



**THE MUSIC AND MAGIC OF BLACKNESS:  
THE CENTERING AND SUSTAINING BEAUTY OF SOUL**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 07-01-21, p.C1*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**T IS GOOD TO SING AND CELEBRATE OURSELVES, to dance in honor of the divine spark and specialness within each of us, and to rejoice in the midst of the sacred music we together make in the many ways we love and struggle to do and share good in the world. But our celebrations must always be rooted in and reflective of our own agency, our own image and own interests. And so, in our celebration of Black Music Month or any other of our holidays, let us not find ourselves raising and praising the name of others rather than ourselves.

Indeed, let us praise our people from whose rich and most ancient culture comes all the good we create and share with the world. Thus, we raise and praise the names of Kenny Gamble, music mogul, master songwriter and architect of the Philadelphia sound of soul and his then wife and partner, Dyana Williams, media strategist and coach, journalist, radio personality and activist, and others of the Black Music Association they founded in 1978. It is they who conceived and carried the idea and project forward, lobbied two U.S. presidents, Carter and Clinton, to recognize it nationally, and organized musicians, producers, managers, DJ's, businesspersons, and others to bring it into celebratory being.

Although we celebrate June as Black Music Month, every day and hour is an open space for making and celebrating our music. We do it not only in writing, playing and performing of sounds and songs. But also, we do it in the way we live our lives, do our work and wage our daily struggles. And at the heart and center of these struggles is the overarching struggle to be ourselves and free ourselves and hold on to and constantly expand our humanity under the most inhumane and dehumanizing conditions. And this celebration of our music and ourselves is also in the righteous and upraising rhythms of our beautiful Blackness and in the melodies and harmonies of our togetherness, our loving and sharing good.

It is important to note that when we talk here of the beauty, music, magic and miracle of Blackness, we are using a synonym for our Africanness. For Black is a colloquial term for the

color, culture and consciousness that speaks to our being African. And being African is actively appreciating and honoring our unique and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world. As I've said before, it is the self-defining and particular cultural way we live our lives and open ourselves up to love; dance and do music; practice our faith traditions; cherish and challenge our children; fiercely fight for freedom; constantly seek justice; delight in doing good and walk gently in peace, but with dignified defiance in the practice of resistance.

For Blackness is not only an identity, but also a duty defined by that identity. Indeed, we are a soul people in radically evil oppression and righteous and relentless struggle to end it. Our identity, then, is also one born in struggle, a dignity-affirming, live-enhancing, world-preserving liberation struggle. Therefore, in the 1960s, we raised up the reaffirmation of the beauty of our humanity and Africanness in the declarations "Black is Beautiful" and "I'm Black and I'm Proud." And we defiantly put forth the prophecy and pursued the promise and practice of freedom with the battlecry "Liberation Is Coming From A Black Thing."

At the heart and center of the music, magic and miracle of our Blackness is this rich and generative notion and reality of soul. And we use the term in at least five basic ways: as a spiritual concept; a defining Black character trait and spirit; a category of cultural distinctiveness; an expression of the beauty and depthfulness of our being and becoming; and a measure and standard of African excellence. In the Sixties, I defined soul as *an inner sense of ourselves defined by creativity, sensitivity and impulse*. This speaks to our capacity to conceive and create magic and miracle, beauty and meaning in the midst of ugliness and meaninglessness, and to develop and defend free space in the midst of unfreedom. It speaks also to our depth of feeling, a sensitivity to others, to beauty and good, but also to human suffering and a will to end it. And the notion of soul speaks also to a creative and sensitive impulse also called improvisation. But I want to keep the word impulse

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which suggests a spontaneous urge and natural inclination to act in beautiful, creative and sensitive ways in art, love and life in general.

In other words, soul is an internal creative capacity, a centering and sustaining spirit and inner strength that undergirds our resilience and resourcefulness, our adaptive vitality and human durability in the face of the most radical evil, injustice and oppression. It is in this context that we recognize the Divine presence in and with us as our ancestors taught. And in the depth of our appreciation of the unbreakable spirit within us, we give it a spiritual interpretation. Thus, when we look back over all we encountered and overcame and rejoiced in it, we are amazed at the miracles and magic we've made and yet giving due honor to the Divine in us and with us, as the ancestors used to say. This is the message and meaning of Sis. Clara Ward's instructive sacred praise song, called gospel, "How I Got Over." She says and sings, and we wonder with her: "My soul looks back and wonders how I got over." And she thinks and thanks the Divine.

But soul is also and above all in its most definitive, distinctive and inclusive sense a cultural concept. It speaks not only to the depth of our spirituality, but is a defining Black character trait and spirit which undergirds, infuses and informs our being and constant becoming. We are again a soul people, soul men and women, soul sisters and brothers. We call our food - soul food, our music - soul music, our Sunday forums on life and struggle - Soul Sessions, and we designate as soulful our preaching, teaching and talking good. And Curtis Mayfield assures us that no matter what happens "We got soul and everybody knows, it's all right."

Thus, we see soul not only as defining us, our music and way of life, but as a distinctiveness of peoplehood and personhood. It is one of the characteristics that makes us distinct without needing to claim superiority. Indeed, it speaks to and reaffirms our unique and equally valid and

valuable way of being African and human in the world. It is this special distinction of peoplehood and culture that we treasure greatly and defend against the imitations of our lives and the appropriations of our culture by others in exploitative and insensitive ways.

The notion and expression of soul in our music or our lives in general also speaks of the depthfulness and beauty of our Blackness as both being and becoming, ever striving to come into the constantly expanding fullness of ourselves. I speak here of a centering and sustaining soulfulness as expressive beauty, by expressive beauty I mean to indicate a meaningful and moving beauty, revealing and reaffirming, eloquent, artistic and evocative, sensitive and suggestive of the good. And this soulful expressiveness can be shared with or without words or sounds or even symbols. It can reveal itself in the music we make in loving close or simply be naturally embodied in the goodness and sacredness of ourselves, as a site of witness and wonder.

**W**HEN I TALK OF THE CENTERING AND SUSTAINING beauty of soul, I conceive and engage beauty in the African sense as expressed in the ancient Egyptian word, *neferu*, the Zulu word, *ubuhle*, and the Swahili word, *uzuri*, all of which mean both beauty and goodness. To talk of the beauty of soul, then, is to speak not only of what is aesthetically pleasing to our senses, but also what is ethically pleasing to our sense of the good. And thus, the beauty and Blackness of our soul and ultimately ourselves must always be demonstrated and reaffirmed in the goodness we do, share in righteous and relentless struggle for and achieve in the world. In this sense, soul is also ultimately a standard and measure of our excellence in every sense of the word. ▲

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