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Protect, Preserve, And Perpetuate: How Black Music Month Started As A Power Play

“Black music is the basis for most other forms of music....There is nothing that I know of, no music that is more important, than Black music.” – Kenny Gambell

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Black Music Association (BMA) co-founders Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff with Clive Davis in 1970. Gems/Redferns

June 7th marks the annual anniversary of [Black Music Month](#)'s first celebration. Some may wonder whether a designated month is needed, when urban music has [officially](#) been the dominant genre, with decades of outsized influence on mainstream culture. In this “post-genre” music era, isn't black music always celebrated?

Yeah, so about that...

The fight for who defines black music and culture, who promotes it, and who reaps the financial benefits is as old as commercial music itself, and possibly stronger now than ever. Hip-hop's growth drove black music and culture into a multi-billion dollar business, with black founders, leaders, and heads at every turn in music and media. [Black Music Month](#) was born of the efforts to make that happen and now seems like the time to regroup.



In the '70s, the business of black music – which has always been an undercurrent of American music as a whole – was getting bigger. The major label system we know today was forming and swallowing up indies – including the black ones. Corporations had their eyes on the commodification of black culture, but in the post-civil rights era, black people had a larger voice, mobilized bases, and an understanding of their growing spending power and influence. They wouldn't be cut out of the business of blackness, as we had been for the entire existence of commodified culture. Now there was significant power to organize and push back. This was the spirit in which a group of black executives formed the Black Music Association in 1978 and conceived Black Music Month in 1979; not just to celebrate black music's contributions, but as part of a larger effort to mobilize black economic power, and for us to have more control over our own business.

Harvard & The Black Music Business

Black music is the foundation of American music. Behind almost every genre there's the influence of black artists at the sonic creation point: Blues, jazz, rock, country, and pop. For most of commercial music's history, we've observed sounds and styles pioneered by black artists and musicians [appropriated](#) by white artists and musicians, who then make more money from it. In the '60s and '70s, black-owned labels like Stax, Motown, Solar, and Sussex were thriving. Their artists and music were relevant – the soundtrack to the social and political unrest of the time. They were not only selling but crossing over while remaining black as hell. Former music exec Gary Harris [explained](#) the strength of Stax's music in an interview: "That sh*t [label owner] Al Bell was putting out was so Black, it was blue—it should have included a discount coupon for Johnson hair care products and a five-dollar coupon for a rib,



Major labels realized they needed to get in on that, but weren't sure how. With the exception of Atlantic, the majors and their affiliates were failing miserably at breaking more than one or two black acts – because they didn't know what to do. White executives love to ignore what black folks tell them to do about black things until another white person confirms it with some data, so in 1972, Columbia Records/CBS (specifically new president Clive Davis) commissioned research from the Harvard Business School. [**“A Study of the Soul Music Environment Prepared for Columbia Records Group,” otherwise known as the “Harvard Report,” was delivered in May 1972.**](#) The report summarily told Columbia they were late to the game and missing money, and outlined steps for them to catch up in the market share – namely adding dedicated black music divisions and black executives who knew how to promote the music. Columbia did as ordered; the label created a black music department; partnered with Philadelphia's storied Gamble and Huff, and established the black joint venture model with Philadelphia International; and bought into Stax records (that went south almost immediately, but that's another story).

Other major labels followed suit, bringing existing black shops under their umbrella or forming new joint ventures to act as a pipeline for black acts and an in-house resource for production. By the end of the decade, however, while black music was booming, this system was creating challenges. Black radio had started calling the black music format “urban” in an attempt to appeal to advertisers and non-black consumers. As part of that pivot, artists deemed “too black” weren't getting airplay. Local mom and



retailers' prices. Black promoters were relegated to the [former Chitlin' Circuit](#) mainstays, all of which were declining post-segregation. They couldn't get in the game with larger venues and tours, as successful black artists moved to the established (white) talent agencies. Black music was making more money than ever, but black people weren't controlling it.

Black Music Is Green

Kenny Gamble was traveling in Nashville and observed how the Country Music Association moved. [The CMA](#) was formed in 1958 to “guide and enhance the development of Country Music throughout the world; to demonstrate it as a viable medium to advertisers, consumers, and media; and to provide a unity of purpose for the Country Music industry.” He was inspired to create something similar for black music, and partnered with Ed Wright, the head of NATRA (The National Association of TV and Radio Announcers) to create the Black Music Association (BMA) with the mission to “preserve, protect and perpetuate black music.”



The BMA's official launch was in September of 1978 at a lavish inaugural convention in La Costa, California. Key figures in black music and media gathered, from label heads and founders like Berry Gordy, Dick Griffey, and Don Cornelius to artists like Stevie Wonder and Smokey Robinson. There were representatives from leading industry organizations like the National Association of Broadcasters and the National Associations of Recording Merchandisers, delegates and executives from the major labels, and some political muscle like Rev. Jesse Jackson. It was a power summit.

BMA had four divisions of membership and focus: marketing and merchandising, record company executives, TV and radio on-air talent and executives (including DJs and journalists), and the artists themselves. The organization also soon had a governing board made up of top executives from some of the major labels – whether black or not – which eventually became an issue internally.



The organization's goals were possibly a little too ambitious in the beginning. They promised to address if not solve almost every grievance in black entertainment, from radio airplay to cable broadcasting, to royalty payments, to distinguishing professional black promoters from the janky [funky fingers productions](#)-esque outfits. One of their first moves was to create a business initiative: Black Music Month.

“Initially, Black Music Month started as an economic program more than anything else,” [Kenny Gamble shared](#) in an interview with his ex-wife and co-founder of BMM, Dyana Williams. “The CMA had worked to establish October as Country Music Month, so we picked June as a time where we could concentrate on recognizing and celebrating the economic and cultural power of Black music and those who made and promoted it. The slogan we came up with was, ‘Black Music Is Green’ – it was about economics. So, in an effort to galvanize, as well as create an advocacy entity, Black Music Month was born.”

Gamble also noted that the CMA had been hosted at the White House for a reception, so he called the “[Godfather of Black Music](#).” Clarence Avant – [because](#)



White House lawn.

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=r3VVJSO69Zs%3Fstart%3D183>

Though Carter declared June Black Music Month with the event in 1979, and black music institutions celebrated every June thereafter, Black Music Month didn't become an official observation until 2000. Dyana Williams discovered in the late '90s that President Carter didn't issue an official decree, so she worked with her local congresswoman to draft [House Resolution 509](#), better known as The African-American Music Bill. In its official form, the bill — signed by former president Bill Clinton — called for a formal acknowledgment and celebration of black music's contribution to and impact on American life and culture. This is the spirit in which we observe Black Music Month today.

Whereas artists, songwriters, producers, engineers, educators, executives, and other professionals in the music industry provide inspiration and leadership through their creation of music, dissemination of educational information, and financial contributions to charitable and community-based organizations;
Whereas African-American music is indigenous to the United States and originates from African genres of music;
Whereas African-American genres of music such as gospel, blues, jazz,



Whereas African-American music has a pervasive influence on dance, fashion, language, art, literature, cinema, media, advertisements, and other aspects of culture;

Whereas the prominence of African-American music in the 20th century has reawakened interest in the legacy and heritage of the art form of African-American music;

Whereas African-American music embodies the strong presence of, and significant contributions made by, African-Americans in the music industry and society as a whole;

Whereas the multibillion-dollar African-American music industry contributes greatly to the domestic and worldwide economy;

Whereas African-American music has a positive impact on and broad appeal to diverse groups, both nationally and internationally; and

Whereas in 1979 President Carter recognized June as African-American Music Month, and President Clinton subsequently recognized June as

African-American Music Month: Now, therefore, be it Resolved, That the House of Representatives—(1) recognizes the importance of the contributions of African-American music to global culture and the positive impact of African-American music on global commerce; and (2) calls on the people of the United States to take the opportunity to study, reflect on, and celebrate the majesty, vitality, and importance of African-American music.



The first Black Music Month gathering hosted by President Jimmy Carter on the White House's South Lawn on June 7, 1979.
Courtesy of Dyana Williams

Getting Back To The Beginning

The Black Music Association dissolved in the mid-80s, as factions split in the leadership based on priority. Radio felt like their needs weren't being properly prioritized, and radio was the driver for almost everything else; Griffey and Rev. Jackson formed the Black Promoters Association as an offshoot of BMA, but it operated as its own entity; and questions rose regarding conflicts of interest with the presence of major label heads – some of the very people the BMA was targeting – on the organization's board.

“The BMA wasn't able to withstand splintered agendas in the leadership. That plus dissension about the organization's direction ultimately led to its demise,” [Williams explained to Billboard](#) a few years ago. “There's still the need for an organization that galvanizes all the styles of black music and also advocates the advancement of black music overall for this and future generations.”

In the 40 years since Gamble, Wright, and Williams championed black music's contributions on the White House lawn, the black music business has circled back to the same place as when BMA was founded. Urban music – specifically hip-hop – is now pop music, by definition, but once again, we're not in control. [Clinton's deregulation of telecommunications industry](#) in 1996 led to the conglomeration of radio, pushing black radio owners out as companies like iHeart and Clear Channel snapped radio stations up by the handful. With that came mass programming based on algorithms and data instead of decisions made by DJs who know their listeners and their markets. As “urban” music became more mainstream, labels dissolved black music divisions and ousted high-level black executives. Now, some labels are using [pure algorithms to sign artists](#) and make marketing



The business' shift to digital interests, while great for hip-hop, has hurt legacy R&B artists. And once again, black labels – even the joint ventures (JVs) – are largely absorbed into the majors, with many in existence as imprint only, if at all. “The whole culture of the music industry has changed,” [Gamble has pointed out](#). “With fewer black executives or dedicated black divisions like back in the day, there are many A&R people at these companies who don’t know anything about black music. But they still sign these artists...It appears that investment in black artists is pretty much at a standstill. There has been a systematic dismantling and ongoing cultural appropriation of black culture.”

It would serve black music now to go back and look at the original goals of the Black Music Association and Black Music Month. Former Sony Urban president Michael Mauldin — a surviving “old head” who oversaw the massive success of Destiny’s Child, [B2K](#), the Fugees and Lauryn Hill, founded The Scream Tour, and produced a mogul in his son, Jermaine Dupri — is working on a new iteration. [He lamented in Billboard](#) that black music’s stratospheric accomplishments in the ‘90s made us a little too comfortable. “The type of cultural impact we were having in 1998 has not been felt since. No one seemed to be paying attention to the future of Black American Music anymore. And once again there were community and political debates over how to best describe black heritage (Black American, African-American, urban, etc.) Resistance to the term ‘black music’ also fueled those debates, as many people — blacks and whites — felt that the word ‘black’ was too racial.” He added that his [Black American Music Association \(BAMA\)](#) “will pick up where its predecessor left off. The mission: to develop, recognize, educate, guide and promote the next generation of artists/musicians and industry executives, while supporting those dedicated to preserving and celebrating the legacy and future of Black American Music (BAM).”

Dyana Williams, now one of the foremost voices on black music history, also guides the future of the culture as labels’ go-to person for auntie-level artist development and communications education for new talent. In addition to getting to know artists beyond their talking points, she teaches them how to talk about their music and their talent, navigate the pitfalls of social media, and insists they know their influences and musical history. She emphasized the continued importance of celebrating Black Music



because we have influenced everybody from The Rolling Stones to The Beatles to Eric Clapton, who cite black music as their wellspring. We are talking about America's indigenous music that just happens to be black.”

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