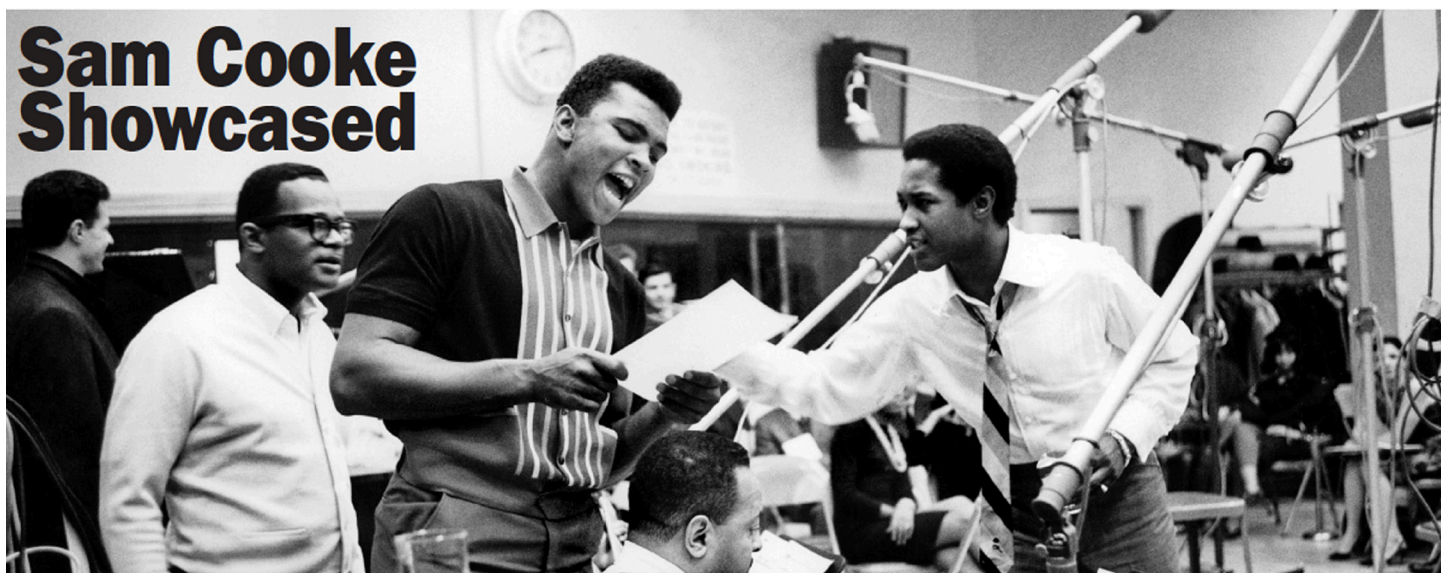


## Sam Cooke Showcased

photo Cooke Estate



*Ali the Greatest* claimed he was as handsome as Cooke, a tough row to how against the singer.

### John Antonelli's PBS documentary looks at the music of the legendary singer and Civil Rights hero.

by David L. Brown

I've have been watching a lot of music documentaries lately, to research two I'm producing, and one of the best is "Sam Cooke: Crossing Over," about the legendary soul singer. Produced and directed by veteran Mill Valley filmmaker, John Antonelli, photographed by Jim Iocona, and edited by Eli Olsen, it was finished in 2009 and aired on PBS's *American Masters* series in January.

"Sam Cooke became sort of a window into the civil rights movement for me," recalls Antonelli, who heard him on a black radio station out of Boston while growing up in a white suburb. "There were no black people anywhere nearby, but when I started to see black performers like Sam Cooke, the Supremes and

Smokey Robinson on [the] Dick Clark [Show, and elsewhere], it revealed this whole side of black culture that really resonated with me."

Acknowledged as the original "cross-over" artist and the inventor of "Soul," Cooke was the first African American to move from Gospel and Rhythm and Blues – so-called "race music" – to the top of the charts in 1957 with "You Send Me" (a couple of years before Ray Charles and Little Richard). With remarkable archival footage and a blue-ribbon cast, including music legends James Brown, Sam Moore (of Sam and Dave), Jerry Wexler (co-founder of Atlantic Records) and Smokey Robinson, Antonelli's riveting documentary shows how Cooke did it. Cooke's brother, David, and niece Gwen add intimate details from his Chicago childhood, his years as lead singer for gospel groups, and the making of his 29 Top 40 hits, including "Chain Gang," "Twisting the Night Away," "Another Saturday Night" and "A Change is Gonna Come," (1963) perhaps the greatest song to emerge from

the Civil Rights struggle, "[the] perfect song for its time," says Antonelli.

The doc captures Cooke's impressive range and manages to weave in most of his hits, often with footage from television shows like *American Bandstand* or the Mike Douglas, Steve Allen or Ed Sullivan shows – including some surprising covers like Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind." "Why aren't we blacks writing more songs like this?" Cooke wonders on camera – not the first to be opened to a new era of song writing by Dylan.

One of the first black artists to refuse to play segregated venues in the South, Cooke was a passionate advocate for Civil Rights which figures highly in "Crossing Over." "Whenever he had an opportunity," Antonelli recalls, "he stood up, risking his life by going on stage when the Ku Klux Klan threatened to shoot him if he performed before an integrated audience."

Along with Aretha, he encouraged other

black musicians to oppose segregation. “Sam and Aretha had one huge thing in common, and that was both being preacher’s kids. And the notion of crossing over from Gospel to popular music back then was so forbidden that it wasn’t even something you could bring up with your parents. Being six years older, Sam had already broken that ground.”

The making of the film is also a tale of filmmaker tenacity in the face of extreme opposition. Antonelli applied to ITVS sixteen times before receiving funding, and then only after he added the great Bay Area actor Danny Glover as narrator. “ITVS questioned whether we had the needed access,” recalls Antonelli. “[When] we cut in James Brown and the Cooke family, they said, ‘Oh, they really do have great access,’” but they still didn’t fund us for three years.

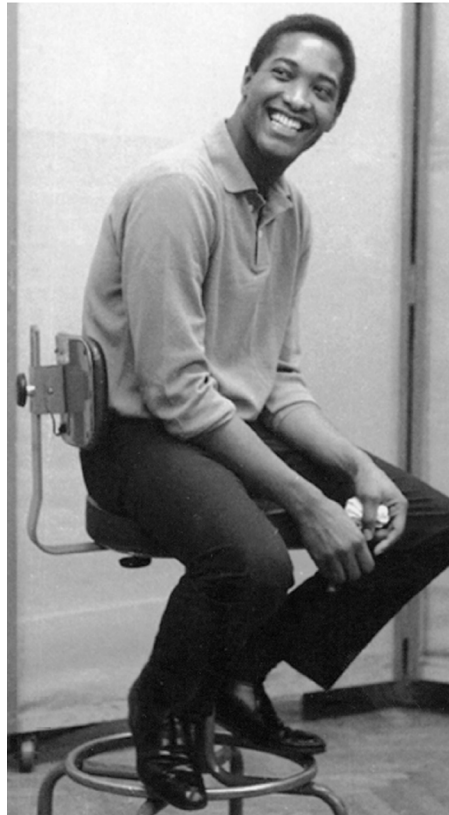
The filmmaker also had problems with interviewees, including repeated no-shows by Little Richard, Aretha Franklin and Lou Rawls. But Chann Berry, an African-American producer, songwriter and musician as well as a friend of Antonelli’s, finally got him to Rawls and other recalcitrants.

Recalling his date with the Queen of Soul, Antonelli remembers: “When we heard we were going to get an interview with her it was very exciting – [Aretha had] a strong personal connection to Sam. “We went to Detroit [but] sat there for three days. That was probably the low point, when I really felt like giving up.”

“We practically cried [when] Lou Rawls didn’t show. We never thought we were gonna get an interview with him. We tried and tried and tried.”

But Antonelli’s collaborators refused to let him quit. Chann made a call to somebody who made a call, and in the end they got an amazing interview with Rawls. “Chann has been a huge part of this film,” Antonelli says.

Another close friend of Cooke’s was Muhammad Ali, captured in the film covering with him a charming duet of



*Cooke at his date with Aretha, Queen of Soul.*

“The Gang’s All Here.” “As you can see,” cracks Ali, “Sam Cooke’s as pretty as me.” Cooke also broke ground as one of the first black stars to produce and publish his own music and start his own label, Sar/Derby, which brought artists like Bobby Womack, Billy Preston and Lou Rawls to pop. With “A Change is Gonna Come,” Cooke was on top of his game and poised for a massive crossover hit, which Antonelli captures beautifully, weaving the tune into a powerful sequence on civil rights.

But that promise was never fulfilled. In the film’s disturbing conclusion, Cooke is shot to death in 1964 in a seedy Los Angeles motel under dubious circumstances involving a woman and an affair gone bad. Like many emerging from the religious music scene, Cooke was torn between his chaste upbringing and immense celebrity sex appeal. We experience the shock and grief, expressed by close friends like Smokey Robinson, before transitioning to a moving summary of his legacy in this masterfully-crafted portrait.

“It was a huge gift I got from Sam Cooke,” concludes Antonelli. “Cooke

really set in motion the whole idiom of Soul music. He set the stage for Aretha and Motown. And to interview these legends. I couldn’t believe I was sitting in a room listening to Smokey Robinson talking about how he idolized Sam Cooke, just like I did as a kid. And Sam’s courage in standing up for Civil Rights. Just as he’d written and recorded his classic song, he got killed. Who knows what he and Ali might have done together?”

---

*David L. Brown is a three-time Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker who lives in Brisbane. He teaches Documentary Filmmaking at City College of San Francisco. See [www.DLBfilms.com](http://www.DLBfilms.com) or email [Docmaker1@aol.com](mailto:Docmaker1@aol.com).*