



A House on Fire: The Rise and Fall of Philadelphia Soul

By John A. Jackson

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"If You Don't Know Me By Now," "The Love I Lost," "The Soul Train Theme," "Then Came You," "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now"--the distinctive music that became known as Philly Soul dominated the pop music charts in the 1970s. In *A House on Fire*, John A. Jackson takes us inside the musical empire created by Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff, and Thom Bell, the three men who put Philadelphia Soul on the map.

Here is the eye-opening story of three of the most influential and successful music producers of the seventies. Jackson shows how Gamble, Huff, and Bell developed a black recording empire second only to Berry Gordy's Motown, pumping out a string of chart-toppers from Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, the Spinners, the O'Jays, the Stylistics, and many others. The author underscores the endemic racism of the music business at that time, revealing how the three men were blocked from the major record companies and outlets in Philadelphia because they were black, forcing them to create their own label, sign their own artists, and create their own sound. The sound they created--a sophisticated and glossy form of rhythm and blues, characterized by crisp, melodious harmonies backed by lush, string-laden orchestration and a hard-driving rhythm section--was a glorious success, producing at least twenty-eight gold or platinum albums and thirty-one gold or platinum singles. But after their meteoric rise and years of unstoppable success, their production company finally failed, brought down by payola, competition, a tough economy, and changing popular tastes. Funky, groovy, soulful--Philly Soul was the classic seventies sound. *A House on Fire* tells the inside story of this remarkable musical phenomenon.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In his latest meticulously detailed slice of pop music history, Jackson (*American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock and Roll Empire*) focuses on the creation, expansion and dissolution of Philadelphia International Records, whose songs and artists dominated soul and pop airwaves throughout the 1970s. Specifically, he follows the careers of three men who defined the company's "Philly Soul" sound: Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, a powerhouse producing-writing team who made stars of Teddy Pendergrass and the O'Jays, and Thom Bell, whose solo work as a producer brought success to groups such as the Spinners and the Stylistics. On the musical side, Philadelphia International combined the smooth harmonies and sophistication of Motown with the hard-driving funk of the Memphis-based Stax Records; on the business end, the black-owned label mirrored the almost dictatorial Motown machine while seeking to emulate the family feel of the smaller Stax. The unlikely combination of the outgoing Gamble and the gruff, taciturn Huff—"a study in complementary talents"—managed to create some of the most memorable songs of the era, including "Back Stabbers" and "If You Don't Know Me By Now." Though by 1983 the label was but "a shell of what it once had been," the Philadelphia International sound influences pop-soul and rap artists today. Photos not seen by *PW*.

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From [Booklist](#)

Jackson tells the inside story of 1970s Philadelphia soul, "a multilayered, bottom-heavy brand of . . . glossy urban rhythm and blues" featuring "crisp, melodious harmonies backed by lush, string-laden orchestration"--a sort of polite funk notably delivered by songwriters Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff of Philadelphia International Records and Thom Bell, whose creations graced various Philly-area labels. Their hits' performers--the O'Jays, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, the Spinners, the Stylistics, Gamble--gave Gamble-Huff and Bell's songs a smooth, urbane sound rivaling Berry Gordy's Motown sound for success with black and white audiences alike. Indeed, the vapid 1974 Hues Corp. record "Rock the Boat" actually charted higher on the pop charts than on those for R&B/Disco (1 and 2, respectively). Endorsement or indictment of Philly soul, this is just one of the informative tidbits embedded in Jackson's highly readable text, the writing of which was made much more difficult by Gamble and Huff's notorious inaccessibility. Essential for thorough pop-music collections. *Mike Tribby*
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Review

"A meticulously researched and engaging story.... There are lessons to be learned from the often forgotten Philadelphia International; before the triumph of the more mechanized sounds of disco and then hip-hop, it was a place where the human dynamics of musicians, songwriters and producers, all collaborating under one roof, were essential to success."--*New York Times Book Review*

"Jackson tells fascinating tale.... Jackson carefully threads through his story the changing backdrop of soul music and society in general, but it's what's happening in Philadelphia that drives the account."--*San Francisco Chronicle*

"A beautiful job of chronicling Philadelphia International Records.... You actually feel that you are right in the studio witnessing their creative processes. Music fans will enjoy the way the author intertwines PIR with Detroit's Motown, Memphis's Stax-Volt, and the sounds coming out of Chicago, and Muscle Shoals, Alabama.... Jackson includes a song list in Appendix 1 that is worth the price of the book alone."--*Black Issues Book Review*

"The definitive account of Philadelphia Soul. John Jackson's five years of research have resulted in a fascinating study of the hit sound that left lasting impressions on both the recording industry and American culture. *A House on Fire* is a wonderful human drama set in the tumultuous world of pop music, and John Jackson expertly captures the full breadth of this rollicking story." --Gerald Posner, author of *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power*

"A meticulously detailed slice of pop music history."--*Publishers Weekly*

Users Review

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