

# **The Funky Diaspora:**

**The Diffusion of Soul and Funk Music across  
The Caribbean and Latin America**

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## Introduction

In 1972, a British band made up of nine West Indian immigrants recorded a funk song infused with Caribbean percussion called “The Message.” The band was Cymande, whose members were born in Jamaica, Guyana, and St. Vincent before moving to England between 1958 and 1970.<sup>1</sup> In 1973, a year after Cymande recorded “The Message,” the song was reworked by a Panamanian funk band called *Los Fabulosos Festivales*. The *Festivales* titled their fuzzed-out, guitar-heavy version “*El Mensaje*.” A year later the song was covered again, this time slowed down to a crawl and set to a reggae beat and performed by Jamaican singer Tinga Stewart. This example places soul and funk music in a global context and shows that songs were remade, reworked and reinvented across the African diaspora. It also raises issues of migration, language and the power of music to connect distinct communities of the African diaspora.

Soul and funk music of the 1960s and 1970s is widely seen as belonging strictly in a U.S. context. This paper will argue that soul and funk music was actually a transnational and multilingual phenomenon that disseminated across Latin America, the Caribbean and beyond. Soul and funk was copied and reinvented in a wide array of Latin American and Caribbean countries including Brazil, Panama, Jamaica, Belize, Peru and the Bahamas. This paper will focus on the music of the U.S., Brazil, Panama and Jamaica while highlighting the political consciousness of soul and funk music. I argue that overt political messages of the music and covert political statements of the soul aesthetic contributed to the popularity of soul and funk among black people across the diaspora.

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<sup>1</sup> The birth place and year of arrival in England for all the band members are listed on the inside album cover of the 1972 self-titled album, *Cymande* on Janus records.

Worker migrations, trade routes and U.S. military presence abroad all contributed to the spread of soul and funk music throughout the Americas.

Music has the power to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers and connects distinct communities from across the African diaspora. Music does not recognize national boundaries and it often does not make sense to talk about cultural expressions in a nationalist context. In the *Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy argues that cultural expressions are fluid transnational phenomena that cannot be bound by national cultural models. In his discussions of music scenes Will Straw argues that popular music scholars have ignored the “migrations of populations, and the formation of cultural diaspora which have transformed the global circulation of cultural forms, creating lines of influence and solidarity different from, but no less meaningful than those observable within geographically circumscribed communities.”<sup>2</sup> This paper uses the diasporic framework of Gilroy and heeds the observation of Straw in discussing the manifestations of soul and funk music in Jamaica, Panama and Brazil.

The research of this paper included listening to dozens of albums and songs, looking at album artwork, reading liner notes, and conducting interviews. I conducted three interviews by phone with musicians connected to the soul and funk scenes of Jamaica, Panama and Brazil. Jay Douglas was born in Montego Bay, Jamaica in 1948 and moved to Toronto, Canada in 1963 where he was lead singer for the Cougars. Horacio “Ray” Adams was born in the Canal Zone in Panama in 1952 and was the drummer and band leader for the Dinamicos Exciters. Adams, who is of Jamaican

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<sup>2</sup> Straw, Will, “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music”

descent, now lives in New York. Ivan Tiririca is the drummer for União Black and lives in São Paulo, Brazil.<sup>3</sup>

## **Soul Power**

Before going any further I want to discuss what I mean by soul and funk music. Soul music was born when the music of the black church went secular, fusing popular rhythm and blues music with a gospel styled vocal. It's the music of Marvin Gaye, Solomon Burke, Nina Simone, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Curtis Mayfield and Aretha Franklin. But at the risk of shortchanging these great artists and countless others, it could be said that soul and funk is the music of James Brown. Brown's recordings from the 1956 pleading gospel-infused ballad "Please, Please, Please" through "It's a Man's World" in 1964 are pure soul.

Papa got a brand new bag in 1965 and Brown's recordings over the next decade are the foundation of funk music. In creating the music that would come to be known as funk, Brown stripped away some of the harmony and melody of soul music to focus almost exclusively on rhythm. He added a prominent bass line and a heavy drum beat on what he called "The One" – the downbeat at the beginning of every bar. As Brown writes in his 1988 autobiography, "I was hearing everything, even the guitars, like they were drums."<sup>4</sup>

More than a pop culture fad, soul and funk music – particularly soul - served as the soundtrack to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> I want to thank Emily Cohen and Matt Sullivan of Light in the Attic records for putting me in touch with Jay Douglas. Thanks to Sean Marquand of Embassy Productions for putting me in touch with Ivan Tiririca and Luis Fujiwara for his help in conducting the interview in Portuguese, a language I'm now learning. Likewise thanks to Roberto Ernesto Gyemant for putting me in touch with Ray Adams.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in David Brackett's *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> Guralnick, Peter, *Sweet Soul Music*, p. 2-4.

same year President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights act of 1964 and less than a year after 200,000 marched on Washington D.C. with Martin Luther King, Sam Cooke's soul ballad "A Change is Gonna Come" reached top 10 on the R&B charts. In the same year the Chicago based vocal trio The Impressions, fronted by Curtis Mayfield, urged the black community to "Keep on Pushing". The group followed up one anthem with another, releasing "People Get Ready" in 1965.

There is ample evidence that soul artists were, in the words of Gil Scott-Heron, "plugged in and turned on" to the black freedom struggle. This paper is not the place for an exhaustive list of socially conscious songs from the era but Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddamn", Marvin Gaye's Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)", Sly Johnson's "Is it because I'm Black?" and the Staple Singers' "We'll Get Over" is certainly a good starting point.

But if the Civil Rights and Black Power era had a single anthem, again we must look to the Godfather of Soul. Brown's 1968 single "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)" was released four short months after the assassination of Dr. King and topped the black music charts for six weeks. As rapper Chuck D. of Public Enemy writes in the liner notes of Brown's *Say it Live and Loud* CD, Brown "single-handedly took a lost and confused musical nation of people and bonded them with a fix of words, music and attitude."<sup>6</sup>

The impact of Brown is lost on many people born after the Civil Rights and Black Power era. Musically, Brown has done little innovative work over the past three decades. His trouble with drugs and the law and his refusal to fade gracefully from the limelight has made him the subject of satire, parody, even ridicule. His politics have also been a

source of puzzlement. In a 1999 interview with Rolling Stone, Brown named Strom Thurmond, long-time Republican senator from South Carolina who ran for president in 1948 on a segregationist platform, as one of his heroes.

Given his more recent past, it follows that Brown's role as a leader of the black community has been somewhat forgotten. But this is the same man that graced the cover of *Look* magazine in 1969 with a headline asking, "Is he the most important black man in America?" The article argues that Brown was uniquely positioned as a leader of the Black community because, unlike artists like Ray Charles and Diana Ross, he never changed his musical style in an attempt to attract a white audience. The article goes on to say that "His stature among American Negroes...has become monumental" and that "His constituency dwarfs Stokely Carmichael's and the late Dr. Martin Luther King's."<sup>7</sup>

On April 5, 1968, less than 24 hours after the assassination of Dr. King, Brown was scheduled to perform at the Boston Garden. The city in turmoil, Boston mayor Kevin White considered canceling the concert and all other public events. Brown convinced White to not only allow the show to go on, but to televise the concert on Boston's public television station, WGBH. Brown made a plea for calm and put on a riveting and emotionally charged performance that largely kept the black community in their homes and off the streets. The concert is credited with preventing in Boston the rioting and unrest that plagued many U.S. cities after King's death.<sup>8</sup>

Brown's plea for calm did not endear him to Carmichael and the Black Power camp. Despite his black and proud anthem, he was often at odds with those in the Black Power movement. They were suspicious of him for dining at the White House, his

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<sup>6</sup> Brown, James, "Say it Live and Loud: Live in Dallas 08.26.68". Released 8/11/98 on Polygram Records.

<sup>7</sup> *Look* magazine, February 18, 1969. "The Importance of Being Mr. James Brown," by Thomas Barry

support of Richard Nixon's presidential campaign and his embrace of capitalism. For Brown, black power meant "education and economic leverage."<sup>9</sup> In June of 1968 Brown recorded the patriotic "America is My Home." It was criticized by many Black Power leaders including radical poet Amiri Baraka who said the song was not "conscious of blackness."<sup>10</sup> As this paper explores soul and funk music across the Americas, the impact of James Brown will be a reoccurring theme.

### **Latino Con Soul<sup>11</sup>**

On the 1974 album *Hell*, Brown recorded a "Latin" version of the hit song "Please, Please, Please," complete with the Godfather shouting out poorly pronounced phrases in the Spanish language. The track could easily be dismissed as a gimmick but I want to use it to highlight the influence that "Latin" music has had on popular music in the U.S. The bulk of this paper focuses on the impact of soul and funk music on Latin America and the Caribbean but the influence has been anything but unidirectional. The popular music of the U.S. and "Latin" music have long been intertwined and the music of Latin America and the Caribbean has had a tremendous impact on soul and funk. In the 1979 book *Latin Tinge*, John Storm Roberts argues that Latin music has influenced the U.S. to such an extent that the whole of U.S. popular music has been "Latinized".

This is particularly true in regards to rhythm and blues, an important precursor to soul and funk. Ahmet Ertegun, founder of powerhouse R&B label Atlantic Records, cited the "samba beat, guaracha, baião and Afro-Cuban rhythms" as adding "color and

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<sup>8</sup> Covach, John, *What's that Sound: An Introduction to Rock and its History*.

<sup>9</sup> Ward, Brian, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*, p. 392.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 390.

<sup>11</sup> "Latino Con Soul" is the title of a 1975 album by Ray Barretto released on West Side Latino Records.

excitement to the basic drive of R&B.”<sup>12</sup> This takes on extra meaning coming from the founder of a label that recorded such soul and R&B giants as Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Donny Hathaway, Sam and Dave, Solomon Burke, Otis Redding, Joe Tex, Wilson Pickett and a slew of others.

Popular Latin dance crazes like the chachachá, mambo and boogaloo had a lasting influence on rhythm and blues music. Roberts cites the boogaloo as a major factor in changing “the black rhythm section from a basic four-to-the-bar concept to tumbao-like bass lines and increasingly Latin percussive patterns.”<sup>13</sup> Further, drummers like the Cuban born Mongo Santamaria and Machito and the Brooklyn born Ray Barretto were extremely influential in integrating Afro-Caribbean percussion into jazz and soul music.<sup>14</sup>

### **New Orleans and the Caribbean Cultural Sphere**

Music does not recognize national boundaries and it often doesn’t make sense to talk about cultural expressions in a nationalist context. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy argues that cultural expressions are fluid transnational phenomena that cannot be bound by national cultural models. In her discussion of Latino involvement in hip hop, Raquel Rivera agrees saying that such models “disregard the cultural commonalities among African American, Puerto Rican and other Afro-diasporic cultures.”<sup>15</sup> That connectivity extends to the discussion of soul and funk music as well.

Rivera argues that soul and rhythm and blues have been “fundamentally influenced by Caribbean cultures.” This influence is most clearly seen in New Orleans.

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<sup>12</sup> Roberts, John Storm, *Latin Tinge*, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> All three artists were an integral part of the Latin Soul scene in New York in the 1960s and 1970s. Machito did an entire album of “Latinized” southern soul tracks on the 1968 album *Machito Goes Memphis*. Santamaria gave James Brown’s work a heavy Latin twist, playing the congas on versions of “I Got You” (1967) and “Cold Sweat” (1969). For a discussion of Latin Soul and Boogaloo see *From Bomba to Hip Hop* by Juan Flores.

No other U.S. city has been more connected to the Caribbean, musically or otherwise. Roy Byrd, better known as Professor Longhair, is often called the father of New Orleans rhythm and blues for his nearly three decades of groundbreaking recordings beginning in 1949. The pianist once described his playing as “a mixture of rumba, mambo and calypso.”<sup>16</sup> Professor Longhair’s musical gumbo was a major influence on Crescent City artists such as Eddie Bo, Fats Domino, Lee Dorsey, the Neville Brothers and the Meters. New Orleans’ quintessential funk combo, the Meters recorded eight albums between 1969 and 1977. A Caribbean influence can be heard in their music, most notably the reggae bass lines on the 1969 track “Ease Back” and the 1970 B-side single “Zony Mash.”<sup>17</sup>

In a 1967 interview, Otis Redding named a calypso tune, “Run, Joe”, as the first song that deeply impressed him growing up in Macon, Georgia.<sup>18</sup> Over the last half century this song about a man on the run has been recorded by saxophonist Louis Jordan (1956), renowned poet Maya Angelou (1957), rock and roll pioneer Chuck Berry (1965), Stranger Joe and the Skatalites of Jamaica (1965), the Neville Brothers (1981), Washington D.C. go-go pioneer Chuck Brown (1986), and bayou brass ensemble the Dirty Dozen Brass Band (1999). This example illustrates that songs travel throughout the “Black Atlantic” and supports Gilroy’s argument that “to borrow, reconstruct, and redeploy cultural fragments drawn from other black settings was not thought to be a problem by those who produced and used the music.”<sup>19</sup> This is a key point as we move

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<sup>15</sup> Rivera, Raquel, *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone*, p.43.

<sup>16</sup> Roberts, John Storm, *Latin Tinge*, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, Dave, *Funk*, p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> Brackett, David, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: History and Debates*, p161-163. Interview was conducted by Jim Delehant and originally appeared in the September 1967 issue of *Hit Parader*.

<sup>19</sup> Gilroy, Pual, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p. 94.

forward to Jamaica, where musicians record versions of versions and covered countless U.S. soul and funk songs in the 1970s.<sup>20</sup>

## **Jamaica**

The influence of black American music on Jamaica is immense and the country produced a great deal of soul and funk music in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>21</sup> This shouldn't come as a surprise given the island's proximity to the U.S., the lack of a language barrier, and the country's enormous output of music relative to its size. In the 1950s, rhythm and blues, especially the musical output of New Orleans and the U.S. South, was immensely popular in Jamaica. New Orleans based rhythm and blues pianist Fats Domino is frequently cited as one of the most popular musicians in Jamaica during this time.<sup>22</sup>

A lesser known R&B keyboard player would prove to be even more influential. Rosco Gordon was born in 1934 in Memphis, Tennessee. Gordon is best known for the song "No More Doggin'" which reached number two on the R&B charts in 1952. The piano rhythm from "No More Doggin'" would come to be known as "Rosco's Rhythm." The rhythm is a medium paced shuffle-boogie with the accent on the off, or up, of all four beats.<sup>23</sup> Rosco's off-beat rhythm is the foundation of Jamaican popular music. Jay Douglas, a Jamaican vocalist who performed with the Cougars in Canada, explains:

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<sup>20</sup> In Jamaica the term version is used much like "remix" is used in U.S. popular music. Many Jamaican seven inch singles have an original song on one side and a dub version on the other. For a discussion of "versions" see *Cut 'N' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* by Dick Hebdige.

<sup>21</sup> A number of compilations have recently been released featuring Jamaican versions of U.S. soul and funk songs. Among them are *Darker than Blue: Soul from Jamdown 1973-1980* on Blood & Fire records (2001), *Funky Kingston: Reggae Dance Floor Grooves 1968-74* on Trojan records (2002), *Impact! Reggae, Funk & Soul from the Vaults of Impact! & Randy's Records*, on Universal Sound records (2004), *Out On a Funky Trip: Funk, Soul & Reggae From Randy's 1970-75* on Motion records (2005), *Soul Power: Funky Kingston 2 - Reggae Dance Floor Grooves 1968-74* on Trojan records (2005), *Studio One Funk* on Soul Jazz records (2004), *Studio One Soul* on Soul Jazz records (2001), and *Studio One Soul, Vol. 2* on Soul Jazz records (2006).

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, Dave, *Reggae & Caribbean Music*

<sup>23</sup> Slim, Mohair, *Rosco Gordon: Pianist, vocalist, composer, label-owner*, <http://www.bluejuice.org>

The way he [Gordon] played the piano in those blues songs, today, that's the reason we have reggae music. When the producers in Jamaica decided they were going to start making their own music...they copied a lot of the progressions that Rosco Gordon used in those blues songs. And that's how ska came about...Then they slowed down the ska years after and turned it into rocksteady. And then they slowed down the rocksteady and that's why we have reggae today. But a lot of it is because of a great blues singer out of Memphis whose name is Rosco Gordon.<sup>24</sup>

As New York's WBAI radio DJ Terry Wilson put it, "Rosco Gordon is the seed of reggae. Not the root, but the seed."<sup>25</sup>

American radio played a large part in popularizing rhythm and blues music in Jamaica. On a clear day, the broadcasts of R&B stations in Miami could be picked up on transistor radios in Jamaica.<sup>26</sup> Jamaicans were able to get hold of their own copies of these records as workers on the trade ships brought them from the U.S. Again, Douglas explains:

We had one radio station for the whole island called Radio Jamaica and Re-diffusion [RJR] and all the music from New Orleans and Miami was coming in at night. And the trade ships - the ships that came in from Louisiana to pick up goods and take stuff to Jamaica back and forth - they would bring vinyl, 78 [rpm] records and albums with Fats Domino, B.B. King, all those artists. They would bring them to Jamaica.<sup>27</sup>

The music became so popular that mobile discotheques called sound systems were set up for dance parties that, at the time, played almost exclusively American R&B. It was an extremely competitive endeavor with rival sound systems headed up by DJs with loyal followings like Sir Coxson Dodd, Duke Reid and Prince Buster. Each sound system would send "scouts" to the U.S. to find the latest and best R&B records.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Personal interview conducted by the author on November 11, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Slim, Mohair, *Rosco Gordon: Pianist, vocalist, composer, label-owner*, <http://www.bluejuice.org>

<sup>26</sup> Hebdige, Dick, *Cut 'N' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*, p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview conducted by the author on November 11, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Hebdige, Dick, *Cut 'N' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*

The influence of black American music on Jamaica did not end in the 1950s. Chicago soul group the Impressions, led by the song writing ability and vocal falsetto of a young Curtis Mayfield, had a huge impact on the musical direction of the country. Gilroy notes that the Impressions were the archetype for dozens of Jamaican male vocal harmony groups of the 1960s, a format that “inaugurated a distinct genre within the vernacular musical form which would eventually be marketed internationally as reggae.”<sup>29</sup> Jamaican harmony groups that patterned themselves after the Impressions include the Wailers, the Heptones, the Meditations, the Melodians, the Ethiopians, the Abyssinians, the Itals, Israel Vibration, Black Uhuru, and Toots and the Maytals among others.

The Wailers, a harmony trio made up of reggae superstars Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer, were particularly influenced by the Impressions. The group covered a wide range of Impressions tracks including “Long Long Winter”, “Another Dance” (originally “Just Another Dance”), “I Made a Mistake” and “Keep on Moving” (originally “I’ve got to Keep on Moving”). “One Love” is one of Bob Marley’s most iconic songs, the final track from the Wailers’ most successful studio album, the 1977 masterpiece *Exodus*.<sup>30</sup> The Wailers first recorded the song in 1963, again drawing heavily from the Impressions. The guitar riff and some of the lyrics are borrowed from the Mayfield penned “People Get Ready”. Douglas weighed in on the impact the Impressions had on the Wailers:

Why do you think we have Bob Marley & the Wailers today? [We wouldn’t] if it had not been for Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions. They were the great

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<sup>29</sup> Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p. 94-95.

<sup>30</sup> Bob Marley’s “One Love” was named song of the millennium by the BBC and *Exodus* was named album of the century by *Time* magazine in 1999.

influence on the Wailers. The song that's called "One Love", Curtis Mayfield owns a chunk of that song because that's "People Get Ready".<sup>31</sup>

Other Jamaican artists that recorded versions of Mayfield's songs include Delroy Wilson, Derrick Morgan, Marcia Griffiths, Junior Murvin, Lloyd Chalmers, the Techniques, the Jamaicans, Slim Smith, Dennis Brown, the Heptones, Pat Kelly, Cornel Cambell, and the Blues Busters.

Covers of soul songs with a political bent were more common in Jamaica than in Brazil or Panama. This has to do as much with language as anything, but nonetheless, Jamaican artists tapped into the political messages of American soul music.<sup>32</sup> One of the most stirring examples is Lloyd Chalmers cover of Mayfield's "We People Who Are Darker Than Blue." The song first appears on Mayfield's 1970 album *Curtis* and again on the 1971 album *Curtis/Live!*. It is a somber song, but one that ultimately calls for unity among African Americans:

"We people who are darker than blue/ Are we gonna stand around this town and let what others say come true/ We're just good for nothing they all figure/ A boyish grown up shiftless jigger/ Now we can't hardly stand for that/ Or is that really where it's at?/ We people who are darker than blue/ This ain't no time for segregating/ I'm talking about brown and yellow too."

Chalmers version features a haunting melodica<sup>33</sup> and a slow lumbering reggae rhythm. It creates a darker mood than the original, especially considering Chalmers omits the last lines of the Mayfield original: "Pardon me brother/ I know we've come a long long way/ Let us stop being so satisfied/ For tomorrow can be an even brighter day."

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<sup>31</sup> Personal interview conducted by the author on November 11, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Many of the funk and soul recordings in Brazil and Panama were instrumental. The language barrier prevented some artists from copying the vocals of American soul songs but, in many ways, the act of playing soul and funk music was seen as political in and of itself.

<sup>33</sup> The melodica is a reed instrument with a keyboard on top and was generally considered a children's instrument until it was made popular in Jamaica by Augustus Pablo. Pablo played the melodica on a series of instrumental albums in the 1970s and 1980s including the 1978 reggae classic *East of the River Nile*.

Syl Johnson, born in Tennessee in 1938, was a soul singer and guitarist with a definite blues aesthetic. He released the album *Is It Because I'm Black?* In 1970. The Title track is an emotionally charged slow burning seven minute lamentation of the obstacles of being black in the U.S. The poignant lyrics were a bold statement from a relatively unknown artist: “Looking back over my false dreams that I once knew/  
Wondering why my dreams never came true/ Something is holding me back/ Is it because I'm black?”

“Is it Because I'm Black” was covered by the popular Jamaican soul singer Ken Boothe in 1973. Boothe released a series of album in the 1960s and 1970s that relied heavily on covers of U.S. soul songs. In fact, “Is It Because I'm Black” appears on the 1970 album *Let's Get It On*, named for his cover of the steamy Marvin Gaye classic. On “Is It Because I'm Black” Boothe sounds more angry than downtrodden as he manages to create a version every bit as powerful as the Johnson original.

As noted earlier, the song that in many ways defined the Civil Rights and Black Power era in the U.S. was Brown's “Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)”. In Jamaica, Brown's black pride anthem was covered by none other than Bob Marley and the Wailers. The Wailers 1970 version is not a straight cover, but a highly stylized reggae-funk interpretation called “Black Progress”. The refrain of “black progress” replaces “I'm black and I'm proud”, but the heavy funk horns and call and response style of the original remain. Marley sings the verses which are variations on the original with a few subtle changes:

I worked on job with my feet and my hand  
And all the work I did was for the other man  
We demand a right to do things for ourselves  
Instead of planting down hill and working for someone else.

Brown's influence can be seen elsewhere on the island as well. Shark Wilson & the Basement Heaters reinvented Brown's "Make It Funky" in 1971, flipping the title to "Make It Reggae". Equal parts funk and reggae, Wilson keeps Brown's famous introduction of the song with a slight twist: "I don't know what to play, but whatever I play it must be reggae." Wilson does his best impersonation of Brown's signature scream and includes the obligatory demand to take it "to the bridge." In the same year Nicky Thomas recorded a reggae infused interpretation of Brown's funky anthem "Soul Power". One Jamaican artist even changed his name to "James Brown (from JA)", dedicating his short-lived career to mildly convincing cover songs.<sup>34</sup>

Black American music had long been popular in Jamaica and it is not surprising that soul and funk – with its political messages and calls for black pride - would resonate with Jamaicans. The island was under the thumb of British colonial rule until it gained independence in 1962. With immense inequality and many of the island's black residents living in poverty the social messages of the music found a receptive audience in the "Concrete Jungle". Calls for social justice and an end to "sufferation" are remain an integral part of Jamaican music and are typical of roots reggae.

## **Panama**

In many ways, Panama is a crossroads and a gateway. The isthmus connects the continents of North and South America and the country's famous canal links the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean. Trade ships from all over the world come in and out of the port cities of Colon and Panama City. The country is home to a dizzying array of cultures and nationalities. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, more than 100,000 black West

Indians settled in Panama, many of them coming to work on the canal and railroads.<sup>35</sup>

Though the majority of workers and immigrants came from the Caribbean islands, others came from China, India, Ireland, Spain and Greece.<sup>36</sup> Throw in the continued presence of the U.S. military and canal workers and you have fertile ground for some very interesting cultural expression.

Whether they came from New York, New Orleans, Trinidad or Jamaica, people brought their music with them to Panama. As journalist and music scholar Roberto Ernesto Gyemant put it, “The continuous passing through of sailors from the ports at Havana, New Orleans, and New York, of dock and Canal Zone workers, and especially U.S. soldiers and marines, ensured that the latest sounds in popular music always reached Panama on time, thick vinyl records on the Panart and Chess labels stuffed into a sailor’s rucksack.”<sup>37</sup>

The principal soul and funk groups of Panama – like the Soul Fantastics, Dinamicos Exciters, and Fabulosos Festivales – grew out of the 1950s *combos nacionales*. Fusing calypso, cumbia, jazz and doo-wop, the *combos* were immensely popular four or five man vocal groups made up primarily of black West Indians. In the 1950s, most of the *combos* were based in Colon, though a few were in Panama City. A group called the Astronautas worked and lived in the U.S. controlled Canal Zone.

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<sup>34</sup> See liner notes from *Soul Power - Funky Kingston 2: Reggae Dance Floor Grooves 1968-74*, on Trojan records (2005).

<sup>35</sup> Conniff, Michael, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Gyemant, Roberto Ernesto, “Panama Esta Bueno Y Ma... Afro-Panamanian Music and Los Combos Nacionales 1960-75”, *Wax Poetics* magazine, Summer 2005. This section on Panamanian music owes a great debt to Roberto Ernesto Gyemant. In addition to the article in *Wax Poetics*, Gyemant helped release a compilation of Panamanian music in 2006 on Soundway records called *Panama! Latin, Calypso and Funk on the Isthmus 1965-75*. Gyemant also helped put me in contact with Horacio “Ray” Adams, drummer for the Dinamicos Exciters.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Black West Indians faced a long history of discrimination in Panama. The 1941 constitution stripped blacks of many rights including Panamanian citizenship for those born in the country after 1928. But things were worse for black in he Canal Zone which functioned as a de facto 51<sup>st</sup> U.S. state some 2,000 miles south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Blacks and whites didn't receive equal pay until the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Treaty and well into the 1970s the zone "practiced overt segregation of the West Indian descendants and covert discrimination against U.S. blacks in the armed services."<sup>38</sup>

The Astronautas, heavily influenced by the American presence in the region, would develop into a James Brown styled funk band and gain enormous popularity in Panama. Drummer Horacio "Ray" Adams said the band started out as a "Temptations type of group" before shifting to a heavy funk sound and changing their name to the *Dinamicos Exciters*. The Exciters were influence by the Temptations, Smokey Robinson and James Brown, but with "a Latin twist".<sup>39</sup>

The bi-lingual group recorded at least five full-length LPs and more than 20 seven inch singles. The recordings may have earned the record companies some money, but the band earned a living almost exclusively from live performances. According to Adams, the band performed in all nine Panamanian provinces and sometimes played three to four different venues a night. Adams said the group became so popular he took out an advertisement in several major newspapers requesting that people stop calling to book the band:

I think it was back in 1971, I had to make a newspaper announcement. From about April or May we were completely booked for the rest of the year. We only had maybe one or two days off every month. And I looked at the schedule and said we can't take any more engagements. Many of the men were family men,

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<sup>38</sup> Conniff, Michael, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981*, p. 158.

<sup>39</sup> Personal interview conducted by the author with Horacio "Ray" Adams on December 3, 2006.

they had to find time to spend with their family. So I made an announcement in the paper. I said, people were not to call us for the rest of the year because we were completely booked. It's amazing, right? Some people thought it was a gimmick but I said why would I tell people not to call me if I'm living off of this. I'm making a living off this, why would I not want people to call me?<sup>40</sup>

That same year the Exciters recorded a smoking eight minute version of Brown's "Papa's Gotta Brand New Bag". They shortened the name of the track to "The Bag" and "added a little bit more instrumental flavor to it."<sup>41</sup> The group played and recorded other straight funk tracks as well as boogaloes, Latin soul tracks and the occasional ska and calypso tune. The Exciters played with the Godfather himself when Brown came to the isthmus in 1972 for two nights of concerts in Panama City.<sup>42</sup>

In Panama, as in the U.S., black pride was very much intertwined with soul and funk music and fashion. In the late 1960s, young blacks from the canal adopted the language and dress of the American Black Power movement. Influenced by black American soldiers and their music, "Canal youth wore Afro hairdos and Swahili robes and adopted other symbols of the black power movement."<sup>43</sup> West Indians began forming political organizations like the *Asociacion Afro-Panameña* and the *Union Afro-Panameña*.<sup>44</sup>

There were also cultural organizations like the *Instituto Soul*. This was a group that, though the name came later, was started by Adams and his fellow band members. The goal of the group was to combat the tradition of always having white beauty queens in the carnival parades. In the early 1970s, Adams and the Exciters started a tradition of electing "soul queens" during carnival:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Liner notes, *Panama! Latin, Calypso and Funk on the Isthmus 1965-75*, Soundway Records 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Conniff, Michael, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981*, p. 165.

[During] carnival times they usually have several floats traveling down the street with musicians behind them and we were the first to put an Afro-American queen on the float traveling through the street. And our band played behind the queen. The queen was called the “soul queen.” We had runner-ups every year. Coronations, runner-ups, everything. We did that for about five or six years before we were dispersed. Following that there was about maybe two or three years where there was no “soul queen” for the activities. Then a group of people decided to pick that back up. I think that’s where the *Instituto Soul* came in. The name, that is. But we started the campaign with soul queens for the carnival. Our group was the first to have, again, an Afro-American queen.<sup>45</sup>

As this example demonstrates, it was more than James Brown’s funky rhythms that caught on with blacks in Panama. The election of the “soul queens” in Panama was another way of saying “I’m Black and I’m proud.”

### **Brazil**

In the late 1960s and 1970s black Brazilians threw soul and funk parties that drew thousands of people and helped spawn black consciousness and a positive racial identity. The black soul movement in Brazil coincided with the most repressive years of a nationalist military dictatorship that would maintain political control for more than two decades. The presidency of General Emílio Garrastazu Médici from 1969 to 1974 was marked by an economic boom and suffocating cultural repression. It was this same climate that inspired – and silenced – the Tropicália movement. In an ultranationalist atmosphere both Tropicália and Brazilian soul music were disparaged for not being authentically Brazilian.

Yet soul – the music and the message – resonated with the black population of Brazil. It first took hold in Rio de Janeiro where the phenomenon was known as Black Rio or Black Soul. The man credited with introducing soul music to Brazil was Big Boy, a white radio DJ. He began playing soul music on his show *O Baile a Pesada* in 1967,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

gaining the attention of Rio's black population.<sup>46</sup> As the music became increasingly popular, DJ *equipas* like Soul Grand Prix, Afro Soul and Black Power – much like the sound systems in Jamaica - spun soul records at dance parties that attracted upwards of 10,000 people.<sup>47</sup>

As the phenomenon grew, Brazilian musicians recorded their own brand of soul with a Brazilian twist. The music, of course, owed a debt to James Brown but the fusion of soul with samba rhythms and traditional Afro-Brazilian instrumentation gave many of the records a distinctly Brazilian flavor.

Tim Maia is widely considered the father of Brazilian soul music. He formed one of Brazil's first rock groups, Os Sputniks, with Erasmo Carlos and Roberto Carlos in 1957. Two years later he moved to New York City. Maia enrolled in university but his real education came through immersion in the black music scene. He joined a multi-racial doo-wop group called the Ideals and partook in cocaine, pot, pills and plenty of other vices as well.<sup>48</sup> He was deported from the U.S. in 1963 on charges of marijuana possession and began recording soul-inspired records upon his return to Brazil.<sup>49</sup>

The soul dances were both a party and a platform for political activism, the extent of which is up for debate. For many soul revelers, the party was the only aim – a place to unwind and model the latest funky fashions. The dance parties also often included

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<sup>45</sup> Personal interview conducted by the author with Horacio "Ray" Adams on December 3, 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Hanchard, Michael, *Orpheus and Power*, p. 112.

<sup>47</sup> McCann Bryan, "Black Pau: Uncovering the History of Brazilian Soul," *Rockin' Las Américas*.

<sup>48</sup> Maia was open about his drug use throughout his career. McCann notes that he famously tried to turn the entire staff of his Polydor record label onto LSD. However, for a two year period in 1975-76, Maia abandoned the use of all illegal drugs and joined the *Universo em Desencanto*, a religious sect that promised a path to enlightenment. Maia recorded two albums during this period, *Racional* and *Racional II*, which are now very hard to find collectibles. The music maintains the soul sound but the lyrical content reflects his newfound spirituality.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74-79.

multimedia presentations including photos and video footage of marches and protests by African Americans. The film *Wattstax* was also shown, a documentary about the 1972 concert at the Los Angeles Coliseum that was a celebration of African American music and style featuring the Staple Singers, Isaac Hayes, Rufus Thomas, B.B. King and others. Activists saw the soul dances as an opportunity to distribute pamphlets and pro-black political literature. Some of these same activists were among the 1978 founders of the *Movimento Negro Unificado*, or Unified Black Movement, an anti-racist political organization that is still active today.<sup>50</sup>

In his discussion of the Black Rio scene in *Orpheus and Power*, Hanchard downplays the black soul movement as a political entity, saying that “it never left the confines of the dance floor.”<sup>51</sup> But the parties fostered political and racial awareness and the very act of centering parties around issues of race was radical. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Brazilian government officials and intellectuals had promoted a myth of racial democracy. It was a central tenet of the Getúlio Vargas dictatorship, from 1937-1945, in its search for a unifying national identity.<sup>52</sup> The official view declared Brazil a harmonious melting pot whose strength was its multicultural mixture. Like the official documents of slavery – many of which were destroyed shortly after abolition in 1888 - much of the country preferred to pretend racial inequality didn’t exist at all. Never mind the staggering correlation between poverty and darker skin color.

Black Soul directly challenged the official rhetoric of racial utopia. To accept Black Rio, and in turn, a philosophy of black consciousness, was to acknowledge that

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<sup>50</sup> Hanchard, Michael, *Orpheus and Power*

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>52</sup> McCann Bryan, “Black Pau: Uncovering the History of Brazilian Soul,” *Rockin’ Las Américas*.

racial inequality permeated Brazilian society. For a repressive military regime that promoted a fantasy of racial utopia, this was unacceptable. When Black Soul gravitated toward the mainstream in the early 1970s, the military police began showing up at the parties. At a record release party in 1974, DJ Don Filó of Soul Grand Prix was taken away for interrogation with a hood over his head.<sup>53</sup> At the 1970 International Festival of Song, Erlon Chaves, who is black, sang while two blonde dancers showered him with kisses. Interracial marriage was not unheard of or illegal - as it was in parts of the U.S. until 1967 – but such a public display was certainly taboo. Chaves was rewarded for his performance with jail, torture and interrogation.<sup>54</sup>

Hanchard and Bryan McCann repeatedly state that the majority of the soul dancers were more interested in showing off their funky threads than they were in political activism. Regardless, adopting the soul style was in and of itself a political act, if only a symbolic one. Adopting the soul style was an affirmation of black pride and could even put Afro-Brazilians at risk. In 1977, a girl was expelled from a Copacabana high school for refusing to cut her afro. As McCann put it, “If being black was by itself grounds for official suspicion, soul style was an aggravating circumstance.”<sup>55</sup>

As a source of style and self pride, Afro-Brazilians were looking to U.S. soul and funk music. In an interview with Sean Marquand, Ivan Tiririca of the group União Black was asked why he performed soul music:

I think it was a self-esteem thing. We didn't have Martin Luther King. We had James Brown. Before I started liking James Brown, I used to hate my hair! Soon

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<sup>53</sup> Thayer, Allen, “Black Rio: Brazilian Soul and DJ Culture’s Lost Chapter,” *Wax Poetics* magazine, Apr/May 2006.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> McCann Bryan, “Black Pau: Uncovering the History of Brazilian Soul,” *Rockin’ Las Américas*, p. 87.

after, I grew my hair and learned everything I needed to know about Black music and Black style.<sup>56</sup>

With this statement, Tiririca is putting Brown in the same category, on the same level, as King. Discrimination was never written into the constitution and made the official law of the land in Brazil as it was in the U.S. Therefore, the same type of civil rights movement that happened in the U.S. never occurred in Brazil, nor was it necessary. However, during this time period discrimination and social barriers were a very real fact of life for Afro-Brazilians. More than for concrete political gains, Afro-Brazilians used soul and funk to affirm their self-worth.

As an important aside, it is interesting that Tiririca cites Brown of all people for helping him like his hair. Given that the afro was the popular style among Brazilian soul revelers at the time, Tiririca is likely referring to the brief period in 1968 when Brown abandoned his famously processed curl for a “natural” hairdo. Brown’s shift in hairstyle was the subject of an article in a 1968 issue of *Soul* magazine.<sup>57</sup> Though Brown would return to his process the following year, he was compelled to write a song encouraging blacks to go natural in 1968. Brown and Hank Ballard are credited as co-writers of the song “How You Gonna Get Respect (When You Haven’t Cut Your Process Yet)”. The track was recorded by Ballard on Brown’s People record label using a nearly identical groove as Brown’s 1968 song “Licking Stick – Licking Stick”:

Now first of all my soulful brothers, you can’t be someone else  
You’re black and you’re beautiful, this I know, just being your natural self  
So get that mess out of your hair, and wear your natural do  
And I’m gonna bet on my dear life, respect gonna come to you  
[chorus] How you gonna get respect if you haven’t cut your process yet?

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<sup>56</sup> Marquand, Sean, “União Black: The Black Sheep of Brazilian Soul,” *Wax Poetics* magazine, Apr/May 2006.

<sup>57</sup> Guralnick, Peter, *Sweet Soul Music*, p. 244.

This song shows the importance of the soul aesthetic – particularly the afro hairdo – as a symbolic gesture in affirming the pride and self-worth of blacks.

### **Conclusion**

This musical journey through the U.S., Jamaica, Panama, and Brazil demonstrates the globality of soul and funk music and shows that music can create linkages between distinct groups of the African diaspora. Soul and funk music functioned within the cultural sphere of the African diaspora and was not limited to the U.S. Soul and funk music linked distinct communities of the diaspora despite the potential barriers of linguistic and cultural differences. Fans and musicians alike adopted elements of the soul aesthetic – such as the afro hairstyle – in a show of solidarity and as an implicit protest against the status quo. Worker migrations, trade routes and U.S. military presence abroad all contributed to the spread of soul and funk music across the diaspora.

The diasporic cultural sphere as outlined by Gilroy in the *Black Atlantic* can be a useful framework for the study of music and other cultural expressions. I also call for researchers to address the concern of Straw that for too long the formation of cultural diaspora have been ignored by popular music scholars. Moving forward, this framework could prove useful in the study of other cultural diffusions, such as the current growing global popularity of hip hop and reggaeton.

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