CHAPTER FIVE

“Can I get a witness?”: civil rights, soul and secularization

The profound sacred and spiritual meaning of the great music of the church must never be mixed with the transitory quality of rock and roll music. (Martin Luther King, Jr)

The end of an era

On 16 September 1964 a new youth music show called Shindig premiered on the ABC television network. Produced by Jack Good and hosted by Jim O’Neal, the first show opened with a view of a darkened studio. Suddenly a single spotlight speared through the gloom and illuminated two young white women, Jackie and Gayle, who gently eased themselves into a folksy version of the black gospel song “Up above my head, I see music in the air”. After a verse, the duo was joined by a white male trio, the Wellingers. By the second chorus the Blossoms, a black female vocal quartet who anonymously furnished the vocals for many Phil Spector girl group hits, were on board too. Before the song was over, the Righteous Brothers and Everly Brothers had also added their blue-eyed soul and country-pop harmonies to the mix and this unlikely biracial choir began to rock the studio like some kind of southern revival meeting.

Perhaps it was even just a little like some of the mass meetings held in southern communities where civil rights activists worked with local blacks to register voters and desegregate public facilities, meetings which invariably concluded with the stirring singing of freedom songs. As white SNCC staffer Mary King recalled, “the freedom songs uplifted us, bound us together, excited us, and pointed the way, and, in a real sense, freed us from the shackles of psychological bondage”. One of the most popular of those freedom songs
was "Up above my head, I see freedom in the air". Like so many other freedom songs it was forged in the very heart of the struggle from an amalgam of old tunes and new consciousness — in this case by Bernice Johnson Reagon in Albany in 1962.

The headline act on the first Shindig was Sam Cooke, yet the ex-Soul Stirrer remained conspicuously absent from the show's gospesque opening. Instead, Cooke served up a decidedly unfunky version of "Tennessee Waltz" — his current single — and breezed unenthusiastically through Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the wind", although the choice of material was again interesting in those a-changing times. Cooke only really came to the boil when he picked up a guitar and joined the Everly Brothers for a boisterous rendition of Little Richard's "Lucille". Until that point, the most arresting performance had been the Righteous Brothers' full-throttle version of Ray Charles' "This little girl of mine"; the worst was when white teen idol Bobby Sherman joined the Blossoms for an ill-conceived showtune duet. As the final credits rolled, however, Sam, Phil and the doo-wopic echo of the show's opening and whipped a docile audience into something not too far from frenzy.

With the studied interracialism of its audiences, artists and material — awkward and strained as those fusions sometimes were — Shindig was both a product and a reflection of the black and white pop era. Yet, ironically, by the time the show premiered, that era was drawing rapidly to a close and new patterns of white and especially black musical preferences were becoming clearer. About a year before Shindig debuted, on 23 November 1963, Billboard had published what it believed would be its final Rhythm and Blues singles chart. Such a racially segregated index of consumer preferences seemed an anachronism with white artists regularly making the black listings and black singles routinely appearing in the pop charts. Just 14 months later, however, on 30 January 1965, Billboard had to revive its Rhythm and Blues chart on the grounds that black tastes had once more become sufficiently distinct from white tastes to demand separate registers.

In a similar way British groups like the Beatles and Rolling Stones encouraged, rather than retarded, white American exploration and patronage of black music by initially recording a diverse range of r&b. Although they later suffered the bitter barbs of black nationalists like Imamu Amiri Baraka for expropriating black musical culture and reaping far greater financial rewards than their mentors, Billboard noted that these groups were, in fact, "the first to tell their audiences which soul artists they were imitating — which led to the wider recognition of such greats as Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Little Richard, Don Covay, etc.".

Most of the other British beat groups successful in the mid 1960s — the Animals, Them and the Spencer Davis Group among them — had also cut their musical teeth on Rhythm and Blues. As black artists and activists appreciated, their public acknowledgement of black influence and inspiration contrasted with the silence of many white American performers on the subject. When Nina Simone arrived in London in the summer of 1965, she "found all the kids playing and singing Negro rhythm and blues", and pointedly remarked that "the nice thing is that they give credit and respect where it is due, something they don't do too much at home". Julian Bond, who with his brother James attended a 1964 Beatles press conference in Atlanta, recalled "reading some Beatle comment about [their black influences] and just being taken aback and saying, 'Hey, way to go!'". And while Martha Bayles is right that sometimes these British enthusiasms had the unfortunate effect of reducing black creators to perpetual "forrunners" in the minds of white rock fans — a tendency accentuated when bands like the Stones let their blues heroes open concerts for them in the States — "forrunners" was precisely what those artists were in this context of intercontinental, cross-racial hybridity: r&b was simply the most important of several influences which collided and merged in these white anglo-pop-blues.

In the mid-to-late 1960s aftermath of these early British acts came a whole slate of earnest white British and American "blues" bands, like the Yardbirds, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. A few years later "progressive" blues leviathans like Canned Heat, Ten Years After and Big Brother and the Holding Company lumbered into the spotlight. At the same time, venerable bluesmen like Muddy Waters, Mississippi John Hurt, John Lee Hooker and Howlin' Wolf, who had been largely ignored by young, increasingly urbane, black audiences, were suddenly in demand again. By the end of the decade B.B. King, a major beneficiary of this white-led blues revival, was one of many bluesmen playing mostly to young white, often college, audiences, although a sizeable black contingent, eager for a therapeutic and indubitably chic shot of rootsiness in an era of heightened black consciousness, had also joined his loyal core audience of older southerners and migrant blacks.

Clearly, then, young white American interest in black musics continued to flourish alongside enthusiasms for folk, British pop and the mid-1960s
American folk-rock syntheses of the Byrds and Lovin' Spoonful. Black artists featured extensively in the first pop Top Forty of 1965 and for the remainder of the decade rarely accounted for less than a quarter, and often for closer to half, of the nation's pop singles chart entries. In 1966, even *Time* magazine noted that James Brown ranked third behind only the Beatles and Dylan in a national campus popularity poll. Its finger fumbling uncertainly for the pulse of youth pop culture, *Time* rather belatedly ventured that Brown's "rise in the mass market gives a sign that 'race music' is perhaps at last becoming interacial".

Given that many whites continued to consume music by black artists alongside white ones, the principal reasons for the revival of a racially specific chart in January 1965 are to be found within the black community and its changing musical preferences. Whereas a third of the records on the "last" Rhythm and Blues Top Thirty in November 1963 were by white acts, including Elvis, Dion, Lesley Gore and the Beach Boys, only three made the first revived chart. One of those, the Kingsmen's "The jolly green giant", was clearly a novelty hit and only the Righteous Brothers' Spector-produced epic "You've lost that lovin' feeling" made the top ten. While individual songs by white artists still found occasional success on the *Billboard* Rhythm and Blues and, following a name change in August 1969, Soul charts, in the second half of the 1960s the black masses simply no longer bought such records regularly, or in great quantities. Instead, they overwhelmingly bought the diverse sounds of black soul, while black-oriented radio stations often programmed little else.

By mid-decade, then, the marked biracialism of black tastes evident in the late 1950s and early 1960s had already given way to more racially discreet musical preferences. This shift in mass black tastes reflected important political and psychological developments within black America, North and South, as the Movement entered a crucial phase of triumph and disappointment, continued progress and rising frustration.

The zenith of the Movement

Looking back at the development of the civil rights struggle, James Farmer of CORE suggested that the March on Washington in August 1963 marked "the zenith of the Southern Movement". The Southern Regional Council estimated that "930 individual public protest demonstrations took place in at least 115 cities" in the South during that year — more than in any other year, before or since. The most widely publicized campaign took place in Birmingham, where peaceful black protesters, including young schoolchildren, were dramatically pitted against the racist brutality of Eugene "Bull" Connor's police force with its high-pressure, flesh-peeling firehoses and snarling dogs. The national outcry provoked by Connor's ruthless methods
a particularly extreme case and in the South as a whole similar voting rights efforts had more than doubled black registration since the early 1950s. Nevertheless, by the end of the year still only 43 per cent of the region’s eligible blacks were registered.12

The Freedom Summer of 1964 ended with perhaps the biggest single blow to the pervasive optimism of the early 1960s, when a delegation from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) failed to win accreditation at the national Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City. The MFDP maintained that the Magnolia State’s official, whites-only, delegation could not claim to be truly representative of the people of Mississippi while there were still manifold procedural, economic and terroristic restraints upon the rights of blacks to register and vote. The MFDP waited in vain for the party’s national leadership to recognize its claim to be the only democratically chosen state delegation. Despite the urgings of some established civil rights leaders, the MFDP proudly refused to accept a shabby compromise which would have assigned it just two token at-large seats while allowing the segregated delegation to assume its traditional place.15

It was this “betrayal” of the MFDP by white liberals, the Democratic Party, and some of the established civil rights leadership which began to prise open the cracks in the Movement coalition which public displays of interracial and inter-organizational unity had largely, if by no means always, concealed. For many younger members of the Movement such as Stokely Carmichael and Cleveland Sellers of SNCC, and even for some older apostles of nonviolence and interracialism like Bob Moses and Jim Forman, the appointments of Atlantic City permanently altered their attitude towards working with whites and their perception of the potential for equitable black treatment in America. It also radicalized their approach to the goals and tactics of the freedom struggle. “The MFDP challenge”, wrote H. Rap Brown, one of the young SNCC workers most affected by the affair and a future chairman of the organization, “not only pointed up the total lack of power Black people had, but it also showed that even when you’re right you lose . . . When people cannot find a redress of their grievances within a system, they have no choice but to destroy the system which is responsible in the first place for their grievances”. Although relatively rare in 1964, such sentiments increasingly characterized the black power rhetoric and politics of the later 1960s.14

In the meantime, however, the Movement continued to present a public image of solidarity and common purpose wherever possible. Despite bitter tactical and jurisdictional disagreements between SNCC and SCLC, this front was just about maintained in Selma, Alabama in 1965, during the last great set-piece confrontation of the southern Movement. On 7 March, much of America watched in shame as Sheriff Jim Clark, Al Lingo and their posse of policemen and state troopers tramped and clubbed peaceful marchers making their way across Selma’s Pettus Bridge, hoping to go on to the state capitol in Montgomery to petition Governor George Wallace in support of black voting rights.

The scenes of “Bloody Sunday” hastened the passage of a comprehensive Voting Rights Act later that summer. In Dallas County, where Selma was situated, the impact of this Act was immediate and dramatic with the number of registered black voters increasing more than eightfold in the months following its enactment. By 1968, even in Mississippi more than 59 per cent of eligible blacks were registered, while by the following year almost 65 per cent of southern blacks were on the rolls. The number of black elected officials in the region expanded in tandem with this increased political power. From around 100 in 1964 the number had risen to 1,185 in 1968, although most of these gains were made at the lower echelons of municipal politics.15

Despite the Herculean efforts of the Movement and its significant legislative and political successes, however, material advances for black Americans in the South and beyond were frequently slow, sometimes non-existent, and invariably equivocal. Massive resistance and federal lassitude meant that by the end of 1964, more than a decade after Brown, only 2 per cent of southern black children attended integrated schools. Nationally, black adult unemployment declined steadily throughout the decade from 10.2 per cent in 1960 to 6.4 per cent in 1969, yet this continued to represent around twice the level for whites. Similarly, although in constant dollars the median black family income rose from $3,230 to $3,393 between 1960 and 1965, that actually represented a decline in its strength relative to median white family income from 55.4 per cent to 55.1 per cent. This gap closed slightly during the next decade, but by 1975 the black median family income of $8,779 was still only 61.5 per cent that of white families.16

Moreover, while southern blacks could draw strength from the recent experience of mass mobilization and political action, and look forward to exploring the possibilities of the new world they had created without Jim Crow laws and with the vote, by the mid 1960s northern blacks were already disillusioned with the absence of any major changes in the patterns of their usually poor and marginalized lives as a consequence of the victories of the southern campaign. In the summers of 1964 and 1965 these smouldering black frustrations, sometimes exacerbated by callous or ill-considered programmes of urban redevelopment which variously devastated or quarantined black inner-city neighbourhoods, exploded in a series of major racial disturbances. Often fuelled by specific incidences of white police brutality and harassment, in 1964 there were riots in Harlem, Rochester, Chicago, Philadelphia and several other northern cities. The following year there was a still more serious black uprising in the Watts district of Los Angeles, which left at least 34 people – one of them Charles Fizer of the Olympics vocal group – dead, 1,000 injured and 4,000 under arrest. Damages were estimated at $200 million. Watts served dramatic notice that the
struggle for black control over black lives, and for the recognition and redress of black grievances, was far from over. Instead, it was entering a new and highly volatile era of long hot summers. In 1966, Martin Luther King conducted his first major campaign outside the South, directed primarily against housing discrimination in Chicago. The failures of that campaign, and the terrifying violence of the white suburban reaction to it, confirmed political commentator Samuel Lubell’s warning that, despite a general “readiness to concede the Negro political and economic rights . . . opposition mounted quickly on anything that touched social life”. Growing white support for basic black civil and voting rights was not indicative of an end to prejudice and discrimination closer to home, when daughters, jobs and neighbourhoods were held to be under threat. While Lubell reported that only 10 per cent of northern whites opposed the idea of blacks working in any job for which they were qualified, more than 90 per cent still opposed allowing blacks to buy houses in white neighbourhoods.

In the aftermath of Atlantic City and Watts, there was another important change in the temper and tactics of the black struggle. The nonviolent direct action strategies which had characterized the southern protests of SCLC, CORE and SNCC came under intense scrutiny from those who now saw such methods as inappropriate for the national struggle against black economic powerlessness and systemic, institutionalized discrimination. In 1965, the Deacons for Defense and Justice and the original Black Panther Party emerged in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, Louisiana, and Lowndes County, Alabama, respectively, embracing ideas of armed self-defence in place of non-violence. In late 1966, another more famous Black Panther Party emerged in Oakland, California, and quickly garnered support for its unique and turbulent mix of street theatre, class politics, black nationalism and armed self-defence. Although King’s SCLC retained its commitment to nonviolence, by the end of 1966 key elements within CORE and SNCC had disavowed the tactic. Soon afterwards they would also reject the interculturalism which was such a hallmark of their early efforts.

In sum, then, the period between the March on Washington and the Meredith March through Mississippi in the summer of 1966, on which Stokely Carmichael first popularized the Black Power slogan, was deeply paradoxical. The Movement continued to make significant progress and succeeded in having its demands addressed in two important pieces of legislation. Yet it was also a period which fostered a much deeper appreciation of the limits of white popular and federal support for the black cause. Important doubts were raised about the functional effectiveness of the legislation which had been won in securing real black equality of economic, social and political opportunity, let alone condition, within the existing socio-economic structure. As blacks confronted the obdurate forces of systemic and habitual racism throughout the nation, the Movement not only began to lose some of its internal cohesion, but also some of the confidence, that sense of focused, unshakeable purpose which had sustained its initial efforts.

The Movement and black consciousness

If significant improvements in the material circumstances of black life often seemed elusive, there were other important consequences of the early freedom struggle which were less easy to quantify in terms of registered voters, economic opportunities and equitable access to public facilities, housing and education. In the South, in the course of participating in the Movement, the black sense of self and community, of rights, destiny and potential had been completely transformed. Doug McAdam has described a process of “cognitive liberation”, whereby southern blacks moved from widespread accommodation to oppressive conditions to a much greater willingness to challenge those conditions. Even in campaigns like Albany and St Augustine, which were relative failures in terms of securing actual changes in local discriminatory practices, there emerged what Richard King has described as “a new sense of individual and collective self among southern black people through political mobilization and participation”.

This feeling of personal empowerment through political action was vividly evoked by Franklin McCain, recalling the first day of the Greensboro sit-ins in February 1960. “I probably felt better on that day than I’ve ever felt in my life. Seems like a lot of feelings of guilt or what-have-you suddenly left me, and I felt as though I had gained my manhood, so to speak, and not only gained it, but had developed quite a lot of respect for it”. Even in the absence of a mass movement on the southern scale – except, perhaps, in Chicago – northern blacks were also inspired by the very existence of the southern campaign to form “Friends of SNCC” groups, to participate in sympathy demonstrations organized by CORE, NAACP and SCLC, and to undertake a variety of independent local initiatives designed to improve and extend black control over the crucial circumstances of their lives. As James Farmer – whose CORE not only initiated the freedom rides but also led direct action attacks on discriminatory employment and housing practices in the North – noted, the larger Movement “provided literally millions of Negroes with their first taste of self-determination and political self-expression”.

Nevertheless, no matter how massive a mass movement the freedom struggle was, even at its zenith the majority of blacks, even in the insurgent South, did not actively participate in its boycotts, sit-ins, marches, voter registration drives, and political campaigns. Yet few, North or South, remained psychologically untouched by its early promise and triumphs, or unmoven by its tragedies, stallings and reversals. It is significant that Franklin
McAin believed that his activism had not only liberated himself, but that by association or identification with the struggle in which he was so conspicuously engaged, it had also psychologically empowered and liberated other blacks. It was, he said, "not Franklin McCain only as an individual, but I felt as though the manhood of a number of other black persons had been restored and had gotten some respect." Thus, while scholars like McAdam and King are undoubtedly right to emphasize the special sense of personal and collective empowerment experienced by those participating on the frontline of the Movement, their actions and utterances also resonated in the hearts and minds of many other black Americans, even in the cities of the North and West, where they helped to stimulate a new era of roused black consciousness and self-respect.22

It was precisely this nationwide revitalization of black pride which made the disappointments of the mid-to-late 1960s so intense, and continued white resistance, prejudice and discrimination so difficult to stomach. A combination of new black assertiveness, raised expectations and mounting disillusionment with the rate and nature of racial change prompted a realignment within the nationalistic-integrationist spectrum of black political thought and consciousness with the nationalistic components acquiring greater prominence. Yet, although the balance between the two may have changed, these nationalistic and integrationist strains in black consciousness continued, less as clearly defined alternatives than as messily and inevitably interlocking impulses which expressed the black desire for both self-determination and equitable access to the rewards and respect of mainstream America. After mid-decade, however, it no longer appeared so certain to many blacks that they would ever be accepted into America on equal terms, with dignity and pride intact. Moreover, as Anne Moody, a young black Mississippi CORE activist, noted at the conclusion of her autobiography, it was no longer clear that blacks should even want to integrate into a society which now seemed so fundamentally and irredeemably rotten.23

It was in this atmosphere that many blacks sought an antidote to white assumptions of cultural superiority by self-consciously valorizing their own culture and celebrating particularly African-American experiences and practices as the critical repositories of identity and worth. It was also in this social, political and psychological climate that the soul phenomenon emerged, eventually encompassing most aspects of black life to become almost synonymous with "negritude". Soul style, as manifested in distinctively black ways of walking, talking, eating, dressing, joking, thinking, working, playing, dancing and making music, defied easy analysis or imitation by outsiders. Blacks themselves rarely felt the need to offer concrete definitions. "Something is felt to be soul", discovered sociologist Ulf Hannerz, who, like most other observers, believed that the lack of a formal definition indicated that it was recognized intuitively as "the exclusive property of blacks."24

It was in this assertion and celebration, rather than denial or evasion, of cultural and racial differences, that the self-respect and pride engendered by the early civil rights movement was most forcibly registered, even among non-activists. Thus black consumers gradually, but inexorably, began to reject white pop and some of the more obviously "whitened" Rhythm and Blues of the black pop era; instead, they increasingly embraced the "blackest" sounds of soul music. And while John Igendu's shrewd 1966 assertion that soul was "overtly anti-white in function" rings false, the popularity of the style did indicate that Rhythm and Blues' new musical mean had moved in concert with shifts in mass black consciousness towards the black end of the conventional black-white musical spectrum.25

And yet, there was a curious and telling ironies embedded in the black embrace of this "blackest", more nationalistic style of Rhythm and Blues. From the early 1960s into the heart of the black power era some of the best and most popular soul was produced, not in racially exclusive black environments, but by integrated groups of southern musicians, writers and producers who relied heavily on white country music for both form and inspiration.

At the risk of over-schematizing a complex reality, the fact is that the soul music of the 1960s was not simply – and certainly not only – a product of the upsurge in black nationalism born of mid-1960s disillusionment. Rather, it was doubly anchored in each of the two major ideological streams which have traditionally coursed through and mingled in black consciousness. The first, nationalistic current was powerfully expressed by soul's reliance on gospel techniques which were unmistakably black in origin and resonance. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the second, integrationist current was reflected most obviously in southern soul's debt to country music and the vital contribution of white musicians to that regional variant, although it also found expression in the ways that black-owned soul labels like Motown eagerly pursued the white market. Perhaps the broader significance here is that soul, like all major black cultural forms, ultimately embodied the diversity, ambiguities and paradoxes of the black experience in America, as well as its common features, certainties and essences.

Brother Ray and the gospel roots of soul

By the mid 1960s, soul was already a rich and variegated bloom in the Rhythm and Blues garden. Classic examples were recorded in cities and small towns throughout the nation: in Detroit and Shreveport, Chicago and Muscle Shoals, New York and Miami. And yet, from the southern country-soul fusions of Jimmy Hughes and Percy Sledge to the horn-laced blues-soul of Bobby Bland and Howard Tate, from the full-throated gospel roars of Wilson Pickett and Aretha Franklin to the seductive purrs of Major Lance
and the Supremes, from the sweltering funk of James Brown to the sweet flowing harmonies of the Impressions, these diverse soul styles were united by the pervasive influence of gospel and the black sacred music tradition. "The Memphis sound started in a church", commented Booker T. Jones, keyboardist with Booker T. and the MGs, a group which, in addition to having many hits of its own ("Green onions", "Soul limbo"), performed on most of the Stax recordings of the 1960s. In Chicago, Mike McGill, of the veteran vocal group the Dells, echoed this belief in the centrality of gospel to soul: "It's got a gospel flair to it... It stems from the church."20

It was the ubiquity of certain musical and presentational devices drawn from a gospel idiom to which blacks had an intensely proprietorial relationship, which gave soul music its nationalist credentials and enabled it to fulfill its major psychological and social functions—functions which had once been largely the province of the black church. Indeed, while it has become commonplace to note the constellation of soul stars who started their careers in the gospel universe (Sam Cooke, Bobby Womack, Johnnie Taylor, Curtis Mayfield, Candi Staton, etc., etc.) it is only really possible to understand soul's significance by placing it within the twin historical contexts of changes in mass black consciousness generated by an evolving black freedom struggle, and the steady secularization of black culture which culminated in the late 1950s and 1960s.

In musical terms, the black sacred tradition's influence on soul was most evident in the style's tumbling gospel triplets, its call and response instrumental and vocal patterns, the regular role of sanctified tambourines, and the energizing slap of get-happy handclaps. At its best, soul presented a remarkable blend of melodic and harmonic fluidity, and rhythmic certainty and drive, all built upon the solid rock of repetitive, yet inventive, bass, drum, piano, guitar and horn figures. Above all, however, soul borrowed from gospel a breathtaking expressive freedom for its finest individual and collective vocalists. As soul singer-songwriter Don Covay—himself a veteran of both the Cherry Keys gospel quartet in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and, like Marvin Gaye, of the Rainbows vocal group in Washington, D.C.—explained, "soul is total vocal freedom".21

In soul, as with all black musical forms, individual performers searched for, and the best of them found, a unique voice through which they made public private emotions and experiences with which their black audiences closely identified. For the performer, a profound sense of selfhood emerged from the full, forceful and, when appropriate, ecstatic expression of these personal truths or emotions. In this context, Ray Charles' comments on the fusion of sacred and secular styles he pioneered at Atlantic in the mid-to-late 1950s are revealing.

Brother Ray redeployed the ecstatic sound of gospel music to underwrite his pulsating tales of sexual ardour. "This little girl of mine", for example, was a reworking of "This little light of mine", while "What d' I say" sounded like a raunchy revival meeting with Charles as the preacher cum gospel singer, driving his congregation of possessed Raelettes—his female backing group—ever closer to some kind of heavenly release with urgent pleas to "shake that thing", and a series of wordless moans which were every bit as expressive. "I'd always thought that the blues and spirituals were close—close musically, close emotionally—and I was happy to hook 'em up", he explained. "I was determined to go out and just be natural... My first concern was seeing whether Ray Charles as Ray Charles—not as Nat Cole or as Charles Brown—was going to work". For Charles, then, the incorporation of gospel elements into his blues was a means to emerge from the shadow of his musical mentors and assert his own voice and individuality. This was what soul, like gospel music, black religion, and for that matter the civil rights struggle, was largely about: affirming individual worth within the context of black collective identity and pride.20

Ray Charles' artistic triumph was to make his personal history live and breathe through his music, making it available to other blacks as a commentary on their own experiences and as a dramatization of their deepest feelings. Charles was the hero of the young Julian Bond's poems "Ray Charles—the bishop of Atlanta", and "I, too, hear America singing". "He just seemed to me to be such a compelling personality. The voice, the music, the whole package taken together pulled me in, as it pulled in many, many others", recalled Bond. Bernice Johnson Reagon was even more specific, linking Charles' appeal both to the new black consciousness associated with the young civil rights movement, and to the new secularism in black society. "Ray Charles does the church has gone into the street... People are walking out of churches into the street, going to jail and that sound is Ray Charles".20

In Mississippi, Anne Moody was not initially a big fan of Charles' music. Then the double shock of Medgar Evers' murder and the Birmingham 16th Street Church bombing in 1963 shook her faith in the prospects for a successful nonviolent revolution in the South. At that point of acute frustration, despair and exhaustion, it was Ray Charles' blues, on this occasion nibbling at overt social commentary, which articulated her mood best:

I put a Ray Charles record on the box and he was saying, "feeling sad all the time, that's because I got a worried mind. The world is in an uproar, the danger zone is everywhere. Read your paper, and you'll see just exactly what keep worryin' me". It seemed as though I had never listened to Ray before. For the first time I said something to me.21

Ray Charles was one of the first artists to reject Jim Crow dates in the mid-1950s. Indeed, in March 1962, when he was successfully sued and fined for refusing to play a scheduled date in Augusta because he learned it was to
in formal Movement-related activities was minimal. He performed in a few benefit concerts, but generally avoided overtly “political” or racial themes in his songs. He rarely aligned himself publicly with any civil rights organizations, or participated in any protest campaigns – although Stanley Wise recalled that when Charles played towns where SNCC had projects, the singer would acknowledge the presence of civil rights workers in the audience and say a few precious words of support and encouragement, perhaps even “have you come back stage and they'd feed you or something like that”.32

The point is that blacks, activists or not, located the political and cultural meanings of Rhythm and Blues in many places other than in lyrical discussions of the struggle, or in the personal participation of its artists. Brother Ray's entire career was inspirational and pregnant with political and racial significance. Rather like James Brown, whose South Carolina roots and Georgia upbringing were similarly mean and uncompromising, Charles' struggle against crushing poverty and discrimination, compounded by the fact of his blindness and his personal wrestling with the demons of drugs and alcohol, was the black community's struggle against disadvantage and prejudice writ large. His see-saw story of travail and triumph served as a potent symbol of how to overcome, achieve enormous commercial and material success, with personal dignity and racial pride intact. His music expressed every emotional nuance of that story by blending the worldly wisdom of the blues with the transcendent ecstasy and visionary promise of gospel.

Soul and the secularization of black America

The fusion of sacred and secular idioms at the heart of soul music had not always been wholly acceptable in black American culture. Faced with a proscription against “unholy” dancing during their religious worship, ante-bellum slaves had developed the ring-shout, a form of dancing by any other name, which avoided the worldly crossing of feet and thereby official censure. Although these slaves were desperate to preserve dancing in their religious rituals, feeling that the freeing of the Holy Spirit demanded some kind of physical celebration, they were careful to preserve a notional distinction, imbibed from their white religious mentors, between sacred and profane terpsichore.33

Historian Lawrence Levine has suggested that with emancipation and the decline of the “sacred world view” which dominated the mental lives of the slaves, previously fuzzy distinctions between black sacred and secular realms of thought and practice actually became more precise. Levine noted, for example, the frequent reluctance of church-going blacks, particularly in the South, to perform secular material for the folklorists who roamed the region between the wars. A Texas cotton-picker, for instance, refused to sing a
boll-weevil ballad, explaining, "Boss, dat a reel. If you wants to get dat song sung, you'll have to git one of dese wor'ly niggers to sing it. I belong to de church." 34

Big Bill Broonzy, an Arkansas-born bluesman who, with Leroy Carr, Sonny Boy Williamson and Lonnie Johnson, was one of the most important figures in the development of a new, urbane, jazz-inflected blues style in the 1930s, was certainly wary of compromising the distinction between sacred and secular spheres. Broonzy had begun his musical career around the First World War playing fiddle in Mississippi. For a number of years he supplemented his income with a little jakeleg preaching, but abandoned that sideline, partly because he calculated that the blues were more lucrative, but mostly because of disquiet about combining sacred and secular careers:

One day I was sitting astride on a fence and my uncle came up to me and said: "That's the way you's living: straddle the fence", he said. "Get on one side or the other of the fence". That's what he said and he meant preach or play the fiddle, one at a time. Don't try to be both at the same time.

Forty years after opting for the life of a bluesman and heading North, Big Bill Broonzy was still troubled by the relationship between sacred and profane practices, not least in the music of Ray Charles. "He's got the blues, he's crying sanctified. He's mixing the blues with the spirituals. I know that's wrong. He should be singing in a church", Big Bill complained. 35

In truth, the division between the sort of dance and music deemed legitimate for the worship of God and that which often smacked of carnal, rather than spiritual, pleasures was always rather stricter in pious theory than in popular practice. "The two musics – religious and secular – have always cross fertilized each other", noted Imamu Amari Baraka. Bernice Johnson Reagon also recognized this interpenetration of sacred and secular musical influences, but warned against homogenizing, or simplifying, the various black responses to that alchemy, which differed according to class, generational and regional factors, and changed over time.

Reagon's father was Rev. J.J. Johnson, the pastor of Mt Early Baptist Church, located in Worthy County, just outside Albany, Georgia. She grew up in the 1950s in a "conservative family in terms of what was expected of you if you were a real upstanding member of the church". Certainly, she recalled there was "a line that said, 'over there is the street and that's where the blues and the rhythm and blues are'". Yet, she also appreciated that this line was more permeable than in the past or, for that matter, than it still was in other "more rigid churches...where if you sang the blues, you were sort of worshipping the devil almost". In Reagon's case, her parents' reaction to her interest in secular music was more bound up with typical concerns about a teenage daughter's first outings to parties, dances and proms, than any sense that r&b was inherently evil. With whatever reservations, the Johnsons simply "decided, it was not sinful for me to be in a doo-wop group in high school." 36

Nevertheless, it is clear that some sort of notional distinction between the music of God and that of the Devil remained a feature of black culture and consciousness for many blacks in the mid-to-late 1950s. In Elizabeth City, North Carolina, Yasmeen Williams, another daughter of a baptist minister who later joined Bernice Johnson Reagon in Sweet Honey in the Rock, "had to sneak listening to popular music growing up". In retrospect, however, Williams too saw signs that the power of the old taboos was waning. She was sure that her "mother was tapping her feet in the kitchen and I don't remember her ever telling us to turn it off". In June 1958, 14-year-old Allese Titus wrote to Martin Luther King, confessing her interest in "Rock 'n' roll" – although, in an echo of the old slave proscriptions, she thoughtfully reassured him that "I do not dance". Deeply troubled by the prospect of spending eternity amid great balls of infernal fire, Titus asked King, "Can a person be a Christian and interested in those things? I am a church worker. Would listening to those things be considered as devil-work? I know I can't combine the work of the devil and the Lord. Should I quit listening to them?" In his regular Ebony "Advice for living" column, King had already warned a 17-year-old reader who played both gospel and rock and roll that "the two are totally incompatible". Echoing the concerns of middle America, the eminently respectable King argued that rock and roll "often plunges men's minds into degrading and immoral depths". 37

Certainly, for black singers contemplating a move from gospel to r&b in the late 1950s, the decision was still not one to be taken lightly. In early 1957, for example, when Sam Cooke released his first secular side, "Lovable", it was felt prudent to do so under the pseudonym Dale Cooke. Cooke had been agonizing about recording Rhythm and Blues for several months before finally taking the plunge. He even considered the possibility of pursuing simultaneous secular and sacred careers and continued to sing with the Soul Stirrers into the spring of 1957. Cooke realized, however, that he could not juggle these two agendas and maintain either peace of mind or an audience. While some blacks still viewed all secular styles with suspicion, special opprobrium was reserved for those performers who tried to fuse sacred and profane styles, or to sing on both sides of the gospel-r&b divide. 38

At a 1957 Easter gospel programme in Detroit, Cooke admitted to Roscoe Shelton, who was then singing with the Nashville-based Fairfield Four gospel group, but also hearing the rising call of the secular world, "Man, if I ever decide, I'm gone. I'm not gonna play around with it". Shelton "had the same feeling" that it was still wrong to "straddle the fence". By the end of the year Shelton was singing r&b for Ernie Young's Excello label and Cooke
was a household name. Meanwhile, another God-fearing young black southerner had crossed over in the opposite direction. In late 1957, Little Richard interpreted the sight of an orbiting Sputnik satellite as a message from God to abandon secular music and enter the ministry. Richard was unable to reconcile his deep religious zeal with R&B and a hedonistic lifestyle which set standards for sheer physical excess and toxic tolerance which generations of wasted rock stars have struggled to match. "If you want to live for the Lord, you can't rock 'n' roll. God doesn't like it," Richard explained as he dumped all his jewellery into Sydney's Hunter River, and headed back to Huntsville, Alabama to enrol at the Seventh Day Adventists' Oakwood College.

While Sam Cooke's father, a Mississippi Holiness Church minister transplanted to Chicago, blessed his son's decision to cross over, and most of his black business and musical associates, like producer Bumps Blackwell, J.W. Alexander and S.R. Crain, were quick to point out the financial benefits which might help to assuage any spiritual misgivings, Art Rupe, Cooke's white boss at Specialty, was deeply disturbed. According to Harold Battiste, who played in some of Cooke's sessions and later worked as an A&R man for Specialty in New Orleans, Rupe had two distinct, but related, reservations about Cooke's secular excursions. The first was that Rupe genuinely feared offending, and thereby losing, his black gospel customers if he put out R&B sides by one of his most successful sacred stars.

Rupe's second reservation concerned the style rather than the simple existence of Cooke's secular recordings. Rupe was hardly opposed to R&B, having had enormous success with artists like Joe Liggins ("Honey dripper"), Guitar Slim ("The things that I used to do") and, most notably, Little Richard. But he had very clear views about how black R&B should sound. According to Battiste, during the "You send me" sessions to which Rupe had reluctantly assented, the boss "came in the studio and really got upset that we were doing this salty music with these white girls singing". Rupe, who in most reminiscences comes across as one of the more principled, intelligent and honest figures in the murky world of the R&B industry ("I really admired him"), confessed Battiste was nonetheless one of those white label owners who, according to Battiste, "sincerely felt, well, we understand you people and this is what you do best". In fact, Rupe had a very narrow, stereotypical conception of what music blacks liked or were capable of performing. "He had this notion that everything had to be loud", recalled Battiste with wry amusement. If Cooke had to sing secular at all Rupe expected him to sound more like Little Richard and less like a mildly sanctified Frank Sinatra. Unable to fathom Cooke's smooth poppy style, or imagine a viable market for it among either race, Rupe freed Cooke from his contract and let him and Bumps Blackwell take their newly recorded masters to Keen Records. Keen promptly put out "You send me" and the rest, as they say....

Art Rupe was not entirely mistaken to fear a backlash to Cooke's secularization. In the early 1960s, Cooke was given a rough time when he appeared at a Soul Stirrers reunion concert in Chicago. That audience, however, consisted of the sort of pietistic gospel fans who had felt particularly betrayed when Cooke descended into the secular world. They were the spiritual - sometimes, no doubt, the actual - cousins of the "older people, deacons and the sisters in the church" in Tennessee, who also never accepted Roscoe Shelton's move into R&B.12

There were always people who would never come around, like Atlanta's venerable gospel deejay Brother Esmond Patterson. Patterson, who had met Cooke a number of times when the Soul Stirrers were in town, was proud to be "a gospel man. Exclusively". He refused to play secular music, even when his job appeared to depend on it. When Cooke defected to R&B his "relationship with him was over then". Patterson called it "playing with God ... It was dangerous to make that change". And he meant this quite literally. Patterson saw Cooke's shooting, by the manageress of a shabby Los Angeles motel he was using for an adulterous fling with a local prostitute, as proof of what could happen to those who left the gospel fold in search of fame and Lucifer's lucre. And there was "another fella, named Jimmy Butler", Patterson remembered, "they bought out of the Soul Stirrers too ... His own brother killed him with an axe."43

Despite the persistence of such sentiments, however, the real significance of Cooke's crossover, coming hot on the heels of Ray Charles' sinewy and highly successful explorations of the nether regions where physical and spiritual sanctification met, was not the outpouring of black criticism, but its widespread acceptance. As Nina Simone recalled, the emergence of the soul styles pioneered by Charles, Cooke, Little Willie John and James Brown, coincided with the maturing of a generation of blacks who were simply much more relaxed about such sacred-secular distinctions than their elders. Simone, herself a preacher's daughter from Tryon, North Carolina, explained, "my parents have a way of looking at it - I always give them a hard time about it because I have never believed in the separation of gospel music and the blues ... Negro music has always crossed all those lines and I'm kind of glad of it. Now they're just calling it soul music".

This general acceptance of gospel-influenced R&B both reflected and helped to consolidate the lowering of traditional barriers between secular and sacred realms in black culture. Although generational, denominational and demographic factors affected the rate and precise nature of this process, it does appear to have quickened and reached maturity throughout black America in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as many of the social and psychological functions of organized black religion were transferred to a variety of secular practices and institutions, most notably commercial entertainment and black popular culture. There was also a related phenomenon,
which saw the increased commodification of black religion, particularly in urban centres, which brought much of it within the orbit of the secular world of black entertainment and commerce. These twin developments coalesced to provide the historical and social context for the emergence of the soul phenomenon as a mass black secular faith, with soul music as its principal liturgy.45

It is important to stress that during the 1960s, this process of secularization enveloped not just music, but most areas of black life. The only religious group in the ascendant was the Black Muslims, whose nationalistic social and economic programmes, and bold championing of black pride and self-reliance, were often of more importance to followers than the specifics of their eschatology. Elsewhere, organized black religion was in "distinct decline", even in the South, where sociologist Daniel Thompson discovered that "very few adults or youth ever become meaningfully involved in the church's interests and programmes". Throughout the nation, there was a precipitous decline in the number of black clergy which cannot simply be explained by increased urbanization and the resulting concentration of blacks into fewer, but larger, congregations. By the end of the decade this trend prompted Wilbur Bock to comment that "Negroes are becoming less involved in the religious institution as they have lost faith in its function for social change".46

Indeed, despite the critical importance of the black church as a source of leadership, organization and finance in some civil rights campaigns, and the centrality of Christian precepts to the tactics and goals of many activists, new organizations and institutions had emerged to fight for black rights and social change. One young black man actually interpreted Martin Luther King's appeal to his own generation as being in spite of, not because of, King's church background: "it was great to see a black person who could get up and move an audience the way he did without talking out of the bible". Even at the apparent height of its influence in the South, in the 1963 Birmingham campaign, for example, 90 per cent of the city's black clergy spurned the protests. Historians John Dittmer and Adam Fairclough both found that cautious black churches in Mississippi and Louisiana respectively were often as much an impediment to Movement activities as a help.47

Such widespread, if by no means universal, clerical conservatism, North and South, necessitated the creation of alternative protest vehicles and political institutions to meet the needs of rising black aspirations. Thus, the centre of black political gravity during the course of the 1960s moved inexorably away from church-based institutions towards secular, or rapidly secularizing, organizations like SNCC, CORE and the Black Panther Party; away from moral arguments and strategies for the redemption of American society informed by Christian ethics, to the pursuit of black economic power and the exercise of black interest group politics.48

"CAN I GET A WITNESS?"

Enterprise and ecstasy: the gospel business

If the process of secularization in black life and culture hardened and hardened in the 1950s and 1960s, its roots went back at least to the time of "The great migration" around the First World War when 1.5 million blacks left the South, while many of those who stayed behind moved to the region's cities. In this urban environment, black preachers and religious charismatics found themselves in fierce competition for black souls and dollars, not only with each other but also with secular institutions which offered many of the services once the preserve of the church. Whereas the rural and small-town church had once been virtually unchallenged as the focus of black community affairs, politics, education and recreation, in the city there were alternative associational possibilities, new political organizations and expanded, if still severely restricted, educational and economic opportunities. There was also a vibrant and variegated entertainment network, including movies, theatres, bars and dancehalls, which threatened to lure away from the pews new generations of blacks less imbued with the trenchant religiosity of their parents.

In response to this secular competition, urban churches deliberately accentuated the spectacular, participatory, ecstatic elements which had always been a feature of black religious worship. "To hold their people", black poet Claude McKay noted in 1940, "the preachers are partial to the excessive demonstration of primitive emotionalism in the pews... The improvised shaking and shuffling of the angels' feet on the floor of a Harlem Heaven was often more highly entertaining than the floor show of a Harlem cabaret".49

For many young blacks, this "entertainment" element in black churches came to exercise an appeal quite independent of any strictly religious dimension. Consequently, as sociologists St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton noted, after the Second World War the line between the sacred and secular realms in black culture became increasingly blurred once more, especially in the cities of the North.

In order to meet the competition of Chicago's night life, [some churches] have evolved the custom of giving "special programs" in addition to, or instead of, preaching. These take the form of dramas, musical extravaganzas, or occasional movies. These Sunday night services are usually entertaining enough to appeal to a circle far wider than the membership of the church. In fact, a great deal of inter-church visiting takes place without regard to denominational lines and many persons will attend services of this type who make no claim to being religious... They attend church, they say, because they "like good singing" and "good speaking", or because the services are "restful and beautiful".50
Claude Brown's memories of post-war Harlem churches similarly stressed their extra-religious appeal. He attended one simply because he lusted after the preacher's daughter and fondly recalled Father Divine's 155th Street Mission, not for its spiritual nourishment, but because he could get all the food he could eat there for 15 cents. Brown also appreciated that the black churches of Harlem were commercial, as well as religious, enterprises. At Mrs Rogers' storefront church, he recalled, "people jumped up and down until they got knocked down by the spirit, and Mrs Rogers put bowls of money on a kitchen table and kept pointing to it and asking for more".51

As preachers did whatever was necessary to attract and retain patrons, and swell the church – and sometimes their personal – coffers, the emergence of gospel music was, frankly, a God-send, often helping to keep young blacks in the churches regardless of their formal denominational affiliations or beliefs. Building on the musical experiments of Philadelphia Methodist minister C.A. Tindley in the early twentieth century, the principal architect of the modern black gospel tradition was Thomas A. Dorsey.

Dorsey was a "saved" blues pianist, formerly known as Georgia Tom. After his religious conversion in 1929, Dorsey abandoned the salacious themes in his blues, which had included choice cuts like "It's tight like that", to write such devotional staples as "Precious Lord, take my hand" and "Peace in the valley". Yet the gospel style he pioneered remained heavily influenced by the sounds of jazz and blues and the showmanship of vaudeville. These were elements of a secular entertainment culture which was under constant attack from black pulits for its alleged depravity and sinfulness. In his recorded sermon "After the ball is over", Rev. A.W. Nix had typically linked the evils of booze, sex and dance music with the prospect of eternal damnation: "A great many people are livin' in hell today, that started on the balcony floor." As a result of such attitudes, when Dorsey first tried to rouse support for his gospel-blues, he "got thrown out of some of the best churches".52

Despite initial resistance, however, gospel proved well-suited to the emotional and social needs of an increasingly urbanized black community. Although the majority of the newcomers to the North were accommodated within the Baptist and Methodist churches, many were unimpressed by the large congregations and relatively impersonal style of worship. Searching for a more fulfilling, participatory form of religion, more in keeping with the southern tradition, they often turned to the storefront churches and various sects which proliferated in the city. In these churches, physical and emotional engagement was central. "The chief religious activity of the members of the Holiness cults is that form of ecstatic worship which is known as 'getting happy' or 'shouting'," remarked sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. As Arthur Faust noted his own study of black urban sects, gospel music provided the catalyst for much of this emotional fervour: "music is employed not merely to preface or conclude or even to relieve the programme: It is the backbone of the service itself, even including the performance of the preacher or chief speaker."53

While the esoteric and holiness churches were first to embrace the new gospel sound, in the competitive world of black urban religion, gospel's growing popularity meant that mainstream denominations were not far behind. Gospel's first major breakthrough came in 1932, when Dorsey performed "If you see my saviour" at the National Baptist Convention in Chicago and began selling the sheet music for his compositions in the foyer of the convention hall. With Sallie Martin, a shrill-voiced singer and shrewd businesswoman, Dorsey immediately set about hawking his gospel songs to the churches, music publishers and record companies of America.

From its inception, then, modern gospel music was a holy hybrid of spirituals, hymns, jazz, blues and sentimental balladry which quickly became inseparable from the world of professional black secular entertainment. In the 1930s, the Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company of Dallas began publishing gospel songs, promoting them initially on KRLD-Dallas and later nationally by means of the Stamps Quartet gospel group. By 1940, Sallie Martin and Kenneth Morris had established another nationwide gospel publisher: the Martin and Morris Publishing Company. In 1957, this gospel market was lucrative enough to warrant a BMI versus ASCAP-style court battle over alleged monopolistic practices. It even had its own little payola scandal, when Clara Ward of the Ward Sisters confessed to "kicking back" half her television appearance fee to NBC, describing it as "common practice".54

Such controversies did little to halt the spread of gospel, although the pace of its acceptance varied according to the location and resources of individual churches, and the predilections of particular pastors and their congregations. In the rural South, for example, it was often a struggle for small black country churches with limited revenue to buy the piano or organ which usually accompanied gospel performances. Some preachers and their congregations also felt that the very act of deploying a gospel choir to offer a "performance" within the service was an unwelcome departure from traditional, participatory forms of congregational, usually a cappella, hymn and spiritual singing.

"In south west Georgia, inside the city limits of Albany, the bigger black churches would probably have gospel choirs", recalled Bernice Johnson Reagon. "But out in the counties those churches would not have gospel choirs ... until the 1950s. So we are 20 years behind, say, Chicago, in terms of gospel. What is really happening though, is that we are hearing gospel on the radio." Reagon's own church did not get its first piano until around 1953, whereafter it established a gospel choir with members spanning several generations. As in most southern churches, Mt Early's new gospel choir supplemented, rather than replaced, the older forms of communal singing. Certainly, although there were still those who would not countenance any contamination of their services by gospel, concerns about the propriety of
this jazzier, more worldly style of musical worship had largely evaporated by the mid-to-late 1950s. Reagon’s own parents “were as taken with the gospel music as we were. I grew up in a church where you didn’t have to choose between the gospel music and other forms”.

While initially rooted in black churches, gospel music quickly found its way into the concert halls and theatres of black America, although this too provoked some initial pangs of conscience. In 1955, Thurman Ruth of the Selah Jubilee Singers organized the first Gospel Caravan—a pulsating package of touring gospel talent modelled on the R&B revues—and took it to the Apollo Theatre. There was still some opposition from the clergy, and a few doubts among the artists themselves, about the propriety of performing the Lord’s music at that shrine of black secular entertainment. Nevertheless, the show went on and gospel tours have been wailing their way around America ever since.

By the mid 1950s, gospel was also an important force in both the recording and broadcasting industries, where it retained an overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, black listenership at a time when R&B was beginning to attract a substantial biracial audience. Later, when soul borrowed from gospel, it was the latter’s relative racial exclusivity which helped to establish the former’s racial credentials. “What you have to understand”, singer Cissy Houston told Gerri Hirshey,

is that it was no accident. You started to hear gospel in black popular music in the mid-fifties because that’s what was going on in black life. Everybody was getting crazy that R & B was making it big, crossing over for whites and all. But gospel stations were just as exciting to listen to. Gospel was making folks jump in a big, big way.

The thrilling gospel records which graced black turntables and the black-oriented airwaves were usually produced by the same enterprising independent labels who recorded R&B. Savoy featured James Cleveland, the Ward Sisters, Bessie Griffen and the great gospel showman Alex Bradford; Specialty had the Soul Stirrers and the Pilgrim Travellers; Apollo recorded Mahalia Jackson, and Atlantic was home to the Silver Leaf Quartette, Gospel Pilgrims and Essie Mae Thomas. Two black-owned labels were especially strong in the field. The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, Sensational Nightingales and Dixie Hummingbirds recorded for Don Robey’s Peacock, one of a stable of influential Robey labels around which black musical life in Houston largely revolved in the 1940s and 1950s. Vee Jay boasted the Swan Silvertones, Maceo Woods Singers and Staple Singers.

Once signed to these labels, gospel artists were just as susceptible as their secular counterparts to the influence of producers and executives.

Their records were designed to sell as broadly as possible and, since by mid-century few blacks lived wholly in the realm of sacred entertainment, gospel record companies, writers and performers were acutely sensitive to changes in secular black tastes. In the mid 1950s, for example, Don Robey insisted that his gospel artists should record with a drummer and, where possible, a full R&B band, so as to approximate the sound of groups like the Drifters. There was an intriguing circularity here, since the Drifters were themselves seasoned in church and steeped in gospel style. Clyde McPhatter was the son of a Baptist minister in Durham, North Carolina, who, like the four singers he recruited for the first coming of the Drifters, had once sung with the Mt Lebanon Singers in Harlem. When this prototype Drifters collapsed, the second coming featured McPhatter and four members of the Thrasher Brothers gospel group. By the mid 1950s stylistic barriers which had once required careful circumvention were beginning to prove highly porous.

Despite the obvious commercial co-ordinates of gospel, much of the writing on the music has been characterized by preciousness and elitism. As with the many hagiographies of jazz and the blues, gospel has frequently been depicted as some kind of pure, unmediated, expression of black “folk” mentality. In such accounts, its cultural integrity and emotional veracity usually depend entirely on its alleged immunity to the crass and distorting business considerations which have made other forms of black popular music, like black rock and roll, pop and soul, somehow less “authentic”, less truly representative of mass black consciousness. Charles Hobson’s view was typical in acknowledging the musical affinity between soul and gospel while pouring contempt on the former’s artistic qualities and denouncing its commercialism. “Nothing in soul can match the best in Gospel”, Hobson opined, sanctimoniously protesting that although the brilliant gospel diva Dorothy Love Coates seemed well-suited for a bid at soul stardom, there was “some money so dirty you hate to touch it”.

In fact, while gospel’s emotive power and artistic merits were indisputable, the music was forged by writers, singers, musicians and, in the case of recorded gospel, producers, working within the context of powerful commercial, as well as spiritual, forces. Publishing, recording, broadcasting and touring interests shaped gospel’s sound and presentation for professional groups. Their recordings, radio shows and concert appearances in turn influenced the music of local congregations. As with any modern mass popular music form, a great gospel record, song or live performance was often one which had to transcend the more prosaic and sometimes craven forces which circumscribed its production. Genuinely fired with the Holy Spirit, gospel performers, from the Five Blind Boys of Alabama to Mahalia Jackson, and from the Sensational Nightingales to Inez Andrews, have been more transcendent than most. Their artistry and passion have often allowed the exploitative paraphernalia of the industry to recede into the background.
at the moments of musical creation and individual or collective consumption. Their musical and lyrical messages, and the manner in which black audiences responded to them, were the critical determinants of gospel's "meanings". Together, they ensured that gospel's basic social and psychological functions could be maintained, regardless of the economics of its production.

In 1964, however, the complexities of this relationship were clearly lost on black theologian Joseph R. Washington, as he launched a withering attack on the commercialism, divisiveness and apoliticalism of much contemporary black religion. Washington charged that black churches had become little more than "amusement centers for the disengaged", concerned with internal politics, status and profit in default of the pursuit of black liberation which was the traditional role of what he called black "folk religion" – a peculiar spirit which transcended denominational allegiances and cut across geographical, gender, generational and class divisions to unite black Americans in a commitment to freedom, equality, individual pride and collective dignity.60

At the heart of Washington's critique was a deep mistrust of the ecstatic core of much black religious practice and, more specifically, the gospel music which frequently promoted it. Gospel, he argued, was

the most degenerate form of negro religion . . . Shorn from the roots of the folk religion, gospel music has turned the freedom theme in Negro spirituals into licentiousness. The African rhythm detracts from the almost unintelligible "sacred" texts. It is commonplace now; it is sheer entertainment by commercial opportunists . . . Ministers who urge their people to seek their amusement in gospel music and the hordes of singers who profit from it lead the masses down the road of religious frenzy and escapism.61

By the early 1960s, Washington's description of many black churches as "amusement centers", if overstated, had a certain legitimacy. There is certainly no doubt that blacks continued to encourage and celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit with joyous music and dance. Yet such emotionalism – what Cornel West has described as the "passionate physicality" of black religion – was rarely frivolous or peripheral. Washington's principal error was to assume that a combination of ecstasy, entertainment and enterprise inevitably encouraged purely escapism and, therefore, vacuous rituals. In fact, it was the participatory fervour which the best gospel artists and preachers inspired among their audiences which accounted for the effectiveness of many black religious meetings. Perhaps even more than any specifically numinous element, it was the emotionally charged, participatory dimension of black worship which enabled individuals, saved and Godless alike, to express themselves freely, and to share in a common, essentially democratic experience with other blacks. Amid the passion of many black religious services, conventional gender, generational, status and class hierarchies were often, at least temporarily, dismantled.62

Cornel West has recognized this phenomenon by suggesting that in the second half of the twentieth century, blacks "do not attend church, for the most part, to find God, but rather to share and expand together the rich heritage they have inherited". In fact, in an age of declining formal religious affiliation and faith, it was not so much in church, but rather in the secular world of black popular culture, of soul concerts, dances, recordings and broadcasts, that this exploration and celebration of black heritage and community largely took place. This transference, as opposed to loss, of function and meaning from sacred to secular forms of black culture was what Amiri Baraka had in mind when he wrote that "The Jordans, the Promised Lands, now be cars and women – flesh and especially dough. The older religiosity falls away from the music, but the deepest feel of spirit worship always remains as the music's emotional patterns continue to make reference to . . .63

Perhaps more than any other artist, the amputated figure of Solomon Burke symbolized the ways in which spirituality and commerce, ecstasy and entertainment, sex and salvation, individualism and brotherhood, could blend in the world of 1960s soul music. Apparently as a result of a vision seen by his grandmother, Burke was groomed from his birth in 1935 to lead a Philadelphia mission called The House of God for All People. By the age of 12 he had his own radio ministry: Solomon's Temple. Burke came of age listening to "all types of music . . . I loved Gene Autry and Roy Rogers", just as the secularization of the urban North was taking firm and irreversible hold. Of course, even in the Godless urban North there were still many deeply religious blacks, not all of whom had formal denominational affiliations, and Burke was one such true believer. When he started his secular singing career as a sort of sub-Belafonte balladeer at Apollo in the mid 1950s, he still felt the tug of old pieties and rejected the label of an R&B singer. Even in his 1960s pomp, Burke preferred the more dignified, if not more modest, title of "King of rock `n' soul".64

"I was always of the church and once in grace, always in grace", he explained. "I don't smoke, I don't drink and I believe very strongly in my religious beliefs, so I refused to be classified as a Rhythm & Blues singer. In those days that was a stigma of profanity". Semantics aside, however, it is clear that as Burke racked up a long run of hit records, beginning with the seminal country-soul ballad "Just out of reach (Of my two open arms)" in 1961, he saw no real conflict between his secular singing career, sacred ministry, and financial ambitions. As far as Burke was concerned, church and soul both enabled him to cope with life's fundamental concerns of "God, money, and women . . . truth, love and get it on".65

Nobody could accuse Solomon Burke of not practising what he preached. Not only were songs like "Cry to me", "If you need me", and "The price"
manager, had assumed Burke would only want to sell personal merchandise like records and posters. Schiffman eventually bought all the popcorn just to get rid of him and placate the traders who had already signed for the food and drinks concessions.

On soul package tours, while other artists squabbled over who should headline and therefore close the show, Burke was happy to go on first. This left him ample time to sneak off to a local grocery store, where he would buy food to sell to the exhausted and famished musicians and crew who staggered onto the tour bus at the end of the concert. His zest for life, in all its forms, continued unabated after his career waned in the 1970s. By the mid-1990s, the “Bishop of Soul” had sired 21 children, expanded his bishopric to embrace an association of some 168 churches, and established a chain of lucrative west coast mortuaries which enabled him to live in some luxury in Beverly Hills.

“Really saying something”: Rhythm and Blues and community building

It was no coincidence that the musical devices and performance techniques which soul borrowed most conspicuously from gospel were those which promoted corporeal responses and audience participation, and which, in emphasizing the individual’s “testifying” voice, put a premium on the integrity of personal experience. With its towering lead vocals framed by supporting call and response instrumental and vocal structures, soul was the sound of a radical democratic vision of individual identities realized and proudly asserted within the context of a sustaining collective culture.

In soul, again as in gospel performances and church services, it was in the “live” setting that these individual and communal agendas were often most dramatically integrated. The soul concert was a public ritual in which the ecstatic responses provoked by the artists, like those excited by the preacher or the gospel singer, simultaneously assumed a unifying and an individuating function. Anyone moved by the sheer excitement of the music to dance or holler could find personal release and expression in the midst of a communal celebration, with their own “performances” becoming an intrinsic part of the show, triggering the fervour of others.

Few soul artists were more adept at inspiring this sort of response than James Brown. Indeed, in the 1960s, few artists appeared live before more black Americans than “the hardest-working man in showbusiness”, whose touring schedule frequently took in more than 300 shows a year. On 24 October 1962, “Butane James” arranged for his midnight performance at the Apollo to be recorded. In January 1963, King Records reluctantly released the resulting album with little publicity and an initial pressing of just 5,000