

Solomon Burke
By Dave Hoekstra
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LOS ANGELES The end of an emotional and epic feast with soul singer Solomon Burke was seasoned by religion, the reason for his expansive existence.

We were taking oxygen between our third and fourth course at a Chinese restaurant along Wilshire Boulevard when I decided to ask Burke a Hollywood kind of question I almost never use: "How would you liked to be remembered?"

The 300-pound Burke leaned back from two full tables of food and slowly wiped his lips with an elegant napkin. There was a long silence.

Mt. Solomon was ready to erupt.

"I'd like to be remembered by me and not just remembered by others," he said, picking his words as if they were pea pods. "It's a hard question because I believe in life. I don't believe in death. I know that death is something that is coming, but I'm preparing to live every day. So to be remembered is not to be remembered, but to be known as one who believed. There's a big difference."

That's a modest statement for a man who is the father of 21 children, who at age 7 was the "Wonder Boy Preacher" of the House of God for All People in his native Philadelphia, holds a doctorate in mortuary science and is best known for his hits "Everybody Needs Somebody To Love," "Got To Get You Off of My Mind" and "Cry to Me."

Burke will make his second Chicago appearance in 21 years when he performs with his six-piece band in "The Night of Legends" at 9 p.m. Saturday and 12:30 a.m. Nov. 13 at the East of the Ryan nightclub, 914 E. 79th St. Sharing the soulful bill with Burke will be Bobby "Blue" Bland, L.V. Johnson, Arkansas Red and Alvin "Twine Time" Cash.

No singer exploits soul music's gospel roots more thoroughly than the 52-year-old Burke. His oratorical vocal style coasts between a church crescendo and husky country murmur. The consistent and tonal richness of Burke's voice reflects the fullness of his life. "When you're born into Christianity and spiritualism, it's natural for you not to shy from it," said Burke, who was wearing a stoplight red jacket, a red-and-white striped shirt and snow white slacks. "I was taught as a child that we were royal and very special - we were considered the anointed ones. I've always kept that in my heart, I've always kept that in my mind. And I've tried to remember that if I give, I will receive. And it works. It doesn't work as fast as you want it to do sometimes, but it works.

"My grandmother used to say, 'The secret of life is living, try to do everything you can to live a good life so you can enjoy life.' I know the hand of God watches over me and my family. My performances are totally dedicated to the healing of someone's mind, spiritually, physically and financially. I know I am a blessing to thousands of people. Sometimes I say things onstage I have no control over. To me it's like a revival. It's me having service, it's not me performing like the average artist. And people who are members of my congregations from St. Louis to Kansas to Texas to Oklahoma - they know to listen."

Back to the beginning of our interview, when the waiter brought the tea.

Eleanora A. Moore, Burke's grandmother, founded Burke's church: The House of God for All People (which street people affectionately call the church of Let it All Hang Out). Burke's father was a chicken plucker from Kingston, Jamaica; his mother was an ordained preacher.

In Peter Guralnick's extensive profile of Burke in his wonderful book *Sweet Soul Music*, Burke's mother is quoted as saying, "It was such a big deal when (Solomon) was born," because to Burke's grandmother, his birth was the confirmation of devoted faith.

Burke delivered his first sermon at age 7. By age 12, he was ministering over the radio and traveling through the Southeast on weekend religious crusades.

Speaking of crusades, it takes at least two waiters to carry the appetizers for Burke, his wife, Sunday, and a reporter: shrimp toast, barbecued spare ribs, hot chicken and egg rolls.

The everlasting power of Burke's big pipes were established in the church. When Burke was signed to Atlantic Records in 1961, producer-vice president Jerry Wexler filtered an emotive gospel air through defined rock 'n' rhythm arrangements that stirred Burke's convincing voice.

For example, that's Dionne Warwick singing the gospel background on Burke hits such as "Cry to Me," "Down in the Valley" and "If You Need Me." Other Southern gospel-influenced soul singers such as Joe Tex and Otis Redding sang behind Burke.

That's how Burke became the King of Rock 'n' Soul.

"In 1964, a Baltimore disc jockey named Rockin' Robin pegged me that when I was at the Royal Theater with the Supremes (their first tour) and the Marvlettes," Burke recalled. "I guess they needed something different to do."

So they made me the king and got me a robe and a crown. Every night, we did that and people loved it." For the next 10 years, Burke never performed without his cape and crown. But the shtick created a conflict with the Godfather of Soul.

"James Brown claimed he was the king," Burke continued. "I was booked for a concert with James in Chicago. I think 'Got To Get You Off of My Mind' was out. People were yelling for Solomon Burke and James said, 'I'll teach you who's the king.' It came time for me to go on, and the guys told me to stand at the stage. I was all ready in the crown and the robe and I heard, 'Now, here's the man you've all been waiting for . . .' I thought, 'Really nice. They're giving me a nice build up.' 'The man who's had such hits as . . .' and I thought he was going to say 'Cry to Me,' 'Down in the Valley,' but he goes 'Please, Please, Please,' 'Night Train' . . . Mr. James Brown. And Mr. Brown walks out and says, 'I'm James Brown, I'm the king.' He looks to me and says, 'I'm paying you so you can just give me that crown and robe.' I put the robe on him out onstage. If he wanted to be king, he could be king. It was a great gig. I made five grand. I said, 'Mr. Brown, I'm not working Wednesday and Thursday, and I'd be willing to cut my price to do the same show with you.' James is a very good performer. An excellent writer. I don't care about some of his personal things, but who am I to judge anyone? I certainly wouldn't want anyone to judge me."

Here comes the main course: beef broccoli and bamboo shoots, scallops, cashews and chicken, asparagus, mushrooms, steamed rice and a bowl of wonton soup the size of a commode. A second table is carried in for the fresh steam whole fish.

Someone could get hurt here.

Burke has just returned from a six-week trip to Europe, where he finished filming a movie in which he co-stars with rock singer Willy DeVille.

"It's a state-of-the-art movie of love and violence, but no blood," Burke explained. "I've got about 42 different scenes. I play the guy who tries to do away with Willy. They made my nails grow real long for this role," and Burke stuck out a left hand of thin, feline fingernails. Burke said the still-untitled film will be released Jan. 1 in nine countries. An American release will follow.

This isn't Burke's first film role. Jim McBride cast him in the memorable role of Big Daddy Mention, a New Orleans roots-and-toots doctor in "The Big Easy."

"I took a screen test for 'The Big Easy,' " Burke said. "For this one, we didn't do a screen test. The writer imagined in his mind I'd be right for

the role. He saw me in concert a year ago and wrote the script around me playing that part. I'd like to do more films, but I want to do it on my own merit. Not just the merit of being Solomon Burke."

Burke mixed the filming with a successful month long tour of Italy with his 12-piece orchestra. Mick Hucknall, the soulful lead singer of Simply Red, joined Burke for one show.

"Mick's my man," Burke declared. "He's fascinating. He came to one of my concerts and got loose onstage. We did 'Got To Get You Off of My Mind' and 'If You Need Me.' He has a lot of soul. He has a collection of blues and soul music that would wipe any disc jockey out. Dick Clark could go to this guy's house and get blown away." Burke said he plans future vocal collaborations with Hucknall and a separate project with Phil Collins.

As he will in Chicago, Burke performed selections from his new record, "The Power," which was just released on Los Angeles-based MCI Records. Seventy percent of the album consists of original material, along with a couple of surprise soul oldies. "The Power" was a family affair produced over the last 18 months by Burke's 16-year-old son, Selassie, and his two daughters, Victoria, 14 and Elizabeth, 13.

Burke still uses a church pulpit when he sings in the studio. "To me it's a method of my stance, and I'm ministering to my people," he said. "It's a royal step."

We're into our third hour of eating and talking; dessert was appropriately light. There were an equal portions of kumquats and lichee nuts framed by a few slices of oranges.

I mentioned I was surprised that Burke didn't appear in last May's Atlantic Records 40th anniversary party in New York City. No artist had a more profound effect on Atlantic Records in the early '60s than Solomon Burke.

"We weren't invited," he growled. "When we were finally informed of it by a one-page letter, the responsibility of getting to New York was at my own expense. I was told the proceeds would benefit artists of the future of Atlantic Records. (In truth, the proceeds from the concert went to the Atlantic Records Foundation, which distributed funds to charities such as Amnesty International, American Foundation for AIDS Research and the New York Mission Society for the Homeless.)

"Well, I have one thing to say to that. So many of the artists of the past haven't been paid yet. If they were going to benefit Ivory Joe Hunter, Big Joe Turner's family or the Clyde McPhatter family, I would have been glad to be part of it. But to me, it was a sham. It didn't represent the real 40

years of Atlantic Records. The praises and the honors should go to the people who really built Atlantic Records. Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, (the late) Clyde McPhatter, LaVerne Baker. (Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin declined to appear at the concert, while Baker and Brown each contributed inspiring sets.)

"It's a sad story."

The most fruitful result of the Atlantic Records celebration was the creation of the Rhythm and Blues Foundation, which already has processed \$250,000 in back royalties to Atlantic artists such as Ruth Brown, Sam Moore (of Sam & Dave), Wilson Pickett and the estate of Big Joe Turner.

Atlantic has promised to erase all the negative balances claimed against older artists and recalculate royalties from 1970 to the present. It's impossible to recalculate before 1970 because of slipshod recordkeeping. Burke said he has not heard of the Rhythm and Blues Foundation.

"I'm one of the few blessed that can survive without it," he said. "It's not like when I started in the business when a hit record could last a year. But there was a time when I did depend on it (royalties), and that's when they let me down. I learned from that. I learned to build, invest, save, buy - not drugs or fancy cars. Real estate. Land. Business. But I've missed a couple of good boats.

"My wife's family owns a noodle company. When I married her 19 years ago, she said, 'Why don't you take these noodles and put an American wrapper on them?' Appeasing her, I said we would start a company called Yankee Doodle Dixie Noodles. We would have red noodles for Yankee Doodles and blue noodles for Dixie Noodles. They could compete against each other in the South. I was going to be the biggest noodle man in town, but I played around with everything but that. A couple of years later, a company named Top Robin started packaging the noodles. By that time her family made a nice fortune distributing their rights. But I've been blessed. I've made some honest dollars.

"I've always been a hustler."