

Q&A



SOLOMON BURKE

Still rocking, still rolling, still ruling

SOLOMON BURKE WAS DUBBED “THE King of Rock and Soul” in the 1960s—and five decades later he is still ruling from the trademark throne he occupies on stage. Burke didn’t find crossover pop success as a young man, but in the 2000s a string of genre-busting albums earned him new respect and new listeners. Now 70, the father of 21 and grandfather of 90 struggles with health problems but nonetheless has plenty on his plate. His latest album, *Nothing’s Impossible*, marked his first collaboration with legendary R&B producer Willie Mitchell, who died in January.

Do you have a favorite among your recent albums?

Every one was a favorite, because they were all masterpieces within their own rights. They were great lessons in learning the next step, the next phase. We learn that in life, the things we thought were so important are no longer important. Changes come and changes go. Life travels on, it doesn’t stand still.

What makes a good song?

The story. If the story doesn’t mean anything to me personally and spiritually, then I just can’t do it. I’ve tried to sing songs that didn’t have a meaning for me and it doesn’t work well. I turned down some big hits, like “Little Bit of Soul” and “Hang on Sloopy.”

Tell us about Willie Mitchell.

What a great man, what an incredible man. I never met anyone with so much positivity and sincerity in what they were doing. When I met him, it was like seeing your brother that you haven’t seen in all these years. After five hours of laughter and jokes and comparing notes, his words were, “Man, you ain’t leaving this studio ‘til you record something. I got you here now. Lock the doors!”

The sound he got was similar to your ‘60s records.

I think he went back and touched upon the time of magic. That was magic for me and magic for Don Covay and Wilson Pickett and Joe Tex, all of those incredible people during that time.

Did you know then that you were forging a new style of music?

No. We were just doing what we do. It’s just amazing how the legendary status of these people still exists in the hearts and minds of the younger generation today. We know the magic of what Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson did. We know Al Hibbler and Ray Charles and Roy Hamilton. It was there, it was real. This is what I’m hoping some of our younger entertainers will bring back. It’s happening in Europe. I worked with a young lady named Joss Stone. Incredible. Soulful. They come forth with this inner soul that just tastes like collard greens and corn bread and candied yams and macaroni and cheese. It’s just there.

Did you ever imagine that you would still be singing at 70?

No, I just thank God I made 33. I was very afraid. I lost my grandmother when she was only 54. I didn’t think that I would ever reach that age. And I’m still excited about things that are happening.

—Richard Cromelin

‘I’ve tried to sing songs that didn’t have a meaning for me and it didn’t work well!’

