

Executive Producer: Jesse Collins  
Executive Producer: Tony Cornelius  
Executive Producer: Devon Gregory  
Executive Producer: Jonathan Prince  
Co-Executive Producer: Andy Horne

# **AMERICAN SOUL**

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"Episode 1: Man is First Destiny"

Episode 101

Story by  
Jonathan Prince and Devon Gregory

Teleplay by  
Devon Gregory

5.10.18

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AMERICAN SOUL

"Man Is First Destiny"

ACT I

OVER BLACK we hear the distant sound of television. A melody rises in darkness. Titles appear. They read: **"Without music, life would be a mistake."** -- Friedrich Nietzsche.

FADE IN:

1 EXT. LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA - AERIAL - NIGHT 1

WE SEE God's view of the moon in its full glory as OUR PRESENCE descends upon the hills of Sherman Oaks and spies an exclusive home nestled in isolation.

This is 12685 Mulholland Drive. The home that Don built.

Our descent continues as we glide through trees... drift past a vintage Rolls Royce... and skim over an aging swimming pool as we hover in front of --

-- Titles that read: **Los Angeles. February 12, 2012.**

The titles fade as we peer beyond a glass-covered entryway before traveling unscathed through --

2 INT. 12685 MULHOLLAND DRIVE - CONTINUOUS 2

-- an elegant dining area. As we continue our journey the sound of Gladys Knight's **"Neither One of Us"** grows distinct. Escorting us through the kitchen... across the foyer... and into the den where we see the back of a MAN, sitting in a chair, watching what looks to be an old episode of Soul Train.

As the camera eases around to get a clear view of our host, we realize that this man is a tired and weak and worn **DONALD CORTEZ CORNELIUS**. Seven decades of life have taken toll.

As the camera settles and holds we note a GUN resting in his lap. We wait and watch him watch GLADYS KNIGHT perform.

GLADYS KNIGHT & THE PIPS

**So we just go on (we go on)... Hurting  
and pretending. And convincing ourselves  
to give it just one more try (one more  
try)... Because neither one of us  
(neither one of us)... Wants to be the  
first to say...**

Don's eyes speak in silence, "My Lord, she's still amazing."

Post applause, Gladys... the room... and the world fall quiet. After an ungodly long beat, Don takes the gun, raises it to his head and as the camera slowly creeps in, he FIRES as we SMASH TO --

3 INT. WCIU TV STUDIO (CHICAGO) - DAY (1971) 3

-- the outside doors SLAMMING OPEN as **GEORGE JOHNSON**, 44 dressed like the self-made millionaire he is, jets down the hall... around the corner... and into --

4 INT. SOUL TRAIN SOUNDSTAGE (CHICAGO) - CONTINUOUS 4

-- a live broadcast of Soul Train. The original set is small and cramped and extremely low budget, but even now it's the hippest trip in Chi-Town.

Titles that read: **Chicago. Summer, 1971.**

DANCERS groove to The Jackson 5 classic "**The Love You Save**"... high cut boots... low cut shorts... Cats sport dashikis... and Chicks boogie oogie oogie with Afros to die for. It's 1970's fashion, get used to it.

On the outskirts of the set, George makes his way toward Camera 2 as an AD calls out: \*

CHICAGO AD

Thirty seconds to camera, Don.

And that's when the CAMERA TURNS to reveal a younger... more virile, **Don Cornelius, 33** and as cool as shade in summer. Don spots George, waves him over.

George approaches, barely able to contain himself, handing Don a folder with paperwork inside. As Don takes a look --

DON

You shittin' me?

GEORGE JOHNSON

Kunh loved it. National distribution. Fourteen cities. All we have to do is guarantee a top-10 act.

Don stares at the contract, his dreams literally in his hands.

GEORGE JOHNSON (CONT'D)

They want us on the air by fourth quarter.

DON

Which means we're behind schedule.

GEORGE JOHNSON

If you want to expedite production, I can buy a bigger percentage of the show. If it helps.

DON

So, fifty percent isn't enough?

Don, half joking, half watching his back, smiles:

DON (CONT'D)

I'll have my share, George. Don't you worry.

GEORGE JOHNSON

And what about the opening act? I love Eddie. But Eddie Kendricks without The Temptations is just Eddie Kendricks.

DON

Thursday, I'll be in L.A. to supervise start of construction and meet with the dance coordinator. Thursday night I'm sitting-down with the Godfather himself.

\*

GEORGE JOHNSON

James Brown? Now who's shittin' who?

CHICAGO AD

And we're back in five... four...

Don returns the contract to George. Grabs his mic. And steps on his mark, turns to George:

DON

Fuck. This is really happening.

The AD gestures a silent, "Two... One..." and points.

DON (CONT'D)

All right Chi-Town, it's that time where we go... from fast to slow... Let's give a Soul Train welcome to one of the most talented groups in the music world... Chicago's own... The Chi-Lites.

The camera pans and zooms to find four 30-something men dressed in flowing red outfits with matching afros -- THE CHI-LITES.

THE CHI-LITES

**Oh, I see her face everywhere I  
go... On the street and even at the  
picture show... Have you seen  
her... Tell me have you seen her?**

The song continues and the music takes us up and over the set, leaving Don and George behind and carrying us to --

5

EXT. UNKNOWN PLACE - AERIAL - DAY

5

THE CHI-LITES

**Oh, I hear her voice as the cold  
winds blow... In the sweet music on  
my radio... Have you seen her...  
Tell me have you seen her?**

The morning sun beams as something materializes from its glow. And for the first time we see it... our show titles:

#### **AMERICAN SOUL**

They fade. But the music remains as the song devolves from its standard melody with classic accompaniment to this a cappella piece tainted with a haunting echo.

The camera 180's from the distant sun to a CLOSE UP of a SOLDIER'S FACE staring skyward. Eyes, dazed. Breathing, light. And as the sound of a helicopter mingles with The Chi-Lites, those eyes focus on a medical transport unit flying above.

The soldier is **PRIVATE NATE BARKER**, 27, and currently we are captives of his perspective. Flat on his back and eerily calm. Thoughtful. Sober. Serene. Then --

KABLOW! A mortar shell kills the song and shakes us to reality. To his left bodies lie motionless. To his right, bullets steam from the forest. Behind him, a HERO SOLDIER grabs his collar, dragging him to safety. Welcome to:

**Hué, Vietnam. The Rocket Belt.**

KABLOW! Ears ringing. HERO SOLDIER is hit. Bodies fly. Blowing us to --

Darkness. As our eyes drift open we see a dustoff copter land. Then, again --

Darkness. Our eyes flutter open and we see TWO MEDICS sprinting towards us, but --

Darkness. Then a voice seeps in:

MEDIC #2 (O.S.)  
 Stay with me, son... gonna get you  
 outta here."

And when our eyes open again our perspective returns to normal. The Medics push against time to save the wounded and stay alive.

Medic #1 tends to the Hero Soldier. Blood-soaked hands. Chest compressions.

MEDIC #1  
 Those shells gettin' hotter.

Medic #2 works on Barker. His left leg hanging by a thread... tibia broken and jutting through blood and flesh.

MEDIC #2  
 Will your date be joining the party?

Medic #1 stops compressions, nods to the negative. Hero is gone. But Barker has a chance. Medic #2 to Barker:

MEDIC #2 (CONT'D)  
 What's your name, soldier?

No answer. Morphine jab. Tourniquet tied.

MEDIC #2 (CONT'D)  
 (to Medic #1)  
 Take the Southside. In three...  
 two... one...

Medic #1 takes his legs, Medic #2 hoists his torso under his arms. They lift and hustle towards --

-- THE AIR AMBULANCE. Bullets WHIZ and PING as they load Barker onto the medi-vac. Climb in. And take off. As they rise and soar...

6 EXT. SOUTH CENTRAL HIGH - PARKING LOT - DAY 6

A car pulls and parks. **KENDALL CLARKE**, a crazy... sexy... cool... 19-year-old, jumps out. Heads to passenger side. Gets his 3-year-old, **DANIEL**, from the back seat. And takes off towards --

7 INT. SOUTH CENTRAL HIGH - AUDITORIUM - CONTINUOUS 7

-- the cheap seats. Where **JULIUS "JT" TUCKER**, a young man whose lived three decades in only two decades of life, keeps a low profile far from the stage.

A stage that's roaring with song as 32 hands and 32 feet trip the light fantastic. Dynamic rhythm. Perfect synchronicity. Envious talent all around.

Kendall arrives. Gives a silent soul handshake and bro hug to JT. Then he sits to watch the show. The selection that emanates is a familiar tune --

## GREASE ACTORS

*You're the one that I want... you are  
the one I want... Oh, Oh, Oh,  
honey... The one that I want... You  
are the one I want... Oh, Oh, Oh,  
honey...*

-- from the musical Grease. It's a dress rehearsal.

[**NOTE:** The actual musical is subject to change depending upon clearance, production and other technical issues.]

The scene is being led by a diva in the making, **SIMONE CLARKE**, 16, confident, beautiful and strong. She shines in the role of Sandy, but an all-black cast and the added flavor of soul makes this version truly unique.

FROM STAGE LEFT, **TESSA LAUREN**, 28, watches with earnest fascination. We don't know it, but she is the Soul Train dance coordinator and Don's future right hand.

## SIMONE

*If you're filled with affection...  
You're too shy to convey... Better  
take my direction... Feel your way...*

Simone executes a perfect 3-turn pirouette and step. As she does, Tessa's foot catches the beat perfectly in rhythm. The window to her soul says it all -- Tessa is a dancer at heart.

As the set continues, "**PROFESSOR**" **AARON HAYGOOD**, 36, South Central's prim and proper drama instructor, steps in beside Tessa.

## PROFESSOR HAYGOOD

What's so important that you'd call  
in a favor just to attend our  
humble rehearsal?

Hands him a flier.

## TESSA

I need dancers. Good ones.

He looks at it... but we don't see what he sees.

PROFESSOR HAYGOOD  
This is beneath you.

TESSA  
A paycheck is never beneath me.

There's unspoken bond between these two... he'll help.

PROFESSOR HAYGOOD  
Start with Franklin...  
(re: a tall athletic guy)  
...then Kasey.  
(re: a pretty young girl)  
Jennifer's good. Lewis, Chad,  
Martin... She won't do it, but  
Simone is a gift. Almost as good  
as you were.

Tessa takes a last look... doubts anyone could be that good.  
And as the number comes to a pulse-pounding end...

TESSA  
(I see you)  
Be careful, she might actually  
believe the dreams you sell.

She goes. He watches, then...

PROFESSOR HAYGOOD  
All right, that's a wrap. Ladies,  
brilliant. Fellas, take ten.

As they wrap, Simone takes off for --

8

EXT. SOUTH CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

8

-- a private spot. Simone runs out, head on swivel, looking,  
when someone grabs her and pulls her into a corner. It's JT.

JT  
You were great.

Her response... a kiss. He kisses her back and taunts her.

JT (CONT'D)  
Hey... somebody might see. You're  
jailbait... and I like my freedom.

SIMONE  
I won't tell if you won't tell.

JT

You seem to forget... your dad carries a gun.

SIMONE

He a big ole teddy bear.

JT

Who carries a gun.

She kisses him again to shut him up...

SIMONE

Don't forget we have the audition tomorrow at four.

JT

I'll try to get off work early.

SIMONE

Don't try, be there.

Tables turned -- he kisses her quiet. Ahh. Young love. Interrupted by:

KENDALL

This is the worst kept secret, in the history of worst kept secrets.

SIMONE

Go away, Kendall.

KENDALL

I would but Mom wants you home. Your turn to make dinner.

One more kiss... Kendall turns away, holds his tongue.

SIMONE

Call you later.  
(she grabs Daniel)  
How's my little nephew? You are so cute...

KENDALL

(you'll be there?)  
Tomorrow.

JT

(I got this)  
Tomorrow.

OFF, JT watching them go until tomorrow...

INT. HIGH-LOW FOODS - WORKROOM (CHICAGO) - DAY

A time clock reads 4:04 PM slot assigned to **DELORES CORNELIUS**.

Delores is beautiful and giving and strong and smart. And yet still doesn't realize that she's any of those things. Delores knocks on an office door reserved for **MARTIN SCHAEFER**.

DELORES  
Marty, I'm heading out.

MARTY SCHAEFER  
Quitting time already?

DELORES  
Time flies. My drawer was plus ten. Think Ms. Kerrigan is taping her money together again.

MARTY SCHAEFER  
Oy. That woman. I'll make sure she gets it back.

DELORES  
And Marty, I took a little extra.

RE: A paper bag with meats and produce bulging from the top.

DELORES (CONT'D)  
I'll settle up next pay period.

MARTY SCHAEFER  
Nonsense. Take what you need. You should be running this store.

Marty grabs up a couple of giant Chick-O-Sticks.

MARTY SCHAEFER (CONT'D)  
Take these for the boys. My little ones swear by 'em.

Delores swallows what little pride she's been clinging to and takes them.

DELORES  
Thanks, Marty.

OFF Marty, wishing he could do more...

10

EXT. CORNELIUS FAMILY HOME (CHICAGO) - DAY

10

A classic Chicago-style three flat apartment. Modest. Charming. The first flat is home.

11 INT. CORNELIUS FAMILY HOME (CHICAGO) - DAY

11

A pan of flour-breaded chicken deep-frying on the stove. Delores works her magic preparing dinner for her absentee family. Don arrives with a bottle of Pérignon and a smile. Delores doesn't have to guess, she knows.

DELORES

They want it.

DON

National syndication. Fourteen cities.

(he takes her in his arms)

It's happening. It's really happening.

(they kiss, then:)

All I've gotta do is book a top ten act to make it official. But things are moving fast... I gotta front the money.

She hears, knows where this is going:

DELORES

I thought we agreed the house fund was off limits. It's the one thing you said we'd never touch.

DON

This is it, Delores. This is the dream. We can't stop here, right?

She looks at him, knows this isn't the fight to have.

DON (CONT'D)

When this takes off, we won't need a house fund I'll buy you a mansion. Hell, I'll buy you a mansion in every state.

But what Don has yet to understand is that Delores doesn't need a mansion... all she needs is this... the hug they're sharing. They break.

DON (CONT'D)

Where're the boys?

DELORES

At Mama's, till Dinner.

That's all he needs to hear. Don takes Delores, hoists her up on the counter, and as he devours his wife...

12 INT. UNKNOWN SPACE - UNKNOWN TIME 12

Pitch black. Until a soft shard of light spills into the darkness and reveals a MAN'S FACE. Bruised. Unconscious. An unexpected jolt helps end his slumber, and for a moment we are all equally disoriented.

Suddenly, he realizes he's trapped, a hostage inside the trunk of a moving car. He pounds the roof. Frantic. Screaming.

FRANTIC MAN

Fuck... Let me outta here. Oh, shit... oh, shit... Help me! Somebody get me outta of here!!

WE FEEL the world take a turn, and roll to a stop. WE HEAR two doors open and one door close and for a moment we're terrified. Silence. Footsteps. A key enters the lock and the trunk pops open.

And the first thing we lay eyes upon is **GERALD AIMS**, 31, Georgia born... Cali bred... a man even brave men refuse to cross. Aims is standing --

13 EXT. GUYS AND DOLLS NIGHTCLUB - PARKING LOT - DAY 13

-- with two of his cronies. CRONIE #1 hands Aims a brown paper bag stuffed with cash.

CRONIE #1

He short. Two large.

GERALD AIMS

You hear that Mikey. You short, two large. What I'm 'sposed to do 'bout that?

MIKEY

Please Gerald. For the love of everything. Don't kill me.

GERALD AIMS

Calm down, Mikey. I ain't gonna kill ya. Not if you get my money.

\*

MIKEY

I swear on my grandmother's grave. I'll get it. I swear.

GERALD AIMS

(to his men)  
Get him out of there.

The two men grab Mikey and toss him to the ground. He's butt-ass naked and --

GERALD AIMS (CONT'D)

For cryin' out loud, Mikey... you shat yourself.

Mikey scrambles to his feet, hands clapped over his man-parts.

MIKEY

Ah jeez, Gerald. I was out cold. I didn't know. I'll clean it up. It was an accident.

He's literally crying like a newborn child.

GERALD AIMS

Ok. Ok. Stop.  
(he does)  
Just get my money.

MIKEY

I will... I'll get every dime.

GERALD AIMS

I see you again and you don't have my money, it'll be the last time I see you, Mikey. Understand me?

MIKEY

I understand, Gerald. You can count on me.

He starts off. Then:

GERALD AIMS

Mikey, you forget something?

Mikey looks at Gerald, he can't be serious. Gerald looks back at the car, dead serious. So, Mikey heads over... reaches in the trunk... and scoops up as much feces as two hands can cup. Then he gets out of there as fast as he can.

Gerald watches, then turns to his men as he goes:

\*

GERALD AIMS (CONT'D)

Clean that shit up.

OFF his Cronies, getting to work...

14 EXT. VICTORIA'S APARTMENT - DAY 14

A set of quaint apartments in Boyle Heights. Kendall makes his way to the door. Doesn't knock. Just enters into --

15 INT. VICTORIA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS 15

-- his baby mama's crib. He closes the door and heads into the dining room. There he sees **VICTORIA OCHOA**, 19, an 80's girl in a 70's world and his first love, up on a stool reaching for a potted plant.

Kendall takes a minute to note how sexy and beautiful she looks in that too-too-short skirt she's wearing.

KENDALL

I believe that I bought every piece of clothing you have on. Even the underwear.

She looks back...

VICTORIA

Make yourself useful.

They switch. Kendall hands off Daniel and climbs up to get the plant.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

How was guys-day-out?

KENDALL

It was smokin'. Daniel had a blast. Got drunk off of apple juice... flirted with some four-year-olds... and still had time to stop and buy mommy dinner.

RE: The bag on the counter.

KENDALL (CONT'D)

It's enough for all of us if you want me to stay.

The tone of his voice says he's serious. But the tilt of her head says it's not a good idea.

KENDALL (CONT'D)

What? Daniel got your favorite... pork chops from Mabel's. Got those homemade biscuits. And he wouldn't leave till they gave him some apple butter.

Kendall knows exactly what she likes. Victoria grabs the bag.

VICTORIA  
You know I love apple butter.

She takes one and eats it.

KENDALL  
I was thinking, this weekend we could all go to Church together. You know, like a family?

VICTORIA  
Marcos won't like that.

KENDALL  
I don't like Marcos, so we're even.

Victoria looks at Kendall with a knowing smile... sits Daniel on the carpet... and gives him the rest of her biscuit.

VICTORIA  
Eat, little Papi...

He does. Then she turns back to Kendall... readies herself:

VICTORIA (CONT'D)  
Kendall, we need to talk. Last weekend, Marcos... asked me to marry him.

Kendall is stunned.

KENDALL  
Wait. Wait. You're joking? Dating other people is one thing, but... this was supposed to be a break.

VICTORIA  
You only hear what you want to hear, Kendall. You were the one who wanted to have fun and not be tied down. Marcos wants a family. He asked. I said yes.

KENDALL  
Vikki.

VICTORIA  
No. We're getting married in October... and we're moving to Texas with his new job.

Kendall's embarrassed... and angry.... and he explodes...

KENDALL

Texas? Like hell you will. You can sleep with whoever you want, but I'll be damned if you take my son anywhere.

Victoria responds to his verbal assault with one of her own... but en español.

VICTORIA

(Spanish w/ English subtitles)  
Like you ever gave a shit about anybody, but yourself!

Kendal responds in kind.

KENDALL

(Spanish w/ English subtitles)  
I gave a shit about you. I just didn't have enough money for my shit to matter.

VICTORIA

(Spanish w/ English subtitles)  
This isn't about money. Or a house. Or anything other than what's best for Daniel.

KENDALL

(Spanish w/ English subtitles)  
Daniel belongs with his father.

VICTORIA

(Spanish w/ English subtitles)  
Who pays for daycare? Who stayed up with him when he had colic and I had to work--

KENDALL

Who threw him the surprise party last month--

VICTORIA

Who didn't sleep with Keisha or Ramona or Tamala... You wanna be a father then act like one.

The fight is interrupted when **MARCOS REYES**, 24 and handsome, arrives... and takes a crying Daniel into his arms...

MARCOS

Hey, hey... I can hear you guys down the block.

They knock it off. Then to Victoria:

MARCOS (CONT'D)  
Is everything okay?

Victoria notices Daniel crying... she calms. She takes him.

VICTORIA  
Everything's fine. Kendall was  
just leaving.

Kendall eyes her. Still loves her, but puts her on notice:

KENDALL  
This isn't over. God as my witness,  
I'll do whatever I gotta do. You  
are not taking my son away from me.

With that he turns, brushing past Marcos and goes...

SMASH TO BLACK:

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

16 INT. CORNELIUS FAMILY HOME - BATHROOM (CHICAGO) - DAY 16

Our eyes rest on a book cover: **"Weekly Words. 365 Days To A Superior Vocabulary."** As Don reads we follow. Today's word, **"Manifest Destiny."** Phonetic spelling. Proper definition. Sentence use.

A knock on the door brings Delores in and REVEALS Don is doing his business... on the toilet. She's in a rush.

DELORES

Don, I need my make-up.

DON

Enter at your own risk.

She grabs her caboodle...

DELORES

You my man, but for the love of God  
light a candle.

DON

You can get out, ya know?

She does, but quickly returns with a candle. Lights it and finishes a quick touchup:

DELORES

What time's your flight?

DON

12:30. Still time for you to come  
with me?

DELORES

(re: him on the toilet)  
Now there's a romantic offer.

DON

I'm serious. We'll make a weekend  
out of it.

DELORES

Someone's gotta hold down the fort  
while you take over the world.

She kisses his cheek, heads out... then returns:

DELORES (CONT'D)  
I'm really proud of you.

...and goes. As she does, Don returns to his lesson.

17 INT. THE LAW OFFICE OF SARAH JACOBS - DAY

17

A cramped space. Kendall waits. After a beat, **SARAH JACOBS** mid 30s, enters, file in hand. Kendall stands, they hug.

SARAH JACOBS  
Boy, how's your mother?

KENDALL  
She's good. Taking night classes  
at Western. Nursing.

SARAH JACOBS  
That's amazing. I have no doubt  
she'll do it. Remind her she owes me  
a million-dollar pound cake. \*

KENDALL  
Yes ma'am, I will.

SARAH JACOBS  
And your father... still on  
deployment?

KENDALL  
He'll be home in October.

SARAH JACOBS  
Godforsaken war.

Pleasantries aside, she sits.

SARAH JACOBS (CONT'D)  
I reviewed the file, Kendall,  
and... an unmarried man, with no  
job, who lives at home with his  
parents. You stand almost no  
chance of gaining custody.

KENDALL  
Uncle Carl got custody of his boys.  
And Janet lives in Denver with her  
dad.

SARAH JACOBS  
Carl's wife ran off with the  
mailman. And Janet's mom is a  
prostitute. Not the same. \*

(MORE)

SARAH JACOBS (CONT'D)  
(what's really going on)  
You're nineteen. You've never struck me as the kind of guy who wants sole custody of a three year old. Is this about Victoria getting engaged?

KENDALL  
(stern)  
It ain't about that.  
(then:)  
I got my ways, I know that. And I might not be the best dad in the world. What kinda dad can I be if my son's in Texas and I'm here?

Good point. Sarah rises and the handshake says she's in.

SARAH JACOBS  
I'll draw up the paperwork and we'll file the motion top of the week. Don't be surprised if Victoria doesn't let you see Daniel until the hearing.

KENDALL  
She can do that?

SARAH JACOBS  
She's got physical custody, she can do that.

He never thought of that.

KENDALL  
Oh. Ok. Thank you, Ms. Jacobs.

SARAH JACOBS  
Thank me by paying your bill.

KENDALL  
Yes, ma'am. I'll make sure of it.

SARAH JACOBS  
And Kendall, let your mom know what's coming. This is gonna get ugly. Custody cases always do.

He nods, goes. OFF Sarah, grieved, knowing all that lies ahead.

18 INT. SOUL TRAIN SOUNDSTAGE (LOS ANGELES) - DAY

18

Dark and dank and dreary. Some sort of liquid drips from the ceiling and lands with a rhythmic TINK TINK TINK atop a jagged piece of metal.

After a beat, the elephant door rolls open and a tall figure lumbers in. Doesn't take long to realize it's Don, flashlight in hand... getting a look at his new digs.

Don aims the light towards a corner... illuminating a discarded stack of cardboard boxes. As he walks further in, he trips on something in the darkness:

DON

Damn it.

He gathers himself, spots an adjacent office and casts the beam into the open doorway. The light sends a pack of rats racing for cover. Don doesn't react. Just watches them disappear into the void before turning and wielding the light over an abandoned space in the back, near the --

SOUNDSTAGE. And that's when his mind eyes it. He moves the light up... looking... then back down. That's it.

Music drifts in... and as he scans the light to the left several **SOUL TRAIN DANCERS** appear on the floor. And when he swings back to the right... his vision of the Soul Train Stage is revealed. In the distance dancers surround **JAMES BROWN** as he performs a piece of his mega hit "**Super Bad.**"

JAMES BROWN

*I got the something that makes me  
wanna shout... I got that thing that  
tells me what it's all about... I  
got soul, ha, and I'm super bad!*

The Godfather of Soul, does his patented turn... kick... and splits and the crowd erupts in thunderous applause.

Then just as abruptly as the visions appeared, they're gone. And we're left with Don standing in the midst of what will become the epicenter of his empire.

There for the first time Don proclaims to himself, barely audible but boldly earnest:

DON

It's gonna be a stone gas, Honey.

OFF, that famous decree...

19 EXT. LOS ANGELES PARK - DAY

19

Another gorgeous day in the City of Angels. Tessa stands, clipboard at the ready, taking notes, shouting commands to a group of **DANCERS** doing their thang to Stevie Wonder's "**Signed Sealed Delivered.**"

TESSA

Show me something good. Come on.  
Come on. Dance like you just don't  
care.

Tessa zeroes in on a few dancers who stand out.

TESSA (CONT'D)

22. 7. 12. Come forward. Keep  
going.

They do. Working it even harder to impress Boss Lady.  
Behind her, Don approaches. Watches.

TESSA (CONT'D)

That's right. Feel it. Groove it.  
Love it.

Tessa finally sees Don, moves to join him.

TESSA (CONT'D)

I didn't know you were coming.

DON

This the first group?

TESSA

Third. The first were ok, but these  
kids... they're amazing, right?

Don's answer is not to answer.

DON

Did we book the construction crew?

TESSA

Scheduled to start Monday.

DON

Crew interviews?

TESSA

First thing tomorrow morning.

After a beat, Don abruptly shuts off the music and --

DON

May I have your attention. Tessa and I appreciate your time, but that's gonna be all for today.

Tessa's thrown, but waits for the crowd to thin before asking:

TESSA

Why'd you do that? I haven't finished scoring them.

DON

(cutting her off)  
I need you to do better.

TESSA

I don't know what that means.

DON

It means I didn't hire you to find people I could get at a house party.

TESSA

You hired me because I'm good at what I do.

DON

No, I hired you because you're cheap.

Tessa takes the jab, absorbs the sting.

TESSA

Mr. Cornelius, these kids are great. They're nailing all the latest moves.

DON

I don't need dancers who can do the latest moves... I needs stars who can create the next dance craze. Do better. Or I'll find someone who will.

OFF that edict, Don goes... leaving Tessa floored in his wake.

20

INT. GUYS AND DOLLS NIGHTCLUB - DAY

20

A stylish and modern juke-joint. Right now it's sparse and measured... a shell of what it'll be by nightfall.

ONSTAGE... **FOUR GUYS** in three-piece suits perform in lock step. They're good... a poor man's Temptations, but the **CLUB MANAGER** isn't impressed. Stops them mid-audition...

G&D MANAGER

Ok. Enough. You guys aren't what we're looking for. Next.

That's when Simone, Kendall and JT take the stage. JT parks at a keyboard. Kendall grabs a guitar and Simone takes a mic stand and adjusts it...

SIMONE

Hi, I'm Simone... this's my brother, Kendall, that's JT and we're Encore.

The Manager remains unimpressed. She steps back. They get their timing.

JT

One. Two. One... two... three...

And suddenly they harmonize their a capella opening and instantly catches his attention. Soulful. Powerful. Fresh.

Encore breaks into a star-making performance to an original piece, that has every eye in the bar glued on them. If Bruno Mars had a '70s hit, this would be it.

Simone is sensational. But Kendall is a dynamo in his own right, and we didn't see it coming. His verse leaves us wanting more of what he has in store as a performer.

From the front, Gerald Aims, who we've already met, enters and watches. It's a truncated performance, but it's phenomenal. And as a crazy riff by JT and soul-stirring run by Simone brings the song to a climatic wrap the few workers in the club roar aloud with applause. The Manager joins the ovation.

G&D MANAGER

That was absolutely fantastic. The gig is yours if you want it.

They look at one another, ecstatic. Simone can barely contain her excitement. She composes herself and:

SIMONE

We want it.

G&D MANAGER

Pays two-fifty a night. Five hundred for the weekend. We break a thousand heads you get a dollar every head we go over. Food and drinks on the house. How many songs you got?

KENDALL

Six originals, but we can cover any--

JT

How many you need?

G&D MANAGER

More than you got.

And that's when the club manager notices Aims.

G&D MANAGER (CONT'D)

Mr. Aims, you need to hear these guys... they're perfect for our House Band.

But Aims takes a long, lustful look at Simone. Then:

GERALD AIMS

How old are you?

SIMONE

Eighteen.

She's lying. He knows it.

GERALD AIMS

Eighteen? So when I pick up the phone and call your references I'll get the same story?

SIMONE

I'll be 17 in a few months. But please, we need this gig.

Aims doesn't care.

GERALD AIMS

You're fly... but you're not worth my liquor license. Call me when you're legal.

(to the Manager)

Get 'em out of here.

G&D MANAGER

But I just hired em'.

GERALD AIMS

And I just fired 'em.

OFF Encore... damn.

21

EXT. GUYS & DOLLS NIGHTCLUB - PARKING LOT - DAY

21

Outside... Encore huddles. Kendall is pissed. JT resigned. But Simone is ever the optimist.

SIMONE

I know we didn't get the gig, but he liked us. That means something.

JT

Ain't no moral victories, Simone.

SIMONE

We're close. All we need is a break.

KENDALL

(screaming out)

Fuck!

Simone initiates plan B, pulls something from her pocket.

SIMONE

We keep trying to make a name for ourselves, so we can get noticed. Well why not get noticed, so we can make a name for ourselves?

She hands them one of the flyers Tessa was passing out.

KENDALL

What's a Soul Train?

SIMONE

A dance show. Cindy has a cousin in Chicago. She says the dancers there are like stars around town. And that's a local show, this is national. I don't know if we can get on the show, but maybe we can use it to help build our name.

Kendall considers --

KENDALL

Do they pay?

SIMONE

I don't think so.

JT finally breaks his silence:

JT

Check it out. I can't keep washing dishes all day and chasing dreams at night. It ain't enough.

But Kendall doesn't empathize, goes at JT.

KENDALL

This ain't just about you. Either we a group or we ain't.

SIMONE

Kendall, don't.

KENDALL

Naw, he barely ever come to practice, anyway. Always got an excuse about somethin' more important. Either Encore mean somethin' to you or it don't. Ain't no in between.

JT

Who the hell died and made you Berry Gordy?

KENDALL

Yo junkie ass momma, bitch.

JT rushes Kendall, jacks him up by the collar, but Simone stands in the gap... barely holding them apart...

SIMONE

Stop it! Kendall! JT! Stop!!

KENDALL

I say we cut our losses. He ain't got what it take to make it anyway.

SIMONE

Kendall, shut up. Everybody shut up.

They do. Ire. Anger. Angst.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

We're in this together. We started this group together. And we're really good. That doesn't just happen. Now, we all want the same thing. We want this to work, right?

She looks to Kendall, he's looks away seething.

KENDALL

Right.

Simone turns to JT:

SIMONE

You want this too, right, baby?

He meets her eyes and holds her gaze before:

JT

Yeah. I do. But I'm not dancing on some teenie-bop TV show... I ain't got time.

(a shot at Kendall)

Some of us gotta work for a living.

He's out. But Kendall needs the last word and gets it.

KENDALL

You better than this, Simone. We better than this. He need to go.

And he's out. OFF Simone, wondering if her brother is right.

22 INT. CAMP EAGLE ARMY BASE (VIETNAM) - COMM HUB - DAY 22

The Theme From Shaft... instrumental only... brings us into the radio room where CORPORAL SIPRIAN, 28 is in a groove... taking calls... dispatching copters... bobbing his head to his own beat.

CORPORAL SIPRIAN

Air Camp 2-2-4-7 you are cleared to depart. Four wounded. Non urgent. Bring 'em back, Bobby.

COPTER PILOT (ON RADIO)

You bet your sweet tits I will.

Siprian flips the switch and listens as non-urgent calls transmit over the airwaves. That's when a box of LUCKY STRIKES land on his table. And without even looking up:

CORPORAL SIPRIAN

Hell no.

He's talking to SERGEANT JOSEPH CLARKE, 34, a man of honor and valor whom we instantly recognize as Medic #2 from the rescue mission.

JOSEPH CLARKE

Come on, Siprian. You know what day it is.

CORPORAL SIPRIAN

Like I give a shit. Almost got busted last time. First week on the job. Um, um, naw. Box of Lucky Strike ain't worth my ass.

JOSEPH CLARKE

How about two?

Another box joins the first.

CORPORAL SIPRIAN  
Why don't you just write letters  
like normal, henpecked Negroes?

JOSEPH CLARKE  
I do write letters. But every so  
often you gotta go the extra mile.  
The hens enjoy it.

Clarke goes one mile further... adds a bottle of Rye Whiskey  
to sweeten deal. Siprian eyes the Rye, then takes it.

CORPORAL SIPRIAN  
Gimme the number. Be back at  
Twenty-two Thirty.

Handing Siprian a piece of paper, before he starts off:

JOSEPH CLARKE  
You're a peach, Siprian.

CORPORAL SIPRIAN  
Fuck you, Clarke.

JOSEPH CLARKE  
If I don't get home soon, I just  
might take you up on that.

OFF Siprian, taking a swig of the Rye...

23

EXT. GUYS AND DOLLS NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

23

Simply put... the hottest nightlife in LA. And Black  
Hollywood is well-repped. The drop-off is lined with  
Mustangs. Mercedes. And Cadillacs. Adorned with chauffeurs  
holding doors so their bosses can make the proper entrance.

The wait-and-pray line starts a block that way. A line Don  
bypasses in favor of the cool kid's entrance. A **BOUNCER**  
greet him:

BOUNCER  
Name?

DON  
Don Cornelius.

BOUNCER  
(scanning)  
You're not on the list.

DON

Check again. Got a meeting with James Brown.

BOUNCER

And I'm the Easter Bunny. Git yo black ass to the back of the line.

But before he does, Don pulls a Benjamin.

DON

Check again. Probably under Franklin.

And just like that, they're simpatico. Bouncer takes the cash... unhinges the rope... and lets Mr. Franklin pass.

24

INT. GUYS AND DOLLS NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

24

A different look from day. Part fancy dinner joint. Part kick-it-all-night party spot. No squares or cares allowed.

Glasses CLINK CLINK CLINK as the good times flow and the Poor Man's Temptations from earlier warms the crowd.

Don enters. Scans the scene. And spots his objective --

THE VIP SECTION where James Brown and crew lounge in luxury.

Don wades through a mass of beautiful black patrons until he lands at a **BODYGUARD** standing sentry at Heaven's Gate.

DON

Don Cornelius to see, Mr. Brown. I was told to ask for Charles Bobbitt.

The Bodyguard eyes him. Then turns and walks over to **CHARLES BOBBITT**. Short. Smug. And barely black. He's a passer. They whisper. Bobbitt glances up, heads toward Don who towers over him.

CHARLES BOBBITT

You're the dance show guy. Thought you'd be bigger.

DON

You're the manager. Thought you'd be blacker.

CHARLES BOBBITT

I get by. Never had any complaints.

DON

Come to Chicago. That'll change.

He looks at Don, laughs... guy's got balls.

CHARLES BOBBITT

I'll take your word for it.

(down to business)

The quote's twenty-five grand for two songs. Half up front.

DON

That's not how it works. It's TV. We pay a set fee, in exchange for exposure. Same deal as American Bandstand.

CHARLES BOBBITT

Yeah... but you ain't Bandstand.

(a waste of time)

Come back when you learn the game.

Don is not the type to take an insult for answer:

DON

I prefer not to be handled, Mr. Bobbitt. I was promised a sit-down with James Brown, S'what I expect.

With that, Don pushes past Bobbitt, but before he can take a third step, Bodyguard and a **SECOND FLUNKY** block his path, each with a hand inside their coat, ready for trouble.

DON (CONT'D)

What... you niggas s'ppose to scare me?

CHARLES BOBBITT

You're obviously new at this so let me give you some advice. Walk away, kid.

Don takes a beat, his anger grows. And as the seconds tick away, he clenches his fist and readies to take a swing... And just as he does... a hand grabs his arm... it's Gerald Aims, who calmly steps into the fray.

GERALD AIMS

Fellas, this ain't going down like this. Not tonight. Not in my club.

(to Charles:)

Charlie, call off the dogs and the next round's on the house.

Bobbitt smiles. Then to Don:

CHARLES BOBBITT

See. That's how you do business.

Bobbitt turns and goes, and his dogs follow suit.

GERALD AIMS

So you 'bout to fight the whole damn crew. 15 brothers? Guns and all.

DON

If I have to.

Don holds his anger and his stare. Aims sees him and laughs.

GERALD AIMS

Look at you. No crew. No gun. Half the folks up in here could make you disappear, never to be seen again, and the cops wouldn't blink an eye... And you don't give a damn. Huh.

(then:)

Where'd you serve?

A curious question, but a good one. Don finally looks at Aims.

DON

Korea. Army. 751st.

GERALD AIMS

Korea. Navy. USS Missouri.

(extends a hand)

Gerald Aims.

DON

Don Cornelius.

GERALD AIMS

Let me buy you a drink, Don.

Don thinks... and then takes Aims up on his offer.

25

INT. MA MABEL'S KITCHEN - DISH ROOM - NIGHT

25

A hole in the wall soul food joint that serves the best food you've never had. JT rushes in, grabs a rubber apron and stops short seeing, **MA MABEL**. She could very well be his grandmother, but she's not.

MA MABEL

You're late.

JT

Sorry, Ms. Mabel. I'll close up.

MA MABEL

You bet your sweet backside you will.

JT

I'll close tomorrow too. I need the hours.

MA MABEL

Julius, you can't even handle the hours I'm giving you.

JT

That's done. I'm good. I need this.

MA MABEL

What you need is to bus them dishes and be on time. We'll talk about hours later. Now git.

JT grabs a hair net, puts it on and starts washing dishes.

26

INT. GUYS AND DOLLS NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

26

A near empty bottle of whiskey sits between two empty glasses. Aims refills them both.

GERALD AIMS

Nothing like a good bourbon.

DON

Except a good woman who likes to drink bourbon.

GERALD AIMS

I'll drink to that.

And they do. Aims pours another glass.

GERALD AIMS (CONT'D)

So let me get this straight. Losing the human perm over there means you lose your Music Train?

DON

Soul Train.

GERALD AIMS

Whatever.

DON

I need a top-10 act. He's my top-10 act. I lose him, I lose syndication. It's alotta money.

GERALD AIMS

Bullshit. Bullshit. Bullshit.

They drink. And the effects are clearly setting in. Gerald takes the bottle and fills Don's glass half way.

GERALD AIMS (CONT'D)

Look. Now is this glass half empty or half drunk?

Don is confused. Thinks he knows what he's trying to ask, but doesn't really. He takes a guess.

DON

Half full?

Aims then fills his glass all the way to the top and then drinks half the glass.

GERALD AIMS

Ok. What about this one. Half drunk or half full?

DON

Half empty?

GERALD AIMS

No. Get it. It's neither. Or both. It don't matter 'cause it's all perspective.

By now they are both clearly drunk. And Aims is looking to take it to the next level. As he talks, he pulls out his private stash of coke and readies a line --

GERALD AIMS (CONT'D)

See, you think Soul Man is all you got. But if he's a top-10 act and you don't got him, perspective say there are nine other top-10 acts.

Boom. Drunk wisdom. And he's very proud of himself. Don looks, on skeptical but lets him continue:

GERALD AIMS (CONT'D)

Perspective.

Aims takes a hit of coke and shakes it off WHOA!!! Good stuff.

GERALD AIMS (CONT'D)

It's like that white man's mantra... what's it called... when they refused to let white women vote... and when they shoved Jim Crow Law down our throat... and... and... and... they gave the Indians smallpox 'cause they wouldn't leave their land... Always put yourself first. Man-Is-First Destiny, Baby. White folks did it. We can do it too.

Don looks up at Aims. Half drunk, half amazed. Is this stupidity? Or destiny?

DON

Manifest.

GERALD AIMS

What?

DON

The belief that the U.S. was ordained by God to rule North America. It's called Manifest Destiny. Not man is first destiny.

GERALD AIMS

First. Fest. Fuck. Who cares. I might not know words, but I know the music game like I know the bumps on my balls. And I'm gonna help you out. You think Gladys Knight would work?

Aims puts a hit in front of Don. Some would see it as a test, some an offering. Either way, Don takes it.

DON

You know Gladys Knight?

GERALD AIMS

Not only do I know Gladys... and Willie and Eddie... But, Bubba, the original Pip... is my ace boon coon. We go way back.

Aims takes another hit. He's fried and loving it.

GERALD AIMS (CONT'D)

They doing a show tomorrow in Gary, and for a small finders fee, I'll set ya up.

Don considers. But:

DON

If I pay money for artists and word gets out, Soul Train will never be legit. I can't risk it.

Aims sets out one more line for each of them.

GERALD AIMS

Ah, fuck. I'm gonna do it any way.

Don is thrown.

DON

Why?

GERALD AIMS

You know what, Cat... I like you. We see the world the same. Besides, if you got major talent coming through on a weekly basis I can book 'em here as much as I want... on discount.

He's shrewd and he's right. Don smiles, he gets it. Win-win. These guys can learn a lot from each other. And as they each snort another line... WE...

SMASH TO BLACK:

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

27 INT. GUYS &amp; DOLLS NIGHTCLUB - GERALD'S OFFICE - DAY 27

Don wakes up on a couch in an unfamiliar room. Aims adds the nightly receipts. He's that guy... the one who counts every nickel, signs every check. It's the first time he's seen Don hungover, it won't be the last.

GERALD AIMS

Man, you can take it to the head  
like a champ.

Don gets his bearings --

DON

What time is it?

GERALD AIMS

Time for you to get yo' ass up if  
you gonna make that plane.

Now it hits him --

DON

Can I use your phone?

Gerald obliges, offers his desk phone per Don's request, and a glass of Alka Seltzer for breakfast. Don dials and as the phone rings, downs his meal and readies to turn it on...

INTERCUT WITH:

28 INT. CORNELIUS FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM (CHICAGO) - DAY 28

Delores, dressed for work, answers:

DELORES

Hello.

DON

Miss me yet?

DELORES

I do. But it sounds like you're  
having enough fun for the both of  
us.

DON

Well how about later we both have some?

DELORES

What are you talking about?

DON

James Brown fell through. But I'm meeting Gladys Knight in Gary at seven. And I want the most beautiful girl in Chicago by my side when I do.

DELORES

Sweetheart, I would love to, but Mama's gone, we don't have a sitter.

DON

What about Millie?

DELORES

She's sick. I'll try Esther, but it's really short notice.

DON

Try. My plane lands at six. Gonna head over straight from the airport. If you can make the drive I'll be the happiest Negro this side of Africa.

DELORES

You done lost your mind.

DON

The right woman will do that to you. It's at the Showcase Supper Club. Don't leave me hangin'.

She disconnects, and so does he. OFF Delores, smiling... maybe this'll work after all.

29

INT. CAMP EAGLE ARMY BASE - MEDICAL HOUSING - NIGHT

29

A sparse and sterile medical facility. Sergeant Clarke walks the communal unit until he finds the bed of Private Barker. He doesn't look good.

Clarke stands for a moment thinking less of Barker than his own son, who could easily be fighting and dying in this war. As he nurtures that thought, a voice invades his silence:

VIETNAM DOCTOR

One of your men?

JOSEPH CLARKE

Naw. Brought him in yesterday.  
How is he?

VIETNAM DOCTOR

He's a fighter. If he makes it  
through the next forty-eight, he  
might make it. Either way, keeping  
that leg is a coin flip.

With that, the doctor moves to his next patient. But Clarke,  
pulls up a chair and sits... he'll stay with Barker a little  
while longer.

30 EXT. MA MABEL'S KITCHEN - BACKDOOR - DAY 30

Break time. JT exits with a Pepsi in one hand and his  
favorite toy in the other, a Blueridge acoustic guitar that  
his father gave him. He sits. Takes a sip of soda. Then  
strums a cord to the beginning of a love song.

He stops. Adjusts the strings and starts again. As he does  
the camera 180's JT, slowly encircling him. And at the exact  
same time --

INTERCUT WITH:

31 INT. SOUTH CENTRAL HIGH - AUDITORIUM - DAY 31

-- as the CAMERA MATCHES the same move... encircling Simone,  
who sits at the piano and likewise plays.

Her fingers tickle the keys. Wondrous. Flawless. Magical.  
And Simone begins to hum a soulful intro to the song. As she  
does, JT's guitar strings seeps seamlessly into her world.

So the trained ear has already heard what we are just finding  
out... they are playing the same song. This is the beginning  
of a beautiful duet, sung together and played together while  
miles apart.

[NOTE: This will be an original duet written by Kenny  
"Babyface" Edmonds. Think of it as the 1971 equivalent of  
"Endless Love" by Lionel Richie and Diana Ross, or "Like I'm  
Gonna Lose You" by Meghan Trainor and John Legend.]

And as they sing we will INTERCUT CLOSE UPS that make them  
feel like they are staring into each other's soul.

We hear them sing the chorus together as if they are together, yet they never are. Visually stunning... musically amazing... this type of creative marriage will be a signature of what we do.

As the song continues they each will get a private audience --

32 EXT. MA MABEL'S KITCHEN - BACKDOOR - DAY 32

REVEAL Ma Mabel watching as JT gets lost in his music.

33 INT. SOUTH CENTRAL HIGH - AUDITORIUM - DAY 33

REVEAL Professor Haygood watching his star pupil shine.

And as the song builds to an incredible climax, it's obvious that these two are in sync as one. And the only question that remains is whether they will remain that way.

The song ends and Professor Haygood applauds:

PROFESSOR HAYGOOD  
Outstanding. Simply Outstanding.

SIMONE  
Professor Haygood, I wasn't--

PROFESSOR HAYGOOD  
No need for apologies.  
(then:)  
Ms. Clarke. I am taking a small  
contingent to Juilliard for a two  
week performance in December, and I  
want you to be my lead.

OFF, Simone shocked and delighted...

34 EXT. MA MABEL'S KITCHEN - BACKDOOR - DAY 34

As JT finishes his final strum, Ma Mabel makes herself known:

MA MABEL  
Julius, don't you dare waste that  
talent washing dishes.  
(then:)  
You can close tomorrow if you want.  
Only a few hours, but s'all I got.

OFF JT, relieved and grateful...

35 INT. SOUL TRAIN STUDIO - BACK OFFICE - DAY 35

Tessa checks a clock before stepping into a makeshift waiting area that houses a group of Guys. Most are white. All hold resumes and wear coats and ties. No suits.

TESSA

My apologies, I'm sure Mr.  
Cornelius will be here any minute.  
Traffic issues.

Tessa turns back to the office desk, picks up the phone and dials. It rings and rings and rings...

TESSA (CONT'D)

Where the hell are you?

OFF this and the phone just ringing...

36 EXT. SHOWCASE SUPPER CLUB (GARY, INDIANA) - NIGHT 36

Don pulls up. Valets. And heads into --

37 INT. SHOWCASE SUPPER CLUB - CONTINUOUS 37

-- an elegant dinner club that crosses the racial divide. We join GLADYS KNIGHT & HER PIPS covering the Motown opus "**Ain't No Mountain High Enough**":

GLADYS KNIGHT & THE PIPS

*Listen baby, ain't no mountain high,  
ain't no valley low, ain't no river  
wide enough baby... If you need me  
call me no matter where you are, no  
matter how far... don't worry baby...  
Just call my name I'll be there in a  
hurry, you don't have to worry...*

A section of tables are cordoned off for a VIP group. The lone face we recognize is George Johnson, who checks his watch. Among the others, include a gaggle of **WOMEN**, all tens. Don arrives and George greets him, hands him a drink.

GEORGE JOHNSON

You're late.

Don takes note of the women.

DON

Seems like a whole lotta extra  
going on.

GEORGE JOHNSON

First rule of business... find out what your client wants and give it to them.

Now he takes note of Gladys.

DON

And what does she want?

GEORGE JOHNSON

Answer that and you'll be bigger than all of us.

He's right. And suddenly Don feels the pressure. But his only tell is to calmly down his drink.

BACK TO GLADYS.

GLADYS KNIGHT & THE PIPS

*'Cause baby there ain't no mountain high enough... Ain't no valley low enough... Ain't no river wide enough... To keep me from getting to you babe...*

The set ends to thunderous applause as Gladys and company clear the stage. She smiles and signs a couple of autographs en route to --

-- Don, George and the others. As they arrive, their **ROAD MANAGER** introduces them:

ROAD MANAGER

Bubba... William... Eddie... Gladys... this is Don Cornelius and this is George Johnson, of Johnson Hair Care fame.

BUBBA KNIGHT

Love that Afrosheen shit.

EDDIE PATTEN

And who are these lovely ladies?

GEORGE JOHNSON

Oh these are some friends of ours.

The guys instantly become enamored with the girls.

GLADYS KNIGHT

Fellas, Mr. Johnson would you excuse us?

They do and Gladys wanders over to --

38 INT. SHOWCASE SUPPER CLUB - PRIVATE TABLE - CONTINUOUS 38

-- Gladys' personal table. Don joins her.

DON

I'm surprised the guys don't wanna be a part of the discussion.

GLADYS KNIGHT

Oh, we've already made the decision. The answer is no.

DON

You haven't even heard me out.

GLADYS KNIGHT

You're a salesman, Mr. Cornelius. I don't like salesmen. And I don't like being sloppy seconds.

DON

Better sloppy seconds than funky fourths.

The joke bombs.

GLADYS KNIGHT

Look, I told Gerald I'd take the meeting. I took the meeting. But this isn't going to work.

As she starts off...

DON

Ms. Knight, look around. Tell me what you see.

GLADYS KNIGHT

I don't wanna play games, Mr. Cornelius. I'm tired, I wanna go to bed.

DON

I've had six jobs in the last five years. I've got a wife and two kids... and if I can't convince you to work with me, I lose everything... so this is no game.

He gestures to the empty chair, she considers, then sits. He joins her.

DON (CONT'D)

Tell me what you see.

Gladys takes a long look around and as she speaks we see what she sees...

GLADYS KNIGHT

I see men and women. Black and beautiful. Dressed to the nines. Eating and drinking and enjoying themselves. I see happiness.

Don sees what she sees, but he sees so much more.

DON

I see freedom. I see economic power. I see a place owned by blacks, for blacks, but where everyone is welcome. Ownership. That's the only way to truly overcome... to have real freedom... is by keeping that power with us. We've got the best singers and dancers and entertainers in the world... but when we want to showcase our talent we either got to go to Podunk Tennessee or on American Bandstand.

GLADYS KNIGHT

Flip Wilson ain't so bad.

DON

I love Flip, but who owns his show... and who owns him?

She never looked at it that way.

DON (CONT'D)

Think about it... I'm talking about a national television show written, directed, produced and owned by black people. The host, the dancers, the stars. I'm talking about bringing us, not whitewashed, not toned down... but us... black folks... into the homes of millions of people. Like it or not. Black folks the way black folks was meant to be seen. Proud. Strong. Beautiful. There's never been a show like it. And it won't just be mine... it'll be ours. All of us. But I can't do it alone...

The invitation hangs in the air... then...

GLADYS KNIGHT

If my daddy were here, he'd say you  
could sell water to a whale.

(I'm in:)

But, I choose the songs we sing.  
And it won't be anything we've  
already recorded.

DON

Absolutely. You won't regret it.

GLADYS KNIGHT

We'll see about that.

DON

Well damn. Let's have a drink...  
all of us, to celebrate.

GLADYS KNIGHT

I'll pass. But I'm sure the boys  
will join you... they're nonstop.

DON

Ms. Knight, I'll never be able to  
thank you.

GLADYS KNIGHT

Call me, Gladys. And you can start  
by doing right by us... black folk  
as you put it. Make this show  
everything you promised. That'll  
be thanks enough.

She goes. Don is beaming, knowing this is a promise he will  
definitely keep. Then:

DON

Drinks on me!

As the club erupts...

39 INT. CORNELIUS FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM (CHICAGO) - NIGHT 39

SHA-CLICK. A still image of FAT ALBERT & THE GANG playing  
basketball... SHA-CLICK... turns to a still image of RUDY  
taking a shot off of Fat Albert's ginormous ass... SHA-  
CLICK. It's a View-Master, and right now it's in the hands  
of Don's eldest, TONY as the youngest, RAYMOND, fights for  
his share of time.

A knock at the door forces Tony to call out --

TONY CORNELIUS  
Momma. Somebody's here.

Another knock and he gets up and opens it to JOYCE... the impromptu babysitter.

JOYCE  
Boy don't you ever open that door  
without asking who is it, hear me?  
(Tony nods)  
Good. Now, where ya mama?

He points to the back as Delores enters, dressed to perfection in a powder blue dress.

JOYCE (CONT'D)  
My God in heaven, that man don't  
deserve you.

DELORES  
You like it?

JOYCE  
You look stunning.

DELORES  
Too bad he won't get to see it.  
I'm not going. It's so late,  
they'll be done by the time I get  
there.

JOYCE  
So you'll have a drink with your  
husband... then have wild sex in  
the back seat of the car.

DELORES  
(re: the boys)  
Joyce.

JOYCE  
What? Y'all married. Sex is legal  
in the eyes of the Lord.

They laugh...

DELORES  
Boys you listen to Miss Joyce.  
Give me a kiss.  
(They do. As she goes:)  
We'll be home by midnight.

OFF Joyce... a final jab...

JOYCE

And ride that stallion one time for  
me, why don't cha... Lord knows  
it's been a while.

40

INT. THE LAUREN FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

40

WE EASE BY a collection of beautiful photos starring Tessa and her husband. Wedding photos. Graduation photos. Her ballerina shot. His Navy still. Silly... Pretty... Candid photos... that all tell the tale of a happy life.

Then a door opens... and a not-so-happy Tessa storms in. She drops her bags. Discards her sweater. And collapses on the couch. A VOICE from the back calls out:

PATRICK

Sweetheart... that you?

Tessa just unloads:

TESSA

I hate him. I hate his Afro. I  
hate his voice. I hate his  
smell... that... that... I'm-on-the-  
prowl-for-anything-in-a-skirt-too-  
strong-cologne... smell. I've only  
known him two months and I can  
honestly say... I hate the man.

From the kitchen, Tessa's husband, PATRICK, 31, emerges. Apron on. Bowl-in-hand. He's cooking.

PATRICK

Rough day.

TESSA

(childlike)

Umm. Humm.

He kneels beside her. Takes the spoon and offers a pre-taste.

PATRICK

Here. Taste. It'll make life  
better.

She does. And it does.

TESSA

Oh, that is scrumptious.

PATRICK

Added a little secret somethin' I  
been working with.

He kisses her to take some of her burden away.

PATRICK (CONT'D)

Now. What's the matter?

TESSA

Everything. I'm not his secretary.  
I'm a professional choreographer.  
I think I'm gonna quit.

PATRICK

Then do it.

TESSA

You're supposed to talk me out of  
it.

PATRICK

There's no way I'm letting you  
quit.

She hits him playfully.

TESSA

I hate you.

PATRICK

I hate you right back, Mrs. Lauren.

They kiss. Soft. Sweet. Tender.

PATRICK (CONT'D)

But just know I will do whatever.  
You wanna work at Soul Train...  
let's do Soul Train... You wanna  
open your own studio... I'm down  
like four flat tires... hell, if  
you want to go back to Frankfurt  
and give it another go... I'll  
start learning German again...

(speaking German:)

Sag mir nur was du willst.

Translated as: Just tell me what you want.

TESSA

You so silly.

PATRICK

That's what my mama say.

A quick kiss...

PATRICK (CONT'D)

I'll do whatever.... as long as I  
can do it with you.

TESSA

Man, I really hate you.

A final kiss... show these two lovers, very much in love.

41 INT. SHOWCASE SUPPER CLUB - NIGHT

41

Whiskey gushes into a line of shot glasses. Don, George, the Pips and the Girls all count down... 3... 2.. 1... before they take the shot and pound the table with their empty glass. A table littered with the remnants of a good time.

BUBBA KNIGHT

I say we take this party to the  
next level.

WILLIE GUEST

There's a club on Gilcrest, where  
we can have some real fun.

GIRL #1

I'm game.

GIRL #2

Me too.

GEORGE JOHNSON

I'm going to call it a night. But  
you should do it. Celebrate.

Girl #3 looks to Don:

GIRL #3

I'll go if you go.

OFF Don, smiling, knowing that tonight he just can't lose...

CUT TO:

42 EXT. SHOWCASE SUPPER CLUB - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

42

Delores arrives and parks. She quickly checks her makeup.  
Exits and starts across the street where she sees -

-- Don and the group leaving. She spots Don at the valet  
stand and notices Girl #3 by his side.

Girl #3 giggles then she steals a kiss from Don. It's passionate. And it goes on a second too long. Don hesitates... breaks the kiss... and --

DON

You know what. I think I'm gonna call it a night too.

GIRL #3

You sure? You'll have a great time.

As Don considers, Delores has seen enough. She gets back into her car... starts it up... and takes off for home.

DON

As much as I would like to... I think I'm good.

GIRL #3

Next time.

She goes, and catches up with the crowd. OFF Don, waiting for his car... barely escaping temptation.

SMASH TO BLACK.

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

43 INT. TUCKER FAMILY APARTMENT - BATHROOM - NIGHT 43

Feminine fingers untwist a band from the neck of a plastic baggie. White powder is scooped by a spoon. A syringe adds water and stirs before a lighter sets fire to the undercarriage. It cooks. It bubbles. It boils.

The chef, a 33-year-old **CAREER JUNKIE**, who's still attractive beneath her outer grime, watches hopeless in anticipation.

She sets the lighter down. Grabs a shoelace and ties off her vein. She takes the syringe... fills it... injects her arm... and lies back to experience the bliss. And all is right with the world.

So right, in fact, that she can't even hear the BANG BANG BANG on her front door... or the incessant cries of her child seeping into her bliss.

Another BANG BANG BANG takes us to --

44 INT. TUCKER FAMILY APARTMENT BUILDING - HALLWAY - NIGHT 44

-- the landlord, **MR. WILLARD**, who's pushing 40 and pounding the door with Cro-Magnon brute force.

MR. WILLARD

I know you're in there, Andrea. I want my money. All of it.

Another rapid series of knocks.

MR. WILLARD (CONT'D)

Dammit Andrea. Don't make me call the cops.

As Mr. Willard continues his siege, JT arrives --

JT

Yo, Mr. Willard, what you doin'?

MR. WILLARD

I need the rent, JT.

JT

What you talkin' bout? We paid the rent.

MR. WILLARD

The check bounced. Again. She's forty days behind and she changed the locks.

As Mr. Willard continues, JT puts key to lock and opens the door to --

45 INT. TUCKER FAMILY APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT 45

-- find his baby sister, **AIYA**, shrieking in her playpen. He picks her up.

MR. WILLARD

I been good to you guys. I can't afford not to get my money.

JT multi-tasks... gets a bottle for Aiya... rocks her. Then digs in his pockets... pulls out a wad of bills... and offers it to Mr. Willard.

JT

Got forty-eight dollars. I'll get the rest by the end of the month.

Mr. Willard relents, knows JT's doing all he can:

MR. WILLARD

S'last time. She won't keep making a fool outta me.

He pockets the cash and as he goes...

MR. WILLARD (CONT'D)

Yo mama needs help, boy. This ain't helping.

JT closes the door... puts Aiya in her pen and heads to --

46 INT. TUCKER FAMILY APARTMENT - BATHROOM - NIGHT 46

-- find **ANDREA** laying on the floor, oblivious to all but the bliss. He looks at her. Sorrow. Anger. Shame. Love.

He goes over. Bends down. Scoops her into his arm and carries her towards --

47 INT. TUCKER FAMILY APARTMENT - ANDREA'S BEDROOM - CONT. 47

-- her bed. He lays her down. Covers her up. And JT tucks his mother in. A moment of silence as he looks at her wondering how they got here.

Then Aiya's cries beckon him. So he turns out the lights. Closes the door. And goes to her. OFF, Andrea nothing but the bliss...

48 INT. CLARKE FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT 48

Oven mitts remove a pan of homemade cookies from the stove. We join Simone and her mother, **BRIANNE CLARKE**, 34, a woman of immense wisdom and unstated strength who's currently playing the roll of baker. Mid-conversation:

SIMONE

I never really thought about theater. But it's singing, so it's kinda the same. Mr. Haygood says I could get a scholarship. You think Daddy would actually let me go?

BRIANNE CLARKE

Your dad's a reasonable man. But there's no way Joseph Clarke is letting his 16-year-old daughter go to New York without him.

A spatula transports the cookies from pan to plate. Simone takes one. Bites one. It's delicious.

SIMONE

Mine never taste like this.

BRIANNE CLARKE

It really ain't hard, child. Love what you do, it'll love you back.

Told ya, wise.

BRIANNE CLARKE (CONT'D)

Where's that brother of yours?

SIMONE

Oooo... lemme check...

Simone pats herself down. Rummages her pockets.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

Nope... not here.

BRIANNE CLARKE

You get that mouth from your grandmother. Got her in a lotta trouble too.

SIMONE

I told him not to forget. He'll be here.

(another bite of cookie:)

What's so special about the second Friday of the month, anyway?

BRIANNE CLARKE

It's your dad's favorite day.

SIMONE

I get that... but why?

Unfortunately, there's no time for explanation, the phone rings. Brianne eagerly discards her apron. Simone hustles to her side. They settle next to the wall-phone to share the receiver. Brianne answers:

BRIANNE CLARKE

Hello.

INTERCUT WITH:

49

INT. CAMP EAGLE ARMY BASE - COMM HUB - DAY

49

-- Brianne's husband, Sergeant Joseph Clarke, on an Army phone, smiling like there's no tomorrow.

JOSEPH CLARKE

May I please speak to the wife of the luckiest man in the world?

BRIANNE CLARKE

Only if I can speak with the husband of the proudest wife on God's earth.

JOSEPH CLARKE

I miss you so much, baby.

BRIANNE CLARKE

I miss you too, Joe. Didn't think you were gonna call. You're so close to being home, I figured...

JOSEPH CLARKE

I haven't missed a call in fourteen months. I'll never miss a call.

Simone chimes in --

SIMONE

Daddy. I finished it. I finished the song.

JOSEPH CLARKE

Simone Louise Clarke... that is the best news I've heard since I've been here.

SIMONE

I kept the melody, but I changed the lyrics. It's a duet now. I hope you're not mad.

JOSEPH CLARKE

Of course not. I gave it to you, it's your song now. Sing it for me.

SIMONE

Not on the phone. We'll sing it together when you get home.

JOSEPH CLARKE

It's a date.

SIMONE

JT thinks the bridge still needs work, but...

JOSEPH CLARKE

First... who's JT? And how would he know?

SIMONE

He's nobody... a friend of Kendall's... he's in the group we put together.

Brianne cuts an eye at Simone, not nice to lie to your father.

JOSEPH CLARKE

Speaking of Kendall. Put him on. I really want to talk to my boy.

Brianne takes over...

BRIANNE CLARKE

He's not here. No telling where that boy's at.

(changing stride)

(MORE)

BRIANNE CLARKE (CONT'D)  
But your daughter wants to know why  
the second Friday of every month's  
your favorite day.

Joseph laughs a hardy laugh...

BRIANNE CLARKE (CONT'D)  
Thought you should be the one to  
tell her.

And he does...

JOSEPH CLARKE  
Well... I fell in love with your  
mother the first moment I laid eyes  
on her in that church choir. But I  
was trouble back then... so when I  
came over to your granddad's to ask  
permission to take her out... well he  
answers the door with a shotgun and  
tells me that if I ever even spoke to  
his daughter again he'd send me  
straight to hell...

SIMONE  
No, Pa-Paw did not say that.

BRIANNE CLARKE  
Oh, yes he did.

JOSEPH CLARKE  
And he meant it. So the only time  
your grandparents were gone at the  
same time was Bingo Night... the  
second Friday of the month. The  
only time I could see Brianne  
without Shotgun Johnny coming after  
me.

And as they all laugh we leave... letting them be as close as  
they can over the thousands and thousands of miles that  
separate them.

50 INT. CORNELIUS FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM (CHICAGO) - NIGHT 50

A young, handsome **O.J. SIMPSON** takes a swig of RC Cola as an  
Announcer proclaims the soda easy on the syrup and easy on  
the gas.

Delores looks on from the couch as the commercial ends and  
Don enters. He turns off the TV and turns... puts a record  
on the player...

and as **"Oh What A Day"** by the Dells pipes in, Don sings a few bars... takes his wife into his arms... and dances with her.

He spins her. He dips her. And then:

DON

I did it. I got Gladys Knight and every single Pip. We did it...

Delores smiles despite herself, genuinely happy.

DELORES

Don, that's great news. I knew you'd do it.

He looks into her eyes, and Delores can't hide the fact that she still loves this man. Don goes over to the counter...

DON

I got something for you.

...grabs a gift-wrapped letter-sized box and hands it to her. As she opens it...

DON (CONT'D)

I know how you hate to fly... and the train ride is long. But it's better than a bus.

She pulls out three Amtrak Train Tickets... Delores is touched and fights back tears.

DON (CONT'D)

For you and the kids. I mean it, Delores, I want you with me in LA. This is our dream and it's coming true.

She's speechless until...

DELORES

Do you remember when you gave me your class ring, before you left for Korea?

(he does)

I was the happiest girl at DuSable High. And I knew that I would wait for you and that we would get married and I knew that I would love you for the rest of my life. I knew then just like I know now that if you move to Los Angeles... if you live there... we won't make it.

(MORE)

DELORES (CONT'D)

(off Don's look)

I'm not moving to LA, Don. I won't put the kids through that.

DON

So you want me to give up my dream?

DELORES

No. I want you here... with us.  
Go to LA, do the show and come home. Every week, come home.

The smile drains from Don's face... those weren't the words he was expecting. But he knows her concern:

DON

You're worried about other women.  
Don't. I want my family, Delores.  
I'm not going to cheat on you.

DELORES

It never stopped you before, Don.

BOOM. The sledgehammer drops. But they've been here before:

DON

Dammit, Delores. That was years ago. I made a mistake. Either you forgive me or you don't.

DELORES

I forgave you and I believe in you.  
And I believe you mean everything you say. I just know what I know.

Don holds the gaze of his wife.

DON

I love you so much. And those boys mean everything to me. But if I don't do this... if I don't do everything I can to make this work, I won't make it... I just won't. I have failed at everything I've ever done. I don't make enough money to take care of my own family. I am suffocating, baby. Without this...

Don can't even finish his thought. If he has to choose between tears and silence, silence wins.

But he doesn't need to finish. Because Delores has heard him and she knows what he needs.

She knows that Don needs Soul Train even more than he needs her. So she simply takes him in her arms and just holds him.

OFF this sign of unconditional love...

51 INT./EXT. KENDALL'S CAR - NIGHT 51

A 1965 Chevy Impala. Kendall isn't taking part in family time because he's parked in a dark alley. Eyes trained on Victoria's place. A million thoughts flood his mind, but only one is of interest. So, he pulls up his hoodie... gets out... and heads towards --

52 EXT. VICTORIA'S APARTMENT - FRONT WINDOW - CONTINUOUS 52

-- the front window of his baby-mama's apartment... looks inside... and sees Victoria and her man snuggled on the couch watching the TV. Kendall is livid... but right now he's on a different mission. So he eases around the corner to --

53 EXT. VICTORIA'S APARTMENT - SIDE WINDOW - CONTINUOUS 53

-- Daniel's room. Where his three year old is playing with toy blocks on the floor. Kendall quietly forces the window open and calls out:

KENDALL

Daniel... come to Daddy.

Daniel looks up and sees his father.

KENDALL (CONT'D)

Come on, buddy... come to Daddy.

Daniel hesitates, before grabbing one of his blocks and waddling over to the window. Then Kendall Clarke kidnaps his son. OFF, this...

SMASH TO BLACK:

AND END HOUR ONE