

People with Disabilities Get Ready: Curtis Mayfield in the 1990s
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Abstract: This article breaks with precedent by emphasizing disability's role in the life and work of Curtis Mayfield (1942-1999) and by arguing that his experience of quadriplegia had both positive and difficult dimensions. Analysis focuses on Mayfield's representation by journalists and other writers in the 1990s, and on how Mayfield answered their portrayals as an interview subject and as a musician with his final studio album *New World Order* (1996). Considered within the whole of Mayfield's career, quadriplegia is revealed as one among many difficulties that he answered with critical positive thinking and powerful music.

Key Words: quadriplegia, African-American music, civil rights

“When a celebrity is ‘stricken’... editors and producers of national news organizations fall all over each other to run a mass-market variation on the theme, but in terms of narrative structure the celebrity story is simply the same notes scored for a symphony orchestra rather than a string quartet” (Riley, 2005, p. 13).

Introduction

Curtis Lee Mayfield (1942-1999) was a master of soul, rhythm, and blues with enormous and positive cultural influence in the last forty years of the twentieth century. Mayfield was also a person with disabilities—diabetes and, more significantly, quadriplegia—that he acquired late in life. Images are as important as sounds to understanding relationships between Mayfield's quadriplegia and his music. Three contrasting views of Mayfield lying flat on his back during the 1990s provide a sort of visual synopsis of public perceptions of his final years. Mayfield crafted the first image with words when recalling what happened onstage at Wingate Park in Brooklyn, New York on August 13, 1990, where a near-fatal workplace accident paralyzed him from the neck down (Williams, 2000, pp. 68-69). Struck by a lighting tower that fell when the weather turned bad, Mayfield could only recall what happened before and after the mishap. One minute he was preparing to join his band members, who were playing the introduction to his 1972 smash “Superfly”; the next, he was looking up at the sky as wind tore through the park and rain fell on his body, struggling to stay conscious and finding that the impact had taken his guitar from his hands and his shoes off his feet (Holtzberg, 1996, p. 42; Williams, 2000). The scenes became staples of media coverage of Mayfield, who confounded many by sharing his story without bitterness. One amazed voice belonged to Sweeting (1997), who thought of the accident as something “that would have driven many people to despair or even suicide” (p. T12).

The second image, problematic as it was prominent, illustrates a 1993 *Rolling Stone* interview that undercut its valuable overview of Mayfield's career by portraying his impairment as victimization (Light, 1993). A full-page picture of Mayfield in bed at his suburban Atlanta, Georgia home, the image's high angle perspective underscores Mayfield's immobility and the photographer/spectator's figurative and literal power *over* him. At first glance, Mayfield looks

like he belongs in a morgue, not a recording studio, despite his stated intentions of resuming music performance and production.

Mayfield remains on his back for the third image, a composite that replaces pitiable aspects of the first two images and confirms his history of creating opportunities out of challenges. Various accounts, some by observers and some by Mayfield, create a unified picture of Mayfield recording vocal tracks while lying on his back, at home or in a recording studio, relying on gravity to adapt to singing with his damaged diaphragm and lungs (Burns, 2003; Fields-Meyer, 1997; Harrington, 1999; Obrecht, 1996). This time-consuming method was crucial to Mayfield's final studio album *New World Order* (1996) (henceforth *NWO*), whose title is a metaphorical, if unintended, evocation of changes that Mayfield and others with traumatic spinal cord injury and paralysis experience (Robillard, 2006; Schultke, 2006). I explore some of those transformations, which others have restricted to the backstage areas of Mayfield's life.

Historical contexts are as vital to this analysis as they were to *NWO*. To my knowledge, Mayfield gave no public explanation of the record's title, probably because he saw no need to elaborate on its dissent from the global vision that President George H. W. Bush unveiled in a speech delivered on September 11, 1990, soon after signing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law and several months before launching Operation Desert Storm against Iraq (Bush, 1990). In retirement when Mayfield released *NWO*, Bush would have been surprised at the appropriation of his language for very different purposes. Mayfield said his motivation was the "concept of peace, love, get it together, and maybe there'll be a new world order" (Werner, 2004, p. 286). A state of the (dis)union address, *NWO* spoke to the sociopolitical atmosphere of the 1990s as much as "People Get Ready" (1964) and "If There's a Hell Below (We're All Going to Go)" (1970) captured changes and conflicts in their times.

Although he was the subject of considerable media coverage in the 1990s, the artistic and commercial successes that preceded the onset of quadriplegia are better known than Mayfield's late career achievements. This essay seeks to fill that knowledge gap by concentrating on how Mayfield continued making music and why *NWO*'s songs have continuity with his pre-1990 work and relevance to his post-1990 disability experience. The context encompasses biographical and music business factors that enhance understanding Mayfield's adaptation to impairment and ableism.

This analysis focuses mostly on major U. S. newspaper articles published during a period starting in the second half of 1990 with coverage of Mayfield's accident and ending in early 2000 with news of Mayfield's death. It also includes reportage from British and Canadian papers and U. S. magazine articles for general and specialized readerships, such as *People Weekly* and *Guitar Player*, and books containing previously published or original commentary on Mayfield. A critical reading approach shaped by the social model of disability considers evidence of how Mayfield and his interlocutors represented his life and work before and after the onset of disability. Much of the print media coverage reinforced the common belief that disability is personal tragedy, especially because of the severity of Mayfield's accident and its consequences. Harmful implications of that approach are important, but this essay is more concerned with contradictions in the coverage and with Mayfield's resistance to portrayal as a victim. Also offered are alternative readings that look at disability as only one of many problems

Mayfield faced, and not inevitably more difficult than racism and the vagaries of the music business. Too few people truly heard Mayfield when he insisted that, “This accident has taught me a lot. It’s just another experience. It doesn’t mean you don’t wake up with a tear in your eyes now and then” (quoted in Charles, 1996, p. 43).

Career Resurgence and Onset of Disability

Signs of possible career resurgence for Mayfield appeared shortly before his 1990 accident (Mills, 1990). He was emerging from more than a decade of low-profile activity and had reason to anticipate a comeback in the 1990s (Gore, 2000). A re-release of the song “Superfly” as a single in 1988, collaboration with younger artists including Fishbone and Ice-T, and a return to film scoring were encouraging developments (Mills, 1990). Mayfield’s choice of “Superfly” to start what would be his last onstage appearance showed he knew his audience well. The Wingate Park accident and its life-threatening injuries triggered a wave of reverence and concern (Burns, 2003, pp. 246-247). Journalists from across and outside the United States interviewed Mayfield via telephone or in person at his home, where his large family (including eleven children from his two marriages) helped him manage a near-total lack of physical mobility. A host of prominent musicians, but a fraction of the many Mayfield influenced, recorded cover versions of his songs for tribute albums in 1993 and 1994 that also helped the Mayfields with medical expenses (Murray, 1994a; Smith, 1993). The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted Mayfield in 1991 as a founder of The Impressions and in 1999 as a solo artist. Unable to attend either ceremony in person, Mayfield thanked the crowd for his first induction via satellite television and relished its standing ovations (Mills, 1991).

The attention occasionally had a frenetic edge, with admirers seeming desperate to give Mayfield his due before he died. This context intensified the already negative perceptions of his disability, which was hard to separate from its harrowing onset. Even if Mayfield had been paralyzed in a less traumatic way, observers would probably have defined quadriplegia as something he did not deserve—a bad thing that happened to a good person whose humility was rare in the music industry (Mills, 1992). Some commentators concluded that Mayfield had lost his music-making abilities along with his physical mobility (Himes, 1996; Norman, 1994). They saw quadriplegia as an end to his career, despite Mayfield’s statements to the contrary, and changed the subject to his previous triumphs and his future legacy (Light, 1993; Phillips, 1995). When *NWO* proved that Mayfield was living and working in the present, its release often became a story of overcoming disability instead of another chapter in Mayfield’s long story of working hard to make music no matter what the circumstances (Fields-Meyer, 1996; Katz, 1997).

Much of the post-Wingate Park writing about Mayfield suggested that his positive attitude about living with quadriplegia was unusual (Hoekstra, 1993a; Jones, 1996; Thomas, 1991). In fact, his generally high spirits were in character for Mayfield and common among people with quadriplegia (Gonzalez, 1998; Longmore, 2003, pp. 178-179). Journalists who expected resentment marveled at Mayfield’s acceptance of paralysis, which he expressed with understated melancholy. Variations on the admission that, “Sometimes I can’t help but wake up with a tear in my eye” were Mayfield’s stock answers to questions about his mental state (Charles, 1996; Fields-Meyer, 1997; Holtzberg, 1996; Light, 1993; Mills, 1992). Putting Wingate Park behind him and returning to recording caused some writers to react with combined

admiration and incredulity. Commenting on perceptions of the careers of Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, and Hank Williams, Barnes and Mercer (2001) note that in some instances, “sickness or impairment is credited with adding to the appeal or the insight of the artist” (p. 518). The way in which Mayfield acquired disability and the magnitude of his physical problems excluded him from such consideration. Instead, media observers suggested that Mayfield’s quadriplegia was the worst of a series of problems he faced in his life and a potentially insurmountable obstacle. Their responses overlooked precedents for Mayfield’s resilience, even though biographical information suggested that his adaptation to disability was unsurprising, if not predictable.

Early Years

Mayfield learned to solve problems and create opportunities through self-determination and critical distance early in life and never lost that ability. Born in Chicago, Illinois in 1942, Mayfield was the oldest of five siblings including a brother, Kirby, who had mental retardation and died young (Burns, 2003; DeCurtis, 1999). Raised fatherless in a family that was often on welfare, with firm guidance from maternal grandmother Annabell “A. B.” Mayfield and mother Marion Mayfield, Curtis developed strategies for survival in a city that represents both optimism and oppression for African-Americans (Werner, 2004). Reverend A. B. Mayfield’s storefront preaching and folk medicine practice made her an assertive role model. Marion Mayfield sang, played piano, and cultivated appreciation of poetry in Curtis, who started writing songs in his teens (Hoekstra, 1993b). Toward the end of his life, Mayfield called his composition skills “natural,” but he was indebted to his mother and grandmother (Obrecht, 1996, p. 29; Smith, 1993). Unrestrained by social devaluation, these strong women prepared Mayfield for a lifetime of challenges (Brown, 1997; Burns, 2003; Smith, 1993; Werner, 2004; Williams, 2000).

Church and family provided Mayfield’s childhood immersion in music. Adolescence in Chicago’s notorious Cabrini-Green housing project provided a musical apprenticeship (Light, 1993; Werner, 2004). Mayfield had precocious, unconventional interests in guitar and piano that put him outside the norms of playing those instruments. Comfortable with his idiosyncrasies, Mayfield learned to make what was odd to others a source of strength (Williams, 2000). “I used to play boogie-woogie on the piano, and not ever having had lessons I subconsciously retuned the guitar to the key of F#,” remembered Mayfield in a 1996 interview (Obrecht, p. 30). “This way when I strummed across it, it gave me a chord. That’s how I learned to play my guitar, and that’s the way I tuned it all the way up to my accident.”

His attraction to the piano’s black keys and his uncommon guitar tunings marked a confident but never arrogant path that Mayfield took to professional success. If the intimate relationship between Mayfield and his guitar was eccentric, he balanced it with pragmatism about his marketplace relationship with his songs. The Library of Congress heard from Mayfield before the rest of the world did. As a teenager, he sought information on copywriting songs from that source and was decisive in using what he learned (Gonzalez, 1998). Claiming ownership of his work was notable not only for Mayfield’s youth, but also because he avoided the exploitation that plagued many African-American musicians (Gonzalez, 1998; Murray, 1994b; Werner, 2004).

Although praise for his business acumen was not unanimous (Himes, 1996), Mayfield had a record of discipline and persistence that served him well, particularly during the 1990s (Mills, 1992). Royalties from his many hits, which surged in the 1980s and 1990s because of hip-hop sampling, helped Mayfield avoid financial burdens that usually accompany paralysis (Robillard, 2006; Werner, 2004). The comfortable, but not lavish material circumstances that Mayfield earned for himself and his family contributed to his optimism, which he acknowledged in interviews (Light, 1993). Mayfield also tempered his appreciation for rap-generated royalties with ambivalence about the music's messages and messengers (Werner, 2004).

Civil Rights Movement

Mayfield's characteristic balance of belonging to and maintaining distance from communities was evident during the African-American civil rights movement, which coincided with his tenure as a member of The Impressions, the ensemble he helped found in 1957 and led until 1970, the first of his solo years (Garofalo, 1992; Ward, 1998; Werner, 2004). His writing, singing, and playing put the group's records on "every movement turntable" (Ward, 1998, p. 299), an honored place that Martin Luther King, Jr. confirmed with appreciation for 1964's "Keep on Pushing" (Harrington, 1999). Nelson George spoke for many when he called Mayfield "black music's most unflagging civil rights champion" (quoted in Thomas, 1991, p. 1). But Mayfield was modest about his achievements and resistant to being identified with activism. Stressing the collective nature of rhythm and blues and soul in the 1960s, Mayfield counted himself among Smokey Robinson, the Temptations, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Gladys Knight, and James Brown as a barrier breaker for future African-American musicians (Garofalo, 1992). At the same time, Mayfield followed a personal agenda that he separated from politics (Mills, 1992; Obrecht, 1996; Ward, 1998). Calling himself an entertainer who educated and a "painless" preacher, Mayfield drew a line between art and politics that was dubious in respect to his own work as well as to music that was less socially engaged (Ward, 1998, p. 414).

Scholars, journalists and music critics tend to be more certain of Mayfield's movement credentials than he was (Mengel, 1996; Smith, 1993; Werner, 2004). Ambivalence worked to his advantage in music that reflected and fostered change while eschewing an ideological conformism that marked some elements of the post-1965 movement (Ward, 1998, p. 414). Mayfield fought in the civil rights struggle on his own terms, saw no conflict in endorsing both King and Malcolm X, and challenged the notion that the movement began and ended with the 1960s (Smith, 1993; Werner, 2004). The Million Man March took place in Washington, D.C. in late 1995, just as Mayfield was starting work on *NWO*. Mayfield recognized the convergence by contributing the album's title song to *Get on the Bus*, director Spike Lee's cinematic commemoration of the march, and by praising (with qualification) Louis Farrakhan's polarizing leadership (Siebert, 1996).

The early 1970s are often considered a time of disillusionment for the millions of U. S. citizens who believed in the African-American civil rights movement. Music by Marvin Gaye, Sly and the Family Stone, Stevie Wonder, and Mayfield acknowledged that period's setbacks with no loss of resolve. Mayfield's *Superfly* soundtrack (1972) was the most arresting demonstration of his critical distance, a career watershed that ensured Mayfield's reputation for decades after the controversial movie's release. Uncomfortable with the film's tone after

watching a rough cut, Mayfield took a skeptical stance that kept *Superfly*'s score from celebrating gangsterism and prevents the movie from seeming as dated as other "blaxploitation" efforts (Mitchell, 2000). The film also featured a cameo by Mayfield that prompted Gonzalez (1998) to compare Mayfield to a "geek" (p. 232). Mayfield's anomalous image embodies his detachment from values he opposed in *Superfly* and foreshadows his future estrangement from an ableist music business that prefers "artists [who are] exceptionally physically attractive by normate standards" (Lubet, 2006, p. 1121-1122) and where "prominent figures with visible disabilities are virtually unknown."

In the 1980s, hip-hop artists began sampling *Superfly* and other Mayfield music to enhance their work's credibility. Although he had reason to be proud of *Superfly*'s resonance when he stepped onstage in Brooklyn in August 1990, Mayfield was concerned simply with pleasing an audience that had come to see and hear him as the headlining act. No matter that the terms of Mayfield's contract guaranteed him payment if the weather prevented him from performing (Mills, 1992). For Mayfield, commitment to his fans was essential to music as a way of making a living and a way of life.

Media Portrayal After Wingate Park

Journalistic coverage of Mayfield after Wingate Park combined elements of an anticipated comeback story with an unanticipated deathwatch. Media interest would have been significant had a temporarily able-bodied (that is, "non-disabled") Mayfield enjoyed a career revival in the 1990s, but quadriplegia raised attention to a level he had not known since *Superfly* (Harrington, 1999). In some respects, the coverage exemplified Thomas Couser's idea of "hyper-representation" that "subjects people with disabilities to objectifying notice in the form of mediated staring" (2006, p. 399). However, there was a stronger tendency among writers to look into Mayfield's past and away from his disability. Lengthy career retrospectives were common in articles about Mayfield in the 1990s and were valuable for what they taught readers (particularly younger readers) about his significance. At the same time, a predominantly tragic tone made the information read like obituary copy. In a review of several Mayfield re-releases and compilations, Himes (1996) wrote about Mayfield and his career exclusively in the past tense. Uninformed readers would have been justified in assuming that Mayfield had already died.

Mayfield's role as an interviewee proved he was very much alive and able to deflect the sentimentality journalists aimed at him. His comments were a "reality check" that refuted the pessimism in many articles. An excerpt from the *Rolling Stone* interview reveals that the facts of Mayfield's life were incompatible with the pity the photograph encouraged. "I live for the music," said Mayfield. "There probably have been four or five songs introduced just based on our conversation. Hopefully, with the voice activators and different things that are coming out... I can be as independent as possible [and] contribute once again in this business" (quoted in Light, 1993, p. 66). In the same interview, Mayfield revealed, albeit unintentionally, that assistive technology was vital to his career long before he acquired disability. Thanking God for microphones and amplifiers, Mayfield credited that equipment with making him a successful performer despite his vocal limitations (Light, 1993, p. 63).

The homogeneity and predictability of mainstream commercial journalism have particularly negative implications for coverage of people with collective histories of social disadvantage (Riley, 2005). Mayfield's media portrayals are tied to devaluation and stereotyping of people with disabilities and should be answered with critical media literacy, which Bell Hooks (1996) and Irving K. Zola (1985) identify as a strategy for social change. When informed by the social model of disability, media literacy can dismantle the tragic frames that journalists put around Mayfield and similar individuals and groups. Contexts that acknowledged disability rights and culture would have situated Mayfield within communities of people with quadriplegia and generated more accurate stories. Along with credibility, originality is a factor that requires reconsiderations of language and style in disability reportage. Riley (2005) notes that "avoidance of stock phrases and clichés is a point of professional pride among the better class of journalists" and not just a concession to what "curmudgeons" call "political correctness" (pp. 51-52). The sources for this analysis had room for such perspectives without sacrificing wide audience appeal, but few writers made even minimal effort to explore the relevance of Mayfield's disability experience to the 1990s, a crucial decade for disability rights, culture, and studies.

Comparing Mayfield's circumstances with those of the majority of "dependent paralyzed people" (Robillard, 2006, p. 1198) illustrates some differences that disability awareness would have made in the coverage. In several stories, Mayfield noted that he was fortunate in material terms (Bauder, 1994; Murray, 1994b; Norman, 1994; Selvin, 1994). Unlike Mayfield, most people with quadriplegia lose their jobs and medical insurance and face pressure "to sell their homes and draw down their financial assets" (Robillard, 2006, p. 1198). Such facts need not have prevented journalists from showing the specificity of Mayfield's experience of paralysis. Moreover, Mayfield almost certainly would have welcomed the broader context, given his critical consciousness of economic inequalities in the U. S (Werner, 2004).

The unusual circumstances of Mayfield's acquisition of disability also set him apart from many people with quadriplegia. Causes of spinal cord injury, from most to least frequently reported, include motor vehicle crashes (46.9%), falls (23.7%), violence (13.7%), sports injuries (8.7%), and other/unknown (7%) (National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, 2006, p. 1). Although the Wingate Park accident had a violent impact on Mayfield's body, his injury fit the other/unknown category rather than the violence category, which refers to willful acts of violence and often to gunshot wounds (National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, 2006, p. 1). A study by Devlieger, Albrecht, and Hertz (2007) shows the disproportionate impact of such incidents on young African-American men. Their ethnographic research study took place in rehabilitation hospitals in Chicago, where African-American men developed their own disability cultures and described their lives before and after paralysis in personal narratives that had much in common with stories Mayfield told in his songs.

When discussing the Wingate Park accident, journalists turned an undeniably traumatic incident that also injured several concertgoers, including children, into melodramatic tragedy. In reality, this was a workplace accident whose magnitude should have been conveyed through careful contextualization. A few reporters addressed the possibility that Mayfield's mishap was avoidable. Questions about the stage area's safety prompted a New York City labor union representative to challenge promoter and former New York state senator Martin Markowitz in

the press (Paulucci, 1996) and led Todd Mayfield (Curtis's manager and oldest son) to take legal action against Markowitz's insurance company (Mills, 1992).

However, media attention to the controversy was muted. Mayfield would not discuss it, the lawsuit was settled out of court, and a somewhat defensive Markowitz insisted that "we all feel terrible" about the accident, which was an "act of God" (Mills, 1992, p. G1). In Atlanta when his father was injured, Todd Mayfield felt guilty about missing his chance to talk Curtis out of going onstage (Mills, 1992, p. G1). Even if journalists had been more willing to investigate the accountability of Markowitz and Todd Mayfield, the major problem was their reliance on clichéd language and tragic storylines that mystified the incident and trivialized concerns for the safety of performers and audiences.

A more complex, affirmative perspective on disability in coverage of Mayfield would have worked against what Paul K. Longmore (2003) calls "the context of a health care system and a society pervaded with prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities" (p. 178). Surveys show discrepancies between physicians' negative assumptions about quality of life with paralysis and the positive outlooks that people with quadriplegia have (Longmore, p. 178). Fictional characters whose paralysis made them want to end their lives had considerable cultural capital, represented notably by the protagonist of stage and screen versions of *Whose Life is it Anyway?* (Longmore, 2003, pp. 119-122). Furthermore, despite the ADA and the momentum of disability studies in the 1990s, Dr. Jack Kevorkian's campaigns for assisted suicide and against the survival of many people with disabilities received more media attention and support from the general public (Longmore, 2003, pp. 175-203). In this atmosphere, Mayfield's resources of family, finance, and optimism were indeed precious.

Only one text featuring Mayfield with quadriplegia and published during his life diverged significantly from normative disability reportage. *Portrait of a Spirit: One Story at a Time*, a Canadian book profiling twenty-five U. S. citizens with disabilities who narrate their experiences in interviews, looks somewhat like a coffee-table book but is solidly within the social model of disability (Holtzberg, 1996). Many of the interviewees, including Mayfield, resided in Georgia and had ties to Atlanta, which was hosting the Summer Olympics and Paralympics in 1996. Several Paralympians appear in *Portrait*, one of the most diverse disability-based texts in its attention to impairments, age, class, ethnicity, gender, race, and occupation. Mayfield posed for his black and white portrait at home and in his wheelchair (Holtzberg, 1996, p. 40). The image's somber silhouette conveys a sense of Mayfield's difficulties without rendering him helpless, as the 1993 *Rolling Stone* photograph did.

Christopher Reeve, whose spinal cord injury occurred one year prior to *Portrait*'s publication, contributed a foreword to the book but was not interviewed or photographed. For many disability rights activists, any role for Reeve would have been objectionable. However, *Portrait*'s context makes Reeve's presence seem a concession to marketability. The musical force behind *Superfly* and his cohort, in which "average" people with disabilities outnumber better-known figures like former U. S. Senator Max Cleland and disability rights advocate Mark Johnson, overshadow the erstwhile Superman. Even though Mayfield's interview repeats information he gave journalists in previous accounts, his chance to address the reader in a more direct manner highlights his agency, as does the editor's note about *NWO*'s release (Holtzberg,

1996, p. 41). The difference that a positive context makes is hard to overstate. *Portrait* brings Mayfield into a community and preserves his individuality. With acknowledgment of disability rights and culture and respect for leaders like Judy Heumann and Irving K. Zola, *Portrait* maintains progressive integrity while reaching out to a general audience, just as Mayfield did with his songs.

Mayfield's Career After Wingate

Mayfield's will to resume work was stronger than doubts he sometimes expressed. Some journalists were flatly pessimistic about the prospect of more Mayfield music in the 1990s, an outlook that Phillips (1995) expressed in an article blending career appreciation and career autopsy. Mayfield responded with *NWO*, astonishing writers who called the accomplishment "inspirational," "miraculous," and "amazing" (Obrecht, 1996, p. 29; Siebert, 1996, p. C8; Sweeting, 1997, p. T12). But the hard work that went into *NWO* was no more mysterious than the Wingate Park accident was tragic, and no more remarkable than his self-determination during the African-American civil rights movement. True, Mayfield made demanding adjustments and struggled with the loss of his guitar-playing abilities and an intimate relationship with the instrument itself, which he described as "part of his body," "another person," and "a brother" (Fields-Meyer 1997; Obrecht 1996). Writing songs with the help of a voice-activated computer was a tough transition from reliance on paper, pen, and keyboards. Of all the new techniques, Mayfield's need to lie down while singing was the most publicized. He required frequent rest breaks during sessions, but *NWO* showcases the beauty of his voice and connects with Mayfield's pre-1990 work, even when the record's production is too glossy.

NWO begins with its title song, which shows that the album's best music relies more on understatement than overproduction. A slow pulse tempo and stop-frame lyrics enhance Mayfield's observation of an infant's emergence into a world of privation and victimization. In the second line, Mayfield alludes to his painstaking singing process:

Darkness no longer, a child is born
Mother shed tears of joy as baby test his lungs
My daddy's not there, where he ought to be
Somewhere in Georgia skinning and shooting craps on his knees
Another victim born out here in the hood
And based on statistics it really ain't all that good
Welfare takes the tab and daddy can't sign
And can't be seen, the family becomes a crime
The hunt is on and brother you're the prey

The empathy that made Mayfield a singular songwriter is as strong as ever. Living at home with quadriplegia took nothing away from his social awareness. Metaphorically, Mayfield is the "baby test[ing] his lungs," a veteran vocalist with an impaired diaphragm relearning his craft. His voice is also that of the mother, absent father, and hunted brother. Moreover, the informed listener knows that Mayfield sings from experience when referencing the stigma of welfare.

Mayfield often said he wrote songs mainly for himself (Mills, 1992; Obrecht, 1996), but there is no self-absorption in *NWO*. Several songs, such as “Ms. Martha,” are stories in which Mayfield observes or inhabits characters and displays his descriptive skills. Mayfield admires how Ms. Martha watches over her urban surroundings from her porch. She endures, even while witnessing effects of pervasive crime on her surroundings and her son. Longtime peer and friend Mavis Staples, an ideal artist to help deliver positive messages about African-American women, is Mayfield’s singing partner on “Ms. Martha.” Her high opinion of Mayfield matched Mayfield’s respect for Ms. Martha (Mills, 1992). Staples may have been the only person who envisioned Mayfield returning to the concert circuit. If Prince could bring a bed onstage for his act, she reasoned, why couldn’t Mayfield? (Werner, 2004, p. 286).

The title of the first-person “Here but I’m Gone” implies Mayfield will narrate the physical and psychological dislocation associated with quadriplegia (Robillard, 1996; Robillard, 2006). Instead, Mayfield uses the persona of a substance abuser (who could be Ms. Martha’s son) to convey the experience of self-imposed immobility that entails immaturity and vulnerability. Mayfield’s narrator explains that he is, “Porched up in a rocking-chair / With my feet all bare / Rolling my blunt in a cigar wrap... Live an adolescent mind / Waiting for my high, quiet as it’s kept / ... Around the boys I play my part rough / Keep myself tough enough / Never to cry / Don’t really want to die.” Speaking more than singing, Mayfield uses hushed tones to render the resignation of this character and the force of his bleak tale.

A remake of Mayfield’s 1970 solo song “We People who are Darker than Blue” is at *NWO*’s center to warn listeners against living up to oppressive definitions that are part of a victim-blaming, culture of poverty ideology. Reiterating the original version’s call for multiracial solidarity in a political context shaped by a Republican Congress’s Contract with America and a Democratic President’s draconian welfare reform, “Darker than Blue” champions interdependence, a value whose personal significance for Mayfield equaled its social urgency.

When Mayfield ventures into what seems unquestionably personal, even private territory on “I Believe in You,” a duet with Sandra St. Victor, the fact of his quadriplegia makes the song’s romantic and sexual subject matter socially resonant. St. Victor assures Mayfield that “You’re my kind of man, with a mind completely rare / We feel the touch, ‘cause we know each other care / The time is now, so we try ourselves for size / Your smiling face, bring a sparkle to your eye / So sensitive we give / It’s your ecstasy, now caressing me, with our feelings free.” One of several songs of intimate love on *N.W.O.*, “I Believe in You” is a necessary reminder that people with disabilities are sexual agents regardless of the severity of their impairments.

The most musically buoyant song on *NWO* also has its most trenchant lyrics. Deceptively danceable, “The Got Dang Song” sends the kind of message that made Mayfield a role model for Bob Marley and other reggae musicians who heard revolutionary spirit in Mayfield’s work with the Impressions and as a solo act (Burns, 2003). Surveying a planet rife with class and race-based iniquities, Mayfield contrasts the physical beauty of developing countries with their harsh economic straits, delineates the struggles of people denied living wages, and paints a vivid picture of urban mayhem. The closing verses of “Got Dang” express a bitterness Mayfield never voiced in his interviews:

Saw him from the shadow when he shot the gun
Through the ghetto jungle away he run
Live in the city, ain't going nowhere
Few folks share and ain't nothing fair
Oh could there be a conspiracy
To thrive on me, a minority
Some folk say to suck it up
Ain't got no straw, ain't got no cup

These six songs are the most compelling music on an album that sometimes provides a merely pleasant listening experience, with questionable production values and a large cast of collaborators who occasionally overwhelm Mayfield. Despite its unevenness, *NWO* ended Mayfield's recording career on a positive note. Burns (2003), an admiring chronicler of the Mayfield legacy, proves that respect does not foster insight when he observes that "once you begin to get over the miracle that Curtis ever managed to record [*NWO*], it is only then that you begin to appreciate [*NWO*] without any further reference to such consideration" (p. 234). I argue for and from an opposing viewpoint, not just in respect to Mayfield and his music, but also to the spectrum of individual experiences and social constructions that disability studies interrogates. Disregarding disability is a barrier to the more positive, complicated, and surprising readings that the stories of all people with disabilities deserve.

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