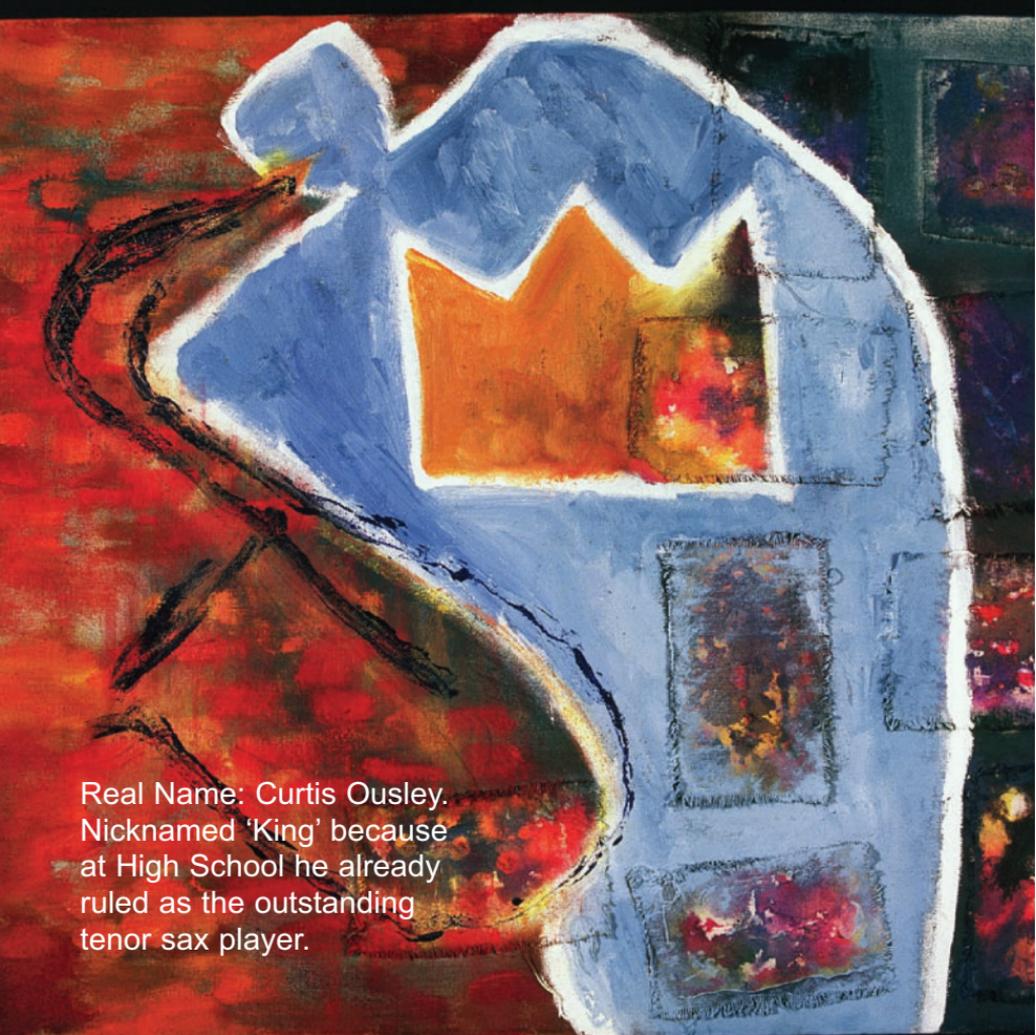


# KING CURTIS

1934-1971

Alto, Tenor and Saxello



Real Name: Curtis Ousley.  
Nicknamed 'King' because  
at High School he already  
ruled as the outstanding  
tenor sax player.

*Aretha Franklin says King Curtis' horn spoke  
directly to her 'King Curtis was a Soul superhero.'*

## **THE KING OF THE SOUL SAX**

His soul saxophone style was the result of taking a singer's approach to a melody. 'I can take a record by a singer, and I can play the identical vocal version on my horn.'

King Curtis probably performed on more record sessions, credited and uncredited, than any other Saxman. His tone varied from the novelty effect that he originated for The Coasters hit, 'Yakety Yak' through the typical R&B blasts found on 'Memphis Soul Stew' to the sensuous lyricism featured on his classic 'Soul Serenade'. It was this versatility that made him such a sought after session musician, but throughout he was identified by his distinctive soul voice.

Although he made his living as a Soul musician, in the studio or touring with the Atlantic Soul Revues, he still took time out for blowing his own brand of jazz saxophone, in clubs around New York. His ability in this field, was acknowledged by contemporary jazz musicians and he cut well received albums in the company of jazz trumpeter Nat Adderley, and fellow saxists, Arnett Cobb, Oliver Nelson, and Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis.

## **THE KING'S BRIEF REIGN**

Famous Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler held him in the highest regard: 'His was a mighty presence. Six foot one, powerful, cool and radiant, he was always in charge. He loved to eat, play sax, shoot crap, ride his cycle and make shrewd

deals with music makoffs. He had an endless parade of great players in his bands, including Jimi Hendrix. He was a fine producer and if he was in town when I was recording he was always next to me in the booth, a fountain of terrific ideas and suggestions. No charge.'

Songwriter Mort Schuman: 'He would come in with those mohair suits, you know like you could see him three blocks away on a foggy London night! I mean, it would just shine out there.'

Soul singer Ben E. King: 'At the end of the day's session, everybody would congregate at Curtis' home - at least a dozen people, Aretha Franklin, Cornell Dupree, Eric Gale, most of the session guys, his door was always open. Until he had passed, we didn't realize what a centre we had lost.'

Contrast this with Joseph McNamara, New York Daily News: 'He was a nice guy. But he had a temper and he wouldn't take any nonsense from anybody.'

A child prodigy, while at High School, he was earning 240 dollars a week from his gigging in all the juke joints in Fort Worth, comfortably exceeding the salary of his school principal.

On Sunday afternoons, he always appeared at 'The Paradise Inn' run by a friend, and noted for its 30 foot bar, which during his rendition of 'Night Train' he would get up and 'walk' in the tradition of the great honking tenors.



During his prolific but curtailed career, he estimated that he backed more than 200 artists over 1000 sessions, including Sam Cooke, Bobby Darin, Clyde McPhatter, Laverne Baker, Brook Benton, Isley Brothers, Connie Francis, and Freddie King.

Eventually he became Musical Director to the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin. She claimed she always sang best when the King was by her side, and it was his presence that cajoled her

into the studio, when she was experiencing temperamental moods. Their partnership produced a veritable catalogue of soul classics.

Though rarely out of the studio as a session man, in 1962 he emerged into the public spotlight, performing his self-penned 'Soul Twist' which became a Number 1 R&B hit.

King Curtis was to continue his relationship with the Twist rage. Arthur Murray, founder of New York's most prestigious dance school decided to record a twist album which included a dance manual. The result was 'Arthur Murray's Twist Party' in a sleeve complete with instructions illustrated by footprints and dotted lines indicating step sequences. The star of the album was the wonderful hard blowing saxophonist King Curtis, who also provided the vocals. Astonishingly, this has become a cult album amongst his fans and changes hands for ridiculous money.

He was 'shrewd' and multitalented, possessing the ability to draw up a contract, make a deal, put a band together and direct a recording session. Apart from owning property, he also ran his own music publishing business 'that makes more money than I do as a performer. Every musician should find another means of making a living.'

However, he was a notorious gambler, a vice he indulged in the company of the jazz musicians, Brother Jack McDuff, Willis Jackson, and Danny Richmond. Domestically his life did not run smoothly and he left his wife for teenager Modeen

Broughton with whom he lived for seven years until his untimely death.

This occurred at the hand of a junkie on the steps of his apartment block. When he refused to move on, possibly the King's temper took over, and in the ensuing scuffle the vagrant stabbed him to death. Over one thousand mourners attended his funeral at which the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin contributed their various talents. He was only thirty seven with his finest years to come, but his recorded work remains as a fitting memorial.

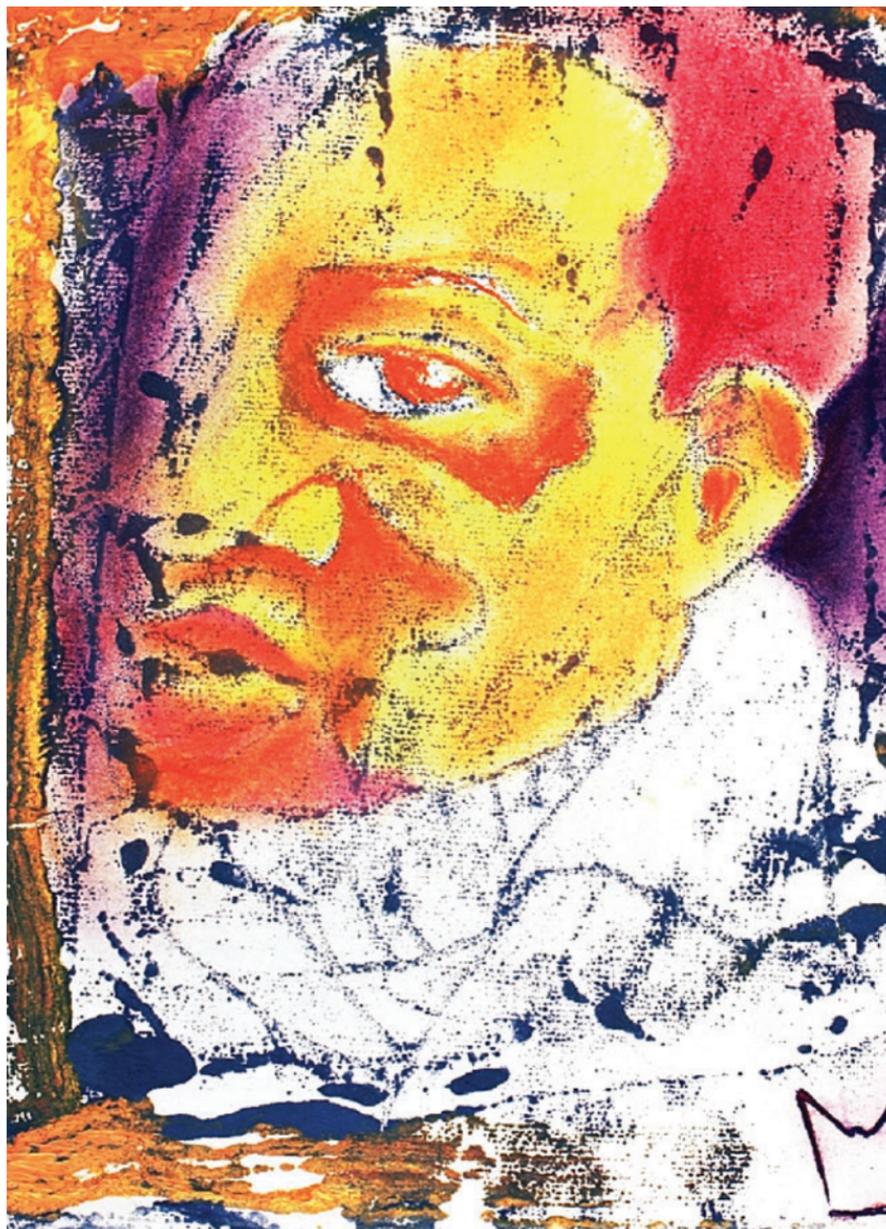
An incredibly loyal band of enthusiasts of King Curtis' music evolved in the UK, with worldwide membership, to the extent that a fanzine appeared called 'The Boss'.

### **KING CURTIS' 'SOUL SERENADE'**

Probably the best known track under his own name is 'Memphis Soul Stew' the funky soul dance number where Curtis introduces each instrument in the musical concoction he is cooking up. However, there is one track which epitomises the man's style and genius, and will stand the test of time as a memorial.

'Soul Serenade' was written by Curtis and his is the definitive interpretation. In under 3 minutes it displays so many of his talents. It has a wonderful melodic feel; the gift to express sadness, passion and fire; his clean soaring tone; his ability to

swing at all times, whether he's blowing ballads, blues or uptempo ravers.



The song builds from a wistful beginning through an ever increasing intensity until, by the end, Curtis is swinging fiercely and pouring his passion into the horn, culminating in a long held haunting note as it fades into the night. Despite attempts to add lyrics to this beauty, his sax playing has more eloquence and passion than any songwriter could achieve.

In the words of Atlantic Records Producer Jerry Wexler: *'He was noble, ballsy and streetwise like nobody I ever knew. I love him, and even though Down Beat won't give him house room, he belongs forever with Pres and Sonny Rollins and Trane.'*

### **King Curtis on CD**

1. King Curtis plays the great Memphis Hits. King Size Soul KOCH KOCD 8015.
2. King Curtis Live at Fillmore.
3. King Curtis: Soul Meeting. Prestige PR CD 24033-2.
4. Best Of King Curtis. Capitol Jazz CDP7243 8 3650422.

Here's a list of some of King's recordings for you to check out: *Whole Lotta Love, Whiter Shade Of Pale, Everything's Gonna Be Alright, For Its Worth, Memphis Soul Stew, I Never Loved A Man, Soul Street.*