

Soul in the cinema...

THE unexpected success of the film "Car Wash" in London's West End, made me wonder if it is likely that Soul music will play an increasingly larger role in future American films.

Now that black talent is finding it easier (but not, let's remember, easy) to get involved in film making (both in front of and behind the cameras), it seems likely that it might, and especially when you consider that cinema audiences, though continuing to dwindle, do tend to come from the 16 to 30 year old age range.

Of course, to make a film is a far more ambitious undertaking than making a record, and the pressures to modify, popularise and bring in elements that are likely to appeal to the widest possible audience are proportionately that much greater. But the signs are encouraging, which is good, because to date, I don't think (a few exceptions apart) that either Soul music or black Americans have been at all well served by the cinema.

What progress there has been came after a long spell of stereotyped behaviour when black actors and actresses were merely "characters" in films which are basically about white people.

Only rarely was the individual black life-style and personality allowed to show itself naturally and unselfconsciously (one recalls sequences from the roles taken by Hattie McDaniel in "China Seas" with Jean Harlow, or "Gone With The Wind" with Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable).

But "black" cinema as a concept is of very recent origin, although in the 30s a few cheaply made films did exploit the fact that places like Harlem provided an audience that was almost totally black, but these movies were fifth-rate "B" feature quickies that never got shown outside of the ghettos.

It was not until the 50s that some serious attempt was made to convey the black American experience to multi-racial audiences.

"Pinky" (1949) dealt with the theme of a black girl who was light complexioned enough to pass as white and traced her feelings of conflict and divided "loyalties". Ultimately however it fluffed its chances to make a valid social comment by using a well-known white actress (Jeanne Crain) to play the "black" girl. But, it was a start, and actually earned itself the distinction of getting banned in several Deep South states.

Five years later the same film company who made "Pinky" 20th Century Fox, amazed the world by presenting what, at the time, seemed destined to become the most certain box-office poison film of the year — which not only had an all-black (largely then unknown) cast but opera too! But "Carmen Jones" became one of the most successful motion pictures of 1954, and even repeated its US success in Europe too.

Although it did have some unfortunate aspects such as the use of the words "dis" and "dat" for

"this" and "that", one should remember that at that time TV shows like "Amos & Andy" were hugely popular, and that the actual musical on which the film was based had been written several years before it was filmed.

Taking Bizet's score for the opera "Carmen" and leaving that intact, Oscar Hammerstein cleverly rewrote all the lyrics and at the same time transferred the action to a Southern state in America during World War 2. It made Dorothy Dandridge into a star (although sadly this seemed to have contributed to her suicide a few years later), and launched Harry Belafonte as a singer (although in the film itself he didn't in fact sing a note, his singing being dubbed).

Despite all the minor shortcomings of "Carmen Jones" (which are of course all that easier to detect with hindsight in 1977) it was not only a thoroughly entertaining movie but was one of the very first to depict black Americans in a rational way.

There was also an undertow of earthy and frank sexuality about the proceedings too — too much for the British censor at the time who insisted on three cuts being made before passing it. (Which you'll be pleased to learn have been restored in the print shown on TV).

It is a sober reminder of the social progress that has been made when I recall as I write this that in 1957 I re-saw "Carmen Jones" in a Texas cinema that was segregated!

The sudden emergence from the underground of Rock & Roll in the 50s saw many cheap films being spun off the phenomena exploiting a few big record hits, but at least gave audiences outside of the States the chance to see some of their favourites perform. Chuck Berry, Clyde McPhatter, The Platters, Little Richard, Fats Domino, and many others made fleeting appearances in "rock" films. Rock historians now always forget that the record "Rock Around The Clock" was already 18 months old before it became a hit in Britain, and only did so when the film "Blackboard Jungle" (which used the record for its credit titles) went out on general release. More and more film makers saw the money-making potential in "black" themes and "black" music, but seemed unable to relate this concept to finished product.

In 1964, Motown co-operated in an attempt to fuse Soul with movie action, and several of their big hits were featured in the film "Nothing But A Man". But this contribution was essentially background inasmuch as none of the performers were seen, and the Soul content was purely casual consisting of snatches of records overheard on a radio or jukebox. The film was never shown in Britain (although it did get shown on BBC TV once), and I personally found it rather disappointing as a movie. But, again, it was a bit more than had been known before.

I suppose today's "break-through" can be traced right



The Dave Godin Column

back to 1969 when the film "Uptight" was shown. A black remake of an earlier movie that dealt with Irish troubles, "The Informer", it was set in a ghetto location after the assassination of Martin Luther King.

It attempted to present the revolutionary anger prevalent on the streets at that time, but in the last analysis it was a slick, glossy and over-simplified production which came close to the commonplace danger of exploiting that which it pretended to deplore.

Replete with an excellent score by Booker T & The M.G.s (even now the theme "Time Is Tight" still sounds good), I was not surprised that the film didn't meet with the audience enthusiasm expected.

Black Americans at that time were too angry to watch their anger diffused and commercialised on the screen, and it was not, in my view, to be wondered at that, at about the same time, after race disturbances in Memphis, when Isaac Hayes rode round the streets in a Cadillac appealing for calm and dishing out free Stax singles at the same time, he was resoundingly turned on by the crowds and had to hot foot it back to the comparative safety of Stax headquarters!

Both he and the makers of "Uptight" had made the same fundamental error of judgement. Had the circumstances been not quite so grim, they could perhaps be excused merely on the grounds of bad taste and indelicacy.

"Shaft" of course was pure fantasy (albeit black fantasy for a change), and the attempts to create the black equivalents of the huge financial success of "Woodstock" with films like "Soul To Soul" failed miserably. It was not that simple. However, by this time black consciousness was beginning to make itself more and more felt in movies.

"Cotton Comes To Harlem" introduced the handsome Calvin Lockhart to thousands, and it was seen that films of this type looked likely to become the permanent winning formula. Oddly enough the music content of such films was seldom emphasised, although the odd night-club scene often provided an excuse to introduce some black act seen performing.

The most brutally realistic of such films however, "Hammer", was hardly shown in Britain, but did manage to combine action and social comment. Much of its impact was considerably lessened however by the extensive cuts made in Britain on its more violent scenes, but it was certainly a film that didn't compromise one bit.

It was the sort of film that black Americans could see and then afterwards agree that it told it like it sometimes is.

"Sounder" told it like it sometimes was. Combining present day black consciousness with a tinge of nostalgia (though goodness knows it showed little in material terms to be nostalgic about!) it distanced it all by putting it in a setting of many years ago.

A simple story of a black family trying to keep together against desperate odds. "Sounder" had a musical backdrop writer and performed by Taj Mahal, and it was a true and honest film. So honest in fact, that it refused to rewrite history in the light of present-day benefit of hindsight, and thus it managed to offend extremists of all hues.

So, did "Lady Sings The Blues" please them more? It was claimed that Diana Ross collected the first ever Oscar given to a black actress for her part in this film, (not true in fact, since Hattie McDaniel got one for her part in "Gone With The Wind"), but I personally, was saddened by the way the film glamoured, and, in a way, cheapened, the sad, painful life of Billie Holiday.

Maybe we have quite a few more miles to travel before such a biography can be filmed without compromise and flinching; the way Billie Holiday lived in fact.

But whilst "Car Wash" may delight some, I still don't see it relating to any totality of American black consciousness. A stereotype is still a stereotype, even when it's allowed to become a sassy and "liberated" one!

To my mind, the inner Soul experiences of black America have

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only ever been successfully captured in a handful of films, and oddly enough, most of these weren't predominantly "black". Maybe that makes sense though when you reflect that it was via contact with white people that the whole historic black American experience began in the first place.

Their very uniqueness lies in their unique experience and history (which was not repeated in any similar way anywhere else in the world), and it seems likely that when the "definitive" black movie does get made, it will not have an "all black" cast. This, if it did, would merely make it another ghetto movie and lose sight of the important fact that the United States always has been a multi-racial society, even when it was pretending it wasn't!

Those films which have come closest to touching upon the inner core of the collective Soul experience have been "Sounder", "The Member of the Wedding", "The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter", and, in a strange sort of way (since not one black actor or actress was in it) "Sacco & Vanzetti".

All four of these films captured the inner depth and poignancy that we find so often reflected in Soul music. In records it is so commonplace that Soul music fans are all (whether or not they realise it) entirely familiar with it, but in films it is rare, and hopefully it will

be the ingredient that will surface more and more in films made during the next ten years or so.

Seldom was this nebulous "something" better captured or symbolised than in "Member of the Wedding". In the final scene, the black housekeeper, Berenice (superbly played by Ethel Waters) finds herself made redundant by the family she has cared for for years. Bereft of her one remaining blood kin who has been jailed, she sits in her now empty kitchen wearing her "Sunday best", alone with her thoughts.

Frankie (Julie Harris), the young girl whom she has sympathetically helped through stormy adolescence to womanhood puts her arms affectionately around Berenice's shoulders and promises "I'll come to see you often, Berenice. I'll come to see you again". Berenice pats her hand and nods, and as Frankie runs out to meet her newly found boyfriend, Berenice half speaks to herself "Sure you will, honey. Sure you will." You know their paths will never cross again.

The artistic genius of this scene really sums it all up — "freedom" is meaningless unless you also have the power to control your own fate and destiny, and it crystallises the universality of the collective Soul experience.

That particular film was made 25 years ago, and I somehow think we can't wait another 25 years for those sort of eternal truths to be depicted again in all the media, and not just records. Black America certainly has the talent to help let the heart and soul speak,

and surface and speak throughout all the media forms it must.

Dave's Raves

1 **The Soul Train Gang** "All My Life (I Wanna Live With You)" Soul Train.

From their self-titled LP, this particular track emerges as a Deep Soul outing with sweet Soul overtones, and also happens to be one of the very best sides I've heard from any source so far this year.

If you liked "If You Don't Know Me By Now" by Harold Melvin, or "Love Ballad" by L.T.D., then this too will delight. Good strings and exceptionally sensitive vocals, this is not in the least commercial for this country, but is certain to appeal to all real Soul fans and is, at the same time, an encouraging sign that such a Soul-filled side can (and still does) get laid down from time to time in the States.

For the discriminating palate, which in my experience and estimation, is the vast majority of our readership.

The LP can also be further commended for the track "That Certain Way" which is another stirring Soul slab for afficianados, and "How Much Longer", a strong uptempo mover with a strong uptown flavour and much soulfulness in the singing. Highly recommended.

2 **The Facts Of Life** "Love Is The Final Truth" TK

Magnificent Deep Soul much on the lines of material recorded by the **Knight Brothers**, which again might only find a minority following over here. Exceptionally good vocals and overall an immaculate no-mistake-about-it Soul opus. Nice lyrics too — "when you play love's game, you can't deal from the middle" — and of course, the title says it all!

The official "A" side is "Sometimes" which, alas, I don't particularly like, being a sort of work-out of "Funny" or "No Charge". Far too C&W draped which doesn't (for once) work for me. The sort of sound that no doubt the **Carter** administration would regard as the epitome of Soul, but to me it's hollow. But, flip over the flip — it'll change you!

3 **The Emotions** "Flowers" CBS

In any other week, any of these first three choices could have made my number one spot. The much-loved **Emotions** haven't changed their sound since their days (and excellent outings) at **Twin Stacks**, and "Flowers" is a gorgeous mid-tempo mover which further demonstrates the continuing pre-eminence of **CBS** in the Soul stakes. (Having said that, let's not forget either that **CBS** have always been deeply involved in Soul).

I love the **Emotions**, and I defy anyone to listen to this utterly charming side and not melt just a little. Great singing and Soul aplenty with superb guitar and overall arrangement. So far as Soul fans are concerned, this one just can't miss.

4 **Dooley Silverspoon & Jeanne Burton** "Am I Losing You" Seville.

Still high in my esteem, this catchy and rhythmic number

should be selling in greater quantity than it is apparently doing, so check it out and do yourself (and **Dooley** and **Jeanne**) a favour. Too good to let slip.

5 **Eugene Record** "Laying Beside You" Warner Bros.

Not more Deep Soul! What's happening? Having gone through a desert parched for some real, good Deep Soul sounds, I'm suddenly finding that this style is coming more and more back into favour. So much the better for all of us!

A really solid tempo and **Eugene Record** in top vocal form, with bluesy guitar, sharp chorus, and brass stabs all making the sort of sound that was first introduced to the UK via the "Cellar Of Soul" albums. Ingratiates itself into your mind with its sheer persistence of beat, and though it mightn't click on first spin, get to you it will, if you let it.

The flip incidentally, "Putting It Down", was recently recorded by **Jimmy Helms**, and his is the better version of the two, but check out "Laying Beside You" before it vanishes.

6 **Joe Simon** "You Didn't Have To Play No Games" Spring

From his "Easy To Love" LP this track presents a more than normally aggressive **Joe Simon** (perhaps he'd just seen his UK royalty statement before going into the studio!), but a prominent chorus and double-tracking add up to a strident and groovy side that might well merit consideration for release as a single.

7 **Eloise Laws** "Love Goes Deeper Than That" Invictus

Anything on the beloved **Invictus** label is always welcomed by me with hopeful optimism, and here **Eloise** ("Love Factory") **Laws** makes a strong bid to become as well known as brothers **Ronnie** and **Hubert**. A fast moving dancer with funky overtones, **Eloise** should make much impact on short order.

8 **Brothers Johnson** "Brother Man" A&M

Superb instrumental from their new single or "Right On Time" LP. It must, surely, be only a matter of time now before the ultra-gifted **Brothers Johnson** burst through into mass public consciousness.

9 **Tornader** "Back Up (Hit It Again)" Polydor.

Polydor (another persistent and long-term keeper of the faith), continue to come up with unexpected left-fielders like this one. Perhaps rather influenced by Heatwave, but nevertheless meritorious with its mixture of falsetto and straight vocals and overall funky funkiness. Nicer one.

10 **Johnny Nash** "That Woman" Epic

Not the old **Top Pops** number, but a real throwback to **Johnny Nash's Joda / Jocida** days, beautifully sung and orchestrated and arranged with skill and grace. Soft Soul of the nicest kind and a welcome reminder of **Johnny Nash's** continuing contribution to Soul consciousness too.

● No room for a run-out groove this week, so ... Until next time. Keep the faith — right on now!

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