

HERSCHEL EDMUND DWELLINGHAM

1944 – 2023



From the moment of his first public performance for members of the Bethlehem Baptist Church of Bogalusa (Louisiana), it was destiny for a five-year-old. He had accompanied his mother performing on the church organ.

Herschel started his professional career as a drummer, playing in Bogalusa with the Rhythm Aces, a group led by Henry Sims, and a group of older musicians, which included Robert Hodge, his high school bandleader, who taught him how to write and arrange music. Legendary Rock drummer Earl Palmer gave Herschel his first set of drumsticks and he became a mentor.

In the early sixties, he took thirty songs he had written with lyricist Charles Lucas, and went to Ron & Ric Records in New Orleans. Their A&R man, Joe Ruffino liked what he heard and invited Herschel to the famous Cosmo Recording Studios where all the New Orleans hits of the 50s and 60s were recorded. It was there he met the legendary Dr. John, who gave him invaluable arranging and writing tips.

One month later at the age of 16, while listening to WBOK Radio, Herschel heard the first-ever release of one of his songs, “*Come On and Tell Her*,” performed by Benny Freeman! Of the thirty songs Joe Ruffino signed, various artists eventually released ten singles.



Graduating from high school—and with inspiration provided by Quincy Jones—Herschel commenced his formal studies at Berklee School of Music, Boston, where he was afforded private studies with William Maloof, Professor of Music. A year later, he sent for Alva Jackson, and they married.

With his success at Berklee, Herschel was introduced to Hale Smith, Professor of Music at Harvard and Yale Universities, and Walter Piston, Dean of Music, Harvard University, both of whom personally furthered his education and training.

While in Boston, Herschel and Alva formed their own record label, My Records. This team consisted of Herschel producing and Alva managing their artists. Their first release, “*Young Girl*,” sung by Frank Lynch, became a nationwide hit. And, not only did he write the song, but he also arranged, produced and played drums on the recording. Other artists included The Valiants and Maurice Rice. The label was distributed by radio personality Skippy White, who also owned Mass Record Distributors.

During this same period, Herschel played drums on the hit Jazz album “*Sweetnighters*” with Weather Report. With this performance, Herschel was credited with creating the first Hip-Hop beats, which continue to be sampled countless times. His career took off. Among other artists he recorded with are Mongo Santamaria, Fats Domino and Johnny Mathis.

Performing in Boston at the Sugar Shack with his band, Herschel played behind many famous artists, including Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, Gladys Knight and the Pips, The Supremes, numerous other Motown acts and Jackie Wilson, managed by August Sims. He earned the moniker of “Boston’s No.1 Soul Man.”

Moving to New York, Herschel soon became the “first call drummer” for session contractors; chief among them was Phil Medley (“Twist and Shout,” “One in a Million”). The experience was like music school all over again, collaborating with great arrangers and producers the likes of Bert Keyes (Stephanie Mills), Paul Leka (Harry Chapin) and Bert de Coteaux (Sister Sledge, The Manhattans) and others, for 25 years of constant studio work.

When not in the studio, Herschel performed on Broadway, playing for many theatrical productions, to include *The Wiz*, *The Lena Horne Show* and *Your Arm’s Too Short To Box With God*.

In New York, Herschel and Alva started Helva Records as a family label with their children and August Sims, Jackie Wilson’s manager. Helva’s first releases were for Sugar ‘n Spice (distributed by West End Records), Barbara Jean English (distributed by Zakia Records) and The Escorts (distributed by Audio Fidelity). Within two years, Helva elected to distribute their own artists, and produced M.J. Wade, Sandy Mercer, La Shanda Dupree and Timothy Wilson, among others.



Herschel was CEO of Bogalusa Music Group LLC, Magic City Records and Tik Records, and was co-owner of Black Lace Productions with Marlana Holt (Molly Holt of *The Rascals*), all based at Bogalusa, Louisiana, where he resided.

On April 16, 2023, Herschel passed away at the age of 78. He leaves behind a legacy of performances, recordings and artists he created over his career. He also leaves behind someone who thought of him as a brother, and not just a client. May he rest in eternal peace.—*Otto Vavrin II*