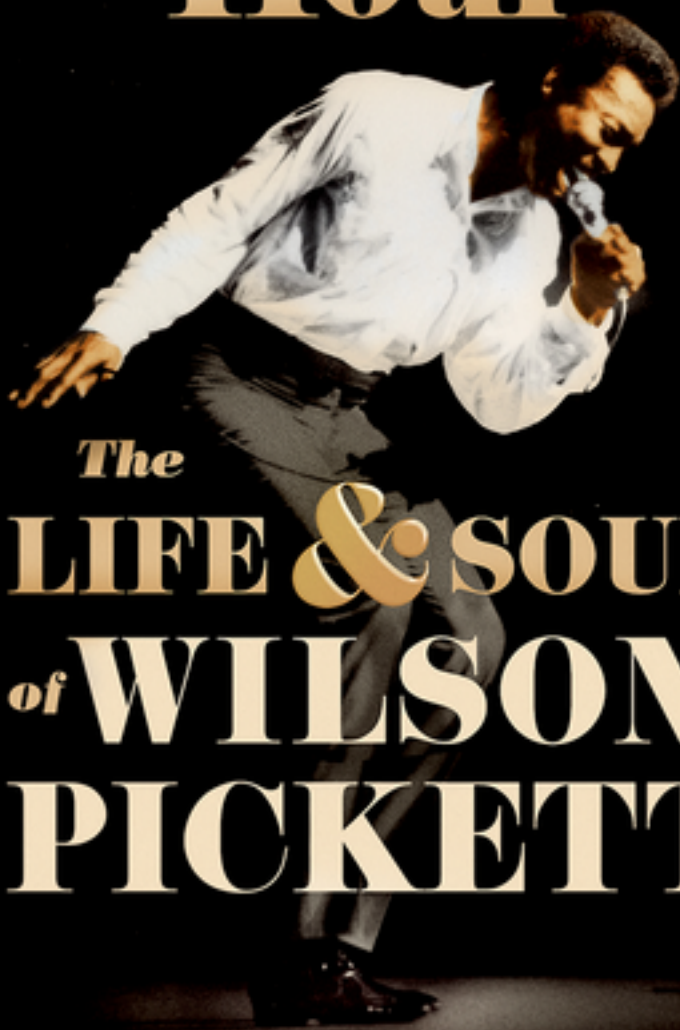


*In the*  
**Midnight  
Hour**



*The*  
**LIFE & SOUL**  
*of* **WILSON**  
**PICKETT**

**TONY FLETCHER**

In the Midnight Hour



# IN THE MIDNIGHT HOUR

*The Life & Soul of Wilson Pickett*

Tony Fletcher

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To Holly George-Warren,  
For ensuring this book is in your hands,  
And to the Catskill 45s  
For being soul brothers and sister.



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## PREFACE

He was the Wicked Wilson Pickett, the Midnight Mover, the Man and a Half. He was the soul man behind an incomparable series of classics that spanned the breadth of the 1960s and early 1970s: “In the Midnight Hour,” “634-5789,” “Land of 1000 Dances,” “Mustang Sally,” “Funky Broadway,” “I’m in Love,” “Engine Number 9,” and “Don’t Let the Green Grass Fool You,” to name just a few of his forty-five hits. He was impossibly handsome (“You end up loving him,” said one of the many female associates who did just that), a shamanistic stage presence whose thunderous live performances were given to repeated stage invasions by men and women of all colors, eager to bask—and dance—in his radiance. In an era graced by so many epic voices, each with their own distinct personalities, Wilson Pickett was in many considered opinions the greatest, the most visceral and sensual—and as a man who turned screaming into an art form, surely the most forceful. He served as the very embodiment of soul music.

Fifty years on, his longevity is evident. Somewhere right now, a Wilson Pickett song is playing on the radio. Somewhere right now, a band is playing a Wilson Pickett song on stage. Indeed, so ubiquitous is his music that it can be difficult to date one’s introduction to it. For my part, I believe it was at the end of 1977 when, aged thirteen, I heard British punk-mod band The Jam covering “In the Midnight Hour”—at such breakneck speed that they shaved fifty seconds off a song that was only one hundred and sixty seconds long to begin with! Similar contemporary interpretations of classic soul songs soon had me searching out the originals, and by my mid-teens, I was among the thousands of Londoners jumping around at house parties every weekend to Pickett’s immortal “Land of 1000 Dances,” a song equally dominant on the live scene at the time.

Still, while writing and researching this book I was frequently asked *Why Wilson Pickett?*—as if a white Englishman born the same year the twenty-three-year-old Pickett signed to Atlantic Records, a writer generally known for his coverage of rock music, would or could have no cultural

connection to a black soul singer from the cotton fields of Alabama. The short answer, as confirmed by the punk originators and mod revivalists of my own youth, is that a love of American soul music runs deep through British veins, even among those who were too young to enjoy it the first time around. The longer answer includes my emigration to the United States in the late 1980s, and an ongoing immersion in a music I believe to be one of America's most important contributions to global popular culture. That immersion has included copious reading, the collecting of box sets and scratchy old 45s alike, and making the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis a compulsory stop on our family's cross-American road trip in 2012.

Several months after that trip, listening to Pickett's music, it suddenly occurred to me I had never come across a biography of the man, and I sought to understand why, especially as my shelves contained so many books on his peers. Perhaps his story was simply not that interesting? cursory research immediately indicated otherwise: his tale might lack the alluring drama of a premature death, such as befell his great influence Sam Cooke, his good friend Otis Redding, and his fellow emigrant to Detroit Marvin Gaye, but from a purely rags-to-riches perspective Pickett's story quickly reveals itself as having all the hallmarks of great fiction, with even his cruel decline meeting some blessed redemption toward the end.

Yet it is from a more historical viewpoint that Wilson Pickett's story proves *truly* remarkable, for it turns out that he was not just at the vanguard of his generation; Wilson Pickett effectively *was* the vanguard. Joining the Great Migration of blacks out of the rural south, he settled in Detroit as a teen in the mid-fifties, where he experienced the waning years of the Gospel Highway with the Violinaires, and witnessed the birth of Motown while in R&B vocal group the Falcons, scoring big with his prototype soul anthem "I Found a Love." Striking out solo and moving to New York City, he hit the charts on a label run by rock 'n' roll pioneer Lloyd Price, before embarking on a tempestuous but highly productive relationship with legendary Atlantic Records soul man Jerry Wexler. Pickett became the first Atlantic singer to record at both Stax in Memphis *and* Fame in Muscle Shoals, the label's first male singer to work with Gamble and Huff at Sigma in Philadelphia. Along the way, he turned "Hey Jude" *and* "Sugar Sugar" into soul songs, rehabilitated an exiled Bobby Womack, and introduced Duane Allman to the world. He was the first to take the word "funk" into the charts, the first to headline a black American music package in Africa. He achieved all of this before his thirtieth birthday. Even in the manner by which he reluctantly—and embarrassingly—jumped on the disco bandwagon, he served as a weather vane for his generation of

gospel-raised shouters left directionless as soul softened throughout the 1970s. His journey, I therefore came to conclude, personified nothing less than that of black American music through the second half of the twentieth century, and it is that wider context I hope to bring readers over coming pages even as I focus most closely on the life and music of Pickett himself.

It is, to be sure, a hard story at times. The “Wicked” Wilson Pickett was born into the deprivations and segregation of the Jim Crow Deep South, and this biography delves frequently, and deeply, into the painful ongoing narrative of race and racism in America. After all, for many listeners, soul music is the sound of black emancipation, and while Pickett never made color an issue in his music (much of which he recorded with white musicians), nor did he hide away from it. His brother Maxwell wrote to me, “Wilson was not only black, he was a dark skinned black man, and . . . I believe it probably mattered in his life.” Given the reaction of the other Falcons when bass singer Willie Schofield introduced Pickett to them as a prospective new tenor in 1960—that he was “*too black*”—there is little doubt that Maxwell’s observation bears merit.

Wilson Pickett demanded the best from his associates, in no small part because he knew how good he was himself. Any number of musicians told me that working with him was the highlight of their professional lives; it would be hard to overemphasize his charisma, the easy manner in which he could energize a studio, dominate a gathering of his supposed peers, and bring tears of joy and laughter to anyone in his vicinity with his quick wit, ready rap, and brilliant smile. But just as one of his long-term stage partners described him as a “quarterback,” so other musicians used the term “drill sergeant” and even “slave driver,” a man as likely to settle an argument or confirm a directive with his fists as with reason. In this readiness to aggression, he was hardly unique—it is one of the many characteristics that links him to James Brown, for example—and though it could make him difficult to get on with, I have done my level best to explain, if not excuse, such behavior.

For, as often the case with such great talent, Wilson Pickett suffered from demons. Those demons led him, belatedly, to drink and drugs, inevitably escalating his violent tendencies and eventually bringing him to prison—twice. As such, it’s surely no surprise that the expression I heard most frequently used to describe Pickett was that “he was his own worst enemy.” Unable to trust those who loved him, unwilling to take advice from those who sought to help him, he simply refused to let people in on his troubled soul. It’s no coincidence that the word applied to the music of Wilson Pickett’s generation is that which we typically use to define our emotional personalities, the part of our body that we can’t physically identify but all

fully acknowledge as real. As such, the subtitle to this book—*The Life & Soul of Wilson Pickett*—has a deliberate double meaning.

Perhaps the most poignant summary of such a supremely talented yet ultimately conflicted personality came from one of his peers, the great, late Ben E. King, with whom Wilson shared a lengthy stint at Atlantic Records, many a concert stage, the short-lived dream of the Soul Clan, and a few insults and contretemps along the way.

“I wish the world would have known him better as a person,” the mild-mannered King told me shortly before he passed away in 2014, “because he let out the rough side of him, and there was a gentle side that I knew, that he would only give to you for a split second. But in that second, you’d learn there’s a fighter in there and there’s a person that’s likable. There was a sweet gentle person in there for that time that you could talk to him—had he not been Wicked.”

Tony Fletcher, Mount Tremper

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On my initial flight to Montgomery, Alabama, where I was meeting with Maxwell Pickett in Prattville to discuss this book, I found myself seated next to a garrulous salesman who, upon concluding his preflight cell phone call, insisted on knowing my reason for travel. “Wilson Pickett?” he exclaimed when I warily told him. “I saw him with the Falcons at Charlotte Coliseum, 1962; I was one of the only white kids in the audience!” For the rest of the flight, he proceeded to engage me in positive conversation about soul music and race in America, and I would like to thank him for being a good omen, given that this book has proven relatively painless, at least by the standards of my previous projects.

I then have to thank the aforementioned Maxwell Pickett, keyholder to his brother’s estate. He was not only receptive to my approach, but was willing to get out of the way and let me write Wilson’s story without any preconditions, all while standing by to provide me with contact information and introductions, and being there as I came back to him with increasingly personal and (for me) sometimes uncomfortable questions. I’d also like to thank his wife Brenda for sharing the welcome mat during that first visit in Prattville.

In alphabetical order, my thanks to all the following for consenting to be interviewed: John Abbey, David Akers, Joe Arnold, Herb Boyd, Charlie Chalmers, Dan Cipriano, Dennis Coffey, Paddy Corea, Don Covay, Steve Cropper, Elcanon Dubose, Bobby Eli, Eddie Floyd, Roger Friedman, Dovie Hall, Bertha Harbison, Nona Hendryx, Ronnie Hinton, Ricardo Holmes, David Hood, Wayne Jackson, Eddie Jacobs, Jerry Jemmott, Jimmy Johnson, Ben E. King, Margo Lewis, Johnny Long, Chris Lowe, Tami Lynn, Bobby Manriquez, Robert Margouleff, Robert Martin, Joyce McRae-Moore, Carlton McWilliams, Mario Medious, Sam Moore, Otis Myers, Floyd Newman, George Norris, Danny O’Donovan, Spooner Oldham, David Panzer, André Perry, Jack Philpot, Helen Pickett, Maxwell Pickett, Saphan Pickett, Veda Pickett-Neal, Curtis Pope, Lloyd Price, Marc Ribot, Willie

Schofield, Terry Scott, Brad Shapiro, Bunny Sigler, Ernest Smith, Marvell Thomas, Robert “Mousey” Thompson, Jon Tiven, Chris Tuthill, Lee Wade, Kevin Walker, Danny White, Elbert “Woody” Woodson, Earl Young, Reggie Young, Paul Zamek.

I prefer not to pull favorites from such a long list, but I must make two exceptions. Pickett’s final producer, Jon Tiven, turned out to be my first interview, and while I was concerned at starting the book from the “wrong end,” so to speak, his wealth of contacts and enthusiasm for the project helped speed up the interview process quite considerably. He also established a positive pattern of people who didn’t just work with Pickett, but clearly cared for him.

On that note, Curtis Pope was also among my first interviewees, and played a similarly vital role in connecting me with the vast network of Pickett’s former stage musicians, many of whom he additionally helped identify in photographs and videos. Although most of these musicians have no financial choice but to gig until they drop, I found them, almost without exception, an extraordinarily friendly group of people, largely devoid of the bitterness and cynicism I have encountered in other genres. More power to all of you—and for the two or three people listed above whose memories have not made it into the text of this book, please know that your words nonetheless helped shape the overall picture.

Special thanks to all those who responded to my follow-up calls and e-mails with such patience and enthusiasm. In seeking as much accurate information from our sources as they will deign to give us, obsessive biographers like myself walk a perpetual tightrope between persistence and pestilence, and I would like to believe that I generally pick up the warning signals that I might be pushing too hard. In any case where I crossed that line, and I’m aware of at least one, I offer my apologies, and my gratitude that you indulged me up to your breaking point!

My thanks to all the family members, managers, publicists, and friends who put me in contact with my interview subjects and otherwise helped facilitate our meetings. You are too numerous to mention; you are all greatly appreciated.

On my major three-week, 3,750-mile, cross-American research road trip during the winter of 2015, I encountered many wonderful people. My especial thanks to Katy Kattelman (for whom “I Found a Love” is still her going-out song) and “King” Curtis (though obviously not *that* King Curtis) for their unexpected and delightful hospitality in Nashville; to Bob Mehr for the night out in Memphis; to Gordon Alexander and Rob Gordon additionally in Memphis; and to my Mini Countryman for keeping me going through snow in every one of the thirteen states I visited, as far south as

Mississippi! Thanks also to Chris and Linda Boyle for hosting me in Florida, and to Mellow Mushroom, for keeping me sated with vegan food and craft beer throughout the South.

Thanks to Tim Sampson at the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis; Jennie Thomas and Andy Leach at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum's Library Archives in Cleveland; Bonnie Bak at Muscle Shoals Music Foundation in Sheffield, Alabama; Dixie Griffin at the Alabama Music Hall of Fame in Tuscumbia; Michael Gray at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville; Michael Perry at the Schomburg Reference Library in New York. The Detroit Historical Museum, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, the Liberty Bell Center in Philadelphia, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum in Cleveland, and the various Smithsonian Museums in Washington, DC all additionally informed my research.

My gratitude to fellow authors Robert Bowman, Robert Gordon, Jonathan Gould, Gerri Hirshey, and David Ritz for sharing notes, conversations, and more. Additional nods to Gerri, John Abbey, Sue C. Clark, Ted Drozdowski, and Michael Lydon for enthusiastic permission to quote at will from their interviews with Wilson Pickett.

Thanks to Barney Hoskyns at *Rock's Back Pages*, Keith Rylatt, Bob Fisher, Opal Nations, Audrey Johnson, Michael Johnson, Ken Hall, Anthony Roman, Deane Rink, Amy Jackson, Real Gone Music, and everyone I else I have surely left out, for miscellaneous correspondence, music, suggestions, and facilitations.

Thank you to the late Fergus McGovern for offering to read and revise.

Thank you to Michael Harriot at Folio for selling this book; to Suzanne Ryan at Oxford University Press for buying it, and for her patience with deadlines and initial overwriting; to Eden Piacitelli for staying on top of editing and production issues, and, in advance, everyone else at OUP engaged in further work on it.

Thank you so very much to my Catskills neighbor, good friend and fellow author Holly George-Warren. Holly pushed me to pursue this project beyond the original idea stage, provided me with several key initial introductions, helped make my road trips more comfortable via further contacts, and was generally there for me at all times, despite a schedule that makes my own look rather lazy. Her husband Robert and son Jack are damn good people too.

As always, an enormous debt of gratitude to my wife Posie Strenz for her forbearance and support. To my children Campbell and Noel for being who they are.

And finally, to fans of soul music in general, and Wilson Pickett in particular, for surreptitiously supporting this project all along.





In the Midnight Hour

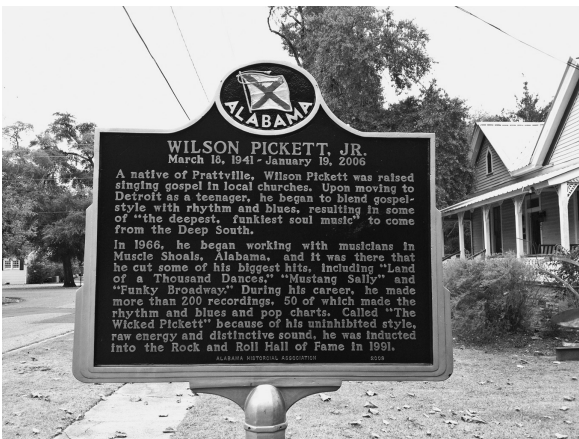




1. The cinderblock house on Route 29, in rural Prattville, Alabama, where Wilson Pickett grew up. Courtesy of Tony Fletcher.



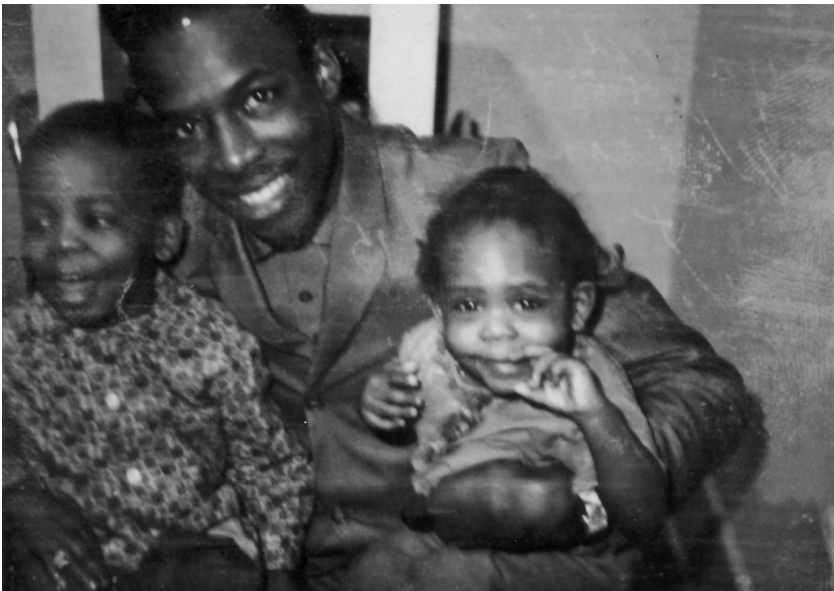
2. The Falcons, “the World’s First Soul Group.” Although Wilson Pickett sung lead on their 1961 hit “I Found A Love,” no official photograph was ever taken of him with the group. L-R: Eddie Floyd, Joe Stubbs, Lance Finney, Mack Rice, Willie Schofield. Gilles Petard/Getty.



3. The historical marker for Wilson Pickett Jr. in downtown Prattville, dedicated in 2009. Courtesy of Tony Fletcher.



4. Wilson Pickett Sr., the singer's father, in an undated photograph. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



5. The earliest known photograph of Wilson Pickett Jr., shown with son Lynderrick (born 1959) and daughter Veda (1961). Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



6. An early promo photograph of Wilson Pickett, solo singer. Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy.



7. At the 110th Street Harlem Armory, June 12, 1964, farewell concert for disc jockey Magnificent Montague, who helped break Wilson Pickett's first solo hit, "If You Need Me." The pair would perform together again in Watts, Los Angeles, the following summer. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty.



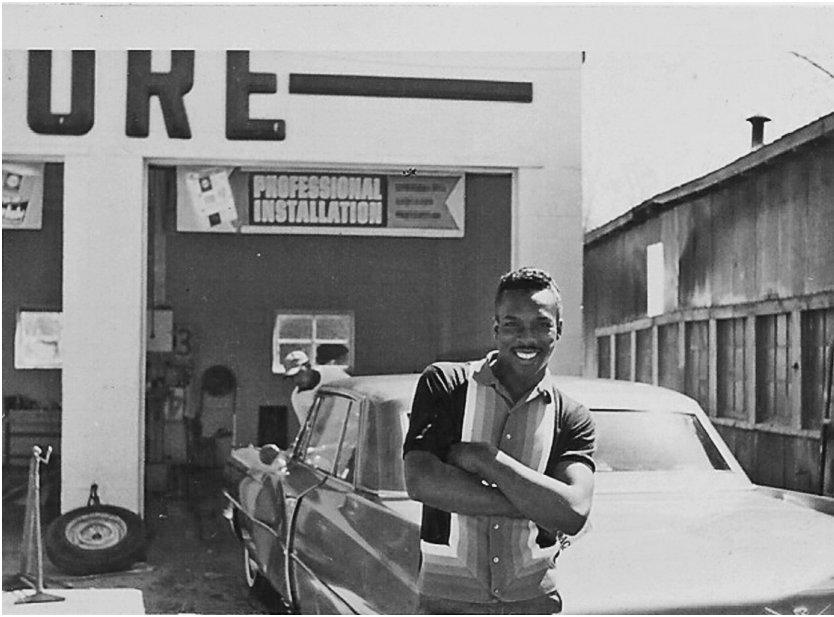
8. Pickett shown performing to a mixed-race audience in an unidentified location circa 1966. In the American South, audiences were still mostly segregated at this point. ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy.



9. At Fame studios October 1966, the sessions that resulted in "Mustang Sally." Top: Rick Hall. Middle row: Chips Moman, Charlie Chalmers, Spooner Oldham, Roger Hawkins. Middle of photo: Jerry Wexler, Wilson Pickett. Bottom row: Ed Logan, Tommy Cogbill, Jimmy Johnson. Courtesy of Fame Studios.



10. With Esther Phillips and Percy Sledge at the Prelude Club in Manhattan, May 5, 1966, at an Atlantic Records party celebrating Sledge's number one single "When a Man Loves a Woman." Cornell Dupree and Jimi Hendrix, then playing with bandleader King Curtis and his Kingpins, are on guitar. Popsie Randolph, courtesy of Michael Randolph.



11. The eternally suave Wilson Pickett in an undated photograph from the mid 1960s. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



12. Wilson Pickett and long-term partner Dovie Hall in the early 1960s, shortly after they met. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



13. With partner Dovie Hall. The pair met in Detroit in early 1962, and stayed together for fifteen years, until Hall left after extensive physical abuse. "To the day he died, I loved him," she said. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.





14. Outside the Howard Theater in Washington, DC, circa 1967. L-R:Pickett, Vincent Pitts (trumpet), Bob Perkins (piano), Baby James (driver), Jack Philpot (sax), Gus Hawkins (sax), Billy (trumpet, last name not known), Carlton McWilliams (guitar). Buddy Miles, in the group at the time on drums, is out of the shot. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



15. With guitarists Jimmy Johnson and Bobby Womack at Fame Studios, circa 1968. Womack wrote or cowrote several of Pickett's hits. "Whatever Pickett said, he stuck by it," said Womack, who credited the singer with giving him "my first break." Courtesy of Fame Studios.



16. With backing band the Midnight Movers in Pisa, Italy, early 1969. L-R: Chris Lowe (trumpet), George Patterson (sax), George Chillus, Leon Lovejoy (drums), Jack Philpot (sax), Wilson Pickett, Danny White (valet/vocals). Photographer: Curtis Pope (trumpet). Courtesy of Curtis Pope.



17. Pickett in Pisa. Courtesy of Curtis Pope.



18. At Fame Studios with Duane Allman, November/December 1968. "He stood right in front of me, as though he was playing every note I was singing," said Pickett of Allman's groundbreaking solo on "Hey Jude." Michael Ochs Archives/Getty.



19. Pickett in fur, late 1960s. The singer had a fondness for expensive clothing. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



20. With producers Dave Crawford and Jerry Wexler, Criteria Studios in Miami, November 24, 1969. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty.



21. With Atlantic Records artist Jackie Moore, Criteria Studios photo session, November 24, 1969. In 1981 the pair collaborated on a remake of Moore's 1971 hit "Precious, Precious." It went unreleased. Michael Ochs Archive/Getty.



22. Outside the house in Englewood, New Jersey, with the Rolls Royce Pickett bought for himself after signing a new deal with Atlantic Records in 1970. Wilson's son Michael is off to the right; Dovie Hall, shown with Wilson, raised him as her own. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



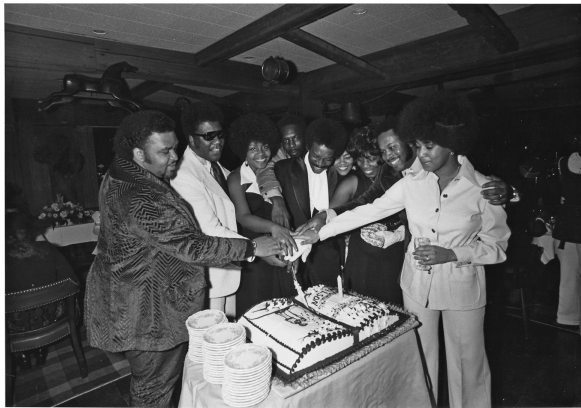
23. A rare early 1970s shot of Wilson with his wife and three children. L-R: Lynderrick Pickett, Wilson Pickett, Bonnie Pickett, Kenneth Felder (Bonnie's brother), Veda Pickett. In front: Michael Pickett, Wilson's son by an unnamed white woman. Wilson and Bonnie had separated in 1962; they finally divorced in 1986. Courtesy of Veda Pickett Neal.



24. In Ghana, 1971. L-R: Nat Grant (keyboards), Jimmy "Liston" Owens (guitar), Wilson Pickett, Jerry "Conseaula" (organ), Claston "Patience" Higgins (sax). Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



25. The postmidnight hours of March 6, 1971: Wilson Pickett headlining the Soul To Soul festival in Accra, Ghana, arguably the zenith of his career. "I've never seen so many black and beautiful people in one place—250,000 of them," said Pickett. ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy.



26. At his thirtieth birthday party in Louisville, KY, cutting the cake alongside, from left to right: Solomon Burke, Don Covay, Mrs Covay, Hezekiah Pickett, Dovie Hall, Lena Pickett, Maxwell Pickett, and Brenda Pickett. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett, Jr. Legacy LLC.



27. At his thirtieth birthday party, March 1971, Louisville, Kentucky, singing with sister Emily Jean. Behind them are Solomon Burke and Don Covay. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



28. At the house Wilson bought for his mother in Louisville, Kentucky. L-R: Wilbert Harbison, Lena Pickett, Hezekiah Pickett, Dovie Hall, Wilson Pickett, Albert Jackson, Bertha Harbison (née Pickett). The girl in front is Cynthia Harbison. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



29. With personal assistant and sometimes lover Lee Wade, 1977, on the occasion of an interview for the *New York Times*, at his home in Englewood, New Jersey. Photo by Ellen Mandel © 1977.



30. Onstage in Japan, 1974. A double live LP from his first Asian tour went unreleased in the States. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett, Jr. Legacy LLC.



31. The four Pickett brothers: William James, Hezekiah, Wilson, Jr. and Maxwell. Date unknown. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett, Jr. Legacy LLC.





32. With daughter Saphan Pickett, born in 1982. Courtesy of the Wilson Pickett Jr. Legacy LLC.



33. Wilson Pickett and trumpet player Curtis Pope in Japan, 1988. "Pickett had to nurse me back from the ghetto," said Pope of rejoining the Midnight Movers, which he then led for fifteen years. Courtesy of Curtis Pope.



34. At the recording sessions for the LP *I Want You*, Le Studio, Marin Heights, Quebec, 1981. L-R: producer Andre Perry, Pickett, and songwriters and musicians Marty Simon and Jean Roussel. Photograph by Yaël Brandeis Perry.



35. The Soul Clan at their press conference on the eve of their reunion show of July 24, 1981. L-R: Ben E. King, Joe Tex, Don Covay, Wilson Pickett, Solomon Burke. Photo by Ebet Roberts.



36. With Dan Aykroyd at the Atlantic Records 40th Anniversary Concert, May 18, 1988, Madison Square Garden. The concert was the first time Pickett had performed with former Stax musicians bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn (on right), and guitarist Steve Cropper, since 1965. Preston/Corbis.



37. At the recording session for the Blues Brothers 2000 remake of "634-5789," with producer Paul Schaffer (standing) and Steve Cropper (sitting at right). Photo by Ebet Roberts.