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**The Mythbuster: An Interview with Bill Withers**

[31 January 2006]

by Dan Nishimoto

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*A middle-aged man with a heart full of songs makes a career change and leaves an indelible print on pop music. Over 30 years later, he's still Bill Withers. And thank goodness for that.*

From a statistical standpoint, no one is supposed to make it in the music industry. Like hoop dreams, the chances of having "that" talent, meeting a sympathetic label with both an open heart and an open wallet, negotiating an equitable contract and, finally, attaining creative and/or financial success are slim. So, when someone actually hits the jackpot, the listener understandably expects a fantastic story, like: a nasally sliver of a boy kneels at his hero's deathbed before shaking the world with his message; or, a girl with concert pianist dreams responds to academic racism by raising her booming voice; or, a child beaten under a strict religious upbringing finds release in rhythm and blues with a most merciful cry. Even without hearing their music, these tales carry an air of mythology that feeds right back into the exclusive prestige of Hollywood (and Vine).

So, why isn't Bill Withers's name on more people's lips?

His story is just as epic: a child with a stutter leaves a home in rural West Virginia, a career in the military and a life of aircraft assembly plants to write a few songs that land him on the Tonight Show. Over the course of eight years those few songs, in addition to a lean body of work, lead to certifiable cultural landmarks: more TV appearances; chart-topping singles; and a performance and live album at Carnegie Hall. And then... silence. Another eight years pass before another album surfaces. Since then, 20 more years of silence.

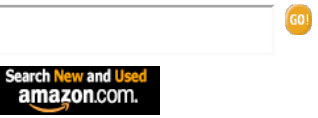
The truth is that Withers remains one of the great spectacles in pop music history, but for reasons mostly beside "the story". While his accomplishments make him appear legendary, their intermittence also makes him sound like an aberrant flash-in-the-pan. Admittedly, even his flippancy makes his success sound random. In a rare conversation with *PopMatters* to promote the reissue of his first album *Just As I Am*, Withers says, "I was just making a record. I didn't know whether anyone was going to like it or not. Had nobody gone for that first record, I would have probably just gone on with life and forgot about the whole thing." In spite of such modesty, he was obviously confident enough to recognize his potential with this music bag; on the television show *Soul!*, he declared, "I would like to say something that has not been said so much." And at a time when most men are more concerned with receding hair and/or virility, the 33-year-old Withers instead turned his back on the 9-to-5 world and allowed his "latent poet" to speak on his behalf. Why? "I would like [music] to be 'for real' for a change."

Indeed, Withers's entry into the industry is a small miracle, paved with the aid of several insiders. First, he was introduced to the small Sussex label by way of Ray Jackson of the Charles Wright and the 103rd Street Watts Rhythm Band and Forrest Hamilton, son of jazz legend Chico Hamilton. Doubly impressive was that the label assigned Booker T.

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Jones to produce the record. As if the lovefest could not get better, Jones drafted the MG's for the recording sessions; when Steve Cropper could not make the dates, Stephen Stills filled-in instead.

In spite of these apparently ideal circumstances, Withers faced his share of restrictions, mainly due to a paltry budget. "First off, it was a small record company that really didn't have enough money to make the album," Withers recalls. "In fact, I got halfway through it, which was two three-hour sessions -- because there was no money to play around all day being picky about everything -- [and] we got kicked out of the studio, because the bills weren't paid." With bemusement Withers recounts being evicted from the studio, "I had this drafting board that someone had thrown away and that I had sawn in half ... and put some old carpet on it, so I could stomp my foot on it, because [the other players] liked the sound of it and I just left it in the studio, because I was expecting to go back! [laughs] They called me up, 'Come and get this thing out of here!'" After a six-month break, the group received funding ("somebody must have gotten a loan from their Aunt Susie," Withers jokes) that was used to complete the remaining six songs in one three-hour session. In the end, Withers praised Jones for "putting that album together with chewing gum and scotch tape".

In spite of these schizophrenic circumstances, Withers flourished through this experience. With the help of Jones's *laissez-faire* approach, he was weaned into a new, order-less world. "I hadn't been socialized as a music person," Withers recounts. "I came from the military industrial complex. I had spent most of my adult life in the navy -- I was in the navy for nine years -- and the other part I was working in aircraft factories... [Jones] knew how to bridge the gap between his musical knowledge and me being, basically, intuitive. I didn't and still don't know... an F# from a chocolate donut." In this manner, each friend, musician and producer served as facilitators and provided Withers with the means to exercise his creativity.

With the release of *Just As I Am* in 1971, it became clear that each individual had placed faith in Withers for good reason. Although the first single "Harlem" languished, it was the dark horse b-side "Ain't No Sunshine" that catapulted the album and the artist into the spotlight. In the liner notes to the reissued *JAIM*, Withers recalls playing the song to Jones during their meeting, but simply repeating the phrase "I know" over the bridge because he had not completed the song; Jones remarked, "Leave it like that." In this manner, Withers's down-home personality shone on songs like "Grandma's Hands", his easy charm and natural frankness bringing a refreshing perspective to pop music. Even when he tackled cover material, notably the Beatles' "Let It Be", his personality soared to the beat of upbeat tambourines, sailing past the barroom chorus of the original. While Withers deflects the gravity of his music in a characteristically lighthearted manner -- "I could smooch you up a little bit," he laughs, "but the whole process for me is that you're basically sitting around scratching yourself and something crosses your mind" -- *JAIA* emphasized humanity and humility in a manner purely Bill.

Although Withers departed the limelight soon after to help raise a family, his absence and fading mythology has not affected interest in his music. Now, more than 34 years since its initial release, *JAIA* is being pressed on CD for the first time. Though he muses whether "anyone is still looking for [the album]", his initial resolve to make his music heard has paid off. On an alternately creative and crass level, sampling and advertising has kept his music current and relevant. However, as has been the case even when he was in the limelight, Withers still views the attention as being relative. "The reason that I didn't do more," he discloses, "I was just short of the amount of ego that people need to be fiercely ambitious. Once life is ok, then I'm ok with that. I'm not driven to drive my name into the mind of every human being [laughs]." Such is the unique grace of Bill Withers -- a man with Grammys under his belt, but who is also content with things just as they are.

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Eternia  
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The Prodigy  
Quintron & Mis Pussycat  
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Sonic Youth  
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