

## **“Able to Carry On”:**

# **How Sam Cooke’s Celebrity and Death Affected and Influenced the Civil Rights Movement**



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## Introduction

Two volleys of gunfire in two different motels three and a half years and nearly 1800 miles apart ended the lives of two of the vanguards of the Civil Rights Movement in 1960s America. One slaying at a motel in Memphis on an April evening in 1968 would become one of the defining moments of American history and a touchpoint for conspiracy theory for decades to come. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. would quickly come to the attention of the world moments after the shot that ended his life rang out, later spawning riots in dozens of American cities.<sup>1</sup> King's death would become a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement, effectively bringing to an historiographic end its traditional timespan in the 1960s.

The other slaying occurred three and a half years prior to the death of Dr. King and would, at its time, resonate more in the world of music than it would resonate in the world of civil rights. Sam Cooke, "the Man Who Invented Soul," was shot at the Hacienda Motel in Los Angeles on December 11, 1964, following an altercation with the motel's manager involving a woman the married Cooke had taken to the motel, who later claimed Cooke had kidnapped her after offering her a ride home from a bar.<sup>2</sup> Much of the circumstances of the shooting would be surrounded in mystery, including Sam and the woman's motives for being there, the nature of the altercation that led to Sam's death, and the later ruling of the killing on the part of manager Bertha Lee Franklin as justifiable homicide after just fifteen minutes of deliberation by seven jurors.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 767.

<sup>2</sup> "Sam Cooke Slain in Coast Motel," *The New York Times* (New York: NY), Dec. 16, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> "Shooting of Sam Cooke Held 'Justifiable Homicide,'" *New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec. 17, 1964.

Cooke, the singer of songs such as “Cupid,” “Twistin’ the Night Away,” “Chain Gang,” and “A Change is Gonna Come” that would help to spawn the genre of music known as soul, mirrored Dr. King in his life in much the same way he mirrored him in his death, with their similar elements of violence, mystery, and tragedy. Both were sons of the South, part of the generation of African-Americans that made their way out of the southern United States into the northern metropolises in search of greater freedoms and opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Both found their homes in the church, as both were raised by reverends that kept their sons close to the faith.<sup>5 6</sup> The two men would find their professional lives as adults through the church as well, with Sam starting on the path to becoming a gospel musician at a young age and King becoming a reverend in the footsteps of his father.<sup>7</sup> Both men would stray dangerously far from the safe, religious background that they had started with, Sam going into the world of pop music and King straying past his usual fields of religiously motivated activism to advocate against the Vietnam War.<sup>8 9</sup> Both would even be known womanizers.<sup>10 11</sup> And, of course, both met similarly young and violent demises.

But perhaps what ties Sam Cooke and Martin Luther King, Jr. together most of all is their comparable influence on the Civil Rights Movement. Of course, Martin Luther King, Jr. is hailed as *the* hero of the American Civil Rights Movement, with his activism being credited for helping

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<sup>4</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Wolff, *You Send Me: The Life and Times of Sam Cooke* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 243.

<sup>10</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 96.

<sup>11</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 197.

to end public discrimination based on race in America and his likeness and name being familiar to most Americans through public school and pop culture. Cooke, however, is primarily known for his contributions to gospel and soul music and his strange, untimely death. How could a pop musician have a comparable impact on Civil Rights than the man whose face people think of when the words “civil rights” is heard?

Sam Cooke’s story, his vision, his celebrity, and his death all played a part in making him a Civil Rights icon. From his earliest days, Sam came to know the struggle of African-Americans from his experience as a Great Migration immigrant to Chicago’s Bronzeville, leaving his native home of Clarksdale, Mississippi along with his family to find opportunity, but often come up disappointed.<sup>12</sup> His entrepreneurial skills would lead him to founding his own record label, SAR Records, and Sam would use it and other means to promote and encourage young black musical talent.<sup>13</sup> But most important of all when considering Sam’s impact is, of course, his music. Beginning his musical career as part of a gospel acapella group, it would make sense that the feelings of hope for a better life, goodwill towards one’s fellow men, and optimism would become central to Cooke’s music. These feelings, which would move through Sam’s gospel repertoire and right into his pop music catalogue, would engender him as a symbol of hope, good times, and success for black and white people listening to his music, and would lead to his assumption of a kind of martyrdom when Franklin’s bullets brought his life to a premature end.

## **I. The Struggler**

In tracing the roots and formulation of the American Civil Rights Movement, no event seems so universal, so transformative, and so scarring as the Great Migration. A generation of

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

African-Americans realized the circumstances they faced in their traditional “home” of the South, how dead-end life there was, and wanted something different. The sprawling metropolises of the North, Chicago, Detroit, New York, seemed to be calling to them, looking like this was where to get their slice of the pie. “Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of America,” writes Isabel Wilkerson in history of the Great Migration *The Warmth of Other Suns*.<sup>14</sup> The staggering figures account for how, going forward, the Great Migration would seem to be a shared experience in the collective unconsciousness of African-Americans. If you were black and you lived in America in the first half of the Twentieth century, there is a good chance you went through the experience of moving away from home to a better life elsewhere.

This, too, was Sam Cooke’s experience. Cooke’s family gathered their belongings from Clarksdale to make the move up to Chicago, with Sam’s Reverend father Charles moving the family to find further opportunity preaching with the Church of Christ (Holiness).<sup>15</sup> Charles Cook (Sam added the *e* to his last name later) was mirroring the actions of many of his fellow African-American fathers and heads of household: move your family out of the South and into the North, away from Jim Crow and myriad of forces rallied against black people, especially in Mississippi. Surely, moving into a metropolitan area of the North would increase opportunity and improve quality of life.

Unfortunately, as so many African-Americans would come to learn, the North brought its own brand of troubles and hardships. While the Reverend Cook was able to find work, Sam

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<sup>14</sup> Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 23.

would get a taste of the discrimination and hatred many felt directed toward them by Northerners. In high school, Sam's white teachers would find him, in their words, "personable and aggressive," words that probably would have been replaced for a white student with the same personality by "friendly" or "confident."<sup>16</sup> Even unjust time spent incarcerated would influence Sam's outlook. After graduating high school, the young Cooke would spend time in jail over an incident in which a girlfriend's little sister came into possession of a Tijuana bible owned by Sam.<sup>17</sup> Injustice and unfairness was a part of Sam's life as much as it was part of the lives of many who were unable to see the promises of the Great Migration realized.

James Baldwin, one of the most famous and influential writers of the Civil Rights Movement, discusses the factors that drive the black person to the church in his essay "Down at the Cross," as many babies of the Great Migration like Sam Cooke found themselves. "[...] all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church," Baldwin writes.<sup>18</sup> Considering Sam's experience growing up in Bronzeville and his religious upbringing under his reverend father, it is understandable that Sam found himself in a similar position as Baldwin. The injustice Sam faced in his youth would strengthen his faith in a just God, surely aided by his father encouraging his children into a religious vocation from an early age: Sam would end up signing tenor in the Cook family acapella group the Signing Children at the age of six.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1962), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, 13-14.

When trying to understand Sam's place in his time period and in the Civil Rights Movement, one piece of music would serve as his personal articulation of what his life and activism meant to him and would remain his most famous and influential song for decades after his death: "A Change is Gonna Come." Every lyric of the song has the potential to be broken down and analyzed piece by piece to understand Sam's emotional state and his consideration of what he will mean to posterity. "A Change is Gonna Come" will come up again in this study, but it should certainly be analyzed when thinking of Sam's upbringing and his own time in the struggle. Released as a single three days after Sam's funeral, the song would both show what his upbringing meant to him and how far his thoughts on God and life had come since his childhood:

*I was born by the river in a little tent*

*Oh and just like the river I've been running ev'r since*

*It's been a long time, a long time coming*

*But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will*

*It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die*

*'Cause I don't know what's up there, beyond the sky.<sup>20</sup>*

Several things stand out when examining these first six lines. First, Sam makes little pretensions about his upbringing, perhaps trying to reflect the experiences of many African-Americans growing up: "*born by the river in a little tent.*" The speaker of the song makes it clear that he started off with nothing and, unlike Sam Cooke toward the end of his life, has little to show after a lifetime of struggle: "*I've been running ev'r since.*" While the lyrics remain deeply personal to Sam, the song is clearly not meant to be autobiographical. After the injustice and

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<sup>20</sup> Sam Cooke, "A Change is Gonna Come," in *Ain't that Good News*, RCA Victor, 1964.

struggle he faced in his youth and the years of constant touring with various groups and by himself, Sam's life ended as one of the most famous pop musicians in the world. In writing "Change," Sam was candidly reflecting the struggles that many African-Americans were facing in his day, going beyond his own personal struggle to speak broadly about the injustices black people were facing. Lastly, the speaker casts doubt on the existence of God, a very un-Sam Cooke thing to do, while worrying about the troubles of the living: "*It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die/'Cause I don't know what's up there, beyond the sky.*" This proclamation strays far, far away from Sam's early life and gospel music in order to focus upon the troubles of the here and now. Pie in the sky promises are no longer enough to sate the desire of African-Americans for equal rights; but a change is gonna come.

## II. The Mover

Sam's beginnings as a gospel ensemble singer left little room for his growth as a musician, celebrity, and *influencer*, and he was well aware of this. Cooke would begin engineering his move away from his longtime acapella group, the Soul Stirrers, and into the pop market in 1956, a year before his song "You Send Me" would become his first major pop success.<sup>21</sup> To reach the height of success that Sam sought for himself, he knew gospel was a dead end road. Years of constant touring with the Soul Stirrers had taken its toll on him, and the path to wealth and stardom could not be found on the Gospel Highway.

Becoming one of the first gospel singers to transition over into the pop market was not a simple feat, one that could have even spelled the end of his career had he not been careful. For instance, one of his first pop successes was the song "Loveable," a retooling of an earlier Soul

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<sup>21</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 129.



Stirrers song “Wonderful,” switching the focus of the song from how the Lord is so wonderful to how the speaker’s girl is so loveable. Had Sam not been careful, he could have alienated his previous gospel audience entirely with his new focus on girls and fun and could have also failed to make a splash in the pop market with simple gospel retoolings. Instead, Sam took his time with the transition from gospel to pop, consulted many in the industry about the switch, and, most importantly, brought a distinct element to his pop music that would lead to him becoming an international superstar and an important voice in the African-American community.

Gospel music has been a part of African-American culture from the time of its roots in slave spirituals and jubilee singers. Reflecting the earthly struggle black people in America have faced for centuries, gospel music has acted as a bulwark against oppression and misery. Figures like Thomas A. Dorsey helped to bring the spiritual music African-Americans had known for so long into the mainstream, helping to popularize gospel as a genre in the early Twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the best illustration of what gospel meant to African-Americans comes from Ava DuVernay’s 2014 film *Selma*. In the film, Martin Luther King Jr., played by David Oyelowo, fearful of what his coming demonstrations in Selma hold for him, places a late night call to his friend, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, asking to “hear the Lord’s voice.” Jackson, played by R&B singer Ledisi, begins singing “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” to King.<sup>23</sup> While this phone call may or may not have taken place, the scene illustrates what gospel meant to African-Americans: living without fear, resilience, *hope*.

With this, we find what made Sam’s music so popular among black people and what made him a mouthpiece for the Civil Rights Movement: the message of hope that runs from

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<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Gould, *Otis Redding: An Unfinished Life* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2017), 61.

<sup>23</sup> *Selma*, directed by Ava DuVernay (2014, Hollywood CA: Paramount Pictures).

“Jesus Gave Me Water,” his first song recorded with the Soul Stirrers, to “A Change is Gonna Come.”<sup>24</sup> This message also helps us to understand how Sam was able to make the successful transition from gospel to pop. During the first half of the Twentieth century, gospel music acted as a vessel of hope for both African-Americans embroiled in the struggle and Americans at large who, with the onset of the Cold War and the beginning of the Atomic age, were facing enemies new and unknown. When Sam made his switch, he knew that the message of hope was absolutely crucial. Hope had been a tool of survival for black people since the days of slavery, and that “little light of mine” would continue to shine down through the teachings of black reverends, jubilee singers, and right into the 1950s with groups like the Soul Stirrers and others finding their own market for spirituals. What Sam would do so ingenuously upon his transition to pop is inject this feeling of hope and goodwill towards men into rock and roll music. Thus, by engaging thematically with gospel music while engaging musically with pop and rock, Sam Cooke would indeed become “the man who invented soul.”

Achievements such as being the first gospel-pop crossover success and inventing a genre of music would not be the extent of Sam’s work as a mover and influencer. In the late 1950s, Sam would become one of the first African-Americans to found their own independent record label, SAR Records (for Sam, Alex, and Roy, after J.W. Alexander and S.R. Crain, two of Sam’s old Soul Stirrers mentors).<sup>25</sup> Rather than release his own music on the label, Sam would bring in new black talent to record for his company, a habit he would continue throughout the remainder of his career. Taking the leap from recording artist to record label executive was once again executed gracefully by the business-savvy Cooke, much as he made the jump from gospel to pop.

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<sup>24</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 78-79.

<sup>25</sup> Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, 297.

This entrepreneurial move on the part of Sam would pave the way for other black executives to make their way in the recording industry, perhaps most notably Berry Gordy Jr., who would go on to found Tamla Records, shortly thereafter renamed Motown, shortly after SAR Records was established.<sup>26</sup> While Motown would become the most famous black record label of all time and help to keep alive and healthy the genre of music Sam inaugurated, SAR and Sam Cooke would be encouraging black talent before Motown ever had its first hit.

It absolutely cannot be understated just how influential Sam would become on the next generation of black talent through both his work as a musician and as an executive. Going through a list of the names of young artists that either worked with Cooke personally or found inspiration from him reads like a who's-who of black talent in the latter half of the Twentieth century. Lou Rawls, one of the most famous R&B singers after the Sixties, can be heard singing alongside Sam on "Bring it on Home to Me."<sup>27</sup> Billy Preston, former gospel child prodigy later christened the "Black Beatle" due to his collaborations with the Fab Four, worked with Sam as an organist in various sessions.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps most famously, Bobby Womack, songwriter behind "It's All Over Now" and "Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street," was nurtured and encouraged artistically by Cooke.<sup>29</sup> Even while Sam went the extra mile in preserving his legacy in the industry and making sure his voice could be heard through those he helped from afar, those he worked with *hand-in-hand in the studio* are enough to show the kind of influence that Sam would come to have on the world of black music. Sam's influence would even be felt across the seas after influential reggae artist Jimmy Cliff saw and was influenced by Cooke during a tour of the

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<sup>26</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 217.

<sup>27</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 148.

<sup>28</sup> Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, 458.

<sup>29</sup> "The mystique of Sam Cooke is still with us," *Milwaukee Star Times* (Milwaukee, WI), Feb. 15, 1973.

Caribbean.<sup>30</sup> Long after his untimely death, the voice and influence of Sam Cooke can be heard by his work as an entrepreneur and a musician.

### III. The Martyr

By the time of his death in 1964, Sam Cooke had become a pop sensation for white and black audiences alike and a beacon of hope for millions of African-Americans that listened to his music. The gospel message of hope that Sam incorporated into his music was being felt by many that listened to it, and no better example of this exists than the album *Live at the Harlem Square Club, 1963*. Recorded two years before his death, the live album chronicles Sam's performance at the black Miami night club the Harlem Square Club, a recording later shelved for decades by RCA who failed to see its significance.<sup>31</sup> The record includes versions of many of Sam's hits, such as "Twistin' the Night Away," "Cupid," and "Bring it on Home to Me," but brought to life before a live, *black* audience in a way that Sam rarely comes to life in studio or before a white audience. Sam understands the struggle of living in Florida the black people watching him must be experiencing in 1963 and, with his music, is able to transport them out of that world into a world of good times and love for a little under forty minutes. Through the entire performance, hope stands center stage next to Cooke. In introducing a song about a prisoner's chain gang working on the roadside, Sam calls it "a song designed to make you feel good," and he performs it ecstatically. Hypothetical relationship troubles Sam brings up to the audience are quelled with a performance of "It's All Right" and "I Love You (For Sentimental Reasons)." Finally, Sam ends the concert with the song "Having a Party," reminding his listeners to always "keep on

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<sup>30</sup> "Cooke Breaks Satchmo's Record in Nassau," *Kansas Sentinel* (Topeka, KS), Aug. 11, 1960.

<sup>31</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 265.

having that party.” The audience’s enrapturement at Sam’s performance and their joy to sing along with him speaks volumes to Cooke’s popularity with African-Americans.

At a time when the racial issue in America was reaching its peak, Sam did not let this position as a treasured voice among African-Americans go to waste. Sam’s social consciousness can be seen in his actions just as well as it can be seen in his grand articulation of social justice, “A Change is Gonna Come.” Sam played to desegregated audiences in the South, much to his peril. The black newspaper *Louisiana Weekly* marveled at how “white girls and Negro girls, white boys and Negro boys [were] seated side by side and together whooping it up” during an integrated show in New Orleans.<sup>32</sup> Alongside Dick Clark, Sam put on a show integrating a fairgrounds in Atlanta in defiance of the KKK, who had threatened producers of the show.<sup>33</sup> Most spectacularly of all, Sam and his wife had been arrested for causing a disturbance after failing to get a room at a whites-only Holiday Inn in Shreveport, Louisiana.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, money and fame were not the only driving forces behind Sam’s emergence as a figure of influence in the African-American community. Sam’s background as both a Great Migration immigrant and a product of gospel helped him specially attune to the struggle and problems of African-Americans all of the nation, having roamed up and down the Gospel Highway visiting black community after black community. By communicating the gospel message of hope to a wider African-American audience, Sam embraced the role of a Civil Rights figure and certainly acted the part with his risky moves.

Not only did Sam command the respect of the African-American community through his music and his actions, he also engaged intellectually with multiple sides of the Civil Rights

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<sup>32</sup> *Louisiana Weekly* (New Orleans, LA), Sep. 28, 1963, p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 185.

<sup>34</sup> “Negro Band Leader Held in Shreveport,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 9, 1963.

Movement. Sam was acquainted with Martin Luther King Jr., who had even asked him to perform at an SCLC benefit, to which Sam agreed.<sup>35</sup> Sam also engaged with Black Muslim though, primarily through his friend Cassius Clay, later to be known as boxer Muhammad Ali. A copy of the Nation of Islam's official newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, was later found in Sam's car after his death and a friend of his claims Sam had actually met Elijah Muhammad.<sup>36</sup> Sam's credentials as a product of and a figure in the Civil Rights Movement are without question. Not only is he influencing the hearts and minds of millions of African-Americans in the middle of the 1960s with songs like "A Change is Gonna Come" and not only is he expressing rage at the state of public segregation to the point of being arrested over it. Sam Cooke was doing *both* of those things while also engaging intellectually and materially with the Civil Rights Movement, and various submovements of it as well. Sam was as well versed in the nonviolence movement of Dr. King as he was in the teachings of Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. Not only could he walk the walk, he could talk the talk.

Indeed, Sam's musical style and his refusal to accept the racist status quo represented a vanguard of young African-Americans that were formulating the frontlines of the Civil Rights Movement. Sam Cooke's crossover from gospel to pop can almost be viewed as a generational divide between those blacks that participated in the Civil Rights Movement and their parents. Martin Luther King and his elders, for example, were listening to the words of Thomas A. Dorsey through the voice of Mahalia Jackson, embracing the gospel ideals of peace and happiness in the hereafter. As the Twentieth century progressed and the 1960s began to heat up, however, black people and people across the nation and world were becoming increasingly

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<sup>35</sup> Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, 609.

<sup>36</sup> "Was Sam Cooke About to Join the Muslims?," *New Pittsburgh Courier* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 9, 1965.

concerned with the issues of the here and now. Public places were still segregated, police were attacking peaceful protestors, children were being murdered. As attentions began to switch from the future to the present, pop music began to take hold in popularity among African-Americans as well as whites. Songs about girls, cars, having a good time, and the real world were beginning to become popular. Gospel was no longer the prominent voice of African-Americans in music: it was rhythm and blues; it was *rock*. As the tides began to turn in America, Sam Cooke switched as America began to switch: gone is the hereafter, what remains is the here and now. But what made Sam such a unique figure in both the world of music and the world of Civil Rights was that element of hope that he always kept alive from his gospel days, a message of hope that would continue right up until the last lines of “A Change is Gonna Come”: “*There have been times that I thought I couldn’t last for long/But now I think I’m able to carry on.*”<sup>37</sup>

This legacy of Sam Cooke as Civil Rights icon and music legend would be furthered by his reputation as “Mr. Soul,” the man that paved the way for an entirely new genre of music. With his crossover success and popularity in both white and black markets, Sam served as the model for soul singers to come.<sup>38</sup> Combining the intensity and emotion of gospel music with the rollicking and good times of rhythm and blues and rock and roll, singers such as Ray Charles, Otis Redding, Percy Sledge, James Brown, and Marvin Gaye would carry on the legacy of Cooke and further develop soul music as a genre. While taking influence from rock and R&B, soul music would stand apart from those genres as a *distinctively African-American form of art* as it developed through the Sixties and into the Seventies. What Sam Cooke developed during his life and left behind in his wake would provide a soundtrack for the Civil Rights struggles to

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<sup>37</sup> Cooke, “A Change is Gonna Come.”

<sup>38</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 13.

come and the turmoil of the Seventies. Musicians like Otis Redding would cover Sam often and quote him musically in songs such as “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long.” Others like Marvin Gaye would pick up on the socially conscious strain of thought Sam was developing later in life and added similar themes to their music, much as Gaye did with his album *What’s Going On* and songs such as “Inner City Blues.” (Gaye also added the *e* to his last name the same as Cooke has done.) Soul music as a genre, with its raw emotion, driving speed, good feelings, and message of hopefulness would almost surely not exist as we know it without Sam Cooke.

Perhaps the factor that truly cemented Sam as an icon of the Civil Rights Movement, other than his music, would be him becoming a sort of martyr of that movement, much as MLK, Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers did. On the evening of December 10, 1964, Sam Cooke was accompanied by a woman named Lisa Boyer as they checked into a room at the Hacienda Motel in Los Angeles. As the evening went on, Boyer stole Sam’s clothes and other belongings and fled the motel, later to make a call to police claiming that she had been kidnapped by Cooke. Sam, clad in only a sports coat and one shoe, ran into the office of the manager, probably less than sober, looking for the girl. Bertha Franklin, manager of the motel at the time, claims that a physical altercation ensued with Cooke that ended in her defending herself, firing at Cooke multiple times with a .22-caliber pistol and striking him once in the chest, killing him. According to her, his last words were “lady, you shot me.”<sup>39</sup> Later legal proceedings would find Bertha Franklin had committed justifiable homicide after the stories both her and Boyer were substantiated by lie detector tests.<sup>40</sup> Lisa Boyer would later be arrested for prostitution charges a month to the day after Sam’s death.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Louie Robinson, “The Tragic Death of Sam Cooke,” *Ebony*, Feb. 1965.

<sup>40</sup> “Shooting Held ‘Justifiable,’” *New York Times*.

<sup>41</sup> Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, 647.



As soon as these suspicious circumstances came to light, a wellspring of conspiracy theory erupted from millions of fans, along with friends and family, who could hardly believe the story laid out by Lisa Boyer, Bertha Franklin, and the press. How could a gospel star turned pop idol die half naked chasing after a woman who claimed he *kidnapped* her? One of the most prominent to cry foul on Sam's death was his manager, Allen Klein. "It is evident that someone is trying to cover up the true reasons for this tragedy," the Baltimore newspaper *The Afro-American* reported him saying.<sup>42</sup> Erik Greene, Sam's great nephew, would summarize the feeling of his family as a whole in expressing the belief that foul play occurred at the Hacienda Motel in his book reflecting on Sam's legacy upon his family, *Our Uncle Sam*.<sup>43</sup> Having died under such violent and mysterious circumstances at such a young age makes the need for conspiracy theory natural. Just as greater theories behind the deaths of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X sought to explain why these men had died in such violent, needless fashions, the people left in Sam's wake needed a better explanation for why he was gone.

In all reality, Sam's death likely lies at the intersection of issues of race and sexuality. Sam was a man that indulged in sexual relationships outside of marriage, a fact well know the black newspapers of the day.<sup>44</sup> The scandal that could have resulted as the white Lisa Boyer fled with his clothes and belongings went far beyond a simple extramarital affair. Presuming that the woman was, in fact, a prostitute, as seems to most likely be the case, Sam, the gospel star turned pop sensation could potentially be caught, quite literally, with his pants down and robbed of his possessions by a white prostitute in a seedy motel. The potential for scandal that ran through the liquored-up Cooke's mind could surely drive many to act irrationally and not think straight.

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<sup>42</sup> "'Cover-Up' Seen in Cooke's Death," *The Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), Dec. 19, 1964.

<sup>43</sup> Erik Greene, *Our Uncle Sam: The Sam Cooke Story from His Family's Perspective* (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2005), 224.

<sup>44</sup> Wolff, *You Send Me*, 175.

Perhaps Cooke was simply attempting to find help and ensure the retrieval of his stolen belongings when he stepped into Bertha Franklin's office that evening and his mostly nude and drunk appearance caused her to act for her own safety. Perhaps Cooke really was agitated and aggressive when he stepped into her office, demanding to know where the woman that robbed him had gone. What can be counted on is this: as a black female motel manager on a late night in Los Angeles, Franklin could almost certainly not trust the Los Angeles Police Department for protection should someone try to rob her or attack her. So perhaps, confronted with the drunken nude Cooke and left with seemingly few other options, Franklin pulled the trigger and ended the singer's life. No matter what circumstances ended his life, Muhammad Ali's words at Cooke's funeral seem to encapsulate the general feeling behind Cooke's death: "if he had been someone like Elvis Presley or one of the Beatles, the FBI would still be investigating and someone would be in jail."<sup>45</sup> If Sam were a white singer, a potential scandal could have just remained that and not ended in murder.

With the work that he put into leaving a legacy behind him and the mysterious and fascinating circumstances behind his death, Sam Cooke was not sure to be forgotten any time after his death. Sam's family would be instrumental in helping to keep his legacy alive, with his parents (both of whom outlived him) later seeing their son and Sam's brother L.C. record some of Sam's songs.<sup>46</sup> Those who worked with Sam, such as Bobby Womack, would help keep Sam's memory alive by recounting the times they worked together.<sup>47</sup> Most importantly, Sam would live on through the music he created and the ways in which he influenced the industry and paved the way for black artists to come after him. The social consciousness that Sam displayed

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<sup>45</sup> Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, 631.

<sup>46</sup> "Father Sheds Tears at Session: Sam Cooke's Brother Waxes Hits," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 22, 1965.

<sup>47</sup> "A Change Has Come," *The Skanner* (Portland, OR), Aug. 5, 1976.

in his life and his music would cement him as a thinker and a leader of the Civil Rights Movement as well as leave him a legendary talent in the eyes of those to succeed him.

The monumental ways in which Sam Cooke shaped the music industry and the Civil Rights Movement in his thirty-three years of life represent what James Baldwin discussed in his letter to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*: “the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moved out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 9.

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