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Sam Cooke's Wonderful World; A Soul Pioneer, Celebrated in CDs, DVD

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"He had the look, he had the voice, he had the manner, he had the charm and he had the savoir-faire."



That's Aretha Franklin's judgment on Sam Cooke, a gorgeous man, a sweet, smooth tenor for the ages with charisma that transcended musical and racial boundaries. Not simply a key architect of soul music, Cooke was also a business visionary who took control of his publishing and started his own label in 1959, one of the first artists, black or white, to seize control of the means of production.

At age 33, Cooke was shot dead in December 1964 in a seedy California motel under mysterious circumstances. The hotel manager who shot Cooke told police she mistook him for a robber and feared for her life; the shooting was ruled a justifiable homicide.

Now, almost 40 years later, the singer's profile is nowhere near what it should be. There are other crucial soul men and women, of course, but none with the ambitious aspirations and all-around portfolio of Sam Cooke.

With the notion that hearing is believing, ABKCO/Universal Records recently released a handful of remastered Super Audio CD titles: the compilations "Sam Cooke: Portrait of a Legend" and "Keep Movin' On," the live "Sam Cooke at the Copa" and his last studio album, "Ain't That Good News" (most of which is included in the compilations). Also available is a DVD called "Sam Cooke: Legend," a much-expanded version of a VH1 documentary; the narrative script was crafted by Peter Guralnick, who also contributes extensive liner notes to the CDs.

Though Daniel Wolff's fine "You Send Me: The Life and Times of Sam Cooke" was published in 1996, Guralnick has spent the last seven years working on a new Cooke biography, to be published next year. And Cooke's first, stellar career in gospel is chronicled in a recent three-CD, 84-song set, "The Complete Specialty Recordings of Sam Cooke With the Soul Stirrers."

As one of his memorable songs put it, "(Ain't That) Good News."

Often enough, Cooke's material was great, from the emotion- drenched gospel of his early years to the socially conscious passion of his last significant recording, the civil rights anthem "A Change Is Gonna Come." Franklin, on the "Legend" DVD, notes that in his heart and soul, Cooke was always a gospel singer, as evidenced in later songs like "Good News," "Meet Me at Mary's Place" and "Bring It on Home to Me," with then-gospel singer Lou Rawls providing rich call-and-response harmony.

Even Cooke's first massive pop hit, "You Send Me," rightfully recognized for its seamlessly innovative meld of R&B and pop, is built upon vocal characteristics more common to gospel. So it's entirely appropriate that "Portrait of a Legend" is bookended by Soul Stirrers classics, "Touch the Hem of His Garment" and "Jesus Gave Me Water." That 1951 track was Cooke's first recording with the Soul Stirrers, and it not only was their biggest single but also augured the distinctive style -- particularly the sweet, effortless ululation -- that would influence generations of singers.

The "Legend" DVD is the perfect Cooke primer, not only because it provides a career overview and includes two hours of bonus footage of family members, collaborators and friends interviewed for the project, but because it gives us a window, albeit small, into the singer's personality. Watching ancient television clips of performances and interviews, one senses an ambitious creative force who could well have become not only one of the biggest musical stars ever -- during his lifetime, Cooke was RCA's second-biggest seller, behind only Elvis Presley -- but a major force on the corporate side.

Equally revealing is "Portrait of a Legend: 1951-1964," a 30- track overview featuring key material from Cooke's solo career at RCA and ABKCO. As with ABKCO's massive reintroduction of the early Rolling Stones catalogue, these digitally remastered, dual-layer hybrid Super Audio format discs (they play in both regular CD and SACD machines) sound so clear and immediate, it's like being in the studio.

After a lengthy career as lead singer with the Soul Stirrers, Cooke became the first gospel star to make the transition into R&B when his 1957 solo debut, "You Send Me," went to No. 1 on the pop and R&B charts. Though he had managed to become an idol and sex symbol among teenage girls in the church community while somehow remaining on the right side of church elders, Cooke had grander ambitions. He wanted a mainstream pop audience. As Guralnick notes, Cooke's role models were Sammy Davis Jr., Harry Belafonte and Nat King Cole, sterling examples of "colorblind success."

Which explains why a fair amount of Cooke's early Keen and RCA label recordings are so mundane. Sweet romantic pablum like "Only Sixteen," "Cupid" and "(What a Wonderful World)" and lite-Latin tracks like "Everybody Likes to Cha-Cha-Cha" are charming and pretty much always redeemed by Cooke's exquisite vocals, but much of the early production -- sappy backing vocals, lugubrious strings, metronomic pulses -- is as milquetoast as Pat Boone's catalogue. Even the glorious "Chain Gang" sounds like a soft-focus premonition of gangsta rap (an image reinforced on the DVD in performance footage featuring Cooke and others sporting prison outfits!).

In the final two years of his recording career, Cooke began exploring some new sounds, represented on the final third of "Portrait of a Legend" and the 23-track "Keep Movin' On" (originally released last year, now upgraded to SACD). Particularly after a 1963 British tour in which he realized that overseas audiences preferred a grittier brand of soul music, Cooke came through with such party- hearty anthems as "Good Times," "Another Saturday Night" and "Yeah Man," which would be a bigger hit when Cooke disciples Otis Redding and Arthur Conley rewrote it as "Sweet Soul Music."

"Shake," cut at Cooke's last recording session in November 1964, was covered by Redding, as was Cooke's last great song, "A Change Is Gonna Come." Cooke's first overtly political song was inspired by Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and the singer's experiences touring in a segregated South. While it's not Cooke's best-known song, it may be his most important one, a template of things that might have been had he lived. In terms of performance and production, it's widely recognized as his most powerful achievement, a mixture of gospel faith, political purpose and musical genius.

"Sam Cooke at the Copa," recorded July 6 and 7, 1964, at New York's fabled Copacabana, was redemption for Cooke. Six years earlier, convinced he was ready to win over a conservative white audience, an underprepared Cooke had given a disastrous performance there. This time he was ready, and though the material is mostly cabaret ("Bill Bailey," "The Best Things in Life Are Free," an invigorated "Tennessee Waltz") and popified folk

("If I Had a Hammer," "Blowin' in the Wind," "Frankie and Johnny"), Cooke rises to the occasion, though some may prefer RCA's grittier "Live at the Harlem Square Club, 1963."

Sam Cooke, son of a Baptist minister, was 15 when he joined the Highway QCs. At 19, he graduated to the Soul Stirrers, one of the most popular gospel ensembles of all time, replacing Rebert Harris, one of the genre's greatest vocalists. Harris was himself a major architect of gospel music, a modernist who brought the lead singer out front and made falsetto and melismatic phrasing key performance elements. Cooke didn't sing lead on all of the Soul Stirrers' tracks, but he was the chief singer (and occasional songwriter) over the last half of his seven-year stay.

"The Complete Specialty Recordings of Sam Cooke With the Soul Stirrers" explains why gospel would remain a crucial influence on Cooke's pop recordings. You can hear the antecedents of his floating phrasing and smooth lilting yodel as early as 1953's "I'd Give Up All My Sins and Serve the Lord." It's not all gospel, of course: The collection includes Cooke's tentative forays into pop territory, like "Lovable" (a secular remake of the gospel hit "Wonderful"), "I'll Come Running Back to You" and "Happy in Love."

The same 1957 recording sessions produced "You Send Me," but Specialty balked, afraid of losing both Cooke and the gospel audience. Released soon after on Keen Records, it sent Sam Cooke across the sacred-secular divide and made him the first gospel star to achieve pop stardom, as well.