Veteran soul singer Bobby Womack dies, aged 70

Richard Phillips
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American soul singer, songwriter and guitarist Bobby Womack died on June 30, after a six-decade musical career. Although the cause of death has yet to be announced, the veteran musician had suffered from diabetes and cancer in the last years of his life.

Womack, who was determined to continue recording and performing right up until the end, passed away two weeks after appearing at the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival in Tennessee. He had been apparently working on a new record—*The Best Is Yet To Come*—his 28th studio album.

Womack's gravelly baritone voice seemed to be at ease in almost any popular musical genre—gospel, doo-wop, rhythm and blues, pop ballads, soul and even country music—giving each his own distinctive signature. While he never achieved the multi-million record sales of Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding or James Brown, Womack was a remarkable performer and recording artist.

Predictably, a lot of the media commentary has focused on Womack's personal life—his three marriages, the tragic death of two sons, the murder of his brother Harry, and his long struggle with drugs. These difficulties, which were related in one way or another to his poverty-stricken early life and the toxic, profit-driven nature of the contemporary music industry, no doubt took their toll—physically, psychologically and professionally.

Born in March 1944, the third brother of five, Bobby Womack was raised in Fairfax, one of Cleveland's poorest neighbourhoods. The area still remains one of Ohio's most socially deprived areas with endemic unemployment and in 2010, a poverty level 268 percent higher than the state's average.

Womack's father—a steel worker, musician and Christian minister—and his mother, both from families of fifteen children, came from the coal mining districts of West Virginia. Married in their teens, they moved to Cleveland in the early 1940s, after their home in Charleston was devastated by fire.

Bobby Womack detailed their difficult circumstances in *Midnight Mover* (2007), his ghost-written autobiography, explaining that his first song was about the five brothers fighting over the blanket in the bed they shared head-to-toe.

Womack and his brothers were taught gospel music by their parents and began performing in churches at an early age, their parents accompanying on organ and guitar. Womack modelled his singing style on Archie Brownlee from the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi gospel group.

In 1956, the Womack Brothers were discovered by popular R&B singer Sam Cooke who invited the young vocalists to move to California and join his SAR Records. After they cut two gospel songs, in 1962 Cooke persuaded them to record "I'm Looking for Love," a pop version of a gospel tune previously written by Womack. The record was a success and they were hired as an opening act for James Brown. The decision to sing secular music, however, caused a decades-long rift with their father who regarded rhythm and blues as the "devil's music."

"It's All Over Now," their next song—co-written by Womack and his sister-in-law—was recorded and released in 1964. It was an R&B hit for the group, now renamed The Valentinos, but eclipsed later that year by The Rolling Stones' version of the song, the British band's first number one hit.

In December 1964, Cooke, a major artistic influence on Womack, was shot and killed in a Los Angeles motel. While the circumstances of this tragedy remain unclear, Cooke's death had a devastating impact on SAR Records, which collapsed soon after, and led to the break-up of The Valentinos. The following year Bobby Womack married Barbara Cooke, Sam's widow, a decision frowned upon by some R&B record companies who blocked his musical career. On one occasion the couple was attacked in Chicago by thugs angered over their marriage.

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Womack found work as a session guitarist at the American Studios in Memphis and Rick Hall's recording facilities in Muscle Shoals, Alabama in 1967–68. He appeared on ground-breaking albums by Joe Tex, The Box Tops, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett and Dusty Springfield. Pickett recorded "Midnight Mover" and sixteen other songs written by Womack.

Womack said that this experience was crucial to his artistic development and brought him into contact with a broad range of musicians, including Alabama session player and songwriter Eddie Hinton, and Eric Clapton, the British blues guitarist. Clapton and Womack were hired as session guitarists for some of the tracks on Aretha Franklin's *Lady Soul*. Clapton's playing, Womack later admitted, "brought tears to my eyes," and challenged everything he had been told about "white" musicians.

"My father used to say, 'They [the white folk] don't have to be around us and we don't have to be around them.' I was already totally confused about everything I'd been taught when I went to Memphis because all those guys in the studios were white … This was soul music and people said white people can't do soul. I got more education playing on those sessions in Memphis and at Muscle Shoals, Alabama."

In 1968, Womack made his first solo album—*Fly Me to the Moon*—which featured his cover of The Mamas and the Papas' pop hit, "California Dreamin." Womack's interpretation transformed the dreamy pop song into an impassioned soul ballad.

Womack, like Stevie Wonder and other innovative R&B musicians, attempted to shift popular African American music away from the sort of saccharine mass market productions and disco music beginning to dominate the scene.

After *Fly Me to Moon*, Womack recorded seven albums in the next seven years—the best of which, *Communication* (1971), *Understanding* (1972), the film score for *Across 110th Street* (1972), *Safety Zone* (1975) and *Home Is Where The Heart Is* (1976), brought him international acclaim. Womack also worked with the great singer-songwriter Jim Ford, played guitar on Sly and the Family Stone's album *There's a Riot Goin' On* and Janis Joplin's *Pearl*, writing the ballad "Trust Me" and helping to inspire her memorable "Mercedes Benz."

In 1976, against the advice of United Artists, his recording company, Womack recorded a country album—*BW Goes C&W*. The album has a couple of interesting tracks, but it was a commercial failure, released just as disco music started to commercially drown serious soul and R&B performers.

While Womack was dropped by United Artists, he continued performing and recording throughout the 1980s and 1990s—his best albums were *The Poet* (1981) and *Resurrection* (1994) during this period. Worthwhile songs from this period include, "If You Think You're Lonely Now" and "I Wish He Didn't Trust Me So Much," as well as his cover of Curtis Mayfield's "Gypsy Woman."

Womack's career and his health began to ebb during the late 1990s and the early years of this century, until he was contacted by Damon Albarn, the British musician and producer. Albarn invited Womack to contribute to *Plastic Beach*, Gorillaz's third album, and tour with the group. This revived Womack's musical career and led to his last album—*The Bravest Man in the Universe*—produced by Albarn and Richard Russell and released in June 2012.

The Bravest Man in the Universe is a reflective work and probably one of Womack's best albums. His earthy lived-in voice is powerful, occasionally haunting and set variously against contemporary electronic beats, music sampling, piano, cello, and Womack on acoustic guitar. The standout songs are the title track and "Please Forgive My Heart"—a striking conclusion to an extraordinary musical career.

Womack continued touring and last year played to sold-out concerts in Melbourne and at the Sydney Opera House with his 13-piece band and three backup singers, including his daughter GinaRe.

Seeing Womack perform for the first time in Australia was a bittersweet experience. At 69, he was still capable of raising the roof with "Across 110th Street" and 16 more of his soul standards, and yet visibly frail.

Womack was one of the few remaining old-school soul singers then still alive and one who had maintained his creative spirit until the end. He will be sadly missed by his many fans and fellow musicians throughout the world.

The author also recommends:

Across 110th Street, Bobby Womack at Billboard Live Tokyo

[23 February 2012]

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