

In the middle of 1970, Curtis Mayfield quit the Impressions and began one of the most groundbreaking and successful solo careers in history. Nothing happened to force his hand—no dramatic falling out or heated argument. In his customary seat-of-the-pants way, he simply picked up the phone one evening, called fellow Impression Fred Cash, and said, “Fred, I’m going to try to go on my own and see what I can do. You and Sam [Gooden] can do the same thing. Y’all go on your own and see what you can do.” Fred called Sam and told him the news, and that was it. My father left the group.

Fred, Sam, and the Impressions, three of the most important forces in my father’s life for more than a decade, no longer occupied his mind. The boyhood dreams, the endless miles traveled on tour, the lonely nights trying to steal sleep in motel beds, the harmonizing and fraternizing all came to an end. Dad struggled with the decision. For years, the three Impressions were so close that if you saw one of them, you usually saw the other two. They spent more time with each other than they did with their own wives. Yet, my father had the ability to turn off his emotions and make cold, calculated business decisions when he felt it necessary.

Recalling this side of him, my brother Tracy says, “You saw a good and evil. The evil part came out when it was about business. I always separated the parent from the businessperson. Because the parent was very nice, soft, sweet, but when he puts his business hat on, you’ve got a different animal there. He becomes something that you don’t want to be around. When it came to business, he was about business. If he’s making the money, he wants all of it.”

Soon after the split, my father put the final touches on his first solo album. After more than a decade of writing with others in mind—either the Impressions, Jerry Butler,

Major Lance, Gene Chandler, or countless others on Okeh and Curtom—he now thought solely of himself. No expectations hung over his head. He could paint his songs with all the darkness and pain that lurked in the ghetto. His pallet was wide as the world. He also had a tight band to match the material, including “Master” Henry Gibson, whose percussion would come to define much of Dad’s solo career.

He toiled through July and August, even putting in a marathon forty-eight-hour session to finish the album on time. His first solo album, *Curtis*, came out in September. It marked a bright moment for my father, but it came amid great darkness. Days after the release, Jimi Hendrix choked to death on his own vomit. Hendrix had often claimed Curtis as his favorite guitar player, and on songs like “Little Wing” and “Have You Ever Been (To Electric Ladyland),” you can hear the influence in Hendrix’s lyrical hammer-ons and pull-offs.

There was little time to mourn Hendrix, though. A month later, Janis Joplin overdosed on heroin and Baby Huey fell dead of a drug-related heart attack in a Chicago motel room. Times were strange, dark, deadly. *Curtis* captured it all.

No one was prepared for the album except my father and those who helped him make it. It starts with the sinister strains of “(Don’t Worry) If There’s a Hell Below, We’re All Going to Go.” The bass guitar growls menacingly as a woman exhorts the book of Revelation, and my father, with a heavily processed voice, shouts, “Sisters! Niggers! Whities! Jews! Crackers! Don’t worry. If there’s a hell below, we’re all gonna go.” Then, he lets out a demonic howl as the rhythm section kicks in.

While Sly Stone had recorded “Don’t Call Me Nigger, Whitey” the year before, “Hell Below” was among the first mainstream recordings to use the word, setting the

scene for both the unflinching honesty of my father's solo career and the hip-hop age it helped spawn.

As the album progresses, my father's obsession with producing different sounds in the studio—assisted by his newfound love for weed—takes off like a V-2 rocket, with trippy guitar and vocal effects that sweep across the sonic field, sounding like the haunted hangovers of a nightmare. The drilling bass lines, the urgent string arrangements, the pounding rhythm section, and the heavy lyrics intertwine in cascading crescendos. Curtis didn't just have his finger on the pulse of the new decade; he was in the bloodstream.

Lyrically, Dad proved himself a true street poet in the vein of Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, who had recently debuted with politically charged, nationalistic music aimed at raising the consciousness of black people. He now used the dialect of the street and the terror of the times to create something as devastating as a shot of heroin to the vein.

Sam and Fred were surprised by the power of the new songs. To this day, they debate the meaning of “We People Who Are Darker Than Blue,” one of the most powerful songs my father ever wrote. In an interview in 2008, Sam said, “I took it as a person that was very, very angry . . . The thing I got from it was, ‘Are you going to let them do it to you?’ Who? Are you going to let *who* do it to you?” Fred, providing the obvious answer: “At the time, he was talking about white folks . . . He ain't talking about black folks.”

My father's audience was equally surprised. No one had made an album like this before, least of all the Impressions. Sure, socially minded songs formed a major part of the movement, but to put so much on the A-side of a record—and in such a personal

manner—was bold and new. It was the work of a man who knew exactly who he was and what he wanted to say. He'd commented on society before, but now he climbed in its skull, poking around the demented mind of a decade that would witness the death of free love and the advent of mass paranoia.

As fans digested the A-side, they learned the new Curtis brought nothing but straight truth. No longer was it a message song or two surrounded by love songs. Now he held a mirror to the realities of ghetto life and forced his audience to look into it, song after song after song. As he described his motivation, "The latter part of the '60s and the early '70s brought about a feeling in me that there need to be songs that relate not so much to civil rights but to the way we as all people deal with our lives."

If my father proved he could be an incisive commentator on the first side, he proved he could still be a damn good motivator with "Move On Up," the opening song on the second side. Rhythmically, it is perhaps the most complex song he ever wrote, and it contains a drum break that predicted the rise of hip-hop in the next decade. Two other things are especially important about the song. One, he chose to put it on the B-side and start his first solo album with the super-heavy, brutally honest "Hell Below." The decision showed Dad's guts and merit as an artist. From a commercial point of view, it would have made more sense to hook the listeners first with the positive, infectious ear candy of "Move On Up" and then lay down the dope. My father decided that his message was too important and put it up front. And two, he went even further by releasing "Hell Below" as the first single, instead of "Move On Up." Again, the message came up front, and the audience responded. "Hell Below" went to number three on the R&B chart.

The album became a mammoth, too, hitting the top twenty pop, selling at a furious pace, and instantly justifying his decision to go solo. It stayed on the charts for months, and by April of 1971, *Curtis* would take the top slot on the R&B album chart. “It just wasn’t my plan,” Dad said. “I thought I’d go home and be a businessman . . . Of course, we were very serious towards the recording and the music and I hoped we’d maybe sell 25,000–50,000 albums, which, of course, would have been an asset to help the company. But I guess I just didn’t realize that we did have so many beautiful people out there.”

That such a race-conscious album did so well on the pop chart showed the power of music to change attitudes, and it showed my father that the masses were ready to hear even the hardest truths. But racism in radio still prevailed. At the same time as *Curtis*’s rise, a white singer named Brian Hyland cut a version of the Impressions’ “Gypsy Woman” that sold three million copies, outselling the original nearly ten times over and rising far higher on the pop charts. It was a story almost as old as recorded music—white artists made the money even when black artists made the songs. Curtis was among the only black artists to change that story by keeping as much of his publishing as possible, which meant he made good money from Hyland’s cover, but the business was still rigged against him. He’d struggle against it for the rest of his career.

The music business had changed for the better, though, and my father played an integral part in that change. So did the Curtom label and the *Curtis* album. The album also changed his image. The iconic cover photo of him sitting in his yellow chamois-cloth suit, and the gatefold images of him surrounded by his children showed a man who had come into his own. My father claimed he never intended to leave the Impressions

forever, but *Curtis* showed him that Curtom now had two artists that could bring in major sales.

He never looked back.