

MUSIC

"I CHANGED MY CLOTHES, BUT I DIDN'T CHANGE MY SOUL"

By Bruce Dancis

The careers of many black singers began with gospel music. Wilson Pickett was raised in rural Alabama before moving to Detroit as a teenager in the 1950s, and he sang with a local gospel group called the Violinaires. Al Green followed a similar pattern, born in rural Arkansas and moving to Grand Rapids, Mich., as a young boy. Green sang in the family gospel group, the Green Brothers. The Pointer Sisters grew up singing in the West Oakland (Calif.) Church of God, a church in which both their parents were ministers.

Changing times and trends led them and many others into new musical sounds. Pickett emerged as one of the most popular and dynamic soul singers of the '60s, recording such great songs as "In the Midnight Hour" and "Funky Broadway." Green didn't make it until the early '70s, but when he did, he became the leading black vocalist of the decade, with worldwide sales of over 30 million albums and singles, plus equal stature with the critics. The Pointers' success was on a smaller scale, but they have been popular.

The spectacular rise of disco has brought about new changes in black music. *Billboard* reports that many black radio stations are replacing more traditional rhythm and blues with disco recordings, and straight soul acts are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain bookings for live engagements. At a time like this, the temptation for a soul performer to make his or her music more palatable to current tastes is great.

Yet singers like Green, the Pointers and Pickett have resisted the trend and recently released albums that rank with the best they've ever made. They prove that there are still stimulating black alternatives to a disco sound that, for the most part, avoids challenging its audience and blurs anonymously. But whether they can succeed commercially is another question.

Marvelously funky.

As with his previous *The Belle Album*, Green's new *Truth N' Time* (Hi Records) was produced in his own studio in Memphis. As with its predecessor, *Truth N' Time* is concerned largely with testaments to Green's Christian



Al Green, the Pointer Sisters, and Wilson Pickett prove there are exciting black alternatives to blurry disco sound. But can they make it commercially?

faith—"I found a new way of living," he sings on "Happy Days." But judging from the marvelously funky music he makes, dancing is obviously not beyond the pale of Green's ministry, and the lyrical theme is barely obtrusive enough to offend non-believers.

Backed by a superb band, with Green supplying the guitar tracks, the sound throughout is dynamic, yet restrained. The title cut in particular shows Green to be as pulsatingly hypnotic as always. Beginning with a gently rolling beat and a soft vocal, it builds in intensity almost imperceptibly before Green's meteoric voice and the sharp, staccato horns kick it in. By the end of the song, I was ready to buy a dozen bibles.

Green also showed that he is still a masterful interpreter of other people's material. Dedicating the '60s hit "To Sir With

Love" to the memory of his father and the father of co-worker Fred Jordan, Green took this pretty but innocuous song and made the most convincing version of it yet.

Truth N' Time was released too recently to tell how it will be received, but *Belle* had disappointing sales, at least by Green's previous standards. Although his record company was unable to provide precise figures, a spokesperson told me that the album "did well, but not as well as it should have with the critical acclaim it received."

Half-hearted disco.

The dropping-off in Green's popularity is nothing compared to the ills that have befallen the veteran soul shouter, Wilson Pickett. Pickett's last four albums were commercial flops and, according

to *Rolling Stone*, his latest release—*A Funky Situation* (Big Tree Records)—has been selling poorly.

Pickett is understandably alarmed at this turn of events, and a quick glance at *A Funky Situation* makes it seem as if he was trying to remedy the situation by going disco himself. The first song on the album is a disco number called "Dance With Me," in which Pickett sings: "Goin' down to the disco/where all the lovely people go/groovin' to the latest sound/everybody's gettin' down."

But proceeding further into the album, it became apparent that Pickett has not really traded in his soul shoes for disco duds. The very next song, "She's So Tight," is a classic soul screamer, and the following cut, "The Night We Called It a Day," a beautiful ballad. By the time the first side finished with the ribald funk of "Hold on to Your Hiney"—Pickett's sexuality has always been outfront; was there every any doubt as to what he wanted to do at the midnight hour?—it was clear that the wicked Pickett was back.

Pickett's understanding of his musical dilemma is expressed in the brutally honest, autobiographical "Time to Let the Sun Shine on Me." Announcing at the beginning that "I'm ready to express myself," Pickett admits that he's been "standing fooling around out there in the rain." Later he sings, "I did all right out there in the soul field." Then disco came along and he was told to get with it. Agreeing to give it a try, "I changed my clothes, [but I] didn't change my soul."

A Funky Situation proves him to be absolutely correct. Returning to the Muscle Shoals (Ala.) studios of producer/engineer Rick Hall, with whom Pickett recorded such past hits as his great version of "Hey Jude," Pickett has made his strongest and most sustained album in years.

New energy.

The Pointer Sisters' problem has been almost the opposite of Pickett's. They've been plenty chic, with their '40s clothes and campy songs, but they haven't been particularly soulful. Their nostalgic look and sound may have gotten them their first public attention, but it has been a dead-end musically. With the release of their new album *Energy* (Planet Records), Ruth, Anita, and June

Pointer have taken an impressive stride forward.

Backed by a strong band featuring outstanding session guitarist Waddy Wachtel, the Pointers do rock and soul versions of songs by such fine writers as Allen Toussaint and Walter Becker/Donald Fagen (Steely Dan). Producer Richard Perry had the sense to keep the Sisters' voices squarely up front, avoiding the tendency of many producers with auteurist hankering to put their own mark all over the tracks.

Whether in dynamic and unidentified solos or rich three-part harmonies, the Pointers have the power to get the best out of almost any song they sing. Particularly impressive was their treatment of Becker and Fagen's story of the self-loathing lover, "Dirty Work," and Russ Ballard's "Come and Get Your Love," in which they turn what could have been a plaintive plea into an order to show some respect.

The only problems occur when the Sisters' lush vocals overpower insubstantial material. Their dense harmonies on Bruce Springsteen's "Fire"—which unfortunately has been released as a single—seem out of place on a song which needs the restraint shown by Robert Gordon on his cover version.

With these three albums, the Pointers, Green, and Pickett have, in a sense, made their responses to the disco challenge. It's not that all disco is dreck, or that it all sounds the same; the latter charge is too close to the usual snobbish disdain for all rock music to be of comfort. Nor is it enough to dismiss disco as being a producer's medium, for a lot of great music from Phil Spector to Motown has been dominated by the people in the control booths.

The problem is that the popularity of disco seems to be based on its uniformity. After spending so much time mastering elaborate dance steps, who wants to get thrown off by some idiosyncratic arrangement? So technology becomes the dominant factor in replicating a tried and true sound, rather than a tool capable of enhancing artistic creativity.

In such an atmosphere, veteran soul performers like Al Green and Wilson Pickett have decided to make their stand on the kind of music they have always done best, and the Pointer Sisters have chosen a more soulful route as well.

Meminger

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A television show called *WHITE SHADOW* centers around a white former pro player who is coaching basketball at a high school in a black ghetto.

I think it's good. It gives an accurate picture of what's happening in the black communities and disadvantaged schools, and gives some sense of the almost insurmountable obstacles that a black child has to overcome to succeed in the world of athletics.

Wouldn't the show be more constructive if it made a teacher or the principal the hero?

But it's real! Because in the real world sports have that kind of power. If you have kids and they are sports-oriented, I bet that if I say something to them or Earl [Monroe] says something to them, they'd listen more than if you told them. What the *White Shadow* is saying is that maybe it is the coach that has to teach these kids. That you have to use the vehicle that's tuned into the people.

A lot of people are against sports, against recreation; they say there's too much emphasis on it. There's not too much em-

phasis on sports; there's an imbalance. Most of the sports that people see on television, whether collegiate or professional, are money-making operations, and the people who profit from them don't care about the quality of the game.

But participating in sports, whether for recreational purposes or for an appreciation of it as an art form, can be a tremendously positive experience. It can teach young people how to cooperate to achieve common objectives, how to function within a group when you're not the central figure, and how to overcome myths and stereotypes about people of different backgrounds.

CULTURE SHOCK

I SMOKE FOR THE TASTE

In a recent market research test (reported by Zodiac News) volunteers smoked the same cigarette under two names, "Frontiersman," and "April." Women reported "Frontiersman" was hotter, stronger, harsher and less enjoyable than "April," while men liked "Frontiersman" better.



IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS

This year Gillette is spending \$18 million, says *Dollars and Sense*, to promote a roll-on anti-perspirant, "Dry Idea." Gillette admits the roll-on is no more effective than similar products on the market, but it feels dry and makes consumers believe they will be drier.

THREE YEARS AGO TWO MALE copy editors at the *New York Times*, aged 29 and 35, developed cataracts, a condition usually associated with older women. It could have been only a coincidence, but there was one disturbing element: they had both recently started using the new electronic text-editing equipment that has become standard in the nation's news rooms and will soon replace typewriters in most large offices.

Known as word-processors, the machines are basically electric typewriters attached to television-like screens called video-display terminals (VDTs) on which an operator can proofread copy and make editorial changes. According to Milton Zaret, associate professor of clinical ophthalmology at New York University medical center, and one of the country's leading ophthalmologic surgeons, the copy editors' cataracts were very similar to those common among radar technicians exposed to radiation emitted by their radar screens.

Two studies of the *Times*' machines found they did not produce dangerous levels of radiation, but Zaret and other critics called the tests incomplete. In late January, the largest dispute so far concerning word processors boiled over once again as 75 UN General Assembly pool typists walked off the job for the third time in two months. For nearly a year they have refused to use the machines on the grounds of physical stress and potentially dangerous radiation. Although training on the VDTs is on a voluntary basis, those who have refused also say that they fear eventual punitive layoffs.

Over 500 other staff members dissatisfied over their own working conditions joined the typists. As a result, the General Assembly, scheduled to end three days later, had to continue into the next week. It was big news at the UN, but the *Times* found this word-processing story only fit for a couple of paragraphs (unlike its own case, which it never saw fit to print). Likewise, the *New York Post*, where VDTs already nearly outnumber typewriters, found the situation not newsworthy.

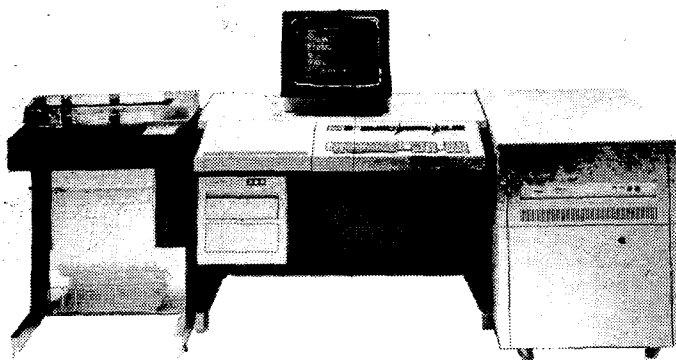
The UN administration insisted that the equipment is not dangerous. Citing a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) investigation conducted last year that found the UN machines non-hazardous, one spokesman called those typists who refuse to use them "just a bunch of hysterical women afraid of new technology."

"Their leaders," claimed administrator Marvin Schlaff, "have latched onto the health hazard issue because it's sexy and appealing, especially if you don't know about physics." He said that VDT operators' eyes showed no abnormalities when examined and that permanent employees will be retained although the pool itself will be phased out.

"The eye exam is a joke," responded Lowell Flanders, chairman of the UN Staff Committee (staff union). "It's just like the army—if you can breathe, you're okay." He added that the VDT operators now have unusually relaxed work schedules, but that physical stress symptoms may become more apparent once they begin full production (which often includes overtime), since the maximum daily recommended machine use for any individual is only four hours. Flanders also charged that typists who rejected the VDTs have been threatened with dismissal and had their salaries withheld during the current job action, a step he called "a clear violation of all international covenants signed by this body, including the UN Declaration of Human Rights."

Two groups.

As protesting pool typists and translators, unable to obtain meeting rooms during their work stoppage, milled about in the Secretariat lobby between strategy sessions, about 25 typists or one-quarter of the original pool was upstairs working at the VDTs. Hostility between those who changed over to word processors and those who did not is so high that they do not speak and the two groups have been assigned to separate floors. The typists who now use the VDTs said they were not coerced; they requested anonymity because they fear repercussions from the non-VDT group.



THROUGH A GLASS, DIMLY

WHY 75 SECRETARIES AT THE UN
WALKED OFF THEIR ULTRA-MODERN JOBS

by Gwenda Blair

"Those who aren't using the VDTs have been cowed by their leaders," said one VDT operator. "They're unsophisticated, simple people who don't know what's going on and are easily swayed." All the VDT operators interviewed said they had no worries about their health and they find the word-processing machines far better suited to their work than their old typewriters. "I've enjoyed the last four months more than the rest of the seven years I've spent here," said another typist. "These machines are quiet, they cut the work in half, and I don't have the headaches and tired eyes I had before."

Veteran labor organizers were not surprised at this response. "It's always hard to get people to accept that anything the boss tells you could be wrong," said one. "People think of offices as safe places, but they're not. It took years to alert people to industrial diseases like brown lung, and it could take years more to spread the word on office dangers."

No standards.

Perhaps the biggest problem in analyzing the danger of the word processors is that there is no generally accepted standard for acceptable exposure to radiation and little is known about cumulative effects. Dr. Karl Z. Morgan, a noted health

physicist at Georgia Tech, says that there is no safe level of exposure and there is no dose of radiation so low that the risk of a malignancy is zero.

"Those limits that do exist are arbitrary and contrived," said Dr. Zaret. "They're just guesses, not based on pathology." For example, U.S. standards for occupational exposure to low-level microwaves, which could be generated when VDTs are used in conjunction with other electronic equipment, like keyboards or computer data banks, are now coming under fire as too lax. They were established more than 20 years ago by Herman Schwan, an engineering professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who called the standards "crudely set" and badly in need of refinement." Critics note that the Soviet Union has a limit 10,000 times lower, based on research there and in Eastern Europe that found damage at low levels included memory loss, infertility, leukemia, central nervous system disorders and genetic damage.

In the same week the UN staff was protesting, the U.S. government released a major study confirming that GLs exposed to low-level radiation developed leukemia at twice the usual rate, and a federal researcher said that up to five million American workers have been exposed to similar radiation levels.

A third problem with VDTs is the light

deprivation caused by the fluorescent cathode-ray tubes that power them. According to Dr. John Ott, director of the Center for Light Research in Ft. Lauderdale and a frequent congressional witness on related matters, long-term exposure to such artificial illumination can cause strain to muscles (including the heart), lowered resistance to disease, hyperactivity, aggressive behavior, and cancer.

As for the *Times* and UN studies of VDTs, Dr. Zaret and others found them less than reassuring for the following reasons:

- At neither workplace were machines tested with malfunctions, even though at the *Times* malfunction was extremely common—over 400 repairs were reported in one three-month period alone.

- The lowest level of background radiation in the *Times* building was more than 40 percent higher than the highest level found naturally, but NIOSH could not locate the source. "It's like a fireman coming to your house, smelling smoke, not finding the flames, and just going home," comments Zaret. Background radiation was not tested at the UN at all.

- At the *Times*, a test engineer wore a Cicoil Personal Hazard meter during one study. Its failure to sound an alarm was cited as proof there was no dangerous level of electromagnetic radiation, but a year later its manufacturer declared it inadequate and took it off the market.

- NIOSH did not measure x-rays at the *Times* but relied instead on measurements made elsewhere two years ago. At the UN, no x-rays were detected. Critics suspect inadequate measuring devices and records since some amount of x-ray emission has been found in every other VDT study.

- The cause of the cataracts at the *Times* remained officially unknown, but the arbitrator still declined to declare the employees ineligible for compensation. In addition, one of three medical experts consulted urged that VDT operators note their work on their personal medical histories—an unnecessary step if VDTs are not dangerous.

There may soon be other such fights as in the UN ahead in the nation's other offices. Five to ten million VDTs are already being used for faster type-setting, airline reservations, stock inventory, mailing lists, scientific research and dozens of other functions.

Office productivity went up only 4 percent in the last decade, as compared to a 90 percent rise in industrial productivity, and office equipment manufacturers are racing to close the gap. By 1982 the burgeoning electronics office systems industry is expected to achieve sales of \$15.1 billion. Word-processing alone is now a \$800 million industry and is expected to reach \$2 billion by that year. If you don't use a word-processing machine already, it surely won't be long until you do. ■

