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The Last Mile of The Way: Soul Music and the Civil Rights Movement

By Christopher Smith

In the summer of 1960, a group of Soul performers was scheduled to perform at a segregated dance in Little Rock, Arkansas. Jesse Belvin, Jackie Wilson and Arthur Prysock were to play two shows that evening—one for a black audience and a second show for a white audience. These segregated shows were essentially the norm in the majority of the country. However, that night, Jackie Wilson decided he was not going to perform the second show for a white audience and encouraged the others to follow suit. They were all subsequently run out of town at gun point and somewhere outside of Little Rock, Belvin's tires on his 59' Cadillac blew and he lost control of the vehicle, resulting in the death of him and his wife. Arkansas investigators attributed the accident to "disgruntled white" audience members who slashed the tires of the Cadillac. Meanwhile at local Soul concerts the "K-9 dogs [were] patrolling the aisles to prevent race mixing or over demonstrativeness on part of the colored population" in Birmingham.

Almost from its inception, Soul music was concretely intertwined with the American Civil Rights movement and the issues surrounding race relations. This struggle by both white and black Americans to eradicate segregation and Jim Crow while fighting to extend equal social and political rights to African Americans is arguably the most understood and appreciated social movement in American history. However, there are areas in which thoughtful analysis can benefit both the history of the movement as well as race-relations in the 21st century. In the early years of the movement, the western world experienced a phenomenon that can be referred to as a "Soul Explosion." Throughout the late 1950s into the 1970s, what was once considered "black" or "colored" music began to crossover into "mainstream" or "white" America with unprecedented success. The effect that this phenomenon had on those involved in the Civil Rights movement is one of a profound and varying nature. Black artists reached the summits of commercial success while black consumers found a voice for unity, strength and perseverance. Meanwhile, white audiences let a significant part of black culture into their world in a period where segregation of both bodies and cultures was the norm.

Although sometimes unintentional, this access to black society helped to alter white perceptions of African Americans. The venues for creation and consumption of Soul music threatened to and, in many cases, did break down the barriers of segregation in America. In fact, Stax Records based in Memphis Tennessee, had one of the most famous studio bands in the industry, Booker T. and the M.G.'s, composed of two black musicians and two white musicians.

However by the 1970s, as the Black Power movement developed alongside the Civil Rights movement, Soul music worked to strengthen the color divisions it had earlier helped to destroy in both African American and white American communities. The legacy of music as a tool for communication and unity that Soul music created is still alive. Even today, explicit in a Hip Hop culture, which finds great consumer appeal amongst white audiences just as Soul appealed to white America in the 1960s, the continuance of political commentary can be seen. As a professor of political science at the University Of East Anglia, John Street notes, “the music was a product of politics, just as the politics was a product of the music.”

Although other genres and styles such as Jazz and R&B had become significantly popular in mainstream American, the explosion of Soul music in the late 1950s and 1960s is unprecedented. Predating Soul, Blues was largely considered “colored” music and Jazz music barely broke outside of the elite, big-city demographic. Soul music, however, saturated American pop culture, and this is reflected in record sales as well as radio charts. Billboard Magazine, the authority on charting radio airplay, first created a chart for monitoring African American popular music in 1942. In doing so, they made a direct gesture to segregate African American music from the rest of “mainstream” America. However, as a result of this separation, the “crossover” phenomenon was created. This occurs when black artists “cross over” or accumulate plays on mainstream charts as a result of their popularity on major radio stations. Dr. Maulsby notes that in order to “retain that [white] segment of their listening audience who began to tune in on soul stations,” disc jockeys had to program Soul music into their line-up.” Consequently, between “August 1968 and August 1969 virtually every single making the Top 20 on the R&B [or colored] charts was a ‘Hot 100 Single’ chart entry also.” Worth noting here is that the “Hot 100 Single” chart was noted as a “mainstream” chart, which generally implied a “white” chart. This success did much to facilitate the spread of Soul music messages, both subtle and overt, in the performances to mainstream America, but it also helped to create economic leverage as well as an economic “space” for African Americans.

As the growth in popularity of soul music continued, economic success generated wealth amongst many artists, producers and record labels. This income allowed many black artists to become quite wealthy, and, for the first time in American history, these black artists began to control their product from start to finish. Blues musicians in the late 1920s and early 1930s were brought to major cities to create records for white-owned labels by white engineers for predominately white audiences often for minimal financial gain. Examples of the exploited blues performers can be found in the stories of Robert Johnson, “Blind” Willie McTell, and “Mississippi” John Hurt. Although whites “continued to own most of the record companies which produced soul music in the 1960s,” black artists

by this time were beginning to be recorded by black engineers for black-owned labels and licensing companies, distributed to black audiences by black-owned record stores. Berry Gordy's Motown Records is perhaps the most obvious example, being the most financially successful black-owned enterprise of this period. However, individual artists such as Sam Cooke invested in their own publishing firms, record labels, which enabled them to control most aspects of the music creation, and distribution process while maximizing the economic gain. This success and subsequent entrepreneurial ventures helped to counter many preconceived notions of African American abilities amongst the pro-segregation whites during the Civil Rights era. Furthermore, this helped to guarantee an economic "space" for African American community seeking refuge from the persecution and violence of the era.

This creation of an economic "space" is reflected in the extension of economic gain outside of the music industry itself and the marked growth in African American owned recording studios, labels and record stores. Dr. Joshua Clark Davis of University of North Carolina's History department argues that this rise in black-owned record outlets created a "commercial public space" especially significant in the American south where there was little prior to the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, Dr. Davis states, "African American retailers and consumers hesitated to assimilate into white-dominated pop-music marketplaces," while "black merchandisers envisioned the record trade as an arena in which African Americans could pursue a broader strategy of bolstering economic self-sufficiency." These stores also provided community spaces for African Americans that, as Dr. Davis and others suggest, served as informal and commercial gather spaces where patrons could mingle, interact and take part in a commercial process "that might best be described as social consumption." In the South, especially, these stores were viewed as safe places for African Americans to gather and socialize but also spend money. Perhaps one of the most significant contributions Soul music made to the African American community during the Civil Rights movement was that the genre provided key public figures that communicated ideas of equality and pride to audiences inside and outside the African American demographic. In fact, Dr. Portia Maultsby, professor of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, writes in *The Journal of Popular Culture* that "black artists were entering the mainstream of American society as politicians and spokesmen communicating the concept of 'black pride'." These artists, such as James Brown, Sam Cooke, and Marvin Gaye, held as much popularity in the white community as they did in the African American community, and these messages were certainly not lost on either demographic. The "black pride" concepts that these artists spoke of preached solidarity and strength to African Americans during this period and, at the very least, exposed white audiences to these messages. That these artists were able to achieve such a role in mainstream society is a direct re-

sult of their commercial success in popular radio and mainstream record sales.

The messages and commentaries embedded in the lyrics of Soul music varied from song to song and artist to artist. Differing messages of political commentary are present in songs by artists from Sam Cooke in the early 1960s to George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic in the late 1970s. Historian James B. Stewart analyzes the varying messages, commentaries and political engagements that were prominent in the genre during the 1950s-1970s. He writes in the *Journal of African American History* that the most common political commentary found in the music of this period is referred to as the “documentary” theme, which William Van Deburg describes as “a running commentary on the state of black culture.” These commentaries generally documented the “negative conditions prevalent in black communities” communicating these realities to both an external (non-black) and internal audience. For example, Roberta Flack sings of these conditions in her song “Tryin’ Times” (1969):

You got the riots and the ghettos,
And it’s all around;
And a whole lot of things that are wrong,
Are going down.

Less common but still prominent themes in the genre at this time were the themes classified by Stewart as “Defiant Challenges,” “Awareness Raising Self-Criticism,” “Collective Self Help Solutions,” “Confrontation Declarations,” and “Revolutionary Manifestos.” Each of these reoccurring themes in the music is targeted at a specific audience of wither internal listeners or external listeners. By examining the perceived “audiences” of such material, we can filter out the messages “sent” to white audiences while understanding that even those commentaries for internal audiences were still received by external audiences.

James B. Stewart notes the significance of the dual audience for soul music of the period and that it “raises the issue of how political messages available to any listener can be shaped in ways that target specific sub-groups.” Stewart goes on to state that both audiences, internal or external, can interpret these messages in their own ways. According to Dr. Stewart’s classification of political commentary in Soul music, the two themes intended for only external audiences are the Jeremiad, which “challenges outsiders to implement humanitarian beliefs and values,” and the Defiant Challenge, which “demands that external forces cease and desist from the exploitative behavior.” Both of these themes center around the belief that “white America” change their attitudes and behaviors towards “black America”; the latter insists or demands that the changes be made while the former suggests a thoughtful transition to equal and humanitarian treatment. The dichotomy of these messages suggests that artists were wholly aware of what

audience they were reaching. Black artists had to walk a fine line with their commentary in the early years of the Civil Rights movement, and this explains why Stewart notes that the more “hard-hitting” messages generally came from artists and labels in the North of the country where such acrid statements were easier to get away with. In the Jim Crow South, commentaries tended to be more passive and often more inclined to be directed at internal audiences. The distinction between an internal and external audience was clearly made by most Soul artists with a message while regional differences affected the diction and tone of said messages.

The majority of political commentary themes in Soul music of the Civil Rights period were intended for internal audiences. Ethnomusicologist Robert W. Stephens notes that, though Soul music evolved out of many black musical traditions, it was Soul music that “respond[ed] to changes in the social, political and philosophical views of the black community.” In other words, Soul music was a black product for black audiences first and foremost as it was a wholly black invention. Thus, the commentary in the music was primarily intended for Black audiences. These internal themes called for “collective problem solving,” “aggressive self-defense,” “overturning existing political and economic institutions,” and finally “advocated spiritual enlightenment to reduce social tensions.” Through these messages, “black performers, presented the qualities of a revitalized black consciousness, reaffirming destiny and a sense of unity and power.” However, these messages reached white audiences through the popularity of the genre, and white audiences must have reflected on these commentaries. One can only imagine the duality of responses from white America when hearing Gil Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (1971) or Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come” (1964). Both envision a changed America, but differ largely about the nature of that change. For instance, in his most famous piece Scott-Heron states:

Green Acres, Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville Junction will no longer be so
damn relevant...

Because Black people will be in the streets looking for a brighter day
The Revolution will not be televised.

These internal messages and commentaries had an external audience thanks to the profound commercial success and subsequent popularity of Soul music in white America. These external audiences were challenged by messages of “revolution” coupled with the “jeremiad” pleas for social equality and harmony. As the Civil Rights movement waned and Black Power took over, Soul music evolved with the movement. The perceived failure to enforce the Civil Rights Act and stubborn refusal to comply with desegregation legislature caused “blacks

residing in large urban centers throughout the United States to reject the non-violent approach of the civil rights movement and retaliated to violent acts by arming themselves and demanding immediate entry into society.” This change helped to usher in the Black Power movement, in which James B. Stewart notes that “the emphasis on black pride arising in the mid-1960s and blossoming in the early 1970s inspired several Defiant Challenge commentaries that incorporated Black Power ideological elements. For example, Marvin Gaye sings in his song, “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler),” (1971) about “deteriorating social conditions” and “skewed public policy priorities,” a direct attack on the white establishment. Gil Scott-Heron’s most famous piece, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” a diatribe on revolution, lambasts “popular culture, the police and traditional civil rights leaders.”

From a white America perspective this helped to weaken race relations, as these artists no longer sent messages of hope, freedom and equality, but disillusionment, aggression and black power. Furthermore, the growth of the Blaxploitation film genre contributed further to misconceptions of African Americans. This genre, originally developed for an urban black audience, used funk and soul soundtracks and primarily used black actors. However, films like the famed “Shaft” and others were criticized for the use of stereotypes. James B. Stewart notes that the “emergence of the so-called Blaxploitation film genre in the early 1970s was perhaps the most difficult challenge that writers and performers faced in seeking to maintain the role of R&B as a major source of political commentary in black communities.” Even so, the positive impact on race relations that Soul music had already made would remain significant.

The most important era in 20th century American history contains the Civil Rights movement, the height of the Cold War, Vietnam and the Soul explosion. This pop culture phenomenon should not get lost in the milieu of mid-20th century American history, as it had a dramatic and profound impact on race relations in America. “Prior to the evolution of soul music, black performers... had either been excluded from or assimilated into the American popular music tradition,” Dr. Maulsby notes. At some point in the 1950s, a circular was distributed around New Orleans that read, “STOP Help Save the Youth of America. DON’T BUY NEGRO RECORDS...the screaming, idiotic words, and savage music of these records are undermining the morals of our white Youth in America.” Roughly a decade later, this “negro” music dominated the mainstream airwaves, sold millions of records and created a place for black culture in American mainstream society.

Through messages of hope and communications of unity, Soul music provided an artistic foundation for blacks in America. Moreover, this helped to strengthen the movement for social and economic equality for African Americans. The attraction to and consumption of this black music by a white au-

dience helped to reshape a generation's perceptions of African Americans in a period where segregation of the races perpetuated lies and misunderstandings of both parties. In accepting black music as "mainstream" and no longer "colored" music, mainstream America legitimized, in their perspective, an element of black culture. This allowed an amount of commercial success that elevated black Americans as a whole demographically. Soul music created a space for black culture and black people in a mainstream popular culture that was as segregated as American society.

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