

## “Soul Man”--Sam & Dave (1967)

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Essay by Robert Pruter (guest post)\*



45 rpm sleeve

When the African-American singing duo of Sam & Dave recorded “Soul Man” in 1967 for the southern recording label, Memphis-based Stax Records, the song represented a message to America (and the world). Sam & Dave in their rousingly declarative manner were telling black and white listeners alike that “soul music” had arrived, and by extension that black people creating such music had arrived. In their gospelized full-throated singing, the song’s powerful refrain, “*I’m a soul man,*” Sam & Dave were communicating another way the famous chant of the Civil Rights Movement, “I’m black and I’m proud.” A “soul man” was a proud black man. One could even say “Soul Man” represented the culmination of more than ten years of struggle by African Americans to be finally considered an equal with all Americans in the promise of the country’s great democracy.

Perhaps some might consider the above claims as a bit hyperbolic, but consider the social impact that “Soul Man” had in the United States at the time. The song was a huge crossover hit—meaning it reached much of the country’s population beyond African Americans—it was number one on the popular music charts (“Cash Box” and “Record World”) (“Billboard” had it #2), and number one on all three of the R&B charts (“Cash Box,” “Billboard,” “Record World”). All through the fall and early winter of 1967 and into 1968, black and white Americans alike turned their radio dials and heard “Soul Man” playing on heavy rotation for some five months. The record sold a million copies, entering a lot of homes in America, notably a lot of white homes. Stax Records, formed in 1961, was one of the emerging soul music companies, and “Soul Man” represented their biggest hit to date and the crowning of “soul music” as the music of black America.

The song was written by two of the company’s best composers, Isaac Hayes and David Porter. The two writers found inspiration for their song from the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement and angry black protest and riots. When watching a television newscast of the aftermath of the July 1967 riot in Detroit, Michigan, Hayes noticed on surviving buildings that had not been looted or destroyed during the riot, black residents had marked buildings with “soul.” It came home to the

two composers that “soul” was more than a designation for music, but for black culture as a whole—“soul” meant black.

While many Americans discovered “soul music” through “Soul Man” it had a long incubation in the African American community. “Soul” in music undoubtedly began in the black gospel world. But outside that world, it was the jazz artists who were the first to use “soul” in describing their music. Jazz pianist Horace Silver was the first jazz figure to be associated with using the word “soul” in describing his music in his 1955 breakthrough number, “The Preacher.” Silver in the next several years was joined by Lou Donaldson, Cannonball Adderley, Art Blakely, and, notably, the organists Jack McDuff, Jimmy McGriff, Richard “Groove” Holmes, and many others in “souling up” jazz. When jazz musicians said they wanted to add a little “soul” to their playing, they were saying, Let’s give it a little essence of blackness, by adding a little of the black church in the music. By 1960, the name “soul jazz” was given to what had become a movement.

The year 1960, likewise, was the first year when the term “soul music” began being applied to R&B. Soul pioneer Ray Charles, during that year, was anointed the “High Priest of Soul.” By 1962, in various parts of the country, the term “soul music” was becoming ever more frequent on the black airways and in African American publications. In April 1962, for example, Chicago radio deejay Richard Stamz, on his hit list, posted a manifesto claiming the term “soul music” for the kind of music he was playing on his show, which, at that time, included hits by Gene Chandler, Mary Wells, Ray Charles, Bobby Bland, etc. There were still many records on the black charts in 1962 that partook of the earlier R&B era at this time, but by 1963, the charts had become strongly soul music dominated--1963 was the year in which R&B on radio transitioned to soul, as the doowops and rock ‘n’ roll style R&B fell off the playlists. So as one entered 1964 black radio was predominantly “soul radio.”

As R&B evolved into soul music, occasionally a record came out with the word “soul” somewhere in the title. These included “Soul Twist” (1961) and “Soul Serenade” (1964), both instrumentals by ace session saxophone player, King Curtis. The musician was probably inspired to give them “soul” titles after his jazz counterparts. Stax Records three years before “Soul Man,” had a hit with an instrumental by Booker T & the MG’s with “Soul Dressing” (1964). The earliest vocal hit using soul in the title was “Soul Hootenanny” (1964), which was a remake of a Jimmy Reed blues song performed soul-style by one of the great soul stylists of the era, Gene Chandler. Early in 1967, star Stax artist Otis Redding independently produced a record on his protégé, Arthur Conley, on “Sweet Soul Music,” which was based on a Sam Cooke soul-style song from 1965, “Yeah Man.” Finally, just six months prior to the release of “Soul Man,” Stax Records on its Volt imprint, released the Bar-Kays’ “Soul Finger,” an anthemic-like instrumental.

Sam & Dave, respectively Sam Moore and David Prater, like many of the most gospelized soul artists, came from the South--Miami, Florida to be precise. Both grew up in the black church singing gospel, before separately entering into secular music performing in Miami black nightclubs. The two came together in a Miami club, forming Sam & Dave in 1961. The same year they made their first recordings with a local label, and soon followed with more records for New York-based the Roulette label. The recordings were in the style of heavily gospelized soul,

with exclamatory and dynamite singing, and had some regional success. In mid-1964, Sam & Dave signed with Atlantic Records. Atlantic exec Jerry Wexler decided that Sam & Dave, with their southern roots and extraordinary gospel-style live performances, would work best with Stax Records, which Atlantic distributed. Sam & Dave then recorded at Stax with their recordings appearing on the Stax label, although technically they were Atlantic artists.

Stax did not have immediate success with Sam & Dave during 1965, but began to click once songwriters Isaac Hayes and David Porter began working with them. Their first hit with the duo was “You Don’t Know Like I Know,” in January 1966, followed by “Hold On I’m Coming,” Sam & Dave’s first number one R&B hit, in April 1966. The group stayed on the charts through the rest of 1966 and 1967, capped with “Soul Man” in September 1967. The song cemented Sam & Dave in the history of soul music. The Dynamic Duo as they were often known were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992.

“Soul Man,” over the years, long after Sam & Dave faded from the public view, has been recognized by several organizations for its historical value and influence. The song was voted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999. In 2001, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) named “Soul Man” as one of the top 365 songs of the 20th century. In 2003, “Rolling Stone” included “Soul Man” in its list of “500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” In 2018, the Library of Congress selected “Soul Man” for preservation in the National Recording Registry for its “culturally, historically, or aesthetically” significance.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.