



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

W.E.B. Du Bois Institute

“Love, Peace, and Soul”

Author(s): Laurence Ralph

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Transition*, No. 108, Boogie Man (2012), pp. 19-31

Published by: [Indiana University Press](#) on behalf of the [W.E.B. Du Bois Institute](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/transition.108.19>

Accessed: 31/05/2012 14:20

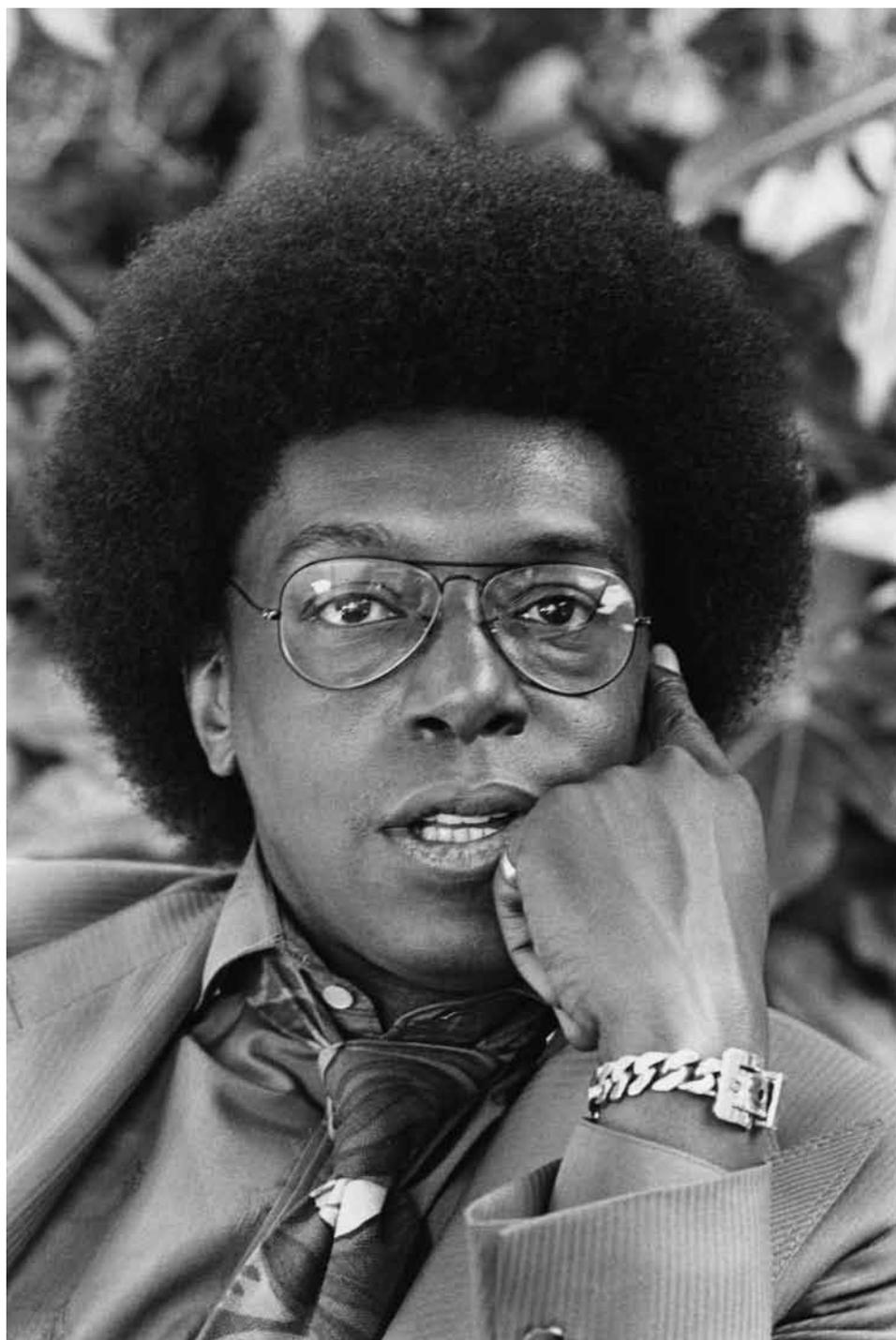
Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Indiana University Press and W.E.B. Du Bois Institute are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Transition*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



Don Cornelius, 1973. © Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images.

“Love, Peace, and Soul”

a tribute to **Don Cornelius**

Laurence Ralph

IF ANYONE WAS fit for a New Orleans-style funeral—a second-line procession with tubas and trumpets blaring over snare drum beats—it would be Don Cornelius. Who better to pay him tribute than rollicking musicians and impassioned street dancers? Don Cornelius was among the first black faces to be broadcast on American television without the scandal of fire hoses and the threat of civil unrest; he, instead, was surrounded by music and dance. *Soul Train*'s devotees seized every moment, kicking their platform shoes and spinning in bell-bottoms like visitors from a funkier dimension, enlightened beings who came to earth to inspire feats like the “moonwalk,” a dance that Michael Jackson mastered by observing *Soul Train* veterans like Jeffery Daniel. So rather than a typical eulogy, any effort to honor the late, and especially great, Don Cornelius ought to be brimming with exactly what he exhorted from his viewers: “love, peace, and soul.”

Don Cornelius helped draw our attention to a central paradox of black culture: incredible art that reeks of a marginalized existence. He helped fashion the double-bind that Cornel West famously noted: “The irony in our present moment is that just as young black [people]... are murdered, maimed, and imprisoned in record numbers, their styles have become disproportionately influential in shaping popular culture.”

What we take for granted about contemporary black music—that poor black people often produce it and wealthier whites are a substantial consuming core—was not always a given. Of course, the consumption of blackness for the purposes of white entertainment dates back at least to the 1830s, to the minstrel days (the very first American variety shows) when directors and writers like Thomas Dartmouth Rice thought a can of body paint was less trouble than finding a black actor to perform his ode to segregation, “Jump Jim Crow.” Sure Malcolm X—then Detroit Red—recalls a 1940s moment when white aristocrats and reefer lovers visited Harlem, “their sin-den, their fleshpot,” under the cloak of night. “They stole off among the taboo of black people, and took off whatever antiseptic, important, dignified masks they wore in their white world.” But the irony that West speaks about—an irony made possible in large measure by Don Cornelius—was forged in Chicago, long before the *Soul Train* host ever dreamed of being in front of a camera.

BORN ON SEPTEMBER 27, 1936 and raised on Chicago's south side, Don joined the United States Marine Corps as a young man and served eighteen months in Korea. He worked at various jobs following his tour in the military, including a stint as an officer in the Chicago Police Department. One of the few black faces trusted to protect his country, and then his neighborhood, Don likely developed his keen eye early on, understanding his position of marginalization within spaces of privilege. Even after he had left the battlefield—whether dodging bullets during his time as a beat cop, or selling tires, automobiles, and insurance—Don held fast to a burning desire to capture an alternate representation of African American life. He wanted to broadcast an image that betrayed his love for his race. Don was a black pioneer, implicitly following W. E. B. Du Bois, the venerated author of *The Souls of Black Folk*, who imagined a unified black community and, as Hazel Carby writes in *Race Men*, “took for granted that the best development of black people meant the best development of American society.” Don Cornelius, in other words, wanted his show to embody all that black people could become.

In 1966, when Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference came to Chicago to launch their northern civil rights campaign, Don was still working as a police officer. One day he switched on his bright lights, as he had done many times before, and pulled someone over for a moving infraction. But instead of complaining about

What we take for granted about contemporary black music—that poor black people often produce it and wealthier whites are a substantial consuming core—was not always a given.

the impending ticket or arguing over the accusation, the motorist told Don that he was struck by the timber of his voice: “You should go into radio,” the driver said. Perhaps the remark was a last ditch attempt to avoid a ticket. It could have been small talk. Idle flattery. Nevertheless, this compliment was the unequivocal tipping point of Don's professional career. With only \$400 in his bank account, he quit the police force to take a three-month broadcasting course. Like so many in his generation, he soon became immersed in the struggles of the 1960s. Yet, because of his broadcast training, he was also now equipped with the tools to report on the backlash against black aspirations for first-class citizenship. The moral and political claims of African Americans seemed audacious to so many who were granted full citizenship by virtue of their race, especially since these claims were accompanied by hundreds of riots across urban America.

Don joined Chicago's WCIU-TV in 1967 as the host of *A Black's View of the News*. Weary of contributing to the steady representations of urban unrest that flooded the airwaves day after day, night after night, Don wanted to engineer a television program that portrayed the flipside of black agitation and misery. Over the next couple of years, he developed an idea for

his own program. After studying the format of how to produce a TV show, Don met with local radio disc jockeys to keep himself abreast of the latest music and fashion trends; he discussed his programming ideas with WCIU-TV owner Howard Shapiro and George O'Hare, the advertising manager at Sears (the company that he hoped would serve as a sponsor). By demonstrating a keen awareness of the broadcast industry and insider knowledge of black culture, Don convinced corporate heavyweights like Shapiro and O'Hare that black teenagers—with Afro puffs who could contort their bodies into splits and back bends while dressed in immaculate velvet suits—were an untapped resource. In 1970, Don not only convinced his boss at WCIU and the advertising department at Sears about the viability of his show, he walked away with ownership of *Soul Train*.

THE TRAIN, IN black popular culture, has long served as a metaphor for African Americans leaving the South in their quest for work. This was the vehicle that relocated working-class blacks from places like Mississippi and Louisiana to Illinois and California. In 1956, for instance, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, “the original soul sister,” remade “The Gospel Train,” a staple African American spiritual:

*The gospel train is coming,
I hear it just at hand,
I hear the car wheels moving,
And rumbling thro' the land
Get on board, children,
Get on board, children,
Get on board, children,
For there's room for many more.*

Soul Train's theme song (otherwise known as “The Sound of Philadelphia”), made a broader plea than Tharpe's rendition of that old black spiritual. Not merely “children,” but “people all over the world” were beckoned to come on board. In addition to the theme song, the show's title was also more inclusive in its conception than “The Gospel Train.” Don replaced the word “gospel” with “soul,” now associated with forms of secular testifying that spoke to the black experience. This gave Don's program an extra-religious connotation. So when, in 1971, Gladys Knight came on *Soul Train* and sang, “this train is standing for justice. This train is standing for freedom. This train is standing for harmony and peace,” it resonated in more ways than one with the youngsters in that brightly lit studio. Don helped reinvent the train from a symbol of economic desperation to one of black progress.

Don Cornelius conceived of *Soul Train* as a black version of *American Bandstand*. But if the way Dick Clark hosted *American Bandstand* was akin to a John Stockton bounce pass, the way Don Cornelius hosted *Soul Train*



Soundsuit.

Found knitwear,
found appliques,
embroidery thread,
found tin toys,
metal armature,
mannequin. © 2011
Nick Cave. Photo
by James Prinz,
Chicago. Courtesy
of the artist and
Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York.

was like a Magic Johnson no-look, thread-the-needle pass to a precocious rookie who dunks as time expires. And just as Magic's legendary passing emerged from the work of countless teenagers on the playgrounds of New York, Chicago, and his hometown of Lansing, Michigan, slowly becoming an integral part of the college and then professional game, and along the way blowing up the binary between substance and style, Don's program was not merely a flash-in-the-pan version of a white model. *American Bandstand* gave little attention to black artists. *Soul Train*, on the other hand, gave airtime to local musicians like B. B. King, the Staple Singers, and Curtis Mayfield, helping them to become nationally recognized icons.

As Don Cornelius helped shape cultural icons, he inadvertently developed the formula that would ultimately solidify itself into impenetrable irony. Like the war veteran who risks his life in Korea for a country that won't grant him civil rights, or a city that will allow an African American to protect and serve so long as it means quelling the riotous sentiment that he agrees with, the black teenage boys and girls Don recruited to dance encountered a similar form of irony. They travelled from the poorest areas of Chicago and, while waiting to get "on board" *Soul Train*, formed a queue in the shadow of the city's economic capital—the bottom of the Board of Trade building. The desire to dance brought hundreds of kids face to face with an economic world that had no use for their youthful exuberance.

It took less than a year before *Soul Train* received national sponsorship and Don Cornelius's studio was transplanted to Hollywood. If ever there was a show tailor-made for a grand stage, it was this one. Don again utilized his immediately successful formula; he scoured the streets, and even hired Angelino residents who worked at local recreation centers to recruit teenagers to come on the show. Dimeta Jo Freeman, Dawn Campbell, Jimmy Scooby Doo, Fred "Rerun" Berry, Rosie Perez, and Jody Whatley were among the youthful faces that became staples on that legendary stage. Motivated by the age-old reasons that compel young kids to do lots of different things for no pay—the pageantry, the street cred, the competition, the chance to skate on instead of slip through the hard surfaces of life—they became the centerpiece of the show in Los Angeles, as they had been in Chicago. They kicked and flipped and spun. They moved with an abandon that many watching the show at home wished they still possessed.

They also pushed dance culture forward. Their "popping" and "locking" movements were the precursors to the break dancing techniques that would explode in the 1980s—movements that highlighted flow, layering, and ruptures in the typical line of the human body, movements in which the joints are snapped abruptly into angular positions to create a "semiliquid effect." A decade before hip hop caught fire, each week Don's dancers added to their own authoritative text, the genesis of a collective performance style. The *Soul Train* "line" that ended each show was the highlight of the program—each dancer folded into a boisterous, undulating, forward-moving

line, bodies pulsing in choreographed, synchronized precision—became a black American wedding tradition (which takes place, at least in my family, after the newlyweds “jump the broom” and just before the “electric slide”). Innovations were not just physical, or cultural, but also political because of the wider context in which these performances spoke to race-based oppression. Outside the studio, white and black society maintained a bitter divorce due to *de facto* segregation. But at least the black entertainers, athletes, and politicians that showed up on *Soul Train*’s “Scramble Board” offered a model for which a generation of young blacks could aspire. *Soul Train* was the fruition of what Don Cornelius imagined when he grew tired of reporting on black violence in Chicago. He orchestrated a groundbreaking show that ended with smiling young people of color, all moving in rhythmic succession, straight towards equality. The next generation of black broadcasters and entertainers, Don might have imagined, would pick up on this civil rights legacy and continue to strut through social barriers.

IN HINDSIGHT, IT’S as clear as day why Don refused for a time to invite hip hop artists onto the show. He was, after all, a black man from the south side of Chicago who fought for Uncle Sam in the Jim Crow era. He couldn’t understand this new breed of artists that never felt the need to project black respectability, artists that couldn’t be bothered with proving to white society that black people were worthy of citizenship. Hip hop artists, neck-deep in civil rights disillusionment, bent the *Soul Train* line into a circle—or cipher—finding it more realistic to seize an ephemeral moment in the spotlight than to cultivate boundless aspirations.

Even though Don never fully comprehended why artists would foreground loss and disappointment as an end in itself and though he never quite “got” hip hop’s brash depiction of reality, he eventually acknowledged the music’s significance. He also recognized that the black community wanted a national platform for this nascent cultural practice. Always aware of what the people desired, always cognizant that marginalized perspectives were the engine that generated enthusiasm for the show, *Soul Train* helped launch rap into the mainstream, allowing artists like Grandmaster Flash, Rakim, and more contemporary rappers like Snoop Dogg and even Lil’ Bow Wow to grace the stage. But I digress.

SOUL TRAIN’S GOLDEN era, from the mid-1970s to the late-1980s, were the days before distinctive regional outgrowths of break dancing—before “krumping” in Compton, “chickenhead” in St. Louis, and “footworking” in Chicago could be searched for and uploaded to laptops—before VCRs were a household item, much less computers. *Soul Train*’s viewing audience couldn’t freeze their technological devices, but would instead have to wait an entire week to watch the local talent glide once again on linoleum. But waiting was part of the ritual, a crucial element in the viewing experience.



Soundsuit.
Twigs, wire,
upholstery, basket,
metal armature,
mannequin. © 2011
Nick Cave. Photo
by James Prinz,
Chicago. Courtesy
of the artist and
Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York.

The routine exercise of sitting in front of the television while enjoying a musical performance, sharing a meal with friends and family members, and exchanging a few laughs in the process, became a way to solidify familial and communal bonds. Just as Don called in favors from groups like The O’Jays, and his Chicago friend, Curtis Mayfield when he needed talent during that first season in Hollywood, countless intimate relationships were built, maintained, and strengthened in black communities and homes while watching the show. Hip hop musician Questlove, for example, recalls that in his childhood home it was his job to announce to everyone when the *Soul Train* line segment was about to begin. At a time when so much of black life seemed violently spectacular, during a period when social



Speak Louder.

Black mother of
pearl buttons,
embroidery
thread, upholstery,
metal armature,
mannequin. © 2011
Nick Cave. Photo
by James Prinz,
Chicago. Courtesy
of the artist and
Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York.

scientific evaluations of black people would flood the mediascape with images of so-called looters, welfare queens, and drug offenders, *Soul Train* provided a respite. The show helped sketch a portrait of black life that was radically ordinary. What's more, the fact that the ritual of watching this show was taking place, simultaneously, in a geographically and racially diverse set of American households is what helped hone an enduring appreciation for black culture.

In the burgeoning age of mass media that was the 1970s, dedicated viewers were not merely copying dance moves, but recoding the fashion trends of black youth. The braids and Afros, the dashikis, shimmering bell



bottoms, and pastel suits—all these styles were born from an encounter between everyday life in America and “cultural nationalism,” the affinity for a symbolic notion of Africa, falsely homogeneous, but a proud origin of civilization nonetheless. By owning *Soul Train*, and employing black floor directors and black cameramen to project proud images of the black experience, Don manifested a very particular legacy of Black Power. Not the radical tradition that the Black Panthers made famous with their berets, shotguns, and leather jackets, but the ideal of cultural nationalism. These precepts forged themselves with a black business model committed to the idea that if an African American like Don Cornelius owned a television

show, he would have better control over the ways in which representations of black life were circulated. Such control, in turn, would benefit the black community as a whole.

The strength of the African American market and the community's petitions for respectful advertising had been demonstrated as early as the mid-1930s, when W. E. B. Du Bois published his magnum opus, *Black Reconstruction in America*. Du Bois wanted to show, in the words of David Levering Lewis, that "black people, suddenly admitted to citizenship...

They stole off among the taboo of black people, and took off whatever antiseptic, important, dignified masks they wore in their white world.

displayed admirable volition and intelligence as well as the indolence and ignorance inherent in three centuries of bondage." But if Du Bois sought to sketch a full portrait of black life under Reconstruction that included both "intelligence" and "indolence," it's clear that white advertisers preferred to focus on the latter. During the same period, *Ebony* editor John Johnson had to give a tutorial to white advertisement firms about how to cater to their black clients: "Don't exaggerate Negro characteristics... Always avoid the word 'Pickaninny,' or lampooning illustrations of Negro children. They are as dear to their parents as are other children irrespective of race." When, decades later, Don Cornelius solicited advertising dollars and wrestled with how to stage black performers, changing the perceptions of corporate America still meant refiguring media representations of race. And he did not shrink from the challenge.

This unique show contributed to a greater constellation of black cultural images that bloomed across the 1970s, which included Johnson's *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, television shows like *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*, blaxploitation movies like *Dolemite* and *Super Fly*, not to mention Berry Gordy's Motown Records (which similarly relocated from the midwest to the west coast during this period). Motown acts like Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder visited the show to promote their albums. And in 1974, in corporeal dialogue with the young dancers on the set, Michael Jackson premiered the dance move that he learned from them—the "robot"—when he performed his hit "Dancing Machine." Showcasing talent like this, and with the soul-satisfying exuberance of both host and dancers, it's not surprising that the show's broadcast expanded from seven cities to fifty by the end of its first season in Hollywood. *Soul Train* only gained steam throughout the 1970s and 1980s, while welcoming a *tour de force* of the most exalted musicians, a list that (in addition to those already mentioned) included the likes of Al Green, Elton John, Sly Stone, David Bowie, Ike and Tina Turner, Aretha Franklin, Barry White, Kurtis Blow, and Public Enemy.

In 1993, when Don announced his retirement as *Soul Train*'s host, ratings steadily slipped. The following fall, *Soul Train* began using various guest hosts on a weekly basis until Don, now a behind-the-scenes executive,



Soundsuit. Found knitwear, found sock monkeys, metal armature, mannequin. © 2011 Nick Cave. Photo by James Prinz, Chicago. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

decided to try out a series of permanent hosts. Even the most well known of these budding stars, Shemar Moore (of soap opera, *Young and the Restless*, and TV drama, *Criminal Minds*, fame) could not beckon people to *Soul Train* with the same promise of friendship and conviviality. The experiment failed as a result of Don's success. None of the young stars could shine bright enough to illuminate the space still occupied by Don's great shadow. But, in what would prove to be another testament to his business acumen, instead of attempting to replicate *Soul Train's* golden era in a different time period, he reveled in its legacy. After the 2005-2006 season, the program aired archived episodes (all from between 1974 and 1987) under the title *The Best of Soul Train*. As the classic episodes revived interest in the show, stations that previously aired *Soul Train* on Saturday afternoons started to re-broadcast it, this time in late-night slots. This is why sometimes on sleepless nights I can still catch a grainy glimpse of Don Cornelius like the Ghost of Christmas Past, there to engender nostalgia, and stir in me a time of carefree innocence, a time when I used to yell "*Soul Train* is on" in my house, as Questlove did in his, and my older brothers and cousins helped me practice the latest dance moves as our parents, uncles, and aunts, looked on—amused as much by our poor mimicry as by the awe-inspiring performances we all watched together.

Soul Train currently holds the distinction of being the longest syndicated show to run original episodes in the history of television. Without question, the show's success can be attributed to the assiduous work ethic of Don Cornelius, who envisioned a weekend reprieve for blacks and gave critical input on every single detail of the show—from its theme song to the line

Don Cornelius, in other words, wanted his show to embody all that black people could become.

dance that served as a farewell, from the "Scramble Board" that celebrated influential blacks to the companies who were encouraged to advertise to a thriving market of conscientious African American consumers. To say, however, that this show's popularity is reflective of one man's success is not enough. As we remember Don Cornelius, how do we reconcile the cultural visibility that *Soul Train* helped to create, as well as the familial and communal bonds it helped to solidify, with the gulf that exists between the "murdered, maimed, and imprisoned" black women and men, on the one hand, and their influence in American popular culture, on the other? How, in other words, do we temper our love for the Jackson 5 with the sobering reality of black poverty in Gary, Indiana, or the equally entrenched poverty an hour away in Chicago, Don's hometown? What prevents the religious devotion of *Soul Train's* captive audience from tilting into voyeuristic lust, reminiscent of the minstrel era?

These questions do not have an easy answer. Yet, Don Cornelius implicitly raised them in the pop cultural imagination. And, every week he hinted at a resolution: after we had enjoyed ourselves, whether through watching

the happy-go-lucky physical staccato of the human robot or hearing about a train that was full of black folks bound for justice and freedom, we were encouraged to embrace all that was beautiful about black art and black expression. Indeed, that sort of investment could itself be a political act—particularly if our *love* for black expression brought us *peace* even as it pushed us toward a spirit born of struggle, a *soul*.🌐