

May 27, 1988---

One of the last times Led Zeppelin smoked out the old Chicago Stadium, soul singer Bobby Bland was applying his velvet touch at the Burning Spear nightclub while an upstart rhythm 'n' blues singer named Otis Clay was grinding and winding his way through a small West Side social club.

After the Zeppelin gig, lead singer Robert Plant led a fleet of six licorice-black limousines down to the Spear to catch Bland's late set. Clay drove his midnight blue Mark IV to the Spear at 55th and State, and the three musicians wound up jamming together, accented by the wacky and wild Burning Spear chorus line.

But what Clay remembers most about that summer night in 1973 was when local producer Bill Cody introduced Clay to Plant. The English singer went Silly Putty about the American rhythm and blues singer. Plant had emulated Clay's deep southern vamp in countless covers of Clay's 1966 hit, "Easier Said Than Done."

"What is it that makes a man rich?" Clay asked after telling the story recently.

"You've contributed something," he answered. "Somebody liked something you've done. I was in Atlanta on Mother's Day doing a gospel concert. After the show, this little boy came up to me and said, 'Mr. Clay, I really enjoyed your singing.' Yeah, this is really a good time for me."

Clay punctuates his sentences with the best smile in soul music. It is a soft beam that goes cheek to cheek, a gentle gateway to the essence of what the man does.

Day after day. Year after year.

Now in his 28th year of satisfying gospel and soul singing, Clay will appear with Tyrone Davis and Johnnie Taylor in a vintage soul revue at 7 tonight at the New Regal Theatre, 1645 E. 79th.. Each act will perform an hour set in the format of an old-style soul revue. And just to make the karma circle complete, Robert Plant will appear at 8 p.m. Sunday at Poplar Creek Music Theatre in Hoffman Estates .

These days, Clay is singing like a coiled cobra, retaining the deep gospel grit and tension he cultivated while growing up in Waxhaw, Miss. The impetus for the spiritual revival comes from Clay being reunited with Willie Mitchell, who produced much of Clay's early '70s material for Hi Records at Royal Recording Studios in Memphis, Tenn. Mitchell is best known for co-writing and producing Al Green's secular hits between 1969 and 1977, as well as producing soul singers Syl Johnson and O.V. Wright at Royal.

Clay and Mitchell are collaborating on an album that is scheduled for an early fall release on Mitchell's Waylo Label. So far, they've laid down four rough tracks ranging from Larry Lee's "Nobody On the Phone," the story of an outside lover that is coated by a prowling guitar and determined dance groove (and a funky "ring-ring-hello-click" chorus), and "I Know I'm Over You," a simple but elegant soul ballad that is demonstrative of the strong bass and guitar lines that embodies Mitchell's works.

But the standout song so far is the stark soul love song written by Chicago's Billy Always (who has just been signed by CBS) called "I Don't Understand," which features some of the most declarative and emotive singing of Clay's career. Clay growls and shrills through the song, pausing only for a breezy chorus influenced by Clay's live interpretation of "Shining Star."

It's strictly lights-out material.

"The new songs are a complete merger of what Willie had with a lot of things on top of it, or improving upon something that's already there," Clay explained. "Willie's into the modern stuff, but it's not dominating anything. That's the key to the whole thing. I love electronics myself, but most of the product you hear now is dominated by electronics. What's happening here is you still have the presence of the Memphis studio musicians (the five-piece Memphis Horns featuring trumpet player Wayne Jackson and tenor saxophonist Andrew Love will be added) with some electronics. I think it's all going to be very effective."

After scoring an R & B hit with a quirky cover of Doug Sahm's "She's About a Mover," on Cotillion/Atlantic records, Clay first met Mitchell in 1970 when Cotillion sent Clay to Memphis to cut "Is It Over." He also did a cover of the Sam & Dave hit "I Thank You," which was never released. In 1971, Clay signed with Hi Records and the relationship was galvanized, with Mitchell producing most of Clay's best-known soul songs: "Precious, Precious," "Trying To Live My Life Without You" and "Holding On to a Dying Love."

"We have kind of a mutual thing between each other," Clay said. "No contracts or anything. Willie will be helping me with both my gospel and my secular music."

In a separate phone interview from Memphis, Mitchell said, "Otis is singing better than he did 10 years ago. He's mellowed with the times. I just let him be himself. See, Otis sings songs. Gospel songs, country songs, rock 'n' roll; you really can't categorize him. I just set up the mike and let him go."

Mitchell is also giving Clay an extraordinary deal on the remodified 16-track recording machine that was responsible for most of the Hi hits. Clay is completing building Redwood Studios (so named because of its redwood facade), a full-production studio at 4245 W. Cermak. "Willie's updated his studio and has monstrous equipment in there now," Clay said. "He says the 16-track is mine. A lot

of people really want it and have offered all kinds of money. Willie feels it's kind of lucky because of all the hits that have been cut on the thing."

One of Clay's first Redwood projects is a live gospel album to be followed by other gospel and soul albums. "There's a lot of guys I know who were doing music at one time or another and they're not doing anything now," he said. "This could be a way to renew their thing. I've been blessed to be able to continue through all the valleys and the mountains - but mostly valleys in life. A lot of guys started doing other things.

"But with all of us, the interest was always there."