

BILLY PRESTON

Gospel Prodigy ROCK SIDEMAN SOUL SUPERSTAR

by Mèlodie Bryant

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From the nappy headed kid whose picture appears on the early gospel albums of Reverend James Cleveland, to the skinny 19 year old in the Beatle wig who was first discovered by Ray Charles tearing up the organ on *Shindig*, Billy Preston has had one of the most varied careers in the pop music business—a career whose variety Preston himself is only now learning how to deal with.

At 33, Preston has produced hits such as "That's The Way God Planned It," "Will It Go Round In Circles," and "Nothin' From Nothin'" —not to mention Joe Cocker's hit version of Billy's "You Are So Beautiful." He has also toured extensively with the Rolling Stones and George Harrison and appeared in the Beatles' film *Let It Be*.

Inspired at the age of three to take up piano, Preston was already playing organ for services at the Victory Baptist Church in Los Angeles and conducting the choir by the age of seven. "It was a very good choir," according to Billy, "about 100 voices, and all older people. They used to have a television show on Channel 11 every Sunday night. So, they built me a box, made me a robe, and put me up in front of the choir. I didn't read music yet, though; I didn't learn to read until I was 13. Then I had about 26 lessons before my teacher died. I never did get another one."

By that time, however, Preston had already won a contest to conduct the Houston Symphony Orchestra and had recorded his first professional gospel session as an organ player with Reverend Alex Bradford. By age 15, Preston was well on the way to a career as a gospel organist and might have continued playing in that capacity indefinitely had it not been for an accidental brush with rock and roll, in 1962.

"Little Richard was a minister then," he recounts, "and he asked me to play on a gospel tour in Europe. So I said great, and my mother was all excited. But when we got over there, we found it wasn't a gospel tour at all. They had conned him into thinking it was, just to get him over there. But when we arrived, they said, 'Hey, it's rock and roll. What you gonna do now?' By that time, it was after all of his hits, so we did it. That was the first time I had ever played rock and roll."

It is doubtful that anyone playing with Little Richard could have escaped being infected by the rock and roll virus, but that particular tour contained an especially potent strain: dates with Gerry and the Pacemakers, Sam Cooke and the Beatles. "We played the Star Club in Hamburg for two weeks," says Preston, "and the Beatles were with us the whole time. We would hang out together, and they would ask me about America.

John taught me to play 'Love Me Do' on the harmonica. Ringo was already with the band—this was 1962—but there were so many groups that they weren't getting any great response yet."

Times being what they were, Preston returned to the States and hooked up with Reverend James Cleveland, with whom he toured for the next two years, once again playing gospel. But by then, his interests were beginning to diversify; and in an attempt to explore new musical areas, Preston began to play both pop and gospel, establishing a pattern which he has continued to this day.

While with James Cleveland, he signed to Sam Cooke's SAR label at Cooke's request, releasing *Sixteen Year Old Soul*, which he recorded in one day. When SAR went under, he signed with VJ, recording several albums of hits of the day; and when VJ went under, he continued with Capitol. Three years after the Little Richard tour saw Preston wearing a Beatle wig, ensconced as resident organist for the TV show *Shindig* where he gained national coverage playing the hits of the week.

He could not have been in a more fortuitous situation. During the course of the show, he worked with artists like Glen Campbell, Delaney Bramlett (one third of the resident *Shindogs*), the



Preston (right) with Ray Charles (far left) and the Raelettes, Newport Jazz Festival, 1968.

Righteous Brothers, Sonny and Cher, and made his first connection with the Rolling Stones, a meeting which was to stand him in good stead later on.

As he talks about his early days as a rock player, Preston is surrounded by the material accumulations of a successful career in the field. A total of nine quarter horses in their paddocks outside, a collection of cars including a Rolls, a Bentley and a Jeep, and a high vaulted house in Malibu all testify to the rewards of a lucrative career in rock. But in Preston's attitude and understated conversation, it is clear that while materially he may owe much to the world of rock, musically his greatest debt is to gospel, and to Ray Charles whom he met on *Shindig*, and with whom he subsequently recorded and toured for three years.

"I had wanted to meet him since I was ten. My mother used to have a lot of records around the house—Nat King Cole, Arthur Prysock, Ray Charles—and I used to listen to Ray Charles, because his music reminded me of gospel. I even remember putting on my choir robe and standing in front of the mirror singing 'I've Got A Woman.' And later on in school, I had a group called Billy and the Billettes [after Ray Charles' Raelettes], and we'd do all Ray Charles songs. I'd put on the shades, and they'd lead me out and everything. Ray Charles has always had a big influence on me.

"I just formed another Billettes," says Preston proudly, "And we do a little Ray Charles number. I haven't put the glasses on yet, though."

If Preston was ecstatic about being able to work with his idol, his enthusiasm constituted only half of what was to become a mutual admiration society. Touring with Charles, he rapidly acquired the introduction as "The young man that anytime I leave this business, I want him to take over." So confident was Charles in his protegee, that he even agreed to launch him on a solo career after his own image.

"Just about the time that *Shindig* was going off the air," remembers Preston, "I met Sly Stone. At that time, he was still a DJ up north

and hadn't started playing professionally yet. We were going to start a group which would have been me, Sly Stone, his brother Freddy and Larry Graham. We were going to call ourselves the Sons of Ray. I was on Capitol at the time, and Ray Charles was my manager, so I had arranged for him to produce us. It was all set, and I sent them the plane tickets to come down. So there I am sitting with Ray Charles waiting for them, and they show up three hours late. After the session, I said, 'Hey, I can't do any business with you.' And that kind of thing just seemed to follow for Sly's whole career." That was the forerunner in a series of attempts by Preston to establish a solo career on the level of the superstars he was backing—a career that saw him become one of the most celebrated sidemen in rock.

While working with Charles, he made frequent visits to England to record with his Beatle buddies, first playing on the "White Album" [*The Beatles*] and then on *Abbey Road* (for which he received an album credit), and participating in the filming of *Let It Be*. "I was with Ray Charles in Europe at the time, doing a concert at the Festival Hall, and George was in the audience and said, 'Wow, I think that's Billy.' So he sent word back for me to come by and say hello to the fellas. And that led to my walking in on *Let It Be*. When I came in, they were arguing and nobody was really that interested in finishing up the film. But we started reminiscing and playing old songs, and it was a nice lift for me to be there." Preston subsequently appeared in the film, and soon after switched from Capitol over to Apple where with Beatle support he made his first serious attempt at going solo.

Recording *Encouraging Words* in 1970 and *That's The Way God Planned It* in 1971, it looked like he might have some luck. The title cut from his second album did well in Britain; but soon Apple became involved in internal struggles and Preston, foreseeing difficulties, decided to leave, less for his own sake than for that of his friends. "That was my dream company," he says fondly. "I was really happy with them. They really wanted me to make it, and they had plans for me. And at first it was very nice. But things started getting out of hand, and I didn't want to be a burden, because we were friends. I felt like there was nothing they could do for me, because

they needed things done for themselves." In 1972, Preston signed with A&M.

While with A&M, he cut a total of seven albums in the space of five years, which included such hits as "Outa Space," "Circles," "Space Race," and "Nothin' From Nothin'," as well as "You Are So Beautiful," which was a hit for Joe Cocker. But in spite of his series of successes, Preston's career did not take off the way he wanted it to. Looking back, he puts the blame on A&M.

"I was dissatisfied with how they promoted my albums," he declares, "because every hit was on the B side. They would say, 'This is the A side,' and they'd put out the single and the disc jockeys would flip it over and that would be the hit. And every time I put out an album, they didn't know what would be the hit. They'd just put it out there and see what happened, and you can't just do that.

"Also," he adds, "they didn't know how to market me. The reason they signed me was that they wanted to break into the black market; but they found out I was more white than black and it was confusing for them."

Listening to Preston talk, you'd think he had never even seen the back pages of a pop chart. The fact is, during his partnership with A&M, he came away with numerous gold singles and had at least one, sometimes two, albums on the charts for a period of four years running; an enviable record by most people's standards. Moreover, if A&M was confused, it was not without reason.

When Preston first signed with the label, his music offered a golden opportunity for them to become involved with black music; and his first two albums, reflecting his apprenticeship with Ray Charles and his many years as a gospel player, fit in well with their strategy. By his third album, however, Preston's musical direction had taken a drastic change. *Everybody Likes Some Kind Of Music* contained not only funk and gospel tunes, but also rock, jazz, classical and even country numbers—a package guaranteed to raise the consumption of Valium in the marketing department of any record company. And the three albums which followed that—*The*

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Kids And Me, It's My Pleasure, and Billy Preston were pure unadulterated pop.

Although hindsight doesn't change anything, Preston's passage into pop was an inevitable occurrence given his musical environment at the time. Even before he joined A&M, his affiliation with the Beatles was more than a superficial one, as was his relationship with the Stones with whom he recorded in 1971 [*Sticky Fingers*] and later in 1976 [*Black And Blue*]. All in all, Preston's success was impressive in view of the fact that he and A&M were working at cross purposes. But it's all relative. Working with superstars undoubtedly had an elevating effect on his solo expectations; and when immediate stardom eluded him, Preston, not used to being patient, took up with his rock cronies at every opportunity, rendering A&M's already ineffective black marketing campaign a rather sad joke. "The gigs I was playing with my music, we just went back to the same places. We never really went up or down, and I didn't see much sense to that. So when the opportunity came for me to be a sideman and be on a big tour and get my money clear, it was a decision I had to make because of finances, and just to get rid of the headache."

Between solo tours, Preston recorded with such artists as Aretha Franklin, Sly Stone and Barbra Streisand, toured with George Harrison in 1974, and made three tours with the Stones.

Of all the musical relationships in which Preston has been involved, that with the Stones has to stand out as the most contradictory in view of his deeply religious background. But says Preston, "I didn't feel any conflict at all. When I was with the Stones, I thought that's just where I should be. I thought they needed a little Jesus, something pleasant in their lives. In fact, I used to preach to them all the time. Me and Mick would talk about Jesus and different prophets, and they weren't skeptical at all. I used to ask him why it was that people think they're devils and worship Satan; and he said they brought it on themselves. They allowed that to happen, because that was what made them famous. But they're very nice people. They're nicer than anybody would know." But even the Stones could not put Preston's solo act together and in 1977, exhausted with relentless touring and session work, he took some time off to sort out his career. In 1979, he signed with Motown.

At this point, there can be no question that Preston is an artist with pop potential. His own dissatisfaction notwithstanding, Preston's solo track record, to say nothing of his rock collaborations, has been a history of popular successes. But his past experiences have made him warier than before. More conscious of the pitfalls involved, and perhaps more than ever aware of how varied an artist he really is, he is leaving nothing to chance; and what amounts to a precautionary self marketing campaign, Preston has packaged and labeled his own music in advance of releasing anything. Signed to Motown for popular releases, he has worked out a separate agreement for his gospel material.



Preston (R) with Mick Jagger, 1975.

"It's different from anything Motown's done before," he says. "Usually you can't be on two labels at once, but I have an outside deal for gospel on Word Records. They're based in Waco, Texas, and have their own distribution. I've always put a gospel song in my albums, but I've never had the chance to do a full gospel album since I was with James Cleveland, so I've been longing to do it."

Preston has already released one album, *Behold*, and recorded a second, entitled *Universal Love*, which is slated for January release. "The band and the Billettes are on it," he says, "but the songs are different from what we do on the show."

Motown is undoubtedly relieved not to have to carry the responsibility for all of Preston's interests, though they shouldn't have a very hard time putting over his newest *Late at Night*. From the title cut to the Beatles oriented "It Will Come In Time" to the sensitive ballad he sings with Syreeta—"With You I'm Born Again"—this is a distilled pop album whose various influences strike a pleasing and consistent balance, and ought to do well enough to satisfy even a tough customer like Preston.

The album's jacket cover is littered with familiar names of studio pros: David T. Walker on guitar, Chuck Rainey on bass, James Gadson on drums. The current touring band, which is naturally different personnel, includes three horns, three "Billettes," two keyboard players, and even two bass players. On top of that, Preston also uses his organ pedals. "I use them for everything," he says, "for gospel and the show. In fact, I get mad when I rent an organ and they forget to bring them. It doesn't conflict with the bass player at all. I just play straight tonic, a very simplified bass, and it matches."

As for how the two bass players work with each other, he says, "It has been a challenge; because it has made better musicians out of both of them to really work together. They had

to sit down and really listen and figure out who was going to play what. It's been a great experience, and it comes off very well. I think that's the art of musicianship: to be able to accompany and play along rather than being the solo artist with the fancy licks.

"I never really got tired of being a sideman," he confesses. "I enjoy it. It's a lot easier than being the one out in front."

But his own career takes precedence now. "I haven't been working with anybody lately," he says, but for Preston that is a very relative statement. This last year he recorded the soundtrack for Gabe Kaplan's movie *Fast Break*, and just prior to this interview he had been in the studio with Syreeta, working on her new album. But generally speaking, he is winding down his outside activities. "People still call and ask me to do sessions, and it's hard to say no, because I do enjoy doing it. But now it's my turn. I really have to concentrate on my own music and my career."

As someone whose playing has always come from the heart before the head, Preston is not very technically oriented. That's a deceptive concept considering how much he has grown as a producer and synthesist; but he insists, "I just play around until I find what I want. That's the interesting thing about electronic instruments. There are so many variations, and that keeps it fresh and interesting."

Preston's basic keyboard setup consists of a Hohner Clavinet, ARP Pro Soloist and Quadra, Polymoog, Melodica, a Univox piano which has been modified so that it can be worn with a shoulder strap—and, of course, a Hammond B-3 (cut down). "My latest gadget is a vocoder. I've written a lot of funky things with it, and I was going to use it on my gospel album, but when we got it into the studio, it wasn't working. I'm still learning about it, though."

Throughout a career that has taken him symbolically from the house of God (James Cleveland) to the house of Satan (the Rolling Stones), Preston remains a devoutly religious man. "I play in various churches whenever I can," he says. "My mother still plays at the Victory Baptist Church, so I go there and play with her sometimes. And my sister has a choir. She does a lot of programs and records, and I play along with her when they're having concerts. Any church that's having a program, I just go along and play. I don't take money for it; just do it for love."

As for why he has been so successful in such a short time, Preston declines responsibility. "Because that's the way God planned it," he says with a smile. "Everything just happened because I was in the right place at the right time. I give God the credit, because it wasn't me. I never could have negotiated with the Beatles to put my name on an album. It was just because they liked me so much they did it. And I think those kinds of gifts are better than asking for something."