JACKIE WILSON

Jackie Wilson was another important link between the R&B of the fifties and the soul music of the sixties. Unlike Sam Cooke, Wilson lived to be a part of soul's triumph, though not the vital part that his spectacular gifts should have warranted. The enormous range and sheer, facile power of Wilson's voice made it one of the great "instruments" of the rock era; unfortunately, it was also one of the most misdirected and squandered.

Wilson was an incredibly energetic and agile showman, able to reel off a series of perfectly executed flips, cartwheels, "moonwalks" and handstands without a missed note or dropped beat. His acrobatic performances were more than matched by his vocal gymnastics—the soaring falsettos, cascading melismas and other tradmarks of his distinctive and much-copied singing style (the Isley Brothers' "Shout" is one of the more obvious appropriations of Wilson's gospel-swoon style). Unfortunately, his recorded material was only rarely able to do justice to the raw talent on display at his live shows, thanks to Wilson's own schizophrenic musical personality and to the appallingly bad career guidance and musical management he received. Wilson was eager to apply his talent and voice to all types of music, and was particularly drawn to the schmaltzy ballads and novelty numbers that highlighted his voice and left plenty of room for his impressive arsenal of vocal tricks. His inspired oversinging helped to create some revelatory surprises, such as his breathtaking version of "Danny Boy," but his operatic range and power were all-too-often placed in the service of mundane material that even Wilson couldn't salvage, or nearly buried beneath corny Las Vegas productions in a misguided attempt to sell Wilson to the mainstream pop market. But if his recording career was not all it could have been, a talent like Wilson's can still shine through any material, and a *voice* like Wilson's is always a joy to hear.

With the Dominoes (1953-57)

Jackie Wilson was born on June 9, 1934 in Detroit, where he grew up singing in church and soaking up gospel stylings. He was also an avid fan of the pop polish of the Ink Spots and Mills Brothers, the entertaining jump blues of Louis Jordan and the showbiz theatrics of Al Jolson—influences that can all be felt in his music. After a brief fling at boxing in the late 1940's, Wilson, with much coaxing from his mother, set his sights on a less injurious musical career. He was discovered in 1951 by bandleader and talent scout Johnny Otis, who circulated Wilson's name and stirred up interest in the young singer. (Otis discovered Jackie Wilson, Little Willie John and Hank Ballard & the Midnighters all at the same Detroit talent show.) Two years later, in an echo of young Sam Cooke's surprise leap to the front of the Soul Stirrers, nineteen-year-old Jackie was hired as lead singer Clyde McPhatter's replacement in Billy Ward and The Dominoes.

Led by McPhatter's emotionally charged voice, the Dominoes were ground breakers in the incorporation of gospel styles into R&B and one of the country's premiere vocal groups in the early 1950's. Billy Ward hired Wilson in 1953, confident that he had the voice, talent and necessary gospel inflections to step in when McPhatter left to front the newly-formed Drifters. The Dominoes never regained their full stride after McPhatter's departure, but they remained a popular live act and gave Wilson a chance to find his voice and establish his reputation. His predecessor's unrestrained theatrics inspired Wilson to expand and exaggerate his own range of vocal and dramatic effects.

(His most obvious tip of the hat to McPhatter's influence were the sobs and shrieks—McPhatter's trademark—that began to punctuate his own singing.)

The sweeping register leaps, the rich vibrato, the impassioned falsetto breaks and other hallmarks of Wilson's style are all in evidence in his Dominoes recordings, as are, unfortunately, the contradictory directions and ill-advised choices of material that would plague the rest of his career. After some good initial efforts in the Dominoes' classic gospel-meets-jump style, such as "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down," the group changed their approach and began concentrating on lighter jazz, pop and novelty styles in hopes of reaching a wider audience. Instead, they lost much of their R&B following without gaining many new fans. They finally made their way into the pop charts in 1956 with the syrupy "St. Theresa of the Roses," an alarming taste of things to come that sold well enough to convince Wilson that it was time to launch a solo career. In 1957 he signed with Brunswick Records, where he remained for the rest of his troubled career.

The Solo Career and Brunswick Records

Wilson launched his solo career, and began his peculiar seesaw between styles and audiences, in the Fall of 1957 with "**Reet Petite**" a minor pop hit that failed to place at all on the R&B charts. Musically, "Reet Petite" set the pattern for his Brunswick output, with blaring horns and a bland big band arrangement that always threatens to suffocate the song and singer. Wilson's powerful voice cuts through, though, and reels off an impressive display of his range, depth and signature "devices," such as the rolled "r"'s on "r-r-r-reet," the grinding "she's a-w-w-l-right"'s and the falsetto leap at the end of the song. ("Reet Petite" is also peppered with low, sensuous vibratos and stuttered syllables that reminded many listeners of Elvis Presley. His new label encouraged Wilson to add some "Elvis-isms" to his naturally flamboyant style—an ironic twist, since Elvis counted Jackie Wilson among *his* influences.)

Most of Wilson's early hits, including "Reet Petite," were written by an old friend from Wilson's boxing days, **Berry Gordy, Jr**., the future founder of Motown Records.[i] Gordy wrote several hits for Wilson over the next two years, including "To Be Loved," "That's Why (I Love You So)," "I'll Be Satisfied" and "**Lonely Teardrops**," Wilson's biggest fifties hit. "Lonely Teardrops" walks a middle line between Wilson's schmaltzy ballads and his more uptempo dance style. The song is part dancetune, part operatic ballad, part novelty number, and an equal mix of pop, R&B and gospel vocal styles. The baby-come-home lyrics were custom-made for Jackie's pleading vocal style ("My heart is crying, crying" became his signature line), and the stops and starts of the backing arrangement provided an effective vehicle for Wilson's dramatics. His falsetto explosion in the gospel-style fadeout of the song feels like a joyous release from the confines of pop convention—he even manages to coax the ever-present K-Mart choir into a downhome call-and-response.

Wilson maintained his musical balancing act into the sixties, bouncing between the pop and R&B charts and audiences, hemmed in by the questionable taste of his manager Nat Tarnopol and producer Milton DeLugg.[ii] His attempts to reconcile himself to some of the pure schmaltz he was given to sing led to some rather incongruous but oddly successful results. His 1960 hits "Alone At Last" and "Night," for example, were based on melodies pulled from a Tchaikovsky piano concerto and the opera "Pagliacci" (truly an "operatic ballad"). Wilson fared better on uptempo and bluesy recordings, such

as "Baby Workout," "Please Tell Me Why," "You Don't Know What It Means," and the great "**Doggin' Around**," which features one of his most soulful vocal performances, supported by a "country soul" piano and churchy organ (and marred by a syrupy and completely inappropriate choir of voices). A few songs from the early sixties, such as "I Just Can't Help It" and "Am I the Man," stand out as relatively integrated productions, though they still only hint at the type of music Wilson was capable of making when he was given a backing arrangement that he could work *with* instead of against.

Higher and Higher

Wilson's music was out of step with the times by the mid-sixties, when his career was unexpectedly revitalized by his collaboration with Chicago producer **Carl Davis**, who brought Wilson's music into the modern soul era. The team began a string of hits in 1966 with "**Whispers (Gettin' Louder)**," a thoroughly contemporary urban soul record with a bass-heavy, Motownish production featuring a tightly compressed string and horn arrangement and a background chorus that, for a change, actually enhances the song. Wilson's pleading, emotional voice is used here to full effect without sounding the least bit melodramatic, as if the music and times had finally caught up with his voice.

With a sympathetic producer and good new material, Wilson finally made records that matched his talent. He followed "Whispers" with "**(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher**," his most popular song. The record begins with a distinctive bass figure, then gradually unfolds with the addition of bongos, tambourine, guitar, vibraphone, drums and piano, with the further layering of strings, brass and background singers for the title refrain. The relentless backing groove—supplied by moonlighting Motown musicians—propels the song through an exultant solo from the trumpets before climaxing with the final chorus and ending fadeout. Wilson sang "Higher and Higher" with joyous abandon, heightening the celebratory spirit of the words and music and turning the song into an almost religious testimony to the redeeming power of love. Wilson's career renaissance continued with "Since You Showed Me How to Be Happy" and "I Get the Sweetest Feeling," pop hits in 1967 and 1968, and several other songs that placed in the upper reaches of the R&B charts. As black music took on a harder edge in the early seventies, however, Wilson's pop-soul was again out of step with times, and Wilson found himself confined to the oldies circuit—where his old hits lived on and where, in a final, helpless twist of irony, he died.

Ill-fortune plagued Wilson's life: two of his children were gunned down on the streets of Detroit and Wilson himself was shot and nearly killed by a crazed fan in 1961. The end for Wilson finally came at an oldies concert in 1975 in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, where he suffered a stroke and collapsed onstage. At first it seemed merely a part of his flamboyant act, as Wilson devotee Tom Jones recalls: "he clutched his chest and went down his knees and [the audience] thought, you know, 'this is Jackie doing a thing.' And he was dying."[iii]

Wilson lapsed into a coma and a tortuous decade-long struggle for life in a New Jersey hospital, where he was horribly neglected and even, according to many reports, abused. Wilson's family had no money to pay for the kind of treatment that could have helped him, and Brunswick and his manager were, characteristically, unwilling to help. Wilson's chronic destitution is one of the most tragic examples of rock era rip-offs (and a distinct contrast to the enlightened self-determination of Sam Cooke and Ray Charles).

Wilson's finances apparently weren't handled any better than his talent—it is alleged that he never received a royalty payment from Brunswick and was forced to tour constantly to pay his bills and support his family. It seems that Wilson's big heart suffered all the indignities the music industry could dish out, and finally just gave up.[iv]

Wilson went in and out of a coma for nine years, and died a ward of the State of New Jersey in 1984. Money was finally raised to buy a headstone for his grave in 1987. That an artist of Wilson's stature could suffer such a horrible fate is a sad indictment of the music industry at its very worst.

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[i]In an industry full of if-only's and what-could-have-been's, few are more tantalizing than the prospect of Jackie Wilson joining Motown as the standard-bearer of his friend's new label. Having an established name like Wilson on the label's roster would have gotten Motown off to a running start, and Gordy's aesthetic guidance—and quality material from Motown's great staff songwriters—could have made Wilson one of the great stars of the sixties. In any case, it wasn't to be. Speculation about the reason for Wilson's decision to remain at Brunswick has ranged from simple loyalty to the label to bizarre charges of Mafia involvement and gangland pressure on Wilson to stay put. For his part, Gordy felt compelled to form his own independent production company—his first step toward Motown—by the frustration of hearing his songs for Wilson buried under schmaltzy productions over which he had no control.

[ii]DeLugg was later the band leader for the *Tonight Show* and musical director for the *Gong Show*.

[iii]Interview from Jan. 1989 "Entertainment Tonight" television program.

[iv] There have also been more sinister allegations about Wilson's death that are hard to dismiss, given the way he was handled in life.