

# CURTIS MAYFIELD



Born June 3, 1942, in Chicago, Curtis Mayfield enjoyed a childhood filled with music. He was singing by age seven, strongly influenced by a local gospel group, the Northern Jubilee Gospel Singers, whose lineup included three of his cousins, Sam, Tommy, and Charles Hawkins, and future member of The Impressions, singer Jerry Butler.

A self-taught guitarist, Curtis joined a local group (The Alphas). Inspired by his mother, who passed her love of poetry on to her son during his early teens, he began developing his songwriting skills. In 1957, Jerry Butler invited a then 16-year-old Mayfield to join The Roosters, for whom Curtis wrote and composed music. Six months later, the group met Eddie Thomas, who renamed them The Impressions and became the group's manager.

The group hit the charts a year later with "For Your Precious Love" and Mayfield's professional career began in earnest. In addition to occasional gigs with The Impressions, he played guitar in Butler's touring band and gave Jerry his first R&B chart-topper in 1960 with "He Will Break Your Heart."

Saving money from his work with Butler, Mayfield took The Impressions to New York to cut some demos; the result was a recording contract with ABC Records that lasted until 1968, and produced a run of more than 18 charted singles that positioned the group as one of the most popular R&B acts of the '60s.

Tunes like "It's All Right" and "Woman's Got Soul" were Mayfield-penned highlights of the group's hit-filled repertoire, while "We're A Winner" (released in January 1968) quickly became a declaration of pride for African-Americans fighting for civil rights in a turmoil-filled decade.

In addition to his work with The Impressions, Curtis wrote and produced songs for many record labels including Okeh, VeeJay, Windy-C, and Mayfield Records. Curtis had also established himself as a hit-maker for other Chicago-based acts including Major Lance, Walter Jackson, Billy Butler, Gene Chandler, and Jan Bradley. Two years later, he launched Curtom Records, with distribution through then-newly formed Buddah Records, and a new chapter in the Mayfield career began. Popular artists on the Curtom label included Linda Clifford, The Jones Girls, and Donnie Hathaway.

Following further hits with The Impressions (including "Fool For You," "This Is My Country," and the classic "Choice Of Colors"), Curtis decided to begin a solo career in early 1970, initially planning to stay with the group for recording purposes only.

However, the reaction to his musically imaginative solo debut album, **Curtis** forced Mayfield to reconsider. Critical acclaim was followed by an immediate response from record buyers who embraced Mayfield's message of social consciousness in lyrics set against an organic, groove-laden backdrop of funky, heavily percussive rhythms, and swirling strings.

After taking to the road for selected performances, Curtis recorded a live album at New York's Bitter End and followed it in the summer of '71 with a second solo studio album, **Roots**.

While at Lincoln Center in New York City, Curtis was approached by Phillip Fenty, a screenwriter, and Sig Shore, a producer, with the script of **Superfly**. They invited the artist to score and perform the soundtrack for the film, which proved to be one of the most successful black action films and soundtracks in history.

Bolstered by hit singles (the LP's title track and "Freddie's Dead"), **Superfly** went on to sell well over a million copies, receive four Grammy nominations, and help launch Curtis into superstardom. The success of this soundtrack led to a number of other similar endeavors. And more than 20 years after its release it is still considered one of contemporary black music's most significant recordings.

By now, established as a hit-maker in his own right, Curtis continued to record new albums (including **Back To The World**, **Sweet Exorcist**, and **Got To Find A Way**), while expanding his activities to include production work with Gladys Knight & The Pips (for the soundtrack of **Claudine**), Aretha Franklin (music from the movie **Sparkle**), and The Staple Singers (the soundtrack for **Let's Do It Again**); and the creative supervision for Curtom Records, which had expanded its roster and switched to Warner Bros. for distribution.

Other Mayfield hits followed including "So In Love" (from the LP **There's No Place Like America Today**), "Only You Babe" (from 1976's **Give, Get, Take And Have**), and "Show Me Love" (taken from the LP **Never Say You Can't Survive**). In 1977, Curtis stepped in front of the cameras for a role in the dramatic movie **Short Eyes** also contributing to the soundtrack which included the hit "Do Do Wap Is Strong In Here," still considered one of his best recordings from the late '70s.

Curtom's deal with Warners ended in 1978, and the following year a new distribution pact with RSO Records yielded some new chart hits for Curtis. Teaming with Curtom artist Linda Clifford, he delivered the sensuous jam "Between You Baby And Me," which became a Top 20 R&B hit in August 1979, and was followed eight months later with another duet charter, "Love's Sweet Sensation."

Curtis achieved solo chart honors again in 1980 with "Love Me, Love Me Now" and "Tripping Out" before moving on to Boardwalk Records where he recorded two albums. In 1982, he relocated to Atlanta; three years later, he decided to resurrect Curtom under the name CRC, with a distribution deal with Ichiban Records, scoring a hit with the single "Baby It's You" from the album **We Come In Peace With A Message Of Love**.

Constant touring in Europe and Japan (where loyal audiences had been supporting

Curtis as a recording artist and performer from his earliest years with The Impressions) kept Mayfield busy along with occasional U.S. dates as part of an Impressions reunion tour that featured members of the group, Curtis, and Jerry Butler.

In 1989, Curtis contributed to the soundtrack of the movie **I'm Gonna Git You Sucka**, and the following year, he worked on tunes for another movie, **The Return Of Superfly** as well as completing a second Ichiban-distributed Curtdom album, **Take It To The Streets**, which featured the standout tracks, "Homeless" and "Do Be Down," included as the final track on Rhino's **People Get Ready!** compilation.

A life- changing tragedy struck in August 1990. While Curtis performed at an outdoor concert in Brooklyn, high winds dislodged a lighting rig, which collapsed on him. The damage to his spine left Mayfield a Quadriplegic. Today, the prolific artist lives in Atlanta with his wife and family.

In the spring of 1994, superstars like Whitney Houston, Elton John, The Isley Brothers, and Aretha Franklin recorded Mayfield compositions for a special salute, **All Men Are Brothers: A Tribute To Curtis Mayfield**, released by Warner Bros. Records, which is - at the time of this writing - his current recording home.

Curtis Mayfield's music has influenced many of today's contemporary artists and producers. In fact, several artists have recorded covers of his original compositions including Deniece Williams' "I'm So Proud," Herbie Hancock's "Future Shock," UB40's "I Gotta Keep On Movin'," and En Vogue's "Giving Him Something He Can Feel." In addition, many of today's most popular hip-hop and rap artists have sampled Mayfield's records.

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