

Biography

BILLY PRESTON

Throughout his career as a performer, 27-year-old Billy Preston has inspired two distinct audiences: the people and other musicians. Preston's work with members of the rock pantheon is well documented; what many people don't know is that performers have been lining up to play music with Billy since he was ten.

At that age, Preston (Houston-born and L.A. bred) began playing music in church, working with James Cleveland and Mahalia Jackson. That same year, incidentally, Bill played the part of the young W.C. Handy in the film, *St. Louis Blues* (Nat King Cole starred as the adult Handy). In 1962 after six years of playing and singing gospel music, Billy joined what was billed as a gospel tour—but with Sam Cooke and Little Richard taking part, it inevitably turned into an explosive rock & roll show. It was the first time Preston had ever played rock & roll, and he enjoyed it immensely. At the end of the tour, Cooke asked Billy to record an album for his Sar label. Preston accepted the invitation and cut *Sixteen-Year-Old Soul*.

Three years later, Billy won a regular spot on the seminal TV series, *Shindig*. He became the resident keyboard player, with occasional solo spots. During his days on *Shindig*, Preston was heard by Ray Charles, who was appearing on the show. Charles took an immediate interest and asked Billy to record an album with him for Vee Jay. Together they came up with *The Most Exciting Organ Ever*, as well as another gospel album. A single, "Billy's Bag," was a hit in Britain. From 1967 to '68, Preston toured with Charles around the U.S. and Europe. It was at London's Festival Hall that George Harrison expressed more than just admiration for Billy's music. Phone calls were exchanged, and before long Harrison asked Preston to come over and "meet the Beatles."

At the time, the Beatles were recording the single "Get Back," and McCartney asked Preston to join in on electric piano. He helped out on keyboards during the *Let It Be* sessions, and it was immediately apparent that a musical and personal rapport had developed between the group and Billy. The Beatles bought Preston's contract from Vee Jay and signed him with Apple as a solo artist. During his three-year stay at Apple, Billy cut a pair of albums—the renowned *That's the Way God Planned It* and the subsequent *Encouraging Words*. Both were co-produced by Harrison. During this time, Billy was practically a transatlantic commuter.

In the midst of this collaborative period with members of the Beatles, Bob Ellis became Preston's personal manager. Although they were flooded with offers, Bob and Billy determined that they should look for a newer, less regimented company that would give them the autonomy they required. They decided on A&M. Billy's first A&M album, *I Wrote a Simple Song* (co-produced by Harrison, Preston, and David T. Walker, and arranged by Quincy Jones), contained the track, "Outa Space," which rocketed to the number-one position and became a million-seller. A second cold single, "Will It Go Round in Circles," came out of the next album, *Music Is My Life*. Album number three, *Everybody Likes Some Kind of Music*, brought with it a third smash single, "Space Race."

