

An old song still resonates: 'Is it because I'm Black?'

Written by Krissy Clark, Special to the NNPA from Marketplace Wealth and Poverty Desk
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This month, Chicago soul singer Syl Johnson releases a new album, and at age 76 his music is as powerful as ever. But this story isn't about his new songs. It's about an old one, and what it means today.

The song in question is a question in itself: "Is It Because I'm Black?" is the title. Johnson recorded it in 1968. In the song, he asks—himself? his listeners?—this:

You see, I heard somebody say one time 'you can make it, if you try.' And some of us, we're trying so hard....Oh, something is holding me back. Is it because I'm black?

Those were pretty provocative lyrics for a black pop singer in 1968, even if we can look back and probably agree the answer to his question was — at least in those days — 'Yes.'

But today the world is different. We have a black president in his second term, and some people point to him and argue it is proof we now live in a "post-racial" society.

So does a question and a song like "Is It Because I'm Black?" still connect to today? That is the question that led me to Syl Johnson's front gate. When he came down to let me in, he burst out of his door, singing.

Johnson lives in the same Chicago neighborhood where he grew up in the 1940s and 50s, known as Bronzeville, after the color of many residents' skin. He spent much of his youth in public housing, but now he lives in a handsome two-story home that he built a few years ago — although, he jokes, the Wu Tang Clan actually built it, after he sued them and a bunch of hip-hop groups for sampling his songs without credit.

"Financed this house thanks to RZA," he laughs. "They paid me real good."

There are guitars and gold records and a Grammy nomination covering Johnson's walls. And he's the first to say that ultimately, being black did not hold him back. But that doesn't mean he thinks we live in a world where race is irrelevant.

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"It matters," says Johnson. "It just means you've got to work harder."

As a young man, to help his family make ends meet, Johnson dropped out of high school and started working — washing dishes, driving trucks, leading a band on the side. When he finally made it in the music business, and put the racial contradictions of the American Dream to song, *his* dreams were starting come true.

By the 1980s, Johnson took a break from a successful music career, and invested the money he'd made to start a seafood restaurant on the South Side of Chicago called Solomon's Fishery — named after his dad. He says, making it — in business or in music — takes hard work and perseverance, but something else too.

"You write a song, you better have a song like 'Is It Because I'm Black?' A beautiful subject matter," he says. "A business, the same. You better have a good idea."

In Johnson's case, the idea for his restaurant came from an unlikely place: a rumor circulating around his neighborhood back then that Church's Chicken restaurants had an ingredient that sterilized black men. Johnson explains that people stopped going to Church's, and "Boom! There were boarded-up Church's everywhere in the black neighborhoods all across the country. So I had the free opportunity to get the Church's Chickens — for little or nothing."

After buying up some of the empty storefronts and converting them to fish joints, business took off. In a few years, Syl Johnson was employing more than 100 people, and had started one of the first black-owned national restaurant franchises in the country.

"You can make it if you try," Johnson says, looking back on his restaurant business. "Some of us black people tried hard to make it, and we did. We excelled," he says.

Of course with a success story like Johnson's, or President Obama's, some Americans wonder if an old song like "Is It Because I'm Black?" still makes sense.

"Oftentimes, the answer can still be yes," says Mary Pattillo, a sociologist at Northwestern University. She says Johnson's achievements are inspiring, but "the progress of a small component of the black community needs to be put in the context of some really unfortunate developments."

Pattillo points to the fact that half of the African Americans who are born poor, stay poor, compared to just a third of whites, and that black unemployment is twice as high as white unemployment, and median incomes are 40 percent lower.

Pattillo says these bleak statistics can be driven by a number of things — unconscious racial bias in the labor market, disproportionately high incarceration rates among black men in the prime of their earning lives, and disinvestment in black neighborhoods.

The effects of many of those forces are in full view if you go to the neighborhood near Racine

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and South 81st Street in Chicago, where Syl Johnson's first Solomon's Fishery was located, before it folded in the '90s.

Now, it's an empty lot among many.

But people still remember what used to be. "It was some good fish," says Chris Johnson, who lives in the neighborhood. "They should have kept it around."

One of the few places still open in the neighborhood is a liquor store, where the clerk works in a bulletproof glass box. Otis Wise, who had just stopped in for an energy drink, remembers Solomon's Fishery, too. I tell him the guy who owned it was a singer who wrote a song called "Is It Because I'm Black?" and ask what he thinks of that idea.

"I do not use race to make an excuse for anything," Wise says. "All opportunity is open for everyone."

Then he looks around and adds that some people live in neighborhoods like this one — where opportunities are a little harder to find.

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