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Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

Isley Brother Picks Up Where He Left Off

Ron Isley keeps it positive after prison on tax charge

(AP) - When Ron Isley talks about the three years he spent in prison for tax evasion, there's no bitterness or anger in his voice: At times, there almost seems to be a bit of nostalgia.

"I made a lot of friends. I was treated like a king. I had all of the respect that one would want. And it's a part of that that I miss — when I say I miss, I miss the people that I met," said the 69-year-old with the golden tenor.

"When I first went in there, there were 300 people there and those 300 people were behind me 100 percent, and when I say 100 percent, I really mean that," he added. "What can we get for you? Do you need this, do you need that?" ... 24 hours a day, and that's a blessing."

Isley's prison experience was probably a bit different from the average person incarcerated for a tax offense. But the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer doesn't credit his good fortune to his legendary status. Instead, he credits a more potent factor.

"We have a lot of faith in God, No. 1, and we always know that he's with us, so that will carry you through anything," he said.

That faith led Isley to believe there were better days ahead, and his faith appears to have paid off: He recently released a new album, "Mr.



Ron Isley

Isley," and has a Grammy nomination for one of the key tracks: a duet with Aretha Franklin on the classic "You've Got a Friend."

"I was always fascinated how this man who made his first song in 1959 with 'Twist and Shout' was able to reinvent himself decade after decade after decade," said Antonio "L.A." Reid, chairman of Island Def Jam, which released Isley's latest project. "This man is as much of an icon as Mick Jagger. This man is as much of an icon as Elton John ... Stevie Wonder."

While Isley's name isn't as iconic as those men, there's a strong argument that his music has been as influential. As part of The Isley Brothers, his contributions to music have been formidable: "Fight the Power," "Between the Sheets," "For the Love of You," "It's Your Thing" and "That Lady" have become pop and soul classics and, through sampling, hip-hop favorites over five decades.

And when other veterans found themselves singing cover tunes to remain relevant, Isley connected with a new generation through the gangster alter-ego Mr. Biggs, linking with R. Kelly, Lil Kim and others to generate hits.

Isley had just released an album

with his brother Ernie, "Baby Makin' Music," and had another hit, "Just Came Here to Chill," when he was sentenced in 2006 to three years in prison for failure to pay taxes. Isley, who still proclaims his innocence, said the government tried to get him to take a plea deal and spend a few months in jail.

"I didn't want to go away for no time at all, so I figure, being that I'd been to court over a 100 times that this would be something that would go away," he said. "I was wrong in figuring that."

Isley was a new father when he went to prison (his son is now 3); he also left behind his wife. It wasn't really behind bars: Isley describes it as sort of a "camp" with plenty of open space. But there were plenty of restrictions.

"You were just held away from what you wanted to do. All the telephone calls, you gotta go to bed a certain time," he said.

Isley sang about once a month and participated in some shows there. He dreamed of recording a new album.

"I wanted to make an album that was special ... that was, 'Wow, he did this?'" Isley said.

Isley's stature hasn't diminished. He recently was honored with a special legend award at the Soul Train Awards, and he eagerly talks about other opportunities, including TV sitcoms and other appearances.

And he won't be complaining about the long hours promoting his album or being away from home.

"I will have to do that, but at the same time I haven't been doing that for a long time, so once again I'm enjoying it," he said. "Now everything is new again, it's like I'm at the beginning, doing everything all over again."

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