

It's a Soul Thing

By Jennifer Amaya

America has been blessed with the ability to make stars out of some of the most gifted and talented commercial musicians in the world. From Scott Joplin, to Hank Williams, to the latest American Idol, these artists have strived to succeed, regardless of rejection and criticism, and have risen to the top of their class because of their determination, their ability to adapt themselves and their music, their basic love of music and performance, and, ultimately because of their talent. The “great ones” are timeless, their music, thirty years after conception, is just as popular, if not more popular, than it originally was. Their lives are documented, their music catalogued, and the impact they have on their art is still heard in the popular styles of today.

Sure, popular musicians have learned from and may even be guilty of copying or imitating their colleagues from time to time, but even the greatest classical composers have done the same. The way for any musician, in the classical or popular world, to become “great” is by struggling to stay true to themselves, regardless of their influences. The great ones have developed their own “voice,” based on the music they grew up with and have loved for life, dazzled with touches of the music they’ve learned and been exposed to over time. A unique combination of musical elements becomes their original template of musical ideas. By sticking to that template, no matter what project they tackle, no matter how far outside of their comfort zone they may roam, they are able to leave their own, unique mark.

So, being authentic means being true to oneself. In popular music, that often means avoiding the grips of producers and record companies. It means finding a way to make America love you without coating yourself with all of the bells and whistles that America is already accustomed to hearing in their favorite music. It means not selling out. It is hard work, it is often some of the hardest work, in fact, but those who survive are rewarded with more than just money from record sales -- they are rewarded with an indescribable feeling of satisfaction. It’s a simple concept, really: The more raw feeling

you put into your work, the more you'll get out of it. So, it's not surprising that many of the artists who have experienced this magic have contributed to a genre of music that is defined as "pure heart singing."¹ They are some of the most raw and authentic musicians of all time. They are, of course, the musicians of soul. And, boy, do they have it.

Now, some people have said that Ray Charles invented soul music. Ray, however, would be the first to tell you that he did not invent anything. He says, "Maybe I put together two things that hadn't been put together before, but, hell, give credit to the church singers...where I got it from."² And, it turns out, Ray is giving credit where credit is due. The two main ingredients of soul music are, of course, gospel and blues. From gospel, soul borrows the call and response pattern, gospel-derived harmonic progressions, gospel-derived words, an exuberant tone, a raspy vocal timbre, and all of the woops, cries, bent notes, melismas, and shouts that one can imagine.³ From blues, soul music borrows a simple and basic structure and, most importantly, that "low-down, gut-bucket *feeling*."⁴

In addition to gospel and blues, Ray's music is also an infusion of country and jazz. In fact, just as he humbly admits that he stole ideas from the music that he grew up singing and performing in church, Ray admits to copying and imitating various artists and musical styles for at least the first half of his musical career. He says, "Every chance I had, I imitated the hits of the day,"⁵ and he admits to purposely studying and imitating the style and music of one of his biggest idols, Nat King Cole. "...I never thought twice about it," he says, "...never felt bad about copying the cat's licks."⁶ Analysts could easily become upset about Ray's stealing, and could be quick to stamp the word "faker" on his forehead; however, one must try to understand what Ray has so graciously taken the time and guts to explain: "...it just makes sense to me," he says, "musical and

¹ Charles, Ray and David Ritz, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles' Own Story* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 178.

² Ibid, 330.

³ Brackett, David, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray*, 36.

⁶ Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray*, 86.

commercial sense, to study his technique.”⁷ So, with an absence of university programs in commercial music performance and composition, Ray has explained to us that the way to learn popular music is by imitation, and by “studying the techniques” of the great masters of the genre. Comparatively, there is not much difference between Ray's process and that of the best classical composers, who have studied their art at highly-esteemed secondary institutions, where they've completed imitative musical exercises and direct transcriptions under the watchful eye of the greatest classical composers. So, yes, the truth has surfaced with Ray, that copying and imitation are alive and real in all genres of music, and Ray very well may be right when he says, “As far as I'm concerned, there's no greater lesson.”⁸

So, it follows that after all of these lessons and a lot of hard work, it is what the artists do with what they've learned that makes them authentic. Ray says that Nat's style wasn't what he wanted his own style to be, exactly, but that Nat was one artist who put together all of the elements that Ray loved: “jazz improvisation, pretty melodies, hot rhythms, and an occasional taste of the blues.”⁹ It was later, in 1950 or 1951, after all of his “studying” was complete, that Ray began to form his own style, and he quickly discovered, “I really didn't have to do anything except be myself.”¹⁰ By 1953 Ray had his own band, which was a dream of his, and he says that those were the years when he really became “Ray Charles.”¹¹ His new band was made up of seven pieces, with a horn section that included tenor saxophone, baritone saxophone, two trumpets, and Ray on alto sax, piano, and/or vocals, as necessary. Ray also enjoyed the sound of girl's gospel groups, so he eventually added female backup singers to the band as well. He says, “I liked that male/female friction, and once I had it, I never let it go.” He took pride in the originality of his completed band because, as he says, “I didn't know any other group with this exact setup.”¹²

⁷ Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray*, 86.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 148

And it was with that setup, minus the background singers, that Ray released his first real, smash hit, *I Got A Woman*, in 1955. Ray's trumpeter at the time, Renolds Richard, brought him the lyrics, and Ray "dressed them up a little and put them to music."¹³ The tune is a spiritual that Ray made into his own. "This spiritual-and-blues combination of mine was starting to hit,"¹⁴ he says, "I'd been singing spirituals since I was three, and I'd been hearing the blues for just as long. These were my two main musical currents. So what could be more natural than to combine them? It didn't take any thinking, didn't take any calculating. All the sounds were there, right at the top of my head."¹⁵

The sounds he speaks of include an abundant use of the gospel- and blues-derived I, IV, and V chords, which he only briefly strays from during the instrumental solo. The tune also has a simple and basic blues-like structure built into it, starting with the lyrics, which are sung in an AABA form similar to the traditional AAB form of the blues:

I got a woman, way over town, that's good to me. Oh, yeah.
I got a woman, way over town, that's good to me. Oh, yeah.
She give me money when I'm in need, yeah, she's a kind of friend indeed.
I got a woman, way over town, that's good to me. Oh, yeah.

She saves her lovin' early in the mornin', just for me. Oh, yeah.
She saves her lovin' early in the mornin', just for me. Oh, yeah.
She saves her lovin' just for me. Yeah, she love me so tenderly.
I got a woman, way over town, that's good to me. Oh, yeah.

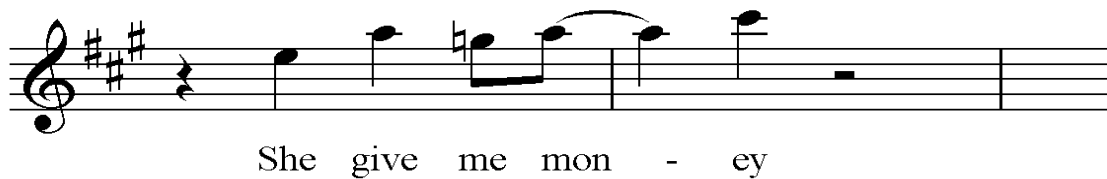
The overall form of the piece is similar to a jazz chart, with two verse statements, an instrumental solo, a "shout" section, a return to the verse, and an ending. There are no gospel-derived words in this particular tune, but there is, no doubt, an abundant use of gospel vocal devices. Starting with the opening melismatic, preacher-like treatment of the word "Well...", mixing that technique with the occasional raspy and growling inflection or upper-range shout or cry, bringing in speech-like singing during the shout section, and singing with an overall exuberant tone quality, Ray has used gospel elements to get the desired gut-bucket feeling of the blues, just from his vocals, alone.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray*, 150.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In fact, Ray's vocal technique in *I Got A Woman* is the main element that stays with him for the rest of his musical career. There is no doubt that this technique is 100% "Ray Charles." His biographer, David Ritz, who spent years *speaking* with Ray, says, "His style of singing is born out of his style of talking... He screams at will. He will moan a phrase rather than utter one. He will whisper to make a point. He will shout the news in your ear. His speech is full of surprises. His accent is essentially Southern, but he is able to bend away from that when he wants to. His voice is flexible... If he is excited, he howls in falsetto. If he is mellow or melancholy, he broods in the bass clef and transforms himself into a baritone."¹⁶ And these vocal qualities that Ray employs when he speaks, the vocal elements that make him who he is as a person, are the same elements that he uses when he sings. For example, Ray jumps into falsetto during the first verse:



And he dips into his mellow baritone range during the shout section:



And he shouts the news in your ear during the final verse:

¹⁵ Ibid., 149.

¹⁶ Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray*, 316-17.



“If I was inventing something new,” Ray says, “I wasn’t aware of it. In my mind, I was just bringing out more of me.”¹⁷ Whether he takes the credit or not, Ray’s *I Got A Woman* contained qualities of a new type of soul music -- qualities that other artists were sure to pick up on and make their own.

Following Ray Charles were hoards of soul artists, a majority of which were based in Memphis or Detroit. Stax Records in Memphis was responsible for recording and promoting some of the finest soul musicians that ever lived, including Wilson Pickett, Isaac Hayes, Don Covay, and Otis Redding. While Stax created its “sound” (with vocals further back in the mix, and vibrant horn parts in place of background vocals),¹⁸ the artistry was never compromised. The true “Stax sound” is “...whatever you feel, play it.”¹⁹ Much like the way Ray Charles preferred to work, at Stax they cut everything together on a one-track machine. The music, then, was automatically as raw and authentic as could be.

The Stax artists were very energetic. They would often address the crowd with phrases like, “Wave your hands in the air!” “Sing!, yah!” The lead singers would call out to their band, “Break it down!” “Oh, yah,” “Come on!” Like Ray Charles, they’d employ the use of talk-singing, falls, scoops, call and response, and gospel piano devices. In the 50s and 60s, soul music became even more exciting, with the addition of funky guitar licks, a more abundant use of the horn section that Ray gave birth to, more sharp cut-offs and wailing vocals, and more gospel-derived words.

¹⁷ Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray*, 148.

¹⁸ http://wn.wikipedia.org/Soul_Music, 6/06/06.

¹⁹ David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*.

It is during this time that some of the greatest and most long-lasting soul tunes surfaced, not all of which had to be overly energetic. “Soul music is often up-beat and fun,” says Isaac Hayes, “...all about dancing. But many of the songs were ballads -- nice and easy.”²⁰ And one of the greatest balladeers of the time was Otis Redding. He, like Ray, had musical roots in the church, and he even sang in the church choir. He was also born in the South, in Georgia. Otis was always performing and writing music, and even became a bit of a celebrity in his hometown after winning a local talent show for fifteen weeks straight.²¹ He eventually had his own music group and toured with several other artists in the early 60s. His band consisted of only four horns (two trumpets and two tenor saxophones), plus guitar, bass, drums, and organ.²²

Otis, first and foremost, was a musician with skills comparable to that of the great Ray Charles. Like Ray, “Otis would come in with horn lines in his mind and he would hum them to people and try to get them to play them the way he heard them in his head.”²³ Otis knew who he was as an artist, he had his own, distinct voice, and a unique template design. He has been described as a “master songsmith and ace interpreter of other writer’s material,” with the ability to make “the listener forget the original version of a song he covered.”²⁴

One of his most famous covers was his 1967 hit, *Try A Little Tenderness*. Al Bell says, “When you think of *Try A Little Tenderness*, you think ‘Otis Redding,’ and this was a standard song that had been done by all of the greats at that time. But once Otis Redding put the Otis Redding stamp on it, which was nothing but genuineness and purity and sincerity, the world forgot about all of the others.”²⁵

²⁰ *Soul Comes Home*, prod. by K2 Pictures & The Stax Museum of American Soul, 112 min., Sony Music Entertainment, 2003, DVD.

²¹ http://wn.wikipedia.org/Otis_Redding, 6/06/06

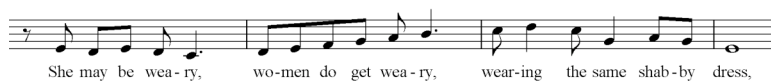
²² David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*.

²³ Jones, Booker T., *Soul Comes Home*, DVD.

²⁴ Hoye, Jacob, ed., *100 Greatest Albums* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 180.

²⁵ Bell, Al, *Soul Comes Home*, DVD.

So, what, really, was the “Otis stamp”? Besides genuineness and purity, in *Try A Little Tenderness* he displays a remarkable vulnerability in his vocals, utilizing even more “voices” than Ray Charles did in *I Got A Woman*. The vocal enters with eight bars of rubato, completely out of rhythm, with moving, flowing melodic lines that encompass a large vocal range. Otis “sings” the melody, hitting every pitch with perfection:



Right away, Otis is pure genius. When the tempo picks up and the piece has a sense of established time, his vocal quality becomes more confident, less vulnerable, and melodically more speech-like. Even though the same melodic notes are written, his delivery makes the listener hear something new. With the entrance of the organ patch sixteen bars later, the piece picks up in tempo even more, and Otis’ voice becomes more preacher-like. He adds more rasp and growl to his voice, and eventually, when we finally get to the next statement of “try a little tenderness,” he is screaming with passion and soul. In fact, that statement is so convincing that it’s almost as if it’s the first time we’ve heard it, even though those words have been sung a few times before. By the end of the tune, it is impossible to not be on the same page as Otis, feeling his words, moving to his music.

And Otis’ colleagues have all spoken about that natural musicality and sincerity in his voice and performance. They’ve said that, “You really got the feeling that this guy was talking to you,”²⁶ and “Even in his most kind of formulated hit songs...there was still a very natural...aspect to them where you could see that this wasn’t far from what this guy believed to be true.”²⁷ And it is true: One listen to Otis Redding, and if you have any soul at all, you believe him, you feel him, and you want more from him.

²⁶ McDonald, Michael, *Soul Comes Home*, DVD.

²⁷ Ibid.

But Otis' voice was not the most important ingredient in his music. Of equal importance were his arrangements. He had the ability to enhance the meaning of his lyrics with clever orchestration, hooks, rhythms, and rhythmic feels. He took the Stax idea of using horns in place of background vocals, and he ran with it. His orchestration in *Try A Little Tenderness* builds right along with his vocals. From the vulnerable, opening horn duet, to the added orchestration and picking up of the tempos, dynamics, and beats, to the screaming horns at the end, Otis has made this song fabulous, unique, and something to call his own. It's no wonder that no one has been able to top his version of the tune.

Otis' arrangements are not all the same. There is a huge difference, for example, between the elements he uses in *Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay* and those in *Try A Little Tenderness*. How, then, did these tunes become two of his best and most popular ballads? It's Otis' ability to capture the essence of the words and mood of a song, no matter what he's saying or doing. (Another amazing example is the tune *Respect*, which Otis wrote, but which became popular by Aretha Franklin.) That is the genius of Otis Redding. He has a knack for orchestrating and arranging music that fits the lyrics and vocals perfectly. Just as Ray Charles invented soul, Otis Redding (and his music) overflowed with it.

Around the time of Otis' tragic death (he was killed in a plane crash, at the young age of 26), another type of soul was emerging in Detroit that was more pop music-oriented than the Memphis sound. This music was even more rhythmical and gospel-influenced than it's counterparts, often including hand-clapping, a powerful bass line, and more untraditional instruments like violins and bells.²⁸ The music is not as authentic as the previous examples -- it consists of heavy orchestration, syrupy vocal timbres, and lots of vocal overdubbing. In a sense, the recordings are more mechanical, and less raw than those from Memphis. Could it be possible, then, for a truly authentic artist to emerge from Detroit? Possible, yes. Easy, no.

²⁸ http://wn.wikipedia.org/Soul_Music, 6/06/06.

The Detroit musicians were more polished, more produced. Their appearance, alone, was almost too clean-cut and classy. But their music was dynamic and exciting, and made progress toward what we now call “Motown.” One of the greatest artists to emerge was a thin, frail, stage-frightened guy named Marvin Gaye.

Marvin always wanted to be in show business. Just like Ray and Otis, his roots were in the church. In fact, Marvin’s father was a traveling minister. Marvin says, “...he’d go to different churches and he’d sing a lot, and I’d sing. I was just a kid, but I enjoyed it very much.”²⁹ When he got older, Marvin became an accomplished pianist and drummer. He was in the Air Force band in 1955, and formed his own doo-wop group in 1957. Later, he began hanging around music studios, doing as many odd jobs as he could, from studio drumming to janitorial jobs, to making the coffee. He was determined to become a star, and was eventually picked up by Berry Gordy of Motown Records.

Unlike Ray Charles, who was fortunate enough to always be able to do what he wanted with his music and his recordings, and Otis Redding, who was lucky enough to be at Stax, where most everyone could record their music without being “produced,” Marvin’s experience was not so satisfying. Ironically, Marvin’s biggest idol was Nat King Cole, but unlike Ray Charles, Marvin had a deeper appreciation and desire for Nat and his music: Marvin “wanted to sing standards... He wanted to be another Nat King Cole.”³⁰

And, boy, did Marvin have the voice for it. His tone was smooth and he had a huge, solid range. But, rather than let him do what he wanted, Berry Gordy of Motown took advantage of Marvin’s vocal ability and exploited him for commercial gain. Gordy’s then-wife recalls, “The voice was ‘almost a joke; to him this wasn’t the serious

²⁹ *Marvin Gaye: The Real Thing*, prod. by Reelin’ In The Years Productions and Universal Music Group International, Reelin’ In The Years Productions, 2006, DVD.

³⁰ Bowman, Rob, “Marvin Gaye: The Real Thing,” in *Marvin Gaye: The Real Thing*, prod. by Reelin’ In The Years Productions and Universal Music Group International, Reelin’ In The Years Productions, 2006, DVD Booklet, 06.

music that he truly yearned to do.”³¹ Motown songwriter Eddie Holland also recalls, “When I first heard him...I sort of scratched my head...normally a singer with such a beautiful voice will say ‘No, no, no that’s not my kind of song.’ It didn’t reflect that pretty, sweet tenor voice that he had. He was the only singer I have ever known to take a song...and do whatever it took to sell the song.”³²

So, for the first half of his career, as difficult as it is to admit, Marvin Gaye sold himself out. Even one of his most famous recordings, 1969’s *I Heard It Through The Grapevine*, was the result of his record company’s production line. Mainly, they pushed Marvin up into his upper vocal range, where he was actually quite uncomfortable singing. Regardless, (and remarkably), it was a brilliant tune that has stood the test of time.

Thankfully, as Marvin’s vocals developed, so did his opinions. After the death of Tammi Terrell, his long-time duet partner, in March of 1970, Marvin took his career into his own hands. He stopped touring (he hated it, anyway), and he stayed in the studio. He grew a beard, threw out the pressed suits and ties, and wore a knit cap on his head...and that is when he recorded what is sometimes regarded as “the greatest soul album ever made,”³³ *What’s Goin’ On*.

What’s Goin’ On, the tune, developed from a lyric idea by Obie Benson, one of the Four Tops. Marvin co-wrote it with Benson and Al Cleveland. The Four Tops did not want to record the song, as they felt it was too controversial for their audience, so Marvin Gaye stepped up to the plate. When Motown told Marvin they wouldn’t release the song, Marvin threatened to not record anything else until they did. So, the song was released, and because of its popularity and success, Motown eventually allowed Marvin to record the entire album, a concept album, “an incisive, cogent critique of social ills ranging from the then-raging Vietnam war and ecological blight to the plight of urban America.”³⁴

³¹ Rob Bowman, “Marvin Gaye: The Real Thing,” DVD Booklet, 07.

³² Ibid., 07-08.

³³ Jacob Hoye, *100 Greatest Albums*, 10.

³⁴ Rob Bowman, “Marvin Gaye: The Real Thing,” DVD Booklet, 04.

Just like Ray and Otis, by 1970 Marvin had his own musical template, which included three distinct voices. One voice was a smooth, sweet tenor, another a growling rasp, and the third, an amazing falsetto, which he uses an abundance of in *What's Goin' On*. The key to Marvin's vocals, in general, became "the completely unpredictable way he would manipulate timbre, dynamics, range, pitch, inflection, timing, and phrasing."³⁵ (Most likely, this unpredictability stemmed from his trying to be creative all those years, while singing with a noose wrapped around his neck.) His colleagues have said that, "the amazing thing about Marvin was his ability to take a rough-house, rock and roll, blues, R&B, any kind of song and make it his own."³⁶ Further, "he had the ability to add in a lot of gospel flavor."³⁷

And he did more than that in *What's Goin' On*. Besides his jazz-inflected vocals and the controversial topic of the tune, Marvin has experimented with extended jazz chords and an extended form. He's moved us away from the days of the I-IV-V progressions. He was the first artist to layer his own vocals on top of each other, which undoubtedly had an impact on future musical production. Most importantly, on this album, Marvin recorded his own drums, vocals, keyboards, and piano, and he was his own producer. He broke all previous soul, R&B, and Motown molds, "inspiring others to take hold of their careers."³⁸

So, the evolution of soul as outlined here looks something like this: Ray invented it, Otis smothered us with it, and Marvin used it to pioneer an entirely new, unpredictable style of music. Despite one slight bump in the road, these three artists learned their craft by copying and imitating, eventually creating for themselves a unique musical design, their very own musical template, that they could then apply to anything they wrote, arranged, produced, or sung.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 09.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rob Bowman, "Marvin Gaye: The Real Thing," DVD Booklet.

Since Marvin Gaye, soul music has gone in so many directions that it's hard to map. Marvin's "psychedelic soul" and James Brown's dance-oriented soul paved the way for funk and disco music. In the 80s, soul became more slickly produced and all-encompassing, and was coined as "contemporary R&B." The 1990s brought "neo soul" to the surface, which was a mixture of 1970s soul-styled vocals and instrumentation with contemporary R&B sound and hip hop beats.³⁹

One more offshoot of soul should be mentioned as well. Back in the 50s, soul actually had an impact on the rock-and-roll styles of such artists as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bo Diddley, and Fats Domino.⁴⁰ Today, with the popularity of American Idol winner Taylor Hicks, this combination of soul and rock-and-roll has been dubbed, "rock-and-soul." And, so, the pressure is now on, to see if Taylor can survive the dreaded record company production "noose" and create an album of soul music, just like the great ones before him, that pays homage to it's roots, while utilizing the template of original ideas that Taylor has already crafted for himself. So, we eagerly wait for Taylor to give us his "soul thing," which almost surely will debut at #1. It certainly is an exciting time, once again, for soul music.

³⁹ http://wn.wikipedia.org/Rhythm_and_Blues, 6/06/06.

⁴⁰ David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 89.