

King Curtis: King of the Yakety Sax

By Tim Wilton

New York City during the month of August can be merciless, especially for those who are not fortunate or wealthy enough to flee to the Hamptons, or the Catskills, or the Berkshires, or wherever it is Big Apple elite go to escape the city's sweltering heat.

And so it was on the night of August 13th, 1971, around midnight, that **King Curtis** was lugging an air conditioning unit along West 86th Street to a brownstone building he owned. A powerfully built man over six feet tall and with broad shoulders, Curtis had planned on installing the unit for a tenant the next day.

For some people though, delivering an air conditioner so late at night may seem odd or even suspicious. But for others, a late night delivery in August makes perfect sense—it is cooler outside and there are less people on the sidewalk to possibly bump into with an air conditioner. For King Curtis however, perhaps this was just a short break from an otherwise breakneck schedule as the music world's most respected and sought after sax player.

In just the past few months alone, Curtis had wrapped up a series of July recording sessions with **John Lennon** for the ex-Beatle's upcoming *Imagine* album; he had headlined at the famed Montreux Jazz Festival in June; he was producing **Freddie King**'s latest effort for Atlantic Records; he was serving as **Aretha Franklin**'s musical director (in fact, Franklin's version of **Simon and Garfunkel**'s *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, featuring Curtis on sax, topped the R&B singles chart in May); and he was putting the finishing touches on a new studio LP, *Everybody's Talkin'*. On top of that, Curtis's

recently released and critically acclaimed *Live at the Fillmore West* was fast becoming the biggest selling album of his nearly two decade career.

Sadly, King Curtis never got to install the air conditioner.

As he approached the brownstone, Curtis saw a couple of junkies on the stoop doing drugs and asked them to leave the premises. The exchange quickly became heated and a fist fight broke out between him and one of the junkies, Juan Montanez. Montanez then pulled out a knife and stabbed Curtis in the chest. Seizing the knife away from Montanez, Curtis stabbed the junkie four times before finally collapsing from the fatal chest wound. Montanez, 26, staggered away as King Curtis lay bleeding to death on the stoop of the building he owned at 50 West 86th Street. Less than hour later, King Curtis was declared dead at Roosevelt Hospital. He was 37 years old.

Born **Curtis Ousley** on February 7, 1934 in Fort Worth, he was raised primarily in nearby Mansfield by adoptive parents. By the time he was ten years old, according to Colin Escott's liner notes for *Instant Soul: The Legendary King Curtis* (Razor and Tie, 1994), Curtis was captivated by the distinct saxophone sound of **Louis Jordan** and told his mother that he "wanted to play that instrument more than anything." The following year, Curtis's parents presented him with an alto saxophone for his eleventh birthday. He later joined his junior high band, and would sometimes switch to tenor saxophone whenever the band needed one.

By 1950, Curtis had formed his own band and began playing at parties and dances in and around the Fort Worth area. Influenced by the great Texas saxophone players of the time (affectionately called honkers and screamers) like **Illinois Jackquet**, **Earl Bostic** and **Arnett Cobb**, as well as nationally known players like **Dexter Gordon**, Young and **Charlie Parker**, Curtis was as comfortable playing jazz as he was playing R&B or pop music.

By 1952, Curtis had built up quite a reputation as a player who could effortlessly pull off almost any genre of music and was recruited by band leader **Lionel Hampton** to join his legendary jazz band. It was also around this time when he adopted the King Curtis moniker. However, the Hampton gig lasted less than a year, and in 1953 Curtis packed up his saxophone and moved to New York City for good to study harmony, counterpoint and theory, and maybe pick up a gig here and there for a few extra bucks.

Within a few years though, Curtis had become one of the most in-demand session players in town and in turn made the saxophone the pre-eminent lead instrument for Rhythm & Blues and early rock and roll during the '50s. His staccato-style sax playing on **The Coasters** smash 1958 single *Yakety Yak* forever sealed his reputation as one of the most innovative sax players in the history of popular music—some of his contemporaries called his distinct sound the “Curtis sound” while others simply called it “yakety sax.”

Signed to Atlantic Records, Curtis did session work for most of the top recording artists of the '50s and '60s, including **Nat King Cole**, **Clyde McPhatter**, **Andy Williams**, **Joe Turner**, **Buddy Holly** (with whom he co-wrote *Reminiscing*), **Bobby Darin**, **Neil Sedaka**, **The Shirelles** and dozens of others. And although he enjoyed huge success as a backing performer throughout the '50s, Curtis's impact as a solo artist was minimal. And then he discovered that he had Soul.

King Curtis's first solo success came in 1962 with the chart topping R&B instrumental *Soul Twist* for Enjoy Records, which he recorded with **The Noble Knights** as his backing band (later renamed **The Kingpins**). In 1964, Curtis moved to Capitol Records and released his very influential *Soul Serenade*, which enjoyed some success on the R&B charts. However, Curtis was very dissatisfied with the lack of creativity of Capitol's recording engineers and, according to the *Encyclopedia of Pop, Rock & Soul*

(St. Marten's Press 1977), he resigned with Atlantic in 1965. By then, Curtis had become a producer in his own right and often teamed with legendary Atlantic producer **Jerry Wexler** on projects. With Wexler, Curtis co-produced Aretha Franklin, **Donny Hathaway**, **Don Covay** and many other Atlantic Records artists. At the same time, Curtis began experiencing more and more success as a solo artist—his 1966 soul-drenched LP *Memphis Soul Stew* became his biggest seller at the time, and within a few years, he began contributing vocals as well as his own guitar work to his recordings, including *The Great Memphis Hits* (1967), *King Size Soul* (1967) and 1968's *Sweet Soul*.

It was also around this time that King Curtis and The Kingpins officially became Aretha Franklin's backing band in the studio and on the road. And as her musical director, he helped guide her through hits like *Respect* and *You're All I Need to Get By*, among others. Additionally, Curtis was finally being recognized by a public that had heard him so often without knowing who he really was, and he became a headliner on his own at rock festivals and concerts throughout the U.S. and Europe. Rock artists like **Duane Allman**, **Eric Clapton** and **Robbie Robertson** of **The Band** collaborated with Curtis regularly, in the studio and on the road.

By the time King Curtis recorded his eponymous *Live at the Fillmore West* during a three night stand as the opening act for Aretha Franklin in March 1971, he had placed more than a dozen singles on the national sales charts since 1962.

In the August 15, 1971 edition of the *New York Times*, reporter Murray Schumach reported that Curtis's death "...touched off memorial programs almost at once among disk (sic) jockeys." His funeral was attended by a who's who of music royalty, including **Stevie Wonder**, Duane Allman, **Sam Moore** and Aretha Franklin. The week after his funeral, *Live at the Fillmore West* topped the music charts, and Lennon's *Imagine* came

out another week later. King Curtis's last studio album, *Everybody's Talkin'*, was finally released a few months later. Clearly, the music world had lost one of its brightest stars.

One last note: The man that fatally stabbed King Curtis, Juan Montanez, was apprehended shortly after Curtis was pronounced dead at Roosevelt Hospital. The policemen investigating the murder had learned that another man had been admitted to Roosevelt with stab wounds at about the same time as Curtis. Montanez was later charged and convicted of homicide and went to prison.

Finally, King Curtis was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2000.

To learn more about King Curtis and his music, a good place to start would be the Razor and Tie CD, *Instant Soul: The Legendary King Curtis*. In it is a fascinating booklet containing Curtis's biography by Colin Escott. Another great resource is the *Encyclopedia of Pop, Rock & Soul* from St. Marten's Press (1977). And in addition to Curtis's *Live at the Fillmore West*, be sure to pick up a copy of his 1964 release, *Soul Serenade*.