

Curtis Mayfield
By Dave Hoekstra
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DUNWOODY, Ga. A gentle road twists between the tall pine trees of the Huntcliff Summit subdivision outside Atlanta. Like a soft falsetto ascending a scale, the road climbs a hill to the home of Curtis Mayfield.

Visitors have to keep on pushing to get to the top of the hill, but once they reach the Mayfield residence, they are met with a calm dignity. The spirited singer-songwriter and his family have lived among the pine trees and the dogwoods since 1980, when they left his hometown of Chicago.

Mayfield has largely been confined to the den-library of the house since August, 1990, after he was paralyzed from the neck down in an accident before an outdoor concert in Brooklyn, N.Y. A lighting scaffold was blown down by a gust of wind, breaking the third, fourth and fifth vertebrae in his neck. Today, Mayfield has no movement, except minimal motion from the bicep down his left arm.

Mayfield was on his back in a hospital bed as he greeted a visitor earlier this month. His head movement was limited by a steel rod in his neck, but his active, wide eyes radiated the warmth that underscores his best-known songs - "People Get Ready," "I'm So Proud," "Gypsy Woman" - tunes that enabled his former group the Impressions to gain induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991.

But if Mayfield has a credo, it is his 1964 tune "Keep on Pushing." References to "Keep on Pushing" pop up in several of his songs: "Amen!," and "Meeting Up Yonder." On the jazzy track itself, he sings:

"I've got to keep on pushin', can't stop now

"Move up a little higher, some way, somehow. . . ."

When the Impressions were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Mayfield's songmates brought a satellite dish into the house so he could watch the ceremonies live from New York.

"Tracy Chapman introduced the group to get the award," Mayfield recalled in soft tones. "She said she'd like to tell Curtis to keep on pushing. It's true. Many of the songs I wrote were a philosophy for me to learn from as well as an interpretation that (I) could tell others."

In one sense, Mayfield's tragedy is amplified because his uncompromising

romanticism and spirit, shaped in the gospel churches of Chicago, appear to have been stilled.

In another sense, that romanticism and spirit are his very strengths.

We talked about the resentment that typically follows a crippling accident, a lingering anger and the denial that often weakens the soul. "That's what I've heard," Mayfield said. "Nothing like that has happened to me yet. I must admit every once in a while I wake up with a tear in my eye. But I am not bitter. There's no one I can blame. It goes without saying I'd rather be my whole self and totally independent, but I'm happy to have been left at least with my mind.

"It allows me to think, observe, look back and still have foresight. I can still carry on as some type of protector and provider in spite of myself. Sometimes I think of it as a man who has died, but who was still able to look back, see himself in the world and see the people who loved him. I'm glad to be living. Otherwise, I never would have had a chance to see that."

The accident has not diminished Mayfield's eloquence. As he looked at the ceiling from his bed, he chose his words carefully and described his feelings with deep emotion. A thin white beard seemed to accent his sense of wisdom.

"Every once in a while, you go through changes," he said. "Sometimes I get restless, and I feel like I'm tied up. It's almost like being bound in a mummy suit. It's frustrating, but it's never been a backlash toward anybody. I think I'm too smart for that. Now I must rely upon others to look after me. Why take them through ridiculous changes when you need them so much?"

Mayfield watches a lot of television and listens to music. Lately, he favors the a cappella group Take 6, jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal, Rod Stewart (who covered "People Get Ready" with Jeff Beck) and Jimi Hendrix's 1970 funky masterpiece "Band of Gypsys."

Bookshelves line the wall behind Mayfield's bed. Hundreds of books range in subject matter from the Beatles to fish to herbs, but Mayfield is frustrated that he cannot read more.

"It's hard for someone to sit up and hold his arms out with a heavy book for me," he said. "I'm not able to read like I used to. I like reading. I like getting information. There are probably books back there from porno to the Bible.

A living room adjacent to Mayfield's den contains rehabilitation equipment, mainly for his upper-arm strength. One of the first things a visitor sees

inside the house is an empty wheelchair.

"There is a rehabilitation program - if you see any signs of anything," Mayfield said. "But you must show muscle signs to work from before you can be rehabilitated. I have not shown much of anything. The reality, at present, is that I'm totally paralyzed. So I'm taking whatever I can use to make myself more independent mentally."

Mayfield has good days and bad days. When he gets stronger and develops more consistency, he hopes to continue songwriting. "There are new technical instruments on the market, like computers with voice activators where I can accumulate some of my thoughts," he said. "And maybe even write a song here and there."

Mayfield weathered another hardship last fall when a fire caused by a fallen candle destroyed the master bedroom.

Mayfield, his wife, Altheida, and children Timfany, 16; Kirk 15; Li Brian, 14; Cheaa, Blaise, 11, and Lena, 10, along with their dog, Kid, have spent the last six months living in a hotel while the house was being renovated. They returned to their home three weeks ago. (Mayfield has four other children: Todd, 27, who lives in Atlanta, Curtis III, 30, and Sharon 25, who live in Chicago, and Tracy, 31, who lives in Phoenix, Ariz.)

"We lost a lot of personal things," he said. "I bought Altheida dolls from everywhere I've worked. Things that become personal to you that you hope to keep forever. But the important thing is we all got out of here safely. The fire was finally over about 1:30 on a Sunday morning. All the hotels in the city were full because of a football game. We couldn't find anywhere to stay. We finally got into a hotel around 7 in the morning."

The fire and subsequent relocation temporarily disconnected Mayfield's chain of friends, which had provided him with a vital support system. "The fact I've been away from here for six months has broke off communication," he said. "A lot of friends had no way of reaching me. I missed that."