

PETER GURALNICK

SWEET SOUL MUSIC

RHYTHM AND BLUES AND THE SOUTHERN DREAM OF FREEDOM



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Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream
of Freedom

Peter Guralnick



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*For Joe McEwen, Mr. C., without whom I wouldn't have been able even to think about writing this
book...*

*And for Solomon Burke, the undisputed King of Rock 'n' Soul, without whom I wouldn't have wanted
to.*

Introduction: Soul Serenade



Off to church. (Val Wilmer)

THIS IS A STORY FIRST AND FOREMOST. IT IS THE story of a particular kind of music, but I hope it is more than that. I started out more than four years ago with the idea of writing a book on Southern soul music in the '60s, a companion volume to my two earlier books, *Feel Like Going Home* and *Lost Highway*, and the last installment in a trilogy covering my three great musical loves—blues, rockabilly/country, and soul. I wanted to write a different kind of book this time, though, tending more toward narrative than toward profile, and while I recognized the impossibility of telling the *whole* story (Who can ever do that—who would ever *want* to do that? As Mark Twain once wrote, a real biography is impossible because “every day would make a whole book—365 books a year.”), I wanted to present as convincing a portrait of a musical movement and a social milieu as could be deduced in retrospect. In the course of researching the book I interviewed well over a hundred people and traveled from Los Angeles to Mississippi, from Georgia to New York, Alabama, Philadelphia, and Tennessee. The weight of the subtext, I hope, reinforces the narrative, because however comprehensive this book may seem, however tangled its chronology and extended its text, it represents only a minuscule portion of the time that I spent with label owners, producers, booking agents, record store operators, disc jockeys, and managers, as well as the artists themselves. And I hope it reflects my disinclination to understand things too quickly, because there is no question in my mind of the education that I got, an education in an aspect of Americana and a facet of American business that, despite my longtime exposure to the music industry, I had never really scrutinized before. I met some of the greatest characters and made some of the closest friends (often one and the same thing) that I have ever known. And I had most of the preconceptions with which I came to the writing of this book turned almost totally upside down.

WHAT IS SOUL MUSIC?

Southern soul music developed out of a time and a set of social circumstances that are unlikely to be repeated. I suppose I should make it clear from the outset that when I speak of soul music, I am not referring to Motown, a phenomenon almost exactly contemporaneous but appealing far more to a pop white, and industry-slanted kind of audience. (Motown's achievement, said Jerry Wexler, vice-president of Atlantic Records and chief spokesman for the rival faction, was “something that you would have to say on paper was impossible. They took black music and beamed it directly to the white American teenager.”) What I am referring to is the far less controlled, gospel-based, emotion-baring kind of music that grew up in the wake of the success of Ray Charles from about 1954 on and came to its full flowering, along with Motown, in the early 1960s. It was for a considerable length of time limited almost exclusively to a black audience which had grown up on the uninhibited emotionalism of the church and to a secret but growing legion of young white admirers who picked up on rhythm and blues on the radio and took it as the key to a mystery they were pledged never to reveal. In the beginning, like rock 'n' roll, it was an expression of rebellion, or at least of discontent, and Ray Charles's transformation of dignified gospel standards into cries of secular ecstasy came in for a good deal of criticism at first, mostly from the pulpit. Once it emerged from the underground, it accompanied the Civil Rights Movement almost step by step, its success directly reflecting the giant strides that integration was making, its popularity almost a mirror image of the social changes that were taking place. When Percy Sledge's “When a Man Loves a Woman,” a pure example of Southern soul emotiveness if ever there was one, made the top of the pop charts in 1966, it seemed almost as if the mountain had been scaled. Here was a song uncompromised, I thought at the time (*many* thought

the time), by concessions to the marketplace, unbleached and unblemished by the endearing palliatives which Motown always brought to bear, an expression of romantic generosity and black solidarity (I thought again). I didn't even like the song all that much, but I took it as a harbinger of a new day, when a mass audience could respond to black popular culture on its own terms.



[*Black Wall of Pride, Atlanta, 1973. \(Val Wilmer\)*](#)

Similarly it seemed no coincidence that when the height of the Movement was past, when the certainty of forward motion and the instinctive commonality of purpose that marked that brief period were called into question by the death of Martin Luther King, the soul movement, too, should have fragmented, the good feeling clearly engendered by the music should have fled, and the charts should have been virtually resegregated, with funk and disco and then rap music rendering themselves as inaccessible, and ultimately as co-optable in turn, as rhythm and blues once had been. Soul music, then, was the product of a particular time and place that one would not *want* to see repeated, the bitter fruit of segregation, transformed (as so much else has been by the encompassing generosity of Afro-American culture) into a statement of warmth and affirmation. This was the backdrop for the evolution of soul, an exciting time, a dangerous time, a time of exhilarating self-discovery. That is the historical context.

Here is what I thought soul music was when I first started writing this book. “Soul music,” in British writer Clive Anderson’s orthodox and not imperceptive formulation, “is made by black Americans and elevates ‘feeling’ above all else. It began in the late fifties, secularized gospel embracing blues profanity, and dealt exclusively with that most important subject, the vagaries of love. The sound remains in church. More often than not soul is in ballad form and employs certain gospel and blues techniques—call and response patterns, hip argot and inflection, melismatic delivery. It is a completely vocal art.... Soul assumes a shared experience, a relationship with the listener, as in blues where the singer confirms and works out the feelings of the audience. In this sense it remains sacramental.”

I think that would serve as a pretty fair summary of my own more basic assumptions. Not that I

was entirely without exposure to nonacademic reality. With my friend Bob Smith I saw every blues act that came to town, and when we were both sixteen, we saw Ray Charles for the first time singing his new hit “What’d I Say” at Boston’s Jordan Hall. From early 1964 on, under the prodding of another friend, John Graham, I must have gone to every major soul revue, every Summer and Winter Shower of Stars that Boston’s soul station WILD put on. John and I saw Solomon Burke and Joe Tex and Garnet Mimms and James Brown and Otis Redding—we saw most of the people I am writing about in this book, in fact, many of them several times and often close up in the little clubs that John introduced me to when we were both around twenty. The first story that I wrote for *Rolling Stone* in 1968 was an appreciation of Solomon Burke, and one of the earliest pieces I wrote for the fledgling *Boston Phoenix* was a description of the spectacular nature of James Brown’s stage show in January of 1967.

I mention all this not merely to cite my credentials but also to downplay my pretensions to scholarly objectivity. I went to the shows, it is true, along with the requisite handful of white spectators, and like Mick Jagger in England, Mitch Ryder in Detroit, Peter Wolf in New York, or writer Joe McEwen in Philadelphia, I was enthralled. I would not want to say that I immediately grasped the reality. Certainly I wasn’t seeing any more of the behind-the-scenes action than any other fan. But more to the point I took the shows as an opportunity for romance in which the impossible grace of the dancers was outweighed only by the exotic allure of the setting. To me soul music was black power. To me soul music was a kind of revolutionary statement of purpose, a bold departure from the rhythm and blues which had preceded it, and (here is where I think I got it most wrong) a kind of separatist, almost Garveyite statement of black pride, a championing of “roots” long before the formal concept became popular, whose adoption by whites only symbolized the goodwill and innocent expectations that the Movement engendered. My thinking along these lines was further reinforced by such statements of social purpose as “We’re a Winner” (the Impressions), “I’m Black and I’m Proud” (James Brown), “I Wish I Knew (How It Would Feel to Be Free)” (Solomon Burke), and “A Change Is Gonna Come” (Sam Cooke), and to this day I have no doubt that the rising tide of expectations and the emergence of new opportunities were a major part of the story. But it was not the whole story, any more than the whole story of rock ’n’ roll was freedom and a rejection of the mood of white middle-class Eisenhower America.

I came face to face with the disparity between theory and reality almost as soon as I started my interviews for the book. Soul music, declared Jerry Wexler, who in his position as vice-president of Atlantic Records had recorded most of the great soul singers of the ’60s and many of the outstanding r&b singers and groups of the ’50s, was no more than “a rubric... a semantic fabrication. It was just a stage of the music, and it evolved to a certain point. It was rhythm and blues.”

It was rhythm and blues. Right away my whole theory was blown out of the water. To me there had existed a sacred distinction between soul and rhythm and blues. Soul was honesty and truth and anguish and, as I say, soul-baring. Rhythm and blues, a genre with which I was also entranced (but for different reasons), was more of a contrivance—honking saxes and double entendres and screaming singers and pounding rhythms. Well, that’s how much I knew. When I went to Macon for the first time and Otis Redding’s brother, Rodgers, introduced me to Otis’s widow, Zelma, he recommended me by saying, “He’s a real r&b fan.” Over and over again I came up against the fact that no distinction was made: all the singers that I was writing about had their roots in the ’50s; the designations were in a sense the invention of critics and anthologists.

Well, all right, I could accept that. But soul was at least a clear expression of black solidarity; it expressed the “inchoate hopes of a noble people” (I might very nearly have written that), didn’t it?

When I earnestly sought out Julian Bond, the former SNCC leader who had written poems inspired by Ray Charles and Charlie Parker, he didn't exactly dismiss my ideological thesis, but he didn't really confirm it, either. Music may well have been important to his emerging sense of racial identity, he said, but like any other teenager, he "romanticized singers, especially Ray Charles. Rhythm and blues was looked down on. It was low-class music, it was wild music, it was sexual music, it was 'dirty' music. So far as we were concerned, it was the most glamorous life in the world. Now I know different, of course, but this was heaven to me back then." From the time that I myself first went to Memphis in the fall of 1980, the picture that I got of the Stax Record Company, and then of the recording scene in Muscle Shoals, as well as the emergence of Otis Redding from the provincial reaches of Macon, Georgia, showed not so much the white man in the woodpile, or even the white businessman capitalizing on social placement and cultural advantage to plunder the resources of a captive people, as the white *partner* contributing as significantly as his more prominent—more visible certainly—black associate. I don't mean to make too much of this, because partnership is a self-evident concept, it is the whole *point* of integration, after all; I was simply not prepared to see it happening here. Perhaps because a working union of this sort is so rare, perhaps because of my own cultural and political preconditioning, it took me a while to come to grips with the nonideological complexion of reality.

Finally, I entered into the writing of this book with what I think was the common misperception that soul music was a phenomenon that existed outside of what we generally view as "the music business." Southern soul, after all, like blues and rhythm and blues and rockabilly before it and rap and beat music after it, was a product of the independents, men and women who had circumvented the stranglehold that the major labels like Columbia, Decca, RCA, and Capitol had on the marketplace by discovering not a new music but a new market. Rhythm and blues was dismissed disparagingly in the '40s as "race music," country and western as "hillbilly," and while each music had its legitimate audience, the majors were in most instances reluctant to service it. Success in these fields was wide open, then, to the independent operator and entrepreneur, and the independent was in most cases someone who loved music, an old radio hand like Sam Phillips (the man whose Sun label gave birth to Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and rock 'n' roll), a collector like Ahmet Ertegun or Herb Abramson (who started Atlantic Records in partnership), a musician like Jim Stewart (founder of Stax), a certified hipster like Jerry Wexler. Whatever their backgrounds, though—and the biographies of some of the other independents include such diverse occupations as shellac manufacturer, nightclub operator, mambo instructor, gumball machine distributor, and small-time gangster—whatever their passion for the Life and the music, their primary motive was to make money. Elementary as this lesson may sound, it took me a while to put into perspective what must have been obvious to someone like Jerry Wexler from the first: that soul music, far from taking place in a vacuum or developing an aesthetic in splendid isolation from other more corrupt and hybridized strains, was in fact developing in tandem with rock 'n' roll and country music, was competing, really, for the same dollar, could never give up the hope of transcending its parochial origins and breaking into the pop marketplace. Categories, it is said, are made for critics, and I have always believed this, but it took me almost two years of traveling around the country and interviewing industry figures as well as soul artists before I came to the realization that the story I was telling was as much the story of a business as it was the story of a music. Indeed, in many ways the story of soul music represents both the triumph and the tragedy of the free-enterprise system; the process of cross-fertilization by which soul music came to exist and influence in its turn the entire spectrum of American music was no more an accident than the invention of the Model T. As Jerry Wexler said in 1979 in a moment of somewhat glib self-doubt,

“Just as it is with literature, where Faulkner remains on the library shelves while Jacqueline Susann hits the charts, it’s the same with records. Each company must do its best to fill the pulsating needs of mediocrity in order to maximize its potential for success. We might as well be selling hubcaps.”

WHAT IS SOUL MUSIC? II

This is what I mean today when I am talking about soul music. Soul music is Southern by definition, not by actual geography. Like the blues, jazz, and rock ’n’ roll, both its birth and inspiration stem from the South, so that while Solomon Burke, one of the very greatest of soul singers, is a native of Philadelphia, and Garnet Mimms, a little appreciated but nearly equally talented vocalist, made many of his recordings there, the clear inspiration for the styles of both is the Southern revivalism that fueled such diverse figures as Elvis Presley and Hank Williams on the one hand, Little Richard and Ray Charles on the other. I do believe there’s a regional philosophy involved here, too, whether it’s the agrarian spirit cited by Jerry Wexler (“There was always this attitude, ‘Oh, man, we’re gonna lose our soul if we do that. We’re not gonna let machinery kill our natural Southern thing.’ ”), or simply the idea that Dan Penn, the renegade white hero of this book, has frequently expressed: “People down here don’t let nobody tell them what to do.” Unquestionably the racial turmoil of the South was a factor, and the rapid social upheaval which it foreshadowed; in fact, the whole tangled racial history of the region, the intimate terms on which it lived with its passions and contradictions, played a decisive role in the forging of a new culture, one which the North’s polite lip service to liberalism could never have achieved. Ultimately soul music derives, I believe, from the Southern dream of freedom.



Garnet Mimms, 1967. (Cliff White/Courtesy of Bill Millar)

It is not, however (contrary to most received opinion), a music of uninhibited emotional release—though at times it comes close. What it offers, rather, is something akin to the “knowledgeable apprehension,” in Alfred Hitchcock’s famous definition of suspense, that precedes the actual climax, that everyone knows is coming—it’s just nobody is quite sure when. Soul music is a music that keeps hinting at a conclusion, keeps straining at the boundaries—of melody and convention—that it has imposed upon itself. That is where it is to be differentiated from the let-it-all-hang-out rock ’n’ roll of a cheerful charismatic like Little Richard, who for all the brilliance of his singing and the subtleties of

which he is capable, basically hits the ground running and accelerates from there. It is to be differentiated, too, from the cultural refinements of Motown, which, with equal claim to inspiration from the church, rarely uncorks a full-blooded scream, generally establishes the tension without ever really letting go, and only occasionally will reveal a flash of raw emotion. This is not because Motown singers were not equally talented or equally capable of revealing their true feelings; it is simply that Motown was an industry aimed specifically at reaching the white market, and every aspect of that industry was controlled, from the grooming and diction of its stars to the subtlest interpolations on its records. Southern soul music, on the other hand, was a haven for free-lancers and individualists. It was a musical mode in which the band might be out of tune, the drummer out of time, the singer off-key, and yet the message could still come across—since underlying feeling was all. Feeling dictated the rhythm, feeling dictated the pace; that is why soul music remains to this day so idiosyncratic a domain. One of the most common fallacies of a post-apocalyptic age such as ours is that there is no room for anything *but* the dramatic gesture; modulation is something as unheard-of as self-restraint. Soul music, which might in one sense be considered a herald of the new age, knew differently in the 1960s, and among the most surprising aspects of going back and listening to the music today—among its most enduring qualities—are the quiet moments at the center, the moments of stillness where action stops and “knowledgeable” anticipation takes over. Think of the great screams you’ve heard from everyone from James Brown to Wilson Pickett; think of the fervor of Solomon Burke’s or Joe Tex’s preaching on subjects as far removed in substance and seriousness as “skinny legs and all” or the price that love can exact. In gospel music, the progenitor of the style, a singer is often described as “worrying” the audience, teasing it, working the crowd until it is on the verge of exploding, until strong men faint and women start speaking in tongues. This is commonly referred to as “house wrecking.” In soul music, perhaps the last of the great vocal arts, there is this same sense of dramatic structure, even if the message does not always provide the same unambiguous release. “I feel like I want to scream,” James Brown announces over and over again, borrowing an age-old gospel technique. “I feel so good I want to scream,” he declares, testing the limits to which the tension can be extended and in one famous recorded passage going past them as a voice from the crowd yells back, “James, you’re an asshole.” Over and over again the soul singer, like his gospel counterpart, begs for complicity. “Let me hear you say yeah,” he implores, taking directly from the church. “There’s just one more thing I want to say,” he declares, just waiting to be invited to say it. “Can I get a witness?” becomes the rhetorical question—secular and ecclesiastical—of the age.

All this is merely testimony to the indisputable bond between technique and feeling, Southern soul music and the church. What is not so readily appreciated, perhaps, is the extent to which soul, once its gospel origins are gotten past, is a self-invented music—not so much in its form (which, like that of every great American folk music, is an amalgam, a hybridization of various strains that have gone before) as in its evolution on record. For soul was to a large extent a tale of three cities—Memphis, Macon, and Muscle Shoals—each of which grew up as an isolated regional outpost as far from the studio system of the majors in spirit as it was in geography and almost equally removed from any real awareness of the achievements of its fellow satellites. Southern soul music, as it evolved in the studio, was very much a homemade art (this was perhaps its one clear distinction from rhythm and blues), little dependent on direct models because direct models were not close at hand, little aware of history because history had not yet been written. The singers, it is true, had their parts down pat; they simply modeled themselves on the gospel stars. But the musicians, the writers, the producers, the managers, the engineers—the whole apparatus of the so-called recording industry—were forced to define themselves and their roles as they went along, were thrown back on their own resources. Perhaps this

was to some extent a function of provincial xenophobia; if the United States was isolationist by inclination, the South remains the last bastion of true populism and regionalism triumphant.



Jerry Wexler and Wilson Pickett. (Courtesy of Jerry Wexler)

But it was not simply the South. The recording industry itself was still in the process of self-definition, and soul music—black music in general—remained the Wild West of the music territory. “We didn’t know how to make records,” Jerry Wexler has said of his own celebrated start in the record business with Atlantic in 1953. “What the hell did we know then?” Jim Stewart and his sister, Estelle Axton, had scarcely listened to black music when they started recording it at Stax; the closest that Rick Hall, founder of the Fame Recording studio and label in Muscle Shoals, had come to the music industry was a little studio lined with empty egg cartons over the City Drugstore in Florence, Alabama. Phil Walden, a recent graduate of the Sidney Lanier High School in Macon, Georgia, plotted with Otis Redding, a dropout from Lanier’s black counterpart, how they were going to crack the great world of entertainment without knowing any more about it than you could pick up from agents’ handbills. Dan Penn, a brash young white kid from Vernon, Alabama (population: 1500), had never seen any of his heroes (Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Bobby “Blue” Bland) sing when he started traversing the Alabama-Mississippi countryside in a made-over hearse, putting on an act in which he imagined himself to be “Bobby ‘Blue’ Penn.” Each region, each *studio*, developed its own distinctive approach, piecing together the hard-won lessons until a recording philosophy was evolved, improvising a system of on-the-spot, “head” arrangements (necessary in the absence of reading musicians) that, whatever its simplicity, impressed Jerry Wexler so strongly that he would say in retrospect, “We didn’t really learn how to put a record together until we worked with the Stax and Muscle Shoals people.” And this from the man on whom “the Stax and Muscle Shoals people” modeled their whole operation once he had sought them out, whom they revered for his track record and producing expertise!

The one other irreducible component of Southern soul music was its racial mix, and here, too, opinion remains divided about its precise significance. To some it is just one more variation on the old racist story: black workers, white owners. I have spoken earlier of my own confusion and my ultimate conviction that here was a partnership. But it was a partnership with a difference: the principals

brought to it such divergent outlooks and experiences that even if they had grown up in the same little town, they were as widely separated as if there had been an ocean between them. And when they came together, it may well have been their strangeness to each other, as well as their familiarity, that caused the cultural explosion.

There are other, more prosaic ways of looking at this affiliation. Idealistically, of course, it did bear out the promise of integration, and one participant after another—black *and* white—has credited the partnership as evidence that the American dream can work, has laid the success of soul music to “blacks and whites working as a team.” On a slyer level black DJ Hamp Swain (the original discoverer of Otis Redding and a prominent Macon bandleader in the mid-’50s) has cited his “secret audience”: “In my early days in radio I would think that fifty percent of my audience was white—high school kids who were crazy about r&b music. At the shows they could sit upstairs and watch the black kids downstairs having a good time dancing. They just had to sit up there and watch.” Soul music, Swain implies, was born when the white kids finally came down and participated. Even more circuitously Jim Dickinson, a white Memphis musician with a singularly iconoclastic point of view, saw white musicians as a necessary ingredient in the mix simply because they would take more abuse in the studio than their black counterparts. Perhaps because there was less at stake in the way of pride or place, “the white musicians would just sit there and not say anything.”

Whatever the true story—if there *is* a true story—one fact is clear: blacks and whites brought very different backgrounds and offered very different contributions to the music itself. Blacks, of course, were the stars. There were no white soul singers, with the marginal exceptions of the Righteous Brothers or Wayne Cochran or a one-shot success like the Magnificent Men, and if a singer-songwriter like Dan Penn played a role similar to Fletcher Henderson’s in the Benny Goodman sound like Henderson he remained for the most part entirely in the background. The quality that other white musicians like Steve Cropper and Jimmy Johnson—primarily *rhythm* guitarists, interestingly enough—brought to the music included a country and western background, a middle-class work ethic, and a rock ’n’ roll heart. By that I don’t mean a musical quality so much as a sense of dissatisfaction with where they were and who they were, and a (very likely unarticulated) sense of social injustice, the kind of instinctive “white niggerism” that Norman Mailer was groping toward when he wrote of “the juvenile delinquent [coming] face to face with the Negro” and from this “wedding” arising the birth of the hipster. To the white protagonists of this book virtually without exception Ray Charles was a god for almost the very reasons that the White Citizens’ Councils had warned about: sex, barbarism, and jungle rhythms. “It is to my surprise,” I wrote of actually meeting Charles some twenty-five years later, “his sense of *organization*, his dedication to humdrum reality, that stands out, not the flash of inspiration, the wicked gleam of orgiastic pleasure that I first glimpsed when I was fifteen or sixteen years old and took not only for all of Ray Charles but for the essence of r&b, 1960 style.”

The other side of such intense romanticization, of course, is patronization, and that is the Animal House side of the story. It was the fraternity audiences North and South—but particularly South—that nurtured the music, that held up a drunken Jimmy Reed as the prototypical “crazy nigger,” that took the music and the musicians for their own as a kind of substitute for real experience, and to this day keep r&b alive in a form of institutionalized revivalism known as “beach music.” To Rufus Thomas, Percy Sledge, and countless others the Southern fraternity circuit provided the best kind of gig: high-paying, dignified (you got to wear a tuxedo, and the young men and ladies were dressed to the teeth), and full of the most appreciative audiences that you could hope to encounter. For the white “cover” bands like Jimmy Johnson’s Del Rays or Dan Penn’s Pallbearers, the fraternities were the life’s blood of the business: there was no club scene, and without records an act couldn’t really travel, but with a

little bit of luck (and a good reputation behind you) you could always come back to Phi Kappa Alpha year after year, sometimes several times in the same year, and find a warm welcome.

I must admit, none of this would ever have occurred to me before writing this book—and not just the fraternity side of it, either. No one knew who was actually playing on the records. “Quaint to observe white man Wayne Jackson step up to the microphone,” wrote Bill Millar of the *English Sax* Volt Revue in 1967. And the idea that Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham, authors of so many of the soul classics, were both white would have seemed heretical to me at the time. Far more shocking, though, was the idea that such classist and racist institutions as *fraternities*, such clear agents of wealth and privilege, could have genuinely been fostering the music that I loved. Well, that was the case, whether I liked it or not.

At the same time, in the midst of all this historical revisionism, I don’t want to suggest that soul music was not socially progressive on some conscious level, or that there was not a firm substratum of idealism in its dedication to an alternative culture—for there was. Soul music was a statement of possibilities that could be taken as far as you liked, and no white participant that I know of was unaware of the implications. I think songwriter Donnie Fritts put it best when he spoke of his friendship with soul singer Arthur Alexander (like Donnie a native of the Muscle Shoals area) in those dangerous times. “How could I be prejudiced?” he said, referring to the bitter divisiveness of the era. “I’m the most prejudiced-against person there is. I’m the biggest nigger you ever met.”

For the black participant, whether singer, songwriter, or record executive, the social dynamic was somewhat more straightforward. On the one hand, as Norman Mailer melodramatically pointed out in “The White Negro,” there was no choice as to how you might represent yourself if you were black; race was an inescapable fact of American life, and “any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day... no experience can ever be casual to him....” Conversely soul music represented another opportunity for upward mobility, much as sports and entertainment in general had for the previous fifty or sixty years. One of the things that surprised me most, I think, when I came to meet my heroes of soul was how middle-class they were: men and women who might have been doctors or lawyers or teachers in many instances, whose private speaking voices, articulation, and erudition were often far different, far removed from the “soul brother” bonhomie that their onstage manner would suggest. I had constructed for myself a mythology of instinctual soul, in which the Ray Charles fantasy figure would have been the archetype. This construction fit right in with my own knowledge of the blues world, or even the world of white country music, where social—if not economic—aspiration was often limited, and, particularly in country music, the rural world from which the star arose was often simply transplanted to suburban surroundings. This did not turn out to be the case in the world of soul, and perhaps that accounts for some of the problems of adaptation and identity which several of the singers I interviewed have encountered. Musically nearly everyone that I spoke to saw soul music as a step up from the blues, a clear departure from primitive chants and cotton patch hollers executed on a more elevated thematic and harmonic level. “We had our type of blues gospel melody,” songwriter Roosevelt Jamison explained, “but we wanted to put some poetic message and philosophy in it. The gutbucket stuff we figured wasn’t really good music. We wanted to put some flavor of God in it.”



[Sam Cooke and Dinah Washington. \(Gordon "Doc" Anderson\)](#)

Not surprisingly nearly every Southern soul singer, almost without exception, took Sam Cooke, the urbane former gospel Soul Stirrer, for a model. With his matinee-idol good looks, liltily graceful voice, sophisticated manner, and effortless delivery (all with a subtle suggestion, or inescapable undercurrent, of gospel passion), Cooke was not only the logical stylistic choice; he provided the clearest social model as well. With "You Send Me" in 1957, a #1 pop hit, he was the first "soul singer" to achieve widespread crossover success; with the creation of his own label and publishing company he became one of the few black stars to take charge of his own career; with his Ferrari, his Jaguar XKE, his appearance on the *Tonight* show, and his triumphant conquest of the Copacabana Club in New York, he entered a world previously reserved For Whites Only. As urbane as Duke Ellington in the world of jazz, and no less dignified, he was revered not just for his music but for his *success*, a notion that took a while to penetrate my preconceived ideas about racial solidarity and the purity of art. Sam Cooke was looking for white acceptance, because he was looking for wider sales and a broader market. That is why he crossed over from gospel in the first place. As Ray Charles said, speaking of his own departure from the chitlin circuit, "My people made me what I am, because you have to become big in your own community first, but as far as leaving that black audience exclusively, I never even thought twice about it."



[The Soul Brothers Six. \(From the collection of Fred Lewis\)](#)

Not everyone was Ray Charles, though. Not everyone was Sam Cooke. For almost all the soul singers the chitlin circuit remained an inescapable way of life, at least to a considerable degree. What should never be lost sight of is that Southern soul music is at least as much the story of the never-weres and might-have-beens, of the one-hit artists, and the impact of their one hit, as it is a chronicle of the stars. Soul music is a message from the heart, and through the story of soul music, as I finally came to see it, runs a spiritual thread that links the Soul Brothers 6 with Sam and Dave, James Carr with Otis Redding, William Bell with Sam Cooke. Within this framework, who is to say that Oscar Toney, Jr., is not as “important” as Wilson Pickett, that George Perkins or Phil Flowers or Freddie Scott did not contribute as much to the body of the music in their own way as the more familiar names, with their instantly familiar hits?

I’ve tried to keep this idea in mind even as the book has settled into a more predictable pattern of social context and historical associations. I’ve tried to express the pulse of the music, not just its formal definition, the idea that here was a truly democratic arena open to anyone as much on the basis of desire as technique, as much on the basis of gut instinct as careful calculation. This held true for singer and businessman, songwriter and musician, from a great synthesizer like Ray Charles, who, recognizing the technical deficiencies of his voice (he had a very limited natural range), explored every nook and cranny of its emotional resources, to a compulsive performer like James Brown, who built revolutions on riffs and trusted to faith, righteousness, and determination to make a way. It is feeling in the end that we are hearing when we listen to soul music, it is feeling that gets the music rocking with that steady beat, it is feeling with which I started out the book and feeling which is the one home truth that I think will survive any tendency toward revisionism or retrospective irony.

THE STORY OF MY BOOK

I started this book in the fall of 1980. One of the first things I did was to try to get in touch with Solomon Burke. I tried his lawyer in California, called his booking agent, song publisher, manager—

all without success. Then one day just as I was going out the phone rang, and my wife, Alexandra, answered it. I was already in the car when she came running out. It was someone calling on behalf of Solomon Burke, she said, or someone who said he was Solomon Burke. When I got on the phone, the voice at the other end was chipper, mild, the voice of an insurance salesman. Maybe, I thought, it was another Solomon Burke. Finally, still fearful that I was being toyed with, I explained the purpose of my earlier calls. I was writing a book; it was about soul music, Southern soul music—I didn't have to go any further. Of course, of course, interrupted the voice at the other end of the line, suddenly warming to the conversation and abandoning all pretense of polite neutrality. "And how could you do a book without speaking to the king?"

That set me off on my ride. I met Solomon shortly thereafter, and he was right: I couldn't have done the book without speaking to the king. He was everything I had ever imagined him to be through his music, and more—bigger, warmer, funnier, larger than life in every respect. Within a short time, through Solomon and others, I had made a whole raft of contacts. One person led to another, and everywhere I went news of my quest preceded me. Everyone wanted to know how old friends were doing; Carla Thomas, a warm, gracious woman as articulate as she is talented, announced, "Next time I'm going to interview *you* and find out what all these people are saying," as soon as I closed the notebook on our interview. Some people were more interested in what others had to say about them than they were in talking about themselves; many of the insights I gained were off the record, and much of the knowledge I acquired lies buried beneath the surface of the text; some of the star interviews that I sought assiduously over a period of years never came off; but gradually I came to feel as if I were gaining entrée to, and knowledge of, a world whose dimensions I had scarcely even suspected.

I was surprised sometimes at how freely so many of the people I interviewed were willing to speak. But then I don't know if I should have been. What they were seeking, most of them, was the same directness and emotional truth that existed in their music. They were looking for their place in history. In the past I have occasionally written things that I thought might offend those I was writing about, material that involved both revelations on their part and insights that I had gained. In almost every instance I found that if the story was honest, it was accepted, no matter how painful acceptance might be, that the highest compliment that the musicians I was writing about could pay was "It's honest. It's the truth."

Well, I hope that's the case here. The truth, as I say, is not a simple thing—or perhaps it's more accurate to say that there are many truths. And when one is piecing together a retrospective account such as this, assembled from a series of interviews with more than a hundred different (and strong) personalities, it's necessary to make one's own judgments sometimes, one is forced often to create a best-case scenario. What I have tried to do is to make a coherent presentation without sacrificing individual perspectives, to sift through the sometimes bewildering maze of claims and counterclaims and arrive at a version that makes the most sense, taking into account the intended veracity of most of the parties. I am aware that some of what I have written challenges the accepted version of history, but here, too, one must remember that history has been largely written—as is the case with so much of popular culture—in promotional literature and publicity releases which, by their very nature (and whatever enthusiastic glimpse of the truth they may afford), are not always the most objective guide. At times, I must admit, I felt as if I were sinking into a bog; occasionally I lost faith and wondered what in the hell I was doing out there in a miasma of memory and allusion (or was that illusion?), set adrift in a sea of oral history without bearings or compass. But then things would start to fall into place once again; the interviews began to seem like pieces of a giant puzzle, which, even if it might

never be completely assembled, was at least beginning to take shape; gradually the work suggested a narrative of its own.



[Solomon Burke and me. \(Scott Billington\)](#)

My one caveat is that it should not be forgotten that this is a retrospective account, and while there are flashes of present-day description interspersed throughout the narrative, for the most part it is an attempt to recreate by documentation, first-person testimony, and portraiture *what really happened* (that is to say, the core of what really happened, whether represented by personal reminiscence with a sometimes metaphorical perspective or assembled as a third-person narrative with a presumed overview). Not to put too fine a point on it, this book lies somewhere between history and personal chronicle: I was there to interview the principals, but as to the events that we are talking about I simply was not there to be a witness, and the written documentation that exists is spotty at best. It would have been easy to introduce a lot of present-day detail, and I have done so on occasion—but only where I felt it substantiated a point that was being made about the past. The book created its own story and imposed its own limitations, limitations to which I could accede only after I had traveled back and forth from Macon to Memphis and Atlanta and Muscle Shoals a number of times interviewing and reinterviewing the principals and cast of supporting players. If I didn't accept the limitations, I realized, I would never get out of this book alive. Or I would never find a readership that could. Sometimes, my mother has always told me, you've got to be practical.

THE LEGACY OF SOUL

Soul music was a brief flowering, really. It first peered out in the mid-1950s, like rock 'n' roll, as a kind of alternative to assimilation. It came into its own no earlier than 1960, crossed over by 1965 or 1966, and, despite lingering traces of its influence throughout the culture, was spent as a controlling

force by the early '70s. Certainly it can be seen as paralleling the Civil Rights Movement stylistically as well as chronologically, emerging with stealth at first, slowly gathering strength, then learning to assert itself without apology or fear, until forced to retrench in the face of a series of traumatic events and jarring disappointments. Musically, I believe, soul remains the story of how a universal sound emerged from the black church. Historically it represents another chapter in the development of black consciousness, similar to the Harlem Renaissance, say, in its championing of negritude, but more widespread in its immediate impact. At the same time it is a whole other story, too. It is the story of blacks and whites together. It is the story of the complicated intertwinings of dirt-poor roots and middle-class dreams, aesthetic ambitions and social strivings, the anarchic impulse and the business ethic. It is a story in which, indisputably, there are heroes and villains, even if, as in real life, sometimes it's difficult to tell them apart. At one point soul music appeared to represent the vanguard of the revolution, and if the revolution never arrived, I don't know that that makes soul matter any less.

Is all this too much for the music to bear? I don't think so. At the same time one doesn't want to forget that one is talking about popular culture. For Jerry Wexler it is all a little bit rhetorical anyway. "We didn't know we were at some cosmic threshold," he declares. "You never know that. I think that's all literary, all this business about decades. I think it's part of the bullshit rhetoric of rock. The only thing about it was, it's like certain movements in art, it's like that place outside of Paris where the light was so good, the Barbizon school, you know, the confluence of certain things, the myth period, the golden period, when the music was fresh, the musicians were fresh—you can't replicate it because there's something in the ambience, something in the atmosphere. Not that I consider rhythm and blues to be art necessarily."



[James Brown. \(Courtesy of Gregg Geller\)](#)

What he did consider rhythm and blues to be—and the context in which Atlantic Records had to

view the music in order to survive—was commerce. I've tried to view it a little bit that way, too, as a combination, at any rate, of art and commerce in which the music attained its highest level when the marriage was closest and in the absence of which the form cannot be revived today. And remember: as much as was going on within this self-contained world of Southern soul, there was that much more creating an inescapable influence (and demanding entrée somehow) from the outside. This was the age of the Beatles, a time when Motown had twelve #1 pop hits while Southern soul music was waiting to have its first. The music itself, however, needs no apologies. To me it almost goes without saying that soul was an incomparably greater form (because it was incomparably more passionate, emotionally expressive, and individualistic) than its more celebrated contemporaries. I once quoted Murray Kempton's assertion that "one moment of Joe Turner singing that 'it's your dollar now, but it's gonna be mine some sweet day' is worth more than all [the Beatles] have ever said," and an editor took it on to save me embarrassment. "Sometimes I feel as if I grew up in a cultural vacuum," wrote Joe McEwen of his own Philadelphia origins. "The Beatles never registered with me; the hysteria and the sense of community that marked their ascendance were so foreign that when I read Greil Marcus's essay on the group in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, I could only shake my head in wonder. I didn't feel left out necessarily... [but] when I read Greil Marcus on the Beatles ('Enormous energy—the energy of frustration, desire, repression, adolescence, sex, ambition—finds an object in pop explosion....'), I [thought] of James Brown.... I knew exactly what he meant when he sang, aching and somewhat bewilderingly, 'A million to one / Ten thousand people / Under my Father's sun / Who need someone,' and I had an even better understanding of a song called 'Let Yourself Go.' "

That was how it was with me, perhaps not the same song but the same feeling, the sense of being clued in to something significant, of being on the edge of a Movement that was so much more than just another pop phenomenon. It was there for the audience; it was there for the protagonists. Over and over again in my talks with the people who made the music there was reference to this same kind of spiritual association, a sense of being part of a larger whole. No one has characterized it more eloquently, though, than Curtis Mayfield, lead singer of the Chicago-based Impressions ("People Get Ready," "Keep on Pushing," "We're a Winner") and later most notably composer for such film soundtrack tracks as "Superfly." Speaking to writer Russell Gersten about the achievements of the larger world of soul, he declared, "You know, to talk about the '60s almost brings tears to my eyes. What we did. What we all did. We changed the world—me, us, Smokey Robinson, Jerry Butler, the Temptations, Aretha, Otis, Gladys Knight, James Brown. We really did. Barriers broke down for us. And for all black musicians afterwards. I mean, to have lived through that, and to have been part of that, is more than anyone can ask."

Prologue to Soul: Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, and the Business of Music

*I, too, hear America singing
But from where I stand
I can only hear Little Richard
and Fats Domino
But sometimes,
I hear Ray Charles
Drowning in his own tears
or Bird
Relaxin' at Camarillo
or Horace Silver, Doodling
Then I don't mind standing a little longer.*

—Julian Bond

SOUL STEW: A THUMBNAIL HISTORY

THE STORY OF SOUL MUSIC CAN BE SEEN LARGELY as the story of the introduction of the gospel strain into the secular world of rhythm and blues. To gospel devotees like Tony Heilbut the newcomers had no special claim on the territory and in some cases were rank imitators. “In all the great modern soul singers,” writes Heilbut in his definitive work, *The Gospel Sound*, “one hears echoes of the pioneer gospel shouters. The influences are usually direct and specific....” Be that as it may, soul music was never the exact equivalent of gospel music (there were simply too many outside influences) and through cross-pollination necessarily gave something back as well. Historically the change began taking place in the early '50s, long before anyone but the record buyer had picked up on it (“Beware of too much categorizing,” wrote Atlantic heads Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun in a 1954 *Cashbox* article. “Record buyers don't read the charts; if a record knocks them out, they buy it and play it”); like most historic developments it may well seem more dramatic in retrospect than it did at the time. Still, it did not altogether escape notice even by contemporary observers.



[The Orioles in the alley, with unidentified woman. \(Gordon "Doc" Anderson\)](#)

Rhythm and blues up until this point had been pretty much what the term suggests: an uptempo, or at least rhythmically modernized (the introduction of the heavy backbeat was a direct precursor of rock 'n' roll), variation on the bedrock of the blues. Its performance was confined, of course, to black artists and reached an almost exclusively black audience. Hence its official designation as "race music," a label which was not changed until Jerry Wexler came up with the more dignified—and descriptive—term in 1949, while still a *Billboard* reporter. Just to give some idea of the breadth of the changes that took place around this time: the r&b charts between 1948 and 1950 were pretty much dominated by what we think of today as the blues and its near-relations. John Lee Hooker made his debut in 1949, with the electrifying "Boogie Chillen." Sophisticated bluesman Lonnie Johnson, who had been recording since 1925, had the #1 hit of 1948 with "Tomorrow Night." Blues shouter Wynona Harris, one of Elvis Presley's chief models (and the source of his epochal "Good Rockin' Tonight"), had half a dozen top hits, while novelty artist Louis Jordan continued his reign as clown prince of the blues. Familiar names like Charles Brown, Amos Milburn, and Muddy Waters crop up for the first time on the charts during these years, while Sonny Thompson, Bullmoose Jackson, and Ivory Joe Hunter all contributed classic variations on blues themes. Meanwhile, the forces of modernism were grouping under a most unlikely banner: what amounted to quartet singing in a new guise. Quartet singing, of course, had a long tradition in gospel music and in pop. In fact it was one of the few areas in which crossover sales had long been open to black artists, with groups like the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots adopting a polite supper-club stance to achieve widespread accolades and influence. In 1947 the first of the "bird groups," the Ravens, had a smash hit with a fairly conventional arrangement of the Kern-Hammerstein standard, "Old Man River." What made the song different, and what gave the Ravens their distinctive neo-r&b flavor, was the playful emotion in bass singer Jimmy Ricks's voice, but even their most ardent supporters will concede that the Ravens never altogether crossed over into the brave new world of rhythm and blues. This was left to the second of the bird groups, the Orioles, to accomplish, along with rawer-sounding country cousins, groups like the Dominoes and the Clovers, that sprang up in their wake.



[Billy Ward and His Dominoes: Jackie Wilson far right. \(Courtesy of Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; the New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations\)](#)

The Orioles made their first impression in 1948 with the lush ballad “It’s Too Soon to Know.” What made them different—and it doesn’t always come through, for me anyway, on the records—is the tortured emotionalism in lead singer Sonny Til’s voice. Here is what Jack Schiffman, whose father Frank owned the Apollo Theatre, had to say about Til in his book, *Uptown: The Story of Harlem’s Apollo Theatre*. “Sonny affected the girls like an aphrodisiac. When he bent over the mike and leaned to one side, sensuously gyrating his shoulders and caressing the air with his hands, the girls would shriek, ‘Ride my alley, Sonny! Ride my alley!’ However, it was the aural as well as the visual aspects of the routine that had captured the teenagers’ fancy. The Orioles had produced what we now think of as the ‘group’ sound—a combination of gospel and jazz, the vocals punctuated with glottal stops....”

More striking still were the contributions of the Dominoes, a group founded in 1950 by singing coach and arranger Billy Ward, who built his sound around the soaring, gospel-driven vocals first of Clyde McPhatter, then of McPhatter’s replacement, Jackie Wilson. Here there is little question as to the source of musical inspiration, and such songs as “Do Something for Me,” “Have Mercy Baby,” and “That’s What You’re Doing to Me” struck an undeniable blow for rhythm ‘n’ gospel freedom—but all these songs remained confined to the r&b charts and reached a black listening audience exclusively. There were not even any successful cover versions. To show how pervasive this back-to-the-roots movement really was (Jack Schiffman surmised that the Orioles gave a new generation “its own symbols of identification,” while the success of Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and the whole school of downhome Chicago blues in urban markets could only indicate a nostalgia for familiar sounds), at the same time that rhythm and blues was undergoing this sea change, modern jazz—which had just come to terms with the bebop revolution—was putting forth its own roots sound. Hard bop, or “soul” jazz (this was probably the first time the term gained widespread currency), came into vogue in the mid-’50s and was seen by cultural critics like LeRoi Jones as the agency that “‘rescued’ the music from the icebox.... Gospel music was the strongest and healthiest influence on jazz, and r&b, too.”

It remained for two r&b songs, though, each in its own way atypical of the new genre, to establish once and for all the legitimacy of the whole process. In 1953, as if by prearrangement, both these songs shot to the top of the rhythm and blues charts and announced by their very presence that the ne

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