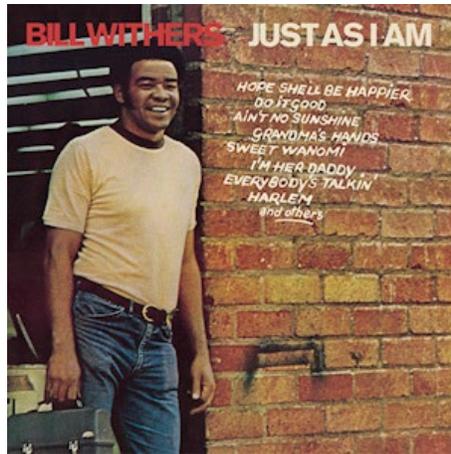


“Ain’t No Sunshine”—Bill Withers (1971)

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Essay by Scott Bradlee (guest post)*



“AIN’T NO SUNSHINE” A Tribute to Bill Withers

The characters in a Shakespeare play still seem to jump off the page, some 400 years later.

The expansive sky and impasto swirling lights in “The Starry Night” still fill us with transcendent awe, even in this digital age.

And, more than five decades after Bill Withers sang and played guitar in the center of a Los Angeles recording studio at the corner of Cahuenga and Selma, his 1971 debut hit, “Ain’t No Sunshine” continues to move us--both physically and spiritually.

What makes these great works endure across generations, long after the fashions and trends that marked their era have passed? I believe that it is a combination of *hand* and *heart*. A great artist is a craftsman, yes--but great skill and technique alone will not suffice to create a masterwork that endures across eons. A great artist must also be a *shaman*--an intermediary between the cold material world and the vivid spiritual realm of the immortal. The craft is always in service to the greater mission of revealing universal truths of the human condition.

No 20th century singer-songwriter gave us universal truths quite like Bill Withers. His music had broad appeal--plainspoken and conversational lyrics, paired with memorable hooks and sparse but sturdy grooves. An honest and profoundly effective communicator, he crafted songs that appeared simple but expertly hid layers of nuance and sophistication, like a fine watchmaker.

More importantly, Withers had *heart*, having lived a life of universality himself. He was raised in the coal-mining region of West Virginia and did nine years of service in the Navy before he made a single dime from his musical gifts. The seemingly overnight fame he experienced after the release of “Ain’t No Sunshine” never made him to forget his humble roots; famously, even after the record became a top 10 “Billboard” hit, Withers still held on to his factory job making aircraft toilets. The factory itself unwittingly became a part of music history when Withers--on his break, lunch pail in hand--leaned against its brick wall for the photo that would become the cover to his first album, the appropriately-titled “Just As I Am.”

There is much to be said about the unique juxtaposition of Withers' embrace of the common life and his wholly uncommon genius. There is also much ink to be spilled on his lasting influence on popular music and songwriting today. However, there is nothing I can write that would give you the faintest idea of *what it truly feels like* to experience Withers' art.

For that, we must go to the source.

So, cue up your turntable with/pop in a CD of/open your streaming app on the second track on "Just As I Am," and let's take a listen together....

"Ain't No Sunshine when she's gone..."

The record opens in a most intimate manner: Withers' plaintive voice sings the refrain, accompanied by only a gently fingerpicked guitar and a softly tapping foot. The spirit of the blues is immediately conjured; the echoing plate reverb diffusing each lyric into a fog of loneliness. The chords pulse mechanically like an endless long, the form becomes familiar to us; it's a 12-bar minor blues. Just as we get comfortable in this setting, however, the loneliness becomes a symphony. Elegant strings and pulsing drums surround Withers' vocals, and we are immediately transported to 1970s Los Angeles. The lush instrumentation seems to suggest that this is but one such sorrowful tale in the City of Angels.

Then, we are treated to one of those spontaneous flashes of serendipity that transforms a humble recording session into a moment forever etched in our collective consciousness. Instead of a third verse, Withers simply repeats "I know" twenty-six times, its frictive syncopation adorning the unrelenting pulse like the sound of a riveting machine on the factory floor. The strings have disappeared; Withers is alone again, letting us hear his most intimate thoughts. We can hear the wheels turning with the realization that he is powerless to end this doomed relationship, because this woman is also the light of his life.

"Hey, I ought to leave young thing alone, but Ain't No Sunshine when she's gone..."

That's when it hits us: It's not a blues. It's a dirge. Withers is mourning the inevitable.

The moment passes, and the strings return in soothing affirmation. The chorus repeats once more and fades away, as the last phrase echoes into eternity:

"...Anytime she goes away..."

At two minutes and six seconds, it is a brief record, but certainly not an incomplete one. Withers has simply said all that there is to say.

And that might just be "Ain't No Sunshine's" most notable quality: it is as close to a *perfect record* as we could ever hope to find. If art is meant to express the human condition--as I believe it is--then there can be no doubt that these two minutes and six seconds of longing and lamenting etched on vinyl is one of the most pure representations of what art has to offer. While this record's impact on popular genres like hip hop and acid jazz is undeniable and certainly worth examining, its sonic contributions are secondary to its contribution to humanity at large. It is "Soul" music in genre, but also *soul* music, in the immortal sense of the word.

Bill Withers physically left this world on March 30, 2020--but spiritually, he never left us. Whenever we access great works of art across history, we engage in communion with their creator--no matter how many years, generations, or centuries have passed. Withers' gift to us is

an open invitation to visit him anytime. Each time we drop the needle on any of his nine albums, he welcomes us in for conversation and song, like a dear old friend.

So, in the spirit of conversation--and in the hopes that Mr. Withers might reveal to us the secret to writing a song with such enduring, universal appeal--I'll let him have the last word:

"I feel that it is healthier to look out at the world through a window than through a mirror. Otherwise, all you see is yourself and whatever is behind you."

Bill Withers
July 4, 1938 - March 30, 2020

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

