Arts & Humanities

All the Right Moves

By
Kelly McMasters '05SOA
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Inside Le Monde restaurant on a recent Monday evening, servers whooshed across the scuffed black-and-white tile floor carrying petite black cauldrons of wine-soaked mussels that trailed steam past the table where Ericka Blount Danois ’04JRN and J-school professor Samuel Freedman sat toasting the publication of their books.

Danois’s book, her first, called *Love, Peace, and Soul: Behind the Scenes of America’s Favorite Dance Show* Soul Train*: Classic Moments*, tells the complicated history of the TV show owned and hosted by Don Cornelius, a man who effectively became, as the *Chicago Tribune* wrote in 2012, “the most powerful DJ in America.” Cornelius created one of the first integrated television experiences in the US, withstanding an enormous amount of racist pushback.

For Danois, *Soul Train* had been a family activity. “We’d sit and watch together,” she said. “My mother and sister had Afros, and we’d all be wearing butterfly collars and bell-bottoms.” Danois’s father was a DJ.

Danois had planned to interview Cornelius for her book, but soon after she received her contract, he committed suicide at the age of seventy-five.

One of the first people Danois called after learning of Cornelius’s death was Sam Freedman. The two had met in the summer of 1998, when Danois was a part-time student in the J-school’s core reporting class, RW1. Although the book did not originate in Freedman’s fabled book seminar, which has seen sixty-six books contracted during the twenty years he’s taught the class, Freedman helped shepherd Danois’s book to publication, providing interviewing and reporting tips as well as moral support. “Ericka is much faster than me,” Freedman said. “I was still plodding along and she was working at warp speed.”

Love, Peace, and Soul was published the same month as Freedman's sixth book, *Breaking the Line: The Season in Black College Football That Transformed the Sport and Changed the Course of Civil Rights*. The book focuses on the head coaches of the historically black Grambling College and Florida A&M, which in 1967 faced each other in the Orange Blossom Classic, or what has come to be called "the black Rose Bowl." The story follows Florida A&M coach Jake Gaither as he organizes his team's first game against the mostly white team from the University of Tampa in 1969, culminating in one of the largest racially integrated events of the time. Meanwhile, the coach at Grambling, Eddie Robinson, strategizes and succeeds in placing the first black full-time starting quarterback in the NFL.

Danois and Freedman have teamed up for a few readings and events to promote their work (they'll appear at Book Soup in Los Angeles in late January), since both books use shared cultural experiences to illuminate America's history of segregation.

"The quarterback was the last position to integrate because it is the thinking and leadership position," Freedman said. "The question always was: are blacks smart enough? At one point this year, there were nine black quarterbacks starting in the NFL and a large number of black team executives. But the same fears are attached to a black quarterback as a black president. Are blacks permissible heroes?"

In music it was different. The Top 40 in the 1970s was radically egalitarian compared to television, encompassing pop, soul, country, and rock. Television, meanwhile, had only seven channels. Freedman recalled walking around with friends from his suburban New Jersey high school, repeating Cornelius's tag line, "love, peace, and soul," trying to get their voices down into the Cornelius sub-octave.

"I didn't really have ears till I was in college — I came late," Freedman said to Danois. "But you had the opposite exposure, since your father was a DJ."

"My father was a rebel," said Danois. "He grew up in one of the only black families in a white neighborhood in Nyack. He started a record collection in the '60s and worked in a bookstore and a record store, and as a DJ. It's funny: my grandfather thought my father should have a respectable nine-to-five job, but all he cared about were records and books. And now he's a teacher at St. Hilda's right up the block and helps kids with reading comprehension after school."

Danois has a boxed set of *Soul Train* DVDs that she shares with her own children, just as her father shared the show with her. As a shy kid who read voraciously, Danois connected deeply with her father's quiet, observant nature.

"He gave me books, and music was playing all the time. If I had a problem, he'd give me Judy Blume and Etta James."

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