



Doin' Their Thing (excerpted from the liner notes for *Charles Wright and the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band: Live At the Haunted House - May 18, 1968*. Available on Rhino Handmade, 2008.)

“Good evenings lady and gentleman, welcome to the Haunted House. We have a live recording session tonight and we’d like for you all to get in the groove and participate.”

With those words, the Watts 103rd St. Rhythm Band kicked off their May 18, 1968 performance at Hollywood's Haunted House. Though warned that there'd be tape rolling throughout the evening, few in the audience could have realized how historic an event this was. Not only would music taped from the show end up edited into the group's sophomore album for Warner Brothers, *Together* (1968), but it was arguably the first album recorded by the “real” Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band.

To understand what I mean, you have to first appreciate that there were at least three different Watts 103rd Bands. The group that played at the Haunted House that evening is the best known version, including singer/guitarist Charles Wright, bassist Melvin Dunlap, drummer James Gadson, guitarist Al McKay, saxophonists John Rayford and Bill Cannon, trumpeter Gabriel Fleming and trombonist Ray Jackson. (Missing from that gig was trumpeter Joe Banks).

Yet, this Watts Band was actually the third iteration. The very first Watts Band dated back two years earlier, to 1966. That's when Los Angeles producer Fred Smith, along with radio personality, The Magnificent Montague, assembled a small group of players to record a theme song for Montague's radio show. The theme turned out to be so popular that Smith released it on his Keyman label, under the title, “Spreadin' Honey” and credited to a band named that Smith created in a moment of inspiration: The Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band. This was the Watts Band v1.

The actual personnel on "Spreadin' Honey" is up for debate. According to writer Ed Hill, who interviewed Charles Wright in 2005, “Spreadin' Honey” was originally recorded by Wright, Leon Haywood, Bobby Womack, and James Carmichael. Dunlap and Gadson both said they thought Wright had played on the single but Wright himself was unsure if this was the case. Unfortunately, Fred Smith was the one man who could have clarified but he passed away in 2005.

Just to make things more confusing, Montague re-released “Spreadin' Honey” on the MoSoul label (a Keyman subsidiary) but attributed it to another band entirely, The Soul Runners. Wright recalls that the Soul Runners included George Clark on congas and drummer Leslie Milton. However, he was very clear in stating that, contrary to popular assumption, there was absolutely

no connection between the Soul Runners and any of the personnel ever organized under the Watts 103rd name.

Concurrent to all this, Smith and comedian Bill Cosby were at the studios of Nashville West while Wright was also there, working with a group of studio players. “We were recording and in popped Cosby and Fred Smith, looking for a band to do Cosby’s first single.” The studio band that eventually backed Cosby included guitarists Wright, Pete Fox, and Mel Brown, saxophonists Herman Riley, Melvin Jernigan and Jackie Kelso, pianist James Carmichael, bassist Arthur Wright, trombonist John “Streamline” Ewing, and drummer Abraham Mills. They went onto record Cosby’s *Silverthroat* album and by Cosby’s next album, *Hooray For the Salvation Army Band*, Smith had taken the Watts 103rd name and bequeathed it onto this collective. This was the Watts Band v2.

Importantly, this was the band that Smith and Cosby helped get signed to Warner Brothers in 1967. In one, quick session, these players recorded the songs that would become the first Watts 103rd album, *Hot Heat and Sweet Groove*. These included loose instrumental jams cuts “Fried Okra,” “Soul Concerto” and an unexpected cover of the Beatles’ “Yellow Submarine.” (At the label’s insistence, “Spreadin’ Honey” was also included: “Warner Brothers wanted it too after it started selling,” Wright said, and thus, the song appears on the album despite the fact that almost none of the Watts Band v2 players were involved with it).

In the midst of all this though, Wright had his own band, outside of the studio: The Wright Sounds. Started in 1962, the Wright Sounds’ personnel evolved over the years but one of the future Watts Band members, saxophonist John Raynford, was with Wright nearly from the very beginning. From there, new members would find their way into the line-up, many by chance.

As a major entertainment center, Los Angeles attracted many out-of-town bands and inevitably, a few would shed off players who wanted to stay. “I came out from Cleveland, Ohio in 1964 or ‘65 with the O’Jays,” explained Dunlap. “They wanted to continue traveling but I wanted to stay out here and try to get off into working as a musician. A friend said, ‘hey, I know this guy named Lefty...Lefty Wright and he introduced me to him.’” Likewise, “another group had come into town from Kansas City and stranded [James Gadson]...then Joe Tex brought a guy into town and he got stranded, named Gabriel Fleming,” Wright recounted. Elsewhere, Wright recruited Al McKay who in turn, brought in his old partner Ray Jackson. Joe Banks came in on audition. Last but not least, Wright met Bill Cannon on a movie set: “the way he got to know me...he borrowed \$20.” With that, Wright completed his Sounds.

When Cosby began touring in 1967 and ’68, Wright brought both the Watts Band v2 and Wright Sounds onto the road (call it Watts Band v2.5). However, Wright had a chemistry with the Wright Sounds – especially as a touring band – that didn’t exist with his fellow Nashville West sessioners and eventually, he whittled down the band to only include the Wright Sounds players. That’s how the Watts Band v3 came to be and they would forever be connected to the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band name. It’s no coincidence that the first album released by them in this final configuration would be entitled *Together*.

Read the rest of the liner notes to learn about the Haunted House and how a live taping evolved into one of the Watts Band's first big hits. www.rhinohandmade.com

--Oliver Wang
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