

Curtis Mayfield dies:

A modest man of great musical talent and sensitivity

Richard Phillips
24 January 2000

The death of 57-year-old Curtis Mayfield last December 26, after several years of failing health, marks the passing of one of the most talented gospel-influenced rhythm and blues singer/songwriters and producers to emerge in the early 1960s. A devoted family man, Curtis Mayfield is survived by Altheida, his second wife, two sons, eight daughters and seven grandchildren.

Although not as well known internationally as Marvin Gaye, Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding or those performers associated with the Motown label, Mayfield's gentle tenor voice, distinctive guitar phrasing and intelligent songwriting combined to produce some of the most subtle and evocative popular music of his generation. Gladys Knight and the Pips, The Staple Singers, Rod Stewart, Steppenwolf, Bob Marley, Elton John, Herbie Hancock, UB40, The Jam, Bruce Springsteen, Eric Clapton, Lauryn Hill, Public Enemy and Ice-T, are just a few of the diverse range of musicians to have acknowledged Mayfield's considerable musical talents and recorded his songs.

Mayfield's music was filled with the spirit of those fighting for progressive social change in the 1960s and 1970s—their optimism, anger and strident demands for equality and social justice. At a time when most popular black music was dominated by dance tunes and love songs, Mayfield was one of the first rhythm and blues performers to write and produce songs articulating the sentiments and appeals of the civil rights movement.

Born in Chicago on June 3, 1942 and raised in the poverty stricken Cabrini-Green housing projects on the city's North Side, Mayfield was surrounded by music from an early age—particularly the gospel singing of his grandmother's Travelling Soul Spiritualists' Church. He sang publicly at the age of seven and became an accomplished guitarist a few years later.

'My guitar was like another me,' he told one interviewer. 'At one time, as a youngster, I used to sleep with my guitar. It was sort of like B.B. King's Lucille.'

While the young Mayfield's singing was gospel-based, he also looked to Muddy Waters—Chicago's greatest bluesman—and world-renowned classical guitarist, Andre Segovia, for inspiration.

For Curtis Mayfield, this rich musical heritage, and his mother's love of poetry, provided some relief from the harsh poverty and other pressures that surrounded the family. The single parent seven-member family shared a tiny apartment in the projects, with Curtis assigned the difficult and demanding task of caring for his mentally retarded younger brother.

In 1957, against his mother's wishes, the talented 16-year-old quit high school to join a group headed by Jerry Butler called The Roosters, later renamed The Impressions. Mayfield wrote several songs for the band and in 1958 they recorded their first hit, *For Your Precious Love*. The commercial success of the song persuaded Butler to leave the band and embark on a solo career. This created difficulties for the fledgling group, but in 1961 Mayfield, who became its lead singer, wrote and recorded *Gypsy Woman*, the group's next hit.

Mayfield's considerable musical talents and the group's beautiful vocal harmonies ensured The Impressions remained in the forefront of the rhythm and blues charts throughout the 1960s with 14 Top 40 hits, and five songs in the Top 20 in 1964, the year that The Beatles dominated US popular music sales.

Beginning in 1964 with his trailblazing *Keep On Pushing*, adopted by Martin Luther King as the unofficial anthem of the civil rights movement, and the inspirational *People Get Ready*, Mayfield began writing songs that reflected the increasing self-confidence of black Americans. This included *We're A Winner*, *This Is My Country*, *Choice of Colors* and *Check Out Your Mind*.

In 1964, *Keep On Pushing*, with its subdued gospel sound and beautiful harmonies calling on blacks to demand their democratic rights, was acceptable to most radio stations. But

three years later, in 1967, when extensive rioting broke out in Detroit, Newark and other American cities, several radio stations refused to play Mayfield's *We're A Winner* because of its more strident appeal for African-Americans to intensify their struggle.

A modest and quiet-spoken man, Mayfield always understated his talents. As he said in one interview, 'It wasn't hard to take notice of segregation and the struggle for equality at this time. These were the issues that concerned me as a young black man. So it was easy to write songs that might prove to be inspiring or give food for thought like *Keep on Pushing*, *Choice of Colors* or take on the gospel hymns like *Amen*. In fact, *Keep on Pushing* was a perfect example of what has laid in my subconscious for years—the musical strands and themes of gospel singers and preachers that I'd heard as a child.'

In 1970 Curtis Mayfield left the group to begin a solo career. Having previously drawn on gospel, rhythm and blues and doo wop musical traditions, his solo records in the 1970s were characterised by a stronger beat, with wah-wah guitar and Latin bass lines punctuated by driving brass sections and lyrics that exposed the reality of ghetto life.

In 1972 Mayfield wrote, performed and produced his most successful album, the soundtrack to the movie *Superfly*. The music set new standards in the sound and production of film scores and as Mayfield commented: 'We showed [the film industry] that you didn't need a room the size of a football field to lay music in. You didn't have to be a Henry Mancini.'

Mayfield's poetic lyrics, which grappled with the impact of drugs on young black men and women in US urban ghettos, his crisp guitar solos and intricate musical arrangements soared above the banal film. *Pusherman*, *Little Child Runnin Wild*, *Freddie's Dead* and *Superfly*, are some of the greatest inner city soul songs, which still retain their intensity and power today and have influenced a number of rap and hip hop singers during the 1990s.

Despite the artistic and commercial success of this album, which sold over four million copies in the US and internationally, Mayfield's popularity, along with many other soul singers from the 1960s, began to wane as disco music came to dominate the popular music industry. Apart from his *So In Love* (1975), *Only You Babe* (1976), *Do Do Wap Is Strong In Here* (1977) and one or two others, Mayfield failed in the late 1970s and early 1980s to reach the musical heights or lyrical subtleties of earlier work.

Mayfield kept performing, writing and producing albums, including for artists such as Aretha Franklin and Gladys Knight and the Pips. And, unlike many of his contemporaries from the 1980s, never became cynical. As he told one newspaper, 'We're all human beings, so we can get

angry and bitter or mad, but for me it doesn't last long. I'd rather be humble and cry tears of joy than to take on the stress and burdens of being dogged out and negative.'

In August 1990, however, tragedy struck the singer/songwriter when a heavy lighting rig fell on him during a stage sound check just before his appearance at an outdoor concert in Brooklyn, New York. The appalling accident broke his third, fourth and fifth vertebrae, and left him a quadriplegic for the rest of his life.

Unable to play guitar or any other instrument, Mayfield was determined to find a way to keep working and in 1996, teamed up with a new generation of black musicians to record his last album, *New World Order*. Paralysed from the neck down and suffering from diabetes, Mayfield had to be laid flat on his back so that he could summon up enough breath to sing. The album was painstakingly put together with Mayfield only able to record a few lines of each song before being forced to rest. The album made no reference to these difficulties or his deteriorating health.

Typically, the contemporary music industry only began to fully acknowledge Mayfield's significance after the 1990 accident. In 1994 he was named a Grammy Legend, awarded a Grammy Lifetime Achievement in 1995, and inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in March 1999.

In a 1997 interview Mayfield said that although many of his songs were social comments, they also represented his search for answers to the problems confronting humanity. The quietly spoken musician went on to explain that he also tried to avoid preaching at his audience. 'With all respect, I'm sure that we have enough preachers in the world. Through my way of writing I was capable of being able to say these things and yet not make a person feel as though they're being preached at.'

What a pity so few contemporary musicians, and especially those who claim to be producing thought-provoking social commentary, have failed to heed this advice. Mayfield's subtle approach and his unique ability to combine social commentary interwoven with a subtle mixture of gospel, rhythm and blues and inner city soul music will be greatly missed.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)