

Billy Preston at  
BBC Studios,  
London, 1973



# BILLY PRESTON

FROM CHILD PRODIGY TO FIFTH BEATLE  
TO CHART-TOPPING ARTIST, HE WAS A MUSICIAN  
OF IMMEASURABLE TALENT.

BY HERB POWELL

**B**illy Preston's musical excellence deserves our unbridled celebration. But for all his work in the trenches of the recording studio and the stage, his excellence must never, ever be taken as a substitute for his bright spirit. Because that luminous spirit is at the very heart of his excellence.

Preston (1946–2006) artfully harnessed a prodigious musical intellect coupled with masterful hands and added the perfect amount of American musical seasoning to every endeavor. For over forty years, his exquisite collaborations knew no cultural or ethnic bounds, including such diverse artists as the Rolling Stones, Aretha Franklin, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Luther Vandross, Johnny Cash, Sam Cooke, Eric Clapton, Sly and the Family Stone, Elton John, Meshell Ndegeocello, Joni Mitchell, Neil Diamond, and many more.

But it was his work with the Beatles that canonized him. In 1962, John, Paul, George, and Ringo first met Preston, then 16, at the Star-Club in Hamburg, Germany. Billy was playing with Little Richard; the Liverpool upstarts were the opening act. Some years later, when Billy was touring as a featured artist with Ray Charles, George Harrison met up with him. The Beatles were in a dark funk, being pulled apart by ever-increasing bickering

over music and business. Harrison had quit the band but agreed to return if Billy joined them in the studio. Much has been written about how Billy's affable personality acted as a gracious glue that made the icons "behave better," and I'm sure that's true.

But music being the mysterious and spiritual art that it is, Billy's electric piano and organ playing was an ethereal healing balm, a unifying and positive influence for the band. He gave the Fab Four an aromatic atmosphere to breathe in during their last days and time as a collective.

When the band stood on the rooftop of Apple on January 30, 1969, sharing a stage for the last time, Preston was right there resonating his instinctual acuity through the Silver Sparkle Top Fender Rhodes. He is the only artist/musician to be named alongside the band: The single of "Get Back" is credited "The Beatles with Billy Preston." His helping hands are all over their final album, *Let It Be*. Soon he was called the "Fifth Beatle," forever cementing his legacy with the band.

Preston's road to being linked with the band that changed music starts where many African Americans' genius begins – in the church. Moreover, it is culturally germane that his first instrument of mastery would be the Hammond B-3. As smaller churches couldn't



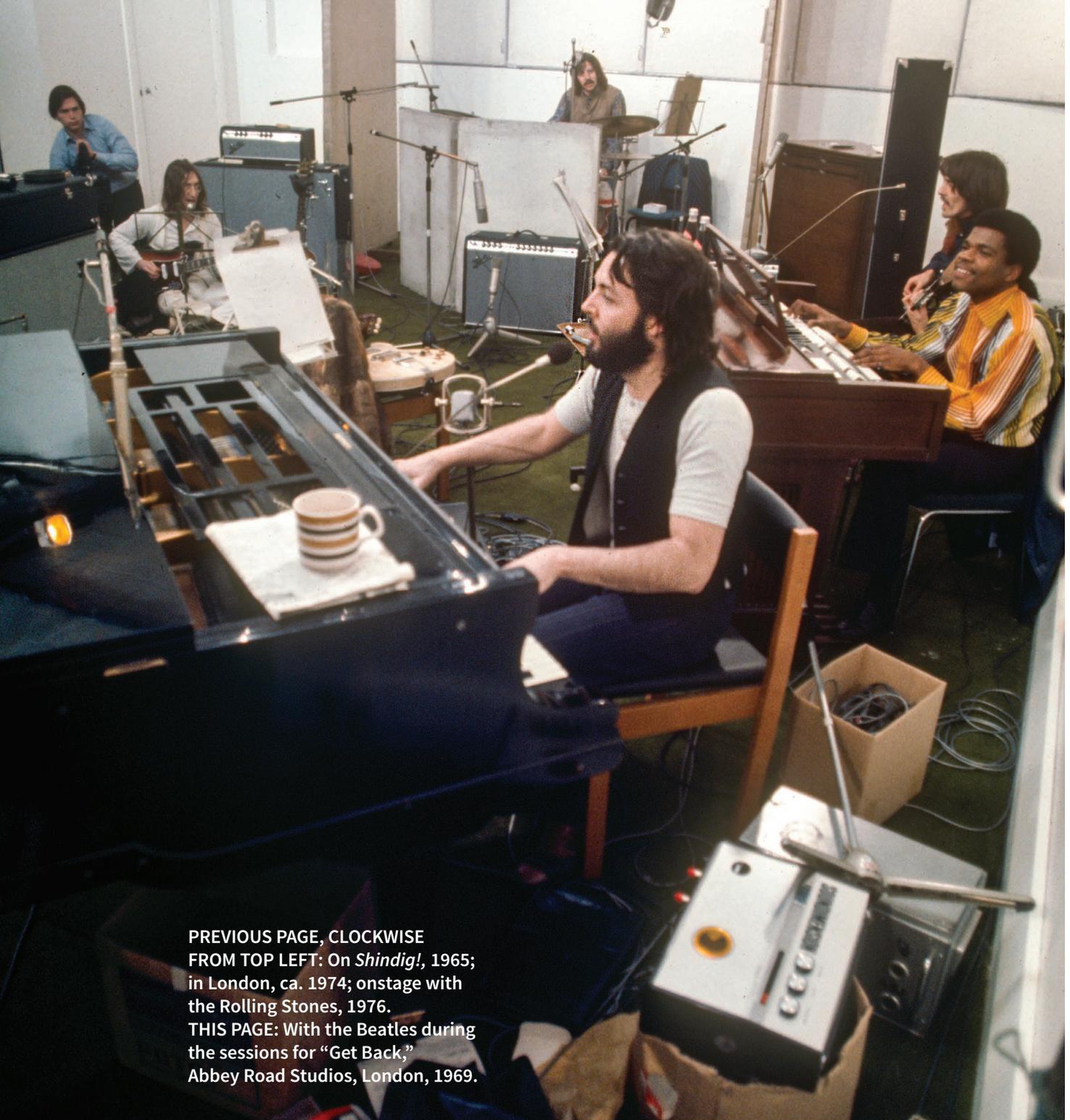
afford pipe organs, Hammond's B-3 became an infinitely cheaper alternative. And as often happens in African American history, we transformed what was meant as a low-cost imitation into a seminal instrument of high musical art. By age 9, Billy had developed B-3 organ chops that could not be denied. And when Mahalia Jackson, the grand dame of gospel music, saw him play while visiting Victory Baptist in Los Angeles – his home church – she asked him to join her on some tour dates. He was 10.

Soon Billy's skill would be showcased on America's biggest stage: television. Racially groundbreaking but short-lived, *The Nat King Cole Show* on NBC featured young Billy and Nat Cole sliding back and forth across the organ bench, trading off the organ and vocal duties while performing the Fats Domino hit "Blueberry Hill." Billy beamed with innocence and charisma while Nat radiated a fatherly tenderness toward him as they performed – a cherished moment in African American and music history.

At 12, he appeared in the movie *St. Louis Blues*, playing a young W.C. Handy. By now recognized as a prodigy, he was signed by the great Sam Cooke to his SAR label, one of

the first African American-owned and –operated record labels. Its imprint Derby released Preston's first album, *16 Yr. Old Soul*, showcasing his organ mastery. Not yet 20, he played in the house band on the rock & roll TV program *Shindig!* What is revealing about Billy's time on the show was that sometimes he left the keyboard and performed as a singer. With conked hair, he stands center stage and sings as soulfully as anyone has, but it is his dancing that comes as a surprise. James Brown didn't have nothin' on him – and I know that's a very provocative thing to say. But the proof is in the pudding. Just watch Preston on *Shindig!* or check him out with Ray Charles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Billy worshiped Ray Charles. When he found out where Ray lived, he would often stand outside of his house – just to absorb his vibe. He studied Ray's nuanced phrasing as a pianist and vocalist, and after years of examination, he could embody Ray's music – body and soul. When the hard-to-please Charles heard Preston, he discovered what other greats knew and would come to know: You could not hear Billy Preston without feeling his spirit – that transcendent world beyond piano chords and vocal melodies. Charles declared Billy as his protégé, and in 1967,



**PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE**  
FROM TOP LEFT: On *Shindig!*, 1965;  
in London, ca. 1974; onstage with  
the Rolling Stones, 1976.  
**THIS PAGE:** With the Beatles during  
the sessions for “Get Back,”  
Abbey Road Studios, London, 1969.

Preston joined his band. It was Billy's dream come true.

After his work with the Beatles, Billy Preston, as a solo artist, recorded two albums for Apple Records produced by George Harrison: *That's the Way God Planned It* (1969) and *Encouraging Words* (1970).

In the early to mid-seventies, Preston's solo career was auspicious. Instrumentals “Outa-Space” and “Space Race” were Top Five pop hits and R&B chart-toppers, with “Outa-Space” winning a Grammy. Correspondingly, “Will It Go Round in Circles” (1973) and “Nothing From Nothing” (1974) showcase Billy's distinctive and fundamental understanding of American popular music. Those smashes were an amalgam of soul, pop, gospel, and funk, with a little 1930s and 1940s ragtime and boogie-woogie thrown in for good measure. Both songs reached Number One on the pop charts.

With knockout hits, Billy became a star, appearing as the first musical guest on *Saturday Night Live*. Still, he made contributions as a composer in obvious and not-so-obvious ways. In 1974, Joe Cocker recorded Preston's composition (with Bruce Fisher) “You Are So Beautiful,” and it became the signature song of Cocker's

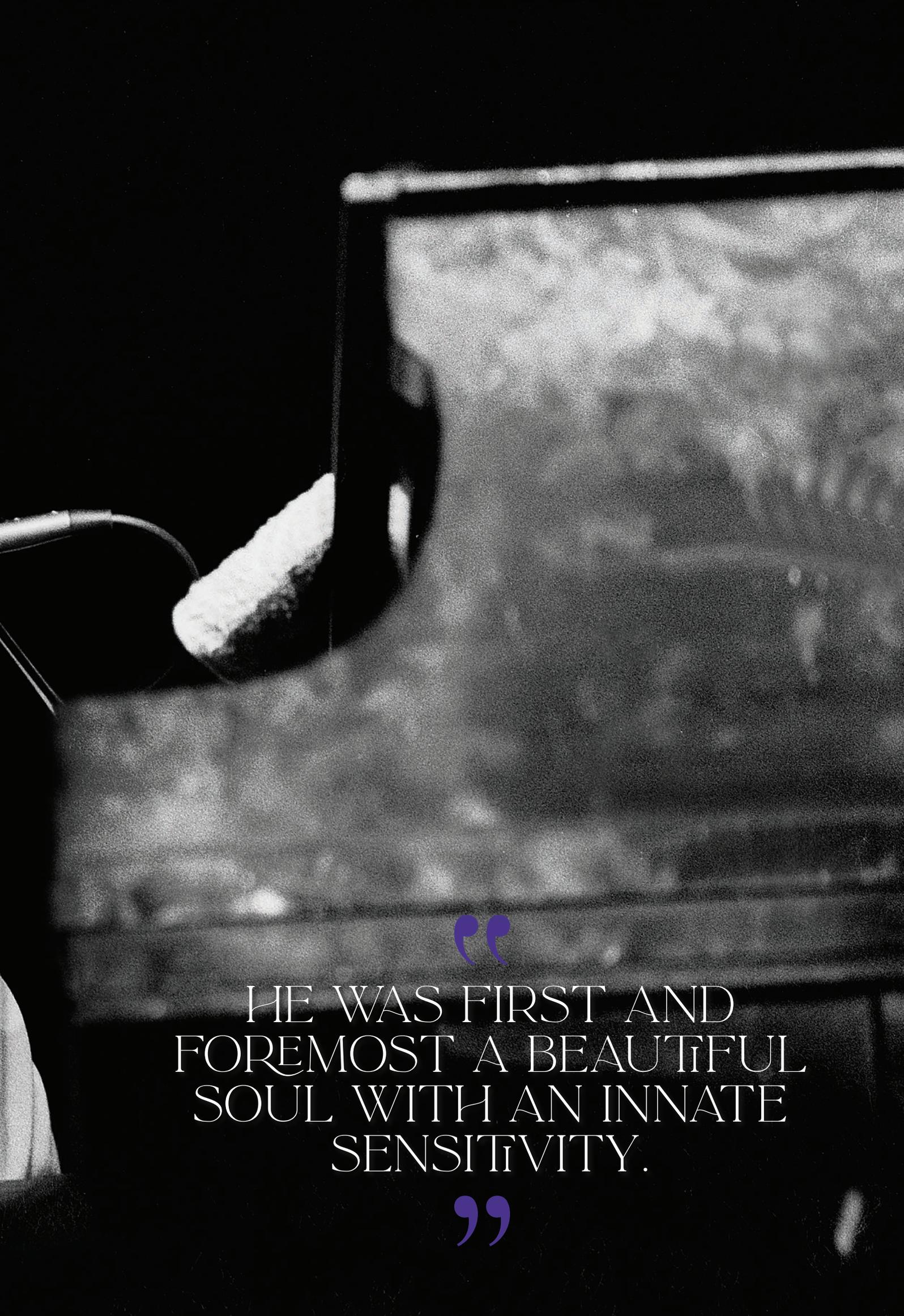
career. An unknown fact to many is that the line “If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with” was a Preston quip that inspired Stephen Stills. When Stills asked the forever-generous Billy if he could use the line, Preston said yes. “Love the One You're With” became the signature song of Stills' solo career.

Billy struggled with the blues of alcohol and drugs. Like so many others, addiction contributed to his decline – despite all the light within him. When he passed away in 2006, several obituaries began with “The Fifth Beatle has died.” For us African Americans, we didn't need this designation to canonize him. Nat King Cole, Sam Cooke, Little Richard, and Ray Charles had already crowned him a long time ago.

Billy Preston had chops. But he was much more than a keyboardist, composer, and singer. He was first and foremost a beautiful soul with an innate sensitivity. And just like the sacred songs of struggle and uplift that Billy grew up singing at Victory Baptist, he was sanctified. For this reason it feels righteous to come back to where he began. May his spirit never be forgotten, and let the whole church say Amen.

Live in Chicago,  
1977





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