Date: 2004-06-25

Interviewee: Mable John

Interviewer: I (Name Unknown)

Collection: Stax Oral Histories

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Mable John: Oh now the red light is on. See I knew there was not a red light on.

Interviewer: Okay, you were right.

John: Playing with my eye sight.

I: Okay so let’s start from the beginning again. Soul music is music with heart.

John: Music of the heart. It has no nationality barriers. No religion. No culture. It’s just plain music of the heart.

I: Now in terms of the soul music, you know, of all kinds of soul music, the soul music that was created in the South, in the 60s, when did you first hear music like that? The soul music that was sort of a mix between blues and gospel and jazz?

John: I'm sure I was a little girl. Which was a long time ago if you remember my date of birth.

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We use to listen to, my being born in Louisiana, and then I listened to what we call, they call it country music now and they were calling it hillbilly music then and I was living in Arkansas before we moved to Detroit. And we would listen to that music and even though it was country music or what we were calling then hillbilly music, there was a lot of gospel mixed in with that. There was happy songs mixed in with that. Men and women were singing about their love that had left them, but more than that they sang happy music too. And they danced while they sang. They played all kinds of instruments. So gospel music and country music have a perfect marriage, but then before 1960

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you have your gospel singers that didn’t do anything but sing in churches, the black churches basically. Well they were singing hymns and things that they called negro spirituals and Mahalia Jackson came along in that time. But you have to give credit also to Thomas Dorsey. And he wrote so many gospel songs, and they were gospel songs that kind of earmarked blacks but he was not black. So that’s why I said its music of the heart. Because his heart, his soul dictated what he wrote. Now what he wrote might have been common to a whole lot of people. So that’s why it has nothing to do with nationality or your color

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your religion or what you believe. It’s in your heart. But I heard that kind of music all my life. From a little girl. Being born in Louisiana, partly raised in Arkansas, and then finished my education and rearing in Detroit, Michigan. So I had a cross section, of everything that you can think of. There was no rock and roll at that time but that’s still music of the heart. Because its what the individual is feeling when they're writing.

I: Now both you and your brother, Little Willy John, you were both very successful recording artists, was your home a very musical place?

John: Always. There was never a time that all the radios were off. There was never a time in my home when no music was going on.

I: And did you have other brothers and sisters?

John: Oh yes, I'm the oldest of ten children. And my father never allowed us to argue.

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He only allowed us to sing and he said, if you sing together you'll be happy. So we couldn’t fight and we couldn’t argue. The only thing we could do was sing. So each one of us would have a day in the kitchen, one would wash the dishes and the other one would dry the dishes. And if we started into a heated conversation my father would say stop that talking and strike up a song. And that's actually how we became, so I guess, fluent in singing. But my mother and father played guitar. They didn’t play for money. They didn’t play in the churches. They only played at home and had us to sing to their playing. Now it’s a good thing that everybody didn't just come in to see and hear because it wasn't like the guitar playing that we hear today. But from that everybody in the family, all of my sisters and brothers, six brothers and two sisters,

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that was all raise to be groomed together. We all sang together. And my father would take us to church. We would go to the Holiness church in the evening and my father would sit in the back of the church. He would just observe everything that’s going on, his name was Mertis John. When we would get home from church he would go into the kitchen and get all of my mother’s cake pans then he would have us singing what we heard in church and he would just be beating with the cake pans. And then my mother would get the guitar and she would proceed to show my father that he was playing it wrong. That these are the notes. And then my father would then sit down with the guitar and play it too.

I: They weren't allowed to fight about it they had to sing about it.

John: No, there wasn't anything to fight about but we had to sing about it. The radios were never turned off. I'm sure that in my, my two sisters have passed and some of my brothers have passed,

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but if you go into any one of our houses now that are still alive, there's a radio in the house somewhere that’s always open. We always have music.

I: That’s wonderful. Well, so when did you first start singing professionally?

John: It was after Willy, I never desired to sing professionally. I was coaching church choirs in the state of Michigan. I was a state minister of music in the Triumph church, which was a Holiness church where they pulled out all the stops. They had guitars, and drums, and pianos, and organs, and everybody was playing. All the children in the church played, everybody played because it was the thing to do. Play music and sing. And my brother Willy had a love for the jazz, Dizzy Gillespie,

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Lionel Hampton, and all of the old greats. Ray Charles, well. Maybe more Dizzy Gillespie and Lionel Hampton than Ray Charles at that time. And there was a theatre in Detroit called the Paradise Theatre. And they would, the big shows would come there and they would be there a week and every Thursday night was amateur night. And my brother Willy and Levi Stubbs of the Four Tops, we were neighbors cause we lived in a project, and they were on one side of the road and we were on the other.

I: And this was in Detroit?

John: In Detroit, right on Dequindre between six mile and Davison. And Levi's parents didn't mind him singing popular music. But my parents didn't allow us to sing anything but gospel so then I had to sneak Willy

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out my bedroom window and get him back in before my father came home, he worked for Chrysler Corporation, because they would've killed both of us if they had known that we were doing such. And Mrs. Stubb's is the one that kind of lowered the boom on us because Willy and Levi kept winning on Thursday nights when they go down for the amateur show and she was so proud of Levi she came over to have coffee with my parents and told them isn't it wonderful that our children are making it so big at the Paradise Theater. And my father said “Where?’” The Paradise Theatre, which is downtown Detroit. And my father said “No not any of my kids because my kids are at home in bed at that time of night.” And Mrs. Stubbs said “No, William Edward, is my brother’s name,

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and she said William Edward and Levi, they've won watches two weeks in a row.” So then my father called all of us into the kitchen where they were having coffee to ask what's this I'm hearing? We knew to tell the truth or everybody would get a whooping. So Willy said I went and I did win a watch because I won first prize. And he said how did you get there? Cause he was a kid.

I: How old was he?

John: He said- oh at that time Willy must have been 15, 14-15. He said but Mable made me do it.

I: (laughter) Oh no.

John: So he asked me how did Willy get there without my mother knowing and I said well I put him out the window, right through my bedroom window. And she said and how did he get back in and I said oh he came in before daddy got home from work.

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So my father made him bring the watch to him so he could see it. Because we were not also allowed to bring anything home that they didn't know anything about or that they didn't buy. So he let him keep the watch because he had won it fair and told him he could never do that again. And told me I could never do that again. Well by now its in Willy's blood and all the big bands that’s coming to the Paradise Theatre are wanting to take Willy on the road with them. And some of them just turned up at our door to ask my parents if he could go. And of course they said No. Well years passed, by the time Willy was 18 and then I was living away from home at that time, I was grown, and Willy came to me and he said I'm leaving

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with this big band and I will not be back until I get a hit record. So I saw him off to the airport and he went into King Records in Cincinnati, asked the girl, the receptionist, to show her to where Mr. Syd Nathan is who’s the owner of King Records. He had never seen him but he knew of him, just by name.

I: He knew Little Willy already?

John: No, no, he knew Mr. Nathan but Mr. Nathan didn’t know him. He knew who Mr. Nathan was by name but had never met him. And Titus Turner was in the studio recording and they were trying to get Titus to do a certain kind of run when he was doing All Around the World. And Titus was having a problem with it. Its Titus' song. So when they took a break, Willy walked down to

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Where the van was, and everybody at that time, they were recording 78's. Everybody was in the studio at the same time. So as they are sitting around, smoking and relaxing Willy walks down and said, I'm looking for Mr. Nathan. And Syd Nathan said I'm Syd Nathan, he says well I'm William Edward John, he said I saw the young man was having a problem with a certain run and he said, is this what he was trying to do? So he made the run, Titus heard him singing and came over and said When did you learn my song and Willy says While you were singing it. And Syd Nathan gave him a contract and Willy's first release on King was All Around the World.

I: Which is one of my absolute favorite songs.

John: It’s a good song.

I: It’s a real good song.

John: It’s a very good song. And that’s how it all got started and it was years, it was long after Fever.

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It was after Need Your Love So Bad, it was after a lot of his hits, and I was still coaching choirs in Michigan. And a young man named Matt Bursey said to me you're running around going from city to city, you know, coaching choirs, you're doing it free, you have talent why don’t you use it and get paid. I said I don’t know, we sing for fun. He said No that’s not the way it should be, he said I'm going to introduce you to a young man he's my client. He was a barber and he wanted to introduce me to Berry Gordy. So he introduced me to Berry Gordy. Berry Gordy was a song writer still working for the automobile companies, automobile company, Ford I think he was working for.

I: Did he have the record store at that point?

John: No, not at that point. They had--the family had a printing company, a printing press on St. Antoine and Farnesworth

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across from the children's hospital. He was living yet at home with his mom and father. And this man Matt Bursey asked him if he would coach me because he said she need to be getting paid for what she's doing. So Berry became my manager and coach. And at that time he was coaching a group called the Miracles. He had no record company, no publishing company, and had never had a song recorded by anyone. It was Jackie Wilson that broke the ice for him.

I: What was the song that Jackie Wilson did?

John: I'm not sure if it was Lonely Teardrops or if it was Reet Petite the first one he did, but I think it was Lonely Teardrops. And as he would do masters on us, taking us into studios and renting the studio

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and the time and musicians and recording us, he would come to New York on Fridays. Spend the whole day on Fridays in New York. I would drive him to the airport in the morning, he would work in New York at the studios from record company to record company with his masters and then I'd pick him up at the airport at 8 o'clock that night. Because there was enough money between all of us to stay over so all we could do was take him to the airport, a ticket there and a ticket to come back. And we went to a BMI awards dinner in New York at the Rockland Palace. And Jackie Wilson was getting an award from BMI because the song had gone gold and Berry was having a problem placing us, the Miracles and me. So as we sat at the table

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having dinner I said to Berry Gordy, Why don’t you start your own company and I will stay with you forever. And Smokey Robinson told him the same thing. And Berry looked at me and he said Don’t ever promise anyone that you will stay with them forever, there are things that you're looking forward to and if I can’t give it to you and someone else can it would be wrong for you to stay with me and not go after your own dream. He said we would always be friends. He didn’t even have a company and he told me that. And he made good on all of his statements to me because I actually left Tamla Motown and came to Stax Records, right here.

I: How did that happen?

John: I had been with Berry since before Motown,

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before Joe Bet. I had had mediocre hits. The young Stevie Wonder was there as a little boy. Martha and the Vandellas, Martha was a secretary to Mickey Stevenson.

I: What was Stevie like at that point?

John: Just a little frisky kid that was very musical and running up and down the stairs, bumping in to everybody saying excuse me, excuse me. Almost knocking you over. It was though he could see and we were blind. And the first song that I recorded at Motown was Who Would Love a Man Like That and it was something about the beat, Berry Gordy wrote the song and he produced it on me and he played for me on the song, Stevie heard me doing the song another way and he convinced Berry to let him produce that song over his way on me. And he was a kid, Berry let him do it. I had never known

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And I have really never seen anybody else coming in and just wrap Berry around their fingers like Stevie did. And actually I think Stevie's version still sells more than the first version. And it was something about that young beat. But in the midst of me being there with Berry, the Supremes came in, who were not known as the Supremes at that time, but then Martha and the Vandellas and all of this stuff is happening. Dancing in the street and all the other songs, Mary Wells, they're pop and the company now is beginning to break and I'm blues. So I'm saying to myself I'm going to get lost here. So then I left Berry,

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this company is moving into a direction that I thought that I could move into. I never thought I would ever sing pop. I never thought I would never sing a song that was classical so I called Berry one day and I said to him Berry I'm going to have to say something to you that I thought I would never have to say. I think the company's going into a direction that I can't go and I want you to give me a release. He never changed words with me. I said the company's going pop and I'm a blues singer and I know I'm not going to get the attention that I need. So he cancelled my contract with me, he sent me a check, sent me some flowers, and we have remained friends, and we see each other periodically. I have a new release now on all of my unreleased Tamla Motown work that’s on Universal

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Motown and we're still very very close friends. He supports whatever I'm doing. I left there, I had met a man when I first did when Who Wouldn't Love a Man Like That and No Love in Nashville, Tennessee and his name happened to be Al Bell. And Al Bell at that time was a disc jockey at WBOL in Nashville and I went on his show to promote my Motown release and we just hit it off. You know you never know where you're going in life and years down the line I had a manager called Lucky Cordell and Lucky Cordell being a disc jockey in Chicago on WVON radio station

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owned by Leonard Chess of Chess records, was friends with Al Bell cause they were disc jockeys, living in two different places and Al was still actually in college in Little Rock or where ever he was going to college but I knew he was from Little Rock. And they made the deal for me when I left Motown completely there would be a place for me at Stax and Al Bell flew from Memphis to Chicago, signed me to a Stax contract where I was running a record company called Fort Brothers and Bright Star in Chicago Illinois. And then they gave me a date to come in here to meet everybody and I met with Deanie and Isaac Hayes and David Porter and Matt Holseen and the rest of that is history.

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I: So what was your big hit with Stax?

John: Your Good Things About to Come to an End.

I: And how did that song come about?

John: Now how it really came about is not like the record label reads so let’s talk about that.

I: Let's talk about it.

John: All of the songs that I do, basically, I only do them if they mean something personal to me because I feel that I'm not as great a singer as I am a story teller. I love to tell stories and I like for them to be true stories so I write about and sing about things that touches my heart cause that's my soul. I had had a very very bad marriage. I was out of the marriage but I was very damaged by that marriage. Had children from that marriage but it just left me damaged.

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I had remarried even but I was still damaged and I didn’t know how to get over it. I didn't know that music could be that kind of outlet for me. But I was carrying kind of a little grudge so when I got to Stax I was told that Isaac Hayes and David Porter had been assigned to me but other writers here would be submitting songs for me to listen to also. But when I got here they had not ever met me, had never seen me so they didn't have anything for me. And I stayed at the Lorraine Motel.

I: What was that like?

John: What was that like? It was wonderful. And there again, you know, this whole thing is a story because there's such a story about even the Lorraine Motel and how I happened to get out of there and gave up the room to Dr. King, I gave up the room so he could take that room, he liked that room. I got on the plane and when I got back to Chicago he had been killed.

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Right in front of that same room. So I didn’t have any material with me, didn’t even plan to bring any because I was told Hayes and Porter would have it. Which was alright whether they had it or not. My confidence was in Al Bell. I met with them and they just we sat down like we're talking now and they said I'm thinking they're fixing to play something on the piano thinking Isaac's gonna play and David said Tell me about yourself, I said tell you about myself? I came here to sing I didn’t come here to talk about myself. And I said Don’t you have something for me? He said No we're going to write it. And I said, there's a story that I need to tell. And I don’t even know where that came from because I had never thought of putting my feelings out like that.

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And David said start telling the story and I said Well its about a marriage that I had, and I started telling him the story of how my husband did me as Isaac played and as I was telling the story David was writing some of what I was saying and then turning it around to make it into verses. So it was really a collaboration between all three of us. I felt so relieved because a lady had told me that was a tenant of mine in Detroit, she said I know you’ve been crying and I'm an older woman than you she said you have a lot to learn. She said you're a good lady but you're still a kid, she said now its written on five dollar bill what one man won’t do another one will. She said so you just tell

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If one is not doing what he's suppose’ to do tell him to look out, and then you walk out you don't have to stay there and take that. So all of that became the punch line and everything to Your Good Thing is About to Come to an End. I was so glad to tell that story and I didn't know that my freedom, my liberty was locked into telling that story. And that’s when I learned that music and soul is heart. Its what you feel. Its what’s making you tick. Now what I did not know that a lot of women were going through and had gone through the same thing I had, and I could not tell the story complete in 2 minutes and 30 seconds. So I actually

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finished the story on stage and I do bits and pieces of it all the time. I would have people lined up at the dressing room door when I would finish singing because they wanted to tell me about their bad marriage. I said Oh no no no, I'm not a counselor I said, oh honey I'm just doing a show. But I did not know that the song was freedom for a lot of men and women and that's how that song came about. And because it is me. Its been recorded by a lot of other women. Even Lou Rawls did it. Etta James did it. Bonnie Raitt did it, it went platinum on an album of hers. The song is me because its my heart. And I was able to love again, to believe again, and to be free again telling that story.

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I: So the climate at Stax records in the south, an integrated record label in the South versus Motown records in Detroit, what were the major differences for you?

John: One of the major differences, and it worked for me see Berry worked for me that was Berry, he and I were friends and I was friends with his mother she gave me the first job I ever had in my life as a teenager and didn't even know that she had a son named Berry. And she kept telling me years later that she had a son that was gonna be rich one day because he was gonna be such a great song writer and I had no idea she was talking about Berry. And I would go in there and I worked with Berry, he played for me, he wrote for me, we would ride along in the car and as I'm driving he's writing, we're talking and he's writing. He and I would write things together.

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And we would sing together, we would travel together. It was great, me and Berry. But now when you start a company it's sometime kind of hard to switch over from you are now the president of the company and I become your artist and you have all of these other artists, you can’t just spend your time with me. I felt that I was crippled without Berry Gordy because everything that I knew from the beginning, my foundation was given to me by Berry Gordy. So he was like hey he was like my music salvation. When I came to Stax there's a whole room of people and everybody is bonding with me. Deanie Parker said I have a song I want you to listen to, she's saying when we get finished tonight come on and go home with me

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and spend the night. We would sit up all night, writing. She and I talking about our men and writing songs on my Stay Out of the Kitchen CD. We wrote the song together You Wanna Have Your Cake and Eat It Too. The B Side of Your Good Thing’s About to Come to An End she wrote called Its Catching. Then we wrote another one because, you know, we had love in our life then, so we wrote Love Tornado. So whatever was happening, Deanie and I could capture it. That was perfect. Then I would be sitting up just talking to Al Bell, we might be having lunch and I would say something and he said write that down, that’s a good song title. So you see what it did, it bridged me to the whole company. Then there was Jim Stewart that would be there engineering, here engineering, and whomever else was an engineer.

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And then there was Dondon and Al Jackson, and Steve Crawford, and Booker T and Isaac Hayes, and David Porter. So when you put all of us together. I had the best of both worlds. I think maybe the first time I've ever voiced it was today, coming here today. I was saying to my daughter Sherry and my son Paul I said you know if I didn’t have the ministry, Memphis is the place I think I would come and live. Because I have so many roots even though I never lived here. Its like its really home to me, musically.

I: I think it’s a place that can really do that to a person even if you're not from here.

John: Stax can do that, let me tell you. Jim Stewart said to me when I walked into the door the first time. He said Mable,

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You will leave here with a hit and if we don’t get it this time you'll come back and we'll get it. And that made me feel comfortable, I'm at home I'm going to have a hit. He said If you come to the studio, we have studio time scheduled for you, if you're in here one day and this is not a good day, we're all in here together but it's just not jelling. He said we'll stop, we’ll go home, you go back to the hotel, you come back tomorrow because we want you relaxed we want you feeling like singing. And of course David Porter, one of these days I'll have to beat him up because he beat me up in studio 8 all the time. If he wanted me to say something louder or with more force he would he hit me in my back because he stood beside me all the time.

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And then sometime when he was ready for me to do an adlib and he wanted me to just say whatever came up in my thinking he would hit me and then he would move the lyrics. Well the band is playing I can’t stop singing to say don’t hit me no more even though I recorded a song called Don’t Hit Me No More but it was written by Joe Tex and that was a story. Everything that I had done was a story.

I: Now Ray Charles…

John: Oh the daddy of all.

I: Brother Ray…

John: Yep, I would have to say that Ray Charles is the best friend I've ever had. And I haven't had to talk about it on camera since he passed. But he took me to a place that probably

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I would've never gone. Because he put the ceiling on where I could and could not do and the way he sealed it was that I could do anything and he made me feel as though I could. And he had me singing music that I thought I would never sing. Its so ironic, and its not too ironic cause my life is a whole story, the Beatles exhibit is here now. I had a chance to meet the Beatles. I recorded several songs of the Beatles with Ray Charles, Look What They’ve Done to My Song, and it became like a standing joke between me and Ray when people would be asking him questions

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or if they turned around and asked me the question and they thought they were really going to get an answer. And I said Ray they tried to pick my brain like it was a chicken bone and he would say And John you're about to go insane. And not only that, it wasn’t only Look What They’ve Done To My Song because we did lines in that song that were in French and he and I established a singing playing rapport, and we didn’t practice this. I talked to him all the while he's on stage, I talked back to him and he would talk to me and then he enjoyed that so much until I don’t know yet how I'm going to get over that part because

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its quite a void. And he use to tell me that I could mess up foreign languages worse than anybody he knew. So when we were recording Look What They’ve Done To My Song and it was time for him to sing his verse in French he started like he was going to go off the other way and I just said to him Say it, say it. And every time that would happen they would not take it off the tape so we established a thing where we were talking aback and playing and it just made the show so easy and working so easy. Of course now it should have been easy to do it an hour show because we rehearsed for 12 and 14 hours a day. Because music, is and was and forever will be Ray Charles. You can’t separate Ray and his music. And I always knew

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two things about him, because he was very vocal to me about it, if we ever get to the place that anyone had to wait on him and take care of him he didn’t want to be here because he could go to a better place. So I knew that that was dangerous ground. I also knew if it ever came a time that he could not stomp around and kick around and play his instruments and record and do all the things he does he wouldn’t want to be here either. Because his whole body, his whole life, his whole makeup is music and if you watch him, when you watch him preform he makes love to his music and he always said that the way I sing and the way I talk songs, cause I always said I'm not singing I'm talking

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He said but the way you do that, you encourage me to do things that maybe I wouldn’t do. So I said well when I see you almost to fall off the piano stool I'm thinking someone need to run over and try to catch you. He said I'll never fall off. But his whole bid, he's kicking his legs, he's moving his arms, he's doing this, he's moving, and everybody that works with him any length of time, because his rhythm is all his own. Because I don’t care who wrote the song, when he takes the song, Johnny Cash could've written it but when Ray Charles sing it, listen to Ring of Fire. When you listen to all of the songs that Mrs. Carter did and we recorded all those songs I was singing country music, I was singing opera, I was singing jazz, everything.

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All of the things that I thought I couldn’t do but every step that I took was a step in the next direction. But it was a step up. Now I've made full circle, I can’t go back to work with Ray Charles, the next time I see him I'll have to be in heaven. But I'm right back at Stax which is where he signed me from.

I: That’s how you met him?

John: No.

I: How did you meet him?

John: No. I met Ray in 1960, I was doing big shows, one-nighters with my brother and he didn’t do all of the one-nighters with us. He worked with us in Atlanta, Georgia he worked with us in Florida but that was BB King. Roy Hamilton, Sam Cooke, Shirley and Lee, the Flamingos, and the list goes on and on, and Jimmy Reed. And I was wearing a perfume

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By Estee Lauder called Youth Dew and it’s a heavy fragrance, its too heavy for anybody small. You know I’m a small frame. The more weight you have on you, you can wear these hefty fragrances, but I loved Youth Dew. So when I first met Ray he said to me Darling what are you wearing? And I said Youth Dew. He said by Estee Ledee? I said Estee Lauder. He said Oh I see. And he didn't say anything else, it was heavy. So years later he teased me about it, where's your Estee Ledee, I said its Estee Lauder and I don’t use it anymore. So it wasn’t what he said it was what he didn’t say. I said you know this fragrance is too heavy for me

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I went shopping and got me some nice pretty soft flowery fragrance. And after that time, whenever I would walk past him he’d say Hmmm. And I knew then he liked that fragrance. But he was a man of all seasons. And he has recorded songs already, already cause you know he's not recording now. He's just playing and having fun. Anything that can ever happen in the world, not just in America, Ray Charles already recorded a song for it. It doesn’t matter what it is, he took America the beautiful and took it to another place. Now I'm on America the Beautiful with him and a lot of the songs I'm on with him. We gave him a song called, my sons and I, Joel and Lynn, gave him a song called I Wish You Were Here Tonight

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and the little kid that did that song is a country singer. Came into my office one day barefooted with his guitar in his hands said I want to play you something. I said Do you have a tape, no I'm going to sing it to you and he sat down and he started playing and singing Wish You Were Here Tonight. And I said Oh, put it on tape and bring it to me. It sounded exactly like something that Ray would sing, now the melody was not like how Ray would sing it.

I: Well he'll take care of that.

John: But I knew he loved simple stories and simple melodies so he would have me looking for songs for him. When I carried the song to him he kept the song six months before he even called me to tell me he had listened to it. One evening in the office he called me he said you know that song you gave me the other day? I said the other day,

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No what did I give you the other day? I think its called Wish You Were Here, I said Oh that was six months ago. He said Oh whatever I listened to it the other day he said I like that song. He said is it yours. I said the young man brought it to me I'll have to get the status on it. I said he's a writer and he might have given it to another publisher. He said call me when its yours, when you have the publishing on it, call me. I said Okay, so I worked with the young man Jim Sullens and got all the paperwork straight. Did the publishing agreement between him and my company, the oldest music company. Then I called Ray and I said I have the paperwork on I Wish You Were Here Tonight. He said good I’m glad you did that.

[44:00]

He said I liked the name- he wanted to name the album I Wish You Were Here Tonight and he was going to make that the title song. And he said I just wanted to be sure it was yours. I said, why what difference does that make whether its mine or not if it’s a good song? He said I told you I would always look out for you, and whenever I would pick songs for him I wouldn’t even tell people that I wanna take them to Ray Charles because I wanted to protect he and my relationship by not having people call him saying Mable John brought me, you a song of mine, are you gonna do it? He didn’t need to be in that. So I would just showcase the songs and whenever I had a deal on the song then I would say Mr. Ray Charles is going to do your song, but I'm the person you have to talk to. And it was a very very good ride. We have 52 songs that we share publishing in.

[45:00]

And that was either written by my sons and myself or was written by all four of us or it might have been written by another writer but published by us.

I: So what are some of your favorite Ray Charles songs?

John: Oh my, I don’t think there's a bad Ray Charles song, but one of the songs that will forever, aside from America the Beautiful. Now America the Beautiful, I'll tell you I can’t even tell you what that song does for me. And there's certain ways he sing it, you see his heart. But one of my favorite things aside from Georgia is I Can’t Stop Loving You.

I: That’s one of my favorites.

John: And it’s the worlds favorite. Now one thing about Ray Charles that I learned

[46:00]

that if you are a Ray Charles fan, you're a die hard Ray Charles fan. And it almost doesn't make any difference what he sings as long as you say its Ray Charles.

I: No, that voice comes on the radio and something happens to you.

John: Oh no one can duplicate it.

I: Unmistakable.

John: No, its like my brother Willy. You know Little Willy John whenever.

I: Yeah the second his voice comes in

John: You know it, you know it! These two men were ahead of their time.

I: Absolutely. You know they're still playing Little Willy John at the clubs filled with young people in New York City today.

John: Wonderful!

I: I was in a club, you know in the pretty hip neighborhood where I lived and I'm sitting there and I'm hanging out with my friends and all of a sudden All Around the World comes on and I said Oh my god. I didn’t know people knew this music anymore

John: I'm trying to get Willy a star on the Hollywood walk of fame because he needs to be there.

I: He needs to be there.

John: Not because he's my brother but because he was just so doggone good.

[47:00]

I: It’s a very tragic, very tragic loss.

John: That’s right, that’s right.

I: I understand that. It must have been awful.

John: It was. It was. It was the first worse thing that ever happened to me, was losing him. But even at that Ray Charles came to my rescue and it was in 19, I met him in 1960 with Willy, when he passed in 1968.

I: And how did Willy pass?

John: He had pneumonia and he actually had a seizure and died in his sleep. But he was in Walla Walla penitentiary at the time. He had been accused of killing a man, Willy weighed 135 pounds wet. With all of his clothes on. He was accused of killing a man that was 200 and some pounds almost 300. And Willy didn't carry a weapon, he didn't carry a knife, he didn't carry a gun, but that’s a whole nother story.

[48:00]

But anyway he was about to be released from Walla Walla and that’s in Washington.

I: Was James Brown a part of trying to get him out?

John: James Brown was helping me. Along with a lot of other close friends of ours, the Atlantic people, Ahmed Ertegun, and why can’t I think of his name, his partner. You can’t remember his name either, well that’s alright.

I: Whose partner?

John: Atlantic Records the two owners.

I: Oh Jerry Wexler.

John: Jerry Wexler! Jerry Wexler and Syd Nathan and the people at Capitol Records. But you know things become kind of political, you know, after a while and you have to realize what's going on

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And I was put into a position where I was kind of asked to back off and I backed off of some things because I was walking into some things that was gonna really turn things upside down and Willy had young children and a wife. And I kind of feared for their safety and I've never really told that story but that’s some kind of story. But when Willy passed one of the first calls I received was from Ray Charles, I was not traveling with him. Didn't even have any desire to travel with him, never would've thought he would wanted me to travel with him. He called me to offer his condolences, that was in 1968 cause Willy passed April 17th, 1968.

[50:00]

And I—May 17th, I’m sorry, and I was here at Stax when he passed, at Otis Redding's house

I: In ‘68?

John: In ‘68. See I had gone with Zelma up to Macon, I had been here recording.

I: Didn’t Otis' plane go down in ‘67?

John: Yes, [unintelligible murmuring from I] but I was still friends with his wife and family. So I got all these world of friends. These wisened children. And when I got the call, and Willy had passed I was here at Stax recording. And then later on that year, at the end of the year Ray Charles called me and approached me about coming to work for him. Well I just knew he had made a mistake, he didn't want me. I could not believe that. And I think all of the years

[51:00]

from 1968 to this year, I said to him its always amazed me that you like my voice. And he said I don’t understand it, I just don’t understand it, you're so unique. He said and we blend together so well and he said I just want us to go in the studio and do something else one more time together. We never got a chance to do that but we have a lot of stuff together. So its alright because he's helping to engineer everything that’s going on in Memphis right now.

I: Well that’s wonderful thank you so much for talking to us.

John: Oh it’s a pleasure.

I: So great to have you.

John: Its always good to be here.

I: What are you going to sing to us tomorrow?

John: Well I'm going to sing a couple of Ray Charles songs if I can get through them.

I: You're going to do I Can't Stop Loving You?

John: I'm going to do I Can't Stop Loving You.

I: I can't wait.

[52:00]

John: And I'm going to do Hallelujah I love Him So. And of course I'm going to do a song that he kept in his desk drawer five years before I came to work with him, Bad Water. And when I walked in his office he pulled it out and played it for me he said I've had this here for five years. I said why didn’t you use it. Well he said I was waiting on who I wanted to record it. He said I want you to do it. And I hadn't even discussed coming to work with him. And the song if it did not go gold, it was pretty close to it maybe 500,000. And he would just pick stuff, like pull it out of the air and say John do this. And I could never tell him I couldn't do it because that was a no no.

[53:00]

You don’t say I can’t do this. You say show me how. When you say show me how, he showed you how. The greatest experience of my life, and all of my experiences have been very good, in music because I've learned from each of them and I remained friends with all of them. And there's not a company that I've ever been with that I couldn’t be with if I wanted to today. And that’s not just because of me its because of us, its not me its all of us together. And what we committed to the art. And everybody's soul at some point is different but music is a universal language and that’s where all peoples come together. It doesn’t even matter what language is singing the song in.

[54:00]

I: Well thank you so much for coming and doing this. It was so good to have you.

John: Thank you. Its good to be here.

I: Great interview, incredible stories about Ray and Willy John I can’t even believe it. Its unbelievable.

John: Oh they were two rascals. You could turn the table all night.

[END]