

Syllabus for Sweet Soul Music: The Golden Age of Soul in the 1960s and 1970s

Fromm Institute

7 Wednesdays, 1-3pm

September 12-November 7 (no class September 19 and October 10)

Instructor: Richie Unterberger, richie@richieunterberger.com

Week One

I. The Roots of Soul

A. Electric blues, vocal jazz, gospel, and rhythm and blues establish themselves as the leading forms of African-American popular music by the middle of the twentieth century.

B. All of these forms feed into early rock'n'roll, including the rock'n'roll of mid-to-late 1950s stars like Little Richard and Fats Domino.

C. Black doo wop groups like the Platters, the Coasters, and Hank Ballard & the Midnighters innovate the use of vocal harmonies in rock'n'roll.

Other themes: The role of independent record labels in rhythm and blues; the influence of the African-American church in giving many of the performers their first singing experience; R&B radio stations bringing music to black (and sometimes white) audiences.

II. The Birth of Soul

A. Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and Jackie Wilson are the most important performers in establishing the mixture of R&B, rock'n'roll, gospel, and pop that start to coalesce into soul music by the late 1950s and early 1960s.

B. Record companies and producers start to introduce orchestral instruments into R&B arrangements to devise the kind of sophisticated arrangements heard throughout soul music, especially with artists like the Drifters and Ben E. King.

C. Detroit and Chicago become the chief hubs of northern soul music, especially as Motown Records starts to take off in Detroit, and Curtis Mayfield and Jerry Butler become major figures in Chicago.

D. R&B in southern regions starts to mature into a distinct southern soul music sound, especially in Memphis and New Orleans.

Other themes: Studios specializing in soul music start to get established in Detroit, Memphis, Muscle Shoals, and New Orleans; the civil rights movement starts gaining steam, creating more opportunities for commercial breakthroughs for black artists.

Week Two

I. The Motown Explosion

A. In the mid-1960s, Motown Records becomes not just the most successful soul label, but the most successful independent record company of all time, and the biggest African-American-owned business of any kind in the US.

B. A wealth of artists have huge Motown hits combining soul, pop, and expert production, including the Supremes, Martha & the Vandellas, the Marvelettes, the Temptations, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson & the Miracles, Mary Wells, the Four Tops, and Stevie Wonder.

Other themes: Motown's slick image ensures TV exposure and large white audiences; the session musicians, songwriters, and producers who play behind-the-scenes roles in Motown's success; the assembly line production-like process at Motown, overseen by owner Berry Gordy, Jr.

II. Other Mid-'60s Soul Centers in the Midwest and East Coast

A. Curtis Mayfield becomes the central figure in Chicago soul, both as leader of the Impressions and singer-songwriter/producer for other artists like Major Lance.

B. New York and Philadelphia studios, songwriters, and producers help craft a glossier brand of pop-soul with singers like Dionne Warwick, Maxine Brown, and Gladys Knight.

Other themes: Non-Motown soul from Michigan; independent labels continue to mushroom; British Invasion bands pay tribute to soul artists by covering many of their songs.

Week Three

I. Southern Soul: Memphis

A. Centered around the Stax Records label and studio, Memphis becomes the leading center of southern soul with artists like Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, Carla Thomas, Rufus Thomas, Booker T. & the MG's, and Wilson Pickett.

Other themes: Non-Stax soul in Memphis; Stax's influence on rock groups like the Rolling Stones; whites play important behind-the-scenes roles in Memphis/southern soul as songwriters, producers, and record label owners.

II. Southern Soul in Other Cities

A. New Orleans generates major soul performers like Irma Thomas, Lee Dorsey, and Aaron Neville, but can't compete with Detroit and Memphis, in part because of its failure to launch a major soul record label.

B. Muscle Shoals, Alabama becomes a major center of soul production with artists like Percy Sledge.

C. Not specifically based in any certain city, James Brown becomes a superstar by planting the seeds for soul to grow into funk.

Other themes: The suppression of African-American business in New Orleans; notable soul stars not based in major southern soul centers, like Joe Tex; the growing popularity of soul in Europe.

Week Four

I. Soul in the Late 1960s

A. Aretha Franklin becomes the biggest soul star, and one of the biggest stars in all of popular music, after moving to Atlantic Records in 1967 and adopting an earthier, more gospel-fired style.

B. Motown continues its unparalleled winning streak with more hits by the Supremes, Temptations, Miracles, Stevie Wonder, and some new acquisitions, like Gladys Knight & the Pips and the Jackson Five. It also starts to venture into socially conscious and psychedelic-influenced material, but is hurt by the breakup of the original Supremes and the departure of top songwriting/production team Holland/Dozier/Holland.

Other themes: Motown initiates moving operations to Los Angeles; social consciousness also starts to make itself felt in the work of artists like Nina Simone and Les McCann.

II. More Soul in the Late 1960s

A. James Brown pioneers funk by emphasizing rhythm and vocal sloganeering. Sly Stone pioneers a more eclectic form of funk drawing in elements of psychedelic rock.

B. Stax Records is hurt by the death of Otis Redding and the loss of Sam & Dave, but continues to generate hits by veteran artists and new additions like Isaac Hayes and the Staple Singers.

C. Smooth soul with vocal harmonies becomes a Philadelphia trademark, particularly with the producer/songwriters Thom Bell, Kenny Gamble, and Leon Huff.

Other themes: The effects of inner-city riots and the assassination of Martin Luther King on the soul scene; Stax Records almost dealt a fatal blow by losing its back catalog to Atlantic Records

Week Five

I. Motown and Stax in the Early 1970s

A. Motown continues to land huge hits in the early 1970s, but some artists stop having hits and/or leave the label, which relocates to Los Angeles. Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder demand artistic independence, resulting in more ambitious music geared to full albums as well as singles.

B. Stax reaches a new peak with the Wattstax festival and movie, but runs into financial trouble that will lead to its closure in the mid-1970s. Elsewhere in Memphis, a new superstar, Al Green, emerges at Hi Records.

Other themes: Motown's mostly unsuccessful attempt to get into the movie business; the breakups of the tight-knit studio systems at Motown and Stax.

II. Other Soul of the Early 1970s

A. Social commentary in soul reaches new audaciousness with Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly* and Sly Stone's *There's a Riot Goin' On*, though Stone will soon be derailed by band and drug problems.

B. Militant poetry makes its way into soul music with the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Watts Prophets.

C. Soul at its sweetest and most romantic is exemplified by Philadelphia-produced soul acts like the Stylistics and the O'Jays.

Other themes: the disadvantages of corporate distribution of Philadelphia and Memphis labels; the use of soul music in blaxploitation movie soundtracks.

Week Six

I. Blue-Eyed and Brown-Eyed Soul

A. Many white singers successfully adapt a soul style, sometimes gaining popularity with black audiences. Examples include the Righteous Brothers, the Rascals, and the Box Tops.

B. Some Latino artists draw heavily on soul music, sometimes getting labeled with the term "Brown-Eyed Soul." Examples include Thee Midnites, Joe Cuba, and Pucho and His Latin Soul Brothers.

Other themes: the specialized Latino audience for soul music in Southern California; the "beach music" audience for blue-eyed soul on the southern East Coast.

II. Soul Music in Britain

A. Soul's influence on British rock groups of the 1960s, including the Beatles and Rolling Stones, and the singers who were most influenced by soul in their vocal style, such as Eric Burdon of the Animals and Stevie Winwood of the Spencer Davis Group/Traffic.

B. British women rock singers with a heavy soul influence, such as Dusty Springfield, Lulu, and Julie Driscoll.

Other themes: the reception of US soul stars when they toured the UK; American record label attempts to record British singers like Dusty Springfield and Lulu in the US with soul musicians.

Week Seven

I. Reggae Music

A. In the 1960s, though mostly unnoticed elsewhere in the world, an R&B/soul-inspired music takes root in Jamaica. Using the island's more irregular rhythms and dialect, it evolves from ska into reggae by the end of the decade.

B. Led by Bob Marley & the Wailers, as well as the cult popularity of the movie *The Harder They Come*, reggae adds some social consciousness and rock influence, and makes commercial breakthroughs in the UK and US by the mid-1970s.

Other themes: The chaotic Jamaican record business; the role of Island Records' Chris Blackwell in popularizing reggae overseas.

II. Other Soul Offshoots

A. Emphasizing insistent dance rhythms and glossy orchestration, disco becomes huge in the mid-1970s.

B. Many of the original soul stars lose momentum and stop having hits. But some continue to be popular, sometimes by keeping a classic soul base while expanding into new directions, like Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson.

Other themes: the controversial, sometimes negative reactions sparked by disco; soul music's legacy in museums for Motown and Stax Records.