

Back in step with 'Soul Train'

THE '70S | Host of show's local version honored as dancers, musicians, fans turn out for reunion

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Every train has a conductor.

On "Soul Train," it was Clinton Ghent, who hosted the local version of the popular dance show that aired every weekday afternoon from 1970 until 1979 on WCIU-Channel 26. Ghent replaced his friend and show creator Don Cornelius in 1971, when Cornelius relocated to Los Angeles.



A fan known only as Travis dances during the reunion at the CAN-TV studio, 322 S. Green.

(Chris Sweda/Sun-Times)

Ghent was honored Friday night at an "Unofficial Soul Train Reunion" held at the CAN-TV Studio, 322 S. Green. Nearly 100 "Soul Train"-era dancers, musicians and friends of the iconic show turned up for the event, which was organized and taped by Jake Austen, editor of Roctober magazine.

Austen had spent months looking for Ghent, 66, who was also a choreographer for the Jackson 5, Chi-Lites, the Stairsteps and others. It turned out Ghent was in Chicago, where he referees Chicago Public League basketball games in the winter and Ruben Gomez League 16-inch softball games at Humboldt Park in the summer.

Pervis Staples of the Staple Singers told Austen about Ghent's brother. Staples and Ghent once ran a choreography studio at 82nd and Cottage Grove.

Friday night's guests danced and recalled the steps to "The Spank" by James Brown. They talked about the fashions of the day -- stovepipes, knits and platform shoes.

"I used to tell my dancers to wear brogan shoes," Ghent said. "So their feet would be lighter when they took them off."

Fans also offered testimony to Ghent, who was born and reared in Bronzeville in the shadows of Nat King Cole and Lou Rawls. Ghent was a star guard for Tilden Tech's basketball team and made all-city in 1962. "Same thing goes into dancing as playing basketball," Ghent said. "Coordination. Timing."

Then he took an imaginary lefty jump shot.

"And hand-eye coordination," he said, still with the soft touch.

The Chicago version of "Soul Train" was produced on the 43rd floor of the Chicago Board of Trade building. The era of famous Chicago dances like Curtis Mayfield's "The Monkey Time" had passed, and disco was beginning to step in.

"There were only three black people in Chicago who had memberships to Faces," Ghent said of the popular mid-1970s Rush Street disco owned by Jimmy Rittenberg. "Me. Dr. Nate Clark and Don Cornelius. I'm not bragging on myself, but I did the Hustle so great that Jimmy Rittenberg tried to get me to teach the Hustle. Disco did bring up the pay scale for artists."

"Soul Train" fan Michael Grego gave props to Chicago's dance improvisation.

"We made them up," said Grego. "The Jerk and the Fly. We had all the people who wrote the songs living here, like Curtis Mayfield. And Carl Davis" -- who produced Major Lance, Tyrone Davis, Jackie Wilson and others.

A 63-year-old fan with long, gray braids who called himself Travis, just Travis, added: "Los Angeles was starry and musical. Here, it was low. And closer to ordinary people."