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In Billy's Band

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The tragedy of the extraordinary musician Billy Preston has less to do with the familiar story of racism in rock and roll than with the Black church and the closet.



Ron Howard/Popperfoto/Getty Images

Billy Preston, London, circa 1970

Reviewed:

Billy Preston: That's the Way God Planned It
a film directed by Paris Barclay

Among the many astonishing moments in *Get Back*—the 2021 documentary that Peter Jackson made from rehearsal footage of the Beatles in January 1969, bickering like siblings as they created some of the songs that would find immortality on the albums *Let It Be* and *Abbey Road*—one of the most magical involves the underappreciated musician Billy Preston. After a few years of studio wizardry, during which the increasingly estranged band members sometimes laid down separate tracks at separate times, the Beatles had decided to try to recapture some of the fun of their early days by recording together in person. That meant, however, that there was no one left to play the

Fender Rhodes, an electric piano that came on the market in 1965 and was a new toy in their studio—and they wanted its sound on the recordings. “We need somebody else,” John Lennon says in the film, “a guy who plays piano all the time.”

The next day Preston—in London while touring with Ray Charles—drops by the studio, invited by George Harrison to say hello. When Lennon asks Preston to sit in on the Rhodes, he coolly agrees. Then his delight and disbelief escape in a giggle. The Beatles are working on the gospel-rock song “I’ve Got a Feeling,” and after Paul McCartney sings the title phrase, Preston answers on the Rhodes like a church organist affirming a preacher. Sliding up to a chord the way a guitarist bends a note, he blurs major and minor, entering the emotional in-between zone of the blues. The Rhodes’s pinched electric cry brings out the ache within the song’s rapture, and the light-fingered riff that Preston plays next ties the chord into the song’s marching momentum. McCartney’s eyes go wide.

“You’re in the group,” Lennon says, and over the coming days Preston records several songs with them. Similar small but perfect adjustments spill from his fingers with native fluency: a blues walkdown in “Get Back,” a concluding solo on “Don’t Let Me Down” that responds to the song’s desperate pleas with waltz-like reassurance. Even more remarkable than the music is Preston’s effect on the Beatles. Instead of squabbling, they’re laughing, quoting their old songs, telling stories from the early days in Hamburg in 1962, when they were the scruffy opening act for one of their heroes, Little Richard, and Preston, then sixteen, was playing organ in Little Richard’s band. Lennon now suggests bringing him on as “a fifth Beatle.”

In *Get Back* you can see how easily Preston finds a place for himself in the music. But you can also see that he isn’t a part of the band’s banter, the funny voices, the inside jokes and coded references, much less the fraught love language between Lennon and McCartney (a bond illuminated as never before in Ian Leslie’s recent book *John & Paul: A Love Story in Songs*). Still, as Lennon remarks, Preston has given them “a lift”—all the way to the top of the building, where he joins the band for the rooftop concert that will turn out to be their last live performance together. Later, when the Beatles released the single “Get Back,” they credited “The Beatles with Billy Preston,” a co-billing they gave to no other musician. *Get Back*’s nearly eight hours of evidence leave the impression that the credit honors a larger contribution—that if Preston had not shown up at the studio that day, we might not have *Let It Be* or *Abbey Road* at all.

When footage of Preston recording with the Beatles appears in Paris Barclay’s new documentary, *Billy Preston: That’s the Way God Planned It*, it demonstrates something different, and larger, than Preston’s connection to the world’s most famous band. As the drummer Bill Maxwell explains in the film, “Billy didn’t just have perfect pitch, he

had



David Hume Kennerly/Getty Images

Billy Preston and George Harrison at the Capital Centre, Landover, Maryland, December 1974

perfect anticipation.” It didn’t matter if Preston had never heard a song before; he could immediately play along. This skill helped turn him into what Barclay has described as a Zelig figure in pop music history. He played with Mahalia Jackson and Sly Stone, Aretha Franklin and The Band. After recording with the Beatles he recorded with the Rolling Stones, a double coup that made him a sideman at the center of the cross-Atlantic, cross-racial exchange of rock and roll.

But Preston, who died in 2006, was also a child prodigy and a solo artist with his own hits, including “That’s the Way God Planned It,” the 1969 song that gives the documentary its title. Ray Charles once introduced him as the young man he wanted to carry on the work he started, and that’s what Preston did. Along with Stone, he pushed

Charles's gospel-derived rhythm and blues into a kind of funk that could cohabitate with flower-power pop-rock. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, he had flamed out in addiction and jail time. *That's the Way God Planned It* tries to explain why. Its answers have to do less with the familiar story of racism in rock than with the Black church and the closet—what one old friend of Preston's calls the “things that he held in.”

Born in 1946, Preston was raised in the church. His mother played piano for a Los Angeles congregation, and he was accompanying choirs and preachers on piano and organ by the time he was six. An early mentor was James Cleveland, the so-called King of Gospel who invented its modern big-choir sound. (You can see Cleveland at full force with another of his protégées, Aretha Franklin, in the miraculous film of her 1972 return to gospel, *Amazing Grace*.) Preston entered show business early, too. At eleven, he portrayed the young W.C. Handy in the 1958 biopic *St. Louis Blues*. Nat King Cole, who played the adult Handy, invited Preston onto his TV show—the first national program to have a Black host. After Preston played his own composition, “Billie's Boogie,” grinning proudly at the camera, the two performed “Blueberry Hill” together, trading off on organ and vocals like peers or maybe father and son. “I know that you have a very excellent career ahead of you,” Cole told the boy, publicly anointing him.

By the time Preston met Little Richard, the holy roller who had helped establish the rapturous sound of rock and roll with songs like “Long Tall Sally” had renounced secular music. He hired the teenaged Preston as the organist for a gospel tour in Europe in 1962. But when Richard heard the contrast between the silence his gospel songs received and the ecstatic screams induced by the opening act his promoters had hired for him in Britain—the gospel-turned-soul star Sam Cooke—Richard brought back his old songs, and Preston played along, rocking on the organ for what he recalled as the first time.

After the Hamburg leg of the Little Richard tour, Cooke hired Preston to bring some juke-joint organ grease to his after-hours masterpiece *Night Beat* (1963), and Cooke's SAR label released Preston's debut album, *16 Yr. Old Soul* (1963). That album and his next three, including the only slightly hyperbolic *The Most Exciting Organ Ever* (1965), were almost entirely instrumental, but as a member of the house band for the TV variety show *Shindig*, Preston also sang and danced—not smoothly like Jackie Wilson, the “Lonely Teardrops” singer who could fall to his knees with feather softness, but less controlled, like James Brown getting the spirit. It was Preston's impersonation of Ray Charles that prompted Charles to hire him.

After Preston helped the Beatles in the *Get Back* sessions, they returned the favor by signing him to their Apple label. Harrison produced solo albums that presented Preston as a pop star, starting

with *That's the Way God Planned It* (1969). Over the next years Preston released a few chart-topping singles—such as “Nothing from Nothing,” a bouncy song with honky tonk piano that he performed on the first episode of *Saturday Night Live* in 1975—and wrote “You Are So Beautiful,” the 1974 song that gave Joe Cocker one of his most enduring hits. In Preston’s original version, on his album *The Kids & Me*, the backing of gospel piano, voices, and strings is combined with a synthesizer like those heard on Stevie

Wonder tracks from the same era. Developing that forward-searching sound while alluding to God and Black Pride, Preston’s Seventies albums fit alongside what artists like Wonder, Stone, and Marvin Gaye were doing then. Preston even contributed the title song to a Blaxploitation film, *Slaughter* (1972).

At the same time, he was contributing to solo projects by Harrison, Lennon, and Ringo Starr, and joining the Rolling Stones on a run of albums including *Sticky Fingers* (1971) and *Exile on Main Street* (1972). The bass line on the Stones’ 1978 disco riff “Miss You” was Preston’s idea. Unlike B.B. King, Chuck Berry, or Ike and Tina Turner—Black heroes who were segregated into the supporting-act slot when they appeared with the Stones—Preston performed as a member of the band who was occasionally allowed to play his own songs, among them the futuristically funky “Outa-Space,” with the Stones backing *him*. He wore a gigantic Afro wig that he liked, he said, because when he took it off, he “could just be a regular guy.”

Fitting in offstage was perilous. Preston developed addictions to Courvoisier, cocaine, and, eventually, crack, and it couldn’t have helped his mental stability when he discovered his girlfriend, the model Kathy Silva, in bed with his friend and collaborator Sly Stone, who married Silva at Madison Square Garden not long after. Over the next few decades, Preston slipped down a slide of self-destruction. In 1991, while on probation for a drunk-driving conviction, he was arrested for sexually assaulting a sixteen-year-old boy. That charge was dropped in a plea deal and his sentence was reduced to a term at a rehab facility, but he was later sent to jail for violating his parole and for insurance fraud after he set fire to his home.

After years in and out of rehab, he finally succumbed to kidney disease and pericarditis. But before that, friends tried to save him. In the early 2000s Eric Clapton vouched for him in a sobriety program so that he



CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images

Billy Preston dancing on *The Ed Sullivan Show* while Ray Charles plays piano behind him, New York City, December 1967

could join Clapton's band on tour. Decades earlier the guitar god had played on Preston's albums and Preston had played on his. In the documentary, Clapton says that Preston was "the most important person on just about every track," able to make a great band sound even greater, to guide without stealing the spotlight. "I was in Billy's band," he says.

What did Preston hold in? David Ritz, the coauthor of autobiographies of Ray Charles, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, and many others, says in Barclay's documentary that he couldn't get far with Preston—even after years of friendship, it was difficult to draw him out. But Barclay coaxed some interview subjects into discussing, uncomfortably, awkwardly, what Keith Richards had revealed in his 2010 memoir: Preston was queer. They mention the "nephews" and "cousins" he would bring on tour, but also that "you wouldn't know he was gay."

"Nephews" and "cousins" were standard euphemisms in the closeted world of the Black church. Another was "the children," a term of somewhat condescending affection for the many queer people—stereotypically the boy playing organ or the choir director—who found a confusing mix of solace, strength, and self-hatred in a church that condemned their sexuality. In the words of the gospel historian Anthony Heilbut (who doesn't appear in Barclay's film): "Without lesbians and gay men there could be no gospel music."

In Ritz's biography of Franklin, published eight years after Preston's death, he quotes Preston addressing the topic with rare frankness. "Everyone knew that my mentor, James Cleveland, was gay," Preston said. "In the neighborhood, they made you ashamed of being gay, but in the church you were almost proud to be part of the gay elite of musicians. Along with the preachers, we were the people who kept the church going.... God is in the grooves." It's now commonly recognized that much of Little Richard's sound and showmanship derived from the gender-fluid aesthetic of gospel, like the high-pitched "whoo!" he cribbed from the gospel queen Marion Williams and claimed to have taught to McCartney in Hamburg.

Barclay's film doesn't delve much into that history, but it does dwell on a secret beneath the secret, first revealed in a 2010 BBC Radio 4 documentary: that Preston was "taken advantage of" or "touched," more than once, as a child touring with his mother. "No one knew what had transpired except us inner circle family people," the singer Merry Clayton says in the film over photos of Preston in the innocence of youth. "He'd have that smile, but his heart would be broken."

His last manager, Joyce Moore, tells of how he finally admitted he was gay during a rehab group therapy session in late 2005. It was the first time, she says, that he had spoken those words to strangers. "I knew

then that he was never going to have to look over his shoulder again,” she recalls. Four days later he fell into a coma from which he never awoke.

The appearance in the film of Clayton—best known for wailing “Rape! Murder!” on the Stones’ “Gimme Shelter”—might suggest a point of view like that of *20 Feet from Stardom* (2013), the documentary about her and other stellar backup singers, or *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* (2002), which gave faces and names to the musicians in the record label’s invaluable house band: a widening of the lens to include more than just the stars. And Preston’s connection to Little Richard might have helped the film bring up the issue of misplaced credit, much as Richard sometimes did when he justifiably reclaimed recognition as one of the true architects and originators of rock and roll.

But while *That’s the Way God Planned It* makes a few feints in those directions, the questions about credit are aimed less at the Beatles and the Stones than at Sly Stone. Sly stole Billy’s funk, Ritz says. Well, maybe, in a limited way. The two musicians were collaborating as early as the mid-Sixties, and Preston played on Stone’s “There’s a Riot Goin’ On.” Despite Preston’s sunny spirit, he wasn’t really a natural front man. He was more at home behind the keyboard, and his showmanship was musical: on YouTube, you can find videos of him on a Hammond B-3, expressing a fiery sermon or a two-part Bach invention, dancing all over the keys and the foot pedals at once. None of his immensely enjoyable albums have the paradigm-shifting creativity of those by Stone or the Beatles—or even other top session musicians, like Isaac Hayes, who were beginning to put out their own music at the same time.

The chameleon who could play along with everyone was also a cypher. He often wrote lyrics about an absence: a song that “ain’t got no melody,” a dance that “ain’t got no steps,” the Lear-like phrase “nothin’ from nothin’ leaves nothin’.” Something is always shrouded. Where Ray Charles famously took the sex in the blues strand of gospel’s DNA and made it explicit—refitting “It Must Be Jesus” as “I Got a Woman”—Preston made the sexual charge tacit again.

The most persuasive argument of Barclay’s film is that most of the songs Preston wrote were praise songs—not just the obvious ones, like that title number or “With You I’m Born Again,” his hit duet with Syreeta Wright. For Preston, music and the search for love were inextricably wound up with faith. To the end he called himself a servant of God, an instrument for the Lord.

“The black church is about truth-telling,” he told Ritz. “Ain’t no shame in crying in church. Ain’t no shame in moaning low and shouting high.” That truth-telling had clear limits but also clear avenues of expression. Heilbut once explained why closeted queer people might

be



Lawrence Movera/White Horse Pictures
Billy Preston and Sly Stone, 1976

attracted to gospel over secular songs: “Why sing disingenuously about one kind of emotion—sexual love—when all the others were yours to intimate, convey, and command?”

Who is the “you” in “You Are So Beautiful”? Sam Moore of Sam and Dave recalled telling Preston how useful the song was for picking up women, only to have Preston inform him that he had composed it in honor of his mother. The version most people know is Cocker’s. Barclay shows footage from the 1985 TV special “Motown Returns to the Apollo,” in which Cocker, accompanied by Preston at the piano, begins the song in his characteristic vulnerable growl, his version of blue-eyed soul. But Cocker is soon joined by Patti LaBelle in a plume helmet hairdo. Her voice leaps into the “whoo”s that Little Richard

took from Marion Williams. She dances and shakes and brings the song back to church. When she kisses Preston on the cheek, he smiles. God is in the grooves, and however much LaBelle gestures at Cocker, her “you” is the Lord. It could also be Preston.

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