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SAM COOKE

A Change is Gonna Come

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The Change That Came

The Life of Sam Cooke
by Peter Guralnick

Sam, c. 1964.

Let me tell you a story on Sam. Sam was always ambitious. One time when we were little boys he said, "Hey, C., you know what?" I said, "What?" He said, "I figured out my life, man." He said, "I'm never gonna have a nine-to-five job." I said, "What you mean, Sam?" He said, "Man, I figured out the whole system." He said, "It's designed, if you work, to keep you working, all you do is live from payday to payday — at the end of the week you broke again." He said, "The system is designed like that." And I'm listening, I'm seven and he's nine, and he's talking about "the system!" I said, "What are you gonna do, then, if you ain't gonna work, Sam?" He said, "I'm gonna sing, and I'm going to make me a lot of money." And that's just what he did.

L.C. Cooke, on his brother's early ambitions

Sam Cooke has been called on more than one occasion "the best singer who ever lived, no contest." In the words of Ray Charles, hardly a man given to gratuitous praise: "Nobody sound like Sam Cooke. I mean, nobody. He hit every note where it was supposed to be. And not only hit the note, but hit the note with feeling. He was the one and only."

Those qualities, those undeniable elements of grace and transcendence, remain plainly on display in his music. It

is the clarity, the beauty, the transparency not just of his voice but of his writing (for Sam Cooke wrote nearly all his own songs) that comes through to this day. "Another Saturday Night," "Cupid," "Wonderful World," "Bring It On Home to Me," "Having a Party" — each was an explicit invitation to sing along. He took his lesson from no less unlikely a source than Louis Armstrong ("Don't listen to the voice, listen to the phrasing," he told his protégé Bobby Womack) and built his songs entirely around a conversational style. "You just talk the story," he told Bobby. "That's how you get people to come to you — because it's not like a song, it's like two people rapping, only with a melody attached." What makes the songs so enduring, though, for all of their evident simplicity, is not just Sam's inimitable singing style but the emotion and craft he put into their composition. To Sam it wasn't worth singing a song if you didn't believe it. And it was his vision not just of the music but of the *possibilities* that the music had to offer, it was his broad vision not only of things as they were but as they could be that fueled both his artistic ambition and his sense of himself.

Sam Cooke was born into a world defined, but not limited, by its separateness, a world of "twoness," as W.E.B.

DuBois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which it was impossible to avoid "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a [predominantly white society] that looks on in amused contempt and pity." It was a world, as DuBois also recognized, so rich, so vibrant, so colorful that, thrown back on its own resources, it created a culture that has in many respects, both with and without acknowledgment, defined the American cultural mainstream. This was a community in which imagination and self-invention trumped pedigree, in which, as James Baldwin wrote, there existed "a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster...very moving and very rare. Perhaps we were, all of us," Baldwin reflected in *The Fire Next Time*, "pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children — bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run." If so, it was that inescapably shared heritage, Baldwin went on, that helped create the dynamic that allowed one "to respect and rejoice in...life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread." It was that freedom, that "presentness," that vitality which Sam Cooke sought to celebrate. It was that experi-

ence which he sought both to embody and transcend.

What was most extraordinary about Sam Cooke was his capacity for learning, his capacity for imagination and intellectual growth. Just nineteen when he joined the nation's #1 gospel quartet, he took his place seemingly without a moment's doubt ("I had never seen anything like it," says singer Lloyd Price. "I was the hottest thing in the country with 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy,' and here was this guy who just stood there and sung, and he *rocked* them") and gave the Soul Stirrers their greatest commercial success with "Jesus Gave Me Water," the first recorded number on which he sang lead.

Six years later, in 1957, after conducting a sometimes contentious debate with himself for over a year, he became the first of the gospel stars to go pop, enjoying a #1 hit with his first release, "You Send Me." With former Pilgrim Travelers' manager J.W. Alexander he established his own song publishing company, Kags, the following year, and in the fall of 1959, spurred on by the idea that there was nothing that a white business establishment could do that they were not capable of doing themselves, he and Alexander, together with Soul Stirrers founder S.R. Crain, established their own label,

SAR Records, as much as anything, J.W. said, to record "people we liked. Sam loved producing, and he wanted to give young artists a chance."

He wrote "A Change Is Gonna Come," which became an almost instant anthem of the civil rights movement, both out of his own experience (and the experience of every person of color in a rigidly segregated society) and out of a broad artistic vision that enabled the song to transcend its particular origins and remain current to this day. Toward the end of his life he set out to develop young African-American talent, establishing the first of what was intended to be a series of "Soul Stations," storefront locations in South Central LA that would offer rehearsal space and audition centers for disaffected black youth who might otherwise never find their way to SAR's Hollywood offices. Looking toward the future, Sam saw himself concentrating more and more on writing for and producing other artists. Asked on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* what would be the greatest thing that could ever happen to him, he replied simply, "If all the singers I'm connected with had hits."

His success was predicated on what his brother L.C. called "second sight," which might be another way of describing his ability to read people and

situations with both an empathetic instinct and an analytic cast of mind. He absorbed every lesson that was put in front of him, but his pride in where he came from would not permit him to be defined in anyone's terms but his own.

"I don't even know why I do what I do," Sam said to the young Bobby Womack. "When I do it, it just comes." And that's the way his music still sounds: as fresh, as elegant, as full of mirth, sadness, and surprise as when it first emerged, translating somehow across the ages in ways that have little to do with calculation or fashion and everything to do with spontaneity of feeling, with a kind of purity of soul. That's the Sam Cooke who continues to live on: that rare individual whose horizons kept expanding right up till the day he died. He was always moving on to the next thing. He was always looking forward to the next chapter. And he was always looking to take anyone with him who was ready to go.

Sam with business partner and Soul Stirrers' member S.R. Crain at the SAR offices, 1964.

