

The Message of Soul Music and Its Impact on African-American Society in the 1960s and 1970s

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Soul music is one of the most popular music genres around the world, and people enjoy it as a form of entertainment. Compared to the time of the Civil Rights movement, currently, most of them listen to soul music by taking delight in characteristic rhythm without thinking deeply about the messages. In the 1960s and 1970s, soul music had an impact on a lot of people, especially African Americans because soul music was a vehicle of political empowerment, awareness, and protest. According to Mark Anthony Neal, the James B. Duke Distinguished Professor of African & African American Studies and Chair of the Department of African & African American Studies at Duke University:

the songs that topped the R&B charts in the intervening months between Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination and the ascent of "Say It Loud," from April to October 1968, highlighted the complexities of Black life in the aftermath of tragedy and anger. Black communities were navigating emotions of grief, rage, resignation, suspicion, and defiance

and black music on the national and local levels reflected those emotions (AAIHS).

During the time when African Americans stood up for their rights, soul music played an important role for them, like changing their way of thinking as black people. At this point, it is needed to say how soul music affected the movement of black equality and respect, and what are the thoughts put into songs by the creators.

The aim of this essay is to explain the influence of soul music on black society, especially during the time of the movement for black equality, and to reveal the messages of soul music by analyzing influential hit songs in the 1960s and 1970s. Artists like James Brown and record companies such as Motown gave a lot of power to the development of soul music. Soul music in the 1960s and 1970s was emotional support for black people and helped contribute to mobilization for protest during the time that there was a great deal of discrimination against them, and they were able to act to acquire their rights because it has messages about emotions of grief, rage, resignation, suspicion, and defiance and it led to a change in consciousness.

Compared to other styles of songs, soul music included strong messages. According to Dick Weissman,

As the reader has seen in other songs of America's wars, the songs express admiration for military heroes, longings for home and family, the sadness of the constant specter of death and wounds, and even a feverish desire for an end to the conflict. Many of these songs contain hidden ironies in

their history, if not in their lyrics (Weissman 18).

Also, Eileen Southern says

Soul singers voiced concern about social injustice, racial pride, black militancy, and forms of protest; their music was correspondingly harsher, more intense, and more explosive than rhythm 'n' blues, with more emphasis upon traditional black-music elements - such as gospel, soul music resists precise definition; most of its leading figures were also claimed by the gospel or blues worlds, or by rock (Southern 517).

As they mentioned, soul music and singers strongly urged on people their thoughts and feelings. For example, James Brown's "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" is a representative song that certainly ties into the themes of black power (Weissman 102). Soul music has some characteristics. As mentioned above, one of the characteristics of soul music is strong emotions. "Its passionate vocalizing, powerful rhythms, and honest lyrics spoke directly to a generation of young African Americans, and soul music became synonymous with the social and political developments affecting them" (Timeline). Also, there are call and response structures, "noting or pertaining to a style of singing in which a melody sung by one singer is responded to or echoed by one or more singers" (dictionary.com). As soul music is defined as "a gospel-influenced African American popular music style," it has a characteristic of the gospel-folk style (Timeline). It is said that "performances of soul music were similar to the preaching style and gospel singing heard in African American

fork-styled churches" (Timeline). In summary, soul music has characteristics such as strong emotions, call and response and gospel-folk style. For example, these characteristics can be seen in "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" by James Brown.

Next, I will introduce the origin of soul music and its history. According to Mark Edward Nero, "soul music was born in Memphis and more widely in the southern US where most of the performing artists were from" (liveabout.com). He is "a former writer for *ThoughtCo* where he wrote about rhythm and blues and soul music. He has been a professional journalist since 1995 and a music critic since 1996" (liveabout.com). Also, it is said that the origin of soul music is the African American church: "After slavery ended in 1865, African Americans weren't welcome in the churches of white Americans, so they built their own churches and sang Christian songs with African-American vocal styles and rhythms" (Timeline). For that reason, soul music was like the gospel-folk style. According to Dick Weissman, "Gospel music was such a dynamic vocal music that it almost inevitably led to the birth of soul. Soul was essentially gospel vocal style married to secular lyrics and rhythm and blues instrumental backgrounds" (Weissman 97). For instance, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin and Johnnie Taylor was some of the first in a long line of artists who came directly out of the church, and other soul artists, like Ray Charles, were not active gospel singers, but their vocals and performing style reflected heavy gospel influences (Weissman 97). In this way, the history of soul music began, and it became more popular as a distinctive style in the

1950s (Timeline). At that time, a lot of soul music artists made various achievements. For example, "Ben E. King achieved success in 1961 with "Stand by Me," a song directly based on a gospel hymn" (Soul Music, Wikipedia). Moreover, "Aretha Franklin's recordings, such as "I Never Loved a Man" (The Way I Love You) in 1967, "Respect" (written and originally recorded by Otis Redding) in 1965, were significant and commercially successful productions (Soul Music, Wikipedia). Finally, soul music reached the peak of popularity in 1968. Thanks to a record company, Motown's and some artists' activities, soul music became popular among a lot of people regardless of race. Afterwards it was distributed into various subgenres, a genre that is part of a larger genre, as Latin soul, Cinematic soul, Motown sound, neo soul, retro-soul, quiet storm (Merriam-Webster) (mizonote-m.com). With the change of soul music, some famous soul singers turned into other genres like Funk, "music that combines elements of rhythm and blues and soul music and that is characterized by a percussive vocal style, static harmonies, and a strong bass line with heavy downbeats" (merriam-webster) (mizonote-m.com). Thus, in the 1960s, soul music rose in popularity as some artists made many achievements, and it reached the peak of popularity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Motown Records specializing in African American music played a big role in politics and the movement for social change (discovermusic.jp). It was founded by Berry Gordy Jr. who was the first African American founder of Record Labels ever (discover music). In this section, I will

introduce his achievements for social change and development of music. First, Gordy put out a lot of African American artists like the Supremes, Stevie Wonder, and the Temptations into the African music scene. Even if at that time, many people had prejudice against African American people in terms of race, Gordy succeeded in making people admire black artists because he had a keen eye for music (discover music). Also, Motown Records handled songs that showed social issues because there were a lot of social problems such as apartheid and Vietnam War in the 1960s in America (discover music). It was one of the strategies of Motown for capturing the sound of "young America" (Weissman 98). For example, "You're Gone (But Always In My Heart)" by the Supremes and "Jimmy Mack" by Martha and the Vandellas were written in response to the Vietnam War (discover music). Moreover, after Detroit's Walk to Freedom - a mass march during the Civil Rights Movement on June 23, 1963, in Detroit, Michigan (Wikipedia) - Berry Gordy produced a record album documenting Martin Luther King Jr.'s impassioned words and Gordy heightened the drama of the event by titling the album, "The Great March to Freedom: Reverend Martin Luther King Speaks" (the Henry Ford). Also, Dick Weissman says, "Modelling his operation after the practices of his ex-employer, the Ford Motor Company, Gordy created an assembly line of songwriters, studio musicians, record producers, and choreographers to capture the white teenage audience" (Weissman 98). Motown did their best to spread African American music to a lot of people including white people like the

above. Berry Gordy's activities were a huge first step for making people around the world recognize African American artists (discovery music). In addition to this, their music attracted attention by producing a lot of music that had messages about politics and social issues because there were many social problems in the 1960s. Motown Records did their best to develop African American music, and one of their strategies was to bring up social issues. In this way, they were successful in attracting attention from people in the world and connecting music to society. Therefore, it can be said that Motown Records connected with society by making songs with a strong message and showed how powerful music is for changing society.

Some artists did a lot to develop soul music and change society. I will introduce influential artists who contributed to spreading soul music like Sam Cooke and James Brown. Sam Cooke was born in 1931 and succeeded with an American singer, lead singer of the Soul Stirrers and songwriter (Sam Cooke, Wikipedia). Moreover, "Sam Cooke was influential - not only musically. He was also a strong activist in the civil rights movement in the early 1960s" (Audacy). The representative songs that he released are "You Send Me" in 1957, "A Change Is Gonna Come" in 1964. "You Send Me", Cooke's debut single, was a massive commercial success, becoming a No. 1 hit on both Billboard's Rhythm & Blues Records charts and Billboard Hot 100" (Sam Cooke, Wikipedia). "A Change Is Gonna Come" initially appeared on Cooke's album *Ain't That Good News* and a slightly edited version of the recording was released as a single (A

Change Is Gonna Come, Wikipedia). Also, it was an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement and had an impact on a lot of people. James Brown was born in 1933 and succeeded as a singer, dancer, musician, bandleader, and record producer until 2006 (James Brown, Wikipedia). Dick Weissman says, "James Brown's "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" certainly ties into the themes of black power" (Weissman 102). It can be said that James Brown was also one of the essential artists at that time. The above song, "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" was written with his bandleader Alfred "Pee Wee" Eills in 1968 and became an unofficial anthem of the Black Power movement (Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud, Wikipedia). Another of his hit songs was "I Got You" which became his second single in a row to reach number-one on the R&B chart and top ten on the pop chart (James Brown, Wikipedia). Like this, Sam Cooke and James Brown were one of the essential artists for developing African American music and society. Also, other artists like Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding and so on, contributed to the general popularity of soul music. In addition to this, Motown Records, founded by a black ex-auto worker named Berry Gordy, brought new highlights in the 1960s (Weissman 98). "Motown was the most successful soul music label, with a net worth of \$61 million. During the 1960s, Motown achieved 79 records in the top-ten of the Billboard Hot 100 between 1960 and 1969" (Motown, Wikipedia). Motown put out a lot of popular artists such as Marvin Gay, Stevie Wonder, and the Temptations. Motown used music not only as a vehicle of pride

and protest, but for entertaining a lot of people regardless of race or nationality. Thus, Motown played an important role in fighting against the negative views of African American.

"A Change Is Gonna Come" is a song by American singer-songwriter Sam Cooke and initially appeared on Cooke's album *Ain't That Good News*, released mid-February 1964 by RCA Victor; a slightly edited version of the recording was released as a single on December 22, 1964 (*A Change Is Gonna Come*, Wikipedia). This song made a big impact. For example, it became an anthem of the 1960s civil rights movement (NRP Music). Also, "it was inducted into the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry in 2007" (*Song Meaning and Facts*). According to *Song Meaning and Facts*, it is said that there was an overt incident of racism which inspired Sam Cooke to make this song.

In summation, this occurred in 1963. Said date saw Sam make reservations for himself and his wife at a Holiday Inn located in the city of Shreveport in Louisiana. But when they arrived, they were turned away under the premise of lack of vacancy. This caused Cooke and his brother to protest and eventually disturb the peace, at least according to the cops who arrested them shortly after they vacated the premises. But on a more-positive note, in 2019 the Mayor of Shreveport did apologize for the event (*Song Meaning and Facts*).

Moreover, "Blowin' in the Wind" by Bob Dylan in 1963 influenced Cooke's composition of "A Change Is Gonna Come" (*Song*

Meaning and Facts). According to Sam Cooke, "Cooke was greatly moved that such a poignant song about racism in America could come from someone who was not black, and was also ashamed he had not yet written something like that himself."

Generally speaking, it is a song that Sam Cooke addressed the Civil Rights Movement (Song Meaning and Facts). "A Change Is Gonna Come" was written as a protest song to support the Civil Rights Movement and to encourage other African American facing oppression to have hope and to not give in to the Civil Rights Movement" (Weebly.com). It can be seen in the lyrics of the song. "But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will" appears four times ("A Change Is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke). It expresses that people should have hope to change for the better. Also, people can see the real situation at that time from the lyrics. For example, "I go to the movie and I go downtown, somebody keeps telling me don't hang around" shows, African American people were not allowed to act freely" ("A Change Is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke). Therefore, people can see the messages that show the situation is hard and he feels discouraged by reality, but he believes the world will change in this song.

"People Get Ready" is a 1965 single by the Impressions, and the title track from the People Get Ready album" (People Get Ready, Wikipedia). "The gospel-influenced track was written and composed by Curtis Mayfield" (People Get Ready, Wikipedia). According to Rick More, "People Get Ready was released during

a time of civil unrest in America, when the country was in turmoil over race relations and the Vietnam War just as Mayfield was beginning to infuse his work with social commentary." As achievements, "Beyond the Civil Rights Movement, "People Get Ready" was a popular success, reaching number three on the "Billboard" R & B Chart and number 14 on the "Billboard" Pop Chart" (Erickson 2). Also, "People Get Ready" was awarded a Grammy Hall of Fame award in 1998" and "the song has been covered by literally dozens of other artists, including Bob Dylan, Alicia Keys" (Moore 2021).

"People Get Ready" is an American song about the sin of slavery never atoned for, the system racism that followed, and the promise of deliverance" (Erickson 2). Also, "it comes off as a faith-based song which is call to people to believe in God as they embark on a ride that will bring them deliverance" (Song Meaning and Facts). There is a word, "train" in the lyrics. It is because "train" has a specific meaning for African Americans who were deprived of their freedom of movement. Moreover, there are the lyrics, "So people, get, ready, there's a train to Jordan" ("People Get Ready" by the Impression). According to Song Meaning and Facts, "he tells his audience to get ready and almost blindly jumps on the train which signifies liberation. This imaginative train is actually crossing to Jordan, another named for Heaven." Not a direct message, but it shows that they were seeking and hoping for relief from a difficult situation like working environment.

"Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" is a funk song

performed by James Brown and written with his bandleader Alfred "Pee Wee" Ellis in 1968" (Say It Loud, Wikipedia). "The '60s was a tumultuous time for race relations in America" (Song Facts). At that time, "African Americans despised their blackness; they tried to get rid of their African American features, for example, by straightening their curly hair, and used the word "black as an insult" (Study Corgi). For this reason, he made this song that shows black pride. "Brown was a leader in the black community, and encouraged his people to stand up for their rights" (Song Facts). "According to Brown's close friend Al Sharpton, the song came about when Brown witnessed infighting among blacks in Los Angeles" (Song Facts). As his achievement of this song, it appeared at #60 on the U.S. Singles Pop Chart, becoming the highest-ranking new song to appear that week and on the R&B chart, it was number one for six weeks in a row (discover). It proved that the song moved all audiences of religions and races' hearts, and it became an unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement (Study Corgi). Moreover, "the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame included "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" in their 500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll" (Say It Loud - I'm Proud and I'm Black, Wikipedia).

"Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" is about black pride as the title suggests (Song Facts). It can be said that James Brown emphasized the need to change not only society but African American's minds. "Brown recorded this live with a group of children from the Los Angeles area answering Brown's "Say It Loud" with "I'm Black and I'm Proud." This call and response

style was a fixture at Brown's shows and inspired a generation of funk" (Song Facts). The voice of children who were actually suffering from race segregation is essential for the song because it really hit a number of people. "Such a song structure implies that Brown does not want to preach to people; instead, he wants them to make their own decision" (Study Corgi). Also, in the song, "Brown refers to the history of African Americans. However, he encourages his listeners to continue fighting for their rights until they get for their rights until they get what they deserve, that is, equal rights and the elimination of racial discrimination" (Study Corgi). For example, there are lyrics that "we've been duked and we've been scorned", and "Brother we can't quit until we get our share" ("Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" by James Brown). In this way, the song made blacks aware that they are being treated badly and inspired them to stand proudly as blacks rather than giving up on improvement.

Soul music had a great impact on society especially during the Civil Rights Movement. According to Dick Weissman, "music seems to be most effective in the sphere of social change when the musician participants are involved in the political process itself" (Weissman 318). Soul music has attractive characteristics to strike a chord with the audience. First, soul music has a specific vocal feature. Soul singer-songwriter Don Covay explained, "soul is total vocal freedom" (Ward, 184). Also, Brian Ward says, "In soul, as with all black musical forms, individual performers searched for, and the best of them found, a unique voice through which they made public private emotions and

experiences with which their black audiences closely identified" (Ward 184). Moreover, there were a lot of songs that reflected strong messages about social and politics. Initially, the messages were not very specific, however, some artists sang songs that express social issues. Eileen Southern says "Soul singers voiced concern about social injustice, racial pride, black militancy, and forms of protest" (Southern 517). For example, Mayfield's "This Is My Country" released in 1968 refers to slavery and to the struggle to achieve equality, posing the question, "Shall we perish unjust or live equal as nation?" (Weissman 318). Thus, "these songs did not create change, but they certainly helped to pave the highway that could lead to change because songs have specific features such as vocal and messages" (Weissman 321).

Throughout the research above, it can be seen that African-American music in the 1960s and 1970s had strong messages to encourage people and change for the better. In other words, even if music changes society completely, it plays a big role in solving problems or supporting people. It is because soul music has attractive features like call and response structures and vocals that show singers' arguments. These features and the lyrics attracted people's sympathy. In addition to this, soul music developed and increased popularity among not only African American people but white people, thanks to a number of great artists like Sam Cooke and James Brown and record companies like Motown. Therefore, in the 1960s and 1970s, soul music became popular, and supported and encouraged people with the strong message of the song especially during the Civil Rights Movement.

In conclusion, this paper discusses the strong messages of soul music in the 1960s and 1970s through researching information of soul music like characteristics and analyzing three songs. First, Motown succeeded in spreading African American music to a lot of people including white people. It led to attracting the attention of African American artists and reducing prejudice. On the other hand, some artists sang songs that have strong messages about social situations. People were encouraged by songs and could have black pride. Through this essay, I have learned that music has great power. I felt that even if words alone cannot convey the message, by putting it to sound, it can touch people's hearts beyond the boundaries of race and country. I also thought that even though music cannot change society at large, it can bring about a change in the hearts of everyone, which will gradually move society in a positive direction.

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