



# Spooner Oldham

BY ANDY SCHWARTZ



**T**he guy who played organ on Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman" in 1966 and on the Box Tops' "Cry Like a Baby" in 1968.

The guy who played piano on Linda Ronstadt's breakthrough album, *Don't Cry Now*, in 1973.

The guy who played keyboards on both the 1967 Aretha Franklin album *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You* and the 2008 Drive-By Truckers album *Brighter Than Creation's Dark*.

The guy who played with Bob Dylan and Neil Young, with Aaron Neville and Bettye LaVette, with Frank Black and Cat Power.

Those guys? They're all the same guy: Spooner Oldham – songwriter, singer, multi-instrumentalist, and a key contributor to the development of Southern soul music and to countless pop, rock, country, and R&B recordings. More than just a celebrated session player, he is the co-composer of some of the best-loved and most-covered songs in the pop-music canon of the American South: "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man," "I'm Your Puppet," "Cry Like a Baby," "A Woman Left Lonely," "It Tears Me Up."

Dewey Lindon Oldham Jr. was born on June 14, 1943, in Sheffield, Alabama, and grew up in the agricultural hamlet of Center Star, in Lauderdale County. His father, Dewey Sr., known as Dot, was a string-band musician who encouraged his son's early musical interests and taught him chords on the mandolin that the boy transposed to guitar. Dewey Jr. sang hymns in church, listened to country music on the Grand Ole Opry, and dug the late-night rhythm & blues records spun by "John R." (John Richbourg) over WLAC-Nashville.

He was four years old when, while reaching for a pan on the kitchen stove, he dislodged a spoon that struck

him in the face, damaged his retina, and ultimately cost him the sight in his right eye. Years later, he told the story to a fifth-grade friend, who began calling him Spooner. Dewey didn't mind, and the nickname stuck.

Two years of piano lessons in junior high sufficed to qualify Spooner Oldham for membership in Hollis Dixon and the Keynotes, the reigning rock & roll/rhythm & blues band in the Sheffield/Florence area. In 1961–1962, while sporadically attending the State Teachers College, Spooner began hanging around Tom Stafford's Spar Music, a ramshackle studio and publishing company located over the City Drug Store in Florence. There he met some talented, hungry Southern-born strummers, drummers, and songwriters – people like Billy Sherrill and Rick Hall, David Briggs and Donnie Fritts. Like Spooner, they loved Ray Charles and James Brown; like him, they were searching for their own path in life and their own place in music.

When Dan Penn arrived in Florence, the two friends began writing together while Spooner played keyboards (and sometimes sang background) on countless local recording sessions (many of them engineered by Dan), first at short-lived Spar Music and later at Rick Hall's FAME studio in Muscle Shoals, just across the Tennessee River. Oldham almost certainly played on "You Better Move On," by Arthur Alexander, the first Top Forty pop hit to emerge from the Florence/Sheffield/Muscle Shoals axis (Number 24 in 1962); on "Let's Do It Over," by Joe Simon, the first Penn/Oldham composition to make the *Billboard* R&B chart (Number 13 in 1965); and on "When a Man Loves a Woman," by Percy Sledge, the apotheosis of the Southern-soul movement and a Number One pop and R&B smash in 1966.

East Coast record executives like Atlantic's Jerry Wexler and Bell Records' Larry Uttal soon beat a path



With Wilson Pickett at FAME Recording Studios, 1966: Spooner (standing, left) and fellow sessionmen bassist Jr. Lowe, drummer Roger Hawkins, and guitarist Jimmy Johnson



The historic "I Never Loved a Man" session, 1967: Atlantic producer Arif Mardin, Tommy Cogbill, Hawkins, Jerry Jemmott, Aretha Franklin, Oldham, Johnson, and engineer Tom Dowd



Do-right man: Oldham side by side with Aretha Franklin, 1967



Upright, loyal, and spiffy: Oldham in high school days, c. 1960



**You gotta serve somebody: Oldham (center) with Bob Dylan at Muscle Shoals, February 1980**

to the doors of FAME and later to the rival Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. Spooner played on multiple albums by Wilson Pickett (*The Wicked Pickett*, *The Exciting Wilson Pickett*), Aretha Franklin (*Aretha Arrives*, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You*, *Aretha: Lady Soul*), and Percy Sledge (*When a Man Loves a Woman*, *Take Time to Know Her*). He can be heard on *Tell Mama*, by Etta James; *Why Not Tonight*, by Jimmy Hughes; *Testifyin'*, by Clarence Carter; and *The Pure Sound of the Purifys*, by James & Bobby Purify.

In the winter of 1967, Oldham relocated to Memphis, where he successfully pursued a freelance session-and-songwriter career. Penn and Oldham cowrote "Cry Like a Baby" for the Box Tops (Spooner played organ on this Number Two Pop hit), "A Woman Left Lonely" for Charlie Rich (later covered by Janis Joplin on *Pearl*), and "Take Me (Just As I Am)" for soul singer Spencer Wiggins (Solomon Burke's version reached Number 11 R&B). Had the interracial bonds of the Memphis music scene not been so badly frayed by the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Spooner might still be there.

On August 31, 1969, Spooner Oldham married Karen Hampton, and the couple moved to Los Angeles. Another transplanted Southerner, Emory Gordy Jr., recruited Spooner into the house band of Producers Workshop Studios. With this group, Oldham recorded *Pot Luck*, his first solo LP (a commercial non-starter in 1972, now highly collectible), as well as the hippest Liberace album ever, *A Brand New Me*.

Spooner fit easily and naturally into the Southern California country-rock/singer-songwriter scene. Playing piano, organ, or vibraphone; arranging, producing, or singing backgrounds, Spooner Oldham was a quietly vital presence on sessions for Linda Ronstadt's *Don't Cry Now*, Jackson Browne's *For Everyman*, Maria Muldaur's *Waitress in a Donut Shop*, and Bob Seger's *Beautiful Loser*. Spooner recorded with Delaney and Bonnie Bramlett, J.J. Cale, Ry Cooder, Rita Coolidge, Jim Croce, the Everly Brothers, Arlo Guthrie, Harry Nilsson, Helen Reddy, and Stephen Stills, to name a few.

All this activity eventually led to Oldham's associations with Bob Dylan and Neil Young. The former was in his evangelical Christian phase when Spooner joined his touring band in the fall of 1979. With Dylan, Oldham played seventy-nine shows, appeared on *Saturday Night Live* and on the Grammy Awards telecast, and returned to Muscle Shoals in February 1980 for the sessions for *Saved*, the last of Dylan's three Christian albums.



**Oldham (second from left) with erstwhile touring partners Drive-By Truckers, from Athens, Georgia**

The Oldham family (now including daughter Roxanne) was living in Nashville when the sideman got the call for the Neil Young sessions that became *Comes a Time*. This collaboration led to Spooner's extensive touring with Young's International Harvesters band, his participation on a half-dozen subsequent Neil Young albums from *Old Ways* (1985) up through *Prairie Wind* (2005), and his appearance in the 2006 documentary *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*, directed by Jonathan Demme. Oldham played keyboards with the reunited Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young on their controversial Freedom of Speech Tour; he appears on the album *Déjà Vu Live* and in the film *CSNY Déjà Vu*, both released in 2008.

In the late 1990s, Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham reunited for rapturously received acoustic tours of the U.S., U.K., Europe, Australia, and Japan. A soulful, stripped-down live album, *Moments From This Theater*, was released in 1999, and in 2006 the duo received the prestigious Roots award in the annual London ceremony sponsored by *Mojo* magazine. Their lasting influence was reflected on Cat Power's 2008 covers album, *Jukebox* – Spooner played on three tracks, including a version of "A Woman Left Lonely."

Having reached his sixty-fifth-birthday milestone in 2008, this gifted musician shows no signs of slowing down, much less retiring. That's a lucky thing indeed for all of us who like our music with a touch of that ineffable but unmistakable feeling called *soul* – the kind that only Spooner Oldham can supply. ♪



**Soul men: Performing live with singer-songwriter Dan Penn, at the Bluesfest, Chicago, 2001**