

Written by Charles Waring

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Emilio Castillo, co-founder of the long-running funk institution, **Tower Of Power**, clearly recalls the band's maiden trip to the United Kingdom.

"In 1974 we went over there with the Warner Brothers music show," reveals the 68-year-old tenor saxophonist who co-founded the band in 1968.

"I remember Keith Richards and Elton John came to see us. It was exciting. We were young and the band was hitting really hard. We were playing with Little Feat, Graham Central Station, □ Doobie Brothers, Montrose, and a little band called Kimberley. Every night, each band was trying to outdo the others and some nights we won, and other nights, someone else won. It was just really a great time."

Fast forward to 2019 and the long-running soul and funk institution originally from Oakland California, are about to return to the UK to embark on a three-date tour at the end of May (with dates in Birmingham, Manchester, and London) as part of the 10-piece band's ongoing 50th anniversary celebrations. *"In the past, we usually just came to do one gig in London,"* says Castillo,

ut we've always been baffled because we haven't been able to play other cities in the UK. Then in the last couple of years, we hooked up with this agent and told him in no uncertain terms, we want to play other cities in the UK. So by God's grace, we've started to do that. And everywhere we go we get a large, excited crowd, and a great response. So we just love it."

Given the band's huge back catalogue - eighteen studio and six live albums, not forgetting numerous compilations - it must be difficult to decide what songs to include and what to leave out. Emilio Castillo's solution is to vary the set gig-by-gig so that he keeps the fans happy - by including the hits and classic songs - but also makes it interesting for the band. *"I try to keep three 90-minute sets that we revolve,"* he explains. "

There are a few songs in there that we have to repeat in all the sets but for the most part, the bulk of the set is different each night. It makes it fresh and a little more challenging too. It's an exciting show, like a James Brown or Prince kind of show in terms of audience excitement. You should leave tired and sweaty."

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vocalists. Now, there's a new front man to add to a long and illustrious list of previous singers, which have included Lenny Williams, Rick Stevens, Hubert Tubbs, Rufus Miller, Michael Jeffries, and Ellis Hall. His name is **Marcus Scott** (pictured above with Emilio Castillo) and he is, without doubt, one of the most charismatic lead singers and commanding stage presences to grace Tower Of Power.

"He's just one of the most incredible vocalists we've ever had," enthuses Emilio Castillo. "

He's so exciting and has a great range. He's from Memphis, Tennessee, and although he's a young man - he's 34 - he has an old school mentality. He's got that James Brown and Johnny Taylor thing, and he's got the Philadelphia soul of Philip Wynne and the soulfulness of Ronnie Isley. He's just an incredible singer and performer. We are very blessed." □

Scott came on board during the session for 'Soul Side Of Town' as the replacement for another singer, Ray Greene, who left halfway through. *"He was fabulous but wound up going to Santana, which was kind of weird because we'd already recorded half of the material with him,"* discloses Castillo.

"We were like, what are we going to do? But I think it came out even better with Marcus. He's just tremendous."



So how did they chance upon Marcus Scott? (pictured above). "I have friend named Tony Coleman," reveals Castillo. "They call him TC. He was the drummer with B. B. King for about 40 years. He's a big fan of the band. He called up and said 'Mimi' - that's what they call me - "I did a gig in Memphis where there was a grand opening for B. B. King's nightclub and they asked me to put together a band. I asked around for the best soul singer in Memphis and they recommended this kid, Marcus Scott. He said, 'Mimi, you need to hear this guy, he sings 'So Very Hard To Go' like a little Lenny Williams. He's got tons of energy, he looks good, you've just got to hear him."

Castillo saw some clips of Scott online but still wasn't totally convinced he'd fit in with the band. Despite his initial doubts, the young Memphis soul man stood out from the crowd when he auditioned in person. *"I looked at hundreds of guys and then we narrowed it down to three,"* says Castillo.

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"We had them fly out to Vegas and they auditioned at our gig there during the day. We chose Marcus. It took a while for him to work in but he's owning it now."

Marcus Scott will undoubtedly realise by now that he's been accepted into a musical family rather than just a group of musicians. Their camaraderie and sense of togetherness is such that they could be considered a bonafide band of brothers. Emilio Castillo thinks so. *"I have three brothers and I love them dearly,"*

reveals the saxophonist,

"but I'm closer to these guys (in the band) than I am to them. I'm with them 200 days a year and we know each other very well. We know how to give each other space when we need it, and we support each other and encourage each other when we need it. It's just a great family."

□ Contrary to what some might think, the key to the band's stability isn't keeping everyone in the group happy. *"If you are endeavouring to keep everybody happy, you've already lost the battle,"* declares Castillo, laughing. *"You just try to help people to work together well. That's the aim for me as leader. I want to advocate for people, I want to encourage people, I want to intercede for people and be a good leader."*

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Going right back, Tower Of Power began life as The Motowns in 1968. *"I grew up in Detroit till I was 11,"*

explains

Castillo, who later moved with his family to Fremont, California.

"As kids, me and my brother had gotten a passion for soul music and wanted to play it. We had this name, Black Orpheus, but that wasn't really flying for awhile and then my mother said, you and your brother are from Detroit, you should call yourself The Motowns if you're going to play soul music."

Taking their mother's advice, the Castillo brothers became The Motowns and toiled away for a year doing soul covers until Castillo met Stephen "Doc" Kupka, who is still with the band. *"He was the first hippie we ever met,"*

laughs Castillo, recalling how Kupka's joining the band had a catalytic effect, enabling them to transform their image.

"That's when we started aiming towards the Fillmore Auditorium In San Francisco, where we

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wanted to play. That's where all the hippie bands played. So we were growing our hair long and adapting to the times of the day and thought we'll never get in there with a name like The Motowns dressed in suits with razor cuts. So we changed our name to Tower of Power." □

□ Castillo says that he stumbled across the name Tower Of Power on a long list of potential band names that someone had scribbled down: "I was doing a little bit of recording at a studio in California when we were on a break and I was sitting at the studio owner's desk and there was a three-page list of weird names, like Low Fire and The Hand People and Sopwith Camel. I'm looking at these names and thinking none of them work for us, and then I got to the second page and I saw the name Tower Of Power. I went out and told the guys, hey, what about Tower Of Power? And they go, yeah, yeah that describes us. So that was it, we chose that name."



The new look, newly-named Tower Of Power auditioned for rock promoter Bill Graham at his legendary Fillmore West venue in San Francisco (he also had Fillmore East in New York). It was vibrant hub of psychedelia and countercultural thinking masterminded by Graham, who was a savvy entrepreneur and tastemaker who saw Tower Of Power's potential and signed them to his label, San Francisco Records, where they recorded their debut LP, 'East Bay Grease,' in 1970.



Emilio Castillo says they owed a huge debut to Graham (pictured above) for his faith in them. "*He was a great friend, an incredible creator, and was really instrumental in changing the face of music,*"

he states. "

Rock and music today wouldn't exist if it had not been for him. He was very instrumental in tweaking the ear of the whole world. He had all these hippie bands like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother & Holding Company, and they were popular. On any given night when you would go to see them, he would bring in Albert Collins, Tito Puente, Miles Davis, Santana, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Sam & Dave and Otis Redding. He always had two different,

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eclectic, acts with these hippie bands, and so the whole collective ear of the Bay Area was tweaked higher and higher because you know that was when everybody was starting to smoke pot and expand their minds. Bill Graham really tweaked the ear of the whole world at that point."



In 1972, Tower Of Power joined Warner Bros, where they released six acclaimed albums between up till 1976, including their self-titled third album from 1973 which included the hit single, 'So Very Hard To Go' as well as the group's funkafied signature tune, 'What Is Hip.' That particular album featured a new incarnation of the band; its debutantes being singer Lenny Williams, organist Chester Thompson, saxophonist Lenny Pickett, and guitarist Bruce Conte.

"Drugs had a lot to do with that," says Emilio Castillo a propos the substantial change in personnel.

"A lot of heroin had come into the scene. I remember I let go of the guitar player and the sax player but kept the singer Rick Stevens. We'd already had a big hit with him with 'You're Still A Young Man,' but by the time it was time for him to put his vocals on the 'Tower Of Power' album, he also was really strung out pretty bad. I already knew Lenny Williams and had actually started writing with him and had asked him to join the band twice before that. This time, when Rick came into the studio and was really under the influence, I shut down the session and called Lenny and said 'look, I need you to come in the band now and if you're not going to, I'm going to get somebody else.' He didn't want to come in because he was friends with Rick and with all of us and he thought he was going to be in the middle of it all. I just told him, I'm making the change, and he told me, he turned over in his bed and said to his wife, I think he's serious this time - I'm going to do it."



Emilio says he was inspired to write the song, 'So Very Hard To Go' - which would become the band's biggest ever US hit, reaching No. 17 pop and No. 11 R&B in the summer of 1973 - as a vehicle for Lenny Williams. *"I had written that song with his voice in mind,"* says Tower Of Power's head honcho.

"He didn't know any of the new material so we got this idea to have him sing 'So Very Hard To Go' - because we knew he would kill it - and then we'd put it as a single which would buy us time so he could learn the rest of the material and we could start gigging. That's what we did."

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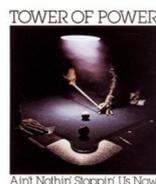
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We put out 'So Very Hard To Go' and it immediately went up the charts. And then we took our time teaching him the rest of the songs and got the rest of the album recorded."



Williams eventually left for a solo career and was replaced by Hubert Tubbs on the group's seismic in-concert LP, 'Live & In Living Colour,' their swansong for Warner Bros in 1976. Recorded in Sacramento, California, at the Memorial Auditorium, it is undoubtedly one of the greatest ever live albums ever recorded. *"Sacramento was always a hotspot for us,"* says Emilio Castillo.

"It still is when we go there today. Those people up there just love us. It's an exciting crowd on any given day. It's like when we come to the UK. We get such a great response that it causes the band to play at a higher level. That's what was happening at that gig that night in Sacramento. The crowd was so great and we just rallied and played at a really high level. The band was filled with great players at that time - Chester Thompson (organ), Lenny Pickett (sax), and (drummer) David Garibaldi - it was incredible band. I'm still proud of that record to this day. I've got a new girlfriend and she was checking out all my material and she said, 'I noticed your live albums, they sound better than other bands.' I said, 'yeah, we got that live album thing down!'"



But the group were poached from Warner's later in 1976 for a big money deal offered by Columbia Records. That was when commercial success started to elude the group. *"Warner's was the perfect label for us,"*

says Castillo, reflecting on that time.

"In retrospect, we wished we had never left them. If you read the book, Hit Men (by Frederick Dannen, published in 1991), which talks about how all those record executives in the '70s were trying to outdo each other, we realise now, looking back, that we were one of the bands that fell into the cracks. The guy over there (at Columbia), Walter Yetnicoff, all he really wanted to do was steal a band from Mo Austin over at Warner's. Columbia offered us so much money, we couldn't say no. And then when we went over there, they had no idea what to do with us. They looked at us as a problem that needed to be solved. But when you look at something like that, you've already lost the battle."

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Tower Of Power recorded three albums for Columbia between 1976 and 1979 - 'Ain't Nothin' Stoppin' Us Now,' 'We Came To Play!' and 'Back On The Streets' - but as good as they undoubtedly were, they weren't able to achieve the success they had experienced at Warner Bros. What made matters worse was that many in the group were afflicted with debilitating drug problems. *"It was a difficult time for us,"* confesses Emilio Castillo. *"In the whole Bay Area music scene, a lot of hard narcotics came into play, and a lot of drinking.... and we were own worst enemy, caught up with a record label that had no idea what to do with us."*

Despite its problems with substance abuse, the band eventually straightened itself out. *"We had a lot of drugs and alcohol stuff in the first 20 years,"* admits Castillo.

"That all ended in 1988. I got sober, then Doc got sober. I started hiring people that were principled and disciplined. That paid off as well."

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Tower Of Power has been a more stable unit since then, a situation that Emilio Castillo (pictured above) puts down to an unlikely source: the power of prayer. *"We started praying as a band in the early '90s and that's changed the whole make-up of the band,"* reveals the band's second tenor saxophonist, producer and chief songwriter.

"We have such a real spiritual foundation now. We pray together before every show. If people have stuff going on, they let the rest of the guys know and everybody prays about it. It's how we've become but if you told me that was going to happen in 1970 I would have told you that you were out of your mind. But that's what it morphed into. I always tell people, God did it, we just showed up."

Though they have experienced many trials and tribulations over half a century of being together, against the odds, Tower Of Power are still going strong today. Though 59 musicians have passed through its ranks in that time, the central core of Castillo and Kupka - the heart and soul of the band - remain, aided by the presence of long-serving rhythm section members, drummer David Garibaldi and bassist, Francis Rocco Prestia. The latest incarnation is completed by vocal dynamo, the aforementioned Marcus Scott, plus guitarist Jerry Cortez, Hammond B3 organist Roger Smith, 1st tenor saxophonist Tom Politzer, and trumpeters Adolfo Acosta and Sal Cracchiolo.

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"We've never been stagnant band because stagnant band's fall apart," declares Emilio Castillo with a palpable sense of pride in his voice.

"When people say, why have you lasted so long, I say we remain creative. That's what we do. We don't chase trends, we don't try to sound like other people, we don't try to sound like what's on the radio today: we just make the music exactly the way we want it to be. We do a different spin on music and it's our own. We realise that having your own signature and your own voice is what makes a great artist, so we stay true to that and it makes it really easy to go to work every day because you're playing music you love."

Emilio Castillo has witnessed both good times and bad times in 50 long years with Tower Of Power and as far as highlights go, there have been innumerable things that have made an indelible impression on his mind. But the one that shines brightest happened only last year. *"Last June, we did two concerts at the Fox Theatre in downtown Oakland celebrating 50 years,"* he reveals.

"We sold out two nights and augmented the band. We had seven horns and some of our old players - Lenny Pickett and Chester Thompson - played all night with us. We also had two extra backup vocalists and ten violins. It was an incredible high. Just the realisation that there I was in the city where it all started in front of two sold-out audiences killing it after 50 years, was hard to believe. I had no vision of that. When I was 18, my favourite band was a local one called The Spiders, and everybody knew that they were the tightest soul band in the area. We wanted to be like them and when they got a gig in Sacramento, I thought man, if I could just get a gig there.... So yeah, Tower Of Power has far-exceeded my wildest dreams."

Catch the mighty Tower Of Power In The UK in May - 'Soul Side Of Town' is out now via Mack Avenue/Artistry



UK 2019 Tour dates:

28th May - Birmingham Town Hall

Forever Hip - Tower Of Power's Emilio Castillo Talks Teamwork, Family Values And The Power Of Prayer A

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29th May - Manchester O2 Ritz

30th May - London Royal Albert Hall