



Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and the Rise and Fall of American Soul

By Craig Werner

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In **Higher Ground**, one of our most insightful music writers brilliantly reinterprets the lives of three pop geniuses and the soul revolution they launched.

Soul music is one of America's greatest cultural achievements, and Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, and Curtis Mayfield are three of its most inspired practitioners. In midcentury America it was soul music--particularly the dazzling stream of recordings made by these three stars--that helped bring the gospel vision of the black church into the mainstream, energizing the era's social movements and defining a new American gospel where the sacred and the secular met. What made this gospel all the more amazing was that its most influential articulators were the sons and daughters of sharecroppers, storefront preachers, and single parents in the projects, whose genius gave voice to a new vision of American possibility.

Higher Ground seamlessly weaves the specific and intensely personal narratives of Stevie, Aretha, and Curtis's lives into the historical fabric of their times. The three shared many similarities: They were all children of the great migration and of the black church. But the gospel impulse manifested itself in different ways within the dramas of their individual lives and musical creations. In Stevie Wonder's case, it was a literally color-blind universal sense of spirituality that expressed itself in his life and music as an urge toward transcendence, particularly in the mid-seventies when albums like *Innervisions* and *Songs in the Key of Life* radically revised what a pop album could be. For Aretha Franklin, the traditional gospel vision of a beloved community anchored in the strength of women comforted her through a life littered with tragedy and found expression in propulsive pop songs like "Respect" as well as in her legendary gospel albums. And for Curtis Mayfield, the gospel notion of conscious living inspired him to create songs that served the purposes of the Civil Rights movement and the radical Black Power movement alike, from the gritty street drama of *Superfly* to the transcendent call of "People Get Ready."

Werner doesn't just provide a narrative of three fascinating lives; he ties them

together with a provocative thesis about American history and culture that compels us to reconsider both the music and the times. And aside from the personalities and the history, he writes beautifully about music itself, the nuts and bolts of its creation and performance, in a way that brings a new awareness and understanding to the most familiar music, forcing readers to listen to songs they've heard a thousand times with fresh ears. In **Higher Ground**, Werner illuminates the lives of three unparalleled American artists, reminding us why their music mattered then and still resonates with us today.

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Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and the Rise and Fall of American Soul By Craig Werner Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1519574 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Crown

- Published on: 2004-03-09
- Released on: 2004-03-09
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.38" h x 1.15" w x 6.36" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this eloquent cultural history, critically acclaimed music writer Werner (*A Change Is Gonna Come*) conducts a journey through the lives of three leading musical artists and the ways they used their gospel music training and the vision it provided to transform American popular music. What makes the music of these three singer-songwriters so significant is that each had a vision of helping African-Americans to strengthen their racial identity while at the same time moving to a higher ground the dawning hope for interracial equality that was emerging in the late 1960s. As Werner points out, Wonder, Franklin and Mayfield grew up in impoverished homes while at the same time singing in their parents' or grandparents' churches about visions of a better world. As each singer took that musical vision to the streets, he or she applied it in various ways to the struggle for civil rights and equality. Franklin's music, as Werner observes, incorporated the hopes of Martin Luther King's interracialist dream and themes of the Black Power movement in songs like "Respect" and "Think." By the early '70s, Mayfield, whose early collaborations with Jerry Butler in the Impressions produced some of soul music's most moving moments and one anthem of the Civil Rights movement ("People Get Ready"), produced music that reflected the concerns of the Black Power movement. Mayfield's focus on black identity, pride and power later made itself felt in his powerful protests against drug abuse in "Freddie's Dead" and "Beautiful Brother of Mine." Werner adeptly examines the beauty and power of each singer's music as well as gracefully tracing the ways that their music and their culture influenced each other. Werner's exquisite prose and his richly informed music history offer a deeply felt love letter to three of soul music's greatest.

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From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

CRAIG WERNER teaches African American music, literature, and cultural history at the University of Wisconsin, where he has won numerous teaching awards.

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