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MISSISSIPPI'S SOCIALIST EXPERIMENT:

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RADICAL VISION FOR JACKSON

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DIANE ROBERTS, CORMAC McCARTHY, YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA, ROSE McCLARNEY
AND FREDERICK McKINDRA ON BLACK SELFHOOD IN LITTLE ROCK*



Soul Meeting

BY
JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

Wilson Pickett was singing nonsense. It was a sunny midsummer afternoon in Englewood, New Jersey, but the soul legend was toiling in his basement studio, fumbling around with words to a song he couldn't figure out how to finish. "Soul Clan is blab-nab-nab," he mumbled in his sacred rasp. His band played through as the singer tried again, "Soul Clan is dab-nab-nab."

Gathered around him were some old friends: Solomon Burke, Don Covay, Joe Tex, and Ben E. King. The five men had convened at Pickett's house to prepare for the at-long-last reunion of the Soul Clan, the onetime supergroup of Atlantic Records r&b singers that hadn't existed in more than a decade. The following evening, July 24, 1981, the revived group would be performing at a sold-out show at the Savoy in Manhattan.

Leon Rubenhold, Pickett's guitarist in the eighties, remembered that day in Englewood when I called him to ask about the Soul Clan. "The rehearsal was very disorganized and without much direction," he said. "The only person that had their shit together was Ben E. King." Rubenhold had kept a recording of the session, and a couple days later, he sent me a digitized copy. It's a curious piece of pop music history: the only known live recording of the Soul Clan, twenty-three minutes of fits and starts and spontaneous commentary that capture the group in all its chaotic glory, a document of strained cooperation and bickering that, every so often, flickers into brief moments of shared musical transcendence.

For the majority of the recording, the group was working out a new tune to serve as their reunion show's introductory theme,

a mission statement for a project the men always had a hard time defining. Pickett's question, the crux of their unfinished, untitled song, was one the old friends had never stopped asking in the years since they first joined together in the late sixties: *Soul Clan is . . . what, exactly?*

"Soul Clan is happiness," Pickett sang next over the E to C-sharp minor progression. "Soul Clan is loneliness," he tried again, before cutting the take short. "You're playing the wrong chord!" he shouted at the backing band, who by this point had grown frustrated themselves, confused as to why they hadn't yet begun rehearsing their extensive set list for the following evening. ("We spent so much time putzing around with that Soul Clan theme," said Rubenhold.)

Ben E. King took over the microphone. "Soul Clan is love and joy," he ventured.

Covay belted the next line, "Soul Clan is Ben E. King," before the ever-humble Burke offered: "Soul Clan is Solomon Burke."

Burke tried again: "Soul Clan is Don Covay, Soul Clan is Don Covay."

"Soul Clan is Wicked Pickett," Covay sang right back.

Pickett took up the mic once more: "A lot of y'all don't know what the Soul Clan is," he shouted to his imaginary audience. "And I wanna say . . . Soul Clan is peace and joy."

His next line isn't sung directly into the microphone, so it's hard to tell, precisely, what he mumbles, but it sounds a whole lot like this: "Help us with the Soul Clan."

In January, I took a train to Queens to visit a secret shrine of sixties soul. The former home of Don Covay sits on a quiet, suburban street where his daughter, Ursula, now fifty-three, has lived almost her entire life. It was a few days after the presidential inauguration and the Women's March, and the city was buzzing with talk of communal energy, the radicalism of togetherness. A fitting time to think about the Soul Clan, a mostly forgotten group whose chaotic commitment to collectivity struck me then, more than ever, as profound.

Ursula was in a reflective mood. The two-year anniversary of her father's death was less than a week away, and she had brought out a meticulously organized scrapbook that chronicled his career. "Let's date it back to where I remember," she said, flipping the binder open to a photo of her father with his Soul Clan comrades.

"Ben E. King," she said, pointing at the singer. "My father and Ben E. King were very good friends. I'm talking very good friends. He really got me through my father's death. He was very true." She pointed to the man dressed in a three-piece suit and a cowboy hat. "Solomon Burke. When my father first got sick, he was there. Very spiritual, very kind. He used to call me his goddaughter."

She turned to another photo from 1981. The quintet posed in front of the same living room window that was just a few feet from where we were sitting. Ursula, who is quiet and reserved, like her father, paused for a moment and looked up from the scrapbook. "Let me tell you, this house brings back such memories of all the personalities that have been here." The Covay household was a place where celebrity musicians gathered for barbecues and song swaps, the unofficial clubhouse for Southern soul in New York City. "You know when you watch those old movies and everybody's having a good time?" she said. "It was one of those."

Though we often conceptualize the soul greats—Etta, Percy, Marvin, Aretha—as distinct, iconic individuals, sixties r&b was genuinely collaborative in spirit and communal in nature. During a time when the music industry had cracked open its doors to black popular entertainers without fully letting them in, young singers like Pickett, Burke, and Covay, relegated to the r&b charts and the chitlin' circuits in the small world of Southern soul, came of age together in the backseats of cramped tour vans and the back stages of unkempt barrooms. When they got famous, they remained the closest of friends.

By the tumultuous summer of 1967, Southern soul music had become a cultural force and its icons had become keenly aware that they were worth more than what they were seeing in returns. For the r&b stars of Atlantic Records, it was a time of budding political consciousness. Joe Tex had become involved with the Nation of Islam. Burke, never one to infuse politics into his music, would soon debut a new verse for his version of the New Orleans standard "Get Out of My Life, Woman." ("Get out and vote now baby, I might run for President," he sang in October '68, a month before Nixon was elected. "You won't have a chicken in every pot, but I'll give out stamps to pay your rent.")

That summer, Otis Redding called his friend James Brown. "I want us to form a union of black entertainers," Brown would



later recall Redding saying. "It would give us more leverage in the business. No more getting messed over by the white promoters and managers." Brown declined (A union? Why would the Hardest Working Man in Show Business do that?) but Burke, Covay, Tex, King, and Pickett rallied around Redding's idea. The concept had been "kicked around for close to two years," Peter Gural-

nick writes of the Soul Clan in the 1986 book *Sweet Soul Music*, one of the few available chronicles of the group. The artists had sold tens of millions of records collectively, and as soul was beginning to dip on the charts after dominating through the mid-sixties, the men decided to see what sort of musical potential, and perhaps sociopolitical influence, they could harness as a communal whole.

Fifty years later, Ursula Covay is just one of several children of the Soul Clan, many of them musicians themselves, who have recently begun to rediscover and fully appreciate their parents' bond. In the past few years, they've reconnected with one another, tossed around ideas for next-generation reunions, and, echoing the spirit of their fathers' friendships, commiserated over

their own peculiar struggles navigating estate payments and convoluted publishing royalties.

Speaking with Veda Pickett, Wilson's daughter, I was struck by how resolute she was in her anger, not about her own father's legacy, but about Solomon Burke's, convinced that he's never received the credit that he deserves as a songwriter. As Ursula explained, her own father's experience was echoed in those of his comrades: "I don't know everybody's individual story. But I could pretty much tell you that if my dad was sideswiped, misinterpreted, underrated, under-acknowledged, under-known, under-*everything*, then I know they have been too." Today, the Soul Clan children are much less interested in what their fathers' group achieved on paper—musically or otherwise—than they are inspired and imprinted by its collective spirit.

"They were brothers in music," Ursula said. "They wrote together, hung out together, traveled together, fought together, loved together, and made deals together." That's the word most of the children of the Soul Clan use today to describe their fathers' bond. Brothers.

A fundamental principle of physics is the difference between potential and kinetic energy. Hold an object ten feet above the ground and its energy is entirely potential, or stored, waiting to be unleashed. Once released, the object picks up speed, and the potential energy converts into kinetic energy, the energy of motion.

The Soul Clan was pure potential energy. From the outset, the group was a gathering of passions, a bouquet of motives, each member with his own conception of what the communion represented. Covay viewed it as a rejoinder to Sinatra's Rat Pack, a way to formalize and rebrand his musical friendships. Pickett saw it as a way to prove his standing among his contemporaries and, perhaps, to earn a load of cash.

Burke had the largest dreams, conceiving of the group as a grand experiment in black autonomy and entrepreneurship that could help shift some of the power, money, and influence away from the white-run music industry. He dreamed that the Soul Clan would buy land, invest in black-owned businesses in the South, and create trust funds, scholarships, and foundations to help support future generations of black musicians.

The idea, Burke would say years later, was to "benefit our people, and to benefit our own selves and our own families, to incorporate our own publishing companies, to establish our own writing pool, to agree to do each other's songs, and to keep each other's names alive in the records, and the songs and the shows."

Around the time of Redding's sudden death in late 1967, Burke requested one million dollars in funding from Atlantic Records. Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun's label, having just been purchased by Warner Bros., was entirely uninterested in their soul roster's extra-musical ambitions. (When Wexler is asked about the proposition years later, Guralnick writes that he "just laughs it off as a typical Solomon scam and fantasy.") The Soul Clan's grand vision was swiftly rejected.

Solomon Burke's dream was on my mind last December when I met with his daughter, Melanie Burke McCall, who was spending a few weeks recording a new album of gospel and r&b in the wood-paneled basement studio in a friend's home in New Haven. "We used to call Wilson Pickett 'Uncle Wilson' and Don Covay 'Uncle Don,'" she told me within moments of meeting her. Speaking about her father, Melanie was equal parts bitter and nostalgic. At fifty-seven, she is much like him, an effusive, expressive person who's just as prone to conspiratorial resentment as she is likely to joyfully erupt, mid-conversation, into song.

When I brought up the notorious million-dollar advance the Soul Clan had requested from Atlantic, Melanie's eyes got wide. "I would say they were probably laughed at. Back in that day, you know what they called us. Like, 'Nigga, seriously? You gonna start a business? Not without me being the head of it. You can have *this* much of it.'" She pinched her thumb and index finger together. "As small as a mustard seed. That's how black artists were treated. It was, 'We're going to make this look good so here's a Cadillac and some new clothes. We'll help you buy your new house, but now give us all your royalties.'"

At one point, Melanie pulled out a huge file of legal documents—birth certificates and songwriting contracts—she'd put together for a legal case over estate payments that she claims have been denied to her and to her siblings. Melanie sees it as part of a larger struggle, the same struggle that her

father faced during the decades he spent fighting against an industry he viewed as deeply hostile to black entertainers.

"Though the Clan's plan died before it reached the communities," writes Denise Sullivan in 2011's *Keep On Pushing: Black Power Music from Blues to Hip-Hop*, "Burke's idea for a benevolent, black-owned corporation would become manifest in later decades." Between Russell Simmons, Puff Daddy, and Beyoncé, it's hard to think of a major black entertainer whose framework for their business empires-cum-artistic collective can't be traced back to the Soul Clan, a group whose "chance on change," Sullivan writes, "proved to be a down payment toward the security of all musicians who followed."

During their brief existence, the Soul Clan insisted upon complete autonomy, refusing all outside support. Perhaps as a result, they released only one single: "Soul Meeting" b/w "That's How It Feels" in the summer of 1968. The songs were written and produced by Covay, and he recorded them with help from Bobby Womack. The rest of the group (including Arthur Conley, who had replaced Redding, and minus Pickett, who had left the band) separately recorded their individual vocals. Considering its scraped-together origins, the B-side is a moving declaration of camaraderie; if the Soul Clan strove to be a symbolic r&b union, "That's How It Feels" was their picket-line protest, with its five members testifying to the hardship they faced growing up in the Jim Crow South. "Soul Meeting," the more up-tempo, if generic, of the two songs, was chosen as the single. According to *Billboard*, one disc jockey in Charlotte was convinced "Soul Meeting" would become a hit; another, in Tallulah, Louisiana, deemed it their "Leftfield Pick" one week, but that was it. The record entered the charts in August, just barely gracing the R&B Top 40. By September, it had completely vanished.

When the Soul Clan re-formed thirteen years later, they once again had no managers to negotiate internal squabbles and mounting pressures, no agents to broker deals, and no handlers to monitor their backstage partying. You can hear on Rubenhold's rehearsal demo that tempers were flaring on the eve of their live debut: "You shouldn't have said that," Pickett calls out to Burke at one point. "You shouldn't have

said Solomon Burke bigger than the Soul Clan by yourself."

Nonetheless, the group was deeply optimistic about its second chance. The months leading up to their 1981 reunion found the men at their scheming and dreaming best: talks of a Broadway engagement, an album, an educational documentary film. A contract was drawn up for a thirty-five-date North American tour, with plans to perform in Europe and Japan. Potential energy.

"These five guys are the black Beatles," Sparkie Martin, promoter of the Savoy reunion, said at the time. "Here is a group that has had 125 years collectively of r&b experience, who have sold 25 million records between them, and who are the pioneers of what they do. And they can come back like 'Beatlemania.'"

But despite a flurry of media excitement and celebrity extravagance surrounding their Manhattan debut (Mick Jagger was in the audience), the show itself, as one reviewer put it, was a "disorganized, disappointing reunion that started late, peaked rarely, and ended with organizer Don Covay walking mikeless among the others with a tambourine hung around his neck like a dog collar."

When I asked Martin how far any of the conversations about the group's big plans—the tour, the album, the film, the Broadway show—ever went after their Savoy performance, he shook his head: "Nowhere."

The second generation of the Soul Clan has come to understand their fathers' collaboration not so much as a tangible musical group but rather as a guiding spirit, one that still endures today, long after its last living members have passed. Solomon Burke's son Gemini has formed what he calls a "Soul Clan Two," Sons of Soul, with Joe Tex Jr. and the sons of Jackie Wilson and Johnnie Taylor. "The Soul Clan didn't dissolve," said Ursula Covay. "I don't want to say the word 'end,' because 'end' puts a period on it."

Of its original members, Don Covay, the group's foremost cheerleader and architect, understood this best, constantly searching for occasions to will the group's dream of collective brotherhood into existence. "The kind of love we had," he once said of the group, "was an everlasting situation." In 1989, Covay's close friend Paul Shaffer, David Letterman's bandleader, asked Covay

if he'd sing on Shaffer's new album. "How about this," Covay responded. "How about we reunite the Soul Clan?"

Joe Tex had passed away, and Burke declined, for financial reasons, to be involved, but Covay began organizing once more, arranging a third coming of the group for Shaffer's album, *Coast to Coast*. Covay, Ben E. King, Wilson Pickett, and unofficial member Bobby Womack reunited to sing on "What Is Soul."

It was another fitting question for the Soul Clan, one without a firm answer. "Soul is Jerry Wexler and Ahmet," Covay sang in the song. "The funkier you are, the bigger Cadillac you get." Hearing the line for the first time, I thought of Melanie's words: *here's a Cadillac and some new clothes . . . now give us all your royalties*. Covay's line is humorous, but it also feels like an open wound.

In 1992, Covay suffered a debilitating stroke that would leave him largely immobile for the rest of his life, eliminating any chance of another reunion. Still, the Soul Clan's surviving members continued to cling to the group's ideal. Until his death in 2010, Solomon Burke, for one, never stopped talking about the Soul Clan, shouting out the group during his concerts and constantly reminding interviewers how unjustly they had been treated.

In their later years, the Soul Clan members kept in touch with each other's families. Every so often, Burke would check in on Ursula, she told me. "Hey goddaughter," he'd say, "how you doing?" During one such phone call several years before Burke died, Ursula, who served on the PTA at her daughter's Catholic school, was telling him about the school choir. Burke interrupted: "Your school has a choir?"

A year later, he called back. "You still involved with that choir?" Burke asked. "Listen—find me three people in that choir who are doing excellent in school, who are trying hard and have a love for the music," he told her. Burke laid out his plans for a musical scholarship. He had one stipulation: the money, he insisted, would not be given under his own name.

So when three girls received scholarships later that year, they were likely confused, but perhaps a bit curious, when they read on their certificate that their scholarship had been funded on behalf of something called the Soul Clan. 🐣

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