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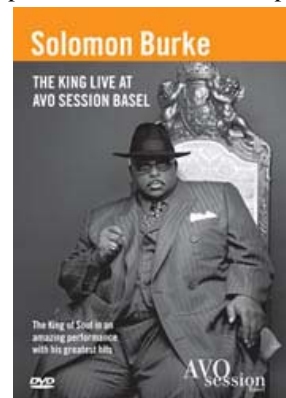


## Music DVD Review: Solomon Burke: The King Live at AVO Sessions Basel :: Aug 3, 20:14

I remember years ago wondering what Soul Music was. In the seventies what was called Soul sounded either like disco or bad romantic music. It had none of the grit of Blues or power of Funk and Rhythm & Blues. It was almost like they had taken all the elements that made those genres honest and sanitized them for mass distribution.

That was before I heard people like Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes, and of course James Brown. When I first heard the aforementioned gentlemen I heard the "Soul" that was in Soul Music. The energy that drove them was the same that had propelled the blues while the silky smooth vocals, the crisp horn sections, and the distinctive guitar sound made their sound unique.

So now when I'm given music to listen to that's called Soul I listen for both the elements that distinguish it, plus the elements retained from it's predecessors. When I hear stuff like the so-called Blue Eyed Soul sound I don't hear any of the elements from the past only slick production values and insipid vocals. Once you hear the real thing you know this stuff for the poor imitations that they are.



After having watched an amazing video of James Brown performing with some of the greatest soul performers of his era, I was interested in seeing how the self-professed King of Soul, Solomon Burke stood up in comparison. The opportunity came with the [MVD Visual](#) release of the DVD concert disc *Solomon Burke: The King Live At AVO Session Basel*.

The disc started off promising enough, the sound and picture quality are great, and the band that was playing with Burke are absolutely amazing. They kicked off his set with a red-hot version of "Back At The Chicken Shack", with some wonderful leads from the tenor sax and Will Smith (not him, another one) on the Hammond B3 organ. Unfortunately I can't tell you exactly who was in the horn section because they don't list as many names in the credits as there were people on stage.

I do know that the guy playing bass saxophone, also blew a mean harmonica as he so aptly demonstrated on the second song, "The Greeting Song", which heralded Solomon's entrance. He started singing off stage while the band was playing and then he made his way out. It's a laborious process because he weighs in at around 330 pounds and doesn't walk well (and that explained why there was a damned throne downstage centre) and he was also wearing a robe – reminiscent of James Brown but far more ornate and probably heavier.

Meanwhile the band is kicking out all the jams; Ricky Rouse on guitar playing with his teeth, Will Smith up and singing while pounding on the organ, and the horn section blowing up a storm. It sounded like we were in for an amazing concert and that Burke might actually deserve the mantle of King of Soul. My first inkling of trouble came when he had two huge vases of cut red roses hauled out onto stage alongside of him and he announced, "These are for the ladies"

Now there's showmanship, which is cool, but there starts to be a point where it begins to cross over the line into Las Vegas style bad taste. It's like the difference between how Elvis Presley was in the late fifties and that great concert in 1968, and how he was when he became a bloated caricature of himself in the seventies. Solomon Burke began to cross that line with his roses comments, and continued through out his concert to do the same.



After hearing his band do such amazing work on the opening two numbers, and seeing the line up of songs that he was to perform, I was expecting some genuine passion and great music. Instead it seemed like the edge had been removed from all the songs

Starting off with an insipid version of the country chestnut "Down In The Valley" and turning it into something even less emotionally powerful than the original helped drive the nails into the coffin of this concert disc. It might have been saved if he could have matched his band's soul, but he kept pulling them down to his level, so that the spotlight would remain on him. For all James Brown's purported ego, when he pulled it never seemed like the music was second fiddle to him, but that's not the case with Solomon Burke.

Classic songs like "Cry To Me", "Georgia On My Mind", "Proud Mary", and "A Change Is Going To Come" were all reduced to safe and tame renditions that didn't do the originals any justice. It's like he's gentrified them to make them safe for as a mass an audience as possible so he can revel in the role that he's created for himself as "King of Soul"

The packaging of the DVD

isn't bad with the usual making of and behind the scene features glorifying the event and the performers. Some of the other performers have been interesting – John Hiatt is always amazing – but some are likes of former Spice Girl Melanie C. and other bland pop stars of similar pedigree. It's very much like some sort of Las Vegas in Switzerland.

When it comes right down to it there is far more of Sammy Davis Junior to Solomon Burke then there is Sam & Dave, and this disc reflects that. This is one of those cases where the Godfather definitely wins out over the King. James Brown can rest easy – he had more soul in his little finger than Solomon Burke has in all of his three hundred plus pounds.

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