

Peace, Love and . . .
Soul! Don Cornelius
on the air, 1977



DON CORNELIUS

HE TURNED THE IDEA OF BROADCASTING AN
R&B DANCE PARTY INTO AN AFFIRMATION OF BLACK
INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-EMPOWERMENT.

BY CAROL COOPER

When sent to Los Angeles in 1975 to cover a studio taping of the then-five-year-old Black music and dance program *Soul Train*, U.K. journalist Mick Farren paid show creator Don Cornelius and crew the ultimate transatlantic compliment. Measuring *Soul Train*'s cultural relevance and efficient production values against prior episodic examples of British (and American) music television, Farren wrote in *New Musical Express*: "They have hit on a formula for generating energy on the studio floor in a way that maximizes the excitement, but never lets it run away with itself. It's the most refreshingly alive TV rock presentation since *Ready Steady Go!*"

During its brief lifespan, like lightning in a bottle, *Ready Steady Go!* faithfully captured and elevated the music and fashion that mattered in British youth culture, so Farren's assessment is high praise indeed. But it doesn't come close to explaining how Don Cornelius turned the simple idea of broadcasting a youth-forward R&B dance party into a galvanizing affirmation of Black independence and self-empowerment. Over thirty-six years of weekly episodes, television producer Don Cornelius institutionalized *Soul Train* as the first nationally distributed, Black-owned commercial TV show able to control how Black American music and dance would be introduced to "mainstream" American audiences. Yet

it would take decades for the political significance of his revolutionary innovation to be fully appreciated.

Born in 1936 and raised in Chicago, a city founded by a Black entrepreneur, Cornelius graduated high school in 1954. After joining the Marines to serve in the Korean War, he returned home to start a family and help integrate the field of broadcast media. It's worth noting that Motown's Berry Gordy, S.O.L.A.R.'s Dick Griffey, Inner City Broadcasting's Percy Sutton, and Don Cornelius were all ex-servicemen who applied the discipline and organizational skills learned in the military to build music-oriented media empires. They had seen enough of the world to dream beyond the racial inequalities of the U.S. – and figure out ways to subvert them. After the initial failure of the G.I. Bill to reward Black war veterans with the same economic and educational benefits as their white counterparts, subsequent federal attempts were made to treat Black vets better. Thus, it only took two decades of nonviolent protests, a martyred civil rights leader, and multiple urban race riots before ambitious initiatives advocated by President Johnson's Kerner Commission made *Soul Train* possible. In 1968, its *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* made many urgent recommendations for how to reduce generational poverty and despair in Black neighborhoods, including an immediate expansion of Black involvement in mainstream media. The report en-

visioned integrating “Negro activities into all aspects of coverage and content, including newspaper articles and television programming.” The Kerner line items that directly opened doors both for *Soul Train* creator Don Cornelius and the younger Black staffers he would hire was the following: “Recruit more Negroes into journalism and broadcasting and promote those who are qualified to positions of significant responsibility. Recruitment should begin in high schools and continue through college; where necessary, aid for training should be provided.”

In 1990, when Don Cornelius agreed to be interviewed for Malcolm Forbes’ publication *Egg*, his weekly Black dance party had earned the distinction of being the longest-running privately owned American TV show of any kind still in first-run syndication. Business-wise, this meant that when Cornelius decided to sell rebroadcast rights, he could demand top dollar. In a move reminiscent of how fast MTV spread once homes had basic cable, word of mouth from the first seven cities to carry *Soul Train* (Atlanta, Birmingham, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, L.A., and Philadelphia) forced another eighteen markets to add the show before the end of that season. During its first two decades, *Soul Train* proved almost impossible for a market to drop once stations put it on – viewers would call and write demanding it. In celebration of this fact, Cornelius insisted on clearing up a basic misconception. He said reporters kept questioning him as if he were a music expert, when his main concern each week was how to use a visual medium to accurately showcase the intelligence fueling Afro-American culture without the unconscious distortions of a historically biased white gaze. No matter how important *Soul Train* became to the music industry, Cornelius still emphasized, “I’m in the television business, not the music business.”

Not that Cornelius didn’t learn to conquer television via strategic flirtations with the music business. He’d decided late in 1966 to abandon a dull job selling insurance for a three-month course in broadcasting; this led to his first radio gig at Chicago’s WVON. Hired as a newsroom staffer, he had little to no input on the music side of Black radio – yet he began to know important people in diverse sectors of the music industry once he put together a traveling revue of local talent to play for teen dances at local high schools. When the head of WVON’s newsroom went to WCIU-TV to anchor a Black-oriented public-affairs show, he brought Cornelius in as a sportscaster. Before long, Cornelius persuaded the channel – which already specialized in ethnic programming – to let him produce a Black teen dance program that would re-create the atmosphere of his popular high school parties. Knowing he could make a Blacker (and therefore more exciting) dance program than *American Bandstand*, Cornelius then proceeded to study what Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz had done with their privately owned Desilu Productions. When the FCC changed syndication rules in 1971, Cornelius noticed how it prompted a national boom in syndication opportunities. This further persuaded Cornelius to model his production company on the maverick trajectory of Desilu, with hopes of at-

taining similar longevity and economic success.

Cornelius had to spend four hundred dollars of his own money to film *Soul Train*’s first episode for WCIU. His featured performers were Jerry Butler, the Chi-Lites, and the Emotions. With a compelling pilot designed to reach a large after-school audience of potential consumers, *Soul Train* secured Sears, Roebuck as its initial advertising sponsor, then premiered on August 17, 1970, airing each weekday afternoon. With the dapper, golden voiced Cornelius steering viewers between dance floor frenzy and polished performance segments, the show was a joyful and respectful window on Black American life that television had never broadcast before.

Because *Soul Train* was an immediate hit as well as an unprecedented promotional opportunity for Chicago’s Black musical talent, the program had no trouble broadcasting five days per week during its first year. There was clearly a hunger within the program’s target demographic for this level of positive representation of Blacks by Blacks and for Blacks. It was also a point of pride for *Soul Train* to use and train as many Black production staffers as possible. In the early 1970s, there was nothing else on TV that showcased as much Black joy and teenage energy as *Soul Train* – qualities that made it perfect for national syndication in 1971.

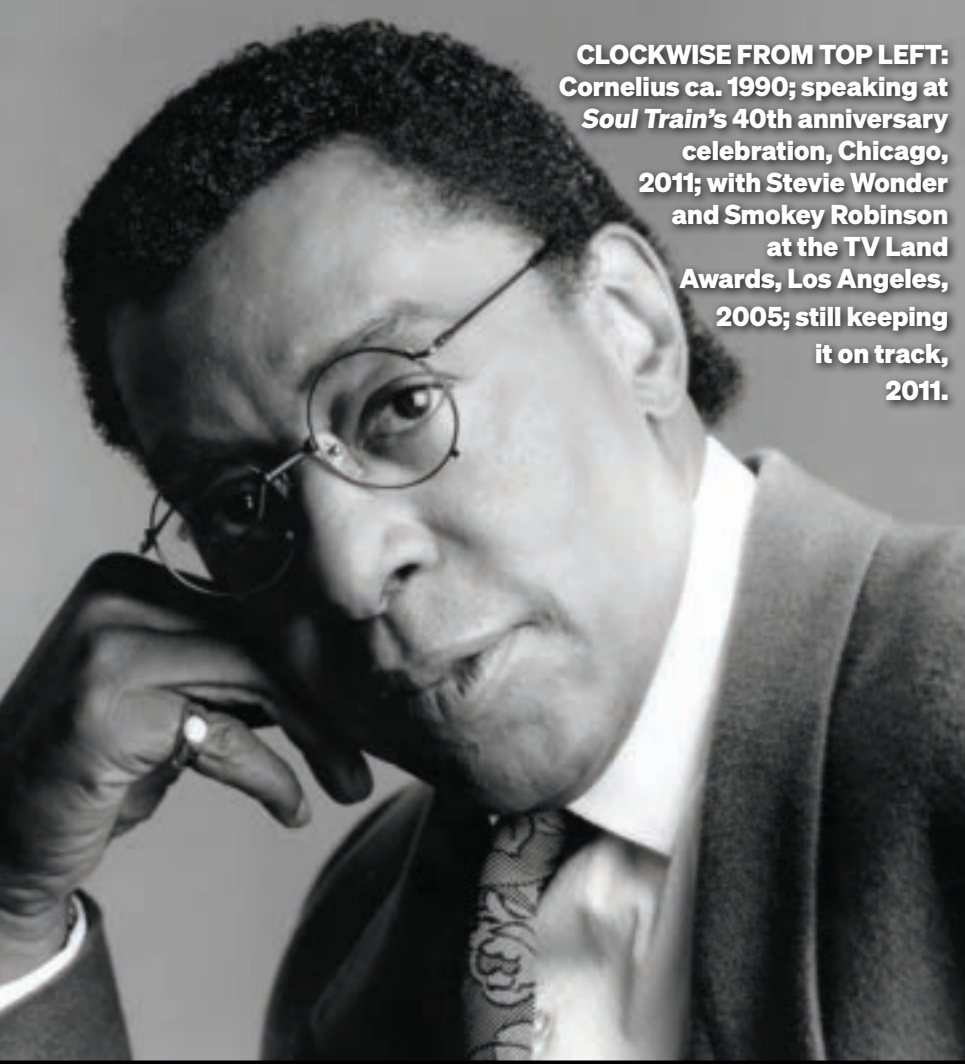
But securing national syndication required more money than Sears was willing to invest. Once again Cornelius had to shop for sponsors, but this time with over two dozen complete episodes to display as proof of concept. George E. Johnson Sr. of Johnson Products Company was an established Black hair-care titan who instantly understood how smart it would be to advertise Afro-Sheen and Ultra-Sheen nationwide on a Black dance show. By 1970, Johnson’s company could already claim annual sales of \$12.6 million. He made ads for *Soul Train* starring Black models celebrating the complex protocols surrounding Black hair care – whether in processed waves, cornrows, or a natural Afro – making us feel as unique and special as our music. Johnson remained the primary advertiser on *Soul Train* for the life of the show because he was thrilled to project the message of Black unity, pride, and brand loyalty implicit in two self-made Black moguls from Chicago teaming up to bring unequivocally Black television into Black homes across the country each week.

From Gladys Knight and the Pips to Bill Withers, if you were Black and made music (or just made music embraced by Black radio), you needed to be seen on *Soul Train*. Fans still talk about the happy surprise of seeing white rockers like Elton John and David Bowie show up performing their funkier singles. Always shrewd about “must-see” TV, Cornelius used to say, “If a white superstar comes to me with a hit single suitable for *Soul Train*, why would I say no?” White funkateers like Dennis Coffey and Scotland’s Average White Band found themselves equally welcome to ride along on what Cornelius called “the hippest trip in America.” As the epitome of righteous authority, Cornelius naturally supported Black-owned labels, encouraging the R&B



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: With fans, Washington, D.C., 1972; with Aretha Franklin on *Soul Train*'s 30th anniversary, 2001; welcoming Bill Withers, 1974; dancing down the *Soul Train* line with the Supremes' Jean Terrell (left) and Lynda Laurence, 1973; presenting RUN DMC, 1991.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Cornelius ca. 1990; speaking at
Soul Train's 40th anniversary
celebration, Chicago,
2011; with Stevie Wonder
and Smokey Robinson
at the TV Land
Awards, Los Angeles,
2005; still keeping
it on track,
2011.



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divisions of Atlantic, Columbia, Capitol, Warner Bros., RCA, and other multinational corporations to compete toe-to-toe with acts from Motown, Sussex, Curtom, Philly International, T-Neck, Tabu, and Al Bell's Stax. As time went on, every style of music seemed to find its place on Cornelius' soundstage: funk, R&B, jazz fusion, rap; even global artists like Hugh Masekela, Letta Mbulu, Yellow Magic Orchestra, and Third World vied for performance segments.

It's been said that Cornelius disliked hip-hop and actively tried to keep it off his show. This was not entirely true – as proven by clips of Kool Moe Dee, RUN DMC, Salt-N-Pepa, and Naughty by Nature rapping on *Soul Train*. But when provocative gangsta rap began outselling more playful forms of hip-hop, he couldn't support it. Cornelius tried to clarify his take on hip-hop to journalist Danyel Smith in the mid-nineties by saying he tried to only purvey positive images of Black people because “it just feels right to do it. Just like it feels right to some white producers to make us look silly. We have always tried to be the antithesis of that approach.”

As the popularity of *Soul Train* grew, Cornelius was inspired to expand his business in many directions. He briefly ran the funky pop-soul label Soul Train Records (1975–1977) with his West Coast Talent Coordinator Dick Griffey, then went on to invent annual awards shows like the Soul Train Music Awards in 1987 and the Lady of Soul Awards in 1995. In 1985, he even allowed Jeffrey Daniel (a former *Soul Train* dancer and founding member of the hitmaking trio Shalamar) to host a short-lived British spinoff christened *620 Soul Train*. Interestingly, after industry fixer Clarence Avant and civil rights activist Jesse Jackson helped Cornelius defeat Dick Clark's attempt in 1973 to put his own Black dance show (named *Soul Unlimited*) in direct competition against *Soul Train*, Clark agreed to help Don Cornelius Productions develop its own network specials.

In 1993, just shy of 60, Cornelius decided to revitalize the *Soul Train* format by letting fresh faces emcee the onscreen action. Behind the scenes, Cornelius and a loyal staff kept the *Train* on script with a revolving cast of

guest hosts until Cornelius opted for the stability of letting a rising young actor or comedian bring something new to the role. From 1997 to 1999, Mystro Clark took over, followed from 2000 to 2003 by Shemar Moore, then Dorian Gregory stepped in from 2003 until Cornelius stopped producing new content in 2006.

Suffering quietly from a congenital condition since 1982, Cornelius soldiered on by packaging archived episodes and finding new avenues of distribution despite being in increasingly poor health. To maximize the value of over one thousand unique episodes of *Soul Train*, he strategically sold off pieces of his media empire for undisclosed sums. Rerun rights, spinoff rights, theatrical rights, the rights to his awards shows, and other intellectual properties changed hands while commemorative DVD compilations continued to be licensed. Books, films, and documentaries about the show were also set in motion. *Soul Train* may have run its natural course on broadcast television, but – as Aretha Franklin said upon hearing of Don Cornelius' death on February 1, 2012 – its revolutionary impact on that medium cannot be forgotten.

As television itself teaches us, all good things – even great things – must eventually come to an end. Yet *Soul Train's* legacy includes more than affectionate name recognition and invaluable visual documentation of how Black music, fashion, and youth culture changed over four tumultuous decades. The show's genesis serves as an object lesson in self-empowerment through media representation for any and every ignored or deliberately marginalized community. Don Cornelius and Don Cornelius Productions prioritized an ethical framework of goals and partnerships built for the purpose of community uplift. The people he trained learned how to apply quasi-military discipline to proven formulas to achieve consistent economic progress. You can see some of the same tactics in how K-Pop acts attain international fandoms, and how Latin trap and reggaeton performers sustain a crossover audience.

So tonight, we pay our respect to Don Cornelius, the man whose vision and tenacity brought a new Black paradigm to our music and culture.