

James Carr: Soul Singer  
by: Dave Hoekstra  
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MEMPHIS---- So this is how it is when all a man has left is a song.

Soul legend James Carr sits on a big sofa in a small office located near the Memphis State University campus. His brittle body is clothed in an oversized brown sports coat and baggy slacks. Some of Carr's yellow fingernails are so long, they curl up at the end.

When Carr drifts in on a conversation, he will explain how his parents left him when he was 3, how he suffered a serious head injury in a Mississippi cotton field, how he grew up illiterate and how he feels regret for becoming "spellbound" onstage at a 1979 concert in Japan. When Carr drifts out, well, there is the song: "(At the) Dark End of the Street."

And there is silence.

Publicist Joe McEwen once called Carr "The World's Greatest Soul Singer," and the label has stuck. The late O.V. Wright, himself a stirring emulator of Otis Redding and Otis Clay, often said he wished he had Carr's big, emotive baritone. Then you look at Carr, who sits on the sofa so shy and so unsure. Maybe his voice is so spiritually manifesting because that is the easiest way he can communicate. If only it were that simple.

Quinton Claunch, the original vice president of Goldwax Records, is trying to restart the label for which Carr recorded. He is taking a long shot by centering the effort on Carr's comeback. Claunch resurfaced in 1988 as a producer for the Rev. Al Green's Grammy-winning "Precious Lord" album.

Toward the end of an interview, Goldwax executive director Elliott Clark pulls out a promotional black-and-white picture of Carr that was taken during the label's mid-1960s glory years. He gives it to Carr, who leans forward on the sofa.

Carr holds the old picture in his left hand and a new promotional shot in his right. He stares at the picture in his left hand. He views it with suspicion. But he looks at the older man in the new picture and shakes his head with contempt.

Carr will turn 50 in June. Besides his dark, gospel-influenced vocals, the other half of the Carr legend is that no one knows where he has been for the last decade. There were rumors of drink and drug abuse and talk of a total emotional breakdown. For a while, Carr drifted between Memphis mental

institutions and a southern Memphis housing project.

"I was living in Memphis, but Memphis is a big town," Carr says with a sly grin. "I knew people thought I was lost. People will talk. The more they're talking, the more I'm on their mind. I haven't been doing any shows. I'd like to start back with that."

Carr would like to start back in Japan, where in 1979, he froze onstage in the middle of a song. He had popped too many anti-depressants. The rest of the concert was canceled. "I think about that every once in a while," he says. "I was tired. They think I had pneumonia. I had been recording. I was hoarse. I shouldn't have gone. I'd like to go back."

That was about the last anyone had heard of Carr.

Peter Guralnick, author of the 1986 book *Sweet Soul Music*, met Carr briefly while doing research but found him uncommunicative. In his book he described Carr as "practically narcoleptic" and speaking with "the foxiness of the truly mad." Carr granted just two interviews in the late 1980s, the last one in 1988 to the Canadian soul music magazine *Soul Survivor*.

But Carr's name began to reemerge when the compelling ballad of regret "(At the) Dark End of the Street" became a focal point of the film "The Commitments." The Irish band received a Grammy nomination for best pop performance by a duo or group with vocal for the soundtrack album. Carr was unaware of the film.

"Was I singing in it?" he asks.

Guralnick wrote the liner notes for the 1987 Carr compilation "Dark End of the Street" (Blueside Records). The notes, adapted from "Sweet Soul Music," are titled "Where Is James Carr?"

Guralnick quotes a flamboyant press release from Carr's manager, Roosevelt Jamison:

"James started singing when he was about the age of 9. He had artistic ability then, so it was just a matter of time. He stood on the middle of the church floor, lead singer for a group of six. With his suspenders too short and pants too big.

There wasn't a song they sang he couldn't lick. . .

. . . When he sang, he walled his eyes (so only the whites could be seen)

He was a funny little fellow, especially for his size

The little boy sang so hard as he knelt to the church floor. Saying, 'This may be my last time, people, I don't know.' "

James Carr debuted his all-consuming act in the Greater Mount Pleasant Church in southern Memphis. He sang spirituals in the church choir. "My mother and father left me when I was 3," he says. "I've been on my own since. But I stayed in church until I got married at 19 or 20.

"When I was little boy, I worked in the cotton fields. Someone threw a brick, and it hit me on the head. I bled all kind of blood. They rushed me to the hospital. So it took me a while to learn how to read and write, but one of the first things I learned to read was the Bible. As I got older, I stopped reading as much as I should."

Being direct and non-verbal may enhance vocal ability, as country legend George Jones has shown with his controlled vocal despair. Carr says, "Yes, it (his quietness) may help, but I have so much to think about when I'm singing."

Through Jamison, the "World's Greatest Soul Singer" met O.V. (Overton Vertis) Wright. On weekends, Wright was singing in two Memphis area gospel groups, the Jubilee Hummingbirds and the Harmony Echoes. On weekdays, Wright worked on a garbage truck.

"So we got a group together," Carr says of what actually was an expansion of the Harmony Echoes. "I was the lead singer. O.V. sang in the group. We used to meet up at church."

The mention of Wright's desire to have a voice as big as Carr's causes Carr to light up. "Yeah, he told me the same thing," Carr says. "You know that medley of songs O.V. used to do ('That's How Strong My Love Is,' 'Eight Men and Four Women' and 'Treasured Moments')? I did that medley for him one time when we were on our way to Arkansas. I was just singing, O.V. was just listening. He went on to record that. I don't think I recorded it."

A few years before Carr and Wright hooked up in the Harmony Echoes, Claunch arrived in Memphis from Nashville. A part-time country musician and traveling salesman, Claunch worked for Sam Phillips, first at the Memphis Recording Service and then in 1952 at Sun Records. Claunch played guitar on early Charlie Feathers and Carl Perkins Sun tracks.

Along with Sun session man Bill Cantrell, Claunch formed Hi Records, which was modeled after Sun. The label's first big hit was 1959's "Smoke, Part 2," by Bill Black, the former bass player for Elvis Presley. Claunch had already left Hi, but by the time "Smoke, Part 2" charted, he was beginning to make a name for himself in Memphis.

In 1964, a Memphis pharmacist gave Claunch \$600 to record a group called the Lyrics in nearby Muscle Shoals. With that, Goldwax Records was born,

although the label didn't hit its stride until Carr and Wright entered the picture.

They provided a Southern-based gospel sound that was even grittier than Stax-Volt Records, Memphis' greatest commercial soul success, or Hi, which was built around the soul of Al Green and Willie Mitchell.

"One night, I was sitting at home," Claunch says. "It was midnight, and there was a knock on my door. It was James and O.V. They had some tapes and asked if I would listen to them. So we sat on my living room floor. When I heard them, it knocked me out."

Wright's only hit for Goldwax was 1964's spiritual-tinged ballad "That's How Strong My Love Is," which became a bigger hit for Otis Redding. Wright left the label in 1965 after Duke Records owner Don Robey claimed Wright was still under contract for earlier work in Duke's gospel group, the Sunset Travelers. Wright died in 1980 of a heart attack brought on by years of drug abuse.

Carr had his first hit in 1966. He says he was living in Kankakee, Ill., with his wife at the time of his chart debut. "That's when they told me I had a hit," he says.

What song was it?

"What song was it, Quinton?" Carr asks.

"You've Got My Mind Messed Up," Claunch answers.

The song is a pleading ballad written by O.B. McClinton. Carr's desperate voice is framed by the quivering lead guitar of Reggie Young (of the Bill Black Combo), Bobby Woods on subdued keyboards and the Memphis Horns, on loan from Stax.

Carr had other hits with "Pouring Water (on a Drowning Man)" and a soulful cover of Harlan Howard's country standard "Life Turned Her That Way." But Carr will always be associated with "(At the) Dark End of the Street."

"We were at a country disc jockey convention in Nashville," Claunch says. "Chips Moman and Dan Penn (who produced the Box Tops) were staying across the hall from us. They were playing poker, and started writing the song, and they got on a streak. It was 2 in the morning, and they were keeping us awake. I went over and said, 'Chips, I don't mind you staying in this room, providing that when you finish that song, you let me have it for James Carr. They finished the song that weekend we were in Nashville.'"

Of the riveting "(At the) Dark End of the Street," Carr only says, "I thought it was pretty."

The last time Carr worked for a label, it was Atlantic in 1971. He lasted a year. "They said I would sell more records with a bigger label," Carr says. "I never got a report if they did."

Carr does not have room in his battered soul to be bitter. He will give soul music one more shot. In 1991, Goldwax released "Take Me to the Limit," a CD of 10 new songs. Carr's voice is in remarkably good shape, although with the exception of a saucy cover of Al Green's "Love Attack," it seems to question some of the contemporary uptempo material. Claunch shelved an experimental followup called "Try My Love" earlier this year.

Carr's next album, "24 Carat Soul," is slated for a May 1 release. Advance tapes show the material is more appropriate, especially the gospel-influenced "Baby, Please Hold On," written by George Jackson (who co-wrote Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll").

After hearing the new songs, I pat Carr on the back and walk out of the office. I normally don't go around patting subjects on the back. One problem with show business is that people get too many pats on the back. James Carr hasn't had enough.

A song will only take you so far.