

# TV Sunday

# The book on Cooke

Sam Cooke on the "Ed Sullivan Show" was a turning point.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**I**N late 1957, Sam Cooke had the biggest hit in the country with "You Send Me." And he was getting the ultimate nod of mainstream success — an appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

Aretha Franklin — in a rare TV interview with "VH1 Legends" for a show about the brilliant singer's short life and career that airs tonight — remembers it as it as a turning point for black performers on TV.

She recalls gathering in a hotel lobby with friends to watch the show.

"The idea that he was going to be on 'Ed Sullivan' was a major high point," says Aretha. "He came out and the lobby just erupted with cheers and screams and swoons and whatever." Their excitement turned into stunned disbelief when Cooke was cut off in the middle of performing his song when the show had run out of time.

"And they cut him short!" says Franklin. "Oh my God, what did they do that for? And we had a fit and all but turned the lobby and the hotel out."

The next clip viewers will see is even more remarkable: an unusually chastened Sullivan is shown introducing Cooke on the show a few weeks later and apologizing.

"I did wrong one night here on our stage by young Sam Cooke from the coast," says Sullivan. "I never received so much mail in my life."

According to writer Peter Guralnick, who wrote the special and is working on a biography of Cooke, Sullivan wasn't as imperious as he usually seemed. And while he was simply jumping on the bandwagon when it came to Cooke, Sullivan had a strong track record of supporting artists of all races.

"I think Ed Sullivan was more awkward than he was rude," says Guralnick, best known for his acclaimed two-volume biography of Elvis Presley, the subject of another controversial Ed Sullivan appearance. "It's funny. People get all kinds of conflicting reputations. But one of the

foundations for Ed Sullivan's reputation was the extent to which he broke black acts on television. That's not necessarily the way he's perceived today."

The VH1 special interviews family members and friends of Cooke like Lou Rawls and Bobby Womack. It also gives full due to his tremendous career as a gospel singer (Cooke's transfer to the secular world of pop was an earthquake), his farsightedness in gaining control of his own publishing rights and his entrepreneurial skills in setting up his own record label.

But it's the clips of Cooke on TV and in concert that show off

his charm, including an excerpt from "The Mike Douglas Show" in which Cooke disarmingly admits he bombed during his first appearance at the famous supper club, the Copa — at that point the most prestigious gig in the country.

"Wasn't that wonderful?" says Guralnick about Cooke's ease and charm.

The most revealing TV appearances of Cooke come courtesy of Dick Clark, who is interviewed for the special and seen in black-and-white footage (looking much the same) chatting away with the singer.

"Sam Cooke was on Dick Clark from very early in his career to the end," says Guralnick. "I'm not shilling for Dick Clark, but I think it's evident the affection Dick Clark has for him."

Given the brilliance of his final recordings — especially the harbinger of "A Change is Gonna Come" — the bursting enthusiasm of his business ventures and tentative forays into Hollywood (Cooke had just done a screen test), the VH1 special can't help but be tinged by sadness. Cooke was shot and killed at the age of 33.

What might he have accomplished?

"It's one of the most intriguing things: what would Sam be doing?" says Guralnick.

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