

Donald Cortez “Don” Cornelius 1936-2012

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Don Cornelius, who with the creation of “Soul Train” helped break down racial barriers and broaden the reach of black culture with funky music, groovy dance steps and cutting edge style, died at 75.

Aretha Franklin, an early “Soul Train” performer, called the producer “an American treasure. God bless him for the solid good and wholesome foundation he provided for young adults worldwide,” she said Wednesday, “and the unity and brotherhood he singlehandedly brought about with his most memorable creation of Soul Train.”

The Rev. Jesse Jackson told KNX-Los Angeles Cornelius “was a transformer.”

“Soul Train’ became the outlet for African-Americans,” Jackson said, adding that he talked to Cornelius a few days ago and there were no signs Cornelius was upset.

Others also expressed their grief.

“I am shocked and deeply saddened at the sudden passing of my friend, colleague, and business partner Don Cornelius,” said Quincy Jones. “Don was a visionary pioneer and a giant in our business. Before MTV there was Soul Train, that will be the great legacy of Don Cornelius. His contributions to television, music and our culture as a whole will never be matched. My heart goes out to Don’s family and loved ones.”

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“I have known him since I was 19-years-old and James Brown had me speak on Soul Train,” the Rev. Al Sharpton said in a statement from New York. “He brought soul music and dance to the world in a way that it had never been shown and he was a cultural game changer on a global level.”

“Don Cornelius’ legacy to music, especially black music, will be forever cemented in history,” said Clarence Avant, former chairman of Motown Records. “Soul Train was the first and only television show to showcase and put a spotlight on black artists at a time when there were few African-Americans on television at all, and that was the great vision of Don.”

“Soul Train” began in 1970 in Chicago on WCIU-TV as a local program and aired nationally from 1971 to 2006.

It showcased such legendary artists as Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye and Barry White and brought the best R&B, soul and later hip-hop acts to TV and had teenagers dance to them. It was one of the first shows to showcase African-Americans prominently, although the dance group was racially mixed. Cornelius was the first host and executive producer.

“There was not programming that targeted any particular ethnicity,” he said in 2006, then added: “I’m trying to use euphemisms here, trying to avoid saying there was no television for black folks, which they knew was for them.”

Entertainers and music fans shared their thoughts about the show and its creator on Twitter, where both Cornelius and Soul Train were top topics Wednesday.

Singer-actor Genuwine remembered the smooth-voiced producer as “someone who paved the way for black music.”

“I still remember my first time on soul train,” he wrote, “what an experience.”

Music mogul Russell Simmons posted a blog about Cornelius, calling him “one of the greatest music legends there was.”

“Don Cornelius gave artists who had been segregated from most mainstream vehicles of expression a chance to perform in front of a huge national audience,” Simmons wrote. “It was a tremendous opportunity that changed their careers and the whole music industry. To win a Soul Train Music Award meant that the most sophisticated tastemakers in the world loved your work.”

“Soul Train,” with its trademark opening of an animated chugging train, was not, however, an immediate success for Cornelius, an ex-disc jockey with a baritone rumble and cool manner.

Only a handful of stations initially were receptive. “When we rolled it out, there were only eight takers,” he recalled in a 2006 interview with The Associated Press, “which was somewhere between a little disappointing and a whole lot disappointing.”

The reasons he heard? “There was just, We don’t want it. We pass,” he said, with race going unmentioned. “No one was blatant enough to say that.”

“Soul Train” had arrived on the scene at a time when the country was still reeling from the civil rights movement, political upheaval and cultural swings. It also arrived when black faces on TV were an event, not a regular occurrence.

“Soul Train” was seen by some at first as the black “American Bandstand,” the mainstay TV music show hosted by Dick Clark. While “American Bandstand” featured black artists, it was more of a showcase for white artists and very mainstream black performers.

“Soul Train” followed some of the “Bandstand” format, as it had an audience and young dancers, and Cornelius was its host.

But that’s where the comparisons stopped. Cornelius, the suave, ultra-cool emcee, made “Soul Train” appointment viewing by creating a show that showed another side of black music and culture. When it started, glistening Afros dominated the set, as young blacks boogied and shimmied to the music of the likes of Earth Wind & Fire and other acts perhaps less likely to get on “American Bandstand.”

“May u rest in peace and thank u 4 ur platform,” rapper Q-Tip wrote on Twitter. “U will always be remembered.”

People tuned in to see the musical acts, but the dancers soon became as much of a main attraction. They introduced Americans to new dances and fashion styles, and made the “Soul Train” dance line -- where people stand lined up on each side while others sashay down to show their moves -- a cultural flashpoint.

Though “Soul Train” became the longest-running syndicated show in TV history, its power began to wane in the 1980s and 90s as the American pop culture began folding in black culture instead of keeping it segregated. By that time, there were more options for black artists to appear on mainstream shows, and on shows like “American Bandstand,” blacks could be seen dancing along with whites.

But even when Michael Jackson became the King of Pop, there was still a need to highlight the achievements of African-Americans, whose achievements were still marginalized at mainstream events. So Cornelius created the “Soul Train Awards,” which would become a key honor for musicians. The series also spawned the Soul Train Lady of Soul Awards and the Soul Train Christmas Starfest.

Cornelius, who was inducted into the Broadcasting and Cable Hall of Fame in 1995 and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, said in 2006 he remained grateful to the musicians who made “Soul Train” the destination for the best and latest in black music.

Cornelius stepped down as “Soul Train” host in 1993. The awards returned to the air in 2009 after a two-year hiatus. Last year’s awards were held on Nov. 27 in Atlanta, with Earth Wind &

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Fire receiving the “Legend Award.”{jcomments on}