

# That '70s Soul

STERLING HARRISON IS STILL CROONING FOR DOLLAR TIPS.

THAT MIGHT SOON CHANGE BY JAY A. FERNANDEZ

**S**ANDWICHED BETWEEN A PAIR OF BOOKKEEPING offices on Manchester Avenue a few blocks east of Western, a ramshackle neighborhood bar makes an enticing pitch on a hand-painted sign: PURE PLEASURE IS NOW OPEN. At 11:30 on a Friday night, Larry Johnson and the New Breed Band's funk-driven riff hovers out of the club's security-gated door. Inside, spare white walls decorated with large gold stars and black musical notes give the place the incongruous appearance of a first-grade classroom. Black Kojak, Pure Pleasure Lounge's emcee, announces tonight's act with enthusiastic flair. "Let's welcome, all the way from the steak house, Mr. Sterling Harrison!"

The singer rises and heads toward the stage. He sports chin-length Jheri curls, a fedora, a giant pinkie ring, and a gold-sequined shirt that makes him sparkle like a mirror ball. Despite being slowed by a cane, Sterling "Mr. Entertainment" Harrison throws a few sug-

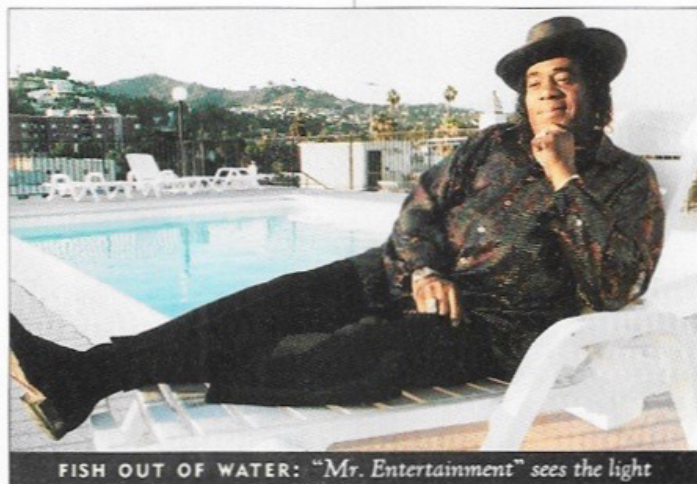
gestive pelvic shakes at the sparse audience of a couple dozen and settles on a stool. The beatific smile he radiates is that of a preacher who bottom-deals at church poker night.

Harrison rolls into Johnnie Taylor's defiant "Last Two Dol-

lars," and the crowd is already with him. As the music builds, women put their hands up in front of them, their heads back. The band then breaks into a racy blues song with staple allusions to infidelity while Harrison fumes at the metaphorical rat now loose in his house. "I'm gonna shoot that dirty two-legged mother," he growls. Harrison, as always, is improvising, changing inflections and lyrics. When the song ends, he wipes

the sweat from his brow with a white towel. "First time in my life," he sighs, "I ever sat down to sing."

A promoter came across Harrison standing on his front lawn in Richmond, Virginia, singing the Lord's Prayer when he was ➤➤



FISH OUT OF WATER: "Mr. Entertainment" sees the light

eight years old. He stuck the youngster on stage with the various showmen who passed through his hometown. Touring the country in the '60s and '70s, Harrison shared the spotlight with James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke, and Otis Redding; at a Nashville club years before his triumph at Monterey, Jimi Hendrix appeared as a sideman in Harrison's band. Harrison's career eventually led him to Los Angeles in 1978.

"Soul to me, it's just music coming from the heart. I really get into it," he says. As does the woman with hair the same color as her slinky silver dress, who's shaking her hips three feet from Harrison's face as he belts out raunchy funk. He turns "Shake your moneymaker" into "Shake your fabulous butt." He seamlessly weaves a round of "Who let the dogs out?" into a blues chorus. He then calls to a woman to cover his "oh babys." She coos them with such gusto that he pulls back the mike and says, to whoops and laughter, "You sound like



**STERLING SILVER:** At the Pure Pleasure Lounge, Harrison sparkles like a mirror ball

you're at Motel 6." Patrons in three-inch heels approach the stage to drop dollar bills into a silver pitcher that has TIPS written on the side.

He lost his last steady club gig when the slightly more upscale M&M Soul Food closed a few months ago. Nerve

spasms in his back, exacerbated by a jump from the House of Blues stage, prompted hospital visits and the use of the cane. "I hate being in this situation," he says of losing some of his mobility. "I feel 30. I never smoked, never drank, never been high a day in my life." But the bad news has recently been tempered by some good: He's finally cut an album.

Before moving on to the next song, he hawks the newly recorded CD, which Eddie Gorodetsky, a producer and writer for *Dharma and Greg*, organized, financed, and coproduced with help from Los Lobos saxophonist Steve Berlin. An R&B enthusiast, Gorodetsky first saw Harrison a year and a half ago and was knocked out by the music. He brought Harrison and his band to Sonora Studios in Los Feliz. "There comes a point when you gotta put your money where your mouth is," says Gorodetsky. "These guys work too hard."

The record, which Gorodetsky hopes to distribute widely this year, features Harrison covers of Tom Waits, Johnnie Taylor, and Howard Tate, with occasional backup singing by Rachel Sweet and Billy West, formerly the voice behind *Ren and Stimpy*. Harrison has "that real deep soul, red-dirt kind of Southern voice that you don't hear anymore," Gorodetsky says.

For his finale, Harrison steers that voice into "For the Good Times," his rich tenor slurring into a falsetto like an angel returning to its cloud. He finishes, at 12:32 a.m., with a resounding "Lord, have mercy," and the dwindling congregation glows with absolution.