





# Isley Brothers

Ronald, Rudolph and O'Kelly Isley might command a niche in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame merely for three volcanic singles cut from 1959-62: "Shout," "Respectable," and "Twist And Shout." But for the next 30 years, joined in 1969 by younger brothers Marvin and Ernie Isley and cousin Chris Jasper, they made even more essential music: "That Lady," "Fight The Power," "Work To Do," "Harvest For The World," "For The Love Of You."

Growing up in Cincinnati, the Isleys sang in the church choir, where their mother Sallye Bernice played piano. They also formed a harmony quartet coached by their father, O'Kelly, Sr. Ronald (born 6/21/41) had a honeyed voice and expressive interpretive gifts. Rudolph (born 7/1/39) sang tenor and commanded the call-and-response he'd learned from the Clara Ward Singers. The gruff baritone of O'Kelly, Jr. (born 12/25/37) was a perfect balance. In 1956, the three teenagers took a Greyhound bus to New York, where they cut their first single ("An Angel Cried") for Teenage Records, and recorded for George Goldner's Mark X, Cindy, and Gone labels.

The Isleys got a hint of their true direction in 1959 when "Shout" became a national hit on RCA. Hatched from a live ad lib with no compromises to pop tastes, the song captured the brothers' gospel roots and raucous energy. Three years later, an update called "Twist And Shout," written and produced by the legendary Bert Berns, proved just as shattering.

Subsequent releases stiffed, whether produced by Berns or Lieber & Stoller. So did the self-produced "Testify," on the Isleys' own T-Neck label, which featured the debut of their new guitarist Jimmy Hendrix. Hoping for a better chance, in late '65 the brothers reached out to an old acquaintance, Berry

Gordy Jr. He supplied plane tickets and "This Old Heart Of Mine," the group's first chart record in four years. But the Isleys' presence at Motown sparked resentment from the company's homegrown stars, and the group left in 1968.

Reactivating T-Neck, the Isley Brothers became a self-contained unit for the first time, with Marvin Isley (born 8/18/53) and Ernie Isley (born 3/7/52) on bass, drums and guitar, and cousin Chris Jasper on keyboards. "It's Your Thing" was the opening salvo, an astounding one-take synthesis of doo-wop, Stax and rock & roll.

"I woke up humming it," Ronald Isley says, "coming back from one of our London trips. I was really turned on by Johnnie Taylor's 'Who's Makin' Love' and Sam & Dave. I went to my mother's house and sang the first line to the family, stomping my foot. Ernie looked at me and said, 'Yeah!'"

A platinum empire was born. Through the Seventies, million-selling albums like *3 + 3*, *The Heat Is On* (a #1 Pop LP), and *Go For Your Guns* pushed the Isleys to the forefront of a funk-rock revolution. Each record had as its cornerstones Ernie's scorching electric guitar and bedroom ballads customized for Ronald's shimmering voice.

In 1984, the group split, the youngbloods finding short-term success as Isley/Jasper/Isley with the glorious "Caravan Of Love." Then, on March 31, 1986, O'Kelly Isley died of a heart attack at age 48. His death and Rudolph's recent departure to the ministry might have put the Isleys' future in limbo. But the Warner Brothers albums *Smooth Sailin'* and *Spend The Night* became best-sellers; Chris Jasper and Ernie Isley both released fine solo albums of their own. This year, the Isley Brothers will mark the 35th anniversary of that first Greyhound trip east with a brand new album reuniting Ronald with Ernie and Marvin.

The Isley Brothers have often seemed like the world's best-kept musical secret. But consistently they've made music of beauty, power and soul--and that makes me wanna shout!

—Harry Weinger

**T**he Isley Brothers in the mid-Sixties, circa "This Old Heart Of Mine." *Insert:* Ready to "Fight The Power" in the mid-Seventies with (l. to r.) Ernie, O'Kelly and Ronald Isley; Chris Jasper; Rudolph and Marvin Isley.