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# 'GET UP, GET INTO IT AND GET INVOLVED' – SOUL, CIVIL RIGHTS AND BLACK POWER

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This section turns away from the relationship between Britain and the Caribbean to focus on Afro-America, a second source of cultural and political raw-material for UK blacks in the postwar period.

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James Brown's 'Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud', the ChiLites 'Power To The People' and various versions of Weldon Irvine Jnr's 'Young, Gifted and Black' were all taken to the heart of black communities many miles from those in which they were created. These recordings are only the most obvious illustrations of the character of a period in which soul was revered as the principal criterion for affiliation to the Black Power movement. *Ebony* pronounced 1967 the year of 'Retha, Rap and Revolt' and during this time, singers, typified by James Brown, 'Soul Brother no. 1', and Aretha Franklin, 'The First Lady', were identified as the spiritual and moral guardians of the inner meanings not merely of black music but of black American culture as a whole. They were a priestly caste guarding the spirit in the dark which represented a political community's sense of its history (Jones, 1967). These singers did not simply provide a soundtrack for the political actions of their soul sisters and brothers. They were mandated to speak on behalf of the community in elaborate, celebratory, ritual performances. The privileged position which flowed from enjoying a public voice was used by artists to blend the contradictory elements of the Black Power movement into an uneasy unity and to create an anti-racist current among whites, particularly the young. Song after song from this era urges the oppressors to 'think' while simultaneously warning them of the dire consequences which would develop if freedom did not follow.[1] The most powerful songs from these years provide a musical counterpart to the urgent definitions of Black Power which were being advanced as 'the last

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reasonable opportunity' for American society to work out its racial problems (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967). The Impressions were, like many others, swept along by the tide of black pride and articulated these aspirations in their late-1960s hits 'We're Rolling On' and 'We're a Winner': 'No more tears do we cry, We have finally dried our eyes and We're moving on up.'

The reformist strategies of the Civil Rights period had developed hand in hand with the movement's espousal of non-violence, creating, indeed requiring, a musical culture which pointed to the patience, dignity and determination of blacks in the furtherance of racial justice. With Black Power, both the tone and the tactics changed. The political focus shifted towards the idea that civil disobedience had to be supplemented by a capacity for defensive violence which was symbolized by Huey Newton's armed Panthers on patrol in Oakland (Newton, 1974).

The defensive militarization of elements within the Black Power movement may have started as a simple response to police harassment and repressive use of the legal system. However, once blacks were speaking the contending revolutionary languages of Marxism–Leninism and cultural–nationalism, in public and seen to be armed, bold and confident, the full weight of state violence descended upon them. The FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (Cointelpro) spearheaded the governmental response but other less overt forms of harassment were employed ranging from assassination to petty persecution, surveillance and dis-information or 'smearing'. In 1969 alone, twenty-seven members of the Black Panther Party were killed by the police and another 749 arrested. The effects of these repressive operations can be judged from the relative decline of the more overt expressions of commitment to revolutionary black struggle in either of its principal forms. Clear open statements were replaced, in musical culture at least, by more oblique forms of signification often more stylized and satirical in their stance. The iconography of soul shifted away from the pseudo-military macho imagery of clenched fists in black leather towards the dress and cultural emblems of ancient Africa. The forthright photographs of Aretha Franklin as a militant African queen which appeared on the cover of her 1972 album *Young, Gifted and Black* were replaced on her next set, *Hey Now Hey The Other Side Of The Sky* by drawings depicting her as a winged Egyptian deity, her microphone plugged into the roots of an African tree in a red, green and black pot. These and other more elliptical statements, like Roy Ayers's memorable 1973 album *Red, Black and Green*, spoke to blacks directly and repeatedly on the subject of their African heritage but withdrew from direct communication with a white audience. Sly Stone, whose Family had been the first multiracial band to achieve any kind of prominence, commented on the transition from Black Power to mystical Pan-Africanism by seguing the track 'Africa Talks To You (The Ashphalt Jungle)' into a non-existent cut entitled 'There's A Riot Going On'. Griel Marcus (1977, p. 97) has pointed out that Sly's album of the same name

> represented . . . the attempt to create a new music appropriate to new realities. It was a music that had as much to do with the Marin shootout and the death of George Jackson as [Sly's] earlier sound had to do with the pride of the riot the title track of his album said was no longer going on. '[F]rightened faces to the wall' Sly moans. 'Can't you hear your

Mama call? The Brave and Strong – Survive! Survive!' I think those faces up against the wall belonged to Black Panthers, forced to strip naked on the streets of Philadelphia so Frank Rizzo and his cops could gawk and laugh and make jokes about big limp cocks while Panther women, lined up with the men, were psychologically raped.

There were still, particularly at election time, records which – like James Brown's 'Payback' and 'Funky President' – addressed themselves to the political conjuncture and correctly recognized its significance as a 'second reconstruction':

> It all started with 40 acres and a mule. . . . But nothing good is simple. . . . As yesterday's windmills turned to today's skyscrapers and farms to parking lots . . . anger and revenge increased. As time ran out, putting politicians and hustlers in the same bag. . . . Backstabbin' scrappin but never rappin' the message cried to live and let live. . . .[2]

Political and cultural activists who were not primarily known as musicians had also been drawn towards popular black music as a result of its interventionist potential. Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), chairman of the Congress of African People in Newark, enlisted members of The Commodores, Kool and The Gang, and Parliament to support his own bands, The Advanced Workers and The Revolutionary Singers. Together they issued 'You Was Dancin' Need To Be Marchin' So You Can Dance Later On' on the People's War label.[3] These assertive statements would reappear in the wake of Reagan's 1980 election victory, but they declined steadily after 1972. Instead, as the war in Vietnam developed, Uncle Sam's imperial adventures were satirized by references to 'Uncle Jam's Army' and tales of 'specially trained Afronauts capable of funketizing galaxies'. The vision of a black homeland, whether in Africa or in an independent republic inside the southern borders of the USA, was secularized and modernized. The dream of life beyond the reach of racism acquired an other-worldly, utopian quality and then manifested itself in a flash hi-tech form deliberately remote from the everyday realities of the ghetto lifeworld.[4] If the repressive and destructive forces unleashed by a 'maggot brained' and infanticidal America were rapidly acquiring a global character, the answer to them was presented as flight, not back to the African motherland, for that too was tainted by Americanism, but into space. The cover of Funkadelic's 1978 set 'One Nation Under a Groove', for example, showed a squad of 'Afronauts' raising the red, black and green standard of Africa as they stepped off the planet earth. The celestial and interplanetary themes in the soul and funk of this period provided a means to satirize American imperialism and to advance utopian visions of a reconstructed society in which the black nation, united under a groove, would thrive in peace. The destructive capacity of America's technological rationality would be held in check by mystic, natural forces contained within the pyramids of ancient Egypt, a durable symbol of black pride and creativity most powerfully evoked by the Jones Girls' 'Nights Over Egypt'.[5] The futuristic emphasis in these images served to underline the impossibility of strategic political calculation. The means by which black America was to get from where it was to its reconstituted future was as inconceivable as time travel itself. The political repertoire which stretched between mass non-violent direct action to open militarization appeared to have been exhausted.



This period also witnessed the re-emergence of jazz as a truly popular music (Palmer, 1974; Siggerson, 1977), a development which had been foreseen by Leroi Jones (1967). This shift, spearheaded by Pharoah Sanders and Albert Ayler in the late 1960s and developed to its logical conclusion by Miles Davis, Herbic Hancock, John Handy and others during the 1970s, connected the most innovative players directly to the dance-floors and gave an added impetus to the work of popular funk musicians who had few pretensions to jazz-based respectability. The most important exponents of this fusion of jazz, nationalism, satire and dance-orientation were also two of the most popular black bands of the 1970s: Earth, Wind and Fire and Parliament/Funkadelic. In 1975, the latter, a loose aggregate of musicians led by refugees from James Brown's backing band, the JBs, cut what is arguably the greatest of all black nationalist dance records, 'Chocolate City'. This was a ruminative piece of funk set to a relentless drum machine beat and decorated freely with Bernie Worrell's piano, Bootsy Collins's base and some free, meandering saxophone solos. The rap vocal from George Clinton, which gave the record its title, explored the post-Black Power situation by speculating about the effects of black inner-city residents electing black local governments and looked at the implications of the move from open protest to electoral politics. 'You don't need the bullet when you've got the ballot,' argued Clinton, suggesting that the latter had become a more appropriate tactical vehicle for black liberation than the former in the aftermath of Cointelpro. The Chocolate City referred to was not simply Washington DC, the national capital in which 'vanilla suburbs' surrounded an inner core populated by impoverished blacks, but rather all cities in which blacks had been able to capture control of municipal government:

> There's a lot of Chocolate Cities around
> We got Newark
> We got Gary
> Somebody told me we got LA
> And we' working on Atlanta

The record climaxes in some frenetic interplay between saxophone and bass. This instrumental passage is introduced by the idea that the transformation of American Democracy is itself within the grasp of blacks. The proposition is made concrete by Clinton's nominations for a new set of leaders: Mohammed Ali for President, Reverend Ike (a well-known evangelist noted for his ability to extract money from his ghetto flock) as Secretary of the Treasury, Richard Pryor as Minister of Education, Stevie Wonder as Secretary of Fine Arts, and Aretha Franklin, as ever, the First Lady. This record was still being played on London's pirate black music radio stations (Mosco and Hind, 1985) in 1985. To the further delight of black audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, the band which made it signified their political contempt for the music business in which they were forced to operate by signing to competing record conglomerates under a variety of different names.

Earth, Wind and Fire's political development covers the same ground as Parliament/Funkadelic, but their movement was in precisely the opposite direction. They began

in the early 1970s with mystical, veiled statements of Pan-African themes. These were presented in arrangements which were heavily reliant on the sound of the African thumb piano or Kalimba, which was to become the group's trademark. The group's unique solution also drew on the jazz tradition. Their arrangers, particularly the Chicagoan Tom Washington, attempted to adapt the big-band sounds of Ellington and Basie to a dance funk context. Later on, the mystical material gave way to open political commentary on songs like 'Stand Tall (Let Me Talk)', which harked back to 'Stand' by Sly and the Family Stone, and 'Freedom Of Choice', a forthright attack on monetarism which was banned by several radio stations. The band's early work was dominated by a desire to represent *in their music* the continuity between black American and African cultural creation. This project was fully realized later on by other artists, particularly Ralph MacDonald, who created a musical equivalent to Alex Haley's *Roots* with his 1978 set *The Path*. Earth, Wind and Fire took Jesse Jackson's Black Litany, 'I am Somebody' (which would have been known to their audience from the film *Wattstax* and the JBs' dance classic 'Same Beat', if not from any immediate political experience), and pared it down to its essential context – a potent affirmation of black humanity and dignity. It became simply 'I am', the title of their 1979 album.

Jackson was a central figure in the relationship between Afro-American music and politics long before a legion of rappers, singers, producers and musicians lent their talents to support his presidential candidacy in 1984. An ex-CORE student leader and aide to Martin Luther King, Jackson had worked in Chicago during the 1960s creating 'Operation Breadbasket', a programme for boycotting ghetto supermarkets which refused to hire local black staff or lodge their profits in ghetto banks. The idea had spread to seven other cities by 1970 and claimed to have created 5,000 new jobs for ghetto dwellers.[6] In 1967, the Operation Breadbasket activists under Jackson's direction in Cleveland had become involved in the campaign to elect the city's first black mayor, Carl Stokes. It was the power of soul music which helped to secure the articulation of the mass movement of blacks with this comparatively narrow electoral aim. Breadbasket's own band toured the ghetto early on election day instructing registered voters to get up early and vote for Stokes (Preston et al., 1982). Jackson was again prominent in the campaign to elect a black mayor in Newark. This time, the candidate, Kenneth Gibson, enjoyed the support of James Brown and Stevie Wonder, who both performed on his behalf. By 1970 black mayors had been installed in Washington and Gary as well. Jackson's combination of black capitalism and militant self-held rhetoric, 'we do not want a welfare state. We have potential. We can produce. We can feed outselves' (Haralambos, 1974) was appealing. However, the cultural dimension to his political interventions was an important element in their success which has been overlooked by some commentators (Marable, 1985).

The extraordinary level of support for Jackson which was expressed by musicians, artists and performers in 1984 had been triggered by the election of Reagan and the subsequent erosion of black living standards which followed it. In 1981, Gil Scott-Heron's commentary on the Reagan victory, 'B Movie', had been a surprise hit, demonstrating that as far as the soul charts were concerned, it was possible to be simultaneously radical and successful. The Fatback Band, the Valentine Brothers and Syl Johnson, whose



early classic, 'Is It Because I'm Black?' had been sung over in reggae style by Ken Boothe, were some of the artists who came forward with denunciations of Reaganomics.[7] Their statements were all underground hits on the British soul scene and significantly drew additional strength from a re-examination of the black militancy of the 1960s. This was an early product of the explosion in New York which created rap, electro and hip-hop in the context of a street culture centred on dance, graffiti and new forms of music-making which will be discussed in detail below.

The rappers and breakdancers who once again established America as the primary source of material for the cultural syncretisms of black Britain articulated a clear political line which was well received here. 'Rappers' Delight', the Sugar Hill Gang's version of Chic's hit 'Good Times', reached Britain in the summer of 1979. There were better rap records to follow. In late 1980, Brother D, a maths teacher and community activist from Brooklyn, issued 'How We Gonna Make The Black Nation Rise?' with his group Collective Effort on the radical reggae label 'Clappers'. Taking their cues as much from the success of 'Rappers' Delight' as from the rap genre's emergent tradition of signovers and cover versions, the group used the backing track from an established dance-floor favourite, Cheryl Lynn's 'To Be Real'. The original chant chorus – the phrase 'to be real' – was left intact between the rapped segments, giving the didactic and pedagogic elements in the second version authenticity and urgency, as well as emphasizing their organic relationship to the underground culture which had made 'To Be Real' into a classic. The rap was a strident and provocative call for solidarity and organization in the Reagan era. It denounced the drug abuse and passivity which Brother D discerned in ghetto life and sought to warn his listeners of the danger they were in.

> As you're moving to the beat till the early light
> The country's moving too, moving to the right
> Prepare now, or get high and wait
> 'cause there ain't no party in a police state

The lyric went beyond a nationalist stance. It noted the rise of the Klan and the possibility of 'racial' genocide but made a clear statement on the ecological crisis, suggesting, rather as Bahro (1982, 1984) has done, that the crisis in the biosphere could achieve the unification of political forces across the conflictual lines of 'race':

> Cancer in the water, pollution in the air
> But you're partying hearty like you just don't care
> Wake up y'all you know it ain't right
> That hurts everybody black and white

Though stylistically a fast soul piece aimed at the very discos it denounced, the record made conspicuous attempts to open a dialogue with the reggae world in which 'Clappers' were established: 'there's a message in our music for I n I'. Picked up for British release in a licensing deal by Island Records, the disc was a dance-floor hit in the soul and hip-hop clubs twice between 1982 and 1985. It also picked up substantial sales in the rock market.

As the smoke from the uprisings of 1981 hung in the inner-city air, young Britons were absorbing the 'Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge' message transmitted by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and pondering the relevance of Afrika Bambaataa's 'Zulu Nation' to their own experience of structural unemployment, police harassment, drug abuse and racial disadvantage. In both America and Britain, a rediscovery of the black politics of the 1960s has been a consistent feature of hip-hop culture. It has been expressed in a variety of ways including, most obviously, an enthusiasm for politically articulate dance music of the period. James Brown's 'Get Up, Get Into It and Get Involved' was a favourite, and the same trend may explain the British popularity of many political waxings on the Philadelphia International label. Of these, 'Let's Clean Up The Ghetto' was so sought after that it was eventually re-released in 1985. Originally produced in 1977 by label bosses Gamble, a Muslim, and Huff, the record used the combined talents of Teddy Pendergrass, Billy Paul, Lou Rawls and others to comment on the need for self-reliance and political autonomy in the context of the municipal strikes in New York City. More significantly, records in this vein exported to Europe the idea that black communities in the inner city, particularly the young, could define themselves politically and philosophically as an oppressed 'nation' bound together in the framework of the diaspora by language and history.

The Pan-African desire to reconstitute and unify New World blacks into a single self-conscious people was given a further musical boost in the summer of 1983 by the release of 'The Crown', a rap on the themes of black history and pride which had been produced by Gary Byrd, an early rapper, lyricist and radio DJ, and Stevie Wonder, the soul musician who had pioneered the adaptation of reggae to black American tastes. The record passed largely unnoticed in the US but was a major hit in Britain, a remarkable development because it was over ten minutes long and its creators refused to issue it in an edited format, thus denying the record any airplay on the legal radio stations. This was a wholly underground success popularized by the clubs and the pirate broadcasters. It remains significant because it demonstrated that the Ethiopianist and Pan-African ideas associated with reggae could be perfectly integrated into a soul setting, and that the results could be popular.

I do recall so very well
when I was just a little boy
I used to hurry home from school
I used to always feel so blue
because there was no mention in the books
we read about our heritage
So therefore any information that I got was education
Bums, hobos at depot stations
I would listen with much patience
Or to relatives who told the tales
that they were told to pass ahead
And then one day from someone old
I heard a story never told



of all the kingdoms of my people
And how they fought for freedom
All about the many things we have unto the world contributed
You wear the crown. . . .
Its not Star Wars, its not Superman
Its not the story of the Ku Klux Klan. . . .

Stevie Wonder's involvement in the campaign to secure a US public holiday for Martin Luther King's birthday provided a further opportunity for black music to become politically engaged and, of course, drew attention to the political legacy of the 1960s which was being commemorated. In support of this campaign, a number of records, including Wonder's own 'Happy Birthday' (issued with selections of King's speeches on the B-side), addressed themselves to both King's death and the continuing relevance of his political achievements. In both rap and more conventional soul styles, some of these tunes even used tapes of King's own voice to develop their arguments. The most interesting of these were Bobby Womack's 'American Dream' and 'Martin Luther' by Hurt 'em Bad and the SC Band. Both featured extracts from the 'I Have A Dream' speech, the latter setting the scene with a rap about the struggle for desegregation.

King's was not the only black radical voice which was retrieved and woven into rap and electro records. The general revival of interest in the struggles of the 1960s was conveyed in particular by 'No Sellout', a record issued by Tommy Boy, a leading rap and electro label and credited to Malcolm X. Keith Le Blanc, the white drummer with the house band at Sugar Hill Records, the company which had spearheaded the commercial exploitation of radical raps, edited together a number of Malcolm's aphorisms and observations into a political commentary which was set to a fragmented electronic rhythm track and punctuated by the spoken chorus 'Malcolm X, no sellout'. The record was an underground hit in Britain during 1984 and received the support of Malcolm's widow, Dr Betty Shabazz. She told the British paper *Black Music*: 'This recording documents Malcolm's voice at a time and space in history some 19 years ago. Its meaning is just as relevant today as it was then.'[8]

The 1983 election provided the first opportunity for Britain's soul and electro subculture to implement the political tactics which had been transmitted across the Atlantic with these new forms. One London rapper, calling himself Newtrament after the milky drink popular with the Afro-Caribbean community, recorded 'London Bridge Is Falling Down', a rap based on the nursery rhyme previously adapted for radical purposes by the reggae group Culture. His version chronicled police malpractice and inner-city decay while suggesting that electoral politics were a sham. Whoever won the contest, he argued, the political processes of significance would take place far from Parliament and the plight of the dispossessed, and the poor would be essentially unaffected:

Election Fever on all four channels
. . . Red or Blue. . . .
Win or lose, lose or win
jobs will still be getting thin

A speech by Labour Party leader Michael Foot could be heard faintly in the background while a voice chanted 'vote vote vote, there ain't no hope'. A second more orthodox soul record which appeared at this time was 'Thatcher Rap' by the Phantom, an anonymous artist who had cut an anti-NF reggae 45 at the time of the first ANL carnival. Here again, snippets of a politician's speeches were assembled so that they became the vocal in a funky dance piece. Mrs Thatcher's lines were interspersed with the chorus – 'they tell me there's a crisis going on'.

Reagan's decision to seek a second presidential term and Jesse Jackson's tactical campaign for the Democratic Party nomination both generated a number of overtly political soul, rap and funk records during 1983–4. Tunes denounced Reagan and praised Jackson in almost equal measure.[9] Some of them used Reagan's voice, either mimicked or recorded, and even rearranged his words to emphasize the unpleasant features concealed behind his avuncular exterior. Several took Reagan's well-publicized *faux pas*, 'we begin bombing in five minutes', and transformed it into the centrepiece of satirical synthesized dance music. The best of these records, significantly perhaps the furthest away from a distorted but none the less realist presentation of his opinions, was Air Force One's 'See The Light Feel the Heat'. This gave the President some surreal lines: 'We still have a lot further to tango', and cut them into a chilling invocation of the nuclear holocaust and a mumbling discourse on the defence budget.

Once again the detail of these records is less significant than the fact that they were enthusiastically received by the inhabitants of Britain's black music subcultures. Those who could not afford to pay inflated prices for imported discs could look forward to hearing them on and taping them from the pirate radio stations which had begun to transmit regularly in the autumn of 1981. These outlets were important sites in which the black cultures of the US and the Caribbean were diverted into the working-class mainstream of southeast England. Their illegal status carried over into the soul scene through a close relationship between the radio DJs and the clubs where they worked when they were not on the air. A mood of opposition was cultivated by the stations who were frequently shut down by the Department of Trade inspectors. Their resistance of the government's attempts to regulate their broadcasting added substantially to the underground connotations attached to the music itself.

## Notes

1. The lyrics from Aretha Franklin's 'Think' which are reproduced below typify this mood.
2. These words come from the sleeve note to James Brown's double album *The Payback* (Polydor 2679025, 1973).
3. *Rolling Stone*, 10 February 1977.
4. The sleeve illustration to any of the Parliament releases after 'Chocolate City' bear this out. The best examples apart from their 'Mothership Connection' are two Dexter Wansell album sleeves, *Life On Mars* and *Voyager*, which depicts him in a space suit preparing to leave earth.
5. The Jones Girls, 'Get As Much Love As You Can' (Philadelphia International 85347, 1981).



6. *Time*, 6 April 1970.
7. The Valentine Brothers, 'Money's Too Tight To Mention' and Syl Johnson, 'Keep On Loving Me' (Epic 25300) are two songs which make overt reference to Reaganomics.
8. *Black Music*, February 1984, p. 10.
9. Face 2000, 'Run Jesse Run' (RSP 1001); Melle Mel, 'Jesse' (Sugar Hill 32016); Reathel Bean and the Doonesbury Break Crew, 'Rap Master Ronnie' (Silver Screen SSR115); Gil Scott Heron, 'Rerun' (Arista AD1-9216); Bonzo Goes To Washington, 'Bombing In Five Minutes' (Sleeping Bag SLX13); Uncle Sham and The Politicians, 'Vote For me' (Easy Street EZS 7509); and Captain Rapp, 'Bad Times (I Can't Stand It)' (Becket KSL 10) are some of the better politically articulate discs of the 1984 election period.

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