

Soul

|Obituary|

Jean Knight obituary

Soul singer who had a multimillion-selling hit in 1971 with the irresistibly funky Mr Big Stuff



📷 Jean Knight performing at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage festival in Louisiana in 1986. Photograph: David Redfern/Redferns

Richard Williams

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Jean Knight, the American soul singer, who has died aged 80, may have been what the music industry calls a “one-hit wonder”, but what a hit it was. In 1971, four years after [Aretha Franklin](#) had turned [Otis Redding](#)’s song Respect into a demand for female emancipation, Knight took a song called Mr Big Stuff and used it to demolish male arrogance and sexual entitlement.

When Knight [performed the song on the popular US television show Soul Train](#), in a maroon velvet trouser suit and a giant bouffant wig, she did so with a proud, derisive smile. She also had the assistance of an irresistibly funky rhythm track, spiced by interjections from a perky trumpet-led horn section. The record flew to No 1 on the R&B chart in the US, and then to No 2 on the pop charts, selling two million copies, and was denied the top spot only by the Bee Gees’ How Can You Mend a Broken Heart.

Mr Big Stuff was released after an initial rejection from the label that eventually profited from its success. It was one of four tracks on a tape originally sent by Malaco Studios in Jackson, Mississippi, to the offices of Stax Records in Memphis, Tennessee, the home of Redding, Carla Thomas and Sam and Dave. When Don Davis, Stax’s head of A&R, showed no interest, Malaco released one of the tracks, King Floyd’s Groove Me, on their own small label, and saw it top the R&B chart and make the national Top 10.

That success prompted a reconsideration at Stax, where Tim Whitsett, the head of the company’s publishing company, listened again and picked out Mr Big Stuff. When Al Bell, the company’s president, heard it being played through an office wall, he sanctioned its acquisition and release, with such success that the record earned Knight a platinum disc and a Grammy nomination for best female R&B performance.

Knight was unknown outside the tight-knit music community of



📷 Jean Knight in the early 70s. Mr Big Stuff earned her a Grammy nomination for best female R&B performance. Photograph: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

her native New Orleans in Louisiana, having virtually given up on her hopes of a professional singing career after performing in clubs and recording without success for small local labels. When a friend, Ralph Williams, asked her to sing on a rough demo of a song he had written with Carrol Washington and Joseph Broussard, her suggestions for improvements were cheerfully incorporated. That was Mr Big Stuff, and soon a renowned local producer, [Wardell Quezergue](#), was inviting her to travel with him to Malaco's studio to record it properly.

Quezergue devised the arrangement for the studio's

regular rhythm section and horn players, using typical New Orleans syncopations and playing the distinctive organ part himself. With Floyd taking over the microphone, they recorded Groove Me on the same day.

Knight was born Jean Caliste in New Orleans. Her parents, Florence (nee Edwards) and Louis Caliste, had sung as a duo in the city's clubs and theatres, and her father also kept a store. One of eight children, she was educated at Joseph S Clark Sr high school, opened in 1947 to educate Black children in the Tremé district. After graduating she embarked on her singing career, adopting her professional name and often appearing at Laura's Bar, a club run by one of her sisters.

By the time she made Mr Big Stuff she had been married twice, first as a teenager, to Thomas Commodore, with whom she had a son, Emile, and then in 1965 to Earl Harris, a longshoreman who became her tour manager after she had become a national figure. Both marriages ended in divorce.

Mr Big Stuff proved to be her only hit. The follow-up, [You Think You're Hot Stuff](#) (1971), was too obviously a retread and lacked freshness. After studying to become a nurse, she worked in healthcare for 15 years but returned briefly to the US charts in 1985, reaching No 50 with a single in the zydeco style, the suggestive [My Toot Toot](#), written by the Cajun singer Rockin' Sidney Simien.

In 2005 her New Orleans house was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. She lived for several months in a caravan provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and later made her home in Tampa, Florida.

Inducted into the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame in 2006, she continued to perform, and at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage festival in 2016 she told her audience that the royalties from Mr Big Stuff, often used in film and TV soundtracks and frequently sampled by rappers, had provided her with a regular flow of cheques through the years. "All I have to do is sit home and wait for the mailman," she said.

She is survived by her son, four grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Jean Knight (Jean Audrey Caliste), singer, born 26 January 1943; died 22 November 2023

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