



SAM COOKE

Biography of Sam Cooke – January 22, 1931-December 11, 1964

Sam Cooke was the most important soul singer in history -- he was also the inventor of soul music, and its most popular and beloved performer in both the black and white communities. Equally important, he was among the first modern black performers and composers to attend to the business side of the music business, and founded both a record label and a publishing company as an extension of his careers as a singer and composer.

In a sense, his appeal anticipated that of the Beatles, in breadth and depth. He was born Sam Cook in Clarksdale, MS, on January 22, 1931, one of eight children of a Baptist minister and his wife. Even as a young boy, he showed an extraordinary voice and frequently sang in the choir in his father's church. During the middle of the decade, the Cook family moved to Chicago's South Side, where the Reverend Charles Cook quickly established himself as a major figure in the religious community. Sam and three of his siblings also formed a group of their own, the Singing Children, in the 1930s.

Although his own singing was confined to gospel music, he was aware and appreciative of the popular music of the period, particularly the melodious, harmony-based sounds of the Ink Spots, whose influence could later be heard in songs such as "You Send Me" and "For Sentimental Reasons."

As a teenager, he was a member of the Teen Highway QCs, a gospel group that performed in churches and at religious gatherings. His membership in that group led to his introduction to the Soul Stirrers, one of the top gospel groups in the country, and in 1950 he joined them.

If Cooke had never recorded a note of music on his own, he would still be remembered today in gospel circles for his work with the Soul Stirrers. Over the next six years, his role within the group and his prominence within the black community rose to the point where he was already a star, with his own fiercely admiring and devoted audience, through his performances on songs like "Touch the Hem of His Garment," "Nearer to Thee" and "That's Heaven to Me." The group was one of the top acts on Art Rupe's Specialty Records label, and he might have gone on for years as their most popular singer, but Cooke's goal was to reach audiences beyond the religious community, and beyond the black population, with his voice.

He tested the waters of popular music in 1956 with the single "Lovable," produced by Bumps Blackwell and credited under the name Dale Cooke so as not to attract too much attention from his existing audience. It was enough, however, to get Cooke dropped by the Soul Stirrers and their record label, but that freed him to record under his real name. The result was one of the biggest selling singles of the 1950s, a Cooke original entitled "You Send Me," which sold over two million copies on the tiny Keen Records label and hit number one on both the pop and R&B charts. Although it seems like a tame record today, "You Send Me" was a pioneering soul record in its time, melding elements of R&B, gospel and pop into a sound that was new and still coalescing at the time.

Cooke was with Keen for the next two years, a period in which he delivered up some of the prettiest romantic ballads and teen pop singles of the era, including "For Sentimental Reasons," "Everybody Loves to Cha Cha Cha," "Only Sixteen" and "(What A) Wonderful World." These were extraordinarily beautiful records, and in between the singles came some early album efforts, most notably *Tribute to the Lady*, his album of songs associated with Billie Holiday.

He later signed with RCA Records, then one of the three biggest labels in the world (the others being Columbia and Decca), even as he organized his own publishing company, Kags Music, and a record label, SAR, through which he would produce other artists' records -- among those signed to SAR were the Soul Stirrers, Bobby Womack (late of the Valentinos, who were also signed to the label), former Soul Stirrers member Johnny Taylor, Billy Preston, Johnnie Morissette, and the Simms Twins.

In 1962, Cooke issued *Twistin' the Night Away*, a somewhat belated "twist" album that became one of his biggest-selling LPs. He didn't really hit his stride as an LP artist, however, until 1963 with the release of *Night Beat*, a beautifully self-contained, dark, moody assembly of blues-oriented songs that were among the best and most challenging numbers that Cooke had recorded up to that time. By the time of its release, he was mostly identified through his singles, which were among the best work of their era, and had developed two separate audiences, among white teen and post-teen listeners and black audiences of all ages.

Cooke felt that the time was right for songs that dealt with more than twisting the night away. The result was "A Change Is Gonna Come," perhaps the greatest song to come out of the civil rights struggle, and one that seemed to close and seal the gap between the two directions of Cooke's career, from gospel to pop. Arguably his greatest and his most important song, it was an artistic apotheosis for Cooke. During this same period, he had also devised a newer, more advanced dance-oriented soul sound in the form of the song "Shake." These two recordings heralded a new era for Cooke and a new phase of his career, with seemingly the whole world open to him.

None of it was to be. Early in the day on December 11, 1964, while in Los Angeles, Cooke became involved in an altercation at a seedy motel, with a woman guest and the night manager, and was shot to death while allegedly trying to attack the manager. The case is still shrouded in doubt and mystery, and was never investigated the way the murder of a star of his stature would be today. Cooke's death shocked the black community and reverberated far beyond -- his single "Shake" was a posthumous Top Ten hit, as were "A Change Is Gonna Come" and the *At the Copa* album,

released in 1965. Otis Redding, Al Green, and Solomon Burke, among others, picked up key parts of Cooke's repertory, as did white performers, including the Animals and the Rolling Stones. Even the Supremes recorded a memorial album of his songs, which is now one of the most sought-after of their original recordings, in either LP or CD form. Sam Cooke's reputation survived and he will be remembered as one of the greatest soul singers to ever live.

~ Bruce Eder, All Music Guide

Sam Cooke – Discography – US Album Releases

Sam Cooke – Keen (1958)
Encore – Keen (1958)
Tribute to the Lady – Keen (1959)
Hit Kit – Keen (1959)
I Thank God – Keen (1960)
Wonderful World of Sam Cooke – Keen (1960)
Cooke's Tour – RCA (1960)
Hits of the 50s – RCA (1960)
Swing Low – RCA (1961)
My Kind of Blues – RCA (1961)
Gospel Pearls – SAR (1962)
Twistin' the Night Away – RCA (1962)
Best of Sam Cooke – RCA (1962)
Mr. Soul – RCA (1963)
Night Beat – RCA (1963)
3 Great Guys – RCA (1963)
Ain't That Good News – RCA (1964)
Sam Cooke At The Copa – RCA (1964)
Shake – RCA (1965)
Best of Sam Cooke, Vol. 2 – RCA (1965)
Try A Little Love – RCA (1965)
The Unforgettable Sam Cooke – RCA (1966)
The Man Who Invented Soul – RCA (1968)
The One and Only Sam Cooke – RCA Camden (1968)
Rockin' Slumber Party – Famous (1969)
Sam's Songs – Famous (1969)
Only 16-Hit Songs of the 50s & 60s – Famous (1969)
So Wonderful – Famous (1969)
You Send Me – Famous (1969)
Everybody Likes To Cha Cha Cha – Famous (1969)
Gospel Soul of Sam Cooke, With The Soul Stirrers, Vol. 1 – Specialty (1969)
This Is Sam Cooke – RCA (1970)
Sam Cooke – RCA Camden (1970)
The Two Sides of Sam Cooke – Specialty (1970)
The Original Soul Stirrers – Specialty (1970)
The Original Soul Stirrers, Featuring Sam Cooke – Specialty
Gospel Soul of Sam Cooke, With The Soul Stirrers, Vol. 2 – Specialty (1971)
Soulin' Sam Cooke-Right On – Cherie (1971)
That's Heaven To Me – Specialty (1972)
Going Back To The Lord Again – Specialty (1972)
The Unforgettable Sam Cooke – RCA Camden (1973)
Gospel Stars In Concert – Specialty (1973)
You Send Me – RCA (1974)
Sam Cooke Interprets Billie Holiday – RCA (1975)
20 Greatest Hits – Tee Vee/RCA (1976)
The Legendary Sam Cooke – RCA/Candlelite (1976)
Gospel In My Soul – Veejay Int'l (1977)
Best of Sam Cooke – RCA (1978)
Sam Cooke At The Copa – RCA (1978)
You Send Me – RCA/Pair (1982)
Live At The Harlem Square Club, 1963 – RCA (1985)
The Man and His Music – RCA (1986)
Sam Cooke Sampler – RCA (1986)
Forever – Specialty (1986)
Sam Cooke At The Copa – ABKCO (1987)
Sam Cooke Having A Party – RCA (1988)
The Best of Sam Cooke – RCA (1988)
The 2 Sides of Sam Cooke – Specialty (1989)
Sam Cooke With The Soul Stirrers – Specialty (1991)
Jesus Gave Me Water – Specialty (1992)
The Great 1955 Shrine Concert – Specialty (1993)
Sam Cooke's SAR Records Story – ABKCO
The Last Mile of the Way – Specialty (1994)
The Specialty Story – Specialty (1994)
Sam Cooke's Night Beat – ABKCO (1995)
The Rhythm And The Blues – RCA (1995)
Greatest Hits – RCA (1998)
The Man Who Invented Soul – RCA (2000)
Keep Movin' On – ABKCO (2001)
Sam Cooke's Night Beat – RCA (2001)
Sam Cooke With The Soul Stirrers, The Complete Specialty Recordings – Specialty (2002)
Sam Cooke At The Copa – ABKCO (2003)
Keep Movin' On – ABKCO (2003)
Portrait of A Legend – ABKCO (2003)
Ain't That Good News – ABKCO (2003)
Tribute to the Lady – ABKCO (2003)
Sam Cooke's SAR Records Story – ABKCO (2003)