

Obituary Curtis Mayfield
By Dave Hoekstra
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By directing his tender falsetto and warm guitar into a call for unity, Curtis Mayfield became one of the most soothing voices in contemporary American music. The Chicago native died Sunday in North Fulton Regional Hospital in Rosewell, Ga. He was 57.

The cause of death was not immediately known.

Mr. Mayfield was too ill to attend his March induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He became a Grammy Legend Award winner in 1994 and a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award winner the next year.

Mr. Mayfield had been largely confined to his home in suburban Atlanta since August 1990, when a lighting rig fell on him on an outdoor stage in Brooklyn, N.Y. Doctors amputated his right leg last year because of diabetes brought on by the injury.

Mr. Mayfield had 13 top 10 singles in the 1960s and '70s, including "People Get Ready," "It's All Right" and "Superfly." He also wrote "The Monkey Time" for Major Lance, "Just Be True" for Gene Chandler and "Let's Do It Again" for the Staple Singers.

"That was the only secular song we've ever done," Mavis Staples said on Sunday. "Let's Do It Again" was the title track for the 1975 film that starred Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier. Staples said, "We were excited. But when we went into the studio and Pops heard his part - I like you lady/so fine with your pretty hair - he said, 'Man, I ain't singing that, Curtis,' And Curtis said, 'Pops, come on. It's a movie score. It's not changing your religion. Do it for me, please?' And Daddy just got tickled. He couldn't say no to Curtis. He was that inspiring."

Mr. Mayfield was born June 3, 1942, in Cook County Hospital. He attended at least nine grammar schools in Chicago. When he was 12, the Mayfield family moved to 966 N. Hudson, into one of the tiny row houses of the Cabrini Homes, where he lived until his mid-20s. In 1995, the section of Hudson that runs through the Cabrini neighborhood was renamed for the composer-singer. Mr. Mayfield and his family moved to the Atlanta area in 1980.

Mr. Mayfield had the soul of a preacher. His commitment to social causes came from his grandmother, the Rev. A.B. Mayfield. In the early 1950s, she formed a Chicago-based gospel group called the Traveling Soul Spritualists, who sang in storefront churches on the Near North and West sides. That's where Mr. Mayfield met Jerry Butler, now a solo singer and Cook County

Commissioner.

Butler, Mr. Mayfield and his cousins sang gospel before joining forces with Chattanooga transplants Sam Gooden and Arthur and Richard Brooks to form the Impressions in 1958. Mr. Mayfield often credited Butler for honing his harmonies. The Impressions and Mr. Mayfield were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991.

"Curtis loved practical jokes," Butler said on Sunday. "I recall going to New York City for the first time in 1958. We stayed at a hotel that didn't have a good reputation. It was in Harlem and was frequented by prostitutes and junkies. But it was the only place we could afford. We stayed in the same room. I went to sleep with my hand over my head, but I was woken up by a bang on the window. I jumped up scared, only to find out Curtis had thrown his shoes up against the window. Everybody was rolling over on the floor. He had an undeniable spirit."

Mr. Mayfield's keen and adventurous mind was unaffected by his accident. He credited the church for his cresting vocal arrangements, citing lyrical influences as diverse as late 1800s dialect poet Laurence Dunbar and Dr. Seuss. "I learned differences in timing with Dr. Seuss and limericks," Mr. Mayfield said in 1993. "Those influences made me be able to change tempos. It gave me the ability to write."

And what a writer he was.

His "Keep On Pushing" (1964) generally is regarded as the first rhythm-and-blues song to rally blacks behind the civil rights movement. Mr. Mayfield's 1970s solo compositions included "We Who Are Darker Than Blue," "Freddy's Dead" and the extended jazz-funk workout "Mighty Mighty (Spade and Whitey)."

Mr. Mayfield is survived by his wife Altheida, his mother, 10 children, two sisters, a brother and seven grandchildren. His funeral will be private. "Probably in February we will let the music world mourn," Altheida said Sunday, "and at that time the public is welcome."