

Chapter 11

SOLAR

The History of the Sounds of Los Angeles Records

Scot Brown

SOLAR (Sound of Los Angeles Records) was the most dominant, black-owned record label from the late 1970s through the 1980s.¹ SOLAR, known as the Motown of the 1980s, dominated R&B and pop music with a run of hits from a large roster of artists, including The Whispers, Shalamar, Lakeside, Midnight Star, Klymaxx, Carrie Lucas, The Deele, Callo-way, and Babyface. SOLAR flourished in the midst of a major transformation in the history of American and African American music—large entertainment conglomerates took a serious interest in gaining a stronghold in black music consumer markets. This change corresponded with a trend toward globalization and corporate consolidation in the music industry at large, leading to the virtual eradication of any significant market share on the part of independent labels.² The drift toward consolidation and usurpation accelerated in the decades to follow, thereby generating new competitive challenges for the survival of black-owned record companies.

The late 1970s was not necessarily an opportune time for a start-up black record label, as major companies had established “black music divisions” aimed at gaining a foothold in African American music consumer markets. Larkin Arnold (Capitol), LaBaron Taylor (CBS), and Tom Draper (Warner Bros.) were among a slew of talented black executives who redesigned artist recruitment and product marketing practices to fit the distinctiveness of the African American music market—business strategies that had been, prior to the 1970s, the domains of black-owned and small “boutique” labels.³ Though Motown Records (which had moved to Los Angeles in 1972) continued to reign as one of the most powerful African American enterprises, its commanding position vis-à-vis popular music

was steadily declining amid increased competition from larger corporations—a glaring symbol to this effect being the steady flight of its top artists and producers to other labels, such as The Jackson 5 (Epic), Four Tops (ABC), Gladys Knight and the Pips (Buddha Records), Temptations (Atlantic), and Marvin Gaye (Columbia).⁴

Two other prominent black labels—Stax and Philadelphia International Records—each of which had their own controversial business relationship with CBS records—were unable to endure these difficult times. Stax Records was sold in 1977, and by the early 1980s Philadelphia International had already seen its most successful days. In 1997 the pop music historian David Sanjek observed that SOLAR had distinguished itself from other recently established black labels: “[o]ne can point to such recent enterprises as Sylvia and Joe Robinson’s Sugar Hill Records, Dick Griffey’s Solar Records, or Paisley Park Records . . . all, with the exception of Solar Records, are no longer labels in the commercial spotlight.”⁵ This chapter chronicles how the unique setting of Black Los Angeles gave rise to SOLAR, a black-owned label that would define a decade of popular black music.

Dick Griffey: Road to Economic Nationalism

By the time SOLAR was launched, Dick Griffey had amassed decades of experience in multiple facets of the music business. He learned to play the drums at an early age, having grown up in a musical household in Nashville, Tennessee. His mother, Juanita Hines, was a gospel vocalist and keyboardist for the National Baptist Convention. In the early 1950s, Griffey attended Pearl High School in Nashville, studying with the formidable music educator and band conductor, Marcus Gunter. The trumpeter Waymon Reed (who went on to play in Count Basie’s band and who was married to Sarah Vaughn) played with Griffey in a jazz band during their high school years. In 1957, after spending a year at Tennessee State University on a music scholarship and playing with the university marching band, Griffey served in the U.S. Navy as a medic and relocated to San Diego.⁶ After his discharge in 1961, he settled in the West Adams/West Jefferson section of Los Angeles and worked as a certified private-duty nurse.

A few years later, Griffey’s Tennessee State schoolmate and basketball player, Dick Barnett, moved to California to play for the Los Angeles Lakers. The two opened the Guys & Dolls club, located at 3617 S. Crenshaw Boulevard at a time when an increasing number of African American

residents and businesses were moving west of the city's historic Central Avenue district—a trend that continued to accelerate after the U.S. Supreme Court's ban on discriminatory restrictions in housing in 1948.⁷

Griffey booked top-performing acts at Guys & Dolls, regularly bringing in artists such as the Impressions, Temptations, Four Tops, Jackie Wilson, and Johnny "Guitar" Watson. Living up to its advertising slogan, "The Haven for the Greatest Athletes and Celebrities,"⁸ the nightclub was a natural path toward Griffey's career as a concert promoter. Initially booking acts in Los Angeles venues such as the Adams West Theater, he went on to become one of the leading promoters of R&B and Soul concerts through the mid 1970s, handling the performances of Al Green, the Temptations, Aretha Franklin, as well as the international tours of The Jacksons, and Stevie Wonder.⁹

While among a small clique of black promoters of national stature in 1973, Griffey raised the issue of racism in the music industry and the need for African American empowerment—recurring concerns that would shape his entrepreneurial efforts. Noting the widespread exclusion of black promoters from large national venues, he stated in 1973 that "[t]here are a lot of capable black promoters all over the country who deserve a shot at some of these major concerts." In keeping with the popularity of economic nationalism throughout the Black Power years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Griffey asserted that blacks themselves held the power to transform this problematic relationship to capital by way of their own cooperative efforts: "Black artists should be pressing their agents and managers to deal with some of these black promoters. . . . [They] have the power to do something about this bad situation, but they have been lax and indifferent."¹⁰

From Soul Train to SOLAR

Don Cornelius, the former Chicago newscaster for WCIU-TV and host/executive producer of the black music variety show *Soul Train*, also considered his show as part of the ongoing struggle for black economic power. While the show's programming was centered on black music, Cornelius was interested in expanding African American leadership in the television industry beyond the entertainment level, arguing that "there is a place in television for blacks who don't sing, dance or tell jokes." "This is," he continued, "what I set out to prove with *Soul Train*."¹¹ Within two

years of *Soul Train*'s debut in 1970 as a Chicago weekday program, the show emerged as a syndicated weekly program spanning media markets throughout the nation. The capacity for black financial cooperation to impact and potentially transform racially exclusionary segments of the American popular culture industry was perhaps best exemplified in *Soul Train*'s co-sponsorship by Johnson Products, one of the largest African American businesses and manufacturers of black hair care and cosmetics.¹² After *Soul Train* moved to Los Angeles in 1971, Griffey joined forces with Cornelius as the talent coordinator for the show. In 1975 they formed Soul Train Records, which featured a roster of artists that included The Soul Train Gang, The Whispers, Carrie Lucas, Shalamar, and Sunbear.

In late 1977, after Cornelius left Soul Train Records, came the label's name change to SOLAR, with Griffey as the head of the company.¹³ The label experienced immediate commercial success with a string of hits on both the R&B and pop charts. Like Motown, Stax, and Philadelphia International, SOLAR's success was tied to its ability to translate local urban culture into a consumer product. Los Angeles's position as the nation's media and entertainment center, however, blurred traditional distinctions between "local" and national black cultural trends. *Soul Train* was as much a part of the Black Los Angeles public sphere as it was an iconic black cultural institution. The prize of appearing on *Soul Train* invigorated dance competitions in nightclubs, public schools, and neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles. Furthermore, the dances, fashions, and hairstyles popularized by the show were a reflection of the styles and tastes of African American youth in Los Angeles and of those transported westward by the steady migration of black artists from other cities (see fig. 11.1).

Temille Porter, a John Muir High School student, and her dance partner, Charlie Allen, received an honorary mention at the radio station KDAY's "Ultra Sheen, Afro Sheen, 7-Up Dance Contest," held at the Whiskey a-Go-Go club on Sunset Boulevard in June 1975. The prize for placing, was an audition for *Soul Train* at the KTTV Studios. Two months later, the two of them—donning matching tropical print outfits, made by her mother, Mazree Porter—strolled gallantly down the *Soul Train* line.¹⁴

One of SOLAR's first top-selling groups, Shalamar was a direct product of *Soul Train*. Two vocalists in the group, Jeffrey Daniel and Jody Whatley, were both dancers on the show and contributed to the growth of numerous dance styles seen by national audiences on *Soul Train*—for example, waacking, popping, robotics, and backsliding (popularized by Michael Jackson as moon-walking). SOLAR's promotion of the Shalamar *Disco*



Figure 11.1. Jocelyn Banks and Fred Camble on *Soul Train* television program, Calif., August 27, 1975. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

Garden LP (1978) made use of national networks with radio stations and record stores through dance contests: "Radio personalities in all tour cities are being invited to host the contests held in each area's prominent disco," the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported, "with entry blanks being distributed through record stores."¹⁵ Clearly these events furthered Shalamar's status as a competitive vocal group affiliated with the disco craze, complementing the marketing niche of the label's dance music diva, Carrie Lucas

("I Got to Keep Dancin" [1977] and "Dance With You" [1979]). In 1978 the Shalamar vocalist Gerald Brown was replaced by Howard Hewitt. This lineup's dazzling stage performances and consistent hit records from 1979 through 1983 ensured Shalamar's passage from the last gasps of disco to early '80s R&B and pop music: "Second Time Around" (1979); "Right in the Socket" (1980); "Full of Fire" (1980); "Make That Move" (1981); "This Is for the Lover in You" (1981); "I Can Make You Feel Good" (1982); "A Night to Remember" (1982); and "Dead Giveaway" (1983).

Unlike Shalamar, The Whispers, a doo-wop styled vocal group from Watts, had been a staple in the Los Angeles music scene for more than a decade before SOLAR was formed. Described in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* in 1970 as "the most popular vocal group in the Los Angeles area," the group comprised of twin brothers Walter and Wallace Scott, Nicholas Caldwell, Marcus Hutson and Gordy Harmon (all of whom attended Jordan High School)—began singing together in the early 1960s. In 1971 Harmon left, after which Leaveil Degree, formerly of The Friends of Distinction, joined the group. The Whispers had recorded on a number of smaller labels prior to signing with *Soul Train* and SOLAR Records.¹⁶ Their final album with Janus Records, *Whispers Getting Louder*, was released in 1974 after which Griffey, then manager of the group, purchased its contract from the Chess Records subsidiary.¹⁷ By 1979, when many Motown-styled vocal groups were facing challenges due to the popularity of self-contained funk bands and the mainstream dominance of disco, the Whispers had demonstrated the continued commercial viability of their style with the dance classic "And the Beat Goes On."¹⁸

The success of Shalamar and the Whispers notwithstanding, SOLAR embraced the trend toward self-contained bands in black music. One of the early SOLAR hit singles was "It's All the Way Live" (1979) by Lakeside, a nine-member band from Dayton, Ohio (Fred Alexander, Norman Beavers, Marvin Craig, Fred Lewis, Tiemeyer McCain, Thomas Shelby, Stephen Shockley, Otis Stokes, and Mark Wood). Formed in 1969 as the Nomads and Young Underground, Lakeside was a product of the rich live-music tradition in Dayton that gave birth to a host of self-contained funk and R&B bands, such as Ohio Players, Sun, Heatwave, Slave, Zapp (Roger Troutman), and several others. Dayton's African American public sphere was a virtual training ground for bands in the craft of live stage performance with its numerous nightclubs and talent show competitions. Mark Wood described the city's "battle of the bands" ethic as "sportsman-like." "When it came to the stage," he noted, "it was all about how the audience

reacted and you had to do something to top the other guys ability to get that instant impact out of the crowd."¹⁹

In 1972 Lakeside arrived in Los Angeles, due to the unintended consequence of a gig gone sour in Oklahoma. Armed with the sole resource of their performance skills, the nine-member band scrambled to find work in Los Angeles's nightclub scene. The band scored a major coup by impressing John Daniels, the famed owner of The Maverick's Flat on Crenshaw Boulevard, and thereby securing regular appearances at one of the most important Los Angeles venues for major black acts.²⁰ Lakeside's show, described as "Sexy Soul Unlimited," blended the choreographed, Motown-era style of vocal groups like the Temptations with the raw self-contained musical energy of their Dayton mentors, the Ohio Players. The group generated a big local following and regularly attracted, as Norman Beavers recalled, "a line of people halfway around the block coming to see us every night. We [were] like the thing in Los Angeles," he continued, and "[t]hey started having radio advertisements, 'Come see them, the panty snatchers, come see Lakeside!'"²¹

Within a few years, Lakeside surpassed local notoriety as a performing act and recorded their first album on ABC Records under the direction of Frank Wilson, former Motown producer/songwriter. Even though *Lakeside Express* was released in 1977, the LP did not fare well, given the acquisition of the label by MCA Records. Soon thereafter Lakeside signed with SOLAR. Griffey, who had managed the band, offered extensive artistic freedom and opportunities for songwriting and publishing. Their first two albums, *A Shot of Love* (1978) and *Rough Riders* (1979), were co-produced by Leon Sylvers III (the producer/songwriter behind SOLAR's initial success), but the largest commercial success occurred with the self-produced *Fantastic Voyage* in 1980.

Admittedly, Lakeside's members learned a great deal from the production expertise of Leon Sylvers. Leon was the second oldest in a musical family of nine children and had been involved in music for many years before he began working with SOLAR artists. As a youngster growing up in the Nickerson Gardens public housing complex in Watts, he—along with two of his sisters, Olympia-Ann and Charmaine, and his brother James—comprised a vocal group called The Little Angels. The group appeared on numerous television variety shows in the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as Art Linkletter's *House Party*, *The Groucho Show*, *The Spike Jones Show*, *The Dinah Shore Show*, and *The Danny Thomas Show*.²² Leon and his siblings also competed at numerous talent shows through the 1960s,

including one at his high school, Verbum Dei, where they placed second behind another family group called Johnson Three Plus One (Tommy, George, and Louis Johnson, and Alex Weir). George and Louis Johnson went on to become the sensational funk duo, The Brothers Johnson.²³

In the early 1970s, the family group The Sylvers, which grew to include Edmund, Joseph, Angelia, Patricia, and Foster, recorded with MGM and then Capitol Records. Leon, a multi-instrumentalist (bass, guitar, and keyboards) and serious student of the Motown sound, learned recording skills from Freddie Perren, who had previously worked with the Motown production team known as The Corporation before producing The Sylvers and delivering the hits "Boogie Fever" (1975) and "Hotline" (1976).²⁴ This background gave Sylvers a unique penchant for arranging and recording complex harmonies alongside tight, up-tempo grooves, which became a trademark of dance hits by Shalamar, The Whispers, and Carrie Lucas.²⁵ Sylvers's musical voice resounds clearly in the compositions of his own group, Dynasty. In this group, he, along with Linda Carrier, William Shelby, Kevin Spencer, and Nidra Beard, as well as band members Wayne Milstein, Wardell Potts Jr., Richard Randolph, Ernest "Pepper" Reed, and Ricky Smith crafted a series of club classics, including the infectious "I've Just Begun to Love You" (1980). Summing up Sylvers's impact, Virgil Roberts, former president and general counsel for SOLAR, mused: "if you were doing a family tree probably all of the great producers from the last twenty-five years came from Leon."²⁶

The 1980s SOLAR Sound

By 1981, SOLAR was a recognized force in the music industry, noted for being part of the revival of "spirited '[b]lack pop.'" Some music critics wondered if the label's late 1970s run would continue into the new decade.²⁷ The issue was certainly valid from a sonic standpoint. The pop and R&B music of the 1980s faced the displacement of strings, horns, guitars, congas, and timbales by the synthesizer and drum machine. Sylvers continued to produce Shalamar and The Whispers, as well as a host of artists on other labels (for example, Gladys Knight, The Brothers Johnson, Glenn Jones, Evelyn "Champagne" King, Blackstreet and Guy) but members from the self-contained bands Midnight Star and The Deee added significantly to the company's songwriting and producing resources during the period.



Figure 11.2. SOLAR act Midnight Star. Photo courtesy of Vincent Calloway.

The Cincinnati-based Midnight Star released their initial SOLAR album in 1980 and, similar to Lakeside, began to self-produce by their third LP *Victory* (1982) (see fig. 11.2). The group of highly trained musicians—Reginald Calloway, Vincent Calloway, Kenneth Gant, Melvin Gentry, Belinda Lipscomb, Jeffrey Cooper, Bobby Lovelace, William Simmons, and Bo Watson (many of whom attended Kentucky State University)—developed a formula that worked for the changing times on the *No Parking on the Dance Floor* LP, released in 1983. Produced by band leader Reggie Calloway, the group blended 1980s electronic sound technologies with sophisticated musical and lyrical arrangements. Virtually each member of Midnight Star played numerous instruments and possessed great songwriting skills. This facilitated its ability to change toward a synthesizer-

driven sound, as an accompaniment to the rich vocals of Melvin Gentry, Belinda Lipscomb, and Bo Watson.

Three years before *No Parking on the Dance Floor* reached the airwaves, another Ohio funk artist, Roger Troutman (leader of the group Zapp), transformed the range and melodic possibilities of the talk box or voice box, a device that allows an artist to fuse vocal patterns with the sound emitted by electronic instruments and thus mimic speech. “More Bounce to the Ounce,” the first single released from Zapp’s eponymous Warner Bros. LP, stood as a declaration of sonic progress—the fattened Mini Moog Bass line offered much more bounce than the standard four-string bass guitar. Troutman described the voice of the talk box on “More Bounce” with the imagery of science fiction film and television: “I consider the voice box . . . like an African robot. . . . It says logical things that a computer says, but instead of saying them very drab and disgusting as a robot would say. . . . I can sound computerized and I can also sound real funky.”²⁸

Even more robotic in tone, the device known as the vocoder closely linked the synthesizer with vocals and conveyed a sci-fi aesthetic in ’80s dance music (for example, Kano’s “I’m Ready” [1980], Kraftwerk’s “Numbers” [1981], Earth, Wind & Fire’s “Let’s Groove” [1981], Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock” [1982], and The Jonzun’s Crew’s “Pack Jam” [1982]). Reggie Calloway, ever-conscious of music as a gateway to a danceable futurism, conceptualized Midnight Star’s first vocoder-laden single, “Freak-A-Zoid” as “already ahead of its time.” He continued, “you’re taking a word like freak which is old as dirt and then ‘zoid’ which is now until tomorrow and people will always deal with the freaky side of things and the whole computer age will continue and never die.”²⁹ His brother Vincent’s vocoder voice on other releases (e.g., “No Parking on the Dance Floor” [1983], “Electricity” [1983], and “Operator” [1984]) ensured Midnight Star’s standing as innovative artists within this trend.

Beyond electro-dance and funk, Midnight Star introduced Kenny “Babyface” Edmonds as a co-writer on the ballad “Slow Jam” (1983). The same year Reggie Calloway produced the debut of The Deele—of which Edmonds and L.A. Reid were members—on SOLAR records with the LP *Streetbeat*. Furthermore, Midnight Star and The Deele provided a host of songwriter/producers—the Calloway brothers, Bo Watson, Babyface, and L.A. Reid—who worked on projects for other SOLAR artists (The Whispers, Klymaxx, Babyface, and Calloway), creating an identifiable 1980s SOLAR sound.

The all-women's R&B/funk band Klymaxx, also came of age as a SOLAR act as the label entered the era of Reagan, MTV, and Michael Jackson. Black women instrumental musicians in blues, jazz, rock, and other genres have a long history of subverting gendered notions of propriety in their mastery of instruments not deemed "feminine."³⁰ Just a few years prior to Klymaxx's first LP in 1981, Janice Marie Johnson and Hazel Payne, the vocal, bass, and guitar duo, had blazed a trail for women musicians as front persons for the Los Angeles band A Taste of Honey, which scored the iconic disco hit "Boogie Oogie Oogie" (1978). Though the disco era has been noted for offering an alternative to the masculine ethos celebrated in rock, funk and R&B, the notion of women as electric guitarists was (and remains) a novelty in American pop music.

Klymaxx, comprised of Bernadette Cooper (drums and vocals), Lorena Porter (lead vocals), Joyce "Fenderella" Irby (bass), Cheryl Cooley (guitar), and Lynn Malsby (keyboards) and Robbin Grider (keyboards and vocals), was a living testimony to their first album *Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman* (1981). The musical arrangement of the title track, with its hard-driving groove, many time-signature changes, crescendos, and modulations, and its defiant lyrics, posed a direct challenge to conceptions of the "band" as an exclusive male province. Unlike A Taste of Honey, Klymaxx—buoyed by collaborations with independent (newly minted Terry Lewis and Jimmy Jam)³¹ and in-house producers (such as the Calloway brothers, Steve Shockley, and Bo Watson)—thived through most of the 1980s with dance hits such as "Heartbreaker" (1982), "The Men All Pause" (1984), "Meeting in the Ladies Room" (1984), as well as classic ballads "I Miss You" (1984) and "I'd Still Say Yes" (1986).

Klymaxx emerged as the top-selling act on Constellation Records, a SOLAR subsidiary established after a contractual renegotiation with its distributor Elektra/Asylum following the replacement of CEO Joe Smith with Bob Krasnow in 1983.³² Intent on cutting back Elektra's expenses, Krasnow moved to reduce SOLAR's artist roster and number of releases, which reportedly amounted to "about 12 albums and 25 singles per year."³³ Virgil Roberts explained that SOLAR "negotiated a reduction in the artist roster, but we also made it non-exclusive so we could take those artists and make another deal."³⁴ Subsequently, Constellation was formed and "the artists that we took off of the Elektra label [Klymaxx, Carrie Lucas, and Collage]," he continued, "we put on Constellation and made a distribution deal with MCA."³⁵

The formation of Constellation occurred after SOLAR had already

relocated to one of the lasting symbols of its 1980s prowess, its own multistory building at 1635 N. Cahuenga Boulevard in Hollywood, which housed its own recording studio, executive offices, rehearsal hall, show-case rooms, and auxiliary businesses (see fig. 11.3). Griffey's economic empowerment agenda was evident in the effort to include as many African Americans as possible in the construction process. After securing financing for the building project on the lot previously occupied by game show producer Chuck Barris, SOLAR employed real estate agent Vanessa Jollivette, daughter of Bettye Jollivette (the former deputy real estate commissioner for the state of California), as the developer and construction manager for the project. Jollivette hired Ray Dones, founding member of the National Association of Minority Contractors, as part of the general contractor team, and Mamie Johnson as the interior contractor.³⁶ "We knew," Jollivette recalled, "that we were embarking upon new territory that could instill entrepreneurial 'can do' attitudes in . . . not just the local community, [but also] the African American community throughout the United States."³⁷

Pan-Africanism and Transitions

Griffey's focus on economic empowerment was tied to a spirited Pan-Africanist perspective. Unlike Philadelphia International or even Motown during the 1970s, SOLAR Records did not musically convey a strong identification or affiliation with black social and political movements. Strategically, Griffey tended to keep the world of selling records and liberation politics in different spheres. Prior to founding SOLAR in 1973, he had promoted a concert, co-sponsored by the Los Angeles Pan-African Law Center to assist in raising funds for FRELIMO (Liberation Front of Mozambique). Griffey became more fully engaged with Africa in 1980, when he along with activist Ayuko Babu, Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles), and others mobilized to bring Guinean dance troupe, Les Ballet Africains, to perform at the city's bicentennial celebration. In making arrangements for the event Griffey traveled to Guinea with the delegation and met President Sékou Touré.³⁸

Politically, thereafter, Griffey formed the Coalition for a Free Africa and became heavily involved in the U.S. anti-apartheid movement, working closely with Rev. Jesse Jackson and PUSH/Rainbow Coalition, the NAACP, Artists and Athletes Against Apartheid, and other activists. Los

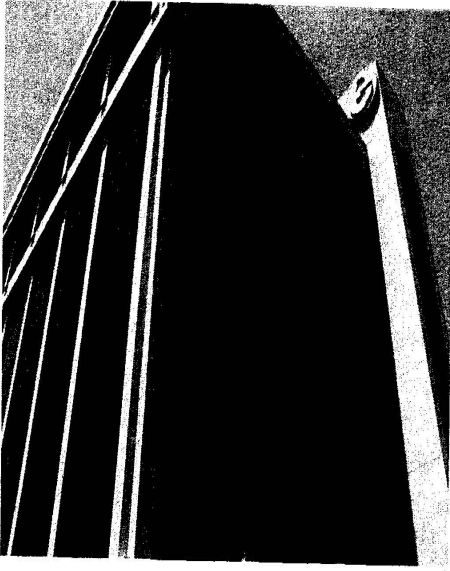


Figure 11.3. SOLAR building in Hollywood. Photo courtesy of Darnell Hunt.

Angeles, as the global media/entertainment center, became a major staging ground for anti-apartheid activism where the cause achieved heightened status, given the frequent publicity accorded by high-profile celebrity support.³⁹

In 1986 Griffey, Jesse Jackson, and a large group of civic and business leaders embarked on a seventeen-day “fact-finding” trip to eight African nations: Nigeria, Congo, Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. The trip spurred closer bonds between the anti-apartheid movement and liberation support of neighboring “frontline” African states.⁴⁰ The campaign to divest from the apartheid regime and pressure the U.S. government to withdraw support of South African-backed rebels in Angola and Mozambique was, from Griffey’s standpoint, part and parcel of a vision for developing black economic solidarity.⁴¹ While continuing to lobby for U.S. policy changes in respect to a number of political issues facing the African continent, Griffey was working steadfastly to create business relationships between SOLAR and African markets for black music.⁴² He concluded that opportunities for international trade with African countries could generate an alternative to the inevitable pattern of large corporate interests overtaking the independence of smaller black-owned boutique record labels, such as SOLAR.⁴³

By the 1990s, it became clear that the SOLAR CEO’s Pan-Africanism framed his criticism and self-criticism of the music industry and broader obstacles to black economic empowerment. Looking at the history of his label, Griffey conceded that power ultimately rested with the conglomerates that controlled venues for market access to musical products. “Distributors have the best of everything,” he asserted, “[i]t is not necessary for them to be very talented, since they have an infrastructure that says, ‘If you want to get your product to the marketplace, you have to come through me.’”⁴⁴ Griffey stated that even SOLAR had “been dependent in that way: my record company and my music company were always distributed by RCA or Warner or MCA or Capitol or Lasky or through a joint venture with Sony.”⁴⁵ He eventually started the African Development Public Investment Corporation, which specialized in investment and trade in the continent’s vast mineral wealth. Moving in a new direction, Griffey declared, “I feel strongly that we Africans need to do something for ourselves that can stand on its own, where we do not need those [corporate] intermediaries.”⁴⁶ In 1992 SOLAR released its last major recording, the soundtrack to the film *Deep Cover*, highlighted by the introduction of would-be West Coast hip-hop icons Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg on the LP’s title track. Griffey was instrumental in the subsequent creation of Death Row Records but eventually went on to focus primarily on his businesses in Africa.

Legacies

SOLAR (as an institution and sound) had deep roots in the Los Angeles African American public sphere, but it also benefited from the city’s position as a global entertainment magnet that attracted multitudinous waves of black artists, cultural workers, political activists, and entrepreneurs from all over the United States and beyond. The label was a catalyst for a Los Angeles 1980s R&B sound characterized by polished melodic vocals, thick bass synthesizer lines, analogue and digital keyboard chords, steady drum machine beats, and lyrical themes centering primarily on love and celebrating life, as opposed to explicit confrontations with social and political issues. SOLAR’s musical formula and commercial success from the late 1970s through the 1980s energized other black-owned labels based in Los Angeles during this period: Clarence Avant’s Tabu Records (S.O.S. band, Alexander O’Neal, Cherelle), Lonnie Smith’s Total Experience Records

(The Gap Band, Yarbrough and Peoples, and Goodie), and Otis Smith's Beverly Glen Music (Chapter 8, Anita Baker, and Bobby Womack).

Like so many black-owned record labels that preceded it (Vee-Jay Records, Motown, Stax, and Philadelphia International), SOLAR not only identified African American talent, but tended to stay with and develop artists in ways that were often not the case with major labels. Griffey, summarizing the success of black-owned labels in recent history, noted that the "majority of the majors . . . have money, they have financing, and they have the infrastructure but they really don't have the Berry Gordys, the Kenny Gambles or the Al Bells," who can see potential beyond quick profits. "When you're looking at the diamond in the rough," he concluded, "most people don't know if it's just a rock . . . Everybody can recognize something once it's already cut and polished."⁴⁷ By the close of the 1990s, the SOLAR Towers building was sold to one of the label's former artists, Kenny "Babyface" Edmonds, who along with L.A. Reid had established their own LA/Face Records. The structure stands as evidence of the institutional fortitude of SOLAR Records and the perpetuation of a black cultural and entrepreneurial legacy in Los Angeles.

NOTES

1. The author is grateful for critical assistance from Virgil Roberts in research for this chapter.
2. Kennedy and Mcnutt, *Little Labels—Big Sound*; Burnett, *Global Jukebox*.
3. Person-Lynn, "Insider Perspectives"; "Black Executives in the Record Business," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 29, 1977, 7, 15, 31; George, *Death of Rhythm & Blues*.
4. Posner, *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power*.
5. Sanjek, "One Size Does Not Fit All," 555.
6. Dick Griffey, "Interview with the Author: Transcript" (University of California at Los Angeles, 2008).
7. *Westwood One: Special Edition LP [Solar Records]* (Culver City, CA: Westwood One, 1983), Sound Recording; "Guys & Dolls Host Jim Brown Night," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 31, 1964, B4; Griffey, "Interview with the Author: Transcript." See also chaps. 1 and 2 for a discussion of this trend.
8. "Guys & Dolls Host Jim Brown Night," B4.
9. Griffey, "Interview with the Author: Transcript"; Myers, "An Afternoon with Dick Griffey," 341.
10. Dennis Hunt, "Griffey: Kingpin of Soul Promoters," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1973, C24.
11. "Don Cornelius Is Guest on WBEE's 'Minority Forum,'" *Daily Defender*, October 17, 1974, 15.
12. "Soul Train Hit with Teens," *Daily Defender*, September 21, 1970, 13; "Soul Train' Back for 2nd Season TV Series," *Daily Defender*, September 20, 1972, 12; Walker, *History of Black Business in America*, 303–09.
13. "Dick Griffey Concerts," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 21, 1983, B8.
14. "Jim Maddox, KDAY Program Director, and Jean Tillman, KDAY Community Relations Director to Temille Porter, June 20, 1975" (Personal Files of Temille Porter, Los Angeles, CA); "Pam Brown, Soul Train Teen Coordinator to Temille Porter, August 1975" (Los Angeles: Personal Files of Temille Porter, Los Angeles, CA).
15. "SOLAR Launches National Dance Contest," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 16, 1978, B1A.
16. *The Whispers Bio*, <http://thewhispers.com/BIO/BIO.html>. (accessed March 18 2009); "May Day with Major Lance," *Los Angeles Sentinel* June 3 1965, C10. "L.A. Twins Score Big with the Whispers Five," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 3, 1970, B.
17. Dick Griffey, "Interview with the Author: Transcript" (Los Angeles, 2009), 1.
18. "The Whispers Say: And Beat Goes On," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 24, 1980, B.
19. Mark Wood, "Interview with the Author: Transcript" (University of California at Los Angeles, 2007), 6.
20. For an insightful firsthand account of the black music scene in Los Angeles in the early 1970s, see Patryce Banks, *A "Choc' Let" State of Mind*, 56–87.
21. Norman Beavers, "Interview with the Author: Transcript" (University of California at Los Angeles, 2007), 11.
22. Leon Sylvers III, "Interview with the Author: Notes" (University of California at Los Angeles, 2009).
23. *Ibid.*
24. "Interview Transcript: Leon Sylvers III" (Karen Shearer Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University, 1982).
25. Leon Sylvers III, "Interview with the Author: Notes"; "Interview Transcript: Leon Sylvers III." Sylvers often collaborated with individual members of different SOLAR groups and his own team of writers and musicians, including Vincent Brantley, Marcus Hare, Dana Myers, Wardell Potts, Ernest "Pepper" Reed, William Shelby, Ricky Smith, Kevin Spencer, and William Zimmerman.
26. Virgil Roberts, "Interview with the Author: Transcript" (University of California at Los Angeles, 2008). Indeed, Sylvers helped launch the careers of Terry Lewis and Jimmy Jam as independent producers.
27. Gene Sculatti, "Home Runs, No Bunts"—Solar Power on the Rise," *Los Angeles Times*, December 6 1981, 82.

Killing "Killer King" The Los Angeles Times and a "Troubled" Hospital in the 'Hood

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28. "Interview Transcript: Zapp (Roger Troutman)" (Karen Shearer Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University, 1982), 2.
29. "Interview Transcript: Midnight Star (Reggie Calloway)" (Karen Shearer Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University, 1984), 6.
30. See M. Johnson ("Black Women Electric Guitarists") and Porter (*What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*) for a discussion of black women blues guitarists such as Memphis Minnie, Rosetta Tharpe, Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, Barbara Lynn, Deborah Coleman, and B. B. Queen. Similar challenges face women instrumentalists in jazz, rock and other genres (Tucker, *Swing Shift*; Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*; Mahon, "Race, Gender and Genre").
31. Terry Lewis and Jimmy Jam (James Harris III) secured initial production work for Tabu Records through their manager, SOLAR executive Dina Andrews.
32. "Warner Names Head of Elektra Record Unit," *New York Times*, January 12, 1983, D2.
33. "Dick Griffey/Solar Records Pact," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 4, 1981, B9.
34. Roberts, "Interview with the Author: Transcript," 18.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. Vanessa Jollivette, "Interview with the Author: Audio Recording" (University of California Los Angeles, 2009).
38. Ayuko Babu, "Interview with the Author: Transcript," (2008), 7, 27-31; Griffey, "Interview with the Author: Transcript," 15-26.
39. "ANC Mothers Inaugural Banquet," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 1, 1986; "Anti-Apartheid Telethon on Drawing Board," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 17, 1986, A1.
40. Stanford, *Beyond the Boundaries*, 149.
41. "Tutu's U.S. Visit Stirs New Anti-Apartheid Awareness," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 30, 1986, A16; "SOLAR Chief Keynotes Ebonics Awards," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 19, 1986, A3.
42. *Westwood One: Special Edition LP* [Solar Records].
43. For a debate on the usurpation of black companies such as Motown and Johnson Products by large corporations, see Rhonda Reynolds, "Must Black Firms Stay in Black Hands?" *Black Enterprise* 26, no. 1 (1995): 191-92, 194, 198; "Big Music Beef at Home Why Funk African Gestapo," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 28, 1984.
44. Myers, "An Afternoon with Dick Griffey" 342-44.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Griffey, "Interview with the Author: Transcript," 26-37.

Awarded to the *Los Angeles Times* for its courageous, exhaustively researched series exposing deadly medical problems and racial injustice at a major public hospital.¹

The above quote, which comes from an overview of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize winners for Public Service, is as familiar as it is ambiguous. The "courageous, exhaustively researched series"² referred to in the quote is based on the investigative work of a team of white *Los Angeles Times* reporters.³ Celebrated by American journalism's highest award, this work documented startling cases of incompetence and fraud at Martin Luther King Jr./Charles Drew Medical Center⁴—a county-run hospital that served one of Los Angeles's poorest minority communities. "[I]t became clear to us that King/Drew rated poorly on practically all statistical measures," wrote lead reporter Charles Ornstein, in an interview with his alma mater's newspaper.⁵ "As we investigated further, we concluded that the hospital was far more dangerous than the public knew."

Poor medical care for the poor, unfortunately, was all too familiar in early-2000s America. What's ambiguous about the quote is its conception of "racial injustice," which can be read a number of different ways. One of these readings reverses the traditional American pattern: the implied villains here are minorities, as opposed to members of the majority. Throughout its thirty-four-year history, King/Drew was known as a hospital staffed mostly by black administrators, doctors, and nurses. The *Los Angeles Times* series charged that too many of these staff members