportunities that simply hadn't existed before. Soul music became one of the most visible, most undeniable expressions of Black culture, reaching a national audience at precisely the moment the country was being forced to reckon with itself.

At the same time, recording technology was advancing fast, and studios like Motown in Detroit and Stax in Memphis were producing records with a clarity and punch that simply jumped out of a car radio. And television gave soul music a

stage it had never had on American Bandstand and The Ed Sullivan Show, introducing audiences who'd never set foot in a Southern club to a sound that had been building in those rooms for years.



***More Than Once, I Saw a Divided Room United by
the Music***

I saw this kind of scene myself more than once on the Southern touring circuit; a room where Black and white audience members started the night on opposite sides, an actual line drawn across the floor as clearly as if it had been painted there. That was simply how certain venues operated in those years. But then the music started, and something happened that I've never been able to explain fully, except to say it was undeniable. People got to their feet. They drifted forward toward the stage. The line that had seemed so fixed began to dissolve slowly at first and then completely, until there was no daylight left between strangers who had nothing in common on paper.

Why White Audiences Came Along Too

Here's the part of the story I find most remarkable, and I lived enough of it firsthand to say this with confidence: music crossed the racial lines of that era more completely, and more quickly, than almost anything else in American life.

I saw it myself, more than once, on the Southern touring circuit; venues where Black and white audience members started the night divided by an actual line across the room, and by the second or third song, that line had simply dissolved because everybody was on their feet dancing to the same thing.

Otis Redding's appearance at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 is the example everybody remembers, and for good reason. Thousands of young white rock fans who'd never experienced Southern soul live watched Otis walk out and just take the whole crowd over, song by song, until there was no daylight left between him and an audience that had nothing in common with him on paper. Aretha Franklin did it. Stevie Wonder did it. Smokey Robinson did it. Gladys Knight did it. Al Green did it. The music connected in a way politics never did.



***Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson,
Gladys Knight, and Al Green Represented Talent
That Crossed the Lines***

Each of these artists proved that soul music could cross the racial lines of that era more completely and more quickly than almost anything else in American life. I saw it myself on the touring circuit, more than once in rooms divided by an actual line down the middle, dissolving.

Why It Still Matters

For me and for everyone I came up with, soul music was never simply entertainment. It was a language that helped shape friendships, build careers, hold communities together, and ultimately help reshape American culture itself. My own story is really just one thread inside that much larger story: a journey from local clubs in Norfolk and Newport News to the Howard Theatre and the Apollo, out onto a national stage where a whole generation of artists changed what American music could sound like and who it could belong to.

I happened to be there for a good stretch of it, guitar in hand, paying close attention. I'm grateful every day that I was.

Chapter 2

Where My Sound Began

If you grew up in Norfolk during the 1950s and early '60s, the way I did, music wasn't something you went looking for. It found you. It came in through the windows on summer evenings, drifted out of cars rolling through the neighborhood, spilled out of church doors on Sunday mornings, and club doors on Saturday nights.

What came out of Norfolk wasn't quite like anything else. It was a particular mixture of Southern soul and East Coast rhythm & blues, seasoned with jazz, gospel, early rock-and-roll, and something the locals called beach music, which had its own easy swing that fit perfectly with summer nights and ocean air.

That was the sound I fell in love with, though rock music grabbed me too- anything with energy and emotion, anything that made you feel something when you heard it. None of that had much to do with how I was raised. My father, Joe, and my mother, Elizabeth, weren't musicians, and neither was my older brother Joe. We were a close, modest family in a neighborhood where people worked hard and looked out for one another.

When I was ten years old, my father died unexpectedly. That kind of loss reshapes everything, especially for a kid, and ours was no exception. My mother raised me the rest

of the way on her own, and she never remarried. She cleaned houses for a living, other people's houses, day after day, without complaint, and somehow kept us stable and loved and pointed in the right direction.



My Mom, Elizabeth Dail, Was My Inspiration

My mother, Elizabeth Dail, raised me on her own after my father died when I was ten years old, cleaning other people's houses for a living, day after day, without complaint, and somehow keeping us stable and loved and pointed in the right direction. I've said it many times over the years, and I'll say it again here: my mother was the greatest influence on my life, not just on who I became as a musician but on who I became as a person. This book is dedicated to her.

direction. I've said it many times over the years, and I'll say it again here: my mother was the greatest influence on my life, not just on who I became as a musician but on who I became as a person. The discipline, the humility, the willingness to keep going when things are hard- all of that

came from watching her. She also made sure I went to church, which I always mention with a laugh because the truth is I went primarily because she made me.

Music in our house came mostly through the radio and the television. I was glued to both, soaking up whatever came through, rhythm & blues, rock, the occasional jazz standard floating in from some late-night station. I wasn't a musician yet, just a listener. I fooled around briefly with the flute as a kid, never seriously, and I didn't play in the school band or take any formal lessons. Reading music was completely beyond me.

I attended John T. West Elementary and later Booker T. Washington High School, where I was a decent student. I played basketball recreationally, but I was never going to be an athlete. What I was drawn to was art, drawing, and sketching, finding visual ways to express how I saw the world. Looking back now, I can see that creativity was already working its way through me, just searching for the right outlet. It would eventually find it. It always does if you pay attention.

The Guitar That Changed My Life

The turning point arrived in the window of a pawn shop.

I can still picture it. An acoustic guitar hanging there, nothing fancy, just an instrument waiting for someone to want it badly enough. I'd thought about guitars before without ever doing anything about them, but something

about that particular moment was different. I stood there looking at it, and whatever the feeling was- attraction, recognition- I can't fully explain it even now. I knew I had to have it. So, I put it on layaway and paid it off five dollars a week, which was about all I could manage as a teenager. When I finally brought it home, something shifted in me almost immediately.

I became obsessed with learning it. That's really the only word for it. Nobody taught me much in those early months; I mostly just listened to records, tried things, failed, tried again, and began to understand how the instrument worked. The trial-and-error approach is slow and sometimes humbling, but it builds a certain kind of knowledge that formal lessons alone can't give you. Within about a year, I could play chords reasonably well, and after two or three years, I finally reached the point where I felt like I was actually playing rather than just approximating. That distinction matters to a musician.

I eventually switched to an electric guitar; my first was a Silvertone, which was affordable and did the job. Once I started earning money from actual performances, I upgraded to a Fender around 1963. That guitar was a revelation. The tone, the feel, the range of what I could do with it, everything opened up. The right instrument at the right moment in a musician's development can change everything, and that Fender did exactly that for me.

The Players I Wanted to Sound Like

Like every young musician, I had players I admired and studied, people whose records I wore out trying to understand what they were doing and why it worked. Two guitarists, above all others, shaped how I thought about the instrument: George Benson and Wes Montgomery.

George Benson had a fluency and sophistication that seemed almost effortless, the ability to move between jazz, soul, and rhythm & blues without ever losing his melodic intelligence or emotional directness. He made difficult things sound natural, which is actually the hardest thing to do. Wes Montgomery operated from a different place entirely: all warmth, feel, and restraint.

His famous octave style and the softness of his picking created a sound that was immediately recognizable and impossible to copy exactly. What Montgomery taught me, without ever meeting me, was that great guitar playing isn't primarily about speed or technique. It's about touch. It's about timing. It's about the space between notes as much as the notes themselves.

One of the first songs I remember actually learning all the way through was "Walk, Don't Run" by The Ventures. At the time, it seemed difficult, which tells you where I was starting from, and years later, it seemed like nothing. That's



Listening to and Learning from the Greats – Wes Montgomery & George Benson

When I first started playing, the sounds I wanted to copy came from these two guitar greats, and I mean I really studied them. Wes Montgomery played with his thumb instead of a pick, which gave his sound a warmth nobody else could replicate, and his octave technique, playing the same note on two strings together, just filled a room in a way that stopped you cold. What Wes taught me, without ever meeting me, was that great guitar playing isn't about speed or flash. It's about touch, and the space between the notes as much as the notes themselves. George Benson had a different kind of genius, a fluency that let him move between jazz, soul, and R&B without ever losing his melodic intelligence, making difficult things sound completely effortless.

always how it goes. The piece that breaks your brain at fifteen becomes the warm-up at twenty-five. Music has a way of recalibrating your sense of what's hard and what isn't, and that recalibration never really stops if you keep pushing yourself.

In the Middle of the Norfolk Talent Pool

Norfolk's music scene during those years was crowded with serious young talent, singers, horn players, drummers, keyboard players, guitarists, and vocal groups, all of them watching each other and paying attention to who was improving and who was starting to get real work. One person who particularly caught my attention was General Norman Johnson, whom most people in the neighborhood just called Norman. He would later become nationally known as the lead singer for The Showmen and then for Chairmen of the Board. Still, back then, he was just this supremely confident local presence who moved as if he already knew exactly where he was going. Watching musicians like Norman taught me something about what professional readiness looked like, even before I fully understood the concept.

Another person who shaped how I thought about music was William Smith, who everybody called Smitty. Smitty showed me that songs aren't born fully formed, but from tiny seeds. I'd watch him sit at a keyboard and start with something almost nothing: a little rhythmic figure, a few chords, a fragment of melody that didn't seem like much on its own. Then he'd begin building from there, layering ideas and expanding the thing outward until what had started as almost nothing had become a full, rich arrangement. That process fascinated me completely. It was the first time I



***I Learned from Norman Johnson What it Meant to
be a Professional Musician.***

Growing up in Norfolk, I watched Norman Johnson move through the local music scene with the confidence of someone who already knew exactly where he was going, and he was right. He went on to front The Showmen, whose "It Will Stand" became a regional anthem, and later Chairmen of the Board, whose "Give Me Just a Little More Time" made him a national name. Back in those Norfolk days, watching musicians like Norman taught me what professional readiness looked like before I even had a word for it.

understood that composition wasn't about waiting for inspiration to arrive fully assembled; it was about trusting the small idea and following it somewhere. Years later, Smitty went on to work with Patti LaBelle, Billy Joel, Rod Stewart, and Bob Dylan, which surprised exactly nobody who had watched him work back in Norfolk.



***My friend, Sangoma Everett, a percussionist,
Taught Me to be serious about my craft.***

Sangoma Everett was one of my closest friends growing up in Norfolk, and even as a young man, his commitment to music and percussion was unmistakable. Being around someone serious about their craft raises your own standards, whether you intend it to or not. Sangoma went on to build a distinguished career as a jazz percussionist and eventually made his home in France, which felt about as far from our Norfolk neighborhood as you could get.

Still, that drive and dedication were always there from the beginning.

Sangoma Everett was another friend and influence during those years, and even as a young man, his seriousness about music and percussion was immediately apparent. Being around people who are that committed raises your own game, whether you intend it to or not. You can't spend time around someone who practices with that kind of focus without starting to examine your own work ethic a little

more honestly. I also grew up around Eric Johnson, a drummer who attended the same high school and later went on to a successful professional career that included playing in Las Vegas with Cher, which felt about as far from Norfolk as you could get.

Playing with local bands during those years was where the real learning happened: learning how to perform in front of a crowd without falling apart, how to listen to the musicians around you instead of just waiting for your turn, how to keep things moving when something goes sideways, which it always does eventually. Fifty dollars for a night's work felt like serious money back then, and even the small gigs were building something inside me that I wouldn't fully understand until much later.

One local figure who helped point me in a productive direction was Leni Guess, a songwriter, producer, and studio owner deeply connected to the local music scene, whom many people credit with helping preserve what people called the Norfolk Sound during years when it might otherwise have faded. As a teenager, I spent time in Leni's recording studio with other young musician friends, laying down demo tracks and background parts, mostly just excited to be near professional recording equipment. What I didn't realize at the time was how much I was absorbing about the business side of music, how songs were built in the studio versus how they worked on stage, how decisions got made about arrangements, how the patience required for recording differed entirely from the adrenaline of live performance.



***Songwriter, Producer, Arranger Lenis Guess
Taught Me the “Business” Side of Music***

Lenis Guess was one of the most important figures in the Norfolk music ecosystem during those years; a songwriter, producer, arranger, and label owner who was deeply connected to what people called the Norfolk Sound and worked hard to keep it alive. As a teenager, I spent time in his recording studio laying down demo tracks and background parts, mostly just thrilled to be near professional equipment. What I didn't realize until much later was how much I was absorbing about the business side of music just by being in that room and watching how things worked.

Bernie Jacobs was another multi-instrumentalist and singer I knew from my early days in Norfolk; a saxophonist and flute player with many gifts who eventually left Virginia and built a strong jazz career in the Seattle area. We played together in my band Smoke after I returned from Berklee in the early 1970s, and his fluid, searching sound on the horn was exactly what that group needed.

Whatever the road looked like, it clearly led somewhere real. Bernie went on to lead his own group, the Bernie Jacobs Quartet, and became a familiar name in the Seattle jazz scene, the kind of player other musicians and radio programmers took seriously.

His quartet was recorded live during the "Art of Jazz" concert series at the Seattle Art Museum, and highlights from that performance later aired on Jazz Northwest, the long-running jazz program on Seattle's 88.5 KPLU, now KNKX, the kind of airplay that tells you a musician has earned real standing in a city's scene. He's also turned up at



I Always Knew Bernie Jacobs, My Multi-Talented Friend, Was Destined for Great Success

One musician I especially remember as a good friend from that period was Bernie Jacobs, a saxophonist and flute player with extraordinary gifts who eventually left Norfolk and built a strong jazz career in Seattle.

the Jackson Street Jazz Walk Festival, an event tied to Seattle's historic Jackson Street jazz district, a neighborhood with its own deep musical roots not unlike the ones Bernie and I came up in back in Norfolk.

Norfolk kept producing musicians like Bernie, serious players who came out of those neighborhoods and went on to do remarkable things that most of the world never connected back to where they started. It doesn't surprise me at all that he ended up somewhere he could still lead a band, still play flute and sax, and sing in front of people who knew what they were listening to. That was always Bernie.

Chapter 3

My First Break – Reputation Travels Faster Than You Do

By the time I was eighteen, music had essentially taken over my life, though I couldn't have told you exactly what that meant in any practical sense. I wasn't making real money at it. I certainly wasn't thinking about a career, at least not in any structured way. I was trying to play every chance I got, which in the Tidewater area of Virginia in those days meant you were always on some informal radar.

Musicians in Norfolk, Newport News, Hampton, and Virginia Beach all knew each other, or knew of each other, and word about who was good, or getting good, moved quickly through that network. Long before social media or any of the tools people use now to spread information, your reputation traveled ahead of you, built entirely on word of mouth and the observations of people who had actually heard you play.

Around that time, I was occasionally sitting in with a vocal group called The Showmen, who had a regional hit called "It Will Stand", one of those songs that seemed like everybody in the area knew it, the kind of record that gets into the local bloodstream and stays there. Members of that circle would eventually become associated with Chairmen of the Board, but in those days, they were talented local musicians still working their way toward something bigger.

I wasn't a steady member of any full-time band, just someone who showed up when they needed an extra player. I had finished school and was practicing constantly, which is apparently how McEvoy (Mac) Robinson heard about me.

Mac was a bass player and band leader from Newport News who led a group called the Rockin' Cabanas. In the Tidewater region, they had built a solid reputation as a dependable road band, the kind of group that could back different singers, play a wide range of material, and show up professional and ready no matter what the gig demanded. They worked dances, clubs, auditoriums, package tours, whatever came along. Most people today only remember the headline acts from that era, the singers whose names are on the records, but what made the whole touring circuit function were working bands like the Rockin' Cabanas, musicians who had to adapt quickly, learn material fast, and hold everything together night after night while the star got the spotlight.

Around 1962, the Rockin' Cabanas had begun backing a young singer from Dawson, Georgia, named Otis Redding. He was starting to make noise with songs like "These Arms of Mine" through Stax Records in Memphis, getting significant radio play and building a following in Southern concert halls. Still, he hadn't yet reached anything close to the level of fame he would eventually achieve. He was still climbing, still road-testing everything, still figuring out who he was as a performer in front of real audiences night after night. The soul music business in those years existed almost

entirely on the road. You built your reputation one show at a time, one city at a time, working the circuit through small theaters and auditoriums and clubs and gymnasiums and church halls and county fairs, anywhere people would come out to hear live music.

When Mac came looking for me, it was because he needed another guitarist. I asked him later what it was about my playing that had caught his attention, and his answer was simple: I could play full chords. That probably sounds unimpressive today, but in the context of soul and rhythm & blues at that time, it was actually a specific and important skill. A lot of younger guitar players were focused primarily on lead lines; the flashy single-note runs and solos that got you noticed. But the rhythm guitar in soul music was the foundation that the whole band stood on. It supported the singer, thickened the groove, and made the room feel the music in their bodies. Mac was looking for someone who understood that role, and apparently, whatever he'd heard about me suggested I did.

When he offered me the spot, I said yes without hesitation, and without fully understanding what I was agreeing to. Honestly, I had no idea how significant the opportunity really was. I was just excited to be playing music and to be playing it with people who were already doing it at a professional level.

Meeting Otis Redding – Before the World Knew Him

The first time I played on stage with Otis Redding, somewhere in North Carolina, around 1964, I was nervous. "Nervous to get it done and do it right." But the show went okay. And after that, things started moving.

We traveled constantly, Virginia and the Carolinas and Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi, always moving, always on our way somewhere. One city starts to blur into the next, especially the early ones, when everything was happening so fast. And I was still learning the music and finding my footing in the band.

My first impression of Otis was not particularly extraordinary. He seemed like another singer, laid back, pleasant enough, pretty good at what he did. At eighteen or nineteen years old, I was too focused on surviving the music and not making mistakes in front of musicians far more experienced than I was to spend much time analyzing the people around me. But the more time I spent in Otis's proximity, the more I began to see what lay beneath the easy exterior. He wasn't laid back at all, not really. He was quiet, completely, thoroughly driven. The easygoing manner was just the surface. Underneath it was someone who knew exactly where he was going and intended to get there, no matter what stood in the way.

Chapter 4

On the Road with Otis, Stax, and the Break-up

Before long, I found myself logging serious road miles with Otis Redding during the early years of his rise, playing shows I couldn't begin to count now if I tried. The touring was concentrated mainly in 1964 and 1965, and those two years felt like a compressed decade in terms of what I experienced and what I learned. The country itself was in the middle of a profound transformation during that period. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had become law, outlawing segregation in public accommodations, and Martin Luther King Jr. had just received the Nobel Peace Prize, which gave the whole movement a kind of international gravity it hadn't quite had before. Everywhere we traveled, you could feel both the pressure and the possibility of that moment, sometimes in the same room.

As young musicians working the Southern touring circuit, we were hardly removed from any of it. The South in those years was still deeply divided in ways that showed up in daily life, where you could eat, where you could sleep, which door you entered through, and what side of the room you sat on. Jim Crow culture wasn't an abstraction. It was the road's texture.

Segregated Audiences, Still

I remember one concert in Mississippi where the venue itself was divided: Black audience members on one side of the room, white audience members on the other, a line drawn as clearly as if it had been painted on the floor. That was just how it was done in certain places, and you either accepted that reality or you didn't work those venues. But then the music started, and something interesting happened. People got to their feet. They drifted forward toward the stage. The line that had seemed so fixed began to dissolve, slowly at first and then more freely, Black and white audience members moving together, dancing together, caught up in the same sound. For a few minutes, the music was much bigger than the rules of the room.

I was young and not especially political. Mostly, I was focused on playing, on keeping up with the band, on making it to the next city without incident. I was observing far more than analyzing. But I saw what I saw, and it stayed with me, not as a story about music solving social problems, because I'm not that naive, but as a small, honest example of what music can do when it's real enough. It reaches people somewhere the rules can't quite get to.

The road itself was its own world, with its own rhythms and its own particular kind of exhaustion. Some nights, the crowds were electric, the kind of energy that makes you feel like you're part of something larger than yourself. Some nights, everything fell apart: the bus broke down, the schedule changed at the last minute, money got tight, and

equipment failed at the worst possible moment. Through all of it, when Otis walked out on that stage, something happened that I don't entirely know how to describe except to say it was undeniable.



***Otis Put All of Himself Into His Songs Every Time
He Stepped on the Stage***

That was exactly it. He meant every word. Whether he was singing “These Arms of Mine” or “Try a Little Tenderness” or “Mr. Pitiful,” there was no distance between the man and the song. I watched audiences respond to that quality night after night on the road, in small Southern venues and large ones, in front of people who knew his records and in front of people hearing him for the first time. They believed him completely because he was telling the truth. That is the rarest thing in music, and Otis had it in a way that very few singers in any era ever have.

Even before he became famous, you could feel that Otis was different. It wasn't just the voice, though the voice was

extraordinary, raw, and full, and capable of conveying a kind of hurt that audiences recognized instinctively. It was the conviction behind it. When Otis Redding sang, you believed him completely. There was no distance between the man and the song. And audiences, whether they could articulate it or not, responded to exactly that quality. They could feel something true.

As his reputation grew, Otis often traveled separately from the band for bigger engagements, flying in on his plane or driving his Cadillac while we took the bus. The one exception I clearly remember was a trip to Jamaica, which stood out because it was so different from everything else we were doing. We played in a large stadium during what felt like a festival, a huge, enthusiastic crowd, the air completely different from anything I knew from the American South, and word going around that the Prime Minister of Jamaica had been in attendance. That would have been around 1964.

At the time, I wasn't thinking about any of that. I was an eighteen-year-old guitarist from Norfolk trying to keep up with what was happening around me and loving every minute of it. The road with Otis was exciting, not just because of the music but because of the constant sense that something was building, that we were all part of a story that hadn't finished being written yet. Every day brought something new.



***One of My First Big Breaks Was Helping Otis Put
on a Big Show in Jamaica***

This picture was taken in Jamaica in 1964, during one of the more memorable engagements of my early years with Otis: a large stadium performance with an enormous, enthusiastic crowd, and word going around backstage that the Prime Minister himself had attended. I'm on the far right. At the time, I was an eighteen-year-old guitarist from Norfolk just trying to keep up with everything happening around me, loving every minute of it, and with no real understanding yet of how significant the story I was part of was going to become.

Back then, people called what Otis did "soul music," and the word fit him perfectly. Whether he was singing "These Arms of Mine" or "Mr. Pitiful" or "Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa," his audiences didn't just enjoy the music; they believed it. That's the distinction that separates the great ones from everyone else, and Otis had it in a way that very few singers ever have.

Offstage, he still carried himself like what I always thought of as a country boy breaking loose. He came from rural Georgia, and even as his reputation expanded nationally, that rootedness never entirely disappeared. There was always something direct and unguarded about him, a quality that made him easy to be around when he was relaxed and in a good mood.

Otis Had His "Gofers"

Otis kept a couple of close friends from home traveling with the operation much of the time. They weren't musicians or managers; they were simply men who had known him before any of this, who kept an eye on him and handled whatever needed handling and treated him the way lifelong friends treat each other, which is to say without any particular deference to the fact that he was becoming famous. One of them was tall and slender, though I'll confess their names have long since left me. What I do remember is the dynamic between them, the easy comfort of people who share a history that predates success.

There was a moment I've always remembered when Otis was joking around and said something like, "Don't you

know I'm a star?", half-serious, half-performing, the way people do when they want to see how it sounds. One of his friends didn't miss a beat: "I don't care if you're the moon. I know where you come from." Otis just laughed. That one exchange told you everything about those relationships and about who Otis was when the spotlight wasn't on him.



Joe Tex & Solomon Burke Were Not Only Serious Musicians, But Competitive Card Players Too

Joe Tex and Solomon Burke were two of the giants of the Southern soul circuit during the years I traveled with Otis, and offstage, the three of them had a friendship built on the road they'd all logged through the same cities and venues. They were competitive, as great performers always are. Each one knew exactly where the others stood, but was warm when the spotlights were off. The card games between them were apparently serious affairs, and I always got the impression that the money mattered considerably less than the bragging rights.

He was a fun guy when he had the space to be, and between shows he liked to relax with poker and good company. He was close with Joe Tex and Solomon Burke, who often worked the same circuit. They were competitive as performers, as great musicians always are, but always friendly offstage, and the card games were apparently serious affairs.

Life on the road during those years was exciting and exhausting in roughly equal measure. Two or three shows a week, sometimes more, and after each one, everybody piled onto the bus and headed toward the next city. Musicians pulled pranks on each other to break up the monotony. Our trombone player, Willie Webb, was especially committed to that particular art form. Mac Robinson ran the band with a firm hand, which was necessary and right. Willie McClone on drums was excellent. Larry, on the saxophone, was strong. When I first joined, I was probably the weakest link in the group; those guys were already polished professionals, and I was still establishing myself. But they took me in, and over time, I earned my place.

One thing that surprises people when I talk about those years is how little money there was in it. We weren't starving, but nobody was getting rich either. Otis kept a standard pay structure for the band, and that was how it worked. "It was okay" is about the most enthusiastic I can honestly be about the financial side of life on that road.

The Day Otis Came to Norfolk

There is one memory from those road years with Otis that has nothing to do with a stage or a recording session or a club, and it may be my favorite of all of them for exactly that reason.

We were coming off a tour, rolling back toward Norfolk on the band bus after however many nights on the road, and when we pulled up to my street, the bus was still full, Otis included. Now, you have to understand what a sight that bus was in my neighborhood. This block wasn't used to seeing a full touring band bus park itself out front. People came to their doors. Curtains moved. Heads appeared. The guys from the barbershop three or four doors down- and there were always guys in that barbershop, at any hour, with nothing to do but watch the street- were suddenly all outside on the sidewalk, trying to figure out what was happening.

And there was my mother. Sitting in the doorway, the way she always sat, calm and straight, the way she did everything. And my daughter was there too, right beside her.

I looked over at Otis and said, come on, say hello to my mom. He pulled back immediately. No, no, I don't want to do that. I don't want to intrude. That was something people didn't always expect about Otis: that instinct for politeness, that reluctance to impose himself, even when he was already famous and could have used his fame as a calling card anywhere he went. I pushed a little. Come on, man, will you do it for me? He thought about it for half a second and said, all right. I'll do it for you.

So Otis Redding climbed down from that bus and walked up to my mother's door in Norfolk, Virginia, and shook her hand, said hello, and exchanged a few words with her, the way a decent young man meets someone's mother. Then he said his goodbyes and was gone.

My mother didn't know who he was. She was gracious about it, the way she was gracious about everything, but the name Otis Redding didn't mean anything particular to her at that moment. She found out later, of course, as the records kept charting and the name kept appearing on the radio, and I like to think she replayed that doorway moment in her mind with a little more appreciation once she understood who had been standing there shaking her hand.

But what stays with me isn't really about Otis's fame or my mother's reaction. What stays with me is the neighborhood. Because word traveled fast in those streets, the way it always did, and by the time the bus pulled away, I could feel the mood of the block shifting. People had seen the bus. They had seen the name on it. They had seen me climb down with these musicians and walk Otis Redding up to my front door. And somewhere in the barbershop down the street, among men who had watched me grow up on that block and known me since I was a kid with a pawn shop guitar, someone said: well, I guess Gene finally made it.

I think about that moment now, not because of the celebrity of it, but because of what it meant in the particular geography of that particular street. My mother had cleaned other people's houses to keep us fed and pointed forward. She did it without complaint, on a block where everybody

knew everybody, and everybody knew exactly what everybody else was working with. And then one afternoon, a tour bus pulled up, and Otis Redding got off it and walked to her door.

She didn't know who he was. But the neighborhood knew. And for a kid from Norfolk who had taught himself to play out of a pawn shop guitar and spent the last few years wondering whether any of it was going to add up to something real, that quiet shift in the air on that street meant everything.

Stax Studios – A Chance to Record That Slipped Away

The first time I walked into Stax Records in Memphis, it felt like stepping into the center of something important. The building had been an old movie theater, the Capitol Theatre, on East McLemore Avenue, before Jim Stewart and his sister Estelle Axton converted it into a recording studio, and you could still feel the bones of that original structure everywhere you looked.

The theater's sloping floor, still carpeted, still tilted the way it would have been for stadium seating, had been left largely as it was, and somebody had figured out, mostly by accident, that the slant and the old heavy theater speakers did something remarkable to the sound in that room. Nobody had engineered it on purpose. It was just a converted movie house that happened to record great, and everybody who worked there knew it and treated the building with a kind of superstitious respect because of it.

Right up front, where the concession stand used to be, Estelle Axton ran a little record shop, and that shop was as much a part of the place as the studio itself. Musicians drifted in and out of it between takes, and it doubled as a hangout, a place to hear what was selling and what wasn't, which told you something about how the whole operation was run: informally, out of a converted theater, by people who were making it up as they went.

Panels hanging from the ceiling, the worn wooden floors, the quality of the air in there; all of it gave the place a gravity that hit you the moment you came through the door. Memphis in 1964 or 1965 was a city living inside its own mythology, and Stax was at its heart.

What struck me most, coming out of the segregated Southern touring circuit the way I had, was the atmosphere inside those walls. Black and white musicians worked together there in relaxed conditions, nobody paying much attention to a clock or fussing over union session rates, at a moment when that kind of easy, unremarked-upon integration was almost nowhere else to be found in Memphis, or in most of the South. Stax didn't make a political statement out of it. It just worked that way, day in and day out, because the music demanded it and everybody in the building had apparently decided the music came first.



***Steve Cropper & Donald “Duck” Dunn Were Two
of the Big Legends Inside Stax***

Steve Cropper and Donald "Duck" Dunn were already legends inside the walls of Stax Records when Otis brought his road band to Memphis to record. Booker T. & the M.G.'s were the engine behind some of the most important soul records being made anywhere in the world, and the idea of an outside band coming in to record the label's biggest rising star was not universally welcomed. You could feel the quiet tension in the room the moment we arrived. Those men had built something extraordinary at Stax, and they knew it.

Otis had decided to use his road band for an upcoming recording session rather than the regular Stax session musicians, Booker T. & the M.G.'s. That was a significant departure from how things normally worked at Stax, and everyone knew it. Booker T. & the M.G.'s, Steve Cropper, Donald "Duck" Dunn, and the whole crew were already legends inside those walls. They were the engine behind some of the most important soul records being made anywhere in the world, and the idea of an outside band coming in to record the label's biggest rising star was not

universally welcomed. You could feel the quiet tension in the room the moment we arrived.

We arrived on the touring bus, got ourselves together, and met Jim Stewart, one of Stax's founders. Jim was professional and courteous, but I'd later reflect that I don't think he was especially enthusiastic about the whole experiment. We were the outsiders. The M.G.'s were standing by. The politics of the situation were not subtle.

Studio work was a revelation to me, and not entirely a comfortable one. Live performance moves on its own momentum, the energy of the crowd, the adrenaline of the moment, the way musicians push each other forward in real time. The studio was the opposite of all that. Everything slowed down. Every detail was examined. You repeated sections over and over, adjusting the tiniest things, until the engineers and producers felt that something finally sounded exactly right.

Carla Thomas was around the studio during those days, along with other Stax musicians cycling in and out of sessions, and watching her move through that building told me almost as much about Stax as the session itself did. Carla had been recording for Stax since it was still called Satellite Records, barely out of high school, and by the time I saw her there, she already carried herself like the label's first family. She'd had her breakthrough with "Gee Whiz" while she was still a teenager, and she went on to finish college before coming home to Memphis to become one of Stax's steady, defining artists, the kind of person the whole

building seemed to organize itself around without anyone having to say so.

She wasn't rehearsing with Otis that week; our session was its own separate thing, but you could see them fall into an easy, joking rapport whenever their paths crossed in the halls, the sort of playful chemistry between two young, gifted singers who clearly enjoyed each other's company. It wasn't until a few years later, in January of 1967, that Otis and Carla actually got into a studio together and recorded the King & Queen album, and their single "Tramp" off that record became one of the most beloved things either of them ever put to tape. But I saw the seed of that chemistry firsthand, back before any of it was official, just two young artists teasing each other between takes in a converted movie theater in South Memphis.

The atmosphere was charged with creativity and a quiet competitiveness that felt like part of the place's culture. Everything happening at Stax during that period felt important, as if the music being made there would matter.

We recorded two songs; one was "Mr. Pitiful," and after all these years, the second one has left me. Hours of work went into those sessions, take after take, adjusting and fine-tuning, and I think we got there eventually. But in the end, the recordings were shelved. They decided not to release them. Whether Otis got cold feet, or whether label pressure prevailed, or some combination of both, I was never entirely certain. What I know is that the opportunity we'd all been working toward disappeared.



Recording at Stax Was a Unique Experience, But It Ultimately Didn't Pan Out

Jim Stewart co-founded Stax Records in Memphis and built it into one of the most important labels in soul music history. When Otis brought his road band in to record rather than using the regular Stax session musicians, Jim was professional and courteous. Still, I don't think he was enthusiastic about the experiment. We were the outsiders. We eventually decided not to release the recordings we made, and those sessions have presumably been sitting in storage somewhere for sixty years. Whether they still exist, I just don't know.

We were disappointed. You work that hard toward something, and then it doesn't happen, and there's a particular kind of deflation in that experience that's hard to shake. The only recording from that general period involving our band that became famous was "I've Been Loving You Too Long," on which Mac Robinson contributed both bass and co-writing work with Otis. Our own Stax recordings have presumably been sitting in storage somewhere for sixty years. I don't know if they still exist.



Carla Thomas and Otis Created Chemistry Together with Their Music

Carla Thomas was a presence around Stax during the sessions when Otis brought his road band to Memphis to record, and watching the easy creative atmosphere between the Stax family of artists gave me my first real understanding of what it meant for a record label to have a unique sound, not just a business address, but a shared musical identity that ran through everything being made inside those walls. Carla had been recording for Stax since its beginning, and her collaboration with Otis on “Tramp” in 1967 became one of the label’s most beloved recordings. Together they had a chemistry that was playful and completely natural.”

What those sessions gave me, beyond the disappointment, was an education in the realities of the music business that I couldn’t have gotten any other way. Creativity was necessary but not sufficient. Politics mattered. Relationships mattered. Business calculations drove decisions unrelated to the music's quality. And the discipline required to do serious studio work- the patience, the

precision, the ability to suppress your ego and serve the song- was something I would draw on for the rest of my career.

Memphis itself, I'll be honest, mostly registered as just another big city. We were working too hard for much sightseeing. But the feeling inside that building, the sound of it, the weight of the history being made there, that stayed with me in a way that no amount of tourism could have matched.

Regretting a Bad Decision – Leaving Otis

Eventually, things fell apart over money, the way things often do. When the band's bus broke down and needed major repairs, Otis fronted the cash to fix it, which was fair enough, but then he began deducting those repair costs from what the band was being paid, which created real tension. I felt cheated by it. Looking back now with the perspective of decades, I can see both sides of the argument more clearly than I could at the time, and I suspect the truth was somewhere in the middle. But at twenty years old, what I felt was that something unfair was happening, and I reacted to that feeling by walking away.

I left the band. The others stayed. That was probably the single most consequential decision I ever made in my professional life, and it's one I've turned over in my mind many times since. I'll never know what path would have remained open to me if I'd stayed. What I know is that leaving certain doors closed and opening others, and that

the story of where those other doors led is the rest of this book.

I never stopped respecting Otis. Whatever tensions existed at the end of my time with the band, they didn't touch my admiration for who he was on a stage. He was the real thing, as complete a performer as I ever saw, and that never changed.

Chapter 5

The Howard Theatre, The Apollo, and A Final Chance with Otis

When I left Otis' band in 1966, I didn't think of it as stepping into the next great chapter of my life. I was just a young guitarist trying to find the next opportunity, keep working, keep growing, and stay close to the music. Washington, D.C., was where that next opportunity came, specifically at the Howard Theatre, which became one of the most important classrooms of my entire musical education, even though it took me years to fully understand what I had been given there.

The Howard wasn't simply a theater. It was one of the most significant stages in the history of Black American entertainment, a room where the greatest performers in the country had been coming for decades, where audiences expected something real and had the sophistication to know immediately when they weren't getting it. By 1966, the Howard sat right in the middle of one of the most creatively explosive moments in soul music history. Motown was conquering pop radio. Stax was redefining Southern soul. James Brown was touring relentlessly and essentially inventing a new physical vocabulary for performance. Aretha Franklin was about to record "I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You" at Muscle Shoals. Being in that building during those years was like having a front-row seat to it all.

For musicians like me, the Howard was a proving ground with very little margin for error. You never knew who would come through, or what they would need from the band.

One night, it might be a polished Motown act like the Temptations or Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. Another night, it might be a hard-driving soul singer from the South like Otis. Then a jazz musician like John Coltrane, a vocal group, a comedian such as Redd Foxx, or a pop act crossing over into rhythm & blues. Every performer brought a distinctive style, a different personality, and a unique way of working.

What the Howard taught me, faster than almost any other experience in my life, was that being a good guitarist was not the same as being a good musician. A good guitarist could play the notes. A good musician could listen, really listen, in real time, to everything happening around them, and make decisions in the moment that served the music rather than just the instrument. You had to be flexible deep in your instincts, not just in your technique. You had to know when your presence was exactly what the performance needed and when your absence was. You had to support without smothering, contribute without dominating, and remain completely prepared for the unexpected at every moment. That kind of experience accelerates your growth in ways that practicing alone in a room simply cannot.



***The Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., Was My
Training Ground for “Musicianship”***

The Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., was one of the most significant stages in the history of Black American entertainment, and working there in the mid-1960s was the most concentrated musical education I ever received. You never knew who was walking through that door. It could be Motown acts, hard-driving Southern soul singers, jazz musicians, comedians, or pop artists finding their footing. Every performer brought a different world, and your job was to enter that world quickly and serve it well. The Howard taught me that being a good guitarist and being a good musician are two entirely different things.

The musicians I worked alongside at the Howard were serious players, some of them significantly better than me at the time, and being around that level of ability every night

sharpened everything about my own playing, my ear, my sense of time, my attention to tone and arrangement, my understanding of what discipline actually looks like in practice.

One musician who had a particularly deep influence on me was Cornell Dupree, the guitarist in saxophonist King Curtis's band, The King Pins. Cornell had grown up with Curtis in Fort Worth, and the musical understanding between them was something you could hear immediately, the kind of fluency that comes from years of shared musical history. Cornell was an extraordinary guitarist and eventually wrote a book on his approach to rhythm & blues guitar. His playing drew on the work of Miles Davis and Aretha Franklin, and his touch was so distinctive that Yamaha eventually produced a signature-model guitar bearing his name. Watching Cornell play was really educational in the deepest sense of that word.

The Howard also showed me something that goes beyond music: how professional performers carry themselves through the entire arc of a performance, not just the part the audience sees. You watched people in the hours before they walked on stage: how they prepared, how they handled pre-show nerves or pre-show overconfidence, how they spoke to the musicians backing them up, and how they responded when something went wrong. Some performers were gracious and collaborative, treating the band as partners in a shared enterprise. Others treated the musicians



***Cornell Dupree and King Curtis Were a Big Part
of My Musical Education at the Howard***

Cornell Dupree was the guitarist in King Curtis's band, The King Pins, and watching him play at the Howard Theater was educational in the deepest sense of that word. He had grown up with Curtis in Fort Worth, and their musical understanding was immediate and unmistakable; the kind of fluency that only comes from years of shared history. Cornell went on to play with Miles Davis, Aretha Franklin, and dozens of others, eventually wrote a book on rhythm-and-blues guitar, and had a signature

Yamaha model produced in his name. His approach to the instrument, the touch, the taste, the absolute service of the song, was something I thought about for a long time after I first heard him.

as furniture, interchangeable and largely invisible, and those performances invariably felt like something was missing even when the technical execution was fine. You can feel the difference in a room.



***Working Alongside Andrew White and Marv
Tarplin at the Howard Gave Me More Behind-
the-Scenes Perspectives About the Music
Business***

Andrew White and Marv Tarplin represented two very different kinds of musical genius, and working alongside both of them at the Howard Theater broadened my understanding of what music could demand from the people making it. Andrew White was a composer, conductor, publisher, and saxophone soloist of remarkable range. His creative ambitions went well beyond any single genre. Marv Tarplin was Smokey Robinson's lead guitarist, a player of extraordinary taste and restraint who co-wrote some of Motown's most beloved records, and whose melodic sensibility was woven through the fabric of an entire era.

The Howard's audiences held everyone to that standard too. These were sophisticated listeners who knew what good music felt like and had exactly zero patience for

anything that wasn't reaching toward it. If you brought your full self to the stage, they gave it back to you in waves. If you didn't, you felt the temperature drop, and that was its own kind of instruction.

Working alongside accomplished musicians like Andrew White, a remarkable composer, conductor, publisher, and saxophone soloist, and Marv Tarplin, who was Smokey Robinson's lead guitarist and one of the most tasteful players I ever heard, gave me a behind-the-scenes perspective on the music business that relatively few guitarists my age were getting. The Howard widened my understanding of what music could be and what it required from the people making it.

Then, in 1967, while I was working at the Howard, something happened that brought my past and present together in a way that I've thought about almost every day since.

Word came backstage that Otis Redding needed a guitar player immediately for an upcoming show at the Apollo Theater in New York. The Bar-Kays were supposed to back him, but their guitarist was afraid to fly and couldn't make it in time. I was already in Washington, which put me close enough, and before I could fully process what was happening, they put me on a train to New York.

A couple of hours later, I walked into the Apollo Theater, and whatever I thought I understood about legendary rooms, the Apollo recalibrated it. If the Howard carried

itself with a certain historical elegance, the Apollo was something else, charged, almost volatile, the air in there carrying decades of auditions and heartbreaks and transcendent nights. That crowd was not a polite crowd. They were honest, demanding, and fully alive, and they'd tell you exactly what they thought without any ambiguity at all. If you brought something real, they let you know. If you didn't, they let you know that too.

Meeting Otis Again – A Bitter-Sweet Memory

When I came through the backstage door, Otis looked up, and his face broke into a real smile of surprise. "Hey, Gene," he said. "I didn't know you were going to be here." There was warmth in it, and I felt it land. Whatever had complicated my departure from the band a year earlier, it hadn't touched the fundamental connection between us. We had been through too much together on the road for that, too many shows, too many long nights, too many moments of shared understanding between musicians who have learned to trust each other inside the music.

Then he told me something I've carried with me ever since. "I'm looking to get my own touring band back together again," he said. "When I come off this tour, I want you back in the band."

That lit me up immediately, and I didn't hesitate: "Why not now?" He explained that management had the Bar-Kays locked in through the end of the tour, budget commitments, contractual obligations, and the machinery of a touring

operation already in motion. But he was clear and direct: as soon as the tour ended, he'd be in touch. He would come back for me.

So, I stayed behind when he left, went back to Washington, and waited. I held on to what he'd said, kept working at the Howard, and told myself that something good was coming.

That was the last time I ever saw Otis. Looking back now, staying behind saved my life.



Overnight, I Was Thrust Back Into Otis' Realm at the Apollo in New York

The Apollo Theater in Harlem was where reputations were made or finished, and nothing I had heard about it quite prepared me for the reality of walking in. If the Howard Theater carried itself with historical elegance, the Apollo was charged with something more volatile: a crowd famous for its honesty, its demands, and its complete unwillingness to be polite about what it thought. In 1967, I was put on a train from Washington to New York on short notice to fill in as Otis Redding's guitarist for an engagement there. It was the last time I ever saw him.

After the Apollo engagement, Otis and most of the Bar-Kays boarded his private plane for the next date in Madison, Wisconsin. I was not on it. I was driving somewhere when the radio came on, and the words reached me across whatever distance separated me from that lake in Wisconsin, and for a moment I couldn't take them in at all.

Otis' Plane Had Gone Down

I've thought many times about how to describe what that moment felt like, and I've never found the right words. I had just been with him. We had just talked about the future, about his band, about my place in it, about what came next. The future had felt completely real, full, completely available. And then it wasn't any of those things.

The plane went into Lake Monona near Madison, Wisconsin, on December tenth, 1967. Otis Redding was twenty-six years old. Most of the Bar-Kays died with him.

Sometime afterward, I learned more of the story from Ben Cauley, the Bar-Kays' trumpet player and the only person aboard the plane who made it out alive. James Alexander, the bass player, had survived only because he hadn't been on the plane at all, he didn't like flying and had arranged to travel separately, a decision that saved his life the same way mine had been saved.



***Only a Twist of Fate Kept Me Off Otis' Plane
That Went Down in Wisconsin***

Ben Cauley was the trumpet player for the Bar-Kays, the band backing Otis on his final tour, and the only person aboard the plane who survived the crash into Lake Monona on December tenth, 1967. He couldn't swim. He held onto his seat cushion life preserver with everything he had, and he told me later that he could hear the others calling out in the water around him in the dark and the cold, and he couldn't reach them. I have never been able to get that image out of my mind. Ben Cauley carried that night for the rest of his life, and every time I think about how close I came to being on that plane, I think about him.

Ben told me what he remembered. He had been asleep when the plane went down, and he woke to impact and chaos, the world coming apart around him in seconds, and somehow found himself in the freezing water of the lake. He couldn't swim. He had his seat cushion life preserver, and he held on to it with everything he had, fighting to stay

above the surface. And he could hear the others calling out in the water around him, voices in the cold and the dark, and he couldn't get to them. He was using every bit of himself just to survive.

I have never been able to get that image out of my mind. The voices on the water. The helplessness. The terrible arithmetic of who was saved and who wasn't.

Even now, all these years later, I still turn it over in my mind: how thin the line really is between one outcome and another, how many ordinary-seeming moments carry enormous weight without announcing themselves. I was close enough to that plane to have been on it. One different scheduling decision, one conversation that had gone another way, and the story of my life ends in that lake in December of 1967. Instead, I'm sitting in Vero Beach writing about it. I've never fully made sense of that, and I'm not sure I'm supposed to; some things you just carry.

Chapter 6

Life After Otis, College Tours, Big Acts, and a New Beginning

After Otis died in December 1967, the world of soul music absorbed the loss the way the music world always absorbs the loss of someone irreplaceable, with grief, with tributes, with a kind of collective pause, and then eventually with the slow resumption of the work, because the work doesn't stop. For those of us who had known him or worked around him, the feeling was more personal and harder to shake. The career he would have had was visible enough from where we were standing. You knew what the world had lost, and that made the loss heavier.

I was still in Washington, still working at the Howard Theatre, still playing wherever opportunities appeared. The Howard remained one of the best environments in the country for developing as a musician, with new performers every week, new challenges every night, and a standard of expectation that kept you honest. But I was also beginning to branch out, looking for work beyond the theater circuit, trying to figure out what came after what had just ended.

One of those opportunities came through a singer named Leroy Taylor from the Baltimore/Washington area, who had recorded with The Four Kays and was putting together a group that primarily worked college shows and warm-up engagements for major touring acts. The material was a mix

of Top 40, rhythm & blues, and rock, the kind of set list that could connect with almost any crowd if you played it with conviction. College campuses in the late 1960s were exploding with live music, fueled partly by the cultural energy of the moment and partly by the fact that young people suddenly had both money and a strong appetite for entertainment that felt relevant to their lives. Promoters were regularly bringing in major touring acts, and opening acts had to understand how to grab an audience quickly and make them care before the headliner arrived.

That was one of Leroy's greatest strengths. He knew how to command attention and hold it. "We didn't just walk on stage and play songs," I'd say later. "We put on a show before the show." The band played energetic sets at colleges and clubs throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, including Washington, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York, and we opened for some nationally significant acts, including Gladys Knight & the Pips and The 5th Dimension.

Watching Gladys Knight & the Pips perform from the side of the stage was its own kind of graduate seminar in what professionalism actually looks like at the highest level. Everything they did was deliberate and polished, from the choreography to the timing to the vocal arrangements to the way they managed the audience's attention. Nothing



***With Leroy Taylor, We Were Hitting the College
Circuit at Just the Right Time***

After Otis died, I needed to keep working, and Leroy Taylor was the next chapter. Leroy was a singer from the Baltimore and Washington area with a gift for commanding a room. He was the kind of performer who could walk out in front of a crowd that had never heard of him and have them in the palm of his hand within the first few minutes. His group worked the college circuit through the late 1960s, opening for major national acts at a moment when live music on campuses was absolutely exploding.

was accidental. The 5th Dimension operated with the same precision, they were at the peak of their popularity in those years, riding records like "Up, Up and Away" and "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In," and their live show reflected exactly the kind of detailed preparation that

separates the acts people remember from the ones they don't.

"They had professionalism down to a T," I said later, and that's the simplest and most accurate way I can put it. What those experiences reinforced for me was something I'd been learning in various forms since Howard: talent is the entry point, not the destination. The acts that lasted rehearsed constantly, paid attention to every detail, and understood how to manage a room from the first moment they stepped into it. Backstage, I occasionally got to talk with musicians from those groups, though rarely the stars themselves, who traveled with their own protective layers of management and road crews. But musicians have always found each other across organizational lines. Guitar players gravitate toward guitar players, drummers toward drummers, everybody watches each other's hands and equipment, and asks the same questions about gear, songs, and road life.

Not every chapter of this period went smoothly. At one point, people connected to The 5th Dimension expressed interest in bringing Leroy's group on as a touring opener, which would have been a significant step up for all of us. The negotiations collapsed almost immediately when Leroy pushed too hard on the money. One conversation, and the door closed.



***With Leroy, I Would Help Open Concerts
Featuring Gladys Knight & the Pips, the Fifth
Dimension, and Other Top Acts***

Opening for Gladys Knight and the Pips and the 5th Dimension with Leroy Taylor's group in the late 1960s was its own graduate seminar in what professionalism looks like at the highest level. Both acts had it down to a degree that was almost humbling to watch: the choreography, the vocal precision, the total command of an audience's attention from the first moment to the last. Nothing was accidental, nothing was left to chance, and everything looked completely effortless. What those performances reinforced for me was something I'd been learning in various forms since the Howard Theater: talent is the entry point, not the destination.

"I was angry," I admitted later. "We bargained ourselves right out of the opportunity." That experience crystallized something I'd been gradually understanding: talent could open doors, but ego and poor judgment could close them just as fast. Leroy was a gifted entertainer; audiences

responded to him naturally, and he had a real command of the stage. But he sometimes failed to appreciate how much the musicians around him contributed to that magic. "The other guys and I were what made him as good as he was," I'd reflect afterward. "You couldn't just use any musicians and make it sound the same." Eventually, I moved on.

A New Direction with Joey Dee

Around 1969 or 1970, a chance meeting produced another unexpected direction. I crossed paths with Joey Dee, already famous as the man behind "Peppermint Twist," the song that launched the Twist craze in 1961 and earned him the lasting label of "The Godfather of the Twist." Joey was larger-than-life, outgoing, and extraordinarily well-connected throughout the entertainment world. I met him at the Cheetah Club in New York, one of the city's popular music venues of the era, likely after he'd caught me performing somewhere nearby.

What struck me immediately about Joey was how he treated people. "He was always very nice to me," I remember. "That was a rare quality." In a business that could be rough and transactional, decency stood out and meant something. Soon after we met, he asked me to join his group for an engagement at the Newport Lounge in Miami Beach.



***Working with Joey Dee Took Me to Florida and
Exposed Me to a More Sophisticated Crowd and
a New Style of Life***

Joey Dee, the man behind “Peppermint Twist” and the undisputed Godfather of the Twist, was one of the most decent people I encountered in a business that wasn’t always full of them. When he invited me to join his group for an engagement at the Newport Lounge in Miami Beach, I said yes, partly because of the work and partly because of the man himself. He treated his musicians with real respect, which was rarer than it should have been. The Newport Lounge drew a sophisticated crowd; the weather was eighty degrees while New York was freezing, and the whole experience had a quality that made you feel good about what you were doing. That hooked me on Florida for life.

That experience opened an entirely different world. The Newport Lounge at the Newport Hotel was a major entertainment destination during the Florida winter season, drawing wealthy tourists from the Northeast and regularly hosting big-name performers. Ray Charles had played there, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, and many others of that

caliber. The atmosphere was sophisticated and warm in ways that felt completely different from the rough-and-tumble one-nighters and college gigs I'd been doing. And then there was the weather.

"It was eighty degrees in Miami while New York was freezing," I laughed later. "That hooked me on Florida." We played nightly shows for about a month, enjoying the beaches and sunshine during the days, which felt glamorous compared to the miles of highway I'd accumulated over the previous years. The whole experience had a different quality: relaxed, well-organized, the kind of work that made you feel good about what you were doing.

One night, between sets, José Feliciano wandered in. He was at the height of his popularity then, his recordings selling well and his television appearances making him one of the most recognizable musical personalities in the country. He asked if he could borrow my guitar and sit in with us for a few songs.

"I handed him my Fender without hesitation," I remembered, "and he jammed with us. I was more than happy to let him play." That was the kind of thing that happened in Joey Dee's orbit. Famous musicians, entertainers, and occasionally movie people seemed to drift in wherever he was, drawn by the warmth of the man himself and the quality of what was happening on the stage.



***José Feliciano Asked to Borrow My Fender.
Without Hesitation, I Said, “Yes.”***

One night between sets at the Newport Lounge in Miami Beach, José Feliciano wandered in. This was at the height of his popularity, his recordings selling well, and his face appearing regularly on television, and he asked if he could borrow my guitar and sit in with us for a few songs. I handed him my Fender without a moment's hesitation, and he played with the same effortless authority he brought to everything. I was more than happy to step back and listen.

More than the famous visitors, though, I valued the operation's steadiness and decency. The work was consistent, the atmosphere was positive, and he treated his musicians with respect, after the uncertainties and frustrations of the road, which mattered more than I can easily convey.

But even in the middle of all that relative comfort, something had been pulling at me for a while, a feeling that I needed to understand music more deeply than performing it had taught me. I wanted to know the theory behind what

I was doing intuitively. I wanted to learn arranging and composition, to understand harmony at a level that went well beyond what I'd picked up on the road. And that desire eventually pointed me toward a place I'd been thinking about for years: Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Chapter 7

Welcome to the Academic World – Berklee and a Different Kind of Education

By the early 1970s, I had lived a musical life that most young guitarists would have envied. I had toured with major artists, played the Howard and the Apollo, worked clubs and theaters and college venues up and down the East Coast, and had the kind of road experience that can't be taught in any classroom. But deep down, beneath all of that, there was something I knew I was missing.

I could play. I could perform. I could survive, and more than survive, on the road. But I didn't fully understand why music worked the way it did. I couldn't explain what I was doing in harmonic terms. I couldn't confidently arrange other instruments. I was operating entirely on instinct and imitation, which had taken me a long way but had a ceiling I could feel. I wanted to push through that ceiling. And that desire eventually led me to Berklee College of Music in Boston.

By the early 1970s, Berklee had established itself as perhaps the most respected modern music school in the country, especially for jazz, composition, arranging, and contemporary performance. It was in the middle of a significant evolution during that period, expanding its focus



My Decision to Attend Berklee Plunged Head First Into the Academic Side of Music

Walking into Berklee College of Music in Boston in the early 1970s, I had eight years of road experience behind me. Major tours, the Howard Theater, the Apollo, recording sessions at Stax, and none of it fully prepared me for what it felt like to sit in those classrooms surrounded by musicians who could play things I couldn't yet explain. That was exactly the point. Berklee taught me the theory behind what I had been doing on instinct for years: harmony, transposition, composition, how to hear the architecture of a song rather than just its surface. I wish I had found a way to stay longer. To this day I believe it is the finest music school anyone could attend.

from its jazz roots into a full engagement with contemporary music, rock, and emerging music technology in ways that felt forward-thinking. Serious musicians from all over the world came there to study, and the level of talent in the hallways was something you felt immediately.

Getting in required an audition, which was no trivial matter. "They made you play chords and scales," I remembered. "It wasn't easy." But I did enough to earn admission, and one of the instructors told me afterward that I had potential, which, coming from musicians at Berklee, meant a great deal to me. Some of the teachers there were active professional players with serious credentials, musicians connected to major recording and television work, including people associated with *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, which at the time was probably the most prestigious regular platform for live music on American television.

One instructor who stayed with me was vibraphonist Gary Burton, one of the most innovative players in modern jazz, a musician who had essentially redefined how the vibraphone was played through his pioneering four-mallet technique, and who brought that same creative intelligence to his teaching. He worked with advanced students on improvisation across all instruments and also taught composition and scoring that reached into rock and contemporary styles rather than limiting itself to jazz. Sitting in his classes felt like being let into someone's working musical mind, and the experience of that opened things in me that I hadn't known were closed.

Berklee represented something larger than school for me. It represented a version of myself I hadn't yet become. At that point in my life, my ambitions were evolving beyond touring into something I'd been circling for years without quite naming: the possibility of becoming an arranger, a

composer, a studio musician working in New York's recording world at the professional level. Berklee changed the way I heard everything.

"I learned a lot about composition," I'd say later. "I could hear songs on the radio and know how to play them before I even picked up the guitar." The school demanded mastery of transposition, scales, harmony, jazz theory, and advanced chord structures, pushing you to rethink songs creatively rather than simply reproduce them. You learned to play in any key, to hear the underlying architecture of a piece of music rather than just its surface, to understand what each element was doing and why. "Berklee taught me how to rephrase chords and songs," I'd explain. "Not just play them basically as they were, but how to enhance them and make them better."

One thing I hadn't anticipated was how differently I would fit in compared to many of my fellow students. Some of them came from wealthy families, some from international backgrounds, and quite a few had never played professionally before. I was carrying eight years of real road experience, major tours, famous theaters, recording sessions at Stax, hundreds of live shows, and I had learned to say almost nothing about any of it. I didn't want to be the person name-dropping Otis Redding and Joey Dee in the cafeteria. At Berklee, talent mattered far more than biography, and there was no shortage of talent. "The students were really good musicians," I'd say later. "Really



My Favorite Instructor at Berklee Was Legendary Jazz Musician Gary Burton

Gary Burton was one of my favorite instructors at Berklee, and sitting in his classes felt like being let into someone's working musical mind. He had essentially redefined how the vibraphone was played through his pioneering four-mallet technique, and he brought that same restless creative intelligence to his teaching, working with students on improvisation, composition, and scoring that reached into rock and contemporary idioms rather than limiting itself to jazz. What Gary Burton understood, and what he conveyed. Without making a speech about it, it was clear that the boundaries between musical genres were far less fixed than most people assumed. That idea opened something in me that I hadn't known was closed.

good." Whatever road credibility I carried, I had to earn it fresh in those classrooms every day.

Some of the most memorable friendships I formed were with Brazilian students who had come to Boston to deepen their jazz proficiency. Their rhythmic sophistication was remarkable: the way Brazilian musicians feel and subdivide time, and the relationship between rhythm and melody that runs through everything from bossa nova to Brazilian jazz, were revelatory to me.

One Brazilian guitarist, Selena Vash, stood out in particular: already an excellent player who had come to Berklee to push herself further, she would go on to become well known in the Brazilian popular music scene. The spirit of constant improvement she embodied was the school's spirit as a whole: no matter how good you already were, you showed up every day trying to be better.

And then the money ran out.

I was living off-campus, surviving on savings from my performing years, and eventually those savings were gone. That was the only reason I left. Not because I wasn't growing, not because the school had stopped challenging me, but because I had run out of the financial runway to stay. "I wish I had stayed instead of taking the path out of there that I took," I've said many times since. "Everything was going on instinct. I really didn't have anybody guiding me." That absence of guidance- someone who could have helped me find scholarships, financial aid, and a way to keep going- is one of the things I think about when I look back at that period.

Still, even in its incompleteness, Berklee transformed me. "To me, it's probably the best music school anybody could ever go to," I've said. "If anything is inspiring inside you, Berklee helps bring it out." What it gave me- the theoretical foundation, the harmonic vocabulary, the understanding of how music is constructed from the inside out- stayed with me through every performance, every session, every arrangement I worked on for the rest of my career. I left Boston around 1972 or 1973 and headed back to Norfolk, where another chapter was waiting.

Chapter 8

Surviving the 70s: Back to Norfolk and On the Road Again

Coming back to Norfolk after Berklee felt a little like stepping back into a skin that no longer quite fit. The city was the same, the same Tidewater air, the same slow summer humidity, the same familiar streets, but I was different. A year in Boston had rearranged something inside me, given me a harmonic vocabulary and a theoretical foundation I hadn't had before, and I was restless with it, eager to put it to use. The problem, as it always is when you come back from something like that, was figuring out where to start.

The answer, as it had always been in my life, was to find the musicians and get back to work.

Around 1973, I helped pull together a small local group we called Smoke. The lineup included drummer Melvin Glover, bassist Rob Evans, and my old friend Bernie Jacobs on saxophone and flute, whom I'd known since the early Norfolk days and who had the kind of fluid, searching sound on the horn that made him really fun to play beside. We worked dances and local events throughout Norfolk and Virginia Beach, nothing glamorous, nothing that would make the papers, but real gigs with real audiences who expected you to deliver. I've never been able to dismiss that.



Back Touring with “Smoke,” Working Out of Norfolk

Coming back to Norfolk after Berklee, I needed to get back to basics, find some good musicians, get on a stage, and play. That's exactly what Smoke was. Drummer Melvin Glover and bassist Rob Evans were solid, dependable players who understood the groove, and my old friend Bernie Jacobs on saxophone and flute brought a fluid, searching sound that made the whole thing fun to be part of. We weren't chasing anything glamorous- dances, local events, whatever came up around Norfolk and Virginia Beach- but honest work on a real stage with good musicians is nothing. Every gig taught you something, and after the academic intensity of a year at Berklee, getting back in a room with people who just wanted to play felt exactly like what I needed.

kind of work, no matter how modest the setting. Every stage is a laboratory. Every audience teaches you something. The pay was modest, and the venues weren't legendary, but the playing was honest, and honest playing was what I needed after the academic intensity of Berklee.

Norfolk's music scene in the early 1970s was a different animal from what I'd left behind in the 1960s. The civil rights movement had fundamentally altered the social landscape. The clubs and venues that had once operated under segregated arrangements were gradually and unevenly moving toward greater openness. Waterside, which would eventually become the hub of Norfolk's entertainment district, was still years away. Still, Atlantic Avenue in Virginia Beach was alive with music on summer weekends. The club circuit running from Norfolk down through the Carolinas and into Georgia was as active as it had ever been. Soul music had evolved and diversified during the years I'd been away; funk was now asserting itself alongside the more polished Motown sound, and a new generation of acts was pressing against the boundaries of what R&B could be.

Playing in that environment required adaptability above everything else. The groups I worked with in those years were never quite what I would have called stable organizations. Musicians drifted in and out, moved on to better opportunities or different cities, and you were constantly rebuilding the ensemble, incorporating new players, recalibrating the sound, starting the process of learning how to listen to each other all over again from scratch. I'd describe it later as being less of a "guitar for

hire” situation and more of a floating group, a core concept that kept reforming around whoever was available and willing. It was sometimes frustrating and sometimes energizing, and it taught me a kind of musical flexibility that I don’t think you can learn any other way.

On the Road with Clifford Curry

Eventually, through a booking agent who matched available musicians with performers looking for backing, I found myself playing regularly with Clifford Curry, a soul and R&B singer from Knoxville, Tennessee, who had built a devoted following across the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. Clifford was known in those parts as the King of Beach Music, which was a specific and passionate regional tradition centered on the Carolina coast, a mix of soul and rhythm & blues from the 1950s and 1960s that people in the Carolinas danced the shag to, a laid-back, gliding style that was completely its own thing. Beach music had nothing to do with surfboards or the West Coast; it was a Southeastern phenomenon rooted in Black R&B that had crossed over to white audiences on the Atlantic shore, and Clifford was its reigning figure.

His biggest moment came in 1967 with a recording called “She Shot a Hole in My Soul,” a pulsating, horn-driven track produced by Buzz Cason at Cinderella Sound in Nashville that reached number 45 on the R&B charts and became a permanent fixture in the beach music canon. Mac



Working with Clifford Curry Showed Me the Importance of Building a Regional Following

Clifford Curry was the undisputed King of Beach Music along the Carolina and Georgia coast, and I spent a good stretch of the 1970s on the road with him working that circuit. His 1967 recording “She Shot a Hole in My Soul” had become a regional anthem, and down in the Carolinas, audiences never stopped wanting to hear it. Clifford taught me that a loyal regional following, built one show at a time over the years, can sustain a career in ways that chasing national fame never reliably does.

Gayden wrote the song and played a distinctive early slide-wah guitar style, making it immediately identifiable. None of Clifford’s subsequent recordings matched that chart peak, but in the Carolinas and Georgia, it hardly mattered. Down there, “She Shot a Hole in My Soul” had become

something close to a regional anthem, and Clifford could work that circuit indefinitely on the strength of it.

Touring with Clifford meant long stretches of highway through the South, a succession of clubs and dance halls from the Virginia coast down through the Carolinas and into Georgia and Florida, playing for audiences who knew exactly what they wanted and were perfectly happy to hear the same beloved songs performed well night after night. The venues ranged from proper club rooms to beach pavilions to whatever space a promoter had booked, and the crowds were warm and physical in the way that beach music audiences always were; they came to dance, not to observe, and if the band was right and the groove was solid, the floor would fill within the first few bars of anything familiar.

I learned something valuable working with Clifford that I hadn't fully absorbed from my earlier road experiences. A regional following, built carefully over years, forging relationships with audiences in specific communities, could sustain a career in ways that a single national hit never reliably could. Clifford had that. He was a constant presence along that circuit for decades, right up until his death in September of 2016 at the age of seventy-nine. The music business is full of people who chase national fame and come up empty; Clifford had found something more durable in the loyalty of people who loved what he did.

Breakin' Bad – Warming Up the Crowd for the Big Groups

A local group called Breakin' Bad was looking for a guitarist. It didn't take much convincing. Within days, I was back in the only rhythm I'd ever really known, loading equipment into a van before sunrise, riding through the dark toward another town, another stage, another crowd that had no idea who I was until the first note.

This wasn't the nonstop national grind I'd lived through with Otis Redding years earlier, the kind of touring that swallows whole seasons and spits you out on the other side of the country wondering what month it is. This was smaller in scale but no less demanding. Home was still Norfolk, at least on paper. In practice, there were stretches when I hardly saw it, when my mail piled up and my apartment felt more like a place I stored things than a place I lived.

Breakin' Bad served as the backing band for Clifford Curry, and our job had a rhythm of its own. We would take the stage first and warm the crowd up with cover songs, the kind of familiar R&B stuff that got people moving before the main event. We had a great female vocalist, but sometimes I would do vocals, singing some of my favorite Stevie Wonder songs, my favorite being “Overjoyed.” I loved that song, and it’s one that still rings in my head today, from time to time.

Then Clifford would join us for a set of his own, working the crowd like a man who'd been doing this his whole life, because he had. Only after that would the stage turn over to whatever headline acts were booked for the night.

It didn't take long to understand our real job. We weren't there to steal the show. We were there to get several thousand people ready for what was coming.

Our lineup was simple: guitar, bass, keyboards, drums, and a vocalist named Sherry who could hold her own against any crowd we played to. I couldn't tell you every song we played that year if you put a gun to my head. But I remember the feeling of it, the particular alertness that comes from knowing every set matters, whether you're playing to two hundred people in a beach-town bar or five thousand in an outdoor bowl.

A Big Night in Charlotte I'll Never Forget

One show has never left me.

It was a massive concert in Charlotte, North Carolina, and looking back now, decades later, I understand just how remarkable that bill actually was. We opened the show doing four numbers. I loved singing vocals when I had the chance, and that night I remember distinctly singing a 1980 hit song by the Gap Band called "Burn Rubber on Me (Why You Wanna Hurt Me)," featuring the famous lyric about a lover who "put the pedal to the metal and burn rubber on me."



Breakin' Bad allowed me to Open Concerts for Big Acts Like the Four Tops, Junior Walker, and the Drifters.

I'm on the right in both of these pictures above, playing with a group called Breakin' Bad, opening concerts across the South for Clifford Curry and big-name acts like the Four Tops, Junior Walker, and the Drifters (below). Looking back, it's almost impossible to describe the exhilaration of playing before thousands in huge coliseums as a warm-up act before these big names came on.



And then, one after another, we watched from the wings as some of the most important names in American popular music took that stage.

Junior Walker.

The Drifters.

And closing the night, the headliners: the Four Tops.

Standing backstage, I remember the specific feeling of it, not just excitement, though there was plenty of that, but something closer to recognition. These weren't just famous performers sharing a bill with us. These were the voices that had been coming out of car radios and diner jukeboxes for years, the soundtrack to a whole generation, and here they were, close enough to watch them breathe.

The three acts couldn't have been more different from one another, and as a musician, I couldn't help but take notes even while I was supposed to be enjoying the show.

The Four Tops worked with a kind of polish that looked effortless precisely because it wasn't. Every movement, every vocal handoff, was locked into place, and yet none of it looked rehearsed from the audience's side of the footlights. That's a harder trick than it sounds.

Junior Walker was the opposite kind of performer. He didn't need choreography. He had a saxophone and a stage presence that could set a crowd on fire inside of thirty seconds, no polish required, just raw command of the room.

And the Drifters, by then a group that had gone through more lineup changes than most bands survive, showed what decades of professional harmony singing actually sounds like when it's been earned the hard way, night after night, city after city.

I stood there and watched all of it. Twenty years into my own career by that point, and I was still learning things I hadn't known I needed to learn.

What Never Changed

That night reinforced something I'd already come to believe, but hadn't always lived up to as well as I should have: I never let myself treat an opening slot as though it mattered less than the headline.

Someone in that crowd might be hearing us for the very first time, and someone else might be deciding, right then, whether we deserved to get booked again.

And somewhere in the wings, some other young musician might be watching us the same way I'd once watched Otis Redding's band, or Smokey Robinson's, or Joey Dee's, soaking up whatever they could, filing it away for later, the way musicians always have.

You never know who's paying attention.

Playing with Breakin' Bad, backing Clifford Curry through all those beach towns and outdoor shows, reminded me

that success in this business was never only about whose name sat at the top of the marquee. It was about showing up ready, every single night, whether the room held two hundred people or twenty thousand.

By then I'd been doing this long enough to know that every show deserved the same commitment, the small club and the packed coliseum alike. That same conviction had carried me from Norfolk to the Apollo Theater, from Stax Records to the Howard Theatre, and now back onto stages across the South once again.

The venues kept changing. The faces in the crowd kept changing. But the music, and the particular thrill of playing it in front of people who came to hear it, never did.

The Howard Theater, Revisited

In the years I was working out of the Washington and Northern Virginia area, I found my way back to the Howard Theater occasionally, never in any sustained way, just when something came up, and they needed a guitarist who knew the room. The Howard in the 1970s was a different kind of institution than it had been in the mid-1960s when I'd essentially grown up there musically. The neighborhood around it had changed. The U Street corridor, which had been one of the great centers of Black cultural and commercial life in America before the 1968 riots that followed Dr. King's assassination, was still in the painful process of trying to find itself again. But the Howard itself continued to book serious acts and remained a stage that

demanded something real from the performers who walked out onto it.

It was at the Howard during those years that I had some of the more memorable encounters of my life with artists whose work I'd been hearing on the radio for years. Some of those moments were brief and almost accidental, a conversation backstage, a shared meal, a few minutes watching someone prepare for a performance. But the briefest encounters with great artists have a way of staying with you far longer than their duration would seem to warrant.

Totally Out of the Blue – Jamming with David Bowie

One night, something happened that I never saw coming. We had finished a set and were just doing what musicians do: playing, relaxing, and enjoying ourselves, when somebody came over and said David Bowie was in the building. He had already finished his own concert somewhere nearby. I figured he was just stopping in to listen for a while.

Then Bowie walked over with a couple of musicians from his band and asked if they could sit in with us for a jam session.

I couldn't believe it.

Here's one of the biggest stars in the world asking if he could play with *our* band. He didn't act like a celebrity. No

ego, no entourage trying to keep everyone away. He was friendly, relaxed, and genuinely interested in making music. That impressed me most.

We played together for a while, and it felt like every other jam session, except it wasn't. It was David Bowie standing a few feet away, smiling, singing, and enjoying the music just as much as the rest of us. He wasn't there to put on a show or prove anything. He was simply another musician who loved to perform.

I remember thinking how gracious and down-to-earth he was. For someone with his level of fame, he made everyone around him feel comfortable. He treated us like equals, and that's something you don't always find in the music business.

I've played with a lot of great artists over the years, but that night has stayed with me. You never expect someone of David Bowie's stature to walk into a club, ask if he can join your band, and spend the evening just making music for the sheer joy of it. It's one of those moments I'll never forget, and it reminded me that the very best musicians are often the most humble.



One Night, After a Concert, David Bowie Was in the Building and Joined Us in an Informal Jam Session I Will Never Forget

One of the most unexpected moments of Gene Dail's career came when David Bowie and members of his band stopped in after a concert and asked to join Gene's group for an informal jam session. Gene recalls Bowie as humble, approachable, and a true musician at heart.

Dennis Edwards and the Temptations

One of the most iconic soul recordings of the entire decade came from a group I'd been aware of since their earliest Motown days: The Temptations. In 1972, they released "Papa Was a Rolling Stone," a sprawling, deeply cinematic piece of music that ran nearly 12 minutes on the album and was condensed to about seven for the single, and even at seven minutes, radio stations played it because they had no choice. It was too good to ignore. A Motown group had

originally recorded the song called The Undisputed Truth, written by producer Norman Whitfield and songwriter Barrett Strong, but what Whitfield did with the Temptations' version was something else entirely; he built an epic around the song, a slow-building, bass-and-wah-guitar-driven landscape with spoken-word verses and a refrain that hit like something almost classical in its weight.



***Working at the Howard Theater Gave Me a Chance
to Spark a Friendship with Dennis Edwards of the
Temptations***

Dennis Edwards brought a raw, gospel-rooted power to the Temptations that took them in a whole new direction. When I met him backstage at the Howard Theater, he had the same presence offstage that he had in front of a crowd, the kind of man who fills a room just by walking into it.

The voice driving that recording was Dennis Edwards, who had joined the Temptations in 1968 after the mercurial David Ruffin was fired from the group. Edwards came from Fairfield, Alabama, the son of a minister, and moved

to Detroit with his family as a boy. He'd had brief stints with The Mighty Clouds of Joy and The Contours before Motown chose him to take the Temptations forward, and what he brought to the group was a rawer, more gospel-rooted power than Ruffin's polished baritone, a voice that could tear the roof off a room when he wanted to, but that also carried a tremendous tenderness in its quieter registers. With Edwards at the front, Whitfield steered the Temptations into what they called their psychedelic soul period: "Cloud Nine," "Ball of Confusion," "I Can't Get Next to You," music that was simultaneously political, spiritual, and completely irresistible.

I met Dennis Edwards at the Howard Theater, and I'll say this about him: in person, he had the same presence he had on stage, that quality of filling the room simply by being in it. We didn't have any lengthy conversation, just the kind of brief, warm exchange that happens backstage between musicians who respect each other's work. But I came away understanding something about him that the records had only suggested: that the power in his voice wasn't a performance. It was just who he was.

The Temptations as a group were something I had enormous respect for, even knowing, as everyone in the business knew, that the internal dynamics were often difficult. "They didn't always get along with each other," I've said more than once, and that was an understatement; the Temptations' history is full of feuds, firings, and the kind of interpersonal turbulence that seems almost built into groups of strong personalities forced into sustained

proximity. But none of that friction was ever visible on a stage. When they performed, they were everything the word “professional” is supposed to mean: precise harmonies, coordinated movement, and an engagement with the audience that felt both controlled and alive. What made the Temptations extraordinary was their ability to leave all the backstage drama exactly there, backstage.

Dinner with Smokey

Marv Tarplin, Smokey Robinson’s guitarist, was someone I’d known since my earlier time at the Howard Theater, and our friendship continued through the 1970s in the natural, easy way that friendships between musicians tend to persist across years and geography. Tarplin was one of the great unsung guitarists of the Motown era, a player of extraordinary taste and restraint who understood his job was to serve the song rather than dominate it, and whose melodic sensibility wove through some of the most beloved records of that period. He co-wrote “Ain’t That Peculiar,” “My Girl Has Gone,” and several other Miracles classics, which gives you a sense of how deep his musical intelligence ran.

One evening when Smokey Robinson and the Miracles were appearing at the Howard, Marv pulled me aside and said Smokey wanted to have dinner nearby and was inviting a few people along. The catch was the logistics: Smokey couldn’t exactly walk out the front door of the Howard Theater without being surrounded immediately. By the mid-1970s, Smokey Robinson was one of the most recognizable

faces in American music. This man had written “My Girl” for the Temptations, “My Guy” for Mary Wells, “Ain’t That.



***Marv Turpin Introduced Me to Smokey Robinson,
a Very Gracious and Unassuming Guy***

The night Marv Tarplin invited me to slip out the back door of the Howard Theater for dinner with Smokey Robinson, I discovered that one of the most famous men in American music was, offstage, just a gracious and unassuming guy.

Peculiar” for Marvin Gaye, “Cruisin’,” “Being with You,” a songwriter whose catalog alone would have secured his place in any history of American popular music, and that was before you factored in his voice, which seemed to operate in some register slightly above the human range without quite departing it.

So, we slipped out through the back. The stage door, the alley, a quick walk to the restaurant with our collars up,

trying to look like nobody in particular. We made it. Dinner was quiet and very pleasant: good food, easy conversation, the relief of a famous person who has temporarily escaped the gravitational field of his own celebrity. What struck me most was exactly what I'd noticed backstage: Smokey Robinson, offstage and off the record, was simply a gracious and unassuming man. Not performing, being normal, but actually normal. "A regular guy," I'd say afterward, and I meant it as the high compliment it is. In the music business, real humility in famous people is rarer than talent, and talent is already rare enough.

Earth, Wind & Fire, A Night That Astounded Me

I saw Earth, Wind & Fire perform once during that period, and I want to be precise about this: I have seen a great many live performances in my life, spanning forty years on the road, and what Earth, Wind & Fire did on a concert stage in the mid-to-late 1970s belongs in its own separate category.

Maurice White had founded the group in 1969 and spent several years refining its lineup and sound before the breakthrough came with their 1975 album "That's the Way of the World" and its landmark single "Shining Star." What White had built was something unprecedented: a large ensemble, nine, ten, sometimes more musicians on stage, which combined the rhythmic power of funk with the harmonic sophistication of jazz, the spiritual energy of gospel, touches of African percussion through the kalimba thumb piano that White had championed, and the soaring

dual-vocal interplay between White's tenor and Philip Bailey's extraordinary falsetto. Bailey had joined in 1972 after White spotted him performing in Denver, and his voice was simply one of the most remarkable instruments in popular music. This range seemed to extend upward without limit, delivered with a warmth and precision that made even technically extreme passages feel effortless.



***I Watched Earth, Wind & Fire Put on
Unforgettable Stage Shows***

I have seen a great many live performances across forty years on the road, and what Earth, Wind & Fire did on a concert stage belongs in its own separate category. The night I watched Maurice White drape a sheet over his band members one by one and have them vanish, only to reappear across the stage inside what looked like a spaceship, I heard a sound go through that crowd that I have never forgotten.

But the music alone, remarkable as it was, was only half of what made Earth, Wind & Fire's live show so staggering.

Maurice White had invested heavily in the theatrical dimension of their concerts. By the late 1970s, they were staging productions that belonged as much to the tradition of spectacular entertainment as to rock or soul shows. For one of their most celebrated illusions, they worked with the famous magician Doug Henning and his associate Mark Wilson, incorporating professional-grade stage magic into the performance in a way that nobody in popular music had ever quite done before.

What I watched that night was this: in the middle of a song, Maurice White directed the band members toward a prop on stage, a construction designed to suggest a spaceship, gleaming and strange-looking under the stage lights. One by one, White draped a sheet over each member of the group, and, impossibly, they vanished. And then there they were, the whole band, appearing inside or around that spaceship structure on the other side of the stage, the audience simultaneously comprehending that something technically remarkable had just happened and completely unable to explain it.

I remember the sound that went through the crowd. Not quite a scream, not quite applause, something more instinctive than either, the involuntary response of thousands of people having their sense of what was possible briefly suspended. “It really astounded everybody, even me,” I’ve said since, and I was a musician who had been around stages and productions for more than a decade by that point. When you can still surprise a seasoned road musician, you’ve done something.

What Maurice White understood, and what made Earth, Wind & Fire truly exceptional, was that the spectacle was never a distraction from the music. It was an extension of it, a physical manifestation of the spiritual and cosmic philosophy that ran through everything they did. White saw music as medicine, as he said more than once: a force for bridging divides, for carrying uplifting energy into a world that had plenty of darkness to push against. The elaborate staging, the African imagery, the kalimba, and the Egyptological symbolism in their artwork all combined into a single vision that was entertaining, ambitious, and sincere.

Stevie Wonder Had the Knack to Bring Any Song to Life

There was a nightclub in Washington, D.C., I no longer remember exactly which one, and I've given up trying, where musicians and performers sometimes gathered after their own shows to unwind and, occasionally, to play. The kind of place where the line between audience and performer was porous, where someone might show up with an instrument or step to a microphone because the feeling was right. I was there one night when Stevie Wonder walked in.



The Artistry of Stevie Wonder Was Unsurpassed

I watched Stevie Wonder sit in with a house band at a Washington, D.C., club one night and perform other people's songs with such complete, natural authority that each one became entirely his own in the moment he sang it. Amazing talent is the only phrase I've ever found for what he had, and it doesn't do it justice. When I had a chance to do vocals with any band I was playing with, I always loved singing Stevie Wonder's hits, especially the song "Overjoyed."

By the early 1970s, Stevie Wonder had essentially reinvented himself. The child prodigy who'd scored his first hit for Motown at twelve years old with "Fingertips" had grown into something far more substantial: a composer, multi-instrumentalist, and conceptual artist of the first order who had negotiated an unprecedented degree of creative autonomy from Berry Gordy and proceeded to produce a string of albums, "Talking Book," "Innervisions," "Fulfillingness' First Finale," "Songs in the Key of Life", that collectively represented one of the great sustained creative achievements in the history of American popular

music. He played virtually every instrument on most of those records himself. He was twenty-five years old when “Songs in the Key of Life” came out. Twenty-five.

What I saw that night in Washington was something simpler and more personal than any of that biography. Stevie came in, gravitated toward the stage, and began playing with the house band, just sitting in, the way musicians have always done in certain kinds of rooms, following the groove wherever it went, singing whatever felt right in the moment. And the thing that struck me most deeply wasn’t his voice, extraordinary as it was, or his keyboard playing, or the evident fact that he could do anything musically that he chose to do. It was what he did when he sang other people’s songs.

Most great singers, when they perform material they didn’t write, carry the original recording with them in some audible way; they’re in dialogue with whoever made the song famous, whether they intend to be or not. Stevie Wonder didn’t do that. He inhabited whatever song he was singing with such complete, natural authority that it became his in the moment of performance without in any way diminishing its original version. The song wasn’t a cover; it was a living thing in his hands. “Amazing talent,” I’ve said, and I’ve never found a more accurate description. There are musicians, and there are musicians, and then there are the ones who make you feel, when you watch them, like you’re witnessing something that shouldn’t technically be possible. Stevie Wonder was that.

James Brown, Michael Jackson, and a Dance-Off for the Ages

I want to be careful here, because this is one of those memories that sits so far outside the ordinary that people sometimes raise an eyebrow when I describe it. But I know what I saw.

James Brown's live performance in those years was in a category of its own. Whatever you'd heard on the records, and by the early 1970s those records formed an entire lineage of American music, from "Please, Please, Please" through "Cold Sweat" and "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" and on into the building blocks of funk that would define the decade, the records were only a pale preparation for the live experience. James Brown on a stage was the most disciplined, the most demanding, and the most electrifying bandleader I have ever seen, a man who communicated with his musicians through a private vocabulary of foot signals and hand gestures while simultaneously doing things with his body that seemed to require the suspension of several laws of physics.

His famous dance, the one I've always described as looking like he was killing roaches in the corner of the room, which is the most accurate description I've been able to manage, was a piece of choreographic invention that existed



An Unforgettable Night with Michael Jackson & James Brown Together Onstage

James Brown spent a lifetime developing his signature movement, that extraordinary, lightning-fast footwork that seemed to operate outside the normal rules of physics. The night I watched a teenage Michael Jackson study it, then step in and do it back, and then push it somewhere further, James Brown's face said everything. He recognized the moment when the student had found his own voice.

somewhere between athletic discipline and controlled abandon. The footwork was extraordinarily fast and precise, the body dropping low and then recovering, the whole movement seeming both completely improvised and utterly inevitable. He had developed it over decades of performing, refining it night after night until it was as much a part of his musical identity as his voice or his band.

On the night I'm describing, a young Michael Jackson was present. Jackson's trajectory with the Jackson 5 had been a phenomena of the early 1970s, their first four singles for Motown, "I Want You Back," "ABC," "The Love You Save," and "I'll Be There," had all reached number one between 1969 and 1970, and the youngest prominent member of the group had been immediately visible as something exceptional, a child performer whose instincts and technical abilities already exceeded those of most adult professionals. Michael studied Brown the way serious musicians study their predecessors: with total absorption, watching every movement, cataloging every choice.

What I saw that night was James Brown perform his dance, that signature expression of everything his performing life had accumulated, with the full power and precision it deserved. And then Michael Jackson, who must have been a teenager at the time, watched for a moment, found his opening, and stepped in.

He did Brown's dance. He did it exactly, every element, every weight shift, every impossible piece of footwork, and then, without pausing, he folded something of his own into it, an extension of the movement that took what Brown had done and built on it in a direction that was entirely Michael's own. The room understood immediately what it had just witnessed. James Brown understood. He had a look on his face that I've thought about many times since, not quite astonishment, not quite pride, something in between, the expression of a master recognizing the moment when the apprentice has found his own voice.

“He could dance with effortless movement,” I’ve said of Michael Jackson, and that’s true, but it doesn’t begin to capture it. What Michael had, even as a teenager, was the ability to make technically extraordinary things look like the simplest and most natural expression of himself. That quality is almost impossible to teach. You either have it, or you don’t.

A Lesson from Sam the Sham

It was sometime in the 1970s, and I was playing with my group, Smoke, at a big nightclub in Ocean City, Maryland; the kind of place that was almost the size of an auditorium. On the bill that night was Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs. Sam was the singer who’d made himself a household name a decade earlier with two words and a fuzz-toned guitar riff: “Wooly Bully.”

Ocean City in those years was its own kind of music circuit. Every summer the boardwalk clubs and the big rooms just off the strip filled up with bands working the resort towns up and down the East Coast. It was a whole seasonal migration of musicians chasing the tourist dollar from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Soul and R&B carried a lot of that scene. Bands built their sets around what people wanted to dance to: Motown, Stax, Philly soul, horn-driven grooves that could fill a dance floor without anybody having to think too hard about it. A lot of it traced back to what folks up and down the coast called beach music, which was a whole subculture built around

smooth, mid-tempo R&B, records meant for slow, easy partner dancing on a hot summer night with the windows open and the ocean a block away.

Groups like mine worked those same rooms, mixing soul covers in with our own material, because that's what kept a crowd on the floor. By the back half of the decade, disco was creeping in too, but in the mid-'70s, when I crossed paths with Sam, soul and R&B still ruled those clubs, and a band that could deliver it right could work the whole summer without ever leaving Ocean City.

The weather had other plans for us. Rain came down hard, and the crowd that should have filled that huge room never showed. Only a few fans, ticket holders who'd braved the storm, scattered themselves through a space built for hundreds. For the rest of the band and me, it was a deflating way to spend a night; all that set up, all that rehearsal, playing to a room that felt empty.

Sam noticed. Before the set, he pulled me aside. "Let me talk to you," he said, and I listened. Don't feel bad about how many people are out there, he told me. Think of it this way: the one and only God, Jesus, is out there, and you're going to play for Him. So you'd better be good.

By the time I met him, Sam the Sham was already a legend, though he wore it lightly. He was born Domingo Samudio in Dallas in 1937, and he'd taken a winding road to stardom.



A Chance Encounter with a Hard-Working Sam the Sham

Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs played their concerts decked out in the turbans and robes that turned a novelty act into a chart-topping sensation. One night, he taught me a valuable life lesson during a gig where we both played in Ocean City, Maryland.

He spent six years in the Navy in Panama, then went to college back in Texas, where he studied classical voice by day and sang in dive bars by night. The stage name itself was a joke turned into a brand: “Sam the Sham,” a nod to his own mock humility about his voice, worn the way only a confident performer could.

What made him unforgettable wasn’t just the hit record. It was the whole package. He performed in a turban and a flowing robe, backed by a band called the Pharaohs, and hauled his gear around in a 1952 Packard hearse fitted out

with maroon velvet curtains. It was showmanship built entirely on his own terms, campy and theatrical in a way nobody else in rock and roll was doing at the time, and it worked precisely because he never seemed to be performing anyone else's idea of what a star should look like. He simply was who he was, turban, hearse, and all, and let the crowd catch up to him.

The success behind the costume was real. "Wooly Bully," a song he wrote himself, sold roughly three million copies, climbed to number two on the Billboard Hot 100, and spent eighteen weeks on the chart in 1965, long enough that Billboard later crowned it the top record of the year even though it never technically reached number one. It broke through at the height of the British Invasion, when American acts were struggling to get a word in edgewise, and by his own account, Sam liked to say he and the Pharaohs kicked The Beatles' butt that year. The follow-up, "Li'l Red Riding Hood," did nearly as well, climbing to number two in its own right. Later, after he'd stepped away from the Pharaohs and gone solo, he even picked up a Grammy for the liner notes on one of his own solo albums, a strange and fitting honor for a man who'd built a career on turning a joke into something people took seriously.

By the 1970s, when he and I crossed paths in that rain-soaked Ocean City club, Sam had already lived several careers inside one: Navy veteran, classically trained singer, novelty-act frontman, chart-topping hitmaker, actor. Looking back, it makes sense that a man with that kind of range would tell a struggling young musician not to worry

about an empty room. He'd built his whole career out of being exactly himself in rooms that didn't always know what to make of him, and it had worked out for him.

It was a simple thing for him to say, but it reframed the whole night for me. A half-empty room stopped being a disappointment and became something closer to an act of devotion. I played my best not because of who was counting the house, but because the music itself deserved it. I've carried that idea with me for fifty years.

We talked more that night. Sam mentioned he had an offer on the table, real money, to score the music for a cartoon show, and that he was heading back to Hollywood to chase it down. Before we parted, he gave me his number and told me to keep in touch. I called, more than once, hoping to catch up. I never heard back. He'd moved on into that next chapter of his career, and to this day I don't know whether that cartoon deal ever came together, just that he was chasing it hard the last time we spoke.

What stayed with me wasn't the missed phone calls or the small disappointment of losing touch. What stayed was the lesson: play as it matters, no matter who's watching. Even now, talking about the old days, it comes back to me all at once: a rainy night in Ocean City, an almost-empty club, and a fellow musician who reminded me why you show up anyway.

Al Green on the Mall

Al Green performing outdoors on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., was one of those performances that could only have happened in a particular moment in American culture and couldn't be fully reproduced anywhere else. The early 1970s were a time when large outdoor events, concerts, rallies, and festivals had a particular energy and meaning that went beyond the music, a sense that public space and public culture were contested territory, that who showed up and what they brought with them mattered in ways that extended past entertainment.

Green had emerged from the gospel tradition in Michigan but had found his commercial footing in Memphis through his partnership with producer Willie Mitchell at Hi Records, who stripped away the elaborate orchestrations of late-1960s soul and replaced them with something more spare and intimate: a rhythm section built around those warm, slightly behind-the-beat Hi Rhythm Section grooves, horns that phrased more like conversation than punctuation, and at the center of all of it, Green's voice, one of the most sensual and most spiritual instruments in the history of recorded music, sometimes within the same bar. "Let's Stay Together," "I'm Still in Love with You," "You Ought to Be with Me," "Call Me," between 1971 and 1974, he released a run of recordings that put him on a very short list of the defining voices of his era.



Al Green, the Consummate Musician

Al Green performing on the National Mall in Washington was one of those experiences that could only have happened in a particular moment in American culture. What struck me most wasn't just the voice, extraordinary as it was, but the settled ease he brought to everything he did, a complete comfort with exactly what he had to offer that never once tipped into arrogance. I've said it simply many times since: when it came to what Al Green did on a stage, he couldn't be beat.

What I remember about watching him on the Mall was how easy it was. Not indifference; Al Green was never indifferent to a performance, but a kind of settled confidence in his own material, a comfort with exactly what he was and exactly what he had to offer that never tipped into arrogance. He could take someone else's song and perform it in a way that made it feel completely his own,

not by overwhelming it with personality but by finding something in it that was uniquely his to bring out. “He couldn’t be beat,” is how I’ve put it, and that’s simply accurate.

Diana Ross, a Robe, and a Lesson in Stardom

Not every backstage memory is about the music.

I was standing in the wings at the Howard Theater, waiting, when the Supremes were about to go on. In their various configurations, the Supremes were among the defining acts of the Motown era, with Diana Ross, Mary Wilson, and Florence Ballard in the original lineup, later with different members as Motown increasingly engineered the group to center on Ross as the singular star. By the early 1970s, Diana Ross had gone fully solo. She was building the second act of a career that would include films, a groundbreaking performance as Billie Holiday in “Lady Sings the Blues,” and the kind of sustained commercial presence that only a handful of artists maintain across decades.

She was standing near me in the wings, robed and ready to go on, and she turned to me; I was simply the nearest person, and she said, quite directly: “Will you hold my robe until I come back?”

I said yes. I was thrilled. Diana Ross had spoken to me. I stood there holding her robe through the entire performance, treating it with what I can only describe as



My Night Next to Diana Ross – Being at the Right Place at the Right Time

Diana Ross asked me to hold her robe while she performed at the Howard Theater, and I held it through her entire show as if it were something sacred. When she came off stage and took it back without a word or a glance, I understood something: she wasn't being rude. She was still inside the performance. That kind of total focus is part of what made her what she was.

reverence, watching her command the stage with that distinctive combination of elegance and absolute authority that she had always possessed. When she came back off stage, I returned the robe. She took it and, without a word, without a glance, walked away.

I've told that story many times and always get a laugh, which is the appropriate response. But there's something in it

beyond the comedy. That night, Diana Ross was not thinking about the guitarist holding her robe. She was inside her performance, before it, during it, and in the immediate aftermath of it, with the kind of focus that doesn't have room for pleasantries. That total absorption in the work is part of what makes someone like that what they are. It's not rudeness, exactly. It's a priority. And watching it up close, even from the robe-holder's position, was extremely educational.

Funkadelic and the Atomic Dog

Among all the acts working the Howard Theater circuit in those years, one group stood apart from everything else in a way that was impossible to categorize and equally impossible to dismiss: Funkadelic.

George Clinton had been developing his musical and philosophical vision since the mid-1960s, first with the Parliaments and then through the dual-entity structure of Parliament and Funkadelic, which he would eventually run simultaneously, releasing material under both names throughout the 1970s while maintaining essentially the same large pool of musicians across both projects. What Clinton was building was something he called P-Funk, a synthesis of psychedelic rock, funk, soul, gospel, science-fiction mythology, and a kind of liberatory absurdism that challenged the conventions of mainstream Black music in ways that some found thrilling and others destabilizing.



I Saw Funkadelic's Extraordinary Talent and Stage Presence

I had been around stages and live music for more than a decade when I saw Funkadelic perform, and I still walked away thinking

I had never seen anything quite like that on a stage. George Clinton had assembled one of the most extraordinarily talented collections of musicians in popular music: Bootsy Collins, Bernie Worrell, Maceo Parker, and Fred Wesley. He wrapped it all inside a philosophy that was strange and funny and completely serious all at the same time. Parliament had the spaceship.

Funkadelic had the groove. Between the two of them, George Clinton may have come closer than anyone to proving that music really can bring people together in ways that nothing else quite manages.

Nothing about it was polished or safe. It was aggressive and weird and joyful and politically conscious and completely committed to the idea that the groove itself was a form of freedom.

Watching them at the Howard Theater, I remember thinking that I had never seen anything quite like this on a stage: the sheer density of musicians, the theatrical elements that Clinton incorporated into the performance, the relentless funk underneath all the spectacle, the way the whole enormous enterprise somehow cohered into something that made people lose their minds with pleasure. “One Nation Under a Groove” was perhaps their most accessible statement, a celebration of collective joy that crossed over in a way their more challenging material never quite did. Still, even that was built on a foundation of rhythmic complexity that rewarded close listening.

They also had a track called “Atomic Dog,” a churning, hypnotic piece of music built on a four-note bass riff that felt simple and turned out to be almost impossibly funky. It became, some years later, one of the most sampled records in hip-hop history, its DNA woven into dozens of landmark recordings, and it had a second life as part of the musical backdrop for David Letterman’s late-night television program, where bandleader Paul Shaffer and the CBS Orchestra would reference it during commercial breaks. I always got a particular satisfaction hearing it in that context, a piece of music I’d heard live in a club in Washington, D.C., eventually becoming shorthand for late-night television cool across America.

Carl Anderson, A Voice That Deserved More

During those Washington years, I came to know a singer named Carl Anderson, a Lynchburg, Virginia, native whose story was one of the more bittersweet I encountered in a career full of them. Carl grew up as one of twelve children, the son of a steelworker and a seamstress, and spent time in the Air Force before landing in Washington in 1969 and forming a group called The Second Eagle. It was with that group, performing material from the concept album of “Jesus Christ Superstar” before the show had ever been staged, that a talent agent from the William Morris Agency heard him perform at a church in D.C. and recognized that Carl’s voice was exceptional.

What happened next was one of those stories that perfectly illustrates the particular cruelty of the entertainment business. Carl was cast in the pre-Broadway touring production of “Jesus Christ Superstar” as Judas Iscariot, for which his voice, powerful, gospel-rooted, capable of carrying both the conviction and the anguish that the role demanded, was ideally suited. But when the show moved to Broadway in 1971, producers chose Ben Vereen, a more established name, for the opening run. Carl was made an understudy. Then Vereen fell ill, and Carl stepped into the role on Broadway and in Los Angeles, delivering a



***Carl Anderson Was At Home Singing on Stage and
in Film***

Carl Anderson had one of those voices that existed completely outside genre: gospel, soul, Broadway, film, and all of it sounded like his natural home. I knew him during my Washington years and always believed his career would become something even larger than it did. He stepped into the role of Judas in Jesus Christ Superstar on Broadway and in the 1973 film, and delivered a performance nobody who saw it ever forgot. Some voices deserve more than the world gives them.

performance those who saw it never forgot. He eventually reprised the role in the 1973 film version, directed by Norman Jewison, and his performance as Judas remains one of the most viscerally committed in the film's history.

I knew Carl personally during those Washington years, and I had hopes for what his career might become. I was at various points in informal conversations with him about the possibility of putting together a proper backing group, myself on guitar, a drummer I trusted, to support him on whatever came next. Carl never said yes or no, and those conversations drifted unresolved into the ordinary business of people's lives as we moved in different directions. He went on to record nine solo albums and had a notable duet hit in the 1980s, "Friends and Lovers," with singer Gloria Loring. He died of leukemia in 2004, one day before his fifty-ninth birthday, while planning a reunion tour with Ted Neeley.

What Carl Anderson had was one of those voices that exists outside genre, capable of gospel, soul, jazz, Broadway, film, and none of it sounding like someone straining to reach beyond their natural home. Voices like that come along rarely, and careers like his, impressive as they were, always carry the shadow of what might have been with a different break or a different conversation. I've thought about that more than once.

A Wild Night with Sly and the Family Stone

It started, as a lot of things did in those years, with a chance connection and an invitation I wasn't about to turn down.

The guys I was playing with at the time knew Larry Graham personally- Larry Graham, the bass player for Sly and the Family Stone, the man who had essentially invented slap

bass. That percussive, thumping style of striking and popping the strings that reshaped the role of the bass guitar across virtually every genre that followed- Larry developed it, as the story goes, because his mother had given up using a drummer and Larry had to supply the rhythmic bottom all by himself. What started as a practical solution to a practical problem became one of the most influential techniques in the history of popular music.

Larry and his group were performing one night at a club in Greenwich Village; I can't pull the name out of my memory now, though I believe it may have been the Village Vanguard. What I know for certain is that this was one of those rooms where everybody who was making a real name for themselves eventually played. Jazz musicians, pop musicians, artists crossing every conceivable genre boundary. You would have felt honored just to be invited through the door, let alone to stand inside listening. Greenwich Village in the early 1970s had that particular quality, a density of serious talent concentrated in a small geographic space that you could actually feel walking down the street.

After the performance, Larry extended a second invitation. Sly Stone kept a hotel suite in New York on permanent reserve for whenever the Family Stone came to town, and that night there was a party.

Now, before I say much more about this party, let me give you a little context about what Sly Stone had built and what was happening to it around that time, because the two

things were running alongside each other in a way that was hard to watch.



***Sly Stone Was a Party Animal, Great Musician, All
Rolled Into One***

Sly Stone built something revolutionary: a racially integrated band that combined soul, funk, rock, and gospel into a sound nobody had heard before, one that shaped everything that came after. The night I found myself at a party in a New York hotel suite where Sly moved through the room like a force of nature, I saw up close the painful distance between what a man can create and what he can do to himself.

Sylvester Stewart (Sly Stone) had done something revolutionary when he formed the Family Stone in the late 1960s. He put together a racially integrated band with both male and female members and blended soul, funk, rock, gospel, and psychedelia into a sound with no precedent. "Dance to the Music." "Everyday People." "I Want to Take

You Higher." "Family Affair." These weren't simply hit records. They were events, cultural moments, music that carried an actual social vision inside the groove. Miles Davis heard what Sly was doing, and it pushed him toward his electric period. Hip-hop producers would spend decades sampling those records. The influence spread everywhere and kept spreading.

But by the early 1970s, the Family Stone's internal reality had grown increasingly dark. Sly had surrounded himself with an entourage that had little to do with music. Substance problems had moved to the center of the operation. The paranoia that would eventually consume the whole enterprise was already making itself felt. Larry Graham himself had left, or more accurately had been forced out, under circumstances that were, depending on who tells the story, somewhat dangerous. He had formed his own group, Graham Central Station, which had several solid R&B hits and gave him a vehicle worthy of his talent. Whatever had gone wrong around Sly, Larry's ability was completely untouched by any of it. Some musicians leave a mark on their instrument that nobody who comes after them can entirely escape. Larry Graham is one of those musicians.

So that was the landscape when Larry brought us up to that hotel suite. And I want to be honest about what I found there, partly because discretion has its limits when you're writing a memoir and partly because pretending the 1970s music world was something other than what it was would be its own kind of dishonesty. The suite was full of people from every corner of the New York music and

entertainment world. The energy in the room was enormous, not comfortable, not relaxed, but enormously alive in the way that only certain rooms at certain moments manage to be. And it had everything you could want in it, including things in the drug category that were very much a part of that particular world at that particular time. Marijuana, cocaine, which was the landscape of the music business in those years, and nobody involved pretended otherwise. Sly Stone's orbit was not an exception to that culture. If anything, it was closer to the center of it than most.

Sly himself moved through the suite the way he seemed to move through everything, less like a host and more like a force of nature, present everywhere and somehow inaccessible at the same time. I didn't speak with him directly that night. I spoke with Larry, and I watched. It was a wild party. I don't remember much of what came after.

But here is what I want to say, because it matters and because I've thought about it many times in the fifty years since: whatever role substances played in the atmosphere surrounding Sly Stone, they were not the source of his creativity. They were not the explanation for what he could do. I know that because, not long after the party, Larry invited me to a recording session.

Later, with Sly at the Recording Studio

I couldn't tell you which studio it was. New York had a dozen serious rooms operating at that level, and the name

is long gone. I also can't tell you with certainty which song they were working on, though what came out of that session eventually made the top ten. What I can tell you, with complete clarity, because this is one of those memories that simply doesn't fade, is what happened when Sly walked in.

He looked around at his musicians, at the engineers behind the glass, at everyone assembled in the room, and he made an announcement. They were going to record in the dark. Not dimmed lighting. Not mood lighting. Every light in the studio was completely off.

And they did it.

I was there only as an observer, having been invited by Larry under strict instructions not to make a sound or interrupt anything. So I stood in the darkness and listened.

People have asked me over the years whether that was just a drug-fueled stunt, a piece of theater designed to impress the room. My honest answer, having been there, is no. What Sly Stone did in that darkened studio was the act of a musical genius. He understood something that most producers never figure out: that creativity requires removing distraction. That the ears open wider when the eyes have nothing to process. That musicians find each other differently, more honestly, when they can't see each other and have to locate the groove entirely through sound. He came up with ideas that night that nobody had thought of before, or if they'd thought of them, hadn't had the

conviction or the authority actually to execute. Sly would do it. He would just do it, and it would work.

I've never been entirely sure why that recording session has stayed with me as vividly as it has, given how much else from those years has blurred and faded. But it did stay. And what it left me with was the clearest possible illustration of something I've always found painful to think about: the distance between what Sly Stone was capable of creating and what was simultaneously happening to him as a man.

The music was revelatory; his ideas about rhythm and texture, about the way a band could function as a single breathing organism, were original in the deepest sense of that word. R&B and hip-hop artists have been drawing from that well for half a century, whether they name him or not. But the man who created all of that was being consumed by something that had nothing to do with music, and even in 1972, standing in a hotel suite or a darkened recording studio, you could feel it in the air around him.

Talent and self-destruction can coexist completely. That's the thing nobody warns you about when you're young and coming up in the music business, dazzled by the greatness all around you. The gift doesn't protect the person who carries it. Sly Stone is the starkest example I ever witnessed of that truth, and I've never forgotten it.



Larry Graham – Bass Guitar “Percussionist”

Larry Graham essentially invented slap bass, that thumping, percussive style of striking and popping the strings that reshaped the role of the bass guitar in virtually every genre that followed. He developed it, as the story goes, because his mother had given up using a drummer, and Larry had to supply the rhythmic bottom himself. I met him during my New York years, and whatever the turbulence surrounding Sly and the Family Stone at that point, Larry's talent was completely untouched by any of it. Some musicians leave a mark on their instrument that nobody who comes after them can entirely escape. Larry Graham is one of those musicians.

The Songs We Played, The Soundtrack of a Decade

The work of a musician in the 1970s was, in large part, learning and performing the hits of the moment. Whatever

the setting- club, dance hall, opening act slot, hotel lounge – audiences wanted to hear the songs they knew, played in a way that gave them what the records gave them, but with the energy and unpredictability that only live performance could provide. The 1970s also provided an extraordinary run of material to work with.

Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" arrived in 1971 and immediately changed the conversation about what a soul record could be. It was an album built around a continuous musical flow rather than discrete tracks, a meditation on Vietnam, urban poverty, environmental destruction, and spiritual searching that somehow managed to be both deeply political and utterly beautiful. Playing "What's Going On" in a club setting required you to honor that emotional weight even when the crowd around you was primarily there to dance, which was its own interesting challenge. Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" was the opposite in some ways, pared down, intimate, deceptively simple, and it worked on a dance floor and in a quiet room with equal effectiveness. Bill Withers' "Ain't No Sunshine" had a darkness in its groove that was unusual for radio material of that era, a barely restrained ache that made it unlike almost anything else being played.



Marvin Gaye – Soul Music Innovator

*When Marvin Gaye released *What's Going On* in 1971, he changed the conversation about what a soul record could even be, a continuous musical meditation on war, poverty, and spiritual longing that somehow managed to be both deeply serious and completely beautiful at the same time. Playing "*What's Going On*" in a club while people were there to dance was its own kind of challenge, because the song carried a weight that demanded you honor it even in that setting.*

Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" was a guitarist's education packed into three and a half minutes. The clavinet riff that opens it sounds simple until you try to lock into it, at which point you discover how precisely every element of the groove depends on everything else. "Signed, Sealed, Delivered I'm Yours" was the opposite: joyful and almost effortlessly accessible, the kind of song that made a room feel good within the first four bars. Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On" was its own phenomenon, a record that seemed

designed for maximum physical response in every possible setting.

Gladys Knight's "Midnight Train to Georgia" deserves more than a passing mention because the story behind it is almost as good as the record itself. Gladys and the Pips, her brother Merald "Bubba" Knight, and their cousins William Guest and Edward Patten, a family group that had been performing together since 1952, had spent years at Motown without ever quite getting their due. Acts like the Temptations and the Supremes absorbed most of the label's promotional energy, and Gladys, who had reportedly never wanted to sign with Motown in the first place, eventually led the group to leave. They signed with Buddah Records in 1973, and the second single they released there changed everything.

The song began life as a country number called "Midnight Plane to Houston," written by Jim Weatherly after a phone conversation in which he learned that actress Farrah Fawcett was preparing to fly home to visit family. It passed through several hands and one city-name change before Gladys heard Cissy Houston's version and knew immediately what she could do with it. What came out of those sessions, recorded partly in a small studio tucked into a Detroit parking garage, reportedly made everyone in the room stand up when the final vocal was laid down. It hit number one on both the pop and R&B charts in the fall of 1973 and won the Grammy for Best R&B Vocal Performance. For a group that had been making music

together for over twenty years, it was the first time they had ever topped the pop chart.



Gladys Knight – R&B, Pop Crossover Queen

Gladys Knight and the Pips had been making music together since 1952, spent years at Motown without getting their due, and then signed with Buddah Records and came out with "Midnight Train to Georgia", a song reportedly rewritten overnight from scratch and recorded partly in a studio tucked inside a Detroit parking garage. It hit number one on the pop and R&B charts in 1973 and won a Grammy. Playing it live, I always felt what made it special: it rewarded the band's commitment, and if you brought your full self to it, the whole thing lifted in a way the audience felt immediately.

What made it a satisfying song to play live night after night was its architecture. The Pips' background work, those call-and-response passages, the harmonies that supported and sometimes gently commented on Gladys' lead, the way the whole arrangement built and breathed, gave the band behind them a structure worth locking into. It rewarded

commitment from the musicians. If you played it mechanically, it sounded fine. If you played it with feeling, the whole thing lifted in a way the audience could feel immediately.



***Kool & the Gang – Unique Sound Moving Toward
the Disco Era***

Kool & the Gang spent years building a jazz-rooted, horn-driven funk that was more sophisticated than most people gave them credit for, and then their attorney bluntly told them they needed some hits. What they came back with was "Jungle Boogie": pure energy, physically relentless, built around a grunt that functioned as much as rhythmic punctuation as anything else. By the time I was playing their music up and down the East Coast circuit, they had built something that filled a dance floor within the first four bars every single time.

Kool & the Gang's "Jungle Boogie" is a song that had been building since 1964, when Robert "Kool" Bell and his brother Ronald started a group with neighborhood friends in Jersey City, New Jersey. They went through a string of

names, the Jazziacs, the Soul Town Band, Kool & the Flames, before settling on the one that stuck. Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, they built a following on a horn-driven, jazz-rooted funk that was sophisticated enough to satisfy serious musicians but physically irresistible on a dance floor. Their early work was largely instrumental, and their sound was tight and schooled, setting them apart from most of the competition for the same radio space.

The breakthrough came with their 1973 album “Wild and Peaceful,” and “Jungle Boogie” was the track most people remember. The story of how it came together is instructive: their attorney told the band, in the most direct terms possible, that they simply needed some hits. What they came back with was pure energy, horn-heavy, physically relentless, built around a grunt from the lead vocalist that functioned as much as rhythmic punctuation as any kind of lyric line. It was a novelty element, but the groove beneath it was anything but novelty. It reached number four on the pop chart and brought the group to a white audience for the first time, setting them on the path toward the disco-era hits “Ladies’ Night” and “Celebration” that would come later in the decade.

The Ohio Players’ “Fire” was something different entirely. The band from Dayton, Ohio, had been working under various names since 1959. By the time they signed with Mercury Records in 1973 and recorded “Skin Tight” and then “Fire,” they had spent years fusing rhythm and blues, jazz, and rock into a regional brand of heavy funk that was entirely their own. They were also, by that point, becoming

nearly as famous for their album covers, provocative, borderline explicit photographs that caused controversy and made their records instantly recognizable in any record store, as they were for the music itself.



***Ohio Players – Their Smoldering Hit, “Fire,”
Became #1***

The Ohio Players came out of Dayton with a heavy, slow-burning brand of funk that was entirely their own, and "Fire" was its best expression. This record didn't explode so much as smolder, building heat through patience and restraint rather than announcement. For a guitarist, playing that song was a lesson in what you can accomplish by holding back and letting the groove do the work.

“Fire” reached number one on both the pop and R&B charts at the end of 1974, but what I remember about playing it is the quality I described: a slow-burn intensity that was somewhat at odds with the title and all the more effective for it. The song didn’t explode. It smoldered. The opening riff settled into a groove and then stayed there with

the kind of patient, coiled energy that made a room lean in rather than jump up immediately. For a guitarist, it was a lesson in the power of restraint, in what you could accomplish by holding back and letting the feel do the work.

Lou Rawls' "You'll Never Find Another Love Like Mine" gave the bass a melodic role unusual for its era, while Rawls' baritone anchored the whole thing with an assurance that made every line feel like a statement of permanent fact. The Moments' "Love on a Two-Way Street" was one of those songs that sounded simple on first hearing and revealed its craftsmanship the more you played it.



As Smooth as They Were – Lou Rawls

Lou Rawls had a baritone that made every line sound like a permanent statement of fact, and "You'll Never Find Another Love Like Mine" showcased exactly that, an assurance in his delivery that no amount of technical instruction could teach. He was one of those singers whose voice was so distinctively his own that you always knew within the first two notes exactly who you were listening to.

What I love about “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now” is that most people who danced to it in 1979 had no idea they were dancing to a song written by two men who had been quietly building Philadelphia soul from the inside out for years. Gene McFadden and John Whitehead wrote “Back Stabbers” for the O’Jays back in 1972- that big, churning, paranoid groove that everybody knows- and they had been working for Gamble and Huff at Philadelphia International ever since, putting hits in other people’s mouths. “I’ll Always Love My Mama” for the Intruders. Songs for Harold Melvin. These were serious, seasoned professionals who knew how music worked from the ground up.

And when they finally talked Gamble and Huff into letting them record their own material, this is what came out. It hit number one on the R&B charts in 1979 and just never really went away. Philadelphia adopted it as a kind of civic anthem; the Phillies used it, the Eagles used it, on any occasion when people needed to feel that something good was still possible. And that’s what the song had in it: optimism. After everything the decade had put people through, this came out of the speakers and said, “We made it, and we’re not done yet.” I could feel that every time I played it. It wasn’t just a dance record. It was people exhaling.

Here’s the thing about “I’ll Be There” that most people don’t know. The first three Jackson 5 singles, “I Want You Back,” “ABC,” and “The Love You Save,” all came from the same Motown hit factory, a team called The Corporation that Berry Gordy had assembled just to write

for this group. Three number ones in a row. For the fourth single, Gordy went in a different direction. A producer named Hal Davis had a song. Berry liked the title but not the song itself, so he got a songwriter named Willie Hutch on the phone in the middle of the night and basically said, "Rewrite this by morning." And Hutch did. Walked in at eight a.m. with a new song; they recorded it, and it became the biggest-selling single Motown put out during its entire Detroit run. Four consecutive number ones; nobody had ever done that before.

But what I always felt playing that song live was something the chart numbers don't capture. Michael was twelve years old on that record, and whatever he had in his voice- that complete openness, that lack of any distance between the boy and the words he was singing- you just can't fake that. The dance tracks were spectacular, but this one reached people on a deeper level. Mariah Carey performed it at an MTV Unplugged in 1992, and the whole thing went back to number one, twenty-two years later. That doesn't happen by accident. It happens because the original meant something real, and people recognized it all over again the moment they heard it.

I played all of those songs and hundreds more across the years, venues, and ensembles of the 1970s. They were the shared language of the era, the common ground between musicians and audiences who might otherwise have had nothing else in common, and playing them well- not just reproducing them but inhabiting them, finding the living thing inside the arrangement- was the real work of being a

professional musician in those years. It was work I was grateful to do.

Thinking About Otis

There is a question that has followed me through every decade since December of 1967, and it was asked of me directly more than once during the 1970s by interviewers, friends, and fellow musicians: What do you think Otis Redding would have become?

I've never found a completely satisfying answer because there isn't one. Speculation about the lives that were cut short is a form of grief more than a form of analysis, and I've always been aware of that. But I do know what I saw in Otis during the years I worked with him, and I know what "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay" told me about where he was going.

The song was recorded just days before his death and marked a new direction in his work. The blues-drenched, physically overwhelming soul performances that had made his reputation- "These Arms of Mine," "Mr. Pitiful," "I've Been Loving You Too Long," "Try a Little Tenderness," my favorite song to play with him, "Just Can't Turn You Loose," all of that was still there in his instrument. But "Dock of the Bay" was quieter, more reflective, more inward. The famous whistled outro at the end of the track, which was unplanned, just Otis filling the space when the lyrics ran out, captured something about where he was

emotionally at that moment in his life, a quality of stillness that his earlier work, brilliant as it was, had never quite had.

He was twenty-six years old. He was, as I've said many times, just starting to become what he was going to be. The musicians who had worked with him knew it, the people at Stax knew it, and the audience that showed up in such extraordinary numbers for his late 1967 Monterey Pop Festival performance, largely a white rock audience that had

not been his primary constituency, clearly knew it too, because what he did on that stage that day converted people in real time.

The last thing he said to me was that he'd be in touch when the tour was over. I called his brother, Rogers, a few times after the crash and left messages that were never returned, which I understood. What do you say to the people who were almost on the plane? How do you have that conversation? I never found out, and eventually I stopped calling. Rogers Redding is gone now, too.

His daughter Karla runs the Otis Redding Foundation in Macon, Georgia, and the museum there draws visitors from around the world. There are festivals. The music is played and remembered and still matters to people who weren't born until long after he died. That's what survives. That's what lasts. And when I hear "Try a Little Tenderness" on



Otis Achieves Big Breakthrough at Monterey

Otis Redding's performance at the Monterey Pop Festival in June of 1967, in front of a largely white rock audience that had never been his primary constituency, was the moment the whole world outside the soul circuit finally understood what those of us who had worked with him already knew. He converted that crowd in real time, song by song, with nothing but his voice and his absolute conviction. Six months later, he was gone, twenty-six years old, his plane down in a Wisconsin lake in December. The last thing he ever said to me was that he'd be in touch when the tour was over.

I've been thinking about that for nearly sixty years.

the radio, or someone puts on “Dock of the Bay” at a party, I don’t feel sadness anymore, not primarily. I feel gratitude.

I was there. I was part of it for a little while. Not everyone gets that.

What I Learned from the Seventies

The 1970s were not my most glamorous years professionally. I wasn't working at the level I'd briefly touched in the mid-1960s with Otis, not playing the Howard, the Apollo, and the Stax sessions, not in the orbit of people making history in real time. I was a working musician on a regional circuit, grinding through nightclubs and dance halls and occasional opening slots, building an ensemble, watching it break apart, and rebuilding it, learning things about the music business and about my own limits and capabilities that I couldn't have learned any other way.

But in those years, I also witnessed things. I was present for performances, moments, and encounters that I've thought about ever since: Earth, Wind & Fire making a crowd forget what was physically possible, Stevie Wonder inhabiting other people's songs with complete authority, Michael Jackson watching James Brown and then going further, Al Green finding his stillness in front of a Washington crowd, Sly Stone burning at full intensity. At the same time, something darker consumed him from inside. I saw what the decade's greatest artists were actually doing, up close.

And what I heard in all of it, if I had to reduce it to one thing, was what I'd been hearing since I first listened to George Benson and Wes Montgomery as a teenager in Norfolk: the distinction between performing what someone

else already established and finding your own voice. The artists who lasted, the ones I watched in those years who are still listened to today, were all doing something that couldn't be reduced to imitation. "They were performing their own style and interpretation," I've said. "It was just totally different from what you hear now."

I don't say that to romanticize a past or to dismiss what came later. Music keeps moving, as it should. But there was a particular quality to the creative ambition of that generation of soul and R&B artists, a refusal to simply deliver what the market already knew it wanted, a willingness to push against expectation even at commercial risk, that I think about when I hear the echoes of their work in the music of today. Those echoes are everywhere. People who may not know where they came from are listening to them. They're still alive in the world.

That's not nothing. In fact, it's everything.

Chapter Nine

A Complete 180: A New Career, New Priorities, and a Different Kind of Stage

By the early 1980s, I had been living out of suitcases for the better part of two decades. I had ridden more buses through more nameless Southern highways than I could begin to count, checked into hotels that all looked exactly alike regardless of what city they were in, and made my living one show at a time for twenty years. I had played with some of the greatest artists in soul and rhythm & blues history. I had stood in the wings of the Howard Theater and the Apollo. I had recorded with Otis Redding inside Stax Records. I had watched Earth, Wind & Fire make an arena full of people forget what was physically possible, and I had handed my guitar to José Feliciano between sets in Miami Beach and watched him remind a room why music exists. I had survived, by the thinnest possible margin, the night that took Otis Redding.

By any honest accounting, I had lived a remarkable musical life. And sometime in the early 1980s, I began to understand that the season of that particular life was drawing to a close.

It didn't feel like failure. It didn't feel like giving up. It felt, if I'm being honest, like something I had known was coming without ever quite letting myself think about it directly. Dreams have seasons. Mine was changing.

Coming Home

The immediate reason I came back to Norfolk was straightforward: my mother needed me. She had suffered a mild heart attack, and there was no one else positioned to look after her the way she needed to be looked after. One of my daughters was living with her, just entering those unpredictable teenage years that require a steady presence, and suddenly the calculus of my life completely rearranged itself. Family mattered more than the next tour. Family mattered more than the next nightclub engagement. For the first time since I was a teenager with a pawn shop guitar and an overwhelming need to figure out how to play the thing, I wasn't chasing the next booking.

I was home.

The welcome back was warm. Norfolk and Virginia Beach still had a healthy club scene, and I knew just about everybody in it. I had every reason to expect that slotting back into local band work would be straightforward. What I discovered instead was a wall I hadn't anticipated. Musician after musician told me the same thing, with regret: Gene, if we'd known you were coming back, we would have hired you. But they already had guitar players. Every good local band was set. The touring outfits that had openings wanted someone willing to stay on the road indefinitely, which was exactly what I had come home to stop doing.

For the first time in my adult life, music wasn't opening doors. It was standing behind closed doors.

I sat with that reality for a while. I'd spent twenty years learning how to adapt quickly to new venues, new performers, new arrangements, new demands, and the instinct to find the next angle rather than stand still served me now. I started thinking about what else I knew, what else really interested me, what transferable intelligence I might have been carrying around without fully recognizing it.

The answer turned out to be sitting in my practice room, broken.

My Amplifier and How It Changed Everything

I had an old tube-type Fender amplifier that had developed a problem, and one afternoon, instead of taking it to a repair shop, I pulled the chassis out and started trying to understand what was wrong. Not just fix it, understand it. I wanted to know what each electronic part was doing, why each capacitor was placed where it was, what the tubes were accomplishing, and how the whole circuit hung together as a functioning system rather than a collection of separate parts.

That afternoon stretched into an evening, and then into several evenings, and I realized something that surprised me: I was completely absorbed. The same quality of attention I had brought to learning songs, to figuring out chord voicings by ear, to understanding how a groove worked from the inside out, the circuitry fully engaged, that same focused curiosity spread out in front of me. Music and



My Amplifier Helped Me Change My Career

Most people look at an old Fender amplifier and see a piece of vintage music equipment. I looked at mine and saw a second career. When it stopped working, I pulled the chassis out and started trying to understand exactly why, component by component, right down to the vacuum tubes. The more I studied it, the more I realized that the circuitry fully engaged the same patient curiosity I'd spent applying to music. One broken amplifier led to an electronics school and 25 years with Eastman Kodak.

electronics, I began to understand, operated on similar principles. Both involved systems where every element affected every other element. Both rewarded people who could diagnose problems methodically, hear or see the gap between what something was supposed to do and what it was actually doing, and had the patience to work backward from the symptom to the cause.

The connection felt real. I decided to trust it.

I took the money I had saved from years on the road and enrolled in an electronics college in Virginia Beach. It was one of the more deliberate decisions of my life, and also one of the better ones. The school didn't simply teach students how to swap out defective circuit boards and call it a repair. It taught theory, how electrical circuits actually functioned at the component level, how to trace a failure through a system step by step, how to work down to an individual transistor or capacitor and understand exactly what it was or wasn't doing. The education was demanding and intensely practical, and the more I got into it, the more it reminded me of Berklee: a place where you were expected to understand what you were doing and why, not merely to execute what you'd been shown.

Just as learning harmony had made me a better guitarist, giving me a theoretical framework for what I'd been doing intuitively, learning electronic theory made me a better technician from the start. Every problem had a pattern. Every solution required patience. Every mistake taught you something you hadn't known before. Within a year, I had earned my degree, and I felt the same quiet satisfaction I'd felt years earlier when a difficult piece of music finally came together under my hands.

Then something happened that I hadn't fully anticipated: I found work almost immediately.

Eastman Kodak Beckons: A Different Kind of Road

Eastman Kodak offered me a position based in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C., The irony wasn't lost on me. I had come off the road to be closer to home and family, and my new career was taking me back again to where I used to perform, only this time without a guitar, without a band bus, without a stage at the other end of the trip. I was traveling with toolboxes instead of instrument cases, servicing equipment instead of playing it. The geography of the work was similar. The purpose was entirely different.

What Eastman Kodak had placed me in the middle of was nothing less than a technological revolution, though it didn't announce itself as dramatically as that phrase suggests. Businesses and government agencies throughout the Washington area were abandoning filing cabinets full of paper records and replacing them with document-scanning systems, microfilm equipment, digital storage, and computerized retrieval systems. Today, that sounds completely ordinary. In the early 1980s, the dawn of the personal computer age, it was cutting-edge work, and the people doing it were figuring things out as they went, which suited me fine. I had spent twenty years in an industry that was always changing, always requiring you to adapt, always putting new material in front of you and expecting you to learn it fast. This was the same discipline applied to a different domain.

My job was installing, maintaining, and repairing the equipment that made that transition possible. Every day was different. Some mornings I'd be servicing microfilm readers

in a government archive. Some afternoons I'd be working on high-speed document scanners that had to process thousands of pages without interruption. Equipment changed rapidly, manufacturers pushed new models and new systems, and staying current required continuous learning. If you stopped studying, you fell behind. I had heard that lesson before, on an entirely different stage.



I Discovered a Different Kind of Road with Eastman Kodak

This is the equipment that defined my second career: Eastman Kodak document scanning and microfilm systems, cutting-edge technology in the early 1980s that helped businesses and government agencies replace filing cabinets full of paper with digital storage and computerized retrieval. Today it looks almost quaint. At the time, it was revolutionary work, and keeping it running required the same continuous learning and on-the-spot problem-solving that the music business had always demanded.

Working Inside Washington

Over time, my territory expanded, and the clients I served became remarkable in their own right. Washington, D.C., was then, as it always has been, a city where ordinary professional work sometimes brought you into proximity with the extraordinary simply by virtue of where the buildings were and who worked inside them. My client list eventually included the FBI, the State Department, Capitol Hill, Senate offices, and the Executive Office Building immediately adjacent to the White House.

Because of the sensitive nature of the work and the locations involved, I underwent extensive government background investigations and received security clearances for certain assignments. There was a particular satisfaction in that: a kid from Norfolk who had spent years on the road with a guitar, navigating the informal and sometimes chaotic world of the music business, was now trusted enough to work inside some of the most secure buildings in the country. The clearances required, I was told, were being looked into. I apparently passed.

Washington had a way of reminding you, regularly, that you were operating in a world where the ordinary and the extraordinary existed side by side without much warning between them. One afternoon, I was working inside FBI headquarters when a man walked through the entrance wearing a heavy jacket. Without any warning at all, he pulled out a large knife and drove it into his own arm while shouting something about Pakistan. Within seconds, FBI

agents had him on the floor. The whole thing unfolded directly in front of me, fast and violent, and then suddenly over. Then everyone around me went back to what they had been doing with a composure that suggested this was not entirely outside the range of normal.

Another day, I watched police pursuing a small four-cylinder Ford through downtown Washington, the driver with the accelerator fully floored, the engine screaming, patrol cars threading through Pennsylvania Avenue traffic trying to keep up. It looked funny, like a car chase from a movie that hadn't quite gotten the budget right. Washington was full of moments like those, reminders that under the surface of the most powerful city in the country, human beings were still doing unpredictable and sometimes baffling things, and that if you paid attention, the city would never bore you.

The work itself suited me in ways I hadn't predicted but came to value. Eastman Kodak trusted its field technicians to manage their own territories with considerable autonomy. As long as customers were satisfied and equipment stayed operational, management largely left you alone to decide how best to do it. That independence felt familiar. I had spent years making real-time decisions on stages and on the road without anyone looking over my shoulder, and I had come to need the freedom to manage my work on my own terms without fully realizing it.

I stayed with Eastman Kodak for twenty-five years.

The Roads Not Taken

Over the course of that career, opportunities arose to take the work in more lucrative but more demanding directions. Management positions were offered. Specialized roles in sophisticated medical diagnostic equipment came up, servicing hospital blood analyzers used to test for dangerous infectious diseases, the kind of work that paid considerably more and carried considerably more risk, both professional and personal. I passed on all of it.

That's a decision I've never second-guessed. One of the things the road taught me, over twenty years of watching how careers and lives played out in the music business, was that knowing what you don't want is as important as knowing what you do want. I had seen too many musicians chase the bigger payday or the more prestigious position and lose something essential in the trade: their health, their relationships, their sense of what they were actually doing and why. The Eastman Kodak work gave me a living, independence, intellectual engagement every day, and the ability to come home in the evening. That was enough. Sometimes enough is exactly right.

Life at 194: The Hayabusa Years

There's a kind of freedom that only comes on two wheels, and for years, I chased it hard.

I bought the bike new in 2002, long after I'd settled down; a Suzuki Hayabusa, named for the peregrine falcon that

dives on its prey at speeds topping 200 miles an hour. Part of it was a whim. But underneath the whim was something more honest: by then the music life was mostly behind me, the road and the clubs and the nights all packed away into memory, and I missed that feeling of adventure more than I let on.

I think some part of me hoped a machine that fast could put a little of that excitement back into my life and maybe bring some new, like-minded friends along with it, the way the band once had. Silver and chrome, low to the ground, built like nothing else on the road, I called her my silver and chrome baby, and she more than delivered. It was a fitting name for the bike itself, too.

The Hayabusa was, at the time, one of the fastest production motorcycles ever built, capable of running well past 190 miles an hour in the right hands, and my hands were plenty capable. I got it up to 150 more than once. On a straightaway with the right friend daring me on, I pushed past that with the machine, and the moment carried me faster than most people ever go on purpose.

The bike itself had a reputation to live up to. When Suzuki launched the Hayabusa in 1999, it wasn't just fast. It was, for a moment, the fastest production motorcycle ever built, clocked by testers at 194 miles an hour. That number rattled the entire industry. Within a year, Japanese and European manufacturers quietly agreed among themselves to cap all future production bikes at 186 miles an hour, worried that



My 2002 Suzuki Hayabusa GSX1300R Gave Me a Newfound Freedom

The Suzuki Hayabusa, the machine Gene called his "silver and chrome baby," is the same iconic silhouette he rode in 2002, virtually unchanged in spirit two decades later. It featured a 1,298cc liquid-cooled inline-four engine with DOHC and 16 valves, producing roughly 175 horsepower. By 2002, output was electronically limited to 186 mph (300 km/h) under the industry's "gentlemen's agreement," though the original 1999 model had been clocked at 194 mph before that cap took hold. Dry weight around 215 kg (474 lbs.), with a 0–60 mph time of roughly 2.7 seconds; numbers that made it, in its day, the fastest production motorcycle a rider could simply walk into a dealership and buy.

anything faster would invite government regulators to do the capping for them. The Hayabusa, in other words, was fast enough to change motorcycling history; the one bike.

That got the whole industry to agree to slow down. Even its shape told that story: designers had chased a drag coefficient sleeker than most sports cars of the era, sculpting every panel to survive the brutal air pressure of triple-digit speeds. And the name fit the machine. Suzuki called it Hayabusa after the peregrine falcon, a bird that folds its wings and dives on prey at over 200 miles an hour, fast enough, as it happens, to catch a blackbird. That wasn't an accident either. Honda's own hyperbike at the time was called the Super Blackbird, and Suzuki's engineers liked the idea of naming their falcon after the very bird it was built to hunt. Riders just called it the 'Busa, and among the crew I rode with, showing up on one meant something. It wasn't a bike for beginners; it was a bike you earned the nerve for, one mile an hour at a time.

My real riding grounds were the Catoctin Mountains, that ribbon of federal land running from just outside Baltimore up into Pennsylvania, and the hills of Virginia beyond; the Shenandoah Valley, the Blue Ridge Parkway, roads that rose and dropped like roller coasters. I remember one stretch in particular: a back road that dove down into a valley so steep you didn't need to touch the throttle to keep your speed. Gravity did the work for you. I gave it gas anyway, because why waste a hill like that? Then the road would spit you out into open farmland, old wooden fences, the kind of

countryside that looks like it hasn't changed in a hundred years.

I rode with a crew of four or five other guys, all on Suzukis, all faster and more seasoned than I was when I started. They were the ones who pulled me along. "Come on, man, keep up," until keeping up wasn't a stretch anymore. Together we rode up to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, parking the bikes by the old water-powered mill to get something to eat before heading back out. One trip took us all the way down to Daytona Beach; an overnight haul, the rest of the group camping out while I stayed with my father-in-law, who lived in Vero Beach, before meeting back up with the pack the next day. In Daytona we watched dirt bike jumps that I never much cared for, and quarter-mile drag races on an abandoned airstrip outside of town that I cared for a great deal.

One rider in that group stood out. A man with more nerve than anyone I'd ever met. He ran a quarter mile in about 9.3 seconds. Once, cruising down the highway in a pack of five or six bikes, a group of strangers pulled up looking for a race. We ignored them and waved them off until one finally challenged him directly. It wasn't close. He hit 180 miles an hour and left them behind in seconds. I never forgot it, and I still wonder, all these years later, where that rider ended up.

There was something almost meditative in it, too. A car puts a windshield between you and the world, and you watch the scenery go by like it's on a screen. A motorcycle doesn't

allow that distance. The wind, the engine's pitch as it climbed through the gears, the smell of the mountain air turning to farmland air, the exact lean of the bike through a curve; all of it came at me directly, with nothing in between. There wasn't room left over to think about anything else. Bills, work, whatever else was on my mind back in Odenton; none of it could survive out on those roads. The bike demanded my full attention and gave me, in return, a kind of quiet I didn't find anywhere else: mind and machine and mountain moving as one thing.

For all the speed, I never thought of myself as reckless. Freedom wasn't really about going fast. It was about noticing the world moving past me: the mountains, the valleys, the old farms, the particular quiet of a road with nobody else on it. The speed was part of the pleasure, but not the point of it. I knew exactly how much throttle a moment called for, and I knew when just to let the hill do the work instead.

By the time I moved down to Vero Beach and brought the bike with me, something in my body had already started to shift, though I didn't know it yet; the earliest, unnoticed effects of declining eyesight. The Florida roads were flat, and flat roads, I found, just weren't the same. The mountains had been the whole point.

I sold the bike two or three years ago, closing out a chapter that ran from the switchbacks of the Catoctins to the flatlands of the Treasure Coast. What's left are the stories; the falcon-fast machine, the friends who dared me faster,

and the particular, specific joy of coming down out of a blind curve into a valley full of old fences and green fields, going just fast enough to feel like flying.

Music in the Background

Music never completely disappeared from my life during those years. It simply stopped being my full-time identity, which is a different thing entirely, and not a loss in the way it might sound.

During the 1990s, I partnered musically with a keyboard player of exceptional gifts, someone who could simultaneously handle bass lines, organ parts, synthesizer work, and melody with a fluency that most musicians can't manage on a single instrument, let alone several at once. I saw real potential in what the two of us might build together. I had ideas about presentation and promotion, about how to position what we were doing and take it somewhere beyond the local circuit.

The partnership didn't survive those ideas. What I understood as thinking bigger, he experienced as overreach, as me trying to take control of something that was supposed to be collaborative. That misreading was frustrating, but it also crystallized something I had been observing since my earliest years in the business: the gap between artistic talent and business intelligence is real and wide, and most musicians never fully cross it. Talent gets you into the room. What you do once you're in the room, how you plan, how you present, how you treat the people around you, how you

think about the long game rather than just the next performance- that's a completely different skill set, and having one doesn't guarantee having the other. I had watched that gap swallow careers more promising than mine throughout my entire working life.

The partnership dissolved. Occasional studio recording sessions came along over the years. Rhythm guitar work here and there. Performances with local musicians when the right situation presented itself. Little by little, those things became the pleasant background of a life that had its center of gravity elsewhere, rather than the center of gravity itself. I found I could live with that. More than live with it, I could appreciate it. The music was still there, still mine, still a source of pleasure, but it no longer had to carry the full weight of my identity. It had already done that work. Now it was simply part of who I was.

Another Kind of Commitment

In 1992, I married again, and the life I was building in those years finally had the shape I'd been working toward without fully knowing it.

I had watched what the road could do to relationships. I had watched it up close for twenty years, from the inside, with a clear and unsentimental view of the temptations and compromises that sustained proximity to even modest fame could create. Men away from home for weeks at a time, in cities where nobody knew them, surrounded by people whose interest in them was directly tied to the performance

they'd just given- that environment tested people, and the tests weren't always passed. I had seen enough of that world to know exactly what I didn't want to replicate.

What I wanted, at this stage of my life, was different. Stability. Commitment. The simple but difficult discipline of coming home every evening and being present for the people who needed me there. For the first time in my adult life, success wasn't measured by applause or bookings or the size of the venue. It was measured by keeping promises. That turned out to be its own demanding standard, quieter than the road, less dramatic, but no less real.

Florida, and the Long View

Eastman Kodak offered a retirement package in 2010, and I took it. Four years later, I left the Washington area for Florida, and the pace of life shifted in a way I hadn't fully anticipated, and I found I genuinely welcomed it. The Sebastian and Vero Beach areas were warm, quiet, and unhurried, with the particular quality of light that coastal Florida has in the mornings, soft and clear and not in any apparent rush. After decades of being in motion, of always having somewhere to be and something to fix and someone waiting on the other end of the drive, the stillness felt like something I had earned.

The guitar still comes out from time to time. The memories never faded and never will.

When I look back across the full arc of it now, the pawn shop guitar, the Norfolk clubs, the Southern touring circuit, Otis, Stax, the Howard, the Apollo, Berklee, the broken amplifier that led to twenty-five years with Eastman Kodak, the Washington buildings and the government clearances, my silver Hayabusa, and the slow drive home in the evenings; what I see is not two separate stories but one continuous one. The discipline I learned playing music was the discipline I brought to electronics. The curiosity that drove me to understand why a chord worked was the same curiosity that drove me to understand why a circuit worked. The adaptability I developed on the road, the ability to walk into a new situation quickly, read what it required, and deliver without excuses, has always served me as well.

The music made me who I am. The rest of my life was built on that foundation.

I've also learned, over the full length of that journey, some things about people that no school teaches and no career prepares you for directly. Not everyone who calls you a friend truly is one. That lesson arrived more than once, sometimes gently and sometimes not, and each time it required the same response: absorb it, adjust accordingly, and don't let it make you hard. The real friends, the ones who were there in the lean years as well as the good ones, the ones whose interest in you has nothing to do with what you can do for them, are among the most valuable things a life accumulates. I've been fortunate in that department, and I know it.

Most of all, what I've come to value in these quiet Florida mornings, in a way I couldn't have understood when I was young and chasing the next gig, is my independence. Not independence in the adolescent sense of freedom from obligation- I've had plenty of obligations and honored most of them- but independence in the deeper sense of knowing exactly who you are and what you think and what you stand for, regardless of who is watching or what the room expects of you.

After all the buses and airplanes, all the recording studios and concert halls and government buildings and long drives home, I've arrived at a simple understanding that I wish I could hand to every young musician just starting out on whatever road is in front of them: the greatest success isn't measured by fame or by fortune. It's measured by how clearly you know who you are when the spotlight finally fades, and by whether you like what you find there.

I do. That's enough. That's more than enough.

Chapter 10

What the Legends Taught Me

There comes a point in a long career when you stop thinking about what you've done and start thinking about what it meant. I reached that point somewhere in my sixties, sitting quietly in Florida with nothing pressing to do for the first time in forty years, and what surprised me was how much of what I'd accumulated over those decades had nothing to do with music in the technical sense. The notes, the chords, the arrangements, the many nights of playing the same song in a different city: all of that was real, and all of that mattered. But the deeper education, the one that actually shaped who I became as a person, came from watching other people. From standing close enough to greatness, long enough, to understand what it actually looked like from the inside.

I was never the star. I want to say that plainly because it matters to what I'm about to describe. Being the star, I've observed, can distort your perception of almost everything around you: the people, the work, the meaning of it all. But being the musician beside the star, the one with a clear sightline to everything happening on and off that stage, gives you a perspective that very few people ever get. I had that perspective for forty years. What follows is what I learned from it.

Presence Is Not the Same as Performance

The first thing the legends taught me, and I mean this, was the very first thing I noticed, even as a young guitarist barely keeping up on those early road trips with Otis, is that the greatest performers were never performing. They were present. Completely, entirely, sometimes almost frighteningly present, in a way that ordinary people in ordinary circumstances rarely are.

Otis Redding had this quality from the beginning, before the fame, before the records charted, before anyone outside the Southern touring circuit had any idea who he was. When Otis walked to a microphone, something changed in the room. Not because of anything he did deliberately- no calculated entrance, no theatrical gesture- but because he arrived with his whole self. Every night. In front of fifty people or thousands, in a gymnasium in Georgia or on the stage of the Apollo Theater in New York. The level of commitment never varied because, for Otis, there was no level to adjust. He couldn't do it any other way.



Otis Redding Was Just a Country Boy Breaking Loose

Otis Redding grew up in Dawson, Georgia, shaped by the same forces that built soul music everywhere it took root: church, gospel, and the blues running through rural Southern life. What made him singular wasn't the ingredients. It was the intensity he brought to mixing them. When Otis sang "These Arms of Mine," or "I've Been Loving You Too Long," or "Try a Little Tenderness," which was always my favorite song to play behind him, you didn't just hear the song. You felt every word land somewhere in your chest. His performances weren't polished in the Motown sense; no choreography, no slick presentation smoothing over the edges. They were raw and emotional, and that rawness is exactly why audiences responded to him the way they did, in any venue, in front of any crowd, every single night.

I watched that quality in different forms in every great performer I encountered over the years. Stevie Wonder sitting in with a house band in a Washington, D.C., club, inhabiting other people's songs with such complete authority that they became his in the moment of performance. Al Green on the National Mall, finding his stillness in front of an enormous crowd, so settled in himself and in his material that the music seemed to flow out of him without effort. James Brown on any stage anywhere, bringing the full accumulated force of everything he'd ever learned, practiced, and perfected to bear on every single performance, regardless of the size of the room or the size of the check.

What I eventually understood about this quality, and it took me a long time to fully understand it, is that it can't be manufactured. You can study it, approximate it, and develop habits that support it, but the thing itself either comes from somewhere real, or it doesn't come at all. The audience always knew. They could feel the difference between a performer who was present and one who was going through the motions, even when they couldn't have articulated what they were feeling. The body knows. The room knows. And the musicians behind the performer know it most immediately of all.

That understanding changed how I approached every performance of my own career, from the largest stage to the smallest club. I stopped thinking about playing and started thinking about arriving; bringing myself, my full attention, my complete investment to wherever the music was

happening that night. Not perfectly. Not every time. But as a standard worth measuring yourself against, it never failed to improve the work.

How You Treat People Tells Everything

The second lesson came from a more personal kind of observation, and it took me longer to fully appreciate because I was young when I first noticed it, and young people tend to dismiss what they see as simply the way things are.

The music business, especially the touring circuit of the 1960s and 1970s, was full of people with power over others. Managers, promoters, label executives, and headlining artists controlled whether the musicians around them worked or didn't, ate well or didn't, and got credit or didn't. That kind of power reveals character in a way almost nothing else does because it removes the social pressure to behave decently. When there are no consequences for treating others badly, some people do so. And in the music business of that era, there were often very few consequences.

What I noticed, over and over again across forty years, was that the artists who lasted, the ones whose music endured, whose reputations survived the inevitable ups and downs of a volatile industry, whose names still mean something decades after their peak commercial moment, were almost without exception people who treated the musicians around them with honest respect. Not performed respect, not the

public graciousness of someone managing their image, but the private, consistent, unremarkable decency of people who simply understood that the musicians behind them were human beings doing important work.

Otis Redding had this. Whatever money tensions arose during my time with his band were real, and I reacted badly. Leaving was a mistake I've never fully stopped second-guessing because Otis himself was never contemptuous of the musicians around him. He knew what the band gave him. He understood that the groove and the sound were collaborative achievements, not his alone. Joey Dee had it too, in a different way: a warmth toward his musicians that made working with him feel like more than a transaction. Smokey Robinson had it the night he slipped out the back door of the Howard Theater and sat down to dinner like a regular person, because that's what he was when the performance was over. Even in brief backstage encounters, you could feel it: the acknowledgment, the eye contact, the moment of human recognition.

And then there were the others. The performers who walked past musicians without seeing them, who treated the band as furniture, whose graciousness existed only in the direction of cameras and important people, and evaporated the moment the audience couldn't see it. I won't name them. There's no point. But I noticed it, filed it away, and it shaped every professional relationship I had for the rest of my career.

The lesson I took from all of it is simple enough to state, though it took years of observation to absorb: how you treat the people who can do nothing for you is the truest measure of who you are. In the music business, those people are usually the musicians. Watch how a star treats the band, and you'll know everything you need to know about the star.

Talent Is the Entry Point, Not the Destination

The third thing I learned, and this one came primarily from watching acts like Gladys Knight and the Pips and the 5th Dimension from the side of the stage during those college touring years with Leroy Taylor, is that talent, by itself, is almost beside the point at the highest level.

Every performer who has ever headlined a major venue has had talent. That goes without saying. The talent is what got them in the room. But the difference between the acts that lasted and the acts that faded, between the performers who were still drawing audiences twenty years after their first hit and the ones who were gone after three years, had almost nothing to do with raw ability and almost everything to do with what they did with it.

What separated the lasting acts was work. Specifically, the willingness to apply the same relentless attention to detail to the ten thousandth performance that they had applied to the first. The Temptations, for all the internal turbulence that defined their history offstage, never once let any of that show in a performance. The choreography was precise, the harmonies were exact, and the audience's attention was

managed with the care of people who understood that nothing could be left to chance. Earth, Wind & Fire rehearsed their theatrical productions with the same intensity that most performing acts reserved for the music itself, because Maurice White understood that everything the audience experienced, from the first note to the final illusion, was part of a single unified statement and all of it had to be right.

I think about Leroy Taylor sometimes in this context because Leroy had great talent, real stage presence, a natural command of a crowd, and a voice that could fill a room. But it wasn't enough. Not because the talent wasn't there, but because the discipline to support and develop and sustain that talent wasn't always there alongside it. The negotiation that cost us the opening slot with the 5th Dimension, the decisions that prioritized short-term gain over long-term relationships, the failure to fully appreciate what the musicians around him were contributing; all of those were failures of discipline and judgment rather than talent. The music business is full of Leroy Taylors. Fully gifted people who never quite became what they could have been because talent alone, it turns out, doesn't carry you all the way.

The artists who made it all the way, who built careers that outlasted trends, label changes, personal crises, and the fickle attention of audiences, were the ones who understood that talent was only the beginning of the conversation.

Know Your Own Voice

The fourth lesson is the one I return to most often, and it connects to something I said much earlier in this book about the guitar players who shaped how I heard music from the beginning. Wes Montgomery and George Benson both had something that went beyond technique, beyond taste, beyond even the extraordinary natural gifts they possessed. They had a voice. A sound on the instrument that was irreducibly, immediately, unmistakably their own.

You knew within two notes that you were listening to Wes Montgomery. You knew within two notes that you were listening to George Benson. And that quality, that complete individuality of musical expression, was what I spent most of my career reaching toward and never fully achieving, which is probably as it should be. The reaching is the point.

What I observed across every great artist I encountered in forty years was that the ones who endured had found their own voice and committed to it completely, even when the market pulled in a different direction, even when imitating someone more commercially successful would have been the easier path. Al Green didn't sound like anyone else. Stevie Wonder, at his peak, was making music that had no real precedent. George Clinton built an entire musical universe from scratch, strange and funny and serious all at once, and didn't apologize for any of it. Otis Redding sang with a rawness and conviction that was completely his own at a moment when polished Motown acts were dominating

the charts, and the world eventually came to him rather than the other way around.

The performers who lost themselves trying to sound like whoever was currently successful, who chased trends instead of developing their own musical identity, rarely lasted. They might have a hit, might have a moment, but without a unique voice underneath the success, there was nothing to sustain it when the moment passed.

I applied this lesson to my own playing in a quieter way. I was never going to develop a guitar voice as distinctive as Wes Montgomery's. That was never the realistic aspiration. But I could bring something uniquely mine to every performance, something that came from my experience and feelings about the music, rather than simply reproducing what someone else had already done. Berklee helped me understand that distinction intellectually. The road taught me to live it.

Survive the Business to Keep Playing the Music

The fifth lesson is the most practical, and in some ways the most important, and it's the one I wish someone had sat me down and explained clearly when I was eighteen years old and first stepping onto a professional stage.

The music business will try to break you. Not maliciously, not in most cases, but structurally, because the business is organized around the interests of people who are not musicians, and the gap between what music means and

what music earns is vast and often brutal. I saw this at Stax when our recordings were shelved after hours of work and creative investment, for reasons unrelated to the quality of what we'd made. I saw it in the negotiation that cost Leroy Taylor's group an opening slot that could have changed all of our trajectories. I saw it in the faces of enormously gifted artists who found themselves on the wrong side of a contract, a label decision, or a shift in popular taste and couldn't find their way back.

What the survivors had in common, and I mean the people who stayed in the music, who kept working and kept playing across decades rather than flaming out or fading away, was a clear-eyed understanding that the business and the music were two separate things, and that protecting your ability to keep playing required paying serious attention to the business even when every creative instinct in you wanted to ignore it.

This meant knowing what you were worth and asking for it, but knowing when to compromise and when to hold firm. It meant building relationships carefully, treating every professional connection as something worth maintaining rather than exploiting. It meant understanding contracts, or finding someone you trusted who did. It meant not letting pride make decisions that judgment should make. And it meant accepting, as I had to accept after leaving Otis's band over a money dispute that probably could have been resolved, that some losses are self-inflicted and the only productive response is to learn from them and move on.

I made plenty of mistakes in the business side of my career. More than I want to count here. But I stayed. I kept playing. I found the next opportunity when the last one closed, and the one after that, for forty years. That persistence, I've come to believe, is itself a form of craft; something that has to be practiced and developed with the same intentionality as the music.

What Stays

I sit on the patio some mornings with my coffee, and I think about all of it: the people, the stages, the long highways between cities, the conversations that lasted five minutes, and the friendships that lasted decades. I think about Otis telling me he wanted me back in the band, and what it means that I'm alive to remember him saying it. I think about Ben Cauley holding onto that seat cushion in the cold December waters of Lake Monona, hearing voices he couldn't reach. I think about a teenage Michael Jackson stepping into James Brown's dance and going further with it in one unrehearsed moment than most people go in a lifetime of trying. I think about Smokey Robinson eating dinner like a regular person, grateful to have escaped his own fame for an hour.

And what I feel, sitting here in the Florida quiet with the birds and the water, is not nostalgia exactly. Nostalgia is soft and a little dishonest. It smooths out the hard parts and makes the past look better than it was. What I feel is more like gratitude. A deep, specific, sometimes almost overwhelming gratitude for having been there. For having

been close enough to greatness, long enough, to understand something about what it actually requires of a person.

The legends taught me that great music comes from complete presence, decency, relentless discipline, an unwavering commitment to your own voice, and the stubborn determination to survive whatever the business throws at you so that you can keep making the music. None of those things is glamorous. None of them show up in the photographs, the highlight reels, or the award show speeches. But they are what the work actually is, underneath everything else. They are what lasts.

I was never the headline act. But I was there, and I paid attention, and that turned out to be everything.

Chapter 11

Career Highlights of Gene Dail

A career that spans over forty years doesn't reduce itself easily to a list. The moments that mattered most were rarely the most spectacular ones: a conversation backstage, a single night in a room where everything clicked, a performance nobody photographed that you still remember note for note decades later. But there is value, I think, in setting down the shape of a career plainly, without embellishment, so that the people who read a story like this one can see the arc of it whole.

What follows isn't everything. It's the highlights, the engagements, the artists, the institutions, and the experiences that defined what forty years on the road and in the studio actually looked like from where I was standing. Some of these names you'll recognize from earlier chapters, where I told the full story behind the connection. Others appear here for the first time: musicians and performers who were part of my working life, even if their stories didn't make it into the main narrative. All of them were real, all of them mattered, and all of them contributed in one way or another to the musician and the man I became.

Early Foundations, Norfolk and the Tidewater Region, late 1950s, early 1960s

Gene began his musical life in Norfolk, Virginia, teaching himself guitar on a pawn-shop instrument purchased on a

five-dollar-a-week layaway. His early development was shaped by the rich Tidewater music scene, one of the most musically fertile regional environments in the country, and by the influence of guitar giants Wes Montgomery and George Benson, whose recordings he studied intently. He performed with local bands throughout Norfolk and the surrounding area, building his reputation on the regional club and dance circuit and recording demo sessions at the studio of producer and label owner Leni Guess, one of the central figures in what musicians of the era called the Norfolk Sound.

The Rockin' Cabanas and Otis Redding, 1964-1966

Recruited by bass player and bandleader Mac Robinson to join the Rockin' Cabanas, Gene became part of the road band backing a young Otis Redding during the critical early years of Redding's rise. Over approximately four years, Gene toured extensively throughout the American South and beyond, performing in theaters, auditoriums, dance halls, and clubs across Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and other states on the soul and R&B touring circuit. Notable engagements during this period included a major stadium performance in Jamaica in 1964, believed to have been attended by the Prime Minister. Gene was also present for recording sessions at Stax Records in Memphis, Tennessee, where the road band recorded alongside Otis rather than the label's regular session musicians, Booker T. & the M.G.'s, a rare and significant departure from Stax's standard practice.

The Howard Theater, Washington, D.C., Late 1960s

After leaving Otis Redding's touring band, Gene joined the house orchestra at the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., one of the most celebrated and historically significant stages in Black American entertainment. In this role, he provided musical backing for a wide range of major performing artists across soul, R&B, jazz, and popular music, developing the versatility, sight-reading ability, and professional discipline that defined his playing throughout the rest of his career. Notable musical associations during this period included guitarist Cornell Dupree, saxophonist King Curtis, composer and multi-instrumentalist Andrew White, and Marvin Tarplin, lead guitarist for Smokey Robinson and the Miracles.

The Apollo Theater, New York, Late 1960s

In 1967, Gene was called to New York on short notice to serve as guitarist for Otis Redding at the Apollo Theater, filling in when the Bar-Kays' regular guitarist couldn't travel. This engagement marked the final time Gene performed with Otis Redding before his death in a plane crash near Madison, Wisconsin, on December tenth, 1967. Redding had invited Gene backstage at the Apollo to rejoin his band after the current tour. The scheduling decision that kept Gene off the plane that night saved his life.

Leroy Taylor and the Leroy Taylor Explosion, late 1960s

Gene toured as guitarist with the Leroy Taylor Explosion, a Washington and Baltimore-based group that performed on the college circuit throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern United States during a period of explosive growth in campus live music. The group served as the opening act for nationally prominent touring artists, including Gladys Knight and the Pips and The 5th Dimension, providing Gene with extensive experience in professional large-venue support performances and close observation of both acts' celebrated stage productions.

Joey Dee and the Starlites, circa 1969-1970

Gene joined the band of Joey Dee, nationally known as the creator of "Peppermint Twist" and widely referred to as the Godfather of the Twist, for an engagement at the Newport Lounge inside the Newport Hotel in Miami Beach, Florida. The Newport Lounge was one of the premier entertainment venues on the South Florida circuit during that era, drawing affluent audiences and regularly hosting major touring artists during the Winter months. During this engagement, José Feliciano, then at the height of his commercial popularity, joined the band informally between sets for an impromptu performance using Gene's Fender guitar.

Clifford Curry and the Carolina/Georgia Circuit, 1970s

Gene performed regularly as guitarist for Clifford Curry, widely regarded as the King of Beach Music along the Carolina and Georgia coastal circuit. Curry's signature recording, "She Shot a Hole in My Soul," became a regional

anthem after its release in 1967, and his touring operation maintained a loyal, devoted following across the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida for decades. Gene's work with Curry gave him sustained experience on the regional soul and beach music circuit and a deep understanding of the relationship between a performing artist and a long-cultivated regional audience.

Berklee College of Music, Boston, Massachusetts, early 1970s

Gene enrolled at Berklee College of Music in Boston, then already one of the world's premier contemporary music institutions, to study harmony, composition, transposition, jazz theory, and advanced chord structures. His instructors included vibraphonist Gary Burton, one of the most innovative and influential figures in modern jazz, known for his pioneering four-mallet technique and for integrating rock and contemporary idioms into jazz composition and performance. Gene credits his Berklee education with fundamentally transforming how he heard and understood music, giving him a theoretical foundation that deepened every subsequent performance and studio engagement.

The Smoke Band, Norfolk, Virginia, early 1970s

After returning to Norfolk from Berklee, Gene formed a local ensemble called Smoke with drummer Melvin Glover, bassist Rob Evans, and saxophonist and flutist Bernie Jacobs, a longtime friend and gifted musician who later built a successful jazz career in the Seattle area. The group

performed throughout Norfolk and Virginia Beach at dances, local events, and club engagements, providing Gene with a stable base for performing during his transition back to civilian life in the Tidewater region.

Associations and Encounters with Major Artists

Over the course of his career, Gene performed alongside, shared stages with, worked in close professional proximity to, or had significant personal encounters with the following artists, many of whose stories are told in detail in earlier chapters of this memoir:

Otis Redding. Smokey Robinson. The Temptations, including Dennis Edwards. Earth, Wind & Fire. Stevie Wonder. James Brown. Al Green. Diana Ross. Gladys Knight and the Pips. The 5th Dimension. David Bowie. Sly and the Family Stone. Larry Graham. Joey Dee. José Feliciano. Clifford Curry. Carl Anderson. Carla Thomas. Joe Tex. Solomon Burke. King Curtis and the King Pins, including Cornell Dupree. Andrew White. Marvin Tarplin. General Norman Johnson. The Showmen. Chairmen of the Board. The Moments. Kool and the Gang. Earth, Wind & Fire. The Ohio Players. Funkadelic. McFadden and Whitehead. Marvin Gaye.

Technical Career, Eastman Kodak, 1985-2010

After transitioning out of full-time performing, Gene earned a degree in electronics from a Virginia Beach college and joined Eastman Kodak as a field service technician, a

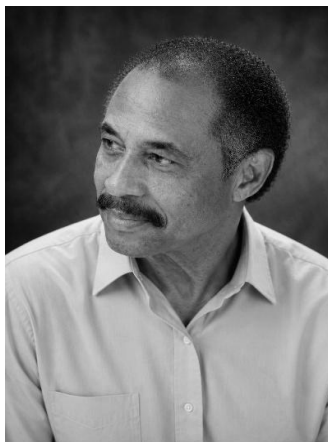
position he held for twenty-five years. His territory included some of the most sensitive facilities in Washington, D.C., among them the FBI headquarters, the State Department, the Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House, and offices throughout Capitol Hill. This work required and resulted in government security clearances at multiple levels. Gene retired from Eastman Kodak in 2010, concluding a second career distinguished by the same professionalism, adaptability, and disciplined work ethic that had defined his first.

Retirement

Gene Dail retired from professional life in 2010 and relocated to Sebastian and Vero Beach, Florida, in 2015, where he continues to reside. The guitar remains part of his life. The memories have never faded. And the story, as this book demonstrates, turned out to be well worth telling.

About the Author, Gene Dail

Gene Dail is a veteran soul and R&B guitarist, vocalist, electronics technician, and now a writer whose life spans two remarkable careers and some of the most transformative decades in American popular music and technology. Born and raised in Norfolk, Virginia, Gene came of age in the rich



Tidewater music scene of the 1950s and 1960s. This regional talent hub quietly produced a remarkable number of accomplished performers, including General Norman Johnson of the Showmen and Chairmen of the Board, percussionist Sangoma Everett, and songwriter and producer William "Smitty" Smith, who later worked with Patti LaBelle, Billy Joel, Rod Stewart, and Bob Dylan.

At sixteen, Gene bought his first guitar from a Norfolk pawn shop on a five-dollar-a-week layaway and taught himself to play largely by ear, studying the records of jazz guitar giants Wes Montgomery and George Benson until their influence shaped how he approached the instrument. Within a few years, his reputation as a guitarist had traveled far enough through the Tidewater music network to reach bandleader Mac Robinson, who recruited him to join the Rockin' Cabanas, the road band backing a young soul singer

from Dawson, Georgia, named Otis Redding, who was just beginning his climb toward national recognition.

What followed was a musical career that took Gene from Southern touring circuits and segregated dance halls to the stages of the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., and the Apollo Theater in New York, from recording sessions at the legendary Stax Records in Memphis to college campus tours opening for Gladys Knight and the Pips and The 5th Dimension, from the Newport Lounge in Miami Beach, where he once handed his Fender guitar to José Feliciano for an impromptu between-sets jam, to a year of formal study at Berklee College of Music in Boston, where vibraphonist and jazz innovator Gary Burton was among his most memorable instructors. He toured the Carolina and Georgia circuit with Clifford Curry, the King of Beach Music, performing with a band called Breakin' Bad, opening for top acts including Junior Walker, The Four Tops, and The Drifters. He performed at Greenwich Village clubs alongside Larry Graham of Sly and the Family Stone, and witnessed a recording session in a darkened New York studio where Sly Stone ordered every light turned off and proceeded to record a top-ten hit in complete darkness, an experience Gene has never forgotten and has never been able to fully explain.

Along the way, Gene witnessed moments that few musicians of his generation were in a position to see. He watched Earth, Wind & Fire make a crowd forget what was physically possible through a stage illusion that stopped the room cold. He saw a teenage Michael Jackson study James

Brown's signature dance from across a room and then surpass it in a single unrehearsed moment that left Brown himself visibly astonished. He slipped out the back door of the Howard Theater for a quiet dinner with Smokey Robinson, held Diana Ross's robe in the wings while she performed, and stood in silence as Otis Redding sang "Try a Little Tenderness," always Gene's favorite song to play behind him, in front of audiences who felt every word land somewhere in their chest.

The most defining moment of Gene's life came in December of 1967, when a scheduling decision kept him off the private plane that carried Otis Redding and most of the Bar-Kays into Lake Monona near Madison, Wisconsin. Otis was twenty-six years old. He had told Gene, just days earlier at the Apollo Theater, that he wanted him back in the band when the tour ended. Gene has thought about that conversation nearly every day since.

When the music stopped opening doors in the early 1980s, Gene did what he had always done on the road: he adapted. Drawn by the same curiosity that had once driven him to understand why a chord worked, he found himself one afternoon pulling apart a broken Fender amplifier and discovering that electronic circuitry rewarded exactly the same diagnostic patience and systematic thinking that music had always required. He enrolled in an electronics school in Virginia Beach, earned his degree, and joined Eastman Kodak as a field service technician, a position he would hold for twenty-five years. His territory eventually included some of the most secure facilities in Washington, D.C.: FBI

headquarters, the State Department, the Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House, and offices throughout Capitol Hill. The work required government security clearances at multiple levels and brought its own cast of unforgettable moments, including witnessing a self-inflicted knife attack inside FBI headquarters and watching a police pursuit wind through the streets of Pennsylvania Avenue like something out of a low-budget film. Through it all, Gene brought to his second career the same professionalism, adaptability, and quiet discipline that had earned him the respect of musicians throughout his first.

Known among fellow musicians for his versatility and steady presence under any circumstances, and among colleagues at Eastman Kodak for his independence and reliability, Gene built both careers not in the spotlight but through consistent, unflashy excellence at whatever the work required. He was never the headline act. But for years on stage and twenty-five years in the field, he was there, in the wings, on the bus, in the studio, inside some of the most sensitive buildings in the country, watching, listening, learning, and doing his part with care.

Gene retired from Eastman Kodak in 2010 and relocated to Sebastian and Vero Beach, Florida, in 2015, where the pace is slow, the mornings are quiet, and the guitar still comes out from time to time. This memoir, shaped through long conversations with his collaborator, Bob Casper, and encouraged by friends at Trinity Episcopal Church in Vero Beach, is his attempt to set the record straight about what

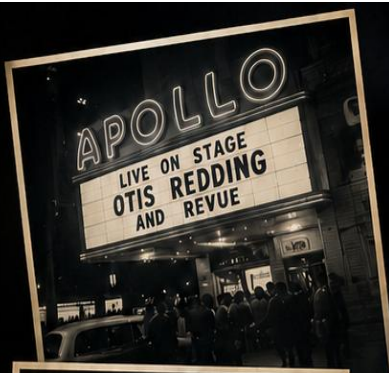
those years were really like and to honor the music and the people who made them worth living.

From the clubs and theaters of the segregated South to the legendary stages of the Apollo Theater, the Howard Theatre, and even a jam session with *this all-star horn section*, Gene Dail spent more than forty years living the life most music fans never see.

Born in Norfolk and armed with little more than talent, determination, and a pawn shop guitar, Gene rose from local dance bands to performing beside some of Soul and Rhythm & Blues' most influential artists during a golden age of American music.

In this candid and heartfelt memoir, Gene takes readers behind the curtain and onto the road — sharing unforgettable stories of touring, recording, friendships, hardships, humor, and the extraordinary personalities who shaped the Soul–R&B era.

More than a music story, *Behind the Music* is a journey through a transformative time in America, told through the eyes of a working musician who was there when the music, and the culture, were changing forever.



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