



Shore Sounds, by Ronny Day. The Atlanticville. June 28, 1990

I first heard Billy Preston's music in the third grade, or maybe I was in the fourth or fifth, but regardless it was in the early '70s when I was at Frank Antonides School. I had one of those little AM transistor radios, the kind that lost the station you were listening to if it was turned the wrong way or swung around or hung on the handlebars of a bicycle. Mine was square and red with a red vinyl wrist strap and on it was where I first heard Billy Preston's great AM hits like "World Go Round in Circles (sic)," "Nuthin' From Nuthin' Leaves Nuthin (sic)" and "Outta Space (sic)." Later I saw him on TV, it might have been on Mike Douglas, playing one of his hits. He had this funny, shuffling kind of dance he did while he played his keyboards which caused his huge Afro, the grandest I have ever seen, to bob up and down to the music.

I didn't know it then, but Preston's musical career had begun about a decade and a half earlier as a child prodigy playing with great entertainers like Little Richard. Throughout the 50's and 60's he played with others like Nat "King" Cole, the Rolling Stones, and the Beatles. He played on the Beatles' "Let it Be" album, earning the nickname "The Fifth Beatle."

Unfortunately, my youthful ignorance of Preston's career stayed with me into the 90's. Up until a few weeks ago, I was unaware that Preston was still playing. He has recently toured with Ringo Starr and recorded with Lee Atwater, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Isaac Hayes. I knew none of this when I walked into the Green Parrot (Route 33, Neptune) to see Preston perform a few weeks ago.

Sitting at the bar was the only person who could have been Preston even though there was no beard, platform shoes, bell-bottoms or grand Afro. It must have been the rhinestone encrusted leather jacket. Maybe it was him sitting in the middle of a group of sharply dressed black men with the one white guy in a business suit (the tour manager). Maybe it was when the band finally began he was playing keyboard and singing. I was still confused after the music started because it was quickly plain that the Billy Preston that I knew from a few AM songs and a TV spot was only part of the great entertainer that I was now witnessing on stage. As I was getting blown away but the guy's performance I was realizing there is much more to Preston than his few hits. I was in fact watching one of the best performers I had ever seen on stage. Preston can sing, dance, play keyboards, joke and do it all while sending the crowd a signal that everyone was there to forget their troubles and party. He played his hits, danced in the crowd, he sang a few cover songs, and he managed to get almost everybody in the club dancing. And although there were only about 30 people in the club, Preston gave us his all.

He was there to have fun and he was going to make sure we did too. He even donned a pair of dark sunglasses and gave his Ray Charles impersonation on a gorgeous version of "Georgia." It wasn't like he had the crowd "eating out of the palm of his hand" because there was too much rapport between him and the audience, he didn't rule the crowd. It was more like he could do nothing wrong once he got started. Everyone there it seemed loved him and his music. After the show, and Preston had walked through the crowd shaking hands, everyone in the club was sort of standing around, smiling and laughing. The man had blown the crowd away.

Maybe soon some more of the musicians who played hits on my little red radio will perform in small clubs like the Green Parrot so other people my age and older can get to see if they still have it, or if they ever really did. A lot of my peers don't go to clubs anymore and some of them say it's because the entertainment just is not there. It is true that performers like Preston are extremely rare and I really have not seen anyone play like him. I doubt that my peers anyway will begin going out to clubs if some of the older performers come around, so I'll hope that the younger people who want to be musicians get to see a performer like Preston play so they will have an idea of what an "entertainer" really is.





