SAVE OUR SOUL

In the shadow of the success of HipHop, the originators have been forgotten. Activists are now striving to bridge the generation gap

by Tobias Rapp

It is a sad story that is told toward the end of "Standing In The Shadows Of Motown", a documentary that has been running in American theaters for several weeks. When the Motown record company celebrated its 25th anniversary in May of 1983 with a big gala show, bassist James Jamerson, the backbone of virtually every Motown production of the 60's and early 70's, had to buy himself a ticket just to get to sit in the audience. Nobody found it necessary to invite him; no one remembers him anymore. He died three months later.

Six of the thirteen Funk Brothers, the Motown house band, are still alive. Piano and keyboard player Johnny Griffith died a few days before the film premiered in November. "Standing In The Shadows Of Motown" (the title is a paraphrase of the Four Tops classic "Standing In The Shadows Of Love") is an attempt to save these musicians from obscurity. After all, they recorded more number one hits than "Elvis, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles combined", as the introduction states.

What's Going On?

"Standing In The Shadows Of Motown" was among the surprise successes of American cinema this last fall. It is still filling independent movie theaters in all of the nation's major cities; it was recently awarded the 2002 New York Film Critics Circle Award. It is a beautiful and moving film. Many anecdotes are recounted; you are guided through the studio where "Dancing In The Streets", "Where Did Our Love Go", "My Girl" and countless other classics were recorded; and in between, you get to observe the Funk Brothers re-record some of those old songs with young artists like MeShell Ndegeocello and Montell Jordan.

It is a movie that tries to build a bridge between the past and the present, and it seems to have hit a nerve. For although black music has been on an incomparable conquest in past years, with HipHop and R&B now dominating record stores and TV music channels on all five continents like few music styles have done before, the heritage of African-American music is not in such a glorious position. Granted, people are happy to explore the Soul and funk archives of the past in search of usable samples, but the fact that many of the oldtimers are still alive, still making music even, continues to be ignored.

"Great Black Music From The Ancient To The Future" is the slogan of Soul Patrol, a website (www.soul-patrol.com) committed to changing this situation. Started a few years ago by brothers Bob and Mike Davis, it has evolved over time into a kind of grass root network dedicated to the rescue of Soul music. Bob and Mike Davis are in their early forties. In person, they look more like the two leading members of New York's financial industry who they in fact are during the daytime. But as soon as you start talking with them, you sense the mission-consciousness of two idealists who have dedicated their evenings and nights to the massive task of creating a platform for their "Save Our Soul"-agenda.

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And it has little to do with nostalgia, but rather a vigorous pro-Indie attitude. "The era of Motown and the many small labels that existed back then has passed. Many people our age still think you can simply make a record, take it to the nearest radio station and it'll get played", says Bob Davis, the older of the two. "But that's not how it is anymore. Today, if you're an artist, you have two options to get your music released:

Either you go to one of the major labels, in which case you'll need a lot of luck, good timing, and the willingness to give the control over your material to the company, along with a large share of your money. Or you become an independent artist." Anyone who chooses the latter path, the Davis brothers greet with open ears and arms. Be it old masters like the Dells, a legendary vocal group from Chicago that has been active since the early 50s, or newcomers like the magnificent Sonny Boy, a singer reminiscent of the early D'Angelo.

Reach Out (I'll Be There)

Soul Patrol is there for them: You can listen to clips from their new albums on the website, alongside dozens of self-produced radio shows, and a huge database of "Great Black Music" history. The heart of Soul Patrol, however, is the Mailing List, through which postings from its approximately 7,000 members are sent throughout the world several times a day. They can contain never-ending discussions about a star's TV appearance (a disrespectful remark about the condition of Aretha Franklin's voice caused days of heated debate, for example), concert reviews (in turn also subject to commentary), memories of forgotten songs (or even cartoon theme songs), endless lists (like "the best Temptations B-sides"), inquiries on the whereabouts of forgotten Soul legends (there is almost always someone who knows the answer). But topics like what to think of black Foreign Affairs Minister Colin Powell also come up. All of this lovingly commentated and sorted by Bob Davis, supplemented by his exclamations saying that anyone who wants change better get off their asses.
The Davis brothers are not the only Soul Patrol activists. Most major American cities have a local coordinator, who sees to it that no Soul Patrol member in the area forgets to show up when, say, Gil Scott-Heron plays his first concert after his release from prison, senior soul diva Bettye LaVette gives one of her rare performances, or when one of Soul Patrol's protégées does a small club gig. None of the involved has any income from this; the funds that come in via sponsoring go into keeping the website in business.

You Keep Me Hanging On

"There's not really a sensible reason why the two of us are doing this", Bob Davis answers when asked of his motivation. "We live a very comfortable life as it is. But we feel we have a moral obligation to do it. Our biographies are the success story of the Civil Rights era. We did what the casualties of the Civil Rights Movement expected their children to do." Indeed, the Davis brothers have something like African American model biographies: They were raised in Brooklyn, they took advantage of all the chances the post-Civil Rights era had to offer, and now they live in a quiet suburb near New York City. "All the experiences that we've made, everything we've learned about business or technology, we want to pass it on so that others can use it for themselves."

Those others being primarily younger people, of course - the ones who have been called the "HipHop generation" in the U.S. And in fact, here lies a problem. While HipHop culture often looks like basically an extension and a reinterpretation of the African-American musical heritage, to many older blacks it doesn't look that way at all. To them, HipHop represents not a continuation, but the end of black culture. Although from a European viewpoint the main force against HipHop seems to be white parent associations, representing in effect an updated form of old racist prejudices, this is only half the truth - the harshest criticism of HipHop comes from within the black communities themselves. Parents who grew up with the Civil Rights Movement cannot stand what they are hearing from their children's rooms.

The Love You Save

This conflict is also a distribution war - Clear Channel, America's biggest radio network, recently changed the format of its Black Music station from Classic Soul to HipHop, for instance - but that is not all. It is a generational conflict so intense that it sometimes almost looks like a culture war, and it is also reflected in postings to the Soul Patrol Mailing List. On one side the Civil Rights-imprinted parents, who expect of the artists that they set a good example - and on the other side their children who, in view of such demands, merely shrug their shoulders.

"Part of black hope since the days of slavery was always an attitude that you could describe like this: If we sacrifice something today, our children will have better chances tomorrow", says Bob Davis. "And now suddenly there's a generation that doesn't seem to care. They go their own way."

If Soul Patrol has one goal, it is to connect this way with all the others that have been walked in the past. Because after all, in the end, everything is connected, according to Davis: "To understand Ice Cube, you have to know just as much about the life conditions in South Central L.A. as about P-Funk. But if I can get a 17-year-old to listen to the Dells today, this music will live on for another 50 years."

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