BILL WITHERS

Title: Live At Carnegie Hall

Label: Columbia Legacy

Release Date: 1997

Medium: CD

Availability: Very Good

Venue: Carnegie Hall, New York City, NY

Recording Date: October 6, 1972

Lineup: Bill Withers - Vocals, guitar, piano
Bernorce Blackman - Guitar
Melvin Dunlap - Bass
Bobbye Hall - Percussion
Ray Jackson - Piano
James Gadson - Drums

Set List: Use Me
Friend Of Mine
Ain't No Sunshine
Grandma's Hands
World Keeps Going Around
Let Me In Your Life
Better Off Dead
For My Friend
I Can't Write Left Handed
Lean On Me
Lonely Town, Lonely Street
Hope She'll Be Happier
Let Us Love
Harlem/Cold Baloney

While Bill Withers did not land a recording contract until he was over 30 years old, he stormed out of the gate with three of the seventies most notable hit singles. Each of these singles sold over a million copies and are some of the most covered songs in pop history. Withers also released three other top forty singles and has three gold albums to his credit. The singer's career did not last long. By the mid eighties, he had virtually retired to spend time with his family. However, those three songs have generated a steady income in royalties to this day, which has taken care of all of Wither's financial needs. As a result, the singer has not released any new material since 1985. Withers was inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 2015. The singer passed away on March 30, 2000.

Withers was born William Harrison Withers Jr. on July 4, 1938 in Stab Fork, West Virginia. He was the youngest of six children born to William Withers and Mattie Galloway. His father worked in the mines and his mother was a maid. His parents divorced when Bill was only three years old and he was raised by his mother's family in nearby Beckley, West Virginia. To make matters worse, he was born with a stutter. Between his condition and the lack of money, Bill had a hard time fitting in with his peers. His father died when he was 13 years, making financial matters even worse. As such, he received no music training as a child.

After graduating from high school, Withers joined the Navy at the age of 17, wanting desperately to form his own identity. He would stay in the Navy for the next nine years. While serving, he was drawn to music. He wrote some songs and discovered that he had a pleasing singing voice. When he was discharged in 1965, he worked where he could, then decided to move to Los Angeles in 1967, feeling that there was more work there and he would be closer to the music industry.

He accepted a job in an aerospace factory and began to perform in local clubs at night. He also shopped a homemade demo tape to every label he could find. For years, his music career did not go anywhere but he caught a break in 1970 when a small label, Sussex Records, decided to give him a chance. They teamed

him with producer Booker T. Jones, who recruited some members of the MGs to play backup on Withers' debut album, *Just As I Am* (#39-1971), which was released in May, 1971.

The lead single, "Ain't No Sunshine" (#3-1971), was released in June and took off up the U.S. pop singles chart. He had written the song after watching the 1962 movie, Days Of Wine And Roses, inspired by the plight of alcoholics Lee Remick and Jack Lemmon. The famous 26 repeated lines of "I Know" were initially recorded as a stopgap while the singer wrote a third verse. However, everyone liked it and it remained in the final version of the song.

The only thing surprising about "Ain't No Sunshine", which is undoubtedly one of the best songs ever written, was that it did not top the U.S. pop singles chart. It cracked the top forty in mid August and rose to number 3 during a twelve week top forty chart run. The single won a Grammy for Best R&b Song and was ranked number 285 on Rolling Stone Magazine's 500 Greatest Songs Of All Time. It was certified gold in the States for one million copies sold in September, 1971 and has continued to be used in media and is covered by other artists to this day.

The success of the single pushed the album onto the American pop albums chart in late June and is rose to number 39 during a 33 week chart run. The album also yielded a second U.S. pop chart single, "Grandma's Hands" (#42-1971), which just missed the top forty, stalling at number 32. It also has been a favorite of many artists who have covered the song. Just like that, the 33 year old singer was a star.

Withers solidified his position at the top of the music world with his second album, *Still Bill* (#4-1972), which was released in May, 1972. It immediately made the American pop albums chart and would rise to number 4 during a forty three week chart run. It was certified gold in the States in September, 1972. It was propelled by two more million selling singles.

The lead single was the iconic "Lean On Me" (#1-1972), which was released slightly in advance of the album on April 21, 1972. Withers had written it on a small piano just after moving to LA. He missed West Virginia and the community ethic of his hometown inspired the lyrics. It cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty by the end of May and shot all the way to number one, where it remained for three weeks during a fourteen week chart run. By June, 1972, it was certified gold in the U.S. The song also reached number 18 in England, number 20 in Canada, and number 24 in Australia. The song was ranked number 208 on Rolling Stone Magazine's 500 Greatest Songs Of All Time and is one of only nine songs to top the U.S. pop singles chart by two different artists, with Club Nouveau taking it to number one in 1987.

The album also contained his third classic single. "Use Me" (#2-1972) was released in September, 1972, cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in one week and rose to number 2 during a ten week top forty chart run. It also sold one million copies, reaching gold status in the States in one month. It also hit number 33 in Canada. The song eventually won a Grammy in 1987 when it was featured in the soundtrack of a movie. The album also contained a third top forty single, "Kissing My Love" (#31-1973), which cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in early March, 1973 and peaked at number 31 during a five week top forty chart run.

In late 1972, Withers released a non album single called "Let Us Love" (#47-1972). It nearly cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty, stalling at number 47. It peaked at number 75 in Canada. Withers toured in the fall of 1972 and recorded a live set on October 6, 1972 at the venerable Carniege Hall. It was released as *Live At Carnegie Hall* (#63-1973) on April 21, 1973. It immediately made the American pop albums chart and rose to number 63 during a twenty one week chart run. It also peaked at number 80 in England. The album included a minor chart single, "Friend Of Mine" (#80-1973).

By the time he released his next studio album, *+'Justments* (#67-1974), in early 1974, Withers was mired in a legal mess with Sussex Records. It made the American pop albums chart immediately but stalled at number 67 during a twenty one week chart run. It included two minor U.S. pop chart singles, "The Same Love That Made Me Laugh" (#50-1974) and "Heartbreak Road" (#89-1974). The label was in a financial mess and could not do very much to promote it's artists. Withers wanted out but was still under contract.

In the end, he agreed to release his first compilation, *The Best Of Bill Withers* (#182-1975). It made the American pop albums chart in mid May, 1975 but stalled at number 182 during a short two week chart run. The album was released one month before Sussex was forced to shut it's door in July, 1975 for unpaid taxes. The album should have been a big seller but with the label bankrupt, it died a quick death.

Withers signed a new record contract with Columbia Records in 1975. His label debut was *Making Music* (#81-1975) which was released in late 1975. It made the American pop albums chart and peaked at number 81 during a fifteen week chart run. It yielded one minor U.S. pop chart single, "Make Love To Your Mind" (#76-1975), which peaked at number 76. His second album for Columbia was *Naked & Warm* (#169-1976), which was released in late 1976. It made the bottom end of the American pop albums chart, only reaching number 169 during a short four week chart run. It did not yield any U.S. pop chart singles.

Just when it seemed that Withers would drop off the charts completely, he stormed back with *Menagerie* (#39-1977), which was released in October, 1977. It made the American pop albums chart immediately and wound up reaching number 39 during a twenty six week chart run. It was propelled by another fantastic song, "Lovely Day" (#30-1978), which cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in late January, 1978 and rose to number 30 during a 4 week top forty chart run. It is yet another song in his catalog that has been extensively covered. It also hit number 7 in England and number 23 in Canada. The album was certified gold in the States in May, 1978.

In early 1979, Withers teamed with another songwriter, Paul Smith, for *'Bout Love* (#134-1979). It was the first time that he had written with another person. The album made the lower end of the American pop albums chart in mid March, but would only rise to number 134 during a short nine week chart run. It did not yield any pop chart singles. In the spring of 1981, Columbia released his second compilation, *Bill Wither's Greatest Hits* (#183-1981). While it dropped off the American pop albums chart after only reaching number 183 during three weeks, it has been a steady seller over the years and was certified gold in the U.S. in July, 2000.

In 1980, Withers had recorded a song called "Just the Two Of Us" with Grover Washington Jr. for his album, *Winelight* (#5-1980). The album was a hit and the song was released as a single in February, 1981. It cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in early March and went all the way to number 2 during a sixteen week chart run. It was written by Withers along with Ralph MacDonald and William Salter. The song won a Grammy Award for Best R&B Song. It also hit number 34 in England, number 31 in Australia, and number 10 in Canada.

After it's release, Withers took an extended break from the industry to raise his family. He finally returned in 1985 when he released *Watching You Watching Me* (#143-1985) in May, 1985. It made the American pop albums chart and peaked at number 143 during a nine week chart run. It remained his last new album for the remainder of his life.

After the release of the album, Withers focused on his family. With the exception of some one off concerts, he virtually disappeared, which was exactly the way he planned it. However, his songs continued

to make noise. In 1988, a new mix of "Lovely Day" by Ben Liebrand went to number 4 in England. In 1988, Withers won a Grammy For Best Rhythm And Blues Song for Club Nouveau's version of "Lean On Me". In 2004, he contributed two songs to Jimmy Buffett's album, *License To Chill* (2004). The following year, he was inducted into the Songwriters Hall Of Fame.

In 2007, "Lean On Me" was inducted into the Grammy Hall Of Fame. At the Annual Grammy Awards show in 2014, Bill Withers: The Complete Sussex & Columbia Albums Collection and Live at Carnegie Hall both won Grammys for Best Historical Album. The singer was inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 2015. While he attended the ceremony, he only sang some harmony vocals on "Lean On Me". Withers' health began to decline as he approached his 80th birthday. On March 30, 2020, he passed away from heart failure in Los Angeles. He was 81 years old.

Bill Withers is featured on numerous compilations. Sony's 1990 set, *Bill Withers' Greatest Hits*, contains 10 tracks. Sony's 2000 release, *Lean On Me - Best of Bill Withers*, includes 18 tracks. Sony's 2000 set, *Ultimate Collection*, contains a more expansive 35 tracks. Sony's 2001 release, *Super Hits*, includes 10 tracks. Sony's 2005 set, *Lovely Day: The Very Best Of Bill Withers*, contains 20 tracks. Sony Legacy's 2009 release, *Playlist: The Very Best Best Of Bill Withers*, includes 14 tracks. Finally, Mastercut Gold's 2007 set, *The Best Of Bill Withers*, contains 20 tracks.

Withers has also released one live album, *Live At Carnegie Hall*. The 1973 Sussex set was reissued by Columbia Legacy in 1997 after being out of print for years. It contains 14 tracks. The four compilations and live set are available at a large music retailer.

I have one live recording of Bill Withers, his well regarded 1973 set, *Live At Carnegie Hall*. The 14 track album was recorded on a single night in October, 1972 at the famed New York City venue. Withers is accompanied by a crack five piece band. There are also songs where horns and strings are prominent. Apparently, they were added as overdubs after the concert. The set focuses on material from his first two albums. Recording quality is excellent.

From the opening eight minute version of "Use Me", which bristles with energy, Withers puts on one heck of a show. His vocals are outstanding, conveying the emotions of each song, and his band is top notch, with some nice subtle guitar work from Blackman ("Better Off Dead", "Let Us Love") and excellent support from the remainder of the group. Withers can be funky and can rock when required, as evidenced by songs like "Use Me", "Friend Of Mine", "Better Off Dead", and "Lonely Town, Lonely Street". On these songs, Blackman's guitar work is particularly strong, with a generous amount of wah wah effects, and Dunlap, Gadson, and Hall deliver the push that each song needs.

Withers is equally effective on soul based numbers like "Ain't No Sunshine", "For My Friend", "Let Us Love", "World Keeps Going Around" and the set closer "Harlem/Cold Baloney". The last has a long audience participation sequence that showcases the singer's ability to work an audience. His on stage skills are also evident in his stage remarks. He is often funny and takes the time to set up songs. He clearly is very comfortable in a live setting and sings with the confidence of a man who knows he's good.

Withers was also known for his ability to write and sing songs that cross many genres. He is familiar with the blues as evidenced by "Grandma's Hands" and "I Can't Write Left-Handed". Jackson's piano work is featured in the later. "Hope She'll Be Happier" and "Let Us Love" have gospel like elements while "Let Me In Your Life" is a slow ballad, with guitar and string accompaniment.

All of these songs are performed with skill and precision, with Withers standing out on each and every cut. His ability to convey the emotions of each song is remarkable, whether they are the sad pieces like "Better Off Dead", "I Can't Write Left Handed" and "Hope She'll Be Happier" or optimistic songs like "Lean On Me" and "Let Us Love". His vocals stand out on nearly every song, but are particularly strong on "World Keeps Going Around", "Hope She'll Be Happier", "Harlem/Cold Baloney", and "Use Me". On these songs, the clarity and power of his voice is remarkable.

Withers takes a rare misstep on "Lean On Me" when he sings the intro section in too low a key, which causes him to go slightly off key, although the singer does a remarkable job with the remainder of the song, which includes an audience participation section. It is the only bad thing on this entire album, which captures Withers at his best. His set list includes his three classic hits, as well as some great lesser known songs that capture every human emotion. The album is alternately sexy, sad, funny, spiritually rousing, starkly realistic, and ultimately positive. That says it all.

While I would have preferred that the strings and horns not be overdubbed, they add value on pieces like "Let Me In Your Life", "Lonely Town, Lonely Street", and "Hope She'll Be Happier" and should not dissuade the purists out there from getting this album. This is an excellent recording from one of the seventies unsung, and often forgotten, heroes. It will be a valuable addition to your live collection.