

Black Liberation and the Spirit of '57  
Sam Cooke, "You Send Me," and the American Highway  
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*As I walked down the lonesome highway  
You know, my heart was lifted up with pride  
"Child," my mother said, "don't you worry  
"You know the Lord will surely fix a way."  
She left me standing out on the highway  
Left me wondering  
Which way to go.*

– "Standing on the Highway," The Pilgrim Travelers, 1948

The stunning success of Sam Cooke's hypnotic "You Send Me" in 1957 is a pivotal moment in the history not just of African American popular entertainment, not just of American popular entertainment in general, but of America as a nation. That a young, handsome black man could top the *Billboard* charts with a song that appealed to *both* black and white teenagers, who could draw black and white alike to his concerts, was a visible turning point in a still relatively young nation's maturation. It showed that the United States, wracked by racism from its founding, could indeed grow up.

Several disparate cultural and economic forces came together at this spear-point in time, all the culmination of decades, if not centuries of growth. Some, such as the influence of World War II on the racial perceptions of subsequent generations of Americans, have been well-documented. Others, such as a relatively unnoticed bit of federal highway legislation – unnoticed at least at the time, anyway – have not. It is that piece of legislation, I believe, that adds another significant piece of the puzzle to the questions, "Why *this* artist, at *this* time, with *this* song?"

The years surrounding 1957 were extraordinary for a number of reasons, most notably a gradual change in race relations. And, as with many cultural shifts during the history of the United States, the world of entertainment was at the forefront of that change. The impact of the great African-American migrations from the Deep South to the industrial North and California because of the needs of the war-fueled industries is the subject of numerous studies. The sudden change in earning power those industries generated for previously marginalized (if not wholly excluded) groups like blacks and women, even in the relatively poor-paying unskilled positions, created new markets – and new demands. Likewise, the "spatial mismatch" for the black soldiers who fought for democracy abroad only to

return to rabid discrimination at home generated still more fodder for change, as did the opportunities provided to poor black and white veterans with the G.I. Bill. Even the easing of war-time purchasing restrictions helped the country quickly rebound from the inevitable post-war depression and enter a period of relative economic prosperity in the 1950s. (1) The post-World War II period also signaled the end for such venerable traditions as the big swing bands. The new economics (gasoline prices, for instance, which had been kept at their pre-war levels, were allowed to rise) meant the downsizing or dissolution of most popular bands, save for a few groups, such as the Duke Ellington Orchestra and the Count Basie Band, which had long been accustomed to traveling on a shoe-string. (2) Besides, for the postwar generation, big band swing was *old people's* music.

Greater changes still were occurring in the attitudes of Americans, black and white, young and old. Where racism and segregation had remained virtually unchallenged for nearly 100 years, particularly in the South, the teenagers of the 1950s were in the midst of a transformation. Only the staunchest Klansman failed to root for black athletes like Jessie Owens, Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, and Alethea Gibson. The entertainment world, particularly popular music, was another trend-setter. Perhaps Herbie Cox of the Clefones was overstating it only a bit when he said in the late '50s that "disk jockeys and record distributors were doing more for integration than *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education.*" (3)

Of the various forces converging at the intersection of Sam Cooke, we will initially examine just two, music and television:

In music, black artists like the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots in particular, along with the Charioteers, the Chocloteers, the Red Caps and the Delta Rhythm Boys, eventually sold enough 78s to leave *Billboard's* "race music" ghetto and began hitting the charts in earnest during the post-war era. But, as Groia notes, they were, for the most part, singing "white popular songs in a very smooth, 'inoffensive' white style." The first black artists who actually began to add a touch of rhythm, the blues and even gospel to their songs and yet still "crossover" into the white pop charts were the so-called "bird groups," including the Ravens, Wrens, and Orioles. (4) Also making inroads among white consumers as early as the 1940s was the Golden Gate Quartet, whose biblically based story songs, "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho" and "Shadrack," were surprisingly straight-forward jubilee/gospel numbers.

To read through the *Billboard* charts of #1 pop songs from this era is to trace the evolution of white acceptance of the "black" in black music. Beginning with the Mills Brothers' "Paper Doll" (#1 on November 6, 1943),

African American artists slowly began appearing with more regularity – from Nat King Cole and the Ink Spots, through the Platters. The stylish, “safe,” and very, very smooth Platters were masters of heart-breaking romantic ballads, such as “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” and “The Great Pretender,” which hit #1 on the airplay charts in February 1956. However, in the eyes of teenagers, despite the presence of the beautiful female singer Zola Taylor, this was definitely music aimed at adults. (5)

But in 1956-7, things begin to change. For one, “Fats” Domino and Little Richard hit the lower regions of the pop charts after dominating their R&B counterparts. Neither, Brian Ward slyly adds, could be considered in *any way* sexually menacing – miscegenation being the great, unspoken fear of racists everywhere. Domino was more like a jolly boogie-woogie Santa Claus, while Little Richard’s outrageous style seemed to be neither male nor female. (6) But both, Jonathan Kamin writes, were important components in what he calls “perceptual learning” and “musical acculturation” by white audiences, *particularly* white teenagers. It’s a gradual process, acclimating the audience with each new breakthrough. While many white teenagers did embrace Little Richard, Bo Diddley, and Chuck Berry, others had to first “work through” the “covers” of their R&B hits by white artists like Pat Boone. In time, kids who loved the music would either seek out or eventually be exposed to the real thing. Kamen bolsters his observation by chronologically following the progress of certain R&B songs from the R&B charts (*Billboard* only added the R&B airplay charts in 1955), through covers of those songs by pop artists on pop charts, which is followed shortly thereafter (in some cases) by the R&B artists themselves (like Cooke) finally landing their own songs on the pop charts. (7)

Not that the original artists necessarily *liked* the idea of white acts covering their songs. Robert Palmer writes that “Little Richard, appalled when Pat Boone’s covers of his records outsell the originals, sings ‘Long Tall Sally’ extra fast to stymie Mr. White Buck Shoes.” But if it was a learning curve for white teenagers, they embraced the process in short order. And Sam Cooke was perhaps the first to truly benefit from this process. As famed producer Jerry Wexler told Palmer, “One of the psychological and sociological reasons for the development of rock and roll was the exposure of white people to black music.” (8)

To this line of reasoning, it’s a gradual process to get white audiences to accept a Sam Cooke. Likewise, to prepare them for the rougher-edged R&B to come, you start them with the softer-edged gospel of Sam Cooke.

Fortunately, “You Send Me” was an instantly memorable song. It had the gentle two-beats per chord lobe of such romantic classics as “All I Have

to Do is Dream” and “Earth Angel,” it was immediately hummable, it was good slow dancing music, and kids couldn’t get enough of it.

Still, was the mass audience of American teen-agers primed and waiting for a handsome, relatively unthreatening black singer who sang with only the barest intonations of his black gospel roots – the logical musical, sociological progression of Kamin’s acculturation? Or did Sam Cooke *create* that audience in 1957?

Curiously, the same question, in many ways, has been asked of Elvis Presley. Did the market make him – or did he make the market? There is a clear confluence of forces at work in the rise of both men. When Sam Cooke’s “You Send Me” rocketed to #1 on November 25, 1957, it was during the third year of the Reign of Elvis, who had had one hit after another (broken only occasionally by “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” by Jerry Lee Lewis and songs by Paul Anka and the Everly Brothers). The success of Presley was unprecedented (and remains unchallenged to this day, save only for the height of Beatlemania), but among the primary reasons for that success was that Elvis was a white man who brought black music (or at least a black music sensibility) to the white teenage audience. (9) Presley’s songs also quickly appeared in *Billboard’s* new Rhythm & Blues airplay charts. To Presley’s credit, he always gratefully acknowledged the black artists who influenced him from the beginning. (10) He was also known to be a fan of Sam Cooke. (11)

What separated Cooke from his immediate African-American counterparts who at the time were making the most noise in the white marketplace – notably Cole and Harry Belafonte – was that Cooke’s biggest support group from the beginning was among teenagers, regardless of race. (12) And while Cooke would spend much of the rest of his career recording songs and releasing theme albums that were designed to capture an older (and primarily white) market, he was arguably the first great black artist to achieve crossover success with white teenagers and, shortly thereafter, white audiences in general. (13) In a nation where teenage blacks were once routinely beaten – or worse – for simply being accused of looking at white teenage girls, this leap was unparalleled.

In time, the dances (and concerts) for artists like Cooke would go from being completely segregated, to having a rope across the dance floor separating the races, to complete integration. According to Ralph Bass, founder of the wonderful Federal/King label in Cincinnati:

“...they’d put a rope across the middle of the floor. The blacks on one side, whites on the other, digging how the blacks were dancing and

copying them. Then, hell, the rope would come down, and they'd all be dancing together. And you know it was a revolution. Music did it. We did it as much with our music as the civil rights acts and all of the marches, for breaking the race thing down." (14)

The second popular entertainment medium to influence the triumph of Sam Cooke and "You Send Me" in 1957 was television. Ferocious opposition from white station owners in the South kept blacks off virtually all national programs in the early days of TV. Save for the racist comedy "Amos 'n' Andy," and appearances by various maids, servants (such as Jack Benny's "Rochester"), and singing porters, African-Americans were rarely seen on television. Nat King Cole was an early exception, and made appearances on the popular Dinah Shore and Milton Berle shows. At last, NBC gambled with a 15-minute (later expanded) variety show starring Cole, which began November 5, 1956. Despite an impressive array of guest stars, *The Nat "King" Cole Show* never had a national advertising sponsor and bounced around the network at different days and times before NBC reluctantly pulled the plug in December 1957. (15)

Cooke's success with "You Send Me" forced Ed Sullivan to have him on his hugely popular variety show on November 3, 1957, despite Sullivan's personal distaste for rock'n'roll acts following an unruly appearance by Bo Diddley. Sullivan, to be fair, had been one of the pioneers in booking black artists on national television, and had been lauded by *Ebony Magazine* as early as 1951 for his "liberal" attitude in booking black entertainers. (16) But he placed Cooke last on the program that night. And, as with many live variety shows, when the programming ran long, the final act was cut. Cooke and the orchestra had barely launched into "You Send Me" when the CBS eye filled the screen, signaling the end of the telecast. Audience response was immediate and vehement. Cooke was rebooked a month later. Sullivan gave the young singer a royal welcome this time and sheepishly admitted, "I did wrong one night here on our stage." Then Sullivan apologized directly to Cooke, "I never received so much mail in my life!" (17) Cooke would then appear on national TV with increasing frequency until his untimely death, but nothing matched his appearances with Sullivan. Wolff posits that while the first show was a "disaster," it actually helped "make" Cooke's career:

"Across the country, African-Americans who never cared about Elvis can still tell you where they were when Sam Cooke got cut off by Ed Sullivan. To the millions of teenagers who were buying 'You Send Me' at an astonishing clip, it was torture to get only that first,

promising line. But to many Negroes who knew nothing about Cooke or his music, it looked like plain old prejudice.” (18)

But ultimately the confluence of the various economic and social factors, along with the advances in American racial acculturation in music and television *still* do not fully answer the question, “Why this artist, at this time, with this song?” To complete the puzzle, we must finally journey first to the dawn of African-American music in this country. From the beginning, black song, both sacred and profane, has been fascinated, even obsessed, with the concept of the open road.

The African-American spirituals themselves were nebulous creatures, ever-shifting, ever-changing from one covert brush arbor singing to the next. The early collections, such as *Songs of the United States* (1867) contain only a snapshot of what one spiritual sounded like on one night on one plantation (or refugee camp). But it is clear from reading the transcribed lyrics that one of the most popular lyric concepts was that of the road – ostensibly the road to heaven but, as Louis Gates Jr. reminds us with his concept of the “signifyin(g)” of captive peoples like the African slaves in the presence of their oppressors, this “road” was more likely the road to freedom. Spirituals like “Rise Up Shepherds an’ Foller,” “Go Down, Moses,” “Wade in the Water,” “Foller the Drinkin’ Gourd,” “Steal Away,” “Swing Lo, Sweet Chariot,” “Seeking for a City,” “Run to Jesus,” “Git on Board Little Children” (also called “The Gospel Train”), “I Got Shoes,” “Marching Along,” “We’ll Soon be Free,” “Roll Jordan, Roll,” and many others may all be legitimately seen in this light. (19)

In time, the spiritual would evolve into jubilee and, eventually, the jubilee into black gospel music. Like the spirituals, the concept of the road or highway to heaven and/or freedom resonated through the words of black gospel music. And once again, there are too many examples to mention but a fraction, including “Standing on the Highway,” “Look Down That Lonesome Road,” and “A Hard Road to Travel,” (the Pilgrim Travelers), “I Looked Down the Road and Wondered,” “Travelin’ Shoes” and “Packing Up, Getting Ready to Go” (the Golden Gate Quartet) and “Last Mile of the Road” (Clara Ward).

Besides the spiritual, the other great offspring of the music of Africa when it was forcibly transported to the United States is the work song (or field holler). The work song eventually morphed into what would be called the blues, although the term “the blues” itself would not be applied until many decades later. While the blues singers were not in slavery, conditions in the post-reconstruction South were little better. And like their religious

counterparts (many bluesmen and women also recorded gospel under various pseudonyms), the desire to leave Jim Crow behind was a dominant theme in their music. Again, the lyrics of some of the most famous blues songs are filled with allusions to highways and roads to freedom, including “Big Road Blues” (K.C. Douglas), “Crossroads Blues” and “Hellhound on my Trail” (Robert Johnson), “Key to the Highway” (Big Bill Broonzy), “Lonesome Road Blues” and “Thirteen Highway” (Muddy Waters), “Going Down Highway 51” (John Lee Hooker), and many more. In fact, Highway 61, the primary north/south artery in Mississippi became informally known as the “Blues Highway” (and is the subject of one of Bob Dylan’s best-known songs).

The myth (or dream) of an open road to freedom, then, burned brightly in the lives of most African-Americans. For those whose families had already moved North, such as Sam Cooke’s family (under the stern oversight of the Rev. Charles Cook), the road was still a potent iconic image. Between 1940 and 1960, 4.5 million blacks left the South, constituting a second Great Migration to Northern cities and, as before, strict zoning restrictions kept the immigrants in small enclaves, such as Chicago’s Bronzeville on the South Side. By 1950, the average “isolation index” in northern ghettos was 90 percent, meaning that on average, African-Americans lived in neighborhoods that were 90 percent black. The end result, in a time of decaying transportation systems, high rents, few jobs, and dangerous over-crowding, was considerable (and understandable) unrest. Still, however improbably, neighborhood structures and support systems – primarily the church – remained. (20)

One common lyric thread between both the secular and the sacred songs is that the highway, whether real or allegorical (and it’s sometimes hard to separate the two), is *always* a dangerous place. For people of all races, American roads through the 1960s were a disgrace – where they even existed. Bad, inconsistent (and sometimes contradictory signage), minimal maintenance, hair-pin turns, inadequate lighting, and unmarked intersections plagued the nation. (21) A vacation across the United States took on the appearances of an expedition for all people, black and white. In 1919, the journey of a military caravan accompanied by then-Capt. Dwight Eisenhower across the U.S. took an excruciating, sometimes brutal 62 days. The trek was so difficult (his convoy had to build both roads and bridges on several occasions) that Eisenhower never forgot it. (22) In fact, in 1921, the American Automobile Association recommended that its members avoid the state of Virginia completely because of its bad roads. Road maintenance came almost completely to a halt during World War II. An advertisement

from the American Mutual insurance in the June 25, 1956 *Time Magazine* called for better roads and “adequate driver training,” stating that 350,000 Americans had been killed on the highways in the decade since World War II ended, with another 12 million injured. (23)

But for blacks, the American road was a *nightmare*.

Thirty years after the fact, *Washington Post* columnist Courtland Milloy Jr. wrote movingly of his memories of a harrowing “bladder-busting” family trip from Shreveport to St. Louis in 1958, when the South’s bad roads and worse attitudes towards blacks meant it was “simply too dangerous for parents to stop and let their little black children pee.” Milloy writes of passing parks filled with laughing, playing white children, of how his mother would cook for days so that they would have food on the road since no restaurant would serve them, and driving all night or sleeping in their car because no hotel would house them. (24)

African-Americans, consequently, rarely traveled, unless it was absolutely necessary. But black gospel and R&B artists simply had no other choice. It was out of necessity that the Pilgrim Travelers, one of the few groups that could challenge the Sam Cooke-led Soul Stirrers for supremacy on the Gospel Highway, became legendary “road warriors.” The group routinely booked itself for “programs” six days a week, 10 months out of the year, according to longtime member S.R. Crain. “It’s a wonder we lasted so long as we did,” he notes. “Run ourselves to death!” Daniel Wolff’s book on Sam Cooke, *You Send Me*, features the Pilgrim Travelers’ April 1950 itinerary – 22 dates in April, beginning in Philadelphia, traveling through the Deep South, ending in New Orleans, driving mostly at night, with few days off for travel. (25) In 1952, the Soul Stirrers, Travelers, and Blind Boys of Alabama were scheduled for 101 dates over a 90 day period. (26) With six men, their equipment, programs, and suits packed into a Buick or Cadillac, the Soul Stirrers routinely averaged more than 100,000 miles per year. (27)

In fact, the biographies of popular and religious singers, civil rights workers, black salesmen, virtually every African-American who ever traveled what Doug Seroff called “America’s dangerous highways” are filled with hair-raising stories of incidents that followed “driving while black.” All had stories of mistreatment on the road through the years, of mechanics who purposefully damaged their cars or intentionally made them miss performances, of racial slurs and veiled threats at every excruciating stop, of stores and restaurants refusing them food, of motels refusing them service. Saxman Andy Kirk told of numerous encounters with small-town sheriffs shaking them down for money for imaginary offenses. (28) Quincy Jones’ treatment on the road in the South was so horrendous that he vowed never to

return to some of those cities again, including some churches in Texas where effigies of black men hung from church steeples. (29) Even Ella Fitzgerald had trouble keeping black musicians because of the threats and the treatment they received on Southern roads. (30) Sometimes it was worse. Following a date in Little Rock, the tires of automobiles belonging to Jackie Wilson, Arthur Prysock and Jesse Belvin were slashed. Belvin, his wife, guitarist, and driver died in one of the ensuing crashes. (31)

According to singer Johnnie Morisette:

“...back in them days, they’d give a (black man) ten years for a roach, you dig? You’d go through Mississippi in one of them new cars, they pull you out and beat you damn near to death. Stay in fleaboxes, eat out of little stores on the highway, be onstage singing, and you’d be funky ... ‘cause you had to ride all day to make the job.” (32)

It was the same, if not worse, for female gospel artists. Mahalia Jackson, one of the best-known singers in the country regardless of race or genre, said, “The minute I left the concert hall, I felt as if I had stepped back into the jungle. And later, “It was a nightmare. There was no place for us to eat or sleep along the major highways.” (33) Another gospel singer, Shirley Caesar, was physically attacked by a group of white men along Highway 15 in the Carolinas during this period. Her small party was beaten with hammers and chased with pitchforks. Caesar hid in a parking lot and escaped serious injury, but the local sheriff refused to press charges against the assailants. (34)

African-Americans responded as they always have against force and racism, by creative adaptation in oppressive circumstances. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, entrepreneurs created *The Negro Motorists Green Book* and *The Travelguide (Vacation and Recreation Without Humiliation)* to help African American motorists navigate the treacherous, sometimes deadly roads of white America. (35)

For all of the horrors of the road, a host of writers have commented for decades on the love affair between African Americans and the automobile. To enjoy the (relative) freedom of the open road, black drivers endured a host of dangers. In part because Detroit’s auto-makers had been one of the earliest and largest employers of African Americans, automobile ownership was proof positive that a black man or woman “had made it.” Unequal, degrading treatment could still be experienced on buses, trains, airplanes, trolleys, and boats in the 1950s, but in the car the driver was afforded at least partial protection from Jim Crow. In status-conscious

America in the boom years following Korea, “*Ebony* magazine estimated that twenty percent of black households intended to buy new cars in the 1958 model year alone.” (36) Just the possibility of automobile possession provided a powerful impetus for the African-American’s aspirations for full and equal partnership in America, almost from the earliest days of the Model T.

By the time of “You Send Me,” something combustible was happening even as the U.S. government reluctantly plodded forward on civil rights, beginning with the half-hearted enforcement of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954. (37)

Many well-known African-American entertainment and sports stars absolutely loved their brawny, showy Cadillacs – as seen in an *Ebony* article from 1949 titled “Why Negroes Buy Cadillacs.” (38) And no one loved them more than Sam Cooke, even during his hard-scrabble days as a young gospel singer (39)

Actually finding some place safe to drive them, however, was another matter. Detroit was producing big, muscular automobiles. It was a nation all dressed up and nowhere to go.

Which brings us to the final piece of the puzzle. During his presidency, Eisenhower, in part because of his memories of America’s terrible roads in 1919, eventually oversaw the passage of the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956, also called the Federal Aid Highway Act, and the creation of America’s interstate highway system. In a study called *Government's 50 Greatest Endeavors of the Second Half of the 20th Century: An Opinion Survey*, the Brookings Institution recently listed the Interstate Highway Act as the seventh most important legislation ever passed in this country. (40)

And yet, this landmark piece of legislation went relatively unnoticed at the time, in part because Eisenhower himself had just endured a series of health problems, first with a heart attack and later with surgery for Crohn’s disease on June 8, 1956. The legislation was actually one of 27 pieces signed into law in a hospital room on June 29, even while most of the media coverage during June concerned debates as to whether or not Eisenhower would be healthy enough to run for re-election. Because of his condition, he allowed no photographer to chronicle the signings. (41) While *The Washington Post* included a four-inch, single column story on the front page on the bill’s passage by Congress two days earlier, it was from the Associated Press, not by a *Post* beat reporter, and nothing appeared in the newspaper on the day following the actual signing. (42)

However, one publication *did* see the importance of the Federal Aid Highway Act, the famed black newspaper, *The Pittsburg Courier*. On June 2, 1956, amid front-page stories on bus boycotts, demonstrations, and the efforts by the conservative Dixiecrats to undermine desegregation rulings, *The Courier* offered this opinion under the headline, “U.S. Road Building Program Means Jobs”:

NEGRO WORKERS ... throughout the nation ... should watch closely the progress of the \$50 billion dollar highway building program! There’s gold in those hills ... in jobs of every kind and description! The President’s Committee on Government Contracts will see to it that when contracts are let for this “Grand Plan,” we’ll be included. States will cooperate with the Federal Government in the overall program. There’ll be 40,000 miles of super-highways ... with median strips of 20 feet or more. There’ll be six-lane highways into and out of all cities of 100,000 or more in population. As things develop, we’ll try to keep you informed ... but for Negro surveyors, clerks, construction engineers, construction workers, laborers, time-keepers bulldozer operators ... and countless other jobs ... there’s WORK ... WORK ... WORK ... WORK! (43)

*The Courier* was right – the Federal Aid Highway Act did, indeed, mean work, although African Americans, particularly in the earlier days, doubtless did not share equally in the government’s largesse. But the promise of open superhighways between major cities – by-passing every white sheriff’s speed-trap, whites-only restaurant, and small-town police chief needing to meet his quota of motorists “driving while black” to fill the town’s coffers – must have been wonderfully utopian, almost dream-like to black Americans at the time.

James J. Flink coined the term “automobility” to describe what he called “the combined import of the motor vehicle, the automotive industry and the highway, plus the emotional connotations of this import for Americans.” (44) And it is in this context that Cotton Seilor applies it to the black experience during this period:

It was in this historical context that African Americans’ desire and fitness for citizenship were tethered to and divined in their participation in automobility, a practice that fused self-determination and self-representation, mobility, consumption, and a particular strain of liberal antiracism necessitated by the cold war, facilitated by the

nationalization of postwar politics and economics, and performed in increasingly standardized public spaces, such as the interstate highways. (45)

At least, that's the way it seemed. The new highway dangled the promise that blacks could ride in their automobiles not just physically and geographically out of the reach of Jim Crow, but also "upward through socioeconomic strata." (46)

Did Sam Cooke know this in 1957, during the heady early days of the Interstate Highway Act? Did that promise influence his decision to leave gospel, grab for wider popular success – and, eventually, prompt the release of "You Send Me"? Certainly, it's never said in so many words in either of his main two biographies. However, both Guralnick and Wolff, along with the literally hundreds of people they interviewed who knew him best, repeatedly assert that Cooke was a very well read man, perhaps exceptionally well-read, a voracious, if somewhat undisciplined, reader. He was certainly aware of public events and, as early as "Chain Gang," began writing songs with a subtle social commentary.

It would be odd, in fact, if he *didn't* make the connection to the promises of the pro-highway forces and his own near-fatal automobile accident, just a year after the release of "You Send Me." Cooke was a passenger in his own '58 El Dorado convertible, along with singer Lou Rawls, his guitarist Cliff White, and his driver Eddie Cunningham. On the trip between St. Louis and Greenville, Mississippi, along Highway 61 (near where blues singer Bessie Smith had died under eerily similar circumstances), Cunningham accelerated to pass a slow truck, only to hit a packed soybean truck on the side of the road. Although Cooke miraculously escaped relatively unscathed, Cunningham was killed, Rawls gravely injured, and White had multiple broken bones, including his fingers. Wolff cites the accident as the possible impetus for Cooke to found his groundbreaking black-owned publishing company and record label. (47)

For Seiler, and others, the establishment of the interstates provided a "new, temporarily inhabitable space" that provided African Americans "an emancipatory leveling of the status-oriented social relations that characterized postmodernity." Driving the relatively anonymous new highways "diminished the risk of humiliation of and violence against 'marked' drivers." (48) And Cooke, dashing, debonair, handsome, and beloved by millions of black *and* white teen-agers, carelessly, dangerously driving his Caddies along the roads of "old" America, certainly *knew* he was a "marked" driver.

Cooke would get to ride on very few interstates before his untimely death in December 1964. He drove yet another new car, a Ferrari, to his date at the ill-fated Hacienda Hotel. (49) As for the interstate itself, by 1964, the Bureau of Public Roads reported that half of the projected system was complete or nearing completion. (50) However, it was also that year that the truly monumental Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed into law. And, in Title II, the Act prohibited segregation or discrimination by race at *any* establishment – gasoline station, hotel, motel, or restaurant – along the entire length of the U.S. interstate highway system. Not coincidentally, two years later, the *Negro Motorist Green Book* ceased publication forever. (51)

But in 1956, the year of the Federal Aid Highway Act, this sort of future was still more of a dream than hard reality.

In the year that followed, Sam Cooke, who started his career with the aptly named *Highway QCs* gospel group, would make the break from gospel, record and release “You Send Me,” and achieve unparalleled success for a black entertainer in that day. Numerous stars had to be in alignment for this to happen, changes in the attitudes of whites in America, changes in the attitudes of blacks in America, the rise of television, of rhythm & blues, of increased pressure from a brave coalition of liberal congressmen, black and white intellectuals, activists, and ordinary black men and women tired of sitting at the back of the bus or outside the kitchens of segregated diners.

But perhaps one more sea-change had to occur, the grand possibilities suddenly afforded to the African American by the promise of a ribbon of broad highways criss-crossing the United States, unmarred by racism, intimidation, or humiliation:

Integration was coming whether or not there were Interstates, of course, but the Interstate gave a boost to integration. Once you were on the Interstate, you could be anywhere; an Interstate in the Deep South felt much like an Interstate in the North. One assumed there was a measure of protection on the roads, as thin a veneer as that protection might be. And the accommodations at interchanges came at a time when the new civil rights bill was passed. At last, African-Americans enjoyed the right to move where and when they wanted. (52)

When Cooke created his own record label following the success of “You Send Me,” one of his first projects was with the Pilgrim Travelers. But long before that day, their first hit back in 1948 had been “Standing on the Highway,” which included this mournful line,

*She left me standing out on the highway  
Left me wondering  
Which way to go. (53)*

The promise of the Federal Aid Highway Act, which ultimately would be fulfilled in a way that not Eisenhower, not *The Pittsburg Courier*, and not even Sam Cooke could imagine, would provide the answer to the Travelers' question. Which way to go? It was another small step on the road towards an America someday that lives up to the considerable promise of its own origins, where all men and women are free.

Guralnick calls his biography of Cooke, *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke*, and the title is taken from the Langston Hughes poem of the same name:

*Good morning, daddy!  
Ain't you heard  
The boogie-woogie rumble  
Of a dream deferred. – Langston Hughes, "Dream Boogie" (54)*

In this, at least, the intersection of the on-going struggle for civil rights for all people and a relatively obscure piece of federal legislation, worked together to see that the dream would not be forever deferred ...

## SOURCES

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(54) Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, Preface.

*Christians, oh Christians press on your starter  
And start your automobile  
Put in first gear and go on up the hill  
Drive on, children, if I never see you no more  
I'll see you when I pull in on the other shore  
I'm not worried about my parking space  
I just want to see my Savior face to face  
You know prayer is your driver's license  
And faith is your steering wheel*

The Dixie Hummingbirds, "Christian's Automobile" (1957)