

# “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long (To Stop Now)”— Otis Redding (1965)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Cary O’Dell



*Otis Redding*



*Original label*

Like a surprising number of America’s most revered and best-known rock ‘n’ roll classics, Otis Redding’s remarkable “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long (To Stop Now)” originally wasn’t much of a hit. Alarmingly, it didn’t make it above #21 on the pop charts when it was first released in 1965.

But, since then, the burning power of Redding’s heartfelt soul has made this record a true standard. As Dave Marsh in his book “The Heart of Rock & Soul” puts it, “[it’s] the ultimate slow dance, a nonpareil seduction song,...a song that will be covered as long as men and women want an excuse to clutch each other tight in public.”

It took about two weeks for Redding and co-writer Jerry Butler to take the song from a fragment that Butler first played for Redding in a Buffalo motel room to the final version. It was recorded on April 19, 1965 and put out on the Volt label (a subsidiary of Stax). While the song did have some success on the pop chart, it was far more popular in the R&B rankings; it made it all the way to number two.

Otis Redding was born in 1941 in Dawson, Georgia. The son of a gospel-singer preacher and his housekeeper wife, Redding showed an early inclination towards music. Quitting school in his sophomore year, Redding eventually went to work as a member of Little Richard’s house band. After taking part in local talent shows and fronting a band that toured the Chitlin’ Circuit, Redding signed with Confederate records in 1960. His first record, “Shout Bamalama,” was for them.

In 1964, Redding signed with Stax Records. His debut album, “Pain in My Heart,” came out that same year and featured Redding’s first successful single “These Arms of Mine.” At Stax, Redding proceeded to put out a series of classic albums featuring some of the most progressive and enduring rock/soul fusion ever committed to vinyl. His albums “The Great Otis Sings Soul Ballads” and “Otis Blue” are considered classics of the emerging genre, and the epitome of the Stax and Memphis sound.

Jerry Butler (b. 1939) is a singer, songwriter, a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and a politician. He serves as commissioner for Cook County, Illinois; he was first elected in 1985. Prior to his life in public service, Butler was a member of the vocal group The Impressions and wrote their first hit, 1958’s “For Your Precious Love.” Butler left the group that same year and scored solo hits with “He Will Break Your Heart” in 1960, “Let It Be Me” with Betty Everett in 1964 and “Only the Strong Survive” in 1969. Nicknamed “The Iceman” during his career,

Butler, as a member of the Impressions, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991.

Redding and Butler's enduring classic "I've Been Loving You to Long" is intricately deconstructed in Scott Freeman's biography of Otis Redding, "Otis." He states:

The arrangement was so simple, yet so ingenious. And there was a magical quality in the feel that Otis captures. The song was carefully crafted so that every single note, every exquisite hesitation in Otis's voice as he sang the opening lines over the muted accompaniment....

After the first line, a sharp drum shot came out of nowhere and the horns played an ascending progression that sounded like a voice rising in anguish. Otis's voice soared behind them, and then, as the horns faded, his voice was left alone and calling out in a hoarse whisper. This verse ended differently than the first, with a series of dramatic, three one-note stops. For a moment, there was complete silence.

Since its release, "I've Been Loving You..." has been narratively interpreted a variety of ways—as a paean to lost love, as a devotional ode, as a plea (its lyrics: "I'm down on my knees...").

So universal, so aching, so unfailingly solid, "I've Been Loving You" has gone on to be re-recorded by the crème de la crème of rock and soul artists, personages so profound they seldom need last names: Aretha, Etta, Ike and Tina, the Stones (in one of their reaches for authentic American blues), and Seal. Country legend Barbara Mandrell had her first career single with a countrified version of the song in 1971.

Yet, for all the covers, there is nothing that compares to the original. Jerry Butler said of his co-writer's approach, "Nobody else on the face of this earth would have gotten that song because it was intended for [Otis]." And Dave Marsh said, "[Redding's] version is inimitable.... Otis tears the song up without showing a second's strain."

After "I've Been Loving You..." Redding would have additional success with other recordings including "Respect" (later to made immortal by Aretha Franklin), "Try A Little Tenderness" "Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa (The Sad Song)," and "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay." In 1967, he teamed with songstress Carla Thomas for a duets album titled "King and Queen." He also found time to establish his own record label, Jotis. It would go on to release music by Arthur Conley, Loretta Williams, and Billy Young. In June of '67, Redding took part in the three-day Monterey Pop Festival in Monterey, California. Organized in part by John Phillips of The Mamas and the Papas, the weekend line-up included the Who, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. Redding's performance—his first in front of a predominately white audience—in which he sang "Satisfaction" and "Respect" has since become the stuff of legend. A recording of his Monterey performance was later put out on a special "live" LP.

Unfortunately, we are left to wonder what other iconic songs Redding might have fashioned. He died suddenly, prematurely, in a plane crash on December 9, 1967. ("Dock of the Bay," recorded three days before his death, was released posthumously and would become Redding's only #1 pop hit.) Redding would be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989.

If the longing and the heartbreak in Redding's voice was palpable in "I've Been Loving You Too Long (To Stop Now)" before (and it was), then the tragic knowledge of this singer's untimely death so soon after he crafted this song has made it take on an even greater weight and poignancy.

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