

SOUL PIONEERS

The difficulties faced by black performers in the rock & roll era grew worse with the coming of the pop-oriented Teen Idol era. Like rockabilly and the raucous sound of classic rock & roll, rhythm & blues fell largely out of favor in the early sixties, though the popularity of the Twist and other dance crazes did inspire a mini-revival and hits for Twist King Chubby Checker and other "neo-R&B" artists like Gary "U.S." Bonds ("New Orleans," "Quarter to Three"), Jimmy Jones ("Handy Man," "Good Timin'"), Joe Jones ("You Talk Too Much"), Bobby Lewis ("Tossin' and Turnin'"), Ernie K-Doe ("Mother-In-Law") and Jimmy Soul ("If You Wanna Be Happy").

The most significant development in black music in the early sixties was the advent of **soul music**. "Soul" is as hard to define as "rhythm & blues," and came to mean as much or as little as the previous label (i.e. "black music"). The key ingredient in soul music, and the element that defined it as a new style, was the influence of gospel music. The vocal styles, musical devices, emotional intensity and the spirit of community central to soul music came largely from the gospel tradition. The gospel elements blended with and influenced the dance grooves, musical arrangements and secular, sensual subject matter of R&B and created a new style for a new and rapidly changing era. The soul movement closely mirrored the growing civil rights movement in America, and functioned as a unifying secular church. Soul music's success on the pop charts and influence on all other styles marked the second great rock era wave of musical crossovers and airwave integration, and was a happy reflection of the changing racial attitudes and the buoyant optimism that, at least for a time, seemed justified.

The rise of R&B paralleled the height of gospel music's popularity, and gospel styles had been creeping into R&B for many years in a natural and largely spontaneous progression that only seemed shocking because of the clash of subject matters. The Dominoes, Drifters, Midnighters, Little Willie John, Bobby "Blue" Bland and many others helped lay the foundations for soul music (including, of course, James Brown, "the Godfather of Soul," who began recording in 1956 but reached the peak of his powers and influence in the 1960's). Gospel styles and devices were a common feature of doo-wop songs, and gospel music itself enjoyed a steady, if limited, popularity through the fifties.

Three artists were of particular importance to the development of soul music: Ray Charles, Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson. The three were very different—their styles ranged from hard driving R&B to teen pop to adult popular standards—but they shared a gospel background that helped shape their music. Ray Charles ignited his jazz combo R&B with the impassioned testifying of a southern, Holy Roller revival meeting; Sam Cooke brought his melodic style of gospel to pop songs with graceful ease; and Jackie Wilson used the expressive range of all styles of gospel singing to fuel his spectacular vocal gymnastics. Above all, the three vocal giants sang with an emotion that united their music and artistic vision, and they remain three of the Great Voices of all time.