

ALBUM ANALYSIS

Ain't That Good News | Sam Cooke 1964

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INTRODUCTION

SAM COOKE - THE MAN AND THE MUSIC

Sam Cooke (Samuel Cooke) was born on January 22nd, 1931 in Clarksdale, Mississippi to Charles Cook Sr., a Baptist minister, and his wife Annie Mae (Eder, 2012). Cooke began singing gospel songs at nine years of age in his father's church with four other siblings. They were aptly named *The Singing Children* and would usually open the morning sermon. Cooke's passion for singing was evident early on to his younger brother L.C. who recalls how Cooke would perform to an imaginary audience in their backyard, "...he would stick these sticks in the ground...and then he would sing!" (Dahl, 2002).

Cooke would continue being involved in singing groups for the next seventeen years, first with *The Highway QCs*, a teenage gospel boy group that performed at numerous congregations around the country (Eder, 2012). His smooth delivery and delicate soulful tones, proved very popular especially with the women (Dahl, 2002). His natural vocal talent, his vibrant charisma and his attractive presence on stage eventually led him to be groomed for a leading role with the most influential gospel group at the time, *The Soul Stirrers* - a group which helped established the *singing quartet* and pioneered the *singing quintet*. It wasn't long, however, until he was able to break away and establish a solo career with Keen Records in 1957.

His first unexpected hit was the B-side for his debut record under Keen, titled *You Send Me* which rocketed to number one on the Billboard Pop charts after a performance on the Ed Sullivan Show (Krajicek, 2012). It was to be one of many chart topping hits for Cooke, garnering eighteen top forty hits by 1963 (Fitzgerald, 2007), the last three years of which were under RCA Records. Cooke also had great success as a business entrepreneur when in 1961 he was able to set up his own publishing company, Kags Music, as well as his very own record label, SAR Records, through which he would eventually sign artists such as Bobby Womack, Johnny Taylor, Billy Preston and Johnnie Morissette (Eder, 2012).

Cooke's personal life, however, served a stark contrast to the overwhelming success of his career. Melodrama, controversies and sexual scandals seemed to follow much of the superstar's private life. Cooke's reputation for being a "skirt-chaser and serial philanderer" was always well documented since adolescence, having impregnated three young girls by the age of 22 (Krajicek, 2012). Scandals continued to haunt the singer right up to his tragic death within the early morning hours of December 11th, 1964 (Dahl, 2002). The events surrounding Cooke's death, as detailed by official police findings, have long since been scrutinised by fans all over the world and many believe foul play was involved. On the night in question, Cooke picks up a young woman by the name of Elisa Boyer and takes her to the Hacienda Motel, in a seedy part of south-central Los Angeles. Soon after checking in, an enraged Cooke, storms into the front office in nothing but shoes and a sports coat demanding answers from Bertha Franklin, the motel manager, as to the whereabouts of Boyer who had apparently ran off with his clothes and wallet. After a violent altercation, Franklin shoots Cooke three times, fatally wounding the singer (Currah, 1964).

Cooke left a legacy of sixteen albums, over a hundred singles and at least 10 million records sold, within the short span of his eight year career (Robinson, 1964). Numerous re-releases were soon to follow after his death and continue to do so even today. His songs have influenced a great many artists and musicians and have been covered and re-interpreted countless times by a variety of performers including Otis Redding, Rod Stewart, The Rolling Stones, The Supremes, Amy Winehouse and more recently Adele (Brennan, 1998). It was his last studio album *Ain't That Good News*, released in 1964 shortly after his death, which brought together all of his influences including Gospel, Rhythm and Blues and Soul.

AIN'T THAT GOOD NEWS

THE ALBUM

Ain't That Good News was originally released by RCA Victor Records on March 1st, 1964, three months after Cooke's death. It was produced by Luigi Creatore and Hugo Peretti and recorded at RCA Victor's Music Centre of the World Studio (Eder, 2012). It has two sides containing six tracks on each. The first contain performances that are "strong and rockin'" and the second are composed of ballads that are delivered "deep and soulful" (Creatore & Peretti, 1964). This essay explores how these contrasting sides became one of the forerunners of how 'Gospel' music, once confined to the revered boundaries of black Christian worship, began to coalesce with the contemporary sounds of 'Rhythm and Blues' to further solidify and establish the emergence of what was to be known as 'Soul', as pioneered by the man himself Sam Cooke.

THE GOSPEL INFLUENCE

Gospel music was undoubtedly one of the biggest musical influences in Cooke's life. His participation in singing spirituals and hymns at church services provided early initiation in how to deliver a dynamic range of emotion in his vocal performances. His successful involvement with Gospel singing groups from a very young age beginning with *The Singing Children* and subsequently with acts such as *The Highway QCs* and with *The Soul Stirrers*, served as comprehensive training ground for refining his innate ability to connect with the hearts, minds and souls of his audience.

The Gospel roots can be traced back to the very beginning of American slavery in the early 17th century "stemming from the spiritual melodies and work songs that the field slaves sang while carrying out their duties" (Turner, 2008). These 'spirituals' were handed down orally and served not only to lift the spirits of the oppressed but also became a way to communicate escape routes amongst the slaves (Reagon, 2001). One infamous example of this is "Follow the Drinking Gourd"¹, a spiritual with which the lyrics (appendix 01) primarily refer to a hollowed out gourd that slaves were allowed to drink from. It is also, however widely believed to be a verbal map for the Underground Railroad operatives to direct fleeing slaves up north, from Mobile, Alabama toward the Ohio River and onto freedom (Bresler, 2008).

In the 1930's, Thomas A. Dorsey (1899-1933), regarded by many scholars as the "Father of Gospel Music", began to bring about the development of modern gospel music by fusing 'spirituals' and evangelical hymns with elements from the more secular sounds of blues and jazz (Robinson-Martin, 2009). The result is "distinctly African-American" characterised by "melismatic moans of the spiritual, the driving music and instrumentation of sanctified music, the syncopated licks and 'bent' notes of jazz and blues, and the ecstatic emotionalism of southern preaching" (Allen as quoted in Robinson-Martin, 2009).

"A Change is Gonna Come"² is a prime example of a soaring gospel composition, written by Cooke as a response to the American civil rights movement of the 60's. With its strong message of hope and change for better world, it best exemplifies Cooke's gospel heritage and echoes other well known 'freedom songs' such as "We Shall Overcome"³ (adapted from a gospel tune by Reverend Tindley), and Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind"⁴ (Zolten, 2003, p.205). Lead vocalist of *The Famous Ward Singers*, Clara Ward, believed that gospel music's popularity especially in the 1960's was due to its ability to fill a "vacuum in people's lives...promis[ing] that things will be better in the life to come", identifying a purpose similar to that of 'spirituals' - to "cheer the downtrodden", just like in "slavery times" (Zolten, 2003, p.206).

"(Ain't That) Good News"⁵, the title track of the album is yet another example of a song deeply rooted within the spiritual/gospel tradition. It is a reworking of a J. W. Work gospel tune of the same title⁶ first published in 1940 (Matteson, n.d.). Although a complete contrast to the original spiritual (appendix 02), Cooke clearly demonstrates the impact of his gospel upbringing in choosing the album's repertoire. Cooke's version was recorded in three takes and includes a banjo (Joseph Gibbons) and a horn section (John Ewing, Jewell Grant, William Green) in an upbeat and danceable arrangement that was indicative of the popular music at the time. This style, aptly named 'Rhythm and Blues', is the main driving influence for the first half of the album and clearly illustrate the dynamic transformation black music was experiencing by mid 20th century.

THE RHYTHM AND BLUES INFLUENCE

'Rhythm and Blues' was a music industry term coined in 1947 by Jerry Wexler, writer for Billboard Magazine, to replace the term 'race' music which was then Billboard's label for identifying "its catalog of music created by and targeted to black Americans" (Ripani, 2006). In 1949, Billboard officially renamed their black record sales chart from "Best Selling Race Records" to "Best Selling Retail Rhythm & Blues Records" (Ripani, 2006). However, the name change was only to become a post-cursor for a revolution that was already sweeping the landscape of the blues and jazz music that dominated these charts, made possible by the groundbreaking work of a number of artists, one of which was the "King of the Jukebox" (also known as the "Father of Rhythm and Blues"), pioneering jazz and blues bandleader, Louis Jordan (Scaruffi, 2003).

In 1938, Jordan began downsizing the swing orchestra and began emphasising the "dance rhythm (the "shuffle"), sharpen[ing] the sax and trumpet counterpoint, and [began singing] the hardship of black life in a detached (almost ironic) tone" (Scaruffi, 2003). This new "energetic and exuberant" form of blues music, dubbed 'Jump Blues', began to take over "the dancehalls, the juke joints and the vaudeville theatres", spawning an urban culture of young working class black audience - "a rapidly-expanding market...that were benefiting from the economic boom of the post-war era" (Scaruffi, 2003). The style was a direct contrast to traditional blues and is best described as "goodtime dance music," "black ghetto music," and "group and joy music" (Ripani, 2006).

When asked by Paulsen (1964) why he thought rhythm and blues appealed greatly to the younger generation, Cooke replies, "when a kid is young he expects a lot out of life. Rhythm 'n' Blues is the most fervent sound in pop music...it has a fervent drive and beat." Cooke would successfully harness this 'fervent beat' in his adaptation of a 1949 Louis Jordan song, "Let the Good Times Roll"⁷. In Cooke's version, "Good Times"⁸, the rhythm is infectious, the percussion is raw and hypnotic and the lyrics perfectly portray what the rhythm and blues music was all about, "Get in the groove and let the good times roll. I'm gonna stay here till I soothe my soul. If it take all night long" (Sam Cooke, 1963).

Another infectious rhythm and blues hit on the album is 'Another Saturday Night', written by Cooke whilst out in a bar. "I take a segment of life. Like, one night I went to the Peppermint Lounge and just wrote down what was going on around me...I heard a guy saying, 'another Saturday night and I ain't gat nobody.' That gave me an idea for a song" (Cooke, as quoted in Paulsen, 1964). The single reached number one on the R&B charts and number ten on the pop charts in 1963. Cooke's ability to connect through to his audience with his songwriting and his voice was a feat recognised widely in the industry including producers Hugo and Luigi (1964); "Here's a really skilful and polished performer who can take any kind of song material and bring it on home to his audience...Ballads, up-tempo or novelty - when Sam works them over, you know you've heard something." That 'something' was the emergence of a style that would be known the world over as 'Soul music'.

MR SOUL AND THE MOVEMENT

In separate interviews with Nathaniel 'Magnificent' Montague (of which were to be his last radio appearance before his death) and Don Paulsen, Cooke both unreservedly self-appoints the title of 'Mr Soul' (Montague, 1963) and gives over a definition of the music as "the capacity to project a feeling" (Cooke as quoted in Paulsen, 1964). These unabashed and self-assured claims were not only in simpatico with his perception of his contribution to black music at the time, but was also indicative of the temperament of the sociopolitical American landscape gaining momentum from the 50's and well into the 60's.

The term 'soul' was thought to have first been popularised by jazz musicians in the 1950's using the expression to "characterise a movement within jazz to reclaim and revitalise a musical tradition that had been repeatedly co-opted by mainstream and corporate culture" (Rudinow, 2010, p.9). African American poet, essayist and playwright Amiri Baraka (formerly known as Everett LeRoi Jones) further expands the definition as, "...an ingredient so essential to African American music that its absence would cause a knowledgeable listener to question the authenticity (as African American music) of what they were hearing" (Rudinow, 2010, p.9).

Determining a common description for the movement itself, however, proffers differing opinions and notions, with varying historical, geographical and social focus from one scholar and/or critic to the next. Stax historian, Rob Bowman, believe that 'soul music' was essentially a movement that was pivotal in blurring hard racial lines through an integrated creative process that largely occurred in the working environments of the record labels (Rudinow, 2010, p.12). Gene Santoro, jazz and popular music critic for the Nation, sees the movement as a commercial development directly influenced by the current African American socio-political discourse (Rudinow, 2010, p.14). British scholar and author Brian Ward, focuses on the "simultaneous urbanisation of Southern rural black music and the secularisation of black church music" (Rudinow, 2010, p.14). Nelson George, music editor for Billboard, believes that 'soul' came about due to the growing disenchantment of the black audience toward the early rock & roll movement (Rudinow, 2010, p.15). Regardless of the diversity in analysis, one common denominator hold true for most devotees of the music - that in essence 'soul music' is a "conflation of 'polytonal' vocal expression over a layered musical landscape of Rhythm and Blues and Gospel" (Neal, 1997). It merged a traditionally spiritual sound with a contemporary secular sound, arriving at a juncture where it served as a "soundtrack" (Rudinow, 2012, p.17) that is unique to the plight of the American civil rights movement.

As mentioned earlier, Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come", released a year before the voting rights act was passed in 1965, was one of the first of many soul anthems written in response to the current political turmoil. It was also written upon hearing Dylan's own civil rights anthem "Blowin' in the Wind" of which greatly moved Cooke (Paulsen, 1964). Such is the continuing resonance and influence of Cooke's paeon that it has been covered by a great number of diverse artists such as Bob Dylan himself, Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, The Supremes, Patti LaBelle, The Fugees, Seal and Leela James.

Other notable soulful inspired tracks on the album include "Falling In Love"⁹ written by Harold Battiste who also arranged Cooke's 1957 hit single "You Send Me". Battiste would later become well known for his breadth of work for Sonny and Cher (Battiste, n.d.). Cooke also records a soulful rendition of a Peter van Steeden's song titled "Home"¹⁰ and a largely unknown Irving Berlin tune "Sittin' in the Sun"¹¹ (Creatore & Peretti, 1964). Perhaps the most demonstrative of Cooke's innate ability to transform any musical material into a powerful soulful agenda is his interpretation of a traditional Appalachian ballad titled, "The Riddle Song"¹². According to Sid Sharp, string section leader for the recording orchestra, Cooke began to tear up at the line "I gave my love a baby with no crying". Cooke had recently lost his 18 month old son, Vincent, who had drowned at the family home (Creatore & Peretti, 1964). This ability to channel and deliver a heartfelt and soulful performance became the enduring standard that linked the music of 'soul' as it evolved throughout the following decades, well beyond Cooke's legacy.

CONCLUSION

Baraka's use of the term 'soul' as being "the necessary and sufficient condition of authentic blackness" (Rudinow, 2010, p.9), is an accurate descriptive measure for music that is deeply rooted in the slave tradition of the antebellum South. 'Soul music' preserves the essence of 'spirituals' through its Gospel tradition, songs that have become so engrained within the African American culture and delivers its soaring and stirring messages to the world through its amalgamation with an emerging contemporary movement, Rhythm and Blues. The success of 'Soul' as a musical movement is recognised by many for its contributions and innovations as a facilitator toward a resolution for the civil rights movement that affected not just the individual black artists, but also the very industry which pioneered this new form of groundbreaking music.

Sam Cooke's music was undoubtedly one of the earlier developments of the 'soul' movement and it is through his early foundational work, as can be heard in his posthumous album *Ain't That Good News*, which paved the way for a number of other artists to take up post and continue the development of 'soul' as a worldwide sensation. The music would reach its zenith with the likes of Ray Charles, Otis Redding, James Brown, Marvin Gaye, Isaac Hayes, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder and Prince, just to name a few. Cooke's songs are recounted, retold and reinterpreted, countless times decades after his death and will continue to do so in many more years to come. In a concluding message for his fans in an interview with Paulsen (1964), Cooke quotes, "I have an intense desire to make all of my audiences happy." And it seems that he continues to do so, leaving behind a legacy that is graceful, sophisticated and yet filled with the very rawness of the human endeavour.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Track 13 on accompanying audio CD - *Follow the Drinking Gourd* by Taj Mahal from the album *Shakin' a Tailfeather* (1997)
- 2 Track 07 on accompanying audio CD - *A Change is Gonna Come* by Sam Cooke from the album *Ain't That Good News* (1964)
- 3 Track 14 on accompanying audio CD - *We Shall Overcome* by Joan Baez from the album *The Collection* (1999)
- 4 Track 15 on accompanying audio CD - *Blowin' In The Wind* by Bob Dylan from the album *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1964)
- 5 Track 01 on accompanying audio CD - *Ain't That Good News* by Sam Cooke from the album *Ain't That Good News* (1964)
- 6 Track 16 on accompanying audio CD - *Ain't That Good News* by Moses Hogan Chorale from the album *The Battle of Jericho* (2004)
- 7 Track 17 on accompanying audio CD - *Let The Good Times Roll* by Louis Jordan from the album *Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five* (2001)
- 8 Track 03 on accompanying audio CD - *Good Times* by Sam Cooke from the album *Ain't That Good News* (1964)
- 9 Track 08 on accompanying audio CD - *Falling In Love* by Sam Cooke from the album *Ain't That Good News* (1964)
- 10 Track 09 on accompanying audio CD - *Home* by Sam Cooke from the album *Ain't That Good News* (1964)
- 11 Track 10 on accompanying audio CD - *Sittin' in the Sun* by Sam Cooke from the album *Ain't That Good News* (1964)
- 12 Track 12 on accompanying audio CD - *The Riddle Song* by Sam Cooke from the album *Ain't That Good News* (1964)

APPENDIX

Appendix 01 - *Follow the Drinking Gourd - Hays lyrics* (Bresler, 2008).

VERSE 1

When the sun comes back,
and the first quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd
The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

CHORUS

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

VERSE 2

The river bank will make a mighty good road
The dead trees show you the way
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on
Follow the drinking gourd.

VERSE 3

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd,
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the drinking gourd.

VERSE 4

Where the great big river meets the little river
Follow the drinking gourd
The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

Appendix 02 - *Ain't That Good News* by J.W. Work (1940) (Matteson, n.d.).

VERSE

I've a crown up in the Kingdom,
Ain't that good news!
I've a crown up in the Kingdom,
Ain't that good news!

CHORUS

I'm a-goin' to lay down this world,
Goin' to shoulder up my cross,
Goin' to take it home to Jesus,
Ain't that good news!

VERSE

I've a harp up in the Kingdom,
Ain't that good news!
I've a harp up in the Kingdom,
Ain't that good news!

VERSE

I've a robe up in the Kingdom,
Ain't that good news!
I've a robe up in the Kingdom,
Ain't that good news!

VERSE

I've a Saviour in the Kingdom
Ain't that good news!
I've a Saviour in the Kingdom
Ain't that good news!

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