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# "You Got To Do The Thing With Soul": Sam Cooke and Soul Music in America

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**“YOU GOT TO DO THE THING WITH SOUL”**  
Sam Cooke and Soul Music in America

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## Introduction

In 1931, Samuel Cook was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi to parents Annie Mae and Reverend Charles Cook, a Baptist, Pentecostal minister. Sam was the fifth of eight children. In 1953 Reverend Cook moved the family to Chicago where he found work as an Assistant Pastor. Cook grew up immersed in the Baptist church, with a strong focus on bible study and church involvement. He started singing in the church choir at six years old and began his vocal career three years later when he formed the gospel trio, The Singing Children, with two of his sisters. In high school Cook became a member of a gospel, a capella quartet, The Highway Q.C.'s. The group became especially popular after performing at the Reverend C.L Franklin's New Bethel Baptist Church, which was known for staging notable gospel acts. This led to exposure on the radio and in time the group had gained popularity, with Cook's voice and charm driving their following. In 1951, when The Soul Stirrers' (the most famous gospel quartet in the area) lead singer, R.H. Harris quit the group, Cook was invited to replace him. With that, Cook's gospel career exploded and he began to change the sound and following of gospel music. Cook's smooth baritone, good looks, and the group's reimagining of the gospel genre allowed The Soul Stirrers, and Cook, to gain a mass following, especially within the younger generation. While at first trying to mimic R.H. Harris' infamous lead vocal, Cook quickly grew into his own performer, all the while paving the way for his impending crossover to secular and popular music. From there, he would start the career that would eventually earn him titles including, "The Man Who Invented Soul," "The King of Soul," and "Mr. Soul."

Sam Cook led the way for African American artists' movement into pop music in the 1950s. After his first hit with "You Send Me" and changing his name, Sam Cooke solidified his stardom as a pop artist and successfully secured a white fan base, despite the 1950s racial

climate. His pop career opened many doors for solo black pop artists who had before been confined to r&b and other traditionally African American genres. Cooke then, as he had always done, considered his roots and began his own label, SAR, with his colleague J.W. Alexander. The Soul Stirrers would be their first signed group and Cooke continued to use SAR to honor his gospel roots and groom young talent. By 1961 Cooke began to move away from the pop music he knew would appeal to white audiences and put a little more of his gospel self into his act. He continued to hone his act and his music and write for himself, until producing “Bring It On Home to Me” in 1962—a landmark piece for the soul genre that was now coming to fruition in the American music scene.

Over two years Cooke’s pop performances strayed more and more from his first performances for a secular audience. He brought a gospel energy to his act and music that captured his American audience, both black and white, and gained him a dominant reputation. Cooke was able to use the stardom and music industry power that he had gained from his wildly successful pop career, to explore his musical interests and produce a variety of music. He deepened his involvement with the civil rights movement after being turned away at a hotel in Shreveport, Louisiana, then being jailed for contesting the snub with the hotel’s manager. Inspired by Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ In The Wind,” Cooke sought out to write a song that would capture the purpose of the civil rights movement. He recorded and released “A Change is Gonna Come.” The song was released as a single three days after Cooke’s death in 1964 and it became one of the most influential songs in American history, not only for its powerful message, but also for its flawless blend of musical genres.

Between the doors he opened for gospel artists who desired a pop career, the barriers he broke by achieving pop success with biracial audiences, his musical achievements—vocally,

instrumentally, and lyrically—and his distinct alignment with social equality, Sam Cooke contributed fundamental characteristics and support to the rise of the soul music genre in America. While the term soul was used during his lifetime to describe a certain enigmatic quality of emotion and a general kind of music, the genre did not become solidified in the American consciousness until after Cooke's death. The genre today encompasses a range of music, representing an amalgam of blues, gospel, rock n' roll, and jazz elements, as well connotations of African American solidarity. Along with other black artists such as Ray Charles, James Brown, and Little Richard, Cooke was one of the first to produce music that included so many elements of what Americans consider soul. Cooke, in particular, infused a gospel flair into secular, mainstream music, inspiring some of the great soul artists who succeeded him, such as Al Greene and Aretha Franklin. The influential steps Sam Cooke took throughout his lifetime, culminating in "A Change Is Gonna Come" prove invaluable to the evolution of soul music in America.

### **More than “You Send Me” and adding an E: Sam Cooke’s Transition from Gospel to Pop**

The traditional or commonly accepted story of Sam Cook’s ‘crossover’ from gospel to pop music, his transition from Sam Cook to Sam Cooke, is fairly simple. After a bit of hesitation and trepidation, Cook and his associates, Bumps Blackwell (R&B veteran who had recently taken over artists and repertoire at Specialty Records), Art Rupe (of Specialty Records), and Bill Cook (of the R&B world) decided to test the waters with a pop song. They came up with “Lovable” (Guralnick, “Sweet Soul Music” 35). The song was modeled after a gospel song Cook had refurbished, recorded and released: “Wonderful,” on which Cook sang lead vocals with his popular gospel group, The Soul Stirrers. “Wonderful” and “Lovable” are unmistakably similar, sharing almost identical melodies, and adjusting crucial nouns and pronouns appropriately to the change in addressee, from “God” in “Wonderful” to “she,” in “Lovable.” “Lovable” was officially released on January 31, 1956, with a black male chorus overdubbed and Cook accompanied by a four-piece band. Sam and his associates decided to release the song under the alias Dale Cook so that if fans were to react negatively, Sam could easily circumvent negative attention. The record was not particularly successful, selling comparably to recent Soul Stirrers’ releases despite the far wider target audience for the secular song.

Everyone listening to the record knew immediately it was Sam, recognizing his luscious, unmistakable vocals, especially the “runs.” The gospel community largely disapproved of Sam’s move to secular music and began to turn its back on Sam. He was released from his Specialty Records contract (a prominent R&B, blues, rock and roll and gospel label). But in 1957 he released “You Send Me” on Keens Records, which quickly became his first #1 pop single. According to most, “You Send Me” is where Sam’s career began.

But, there's more to "Lovable" than even the historians credit. This song was the initial cause of the controversy surrounding Cook's transition from gospel to pop. "Lovable" is the song that encompasses Sam's gospel roots. Except for the obvious changes in addressee, this song not only pays tribute to Sam's gospel roots, it is a gospel song to begin with. This is the song that changed Cook's career, not "You Send Me."

"Wonderful," the gospel hymn, was written by Virginia Davis and Theodore Frye and originally recorded by Beau Williams. While the introduction of Beau Williams' version is comparable to the Soul Stirrers' intro, the rest of the song features a gospel backup chorus and a more conspicuous band. Sam Cook and The Soul Stirrers: SR Crain, Jesse Farley, Bob King, RB Robinson, and Paul Foster covered the song with an updated style in 1956. Sam began to dream of stardom and wealth after he garnered a following when his versions of 'Wonderful' and 'Jesus Wash Away My Troubles' became crowd pleasers largely among young gospel fans. Sam evoked a type of sensuality in his performances that was relatively new to gospel.

"Lovable" came to fruition after Sam Cook was approached by Newark DJ and Roy Hamilton's (a popular R&B artist) manager, Bill Cook, who began to introduce him to the R&B and pop worlds and encouraged him to write 'experimental' pop songs. After establishing a relationship with Bill, Sam became interested in recording some of his own new work. Together, they asked Art Rupe's permission to record some ballads with Atlantic Records (Ray Charles' label, with which Bill had acquainted Sam). Rupe did not allow this, and reminded Sam of his contract with Specialty Records and The Soul Stirrers.

It became clear that Cook was looking towards a career bigger than that of a member of The Soul Stirrers, as he became interested in the work of such pop R&B stars as, Frankie Lymon and Fats Domino. Later in 1956, he began recording demos of short pop songs and

sending them to Bumps Blackwell and Art Rupe, under the condition that the songs were merely an experiment (Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 151). Sam was nevertheless worried about this transition and the possibility that he would lose his church following and, in that, his reputation for moral decency. Bumps saw this experiment as the beginning of Sam living up to his star potential, and despite Sam’s gospel roots, Bumps understood that “there was no inherent taint to *any* kind of music, so long as you were not singing degrading material – and he knew Sam would never do that”(as qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 151).

At this point Sam and his supporters (both spiritual and secular—Bumps, J.W. Alexander, Bill Cook) understood that it was time for him to pursue secular singing, partly because they knew of his capacity for stardom, and also for potential prosperity. Bumps Blackwell, although a major player in Sam’s gospel career, understood he was destined for more than just spiritual world. He explains, “That was just too much voice to be in such a limited market”(as qtd. in Wolff 121). Despite his moral qualms, Sam started to get interested in the wealth associated with a pop career, he recalls, “Making a living was good enough, but what’s wrong with doing better?”(as qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie 135). Save for Art Rupe, Sam’s closest associates encouraged Sam to strive for stardom. Reverend Sammy Lewis told him “you shouldn’t even ask nobody. It doesn’t stop you from being a Christian. What you’re doing out there is making a living: you’re not shooting nobody...”(as qtd. in Wolff 134). Daniel Wolff responds to Lewis by pointing out that, “...in late 1956 no gospel star of the first rank had crossed over”(135).

Sam and Rupe’s hesitations were not unsupported. In 1956, as rock ‘n’ roll music gained popularity, the public largely rejected it as too wild and offensive. Wolff recalls that “In April of 1956, the head of the North Alabama Citizens’ Council told *Newsweek* that rock ‘was

designed to force ‘Negro culture’ on the South...[T]he basic heavy beat of Negroes appeal to the very base of man, brings out the base in man, brings out animalism and vulgarity”(as qtd. in Wolff 134-135). Despite the racist sources of these condemnations, the African American community also rejected much of rock ‘n’ roll. A.S. ‘Doc’ Young, an African American columnist, complained that he was “assaulted...[by] raucous jukebox renditions” (as qtd. in Wolff 135). In addition, the Christian community avoided R&B because of its immoral associations. By entering into the popular music world Sam associated himself with this ‘vulgarity,’ and strayed from the righteous path. Sam could have been viewed as rejecting his moral center, but he and his advisors knew him to be a good man at heart, who wouldn’t lose his morals even if his secular career was successful, and they hoped the church community would understand this.

Sam and Bill worked on an adaptation of “Wonderful” (“Lovable”) that was meant to translate Sam’s gospel sound into the secular music world through simply changing the lyrics. They took the spiritual words out of the equation in order to prove that Sam’s sound was appropriate for a secular audience. But, the version that Sam and Bill came up with was not quite what they wanted, until Tony Harris, another gospel singer with a sound similar to Sam’s, rewrote the lyrics to a great and grateful reception from Sam, Bill, and Bumps. Rupe still had trouble with the idea though, and assigned the contract of recording four secular songs on Specialty Records to Bumps. When “Lovable” was released in January 1957 many of his friends supported his decision to cross over, but Sam’s gospel fans began to move away from him, as they couldn’t support his music. Many people discouraged his moving further into the secular world (Guralnick, “Sweet Soul Music 36). But after the release of “You Send Me”

under his real name or rather his star name (Sam Cooke with an e), Sam was no longer a gospel star, but instead, a pop star.

The opening phrase of “Wonderful,” “Wonderful, God is so wonderful he’s wonderful, God he’s wonderful,” features Cook singing in a soft voice with only light piano accompaniment. Cook improvises runs at the end of each musical phrase, with the piano playing long, complex scales with spirit and alternating them with open major chords. As this opening concludes, the piano introduces the rest of the song through an accelerated repetition of a major chord. Cook’s vocals are at first restrained and controlled. Later, Cook’s intensity grows, and he uses his voice to express exalted feeling through his repeated words “he’s so wonderful.” After the last chorus, The Soul Stirrers sing “ooo’s,” finishing the phrase with a repeated “my God” and “he’s so wonderful.” Cook sings, “He’s been my mother and my father too. There’s no limit to what my Lord can do.” On the word “my” Cook opens the vowel to create a “mah” sound and allows his voice to get much louder and grittier. This last verse is the most emotion-filled, and the song fades slightly, yet ends rather quickly.

“Lovable” follows a very similar pattern. The song begins with a similar solo intro and piano accompaniment, but this song features a cymbal throughout this intro. The piano plays controlled chords, with the exception of one scale that leads into the rest of the song. We hear the repeated chords introducing the first verse, just as in “Wonderful.” “Lovable” includes backup vocals, which were dubbed around Cook’s solo after the initial recording. In “Wonderful” each stanza is of a different length and has varying back up vocals, whereas “Lovable” simply has a chorus followed by a three line stanza (each of which ends in “I love my girl, she’s so loveable” three times). This song’s recording sounds more produced than “Wonderful,” and Cook sings with a more controlled, luxurious tone. His voice grows in

intensity throughout the song, similar to ‘Wonderful,’ culminating in two open gritty words, ‘I’ and ‘woah’ of the last chorus (just like ‘my’ in the end of “Wonderful”).

“Wonderful,” like so many gospel songs, reads as a religious text in musical context. “Wonderful” is a gospel hymn that Sam Cook and The Soul Stirrers reinvented, not only for gospel quintet, but also for Sam’s voice and performance style. The first half of the song proclaims of the performer’s admiration and love of God. He explains his own personal connection to God and why he believes the Lord is wonderful. In the second half of the song the lyrics encourage the listener, or presumably congregants or sinners, to find God.

Sam’s reimagining of “Wonderful” (the slight melody changes and Sam’s improvisations) allowed the gospel song to shift easily to a pop song when the lyrics were changed for “Lovable.” “Lovable’s” lyrics are less complex than “Wonderful.” The words are used to facilitate the melody and Cook’s luscious tone, rather than articulate actual meaning through the lyrics. The song is simply about a man’s admiration of a woman, including various, generally innocuous sentiments of love. Peter Guralnick notes that there is something missing in this secular version. He also asserts “there is an inescapable awkwardness attached to the evolutionary process, somewhat similar to the transformation of a popular song into a television commercial. But...there was no lack of purposefulness...no one else directing the show”(“Dream Boogie” 157). The song feels like a calmed-down gospel tune – especially in comparison to Cook’s version of “Wonderful.” One waits for those exalted notes and feeling of spirituality, but they are withheld with the new words and subsequent new meaning.

While the traditional story just includes gospel’s “Wonderful” and pop’s “Loveable,” in fact, before the release of “Loveable,” Cook had created a version of “Wonderful” called “She’s Wonderful,” which features lyrics that are different from that of both versions, and takes

a step away from the gospel version. This version was not released for public consumption, and even now remains a rare record. The only publicly available recording of this song that I have found is on YouTube (Yousendme2). According to commenters, the recording was taken from a private collection of LP's that also apparently featured other iterations of Sam Cook songs.

The band is a bit livelier. Some lyrics overlap with both "Wonderful" and "Lovable," but most are new. It is obvious that this was a demo version rather than an attempt at a final cut, because it feels as though Cook is playing around with his voice, experimenting. He takes liberties that he doesn't in either of the other songs; but all three are still strikingly similar. "She's Wonderful" is almost an untamed version of "Lovable" with more signature runs, open vowels, and gritty phrases. It goes beyond the subsequent released "Lovable," which is agreeable and calm. Sam introduces a strong element of gospel, in the unrefined emotion he includes in his improvisation. This was presumably one of Cook's first attempts at changing the gospel song "Wonderful" into a secular piece. But it wasn't until a collaboration with Tony Harris that they came up with a version that the group wanted to release, i.e. "Lovable". Given the untamed nature of "She' Wonderful" it is likely that when Sam and Tony continued to work on a 'better' version, it seems to mean they were looking to create a more subdued version, so as to be more amenable to his pop and gospel audiences. This was to keep his pop crossover unobtrusive enough to ease into the transition from spirituality to secularism and appease conservative audiences as much as possible. Many Cooke historians only briefly mention that Cook tried to write a version on his own before teaming up with Tony Harris, and many don't mention this other version at all.

All Cook scholars place much more emphasis on the release of "You Send Me" and Cook's subsequent secular career rather than on his initial—and earlier—attempt at crossing

over. What's interesting is the number of secular songs that were rough-recorded, but never released. "She's So Wonderful" is one of them. When Guralnick wrote what could be considered Sam Cooke's 'definitive biography:' *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke*, published in 2005, this "She's so Wonderful" YouTube video (which is just a recording along with a photo of Cook) had not been uploaded, and therefore may have only existed in this mysterious private collection. In Guralnick's notes he does not mention the authority he has to assert that Sam had been working on "'Lovable,' the adaptation of 'Wonderful' that [Sam] and Cook had attempted but been unable to successfully complete" ("Dream Boogie" 155). He only notes that Rupe claimed it was his and Bumps' idea to adapt "Wonderful," even though, according to another of Guralnick's own footnotes, correspondence suggests that Sam and Bill had thought of the idea long before ("Dream Boogie", 666, n 155). This recording could also have been made during a 1963 session when, according to Guralnick, Cooke returned to "Lovable" / "Wonderful" creating a "She's Wonderful" version that was "swiftly abandoned" ("Dream Boogie" 460). This would also explain the different recording style, as by then, Cook's style had evolved significantly.

In his first—now classic—book, *Sweet Soul Music* (1986), which traces the origins and path of soul music's history, Guralnick covers the story of "Lovable" in less than two pages. It merely states that Sam wanted more money, that people like Bill Cook and J.W. Alexander saw potential in him, that Bumps Blackwell offered to record him, and that "Lovable" thereby emerged. *Sweet Soul Music* briefly discusses the backlash from the gospel community, but resolves this conflict with a quotation from Alexander, "I ...[told him] about the little white girls, who had their heroes, and the little black girls, who really didn't have anyone they could relate to. I told him it was important for him to make a decision to be Sam Cooke and not worry

about whether he would be able to rejoin the Soul Stirrers”(As qtd. in Guralnick, “Sweet Soul Music 36). Here, establishing the pattern, “Lovable’s” story is used only to facilitate the coming about of “You Send Me.” Sam’s true crossover song is almost glazed over, rather than regarded as the seminal moment that it is.

In his second book, *Dream Boogie* (2005), which chronicles Sam Cooke’s life, career, and death, Guralnick takes a more precise look at the creation of “Lovable” and the elements surrounding it. Guralnick details actors, recording sessions, and songs all involved in “Lovable’s” birth. He includes quotations from all of these actors, largely in regard to the hesitations and implications of Sam’s imminent career move. He focuses largely on the various recording hurdles Sam had to go through for “Lovable” to exist. The reactions to the song, however, are again incomplete. He includes some support of Sam’s crossing over and some negative reactions. He again concludes that, after “Lovable,” Sam made up his mind to move to the secular world and, ultimately, that’s why “You Send Me” and his real career began (154-170). While this version is more precise than *Sweet Soul Music’s*, Guralnick still overlooks what moving from the spiritual to the secular world meant at this time; what it meant for Cook.

He doesn’t explore how “Lovable” truly came to be, which could’ve been achieved through perhaps including more details about Sam’s first attempt at writing, or Harris and Cook’s collaboration. He goes on tangents about members of the Soul Stirrers’ experience and impressions, or other songs that Sam demoed at the time that Guralnick deemed more intriguing (i.e. I’ll Come Running Back to You). He doesn’t explore why the men chose to rework a Gospel hymn – why not, for instance, write a new song? Guralnick also summarizes the temperature of the gospel community, but includes few first-hand accounts. This dismissal of the experience of creating “Lovable” again puts “You Send Me” into the spotlight as Sam’s

decisive work, even though it was “Lovable” that garnered the negative response from the gospel community. After all, it was “Lovable” that ultimately got Sam and Bumps released from Specialty Records.

Along with this first official recording of “Lovable,” Cooke concentrated on and recorded three more songs, “That’s All I Need to Know,” “I Don’t Want to Cry” and “Forever”—“a doo-wop ballad...by saxophonist Red Tyler” in a New Orleans recording session on December 12, 2013 with Specialty Records (Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 156). Guralnick asserts, “they were...undistinguished songs elevated only by the sound of Sam’s voice – but that made all the difference and set them apart in a way that even the most sophisticated harmonic structure never could”(“Dream Boogie” 157). While “That’s All I Need to Know” and “I Don’t Want to Cry “ were released later as singles, “Forever” was included as the backside of ‘Dale Cooke’s’ “Lovable.” This B-side did not garner specific attention upon the album’s release, possibly because it wasn’t particularly outstanding in itself and it was, after all, a backside. However, other than it being more evidence of Cooke’s imminent crossover, it wasn’t originally a gospel song. What made “Lovable” stand apart from the rest was its direct substitution of a gospel hymn. Taking out the word “God” and the discussion of God’s power and love and replacing it with a song about a woman was inherently uncouth for traditional congregants.

In the music world, “Lovable’s” reception was mediocre, with the song’s Billboard review reading, “Cook is a new artist on the label and he makes a personable debut. Of interest are the church touches he injects into his style. The material is the only weak ingredient here.” While the church community saw it as a pop song, the secular music world recognized the ‘church’ style in the song.

Although it became clear that by and large, the gospel world rejected the idea of Sam crossing over, Sam's far smaller and closer circle of gospel associates understood this transition, and appreciated the sound. Fifteen-year-old Aretha Franklin and her friends, who had worshipped Soul Stirrer Cook, immediately regarded the record as a favorite. The song was also introduced on Gatemouth Moore's Birmingham gospel program (Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 159). Gospel and soul artist Otis Clay noted "that, while 'die-hards' in black congregations may have disapproved of Cooke's crossover, most gospel fans 'moved on with him. He was our boy.'" (as qtd. in Buford 59). Sam Cook's father, a reverend, also gave his blessings even before "Lovable" was released, explaining, "You're going out there making money, boy! Don't let anybody tell you nothing about no church song!"(as qtd. in Wolff 135).

At first, the negative response to Sam's potential crossover was as a musical judgment, an effort to dissuade him from continuing this transition. Fellow gospel singers disapproved of this translation of gospel music into secular, and soon began to exclude Cook (Guralnick, DB, 165). Bobby Womack explains, "In those days if you serving god, you serve god. You can't turn around and sing a pop song, then you serving the devil" (as qtd. in "American Masters"). Zena Sears, the white DJ and R&B station owner who facilitated Ray Charles' recording of "I Got A Woman," tried to discourage Sam's risky choice, arguing that what he had going for him was working (Guralnick "Dream Boogie" 165 and American Masters). The Soul Stirrers also had a difficult time, in that everyone knew it was Sam on the record, leaving The Soul Stirrers to deal with comments about Sam's move—as well as, disconcerting requests for the song at concerts. Sam began to feel discouraged. "J.W. Alexander explains, "he was being ostracized really...the whispering campaign was really going on"(as qtd. in Guralnick 36). Despite Bumps' encouragement, and his promise that after one more try at pop they would stick to

gospel for good, Art Rupe still discouraged the idea of Sam leaving gospel behind at all. Bumps explained, “[Art was] a frightened businessman, any opposition whatsoever and he would pull in. So when he received various knocks from the gospel disc jockeys, he stopped the push, [And ‘Loveable’] died on that vine” (As qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 166).

Despite this negative attention from the gospel community specifically for releasing a pop song, Cook had in fact already paved the way for his crossover through his reinvention of the gospel sound. When Sam began his career in gospel, he took after previous Soul Stirrers front man, R.H. Harris and tried to mimic his raw, stirring sound (Heilbut 75). This raw sexuality was accepted in the church because that was God or the Holy Spirit that was stirring the listener. Over time, Sam developed his own distinct singing style as described by Daniel Wolff: “When Sam took hold of a note... it wasn’t the traditional nonverbal moan that Holiness congregations were used to. It wasn’t a cry of pain. Instead he decorated the note, embellishing the melody till it hung, fragile as lace, in the air over the congregation”(as qtd. in Werner 35).

The way Sam had performed gospel hymns was indeed new, and well before any “crossover” dissatisfied the church’s more traditional members. “He was combing his hair on stage ‘God’, with a mirror, ‘is so wonderful’ and the preachers are going crazy, ‘he can’t do that in this church no no no’” (Bobby Womack, “American Masters”). However, Sam’s gospel performing style mesmerized his audience, and his distinctive charisma had gained him acceptance over time in the church. Craig Werner writes, “the key to Cook’s success, even within the gospel world, lay in his provocative blending of sex and spirituality”(36). Of course, according to Heilbut, sexuality in gospel performers was nothing new—especially in the case of the Soul Stirrers. “[I]n 1947 R. H. Harris sang ‘I Thank You Lord’ so hard a woman suffered a laughing seizure”(Heilbut 75). Sam’s performance was also known to make girls swoon, but for

different reasons than the sources of Harris' power. He took a lighter approach, taking away any guttural qualities or emotional defeat. Sam flirted with his audience, making his fan base largely female. This sensual approach to the sexual nature of gospel was at first notable, even startling, but people got used to it. Sam's coyness was accepted because the lyrics he sang were precisely spiritual. It wasn't the man who was making a woman 'fall out' or become infatuated, but rather God's power presenting itself through song. These overpowering effects on the audience were explained through God's power. When he took away those spiritual words and replaced them with words about a woman, the audience's enjoyment and emotion could no longer be explained through spirituality, but inevitably through sex.

The release of "Lovable" was therefore not an enormous shock; it was more a red flag that Sam would possibly be making this crossover. Cook's gospel style was already becoming conducive to popular music, as it had moved away from the unprocessed, emotional quality of popular gospel music. Heilbut explains that Sam brought a pop style to the gospel genre with his work with the Soul Stirrers, who were one of the first groups to use instrumental accompaniment rather than singing a capella (88). Heilbut asserts, "His two gospel masterpieces 'Wonderful' and 'Jesus Wash Away My Troubles,' are both pure gospel tunes, but the phrasing, breath control, and polish are a library of hymns removed from the Kings of Harmony....As good pop singers are supposed to do, Sam grabbed you with his first notes"(88). Sam was already on his way into pop music while still in the spiritual world.

Sam's sound did not change drastically, therefore, when he moved from gospel to pop. He changed his gospel sound first and only later shifted his music from singing about God and the church to singing about love and experiences. Guralnick asserts about "Lovable," "Sam his new message with the same combination of smooth conviction, precise articulation, and

unerring melodic improvisation that was the hallmark of his gospel style”(157). Chicago-born gospel singer Jeanette Robinson-Jones “appreciated how Cooke brought a gospel singer's directness of communication and personal charisma to even his most unabashedly pop performances: ‘[H]e was captivating and he could get your attention...that's what made it interesting in ‘You Send Me’ and in the gospel thing. It gets your attention’” (as qtd. in Buford 58). The melodies and instrumentals in the eventual “You Send Me” are not offensive and did not fall into the R&B genre of the time. Cook truly crafted a new sound for even the pop world by combining this almost clean teen idol/musical standard content with his already softened gospel style all under the umbrella of his unique, luscious tone. It wasn't therefore necessarily the musical liberties or content that offended the church; they had already accepted Sam's unique performance style and musical autonomy. It was the fact that he was no longer serving God through performing for churchgoers, and singing traditionally spiritual hymns, that drove much of the gospel community against him. The agreed upon crossover narrative is bland and incomplete. It does a disservice to both gospel and pop, and especially to Cook's involved resolution of their differences, which eventually resulted in a new musical form, that became known as “soul.”

### **At First I Thought It Was Infatuation: Cooke's Mainstream Secular Success**

Historians also commonly accept the notion when he released “You Send Me” and officially crossed over from gospel to pop, Sam Cooke began producing soul music. There is, however, much more to each step of this shift across genres. Through his charm and musical style, Cooke was over time able to appeal to largely teenaged white audiences, garnering success on par with white pop artists of the time. He had to secure this white audience before gaining the musical autonomy he needed in order to explore across musical and social boundaries and to produce music that would lay the foundations for the soul genre. The stardom Cooke quickly gained after the release of “You Send Me” was unparalleled for a black pop artist of this time, and opened the door for many black artists to explore musical genres beyond r&b. He also remained committed to his African American music community, ultimately keeping a door open to return to traditional black genres and to make significant contributions to the soul genre. In 1957, however, Cooke was not producing what many would describe as soul music; he was generally singing pop ballads and dance tunes. Even though Cooke did not produce this distinct ‘soul’ style until 1962 with his unique release, “Bring It On Home To Me” (an edgy mix of r&b, ballad, and gospel), in his mere procurement of a white, American audience, he broke the genre barriers that needed to be broken, in order for what became known as soul music to come to fruition.

After the release of “Lovable” in 1956, it was time to try again at a pop single, and this meant changing record labels. Cooke saw a change as a way to distance himself not only from the gospel world, but also from Art Rupe’s denial of his new dream. Art rejected Sam’s voice paired with white backup singers and therefore much of the progressive work he was doing with Bumps Blackwell. Art openly ridiculed Sam’s recording session of “Summertime,” “You Send

Me,” “You were Made For Me,” and “Things You Do To Me.” When he saw the white female background singers he yelled, “[y]ou’re going to try and turn everything into Billy Ward’s Dominoes with your ideas...”(as qtd. in “Dream Boogie” 176). Bumps was confident in his vision for Sam and in marketing an original sound and style for a black artist. Bumps sought to “set Sam’s gospel trained voice against the unmistakable white sound of Lee Hotch Singers, L.A.’s number-one pop session group –they would be...’the classical frosting on the cake,’ the ‘refinement’ that would make Sam acceptable not just to his old fans ... but to the new white audience that he knew was out there just as much for a romantic talent like Sam’s as for an outlandish one like Little Richard’s” (Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 177). Art wanted to keep Sam within the realm of an R&B sound, while Bumps was looking for something completely different. Given Art’s struggle against this new sound in addition to unsatisfying wages, Bumps and Sam decided to leave Art Rupe and Specialty Records.

After a strenuous process dissolving their contract with Specialty Records, but continuing their role as songwriters, Blackwell and Cooke looked for record labels to release Cooke’s next stab at a pop hit single. They chose Keen records, a new label with white clarinetist, Bob Keane, and businessman, John Siamas, at the helm. Bumps was put in charge of the R&B line as well as the gospel section, largely due to the credit Bump’s had garnered from producing Little Richard. Sheridan ‘Rip’ Spencer, a friend of Sam and Bumps and a fellow musician, explains, “...Sam didn’t know anything about the music business or record labels at that time....But we believed in Bumps, because the way that he talked, we believed that he knew. He was our leader. And I believed he convinced Sam to go with Keen Records because it was a new label, and John Siamas was a very rich man and Sam was going to get all the attention. Sam always wanted the attention, you know because he always had it. I think that’s

what sold Sam”(as qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 184). Cooke made a business decision to go with Keen, based both on his desire to be in the public eye and on his musical confidence in Bumps Blackwell.

At this time, as Keen was developing and getting ready for its first record launches, Cook began to meet more black artists. He got to know John Dolphin, owner of “Dolphin’s of Hollywood,” a store that reportedly sold “race records.” Guralnick explains, “[Dolphin] considered Central and Vernon, where the store was located, to be as glamorous as any white-folks’ neighborhood, but also because, as he boasted, if black folks couldn’t go to Hollywood, ‘then I’ll bring Hollywood to the blacks’” (“Dream Boogie” 189). After moving to LA, Cooke found an “independent black enclave of musicians and entrepreneurs that [he] was now determined to make his home”(Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 188). At this point Cook took acting classes and added the ‘e’ to his name as part of his mission to appear more ‘refined.’ Through these new friendships and involvement with “Dolphin’s” (which would later place an integral part in the success of “You Send Me”) Sam was able to establish his own music community, which later allowed him to foray into the markets he sought after.

In 1957 Keen released their first Cooke single—an unusual, updated version of Gershwin’s “Summertime” with Cooke’s original song, “You Send Me” on the B-Side. The record starting selling right away and quickly gained traction on the R&B charts. The popular song on the record however, was the B-side, “You Send Me.” The record was initially seen as an R&B single because Cooke was black. People in the music industry and Sam’s peers, however, understood that this was a pop song, similar to white artists like Paul Anka of the time, but with Cooke’s smooth baritone added to the mix. Wolff explains, “Bumps saw ‘tremendous discrimination in the industry.’ Negro singers were ‘not allowed to be balladeers’ until they had

paid lengthy dues in r&b. But instead of leaving gospel for r&b, Bumps and Sam planned to leapfrog all the way over into mainstream pop, where the white market was, the status, and the big money”(154). After DJs, including those from Dolphin’s, played the song over and over again, “[p]eople had been brainwashed into hearing this record around the clock, and they just went crazy... That was it. Sam was a star”(Rene Hall as qtd. in “Dream Boogie” 195). Not long after, Cooke was invited to play at the Los Angeles County Fair in Pomona for Art Laboe, an influential white rock n’ roll DJ, who had received positive feedback about “You Send Me” from his listeners. The audience at this fair was predominately white, but Laboe understood that “You Send Me” was “a love song for teenaged girls, black *and* white.” It was clear from the start that this was more than a r&b record, and its ability to appeal to white audiences allowed the song to climb the pop charts.

Sam’s fan base grew considerably as the record rose on *Billboard* charts. It was clear that his fan base was largely female (both black and white women), but because of the inoffensiveness and catchiness of the record, it followed the path of many white pop singles of the time such as Anka’s “Diana” and Buddy Holly and The Crickets’ “That’ll Be the Day.” Covers of the single began to come out shortly after its original release, the most controversial of which was a “polished pop” version from Teresa Brewer. The controversy surrounded the fact that she wasn’t just copying the song, she was trying to copy Cooke. Wolff explains, “Sam’s note-bending and the intimate quality of his voice produces a similar effect, you could cover it, but you couldn’t duplicate it. The vanilla changes lost their meaning when Teresa Brewer plodded through them; she turned the swoop of ‘You-ou-ou’ into the stop-action ‘You. You. You’ In Bumps’ words, ‘Everybody that sang ‘You Send Me’ were not singing ‘You Send Me.’ They were singing Sam Cooke’” (157). Maybe so, but not successfully. The song alone

did not spark an enthusiastic following, but Sam's singing of it did. His voice was different from the pop artists of the time and did not exclusively belong to r&b or rock 'n' roll. Cooke's distinctiveness allowed him to be, in essence, the first successful black pop balladeer – no one could replicate him.

Soon after, Cooke was invited to sing on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Sam was put last on the show, and after just a few lines of "You Send Me" the show ran out of time and he was cut off before finishing. Fans sent angry letters to the *Ed Sullivan Show*; not only black fans who had tuned in an event so monumental to them, but white Ed Sullivan devotees as well. Sullivan recognized his mistake and invited Cooke back on the show, apologizing on air and explaining how much mail he had received after Sam's truncated first appearance. Sam also sang his newest Keen single, "(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons." Not only was Sam the first black pop artist on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, but after the small insult of interruption, he was met with respect as a real star. "You Send Me" hit number one on the *Billboard* charts the next day. Through this exposure Cooke was invited to perform at *The Arthur Murray Party* for an all white audience, establishing him as an equal among his white contemporaries.

At this point, Sam was a pop star, having officially crossed over from gospel music. He continued to produce pop-style mainstream ballads and dance songs. Nevertheless his songs were still listed in reviews and one charts as r&b, despite his distinct stylistic differences from r&b artists of the time. Yet, Sam did not seek to exclusively enter the white world of pop artists. His managers had always been and continued to be African American, and his label's artists and staff was largely integrated. This complicated how Sam Cooke was able to become the first black pop artist to appeal to both white and black audiences. Craig Werner explains, "Cooke's foray into the mainstream established the approach refined by Berry Gordy's Motown.

There were three basic principles: innocent (if sometimes masked) lyrics; arrangements (frequently built around strings) that emphasized hooks; and smooth background harmonies (often provided by white studio singers)” (36). Despite this “formula” Cooke still refused to forever abandon his distinctive style. Larry Auerbach, Sam’s William Morris Agent who had seen Sam perform, “felt like if he could just ‘loosen him up, [get him to] give some of his gospel training in his performance,” then Sam would really come across to a white audience that was looking for flash and excitement” (as qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 218). However, Sam’s more demure performance proved successful with “You Send Me,” and he wasn’t quite ready to move away from that degree and kind of success. While Cooke would add more gospel informality to his performances later in his career, at this point his performance was distinctively and deliberately unthreatening and uncomplicated.

Throughout his early career in pop music, Cooke’s performance was apparently the opposite of a gospel one. It appeared to be his instinctual, pop performance style to resist flamboyance (as he was not a natural dancer) and he performed songs in his distinct voice, but generally without particular emphasis to convey special meaning. Cooke had the experience as an energetic, raucous gospel performer, but at this time in his career he was very much establishing himself as a respectable pop artist with an outstanding voice. Buford explains that Cooke’s vocal performance of “Danny Boy” (which came out not long after “You Send Me”), “is ... notably devoid of the brimming emotions, nostalgic reflection ... or stagecraft offered in many readings of the song--by, for instance, [Morton] Downey, Bing Crosby, Al Hibbler, Judy Garland, Mahalia Jackson, or Belafonte. Cooke's laid-back, resolutely untheatrical delivery seems intent simply to deliver a familiar song in a personal style, though with a recognizably up-to-date feel”(134). He wasn’t trying to change music in one huge move with the fusion of

gospel, r&b, and pop. With “You Send Me” he took one step towards wide appeal, which was successful because of his outstanding performance style and abilities. Cooke wasn’t trying to “be white” or rejecting anyone from his past, it was his distinct charm, inoffensiveness, and matchless tone and enunciation that allowed him to become a member of the pop world, while still remaining respected by the r&b one. This entrance into the mainstream eventually allowed him the freedom to move back to more gospel based, r&b music that would be called soul.

Early on, Bumps’ understanding of the musical climate of the time, which helped allow Sam to become idolized by teens. This astute understanding is what ultimately caused the rift between Specialty Records and Sam Cooke, in that Specialty’s Art Rupe wasn’t willing to stray from established black music—r&b, blues, jazz, or gospel. However, Guralnick had explained in his early study, *Sweet Soul Music*, that the pop market was a “mix of sentimental standards and teenage soul, catchy originals and light classics. This was what was perceived as the market, this was the strategy of diversification that everyone around Sam Cooke...embraced, and if it did not necessarily create great art...it created a climate in which Sam Cooke could become not only the black teenaged girl’s idol but quite possibly the white teenager’s as well” (37). Cooke used the popularity of sentimental ballads and unthreatening rock ‘n’ roll–style dance numbers to market himself as a star. This broadening (and dilution) of his musical style, mixed with his good looks and charm, allowed him the fame and subsequent wealth to expand his career. These first steps may have distanced him from the gospel and then R&B worlds; but this distance, and association with the rock ‘n’ roll and pop ballad genres, in addition to his consistent connection with the black community, ultimately gave him a wide and diverse fame and star power across races necessary to become a superstar.

Not long after the *Ed Sullivan Show*, in 1957, Sam was invited to play at the New York City Copacabana, which was an exclusively white venue and, despite his discomfort with the idea of the segregated audience, Cooke took the opportunity and again asserted himself as breakthrough contemporary black artist (“American Masters”). Sam made sure to wear his hair “in a modified crewcut, close-cropped and ‘natural’ brushed up in front” in order to not appear slick or “threatening to the white man”(Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 220). In anticipation of the performance, he also revamped his wardrobe and purchased a new home, enjoying his newfound success. But his show at the Copa was unsuccessful. Bumps’ arrangements were rudimentary for the Copa’s band, Cooke did not have enough experience in the supper club setting, and he wasn’t singing original songs, but rather the songs expected in a supper club such as the Copa, all making the show come across as lackluster. Nevertheless, this show did mark the next phase of Cooke’s career. He had established himself as a non-threatening black contemporary artist and was beginning to garner the freedom to make more demands socially and musically. At the same time, however, while he was a star, the show’s failure revealed his inability, at the time, to capture adult audiences as he had the teenage ones, continuing to define his style at this time in his career as a pop one.

Sam Cooke headlined the spring edition of *The Biggest Show Stars of 1958* tour. The other touring artists included idols like Paul Anka, Frankie Avalon and the Everly Brothers, in addition to African American artists, LaVern Baker, Clyde McPhatter and, then rookie, Jackie Wilson. This made for an integrated group of artists, which it had been since 1956. The group was to go on tour together as a rock n’ roll revue, but on October 21, 1957 *Billboard* reported, “As though to highlight current segregation upheavals, the package will operate for five consecutive dates in Chattanooga, Columbus, Georgia, Birmingham, New Orleans, and

Memphis without [its white acts]. In the cities mentioned, Negro and white performers cannot appear on the same stage in the same show”(as qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 228). While this issue was resolved upon the rerouting of the tour, this conflict as well as its resolution illustrate one of the first instances of Sam’s exposure to segregation, despite his biracial appeal. Later in Little Rock, Arkansas the group was told they had to do two shows, a separate one for blacks and whites. Sam refused to do so. Sam reportedly was not threatened by the flagrant racism he witnessed in the south. He historically lacked fear being hurt or punished and often challenged those who threatened him. The venue compromised, though, running a rope down the middle of the audience in order to separate the audience.

When Sam played for *Dick Clark’s Saturday-night Show* broadcast from Atlanta’s Southeastern Fair, Clark received threats and warning that the KKK would be at the performance. Clark brought his concerns to Cooke, who said, “I’m gonna be out there for two and one-half or three minutes. You’re gonna be there for the [whole show]”(Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 261). Even though Sam’s music was mainstream and in many ways—musical and cosmetic—did not challenge social norms, Sam was very aware of the social climate in the south (on account of his roots in Mississippi and extensive touring experience with The Soul Stirrers and as a solo artist), and openly contested racism and segregation. Mark Buford highlights that other black pop artists faced “the challenge of safely navigating the racial and sexual politics brought into play by white male response and white female reception of black male pop vocalists”(148). Buford notes that while many others were often hindered by this implied tension within white audiences, “[Cooke] seemed to draw self-empowerment from taking [these dynamics] on directly”(Buford 149). Although it can seem as though Sam’s rise

to mainstream pop fame was rather smooth, there were many factors, especially in the south, that would lead to Sam's return to his gospel roots a short time later.

Despite the dangerous climate in the South, Sam and his associates continued to travel from gig to gig. On November 8<sup>th</sup> 1958 on the way home from a gig in St. Louis, (a few months after his now ex-wife Dolores had been killed in a car accident) Sam was in a car accident with the Lou Rawls' band, The Pilgrim Travelers, which had long been gospel and was now moving towards pop. The group was transported to an African American hospital and later Cooke's driver, Eddie Cunningham, died, and Lou Rawls was left in a coma (but later survived). Sam escaped with a few scratches, relatively unscathed.

Just after leaving the hospital, Sam and J.W. Alexander met for breakfast and it was clear that Sam was not only eager to start performing again, but also looking towards the future of his musical career. During this meeting Alexander said, "Man, I keep telling you, you ought to get *you* a publishing company"(as qtd. in Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 267). Sam liked the idea of establishing some degree of autonomy in his career. The pair became partners for what would become SAR records.

Also in the fall of 1958, Keen began to have financial issues and when they hadn't paid his royalties, Sam refused to continue recording with them. Sam started to focus on his "production company" which was meant to "serve as a kind of outlet for all the song ideas they now had floating around", and also a record label of his own (Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 297). Sam learned that the still existing Soul Stirrers had been dropped by Specialty because of a general, industry wide decline in gospel sales. The company, SAR, (S—Sam, A—J.W. Alexander, R—S.R. Crain) at its genesis was meant to simply record the Soul Stirrers. One of their first recordings was the gospel hymn "Stand By Me Father" with Johnnie Taylor on lead

vocals. The version attempted to appeal to gospel and pop audiences. It was at this point that Sam started to use his star power to come back to his roots. The establishment of SAR was a turning point in Sam's career towards his success as a soul artist and establishment of the genre's core elements. Cooke had enough the mainstream success to start a publishing company and the first decision he made with that power was to return to his gospel foundations. He had something to prove that soon became part of what soul was about.

Cooke made his official crossover from gospel to pop with the 1957 release and subsequent success of "You Send Me" on Keen records. His looks and strong vocal abilities paired with unthreatening performance and recording choices gained him a following similar to that of white pop artists of the time, and furthermore made him stand out among pop acts. He attained stardom through a teenage fan base and success in performing for white audiences and venues; but paradoxically perhaps it was Cooke's unwavering commitment to the African American community throughout the country, which first led to his impending shift back to his gospel roots, starting with SAR and the return to the Soul Stirrers. In order for Cooke to gain the freedom to produce the music he discovered he wanted to produce, he had to gain the star power and autonomy to do so. His successful venture into pop music via graciousness, vocal power, and determination allowed him the power to get that much closer to producing what we now know as soul music.

### **Cooke Brings it On Home: Introducing the Gospel Character to the Mainstream**

The soul music genre is ambiguous, including everything from Ray Charles' "I Got A Woman" to Otis Redding's "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" to the Temptations' "Just My Imagination," all the way (in some regard) to James Brown's "Get Up Off of That Thing." The genre has come to be known as a historically African American genre, often encompassing songs that include elements of gospel, blues, jazz, funk, and r&b and the less definable or indefinable element of 'soul.' I argue that Cooke's work around and after the recording of "Bring it On Home To Me," (both the original song and his performance at The Harlem Square Club in 1963), lays important foundations for the soul genre. His long-standing vocal power and his entire body of work are often associated with the soul genre, but it is not until "Bring it On Home to Me" that Cooke's music really falls into that intersecting place that would be so influential for artists after him. While the word "soul" was used in reference to Sam Cooke and other artists during his lifetime, it was still ill-defined, as so many songs and artists would fall under the genre in years to come. Nevertheless, the remarkable techniques displayed in "Bring It On Home to Me" and Cooke's superior, boisterous performances of the piece, combined to play an important role in the evolution of soul.

By establishing SAR records, Sam was not only looking for an outlet to explore his talents as producer, but also a way to pay homage to his roots. Even as he had stopped recording for Keen and looked toward his next move, he consciously took care of everyone who had helped him get there. SAR reignited The Soul Stirrers' popularity in the gospel world and Sam used his name to help market them. Guralnick explains, "[i]t was as if he were determined to leave no part of himself behind...he would always mark a clear path to find his way home"("Dream Boogie" 310). SAR played a major role in this dedication to his roots, as he

took the time to record not only the Soul Stirrers, but other influential gospel and r&b artists. In December 1959, Sam began proceedings to join RCA records. Despite this move, (which was largely in order to grow his fame and net worth) Cooke worked closely with and grew SAR throughout the duration of his career. He explained, “[w]hen the whites are through with Sammy Davis Jr., he won’t have anywhere to play. I’ll always be able to go back to my people ‘cause I’m never gonna stop singing to them. No matter how big I get, I’m still gonna do my dates down South“(As qtd. in Werner 37). This connection to the black community, not only through his shows, but also through SAR and his civil rights activism (which became more outstanding later in his career), contributed to his success as an r&b and soul artist.

While Cooke founded SAR to stay close to his roots, he joined RCA almost expressly to make money and hopefully achieve the financial independence he needed to pursue his more meaningful musical goals. His first releases with RCA, all covers of established pop songs, were not hits. After Keen released “Wonderful World,” which Sam had recorded before leaving, RCA allowed him to try a song of his own. Sam achieved his first RCA hit with “Chain Gang” in 1960, revealing RCA’s initial mistake: making Cooke sing other people’s songs. Seeing the men in the American south working on a prison chain gang inspired Cooke to write “Chain Gang.” The song quickly rose through the charts, eventually reaching #2. “Chain Gang” represented an example of Cooke’s classic crossover dance pop hit, while still moving towards an individual, experience-based song style—a tactic Cooke would use in his future writing. The label recognized Cooke’s talent and allowed him to write for himself. With his move to RCA and because of a smaller publishing company that he had created with Alexander, Cooke technically owned the rights to the songs he wrote (although it would take a few more years for this fact to be fully honored by the record company). He also gained the

respect to become more than just an artist at RCA, eventually becoming a producer and mentor to younger artists as well (Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 338-339). Cooke’s producer role was fairly unprecedented for a recording artist, especially an African American one, as the two roles were previously almost always separate. This autonomy marked another turning point in his career as Cooke moved away from being a traditional pop star and towards the role of esteemed singer, writer, and music producer.

He went on to turn out numerous hits with RCA including “Cupid” and “Twistin’ the Night Away,” and by 1962 became the second best selling artist at RCA, behind Elvis Presley. However, his hits, which then fell under the rock ‘n’ roll and r&b genres, were still considered ‘teenager music’ and consequently Cooke held a largely teenaged audience. According to those around him at this time, Cooke was determined to overcome his initial failure at the Copacabana and once and for all capture an adult audience, to officially achieve the undeniable stardom he desired. He was still “determined to become a crossover superstar” (“Legend”). Cooke approached this goal counterintuitively—he began to craft unprecedented serious songs and return to a black audience. Rather than imitate what successful white artists were doing at the time, he tried to distinguish himself as a distinct, yet adaptable black artist. When he achieved the status as #2 selling artist at RCA, “he hadn’t played a white nightclub in four years”(Kempton 144). At this point, to see more gospel and blues influences start to emerge in his singles such as “It’s all Right.” The song is a mellowed version of his pop hits, with more minor chords and an African American male and female gospel-style back up chorus. Sam’s peers also attest that Cooke’s heart was always in gospel. Along with his revisiting of gospel through his creation of SAR records and re-adoption of the Soul Stirrers, he also began to return to his gospel style within his popular RCA repertory.

Cooke decided to rework a Charles Brown blues, gospel-essenced song that he was particularly taken with, “I Want To Go Home” in April of 1962. Guralnick explains, “The song would retain its gospel flavor and the call-and-response format that made it in essence a vocal duet, and some of the words would even continue to suggest its spiritual origins – but its refrain (“Bring it to me, bring your sweet lovin’, bring it on home to me”) would leave little doubt as to its secular intent”(“Dream Boogie” 405). “Bring it On Home to Me” represents one of the first instances of a Sam Cooke mainstream hit having direct gospel ties since ‘Dale’ Cook’s “Lovable.” He recorded his reworking of the Brown song on April 26<sup>th</sup> during the same session that he recorded “Having a Party.” “Bring it on Home to Me” represented a change for Cooke; it is arguably one of the first mainstream soul songs. It’s not quite pop, no gospel, nor r&b, nor rock n’ roll. “This was the closest Sam had come to the classic gospel-give and take he had once created with Paul Foster [whom he had performed/recorded with, with the Soul Stirrers]”(“Dream Boogie” 407). While it could be put into a category of r&b, I argue that the song’s distinct gospel and instrumental blues elements and Cooke’s shift in content and tone move it away from r&b and into a new genre.

When the record came out, “Having a Party” as the A-side and “Bring It On Home to Me” the B –side, the record became a fast hit, with “Bring It on Home to Me” rising to #2 on the pop charts. Cooke mixed gospel elements into a pop song—a pop song that was inspired by a blues track. In doing so he created a new style, which fell closer in line with what is now understood by the word “soul.” The song was another example of Cooke remaining true to his roots, not just socially and with SAR, but now musically. It was also around this time that the notion of “soul” music became more popular in the musical vernacular. Daniel Wolff explains, “ Sam wasn’t ‘The Man Who Invented Soul, ‘ as RCA titled a posthumous album, he would

have been the first to point out that no one person invented what he'd grown up with. But 'Bring it On Home to Me' is one of the defining examples of what was about to be identified as 'soul' music (249). Soul was what one needed in order to create a great gospel performance, and also what one needed to be a true blues musician. Cooke inherently conveyed 'soul,' but wasn't singing just gospel or the blues, he was putting the combination across in a new musical genre.

"Bring it On Home to Me" opens with a light bluesy intro of piano and drums. Cooke "declares in full gospel mode:" "If you ever, change your mind / About leaving, leaving me behind." Almost right off the bat we hear a pain and tension in Cooke's voice that is not represented in his early pop and mainstream music. This grittiness had typically been reserved for the end of his songs, during riffs and improvisations, but here Cooke evokes an afflicted style unlike his earlier songs. Wolff explains "[t]he passionate plea of "Bring it on Home to Me" was outside Sam's established pop range...the lyrics present a plea for forgiveness, which for Cooke—perpetually smiling, apparently unwilling to talk about his problems—was a stretch"(248 – 249). As the first stanza concludes, with "yeah" Lou Rawls responds with his own, "yeah." The two echo each other three times, creating the call and response effect that was so typically gospel. This gospel aspect of call and response and Cooke's open appeal combine with secular lyrics to generate an unclassifiable experience.

Cooke continues these pained open vocals throughout the song. The second line in each stanza—"But now I know I only hurt myself" in the second stanza and "That ain't all, that ain't all I'll do for you" in the third—always serves as a climatic point in the verse, with Cooke expressing an extra soreness in each appeal. The lyrics are especially distinctive for Cooke because they tell a story of lost love and admission of guilt, moving towards a more gospel-

centered and gospel-derived theme of asking for forgiveness. At the end of the song when Cooke exclaims, “But, I forgive you” almost shouting, this is in great contrast to Cooke’s mainstream pop hits. He was known for his smooth vocals and subtleties in his runs, but here, Cooke departs from that style and back to one that a congregant might hear, not necessarily on a recording of a gospel hit, but in a gospel performance. By 1962, at his full-length shows, Cooke departed from a specifically mild-mannered performance, like his on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Cooke’s recordings, however, were rarely this brash and fraught, but in “Bring it On Home” he merged his live performance style (rooted in gospel performance) with his mellow recording style.

The call and response aspect of the song is also particularly unusual for one of Cooke’s pop songs, but not for a gospel tune. He took the gospel quartet-style call and response and pulled it back to a more bluesy call and response, using just one back up vocalist. He created a blues, gospel amalgam in a pop context. Kempton explains, “‘Bring it on Home to Me’ accomplished in a popular song what Cooke strove for as a writer and producer of gospel music: church feeling without too much flavor of the church”(138). Cooke took the “soulful” elements from gospel music, plus inspirations from the blues, and brought them to mainstream pop with his rendition of “Bring it On Home to Me.” It was this actual combination of gospel, blues, and pop, (rather than simple crossover) that would become identified as soul music.

By 1962, Cooke had gained enough stardom and financial stability to buy a home in an all white neighborhood in Los Angeles for his wife and two children. He could now also more independently produce and assist other RCA artists. He toured Europe with Little Richard, capturing the attention and respect of white European rock ‘n’ roll artists such as The Rolling Stones and The Beatles. Along this tour he received huge audience responses and affected his

audiences on a new level. “They thought he was gold” (Lou Rawls in “Legend”). When he returned from England, Cooke had a new idea: “instead of trying to please the mainstream audience by singing white he would bring what he called the gospel fervor to the mainstream”(Legend). Buford explains, “It is this dialectic tension between the salience and transparency of cultural identity, between mainstreaming the vernacular and vernacularizing the mainstream, that ... captures the crux of Cooke's unorthodox crossover strategy.” Other artists such as James Brown and Ray Charles had already introduced gospel’s liveliness in secular music, but Cooke decided to formally bring the energy of a gospel show to not only secular music, but also a mainstream audience.

After his trip to London, Cooke started a new show at the Apollo Theater in New York. He opened on November 2<sup>nd</sup> and there he experimented with his performance in order to get the most raucous, dedicated audience response he desired. “[J.W Alexander] had been advancing the argument for some time that Sam needed to develop a set that reflected the gospel *fervor* of his music. ‘In England Sam could [finally] see the truth of that. And we started reworking his act [with] that gospel approach”(Alexander as qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 431). Cooke’s music had started to gain more and more gospel qualities (as exemplified in “Bring It On Home to Me” with call and response) and now it was apparent that he needed to infuse that energy, that one would find at a gospel show – with congregants ‘feeling the spirit’ – into his secular act.

He worked and reworked his Apollo act in order to gain the liveliness that he sought. Guralnick describes this energy at his Apollo show: “With all the tried-and-true methods of his gospel training, he has drawn out the tension until it is almost unbearable, people are screaming, they are crying out for release, the level of emotion almost visibly rises, the audience becomes

his congregation” (“Dream Boogie” 432). It was the application of gospel performance in a pop environment that outlines what Americans view as soul music today. When one looks at a performer such as Jackie Wilson or Otis Redding, what is most apparent is their combination of an immense energy and wild flavor with an otherwise tame song – something Cooke’s contemporaries already did for faster paced songs, but not necessarily for ballads. Cooke’s gospel background specifically informed his performance and exactly how he wanted an audience to react. Cooke used a vigorous, at times, untamed tone on a meditative tune, “Bring it On Home to Me,” to instill emotion and profundity by means of his vocal abilities. His gospel background made his pop performances passionate and thus successful, and something later artists wanted to emulate. A few months later at a radio interview with Nathaniel [The Magnificent] Montague, Montague asks Cooke to hum eight bars of what soul represents. When Sam’s eight bars of tender, lingering humming conclude, Montague whispers, “and time finds its soul / All I can say to you darlings, is; ‘Sam Cooke’s yours, he’ll never grow old” (as qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 448). These pivotal moments in Cooke’s career define him as more than a pop artist, but a gospel, turned secular, artist, with *soul*.

On New Years Eve, 1962 Cooke performed with the Soul Stirrers in Newark, New Jersey—a show often remembered as one of his most brilliant performances. “When he came on and joined the Soul Stirrers, the house went crazy and all these women were going up throwing their arms in the air, shivering and just fainting....probably the greatest show I ever saw in my life” (Jerry Brant in “Legend”). The recordings of this performance reveal Cooke’s performance style during this concert as drastically different than that of his pop career and even his original Soul Stirrers performances. We hear a freedom in his tone that wasn’t present before, even in his gospel hits such as, “He’s so Wonderful” or “Jesus, Wash Away My

Troubles.” Cooke’s gritty voice quality, usually reserved for climaxes of his songs, (often on an ‘oh’ or a woah’) is amplified and extended throughout whole songs. The control, that Sam Cooke became famous for, that temperate and decisive voice quality, is discarded and replaced with a different type of control, one where Cooke rules the audience’s energy and incites wild reactions. Sam had the ability to “wreck” gospel and pop audiences alike through wearing them out with the spirit of the music. In the recordings of this performance one can hear the audiences overwhelming energy, and it is certainly conveyed through Cooke’s lively, turbulent performance. There is a lack of polish in this live recording that allows the listener to be immersed in the room’s intensity even years later.

This performance was a huge contribution to the developing soul genre. If one were to mix equal parts of this performance and Cooke’s performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (“You Send Me”) he or she would have an example of what we now more generally regard as Cooke’s soulful musical legacy. This exacerbated, overpowering energy and open and brash quality was missing from his pop standards. When he added that oomph, Cooke to become the influential, unmatched artist he was especially to so many soul musicians.

In January of 1963, Cooke debuted a new act at the Harlem Square Club, which directly reflected his act at the Apollo. He wanted to expand his appeal and show the world everything he could do, and so the performance was to be live-recorded (Wolff 265). It was during this act that he debuted this new *mainstream* “gospel fervor.” The Harlem Square Club was historically an African American venue and he reportedly came to “get down”—something that the mainstream didn’t know he could do before. It was here that Cooke performed “Bring it On Home to Me” with a genuine gospel energy.

At this performance, Cooke reveals the gospel performer from his Newark performance with the Soul Stirrers to a secular audience. The recording of this performance of “Bring it On Home To Me,” showcases a drastic difference from his style in the recording studio. So much so, that Cooke felt he needed to reduce the gospel-ness of his performance of this song. Wolff describes the performance: “The congregation/crowd takes Lou Rawls part and calls ‘yeahs’ back at Sam till it becomes almost too much to bear, and he starts as gospel should, heading into the unknown—then catches himself. ‘I better leave that alone’”(246). This song allows Cooke the freedom to slip into his gospel self— his previous songs did not tolerate a loss of control or precision in this way. Part of this freedom was due to the fact that the Harlem Square Club was an African American venue. Not being concerned with appeasing a white audience gave him the freedom to open up and introduce more riotous ‘gospel energy’ into his performance. Guralnick explains, “There was nothing soft, measured, or polite about the Sam Cooke you saw at the Harlem Square Club; there was none of the self-effacing, mannerable, ‘fair-haired little colored boy’ that the white man was always looking for. This was Sam Cooke undisguised, charmingly self-assured, ‘he had his crowd,’ ...—he was as proud as he had been raised to be, not about to take any scraps from the white man’s table”(“Dream Boogie” 454). While white audiences would not necessarily view this performance, it was recorded, theoretically revealing Cooke’s new style to fans. From this point forward, Cooke would in many ways let go of the courteous demeanor he had evolved to fit into white audiences, although he was still – as far as it is documented- as well meaning, kind, and polite person in general. This performance allowed his career to move towards one in which he was regarded as a multifaceted, influential soul artist.

The live recording of Cooke's performance at the Harlem Square Club did not become available until June of 1985. In 1963 the performance promised a new live record, but RCA delayed the release "due to uncertainty about how such a Cooke performance would be received"(Buford 165). This performance challenged Cooke's reputation as a demure pop and r&b singer. Buford writes,

"Indeed, two decades after his death, the notion of Cooke as soul man remained for many a hitherto unfamiliar concept. 'The smooth sound showcased by the vocalist on many of his hits and especially on his previous live album, 'At the Copa,' is almost diametrically opposed to the gritty, swaggering, hard-core soul of the new release,' observed one reviewer of the Harlem Square Club album in 1985. 'I believe it's going to surprise the hell out of people. Because Sam Cooke was the beginning of the '60s soul movement...'"(Fred Goodman as qtd. in Buford 165).

This album's release would complete the evidence of Cooke's public musical history and reveal the true triumph of this performance, beyond oral accounts. His outstanding fervor and gritty vocal choices, particularly in this performance, laid more groundwork for soul music in America.

The songs Sam recorded after "Bring it On Home To Me," for the most part, showcase more gospel qualities than his pop beginnings with "You Send Me" or "(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons." He recorded "Nothing Can Change This Love" shortly after "Bring It On Home to Me" in August of 1962. This song also pleased crowds at the Apollo and Harlem Square Club, and he would often sing it just after "Bring It On Home to Me," keeping with a gospel vibe. The love ballad is a bit slower and is lyrically closer to Cooke's very white-poppy pop songs. However, Cooke's mood is humbled and restful. The minor chord progression creates a jazzy, yet bluesy tone. If considering just the lyrics, one could argue the song is in the vein of Cooke's earlier love ballads such as "I'll Come Running Back to You." However, Cooke's voice in "Nothing Can Change This Love" is rugged, and lacks the elegance of his

earlier songs when he was first trying to appeal to white audiences. In the recording of Cooke's performance at The Harlem Square Club, Cooke opens the song with an energetic intro, revving up the crowd. The band picks up the tempo and Cooke lets loose, allowing the song to become spirited and a true gospel-fevered tune. Because Cooke was no longer working towards appealing to white audiences, and he had by now secured a following across races, he was free to experiment with his music and come into his own, which allowed him to explore the expanding soul genre with gospel ingredients in the mainstream.

In 1964 Cooke recorded "Night Beat" which was Cooke's only blues album (with some traditionally gospel tracks) and definitely his most unusual compilation of work. The album was meant as a "tribute to [Cooke's] early inspiration"(Wolff 266). "Night Beat" evidenced that Cooke had never really abandoned traditionally African American music. Guralnick explains that "Night Beat" was "in a sense, ... a music debt repaid: if [Charles] Brown couldn't find the time to make the session at which Sam had recorded "Bring it On Home to Me," then Sam would pay homage in this fashion to a musician who had educated everyone from Ray Charles to Sam himself in a more refined style"( "Dream Boogie" 458). "Night Beat" is one of three of Cooke's albums that illustrate cohesiveness between tracks, rather than just a collection of hit (or hopefully hit) singles. The songs are all somewhat dark, and definitely bluesy, in exploring an even deeper, tormented side of Cooke's abilities.

The minor-key gospel based "Lost and Lookin'" conveys this homage in Cooke's obvious feeling for the music. He "showed off every one of [his] vocal effects—his delicate falsetto, the way he would ride a syllable, elongate a vowel to suggest dimensions of meaning scarcely hinted at in the lyrics, the slight roughening that he could use to suggest intensity of feeling without raising his voice"(Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 459). The song (and most of the

album) is in no way calculated and highlights his emotionally driven voice, as only a bass and drum set accompanied him. Through “Night Beat” Cooke moves back towards a style which he had, had to change in the first place to achieve the musical autonomy to produce such an album. He takes the pop out of his pop gospel blend and returns to the more traditional, bluesy sounds he’d learned from. Cooke proved his versatility and artistic abilities in that he was no longer writing and performing music strictly for the broadest of audiences to be able to enjoy, but rather making a decision to honor his roots, which greatly expanded his body of work.

Night Beat’s posthumous release to “Bring it On Home to Me” marks another of Cooke’s contributions to the establishment of the soul music genre. Cooke started with a blues song and made a pop, gospel mix with “Bring it On Home to Me.” He knew he had something with his gospel-fervor inducing performances and amalgam musical renderings and capitalized on those skills in Newark and at The Harlem Square Club. His success in introducing these elements to his career gave him even more freedom to explore musically. Other artists were contributing unique elements to the soul genre at the same time, but Cooke established what the genre requires at its core. Not only could he transmit these notions through his voice, but his performances flooded audiences with sentiment and zeal. He came to exemplify the soulful element soul needs to be successful.

### **Another Saturday Night: Cooke's Egalitarian Legacy and Peculiar Death**

After Cooke laid early foundations of soul music between 1958 and 1962, Cooke's career had grown to a point where he was able to push musical boundaries. This growth culminated in his recording and release of "A Change is Gonna Come" in 1963. "A Change is Gonna Come" not only marked his freedom as a black recording artist, but also a pivotal moment in Cooke's civil rights activism. He was able to release a song as a mainstream artist on an equal level with white artists, and at that, a song that expressed a critical message. Cooke was killed shortly after "A Change is Gonna Come's" release on an LP, and days before its release as a single. The nature of Cooke's death and the ambiguous investigation surrounding it also run parallel with the political current of the time; no one was held accountable for a death that, apparently, was in part a random and sordid crime, and in part an absurd misunderstanding. The timing of his death also complicates Cooke's standing in history, abruptly ending his production of music. This included music that might have further influenced the soul music genre—or perhaps music that might have decreased his esteem. Similarly, his death established his legacy as that of a soul musician, while at the same time, diminished the ubiquity of that legacy.

In June of 1963, the death of Cooke's infant son, Vincent, had sent Cooke into a depression and distanced him from his wife Barbara, but he continued to perform around the country. Lou Rawls speculated that, while seemingly masking his depression, Cooke "vented his anxieties through his music" ("Legend"). After Cooke complained that he felt he was being

mistreated by RCA (the company wasn't honoring on agreed upon business), Allen Klein, an accountant and his friend, set to work on retrieving Cooke's owed royalties and securing his ownership of his future songs. After arduous dealings and negotiations later that summer, Klein was able, not only to secure the money RCA owed Cooke and his team for their numerous hits, but also to create a contract guaranteeing Cooke full rights to his songs and timely payment of all future royalties. Cooke thereby officially owned all rights to his music and, in return, RCA became the exclusive distributor of his releases. This put Cooke in a fully secure financial position for the first time in his life. He was now able to have the safety and freedom to not only be an entertainer performing for the mainstream. But at this point, we see the last shift in Cooke's musicality and eventual legacy.

By late 1962, Cooke looked to guide and direct new talent in the music industry, now that he was able. Because of his stardom and outstanding reputation, young artists looked up to him. He toured with the Womack Brothers, who became the *Valentinos*, grooming their style and music to be hits. SAR produced their song "It's All Over Now" that became a bigger hit than any Rolling Stones' cover of the song ("Legend"). After writing "When A Boy Falls in Love," a surefire hit, he famously assigned it to the young, former gospel singer, Mel Carter, launching his pop career ("American Masters"). Cooke became known as an outstanding producer, and one of the first African American artists turned producer in the music world. Lou Rawls explains, "he was gonna be a Berry Gordy before Berry Gordy was Berry Gordy" ("Legend"). Cooke was becoming the first African American performer and successful producer for not only himself, but now other black artists.

As a result of Klein's success with RCA, he became Cooke's manager. In the summer of 1964, after some convincing, he booked Sam for another performance at the Copacabana, 6

years after his first Copa performance. Since his initial experience at the Copa, Cooke had become a renowned star and had fashioned a new, up and coming genre of music, and after the perceived failure of his first Copa performance, this was his chance to redeem himself. Cooke tried out his planned set at another club in the Catskills, The Laurels, which included typical supper club songs like “Girl From Ipanema,” and it was unsuccessful. Just like his negative start with RCA, Cooke’s lack of success was precisely because he wasn’t singing his own songs – wasn’t being himself. He brought in his old arranger, Rene Hall, to revamp the show and arrange Cooke’s own songs for the bigger orchestra.

Cooke’s performance was widely anticipated. An advertisement on the corner of Broadway and Forty-Third Street stood 5 stories high and read: “SAM’S THE BIGGEST COOKE IN TOWN” with a photo of Cooke dressed all in white. In those six years, the Copacabana’s racial policies had changed, and industry greats, black and white, awaited the performance (“American Masters”). Following advice from Cooke’s cohorts, in particular Hall, he ditched “The Girl From Ipanema” and included mostly his own songs and others of the time, with some classics thrown in, opening with “The Best Things In Life Are Free.” Guralnick writes, “the performance built, as Sam had taught Bobby [Womack] a performance should always build, ‘till we started getting it in closer, bringing it all closer to home, and then he started doing [the civil rights folk favorites]” (“Dream Boogie” 580). Cooke combined what he stood for as a popular black artist with what it meant to play at the Copa. “It was, as Sam had explained to Bobby, a distinctly white-folks version of his standard show” (Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 581). Guralnick points out that despite this ‘white-folks version,’ there were still similarities between Cooke’s traditional show and this one. He explains “Sam’s easy conversational delivery drew in the audience, drew in an entirely *different* audience, in much the

same way that he had first wrecked house in all those makeshift storefront churches...” (“Dream Boogie” 582). The performance was a huge success, despite upbeat, but not overwhelmingly positive reviews. “The *Amsterdam News* announced that Cooke simply had ‘the best voice in the smart supper clubs.’ While he drove the females crazy, the paper observed, even the men ‘clapped’, stamped their feet and added their applause to the deafening thunderous cheers” (Wolff 306). Seemingly, everyone in the industry was entranced by Cooke’s show and it led to further successes for Cooke, like television advertisements. After this performance, “he was no longer crossing over to the white audience, they were crossing over to him” (“Legend”). Cooke’s songs, his versions of existing songs, and most of all, his compelling, charismatic performance persona drew people in. These traits established his unwavering success in the pop industry, whether he was performing “for” white-folks or simply presenting his roots and gospel-inspired performance style “to” a white audience. He became “the face of the new black entertainer,” allowing him the freedom and star power to exercise a little more risk-taking (Legend).

During and directly after this show we also see a shift in Cooke’s civil rights activism specifically through performance. Cook had an established interest in Black History (he had an extensive library of black history literature at his home) and became known for his committed stand against the mistreatment of his companions and himself. His inclusion of “If I Had a Hammer” and Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” (which inspired “A Change Is Gonna Come”) in his Copa set, established a public tie with the civil rights movement beyond the stories of Cooke’s refusal to play for segregated audiences or his opposition to abuse surrounding his gigs in the South. His Copa set did not include his recent work, “A Change is

Gonna Come” as it was drastically different from his previous pieces, and he wasn’t quite comfortable enough with the song’s intensity.

Around the time of his Copa performance, Cooke focused more and more on young talent. Even as the music scene in 1963 going into 1964 became more polarized, Cooke continued to record an array of musical styles from pop dance numbers to gospel- and blues-inspired songs. Cooke explained, “The greatest thing that [could] happen to me? If all the singers I’m connected with had hits”(as qtd. in Guralnick, “Dream Boogie 565). Cooke became publicly associated with Cassius Clay, working together on, not only Clay’s music, but also his civil rights efforts. The two worked on an album together. As Clay announced his affiliation as a Black Muslim, Cooke stood by his friend as they worked with the civil rights movement. Cooke was also a known acquaintance of Malcolm X.

In fall of 1953 Cooke and his band were turned away from a Holiday Inn in Shreveport, LA. “He just went off, ... And when he refused to leave, he became confrontational to the point where his wife, Barbara, said, 'Sam, we'd better get out of here. They're going to kill you.' And he says, 'They're not gonna kill me; I'm Sam Cooke.' To which his wife said, 'No, to them you're just another ...' you know.”(Guralnick as qtd. in “Sam Cooke and the Song”). Cooke and several of the people he was with were arrested and jailed for disturbing the peace. This further fueled Cooke’s desire to advocate for change. This incident, reportedly, in part, moved him to write “A Change is Gonna Come” (Guralnick as qtd. in “Sam Cooke and the Song”). Cooke had stayed true to his beliefs and demanded respect for himself and the increasing tension in the U.S. prompted his action to make a nationwide political statement.

Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in The Wind,” a song widely understood as relevant to civil rights and equality, inspired Cooke to write perhaps his most famous song, “A Change Is Gonna

Come.” Guralnick explains, “When he first heard ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ on the new *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* album J.W. had just given him, he was so carried away with the message, and the fact that a white boy had written it, that, he told Alex, he was almost ashamed not to have written something like that himself“ (“Dream Boogie” 512). This was the first instance that Cooke sought to write a song that had a message. He had never before written a song with words significant enough to make a change, or even to offend some of his audience he had worked so hard to attract.

He first played the song for J.W. Alexander in December of 1963, and the two were excited yet a little spooked by the song, on account of its potential impact rather than earning potential. Guralnick explains that the song “brought to mind a gospel melody but that didn’t come from any spiritual number in particular, one that was suggested both by the civil rights movement and by the circumstances of Sam’s own life” (“Dream Boogie” 540). Rene Hall then arranged the song with greater care, and seriousness than any song he had arranged before, wanting the “orchestral arrangement [to match] the dignity of the song”(Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 547). Cooke recorded it in January of 1964 and RCA released it on Cooke’s *Ain’t That Good News* LP shortly after. With the album only gaining small attention, Klein had Cooke sing the song on *The Tonight Show* in early February. The performance was historically overshadowed, however, by the Beatles’ performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* two days later (Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 555). RCA later agreed to release the song on an upcoming single, as the back-side to his potential hit, “Shake” in November 1964. The single was released days after Cooke’s death in September 1964, and while never succeeding financially at the time, it became a civil rights anthem for years to come.

“A Change Is Gonna Come” demonstrates a seamless combination of musical styles. With songs like “Bring it On Home To Me” and “ Nothing Can Change This Love” Cooke combined gospel and blues to create the new feeling of soul music. However, with “A Change is Gonna Come” Cooke not only combines musical genres in terms of style (ie. gospel – through musical form, lyrics, and Cooke’s evangelical crooning; pop, in terms of the stage Cooke was now presenting his music on, which was a mainstream one; and blues as the gospel elements of the song are balanced with blues chords and themes), but it also combines meanings. Guralnick explains, “[p]art of what’s extraordinary about [“A Change Is Gonna Come”]—is how it combines forms and, in the process, combines meanings“(McKeen 485). In “Change” in particular, Cooke addresses issues beyond his previous lyrical boundaries and unites this with an evocative melody to create an enduring paradigm of why soul music often connotes civil rights. Wolff writes, “‘Change’ crosses musical barriers, combining gospel, blues, the nightclub ballad, and the protest songs. It wants to be speaking at the same time to Sister Flute, to the drunk on the corner, to the white ladies in their gowns and the kids at sit-ins. It implies they all have something in common”(292). The song unites ideas and groups in a way that not many African American artists had done before, especially in a secular context.

Cooke heightens his use of gospel elements in “A Change Is Gonna Come,” adding a religious, binding layer to his plea for equality. Kempton writes, “[u]ndressed of its adorning strings and French horns, ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’ is a companion to ‘Jesus Wash Away My Troubles,’ arguably Cooke’s purest performance. In it he was up to what smart, contemporary songwriters ... were doing, bending a ‘gospelism’ to broaden its meaning rather than adapting a song by changing its words”(Kempton 189). Gospel hymns were a large portion of the musical accompaniment to the civil rights movement, but there was little new material that directly came

out of civil rights from black artists prior to “A Change is Gonna Come.” Guralnick explains, “‘A Change Is Gonna Come’ was a real departure for him, in the sense that it was undoubtedly the first time that he addressed social problems in a direct and explicit way”(as qtd. in “Sam Cooke and the Song”). This haunting melodic ballad distinguished itself from anything Cooke had produced before and its lyrics stamp the song as unique, allowing it to be that much more influential.

The song opens with a seventeen piece orchestra, the strings guiding us through to a lingering lead in, making us long for Cooke’s opening note. Cooke comes in with “I was born by the river,” and we almost expect the rest of the tune to be about God and the Holy Spirit. Wolff explains, “He was born by the river in a little tent. If that sounds like gospel –born again in some tent revival baptism—when he adds that he’s been running ever since, we’re into the blues” (291). Cooke seamlessly combines genres, again capturing the open, evangelical power of gospel along with the heartrending grittiness of the blues. We hear quiet, tentative strings and a legato horn underscoring his contemplative words. On the second verse, “it’s been too hard livin’, but I’m afraid to die” the orchestra is much louder, the song escalates. We move into “I go to the movies” and the horn begins to respond to each line, moving into the bridge, with a repeated echo, that almost makes a jubilant proclamation of strength with each burst. Guralnick explains, "Each verse is a different movement: The strings have their movement, the horns have their movement. The timpani carries the bridge. It was like a movie score. He wanted it to have a grandeur to it,"(as qtd. in “Sam Cooke and the Song”). A slowly crescendoing orchestra tremolo and slow timpani underscore the bridge. Here, the horn changes to a four-note rhythm that is forceful and persuasive, giving deference to Cooke’s words through the end of the piece. In Cooke’s final verse, introduced by the bridge’s climactic last line, the

horns go back to their original pattern and Cooke's raw words conclude, at which point the orchestra swells and whimsically, with a faint blues piano, fades.

Just as the score gives power and testament to the song's message, Cooke's words are precise and commanding. In his opening lines, Cooke touched on the gospel tropes of the river and a tent, recalling the church community he came from and, in which so much of what the civil rights movement was rooted. In his second verse, "I go to the movie and I go down town / Somebody keep telling me don't hang around." Here, Cooke evokes both a personal experience and familiar occurrence for African Americans in the south. It was "simply his way of describing their life – Memphis, Shreveport, Birmingham – and the lives of all Afro-Americans." (Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 541). The bridge reads, "Then I go to my brother / and I say 'Brother, help me please.' / But he winds up knockin' me back down on my knees" citing the degrading force of the white establishment. J.W. Alexander recalled, 'in the verse where he says, 'I go to my brother' ... – you know he was talking about the establishment – then he says, 'That motherfucker winds up knocking me back down on my knees' ... I said, "We might not make as much money off this as some of the other things, but this is one of the best things you've written.' 'I think my daddy will be proud,' he said" (as qtd. in Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 541). Cooke's use of the word "brother" also implies internal dissonance within the African American community. Cooke's final verse offers a note of redemption and hope explaining, "I think I'm able to carry on" concluding the song with the sense of perseverance the movement inspired.

The song's orchestral accompaniment and haunting chords present something novel within Cooke's body of work. It was the song that famously, "almost scared him" ("Sam Cooke and the Song"). His vocal approach was not necessarily something completely new for Cooke,

but the orchestra, his vocals, and the lyrics combined to become something lasting, its release falling almost serendipitously in line with his untimely death. Guralnick explains, “Everything in that song really had a meaning you could refer to”(“Sweet Soul Music” 46). The content ranges from the struggles of then present day prejudice in segregated spaces such as the movies, to historical concepts of civil injustice, all coming together to generate a musical beacon in pursuit of social change.

“A Change is Gonna Come’s” single release was planned before Cooke’s death, and had the rousing, dance number, B-side “Shake.” “Shake” in and of itself was as progressive as its ballad A-side. Inspired by Bobby Freemans’ “C’mon and Swim,” Cooke wanted to emulate the song’s specific “groove” and “straight-ahead energy” (Guralnick, “Dream Boogie” 607). Guralnick explains, “[i]t was the definition of what Sam kept telling everyone who would listen was the coming trend in popular music and r&b, something that, like James Brown’s raw extemporizations, the Valentinos’ and the Rolling Stones’ rough-edged rock ‘n’ roll, was conveyed as much by rhythm and attitude as it was by vocal technique”(“Dream Boogie” 607). Cooke achieved a complex feeling through his concentrated use of drums, again generating something new, outside of a distinguished musical genre. Wolff writes, “Sam’s workout is nowhere near as frantic as James Brown’s, you can always hear Cooke calculating how this slower, controlled dance number could be adapted to the nightclub, but it’s got the same message; all power to the beat”(314). These songs together represent a musical progression towards a newly defined music, specifically for African American musicians that could further Cooke’s legacy. It also presents the possibility of what musical explorations Cooke could have undergone had his death not come so soon after the song’s recording.

While “A Change Is Gonna Come” may not be Cooke’s first uniquely “soul” song, its popularity and enduring influence on, not only the civil rights movement, but also music in general, allowed his music and the soul genre, to which it is affiliated, to gain the status that it holds today. Popularly, this soul music status is associated with later artists such as Jackie Wilson, Otis Redding, Marvin Gaye and Al Green, but these artists all attribute musical influence to Sam Cooke. Cooke took his career step by step in order to establish what this song exemplifies—a genre of African American music that could be considered “pop” while also influencing generations. The song not only gained its popular status through its outstanding meaning, its lingering tune, haunting melody and instrumentation, but also its release’s proximity to Cooke’s death. The song had already been released before Cooke’s death on an LP, but it did not gain mass popularity and subsequent civil rights anthem status until after Cooke’s racially-charged killing. While Cooke had already established some groundwork for soul music as a genre with “Bring it On Home To Me” in 1962 and his performance at The Harlem Square Club in 1963, this song, combined with his violent and untimely death, allowed the genre to reach a monumental status as an African American genre.

Bertha Franklin shot Sam Cooke in alleged self-defense at the hotel she managed in Los Angeles, CA on December 11, 1964. He had come to the hotel with Elisa Boyer, “a twenty-two-year-old unfailingly identified in the contemporary reportage as Eurasian”, who claimed that after leaving a local nightclub, Cooke refused to take her home and took her instead to a motel (Kempton 176). Speculation arose after Boyer was later arrested for prostitution, and when Cooke’s money, which he reportedly carried was never recovered, suggesting that Boyer went willingly to the motel with Cooke and left the room attempting to rob him while he was half dressed—which explained Cooke’s lack of clothing and rage at the hotel manager. Franklin

recounted that Cooke broke into the manager's office-apartment demanding to know where Boyer was, and accosted Franklin wearing only his shirt and a sports coat. When Cooke forcefully grabbed her, not believing that Franklin was unaware of Boyer's whereabouts. Franklin fired the gun at Cooke in self-defense. Cooke scrambled for the gun, Franklin shot twice more, the third bullet hit Cooke. He exclaimed "Lady, you shot me" before coming at Franklin again, at which point Franklin hit him over the head with a broomstick so hard it broke and he fell (Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 618-619). Boyer later called the police from a nearby payphone claiming she had just escaped a recent kidnapping. After the investigation and trial, Franklin's act was ruled to be self-defense. Franklin and Boyer both passed a lie detector test and Franklin happened to be on the phone at the time of the incident, allowing for a witness who corroborated Franklin's testimony, ultimately allowing for the verdict of justifiable homicide.

Cooke's family and supporters continued to refute this verdict, as Boyer's intentions and actions had never been thoroughly investigated, and Franklin's account presented several inconsistencies. Singer Etta James explained that upon viewing Cooke's body, it was clear that he had suffered a much more brutal beating than Franklin had recounted. Allen Klein (despite the fact that he was a subject of the investigation because he inherited much of what Cooke left behind) and J.W. Alexander pursued an investigation with private investigators. Investigators reported that the evidence "had clearly showed that the victim Sam Cooke was lured to the place where he died by trick and device and though the homicide was justifiable, the alleged [*sic*] kidnapping was pure fiction"(as qtd. in Guralnick, "Dream Boogie 643). The report further explained, that "Elisa Boyer is well known among cheap night-club hangers on as being a professional roller. Her regular modus opperendi [*sic*] [*is*] to lure the victim into a cheap hotel room and after they are both undressed to tell the victim that it is her custom not to undertake

the evening's entertainment until after her male partner has bathed. When he goes into the bathroom she then steals the clothes and takes off" (as qtd. in Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 643). Klein ended the investigation after realizing it could not lead anywhere, as Boyer had not committed the killing and Franklin apparently acted accordingly, given Cooke's furor. One reporter explained that "[a]s far as the desk sergeant she talked to knew or cared, Sam Cooke had been just flotsam washed up from the wreckage of another Saturday night in Watts, another dead Negro" (Kempton 181). Cooke's death was never truly clarified, likely because of the unsavory circumstances of the situation, the political climate, and more so, the lack of evidence. Cooke's funeral in Chicago drew thousands of fans who waited in the cold over four city blocks to pay their respects. His body was then flown to Los Angeles for another service at which Ray Charles performed "Angels Keep Watching Over Me." Despite his death's atypical circumstances, Cooke is remembered for his music, kind demeanor, and dedication to his communities.

Between 1955 and 1963, the number of top ten pop hits by black artists had increased by 50 percent (Guralnick, "Dream Boogie" 646). RCA continued to release Cooke's singles and, of them, only "Sugar Dumpling" made the top 40 charts. It is clear that Cooke opened many doors for black recording artists, but his untimely death also altered the way his career would be remembered. Yet, Cooke's legacy as a soul and gospel singer was also magnified on account of his death. Just as Ray Charles' career moved for a while to that of a country singer, had Cooke lived on, he surely would've explored more genres or perhaps put a more definite, meticulous stamp on the soul genre. Over time, however, largely on account of "A Change is Gonna Come," the music he produced in the final years of his life came to define him. Buford explains, "Through a peculiarly neat intersection of progressive political energies, alert

corporate marketing, and discursively nimble music-historical revision, a performer whom the black press just years earlier had identified as a ‘pop crooner’ was reinterpreted as a founding father of soul”(165). It seems as though his entire career became that of a soul artist, rather than that of a gospel, then pop artist, then soul artist after producing “Bring It On Home To Me.” His early death caused that much more attention to be called to his music than perhaps would have been had he moved on to write unsuccessful show tunes. His place in musical history was redefined—even though he started to be associated with the new soul genre during his lifetime, his death secured his spot as a father, and master of it.

Yet, to some degree, his music was also minimized because of his death. Were it not for artists and influencers who succeeded him, it’s possible that Cooke’s legacy could have been relatively forgotten. Buford asserts that, “[a] notion of Cooke as “The Man Who Invented Soul” never would have been viable had it not been for the many soul singers in the late 1960s and 1970s , including Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Al Green, and Sam Moore, who cited Cooke as a seminal inspiration, and the countless others singers who to this day, bear his influence. Moreover, to be identified as a “soul man” in the 1960s and early 1970s ... had politically vital significance to an entire generation of African Americans”(165-66). His influence within the African American musical community allowed him to adopt the reputation of being a father of soul, even though this was not the case during his career.

Sam Cooke’s early death would have perhaps caused his career to be less influential or memorable than it could have been, but the political temperature of the time, his shift towards civil rights focused work, and his influence on similar soul artists to later rise to fame allowed for his place as a founding father of soul to be solidified. At the same time, however, over time younger generations become less and less exposed to Cooke. While they may be more exposed

to his most popular music (“Cupid,” “Wonderful World,” “A Change is Gonna Come”), his name and reputation is less recognizable because such names as Otis Redding and Ray Charles have endured as soul artists. “A Change is Gonna Come” being his “last song” solidified his place as a soul artist, even if his music had only technically turned towards soul during the last three years of his career. Its powerful message moved Cooke from being one of the first mainstream black pop artists to being a pioneer of change for African Americans. The song’s message and serendipitous release, combined with Cooke’s vocal and music-business influence, contributed a huge piece to what Americans define as soul music.

## Conclusion

Sam Cooke's musical influence proves monumental when considering those artists who were inspired by him. Cooke played an integral part in the lives of artists Americans now consider the fathers and masters of soul. When now famous soul musicians are asked to recall their inspiration, Sam Cooke almost always comes up. Aretha Franklin, a close family friend of Cooke's, once said, "Ooh, I loved that man. And when I saw he went pop, you know, outside the church, that's what made me say, 'I want to sing that stuff, too'"(as qtd. in Dobkin 78). "According to [Marvin] Gaye, ... he would study Sam Cooke and afterward go home and shut himself in a room and practice for a day or two, imitating whatever he'd seen Cooke do. The young and introverted Gaye identified with Cooke so much, he even added an 'e' to his name in emulation"(Kempton 149). In 2004, Al Green explained, "I heard Sam Cooke sing 'Nearer My God to Thee' with the Soul Stirrers live, and I just—that just blew my mind. ... I played the record to death...I was like eight, nine years old and I said if I could just do that...I wish I could do that, and I think that started everything" ("On Hearing"). Kempton asserts, "[Otis Redding] wore out record grooves studying *Sam Cooke at the Copa*, trying to assimilate as much as he could of that fated know-how"(158). Even his contemporary at the time of soul's initial evolution, James Brown, said, "Sam Cooke was one of the best that ever did it in the world"(American Masters). Those contributors to the soul genre as we know it today, unfailingly name Cooke among their biggest inspirations, thus forever impacting soul in America.

Cooke's musical influence is not limited to soul musicians. His unique pop success was essential to the achievement of Motown in America. Smokey Robinson asserted, "Sam Cooke had a huge impact on music itself and of course he had a huge influence on us at Motown"

(Smokey Robinson in “American Masters). The Animals, The Rolling Stones, James Taylor, Paul McCartney, and John Lennon all notably covered Cooke’s work, among so many others. Esteemed music journalist and producer, “Jerry Wexler thought sweetness a defining element of soul singing and called Sam Cooke ‘the prophet of the sweet school’” (Kempton 135). Rod Stewart covered numerous Sam Cooke hits, once saying, “To explain what Sam Cooke meant to me, it would take a couple of hours just to scratch the surface. The man basically introduced me to soul music, ...The first time I heard him, his music hit me like a thunderbolt and just slapped me around the head. I was 15 years old, and he changed my life”(as qtd. in Merlis). Cooke was one of the first inductees when the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame was established in 1986 along with artists such as James Brown, Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, Buddy Holly, Ray Charles and Chuck Berry. While today, Cooke may not be the first name that comes to mind when Americans are questioned about soul music, he almost certainly played a part in the career of whomever or whatever they do think of.

Sam Cooke had to change gospel music to allow for his sound to translate to pop. He rose to gospel fame with the Soul Stirrers, his vocal abilities and charming energy standing out to churchgoers—especially females. He used his inimitable voice and amiable magnetism to successfully transition to secular music, achieving a number one hit with his first official secular release, “You Send Me.” With each of Sam’s performances following “You Send Me’s” 1957 release, he took a step towards achieving mass white appeal, while never abandoning his black audience. He moved towards the fame that would allow him and other African American artists to move away from exclusively r&b and rock ‘n’ roll, and in doing so, established a largely African American genre that was considered mainstream. As one of the first black artists to double as a producer, Cooke was in a position to groom young artists as well as publish the

alternative music that would become soul. When Cooke achieved the star power to return to his gospel roots and came out with “Bring it On Home to Me,” he officially infused a gospel feeling into r&b and the mainstream. This gospel introduction proved to be his major contribution to the soul genre. Finally, Cooke contributed to soul music’s association with the civil rights movement and its artists’ clear stance on the side of equality, through his song, “A Change is Gonna Come.”

Without Cooke’s contributions, soul music surely would have been delayed, altered, and unlike what we know today. He crossed racial and musical barriers and introduced the multifaceted spirit of gospel to the mainstream. Cooke had to leave gospel, for a time, to gain to power to return to it. When he introduced that gospel force to the mainstream, he established elements of soul that gave the genre its name.

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