





P E R F O R M E R S

# ISAAC HAYES

By ROB BOWMAN



IN THE PAST FIFTY YEARS, THERE HAVE BEEN A HANDFUL of seminal, innovative albums that truly changed the course of popular-music history. LPs such as Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, James Brown's *Live at the Apollo*, the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and the Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks* opened new doors, created new possibilities and suggested new directions to other musicians, record company personnel and fans alike. Each of these albums, in its own way, defined a moment in time, captured the Zeitgeist of an era and helped create a musical subgenre in the process. To have created one such album over the course of a career is a heady accomplishment. To have done it twice, as Isaac Hayes did with *Hot Buttered Soul* and *Shaft*, puts one in extremely rarefied company indeed.

**Isaac Hayes: (Opposite) In 1972, in *Shaft* mode, and (above) as *Black Moses*, the title of one of three Hayes LPs released in 1971**

Hayes's story is one of epic proportions. Beginning in 1969, with the release of *Hot Buttered Soul*, he became the biggest artist Stax Records ever produced and one of the most important artists in the history of rhythm & blues. In the first few years of the 1970s, he single-handedly redefined the sonic possibilities for black music, in the process opening up the album market as a commercially viable medium for black artists. Earlier, Hayes, alongside partner David Porter, had helped shape the sound of soul music in the 1960s with such definitive compositions as "Hold On! I'm a Comin'," "Soul Man," "When Something Is Wrong With My Baby," "B-A-B-Y," "I Thank You" and "Wrap It Up." The fact that one artist could be responsible for such disparate but equally great and influential music





as Hayes produced in the 1960s and 1970s simply boggles the imagination.

Born August 20, 1942, in Covington, Tennessee, Hayes moved to Memphis with his maternal grandparents at the age of seven. During and immediately following his school years, Hayes, largely a self-taught musician, apprenticed with a number of ensembles that variously worked the school, amateur-hour and nightclub circuits. Hayes sang doo-wop with the Teen Tones and the Ambassadors, gospel with the Morning Stars; he played blues saxophone with Calvin Valentine and the Swing Cats, rhythm & blues piano with Jeb Stuart and jazz sax and piano with the Missiles and baritone saxophonist Floyd Newman's band. Hayes was also more than acquainted with country music, fondly recalling Saturday evenings listening to the Grand Ole Opry as a child.

It was as a member of Stax sessionman Newman's band that Hayes first worked at Stax, playing piano and cowriting one side of Newman's solitary solo single, "Frog Stomp," in late 1963. In the five-plus years between the Newman session and the recording of *Hot Buttered Soul*, Hayes worked his way up through the Stax studio ranks as a session player (replacing Booker T. Jones while the latter was at college and, upon Jones's return, playing second keyboard as part of the Stax house band), uncredited arranger (it was Hayes who crafted the horn break on Eddie Floyd's epochal "Knock on Wood" and the contrapuntal horn intro on Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness"), songwriter and producer.

Despite his prodigious ability to create hits for others, Hayes never lost sight of his desire to record as a solo artist in his own right. To that end, he cut singles in 1962 and 1965 and a solo album, *Presenting Isaac Hayes*, in 1967. None of these efforts made much of an impact commercially or aesthetically. That situation was to change in a way no one could possibly have envisioned when Hayes recorded the four extended pieces that made up his second solo

LP, *Hot Buttered Soul*. Unleashed in April 1969 as one of twenty-seven albums Stax released simultaneously in an audacious move to create an instant back catalogue, *Hot Buttered Soul* forever changed the fortunes of both Hayes and Stax Records, while expanding the vocabulary of rhythm & blues.

*Hot Buttered Soul* was unique in many respects. Its four songs were five, nine, twelve and nearly nineteen minutes in length, respectively. Although at that time such extended forms were relatively rare in popular music at large, they were simply unknown in black music. The longest song, Jimmy Webb's "By the Time I Get to Phoenix," opened with an extended spoken "rap." Immensely popular, it began a craze for such raps by a wide variety of rhythm & blues artists. When singing, Hayes employed a smooth low baritone that betrayed little overt gospel influence. Although there was a long tradition of smooth, silky baritone black singers from Brook Benton to Billy Eckstine, in the era of soul, this was a radical departure. Hayes's innovation paved the way for subsequent artists such as Barry White.

Each song on *Hot Buttered Soul* was draped in an incredibly complex and dramatic orchestral arrangement. Although orchestral accompaniment had been used as a sweetener on R&B records as early as 1959, the stunningly elaborate arrangements concocted by Hayes, with the assistance of Johnny Allen and Dale Warren, had absolutely no precedent in popular music. In the midst of all this orchestration, on Hayes's cover of Bacharach/David's "Walk On By," guest guitarist Harold Beane played an extended rock-inspired guitar solo. *Hot Buttered Soul* ultimately combined jazz, classical, rhythm & blues, rock, pop and easy listening elements. The result was an album that could fit most radio formats of the time, and Hayes enjoyed an unequalled level of crossover success.

Hayes followed *Hot Buttered Soul* with the similarly styled *Isaac Hayes Movement* and . . . *To Be Continued*. All three albums comprised extended and extensive reworkings of pop and R&B songs that had been hits for others. Whether Hayes tackled Glen Campbell's "By the Time I Get to Phoenix,"

**Above: In the Stax studio with collaborator David Porter, ca. 1965; below: Hayes in his gold-plated Cadillac, 1972; opposite: With grandmother Rushia Wade, who raised him, and his Oscar and Golden Globe awards for his 'Shaft' soundtrack, 1972**







the Beatles' "Something" or Jerry Butler's "I Stand Accused," the original tune was so substantially reinterpreted that, for all intents and purposes, Hayes had rewritten it. The formula proved so immensely successful that with each album he achieved the unparalleled feat of reaching the upper echelons of the pop, R&B, jazz and easy listening charts. Proving unequivocally that black artists could record album-length works that would sell in the millions, Hayes was the catalyst for a complete transformation of the political economy of black music. In the process, he paved the way for the first wave of R&B album masterpieces by Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield and Funkadelic as 1960s soul expanded into a plethora of newly created R&B styles in the early Seventies.

In 1971 Hayes was commissioned to write the score for Gordon Parks's *Shaft*, one of the first so-called blaxploitation flicks. The resulting double album and the "Theme From Shaft" single kick-started disco, created the phenomenon of the black soundtrack, earned Hayes Academy and Grammy Awards and boosted his position as an African-American icon to the point where he was proclaimed Black Moses. Sporting a bald pate and wearing chains onstage, Hayes became an important symbol of black achievement and possibility.

After parting company with Stax in the fall of 1974, Hayes recorded for ABC and then Polydor through 1981, placing more than a dozen singles on the R&B charts, including "Chocolate Chip" and "Don't Let Go." With the exception of an album for Columbia in 1986 that produced the Top

Ten R&B hit "Ike's Rap," a 1992 single with Barry White and a pair of albums for Virgin, Hayes spent most of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s developing an acting career, starring in movies such as *Escape From New York* and *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* and appearing semiregularly in *The Rockford Files*. Although he was largely absent from the music industry, much of his funkier writing was extensively sampled by rappers, and Hayes became a musical hero with an extensive influence on artists who hadn't even been born when he created his most important work.

In 1997 Hayes landed the part of the voice of Chef in the animated late-night series *South Park*. When the show blew up with the teenage set, Hayes once again achieved prominence as a contemporary icon of popular culture. The year before, he'd entered the world of radio, assuming the position of morning disc jockey on KISS-FM in New York City, quickly achieving high ratings in the most competitive market in North America. In the fall of 2000, Hayes expanded his radio empire, taping an early-evening show titled *Hot Buttered Love Songs* that airs six times a week in Memphis on Soul Classics 103.5.

In 1989 the Smithsonian Institute spent two days honoring the compositions of Isaac Hayes and David Porter, and in 1999 Hayes received an R&B Foundation Pioneer Award. Tonight he is fittingly being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, assuming his rightful place alongside others who have similarly transformed the world of popular music. †