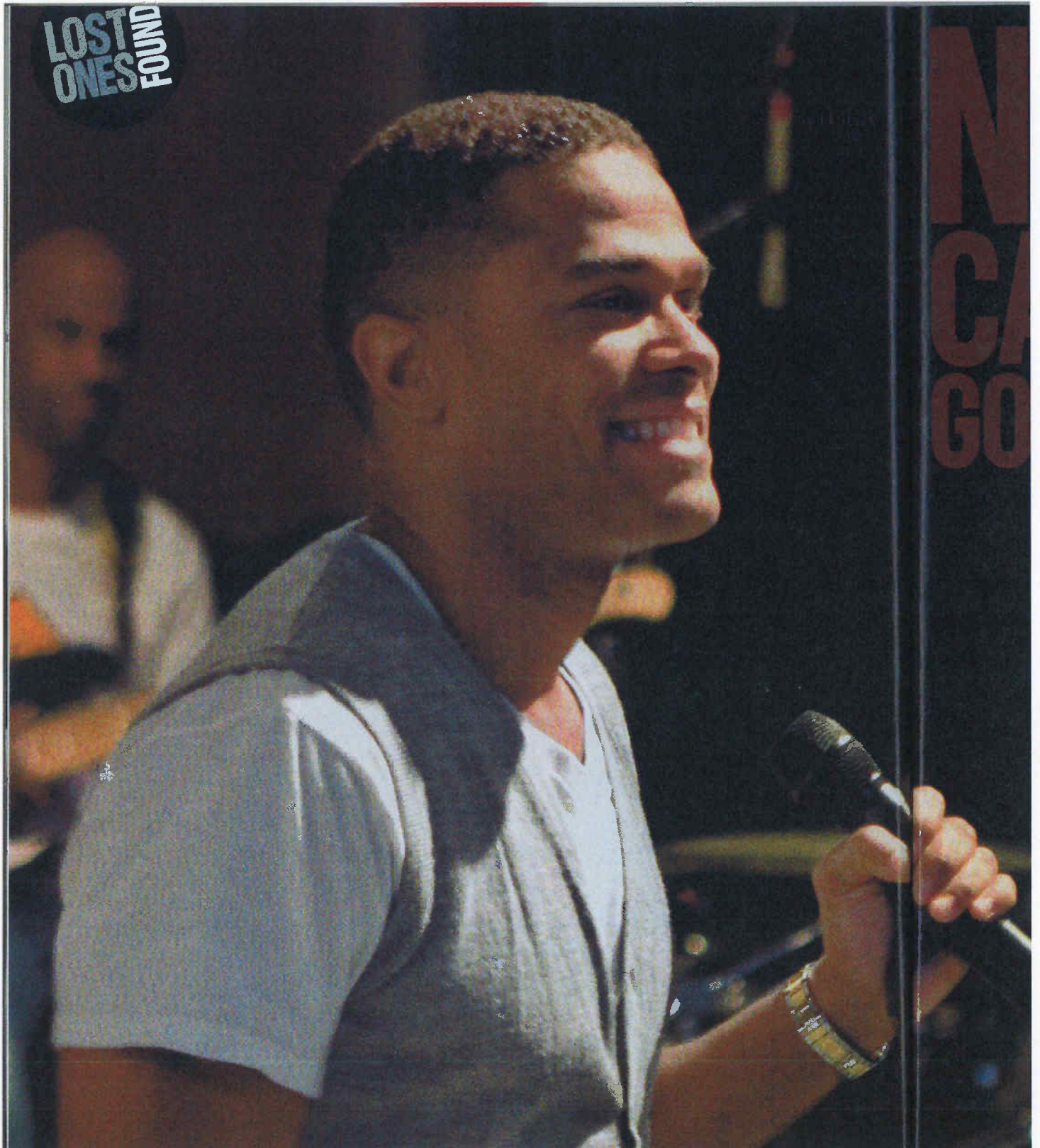


VIBE

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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.

