

Incandescent Preston jammed with best

PHOENIX (AP) - Billy Preston, the exuberant keyboardist who landed dream gigs with the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and enjoyed his own hit singles including "Outta Space" and "Nothing From Nothing," died Tuesday at 59.

His longtime manager, Joyce Moore, said a heart infection in November left him in a coma, and he never regained consciousness; he was taken to a Scottsdale hospital Saturday after his condition deteriorated.

Preston had battled chronic kidney failure and received a kidney transplant in 2002. But the kidney failed and he was on dialysis ever since.

Known for his big gap-toothed smile and towering Afro, Preston was a teen prodigy on the piano and organ, and lent his gospel-tinged touch to classics such as the Beatles' "Get Back" and the Stones' "Can't You Hear Me Knocking?"

He broke out as a solo artist in the 1970s, winning a best instrumental Grammy in 1973 for "Outta Space," and scoring other hits with "Will It Go 'Round In Circles,"

"Nothing From Nothing" and "With You I'm Born Again," a duet with Syreeta Wright that became a favorite at weddings. He also wrote Joe Cocker's "You Are So Beautiful."

Other career highlights included being a musical guest, in 1975, on the debut of "Saturday Night Live"; having a song named after him, by Miles Davis; and appearing last year on "American Idol." Among his film credits: "Blues Brothers 2000" and "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

His partnership with the Beatles began in early 1969 when friend George Harrison recruited him to play on "Let It Be," a back-to-basics film and record project that nearly broke down because of bickering among band members. Harrison himself quit at one point, walking out on camera after arguing with Paul McCartney.

Preston not only inspired the Beatles to get along — Harrison likened his effect to a feuding family staying on its best behavior in front of a guest — but contributed a light, bluesy solo to "Get Back," performing the song



Billy Preston enjoyed a storied and exciting music career.

with the band on its legendary "roof top" concert, the last time the Beatles played live. He was one of many sometimes labeled "The Fifth Beatle," a title he did not discourage.

Preston remained close to Harrison and performed at Harrison's all-star charity event "The Concert for Bangladesh," and at the "Concert for George," a tribute to Harrison, who died of cancer in 2001. He played on solo records by Harrison,

Ringo Starr and John Lennon.

Preston also toured and recorded extensively with the Rolling Stones, playing on such classic albums as "Sticky Fingers" and "Exile on Main Street." In the mid-'70s, he parted from the Stones, reportedly unhappy over not getting proper credit for "Melody" and other songs, but reunited with the band in 1997 on its "Bridges to Babylon" record.

"Billy was a fantastic and

gifted musician... a superb singer in both recording sessions and on stage," Stones singer Mick Jagger said. "He was great fun to be with onstage when touring with us and I will miss him a lot."

His sessions credits included Aretha Franklin's "Young, Gifted and Black," Bob Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks" and Sly and the Family Stone's "There's a Riot Goin' On," three of the most acclaimed albums of the last 35 years.

"His legacy is so huge I don't even know where to start," Moore said. "It's many genres, so many years. ...It's rock 'n' roll, it's soul, it's funk, it's everything. He was truly, truly, truly a genius."

A Houston native who soon moved to Los Angeles when his parents split up, Preston was in and around show business for much of his life. He was taking piano lessons at age 3 and was just 10 when he played keyboards for gospel singer Mahalia Jackson.

He toured with mentors and fellow piano greats Ray Charles and Little Richard in the early 1960s, first encountering the Beatles while on

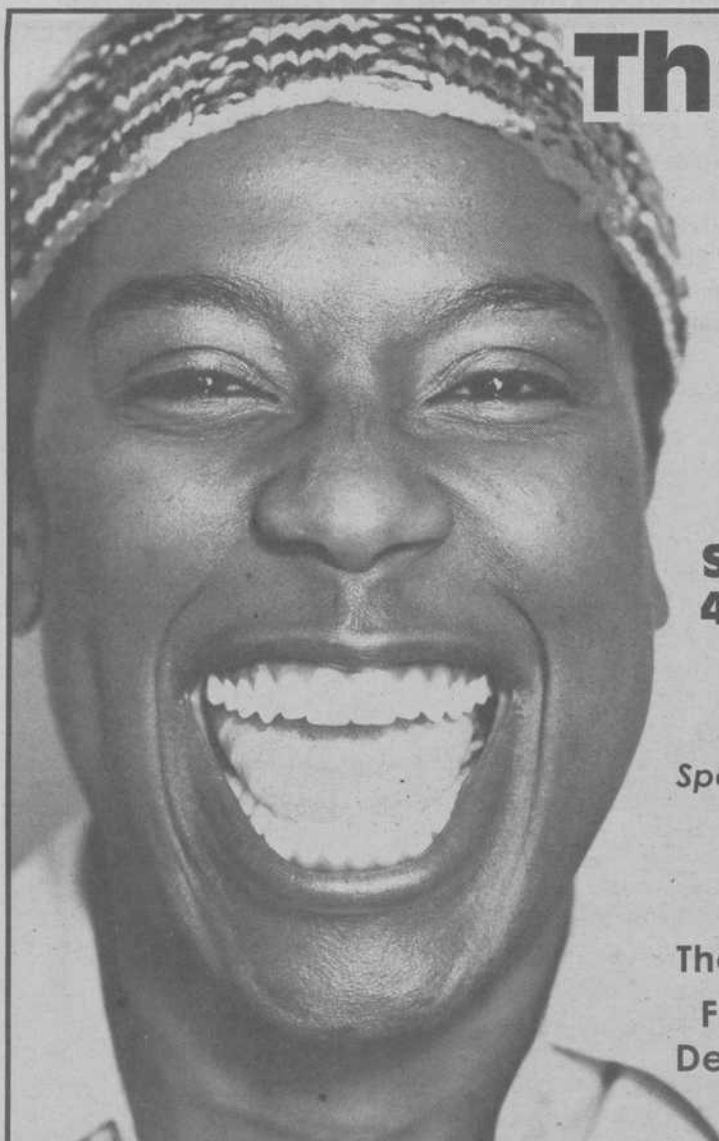
the road in Germany.

Gospel musician Andrae Crouch, whose friendship and musical collaboration with Preston spanned four decades, said he had a knack for knowing how to play a song.

Exposed to drugs and alcohol early on, Preston had numerous personal troubles in recent years. In 1992, he was given a suspended jail sentence, but ordered incarcerated for nine months at a drug rehabilitation center for his no-contest pleas to cocaine and assault charges. Five years later, he was sentenced to three years in prison for violating probation. In 1998, he pleaded guilty to insurance fraud and agreed to testify against other defendants in an alleged scam that netted about \$1 million.

"It (jail) was a great lesson, an awakening. I needed to reflect, to get rid of some of the dead weight around me," he later said. "You take the bitter with the sweet and I have to say it was my faith that kept me going. I had nothing else to fall back on."

Preston is survived by two sisters.



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