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Funk My Soul: The Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And the Birth of Funk Culture

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FUNK MY SOUL:

THE ASSASSINATION OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

AND THE BIRTH OF FUNK CULTURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Painstakingly created over the course of several difficult and extraordinarily hectic years, this dissertation is the result of a sustained commitment to better grasping the cultural impact of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s life and death. That said, my ongoing appreciation for contemporary American music, film, and television served as an ideal starting point for evaluating Dr. King’s legacy in mass culture. This work likewise is wrought from an intricate combination of support and insight derived from many individuals who, in some way, shape, or form, contributed encouragement, scholarly knowledge, or exceptional wisdom.

I am forever indebted to my immediate family for their undying support and sustained sponsorship; I can hardly reciprocate fully their generosity and unconditional love. To be sure, they made this possible. I must express the deepest affection and sincerest gratitude to my partner, Marite’ Fregoso, whose love, knowledge, understanding, and support propelled me toward a seemingly unreachable finish. I must also express endless gratitude to my mentor, adviser, and friend, Lewis Erenberg, who patiently remained committed to my cause and has inspired a level of self-confidence that I never thought possible. Susan Hirsch likewise deserves my deepest respect, admiration and appreciation; her tutelage and enduring encouragement throughout my graduate and professional career have been nothing short of essential and extraordinary. I also wish to express deep gratitude to Elizabeth Fraterrigo, without whom this final product in its
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For Rosa, Rocco, and Maria
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ABSTRACT

Few can deny that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s untimely death had a profound impact on American life. In this dissertation, I argue that the assassination inspired musicians, producers, artists, and consumers across the nation to reconstruct soul music and, in its place, construct the cultural idiom known as funk. Narrating the process by which black artists’ embraced and popularized funk modes of expression, this dissertation traces how the genre extended directly from post-assassination trauma and attempted to provide a purposeful announcement of black solidarity and an uncensored narrative of the black American experience. In telling the story of funk, its origins, and its long-term cultural impact, this dissertation collects, narrates, and analyzes the sounds and voices of the genre. It highlights its musicians, management, critics, and fans while demonstrating how these individuals derived inspiration from the King legacy.

The funk movement, which emerged as an alternative to the more militant Black Freedom Movement platforms of the 1960s and 1970s, ultimately recast mainstream black identity as forever dynamic and distinct, but indisputably American. In telling the story of funk, its origins, and its long-term cultural impact, this dissertation collects, narrates, and analyzes the sounds and voices of the genre. It highlights its musicians, management, critics, and fans while demonstrating how these individuals derived inspiration from the King legacy. Research and writing explores James Brown’s activism, music, and stylistic innovations, all of which profoundly challenged the creative centers of Motown, Stax, and Hollywood to offer their own interpretations of funk. In
the context of these chapters, purveyors used funk modes of expression to react to the
death of Dr. King, express black pride, comment on the broader problems of black
America, and showcase new iterations of black fashion. The final stage of this project
hones in on the process by which funk’s most successful albums, along with high-
grossing blaxploitation films and black network television, gradually became permanent
components of American popular culture. In the end, the broader cultural impact of funk,
inasmuch as it gave rise to new musical genres, emerges as directly responsible for black
music’s supremacy over contemporary mainstream American airwaves and the
establishing of a more prominent position within the American culture industry.
INTRODUCTION

RECONSIDERING FUNK ORIGINS AND INFLUENCE

So, we said we were gonna do blues so loud and so long that there wouldn’t be any doubt that funk would be ours forever.

— George Clinton, Tavis Smiley interview, 2008

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolent pledge was explicit in its terms and served as the enduring ideology to which the Southern Christian Leadership Conference adhered throughout its existence. On the “commitment cards” that Dr. King distributed to those who joined his many demonstrations, he asked that participants “refrain from violence of fist, tongue, and heart.”¹ While this moral imperative remained the central tenet of Dr. King’s campaign to reconcile racial tensions and peacefully integrate American society, those who placed a greater emphasis on the need for self-defense against unmitigated violence and institutional oppression questioned the effectiveness of nonviolent activism. Stokely Carmichael, for example, observed how the nonviolent approach seemed to render black Americans “helpless.” As a result, he called for the use of more aggressive techniques to counteract excessive police force and institutional bigotry.²


Newton and the burgeoning Black Panther Party also rejected Dr. King’s nonviolent standard, labeling it as an “emasculating” and “restrictive” conviction.\(^3\) Challenging Dr. King during the late 1960s, the espousal of Black Power likewise grew alongside a growing number of Vietnam War protest movements. With intensified challenges to his role as a civil rights authority, Dr. King’s status as the chief agent of black empowerment was no longer unassailable.

While the fragmentation of alliances and philosophies within the Black Freedom Movement and the broader Civil Rights Movement are by no means unfamiliar topics, Dr. King’s connection to the evolution of American popular music remains underexplored. As the Civil Rights Movement and its many factions evolved during the 1950s and throughout the 1960s, so too did black music’s popularity. Motown, Stax Records, Atlantic Records, and countless other prominent music-making centers steadily propelled soul and R&B into competitive positions within a Billboard Pop category historically dominated by white artists. Such a transition signaled that a fast growing number of American listeners were ready to embrace fresh talent from across the color line. In this progressive social context, Dr. King himself developed an appreciation for soul and R&B, noting its connection to his cause when, in 1967, he delivered a speech on Aretha Franklin Day in Detroit. On that occasion, he voiced typical concerns about economic injustice before affectionately introducing Franklin to the audience.\(^4\)


Though he often is overlooked as a major force in the evolution of American popular culture, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a profound influence on musicians and artists across the nation, whether or not they agreed with his political and social philosophy. This influence became even more powerful after Dr. King’s untimely passing. Shortly after his death, funk emerged as both a politically charged corollary of soul music and as a kind of tribute to the beloved activist and his cause. Soul music had matured throughout the 1950s and 1960s as a magical amalgamation of blues, country, gospel, folk, and jazz traditions, but much of what made it popular was its “crossover” appeal. At the same time, soul music bore the indelible mark of legendary black musicians, many of whom felt that with Dr. King’s death the goal of appealing to white listeners was no longer of vital importance. In other words, soul in a post-assassination context had to better reflect the anguish of black America by sounding off stridently alongside those who called for social change. For James Brown, Motown, Stax, and other founders of funk culture, this was to be accomplished by abandoning rudimentary elements of soul such as the verse-chorus-verse format, the classic 1-4-5 blues and country progression, and innocuous lyrics that failed to relate in some way to the social state of black America. Getting funky also entailed replacing clean-cut looks with varied configurations of large Afros, colorful dashikis, flashy bell-bottoms and, occasionally, fists raised in the air.

As it steadily figured into the reinvention and recasting of black culture, funk’s linear, repetitive, and elongated grooves, gave countless listeners a crucial platform for dancing, political expression, self-improvement, and the promotion of black pride and
solidarity. As the sound progressed, it served as an alternative means of expressing the state of black America, asserting blackness as a unique and celebratory construct that did not need to be toned down in the interest of assimilation. While challenging the conventional goal of mainstream cultural absorption, the funk idiom brought together seemingly incompatible ideologies and sentiments held by black nationalists and integrationists. Moreover, in a manner similar to how Dr. King’s death temporarily suspended tensions within the Black Freedom Movement, funk managed to do so in a more prolonged sense by simultaneously celebrating black cultural distinctiveness and securing its status as a household phenomenon. But before that could happen, those who mourned Dr. King protested fiercely, subsequently spreading chaos throughout 110 cities and causing over $50 million in damage. Among the 39 people who died during the riots, 34 were black. The largest riots erupted in Chicago, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Over 22,000 federal troops and 34,000 National Guardsmen were deployed to aid local police in an effort to restore order. In Memphis, where a significant community of musicians would later develop funk, the shocked and distressed black community engaged in a firestorm of riots that engulfed nearly the entire city for seven days. A report of the international chiefs of police reported three civilian deaths, forty-seven severe injuries, property damage at around $900,000, 275 stores looted, and several major fires confined to ghetto areas. At the behest of a perturbed Mayor Henry Loeb, a dawn

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5 Jo Freeman, “The Death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” http://www.uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/jofreeman/photos/Kingfuneral.html (accessed 12/12/10).

6 Michael Honey, Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign. (New York: W. W. Norton, & Company), 71.
to dusk curfew was enforced while local police mobilized alongside the National Guard in armored vehicles. Despite the way in which assassination-related mayhem seemed to signal an irreversible breakdown of civic order, the riots ultimately “ended in a sputter” as a result of the hard-lined response. In sum, the chaos that surrounded Dr. King’s assassination stands as one of the largest civil disturbances in United States history.

Ten years before the tragedy struck in Memphis, Reverend Samuel Kyles, an ally of Dr. King, observed a city where “there was not one thing integrated. From the cradle to the grave, everything was segregated in Memphis.” Since Memphis’ economic and racial problems intensified alongside its cultural and industrial growth during the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. King made a fateful decision to direct his activist crusade in the direction of the city’s intensely drawn and institutionally enforced color line. Using the momentum of the SCLC’s national success, Dr. King was determined to expose and dramatize how Memphis’ particular brand of segregation figured into the perpetuation of substandard working conditions and the low wages that impoverished over 1,300 disenfranchised black sanitation workers. In February of 1968, Dr. King proceeded to rally local civil rights activists, including the Reverend Kyles, and direct a sixty-eight day nonviolent march against a defiant Loeb and the all-white city council that refused to

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9 Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: W. W. Norton, & Company, Inc.), 78.
address the matter.\textsuperscript{10} Unable to win the kind of concessions for which he had hoped, Dr.
King’s lengthy and frustrating crusade met its demise on April 4, 1968 at the Lorraine
Hotel. Ex-convict James Earl Ray allegedly took aim from a nearby flophouse window
and fatally hit Dr. King in the jaw, killing him instantly. Reverend Kyles watched in
horror as the unthinkable unfolded: “I was there when that bullet was fired. I was
standing on the balcony. I mean, I spent the last hour of his life on earth. ‘Bout 6:45, we
stepped on that balcony…the shot rang out. I look back and saw he had been knocked
from the railing back onto the balcony…The police were coming and I hollered to them:
call an ambulance on your police radio! Dr. King has been shot.”\textsuperscript{11}

On the evening of April 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1968 - one night after Dr. King’s assassination - a
nascent funk sound served as both a eulogy and the vehicle for an uncompromised
declaration of black solidarity. It resounded publicly and evolved spontaneously in the
ears of those who mourned Dr. King’s murder at the Boston Gardens. That evening,
James Brown gave a rousing memorial concert and “saved” Boston from the turmoil that
was spreading throughout over a hundred American cities and towns reeling from Dr.
King’s unexpected death.\textsuperscript{12} Although Brown had commented on several occasions that
he did not accept wholly the tenets of King’s nonviolent ethos, Brown’s sympathy for

\textsuperscript{10} Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 79.

\textsuperscript{11} Interview with Rev. Kyle, dir. Gordon and Neville, in Respect Yourself.

\textsuperscript{12} Martin Luther King Jr., James Brown, and Boston,” in The Boston Traveler,
30\textsuperscript{th}, 2010).
King and for the plight of black America compelled him to react with artistic expression instead of with violence.  

In terms of the genesis of the basic funk rhythm structure, since the early 1960s Brown had been experimenting with a groove that emphasized the first beat of every measure, rather than the backbeat that formerly typified R&B and Country music throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Brown changed the percussive emphasis, from the one-two-three-four backbeat to a one-two-three-four downbeat (“one-three”) accompanied by synchronized guitar rhythm (on quarter notes two and four) featuring a hard-driving, repetitive brassy swing. The resulting sound was less familiar to American listeners, but more direct, less predictable, and easily extended for audiences who wanted to dance. It also bears mentioning that the abandonment of the one-two-three-four backbeat signified a monumental departure from a musical format with which most of white America had been familiar. Thus funk’s unique structure, later coupled with overt, political messages and an afrocentric aesthetic, signaled a new era of black independence within the music industry and beyond. Brown gradually had been moving in this direction as early as 1962 with tracks such as “I've Got Money,” representing the first recorded example of Brown’s shift to a funkier format based on sixteenth-note rhythms and the one-two-three-four downbeat. In developing this approach to his music, Brown relied heavily on the contribution of a new drummer from St Petersburg.

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Florida: Clayton Fillyau. Fillyau was taught the second-line rhythms by an unknown New Orleans drummer with Huey ‘Piano’ Smith and the Clowns when they passed through his hometown.  

Emphasizing the downbeat and extending the repetitive, non-traditional groove was an essential part of Brown’s 1964 single, “Out of Sight” and the 1965 hit, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag,” both of which were performed in Boston for the Dr. King memorial concert and helped to redirect the rage of mourning, would-be rioters. After that monumental evening, Brown proceeded to pen his 1968 hit, “I’m Black and I’m Proud,” sketching this “post-King style” in concise terms and tenor. As a testament to its social relevance, the track reached number ten on the Billboard Hot 100. In a 1986 interview with biographer Bruce Tucker, Brown elaborated on the political significance of the song and said, “(It’s) obsolete now... But it was necessary to teach pride then, and I think the song did a lot of good for a lot of people... People called “Black and Proud” militant and angry - maybe because of the line about dying on your feet instead of living on your knees. But really, if you listen to it, it sounds like a children's song. That's why I had children in it, so children who heard it could grow up feeling pride.”

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16 Alex Stewart, “Funky Drummer,” 293-318.


heard Brown’s message were asked to improve their own communities, rather than work for the benefit of others or wait for someone to do it for them.¹⁹

Brown's creativity and ambition continued to push the funk sound and its message to the forefront of popular culture with “Mother Popcorn” in 1969 and “Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine” in 1970. These hits were distinct in that they continued to omit twelve-bar blues featured in his earlier music and relied solely on the continuous groove that Brown had perfected by then. Brown's music was also comprised of repetitious and anthemic vocals that likewise served a percussive purpose with rhythmic grunts and with rhythm-section patterns reminiscent of West African polyrhythm, vastly different than a more familiar country backbeat.²⁰ Throughout his career, Brown's frenzied singing, frequently punctuated with screams and grunts, channeled the “ecstatic ambiance of the black church” in a secular context.²¹ Nowhere in this sound could one detect an urgent need to appeal to white sensibilities; this was a music devoted to blackness in its most contemporary form. This was funk and it was destined to stay.

Funk has been defined in many ways, but for the purposes of this study a working definition can begin with that of Rickey Vincent’s study of the genre. In Funk: The Music, the People and the Rhythm of the One, Vincent aptly described funk as:

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That nitty-gritty thang that affects people when things get heavy. Funk can be out of control, like the chaos of a rebellion, or instinctively elegant, like that extended round of lovemaking that hits overdrive. Funk is what you say when nothing else will do...Funkiness for our purposes is an aesthetic of deliberate confusion, of uninhibited, soulful behavior that remains viable because of a faith in instinct, a joy of self, and a joy of life, particularly unassimilated black American life.22

This sketch of funk is particularly useful for designating the musical essence of the movement, though its social roots remain somewhat underexposed. As funk developed, the genre most assuredly emerged as an extension of the modern and urban black experience, signifying racial self-awareness and a festive spirit that spoke less about the King-inspired hope of cultural integration/absorption and more to the essence of black American culture in its own right. At the same time, funk became mainstream, informed style and fashion beyond the color line on a national scale, and represented a commercial space reserved within the national culture. All of these transformations emanated from black artists who, while reeling from the murder of their moral champion, simultaneously considered the failed promise of integration and upward mobility for all Americans. As disappointment surged in the post-King world, soul, once the nation’s venerated black music institution, began to give way to funk.

With an existing momentum generated by the black pride mantra of the late 1960s and 1970s, funk gradually superseded R&B and soul and the resulting sound spread throughout the entertainment industry in various forms. Shortly after the King assassination, a rush of recordings, films, commentaries, and concerts laid the groundwork for what ultimately became a fundamentally black musical idiom whose

ownership could never be equivocated. As George Clinton declared forty-one years later, “(Back then) it was at the end of Motown's reign, and we started seeing music coming back from England to the States. I said, ‘Wait a minute, we're going in the wrong direction.’ So we just made a quick turnaround. Threw our suits away. Got some jeans with holes and patches in ‘em and started becoming hippies.”

Clinton went on to say in a 2008 interview with Tavis Smiley that the Motown sound gave rise to a kind of proto-funk that he, Bootsy Collins, and other premier Motown players developed after Motown moved to L.A. to work more closely with the film industry. Clinton stated, “Since they were doin’ rock ‘n’ roll and blues, I’m gonna do the mid-tempo. I’m gonna do that nasty part of it - you know the real slow, drunk music - and so we would never change it, you know, because rock ‘n’ roll got co-opted from us, blues almost got co-opted from us, I mean, to the point that we didn’t even realize it was black music. We said, ‘that’s white music’ when we heard a rock ‘n’ roll song. So, we said we were gonna do blues so loud and so long that there wouldn’t be any doubt that funk would be ours forever.” Clinton, numerous musicians, record companies, and producers with a foothold in the music and film industry all participated in the perpetuation of a new, exclusive black sound and aesthetic instead of receding into the racially ambiguous milieu of American pop. Although this may have been a crusade in part carried out with commercial interests in mind, it is abundantly clear that the music itself became a means by which black America could be better understood by mass audiences.

As a result of funk’s explosive mass appeal, Clinton’s former employer, Berry Gordy, had to reconsider his campaign to appeal to white sensibilities. The Motown crossover hit-making mogul and his operation could no longer satisfy a host of talented players who, emboldened by Dr. King’s death, desired to transcend formulaic approaches to making music and, furthermore, remained drawn to the creative freedom represented by primetime funk. At Motown, just before its move to Los Angeles in 1969, producer Norman Whitfield and singer/songwriter Barret Strong pushed the Temptations into funk, inspired by Sly and the Family Stone’s feel good format. In touch with the vibe of the moment, Motown house band, the Funk Brothers, cut “Cloud 9,” which was distinct in how it advanced an assertive and repetitious groove every bit as complex as its lyrical content. As a statement on the black condition in 1968, Cloud-9 reached number two on the R&B Chart and number 6 on the Pop Chart.²⁴ With regard to the political and racial tensions of the year, Temptations Tenor, Otis Williams, declared, “Looking back on those days, I suppose a certain amount of radicalism was needed to raise the nation’s consciousness about the plight of black Americans. Still, I never stopped believing that prejudice and hate go hand-in-hand, and having been the target of that crap, I don’t believe in or support anyone who preaches hate, no matter who they are.”²⁵ This statement is, in a sense, the perfect encapsulation of how musicians would use funk not as a militant platform, but instead as means to convey the stuff of black creativity and social consciousness as forever distinct from that of mainstream white America.

²⁵ Williams, Temptations, 132.
There is no shortage of scholarship examining African American culture in its many forms; however, seminal works critically analyzing black popular music and its link to the Civil Rights and Black Power movement are of particular relevance to this study. While the music itself, its commercial success, and critical reception in popular press all serve as valuable primary sources, there are also a growing number of secondary monographs that have begun an important and ongoing discussion of how soul, R&B, and funk speak to not only the totality and evolution of the black American experience, but also to the broader evolution of American culture.

As the essential starting point in a dense body of literature, William L. Van Deburg’s *New Day in Babylon* reinforces a salient link between the culture of Black Power and mainstream America from 1965 to 1975. Deburg’s model of the movement depicts it as one that emphasized positive self-worth for African Americans who continued to struggle with the social and economic strictures of a white dominated society. In examining Black Power as an often-misunderstood “oppositional culture of militancy,” Van Deburg’s study argues with compelling evidence that it was less the ideological product of crude reactionaries and more the logical and sophisticated response of conscientious activists. In facilitating a transition from “negro” to “black” consciousness, Black Power advocates grew tired of how established black leaders continually accepted the unsatisfactory policies of white liberalism.²⁶ The abandonment of the nonviolent and integrationist reform agenda extended from black Americans who

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recognized the need for more creative and assertive ways to reverse a persistent state of social inequality.

*New Day in Babylon* stands as an almost unassailable treatise on the legacy of Black Power; however, in is not intended to serve as an exploration of the relationship between black militancy and popular music. Along those lines, culture critic and television producer Nelson George has published a plethora of writings that outline what he has called “post-soul” culture, focusing exclusively on the music of black America. His attention to the demise of sixties soul sensibilities suggests that while the “black is beautiful” movement of the seventies celebrated the unique and authentic character of black American culture, it gradually gave way to a diluted, if not artificial, model, advanced by way of a profit-driven music industry.²⁷ In *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, George examines how the business of black music, in contrast with Black Power, remained “assimilationist obsessed” and contributed to a collective confusion among black Americans whose public and private identity grew increasingly polarized. The ideological vision of integration was to many an honorable one, but the simple fact demonstrated in *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* is that its promise and spirit was, in a sense, exploited and distorted in an effort to generate profit for a white dominated music industry.

Nelson George’s work certainly reveals much about the black experience over the past three decades, but it bears mentioning that his view of funk requires augmentation largely because he has failed to notice the significance of funk’s radical departure from

soul’s technical form, not to mention the extent to which funk enabled black America to occupy a much larger segment of the culture industry. While George groups funk alongside soul and R&B, he fails to see how the transformation of the sound itself was an assassination-inspired phenomenon.

Helping to shed light on this particular point is music historian Rickey Vincent who casts the genre as a more exceptional sensation when compared to earlier forms of black music. In *Funk: the Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One*, Vincent, like George, stressed that soul music was a crucial element in the development of funk. Vincent also underscores the important way in which soul music provided “the synthesis of popular R&B styles with the moral overtones of gospel music...there was empowerment in the unification of the sacred and the secular.”

Clearly both George and Vincent recognize the intimate link between soul and funk. However, Vincent places a greater emphasis on the exceptional role that funk played in terms of national representation and the galvanization of a more exclusively black identity. He asserts that “the funk can help explain the continuity of the black folk experience in America” and, insomuch as it represents a sonic departure from soul, the future of black America is best understood through the styling of funk and the genres to which it later gave rise. While this dissertation will owe much to Vincent’s invaluable foray into the annals of funk, further investigation is required in order to better document the genre’s relationship with King’s murder. Beyond Vincent’s perspective, this work is arguing that funk’s rise to prominence could not have occurred without Dr. King’s death and the extent to which it

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28 Vincent, *Funk*, 120.
positioned funk as a unified commercial voice. This voice managed to combine seamlessly elements of Black Nationalism with mainstream, activist culture.

Adding to the scholarly acknowledgement of funk’s unique and formative influence on American life is Ann Danielsen’s *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*. Danielsen’s deconstruction of funk may very well represent its most astute and revealing study in terms of pinpointing fundamental elements of a funk groove unique to Brown and Parliament, further distinguishing funk from other forms of black American music. From an ethnomusicologist’s perspective, funk emerges in Danielsen’s view as a kind of technical phenomenon whose practical distinctiveness grew in popularity alongside an increasing public demand for dance music, thus explaining why funk was so commercially successful.²⁹

While in Danielsen’s work the groove and its mass appeal emerge as inextricably linked entities, the sociopolitical underpinnings of funk receive limited treatment as Danielsen attempts to depart from traditional, race-based assessments of the sound. Moreover, Danielsen positions funk between “African American musical traditions and the international, Anglo-dominated range of popular music.”³⁰ This assertion omits a critical examination of how civil rights era turmoil inspired black musicians to channel their collective response to unchecked violence, bigotry and, to be precise, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Mark Anthony Neal’s *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* serves as a useful addition to Danielsen’s work by expanding upon funk’s social and political roots. Neal identifies funk as a kind of “postindustrial soul” taking place within the broader context of intense poverty, economic collapse, and the erosion of valuable public space.\(^{31}\) With regard to the many barriers black Americans faced in becoming upwardly mobile, Neal asserts that the musical sensibilities of James Brown and Parliament provided a counterpoint to both society and the music industry’s inability and unwillingness to interpret a stark social reality, one that industry leaders deemed an undesirable basis upon which to construct song concepts. In this context, funk culture emerged as an enduring and profitable form of oppositional expression that revised the meanings and icons of blackness for consumers.\(^{32}\)

With the previous studies in mind, one can conclude, in part, that the business of funk has much to do with the simple generating of profit. At the same time, the study of funk as a cultural tradition emerges as a site where the marginalized voices of black America arguably legitimized and demarcated their status by emerging as a recognizable and wholly American force within the body politic. In this line of argumentation, funk culture most assuredly exemplifies a bottom up phenomenon that both reflects and skews the actual folk experience of black Americans. Funk, as opposed to jazz or even soul, represents a unique development insomuch as it was wrought from the need to reassess the feasibility of cultural integration and express what had been censored from that which

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This dissertation collects, narrates and analyzes the sound and voices of funk as it replaced soul. It examines funk’s musicians, management, critics, and fans. As the story unfolds, it pays particular attention to the way in which a sizeable funk milieu evolved and used funk modes of expression to react to the death of Dr. King, express black Pride, comment on the broader problems of black America, and showcase new and uncensored black sensibilities. In relating Dr. King and his tragic murder to the culture industry, this dissertation provides a critical portrait of several reactions to his death. Within this context, the study proceeds to survey direct and indirect responses within the music, television and film industries, along with activist communities. Moreover, the deconstruction of funk media is of particular importance to this study. Examining the sound and lyrics of funk’s most successful albums, reading high-grossing Blaxploitation films, and measuring the popularity of the funk aesthetic in terms of clothing and speech, are all vital parts of this dissertation. As this study proceeds with the help of interviews, biographies, albums, articles, and films, it will also provide a broader statement on the racialization of American popular music, underscoring the profound influence King’s death has had on American society.

This dissertation also proceeds with attention to the dominant theoretical concerns that inform contemporary American cultural history. Research and writing were devoted to uncovering the authentic contribution that black Americans made to an ever-evolving national culture in the 1970s and beyond. Moreover, a critical examination of the sociopolitical and economic roots of funk reveals how unconventional and controversial
modes of artistic expression earned national attention with minimal manipulation from captains of the culture industry, for a brief time. That is to say that the essence of funk is unequivocally black and, while other black music traditions clearly exist as fundamental parts of a broader American culture, funk remains distinct in that it was forged exclusively as a collective and organic response to suffocating social conditions that had not been ameliorated through more traditional forms of activism in the Civil Rights Movement. Funk was reactionary, but not always militant; moreover, funk epitomizes a refusal to assimilate and modify black culture with respect to King’s integrationist vision. In terms of quantifying the mass appeal of funk, Billboard charting serves as an invaluable mechanism of measurement, which reveals convincingly how the newly forged musical idiom earned popular attention and simultaneously appeared to have moved away from a more integrated mode of expression one can sometimes find in the form of soul and rock ‘n’ roll.

The starting point for a study that demarcates clearly this transformation in American popular music is the tumultuous national environment that formed in the immediate wake of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination on April 4th, 1968.

Throughout subsequent chapters, the term “post-assassination” serves as a vital term that refers to a unique phase in the evolution of black music and culture. The phrase generally signifies a permanent transformation of an already distinct cultural landscape, such that took shape as a direct result of the murder. As an unprecedented eruption of frustration and fury decimated American cities, the chaos likewise underscored a pivotal moment in cultural history: the patient and peaceful tactics of the nonviolent movement
had reached their expiration date and the call to express more stridently a disappointment with the limited effectiveness of ordered and deferential social activism marked an entirely new chapter in American cultural identity. While a wealth of documentation has quantified post-assassination urban disorder and the nation-wide damage to property that characterized it, the music community’s response to Dr. King’s death requires a much closer look. At the same time, limited attention to related, flourishing trends within popular music ignore a key part of a cultural phenomenon whose impact is still felt and heard today. In more precise terms, the deconstruction of a post-assassination sonic reaction and the cultural traditions it spawned can provide a deeper sense of the way in which Dr. King, the Black Freedom Struggle, and the Civil Rights Movement fundamentally altered American society beyond political and economic terms. In this context, the economic frustrations centered on joblessness and substandard housing conditions would find a new outlet in funk.

Through funk, black Americans reacted creatively and commercially to the unmitigated urban violence, poverty, and geographic isolation as white counterparts continually established homogenous and often affluent communities outside of the city proper. Although contending with the strictures of institutional bigotry and social injustice represented the primary reason to make a strident political statement, funk was something more than a simplistic and reactionary battle cry. It expressed both the good and bad of what black America had become in segregated quarters. At the same time, funk emerged as a sonic and aesthetic challenge to a narrowly defined idea of cultural integration; it declared that while some of black America had resolved to exist in the
context of its own cultural exclusivity, it did so mainly as a result of how its leaders and their reform initiatives consistently had been met with vitriol, violence, murder, and political marginalization. From April 4th, 1968 to the present, prominent post-assassination artists within the culture industry wove elements of these aforementioned sentiments into their collective works. In short, Dr. King’s death gave rise to an immense continuum of expression - funk - that represented a fundamental and irreversible transformation of how black America represented itself, altering the world’s perception of what it meant to be black. The evidence that supports this argument is embedded in a dense funk discourse comprised of both music and testimony, all of which serves as the raw material of this work.
CHAPTER ONE

“AIN’T WE TOGETHER?”:

JAMES BROWN AND A NEW MODEL OF BLACK MUSIC

It was like opening the floodgates to a rhythm-based extension of soul, a physically performed, roots-derived configuration of music that comes straight from the heart. In that sense, soul became the perfect marching music for the civil rights era, a way to choreograph the burgeoning pride that could be found everywhere. It was, to me, like the jump beat that we always saw in films from Africa, when the blacks were organizing against apartheid. We'd always see them jumping in place, with the sound of the drum beneath them, giving them weight, lending them focus, providing them unity. What was missing for me and my people was the rhythm of our own revolution—a soundtrack strong enough to bring us to the outside rather than keep us on the inside.


There was only one man that could make America stand still and think and that was a man who didn’t have a Ph.D. from Boston University, like Dr. King did, wasn’t a proponent of nonviolence and never got a Nobel Prize. But he was a man that knew how to express the screams and the feelings of a whole people. And because people say he feels like us, we’re going to at least give him the benefit of the doubt and hear what he got to say. Because if anybody understands what we feel tonight, it’s James Brown.

— Rev. Al Sharpton, David Shankbone Interview, 2007

The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. redefined race relations across every American institution. While post-assassination social and political change is framed often in terms of riots, property damage, evolving civil rights laws and the
gradual emergence of politically correct attitudes, the cultural and musical repercussions of Dr. King’s death are more difficult to identify and analyze. Beyond familiar issues related to the assassination itself, it is important to note that the tragedy inspired the emergence of a powerful, nationwide movement to recast and proclaim the distinctiveness of racial identities as a direct and indirect homage to the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King himself. For African Americans, to be black and proud after April 4th, 1968 wasn’t an act of militancy, instead it became an assertion of unique heritage that influential entertainers promoted with profound success. While grieving the loss of Dr. King, an enhanced sense of black pride flooded mainstream cultural spaces and altered enterprises from music to fashion. As the phenomenon achieved a higher level of commercialization, it struck a kind of compromise between integrationist and separatist perspectives; the “black and proud” mantra’s association with extremism gradually faded away. In specifying a starting point for the momentous and counter-hegemonic force of the black response to Dr. King’s death, one must note that James Brown was among the first high-profile entertainers who in sound and lyric offered a nonthreatening, albeit strident, declaration of black pride. As he performed the deeper reality of American blackness, he augmented his own commercial appeal, and provided a political narrative more sensitive to and reflective of black America. Moreover, Brown became the central figure in the transition from soul and R&B to funk while his role in the Civil Rights Movement and in the aftermath of the assassination underscored how that musical transformation was a direct result of Dr. King’s untimely passing.
Black Boston

Boston happened to be the site where Brown’s call to be black and proud first achieved national notoriety. Although it was a city largely associated with white ethnic groups, Boston by the late 1960s had a sizeable Black population. Much like other major American cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and Memphis, Massachusetts’s “city on the hill” had emerged as no paradise of race relations. According to noted philosopher and social commentator, Cornell West, “Boston historically has been a liberal city in terms of its intelligentsia and self image, but deeply segregated based on race and in terms of its practices. Boston has never been a city that’s been highly appealing to black folk. You don’t think of Boston as a center of black life as you think of Detroit and New York.”

Yet Boston, while no postwar racial utopia, was the place where Dr. King earned a doctorate degree from Boston University and met his wife, Corretta Scott. Even with such a Civil Right’s Era highlight, the more sobering reality was that black Bostonians throughout the 1960s lived in deteriorated and underserved neighborhoods, like Roxbury on the South End. Figuring into their less than favorable status and similar to other urban black Americans attempting to establish affluent livelihoods, blacks in Boston indisputably faced severe political and economic limitations in housing, health care, education, and labor.

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Perhaps in an even more profound and prophetic manner, Boston played a central role in the development of ideology underlying both black militancy and Dr. King’s rendition of secular nonviolence. As for a Boston connection to the birth of the Black Power movement, one need not look further than the legendary life of Malcolm X. In 1946 before he took the name of “X,” Malcolm Little was found to be in possession of a stolen watch that he had left for repair at a Boston jewelry store. Malcolm was then arrested and subsequently indicted for carrying firearms, for larceny, and for breaking and entering. He then was transferred to Norfolk State Prison where he served out his sentence until 1952. While incarcerated, Malcolm began studying the Koran, became a Muslim, and took it upon himself to emerge as a staunch advocate for black self-defense. Upon returning to Boston, Malcolm officially transformed himself into an enlightened “Malcolm X” and began his fateful association with the Nation of Islam. For Malcolm X, Boston became the site where observed racial injustices shaped an aggressive crusade to remedy those predicaments facing other black Bostonians. In this regard, Boston emerges as a pivotal site where Malcolm X and other black Americans “renamed themselves and reshaped their voices.”

Dr. King’s worldview similarly was shaped in Boston. While completing ministerial training at Boston University's School of Divinity from 1951 to 1954, he familiarized himself with the compelling preaching style of Boston’s own legendary

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4 Wilcox, “Chronology of the Life and Activities of Malcolm X.”

Phillip Brooks, who served as the Episcopal rector of Trinity Church in Copley Square. Moreover, during the course of his studies, Dr. King became familiar with the nonviolent tactics of Mahatma Gandhi and would later use it as a basis for his own social justice campaign. Despite the differences between Malcolm X and Dr. King, both of them matured intellectually and spiritually in the context of the Boston’s rich political and cultural traditions, not to mention its longstanding racial tensions.

_Boston Spared, James Brown Style_

Although the black Boston experience paralleled and informed national urban trends, the way its inhabitants reacted to the assassination of Dr. King surprisingly emerged as distinct from that of any other city. Upon learning of Dr. King’s death and the subsequent national outbreak of rioting, Boston Mayor, Kevin White, braced himself for what seemed to be an inevitable eruption of disorder in his own city. Much to his surprise, Boston did not follow suit. The savior of Boston on April 5th, 1968 was none other than James Brown, whose monumental memorial concert inspired the city to dance instead of riot. As over one hundred cities burned, Boston remained relatively calm while mourning through dance and celebration at the legendary Boston Memorial Concert.

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Initially miscalculating, the Mayor’s office attempted to cancel Brown’s previously scheduled concert for fear that it would inspire the very riots that had overtaken other cities. Tom Atkins, a Harvard Law student who happened to be the only Black American on Boston’s city council, eventually talked White into changing that position. White subsequently appeared on a Boston public access program where he stated, “Well, I’m hoping it’s one valve that will let off the steam. And I think it’s appropriate to have it because it’s a peaceful gathering and that’s synonymous with everything that King did.”¹¹ In addition to hoping that the concert would act as an effective measure of riot prevention, Atkins and White felt that airing the concert on television could further minimize the potential number of rioters. It was their fervent hope that, instead of dashing into the streets, the citizens of Boston would remain at home, glued to their television sets.¹² Following that trajectory without first consulting Brown, Mayor White arranged for Boston’s public access station, WGBH, to broadcast the memorial concert. After learning that the show was being televised for free and heeding Brown’s radio announcement to stay off the streets, hundreds of ticketholders quickly demanded refunds.¹³ Fearful that he would lose significant revenue, Brown agreed to cooperate only after the city guaranteed $60,000 in projected lost revenue.¹⁴


¹² Tucker, “He Said it Loud.”


Despite the tensions surrounding compensation and the public broadcasting of the concert, the show went on. On the evening of the show, 15,000 mostly black fans arrived downtown with white cops wielding billy clubs anxiously waiting to chaperone them.\textsuperscript{15} In spite of the police force’s intimidating presence, Brown took the stage, introduced the mayor as “a swinging cat,” and began what arguably would become one of his most meaningful performances.\textsuperscript{16}

True to form, Brown gave the crowd his best and part of his successful mastery of the moment rested on his ability to extend songs into danceable blocks. He opened the concert with “Get it Together” and relentlessly inspired the crowd to channel their frustrations in dance. Riding the crowd’s energy, he served up more heated helpings stretched out song performances such as “There was a Time,” which went on for over nine minutes and “Get It Together” for another eight minutes. On “There Was a Time,” Brown allowed the band to extend the bridge, show off their talent, and provide the crowd with ample time to dance. Maintaining the momentum, Brown urged the crowd for several minutes to “stand up and be counted” before descending into a commanding version of “I Got That Feeling,” which lasted for over six minutes. After “It’s a Man’s World”, “Lost Someone”, “Bewildered”, “When a Man Loves a Woman”, “Tell Mama”, “Check Yourself” and “Chain of Fools” blasted in succession, Brown invited Mayor White on stage for a word on the national situation and to urge concertgoers to remain calm and orderly. Once the political gesturing ended, Brown ironically launched into

\textsuperscript{15} G. Brown, \textit{The Life of James Brown}, 318.

\textsuperscript{16} Tucker, “He Said it Loud.”
“That’s Life”, which led into an arresting and sensual version of “Try Me” as the lull before the show’s climax. The dramatic finale began with a bold twelve-minute version of “Cold Sweat” and its unanimously positive reception confirmed Brown’s complete control of the crowd. The evening finally ended with a bang as Brown performed “Can’t Stand It” and, in doing so, made an indelible mark on American cultural history.\textsuperscript{17}

While the concert was an overwhelming success, it was not a perfectly placid affair. In the midst of the concert, a young black man jumped on stage to dance alongside Brown. Cops quickly rushed in, apprehended the fan and Brown had to move with dispatch to calm tempers. In the face of what could have been the eruption of a riot, Brown exclaimed, “You’re not being fair to yourself and me either... or your race. Now, I asked the police to step back because I figured I could get some respect for my own people. Are we together or ain’t we?”\textsuperscript{18} Brown’s peaceful and sympathetic overtures assuaged much of the black community’s rage as he called for peace, but not silence. In explaining his feelings on the matter he stated, “You know you felt sad, then you got angry. I think that the anger, the heart, all of it was rolled into one. The retaliation was brewing.”\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, Brown used his commanding showmanship to subdue the crowd with an extended groove that represented the future of American music and the very force that saved the city from descending into chaos.

\textsuperscript{17} James Brown: Live at the Boston Garden - April 5, 1968 DVD, Directed by WGBH, (New York: Shout Factory, 2009).

\textsuperscript{18} Brown, James Brown: Live at the Boston Garden.

\textsuperscript{19} The Night James Brown Saved Boston DVD, dir. David Leaf.
As Atkins and company had surmised, the miraculous performance kept many potential rioters off of the streets since they watched the concert for free, on Boston's public television station, WGBH.20 According to one fan, “If the concert had not occurred, we would have had the biggest problem in the history of Boston since the Tea Party.”21 Immediately after the concert, Brown naturally requested the $60,000 that he was promised as compensation for ticket revenue presumably lost to the live broadcast. When the city was slow to pay, Brown threatened to go public, expose the city officials’ deceit, and possibly stir up the very riots the he successfully had prevented. Understanding the delicate nature of the situation, White called upon a local, powerful commercial group known as “The Vault” to come up with Brown's fee and donations for other local community organizations. As a result, “The Vault” contributed $100,000 to social programs for black youth, and Brown received $15,000.22 Mayor White even persuaded the management at the Boston Garden to contribute additional revenue to compensate Brown.23

Brown’s crowd control duties were not over. The day after the concert, the mayor of Washington D.C called him and requested help in “cooling the negroes of the Nation’s capitol.”24 Rushing into action, Brown flew into town, hit the streets and personally

20 The Night James Brown Saved Boston.
22 Don Rhodes, Say it Loud!: My Memories of Soul Brother No.1 (Boston: Globe Pequot Press, 2009), 43.
23 Rhodes, Say it Loud!, 44.
confronted looters. Later that day, he appeared on the local news stating, “This is the greatest country in the world. If we destroy it, we’re out of our heads. We’ve come too far to throw it away. You gotta fight with dignity.”

Many in the black community responded favorably, appreciating and respecting his directives, as opposed to what many regarded as seemingly unsympathetic politicians who hardly seemed to understand the breadth and scope underlying the nation’s woe-driven rampage.

*James Brown, Black Power*

Literally and figuratively, Brown’s Memorial Concert in Boston thrust the entertainer into the center of the national civil rights debate, though during previous years he had already begun a gradual engagement with the activist world. Brown was not a pacifist; rather, his version of “Black Power” involved advancement through capitalist successes such as owning radio stations and various business endeavors. In 1967, before he became a kind of point person for liberal politicians in the wake of Dr. King’s murder, Brown had released a track entitled “Don’t Be A Drop Out,” which further emphasized his unique activist vision by stating, “Without an education, you might as well be dead.”

The song also emerged from Vice President Humphrey’s direct request for black entertainers to support a national “Stay in School” campaign. The single sold over one million copies and Brown personally distributed for free thousands of additional copies.

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“Stay in School” buttons, which he printed at his own expense. Of his efforts, *Billboard* magazine called Brown, “a credit to his race, his profession and his country. He is living evidence of what opportunity can do, of how an industry can serve a man, and how he, in turn can bring esteem to an entire industry.” At the same time, the industry served him well. In 1968 alone, he grossed roughly $2.5 million in concert revenues and donated around ten percent to Black charities and youth groups. As Brown became a household name throughout 1960s, he saw himself as a civil rights era celebrity and with good reason. Brown performed at benefit concerts for civil rights events, purchased a lifetime membership to the NAACP, and regularly extolled the virtues of education, avoiding drugs, and establishing safe communities.

By 1968, Brown’s activist platform could be observed in full swing, whether communicated through a hit track or announced from its own stump. It is however important to note that the origin and motivation behind Brown’s funky activist persona extended deeper into his flourishing career. Black pride and social awareness had informed the development of his unique sound, which in itself conveyed an intensified sense of black identity. This message resounded with greater force by emphasizing the first beat of every measure, rather than the backbeat that formerly typified African American and Country music and, in a sense, represented a musical element historically...

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29 “Hail, James Brown,” 58.

30 Ibid, 58.

shared with white culture. Inspired by the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Freedom Movement, and even more so by the death of Dr. King, Brown redefined black music not only in political terms, but also by pushing the stylistic boundaries of conventional rhythm and blues. Brown’s admiration for and connection to the plight of the national black community compelled him to reject violence and instead take action through commercial success, artistic innovation, and heroic self-expression. Carrying his Afrocentric flair to the fore of his craft, Brown often changed the percussion emphasis, from the one-two-three-four backbeat of traditional soul music to the one-two-three-four downbeat with a synchronized guitar rhythm on quarter notes two and four, featuring a hard-driving, repetitive brassy swing.32 “I've Got Money” in 1962 is the first recorded example of Brown's shift to what later would be regarded as a funk-style, based on intense compositions of sixteenth-note rhythms.33 In composing this tune, Brown relied heavily on the contribution of a new drummer from St Petersburg, Florida: Clayton Fillyau. Fillyau was taught the second-line rhythms by an unknown New Orleans drummer who played with Huey ‘Piano’ Smith and the Clowns when they passed through his hometown.34 With creative input reminiscent of New Orleans jazz and R&B, imported by way of Fillyau, Brown was experimenting with stylistic elements that were destined to forever alter the foundation of mainstream “race music.” Brown’s unique modification of soul and R&B formats, such that would serendipitously accommodate the


34 Stewart, “Funky Drummer,” 299.
Black reaction to Dr. King’s death, evolved over the course of several years. Flirtations with his signature one-three emphasis first appeared on Brown’s 1964 hit single, “Out of Sight” and later on the 1965 hit, “Papa's Got a Brand New Bag,” both of which were performed in Boston and helped to redirect the rage of would-be rioters.

At this juncture it is crucial to reemphasize the fact that that Brown began the advancement of an alternative model of black activism, such that neither the Dr. King crowd nor the Panther milieu had arrived at in their search for answers. On the one hand, seamless integration into mainstream society as Dr. King had prescribed increasingly seemed an unreachable end. On the other hand, remaining in touch with and accentuating what had made black America distinct all along was possible without resorting to extremism. For Brown, true black empowerment could be achieved in three critical ways. First, through the successful channeling of the voice of the black communities in their respective cities. Second, black success was to be further propelled by securing true black American independence and “business initiative.” Last but not least, Brown urged his peers to successfully break into and profit from the media world.35 Although he never adopted a full Black Nationalist platform, Brown, in asserting black pride, did for a short period replace his customary straightened hairdo with a natural Afro in an effort to better announce his race.36 Moreover, by emphasizing that being “black and proud” did not have to equate to the kind of aggressive activism typically associated with the Black Power movement, Brown established for Black America a crucial, political middle


ground. For Black Americans in search of a way to preserve their identity, but also to express in some way the serious need for social change and public acknowledgement, Brown’s prescription for self-improvement and self-celebration emerged as an extremely viable alternative.

By 1968 and with his pivotal role as civil rights advocate underway, Brown’s lyrics continued to evolve in an effort to better match the boldness of his sound. That year, Brown officially released ‘Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud,’ stridently speaking out on behalf of Black Americans and the need for self-empowerment. Of the track’s significance he stated, “Look a’here, some people say we got a lot of malice; Some say it's a lotta nerve; I say we won't quit moving; ‘Til we get what we deserve; We've been buked and we've been scorned; We've been treated bad, talked about; As just as sure as you're born; But just as sure as it take; Two eyes to make a pair, huh; Brother, we can't quit until we get our share; Say it loud.”

In a sense, the song diminished the militant implications of announcing Blackness in both public and contexts. Bold and clear in its message, the slogan became an anthem for many black activists, but more importantly offered to black America a morale boost during a particularly challenging historical moment. While the track was a nationwide hit and garnered some pop radio airplay, it is perhaps more crucial to highlight the psychological impact of the song. In 1975, an Ebony editorial piece entitled “The Unity of Blackness: the Secret of Success” summed up the enduring significance of the track in a most profound manner:

Today, the black man in America is beginning to learn the secret of success. He is at the point where he can stand on his own two feet and

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look at himself. In the privacy of his home or on public streets, he can look at himself and say, "I'm black. My people were black, my peoples' people were black. Some of my ancestors were slaves. Some of my ancestors were chiefs. Some of my ancestors were great, some were thieves. My people did what they had to do. I am not ashamed of my color. I am not ashamed of myself. Like James Brown, I can say, 'Say it loud. I'm Black and I'm proud.'" He has helped us reach the point where there is no more apologizing. "Boss, I'm colored but I can work as good as a white man," is out. The constant striving to measure oneself by white standards is out. The constant acceptance of "white is right" is out. Black people are finding freedom that they never had before - the freedom to be themselves.  

With the social and personal epiphany that black Americans experienced through Brown’s message, some white listeners did find themselves turned off. For instance, a handful of white radio stations across the country temporarily stopped playing Brown’s tunes, while on an international level such was not the case since his music achieved unprecedented popularity in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Despite some American radio stations’ initial refusal to play “Say it Loud,” the track could not be stopped from becoming a spectacular commercial success the following year. In 1969 alone, it reached number six on the R&B Albums Chart, number six on the Billboard Top 200 Chart, and number fifty-three on the Billboard Top Singles. In light of this success, it becomes easy to conclude that the militant implications of black pride had begun to fade, becoming more fashionable than political. Moreover, it is also prudent to note that


Brown’s social message resounded with greater emphasis in the context of Dr. King’s
death. Like the demand for acknowledgement and societal respect echoed in Dr. King’s
“I am a Man” mantra, Brown used his own slogan to encapsulate black thought and
corns that resonated particularly well with black listeners while maintaining more
than adequate commercial appeal across racial lines.41

Further contributing to the advancement of his career and message were a host of
musicians and purveyors. Brown’s legendary domination of all things band-related
certainly earned him the moniker of “hardest working man in show business,” though it
wasn’t a system that suited all colleagues. In 1996, New York Times journalist, Doon
Arbus, aptly described Brown’s ubiquitous power:

He is the whole show; he writes the music and the lyrics, he does the
arrangements, and he does the choreography. He designs all the costumes
and makes all the decisions. With some mystical, magnetic force, he
keeps the whole thing together, all the parts working as a unit. He's got
something, but they'll never tell what it is. Maybe they don't even know.
All they know is that each has to be the best in what he does. “The whole
show has got to be the greatest.”42

As the consummate bandleader, Brown maintained total control by rigidly disciplining
his cohorts. In 1966, Bobby Bennett, one of the Famous Flames, stated, “Yes sir. You
gotta learn to do everything for yourself. No one’s gonna do it for you. So you learn.
‘Cause there's a $20 fine for having wrinkles in your clothes. Or making a bad goof on
stage. Or getting’ in trouble. It's like the Army.”43 By 1969, the Flames folded in an

41 Fred Bronson and Adam White, The Billboard Book of Number One Rhythm and Blues Hits

42 Doon Arbus, “James Brown is Out of Sight,” in Nelson George and Alan Leeds eds., The James
Brown Reader: 50 Years of Writing about the Godfather of Soul (New York: Plume, 2008), 20.
effort to pursue other opportunities and, to a degree, to part ways with their somewhat tyrannical leader. At the same time, the elder statesman of the group, Bobby Byrd, chose to stay on as one of Brown’s backup vocalists. Brown and Byrd forged ahead and hired a new band that included funk founders Bootsy Collins on bass, his brother, Phelps “Catfish” Collins, on guitar, and famed trombonist, Fred Wesley. Brown also broke the traditional R&B band formula by adding a professional hand-drummer named Johnny Griggs. According to Wesley:

Griggs was a veteran of the New York Afro-Latin and jazz scenes who had played with Mongo Santamaria, Freddie Hubbard and many other Latin and jazz greats. He gave the band an unexpected lift without compromising sound - somehow, he made it sound not more Latin but more funky. This hand drumming combined with Catfish’s unique, twanging stroke and the relentless thump of Bootsy’s bass gave the audience a great simulation of the James Brown sound of the ‘60s, arriving at it from a different direction.

_A Funk is Born_

The new backing band was dubbed “The J.B.’s” and even as the group underwent several minor lineup changes, the act remained Brown's most familiar and successful team of musicians. With this new line-up, Brown had established a magical milieu that would soon emerge as a unique brand with distinct commercial appeal. The J.B.’s also facilitated Brown’s desire to discard the classic twelve-bar blues format featured in his

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45 Fred Wesley, _Hit Me, Fred: Recollections of a Sideman_ (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 133.

46 Wesley, _Hit Me, Fred_, 134.
earlier music and allowed him to rely solely on elongated, often improvised grooves that could inspire prolonged dancing. In this vein, the new Brown outfit made a tremendous debut with “Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine” in 1970. Unrestrained both musically and lyrically, the brash effort struck a chord with listeners. That same year, the single blazed the Billboard, reaching number 15 on the Hot 100 and the number two R&B Singles Chart. “Sex Machine,” though provocative in its expression of male sexual power, equally advanced a relatively straightforward message of personal perseverance and, surprisingly, a kind of simple sermon on Black Capitalism. The lyric, “Shake your moneymaker,” can be read as a confirmation of Brown’s black capitalist mantra, which emphasized success in the entertainment industry or by any other means that could generate profit. Brown’s swagger in this context can also be regarded as a tribute to black male sexuality, similar to the manner in which the Black Power Movement distinguished and celebrated male pride. Rather than serving as a source of shame, Brown's overt masculinity - announced by way of grunting and accentuated by intense pelvic movement - beckoned black men to stand up for their rights while embracing (and making strategic use of) their natural gifts and distinctive style.

As exemplified by “Sex Machine,” Brown’s music continued to make strategic use of repetitious, anthemic vocals that served a percussive purpose with rhythmic grunts matching rhythm-section patterns. These sonic innovations emerged in accordance with Brown’s unique and sustained commitment to the Civil Right’s Movement throughout

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the early 1970s, particularly when one considers his fervent support of Jesse Jackson's PUSH organization and casual affiliation with the Black Pride Movement. In this vein, Brown released a particularly socially conscious single in “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved” in 1971. The single reached number thirty-four on the Hot 100 Billboard charts, but its impact stretched far beyond commercial success. The track clocked in at just over seven minutes and featured what had officially become the signature James Brown vocal styling. With the song, Brown explicitly called upon listeners to get involved by saying, “You better become a part of the call, you gotta have patience or you won't be called, you gotta have patience or you don't have the call; do it right, so you won't have to go back and do it at night, do it one time, make it right, you got the world, you got to fight.” The song also includes the familiar lyrics, “Hit Me, Two Times, Come on, Do it” and “Get on up.” The song has been readily sampled by seminal Hip-Hop artists like Public Enemy, Leaders of The New School, the Beastie Boys, Heavy D, 2 Live Crew and other notable acts.

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52 Brown, “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved.”

In terms of its political significance, the track gained greater momentum and relevance among younger activists as a result of the Kent State and Jackson, Mississippi shootings that had taken place less than a year earlier. In addition, the 1969 murder of Illinois Black Panther Chapter leader, Fred Hampton, at the hands of the Chicago Police and the FBI’s covert anti-sedition division, COINTELPRO, further fueled the track’s dual appeal; it was timely and regarded as yet another artistic and creative reaction to unchecked violence carried out by authorities against key members of the Black Freedom Struggle.\footnote{Christopher R. Weingarten, \textit{It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back} (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 52.} Brown’s musical and stylistic approach to resisting oppression allowed listeners to embrace black America, social consciousness, and dance without necessarily identifying with militancy or violence.

Although Brown is generally recognized as the “Godfather of Soul,” it remains essential to emphasize that he was so much more than this moniker implies. In essence, he stood as the primary conduit between “race music” and postmodern black music. His transformation of soul – an idiom designed to appeal to the musical tastes of both white and black listeners, best exemplified by Motown’s unprecedented crossover success – established a clarified voice for black America by way of a new, mainstream genre designed to reflect the broader reality of black culture. In “getting funky” with extended grooves, song formats reminiscent of African musical styles, and a distinctive Afrocentric aesthetic, Brown satisfied black America’s desire to be better understood, all the while satisfying a growing national desire to know something more intimate about black American life. Beyond the upstanding model of blackness that Dr. King had been trying
to promote, Brown saw no need to appear extraordinarily straight-laced and, instead, sought proudly to portray his culture simply as it was and with a greater respect for its historic origins. While soul had masterfully illustrated the sound of biracial collaboration, especially at Stax Records in Memphis, Brown advanced it into a platform for demonstrating the introspection and exclusivity of black culture, in essence picking up where jazz had left off and where soul had failed. In the sharp word of funk scholar Tony Bolden, “Brown's music of this period combined no-nonsense, straight-talking delivery with a unique form of rhythmic contrast and tension that exuded confidence, strength, and pride for participants. Brown was at the forefront of a race conscious collective emerging, such that was taking place in black America at the time.”

Brown’s vision for black America was not limited to the need for authentic self-expression and self-celebration, in a Duboisian sense. Entertainment that channeled the stuff of blackness also represented the black community’s greatest resource and, as far as Brown and other black capitalists were concerned, the key to economic, political, and social redemption. According to music and social historian Craig Werner:

James Brown dealt with the money problem by emphasizing the need for Black economic self-determination. An ad Brown placed in the New York City newspapers just before the 1969 appearance at Madison Square Garden proclaimed: "James Brown is totally committed to Black power, the kind that is achieved not through the muzzle of a rifle but through education and economic leverage." Brown's embrace of "Black capitalism' grew out of his experience on the "chitlin circuit": the Black theaters and clubs famed for presenting performers with the toughest audiences imaginable. Even after he'd performed at the inaugural ball for Richard Nixon, another advocate for Black capitalism, Brown steadfastly

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maintained, "I'd rather play for my folks at the Apollo than play the White House." But he definitely cashed Nixon's check.\textsuperscript{56}

In the wake of King’s demise, and blossoming alongside the Black Power Movement, Brown had managed to propose his working plan for national Black renewal, but also transformed the technical foundation for all black music to come. Funk scholar Rickey Vincent notes, “Brown's new approach to music making was rhythm based. Unlike music derived from the Blues, it was not built around a melody or even an implied melody. This music came from the drums, bass and guitars and for the first time in America, this music spoke directly to Africa.”\textsuperscript{57} As his sound solidified throughout the 1970s, black listeners developed unprecedented allegiance to James Brown and his musical colleagues while a resurgence of interest in African folkways further accentuated Brown’s image. Although many white contemporaries in the music industry were reluctant to advance similar sentiments, Brown nonetheless maintained some appeal among white listeners who had embraced the New Left, psychedelic counter-culture, or simply found themselves disillusioned with the Vietnam War and the Nixon administration.\textsuperscript{58}

In 1971, against the backdrop of a country still at odds with itself over civil rights and the Vietnam War, Brown began working with Polydor Records as a de facto result of


\textsuperscript{57} Bolden, \textit{The Funk Era and Beyond}, 56.

their purchase of his original label, King Records.\textsuperscript{59} Brown's Polydor years were destined to be both successful and contentious, largely because he would not be able to enjoy the same creative control granted by King Management. Nevertheless, Polydor tracks such as “The Big Payback”, “Papa Don’t Take No Mess”, “Stoned to the Bone”, “Funky President (People It's Bad)”, and “Get Up Offa That Thing” all received commercial acclaim and kept Brown relevant in a competitive and quickly growing pool of funkier acts. At the heart of what made these tracks distinctive was Brown’s continued use of longer song structures while addressing social issues in a much more explicit manner than he had in the past. For instance in “Papa Don’t Take No Mess,” Brown connects the obligations of manhood and fatherhood to the challenge of uplifting the entire community. The lyrics spell this out in a most provocative, yet critical fashion: “Papa is the man; Who will take a stand; Papa don't take no mess; Papa is the man who can understand; How a man has to do; Whatever he can; Hit me.”\textsuperscript{60} “The Big Payback” similarly emerged as a powerful social statement demanding Black America’s long overdue recognition and compensation:

\begin{quote}

“Sold me out, for chump change (yes you did!!) Told me that they had it all arranged; You handed me down, and that’s a fact; Now you're pumped, You gotta get ready For the big payback!! (The big payback!!) That’s where I am, the big payback (the big payback!!); I can do wheelin', I can do dealin' (yes you can!!) But I don't do no damn squealin'; I can dig rappin', I'm ready!! I can dig scrappin’: But I can't dig that backstabin' (Oh No!!); The brother get ready!! That’s a fact!! Get ready you Mother, for the big payback (The big Payback!!); Let me hit ‘em!! Hey Hey!! WOOOOOOOOOOOOO! Took my money, you got my honey; Don't want
\end{quote}

me to see what you doing to me; I got to get back I gotta deal with you!!
Hey let me tell ya!! Get down with my woman, that ain't right! You
hollarin' and cussin', you wanna fight!! Don't do me no darn favor; I don't
know karate, but I know KA-RAZY!!!! (yes we do!!).\textsuperscript{61}

These works clearly stood in stark contrast to the generally apolitical songs that Brown
offered up prior to 1968."

\textit{James Brown Beyond the Music}

With “The Big Payback,” Brown also managed to break into the film industry, as
doing so in the early seventies was an essential part of what solidified his superstardom.
Moreover, the black film format represented an important medium in which musicians
could explore and interpret black American life in both sound and image. Although in
hindsight, the Blaxploitation genre has received much criticism for reinforcing negative
stereotypes about black America, Brown and other purveyors saw a profound financial
opportunity, a viable Hollywood inroad, and a chance to express oneself without fear of
censorship. Following the successful soundtracks of Isaac Hayes’ \textit{Shaft} (1971) and
Curtis Mayfield’s \textit{Superfly} (1972), Brown produced his own blaxploitation score for
\textit{Black Caesar} in 1973. \textit{Black Caesar}’s message was in step with Brown’s post-
assassination crusade to uplift Black America, but with certain twists. The films
protagonist, Tommy Gibbs, embodied the tragic plight of young Black men with no real
opportunities for social mobility. With limited vision beyond the stark possibilities for
temporary, extralegal successes offered in the ghetto, Gibbs found that his only option
was to become a successful criminal. As a youngster who was beaten and had his leg
broken by members of the New York Police Department, he maintained a deep-seated

disdain for authority and the racist society that left him scarred and marginalized.⁶² Churning with ambition and resentment, Gibbs sees the conquest of Harlem’s illicit underworld as a viable path toward success and redemption. While Brown’s antidote to this broader social conundrum entailed legitimate success in the entertainment industry, Gibbs pursued success through crime with equal determination. *Black Caesar* both sexualizes and glamorizes Gibbs’ criminal disposition, but ultimately concludes as a cautionary tale indicating how a life of crime, though at times flashy and appealing, can only lead to an untimely death.

Although the *Black Caesar* soundtrack failed to generate a level of interest comparable to that of *Shaft* or *Superfly*, *Black Caesar*’s most successful single, “Down and Out In New York City,” reached number 50 on the Billboard Hot 100 list in March of 1973.⁶³ The track gracefully adorns the coming-of-age portion of Gibbs’ story, while the funkier “Make It Good To Yourself” and “Mama Feelgood,” provide Gibbs’ more eventful and dangerous years with appropriately hip and lurid accompaniment. Other standout moments on the album include the ominous “Boss,” the sensual, “Make It Good To Yourself,” and the melodramatic “Mama’s Dead,” which exemplify Brown’s insistence on allowing his players to showcase their talents throughout extended sequences.⁶⁴ Brown also wrote the soundtrack for *Slaughter’s Big Rip Off* the same year

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that *Black Caesar* debuted. Though *Slaughter’s* was even less popular than *Black Caesar*, its score is regarded as one of the funkiest and most aggressive albums that James Brown ever recorded.\(^{65}\) The album’s most successful track was entitled “People Get Up” and, true to Brown’s black capitalist mantra, urged listeners to “Raise up, get yourself together, get some money and drive that funky soul.”\(^{66}\) The song reached number 36 on the R&B Charts in 1973.\(^{67}\) Although Brown made a temporary mark on the film industry with these two soundtracks, he would not revisit the cinematic realm until 1986, when he made a brief appearance as himself in the opening fight scene of *Rocky IV.*\(^{68}\)

In 1974, Brown’s continued efforts to bring Afrocentric sensibilities to the fore of the entertainment industry earned the attention of boxing promoter Don King, who extended Brown an invitation to participate in a concert event held in conjunction with the “Rumble in the Jungle.” At this massive venue in Zaire, Brown headlined a three-day concert and dance festival that preceded the much-anticipated fight between Muhammad Ali and then heavyweight champion George Foreman. Ali himself had developed an appreciation for Brown while Brown also expressed admiration for the controversial


fighter. Upon arrival, Brown proceeded to tour various parts of Africa and later performed in Zaire with other African-American players, Latin musicians, and a host of visiting music, sports, and literary figures. As a nod to the growing desire for many black Americans to reconnect with African heritage, the Spinners, BB. King, and Bill Withers also performed on the same stage as notable Africans like South African singer Miriam Makeba and the top Zairean groups such as Tabu Ley Rochereau. It is likewise worth noting that Brown’s historic set elicited nearly as much attention as Ali’s monumental victory. Brown’s performance was also reminiscent of the powerful and profound show he put on at the Dr. King memorial concert in Boston; even his set list was similar, including his standards from the 60s and newer hits like “Sex Machine,” “The Big Payback,” and “The Boss.” In comparing the Zaire performance with the 1968 Boston event, one can note that Brown similarly extended song lengths in an effort to promote dancing, but in Zaire he further initiated intense movement both in the crowd and on stage with an extraordinary team of professional dancers. This elevated the intensity with which his act utilized dance. In this regard, six years following Brown’s brilliant maneuver to redirect the rage of black Boston, a dance of sorrow became one of triumph and jubilation. Once he had completed his performance, Brown chose to depart before the fight even took place as he had multiple international concert obligations to fulfill. In


doing so, Brown himself evaded a dispute with dictator Mobutu Sese Seko to whom his colleagues remained captive as Seko refused to provide a $10 million dollar payout.\(^{72}\)
The fighters, on the other hand, were compensated.

*Funk and Business*

Although he had become an internationally renowned entertainment icon in the wake of Zaire, Brown remained somewhat frustrated with the way Polydor tampered with his career and, specifically, creative process; oftentimes, Polydor took liberties editing Brown’s signature sound without his direct permission.\(^{73}\) “Funky President” has been identified as his most outspoken Polydor recording and, as such, stood out during the Polydor era as a track that both musically and politically retained the spirit of what Brown had been attempting to establish throughout much of the 1960s and into the 1970s. The track offers a scathing critique of American government, its perceived decline during the Vietnam Era, and black America’s particularly perilous position therein: “Stock market goin’ up, jobs are goin’ down; And ain't no funkng jobs to be found; Taxes keep goin’ up, I changed from a glass; Now I drink from a paper cup, getting’ bad; People, people, we got to get over; Before we go under.”\(^{74}\) In lieu of “Funky President” and its strident critical message, Brown had grown weary of Polydor’s reluctant leadership. Of their organization he said:

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\(^{73}\) Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure*, 103.

In the early years with them I was hitting the singles charts in spite of the company. The songs were hits because I forced them through the company and made them hits myself. I was supposed to have creative control, but they started remixing my records. I mixed them, but when they came out they didn’t sound like what I’d mixed. The company didn’t want the funk in there too heavy. They’d take the feeling out of the record. They didn’t want James Brown to be raw. Eventually they destroyed my sound.\textsuperscript{75}

It can be argued that Polydor’s stifling of Brown’s creative fervor may have undermined his prominence within the avant-garde funk genre as it exploded throughout the 1970s. Also according to Brown, Polydor seemed to insist on promoting him as a kind of a “disco artist” and not wholly in favor of maintaining, let alone enhancing, the funk/soul activist that he had become.\textsuperscript{76} The company openly complained about Brown’s excesses, specifically criticizing the “unreasonable” number of people he had hired to assist with his operations. Brown complained that Polydor was simply a racist organization saying, “Godammit, I’m tired. It’s been a racist thing ever since I have been there.”\textsuperscript{77} Problems with Polydor also extended beyond the creative process and cultural differences. In 1976, the company stated that Brown owed them “$1,514,154 in unrecouped loan balances,” such that the company had paid to James Brown Productions.\textsuperscript{78} This amount remained under dispute and eventually locked in litigation until 1980. Throughout those years, Polydor retained portions of Brown’s royalties until his contract expired in 1981.

\textsuperscript{75} Bruce Tucker, \textit{The Godfather of Soul}, 239, 240.

\textsuperscript{76} Steven Hochman, \textit{Popular Musicians, Volume 1} (Ipswich: Salem Press, 1999), 141.

\textsuperscript{77} G. Brown, \textit{The Life of James Brown}, 151.

\textsuperscript{78} G. Brown, 150.
and the majority of the funds had been returned. Brown eventually proclaimed to the press that the white-owned label’s mistreatment was demonstrative of continued racism in the entertainment industry.

Mainstream press, while at times critical of Brown’s ways, generally offered positive reactions to his endeavors. One particularly telling piece was Albert Goldman’s, “Does He Teach Us the Meaning of ‘Black Is Beautiful’?” which was published on June 9th, 1968 for The New York Times. In the article Goldman proclaimed, “Talk about your Black Power. Take a look at James Brown, Mister. That’s right, James Brown, America’s Number One Soul Brother. To whites, James is still an offbeat grunt, a scream at the end of the dial. To blacks, he’s boss - the one man in America who can stop a race riot in its tracks and send the people home to watch television. Twice he worked that miracle in the terrible days following the murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”

Throughout the 1970s, several pieces similarly extolled the virtues of what Brown was trying to accomplish in music and politics. Phillip Norman’s “Mister Messiah,” published in 1971 for the Sunday Times Magazine (London), proclaimed Brown’s presence as one of the greatest factors maintaining any semblance of racial harmony in the United States. In this vein he stated, “James Brown will die on the stage one night, on the moving staircase of his own feet in front of a thirty-piece band; and then who knows what may be


What’s clear is that much of America and the world either loved or simply could not ignore what James Brown had to offer. While Brown maintained a positive public image as a self-styled activist, he nevertheless found himself owing the Internal Revenue Service $4.5 million in unpaid taxes, which he later paid by selling his jet and radio stations. Nevertheless, he was ever convinced that black empowerment wasn’t to be achieved by way of militancy or welfare, but through financial success and unmitigated pride in being black. Of his business acumen he said:

I control James Brown Enterprises, which has 137 Blacks on the payroll. My payroll for the 20 persons on the road with me alone amounts to $14,000 every week. I control five radio stations, which give Black people the kind of voice that they would never hear on a white radio station. The President of all my enterprises is a Black Man, Charles Bobbitt, who started out as my valet. My Black-run and Black-controlled enterprises were not built on funds, grants and handouts. I’m 25 percent entertainer and 75 percent businessman. That’s why I can give benefits to help worthy Black causes and that’s why there are Black students in colleges.

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and vocational schools on scholarships given by James Brown Enterprises.  

Conclusion

In the context of Brown’s career it is also clear that what made him distinct from a host of notable contemporaries was his creativity and political zeal. His powerful sense of black pride and activism was heightened by the assassination of Dr. King, which further augmented the extent to which Brown’s music featured percussion, extended groove segments, and West African-style polyrhythm, as opposed to country or even blues rhythms, melodies and structures. Throughout his career, Brown's agitated, masculine vocal styling, which was frequently punctuated with screams, grunts and expressions of black pride, channeled the “ecstatic ambiance of the Black Church” in a secular context. Nowhere in this sound could one detect a need to appeal to white sensibilities; this was a music devoted to blackness in its most contemporary sense. Beyond its obvious departure from traditional song structures, Brown’s fresh reinvention of R&B actually celebrated rhythm rather than chord changes and melodies.

With rhythm emphasized over harmony, one can hardly deny the salient link between Brown’s sound and the explosion of funk, disco, and hip hop’s popularity, not to

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mention a profound influence on numerous White artists such as The Righteous Brothers, Tom Jones, Joe Cocker, David Bowie and even Elvis in his later years. Allowing his drummer to bring out the downbeat dramatically challenged conventional band dynamics wherein drummers were seldom the featured element of a particular song. Brown also introduced to mass audiences the idea of the “black band” as a formidable and centralized element of the show. This format stood in stark contrast to Motown acts such as the Temptations, who often performed with their backing band situated behind a curtain.

With the reshaping of R&B’s format, Brown literally and figuratively set the stage for a new generation of black performance. As a testament to his influence and undeniable importance, Brown was inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame and became among the earliest inductees to the Cleveland Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1983.

Spurred along by the death of Dr. King, Brown’s focused crusade to celebrate and promote black culture gave rise to a veritable funk revolution and a rush of uncensored expressions of Black culture in mainstream American life. In essence, Brown’s funky elixir of jazz, R&B, gospel, and rock began to take shape in the streets of Watts, Chicago, Detroit, and New York. Of his adaptation of soul, Brown proclaimed in his 2005 memoir, *I Feel Good*:

> It was like opening the floodgates to a rhythm-based extension of soul, a physically performed, roots-derived configuration of music that comes straight from the heart. In that sense, soul became the perfect marching music for the civil rights era, a way to choreograph the burgeoning pride that could be found everywhere. It was, to me, like the jump beat that we

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always saw in films from Africa, when the Blacks were organizing against apartheid. We'd always see them jumping in place, with the sound of the drum beneath them, giving them weight, lending them focus, providing them unity. What was missing for me and my people was the rhythm of our own revolution—a soundtrack strong enough to bring us to the outside rather than keep us on the inside.  

Along with the inspiration generated by the assassination, his call to innovate motivated Motown, Stax and every other notable Black contemporary hit-making agent to find new modes of expression, grounded in pressing social circumstances. In this work, Brown’s innovation dovetails with the cataclysmic death of Dr. King, ultimately serving as the precise means by which a new, more complicated form of black consciousness made its way into the minds and hearts of fans, musicians, black capitalists, and frustrated activists who categorically recognized the need to embrace a defiantly black sound for uncertain times. Overall, Brown challenged popular culture to include permanently a better-defined space for black Americans, wherein all of non-white America potentially could express and explore racial self-awareness with a newly acquired sense of freedom and unwavering individuality.

CHAPTER TWO

WE WANT THE FUNK:

THE DEATH OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND THE

TRANSFORMATION OF THE MOTOWN SOUND

I heard the news. Dr. King had been assassinated in Memphis. The very man who had fought with the weapon of nonviolence, violently shot down. He who had refused to hate when all around him were hating, now ironically snuffed out by hate. A man I so loved and admired. A man who was my friend. He was thirty-nine years old, a year older than me. I couldn’t contain my anger. I wanted to fight. But who? I knew I couldn’t make it a personal fight I had to be a part of some kind of organized response.

— Berry Gordy, To Be Loved, 1995

I am not only Stevie Wonder the artist, but my purpose is to communicate messages that improve the life of all of us. Public holidays in the United States should be, and normally are, reserved for celebrating great traditions in the nation’s history and our highest ideals and leaders who have shaped our common destiny. Dr. King lived and died for this nation’s ideals of justice, honor, dignity, and freedom.

— Stevie Wonder, speech at rally for MLK Holiday, 1981

Detroit is no stranger to racial upheaval. As droves of black Americans arrived in search of industrial employment during World War II, competition for work and housing exacerbated pre-existing racial tensions. As a result, on June 20th, 1943, a race riot between blacks and whites began on Belle Isle and continued for three days. Thirty-four people died, four-hundred and thirty-three were wounded, and property damages totaled
around $2 million.\(^1\) By the 1960s, tensions hardly subsided as segregation became more pronounced and quality housing for black residents grew increasingly scarce. At the same time, black Detroiters paid considerably higher rents than their white counterparts; only 39 percent of African Americans owned their own homes while 64 percent of whites were homeowners.\(^2\) With these matters unresolved, the city’s racial tensions erupted once again on July 23\(^{rd}\), 1967, when Detroit police raided a popular, underground nightclub and concert venue located in the city’s largest black enclave.\(^3\) Upon breaking into the private establishment without a legal warrant, the police proceeded to arrest and vigorously handle some 85 club patrons and staff. In response to what onlookers deemed a flagrant display of police brutality, the sizeable crowd threw bottles, beer cans and rocks. By 8:00 a.m., the mob grew to three thousand strong and raged until finally suppressed by a combined force of seventeen thousand law enforcement agents, including Detroit Police, National Guardsmen and federal troops. After five days of violent confrontation, 43 people were dead, 467 were injured, 7,231 individuals were arrested, 2,509 buildings were damaged, and over $36 million in insured property perished.\(^4\) In hindsight, most analysts conclude that Detroit’s now legendary eruption of civic disorder was clearly linked to frustrations surrounding broader issues of discrimination and deindustrialization, which rendered much of Detroit’s black community desperately

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impoverished. In stark contrast and adding to a sense of isolation, a staggering number of white residents preserved their assets and, with them, moved away from the city.⁵

For the thousands of black Detroiter who participated in the 1967 riot, many had even grown frustrated with Dr. King’s nonviolent doctrine and the extent to which it had failed to resolve the predicament. As a new generation of black youth took to the streets in protest, the Martha and the Vandellas classic “Dancing in the Street” served as a kind of anthemic “call to arms.”⁶ Although the backlash against institutional bigotry sometimes was accompanied by the classic sounds of Motown, label steward Berry Gordy found that an abrupt departure from Dr. King’s nonviolent doctrine was, on the contrary, ill advised. On Motown’s political stance around the time of the 1967 riot, Gordy stated, “I saw Motown much like the world Dr. King was fighting for – with people of different races and religions, working together harmoniously for a common goal. While I was never too thrilled about that turn-the-other-cheek business, Dr. King showed me the wisdom of nonviolence.”⁷

Although Gordy’s declaration suggests some degree of proactive political commitment to Dr. King’s cause, his efforts to offer a substantial contribution to black community development fell somewhat short. As black middle-class Detroiter observed their economic health and political influence declining alongside the automobile industry, the Motown Record Company, like its automobile counterparts, started down the path

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⁶ Craig Werner, A Change is Gonna Come (New York, Plume Press, 1999), 27.

⁷ Berry Gordy, Jr., To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 249.
toward decentralization. As jobs steadily left Detroit, so too would Gordy. In doing so, he first moved his profitable hit-making operation approximately three miles from its original location to the larger Donovan Building in downtown Detroit. For Gordy, the upgrade to a larger facility represented a preliminary step toward globalizing the operation and moving Hitsville’s home base to Los Angeles. He further foreshadowed his desire to relocate by purchasing a home in Los Angeles in 1967. Overall, it was more or less clear that Gordy was determined to transform his company into a larger, international media empire at any cost. This was to be accomplished not by harnessing the power and resources of black Detroit, but by breaking into television production and the film industry. Little did Gordy know that the key to a successful future was not relocation and expansion; rather, it would be found in allowing his label’s sound to become funky and to channel the quickly changing desires of black America experienced by black America after the assassination of Dr. King.

_Berry Gordy, “Classic Motown,” and Dr. King_

Just as Dr. King represented a beacon of optimism to countless black Americans, Berry Gordy’s commercial empire was, for a time, an inspiring example of black success in both economic and cultural terms. Though he seldom spoke publicly about the issue of activism as it pertained to music, Gordy’s rise to prominence in the 1960’s nevertheless linked him to the Black Freedom Movement. Dr. King visited Motown in 1963 and Gordy subsequently released the “I Have a Dream” speech, along with a few other civil-

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9 Smith, _Dancing In the Streets_, 215.
rights related albums throughout the decade.\textsuperscript{10} During the first half of the decade before black militancy called nonviolence into question, many regarded Motown as “the entertainment-business equivalent of the NAACP or the SCLC.”\textsuperscript{11} While few can dispute Gordy’s status as a preeminent black crossover music promoter prior to Dr. King’s death, a critical examination of Motown reveals a fundamental stylistic transformation that reflected growing social awareness from 1968 until the organization folded in 1988. In essence, the signature Motown formula had to give way to a funkier sound that tactfully addressed both the assassination and broader civil rights issues. Only by following the lead of his star acts did Gordy gradually embrace post-assassination trends, such that were championed by other musicians and entertainers who adjusted rapidly to the changing spirit of the times. Even as the label continued to enjoy commercial success after 1968 because its deep reservoir of talent, it inevitably had to deemphasize crossover appeal and become more closely aligned with the newest phase of popular black identity.

By April of 1968, Detroit remained a hotbed of racial tensions. Already seething after the summer riot of 1967, many distraught black Detroitsers took to the streets in protest with the news of Dr. King’s murder. Responding swiftly, Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh requested the deployment of three thousand Michigan National Guardsmen in an attempt to prevent further injury and property damage. Detroit Police were also a major part of Cavanaugh’s concentrated strategy for preventing further disorder; in

\textsuperscript{10} Nelson George, \textit{Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 54.

\textsuperscript{11} George, \textit{Where did our Love Go?}, 55.
carrying out their directives, they shot several rioters and killed one.\textsuperscript{12} The Michigan National Guard maintained a strong presence throughout the entire state of Michigan, monitoring the black communities of Flint, Kalamazoo, and Grand Rapids.\textsuperscript{13} Although Detroit’s physical damage in April of 1968 did not equal that of the 1967 riots, the Michigan National Guard and local police continued to patrol areas deemed prime for further unrest, most of which were occupied by black residents. As Detroit increasingly resembled a war zone in the wake of Dr. King’s death, the practicality of Motown’s formula for self-improvement through commercial success almost seemed irrelevant. For frustrated activists, it became increasingly clear the Gordy’s personal success was more of an aberration than inspiration.

Meanwhile, Gordy was genuinely affected by Dr. King’s death. In describing how he felt about the tragedy, Gordy stated, “I heard the news. Dr. King had been assassinated in Memphis. A man I so loved and admired. A man who was my friend. He was thirty-nine years old, a year older than me. I couldn’t contain my anger. I wanted to fight. But who? I knew I couldn’t make it a personal fight – I had to be a part of some kind of organized response.”\textsuperscript{14} While Gordy clearly felt the need to respond in some way, he would not immediately flood airwaves with more strident expressions of black pride and bold protest music, as was the case with James Brown and Stax Records. Nevertheless, Gordy displayed his solidarity with an invigorated Black Freedom

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Clay Risen, \textit{A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination} (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2009), 141.}
\footnote{Risen, \textit{A Nation on Fire}, 166.}
\footnote{Gordy, \textit{To Be Loved}, 250.}
\end{footnotes}
Movement by publicly grieving at the funeral in Atlanta. He made the somber journey with two of his top advisors and friends, Ewart Abner and Junius Griffin. Abner was a successful recording manager, black music aficionado, and director of Motown’s International Talent Management Incorporated (ITMI), which was responsible for booking stage and television acts. Griffin was an ex-journalist who also had worked as an assistant to Dr. King before Gordy hired him as Motown’s director of publicity; he was said to have maintained his support for Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement even after taking up a new career alongside Gordy. Motown artists, Stevie Wonder, the Supremes, Gladys Knight and the Pips, and the Temptations likewise joined Gordy at service. In Atlanta, the Motown entourage took its place alongside the likes of Robert Kennedy, Michigan Governor George Romney, Jackie Kennedy, Rabbi Abraham Herschel, Thurgood Marshall, Vice President Hubert Humphrey and many other noteworthy figures.

Beyond attending Dr. King’s funeral, Gordy fielded a request from the newly-widowed Coretta Scott King and Hollywood star, Harry Belafonte. The two asked Gordy to organize a benefit concert that would feature Motown stars performing and launching the Poor Peoples’ March on Washington. Gordy volunteered Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight and the Pips, the Supremes, the Temptations, and an eleven-piece Motown band

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17 Posner, 178.

18 Rebecca Burns, *Burial for a King: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Funeral and the Week that Transformed Atlanta And Rocked the Nation* (New York: Scribner Press, 2011), 3.
to perform at the Atlanta Civic Center.\textsuperscript{19} At the conclusion of the concert, Gordy received from Coretta Scott King and Ralph Abernathy a plaque along with bound volumes of Dr. King’s words as an official commemoration of Motown’s contribution. The following day, at the opening of the march in Washington D.C, Gordy and Motown performers joined Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Sammy Davis Jr. and Nancy Wilson to commence the actual Poor People’s demonstration at the Mall in Washington D.C.\textsuperscript{20}

After attending the funeral service, orchestrating the benefit concert, and potentially gaining inspiration from his peers during the Poor People’s March on Washington, Gordy remained keenly focused on preserving Motown’s commercial success. The dominant view advanced by historian Suzanne Smith is that from this point forward, “Motown’s involvement in the Poor Peoples’ Campaign stood out as the company’s most overtly political gesture since its recording of King’s speech at Detroit’s Great March to Freedom 1963.”\textsuperscript{21} It bears mentioning that the next overt statement of Motown’s allegiances came in the form of its \textit{Black Forum}, which released, among other things, a spoken word album of the Stokely Carmichael speech entitled \textit{Free Huey!} and a recording of Dr. King’s 1967 speech against the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{22}

Smith maintains that despite the aforementioned political gestures, Motown more or less maintained a narrow focus on commercial success, as opposed to becoming a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Smith, \textit{Dancing in the Street}, 217.
\item Smith, 216. See also “Mrs. King Cites Gordy in Atlanta Spectacular,” \textit{Michigan Chronicle}, May 18, 1968.
\item Ibid, 230.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
fledged contributor the Black Freedom Movement. What Smith did not fully factor into this observation is how the dramatic, funky transformation of the Motown sound helped to promulgate on a larger, mainstream level much of what the Black Freedom Movement attempted to communicate to the world. Following the assassination, a funkier Motown sound quite clearly emerged and, to a considerable degree, helped make declarations of black pride and consciousness more acceptable and familiar to mainstream audiences. However in terms of the label’s original, trademark sound morphing into something aptly described as “psychedelic soul,” Gordy himself was not quite the catalyst that enabled Motown to evolve; rather, Motown’s unique embrace of Black Freedom Movement sensibilities was crafted and subsequently propelled by the talent beneath Gordy. In other words, Motown’s artists – not Gordy – reinvented the Motown sound with respect to eternal, post-assassination inspiration.

What Gordy gave listeners in the form of “classic Motown” was rich, sweet, melodic, and universally appealing. Most of Motown’s successful, pre-1968 catalog relied on traditional verse-chorus-verse song structures that utilized the familiar 1,4,5 blues progression along the way. The label’s venerated house band, the Funk Brothers, provided melodic and rhythmic flourishes to accentuate an already tremendous range of vocal accompaniment. This “pre-assassination sound” certainly suggested blackness in subtle ways and, in order to become a historically unprecedented crossover success, never seemed to alienate white listeners. This phenomenon was due in no small way to the clean, polished image exhibited by Motown’s unprecedented talent. It was, to be sure, a cadre of individuals that represented a bonafied model of assimilated black identity, more
or less fitting into a quickly expanding definition of quintessential American culture. The classic Motown image and sound, however, gradually failed to remain in step with a rapidly evolving black consciousness during the second half of the 1960s. Once Dr. King was shot, Motown’s time-honored formula for commercial success emerged as more of what white listeners wanted and much less of what black Americans could embrace. As such, the label, with or without Gordy’s express permission, had to adopt a greater sympathy and respect for the black Americans and would do so by embracing funk cultural cues.

_Toward a Funky Motown_

In describing the broader social context surrounding the inevitable paradigm shift in Motown’s sound, journalist and historian, Eric Dyson, aptly describes the driving forces that would ultimately render classic Motown out of touch with black America:

> The rise of new black political consciousness, urban rebellion, the war in Vietnam, the momentum of protest music and the relentless appropriation of black music by white artists, the evolution of student activism, and the resurgence of progressive politics began to shape the music of some of black America’s bravest artists. Many black jazz artists had already been politicized in the fifties and sixties, and the recordings of Sun Ra, John Coltrane, and members of the Association of Creative Musicians (AACM) showed how the line between music and social conscience could be artfully blurred.\(^{23}\)

With the inevitable infiltration of politics into pop music, Gordy, at the very least, had to consider whether his enormously successful acts would have to change in light of post-assassination sociopolitical circumstances. These stars included Martha and the Vandellas, Smokey Robinson, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Jr. Walker and the All

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Stars, Marvin Gaye and a young Stevie Wonder, all of whom Gordy labeled “The Corporation.” During the months following the assassination and right up to the end of 1968, Motown’s unmistakable talent showed no signs of slowing down. The label scored ten top-ten singles, suggesting perhaps to Gordy that there was no need to use his music as a political bullhorn as James Brown had. Such a view is difficult to dispute with hits such as “Love Child” by Diana Ross and the Supremes, along with Marvin Gaye’s “I Heard It through the Grapevine,” which remained for all intents and purposes politically innocuous, yet indisputably successful.  

By December of 1968, Gordy seemed intent on staying the course, caring less about the political climate of the day and, instead, focusing on the move to Los Angeles, where he presumably would begin a new phase of success for Motown.

Despite the aforementioned indications of long-term stability and the classic Motown sound’s ostensible immunity from post-assassination sentiment, the label’s trademark sound nonetheless would undergo revision as its domination of the charts would gradual diminish. Prior to King’s death, soul and the particular version that Motown had created did arguably convey a general sense of unity across black and white America. At the same time, and while few failed to acknowledge soul’s association with black musicians, the genre very rarely emerged as synonymous with the Black Freedom


Struggle. However after the murder of Dr. King in April of 1968, the Motown sound was challenged to change and “get funky” with the times, thereby joining the growing number of soul and R&B musicians who chose to change their sound and image and explicitly announce black pride.²⁷ As James Brown’s black and proud persona resounded over rhythm-based, riff-like dance tunes that deviated from traditional pop music, he also began to undermine Motown’s “crossover” influence in the sales department. Sly and the Family Stone, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, and Herbie Hancock further contributed to growing appeal of exploratory, psychedelic, and groove-based song writing. In other words, in the late 1960s through the 1970s, during the height of the black pride movement, many younger black listeners thought that Motown “sounded too white and not authentically black enough.”²⁸

With this intense political climate and the growing appeal of funkier music, general demand for the traditional Motown sound continued to fade. As a result, the label’s artists began to reconsider the political and stylistic trajectory of their creative work. In general terms of how funk began to take shape in the wake of Dr. King’s death, it is worth noting that the only Motown acts that thrived in the seventies were the artists who had successfully reinvented their music and image in accordance with post-assassination trends. To be precise, label all-stars who found success after 1968 were Diana Ross, the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye. Each of these artists succeeded beyond Motown’s golden era because they embraced and contributed to the


funky, psychedelic spirit of the post-assassination era instead of clinging to dated formulas. In addition to this cadre of talent, the Parliament-Funkadelic phenomenon can be positioned alongside the evolution of the Motown Corporation since George Clinton’s early career began under Gordy’s leadership. At the same time, the band’s major successes occurred far beyond Gordy’s reach and influence. Lastly, it is vital to note that Motown’s funky metamorphosis was in no small way facilitated by the technical genius and political awareness of producer and engineer Norman Whitfield. By way of mastering new studio techniques and channeling the changing sound of politically-charged popular music, Whitfield helped to transform the Motown sound into something much more relevant than anything Gordy could have envisioned.

*The Supremes and Diana Ross*

If anything, the Supremes demonstrated how failing to fully adapt to the changing times led to declining fame. Conversely, Diana Ross’ storied career illustrates how important it was to reinvent oneself after Dr. King’s demise. The Supreme’s commercial success from 1959 to 1965 undoubtedly had much to do with Gordy’s ability to promote a rags-to-riches, wholesome American icon whose sound could be considered by mass audiences as unobjectionable race music. By 1965, Diana Ross and the Supremes indeed had emerged as household names, given their record sales and sold-out performances. Statistically speaking, their popularity was competitive with that of the Beatles. Their target demographic, by Gordy’s design, had become young white women who adored the
singing cadre as “BLAP’s” (black American princesses). In promoting the group, Gordy ensured that their persona was unequivocally “pure” and in step with what he believed were the dominant, white suburban values of the day. While this carefully crafted public-relations campaign remained trendy among white listeners, much of black America related to a lesser degree as civil rights turmoil began to erupt in dramatic fashion. In March of 1965, “bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama appalled onlookers as state troopers fired upon nonviolent marchers. The following day, civil rights workers Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb were murdered in cold blood. In August, the infamous Watt’s riots left America further unsettled by the notion that harmony between the races was a much more distant dream than the palpable reality acted out by Motown’s well-behaved stars. In a sense, the Supremes’ sound represented the essence of cross-over success; however in Gordy’s view, if it ever alienated consumers by being “too black,” it would, in fact, violate “basic business principles.”

For Gordy and the Supremes, adhering to a white suburban ideal more or less succeeded from 1965 to 1968. Throughout these years, Gordy expected the group to issue chart-topping hits on a consistent basis. Facing such stringent expectations, several Supremes singles reached number one and much of their music remained competitive on all of the charts. “You Keep Me Hangin’ On” was the group’s standout achievement; it reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 Pop Singles Chart from November 13,

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31 Ribowsky, 330.
1966 until November 27, 1966.\textsuperscript{32} However as the Supremes’ career progressed, so too did Gordy’s obsession with Diana Ross. As his feelings intensified, Gordy’s attention to the group as a whole fell to the wayside. Recognizing and resenting his favoritism, the other Supremes made their collective dissatisfaction known. In particular, Florence Ballard, who regarded herself as the group’s superior singer, lashed out against both Ross and Gordy. In mid-1967, as a result of what he deemed increasingly unprofessional behavior, Gordy retaliated by replacing the indignant Ballard with Cindy Birdsong, who had formerly served as one of Patti Labelle’s backing singers.\textsuperscript{33} After leaving Motown, Ballard’s life spiraled out of control; she ended up emotionally broken, on welfare, and eventually died in 1976.\textsuperscript{34}

In addition to the interpersonal conflicts gradually impinging upon the group’s ability to succeed, the assassination of Dr. King imposed another constraint on the group’s polished image. The time to downplay blackness and accentuate crossover dynamics had ended abruptly. In response to mounting pressures to respond to pressing social events, Ross led the charge to break beyond the group’s wholesome image. As Mark Ribowsky describes in \textit{The Supremes}, “On the September 29 \textit{Ed Sullivan Show} to break the song (“Love Child”) and, before millions of viewers, they (Ross and the Supremes) were seen in repose on the “stoop” of a painted facsimile of a ghetto street, Mary dangling a nice necklace from under a chocolate-brown shorts-suit, Cindy in a

\textsuperscript{32} “Hot 100,” in \textit{Billboard Magazine}, November 19, 1966, 30.


\textsuperscript{34} Unterberger, “Diana Ross and the Supremes.”
brown and white pantsuit, both barefooted, and - most shockingly - Diana looking every bit the street urchin, wearing a close cropped Afro wig, a baggy yellow sweatshirt, tattered cut-offs, her legs like matchsticks, her feet also bare.”

Embracing this “ghetto chic” aesthetic was a tremendously bold statement for a Ross. Her fame had rested squarely on the shoulders of a virtuous and fine-tuned image; coming out in full “street garb” conveyed a sense of solidarity with urban blackness, however generalized, and liberation from Gordy’s script. As a result of this performance and the manner in which the political facade had undergone a sympathetic transformation in light of Dr. King’s murder, “Love Child” received extraordinary radio play and attention. At the same time, the song’s message was nothing short of a heartfelt plea for social change and justice:

“Love child, never meant to be; Love child, born in poverty; Love child, never meant to be Love child, take a look at me; I started my life in an old; Cold run down tenement slum; My father left, he never even married mom; I shared the guilt my mama knew; So afraid that others knew I had no name; This love we're contemplatin'; Is worth the pain of waitin' We'll only end up hatin' The child we may be creatin'”

The single resonated with listeners nationwide, ousting the Beatles’ “Hey Jude” as the number one listing on the Billboard Pop Charts and dominating the Billboard R&B Charts for 2 weeks straight.

35Ribowsky, The Supremes, 338.


37Ribowsky, The Supremes, 339.
In November of 1969, Ross announced her departure from the Supremes and her intention to pursue a solo career. Her final performance with the group took place at Las Vegas’ Frontier Hotel on January 14th, 1970. Jean Terrell later replaced Ross, and the group continued until finally disbanding in 1977. Few groups have been able to transcend the loss of their central figure and the Supremes were no exception. As an act devoid of its superstar, the group only scored a total of two top-ten hits with “Up the Ladder to the Roof” and “Stoned Love.” For Ross, her solo career would flourish in profound ways that reflected a funkier black America.

In launching her solo career, Ross enlisted the services of established producers Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson, who already had made positive contributions to successful Marvin Gaye recordings. With their assistance, Ross released *Diana Ross* in May of 1970, on the Motown label. The album’s first single, “Reach Out and Touch (Somebody's Hand),” peaked at number 20 on the Billboard Hot 100 while the album's second single, a cover of Marvin Gaye’s and Tammi Terrell’s 1967 hit, “Ain't No Mountain High Enough,” secured Ross’ first number one pop single and gold record award as a solo act. “Ain't No Mountain High Enough” also received a Grammy nomination for Best Pop Vocal Performance for a female. Ross's subsequent full-length

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39 Unterberger, “Diana Ross and the Supremes.”


41 Ruhlmann, “Diana Ross”. 
album, *Everything Is Everything*, landed at number 43 on the Billboard’s top LP list.\(^{42}\) The album also generated her first UK number-one solo single with “I'm Still Waiting.”\(^{43}\) Several months later Ross released *Surrender*, which included the top-20 pop hit, “Remember Me.” That same year, she hosted her own television special, entitled *Diana!*, which featured guest appearances by The Jackson 5, Bill Cosby and Danny Thomas, to name a few.\(^{44}\) Ross also released a full-length album that featured tracks from the program.\(^{45}\) By this time, she indisputably had blossomed into Motown’s central entertainment diva, charging over $40,000 per week for bookings.\(^{46}\) Moreover, her image had quickly gone from “ghetto-chic” to “black is beautiful,” complete with Afro, tight pantsuits, and platform shoes.\(^{47}\) This funky, aesthetic transformation coincided with Ross’ newfound desire to address social issues, best exemplified by the conscious content of “Love Child.”

In 1973, Ross scored yet another number one single with “Touch Me in the Morning.”\(^{48}\) The full-length album by the same name then won her first spot on the Billboard Top Five Pop Chart, illustrating that she still possessed crossover appeal


\(^{43}\) Ruhlmann, “Diana Ross.”


despite emerging as unabashedly black.\textsuperscript{49} Later that same year, Ross joined Marvin Gaye to release a duet album entitled \textit{Diana & Marvin}; it landed at number five on the R&B Chart and number twenty-six on the Pop Chart in September, 1973.\textsuperscript{50} Three years later, and after a slight lull in her success, Ross released quite possibly her most legendary song with “Love Hangover;” it was ready-made for the bumping disco dance floor and earned her the number one slots on both the Pop and R&B Charts.\textsuperscript{51} Disco historian, Peter Shapiro asserts that the song was more than just a momentary commercial triumph; rather, “Love Hangover” - aided by legendary Motown studio guru Brian Holland’s bass-line concept - became “the backbone of nearly everything we know think of as disco: Thelma Houston’s ‘Don’t leave me This Way,’ Village People’s, ‘San Francisco (You’ve Got me),’ Donna Summer’s ‘Try Me, I know We Can Make It’ and, of course, the Bee Gee’s “You Should Be Dancing.”\textsuperscript{52} While Ross released several albums after \textit{Love Hangover}, it became clear that she had peaked as a music diva. Nevertheless, she did enjoy multiple successes with a Broadway, one-woman show entitled, \textit{An Evening with Diana Ross}; the effort later earned a Tony Award. Ross later was featured in TV special with the same name.\textsuperscript{53} Having transitioned from singer to actor, Ross made hundreds of


\textsuperscript{50} Taraborelli, \textit{Diana Ross}, 512.

\textsuperscript{51} Taraborelli, 515.

\textsuperscript{52} Peter Shapiro, \textit{Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco} (New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 2005), 107.

\textsuperscript{53} Ruhlmann, “Diana Ross.”
appearances in television and film, emerging as an iconic black woman who was elegant and outspoken on her own terms.\textsuperscript{54}

While Ross as a solo act does not qualify as seminal funk per se, it is clear that her music became decidedly “blacker” than anything she had done with the Supremes. In particular, her sound during the seventies is best characterized as dance music overlapping with, if not helping to establish, a disco idiom that did away with the traditional 1, 4, 5 format of 1950s pop, emphasizing danceable, continuous bass lines. These “groove vessels” were further adorned with horns, strings, and Ross’ memorable anthems. Moreover, her forays into cinema and dance music borrowed from funk contemporaries in ways that signified her own desire to emerge as a modern black woman; her personae was no longer pre-determined by Gordy’s guiding hand. Certainly her torrid love affair with Gordy bears mentioning inasmuch as it informed the establishment of her solo career, but there is little doubt that with or without Gordy’s affections, Ross had a distinct mass appeal and managed to update her image in a timely fashion.

\textit{The Funky Temptations}

As Ross certainly reinvented her image in the spirit of the post-assassination decade, Motown further established its new niche through the Temptations, who arguably were the first Motown act to emerge with a full-fledged, funky sound and look. In early 1969, Motown’s ace producer, Norman Whitfield, and established singer/songwriter, Barret Strong, assisted the Temptations in their transition to a sound clearly inspired by

Sly and the Family Stone’s loose, “feel good” format. Also in touch with the cultural and political vibe of the times was the Motown house band, the Funk Brothers, who further contributed to the Temptations’ evolution by providing the unmistakable instrumentation for tracks such as “Cloud 9.” With these elements coalescing beneath the surface, the song was a pure success and furthermore distinct in how it advanced an assertive and repetitious groove, every bit as complex as its lyrical content. As a statement on the black condition, “Cloud-9” reached number two on the R&B Chart and number 6 on the Pop Chart. With regard to the political and racial tensions surrounding the release of the song, Temptations tenor, Otis Williams, declared, “Looking back on those days, I suppose a certain amount of radicalism was needed to raise the nation’s consciousness about the plight of black Americans. Still, I never stopped believing that prejudice and hate go hand-in-hand, and having been the target of that crap, I don’t believe in or support anyone who preaches hate, no matter who they are.”

This statement is, in a sense, the perfect encapsulation of how musicians used funkier sounds and politically charged statements as means to convey and combine the stuff of black creativity and social action, definitively distinguishing black identity from that of mainstream America.

It is no secret that during the late 1960s large swaths of American youth, many of whom were embroiled in a campaign for social change and political reform, likewise developed an appreciation for recreational drug use, sexual experimentation, intensified nightlife. As such, this sort of psychedelic zeitgeist – as a prelude to the disco era - lent

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56 Williams and Romanowsky, Temptations, 132.
itself well to the celebratory message of funk. Speaking directly to the spirit of the times and gaining national spotlight in the process, the integrated band of Sly and the Family Stone blazed the Rock and Pop Charts. For the Temptations, their contribution emerged in the form of the *Cloud Nine*. This experimental full-length album supplemented previous funky singles like “Psychedelic Shack” and “Ball of Confusion,” adding celebratory statements of individuality and black pride. These tracks included rock-style guitars, spacey sound effects, and drug-references. The more obvious political content appeared on “Message from a Black Man” and “Slave.”57 “Message from a Black Man” stated, “No matter how hard you try/You can’t stop me now/No matter how hard you try/You can’t stop me now/Yes, my skin is Black/But that’s no reason to hold me back.”58 With such a statement clearly steeped in the social frustrations that characterized the black pride spirit, the Temptations had moved far beyond the innocuous love songs of their earlier days.

As evidence that Whitfield and the Temptations had struck a chord with American listeners, *Cloud 9* reached the number four position on the Pop Chart and the number one slot on the R&B Chart.59 With the *Cloud 9* album experience, the Temptations emerged as a formidable entertainment unit that embraced the burgeoning psychedelic sound and aesthetic. In terms of their appearances, they no longer accepted Gordy’s insistence on wearing coordinated suits for live performances. Instead, “each member would select his

own boots, flared pants, sweaters, leather vests, and widely cut shirts of all colors, with
bandanas, fedoras, and scarves worn, reminiscent of Jimi Hendrix.\footnote{60} 

From 1969 to 1972, the group - under the continued direction of songwriter/producer Norman Whitfield - released an array of funky and politically relevant hits, including “Runaway Child, Running Wild,” “I Can't Get Next to You,” “Psychedelic Shack,” “Ball of Confusion” and the renowned statement of social consciousness and stylistic innovation, "Papa Was a Rolling Stone.” “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone” was written originally by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong as a single for release on a full-length album entitled The Undisputed Truth in 1971. At this stage of the group's career, their new image was complete with the look of large Afros, eccentric costumes, and flashier dance moves, which in some circles had come to typify a new spirit of black identity after Dr. King’s death. Along with “Papa was a Rolling Stone” sounding off on the fractured state of black families, a substantial number of politicized singles became, at the very least, minor hits. Among them were “You Make Your Own Heaven and Hell Right Here on Earth,” and the legendary “Smiling Faces Sometimes,” which hit number one on the Pop Chart in 1971.\footnote{61} “Smiling Faces Sometimes” also advanced a powerful message regarding the state of black America and its struggle for equal rights and economic opportunities, giving voice to the concern that black America wholly was not in charge of its own destiny. Stating stridently, “Smiling faces/Show no traces of the evil/That lurks within/Smiling faces, smiling faces sometimes/They don't tell

\footnote{60} Vincent, \textit{Funk}, 126.

\footnote{61} Mark Ribowsky, \textit{Ain't Too Proud to Beg: The Troubled Lives and Enduring Soul of the Temptations} (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons Inc. 2010), 237-239.
the truth, Smiling faces, smiling faces/Tell lies and I got proof/Beware, beware of the handshake/That hides the snake/I'm telling you beware/Beware of the pat on the back/It just might hold you back.” 62 The suspicion and resentment clearly expressed in the track corresponded with the frustrated state of the everyday black citizen; this kind of political statement, unrestrained and laid on top of a loose and repetitive groove, suggests that in the post-assassination world the time to adhere to the old ways of Motown and refrain from speaking one’s political concerns were long over. In the spirit of an outspoken era, the Temptations recorded some of their strongest and most cohesive tracks, including "Masterpiece" in 1973, and “A Song for You” in 1975. 63 “Ball of Confusion” also bears mentioning as it likewise announced the singers’ deeply felt social concerns, plainly lamenting the harmful effects of white flight and inner-city poverty.

Still a cultural force in September of 1975, the Temptations traveled to Manila to give a concert and see Muhammad Ali fight Joe Frazier. At the “Thrilla in Manila,” the group visited Ali in his locker room where the boxing legend asked them to do an impromptu version of “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” in an effort to calm his nerves. In recounting the moment, Temptations tenor Otis Williams claimed, “We broke into it and gave it our all. When we finished, Ali gave us a smile, and all of his helpers and handlers broke into applause. We wished Ali the best of luck and returned to our seats to watch the match. Later, trainer Bundini (Brown) told us that our singing really helped soothe


63 Ribowsky, Ain't Too Proud to Beg, 240.
Ali and maybe even helped him beat Frazier.” Following the fight, the Temptations performed flawlessly in front of a capacity crowd in Manila and seemed to be at an all time career high.

Despite the promise of an international career boost that accompanied the Manila experience, the Temptations soon after began to decline in popularity. This gradual diminishing of prominence had much to do with the group’s fateful choice to allow producer Norman Whitfield to become, for all intents and purposes, the driving creative force behind the band’s subsequent releases. Whitfield, confident that he could remain successful in lieu of Gordy’s direct creative involvement, moved to set up Whitfield Records, which remained a subsidiary of Motown. With the transition into Whitfield’s semi-independent operation, the Temptations fired long-time member Damon Harris and replaced him with Washington, D.C. native, Glenn Leonard, formerly of the Unifics. Along with Whitfield, a number of producers, including Brian Holland, James Carmichael, and even the Temptations themselves attempted to maintain the band’s success, but struggled to do so without the Motown operation’s full support. As such, the new arrangement produced a meager number of hits derived from three albums: *House Party* in November (1975), *Wings of Love* in March (1976) and *The Temptations Do the

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{64} Williams and Romanowski, *Temptations*, 174.

{65} Williams and Romanowski, *Temptations*, 170.
Temptations in August of that same year.\textsuperscript{66} None of these efforts produced a top ten hit, though each album still reflected a new, groovier spirit.\textsuperscript{67}

With a sustained decline in promotion, popularity, and record sales, Temptations’ tenor Otis Wilson accused Motown headquarters of neglect and hired an attorney to leverage Gordy for a new and improved contract in 1976. Upon confronting the band’s dissatisfaction, Gordy was said to have “considered himself above the artists at that point” and simply ignored their requests.\textsuperscript{68} As the dispute with Motown faded inconclusively, long-time group member Dennis Edwards parted ways and was replaced with a new lead singer. By the end of the year, the frustrated and struggling outfit left Motown for Atlantic Records. At Atlantic, the Temptations issued Hear to Tempt You in 1977, Bare Back in 1978, and several associated singles, all of which failed to perform any better than their last handful of Whitfield/Motown singles.\textsuperscript{69} As a result of these failures, the Temptations were released the from their Atlantic contract in 1979 only to reunite with Smokey Robinson and Berry Gordy, who re-signed the group in 1980.\textsuperscript{70}

Although the Temptations’ return to Motown did not restore their once dominant status in the music industry, both their traditional and psychedelic offerings had far-reaching influence. Most important for the purposes of this study is the fact that the group underwent a profound transformation inasmuch as they combined the

\textsuperscript{66} Ribowsky, Ain’t Too Proud to Beg, 256.

\textsuperscript{67} Ribowsky, 249.

\textsuperscript{68} Posner, Motown, 290.

\textsuperscript{69} Ribowsky, Ain’t Too Proud, 240.

\textsuperscript{70} Ribowsky, 265.
announcement of post-assassination social concerns with a new, funkier sound and image. In doing so, Temptations’ songs influenced virtually every American musical genre, from rock to Hip-Hip and from Jazz to Adult Contemporary. Furthermore, noted musicians including Luther Vandross, Bette Midler, Anthrax, Love and Rockets, Duran Duran, the Rolling Stones, and Peter Tosh have covered Temptations’ songs.\(^7\) In 2004, *Rolling Stone Magazine* ranked The Temptations number sixty-eight on their “100 Greatest Artists of All Time.”\(^7\) Overall, their career included five Platinum Albums and fourteen Gold Albums. They’ve also scored an impressive total of sixteen number one singles on the Billboard Charts and four Grammy Awards.\(^7\) Commercial success aside, the trajectory of the Temptations’ career highlights well the broader stylistic and political transformation undertaken by Motown’s key figures after April of 1968. Being sweet and playful had served the singing outfit well, for a time. However, after the death of Dr. King, the same old song and dance was not enough to satisfy black listeners and, to a degree, white listeners. Most important was the fact that the Temptations themselves weren’t satisfied with their old image and, quite simply, had to speak out in song in order to sustain not only their career, but also their personal integrity.

*Stevie Wonder and Post-Assassination Reinvention*

As the Temptations underwent identity reinvention in the wake of Dr. King’s death, so too did label darling Stevie Wonder. Wonder took seriously the challenge of

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\(^7\) Stewart, “100 Greatest Artists of All Time.”

redefining himself along the lines of post-assassination black sensibilities and, in doing so, established an enduring presence in the music industry and American culture at large. Wonder’s career began at age 13 when he scored his first hit, “Fingertips (Pt. 2).” The song was a 1963 single derived from the full-length album, *The 12 Year Old Genius.* The song featured Marvin Gaye on drums while Wonder supplied lead vocals, bongos, and harmonica; it was a number one hit on the Pop and R&B Charts, laying the foundation for Wonder’s iconic position. By 1965, Wonder dropped “little” from his moniker, and further solidified his status with three hits: “Uptight (Everything's Alright),” “I was Made to Love Her,” and a memorable cover of Bob Dylan’s “Blowin' in the Wind.” “Blowin' in the Wind” was not only a Bob Dylan cover, it also reflected Wonder’s personal concerns, such as the Vietnam War and the state of race relations. Interpreted in the broader context of his maturation as both musician and activist, the song likewise foreshadowed the manner in which Wonder would use his position for both creative and political expression. With the death of Dr. King, Wonder’s proclivity for mixing social and music consciousness further blossomed.


75 Bronson, *The Billboard Book,* 135.


Wonder first heard the report of Dr. King’s death on his car radio; the Motown star was riding home from school and sat speechless for the duration of the trip.\textsuperscript{78} Wonder had met Dr. King two years earlier at a Student Christian Freedom Rally in Chicago.\textsuperscript{79} At the funeral, Wonder walked alongside Coretta Scott King and the rest of her entourage; the moment clearly engrained in him an urgent sense of how his career ought to be used as means to address such vicious injustice while the subsequent assassination of Robert Kennedy further emphasized the need to speak out. In a broader sense, the increased militancy following King and Kennedy’s assassination altered the content of black music in fundamental ways. As soul music historian Martha Bayles aptly describes, “Instead of love and brotherhood, the theme became anger and distrust in songs by Sly and the Family Stone, the O’Jays, Stevie Wonder, and certain Motown groups working with Norman Whitfield.”\textsuperscript{80}

After 1968, Wonder’s releases continued to reflect a growing political awareness, though Gordy expected him to continue creating chart-worthy numbers, true to classic Hitsville form. In addition to giving voice to his social concerns, Wonder was determined to indulge in a growing affinity for new music technologies and stylistic innovation instead of relying upon a the customary soul crooner archetype, ala Ray Charles. Wonder’s first foray into new sonic territory was the full-length entitled, \textit{Eivets


\textsuperscript{79} Lodder, \textit{Stevie Wonder}, 47, 48.

Rednow, which featured exclusive instrumental tracks characterized by the heavy use of harmonica solos and intricate, repetitious grooves. The album was somewhat of a commercial disappointment, but did include a rendition of Burt Bacharach and Hal David’s show tune, “Alfie,” which reached number 66 on the U.S. Pop Charts and number eleven on the Adult Contemporary Chart.\(^{81}\) Despite the tepid reception he received with Eivets Rednow, Wonder remained determined to blossom as a unique creative force in music, albeit weighed down by contractual obligations to craft standardized Motown hits. In meeting Gordy’s demands between 1968 and 1970, Wonder offered up memorable full-length efforts such as For Once in my Life and My Cherie Amor.\(^{82}\)

In September 1970, at the age of 20, Wonder married Syreeta Wright, a former Motown secretary and songwriter.\(^{83}\) His subsequent album, Where I’m Coming From, enlisted Wright’s assistance with writing on several tracks. Their combined effort hit stores on April 12\(^{th}\), 1971, eventually reaching number seven on the R&B Chart and peaking at number sixty-two on the Pop Chart.\(^{84}\) After a promising start, album sales diminished, but the work still underscored Wonder’s maturation as a socially conscious innovator. He said of the album, “Yeah, we did Where I’m Coming From. It was kind of

\(^{81}\) Mark Ribowsky, Signed, Sealed, and Delivered: The Soulful Journey of Stevie Wonder (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 170.

\(^{82}\) Werner, Higher Ground, 151.


\(^{84}\) Ribowsky, Signed, Sealed, Delivered, 191.
premature to some extent, but I wanted to express myself.”85 On “Do Yourself a Favor,” Wonder preaches his own social gospel stating, “Do yourself a favor/Educate your mind/Get yourself together/Hey there ain't much time/Shredded know-how give away/Species of the human race/Those funky winds of ups and downs.” 86 According to Wonder biographer, Steven Lodder, the album also showcases Wonder’s formidable musical skill and affinity for psychedelic contemporaries such as Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton:

The factor that points to Hendrix/Clapton is the appearance of lengthy periods with few changes and the penchant for extended soloing over a riff. The song is tonally static, and with some change of emphasis on the chorus, that’s how it’s going to stay. (With the whole band wandering far from the chorus) the slightly collective exploit suits the feel of the ‘band' breaking free of its chain, unconstrained by record company execs. 87

On May 13, 1971, Wonder turned twenty-one as his first Motown contract expired. At the time, Motown President, Ewart Abner, braced himself for Wonder’s next step, having fully realized the extent to which Wonder, since age 19, had claimed, “that when he turned 21 he was going to do what he wanted to do.”88 Reflecting on his next step, Wonder stated, “My contract with Motown ended May 13, of 1971, and I decided to just not sign with anybody for a while and just cool it.”89 For Ebner, a growing concern

86 Stevie Wonder, “Do Yourself a Favor” on Where I’m Coming From (Los Angeles/Detroit: Tamla Records, 1971).
87 Lodder, Stevie Wonder, 62.
88 Werner, Higher Ground, 164.
was that Motown would permanently lose Wonder who, so adamant in his ambition to remain autonomous, was also quoted saying, “When I’m 21, I’m going to have things my own way. I don’t think you (Abner) know where I’m coming from. I don’t think you can understand it.” Eventually, Wonder arrived at the conclusion that securing full creative license and the right to own his own work were imperative conditions for any future legal arrangements with Motown. Gordy eventually agreed to these demands and the resulting 120-page contract included “a greatly increased share of revenues and the establishment of Taurus Productions and Black Bull publishing, both staffed by employees under Wonder’s direct control.” Gordy knew that he had taken a risk and of the decision stated, “Though I had some misgivings when he asked for total creative control, I thought of the progression he had made from an eleven-year-old high-pitched singer banging on bongos to a full-voiced vocalist, writer and now producer. I agreed to creative control. It was only the beginning what we’d hear from him in the seventies”

In 1972, Wonder wasted no time in using his newly acquired freedom to launch into what many critics regard as the most brilliant and defining phase of his career, such that was epitomized by five seminal full length albums: Music of My Mind, Talking Book, Innervisions, Fullfillingess’ First Finale, and Songs in the Key of Life. Having already begun work on Music of My Mind during contract renewal negotiations, Wonder

90 Werner, Higher Ground, 164.
91 Werner, 164.
92 Gordy, To Be Loved, 305.
ultimately brought forth an artistic statement with songs flowing together under compelling personal, social, and mystical themes. Released on March 3, 1972, the album was recorded with Wonder’s own money at Electric Lady Studios in New York City; it was among the first mass produced recordings to utilize a synthesizer. Moreover, the album performed admirably, reaching number six on the R&B Chart and number 69 on the Pop Chart. As the album title implies, Wonder did not make the work a heavy-handed expression of social concerns; rather, he used the platform as an opportunity to present his contemplative and introspective state of mind brought on by fascinations with love, new technology, and spirituality.

While *Music of My Mind* illustrated Wonder’s compelling ability to master era defining sound technologies as a complex means of self-expression, he quickly followed along a similar trajectory with *Talking Book*. Released on October 27, 1972, the album was a logical continuation of its predecessor, but reached a larger audience as a result of featuring catchier songs and the enhanced exposure that Wonder received while touring with the Rolling Stones that summer. *Talking Book* also performed considerably better on the charts as it was the first album by an American artist to debut at the number one

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96 Brown, *Stevie Wonder*, 49

spot. In addition, “Superstition” and “You Are the Sunshine of My Life,” both became number one singles several weeks after release. Adding to his accolades in conjunction with Talking Book, the album’s two number one hits each received Grammy Awards.

In terms of the albums long-term cultural legacy, funk scholar Rickey Vincent perfectly summarizes the manner in which Talking Book pushed the boundaries of music in the post-assassination environment:

Talking Book was a powerful piece of work. It had biting political commentary with “Big Brother,” and dramatic love songs like “You and I” and “I Believe When I Fall in Love It Will Be Forever.” It also changed pace and dropped furious funk bombs with “Superstition” and “Maybe Your Baby.” Stevie popularized the use of the clavinet keyboard. The clavinet became a staple of funk music, as it often accompanied the bass line, making the bass bottom sound thicker, and often was simply played in a counter rhythm to make the entire ensemble fill with sound. The funk musicians were paying attention.

Clearly determined to redefine black music and culture, Innervisions followed in 1973 and further fortified Wonder’s contribution to the “funkification” of popular culture. The album featured “Higher Ground,” which reached number four on the Pop Chart and number one on the R&B Chart. Similarly, “Living for the City” reached number eight...
on the Pop Chart and later secured the number one spot on the R&B Chart. Beyond its commercial triumph, the song emerged as noteworthy due to the manner in which it lamented the failure of the American city while affirming the difficult plight of black Americans in the post-assassination world. Thematically, the song follows a family from “hard time” Mississippi to their new life in New York, where work is scarce and the health conditions deplorable. In essence, the song was concise and precise in how it underscored both the personal and public traumas that black America continued to endure. The song’s commentary on the condition of black urbanites likewise reified the same pressing concerns tirelessly addressed by Civil Rights Era activism, laid them on top of the funkiest musical foundation and, in doing so, established a ubiquitous call for serious and fundamental social change. For these reasons, “Living for the City” remains one of the most heavily sampled songs in contemporary Hip-Hop. As it pertains to popular consciousness, Innervisions generally is meaningful because it addressed “the myriad social ills so endemic to the ghetto experience and a stirring celebration of African-American resilience” and penetrated the confines of countless households across lines of race and class. As a personal success, Innervisions scored for Wonder three additional Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year. At this point in his career it


104 Griffin, “Who Set you Flowin’?”, 98.

105 Vincent, Funk, 133.

was safe to conclude that Gordy’s gamble paid off; Wonder had emerged as one of the most critically acclaimed black musicians of the early 1970s.

The commercial success continued, though on August 6, 1973, Wonder was in a near-fatal car wreck that left him in a coma for four days.\textsuperscript{108} Despite this traumatizing experience, Wonder fully recovered and released \textit{Fulfillingness' First Finale} in July of 1974.\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Fulfillingness’} did not achieve chart-topping success, but it did advance a strident political message aimed at government’s inability to mitigate pervasive social injustice and inequality. In particular, the album’s “You Haven't Done Nothin’” exposed President Nixon’s distinct disregard for the concerns formerly championed by Dr. King. On the track Wonder stated, “How you are gonna change right from wrong?/ Cause if you really want to hear our views/ You haven't done nothing.”\textsuperscript{110} The song resonated with listeners as evidenced by it becoming a number one single on the US Hot 100 Chart.\textsuperscript{111} The album also included the infectious and funky “Boogie On Reggae Woman,” which reached the top five for both Pop and R&B Charts.\textsuperscript{112} Lastly, \textit{Fulfillness’} received the 1974 Grammy for Best Album of the Year.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{107} Jesee K. Mwaura, \textit{Whiz Kids: Biographies of 60 Young Achievers And Celebrities From All Over The World} (New York: CreateSpace, 2006), 218.

\textsuperscript{108} Perone, \textit{Stevie Wonder}, 57.

\textsuperscript{109} Stevie Wonder, “You Haven’t Done Nothin’,” on \textit{Fulfillingness’ First Finale} (Los Angeles: Tamla Records, 1974).

\textsuperscript{110} Lodder, \textit{Stevie Wonder}, 154.

\textsuperscript{111} Bronson, \textit{The Billboard Book}, 381.

\textsuperscript{112} Perone, \textit{Stevie Wonder}, 60.

Two years in the making after *Fulfillingness*’ success, Wonder released *Songs in the Key of Life* in September of 1976. Its initial reception was nothing short of impressive as *Songs* emerged as only the third album in history to debut at the number one spot. While many regard the sprawling and complex effort as Wonder’s defining opus, its excesses and absurdities elicited a fair amount of confusion and criticism. In 1976, Nik Cohn of *New York Magazine* stated:

Simply in terms of time and sound, *Songs in the Key* is prodigious. Wonder is the rhythm master of rock. Nobody creates more impetus or sheer gut excitement; no one sings with more exultation. If only he sang in Zulu throughout, as he does on one track, or stuck to wordless growls and yells, he would be heroic. Sooner or later, however, there are the lyrics to be confronted and they are truly abysmal. For years now, Wonder has been telling us that love is the answer, that all we need is bliss. As philosophies go, this has two major drawbacks. First, it isn’t true; second, it isn’t interesting. Repeat ad infinitum, as Wonder does, it becomes unbearable. Illiterate pretension, beatific dumbness: on *Songs in the Key*, Wonder pushes his self-image as mystic messenger, universal pop-sage, beyond all limits.

While listeners like Cohn may have cringed at Wonder’s indulgent and seemingly sanctimonious tome, the album still had more than enough momentum and virtue to generate chart-worthy hits. “I Wish” and “Sir Duke” reached number one on both the Pop and R&B Charts. The ode to Wonder’s newborn daughter, Aisha, “Isn't She Lovely?” and “Love's in Need of Love Today” made respectable showings on R&B and Pop

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Charts. While Wonder’s preoccupation with the healing and restorative power of love figured heavily into *Songs*, the album’s social exposition, “Village Ghetto Land” and “Gangsta’s Paradise” delved deeper into the same themes broached by way of “Living for the City,” but issued what one reviewer deemed “a deeper parboil of hood reality.”

For all its excesses and melodrama, *Songs in the Key of Life* still won Album of the Year and two Grammys. Furthermore, the album ranks number fifty-six on Rolling Stone Magazine’s 500 Greatest Albums of All Time. Its legacy is unsurpassed and portions of it continue to be used by artists across the world. As a testament to Wonder’s far-reaching influence, hip hop megastar Kanye West said, “I'm not trying to compete with what's out there now. I'm really trying to compete with *Innervisions* and *Songs in the Key of Life*. It sounds musically blasphemous to say something like that, but why not set that as your bar?”

Wonder continued to produce and perform throughout the remainder of the seventies and eighties, but no single effort matched the success and prominence of the aforementioned five albums. However as a political spokesperson and cultural icon, Wonder was a pivotal agent in the establishment of the nationally recognized Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday. The stalled crusade to honor Dr. King received a much needed

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118 Ribowsky, 263.


boost when Wonder led a rally of over 100,000 supporters in Washington D.C. on January 15th, 1981.\(^{122}\) When asked why the issue was so important to him, Wonder stated, “I am not only Stevie Wonder the artist, but my purpose is to communicate messages that improve the life of all of us. Public holidays in the United States should be, and normally are, reserved for celebrating great traditions in the nation’s history and our highest ideals and leaders who have shaped our common destiny. Dr. King lived and died for this nation’s ideals of justice, honor, dignity, and freedom.”\(^{123}\) Wonder’s efforts to honor Dr. King helped in no small way to generate greater interest in creating the holiday, ultimately overwhelming any skepticism or resistance that stalled the process. As a result of Wonder’s involvement, large donations from Coca-Cola, the Miller Brewing Company and other powerful corporations helped push the bill forward.\(^{124}\) In 1983, Ronald Reagan signed the holiday into law; the occasion was first observed on January 20, 1986 as a nationally certified holiday coinciding with Dr. King’s birthday.\(^{125}\) More recently, President Barack Obama presented Wonder with the Library of Congress’s “Second Annual Gershwin Prize for Popular Song” during a private concert at the White House. Mr. Obama described Wonder’s music as “the soundtrack of his youth” and claimed that he chose Wonder’s “You and I” as his wedding song.\(^{126}\)


\(^{123}\) “Birthday Celebration for MLK,” 128.


Wonder’s mystic and funky rebirth parallels label mate Marvin Gaye’s transformation from lounge crooner to groove messenger. Before coming into his own, Gaye was first a studio session drummer. Upon learning that he could sing quite well, Gordy moved to capitalize on the genuine quality of Gaye’s surprisingly smooth vocals. As a doo-wop style lead singer, Gaye’s career gained traction during the early sixties as he scored several top twenty pop hits such as “You Are a Wonderful One,” “Try It Baby” and “Baby Don't You Do It.” Gaye also made his first public TV performance on American Bandstand in 1963 and later became a fixture on other programs such as Shindig! and Hullaballoo! His popularity proceeded further after Gordy began using the charismatic singer in a duet project with Mary Wells, entitled Together. The album produced two hit singles: “Once Upon a Time” and “What's the Matter with You Baby.” Gaye became an even more recognizable and adored figure during the mid-sixties as a result of another hit single, “How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You,)” which

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sold nearly a million copies and reached number six on the Pop Charts. Further confirming his superstar status, Gaye used two Smokey Robinson compositions, “Ain't That Peculiar” and “I’ll be Doggone,” to turn out consecutive number one hits on the R&B Charts. On his first number one hit single, “I Heard it Through the Grapevine,” Gaye cemented his status as label luminary by giving Motown the fourth-longest run at the number one position on the Hot 100 Chart. Gaye’s version of the song was later inducted to the Grammy Hall of Fame for “historical, artistic and significant” value.

While reveling in his mounting commercial success, Gaye remained familiar with the evolution of the Black Freedom Struggle. As the closing years of the sixties became increasingly volatile due to escalating urban unrest and divisions surrounding the Vietnam War, the brunt of the times struck Gaye on a personal level when his brother, Frankie, was drafted. In personal letters to his brother Frankie, who was stationed in Vietnam, Marvin commented on stateside civil unrest, describing riots in Watts, Chicago and Detroit. Gaye stated in one of his letters, “Armed National Guardsmen came as well as part of the Army. Those guys were all over. We heard gunfire out on the streets, so it got pretty close. I pray for the people everywhere.” After the King assassination,

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134 Bronson, 249.

Gaye’s political and spiritual preoccupations had to be expressed in his music. His releases from 1970 until his tragic death in 1984 reflected an intimate sense of how love, social awareness, poetry, and music could somehow assuage the ferocious state of American society.

Having taken Dr. King’s death quite hard, Gaye channeled his sorrow and many of his own personal tribulations, blended them with a strong sense of romance and faith, and produced a career-defining body of work, epitomized best by What’s Going On, Trouble Man and Let’s Get It On. In late 1968, just before initiating this fruitful phase of his career, Frankie Gaye described his brother’s transition into a more socially aware state of mind:

Around the time of Dr. King’s death, Marvin wrote that he had taken part in a series of weeklong variety shows, put on by Quincy Jones and members of the Institute for Black American Music, to raise money for civil rights causes. The shows were held at the Chicago Amphitheater and featured one of the greatest all-star casts ever put together. All the Motown artists were there, he wrote, along with Flip Wilson; Dick Gregory; Richard Pryor, Sammy Davis Jr.; Bill Cosby; and the cast of Sesame Street. Marvin noted, “With so many people around doing their thing I was only a small part of the show; but I was also glad to be there doing whatever they needed me to do.’ He also added, “Wish you could have seen the faces when I came out with my new look. I shaved my head to show support for the protests.”

Gaye would go beyond simply changing his look in an effort to contribute to a new activism. His music advanced a message that tenderness and compassion could be just as appropriate as anger and that celebrating the essence of black America was a pursuit shamelessly accompanied by rhythm, sensuality, and dance with or without consideration

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136 Gaye and Basten, Marvin Gaye, 68.
for white tastes. The Marvin Gaye who offered a unique rendition of “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” was anxious to soar on his own terms, but first had to honor Gordy’s insistence on releasing yet another formulaic offering with *That's the Way Love Is*, which hit stores on January 8, 1970.\(^{137}\) While the title track enjoyed commercial success, one reviewer said that “Gaye was beginning to become disillusioned with Motown, but that hadn’t affected his album output or his singing. Anyone hearing *That’s the Way Love Is* wouldn’t have suspected that Gaye was about to unleash *What’s Going On*.”\(^{138}\)

*What’s Going On* was the first album that Gaye produced on his own, without Gordy’s creative micromanagement. Undoubtedly a product of Gaye’s growing social concerns and feelings about his brother’s involvement in the Vietnam War, the album is told from the perspective of a veteran returning to a country in disarray. On the acclaimed “What’s Happenin’ Brother,” Gaye was the most outspoken that he had ever been on any song: “I'm just getting’ back, but you knew I would/War is hell, when will it end/When will people start getting’ together again/Are things really getting’ better, like the newspaper said/What else is new my friend, besides what I read/Can’t find no work, can't find no job my friend/Money is tighter than it’s ever been/Say man, I just don't understand/What's going on across this land.”\(^{139}\) On this track, Gaye bravely addressed the demise of black communities and the extent to which massive unemployment,


\(^{138}\) Wynn, “That’s the Way Love Is,” 452.

economic restructuring, and a lack of sound housing all figured into a generally low quality of life. According to seventies historian, Tom Boyd, “(the song) could have very easily been referring to the notion of a “brotha,” the common term used to refer to other black men in general, as the ideas of the times suggested that all black men were indeed brothers. The title could be interpreted directly, as in Marvin asking his own brother, or it could be thought of as a question about the condition of the black man in America.” Whomever the song was meant to portray, the message was received loud and clear by audiences whose appreciation for the track enabled it to became a crossover hit that reached number two on the Pop Chart and number one on the R&B Chart. With Gaye’s social concerns unleashed and charismatically set to a new-groove sound - masterfully played by house band, the Funk Brothers - there was little doubt that Motown had found in Gaye the successful unification of a its traditional saccharine and new era bittersweet.

With his new stature as sensual social prophet and groove master, Gaye proceeded to offer his music to the 1972 blaxploitation film, Trouble Man. Following the lead of Isaac Hayes and Curtis Mayfield who similarly had found success scoring films, Gaye wrote, produced, and performed the soundtrack as a standalone album. However unlike Shaft and Superfly, Gaye’s soundtrack was mostly instrumental. In assessing why Gaye chose to refrain from singing throughout the majority of the record, historian Marc

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Anthony Neal offers the following assessment: “The narrative silence that undergirds Gaye’s Trouble Man, particularly when contextualized with the narrative themes of What’s Going On and post-King political repression, represented a conscious retreat from mass-market-mediated social protest. As a commercial product, Trouble Man, unlike the more commercially valuable What’s Going On, could not be reduced or manipulated by mass-market sensibilities.” While Neal’s comments are insightful, it is likewise important to note that whether Gaye sought to cross over becomes a moot point given that the Trouble Man title track reached number seven on the Billboard Pop Singles Chart. The movie, on the other hand, was a critical failure and widely regarded as one of the worst films ever made.

After the Trouble Man project, Gaye maintained his magic touch as composer and prophet with Let’s Get It On in the summer of 1973. The album quickly became Gaye's greatest commercial success, selling more than five million copies. The album’s title track skyrocketed to the number one position on both the R&B and Pop Chart, generating unprecedented profits. Let's Get It On was not concerned with addressing society and politics as What’s Going On had been. Instead, Gaye emerged as a voice of the Sexual Revolution, brazenly extolling the virtues of sex, while pontificating on the transcendental power of romance. Gaye was erotic, but never lewd as he consistently

143 Neal, What the Music Said, 68.
144 Whitburn, The Billboard Book, 262.
146 Ritz, Divided Soul, 163.
positioned amorous sensibilities in the context of traditional familial structures.\textsuperscript{147} Moreover, \textit{Let’s Get It On}, exposed and, in a sense, sanctified the role of lovemaking as Gaye believed black America had come to embrace it, ignoring and contradicting distorted, racist assumptions about black sexuality. With the abandonment of social and political commentary, Gaye had become as controversial, and successful, as ever. Gaye’s sensual celebration continued with his subsequent release, \textit{I Want You}, but did not match the success that he experienced in conjunction with \textit{Let’s Get It On}.

As seminal and sensational as Marvin Gaye was, the most flamboyant and influential Motown artist to reinvent R&B in the post-assassination environment was George Clinton. Clinton had served as an auxiliary member of the Motown community as a songwriter and occasional back-up vocalist. He was, of course, destined for much more. As Clinton declared forty-one years after Dr. King’s death, “(Back then) it was at the end of Motown’s reign, and we started seeing music coming back from England to the States. I said, ‘Wait a minute, we’re going in the wrong direction.’ So we just made a quick turnaround. Threw our suits away. Got some jeans with holes and patches in ‘em and started becoming hippies.”\textsuperscript{148} Clinton went on to say in a 2008 Tavis Smiley interview that pre-1968 Motown advanced a kind of proto-funk that he, Bootsy Collins, and other premier Motown players developed after Motown moved to L.A. to work more closely with the film industry. Clinton stated, “Since they were doin’ rock ‘n’ roll and

\textsuperscript{147} Michael Eric Dyson, \textit{Mercy, Mercy Me: The Art, Loves and Demons of Marvin Gaye} (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 89.

blues, I’m gonna do the mid-tempo. I’m gonna do that nasty part of it - you know the real slow, drunk music - and so we would never change it, you know, because rock ‘n’ roll got co-opted from us, blues almost got co-opted from us, I mean, to the point that we didn’t even realize it was black music. We said, ‘that’s white music’ when we heard a rock ‘n’ roll song. So, we said we were gonna do blues so loud and so long that there wouldn’t be any doubt that funk would be ours forever.”

_P-Funk Promises_

The legendary Parliament-Funkadelic that Clinton led to stardom was not what one might call a formal part of Motown’s talent stable. The outfit began in the form of a doo-wop group called “The Parliaments,” which Clinton formed in the late 1950s in Plainfield, New Jersey.149 Throughout the 1960s, the original members of this collective congregated at Clinton’s New Jersey barbershop, the Silk Palace, where Clinton “was making a thousand dollars a week and spending it all on making records. That was the only way I could get to do my own thing, was to pay for it.”150 Their sound was, for all intents and purposes, unremarkable, though good enough to earn Berry Gordy’s attention and a small fan-base from 1960 to 1967.

Clinton’s emergence as a funk superstar was a few years off during the late 1960s and, while treading water as a conventional outfit, his Parliaments required a boost of creative genius from an outside source. As fate had it, the arrival of Bootsy and Phelps “Catfish” Collins dramatically reinvented what Clinton had started nearly a decade


150 Vincent, _Funk_, 11.
earlier. By 1971, the Collins brothers officially joined the P-Funk organization and, in doing so, redirected the band toward experimental greatness. At this pivotal stage in the band’s career, one thing became abundantly clear to both Clinton and the Collins: James Brown represented the future of black music. The Collins brothers knew this better than most, having played under James Brown’s rigorous command for over a year. The Collins’ musical contributions helped Brown score hits such as “Sex Machine,” “Super Bad,” “Talking Loud and Saying Nothing,” and “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved,” in 1970. On Brown and the P-Funk sound, Bootsy Collins stated, “James made us more aware of the One and dynamics, which Funkadelic had never experienced before.”

The political concerns taken up by James Brown also informed the burgeoning outfit’s commitment to empowering and speaking out to black America. Though not as overt as Brown was in word and deed, P-Funk was without question a project that took aim at interpreting, celebrating, and glorifying black America in an environment recently and fundamentally altered by Dr. King’s death.

For Clinton, Bootsy Collins remained somewhat elusive from 1972 until 1974 as the bass virtuoso free-lanced throughout the music industry and explored his own interests. When he finally settled down and committed to P-Funk, Bootsy and Clinton’s talented crew stood at the threshold of its most successful phase. The heavy funk grooves that characterized P-Funk in its prime were, according to Clinton, “Out of

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151 Danielsen, Presence and Pleasure, 6.

152 Danielsen, 7.

the hippie vibe of the sixties and something new, it was time to be glitter again.”\textsuperscript{154} For Clinton, this meant the creation of what he called a “P-Funk Cosmology.” This construct included Clinton’s alter ego, “Dr. Funkenstein,” his vast entourage serving as “The Mothership Connection,” and a new, otherworldly discourse comprised of new rhythms, a unique vocabulary, and a spaced-out aesthetic.\textsuperscript{155} Clinton essentially drew from trendy psychedelic elements of the 1970s, his own racial consciousness, and, most importantly, from his enigmatic and inexhaustible creativity. Perhaps the most useful description of the Clinton’s fantasyland comes from 1970s cultural critic Scot Hacker:

For the religiously inclined, P-Funk offered up an array of minor gods, an intangible and omnipotent metaphysical reality (the funk itself), and a whole flotilla of ministers (actually a loose-fitting assemblage of crack musicians and crackpots dedicated to the administration of an entire cosmology). The roots of this church lay deep in the African polyrhythmic pantheon; its disciples (“Maggotbrains” or “Funkateers”) consisted of anyone who sought a quasi-cohesive view of a universe which included a god who danced, and who knew that having a loose booty to shake was as crucial to the keeping of the faith as the rosary was for the Catholic.\textsuperscript{156}

While the absurdity and spectacle of the P-Funk aesthetic was an indisputable attention grabber, the actual performance and construction of their music likewise attracted adventurous listeners of all demographics. According to groove deconstructionist Anne Danielsen, “P-Funk seems to have taken the rhythmic layers of James Brown, chopped them up into pieces, mixed the pieces, and then replayed them under orders to obtain the

\textsuperscript{154} Corbett, “George Clinton: Every Day His Dog,” 145.

\textsuperscript{155} Danielsen, Presence and Pleasure, 8.

absolute maximum jolt out of every note.”157 The power and appeal of P-Funk’s musical and stylistic distinctiveness surfaced in spectacular fashion with their most acclaimed album trilogy: *Up for the Down Stroke* (1974), *Chocolate City* (1975), and *Mothership Connection* (1976). The P-Funk cosmology, while the product of Clinton’s limitless imagination, successfully capitalized on psychedelic themes of the seventies.

*Up for the Down Stroke* was the band’s second album, which followed their somewhat lack-luster debut, *Osmium*, in 1971. Unfettered by the flat reception it received in 1971, *Up* marked a much more cohesive and engaging effort that received strategic support from Casablanca Records, a subsidiary of Warner Brothers Inc. The album also included a funky interpretation of an older Parliaments’ doo-wop song, “Testify.” This particular tune underscored the bands dramatic rebirth and although the reworked version did not eclipse the success of its 1967 incarnation, *Up*’s title track reached number ten on the R&B Chart and number 63 on the Hot 100 Chart.158 The original title of the album was “Whatever Makes Baby Feel Good,” and the cover of the album featured group leader George Clinton standing over a woman who appears to be distressed, wearing a black wig and monster-type gloves.159 It is safe to say that no one ever had seen or heard anything quite like P-Funk exploring this variety of the absurd, but their sonic and cultural alchemy hardly stopped there.


*Chocolate City* continued with similar themes and grooves; it was released in 1975 on the Casablanca Label. Clinton produced it himself and the effort served as a politically charged commentary on black diaspora in urban America, with a particular emphasis on Washington D.C. The actual term “Chocolate City” had been used previously to describe Washington, D.C. where the black population had been growing exponentially through sustained waves of migration.\(^{160}\) According to Kenneth Carroll of the *Washington Post*:

Chocolate City rose from the ashes of 1968 along with black people's hopes for self-determination, whether it took the form of home rule or statehood or something else. My family lived at Montana Terrace in Northeast, the last major public housing built by the city. When the city government announced that it was going to take over the Terrace from the private firm that was managing it, an ad hoc tenant’s organization sprang up almost overnight. Many of the folks who lived at the Terrace had moved in from other projects, and knew how poorly the city had managed them. They were not about to be “taken for bad,” which in D.C. slang is the worst thing that can happen to you.\(^{161}\)

Since the late 1960s, “Chocolate City” was a term that also had been used by Washington’s black radio deejays on WOL-AM and WOOK-AM. Bobby “The Mighty Burner” Bennett, a black DJ on WOL, told the *Washington Post* in 1998 that, “Chocolate City was the expression of D.C.’s classy funk and confident blackness.”\(^{162}\) In a similar vein, George Clinton used the term as a critique of the negative stigma that had been

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\(^{161}\) Carroll, “The Meanings of Funk.”

\(^{162}\) Carroll.
applied to black inner city populations during the age of white flight.\textsuperscript{163} The lyrics of the song likewise note the growth of black ghettos as a national phenomenon: “There's a lot of chocolate cities around/We got Newark, we got Gary/Someone told me we got L.A./And we're working on Atlanta/But you're the capital C.C.”\textsuperscript{164} For Clinton, his funk was a kind of homily about which he stated, “Once we did Chocolate City – putting black people in situations they had never been in, and it worked – I knew I had to find another place for black people to be. And Space was that place.”\textsuperscript{165} Clinton was, at the very least, correct about the appeal of his utopian construct; as such, the track, “Chocolate City,” reached number 24 on the R&B Chart and number 98 on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart.\textsuperscript{166} Moreover, “Ride On,” the second single from the album, reached number 64 on the Black Chart.\textsuperscript{167} On the whole, \textit{Chocolate City} peaked at number 18 on the Billboard Soul LP Charts in 1975 and reached number 91 on the Album Chart.\textsuperscript{168} 

After the success of \textit{Chocolate City}, \textit{Mothership Connection} followed up with added creativity and enhanced commercial success. Widely regarded as P-Funk’s definitive work, the album went platinum with the help of former James Brown musicians Fred Wesley and Maceo Parker, who were the latest additions to the already

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{165} Danielsen, \textit{Presence and Pleasure}, 114.

\textsuperscript{166} “Billboard Hot 100,” in \textit{Billboard Magazine}, June 14\textsuperscript{th}, 1975.


\textsuperscript{168} Burchmeier, “Chocolate City: Parliament.”
supremely talented P-Funk ensemble. Mothership included three exceedingly infectious tracks in “P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up),” “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” and “Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof off the Sucker).” Each of these tracks performed well on the charts while the entire album remained for twenty-nine weeks on the Billboard Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums Chart while generating 1.6 million in sales. 

The work has also provided endless samples for future rap producers.

Conclusion

Although the Motown contribution to American popular culture is poignant and profound, collective memory tends to recall affectionately a Hitsville sound that is markedly different than anything P-Funk added to the evolution of black American music. A year prior to the Dr. King’s death, Motown had already established its unique legacy and stood as an immense commercial success despite the volatile state of race relations that characterized American cities nationwide. In 1968 alone, thirteen Hitsville singles reached the top ten on the Pop Charts, signaling sustained crossover success. 

These hits included “Love is Here and Now You're Gone” and “The Happening” by the Supremes, which reached the number one position. Motown had five major labels active including Motown, Tamala, Gordy, Soul, and V.I.P., all of which thrived. 

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having achieved such compelling success, Gordy’s Hitsville, like the Civil Rights Movement, gradually became a “houseful of discontent.” Even with unimaginable wealth, Gordy grew reclusive throughout the late sixties and seventies and started to isolate himself from the people who had helped him build the company from scratch. Detaching the organization from its original community and moving its base to Los Angeles, he also appointed to high-ranking positions individuals who had no history with company, let alone experience with making music.\(^{173}\) In other words, Gordy was becoming a more conservative businessman while his black colleagues and fan-base in Detroit became increasingly sympathetic to a more aggressive and flamboyant spirit escalating within and outside of the Black Freedom Movement. To be sure, Motown had provided the soundtrack for activism and black identity up until Dr. King’s demise; the music that helped to define black culture thereafter would sound and seem much different than the soul that Motown had once made famous.

In the wake of Dr. King’s death, classic Motown quickly became the old sound of black America while James Brown and others like him spontaneously emerged as the cutting edge. However behind the times they had become, Motown’s funkier material after 1968 did represent a success effort on the part of musicians who pushed Gordy into new directions. As such, Motown’s post-assassination “funkification” should be regarded as a “bottom up” phenomenon, designed by artists and producers who drew inspiration from a variety of contemporaries who successfully mixed pressing political concerns with funkier songwriting and performance. The Motown acts mentioned above

\(^{173}\) Raynoma Gordy Singleton, *The Untold Story: Berry, Me Motown* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990), 166.
successfully retooled their image and, in doing so, kept Gordy’s operation solvent for over two decades. However after Gordy relocated the company to Los Angeles in 1972, it remained an independent company until June 28, 1988, when Gordy sold it to MCA and Boston Ventures. On the reasoning behind the decision to sell, Gordy stated, “To insure the perpetuation of Motown and its heritage, I decided to clasp hands with one of the most formidable giants in our business, MCA.” Unfortunately, Motown’s identity later dissolved into a series of different owners and labels, few of which maintained a semblance of what Gordy had established. While the legendary organization no longer exists in its own autonomous form, the legend lives on as a distinctly American offering, cherished the world over.

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CHAPTER THREE
FROM SATELLITE TO SOULVILLE: MEMPHIS, STAX RECORDS AND
THE SOUL-FUNK REVOLUTION

Luckily we managed to make great music after Dr. King’s death. Those of us who were writers used our lyrics and melodies to write about and reflect on the African American lifestyle. We had our own little world, and some of us at Stax had a vision of how we should be projected as people. In a sense that was what Dr. King was about.”

— Al Bell, “I Know a Place,” 2005

Stax and me had that funky stuff. That was the difference between Stax and Motown. Motown had the Sweet, Stax had the funk.”

— Rufus Thomas, Respect Yourself: The Story of Stax Records, 2007

Few can deny that the political and social repercussions of Dr. King’s assassination extended deep into the heart of American political and cultural life. In Detroit, Motown gradually modified its classic formula with respect to pressures and expectations intensified after Dr. King’s demise. For Stax Records in Memphis, Tennessee, a similar transformation occurred, but in a more immediate and overt fashion. As opposed to the Berry Gordy milieu, Stax’s rich and talented corps of players was more closely tied to Dr. King and what he tried to accomplish before his untimely demise. Prior to the assassination, the Stax Record Company was a fine illustration of the kind of beauty and success that interracial interaction could produce. The label was a truly
integrated operation in a larger urban environment that was nothing of the sort. After the assassination, the label became an outspoken ally of the Black Freedom Struggle and overtly declared its ongoing support of the Black Freedom Struggle.

*Pre-Assassination Stax*

As a successful hit-making center prior to the assassination, Stax’s Cinderella story began with a white Jim Stewart, who was born in 1930 on a farm in Middleton, Tennessee. After graduating high school in 1948, he moved to Memphis in an effort to find “better jobs, better opportunity, and a better way of life.”¹ After spending two years in the army, Stewart attended Memphis State University where he took courses in Law. After graduation, he took a job at First Tennessee Bank. As a white Memphian, Stewart preserved a love for music that compelled him to hone his fiddle skills whenever he was not working. He eventually became proficient enough to play regularly with a country band at the local Eagle’s Nest Club where Elvis Presley, Bill Black, and Scotty Moore sometimes appeared. At the Eagle’s Nest, Stewart observed “the excitement that hit the stage when Presley performed.” It wasn’t long before Elvis’ undeniable appeal convinced Stewart that Rock ‘n’ Roll was a “form of freedom and expression that transcended the music of the big band era and even country.”²


² Daniel and Guralnick, “Rock ‘n’ Soul Social Crossroads Project.”
Stewart was not always a lover of rock ‘n’ roll, let alone a black music aficionado. In reflecting on his youth he declared, “I had scarcely seen a black man till I was grown. I had no desire to start something like Stax Records; I had no dream of anything like that. I just wanted music. Just anything to be involved with music – one way or the other.”

Despite Stewart’s initial naiveté, his love for music and determination to remain involved in its creation positioned him favorably in a key historical moment. Fueled by a desire to partake in the local cultivation of rich talent, he discovered the ability to ignore racial norms and simply “let them play.” In an even broader sense, Stewart’s mission evolved into a clear illustration that real and meaningful relationships could cut across thickly drawn lines of color.

Bringing his financial know-how, legal expertise, and burgeoning love for new music into a serious business venture, Stewart opened a record store inside a dingy northside Memphis garage that by 1957 became known as the Satellite Record Store. A year later, Stewart and his sister Estelle Axton, who provided the financial assistance needed to keep the business running, moved the operation to Brunswick, Tennessee, just outside of Memphis. In less than a year, the two moved yet again into the abandoned Capitol Theatre at 926 East McLemore Avenue in Memphis. Here, Satellite managed to stay afloat by serving up the latest trends in popular music to the growing number of black and white Memphians who had recently caught rock and roll fever.\(^3\)


In Memphis circa 1958, Stewart undoubtedly benefited from the manner in which home and car radios perpetuated a rock ‘n’ roll epidemic among southern audiences. WHBQ deejay Dewey Phillips wielded additional responsibility for flooding the airwaves with racially charged sounds, further enticing curious white Memphian youth. Phillips pushed some of the hippest records available at the time. Legendary Stax guitarist and sound engineer, Steve Cropper, stated, “I kinda grew up on Dewey Phillips’ ‘Red, Hot, and Blue’ show. He played a lot of R&B records. We were highly influenced by that.”\(^5\)

Riding the wave of a budding music industry and situated in the midst of numerous talented country and blues players, the Satellite shop soon became a hip meeting place for the very same session musicians, songwriters, and vocalists that would later work for Stax Records. Among those who would drop by to sample the vinyl was keyboardist Booker T Jones who in 1961 said, “I think there would have been no Stax records without the Satellite Record Shop.”\(^6\) Future MG’s bassist Donald “Duck” Dunn also frequented the hot spot, primarily because he was unable to get rhythm and blues records from the music vendors in his mostly white neighborhood. At the counter of the Satellite store where Dunn got his fix sat none other than Steve Cropper himself working the register.

All the while, Estelle Axton demonstrated a remarkable ability to seek out R&B music that had the potential for mass appeal. Regularly offering up and coming records, she simultaneously attracted the neighborhood’s growing number of black youth.


\(^6\) Bowman, 12.
including aspiring artists like Booker T. Jones. As Stax evolved, the store became an indispensable resource for Stax players who needed to hear the material of other musicians. For example, Booker T. and the MG’s interpretive rendition of *Abbey Road* entitled *McLemore Ave.* along with Otis Redding’s celebrated rendition of the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction” were each made possible by the shop’s collection.”

After its first full year of operation, the Satellite Record Shop gained steadily in local popularity and, in doing so, stabilized its financial situation. With a cash base and a multitude of talented players ripe for the picking, the company expanded its operation to include a recording studio and record distribution division. After initially offering a large number of country records in addition to Rock ‘n’ Roll, the company switched to selling R&B music exclusively. Stewart’s choice to commit to this burgeoning market was linked to a trend established by larger record companies like Atlantic that had transformed “race records” into bonafied R&B during the late fifties. In a sense, a ready-made national audience, particularly in a South poised to purchase “real” black music awaited what Stewart and Axton would record and distribute.

As early as 1958, Jerry Wexler, Atlantic’s head of distribution, made the choice to sell R&B records featuring black musicians. He said, “It was very much in our interest to bring the music of black artists to the general public, to mainstream America, because we were a small, struggling company and we wanted to expand our market. And it did have a residual effect of helping to break down the barriers of discrimination.”

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founder and chief executive, Ahmet Ertegun, declared that “we wanted to make funky, soulful records for the southern market and the extension of the southern market in all the big cities where a large population of people who had migrated from the South. That market demanded soul.” Stewart undoubtedly experienced a similar awakening that was on the one hand profit-driven and on the other hand a matter of taste.9

During the summer of 1959, Satellite began recording artists with the intention of following the Atlantic model, which was already profiting from the sounds of an evolving R&B style pioneered by Ray Charles. At this time, the younger label’s premier roster consisted of Carla and Rufus Thomas, the Mar-Keys, the Veltones, Barbara Stephens, the Canes, and William Bell, all of whom would join the ranks of musicians Wexler could bring to his new target southern audience. With Carla Thomas, a local Hamilton High School student trained in voice and opera, Wexler saw the potential for the first Satellite hit song. Wexler’s affection for Thomas grew intensified after a Memphis record press operator told him that her single, “Cause I Love You” was to be mass-produced in preparation for substantial sales. Capitalizing on this information, Wexler promptly paid Stewart and Axton a thousand dollars for the master copy of the song along with a small royalty on all sales. “Cause I Love You” also featured for the first time Booker T. Jones on the baritone saxophone.

Jones’ long time affiliation with Stax began on an average school day at nearby Booker T. Washington High School in 1960. As he sat in an eleventh grade classroom, friend David Porter summoned him into the hallway to make him a fateful offer. Earlier

that day Porter had received word from Rufus and Carla Thomas that they needed a baritone sax player for a soon to be hit, “Cause I Love You.” Porter then managed to remove Jones and a saxophone from the school and transported both essential ingredients to the Stax studio. This particular recording session was the first of many for Jones, who would go on to spend the remainder of his high school days “rushing to get papers down so he could head on over to Stax to record.”  

Shortly after recording “Cause I Love You,” Jones gradually convinced Stax management to use him as a keyboard player instead of a saxophonist. As he stated, “I convinced them to try me out on piano, and eventually organ.”

With help of Jones’ lead baritone sax line, “Cause I Love You” put Stax on the map. At the same time, the song’s moderate success did not quite fulfill Wexler and his informant’s sale projections. Luckily, the single did generate the revenue that Jim and Estelle needed to record “Gee Whiz,” which became the first Thomas single to hit the charts in both the R&B and Pop categories, signaling a cross-over success. In March of 1961, the tune peaked at number thirteen on the Pop Chart and established Carla as a national star. That same year, Memphis begrudgingly desegregated some of its schools, but still enforced segregation codes for movie theatres. As irony would have it, Carla, despite her nation-wide success, faced arrest for the mere act of going to see a film.

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11 Gross, “Booker T. Jones.”

Wexler, unfettered by such racism, later purchased the rights to the father and daughter singing duo for the next five years. This move marked the beginning of a long-standing relationship between Satellite Records – soon to be known as Stax- and Atlantic. It was also at this time that Stewart and Axton faced a lawsuit from a record company in California already called “Satellite,” over the use of the label’s name. The Satellite moniker was transformed promptly into “Stax,” which was an amalgamation of the owners’ surnames, Stewart and Axton. As a result, the California company subsequently withdrew its complaint.13

As Stax Records settled into the mostly black neighborhood, Rufus Thomas became a permanent fixture at the young company. Thomas’ association with Memphis’ music industry provided Bell and Axton with an indispensable expertise. He possessed a feel for and familiarity with black American culture that Stewart had yet to establish on his own. The son of a sharecropper from Cayce, Mississippi, Thomas moved to Memphis with his family at an early age. After gravitating toward musical pursuits in high school, he eventually became the main deejay at WDIA, one of the first radio stations in the US to feature an all-black staff and “programming geared toward blacks.”14 In addition to being a radio sensation, he recorded an “answer record” to Big Mama Thornton's hit “Hound Dog,” which he entitled “Bear Cat,” and was released on Sun Records in 1953.

13 Bowman, Soulville, 19, 23.
When Thomas visited the Stax facility unannounced, he brought with him an open-mindedness that was in step with the burgeoning, integrated environment. Of those early days he said, “At that time I thought nothing about white folks. I thought white folks were all the same. I was willing to work with them so long as they could support the music.” Thomas continually offered vital assistance to Stewart and Axton not only as a songwriter and mentor for his daughter Carla, but also as an innovative musician involved in the production of numerous hits.

By 1962, Rufus remained at Stax while daughter Carla Thomas continued to enjoy success at the register and on the airwaves; however, as her popularity waned during the next year, Stax began to struggle financially. Fortunately, a unique studio sound was beginning to ripen around a loosely affiliated group that would become Booker T and the MG’s. This assemblage of musicians included trumpeter Wayne Jackson, baritone player Andrew Love, keyboardist Booker T. Jones, guitarist Steve Cropper, and bassist Lewis Steinberg. For its time, this arrangement was highly unusual in that it consisted of white and black members set to tour on an international circuit.

The chief creative force in the MG’s was Booker T. Jones who began his musical career as a teenager by playing upright bass with blues legends Bowlegs Miller and Willie Mitchell at the local Flamingo Club. He soon switched to the organ after hearing

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15 Gordon and Neville, Respect Yourself.


17 Peter Guralnick, Sweet Soul Music, 124.
Jack Mc Duff’s combo organ one night at the club. Mc Duff played the lead with is left hand and played the bass lines with his right hand and on the pedals. Booker was so impressed by what could be achieved on the keys that he decided to take piano lessons. He said, “No one was playing organ much then. I was able to get attention and get a job by playing it.” Ultimately, Jones made a world-renowned name for himself by mastering the Hammond B-3 organ; it became his sound of choice for live and studio performances.

Working with Jones on a number of studio sessions was local Memphian Steve Cropper, who was steadily becoming Stewart and Axton’s preferred guitarist. In the late fifties, Cropper worked as the clerk for the Satellite Record Store and, in his spare time, increased his musical proficiency by receiving intense instruction from the widely respected black jazz guitarist Lynn Vernon. As his skills improved, Cropper, along with close friends Charlie Freeman and Donald Dunn formed the Royal Spades. According to Dunn, “the Spades played anything from Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard to Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley stuff. We were a white band trying to play rhythm and blues music, kinda the first in Memphis to do that. We used to play for, like, five dollars and a few free beers. It was just a joy to play.” The Royal Spades later morphed into the Mar-Keys for whom Cropper co-wrote and recorded “Last Night.” In the early summer of 1961, the record shot into the Top 5 on both the Pop and R & B Charts.

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18 Dickerson, *Going Back to Memphis*, 125.

In the wake of “Last Night’s” success, Stewart proclaimed that “Cropper was my right-hand man, he would come to the studio and sit there and take care of business; he was disciplined and responsible. Steve was the key.” In terms of Cropper’s function at Stax, he offered far more to Axton than slick guitar lines. Cropper became adept at mixing and recording in the studio and, as a result, he participated in the production or performance of every record issued by Stax from the fall of 1960 to the close of 1971. Stewart was so reliant upon Cropper that he gave him the keys to the Stax studio, considering him the label's “de facto A&R man and engineer.”

While Cropper was a continuous resident of the MG’s and Stax from nearly the beginning, Mar-keys’ bassist Donald “Duck” Dunn would take up residency in the studio only after the original bassist, Lewis Steinberg, the well-known black and Jewish bass player, left Stax in order to pursue other musical opportunities. Despite a late arrival to the Stax studio, Dunn first entered the picture as Cropper’s neighborhood pal and band mate. As a Memphis native who helped look after his four brothers and two sisters while his father drove a cab, Dunn was a self-made virtuoso whose bass lines complemented nearly every Stax hit ever produced.

Before Dunn settled into his steady role, Steinberg served as the Stax studio bassist from 1960 to 1964. During this period Dunn toured with the Mar-keys who received a wider range of venues by maintaining an all-white line-up. The fact that a

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large percentage of potential shows throughout the South were reserved for white acts was, in a sense, the kind of obstacle, among others, that slowly redirected both Dunn and Cropper to the Stax studio, where they could focus on writing hits with whomever they chose.\(^23\) Once Dunn had finished touring with the Mar-keys, he seized an opportunity to replace Lewis Steinberg, who was more interested in playing out and, in 1964, Dunn assumed permanently the duties of Stax session bassist.\(^24\)

Completing the Stax house band was drummer Al Jackson Jr., a black American who had played with Jones at the Flamingo Room in Memphis on several occasions. After witnessing firsthand Jackson’s technical command of jazz drumming in the Willie Mitchell Band, Jones invited Jackson to Stax for a recording session.\(^25\) Jackson remained at Stax from that point forward. According to Jones, Jackson was as indispensable to Stax as famed bassist James Jamerson was to Motown. The MG’s signature sound was in large part attributed to how “Al brought the groove and didn’t stop until we got the groove on whatever song whether it was “Can’t Turn Me Loose” or “Green Onions” or “Knock On Wood” or “Try a Little Tenderness.” That groove was inside of him and us; it was the combination.”\(^26\)

With two white members and two black members, Stewart facilitated a musical project that did not exist anywhere else in Memphis. Although he was not necessarily

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\(^{24}\) Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 126.

\(^{25}\) Guralnick, 127.

fixated on the fact that he was sponsoring an integrated band at that time, he did observe that he and sister Axton “never saw color, only talent.” Beyond Axton and Stewart’s ability to see beyond color, Stax historian Robert Bowman emphasizes that there were additional, “accidental” circumstances that lead to the operation’s becoming integrated. The primary force to which he refers is the neighborhood surrounding 926 E. McLemore Ave, which was quickly becoming a ghetto and, as a result, the majority of talented musicians who entered the fold were black.27 Jim Stewart, on the other hand, maintained that Stax, regardless of the process by which it became integrated, was ultimately an enterprise that fostered “black and white individuals making music for themselves.”28 A few years later, Stewart further acknowledged the implications of the project by stating “we were sitting in the middle of a segregated city, a highly segregated city and we were in another world when we walked into the studio.”29

If Stewart, Axton, or anyone at Stax had misgivings about reaching across the color line, the explosion of commercial success about to be experienced by Booker T. Jones, Lewis Steinberg, Al Jackson, and Steve Cropper eclipsed these concerns quickly. On a summer morning in 1962 - before the MG’s had even decided upon a name for their outfit - the musicians arrived at Stax studios to serve as the back-up band for a white rock and roll singer by the name of Billy Lee Riley, whom Stewart believed could deliver a chart-topping hit. As they awaited Riley’s arrival, the MG’s playfully began working out

27 Bowman, Soulville, 20.

28 Stax Documentary, unreleased and currently showing at the Stax Museum of American Soul Music.

29 Quote obtained from wall of the Stax Museum of American Soul Music.
a blues progression. Since Riley never appeared that day and because Jim Stewart liked what he heard coming from the band, Stewart decided to tape the session. The result of this impromptu recording was the single “Behave Yourself.”

For the flip side of the record, the band began rehashing a riff that Jones had developed a few weeks earlier. As the rest of the band played along, Cropper realized that something remarkable had taken place. He exclaimed “Shit, this is the best damn instrumental I’ve heard in I don’t know when. I knew we had a winner there.” Because Stewart had recorded “Behave Yourself” and “Green Onions” intending fully to distribute it, the MG’s had to decide upon a name for their project on the spot. Jones claimed that bands name became “Booker T and the MG’s because “Al Jackson said ‘Booker T and the…’ and he looked out the window and saw a little MG car and said ‘Booker T and the MG’s. It was all just a little bit more than a joke.”

Shortly after the newly christened MG’s recorded the track, it went on to become an instrumental anthem for both black and white America, peaking at Number one on the *Billboard's* Rhythm and Blues Chart in 1962 and Number Three on the Pop Chart. This dual success fully illustrated that the MG’s sound transcended the lines that divided American tastes into race-distinct categories. With this crossover success, the MG’s reinvigorated Stax by generating some much-needed income; they also expanded Stax connections in the industry. While “Green Onions” was distributed locally through

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30 Bowman, Soulville, 38.
32 Bowman, Soulville, 39.
Stax/Volt, Atlantic Records boosted its national circulation to over 750,000 copies. Jerry Wexler, the Atlantic co-owner who helped to orchestrate national distribution, returned to the Stax studio in 1963 and sang the praises of the MG’s saying:

Their rhythm was the heart of the matter, the chief reason Memphis mattered. The even racial composition of Booker T and the MG’s became a metaphor in my mind for their extraordinary harmony, in and out of the studio. Booker T Jones, the keyboardist, and drummer Al Jackson were black; guitarist Steve Cropper and bassist Donald “Duck” Dunn were white; and Duck’s predecessor was Jewish (and African American). The results were anything but gray. The boys played in red clay soil, and I was walking into fertile territory. The funkiness of the music – bare-boned, yet razor sharp – knocked my dick in the dirt.33

In a similar vein, Wexler’s right-hand man and head sound engineer, Tom Dowd, said that the MG’s “were the most beautiful people in the world. They didn’t belong in the South. I mean, they couldn’t work in Memphis or Little Rock Arkansas because two members were black and two members were white. It was like; they were in a cocoon, because the band was integrated in a segregated community. They could work in New York, they could work in Los Angeles, but they couldn’t work in their own home town.”34

Dowd’s characterization of the race issue and the degree to which it impinged on the MG’s national success is, in many respects accurate. At the same time, two additional factors accounted for the MG’s inability to capitalize fully on their commercial success. First, Booker T. Jones was an undergraduate student at Indiana University while “Green

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34 Moormann, *Tom Dowd and the Language of Music*. 
Onions” was making its way up the Billboard Charts. Even if Jones desired to take the MG’s on a national tour, his schedule did not allow for it. Moreover, Jones was determined to complete his college education. The second reason why the MG’s rarely toured is that Stax needed the group to remain in the studio because they were the unparalleled rhythm section that no other outfit could copy adequately. To Wexler and Atlantic, their sound was worth more in the studio than on the road.³⁵

The very same issue that arguably curtailed the MG’s growth was ironically the virtue that set them apart from other acts. In highlighting the magic that resulted from the band’s integrated make-up, Isaac Hayes, who was just getting started as standby session man in 1963, observed that the MG’s were a special force in American music. “They were an integrated band, half white, half black. There was a "cotton curtain" back in the Sixties,” he declared.³⁶ Hayes went on to say that “bands were all segregated in Memphis. But the MG's were like a family. That integration was a sign of things to come. Their sound was one of a kind.”³⁷

As Hayes and Dowd suggested, the MG’s sound was an attractive force of racial collusion in American popular music, just not on tour in the South. Based on the band’s resume, however, there can be little doubt that the MG’s transcendence of bigotry figured heavily into their unique sound and sustained sales success. At the same time, there was something about their style that caught the attention of mass audiences. There was a certain rhythmic quality that suggested blackness and, yet, a song structure that was very

³⁵ Guralnick, Sweet Soul Music, 156.


³⁷ Hayes, “Booker T. and the MG's.”
much akin to a country jam; it was a dialectic between two opposing cultural forces eventually synthesized into a natural conclusion. In essence, the magic was the music’s ability to exist perfectly as a sonic coalescence of two cultures at odds; it was a long overdue meeting between black and white America.

Although the crossover success of “Green Onions” represented the apex of the MG’s commercial prowess as a featured act, they continued to crank out hits from the Stax studio. Throughout the 1960s, the MG's recorded “Hip Hug-Her,” “Groovin’,” “Soul-Limbo,” “Hang 'em High,” and “Time Is Tight,” all of which were top 40 entries on the Billboard R&B and Pop Charts between 1967 and 1969. On the whole, the sonic product of this racially mixed outfit served as the foundation for the sound that garnered several more Billboard hits as the backing band for Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, Albert King, Johnnie Taylor, Eddie Floyd, The Staple Singers, and Wilson Pickett.

Because Stax provided Atlantic with such a wealth of sensational and commercially viable material from 1960 to early 1968, Wexler regarded the operation as “one of the best associations or arrangements we ever made.” Atlantic certainly maintained a strong position in the music industry before it was bought out by Warner Brothers in 1967; its catalogue extended far beyond Stax’ offerings and maintained key sales in the jazz and rock ‘n’ roll markets. At the same time, one can argue that Wexler’s claim was the result of not only Booker T and the MG’s success, but also the incomparable singing of Otis Redding.

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38 Moormann, Tom Dowd and the Language of Music.
Redding got his informal start in the music business while working for Macon guitarist Johnny Jenkins’ local band, the Pinetoppers. The band later recorded with the Georgia-based Confederate Label in 1960. Jenkins came to Memphis to record in October of 1962, and it was during this date that Redding received an opportunity to show the people at Stax his astounding talent. At the end of Jenkins’ session, Redding belted out “These Arms of Mine,” a ballad that he had written on his own. Having astonished the people at Stax on the spot, Redding soon became the darling or “natural born prince,” as Wexler called him, of the Stax roster.

Redding eventually used Booker T. and the MG’s as his backing band and, in doing so, involved himself with the arrangements of his songs, whistling those parts that would later become horn sections. His solo career began picking up speed in 1966, when “Mr. Pitiful,” “I've Been Loving You Too Long,” “I Can't Turn You Loose,” a cover of the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction,” and "Respect” became big sellers. Redding’s chief audience during his early rise to fame tended to be black Americans, as his showings on the Pop Chart remained relatively low. He was nonetheless tremendously respected by many white groups, particularly the Rolling Stones, who covered Redding’s “That's How Strong My Love Is” and "Pain in My Heart.”

With Redding on hand, studio experiences became legendary events. In the throes of passion, Redding often ripped off his shirt and furiously directed players to follow his lead. Duck Dunn described the experience saying, “It was never a routine


40 “Otis Redding: Biography.”
session with Otis. You’d go along six weeks, say, eight hours a day, and all you’d ever see was Jim (Stewart) with a hand on his chin, and then Otis would come in, and, boy, he’d just bring everybody up. ‘Cause you knew something was gonna be different. When Otis was there, it was just a revitalization of the whole thing. You wanted to play with Otis. He brought out the best in you. If there was a best, he brought it out. That was his secret.” Indeed, Redding’s energy and determination, along with an uncanny ability to write compelling, tender and sexy songs, was what enabled him to garner three top 10 soul hits in 1965 alone.41

Although Redding’s early success was impressive in its own right, it was not quite enough to single-handedly resuscitate the label, which barely stayed afloat in 1965. In an effort to stimulate national sales, Stewart began forging a relationship with former Martin Luther King Jr. pupil, Albert Bell, who had recently given up civil rights activity and turned to the music industry. Bell became a useful A&R contact for Stax by using his popular deejay status in Washington D.C. to peddle the popular gritty soul music of Stax to a new demographic. He stated, "To me, as a jock, knowing the power of the music, it became an asset. I went on the air with some Otis Redding and William Bell, and I started having fun in Washington, D.C., because nobody else would play the music in Washington and in Baltimore and all those areas. The music that was dominant was the doo-wop music and the early Motown music. So there I was with all of the great Stax

41 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 151.
music that they had at that time, playing that and getting a lot of attention in Washington, D.C., and pretty soon I became top jock there.”

Stewart continued to rely on Bell whose promotions of Stax music did help record sales somewhat, but not enough to bring Stax out of debt. Stewart, who knew that Bell’s compelling radio endorsements could not fully restore the company's financial stability, realized that Bell’s expertise, was something of a rare treasure. As a result, Stewart called Bell and asked him to become the label’s chief promotion person on a full-time basis. Bell described Stewart’s somewhat desperate proposition declaring, “Jim called me and said, ‘Man, I wish you'd consider coming to Memphis and taking over as the promotion person at Stax records. We really have a problem. We aren't selling records. Atlantic isn't getting product played for us. I'm $90,000 in the hole and about to go under. But I believe that if you came here and worked for the company, the disk jockeys around the country that respect you would play this product if you were involved here.’”

After accepting the offer and relocating to Memphis, Bell helped push Stax artists like Sam & Dave, Johnnie Taylor, Otis Redding, and the Staples Singers nationwide and beyond. He declared, “Pretty soon, we got to the point where instead of selling 300,000 singles, we're selling a million singles, and instead of selling 30,000 albums, we're selling a half-million and a million albums.” Such success was the ideal goal for Bell who had shifted his view of black empowerment from one of civil rights activism to black 


43 Koch, “Al Bell Takes us There,” 49.

44 Koch, 51.
capitalism. In the midst of the economic success he helped to establish for Stax, he discovered the added bonus of a harmoniously integrated environment. As he stated, “To sit in that office with this white man, sharing the same telephone, sharing the same thoughts and being treated like an equal human being was a breath of fresh air for me.”

While Bell’s observation is encouraging when one considers the state of a deeply segregated South circa 1967, the racial accord to which he referred proved all too fragile in the face of Dr. King’s death.

_The Soul-Funk Reaction_

Regarding Dr. King and his impact on Memphis race relations in particular, Isaac Hayes said, “When Dr. King came to Memphis for the last march, I marched with him. We were disrupted by the police. We got maced, and we told each other to go back to Mason Temple, where the march began. I got locked outside with a bunch of people, and dogs were sicced on us. It was a rough time.”

Memphis-based Stax Records was located at 26 E. McLemore Ave, less than one mile away from the site of King’s death at the Lorraine Motel. Hayes said of the familiar establishment, “When it was too hot in the summer, we didn’t have air condition and so we played by the Lorraine’s pool. (The manager) Mr. Berry would bring us fried chicken and ice cream and we just frolicked until the sun went down, until it was time to go back to work.”

In a similar vein, legendary Stax vocalist Mavis Staples fondly remembered the Lorraine as a refuge for

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45 Gordon and Neville, *Respect Yourself.*


47 Gordon and Neville, Interview with Isaac Hayes, in *Respect Yourself* DVD.
swimming, for socializing, and for song writing. She said, “The Lorraine was just THE Hotel. It was a hotel for blacks in Memphis. Everyone stayed at the Lorraine. If you wanted to meet up with your friends, anytime you went to the Lorraine, somebody was there.” Guitarist virtuoso Steve Cropper and session horn player Wayne Jackson also enjoyed the hotel’s amenities when they required a quiet and comfortable place to fine-tune songs for studio recordings.

When Stax singer William Bell and other label musicians first heard the news of Dr. King’s murder, they walked out of a recording session and escorted Duck Dunn and Steve Coppper to their cars, through an angry mob that had formed outside the studio. When Stax singer William Bell and other label musicians first heard the news of Dr. King’s murder, they walked out of a recording session and escorted Duck Dunn and Steve Coppper to their cars, through an angry mob that had formed outside the studio.49 Hayes and singer songwriter David Porter left the scene and quickly drove to the Lorraine, where they encountered thousands of agitated Memphians.50 At the outset of the tragedy, Hayes was dumbfounded and discovered himself “filled with so much bitterness and anguish, till (he) couldn’t deal with it.” Booker T. Jones likewise acknowledged the grim nature of the event when he declared in a recent interview how, “That was the turning point for relations between the races in the South.”

Jones proved correct in his assessment of the matter; both his own experiences and those of his colleagues confirmed a profound transformation in race relations in Memphis and beyond, but also at Stax Records itself. As white horn player Don Nix and

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48 Gordon and Neville, Interview with Mavis Staples, Respect Yourself DVD.
49 Peter Guralnick, That Sweet Soul Music, 355
50 Guralnick, 356.
51 Bowman, Soulville, 188.
white bassist Duck Dunn stood in front of the Stax studio on the evening of April 4th, 1968 they also stood at the threshold of a new era in popular music, capped off by a preliminary wave of rioting and looting. Nix said of the immediate commotion, “There was a lot of activity. People were moving around in the streets.” Dunn and Nix did not fear for their own safety during this chaotic moment, largely because they maintained a strong rapport with nearly every black business owner in the vicinity; in essence, they never imagined that anyone in the neighborhood, white or black, would regard them as a target. Nix also remembered how later that evening “Duck Dunn and I started to go out to our cars when Isaac Hayes came out and said, ‘No, I'll drive you out,’ because it was doubtful we would have made it.” As he encountered the seriousness in Hayes’ expression, Dunn began to comprehend the insurmountable nature of the situation and could “see smoke on the horizon.”

In the midst of the pandemonium in Memphis, Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton took precautions to protect the most valuable items housed in the studio: the master tapes. Axton said, “When we heard that Dr. King was assassinated, it was a shock. The only thing we could think of at that particular time was to be safe. We didn’t know whether the building would be burned, somebody would break in, or what would happen because there were riots all over the city. So, Jim and two or three others loaded up the master tapes we had in the back because that was a lot of investment. They put them in the trunk

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of the car and we closed our business. We were very fortunate. We were protected.”

Although several of the white-owned businesses near Memphis’ College Street and McLemore Avenue were destroyed by rioters, the Stax building remained intact. Of this miracle Al Bell proclaimed, “In the aftermath, when all the looting started, David Porter, Isaac Hayes, and I went on the radio and pleaded for calmness and for people to not destroy the neighborhoods. The thing that hit me the most is that Stax was one of the few buildings in the area left untouched. The neighborhood held Stax records in high esteem.”

While the Stax building escaped a tempest of civilian rage, Stax employees did not wholly evade the severe social and cultural repercussions of the tragedy. The day after Dr. King’s assassination, renowned bassist Donald “Duck” Dunn returned to the Stax building to retrieve his bass guitar. Upon arrival, he encountered a distraught Hayes. Dunn recounted the rest of the event: “all of a sudden these cop cars pull up; cops jump out and pull out their guns. They thought these black guys were doing something to hurt us because we were white. Pulling them shotguns on Isaac, you want to see someone feel like an idiot? …And the next day, having to go down there and face that shit, I mean, the cops jumped in because we were white. It makes you feel like shit.”

Hayes’ and Dunn’s alienating experience serves, in many respects, as a key illustration of how tensions outside of the studio complicated relationships among black

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54 Bowman, *Soulville*, 144.

55 Andria Lisle, “I Know a Place,” 105.

and white Stax employees on the inside. Prior to the assassination, Stax was a truly integrated operation that quietly stood in contrast to a Memphis where civic leaders preferred to shut down schools and pools rather than abide by a mandate to integrate them. As a rare biracial operation, Stax provided the conditions necessary for musicians such as Cropper (white), Donald “Duck” Dunn (white), Booker Jones (black), and Al Jackson Jr. (black), and many others to meld their distinctive musical talents, uninhibited by those residual societal norms that discouraged interracial fraternization. Otis Redding’s illustrious career also benefitted greatly from Stax’s integrated arrangement until his tragic death in 1967. It is clear that much of what went on at the Stax studio had existed in an insular realm and shielded its talent from Memphis racial tensions throughout the sixties. The unanimity in isolation that enabled Stax players to develop a distinctive sound irrespective of Memphis’ larger race-related turmoil - already crippled by Otis Redding’s demise - came to a crashing halt with the assassination of Dr. King. As present-day listeners reflect on the enduring legacy of Stax, it is likely that they regard the label as a renowned vendor of Soul music that introduced the world to notable acts such as Otis Redding and Isaac Hayes. At the same time, it remains doubtful whether collective memory includes a critical acknowledgement of the Stax experiment as a short-lived model of black and white musical collaboration, challenging a rigidly racialized culture.

While the legendary Stax label and sound stood as an amalgam of black Blues, Gospel and white Country music, it underwent profound change as a result of Dr. King’s

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57 Gordon and Neville, Respect Yourself.
death. In that vein, new management endeavored to speak less about the King-inspired hope of integration -- a tradition upon which Stax had built its reputation -- and more to the essence of black American culture in its own right. This commentary was to proceed apart from the way it had related to southern white working class culture, regardless of the extent to which it inspired the Stax of old. Moving away from the sound that made them famous, nascent Stax soul-funk claimed a new commercial space unmistakably reserved for a black America reeling from the ultimate setback in the murder of its honorable champion. In other words, there was no better time to stridently assert pride in being black and distrust of everything white.

Floating in a sea of sociopolitical and racial volatility, the Stax operation looked to manager Al Bell as a kind of anchor. Conceptualizing the future of a company so deeply affected by Dr. King’s death, Bell declared “We would have the wherewithal in this capitalistic society to perpetuate our culture, our history, educate our children, etcetera. Dr. King’s death reinforced that thinking in me and I set out from that point forward to make sure that as an African-American, whatever it was I was doing in this music business, I was going to aid in the development of that economic base. I felt that the music of African-Americans was about the only music that America could claim as its own.” In the spirit of Bell’s edict, the uniquely integrated organization would soon convey through its many projects a greater sense of social responsibility and black pride. Ambitious and relentless, Bell envisioned himself the helmsman of a complex modern

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59 Bowman, _Soulville_, 152.
enterprise that manufactured and sold black American popular culture worldwide. With Dr. King at the back of his mind, Bell was in touch with the changing social rhythms of his time and endeavored to position the spirit of blackness into the center of a culture industry that had not justly spoken to or served its grieving public.\(^{60}\)

In an effort to serve this end, Bell soon pressed label founders Jim and Estelle Axton into making him a partner. At a meeting during a picnic on Bell’s boat, he, along with all the key black employees including Bell, Porter, Hayes, Jones, Deanie Parker, and Al Jackson, told Stewart and Axton that if he was not brought on board as a partner, they would “force Jim’s hand if it needed to be forced.”\(^{61}\) Stewart, who had recently agreed to sell Stax to Gulf & Western, made sure that Bell became a partner when Stax entered its new phase of ownership. According to a young engineer at Stax who was privy to this turn of events, “Jim had no choice because of what was happening racially. That company never could have survived if Jim had not taken in Al Bell. If he had made another white man his partner…it just wouldn’t have happened with King and all. We were having to carry guns in there. It was crazy. Jim made a smart move as far as a business, how to survive.”\(^{62}\)

Although Bell was determined to reinvent Stax as a platform for economic success and black activism, the organization still had to contend with severe racial tensions that lingered in the surrounding neighborhood. Conditions at Stax became quite

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\(^{61}\) Bowman, *Soulville*, 143.

\(^{62}\) Bowman, 144.
dangerous when in late 1968 Jim Stewart was threatened by two armed black men with pistols who demanded $50,000 or his life. Of the neighborhood changes Bell remarked, “We started experiencing some attitudes that were directed toward both the white side and the black side of our oasis.” Dunn remarked that “after Dr. King got killed, it got pretty intense around there. Al Bell sent me to Westminster, Arkansas. I bought five .38 pistols. He said, anybody gives you any shit, pull the trigger.” Jim Stewart looked in vain to the FBI for protection and was told, “You’re over there on McLemore Ave. What are you doing over there anyway?” With no help from the FBI and as a result of fearing for his life, Stewart hired Johnny Baylor and Dino Woodard for protection. Baylor had worked security for prizefighter Sugar Ray Robinson and was a former Army Ranger. Baylor also ran a small record label in Harlem. Woodard was determined to instill a sense of gravity among Stax employees who, until this point, had never felt unsafe in the neighborhood. Woodard claimed, “We just challenged them and let them know, hey, it’s do or die. That’s what it is. We’re gonna protect these artists. We’re gonna protect Al Bell. And there would be no more of this robbery, stealing, or stickups.”

63 Stewart then allowed both Baylor and Woodard to become not only the heads of Stax security, but also personal bodyguards for Isaac Hayes.

With Baylor and Woodard as resident guardians, Booker T. Jones began to notice that the two often overstepped their boundaries by interfering with the actual management of the company. He stated, “Sometimes they appeared to harass us.” Singer and songwriter David Porter viewed Bell’s use of Baylor as “a conspiracy to take

63 Gordon and Neville, Interview with Dino Woodard, in Respect Yourself DVD.
control of the most powerful individual in the company at that particular time, which was Isaac. And if he could do that, then he could call any shots that he wanted to call."\(^\text{64}\)

Baylor continued to meddle in Stax’s affairs and, along with pressure from Al Bell, caused Estelle Axton to walk away from the company. Bell and Baylor had already made Axton close down the Satellite record shop adjacent to the recording studio. Without the record shop to oversee, Axton saw no need to remain involved in Stax after over a decade of partial ownership. In 1969, she sold her part of the company and left Jim Stewart to run the operation with Al Bell.\(^\text{65}\)

-Al Bell Sells Blackness-

Despite tensions with Stax label founders, Bell remained determined to reinvent Stax. In doing so, he looked to what Berry Gordy had accomplished in Detroit. He stated, “Motown was like, THE company for me because Berry Gordy was doing what I wanted to see done in the market place with the right company. In terms of how the company was perceived and accepted by the larger segment of society.”\(^\text{66}\) With Motown as a business model, Bell was not satisfied to simply become a carbon copy of the Hitsville Operation. “In my mind, I thought something should be done to distinguish us from Motown. Then people would have to look at us as the one that’s different from Hitsville; this is Soulville.”\(^\text{67}\) Label veteran, Rufus Thomas, elaborated on the distinction

\(^\text{64}\) Gordon and Neville, Booker T. Jones Interview, Respect Yourself DVD.

\(^\text{65}\) Gordon and Neville, Al Bell Interview, Respect Yourself DVD.

\(^\text{66}\) Gordon and Neville, Al Bell Interview.

\(^\text{67}\) Ibid.
saying, “Stax and me had that funky stuff. That was the difference between Stax and Motown. Motown had the Sweet, Stax had the funk.” Bell endeavored to execute his mission by way of what he called a “Soul Explosion Venture.” His aim was to put together 28 albums and “let them know we are a formidable, independent record company.” Since much of the Stax catalog had been claimed by Atlantic in a 1968 deal that ended badly, Bell was looking to rebuild the catalog with a special emphasis on the first independently owned records.

Another part of Bell’s mission to modify Stax’s political image after Dr. King’s death was accomplished by enlisting the help of Larry Shaw, who would become Stax’s vice president of advertising and publicity in late 1969. Before moving to Memphis at the behest of Jesse Jackson and Al Bell, Shaw had made a name for himself as a successful ad-man in Chicago, where he worked for Vince Cullers Agency. As a seasoned ad-man, Shaw was well versed in marketing to black consumers and had enjoyed much success with his promotion of “Afro-sheen,” which was a natural hair-care product made by the Johnson Company. Bell felt that the product’s success was due in large part to the way in which its ads used a Swahilli phrase, “Wantu Wazuri Beautiful

68 Gordon and Neville, Rufus Thomas Interview, Respect Yourself DVD.
69 Gordon and Neville, Al Bell Interview.
70 In 1968, the relationship between Stax and Atlantic ended. Atlantic was sold to Warner-Bros. and the provisions of the original 1965 contract called for the re-negotiation of the agreement to manufacture and distribute Stax records. Stewart learned from Atlantic lawyers that the agreement he had signed in 1965 contained a clause giving Atlantic ownership of all of the Stax material ever released while the distribution agreement was in place. Stewart learned that in the 1965 contract he had signed away the entire Stax catalog for one dollar. Stewart was left with almost nothing and he eventually sold Stax to Gulf & Western. In his autobiography, Jerry Wexler says that he was unaware of this devastating clause in the Stax distribution contract as it had been inserted unbeknownst to him by Atlantic lawyer Paul Marshall. From David Edwards and Mike Callahan, “The Atlantic Records Story,” in Both Sides Now, 2003.
People.” Bell also admired Shaw’s work for Newport Cigarettes; “The Bold Soul in the Blue Dashiki” represented the kind of advertising approach that Stax needed in a post-assassination world. Jim Stewart gradually accepted Bell’s plan to bring Shaw on board. Upon entering the organization, Shaw commented on the common ground he shared with Bell. “He saw I was where he wanted the philosophy of the company to go and had some perceptions that could be applied to the industry. In addition, he was very impressed with Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson as Martin’s Lieutenant. So the King relationship to Jesse, the Jesse relationship to me, my relationship with the movement and the movement’s relationship to Al made a little combination of sensitivities that proved to be very comfortable for him.”

In further building a capable and black-oriented staff, Bell also hired an outsider named Tom Nixon. Nixon had done marketing work for Motown by analyzing Billboard Charts. As such, Bell believed that Nixon would provide Stax with “yet one more flavor of contemporary black music aesthetics.”

It was also during this time that Bell established a close relationship with Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson. Bell had helped Jackson coordinate the ground efforts in Memphis in conjunction with the Chicago-based activist group “Operation Push.” Among other politically relevant statements and maneuvers, the association between Jackson and Bell would lead to the production of a spoken word album called “I am Somebody.” Jackson was also a key figure in the planning and execution of the

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72 Bowman, 195.

73 Ibid, 222.
legendary Wattstax concert, during which Jackson famously delivered the same “I am Somebody” speech. A full fledged ally by 1969, Stax used its newsletter, *Stax Fax*, to reprint SNCC’s black Manifesto, declared its support for the NAACP’s Julian Bond and SCLC’s Coretta King, offered features on Dr. King, and provided editorials on how to counteract racism and prejudice. Motown, while also impacted profoundly by the King assassination, would refrain from advertising its direct affiliation with these more controversial elements of the burgeoning black Nationalist movement.\(^{74}\)

In early 1970, Al Bell renamed the Stax studio “Soulville, USA.”\(^{75}\) At the time, the label regularly advertised that it was in solidarity with the growing intensity of the black pride movement. In this vein, Al Bell declared, “After King died, they said Stax was dead too. From that moment to Wattstax, I was on the kill, to take Stax to a new level of appreciation in this country. It was during that period of time that the ‘fingersnap’ was developed. It signaled a change. In the process, I started looking for whatever that sound could have been, that was a merger between Stax and its raw gritty, gutsy soul and Motown and its contemporary, sophisticated and polished sound.”\(^{76}\) Ad-man Shaw would help Bell refine the Stax image and synchronize it with Bell’s sense of black consciousness and profitability. He took the snapping-fingers logo and changed the color


\(^{76}\) Gordon and Neville, *Respect Yourself*. 
from white to brown, adding the word “Records” beneath the logo. Shaw also designed 
new logos for affiliated distributor, Enterprise, and Stax’s newest sub-division, Respect.  

Al Bell’s ascent to Stax leadership underscores how the rising tide of Black 
Nationalism and post-assassination trauma dovetailed to embolden many key figures in 
and around the music industry. Bringing his social preoccupations to the center of the 
company image, Bell aggressively sought to use Stax in a larger effort to inundate 
American culture with a new and more pronounced spirit of black identity. In essence, 
Bell’s mission led to the creation of a new Stax sound more reliant on African rhythms 
and, in a long-term sense, aimed at “recoding blackness” in the post-assassination 
environment. The message had to be communicated in explicit terms, such as those 
messages found in Stax Fax and Jesse Jackson’s speeches. The message was also 
broadcast stylistically by way of rich new song writing that stood in contrast to the more 
restrained and structured Soul that had made Stax famous prior to Dr. King’s death. 
After April 4th, 1968, the need to announce blackness was indeed pressing and, to refrain 
from doing so, may have been construed as a failure to sympathize with King’s death and 
the broader plight of black America. With regard to the far-reaching effect of the murder, 
Booker T. Jones said, “If Dr. King had not been shot; Stax would still be operating 
today.”

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77 Bowman, Soulville, 223.

78 S. Craig Watkins, “Black is Back, and It’s Bound to Sell! Nationalist Desire and the Production 
of Black Popular Culture,” In Edie S. Glaude Jr. eds., Is it Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black 

79 Stax Museum Exhibit, 2007. Also, Stax was reactivated by Concord Records in 2006, but went 
officially bankrupt in 1975.
Booker T and the MG’s Get Funky

In the context of Stax’s tragedy-induced identity modification, the overall transformation of Booker T and the MGs from clean cut, suit-wearing Soul diplomats to Afro and beard-sporting, bell-bottomed hipsters exemplifies how the King assassination and subsequent sea-change in black sensibilities inspired a new approach to dress as well as to writing and performing songs. Since the Black Power and Nationalist movement expressed its dissent by way of an alternative, Afrostyle, the MG’s can be seen in context, with bushy and brushed-out coiffures, as an important symbol of cultural autonomy and “debrainwashing.” After 1968, the MG’s, although by no means a militant assemblage of individuals, remained integrated, but clearly rejected conventional, white-influenced beauty standards, just as Stokely Carmichael had urged activists to do in 1967 when he declared that “A broad nose, a thick lip and nappy hair is us and we are going to call that beautiful whether they like it or not.” With this declaration in mind, one glance at the cover of Soul Limbo instantly acquaints listeners with a group of musicians draped in polyester, sporting bell-bottoms and adorned with goatees, beards, and bushy, curly hair.

In addition to the politically charged and funky look that the MGs embraced, their music likewise changed dramatically. The MG’s tried and true blend of traditional country and blues backbeat, best exemplified by the 1962 cross-over hit “Green Onions,”


82 Booker T and the MGs, Soul Limbo, CD (Memphis: Stax, Records 1968).
gave way to a fundamentally new MG sound in step with their new look. On *Soul Limbo* (1969) the MG’s created a loose, repetitive and extended groove vibe, curiously different from anything they had recorded in previous years, which were by and large tracks predictably laid out in 1,4, 5 patterns. Although the album did contain a familiar batch of “old-school” Soul standards with tracks like “La La Means I Love You,” and “Be Young, Be Foolish, Be Happy,” the second half of the album caused listeners to take notice. The outfit was speaking a new language as it changed percussive emphasis from the backbeat of traditional soul music to a more complex, one-two-three-four downbeat adorned with a synchronized guitar rhythm and a hard-driving, repetitive brassy swing. On tracks such as “Willow Weep for Me” and “Over Easy,” Jones switches over to the acoustic piano and the band grooves straight through the track, creating a somewhat jazzy ambience.  

This innovative flare surprised critics who were both baffled and thrilled by the fact that the MG’s were no longer relying exclusively on the more predictable R&B song patterns for which they were known.  

*Soul Limbo* also illustrated the extent to which the Memphis instrumental group had decided to announce blackness and style in a symbolically novel way, much like many of their socially conscious contemporaries proceeded to do after 1968.

Throughout late 1969 and much of 1970, the MG’s would continue to record and release their own albums while playing on nearly every Stax release; all the while, Bell essentially was using them as the label’s assembly line. In their own right, Duck Dunn

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and Booker T. Jones, in particular, had developed an appreciation for The Beatles. The appreciation was mutual; John Lennon was a huge Stax fan and Paul McCartney cited Duck Dunn as one of his major influences. In 1970, Jones, Dunn, and Jackson recorded *McLemore Avenue*, which covered thirteen of *Abbey Road*'s songs, condensing twelve of them into three medleys, and included a cover version of George Harrison's “Something.”85 The album's cover was an intentional, albeit respectful, riff on *Abbey Road*’s “street crossing” album cover. The album peaked on Billboard Top 200 Chart at number 107 and on the Billboard R&B Chart at number 19.86

After successfully promoting *McLemore Ave* at home and abroad, the MGs followed up in 1971 with what would be their last Stax single, “Melting Pot,” from their last Stax album of the same name. “Melting Pot’s” repetitive groove-oriented drumming, attacking bass line, and jangly rhythm guitar continued to explore the new freedom of post-assassination cultural expression. The album cover, once again, featured an image of the MG’s clad in beards, with the unkempt and bushy hair.87 The album's title track was edited down to a single release, and issued by Stax as a 45 in spring 1971.88 “Melting Pot” peaked at number 45 on the Billboard Hot 100 in the United States, and at number 16 on the Billboard Black Singles Chart.89 Although this was the MG’s final full-length album, it stands as a seminal record, especially because of the manner in which it

86 Deanie Parker, “Booker T and the MG’s Tour Europe” in *Stax Fax*, March 1970.
87 Booker T and the MGs, *Melting Pot* CD (Memphis: Stax Record, 1971).
89 Bowman, 218- 219.
made elongating and indulging in drawn out explorations of rhythmic hooks a fashionable choice. In this vein, “Melting Pot” lasts more than eight minutes. In contrast to *McLemore Avenue*, the compositions on *Melting Pot* are all original and summon aggressively a danceable funk with songs like “Fuquawi,” which features Cropper’s guitar work at its most intricate stage of development. The album even offered a nod to gospel and Memphis with the track, “Back Home,” which seamlessly blended the force of a lively church service with slow and swampy blues.\(^90\)

Just before *Melting Pot* was recorded, Booker T. Jones confessed that he was not comfortable with Al Bell’s leadership. He was also deeply frustrated by the fact that he had not been made partner in a company whose success he helped to create. As a result, Jones left Stax for California with his new bride Priscilla Coolidge who was the sister of vocalist Rita Coolidge who was white. There is no conclusive evidence suggesting that Jones felt uncomfortable in his interracial marriage at the new Stax. However, Jones clearly was reluctant to leave Memphis and in an attempt to keep the MG’s alive, he offered to bring Al Jackson, Steve Cropper, and Duck Dunn with him to share a record deal that he received from the A&M Corporation. Cropper, Dunn, and Jackson were tempted to follow Jones because they too resented Al Bell, largely because he denied them an opportunity to play on Paul Simon’s soon to be hit, “Bridge over Troubled Waters” for reasons that remain unclear.\(^91\) Although they opted to refrain from leaving with Jones, part of *Melting Pot* had to be recorded in New York instead of the Stax.


\(^{91}\) Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 370.
studio. Dunn and Jackson stayed in Memphis and did the session and production work in house. Cropper did not leave immediately because he still believed that he would eventually become a partner at Stax.¹² Before he was tragically murdered in a home invasion on October 1st, 1975, Jackson also continued a music career outside of Stax; he played on many of Al Green's biggest hits.³³

For over a decade, the MG’s were the architects of the “earthy, simple, and funky” Memphis sound that thrust Rufus and Carla Thomas, Albert King, Wilson Pickett, and the venerable Otis Redding into the spotlight of the music industry.⁴⁴ Booker T. Jones has suggested that the Stax project was a “confirmation that people’s hearts can change, it was a confirmation of a lot of things people were trying to get going in the sixties and had no success with, it was affirmation that people could really care about each other and cooperate. It was crazy.”⁵⁵ With respect to the way in which the MG’s represented an integral part of Stax’s past, a unique and influential brand of soul-funk pushed the label into the future. When the integrated outfit ceased to be the primary architects of the Stax sound, Al Bell seized the opportunity to import a new house band, much of which was comprised of the highly sought after Muscle Shoals Sound players from Sheffield, Alabama.⁶⁶ This new black house band, after a few minor personnel changes, became the primary engine driving Stax “message” song that channeled and

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¹² Cropper also left Stax in 1971 for similar reasons.


⁵⁵ Gross, “Booker T. Jones.”

⁶⁶ Bowman, *Soulville*, 192
interpreted the expanding reality of racial identity during in a post-assassination environment.

Throughout the early 1970s, Stax continued to enjoy sustained commercial success with multiple Billboard hits. While the bulk of their successful songs landed spots on the R&B Charts prior to 1968, many of Stax’s soon-to-be anthemic tracks would cross over onto the Pop Chart and even into the gospel and jazz categories. This genre jumping can largely be attributed to a funky Stax sound that was on the one hand familiar, but on the other a politically charged and technologically enhanced extravaganza that had yet to be classified. In hindsight, it can easily be viewed in a funk context. While Stax hits in the post-assassination era were ahead of the times, they were indeed times during which blackness would break free from conventional categorization and establish a new “Afrocentric” idiom to call its own. Funk had yet to enter the American vernacular as a recognizable entity and Stax would be an indispensable part of building the funk foundation.

_isaac hayes, front and center_

With all the company’s previous successes, it remained stripped of a chief commercial superstar due to the untimely death of Otis Redding who, on December 9th, 1967, tragically perished in a plane crash. With the sizeable void left by Redding’s absence, the torch of stardom gradually passed into the hands of Isaac Hayes. Hayes started his career at Stax as a studio utility player and had released his own debut album entitled _presenting isaac hayes_ prior to Redding’s death. To both Hayes and

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management, the album was a commercial failure. Moving beyond the mediocrity of his first album, Hayes enjoyed the artistic freedom he received at Stax and, after two years of fine-tuning, released *Hot Buttered Soul*. It was a grand success in 1969, and enabled Hayes to reassure Stax executives that he was Otis Redding’s rightful heir. On *Hot Buttered Soul*, Bell found the long-awaited sound he needed to distinguish himself and Stax. Hayes found a winning sound by experimenting with long, jazzy jams that paid homage to an “African aesthetic of extended ensemble performing.” The album’s most successful track, “Walk on By,” was written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David. Dionne Warwick first performed it in 1964, and later took it to the number one spot of the Billboard Pop R&B Chart and number six on the US Hot 100 Chart that same year. Hayes also had his way with the song; with his unique approach, he successfully transformed the tune from Warwick’s somber ballad into his own twelve-and-a-half minute funk opus. Given the post-assassination climate, the song’s lyrics likewise emerged as a fitting accompaniment to the emotional environment in which Hayes and Stax grieved the loss of King: “I just can't get over losing you and so if I seem broken and blue, walk on by, walk on by.” With the wounds still fresh from the assassination, it seems clear that the song was apropos in both a literal and musical sense. It stood as a newer, funkier phase of southern soul, but it hinged on a sound that emerged as avant-

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garde when compared to any Motown crossover track. While to some reviewers Hayes’ approach was regarded as “an exercise in melodrama and indulgence,” one cannot deny the album’s transcendent power, quantified by its top 40 successes.  

According to Rickey Vincent, what also came forth from *Hot Buttered Soul* was a groundbreaking work that “changed the popular definitions of black music.”

Capitalizing on the album’s creative and commercial momentum, Hayes and Stax continued to remake soul music with a funkier flair. Following up on the iconic success of *Hot Buttered Soul*, Hayes released the *Shaft* double LP, recorded for Stax Records’ Enterprise label as the soundtrack for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's 1971 film, *Shaft*. The album mostly consists of instrumentals composed as a score for the film. The three vocal tracks on the album are “Soulville”, “Do Your Thing”, and “Theme from Shaft.” In terms of its sonic distinctiveness, the album incorporated a complex percussive sound that introduced cowbells, congas, and bongos, all of which added a new polyrhythmic flavor to a sound continually moving beyond more traditional R&B formats. Hayes unabashedly used minor chords that had been omitted during the earlier years because their sound didn’t quite fit the more familiar country-inspired backbeat that blended so well into the signature Stax sound of the 1950s and 60s.

“Theme from Shaft” begins with a sixteenth-note hi-hat ride pattern (later becoming a staple of disco), played by

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103 Vincent, *Funk*, 115.


105 Minor chords had been omitted often during the Soul years, largely because they deviated from a more familiar, country-inspired sound.
Willie Hall, which was drawn from a break on Otis Redding's “Try A Little Tenderness,” a Stax record on which Hayes had played. Also featured heavily on the intro to the track is Charles Pitts’ guitar line, which makes masterful use of wah-wah effect, such that later became the signature garnish of 1970s funk.

*Shaft* was likewise in step with R&B music on a national scale; Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Earth, Wind and Fire, and Kool and the Gang all worked in a kind of unspoken unison to bridge the gap between premier jazz players and R&B. Beyond jazz and soul, the song also had an enormous influence on Disco, ranging from ABBA to the Bee Gees, whose hits later dominated Billboard Charts. One of the albums often overlooked tracks, “Soulsville,” can be regarded as a quintessential 70s protest song; its commentary on ghetto strife was clearly written as a plea for listeners to sympathize with black America's troubles. “The chains that bind him are hard to see/ unless you take this walk with me”, and its mournful sax might be the most iconic moment outside the title theme. In a similar vein, “Do Your Thing” took a song’s bridge to new exploratory heights, started slowly working its way into a manic, wailing-guitar frenzy that nearly matches the intensity of the climax heard on “Walk on By.”


107 Isaac Hayes, * Shaft*.


The outspoken expression of blackness that Hayes communicated by way of the soundtrack was also personified by the film’s chief character, John Shaft. Fighting against the oppressive forces of white-dominated institutions and corruption, Shaft’s coolness, courage, and sex appeal stood as a righteously subversive model of blackness, such that was required for survival during an era when non-violence had become obsolete. With Hayes’ lead vocals punctuated by a trio of female backup singers, Shaft’s prowess with women was also a central component of the new black imperium in a hostile world. At one famous moment, Hayes calls Shaft “a bad mother,” before backup singers interrupt the implied profanity with the line “Shut yo’ mouth!”11 Hayes immediately defends himself by replying that he's “only talking about Shaft,” with the back-up vocalists replying, “We can dig it.” Other well-known passages include “You're damn right!” also uttered by Hayes, and “He's a complicated man/but no one understands him/but his woman.”112

Beyond Shaft's arguably controversial subject matter, what made critics take notice of the Shaft soundtrack was its technological sophistication. In March of 1973, one reviewer from The Black Perspective in Music -- a then upcoming source for critical views on the growing popularity of black music -- declared, “Isaac Hayes is another of today's contemporary music super-talents who utilizes modern recording technology to enhance the sounds of his music. One might say that Hayes uses the recording studio as a stage. It was there that he feels most comfortable and prefers to work, as he intimated in

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11 Hayes, Shaft.

112 Hayes.
an interview published in Jet magazine.”

It should be noted that Hayes’ technical mastery over nearly every aspect of the performing and recording process endowed him with the formidable ability to create and sustain powerful moods in his music. Hayes explained his approach as follows: “I wanted a musical score that would really tie into the character, John Shaft .... You see, Shaft is a driving and relentless person, and I wanted a rhythm that was the same way: driving and relentless. So, we went to a combination of the guitar and drums.”

While Shaft continued to influence contemporaries and redefine popular music, it also earned Hayes an array of major awards, including the honor of becoming the best-selling album ever released on a Stax label. In 1971, Shaft won an Academy Award as Best Original Song, establishing for the first time an African American artist as a formidable force within motion picture industry. While the song was not intended to be a stand-alone single, the success of the film and the popularity of the track in nightclubs also led to a 45 record of the theme being released on Enterprise Records two months after the soundtrack was released. Within two months, it reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 and stayed there a second week.


115 Bowman, Soulville, 230.


117 Whitburn, Top R&B/Hip-Hop Singles, 699.
Shaft earned Hayes unprecedented critical acclaim, established an expanding national fan base, and propelled the newly-christened superstar into the recording of his next concept album, Black Moses. It was released as a double LP on Stax’s Enterprise label in 1971 and featured Hayes’ version of The Jackson 5’s hit single “Never Can Say Goodbye.” The track became a hit in its own right, peaking at number 22 on the Billboard Hot 100.118 In addition to “Never Can Say Goodbye,” other selections on Black Moses included covers of songs formerly made popular by The Carpenter’s “(They Long to Be) Close to You”, Toussaint McCall’s “Nothing Takes The Place Of You,” The Friends of Distinction’s “Going in Circles,” Dionne Warwick’s “I'll Never Fall In Love Again,” and Little Johnny Taylor’s “Part Time Love.”119 "Good Love", the lone Hayes original on the album, may be a minor sexual proposition, but in this context sounds more like a boast: “We interrupt this broadcast for a special news bulletin," he intones in the intro. “Let all the young women crowd around before the news begins.” Black Moses is brashly, lushly, and lovingly orchestrated, each track piled high with soundtrack strings, persistent horns, gentle flutes, sultry back-up singers, and the wah-enhanced guitars that had become the Hayes signature flourish. 120

The album’s title was derived from Stax executive Dino Woodward's nickname for Hayes, which he bestowed upon the musician after comparing the effects of his music on black audiences to the leadership of the biblical figure Moses.121 At first, Hayes shied

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118 Whitburn, 700.

119 Issac Hayes, Black Moses, Vinyl insert (Memphis: Stax/Enterprise, 1971).

120 Hayes, Black Moses.
away from the nickname, finding it an affront to his deeply-held sense of Christianity. Although journalist Chester Higgins popularized the “Black Moses” nickname in an article he wrote for Jet Magazine, Hayes eventually embraced the name “Black Moses” as a symbol of black pride: “I was kicking and screaming all the way. But when I saw the relevance and effect that it had on people, it wasn’t a negative thing, it was an inspiring thing. It raised the level of black consciousness in the States. Black men could finally stand up and be men because here’s Black Moses; he’s the epitome of black masculinity. Chains that once represented bondage and slavery now can be a sign of power and strength and sexuality and virility.”

In this vein, Hayes was almost single-handedly uniting swaths of black America in a celebration of both independence and liberation, both of which were goals shared by all members of the Black Freedom Struggle, from the nonviolent to the most radical.

Larry Shaw, who in 1970 became the head of marketing and publicity at Stax, suggested that the album be called Black Moses. He also designed, with the assistance of Bar-Kay member Ron Gordon, an elaborate album cover, which unfolded into a poster-sized image of Hayes, robed in biblical attire. For Shaw, the packaging of the album was just as important as the album’s sound. In the sense that his Johnson Company “Beautiful People” ad campaign communicated a positive and authentic African-American image, the Black Moses cover similarly raised the social conscience of

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121 Bowman, Soulville, 238.
122 Bowman, 238, 239.
marketers and consumers. *Black Moses* was, at that time, one of the most elaborate LP packages ever issued for a black artist. As such, it represented a show of faith that Hayes could command sales to rival any white artist. According to Hayes, the LP’s foldout cross was an ambitious statement that documented the collapse of his marriage.\(^{124}\)

Beyond the personal significance of the album, it should be noted that the album title indeed was a kind of prophecy. Hayes was leading his people to a metaphoric “promised land” that allowed for a freer expression in both social and musical terms. The sound of a Hayes’ musical utopia emphasized synthesis as much as it celebrated blackness: rock, funk, disco and new strains of soul music coalesced in the alchemy of elaborate arrangements and lengthy running times.\(^ {125}\) All hyperbole aside, the album was an enormous success, hitting number one on the R&B Chart for seven weeks.\(^ {126}\) Hayes’ ornate orchestrations in hindsight may seem excessive to some, but *Black Moses* remains an industry standard that provided a goldmine of samples now used for many noteworthy tracks during the mid-1990s. Some examples include, “Hell Is Around The Corner” by Tricky, “Glory Box” by Portishead, “Jorge de Capadócia” and “Salve,” both by the Brazilian hip hop group, Racionais MC’s.\(^ {127}\)

\(^{124}\) Bowman, *Soulville*, 239.


\(^{127}\) Deusner, “Album Review: Black Moses.”
Gospel-Funk Hits

Riding high on the monumental success of *Hot Buttered Soul*, *Shaft*, and *Black Moses*, Hayes became the indisputable superstar of the Stax organization. At the same time, he was not the organization’s sole hit-making force. With gospel-diva Mavis Staples providing the heart of the label’s distinctive fresh gospel-funk sound, the Staples Singers enjoyed much success with Stax’s most overt message song, “Respect Yourself.” Released in late 1971 with their album *Be Altitude: Respect Yourself*, the song peaked at #12 on the Billboard Hot 100 Singles Chart and reached #2 on the Hot Soul Singles Chart. In a broader sense, the effort was a crucial part of a new black cultural aesthetic, which took older black music forms and updated them, just as funk did. At the same time, it was one of Stax’s most recognizable hits and explicitly communicated an appropriate post-assassination sentiment: “If you disrespect anybody that you run into/how in the world do you think anybody's s'posed (sic) to respect you/If you don't give a heck 'bout the man with the bible in his hand/Just get out the way, and let the gentleman do his thing/You the kind of gentleman that want everything your way/Take the sheet off your face, boy, it's a brand new day.” The song also stood as a striking counterpoint to the hyper-masculinity advanced by way of Hayes’ funk-stud image: “Oh, you cuss around women and you don't even know their names and you/Dumb enough to think that'll make you a big ol’ man.” In 2002, the song was inducted into the Grammy

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129 Staples Singers, “Respect Yourself.”
Hall of Fame and in 2004 it was ranked #462 on the Rolling Stone list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.\footnote{Pat Blashill et. al, In \textit{Rolling Stone Magazine}, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-19691231/songs-in-the-key-of-life-stevie-wonder-19691231 (accessed 07/01/2011).}

\textit{Be Altitude: Respect Yourself} also offered listeners the first major Gospel-Soul-Pop mega-hit in the form of “I’ll Take You There.” The track featured signature, “muted” guitar lines, busy rim work from the snare drum, and a particularly memorable bass solo at the two-thirds mark. Flashy guitar fills and syncopated horn-lines adorned Mavis Staples’ forceful chants to earn the #95 spot on the Billboard US Top 100 list in 1972.\footnote{Whitburn, \textit{Top R&B/Hip-Hop Singles}, 700.} The Staples Singers’ sound was, to many listeners at the time, Soul at its best; however, it is impossible to ignore the extent to which the track also represented a foray into genre-bending and stood at the threshold of a paradigm shift in black music. For the group itself, their sound signified a long journey from the Mississippi delta to the top of the chart. Of their career, Roebuck “Pops” Staples commented, “We kept it all in perspective and never forgot for an instant who made it happen. It pleased God to put a guitar in my hands and a song on the lips of my children, and we aim to please God through our music.”\footnote{Fred Bronson, \textit{The Billboard Book of Number One Hits} (New York: Random House, 2007), 312.} Considering Stax’s Gospel-Soul roots and reverence for Dr. King’s evangelical orientation, the Staples Singers’ contribution was every bit as relevant as any of Hayes’ offerings.
Bell aimed to capitalize further on the success of the Staples Singers and decided to create the “Gospel Truth” label, which drew Gospel acts from all over the country into the ever-growing Stax family. In launching this project, Bell enlisted the services of black radio promotions guru, Dave Clark, who ran the Gospel division until Stax’s bankruptcy in 1975. While the majority of acts produced through Gospel Truth originated from a rather insular world of Gospel players, Stax used its indelible influence to transform the sonic essence of what Gospel had become. Many of the guitarists, bassists, percussionist and engineers who helped craft Stax’s secular hits provided tracking for the Gospel world whose tabernacle-based sensibilities moved in step with the burgeoning funk trend.

With the Staples Singers leading the way, the Rance Allen Group also emerged as a notable act for the label. Long-time gospel singer, Rance Allen, founded the group in Detroit during the early 1960s and fronted the band throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The traditionally trained black gospel unit was much like the Staples Singers in that they incorporated rock, jazz, and soul into their music. They were also instrumental in launching the contemporary Christian music movement, such that was popularized in the late ‘70s by Andrae Crouch, Amy Grant, and the Winans. The Rance Allen Group


scored a Top 30 R&B hit in 1979 with "I Belong to You," one of two Stax singles that year to make the charts.137

Another standout Stax performer who earned critical acclaim was the "Philosopher of Soul," Johnnie Taylor. Among his more memorable tracks were "Take Care of Your Homework," "Jody's Got Your Girl and Gone," "Steal Away," and "I Am Somebody."138 By the early '70s, Taylor's bread and butter had become smooth, elegant crooning, exemplified best by his 1973 album *Taylored in Silk* and his two ballad hits, "I Believe in You (You Believe in Me)" and "Cheaper to Keep Her."139 Taylor’s other hits included "I Had a Dream," "I've Got to Love Somebody’s Baby," which were both written by the team of Isaac Hayes and David Porter. His most notable track was "Who's Making Love," which reached No. 5 on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart and No. 1 on the R&B Chart. "Who's Making Love" sold over one million copies, and went gold.140

*Wattstax*

In surveying Stax’s output from 1968 to 1972, one is struck with a sense of both quantity and quality. Under Bell's leadership, Stax Records had transcended the role of a record label by working with MGM Studios on the release of the film *Shaft*, and it evolved into a multimedia company including spoken-word recordings, and introduced marketing and promotional innovations that changed the direction of the nation's music

137 “All Music Guide: Rance Allan Biography.”


141 Hits from Hayes, the Staples Singers, Johnnie Taylor, and Rufus Thomas further enabled Stax to emerge in 1972 as one of largest black-owned businesses in the United States. 142 In terms of the message, these accomplishments conveyed a complex social sentiment that figured heavily into the genesis of contemporary Afrocentric identity, such that stands as a direct extension of the reaction to Dr. King’s death. Of what he accomplished, Bell said, “Luckily we managed to make great music after Dr. King’s death. Those of us who were writers used our lyrics and melodies to write about and reflect on the African American lifestyle. We had our own little world, and some of us at Stax had a vision of how we should be projected as people. In a sense, that was what Dr. King was about.” 143 While there can be no doubt that Al Bell’s rejuvenation of the Stax label established a far-reaching legacy with political, technological, and talent-driven innovation, the legendary Wattstax concert was the supreme illustration of Stax’s message resounding worldwide.

Held on August 20, 1972, Wattstax was no ordinary concert event. On the contrary for Bell and Afrocentric promoter, Larry Shaw, it was a way to celebrate the vitality of black culture on a grander scale. Shaw decided to hold the concert at the Los Angeles Coliseum since the surrounding locale could participate in an effort to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the 1965 Watts riots. To enable as many members of the black community to attend, Bell insisted that tickets sold for only $1.00

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143 Kelly, Interview with Al Bell; Andria Lisle in “I Know a Place,” Waxpoetics 11 (2005): 108.
each, with the proceeds later directed to assist the working-class black residents of Watts.\footnote{144} In order to further reward the community, Shaw and Bell also used local black business and labor to support the event. Of his philosophy on the event’s importance, Bell stated, “Wattstax graphically demonstrated how a people, living in the land of plenty, possessing so little, found refuge in the spirit of celebration.”\footnote{145} The concert drew over 100,000 people and was simulcast in several urban markets across the country; it became the second largest gathering of African Americans at that time just behind the March on Washington in 1963.\footnote{146}

The actual concert was a smashing success. Jesse Jackson delivered an unforgettable invocation, which included the recitation of his “I am Somebody” poem in a call and response format that roused nearly every guest in the massive stadium crowd. The message of Jackson’s poem was a fitting declaration of black identity and an accurate reflection of Stax’s mission to promote it: “My Clothes Are Different/My Face Is Different/My Hair Is Different/But I Am/Somebody/I Am Black/Brown/White/I Speak A Different Language/But I Must Be Respected/Protected/Never Rejected/I Am/God's Child/I Am Somebody.”\footnote{147} After its stirring intro, the concert boomed for seven hours and featured performances by Isaac Hayes, Luther Ingram, Rufus Thomas, Carla

\footnote{144}{Kelly, “Wattstax,” 54.}

\footnote{145}{Davis, “Record Exec Al Bell to Help Open “Wattstax: I Am Somebody!”}

\footnote{146}{Kelly, “Wattstax,” 53.}

Thomas, The Bar-Kays, Albert King, Kim Weston, and the Staples Singers, as well as interviews with the residents of Watts in 1965.\footnote{Kelly, “Wattstax,” 55.}

Beyond the concert’s immediate success, Bell and Shaw teamed up to produce the 1973 film \textit{Wattstax: The Living Word}. In an effort to secure adequate funding, they solicited the support of Wolper Productions to co-produce the movie, which was then distributed by Columbia Pictures.\footnote{Larry Shaw and Mel Stuart, \textit{Wattstax} DVD (New York: Columbia Pictures, 1973).} True to form, Bell and Shaw asserted that the movie would provide an “intimate portrait of the African American experience” and the extent to which it had evolved in the context of the Civil Rights Movement.\footnote{Shaw and Stuart, \textit{Wattstax}.} Since its release, the film has been featured in film festivals all over the world including the Cannes Film Festival and has garnered a Golden Globe nomination for Best Documentary.\footnote{“Larry Shaw Biography,” http://www.wattstax.com/wattstax_presskit/LarryShaw_Bio.pdf (accessed 12/30/2010).}

Throughout the film’s narration of the concert, up and coming black comedian, Richard Pryor, emerged as an unanticipated superstar, if not one of the more compelling elements of the film. Shaw wrote the opening sequence for Pryor and guided the technical crew in order to establish an authentic black perspective. In the film interspersed between songs are interviews with Richard Pryor, Ted Lange and others who discuss the black experience in America.\footnote{“Larry Shaw Biography.”} These conversations provided the authentic voice and faces of poor residents who would normally be looked down upon, if not...
vilified. Bitter truths from the ghetto struck viewers alongside Pryor’s funny and wise quips in such a way that rendered them palpable and all too human. As the unofficial laureate of the ghetto experience, Pryor’s career greatly benefitted from his involvement with Stax and the *Wattstax* film. Two years after the film’s release, he recorded “That Nigger’s Crazy” live at Don Cornelius’ Soul Train nightclub. The album later won the Grammy for Best Comedy Album in 1974. Initially released on Stax Records under their “Partee” imprint, the album's success was temporarily derailed by the sudden closing of Stax later in 1974. Undeterred, Pryor regained control of the master rights to the album and signed with Warner Bros. Pryor’s career certainly extends far beyond this point, but his early efforts in symbolic fashion broke ground, arguably becoming the founding father of risqué, “resistance” black comedy.

*Conclusion*

Despite the success of *Wattstax* and those associated with it, the financial future of Stax was unstable. In 1972, Bell garnered a distribution deal with CBS Records, which saw Stax as a way to break further into the African-American market and compete with Motown. Much to the dismay of the Stax organization, CBS very quickly lost interest in holding up their responsibility to distribute Stax products nationwide. The reason for this decline appeared to be deliberate and furthermore stemmed from the fact

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that CBS distribution agents had chosen to bypass traditional mom-and-pop vendors in the black communities where Stax historically sold quite well. To make matters worse, CBS failed to push the Stax product to the larger vendors; they did so in an effort to minimize competition with their own R&B acts such as Earth Wind and Fire, The Isley Brothers, and Sly & the Family Stone.\textsuperscript{157} Stax received reports from Chicago and Detroit vendors who were unable to get new Stax records despite consumer demand. As a result of the problem, the company attempted to cancel its distribution deal with CBS.\textsuperscript{158} However, although CBS was uninterested in fully promoting Stax, it refused to release the label from its contract for fear that Stax would land a more productive deal with another company.\textsuperscript{159}

With their revenue severely reduced, the last big hit for Stax was Shirley Brown’s “Woman to Woman” in 1974.\textsuperscript{160} The single's success helped delay the inevitable demise of the company for several months, but ultimately could not prevent its collapse. By 1975, all of the secondary Stax labels had folded, with only the main Stax label remaining. In an attempt to remain afloat, Al Bell refrained from declaring immediate bankruptcy by securing more loans from Memphis’ Union Planters Bank.\textsuperscript{161} Jim Stewart, also unwilling to see the company die, returned to active participation in Stax and


\textsuperscript{158} DeLeon, “Stax Chief Bell Charges Fair Trade Manipulation,” 55.

\textsuperscript{159} DeLeon, 55.

\textsuperscript{160} Bowman, \textit{Soulville}, 386.

mortgaged his Memphis mansion to provide the label with short-term working capital. However, the Union Planters bank officers got cold feet, foreclosed on the loans, and cost Stewart his home and fortune. Despite Bell and Stewart’s last-minute heroics, Stax Records was forced into involuntary Chapter 11 bankruptcy on December 19, 1975.\textsuperscript{162}

Although Stax met a premature demise due largely to Bell’s mismanagement of the company’s finances, the organization’s cultural influence continued to inform the development of funk and the larger reinvention of black culture throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. Starting off as a model of interracial collaboration and later becoming an emblem for modern black identity, Stax’s evolution underscores a commercially successful embrace and facilitation of black consciousness transformed. Advancing a distinct black sound and aesthetic derived from black America’s response to Dr. King’s death and a larger backlash against restrictive social and political conditions, Stax was a primary agent of change that in no small way laid the groundwork for what is now defined as contemporary blackness in various forms. Stax’ influence clearly can be detected in newer music genres such as neo-soul and Hip Hop. Furthermore, the swagger and cool of Stax’ funky post-assassination reinvention inspired the fashion, film, and television industries to launch a host of programs stylized in the way that black America would redefine itself through both tragedy and triumph.

\textsuperscript{162} Bowman, \textit{Soulville}, 370.
CHAPTER FOUR
OUT OF SOUND AND INTO SIGHT:
FUNKY, CONTENTIOUS DEPICTIONS OF BLACK AMERICA
ON FILM AND TELEVISION

When you have nothing else left you give up your body, just as when you are starving you might eat your fingers; but it is the conditions which cause this, not the desire to taste your own blood; you have to survive... What happens is not a distorted act of prostitution even though it takes place in a house of prostitution. The place is profane because of the oppressive conditions, but so are our communities also oppressed. The black community is often profane because of the dirtiness there, but this is not caused by the people because they are victims of a very oppressive system.

— Huey P. Newton, “He Won't Bleed Me,” 1969

We will not tolerate the continued warping of our black children’s minds with filth, violence and cultural lies that are all pervasive in current productions of so-called black movies. The transformation from stereotyped Stepin Fetchit to Super Nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide. The black community should deal with this problem by whatever means necessary.

— Junius Griffin, speech to the NAACP, 1970

The post-assassination spirit of black American individuals and communities, as expressed and experienced within the context of the music of James Brown, Motown, and Stax, further evolved as it extended into film and television during the 1970s and beyond. With regard to black America’s augmented presence therein, late sixties and early
seventies funk had set a precedent by advancing sensibilities and sound in the interest of presenting and popularizing a more nuanced model of black culture for mass audiences. Following the lead of funk’s commercial success, a slew of television programs and films similarly strove to convey a fuller sense of black American life: flamboyant black dance and fashion flashed and flourished on Soul Train; quotidian, racially charged domestic dealings unfolded on black sitcoms like Good Times and The Cosby Show; and sensationalized, erotically charged “ghetto” action played out in edgy blaxploitation films such as Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song and Coffy. By and large, these cultural representations emerged in stark contrast to pre-assassination, inoffensive, servile and sanitized characterizations along the lines of the Hattie McDaniel’s “Mammy” and Sydney Poitier’s “John Prentice.”

Unlike anything before it, black television and film, like funk music, grew to better reflect the complex state of black culture and the extent to which it had been affected deeply by Dr. King’s death. At the same time, as black America gained increased exposure, much of 1970s and 1980s Afro-centric programming struggled to wholly represent the totality of the black experience across lines of class and gender. Indeed, some television shows and films depicted black society isolated in “ghettos,” while later examples explored black Americans occupying more affluent positions within the middle class. In either case, the thread that ran throughout these depictions of black American life can be described as “congregational” inasmuch as the integrity of a given black community or individual preserved a sense of cultural distinctiveness in the face of mainstream culture and a wide range of societal challenges. That sense of distinctiveness
and its preservation was the direct result of black America emerging in the wake of Dr. King’s death with a newly discovered sense of responsibility to celebrate, preserve, promote, and profit from a unique heritage. Whether the work in question’s narrative was an incendiary diatribe seemingly aimed at encouraging black America to overthrow the system or whether it was a simple, innocuous portrait of a black family’s working class life, the commonality between the two was a portrayal of black community. In these fictional realms, the idiosyncrasies of black enclaves underwent extensive exhibition and exploration.

When contextualized as an evolving interpretation of black identity, black visual media in the wake of the assassination consisted of artists who at times held conflicting visions of how to define black America, but were nonetheless emboldened by Dr. King’s demise as they attempted to showcase themselves with a diminished fear of ostracism, racist criticism, and commercial failure. In the post-assassination popular music marketplace, crossover appeal ceased to be the pressing concern it once was during Berry Gordy’s domination of the 1960s; rather, an expression of identity, unabashedly unique to the black experience, was no longer suppressed as it had been during previous decades. With fewer diluted representations of black culture broadcasting through funk music, the profitability and popularity of Afro-centric themes extended into film and television, even taking into account the perspectives of black women and the black middle class. Combining a sense of the impact that funk and black Film and Television had on American popular culture, one can discern that the projection of black America’s identity had established successfully a permanent place in American popular culture.
Black film, in particular, figured heavily into the evolving depiction of black Americans in mainstream culture after 1968. Mixing a stark sense of urban realism with extreme and, at times, absurd scenarios, blaxploitation cinema capitalized on the success of funk while advancing both utopian and dystopian models of black America. The connection between burgeoning funk music and blaxploitation Cinema is a salient one, especially when taking into account how funky film scores significantly augmented popularity and appeal. In some ways, one could argue that the films themselves were secondary to the soundtracks, further emphasizing the culture industry’s deep-seated affection and fascination with funk. Since just about every successful blaxploitation film of the 1970s served as a platform for advancing the sound and aesthetic of funk, no serious conversation about the film genre can proceed without a sense of how the music granted the films a greater social and cultural significance.

A discussion of blaxploitation soundtracks that elevated the appeal of their film counterparts should certainly include *Superfly*. For this masterpiece, Curtis Mayfield served up a timeless piece of work whose instrumentation and format arguably inspired every subsequent black gangster film soundtrack (and beyond). But unlike other soundtracks, Mayfield used each song to focus on a social problem, specific to black American communities. For instance, “Freddie's Dead,” one of the album's most successful tracks, spoke of the film’s central tragedy, the death of a misled and desperate man who resorted to selling drugs and later pays the ultimate price. Equally powerful in “Freddie’s Dead” was Mayfield’s ability to use the song as a platform for critiquing
American society and government’s lack of concern for black American communities plagued by drug-related deaths. “Pusherman” goes on to recast the drug dealer as a kind of businessman trying to survive like any other, redefining both the legitimate motivations and catastrophic consequences of street hustling.

Of the Superfly soundtrack’s far reaching influence, Black Caesar soundtrack composer and accomplished musician, Adrian Younge, claimed, “this is a timeless piece of work that transcends the era. The instrumentation alone is arguably the beginning of modern black gangster music. The thick bass lines and the driving lyrics definitely served as an inspiration for my score for the movie Black Dynamite.”¹ While Mayfield’s work invoked a sense of the future of black American music its classic, soulful bass tones and tasteful horn lines adorned nearly every track in a manner reminiscent of Stax and Motown. On the other hand, Mayfield used the album to showcase his own interpretation of funk by extended track lengths, prolonging the groove without vocal accompaniment, and integrating horn lines that were more rhythmic and percussive than melodious, an effect which was meant to inspire dance along with an appreciation for the players. To be sure, the Superfly soundtrack was the quintessential blaxploitation soundtrack, and influences artists across genres to this day. In its own time, it produced five top Billboard

singles, including the title track and “Freddie's Dead.” It also held the number one spot for four weeks on the Billboard 200, later earning a total of four Grammy nominations.  

While memorable and successful blaxploitation soundtracks like *Superfly* buttressed blaxploitation by providing a sense of style inextricably linked to the spirit and success of the films, the movies themselves continue to invite interest and controversy from a wide range of critics and scholars. While blaxploitation remains contentious, as a body of work it undeniably said much about black consciousness. Documenting, deriding, and sometimes reinforcing racial stereotypes with provocative flair and sex appeal, blaxploitation films boldly challenged mainstream America to face even the most unmentionable realities of its multiracial identity. Widely regarded as the first of the genre, Melvin Van Peebles *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* was released just three years after the assassination of Dr. King, but in hindsight appears far ahead of its time due to its unmitigated willingness to confront taboo.

Given its sensitive social, sexual, and political subject matter, no major Hollywood studio would finance the film. As a result, Van Peebles had to find creative ways to circumnavigate the Screen Actors Guild and Hollywood executives. In a clever bit of maneuvering, he repackaged *Sweet* as a pornographic film, enabling the project to move forward without further obstruction.  

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Association explained in no unclear terms how he intended to proceed with or without their official rating and approval:

I refuse to submit this film, made from a black perspective for blacks to the Motion Picture Code and Administration for rating that would be applicable to the black community. Neither will I “self apply” an “X” rating to my movie, if such a rating, is to be applicable to black audiences, as called for by the Motion Pictures Code and Administration rules. I charge that your film rating body has no right to tell the black community what it may or may not see. Should the rest of the community submit to your censorship that is its business, But white standards shall no longer be imposed on the black community.5

Boldly moving forward on his own terms, Van Peebles funded the film mostly with his own money--and a $50,000 loan from Bill Cosby to help complete the project--shot it with his own equipment, and performed all of his own stunts and sex scenes.6

Earth, Wind & Fire provided the film’s soundtrack and Van Peebles oversaw its release as a full album prior to the film’s premiere in order to generate publicity and additional funding. Stax Records sponsored the album. Doing so paid off as it held the number one position on the Billboard R&B chart for nine weeks, eventually winning three top-twenty singles.7 Like the film, the soundtrack’s content explored the relationship between black America and urban life with a definitively funky style. As an added political statement, the album’s packaging utilized a number of compelling poems and scattered messages of Black Power in an attempt to frame the entire work as an


essential companion and reader for the film. Initially, the film itself was screened only in two theaters in 1970 and although the picture almost never came to be, *Sweet* grossed over $15.2 million at the box-office, and later, $4.1 million in domestic rentals. Such unanticipated success reinforced the undeniable marketability of independent Black Cinema and culture in general. As such, *Sweet* was the inspiration not only for every subsequent blaxploitation film, but also for a group of young African American and African student filmmakers who began working within the graduate film program at UCLA, establishing the “L.A. School” style of film. Like Van Peebles, the LA School filmmakers were interested in developing a revolutionary form of cinema that challenged Hollywood conventions. Instead of deferring to formulaic traditional narratives, their films, although lesser known, examined “family, women, history, and folklore” within the turbulent setting of a post-assassination Los Angeles. While no particular works from the L.A. school became Hollywood blockbusters, the films, filmmakers and scholars that it produced offered an intellectually stimulating and politically challenging critique of popular culture and the dramatic extent to which had omitted or degraded non-white Americans.

*Sweet*, in its own right addressed those classic Civil Rights Era social problems such as poverty, police brutality, crime, and discrimination, but by no means prescribed

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legally sought-after solutions offered up by activists of the 1960s. Instead, *Sweet* defiantly portrayed self-empowerment through extralegal means such as sex work and “hustling,” which may or may not have seemed more realistic to the average, downtrodden American. As such, the film’s message received intense criticism from both black and white reviewers. In this context, an article written by Lerone Bennett Jr. of *Ebony* certainly bears mentioning. In essence, Bennett argued that black artists who fail to break the cycle of associating blackness with degradation were doing the black community a profound disservice. In the article, “The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback In”, he stated, “An additional and perhaps even more important source of symbolic confusion in the black community is the tendency on the part of some men to identify black people with the degradation of conditions imposed on them. This tendency reaches its depth in artistic works based on the equation: blackness = Degradation. It is even more embarrassing to note that some enthusiasts are creating elementary school textbooks which present rapes, muggings, and dope as the new pedagogic frontier of the black experience.”¹¹ This criticism foreshadowed what future critics maintained as the genre proceeded through the seventies. Most notably, the NAACP criticized the negative stereotypes featured in most of the genre’s movies and maintained that they were detrimental to positive perceptions of black culture, reinforcing “typical prejudices.”¹² Perhaps the most memorable criticism along these more conservative lines originated

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from Junius Griffin, former president of the NAACP’s Beverly Hills chapter, who pointedly told a press conference:

We will not tolerate the continued warping of our black children's minds with filth, violence and cultural lies that are all pervasive in current productions of so-called black movies. The transformation from stereotyped Stepin Fetchit to Super Nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide. The black community should deal with this problem by whatever means necessary.13

On the contrary, it is also essential to note the fact that as a film Sweet clearly rejected the idea that black America could advance its social and economic status if broader societal terms continued to be those established exclusively by white America. This indeed was a message that registered quite favorably among more radical thinkers such as Black Panther, Huey P. Newton, who in a variety of outspoken ways had long been maintaining a similar perspective. Moreover, in the context of a perceived, fatally flawed socioeconomic superstructure, Newton’s devotion of the June 19th issue of The Black Panther to Sweet can be understood perfectly. Newton characterized Sweet as “the first truly revolutionary black film made by a black man.”14 In addition to such praise, Newton helped to explain Sweet’s significance in terms of black America’s survival in a broader world not designed to accommodate “the Other”:

When you have nothing else left you give up your body, just as when you are starving you might eat your fingers; but it is the conditions which cause this, not the desire to taste your own blood; you have to survive... What happens is not a distorted act of prostitution even though it takes place in a house of


prostitution. The place is profane because of the oppressive conditions, but so are our communities also oppressed. The black community is often profane because of the dirtiness there, but this is not caused by the people because they are victims of a very oppressive system. Yet within the heart of the community, just as in the film, the sacred rite of feeding and nourishing the youth goes on; they are brought to their manhood as liberators.\textsuperscript{15}

The male-dominated leadership of the Black Panther Party, not to mention the overall leadership of the Black Power wing of the Black Freedom Movement, further coincided with the manner in which Van Peebles’ celebrated black masculinity throughout the film. With a controversial and extraordinarily sexualized male lead, \textit{Sweet} moved far beyond wholesome, Sydney Poitier-style depictions of black men on the big screen. At the same time, nowhere in the film could viewers discern an ordinary or average sense of black male sexuality; for Van Peebles, the idea of black male sexual potency was worthy of both celebration and ownership. But beyond the film’s erotic hubris, the uninhibited resolve to expose to the masses a stark sense of the failure of racial integration remained a radical perspective repackaged and reinterpreted with surprising effectiveness.\textsuperscript{16} As \textit{Sweet} represented a fearless attempt to explore and interpret the most risqué racial and sexual stereotypes associated with black masculinity, it did not do so at the expense of forgoing a profound, albeit extreme, social commentary. In the world of \textit{Sweet}, one could discern little hope for a white-dominated society to absorb, let alone embrace, black America into its midst. In essence, the film underscored the hostilities inherent in traditional American institutions that remained unwilling to accept black Americans, with particular emphasis placed on local police.

\textsuperscript{15} Newton, “He Won’t Bleed me,” 89-90.

The film is a relatively straightforward, coming-of-age tragedy that follows the life of protagonist, Sweetback, as he grows up an objectified, sexual phenomenon whose bedside talents become known (and sought after) as a teenager. Sweetback steadily astounds women twice his age and eventually grows up to become the ultimate lady’s man with a reputation for pleasing the opposite sex in super-human fashion.

Unfortunately, Sweetback’s prowess as a lover does not render him immune from the larger societal forces that threaten to encumber and stifle not only his success and prosperity, but also that of his entire community. Sweetback, while likely content to operate humbly as a kind of top-shelf male escort, inevitably gets sucked into legal problems, exacerbated by corrupt police officers who eventually emerge as determined to destroy Sweetback. As one might imagine, Sweetback’s ultimate demise was carried out at the hands of said corrupt, racist and murderous police officers who kill him in cold blood. With such a tragic conclusion, the film nevertheless advanced a subtle message of hope inasmuch as it explored alternative ways in which black Americans might pursue liberation from economic deprivation and geographic isolation. Whether through hustling, capitalizing on the value of one’s sexual talents, or simply taking up life in another country, Sweet’s most powerful conclusion is that securing and nurturing a sense of community unto itself, although hopelessly tethered to the mainstream, was perhaps black America’s ultimate form of redemption. With regard to this vision, one can observe a distinct departure from the King-inspired pursuit of harmonious integration. Nevertheless, what Van Peebles did accomplish was rather remarkable from both a personal and business standpoint. In his brazen defiance of Hollywood bureaucracy, he
underscored the social and economic value of black popular culture beyond any prior understanding and created additional channels of inclusion within the film industry for black artists.\textsuperscript{17}

Few can argue that subsequent blaxploitation films failed to generate significant revenue or empower a whole new class of black entertainers. The fact is that the burgeoning genre did make many black artists wealthy and to a degree challenge American viewers to accept more dynamic representations of black individuals. In earlier portions of this work, blaxploitation classics \textit{Shaft}, \textit{Black Caesar}, and \textit{Superfly} appeared to augment not only their corresponding soundtrack sales, but also major box office revenue, along with an evolving hegemony of black culture. While such a far reaching sense of black America may have been a distortion in the eyes of those poised to abandon racial stereotypes, the idea that black artists were more directly and successfully controlling the manner in which mass media represented blackness is hardly contestable. Moreover, to regard most blaxploitation films as inaccurate and pejorative reinforcements of racist personifications is to fully overlook the complex, often intellectually mystifying messages that the genre attempted to advance. If blaxploitation’s single, most enduring theme is that of spiritual transcendence and social empowerment, it is clearly worthy of greater historical significance inasmuch as the genre profoundly expanded popular perceptions of black Americans.

The 1973 blaxploitation classic, \textit{Coffy}, serves as a case in point. To a significant degree, Pam Grier’s character in \textit{Coffy} emerged as the female counterpoint to Van

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Peeble’s Sweetback. Inasmuch as Sweetback utilized his sexual prowess to advance his own cause, Coffy similarly relied upon her own desirability to achieve her goals. However, Coffy’s plight was very much one that included the concerns of her community more so than her own personal struggle. The narrative of Coffy also exemplified the way she enacted a more effective brand of revenge against white oppressors determined to exploit working-class black communities. During one of the two showdowns between Coffy and archenemy drug lord Vitroni, Coffy famously defined her objective in confronting injustice: “It could be your brother too, or your sister, or your children. I want justice for all of them. And I want justice for all the people whose lives are bought and sold, so that a few big shots can climb up on their backs, and laugh at the law, and laugh at human decency. And most of all, I want justice for a man, this man had love in his heart, and he died because he went out of his neighborhood to try to do what he thought was right.”18 In essence, where Sweetback had failed, Coffy had succeeded.

Coffy’s mission to confront, expose, and eliminate corruption as a means of empowering poor black communities was perhaps just as commendable as the extent to which she embodied a bold new image of black womanhood. Coffy might have been exposing inordinate amounts of her own flesh, but, as Pam Grier explained in one of her interviews, “the social revolution of the 70s gave my look an entirely different context.”19 By harnessing the power of her undeniable sex appeal, Coffy was, in a sense, demonstrating for black women the potential advantages of embracing and utilizing one’s...


desirability as a means of empowerment. In doing so, Coffy had successfully become a woman on her own terms, completely self-sufficient and quite successful without the assistance of men. This autonomy echoes the postmodern feminist defense of self-reliant sex-workers, who have willfully chosen a path to empowerment, albeit a controversial one. In this vein, while posing as the Jamaican prostitute, Mystique, Coffy proved able to defeat the film’s main male lead, Vitroni. Knowing his Achilles heel was a sadistic sexual fetish for “exotic” women, Coffy relied almost exclusively on her feminine wiles to expose his perversion and orchestrate his arrest. This was a task that Coffy’s lover could not have accomplished on his own as a man.20

While the aforementioned reading of Coffy underscored the more positive aspects of the film’s racial and gendered significance, not all viewers and critics celebrated the manner in which Coffy remained an overly sexualized, flagrantly objectified figure. Perhaps the most formidable criticism applicable to Coffy was published in 1978 and entitled, Black Macho and the Myth of the Black Superwoman. In this trenchant and profound commentary on the state of gendered identity and black America during the Civil Rights Age, Michele Wallace critiqued how the men of the Black Power Movement had reinforced the legacy of male privilege by exploiting and subordinating the efforts and roles of black women.21 She further noted that black women were expected to continually nurture the race physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and that the

20 Mia Mask, Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 95.

“superwoman image” assigned to them conveniently allowed the male leaders of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement to ignore the pressing needs of their female counterparts. Within the context of Wallace’s rationale, one can discern that the typical black superwoman served only as a support mechanism for black men.\(^22\) On the whole, Wallace challenged readers to acknowledge how black women - even Coffy - more often than not, were still required to sleep with the enemy in order to secure a meaningful place in the social hierarchy, regardless of its leadership.

Wallace’s criticism notwithstanding, Coffy is a relative anomaly in a blaxploitation genre flooded with dominant black male protagonists fashionably fighting “the man” from inside and outside of the system, on behalf of downtrodden black communities. With the exception of Grier’s emergence as a kind of superwoman, black women often appeared within the context of blaxploitation narratives as victimized, hyper-sexualized, underdressed and underdeveloped characters whose purpose was more visual adornment than direct involvement in a story arch largely devoted to creating a glorified black male fantasy.

Male-centered and risqué as the genre had become, the popular on-screen indulgence emerged as a low-risk, high reward endeavor for Hollywood filmmakers. Low production cost and high box office returns even helped to sustain major Hollywood studios such as UA, Cinamation, MGM, Warner Brothers, and AIP; 1970 to 1973 were particularly profitable years for each organization.\(^23\) In 1970, UA’s Cotton Comes to

\(^{22}\) Wallace, Black Macho, 81.

*Harlem* grossed $15,375,000 with an estimated production cost of $2.2 million, earning a grand total of $85,527,003 by 2009.\(^{24}\) In 1971, MGM’s *Shaft* earned $23,250,000 and only cost $1.2 million to make; by 2009, it had earned an astronomical $123,904,703.\(^{25}\) *Shaft* also had confirmed the narrative standard of a charismatic black man, Richard Roundtree, acting in James Bond-like fashion, successfully besting “the man.” He did so twice more in *Shaft's Big Score* in 1972 and in *Shaft in Africa* in 1973.\(^{26}\)

Warner Brothers blaxploitation cash cow, *Superfly*, earned $18,900,000 in 1972 alone. By 2009, after spending a mere $149,000 to make it, they brought in upwards of $98 million in total revenue.\(^{27}\) No film had ever made drug dealers appear so worthy of a viewer’s sympathy and envy while Curtis Mayfield’s extraordinary soundtrack literally changed the meaning of swagger. As the 1970s drew to a close, an increasing number of critics and viewers began to regard the genre as predictable and clichéd, rarely offering the deeper social commentary that had inspired it earlier on. Moreover, producers also seemed to grow tired of the genre’s continual rehashing of the familiar “crime-action-ghetto formula.” In addition, the decline of blaxploitation’s success within Hollywood can be attributed to the gradual shift from niche filmmaking to the industry’s

\(^{24}\) ToFunky, “Blaxploitation Filmography.”

\(^{25}\) ToFunky.


“blockbuster” fixation. In describing the transformation of Hollywood’s modus operandi into a “high concept” and “summer hit” formula, film critic Dave Denby noted:

The movie business, perhaps American Culture, has never recovered from that electric media weekend in June 1975 when Jaws opened at 464 cinemas and went on to become the biggest grossing of all time (well, for two years, until George Lucas's Star Wars came along and topped it) we entered the era of high concept and summer hits.

With Hollywood making a concerted effort to abandon blaxploitation in an effort to produce high grossing films along formulaic, “blockbuster” lines, audiences in kind soon demonstrated a diminished interest in the avant-garde at the box-office. As such, production and promotion of Black Cinema abruptly waned. Despite blaxploitation’s fall from favor, enough time had elapsed during which a sensational and politically-charged rendition of black culture had made a significant showing to mass audiences and, in turn, helped to carve out a distinct, albeit controversial, place in mainstream visual culture. By the end of the seventies, black directors, actors and technicians formerly associated with Afrocentric film production were no longer in demand. Many pioneering black directors had little choice but to move to television, while others worked on direct-to-

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video releases. The heyday of blaxploitation cinema had ended by the early 1980s, but its long-term impact on popular culture is best measured by noting the subsequent emergence of black actors who became long-term, profitable fixtures within Hollywood. In 1990, Jet published “Hollywood’s Biggest Black Box-Office Stars,” which offered compelling data that substantiated the claim that black actors represented Hollywood’s most profitable attraction during the 1980s:

The survey, published in Orbit Video's January 1990 issue, reviewed box office receipts for movies from 1981 through 1989 and found that Eddie Murphy is the number one black box-office star and the number three overall box-office star of the decade. Murphy's movies have grossed an estimated $828 million. He is followed by Billy Dee Williams, whose movies have pulled in $503 million; Danny Glover ($439 million); Forest Whitaker ($410 million) and Richard Pryor ($401 million). Ernie Hudson comes in at sixth place with $354 million, followed by Carl Weathers ($328 million); James Earl Jones ($268 million) Lou Gossett Jr., ($254 million; and Bernie Casey ($203 million.) The phenomenal figures prove that both blacks and whites will go see a movie if it's good, movie industry observers say.

The article proceeds to use Orbit Video data to assert that the success black actors had during the 1980s served as compelling evidence that the black actors did not deter white moviegoers. The successful integration and prominence of the aforementioned black actors within big budget Hollywood films can also be regarded as an indication of how, since Dr. King’s death, blackness had edged further into the center of mainstream culture and laid definitive claims to being a permanent constituent therein. Moreover, the fact that black actors were regularly starring and co-starring in major films confirmed that the

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achievements of predecessors such as Fred Williamson, Richard Roundtree, and Pam Grier were not “made in vain.”

New Black Cinema

With a new generation of black actors undeniably enjoying success by fitting into Hollywood scripts as needed, several black actors who previously achieved notoriety through their memorable roles in blaxploitation films remained relevant by participating in a series of comedic and self-aware tributes to the extinct genre. In the 1980s and 90s, blaxploitation’s “affectionate revival” enjoyed considerable box-office success through films such as *The Last Dragon* (1985), *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1985), *Original Gangstas* (1996), *Jackie Brown* (1997), and *Undercover Brother* (2002), to name a few. While these films earned praise mainly for their outrageous and provocative comedic value as blaxploitation spoofs, they should not be overlooked for the effective manner in which they satirized racial stereotypes within Hollywood and American society. *Hollywood Shuffle*, in particular, offered a profound and incisive critique of the film industry’s tendency to typecast black actors, frequently dismissing their ability to take on more serious roles. The film itself followed the struggles of protagonist Bobby Taylor, played by Robert Townshend, as he attempted to establish a professional and diverse acting career. While working a day job at a fast-food restaurant, Bobby headed to a series of demeaning auditions and essentially had to choose between accepting low-level film work, which could have opened doors to future roles, or to walk

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34 Grant, “New Jack Cinema,” 69.

away from acting with his principles intact. As a classically trained actor, he ultimately did “sell out” by accepting a stereotypical role in a slave-film along the lines of *Roots*. As Taylor’s story further unfolded with a series of flashbacks and vignettes, the viewer experienced a humorous, yet scathing, account of Hollywood’s treatment of black actors and their narrowly defined place in cinema.

The film’s plot originated from Townshend’s actual acting career, which began during the 1970s with roles in blaxploitation films such as *Cooley High* (1975), *Mahogany* (1975) and *The Monkey Hustle* (1976). After several years of being typecast in the blaxploitation circuit, Townshend made a considerable effort to break into more complex roles. In doing so, he only experienced limited success with small parts in films more or less aimed at white audiences. Townshend’s crusade to find a viable place within mainstream cinema proved difficult; he remained in demand only for those clichéd roles commonly assigned to black actors in the 1970s and early 1980s. Of the experience Townshend said, “I kept getting calls for slaves, pimps, muggers, and rapists and I said, ‘I can't do this. This is ridiculous...' So, I said, ‘Well, I'll do my own film. I didn't go to film school but I had seen enough bad movies to know what I don't like.’”

Townshend did just that and found his own success, on his own terms, eventually producing his own television series and several moderately successful films.

While *Hollywood Shuffle*’s satirical look at the relationship between Hollywood executives and black performers marked a new beginning for Robert Townsend as a director and producer, it also helped to launch the careers of several individuals who

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would later create iconic films and television shows along similar lines. In particular, *Hollywood Shuffle* served as a springboard for the Wayans family of artists, as it was led by director and actor Keenen Ivory Wayans. Wayans contributed in no small way to the continued presence of Afrocentric film and television throughout the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. Wayans producing and directing credits extend to *Eddie Murphy: Raw* (1987), *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1988), the television hit *In Living Color* (1989-1994), *The Five Heartbeats* (1991), *A Low Down Dirty Shame* (1994), *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (1996), *Scary Movie 2* (2001), *White Chicks* (2004), and *Little Man* (2006). All of these efforts were quite profitable and have since become hallmarks of American comedy at the turn of the century. As black actors became integral parts of Hollywood culture during the post-assassination years, it likewise is important to note that Black Cinema unto itself did not expire entirely or need to rely solely on parody after the demise of blaxploitation. In 1986, Spike Lee emerged as an up-and-coming director who, for all intents and purposes, resurrected and reinvented black filmmaking. What is perhaps the most important issue raised by Lee’s work is that, historically, films featuring black Americans presented one-dimensional models of black people and communities, essentially falling short of representing the complex nature of the black experience. As such, Lee’s work strove to address issues of race head on, but with a keen sense of the infinite varieties of black American culture and the manner in which it evolved in both public and private ways.

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Unlike how blaxploitation films discussed primarily the plight of black Americans in poor and deprived areas, Lee looked at a wider range of social classes and, in doing so, confirmed that race-based social problems are not exclusive to slums and ghettos. Moreover, Lee’s perspective effectively concludes that various forms of racism can also be found in everyday middle-class life. Lee realized and implemented into his work a sense that since white America appeared in countless iterations within the context of mainstream film, so too should its black counterpart.

Lee independently produced his first feature film, *She's Gotta Have It*, on a budget of $175,000. The film was fresh and innovative, taking risks in black and white while using scattered scenes and shots to decorate the relatively linear narrative. The affordably and creatively constructed film paid off, grossing over $1 million during the six weeks following its release. Some film historians and critics contend that *She’s Gotta Have It* launched a kind of renaissance in black filmmaking and further inspired an American “indie film scene” that soon embraced filmmakers of all races. In addition, *She's Gotta Have It*’s undisputed popularity among non-black viewers served as further evidence that movies depicting intricate black characters could be successful without using tired stereotypes and racial gimmickry to develop them.

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40 Gary Susman, “This Week in Movie History: Spike Lee’s ‘She’s Gotta Have It’ Launches a Film Renaissance,” http://blog.moviefone.com/2011/08/12/shes-gotta-have-it-movie-history/ (accessed 05/10/2012).

41 Gary Susman, “This Week in Movie History.”
Lee’s innovation and success continued with *Do the Right Thing*, which was released in 1989. The work represented a long-awaited, true-to-life statement on the conditions and attitudes of black and Latino New Yorkers, a perspective long overlooked or sugar-coated by Hollywood writers and actors alike. While the film admittedly embellished in certain areas, Lee stood by his work, maintaining its authenticity in the face of certain criticisms. In a letter he wrote for *New York Magazine*, Lee defended the film from the assertion that it was designed to “feed white fears and hysteria.” Instead Lee asserted, “This film is very accurate in its portrayal of the attitude that black and Hispanic New Yorkers have toward the police. Visit any black-Hispanic neighborhood in the city to confirm this. Innocent Grandmothers are shot by cops, but the drug trade continues in open air.”

Lee also challenged film critic David Denby’s criticism of the film, saying, “Denby’s review of *Do the Right Thing* also is full of such troubling double standards. Denby asks where the drugs are in *Do the Right Thing*. He says I've presented a “sanitized” black community ‘without rampaging teenagers, muggers, or crack addicts.’ I guess Denby hasn't spent much time in Bedford-Stuyvesant. It has its share of crime and drugs like every neighborhood in the city. Black people in Bed-Stuy actually work; some even own homes and take care of them.”

Lee’s determination to represent the black experience without the use of clichéd tropes continued with *Jungle Fever* in 1991. Hollywood had made previous attempts to comment on the issue of interracial intimacy, but never with such a sense of realism and

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balance. To be sure, Sidney Poitier’s portrayal of an extraordinarily upstanding black man in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967) -- more than worthy of his fiancée and her family’s approval -- emerges as entirely too fanciful by comparison. *Jungle Fever* is distinct in that it devotes ample time to portraying candidly the black (and white) perspective with regard to interracial romance and sex. Contrary to the cheerful conclusions viewers gleaned from *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, Lee exposes the notion that black individuals hold their own unique and deeply held convictions when it comes to crossing the color line in love. Moreover, Lee uses the film to masterfully illustrate a social context fraught with an array of American social problems such as sexism, domestic violence, segregation, police brutality, workplace discrimination, and the crack-cocaine epidemic of the 1980s. While the film is aimed at exploring the issue of interracial intimacy, its most powerful moments surprisingly can be found in how the film treats these issues, especially when comparing the state of Wesley Snipes’ central character and his brother’s (Samuel L. Jackson) life-destroying drug addiction. Even while presenting sensitive and potentially off-putting subject matter, Lee showed the nation that his approach was profitable; the film grossed $32,482,682 on an estimated budget of $14,000,000.

In part due to Spike Lee’s successful recasting of black identity in film, new doors had opened for black actors and directors, establishing the “New Wave of Black

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Cinema.” In 1991 alone, sixteen Afro-centric films saw theatrical release, essentially breaking the record of any previous year. Among those films released were *New Jack City, True Identity, The Five Heartbeats, House Party II, Talkin’ Dirty After Dark, Hangin’ with the Homeboys, A Rage in Harlem, Chameleon Street, Strictly Business, Living Large, To Sleep with Anger,* and *Up Against the Wall.* Apart from *Jungle Fever,* the year’s highest grossing release by far was John Singleton’s, *Boyz N’ the Hood,* which brought in $10,023,462 during its opening weekend and a grand total of $57,504,069.

In portraying the extent to which urban disorder and civic chaos had not ceased to disrupt and endanger the lives of black Americans, the film succeeded to make its dramatic case. While blaxploitation had attempted to make a similarly sobering point in its own way, Singleton had unveiled an accessible, gimmick-free, and realistic portrait of how the American city had clearly failed its black residents, placing particular emphasis on the black male as an endangered citizen. Cultural sociologist Michael Eric Dyson makes a clear and compelling case for the importance of the film:

> Most chilling, black-on-black homicide is the leading cause of death for black males between the ages of 15 and 34. Or to put it another way, ‘One out of every 21 black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die in the hands of another black male.’ These words appear in stark white print on the dark screen that opens John Singleton’s masterful new film, *Boyz N the Hood.* These words

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are both summary and opening salvo in Singleton's battle to reinterpret and redeem the black male experience.\footnote{Michael Eric Dyson, \textit{Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 91.}

As a result of his film’s profound commercial triumph, Singleton became the youngest black director to be nominated for an Oscar in the categories Best Director and Best Original Screenplay.\footnote{Barry Keith Grant, \textit{Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film, Volume 1} (New York: Schirmer Reference, 2006), 68.} Successful as it was, \textit{Boyz N The Hood} was to be copied by films such as \textit{Juice} (1992) and \textit{Menace II Society} (1993), causing some to wonder if the blaxploitation phenomenon was to recur. To a degree, the similarities were apparent, mainly in continued emphasis on the urban, male perspective and the perpetuation of a stereotype of young black males engaging in extralegal activities. There also remained the matter of presenting a one-dimensional model of black communities, once again positioning them in ghettos and failing to explore the true diversity of African American populations, as Spike Lee had done with \textit{Do the Right Thing} and \textit{Jungle Fever}.

Although the crime-action formula remained profitable in the 1990s, by no means did Afro-centric film digress into its previous iteration. On the contrary, many black films of the decade, similar to their television counterparts, addressed the black family and the extent to which all had not shared in concrete middle class success. Strong examples of works exploring this issue included Charles Burnett’s \textit{To Sleep With Anger} (1990), Spike Lee’s \textit{Crooklyn} (1994), Kasi Lemmon’s \textit{Eve’s Bayou} (1997), John Singleton’s \textit{Rosewood} (1997), George Tillman’s \textit{Soul Food} (1997) and Lee’s \textit{He Got...
Game (1998). Each of these films explored class tension within black communities and, in doing so, provided viewers with a heightened sense of previously underrepresented economic and cultural variation. The pivotal distinction to be gleaned from films of this type is that a fixation on ghetto life had been put aside in favor of a perspective whose breadth and scope included a larger swath of the black population. Lastly, Darnell Martin’s I like it Like That (1994) examined the Afro-Latino family, a subject that is becoming increasingly relevant to the state of black America as it navigates “Otherness” alongside its fastest growing counterpart. Overall, the New Wave of black film pushes into new terrain while exhibiting the influences of independent black and white filmmakers from the 1960s and 1970s.

Black Television

In noting how Dr. King’s death bore direct influence in funk and black film, it likewise is imperative to discuss how it also had exposed the power and influence of Black Radio, which subsequently served as a source of inspiration for Afro-centric television. With regard to the legendary variety show, Soul Train, the significance of Black Radio in general became better known on the night of the murder as radio voices promoted calm and reason in the nation’s black communities. Del Shields, Jazz deejay for New York’s WLIB, described:

On the night Dr. King was killed, all across America every black station was tested and everybody who was on the air at that time, including myself, told people to cool it. We tried to do everything


possible to keep the black people from just exploding even more than what they were. When America looked at black radio in that particular period, it suddenly hit them that this was a potent force. If, in every major city, a black disc jockey had said, “Rise Up,” there would have been pandemonium. The impact and influence of black radio, and the understanding of the strength and community created among deejays, music, and audience, brought Don Cornelius from black radio to television and the concept of Soul Train.52

Don Cornelius was born on September 27, 1936. He grew up on the South Side of Chicago, attended DuSable High School and later worked as a cab driver and a car insurance salesman.53 After taking some community college broadcasting and journalism courses, Cornelius came into contact with Roy Wood at WVON Radio. Wood had heard Cornelius’ smooth, deep voice in person and invited him to host Channel 26’s news program called A Black’s View of the News.54 While at Channel 26, Cornelius began to dream up the idea of an experimental black music and dance show. Of Soul Train in its conceptual stage he said, “I came to Channel 26’s management with the Soul Train idea as an experiment, so I put together the pilot. Sears was the only taker.”55

After its initial acceptance in 1971, Cornelius later produced the Soul Train pilot with $400 of his own money, deriving the title from a road show that he had created for

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52 Christine Acham, Revolution Televised: Primetime and the Struggle for Black Power (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 59.


55 Maurice Weaver, “’Soul Train’ Awards Are A 1st For Black Music.”
local Chicago high schools.56 Looking back at the genesis of the show, Cornelius told The New York Times in 1995, “Soul Train was developed as a radio show on television. It was the radio show that I always wanted and never had. I selected the music by simply seeing what had chart success.”57 The show certainly borrowed from the format of Dick Clark’s American Bandstand, but instead of concealing diversity, Soul Train celebrated black music, fashion and dance, never shying away from broadcasting celebratory images of black Americans dancing and commiserating with people of all backgrounds. Cornelius was well aware that until Soul Train had aired, network television had never attempted to present American viewers a completely uncensored portrait of an integrated leisure and social venue. Acknowledging the groundbreaking nature of his project, Cornelius stated, “It was a tremendous export from America to the world, that showed African-American life and the joy of music and dance, and it brought people together.”58

The show’s formula remained more or less the same from 1977 to 2006, though its aesthetic was periodically updated and the music it featured evolved from Motown to funk, and eventually branched out into rap and hip hop. After it established itself as a profitable local sensation in the Midwest, Cornelius moved the operation to Los Angeles and began broadcasting nationally in 1971, beginning a 35-year syndication.59 At its height, the show was a memorable experience for which viewers tuned in every Saturday

56 James C. McKinley Jr., “Don Cornelius, ‘Soul Train’ Creator, Is Dead at 75.”

57 Mckinley, “Don Cornelius”.

58 Mckinley.

59 Amy Goldberg, J. Kevin Swain, Soul Train: The Hippest Trip In America DVD (Los Angeles: VH1 Rock Docs, 2011).
morning. As the shows ratings remained steady for two decades, viewers from every demographic observed and embraced important soul and R&B acts, such as Al Green, The Isley Brothers, and Barry White, many of whom were making national television appearances for the first time. The show was also a platform for white musicians like Elton John and David Bowie whose record sales undoubtedly benefitted from increased exposure to black audiences. Beyond music, *Soul Train* showcased dances and clothing styles that were popular among young blacks and without question went on to be adopted by young white Americans across the country. Finally, *Soul Train* laid the structural groundwork for dance programs like Fox’s *So You Think You Can Dance* and MTV’s *America’s Best Dance Crew*, and countless other program iterations whose format continues to bear Cornelius’ influence. With over 35 years of sustained popularity, *Soul Train’s* success was a matter of aesthetic, romantic, and danceable appeal. The emphasis on apolitical and heavily stylized elements underscored the national black community’s willingness and need to express itself on its own terms, independent of what more conservative, white and black audiences might have preferred.

*Soul Train’s* success dovetailed with popular black sitcoms appearing throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In many ways, these programs also navigated uncharted territory in their attempts to present black America’s positive cultural attributes in the context of dominant social concerns, along with a distinct need to preserve commercial appeal. Post-assassination black television had come a long way since the days of the *Amos ’n Andy Show*. While it had portrayed black businesspeople, judges, lawyers and policemen, the

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60 Golberg and Swain, *Soul Train: The Hippest Trip In America*. 
show ultimately was canceled in large part due to a serious NAACP protest, which asserted the following on an official bulletin:

It tends to strengthen the conclusion among uninformed and prejudiced people that Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest. Every character in this one and only TV show with an all-Negro cast is either a clown or a crook. Negro doctors are shown as quacks and thieves. Negro lawyers are shown as slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics. Negro Women are shown as cackling, screaming shrews, in big-mouthed close-ups, using street slang, just short of vulgarity. All Negroes are shown as dodging work of any kind. Millions of white Americans see this Amos 'n' Andy picture of Negroes and think the entire race is the same.61

Following the demise of Amos 'n Andy in 1953, some critics regarded television programs such as Julia and The Bill Cosby Show, which enjoyed moderate success from during the late 1960s, as indicative of a new “Assimilationist Era.”62 According to television scholar, J. Fred McDonald, blacks indeed had made discernable gains within the television industry as the 1960s concluded. McDonald also noted, “American television by the late 1960s had been moving toward a more equitable treatment of blacks. In a decade of racial reassessment and new domestic priorities, TV was propelled toward the realization of that color-blind promise so long a part of the medium. With nonfiction television focusing in depth on the racial question, with African-American talent starring in dramatic, comedic, and informational programming—and with small but significant inroads being made into technical and executive aspects of the industry—in

61 “Why the Amos 'n' Andy TV Show Should Be Taken Off the Air,” NAACP Bulletin, August 15, 1951.

the last years of the decade there was reason to anticipate the ultimate realization of bias-
free video."\(^{63}\)

Although it is fair to say that sitcoms of the 1970s were by no means offensive to the extent of *Amos 'n Andy*, many progressive black viewers and critics still regarded them as flawed because they tended to downplay “blackness” in favor of promoting personas more eager to embrace the notion of assimilation and cultural absorption. On the contrary, Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin, whose subsequent approach to television represented a dramatic departure from the assimilationist style, did not believe that sanitized depictions of black Americans were particularly interesting. Their treatment of black television dominated networks from 1971 until 1982 with hit series such as *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. Lear and Yorkin challenged the notion that blacks must always appear extraordinarily upstanding and eager to assimilate. Instead, they used their scripts to address racism, politics, and various forms of discrimination, often in the interest of black empowerment. While these tropes recurred throughout their shows, Lear and Yorkin almost always managed to maintain a playful sense of humor, which in no small way helped to secure sustained popularity and viewers from all demographics. Under Lear and Yorkin’s reign, situation comedy presented black America as central subjects, as opposed to trivial objects.\(^{64}\) While these programs can be celebrated for their advanced portrayal of black individuals, characters often remained


\(^{64}\) Coleman and McIlwain, “The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms,” 128.
somewhat isolated from the rest of society, only intermittently interacting with select individuals from other races.

Lear and Yorkin’s formula gave way to a less confrontational approach that would characterize the more “refined” black sitcoms of the mid-1980s. Among the most prominent examples are *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, both of which continued to challenge stereotypical portrayals of blacks, but utilized increased appearances by white actors. In doing so, *The Cosby Show* attempted to appeal to a larger number of white viewers while maintaining the interests of black viewers. In 1992, after nearly a decade of the show’s sustained success, Bill Cosby attempted to measure the show’s cultural impact through a study conducted by scholars Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis. After extensive content analysis and gathering focus group data, Jhally and Lewis produced the following seven conclusions:

1. *The Cosby Show* was successful in generating racial tolerance among white viewers and racial pride among black viewers.  
2. Racially, the United States remains a deeply divided society in desperate need of major structural changes to rectify its profound racism.  
3. *The Cosby Show* joined other programs in promoting the fiction that the Civil Rights movement had “won.”  
4. By touting the exceptions rather than the rule of class and race oppressions, the program contributed to the myth of the American dream.  
5. The debate among viewers regarding whether the Huxtables were "too white" was really a debate about class and resulted in confusing both black and white audiences about both race and class.  
6. *The Cosby Show* contributed to a strong belief among some whites that there was no need to act on racism in this country, because it is no longer a problem.  
7. The term "enlightened racism" refers to the complex concept indirectly fostered by *The Cosby Show*, which left white viewers to believe that black people who do not succeed like the
Huxtables are individually to blame for their problems and are lazy, and/or stupid.\textsuperscript{65}

Although *The Cosby Show* received due criticism for its sometimes naïve sense of social dynamics, its focus on sustainable, upper-middle class black family life nevertheless brought audiences a fresh perspective that had been lacking from previous television programs. Cosby felt that depicting black Americans as upwardly mobile and permanently affluent arguably figured into the promotion of new employment opportunities and, ultimately, the expansion the black middle class.\textsuperscript{66}

In the wake of Cosby’s domination of network TV, mainstream black sitcoms evolved into what have become known as “urbancoms,” but remained a desirable enterprise for major television networks. Since black Americans currently represent 12% of the total television-watching households and 13% of total individuals with television units, newer networks such as Fox and The WB invested in urbancoms such as *Martin* and *Living Single*.\textsuperscript{67} While these shows preserved the long-standing tradition of the black sitcom, some critics such as leading black American television scholar Robin R. Means Coleman calls the current state of black television the ‘New-Minstrelsy Era.’ In a show such as *Martin*, the lead character, Martin Lawrence, advanced a somewhat bittersweet portrait of black working class life in Detroit. Each of Martin’s friends adhered in some


\textsuperscript{66} Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television And The Struggle For Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 81.

way to predictable and formulaic archetypes of black men and women. Cole Brown, played by Carl Anthony Payne II, was a blue-collar dimwit who cleaned jets, drove an AMC Pacer, and lived with his mother. More interestingly, he proudly declared his affinity for larger women, like his steady girlfriend, “Big Shirley.” Pamela James, one of Martin’s recurring female friends played by Tichina Arnold, was hotheaded and portrayed as Martin's foil. Pam worked in a salon and her character rarely developed beyond the image of a hysterical, narcissistic black woman, though she did exhibit endearing and selfless qualities as a loyal friend during hardship. All these critical readings aside, the show was genuinely funny to most viewers and enjoyed a very long run on network TV. Despite Martin’s keen sense of satire and humor, Means still asserts that contemporary programs featuring depictions of everyday life for black Americans increasingly digress to a kind of shallow gimmickry akin to that of *Amos ’n Andy*. Moreover, influential black actors such as Bill Cosby and Tim Reid have criticized Fox's “urbancoms.” Reid said, “By depicting African American culture solely through the hip generation, Fox is making a tiny segment of us drive our entire TV image. Calling that 'cutting edge' is comical. It's more of a tragedy.” Cosby likewise spoke out against one of Fox’s urbancoms, *Martin*, calling it “crass and vulgar.”

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Conclusion

While the ideal content of black television and film remains a contentious matter, the modes of visual entertainment discussed in this work clearly reveal the influence of funk and how it transformed American television and cinema in a variety of profound ways. Notable among these changes is the permanent inclusion of Afrocentric programming and, ultimately, wider variations of multicultural entertainment. Although some critics have regarded the increased appearance of “the Other” within the context of conventional narratives as mere tokenism - which in some ways has become an accurate criticism - the process by which popular music, film and television ceased to exclude non-whites is both profound and verifiable. Granted, minority representation in popular culture remains unsatisfactory for many, but with respect to the momentous creative effort and enduring campaign for inclusion outlined in this work, one cannot deny salient improvement over time. Moreover, one cannot ignore the pivotal role that Dr. King’s death played in laying the groundwork for a popular culture more reflective of the nation’s diverse character.
CONCLUSION:

POST-ASSASSINATION REFLECTIONS AND LEGACIES

This dissertation maintains that the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. impacted American popular culture in a profound way, namely by giving rise to funk culture. In making this point, research and writing have paid deliberate attention to how seminal soul personnel collectively contributed to the creation of funk culture. From James Brown, to Motown, to Stax, and into the television and film industry, it is clear that a sweeping reaction to Dr. King’s murder inspired black America to change the way it represented itself in popular culture and, in turn, altered American tastes and the way audiences interpreted blackness. In the case of funk and its lasting impact on other facets of American life, it has been the task of this dissertation to underscore a salient progression from Dr. King’s death to contemporary, mainstream American culture.

In contemplating the death of Dr. King as it relates to the birth of funk culture, one can acknowledge how it fits into the “dialogic model” that originally was advanced by the noted cultural historian, George Lipsitz.¹ On the one hand, purveyors and practitioners of black music such as James Brown, Berry Gordy at Motown, and Al Bell at Stax used their positions within the entertainment industry to transform soul into funk, better reflecting a new set of political and social concerns. This shift was both a strident public expression of mourning and a newly discovered wellspring of black pride

¹ George Lipstiz, Time Passages (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 100.
emanating from many frustrated and distraught Americans. At the same time, as post- assassination sounds and sensibilities flooded airwaves, the stuff of the black American experience began to vary in its portrayal and presentation. This variation was a result of how the captains of the culture industry, along with rising black stars, modified content to suite changing attitudes and expectations throughout the 1970s and beyond. But even as representations of blackness underwent revision, the essence of the funk culture phenomenon, punctuated by rhythm, dance, swagger, and celebration, continued to captivate and influence American listeners. As such, its impact should be regarded as nothing less than a kind of cultural revolution derived from the folk realities of everyday individuals.

Identifying funk as a “bottom-up” phenomenon within the culture industry also requires a reference to Antonio Gramsci, the devoted Marxist labor organizer, who devised the formative theory of cultural hegemony. While in a broader sense Gramsci advanced a sophisticated, complex critique of cultural domination within industrial capitalism, he also acknowledged the possibility of a “soft” working class revolution that could take place by reclaiming the mechanisms that circulated dominant cultural ideals. In this context, funk comes into view as a movement that successfully flooded mainstream society with the sensibilities, creativity, and, at times, the subversive spirit of a marginalized people. In this vein, the advancement of funky counter-hegemonies represented a vital step toward reshaping the way in which white society dominated the tenor of a national culture.
Given its origins and impact, funk’s rather intimate relationship with the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King’s death represents an under-explored site in social history where fundamental transformations of collective attitudes and tastes have yet to be understood and documented fully. Examining the way in which funk permeated mainstream music of the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s entailed a critical look at its performance, sale, and consumption. In excavating each of these areas, profound and compelling illustrations of how Americans both rejected and accepted the idea of a society devoid of a color line came into view. Moreover, the declarations of racial and ethnic pride resounding throughout the post-assassination world featured the funk sound conveying and documenting the frustrations of a people whose hope for a peaceable transition into integrated harmony appeared to have suffered an irreversible setback with the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In other words, if making music that downplayed blackness and accentuated crossover appeal was a key part of successful cultural absorption, then its futility became painfully apparent with the violent death of one who personified it so well. Contrary to what one might assume, the tenor of a musical backlash was not characterized exclusively as one of sheer anger. While the militant mantras of funk pariahs such as Gil-Scott Heron and Eugene McDaniel moved closer to the radical fringes, mainstream funk, in contrast, was a technically sophisticated, sexual, humorous, absurd, and politically astute response to the failure of social integration and those who contributed to it.²

² Both Heron and McDaniel wrote material that many audiences found both shocking and threatening. Heron offered severe depictions of ghetto life and called for revolution. His most notable work was entitled The Revolution Will Not Be Televised and was a compilation of poems set to Funk rhythms. RCA studios released it in 1971. McDaniel warned listeners about a white conspiracy to
Although some continued to regard black America as “unabsorbable,” many black artists emerged as household names from 1968 to today. With this undeniable success, one finds verification of the impact of post-assassination black musical expression, with particular emphasis on funk’s influence. Following the subsequent progression of funk sensibilities, one also notices how the movement informed the emergence of new Billboard categories such as Dance, Hip-Hop and R&B. In this vein, Nitsuh Abebeentitled’s recent Rolling Stones article entitled, “We Must Be Superstars: In Defense of Pop” reveals that since 1980, these three particular genres have steadily overcome “white” rock ‘n roll as America’s favorite sound. Abebeentitled effectively illustrates this point by highlighting black music’s gradual conquest of the Billboard Pop Chart. Scoring nearly ninety percent of the number one Billboard singles between 1980 and 2010, it is clear that American listeners’ collective appreciation for commercial rock n’roll has given way to an even greater affinity for genres historically classified as “black music,” which bears the mark of those stylistic shifts made in response to and around the time of Dr. King’s death.3 With this association more clearly defined, there can be no disputing from a sales perspective how post-assassination sensibilities and funk culture redefined American listening habits and tastes. With respect to these consumer preferences and evolving industry classifications, it likewise is important to confirm how present-day dance, hip-hop, and R&B connect to the funk legacy in sonic and stylistic terms.

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The first chapter of this work explored how James Brown changed American music as he coped with Dr. King’s death. The result was a new sound emphasizing rhythm over harmony, thereby establishing a clear connection to funk, disco and hip-hop’s popularity. In particular, Hip-Hop represents a musical genre where Brown’s mark can most easily be identified. In a recent, popular Hip-Hop blog called egotripland.com, an anonymous contributor compiled a list of twenty-five seminal Hip-Hop tracks that made use of Brown’s music in some way shape or form. Among them one can find without question some of the most successful and influential Hip-Hop acts to date: Big Daddy Kane, Eric B. and Rakim, Public Enemy, Biz Markie, Gang Starr, The Geto Boys, Notorious B.I.G., LL Cool J, and Jay-Z. Impressive unto itself, Brown’s contribution to the success of these world-renowned acts is not without due praise from the Hip-Hop community. For instance, of Brown’s general impact on the genre, the contributor stated: “Frankly, I don’t think there’s any way to reduce the importance of James Brown’s music to hip-hop to 25 examples because without James Brown there is no hip-hop (not to mention any other form of modern club or dance related music). And that applies whether you’re talking hip-hop constructed via samples, or played by keyboard or band, or built from (turntable) scratch.”

Given Brown’s lyrics and riffs regularly adorning modern, chart-topping Hip-Hop tracks, the statement is hardly an exaggeration.

In chapter two of this work, Motown’s reluctant transformation from crossover success to purveyor of a funkier sound represented another profound consequence of Dr. King’s death. Under the savvy leadership of Berry Gordy during the 1950s and 1960s,

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Motown helped black Americans break into a music industry divided by race, but due to the death of Dr. King and additional pressures exerted by the Black Power Movement, among others, it had to reinvent itself with respect to how a growing number of black Americans desired to transcend Gordy’s tried and true “polished” image. As such, 1970s Motown label stars such as The Temptations, Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Marvin Gaye, Parliament/Funkadelic, and Stevie Wonder, indisputably laid their fair share of funky groundwork for contemporary Dance, R&B, and Hip-Hop, even as they departed from the “classic” Motown sound. In terms of influence on future iterations of black music, Parliament, while adding a psychedelic and ultra-original flair to the nascent funk sound, has provided endless samples for future rap producers. In that vein, Hip-Hop mogul, Dr. Dre, paid homage to the P-Funk sound on his best-selling album, *The Chronic.*\(^5\) Moreover, the P-Funk collective scored thirteen top ten hits on the R&B Charts between 1967 and 1983, including six number one hits.\(^6\) Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic dominated the music industry during the seventies and eighties, racking up over 40 R&B hit singles, three number ones and three platinum albums.\(^7\)

Chapter three examined how the uniquely integrated structure at Stax underwent severe challenges in the wake of Dr. King’s death. While internal, interpersonal rivalries unfolded, the larger story had to do with how the Stax organization as a whole more aggressively modified its sound and image with a funkier, racially charged flair. This


\(^7\) Vincent, *Funk*, 323.
particular transformation was due in large part to the leadership of Al Bell and the
creative contributions of Booker T. and the MG’s, the Staples Singers, the Bar-Kays,
Rufus Thomas, and Isaac Hayes, all of whom advanced a soul-funk image that elevated
the label’s overall popularity. The Stax organization also played a more prominent
activist role than Motown. It published a civil-rights minded newsletter called Stax Fax,
regularly coordinated its efforts with black activists and even conducted a massive benefit
concert, Wattstax, in an effort to raise money for the residents of Watts, Los Angeles.
The Stax organization also helped to launch the career of Richard Pryor, whose comedic
genius set a precedent for a long and distinguished line of black, socially astute and
sharp-tongued comedians.

Also in chapter four, funk music’s success figured significantly into the
emergence of successful blaxploitation soundtracks and films, all of which created
enormous profits while advancing both subversive and controversial messages regarding
the state of American race relations. As the blaxploitation genre faded, black sitcoms
emerged as permanent parts of American television programming while a growing
number of black actors and directors found Hollywood success in the 1990s. Through it
all, the challenge to represent black America in an authentic manner while maintaining
commercial viability often rendered depictions contentious and reductive. Whether
viewed as a setback or as a revolution in representation, one cannot dispute that film and
television of the funk era were as uncensored as they were popular.

In this dissertation, as it is with funk, black music in the context of the post-
assassination environment and beyond spoke in new ways to the civil rights debate while
placing a new emphasis on announcing black sensibilities to mass audiences, more or less independent of white influence. While this content sustained national attention by virtue of its creativity and the dance appeal, it also took by storm the film and television industries. Such a phenomenon was made abundantly clear not only through the unprecedented Billboard success of funk acts, but also with the reign of programs such as Soul Train, which maintained a 35-year syndication.

Funk’s emphasis on stylistic elements unique to black America went on to inspire new popular genres, but also underscored the black community’s willingness and need to express itself on its own terms, independent of what more conservative, white and black audiences may have preferred. As such, crossover appeal ceased to be the pressing concern that it once was under Berry Gordy’s stewardship during the 1960s. Instead, black music, film and television of the post-assassination era attempted in various ways to project a more complex and arguably authentic model of blackness and, in doing so, redefined what ‘cool’ had meant in previous decades. The result launched itself to the top of the charts, into eager hearts and minds, and cut across lines of race and class.
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