

My Top 20 Soul sides of 1976...

COMPILING the top 20 for this year-end column is never an easy task, but such was the richness of Soul material on offer in 1976, that it proved to be an even tougher task than usual. After much thought, consideration and re-auditioning however, I present below what I consider were the 20 best sides that I heard in 1976.

I stress "that I heard" because nobody nowadays (as if they ever could, come to that) can hear *everything* that gets issued on both sides of the Atlantic, so it may well be that certain gems and masterpieces did escape my notice, as indeed they have done in other years, and have never had a placing which they perhaps deserved.

To be considered for inclusion, a record must have been issued in a 45rpm format (so that excludes some great LP tracks that should be issued as singles perhaps), and must have either been issued for the first time in the States between November 1975 and November 1976, or, must have been issued in the UK for the first time during the same period.

This method takes into account delays in getting a record out here after the States, and avoids overlaps like Jeff Perry's "Love Don't Come No Stronger" which, although issued for the first time in the UK in 1976, was my Number 1 choice for last year as an import.

Unlike other years, this time a good proportion of the sides I've chosen were ones which were issued in the UK, and 1976 was also memorable and remarkable from the point of view of the number of really excellent Soul sides that made the UK charts.

Sides which in other years may well have sunk without trace after being issued, but which this year were acclaimed by a far wider public than just Soul circles, and this is such a positive and optimistic sign that it augers very well indeed for Soul music's prospects in 1977.

If the momentum that the music has gained this year can be sustained and augmented by enthusiasm and effort, then it could be a permanent break through for Soul in Britain.

Sadly, there will be those in the Soul spectrum who will not only regret and resent this happening, but will actively do all in their power to ensure that Soul remains their tiny, personal "kingdom" because there is nothing more they dread than having to acknowledge that a Soul record can also sometimes be a pop record, and at heart, these people are too selfish and self-centred to share the wealth.

But all this must wait for my next column which will review the year in

more general terms. Right now it's my personal Top 20 for 1976 that is under review! So here they are from 1 to 20, and I hope that you'll agree with at least some of them!

1 Stairsteps "Tell Me Why" *Dark Horse*

By the time you've finished reading this column, you'll realise that for me, the signing and recording of **Stairsteps** to the *Dark Horse* label was the most significant and important thing that happened to Soul in '76.

There will be many who will say (and not without a great deal of justification), that 1976 really was the year of **George Clinton**, but as great as all his work and output was, (and this I do not dispute), the work created by **Stairsteps** was, to my mind at least, greater, and, perhaps more importantly, was so avant-garde and ahead of its time that I am convinced that these recordings will still sound fresh and new in 1984.

Maybe it was because the recordings for *Dark Horse* were so ahead of their time that very few commentators remarked upon or noticed their exquisite subtlety, and what impact was in them was not the type that is immediately apparent, but the sort that reveals itself slowly and nebulously.

There are enough references within the works too to indicate that **George Harrison's** involvement with religions that have a more mystical content than traditional Western beliefs, has infiltrated through to **Stairsteps** as well. The mellow but highly disciplined love ballads of **The Five Stairsteps** have evolved into the strict discipline of love and compassion itself.

It is not without significance either that this intense theological development within the Soul spectrum should have been almost totally unnoticed when the media



was, towards the latter part of this year at least, preoccupied with its very antithesis in the form of 'punk rock'.

"Tell Me Why" is a remarkable record that can be taken on several different levels; as a straight love song of hurt and regret; a confused and bewildered cry from the heart; but on a deeper level it can also be heard as a profound questioning of all philosophic ideas which generally prevail in present-day society. "*Only the truth can set me free . . . sometimes I wonder if I'll ever find peace of mind . . .*"

Set against a quirky musical backdrop that has tango overtones and typical "Western" concepts of Middle East rhythms and melodies, the climax of the song is followed by a near pastiche of an oriental cooch dance (much longer on the LP cut, and tragically abbreviated for the single), which perfectly counterbalances the sheer weightiness of the preceding lyrics. Almost certainly the "heaviest" Soul side of '76, it shakes the mind, disturbs the soul and almost creates a fool's paradise as the sweetly hypnotic melody lulls you into a state of tranquility which only the harshness of the lyrics can jolt you out of.

More importantly however, it makes you realise that we have all been seduced by ease, comfort and myths. And it urges you and begs you to question them all.

Not only the best record of the year, but for my money one of the best of all time too!

2 Jean Plum ("Look At The Boy") *London*

A close second this, it is a masterpiece of simplicity, understatement and beauty that is totally enveloped in the musical mastery of **Willie Mitchell** at his very best. Cleverly utilising double-tracking with brass and strings giving emphasis, **Jean Plum** sings with a directness that perfectly matches the lyrics — "*Look at the boy. If he'd look my way I don't know what I'd say*".

It is a song of secretly held one-sided love, a love nursed from afar that is almost afraid that it might crumble if it came any closer to reality that it already is. It is unashamedly romantic.

Pure anathema of course to the cynics who forget they themselves were once teenagers (if they ever really were, that is), but for those who'd sooner be honest and true to their emotions rather than to cold, unfeeling intellect, this is a side that they'll warm to, and no doubt will, somewhere or other along the line, recognise as part of their own experience. So honest it almost hurts. A brilliant outing to treasure for keeps.



The Dave Godin Column

3 Parliament "Tear The Roof Off The Sucker" *Casablanca*

In complete contrast to the foregoing, but very much on the same wave-length in terms of Soul communication. As this obsessional war chants for funk goes deeper and deeper, so elements of self-derision creep in, and as it gets beyond what it is initially calling for, it remains an unanswered enigma.

So beautifully and rigidly strung together, only the wandering, erratic, anarchic and joyously lunatic synthesiser counter-balances the almost "strict-tempo" quality of all the rest of it. Almost purely gospel in places, the vocals wander through a whole variety of Soul styles and attitudes.

An altogether intriguing side that, by using seemingly chaotic ingredients, produces what could possibly be the definitive funk side of all time, but, as the same time, it also sails very close to actual parody of the style!

Maybe this is an indication that funk has come to the end of its creative road, but either this record is the cleverest send-up of all time, or (as I suspect) it has gone beyond the borders of funk and rests somewhere in a realm that can only be

described as triualised funk. Stunningly great.

4 The Brothers Johnson "I'll Be Good To You" *A&M*

Funk of the more conventional type here that has no gimmicks and which is so beautifully produced and arranged that it is a masterpiece of economy and simplicity. (The type that no doubt cost several thousand dollars!)

The subtle rhythmic ambiances with choral backup emphasised by tambourine are a perfect vocal setting for the vocals of **the Brothers Johnson**. They do not sing harmony but this is provided from the femme chorus, and soon it gets into a compulsive, mean, hip groove of the sort you hope just isn't going to stop.

Thank goodness *A&M* in the UK didn't do what their US counterparts did, and put this out in a shortened format. It is a work that needs every single second it can get to say what it has to say.

From the morse-code RKO-Radio signal of urgency at the opening, it builds and builds in emotional intensity without ever once gaining tempo or losing its cool. And that is something that *only* Soul music knows the secret of doing.

Utterly exquisite, and, in the nicest possible meaning of the word, pretty too!

5 General Johnson "Don't Walk Away" *Arista*

The moody and ominous opening contrasts with the almost happy and light hearted feel of the ensuing strings, and a dead-beat pace from the rhythm are all rich ingredients in which to set **General Johnson's** ever-interesting voice.

Strong lyrics too — "*She don't mean nothing to me, I'm in love with you. And I'll tell her to her face in front of you*", and he delivers them with gutsy force and conviction. Superb production values with mixed chorus and sterling orchestral work, overall it is a side that just can not be faulted.

One is attempted to nag *Arista* into putting it out over here, but no doubt by now imports have rendered any initial sales leap meaningless. Once you've heard it, I don't think you'll walk away and leave it either!

6 L.T.D. "Love Ballad" *A&M*

Love, Togetherness and Devotion were seldom better serviced than in this superlative outing which appeared in this country only a few weeks ago.

Its simple title sets the scene perfectly because not only is it a love ballad, but it is also a secular hymn to its joys and happiness too. "*What we have is much more than they can see . . .*" the basic conviction of everyone who has "*discovered love for the first time, as if nobody had ever heard of it before them . . .*"

Splendid use of strings and alto-gether superbly orchestrated, **L.T.D.** sing with skill, style and deep understanding, and the finished result is an exquisite gem of rare quality and sincerity.

7 Freddie Hughes "Sarah Mae" *Greg-Uh-Rudy*

The first authentic, 100%, no-fooling Deep Soul side in this year's

listing, (and as regular readers will know, Deep Soul is the area of Soul music in which I am most totally captivated and mesmerised), **Freddie Hughes** really sings out on this haunting and haunted ballad as he begs his lady to come home off the streets and go back with him and the kids.

A weird dirge-like sound gives this side a positively "Southern" feel to it, but cleverly this is augmented by strings, excellent drum and cymbal work, and a distanced organ. Starkly simple, but if anything, this merely serves to heighten the intensity of its pleading.

Brilliantly evocative, it lingers and echoes in the heart and mind with the bleak chill of rainswept streets and alleyways.

8 Automatic Man "My Pearl" *Island*

Almost old-time Motownesque with electric piano, ooo-ooing chick chorus and **Levi Stubbs** rasped type vocals, this exciting blend produced one of the most "happening" sides of the year, and yet despite all these complex production values, the actual melody is both catchy and memorable.

It is little short of a national disgrace and a scathing indictment of media "hipness" in this country, when a record like this is accorded so little attention that it stood almost no chance at all of becoming a hit!

Automatic Man on the strength of this single alone should have emerged as one of the leading new groups for 1976, but if they keep making sides as exciting and vibrant as this one, then no doubt they will eventually overcome media inertia and sloth. Full of surprises, this record positively sparkles.

9 Sir Mack Rice "It Takes One To Know One" *Contempo*

One of the light-weight goodies of the year perhaps, but all the more refreshing because of that! An intriguing piano pattern set against a really solid stomping back beat that positively cascades down in a ragtime shuffle which is emphasised by a doo-wop chorus, **Sir Mack** is in fine fettle as he sings the ironic and wise lyrics with a sense of fun and good natured humour.

"*If your sex drive gets kinda wild*" he sings, and then reminds us with a simplicity and honesty that even **Sigmund Freud** would have mightily approved of, that "*it takes one to know one*"! Great brass work in there too, but it's that piano that provides the hook that is so addictive and irresistible.

A really great side, and don't worry, listening to it won't make you go blind!

10 Frannie Golde "Save Me" *Atlantic*

A cascading dulcimer opens up, and for a change the girl chorus has the opening lines, but **Frannie Golde** soon steps into the solo spotlight with a direct and simple vocal style, and she gives a bravura reading of a rhythmic and deeply felt ballad in the grand style. Only the most hard-hearted could fail to melt before the rich warmth of her singing, and she emotes a power-house volume.

Not strictly Deep Soul perhaps,

but a beautiful blend of many Soul styles that should make it have universal appeal to all Soul fans. Glorious and fully deserving of its high placing.

11 Stairsteps "From Us To You" *Dark Horse*

Again, a bizarre formulation that borders on paradox as it pushes the known frontiers of Soul out wider and wider, this can be seen both as a straight love dancer, or a bewildering and bewildered confusion in which lyrics are inserted in such a way that at times it almost seems done at random. It attacks with a healthy aggression that belies the apparent innocence of its lyrics.

An undoubted masterpiece — watch the copyists of 1978 rip off what **Stairsteps** put down in 1976!

12 Norman Connors & Michael Henderson "You Are My Starship" *Buddah*

A ballad of true artistry and beauty, "Starship" shimmers and gleams like a beacon in a sea of mediocrity, but it's a key record and perhaps like so many in this listing which I consider to be so truly accomplished, it shows well the musical (and, dare I say spiritual?) chasm that exists between here and the USA.

It would be almost impossible to imagine a record of this calibre even being conceived in a UK studio, let alone realised to such an exquisite artistic perfection. It is light years ahead of so much of today's popular music, and its fragile exterior should not blind you to the intensely erotic qualities of the lyrics which teem with delicious ambiguities and symbolism.

"Starship" may be the title, but love is undoubtedly the message!

13 Sun "Live On, Dream On" *Capitol*

Capitol as a label did more than most help keep the Soul flag flying over the UK in 1976, but for me, of all the excellent sides they issued, this exciting mover with its "world of imagination" remains the best.

A furious pace that swings along into a solid wall of sound, the mixed vocal group are highlighted by synthesiser and complex arrangements that make this a triple threat outing that should shrink your underwear!

A strangely angry flavour in there too, but maybe its just very, very determined to get its message across. Too bad more didn't listen.

14 Ujima "Still Hooked On You" *Chelsea*

Real Deep Soul again here and I had assumed that **Ujima** was a group, but the splendid lead female vocal on this may well carry that name alone, and in any case it's to her that the major part of credit should go. A real aficionado's treat, this brings it all out from deep down inside and executed with passion and biting conviction.

Midway trumpet gives an added blue tonality to the general 'downer' quality of the lyrics, but the sheer verve and skill of the singer's vocal give undoubted hope in troubled waters, and the whole rendition results in a sterling and classic example of the Deep Soul ethic and idiom.

15 Candi Staton "Young Hearts Run Free" *Warner Bros.*

If a record that starts off as a Soul side goes on to become a pop hit, does that lower your original estimation of it? If this had flopped (as well it might have done a year or so ago, or this year even if initial DJ response was anything to go by), I wonder if we'd put it higher in our annual listing?

But, that said, what a great record this was! Fresh, exciting and full of all that's great in contemporary Soul, it fully deserved all the acclaim that the general public gave it, and I think *Warner Bros* deserve a vote of thanks from all of us for taking such a high quality item so high in the national charts.

16 Love Committee "Can't Win For Losing" *Ariola America*

Cosmic whirligig that takes a spinning leap into action with a catchy chorus, **Love Committee** produced a great mover here with panache and a thrillingly captivating pace.

Wayout wailing at times that squashes the lyrics out of all recognition, when the lines are sung they are stabbed out for added emphasis, and the whole moves along towards a great, messy climax.

17 Sylvia "L.A. Sunshine" *All Platinum*

Totally captivating, this dream-like opus has a positively seductive quality about it, and **Sylvia** excels herself along with the delicious femme chorus she uses, and by playing it cool instead of intensely.

By not coming on as strong as on some of her former outings, I actually find this her sexiest side to date.

18 Ron Walton "Always Be The One" *Gull*

Although officially a 'B' side, this beautiful ballad deserved far more attention in its own right than it got. **Ron Walton's** unique vocal style and the simple backing left no room for insincerity to hide, but none was needed because the end result was not only a totally convincing performance, but one which was also a total delight.

19 Roger Hatcher "We Gonna Make It" *Mint*

Executed in a "classic" Soul style, right down to **Roger Hatcher's** declamatory vocal, this is a Soul side that follows the rule book so closely and with such precision that were it played to almost anybody they'd immediately identify it as "a Soul record".

20 Stairsteps "Pasado" *Dark Horse*

Never before have I known a year where an act or artist gained *three* places in my Top 20, but truly I cannot exclude this just because **Stairsteps** have already had two previous entries.

SO THAT'S it for another year, and it is certain that I've probably left out sides which you think should have been included, but I must stress (as I do every year) that this is purely a personal choice, and what all critics should remember is that no one is born with infallible taste.

• **Until next time then. Keep the faith — right on now!**