Bobby Womack: Not Just A Ghost of Sam Cooke

By MOSES J. NEWSON

Ever since that ill-fated December night in 1964 when a female Los Angeles motel operator shot super star Sam Cooke to death during a girl chase (her story), faithful fans of the singer insist they have been stirred at times by voices or stage styles that echo the "late, great" entertainer.

Unlike Sam's brother, L. C. Cooke, who took an unspectacular stab at keeping alive the Cooke fame, there's another hard-driving singer from the "late great's" past who many music critics feel could be knocking on the door to super stardom.

Bobby Womack is the man. At 30, he is, for starters, a singer, funky guitarist, songwriter-composer, bandleader, producer, film musical scorer, one-nightstander and part-time philosopher. His singles and albums are selling, he gets satisfactory gates most tour nights, his scoring of the movie "Across 110th Street" won him another film job, he's thinking about devoting more time to the production end of the business and there could be a movie around the corner.

He's been out there a long time, having started on the church circuit with his brothers as a youngster in his native Cleveland. Womack's writing and talent as a self-taught, lefthanded guitar master, earned him work with and for some of the best in the business, people like Aretha Franklin, Joe Tex, the Rolling Stones, Ray Charles, Sly and the Family Stone and Wilson Pickett, for whom Womack developed the hit, "I'm a Midnight Mover."

But Bobby Womack worked longer and closer with Sam Cooke than with any of the others. A man intent on doing his own thing, Womack isn't about to agree that he's just a ghost of Sam Cooke, to whose widow, Barbara, he was married for a while after his longtime friend's death.

In fact, Bobby tells you, "I don't even think I sound like him."

Certainly he is different out there on stage; more of a prancer with more of the rock sound in his voice. He appears to be working a lot harder, or maybe it was that Sam made it look easier.

WORKED WITH SAM 8 YEARS

But for those who see or hear a resemblance, Womack has an answer.

"Some people still say I sound like Sam. A lot of what they hear comes from our gospel backgrounds. These phrases and mannerisms are used by all of the singers who came out of church backgrounds. Sam was the first one to bring it out into the pop field," Womack offered.

"People don't realize that a big part of Sam's style came from me. We worked together eight years and I helped to create his style. We had a combination of things that worked for both of us."

"I Know One Thing When You've Got To Eat, You Do What You Do Best."

Womack talked warmly of his long relationship with Sam Cooke before and after a date at Washington's Constitution Hall that attracted about 3,000 paying fans.

He thought it was a good crowd and told his road manager and the show sponsors so as he laughed off a lesser "homecoming" turnout in Cleveland the previous night. "I don't know how I did an hour. That was embarrassing, nobody there," he cracked.

Womack is one of those good-natured, cheery perfectionists who jokes and clowns a lot with anyone around and throws bouquets to his nine-piece backup band, "Peace." Back in the dressing room at Constitution Hall after a fast-paced show he yelled to the band next door, "Damned good show, men." Someone chirped back, "Thanks, boss."

But there's a lot of difference in being behind another star as a fabulous backup man and being Number One with the responsibilities that are mixed in, and Womack, despite his Pisces optimism, at times sounds like a man who understands closeness is not the same as super stardom.

"The Pressure Is Terrific. We Tour Year Around, Work All The Time."

"I'd like to lay off three weeks, but I'd be in trouble," he insisted. "We make good money but we can't lay off.

"Sometimes, I get tired and disgusted. We tour year around, work all the time.

"You're carrying an organization and everybody says you're making a lot of money. Well, I'm going home with very little.

"Sometimes it's like being in a box. You know if the bottom falls out the government comes after me."

When you're out there struggling, a lot of incidents and situations make a star reaching for bigger things think. The pressure is terrific.

Bobby Womack

Womack recalled he'd "got worried the other day. Things were slow, the group was late for rehearsal. We had a little session about getting it together and being the best you can. If you're going to be a shoeshine boy, be a good one."

Bobby says he works best under pressure. "You have to keep coming up with ideas to keep things going."

Although he keeps punching his way up the ladder, Womack has no idea where his efforts will lead. "When I come to my quota, that's where I'll land," he said. "I know one thing, when you've got to eat you do what you do best."

One of the pleasures of performing for Bobby Womack is being able to communicate with his audiences. He wants to deal with realities of life.

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