

# Donny Hathaway: Biography

Donny Hathaway was born on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945 to Drusella Huntley and Hosea Brown, a serviceman just returned from World War II. Shortly after his birth, Hathaway's parents split up and his mother became unable to support her young son on her own. He was thus raised in the housing projects of St. Louis Missouri by both his mother and his maternal grandmother, Martha Cromwell, a professional gospel singer. Hathaway's grandmother quickly discovered her grandson's talent for music and he was placed in the Choir of Trinity Baptist Church at the age of three. Hathaway was close with his grandmother, but his siblings have noted that the matriarch of the family could be overbearing and harsh. Hathaway was a quiet boy who wasn't permitted to play sports and who was limited in his relationships with other children.

But Hathaway's sheltered childhood fully immersed him in the tradition of gospel music. By the age of four, Hathaway was touring and singing gospel throughout the mid-west under the name "Little Donny Pitts." At age six, he began piano lessons and shortly after began composing his own music. Despite his musical talents, Hathaway's ambition was initially to join the church, and it wasn't until his later teenage years that he decided to professionally pursue music. As a high school student, Hathaway received classical piano training. Perceived as musically gifted, his piano teacher recalled him playing complex concertos by Greig and Handel "without any mistakes" (Lordi 21).



*Figure 3: A young Donny Hathaway.*

At the age of 19, Hathaway received a scholarship to attend Howard University in Washington D.C. There, Hathaway's studied both music education and music theory. At the time of Hathaway's studies, Howard University taught only classical European music, refusing to delve into the well-spring of modern and historic black musical tradition. Jazz, the blues, and soul music were explored by the students after studying hours, and it was here that Hathaway was introduced to these genres for the first time. Hathaway had grown up sheltered from music that wasn't classical or religious; his grandmother believed it to be the "devil's music." Hathaway's friend and collaborator, Ric Powell noted in 2019 that when Hathaway started at Howard, he knew only three popular music songs: "Maria" from West Side Story, Ray Charles' "Georgia On My Mind," and Errol Garners song, "Misty." Hathaway's time at Howard, both within the school's rigid classical curriculum, and the outside jam sessions that occurred after hours, no doubt shaped Hathaway's "rapid assimilation of the diverse vocabularies of blues, jazz, classical and R&B music" which was, as critic Charles Waring notes, an "act of defiance against authoritarian musical hierarchies or notions of purity" (Lordi 23, Waring).

While still in college, Hathaway met friends and future collaborators, Leroy Hutson, Roberta Flack, and Ric Powell, singing in the latter's trio where he built a larger repertoire of pop and jazz songs. Hathaway also met Eulaulah Donyll, a vocal performance major one year his senior. Hathaway and Donyll married in 1967 after she graduated.

Despite his academic success, Hathaway felt increasingly unchallenged as he neared the end of his undergraduate career, and he left Howard shortly before graduating when he received a receiving a job offer from Curtis Mayfield as a producer for the record label Curtom. Mayfield recalled Donny's confidence in directing musicians in the studio, even at the young age of 23. "He wasn't conceited about it," Mayfield said, but he knew he could do anything these guys could do, and almost certainly better" (Lordi 25, Mayfield). Hathaway and Mayfield's partnership didn't last. Hathaway felt increasingly limited in the role of arranger and pianist, and he wanted to pursue recording his own records. But Hathaway didn't have to wait long, King Curtis heard Hathaway sing in an elevator and mimic the elevator motor with his perfect pitch, and he rushed to recommend Hathaway to producer, Jerry Wexler and then Atlantic president Ahmet Ertegun. Hathaway's first studio album, *Everything is Everything*, was released in 1970, by Atlantic's label Atco.

Jerry Wexler was struck immediately by Hathaway's musical talent, which he wrote about in his biography, *The Rhythm & the Blues*. He referred to Hathaway as "the most brilliant musical theorist" he had ever encountered, recalling Hathaway's ability to play, sing, and arrange with an unapparelled depth (qtd. in Crazy Horse). Wexler also noted that Hathaway was a perpetual student when it came to music, he learned and listened as much as he could, and would speak at length about complex, often abstract concepts of music theory to anyone willing to listen. However, Wexler, like many of Donny's other friends and colleagues, witnessed his self-doubt, his loneliness, and his frequent bouts of depression, which were never fully quelled despite the success of his first album and the albums that followed.

Despite his struggles with mental health, Hathaway's career continued to escalate. In 1971, he released his second album, *Donny Hathaway*, and in 1972, he provided the music for the film, "Come Back Charleston Blue." He also joined forces with Roberta Flack to record a number of duets for their album, *Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway*, which became a critical and commercial success, reaching #3 on the pop charts, and earning the pair a Grammy for Best Pop Performance in 1973. Later that year, Hathaway released *Donny Hathaway Live*, a live record from his performances at the Troubadour in Los Angeles, and *The Bitter End* in

Greenwich Village. The album was critically well reviewed at the time and reached #4 on the R&B charts. *Donny Hathaway Live* has since gone on to be considered one of the best live albums ever recorded. Hathaway also performed at several benefits for the Black community, including the Fred Hampton Legal Assistance Scholarship Fund in Chicago, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the National Black Political Convention.

Following this period of brilliant musical accomplishment, Hathaway's struggles with mental health reached new heights as he experienced intense anxiety and paranoia. Many of Hathaway's friends credit this decline with the pressures of success, and Hathaway's trusting



Figure 4: Donny Hathaway in 1970.

nature regarding music business associates who often failed to put Hathaway's well-being first. He was hospitalized multiple times in 1973 and 1974, and sometime during this period he was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.<sup>2</sup> His wife, Eulaulah, recalled the struggles of this period; at his lowest, Hathaway was dosed on dozens of medications a day. While these may have stabilized his mood to some extent, they resulted in often crippling side effects, limiting his creative output. At his best, he was a flurry of productivity and a doting father of two, but these moments of stability became fewer and farther between. Nevertheless, in the summer of 1973, he released *Extensions of a Man*, another critical success, and a week later he performed at Carnegie Hall where he was introduced as "one of the great Black vocalists of our time" (Lordi 93).

He played a scattering of shows in 1975 and 1976, but his musical output continued to be diminished both by mental illness, prescribed medication, and difficulties with substance abuse. Donny and Eulaulah separated when she became concerned over her safety and the safety of their children. One of his closest friend's Edward Howard recalled Hathaway's childlike, often confused state during this time.

In 1977, Hathaway had a small comeback when he reunited with Roberta Flack to record "The Closer I Get to You," for her album, *Blue Lights in the Basement*. The song, a huge commercial success, and a Grammy contender, brought Flack and Hathaway back together to record a second album of duets in January of 1979. At the time, Hathaway was at a low, and Atlantic Records had to make a special request for Hathaway to be released from the hospital. Reggie Lucas and James Mtume, the writers of "The Closer I Get to You," recalled meeting with Hathaway at Flack's New York apartment, stating that Hathaway was heavily distraught. He seemed to suffer hallucinations throughout the day, often leaving the room and speaking to voices that weren't there. On January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1979, after Flack and Hathaway finished up recording "Back Together Again," Hathaway was left alone at his hotel. Sometime during the night, he

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that in the 60s-70, schizophrenia was often diagnosed in Black men who suffered any sort of mental illness. Because of this racial bias, it is difficult to know with any certainty if Hathaway's diagnosis was correct. Regardless of this fact, Hathaway's struggles with mental illness included hallucinations, depression, and paranoia. These symptoms were often severe, and they heavily impacted his life.

either fell or jumped out the window to his death.<sup>3</sup> He was 33 years old. He left behind his wife, three daughters, Lalah, Kenya, and Donnita, and many devoted friends, colleagues, and fans.

Donny Hathaway's musical brilliance is preserved in his own albums, and the albums of others who he produced, arranged, and played for, including Aretha Franklin, Willy Nelson, Curtis Mayfield, The Impressions, Roberta Flack, and Lena Horne. In 2019, Hathaway was posthumously honored with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Since his death, Hathaway's contemporaries and collaborators have often spoken about the lasting influence of his music, his sensitive soul, and his bright intellect. "All I know is that he was a kind and gentle man," stated Jerry Wexler, "Sometimes I think his artistic sensibilities were almost too exquisite... I loved Donny and continue to derive sustenance from his records... I often think of what he might have accomplished. His talent had no limits. The beauty of his voice and the sweetness of his soul remain a permanent part of the liturgy" (Wexler 377).

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<sup>3</sup> Hathaway's death was ruled a suicide. However, no suicide note was left, and Hathaway's closest friends and family have iterated that Hathaway had never before expressed suicidal ideations. Edward Howard, one of Hathaway's closest friends, noted that Hathaway, when very ill, had had a tendency to lean out the window of his New York City apartment in order to see Central Park. Howard recalled getting concerned and pulling Hathaway back from the window multiple times.

## Roberta Flack: Biography

Roberta Flack was born in Black Mountain, North Carolina in 1937 to Laron Flack, a draftsman, and Irene Flack, a church organist. At the age of nine, Roberta and her family moved to Arlington Virginia, where Flack and her siblings lived in a “relatively comfortable, black, middle-class suburb.” (*Killing Me Softly: The Roberta Flack Story*; Tyson)

Shortly after her family relocated, Flack began piano lessons. Quickly excelling in her musical studies, Flack won second place at a statewide music contest for young Black students, where she played a Scarlatti sonata. Shortly after, in 1952, and at the age of 15, Flack was enrolled at Howard University, where she became one of the youngest students ever enrolled.



Figure 6: A young Roberta Flack around the time she attended Howard University.

She studied music in the hopes of developing the skills to pursue a career as either an opera singer or a classical pianist. However, her teachers were aware that Flack would face a severe disadvantage in the classical music industry as a Black woman, and she was encouraged to study education. Flack ultimately changed her major to music education, and she graduated in 1958.

Following her graduation, Flack taught both English and music in North Carolina, and then Washington D.C, where she began taking voice lessons with the renowned instructor Frederick Wilkerson whose other pupils included Paul Robeson and Maya Angelou. During this time she also played piano at the Tivoli Club in Washington to accompany visiting opera stars on the Piano. In 1966, she married Steve Novosel, a jazz bassist in her band.<sup>4</sup>

In 1967, Flack began professionally singing blues, folk, and pop songs at Mr. Henry’s, a nightclub in D.C. Flack made the club on Capitol Hill a “hot spot” – so much so that, to this day, an advertisement bearing her name still hangs on the door of the club (Keyes). Flack was first discovered in 1968 by Les McCann who heard her perform at a charity benefit. McCann made a demo and delivered it to Atlantic City Records, where Flack was signed soon after. Her debut album, *First Take* was recorded in ten hours and released in 1969. Despite its critical success, the album did poorly commercially, until Clint Eastwood heard “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” on the radio. He called Flack, asking if he could put the song into the film that was to be his directorial debut. The film, *Play Misty For Me* was released in 1971, and it featured an Flack’s cover in its entirety. The film was wildly successful, and Flack’s featured track quickly became a hit, becoming Billboard’s number-one single of 1972. The following year, “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” won the Grammy for both song and record of the year, vaulting Flack’s entire debut album to up the charts and selling almost 2 million copies nearly three years after its initial release.

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<sup>4</sup> Flack has acknowledged that in the span of her seven-year marriage, she never once met her husband’s parents due to their disdain for their son’s interracial marriage.

In May of 1972, Atlantic released *Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway*, an album of duets recorded over a year before at the suggestion of Jerry Wexler. The album was both commercially and critically successful, and the featured track, “Where is the Love,” won the 1972 Grammy Award for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group. Despite her professional success, Flack’s personal life hit a rocky patch when her husband became unsupportive of her full-time music career. Around the time her career began to take off, Novosel expressed concern that she would change. ”I told him I wasn’t going to change, that I’d been playing the piano and singing and helping other people play and sing all my life... I’m doing it. I want to do it. He said, ‘If you do, we can’t stay together.’ I said, ‘Okay. Bye. See you later.’” Flack and her husband divorced in 1972.

Flack earned her second #1 single with “Killing Me Softly With His Song,” which she released in January of 1973 on her album of the same name. Flack earned the Grammy for Best Pop Female Vocal Performance, and Record of the Year for her cover of the song, which charted at #3. Between 1975 and 1979 Flack released three more successful albums, and began producing her albums under the pseudonym, “Rubina Flake.”

Despite her popularity, many critics in the 70s didn’t consider Flack to be a true soul artist. This view, notes scholar Jason King, was likely because many people felt her voice and style to be “very white.” She didn’t possess the “fiery quality” of Aretha Franklin, instead, she possessed a “quietude,” something likely ingrained in her from her classical training and Methodist upbringing. Flack’s friend and contemporary, Dionne Warwick notes that Flack is “more lyrical in her...vocal prowess.” If Aretha Franklin makes you “sweat,” Roberta Flack’s “clear, haunting, and soothing voice” will make you “think” (*Killing Me Softly*; King, Warwick).

In 1979, Flack once again collaborated with Donny Hathaway on what was meant to be the second album of duets. However, Hathaway died before the album was finished, and Flack finished the album with several solos. The album, *Roberta Flack Featuring Donny Hathaway*, was well received, and the track “Back Together Again,” reached #8 on the R&B charts.

In the early 1980s, Flack toured with Miles Davis, released two solo albums, and one album of duets with Peabo Brysen. In 1987, Flack appeared in the Martin Scorsese-directed music video of Michael Jackson’s “Bad” where she played his mother. In 1999 she received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and in 2012, after a nearly 10 years hiatus from recording an album, Flack released *Let it Be Roberta*, an album of covered Beatles songs. Throughout the 90s and 2000s, Flack appeared at multiple fundraisers for AIDS research and care. She also founded the Roberta Flack School of Music at the Hyde Leadership Charter School in the Bronx, a music program dedicated to providing students from underprivileged backgrounds with music education. In 2010, she founded the Roberta Flack Foundation, an organization dedicated to supporting both animal welfare and music education. In 2018, after releasing her last album



Figure 7: Roberta Flack in 1971.

*Running*, Flack announced her retirement from music after suffering from a stroke. In 2020, Flack received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.