

It's All Over Now: Remembering Bobby Womack

[This is the original – and very slightly different – version of a piece that appeared in the Observer on 29 June, 2014.]

BOBBY WOMACK is ravenous. He woke late in his Belgravia hotel and is now in a crazed hurry to get to the Oxford Apollo for a show to promote his new album *The Poet II*. He hasn't had time for lunch, let alone breakfast, and the blood-sugar levels are dipping perilously. He asks the limousine driver to pull over in South Kensington, where he loses it with a dopey Sloane Ranger who can't work out how to make the sandwich he wants. "Lady, jes' gimme the meat!" he finally says with much exasperation. Fifteen minutes later, as we head west on the M4, Bobby is spreading various items of food across the back seat of the limo and shoveling them down, to the barely-stifled amusement of his third wife Regina and young son Bobby Truth. To say it's mildly undignified would understate matters, especially from the viewpoint of someone who for a decade has worshipped

Womack as one of soul's great singer-songwriters, and who is additionally delighted by the recent career uplift that's come with *The Poet* (1981) and *The Poet II*.

Having chowed down and brought the sugar levels back up, Bobby almost immediately falls asleep; he spends the rest of the journey in that state. Thirty years later it occurs to me that he might have watched the sun rise with his old mucker Ronnie Wood. "I been doin' this for twenty years now," he tells me on waking; "I'm fuckin' tired of it." Making matters worse, after ninety minutes of sporadic conversation with Mrs. Womack about Los Angeles shopping malls we hit a long tailback on the outskirts of the City of Dreaming Spires and realize that Oxford United are at home for an evening game. Bobby is going to be very, *very* late.

"I felt terrible last night," he tells me the next morning after a show he knew had been poor. "I felt like I was gonna die." And now he *is* dead, having experienced yet another career upswing with 2012's heart-wrenching *The Bravest Man in the Universe*,

masterminded by Damon Albarn and XL's Richard Russell after many years in which Bobby again lost his creative way. On that album's 'Please Forgive My Heart' you heard a lifetime's contrition as he looked back on decades of addiction and loss (including the tragic deaths of two sons and the murder in 1978 of his brother Harry). What you also heard in it, with his tortured gospel baritone fascinatingly framed by futuristic electro keyboards, was the good man inside Bobby struggling to get out. He was nothing if not honest about his faults and flaws. And that was the man I got to know over three days in late September 1984, when the *Poet II* tour climaxed with three exhilarating nights at London's Hammersmith Odeon.

In my time on the road with him – taking in a slightly surreal wander round Warwick Castle – Bobby talked through his whole life and multifarious career. He spoke of the child-star days with his brothers on the gospel highway, and of their mentoring by secularised soul idol Sam Cooke. He spoke painfully of the ugly fallout from his marrying Sam's widow. He talked about playing

guitar on Aretha Franklin sessions and of his deep immersion in the soul of Memphis and Muscle Shoals.

Though he wrote 'I'm a Midnight Mover' for wicked Wilson Pickett, Bobby was himself far less conventionally macho as a Soul Man. He drew many elements into his signature R&B sound, from pop to singer-songwriter ballads to country music. (Predictably 1976's *B.W. Goes C&W* was his worst-selling album, but I like it.) He dug hanging out with Sly Stone, who influenced the coked-out funk of 'Communication', but he also liked cronying with the Stones, who had their second American hit with his song 'It's All Over Now'.

"I wanted to be different from all the Stax cats," he told me on his tour bus. "It was like all of those acts was branded. It was the company that was famous, and I wanted my style to be so unique. I wanted to have a sound that wherever you took it, people would say: 'That's the Womack sound.'"

If Bobby never forged a cohesive enough identity to achieve the fame of Sly or Stevie or Marvin, his greatest songs – 'I Can

Understand It', 'Woman's Gotta Have It', 'That's The Way I Feel About 'Cha', 'I Don't Wanna Be Hurt By Ya Love Again', 'When Love Begins, Friendship Ends', 'Games', 'Love Has Finally Come at Last', 'Please Forgive My Heart' and many more – were the equal of most of theirs.

It *is* all over now. When the *NME* ran my on-the-road epic on October 6th of that year, they called it "The Last Soul Man".

"When Stax fell, that was the end of it," Bobby had said to me.

"And when you look, there's nobody else out there. All those guys is either shootin' up or doin' nothin'. Out of all that music I seem to be the only guy I know who still does the same thing, but in a new world."

Three years later Bobby used the title *The Last Soul Man* himself – ironically for a slick album which wholly lacked the soaring emotional power of the two *Poet* albums. By the time *The Bravest Man in the Universe* came out, "soul" seemed an almost discredited notion in the new world of blingy over-production and rococo vocal mannerisms. Which is probably why the

plaintive, inflamed 'Please Forgive My Heart' pissed all over the R&B competition that year. Wouldn't it be nice if Bobby's posthumous *Best Is Yet To Come* album featured something equally devastating?

Of course we forgave Bobby's big troubled heart when it finally gave out on Friday. We forgave him because he sang so honestly and nakedly of the pain and the pitfalls of being loving, losing humans. That's the way we feel about 'cha, Bobby Womack.

Now rest in the peace you never found in life.