Call to protest, to riot, or just to dance?

Author assigns civil rights-era weight to Motown song

By Glenn C. Altschuler
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At the time Martin Luther King Jr. led the March on Washington in 1963, Dizzy Gillespie declared he was a candidate for the presidency of the United States. If elected, the trumpeter promised to change the name of the White House to the “Blues House,” appoint Duke Ellington as secretary of state, Malcolm X as attorney general, and Miles Davis as director of the CIA, and deport George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, to Vietnam.

By July 1964, many Americans believed that the pace of change, especially on civil rights issues, was, well, dizzying. Others thought the pace not nearly fast enough. Across the political spectrum, however, young people, black and white, responded affirmatively when Martha and the Vandellas asked “Are you ready for a brand new beat?,” the first line of the Motown song “Dancing in the Street.”

In “Ready for a Brand New Beat,” Mark Kurlansky, the author of two dozen books, including “Salt: A World History,” “Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World,” and “1968: The Year That Rocked the World,” provides informative sketches of the Motown men and women who wrote, sang, and produced the recording that became an icon of popular culture and sets the song in the context of an increasingly radicalized civil rights movement and a summer of violence. Designed to be a fun-filled party song, “Dancing in the Street,” Kurlansky writes, became a call to arms associated with urban rioting and revolution.

Kurlansky’s assessments of the racial politics of the middle 1960s are not always reliable. He equates support for intermarriage with support for integration; suggests, without evidence, that the Democratic Party made a mistake in not seating the black “Freedom Party” Mississippi delegates at its national convention in 1964; and implies that because James Brown went on television with Mayor Kevin White and told Bostonians to “cool it,” the city did not explode in violence in 1968. Sympathetic with black radicals, to whom he often gives the last word, Kurlansky characterizes the March on Washington as theater that touched people but covered up the anger that “seethed underneath” and claims that not all blacks cheered the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

More interesting is Kurlansky’s account of the appropriation of the song. He indicates that black militant H. Rap Brown, who constantly used the word “street,” included it in his catalog of inspirational music. Others deemed the song’s opening lyric, “callin’ out around the world,” its list of cities, each of which was likely to have had a riot, and its telling phrase, “Summer’s here and the time is right,” prophecies of rebellion. They pointed out that during the urban riots, “Dancing in the Street” was not played on the radio. Rumors persisted that it had been banned because it provoked violence.

Martha Reeves protested, to no avail, that “street” does not have the same political connotation as “streets.” She does, indeed, sing “street” in the recording, Kurlansky writes, but, he claims, the backup singers often reply, “dancing in the streets.” In any event, he adds, when a word becomes part of popular culture, what the writer or performer meant becomes one interpretation among many, and not necessarily the determinative interpretation.

“Dancing in the Street” remains part of our cultural language. After 9/11, Clear Channel included it among 70 songs not to be played on its radio stations. In 2011, President Obama called it “the soundtrack of the civil rights era.” The song lives, Kurlansky concludes, because “it keeps meaning different things to different people in different circumstances.” And, most importantly, perhaps “because it gets people on their feet.”

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BOOK REVIEW

READY FOR A BRAND NEW BEAT
How ‘Dancing in the Street’ Became the Anthem for a Changing America
By Mark Kurlansky
Riverhead, 246 pp., $27.95