



Wilson Pickett

BY LEO SACKS



SHOWERING HIS VOLCANO OF a voice over a stripped-down backbeat, Wilson Pickett was the original Midnight Mover, a man-and-a-half to a legion of female admirers, a modern-day Stagger Lee who fought with the Devil and came out on top. Rough-hewn, sex-driven, he brought passion and pain to every throaty scream. Because there was no in-between for Wilson Pickett, the "Wicked" Pickett, the blood and guts of Southern soul.

Born March 18, 1941, in rural Prattville, Alabama, Wilson Pickett sang in the Baptist church as a boy. When his family migrated to Detroit in 1955, the teenager formed a gospel group called the Violinaires. Their rich, resilient harmonies, inspired by the Sensational Nightingales featuring Julius Cheeks, galvanized the local church community. By 1959, Pickett crossed into secular music with another vocal group, the Falcons, which also included future soul stars Eddie Floyd and Sir Mack Rice. Their gospel-and-rhythm style gave shape to the emerging Detroit soul scene of the early '60s.

In 1962, the power of Pickett's vocal on the Falcons' LuPine recording of "I Found A Love" brought the group its biggest hit in several years. The song spent 16 weeks on the R&B chart, peaking at Number Six, and was partly financed by Atlantic, whose Jerry Wexler was forced to buy back the Falcons master after the record blossomed into a regional hit. Somehow he never listened past the featured side on the finished tape, an ungodly dance ditty called "The Swim." In another twist of fate, in 1963, Atlantic tried to stop the release of Pickett's first solo single, "If You Need Me," on Double-L Records. This slow-burning ballad, with its passionate spoken sermon, arrived on a tape for which Atlantic had purchased publishing but not recording rights. Solomon Burke's version became the bigger R&B hit (Number Two to Wilson's Number Thirty); ironically, Pickett himself signed with Atlantic two years later.

He hit his stride in 1965 with a series of memorable Memphis sessions at Stax, collaborating with MG's guitarist Steve Cropper on one of the most enduring soul hits of all time, "In The Midnight Hour." A Number One R&B smash and Pickett's first Top Forty pop hit, "Midnight Hour" bred a host of worthy successors (several co-written by Pickett) including "Don't Fight It," "Ninety-Nine And A Half (Won't

Do)," and the strutting novelty smash "634-5789."

The Memphis sessions, more blues than gospel, pointed Pickett in a direction he would explore more fully at Muscle Shoals beginning in 1966. "He reminded me of a black leopard—you know, look but don't touch, he might bite your hand," Muscle Shoals engineer Rick Hall told author Peter Guralnick in *Sweet Soul Music*. Pickett swiveled through the Shing-a-ling and the Boogaloo on the frenetic "Land Of 1000 Dances" (at Number Six, his all-time biggest pop hit); turned out "Mustang Sally," penned by his friend Mack Rice; tossed off a groovy follow-up with "Soul Dance Number Three;" and reached a pinnacle of his Muscle Shoals style with a chart-topping cover of Dyke & the Blazers' "Funky Broadway."

Toward the end of 1967, Pickett expanded his range with a happy sort of blues, translating Bobby Womack's exquisite ballad "I'm In Love" into another Top Five R&B hit. He cut white rock and pop songs—"Hey Jude," "Born To Be Wild," even "Sugar Sugar"—with varying artistic and chart success.

In 1971, Pickett journeyed to Ghana, West Africa, headlining a tour of American and African musicians later documented on the concert album and film *Soul To Soul*. Later that year he recorded in Philadelphia with producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, scoring with the slick but forceful "Don't Let The Green Grass Fool You" and "Engine

Number 9." He enjoyed several more Atlantic hits, including "Don't Knock My Love," before departing the label in 1972.

Like so many soul stars of his era, Pickett struggled to find his place in the black music marketplace of the '70s, recording for such labels as RCA, EMI America and Motown. But his Atlantic legacy remains some of the greatest music ever to emerge from the American South, and assures Wilson Pickett a permanent entry in the Dictionary of Soul.

I ' M I N L O V E

WILSON PICKETT arrived at Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama in October, 1966 and rekindled his friendship with singer/songwriter Bobby Womack. The two men had first met on the Midwest gospel circuit in the late '50s. "We were from the same mold," Womack says. "We had the same vibe. When we sang, we always knew where the pocket was."

Womack became a top session guitarist in Memphis and Muscle Shoals following the breakup of his group, the Valentinos, and the death of his mentor, Sam Cooke. But in 1967, Womack's considerable talents were obscured by fallout from his marriage to Cooke's widow, Barbara.

"I was getting static all around the world," Bobby remembers. "I started wearing shades to hide the pain—I didn't want you to look into my eyes. I wanted to everyone to know how I felt—that I loved Barbara, that Sam really was my partner, that I was in living hell—but radio people were throwing my records in the garbage. Then someone said, 'Pickett's your ticket. Channel your energies through him.' So I wrote 'I'm In Love.'"

Pickett's take on the tune captured its most joyful and painfully tragic aspects while transcending his own musical boundaries. "When I played it for him," Bobby remembers, "he ran around the studio screaming, 'Womack, you're crazy! All this hurt comin' out of you! I'm gonna tell this story!' He sang it with the depth and feeling and commitment of a person crying out, because he knew my situation."