

Arts Management and Production-

How 90's R&B Became a Nostalgic

Sound

By-

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Abstract

The following is a close analysis of the relationship between arts management and the music industry during the 90's. That had helped shape and pioneer R&B music in becoming one of the most iconic and successful sounds throughout music's history due to its musicality, reputation, and imagery. That was founded by different artists and professionals who were supported by fans and other music peers, would finally realize that R&B music was very influential. Proving that the 90's R&B had transcended from prior decades like using the "quiet storm" method to featuring rap music in some of their songs. This would soon normalize the act of risk taking throughout the music industry since it had brought great change and innovation towards R&B music, making people slowly support and help R&B's duration. Especially, since today's R&B music is not seen as better or excelling but mediocre instead even though people often forget that a team of creatives. Were dedicating themselves to transforming R&B music in being a righteous music form that is now overplayed and mimicked by some of today's artists. Which is why I believe that arts management and production was the main source of 90's R&B success and growth during a popular time in music.

The History of R&B

When we think about music, we often think about our favorite artist or song that has affected us. In ways that will make us understand who we are as people and individuals in what we like to what we don't like. So that we can reveal our common goals and interests to one another by expressing ourselves and feelings, that most artist do. In order to connect and relate to their audience so that they can maintain a successful career. Although, this shouldn't overshadow or dim away from the importance of management as a critical aspect of an artist's career since it can help facilitate and reconstruct them. Who are destined for music greatness like: Beyoncé, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, and Prince, who have all been prestigious musicians in R&B music, which is a music genre also known as "Rhythm and Blues" that is "a style of music developed by African Americans that combines blues and jazz, characterized by a strong backbeat and repeated variations on syncopated instrumental phrases." According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, R&B music is a blues-based sound that was found in the South during a time of severe oppression and inequality for black people who were not able to get the same rights or opportunities. Due to their skin color but were able to at least sing and make music, which would soon become the blues, the boogie-woogie, and jump blues as America's new post-war music, that would give black people the chance to finally express themselves. These new forms of music would also bring a different perspective to them like being erotic or dance based, making listeners now assume that R&B music was a spiritual sound that had given black people a chance to be unapologetic for their unfortunate experiences. According to *The Soul Music Sanctuary*, the blues would create different types of techniques that would help produce multiple effects on a singer's voice including; the binding of guitar strings, the classic bottleneck, and the

harmonica intimating a person's voice. Which would make the blues urban after moving into the North and incorporating more instruments like the; piano, harmonica, bass, drums, and electric guitar. Intensifying its sound and rhythm that would finally confirm R&B as a sub-category to the blues where band formations and humorous lyrics were later found in the 1930s. Until, in 1947 a music journalist named Jerry Wexler would submit in the term, as its official name in Billboard Magazine. Informing all listeners to be aware of the new music genre despite of RCA Victor Records, an electronic consumer brand and record label. That had begun marketing the music genre as "Blues and Rhythm" in 1948, according to *Icons of R&B Soul- An Encyclopedia of the Artists who Revolutionized Rhythm* by Bob Gulla. Jerry Wexler would then diminish this phrase and solidify the genre as "Rhythm and Blues" according to the Billboard chart listing in 1949. Where suddenly Los Angeles would become the premier place for R&B recordings, influencing small record labels like Vee-Jay and Modern to begin showcasing R&B music throughout its beginning stages. For example, Atlantic Records had already been creating an R&B roster that was unfortunately ineffective due to people's perception of R&B as a single form of music during the 1950s. Until, people would later realize that R&B music was just not defined by its name but by its artistry that would cause its demographics to be mostly adults. However, this wouldn't help raise the limiting record sales in 1960, forcing traditional R&B music to transform into soul music by having smooth, jazzy- ballad vocal styles even though R&B music would prevail throughout the mid-1960s. After, the electric bass guitar would challenge the acoustic sound by controlling the chord roots and specializing the bass voice to help emulate the lowest harmony voice within a group. Where singers would be glorified for having the "four features" which included; the melisma, a blues-scale neutral thirds, a high

tessitura, and extreme gravelly vocal skills, according to *Rap Goes Mainstream: 1990-1999* in *The New Blue Music- Change in Rhythm and Blues, 1950-1999* by Richard J. Ripani. Singers like Otis Redding would exemplify this by performing with emotion and soulfulness that was on much slower tempo songs even though it wouldn't compare to "The Godfather of Soul", James Brown. Who was a pioneer in the 1960s by having a contemporary "blues" feel to his music that would help shape and influence the next generation of R&B artist. As funk, disco, and rap music would soon prevail throughout the 70s making James Brown transition into funk music as well, topping the charts as leading artist with songs like; "Get Up (I Feel Like Being a Sex Machine), Part 1" (1970) and "The Payback, Part 1" (1974). However, there were other remarkable artists like; Earth, Wind, and Fire, The Isley Brothers, Sly & the Family Stone, and Parliament/Funkadelic who had also helped pioneer "funk music". While Barry White and Johnnie Taylor would be developing a new sound called disco that had soul-based vocals and pop dance beats combined with instrumentals. Illustrating a liberal dance party scene that would have some critics say that it was too commercial convincing music producers to try and compose a "secret formula" in order to solidify its permanency. By playing funky dance beats throughout disco's rhythm section and incorporating Latin-based sounds with an orchestra of strings and horns. This luckily had received some results of more solo and group female acts than any other music genre or era until the rise of rap would soon take over during the late 70s. Where this underground style of music would originate in the Bronx, New York and become very popular in music that had brought a new dynamic towards R&B. That would be a dominant force throughout the music industry in the 1980s by influencing the market however R&B legends like Michael Jackson and Prince would still be the top two leading artists of that time. Until rap and R&B music would

soon combine creating “new jack swing” made by music producer, Teddy Riley who was inspired by his Linn drum machine and the effects of the triplet swing. Where the sound would unfortunately get overshadowed by other music trends but had still made its mark, while other iconic moments would lead to help develop the rise of 90’s R&B. For example; the “quiet storm” which was an R&B music trend would originate in the 80s from a Smokey Robinson's album. As a type of song that would incorporate slowly to moderate tempos and romantic, sensual, and jazzy sound feels. That would also be unfortunately overlooked and faded by technology once the production of R&B music had incorporated the; synthesizer, keyboard synthesizer, the MIDI system (musical instrument digital interface), the drum machine, and sampler. Which had all coincidentally stemmed from rap’s music production alongside its political and social messages that were all incorporated within 90s R&B music.

Creating the Signature Sound(s)

Throughout the 90's, R&B music had become one of the most prevalent music genres that had ever existed during that time due to its combination of sounds and equipment that was used to make songs transform into classics, with the help of arts management. In taking the initiative to assist in the careers of artist who needed to take risks and break boundaries throughout the music industry since it wasn't normal at one point in time. Until people had realized that a new era of music was coming to audiences and somebody needed to be the new face of it, making record labels become more effective and consistent throughout the 90s. In order for the legacy of R&B music to continue so that it wouldn't be diminished by people who didn't understand it.

Especially, since not too many record labels were becoming successful by selling enough R&B records throughout the 50s and 70s according to *Rap Goes Mainstream: 1990-1999* in *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm & Blues, 1950-1999*. Over 70% of the top twenty-five R&B songs were made up of or distributed by multiple record labels that included: BMG (Bertelsmann Music Group) and SONY Corporation. Which were both high level corporations alongside CBS, WEA, and EMI throughout the music industry. Concerning music executives as to whether or not R&B music would be marketable since it couldn't connect with people even though R&B artist were involving the "keep it real" effect. Since it was the original concept behind making R&B music where a "street level" and the blues would be more desirable despite of the fact that large corporations were still releasing it. Luckily, small record labels were beginning to form like; Interscope, Tommy Boy, Def Jam, Death Row, and Priority Records where the artist and owner would often become co-owners instead of corporate executives. That were not knowledgeable of the music genre and would bring a negative stigma towards it where luckily massive changes

would be happening like sub-genres and trends that were all combining different styles of music. In helping to excel it until later on this would hinder the music genre's own identity as a separate music outlet in which the term "hip-hop" would soon define it. Being the main referral to R&B's discography instead of R&B despite of many writers agreeing to it, one song that would help exemplify this would be Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" in 1989. As the number one song on the R&B charts in 1990 this became the standpoint of using multiple sound serenades including; the sample loop, the triplet swing, rapid vocal parts, and some blue notes. That would soon help highlight the techniques of how and why the sample loop would become the main tool in creating a 90's R&B song and its signature sound. While the triplet swing was an "alternating rapped and sung vocal section within the body of a song", says Richard J. Ripani that had later turned into "new jack swing", a music trend in the early 90s. That would unfortunately disappear in the mid-decade due to its low demand in R&B music where many artists would still succeed in it including; Bell Biv DeVoe, Al B. Sure, Mary J. Blige, Keith Sweat, and Johnny Gill. However there was one song by Bell Biv DeVoe that was extremely well known for being "new jack swing" called "Poison" in 1990. Where its musical key traits were: the snare drum, the driving bass parts, an upbeat dance tempo, and a sparse production. That was later made into other sub-genres like "urban" and "urban contemporary" which included smooth and soulful ballads that resembled the "quiet storm" trend during the 1980s. Returning in the 1990s with an up tempo, dance, and funk feel to it with a romantic context, that had helped gravitate towards more black audiences throughout the 1990s from artist like; Whitney Houston, Luther Vandross, Teddy Pendergrass, and Peabo Bryson. Whose careers would unfortunately pass since they couldn't make a number one song by 1992 except for Whitney Houston who had to alter her own

music, in order to upkeep the likeness of fans. Until one singer by the name of Mariah Carey would help continue the “quiet storm” trend in music with songs like "Vision of Love"(1990) and "Love Takes Time"(1990) even though her angelic voice would soon counteract it. During the mid-1990s, R&B music was already popular after blending in so many other music types and production tools, that its music would either sound like a quiet storm/urban song or a rap-influenced hip-hop song. Becoming very common for artists to make like; Tevin Campbell, Toni Braxton, Usher, Erykah Badu, and Brandy who had all been featured on the top of the charts. Newer R&B styles had been represented by “hip-hop”, as the term would be used to showcase the sixteenth notes of the metronomic value and the tempi moving very slowly. While the b.p.m (Beats per Minute) meter would range from 60-70, resulting in the “quiet storm” sound being replaced by hip-hop ballads during the mid-1990s. Where there was one artist and producer named Kenneth “Babyface” Edmond who would help promote and advance the careers of many R&B artist like; Toni Braxton, Bobby Brown, Boyz II Men, Celine Dion, and En Vogue. As a young talented singer, instrumentalist, and songwriter, Babyface would make his own music and partner with Antonio “L.A.” Reid in creating their own record label called LaFace Records. That was made during the mid 80’s to mid 90’s where classic R&B songs were found including; “Whip Appeal” by Babyface (1990) or “Give U My Heart” (1992) by Babyface featuring Toni Braxton. The music would sound “smooth” and “sophisticated” naming Babyface and L.A Reid two of R&B’s most highly astound music executives and producers throughout the 90s. Due to their skills in modernizing R&B in becoming more dominant and mainstream while new music groups were developing, making seven groups be on the top twenty-five R&B artist list. Who used similar stylistics of some few solo R&B artist by incorporating different music genres that

had made groups like; Tony! Toni! Tone, Jodeci, TLC, Xscape, and SWV where they had used vocal arrangements from the 80s. In which a lead vocalist would sing the melody while the rest of the group would harmonize it, as the sample loop played. Throughout R&B music from the 90's, it's base would include multiple overlaps of instrumentals, vocals, and gospel based influence like the Boyz II Men song "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday" (1991). Featuring high melismatic vocals and a gospel quartet-based harmony this suddenly would change when rap music had appeared throughout the early 90's, persuading rappers to combine their own music with the older styles of R&B. Especially since there was no rappers on 'top of the twenty-five R&B list during the 1980s. But during the 90s, there was at least four who were; Jay-Z, LL Cool J, 2Pac, and P. Diddy that had gained a lot more notoriety from R&B music. Even though there was a rap group that had made R&B samples popular to use in rap songs, called Digital Underground who were natives of Oakland, California; Shock-G and Chopmaster J would first develop the rap group in 1987. Revamping the Parliament/Funkadelic sound and other funk music as their musical background that would help further their careers throughout the 90s, in which another event would also help leave a major impact on 90's R&B called *The Chronic*. One of rap music's most influential albums in the 1990s which was released in 1992 created by music producer and rapper Dr. Dre, featuring Death Row label mate Snoop Dogg. The two would create and capitalize "G-funk", a brand new hip-hop genre that would have a much slower tempo, retro synthesizer sounds, a deep-bass groove, and a few instrumentations that had been similar to the quiet storm trend. With its slow, mellow grooves it would definitely coincide with R&B music as another prestigious music figure had been leaving his mark on R&B music in the '90s. Sean "Puffy" Combs or P. Diddy would be a music mogul creating his own record

label, Bad Boy Records. as an artist himself, where his sound would resort to sample loops from older songs in helping to produce his own like: “Can’t Nobody Hold Me Down”, “I’ll Be Missing You”, and “Don’t Stop What You’re Doing” on the 1997 album, *No Way Out*. Resulting in the combination of both singing and rapping that signified how R&B music would be so important and relevant towards artist, executives, and audiences throughout ’90s music. Propelling musician’s careers like Usher’s with hits like “Nice and Slow”, his 1998 single where it would feature blended parts of him singing and rapping that accompanied two sequenced measured chords with sample loops, sparse drums, and a bass part. R&B and rap music would become a permanent music tool throughout its production as two influential vocal styles.

Artistry & Trends

Over the years, people have acclaimed that during the 90's R&B music was very innovative and transitional due to its sudden changes and diversities. That had been occurring according to *The Transformation of Rhythm & Blues*. In *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm & Blues, 1950-1999*, Richard J. Ripani explains how and why some factors were either flourishing or delaying the music genre's success. Throughout the music industry like for example, more traditional blues-based harmonic sounds were being developed while some chord types were being dismissed. As the "I" chord was being stabilized, most blue notes were disappearing once the rise of rap music had appeared even though some artist couldn't rap specific lengths of notes like a sixteen or thirty, onto fast tempo songs. Until, suddenly the sub-genre called G-Funk would help make the impact of decreasing R&B's tempo, leading into slower songs being more prompted throughout the 1990's. Although one change would effect R&B music forever which was the replacement of the cyclic form being overshadowed by the sample loops due to the digital era. Where this ancient technique was used to detect the various forms of a musical composition's theme according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*. This had played a major part of R&B music during the 1960's and 70's, alongside another production tool called the triple swing. That would be used often by 8% during the 1980's to 12% during the 1990's, making an overall growth of 20% which would be cut short by the end of that era, even though it had helped showcase the perseverance of black music and culture. In a modern way that was in high demand for most audiences after it was a declaration of how relationships and intimacy should be for people. Since R&B music stems from real life based on love and heartbreak according to *The-Dream On Why We All Need R&B*. Singer, songwriter, and record producer

Terius Nash also known as The-Dream expresses his sentiments towards the music genre while discussing his creative process as a R&B artist with NPR's music edition, "The Record". As a product and adherent of the genre, he first states that R&B is "the closest point to the reality of love that there is" because of its personal contact and human experiences. That make people feel good and relate to it when listening to its slow jams, this appears as classic and tasteful even though the content and lyrics can be vulgar and/or explicit. Including sex and monogamy however the way that R&B music was written during the 1990's by songwriters was very genuine and mature like for example; lyrics about women were not degrading but once stated in a relationship. It was respectful, romantic, and sensual while another key aspect of 90's R&B was its tempo where it would reflect the emotions of an artist who had to make audiences relate to them and the message of the song. In which producers like The-Dream had definitely agreed too and incorporates within his very own music because of the goal to make listeners feel the way an artist feel when creating or performing a song. Just like many other R&B artist who had dedicated themselves to storytelling so that their music, melodies, and harmonies could be nostalgic. Although, actual music wasn't just the only thing that was being transcended throughout the 1990's in R&B music, style and image had also been another key factor in cultivating this music genre. By identifying some R&B groups that used clothes and their personalities to differentiate them from everybody else like Boyz II Men having a board commercial appeal to Jodeci defining street aesthetics outside of rap. According to, *How 1991 Changed Music Forever* by Stereo Williams certain types of fashion sense and styles were beginning to be seen on artist who had made it iconic throughout the 1990's in R&B music. Where it became a domino effect of artist to transition into more raw and raunchy looks and

aesthetics for example, Jodeci would be perceived as the “R&B bad boy” group since they would always be seen in baggy militant clothes and leather black boots. Adding another level and higher standards of being a male R&B group during the 90’s, while other artist had some unique yet similar styles as well. Like Jon B, Montell Jordan, and Usher who had all been found in suits, suspenders, bright printed shirts, leather jackets, hats, and silk robes as R&B artist who made their appearances coincide with their music. Concluding the fact that risks and changes were very necessary for the growth of R&B music to help equip and flourish it as a multifaceted music genre. That has impacted so many people for years based on its realness and passion from artist who decide to share their personals stories with the world in order to release inner emotions to make a connection with people who feel the exact same way.

Management

Nowadays, it's important for an artist to have a team of people who they can trust in order to be reliable and professional in how well they can handle someone else's career. By making them successful throughout their creative journey and endeavors that can help maintain them including reviewing certain business deals to moderating specific appearances and performances, that these moments will either help or hurt an artist's workload and/or self-image. If not done properly, which is why management and production are two very crucial parts within an artist's timeframe throughout the music industry. In order to have longevity and accomplishments made without ever being taken advantage of like what music executive and songwriter, L.A Reid had said on *The Wendy Williams Show* "my job is to protect talent and to present them in the best possible fashion". Clarifying his purpose and the meaning of arts management that help create a future for artist who need direction and guidance to fulfill their highest amplitude of talent by entertaining and influencing others. However, this must correlate with the artist and their ideas in order for a mutual exchange to happen so that any disputes and/or conflicts can be avoided between artist and management. Since, it has become a negative expectation throughout the music industry overtime because of the many factors that can help cause friction between a creative and its administration like greed, control, lack of communication, and personal desires. That will lead to the currency of what most artist are doing now which is being independent and self-sufficient in the roles that a record company plays. Like management, production, styling, directing, marketing, and making their own label instead of signing a "360 deal" which is "a contract that allows the record label to receive a percentage of the earnings from all of an artist's activities rather than just earnings from record sales". According to *An Overview of the 360 Deal* by

Tiffany Simmons-Rufus, musicians can now have complete control in navigating their own careers by using multiple outlets like debuting music on online streaming services to co-signing other artist on tour, partnerships, and their own record company. Giving them the power now more than ever in representing themselves to release any kind of content contributing towards their perception, made by the public. Proving that times have changed since the 90's did not have these attributes to help possess these quick and easy opportunities in getting monetary gain throughout music. Since the CD was the only thing that would receive income during that era until the internet was discovered according to *The Music Industry- 1990s* by LinkedIn SlideShare, a platform that shares knowledgeable based presentations. Over 84% of the 755 million albums that were sold had been from the five largest records companies in the United States by 1999. Where the quest in finding talent would be complex from word of mouth to being recruited and auditioned by an A&R (Artist and Repertoire), from an elite well-known record label like LaFace. Who had urge to find the best talent in order to set a new tone in R&B music throughout the 90's, especially since it was wanted by large audiences and executives were in need of it to continue. Luckily, artist like Faith Evans, Keith Sweat, Aaliyah, and Maxwell would be found to release an immense amount of work that would be in the form of albums, music videos, performances, and collaborations. For the world to see and recognize these artist and their representatives including one particular music A&R, Antonio "L.A" Reid who had embarked on the beginning stages of many R&B artist discography from writing songs for Bobby Brown and Michael Jackson to signing Usher on the day of his audition. "L.A Reid is a star finder he knows what a superstar is", according to his label co-founder Kenneth "BabyFace" Edmonds. The two were a dynamic duo in songwriting and producing for developing artist by

providing material that would be endorsed once BabyFace and L.A Reid what started their own record label called LaFace Records in the Capital City Plaza building in Buckhead, Georgia.

After moving from Atlanta in 1989, Reid's autobiography called *Sing to Me: My Story of Making Music, Finding Magic, and Searching for Who's Next* co-written by Joel Selvin, according to the prologue it states that the small based label was first employed by family members and close friends like Pebbles (L.A Reid's wife), Bryant (L.A Reid's brother), Daryl Simmons (Kenneth's childhood friend), Derek Ladd (Kenneth's brother-in-law), and more. But the significance behind the south in being the place for this new musical venture was that no one had done it before, L.A Reid says that "it felt like a city full of dreamers, a place where things could happen and a place that hadn't been born yet musically". And so it did after LaFace Records had created a roster of artist selling over 1,000 gold and platinum records, 33 number 1 Billboard hit songs, and the result of three grammy's. There was no doubt that any artist overseen by L.A Reid would not be a failure but a upheaval of musical progress for example; Whitney Houston was one of the most popular woman vocalist and most selling acts on LaFace Records while Outcast was supplied a great asset of "sex appeal" to receive better reception from audiences. But one compelling artist that had gained the ultimate arts management experience was Usher from his style transformation to debuting his fourth album *Confessions*, as one of the best R&B albums in the 21st century. Usher was just 14 years old when he was recruited by Bryant Reid to audition for L.A in 1993 by hopefully getting signed even though the label wasn't expecting to mentor and/or mold any child's music career. But L.A had an "open door policy" in his office where there would be about 3-4 auditions happening a week in order to find new talent so once the instrumental of Boyz II Men "End of the Road" had played, Usher's charisma, confidence, and

stage presence had gotten everyone's attention in believing in this young man's talent and dream of becoming a professional entertainer. This would just impress the music executive but entice him at the same time where he added more audience members who were women, to see if Usher would resist. But he didn't, he actually persuaded every college employee and intern from going on his knees to making eye contact with them throughout his entire performance. Making Usher be a new signee of LaFace Records that very same day and would soon get sent to New York by L.A Reid for an artistic makeover. Where he was accompanied by Sean "Puffy Combs" for his "Puffy Flavor Camp" so that Usher could be more edgier and less "soft" and "pretty", updating artistic so that LaFace Records would be known for revamping and reshaping Atlanta's music scene as a gifted and talented city. With acts like BabyFace, TLC, Toni Braxton, and Donell Jones the 90's would be in for a great treat with new music being released while L.A continued to sign and develop artist. He would also work in corporate by moving to New York and being in charge of Arista Records, LaFace Records parent company. According to *Mr. President: A Conversation with LA Reid* by Kyle Kramer who interviewed the music executive, R&B was very posed at the time and L.A wanted to "shake it up a bit" however he never wanted to change an artist or control them. Instead he hates when creative executives try to possess an artist career because "it isn't our jobs to tell people who to be; it's our jobs to recognize it" says L.A Reid. Another dynamic duo that had helped shape and cultivate the material and sound of 90's R&B music were producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis who had provided a gateway for future songwriters. To manifest in music production by going up and beyond according to *From Usher to "Scream": We Spoke to Jimmy Jam About the Greatest Shit He's Ever Made* by David Hillier, Jimmy Jam one of the two legendary music producers would sit down and unfold some of his

most cherished moments. In how he made classic music like Janet Jackson's, "That's the Way Love Goes" or Johnny Gill's "Provocative" in 1993 after being in the business for over 30 years. Jam describes a great music producer as "a really great wing buddy: They accentuate all your best points and they make other people love you", supporting the fact that individuals who were in arts management during the 90's helped support R&B artist to the best of their abilities. So that great results were returned and that the artist felt secure within their career while R&B music became loved and reminisced by its current and past listeners in today's era.

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