

“September”—Earth Wind & Fire (1978)

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Essay by Rickey Vincent (guest post)*



“Do you remember, the 21st night of September...?” those were the opening lyrics to one of the biggest hits of 1978, and still one of the most entertaining pop songs over the decades. It is a song about memory, memories that have happened, and memories yet to come. A contagious joy emanates from the song, with lyrics that tease with importance, yet captivate with a repeating “*ba-de-ya*” refrain that is as memorable as any lyrical phrase. The song is a staple of movie soundtracks (such as “Ted 2,” “Barbershop--The Next Cut,” and “Night at the Museum”), commercial jingles, and family gatherings everywhere.

With music providing tickles of percussion, soaring yet comforting horn lines, and the breathtaking harmonies, “September” is one of Earth Wind & Fire’s most catchy sing-along favorites. The lyrics spoke of dancing under the stars, and of celebrating moments in our lives. The words captured ideas that seemed so meaningful, yet really were not. The 21st night of September? What date was that? Was it someone’s birthday? How could a song tug at one’s memories, and yet refer to so little? Co-writer Allee Willis has said the date was used simply because it “sounded right when sung.”

The irony was that Earth Wind & Fire had had a run of some of the most thought-provoking and inspiring messages in their catalogue of hit songs, from “Keep Your Head To the Sky” to “Shining Star” and “That’s the Way of the World,” there was an expectation of something deeper underpinning the uplifting experience. With “September,” the group simply went for the jugular vein of pure joy and happiness instead.

Guitarist and co-writer Al McKay recalled how it began: “I brought it to Maurice, and he liked it right away. Then he said, ‘Play it again.’ And I kept playing it for him. The last time, he looked at me and he sang, ‘Do you remember ...’”

Why does this song continue to captivate listeners? Jeffrey Peretz, a professor of music theory at New York University, said that the magic has a lot to do with how the music unfolds. “The song's very structure is an endless cycle that keeps us dancing and wanting more,” he told NPR’s Dan Charnas. “There's four chords in the chorus that just keep moving forward and never seem to land anywhere--much like the four seasons.” Like memories that are familiar yet change every time, we cannot hold them, but we find a joy in revisiting them nonetheless.

Earth Wind & Fire was the vision of Memphis-born bandleader, songwriter and lead singer Maurice White, who had developed the band from an obscure jazz-fusion outfit in Chicago in 1970 into one of the most popular and entertaining acts in the world. They dressed as if they walked out of the Egyptian pyramids, and their epic high-energy concerts incorporated laser-light shows, pyrotechnics, floating pianos, disappearing acts, and performance art parables delivered through skits and memes onstage. Following a string of multi-platinum albums from 1974 to 1977, “September” emerged as a crowning achievement of the band’s decade of stellar output.

By 1978, Maurice White had the pick of songwriters to collaborate with, and he brought young pop stylist Allee Willis in to help with the lyrics. Willis’ work was already on the radio that spring, with a Rita Coolidge song “Love Me Again,” but she was not familiar with White’s methods, a combination of meticulous arranging, and easygoing improvisation. White recalled working with her on the song in his autobiography “My Life In Earth Wind & Fire”: “Allee Willis was livid, insisting that ‘September’ needed a vocal hook instead of ‘*Ba-de-ya*’... she was almost in tears. I just put my arm around her and said, ‘You gotta trust me on this one--I can’t let a bulky lyric get in the way of a melodic groove.’”

For that melodic groove, rhythm guitarist Al McKay was his go-to hit maker. McKay could make any musical idea come to life with joyful notes and driving rhythms all at once. It took some effort to get him into the fold, but once he did, the results they made were magical. White explained that: “‘September’ was the last of a trilogy of songs that Al and I wrote, which were all coming from the same groove and feel. Those songs were ‘Sing a Song’ (a #5 pop hit), ‘The Best of My Love’ (by the Emotions, a #1 pop hit) and now ‘September.’”

“September” defined the band’s dominance as the 70s came to a close. It was their tenth top-ten R&B hit, their sixth #1 R&B single, and fourth top ten pop song. It was their 20th charting single to that point. Earlier, in 1978, the group had released the Beatles’ cover, “Got To Get You Into My Life,” made for the “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” movie, the high point of an otherwise forgettable film. That single (#9, Pop) gave the group such momentum, that they no longer needed a full-length album release to remain the dominant musical group of their time. “September” appeared on their 1978 compilation album “The Best of Earth, Wind & Fire, Vol. 1.” For White, he was working in rarified air, and “September” was Earth Wind & Fire in its purest form.

The joyful noise of “September” continues to resonate. In the fall of 2018, 40 years from its release, Spotify plays for “September” totaled over 384 million--four times the amount of their second most played song, “Boogie Wonderland” (98 million, a bigger hit at the time of its release). According to Bryan Roll at “Forbes,” the official “September” video has accumulated over 226 million Youtube views, and on September 21, 2017 alone, the video earned 719,000 views. The song was re-recorded, as “December” for a 2014 holiday album, one of Maurice White’s last recording sessions with the group. White succumbed to the effects of Parkinson’s disease on February 4, 2016.

Yet the song continues to lives on. Pop superstars such as Taylor Swift and Justin Timberlake have attempted to update and cover the song in recent years. Unlike other fun and funky hits from the seventies, there has not been a run of hip-hop productions with samples responsible for rekindling interest in the song, it continues to live and breathe in its original, timeless form. Contemporary artists should *remember* that Earth Wind & Fire songs feature complex, multifaceted vocals--supported by complex, multifaceted musical grooves, a sonic combination that is second to none, and something still so satisfying to this day.

Rickey Vincent is the author of “Funk: The Music, the People and the Rhythm of The One.” He is a noted educator, radio host and commentator on popular music and culture.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.