

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 66 – Quentin Talley – Intergalactic Soul

Keeping it Real

And now a personal word,

The other day after class a student came up to me and said my lecture was dope. Best compliment ever. I asked my student why he thought so. He said, “It was real, professor. You weren’t faking it. I could feel you.”

That’s how I feel about Quentin Talley. I’ve watched him recite poetry. I’ve seen him act. I’ve heard him sing. When he performs, I feel the man.

Q’s band is called Quentin Talley & The Soul Providers. Here is who I think of when I think of soul music. I think of Etta James and Sam Cooke and Otis Redding. I think of Al Green and Marvin Gaye and Isaac Hayes. I think of Lauryn Hill and Leela James. Soul music calls upon us. It asks something of us. It reminds us to hold on.

I live in a town that people complain has no soul. At least not much. The complaint goes like this: Charlotte is a corporate town. Corporate executives and city officials, in that order, decided that Charlotte needed a competitive advantage. They decided they would invest in arts and culture. They built venues. They raised money. They imported shows and kept the streets clean. Art and culture have been top-down ever since. The list of offerings checks all the boxes, but something essential is missing. It feels fake. It feels purchased. It doesn’t feel real, critics say.

The people who are not feeling it tell us we need more dirt and grime. The city needs more grit. We need to be more like Detroit. More like New Orleans. More like Nashville and Memphis. More rough edges. More graffiti. That would do it. That would give the city soul.

Here is my view: Charlotte doesn’t need to do any of that. It doesn’t need to pretend to be someplace else. It needs to embrace what it is. Charlotte is a dynamic, youthful, vibrant city, and in the center of things, a clean and functional and beautiful one. All those investments it made in arts and culture are attracting thousands of new residents who are creating every day. As people collaborate, as neighborhoods integrate, as the center goes out and the edge comes in, the city is finding its voice and expressing more of its soul.

Efforts are underway in the city that ask something of us: transportation networks, social mobility, music everywhere. Reminding us to hold on.

There is one more thing we can do. We can give Quentin Talley his money. We can pay the man. Then we can give money to local artists he admires. We can ask those artists to create something. If what they produce is good, we can pay them to create more. If what they produce is not good, we don't need to pretend otherwise. Keeping it real. Right down the line.

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