

Don Cornelius

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# Chapter 1

## Don Cornelius

**Donald Cortez “Don” Cornelius** (September 27, 1936 – February 1, 2012) was an American television show host and producer who was best known as the creator of the nationally syndicated dance and music show *Soul Train*, which he hosted from 1971 until 1993. Eventually Cornelius sold the show to MadVision Entertainment in 2008.

### 1.1 Early life and career

Cornelius was born on Chicago’s South Side on September 27, 1936,<sup>[1]</sup> and raised in the Bronzeville neighborhood. After graduating from DuSable High School in 1954,<sup>[2]</sup> he joined the United States Marine Corps and served 18 months in Korea. He worked at various jobs following his stint in the military, including selling tires, automobiles, and insurance, and as an officer with the Chicago Police Department.<sup>[3]</sup> He quit his day job to take a three-month broadcasting course in 1966, despite being married with two sons and having only \$400 in his bank account.<sup>[1]</sup> In 1966, he landed a job as an announcer, news reporter and disc jockey on Chicago radio station WVON. He stood roughly 6 ft 4 in (193 cm) tall.

Cornelius joined Chicago television station WCIU-TV in 1967 and hosted a news program called *A Black’s View of the News*. In 1970, he launched *Soul Train* on WCIU-TV as a daily local show. The program entered national syndication and moved to Los Angeles the following year.<sup>[4][5][6]</sup> Eddie Kendricks, Gladys Knight & the Pips, Bobby Hutton and Honey Cone were featured on the national debut episode.

Originally a journalist and inspired by the civil rights movement, Cornelius recognized that in the late 1960s there was no television venue in the United States for soul music. He introduced many African-American musicians to a larger audience as a result of their appearances on *Soul Train*, a program that was both influential among African-Americans and popular with a wider audience.<sup>[7][8]</sup> As writer, producer, and host of *Soul Train*, Cornelius was instrumental in offering wider exposure to black musicians such as James Brown, Aretha Franklin, and Michael Jackson, as well as creating opportunities for talented dancers, setting a precedent for popu-

lar television dance programs.<sup>[9]</sup> Cornelius said, “We had a show that kids gravitated to,” and Spike Lee described the program as an “urban music time capsule”.<sup>[9]</sup>

With the creation of *Soul Train*, Don was able to keep the movement going well past Martin Luther King’s death. He kept the momentum going well on through the 1970s and 1980s. He gave African Americans their own show, the first of its kind. In this show he was able to show African Americans in a new light, creating a Black is Beautiful Campaign.<sup>[10]</sup> Before he did this, African Americans were seldom seen on television. *Soul Train* showcased their culture and brought African American musicians and dancers to television.<sup>[11]</sup> This show even appealed to white audiences and it got huge attention.<sup>[12]</sup> It was one of the most groundbreaking television shows ever.<sup>[13]</sup>



Cornelius (second from right) with The Staple Singers during production of a 1974 episode of *Soul Train*.

Besides his smooth and deep voice and afro (which slowly shrunk over the years as hairstyle tastes changed), Cornelius was best known for the catchphrase that he used to close the show: "... and you can bet your last money, it's all gonna be a stone gas, honey! I'm Don Cornelius, and as always in parting, we wish you love, peace and soul!" After Cornelius's departure, it was shortened to "...and as always, we wish you love, peace and soul!" and was used through the most recent new episodes in 2006. Another introductory phrase he often used was: "We got another sound comin' out of Philly that's a sure 'nough dilly".

He had a small number of film roles, most notably as record producer Moe Fuzz in 1988's *Tapeheads*.

Cornelius last appeared on the episode of the TV series *Unsung* featuring Full Force, which was aired two days before his death.

## 1.2 Arrest

On October 17, 2008, Cornelius was arrested at his Los Angeles home on Mulholland Drive on a felony domestic violence charge.<sup>[14]</sup> He was released on bail. Cornelius appeared in court on November 14, 2008, and was charged with spousal abuse and dissuading a witness from filing a police report. Cornelius appeared in court again on December 4, 2008, and pleaded not guilty to spousal abuse and was banned from going anywhere near his estranged wife, Russian model Victoria Avila-Cornelius (Viktoria Chapman), who had obtained two restraining orders against him. On March 19, 2009, he changed his plea to no contest and was placed on 36 months probation.

## 1.3 Death

In the early morning hours of February 1, 2012, officers responded to a report of a shooting at 12685 Mulholland Drive and found Cornelius with an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. He was taken to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead by the Los Angeles County Assistant Chief Coroner.<sup>[11][15]</sup> According to former *Soul Train* host Shemar Moore, Cornelius may have been suffering from early onset of dementia or Alzheimer's disease and his health had been in decline.<sup>[16][17]</sup>

An autopsy found that Cornelius had been suffering from seizures during the last 15 years of his life, a complication of a 21-hour brain operation he underwent in 1982 to correct a congenital deformity in his cerebral arteries. He admitted that he was never quite the same after that surgery and it was a factor in his decision to retire from hosting *Soul Train* in 1993. According to his son, he was in "extreme pain" by the end and said shortly before his death, "I don't know how much longer I can take this."<sup>[18]</sup>

## 1.4 References

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- [17] Don Cornelius' Obituary on BBC Radio 4's *Last Word*, first broadcast on February 10, 2012.
- [18] "Don Cornelius Autopsy Report - 'I Don't Know How Long I Can Take This'", TMZ, 4/24/2012.

## 1.5 External links

- Don Cornelius 'Soul Train' Creator Dies
- Cornelius memorial at the Soul Train website
- Don Cornelius at the Internet Movie Database
- Don Cornelius in the Hollywood Walk of Fame Directory
- "Factbox: Key facts about Don Cornelius and 'Soul Train,'" *Reuters*, Wednesday, February 1, 2012.

## Chapter 2

# Soul Train

*Soul Train* was an American musical variety television program which aired in syndication from 1971 until 2006. In its 35-year history, the show primarily featured performances by R&B, soul and hip hop artists, although funk, jazz, disco and gospel artists also appeared. The series was created by Don Cornelius, who also served as its first host and executive producer.

Production was suspended following the 2005-2006 season, with a rerun package (known as *The Best of Soul Train*) airing for two years subsequently. As a nod to *Soul Train's* longevity, the show's opening sequence during later seasons contained a claim that it was the "longest-running first-run, nationally syndicated program in American television history," with over 1,100 episodes produced from the show's debut through the 2005-2006 season. Despite the production hiatus, *Soul Train* will continue to hold that honor until at least 2016, if and when its nearest competitor, *Entertainment Tonight*, completes its 35th season. If *ET* does not complete a 35th season, *Wheel of Fortune* will surpass it in 2018 if it continues to air.

## 2.1 History

### 2.1.1 Chicago origins

The origins of *Soul Train* can be traced to 1965 when WCIU-TV, an upstart UHF station in Chicago, began airing two youth-oriented dance programs: *Kiddie-a-Go-Go* and *Red Hot and Blues*. These programs—specifically the latter, which featured a predominantly African-American group of in-studio dancers—would set the stage for what was to come to the station several years later. Don Cornelius, a news reader and backup disc jockey at Chicago radio station WVON, was hired by WCIU in 1967 as a news and sports reporter. Cornelius also was promoting and emceeing a touring series of concerts featuring local talent (sometimes called "record hops") at Chicago-area high schools, calling his traveling caravan of shows "The Soul Train". WCIU-TV took notice of Cornelius's outside work and in 1970, allowed him the opportunity to bring his road show to television.

After securing a sponsorship deal with the Chicago-based

retailer Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Soul Train* premiered on WCIU-TV on August 17, 1970, as a live show airing weekday afternoons. The first episode of the program featured Jerry Butler, the Chi-Lites, and the Emotions as guests. Cornelius was assisted by Clinton Ghent, a local professional dancer who appeared on early episodes before moving behind the scenes as a producer and secondary host.<sup>[1]</sup>

### 2.1.2 Move to syndication



*Soul Train* host Don Cornelius (second from right) with *The Staple Singers* in 1974.

The program's immediate success attracted the attention of another locally based firm—the Johnson Products Company (manufacturers of the Afro Sheen line of hair-care products)—and they later agreed to co-sponsor the program's expansion into national syndication. Cornelius and *Soul Train's* syndicator targeted 24 markets

outside of Chicago to carry the show, but stations in only eight other cities—Atlanta, Birmingham, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Francisco—purchased the program, which began airing on a weekly basis on October 2, 1971. By the end of the first season, *Soul Train* was on in the other sixteen markets.<sup>[2]</sup> When the program moved into syndication, its home base was also shifted to Los Angeles, where it remained for the duration of its run. *Soul Train* was part of a national trend toward syndicated music-oriented programs targeted at niche audiences; two other network series (*Hee Haw* for country music, and *The Lawrence Welk Show* for traditional music) also entered syndication in 1971 and would go on to have long runs.

Though Don Cornelius moved his operations west, *Soul Train* continued in Chicago as a local program. Cornelius hosted the local Chicago and Los Angeles-based national programs simultaneously, but soon focused his attention solely on the national edition. He continued to oversee production in Chicago, where Clinton Ghent hosted episodes on WCIU-TV until 1976, followed by three years of once-weekly reruns.<sup>[3]</sup> The syndicated version was picked up in Chicago by CBS-owned WBBM-TV at its launch; the program moved to WGN-TV in 1977 and remained there for the rest of its run.

In 1985, Chicago-based Tribune Entertainment (WGN's syndication wing) took over *Soul Train's* syndication contract; the series would continue distribution through Tribune for the rest of its original run.

Most of the stations that aired *Soul Train* during the final 13 years were either Fox affiliates or independent stations that would later become WB network affiliates (like WGN-TV from 1995-2006 in the Chicago area and from 1995-1999 on the national superstation version), UPN affiliates or both dual WB/UPN affiliates.

### 2.1.3 Later years

Don Cornelius ended his run as host at the end of the show's 22nd season in 1993, though he remained the show's main creative force from behind the scenes. The following fall, *Soul Train* began using various guest hosts weekly until comedian Mystro Clark began a two-year stint as permanent host in 1997. Clark was replaced by actor Shemar Moore in 1999. In 2003, Moore was succeeded by actor Dorian Gregory, who hosted through 2006.

*Soul Train* pulled into its last stop when production of first-run episodes was suspended at the conclusion of the 2005–06 season, the show's 35th. Instead, for two seasons starting in 2006–07, the program aired archived episodes (all from between 1974 and 1987) under the title *The Best of Soul Train*.<sup>[4]</sup> This was because in later years, Nielsen ratings dropped to below 1.0; in the process, some of the stations which had been airing *Soul Train* on Saturday afternoons started rescheduling the program to

overnight time slots. The future of *Soul Train* was uncertain with the announced closing of Tribune Entertainment in December 2007, which left Don Cornelius Productions to seek a new distributor for the program.<sup>[5]</sup> Cornelius soon secured a deal with Trifecta Entertainment & Media.

### 2.1.4 Revival

When Don Cornelius Productions still owned the program, clips of the show's performances and interviews were kept away from online video sites such as YouTube owing to copyright infringement claims. Cornelius also frowned upon unauthorized distribution of *Soul Train* episodes through the sale of third-party VHS or DVD compilations.

In May 2008, Cornelius sold the rights to the *Soul Train* library to MadVision Entertainment, whose principal partners came from the entertainment and publishing fields. The price and terms of the deal were not disclosed.<sup>[6]</sup> However, by the start of the 2008–09 television season, the Tribune Broadcasting-owned stations (including national carrier WGN America) that had been the linchpin of the show's syndication efforts dropped the program, and many others followed suit. *Soul Train's* website acknowledged that the program had ceased distribution on September 22, 2008.

Following the purchase by MadVision, the *Soul Train* archives were exposed to new forms of distribution. In April 2009, MadVision launched a *Soul Train* channel on YouTube. Three months later, the company entered into a licensing agreement with Time-Life to distribute *Soul Train* DVD sets.<sup>[7][8]</sup> MadVision then came to terms with Viacom-owned Black Entertainment Television to re-launch the *Soul Train Music Awards* for BET's new spin-off channel, Centric, in November 2009, a move that may be one step into reviving the program. Centric, which launched on September 28, 2009, is currently broadcasting archived episodes of the program. Archived episodes of the series can also be seen on Bounce TV, an Atlanta-based television network that launched on September 26, 2011.

MadVision sold the rights to *Soul Train* to a consortium led by basketball player Earvin "Magic" Johnson in 2011. Johnson's group plans on a potential film project Cornelius had briefly mentioned prior to selling the franchise, as well as producing potential stage adaptations and a cruise.<sup>[9]</sup> As part of the sale, Johnson's Aspire TV channel also began airing reruns of the series.

Cornelius continued to appear for *Soul Train* documentaries and ceremonies up until his death from suicide in February 2012. In 2013, a cruise-based revival, called the Soul Train Cruise, began taking place; the cruise is presented by Centric.<sup>[10]</sup>

### 2.1.5 Influence

Some commentators have called *Soul Train* a “black *American Bandstand*,” another long-running program with which *Soul Train* shares some similarities. Cornelius, however, tended to bristle at the *Bandstand* comparison.<sup>[11]</sup>

In 1973, Dick Clark, host and producer of *Bandstand*, launched *Soul Unlimited*, controversial for its pronounced racial overtures, to compete directly with *Soul Train*. Cornelius, with help from Jesse Jackson, openly accused Clark of trying to undermine TV’s only Black-owned show. Agreeing, ABC canceled it after a few episodes. Clark later agreed to work with Cornelius on a series of network specials featuring R&B and soul artists.<sup>[12]</sup>

Cornelius was relatively conservative in his musical tastes and was admittedly not a fan of the emerging hip hop genre, believing that the genre did not reflect positively on African-American culture (one of his stated goals for the series). Even though Cornelius would feature rap artists on *Soul Train* frequently during the 1980s, he publicly would admit (to the artists’ faces such as Kurtis Blow) that the genre was one that he did not understand; as rap continued to move further toward hardcore hip hop, Cornelius would admit to be frightened by the antics of groups such as Public Enemy. Rosie Perez testified in the 2010 VH1 documentary *Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America* that Cornelius also disliked seeing the show’s dancers perform sexually suggestive “East Coast” dance moves. Cornelius admittedly had rap artists on the show only because the genre was becoming popular among his African-American audience, though the decision alienated middle-aged, more affluent African Americans like himself. This disconnect eventually led to Cornelius’s stepping down as host in the early 1990s and the show’s losing its influence.<sup>[13]</sup>

Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson, drummer for hip-hop band The Roots and a fan of the program, authored *Soul Train: The Music, Dance, and Style of a Generation*. ISBN 978-0-0622-8838-7., which was published in 2013.<sup>[14]</sup>

## 2.2 Program elements

Within the structure of the program, there were two enduring elements. The first was the “**Soul Train Scramble Board**”, where two dancers are given 60 seconds to unscramble a set of letters that form the name of that show’s performer or a notable person in African American history. In describing the person’s renown, the host concluded their description with the phrase “...whose name you should know”. Cornelius openly admitted after the series ended its run that the game was usually set up so everybody won in an effort not to cause embarrassment for the show or African Americans in general.

There was also the popular “**Soul Train Line**”, in which all the dancers form two lines with a space in the middle for dancers to strut down and dance in consecutive order. Originally, this consisted of a couple—with men on one side and women on the other. In later years, men and women had their own individual lineups. Sometimes, new dance styles or moves were featured or introduced by particular dancers. In addition, there was an in-studio group of dancers who danced along to the music as it was being performed. Rosie Perez, Damita Jo Freeman, Darnell Williams, Alise Mekhail, Carmen Electra, Nick Cannon, MC Hammer, Jermaine Stewart, Heather Hunter, Fred “Rerun” Berry, Laurieann Gibson, Pebbles, and NFL legend Walter Payton were among those who got noticed dancing on the program over the years. Two former dancers, Jody Watley and Jeffrey Daniel, enjoyed years of success as members of the R&B group Shalamar after they were chosen by *Soul Train* talent booker/record promoter Dick Griffey and Cornelius to replace the group’s original session singers in 1978.<sup>[15]</sup>

Each guest usually performed twice on each program; after their first number, they were joined by the program host onstage for a brief interview. The show was also known for two popular catchphrases, referring to itself as the “hippest trip in America” at the beginning of the show and closing the program with “...and as always in parting, we wish you love, peace...and SOUL!”

## 2.3 Spinoffs

In 1987, *Soul Train* launched the *Soul Train Music Awards*, which honors the top performances in R&B, hip hop, and gospel music (and, in its earlier years, jazz music) from the previous year.

*Soul Train* then produced the short-lived *Soul Train Comedy Awards* in 1993, which discontinued that same year.<sup>[16][17][18]</sup>

*Soul Train* later created two additional annual specials: *The Soul Train Lady of Soul Awards*, first airing in 1995, celebrated top achievements by female performers; and the *Soul Train Christmas Starfest*, which premiered in 1998, featured holiday music performed by a variety of R&B and gospel artists. Award categories for the *Soul Train Lady of Soul Awards* presented to female recipients included,

- R&B/Soul Album of the Year, Solo<sup>[19]</sup>
- Best R&B/Soul Album of the Year, Group or Duo<sup>[19]</sup>
- R&B/Soul Song of the Year<sup>[19]</sup>
- Best R&B/Soul Single, Solo<sup>[19]</sup>
- Best R&B/Soul Single, Group or Duo<sup>[19]</sup>



- Best R&B/Soul or Rap New Artist<sup>[19]</sup>
- Best Jazz Album<sup>[19]</sup>
- Best Gospel Album<sup>[19]</sup>
- Best R&B/Soul or Rap Music Video<sup>[19]</sup>

Specials awards given were The Aretha Franklin Award for Entertainer of the Year, and The Lena Horne Award for Outstanding Career Achievements<sup>[19]</sup>

The *Lady of Soul Awards* and *Christmas Starfest* programs last aired in 2005. In April 2008, Don Cornelius announced that year's *Soul Train Music Awards* ceremony had been canceled. Cornelius cited the three-month strike by the Writers Guild of America as one of the reasons, though a main factor may have been the uncertainty surrounding *Soul Train's* future. Cornelius also announced that a motion picture based on the program was in development.<sup>[20]</sup> However, subsequent owners of the franchise have followed their own agenda for the program, which included a revival of the *Soul Train Music Awards* as of 2009.

## 2.4 Theme music

*Soul Train* used various original and current music for theme songs during its run, including

- 1971-1973: "Soul Train (Hot Potato)", by King Curtis (Curtis Ousley) and later redone by The Rimshots as "Soul Train, Parts 1 & 2". [The original 1962 version, which was used on the show, was recorded nine years before the show was named "Hot Potatoes (Piping Hot)"]
- 1973-1975: "TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia)", composed by Gamble and Huff and recorded by MFSB with vocals by The Three Degrees. Released as a single, this song became a pop and R&B radio hit in 1974 and the show's best-known theme.
- 1975-1976: "Soul Train '75", by The Soul Train Gang, which was later released as a single for the newly formed Soul Train Records
- 1976-1978: "Soul Train '76 (Get On Board)", by The Soul Train Gang
- 1978-1980: "Soul Train Theme '79", produced by the Hollywood Disco Jazz Band with vocals by the Waters
- 1980-1983: "Up On Soul Train", first by the Waters and later by The Whispers, whose version appears in their 1980 album *Imagination*.
- 1983-1984: "Soul Train's a Comin'", by R&B artist O'Bryan<sup>[21]</sup>
- 1984-1987: "TSOP '84", a remake of the original "TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia)," composed and produced by George Duke
- 1987-1993: "TSOP '87", a remixed version of "TSOP '84", by George Duke
- 1993-1999: "Soul Train '93" (Know You Like to Dance)", by Naughty by Nature with a saxophone solo by Everette Harp
- 1999-2006: "TSOP 2000", with rap vocals by Samson and music by Dr. Freeze, and again featuring an Everette Harp saxophone solo. However, a portion of "Know You Like to Dance" was still used in the show's second-half opening segment during this period.

## 2.5 See also

- List of *Soul Train* episodes
- Guests on *Soul Train*
- SOLAR Records
- Soul Train Music Awards
- *Showtime at the Apollo*
- *The Midnight Special*
- *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert*
- *Electric Circus*
- *The Party Machine with Nia Peeples*

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## 2.7 External links

- Official website
- *Soul Train* DVD from Time-Life
- *Soul Train* at the Internet Movie Database
- *Soul Train* at TV.com

## 2.8 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

### 2.8.1 Text

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