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Columbia Pictures

Fact Sheet
“Wattstax”

12/13/72

“Wattstax” was a concert – a very special kind of concert, given by an entire Black recording company. For all of the summer of '72, every member of the Stax Organization's staff was involved, in one way or another, with creating a benefit concert for the Southern California community of Watts on the last day of the Seventh Annual Watts Summer Festival.

On August 20, more than one hundred thousand people witnessed a seven-hour show in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum at a donation of \$1 per seat. All of the money was turned over to the community. The entertainers' expenses, the equipment and the promotion and advertising were all paid for by the Stax Organization in conjunction with the Schlitz Brewing Company. The performance was a smashing success, so was the benefit. Ticket sales benefited the Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation, the Martin Luther King Hospital in Watts and future Watts Summer Festivals.

“Wattstax” has now become a feature-film immortalizing, not only those who came to perform, but, also, those who came to witness the event and those who live in communities of which Watts is symbolic.

Of the twelve four-man camera crews that recorded the event and later shot the community scenes, 45 members were skilled Blacks who have been “discovered” for Hollywood. Two of the people who share their views of life with us from restaurants, barber shops and front porches will soon be seen in dramatic roles in upcoming films – they too have been “discovered.”

Another discovery has been the talents of Stax executives Al Bell, Larry Shaw and Forest Hamilton, who before this year had never been involved with film-making.

“Wattstax” is a film about this very special kind of people – the people who are seldom heard and these individuals who have listened. We have seen many films recently about Black people, but none of them represented the real people of the National Black community until “Wattstax.”

The film is based upon the music of Black America, the stuff upon which much of the recreation of the Black community is based. The rhythms and the lyrics are both explicitly defined by the method used in editing the visual aspects of this feature film.

As a song is performed, the camera moves out to the audience, then breaks away into the community and visual elaboration on the theme of the tune. And “Wattstax” also reaches the people they talk about the subject too.

The opening song, “Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get,” moves from the people of the community today, through the people’s revolt of 1965, and back to the present. The concert performances of songs from gospel, to pop, to jazz are used as products of the life of the people.

Soon it becomes apparent what kind of an art form Black music is – it is one way the people of the Black community can express their feelings on every aspect of their lives. It is the “Living Word.” The songs express divergent opinions on a variety of topics; so do the people we hear from.

The film deliberately uses only one entertainer’s point of view on these topics. Richard Pryor and his tragically humorous comments on life, people and situations, serve as another thread through the exposition of the many themes. And there are so many themes in the film. “Wattstax” is a film about people, and how very special these people are – but one other thing becomes apparent as the people unfold.

The music is the message, but it is also the method. In explaining why Stax gave the concert, the Stax Organization’s board chairman, Al Bell, stated, “This is one

of the ways in which Stax thanks the community for its support.” As the film unfolds, the viewer realizes that he does not mean merely financial support.

The songs Stax artists record are forged from the lifestyle of the community, and when they are put through a record company, the rhythms and the lyrics become a means of gaining revenue, and thus power. What the Stax Organization has done is take the pain and frustration of the ghetto, transform it into power, and utilize that power in turning money and strength back in the community.

That power flow did not stop the day after the concert – portions of the proceeds from the film will also be given to a variety of non-profit national organizations across the country.

“Wattstax” takes its audiences through 300 years in history, through a six-hour concert documenting that history in music. In the framework of a two-hour film, it demonstrates the vitality of a people who have created a rich culture out of the left-overs of a nation and transformed it into power.

“Wattstax” is a film about a very special kind of people, made by very special people, at a very special time.

The happening took place on an August Sunday, under a hot sun and an unusually clear sky, in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. What seemed like the entire Black population of Los Angeles County turned out in incredibly uninhibited clothes to spend an equally uninhibited afternoon with the largest number of Black entertainers ever assembled to contribute their talents to benefit their own people.

At a dollar a ticket, the seven-hour session of rock-and-rap was the best deal in town. Any town.

The event depicted in “Wattstax” began when Reverend Jesse Jackson took the microphone for the National Black Litany, “I Am Somebody,” and singer Kim Weston led the vast audience in both “The Star Spangled Banner” and the Black National

Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." The Dramatics sing "What You See Is What You Get," and other songs and their performers are:

"Oh La Da Da," "We The People" and "Respect Yourself," sung by The Staple Singers.

"Someone Greater Than You and I," Jimmy Jones.

"Lying on the Truth," the Rance Allen Group.

"Peace Be Still," The Emotions.

"Old Time Religion," William Bell, Louise McCord, Debra Manning, Eric Mercury, Freddy Robinson, Lee Sain, Ernie Hines, Little Sonny, Newcomers, Eddie Floyd, Tempress, Frederick Knight.

"Son of Shaft," The Bar Kays.

"I'll Sing the Blues for You," Albert King.

"Walking the Backstreet and Crying," Little Milton.

"Jody," Johnnie Taylor.

"I May Not Be What You Want," Mel & Tim.

"Picking Up the Pieces," Carla Thomas.

"Breakdown" and "Funky Chicken," Rufus Thomas.

"If Lovin' You is Wrong I Don't Want to Be Right," Luther Ingram.

"Shaft" and "Soulsville," Isaac Hayes.

Written by Bill Cherry of Cherrytree Productions, December 12, 1972