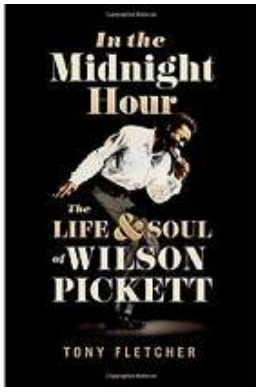
“In the Midnight Hour”—Wilson Picket (1965)

Added to the National Registry: 2016
Essay by Tony Fletcher (guest post)*



More than 50 years later, “In the Midnight Hour” remains impervious to the thought of improvement. It was recorded in mono; the pianist is all but inaudible; there are no hidden complexities. There is, in fact, almost nothing to it. Every chord required of the song is announced in the opening two bars and one beat; a descending pattern that, like a guitar beginner’s tutorial, follows the dotted marks on the fret-board from a high D major down to an open E major. Yet behind this simplicity lies every possible layer of masterful musicianship. It’s there in the power of Al Jackson’s opening roll, on a single tom. It’s there in the way trumpet players Wayne Jackson, Andrew Love and Packy Axton blaze those initials descending chords, on the last of which one of them breaks off to play the root note an octave higher, emphasizing the incoming E major. It’s there in the way that they then vacate the space and let the rhythm section assume responsibility, Donald “Duck” Dunn establishing the groove with a lightly loping bass line, as baritone sax player Floyd Newman pokes in with exquisitely timed interjections at the deep end. It’s there in the core of the rhythm itself, driven by Jackson and Cropper, who hammer home the second and fourth beats in tandem with an almost imperceptible mutual delay, the former with a snare sound so bright that it defies the mono recording, the latter with a sharp, consistent downstroke.

The song thus anchored, Picket starts singing, reintroducing that refrain he’s been throwing into his recordings and performances all along, that reference to the time of night when his love “comes tumbling down” (as Clyde McPhatter had sung on the Dominoes’ “You Do Something for Me” over a decade earlier). He continues with further lustful promises and assurances, familiar to anyone courted on the dance floor of the era. He sings and shouts, growls and rasps through the song but never screams; toward the conclusion of the second verse, when he proclaims “you’re the only girl I know,” his voice ascends to the thrilling falsetto instead.

At the end of each verse, Cropper and Dunn throw unexpectedly to the major seventh chord before resolving on the fifth, the guitarist reverberating his Telecaster through that measure before locking back into the two and the four. When the trumpets join Pickett on the second verse, they do so almost as an afterthought, in languid but harmonious contrast to the precision of the rhythm. Those trumpets then restructure their melody for an instrumental interlude that sounds as effortless to perform as it is easy to hum—but again, there’s a sudden push to the major seventh chord again just when the listener least expects it. The song is so locked in its groove by this point that the third verse just alternates between the I and the IV chords, inviting a vocal vamp that Picket readily assumes before the song fades out at two and a half minutes *precisely,* his final words being those of the song title.

Officially, Stewart and Cropper produced the momentous session, but Wexler could not help but play the backseat driver. Crucially, he suggested to Cropper that the guitarist change his original guitar riff—a move that required chutzpah, considering Stax's hits under Cropper's production. Cropper duly abandoned his original, busy part, and fell in line with Jackson's snare instead. He was glad to have done so. "That backbeat thing was just magic. It doesn't get any simpler than that, but it actually had function as well." The function was to emphasis the jerk, a dance craze that R&B vocal group the Larks had celebrated in a chart-topping song a few months earlier—and which Wexler promptly came down from the control room to demonstrate. It must have been quite the sight for the young studio band to behold a 48 year-old executive from New York "just dancing around the studio, shadowboxing," in the words of Cropper, an accurate description of the jerk's emphatic arm movements in tandem with the downbeat.

Steve Cropper and Al Jackson largely had that rhythm down already. Recording without head phones, Cropper preferred to watch Jackson's left hand rather than just listen for it, to hit his guitar chord the absolute moment the drummer came down on the snare (with the thick end of his stick, a practice Jackson had picked up in the nightclubs), emphasizing that downbeat and ensuring there was no "slap." If Wexler wanted anything more from them once Cropper had abandoned his syncopated riff, it was merely to give it an extra emphasis. Either way, the result was ideal for the song in hand. While there was enough of a contemporary jerk to the beat of "In the Midnight Hour" to render it popular on the 1965 dance floor, there was never too much to date it. If anything, that emphasis on the downbeat rendered it subtly familiar with the same young white audience that was otherwise buying the Beatles, the Rolling Stones (who had recorded Pickett's "If You Need Me" on their first visit to Chicago's Chess studios in 1964), and the other British Invasion bands, given how that rhythm was to become a staple of rock music. "In the Midnight Hour" was probably the first southern soul recording to have such an effect on such a young white audience, yet it was every bit an authentic rhythm and blues record too, the rare kind of single that appealed to everyone without compromising.

The final stroke of musical genius surrounding "Midnight Hour" was the decision to leave it well alone. There were no female backing vocals, no additional sweetening. "In the Midnight Hour" was released, unadorned, while the tape was still warm. It was backed by "I'm Not Tired," another song from the sessions that was similarly kept free of female vocals, allowing Joe Hall, the pianist barely audible on "Midnight Hour," to flex his blues chops. "I'm Not Tired," said Cropper, was "a gospel shuffle, it's [Pickett's] thing, it's where he came from. It was easy to do, and the band learned it in five minutes." The process of making music (and magic) at Stax really could be that simple.

Tony Fletcher is a music journalist and author of "In the Midnight Hour: The Life & Soul of Wilson Pickett" (New Oxford University Press, 2017) from which the above excerpt was taken.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.