

Little Willie John was a teenager when he recorded his first hit, "All Around the World," for King Records, in 1955. When his career faded in 1962, John was a grizzled veteran of 25. Although rock & roll was once the province of the young, few singers under the age of 20 have been able to communicate more than jittery restlessness or poignant ache. Little Willie John did much more. Like his contemporaries Sam Cooke, Ray Charles and Clyde McPhatter, Little Willie John was a vanguard voice of soul.

Little Willie John was born in Camden, Ark., on Nov. 15, 1937, one of the six sons and three daughters of Lillie and Mertis John. The family moved to Detroit in 1942. R&B bandleader Johnny Otis remembered eyeing a 14-year-old John at a Detroit talent show in 1951. Otis passed the word to Syd Nathan of King Records, who ignored John and signed Hank Ballard instead. A local theater-chain executive named Harry Balk became Little Willie John's manager two years later. Throughout the early '50s, John made brief appearances with Duke Ellington and Count Basie, and toured extensively with tenor saxophonist and R&B hitmaker Paul Williams. In no way did Little Willie John lack for proper schooling.

In 1955, John auditioned for Henry Glover, the head of King Records' New York office, and was signed on the spot. "All Around the World" quickly followed.

Jackie Wilson had more range and Sam Cooke more purity, but no one had a voice like Little Willie John. While he did share a nasal cigarette rasp with James Brown, John could punctuate even the harshest phrase with a wild falsetto or a sudden retreat into a muffled, choked sob. John also had a fullness that Brown never possessed, a quality that gave John's blues and ballads a heavy, drenched quality. At the same time, John was capable of great density; his phrasing on the subdued "Let Them Talk" is meticulous and tender. For a mature adult, though, a performance as dark and knowing as "Need Your Love So Bad" would have been an achievement worth a lifetime; for a recently turned 18-year-old, the song is staggering in its depth and emotion. At his best on songs like the oft-covered "Fever" (which Otis Blackwell co-wrote with Eddie Cooley) and "Talk to Me, Talk to Me," John simply sounded eerie. He wore tailored wide-shouldered suits, snap-brim hats and stood just over 5 feet (hence the nickname Little Willie). Like Cooke, John could move audiences without acrobatics or showing off. Little Willie John had style.

Although John nudged only two songs into the pop Top 20, the list of those who have covered his songs is impressive: the Beatles, James Brown (who recorded an entire tribute album), Elvis Presley, Sam and Dave, Al Green, Peggy Lee, Sting and Bobby "Blue" Bland. None of their covers matched the brooding pathos of John's originals.

Willie, as his family called him, married Darlene Bonner of Philadelphia, and they had two sons, William Kevin and Darrell Keith.

By the end of 1961, John was off the charts for good. In 1965, he was convicted of manslaughter for stabbing a man to death in a barroom brawl in Seattle; on May 26, 1968, he died of pneumonia in Washington State Penitentiary, in Walla Walla. Although Little Willie John's life ended tragically, his legacy is glorious.

—Joe McEwen



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