

Curtis Mayfield  
By Dave Hoekstra  
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DUNWOODY, Ga. It is important to remember that Curtis Mayfield has not been forgotten. Such a sentiment is certain to bring a smile to his face.

The funky girl group En Vogue recently sent Mayfield a gold compact disc for the band's hit "Giving Him Something He Can Feel," which he wrote in 1976 for the film "Sparkle." (Aretha Franklin sang the soundtrack version.)

Mayfield asks a visitor to find the framed gold CD, which is propped up against a wall near his bed. The visitor reads the commemoration and then glances over at Mayfield, whose smile is measured by pride.

Mayfield defined such feelings in Chicago.

He was born June 3, 1942, in Cook County Hospital. Mayfield spent his early years living with his mother and grandmother, first at 18th and Cottage Grove. Mayfield attended at least nine grammar schools in Chicago. When he was 12, the Mayfield family moved into the tiny row houses of the Cabrini Homes, where he lived until his mid-20s. Mayfield said, "We were on some kind of welfare during those early years, but you really don't know you're poor as youngsters."

His grandmother, the Rev. A.B. Mayfield, left a sincere impression. It was on an old Victrola at her house that Mayfield first heard Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers, Clyde McPhatter and various gospel groups. In the early 1950s, she was preparing to become a minister, and Mayfield and his cousins would travel with her to religious conventions.

"She finally started the Traveling Soul Spiritualist Church," Mayfield recalled. "We always had a lot of kids at a storefront church for Sunday school. That's where we met Jerry Butler. We had been trying to start a quartet, and Jerry asked if he could join the group. That was my introduction to harmonies."

Mayfield, Butler and his cousins sang gospel for a couple of years as the Northern Jubilees before joining forces with Chattanooga transplants Sam Gooden and Arthur and Richard Brooks to form the Impressions in 1958. (Butler left the group after their first hit, "For Your Precious Love," and was replaced by Fred Cash.) Although the Impressions were crossing over, Mayfield never forgot his spiritual roots.

"I found myself in the church," he said. "You hear all kinds of voicings.

Along with the gift of music I inherited, I also learned a lot from the introductions of my mother, (late 1800s dialect poet) Laurence Dunbar, Dr. Seuss and limericks."

Dr. Seuss?

"Of course," he said. "I learned differences in timing with Dr. Seuss and limericks. Those influences made me be able to change tempos. It gave me the ability to write."

Mayfield's clever wordplay, layered over choppy guitar riffs and defined rhyme patterns in tunes such as "If There's a Hell Below We're All Going To Go," "He's a Fly Guy" (which Mayfield recorded with the ska band Fishbone) and "Superfly," make many think that his music was a precursor to hip hop. Mayfield's last record before his accident was 1990's "The Return of Superfly," which blended four Mayfield tunes with rap tracks by Tone-Loc and Eazy-E.

"I don't see it," he said. "But I'm happy that a lot of my music has influenced many rap singers - or rappers. I've had 35 or more samples just over the past year from different rap people. From 'Superfly' to albums before that. It's been a source of income for me as well."

Completing Mayfield's genius was his tender falsetto. It complemented to his warm style of guitar playing, which seemed to embrace the listener. "What Curtis invented was this warm, caressing wash of sound," guitarist Ry Cooder said in a 1990 interview. "It's like stepping into a Jacuzzi."

Mayfield said, "I never took guitar lessons. One of my cousins was drafted into the Army, and his guitar was off in the corner where nobody touched it. I was around 10 when I finally picked up this guitar. When I strummed across it, it sounded out of tune because it was tuned to Spanish tuning. I subconsciously retuned it to the key of F sharp - which was all the black keys on the piano. I didn't know what I had done for years, until I got into the Apollo Theater and found that my (guitar) tuning actually matched the piano. No one has been able to play it like I did. Except for one guy, who used to come visit me at Cabrini - that was Billy Butler (Jerry's brother.)"

Mayfield wrote all his songs from the tender vibrato of his guitar - "Got To Find a Way," "We People (Who Are Darker Than Blue)," "Keep on Pushing" - songs of soul, colors and courage.

"That guitar was the other me," he said. "That was my partner. That's the instrument I slept with for many, many years. And I miss it so."