

**Bill Withers Comes Back Into The Spotlight for Carnegie Hall Tribute
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Is there a happier refugee from the music business than singer-songwriter Bill Withers? The ex-Navy aircraft mechanic from dirt-poor Slab Fork, West Virginia, who got his first record contract in his thirties, was never a showbiz kid. He famously distrusted the business, keeping his day job as his first hit single, “Ain’t No Sunshine,” climbed the charts.

Withers went on to write more hits, including the ubiquitous “Lean On Me.” By October 1972, a mere 15 months after he quit his day job, Withers was playing Carnegie Hall, a performance immortalized on the album *Bill Withers Live at Carnegie Hall*. Eventually he got disgusted with the record business, retired in 1985, and has lived contentedly at his home in the Hollywood Hills ever since, collecting a steady stream of royalties and, as he told Stephen Colbert recently, watching “Judge Judy.”

This year has been very good to Withers. In April he was inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame. And on October 1, almost precisely 43 years to the day after his initial Carnegie Hall show, he was the subject of an all-star tribute concert at the same venue, a benefit for the Stuttering Association for Youth, or SAY (Withers stuttered until his mid-twenties). The concert producers, including City Winery’s Michael Dorf, assembled a parade of first-class R&B, pop and jazz talent to perform the Withers songbook, including Gregory Porter, Branford Marsalis, Ed Sheeran, Dr. John, Michael McDonald, Ledisi, and Keb’ Mo’ and others.

One thing Withers does not do in retirement is sing. The last time he did so in public was at his Songwriters Hall of Fame induction in 2005. At Carnegie Hall, there was considerable anticipation about whether he would break his silence. Introduced by producer Michael Dorf before the concert, Withers greeted the crowd and briefly rapped along with a choir made up of SAY children, but left the audience in suspense about whether he would sing.

Keyboardist/bandleader Greg Phillinganes, just coming off his stint as music director for Stevie Wonder's Songs In The Key Of Life tour, led a large orchestra, including a four-person horn section, eight-member string section, and a six-member rhythm section featuring David Letterman veteran Felicia Collins on guitar, Willie Weeks on bass, and Steve Jordan on drums. Although the arrangements were spot-on, the show was, unfortunately, not without sound problems. Carnegie Hall is unsurpassed for acoustic instruments, but on this night, depending on where you sat and the overall volume, booming drums and bass made some vocals hard to hear.

That was a shame because, as a songwriter, Withers has a devastating one-two punch: a knack for telling a story from the point of view of a plainspoken Everyman; and another for writing memorable melodies and funky R&B riffs.

Overall, songs and singers were expertly matched. McDonald's soul crooning was a perfect fit for the gentle groove of "Hello, Like Before" (when you could hear him). R&B powerhouse singer Ledisi, however, had no trouble cutting through on what she described as "the best 'Is you cheating?' song I ever heard," the devastating "Who Is He (And What Is He To You)?" McDonald returned later to sing an impassioned "Lean On Me," backed by the SAY choir.

Dr. John, who gets a standing ovation these days just by showing up, came on stage resplendent in purple suit, shades and a fedora festooned with feathers, to sing "Use Me." For my money, Withers never composed a better song: it's a killer combination of one of the funkier Afro-Latin grooves ever written with an indelible lyric that riffs on a universal theme: how much abuse one person will tolerate if the sex is hot enough. {Note to editor: if you feel this is a little too raw, you can substitute "physical relationship" for "sex."} Dr. John's version doubled down on the funk, with the four-person horn section playing the signature riff. Still, even the good doctor could not surpass Withers' original Carnegie Hall version, in which the audience demanded and received a spontaneous encore.

Probably no one could sing the antiwar gospel anthem, "I Can't Write Left-Handed," better than the folk/blues troubadour Keb' Mo'. One of Withers' best songs, it tells a

Vietnam War story from the perspective of a soldier who has lost his right arm to enemy fire. Like Withers' best songs, it's straightforward, simple and profound. Keb' Mo' delivered the tale with emotional honesty and punctuated it with blistering blues guitar licks.

Porter sang twice, moving the crowd with a poignant duet with Valerie Simpson on the love ballad, "Let Me Be The One You Need." Sheeran offered a simple, superb "Ain't No Sunshine," backed by his guitar and the string section. South African soul star Jonathan Butler sang Stevie-ish licks on the tender "Let Me In Your Life," and two younger singers - Amos Lee ("Grandma's Hands") and Anthony Hamilton ("Better Off Dead") - were warmly received. The young retro R&B singer Aloe Blacc, who seems especially influenced by Withers' easygoing soul, was smashingly effective on the bereft ballad "Hope She'll Be Happier," earning a standing ovation. Later, he returned to perform "Just The Two Of Us," with Marsalis playing the trademark Grover Washington, Jr. tenor solo, and leaving the audience wanting more.

Still the audience wondered, would Withers sing? At the end of the program, the entire cast came out to sing the mid-tempo soul-rocker, "I Wish You Well." As the band hushed, Withers grabbed the mike and began a sly two-step, looking left and right, building suspense about whether he had, at long last, decided to sing. Finally dispensing with the charade, the answer was no, at least not tonight. Instead he spoke, expressing his gratitude: "I'm still amazed that all these young, great artists even know my name." - Allen Morrison