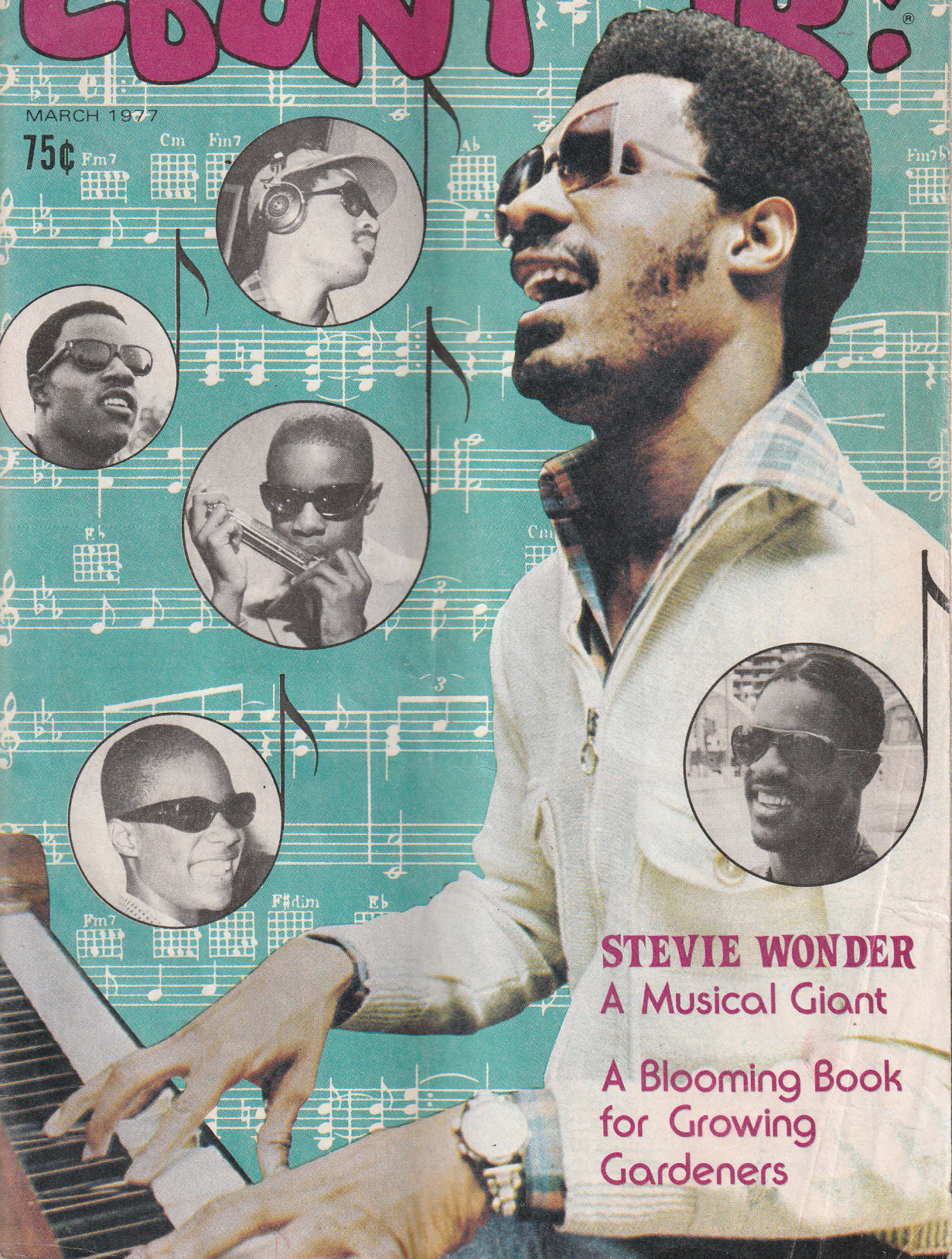
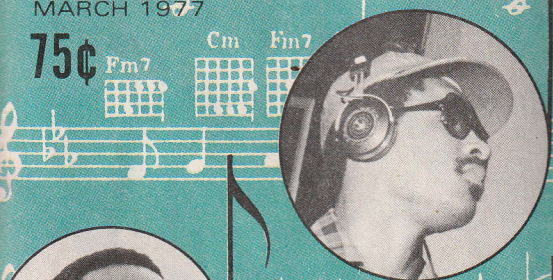


A JOHNSON PUBLICATION

EBONY Jr!

MARCH 1977

75¢



STEVIE WONDER
A Musical Giant

A Blooming Book
for Growing
Gardeners

GRANDPA YAM, WHAT AM

by Candelaria Silva

We call him Grandpa Yam. Yam 'cause that's what he likes best of all foods, piping hot from the oven, buttered brown and orange. He even eats the yam skin. Besides, he is such a sweet man, least that's what all the grownups on our block say. He says, "I'm Grandpa Yam, what am. And what I am is something secret and something known. I am a tree and you children are my roots and branches, which means that you're Grandpa Yam, what am, too."

It's hard to describe how "what am" looks. His looks fool you. He looks broken down busy, he looks old. Secret part of it being that his looks are only what he

seems—never what he is. He is young and old. He is young because he has long, bushy hair all over his face and head (we call him nappy face); but old at the same time since his hair is white, white like baking powder, white softly.

Grandpa Yam is a tree. Grandpa Yam is the soil. Grandpa Yam is a man of stories. Grandpa Yam loves us all.

The place "what am" is most likely to be found is his front porch. In fact, he fits into the porch so beautifully he seems a part of the makings of the house. The house is black and brown wood, the porch is green, grass green, Grandpa Yam's chair is golden—straw golden. He sits in



his golden chair and carves. Takes a stump, makes a drum; takes a stick, becomes a flute; takes a limb, creates a statue.

Grandpa Yam carves and sways, side to side, and he pats his feet, side to side, and he whistles, side to side, and he speaks.

"I take the wood and turn it sideways and upside down. I look at it in the sunlight and I watch it while it's in the shade. I set it on the ground and then I place it up high. And sooner, or later, I'll look

at it from a certain angle and something will come to me. It's like the wood is talking to me, telling me what to make. That's when I begin to carve. When I carve I'm naming the wood; I'm naming it us, giving it our names."

Grandpa Yam says all this and keeps up his sway. He gets a little rhythm going. We've learned to watch him and his chair 'cause when his chair starts squeaking, it means he's started rocking and when he rocks, it's story time.

We always have to ask him to tell his stories; he doesn't volunteer many words on his own. "So Paw Paw Yam, what am." (That's to get his attention, then you have to touch his knee.) "What am, Grandpa Yam?" He'll answer then.

Grandpa Yam never tells stories the same way twice so you have to remember the version you like best. Best way to remember is to tell it to somebody you know so they can help you remember it; before long the whole block knows it and it's grown a little bit. Sometimes you can hardly recognize it when it gets back to you.

Grandpa Yam tells long stories, short stories, and those in between. One of my all time favorites is an in-between one about the sun. It was about four o'clock on a Saturn-day. We were all sitting 'round on Grandpa Yam's front porch messing with his cowbells and drums, making music and all kinds of sounds. "So Grandpa Yam, what am, what am, tell us a story, please," says Neesi. "Hey, hey, father Yam . . . a story," sings 'Jeule.

"What am," says Grandpa Yam, "is that the sun went away. Packed up and left us on this here earth one day. The

people didn't know what to do or say. They just stood amazed, screaming and hollering, 'Stay . . . stay!'

"Children, the sun fell. Fell fast and fiery to the earth, fell orange and yellow and red, fell beautiful like a storm—a sunstorm—orange, yellow, red. Li'l folks, it was a beautiful, fearsome sight and folks was scared. Didn't know what to do or say."

"Why did the sun leave, Father Yam?" someone asked.

"That's the next part to the tale. I'll get to it directly. The sun's been shining for so many years—years of plenty, years of sadness, troubled years, years of peace—that people had begun to ignore it, taking its beauty and warmth for granted. Sun is always ignored 'cept right after it's been cold or when folks have something special like a picnic they want to do. Then they listen to the weather man hoping he can tell them what the sun's plans are for the day.



"Anyway, the sun was forgotten so much that it got lonely and decided to go away for a vacation to get itself together. Sun thought maybe if it got a rest it would appreciate the land and people it shined on more. Sometimes it got tired and didn't feel like shining and would pray for a cloud to come in front of it. Sun figured after a rest it'd come back and smile real wide and everybody would be happy.

"Another reason the sun left was because of its best friend, Dark. Folks have called Dark everything but its name, and Sun didn't like that. No, Sun didn't like that one bit and figured that while it was away, folks would naturally have to start appreciating Dark for its specialness and not judge it the way they judge light. Light and darkness do two different things anyway."

ap•pre•ci•ate = be thankful for

"I can understand that," said 'Jeule.

"As the sun was falling, Rainbow and Sky joined hands and caught it. 'Whewwwwww!' said Sun.

" 'We thought you were going to crash,' said Rainbow and Sky.

" 'Never happen,' said Sun. 'I was planning on curving back up into you, Sky, before I got too close to earth.'

"People on earth were full of joy. There was a kind of half-light over the land and a new kind of warmth what with the sun being so close and shining rainbow colors.

"Folks started looking up in the sky and at each other and said words like, 'Beautiful!' 'Out-a-sight!' 'Wonderful!' Sun liked those words and stuck out a few of its rays, then brought out its entire face. Rainbow and Sky dropped their

hands. It was a beautiful sight—the lightness shining through the dark, the dark leaving a pattern through the light. It was a dark delight, yes indeed. Speaking of which, it's about time you children go home to supper, don't you think?"

"Aw, Grandpa Yam, let us stay. Just one more story, we promise."

"Head home."

"Shoot!"

"Go on . . . save some for tomorrow. Maybe then I'll let y'all braid my beard and I'll tell you what happened when the Sun went back home. It was a celebration."

A long time passed before we heard part two. Seem like something happened to Grandpa Yam. Something different, both old and new. Grandpa Yam changed, but remained the same, too. He got softer and a little more joyful. He started singing all the time. Talked about something wonderful that was going to happen. A celebration!

This celebration was like the

celebration the stars and people had when the Sun went back home. It lasted for days. Only this celebration was going to happen forever, Grandpa Yam would tell us. He would talk and sing, "I'm gonna sit at the welcome table and I'm gonna sing and shout and dance and never get tired . . . and I'll be with all of my family and all of my friends."

We all figured that he might be hinting about his birthday party. And after we started thinking, none of us could ever remember him having a birthday, so we organized ourselves to play for the feast to be held on Yam Yam's birthday which was July 24. Grandpa Yam is a Leo, which is a lion, who is the king.

"But it will have to be a secret," said Ms. Jefferson who was helping us with the party plans.

"Yes, a secret!" Neesi shouted.

"Don't say a word about it," 'Jeule whispered.

"I won't."

"I wouldn't."

"Okay . . ."



In Johnson's Field we gathered tables from all over the neighborhood and pushed them together and covered them with a long, bright orange cloth. Then Arnold, the neighborhood artist who draws as good as Jacob Lawrence or Henry Tanner or Elizabeth Catlett, drew a huge sign that said, "This is the Welcome Table. Welcome EVERYONE!"

On the Welcome Table was more food than I've ever seen in a lifetime. And on the ground around the big, big, biggest tree in the field were all kinds of presents—everybody in town had given Grandpa Yam something. Everything looked so beautiful and bright and just right that we almost forgot to go get the guest of honor.

Ms. Jefferson had been elected to escort King Grandpa Yam to his place in the center of the Welcome Table.

"Let's go for a walk to Johnson's Field, Pa Yam," she said.

"Why don't you come back later. I'm working with my wood now."

"But, uh, well . . . the kids have something they want to show you, right now."

"Well, if my kids want me, I'll have to go. I'll be right there," he said.

Grandpa Yam had on his jeans with all the paint and varnish stains. He looked colorful but a mess. Ms. Jefferson didn't know how to get him to change without spoiling the secret the kids had planned, so she didn't say a thing.

"You know," Grandpa said while they were walking, "No one even remembered it was my birthday today."

"I'm sorry, I forgot it myself! Why didn't you remind me?" she said, trying not to smile.

"Things happen that way sometime."

They turned the corner, walked up the steps and down the hill around the old wooden shack where no one lived anymore, and heard music and people's voices. And Grandpa Yam saw the Welcome Table and asked Ms. Jefferson, "What's all this?"

"You'll see," she said.

Then someone noticed Grandpa Yam

and let out a whoop. And everyone yelled, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, GRANDPA YAM. COME SIT AT THE WELCOME TABLE!"

"Thank you," Grandpa kept saying. "Oh, thank-you. Why I never had a birthday party in my whole, entire life. THANK YOU!!!!!"

After we ate all the food, Grandpa opened all his presents. He got tools, a tape recorder for him to preserve his stories, and a dream, and someone gave him a kiss, and someone else promised to fix his dinner every night for a month. Grandpa Yam said he had something to give us, too—a story/song about the Welcome Table. "One day I might not be around you all like I am now, but I'll always be here. I'll always be in Johnson's Field. There will always be a welcome table, and we will always love each other. And remember this: Some seek and some simply sigh and cry, but I want my children to fly. You must never, never settle for anything else but the right thing. For only the right folks and the sharing folks and the loving folks can always be at the welcome table. The welcome table is where everybody is loved and everybody is wanted and everybody is needed. That's every one of us and whoever you tell my stories to."

"Maybe one day everyone in the world would have heard your story, Grandpa Yam," said Kofi.

"Certainly will," Grandpa smiled.

He got up and took four yams from his pouch and put one in the ground on each side of that biggest tree in Johnson's Field. And don't you know that tree had yams all over the next summer! Black and brown tree with green, green leaves and golden yams growing on it. Only one of its kind in the world.

Grandpa Yam is a tree.

Grandpa Yam is the soil.

Grandpa Yam is a man of stories.

Grandpa Yam loves us all.