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By Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

Full circle: Charlie Wilson shows the alley he slept in as a homeless person after his Gap Band days in Hollywood. Wilson has renewed his life and career.

Charlie Wilson fills the gaps

R&B legend rises from addiction, homelessness to return to glory as a Grammy nominee

By Edna Gundersen, USA TODAY

HOLLYWOOD — "This building wasn't here," Charlie Wilson says, waving at a high-rise condo under construction along busy La Brea Avenue. "It was a parking lot for U-Hauls. I slept under them when it rained. So did a lot of other crackheads."

He brushes a tear from his cheek. Revisiting the haunts of his darkest days is distressing for the R&B legend, who led the Gap Band to international stardom in the '80s and rebounded to solo glory in recent years. In between lies a desperate stretch of addiction and homelessness that took the singer from a posh Hollywood Hills manse to seedy alleys.

Strolling a narrow road behind a pawn shop, he points to the grassy spot he frequently staked out while living on the streets from 1993 to 1995.

"I slept in that deep corner there," he says. "When I come through this area

**Cover
story**



Take a video tour of Charlie Wilson's ranch and the Hollywood streets he lived in when he was homeless at life.usatoday.com.

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Rebuilding his reputation took work and patience

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now, I get all tensed up. A lot of people who sink that far into depression, drugs and street life don't come back. A lot of people I knew then are dead."

Wilson, who turns 57 on Friday, did more than survive. He just had the most successful year of his 43-year career. The singer is up for two Grammys: R&B album for fourth solo effort

Cover story *Uncle Charlie* and R&B vocal for hit single *There Goes My Baby*, which spent 10 weeks atop *Billboard's* adult R&B chart. The album entered the R&B chart at No. 1 and the pop chart at No. 2, a career peak. He's also nominated for an NAACP Image Award.

Nobody is more astonished by this resurrection than Wilson, who returns to the mileposts of his downfall with humility and gratitude. He starts a walking tour at the former location of the Total Experience studio, where the Gap Band, his trio with brothers Robert and Ronnie, recorded from the mid-'70s to the late '80s, generating a string of platinum albums and such hits as *You Dropped a Bomb on Me*, *Party Train*, *Outstanding*, *Burn Rubber on Me* and *Shake*.

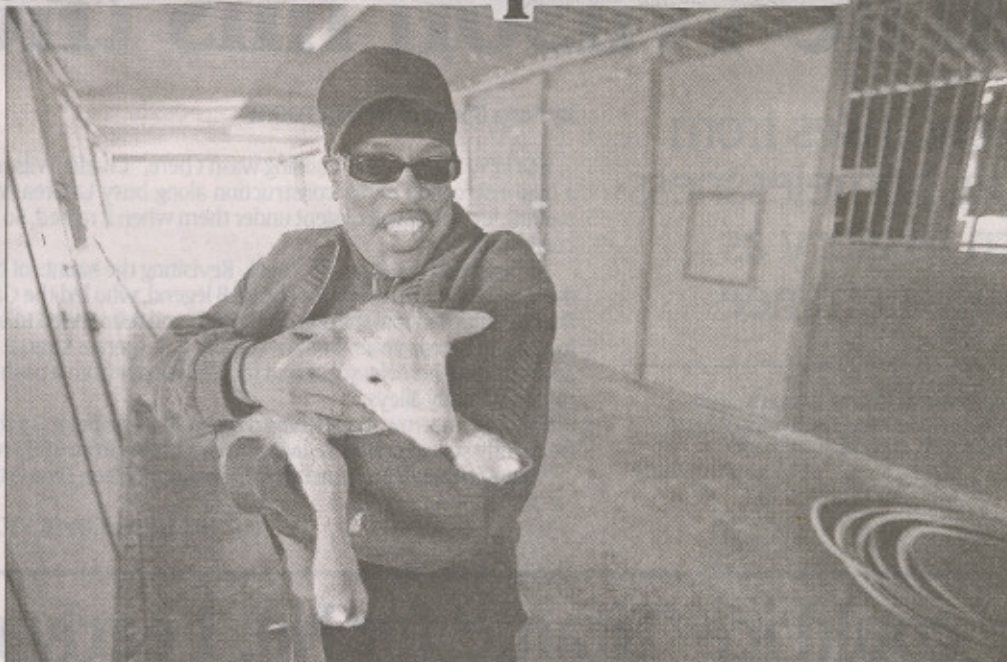
Unable to revise their label and publishing deals, the brothers first talked of splitting in 1986, and Wilson surrendered a stately home and half-dozen cars in 1987.

"They weren't in my name," he says. "We went from rags to famous, from famous to rags. We never got the riches. It took a toll on us, and we decided to quit."

His money dried up and an existing drug habit worsened, until Wilson landed on the streets with only the clothes on his back.

"I had no home, no money," he says. "You could still hear my records on the radio. People gave me drugs because they thought I was still on top. Nobody knew I was down and out."

On Hawthorn Avenue, he finds another former hideout, but the shrubs he slept behind no longer line the wall. He points across the street to an apartment house, where a sympathetic landlady let him hole up when she had vacancies. A homeless couple who



By Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

A new life: Charlie Wilson cuddles a 3-day-old lamb at his ranch home in Acton, Calif. At Sunday's Grammys, he is up for best R&B album for *Uncle Charlie* and R&B vocal for hit single *There Goes My Baby*.

camped near trash bins in the back often let him curl up in a makeshift shelter of shopping carts and plastic tarps.

"Cardboard for a bed and a brick for a pillow," he recalls. "If they had a sandwich, they shared it with me."

Hiding his pain

During his three years adrift, they were the only people he confided in. To others, he bluffed the part of a big shot trolling Hollywood's underbelly for cocaine. He avoided soup kitchens and shelters, cut ties to former associates and, if recognized, feigned a lost weekend.

"I'd say I just got out of the studio or was on my way to the office," Wilson says. "Nobody knew I had sunk this far. I was really bitter about what I didn't have. And embarrassed. Even when I was getting high, I'd pray, asking God not to let the devil kill me before I got on my feet again."

Eager to leave these grim lairs, Wilson quickens his pace and says, "Woo, it's hard emptying out. I tried to put all this behind me. I had to start over. That road was tough, but I love this music so much that I let nothing stand



By Gregory Smith, AP

His "angel": Wilson credits his wife, Mahin Tat, for helping turn his life and career around.

in my way back to the top."

Initially dismayed to see parking tickets on his entourage's cars, he laughs when the female officer shrieks at the sight of her favorite singer. Her fellow traffic cops are summoned from blocks away, he poses for snapshots, and the tickets vanish. Riding in the SUV with his wife and manager, he describes a turning point.

"I ran into a cousin, who started crying when she saw me," he

says. "We used to get high together, but she had been clean three years. She told me, 'Cuz, you have to stop, you're dying.' She talked me into rehab."

Wilson, then a gaunt 130 pounds, entered a 28-day program in 1995 in Acton, 50 miles north of L.A. He was hardly a poster boy for sobriety.

"For 14 days, I was showing off, acting like a superstar," he says. Finally, a rehab director confronted him. "This lady called me in and said, 'Mr. Wilson, I notice you've been sleeping in class, not paying attention. What are you going to do when you get out?' I told her I had nowhere to go."

On Wilson's weekend pass, the woman rented him a house in nearby Palmdale, then furnished it. "So I asked her for a car," Wilson says. "She said, 'I can't, because your subconscious mind will take you to a liquor store or a drug house.' I told her I couldn't live in this house by myself. So I asked this lady to marry me."

He and Iranian native Mahin Tat have been married 15 years. She weeded toxic and unscrupulous influences from his life, began booking Gap Band shows and boosted his confidence.

"I asked God for an angel, and

“I had to start over. That road was tough, but I love this music so much that I let nothing stand in my way back to the top.”

— Charlie Wilson

he sent her,” Wilson says. “Everyone told me I was washed up and too old. She told me, ‘We’re going back to the top.’ My wife believed in me more than I did.”

Doing the work

A driveway lined with rose bushes and pepper trees leads to the palatial Mediterranean home on Wilson’s 20-acre hillside spread in Acton. Inside, Persian rugs and crystal chandeliers grace nearly every room, including a 3,000-square-foot master suite. Wilson’s studio sits higher on the hill, adjacent to the couple’s menagerie of goats, llamas, alpacas, ducks and chickens. With pit bull Chloe on his heels, Wilson cradles a 3-day-old lamb and assesses three pregnant sheep before gathering eggs.

Though he feels vindicated by such domestic comforts, he measures pride by another yardstick: “Not one relapse in 15 years. Not one beer, no cocaine, and I quit cigarettes in 2000.”

Restoring his R&B authority required patience and stamina. He got a leg up when admirer Snoop Dogg, who gave Wilson the nickname Uncle Charlie, began enlisting him on recordings in 1996.

“Snoop is a nephew, not by blood, but by love,” Wilson says. “He got me back in the business. The hip-hop community embraced me and sustained me.”

Wilson worked with Master P, Mystikal, Kanye West, Lil’ Kim, the Black Eyed Peas, Notorious B.I.G. and 2Pac. Michael Paran, Mahin’s son, served for two years without pay as the Gap Band’s manager and rebuilt the band’s reputation and bank accounts during eight years of touring. He urged Wilson to go solo and ne-

gotiated his record deal at Jive.

Wilson quickly discovered sobriety and talent weren’t enough to reclaim his position in the limelight, Paran says. He had to fight for it.

“Every day was an uphill battle, with all the doors shutting on him,” Paran says. “He kept himself clean and got rid of people with the potential to bring him down. He was a true underdog. We just told him, ‘Be yourself, stay on track and people will wake up and see what you’re capable of.’ He was resilient.”

Wilson released 2005’s *Charlie, Last Name Wilson*, produced by R. Kelly, T-Pain and others, then produced *Uncle Charlie* himself, though he says some Jive executives balked and doubted the hit potential of *There Goes My Baby*.

“People at my own label said, ‘I never would have signed you,’ but I’ve been told no too many times,” Wilson says. “I know I can sing. I know I can record. I didn’t want anyone dictating to me. And now I got two Grammy nominations! This is sweet.”

Wilson’s revival should surprise no one, says Gail Mitchell, *Billboard*’s senior R&B/hip-hop editor. She credits a still-supple expressive voice that continues to shape soul singers.

“*There Goes My Baby* is the perfect balance between old-school and contemporary neo-soul,” she says. “It’s retro without sounding dated. And Charlie loves to entertain. He’s never lost that showmanship. He gives his all, and I feel sorry for anyone following him on stage.”

No longer sleeping behind hedges, Wilson isn’t living on Easy Street, either. Diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2008, he lost his father, Bishop O.W. Wilson, to the disease last June. His cancer now in remission, he’s a spokesman and fundraiser for the Prostate Cancer Foundation.

“I do a lot of performing, so I thought it was time to do a lot of informing my brothers about this disease,” he says.

Before he died, Wilson’s father encouraged him to let go of regrets and grudges.

“My blessings are ahead of me,” Wilson says. “I’ve cleaned out the garbage can. I don’t have fear of anybody taking anything anymore. You can’t steal my joy.”