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The flash shines brighter as the song grows older.

Formerly the cool baritone of the Impressions, Jerry "The Ice Man" Butler just returned from an oldies show in Pittsburgh, where he appeared with the Flamingos and the Moonglows. During a conversation in his fifth-floor offices at the County Building, I asked the Cook County commissioner what goes through his mind when he listens to the permanent magic of the old songs - the stark beauty of "For Your Precious Love," the snap-fingered soul of "It's Alright" and the grizzly power of "Only the Strong Survive."

"It's difficult to think in those terms," he said. "The one thing that came to my mind was that most of the members in those groups were either dead or no longer in the group."

"Those things really flash at you when you're in that environment."

Butler will appear in an arena of his own next week in the Moulin Rouge at the Fairmont Hotel, 200 N. Columbus. By all rights, the Impressions should have blazed the same trail of glory as the Temptations. Butler's appointed lead baritone was the ideal complement for the vulnerable falsetto of Curtis Mayfield. Through such wide emotional range, the Impressions could be masculine with Butler's booming voice or feminine through Mayfield's soaring sentimentality.

Butler and Mayfield were the original river deep, mountain high. Butler formally left the Impressions in 1959 - only a year after their first hit, "For Your Precious Love" - although he continued to collaborate as a songwriter and singer with Mayfield. Butler split because his fellow Impressions didn't care for the record company's billing: "Jerry Butler and the Impressions."

"We knew we had something the first day we started to rehearse," Butler said, looking back 30 years. "No. 1, our harmony was always good. No. 2, we came from more of a gospel and spiritual feeling than the doo-wop groups of the day. As a matter of fact, Rolling Stone called 'For Your Precious Love' the first soul record, and I think that was why. That influence came from Curtis and I, having sung spirituals together and also from the way Curtis played. We used all the high harmony voices in 'For Your Precious Love,' while keeping the baritone as the lead, and it usually was the other way around."

"At the time, groups were singing with a lot of high pitches, and the background was heavy and warm. When we started to sing at community centers around Chicago, kids always were intrigued that we sounded different. The first time we heard 'For Your Precious Love' as a recording, it actually brought tears to our eyes. We thought it was just because we were caught up in it emotionally. But when we sang it in person, we saw people affected the same way. And then we knew it just wasn't our own energy that was making this happen."

Butler will include "For Your Precious Love" in his Moulin Rouge supper club sets, as well as "Never Gonna Give You Up," "Only the Strong Survive" and a rarity, "Strawberries," which was the flip side of Butler's 1963 hit, "I Almost Lost My Mind." It will be Butler's first concert appearance in the Chicago area since an impressive Impressions 25th anniversary tour that came through the Holiday Star Theatre in 1983. In the summer of 1986, the Impressions performed at Pheasant Run in St. Charles, but a 1986 Butler-Mayfield concert was canceled at the Park West, reportedly because of poor ticket sales.

And that's a shame.

"Often times when you live in a place, people in that place kind of take you for granted," explained Butler, who is 48. "Because of that, they overlook what you might bring to the music industry. There's a great deal of history relative to what the Impressions, Curtis and myself have brought to the music scene."

The success of Motown overshadowed what was happening in Chicago during the mid-'60s. Besides the

Impressions, the saucy soul of Gene Chandler, Major Lance, the Artistes and Walter Jackson was flashing out of Chicago under the punchy production of Carl Davis.

"The record companies in Chicago had a tendency to promote the artist and not the label, where Motown was the only major label in Detroit and Berry (Gordy) promoted that label equal to the artists on the label," Butler said.

There were also other sounds coming out of Chicago besides sweet soul. Eddie Harris was leading funky jazz exploration when he wasn't doing arrangements for the Impressions, and Mississippi blues were continuing to solidify the South and West Sides.

"There were so many pieces that no one could say, 'This is the Chicago sound,' " Butler said. "But at Motown, you had the same people playing on every record, so that thread of writers, producers and players created a sound that was unique to Motown. No matter who was singing, you could tell a Motown record anyplace in the country. It was pretty much the same with the Sound of Philadelphia (Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, whose heavy rhythm production was responsible for the successes of Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes and the O'Jays)). It wasn't the case in Chicago.

"We always had a great wealth of people to attract. If Maurice White was playing for Chess, Vee-Jay (Records) would use another drummer because they didn't want to sound like a Chess record. Then whoever Vee-Jay was using, Carl Davis would go out and try to find another drummer so he wouldn't sound like Vee-Jay. For instance, when Donny Hathaway first came to town, I used to use him because I didn't want to sound like the other records. Because of that, there was never a concentrated effort that relates to the sound of Chicago."

While Butler and Mayfield remain relatively neglected in their hometown (Butler was born in Mississippi, Mayfield in Chicago, but they began singing gospel together on the South Side in the mid-'50s), their popularity abounds across the country. Butler, Mayfield and the Impressions are major figures in the beach music dance clubs throughout the Carolinas and while recently browsing a record store in Nassau, I found a huge collection of vintage Butler albums on Vee-Jay. The tight harmonies of the Impressions remain a fluid influence on reggae vocal groups.

During a visit to Nassau in the Bahamas, Butler decided to cut his hit interpretation of the Everly Brothers "Let It Be Me" with Betty ("Shoop Shoop Song") Everett. On West Bay Street, there's a funky Bahamian show lounge named Peanuts Taylor's Drumbeat Club.

"There were two guys in that place singing 'Let It Be Me' only in the way people in Nassau can sing - with a conga drum, electric guitar and a bass player," Butler recalled. "And it sounded so beautiful that night. They found out I was in the audience and asked me to come on up. While I was singing it, the thought came to me, 'What a wonderful song to sing with a woman.' We used to play Nassau quite often. For some reason they wrapped their arms around me. You will find people who will tell you that Jerry Butler is from the Bahamas. As a matter of fact, when 'He Will Break Your Heart' was released (in 1960), there was a dance they were doing in Miami and the Bahamas called the Hully-Gully. And 'He Will Break Your Heart' was the perfect beat to do the dance to. So the first time I went to the Bahamas, they had me booked as 'The Hully-Gully King.'

"Now you know the Ice Man doesn't dance," Butler said with a grin. "So I didn't know what this Hully-Gully thing was about, and the people were very disappointed. They had been led to believe I invented this dance. So the way I got out of it is that I'd get the native people onstage and I'd sing to them while they danced."