



CULTURE

Hearing Otis Redding's 'Try a Little Tenderness' as a Song of Resistance

The quiet, revolutionary power of one of the soul-music legend's biggest hits, 50 years after his death

By Emily Lordi



The American soul singer Otis Redding performs at the Monterey Pop Festival in California in June 1967. (Bruce Fleming / Getty)

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On December 10, 1967, the plane carrying Otis Redding and his band the Bar-Kays crashed into the frigid waters of Lake Monona in Wisconsin, killing nearly everyone on board. Redding was only 26 years old when he died. And while he was the life force of Memphis's Stax Records and the internationally acclaimed King of Soul, he had not yet reached the peak of his powers. Such was indicated, anyway, by the new creative direction of a song released the month after his death, "(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay." News of his passing dumbfounded his fans and loved ones, not only because of how sudden it was, but also because Redding had seemed unstoppable. The charismatic son of Georgia sharecroppers who, according to his siblings, "was always in the spotlight about something," Redding had become an electrifying performer whom some witnesses compared to God incarnate.

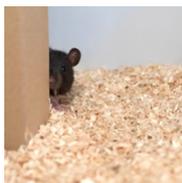
Yet his music was defined by vulnerability as well as dynamism. Redding's gift lay in his ability to synthesize the sentimental crooning of Nat King Cole, the sanctified fervor of his early training in the Baptist church, and the bombastic flair of his hometown hero Little Richard (who was also from Macon). Some of Redding's best-known recordings—"These Arms of Mine," "Mr. Pitiful," "Pain in My Heart"—are full-voiced petitions against loneliness and zealous efforts to stave off loss, displaying his sensitivity to pain and desire.

RECOMMENDED READING



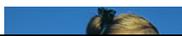
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Redding's attentiveness to both lyrical meaning and musical possibility made him a brilliant interpreter of other artists' songs, from Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" to the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." Throughout the '60s and '70s, other great African American artists covered songs by white writers (Ray Charles's "Georgia on My Mind," Aretha Franklin's "Let It Be"), announcing the sound of soul while symbolically reversing the process by which white artists had appropriated and profited on black musical innovation.

Redding's 1966 version of "Try a Little Tenderness" was his most stunning such *coup d'état*. First popularized by Bing Crosby in 1933, this paternalistic ballad about the power of male affection to revive female morale had been covered by Aretha Franklin and Sam Cooke in the years preceding Redding's version. But whereas Franklin and Cooke maintained the song's basic ballad structure, Redding revolutionized it. His version begins in the usual maudlin mode: Interweaving horn lines arranged by Isaac Hayes set the scene as if drawing a stage curtain. But when Al Jackson Jr. strikes up rim shots on the drum like a metronome, the band starts to build the kind of suspense the song's lyrics describe:

*You know she's waiting, just anticipating
For things that she'll never, never, never, never possess, yeah yeah
But while she's there waiting, without them
Try a little tenderness*

The recording owes its drama not just to Redding's throaty vocals and lyrical embellishments—*hold her, squeeze her, never leave her!*—but also to the synergy of the band as a unit. As Jonathan Gould writes in his wonderful new biography *Otis Redding: An Unfinished Life*, "the track is ... a musical microcosm of the Stax sound, a seamless synthesis of the pleading ballads and pounding grooves that [Stax artists]

played better than anyone else.” Gradually, like a group of friends adding their voices to a single appeal for kindness, the rhythm section fills in the space between the spare drum beat and Redding’s vocals: Here comes the churchy organ, crossed with an acoustic piano, both soon joined by a chicken-scratch guitar, blaring horns, and hard-driving drums. At this point, Redding manipulates the lyrics to match the wordless intonations of the band: *Got to try—ma nah nah—try—try a little tenderness!*

The song was even more intense in live performance. As the bring-down-the-house closing song of his sets, “Tenderness” became Redding’s signature hit and a vehicle for his electric persona. The musicians often rushed through the curtain-drawing introduction like a formality, picking up speed until Redding was shouting, jumping, and stalking around the stage like a stiff-limbed preacher while demolishing the lyrics: *ga-ga-ga-ga-ga-ga-gotta-tenderness!* In a crowd-pleasing church trick that showed Redding in thrall to his own momentum, the group often “ended” the song only to strike it back up again.

In short, Redding’s “Tenderness” was a *tour de force*. Still, there was something bizarre about it—about a call for tenderness that was distinctly *untender*. Singing (then shouting) about women but not to them, Redding enacts a man-to-man aggression

that seems to replicate the problem he wants to address. To make sense of this irony, we might consider a level on which Redding's performance of "Tenderness" was not about a woman at all. We might instead hear it—in the context of the civil-rights movement that Redding had engaged with in his urgent 1965 recording of Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come"—as a veiled demand for proper treatment of black people.

In this reading, Black America itself is the "she" who is "waiting, just anticipating" the change that Redding and his band want to effect. If one imagines Redding singing on behalf of those citizens subjected to gradualist approaches to integration and brutal anti-protest measures including dogs, water hoses, and death, it seems not odd but wholly appropriate for Redding to shake the song's addressee by the collar and insist that he try—for god's sake—a little tenderness.

This is not to suggest that Redding himself intended the song as a political allegory. But his performances of it, in the mid-1960s, do make a space for an otherwise verboten display of black male agitation. At a moment when even the most peaceful bids for racial equality could be viewed as attacks on white Southern mores—when sitting at a segregated lunch counter or entering an integrated school could be perceived as a violent provocation—the show of *actual* black aggression could be a death sentence. This may partly explain the cathartic force of Redding's performances for his African American fans, as well as for an expanding white fan base that may have sensed the power and rage black citizens were often compelled to restrain.

To hear Redding's "Tenderness" as a plea for interpersonal love and a demand for interracial civility is also to perceive a political charge in his choice to keep ending and restarting the song when performing it live. This was a showman's device, to be sure, but it could also be seen as a musical enactment of resilience—a reminder that the struggle wasn't over when it seemed to be, that a band of compatriots could keep pushing, together, toward a change that might have sometimes seemed like it would never come.

When the group played the song to close their legendary set at the Monterey Pop Festival in June of 1967, Redding clearly wanted to go on reprising it. But the band's allotted time was up: "I have to go, I don't want to go," he waved to the crowd before

leaving the stage. His parting lament becomes haunting in light of his imminent death, six months later. Even the god-like icon couldn't keep pushing as long as he wanted to. But, like so many others, he still had to try.