

# FLORIDA SOUL



From Ray Charles to  
KC and the Sunshine Band

proof

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proof

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# Introduction

## *The Soul State of Florida*

IT'S A WINTER NIGHT IN AMERICA, and “Monday Night Football” is about to air on ESPN. First, though, comes the lead-in show, “Monday Night Countdown.” The inherent challenge here, it seems to an outsider, is to make more than two hours of older men sitting down, talking, and *not* playing football remotely compelling to watch. To keep the energy level high, the network uses brash-talking commentators, action-packed game highlights, fancy graphics, and, very selectively, music.

As the show goes to its last commercial, the camera pulls back from the broadcasters and an up-tempo song blares briefly. It’s “Hold On, I’m A Comin’,” powerfully declaimed by Sam and Dave, the classic soul duo formed in Miami’s Overtown neighborhood. That anticipatory song was a #1 hit on *Billboard* magazine’s Hot Rhythm & Blues Singles sales chart in 1966—and just about a half-century later, ESPN’s producers chose it to introduce their football game.

Now it’s May, and thirteen-year-old New Yorker Elena Messinger is celebrating her bat mitzvah in a 6th Avenue hotel. The entertainment includes much food and a man cutting uncannily accurate silhouettes of guests out of folded paper, followed by music and dancing. A saxophonist plays over recorded music, while the DJ exhorts the throng to “come on!” via their wireless mikes. Smiles of recognition break out across the crowded, high-ceilinged hall at the very beginnings of “Get Down Tonight” and “That’s the Way (I Like It),” 1970s hits by KC and the Sunshine Band. Multigenerational dance gyrations ensue.

As the weather reference in its name infers, that band is from Florida, too. Originally, they were called the Sunshine Junkanoo Band, a nod to the Bahamian music Harry Wayne Casey, aka KC, heard in Miami and incorporated into their sound. Improbably, Casey still leads a current iteration of the Sunshine Band, touring and performing in his mid-sixties.

Now it's autumn. Walking toward East 6th Street, Austin, Texas' main drag for bars and entertainment, passersby can't help but notice an outpost of the Coyote Ugly Saloon chain. For one thing, the smell of spilled beer is rank. For another, the music coming from the bar's outdoor speakers is resoundingly loud. The college students in this contingent immediately recognize "Hotline Bling," a 2015 hit by the Canadian rapper Drake. But it's their "old school" professor (that's their term; I think they mean it affectionately) who identifies the haunting organ track underneath Drake's singing. It's "Why Can't We Live Together," a plea for peace and tolerance by Florida soul singer Timmy Thomas, released in 1972. (The "Bling" lyrics are concerned with very different matters.)

Thomas' song, born of the Vietnam War and the African American civil rights struggle, has since been covered by Sade, Joan Osborne, and Carlos Santana, among others. The song's greatest impact, however, was felt half-way across the world from Florida. "Why Can't We Live Together," which contains the line, "*No matter what color, you are still my brother,*" became an anthem of the black liberation movement in apartheid-era South Africa. Thomas performed the song in Johannesburg while Nelson Mandela was in prison and returned to sing it again in 1994 when Mandela was elected that country's president.

These Florida songs and artists all surfaced during my writing of this book, so, naturally, I noticed. My antennae for passionate vocals and funky sounds with Florida origins were up. Here's the other thing I noticed: None of these artists' Florida origins were discussed or even alluded to; it never came up. Perhaps the loudest silence came when the Seattle Symphony performed its "Tribute to Ray Charles." Press coverage declared that Charles "spent a significant part of his career in Seattle." There was no mention of the fact that Charles was a Florida soul artist, perhaps the greatest of them all. The late singer, piano player, composer, arranger, and bandleader—known during his Florida decades by his given name, Ray Charles Robinson—was raised here, went blind here, became a musician here, and made his first recordings here. At one point he even played in a Tampa country and western band, the Florida Playboys, and in 1951 recorded a composition of his called "St. Pete Florida Blues."



Ray Charles circa 1949, just after he left his home state of Florida. Courtesy Joel Dufour.

In the years immediately following World War II, the talent level was so high and the pool around him so deep that, talented as he was, “RC” struggled to make it as a working professional—and at times, to eat. Later in his career he attributed his success in part to this cutthroat environment, saying, “Florida toughened me up.”

Much of the music that he and the other Florida performers above produced endures today—still enjoyed, still part of our collective culture and our collective commerce—forty to fifty years after it first issued into a very

different country. These artists and the classic songs of the Florida soul canon continue to demand attention, renewed or continued.

Somehow, though, Florida soul in the aggregate remains largely unrecognized, both in and outside of this state. Although the term “southern soul” is widely used and accepted, the South it conjures up seems to end before it reaches Florida’s borders. In the otherwise excellent 2004 soul documentary, *Only the Strong Survive*, the narrator says: “When soul spread north from Memphis to Philly, Chicago and Detroit, where it became Motown, pop music was changed forever.” Again, Florida gets no play.

When most listeners, even knowledgeable devotees of this genre, think of soul hotbeds, their minds will likely move to Memphis, with its illustrious Stax and Hi record labels; to Muscle Shoals, Alabama, home to the FAME recording studio; or to Detroit and the Motown sound. (That is, if they consider Motown soul; many don’t, calling it pop.) New Orleans may deservedly come up, as can Macon, Georgia, from which Little Richard and James Brown emerged in the 1950s, and Philadelphia, where Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff created TSOP, the Sound of Philadelphia, in the 1960s and 1970s.

And that’s not right—or that’s not entirely right. Soul soared in those places, but Florida’s contributions—to soul, rhythm and blues, funk, and 1970s dance-soul or disco—are equally rich, and deep. In the thirty-five-year swath between 1945 and 1980, Florida produced some of the most electric, emotive soul music this country’s ever heard. Great singers, musicians, and songwriters plied their crafts here in the service of a fine, funky art. DJs on local AM radio stations like WTMP in Tampa, WBAS in Tallahassee, WJAX in Jacksonville, and WFEC and WMBM in Miami spun little vinyl 45-rpm discs with Florida labels on them—labels with names such as Jayville, Tener, Marlin, Leo, Alston, D & B, Glades, and Bound Sound. Performed live, this music rang out—and found responsive audiences—in nightclubs, dance halls, ballrooms, “casinos,” and juke joints all over the state, from Miami and Tampa Bay to Gainesville, Jacksonville, and Pensacola, and in between.

Then as now, this music’s reach extended far beyond the Sunshine State, stirring limbs and loins all over the United States and beyond, especially in the United Kingdom and Japan, where American soul music has long had strong followings. Especially in soul’s golden age, the 1960s and 1970s, Florida soul shone. Yet that remains a hidden history, an underappreciated cultural heritage.

This book aims to document and celebrate that legacy. Its most ambitious goals are to expand the history and cosmology of soul and to prove that Florida and its cities deserve their own prominent places therein—to redraw that misshapen musical map. Until that happens, though, millions will continue to listen, dance and sing to this music—to love it—without understanding just how many of their beloved touchstones have Florida in their geological makeup.

I didn't. Growing up in New York and New Jersey I was drawn to the soul music of the 1960s and 1970s. When Betty Wright came on the radio singing her hit "Clean Up Woman" or when one by Sam and Dave or Timmy Thomas came on the radio, I turned those songs *up*. I especially remember banging on dashboards to the driving rhythm and blasting horns of "Funky Nassau" by the strangely named group, the Beginning of the End. But the DJs on WABC and WNJR (in Newark) didn't say—had no reason to say—"You know, Betty Wright is from Florida" or "'Funky Nassau' is on the Alston label, based in Miami."

I was too young to get caught up in the global outbreak of Chubby Checker's song "The Twist" in the early 1960s. But millions who did, from San Francisco to Scandinavia, had no idea this little hip-shimmy of a dance and the song celebrating it almost certainly originated in the black enclave around Central Avenue in Tampa. As chapter 4 relates, R&B singer Hank Ballard wrote that tune, and first recorded it, in Florida.

Until I began teaching at the University of Tampa I had never heard of the late Henry Stone—the Berry Gordy or leading impresario of Florida soul. As I discovered, he recorded virtually all the important soul artists who came from or passed through Miami at his T.K. Productions, from Ray Charles, James Brown, and Sam and Dave to Betty Wright and including KC and the Sunshine Band. (Both Casey and Rick Finch were working for him when they cofounded that group.) This state's soul yield was not as concentrated as in Memphis, where two labels, Stax and Hi, essentially held sway. Yet, especially in the 1970s, Miami still dominated, through its size and stature, and through Stone. (See chapter 14.) In 1976 an Associated Press story on T.K. went out across the country with the headline "'Miami Sound' Dominates Floors," meaning dance floors.

Artists and groups with Florida roots have certainly earned respect and renown. But that glory is specific, individualized; it doesn't acknowledge any shared context or the ways and reasons they became so accomplished where they did. One likely underlying reason is that some important artists,