

Al Green is one of the few men left who can tell the rollercoaster story of 1970s soul as it really was... the women, the drugs, the daily birthday cakes. On the eve of his British tour the newly appointed Bishop of the Full Gospel Tabernacle confesses all to Adam Higginbotham

SOUL SURVIVOR

PORTRAIT BY JEFF REIDEL

The bishop, at 59, sits at his desk and mutters to himself. Once again, he seems almost to have forgotten what we were talking about. 'I think...' he begins, and tinkers with the stereo equipment beside him, '...maybe, no, let's just go back... to the CD... how do I change the CD?'

Behind him hangs a large sepia-tinted portrait of him taken more than 30 years ago, when, as simply Al Green, he became a star: in it a giant gold cross falls across his chest, naked beneath a white suit jacket. The walls of the office are crowded with gold records and awards; here a row of Grammys; there a letter from the former First Lady Barbara Bush; over there the certificate making him a Master Mason.

'Uh... uuum...' he continues, to no one in particular. 'To the next one... forward... oh... the CD itself, to change the CD itself... oh, OK... I don't know how to do that then, on this new machine...'

In front of him on the desk sit three hardback copies of his autobiography. On his left wrist he wears two watches – one showing the time in Los Angeles, the other the hour here in Memphis. (The third – for New York – he decided not to wear today: 'I thought it was too much,' he explains.) Around his neck he wears three gold chains, and a fourth bearing a Star of David with a diamond in the centre.

Suddenly, he twists a volume knob and music explodes into the room: it's *One Nite Stand*, a song about playing shows and getting girls he recorded in 1974. 'Yeah!' shouts Bishop Al Green, popping his fingers as

the 28-year-old Al on the record begins to sing – 'Right!' he cries, 'Yeah – that's it!' and 'That's the idea!'

And a few minutes later the bishop – just last week elevated from reverend – plays the song once more, clapping along, winking at me over the risqué words and smiling a blinding smile. His eyes closed with joy, he looks ecstatic – transported by his own music. 'If you could be a reverend,' he hoots exultantly, 'wouldn't you want to be a reverend who could sing songs like this?'

It's now nearly 35 years since Al Green and the producer Willie Mitchell recorded 'Tired of Being Alone' – the song that made Green an international star, launching his career as the stack-heeled Lothario with an achingly beautiful voice whose series of legendary early-1970s albums made him a millionaire and defined romance for a generation; and it's more than 25 years since he gave it all up for the Lord.

In 1976, after recording a string of albums with Mitchell that sold more than 35 million copies worldwide, Green was ordained a minister in Tennessee and bought his own church, the Full Gospel Tabernacle, on the outskirts of Memphis, where he began holding regular Sunday services. In 1979, after a near-fatal fall from a stage in Cincinnati, he announced his intention to withdraw entirely from secular performance. He became an increasingly remote figure, devoting a decade to recording purely gospel material: 'It would be best if the people not wait for me to sing rock 'n' roll again,' he said. In the 1990s his live shows were



Al Green at his office in Memphis, Tennessee

rare and unpredictable, as likely to feature renditions of scripture as they were of perfunctory – if spellbinding – medleys of his old hits.

Eventually, he relaxed his gospel-only approach to recording, but the results – attempts to update his sound for modern R&B listeners – were incongruous and unsuccessful. By the mid-1990s one of the greatest soul singers of all time was left without a record deal, his appearances at the Full Gospel Tabernacle every Sunday regarded as a must-see attraction for adventurous tourists.

But in 2003, Green was reunited with Willie Mitchell to make their first secular album together since 1976. Using the same studio, many of

Green's autobiography, *Take Me to the River* (2000), goes into great detail about his life. It describes his upbringing as the sixth of ten children in a dirt-poor sharecropping family in the tiny village of Jacknash, Arkansas, and his singing in the gospel group his father started, the Greene Brothers. It follows his months fronting a soul act called the Creations and the penniless weeks he spent touring bars and fleapits playing their one and only hit single, *Back Up Train*; it describes the two years he spent living with his girlfriend, a prostitute named Juanita, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, before he finally met Willie Mitchell, playing a show at a roadhouse in Midland, Texas in 1969.



“When my father came on tour he says, “Al, don’t get carried away. It’s cakes and ice-cream today – but it could be rocks and salt. And maybe one girl, not eight””



the same musicians – even the same microphone – with which they recorded 34 years ago, they made *I Can't Stop*, a remarkable return to the sound of the bewitching glory days of Al Green. This year, they completed a second – *Everything's OK* – and are currently working on a third.

‘Myself and Al have a formula that’s hard to get to,’ Mitchell tells me. ‘Something musical that happens between us. You can tell – if you hear an Al Green record, as soon as you hear it come on you know it’s *the* Al Green.’

Talking to Al Green is infamously difficult. When I first meet him he welcomes me into his office at Al Green Music, a small, white building behind the Full Gospel Tabernacle Church; he is energetic and effusive, has an infectious, dazzling smile and a loud, manic laugh he uses often. But the bishop prefers granting an audience to conducting a conversation: he wraps himself in well-worn anecdotes for protection; delivers rambling and confusing parables filled with arduously detailed conversations with angels; sometimes he simply abruptly changes the subject, or smothers an issue he wants to avoid by bursting into song; gradually, it becomes clear that his laugh is often used as a sign of displeasure. ‘*Hahahahahahahahaha!*’ he howls mirthlessly when I cut into one repetitive monologue to ask more questions, ‘Here I’m giving this guy a million-dollar – 20-million-dollar – story, and he wants to go through some questions! Hahahaha! OK! That’s funny!’

But today Green says he has no idea what’s in his autobiography: ‘Well. The book! Hahahahaha! I haven’t even read the book – haven’t read my own book. They print stuff in the book for people to read so as to be exciting to them. I’m the real person who lived the real life.

And I have to keep moving on. This is 2005, and as far as I’m concerned, I’m working songs for 2006. I’m in 2006.’

Al Green had been hungry for success for a long time before he found it; when he did, it came on with phenomenal speed. In 1972 he spent nine or ten hours a night every day for a week at Willie Mitchell’s Royal Studios in Memphis trying to sing ‘Tired of Being Alone’ the way Willie wanted him to. Only on the seventh night, after breaking down in tears of frustration and swearing he’d never sing again, did he get the sound the producer wanted: ‘Silky on the top, rough on the bottom.’

But it was the perfection of a potent formula, and after that Green – and Mitchell – hit an astonishing commercial roll. It was easy – Green wrote the lyrics to ‘Let’s Stay Together’ in five minutes in the lobby of Royal Studios; the song went to number one and stayed there for nine weeks. By 1973 he had made five million-selling singles, was on his

fourth consecutive hit album in two years and was selling out halls around the world to audiences of screaming fans. He built himself a 21-room mansion on the outskirts of Memphis, surrounded by an electric fence and with land to graze cattle; 31 August 1973 was designated Al Green Day; he was handed the keys to Memphis by the mayor and, from the back seat of his chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce, led a police-escorted motorcade through downtown.

And out on the road, there were excesses to match: ‘Sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll,’ he says now. ‘We had our time for that.’ He tried cocaine a few times, he says, but didn’t like it: ‘No thank-you; you just roll me a nice joint,’ he says, ‘I go onstage and do my thing.’ Besides, champagne and girls were more his poison. Women followed him from town to town, and he slept with more than he can remember: ‘Two or three girls come, and then there’s three or four more, and you find this suite and you’re playing this music and you’re burning your coconut incense and all...’ There was



a party every night. One promoter insisted on literally that – balloons, streamers and cake with candles after each show. ‘Every night,’ he says, ‘for 40 days. It was a kind of a fantasy land. A *fantasy*. It wasn’t real.’ In 1973 Green’s father came on tour; one day his son took him aside to ask his opinion of what he saw. ‘He says, “Al, Don’t get carried away. If you stay out here long enough, you’ll find that people have a very short attention span. It’s cake and ice-cream today – but it could be rocks and salt tomorrow. That’s the way life is: every day ain’t cake and ice-cream and parties.”’

And Green senior had one more, tentative, observation to share. ‘Al,’ he said, as his son was leaving the room, ‘another thing: maybe... one girl? Instead of eight?’

In late summer 1973 Al Green played two shows on the same night, in two different cities hundreds of miles apart: the first, at the Cow Palace in San Francisco; the second at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. By the time he checked into the Disneyland hotel, he was utterly exhausted and went straight to bed. He was woken at 4.30am by the sound of shouting; it took him a while to realise it was his own voice he could hear. He was speaking in tongues, praising the Lord, and he couldn’t stop: he went to the bathroom and stuffed towels into his mouth to avoid waking people up.

But it was too late by then: the corridor outside was filling with people; he held out his hands and feet so that they could see how clean and new

they seemed. His father knew what had happened. ‘This boy,’ he said, ‘has been born again.’ ‘I was washed clean,’ Green says. ‘A hand came and washed the slate all the way clean. And after that I was told, “Be careful what you write on the slate, because I’ve cleaned it. Whatsoever you write, that’ll stand.”’

When he got back to Memphis, Al went to Willie Mitchell’s house and told him about his religious conversion: ‘I don’t know anything about gospel,’ the producer warned him; Green carried on working – and partying – as before. That summer, the local paper the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported that 208 women from the city had



Al Green, from left, in Britain in the early 1970s; as a member of the Greene Brothers; reunited with his producer Willie Mitchell in 2003; and preaching at his Full Gospel Tabernacle in Memphis in the late 1970s

responded to rumours about Green’s plans to marry with a petition imploring him not to wed. ‘Don’t worry, girls,’ he told them. ‘I’m not anywhere near getting married.’ As a matter of fact, I don’t even have a steady girlfriend.’

On the night of 18 October 1974 Green and Mitchell were working on a new song together at Royal Studios. Al brought two girls along: Mary Woodson and Carlotta Williams, a Delta Airlines stewardess. Green had been seeing Mary on and off for almost a year, but Willie had never met her before; he remembers her because she was drunk – or something – and fell across the mixing desk, upsetting his levels. At the end of the session, Al took both women home with him.

There is confusion about what happened next – police reports record contradictory statements and apparently strange time lapses. But in his book Green says that, back at the house, Mary raised the subject of marriage and that he didn’t want to talk about it. When he retired to the bathroom to get ready for bed, she appeared in the doorway with a boiling pan of grits and hurled them at him. On his naked back and arms, Green sustained second-degree burns. Mary ran into a nearby bedroom, and there apparently shot herself in the head with Al’s .38-calibre revolver.

Later that night Willie Mitchell found Green in the emergency room, singing and praying. Willie asked his friend twice if he had murdered the woman; twice he said no. Carlotta Williams and FBI powder tests on his hands confirmed his story. Subsequently, Memphis police discovered that Mary Woodson was married, with four children and a husband back in New Jersey, and had a history of psychiatric problems. She left behind two separate suicide notes. ‘I love you, Al,’ she wrote in one. ‘I’m not mad, just unhappy because I can’t be with you.’

‘It seemed unreal,’ Green tells me. ‘I never knew she was married – I was blinded by the fact that she was just beautiful... it was just so unbelievable. I was angry, though. Because I felt that Mary took the easy way out.’ Today, he’s fond of telling people that he still loves Mary, and that, long before she killed herself, she told him that one day he would become a great preacher. The song Al Green and Willie Mitchell were working on in the studio that night was one of his sweetest recordings, ‘Strong as Death (Sweet as Love)’. ➤



COFFEE CONNOISSEURS
**HOW TO TAKE
 THE TASTE TEST**

Add delicious aroma to your next gathering with a coffee tasting session. A fun exploration of coffee's complex flavours is sure to percolate conversation. Make a pot each of Fair Trade Organic, Rich Italian, Lazy Sunday, Havana Gold, Take It Easy and Decaffé. Take your guests through three tasting steps and guess which is which...

- 1 Smell:** place nose directly over mouth of the cup. Inhale the coffee and evaluate its aroma.
- 2 Slurp:** to properly savour each coffee's unique flavour, it is important to involve your olfactory senses. Slurp the coffee, ensuring it covers your tongue and palate.
- 3 Swish:** move the coffee around in your mouth, experiencing flavours and nuances on different parts of the tongue. Consider the body of each coffee too.

Tasting notes: flavours and aromas – such as chocolate, fruit or flowers – are as varied in coffee as they are in wine. Soil, climate and cultivation methods affect the taste.

- Rich-roast Havana Gold has a

seductive, slightly smoky characteristic and delicious hints of toasted hazelnuts.

- Lazy Sunday, a blend of pure arabica coffees from Africa and Central America, is a smooth, lively, medium-roast coffee with a delicious aroma. You may detect the merest hint of lemons.
- Dark-roast Rich Italian is another blend of top-quality arabicas. It is rich, chocolatey and full-bodied.
- Fair Trade Organic, organically grown in Nicaragua in the shade of indigenous trees, is a medium-roast coffee with a rich, nutty flavour, citrus notes and a tantalising aroma.
- Take It Easy is a medium-roast coffee with only half the caffeine and the slightest hint of caramel.
- Decaffé is a blend of top-quality arabicas from Central America and Brazil with a slightly darker roast. It is rich, smooth with a malty finish. This may fool you. It's the best decaffeinated coffee you'll taste.

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NEXT WEEK: THE PERFECT CUP OF COFFEE

These days, Bishop Al Green says there isn't a single one of the old songs he can't perform – whatever the words are like. God, he explains, came to him and sorted that conflict out: 'Al, I gave you the songs – don't let nobody tell you can't sing your songs. The songs are wonderful. They're about life, about love, about having children. If people are telling you can't sing your songs, ask them how they got here.'

Since he became a pastor, Al Green has been married three times: once in 1977, to a church administrator, who divorced him in 1983 amid allegations of beatings and abuse. 'Then I got married again for seven months, to a Jamaican girl, Clover Dixon,' he says. And although he's married once more since, that, too was more than ten years ago: 'She's a wonderful girl. I blew it.'

There are children, but he won't say how many: 'I have a few children of my own and I love them and I'm glad they're all "A" students. And that's about all I want to say about my personal family, yeah.'

Now, he says, he still lives in the big house he bought back in '71, but he's on his own again: 'A bachelor-orrrr,' he says. He teaches bible study on Wednesday evenings and, more often than not, conducts Sunday services at the Full Gospel Tabernacle. Sometimes the worship will go on for more than four hours at a time.



In performance this year

Today Willie Mitchell is a wiry 77-year-old who has recently been hospitalised with diabetes, walks with the aid of a frame and dyes his trademark pencil moustache an inky blue-black. But he says Al's voice is every bit as magical and incandescent as it was when they cut 'Tired of Being Alone' nearly 35 years ago: 'I'll tell you what,' he says in his salty Tennessee drawl, 'he's the best. Nobody can do what he can do. Nobody. The way he hears things, the way he phrases things. The voice up here or down there. And he can groove you any time he wants to. I mean, he's the boss when he's singing the song – it's his song then.'

Willie isn't all that religious himself. He's seen Al in the pulpit only once – a long time back, when he preached at a funeral. It was funny, he says, seeing him up there. 'He was in the pulpit and I said to myself, Is this real? And when I left the church – all the way home – I was thinking, it was an experience, to see him preaching. A real, real experience. I mean, it didn't go away. Still thinking about it after a couple of weeks... real strange.'

Was he any good at it? I ask. 'I don't know,' Willie says, and thinks carefully about his old friend the bishop before he gives his final answer. 'I... I don't know. I don't know whether he was good or not. I really don't.' ●

Al Green's British tour begins at the Royal Albert Hall on 29 June. For booking details please telephone 0870 444 5556