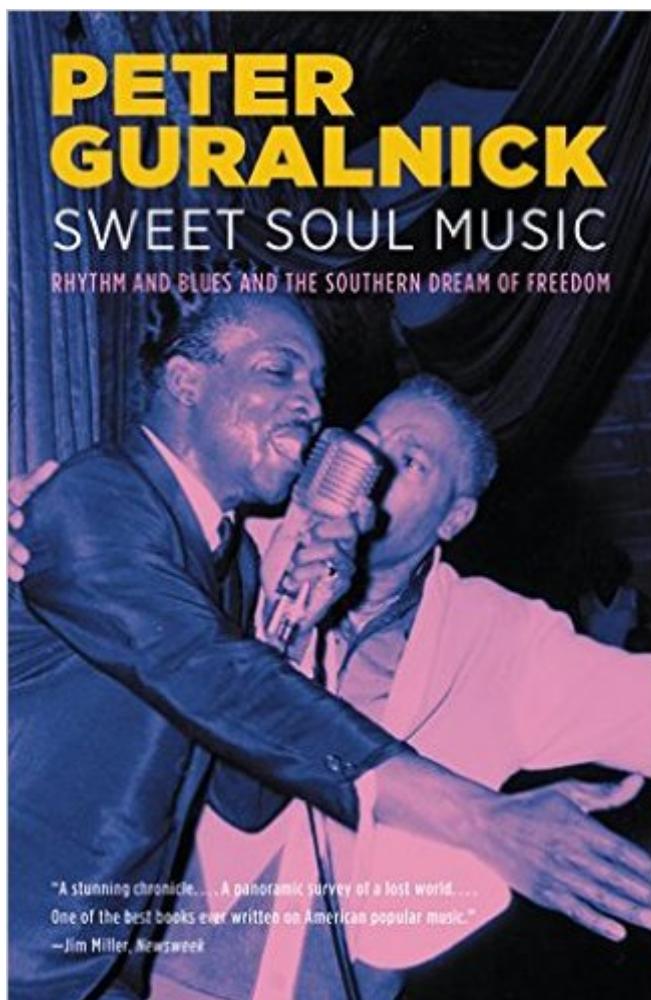


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Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm And Blues And The Southern Dream Of Freedom



Synopsis

A gripping narrative that captures the tumult and liberating energy of a nation in transition, Sweet Soul Music is an intimate portrait of the legendary performers--Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, James Brown, Solomon Burke, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, and Al Green among them--who merged gospel and rhythm and blues to create Southern soul music. Through rare interviews and with unique insight, Peter Guralnick tells the definitive story of the songs that inspired a generation and forever changed the sound of American music.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Like Robert Palmer's superb "Deep Blues," Guralnick's extensive look back at the roots of R&B and soul music combines criticism, biographical profiles and social history into one rich, printed tapestry. Meticulously researched, the book shows its author's deep love of the music without sacrificing objectivity. Guralnick provides plenty of background on the "race music" that spawned R&B and the great soul music of the sixties and early seventies, on which much of the book concentrates. Like most, if not all, of the great blues musicians, the early pioneers of soul came from humble, mostly southern beginnings, and made little or no money from their work, which was liberally sampled by white musicians. A good portion of the narrative revolves around the fascinating rise and fall of Stax Records, the tiny Memphis-based label that brought together white executive leadership and musicians with raw black talent from the South. Despite initially primitive recording conditions, Stax developed into a powerhouse that was home to some of the greatest musicians in soul music, from Otis Redding to William Bell to Carla Thomas to Sam and Dave to Johnny Taylor. The label became

representative of the growing sense of black pride that defined the era, one in which civil rights, of course, moved to the forefront of America's consciousness. All of these musicians and many more, including Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett and James Brown, to name a few, are given finely drawn profiles by Guralnick, and he treats their contributions to American music with the respect that they deserve. Throughout, he is intent on letting the artists tell their stories in their own words, and remains content to use his own fine writing to direct and bind together the narrative. Another great accomplishment of the book, for me, was Guralnick's successful effort to illuminate the ties between white and black musicians during this period. Yes, many of the most successful producers, notably Atlantic's Jerry Wexler, were white, but so were many of the musicians. Most had grown up in the south around blacks and were intimately familiar with African-American music. The Stax house band, which included Steve Cropper and Donald Dunn, was white, and they performed on many songs penned by great black songwriters such as David Porter and Isaac Hayes. Think of the great, ominous organ introduction to Aretha Franklin's "I Ain't Never Loved a Man." The white player is Spooner Oldham. This musical cross-fertilization is a notable point, one not often brought into considerations of the era. As a young kid coming up in the mid-60s, I loved the music that Guralnick writes about here, and I could tell -- even if he hadn't said so -- that he did too. He goes beyond that love to really dig into its roots and understand it, and succeeds admirably.

'Sweet Soul Music' is a fantastic book, the best book I've read on the subject. Having said that, it isn't by any means a complete history of Soul Music (it completely omits the great music that came from New York, Motown, Chicago and Philly), nor is it a complete history of Southern Soul Music (the book ends with the acrimonious break up of Stax/Volt records, even though great Soul was still being made elsewhere in Memphis). Guralnick's book starts off looking like a history of Soul Music (there are early chapters on Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and an amazing and hilarious chapter on Solomon Burke), but then the book changes emphasis and becomes the story of the involvement of white musicians in Southern R&B. Guralnick's thesis seems to be that Southern Soul achieved its great creative flowering in the 60s as a result of the partnership between black and white musicians, and even though he interviews a great number of musicians and businessmen - black and white - he can't help himself from empathising with the young white hipsters that made up the house bands at Stax and Muscle Shoals, with the result that the book becomes very much a story told from their point of view (Guralnick calls Dan Penn the "secret hero of this book" - fair enough, but surely James Brown should have been its overt hero). After these white musicians were intimidated out of the business during the racial tension that followed Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968,

Guralnick concentrates more on the politics and seems to lose interest in the music itself. Which is a great pity, since Southern Soul in the 70s went on to even greater heights (James Brown's rhythmic revolution, then Al Green's great synthesis of the sexual and the spiritual). Though I learnt a great deal from the book (my CD collection has mushroomed after reading it) it felt to this reader as though the book had ended just before its real climax.

And that's about as good as books on music get. The stories of minor and supporting character's are given air in Mr. Guralnick's books and that is what sets them apart. As a fairly serious follower of American music it is a treat to have a writer who obviously loves his subject (and has similar tastes to me) choose to write at some length about people like Dan Penn, Solomon Burke and James Carr. That he does so in such a poignant yet unforced way is just icing on the cake. This is more than a history of Southern soul music. It's an exciting and surprising story of real people who created some real extraordinary music.

If you want a starting place in your search to find REAL Soul music, look no further than this book. Guralnick points you in the right direction. It is very clear that he loves the subject matter. He investigated the legends, and reports as much truth as will come to light, about performers like Otis Redding, Solomon Burke, James Brown, Sam Cooke, Arthur Alexander, Aretha Franklin, James Carr, O.V. Wright, Al Green, Wilson Pickett, and many others. There is also a history of Stax Records that Rob Bowman used as a reference for his epic history of the label. And there's a comprehensive discography, which has been updated for the CD era. Guralnick let the story take him wherever it led, even if he didn't always like the conclusions. It is an honest book and a good read. I write a lot of reviews on Soul music. Much of what I know about the roots of Soul, I learned from this book!

I'm not finished yet but I love this book. If you like reading about the story behind the music, then this is the book for you. However the very best book ever written about R&B remains Nowhere To Run by Gerri Hirshey. That book should be available as an e-book.

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