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Will the Final Season of 'Mad Men' Get Any Blacker?



By

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In March 1968, a month before fires crackled loudly with exasperation and windows would be smashed in indignation, there was change occurring quietly in the boardrooms on Madison Avenue in New York City.

Roquel Billy Davis had reinvented himself yet again. Mary Wilson from The Supremes stood near Davis at a party at Aux Puces restaurant, a beaded necklace around her neck, a wide smile just above it. Paul Foley, president and CEO of Interpublic Group of Companies, stood in between them. Davis, an ad executive at McCann-Erickson advertising agency on Madison Avenue, had just been appointed music director of the agency, and execs at McCann were throwing a party to celebrate.

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Davis was famous in music industry circles, and he was African-American. The senior art director at McCann-Erickson was George Olden, another African-American.

Beyond the curtains of the office tower where McCann-Erickson overlooked the best parts of the American dream, bullets were flying, verbal and otherwise, in pockets of Black America. John Lindsay was mayor of New York, supporting activists who were against building a gym in Morningside Park where Black residents of Harlem would enter through a rear door. Unrest that ensued from poor housing conditions, job discrimination, FBI infiltration of Black Power and Civil Rights groups, and the assassination of Black leaders like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. was easy to ignore for those who were thriving in corporate America. But then again, it wasn't. The world was taking notice. Headlines shouted around the nation and overseas.

Let Matthew Weiner—creator and producer of the highly acclaimed, Emmy-award winning TV series *Mad Men*—tell it, the revolution happening in the streets didn't seep into corporate America except as a shadow. The only Black characters of *Man Men* (custodians, elevator operators, housekeepers and secretaries) are all stoic in the company of the White people who surround them on the show. They keep their heads down and do their work—happy to be employed. That's entirely accurate. And then, it's not.

The climate in advertising a few decades prior to the time period of *Mad Men*, 1931 to be precise, is illustrated best from a quote in the publication *Who's Who in Advertising*: “Adherents to the theory of Nordic supremacy might relish the fact that blue-eyed advertising men are in the majority,” it read. In the 1950s, few marketers understood the purchasing power of African-Americans. By the 1960s, Jews, Italian-Americans and women began to open doors at the formerly White agencies, as civil rights groups like the Urban League and the NAACP pressured the industry to include more African-Americans.

In an interview with Charlie Rose, Weiner once defended his position to present the viewpoint of the show through the eyes of White America—in a subtle critique of their obliviousness to the world around them—saying, “It would be a lie to portray Sterling Cooper and Price's [the show's fictional ad agency] world as integrated.”

Well, yes and no. Fully integrated? No. Having Black executives? Yes.

Before moving into advertising, in the mid-1960s, Detroit native Roquel Billy Davis, along with Berry Gordy, co-founded the Motown concept. Davis was the A&R man at Chess Records then, supervising in-house writers and producers and writing songs. “‘Cause I'm lonely and I'm blue, I need you,” he wrote for Fontella Bass, on her hit, “Rescue Me.” He wrote for Billy Stewart, The

Dells and Jackie Ross, and worked and sang with the Four Tops when they still called themselves The Four Aims.

Davis also produced records for Little Milton, and helped along new writers and arrangers working with Berry Gordy to write hits. He developed the songwriting team of C. Davis and R. Minor. For Jackie Wilson (his cousin), he wrote “Lonely Teardrops,” “That’s Why (I Love You So),” and “I’ll Be Satisfied.” He wrote “All I Could Do Was Cry,” for Etta James, with songwriting partners Berry Gordy and his daughter, Gwen Gordy.

Davis formed a record label with Gwen, began dating her (before Harvey Fuqua stole her from him and married her), and distributed Barrett Strong’s hit, “Money (That’s What I Want).” Motown eventually absorbed the label they named after Gwen’s sister, Anna, and signed Marvin Gaye in the process.

Davis would write for Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Neil Diamond, Phoebe Snow, Ray Charles, Quincy Jones, Chuck Berry, The Beach Boys, and Otis Redding, among many others. In all, he produced hit singles that sold in excess of 20 million records. Soon, the advertising world came recruiting.

“Davis was one of the first top executives of an advertising agency with a background in pop music,” said Susan Irwin, corporate communications director for McCann. “Attracting him to a big advertising agency was a big deal. He remains a legend here. He is given credit for popularizing song form in advertising. Before that, it was just jingles. One of our conference rooms is named after him.”

Davis stayed with the agency for 19 years as a music director, creative concept writer, composer and producer, rising to senior vice president. He would popularize and create new “song-form” advertising that won every award the industry offers. He wrote Coca-Cola songs which are some of the most popular advertisements in existence today, including, “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing,” “It’s the Real Thing,” “Have a Coke and a Smile,” “Mean Joe Green,” “Coke Is It” and “Country Sunshine.” He also wrote songs for Miller Brewing Company (“If You’ve Got the Time”), Campbell’s Soup and Sony.

Mad Men is intriguing as it is in part because it recreates a warts-and-all version of 1960s WASP America: privilege, entitlement and the inevitable result of both, resistance to change. It undermines the myth of moral stability that shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* offered.

In the final episode of season 3, Sterling Cooper and its British parent company, Putnam, Powell and Lowe, are acquired by the ad agency McCann-Erickson, which inspires Jon Hamm’s character, Don Draper, to start a new agency rather than be a part of what he calls “the sausage factory.” In season 1, episode 9, a senior executive at McCann tries to hire Don Draper away from Sterling Cooper by giving his wife a modeling job in a campaign for their client, Coca-Cola. There aren’t any people of color presented working at either agency in either episode. The genius of *Mad Men* is that it’s as much about what’s invisible and what’s not said as what is. White male privilege is critiqued and dissected with fascinating scrutiny, because of the problem it creates in seeing the value in “others,” and the resulting self-destruction that comes from unchecked power and privilege. The catch is, those “others” have to be present to even begin to be neglected. That hasn’t happened yet, even as its final season begins this Sunday.

The women in *Mad Men* shine so much as characters (though they're relegated to second class status in the advertising world) that the show could just as well be called *Mad Women*. Last season ended in 1968. Let's see if this season, set to air April 13 at 10 p.m., will explore what invisibility really looks like for many of the other "others."

Erica Blount Danois is the author of Love, Peace, and Soul: Behind the Scenes of America's Favorite Dance Show—Soul Train: Classic Moments. Follow her at Twitter @erickablount and her website, EricaBlount.com.

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