

“Very few writers who covered the recent Wattstax 72 benefit concert, which was a part of the seventh annual Watts summer festival, took it upon themselves to analyze the meaning behind the concert and its expressed purpose which was a ‘celebration of blackness.’ For the most part members of the media casually reported your motive, vital insentient dimensions of the festival and virtually dismissed it as ‘hot fun in the summertime.’

Many attempts have been made to treat music as the language of emotions none has been really satisfactory, some of them or both searching and will directed. In short there is a strong tendency today to treat a mass concert as a mirror pleasurable experience, as if it had little, if any, social or cultural significance.

But the Wattstax 72 concert was inherently relevant, its significance was in some sense that of a symbol. Thus any legitimate comment on the Wattstax 72 must be based on serious consideration of the previously unrecognized symbolic mode of the black experience, typified in the performer/audience interaction that is the kernel of black music.

The event that led up to Wattstax 72 was the long racial flareup that rocked it in the Watts section of Los Angeles in August 1965 it is often been labeled as the worst outbreak of civil disobedience in the United States since the Civil War. The Watts rebellion which involved at least 10,000 persons left 34 person is dead in more than \$40 million in property damage shooting, burning in killing made Watts a symbol for all the evils that had befallen blacks in a white society.

But every year since 1965, citizens of Watts have channel the energy, fervor and emotion that was used to “burn baby burn” into The Watts summer festival, celebrating black culture instead of burning down their own community festival commemorates the changes what has gone through in the past six years. People have continue to move forward, to leave their conditions of depredation and despair behind. It was only fitting and proper that Music would play at Seef part in the celebration since blacks were permitted to develop rhythmic freedom long before white America granted the social freedom. For the most part, the watch festivals in the past have consisted of films, parades, exhibits, rides, food in entertainment.”

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written by James Maycock:

When Los Angeles erupted in the bloodiest racial uprising of the 1960s, the black citizens of Watts sent a message to the world, demanding that their struggle be noticed. And it was; for the social, intellectual and emotional rebellion that followed was played out to a soul soundtrack that culminated, in the biggest music event of the Black Power era: Wattstax

On August 20 1972, the expectant audience at the LA Coliseum in South Central Los Angeles basked in hot Californian sun. Just before 3pm, soul singer Kim Weston approached the centre stage mic and belted out the US national anthem.

As the Star-Spangled Banner resonated around the huge auditorium, the 100,000-plus black crowd, well, they just chilled: the stadium hummed with light conversation, some ate their picnics, others twitched their noses with indifference. No one stood. Jesse Jackson, dressed in what most self-respecting civil rights officials wore in

1972 - multicoloured dashiki, bushy sideburns and medallion - addressed the crowd. Declaring "We've gone from 'burn, baby, burn' to 'learn, baby, learn'", he urged everyone to repeat, "I Am Somebody!" Then Weston was invited back to sing the black national anthem, Lift Every Voice And Sing. As the first notes left her lips, the crowd bolted to its feet and fists punched the air. And so began Wattstax, the biggest, baddest musical event of the Black Power era, featuring most acts from the Memphis-based Stax label.

Rewind to another sizzling weekend in LA, August 7 and 8 1965. This time a less grandiose Stax Revue - including Wilson Pickett, the Astors and Booker T And The MGs - is performing at the 700-capacity 5/4 Ballroom in Watts. The budding Memphis record label is in town to raise its profile on the west coast and the shows are promoted by Magnificent Montague from local radio station KGFJ. Montague, a friend of Malcolm X - assassinated six months earlier - is the originator of the expression "Burn, baby, burn", which he yells wildly at the climax of a record. It's become the slick phrase among black Los Angelenos, and Montague, as MC, screams it between acts, inducing a female audience member to howl deliriously, "Jump in that water and let it burn!"

The trip is deemed a modest triumph. Some Stax artists return to Memphis on Monday, but the Astors leave on Wednesday, August 11. As their plane flies above LA, they watch incredulously as thick coils of black smoke billow out of Watts. Booker T, Steve Cropper and Al Jackson have remained in town to record a session; that same day, Booker T slips out of the studio for some air and sees National Guardsmen sprinting down the street. Both Booker T and the Astors are witnessing the first flashes of the Watts rebellion, the bloodiest racial uprising of the 1960s. A little earlier, two black men, brothers Marquette and Ronald Frye, are driving a 1950 Buick in South Central LA. They are stopped by the California Highway Patrol at 116th Street and Avalon Boulevard, and arguments ensue. The Fryes' mother arrives and is handcuffed. Marquette is punched in the head and a car door swung into his legs, before he is pushed into a police car and punched again. His mother is slapped in the face and hit on the knee with a blackjack. Police motorcyclists mount the sidewalk, aggressively breaking up the angry crowd that has gathered. The LA Times later reports, "Rocks began flying, then wine and whisky bottles, concrete, pieces of wood. The targets were anything strange to the neighbourhood." The rage and violence swell rapidly. Stationary cars are burnt, moving vehicles attacked. As night falls, flickering fires light up Watts.

The next day, media coverage of the uprising tightens the pressure. It is also the day of the first death: Leon Posey is shot by the LAPD outside a barbers shop at 89th and Broadway. On the third day, Friday, August 13, LAPD helicopters are fired at and the authorities admit that south LA is out of their control. The police visit Magnificent Montague after nervous citizens complain about his incendiary on-air use of "Burn, baby, burn." Unwillingly, he switches it to "Have mercy, baby!" Watts burnt for another three days until 16,000 National Guardsmen, police and Highway Patrolmen quelled its 35,000 rebellious citizens - \$200m worth of damage was caused, and of the 34 dead, most were black Americans. Charles Fizer, from the R&B group the Olympics, was among them. More than 1,000 more were injured, including the comedian and activist Dick Gregory, who was shot in the leg; 4,000 people were arrested. President Johnson condemned the uprising, saying, "Our conscience cries out against the hatred we heard last week. It bore no relationship to

the orderly struggle for civil rights that has ennobled the last decade." But Senator Robert Kennedy commented, "There is no point in telling Negroes to observe the law. It has almost always been used against them."

Al Bell, former head of Stax, recalls watching the spectacle on television and thinking, "Well, we just have some more African-Americans that are tired of oppression." There was certainly an appalling record of police brutality in Watts - the traditional training ground for rookie cops - but poverty and unemployment had also pushed it over the edge. In the 1950s, there had been a huge black migration west from Texas and the south, inspired by a sense that Los Angeles was the promised land. But the reality was very different. The booming film industry was mostly off-limits to blacks, and poor public transport and segregated housing impeded them from living near or commuting to major industrial sites in LA. Slowly, Watts deteriorated. In the build-up to August 1965, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was increasingly perceived by the LA black masses as a middle-class institution that neglected their interests. Writing in the New York Times Magazine just after the Watts uprising, social scientist Kenneth B Clark described the rebellion as an attempt "by prisoners in the ghetto to destroy their own prison".

The Watts insurrection symbolised a dramatic sea change in the civil rights movement. It was the harbinger of the Black Power era, an age of black consciousness and militancy. Civil rights acts passed in 1964 and 1965 had heightened expectations among African-Americans, but the mood had turned to one of frustration as they observed only microscopic shifts in their daily lives. The battle cry of "Burn, baby, burn" echoed through the long, hot, violent summers of the second half of the 1960s. The civil rights movement became more diverse as black militant groups such as the Black Panthers emerged and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC ("Snick"), fronted by Stokely Carmichael, kicked out its white members. Faith in passive resistance diminished and was eclipsed, in part, by a more aggressive black nationalism. Yet, despite the media's focus on its revolutionary rhetoric and "Get Whitey" braggadocio, Black Power's main goals were attaining political, economic and psychological strength.

A friend of Martin Luther King, Stax Records boss Al Bell recalls that, after King's assassination in 1968, "Blacks all of a sudden wondered if it was a hopeless situation because here was the guy who talked about turning the other cheek and all of a sudden he was killed." Bell believes that "Black Power was no more than black people saying, 'We Are Somebody!' " but he also identifies it as "an intellectual, social and emotional rebellion taking place among a people, and it manifested itself in the music".

Before the music, however, came the Watts Summer Festival: without that, there would have been no Wattstax, says Tommy Jacquette, a Watts resident who played "an active part" in the 1965 rebellion. The first festival, in 1966, was, he says, "a cultural celebration" that "came straight out of the ashes of the 1965 revolt" and was a "memorial for the 34 people who died".

The Watts Writers Workshop was also created in the wake of the uprising. Funded in part by Hollywood scriptwriter Budd Schulberg (On The Waterfront), this was where

the Watts poet and aspiring scriptwriter Richard Dedeaux met Amde Hamilton and Otis O'Solomon, who formed the Watts Prophets. Performing regularly at the Summer Festival, they released their first album, *Rappin' Black In A White World*, in 1971. It included the track *Amerikkka*, in which the Prophets screamed, "Ask not what you can do for your country, 'cause what in the fuck has it done for you?" - lyrics, says Dedeaux, "that automatically got us on the Un-American Activities list".

Stax, meanwhile, had catapulted from "the little label that could" into a mighty corporate institution to rival Motown. It was also branching out into film. In 1972, the concert promoter Forest Hamilton was in LA, tentatively establishing a movie arm, Stax West, when he was introduced to Dedeaux. Hamilton invited Dedeaux to Memphis to work on a film script and it was through this collaboration that the idea for a benefit concert was born. The idea generated excitement at Stax, but as more musicians offered to perform for free, the label struggled to find a suitable venue. A slightly nervous LAPD suggested the LA Coliseum - home to the LA Rams - because "they didn't want to see that many black people in Watts 'uncorralled'!" says Jacquette, the man responsible for turning the Watts Summer Festival into an annual event. But "It was a win/win for all of us. Their motives were different, but it was still a win/win."

Finally, a date was set: Sunday, August 20 1972, the last day of the Watts Summer Festival. Mayor Yorty declared it "Wattstax Day" and for one extraordinary Sunday, the LA Coliseum metamorphosed into a riot of funky, soulful music, black pride, zebra-striped flop hats, gymnastic dancing, electric-yellow hotpants, Afros of inordinate volume and flares of unnatural width. Dedeaux remembers: "It was electrical, man. The radio stations started playing it up, giving away tickets. Everybody just really got into it. It was a magic thing."

At \$1 a pop, tickets were affordable to everyone. Stax underwrote most of the expenses and Schlitz beer acted as sponsors. Magnificent Montague's former radio station broadcast the event live and Al Bell hired an LA production company to film it.

Weston's renditions of both national anthems and Jackson's speech, in which he spoke of "liberation through music", kicked off six hours of fat, full-bodied Stax sounds. Famous black entertainers, including Shaft star Richard Roundtree, presented each act, and Melvin Van Peebles, director of the film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, introduced the first, the Staple Singers.

With Pops Staples dressed in a dazzling white safari suit and Mavis Staples sporting large hoop earrings, the group launched into *Heavy Makes You Happy*, followed by black pride anthems *Respect Yourself* and *I Like The Things About Me*. Of the latter, Mavis says, "We felt it was a good song to sing at that event. With Pops saying, 'There was a time I wished my hair was fine.' Well, no. Not any more. We want our hair the way we came here with it - nappy. That's what was happening. Black people were showing they were proud to be black. We were singing songs to lift the people." In the middle of this bluesy number, with his guitar set in tremolo, Pops rapped a history lesson to the crowd, declaring, "No nationality could go through what we been through and survive like the black people." He quoted James Brown - "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud" - and praised "our own Black Moses, Isaac Hayes."

Just before the Bar-Kays launched into Son Of Shaft, their saxophonist, balancing a huge white Afro wig on his head, boomed, "Freedom is a road seldom travelled by the multitude." Both this and Jackson's holler, "I don't know what the world is coming to!" were sampled years later by Public Enemy on their opus of rage, It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back. Despite the uncompromising tone of some performances, the atmosphere was one of celebration. For one hot day, the LA Coliseum flipped into an outrageous fashion parade as the crowd posed, strolled, strutted and checked each other out; Wattstax buzzed with the bonhomie of Woodstock and Monterey.

Amazingly, says Al Bell, "We were able to cut a deal with the city. We had only black police officers, and not one of them had a gun." There were "no riots, no fights", according to Bell, in spite of a 112,000-strong audience and a significant gang presence - at one point in the film, Tookie, head of the Watts Crips, is seen signalling to gang members in the crowd.

Most of the Stax roster performed at Wattstax, including Eddie Floyd and Albert King, Hayes and Rufus Thomas. As the sun dipped below the Pacific, "the world's oldest teenager" took to the stage in hot-pink cape and shorts, and white go-go boots, imploring, "Ain't I clean?" before causing uproar with Do The Funky Chicken. Flapping his arms and clucking, Thomas invited the crowd to invade the sacred turf of the pitch. Within seconds, 5,000 people were doing the funky chicken right in front of the stage.

But if Thomas was the court clown, Isaac "Big Ike" Hayes was the king of Wattstax. The roar of police motorbikes - lights flashing - signaled that he was in the building. The atmosphere was eye-popping. Sporting a huge brown flop hat and a psychedelic-print cape, Hayes mounted the stage. Jesse Jackson, standing next to him, yelled, "Do we want to see Isaac Hayes? Brothers and sisters, we are about to bring forth a bad, bad ... " On the point of blurting out the oedipal expletive, Jackson gushed, "I'm a preacher, I can't say it!" With the theme from Shaft throbbing in the background, Hayes ripped off his cape, revealing a thick gold chain vest. "Shaft" and "Black Moses" flashed wildly on the huge screen. The crowd screamed and Jackson looked thrilled.

Hayes performed for an hour. His set included Shaft and Soulsville, and an extraordinary 18-minute version of Bill Withers' Ain't No Sunshine, before it came down to rest with a mellow I Stand Accused. Wattstax drew to a close with Kim Weston singing If I Had A Hammer with the audience.

Today, Jacqueline remembers that there wasn't "one single problem" at Wattstax. He was delighted that the event contradicted the racist stereotype that a large number of black people "can't get together without having a revolt". "It was," he says, "a day of unity."

It was not the first time the community had displayed such togetherness. The sleeve notes to the two double live Wattstax albums stressed an explicit connection between the riots and Wattstax, saluting the citizens of Watts in 1965, "who stood together and demanded to be heard". In a documentary film about Wattstax, director Mel Stuart (responsible for Willy Wonka And The Chocolate Factory a year earlier) created an unflinching portrait of the Watts community, who rapped about racism,

civil rights, relationships, the blues, Vietnam and social changes since 1965. This was intercut with news archive of the '65 uprising and images of Black Power politicians. A kind of Greek chorus was presented by a fledgling Richard Pryor, whose mischievous monologues glue the film together: "They accidentally shoot more niggers out here than any place else in the world. Every time I pick up the paper - 'Nigger accidentally shot in the ass'." The film was released by Columbia Pictures and kicked off the Cannes Film Festival in 1973. In Lagos, Wattstax was a hot draw.

But the event was not without its critics. Stax artist Donald "Duck" Dunn grumbled, "Were they doing it for the people in LA or to promote Al Bell in LA?" In his defence, Bell insists, "That's the American way!" The original intent was to raise money for the Watts Summer Festival, but as a label boss, he says, "I had a responsibility to my artists."

Under Bell, Stax was now black-owned and, at Wattstax, its black musicians were performing to a black crowd whose ticket fee was helping black charities, among them the Martin Luther King Hospital, the Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation, Jesse Jackson's Operation Push (People United to Save Humanity) and the Watts Summer Festival itself. But while Soul magazine described Wattstax as "completely black-controlled", "whitey's" fingerprints were detected on some parts of the event. For a start, the documentary film director, Mel Stuart, was white, and Schlitz and Columbia, who sponsored the concert and film respectively, were both white-owned. But to Al Bell, "What was important was to get the very best, it wasn't about colour. There was enough colour in putting the event on." Today, he is adamant that Wattstax reflected the Black Power ideologies: "Here was a little black company that was able to go to LA, where you had all the giant corporations, and get the musicians out there, hire Mel Stuart, take a stadium and finance the production, then get Columbia to distribute it, and not ask any of them for any money. Now, from an economic standpoint, that was the ultimate in Black Power!"

After the heady days of Wattstax, life and death continued in the City of Angels. Ten years ago, LA burnt again after members of the LAPD were acquitted of brutality towards Rodney King. Tommy Jacquette has faithfully produced a Watts Summer Festival each year, still commemorating "the 34 people who died in 1965 and the cultural contribution of a people".

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