

performers

Solomon burke

By John
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IS ONE OF
the transcendent figures of
Twentieth-Century American
culture. A child prodigy as
a gospel singer, Burke was
nicknamed “the Wonder Boy
Preacher,” and by the time he
was twelve, he had founded
his own ministry, Solomon’s
Temple, in his hometown of
Philadelphia. After signing
with Atlantic in 1960, he
became a key player in the
birth of soul music, recording
such hits as “Just Out of
Reach (of My Two Open
Arms),” “Cry to Me,” “If
You Need Me” and “Got to
Get You Off My Mind.”

BURKE'S FANTASTIC TESTIMONIAL, "Everybody Needs Somebody to Love," was one of the defining musical moments of the 1960s, a home truth in that decade of social and artistic foment delivered with such emotional clarity that the song became a medium for talents as diverse as Wilson Pickett and Mick Jagger.

Burke, whose robust voice carries its preacher's authority to this day, had it all: In addition to possessing that amazing voice, he was an outstanding writer with the ability to assimilate the style of virtually every soul star who came down the pike, and his revival show set the standard for soul excitement. Only Ray Charles and Sam Cooke can claim precedence to Burke in the act of transforming the gospel spirit into the realm of popular music. But neither of those pioneers could touch Burke as a secular preacher.

When Peter Guralnick set out to write his definitive history of R&B, *Sweet Soul Music*, the first person he tried to contact was Solomon Burke. "You couldn't do the book without talking to the King," Burke told Guralnick when the author finally tracked the musician down. Burke was in fact crowned the "King of Rock and Soul" by Philadelphia disc jockey Rockin' Robin in 1964; the regal headgear became a permanent part of his act.

During the mid- to late 1950s, Burke could be heard on the radio via his broadcasts from the temple and on minor-label gospel recordings such as "Christmas Presents From Heaven." Ironically, his first hit for Atlantic was a country song, "Just Out of Reach," complete with schmaltzy backing vocals. Recorded in August 1961, the song is a solemn reading that offers no clue to Burke's gospel background. Five months later, Burke went back into the studio to record a followup, another tearjerker on white bread complete with strings and generic backup singers. But Burke worked "Cry to Me" like the master preacher he is, building to a tumultuous gospel improvisation. The Rolling Stones later covered the tune on *Out of Our Heads*.

In the 1960s, Burke became the flagship performer in Atlantic's fleet of soul stars. Jerry Wexler and Bert Berns produced all his early hits, and he went on to work with Dan Penn, Chips Moman, Tom Dowd and Don Covay. By 1969, he was producing his own records for Bell, scoring a hit with a version of John Fogerty's "Proud Mary" that he re-fashioned into an anthem of black pride.

Though soul was eclipsed by electronic dance music after the disco craze of the mid-1970s, Burke never retreated into the realm of oldies. He has remained on the road, recording sporadically over the years, and his voice has retained all of its subtlety and power, as recordings such as "Soul Alive!," "A Change Is Gonna Come" and "Soul of the Blues" attest. Burke is a true Hall of Famer—and that's the gospel truth. ●



Top: The King of Rock and Soul in his royal raiment, ca. 1969; In New York City, ca. 1965