

# The Sound of Soul

On clear nights, WLAC reached out from Nashville with 50,000 watts of pain and comfort

by Phillip Moffitt

Once again it appeared.

I couldn't believe it, but there it was printed in bold letters across a close-up photo of jazz singer Sarah Vaughan on the cover of her re-released Fifties album: the lead song of the album—and my song—“After Hours.”

IT WAS 1972, the beginning of the worst recession since the Thirties; along with several friends, I was trying to launch a magazine company, and it was not going well. I was in Chicago on business, alone, depressed, and needing some kind of a lift. I walked along the streets, my mind filled with my failures, my disappointments; I worried about the money we were losing, how to raise more, the style of life I was living, and the love relationship that had somehow gotten away from me in the midst of all the pressure. Quitting was much on my mind. I stopped in a restaurant, and there at a piano was an old black man playing requests from the customers. After a short while I asked him if he knew “After

Hours.” He gave me a surprised look and smiled kindly. I knew he was thinking, “What’s a white boy doing asking for this song?” As I listened I suddenly remembered how it was I had gotten myself in such a hard place. The crippling depression over my situation gave way to a great sadness for what was lost, and I was able to go on.

THE FIRST time I heard “After Hours” was in 1959. I was a thirteen-year-old boy growing up in a southern mountain town when I discovered a radio station that was to become a force in my life. It was WLAC from Nashville, Tennessee. Back in those days it was one of the few stations with a powerful 50,000-watt broadcast beam, which reached, on a clear night, as far as New York, Texas, Illinois, and Florida. Such stations played a major role in the cross-fertilization of culture in the days before the dominance of television, carrying the big-city word to the “sticks.” It is important to remember that during the Fifties, Jim Crow was still king in the South and blacks had little opportunity to

hear their own music on the radio. There were almost no black-owned or black-format radio stations anywhere, and few record stores carried black music, even when they allowed blacks in the store.

In 1950 a disc jockey at WLAC named Gene Nobles began playing some boogie-woogie tunes on his late-night Dance Hour Show in response to requests from black World War II veterans attending Negro colleges in Nashville. Nobles and his white colleagues at the station were astounded at the audience reaction, as listeners from all over the South wrote in asking for more.

They did in fact play more. Nobles first set aside Wednesday and Saturday nights for what used to be called “cotton field” or “delta” blues. Then, finally, he went to a completely black late-night format. As such things work, Nobles had a friend in the little town of Gallatin, Tennessee, named Randy Wood. Randy, also white, had recently become an appliance-store owner, inheriting

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as part of the store inventory three thousand or so 78s by black musicians. Randy and Gene decided to try advertising these records on the radio and selling them by mail. It worked quite well, and suddenly the black format was a commercial success, with Randy's Records store joined by mail-order advertisements from Ernie's and Buckley's record stores and a series of black products such as Blue Magic and White Rose hair-dressings and Royal Crown pomade.

Of course in 1959 I knew none of this. One night, while searching the dial of my radio, I came upon a deejay called John R., who sounded black to me and who played wonderful music in between mail-order-record and hair-gel ads. It was as though I had tuned into another world—a world of genuine expression of true feelings, in which life had no facade, and hurt and loneliness were the natural price for being alive. Such a world was in total contrast to my school, where my peers were entering that adolescent phase of either totally imitation adults or rebelling against them. I could not relate to either peer group as well as I could to “The Hossman” (as deejay Bill Allen was called in those days), and I eagerly waited for his program to come on the air after midnight.

The theme song of the show was a piano version of “After Hours.”

Thus it was that a young man raised on country and white gospel music came to think that B.B. King was the real thing, and that Jimmy Reed played music that was the truth, and began to learn about Muddy Waters and T-Bone Walker.

The white pop music of the day seemed full of pretense to me, while this raw music somehow captured the genuineness of inner feeling—what it was like being affected by a woman, what it was like not having any money, being lonely, having a good time. There was an authentic spontaneity in that music that could only have come from the black experience. By being excluded from the mainstream of society, blacks were free of the pressure to pretend; they were free of the self-consciousness that created a false social persona for the whites and stood in the way of the inner feeling coming through in the music.

Within a few years white bands began to find commercial success doing that same music—groups like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band in Chicago and the Allman Brothers in Georgia. But initially, it was my own secret “After Hours” world.

How I loved listening to that music. It was my music. Moaning black music, real black music. Not the rhythmic dance music that young whites

everywhere were discovering, but the down-and-out music, the bad-time, no-win blues, jumping with lust and yearning, music the station usually reserved for after midnight. It fed my fantasies about what real life offered. It could both arouse and comfort me, because in identifying with it I felt alive and free.

Like everyone else, I had difficult teenage years. I felt trapped in a situation without meaning or relevance; I felt somehow denied the comfort of learning and the escape of an active social life, although both by my own willful choice. I could not understand why I was making such a choice, but I did know that my love of the music was somehow related to my alienation. The times I felt most at home would be driving in my father's old Chevy late at night, listening to the music on the station, with the windows down, the wind on my face. I felt in harmony with the music. My spirits would soar, and I would believe there would come a day when my life would be different.

Who can guess how many other white boys in the South listened to the same station and had similar feelings? Whatever it is about music that touches a person's soul, it had a magical transforming power that allows the individual to escape the oppression of his immediate self.

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I am convinced that the music helped me hold it together so that I could stumble through high school and enter a large university. I will always associate 1959 through 1965 with the music of those years. In my mind, I existed as a free spirit, a poet-adventurer, while in fact I was leading the most ordinary of lives. To this day I believe that I somehow remained true to my inner spirit, while so many of my peers lost their own sense of themselves in the turmoil and anxiety of those years.

I used to seek out soul mates, male or female, who shared my dreams and my feeling for the music. I even had an elaborate, if ill-devised, classification system by which I ranked the depth of people's feelings by how they related to the music they loved—the top grade being if they could feel my music. If they could, I opened up and spoke my language; if not, I spoke only theirs.

Midway through my college years everything began to change. It was the late Sixties, and suddenly everyone wanted to be a free spirit; what once had a subtle, inner meaning to me became something quite different as it became the style of youth. The station suffered from the change. Targeted-audience formats sprang up, some appealing to whites, some to blacks. Eventually the station lost its original audience; it changed ownership; most of the old

crowd of deejays left. Today The Hossman, now sixty-two, is doing a 1:30 to 3:30 A.M. black gospel show sponsored by Randy's Records, which now sells black gospel music through the mail.

I changed along with my peers. I discovered first a joy in learning and then a sense of accomplishment in leadership. I made a new choice, a choice to be an active participant. I tried to take my music along with me, but it often seemed out of place to my new friends, and I found it difficult to explain why it was so special to me. As for my system of finding soul mates, I discarded it as juvenile and shallow, only to realize years later that I had done a foolish thing. I had ventured forth into the land of worldly accomplishment without a strong bond to the inner spirit I'd valued so dearly. It was like flying a plane at night without radar—when the sky is clear one can find one's way, but when things get cloudy, trouble is at hand.

By that night in Chicago in 1972, I had realized my mistake, but I did not know how to turn back. The Sixties had ended, and I had made deep adult commitments to others in the very different world of the Seventies.

So I have proceeded, dragging along with me the ever-wearing album collection of my early days. As I've grown more reflective in the mid-Eighties, I find that my

taste has become equally divided between classical and blues jazz, but that the spirit of personal aliveness is only in the blues.

One night last winter, while in London, I listened to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers in a little nightclub and watched Blakey, now a very gray, wrinkled old man, still pounding those drums with the full joy that knows no age. Witnessing him, a living testament to the power of the music, I felt that at last I was coming home. Maybe once again I can become a man who has his "After Hours" to nourish the inner spirit that has languished so long in the land of accomplishment.

One thing is certainly true: life does not often provide opportunities for a person to make a clean choice, create a new personal format. When such a time comes, it has to be the most foolish or self-destructive of human acts not to listen to the sounds from the soul and anchor oneself in that most powerful of all broadcasting signals.