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Don Cornelius: 'Soul Train' 's Silky-Smooth Conductor Remembered by Close Friends, Admirers

By [Ericka Blount Danois](#) on February 2, 2012 10:40 AM [Comment](#)



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This past summer was the first and last time I ever saw Don Cornelius in person. He was at the Expo 72 in Chicago, which featured an exhibition of rare photos and vintage footage from *Soul Train*, the television show he produced for 35 years. The day before, the steely, still-smooth train operator (and former radio reporter at Chicago's WVON) was impeccably turned out in all-black leather and alligator shoes, serving as a panelist at a screening of the VH1 *Soul Train* documentary, *The Hippest Trip in America*. He was in rare form. Sometimes, he was so blunt that audience members would visibly squirm, or the whole room would fall silent, unnerved by his honesty. He hurled playful expletives at his childhood friend Richard Steele, from Chicago public radio outlet WBEZ, who moderated the panel. Straight answers weren't part of his repertoire. I was immediately impressed.

The Don Cornelius we knew from *Soul Train* was laid-back, the latest slang bobbing in the waves of his profoundly bass announcer's voice, always showing the artists respect, asking good questions, giving a conversational, in-your-living-room style to his interviews. This Cornelius was irreverent. He was funny. He was someone who acted like he didn't need to impress anyone and that he had nothing left to lose. And maybe that was just it.

Cornelius, who was [found dead yesterday morning](#) at his home in Los Angeles of an apparently self-inflicted gunshot wound at age 75, sold Soul Train Holdings in 2008. It was a brand he had protected ferociously. During the Expo 72 panel, he half-joked to Kenard Gibbs, the current CEO of Soul Train Holdings, and J. Kevin Swain, the producer of the VH1 documentary, that "these Negroes are making millions of dollars off of this *Soul Train* shit." *Soul Train* — the primary destination for the dissemination of black culture throughout the 1970s, was the longest-running, first-run, nationally syndicated program in television history, with more than 1,100 episodes produced through its final 2005-2006 season. It was the show that made formerly no-name artists go platinum. It was the show that gave a black man from the south side of Chicago a platform to talk with all his favorite artists; it gave a young activist named Jesse Jackson a spotlight, a place to host beauty pageants and award scholarships for students; and it gave an opportunity for Marvin Gaye to show off his basketball skills. It was an unapologetically black show, from the boardrooms to the wiggling rafters struggling with the weight of pop-locking dancers.

Cornelius, sporting the hip clothing that became his signature, first made a name for himself and Soul

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Train on local Chicago television, by spotlighting 'the city's rich musical talent. The set was housed in a cramped room with a faulty air conditioner on the 43rd floor of the Chicago Board of Trade"; it was so hot that some of the local dancers would often get nauseous. This was where Cornelius, as the owner and conductor of the train, instituted his signature rolling sign-off: "Love, peace, and souuuul!" It was where many talented dancers became local celebrities and where live television taught Cornelius, the dancers, and the artists to get it right the first time.



Aretha Franklin with Don Cornelius on Soul Train in the 1970s. (Photo: 2001 Tribune Entertainment)

After just one season in Chicago, he moved the show to Los Angeles and it immediately took off, expanding to 80 markets by its third year, matching the ratings of prime-time network shows. Musical artists who had been relegated to the chitlin' circuit for much of the '1960s were suddenly catapulted to the mainstream, as the show became the most important promotional vehicle for record companies to sell black artists' music to white America.

"Seeing this black man with this big Afro and this deep voice, he was the epitome of being male," remembers former dancer Derek Fleming. "It put you in the same frame of mind as James Earl Jones and Godfrey Cambridge, other strong black figures on television. It made you have a higher regard and respect for him. The image he had on television conveyed exactly what you got in person. He was like a father figure."

Marvin Gaye's widow Janis, who remained one of Cornelius' best friends until his death, says Cornelius once told Marvin, who was given the entire episode of Soul Train to promote his 1976 album *I Want You*: " 'I can't imagine you sharing the stage with anyone, so, hey man, we're gonna have to give you the whole show.' [Don Cornelius] was a creative genius — someone who took African-American music out of the '60s, brought it into the '70s, crossed it over, and had the utmost respect for the artists he presented. He was willing to take unknown artists and give them a leg up."

But all trains come to a stop. In the early '80s, doctors found a congenital malformation in the blood vessels of Cornelius' brain. He had life-threatening surgery that lasted 21 hours. After a rest period of only six months, he was back working on the show.

Why would someone who had so much, who helped so many, take his own life? "I think he needed to be in control of when his life ended," says Janis Gaye. "I think he was not happy with his health, and his divorce, and the fact that he wasn't on television, or the sale of *Soul Train*. That changes the personality of a man like him and you start to doubt yourself. I think he wondered if he was still valued."

"He demanded excellence, he demanded perfection," says J. Kevin Swain, producer of VH1's *Hippest Trip* and the Soul Train Awards show. "For artists, without *Soul Train*, you weren't going platinum. Radio sold records, *Soul Train* sold artists."

But for the people he left behind, he was an innovator, forever a part of black culture, fashion, and '70s dance culture. "We would often end up talking, sitting in his car. He had this convertible Rolls Royce," remembers former Shalamar lead singer Howard Hewett. "He said, 'Howard, I don't claim to be right 100 percent of the time, but I'm right 80 percent of the time.' He said if you can reach that 80 percent mark, then you're doing pretty good.' "

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Ericka Blount Danois is the author of the forthcoming book, Soul Train's Mighty Ride: Behind the Scenes of America's Favorite Dance Show, to be published by Backbeat Books next year. You can reach her at [her website](#).

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