

Whatever Happened to R&B?

By Bob Davis



Candi Staton, 1971

Whatever happened to R&B, and artists like Al Green, Aretha Franklin, Earth, Wind & Fire, the Spinners, the Commodores, Parliament-Funkadelic, the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, the Jackson Five, War, Jackie Wilson, Blue Magic, the Delfonics, Kool & the Gang, the Stylistics, Isley Brothers, etc. who not only dominated the charts, but also dominated our hearts and minds? Whatever happened to funk, Motown, Stax/southern soul, and disco?

We tend to forget that music does not exist in a vacuum. This music was a product of the time, the high period of black music, roughly defined as 1955-1970, very much paralleling the height of the civil rights movement. Soul/R&B and the civil rights movement had an impact on each other, creating classics like “A Change Is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke, and such unforgettable images as Aretha Franklin singing at Dr. King’s funeral.

When Chuck Berry announced to the world that he was “A Brown Eyed Handsome Man” in 1956, he was telling listeners that he was a black man, here to stay. Bo Diddley (named after an African drum) announced to the world “I’m a Man,” and it was no coincidence that the same exact phrase appeared on the signs of civil rights protesters.

A few years later, Berry Gordy took Chuck and Bo’s notion and turned it into a record company that would quietly achieve all of the objectives of the American civil rights movement without ever uttering a single sentence about it. The Stax record label was perhaps the ultimate, a unique black/white partnership which created raw soul music for the masses.

Genre Confusion

The music industry has been struggling with terminology since 1950, when there were only three charts and only three kinds of

popular music radio stations: pop, race and hillbilly. During the 1950s this changed, largely as a result of the connection between the evolving civil rights movement and the evolution of the music marketplace. “Hillbilly” was replaced with “country,” “race” was replaced with “R&B” (by Atlantic Records’ co-owner and A&R man Jerry Wexler), and as the 1950s moved forward, R&B music targeted at teenagers was dubbed “rock ‘n’ roll.” At the dawn of John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier (1960), R&B aimed specifically at black radio stations became designated as “soul.”

As the marketing objectives of record labels changed, other sub-genres of black and white music emerged. While they made it easier to classify radio stations and organize bins at record stores, these labels confuse the actual roots of the music. Interestingly enough, only two such designations were created by black people. “Funk” and “hip hop,” assumed to be musical classifications, are really terms that the black community uses to identify lifestyle choices, choices that have a direct relationship to the individual’s identification

with the civil rights movement. Today, the term “NuSoul” is used to identify the lifestyle choice of those who grew up during hip hop’s cultural dominance (’90s and ’00s), but have consciously chosen to make music that is the polar opposite of hip hop, and is aligned with the sounds and styles of 1970s’ black music.

In many respects, what is happening today with NuSoul is reminiscent of what happened with the music/culture that surrounded funk in the ’70s. Artists such as Jimi Hendrix started the cultural trend of wearing afros in the 1960s, and during the 1970s, afros became part of the standard uniform for young blacks. Today we see something similar happening with dreadlocks and other African styles becoming part of younger blacks’ uniforms, as opposed to the clothing their peers in hip hop wear. Today’s NuSoul artists such as Nadir, Donnie and others are making music with inspirational Afro-centric lyrics reminiscent of Earth, Wind & Fire, the Staples Singers, or Gil Scott-Heron’s biggest hits from the ’70s. Meanwhile, love songs by artists like Frank McComb, Angela Johnson, Conya Doss, and others will



The Spinners

Earth, Wind & Fire

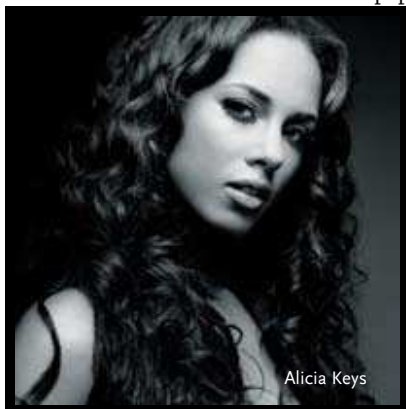


remind fans of artists like Al Green, Natalie Cole and the Commodores.

Solidarity Fragments

In his famous book, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, Nelson George said that “R&B music died in the 1980s.” This is true, but the history is far more complex than that simple statement implies. It didn’t die; it splintered and became unrecognizable during the ‘80s and ‘90s. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the widespread (but incomplete) integration of American society, the emergence of MTV as the replacement for Top 40 radio and the mainstreaming of black radio all contributed to this change.

In 1980, when Ronald Reagan declared the “official” American civil rights movement over, the movement went underground and so did black music, as it moved into the American pop music mainstream. The great independent record labels that had brought black music to its greatest creative heights—labels such as Atlantic, Chess, Motown, Stax, Philadelphia International—were absorbed into the majors. Once these record labels

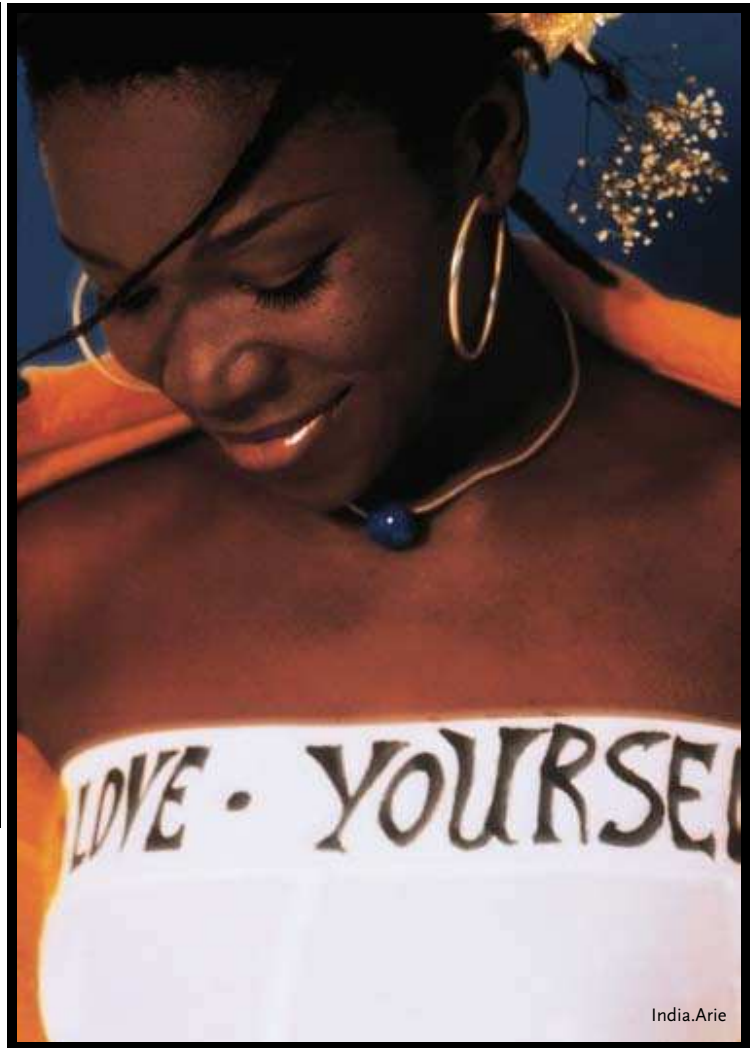


Alicia Keys

lost their identity, so did black music itself.

For example, we saw great artists such as Chuck Berry, the Dells, and Etta James from Chess stop having hits after the mid-1970s, after Chess was acquired by MCA and became mostly a catalog shop. Atlantic, also known as “The House That Ruth [Brown] Built,” was bought by Warner and shifted its focus towards rock artists like Led Zeppelin; eventually artists like Aretha Franklin left. As the ‘70s turned into the ‘80s, most of Motown’s great artists (Lionel Richie, the Jacksons, Diana Ross, the Temptations) not only left the label, but also left black music behind, shifting over to the more lucrative pop marketplace. Most Stax and Philadelphia International artists never recovered from the companies’ financial mismanagement and either labored in the obscurity of southern soul or simply became “oldies artists.”

R&B lost its identity as it was absorbed into the larger pop music marketplace. This is



India.Arie

really no surprise, as the 1980s were the decade when Americans stopped talking about integration as a goal and started to behave as though it were a reality. As black Americans became more and more integrated into mainstream American society during the 1980s, so too did their music/culture.

Moving into the 1990s, the decline of R&B was further accelerated by a new factor in black America. Within the black community, a serious generation gap began to emerge between those who behaved based on pre-civil rights era experience, and those who acted with a post-civil rights era mindset. This breakdown was somewhat based on age, but not entirely.

In the 1990s we began to see this gap expressed in the terms “hip hop” and “old school.” At first these two terms did have a direct correlation to certain musical styles and age ranges, but today they have less to do with music than with an individual’s perspective. During the civil rights struggle, black Americans were united and dedicated to their goals. The split in the black community



occurred when Ronald Regan declared the civil rights victory, and black unity disappeared because it no longer seemed necessary. The more distant the civil rights era becomes, the more this split widens.

NuSoul

Over the past seven years, R&B has been re-energized and made a comeback under the banner of NuSoul, with original artists and talented newcomers leading the way. Since 2000, events such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, Jena 6, and the presidential campaign of Barack Obama have caused many younger and older black Americans to begin to look back to the civil rights era for inspiration. NuSoul represents an evolution in R&B, defined by a lifestyle perspective. It blends together elements of soul, jazz, blues, rock, and rap music, sometimes at the same time and sometimes separately. It's best described as "R&B with a twist."

The "twist" is that NuSoul takes the black music styles of the civil rights era 1970s (funk,

slow jams/Philly soul, jazz/funk, Motown, Stax/southern soul, and disco) and projects them onto the landscape of 2008, unafraid to incorporate additional elements like rap, rock, spoken word, and new technology into the mix, largely to prevent NuSoul from sounding old-fashioned. In fact, many R&B oldies fans do not like NuSoul, because for them it's a "tease."

It is mature music, for thoughtful people, but it doesn't sound like oldies. It doesn't fit neatly into radio formats, but it does fit neatly into the lives of people whose modern-day perspective and behavior now include elements of the civil rights era.

The last time something like this happened in black music was in the late '80s/early '90s.

The expense of touring with a multi-piece band spelled the demise of funk music from a

practical perspective, but hip hop became, to a great degree, funk without the band. Artists such as Public Enemy, BDP, Paris, and Kool Moe D were making music that was very much like that of Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets' in the 1970s. Their purpose was to educate as well as entertain (accompanied by a slammin' beat of course). During this period fans of this

music wore "X caps" and other Afro-centric clothing. We were witnessing a rebirth of the spirit of funk. NuSoul artists today, highly influenced by these artists, have taken things one step further by bringing the band back into the equation.

NuSoul itself is rarely political in nature. From a content perspective, the topics are generally family, work, and interpersonal relationships. No surprise, since those basic elements of survival were also the elements of the civil rights era, very different from today's commercial hip hop/R&B which mostly focuses on money, sex and power. NuSoul features both younger and older artists, performing modern music. As such it has the potential to bridge the generation gap that has plagued black America since the '90s. Even if the music never becomes commercially successful, if it can help bring these two generations together once again, then it will have accomplished something more important than record sales.

As the overall music industry continues to shrink, we will begin to notice much more of what has been there all along—really the same old stuff that Nelson George told us died in the '80s. The artists never stopped



making the music, and certainly the good Lord didn't decide to stop handing out musical talent to new people along the way. Two of the key features of NuSoul are its high quality and its existence in massive quantities. We just stopped paying attention, because the media focused our attention elsewhere.

New Sub-Genres

Slow Jams/Philly Soul - Quiet as it's kept, this is actually the most popular form of NuSoul. In big cities and suburban areas, there is a thriving underground "chitlin' circuit." Thousands of hard-core fans gather outside of the view of the mass media to enjoy live performances of R&B legends from the past. Not only is this underground circuit quite lucrative for promoters, many of these artists still continue to produce high quality new recordings as indie artists and sell them to their fanbase at shows and on the internet. Artists like the Dells, O'Jays, Chi-lites, the Stylistics, and Jerry Butler are the stars of this circuit. You will often see advertisements in urban centers like Chicago, Newark, Cleveland, Philadelphia, etc. for weekend concerts with names like "'70s' Soul Jam," "Old School Weekend," "Throwback Night," etc. These shows usually feature four to eight artists on the bill, sometimes drawing audiences of 10,000 or more at venues usually (but not always) located within the inner city.

Jazz/Funk - The smooth jazz marketplace is alive and thriving commercially. That is in large part due to the crossovers of many classic R&B artists. Listen to a smooth jazz radio station for an hour and you are likely to hear new music from Sade, George Benson, Al Jarreau, Anita Baker, Luther Vandross, Will Downing, Phil Perry, and Chaka Khan. Whether the smooth jazz environment is really a home for R&B or is just a retirement home for aging R&B singers remains to be seen.

Motown - If we use the term "motown" as a synonym for the big-city-based, sophisticated, and soulful R&B vocal stylings of the past, its resurgence can be found in "underground soul," an umbrella term to describe the music of many young artists in big cities across the US. Characterized by strong vocals and instrumentation,



Chaka Khan, 1992

these singer/songwriters are largely unknown outside of their own cities' rabid fan bases. A few have broken through to the mainstream over the past decade (D'Angelo, Maxwell, India.Arie, John Legend, and Alicia Keys), and hundreds more are poised for similar breakthroughs. But as most are not signed to major labels, they remain "underground," despite having large followings in many cities.

Stax/Southern Soul - The re-emergence of the Stax label itself, along with the growing underground regional strength of indie southern soul artists in the deep South, is the big news here. In 2007 Stax began producing new music under the flagship of the Concord label. Concord has demonstrated a strong commitment to the advancement of NuSoul music, with strong releases by artists like Angie Stone, Soulive and the Grammy-nominated *Interpretations: Celebrating the Music of Earth, Wind & Fire* (featuring NuSoul artists like Ledisi, Chaka Khan, and Lalah Hathaway). In 2008 Concord will be releasing albums from artists like N'Dambi, Lalah Hathaway, Leon Ware, and the venerable Isaac Hayes. On the indie southern soul front, labels like Malaco (Willie Clayton) and Ecco (Denise LaSalle) continuously pump out brand-new soul music played by small radio stations, nightclubs, and the rabid fanbases located primarily in the states of the old Confederacy, far from the eyes of the mass media.

Disco - The popularity of dance music in reality TV shows and exercise videos is a big clue that people are still very interested in R&B-style dance music. Not only are dance-oriented reality TV shows becoming more and more popular, but the marketplace for at-home exercise videos continues to grow. Billboard has a chart for exercise videos, and they are widely available on VHS/DVD formats and increasingly available as video podcasts. Interestingly, all of this "dance music" is being used for private instead of mass consumption.



Re-Emergence

As the trends shake out, history will repeat itself. NuSoul is going to do what black music has always done—save the music business from itself. We can compare today to the early 1950s, when underground R&B artists perfected their craft on street corners, basketball courts, and subway stations, made recordings at small independent recording companies, promoted their music on small independent radio stations, and performed shows in their own neighborhoods. This is exactly what is happening today with soul, and it's all being facilitated by the internet and mp3 technology. It's going regional; it will thrive in independent media (radio, websites, etc.); it will be "discovered." It's going to be exciting.

These folks deserve respect for using the music of the 1970s as an inspiration and jumping-off point for their music. For the first time since the mainstreaming of hip hop in the 1990s, we have a large body of artists who can serve as credible replacements for the aging group of artists who defined black music in the 1970s. We can only hope this means that far into the future, there will still be a large body of people making the kind of music I grew up listening to. **E**