

Gene McDaniels, soul singer and songwriter, dead at 76

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Singer and songwriter Gene McDaniels died July 29 at the age of 76. McDaniels is perhaps best-known for having composed the protest song “Compared to What,” made famous by jazz musicians Les McCann and Eddie Harris, and the R&B standard “Feel Like Makin’ Love,” recorded by numerous performers, most notably Roberta Flack. He was a talented composer and an even more impressive singer.

McDaniels was born February 12, 1935 in Kansas City, Missouri and grew up in Omaha, Nebraska where his family relocated in the 1940s. Like so many of the soul singers who would go on to make names for themselves in the 1960s, McDaniels got his start singing in church. His father was a preacher and the young McDaniels was a regular in the choir from an early age. Inspired by popular gospel singing groups such as the Soul Stirrers, McDaniels would form his own gospel quartet, The Sultans, at a young age.

While initially a gospel act, the Sultans, under the influence of pop, R&B and jazz, soon began to expand their repertoire. No doubt the more lucrative prospect of performing “secular” music was also a factor. By the mid-1950s, McDaniels’ quartet could be found paying their dues singing pop and R&B in nightclubs throughout the region. Gaining the attention of Duke Records, the group made a few recordings, under the tutelage of Johnny Otis, but none of them was a great success.

By the late 1950s, the Sultans had disbanded and McDaniels found himself performing with jazz musicians on the West Coast. He joined up-and-coming pianist Les McCann’s group and performed at night, while supporting himself by working in the mail room at Liberty Records during the day. By 1959, he would move from the mail room into the recording studio at Liberty, embarking on his solo career.

McDaniels’ early music was not unlike Sam Cooke’s, both drawing from the musical vocabulary and traditions of R&B as well as pop. McDaniels had hits in the early 1960s with “A Hundred Pounds of Clay” and “Tower of Strength,” the latter co-written by Burt Bacharach.

One of the best songs of McDaniels’ early career was “Another Tear Falls,” about a man suddenly overcome by emotion when reminded of a lost love. McDaniels’ voice is especially strong on this recording. A beautifully shot performance of McDaniels singing “Another Tear Falls” in Richard Lester’s 1962 film *It’s Trad, Dad!* can be seen on YouTube.

As a vocalist, McDaniels approached pop music with the sensibilities of a jazz singer. His unusual phrasing, with sudden dips of his voice, pulling his melodies through the less worn paths of pop and R&B chord changes, make him a standout performer. McDaniels was blessed with a beautiful singing voice and was said to possess a four-octave range. As others have pointed out, the influence of jazz singers such as Billy Eckstine and Sarah Vaughn had clearly left its mark on him.

As interesting as much of it was, McDaniels’ early pop music only hinted at what he was capable of. By the late 1960s, his music would undergo a dramatic change as he embraced radical politics and began to experiment with a fusion of jazz, soul and rock.

This dramatic change of direction was certainly not exclusive to McDaniels. The experience of civil rights struggles and the anti-Vietnam war protest movement, of the immense social crisis then underway, had a radicalizing effect on many musicians and artists of the period. One began to see works in which popular musicians took up significant social and political themes for the first time—Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On* being a prime example. But even for those artists who did not create explicitly political works, one felt a *musical* complacency being challenged.

McDaniels’ best work of the late 1960s and early 1970s came to life with a new confidence and ambition that would have been unthinkable without the social upheavals of that period.

In 1969, jazz musicians McCann and Harris recorded “Compared to What,” a hard-driving, soul-jazz composition by McDaniels, and the first to give a sense of his new direction.

The song articulated McDaniels' disgust with the Vietnam War. McCann's gruff voice sang the angry lyrics:

"The President, he's got his war
Folks don't know just what it's for
Nobody gives us rhyme or reason
Have one doubt, they call it treason"

Recorded live at the Montreux Jazz Festival, the audible excitement of the audience only made the recording that much more powerful.

McDaniels' 1971 album *Headless Heroes of the Apocalypse* is most representative of his work from this period. The album has become something of a cult classic, particularly for a younger generation of listeners who were first introduced to the recording by the many hip hop artists who sampled it.

Listening to *Headless Heroes*, one is struck by its audacity. McDaniels is trying and taking on everything. There are songs about racism, colonialism, consumerism, as well as a few gospel-tinged parables, and even a tribute to Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger. In some ways the album is a mess, far too eclectic. But there are inspired moments.

Among the more interesting songs is "Headless Heroes," in which McDaniels sings of his disgust with the forces who foster and exploit racial and national divisions, using ordinary people as "pawns in the master game." In one remarkable moment, he sings, "Get it together and see what's happening!"

"Susan Jane," the amusing but not unsympathetic story of a middle class hippie girl, "beautifully insane, standing barefoot in the middle of the muddy road" provides the album with one of its gentler and more delightful moments.

The rich bass guitar work and warm Fender Rhodes electric piano that feature throughout the album are captivating. For this album, McDaniels enlisted drummer Alphonse Mouzon and bassist Miroslav Vitous, the rhythm section from popular jazz fusion band Weather Report. The interplay of these two musicians is one of the more outstanding features of the work.

Following this somewhat "underground" work, one of McDaniels' compositions would find a much larger audience. In 1974, soul and R&B singer Roberta Flack released her recording of McDaniels' song "Feel Like Makin' Love." The song was a hit, going to number one on the Billboard charts. McDaniels' own recording of this very sensual and direct love song was featured on his interesting 1975 album *Natural Juices*. McDaniels' vocal performance on this recording is less subdued, less "sly" than Flack's.

It is perhaps not surprising that the work of a musician whose most creative years seemed so bound up with the upheaval of the 1960s and early 1970s should undergo significant change when that wave of radicalism began to subside. In fact, McDaniels essentially disappeared as a performing artist. While certainly not going altogether quiet—he began producing music for other artists, including Jimmy Smith and Nancy Wilson—things were different after 1975. There were no more albums released under McDaniels' own name for decades. His work became noticeably less daring. While one can't say for certain what McDaniels' views were during this time, one can surmise that some degree of demoralization had taken hold.

Commercial considerations may also have come into play. One had to make a living, after all, and in spite of having penned a few hits for other artists, McDaniels largely remained a cult figure, greatly admired by a relatively small audience.

In more recent years, there was a reemergence of sorts, as McDaniels self-released new recordings of his own. In the months before his death, McDaniels had also posted to YouTube footage from recent live performances, including a lovely rendition of Hoagy Carmichael's "The Nearness of You." While these performances were in a much more traditional setting and more reserved than his work from three decades before, McDaniels' voice was as beautiful and expressive as ever.



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