

“A Change is Gonna Come”—Sam Cooke (1964)

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Essay by B.G. Rhule (guest post)*



Sam Cooke

Recalling Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come”

So much has been written over these many decades about “A Change is Gonna Come,” Sam Cooke’s mellifluous and soulful ode to the struggles, yet prevailing hopes, of a black citizen living under the oppression of Jim Crow laws in the segregated South, that one may wonder, with 2019 approaching to mark the 55th year of its release to the public, exactly what is left to learn of the song’s etymology, and how it may be inextricably bound to the life experiences of its composer /lyricist. The answer, succinctly put, is plenty. Furthermore, unknown to the public are several intrinsic, key factors related to Sam Cooke’s personal and professional lives that, ironically, were played out against the backdrop of the Civil Rights era in which he lived and worked.

It is a commonly held truth by those who knew and worked with Sam that the song was first inspired by the awe he felt and expressed for singer Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind.” During a dinner break from his on-the-road performance travels, Sam, in the company of his band, tuned on the hotel room TV to watch the now-infamous 1963 March on Washington, and heard Dylan’s stirring and equally infamous anti-Jim Crow folk protest ballad. Yet, contrary to what some have written in stating that Sam was “angry” that a white boy wrote the song (which would have run totally counter to his lack of prejudice, a fact bolstered by his plethora of racially-variegenated friends and music business associates), Sam, instead, was buoyed by and inspired by Dylan’s lyrics, just as he had been by Pete Seeger’s “If I Had a Hammer.” Rather, it was more of a feeling that he, as a black man, should also write such a song, especially given the fact that on numerous occasions he had personally experienced the ugliness of Jim Crow when performing down south on the “chitlin circuit,” as the black road tours were historically dubbed, first with his early gospel group, the Soul Stirrers, and later as a solo pop performer.

During my interview with the late rock ‘n’ roll pioneer Fats Domino at his home in 2011, Domino recalled fondly his travels with Sam and others on those southern highways, yet, despite suffering from early onset of Alzheimer’s disease, he could still recall the

bitterness they felt at not being able to eat at the same establishments that white folks enjoyed. So Fats often turned chef, feeding the guys himself. He said, "I learned to cook real fast," he said, then patting his stomach and adding, "and pretty good too. We all ate great, just to show 'em!"

When Sam, a notoriously skilled, backstage craps player, was subsequently owed \$5,000 by singer Eddie Fisher, with whom he co-starred on an "Ed Sullivan Show" in the latter 1950's, Fisher gave Cooke the keys to his Maserati as payment. Sam decided to take the car on the open road when he soon afterward commenced a road tour in Shreveport, Louisiana. After checking into a hotel there, with a less-than-friendly manager who had only rented them a room because of Sam's celebrity, Sam and the band were freshening up, preparing to order dinner and start a card game to pass the evening. Suddenly, the Maserati's horn began to blare unceasingly. Road manager S.R. Crain had already taken it to a mechanic, who apparently failed to properly fix the horn, which roiled Sam so much so that when the manager pounded on the door complaining, Sam told him, "Look, man. I'm a singer, I'm no damn mechanic! What do you want me to do?" The entire entourage ended up in jail, bailed out by a large cache of money S.R. Crain kept in a briefcase at all times for just such incidents.

Dorothy Holloway Miller, who Sam first met as a 17 year-old Washington, DC model when he was a fresh-faced 20 year-old tenor for The Soul Stirrers, and remained, according to family, the love of his life for the next 13 years, recalled Sam being arrested with that group, which probably precipitated always having cash on hand when touring.

Sam received death threats when he appeared down south on Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars tour. Clark had offered him the right to legally back out with his full blessing, but Sam would not hear of it. Bravely, he performed in defiance of the threats, well aware that on another tour years previously, his dear friend, singer Jesse Belvin ("Goodnight My Love"), who had refused to perform at a second show where Jim Crow segregation laws would be strictly enforced, thus regulating black concert-goers to the balcony, paid the ultimate price with his life and the life of his young wife, Joann, when Klansmen slashed their tires prior to their departure. The tires collapsed, causing their car to slam head on into oncoming traffic.

Sam and Jackie Wilson, both on that same tour, had never gotten over their palpable anger that Jim Crow ostensibly orphaned Jesse and Joann's two toddler sons. If faced with a segregated audience, Sam made sure that his 5'9", 160 lb. frame frequently faced the marginalized black section. He did not mean to slight the white kids who paid their money but, he figured, they would be the ones to raise a fuss, which could possibly force changes in the policy.

Legendary "twangy" guitarist Duane Eddy confided that he had toured the South briefly with Sam and observed him regularly getting "the red carpet treatment," despite his race. He was, after all, articulate, educated, well-dressed, affable and classy. People often described him as someone who made a room better just by having been in it. Yet, Sam lived by a different creed, one that was taught to him by his father, the Rev. Cook, which

was to show the same respect and dignity he would demand of others; to live the Golden Rule; to think in Christian terms of “otherness,” particularly for the least among us, just as Sam’s mother, Annie Mae, would by sharing their food with less fortunate neighbors and friends, including Sam’s best bud, Lou Rawls, who he would look out for his entire life.

Most of all, never forget where you came from, Rev. and Mrs. Cook would remind all of their seven children. Sam may have had a poolside home in the hills of LA’s posh Los Feliz area, and may have worn \$500 silk shirts when he performed, but he never lost sight of his early childhood poverty in Clarksdale, Mississippi, nor as an adolescent in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood. “A Change is Gonna Come,” then, was his dedication song to those who were oppressed by the sinful social structures created by the complicit partnership of obscene wealth with racism; those ostracized, forced by Jim Crow to live on the margins of society, told where they were permitted to be, but mostly where not to be.

The late Eliot Chavers, a sometime bandleader and saxophonist who often traveled the South with Sam, recalled Sam defiantly correcting a Texas highway patrolman who’d called him “Sammy, in a smarmy fashion.” He also recalled the bone-chilling apprehension they shared upon witnessing more than one of the noon-time lynchings of black men, a sick and perverse form of white southern entertainment in its day.

Sam Cooke was the first black pop singer to own his own record labels (SARS and Derby), and publishing company (KAGS, named for friend Lou Rawls’ eccentric stepfather); and the first to wear his hair in a natural, shunning the processed “conk” so common for black entertainers who felt pressured to acquiesce to the white hairstyles of that era. He was the first black singer to produce other young black talent, including Bobby Womack and his brothers who performed as The Valentinos, as well as Billy Preston, Mel Carter, Johnny Taylor, the Sims Twins, and others.

At the time of Cooke’s December 1964 death, he was also set to produce two Italian singer-songwriters, Angelo Spezze and his nephew, Kenny Ancell, who brought their composition “Day Late and a Dollar Short” to Sam. Famed music producer Lou Adler, who roomed with Sam when he first came to LA to record “You Send Me,” told me, “Sam Cooke was colorblind. He didn’t care what you looked like, he was after a sound. Sam taught me to close my eyes and listen to the song.”

Imagine the reaction of the top brass at RCA, who produced Sam, upon learning that he was producing other artists, both black and white, thereby cutting out their distributors at the mobbed-up Liberty Records. The very conduit for a black singer/songwriter’s freedom, namely independent production, would be the very reason Sam Cooke would later be set up to be killed.

Sam had discovered days before his death that not only had Klein stolen his titles, removing his and his father’s name from the list of officers, but monies from his SARS publishing was going straight to subsidiary WL Records, who was also siphoning

proceeds from Specialty Records, home label of singers Little Richard, Lloyd Price, and Larry Williams (“Boney Maronie,” “Short Fat Fanny,” “Slow Down”), the latter of whom would also later be found shot to death, a police-ruled “suicide,” even though the wound was in the back of his head. At the time of his death, Williams was being managed by J.W. Alexander, Sam’s labels partner who later admitted to family members that he had been the one Klein had forced to register the forged titles of operation in Reno, Nevada. Coincidentally, Allen Klein had for a time managed the Beatles who recorded “Slow Down,” for which Williams had also been missing song royalties. WL Records’ “bag man” was John Montague, who worked *for* Sam Giancana and *with* J.W. Alexander. Montague was also skimming from singer Bobby Vinton.

When Sam had a brief, chance encounter with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Atlanta airport, sometime after that March on Washington, he committed not only a song to him, but agreed to organize other artists for a compilation album of folk and gospel songs, the proceeds of which, according to family members, he would completely donate to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). It was never Sam’s intention to profit personally from the song; too much blood and too many tears had been shed already. This was Sam Cooke’s sole opportunity to contribute to the movement and he was thrilled to volunteer his talents toward this end.

Cooke knew once “Change” was written that it was unquestionably a spectacular statement in song. It ingeniously weaved a powerful statement with a powerful vocal within an equally powerful production—strings, horns, bass. It had all the makings of a potential number one hit. Why then did it lie dormant for four months? Obviously, Sam never had any intention of releasing it as a commercial song. Logically, it would also take some time to organize other artists. Surely he would have employed the talents of his protégés, as well as friends Lou Rawls and Leroy Crume, who now sang with the Soul Stirrers. One can only imagine how unique an LP this would have been under Sam’s tutelage. Sadly, Sam did not have the opportunity to bring his concept to fruition, but a similar LP was subsequently produced by Harry Belafonte in 1965, which only enjoyed moderate success.

While Sam eyed artistic and production independence in the soon-to-be new year, others had different ideas. His nefarious manager Allen Klein, who was most likely highly involved in Sam’s set-up murder on December 11, 1964, would soon own Sam’s entire catalog weeks later, per some shady probate hearings in an LA courthouse. There, the hastily re-typed catalogue sat in stark contrast to the original recordings, such as “Chain Gang,” co-written by Sam’s brother and driver Charles. (Written when Same and Charles literally came upon a chain gang in the Deep South, and Sam got out of the car to offer food and cigarettes to the men. The feelings Sam shared with his brother about the sufferings of those poor black men in chains was a forerunner to “A Change is Gonna Come.”)

A man who obviously did not share that same empathy was Klein, who would stick the initial release of “A Change” onto the “B” side of the dance tune “Shake”; this was very telling. Thus, it rendered Sam the victim of a still-rigged and racist judicial system that

neither would preclude his reputation from being irreparably smeared in death at the bogus coroner's inquest hearing, nor mete out justice for his ideals and the well-being of his family. Klein's personal attorney, Marty Marchat (to whom Klein quietly paid \$6,000 a month for life, long after they'd stopped speaking), was representing the Cooke Estate, a clear violation of ethics and a conflict of interest. Stuningly, after Sam passed, the family received threatening phone calls from Klein not to investigate. Every attorney they hired was paid off and summarily disappeared. It was Sam's brother-in-law, husband of his baby sister Agnes, who had devoted his life to getting justice for Sam and for the family, working as a Cook County investigator, who uncovered the dirty truth: Allen Klein had re-filed Sam's Tracey Records Limited (named for his youngest daughter), listing himself as President, with his wife, Betty, business associate Henry Newfeld, and J.W. Alexander, Sam's labels partner, as Vice-Presidents. Alexander would soon afterward be paid off and removed from the company altogether.

The night of Sam's murder, he would actually be blamed for having kidnapped one Elisa Boyer, who, it would be claimed, took his clothes, causing the allegedly naked singer to beat down the door of a \$3.00 a night flophouse and ultimately be shot by a motel manager in what was declared at the scene as "justifiable homicide." Boyer, in fact, was a prostitute known to record companies and police departments alike as Crystal Chi Young, and had been squired to Martoni's Restaurant by Pete Bennett, Liberty Records' A&R man, and a co-conspirator with Klein, both having been caught by the feds, in later years, selling \$35,000 worth of Beatles promo records. Sam had had a dinner meeting with sound engineer Al Schmitt and his wife. When Gold Star Studios co-owner and producer Stan Ross entered Martoni's at 10:30, Sam was alone at the bar, the Schmitts and Young both gone.

After Ross departed home to his wife, Vera, at 12:30 a.m., Sam got a phone call from a hysterical Johnny Morisette at P.J.'s nightclub on the Sunset Strip, begging him to hurry over there. Morisette's family has steadfastly maintained that Johnny told them Klein ordered a gun pointed at his head at the time. Witnesses Morisette and the Olympics' Walter Ward both saw Sam leave with Young, who had asked him for a ride home to the Hacienda Hotel, even though she gave testimony to living elsewhere. Is there any serious question as to who killed Sam Cooke? Only days before, Sam had told his father that he would be shedding Klein's management, explaining, "Papa, this is a dog-eat-dog business. I intend to eat that dog before it eats me." Sam had a foreboding of violent forces surrounding him, and sought to extricate himself from their vile criminality, but failed to stop them in time. The Spezes, in fact, active in the close-knit Italian-American community of LA, discovered that they knew at least two of Sam's killers, who admitted to beating and later shooting the singer inside Klein's limo. All of this adds a fierce urgency to Sam's premonitory focus on death in "A Change is Gonna Come."

Sam's late nephew, Eugene Jamison, had earlier told me that it had been of utmost importance to Sam that his father, Rev. David Cook, Sr., a Baptist minister, hear the gospel music influence and flavor of the tune, an homage to Sam's own spiritual and musical roots which coincided when he first sang in his father's children's choir as a nine

year-old. He wanted for his father to be proud, as well as the family's honest reaction to the song.

Sam's only surviving brother, David Cook (the family does not spell their name with an "e" at the end, which had been given to Sam by his first record producer Bob Keane), recalled the afternoon in late summer 1964, when Sam bought the first pressing of the song for the family to be played on their portable phonograph in his mother's Bronzeville kitchen.

"We were beyond impressed," David told me recently:

I was just so amazed by it. I thought it was beautiful. Just beautiful. When I heard the lines, "I go to the movies/And I go downtown/Someone keep telling me/Don't come around..." and then the lines, "I go to my brother/And I say, brother, help me please/But he just keep on knockin' me/Back down on my knees..." I was so moved. I thought about Sam's earlier days on the gospel circuit, traveling through those treacherous towns.

Of course, a black person did not need to necessarily be doing anything to incur intense scrutiny and the wrath of racist whites. Blind singer Al Hibler, a friend of Sam's, was arrested by the notorious Birmingham, Alabama, Sheriff Bull Connor (who, ironically, served as Public Safety Commissioner), merely for standing on a sidewalk-- "*Someone keep telling me don't come around...*"

David Cook recalls Sam telling them, "This was the hardest song I've ever sat down to write." After being stunned by the haunting beauty of the song, they all understood why it posed such a formidable challenge to Sam. There was so much of him in that song. Bobby Womack had said he was "terrified because the song sounded like death."—"*It's been too hard livin'/But I'm afraid to die/I don't know what's up there/Beyond the sky...*"

Cooke's great love, Dorothy Miller, added her memories of observing Sam writing songs on cocktail napkins or envelopes, and writing often after he read extensively about a topic that interested him. She attests to his deep spirituality, calling him "a religious person, through his beliefs, and often his actions. I remember Papa Cook would always be telling him, 'Go with God. No matter where you are, Son, don't forget God.' Sam had premonitions about things, including life, and its ultimate end. He deeply felt 'A Change is Gonna Come'; that's why he wrote 'A Change is Gonna Come.'"

Undoubtedly the drowning death of his 18 month-old son Vincent in the family pool on June 17, 1963, had broken a piece of Sam's heart and left his already teetering four-year marriage to his wife, Barbara, in shambles. "He wasn't quite the same after that," Eugene Jamison and Doncella Pamon, Sam's niece, both told me. Each kept separate apartments while Sam's labels' manager, Zelda Sands, often watched the children in their house on Ames Avenue in LA, along with a housekeeper. Death of a baby, death of a marriage, and then, only known to a few, Sam's lingering confrontation with his own

mortality, brought him full circle with his own questions about Christological salvation in the afterlife.

Cooke's staunch support of friends Mohammad Ali and Malcolm X's black entrepreneurialism was juxtaposed against his own Baptist upbringing. At the time of his death, Sam was also attempting to create business opportunities for family and friends, including the mothers of his other children. Freedom, independence, liberating one's creative spirit from oppressive domination: Sam Cooke not only died for these God-given rights, he fought for the rights of others to enjoy the same.

"A Change is Gonna Come" was as cathartic a songwriting experience for Sam Cooke as it was transformative a song for anyone who has heard it. It is an allegorical civics tale, snugly wrapped in the soothing Balm of Gilead, mesmerizingly delivered by Sam Cooke's honey-drenched tenor. Fifty-four years after Sam's death, it continues to captivate Millennials and Baby Boomers alike. It knows no age, gender or racial barriers, though undoubtedly, as the Anthem of the Civil Rights Movement for which it was intended, its uplifting qualities, and soulful inspiration remain boundless. Of this, Sam Cooke would be most proud.

B.G. Rhule is the author of the book "One More River to Cross: The Redemption of Sam Cooke."

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