

Defining Soul: Black Survivorship in the 1960s and 1970s

"Sometimes it seems to be a profane liturgy of the doomed and the despairing, but more frequently it is a hymn of hope or an unbridled affirmation or dark defiance." – Phyl Garland

Soul music, as a genre is often illusively defined, in large part because it is a genre defined by evoked feeling rather than by a common musical or lyrical structure. The soul of the late 1960 and early 1970s was as much an ideology as a musical shaped by the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, and the conservative push-back that followed in the 1970s.

The word, "soul," emerged as a "household word among black people" during the "inner city uprisings" of the 1960s that protested police brutality, housing inequalities and systemic racial oppression.¹ Black business owners living in inner cities began placing signs in their shop windows reading "soul brother," in an attempt to keep protesters from looting or damaging their shops (Maultsby qtd. in Lordi 6).

Before it emerged as a musical genre in the late 1960s, "soul" was historically used in Black communities to describe kinds of emotionally rife jazz and gospel performance. Music historian, David Brackett believes that the "changes in black political thought, from the civil rights era to the Black Power era" were responsible for shifting soul to "an adjective from a noun." Such a change was also perpetuated by Billboard renaming its R&B chart the soul chart in 1969, and the release of Phyl Garland's book, *The Sound of Soul*, the same year. Garland's book, Lordi concurs offers the best definition of soul music as a genre.

Garland describes soul by way of American novelist and essayist, James Baldwin, a literary giant of the period who fought against a nullification of the self that was a built-in risk of Black existence..." (Garland 23). In his book of essays, *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin explored the passion and power of Black musical tradition. The outpouring of emotion and sense the of togetherness that is so poignant in Black music – gospel, jazz and the blues – was crucial, Baldwin said, to Black communal resilience. While Baldwin never referred to the soul genre by name, his explanation of Black resilience and the revolutionary act of celebrating life in the face of continuous oppression, was the core belief of the soul era. "To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life" wrote Baldwin. "To be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread." This notion of intimacy and the cherishing of life, is in Garland's view, "the most eloquent and concise definition of soul and all it entails ever to be set down on paper" (Baldwin qtd, Garland 23). Lordi expands on this definition in her book, *The Meaning of Soul*, stating that "soul discourse reimagined the Judeo-Christian ideal that suffering might be worth something." However, this suffering did not necessarily offer a "heavenly



Figure 1: A Black woman stands outside a shop window which reads: "Negro Owner, Soul Brother." Photo from the Newark Rebellion of 1967.

¹ These included the uprisings in Harlem in 1964, the uprisings in Watts, CA in 1965, and the many city uprisings (including Detroit and Newark) during the summer of 1967, dubbed "The Long, Hot Summer of 1967."

afterlife.” Rather, suffering afforded one “worldly gifts” like “emotional depth and communal belonging.” At its heart having soul, meant to have developed a kind virtuosic survivorship specific to black people as a group.” (Lordi 5).

The 1960s saw a number of policies and laws that improved the civil rights of Black Americans, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racist voter suppression laws, and the Civil Rights Acts of 1966 and 1968 prohibited government and housing discrimination. However, these successes were hard won, and Black Americans often suffered and died at the hands of those who wished to uphold Jim Crow and America’s legacy of white supremacy. Historian Mark Anthony Neal notes that “there may be no period in twentieth century America that witnessed more state-sanctioned repression against African-Americans than the period from 1968-1972” (qtd in Lordi 29). This period, which was the peak of the soul era, saw the murdering of Black Panthers, school shootings targeting Black students, the assault of Black prisoners, the beginning of the war on drugs and the beginning of the era of mass incarceration.

“What the discourse of soul gave people,” writes Lordi, was an assurance that even their most chilling experiences connected them.” A connection that existed between Black contemporaries, but also a “procession of ancestors whose personal griefs were unknowable but whose historical traumas were rendered increasingly more present” (Lordi 8). Writer Zadie Smith’s definition of soul echoes Garland and Lordi, and by extension Baldwin. “Soulfulness, she says, “is an alchemy of pain” (qtd. in Lordi 8). This transformation of pain into music took on numerous forms. Songs like Nina Simone’s “Young, Gifted and Black,” Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack’s “Be Real Black For Me,” and Hathaway’s “The Ghetto” affirmed Black life, Black love, and Black communities, while songs like Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness” and Al Green’s “How Can You Mend A Broken Heart” poignantly expressed the complexities and vulnerabilities of romantic love. Like the folk genre of the 60s and 70s, soul also commented on the complex political moment: Curtis Mayfield’s “People Get Ready,” Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come,” Gene McDaniel’s “Compared to What,” and Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Goin’ On” questioned an era marked by political divisions, racial violence, and the Vietnam War and expressed the Black collective desire for a better future.

The soul era was brief – by the mid 1970s, the popular music scene began to veer in a more escapist direction of disco and dance pop, a drastic shift from soul’s simmering emotionalism and its often expertly-crafted musical call-to-arms. But soul has remained. If “soul” shifted, as Brackett suggests, from a noun to an adjective in the 1960s, today it is both a noun and an adjective—an ideology and the music from which that ideology sprung. Geneva Smitherson’s dictionary of Black words defines “soul” as “the essence of life; feeling, passion, emotional depth—all of which are believed to be derived from struggle, suffering, and having participated in the Black experience. Having risen above the suffering, the person gains soul” (Smitherson 284).

Soul is an aesthetic, a creed, and a music. Its roots span from west African call-and-response, to Black churches, colleges, and inner city “ghettos.” Never stagnant, soul is found in the words of James Baldwin yesterday, and the words of Zadie Smith today. Its musical legacy has informed the R&B of the 21st century, and the hip-hop generation. But soul is always tethered to Black identity: “Each generation” of Black America, says Maultsby, “employs” soul’s ideology “in ways that reflect its unique set of circumstances” (qtd. in Guillory 284). There is no such thing as “post-soul;” there is only the soul of now, a product of the soul of the past, and a promise of the soul to come.