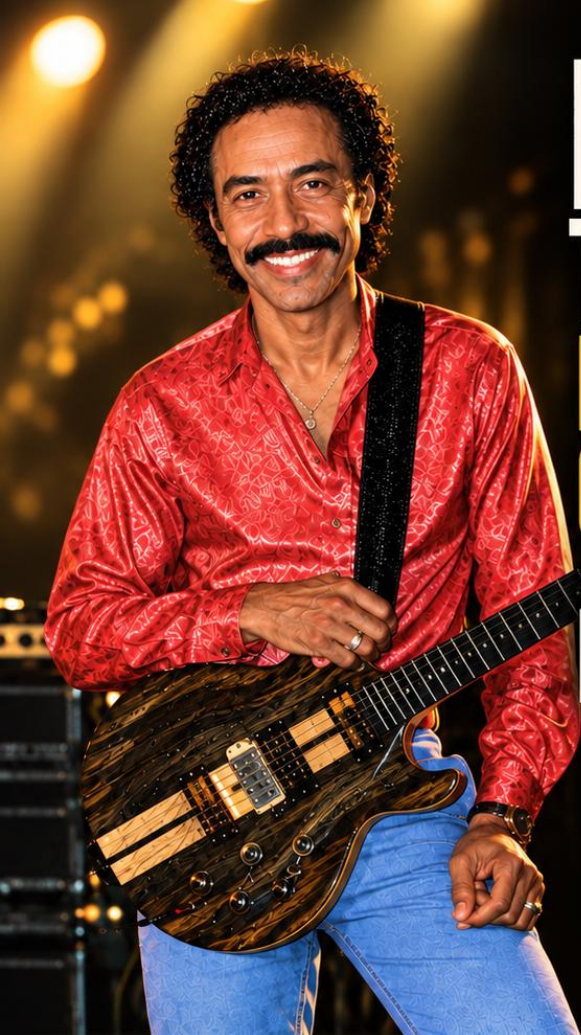




BEHIND THE MUSIC: FORTY YEARS ON THE ROAD

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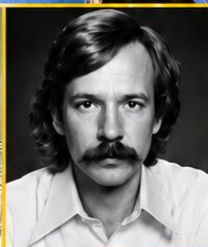
R&B LEGENDS

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.



CLIFFORD CURRY



GARY BURTON



OTIS REDDING



GLADYS KNIGHT



SMOKEY ROBINSON

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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Cover Illustration. *Musical artists and legends Gene knew or worked with during his years on the road as a guitarist. From left: Clifford Curry, Wikipedia; Gary Burton, The Music Museum of New England; Otis Redding, Bruce Fleming/AP; Gladys Knight, Instagram; Smokey Robinson, Primary Wave Music.*

Foreword

Getting to know Gene over the past several months through many personal interviews and conversations has been a genuine pleasure. Before we began this project to tell his story, I knew him only through brief encounters, usually at church on Sunday in Vero Beach. Gene initially struck me as quiet and introspective; a man more inclined to listen than to talk about himself. I had little idea of the remarkable life behind that reserved manner.

As our conversations unfolded, I discovered Gene's keen intellect, extraordinary memory, and thoughtful understanding of the unusual path his life had taken. Each interview brought another surprise. A question about one period of his life led to a forgotten performance, a night on the road, a recording session, or an unexpected encounter with someone whose name would later enter American music history.

Gene had been there; not as a spectator looking in from the outside, but as a working musician. He experienced the long drives, late-night performances, rehearsals, recording studios, backstage conversations, disappointments, friendships, and unexpected opportunities that made up a musician's life. Along the way, his path crossed those of some of the great figures of soul and R&B music.

What impressed me most, however, was the way Gene told these stories. There was little self-promotion and no

attempt to make the past larger than it was. Often, he would mention something remarkable almost in passing, and I would stop him to ask, “Gene, tell me more about that.” Slowly, one recollection at a time, a much larger story emerged.

That is really how *Behind the Music* came to be. It grew out of conversations between two friends, one asking questions and the other reaching back across more than half a century to recover the people, places, music, and moments that shaped his life.

This memoir gives Gene the chance to take us beyond the stage lights and familiar names and into the life of one of the musicians behind the music. It is a story of talent and perseverance, fortunate choices and missed opportunities, life on the road, and music's enduring power.

I am grateful that Gene trusted me to help him tell it.

RE (Bob) Casper, 2026

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Introduction

Why I Decided to Write This Memoir

“He (Gary Jeff Walker) 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 specific detail that surprised me as much as anyone. Names, places, conversations, moments I hadn’t consciously thought about in years.”

Gene Dail

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's WLW 700

radio station 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 January 27, Gary called, and we did the interview.



Illustration Source: Gary Jeff Walker, Northern Kentucky Tribune

He asked about my career as a guitarist, my relationship with Otis Redding, and what it was like to travel and tour with him in 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

**Gene Dail was a featured guest on The Night Cap with Gary Jeff Walker episode that aired on January 28, 2026. You can stream or download the recording directly through iHeartRadio, Apple Podcasts, or Spotify.*

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. 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, many friends at Trinity Episcopal encouraged and supported me, especially Paul Gallagher, Christiane Hermanas, Paul Lagassey, 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 your story matters and is 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, bus rides, 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 this gives you a real sense of what that era felt like from the inside; what life on the road was actually like, who those artists were as people when the cameras weren't rolling, and what the music meant to both those who made it and those who heard it. Above all, I hope it entertains you while teaching you something true about a time and a world that deserve to be remembered accurately and treated 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 I've remembered here is someone who shaped me, and I'm grateful to every one of them.

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

Gene Dail

Prologue

“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.”

Gene Dail

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 became enough of a compass to carry me to 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 both careers taught me far more 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. Famous names are 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

“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.”

Gene Dail

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.

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. A particular kind of singing 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.



To find soul music's deepest roots, I wouldn't start with a record label or a radio station. I'd start with a Sunday morning in a Black church somewhere in the South, decades before anyone named what we were doing: call-and-response, hand-clapping that pushed the whole room forward, singing that wasn't trying to be pretty so much as true.

Original Illustration: The Black gospel tradition that helped shape Southern soul music.

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: 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 and working through records by ear, I absorbed a lot of blues phrasing without fully realizing it: how you could make a single note cry if you bent it right, how 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. People came to call that fusion 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.

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.



I always think of Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, and Fats Domino as the ones who built the bridge between traditional R&B and soul. Ray took gospel's structure and fervor and set secular, sometimes scandalous, lyrics on top. Ruth and Fats laid down that same bridge alongside him.

Composite Illustration: Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, Fats Domino image created from period publicity photographs; original photographers/sources unknown.

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, Maryland, 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 each one carried his own record collection and 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.

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 its scale 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: *American Bandstand* and *The Ed Sullivan Show* introduced audiences who'd never set foot in a Southern club to a sound that had been building in those rooms for years.



Norfolk Was Where The Sounds Came Together

In the 1960s, Norfolk sat at a remarkable crossroads of American music. Norfolk's clubs, theaters, record shops, and local radio carried rhythm and blues, gospel, soul, jazz, Motown, beach music, and the emerging sounds of rock 'n' roll.

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.

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

Composite Illustration: Created from period publicity photographs; original photographers/ sources unknown.

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.

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.

Why It Still Matters

For me and for everyone I came up with, soul music was never simply entertainment. It was a language; one that let a kid with a guitar say things he couldn't say any other way, and be understood by strangers the moment the first chord rang out.

It helped shape my friendships that lasted a lifetime, the kind forged in cramped dressing rooms and long overnight drives between gigs. It built careers out of nothing but talent and stubbornness, careers that had no business surviving

the odds stacked against them. It held communities together when everything else in the country seemed determined to pull them apart. And somewhere along the way, without any of us quite planning it, it helped reshape American culture itself; the way people danced, dressed, and thought about who got to stand on a stage and be heard.



Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson, Al Green, and Gladys Knight proved soul music could cross racial lines faster and more completely than almost anything else in American life. I saw it myself on the touring circuit, with rooms once divided by an actual line down the middle, dissolving.

Composite Illustration: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson, Al Green, and Gladys Knight. Created from period publicity photographs; original photographers/sources unknown.

My story is just one thread in that much larger story. It runs from local clubs in Norfolk and Newport News- rooms where you learned your craft by playing until your fingers hurt and the crowd either loved you or let you know they

didn't and up through the Howard Theater and the Apollo, those hallowed rooms where you found out if you were really ready.

And from there, out onto a national stage where a whole generation of artists, some of whom started in rooms just like the ones I did, changed what American music could sound like and whom it could belong to. We didn't just add a new sound to the radio; we changed the audience listening to it, and in some small way, we changed the country listening along with them.

I happened to be there for a good stretch of it with guitar in hand, paying close attention, trying to get it right night after night. I didn't always know I was witnessing history. Most nights it just felt like work, like showing up and doing the job in front of you. Only now, looking back, can I see the shape of what we were part of. I'm grateful every day that I was there for it, grateful I got to add my own thread to that story, and grateful that our music still matters to people who weren't even alive to hear it the first time around.

Chapter 2

Where My Sound Began

“I became obsessed with learning it (guitar). 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.”

Gene Dail

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 windows on summer evenings, drifted out of cars rolling through the neighborhood, spilled out of church doors on Sunday mornings, and spilled out of 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.

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



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. 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.

Photo Source: Elizabeth Dail, The Gene Dail Collection.

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 a pawn shop window.

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,



When I first started playing, I studied these two guitar greats closely. Wes Montgomery played with his thumb instead of a pick, giving his sound a unique warmth. Wes taught me that great playing isn't about speed; it's about touch and the space between notes. George Benson moved between jazz, soul, and R&B, making difficult things sound effortless.

Photo Sources: George Benson St. Louis Magazine 2017.

Wes Montgomery, Wikipedia.

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, as always, 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



Growing up in Norfolk, I watched General Norman Johnson move through the local music scene with the confidence of someone who already knew exactly where he was going. Back in those Norfolk days, watching musicians like Norman taught me what professional readiness looked like before I even had a word for it.

Photo Source: Norman Johnson, Charleston City Paper, 2007.

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, whom 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 build from there, layering ideas and expanding outward until what had started as almost nothing became a full, rich arrangement. That process fascinated me completely. It was the first time I 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.

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 examining 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



My friend Sangoma Everett was one of my closest friends growing up in Norfolk, and even as a young man, his commitment to percussion was unmistakable and very serious. Sangoma went on to a big career as a jazz percussionist, eventually making his home in France.

Photo Source: Sangoma Everett, Le Progres 2021.

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 about arrangements got made, and how the patience of live performance required for recording differed entirely from the adrenaline.



Leni Guess was a songwriter, producer, arranger, and label owner tied to what people called the Norfolk Sound. As a teenager, I spent time in his studio laying down demo tracks and background parts. I didn't realize until later how much I was absorbing about the business side of music just by watching how things worked.

Photo Source: Leni Guess, Discogs.com.

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. He 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 a local radio station, the kind of airplay that tells you a musician has earned real standing in a city's scene.

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



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.

Photo Source: Bernie Jacobs, KNKX Public Radio by Jim Wilke 2013.

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

"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."

Gene Dail

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 back then 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 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. 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, practiced constantly, and played a lot of gigs, which is apparently how McEvoy (Mac) Robinson heard about me.

Mac was a bass and sax player and band leader from Newport News, leading a group called the Rocking Cabanas. In the Tidewater region, they had built a solid reputation as a dependable road band, the kind of group



I'd occasionally fill in with the Showmen, a Norfolk group led by singer-songwriter General Norman Johnson, alongside Milton Wells, brothers Gene and Dorsey Knight, and Leslie Felton. The group released the classic R&B song "It Will Stand," which became a staple of Carolina beach music.

Source: The Showmen, Billboard Database.

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 Rocking 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 Rocking 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 come 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, he needed another guitarist. I asked him later what about my playing 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 play music and to play 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, Maryland, and the Carolinas, and Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi- always moving, always on our way somewhere. One city blurred 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.

At eighteen or nineteen, 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.



When I performed on the road with the Rocking Cabanas, Otis was just starting to make a big name for himself. He had a cool, laid-back, but energetic style that won over audiences wherever he went.

Photo Source: Otis Redding, Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images.

You learn fast in those years that the band doesn't wait for you to catch up, so most of my attention went to the chart in front of me, not the man standing at the microphone.

But the more time I spent near Otis, the more I began to see what lay beneath the easy exterior. He wasn't laid back at all. That was just the manner he wore in public, the same

way a man might wear a good suit: comfortable, unremarkable, easy to overlook. Underneath it was someone quiet, completely, thoroughly driven, someone who knew exactly where he was going.

You could see it in the small things, if you knew to look. The way he'd take a song apart after a show, asking what worked and what didn't, never satisfied with "good enough for tonight." The way his easy laugh in the dressing room could disappear in an instant the moment the conversation turned to the next record, the next tour, the next rung on the ladder.

He didn't raise his voice to get what he wanted. He didn't have to. A stillness in him was more forceful than anybody else's shouting, a patience that came from a man who had already decided how the story was going to end and was simply waiting for the rest of the world to catch up to him.

I came to understand later that this was the difference between a singer and an artist building something that would outlast him. Otis wasn't just trying to have a hit. He was trying to say something, to leave something behind, and that kind of ambition doesn't always look like ambition from the outside.

Chapter 4

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

“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...”

Gene Dail

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. In those years, the South 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 which 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 focused on playing, keeping up with the band, and making it to the next city without incident. I observed far more than I analyzed. 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 where the rules can't quite get.

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



I saw this more than once on the Southern touring circuit: a room where Black and white audience members started on opposite sides, a line drawn across the floor as clearly as if painted there. But once the music started, people got to their feet, and the line dissolved until no daylight remained between strangers with nothing in common on paper.

Composite Illustration: Otis Redding, created from period publicity photographs; original photographers/sources unknown.

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.

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



Otis meant every word. Whether singing "These Arms of Mine," "Try a Little Tenderness," or "Mr. Pitiful," there was no distance between the man and the song. I watched audiences respond that night after night. They believed him because he was telling the truth. Otis had it like few singers in any era ever have.

Photo Source: Otis Redding, Bruce Fleming / AP, Otis Redding Monterey Pop Festival in June 1967.

him completely. No distance separated the man and the song. Audiences, whether they could articulate it or not, responded to 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



This picture was taken in Jamaica in 1964, during one of my more memorable early engagements with Otis: a large stadium show with an enormous crowd, and word backstage that the Prime Minister himself had attended. I'm on the far right; an eighteen-year-old guitarist from Norfolk, just trying to keep up.

*Photo Source: Otis Redding and the Rocking Cabanas,
The Gene Dail Collection.*

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, with a huge, enthusiastic crowd and an air completely different from anything I knew, and word going around that the Prime Minister of Jamaica had attended. 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.

Back then, people called what Otis did "soul music," and the word fit him perfectly. Whether he was singing "These Arms of Mine," "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. Something about him was always direct and unguarded, which 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 slipped my mind. What I do remember is the dynamic between them, the easy comfort of people who share a history that predates success.

I always remember a moment 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.

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; the card games were apparently serious affairs, though mostly played for bragging rights.



Joe Tex and Solomon Burke were stars of the Southern soul circuit during my years with Otis, and offstage the three were friends. They were competitive, as great performers always are. The card games between them were serious affairs, and I always got the impression the bragging rights mattered more than the money.

Photo Sources: Joe Tex, Wikipedia. Solomon Burke, Britannica.

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. Willie McClone on drums

was excellent. Larry on 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 finding my feet. 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. 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

One memory from those road years with Otis has nothing to do with a stage, 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.

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, walked up to my mother's door in Norfolk, Virginia, 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, as she was about everything, but the name Otis Redding didn't mean anything particular to her then. 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 on a pawn shop guitar and spent the last few years wondering whether any of it would 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 Theater, 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.

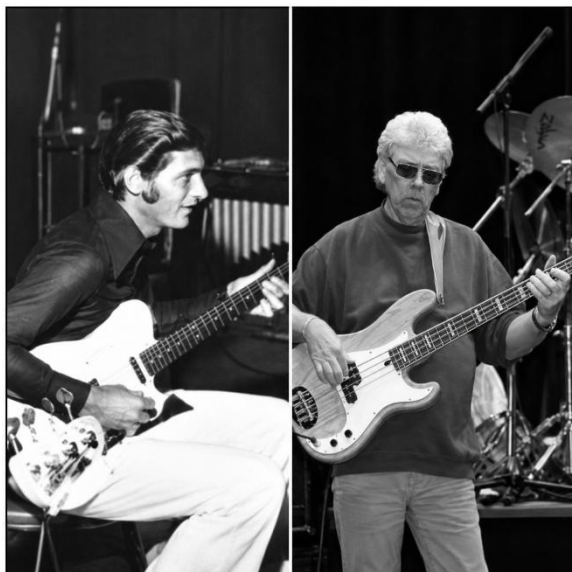
The theater's sloping floor, still carpeted, still tilted the way it would have been for stadium seating, had been left largely as it was, and somebody had figured out, mostly by accident, that the slant and the old heavy theater speakers did something remarkable to the sound in that room. Nobody had 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.

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



Steve Cropper and Donald "Duck" Dunn were already legends inside Stax Records when Otis brought his road band to Memphis to record. Booker T. & the M.G.'s powered some of the most important soul records ever made, and an outside band recording the label's rising star wasn't universally welcomed.

Photo Sources: Steve Cropper, Stax. Donald Dunn, 4fatstrings.wordpress.com.

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.

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.

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 powered 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 wasn't 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. Everything slowed down. Every detail was examined. You repeated sections



Carla Thomas was a presence around Stax during those sessions, and watching the easy creative atmosphere among the Stax family gave me my first real understanding of what it meant for a label to have a musical identity. Carla's 1967 collaboration with Otis on "Tramp" became one of the label's most beloved records, built on playful, completely natural chemistry.

Composite Illustration: Otis Redding and Carla Thomas created from period publicity photographs; original photographers/sources unknown.

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". At the same time, 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 1967, that Otis and Carla got into a studio together and recorded the King & Queen album. Their single "Tramp" from 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, they shelved the recordings. 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.

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.

What those sessions gave me, beyond the disappointment, was an education in the realities of the music business that



Jim Stewart co-founded Stax Records and built it into one of the most important labels in soul music history. When Otis brought his road band in rather than using regular Stax session musicians, Jim was professional and courteous. They ultimately decided not to release those recordings. Whether they still exist, I just don't know.

Photo Sources: Jim Stewart, Wikipedia. Stax Museum, Stax.

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, as they 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 then, and I suspect the truth was somewhere in the middle. But at twenty years old, I felt something unfair was happening, and I reacted 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. I've turned it over in my mind many times since: on long drives, in quiet hotel rooms, in the moments right before sleep when a man's mind likes to drag out its old regrets and turn them over as if the decision is still in front of him.

I'll never know what path would have remained open to me if I'd stayed. Maybe it would have led somewhere richer than the one I found. Maybe it would have led nowhere at all. That's the particular cruelty of a decision like that. You only ever get to live the one you chose, and the other version of your life stays forever unwritten, tempting you to fill in the blanks however your mood that day sees fit.

What I know is that leaving certain doors closed opens others, and that the story of where those other doors led is the rest of this book.

I don't say that to build suspense so much as to be honest about how a life actually gets made. It isn't one grand decision followed by a straight line to where you end up. It's a door closing, and then you're standing in a hallway you didn't choose, looking for the next door, and you take it because it's there and because staying still isn't really an option for a man who has to eat and has to work. Looking back, I can see how much of what came after grew directly out of that one choice, the way a tree's whole shape is decided by which way the trunk first leans.

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 stage. He was the real thing, as complete a performer as I ever saw, and that never changed. I've watched a lot of singers since then, some of them very good, a few of them great. I've never lost the ability to spot the difference between a man performing a song and a man who has disappeared entirely into it,

becoming nothing but the feeling the song is trying to make you feel. Otis had that.

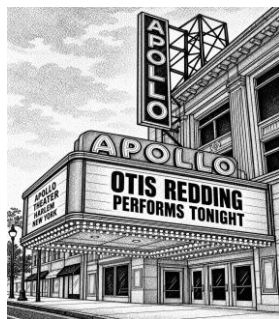
Chapter 5

The Howard Theater, the Apollo, and Playing with Otis for the Last Time

“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.”

Gene Dail

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 Theater, 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.

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 Redding. Then it might be 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 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



The Howard Theater in D.C. was the most concentrated musical education I ever received. You never knew who'd walk through that door, and your job was to serve each world quickly and well. The Howard taught me that being a good guitarist and being a good musician are two different things.

Photo Source: Howard Theater, Michigan Movie Magazine 2012

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 as furniture, interchangeable and largely invisible. Performances invariably felt incomplete, even when the technical execution was fine. You can feel the difference in a room.

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.



Cornell Dupree was the guitarist in King Curtis's band, The King Pins, and watching him play at the Howard was educational in the deepest sense. Cornell went on to play with Miles Davis, Aretha Franklin, and dozens of others; he wrote a book on R&B guitar and had a signature Yamaha model made in his name.

Photo Sources: Cornell Dupree, T-Bone's Prime Cuts Blogspot. King Curtis, Wikipedia.

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.



Marv Tarplin and Andrew White represented two very different kinds of musical genius, and working alongside both at the Howard broadened my understanding of what music could demand from its makers. Marv was Smokey Robinson's lead guitarist, a player of extraordinary taste who co-wrote some of Motown's biggest hits. Andrew was a composer, conductor, publisher, and saxophonist.

*Photo Sources: Andrew White, JazzTimes Magazine.
Marv Tarplin, Wikipedia.*

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 few 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.

The Apollo crowd was not polite. They were a New York crowd: honest, demanding, and fully alive, and they'd tell you exactly what they thought, without any ambiguity. If you brought something real, they told you. If you didn't, they let you know.

The Last Time I Will Meet Otis

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.



The Apollo Theater in Harlem was where reputations were made or finished, and nothing I'd heard about it prepared me for walking in. Its crowd was famous for honesty, high demands, and no patience for polish. In 1967, I was put on a train from D.C. to New York on short notice to fill in as Otis's guitarist. It was the last time I ever saw him.

Otis Redding at the Apollo Theater, 1963; Historical reconstruction image-generation tools, 2026. Not an archival photograph.

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.

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; 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.

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 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.



Ben Cauley, trumpet player for the Bar-Kays, was the only survivor of the plane that crashed into Lake Monona on December 10, 1967, carrying Otis on his final tour. Cauley couldn't swim; hearing the others calling out in the water and unable to reach them, he carried that night for the rest of his life. Every time I think about how close I came to being on that plane, I think of him.

Photo Sources: Otis Redding, Zelma Redding Collection: Ben Cauley, The Associated Press.

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

“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 was accidental. The 5th Dimension operated with the same precision; they were at the peak of their popularity then.”

Gene Dail

After Otis died in December 1967, the world of soul music absorbed the loss the way the music world always does: 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. His career 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 Theater, 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 regularly brought in major touring acts, and opening acts had to learn how to grab an audience quickly and make them care before the headliner arrived.



After Otis died, I needed to keep working, and Leroy Taylor was the next chapter. Leroy was a singer from the Baltimore-Washington area with a gift for commanding a room. His group worked the college circuit through the late 1960s, opening for major acts as live music on campuses was exploding.

Photo Source: Leroy Taylor, Spotify and Amazon.

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 and timing to the vocal arrangements and the way they managed the audience's attention. Nothing was accidental. The 5th Dimension operated with the same precision; they were at the peak of their popularity then, 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. Those experiences reinforced 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



Opening for Gladys Knight & the Pips and The 5th Dimension with Leroy Taylor's group in the late 1960s was its own graduate seminar in professionalism. Both acts had it down and left nothing to chance; everything effortless. It reinforced something I'd been learning since the Howard: that talent is the entry point, not the destination.

Photo Sources: Gladys Knight and the Pips, Motown Museum. The 5th Dimension, Spotify.

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.

"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 commanded 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-



Joey Dee and his group, the Starlites, the man behind "Peppermint Twist" and the undisputed Godfather of the Twist, was one of the most decent people I met in a business that wasn't always full of them. When he invited me to join his group at the Newport Lounge in Miami Beach, I said yes. The crowd was sophisticated, and eighty-degree weather beat New York's cold. That hooked me on Florida for life.

Photo Sources: Joey Dee and the Starlites, From the Vaults and Joey Dee, Discogs.

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. 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, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, and many others played there.

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 join 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 man's warmth and the quality of what was happening on stage.

More than the famous visitors, though, I valued the operation's steadiness and decency. The work was



One night between sets at the Newport Lounge,
José Feliciano wandered in. He was at the height of his fame, and his face was regularly on television. He asked to borrow my guitar and sit in for a few songs. I handed him my Fender without hesitation, and he played with the same effortless authority he brought to everything.

Photo Source: José Feliciano, Alchetron.com, the Free Social Encyclopedia.

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 could play. I'd proven that on stages up and down the East Coast and beyond, in front of crowds that didn't forgive a man his mistakes. But there's a difference between knowing how to do something and knowing why it works, and that difference had started to nag at me in a way I couldn't shake. I'd hear a horn arrangement behind a singer and know instinctively that it was right, that it was doing something to the song, without being able to say exactly what or how. I wanted the words for it.

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, trading tips with other musicians in the back of a bus or catching some older player's trick out of the corner of my eye and trying to steal it for myself.

That kind of education had gotten me a long way. It had taught me how to survive, how to follow a bandleader's count-off, how to find my place inside a song I'd never heard before. But it was an education built entirely on necessity, patched together gig by gig, and I could feel its

limits every time I sat down and tried to write something of my own instead of just playing what someone else had already figured out. I didn't just want to keep having good instincts. I wanted to understand where they came from, so I could trust them on purpose instead of hoping they'd show up again the next time I needed them.

And that desire eventually pointed me toward a place I'd been thinking about for years: Berklee College of Music in Boston.

I'd heard the name spoken with a kind of reverence by musicians who took their craft seriously, the way certain schools get spoken of in other professions, as a place where the real foundations get laid. Part of me wondered if it was too late for that, if a man who'd already spent years on the road learning things the hard way had any business sitting in a classroom being taught them the formal way. But the pull was stronger than the doubt. I'd spent my whole life up to that point learning music from the stage down. I finally wanted to learn it from the ground up.

Chapter 7

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

“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.”

Gene Dail

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



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. During that period, it was in the middle of a significant evolution, expanding its focus.

From its jazz roots, it fully embraced contemporary music, rock, and emerging music technology in forward-thinking ways. Serious musicians from all over the world came to

study there, and you felt the level of talent in the hallways immediately.



When I walked into Berklee in the early 1970s, I had eight years of road experience, including work at the Howard, the Apollo, and Stax. None of that prepared me for classrooms full of musicians who could play things I couldn't yet explain. Berklee gave me the theory behind instinct: harmony, composition, the architecture beneath a song's surface.

Photo Source: Berklee College of Music, Wikipedia.

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 that experience opened things in me that I hadn't known were closed.

Berklee meant more than school to 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.



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. Having redefined the vibraphone through his four-mallet technique, he brought that same restless intelligence to teaching improvisation and composition.

Photo Source: Gary Burton, The Music Museum of New England.

"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 talent was no shortage. "The students were really good musicians," I'd say later. "Really 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.

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 ran out. That was the only reason I left; not because I wasn't growing, not because the school had stopped challenging me, but because I'd run out of financial runway. "I wish I had stayed instead of taking the path I took," I've said many times since. "Everything was going on instinct. I didn't have anybody guiding me." That absence of guidance is one of the things I think about when I look back on that period.

Still, even in its incompleteness, Berklee transformed 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 built from the inside out- stayed with me through every performance, every session, every arrangement for the rest of my career. I left Boston around 1973 and headed back to Norfolk, where another chapter was waiting.

Chapter 8

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

“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.”

Gene Dail with Sly Stone
at a recording session in New York

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 use it. 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

He had a 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 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



Coming back to Norfolk after Berklee, I needed to get back to basics, find 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, and my old friend Bernie Jacobs on sax and flute brought a searching sound that made it fun.

Photo Source: The Gene Dail Collection.

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 constantly rebuilt the ensemble, brought in new players, recalibrated the sound, and started learning to listen to each other all over again from scratch. I'd later describe it as 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 Gayden wrote the song and played a distinctive early slide-wah guitar style that made 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 its strength.

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.



Clifford Curry was the undisputed King of Beach Music along the Carolina and Georgia coast, and I spent a stretch of the 1970s on the road with him. His 1967 recording "She Shot a Hole in My Soul" was a regional anthem Carolina audiences never tired of. Clifford taught me a loyal regional following can sustain a career.

Photo Source: Clifford Curry, Wikipedia.

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 and forged through relationships with audiences in specific communities, could sustain a career in ways a single national hit never reliably could. Clifford had that. He was a constant presence on that circuit for decades, right up until his death in September 2016 at age 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 its own rhythm. 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 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 distinctly remember 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."

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



I'm on the right in both pictures, playing with a group called *Breakin' Bad*, opening concerts across the South for Clifford Curry and big names like the *Four Tops*, *Junior Walker*, and the *Drifters*. Warming up the crowd before those acts took the stage was exhilarating

Photo Sources: Top, Breakin' Bad band, Gene Dail Collection. Bottom, Four Tops, Wikipedia; Junior Walker, alamy.com/stock; The Drifters, Britannica.



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, 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 it all. Twenty years into my own career, 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 Theater, 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.

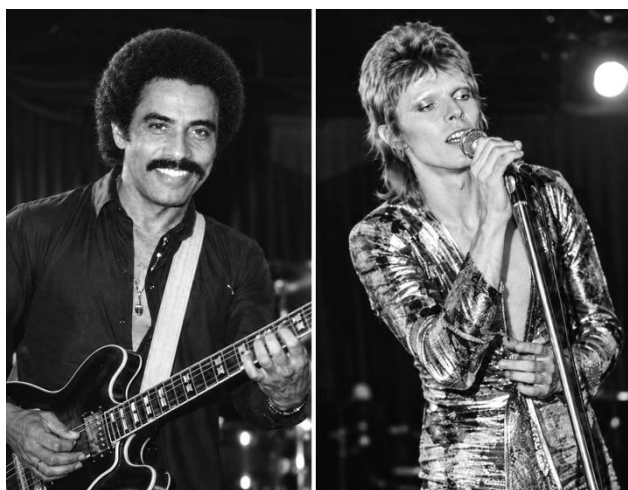
Then Bowie walked over with a couple of musicians from his band and asked if they could jam with us.

I couldn't believe it.

In the early 1970s, David Bowie was crazy-famous. He had transformed himself from a promising British singer-songwriter into one of rock music's most influential and visually distinctive stars. He had taken on the persona of Ziggy Stardust, an otherworldly rock star who helped define a new rock movement. Bowie combined theatrical costumes and provocative stagecraft with sophisticated songwriting, drawing on rock, pop, science fiction, art, and avant-garde culture.

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



One of the most unexpected moments of my career came when David Bowie and members of his band stopped in after a concert and asked to join us for an informal jam session. I remember him as humble, approachable, and a true musician at heart.

Gene Dail and David Bowie. Historical reconstruction image-generation tools, 2026. Not an archival photograph.

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.

Dennis Edwards and the Temptations

One of the decade's most iconic soul recordings came from a group I'd known 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.



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, he had the same presence offstage that he brought to a crowd; the kind of man who fills a room just by walking into it.

Photo Source: Dennis Edwards, UltimateClassicRock.com, NBC / Getty Images.

Dennis Edwards drove the voice on that recording, joining 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.

I had enormous respect for the Temptations as a group, 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 shows 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"



The night I had dinner with Smokey Robinson.

Marv Tarplin invited me to slip out the back door of the Howard 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.

Photo Source: Smokey Robinson, Rolling Stone Magazine.

for the Temptations, “My Guy” for Mary Wells, “Ain’t That 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 started the group in 1969, and he spent years messing with the lineup and the sound before it all came together in 1975 with "That's the Way of the World" and the single "Shining Star." What he built was something nobody had really seen before: a big band, nine, ten musicians up there sometimes, mixing the punch of funk with the sophistication of jazz, the feel of gospel, and African percussion through that kalimba thumb piano he loved so much. And then you had his tenor going back and forth with Philip Bailey's falsetto, which was just one of the most remarkable voices I've ever heard. White found Bailey performing in Denver in '72 and brought him in, and Bailey's range just seemed to keep going up with no ceiling on it, and he made even the hardest passages sound easy.



I've seen a great many live performances, and what Earth, Wind & Fire did on a concert stage belongs in its own category. One night I watched Maurice White drape a sheet over his band members one by one, only to have them reappear across the stage inside what looked like a spaceship; the sound that went through the crowd is one I've never forgotten.

Photo Source: Earth, Wind & Fire, Colorado Music Experience.

But the music was only half the show. Maurice White put just as much into the theater. By the late seventies, those concerts weren't just soul shows or rock shows; they were full productions. For one of their big illusions, they brought in magician Doug Henning and his partner, Mark Wilson.

They worked real stage magic into the set, which nobody in popular music had really tried before.

I remember watching this happen one night: right in the middle of a song, White sends the band toward this prop built to look like a spaceship, all gleaming and strange under the lights. He throws a sheet over each guy, one at a time, and they just vanish. And then, somehow, there they all are again, the whole band, over on the other side of the stage, in or around that spaceship. The crowd knew something incredible had just happened. Nobody could tell you how.

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 by then I was a musician who had been around stages and productions for more than a decade. 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, carrying uplifting energy into a world with 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.

By the early seventies, Stevie Wonder had pretty much reinvented himself. He'd been a kid prodigy, scored his first hit with "Fingertips" at twelve years old. Still, by then he'd become something else entirely: a composer, a multi-instrumentalist, a real conceptual artist. He'd worked out a deal with Berry Gordy that gave him a level of creative freedom nobody else at Motown had, and he used it to put out albums like "Talking Book," "Innervisions," "Fulfillingness' First Finale," and "Songs in the Key of Life." Taken together, that's one of the great creative runs in American music, period. He played almost every instrument on most of those records himself. And get this; he was twenty-five when "Songs in the Key of Life" came out. Twenty-five.

But what I saw that night in Washington was a lot simpler than any of that. Stevie walked in, drifted toward the stage, and just started sitting in with the house band, the way musicians do in certain rooms; following the groove



I watched Stevie Wonder sit in with a house band at a D.C. club one night, performing other people's songs with such natural authority that each one became entirely his own. Whenever I had the chance to sing with a band, I loved covering Stevie's hits, especially "Overjoyed."

Photo Source: Stevie Wonder, Evening Standard, Getty Images, Via NPR, 1973.

wherever it went, singing whatever felt right in the moment. What got me wasn't the voice, even though it was extraordinary. It wasn't the keyboard playing either, or the obvious fact that he could do whatever he wanted musically. It was what happened when he sang somebody else's song.

Most great singers, when they cover a song, still let the original hang around somewhere in the background. They're in conversation with it, whether they mean to be or not. Stevie didn't do that. He'd step into a song with such natural authority that it became his, right there in the moment, without taking anything away from the original. It wasn't a cover. It was alive in his hands. "Amazing talent" is the phrase I've always used, and I've never found a better one. There are musicians, and there are musicians, and then there are the ones who make you feel like you're watching something that shouldn't be possible. Stevie Wonder was one of those.

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



James Brown spent a lifetime developing his signature movement: that lightning-fast footwork. The night I watched Michael Jackson study it, step in, do it back, and then push it further, James Brown's face said everything. He recognized the moment his student had found his own voice.

Photo Source: Michael Jackson and James Brown, 2003 BET Awards, CNN.

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.

On the night I'm talking about, a young Michael Jackson was there. This was right in the middle of the Jackson 5's run in the early seventies; their first four singles for Motown, "I Want You Back," "ABC," "The Love You Save," "I'll Be There," all hit number one between 1969 and 1970. Even then, you could tell the youngest kid in that group was something else; a child performer whose instincts and technical ability already outran most adult professionals. And Michael watched James Brown the way serious musicians study those who came before them: total focus, taking in every movement, filing away every choice.

What I saw that night was James Brown doing his dance, the one that summed up everything his whole performing life had built toward, with all the power and precision it deserved. Michael, who must have still been a teenager, watched for a second, found his moment, and stepped in.

He did Brown's dance. All of it, exactly; every weight shift, every impossible piece of footwork. Then, without even stopping, he added something of his own, took what Brown had just done, and pushed it somewhere that was entirely Michael's. The room knew right away what it had just seen.

James Brown knew it too. He had this look on his face I've thought about a lot since; not quite astonishment, not quite pride, something in between. It was the look of a master watching his student find his own voice.

I've said Michael could dance with effortless movement, and that's true, but it doesn't really cover it. Even as a teenager, he could take something technically insane and make it look like the simplest, most natural thing in the world. You can't really teach that. 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. 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 setup, 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 just need to do your best.

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.



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.

Photo Source: Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, Wikipedia.

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 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 happen at 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 came up out of the gospel tradition in Michigan, but he really found himself in Memphis, working with producer Willie Mitchell at Hi Records. Mitchell had this instinct to strip everything back. Where a lot of soul records in the late sixties were big, layered, orchestrated, Mitchell went the other way: a rhythm section that sat warm and just a little behind the beat, horns that talked to you instead of just punching, and Green's voice right in the middle of all that space.

Between 1971 and 1974, he put out a run of records that puts him on any short list of that era's defining voices: "Let's Stay Together," "I'm Still in Love with You," "You Ought

to Be with Me," "Call Me." That kind of streak doesn't happen by accident.

What I remember from watching him on the Mall was how easy he made it look. Not indifferent; Al Green was never indifferent up there; just settled. Comfortable with exactly



Al Green on the National Mall was one of those moments that could only happen at that particular time in American culture. What struck me wasn't just the voice. It was the ease he carried, a comfort with what he had that never tipped into arrogance.

Photo Source: Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Milton Williams Archives.

what he was and what he had to give, and it never once tipped over into arrogance. He could take somebody else's song and sing it in a way that made it his, and he didn't do that by stepping all over it. He'd just find the thing in the song that was his to bring out, and bring it out.

He couldn't be beat. That's really all there is to say about it.

Diana Ross, Her 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; Motown later replaced Ballard as it 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 sustained commercial presence only a handful of artists maintain across decades.

She stood near me in the wings, robed and ready to go on, and 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

respect, watching her command the stage with that distinctive combination of elegance and absolute authority that she had always possessed.



Diana Ross once asked me to hold her robe while she performed at the Howard Theater, and I held it through the whole show like it was sacred. When she took it back afterward without a word, I understood; she was still inside the performance. That total focus was part of what made her Diana Ross.

Photo Source: Diana Ross, Harper's Bazaar.

When she came back offstage, 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. Clinton was building what 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 some found thrilling and others destabilizing.

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.



I'd been around live music for over a decade
when I saw Funkadelic, and I still walked away
thinking I'd never seen anything like it. George
Clinton had an incredible band: Bootsy Collins,
Bernie Worrell, Maceo Parker, Fred Wesley, wrapped
inside a philosophy that was strange and funny.
Parliament had the spaceship. Funkadelic
had the groove.

Photo Source: Funkadelic, Spotify.

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 but turned out 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. It recognized that Carl's voice was exceptional.



Carl Anderson had a home voice in gospel, soul, Broadway, and film. I knew him during my Washington years and always believed his career would grow even larger than it did. He stepped into the role of Judas in Jesus Christ Superstar, on Broadway and in the 1973 film, and gave a performance nobody who saw it forgot.

Photo Source: Carol Anderson, Spotify.

What happened next was one of those stories that perfectly illustrates the entertainment business's particular cruelty. 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 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 popular music history.

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.

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 around that time, because the two things were running alongside each other in a way that was hard to watch.

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



Sly Stone built something revolutionary; a racially integrated band that fused soul, funk, rock, and gospel into a sound nobody had heard before. One night I found myself at a party in his New York hotel suite and watched him move through the room like a force of nature.

Photo Source: Sly and the Family Stone, Wikipedia.

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 didn't explain 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.

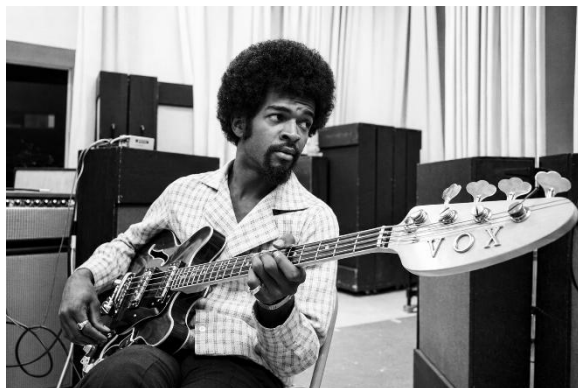
He looked around at his musicians, at the engineers behind the glass, at everyone assembled in the room, and he made an announcement. They were going to record in the dark. Not dimmed lighting. Not mood lighting. Every light in the studio was completely off.

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



Larry Graham essentially invented slap bass, that thumping, percussive style that reshaped the instrument across nearly every genre that followed. The story goes he developed it because his mother had stopped using a drummer, so Larry had to supply the rhythm himself.

Photo Source: Larry Graham, Rolling Stone Australia.

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 authority 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.

The Songs I Loved to Play, The Soundtrack of a Decade

In the 1970s, a musician's work largely meant 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.



When Marvin Gaye released “What’s Going On” in 1971, he changed the conversation about what a soul record could be. Playing it in a club where people had come to dance was its own kind of challenge; the song carried a weight that demanded you honor it even there.

Photo Source: Marvin Gaye, Wikipedia.

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 was there primarily 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 equally effective on a dance floor and in a quiet room. 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. 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, and then 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 they laid down the final vocal. 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. 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, and the way the whole arrangement was built and breathed gave the band 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.



Gladys Knight and the Pips had been making music since 1952, spent years at Motown without their due, then signed with Buddah and released "Midnight Train to Georgia"; reportedly rewritten overnight, recorded partly in a Detroit parking garage. It hit number one in 1973 and won a Grammy. Playing it live, commitment always lifted the whole room.

Photo Source: Gladys Knight and the Pips, Wikipedia.

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.



Kool & the Gang spent years building a jazz-rooted, horn-driven funk until their attorney bluntly told them they needed some hits. What came back was "Jungle Boogie"; pure energy, built around a grunt that worked as much as rhythmic punctuation as anything else. By the time I was playing it up and down the East Coast, it filled a dance floor.

Photo Source: Kool & The Gang, New York Times.

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.

“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.



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. It didn't explode so much as smolder, building heat through patience and restraint. For a guitarist, playing that song was a lesson in what you can accomplish by holding back and letting the groove do the work.

Photo Source: The Ohio Players, Britannica.

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.

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



Lou Rawls had a smooth baritone voice 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 no amount of technical instruction could teach. He was one of those singers whose voice was so distinctly his own that you knew who you were listening to within the first two notes.

Photo Source: Lou Rawls, Time.com.

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 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

A question has followed me through every decade since December of 1967, and interviewers, friends, and fellow musicians asked it of me directly more than once during the

1970s: 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. People play the music, remember it, and still feel it matters long after he died. That's what survives. That's what lasts. And when I hear "Try a Little Tenderness" on 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.



Otis Redding's performance at Monterey in June 1967, before a largely white rock crowd that had never been his audience, was the moment the world finally understood what those of us who worked with him already knew. He converted that crowd with nothing but his voice and conviction. Six months later, he was gone.

Photo Source: Bruce Fleming / AP, Otis Redding Monterey Pop Festival in June 1967.

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 9

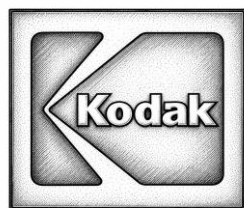
A Complete 180: A New Career, New Priorities, and a Different Kind of Stage

“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.”

Gene Dail

By the early 1980s, I had been living out of suitcases for nearly 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



Most people look at an old Fender amplifier and see vintage equipment. I looked at mine and saw a second career. When it stopped working, I pulled the chassis out and started figuring out why. The more I studied the circuitry, the more it engaged the same patient curiosity I'd spent years applying to music. One broken amplifier led me to electronics school and 25 years at Eastman Kodak.

Photo Source: Fender Amplifier, Crutchfield.com.

worked from the inside out, the circuitry fully engaged; that same focused curiosity spread out in front of me. Music and 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 deeper I went, the more it reminded me of Berklee: a place where you were expected to understand what you were doing and why, not merely execute what you'd been shown.

Just as learning harmony made me a better guitarist by 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 didn't escape 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.

Eastman Kodak had placed me in the middle of 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. The same discipline applied to a different domain.



Eastman Kodak's document scanning and microfilm systems defined my second career. In the early 1980s, they were cutting-edge technology, helping businesses and government agencies replace filing cabinets full of paper with digital storage and retrieval. It was revolutionary work at the time, and keeping it running demanded the same continuous learning and on-the-spot problem-solving the music business always had.

Photo Sources: Kodak Document Scanners, Kodak.

My job was to install, maintain, and repair 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.

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. I was told they were looking into the required clearances. 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 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

A kind of freedom 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 hit 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 Suzuki Hayabusa was my "silver and chrome baby." My 2002 model packed a 1,298cc liquid-cooled inline-four making roughly 175 horsepower, electronically limited to 186 mph under the industry's "gentlemen's agreement"; though the original 1999 version had been clocked at 194. With a 0-60 time of about 2.7 seconds, it was, in its day, the fastest production motorcycle you could simply walk into a dealership and buy.

Photo Source: 2002 Suzuki Hayabusa, Autoevolution.

The bike itself had a reputation to live up to. When Suzuki launched the Hayabusa in 1999, it wasn't just fast. For a moment, it was 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 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 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, parked the bikes by the old water-powered mill, and grabbed something to eat before heading back out. One trip took us all the way down to Daytona Beach; an overnight haul, with the rest of the group camping out while I stayed with my father-in-law in Vero Beach, then meeting back up with the pack the next day. In Daytona, we watched dirt bike jumps I never much cared for, and quarter-mile drag races on an abandoned airstrip outside of town that I cared about 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 was no room left 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'd observed 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've watched that gap swallow careers more promising than mine throughout my 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; 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. I built the rest of my life 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 mornings in Florida, in a way I couldn't quite have understood when I was young and chasing the next gig, is my independence. Not independence in the adolescent sense of more 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 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

“What I noticed, over and over again across forty years, was that the artists who lasted, ...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.”

Gene Dail

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 I was surprised by 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. This book describes 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.

I've seen that quality in different forms in every great performer I've 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



Otis Redding grew up in Dawson, Georgia,
*shaped by the same forces that built soul
everywhere: church, gospel, the blues of rural
Southern life. What made him singular was the
intensity he brought to mixing them. When he sang
"Try a Little Tenderness," always my favorite to play
behind him, you felt it land in your chest.*

*Composite Illustration: Otis Redding images created from period
publicity photographs; original photographers/sources unknown.*

single performance, regardless of the room size 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.

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 after the performance. 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, 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. At his peak, Stevie Wonder made music with 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 were completely his own at a moment when polished Motown acts dominated 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, nothing sustained it when the moment passed.

I applied this lesson to my own playing, but more quietly. I was never going to develop a guitar voice as distinctive as Wes Montgomery's. That was never a 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 photographs, highlight reels, or 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.

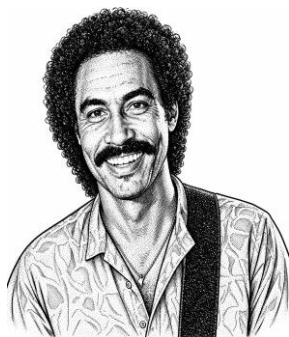
Chapter 11

Career Highlights of Gene Dail

“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.”

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: a conversation backstage, a single night in a room where everything clicked, a great performance that nobody photographed but 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. You'll recognize some of these names 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 country's most musically fertile regional environments, 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 Rocking Cabanas and Otis Redding, 1964-1967

Recruited by bass player and bandleader McEvoy (Mac) Robinson to join the Rocking Cabanas, Gene joined the road band backing a young Otis Redding during the critical early years of Redding's rise.

McEvoy "Mac" Robinson was one of the talented Tidewater musicians who moved easily between the local Virginia music scene and the rapidly expanding world of professional rhythm and blues during the 1960s. Mac was an accomplished bass player and saxophonist whose career eventually took him far beyond Newport News. In addition to Otis, he performed professionally with some of soul music's biggest names, including Wilson Pickett and Jerry Butler.

Mac's association with Otis Redding was particularly significant. He received a songwriting credit alongside Otis and guitarist Steve Cropper for "Just One More Day," which Otis recorded and released on *The Soul Album* in 1966.

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 backed 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 for 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 a 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 Joey Dee's band, nationally known as the creator of "Peppermint Twist" and widely referred to as the Godfather of the Twist, for a long-term 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 1967 release, 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, giving Gene a stable base for performing as he transitioned 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. Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs.

Technical Career, Eastman Kodak, 1985-2010

After leaving full-time performing, Gene earned a degree in electronics and joined Eastman Kodak as a field service technician, a position he held for 25 years. His territory included some of the most sensitive facilities in Washington, D.C., including 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 high-level government

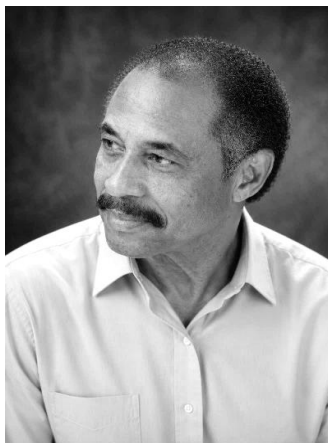
security clearances. In his off-time, Gene occasionally did studio work and performed as a fill-in player with various bands around Washington, D.C., and Maryland. Gene retired from Eastman Kodak in 2010, ending a second career marked by the same professionalism, adaptability, and disciplined work ethic that defined his music.

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 many accomplished performers, including General Norman Johnson of the Showmen and Chairmen of the Board, percussionist Sangoma Everett, jazz musician Bernie Jacobs, multi-talented Lenis Guess, 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

Rocking 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 was good friends with Larry Graham of Sly and the Family Stone. He 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 explain fully.

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, holding Diana Ross's robe in the wings. At the same time, 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 defining moment of Gene's life came in December 1967, when a scheduling decision kept him off the private plane that carried Otis Redding and most of the Bar-Kays to 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 the same diagnostic patience and systematic thinking that music had always required. He enrolled in an electronics college, 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. It 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 the same professionalism, adaptability, and quiet discipline to his second career 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.

During his time off at Eastman Kodak, he continued studio work and performed with various bands around Washington, D.C., and Maryland until his retirement.

Gene retired from 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.



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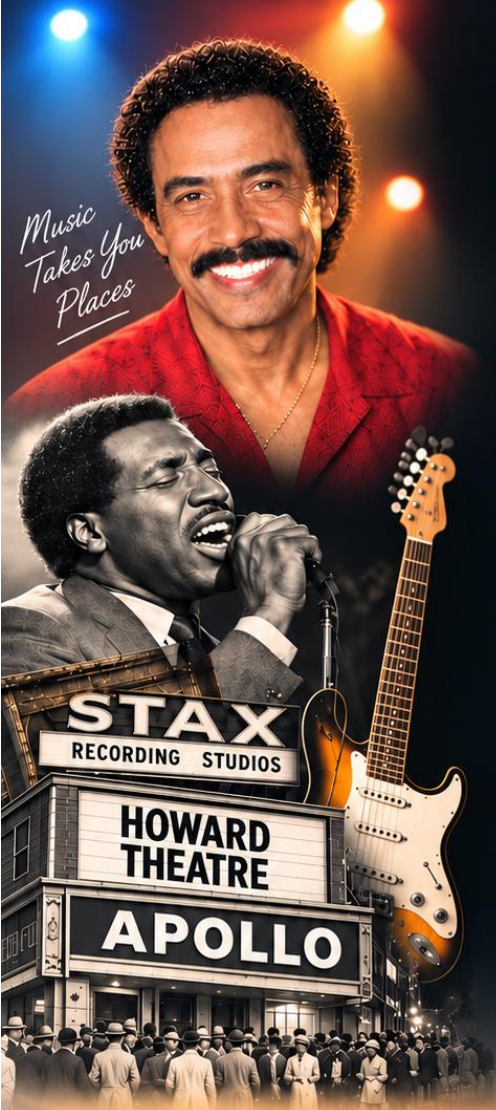
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*Music
Takes You
Places*

A five-dollar-a-week pawnshop guitar.
A teenage guitarist from Norfolk, Virginia.
And a phone call, sixty years later,
that finally brought it all back.

Gene Dail was twenty years old and touring the segregated Southern circuit with a rising young singer named Otis Redding when he recorded at Stax Studios in Memphis, played the Howard Theatre and the Apollo, and walked away from Redding's band over a pay dispute he still thinks about today. That decision, made in anger at twenty, may have saved his life: a scheduling choice kept him off the small plane that carried Redding and most of the Bar-Kays into Lake Monona in December 1967.

Behind the Music is Gene Dail's account of the decades that followed, one lucky break and hard lesson at a time: the road with Otis Redding, a year of formal study at Berklee, college tours opening for Gladys Knight and The 5th Dimension, a Greenwich Village night with Sly Stone, and a final unlikely reinvention few musicians ever attempt, twenty-five years as an electronics technician with security clearance inside FBI Headquarters, the State Department, and the White House complex.

Told in Gene's own plainspoken voice, this is not a book of name-dropped anecdotes. It's the story of a young man who was never the headline act, but who stood close to the performers and their music, and saw exactly how history was made.

"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."

— GENE DAIL

