

THE CHICAGO SOUL SERIES

BY ROBERT PRUTER

Willie Parker – Frankie Newsome One Of Chicago's Finest Soul Singers

Chicago recording artist, Willie Parker (aka Frankie Newsome), was one of the finest representatives of what might be called hard soul during the golden era of soul music, which swept the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. The hard soul style, partaking of gospel and blues, was a powerfully and emotionally-sung music, with the lyrics often shouted and cried out. But as fine a singer that he was, he never broke out to any substantial success. This was in part because of the vagaries of the music business, where even superb recordings do not translate into hits, and partly because he performed under two completely separate names – Willie Parker and Frankie Newsome. Parker broke out into the music business in 1966, recording for M-Pac!, an imprint of the One-derful! recording company. Then in 1968 he began recording as Frankie Newsome for a bevy of small Chicago labels.



Willie Parker, circa mid 1960s.

Willie Parker, as we will call him for the first part of his career, was born on 3rd January, 1944, in McGee, Mississippi. His birth name was Willie L. Newsome, which explains in part his two separate show business names. His family moved up North when Parker was ten years old, and settled in Joliet, a city southwest of Chicago. As to how he got into the entertainment business, Parker says: "I've been singing basically all my life. I started out singing gospel, what they called quartet singing." Parker sang in the church choir, and while still only eleven years old, sang as a part of an adult quartet, the Chariot Wheels Gospel Singers, which he said recorded only after he left.

Parker was also singing rhythm and blues, and by the age of fifteen, he was singing in Joliet clubs, first at the Rock Inn, a nearby club owned by Junior Adams. Assuming Parker's memory is correct at when he broke into the clubs, this had to be 1959. He had come under the management and mentorship of Lawrence Parker, who had discovered Parker singing in a local youth centre. To facilitate getting the under-aged singer into the clubs, Parker gave Willie Newsome the name of 'Willie Parker', and passed him off as his nephew.

At one club, in 1962 or so – about the time he graduated from Joliet High School – Willie Parker found himself backed by the Lorenzo Smith Orchestra, led by sax man Lorenzo Smith, who lived in Hammond, Indiana. Smith asked Parker to become the band's vocalist, and the group toured the Midwest, hitting such cities as Detroit and St. Louis.

Billed as Little Willie Parker, he made his recording debut with the Smith band in 1962, a bouncy mid-tempo ballad, 'Lookin' In from the Outside', on which Parker sounds a lot like McKinley Mitchell, maybe a little of Sam Cooke. The song, recorded in the Chess studio, was a solid number, written by Parker and Smith, but the arrangement is thin in contrast to the more heavily orchestrated proto-soul and soul records hitting the market at the time. But Parker proudly remarks: "That was my first recording – that was the only song that I had penned that I sang on record."

The record was released on the Hammond-based Mar-Vel label, which was a mostly country and rockabilly label operated by Harry Glenn (who is credited as producer). The flip of the release was 'Too Much) Firewater', a rousing instrumental number by Smith's band, with a

pseudo-Native American sound. It might have garnered greater interest, as this was an era of many instrumental recordings.

Throughout his career, Willie Parker played many of the African-American social clubs in Chicago, and during the 1960s social clubs were booking a lot of black entertainment. For example, in November 1963, he performed with Smith at the Cameo Social and Civic Club on Chicago's West Side, and by himself performed at the Original Blue Tigers bash on the South Side (along with Tiny Topsy, Geraldine Hunt and Guitar Red). In 1964, he performed at the *Chicago Defender's* annual Bud Billikin Day parade and picnic.

Sometime in 1966, One-derful! producer/A&R man, Eddie Silvers, discovered Willie Parker, and signed him to the M-Pac! imprint. Parker, who was 22 at the time, does not recall how he was discovered by Silvers.

His first two releases were under the production aegis of Silvers (credited as arranging and conducting). The first single, 'I've Got To Fight It' and 'Let's Start A Thing New', released in September of 1966, exhibited a hard aggressive soulful approach that the company nearly always employed on Parker.

'Let's Start A Thing New' was the stronger side, with its chugging drive. Both sides were written by doo-wop veteran Maurice Simpkins, who was writing regularly for soul and blues artists during the 1960s.

In March of 1967, the first of three consecutive and final Parker releases on M-Pac!, paired 'Salute To Lovers' with 'Don't Hurt The One You Love', both in the uptown soul vein, reminiscent of what New York was producing. With Parker's aggressive vocalising, however, 'Salute To Lovers' was given a more hard soul feel. 'Don't Hurt The One You Love' sounded almost like pure uptown soul, but the Frank Williams and Eddie Silvers composition did little to keep M-Pac! afloat.

The strongest of the four Parker releases was the Jimmy Jones/Eddie Silvers/Otis Hayes-created groove of 'You Got My Finger In My Eye', and, said Chicago liner notes-writer extraordinaire, Bill Dahl: "Hits as hard as any Southern soul missive from Memphis or Muscle Shoals, Parker rising to the occasion with sweaty abandon." The other side, the rousing and anthemic 'I Live The Life I Love', is another Jones composition and production that Parker sings with magnificent self-assurance.

The final single paired a revival of McKinley Mitchell's 'The Town I Live In' with 'Don't Hurt The One You Love', from Parker's earlier single. 'The Town I Live In', produced by Jimmy Jones, was a re-imagining of the original version, with a relaxed faster lope, that made it sound like almost a different song. The record was his last recording for M-Pac!, fittingly so since Mitchell's 'The Town I Live In' was the company's first release. Parker related: "'The Town I Live In' was one of my better recordings as far as my voice. I thought that song and 'Salute To Lovers' were two of the best things I did on One-derful!."

Whilst none of his releases hit the charts, Parker asserts that all his records were played on the local radio stations. One would have thought that at least the impressive 'You Got My Finger in My Eye' would have generated some chart action.

M-Pac! left some outstanding songs in the can on Parker however, which might have generated some sales, most notably the exuberant Frank Williams-Eddie Silvers song, 'So Glad', in which Parker sings with his customary forcefulness. 'Let Me Make It Up To You'



Willie Parker (as Frankie Newsome), circa late 1960s.



Element Of Sound, circa mid 1970s.

and 'Never In A Million Years' are two other lost treasures, mid-tempo numbers that find Parker emoting with full-throated expressiveness. These songs were released by Secret Stash Records as part of an M-Pac! collection in 2015.

While Parker was recording at One-derful! he never sensed that the company was in decline, probably because in the same facilities a new operation by Ernie and Tony Leaner were ramping up with the Toddlin' Town imprint and a new Midas imprint.

After his One-derful! association ended, Willie Parker continued his career under a new, alternative name, Frankie Newsome.

Parker explained that his eldest son was named Frankie, and he thought the name 'Frankie' had a more show business ring to it than 'Willie'.

Most of his subsequent recordings were under the aegis of the Caribbean performer and producer, Zono Sago, whose real name was Allan Williams. The producer began his career as a calypso performer, singing and playing drums, making his first calypso record in 1953 for Job Records. Said Parker: "Zono Sago, what a guy! He really wanted to succeed with me. He had a big interest in me and my talent. So we recorded several songs together."

The first, in 1968, was on USA, to which Parker quickly moved after his last M-Pac! single. He recorded under his new name, Frankie Newsome (Newsom on this release only), and came out with more relaxed, less hard, soul songs, 'Taunting Love' b/w 'It's A Shame' both written and produced by Zono Sago.



Eddie Silvers, One-derful! producer and A&R man.

On GWP, as correctly spelled Newsome, he hit nationally with a song written and produced by Sago, 'My Lucky Day', recorded in two parts. This was his first and only national chart success, lasting three weeks and going to number 42 on the *Billboard* r&b singles chart in 1969.

Another compelling release with a funk groove, was the Sago-produced and composed, 'Coming On Strong, Staying Long', on the tiny Sagport label, from 1970. Says Newsome (as we'll call him now): "I thought it was a real groovy song. It had a real nice uptempo beat to it, a good dance tune." The flip was 'Last Bus To Tupelo', a southern-style soul ballad.

From the B&R Archive.



Newsome was intermittently playing clubs in the city during the 1970s. During December 1970 through January 1971, he was the featured artist at the Skyway Lounge, at 135 W. 75th, on the South Side.

Most of his gigs, however, were at the High Chaparral Show Club, at 7740 S. Stony Island. In December 1971, he appeared on a Christmas show with Simtec and Wiley, and then in December of 1973, he appeared on the bill with star-billed Tyrone Davis, along with Johnny Moore and Bobby Rush. The last gig found by this author was again at the High Chaparral in March of 1975, where he was billed equally with Jerry Butler.

Newsome's last single was in 1974, 'We're On Our Way', on Warner Brothers, yet another two-part song. It was written and produced by Johnny Moore (of 'Your Love's Got Power' fame), and arranged by Benjamin Wright. Despite the muscle of a major label distribution, the record did not go far.

Newsome was not just playing gigs in African-American clubs in Chicago. From around 1967 to 1971, he was a lead singer in a cover band, the Elements Of Sound, which played around Joliet and surrounding towns. He recalls singing Beatles songs, Little Anthony's 'Going Out Of My Head' and Eddie Floyd's 'Knock On Wood' among others. The band featured four white instrumentalists and two African-American vocalists. Newsome does not recall the names of the members, except for the other vocalist, James Kelley.

The next phase of Newsome's career was performing as vocalist for the self-contained band, Sons Of Slum, managed by Pervis Staples. The band toured throughout Illinois. Staples, who had left the Staple Singers a few years earlier, was promoting Sons Of Slum and the Emotions at this time. Newsome said he travelled around Illinois with the Sons Of Slum, who were an endemic presence in the clubs during the 1970s. In terms of putting food on the table, Newsome always kept his day job at Caterpillar, the giant earth-moving equipment company, and worked the nightclubs and toured on weekends. From about 1999 to 2011, Newsome re-established himself in the music business, singing in a big band called the Georgia Francis Orchestra, which played wedding receptions and business conference banquets.

The singer, as Parker and then Newsome, looks back at this career with some ruefulness. "I was disappointed in my career, because I never made it to that height - where I could be a headliner and a national star.