SAM COOKE

Sam Cooke possessed one of the greatest voices ever to grace a record. "Grace," in fact, is the key word for Cooke's voice and his sublime sense of pitch, tone and phrasing. He could fill a dance floor and whip a crowd into a frenzy, but he was at his best when gently bending a delicate pop melody or reverent gospel tune. Although his northern and urban gospel roots and resulting pop style were very different from those of Ray Charles, Cooke's beautifully arched melodies and quiet intensity were just as revelatory and important to the development of soul music.

Sam Cooke was a true pioneer: a supremely gifted singer and songwriter and a successful businessman with a firm grip on his own career at a time when few black artists even dreamed that such a thing was possible. Cooke was a great inspiration to those who followed him, and it is a great tragedy that he died just as the soul movement that he helped found was flowering. His voice remains a standard against which all others can be measured; as Keith Richards put it, "Sam Cooke is somebody other singers have to measure themselves against, and most of them go back to pumping gas."[i]

With the Soul Stirrers (1951-57)

Sam Cooke was born on January 2, 1931, in Clarksdale, Mississippi, but grew up in Chicago, Illinois. One of eight children of Baptist minister Charles Cook (Sam added the "e" later), he grew up immersed in the church and gospel music and spent his teens in a gospel group called the Highway QC's and gradually developed a reputation as a surprisingly mature and facile young singer. The Highway QC's were patterned after the renowned **Soul Stirrers**, and had the good fortune to be coached by Soul Stirrers baritone R. B. Robinson.

Founded in 1934, the Soul Stirrers were one of the most popular gospel groups of the day, thanks largely to lead singer and guiding spirit R. H. Harris. Harris revolutionized the group dynamics of gospel quartet singing, emphasizing a steady, chanted background against a freely improvised lead vocal. His pious sincerity and florid singing had a strong influence on Sam's style (as well as that of Jackie Wilson and a host of other young singers). When Harris left the group at the end of 1950, R. B. Robinson brought Sam, barely twenty years old, into the group as his idol's successor. Understandably nervous at first, Sam quickly gained confidence and stopped trying to imitate Harris' powerful voice, singing instead in a sweetly longing natural style, embellished with an expressive rasp, that stood in sharp contrast to the frenzied lead vocals of other groups and prompted the Soul Stirrers to soften their overall sound and move toward more delicate, pop sounding arrangements. Cooke also proved himself a skilled songwriter, writing "Touch the Hem of His Garment," "That's Heaven to Me" and other gospel hits the Soul Stirrers, and he always seemed more concerned with the meaning and message of the songs he sang that with showing off his voice or personality.

Cooke's recordings with the Soul Stirrers, on Specialty Records, stand with and perhaps even surpass the best of his pop output. All of the musical traits that he would bring to his pop recordings are in fully-formed evidence in his gospel music: the sweet, gentle tone, the lighter-than-air phrasing, the impeccable melodies and diction, the sincere sentiment, the quasi-yodeled "whoa-o-o-o-oh"s and lilting melismas that became his most recognizable vocal trademark. Cooke's unforced ease and genuine conviction

won him the respect of older gospel artists and fans, while his charismatic personality and sensual look and sound gained him a large young following, as Soul Stirrer Jesse Farley recalls: "In the old days young people took seats six rows from the back, the old folks stayed up front. When Sam came on the scene, it reversed itself. The young people took over."[ii]

By the mid-fifties Cooke was something of a matinee idol: "the sexiest man in gospel music." His appearances inspired a frenzied reaction from the female fans that seemed more appropriate for a pop idol than for a troubadour for the Lord. The response did not go unnoticed: Cooke was already eyeing the pop market and couldn't help but wonder what type of reaction he could get from a pop audience if he could make girls swoon at a *gospel* show. Cooke made his first, tentative steps away from gospel music and recorded a few secular pop songs in 1956 with Specialty producer **Bumps Blackwell**, who was also producing the label's rock & roll star, Little Richard. Specialty was doing well in the crossover market, but owner Art Rupe felt that the gospel and secular wings of his label should remain separate—that any intermingling would offend the gospel audience and that Sam Cooke, in particular, would destroy his credibility by recording pop music. It took some prodding, then, to persuade Rupe to release Cooke's first pop venture, "Lovable," in 1957. The record was released under the name "Dale Cook," but the pseudonym could hardly disguise Sam's distinctive voice and there was, indeed, an immediate backlash from his gospel fans and fellow Soul Stirrers.

Rupe ruled out any further pop recordings, only to discover Cooke and Blackwell in the studio one night recording more syrupy pop material behind his back. Rupe sold Cooke's contract to Blackwell, who became his manager as well as producer, and promptly fired them both, along with gospel singer and A&R man **J. W. Alexander**, who remained a close friend and business partner until Cooke's death. Cooke, Blackwell and Alexander took the tapes from that fateful night to the newly formed Keen label, which signed Cooke and gave Rupe reason to regret his rash move when one of the songs that so angered him, "You Send Me," went to #1 on both the Pop and R&B charts in the Fall of 1957.

<u>Keen Records</u> (1957-60)

"**You Send Me**" was the perfect record to launch Cooke's pop career—the soft, self-penned love song had broad appeal and was a marvelous vehicle for his voice. Backed by a sweet pop choir and an understated band accompaniment, Cooke glides through the song suspended above the beat, gently pushing the melody then soaring up to his exhilarating "who-o-oas" and floating back down into the sighing lyrics. Like Ray Charles, though in a completely different manner, Cooke sings to the Woman just as he had sung to the Lord, with the same yearning devotion and eyes-lifted reverence. Filled with the joys of love, "You Send Me" is the very best accompaniment for a romantic night by the fireplace.

"You Send Me" established Cooke as a "romantic lead" with a sensuous, intimate voice to match his wholesomely seductive looks and image. The record also sparked the anticipated wave of resentment among Cooke's gospel following. While his younger fans followed eagerly, many of Cooke's devout, older fans were upset by his "sell out" to the commercial world. Cooke was quickly ostracized from the gospel community, a painful loss but irrelevant compared to the huge number of new fans he gained as

millions of pop listeners heard his voice for the first time. (Cooke's role in the gospel world and his switch to pop was mirrored in the next decade by Bob Dylan, who drew huge numbers of young listeners to folk music in the early sixties, then raised the ire of the traditionalists—and gained a much broader audience—when he plugged in an electric guitar and switched from folk to rock.)

"Wonderful World"

Cooke's Keen recordings featured a variety of pop shadings, ranging from crooners like "(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons" to the calypso-tinged "Everybody Likes to Cha Cha Cha" and the teen pop of "Only Sixteen" and 1960's "Wonderful World," his last hit for Keen. "Wonderful World" is a featherweight gem of a song, with a delicate, childlike melody and a gushing adolescent sentiment that surely horrified Cooke's gospel fans. It certainly is a far cry from the weight and depth of his songs to the Lord, but it is sung with the same ennobling grace and devotion. Backed by a softly rocking band arrangement and pulsing background harmonies, Cooke sings in the first-person as a teenager experiencing love for the first time. Sure of his love, if not his homework, he admits that he doesn't know much about his schoolwork, but he knows he's in love and he's even willing to make the ultimate sacrifice and work to become an "A student" if it might win his girl's heart. Cooke's songwriting style (he wrote most of the songs he recorded throughout his career) was as graceful as his singing, as evidenced by the twist this verse takes into the final couplet:

Don't know much about geography,
Don't know much trigonometry,
Don't know much about algebra,
Don't know what a slide rule is for,
But I do know one and one is two,
And if this one could be with you,
What a wonderful world this would be.

Cooke's problems at Specialty Records made him determined to keep full control over both the musical and the business aspects of his career. With J. W. Alexander as his partner, Cooke launched his own publishing company, Kags Music, and his own record label, Sar Records, established as an outlet for his production work with other artists. In an era marked by a shameless exploitation of young and inexperienced performers, and a particularly unconscionable treatment of black artists, Cooke's success and self-reliance was extraordinary and helped pave the way for Motown Records and the greater inclusion of blacks on all levels in the music industry. Cooke also helped launch the careers of Billy Preston, Lou Rawls, Bobby Womack and other former gospel singers who decided to try their luck in the pop world, including Johnnie Taylor, Cooke's replacement in the Soul Stirrers. (Cooke and Alexander even recorded the Soul Stirrers after Art Rupe disbanded Specialty Records.) Cooke's business acumen eventually led to his departure from Keen Records in 1960, when he demanded an audit of his recording royalties and found that, like most artists, he'd been grossly underpaid. Cooke won a

series of lawsuits, split from Bumps Blackwell and signed with RCA, leaving Keen Records bankrupt and permanently out of business.

RCA (1960-64)

Cooke's move to RCA was a personal triumph and a confirmation of his star status. Although RCA had little experience with any type of black music, it did have the resources and industry clout to broaden Cooke's appeal and expand his base further into the pop market. As his music and image "matured," Cooke found himself increasingly torn between opposing musical directions—between the gospel roots of the burgeoning soul scene, the teen-oriented pop of his Keen days, and the lure of the big money and respectability that the mainstream adult market offered. He recorded in a wide variety of styles at RCA, ranging from the most soulful and affecting music of his career to the middle-of-the-road glitz of his *Live at the Copa* album and other attempts at establishing Cooke as an "all-around entertainer."

The best of Cooke's RCA output took on a more personal depth than his Keen recordings. The teen love songs like "Cupid" and "When a Boy Falls in Love" were given lusher treatments and strike a deeper chord than his similar Keen material, while his brass-driven dance numbers like "Shake" and "Twistin' the Night Away" (the best of the flood of early sixties "twist" songs) showed a tougher uptempo side of Cooke's style. His best and most enduring recordings were the slow and mid-tempo songs tinged with a weary realism and sung with Cooke's most personal voice. Working with RCA staff producers Hugo Peretti and Luigi Creatore, and with Keen veterans arranger Rene Hall and guitarist Cliff White, Cooke wrote new songs that fully accommodated his emotion and forged a soft soul style that fully integrated his gospel roots.

"Chain Gang"

Sam Cooke's first RCA hit was the biggest seller of his career: "Chain Gang." Released in the summer of 1960, the song also marked a shift away from the teen love songs and lightweight productions that characterized most of his Keen output. The hardships of prisoners chained together in a work crew was an odd subject for a pop song, made even odder by the extended introduction featuring a clanging anvil and syncopated grunts and groans from the "chain gang." The groans give way to a plaintive violin melody for the first verse, then return to accompany the second and continue through the third, where the violins return and all of the backing figures join together to witness Sam's lament and the sounds of the work crew as they fade, unrelieved, into the distance.

Inspired by his images of men "moaning their lives away," missing their women and yearning for deliverance, Cooke sings "Chain Gang" with the longing spirit of his religious songs. His verse melodies float freely above the background, bending and pleading without ever playing for cheap sentiment. At the end of the song Cooke breaks out of the arrangement altogether and testifies in pure gospel style, with elaborate melismas ("my-y-y-y-y-y work is so hard") and a perfect, sighing "whoa-o-o-o-oh" as the song fades.[iii]

"Chain Gang" set the tone, musically and emotionally, for Cooke's best work at RCA. His next release, "Sad Mood," was another melancholy masterpiece, sung by the

real Sam Cooke (not Sam playing a moonstruck teenager) in a heartrending expression of sorrow and penance that was universal enough to appeal to both teenagers who fantasize about the heartaches of love and adults who know it only too well. A similarly sorrowful quality colors all of Cooke's greatest recordings, even the songs that "ought" to sound happy. "Good Times," for example, is an invitation to "get in the groove and let the good times roll," but the tired 3:00 a.m. tempo and Cooke's wistful singing make it sound less like a celebration than a desperate attempt to escape his blues. "Meet Me at Mary's Place" has a similar, 'come on and party' storyline, and the same troubling feeling that it won't do any good. "Having a Party" was the highlight of Cooke's set of "gotta dance to keep from crying" songs. Frequently covered as a bar-band party song, the original sounds almost mournful, like a funeral wake—a feeling that the singalong at the end only seems to heighten. Cooke addresses the song to the radio DJ, pleading with him to keep the music playing, and even puts in requests for "Soul Twist," "I Know" and "Mashed Potatoes," a tip of the hat to contemporary hits by King Curtis, Barbara George and James Brown. Cooke's yearning, double-edged emotion gave his songs a depth that lifted them beyond their surface "meanings" (and beyond the expressive grasp of most of the singers who try to cover them).

“Bring It On Home to Me”

Cooke's melancholy feel and pleading gospel delivery were used to fullest effect in the "country soul" ballads that reflected the influence of Ray Charles and the southern soul movement. "Bring It On Home to M**e**," from 1962, is his most integrated arrangement: a seamless blend of piano, strings, saxophone, guitar and bass, gently pushed along by a steady snare drum backbeat and cymbal triplets, all supporting a set of lyrics and lonesome melody so perfectly in sync that it's impossible to imagine one without the other. "Bring It On Home to Me" opens with a piano line straight out of an afterhours Nashville honky-tonk, then gains momentum through a church-like call & response between Cooke and Lou Rawls. Nothing is allowed to get in the way of the direct emotion: there is no lead break and no bridge section or isolated chorus, just the plaintive refrain of "bring it on home to me" at the end of every verse and the insistent, anthemic passion of the voices and feel of the music. "Bring It On Home to Me" simply *says* it, as directly and sincerely as possible, and shows Cooke's debt—repaid in full—to his gospel roots.

“A Change is Gonna Come”

"Shake" and "A Change Is Gonna Come," released as a single a month after Cooke's death, show the two extremes of Cooke's big production numbers. A brassy horn section and strong dancebeat give "Shake" more of a straightforward R&B sound than most of Cooke's output. The tougher, louder arrangement let Cooke sing full-voiced and show the raw energy that inspired a revival meeting frenzy at his live performances in black clubs, where he was free to let the "real" Sam Cooke show. (Cooke's *Live at the Harlem Square Club* album shows a completely different singer from the Sam Cooke singing "supperclub soul" for the white crowd at the Copacabana.)

"A Change is Gonna Come" is one of Cooke's greatest achievements and represents, in light of his untimely death, the end of a homeward musical journey. In

spite of its overblown orchestral setting, it is a gospel song in the purest sense—an eyes-lifted reaffirmation of faith and redemption, though the object of faith is not the Lord or the Woman but the promise of long overdue justice for his race. Cooke's growing involvement with the civil rights movement deepened his sense of musical and personal identity. "A Change is Gonna Come" is sung with a passionate conviction that soars above the production and lends a supreme dignity to Cooke's most important and heartfelt lyrics. Few singers can ever achieve such heights and truly sing with the "voice of millions" as Cooke does here. "A Change Is Gonna Come" stands as one of the great monuments to the struggle for human dignity, and ample evidence of why Cooke's death was a terrible loss felt far beyond the confines of the music world.

Cooke was at the peak of his success and artistry when, on December 10, 1964, it all ended suddenly in a seamy motel in South Los Angeles. According to testimony at subsequent hearings, Cooke attacked a woman at the Hacienda Motel and, when she fled, assaulted the motel's manager, who shot and killed Cooke in the motel office. Despite attempts, led by Cooke's new personal manager, Allen Klein, to find sinister, racial and even mob-related explanations for Cooke's unbelievable death, the true facts were apparently as simple and stupid as first reported.

The sordid circumstances of Cooke's death did nothing to blunt the outpouring of grief that accompanied his funeral services in Los Angeles and Chicago, where over 200,000 people turned out to pay respects, or the sorrow felt by his admirers across the nation. Few artists have inspired such intense love and devotion, and few have been so sorely missed. Sam Cooke had a profound influence on all soul singers, particularly the sweet soul sound of artists like Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, Jerry Butler, Smokey Robinson, Percy Sledge, Al Green and Otis Redding, who idolized Cooke and always performed "Shake" at his shows as a tribute. His songs have been covered by Aretha Franklin, Sam and Dave, Eddie Floyd, Diana Ross & the Supremes, Van Morrison, the Rolling Stones, the Animals, the Band, John Lennon, Steve Miller, Cat Stevens, Mickey Gilley, Southside Johnny, Rod Stewart and many others, and his voice has inspired singers of all styles. Jerry Wexler, the Atlantic producer who recorded many of the greatest soul singers, summed it up this simply: "Sam was the best singer who ever lived, no contest."[iv]

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[i]ibid.
[ii]Peter Guralnick, "Sweet Soul Music," p. 34
[iii]A "melisma" is a single syllable stretched out over several notes.
[iv]ibid.