The record-buying world was largely introduced to the writer, the artist, the voice that was Sam Cooke via “You Send Me” in 1957. It was one of those seismic songs, like “Heartbreak Hotel,” “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” “Respect,” “My Generation,” and “Like a Rolling Stone,” in which one’s first hearing proves forever indelible, called to mind with every future encounter of the piece. Cooke seemed to have arrived all of a sudden, like Santa Claus coming down the chimney in the famous Clement Clarke Moore poem, but without any forewarning that he might be coming. He was simply there, on your radio, a radiating form of soulful ubiquity.

But the reality was that Sam Cooke had long been journeying to this particular stop in what was an elongated musical quest. He was on his own now because he had left one glorious humdinger of a performing unit. That group was the Soul Stirrers, with whom Cooke sang from the age of 19 in 1950 until that same year of the release of “You Send Me.” To put the timeline in perspective: the duration would be similar to the commercial whole of the Beatles’ career. Which is to say, Cooke took his stint with this trail-emblazoning gospel unit very seriously indeed. The Soul Stirrers sang gospel, but one could have called it rock and soul, when they whipped themselves up into a tizzy. Or rhythm and blues. Audiences rushed the stage, women screamed and fainted, with crowds coated in multiple forms of lather, to be delicate about the matter. Sam Cooke was a big reason why.

The young man had to prove himself early. After all, the unit’s lead vocal chair had essentially been forked over to a teenager. The Soul Stirrers made a nice piece of change--there was money in these gospel hills--and where in life can a person so young transform the quality of the whole? One perhaps thinks of Arthur Rimbaud writing his best verse by the age of 20, and while Cooke would go on to realize a bevy of future masterpieces--a roll call of singles that can compete with those of the Beatles and Rolling Stones; arguably the most consequential live album in popular music history with “Live at the Harlem Square Club, 1963”; and his crowning “A Change Is Gonna Come,” the key song of the Civil Rights era--he got the first one up on the board early.
Nineteen fifty-one’s “Jesus Gave Me Water” didn’t just impress Cooke’s fellows in the Soul Stirrers; it remade the possibilities of what it meant to sing gospel songs. Cooke was a born parameter-buster, one of those artists who, upon seeing walls, essentially says, “You are not for me!” and down they come. Cooke is Cook at this point—he’s yet to add the crowning “e” for theatrical bravado. And he is a “cook” of sorts, the man who prepares a musical meal for Jesus and the disciples, and for everyone, regardless of faith, color, creed.

Cooke begins his ascent on greatness with a single, sustained, “Whoa,” and we know that we are in the presence of the real deal. That’s all it takes—the rendering of a word that also feels like a vocalization. It is a word from the dictionary that also lives in the liminal space between official language and un-stifled ejaculation, which makes it a most human word as rendered by Cooke. Say “Jesus” and “water,” and one typically thinks of the bathing of feet, but this is a Jesus that is out on a trail befitting a cinematic Western. Everyone may encounter him, and the slaking of thirst becomes a metaphor for learning to carry on better, actuated from the inside out—which is exactly how Cooke sings.

He enunciates the entirety of the word. When we hear it at other times in popular music—think of the Who’s “Water”—that concluding “er” is almost always sliced away; there’s a bit of the Boston accent that appears in virtually everyone’s phrasing, no matter where they’re from.

Not with Cooke. He gives the full word, goes double-barrel with both syllables, and it’s obvious that he’s being mindful to do so. There’s a love and a grace in that fullness, a respect. Water is the life force, and hearing this song, we start to think that the way a person communicates to another—as this man is to us—is itself aqueous. And so are the stories we tell with our voices in hopes to reach someone—especially when we sing them, which can take so many forms. Proust sang; and so did Sam Cooke.

A lot of Cooke’s music was nighttime music, the way that Nick Drake’s music was for a Sunday morning in autumn. If “You Send Me” was a bird, it would be an indigo bunting accentuated by the leftover hues of twilight. The “Night Beat” (1963) album was cut at the time of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s dark night of the soul, and is best listened to at the same hour. “Live at the Harlem Square Club” could hardly be the documentation of a matinee. He was an artist of evensong, and his music—whether with the Soul Stirrers or out on his own—suggests Christmas carols. They’re often religious in nature—even spiritual—but we don’t think of them that way. They are secular odes that build an internal sense of joy from minor keys. They musically embody transformation.

“Jesus Gave Me Water” is a break from what will be a pattern, but not a rule. It’s an antemeridian effort, and we imagine it playing out under a citron sky, within its own sacred-secular dyadic nimbus. Listen to how straight-up funky this is, the way Cooke builds rhythm in the voice. That rhythm is of a piece with another seismic song of the Civil Rights Movement, Steve Reich’s “Come Out” (1966). This is Sly Stone, this is Prince’s “The Black Album,” and it’s Cooke in his first moment where we see the entirety of him.

Cooke was never a big falsetto guy, but he goes there early in this song, voice climbing the path up the mountain, hitting the altitudinous notes. Every word he sings seems to set up a yet-more-
powerful rendering of the word “water.” Cooke is wassailing just as Christ the man--not the crowned deity--went a’parabling. It’s a Cooke-ian carol in the manner of “I Saw Three Ships,” “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” and “Ding Dong Merrily on High.” These are also sun-splashed odes of soul and celebration, of the thirst that is quenched, the faith in one’s self either initiated, or restored.

Water does this curious thing when a drop of it falls, which we often don’t notice. But next time you’re sweating or crying, watch what happens when a droplet of your essence falls and hits the side of a surface. We expect it to be absorbed, to puddle, make its small splash, but that’s not what occurs. The water bounces. It makes this horizontal break, like a hummingbird shifting in mid-air, and it continues on to another plane. One could say that even our tears attempt to cheer us by underscoring the power of possibility and the undercutting of expectations. All is not lost, all is not pain; we travel on, same as the water born within us, and now borne in the world.

Cooke builds his water, we might say, in this song. He’s working towards a payoff, a release, the same as Handel does with the word “amen” at the close of “Messiah.” We get there when Cooke gives up the ghost of singing lines as we’ve previously thought of lines in song, and just starts saying the word “water” again and again. It’s the sound of that horizontal movement, the bounce off the surface’s edge, and on to whatever is bigger, brighter, the eternal and holy—and humanly secular--Next. Our faith as humans is bound up in that Next. That which follows, and the hope--the water--that gets us there.

Drink heartily, this boy just out of his teens says to us, sings to us, communicates to us. And then drink again, my brothers and sisters.


*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*