

EARTH, W



P E R F O R M E R S

E A R T H , W I N D & F I R E

BY HARRY WEINGER

ND & FIRE



EARTH, WIND & FIRE PROVED THE POWER OF BLACK MUSIC. The awesomely talented band rose to prominence in the Seventies by bringing together the sounds that came before it – jazz, blues, R&B, pop, gospel, African roots, funk and deep soul – making an impact that transcends race, cultures and time. One of the tightest ensembles since the Count Basie Orchestra, Earth, Wind & Fire are legendary for their stage shows, a spectacle of magic, muscle and musicianship. More than any other group, Earth, Wind & Fire solidified the growth of black album music in the Seventies, scoring six consecutive double-platinum albums and becoming Columbia Records' best-selling R&B band of all time.

Earth, Wind & Fire took root with Maurice White. A child of the gospel touring



circuit, White was mesmerized by marching band drummers in Memphis, where he grew up in the Forties and Fifties. White relocated to Chicago in the early Sixties, quickly moving into the musical inner circle. Recognized for his tough rhythms and meticulous touch, he became Chess Records' studio drummer from 1963 to 1966. That's 'Reece laying down the grooves on classic soul sides like "You're No Good," "Rescue Me," "Sitting in the Park" and blues tracks by Muddy Waters, Etta James, Howlin' Wolf and more.



As the Ramsey Lewis Trio's regular drummer from 1966 to 1970, White saw the promise in presenting jazz and gospel with a pop touch. On the road, he discovered Far Eastern philosophy, as well as the kalimba, an African thumb piano. Back home, he and his brothers, Verdine and Fred, witnessed the flowering of the African-American consciousness movement. Culling all these influences and interests, 'Reece envisioned a mix of the kalimba, Black Power, jazz and a funky bottom and formed a band around a core of Chicago players, including teenaged Verdine.

"Maurice was very clear," recalls Verdine. "We were to strive to be part of the great history of black music. He pulled from our roots, Miles Davis, John Coltrane. Then he'd point to Sly Stone and say, 'There's someone who's bringing the music forward.'"

For the group's name, 'Reece took three of the four universal elements: Earth, symbolizing love, healing and ambition; Wind (air), for friendship, artistry and balance; and Fire (his zodiac sign), representing courage, leadership, truth and rebirth. He complemented his metaphysical approach with a pragmatic sense illustrated by his appreciation of Napoleon Hill's guide for millionaires, *Law of Success*. Moving the band to Los Angeles, Maurice got a deal with Warner Bros.

After two albums, Maurice remade the band into a younger outfit: From Denver, Colorado, Philip Bailey, full of sweet falsetto and pop sensibilities, became the counterpoint to White's funky growl, and Larry Dunn joined in on keyboards. Guitarists Roland Bautista, and later, Johnny Graham of New Birth and Al McKay from the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band came on board. Ralph Johnson and soon younger brother Fred White backed Maurice up on drums and percussion. Verdine's inventive bass lines glued it all together.

Clive Davis signed the reborn band to Columbia in 1972.

TOP: EW&F,
DECEMBER 1977;
BOTTOM: VERDINE
AND MAURICE WHITE
SHAKE UP THE STAGE



Last Days and Time and *Head to the Sky* showed dazzling stylistic diversity. Andrew Woolfolk replaced Ronnie Laws on saxophone, and by 1974's *Open Our Eyes*, every aspect of the band had improved – its songwriting, musicianship and camaraderie. Earth, Wind & Fire were rewarded with their first million-seller, while the uplifting “Mighty Mighty” brought them into the R&B Top Ten for the first time.

TOP: VERDINE,
MAURICE AND
AL MCKAY, 1979;
EARTH, WIND &
FIRE, CA. 1976

A big part of the success was 'Reece's arranging mentor at Chess, Charles Stepney, who refined the group's vision. Also new to the group was a horn section. By 1975, Earth, Wind & Fire had become one of the biggest bands in the world. *That's the Way of the World*, the soundtrack to a forgotten film, was a pop and soul masterpiece, its centerpiece a Number One, Grammy-winning chant of positivity, “Shining Star,” which also sported some of the most intricate rock guitar lines heard on Top Forty radio. Another single off the soundtrack, “Reasons,” brought Philip Bailey recognition for his range and emotion.

Gratitude, a souvenir of the group's spectacular stage show, also included the studio tracks “Sing a Song” and “Can't Hide Love,” which became hits. *Spirit*, the followup featuring the smash “Getaway,” mourned the 1976 passing of Stepney. With the double-punch of *All 'n All* and *I Am* – chock full of deep grooves, jazz soloing, crushing ballads and world-music themes – Earth, Wind & Fire were untouchable in the late Seventies. Their hits were even bigger: “Serpentine Fire,” “Fantasy,” “September,” “Boogie Wonderland,” “After the Love Has Gone.” They had their own label, controlled their own operations. The exhausted group, however, was beginning to splinter. “Let's Groove” reached the Top Three in 1981, but two years later

Earth, Wind & Fire broke up.

The core of the band re-formed in 1987, striking gold with the Number One R&B hit, “System of Survival.” The song was a clever update of the Earth, Wind & Fire trademarks: the words of the street coupled with the wisdom of the ancients, burnished bright over choppy rhythms. Returning to Warners in the Nineties, the group reconnected with its audience by touring. Maurice retired from the road in 1996, content to produce and listen to Earth, Wind & Fire's influence on pop, rock, jazz, fusion and hip-hop grow each day.

It is difficult to imagine the beats and free-flowing, positive rhymes of Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean, A Tribe Called Quest, Brand Nubian and De La Soul without Earth, Wind & Fire. Or the stew of world beat and spiritual poetry that feeds Sting's success. Or the solo career of Phil Collins, a fan who borrowed the group's horn section, singer and engineer for a few of his hits.

Over the course of three decades, Earth, Wind & Fire have displayed delicious grooves, daring musicianship, breathtaking arrangements, energetic virtuosity and beautiful singing. By stitching together the roots and fruits of Twentieth Century popular music, Earth, Wind & Fire truly *rock*. Tonight we welcome them as one of the Mighty Mighty into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

