

# Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

## Soul Train Host Broke Racial Barriers

Don Cornelius helped make soul music a national brand

(AP)—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 Feb. 1 of an apparent suicide. He was 75.

Aretha Franklin, an early "Soul Train" performer, called Cornelius "an American treasure."

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

"Don was a visionary pioneer and a giant in our business," said Quincy Jones. "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."

The Rev. Jesse Jackson told KNX-Los Angeles he talked to Cornelius a few days ago and there were no signs Cornelius was upset.



Singer Aretha Franklin with Soul Train host and producer Don Cornelius.

"He was a transformer," Jackson said. "'Soul Train' became the outlet for African-Americans."

"Soul Train" began in 1970 as a local program in Chicago and aired nationally from 1971 to 2006, introducing television audiences to such legendary artists as Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye and Barry White. It became the longest-running syndicated show in TV history.

It was one of the first shows to showcase African-Americans prominently, bringing the best R&B,

soul and later hip-hop acts to TV. 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."

Music mogul Russell Simmons called Cornelius "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 in a blog post. "It was a tremendous opportunity that changed their careers and the whole music industry."

"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



Don Cornelius

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" arrived on the scene

at a time when the U.S. was still reeling from the civil rights movement, political upheaval and cultural swings. 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, but it 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."

The show's dancers introduced Americans to new moves and fashion styles, and made the "Soul Train" dance line — where people line up while others sashay down the middle to show their moves — a cultural flashpoint.

The show's power began to wane in the 1980s and '90s. But even when Michael Jackson became the King of Pop, there was still a need to highlight the achievements of African-Americans. So Cornelius created the "Soul Train Awards," which would become a key honor for musicians.

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.

"I figured as long as the music stayed hot and important and good, that there would always be a reason for 'Soul Train,'" Cornelius said.

Cornelius stepped down as "Soul Train" host in 1993.

## Cornelius Called Son before Taking his Life

The son of "Soul Train" creator Don Cornelius said his father called him shortly before taking his life, and that he was unhappy and in failing health but kept most of his feelings inside.

Tony Cornelius, who worked closely with his father on "Soul Train" said he had received a phone call from his dad on the morning of his death.

"It was a call of urgency and I came to his home immediately," he said.

"He had been very unhappy about some things that had gone on in his life and his health was failing," Tony Cornelius said. But none of his family realized quite how depressed he was.

"My father was extremely private and unfortunately, when

you're a private person, you keep things inside ... Obviously, me being extremely close to him, I could tell that he was uncomfortable. But our family could never know that he would -- how uncomfortable he really was," he added.

A spokeswoman for the family said a memorial service was being planned for Feb. 13 in Los Angeles.

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