



American Legends: The Life of Otis Redding

Charles River Editors

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“If you want to be a singer, you've got to concentrate on it twenty-four hours a day. You can't be a well driller, too. You've got to concentrate on the business of entertaining and writing songs. Always think different from the next person. Don't ever do a song as you heard somebody else do it.” – Otis Redding

A lot of ink has been spilled covering the lives of history's most influential figures, but how much of the forest is lost for the trees? In Charles River Editors' American Legends series, readers can get caught up to speed on the lives of America's most important men and women in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known.

At a time when the studios of Motown were turning out one sophisticated, well-groomed artist after another, reinforced by the latest studio technology and benefitting from a powerful marketing system, a parallel industry of more traditionally grounded soul music was also thriving, much of it in the city of Memphis, as represented by artists such as Otis Redding and Stax Records, the label with which Redding would eventually create six studio albums, 30 singles, worldwide fame and a stellar musical legacy.

To some, the Stax Records model may have lagged behind Motown in terms of modernity, with its adherence to older musical and technological modes, but in actuality, Otis Redding and his musical circle represented a preservation movement of sorts, and “exemplified to many listeners the power of Southern ‘deep soul’ – hoarse, gritty vocals, brassy arrangements, and an emotional way with both party tunes and aching ballads.” Such was the perfect conduit for an artist like Otis Redding, who felt compelled by the lifelong urge to sing, years before his dreams of a professional life would ever be realized. And, as the edifice of soul broke further into sub-styles, Redding seemed able to succeed in every one of them.

Once reaching the stage, and becoming increasingly known to the genre's growing public, Redding appeared throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and the Caribbean, standing “among the biggest box office smashes of any touring performer during his time.” As a live performer and recording artist, Redding developed into a master producer, arranger and talent scout as well for pop, soul and R&B and, in time, came to exert a greater control over his own destiny by heading up his own recording studio, Jotis Records, and his own publishing company, Redwal Music. The publishing wing, over a brief period, gained the rights to over 200 commercially distributed songs, some of which would later sell copies numbering in the millions.

The tragic timing of his death robbed Redding of the chance to parlay his success to the next level, but in retrospect, later audiences have not experienced him as either behind the times or inordinately modern. In “I've Been Loving You Too Long,” Redding defines and redefines the term “soul man,” and he is widely regarded by the 21st century as a “singer of such commanding stature that...he embodies the essence of soul music in its purest form.” What was so original and untested in the beginning for the wider audience now occupied a place within its mainstream interests as the new soul forms became more clearly understood. Through his most popular effort, “(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay,” and by a later review of his entire body of work, Redding is also regarded as one of the premier songwriters and arrangers of his era. In both areas, he had “an enormous talent, [not to mention] a hard-working nature and generous disposition.”

American Legends: The Life of Otis Redding looks at the life and career of one of America's most influential musicians. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about Otis Redding like never before, in no time at all.

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