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## Albert George ("Al") Hibbler

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**HIBBLER, ALBERT GEORGE** (b. 16 Aug. 1915 in Tyro, Mississippi; d. 24 Apr. 2001 in Chicago, Illinois), blind singer best known for the 1955 song “Unchained Melody,” and his earlier vocal work with Duke Ellington.

Born blind, Albert was the third of five children of Hubert Hibbler, Sr., and Lucy Propst Hibbler. He added the middle name George because he liked the way it sounded. Hibbler’s parents sold their farm in the early 1920s and moved from Mississippi to Dell, Arkansas, to become sharecroppers. Albert picked cotton and never attended school until 1929, when he was enrolled at the Arkansas School for the Blind in Little Rock, where he sang soprano in the school choir until his voice deepened into a baritone. His early vocal influences were Pha Terrell (of Andy Kirk’s Twelve Clouds of Joy), Arthur “The Street Singer” Tracy, and popular radio crooners Bing Crosby and Russ Columbo.

A local promoter began to arrange auditions for Hibbler with bands visiting Little Rock, including Fletcher Henderson and Fats Waller. With financial support from a Little Rock department store owner, Hibbler left school before graduating and studied voice for two terms at the New England Conservatory in Boston in 1935-1936. After returning to Little Rock, he began singing the blues in roadhouses, and his first professional job was with Monroe Fingers and His Yellow Jackets. Hibbler’s local notoriety led to him hosting his own weekly radio show on KGHI-AM from 1936 to 1938. He then moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where he sang with Dub Jenkins and His Playmates, before going to San Antonio, where he performed with Boots and His Buddies and then formed his own outfit. Near the end of 1941, Hibbler met pianist Jay McShann and sat in with his band, impressing both McShann and his young sax player, Charlie Parker. Hibbler joined McShann’s band for a year, and their first recording together was “Get Me on Your Mind” for Decca (1943).

After leaving McShann in early 1943, Hibbler briefly went solo in New York City, where he crossed paths with Duke Ellington for the third time – he had auditioned for Ellington earlier in both Little Rock and Memphis. Hibbler sat in with Ellington’s band at the Hurricane Club, and this time was hired. During his eight years in the band, which was the longest tenure of any of Ellington’s male vocalists, he was featured on such notable songs as “Do Nothin’ Till You Hear From Me” (which was written especially for him), “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore,” and “I’m Just a Lucky So and So.” While with Duke Ellington, he also made several solo recordings with Mercer Ellington (including the 1948 hit “Trees”), as well as recordings with various Ellington sidemen (Billy Kyle, Harry Carney, and Billy Strayhorn) and other jazz greats, such as Billy Taylor.

Hibbler’s idiosyncratic “scoop and swoop” vocal style was praised by some and panned by others. His

voice reached from deep baritone to high tenor, and, although he used very precise diction, Hibbler often included vibrato, grunts, growls, and a vague cockney accent. Ellington described it as “tonal pantomime” and clearly appreciated Hibbler, paying him \$250 per week and referring to him in his 1973 memoir as “our major asset.” Singer Mel Tormé praised Hibbler’s vocals on “I Like the Sunrise” (from Ellington’s *Liberian Suite*) as “one of the gentlest, most moving vocals ever put on wax.” Some critics, however, thought Hibbler’s singing to be exhibitionist – jazz historian Leonard Feather described Hibbler’s vocals as “grotesque tonal distortions,” and in 1990, writer Will Friedwald likened Hibbler to how Billy Eckstine “might sound if he were drunk.” Nevertheless, Hibbler was named a “New Star” jazz male vocalist by *Esquire* (1947), and was twice voted best male band vocalist by *Down Beat* (1948-1949).

Hoping to earn more money as a solo act, Hibbler left Ellington’s band in September 1951, and recorded several albums, including “Al Hibbler Sings Love Songs” (Verve, 1952), and “Al Hibbler Sings Duke Ellington” (Norgran, 1954), as well as a collaboration with Count Basie, “Basie/Jazz” (Clef, 1953). He was not an immediate solo success, however, and had to return to singing in small clubs for little money. In 1955, his new manager signed him with Decca, who recorded him with choirs and strings. “Unchained Melody” (which reached number 3 on the pop chart) and its follow-up single “He” (which reached number 4) were both million-sellers, enabling Hibbler to purchase a house in Teaneck, New Jersey, where he lived for nearly 40 years. He made numerous television appearances, including the “Ed Sullivan Show” and Alan Freed’s “The Big Beat,” and was one of the first artists signed by Frank Sinatra’s Reprise record label, releasing the album “Monday Every Day” (1961), which was recorded with the Gerald Wilson Orchestra. Hibbler preferred to sing songs with intelligent lyrics which could be understood by listeners – he thought rock and roll to be “a passing fancy” – while the musical tastes of young people began moving toward rhythm and blues, and then rock and roll.

At the same time that his commercial success was beginning to wane, Hibbler was also taking an active role in the fight for civil rights for his fellow African Americans. Responding to an invitation from Martin Luther King, Jr., Hibbler led a picket line in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, carrying a placard with the inscription, “Equal Opportunity and Human Dignity,” and was briefly arrested along with fellow protestors. Police officials immediately released him because of his blindness, however, which Hibbler complained was “segregation at its highest level.” Two days later, he held an outdoor concert as a movement fundraiser. In an earlier bizarre incident in New Jersey, Hibbler was arrested in 1960 for being drunk and disorderly after accepting a ride home from a

Harlem bar with a man who (unbeknownst to him) turned out to be a burglar – a disoriented Hibbler had been abandoned and was found alone by police at the third gas station that the man had broken into on the ride home.

Although chronic drinking and smoking coarsened his voice, he continued to record and concertize sporadically, including albums with blind multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk (1972) and pianist Hank Jones (1984), and he performed at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1973 and 1976. Hibbler sang “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” and “When the Saints Go Marching In” at Louis Armstrong’s 1971 funeral. One of his last appearances was at New York City’s Lincoln Center (1999) as part of the centennial celebration of Duke Ellington’s birth. He received a Pioneer Award from the Rhythm and Blues Foundation (1991), and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Arkansas Jazz Heritage Foundation (1995).

A Baptist, Hibbler married Jeanette McAden on 23 January 1949, and they separated in about 1966. They had no children, and she died in 1982. He lived with a girlfriend, Cetire Streater, from the 1970s until her death in a fire that destroyed his house in 1994, after which he went to live with his sister in Chicago. He died at Holy Cross Hospital in Chicago at age 85, and was buried in Lincoln Cemetery.

Hibbler never used a white cane and only wore dark glasses when performing on stage. A gregarious man, Hibbler wanted no special treatment, for he did not consider his lack of sight a handicap – he frequently pointed out that, “Anything can be a handicap if you let it.” Hibbler’s singing transcended many different types of music (blues, jazz, and popular standards), but he worked with some of the greatest jazz musicians of the twentieth century. His success and acceptance by the public helped pave the way for blind entertainers who followed him.

[Felix Grant conducted a far-reaching audio interview with Hibbler, 23 Apr. 1968, for “The Album Sound” radio program on WMAL-AM, which is in the Felix E. Grant Jazz Archives at the University of the District of Columbia. Hibbler discussed his life and career in “What Love Can Do,” *Tan* (Aug. 1956), and “A Blind Man Can Get Rich,” *Sepia* (Dec. 1958). Early profiles are in *Hue* (Feb. 1956), *Time* (3 Sept. 1956) and *Ebony* (Aug. 1957). Valuable information also appears in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, edited by Barry Kernfeld (2nd ed., 2002); and *Contemporary Musicians*, volume 34 (2002). A very useful overview of Hibbler’s career, written by Joseph F. Laredo, was published in the booklet accompanying the 1998 Varese compact disc, “Unchained Melody: The Best of Al Hibbler.” Hibbler’s involvement in the Birmingham civil rights protests is briefly discussed in *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*, by Diane McWhorter (2001),

which also contains a photograph of Hibbler leading a picket line. Brief footage of Hibbler's Birmingham arrest can be seen in the 1986 PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, episode four, *No Easy Walk*.

Obituaries are in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (26 Apr. 2001), *New York Times* (27 Apr. 2001), and *Los Angeles Times* (28 Apr. 2001).]

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