

SOUNDS OF BLACKNESS "TIME FOR HEALING is cause for celebration," says one Rolling Stone writer. "It's especially satisfying that on the occasion of their twenty-fifth anniversary, Sounds of Blackness has released their most moving record to date. The ensemble has fashioned a powerful suite of songs, proving that radio-friendly music can be just as inspiring as it is irresistible and just as hip as it is historical." In a music scene crowded with confusion and mixed messages, Sounds of Blackness has consistently sought to bring out the best in its listeners.

"Our message is hope," says Gary Hines, the group's director for the past quarter-century. "Our message is about healing individual hearts, healing our nation, healing the family of nations."

"Spirit" is the first single from TIME FOR HEALING and features rapper Craig Mack invoking the spirit of unconditional love: "Preachers, teachers, everybody let's start reaching." Sounds of Blackness also reach out to collaborate with diva sensations Salt-N-Pepa on the super-charged "Hold On (Don't Let Go)." "Reaching out has always been our mission," says Hines. "It was when we started out in the early Seventies, and it remains so as we head into a new millennium. In embracing all members of the family of African American music, we ourselves become a model family based on tolerance and love." Winners of a bevy of prestigious awards, including two Grammys, an NAACP Image Award and a Soul Train Music Award, Sounds of Blackness holds a unique place in the annals of popular music.

Their strength is in their African-American heritage, the roots of which extended themselves to the campus of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Gary Hines stands alone in the tiered rehearsal hall where he assumed leadership of the group in 1971. Hines is a scrupulously well-mannered man of easy temperament and warm demeanor. Impressive in physical stature a former prizewinning bodybuilder still in shape he projects unusual gentleness. A serious student and natural leader, an intriguing mixture of modesty and unshakable confidence, he looks you straight in the eye when he speaks. And he speaks straight from the heart. "Sounds was born out the emerging Black consciousness of the times," he explains. "Black arts programs were electrifying campuses all over the country. The original format was protest and freedom songs. But we soon saw a broader concept was even more exciting and compatible with our vision. Our simple idea was that the rich tradition of African American music, in all its magnificent forms, was a vehicle God's vehicle to both entertain and enrich the lives of our listeners. "We wanted to free ourselves of all the categories while embracing all the categories, from spirituals to swing to gospel to soul and jazz and hip hop. With all its innovative and adaptive powers, the nature of our music is to embrace and transform the life experience joy, pain, the whole gambit of human feeling into a celebration of spirit."

Sounds' celebration is always a communal affair. "We see the group's communal structure as a metaphor and mirror of the music we present," says Hines. "It's been that way since our beginnings." The era of Sounds' origins was marked by the spiritual/social consciousness of revolutionary artists like Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. "Those are the sounds that nourished us," Hines insists. "You even might view TIME FOR HEALING as What's Going On,' Part 2. What was true in 1972 is just as true, maybe even truer, today." If the resounding theme of TIME FOR HEALING is the bounty of tenacious faith, the history of Sounds of Blackness exemplifies such faith. Their success, though nothing short of spectacular, was long in coming. "We've struggled," Hines remembers, "but stayed the course. As an ensemble of singers and musicians who presented a mix of musical programs and styles, we enjoyed a following in the Minneapolis area. We played Urban League meetings, we shared the stage with everyone from bebop pianist Hampton Hawes to the Jacksons. We put out a few records by ourselves. We were ambitious socially, politically and spiritually. We wanted to make a difference.

Fortunately we also learned patience, because it took sixteen years before we found the path to a broader audience." The break came in 1989 when Janet Jackson attended a Sounds of Blackness concert with her producers, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. Sons of Minneapolis themselves, Jam and Lewis had been Sounds fans for years and were about to sign them, but it was Janet's unabashed enthusiasm that was the catalyst that hastened the process. Jam and Lewis went on to produce the majority of the tracks on their first three albums. Those records EVOLUTION OF GOSPEL, THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS (A Musical Fantasy) and AFRICA TO AMERICA (The Journey of the Drum) became international sensations, spawning a half-dozen pop hits and sending the group around the world. Audience reaction and critical praise were unrelentingly positive.

Now, TIME FOR HEALING represents still another plateau. With the exception of the Salt-N-Pepa tracks, this is the first completely self-produced Sounds of Blackness release, the analogy to What's Going On, Gaye's first self-produced effort, is especially apt. "Our assistant director Billy Steele and band leader Levi Seacer made tremendous producing and writing contributions to TIME FOR HEALING," says a proud Hines. "In some ways, this may be our most organic album. It catches the essence of our energy." The energy is contagious.

From the good-feeling retro soul sound of "Hold On (Change is Comin')" to its hip hop counterpoint "Hold On (Don't Let Go)" featuring Salt-N-Pepa, TIME FOR HEALING is a brilliant compendium of the most appealing heart-healing sounds in black music. The gospel-tinged ballads "Love Will Never Change," "God Cares" and "Familiar Waters" are lush. The tributes to the roots of Nineties R&B "Love Train" and "You Can Make It If You Try" are mint-new and right on the money. The medley of traditional spirituals, the bossa-nova flavored "So Far Away," the poignant urgency of "Crisis" all give enormous pleasure while providing nourishment to music lovers hungry for songs of real substance.

Twenty-five years later, Gary Hines can stand in the place where he started and say, "We stand for music we believe in. And we believe music can change lives, replace despair with hope. I love the idea that our music of the present and future is so solidly rooted in the past. "We hope TIME FOR HEALING is right on time. We trust it is, basing our trust not on the ups and downs of the material world, but on that same Spirit that has sustained us from the beginning, the same Spirit that will sustain us forever." - April 1997