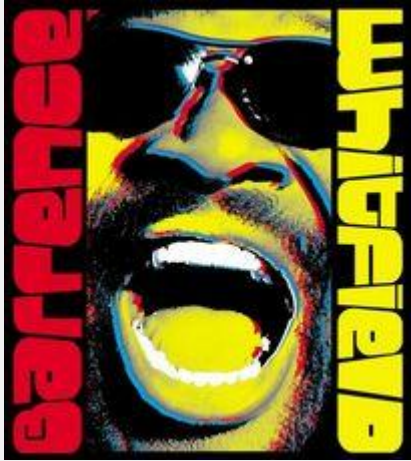


Gospel according to Barrence Whitfield

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By **Ken Capobianco**

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"People in this era don't know what to make of me," Barrence Whitfield says, "but if they see the live show, they know they've seen something different and special."

(Graphic created by David Stowell)

If considering the great performers of the Boston music scene in the last quarter-century, you'd have to put Barrence Whitfield at the top of the list. The soul shouter has torched so many stages; you wonder how his hoarse fans don't have singed eyebrows.

Singing Praises

Barrence Whitfield, who has opened for many acts, including Tina Turner, Solomon Burke and even the Pogues, counts among his fans musicians who respect the purity of his music and spirited live performances. He says he even hopes to corral Robert Plant into doing something together someday. "The guy is a fan. He showed up one night and I got a note saying Robert Plant wanted to be on the guest list," says Whitfield. "I'm like, you're joking – he doesn't have to ask. But apparently he had heard my music and other musicians had told him I was a must-see. I've always thought to search him out but never really done it."

Members of Los Lobos always invite Whitfield onstage when they play in Boston. They remain one of his biggest supporters. "Not only are they great musicians – maybe the best band working – but they are genuinely nice and approachable people," Whitfield says.

George Thorogood also is a fan. "He's a kindred spirit, and he has always sung my praises and been in my corner. I've opened for him, and those are truly great shows."

– *KEN CAPOBIANCO*

Whitfield, who arrived in Boston in the late '70s and became the frontman for the Savages, is a throwback stylist in the tradition of Little Richard and Wilson Pickett. His antic, bug-eyed, leave-the-car-in-overdrive approach has been unmatched in Boston musical lore. With gusts of lung power and an Energizer Bunny stage persona, Whitfield has earned accolades from critics and deep respect from his peers.

"I'm an oddball, and some people in this era don't know what to make of me, but if they see the live show, they know they've seen something different and special," says the artist from his home in Beverly. Whitfield never managed to break out of the Boston music scene to bigger things but has developed a national grass-roots following.

Some of his records with the Savages, including the seminal party record "Ow! Ow! Ow!" from 1992 and "Let's Lose It" (1995), are essential listening for anyone who wants to hear how to fuse R&B, soul and rock with an irreverent preacher spirit. This is shake-the-rafters material. Whitfield was getting the party started when Pink was taking out her retainer.

All of his records are out of print, but Whitfield, who just returned from playing shows in Spain, where he has a large following, is working toward rectifying his catalog situation.

"It's one of my projects, because people just don't know what we were about, and I still want the music to be out there and available," he says. He's in talks with the terrific roots-rock label Yep Roc, among others, but he says it is interested in putting the songs out digitally only and Whitfield, like any old-school music veteran, would also like to get physical distribution.

Born Barry White in New Jersey, Whitfield found an unlimited love for raucous soul and unhinged R&B early on, and was inspired by the likes of Little Richard and Big Joe Turner.

"There were so many acts in the '50s and early '60s who were taking the music to another level and really set the groundwork for rock 'n' roll. They just changed the way we think about things," he says. "Like many singers like me, I came out of the church, and there's a gospel influence to my music and that sense of how the songs can help you reach a higher plane."

Whitfield moved to Boston in the late '70s and eventually hooked up with a bunch of refugees from the Boston rock scene and formed Barrence Whitfield and the Savages. They became a staple on the club scene, as there was nothing else in the area like these guys – playing sweaty, go-for-broke R&B in a town and an era known for their garage rock, indie punk ethos.

As a black singer in a predominantly white music scene, Whitfield was a rarity. "Again I go back to the idea that I was an oddball, and sometimes people didn't know what to do with me, but the city embraced me wholeheartedly at the time and the musicians knew that what I was doing really was making a difference to the people in the clubs," Whitfield says. "I have nothing but good memories, and there really was a spirit and soul to the music scene in Boston in those days."

He is philosophical when considering why the soul-stirrer singing tradition has mostly died out in the new millennium.

"It's a different era, and people's tastes have changed. The focus is more on the smoother neo-soul and hip-hop," he says. "Also, the way records are recorded has changed things, as technology can really mask some of the singing, so the immediacy and urgency doesn't have to be there and the focus becomes more on the tracks."

Whitfield may be too polite to add that many artists are content to coast through live performances and leave the roof-raising to carpenters. But he notes that there are many soul acts he admires these days, including Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings. He mentions the late-career success of Jones and the great soul singer Bettye LaVette as inspirations as he works on a few different new records, which he hopes to release in the near future.

One is a "garage-y R&B" set of songs he says he's almost finished with and readying for the Blood Red Vinyl label. "There's an audience out there for this kind of music, but people just have to hear more of it these days.

"I know when I see the reaction of the clubs that folks are really hungering for something real and authentic to shake their souls." He pauses and considers things momentarily. "What I do isn't nostalgia, I call it living history, and that's something we all share in."