



The Hippest Trip in America: Soul Train and the Evolution of Culture & Style

Nelson George

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An authoritative history of the groundbreaking syndicated television show that has become an icon of American pop culture, from acclaimed author and filmmaker Nelson George, “the most accomplished black music critic of his generation” (*Washington Post Book World*).

When it debuted in October 1971, seven years after the Civil Rights Act, Soul Train boldly went where no variety show had gone before, showcasing the cultural preferences of young African-Americans and the sounds that defined their lives: R&B, funk, jazz, disco, and gospel music. The brainchild of radio announcer Don Cornelius, the show’s producer and host, Soul Train featured a diverse range of stars, from James Brown and David Bowie to Christina Aguilera and R. Kelly; Marvin Gaye and Elton John to the New Kids on the Block and Stevie Wonder.

The Hippest Trip in America tells the full story of this pop culture phenomenon that appealed not only to blacks, but to a wide crossover audience as well. Famous dancers like Rosie Perez and Jody Watley, performers such as Aretha Franklin, Al Green, and Barry White, and Cornelius himself share their memories, offering insights into the show and its time—a period of extraordinary social and political change. Colorful and pulsating, *The Hippest Trip In America* is a fascinating portrait of a revered cultural institution that has left an indelible mark on our national consciousness.

The Hippest Trip in America: Soul Train and the Evolution of Culture & Style Details

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From Reader Review The Hippest Trip in America: Soul Train and the Evolution of Culture & Style for online ebook

Sara says

This book was a HUGE disappointment! It read like a long manifesto of facts and lacked charm in the storytelling. We never really get a feel for Mr Cornelius as a person, and there is no narrative of his growth and development. Also, so few pictures. Every chapter or so there is a "dancer profile" where they describe at great lengths the colorful costumes, perfect hair, distinctive glasses.....but no picture. Every chapter makes mention of the clothes and the wild colors and textures.....all pictures black and white. This is neither a scholarly read nor a rollicking memoir....it drifts somewhere in a boring limbo in between.

Cassandra says

Nelson George took me behind the scenes of Soul Train from Chicago to California. As I journeyed down memory lane I was taken aback to Saturday afternoons where I learned the latest dance moves, acquired important tips on the latest styling trends and watched my favorite artists perform via lip-sync or live on television.

Through the author's words you learn all about the politics and shady deals that lead to the rise and fall of a somewhat corrupted empire. From the 70s to the turn of the century, the author incorporated anecdotes from some of the Soul Train Dancers, artists and even Mr. Don Cornelius himself, as they explained their personal experience riding down memory lane on that animated boogie train. Soul Train was definitely the hippest trip in America.

Reading this book may require the use of You Tube to identify certain dance moves, styling trends, and some of the nameless Soul Train Dancers where the author did a wonderful job placing a face with a name such as the Asian girl with the long hair (Cheryl Song) who I remember seeing a lot on the show, the Puerto Rican Firecracker from New York (Rosie Perez) and the famous dance known as waacking. I enjoyed viewing Rosie Perez working it out down the Soul Train line and Jody Watley showing me how waacking is correctly done. But I must warn you, viewing these clips on You Tube can become highly addictive as I found myself watching over a dozen or so Soul Trainappings. This is definitely a great book that will leave you reminiscing on the good times of yesteryear.

Phil Ford says

Soul Train and Don Cornelius are an epoch in 20th century African American culture. Don's mission to bring the fantastic funk and soul music of the era to the public his way is a landmark importance. This show iconically touched millions, and still does today. The influence the program had on music, television, dance, fashion and style is immeasurable and long lasting. As a kid, I was raised on this, every Saturday, watching artists come do their hits while a swarm of terrific dancers did their thing. It was mesmerizing and funky as all get out.

That being said, this book comes across as a mixed bag of nostalgia and biography. I certainly appreciate the vibe of the book, and it really is a quick read indulgence. Some moments in the book, George addresses the struggle Cornelius made to get black produced music television on the air, other times the author interviews various dancers and their experience working on the set. It is a decent balance, but not fantastic. Some of the unnecessary bits are when he asks some random artists about their nostalgia for the show. While I guess the point of it is to let readers know the impact it made on a lot of famous people, it is not something I need to read about since I experienced it. The point here is that it not only affected rappers and DJs, but America and the world. Duely noted.

Overall, the book is a fun light read and it really REALLY make you want to watch some old episodes.

Craig Pittman says

An entertaining look at one of the most influential TV shows ever made, but ultimately very frustrating for what the author leaves out. Nelson George does a fine job of on the chronology and context of the syndicated TV music show "Soul Train," treating readers to an in-depth look at founder-host Don Cornelius' background as well as short bios of some of the best known dancers on the show, such as the group that became known as the Lockers. But he skips over some of the things that a reader might crave most. For instance, we get nine pages on Nick Cannon, aka "Mr. Mariah Carey," who danced on the show briefly in the post-Cornelius era and later returned as a performer. But we get not one word on the background, life of or expertise of Chuck Jackson, the guy who picked which wanna-be dancers got on the show and then selected where they danced. We get two photos of Rosie Perez, who danced on the show for a short time before getting into a fight with Cornelius (and throwing a box of chicken at him) and then going off to a career as a choreographer and actress, but no pictures of some of the more important, better known dancers who were on the show much longer. George does go into some detail on how Cornelius failed to adapt to the rise of hip-hop and rap and how the show went into decline, as well as offering a theory about why Cornelius committed suicide -- a tragic end indeed for a man who ever week wished us all, "Peace, love and sooooooooooul!"

Artie says

A pretty good book about a ground-breaking show.

Ariya says

This rating should really be 2.5 stars. I gave it three stars because I loved Soul Train as a kid and I've admired Nelson George's other works. But, the book seems like it was not organized well (it kept jumping back and forth with no real flow to it), there were not enough photos to capture the essence of the style and fashion of Soul Train, and it seemed like George rushed to finish it (glaring typos, repetitive anecdotes, etc.) It also read as though it was originally written as a series of separate articles that were hastily put together in book form. I was disappointed to read (toward the end of the book) that most of the first-person accounts set off in block quotes (as though George personally interviewed the subjects) were actually taken from a documentary that came out a few years ago.

Jeff Crosby says

Saturday mornings in my home in rural Indiana were often filled with the sights and sounds of Don Cornelius's Soul Train television program. Originally started in Chicago and moved to Los Angeles in the early 70s, one could catch up with the latest soul/rhythm and blues artists like the O'Jays, Gladys Knight & the Pips, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes and other acts of the day (usually - though not always - lip synched to the smooth sounds of the original recording). As music critic and author Nelson George aptly displays in this book, Soul Train was equal parts music, fashion and dancing - with an emphasis on the third part of the equation.

I had hoped this book would delve more into the background of the music and the artists who frequented the program than it did. (A few, such as "TSOP" by MFSB are included, but they are sparse.) Nonetheless, the book sheds light on the rise of this institution and its founder, Cornelius, and the ways in which it adapted to music and dance styles over its more than three decades on television. All of the sidebars are focused on the dancers, such as Jody Watley and Fred "Re-Run" Berry (among many others) who parlayed appearances on Soul Train into acting and musical careers of their own. An interesting book written by a journalist who had a great deal of access to the people who made Soul Train such a phenomenon for so long, including the late Cornelius.

Lauren says

How could I NOT love this book? R&B & Soul Music was what I thrived on the the 70's. I saw a special "Unsung" episode recently on the TV1 Network that featured this music and included a number of comments from this book's author, Nelson George. So I quickly ordered this book and one of this others, "The Death of Rhythm & Blues."

Reliving so many of the Soul Train episodes I watched in the 70's has been a real treat. George's profiles of so many of the Soul Train dancers is fascinating. This is a story of how R&B and Soul Music was brought out in the open on nationally syndicated TV for an amazing 35 years!

If you like R&B from this period and/or ever watched Soul Train, you'll love this book.

Anthony Exum says

Nelson George is a great writer and journalist, yet this tome leaves something to be desired. I feel as though in his haste to tell all types of stories, he fails to give a full picture of Soul Train itself. He spends too much time on the dancers. The dancers were a big part of the draw to Soul Train, but he spends three-fourths of the book talking about them. The book lacks focus, it jumps around too much.

Andre says

I'm a fan of Nelson George and also of Soul Train, so I was certainly expecting fire. Instead I got a tiny spark. I think he gives the reader a good feel for the importance of the phenomenon that was Soul Train. But

it is done in a very surface manner. The book never gets deep, it isn't a bold effort by George that seeks to go beyond the shallow waters of Soul Train history.

We don't learn much about the personal life of Don Cornelius, even though by all accounts he was an extraordinary individual, with a sharp business acumen.

We do get profiles of some of the dancers that fans of the show will recognize by description, as the absence of many pictures is a glaring omission. Now don't get me wrong, as an avid reader I don't generally crack a book looking for photos, but it is a necessity when you are trying to describe a dancer that most fans probably saw in the late 70's or early 80's, so we're talking 34-37 years. A photo as a reminder would be helpful, instead Nelson refers readers to YouTube to experience the moments he writes about. This is an example of glossing over information that ultimately hurts the book.

He writes that the holy trinity of Soul Train was music, dance and fashion. But Nelson George only gives lip service to the fashion and even arguably the dance. There are some interesting tidbits, but frustratingly not explored thoroughly. Of course we hear all about the great musicians that graced the Soul Train stage, and some behind the scene looks. All said I think the book could have been much better, but in the final analysis it is an ok read, and a memorable trip down the Soul Train line. Love, peace and Soooooouull!

Hallie Yam says

Good and interesting information, but not super engagingly written. It read almost like a list of facts. I did really enjoy the Dancer Profiles throughout the book. It made me really want to watch the documentary.

Robin says

Oh, the mornings in front of the tv with my big sister and a bowl of seventies sugar cereal! I didn't know why the show was cool but she thought it was and that made it so. Sooooooul Train.

Nelson George takes us back to the 1970s, following the evolution of Soul Train as a local Chicago show with regular teenagers dancing to the music they loved to the LA phenomenon with smooth dancers, incredible wardrobes, and already-famous music acts asking to be allowed on.

The first half of the book is more fun, with George putting Soul Train into context as one of the earliest regular opportunities for black Americans to be on television being themselves and being shown in an entirely positive light. He also touches on soul music, disco, and American regional trends in dance styles. The dancer interviews are fun and endearing -- Many of Soul Train's dancers started out young - as young as 14 - and later made careers as dancers and choreographers for music videos, musical theater, and movies.

As the book moves forward in time into the 80s, the focus is more on business successes and losses, bad performances by artists who should have known better, the move in our country towards corporate everything, and the rift between old (soul and funk) school and new (rap, hip hop, and especially sexually or violently explicit songs) school musicians and promoters. Don Cornelius' testimony in the House of Representatives on the question of a ratings system for music recordings is interesting reading.

I'll agree with those reviewers who lament the paucity of photographs, and the choice to go with b & w. Fortunately, you can supplement with the internet. Soul Train has a website and you can buy a 'best of' DVD compilation, 130 performances on 9 DVDs!

Read it for the memories. Read it for the photographs of fabulous fashion over the last 30 years. Make sure you look up the dance moves and songs on you tube! And, if you need more, Questlove has written his own Soul Train book.

Jeff says

This was a fun read; I had been a sporadic rather than regular viewer of Soul Train back in the day. I never knew that so many singers & actors got their start as Soul Train Dancers, so that was interesting. It seems this was written from material gathered for a VH1 special and maybe that biased me, but it did come across as kind of lightweight, even for a pop culture piece.

Julie says

The Hippest Trip in America: Soul Train the Evolution of Culture & Style by Nelson George is a 2014 William Morrow publication. I was provided a copy of this book by the publisher and Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

This book is like a companion book for the highest rated VH1 rock documentary by the same name. In honor of Black History Month the documentary explored the humble beginnings of Soul Train all the way to the end of the show and sadly the death of Don Cornelius. This is a very good documentary and if you ever have a chance to locate it I do recommend you watch it.

This book compliments everything we saw in the documentary with interviews and photos and aims the focus more on the show itself and the dancers in particular. This was a great angle to explore. Instead of rehashing the history of the 1970's and giving us technical details of business transactions, this book zeroes in on the entertainment value of the show and the massive impact it had on clothing, hair styles , dance trends, marketing geared toward blacks and opening doors for many to cross over into careers of their own. As a child I was not allowed to stay up past a certain time so it wasn't until I was in my teens that I had the chance to watch Soul Train. I got in on the tail end of the great soul and funk music of the seventies but the disco transition was nearly complete. I didn't watch the show all that often. It came on Saturday afternoons and if I happened to be home at that time of day and thought about it I would tune in. Now all these years later I really wish I had paid more attention.

I read a book not all that long ago all about Soul Train and that book was nearly encyclopedic, extremely well documented and researched. At that time I got on the internet and began looking through videos for Soul Train and ended up spending hours watching the old clips from various eras of time.

The Nelson George book I am reviewing here, listed certain dancers and controversies that had me going back and looking up specific details and videos. Rosie Perez and Jody Watley are some of the more recognizable names. Again ,I have found myself enjoying the performances and the line dances once more. While not filled with a detailed list of performers and dancers or anything along those lines, this book highlights the points that pop culture will remember the most. There are many quotes and interview excerpts from the people on the show and from Don Cornelius himself.

Don Cornelius is still somewhat of an enigma. He wanted Soul Train to show blacks in a positive light and made a diligent effort to keep the show clean. He frowned on provocative clothes and certain dance moves

that could be considered suggestive. He was a very disciplined man, serious, private, perhaps a little aloof. He suffered with many health issues and it is very sad that his life ended in such a way.

The influence Don and Soul Train had on pop culture and the impact it had in opening doors for black performers to cross over into mainstream is immeasurable. It angered and saddened me to know that performers poked fun at Don in his later years and parodied Soul Train in an unflattering way. If it were not for the vision and tenacity of Don Cornelius I don't know how long it would have taken for black performers to break out into television, movies, and have their music universally recognized. Surely, a little respect is due and I do hope that the show can be rebooted in order to touch a whole new generation of people.

A fun book that gives us a point of view unique to the dancers and the impact the show had on their lives and continues to have for many. I had a lot of fun reading it and now I am off to look through more videos to go along with this review when I post it on my blog. This one gets 4 stars.

Lisa Mcbroom says

My tween and teen years were spent doing the following on Saturdays. Sleeping in til 12:30 , catching American Bandstand, and then riding the SOUUUUUUUL TRAIN!!!!!! It was the hippest trip in America. Nelson George talks about how it was a evolution of black culture!
