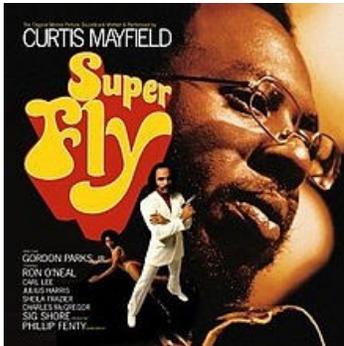


# “Superfly”—Curtis Mayfield (1972)

Added to the National Registry: 2018

Essay by Josiah Howard (guest post)\*



*Album cover*



*Label*



*Mayfield*

What is there left to say about Curtis Mayfield’s seminal work “Superfly,” his soundtrack album for the 1972 Warner Bros. Pictures film? One might start by stating the facts. “Superfly,” a collection of nine songs written, produced and performed by Mayfield, is one of the most critically praised, politically aware, and financially successful blaxploitation cinema soundtrack albums ever made.

And it’s no wonder: the album spawned two million-selling Top Ten pop and R&B hits--“Superfly” and “Freddie’s Dead”--continued the tradition of social commentary in popular black music and served as a subversive dissonant--a counter story to the story being played out on the screen.

“I was very influenced by Marvin [Gaye’s] ‘What’s Going On’ album,” Mayfield remembered years later (Gaye’s album was released the year before). “When they asked me to do ‘Superfly,’ I was worried because I thought Marvin had already covered all the social commentary and soul music bases.”

He needn’t have worried. It was true that Gaye’s album was a touchstone--even broaching the topic of the environment; “Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology).” But it was also true that Mayfield, not Gaye, first introduced and was first credited with afro-centric, black power, “brother” songs that, as it turned out, served as the soundtrack for the Civil Rights movement.

Curtis Lee Mayfield was born in Chicago, Illinois, on June 3, 1942. He grew up in the hard knocks Cabrini-Green housing projects--the incendiary backdrop for the blaxploitation favorite “Cooley High” and the African-American TV series “Good Times.” One of five children, his mother encouraged his innate musicality. At 14, Mayfield joined a singing group that would later become the Impressions. He sang, played instruments--including the piano, guitar and bass, and wrote catchy songs.

The Impressions--Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees (as is Curtis Mayfield as a solo artist)--went through several casting changes over the years. The one constant was Mayfield’s masterful songs. “Gypsy Woman” (1962), “It’s All Right” (1963), “Keep on Pushing” (1964), and “People

Get Ready” (1965)--the latter two of which were embraced by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and utilized during the decades’ many freedom rides, elevated Mayfield from soul group member to poet/artist/activist. The cumulative effect was that his unique talents made him seem larger than the group that brought him fame.

Nineteen-seventy was the year Curtis Mayfield said goodbye to the Impressions. That years’ “Curtis” and the following years’ “Roots,” released on Curtom—his very own record label-- appealed to Mayfield’s already established black audience but took his music and his message a step further. The new song titles said it all: “The Other Side of Town,” “We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue,” “Move on Up,” “Miss Black America,” “Get Down,” “Beautiful Brother of Mine,” and “Keep on Keeping On,” made clear that Mayfield was acutely aware of America’s ongoing race and class divide--and he wasn’t afraid to discuss it.

With his renown as both a musician and social commentator firmly in place, it was no surprise that Mayfield was tapped to create the soundtrack for a push-the-buttons new black film called “Super Fly”: a controversial picture (condemned by the NAACP and CORE) whose focus was a flamboyantly dressed--and coiffed--New York City cocaine dealer named Youngblood Priest.

The blaxploitation movie boom was ignited in 1970 when director Ossie Davis’ low-budget black-cast comedy “Cotton Comes to Harlem” turned out to be a box office bonanza. The following year, Melvin Van Peebles’ “Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song,” Gordon Parks’ “Shaft,” Ivan Dixon’s “Trouble Man,” and Gordon Parks, Jr’s “Super Fly” (a new wave of black directors directing a new wave of black films) underlined the obvious--times had changed. The contemporary cinema hero was now, for a time at least, a young, tough, sexy, pointedly ethnic black man or woman, who may or may not be operating within the confines of the law.

Recorded in just three days at the RCA Recording Studios in Chicago, Illinois (with the exception of “Pusherman” recorded at Bell Sound Studios in New York City), “Supefly” made a lasting mark on the pop consciousness. Blaxploitation films had opened up an ancillary market for black musicians. Earth Wind and Fire performed the music for “Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song,” Isaac Hayes did “Shaft” (and won a Grammy and an Oscar for “Theme from ‘Shaft’”), and Marvin Gaye did “Trouble Man.” Now it was Curtis’ turn.

“Little Child Runnin Wild” (originally titled “Ghetto Child”) was “Superfly’s” introductory opus: an evocative story song set to an infectious beat. The tale of a disadvantaged black child’s experience growing up amidst neglect, “Little Child,” a song Mayfield later revealed contained all the details of his own childhood, was prescient--“*Little child, runnin wild / Watch a while / You see he never smiles / Broken home, father gone / Mama tired, so he’s all alone.*” These were profound and personal lyrics: an ugly snapshot of ghetto life.

“Pusherman” had all the tropes of hip-hop and rap. The N-word was there. So was current black slang: “your main boy,” “super cool,” “tryin to get over.” “Pusherman” took an unflinching look at grooming and coercion, the tools of the trade of a dope dealer. Mayfield’s haunting falsetto, backed by strings and horns, delivered the disheartening tale. (In the film, Mayfield and The Curtis Mayfield Experience, perform the song during a nightclub sequence.)

“Freddie’s Dead,” was “Superfly’s” first single release. Reaching record stores before the film hit theaters (in “Super Fly” a character puts the record on a turntable!) the song went to No. 4, pop and No. 2, R&B. “Freddie’s Dead” was compelling but bleak: it was all about “Fat” Freddie, a young man who got caught up in drug culture and was murdered, only to be replaced by another unfortunate “Freddie.” Mayfield’s lyrics, combined with a distinct three-cord musical punctuation, was haunting: *“Everybody’s misused him / Ripped him off and abused him / Another junkie plan / Pushing dope for ‘the man.’”* (In his book, “Traveling Soul the Life of Curtis Mayfield,” Mayfield’s eldest son, Todd, revealed that his father was furious when “Freddie’s Dead” lost out on a Best Original Song Academy Award nomination. It proved to be ineligible because the version played in the film didn’t feature Mayfield’s vocals).

“Junkie Chase” was one of two instrumental tracks on “Superfly”: a bombastic affair that reinforced Mayfield’s ability to deliver straight-out narrative driven orchestral arrangements. What’s striking about “Junkie Chase” is its obvious necessity. Devoid of Mayfield’s musical artistry two pivotal scenes--an extended chase through the streets (and apartments) of Harlem, and a final act chase and “surrender” to the mob--would have seemed pedestrian and formulaic. Instead, Mayfield made the dialogue-less cinema spaces film highlights, what Alfred Hitchcock referred to as “pure cinema.”

“Give Me Your Love (Love Song)” was a slow jam used in “Super Fly” during a much talked about, semi-nude bathtub sequence featuring Priest and his “main squeeze” Georgia (Sheila Frazier). Downbeat and tender, seductive and heady, the song provided a much-needed respite from the film’s non-stop action. When it was released as a single, “Give Me Your Love (Love Song)” became an easy listening and R&B favorite--even rising to No. 31 on the pop charts.

“Eddie You Should Know Better” is a self-explanatory mid-tempo tune that tells the story of a young black man who was loved and supported by his family and friends, only to end up exploiting them: *“Eddie, you should know better / Brother, you know you’re wrong / Think of the tears and fears / You bring to your folks back home.”* It’s an engaging musical moment on the “Superfly” soundtrack album that doesn’t appear in the actual film.

“No Thing on Me” looked at a black man who avoided joining the mob-controlled white power structure that promoted and sold drugs in his neighborhood. Mayfield introduces the song with a heartfelt spoken passage, equal parts homily and cautionary tale. Then the music kicks in. Backed by the refrain *“I’m so glad I’ve got my own / So glad that I can see / My life’s a natural high / ‘The man’ can’t put no thing on me,”* “No Thing on Me” was modern and specific, it spoke about gratitude, awareness and self-preservation.

“Think” was “Superfly’s” second and final instrumental track. A lush, poignant mood piece that travels through an emotional curve, it expressed the sentiments and experiences of “Super Fly’s” characters. In the film, “Think” played over a heart-wrenching overdose, and later, a surprise plot twist: it was a lasting musical highlight. (Note: Johnny Pate, a legend in the jazz world and a man whose first association with Mayfield took place during Mayfield’s tenure with the Impressions, later claimed that *he* had composed and executed “Superfly’s” two instrumental tracks--“Junkie Chase” and “Think.” When Mayfield refused to give Pate a co-writing credit, Pate told his story to the press. The two never spoke or worked together again.)

Superfly: 1. *Ostentatiously fashionable*; 2. *An ostentatious, self-confident person*.

“Superfly” (one word for the song title; two words for the film title) was, in 1971, popular black slang for “cool” or “on-point.” “Super Fly’s” male lead was superfly. So was the blaxploitation film genre. And so was Curtis Mayfield’s 3:51 “Superfly,” a song that brought the catchphrase to an even larger audience (in the film a character takes a snort of cocaine and exclaims “Superfly!”).

“Superfly” was a tailor-made, instantly recognizable tune that, along with its musical acumen, dared to tackle the fantasy/wish fulfillment of dealing drugs: the supposed quick route to success decorated with flashy clothes, fast cars, fancy women/men, and an endless stream of cash. When it was released as a single, Mayfield’s brand-new-sounding funk jam rose to No. 8 pop, No. 5 R&B and sold more than a million copies.

Following the critical praise and financial success of “Superfly,” Curtis Mayfield went on to score several more blaxploitation soundtrack albums. “Claudine” (1974; Gladys Knight & the Pips had a No. 5 pop hit and a No. 2 R&B hit with Mayfield’s “On and On”); “Let’s Do It Again” (1975; The Staple Singers had a No. 1 pop and No. 1 R&B hit with Mayfield’s title track); “Sparke” (1976; Aretha Franklin had a No. 28 pop hit and a No. 1 R&B hit with Mayfield’s “Something He Can Feel”; 15 years later En Vogue had a No. 6 pop and No. 1 R&B hit with the song); “Short Eyes” (1977; in which Mayfield made a cameo and performed his “Do Do Wap is Strong in Here”); and “A Piece of the Action” (1977; the third in a trio of films starring Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby).

Irrespective of his estrangement from Curtis Mayfield, Johnny Pate, too, enjoyed post “Superfly” soundtrack album success. On “Superfly,” Pate maintained that he was grudgingly credited as “arranger” of Mayfield’s “original dictations,” a citation that galled him. On his own, Pate was credited fully as “composer, arranger and conductor” as well as the major songwriter of “Brother on the Run” and “Shaft in Africa” (both 1973), and “Bucktown” (1975).

“I don’t think that ‘Super Fly’ would have been half as popular as it was if it wasn’t for Curtis’ wonderful music,” “Super Fly” co-star Sheila Frazier surmised in 2001. And it’s true. “Super Fly” elevated blaxploitation cinema (it knocked “The Godfather” out of the No. 1 spot on “Variety’s” all-important Top Grossing Films List); confirmed the musical legacy now associated with the films (blaxploitation soundtracks are recognized as a fertile forum in which black musical talent combined forces with the motion picture industry); and cemented Curtis Mayfield’s place in the pantheon of profoundly talented African-American singers, songwriters, producers and musicians.

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