

Don Cornelius: An American Icon Who Shaped Black Culture Dies, But His “Train” and “Soul” Will Ride On Forever!

By James L. Walker, Jr., Esq.

For many of us who grew up in the 1970s or 1980s, Don Cornelius and his *Soul Train* was our **106^t & Park**; **American Idol** or **BET’s Sunday Best**.

There was once a time when there weren’t 500 cable channels to scroll through. Most of us only had five or six channels on a television set at most, with a hanger servicing as an antenna and pliers holding the channel dial in place. And **Soul Train** was that one special hour on Saturday mornings where you saw your favorite R&B and Black artists.

You mimicked the dances and lip-synched to **Gladys Knight & the Pips**, **Minnie Riperton**, **The O’Jays**, **Curtis Mayfield**, **Marvin Gaye**, **the Jackson 5** and **Aretha Franklin**.

For many artists, there was no chance they could get on Dick Clark’s **American Bandstand** and Clark even tried to mimic Cornelius with a show called *Soul Unlimited* (later cancelled when black leaders realized the power of *Soul Train* and demanded Dick Clark remove his copycat show from television).

If Berry Gordy and Motown were deemed the music pulse of America in the last century, then Cornelius and **Soul Train** would clearly be America’s pioneer media source for black music to be seen and heard.

Millions tuned in to see the coolest dance moves, the latest fashion fads, the chic hairdos, and of course, the scrabble board (where no one ever failed to solve the puzzle).

Although Cornelius died earlier this week of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at the mere age of 75, his legacy and legend will ride on like the dancing choo-choo train that traveled across millions of television screens in the opening credits of the show.

“Don Cornelius and his creation of *Soul Train* and its legacy had a great impact on American culture,” said Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff of Philly International. The 1970s label duo powerhouse, Gamble and Huff wrote and produced the 2nd version of the theme song for the show. “TSOP: The Sound of Philadelphia” hit #1 on the soul charts and became a platinum selling record.

Today is the first day of Black History Month (February) and Cornelius' death on this date is ironically symbolic to the Black History he represented.

While the dapper dressed and smooth voiced Cornelius or "The Don" as Public Enemy's Chuck D calls him was known for the hip *Soul Train* dance line and the infamous "Peace Love & Soul" popular closing line, it should be known that Cornelius was not just a popular TV host and creator of a popular TV show, but was one who immersed himself into the Civil Rights Struggle of the 60s in Chicago.

For example, as a reporter, he went to the Civil Rights marches and covered the stories when others were afraid and he even interviewed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He also recognized the lack of blacks in media, so he used television to change perceptions, give black artists a chance, empower blacks and create black pride.

I worked closely with Reverend Jessie Jackson on a protest at Yale once and he noted how Cornelius was a journalist in the 1960s and covered the riots of Chicago when Civil Rights leaders marched through Chicago.

"Don was a news reporter and when Dr. King would have these rallies Don would report and he was very connected to the Civil Rights Movement," Jackson recalled.

Cornelius would also use advertisers like Johnson & Johnson and Afro-Sheen to instill and empower black owners and black pride. And, for many black Americans, Cornelius was a role model and countered the stereotypical light-skinned blacks who were chosen in top movies and to work in newsrooms.

"Billy Dee Williams & Don Cornelius were the two flyest black men back in the day," recalled Sherri Shepherd of *The View* on Twitter as news rippled throughout the country of Cornelius' death. "Nobody could rock sky blue lace boots, sky blue pants and long sky blue jacket like Mr. Don Cornelius with his Afro picked out (to) perfection...Love, Peace & Soul."

We often hear the story of Diana Ross & The Supremes appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964, but the countless black artists who got their opportunity to be seen on *Soul Train* far outnumber the few Ed Sullivan put on air as most mainstream shows did not book black acts on TV.

“I wanted to make a show for black folks like *American Bandstand*,” Cornelius often said in reference to Clark’s popular teeny-bopper franchise that aired on ABC for years.

Personally bothered that the media only showed negative portrayals of blacks, Cornelius said recently, “I had a burning desire to see Black people presented on television in a positive light.”

And, 40 years later, Cornelius not only showed blacks in a “positive light”, but had an impact that stretched much farther than he could have ever imagined.

“Don brought soul music and dance to the world in a way that it had never been shown and he was a cultural game changer on a global level”, said the Reverend Al Sharpton.

Cornelius even featured soulful pop artists on the show such as Elton John and David Bowie.

“Really sorry to hear the news about Don Cornelius,” wrote **Guns N’ Roses** guitarist Slash on Twitter. “He was quite the maverick in his time. *Soul Train* had a tremendous impact. Sad.”

Donald Cortez aka “Don Cornelius” was born in Chicago on September 27, 1936. He launched *Soul Train* in the late 1960s in Chicago on WCIU with four hundred dollars of his own money, and later shockingly convinced station owners to allow a black man to own his own production and show.

He then took his show to Hollywood and the *train* ran nonstop from 1971 to 2006, which also included a popular “Soul Train Awards” show spin-off.

MadVision brought the *Soul Train* franchise a few years ago and owner Magic Johnson vowed this week to keep the brand alive and maintain the integrity of Cornelius.

Before Oprah blasted nationwide in syndication, it was Cornelius who trailblazed out of the Windy City on to the national stage.

His 35 year run is only closely matched by *Entertainment Tonight* which is approaching 32 years and would pass Cornelius in 2016 for the longest running first-run syndicated show ever.

B.B. King, Al Green, James Brown, Sly & The Family Stone, DeBarge and Anita Baker could all be found on *Soul Train* on any given Saturday morning.

As a child, my whole neighborhood would cram around the television set to see New Edition, The Temptations or even Cornelius himself dancing down the *Soul Train* line (his first and only time) with Mary Wilson of the Supremes.

We all had the plaid three-piece suits, afros, bell-bottoms and enjoyed watching the likes of singer Jody Watley, actress Rosie Perez and the late Fred “Rerun” Berry (*What’s Happening* fame) dancing on the show every Saturday.

The show was part music, part fashion, part dance and part black empowerment.

Bobby Jones is the creator and host of *Bobby Jones Gospel*, BET’s longest running show. With his television property still receiving top Nielsen ratings after 31 years, Jones was definitely influenced by his late colleague. “Don Cornelius is an icon unlike any other. What he did for black music and black people in providing the platform through a TV show opened so many doors and I’m proud to have known him,” says Jones.

It seems as if every house party, family reunion and black wedding (and now black movie), honors Cornelius at some point with the *Soul Train* dance line showdown.

Worldwide statements and accolades are being showered on Cornelius and umbrage given for his years of hard work.

Neil Portnow, President/CEO of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) says, “Don Cornelius created a cultural phenomenon with “*Soul Train*”, providing a platform for recording artists to showcase their talents to a wider, more diverse audience. He made an indelible impact on American television, one that will continue to be appreciated for generations to come.”

Gospel Stellar Awards founder and President Don Jackson was reportedly very distraught and “saddened” by the news when I called his office to get his feedback on the death of his longstanding Chicago friend Don Cornelius, whom he had often told me about when we worked on the Stellers for five years.

Hip Hop Icon Russell Simons put it very simple on Twitter: “R.I.P. Don Cornelius. He’s on the Hippest Trip in Heaven now.”

Gladys Knight told CNN, “He was taking a giant step to even compete in the same arena where Dick Clark had such a hold with *American Bandstand*, but (Don Cornelius) was brave and he went out and he did it. And, we as artists are so grateful to him for giving us that space.”

Rapper-turned actor Ice-T declared, “Don Cornelius is an idol. There will never be another one of him in television (and) God bless him.”

“I am shocked and deeply saddened at the sudden passing of my friend, colleague and business partner Don Cornelius,” said veteran music producer and TV mogul Quincy Jones.

Jones added, “Don was a visionary pioneer and a giant in our business. Before MTV, there was *Soul Train*. That will be the great legacy of Don Cornelius. His contributions to television, music and our culture as a whole will never be matched. My heart goes out to Don’s family and loved ones”.

Aretha Franklin, who as a young artist hit the *Soul Train* stage before the world knew her by first name only, also reflected on the passing of the television legend. “God bless him for the solid good and wholesome foundation he provided for young adults worldwide, and the unity and brotherhood he singlehandedly brought about with his most memorable creation of *Soul Train*,” said Franklin.

Even BET’s top executive Stephen Hill, normally a quiet key player behind the scenes, acknowledged publicly on Twitter, “Don Cornelius was an early Black TV entrepreneur/businessman. *Soul Train* was a pivotal show. Without *Soul Train*, *106 & Park* doesn’t exist. Without the Soul Train Awards, The BET Awards doesn’t exist.”

The accolades will come in for months and years for Cornelius’ vision with *Soul Train* and simply what he represented as a reporter, producer, businessman, entrepreneur, black leader and pioneer.

I just hope as folks dance down their own *Soul Train* lines, they realize Cornelius stopped dancing to walk alongside Dr. King and the Civil Rights

Movement and paved the way in changing the music and media opportunities for thousands of artists for years to come.

Dozens of memorials and celebrations are being planned across the country over the next few weeks and as Cornelius would say in *Soul Train's* closing credits, "And you can bet your last money, it's gonna be a stone gas honey!"

Peace, Love & Soul Don Cornelius! Rest in Peace!

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