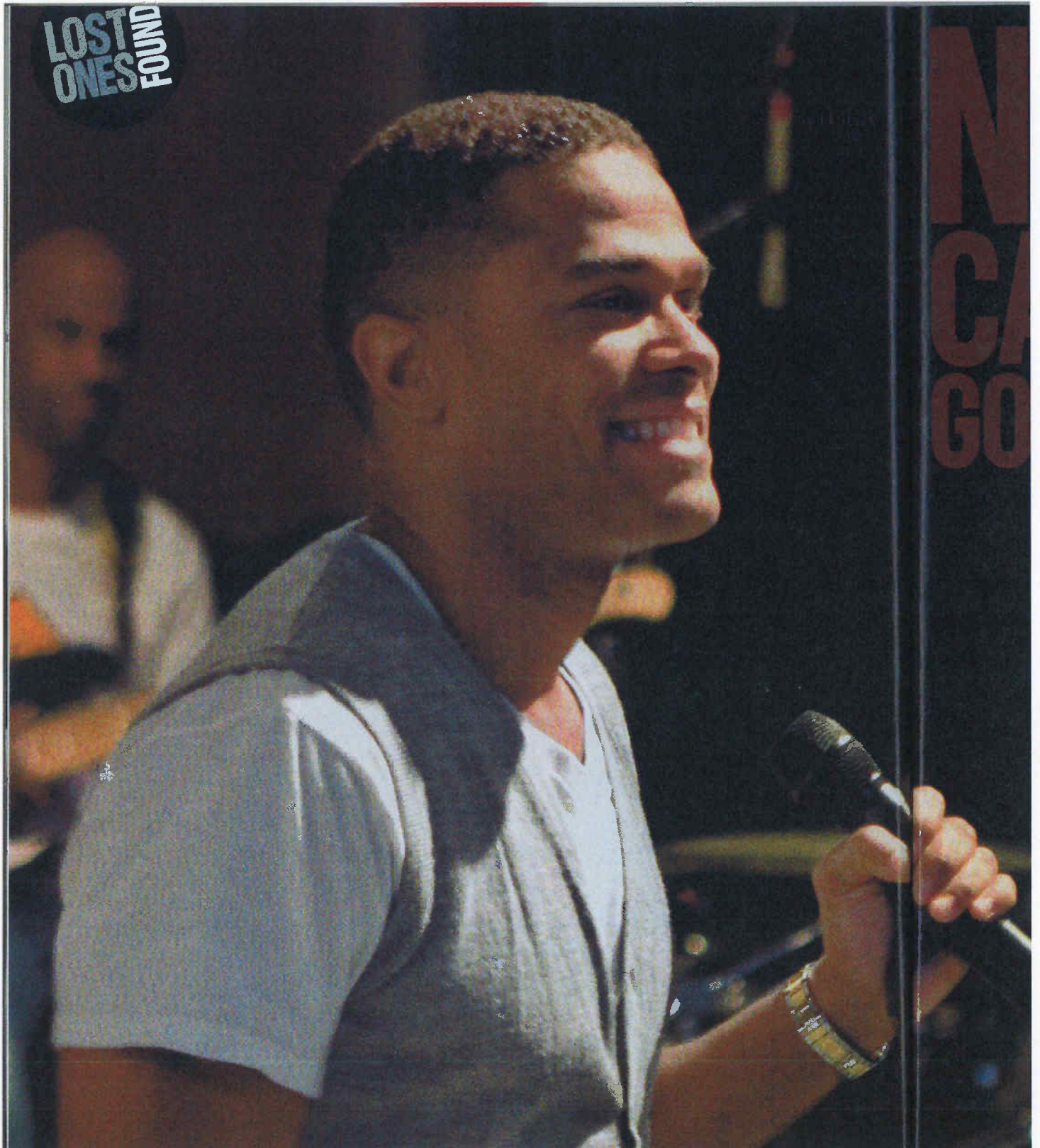


VIBE

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LOST
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NEVER CAN SAY GOODBYE



SEVEN YEARS AGO,
MAXWELL
WALKED AWAY
FROM THE GAME
WHILE HE WAS
ON TOP.

NOW, THE KING OF SULTRY
IS BACK WITH A NEW TOUR
(AND MAYBE A NEW ALBUM).
SO WHERE DID MAXWELL
GO—BESIDES THE BARBERSHOP?

BY KEITH MURPHY

Late one cool March night, Maxwell, relaxing in his New York City home, felt his phone buzz. It was a text from his old friend Stephen.

STEPHEN: “WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT MAKING YOUR RE-EMERGENCE DOING A TRIBUTE TO AL GREEN AT THIS YEAR’S BET AWARDS?”

MAXWELL: “Wow, wow, wow, wow.... GIVE ME THE WEEK-END TO THINK ABOUT IT.”



That friend, Stephen G. Hill, now BET's interim president, was busy assembling a lineup for the cable network's June awards show at Los Angeles' Shrine Auditorium. For Hill, landing the mercurial talent was a long shot. "I was fully expecting a no," he says now, though he eventually convinced Maxwell to sing Green's supple 1972 hit "Simply Beautiful."

It was no easy call for the singer. "I was thinking, 'Can I do this?' I felt like I was going to fall out. I was like, *Man, did I mess up? Did I stay away too long?*" He fought through doubts, though. "I couldn't let the chance pass. He's Al Green. I heard good things about my performance. But...I wasn't sure if people were [just] being polite," he says, almost embarrassed. "But when I was onstage, I felt an affirmation. I didn't know people really cared."

"[A lot of people] hadn't seen him without his Afro," Hill says. "But when Maxwell hit that falsetto, there was a collective intake of air. Then you could hear the screams from the audience. They realized, *Oh my God...it's Maxwell!*"

The performance became one of the most talked-about television moments of 2008.

But was Maxwell officially back? Or was this just a one-shot deal?

AT BROOKLYN'S COMPLETE MUSIC STUDIOS on a chilly September afternoon, Maxwell's chiseled, caramel face is locked in bewilderment. It's like he's experiencing his first lick of fame. All this excitement for little ol' Maxwell? Well, yes. The acclaimed singer/songwriter has sold more than 10 million albums since his unabashedly romantic 1996 debut, *Maxwell's Urban Hang Suite* (Columbia), made him R&B's leading ladies' man. But he's been off the map for the last seven years.

"I'm just grateful for this," Maxwell, 35, says, nodding in the direction of a photographer capturing a quiet moment during a rehearsal. He's working it out with a 10-piece band for his upcoming *Black Summers' Night* concert tour. But this is not the refined Maxwell who epitomized '90s downtown chic with his woolly Afro and devil-may-care skinny suits. This is 'round-the-way Maxwell: black jacket, jeans, and black sneakers. His 6-foot frame is lean, the product of three-mile runs around his NYC neighborhood and basketball sessions

with his band. His hair is close-cropped—the crooner looks even younger than when his soaring vocals first soundtracked bedrooms everywhere. Back then, when his dreamy hit "Ascension (Don't Ever Wonder)" blasted up the charts, Maxwell mixed Marvin Gaye's airy, collapsing falsetto with a touch of smooth jazz and made singing about romance hipper than it had been in a while.

But after two more platinum albums, including 1998's *Embrya* (Columbia), Maxwell pulled a Sade, all but vanishing. Since 2001's *Now* (Columbia), he's released no new material—a potential death sentence in the ever-fickle music industry. "I can't believe I got to get away for seven years to enjoy life before I got too old," he says, standing before a metal practice stage. "I'm over the moon about the fact that I've been given another chance."

But Maxwell has no intention of becoming a nostalgia act. He's prepping the first installment of *Black Summers' Night* (Columbia), an album project he describes as a conceptual trilogy. *Black*, which he hopes to release after the first leg of the tour, details his personal highs and lows of life away from the spotlight.



“I WAS LIKE, MAN, DID I MESS UP? DID I STAY AWAY TOO LONG?”

worked as a barback at New York’s Coffee Shop. “D was that cool dude women wanted to fuck, but Maxwell represented matrimony—his vibe was Dream Guy. What Ne-Yo’s *Year of the Gentleman* is now, he represented that first. It was amazing how people responded.”

“You definitely feel the pressure,” Maxwell says. “I look to form relationships with women who really don’t get caught up in image.... You [get to the point where you] really don’t trust or connect with people. I wanted to re-explore everyday living as opposed to living in work mode. There wasn’t anything for me to say in the music.”

Maxwell recast his image, taking some shears to his signature Afro. The freedom of walking around New York unrecognized proved re-energizing. “I’d meet people and they’d say, ‘Hi, what’s your name?’ I would just say, ‘It’s Max.’ That was a breath of fresh air.”

The freshly shorn singer’s return is well-timed. At press time, overwhelming demand for the Black Summers’ Night tour forced an extension of the initial 26-date theater trek. Shows in New York, Toronto, Oakland, Houston, and Washington, D.C., were sold out weeks before Maxwell sang his first note.

“I’m amazed we’ve been selling out venues without an album,” he says. “I wasn’t sure I could do it. It just puts my faith back into the people that have supported me.”

Folks are doing more than “supporting.” On the social microblogging network Twitter, fans swapped war stories about the lengths they’d gone to just to score good seats. One fortysomething woman joked about asking her parents for a loan so that she wouldn’t miss her mortgage payment. And with a gig slated at Loch Logan Rose Garden in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in just a few days, members of Maxwell’s team are elated.

If judged on anticipation alone, Maxwell’s tour has received an overwhelmingly enthusiastic public reception, arguably bigger than younger artists, like Usher’s *One Night Stand*.

Maxwell beating his younger competition at the box office speaks volumes about his

influence, according to Lisa Ellis, executive vice president at Sony Music Label Group, home to the singer’s longtime label, Columbia. “You really realize how much someone like him was missing in the business.”

Here in the stark, quiet rehearsal space, Maxwell is busy justifying the hype. He praises his effortlessly funky band as “the baddest I’ve ever had.” He adds, “We are doing ‘Ecstasy’ by the Ohio Players. I just love that song to death, plus it’s the original [sample] to ‘Brooklyn’s Finest’ with Jay-Z and Biggie, one of my all-time favorite hip hop records.”

During sound check, Maxwell’s voice—one of the most distinct and mesmerizing in modern pop music—is rapturous, gorgeously floating. The opening to—the-heavens note of his dramatic 2001 cover of Kate Bush’s soaring 1989 “This Woman’s Work”—a song he now owns—is otherworldly. Maxwell cracks a smile, as if to say, *Did you hear that, motherfucker?*

Along with like-minded talents like D’Angelo, Erykah Badu, and Lauryn Hill, Maxwell helped define the late ’90s neo-soul era. The fearless foursome offered an alternative to R&B that seemed bound by cold synthesizers and crass I’m-fucking-you-tonight come-ons. Maxwell ate well during that period, garnering five Grammy nods, including one for Best R&B Album. He still gets caught up remembering the time. “It’s an honor still to be placed with those same people.... They’re awesome musicians,” he says. “Erykah is great. And I can’t wait for D to come back out.... But I never wanted to be thrown in a box like I’m some kitschy neo-soul-type act. That was created to make people understand what that movement was. I wanted to go past that [because] we were all different expressions of soul.”

He talks excitedly about settling down, getting married, and having kids. But first the show must go on. It’s obvious the singer has missed the stage—his spiritual connection to it is palpable. He sings a new song, “Help Somebody” that sounds like U2 might have if the late Isaac Hayes produced that band, as if the Edge’s reverb guitar rock rode shotgun with Black Moses’ stripped-down, muddy funk. It’s the track he seems most excited about performing live.

But Maxwell is no fool. Two weeks later, he’s dropping a sexy soliloquy to Rev. Al’s “Simply Beautiful,” the same song that started Maxwell’s revival, before a feverish sold-out crowd at NYC’s Radio City Music Hall. In a sleek black suit, bow tie undone, he whips the mostly female throng into a frenzy, complete with the obligatory panties thrown onstage, and piercing, longing screams: “I love you, Maxwell!”

“I want to talk to the beautiful women out there,” he says, closing his eyes, wry smile reappearing, panties draped around his neck. “I’m talking about those healthy cornbread-fed girls...you know you beautiful.” There goes Mr. Romantic, falling back into old habits.

Keith Murphy talks about his time with Maxwell in the VIBE.com podcast.

Summers’ is a more uplifting, socially conscious statement. *Night* is a collection of slow jams.

“I wanted to set up the album with something real, not with the regular media blast,” he says. “It’s filled with, you know...meaningful relationships, breakups, debauchery, and all that crazy stuff that goes on when you’re just living normal. From Miles Davis to Marvin Gaye—they took long breaks between albums. That’s why these artists made great records. Living life helps make the music better.”

Maxwell has had plenty of time to get to living. The singer says that as his fame grew, he struggled. The line between the jet-setting superstar and the quiet Brooklyn kid of Haitian/Puerto Rican background who took the J train to East New York had become blurred. Relationships suffered. Maxwell was, in his own words, “an android.” Living up to the image of the romantic icon was a heavy cross to bear.

“He was the man women wanted to marry,” says music industry veteran Dominique Trenier, who has managed the singer as well as D’Angelo and Nikka Costa. Trenier met Maxwell circa 1994 when he