‘Soul Train’ looks at iconic show that was much more than a dance party ...

By Dr Glenn C. Altschuler
Special to the Florida Courier

Nick Cannon, star of the film Drum Line and husband of Mariah Carey, is delighted that Soul Train is "something archived."

If aliens land on earth and watch episodes of the show, created, produced, and hosted by Don Cornelius, Cannon claims, they’ll see how African-Americans "got down. Our fashion, the way we walk, the way we talk, the way we move, what type of music we listen to." Soul Train wasn’t "the watered-down version you might see on a sitcom" or "the negative depiction of us you might see on the news. It was us having a good time and enjoying each other."

Nelson George, a music critic, author, and filmmaker, who specializes in African-American culture, agrees. In The Hippest Trip in America, he draws on interviews with dancers and singers to send a valentine to Soul Train. For decades, he suggests, the show was "a Saturday ritual watched with religious fervor and dedication," with a spiritual quality that "touched the soul of viewers."

From ‘waacking’ to ‘moon walk’
George’s reliance on interviews allows him to capture the enthusiasm of the performers; a new world, built on Black pop stars; advertisements featuring Afro Sheen; and “the holy trinity” of Soul Train’s appeal: music, dance, and fashion.

The dancers invented “waacking,” George reveals, and laid claim to the “moon walk” that became Michael Jackson’s signature step. And the “freaky, fantastic threads” of singers and dancers (platform shoes, applejack caps, tight bell bottoms, and lime-colored and hot pink pantsuits), he writes, were “imitated, parodied, but never quite duplicated.”

George’s oral history, however, has distinct limitations, and leaves one wondering whether there are documents related to the show that he might have consulted.

Little light on ‘Bandstand’ conflict
He mentions, all too briefly, Cornelius’ hope of securing a slot for Soul Train on CBS, NBC, or ABC, and his decision, born, no doubt, of necessity, to settle for syndication as the only alternative route to carving out a niche audience.

In part because Cornelius did not want to talk about it, George sheds little light on Soul Train’s rivalry with the rival ‘Bandstand’. The current battle between the two旧的 hourly specials has been a feature of prime time for decades, and one would think that Cornelius would have been interested in covering that history.

BOOK REVIEW
Review of The Hippest Trip in America: Soul Train and the Evolution of Culture and Style.
By Nelson George. William Morrow. 236 pp. $27.99
American Bandstand.

He does not adequately document his claim that Dick Clark’s attempt in 1973 to launch Soul Unlimited, a Black-themed dance show designed to co-opt or kill Cornelius’ franchise, was stopped in its tracks by music industry powerhouse Clarence Avant (and the opposition of African-American political leaders, including Jesse Jackson).

Nor is he able to explain why, for a brief period (1983-1986), Cornelius stopped his “love, peace, and soul” sign off, and featured a raft of White celebrities in cameos, videos, and studio performances, including the decidedly uncool country-rocker Don Henley, soap opera star Jack Wagner, and “Weird Al” Yankovic. And George does not follow up on Cornelius’ comment that he reaped no financial rewards for Soul Train’s international appeal, “and that takes us back to some of the money we weren’t able to make.”

Final episode in 2006

By the 1990s, Nelson points out, Soul Train seemed “locked into an outmoded Black hipness.” Cornelius did not understand and did not approve of hip-hop and gangsta rap. And so, at the start of the 1993-1994 season he announced that after 25 years, he was relinquishing his on camera role.

Soul Train soldiered on, until March 26, 2006, when its 1,117th and final episode was televised. Reruns of classic shows from the ‘70s and ‘80s remained in syndication; they served as testimony, George indicates, “to the truth that Soul Train’s past was richer than its present.”

And, as a recent retrospective, where performers shared stories and danced the night away, demonstrates, Soul Train still evokes “a warm looking back and a fun sense of nostalgia.”

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