There's a Riot Goin' On: Sly and the Family Stone's album turns 50

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November 1 marks the 50th anniversary of the release of *There's a Riot Goin' On* by the American band Sly and the Family Stone. The album was a commercial success and, despite an initially mixed reception, came to be hailed as one of the all-time great albums of popular music. It marked an artistic turning point for the band and reflected a souring in the counterculture's romance with drugs and free love. It is well worth taking this occasion to examine the album anew.

Sly and the Family Stone was formed in the San Francisco area in 1966. It was founded by siblings Sylvester, Freddie and Rose Stewart, who had been encouraged as children to sing and play music. They took the stage name Stone on forming the band. In addition to Sly on organ, Freddie on guitar and Rose on keyboards, the band included trumpeter Cynthia Robinson, saxophonist Jerry Martini, bassist Larry Graham and drummer Greg Errico. It included black, white, male and female musicians—a template later copied by Prince and the Revolution.

The band's music combined rock, gospel and funk, also jazz, with a few psychedelic touches and even a bit of surf music. They crossed racial and musical lines, in fact, rejecting those lines altogether. Their first success came in 1968 with their exuberant single "Dance to the Music." Later that year, they released one of their best-known songs, "Everyday People," a good-natured rejection of bigotry that became a number one hit. Their album *Stand!* followed in 1969 and became an artistic and commercial high point for the band.

Embodying optimism, humor and unity, *Stand!* reflected the desire for a new society that was widely shared in the late 1960s. The very titles of songs like "I Want to Take You Higher" and "You Can Make It If You Try" suggest idealism and hope. The album has a dense, full sound propelled by funk rhythms. Almost the entire band sings together, and front man Sly emerges as the first among equals. One critic observes that it was a music "of endless humor and delight, like a fantasy of freedom."

Unfortunately, the band did not respond well to the pressures of its newfound success, like many American performers before (and after) them. Speaking of Sly, another critic notes that the "temptations and contradictions [of success] ate him up." Tensions arose between the band members, who began heavily using cocaine. Sly became moody, unpredictable and distant. He hired bodyguards to protect him, even from his bandmates. The Black Panther Party heightened tensions by demanding the replacement of the band's white members with black musicians. The group released no new music throughout 1970.

The year was not merely a fallow period for Sly and the Family Stone; it also brought a series of traumas to the world of popular music. In the spring, the Beatles announced their breakup. During the fall, the drug-related deaths of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin occurred within about two weeks of each other. These shocks heralded the end of "flower power" and may have contributed, along with his personal situation, to the curdling of Sly's optimism.

More generally, the gravity of the unraveling of the postwar economic boom and the deepening crisis of American society was making itself felt. Political assassinations had helped move official politics to the right, leading to the election of Richard Nixon as US president in November 1968. Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Hampton, among others, had been gunned down. Riots had erupted in every major American city. The war in Vietnam dragged on, at a staggering cost in death and destruction. The relatively "playful" and "light-hearted" mood of the mid-1960s was giving way to something else. The working class was undertaking major strikes and struggles and would continue to do so throughout the decade, but the artistic-musical elements were largely removed from that. Their bohemianism, aided by the flood of drug taking, isolated them from the lives of the oppressed to a considerable extent.

This was the context for the release of *There's a Riot Goin'On,* "recorded in anarchic, druggy torpor over a year, or was it two," as a critic commented acerbically. The album's working title, *Africa Talks to You,* was changed in response to Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On,* which had

been released several months earlier. Despite its title, the album does not explicitly address the urban riots or other social developments of the time. In fact, the title track has a running time of zero.

In contrast with the ebullience of *Stand!*, *Riot* conveys enervation. Lyrics and melodies, which were prominent on previous albums, now take a back seat to groove and momentum.

The sound quality, too, is markedly different from that on *Stand!* If that album was in Technicolor, this album is in faded black and white. Tape hiss is audible, and fidelity has been lost because of repeated erasing and overdubbing (i.e., adding tracks to a previous recording). On many of the songs, Sly played most of the instruments himself, and the consequent lack of interplay between individual musicians is noticeable. Nevertheless, the songs are marked by invention and drive.

The title of the opening song, "Luv N' Haight," refers to the Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco, which was a hippie Mecca. The song begins with women who sing rising chords that seem to signal impending danger. Suddenly, Sly sings, "Feel so good inside myself, / don't want to move." This declaration jars against the song's sinister introduction. It establishes the indolence and inward turn that characterize the album. Call-and-response gospel vocals and piano soften the mood, yet the song remains somewhat forbidding.

"Family Affair," the album's first single, became a number one hit. It begins with a percolating rhythm from a drum machine—a first for the band. Rose's vocals are muffled, as though she is singing from behind a thick wall of Styrofoam. The spare arrangement includes electric piano (played by Billy Preston), bass and electric guitar. Sly recorded his vocals while lying in bed, and his performance splits the difference between seductive and lazy. The lyrics describe a young married couple grappling with infidelity, stuck in an apparently insoluble situation. Sly's singing is arresting, running the gamut from a low mumble to a feline shriek. The song is intimate, catchy and funky, yet shadowed by pessimism and futility. It encapsulates the album's contradictions.

The melody and arrangement of "You Caught Me Smilin'" are comparatively lush. The relaxing, mid-tempo song lightens the album's mood. Yet Sly's cries, which punctuate the song, have a plaintive quality that they didn't have on *Stand!* "Spaced Cowboy," in which Sly alternates between mumbled asides and mock-heroic yodeling, provides another light moment.

Like some of the band's earlier songs, the jazzy "Runnin' Away" is partly inspired by schoolyard chants. Yet the mood is not lighthearted. Where the band previously sang, "The higher the price, the nicer the nice," they now observe, "The deeper in debt, the harder you bet." Despite the sing-song vocals and interjections of "ha ha," the song projects not insouciance, but worldliness.

Both halves of the album end with extended funk vamps: "Africa Talks to You" and "Thank You for Talkin' to Me, Africa." Clearly performed by the whole band, these songs have more warmth than some of the others. The former features rhythmic interplay, complementary guitar improvisations, incantatory vocals and apparent calls for deliverance.

The latter is a reprise of "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)," which was the last single that the band released before its hiatus. Compared with the original, it is slower, more deliberate. Its funky strut conveys determination. While the other members' singing is subdued, Sly lets loose with gospel shouts and keening. As elsewhere on the album, his performance is powerful and inspired, but with a tinge of sadness.

There's a Riot Goin' On is a fascinating and contradictory album. Its low fidelity, recumbent vocals and comparatively bleak outlook reflect the end of the "Summer of Love" and of the band's utopianism. Yet the band's humor and togetherness, though shaken, endure, even if in a different form. On *Riot,* joy has given way to grit, even defiance. The element of soul in the band's sound has deepened. The funk is less celebratory and more pointed.

There's a Riot Goin' On presents a band beset by difficulties that have changed its sound and its perspective, but not dimmed its talent. Though the lyrics express skepticism, the musical performances are inspired—the album was not made by rote. Although it is markedly different from the work that first brought Sly and the Family Stone popularity, the album is a serious and enjoyable artistic effort that has remained relevant over time.