



The Heart of Rock and Soul by Dave Marsh



1001

NO WAY OUT, Joyce Harris

Producer not credited; written by Joyce Harris

Infinity 005 c 1960

Did not make pop chart

Like a lot of kids who went off to college in 1959, Michael Goodwin loved folk music. Having grown up the son of radicals, he knew more about it than most. But like a lot of kids who loved folk music, he also developed a passion for rock and roll and rhythm and blues. So he went to work at WVBR, the radio station on Cornell's campus as a jazz and folk DJ. Years later, when Goodwin had become a writer about film and food and music, he still referred to his WVBR days as "the best thing I did in college."

Michael especially cherished finals week, the exam period during the last week of each semester, when each of the student DJs would bring their favorite records into the station for the Rock and Roll Marathon, during which WVBR blasted rock and roll and R&B day and night, as both a study aid and relief from study. Before the week was over, singles covered every surface of the studio, famous ones and obscure ones, records you'd heard every week for the past five years, records you'd never hear again.

In 1963, when he was a senior, Michael decided it was time to keep track. The day after finals, he arrived early in the morning at the bedraggled studio, finding nothing but stacks of singles, half-eaten boxes of pizza and the morning deejay spinning classical sides. Goodwin grabbed some reels of blank tape and locked himself into a cubbyhole with a tape deck and a turntable, then spent an entire day taping singles, hastily listing title and artist on sheets he taped to the outside of the tape boxes.

Graduating that spring, Goodwin packed up his tapes and went back to lower Manhattan. Bouncing around the next couple of years, trying to get a career started, busy ingesting the sixties as they happened, he barely had time to look back. But one day, long about 1966, he decided to listen to those college tapes.

For a reel or two, all was well. Some nice surprises, some old favorites, just about the way he recalled it. Then, out of nowhere, came a noise. "I've gotcha!" shouted a man. Bump. "I've gotcha." (Perhaps the needle had slipped; maybe it was meant that way.) "And there's no way oooooout!" he shouted.

Abruptly, a woman came in, hollering over crude bass and drums doing some kind of up tempo New Orleans breakdown: "Welllll," she began, as if gargling grit, "I don't wanna go and I don't wanna stay . . ." and they were off, trading lines with a vociferousness that Shirley and Lee never suspected, a crudity that Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell never countenanced, a desperate, surging passion that elevated the music far beyond the bounds of raucous primitive noise (despite one of the cheesiest blues guitar solos ever committed to vinyl). "I'm gonna jump out the winda," declares the guy, just before the end. "No way out," taunts the girl.

Goodwin sat stunned for a moment, then like any normal person - got up and ran the tape back to hear it again. Meantime, he picked up the tape box to see who'd made this noise; he had absolutely no recollection of ever hearing "this weird primal scream of a record that cut through everything."

"The song before it was written down, and the song after it, but there was nothing about this one," he remembered a couple decades later. "I'd just screwed up and failed to write it down. Or maybe it was like some Satanic hand had erased it."

Michael grew obsessed by the record. "It was dumb, incoherent, except that it was so . . . shapely. And hypnotic. It was across the universe from what the Beatles were doing." Over the next couple of years, he played this rare treasure for a few people. They always liked it. But nobody had any idea who it might be, where it could have come from. Goodwin guessed New Orleans; others said Chicago or Los Angeles.

When he moved to California near the end of the decade and became friends with Rolling Stone colleague Greil Marcus, he'd hooked another one. Marcus played a tape copy of "No Way Out"-nobody knew for sure if that was the title but it hardly seemed likely to be anything else-for friends, music critics, R&B scholars, record collectors. Nobody knew what it was. Goodwin, delving deeper into the mystery, began to drop references to the mystery record in things he wrote. Others grew curious. Nobody got many facts.

Sometime in the mid-seventies, somebody identified the voice on "No Way Out" as an R&B singer named Joyce Harris, though that person knew nothing of who Joyce Harris might be, or where the record might have come from. A little later, Goodwin tracked down one copy of the actual disc; Infinity was an L.A. label, but he still thought the beat was from the Crescent City. Later, on a trip to New Orleans, he played a hunch and looked through record shops for Joyce Harris sides. He found a couple on the Fun label.

I'd been mesmerized when I first heard the thing, sometime in 1972, on a tape sent to me by Goodwin and Marcus operating in their guerilla media critic role as The Midnight Raiders. Framed by John Lennon's "Power to the People" and the Chi-Lites' "(For God's Sake) Give More Power to the People," it summarized everything not even such great polemics could express. For a while, "No Way Out" hit my tape deck frequently. Even a decade or more later, whenever I wanted to impress somebody with how rare and wonderful R&B and rock and roll could really be, I'd drag out that old cassette. It's on its last legs now; creaks when it's rewound. The first I knew that Goodwin had solved any part of the riddle came while I thumbed through the discography of *Stranded*, a book of rock criticism Marcus edited in 1979. There it was, one line of stark type: "Joyce Harris, 'No Way Out' (Infinity). c. 1960." It tickled me to know that someone now knew who, but the record label was too perfect-it had to be Greil's idea of a joke. I'd have thought the same if it had been on Fun.

I'm not sorry we know what we know. We're men, not dogs, and when we find a mystery, our job is to solve it, not roll in it. Yet I can't say I'm entirely unhappy that Michael Goodwin was careless that day in 1963. Pursuit is half the joy of this line of work.

The other half, and the better one, is listening, hearing, maybe understanding a little bit more. "No way out / Can't think of nothin' but a-lovin' you" Joyce Harris cries as I type these lines and I smile to myself and think of the two thousand records that almost but didn't quite make these pages.