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VH1 SINGS SAM COOKE'S PRAISES

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[Illustration]

Caption: Biographer Peter Guralnick (right) wrote VH1's "Legends" documentary about Sam Cooke, which airs today at noon. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM HERDE

[TELEVISION REVIEW]

VH1 "Legends: Sam Cooke" / Executive producer, Bill Flanagan; producer, Mary Wharton; writer, Peter Guralnick; editor, Alex Hall / 60 MIN.

By Steve Morse, Globe Staff

VH1's "Legends" merits another round of applause for its new show on soul singer Sam Cooke, who crossed over from gospel to pop during the late '50s and early '60s, influencing everyone from the Beatles to Aretha Franklin. Cooke not only was an angelic singer but became a pivotal figure in the civil rights movement with his anthem "A Change Is Gonna Come."

This new documentary was written by Boston's Peter Guralnick, who is also penning a biography of Cooke. Guralnick is probably best known for his epic two-volume biography of Elvis Presley, but he's spent years researching, interviewing, and profiling blues and soul artists. He clearly couldn't resist the urge to write about Cooke, who was RCA Records' second-best-selling act (second to Presley, of course) during that era. In addressing Cooke's influence, especially on young rockers of the day, Guralnick writes that "the Stones wanted to meet him, the Beatles wanted to tour with him, and Rod Stewart wanted to be him."

The Cooke documentary airs today on VH1 at noon. It's the last airing (the premiere actually fell around Christmastime, meaning it got lost), and not to be missed. This is a magnificent one-hour show, tracing Cooke from his birth in Clarksdale, Miss., in 1931, through his Chicago upbringing (as a minister's son) to gospel stardom with the Soul Stirrers and a soaring pop career with the hits "You Send Me," "Chain Gang" (based on his own observations in the South), "Wonderful World," "Cupid," and "Twistin' the Night Away."

Performance footage is culled from the Ed Sullivan and Merv Griffin shows. Interviews are done with the likes of Franklin (whose first tour was as opening act for Cooke), Lou Rawls, and Allen Klein (Cooke's business manager, who also worked with the Beatles). There are poignant clips with his family that reveal a more tragic undercurrent (his first wife was killed in a car crash, and his 18-month-old son died in a swimming-pool accident). But there's also comic relief in scenes with his friend, boxer Cassius Clay (later Muhammad Ali), for whom Cooke produced a record.

Cooke died tragically young - shot at age 33 by a hotel manager in Los Angeles after Cooke confronted her, thinking she was the partner of a woman who had just robbed him while he was in the shower. The documentary offers no new revelations on the shooting but does provide a sturdy glimpse of one of soul music's greatest talents and a man of conscience who was among the first acts to refuse to do segregated concerts. There's also a new two-CD release on Cooke, "Keep on Movin'," which, together with this documentary, focuses long-overdue attention on this soul pioneer.