

Aug. 2, 1992-- It was one of those September summer mornings in Los Angeles where the smog slid across the city like a cheap blanket. Mary Wells was resting in a downtown hotel after being honored at the 1990 MTV Awards.

A mutual friend of ours invited me to visit Wells. The Cincinnati Reds were staying in the hotel where Wells was living. To get to her suite, I had to wade through dozens of autograph-hungry youngsters surrounding the elevator. A brawny 25-year-old outfielder named Paul O'Neill strolled off the elevator as I got on.

Lucky guys like O'Neill always seemed to live in Wells' music. Wells' biggest hits included "My Guy," "You Beat Me to the Punch" and "Two Lovers." For a while, her innocent and sultry vocal style made her Motown's female answer to Smokey Robinson. Robinson wrote or co-wrote all of Wells' hits. Robinson and Wells also dueted on "You Beat Me to the Punch" and "The One Who Really Loves You." Wells was in bad shape when I last saw her. (She died last week at age 49.)

She was diagnosed with throat cancer in August, 1990, and immediately underwent surgery. Wells had finished intense radiation treatments and was trying to gather strength to embark on 33 chemotherapy sessions. A tracheotomy tube hung from the middle of her throat.

To give her voice a chance to rejuvenate, Wells was not allowed to talk. She communicated with a pen and note pad. Sugar, her 4-year-old daughter, ran around the suite, oblivious to the emotional and physical pain her mother was going through.

Cancer struck Wells at a particularly bad time. She had no medical insurance. She had not earned enough money to meet American Federation of Television and Radio Artists qualifications and was dropped on March 1, 1990.

Her final concert was in May, 1990, on a cruise ship in Mexico.

Wells also had separated from husband Curtis Womack (the brother of soul singer Bobby Womack). She had been evicted from her Van Nuys town house, and her touring van had been repossessed. Although she

had received a \$15,000 artistic grant from the Rhythm and Blues Foundation in Washington, D.C., medical bills quickly depleted those funds. The foundation also paid for the hotel suite.

Bruce Springsteen, who had planned to use Wells in duets on upcoming releases, donated \$10,000 to a fund established in Wells' name. Diana Ross gave \$15,000. Rod Stewart donated \$10,000. The Temptations delivered \$5,000. Frank Sinatra sent an undisclosed amount.

Before Wells entered the room, our friend Joyce McRae - a foundation trustee - and I discussed how Wells' misfortune had made her the first point of identity of the fledgling rhythm and blues organization.

"I'm not into the role model thing at this point," Wells wrote.

"I'm trying to get myself involved. I'm trying to get into it. But yesterday, the radiation made me feel like I was burning inside. I could feel the heat."

Wells began to cry.

McRae, who met Wells in 1981, held her hand.

"I worry about my children," Wells continued. (Besides Sugar, she is survived by a 25-year-old daughter, and 17- and 23-year-old sons.) "They don't have any choice. Cities need to move industrial plants that cause pollution away from where people have to live and breathe. And I encourage anyone not to smoke."

Wells smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for 15 years.

"It is not good," she wrote. "When I was growing up, cigarette smoking was chic and elegant. It was the thing to do. But you have to try and keep your system clean. When we went to the MTV Awards, there was smoke from the crowd. At least I was able to come back here, stick a tube down the (tracheotomy tube) hole and suction all that stuff out. I've been telling my friends to stop. Dionne (Warwick) is still smoking like a chimney. And I've told Aretha (Franklin) to stop."

Wells' career peaked after the release of "My Guy" in 1964, later opening for the Beatles on their U.S. tour that year. But Wells said she could sense Berry Gordy's shift from promoting her urban

soul to investing more time and money in her Motown stablemates Diana Ross & the Supremes, who had greater crossover appeal.

Wells thought Gordy didn't do as much as he could to push her records. She left Motown in 1965. "There's no evidence that anything was done to hold me back," she wrote. "But at one time I was No. 1 on pop, R & B and jazz charts. Somehow, things just didn't work out for me. At this point, I need to have my mind full of positive things. I never hold hatred. If it is inside of you for a small time, it can damage you.

"But you never let anybody know that."

McRae, who also has championed the career of Sam Moore of Sam & Dave fame, met Wells in 1981 at an oldies show. The two struck up a conversation about Jackie Wilson, whom they both admired.

Wells wrote her first song, "Bye Bye Baby" at age 16. She wanted Wilson to record it.

A friendship blossomed between Wells and McRae. "I'd drive a rental car between dates, and Mary, Curtis and Sugar rode with us," McRae reminisced with Wells by her side. "We had our bonding experience. Whenever we got into talking about what happened with Jackie (he spent nine years in a semicoma before he died in 1984), Mary said, 'Girl, if I ever get sick, I'm calling you up.' That's basically what happened."

The cancer was detected after Wells had polyps removed from her vocal cords. After that operation, her windpipes collapsed and Wells went into respiratory distress.

"Like any other rhythm and blues artist, she was living in a house of cards," McRae said in 1990. "Many of these artists are only two or three gigs away from being indigent by catastrophe."

Things have gotten better for rhythm and blues artists since Wells' problems became public knowledge. Earlier this year, EMI Music announced that it would recalculate royalty rates for all of its artists from the 1940s, '50s and '60s. In addition, where negative balances prevented royalty payments, those debts were scratched. Before that, Atlantic Records erased all negative balances

claimed against older artists' accounts and recalculated royalties dating to 1970.

"Mary Wells is our poster child, as it were," McRae said. "Mary really stands for and is the point of being the role model of what is wrong with our industry - and what needs correcting urgently. These artists are all getting older.

"There is going to be another Mary Wells."