

# The Evolution of Pop-Soul

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

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**M**iddle-of-the-road music, that unabashedly glamorous gush that dates from the 1940's and includes the recorded work of everyone from Frank Sinatra to Barbra Streisand is increasingly being taken over by gospel-influenced black performers. And so now it goes by the name of pop-soul. If rock and its black counterpart, funk, are committed to an aggressive pop realism, the chief concerns of pop-soul artists such as Dionne Warwick, Diana Ross, Ashford and Simpson, Peaches and Herb, Chic, the Commodores and Michael Jackson are soft-focus romance and spiritual affirmation.

Actually, pop-soul was born about 20 years ago with the fusion of rhythm and blues into the pop-music mainstream. Around 1960, black gospel singing replaced white crooning as the exemplary pop vocal style, and so it has remained ever since. The biggest training ground for today's sophisticated pop-soul was Motown Records, the Detroit-based, black-owned record company that dominated black music in the 1960's. But even before Motown, the early hits of Roy Hamilton, Jerry Butler, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke, the Drifters, the Platters, Brook Benton and Dinah Washington were commercially successful examples of church-oriented singing combined with pop sentimentality. Perhaps the most influential crossover singer of all was Ray Charles, whose gospel renditions of everything from pop standards to country and western ballads sold millions of albums.

Dionne Warwick, another seminal pop-soul singer, is currently enjoying a commercial comeback with her first top-10 single in a decade, "I'll Never Love This Way Again." Starting in 1962, Miss Warwick put out a string of hits in collaboration with the songwriting-producing team of Burt Bachrach and Hal David. The combination of Miss Warwick's vocals, Mr. Bachrach's French- and Brazilian-flavored Broadway melodies and Mr. David's streetwise lyrics set standards in the craft of pop-soul that few have topped.

The wistful harmonic signature sound of Warwick hits like "Walk On By" and "I Say a Little Prayer" strongly influenced the "Philadelphia Sound" that writer-producers Thom Bell and Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff created in the late 1960's and that dominated pop-soul in the first half of

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the 1970's. Essentially, they abbreviated Mr. Bachrach's melodic style into a propulsive choral chant with a much stronger gospel influence. Appearing after a three-year break in her recording career, Miss Warwick's new album, "Dionne," containing the hit, teams her with songwriter-producer-singer Barry Manilow, who shares a similar New York Brill Building background with Mr. Bachrach and Mr. David. The emphasis is on big, booming ballads, which Mr. Manilow has produced in his characteristically stentorian style, with thick strings, horns and crashing drums. Miss Warwick's voice has deepened and darkened, taking on an almost masculine quality. No longer a fluently buoyant stylist, she nevertheless still impresses as a dramatic singer able to hold her own in a production that would have overwhelmed a singer of lesser determination.

Diana Ross is also enjoying something of a commercial comeback with the success of "The Boss," her first top-20 album in three years. Custom-

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written and produced by Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson, the Motown-trained team that gave Miss Ross her biggest hits in the early 1970's after she left the Supremes, "The Boss" is a vaguely thematic album filled with upbeat messages of self-reliance. Ashford and Simpson (as they are known when they perform) have provided Miss Ross with a fine array of material, interspersing dramatic ballads ("All For One," "Sparkle") with disco ("The Boss," "No One Gets the Prize") to create a beautifully proportioned pop-soul showcase. Miss Ross's voice, which on recent albums had sounded thin, strained, and syrupy, emerges remarkably rejuvenated.

In the past three years, Mr. Ashford and Miss Simpson have themselves become popular recording artists, and have just completed a successful engagement at New York's City Center. After writing an impressive string of hits for Motown artists in the late 1960's and early 1970's, they moved to Warner Bros. and began recording and performing as a duo. Their six Warner's albums have shown a steady growth in their producing and performing skills. Until recently, Miss Simpson's brassy church soprano tended to overwhelm Mr. Ashford's delicately husky tenor. But Mr. Ashford's singing has gained in

strength, and on their last three albums, the pair, who were married five years ago, have begun to exhibit a deft interplay, with Mr. Ashford tenderly partnering his wife's vocal flights.

The main subject of Ashford and Simpson's albums is the nuances of romantic love, with their own relationship presumably serving as a model. Mr. Ashford's lyrics are very upbeat, but not so wildly as to preclude psychological subtlety. Mr. Ashford and Miss Simpson's best album, last year's "Is It Still Good To Ya?," described the renewal of a relationship that had withstood some rough sailing. Their newest release, "Stay Free," is even more high-spirited, though a bit more superficial, with all but two cuts aimed squarely at the disco market. Both the singing and production swirl with a dreamy, erotic euphoria that reaches a peak of manic exuberance in "Found a Cure" and "Nobody Knows."

Peaches and Herb are a more pop-oriented duo. While Mr. Ashford and Miss Simpson's passionate call-and-response duets are rooted firmly in gospel, Peaches and Herb revel in creamy

two-part harmonies that suggest cuddly togetherness rather than erotic bliss. Though not as arresting as their phenomenally successful "2 Hot!," "Twice the Fire!" still glistens with the shrewd production of another Motown graduate, Freddie Perren and his writer-collaborator, Dino Fekaris. Peaches and Herb's pleasant nightclub voices go well with the album's bouncy bubblegum ditties, which range in style from a catchy roller disco anthem ("Roller-Skatin' Mate") to a slick updating of 1950's doowop ("I Pledge My Love").

Pop-soul acts, especially disco acts, tend to be more fashion conscious than other pop artists. Chic, the quintet that achieved international success with "Le Freak," represents the ne plus ultra of high-gloss disco. The creation of writer-producer-instrumentalists Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers, this group makes spare, almost blank dance music built around Mr. Edwards' stark bass lines and Mr. Rodgers' guitar. Chic's cool, female-dominated vocals, led by Alfa Anderson, harken back to the Fifth Dimension, the most pop-sounding among best-selling 1960's and pop-soul acts. But Chic's songs — both words and music — are made up of clipped, telegraphic, hypnotically repeated phrases. Strings are

used sparsely as a sort of aural wash. The result is an elegant, minimalist dance music that becomes powerful when attached to a strong hook. "Risqué," Chic's third album, boasts one such tune, "Good Times," a celebration of late 1970's fashions with more than a touch of irony in the lyric.

The Commodores, the most popular Motown group since the Temptations, produce pop-soul that's stylistically so broad-based it takes into account everything from brassy Earth, Wind and Fire-style Afro-funk to jaunty country and western. But the staple ingredient of this Alabamian sextet's massive popularity is the ultra-tuneful work of their main ballad singer-composer, Lionel Richie. "Midnight Magic," the Commodores' ninth Motown album, contains two such tunes, in "Sailin'" and "Still." Mr. Richie, who also wrote and sang the Commodores' most famous song, "Three Times a Lady," has a bold crowd-pleasing style, more pop than gospel, that strongly recalls Neil Diamond.

The fall's best new pop-soul record, Michael Jackson's "Off the Wall," is also Motown-related in that Mr. Jackson grew up in the Motown fold as the boy wonder-lead singer of the Jackson Five. "Off the Wall" is his first solo album since the Jackson family signed with Epic several years ago, and it marks his ultimate transition from child star to adult singing idol. The album teams Mr. Jackson with producer Quincy Jones, the brilliant jazz and pop arranger-conductor-composer.

"Off the Wall's" dance music is not merely kinetic but aurally exciting, with layered inner voices and scintillating percussion. The album's first hit single, "Don't Stop Till You Get Enough," is a masterful, all-out disco extravaganza. The dance cuts set off two shimmering ballads, "She's Out of My Life" and "I Can't Help It," the latter co-written by Stevie Wonder. Although at this point in his career, Michael Jackson may lack Mr. Wonder's emotional depth, he's already the equal of both Mr. Wonder and Smokey Robinson, the other obvious Motown prototype, in technical control. His high tenor voice is extraordinarily lovely, while in his ballad phrasing he is not afraid to take big dramatic risks, most of which work. "Off the Wall" is a true state-of-the-art pop-soul record, as well as an auspicious collaboration between two protean pop talents.

**DIONNE WARWICK:** *Dionne*; Arista AB 4239.

**DIANA ROSS:** *The Boss*; Motown M8 923M1.

**ASHFORD AND SIMPSON:** *Stay Free*; Warner Bros. HS 3357.

**PEACHES AND HERB:** *Twice The Fire*; Polydor/MVP PD-1-6239.

**CHIC:** *Risqué*; Atlantic SD 16903.

**COMMODORES:** *Midnight Magic*; Motown M8 926M1.

**MICHAEL JACKSON:** *Off the Wall*; Epic FE 35745.

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Tom Caravaglia

"EMIGRES"—Brent Spiner and Jon Polito are in the Dodger Theater production of Slawomir Mrozek's play, starting Tuesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

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Bert Andrews

"ONE MO' TIME"—Thais Clark, Vernel Bagneris and Topsy Chapman are in the musical salute to the days of black vaudeville, tomorrow at the Village Gate.