

The music man: From choirboy, to R&B celebrity, to record store clerk, Barrence Whitfield's life is all about the tunes

By Rosemary Ford, Staff writer
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He was born Barry White.

Then a singer by the same name started scoring big hits and winning fans in the '70s. So it wasn't the easiest name to bear for a kid who also wanted to be a singer - but not like Barry White. "I always had the idea I could be like James Brown," said the 53-year-old musician now living in Beverly. He changed his name to Barrence Whitfield, and it has served him well.

In the '80s, as part of Barrence Whitfield and The Savages, he achieved cult status here and fame in England, where he counts Robert Plant and Elvis Costello among his fans.

Nowadays, Whitfield still is singing - and screaming and shouting like Brown - locally. Sometimes he performs with the former Savages, other times with another local favorite, the Boston Horns, comprised of many North of Boston musicians. He's also featured on the Horns' latest album, "Shibuya Gumbo."

"He gets the audience into the music," said Horns saxophonist and co-founder Henley Douglas Jr. of Salem. He's traveled the world with great singers, and Douglas ranks Whitfield among the best. "Barrence Whitfield, there is nobody like him," Douglas said. "He is a true soul singer."

In addition to playing clubs by night, Whitfield by day works at the Record Exchange on Washington Street in Salem, Mass. To him the store is a musical museum, an archive for great music of the past that allows him to indulge his eclectic musical tastes every day.

"I am glad to have a place where I can come to, and I'm able to take off from," said Whitfield, who started working at the store in 1992. Taking off usually means touring. In February, he's got some dates in southern Spain where he will perform at a jazz festival. Whitfield frequently plays Europe, where he says he may be better recognized and appreciated than he is in America. It's a dynamic that can be traced back to the 1980s, when Barrence Whitfield and the Savages were discovered by a BBC disc jockey.

But that wasn't the beginning of Whitfield's musical career. He started singing as a boy with his church choir in New Jersey, had a few bands in high school, then abandoned his musical ambitions for college. He came to Massachusetts in the late 1970s to study broadcast journalism at Boston University. In 1983 he met ex-Lyres guitarist Peter Greenberg, founder of the original Savages. At the time, Whitfield says, his voice was a little rusty. "I hadn't performed for five years," Whitfield said. "It took me a while to get it together." Soon Barrence Whitfield and the Savages were making waves in Greater Boston, gathering favorable reviews and national attention in the '80s. They played traditional R&B and rock, a mix of cover songs and originals, and took off after signing with Rounder Records in Cambridge. They lived up to their name, playing wild live shows. "We had people rip off their shirts and dance on tables," Whitfield recalled.

It was then that the group caught the attention of well-known BBC disc jockey Andy Kershaw, who came to America and recorded Whitfield and the Savages, then broadcasted the show in England. It was so popular, Kershaw pushed for the band's first European tour.

"It blew us wide open," said Whitfield, who met Plant and Costello there. By 1995, the band would officially split though Whitfield still plays with some of the former members. Over the years he has done a variety of other projects, ranging from two country albums with Tom Russell, to performing with Bo Diddley, Tina Turner, George Thorogood, Robert Cray, The Rev. Solomon Burke, Los Lobos, and many others.

Whitfield currently is working on a CD with producer Tommy Hambridge, who also worked on Susan Tedeschi's first album (which went gold), as well as her second. He also has a tune on the soundtrack to John Sayles new movie, "Honeydripper," starring Danny Glover and Lisa Gay Hamilton.

He's most proud of the fact he has been able to deliver music to so many people.