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KNOWN NOT ONLY for his music, but also his sincerity, Otis Redding often bridged the schism between whites and blacks in 1950s and '60s America.



Sweet, sweet soul music: remembering Otis Redding

■ Some folks think of Redding, who died 30 years ago today, as a one-hit wonder. They couldn't be more wrong.

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Music Critic

In the world of rock 'n' roll, how one dies can be almost as much of a badge of honor as how one lived.

And Otis Redding's death was undoubtedly tragic enough to garner rock legend status. Thirty years ago today, the 26-year-old Redding died in a plane crash near Madison, Wis., that threw him into the premature-death-by-aviation club that already was ruled by such luminaries as Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper.

But the death of Otis Redding was more than a surprising and unwelcome flash — it was the end of the life of a man who practically defined soul music in the 1960s. It was the death of a man whose influence continues to this day.

For most people, particularly those born after Redding's death, the King of Soul is a one-hit wonder whose only lasting recording is "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay," an uncharacteristic song that was released posthumously and recorded only days before the plane crash.

Most true music fans know that Redding was more than "that 'Dock of the Bay' guy," and countless professional musicians list Redding as a major influence.

Even though I grew up as an avid listener of oldies stations, I knew very little of Redding until my freshman year at UNL, when I started my '60s soul phase of music purchasing. It was then I picked up a compact disc on the Rhino label called "The Very Best of Otis Redding, Vol. 1."

I was floored.

My early dabblings in soul music had consisted mostly of Motown groups that, to the best of my knowledge, were the definition of soul music.

But the slick production and flawless harmonies that pushed Motown into the music charts were absent from Redding's work. When Redding played, it often sounded like a group of street musicians had hastily assembled to play backup for a man with a voice that often wavered and rarely formed a pure tone.

In short, Otis Redding didn't sing like Smokey Robinson or Marvin Gaye.

Instead, Otis Redding sang like he meant it. On every song, you can practically hear Redding dropping to his knees and testifying. You can see the tears and sweat mingling on his face.

On "Try a Little Tenderness," you can feel the tension build until you can hardly take it anymore, and then the Big O shows mercy and lets you have it.

And ever since the day I picked up my first Otis Redding album, I've been — by every definition of the word — a Redding fanatic.

Redding is buried on his ranch north of Macon, Ga. Naturally, being the fanatic that I am, I went there. Luckily, I have friends who also have been snared by Redding's recorded charm.

My friends and I embarked on a late-summer journey through the Deep South.

We drove dozens of hours. We slept in the back seat of a car. We ate terrible food. But none of us cared, because we were going to see Otis.

By the time we got to Macon, we were tired and hungry and ready to find a hotel.

But first, we went to see Otis.

After about an hour of driving around the heavily wooded backroads of suburban Macon, we found a jogger who pointed us to Redding's ranch.

Dusk was upon us, but her directions led us right to the front gate. We saw the sign, complete with Otis' picture and a warning that the ranch was private property and trespassing was not permitted.

We stopped, considered our options and decided that receiving a ticket for trespassing on Otis Redding's property may not be cheap, but it also might be a great story for the grandkids.

We drove down the long driveway slowly, eventually reaching the large white marble slab that marks Redding's final resting place.

A few bunches of flowers were scattered around the grave, and we read the inscription, from Redding's most famous song: "2,000 miles I've roamed, just to make this dock my home."

We just sat and looked at it.

I had been to Graceland before and watched old women weep at Elvis' grave. I remembered seeing people crying in Central Park on television after John Lennon died. And I had never understood why those people cried for someone they had never known.

But as I sat and looked at Otis Redding's tombstone, I realized that I was crying, too. I realized that those people weren't mourning someone they had never met. They knew their musical heroes because of their music.

And even though Otis Redding died 11 years before I was born, I feel obligated to pay my respects to him every year.

So tonight my roommate and I will perform the annual ceremony, lighting candles and listening to nothing but Redding's music. We will eat whatever Southern food we can find in Lincoln. And we may not cry, but we will mourn.

It's the least the Big O deserves.