

Feb. 10, 2005---

Tyrone Davis, one of the preeminent figures in Chicago rhythm and blues history, died Wednesday at Hinsdale Hospital. He was 66 years old.

Mr. Davis had been in a long-term health care facility since suffering a stroke on Sept. 7.

Deploying a vulnerable baritone and a smile of deep style, Mr. Davis had national hits with "Turn Back the Hands of Time," "Can I Change My Mind" and "Turning Point." His romantic sense of conviction helped him place 43 singles on the Billboard R&B charts between 1968 and 1988.

Mr. Davis portrayed a larger-than-life exterior, performing in mustard yellow suits, wide-brimmed hats and outrageous fur coats. Even as an adult, Mr. Davis liked to be called by his stage name, "Wonder Boy." Beneath the surface there was the twinkle of a small-town kid.

Mr. Davis was born in Greenville, Miss., and at age 19 moved with his divorced father to Saginaw, Mich. He arrived in Chicago in 1950 and became a valet for bluesman Freddie King.

Mr. Davis met his longtime friend, Chicago soul-gospel singer Otis Clay, in 1962 when they worked side-by-side in the shipping department of National Castings in Chicago. Their bond was never broken. During Mr. Davis' hospital stay, Clay would visit Mr. Davis two or three times a week, sometimes singing him songs such as Sam Cooke's "Keep Movin' On."

"I lost my last biological brother in December 2002," Clay said Wednesday. "Tyrone was like my brother, and I don't mean that in any street terms. I mean that from the heart. This is hurting me. He was unique as an artist because there were some things he did wrong that were so right. He had a way with words."

The friends enjoyed debating about Mr. Davis' late 1990s and early 2000s hits like "Let Me Be Your Pacifier" and "Whip Appeal." And in a 1998 concert at the House of Blues, Mr. Davis' saucy demeanor recalled the glory days of the High Chaparral nightclub on South Stony Island. But he stunned the crowd with an extended, pleading version of Kris Kristofferson's "For the Good Times."

Chicago record producer Carl Davis (no relation) discovered Mr. Davis in 1968, a year after Carl Davis cut Jackie Wilson's "(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher."

"Tyrone was recording for Wally Roker in New York," Davis recalled Wednesday.

"They had cut 'Can I Change My Mind,' but Wally had violins and it was schmaltzy. Tyrone wanted to be with me. I said, 'I like the song, but not the way it's recorded.' "

Roker agreed to release the singer to Carl Davis' Dakar Records, where producer Willie Henderson added feisty Chicago horns. Jerry Wexler at Atlantic Records distributed Dakar's "Can I Change My Mind" in 1969 and "Turn Back the Hands of Time" in 1970.

"Tyrone even wanted to put 'Tyrone the Wonder Boy' on the label," Davis recalled. "I said, 'I ain't putting that crap on the record.' I said, 'What's your real name?' He said, 'Tyrone Fettson.' I said, 'I don't like that either.' So finally he said, 'Just give me your name.' And that's how it came out to be Tyrone Davis."

In 1998 Mr. Davis triumphed after a two-year battle against prostate cancer, and his recovery was celebrated in a roast that drew more than 1,000 friends to the East of the Ryan Motel on the South Side. He was genuinely humbled by the affection and sat in a sense of wonder.

"He had a gruff exterior," Carl Davis said. "But inside he was so warm and nice. And he was loyal. Even after I stopped producing him, he would tell anybody that it was Carl Davis who gave him his chance."

In mid-November Clay helped organize a successful fund-raiser for Mr. Davis at the Harold Washington Cultural Center that featured Jerry Butler, Buddy Guy, Koko Taylor and others. Clay said, "Tyrone and I talked two or three times a day, usually about music. One of our favorite tunes was Roy Head's 'Treat Her Right.' He'd sing a couple of verses, I'd sing a couple of verses. He always wanted me to cut that song, but I never did."

A generation of music fans fell under the evocative musical spell of Tyrone Davis. They were treated right.