Black Sinatras, White Panthers: Race, Genre and Performance in Detroit Black Pop and Rock, 1960-1970

by

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Abstract

This paper explores several narratives of race and racialized music production in postwar American popular musics, to study the ways in which race has played an intrinsic role in structuring not only contemporary expectations of popular music-making, but also the frameworks by which we continue to study American popular musics today. The first section of the essay provides a critical analysis of the concept of musical genre, and argues that race has always played a significant role in forming the vocabulary by which we discuss American popular genres. The next sections discuss two case studies from Detroit's music cultures of the 1960s – black pop star Marvin Gaye and the white hard rock group the MC5 – to illustrate how entrenched expectations of racialized performance served to inform contemporary and current critiques of these groups; these case studies also reveal the inadequacy of some standard musico-racial narratives in interpreting the racialized dimensions of these artists' performances. Ultimately, the findings of this analysis promote a search for more nuanced understandings of racialized sounds in American popular musics, and beg more careful critiques into some of the conventional wisdom that has traditionally guided our understandings of race and its relationship to popular culture.

Chapter One

Introduction

> It mattered less that there had been a long, reciprocal, process of theft, borrowing and synthesis between these nominally "black" and "white" musical streams than that these categorical divisions had assumed a notional validity in American minds and race-conscious ears. After all, everyone knew that Elvis and Jerry Lee [Lewis] sounded black, while the Mills Brothers and Lena Horne sang white.
>
> - Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*[1]

> Said Beatle John Lennon recently: "We can sing more colored than the Africans."
>
> - *Ebony,* November 1965[2]

The first comprehensive attempt to tell the story of rock-'n'-roll was, in large measure, a quest to map its genealogy: to place its pioneers, its stars (past and present) and even many of its also-rans somewhere amidst a musical family tree that would render legible rock-'n'-roll's infinitely complicated historical development. Conceived in 1966 by a masters' student of journalism seeking a thesis topic, and eventually expanding to the size of a dissertation, Charlie Gillett's *The Sound of the City* was published in 1970 as the first book-length study to explore the origins and mutations of perhaps the most insistently hybridized musical style in American history. Gillett's publisher, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, chose for the book's jacket the image of the first rock-'n'-roll family tree, drawn up based on the author's own research – a nefariously sprawling network of hundreds of names tied together by a cat's cradle of relational lines that could trace the heritage of the "British Beat Music" of the Beatles all the way back to "Harmony Group"

[1] Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 120.
[2] Louie Robinson, "Rock 'N' Roll Becomes Respectable," *Ebony*, November 1965, 54.

sounds of the Mills Brothers, some decades before.[3] Across dozens of styles, labeled according to region, era, genre, or sometimes even a performer's attitude, Gillett spun a chaotic web of mutual musical influence that bespoke a long and complex process of borrow and exchange – across races and across national boundaries – culminating in the emergence of rock-'n'-roll.

Among these many and disparate styles that occupied Gillett's history were several taxonomic oddities: "white blues," for instance, and another intriguing entry called "country-soul." Oddities, that is, in the sense that according to the conventional wisdom of the recording industry, the *blues* had historically been defined by *not being white*. *Soul*, likewise, was the domain of black performers; what was it doing in this uncomfortable matrimony with working-class white *country* music? Gillett's genealogy would form the backbone of many genre studies in the years after its publication, but more significantly it was the clearest representation, at the end of the American Sixties, of the convoluted and cross-racial exchanges that had marked American popular music as far back as the "Harmony Groups" like the Mills Brothers of the 1930s, and indeed much further beyond. The recording industry had always insisted on "categorical divisions," in the words of music scholar Brian Ward, that held black and white-produced musics to be racially distinct based on nominally racialized sounds; cultural producers in the mainstream music marketplace, however, had never been as bound by these divisions as the racialized rhetoric of the industry had implied.[4]

In the same year that *The Sound of the City* was issued, cultural critic Albert Murray published his quintessential study of black American experience, *The Omni*

[3] See Charlie Gillet, *The Sound of the City* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970).
[4] Ward, 120.

Americans, in which that author declared in no uncertain terms that American culture was, and had long been, "incontestably mulatto" – a term that has since fallen into disuse for obvious reasons, though a theoretical position that remains highly useful for interpreting discussions of race and culture.[5] *The Omni Americans* was one of the most significant contemporary works to push for an understanding of American culture according to a model of racial hybridity; American blacks and whites occupied radically different subject positions in mainstream society, of course, but the cultural offerings of each group, nominally marked "black" or "white," had long ceased to exist in autonomous isolation. Even the "blackest" of African-American musical forms, such as the gospel sounds of the black church that would come to define a good deal of black musicianship in the twentieth century, were an intriguing combination of African, African-American and putatively white (i.e., Western European) traditions. What had begun, in the antebellum and postbellum periods, as folk spirituals in the fields of the American South became musically codified and informed by Western European harmonic notions sometime around the turn of the century, giving rise to a style of gospel vocal harmony that would, however, continue to be coded "black" according to the logic of an emergent recording industry despite its multicultural development.[6] Thus, while styles like *country-soul* may have suggested a Frankenstein grafting of an historically white style onto the musical language of one historically coded black, in truth the boundaries between these two genre labels were more easily traversed than most mainstream music

[5] Albert Murray, *The Omni Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 22.
[6] For an illuminating discussion of gospel's cross-racial development, see Stuart L. Goosman, *Group Harmony: The Black Urban Roots of Rhythm & Blues* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 3-4.

consumers probably suspected – consumers who had grown up with descriptors like "Race" and "Pop" to denote almost exclusively black and white musics, respectively.

One important progenitor of so-called *country-soul* was a musical innovator who had never wanted for credentials as a performer of "black" musics. In the 1950s, Ray Charles had begun incorporating the spiritual sounds of gospel into the secular world of a nascent rhythm and blues style, almost single-handedly birthing what was to become known as "soul music" (in the 1960s a crucial site of black cultural pride in mainstream music). In 1962 Charles took another pioneering step by recording *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* (ABC-Paramount Records), the most successful effort made to that point to meld the stylistic impulses of putatively white country music to black rhythm and blues, achieving an apparently effortless and sophisticated synthesis of the two styles.[7] Even so, the fictions that drew limning enclosures around "black" and "white" performance continued to feed into receptions of Charles' country-soul work – and not just from stodgy conservative listeners and record executives. Marvin Gaye, a young black singer from Washington D.C. who had recently been transplanted to Detroit's Motown label, later claimed that he felt Charles "went too far" in his cultivation of white audiences with the *Modern Sounds* record. Gaye prized Charles' "raw soul," but claimed that "Ray got funny when he started using white background vocalists…to sing his country shit. Black folk resented that…He quit them, and they knew it."[8]

The ultimate irony, of course, is that Gaye himself – along with many others on the Motown roster – spent long years combating perceptions that Motown embodied a "bleaching" of black musics with its offerings of what was then termed "black pop."

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[7] See Ray Charles, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western*, LP (ABC-Paramount, 1962).
[8] Quoted in David Ritz, *Divided Soul: The Life of Marvin Gaye* (New York: Da Capo, 1985), 29, 79.

Though it never made it onto Gillett's family tree, "black pop" provides another intriguing taxonomical example of postwar pop music genre; like "white blues," black pop as genre descriptor carried within its monikor an inherent paradox according to the historically racialized categories of the recording industry. "Pop" music, at least until the mid-1950s, had been (in theory if not always in effect) the property of white cultural producers, and its assumed audience was believed to be the white middle classes. The very existence of black pop, which grew into a fabulously popular style among cross-racial audiences, belied these industry assumptions, but it also invited perhaps predictable criticisms that there was something – like Ray Charles' country-soul – vaguely less *black* about the style than more identifiably African-American styles like rhythm and blues.

Identifiable blackness was important for many white music consumers as well, at least by the mid-1960s when "white blues" had become so commonplace that it could no longer raise an eyebrow among mainstream listeners. While Charles' 1962 record may have appealed to some white audiences based on its apparent concessions to "white" country musics, it was in the singer's most unapologetically "black" records that white blues musicians found the cultural capital necessary to validate their performance of historically black-performed styles. To this end, when a late-1960s white Detroit blues group called the MC5 sought to invoke the spirit of "raw soul," it was to Ray Charles' most staunchly soul-inflected works that they looked. The MC5 incorporated Charles' "I Believe to My Soul" into their onstage repertoire (note the titular suggestion of Charles' tune), but never deigned to acknowledge the black singer's country-soul style.[9]

The black pop of Motown's Marvin Gaye, and the white blues of Detroit rockers the MC5, form the two case studies of this present essay – an essay that seeks to

[9] See The MC5, *Live at the Grande Ballroom 1968*, CD (Get Back Records, 2005).

complicate historical, contemporary and still-current ideas of race and genre in postwar American popular music. This is not, to be sure, a social history of Detroit or even of the city's vibrant music cultures as they existed in the 1960s; there are already several excellent studies of the city's cultural politics that provided the backdrop for the development of "the Motown sound" and the later "Detroit rock" aesthetic.[10] The scope of this project is somewhat more specifically limited to the ways in which narratives of race in American pop music have been constructed, contested, understood and misconstrued, by reference to two illustrative cultural producers whose musics occupied the same geographic and temporal space, yet whom amazingly never engaged in dialogue with one another. Both Marvin Gaye and the MC5 struggled under preconceived expectations of what black and white performers *ought* to sound and behave like in a 1960s context. For Marvin Gaye and the Motown clan, despite unprecedented levels of success as black cultural producers, there was an ever-present stigma of betraying identifiably black musical expression in the service of cultivating cross-racial audiences with their black pop. The members of the MC5, conversely and somewhat more troublingly, sought at every turn to disengage with their white identities and to situate themselves as oppositional dissenters to the parent culture by employing the markers of black musical and bodily identity. Gaye longed to avail himself of his favored musical styles regardless of their apparent racial origin – to prove that a black singer could adopt the tropes of white singers like jazz crooner Frank Sinatra and become "the Black

[10] See Suzanne Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); David Carson, *Grit, Noise and Revolution: The Birth of Detroit Rock 'n' Roll* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); for two superb non-musical histories of Detroit's Sixties, see Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Sinatra," not less black for his efforts but certainly not pigeonholed according to historical demands of racialized musical performance. In an intriguing inversion of Gaye's bid for mainstream acceptance, the MC5 sought to disrupt the structures of power by throwing themselves into the margins of leftist political dissent, to which end they in time became the cultural figureheads of the infamous White Panther Party, proud emulators of black nationalist political leaders and wholesale appropriators of black musical culture. At a remove of just a few city blocks, the Black Sinatra and the White Panthers concocted programs of musical performance that would – hopefully – explode the boundaries upon which the American recording industry had structured its dissemination of popular culture.

These racialized boundaries occupy the focus of the essay's first chapter, an overview of musical genre in American popular music in the period following the end of the Second World War. In the postwar period, race played an integral if often implicit role in how musical products were categorized and marketed to American consumers by the major recording companies and industry arbiters like the preeminent trade paper *Billboard*. By the early 1970s, the vocabulary used to denote specific musical genres had grown exponentially to encompass a huge range of styles and sub-genres, including the dozens identified and mapped out by Charlie Gillett in his early history of rock-'n'-roll. In the immediate postwar period, however, the industry recognized only three primary categories of popular music: "Pop," "Hillbilly," and "Race." For black recording artists, no matter what type of musical product was offered, they were "Race" artists exclusively; their "genre," as it were, was to be defined by their inhabited racial category. This first chapter explores not only the obvious problems inherent in such a system of genre-typing,

but also points to the ways in which these problematic categories worked to codify and make rigid consumer expectations of racialized performance, even while these categories were contested and threatened by musical products that defied such expectations.[11]

Since this essay is primarily directed towards unpacking our historical and current understandings of racialized sounds in American popular music, it is necessary that I clarify the terms and theoretical positions drawn upon throughout the following analysis. Certainly, one of the most significant arguments informing this essay draws upon Murray's formulation of a hybrid American culture, "incontestably" multiracial in form and content; Murray's model challenges the somewhat more rigid claims of writers like Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), whose works, including *Black Music* (1968) and *The Music* (1987), tended towards a separatist model of autonomous black musical traditions.[12] This essay does not seek to deny the existence of an identifiably *black music* in American culture, but to approach these notions of black music – here and throughout the essay referring to *African-American* musical creation – with an awareness of how we (by which I mean scholars and critics) may use these terms sensibly and intelligibly.

Typically, the dissection of black musics has fallen into one of three theoretical modes of thought. The first, proposed by Simon Frith (*Sound Effects*, 1981) and others, argues for an essentialist understanding of black cultural forms: that "black music is essentially 'body music'," more natural and spontaneous in execution than corollary white musics. This view holds black music to be a naturalized expression of some

[11] See David Brackett, "The Politics and Practice of 'Crossover' in American Popular Music, 1963-1965," *The Musical Quarterly* 78:4 (Winter, 1994); Reebee Garofalo, "Crossing Over: From Rhythm & Blues to Rock 'n' Roll," in *R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music*, ed. Norman Kelley, (New York: Akashic Books, 2005).
[12] Murray; Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York: Morrow, 1987); *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010 [1968]).

intrinsic creative impulse, shared by black performers but somewhat unreachable by white outsiders whose own musics are, in effect, more cerebral and less spontaneously offered.[13] Frith's model relies on socio-biological views of the black body that I believe are untenable as working models for the critique of African-American cultural forms.

A second theoretical position, promoted by writers like Philip Tagg ("Open Letter About 'Black Music'," 1989), Paul Oliver (*Black Music in Britain*, 1990) and Stephen Millward and David Hatch (*From Blues to Rock*, 1987), argues for a pluralistic approach to studying black music. These writers offer a direct anti-essentialist challenge to the views of Frith, claiming that there is no inherent and natural (that is, biological) quality to black musicianship to distinguish it as such. Tagg's argument, in the words of Keith Negus, "make[s] it clear…that blackness is not *in* the music but has been identified with certain stylistic traits that can be *found* in the music made by *people* who are described as black": but not, as a crucial addendum, *all* of this music.[14] Oliver pushes for an understanding of black music as "encompassing the music of those *who see themselves as black*" [emphasis added], thus providing us with a sociological, as opposed to biological, model.[15] The pluralistic approach is, I suspect, a far more useful way of describing and parsing black musics by according agency to its creators and accepting the diverse and irreducible forms that this music can take. This viewpoint does, however, contain within its relativist underpinnings a risk of denying the political implications of "black music" as

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[13] Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 16-21.
[14] Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 103; see also Philip Tagg, "Open Letter About 'Black Music,' 'Afro-American Music,' and 'European Music'," *Popular Music* 8:3 (1989), 285-298; Paul Oliver, *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990); David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).
[15] Oliver, 8.

an historical construction. That is, if we accept black music as virtually anything created by self-identified black musicians, we might be led to argue that there is nothing within the historical condition of American blackness itself, as a shared identity, which leads to the formation of an identifiably black music.

A third model for undertaking an analysis of black music draws on the work of Paul Gilroy (*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, 1987; *The Black Atlantic*, 1993), who complicates these notions by toeing a line between the essentialist and pluralistic approaches while submitting to neither. For Gilroy, the racial category of blackness is an essential piece of the vocabulary within these debates – that black identity is the key to understanding black musics, but that this identity is neither fixed nor essential, but changes and is renegotiated constantly over time. Gilroy's framework thus establishes black identity as a central component of understanding black musics, but insists that this identity is not the result of common origins but of ties created and recreated over time through cultural practice. This is to say that black music is not *African*, but is rather the product of cultural identities formulated through the diasporic experience; it is not an ethnically absolute identity that compels the creation of black cultural forms (i.e., African-ness), but the knowledge of a collective history of dislocation and oppression.[16] Gilroy's subtle formulation provides a means of accepting the heterogeneous forms of American black musical expression while locating their meanings within the political; it is this last viewpoint, picked up by writers like Mark Anthony Neal (*What the Music Said*, 1998), which seems to me to be the most valuable way of entering into discussion of

[16] See Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

what "black music" has meant, historically, to the observers of American culture who have largely written our narratives of race and popular culture.[17]

Regarding apparently "white" musics, I have looked to the commentaries of literary theorist Ross Chambers ("The Unexamined," 1997) and cultural critic Richard Dyer ("White," 1988; *White*, 1997); both authors argue that *whiteness* in the realm of cultural studies has historically been a vaguely and inadequately defined racial category – an unspoken normative and natural condition against which other racial categories may be defined.[18] For this reason, while I have made liberal reference throughout the essay to "black music" as, for instance, something liable to be co-opted by white musicians, the same does not hold true in reverse: because quite simply, there is no fixed agreement on what this "white music" is, or sounds like. In other words, while all the musics discussed in the following chapters are themselves the result of cross-racial hybridity, there is nonetheless a political element to white co-optation of "black musics" that makes it more difficult to discuss the process in reverse. Thus, I have rejected the notion that artists like Marvin Gaye sang *white*, because there have been no satisfactory critiques into what exactly this means from an aural or even social standpoint; on the other hand, the MC5 could indeed sing *black*, because they sang music that historically had been cloistered in what Mark Anthony Neal calls the "Black Public Sphere," in which it served a social role just as significant as its use as mainstream entertainment (i.e., as a way of reflecting on collective traditions of marginalization, dislocation and racial oppression). In short, we can talk about "black musics" as social works, because they worked to foster and reflect a

[17] See Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
[18] Ross Chambers, "The Unexamined," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29:4 (1988), 44-64; *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

communal black identity – or, to be precise, many communal black identities. Whites, ever privileged and free of the imperative to define their culture (except as oppositional to marginalized groups), never worked to patent and protect their racial culture in quite the same way.

These theoretical frameworks are of course only useful when applied to a sufficiently developed historical context, which has been the foremost goal of this project. To address the qualitative research questions prompted by my initial research into the source materials, I have attempted to reconstruct, as far as possible, the social, legal, and cultural contexts within which these materials were created and received. This process began by collecting and evaluating the written, spoken and recorded materials generated by the artists themselves, as well as the critiques made by contemporaries regarding the musical performances of the case studies. My research then moved outwards towards establishing a specifically musico-cultural context for the works of artists like Marvin Gaye and the MC5, followed by a broader consideration of American race relations and racial-social movements in the postwar period. Where appropriate, I have drawn upon legal and social landmarks in postwar race history (e.g., *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, the Selma marches), as well as currents of contemporary intellectual thought (e.g., E. Franklin Frazier, Ralph Ellison), to provide further context for discussions of race and racialized performance in Detroit's Sixties.

As a last point before entering into my analysis, I would like to clarify my usage of a number of musical terms, relating to genre, used throughout the essay. Pop, Country and Rhythm and Blues, capitalized, denote only the categories suggested by recording industry affiliates such as *Billboard*, and do not necessarily reflect either the contents of

the music described as such, or my own interpretations of genre-typing. In lower-case, the term rhythm and blues (or r&b) is used with somewhat narrower focus, to address those forms of (usually black-produced) postwar music that featured foregrounded rhythms and blues-based structures or chord progressions. The term pop, also lower-case, is an infinitely tricky label to unpack, but ultimately a necessary term for describing postwar popular musics. Its usage here tends to refer to musics that could be understood by mainstream American consumers of the period as *white*, or else lacking what Jeffrey Melnick has called "a threshold of identifiable blackness," while recognizing that these conceptions of racialized sound are unseemly and grossly unfair, however historically accurate.[19] Moving towards a more apolitical usage of the term, we might alternatively consider "pop" (in itself a term of constantly shifting meanings) as suggestive of a certain kind of postwar popular music: one that tends to steer away from risqué lyrical themes; which prizes harmonic point and counterpoint, and melodic – rather than percussive – instrumentation; and which is generally "sweeter" in style and tone (that is, possesses little aggression in delivery and often employs more lush instrumental arrangements of strings, brass or choral voices). These qualifications are crucial for understanding not just how genre was conceived of historically, but also how the vocabulary for describing popular music underwent profound shifts in the postwar period, as the limits of Pop/pop were expanded to include black recording artists for the first time, and eventually as the significance of "pop" music itself faced a humiliating challenge from adherents to a predominantly white rock culture (to which I will return in Chapter 1).

[19] Melnick's phrase, to which I will return throughout this essay, can be found in Jeffrey Melnick, "'Story Untold': The Black Men and White Sounds of Doo-Wop," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 140.

One broad overview and two specific case studies cannot possibly tell a comprehensive story of race in American popular music, but can serve a function of arguably equal importance: to complicate our preconceptions of what white and black meant, contemporarily, by reference to two prominent musical producers of the American Sixties. Without subscribing to theories of racial essentialism, this essay nevertheless acknowledges the strong influence that these deeply-engrained perspectives historically held on the creation and reception of racialized musics. But racial essentialism takes many forms, and it can hold many different directives; to condemn its enactment without critiquing it is to risk misunderstanding its uses and motivations in the first place. True, it is most often a distasteful simplification of what racial culture can and ought to be (e.g., Marvin Gaye sings *white*); but these same impulses to find the essence of an Other's racial identity can also be employed, sympathetically if impractically, to provide an ideal for one's own fantasies of racial freedom and transgression (e.g., the White Panther Party). If, as I hope to be the case, we are seeking a more satisfyingly nuanced picture of race that is not contained within notions of racial essentialism, then we should begin by trying to understand these impulses as fully as possible. Most injurious of all would be to sit in judgment of these historical actors, armed with all of the theory and knowledge we now claim to possess, and thence to find their motivations opaque: to conclude that Black Sinatras and White Panthers are mere misfits in an otherwise intelligible story, inaccessible to us and destined to remain peripheral figures in a narrative that we have otherwise fleshed out to our satisfaction. As this analysis hopefully illustrates, this narrative is far from a complete and legible final draft.

Chapter Two

Whose Hit Parade?
Race Politics and Genre in Postwar American Music

> There was, at that time, an absolute wall – an impenetrable wall – between Pop and R&B. There were R&B stations, there were R&B artists, there was R&B music, but it was not gonna get played in its original form on Pop stations. It was too ragged, and in some cases it was a little suggestive – or more. In some cases it was even explicit.
>
> – Pat Boone[1]

An Illustration: The Pop Idol and the Queen of Rock-'n'-Roll

When twenty-one-year-old Pat Boone entered the *Billboard* Pop charts in February 1956 with a finger-popping tune called "Tutti Frutti," few could have anticipated the ramifications the record would have, both practical and symbolic, for the nascent American musical genre called rock-'n'-roll. At the time, rock-'n'-roll as a distinct musical style had only recently crept into the lexicon of mainstream American music consumers, and for many of Boone's listeners, no doubt, the upbeat single represented the totality of the rock-'n'-roll experience: a lively dance tune that stood in apparent contrast to the novelty fluff that had occupied the top positions of the Pop charts for several years prior. Its lyrics nodded towards the excitement of sensual-but-safe adolescent romance (or so it would seem), marking the song as the exclusive property of the young American record-buyer. Its quirky refrain, just so much gibberish to the casual listener, was at once infectious and deliciously obfuscating – "A-wop-bop-a-loo-bop, a-lop-bam-boom!" It didn't matter that few teenaged fans could decipher its meaning; Pat

[1] Quoted in *The History of Rock 'n' Roll: Vol. 1*, dir: Andrew Solt, DVD (Warner Home Video, 1995).

Boone had arrived as a pop idol – a handsome, clean-cut purveyor of a new style of youth music, who grinned and swayed and drove his audiences into swooning fits of admiration.

The song's composer, a black Georgia-born singer and pianist named Richard Penniman – known better to his fans as Little Richard – understood the implications of Boone's success all too well, however. Penniman's own recording of the song was only a month old when Boone's rendition entered the *Billboard* charts; though the original record initially fared relatively well with consumers, for a month at least, its success was immediately and overwhelmingly eclipsed by the vigorous sales of Boone's cover version. This in itself was not necessarily a sign of disaster. For one thing, successful covers of original material had long been a fixture of the record industry, and were nothing new by 1956; Boone's success seemed to promise Little Richard at least a moment of reflected glory, as the song's composer and original performer. Finally, if nothing else, the royalty cheques would ensure some kind of financial compensation for the tunesmith. The problem facing Little Richard was of a more insidious kind:

> Now, Pat Boone was a white guy that then took my music and made my hit. This was my chance to be a big star, and he short-cut me, and was going to outsell me – and he did, with my songs, that I wrote.[2]

On the one hand, Penniman was receiving royalties on every record that Boone sold; on the other hand, the white singer had co-opted his material, steeped as it was in firmly African-American rhythm and blues culture, and had bleached it a ghastly shade of white – and with more commercial success. Penniman's fears were doubly exacerbated when his follow-up single, the rollicking "Long Tall Sally," was similarly covered by Boone and released as *his* follow-up single within months, with near-identical market results.

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[2] *Ibid*.

For a black recording artist in 1956, releasing his material on a comparatively tiny independent rhythm and blues label, there was no way to compete with the major-label backing of white rock-'n'-rollers like Pat Boone.

Between 1955 – the year of his first number one Pop hit – and 1960, Pat Boone succeeded in placing an incredible 33 singles in the Pop Top 40 chart, many of which also found their way onto the Rhythm and Blues chart, and a huge portion of which were covers of black rhythm and blues tunes.[3] Boone's limpid imitations ran the gamut of 1950s black musical performers, from rough-edged R&B singers like Joe Turner and Little Richard to the sweeter doo-wop groups like The Five Keys, The Flamingos and The Orioles. Without exception, Boone's singles offered rock-'n'-roll in its most passively inoffensive form. In the case of "Tutti Frutti," Penniman's original tune had derived much of its energy from a ferociously-paced, foregrounded backbeat so overdriven as to dominate the song. The piano heard on the record was played so fast and aggressively it became a percussive element in its own right, defying the European classical traditions that placed the piano in a melodic-harmonic role. The singer's loose diction, together with the song's nonsensical phonetic refrain, denied the primacy of lyrical content; constantly racing to catch up to the propulsive backbeat, Little Richard's breathless vocal and frequent falsetto howls suggested a reckless abandon that seems now to have been instrumental to the song's excitement.[4]

Boone's cover of the song, on the other hand, inverted most of these tropes, misguidedly downplaying the rhythmic base of the song to sweeten the tune harmonically. A gloss of orchestral strings was laid overtop a backbeat that had been softened and

[3] *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits*, 6th edition, ed. Joel Whitburn (New York: Billboard Books, 1996), s.v. "Little Richard," "Pat Boone."
[4] See Little Richard, *Here's Little Richard*, LP (Specialty Records, 1957).

pushed back in the mix. The tempo of the song was drastically slowed down to complement Boone's "whip-crack of perfectly articulated consonants," which seemed slightly silly when delivered with the exaggeratedly perfect diction of a totally controlled singer.[5] Even worse, Boone had utterly missed the significance of Little Richard's characteristic falsetto howls drawn from his roots in church gospel styles. For Little Richard, these interjections were gestures implying impassioned loss of inhibition, supplicating oneself before the emotional demands of the frenzied music; Boone evidently saw them as wordless space-fillers, and he delivered them in the same controlled tones as the rest of the lyric, utterly failing to employ them as markers of musical intensity.[6]

Though it did little to assuage his bitterness, Richard must have appreciated one particularly sharp irony of Boone's "antiseptic" take on "Tutti Frutti" – for in fact, the wonderfully silly paean to adolescent lust was actually a supremely erotic codified reference to homosexuality – and not of the puppy love kind.[7] The chorus of Penniman's tune ("Tutti Frutti – all rooty!"), despite its vaguely sexual suggestions, was in fact a much-sanitized version of an original rhyme that even the boldest of independent labels would not have released in 1956:

> Tutti frutti – good booty!
> If it don't fit, don't force it,
> You can grease it – make it easy.[8]

[5] Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 49.
[6] See Pat Boone, *Gold Collection*, CD (HNG, 2001).
[7] Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Quasar of Rock* (New York: Harmony, 1984), 40.
[8] *Ibid.*

To make the irony even more complete, the second Penniman tune covered by Boone in 1956, "Long Tall Sally," was rife with the kind of sexual innuendo that had long characterized so much of the African-American blues canon. Surely unbeknownst to the insipid white singer, "Long Tall Sally" was in fact a fairly elaborate homage to masturbation, and the eponymous "Sally" was not exactly the all-American girl-next-door:

> I saw Uncle John – with bald-headed Sally,
> He saw Aunt Mary coming and he ducked back in the alley.
> Oh baby – yeah, baby,
> Baby – havin' me some fun tonight.[9]

That Boone and his record company failed to appreciate the underlying sexuality of Penniman's tunes speaks to just how far removed the young white singer was from the cultural and musical traditions that gave rise to African-American rhythm and blues. "He was important to rock-'n'-roll," claimed music journalist Charlie Gillett in 1970, "only in the role he played in bringing a little conservative respectability to the music's image."[10] Boone was a surrogate rock-'n'-roller, a diluted crooner whose legacy was to bring rock-'n'-roll to meet mainstream American morality halfway.

Reading Genre in Postwar Popular Music

Pat Boone and Little Richard stand at the nexus of an acute crisis-point for the American recording industry, wherein long-standing musical categories which denoted putatively white and black styles of music came to be contested for the first time. The concept of musical genre, as a means of organizing the production of popular music, had for decades been informed by racialized understandings of record-buying consumer demographics.

[9] Little Richard, *Here's Little Richard*, LP (Specialty Records, 1957).
[10] Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970), 32.

"Pop" music, as delineated by trade magazines like *Billboard*, had been unspokenly assumed to be the domain of middle-class white Americans; those styles which did not cater to this assumed audience, regardless of their popularity, were labeled in opposition to this normative non-musical descriptor. Rock-'n'-roll, emerging in the mid-1950s, mounted the first serious challenge to the racialized logic of genre categories like "Pop" and "Rhythm and Blues." Musically a synthesis of nominally white and black styles, the music was performed by white, black, and Latino performers, and its target audience was understood to be young and integrated. Since at least the late 1940s, records supposedly intended for non-white or non-middle-class audiences had begun to "cross over" from their marginalized categories to enter *Billboard*'s Pop charts. Rock-'n'-roll would be the culmination of this crossover phenomenon: both Little Richard's and Pat Boone's recordings of "Tutti Frutti" and "Long Tall Sally" would chart on *both* the Pop charts and the Rhythm and Blues charts, betraying the falseness of the boundaries that had always been used to bring order to the music industry.

But while rock-'n'-roll seemed to demand a re-evaluation of the nomenclatures that organized the distribution of popular records, it posed significant threats to the record industry and to mainstream American listeners. To both its detractors and supporters, it was overtly symbolic of a larger project of racial integration and assimilation that was gaining momentum through the efforts of early Civil Rights activists; as such, it also refracted the darkest fears of segregationists who railed against the possibilities of miscegenation, and the unholy influence that sexualized African-American musics could have on middle-class white America. For the seven major American record labels, it was a sign that their presumptions of audience expectations had been hollow, and that they

had missed out on a significant record-buying demographic in their efforts to keep Pop music white. White America could apparently embrace nominally black music with their hearts and their chequebooks; the companies which had managed to capture these consumers were almost exclusively small, independent labels. The record industry's response was to groom a stable of young, white and largely asexual performers like Pat Boone, to capture back the rock-'n'-roll audience with sanitized versions of black rhythm and blues tunes, and effectively whiten the new genre enough to allay the fears of mainstream Americans. Boone and his ilk would be the greatest winners in the rise of rock-'n'-roll, establishing long careers founded on the appropriation of (usually black) rock-'n'-roll tunes, while many of the first wave of rock-'n'-roll stars would find themselves quickly marginalized from the financial rewards that accompanied success in the marketplace.

Taking as its centerpiece the phenomenal ascendancy of rock-'n'-roll in the mid-1950s, and the vicious public backlash that soon greeted it, this chapter will provide a partial overview of the changing landscape of American popular music in the two decades immediately following the end of the Second World War. Specifically, I am interested in the shifting conceptions of musical genre in the postwar period, and the ways in which the descriptive categories of musical style were inevitably crafted around racialized expectations of normative musical presentation. Though genre theoretically speaks as a musical descriptor, it has always been an historical construction that works to prescribe limits on what constitutes "black" or "white" musical language and performance.[11] The postwar period saw these constructions facing contestation and

[11] See David Brackett, "The Politics and Practice of 'Crossover' in American Popular Music, 1963 to 1965," *The Musical Quarterly* 78 (1994), 774-797; Reebee Garofalo, "Off the Charts: Outrage and

renegotiation, as the record industry scrambled to keep apace with profound shifts in consumer demographics and the emergence of new musical syncretisms. What emerged was a pitched battle over the meanings of black and white performance, and how far these racialized sounds could be acceptably combined before they threatened to undo the racial hierarchies of American musical consumption.

The first two sections of the chapter explore the history of genre as proposed by organs of the record industry such as *Billboard*, whose weekly singles charts worked to inscribe invisible boundaries around the racialized identities of American performers. These sections develop an historical understanding of the unspoken and unquestioned assumptions of race that dictated the promotion and categorization of musical products in the postwar period, and how these assumptions were finally laid bare by the phenomenon of racial "crossover" beginning in the early 1950s. The next section addresses the historical moment of rock-'n'-roll's emergence, and suggests the ways in which these aforementioned genre categories were first challenged by rock-'n'-roll artists, and then rearticulated by a recording industry unwilling to relinquish its control to the independent record labels growing in significance and power in the rock-'n'-roll era. The final section of the chapter provides a brief critique of the development of a "rockist" narrative, from the mid-1960s onward, that encouraged the separate treatment of rock and pop musics of the period, and which was itself freighted with problematic assumptions of race and its relationship to popular music.

Exclusion in the Eruption of Rock and Roll," in *American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 111-126; Philip Gentry, "The Age of Anxiety: Music, Politics, and McCarthyism, 1948-1954" (PhD diss., University of California, 2008).

Several theoretical observations undergirding the arguments of this chapter require elaboration here. The first, drawing on the recent work of literary theorist Ross Chambers, positions the concept of *whiteness* as "the primary unmarked and so unexamined…category" of American culture.[12] Chambers' work points to the historical condition of whiteness, among predominantly white populations, as a category of ethnic typing that is understood to be so normative as to be rendered invisible – "examinable but nevertheless…unexamined," in that author's words. "Whiteness is not itself compared to anything," Chambers writes, "but other things are compared unfavorably with it, and their own comparability with one another derives from their distance from the touchstone."[13] In other words, in an historical context, whiteness exists as a presupposed benchmark against which all *non-white* culture is to be compared; the further such culture seems to stray from the invisible normative model of whiteness, the more the culture is read as recognizably distinct from a hegemonic ethnic category that is itself underexamined and thus under-critiqued. Chambers' conceptions of whiteness as "the unexamined" (in this instance, in American culture) provides a superb model for understanding the silent expectations of normative musical performance that once structured the production and consumption of American music according to implicitly racialized categories.

A second observation guiding the arguments of this chapter derives from the postulations of cultural critic Albert Murray, whose 1970 work *The Omni Americans* famously insisted that American culture was and had almost always been "incontestably" racially hybridized, "patently and irrevocably composite" as the result of centuries of

[12] Ross Chambers, "The Unexamined," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 189.
[13] Chambers, 189.

cross-racial and cross-cultural exchange that belied the visibility of racial identities in twentieth-century America.[14] Murray's work pushes for an understanding of American cultural nationality by pointing to the ways in which even seemingly *pure* European and African cultural traditions had, by at least the nineteenth-century, been subject to a long process of borrow, exchange and negotiation. This hybridized culture provides the backdrop for our discussion of 1950s crossover musics, and serves to underscore the fallacy of musical categorization based on prevailing expectations of black and white cultural expression, by revealing the ways in which musics are rarely *either* black or white, but can typically only reflect varying degrees of visibly (and nominally) white or black influences.

This is not, of course, to say that American music cannot be understood as African or European in influence, even if this music is not wholly of one or the other. There do exist some indisputably European and African musical characteristics, which at one point did suggest two autonomous musical traditions. The question is, how best do we understand how musics can sound predominantly white or black – as indeed they were always seen to by mainstream America? One method is to examine the musical tropes largely unique to certain musical heritages. For instance, Samuel Floyd posits a series of African musical tropes that ultimately find their way into African-American styles (and beyond): "call-and-response devices…polyrhythms…blue notes…rhythmic-oral declamations…[and] constant repetition of rhythmic and melodic figures," to name just a few.[15] Classical Western European traditions (i.e., "white" musics), by contrast,

[14] Albert Murray, *The Omni Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 22.
[15] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

historically placed much less emphasis on rhythmic interplay and melodic "oddities" such as the blue note, and prized above all what Geoffrey Leech and Andrew Chester call "the *extensional* form of musical construction" – building outward from a basic melodic theme, and rarely relying on the repetition of figures (what is called the "*intensional*" development model.)[16] Though indeed a restrictive binary, we can understand the difference in these two musical traditions simplistically as such: African musics were predominantly rhythmic in affect, while Western European musics relied most heavily on harmonic point and counterpoint.

Another way of examining the historical constructions of whiteness and blackness in music is to examine styles in context, by *who* was playing which forms of music, and how racial identity came to be inscribed on these genres. Thus, musics that borrow from blues traditions – almost exclusively promoted by black artists until, say, the 1930s – are coded *black*, while styles like the Tin Pan Alley sound of the 1930s and 1940s were historically seen to be *white*. The problem with this approach is two-fold: first, neither of the above-mentioned styles were racially independent musics (they were both born of the hybridized culture of America), and secondly, understanding these styles as coded black or white risks committing to the same expectations of racialized performance that have historically plagued the American recording industry.

Ultimately, one of the most pertinent observations of these kind of quagmires is captured in Jeffrey Melnick's study of race and doo-wop performance, when the writer discusses that genre's apparent failure to reach "a threshold level of recognizable

[16] Andrew Chester, "Second Thoughts on a Rock Aesthetic: The Band," in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 268-271.

'blackness.'"[17] I would suggest, on the basis of Melnick's comment, that by locating and extrapolating this "threshold level of recognizable 'blackness'," we can begin to map out an historical understanding of what constitutes white and black aural identity in musical performance. If American whiteness stands as the invisible category of normative racial expectations, then historically, all American musics have been produced and consumed with an eye for such "threshold levels," below which any music – whether performed by black artists or white – was considered *white*, or at least white in intent. In other words, African-American musics no longer sounded black if they exhibited few or none of the distinctly African musical tropes that betray visible markers of race; as long as a threshold level of blackness was not reached, music could (theoretically) remain unexamined from a racial standpoint, cozily protected by the unexamined quality of white identity. The problems inherent in these theoretical formations will hopefully become apparent over the course of this and subsequent chapters. As an entry into our analysis, let us first however consider the postwar condition of those musics which were, unquestionably, "white musics."

Orthodoxy: The Postwar Sound of Whiteness

Between 1947 and 1954, the record industry saw a near-complete changing of the guard for its best-selling Pop artists. Where the immediate postwar period had belonged almost exclusively to white male vocalists working in a post-big-band, swing-jazz milieu, the early 1950s saw the ascendancy of (again, exclusively white) female pop vocalists like Rosemary Clooney, Patti Page and Doris Day, all of whom – together with a new,

[17] Jeffrey Melnick, "'Story Untold': The Black Men and White Sounds of Doo-Wop," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 140.

thoroughly inoffensive breed of white male singers such as Eddie Fisher – would serve to mark the early 1950s as a period of "bland, 'pleasant,' and, in effect, suburban" pop singles dominating the *Billboard* charts. "The general tone of this style and the songs that belonged to it denied the physical nature of sexual relationships," observed Charlie Gillett in his survey of rock and roll's history, "and expressed trite emotions about simple events with almost no reference to any shared experiences."[18] Songs like Doris Day's "Be My Little Baby Bumble Bee," Patti Page's "(How Much Is That) Doggie in the Window," and the clean-cut Eddie Fisher's "Just Another Polka" suggested a stylistic shift, promulgated largely by the seven major American recording companies of the period, towards an unobjectionable, middle-of-the-road, and increasingly undifferentiated white pop music – a shift, as many commentators have since noted, that seemed uniquely in step with the normative values of a much broader social reordering in the postwar period.[19]

In a superb study of race, ethnicity and popular music in postwar America, Philip Gentry has suggested that the vocal pop of the early 1950s represented, in effect, a new and historically-specific "sound of whiteness," one which refracted middle-class America's increasing expectations of a postwar consensus in a political environment characterized by the xenophobic agenda of Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous anti-Communist witchhunt.[20] Commentators even at the time were quick to connect the senator's political philosophy to the new, unmarked sounds filling the airwaves:

> It may not be coincidence that in these days of Senator McCarthy's sort of Americanism, the newest type of

[18] Gillett, 10
[19] The seven major recording companies in this period were: Decca, Mercury, Victor, Capitol, Columbia, ABC-Paramount and MGM. See Gillett, 59-77.
[20] Gentry, 66-69.

> hit…on the *Hit Parade* concurrently in the winter of 1953-54, is blatantly orthodox in structure and sentiment.[21]

Though McCarthy had little to do with the operations of the record industry (except through the persecution of some its biggest stars, such as Italian-American crooner and outspoken leftist Frank Sinatra), his highly public demands for American cultural conformity remained a spectral presence in an industry overwhelmingly dominated by a handful of major corporations, each with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

It was not just McCarthyism, of course, but fundamental changes to middle-class behavioral norms that could be seen reflected in the "orthodox" musical offerings of the period. The explosive growth of the suburbs in the immediate postwar period introduced a new cultural space, however fictitious in its presumed idyll, wherein the "visible markers of class and ethnic identity" inherent in (especially) urban living came to be replaced by "a vision in which class and race were invisible."[22] Invisible, of course, only to the extent that no class existed in the suburbs besides the middle-class, and virtually no race could be found in this new domestic space apart from whiteness. Institutional barriers (e.g., the practice of "redlining" mortgage applications by non-whites, or the implementation of restrictive covenants in suburban neighbourhoods) "functioned as codes…that established suburbia – at once imaginatively and demographically – as a zone of protected whiteness over and against the racially marked zones of both the country and the city."[23] The suburbs, in short, created a domestic space in which race and class almost always equaled white and middle-class; consequently these factors

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[21] Hughson F. Mooney, quoted in Gentry, 72.
[22] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Leerom Medavoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 95.
[23] Medavoi, 96.

became, for a time at least, a non-concern for residents of this newly-established American utopia.

The assumptions inscribed into this new American way of life – those of classlessness and cultural homogeneity – were fed back to middle-class Americans by entertainment media (not just network radio but, increasingly, the relatively new medium of television) whose operators conceived of "one monolithic audience" for their cultural products.[24] As the suburbs continued to grow, and as non-white, non-middle-class Americans continued to face exclusion from this apparently idyllic domestic lifestyle, it became ever clearer that this monolithic audience was unspokenly assumed to be the populace of American suburbia. To this end, the records that topped the *Hit Parade* throughout the early 1950s, the "blatantly orthodox" pop songs shorn of any racialized or classed signifiers, were created and distributed with a view to their universality – assuming, of course, that the universe contained only white, middle-class Americans. Records by singers like Patti Page and Rosemary Clooney were homogeneous not just in relation to one another, a largely undifferentiated rotation of hit singles that flowed from the radios and hi-fi sets of suburban American, but even in and of themselves; though both Page and Clooney were southern-born singers, for instance, their records betrayed little trace of any regional accent that could threaten the nation-wide appeal of their vocal pop.[25]

Ironically enough, as Gentry notes, despite the bid for universality suggested by the pop hits of the early 1950s, and the homogeneous quality of the music, assigning a genre-label to such material proves neither easy nor particularly edifying:

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[24] Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 86.
[25] Gentry, 97.

> […] Whether we call it 'Post-Swing' (historical), 'Vocal' (phenomenological), 'Jazz' (racial), or simply 'Pop' (commercial)… the music of mainstream culture became increasingly unmarked. It was defined simply by not being anything else.[26]

Defining a musical style (and especially a white musical style) by what it was *not* was indeed a core component of the racialized logic upon which the American recording industry had been founded, and had informed the operations and marketing strategies of network radio, the major record labels, and trade magazines like *Billboard* even in the prewar period. Consider, for example, the genre assigned to these white postwar singers by *Billboard* (the leading American trade paper for recorded music, then as now): "Pop," a category that nominally denoted the popular (read: commercial) appeal of a record, but which meant, effectively, popular and *white*. "The assumed mainstream pop audience was northern, urban, middle or upper class, and also white," suggests David Brackett in a close analysis of the *Billboard* charts' political underpinnings.[27] In other words, as in the imagined space of American suburbia, class and race were largely rendered invisible by the *Billboard* Pop chart insofar as they remained undefined yet taken for granted as normatively white and bourgeois.

Pop artists were "Pop," quite simply, because their records required no qualifications to mark them as anything else. Yet, as Brackett is quick to point out, these assumptions of bourgeois whiteness were rarely, if ever, spelled out in such terms by the organs of the American recording industry:

> *Billboard* present[ed] the world of popular music as if all products were created equal, distinguished solely by their "popularity," but never acknowledge[d] that not all

[26] *Ibid*, 73.
[27] Brackett, 777.

> products have equal access to this particular form of popularity.[28]

The subtext to Brackett's observations should be obvious: a non-white artist, or an artist whose recordings were implicitly directed towards a working-class audience, could be commercially successful (i.e., popular), but the mechanisms that ordered the recording industry typically found such artists relegated to one of *Billboard*'s two "specialty" charts – defined not necessarily by genre but against the unspoken preconditions for being "Pop."

The racialized and classed marginalization of such recordings is evident in the nomenclature adopted by *Billboard* when the paper (reluctantly) introduced these two specialty charts in 1942: "Hillbilly" and "Race." "Hillbilly" records, as the name surely implies, were directed towards an assumed working-class "rural southern white" audience (the chart was renamed the now-familiar "Country" chart in 1948, though its presumed audience remained, and to some extent still remains, the same).[29] "Race" records were not even vaguely defined according to their respective musical styles; the chart encompassed any and all popular recordings made by African-American artists, whether gospel, blues, jazz, vocal harmony or any number of other genres in which these artists worked. On the surface, the introduction of *Billboard*'s specialty charts in 1942 signaled an acknowledgment of a thriving non-white, non-bourgeois American musical culture; in reality, however, the new "Hillbilly" and "Race" charts served mainly to underscore the classed and racially-demarcated boundaries of musical success continually reinforced by the institutions of the American recording industry.

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[28] *Ibid*, 776.
[29] *Ibid*, 777.

Specialty records by name, if not by nature, the music created by and marketed to non-whites or those of the working-class clearly occupied a subordinate position within the hierarchy established by the *Billboard* charts. The problem was that behind the magazine's seemingly impartial reportage of a record's commercial success, its numerical assignations that promised to turn the intangibility of musical expression into measurable fact, the *Billboard* charts were anything but objective:

> Chart position was the result of complex mediations among market forces; internal and external politics; geography; aesthetics; and the efforts of musicians, songwriters, managers, DJs, label executives, jukebox manufacturers, television bookers, journalists, and – once in a while – record-buyers.[30]

The racially-organized hierarchy of the three separate charts, then, like the actual chart positions printed weekly in *Billboard*, were to some extent an attempt to foster a false (or at least heavily biased) sense of order on an industry that by the early 1950s was beginning to face an anarchic and unpredictable moment of flux.

For the fact was, despite the three clearly-delineated market streams into which record releases supposedly fell, there had always been a certain degree of crossover on the *Billboard* charts. These crossover records could see African-American artists reaching across *de facto* racial boundaries to chart with country-inflected tunes, as in 1944 when both Louis Jordan and Nat King Cole had hit records on the *Billboard* "Folk" chart (a short-lived relabelling of the original "Hillbilly" singles chart). More significant for the purposes of this analysis, however, were those records which managed to cross

[30] Gentry, 120.

over "from one of the 'marginal' (race or hillbilly) charts to the mainstream," an exchange, Brackett observes, that less often occurred the other way around.[31]

Because, by nature of American demographics, the consumer market for records was overwhelmingly white, reaching the Pop market commanded the lion's share of promotional efforts by the seven major recording labels in the immediate postwar period. Most of these corporations did, however, feature subsidiary labels that catered to the so-called specialty tastes of the record-buying minority; the marginal charts, "Hillbilly" and "Race," thus became what David Brackett refers to as "testing grounds," wherein particularly popular songs with crossover potential could be identified soon after their release. "By the 1950s," Brackett writes, "these testing grounds had become increasingly useful in determining which songs might have broad enough appeal to cross over to the mainstream."[32] That is to say that by the 1950s, specialty records successfully crossing over to the mainstream Pop market had become more than a casual anomaly in the pages of *Billboard*; crossing over was now a commonplace event in the American music industry, anticipated with near-scientific methods of scrutiny by the major corporate players. Though the record industry still clung to the tripartite structure of the *Billboard* charts, the racial demarcations implicit in this structure had met their first serious challenge, as records by (for instance) black artists began to appear routinely in the weekly Pop singles charts. Never again, after the early 1950s, would the Pop music of American culture, as defined by sources such as *Billboard*, look or sound so uniformly, bourgeois white.

[31] Brackett, 777.
[32] *Ibid*, 777-778.

Crossing Over: From "Race" to "Rhythm and Blues"

In the long list of African-American musicians who might qualify as the *first* truly successful crossover artists – those that provided the impetus for the groundswell of crossover successes that intensified throughout the 1950s – many commentators seem in agreement in pointing to the centrality of one player: Louis Jordan.[33] Jordan, an Arkansas-born singer and saxophonist, had played a key role in developing the small-combo format of post-war dance bands, foregrounding the rhythmic base of drums and bass (stand-up or electric) to compensate for the loss of the sonic expansiveness provided by the pre-war big band orchestras.[34] Jordan's lively "jump blues" style, together with the singer's affable demeanor and smooth vocal delivery, struck a nerve with the record-buying public – and not just the specialty markets for "Race" records. In 1946, Jordan's combo the Tympany Five had a smash hit on the *Billboard* Pop chart with their Decca Records release, "Choo-Choo Ch'Boogie," just one of many Jordan hits that would exert a major influence on later white rock-'n'-rollers like Bill Haley.[35] More than proving the viability of black blues styles in the white marketplace, however, Jordan had pioneered a new post-war approach to dance music: one which married the sounds of pre-war African-American blues with the propulsive rhythms of a stripped-down instrumental combo, which relied heavily on drums and bass to maintain its danceable groove.

A young staff writer for *Billboard* named Jerry Wexler provided the first descriptive monikor for the new electrified dance music of groups like the Tympany Five,

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[33] See Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 27; Reebee Garofalo, "Crossing Over: From Rhythm & Blues to Rock 'n' Roll" in *R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music*, ed. Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic Books, 2005), 121; Nelson George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues* (London: Omnibus, 1988), 26.
[34] For an interesting examination of the economic underpinnings prompting the decline of the orchestral big band, see Neal, 27.
[35] David Joyner, *American Popular Music*, 2nd edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), 190.

a term he coined in the pages of *Billboard* that would eventually come to encompass a wealth of new subgenres emerging in the 1950s and on into the next decade: "rhythm and blues."[36] In June 1949, *Billboard* renamed its "Race" chart for the second time, away from an overtly racial nomenclature to Wexler's seemingly genre-based descriptor; the "Race" chart became, and remained, the "Rhythm and Blues" chart (familiarly known today as the R&B chart). For an industry that was fast waking up to the commercial crossover potential of African-American musics, the taxonomical shift had its own particular logic. "Race" records seemed to denote musical cultures with specific, and almost by definition non-white, target audiences; "rhythm and blues," on the other hand, appeared to subsume issues of race in favour of a genre-derived vocabulary. The reclassification of the "Race" chart stood as one of the earliest visible acknowledgments by the record industry of the increasingly contested categories that had previously functioned to maintain segregation of white and non-white popular musics in America.

(*Billboard*'s first reclassification of the "Race" chart had occurred just two years earlier, in 1947, when the chart was very briefly relabeled the "Harlem Hit Parade" – a title that was, if anything, even more grossly misrepresentative of the dynamic and manifold genres and subgenres of black popular music produced at the time. As a shorthand for African-American cultural products, "Harlem Hit Parade" was less than useless for two reasons. Firstly, it threatened to deny the dozens of regional styles and subgenres unique to urban centers scattered throughout America; Texas blues, Kansas City swing, and Midwest jump blues like Jordan's were all seemingly contenders for the "*Harlem* Hit Parade," a term whose meaning in any case relied on white America's tacit equation of the New York neighborhood and African-American public culture. Even

[36] Gentry, 120.

more significantly, however, the "Harlem Hit Parade" tag served to further underscore the underlying racial divide that inscribed an artist's white identity onto the "Pop" hits of the 1940s. Since 1935, pre-empting the *Billboard* national charts by some five years, CBS' *Your Hit Parade* radio programme had served as network radio's own weekly countdown of the nation's top, almost exclusively white, hit singles. The "Harlem Hit Parade," then, stood in effect as a marginalized, "blackened" version of the *Hit Parade* programme – which was only "*Yours*" provided you looked the part.)[37]

"Rhythm and Blues," unlike the overtly racialized suggestions of the "Race" chart or the "Harlem Hit Parade," seemed to propose a new taxonomical system for typing records indebted to the postwar sounds of groups like Louis Jordan's – in theory, at least, free of the socially constructed assumptions of race identity implicit in the older chart labels. Of course, while the new monikor was supposedly a musical (i.e., genre-specific) category, it soon became obvious that the "Rhythm and Blues" chart – like its predecessors – still worked to confine black musics to a marginal space, still in opposition to the invisible normative models of the "Pop" marketplace. As Gentry points out, most of the top singles to appear on this first "Rhythm and Blues" chart "were neither unusually 'rhythmic' nor particularly bluesy."[38] What had been intended as a descriptor of limited focus to address those songs, such as Louis Jordan's, which *were* both rhythmic and bluesy became a catch-all for most postwar forms of black-performed

[37] See *Billboard*, October 24, 1942, p. 25 for the introduction of the "Harlem Hit Parade" Top 10 singles list. For an outstanding analysis of the politics of *Billboard*'s nomenclature, see Brackett, "Crossing Over," and Philip H. Ennis, *The seventh stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 124-128. See also Bruce Elrod, *Your Hit Parade: April 20, 1935 to June 7, 1958: American Top 10 Hits, 1958-1984* (White Rock: B.C. Elrod, 1985.)
[38] Gentry, 122.

musics (which is precisely how the term is used today by authors like Brian Ward, who have adopted the label as a celebratory nod towards these postwar forms).

Among such songs – neither unusually rhythmic nor particularly bluesy – were recordings by a new type of vocal group emerging in the late 1940s, largely unique to the urban north, whose material would come to be collectively known as "secular vocal group."[39] Led by pioneering groups like Baltimore's The Ravens, and further developed by Sonny Til's The Orioles, secular vocal group was both a response to, and reflection of, "widespread black approval for a 'sweeter' strain of r&b" in the post-war period.[40] The secular vocal groups drew on firmly gospel vocal traditions, as well as the kind of street-corner harmonizing familiar to many black youth living in northern urban centers, and wed these traditions to "slick, putatively 'white'" musical elements such as orchestral string arrangements, to create "a smoother, poppier strain of r&b" with tremendous crossover potential.[41] From the early 1950s to mid-decade, dozens of these groups and their releases – mostly recorded for small, independent labels as opposed to the major American recording companies – cropped up on the newly-established Rhythm and Blues charts, and what is more, began to cross over to *Billboard*'s Pop chart with increasing regularity.

One of the most successful of these groups, The Orioles, had their first crossover hit with their 1949 release, "It's Too Soon to Know," which became a number-one R&B hit and reached the fourteenth position on the Pop charts in that same year. "It's Too Soon to Know" traced the basic outline of the "doo-wop" vocal style (one of several

[39] See Gentry, 117; Ward, 56; Stuart L. Goosman, *Group Harmony: The Black Urban Roots of Rhythm & Blues* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
[40] Ward, 55.
[41] *Ibid*, 40-41.

progenitors of what would eventually become rock-'n'-roll), which privileged background vocal accompaniment overtly derived from the gospel-quartet traditions of past decades.[42] Aside from this obvious indebtedness to black gospel performance, however, "It's Too Soon to Know" was notable for betraying relatively little trace of what Philip Gentry calls "the supposed markers of African-American musical authenticity – [there were] no blue notes, no driving rhythms, no sexually knowing lyrics."[43] In short, The Orioles' hit had little to do with many of the traditional signifiers of African-American blues music, which by the early 1950s was fast losing favour with an increasingly urbanized northern black population; instead, "It's Too Soon to Know" suggested a new style of rhythm and blues, "caught in the midst of stylistic cross-currents which edged…[r&b] away from the blues and closer to the musical and lyrical orthodoxies of post-war 'white' popular musics."[44]

As Robert W. Stephens suggests in his survey of post-war soul music styles, this apparent "whitening" of the vocal harmony groups like The Orioles was an identifiably northern phenomenon; in the southern U.S., most early R&B performers were at once more heavily indebted to both gospel and blues traditions, and ultimately less successful in the white marketplace. The northern vocal groups, according to Stephens, "made conscious efforts to avoid traditional blues elements," a consequence, he argues, of these groups' appeal to white audiences as well as black (though I would argue the author is wrestling with something of a cause-and-effect problem – i.e., the appeal to white

[42] The term "doo-wop," itself, derives from the type of phonetic utterances provided by the backing singers in much of this music, who would attempt to vocally emulate particular instrumental sounds from gospel music traditions. See Floyd, 175. For a close analysis of "It's Too Soon to Know," see Gentry's chapter on The Orioles, 112-164; and Goosman, 201-202, 206, 208.
[43] Gentry, 123.
[44] Ward, 42.

audiences probably owes largely to the downplaying of blues styles in northern R&B, rather than *vice versa*.)[45]

Significantly, though, Stephens also cites a second major factor in these vocal groups' circumvention of traditional blues and gospel styles: namely, that such traditions "were not sanctioned musical styles of the black middle class at that time."[46] As Philip Gentry has suggested, groups like The Orioles embodied a new performative approach to the delivery of rhythm and blues, which was coded not necessarily as white (or even white-inflected), but rather in the specifically classed terms of the *bourgeoisie*. The group, led by emotive tenor Sonny Till, reflected a new and urbane manner of delivering rhythm and blues music: one that was clearly intended to evoke an alternative reading of black masculinity, in contrast to the construction of working-class blackness suggested in recordings by other r&b stars of the period (e.g., Wynonie Harris and Joe Turner, both planted firmly in the southern r&b camp, whose material tended to reference the pleasures and concerns of the black working class).[47]

Gentry discusses The Orioles' performativity by reference to what he calls a "discourse of smoothness" that would come to mark the growing black American middle-classes in the 1950s. This discourse of smoothness, within the context of the secular vocal groups, was virtually all-encompassing, suggesting not only an aural smoothness (i.e., the sweeter, pleasant sounds of "It's Too Soon to Know"), but a sartorial and physical smoothness as well. The Orioles and many other secular vocal groups were invariably clean-cut; adopted relatively conservative matching suits for their stage-wear;

[45] Robert W. Stephens, "Soul: A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 12 (1984), 28.
[46] Stephens, 28.
[47] Gentry, 123-124.

and performed carefully constructed and well-rehearsed stage repertoires, in which raw emotion was elaborately suggested but constantly held in control. The Orioles struck a dynamic contrast, both to the gruff working-class machismo of singers like Joe Turner, and to the outrageous spectacle of comic showmanship practiced by acts like Louis Jordan's Tympany Five. They were also, as it happened, phenomenally successful with white audiences.[48]

Eventually, this discourse of smoothness would be adopted by later black performers, like one-time gospel star Sam Cooke, who were not necessarily indebted to the doo-wop groups directly, but whose marriage of gospel vocal styles and "putatively 'white'" musical elements would carve out a similar niche with what came to be known as "black pop." Sam Cooke began his career as a purely gospel singer, becoming one of the most famous gospel performers in America by the mid-1950s as the leader of the fabulously popular Soul Stirrers. In 1957, after a period of acute anxiousness and indecision, Cooke finally made up his mind to "go secular," a hotly controversial career choice for many gospel singers of the period who were lambasted by some in the black community for their unholy embrace of secular themes. The first artist to meld overtly gospel tropes to secular rhythm and blues, Ray Charles, had only recently faced an outpouring of highly public and often vicious criticism for his employment of spiritual music in the service of secular (and sometimes sexual) subject matter. Cooke understood well the risks involved in this different sort of "crossing over," and his decision was a

[48] *Ibid*, 145-150.

difficult one, but by late 1957 he had reinvented himself as a black pop idol, and an immediate crossover success.[49]

Cooke's first single as a pop artist, "You Send Me," released in November 1957 on Keen Records, rocketed to the top of both the Pop and Rhythm and Blues charts, immediately cementing Cooke's viability as a crossover singer. Keen Records, however, had not been the original candidate to release Cooke's new secular record. Until November, Cooke had recorded for the white-owned r&b label Specialty Records, under the supervision of Art Rupe. Rupe was deeply ambivalent about the new direction his gospel star had decided to take – not only for fear of losing Cooke's gospel audience, but because, quite simply, "You Send Me" conformed to none of Rupe's expectations of what rhythm and blues should sound like. For Rupe, r&b was to be loud and frantic – "more like Little Richard and less like a mildly sanctified Frank Sinatra," as Brian Ward writes.[50] "You Send Me" contained hints of the singer's gospel origins, with its wordlessly melismatic vocal interjections, but otherwise betrayed few hallmarks of unmistakably African-American-derived musical styles. Its harmonic structure was more reminiscent of white Tin Pan Alley styles of the prewar period than contemporary rhythm and blues, and its refrain featured a chorus of white female singers lilting in a decidedly *non*-gospel vein. Moreover, the song was utterly undanceable – a gentle ballad that was miles removed from the raw aggression of label-mate Little Richard. Art Rupe could not envision an audience for such pop balladry on *either* side of the colour line, and freed Cooke from his contract with Specialty. The record was picked up by Keen, and within weeks had proven in grand style the falseness of Rupe's expectations for his black artists.

[49] See Ward, 189-191; Peter Guralnick, *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke* (New York: Little Brown, 2005).
[50] Ward, 190.

In one sense, the new black pop styles had liberated artists from conforming to straightjacketing notions of expected black musical performativity, and had helped to solidify a musical expression of black middle-class culture which turned out to have massive appeal for white and black listeners alike. The black pop stylings of Sam Cooke, and his forbears of the early doo-wop movement, had also uprooted mainstream American expectations of what it meant to *sound* black, by unveiling the extensive cross-cultural musical exchanges – always present, but so often ignored – that saw nominally black and white forms synthesized. Cooke's pop illustrated that white and black sounds need not be independent and exclusive modes of musical expression, but merely that these sounds had always been understood according to *expectations* of what were and were not appropriate styles for black and white performers. Black pop, finally, also served to reveal the extent to which black Americans had long been enthusiastic consumers of white musical performance, and how fruitful this cross-racial exchange had been.

At the same time, by the late 1950s black pop had become one of the few sites of intense crossover success for black artists wishing to reach white audiences. After several years of unprecedented crossover activity, in which racialized categories of Pop and Rhythm and Blues had been blurred to the point of meaninglessness, the record industry and its consumer markets returned to structures of musical organization that prized certain codified expectations of what could be considered palatable forms of musical performance. It was not that such pop tunes as Cooke's were in any way diluted expressions of African-American musicality, or that they were somehow less authentically *black* than the raw sounds of soul music or hard-edged rhythm and blues,

but rather that white mainstream tastes seemed to gravitate towards those sounds and performers which, according to the dictums of conventional wisdom, seemed visibly white-inflected or firmly middle-class. As was so often the case, reading music as white-inflected typically meant an *absence* of identifiably African or African-American musical tropes (e.g., blue notes, call-and-response vocals, lyrical innuendo); black pop artists succeeded, in a sense, because they managed to make racial markers largely inaudible, and thus laid partial claim to inclusion in the blissfully naïve invisibility of white American culture.

One strong impetus for this pendulum swing, back towards a coherent system of understanding music according to racial parameters, was the rise and fall of a new and totally unanticipated popular music: rock-'n'-roll. Rock-'n'-roll grew up alongside Cooke's gospel heyday, bringing the sounds of the nascent doo-wop genre into its fold and giving rise to a moment of intense cultural hybridity. The aggressively racist backlash against this new form of music served to undo much of the cross-racial challenges to boundaries of seemingly white and black musics; the rock-'n'-roll era ended with a resurgence of the bland, white and thoroughly safe style of pop singer against which *any* overly-black musical expressivity was seen, if not as a threat, then at least belonging back in the Rhythm and Blues category, which once again appeared to spell non-white or non-middle-class. Black singers would always thereafter be welcome on the *Billboard* Pop charts – but more often than not, they had to be a certain type of black.

Backlash: Race, Youth and the Fight Against Rock-'n'-Roll

By 1957, the year of Sam Cooke's decision to leave the gospel community, nearly a third of all records appearing on *Billboard*'s Pop charts were by black artists, while white musicians – mostly first-wave rock-'n'-rollers – accounted for an equal share of the Rhythm and Blues hits.[51] Well over half of the records to reach the top ten Pop singles chart that year were rock-'n'-roll tunes or some variation on the rock-'n'-roll aesthetic, and the large majority were produced and distributed by independent companies, as opposed to the staunchly conservative major labels that had dominated the Pop market for decades.[52] The sheer number of crossover hits that year was without precedent in the history of the American recording industry, and they posed a profound threat to the prevailing wisdom according to which the industry had evolved at its deliberate pace. Rock-'n'-roll, as sociologist Peter Wicke wrote, "caused a tremor in the foundations of the music business which ultimately threatened to make its carefully calculated sales categories…completely absurd."[53] Black and white artists had leapt, *en masse*, over the boundaries of seemingly fixed musico-racial forms, with a music that was insistently hybridized; no longer could mainstream American society subscribe to the fiction that Pop, Country, and Rhythm & Blues existed in tripartite solitude.

The term itself, "rock-'n'-roll," had begun as a shorthand for a handful of regionally-distinct but related styles: rockabilly, an uptempo Memphis-based hybrid of roughly equal parts country and rhythm and blues, played largely by young, white southerners (Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly); Chicago rhythm and blues, an electrified urban blues style promulgated by black migrants from the South (Muddy Waters, Howlin'

[51] Garafalo, "Off the Charts," 114.
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 35.

Wolf); New Orleans blues, a mixed bag encompassing singers as disparate as boogie-woogie pianist Fats Domino and frenetic black and white shouters like Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis, respectively; Northern Band Rock and Roll, a woefully unrevealing label for a style of fast-paced rhythm and blues played by white artists like Bill Haley, and heavily indebted to the jump blues of Louis Jordan; and finally, doo-wop, a term given *ex post facto* for the new secular vocal groups like The Orioles, who drew on black gospel and married it to "putatively white" recording arrangements.[54]

It was impossible to deny the multi-racial musical heritage from which these styles emerged, nor was it easy to ignore the popularity of rock-'n'-roll after its earliest hits had registered in 1954. But rock-'n'-roll's audience did not appear to abide by any of the structures that the music industry had set in place to guide the tastes of its consumer base; not only did the music defy racial typing, but it had also drawn working-class musicians and musical expression into the Pop marketplace, long considered an exclusively middle-class forum for musical consumption. Rock-'n'-roll's audience cut across the invisible racialized and classed divisions of any Pop/Country/R&B organizational framework. It was a generational divide, more than anything, which separated the music's consumers from the befuddled record executives and their media outlets.

In the early 1950s, American adolescents were enjoying the trickle-down effects of a burgeoning postwar economy, with its much-touted emphasis on consumption and leisure, and had emerged as a fundamentally important consumer demographic in the cultural marketplace. A growing self-awareness of their purchasing power was paralleled by an increasing disaffection among many teens for the conservative values of the

[54] See Gillett, 29-44; Joyner, 190-197.

Eisenhower-era American ideal. For the first time, teenagers could define the meanings and practices of their leisure time, which was invariably contrasted to the drab realities of school life and the parental authority of the domestic space. The relatively new concept of the teenager's private space – the bedroom – provided American teens a sphere in which to follow their own conceptions of leisure free of the influence of the parent culture (in both senses of the term); inexpensive hi-fi sets and record players freed them from the need to listen to music on communal living-room sound systems and gave them a means of engaging privately with their own preferred musical products. Meanwhile, a growth in regionally-specific radio programming gave youth access to new and often idiosyncratic forms of popular music not heard on national broadcasts like *Your Hit Parade*. Rock-'n'-roll inserted itself into this generational struggle as a symbol of this "alternative world" of adolescent leisure, defined against the expected behavioural norms handed to teens by the parent culture, and was itself shaped in turn by the demands, desires and concerns of its teen listeners.[55]

Some of the earliest rock-'n'-roll hits served to crystallize the nascent genre as a musical manifestation of generational struggle. Chuck Berry, a St. Louis-born guitarist who melded rockabilly with the Chicago electric blues, demonstrated an uncanny knack for capturing the conceits and concerns of American teens in clever blues-based tunes with titles like "School Days" and "Sweet Little Sixteen." Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, a group of black teen doo-wop singers, provided a wholesomely defiant adolescent rallying cry with "I'm Not a Juvenile Delinquent." Most significant of all, however, was a tune by Bill Haley & His Comets called "Rock Around the Clock," one of the earliest identifiably rock-'n'-roll hits, as well as perhaps the strongest declaration

[55] Wicke, 28-47.

of teen preference for leisure at the expense of anything else. (In Haley's jubilant lyric, the singer and his mates occupy an idyllic space where the passing of time cannot interrupt the pursuit of fun – literally, rocking "around the clock.") "Rock Around the Clock" would become a smash hit after being used as the theme song of the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle*, a landmark commentary on adolescent delinquency in America's inner-city public schools.

Rock-'n'-roll's perceived threat to parental authority, latent or overt, was enough to make many Americans suspicious of the often raucous and untamed musicality of its performers, but it was another kind of rock-'n'-roll tune that would finally cement the genre's reputation as a danger to American morality. Never before had the Pop charts been infiltrated by so many overtly sexual songs, ranging from sly innuendo (e.g., Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire") to outright suggestions of intercourse (e.g, The Drifters' "Sixty Minute Man" – a title, it is hoped, that begs no further explanation of its erotic agenda.) Citing some of the most egregious examples in a 1954 critique of the new style of youth music, *Variety* coined and promoted the phrase "leer-ics" to describe the degradation of rock-'n'-roll's lyrical expressivity.[56] Songs like Hank Ballard and the Midnighters' "Work With Me Annie" (which did *not* refer to the breadwinning, nine-to-five kind of work) were banned from radio stations across America for their blatantly sexual content, along with less-explicable casualties like the Everly Brothers' "Wake Up Little Susie" – in truth, as innocuous a song as could be imagined.[57]

The popular press was quick to latch onto the perceptions of many Americans who viewed rock-'n'-roll as an affront to respectable modes of adolescent behaviour, and

[56] Quoted in Garofalo, "Off the Charts," 116.
[57] *Ibid.*

who were increasingly suspicious of inherently rebellious suggestions in the music and the sexualized performativity of both its creators and consumers. "Rock 'n' roll evokes a physical response from even its most reluctant listeners," observed a writer for *Time* in June 1956, echoing a familiar refrain of the period that placed rock-'n'-roll's perceived threat squarely within the realm of its physical demands on the body.[58] Psychologists and psychiatrists were widely quoted in their seemingly scientific observations that rock-'n'-roll music – with its insistent, repetitive rhythms – virtually hypnotized its listeners, compelling them to dance and sometimes even to foment violent disorder during public performances. One psychiatrist infamously called the music a "communicable disease" that took hold of its listener, willingly or not, and forced him into a posture of juvenile delinquency. *Time* reported that an unspecified group of psychologists saw, in the public consumption of live rock-'n'-roll music, a "passing resemblance to Hitler mass meetings."[59]

The subtext beneath almost all of these popular media accounts was one of racially-motivated fear for the increasingly visible sexuality that marked rock-'n'-roll in contrast to other past and contemporary styles of Pop music. Rock-'n'-roll may have been a cultural hybrid of black and white forms, presented by black and white entertainers (among others), but few of its opponents were willing to forget that the sexuality of the music had hitherto always been "neatly contained 'across the tracks'," as Reebee Garafalo puts it – in the "Race" and "Rhythm and Blues" music of black America,

[58] "Yeh-Heh-Heh-Hes, Baby," *Time*, June 18, 1956, 54.
[59] "Rock-and-Roll Called Communicable Disease," *New York Times*, March 28, 1956, 33. For this source, as well as the *Time* article cited above, I am indebted to David Brackett, who includes both articles in his indispensable collection of primary sources, *The Rock, Pop, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

where it had not posed a threat to white middle-class youth.[60] Though it was not often spelled out in such terms, commentaries in the mainstream media often employed language that tied the controversial new youth music to primitivist notions of African-American sexuality and musicality. Dr. Francis Braceland, the diagnostician of the "communicable disease," was quoted in *The New York Times* as characterizing the style as "cannibalistic and tribalistic." *Time* described the theaters wherein rock-'n'-roll was presented as wild "jungle bird houses" of deafening cacophony and unbearably amplified rhythmic pounding.[61] In the postwar period, as the American Civil Rights movement began to gain traction, it obviously would not do for such mainstream media outlets to clarify the undertones of these, and similar, observations: namely, that rock-'n'-roll stood to confirm white America's worst fears of some mythical Africanized hyper-sexuality.

Other commentators, less ambiguous in their condemnations of rock-'n'-roll, were only too willing to supply this subtext in grossly explicit terms. Probably the most vocal of rock-'n'-roll's opponents (and certainly the most often cited) was the head of an organization called the North Alabama White Citizens Council, a vociferous group of segregationists working to combat the perceived threat of southern integration. Asa Carter and his council saw themselves as bastions of the "separate but equal" doctrine of American race relations, which had met its most serious challenge in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision handed down by the Supreme Court in 1954, declaring the unconstitutionality of segregated public schools. Rock-'n'-roll, as a symbolic twin to the newly-integrated schools of America, appeared to herald the death of an American youth culture that could be understood (by Carter and his associates, anyway) as

[60] Garofalo, "Off the Charts," 115.
[61] "Yeh-Heh-Heh-Hes…," *Time*; "Communicable Disease," *The New York Times*.

unambiguously white.[62] Its musical bastardry, a jumble of seemingly black and white influences, seemed all too suggestive of the kind of miscegenation Carter and his White Citizens were fighting to stamp out. Thus, decrying its "degenerate, animalistic beats and rhythms," Carter launched an attack against rock-'n'-roll that was nothing short of hysterical in its racial paranoia:

> The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples] uses this type of music as a means of pulling the white man down to the level of the Negro… This savage and primitive type of music which comes straight from Africa brings out the base things in man… Instead of opposing it in an attempt to raise the morals of the Negro…the NAACP encouraged it slowly for the purpose of undermining the morals of white people.[63]

Carter's wild suspicions of an NAACP conspiracy were utterly unfounded, of course, and his rhetoric served to betray just how ignorant the segregationist was of the complex cultural forces that had given rise to rock-'n'-roll in the first place – or, at least, how little he cared to discuss them. What his comments did confirm, however, was to what fierce extent white Americans could view the music as an unwanted mongrelization of an apparently pure white culture.

From 1954 to 1957, rock-'n'-roll had seemed, to its proponents, to propose a nearly post-racial vision of American musical culture (at least from the perspective of genre-typing), wherein historically rigid racialized categories ("Pop," "Rhythm and Blues," "Country") were contested by a music that was, in name anyway, racially-aspecific and ultimately among the most inclusive forms of American music seen to that

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[62] Asa Carter's grotesque denouncements of rock-'n'-roll – and his Council's disturbing vigilante policing of musical morality in the American South – find their way into many histories of rock-'n'-roll, particularly where race is concerned. See Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 99-104; Suzanne Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 150-151; Garofalo, "Off the Charts," 116.

[63] Asa Carter, quoted in Rob Roy, "Bias Against 'Rock 'n' Roll' Latest Bombshell in Dixie," *Chicago Defender*, April 7, 1956, p. 14.

point. That dream was quickly and harshly dispelled by the practical realities of the backlash that soon greeted rock-'n'-roll's ascendancy, which turned the vehement rhetoric of the Asa Carters and the Dr. Bracemans into realizable consequences. The music, it was clear, posed a threat to segregationists for its miscegenated agenda; to parents and educators for its unmistakable suggestions of youth rebellion and open sexuality; and to major record conglomerates and music publishers, for its control by independent labels. It was this last group – the major players in the American recording industry – which, with the help of the U. S. government, largely initiated the unseemly response to rock-'n'-roll's sudden popularity, in a desperate (though ultimately successful) attempt to redirect the increasingly anarchic trajectory of the popular music industry.

One of the most damning of the strategies employed to curb the threat of independently-produced rock-'n'-roll came in the form of the infamous "payola hearings" of 1959-1960. Payola, "the practise of offering…personal inducements [by record companies] in return for radio play," had been a deeply-ingrained and largely unquestioned component of the recording industry for decades, and to critical observers the hearings seemed baseless and obviously motivated by self-interest.[64] All told, the hearings concluded that levels of payola in the rock-'n'-roll era were substantially lower than they had been in the prewar period; this, however, did not stop the investigative hearings from devolving into the kind of McCarthy-style witchhunts of a few years prior, as some of the most successful American DJs were pressured to testify against their colleagues in hearings that were beginning to look ever more like kangaroo-courts.

One casualty of the payola scandal was a popular DJ named Alan Freed, one of the earliest and most vocal champions of rock-'n'-roll, who had been instrumental in the

[64] Garafalo, "Off the Charts," 117.

mid-1950s in bringing black rhythm and blues to white American listeners. Freed famously refused to play whitened cover versions of black rhythm and blues and rock-'n'-roll tunes; to the major American labels, therefore, he was a *de facto* supporter of independent record labels against the efforts of the majors to capture a share of the rock-'n'-roll market.[65] Freed was fired from New York's WABC record station in 1959 in a payola-related controversy; three years later he was charged with two counts of accepting bribes, and died in 1965 of diseases brought on by alcoholism, never having resuscitated his scandalized career.[66]

Meanwhile, the hysteria over the controversial new genre had begun to claim some of rock-'n'-roll's biggest names as targets – while others inflicted scandal upon themselves – culminating in a disheartening span of some years which saw the decline of rock-'n'-roll's popularity symbolically reflected in the commercial, or even literal, deaths of some of its first stars. In March 1959 Chuck Berry was found guilty of violating Missouri's Mann Act, for transporting an underage girl across state lines, in a trial so racially-charged and grossly biased that it was later nullified, on account of the judge's "inten[t] to disparage the defendant by repeated questions about race," as noted by an appellate court.[67] Later that year, four members of black vocal group The Platters were arrested in a Cincinatti hotel room and charged with "aiding and abetting prostitution, lewdness and assignation" – though their true crime seems to have been being discovered entertaining three white women. The Platters were acquitted of the charges, though not before their actions were decried (by the trial judge, no less) as "a socially abhorrent,

[65] Joyner, 202.
[66] Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Da Capo, 1988, 1993), 100-101.
[67] Quoted in Ward, 111.

tawdry indulgence in lust."[68] The barely concealed racism of such highly-public trials, refracting white America's long-standing fears of black male sexuality, had a naturally poisonous impact on rock-'n'-roll's already-besmirched public standing.

A series of incidental or ill-timed events worked to displace some of the other most popular performers over this same period. In early 1958, Elvis Aaron Presley was drafted into the U. S. Army, at the height of his popular success, where he would serve until 1960. That same month, Jerry Lee Lewis married for the third time, to his 14-year-old cousin Myra; when the marriage was publicly unearthed several months later, Lewis' career would enter a tailspin from which the singer would never fully recover. Little Richard, the untamed showman who had worked to establish rock-'n'-roll as a site of eroticized extroversion, left rock-'n'-roll in 1957 to return to his roots in the church, working as a minister. Finally, in February 1959, a plane crash in Iowa would carry off rockabilly pioneer Buddy Holly, and seventeen-year-old Mexican-American guitarist Ritchie Valens, whose 1958 Latin-influenced rock-'n'-roll hit "La Bamba" was the first Spanish-language record to reach the top of *Billboard*'s Pop chart.[69]

Such anecdotes – sad, sordid, or otherwise – are well-known and oft-repeated by even casual fans of mid-century American popular music, but they are nonetheless crucial for understanding the vacuum left behind by these early practitioners of rock-'n'-roll as they headed towards Army tours, prison terms, vulgar infamy, spiritual calling, premature death or grotesque public denigration. There are heated and ongoing debates regarding some of the early white rock-'n'-rollers, like Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, over the exact conditions of what we might call *cultural theft* or appropriation of racial culture,

[68] *Ibid*.
[69] A neat summary of rock-'n'-roll's "death" is found in Gary Donaldson, *The making of modern America: the nation from 1945 to the present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 71-72.

and how this appropriation of (specifically) African-American musics impacted on these artists' constantly marginalized black counterparts. Much less debated, and understandably so, is the impact of those artists who came afterwards, to fill the vacuum left behind by the first rock-'n'-roll stars: the Pat Boones, the Fabians, and the Frankie Avalons – white pop idols who could not claim even passing familiarity with the roots of the rhythm and blues music they were enjoined to cover, to make white, and to repackage in ersatz form for mainstream American tastes.

This "whitening" of rock-'n'-roll music proved the *coup de grace* of the record industry's battle against the independently-produced, racially-hybridized music that shook America in 1954. It would take a second wave of black pop performers, like the many teen "girl groups" of the urban north, to revitalize rock-'n'-roll in the early 1960s. By mid-decade, however, ideological fault lines had emerged that would posit "rock" music and "soul" music as two poles of musical authenticity (one white – the other black), with "pop" music now occupying a watered-down middle space of seemingly inauthentic expressivity. Our chapter closes with an examination of this developing "rock" ideology, which would work to reinvigorate racialized expectations of musical performance in the 1960s, counter to the intentions of many of its subscribers

Into the 1960s: The Rise of the Rockist Narrative

The next wave of rock-'n'-roll records and artists, following the exploitative pap of singers like Pat Boone, began to emerge as early as 1960, on the success of the new "girl group" sounds promoted by acts like The Shirelles and The Crystals, and by impresarios like producer Phil Spector, whose pioneering studio techniques laid the foundation for the

sound of early 1960s rock-'n'-roll. Trios and quartets of mostly teenaged black girls from urban centers in the north, the girl groups reclaimed the sounds of rock-'n'-roll and demonstrated its continued commercial viability on the Pop and Rhythm and Blues charts throughout the early 1960s. The girl group sound typically maintained the foregrounded beat of the original rock-'n'-roll aesthetic, wedding these danceable rhythms to the harmonic structures of black pop and employing lyrical tropes of definitely adolescent themes – boy/girl crushes, early sexual experiences, high school melodrama – in palatably safe expressions of teenhood that appealed to young listeners across racial lines.[70]

The significance of the girl group period, however, has been woefully under-recognized by scholars of popular music largely thanks to what came next: the rise of "rock music" as a distinct musical discourse, that for decades afterwards would pit rock music (no longer "rock-'n'-roll," by the mid-1960s) against pop music in a grossly misguided war over the social significance of popular music forms. Ironically, one of the groups at the center of this developing discourse – The Beatles – were hugely influenced by the early American girl group records finding their way to the radio stations and record shops of Liverpool, England.[71] By 1964 The Beatles were the most popular group in America and their native Britain, and their success opened the floodgates for a raft of British rock-'n'-roll groups that were invariably indebted to sounds of postwar black American musics (e.g., The Rolling Stones, The Dave Clark Five, The Who). Meanwhile,

[70] The best and most comprehensive history of the girl group era can be found in Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
[71] Not only is the influence of the girl group aesthetic evident in the songcraft of Lennon and McCartney, but the group in fact recorded a number of American girl groups hits over the course of their first half-dozen LPs: The Shirelles' "Baby It's You," the Phil Spector-penned "To Know Him is to Love Him," and the wonderfully obscure Donays tune, "Devil in His Heart," sung by future Motown prospect Yvonne Allen, to name just a few.

white artists in America like Bob Dylan had begun to emerge as torch-bearers for the traditions of American folk (nominally, white) and acoustic blues music (black), and had begun to ingratiate themselves into the evermore heated Civil Rights struggle with songs of protest that were capturing the ears of especially young, white college students across the country. By mid-decade, transnational musical exchanges between Britain and America had birthed a repeating cycle of musical experimentation, with the end result of artists like Dylan joining the ranks of rock, and The Beatles bringing Dylan's increasingly cerebral poetry into the rock music aesthetic.[72]

Rock music became, and has largely remained, the epicenter of a discourse around notions of *authenticity* in popular musical expression. Rock as an apparently distinct genre authenticated its expression by defining itself in contrast to the commercialism of pop music, driving a misguided but enduring wedge between these two spheres of cultural production. As some of the foremost influences on rock musics of the 1960s, African-American blues and r&b appeared to lend rock musicians a kind of automatic authenticity – "cultural capital," as Michael Coyle suggests, echoing the terminology of Pierre Bordieu.[73] By the mid-1960s, few young black American artists were still trading in the kind of blues-based styles adopted by white rockers, having largely moved towards the new sounds of soul music and funk, or to styles of black pop.

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[72] There is a vast catalogue of scholarship and popular history addressing the mutual influence of The Beatles and Dylan, and its impact on the course of American pop music throughout the remainder of the 1960s. For several illuminating discussions, see Carys Wyn Jones, *The Rock Canon: Canonical Values in the Reception of Rock Music* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 56; Devin McKinney, *Magic Circles: The Beatles in Dream and History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 104-108. In popular biography, the subject is treated in Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 155-156, 166-167. For a contemporary perspective that places The Beatles, in 1966, at the epicenter of a nascent "rock" discourse, see Richard Goldstein, "Pop Eye: On 'Revolver,'" *Village Voice*, August 25, 1966, 23, 25.

[73] Michael Coyle, "Hijacked Hits and Antic Authenticity: Cover Songs, Race, and Postwar Marketing," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, eds. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 147.

Thus, Coyle argues, rock's embrace of the blues and r&b did not present the same threats to black artists' commercial viability that had marked the career of singers like Pat Boone, whose whitened rock-'n'-roll hits typically stood in direct commercial competition to the still-current (black) original recordings. The early rock groups, instead, "treat[ed] R&B as an investment – as 'cultural capital'," and "valorized 'blackness' by positing it as the embodiment of difference from or resistance to the mainstream."[74] Standing outside of the mainstream was integral to rock's self-perception as a distinctly non-commercial enterprise, in contrast to pop music, and the earthy earnestness of black blues styles seemed to offer a model of credibly authentic self-expression. In a sense, white rockers of the 1960s had picked up on styles largely abandoned by younger black musicians to legitimate rock's agenda as a more open and honest milieu, free of the commercial trappings that characterized the pop music industry.

The resultant mythology that this self-presentation inculcated has plagued popular music studies ever since. The legacy that rock left behind – a set of informal rules dictating the terms and limits of authenticity in popular music – was, for musicologist Simon Frith, "a legacy of good music but bad theory." Writes Frith:

> Rock was presented to its audience as something to work on and commit oneself to…The political significance of this was not that rock was coopted, but that the terms of its cooptation were concealed. Pop commercialism was so blatant that pop fans could never forget their consumer status; rock fans, by contrast, could treat record-buying as an act of solidarity… The suggestion that rock somehow went beyond pop, did things it couldn't do, concealed the way in which rock too was really a music of transitory private pleasures.[75]

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[74] Coyle, 147.
[75] Simon Frith, "Rock and the Politics of Memory," in *The 60s Without Apology*, eds. Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 62, 66, 68.

Rock music engendered a *community*, as opposed to an audience, by presenting the terms of its production and consumption as located within culture, in opposition to commodity; in doing so, it obscured the "contradictions of the culture of the commodity."[76] Decades of cultural theory have since betrayed the insupportability of these assumptions, and yet the rockist narrative has managed to maintain its hold over what Frith calls "the politics of memory" in 1960s pop music.

These politics of memory have informed our historical understandings not only of rock music, but also those forms that remained peripheral to the rock mythology, such as African-American soul music of the same period. While a convincing case could be made for the inclusion of soul *within* the sphere of rock (as both genre and symbolic totem), soul is generally reflected on as the opposite pole of 1960s authentic musical expression – a black analogue, perhaps, to the social significance of rock music. The problem is not only one of limning rock music as predominantly white (though this is part of it), but also that the ways in which these two forms are remembered reflects the endurance of the rockist mythology in suspiciously racialized, albeit subconscious, terms. John Sheinbaum's study of rock historiography has identified an intriguingly consistent rhetoric, employed by writers and documentarians, in presenting the world of 1960s rock music – one that insists on value judgments for its white subjects, while carefully eluding similar judgments of black soul singers of the 1960s. As Sheinbaum points out, white artists like The Beatles and Bob Dylan are invariably portrayed as iconoclasts of the Romantic-genius variety, purveyors of effortlessly natural *art* "not fully comprehensible to the public" but rarely bothered by it. The vast majority of black musicians, like soul singers Aretha Franklin and Otis Redding, are painted in the more earthy terms of

[76] *Ibid*, 63.

"craftspeople," ever striving for acceptance by white audiences and working hard to achieve it.[77]

One hotbed of such apparent "craftsmanship" was an upstart independent company whose artists fit comfortably into neither category – who were neither rock nor soul, but decidedly pop. Motown Records, founded in 1959 by a black Detroiter named Berry Gordy Jr., would come to define the sound of black pop in the early 1960s, in the process becoming the most successful black-owned recording label in American history. Motown has been scrutinized for decades against its practices of apparently routinized, "assembly-line" production methods, wherein hit songs were rolled out of the company's basement recording studio much like the shiny new Cadillacs coming from the nearby auto plants of inner-city Detroit.[78] As the archetypal craftspeople, Motown's producers and performers would find no place within the romanticism of the rock mythology, which rejected the mediated nature of such so-called commercial musics; by the same token, as cultivators of an aggressively integrated audience, Motown seemed the antithesis of the notions promoted by some black cultural nationalists of the mid-1960s, like prominent writer and cultural critic Amiri Baraka, who championed soul, jazz and funk musics as the sole totems of authentically black American popular music culture.

By the mid-1960s, the phenomenally successful Motown was caught amidst once-again changing expectations of black and white musical expressivity: this time propelled by a growing adherence to rockist discourse and its implicit structuring of musical and

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[77] John Sheinbaum, "'Think About What You're Trying to Do To Me': Rock Historiography and the Construction of a Race-Based Dialectic," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture,* eds. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 110-115.

[78] Reference to Motown's "assembly-line" process, as a convenient dismissive, is addressed by Sheinbaum, 116. There are, at the same time, few histories of Motown that do not weigh in on some aspect of this "stereotypical story," in Sheinbaum's phrase.

racial hierarchies, and by emergent forms of Black Power rhetoric that mounted a challenge to long-held goals of integration and assimilation. Twenty years on from the end of the Second World War, the recording industry and American society as a whole was still grappling with the problem of genre structures that could logically order racio-cultural expression in understandable ways. How Motown negotiated its representations of racialized musicality, and how it found these images challenged from several fronts by the mid-'60s, will be the focus of the next chapter, through an examination of just one of Motown's star performers – Marvin Gaye.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of American forms of popular music in the postwar period which, though narrow in its focus, nonetheless illustrates how prevailing ideas of genre informed – and by turns were influenced by – representations of racial identity, both aural and visual. This analysis suggests how the hybridized culture of American musics has historically been refused by the construction of normative models for describing and categorizing musics according to racial markers. In mapping out the boundaries of these historical models, I have attempted to unveil the ways in which *white* and *black* sounds have been historically constructed and understood in American music, and how challenges to this construction could serve to unseat the unspoken conditions of *whiteness* against which other categories of racial typing have always been defined. At the same time, and in accordance with the grossly unequal power structure of the American recording industry, this chapter has demonstrated how many expressions of blackness outside of the normative expectations of African-American culture (i.e., black

pop tunes) have been embraced by mainstream consumers as suggestive of black assimilation into white culture, without a corresponding critique of that most invisible of cultures.

The picture of genre that emerges out of a study of the postwar period seems to suggest a series of pendulum swings, wherein normative categories of typing become first contested by shifts in musical production and consumption, and then reinscribed in subtly different form as the recording industry settles back into predictable models of organization. The challenge to racialized boundaries of Pop, Rhythm and Blues, and Country – beginning in the late 1940s and culminating in the rise of rock-'n'-roll – served to dismantle the tripartite structure of musical consumption according to clear expectations of racialized performance; thereafter, any and all of these categories could accommodate any kind of performer, regardless of race or class. However, just as these three market streams become subject to interpenetration, American consumers helped to suggest a set of new limitations on acceptable modes of performances: first, by adopting rock-'n'-roll in safe white packages; and second, by implicitly cultivating those black singers and performers who could remain below the "threshold level of recognizable 'blackness'" – black pop stars like Sam Cooke, and somewhat later, the girl groups and Motown's artists.

This apparent return to predictable normalcy faced its own challenge with the rise of the rockist narrative from the mid-1960s onward, which was itself unspokenly white and which cast judgment on the degradation of the pop form employed by many commercially successful black and white performers. The rockist adherents, together with proponents of black cultural nationalism, served to perpetuate the schism between

black pop performers and the seemingly authentic practitioners of rock (read: white) and soul (black), by pointing to the social significance of rock and soul music and contrasting it to the capitalist aims of the pop music marketplace. The lasting impact of the rockist narrative was to perpetuate invisible boundaries that attempted to contain black artists within the narrow confines of the "pop" or "soul" style, much as the *Billboard* charts of the 1940s and '50s traced performative expectations with their tags of Race and Rhythm and Blues musics. Even soul music, however, was implicitly subjugated to rock by the rhetoric of the rock culture – with its iconoclastic pioneers – and its legacy was shaped by being defined against these iconoclasts; soul was not the product of romantic genius but of its artists' hard work and diligence in reaching out to white audiences.

It is not just that such simplistic perspectives of genre were inherently misdirected in the first place, or that they were the product of a disproportionately powerful white authoritative voice, but that such narratives *continue* to guide our study of popular music and the role that race plays within the meanings of American music. These narratives require examination and critique to complicate our visions of American musical heritage, and to appreciate how significant certain styles have been to the story of postwar musics even while they faced criticism from many sides at once. To this end, in the next two chapters I unpack case studies from two radically disconnected musical cultures – Motown's black pop and Detroit rock – to understand how these various narratives were occupied, contested, elaborated on, and complicated by racialized public performance. My goal is to demonstrate not only the problematic racialized and gendered assumptions of a rockist discourse, but to make room for a fuller explanation of those cultures, like

black pop, that remain central to our musical memory of the period, but not to our scholarly analytical efforts at exploring race and genre in the postwar era.

Chapter Three

Black Sinatra at the Copacabana:
Marvin Gaye, Motown Records, and the Performance of Black Pop

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> Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure. Comments such as, "Funny, you don't look black," betray an underlying image of what black should be. We expect people to act out their racial identities; indeed we become disoriented when we don't… The whole gamut of racial stereotypes – that "white men can't jump," that Asians can't dance, etc., etc. – all testify to the way a racialized social structure shapes racial experience and conditions meaning.
>
> – Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*[1]

> My dream was to become Frank Sinatra… He grew into a fabulous jazz singer and I used to fantasize about having a lifestyle like his – carrying on in Hollywood and becoming a movie star… He was the king I longed to be.
>
> – Marvin Gaye[2]

Resuscitating the "Prince of Motown": Marvin Gaye and Selective Memory

If the popular narrative is any indication – in popular biography, documentary film, and the innumerable canonizing "best-of" lists by cultural arbiters like *Rolling Stone* and *Pitchfork* magazines – we don't tend to think of Marvin Gaye as a performer of black pop, though indeed he was, for almost a decade before developing into a more overtly soul-inflected singer in the late 1960s. Nearly three decades of memorializing and mythologizing the great American singer since his slaying on April 1, 1984 have served to inculcate a more-or-less standard narrative of Gaye's life – one which privileges the

[1] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59.
[2] Quoted in David Ritz, *Divided Soul: The Life of Marvin Gaye* (New York: Da Capo, 1985, 1991), 29.

predictable milestones of a quarter-century in the music business, while persistently downplaying those elements of Gaye's story that do not seem to fit neatly into this narrative. The prevailing mythology is as irresistible as it is intractable: Gaye, the R&B-shouter-*cum*-social-crusader, whose landmark 1971 concept album, *What's Going On*, helped bring American soul music out of the 1960s; Gaye, the bearded sexual-spiritual visionary whose newfound eroticism in the 1970s influenced a new generation of black soul singers; Gaye, the "divided soul," whose personal demons ultimately led to his unraveling in dark years of depression and legal trouble, culminating in his brutal killing at the hands of his constantly disapproving father.

It is a narrative that makes for fascinating popular biography, and one that has gone largely unchallenged by critics of Gaye's work. In truth, it is a story that was already embryonic at the time of Gaye's death. On 2 April 1984, obituaries by prominent critics in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* carried nearly-identical details of Gaye's life, heavily weighted towards the singer's pioneering midlife work while mostly dismissive of what the *Post* called his early "straightforward R&B."[3] And it is a story that has survived intact, promoted through a spate of popular biographies of varying quality, as well as documentary films such as PBS' *American Masters* entry on Gaye, unsurprisingly titled "What's Going On" and primarily focused on the singer's post-1960s career.[4]

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[3] Robert Palmer, "Marvin Gaye is Shot and Killed," *New York Times*, April 2, 1984, Obituary, Late City Final Edition; Richard Harrington, "APPRECIATION: The Fallen Prince Marvin Gaye & His Songs Full of Soul," *The Washington Post*, April 2, 1984.

[4] See Ritz; Sharon Davis, *Marvin Gaye: I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 1991); Steve Turner, *Trouble Man: The Life and Death of Marvin Gaye* (New York: Ecco Press, 2000); *American Masters: Marvin Gaye: What's Going On*, Dir: Samuel D. Pollard. PBS Television, 2008.

Such accounts are no less true for their selectivity, yet they tend to obscure the origins of Gaye's towering musical mythology. In championing the primacy of his mature soul-grounded works, these narratives have relegated much of Gaye's early career as a black pop performer to a mere footnote of his own biography, practically if not literally. In some sense these distortions are understandable; few of Gaye's early works could reasonably be considered major artistic triumphs on the level of *What's Going On*, or even his well-remembered 1968 single, "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" (possibly the first example of what came to be called "psychedelic soul.") And yet to get a sense of just how skewed the standard narrative can be, we need only consider that, of Gaye's recorded output to 1965, most of the singer's early records were far removed from the sounds of R&B – "straightforward," or otherwise. In telescoping his life into a handful of personal and professional highs and lows, Gaye's chroniclers had written many of his earliest artistic efforts out of existence; ironically enough, so too had his longtime record label, Motown Records, which had long since let his early LPs fall out of print (they would not be made widely available again until Motown's back-catalogue reissue efforts in the 1990s.)

Extant scholarship, much of it superb, likewise tends to focus on Gaye's tenure as a *soul* singer rather than as a black pop star. Mark Anthony Neal's study of popular music in black public culture, *What the Music Said*, addresses three of Gaye's most significant post-1960s productions to connect the singer's turn towards socially-conscious black musical expressiveness with broader developments in post-Black Power social movements. Neal finds in these records (including *What's Going On*, "the seminal black protest recording") a refraction of a specific historical moment in American culture,

"when the black protest movement and the communities of resistance within it were being altered by forces both internal and external to the African-American experience."[5] But what to say about an earlier historical moment, when the black protest movement was still largely guided by end-goals of racial integration (and frequently cultural assimilation), and before soul music and the hard-edged sounds of funk established a distinctly *black* forum for the representation and mediation, in the cultural sphere, of the political and social issues facing African Americans in the age of Black Power and Black Pride? In other words, can we look to black pop to find a similar window into the ways in which early 1960s popular musics negotiated the unique contextual concerns of their audiences?

As it happens, the early career of Marvin Gaye provides a uniquely useful window into the historical development of the black pop movement, and the racialized meanings that the style held for an America still struggling to realize the integrationist agenda of the civil rights movement. Until his baptism into soul music in the late 1960s, Gaye's singing career was constantly engaged with the history of the black pop aesthetic in ways that few other artists could claim. His first vocal groups, formed in his native Washington D.C. in the mid-1950s while he was in high school, traded in the sounds of doo-wop – among the earliest sites of a recognizable "black pop" sound; his first professional gig as a singer was with Harvey Fuqua's doo-wop group The Moonglows before both men headed to Detroit to sign on with Berry Gordy's fledgling Motown in 1960.[6] Motown, which would become the largest black-owned corporation in American history by 1964, embodied the pinnacle of the black pop movement, reaching out to a

[5] Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 63.
[6] Ritz, 47-50, 55.

huge and impressively integrated young audience with a production style that built on nearly two decades of black pop performance; as many commentators have argued, Motown was an ideal musical metaphor for the early civil rights movement, whose growth from the mid-1950s into the 1960s was paralleled by remarkable inroads made by black pop performers into the mainstream pop music marketplace (see "Crossing Over," Chapter 1).[7]

While Gaye's early stint at Motown saw the singer rack up an appreciable number of r&b hits, his musical predilections ran towards the more overtly *pop*: not just the black pop of doo-wop, but also white singers like Perry Como and especially Frank Sinatra, after whom he attempted to model his performance style. His high school friend and onetime musical collaborator Reese Palmer recalled that when Gaye first began singing in vocal groups, "he said he wanted to do pop, like Sinatra, and he never did change his mind."[8] On arriving at Motown, Gaye had had one overarching ambition: to become, in his words, "the black Sinatra" – an ideal that would remain his central focus until mid-decade. Gaye's wholesale embrace of white-produced musics was not at all unusual for the time (critic Arnold Shaw has pointed to a mushrooming crowd of "sepia Sinatras" in the early 1950s, who would later help to forge a black pop aesthetic), though it is part of a story often ignored in the prevailing narratives of race and music in America.[9] The

[7] For a brief analytical perspective on Motown's integrationist agenda, see Reebee Garofalo, "Popular Music and the Civil Rights Movement," in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music & Mass Movements*, ed. Reebee Garofalo (Cambridge: South End Press, 1992); for two of the most thorough explorations of the company's relationship to the civil rights movement and race politics in Detroit, see Suzanne Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

[8] Quoted in Ritz, 29.

[9] Shaw's phrase, used to describe the "smooth" black pop singers of the kind discussed in this chapter, is first introduced in Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Collier, 1978), 89-92.

negotiation of putatively white and black musical sounds is inextricable from the cultural politics of integration and the civil rights movement, and by extension the history of black pop music in America, which remains regrettably understudied. It was this negotiation that fed into the controversy surrounding the career of another of Gaye's musical idols, the black jazz-pop vocalist Nat "King" Cole, whose phenomenal crossover success in the 1940s and 1950s was accompanied by constant attacks from whites and blacks alike over the seemingly inappropriate image of a black singer trading in apparently "white" sounds. When Gaye recorded a tribute album to the late Cole in 1965, he was not just paying homage to a critically undervalued vocalist; he was providing a commentary on the history of black pop performance and Motown's indebtedness to those early artists, like Cole (and indeed Frank Sinatra as well), who refused to acknowledge the implicit bounding of white and black musical expressiveness.

This chapter is, in part, an attempt to prompt further dialogue regarding the racial and social meanings of black pop, and to restore this often-overlooked style to some level of significance within the standard narratives of race and music in postwar American popular music. In critiquing the early, typically under-recognized works of Marvin Gaye's long career, I have attempted to bring together several strains of argument which, while not by any means exhaustive, may help to suggest further inquiries into Gaye's (and Motown's) black pop offerings, as well as the genre more fully. The first section of the chapter, picking up on the arguments of the previous chapter, examines an important historiographic debate regarding the nature of "the Motown sound" and its apparently racialized underpinnings. Here I seek to complicate some standard critiques of Motown's pop as somehow "whitened" black musical expressivity, as well as to point to the

pervasive influence of an entrenched backwards projection, of a later black consciousness onto the sounds an images of an early 1960s period not yet informed by notions of Black Power and its associated expressions of racial identification. In the next section I grapple with one of the most popularly recognized elements of Motown's performative strategy – the cultivation of an image of upward mobility – to contextualize and critique arguments surrounding the conspicuous displays of black bourgeois identity found in the performances of artists like Marvin Gaye. The final section of the chapter provides a brief analysis of one of Gaye's recorded performances in order to illuminate the ways in which black pop performers like Gaye could avail themselves of less frequently acknowledged masculine performance strategies. I argue that Gaye's performance, within the context of the 1964 concert film *The T.A.M.I. Show* and the acts which shared this stage, hints at a diverse plurality of ways to *perform* black manhood in an early 1960s context – this, in spite of some deeply-entrenched expectations of what black performance historically looks like, and despite a heavy emphasis, even in recent literature, on more spectacular and *identifiably black* masculine performative images.

I wish to suggest, throughout these three main arguments, that the vision of black musicality frequently handed to us by popular culture and even, less overtly, through the selective offerings of academic scholarship, is a picture heavily weighted towards a certain kind of black performance: one that we can *unmistakably* read as black. We become uncomfortable in dealing with styles like black pop because they often work to confound and complicate our vision of what black culture should be; we call them "white," or we say that these artists pander to white expectations, without really considering whether black artists have the right and freedom to choose a certain kind of

musicality outside of traditionally limning boundaries of racialized sounds. Ultimately, the black pop aesthetic is inextricably rooted in the politics of its era: politics which, when poked and prodded, reveal more comprehensible motivations for the performance of such a distinctly unique style than merely some kind of white envy.

Between Black and White?: Reconsidering Motown's Black Pop

Black pop itself remains a slippery term, which seeks to describe not a given set of recordings so much as a cultural moment of intensified racial crossover in the pop music marketplace, beginning in earnest in the early 1950s, when both white and black artists found themselves reaching audiences long thought to be bounded by racial difference.[10] Bracketed by two major landmarks in postwar black musics – the supposedly unadulterated sounds of "pure" rhythm and blues of the late 1940s, and the ascendance of soul music from the mid-1960s onward – the black pop era has often come to be remembered (if at all) as a stopgap between these two poles of black musical authenticity, rather than an explicable historical moment in itself. Critics like Nelson George, decidedly more sympathetic to these earlier and later expressions of black musicality, explain away the significance of this moment of heightened crossover activity in less than satisfying dictums: that while black audiences may have consumed white musics on an unprecedented scale during this period, "their heads were in a different place," secretly and even unconsciously yearning for the more "authentically" black sounds of jazz and r&b.[11] In other words, the black pop era represented a keenly biracial musical moment

[10] It is worth noting here that such crossover successes did not work just one way; as Brian Ward notes, the period also saw a tremendous growth in the consumption of white pop musics among non-white listeners – again, an intriguingly understudied cultural exchange.
[11] Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (London: Omnibus, 1988), 67-68.

only because these consumers *tricked themselves* into enjoying products not meant for them; in this argument, then, black pop itself occupies some watery middle ground between black and white sounds. While George's works remain among the most sophisticated critiques of black musicality in American culture, his arguments regarding the appeal of a cross-racial black pop aesthetic seem more wishful thinking than impartial analysis; so what then do we make of the racial implications of the black pop era?

Broadly, black pop can refer to artists of wide stylistic disparity: the close vocal harmony of early 1950s doo-wop groups The Drifters and The Platters, the jazz-pop crooning of Nat "King" Cole, the gospel-inflected dance music of Sam Cooke, the rock-and-roll of the early 1960s "girl groups," and perhaps the most familiar strain of black pop, provided by Motown, which would serve as the last major player in the black pop era before most of its artists embraced the wider turn towards soul music in the mid-1960s. All of the major figures of the black pop era embraced a crossover ideal, consciously arranging and producing records that would appeal to audiences across colour lines; thus, in almost all black pop, recordings betrayed few overt lyrical expressions of black experience (in contrast, especially, to soul) in favour of the sort of universal sentiments found in contemporary "white pop" recordings. Gospel-derived vocal styles and blues-based song structures were typically avoided or restrained, and the recordings often featured musical elements coded "white" according to presumptions of the period – especially orchestral strings and choral accompaniment.[12] Between 1957 and 1964, arguably the heyday of the black pop phenomenon, records by black pop artists accounted for well over a quarter of the Top 10 Pop hits in *Billboard* magazine – records

[12] See the discussion of aural-racial black and white tropes in "Reading Genre in Postwar Music," Chapter 1.

that proved, with impressive consistency, not only that black-produced music could appeal to cross-racial audiences on a massive scale, but moreover that "black music" could not be contained within the parameters of gospel, blues, jazz or r&b.[13]

Given the commercial impact of black pop, it is thus surprising that so little attention has been given to the black pop era. While a voluminous literature continues to parse the significance of soul, jazz, r&b, blues, and (more recently) hip-hop, comparatively few studies have sought to unpack the evidence of the "important… expression of mass black consciousness" unique to the black pop era and its musical products, "a profoundly different consciousness" than that which gave rise to soul music, "linked to a particular historical moment."[14] To be sure, there exist a handful of excellent studies into the complexities of black pop's racial meanings, but on the whole the style has gone unfairly underrepresented in the existing literature – its absence marking a sort of embarrassed silence on the part of commentators reluctant to engage with a racialized genre that seems so obviously, if vaguely, "whitened" to some degree.[15] But what is meant by this charge, that black pop is in some essential way less authentically black than contemporary styles like soul music or rhythm and blues? Historically, there seems to have been curiously little interest in pinpointing the nature of this aural whiteness in black pop, a situation that is now fortunately beginning to change thanks to an increasing

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[13] Reebee Garofalo, "Off the Charts: Outrage and Exclusion in the Eruption of Rock and Roll," in *American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 114.

[14] Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 124.

[15] Black pop is given sophisticated treatment in works such as Brian Ward's comprehensive overview of postwar black musics, *Just My Soul Responding*, and Samuel Floyd's history of African-American musical development, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Jacqueline Warwick's study of female black pop, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2007), is one of the few works to address solely this style both critically and sympathetically.

emphasis on critical whiteness studies. Generally speaking, it seems that assigning a *white* influence to the products of black pop artists is the default conclusion for writers wrestling with a problem simply stated yet profoundly complicated in its suggestion: namely, that much of the black pop canon lacks the aural (and sometimes even visual) signifiers that we have come to expect from black musical expression.

Since black pop so often falls below what Jeffrey Melnick calls "a threshold level of identifiable 'blackness'," we assume that these levels of blackness are absent; but what if, looking closely to Melnick's phrasing, it is not the *level* of blackness which is absent, but instead our ability to *identify* it?[16] What if our expectations of black performativity account for only one, or several, forms of black musical expression among many countless permutations? Melnick, in his study of race in doo-wop performance, insists that we need a more nuanced theoretical apparatus for the reading of black-performed musics that appear at least partially whitened; following his suggestion, I have directed my critical inquiries towards understanding the possible racial meanings of black pop, without recourse to the tidy conclusion that these musics are the result of a bleaching process. Put another way, if all postwar American musics are the result of cultural hybridity (see "Reading Genre in the Postwar Period," Chapter 1), then what marks black pop as an anomaly in the canon of twentieth-century African-American musical styles? Why do we still find, as in works like *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, dismissive silences like: "The history of black American music since the 1950s rhythm and blues can be divided between two strands – soul… and funk"?[17]

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[16] Jeffrey Melnick, "'Story Untold': The Black Men and White Sounds of Doo-Wop," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 140.
[17] See *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), s.v. "James Brown," 86.

In the previous chapter I have suggested that the historical bounding of American popular musics as inherently black or white was largely a fiction that served, intentionally or not, to disguise the hybrid nature of American culture. It is surely a testament to the enduring legacy of that fiction that, for all that has been written about Motown Records, commentators seem uncertain (as a whole) as to how far "the Motown sound" can be attributed to either black or white influences. Michael Bane dismissed the company's products outright as "white music produced by blacks," whatever that was supposed to mean.[18] Deborah Anne Wong, on the other hand, citing the recollections of a young black Motown fan, considers the Motown sound "urban African American music," period.[19] But, continues Wong:

> Motown's place in the racialized imaginary of American popular music looks more complicated if one considers arguments by African American critics who suggest that Motown provided a model of assimilation for Americans – a means of making the Black body palatable for White/non-Black audiences even while clearly not quite, not-White.[20]

What precisely is the criticism roaming through this observation? Clearly, that Motown embodied a performative vision of the black body as "not quite, not-White," but in appearing "not quite" white (that is, *almost* white), neither was it quite *black* either. I will return to this intriguing argument later in this essay, in the section titled "A Minimum of Movement."

A retrospective advertisement from the company itself, appearing in magazines like *Vibe* in the mid-1990s, claimed that the company's 1960s black pop had "eradicated outmoded notions of 'black music' and 'white music'," that Motown had somehow

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[18] Michael Bane, *White Boy Singing the Blues* (London: Penguin, 1982), 170.
[19] Deborah Anne Wong, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 263.
[20] *Ibid*.

written race out of the equation entirely with a music that was *neither*.[21] Gerald Early, whose *One Nation Under a Groove* is among the most illustrative of Motown studies, posits a less-assured, though more careful, claim for a similar middle-ground perspective. Writes Early:

> [Motown CEO Berry] Gordy, with the music he was to create, pinpointed…the precise identity neurosis of both blacks and whites: the African-American's fear that he will be bleached into whiteness and the white's fear that he will be Africanized. […] Gordy managed to negotiate these neuroses by appealing to American youth through music that neither bleached nor blackened, although, of course, from the margins, throughout his career, he was accused simultaneously of doing both.[22]

True though this may be in principle, Early's comments do not shed much light on how such a negotiation worked in practice. What kind of music was this, which neither "bleached nor blackened," and thus appealed to Americans across racial lines? The closest musicological analysis of "the Motown sound," conducted by Jon Fitzgerald, reveals some interesting conclusions. Examining chord progressions, instrumentation techniques, song structures and melodic-harmonic frameworks for several dozen Motown hits of the mid-1960s, Fitzgerald demonstrates that the Motown sound was in fact more heavily indebted to traditional African-American musics like gospel than most commentators have previously allowed. Relative to most other black pop of its day – or at least those songs to capture a significant share of white radio – Motown's tunes were among the *blackest*-sounding products of the black pop era (with all of the caveats that come with such statements, of course).[23]

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[21] See this advertisement in *Vibe*, June-July 1995, 65.
[22] Early, 48-49.
[23] Jon Fitzgerald, "Motown Crossover Hits, 1963-1966 and the Creative Process." *Popular Music* 14 (Jan., 1995), 4-5.

Writers like Brian Ward approach the question with somewhat more suspicion, acknowledging – as the previous chapter has argued – that there indeed existed a "conventional white-black spectrum" informed by historical expectations of what constituted an aural representation of racialized identity; Ward argues that, against this conventional wisdom (i.e., Pop reads white, while R&B reads black), any black pop in the vein of Motown was at least *understood* to have been "whitened" in some way.[24] The problem again, however, is that this apparent whiteness remains undefined – "unexamined," in the words of Ross Chambers – recognizable as white only by its failure to be demonstratively black.[25] Whiteness, as Chambers' "primary unmarked…and so unexamined [racial] category," thus becomes a catch-all receptacle for those musics, such as black pop, that opt out of a set of specific (and I would contend restrictive) representations of black musicality: the identifiable performative codes found in jazz, blues and gospel styles. Black pop stars, like Marvin Gaye and his Motown brethren, were by no means trying to "pass" as white by limiting their reliance on identifiably black musical tropes, any more than the black record-buyers who began to consume white pop *en masse* were trying to conspicuously emulate the musical tastes of their white counterparts. Both phenomena, the appearance of a black pop aesthetic and an increasing demand among black record-buying markets for cross-racial product, were instead clear manifestations of Ward's proposed historical moment: the promised dawn of a "race-free" American society.

The notion of the race-free society, the hypothetical achievement of racial equality in America by refusing to acknowledge race as a primary marker of difference,

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[24] Ward, 183.
[25] Ross Chambers, "The Unexamined," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 189.

has its roots in a theoretical perspective of race known as the *ethnicity paradigm*. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in their 1994 study *Racial Formations in the United States*, cite the ethnicity paradigm as one of three historical critical perspectives guiding the development of race relations in twentieth-century America, together with *class* and *nationhood* paradigms.[26] All three theoretical viewpoints, according to those authors' arguments, have since proven inadequate in addressing the full complexity of the ways in which the concept of *race* has been formed, refined, and redefined in American culture. Yet, as Omi and Winant insist, the *ethnicity paradigm* was the philosophical cornerstone of the organizational and rhetorical strategies employed by early civil rights activists, legislators, and community leaders – mostly political moderates, including Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the intellectual leadership of groups like the SCLC and the NAACP – in their mobilization towards end-goals of racial integration and assimilation. "The modern civil rights movement was initially organized *within* the dominant paradigm of ethnicity," write Omi and Winant; later, after the movement attained national visibility, "the limited explanatory abilities and programmatic usefulness of the ethnicity paradigm were revealed."[27]

The ethnicity paradigm, which by the time of Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s had become the "common sense" approach to matters of race in the United States, was the first framework to posit race as a social category, as opposed to a biological given, which formed only part of one's ethnic identity.[28] Subsuming race to the broader concept of "ethnicity," proponents of the ethnicity paradigm began to insist – beginning in the postwar period – on the desirability of integrating and assimilating not just ethnic

[26] Omi and Winant, 12-20.
[27] *Ibid*, 96.
[28] *Ibid*, 14-17.

European immigrant groups (the Irish, the Polish, the Italians, etc.) but African-Americans as well. The most influential call came from sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, whose 1944 study *An American Dilemma* brought the ethnicity paradigm to the forefront of racial theory, calling on America to resolve the contradictions of its unequal treatment of blacks by suggesting a program of assimilation. The 1948 defeat of a segregationist coterie within the Democratic Party, at the hands of integrationists, signaled the onset of a nearly two-decade-long legislative push towards enforced integration, whose call would be picked up just a half-decade later by grassroots activists of a nascent civil rights effort. Until 1965, the twin pillars of the ethnicity paradigm, with its emphasis on cultural assimilation, and civil rights calls for integration would continue to define the consensus of liberal-progressive race politics in the United States – by which time the true inadequacies of the ethnicity paradigm had become all too apparent to a growing multitude of critics.[29]

If we accept Omi and Winant's argument of a "consensual shift" towards the goal of integration – a sort of *zeitgeist* of racial thinking beginning in the late 1940s – then the racial dimensions of the black pop movement become somewhat more intelligible. With intellectual and political leaders, black and white alike, proclaiming the desirability and even the inevitability of racial equality through integration and assimilation, it should be no surprise that black pop artists, from doo-wop's The Drifters to Nat Cole to Marvin Gaye, sought to expand the limits of what could be considered "black" music by availing themselves of musical styles identified with a mainstream American taste. Black pop did not seek to become white, or even to model itself after *white* musical styles; in a proposed

[29] *Ibid*, 16, 17, 96; see also Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962 [1944]).

"race-free" America, whiteness would lose its distinction as a racial category in any case. And indeed, despite decades of pronouncements over the seemingly "white" influences of companies like Motown, there was nothing inherently white about postwar pop music to begin with – except that the structure of the American recording industry had been organized, by almost exclusively whites, in order to maintain a false front declaring "Pop music" to be the domain of white middle-class performers and listeners.[30] The black pop movement and its performers insisted on partaking in the promised gains afforded by assimilation into American society: the freedom to engage in mainstream musical culture across colour lines, without the stigma of being marked as interlopers based on racial distinction.

Why, then, if we can tender such a neat explanation over the racial dimensions of black pop performance, do we find so little written on the black pop era in the extant literature on postwar popular musics? It seems that the answer lies, in part, with socio-political developments that immediately followed the black pop era, including a more-or-less complete consensual shift away from the politics of integration towards a new, and profoundly dissimilar, mass black consciousness. By the mid-1960s, black America's long-held hopes for equal participation in American society had received a series of sharp blows that threatened to undo the early optimism of the civil rights struggle. Episodes of gross racially-motivated violence against non-violent civil rights demonstrators, culminating in the state police attacks on marchers in Selma, Alabama in March 1965, had begun to convince many observers of the inefficacy – and perhaps the undesirability

[30] See David Brackett, "The Politics and Practice of 'Crossover' in American Popular Music, 1963 to 1965," *The Musical Quarterly* 78 (1994), 774-797; Garofalo, "Off the Charts," 111-126.

– of goals of racial integration and assimilation.[31] A "nationwide revitalization of black pride" began to take hold beginning in mid-decade, paralleled by increasingly assertive calls for black self-determination and, in more than a few cases, reinvigorated forms of black nationalism that would serve as counterpoints to the previously-held end-goal of integration. In this changing climate marked by defiant black cultural pride, which implicitly outed America's failure to deliver on its promise of equal opportunity, "the soul phenomenon emerged," writes Brian Ward, "eventually encompassing most aspects of black life to become almost synonymous with 'negritude'":

> Thus black consumers gradually, but inexorably, began to reject white pop and some of the more obviously 'whitened' Rhythm and Blues of the black pop era: instead, they increasingly embraced the 'blacker' sounds of soul music… The popularity of the style…indicate[d] that Rhythm and Blues' new musical mean had moved in concert with shifts in mass black consciousness.[32]

Soul music thus became an integral cultural reflection of an historically-specific political and social moment for black Americans: one that was unmistakably rooted in the increasing frustrations of many African-Americans over the unrealized aims of the integrationists. While this revitalized black cultural consciousness provides fascinating analytical fodder for studies of race relations in mid-to-late-1960s, viewing the black pop era backwards through this lens of "a robust pride in things distinctively black" risks obscuring the reality of racial consciousness as it existed in the pre-Black Power, pre-Black Pride years of the 1960s. As Ward has pointed out, many of the most damning

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[31] See Clayborne Carson, "The Crucible: How Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge Changed Everything," in *The Unfinished Agenda of the Selma-Montgomery Voting Rights March*, ed. Dara Byrne (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 27-36; Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 308; Dean Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001).

[32] Ward, 183.

critiques of the black pop aesthetic (including Nelson George's comments cited above) fail to illuminate because it is just such a backwards projection – of a late-1960s "intense racial consciousness" onto artists of the early decade – that leads them to seek, and expect to find, declarations of proud racial difference in an era where this was either politically (and commercially) unwise, or else socially undesirable.[33]

In short, the black pop era seems to have fallen victim, in the prevailing literature, to its uneasy legacy as the last major African-American musical movement to emerge before a nationwide turn towards the valorization of blackness as a distinct site of cultural pride, beginning in the mid-1960s. In this sense, black pop shares something in common with its white counterpart, whose legacy too has been perennially distorted by the projection of a late-1960s "rockist" discourse backwards onto the shamelessly commercially and willfully apolitical pop music of an earlier period (see "Into the 1960s," Chapter 1). So long as these projections continue to inform our study of postwar musics up until the mid-1960s, we will continue to fail to grasp the full significance of these musical cultures as sites of unique historical relevance – and even worse, to misconstrue the varied historical contexts in which these musics were developed. The remainder of this chapter will look more closely to the details of Marvin Gaye's early musical and performative career, to further develop the contextual relations of black pop music with broader shifts in race consciousness in the postwar, pre-soul period of American pop musics.

Conquering the Copa: Upward Mobility and the Black Bourgeoisie

[33] *Ibid*, 142.

The rock-'n'-roll of the mid-1950s had illustrated that integrated audiences could be consistently cultivated by savvy independent record labels, but it had also suggested the limits of acceptable musical performativity, beyond which (especially black) performers could be marked as social undesirables. The great achievement of Motown founder Berry Gordy was in his company's ability to carefully orchestrate a public presentation of black performance that still maintained a "threshold level of recognizable 'blackness'," while defying the stereotyped images of African-American musicality that had prompted the fierce resistance of white mainstream America to the apparently morally degrading tendencies of rock-'n'-roll. Most obviously, this meant the suppression of overtly sexual lyrical content, which all of Motown's songwriters stringently avoided in favour of the kind of unobjectionable, teen-centric puppy-love anthems that would help to establish the company's family-friendly public image. (It is worth noting, too, that many of Motown's most prominent tunesmiths, like William "Smokey" Robinson, were still teens themselves when they began working for the company). Beyond this, however, Gordy and his colleagues worked tirelessly to develop an image of elegance and sophistication for their flagship artists, which placed Motown's performers firmly within the sphere of the black bourgeoisie. "With his roster of young black hopefuls," writes Brian Ward, "all eager to succeed in the American mainstream, not marginalized in some segregated racial enclave, Berry Gordy intended his label to become 'The sound of young America,' and not just of young black America."[34] The surest way to do this, it seemed, was to engender an image of Motown's performers that spoke of upward mobility and middle-class refinement – to insist on Motown's inclusion within mainstream America by

[34] *Ibid*, 161.

locating its artists at the heart of Pop music's historic power-base: the American middle-class.

Except perhaps for The Temptations, the vocal quintet whose 1964 single "My Girl" would come to serve as a paradigmatic example of the Motown sound, none of Motown's male artists negotiated the image of the black bourgeois performer as successfully as the young Marvin Gaye. His striking clean-cut good looks and his towering athletic build suggested a picture of the All-American boy-next-door, an image nicely complemented by his ready smile and a penchant for modishly conservative dress. Gaye's nervousness onstage tended to manifest itself in a charming image of vulnerability, which inevitably placed him in the role of hopeless romantic rather than sexualized icon – a distinction, in an early 1960s context, which should not be mistaken as one of mere semantics.[35] A mid-1960s publicity photo from the Motown archives captures Gaye as he first appeared to an infatuated American audience, enjoying the fruits of the good life that accompanied participation in the American middle-class: a yachting cap slung jauntily down over his forehead, he leans on the doorframe of a gleaming new Cadillac in pin-neat prep-school attire, a disarming smile on his face. The photo op was a carefully choreographed one, obviously intended to invoke the classical magazine-ad images of blissful American middle-class domesticity, with one crucial substitution: this time, the Cadillac – that overt symbol of American enterprise and luxury – belonged to a black man.[36]

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[35] Gaye was a notoriously uncomfortable performer onstage, as biographer David Ritz has emphasized, and resented perceived expectations to perform the role of the sex symbol. Ritz, 174, 315.

[36] Cadillacs would become in time "status symbols within Motown's company hierarchy," as Suzanne Smith claims; nearly every prominent employee would own one by the mid-1960s. Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 127; see also Mary Wilson, *Dreamgirl & Supreme Faith: My Life as a Supreme* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), 180.

Motown's calculated bid for an image of upwardly mobile, middle-class respectability claims center stage in many (if not most) narratives of Gordy's empire: narratives that occasionally seek to imply that Gordy and his employees were the first to successfully craft and market an image of black pop performers as refined, elegant aspirers to American bourgeoisdom – inventing, as it were, the template for the black bourgeois performer. While it is no doubt true that Motown was indeed the most successful promoter of this image, the history of the black pop movement reveals that the careful presentation of respectable middle-class singers had always formed a core element of black pop as a distinct style. Berry Gordy and company were not the creators of the black middle-class pop star; they were the inheritors of its legacy, which stretched back to the performance strategies of Nat Cole in the 1940s and beyond – even back to the highly polished stageshows of jazz composer Duke Ellington and his tuxedoed big bands of the 1930s.[37]

The images of middle-class respectability found in black pop, from Nat Cole to The Orioles to Marvin Gaye, were not adopted solely for the appeasement of white audiences (though there was typically a strategic element at play in this respect); postwar consumer culture and the attendant growth of the American middle-classes were naturally played out in African-American communities as well as white, giving rise to a similar (if hotly contested) discourse on what it was to *be* black and middle-class. Throughout the 1950s, arbiters of black middle-class tastes – such as John Johnson's widely-circulated

[37] It is almost certainly true that the image can be traced even further – perhaps much further – back in time than Ellington's groups of the 1930s; after all, the black middle class was certainly not a twentieth-century creation. For an interesting counterpoint, however, consider the recollections of Ruby Walker, niece of the great 1920s jazz singer Bessie Smith, who recalled that, when Smith and her group appeared before white audiences, she opted to perform in headkerchief and skirt: the archetypal dress of the "mammy," certainly a well-known and comfortable stereotype among white audiences. See Ruby Walker quoted in liner notes in *The Essential Bessie Smith*, CD (Columbia Records, 1997).

Jet and *Ebony* magazines, whose readerships were assumed to be the expanding black middle-classes – constantly championed what Philip Gentry has labeled "the discourse of smoothness" as a behavioural condition befitting the black bourgeoisie.[38] "Smoothness," as Gentry suggests, was an all-encompassing directive for black middle-class readers of *Jet* and *Ebony*. To become the ideal participant in the black middle-class was to be *smooth*, and "to be smooth in the world of the black bourgeoisie meant to avoid extremes."[39] Visually, this was typically reflected in the close-shaven, tastefully-dressed images of men like singer Billy Eckstine and, of course, Nat Cole, who were prized by *Ebony* and its ilk for their sartorial suaveness and mannerly refinement. But the discourse of smoothness extended beyond mere aesthetics; *Ebony* and *Jet* also carried reviews of contemporary record releases, heavily weighted towards the genteel sounds of black pop and cool jazz styles. Their most laudatory reviews tended to frame the desirability of aural smoothness in overt terms: Nat Cole's "Jet" was "unusually smooth;" Billy Eckstine sung in a tender style that "virtually glow[ed] with smoothness;" Duke Ellington's releases were "subtle" compared to the energetic hard bop of saxophonist Charlie Parker, who received triumphant praise only when he laid back on his instrument and adopted a gentler tone.[40] Soothing, inoffensive sounds were almost invariably championed as reflections of a middle-class refinement; the pages of *Ebony* tended not to reflect the sounds of aggressive rhythm and blues – typically coded urban and working-class, even when its creators (Brownie McGhee, Wynonie Harris) were seasoned, urbane professionals of the middle-classes.

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[38] Philip Gentry, "The Age of Anxiety: Music, Politics, and McCarthyism, 1948-1954" (PhD diss., University of California, 2008), 139, 142-148.
[39] *Ibid*, 148.
[40] Quoted in Gentry, 149.

As we saw in the last chapter, there remained some white industry executives (presumably not readers of *Ebony*) who entirely misunderstood the significance of black pop's subject position as a site of middle-class musical expression. For Art Rupe, the boss of gospel star-*cum*-pop crooner Sam Cooke, the smooth sounds of Cooke's early pop records were a gross violation of what Rupe understood to be the proper way to perform blackness on record. In Rupe's estimation, audiences on both sides of the colour line expected black singers to play out the position of the unbridled rhythm and blues singer – one more Wynonie Harris, or even rock-'n'-roller Little Richard, but certainly not some "mildly sanctified Frank Sinatra."[41] Ironically enough, it was exactly this image of the "mildly sanctified" black Sinatra that received the blessing of Motown's black CEO, Berry Gordy, when his star male artist Marvin Gaye began demanding the right to cut his own LPs, his way, in 1962.[42] Though most of Gaye's early chart successes were firmly indebted to the kind of pop/r&b that came to define "the Motown sound," Gaye's passion projects – four of his first six LPs for Motown, all recorded at his insistence – smacked less of post-rock-'n'-roll black pop than of the sophisticated bygone jazz-pop of his idols, Frank Sinatra and Nat Cole.

Though the conspicuously bourgeois aspects of the black pop style always occupied the center of uneasy controversy among commentators (to which I will return), the conscious display of upwardly mobility caused less consternation for artists like Gaye and his black audiences, "who had been routinely denied equal opportunity to compete for the financial rewards of the mainstream" and who looked upon Gaye's slick tuxedoed

[41] Ward, 190.
[42] According to Ritz, it was Gaye and his wife Anna (Gordy's sister), rather than Gordy himself, who insisted on the singer's opportunity to cut records in the vein of "the black Sinatra." Ritz, 73.

sophistication as "symbols of how far they had come from humble beginnings."[43] It was among these singers and listeners – many of whom, like Gaye, had grown up on the disadvantaged side of the *de facto* residential segregation of the urban north – that the figure of Frank Sinatra held special resonance, and it was within these groups that Arnold Shaw's "sepia Sinatras" blossomed in the 1950s and 1960s. It was not just Sinatra's accomplished singing that attracted these aspiring black singers, though some – like Gaye – proved uncanny emulators of the great singer's idiosyncratic style. Sinatra, who rose to fabulous popularity during the Second World War as a singer of big band jazz, was a potent symbol of upward mobility among traditionally marginalized ethnic and racial groups in American society.

Born into a working-class Italian-American family in distinctly unglamorous Hoboken, New Jersey in 1915, Sinatra came of age in a society in which his ethnic brethren were still considered marked outsiders of mainstream America – barely "white" according to racial categories of the period, which reserved such privileged status for almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon Protestants.[44] By the mid-1940s, he was the most famous entertainer in America. A careful cultivator of his public persona, Sinatra would take pains to perennially attach himself to the image of the poor boy from Hoboken – to insist not only on his credentials as a self-made man, an unlikely outsider battling against odds to achieve stardom, but also to employ his working-class roots as an overt "symbol of how far [he] had come from humble beginnings."[45] (Berry Gordy, some twenty years

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[43] Ward, 267.
[44] See Gentry, 73-77; Stanley Lieberson, *Ethnic Patterns in American Cities* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 206; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
[45] See Karen McNally, *When Frankie Went to Hollywood: Frank Sinatra and American Male Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

later, would shoot promotional films for his artists using the backdrops of working-class Detroit – its auto plants and its housing projects – as tokens of Motown's own humble roots.)

Occupying an ambiguous fringe position in "white" American society, Sinatra gravitated early on towards the sounds of African-American jazz, eventually becoming the most outspoken wartime entertainer to acknowledge his debt to jazz greats like black vocalist Billie Holiday.[46] Later, as the civil rights movement gained traction in the mid-1950s, Sinatra would commit himself as an aggressive proponent of civil rights for African-Americans, in which capacity he continually earned the suspicion and disfavour of the political right. He was explicit in the connections he drew, between the disadvantaged position of black Americans in the postwar period and his own experience as a marginalized "ethnic" American, and though he seemed unprepared to disentangle the racially-based distinctions that fed into two different types of oppression for both groups, his rhetoric made the charismatic singer a magnet for appreciative black audiences on the cusp of a promised dawn of equal opportunity across races.[47]

For Marvin Gaye, Sinatra's appeal went much further than that singer's practical or symbolic commitments to black American opportunity; Gaye's desire, to become "the black Sinatra," was premised on sharing the great singer's lifestyle complete. As early as high school Gaye had "fantasized about having a life like his [Sinatra's] – carrying on in Hollywood and becoming a movie star," seducing innumerable women and living a

[46] Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan, *Frank Sinatra: The Life* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 34.
[47] See Frank Sinatra, "The Way I Look at Race," *Ebony*, July 1958, 35-44; Frank Sinatra, "What's All this About Races?," reprinted in *Frank Sinatra and Popular Culture: Essays on an American Icon*, ed. Leonard Mustazza (New York: Praeger, 1998), 23. See also Karen McNally, *When Frankie Went to Hollywood: Frank Sinatra and American Male Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

supremely romantic vision of the American dream.[48] In this sense, anyway, Gaye's reach seemed perpetually to be at odds with Motown's grasp on a distinctly middle-class image, though it did speak to Gordy's ambitions for his artists' presentations of upward mobility. Rhythm and blues music somehow did not seem to fit neatly into this aspiration of Gaye's – particularly not the boy-meets-girl lyrical simplicity of the tunes he was being pressured to record by Berry Gordy – and when Gaye was occasionally given free rein over his musical projects, he typically opted to try out material that flattered his self-image as the successor to Sinatra's crown.

His four LPs in the "black Sinatra" vein – *The Soulful Moods of Marvin Gaye* (1961), *When I'm Alone I Cry* (1964), *Hello Broadway* (1964), and *A Tribute to the Great Nat "King" Cole* (1965, recorded and released several months after Cole's death) – were abysmal commercial failures to the last, though the records, along with Gaye's cultivation of a Sinatra-esque onstage suaveness, seem to have prompted the profit-minded Berry Gordy to expand his vision for the Motown empire along similar lines. Throughout the early years of the 1960s Gordy had increasingly turned to the medium of television to promote his top-shelf acts, like Marvin Gaye and The Supremes, who made dozens of appearances on variety programs and teen-oriented music shows like *Shindig*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and Britain's *Top of the Pops* to promote their latest releases. As Motown increasingly harnessed television's promotional potential, Gordy moved to consolidate his artists' image as recording stars by grooming them from capable amateurs into flawlessly rehearsed performers. Once the Motown singers had been polished into well-rounded entertainers, Gordy set his sights on an even bigger prize than a slot on *The Ed Sullivan Show*; following Gaye's lead, he began in 1964 to prepare his young talent to

[48] Quoted in Ritz, 29.

capture the adult market by injecting each stage show with a dose of "the black Sinatra." Selling singles to teens was all very fine, but Gordy's untethered ambition sought the upper reaches of bourgeois sophistication: he wanted a shot at the Copacabana, the legendary New York nightclub continentally renowned for attracting only the finest in American talent, where Sinatra and Nat Cole ("The King of the Copacabana") had held court a decade before.

The seeds of this ambition had been planted several years before, when at the urging of Marvin Gaye's mentor Harvey Fuqua – by then the head of Motown's Artists & Repertoire – Gordy agreed to organize an Artist Development Department at Motown, a sort of training school to transform the company's top artists into slick, professional entertainers that would look as good as they sounded, onstage and off.[49] Together, Gordy and Fuqua arranged for the hiring of outside assistance to help groom Motown's stable of artists into top-drawer talent: bandleader Maurice King, who assumed responsibility of the artists' onstage repertoire and vocal arrangements; veteran choreographer Cholly Atkins, who refined and streamlined the performative gestures of the Motown acts; and Maxine Powell, a local finishing school headmistress who came to Motown as a sort of charm school instructor, coaching her pupils on etiquette and elocution. Within a few short years, the efforts of Motown's Artist Development Department had made its flagship artists the envy of the music industry: bourgeois entertainers who could act, speak and perform with a polish and sophistication that many middle-class parents across America could only dream of instilling in their own youths.[50]

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[49] The best firsthand account of Motown's Artist Development Department is provided in Cholly Atkins and Jacquie Malone, *Class Act: The Jazz Life of Choreographer Cholly Atkins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 146-147.
[50] *Ibid*, 146-152.

Though Motown proudly billed itself as "The Sound of Young America," Berry Gordy clearly saw the benefit of promoting a high-life image to audiences, bestowing as it did a certain adult elegance to Motown's otherwise teen-centric products. Gaye had been his test subject, in a manner of speaking – the sole artist in the Motown roster who preferred to adopt the understated refinement of Frank Sinatra's stage presence, treating the modest r&b clubs in which he performed as dry runs for his eventual entrance into the ritzy supper-club circuit that spelled the upper reaches of bourgeois taste. Even before Gordy had cracked the supper clubs of the northeast, he had been promoting Gaye as his foremost "adult" entertainer. Gaye received top billing on the 1964 Motortown Revue, a national tour featuring the company's most popular artists (The Supremes, The Marvelettes, The Temptations, and others – most of whom were actually outperforming Gaye in the marketplace at that time); the Revue's program devoted two full pages of photographs to Gaye, looking svelte in a dinner jacket and striking his best Sinatra pose, on a stool with cigarette in hand. Never one for subtlety, Gordy had the spread captioned: "This personable showman is appealing to adults as well as teens."[51] By 1965, with the help of the Artist Development Department, Gordy had made drastic overhauls to the presentation of most of his foremost acts, bringing Gaye's level of adult sophistication to bear on groups like The Supremes and The Temptations by injecting their stageshows with flashy Broadway tunes and Gilded Age Hollywood fare, in order to boost the adult content to levels felt appropriate for venues like The Copacabana. The Supremes debuted the Copacabana in June 1965, never to return to the r&b clubs in which they had begun; The Temptations and Marvin Gaye soon followed.[52]

[51] Quoted in Ritz, 91.
[52] Atkins and Malone, 161-163.

Not everyone was enamored with the repositioning of Motown's acts as firmly upscale supper-club entertainers. In a 1967 article referencing Motown's entrance into the chic supper-club world, rock critic Ralph Gleason condemned the company's new Copacabana-friendly image as "almost totally style with very little substance." The Supremes, wrote Gleason, were "striving as hard as they can to get on that stage and become part of the American success story," and their upscale flash seemed at odds with what that critic apparently believed to be the proper way to perform black soul music.[53] There was an undertone to Gleason's criticism, fueled as it was by an increasingly entrenched "rockist" perspective on pop music commercialism, which seemed designed to portray Gordy and his team as nothing short of race traitors, pandering to an elite bourgeois (and chiefly white) audience while ignoring their commitment to a new program of black uplift and racial pride. Nor were Gleason's criticisms a cry in the wilderness; just as black pop's racial-aural dimensions were (and remain) a matter of no small disagreement, so too was the image of the black bourgeoisie a site of fierce contestation in the postwar period. Motown was merely the latest and most conspicuous proponent of a certain kind of blackness – an image that refracted as many meanings as there were observers ready to debate this image.

While white commentators, like Gleason, provided some of the more repugnant condemnations of Motown's upwardly mobile image, there was by no means a firm consensus among black critics over the desirability of a unique black bourgeois culture. In 1955 sociologist E. Franklin Frazier published perhaps the most famous (and certainly most vitriolic) critique of the growing black American middle-classes, *Bourgeoisie Noire*,

[53] Ralph Gleason, "Like a Rolling Stone," reprinted in *The Age of Rock: Sounds of the American Cultural Revolution*, ed. J. Eisen (New York: Random House, 1969), 59.

published in translation the following year in the U.S. and sparking decades of controversy over the social role of what turn-of-the-century intellectual W. E. B. Dubois called "the talented tenth" of black American society. Frazier's dissertation was composed as a polemic against the roughly ten percent of black Americans (mostly professionals) who had comfortably achieved middle-class status in the postwar period – and who had, in Frazier's view, become uprooted from their racial traditions and hence "[did] not really wish to be identified with Negroes" any longer:

> As a result of the break with its cultural past, the black bourgeoisie is without cultural roots in either the Negro world with which it refuses to identify, or the white world which refuses to permit the black bourgeoisie to share its life.[54]

The result of this purgatorial unbelonging, Frazier claimed, was a "deep-seated inferiority complex" for the black bourgeoisie, who created "in its isolation…a world of make-believe" wherein respectability came to be defined not by "morals or manners" but by "external marks of a high standard of living."[55] Wielding "no political power as a class," the black bourgeoisie sought status through conspicuous consumption, "hav[ing] been taught that money will bring them justice and equality in American life."[56] They were, in one of Frazier's most strongly-worded condemnations, "in the process of becoming NOBODY."[57]

Frazier's work was praised upon its publication in the U.S. for its insights into the so-called "social pathology" of the middle-class African-American, and was still considered contemporary enough to form the basis for some of the most infamous

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[54] E. Franklin Frazier, *The Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press, 1957 [1955]), 216, 24.
[55] *Ibid*, 24-25.
[56] *Ibid*, 86, 85.
[57] *Ibid*, 26. Emphasis is Frazier's.

analyses of social conditions among African-American communities into the 1960s – most notably, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Moynihan's controversial 1965 sociological study *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.[58] Yet Frazier's work has attracted its share of critical scrutiny, which has typically fallen into two camps critiquing either the author's methodology, or his study's usefulness in the wake of the radical social reordering wrought by the emergent civil rights movement. As Martin Kilson has pointed out, Frazier directed his critical lens more towards the "societal dimensions" of the postwar black middle-classes than the "power-structure dimensions," leaving little room for an exploration of those bourgeois elements – like Gordy's Motown – that controlled their own means of production to an extent considered impossible or unlikely in the pre-civil rights Eisenhower era.[59]

Furthermore, as Bart Landry's exhaustive 1987 sociological study, *The New Black Middle Class*, argued, by the early 1960s it was possible to speak of a "new black middle class" which had come to replace the black bourgeoisie of Frazier's time – one which, thanks to increased national prosperity (economic) and the gains of the civil rights movement (legislative), no longer existed as an isolated faction living in a world of "make-believe." Between 1960 and 1970, the black middle-classes of American doubled in size to include not just the traditional members of the professional class but small business owners and white collar management as well.[60] To claim, as Franklin had, that

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[58] For a contemporary review of Frazier's work, see James A. Hulbert, "The Price of Illusion," *Phylon* 17:1 (1956), pp. 89-91. For the employment of Frazier's analysis in later social studies, as well as their controversial reception by sociologists, see Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan report and the politics of controversy : a Trans-action social science and public policy report* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967).

[59] Martin Kilson, "E. Franklin Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie Reconsidered: Frazier's Analytical Perspective," in *E. Franklin Frazier and Black Bourgeoisie*, ed. James E. Teele (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 118-119.

[60] Bart Landry, *The New Black Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 67-93.

the black middle classes were in the process of becoming "NOBODY" was to continue pursuing an argument whose premises had been eclipsed by substantive changes to the very make-up of the black bourgeoisie by the early 1960s. Regrettably, it would be just such arguments that would inform critiques of classed blackness well into the decade – critiques, like the Moynihan report, that would have very real and lasting consequences on public policy directives towards African American communities at large.

Outside of the academy, of course, there was still no firm agreement on how it behooved the black middle-classes to conduct themselves, and perhaps predictably, the bourgeois implications of the black pop movement occupied a central place in the public discourse. Many observers still sensed that there was something vaguely insidious to Motown's bourgeois aspirations, and following Frazier's emphatic arguments (wittingly or not), declaimed the Motown roster – with its "charm school" and displays of material consumption – a product of white envy. The old latent stereotypes that white America held towards blacks served to inevitably skew the narrative of Motown's Artist Development Department, transvaluating the refinement of its artists into little more than an imitation of "white" behaviour (as though whites had proprietary rights to elegance or manners).

The Supremes' Mary Wilson called it "the Motown Myth" – Berry Gordy provided a crash-course in proper etiquette for his artists, and then "young 'uneducated' blacks suddenly knew how to speak and which fork to use."[61] Wilson, who, like her fellow Supremes and indeed many of Motown's performers (including Gaye), grew up in lower-middle-class housing projects, came from a home that valued etiquette as a

[61] Wilson, 150.

prerequisite for upward mobility, and she was keenly insulted by the assertion that Motown's performers strove to emulate white behavioural norms:

> The truth is that Berry [Gordy] never signed anyone to Motown who needed to be 'remade.' The uncouth, boisterous, and slovenly couldn't get a foot in the door anyway. Almost everyone who came to Motown wanted to move up in the world. None of us came from homes that didn't teach manners. We were all trying to get ahead, and it's always bothered me that some people have assumed that by accepting what some considered 'white' values, we sold out. It's just not true.[62]

It is surely a reflection of American race relations in the early 1960s that politeness and gentility were understood to have been in some way exclusively "'white' values." But the endurance of "the Motown Myth" also suggests that black performers of the 1960s had to work doubly hard in order to lay claim to bourgeois status; even to "sell out" their supposed commitment to black cultural traditions required, in the eyes of Motown's detractors, a crash course in middle-class white behaviour!

Ultimately, what these arguments reveal most clearly is a kind of unresolved dialogue regarding the very nature of what it meant to *be* black and upwardly mobile in a period of legislative integration (which coincided almost exactly with the growth of black pop as a distinct musical style.) Each side of this dialogue suggested very clear expectations of how bourgeois blackness was to be "properly" performed: how racial identity of a certain classed type could be codified and mediated, not just at a social-structural level but in very specific terms of everyday lived experience, including the creation and performance of pop music products. White commentators like Ralph Gleason and record executive Art Rupe – perhaps bravely, but more probably naively – opined that the bourgeois indicators of black pop were in some fundamental way

[62] *Ibid.*

inappropriate, running against the grain of expected black behavioural norms. Much more importantly, however, the racial uncertainty that marked the black pop era provided a crucial impetus for African-Americans themselves to seek to define and inhabit roles of classed racial identity that could reflect an historically-specific black consciousness. It is a testament to the impermanence, and the mutability, of racial consciousness that even contemporary black bourgeois participants – men like John Johnson of *Ebony* and E. Franklin Frazier – could sustain a dialogue that reflected a plurality of different "ways" to be black and middle-class without reaching any firm consensus. The final section of this chapter will look to one specific instance of Marvin Gaye's black pop performance – the 1964 concert film *The T.A.M.I. Show* – to investigate gendered expectations of black musical expressivity, and the ways in which black pop (so often dismissed as a "bleached" counterpart to r&b and soul) managed to operate as a site wherein alternative black masculinities could be considered and explored alongside those images of black masculine performance more familiar (and perhaps more legibly *black*) to readers today.

"A Minimum of Movement": Black Pop's Bodily Performance

This chapter opened with an observation from sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant regarding how we interpret racial meanings based on preconceived notions of what racial identity looks like, both physically and behaviourally. "We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities," write Omi and Winant, "[and] become disoriented when they do not."[63] But when we posit a comment such as "Funny, you don't look black" (or, for the purposes of the case at hand, "funny, you don't *act* black"), from where do our expectations come, that lead us to anticipate a specific vision of what *acting*

[63] Omi and Winant, 59.

black actually looks like? Omi and Winant argue that interpretations of racial meanings in the United States are the result of "racial formations": "the sociohistorical process[es] by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed."[64] Racial formations are unfixed and contingent on context, subject to change based on what those authors call "racial projects" – macro- and micro-level social processes, which represent and organize racial meanings in a coherent, though ever mutable, pattern or system.[65] At the level of everyday lived experience (that is, micro-level processes), the "rules of racial classification" are often learned unconsciously from many racial projects operating on us simultaneously, though not necessarily in conjunction, which together feed into our understanding of what, say, *blackness* is: what it looks, sounds and behaves like.

It is obvious, from the analysis provided thus far, that though Motown's black pop found unprecedented commercial success among cross-racial audiences, many of its artists nonetheless found themselves working under the stigma of not sounding, or behaving, *black enough* for some observers' tastes. During a 1968 visit to England, The Supremes' Mary Wilson recalled one music critic – fearing that the girls had lost touch with their "roots" – imploring the group to "Get back to church, baby!"[66] (None of the three Supremes had ever sung in church, as Wilson dryly pointed out.) For this critic, as for Ralph Gleason, the measure and mark of a performer's blackness was to be found in their transparent indebtedness to the gospel of their presumed Southern Baptist roots – a totalizing stereotype that, regrettably, failed to account for the comparatively thin congregations of church-going black Americans living in the postwar urban north. Funny, these critics thought: they don't *sound* black. Wilson interpreted such remarks as "a new

[64] *Ibid*, 55.
[65] *Ibid*, 55-60.
[66] Quoted in Wilson, 210.

kind of racism," which demanded that all black musicians "sing 'soulful' music," and leave the show tunes to whites.[67]

Need it be said, there is no one way to perform black musicality; there are, however, stereotypes of a more or less injurious nature that have historically limned "black musicianship" – racial projects that seek to essentialize black musical performativity, often (but not always) in a direct affront to the performative identities proffered by African-American musicians themselves. Certainly there were black artists who wished to sound "soulful" – but then again, there were plenty of whites who did as well, and plenty more black singers who sang Broadway tunes that they had grown up listening to; The Supremes sang "American music," as Wilson pointedly called it. We have already considered black pop's apparently "whitened" aurality, and the "white values" attached to its performance of bourgeoisdom, and found both arguments untenable – in fact, ahistorical. But what about the bodily performance of this black pop style? Can the black body perform "whiteness," and if so, what does this look like? Or, like the arguments found above, do we simply *read* whiteness onto a black body that does not act out its racial identity according to preconceived expectations of what that identity is supposed to look like?

The reassuring answer, if the integrated audience of *The T.A.M.I. Show* is to be believed, provides a welcome antidote to the flippant racialism of writers like Ralph Gleason and the "soul"-hungry English critic. *The T.A.M.I. Show* (for "Teenage Awards Music International") was conceived as one of the earliest rock-'n'-roll concert films, shot over two days in October 1964 in Santa Monica before a cross-racial high school audience, and featuring many of the top-selling British and American pop acts, black and

[67] *Ibid*, 211.

white, including Motown's The Miracles and Marvin Gaye, and the recent crossover success, the frenetic r&b shouter James Brown. Surely by accident, but no less fascinatingly, the performances of these artists – the black pop singer of Motown and the incendiary Godfather of Soul – bespoke a unique historical interchange among integration-era black entertainers, a sort of physical negotiation of black bodily performance as well as an implicit recognition of the plurality of black masculine images available to these artists. *The T.A.M.I. Show*, in effect, served as its own racial project, to racially *reform* standard narratives of black physical performance by expanding the circumscribed boundaries of the black body and its employment on the stage: to point to the possibility of many different ways to look, sound and perform *black*, over and against historical expectations of what this entailed.

Without much fear of contradiction, it is safe to say that as far as there did indeed exist a "conventional white-black spectrum," James Brown's performativity fell towards the latter extreme. (Unlike the Motown stable, Brown was never accused of aspiring to whiteness). The extreme physicality of his stage presence, registered even in the physical demands placed on the body by his titanic voice, was directed towards the invocation of the Baptist revival meeting – a strategy firmly indebted to the gospel groups of an earlier period, who also provided the template for Brown's ecstatic vocalisms. James Brown was "soulful" in the strictest sense (though, like The Supremes, he had no church background to speak of), and though some of his first crossover hits were covers of white-produced pop (including his signature staple, "Night Train," first recorded by Jewish jazz bandleader Buddy Morrow), he injected these tunes with rhythmic and oratory gestures unmistakably coded black: rhythmic-oral declamations, repetitive vamps,

syncopated polyrhythms and timbral distortions of his incredibly dynamic voice.[68] It is Brown's pre-soul rhythm and blues that has come to be memorialized, in much of the extant literature, as the "authentically" black music of the early 1960s, against which – if we are lucky – we sometimes find a comparison to the black pop of artists like Marvin Gaye.[69]

Brown was of course no more *black* than Marvin Gaye, though in terms of their performance strategies the two singers provided a marked contrast to one another. Viewing the footage of Brown onstage at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium in 1964, one is immediately struck by how deeply rooted the singer's performance is in the exercise of an overtly masculine power and control. The twenty-minute performance hinges on an almost uninterrupted series of carefully choreographed space-filling gestures; Brown commands not only center stage but the entirety of the floor, repeatedly shuffling to stage left and right in impossibly sophisticated dance steps to claim the entire stage as his performative sphere. He sits atop the hierarchy of the dozen or more black musicians onstage, commanding them individually or collectively to bend to his apparently spontaneous musical whims. (Not only are his orders, executed precisely, a display of

[68] See Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6; for an intriguing comparison, see Buddy Morrow, "Night Train," *Buddy Morrow on RCA*, CD (Collector's Choice, 2000) and James Brown, "Night Train," *Live at the Apollo*, CD (Polygram, 1990 [1962]).

[69] To get a sense of just how firmly implanted this vision had become, even by 1968, consider Amiri Baraka's (Leroi Jones) pronouncement that James Brown's "world" was "the Blackest and potentially the strongest" for its distance from the "white American social order." This was no doubt partly true in the post-integration funk phase of Brown's career, though as the following analysis suggests, this is not the historical image, complete, of Brown's performativity, which within the context of the *T.A.M.I. Show* appears not to have been as far removed from the "white…social order" as Baraka may have us believe. Leroi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010 [1968]), 212.

totalizing control – they are also a superfluous display made for their own spectacular sake, his band having rehearsed every second of the performance *ad infinitum*.)[70]

The performance climaxes with an outburst of emotional catharsis: Brown drops to his knees, heartbroken and exhausted as he implores his lover "please, please – don't go," and for a moment the singer succumbs to his apparent emotional vulnerability. Out comes the cape, draped over the spent singer by one of his handlers, and Brown feebly stutters towards stage left with the help of an escort, before turning on his heel, throwing the cape off, and rushing back to center stage to engage his band in an encore. Never a performer of understatement, Brown repeats the cape routine twice more, each time throwing off cape and handlers (more space-filling postures) to reclaim his central position at the microphone. Nearly every aspect of Brown's *T.A.M.I. Show* performance bespoke an insistent assertion of his power onstage: his superlative dance abilities, his command over band and audience, the feint of overcoming utter and total exhaustion – indeed, even the sheer volume of his voice – all loudly and unmistakably fed into a subject position legible as a source of masculine authority and certitude. James Brown collapsed in fits of agony, only to *revive himself* against the well-meaning advice of his underlings![71]

Marvin Gaye, it must be said, was playing with long odds when stacked up against the consummate showmanship of James Brown – for in truth, Gaye was simply not the same dazzlingly extrovert performer that Brown was. Gaye was unsure of himself onstage, lacking a considerable amount of Brown's confident physicality, and more inclined to make like Sinatra, performing while slunk across a stool and letting his

[70] *The T.A.M.I. Show*, DVD (Shout! Factory, 2010 [1964]).
[71] *Ibid.*

vocals convey his message for him. He was a competent performer (nobody succeeded at Motown who was not); but his onstage mannerisms were directed towards working within a certain set of parameters, dictated not only by Berry Gordy's insistence on his artists' genteel refinement but on his own shortcomings as a physical entertainer. Thus, the image he conveyed onstage in Santa Monica – a 1960s rendition of the middle-class black pop star – occupied a place along the black performative spectrum that was far removed from James Brown's unabashed bravado.

Gaye's biographer, David Ritz, described his performance style as "very classy… smoothly swaying with a minimum of movement." (Readers will note the repetition of those Motown-centric buzzwords: "classy," "smooth.")[72] This "minimum of movement" is a standard hallmark of Gaye's performance throughout his career, and is worth some special attention. In the *T.A.M.I. Show* film, Gaye appears onstage in a six-minute set featuring four of his contemporary r&b hits, accompanied by a veritable circus of peripheral performers: the female trio The Blossoms on backing vocals, two pairs of frenzied teen twisters, and eventually an entire troupe of dancing kids who swarm center stage during the singer's encore. Over the course of four tunes Gaye never once removed himself from his fixed position at center stage, and apart from several fleeting hand gestures, some seemingly spontaneous hip swivels, and one more or less palatable effort at a James Brown-esque kineticism, he never attempted any bodily movement that could even generously be called "dancing." In fact, nearly everyone on stage with Gaye (including the backing vocal trio) exhibited more physicality throughout the performance than did the star singer; in this sense, Gaye was not so much commanding the stage as he

[72] Ritz, 103.

was sharing it with a cavalcade of curiously active extras.[73] It was a special kind of masculine authority that Gaye managed to enact on the stage of the Civic Auditorium: an authority established not through the foregrounding of physical effort, or emotional histrionics, but through a reserved kind of magneticism – his was a charismatic authority, of the kind frequently mentioned by critics of his idol, Frank Sinatra.[74]

The black male body has long been a repository for racial stereotyping, promoted not only in the supremely racist mythical portraits of the "hypersexual 'savage'" and his counterpart, "the delicate, fragile, and exotic 'oriental'," but also – somewhat more benignly – in the cultural self-images of African-Americans themselves, who refer to the standard clichés that the black male body is more attuned to rhythm and thus more capable of dance than is the white body.[75] This last stereotype, in particular, seemed especially popular in conditioning reactions to "the Motown sound." Singer Isaac Hayes, who spent his career at Stax Records, the premier southern soul label, sought to clarify the key distinction between Motown and the "soulful" sounds of Stax:

> Now it was a standard joke with blacks, that whites could not, cannot clap on a backbeat. You know – ain't got rhythm? What Motown did was…beat the kids over the head with it. That wasn't soulful to us down at Stax, but baby it sold.[76]

Hayes' indirect implication – that blacks did indeed have rhythm, unlike their white counterparts – should probably be understood as at least partly tongue-in-cheek, but it nonetheless raises some spectral questions over the racial meanings of Marvin Gaye's

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[73] *The T.A.M.I. Show*, DVD.
[74] See T. H. Adamowski, "State of Grace: Sinatra and American Charisma," in *Frank Sinatra: History, Identity, and Italian American Culture*, ed. Stanislao Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 101-117.
[75] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 133.
[76] Quoted in Floyd, 205.

"minimum of movement." What did it mean that Gaye, with his allegedly "white"-sounding black pop, and his "white" bourgeois values, didn't dance for his audiences? Motown singer Bobby Taylor, echoing another contemporary in-joke from the Motown family, claimed that Gaye "couldn't dance a lick – he patted his foot like a white boy."[77] How does one pat one's foot "like a white boy," and does this automatically mean he is not "soulful"?

Ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt has suggested that there is indeed a firm social grounding for the stereotype of black kinetic prowess, one which is obviously socio-cultural rather than biological in nature. In her 2006 work *The Games Black Girls Play*, Gaunt puts forth a notion of "kinetic orality," a kind of socializing practice particularly common in black urban American communities, wherein basic tenets of rhythm are learned at an early age through schoolyard games like handclapping exercises. What emerges through this kind of socialization is what Gaunt refers to as a "metronome sense:" an acute internalization of musical and oral rhythms that comes to seem almost *innate*, though naturally it is not.[78] Samuel Floyd argues that "the Motown sound," with its seemingly unsoulful foregrounded backbeat, actually served a similar function for its cross-racial audiences; fearing that some listeners might need some help establishing this "kinetic orality," Berry Gordy employed his unusually large rhythm section as an "educational tool," downplaying the more identifiably black musical polyrhythms of soul, jazz and funk in favour of a dance beat that indeed "beat the kids over the head."[79] Marvin Gaye could clap on the backbeat, we can be sure: he was a session drummer on

[77] Quoted in *American Masters: What's Going On*, PBS Television.
[78] Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3, 29, 62.
[79] Floyd, 205.

some of Motown's earliest hits before he became one of the label's recording artists. But dance appears to have been a skill he never fully mastered (nor, it seems, particularly cared to); Motown choreographer Cholly Atkins later claimed that he spent more time golfing with Marvin Gaye than teaching him to dance.[80] Gaye instead developed a performativity that capitalized on an economy of physicality – "a minimum of movement" – that may not have been soulful to Ralph Gleason or the artists of Stax, but was certainly no less "authentically" black than the kinetic fireworks of the Godfather of Soul.

Economy of movement, in fact, defined the tradition of black pop's spectacular performance, from its earliest doo-wop practitioners like Sonny Til's The Orioles through to the mid-1960s Motown acts. (Few commentaries that I am aware of have made much of the fact that, despite Motown maintaining an in-house choreographer, the physicality of the label's artists was remarkably understated – and what is more, carefully arranged to be so.) For Philip Gentry, this "minimum of movement," within the context of The Orioles' doo-wop, was bound up in the politics of the discourse of smoothness and its associated effort "to create a masculinity that did not draw attention to itself."[81] In a pre-civil rights era, when black men were often compelled to employ a "social subterfuge…to mask their masculinity," lest they become targets of white fears over black sexuality, this low key masculinity served a crucial role in male African-American artists inserting themselves into the mainstream of pop music.[82]

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[80] Atkins and Malone, 158.
[81] Gentry, 150.
[82] "Social subterfuge" is Steve Estes' phrase. Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 2.

And yet these unassuming male performance strategies survived well into the modern civil rights era of the early 1960s, a movement that for both its advocates and detractors turned on increasingly public acknowledgments of black masculinity and an African-American "quest for manhood," embodied by the strong masculinist rhetoric of both the movement's male leadership and their segregationist opponents.[83] Was there a political imperative involved, which led artists like Marvin Gaye to downplay the physicality of their performances in a bid for a "masculinity which did not draw excessive attention to itself"? Or were these performative masculinities, embedded in the roots of the black pop aesthetic, simply a continuation and extension of an alternative image of black manhood that had outlived its initial socio-political purpose? Ultimately, perhaps, Gaye's "minimum of movement" was simply a matter of preference – a fulfillment of a unique ambition, little discussed in histories of black musical aesthetics, to become the Black Sinatra, whose stately mannerisms would open the doors to the bourgeois refinement of the Copacabana.

As I noted in the first section of this chapter, the emergence of the mid-1960s soul phenomenon (itself the product of complex socially and politically-driven shifts in black consciousness) would drastically change the fortunes of black pop as a viable mediator of black public culture: so drastically, in fact, that even the memory of the black pop era would come to be scrutinized through a misplaced backwards-looking lens of late-1960s racial consciousness, as an aberration of staunchly black cultural expressivity. So strong was (and is) the narrative of "a robust pride in things distinctively black" that distinctive blackness itself became nearly monolithic in music histories – and it looked a good deal more like James ("I'm Black and I'm Proud") Brown than it did the Black Sinatra.

[83] *Ibid*, 7-9.

Perhaps the reason that Jeffrey Melnick's "threshold level of identifiable blackness" has proved such a thorny issue for commentators of black musical culture is that "identifiable blackness" has slipped from its moorings as an historically-contingent construct, now often valorized as one or several ways of performing blackness at the expense of others. And finally, perhaps we should devote more significant scholarly attention to those intriguing cultural snapshots, like *The T.A.M.I. Show*, which are compelling for much more than their offerings of nostalgia. On a bill that was surely among the most aggressively integrated of the rock-'n'-roll era, two performers of radically different social, geographic and musical backgrounds presented two very different images of what black male musical performativity could look and sound like in modern integrated America – and the kids offered their adulation generously and indiscriminately, for the "blackest" rhythm and blues as for the "whitest" black pop.

Conclusion

As this analysis has suggested, reviewing the early career of Marvin Gaye without a view to the canonical values of the singer's oeuvre prompts some interesting questions regarding our treatment of black pop as an historical phenomenon. With the exception of the "Black Rock Coalition" movement of the 1980s, there is perhaps no single twentieth-century African-American musical style (of comparative popularity) that has drawn so little attention from scholars and even popular critics, and this silence itself offers intriguing fodder for critique.[84] If Motown's bid for crossover success is any example, there appears to be a constellation of racial projects that touch on black pop, feeding into our perceptions of the style and the racialized meanings we have come to assign to it; but

[84] For an exceptional study of the Black Rock Coalition, see Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

do these meanings satisfy an attempt to historicize the black pop aesthetic, understanding it within its postwar, pre-soul context? I would suggest, based on the evidence above, that black pop demands further consideration as a distinct site of black musical expression in the postwar period, but that first we must complicate and reconsider the frameworks in which the style is to be dissected.

Considering the tremendous weight assigned to "soul music" in the prevailing literature – and without denying the profoundly important social meanings that soul music cultivated for black Americans in the late 1960s – it is not especially surprising that we should come to remember Marvin Gaye as the social prophet of his *What's Going On* period. But one unintended effect of this emphasis, on the singer's post-Sixties work, is that by addressing almost exclusively the "black" end of a "conventional black-white spectrum," studies of soul music (and Motown's eventual participation in the style) tend to reflexively place the early decade's black pop further towards the opposite end of this spectrum than it probably belongs. Crossover success, once a potent symbol of black opportunity and optimism for an egalitarian musical mainstream, came to stand for a bleaching of black expressivity; in recollection, images of white faces in the crowd slid uneasily into images of "white sounds" in the music – how else could black pop singers nurture so many white listeners? Soul music was more openly, proudly and sometimes even defiantly black than most of its ancestral genres, but this was a reflection of a mass black consciousness that was decidedly of its cultural moment in the mid to late-1960s. This declarative blackness had not been the imperative of many postwar black musical forms, like black pop, whose entrance into the mainstream of American music coincided not just with an emphasis on a sort of musical universalism (i.e., the absence of

identifiably *black* subject matter), but more importantly a social shift towards end-goals of an apparently "race-free" society. To insist on one's blackness in the heyday of Motown's market dominance invited possible alienation from the mainstream marketplace (a regrettable reality, to be sure); it also, however, might suggest a betrayal of a longed-for societal "colour blindness." The pitfalls of this program towards a post-racial society became apparent in time, but the projection of these lessons back onto the relatively optimistic black pop era does not provide us with an appreciation for the nuances of the pre-soul black musical marketplace.

The black middle classes in the postwar period had always been the site of contention and contestation, though considering their rapid transformation from 1960 to the end of the decade it is natural that the black bourgeoisdom of the pre-Black Power era should likewise come to be reflected on through a similar backwards projection. Black economic empowerment in the Black Power era, as promoted even by musicians like James Brown (who would use his wealth to reclaim dozens of southern radio stations for black owners and black content), often followed a distinctly separatist agenda; it was no longer enough for the black middle classes to enjoy the fruits of economic success, if this had to come at a price of racial assimilation of the sort previously promoted by integrationists.[85] Indeed, by the time the ideal of Black Power emerged in 1966, it had become all too clear that the benefits of the civil rights struggle for integration had mostly gone to those already of the middle class; the movement itself had been the work of largely middle-class leaders – lawyers, clergy, scholars – and the gains made for voting

[85] Brown would become a staunchly separatist proponent of black economic empowerment from the mid-1960s onwards. For his views on black nationalist economics, see interviews in *The Night James Brown Saved Boston*, dir: David Leaf, DVD (Shout! Factory, 2009).

rights and desegregated public facilities were uniquely middle-class gains.[86] In this sense, the ostentatious displays of upward mobility and economic luxury so prevalent in the public images of artists like Marvin Gaye became uncomfortable, if only implied, acknowledgments of just how selectively racio-economic equalities had been achieved by the integrationist agenda.

And then there were the expectations of whites, like rock critic Ralph Gleason, whose expectations of black performativity led him to balk at the Motown artists' unabashed totems of economic success. For Gleason, working at that time to inculcate an emergent rockist narrative, there was an obvious and proper way to *perform* the black body – not necessarily a fictitious ideal, but one that was embraced by a certain kind of black performer, like James Brown, while others like the Motown roster opted for a more-or-less de-racialized "American music." If Gleason's remarks were impelled by an essentialist vision of black musicality, they were not necessarily racist in intent; it was just that there was something oddly incomprehensible to that writer about a black body that did not act out its racial identity according to prescribed notions of how that body ought to behave. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant might suggest, Gleason and his ilk were "disoriented" by singers like Marvin Gaye and The Supremes, who acted as though they had lost touch with their apparent "church" roots (which indeed *was* a fictitious ideal). This perceived discrepancy – this disorienting mismatch of the actual and stereotypical image of the black singer – has unfortunately continued to influence perceptions of the black pop era, with the result that many commentators seem loath to address the style in appreciable depth.

[86] For the classed implications of the civil rights movement, see Omi and Winant, 101.

What is most interesting about artifacts like *The T.A.M.I. Show* film is that this supposed discrepancy does not seem to have particularly troubled (or "disoriented") those observers whose opinion we, as critics, should value most: the teenaged consumers for whom the music was produced, after all, in the first place. Nelson George, at a remove of several decades, would posit that the black teens who listened to white pop music (like the *T.A.M.I. Show*'s Beach Boys, Leslie Gore or Jan & Dean), or "whitened" black performers (e.g., Marvin Gaye), were deluding themselves in believing this music to be their own. If so, this was a supremely powerful self-delusion, capable of inspiring near-hysterical levels of admiration and excitement. And if James Brown was, as Amiri Baraka claimed, "the Blackest" of America's entertainers, then the *T.A.M.I. Show* audience seemed to suggest that they could sustain an appreciation for multiple dynamic expressions of black musicality without acknowledging any discrepancy. Marvin Gaye didn't dance, didn't holler, didn't insist on representations of a familiar masculine performativity – he did not behave, that is, like James Brown, but offered instead a neat performative alternative to the great r&b shouter that proclaimed, above all else, the excitingly diverse modes of black musical expressivity available to the black pop-era male singer. It was then up to history to decide just how "white" this performance appeared.

By 1966, in the wake of a disastrous debut at the Copacabana, Marvin Gaye was beginning to change in attitude and ambition: maturing as a performer and songwriter, but even more profoundly, awakening to the harsh reality of contemporary American race politics, and increasingly convinced that he ought to be engaged in commitments to black American communities beyond the delivery of danceable pop tunes. "He's just

converting to adult life and getting away from the kinderspiel," noted a reviewer in *Variety* writing on Gaye's Copa debut, "It's a difficult period of transition."[87] Difficult, as it happened, would prove a marked understatement. "Suffering and injustice are things which I've always felt deep in my soul," Gaye would later remark of the period, "and I wondered what I was doing singing rock and roll…instead of leading the marchers."[88] He would not lead the marchers, but neither was he still content to "sing for rich Republicans in tuxes and tails at the Copacabana."[89] In 1968, with the arrival of fresh blood to Motown in the form of soul-minded producer Norman Whitfield, he released his first distinctly soul-based record, "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," which would become his biggest hit to that point. Later, in 1970, his brother Frankie returned from a tour in Vietnam, whereupon he found Marvin deep in the throes of a year-long reclusive depression wrought by the death of his duet partner Tammi Terrell. Personally and professionally, Gaye entered the 1970s thoroughly disillusioned with his pop career, nearly destroyed by personal demons – and increasingly disturbed by the continued plight of black America and the socio-political prospects of the country at large. As he worked towards preparation of his opus, *What's Going On*, which would be the first explicitly personal statement made by Gaye after a decade at Motown, he decided that never again would he content himself with being "merely" a black pop star.[90]

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[87] Quoted in Ritz, 108.
[88] *Ibid*, 52.
[89] *Ibid*, 79.
[90] See Ritz; Davies; Michael Eric Dyson, *Mercy, Mercy Me: The Art, Loves & Demons of Marvin Gaye* (Cambridge: Perseus, 2004).

Chapter Four

"I May Be a White Boy but I Can Be Bad Too":
White Negroes, Superstuds, and the Blackface Roots of the MC5's Rock

> The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could. Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body.
>
> – Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (1957)[1]

> The same old primitivism crap in a new package.
>
> – Ralph Ellison, on *The White Negro*[2]

"The Same Old Primitivism": Norman Mailer, the American Hipster, and the MC5

In the autumn of 1957, in the pages of the leftist intellectual journal *Dissent*, a young New York Jewish writer named Norman Mailer – until then a bit-player in liberal intellectual literary circles – published what would become one of the most infamous and divisive social critiques ever offered against the straight-jacketing conformity of the Eisenhower-era American middle classes. Titled after the heroic archetype of Mailer's trumpeted brand of bohemianism, "The White Negro" was intended as a class warrior's manifesto: a program by which the Beat-age white bohemian "hipster" could mitigate his

[1] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent*, Fall 1957. http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=26 (accessed November 21, 2009)
[2] Ralph Ellison, quoted in Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 69.

supposed existential crises by throwing off the shackles of his sexually inhibited middle-classness and launching himself, by choice, into the furthest margins of American society – where dwelt the *true* Negro, or at least that version of him that occupied Mailer's fertile fantasies. Reeking of a sort of sympathetic liberal primitivist perspective, "The White Negro" blasted the conformity of middle-class white America and championed obeisance to a life ruled by the urges of the id: gratification of the body and the embrace of so-called "psychopathic" spontaneous impulses to signal the hipster's rejection of white society's prescribed roles.[3] For Mailer, the problems facing the alienated white liberal in a Cold War context reflected black America's long struggle for recognition in a society still held in the throes of virulent racism; resolving these crises of self, he suggested, depended on the hipster's adoption of an essential black masculine psyche – clothing himself in the attitudes and rhetoric of the African-American male. It was in the black body and black street culture that Mailer saw (or, to be precise, imagined) the solution to white liberal detachment; the dissenting dissonance of the black man's jazz, his negotiation of societal fringe positions, and indeed even his orgasms, hard-sought and spontaneously given, were to be the cultural capital by which the white hipster could claim a legitimate stance within the underbelly of polite society. Racial masquerade, of white beatniks costumed in the anti-privilege of American blackness, was Mailer's key to overturning the expectations of a mainstream American morality.[4]

"The same old primitivism crap in a new package," remarked writer Ralph Ellison in a letter to a friend – just one among many countless objections black intellectuals took

[3] Mailer.
[4] *Ibid.*

towards Mailer's well-intentioned though "absurd blowhardism."[5] In the service of his radical white polemic, Mailer had appropriated the most uncomfortable historical stereotype of American black manhood, the "hypersexual 'savage'" in the words of Kobena Mercer, and invested it with a heroism evidently born of white envy; nevertheless, argued Ellison and others in black literary circles, a black stud was a black stud – no less egregiously caricatured for his apparent heroism. "[Mailer] thinks all hipsters are cocksmen possessed of great euphoric orgasms and are out to fuck the world into peace," Ellison wryly continued, "[and] it makes you hesitant to say more than the slightest greetings to their wives lest they think you're out to give them a hot fat injection."[6] Playwright Lorraine Hansberry referred to Mailer as the figurehead of "the New Paternalism," whose "romantic racism" was merely a new skin on a very well-worn trope of racial essentialism.[7] "The White Negro" embraced the classical stereotype of black male hypersexuality, favored by contemporary segregationists in their quest to curtail a perceived path towards miscegenation, and offered it up as an exemplar for disenchanted white bohemians; the problem was that it was a project neither asked for nor appreciated by many black commentators.

The pathological black superstud who graces Mailer's "White Negro" was chiefly a product of that author's white fantasies, to be sure. Mailer was not far off, however, in limning the alternatives available to the African-American male of the late 1950s: he could "live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger."[8] What complicated this observation was the author's contention that the disillusioned white

[5] Saul, 67, 69.
[6] *Ibid*, 69.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Mailer.

beatnik was faced with the same unenviable choice: to kow-tow to mainstream behavioural norms or to find himself utterly marginalized (or worse, targeted) for living according to the whims of the body. The political aims of Mailer's manifesto were deliberately ambiguous; the White Negro existed not to challenge, reform or transform the society from which he had come detached, but rather to *circumvent* that society, opting by his racial masquerade to occupy the outer regions of a social structure within which he, like the black male, could not find a place. Insofar as "The White Negro" charted a program of political dissent it was, according to literary scholar Scott Saul, an "argu[ment] against liberal platitudes of reasoned, articulate dissent." Mailer envisioned "a company of hipsters 'trying to create a new nervous system for themselves,' engaged in psychological and even physical combat with anyone who might constrain their free will."[9] It was this nihilistic breach of "reasoned, articulate dissent" that would prove the most striking feature of Mailer's vision for the marginalized American bohemian of the Beat age – "a class warrior's admission of defeat," claims Saul, by a self-professed hipster castrated by the inefficacy of liberal political action and ghettoized by his adherence to "the art of the primitive."[10]

Given the history of white musical appropriation of black cultural forms (see Chapter 1), it should not be surprising that we often find semblances of Mailer's White Negritude most acutely pronounced in the performances of white entertainers. Once The White Negro had gained a foothold in the American consciousness, his image proved remarkably resilient even through the radical changes to American race relations in the decade following his creation. Maureen Mahon, in her study of black presence in rock

[9] Saul, 65-66.
[10] *Ibid*, 68.

culture, *Right to Rock*, suggests a virtually unbroken chain of musical White Negroes operating in the mainstream of pop music, visible in the firmly apolitical rhythm and blues of Elvis Presley in the late 1950s, through to Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger, who from the early 1960s onwards dabbled in the performance of a more or less legibly black musical identity.[11] This commitment to the image, by whatever name, of the blackened white singer is at once understandable and thoroughly problematic, as cultural critic Margo Jefferson observed in a 1973 *Harper's* article, "Ripping Off Black Music." "You can't lose playing the White Negro," wrote Jefferson, "because you are in the unique position of retaining the material benefits of being white while sampling the mythological ones of being black."[12] White Negroes wear the mask of blackness, Mahon claims, "but it is a mask that they can remove if need be. This flexibility is, of course, a luxury no African American can enjoy."[13] In other words, the White Negro's alleged sharing of outsider status worked on only the most superficial level – not even skin deep, as it were. Mailer's white hipster could implicate himself in a process of becoming The Other, but his escape hatch, back into the folds of mainstream white society, remained perpetually open by virtue of his white privilege, wanted or not.

The earliest of rock-'n'-roll's White Negroes – those referenced by Mahon, such as Elvis Presley and Mick Jagger – certainly availed themselves of the benefits of "sampling" black musical identities, but they were admittedly less concerned with the overt rejection of their own whiteness than was Mailer's hypothetical bohemian. Nor were these blackened white singers much interested in the political imperative of Mailer's

[11] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 248.
[12] Quoted in Mahon, 248.
[13] *Ibid.*

treatise, if indeed they were aware of the text at all. They were White Negroes only insofar as they chose to try on Mahon's "mask of blackness" as a performative strategy. Mailer's article merely provided a convenient handle for these white rock-'n'-rollers' fascination with black culture – a postwar update on a story of white curiosity over black cultural identity that pre-dated the publication of "The White Negro" by more than a century, its roots lying in the wildly popular nineteenth-century form of the blackface minstrel show.

With the mid-1960s shift in mass American black consciousness, towards a more open and enunciated pride in blackness as a site of cultural empowerment, came a renegotiation and reexamination of black identity and its meaningful employment in the service of new black social movements: Black Power, Black Pride, the Black Arts movement, and reinvigorated forms of black nationalist politics.[14] By late decade, blackness as racial and social category had become "a confrontational identification that stood in clear opposition to whiteness."[15] The increasingly separatist strains of black political and intellectual rhetoric in this period were twinned by a rejuvenation of a radicalized (and largely white) New Left, embodied by the "countercultural" efforts of groups like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Youth International Party (the "Yips").[16] It was in this climate that a new and highly conspicuous group of musical White Negroes emerged out of inner-city Detroit: a group that came to

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[14] See Dean Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka & Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
[15] Mahon, 249.
[16] See Mathew J. Bartkowiak, "Motor City Burning: Rock and Rebellion in the WPP and the MC5," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1:2 (2007), 55-56; James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Touchstone, 1987), 226, 235-236 (on the SDS antiwar movement); 285-299 (on the Yippies); Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 147-148, 210, 254 (on the New Left and the counterculture).

rearticulate the logic of Mailer's White Negro with remarkable (if unconscious) faithfulness to the original. Presley and Jagger may have contented themselves with "sampling the mythological [benefits]" of blackness, and so been branded White Negroes, but they shared none of Mailer's rage against "liberal platitudes of reasoned, articulate dissent," nor did they see fit to remark upon the condition of their own whiteness. This was not true of Detroit's prodigal New White Negroes – a brutishly amplified hard rock group called The MC5 – who would enact a performance of black manhood so strongly indebted to Mailer's Beat-age hipster as to be his most obvious successors to the crown of White Negritude.

The MC5 (for "the Motor City Five," unofficially) occupy an intriguing and complicated niche in the history of America's youth counterculture of the 1960s, and it is thus surprising that comparatively little has been written on the group – especially given their often uneasy representations of racialized masculinities and racial identity in the service of their politicized white hard rock. Sympathetic to a fault to the politics of radical black nationalist groups like the Black Panthers, the members of the MC5 crafted a collective persona that championed the Panthers' brand of radical Maoist-Marxist politicking, marrying these politics to a musical and lyrical hyper-masculinism that was quite consciously and explicitly derived from the same myths of black male sexuality that had birthed Mailer's White Negro nearly a decade before the group was founded. Perhaps the best analytical study of the MC5, by music historian Steve Waksman, situates the group's performances within the tradition of Mailer's White Negro, claiming a "logic of blackface" that undergirds the visual and musical aesthetics of the band.[17]

[17] Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 222.

Like the hipster of Mailer's imaginings, the members of the MC5 sought to discredit their birthright of white privilege by locating themselves within the outsider culture of a perceived mythical black manhood; musically, rhetorically, and even tonsorially, the group adopted wholesale the signifiers of radical black nationalists like the Black Panthers in order to insist upon their assumed marginalized status and to claim detachment from the mainstream parent culture with which they, like many other white radicals, had become thoroughly disillusioned. And, as for Mailer, it was within the irrational (and perhaps even nihilistic) impulses of the sexualized body that the MC5 located the key to the psychological liberation of the disillusioned white radical, calling for communion through orgasmic bodily experience over and above any program of "reasoned, articulate [political] dissent."

With their explicit emulation of their black male heroes, political and musical, and their frequently chauvinist calls for erotic liberation, the MC5 are a tricky group to extract from their immediate historical context – liable to be (mis)read as profoundly racist or decidedly anti-feminist, or both. Like Steve Waksman, I suspect that such a facile dismissal of the group's performativity does not quite account for what now may seem a one-dimensional portrayal of racial and gendered explorations of performed identity. The group was deeply sympathetic to the most progressive elements of the Black Power era, and if their essentialized readings of black hyper-masculinity seem cartoonish today, it is worth exploring how we might account for the discrepancy. Was this a racist project? Or perhaps, more mildly, "the same old primitivism crap in a new package"?

Following on the initial arguments of writers like Waksman, this chapter seeks to address the MC5's "logic of blackface" and to root out both the motivations and implications of the group's potentially perturbing emulation of black masculinities and black culture. The first section of the essay looks to the group's participation in a somewhat unique countercultural political movement – the Detroit-based White Panther Party – to explore the group's cultivation of a black nationalist political philosophy for white leftists, and the ways in which this radical politicking was reflected in the MC5's performance of a revamped White Negritude. Next, I provide a critique of just one of the group's recorded performances, captured on their debut LP, which has attracted surprisingly little attention in the extant literature and yet speaks clearly to the perceived cultural capital of the MC5's black nationalist heroes, and the ends to which groups like the Black Panther Party were employed in the service of the band's political rhetoric. The final section of the chapter, drawing on cultural theories of musical appropriation and racialized performance posited by Theodore Gracyk, George Lipsitz and feminist musicologist Gayle Wald, addresses the thorny issue of white cultural co-optation; this section seeks a more nuanced understanding of the uses to which historically black musics were used, by groups like the MC5, to validate the performance of the White Negro, but also to unveil the complex contradictions inherent in the late-1960s phenomenon of the "white blues."

State/meants: White Panthers, Black Masks

Like any number of contemporary late-1960s rock groups, the MC5 remain swaddled in a set of impossibly romantic myths that make it difficult to tease out fact from legend.

Early footage of the group performing on local Detroit television in 1966 suggest that the rudiments of the MC5's thrashing sonic assault were already in place before they had gained any significant local notoriety, and certainly before an identifiable "Detroit rock" sound had been pinned down and explicated by emergent rock journals such as *Rolling Stone* and Detroit's own *Creem* (the latter of which would play an instrumental role in hyping the city's late-'60s rock coterie to a national readership).[18] Apart from their exceptional volume, there was in fact little to mark the early MC5 as anything more than another of the city's many white rhythm and blues groups. Since the late 1950s, Detroit had boasted a close-knit, if somewhat cultish, community of black and white r&b singers like Nathaniel Mayer ("Little Village") and Mitch Ryder ("Little Latin Lupe Lu"), who together shared the stages of the city's happily integrated teen dancehalls and coffeeshops.[19] The sounds of Motown's staggeringly successful black pop, produced just a short drive from where the Motor City Five attended classes at Lincoln Park High School, seem rarely to have crept onto these groups' musical radars; Detroit's r&b groups prized the hard-edged sounds of raw black rhythm and blues, and even the black singers expected their white counterparts to sing with "soul," praising them when they accomplished such a feat.[20] If they were more noxiously loud than Mitch Ryder's Detroit Wheels, the MC5 of formative years were still very much planted in Detroit's cross-racial rhythm and blues community, suggesting only a glimmer of the racial masquerade that would become their totem and rallying cry by decade's end.

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[18] This performance footage is included in *MC5: A True Testimonial*, dir. David C. Thomas, DVD (Future/Now Films, 2004). For further reading on Detroit's rock journalism culture, see Michael J. Kramer, "'Can't Forget the Motor City': Creem Magazine, Rock Music, Detroit Identity, Mass Consumerism, and the Counterculture," *The Michigan Historical Review* 28 (Fall, 2002), 42-77.
[19] See David Carson, *Grit, Noise and Revolution: The Birth of Detroit Rock 'n' Roll* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 58-61.
[20] *Ibid.*

The impetus for the group's eventual dive into White Negritude appears to have been their first encounter, in 1966, with one of Detroit's most prominent radical activists, a self-proclaimed Maoist and full-time fomenter of disorder named John Sinclair, who would become the MC5's manager (and, unofficially, the in-house political sage) before his arrest for marijuana trafficking in 1969.[21] The group first approached Sinclair in hopes of securing rehearsal space at the headquarters of the activist's artist workshop, Trans-Love Energies, and quickly ingratiated themselves through their shared love of black free jazz and blues musics. Sinclair immediately set to work inculcating his young kindred spirits to his radical leftist political perspectives (not a difficult sell, it would appear), providing copies of Mao's Red Book to the Five and inviting them to live communally at the Trans-Love headquarters while they continued honing their increasingly abrasive hard rock. By 1967 Sinclair was the group's *de facto* manager and spokesman, promoting the MC5 through his columns in left-wing underground journals like *The Fifth Estate*, to which he was a regular contributor, and arranging live appearances by the band at some of Detroit's earliest hippie events.[22] An ardent admirer of the revolutionary radical black nationalism of the Black Panther Party (an infatuation shared, especially, by MC5 vocalist Rob Tyner), Sinclair would be the one to cement, in the public imagination, his collective's legible "fascination with black manhood," in the words of Steve Waksman. By the fall of 1968, when the MC5 finally set to work on their

[21] Sinclair was set up by an undercover officer and convicted of trafficking for the sale of two joints, sentenced to ten years in prison in 1969. His release from prison, in 1971, is often credited to the efforts of high-profile supporters like John Lennon, whose "Free John Sinclair" ("It ain't fair / John Sinclair / In the stir for breathing air") was released as a benefit single to offset Sinclair's hefty legal fees. Sinclair would never again be affiliated with the MC5 after his arrest. See *MC5: A True Testimonial*, DVD; John Sinclair, *Guitar Army: Rock and Revolution with the MC5 and the White Panther Party* (New York: Process Books, 2007 [1972]).

[22] The most notable of these performances, at the 1967 Belle Isle "Love-In," proved the first of many run-ins the MC5 would have with police-sponsored violence against youth countercultural dissenters. See Bartkowiak, 63; *MC5: A True Testimonial*, DVD.

first long-playing record, Sinclair had already dreamed up his vision for a political party of his own, in which the hard rockers were to play a central role as the "official house band and propaganda machine to the masses."[23]

Notwithstanding a pair of early studio-cut singles (including the willfully uncommercial "Looking At You" [1967], produced – to use the word generously – by Sinclair himself), the MC5 would enter the pantheon of late-1960s hard rock groups largely on the strength of their live debut LP, *Kick Out the Jams*: "the only live debut album that's ever mattered," as reviewer Chuck Eddy described it, "[and] one of the livest *anythings* ever."[24] The record was recorded over two nights at Detroit's Grande Ballroom in October 1968, and upon its release the following January served to crystallize the group's image not only as rock's most outspoken political grand-standers, but as unapologetic emulators of black masculine performance. The first sounds on the record came from a bearded white hippie named "Brother" J. C. Crawford, the group's informal rally-man, whose fiery imploring of Detroit's "brothers and sisters" to "testify" bespoke a clear debt to the oratory of a black Baptist preacher. Then followed nearly forty minutes of impossibly loud white rock, unvarying in its dependence on African-American blues, rhythm and blues, and even free jazz – the whole circus led by the outrageously afro-ed Rob Tyner, who ceased his ham-fisted white soul vocalisms only long enough to provide angry condemnations of rich "honkies" and to introduce "Brother" Wayne Kramer on lead guitar.[25] One of the group's blues celebrated the insurrectionary Black Panthers explicitly; most of the other songs, no less overtly,

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[23] Bartkowiak, 55.
[24] The concept of a *live* debut album from a rock group was, and remains, extraordinarily novel in the history of American rock music: or, as Eddy pithily continues, "damn few [live debut albums] have ever even *not mattered!*" Quoted in Waksman, 233.
[25] MC5, *Kick Out the Jams*, LP (Elektra Records, 1969).

declaimed the singer's hypersexual prowess in musical terms unmistakably coded black. Even the group's most famous rallying cry, howled with utter disregard for the legalities of public decorum, was indirectly borne of the Panthers' much-maligned public rhetoric: "It's time to – Kick Out the Jams, Motherfucker!" ("Harangues that began with f---------- and mother-f----------," noted a critic from *Newsweek*, were among the most frequently observed elements, in mainstream American media, of the Black Panthers' allegedly anti-white public rabble-rousing from the late 1960s onwards.)[26]

John Sinclair was not leaving anything to chance with regard to his group's defiant message, and in the weeks following the Five's Grande Ballroom performances the activist played his trump. In mid-November Sinclair published a column in *The Fifth Estate* outlining his ten-point program for a new political party to be headed by himself and Ann Arbor radical Pun Plamondon: a BPP corollary fittingly (if ambivalently) named the White Panther Party (WPP). Sinclair's "White Panther State/meant," as the program was titled, was modeled after the Black Panthers' own ten-point charter and intended as a manifesto for a "cultural revolution through a total assault on the culture."[27] Decrying the "white honkie culture that has been handed to us on a silver plastic platter," Sinclair employed a rhetoric that placed his group firmly on the side of a rising militant black nationalism, repeatedly citing the late Malcolm X's call to force change "by any means necessary." The first point of the WPP's program called for full support of the BPP's ten-point program. The second: "Total assault on the culture by any means necessary,

[26] Quoted in Edward P. Morgan, "Media Culture and the Public Memory of the Black Panther Party," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 344.
[27] John Sinclair, "State/meant," reprinted in Sinclair, *Guitar* Army, 89-91.

including rock & roll, dope, and fucking in the streets."[28] Looking back decades later, with the clear-eyed detachment of hindsight, Sinclair laughed as he admitted that the WPP "was the furthest thing from a political program that you could possibly imagine."[29] Like his brothers-in-arms of the MC5, Sinclair was deeply committed to a re-evaluation of America's moral boundaries, but as a political party the WPP accomplished little apart from an aesthetically-striking play-acting.

What the White Panthers did call for, repeatedly and insistently, might have been lifted directly from Mailer's "White Negro." "We will do anything we can to drive people out of their minds and into their bodies," promised Sinclair's manifesto, "[and] rock & roll is the spearhead of the attack." The author claimed that the music of the MC5, the *de facto* cultural figureheads of the WPP movement, "contains and extends the power and feeling of the black magic music that originally informed our bodies and told us that we could be free."[30] (One can almost hear Ralph Ellison muttering in the wings.) Despite an obvious sympathy for the struggles of his black nationalist peers, Sinclair almost automatically tended to conflate a turn towards the *body* with the mythical quality of black masculinity. His rage against reason, the cornerstone of Norman Mailer's hipster program, was reflected not only in his desire to see white America join the ranks of the "white mother country dope fiend rock & roll *freeks*" but also in the conjuring of a mythic "black magic" – the "crazy [and]…pure" sounds of his musical heroes like John Coltrane and Archie Shepp, and also the emboldened political stance of BPP members Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seale.[31]

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[28] *Ibid*.
[29] *MC5: A True Testimonial*, DVD.
[30] Sinclair, 90-91.
[31] *Ibid.*

Historian Yohuru Williams, in a recent survey of Black Panther look-alike groups of the 1960s, elects to see the WPP not as a Panther support group but as "Panther mimics" – "[making] clear their emulation of the Panthers, but through their own cultural lens."[32] Williams is being slightly generous here, I suspect, in light of Sinclair's later disarming of his group's true political potency. Certainly, the Black Panthers were not overly concerned with their white counterparts' "cultural lens." MC5 guitarist Wayne Kramer recalled the first notice taken by the Black Panthers of their white mimics: "They wrote about us in the Black Panther newsletter – they called us 'psychedelic clowns.'"[33] The critique is worth some consideration, particularly since the MC5 represented a mediated public enactment of the WPP's somewhat ludicrous platform – a *clown-show*, in a manner of speaking. The group was obsessed with costuming itself, often quite literally, in the codified language of the Black Panthers' aesthetic – "mimicking" the signifiers of militant black resistance that made the BPP such a conspicuously terrifying presence in the American psyche.

But where were the capital-P Politics in the MC5's guerrilla theater performance of Black Panther-isms? Where do we find, in Sinclair's inflated rhetoric, engagement with the Panther's socialist programs – of their breakfast programs for ghetto youth, their free medical clinics established in America's most degraded urban centers, or their march on California's state Capitol in May 1967, guns drawn, to demand their constitutional right to armed self-defense? Just as Norman Mailer, a decade before, had spun the anxious myth of the black superstud into a site of apparent celebration, so too did the WPP appear to latch onto the most superficial media portrayals of the Black Panthers –

[32] Yohuru Williams, "White Tigers, Brown Berets, Black Panthers, Oh My!" in *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 186.
[33] *MC5: A True Testimonial*, DVD.

"the Bad Niggers of white America's nightmares," as *Newsweek* cheekily commented in 1970 – using these images to advance their own (quasi-)political capital.[34] Sinclair's wife Leni, a German-born radical socialist and accomplished photographer, choreographed photo sessions to capitalize on the MC5's increasingly emphatic involvement with the White Panthers: imitations of the most iconic BPP images, including a series of the group with automatic weapons at the ready, and one especially infamous snapshot of Wayne Kramer, carbine strapped across his back, giving a raised-fist Panther salute to the American flag.

The Black Panthers' appeal, for the MC5 and the White Panther Party more generally, seems to have been almost entirely grounded in aesthetics, as Rob Tyner (perhaps unwittingly) revealed in a later reminiscence:

> When I first heard about this… I said [to John Sinclair] "You know, these Black Panther guys are really kicking some ass – they've got these long black leather coats, this is kind of a cool image, y'know?" I said, "Man, it's too bad white people ain't cool like that." And [Sinclair] goes: "Oh – *White* Panthers!"[35]

Aside from the possible recollective slippage (are we to understand that Tyner prompted the whole idea?), Tyner's anecdote most clearly reveals the role of the Black Panthers, for groups like the WPP and the MC5, not as models of political mobilization so much as a usable symbolic stance against the mainstream parent culture: blackness as a desirable condition for the ways in which it stood to oppose whiteness. Like Sinclair's WPP manifesto, the group's admiration for, and eventual appropriation of, blackness stood at once as an apology for their own whiteness as well as a willful attempt to paper over the

[34] Morgan, 344. For a thorough analysis of the BPP's treatment by mainstream American media – and particularly the tendency to approach the BPP's politics with reductivist dismissals – see the above-mentioned article.
[35] *MC5: A True Testimonial*, DVD.

distinctions between the naively enthusiastic white radicals and their "magic" heroes of black nationalism. It was, in theory anyway, a means of adopting the mantle of black marginalization in order to purge oneself of his whiteness as a source of unwanted privilege.

If it should seem strange that a group of sympathetic white liberal radicals should employ the image of radical black nationalists for seemingly self-interested aims, it should be noted that the MC5 – and by extension, the WPP – were certainly not alone. Historian David Barber has recently offered a fascinating study of the BPP's often uneasy relationship with white countercultural politics, and shows the phenomenon of co-optation to have been common amongst white radical groups like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the notorious Weathermen:

> [By 1969] the contradiction between the Panthers as real representatives of the black community, seriously attempting to organize a popular struggle for black liberation, and the Panthers as vanguard representatives in the imagination of young white leftists, had become too great.[36]

The aesthetic appeal of the Panthers – their slogans, uniforms, and defiant gestures (physical and figurative) – provided a striking and immediately graspable set of signifiers available to militant white leftists, even if their "imagined" version of the Panthers did not make room for full engagement with their politics. At least part of the problem, Barber suggests, is that while groups like the SDS were nominally supportive of the BPP's agenda, they "had never accepted the black movement's intellectual leadership." "In choosing the Panthers' militancy over their electoral strategy," the author claims,

[36] David Barber, "Leading the Vanguard: White New Leftists School the Panthers on Black Revolution," *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 238.

"SDS chose the black body over the black mind…It was what the white Left in the United States had always done."[37] Black struggle for liberation, according to Barber, was a struggle "to recover the mind." The failure of the white counterculture, then, was in its unwitting reinscription of what Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver called the role of "the supermasculine menial": reducing the black revolutionary to a flattened caricature of physicality.[38]

The black body, with all of its historical baggage (as the "superstud," the primitive hypersexual savage, and the key to the White Negro's psychosexual liberation), proved an irresistible site within which the MC5 could enact its performances of hypermasculinity. *Kick Out the Jams* is chock full of references to the kind of orgasmic communalism that would supposedly liberate the detached white liberal: "come together in the darkness," Tyner howled, in reference to "the dance from which all dances come"; "we can sock 'em out for you 'til you're flat on your back," he elsewhere promised; and one of the group's most phallocentric lyrics, cited by Steve Waksman as a firm indication of the group's "logic of blackface" – "I've got to keep it up, 'cause I'm a natural man."[39] (The "natural man," naturally, being the mythically libidinous black stud after which Rob Tyner styled his performative persona lyrically, vocally, and perhaps even tonsorially). If the hypersexual component of the MC5's lyricism immediately calls to mind the sexually uninhibited White Negro that Norman Mailer sought to cultivate in the 1950s, we should

[37] Barber, 230.
[38] Cleaver's discussion of the Supermasculine menial can be found in Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Ramparts, 1968), 80. It should be noted that the reference to Cleaver's phrase comes from Barber's analysis; Cleaver's position as regards the New Left was somewhat more ambiguous.
[39] All lyrics drawn from *Kick Out the Jams* LP.

consider that the White Negro himself was, as Maureen Mahon notes, "a wayward, privileged descendant of the white minstrel."[40]

This is to say that white entertainers' "fascination with black manhood" was nothing new – not in the late 1960s, nor in Mailer's Beat age. "White men's investment in the black penis," argues historian Eric Lott in his landmark critique of American blackface performance, *Love and Theft*, "appears to have defined the minstrel show," the most popular form of American theatrical entertainment in the nineteenth century.[41] The blackface minstrel show, the first overt American gesture towards whites' adoption of the "black mask," grew out of two contradictory impulses among working-class whites in the antebellum period: a desire to subordinate black American slaves by naturalizing their condition through the parody and ridicule of the staged minstrel show, coupled with an anxious fascination to mirror and embody – to *inhabit* – the character of the African-American male:

> [Minstrelsy] was a cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly-insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure.[42]

This tension, between fascination and anxious repulsion, lay at the center of the minstrel's enactments of black male sexuality. The minstrel stage became an early site for public mediation of black manhood – a tacit acknowledgment of white men's curiosity about the black phallus, which simultaneously served to disarm the threatening aspects of black sexuality by rendering the minstrel archetypes as comic objects worthy

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[40] Mahon, 248.
[41] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 121.
[42] *Ibid*, 6.

of ridicule. The centrality of sexual anxieties to the minstrel tradition, and the subconscious need to publicly negotiate their representation in order to mitigate them, gave the American minstrel show its *raison d'etre*.

In other words, and as the title of Lott's work succinctly suggests, the performance of blackface involved more than the mere dominance of the black man by inhabiting his mythical qualities ("theft"), but was always and conspicuously tempered by an unspoken homoerotic urge to play out his masculinity ("love"). "The desire to have the black man's qualities," Steve Waksman observes, "slid easily if uncomfortably into the desire to have the black man."[43] It is exactly these racialized fantasies of the black body that placed the few *truly* black participants of rock culture, like psychedelic blues guitarist Jimi Hendrix, in the uncomfortable position of having to play to their white audience's expectations of what Paul Gilroy calls Hendrix's "neo-minstrel buffoonery," which was "received as a sign of his authentic blackness by the white rock audiences."[44] White musician Eric Clapton, in a comment that could not quite distance the speaker from the process he described, claimed that "English people have a very big thing towards a spade…Everybody and his brother in England still think that spades have big dicks. And Jimi came over and exploited that to the limit."[45] Hendrix clearly understood his audience's presumptions of black male sexuality, and whether he sought to parody or reinforce the signifiers of the minstrel role (Gilroy and others remain unsure), he evidently saw within their enactment his cachet within the white rock counterculture. After all, even his white counterparts were committing to a more-or-less traditional

[43] Waksman, 222.
[44] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 93-94.
[45] Quoted in Gilroy, 93.

exploration of the minstrel performer. The ritualized performance of blackface minstrelsy, by whites, gradually lost its original trappings, of the literal burnt-cork "blacking up" of its performers, but its navigation between "love and theft" remained a constant presence well into twentieth-century white experiments in portraying black manhood. As it had in so many other cases, the black male body remained a uniquely useful repository not only for white sexual anxieties, but just as importantly, for white curiosity regarding the promised freedom of racial masquerade, where one could temporarily liberate himself from the expectations contained within his whiteness.

The blackface component of the MC5's performances was part of a naïve quest to "sample" the benefits of blackness, to be sure; and there is no doubt that such racial masquerade was unwanted, or at least unworthy of acknowledgement, in the eyes of groups like the Black Panthers, for whom it was dedicated. But to what extent can we consider the racialized political posturing of Tyner and his group *racist*, if at all? If we accept the definition of a racist project posited by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant – "[one that] *creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race*" – then we find half of the equation missing: the Five's appropriation of black manhood was inherently essentialist, as were all efforts towards White Negritude, but its employment was not meant to reproduce "structures of domination" so much as challenge these same structures.[46] Theirs was a project, like Mailer's missive to white bohemians, which rhetorically mounted a direct confrontation to these structures of domination, seeking through racial masquerade to emulate the separatist tendencies of

[46] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 71.

black nationalist politics and to achieve this same separatism for disengaged whites as well as blacks.

If the self-marginalizing tactics of the MC5 cannot be dismissed as some brand of naïve racism, neither can the group's "disidentification with whiteness," in the words of cultural critic Gayle Wald, "necessarily be equated with antiracism."[47] Wald's focal subject, the American Sixties' foremost *female* White Negro, blues singer Janis Joplin, "staged her defiance of white[ness]" through a similar process of "racial projection [onto the black body], introjection, and disavowal," though it is clear to Wald that the main beneficiaries of such racial disavowals remain, inevitably, the phenotypically white bodies who enact them.[48] The imperative of groups like the MC5 and John Sinclair's White Panthers was to detach themselves from culpability in systems of white dominance, not only by celebrating and play-acting the black body but by acknowledging and disowning the contrapuntal white body. In Sinclair's "State/meant," whiteness ("the white honkie culture") is treated from a distance, as an alien condition against which the defiant Other can measure himself. On the *Kick Out the Jams* record, Tyner provides a fiery sermon that similarly stresses his group's – and audience's – detachment from white society:

> I hear a lot of talk, by a lot of honkies, sitting on a lot of money, telling *me* they're high society! Well I'll tell you something – if you ask me, *this* is the high society, right here! This is the high society![49]

George Lipsitz, addressing the phenomenon of white co-optation of black musical culture, suggests that, for "alienated and aggrieved individuals cut off from other sources of

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[47] Gayle Wald, "One of the Boys? Whiteness, Gender, and Popular Music Studies," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 164.
[48] Wald, 164.
[49] *Kick Out the Jams* LP.

oppositional practice," the historical condition of blackness in the United States has long provided a ready-made set of "moral and cultural alternatives to dominant values."[50] It was exactly this "disruptive, oppositional power," continues Wald, "that Mailer [found] lacking in the dominant culture."[51] In short, the disavowal of a dominant culture required the disenfranchised white to seek a way of legitimating the embrace of "moral and cultural alternatives": required him, that is, to don the mask of blackness to authenticate his desire for oppositional power.

One problem with this version of White Negritude, it should be obvious, is that the process of donning the black mask was not a collaborative (i.e., cross-racial) effort. It worked only one way, and contained within itself the same imbalance of power that had birthed the system of oppressive hegemony that the White Negro was allegedly combating in the first place. Whether or not the marginalized black American was flattered by his seemingly enviable oppositional position in mainstream society, it was neither by his wishes nor his consent that alienated white radicals sought to emulate his identity. Racial disavowal, the explicit rejection of whiteness as a desirable self-image, was of course the right of any disillusioned white liberal; racial introjection – that is, the trying on of blackness – was somewhat more troubling in its implications. However, I would contend that it was the third component of Wald's tripartite model of musical White Negritude, "racial projection," which was and remains the most uncomfortable element of the performative programs of groups like the MC5. It was in the MC5's projection, onto the black body and black culture, of their own oppositional politics that the true power imbalance of White Negritude made itself most visibly manifest.

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[50] George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1997), 53-54.
[51] Wald, 159.

"Let It All Burn": July 1967, A Revolutionary White Blues

Considering the reputation for blowhard politicking that has grown up around the MC5 (no doubt owing to their loud allegiance to the White Panther Party), it is curious to note just how little does the group's repertoire reflect the WPP's brand of radical socialism. Indeed, the majority of their (admittedly scant) body of political commentaries – songs like "American Ruse" and "Gotta Keep Moving" ("atom bombs, Vietnam – missiles on the moon!") – were written and recorded after John Sinclair had left the picture. The flagship work of the group's legacy, *Kick Out the Jams*, does feature one explicitly political track, and it remains one of the most intriguing and revealing insights into the group's relationship to the New Left and American youth counterculture, as well as Rob Tyner's ambiguous courtship of a black nationalist rhetoric. Little remarked upon in many histories of the group, "Motor City is Burning" is perhaps the most illuminating entry in the group's performative canon – the clearest expression of their "psychopathic" political impulses, and the song that throws into light most evidently the problems of racial projection in the service of a radical liberal White Negritude. Ironically, and probably most to the point, "Motor City is Burning" was not an MC5 tune at all, but a cover of a contemporary track recorded by Detroit's foremost bluesman, John Lee Hooker.

In the early morning hours of 23 July 1967, a routine police raid on one of Detroit's many blind-pigs (a speakeasy, in familiar parlance), located in the predominantly black working-class neighbourhood around 12th and Clairmount St., on Detroit's West Side, set off one of the most vicious and destructive urban uprisings in

American history to that point. At a time when police-community relations in Detroit – and especially police treatment of the city's enormous black population – were reaching a crisis point wrought by a half-decade of growing tension, the raid proved the spark that would unleash the blind fury of thousands of Detroiters. As with the Los Angeles community of Watts in 1965, and Newark that same summer of 1967, July in Detroit would provide a hellish microcosmic reflection of the fierce strains American society was beginning to face on the home front, as the optimism of the early 1960s gave way to visions of a bleak social and political future. For five days and nights the city was engulfed in flames; snipers perched atop roofs to keep police and fire crews from restoring order; and thousands took to the streets to unleash anarchy and destruction over an ever-widening swath of terrain, spiraling out from the epicenter at 12th & Clairmount. The chaos was brought to a close only after nearly seventeen thousand armed officials – among them some several thousand National Guardsmen – were called upon to address the state of emergency on July 27, ending an urban insurrection on a cataclysmic scale that would not be seen again until Los Angeles' "Rodney King riots" of 1992.[52]

"Motor City is Burning," which appeared on Hooker's 1967 LP *Urban Blues*, was written by a session musician named Al Smith, and recorded and released by Hooker in the tense months following the end of Detroit's massive uprising. Hooker's tune, a straight 12-bar blues of the kind that was the singer's stock in trade, provided an elegiac contemplation of the violence and confusion marking America's contemporary inner city experience. Lyrically hung around a personalized narrative account of the Detroit riot, its

[52] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 257-259; Hubert G. Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969); Sydney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 155-197.

periphery is haunted by the twin specters of domestic unrest and racial violence that characterized America's turbulent late 1960s. It is, in other words, a song inextricable in its meaning from the context in which it was sung. For the Motor City Five, proud Detroiters to their core and eye witnesses to the violence in Detroit's city streets, "Motor City is Burning" was a tune begging to be picked up and incorporated into their repertoire.[53] Their resultant cover version echoed the musical framework of Hooker's performance, but its ideological overtones had been profoundly altered. Performing the song live from the Grande Ballroom just a year after the riot's end, the MC5 transformed Hooker's tune into a vehicle of nihilistic revolutionary resistance; Rob Tyner invested the song with political undercurrents totally absent in the bluesman's understated original, and what had been personal became deeply and publicly political.

The singular expression of blackness implied in "Motor City is Burning" needs some iteration here, as certainly the intent of the original must be understood before we can make some sense of its transformation in the hands of the MC5. As David Carson has noted in his superb study of Detroit's rock culture in the 1960s, John Lee Hooker was *the* Detroit bluesman upon migrating to the city in 1948. Unlike Chicago, where an active electric blues scene afforded opportunities for musicians to rely on their talents on a mostly full-time basis, Detroit's blues culture was propagated by part-timers, including Hooker, who worked day-shifts in the city's auto plants and played music by nights. Without Chicago's musical opportunities, Detroit never boasted its own cohesive blues culture, and thus its most successful peddler of the blues became a *de facto* figurehead for

[53] Perhaps apocryphal, David Carson relates a story of MC5 guitarist Wayne Kramer actually having been arrested sometime during the July riot, mistaken for a sniper after he was seen watching the chaos through a telescope from a bedroom window. In any case, we know that Sinclair did his best to foment disorder during the uprising, hanging a sign from the windows of the Trans-Love Energies headquarters reading "Burn, Baby, Burn!" – to the great displeasure of local police. Carson, 122-123;

the city's blues tradition. John Lee Hooker was, in effect, the torch-bearer for the black culture of the blues that had migrated to the Motor City from the Deep South, along with tens of thousands of unskilled labourers, beginning in the 1940s.[54]

"Motor City is Burning," then, must be seen within its context, as a commentary on an implicitly black urban experience, by a singer working within a clearly defined African-American musical milieu. Moreover, while many commentators have rejected Detroit's 1967 riot as a "race riot" – in contrast, for example, to the Watts Uprising in Los Angeles, or Detroit's own not-so-distant race riot of 1943 – coverage of the event by the mainstream media was, in large part, actively unsympathetic to such distinctions. "During the week of the riot," wrote scholar Hubert Locke in 1969, "the *Detroit Free Press* somehow managed to work the phrase 'Negro rioters' into the first sentence of most of its lead stories" – despite the overwhelming evidence that the riot had been a notably integrated affair.[55] Nor, as Locke pointed out, was the *Detroit Free Press* unique in this respect. "The impression that there were no whites who were looting and burning" was already a "popular misconception" in the American imagination before the last fire had been extinguished in Detroit's inner-city streets.[56] The Motor City burned, "worser than Vietnam" as Hooker had it, and for all the public could tell, it had burned at the hands of blacks; in that sense, the fact that the first artistic response to the chaos came in the form of a twelve-bar blues seems doubly significant.

James Stewart has suggested a typology of rhythm and blues protest songs of the 1960s and 1970s, and under this rubric Hooker's tune – if indeed it can be considered a political expression at all – must fall under Stewart's category of the "Documentary"

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[54] Carson, 2-6.
[55] Hubert G. Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 85.
[56] *Ibid,* 88.

account.[57] Hooker's "Motor City is Burning" is a fairly straight reportage of the anarchic scene on Detroit's streets in July 1967, delivered with a few personal asides that place the hapless narrator in the midst of the rioting. Its details are sparse, but consistent with most contemporary accounts:

> It started out on 12th & Clairmount this morning –
> I don't know what it's all about.
> The fire wagons kept coming,
> but the snipers wouldn't let 'em put it out.[58]

His third verse runs down a catalogue of the week's most upsetting events: firebombs "[burst] everywhere," National Guardsmen patrol the streets, sirens wail and citizens scream. In the song's ad-libbed outro, the narrator recalls a fireman telling him to "'get outta here – it's too hot'," though he has already made up his mind to go, "taking [his] wife and family and…clearing out." Hooker's performance implies a palpable attachment to the song's meaning – a vested emotional connection to his adopted hometown and its disturbing fate during the "long, hot summer" of 1967. He is helpless, without "a thing in the world that [he] can do" except to flee for his own safety, and in a final comment positioned between a warning and a lamentation, exclaims: "I just hope, people / it'll never happen to you."[59]

According to Stewart, the Documentary form of R&B lyricism typically employs "quasi-objective and non-pejorative language," an approach which "facilitates engagement with both internal and external audiences, with each able to frame distinct interpretations."[60] With this in mind, we can safely submit that Hooker's tune is at least

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[57] James B. Stewart, "Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop," *The Journal of African American History* 90:3 (Summer 2005), 201.
[58] John Lee Hooker, "Motor City is Burning," *Urban Blues*, LP (ABC-Paramount, 1967).
[59] *Ibid.*
[60] Stewart, 201.

quasi-objective – that is, there is nothing factually inaccurate in its (albeit limited) details, nor do these details appear to speak to any agenda beyond the singer's own immediate distress. Similarly, we can understand the song as clearly non-pejorative in that there is no obvious attempt at finger-pointing, either by reference to race or police–community relations, the two major loci of the July conflict as proposed by the popular media and by later histories of the event. It is not, unlike other types of protest songs, a call to action as much as it is a plea for order – a call to "disarm," as it were, which resonated with the vast majority of American observers, black and white alike. Thus, while Hooker situates himself within the community of his *internal* (read: black) audience ("there ain't a thing in the world *that I can do*"), his rendering of events is drawn in such a way as to subsume implicit issues of race beneath a broader appeal to level-headedness. Certainly, the song must be read by internal and external audiences differently, yet Hooker's lyric precludes the sort of "us" and "Other" challenge found in more polemical types of protest songs discussed by Stewart.

While Stewart's typology admirably captures the most significant forms of protest song in r&b, it does not provide much direction for understanding the ways in which meanings are subject to reinscription and transvaluation when they are recontextualized. Here is a problem of paramount importance to evaluating the MC5's transformation of Hooker's "Motor City is Burning." First, there is the thorny issue of the group's whiteness, already shown to be problematic for its adoption of black signifiers; this is further problematized by the implications of black identity inherent in Hooker's "Motor City is Burning" (as I have said, the song must be appreciated as a black musical response to what was largely considered a defiant black urban insurrection). Yet a whole

host of further complicating factors are at large within the MC5's cover of the song. Referring again to Stewart's typology, the revamped "Motor City is Burning" of the MC5 was not a Documentary account at all, and its language was far from non-pejorative or even quasi-objective; properly, Stewart calls this type of song the "Defiant Challenge" form of R&B protest.[61]

The "Defiant Challenge," Stewart tells us, is a form of R&B protest lyric that invariably targets an external (white) audience:

> As suggested by the terminology, an aggressive lyrical style is employed with more limited use of nuance than in the other types of commentaries… Such songs emphasize that significant changes in the social order are on the near horizon and are more likely to emanate from revolutionary than evolutionary processes.[62]

How, then, can the seemingly unmediated task of covering a 12-bar blues pattern be so far complicated as to render its original "quasi-objective" reportage into a statement of revolutionary challenge? Ironically enough, "Motor City is Burning" was musically unique in the early repertoire of the MC5 for its more-or-less faithful adherence to Hooker's tune. Dispensing with their signature cacophonous guitars and thrashing rhythm section, the group delivered an unusually close approximation of Hooker's steady-paced blues. It was, of course, in the lyrics that subtle adjustments were made to Hooker's tune, injecting it with a potency of political expression. Though the changes were slight, they were nonetheless deliberately arranged to create a revolutionary overtone that almost completely subverted the intent of Hooker's original.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the MC5's "Motor City is Burning" is less a lament than an exaltation. Where Hooker's Documentary lyric depicts a nightmarish

[61] Stewart, 202.
[62] *Ibid.*

scene of chaos, Tyner's Defiant Challenge revels in that same chaos. "Let it all burn!" he screams as the song concludes – a far cry from Hooker's expressed hope that "it'll never happen to you." In his frenzied ad-libbed outro, Tyner calls for a match that he can strike "for freedom," crowing: "I may be a white boy, but I can be bad too!"[63] The problematic racial component of Tyner's delivery should be immediately obvious, and in light of the group's "fascination with black manhood," reveals a great deal about where the white radicals saw themselves in late 1960s efforts to challenge the social order. Not only does Tyner see the riot as an impetus for potential positive social change, but his acknowledgment of his own whiteness carries an implication that the riot itself was the making of largely black, revolutionary forces. This is further iterated by a handful of similar lyrical substitutions: Hooker's "snipers" become "Black Panther snipers" in Tyner's jubilant retelling, which, if historically true, is not documented in any source of which I am aware.[64] And whereas Hooker located responsibility for the chaos within his own community ("ain't a thing…that I can do"), Tyner's polemical anger is redirected towards definitely external sources. With the city in flames, there was now nothing in the world "that *white society* can do," and the singer's glee is unmistakable.

Obviously, then, the MC5's performance of the song does not merely constitute a shift from an expression of grief to a nihilistic celebration, but is confounded by assumptions of race and revolutionary black nationalism that are elsewhere clearly demonstrated in the group's participation with the WPP. Paradoxically, though Tyner acknowledges his own whiteness, he does so in order to refuse its relevance – to claim explicitly that he and his group remain outside of the "white society," the "honkie

[63] The MC5, "Motor City is Burning," *Kick Out the Jams*, LP (Elektra, 1969).
[64] In fact, the presence of white snipers on Detroit's rooftops is well documented in Locke's work, among others. According to Locke, white snipers were among the first killed or arrested in the July uprising.

culture" that is seen to stymie the revolutionary efforts of white and black radicals alike. There are, of course, some deeply problematic issues that arise from such self-fashioned identities. Most readily apparent is the notion of celebrating an act of civic violence that few, even amongst radical revolutionaries, saw as anything but an aimless articulation of rage with no specific political aims or consequences.[65] This issue is complicated further by an exaggerated association of the Detroit riot with the efforts of militant Black Power groups, unwittingly rearticulating the popular misconceptions that the terrified "honkie culture" held towards conspicuous groups of revolutionary black nationalists like the Black Panther Party. Violence for its own nihilistic sake was, of course, never a component of any revolutionary black nationalist agenda; beginning at least with Malcolm X and continuing into the Black Power/BPP era, black nationalists in the 1960s found themselves constantly defending their ideas of armed self-defense against the distortions of the mainstream media – the "honkie culture," ironically, that most revolutionary radicals sought to challenge in the first place.[66]

Ultimately, what such fabulously misguided racial projections suggest is a quest, by groups like the MC5, to establish themselves as *authentic* purveyors of dissident rock culture, attempting, as Michael Coyle has written of 1960s white rock groups more

[65] One notable exception seems to be the chair of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), H. Rap Brown, who was probably the most publicly outspoken supporter of civic violence amongst black nationalist groups, calling violence "as American as cherry pie" in a press conference during the Detroit riot. See Bridgette Baldwin, "In the Shadow of the Gun: The Black Panther Party, the Ninth Amendment, and Discourses of Self-Defense," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 67.

[66] In the last week of his life, Malcolm X visited Detroit on a speaking engagement in which he clarified his calls for armed self-defense against the characterizations of the mainstream American media. See Malcolm X, *February 1965: The Final Speeches*, ed. Steve Clark (New York: Pathfinder, 1992), 87-89. See also Dean Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001).

generally, "to summon associations of a music indifferent to merely pop sensibilities."[67] If pop music was seen by the youth counterculture for what it was – namely, a decidedly profit-making capitalist venture operating within the "culture of the commodity," in Simon Frith's phrase – then rock music stood, in the "bad theory" of the nascent 1960s rockist discourse, to operate as its counterpoint: a music "that somehow went beyond pop, did things it couldn't do."[68] What pop music "couldn't do," clearly, was boast credentials as an unmediated venue for musical expressivity; radical politicking of the sort that runs throughout "Motor City is Burning" was apparent anathema to the pop music industry's overarching quest to sell, above all else. Its white boys, in other words, could not "be bad too."

Who Owns the Blues?: Authenticity, Appropriation and White Rock Culture

The cultural capital by which adherents to the rockist narrative – The MC5, certainly, but also virtually all of the white rock groups of the late American Sixties – could achieve the credentials of authenticity was to be found, as it had for decades, in the black culture of blues and blues-based musical styles. It is fair to say that by the late 1960s, the parading of blues influence by a white rock artist was at once the most legible, and most widely-acknowledged, signifier of one's bid for authentic musical expression.[69] This was racial projection in its most concentrated form: a usable musical trope, beautiful in its simplicity,

[67] Michael Coyle, "Hijacked Hits and Antic Authenticity: Cover Songs, Race, and Postwar Marketing," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, eds. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 152.
[68] Simon Frith, "Rock and the Politics of Memory," in *The 60s Without Apology*, eds. Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 62, 63, 68.
[69] See Coyle 143, 152; John Sheinbaum, "'Think About What You're Trying to Do To Me': Rock Historiography and the Construction of a Race-Based Dialectic," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, eds. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 110.

that could be immediately registered as a sign of one's musical "roots" in the mythical, primitive past – where *real, black* musicians, as yet untainted by the sordid world of pop commercialism, sang what they felt without regard for its commercial viability.

This "cult of authenticity," in Benjamin Filene's exceptionally useful phrase, seems ironically to have been a firmly modern creation (as opposed to pre-modern, that is).[70] Among the first to be cultivated by white cultural brokers as an authentic "primitive" black bluesman – with extraordinary success, we might note – was a southern-born onetime sharecropper and ex-convict named Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter, who was "discovered" by ethnomusicologists Alan and John Lomax in Louisiana's Angola prison in 1933.[71] Ledbetter, as the Lomaxes were delighted to learn, possessed a staggering repertoire of folk and blues songs spanning decades of southern black musical culture, but they were less interested to find that he was also well-versed in popular numbers of a more contemporary vintage – songs he may have even picked up (shudder to think!) from radio broadcasts. Taking control over the management of Lead Belly's career, the Lomaxes would sell the singer to the northern press and to curious listeners as "a 'natural,' who had no idea of money, law, or ethics and who was possessed of virtually no restraint."[72] They dressed him in overalls and had him sit barefoot on gunny sacks for photo ops; sometimes they requested he perform in the rags of his convict's prison stripes. (On his own terms, Lead Belly preferred immaculate three-piece suits – bought, incidentally, with the money he had demanded of the Lomaxes as compensation for his work). John Lomax claimed that, unlike the contemporary northern

[70] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 49.
[71] *Ibid*, 51.
[72] John Lomax, quoted in Filene, 60.

Negro whose spirituals were "too refined," Lead Belly was the torch bearer for the "true southern spirituals"; the American press bought the story wholesale, often remarking on the "deep primitive quality" of the singer's voice and song.[73]

The creation of Lead Belly's "authenticity," despite its endurance in the performance of black blues over the next half-century, was bound by an untenable contradiction that threatened to belie the utterly constructed façade of this same mythic authenticity. For, while the Lomaxes were enamored with Lead Belly's encyclopedic knowledge of the African-American folk song, the singer was usually pressured by the two folklorists to make his "authentic," "natural," and "primitive" blues more accessible to northern audiences; his strong southern dialect was to be downplayed and obscure references were to be cut from his lyrics. Lead Belly was marketed as a raw black singer who "existed out of time," a direct musical conduit to a primitive past, even while his supposedly autonomous folk works were subjected to the kind of updating, refining and reinterpreting that has always characterized oral-folk traditions; and what is more, despite the Lomaxes' desire to present their man as a living, breathing exhibit of a frozen cultural past, who had "no idea of money," Lead Belly himself was an enthusiastic pursuer of mainstream success, willfully manipulating his "authentic" blues to cater to what he believed were his audience's wishes.[74] In this sense, as Filene notes, the "cult of authenticity" that grew up around early blues performers like Lead Belly was in fact "an idealized conception of authenticity." "The tensions in this agenda left performers like Lead Belly caught in limbo between folk and popular culture," writes Filene, prodded as the singer was by the Lomaxes to strike a balance between both, while at the same time

[73] *Ibid*, 58-59.
[74] *Ibid*, 67, 71.

the ethnomusicologists sought at every turn to deny the polluting influence of popular culture on Lead Belly's image.[75]

And so the black blues singer, from Lead Belly through to Chicago electric bluesmen Willie Dixon and Muddy Waters, and on into the blues and folk revivals of the 1960s – when many of the prewar blues singers experienced career resurgences playing to white college-aged audiences – continued to bear the standard of the authentically expressive "natural" man, whether he was burdened or flattered by these expectations. Like the black body (and in fact the phenomena are intricately related), the black culture of the blues became a repository for whites' racial projections – of primitive, unfiltered expressivity – onto its practitioners. (Remember John Sinclair's "black magic music that originally informed our bodies and told us we could be free.") By the late 1960s the blues had influenced the development of rock to such an extent that many of the foremost groups of the period were visibly blues-inflected, musically and often lyrically; it was in this period that it had also become clear that rock music was to be virtually the exclusive domain of whites, as black musicians increasingly gravitated towards the more current trends of funk and soul.

John Lee Hooker lived to watch the blues – which he had done so much to cultivate in the otherwise blues-barren city of Detroit – become an embarrassment to a new generation of black musicians, while their white counterparts took up its musical language and sequestered it in the culture of predominantly white rock. Lamented Hooker in a 1964 interview:

> The average coloured kid, it feels like the blues is embarrassing to them. This is my story. I think they dig it, but they feel like it's embarrassing… They like it, but they

[75] *Ibid*, 74.

> feel like in the modern days they shouldn't listen to it. They feel it drags them back. But it don't do that. But that's the way they feel.[76]

By 1967 the blues had become so identifiably linked to white rock that the few black participants in the rock counterculture, like Jimi Hendrix, were looked on as distinct anomalies – even Uncle Toms or race traitors for their cultivation of an almost exclusively white audience, and in Hendrix's case for performing the signifiers of a stereotyped sexualized black masculinity in accordance with his audience's expectations of an authentically *black* bluesman in their midst.[77] It was a singularly contradictory facet to the American youth counterculture, that an artist like Hendrix was seen to provide a solitary black referent for a musical movement that was distinctly black in its roots yet almost entirely white in its performance. After all, apart from Hendrix and a scant few others (Sly Stone comes to mind), the closest the white counterculture had to the "authentically black" performer was to be found in groups like the MC5, and their trafficking in the image of the White Negro! There is a larger question lurking within these considerations, however, whose answer may help to throw into relief the complex subject position of artists like Hendrix, who sought to reclaim the blues for black performers only to find themselves ingratiating themselves to predominantly white audiences: at the end of the American Sixties, who *owned* the blues? How could a phenotypically black musician, working within an historically African-American milieu, come to be seen as a marked anomaly in such a staunchly blues-based musical community?

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[76] John Lee Hooker, quoted in Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970), 183-184.
[77] Gilroy, 94; Mahon, 248-249.

There is the temptation, on the one hand, to consider the blues' "passage into the international pop music marketplace," as Paul Gilroy puts its, as blatant cultural larceny: an historically black music, as whites clue into its use as cultural capital, is summarily coopted by white rock musicians, whereupon the subsequent reclamation of the style by black rockers is seen as something close to a trespass, or at least a marked departure from the normative.[78] Black cultural nationalist Amiri Baraka, one of the loudest proponents of black cultural separatism in the 1960s, referred to this process as "The Great Music Robbery," and condemned its enactment outright.[79] Certainly, in the pre-1960s rock-'n'-roll era, white cooptation of black rock-'n'-roll and rhythm and blues tunes proved injurious to many black performers, like Little Richard, who could not hope to compete with the major-label backing of white "thieves" like Pat Boone (see "An Illustration," Chapter 1). And even some participants in the rock counterculture made use of the racialized power imbalance of the record industry to avail themselves of black blues' cultural capital while literally claiming copyrighted works as their own; British hard rockers Led Zeppelin became embroiled in an infamously ugly legal case regarding their outright theft of Chicago bluesman Willie Dixon's "You Need Love," appropriating the bulk of Dixon's tune to form their own, self-credited, "Whole Lotta Love" in 1969.[80]

Notwithstanding these especially egregious examples of "Great Music Robbery," dismissing the white counterculture's adoption of the blues, with its promised dowry of instantaneous "authenticity," as mere cultural theft risks oversimplifying and vilifying a process that was in truth more complicated than the examples of Pat Boone, or even Led

[78] Gilroy, 94.
[79] See Amiri Baraka, *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 328-332.
[80] Robert Gordon, *Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters* (New York: Little, Brown, 2002), 182.

Zeppelin, suggest. Looking back to Eric Lott's analytical formulation of blackface minstrelsy's meanings, perhaps we would be better served to consider this late-1960s appropriation of blues culture a similar negotiation between "love and theft." The process of co-opting the blues as a formative influence on white rock music differed from the enactment of blackface minstrelsy, of course, in the *intentionality* of these rock performers. Few devotees of the rockist narrative considered themselves culpable partners in the systems of hegemonic racial dominance that had given rise to the trappings of blackface performance; indeed, most of the late Sixties' White Negroes, like the MC5 and Janis Joplin, believed they were performing the black body as a means of expressing their "disruptive, oppositional" stance to the parent culture. It is not much of a stretch to see this use of the oppositional body as part and parcel of the white counterculture's employment of the oppositional musical culture of the blues. If both programs proved naively utopian in practice, this did not necessarily stand to reflect on the initial intentions that prompted such programs. There was obviously a great deal of "love" – that is, a natural affinity and appreciation for the musical codes of the blues – that fed into the adoption ("theft"?) of blues-based styles for groups like the MC5. (As Eric Lott might suggest, nobody who performs *blackness* does so for the simple sake of degrading and dominating black body and culture, as these performances also suggest an appreciation for its desirable aspects as well.)

To view the performativity of the MC5 as confirmation of white "Great Music Robbery" is to furthermore position black performers as hapless victims of white cultural cooptation, sidelined in a process in which they sought equal participation with white musicians. This obscures perhaps the most important truth regarding white adoption of

blues-based styles, a truth recognized by John Lee Hooker as early as 1964 and the central complicating factor at play within these debates: namely, that the majority of black American cultural producers and consumers were not much interested in the blues as a mainstream musical idiom by the mid-Sixties, having largely graduated to the more fashionable sounds of soul and funk music. There were bluesmen of an older vintage, like Hooker and Chicago's Muddy Waters, who continued to bear the standard of the blues, though even they, by mid-decade, were increasingly finding their audience in young white listeners and aspiring musicians. As Muddy Waters claimed when he integrated his band with the addition of a white harmonica player in 1967, "there ain't enough of my peoples trying to get interested in playing the blues."[81] The decline of African-American participation in blues culture was not due to any infringement of whites into the economic rewards of this culture, in which case appropriation would begin to look very much like "Robbery." It was, rather, a continuation of a process described by critic Nelson George wherein the "black audience's consumerism and restlessness burns out and abandons styles" more rapidly than in the mainstream white marketplace.[82] It was, in other words, an exercise of choice by black producers and consumers intertwined with, but not necessarily compelled by, white experimentation with blues styles.

Economic considerations aside, cultural nationalists like Amiri Baraka believed in a more fundamental inappropriateness of white musical appropriation: not that whites had absconded with black musical *property* so much as they had diluted African-American collective traditions with ersatz performances. Wrote Baraka: "After each new wave of

[81] Quoted in Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 126.
[82] Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988), 108.

black innovation…there was a commercial co-optation of the original music and an attempt to replace it with corporate dilution."[83] "[Baraka's] is the harsher accusation," writes Theodore Gracyk, "that appropriation contributes to cultural genocide, threatening the very existence of African-American culture."[84] In the case of a singer like Pat Boone, this argument is worth parsing; without committing a value-judgment of Boone's oeuvre, we can nonetheless point to consensus amongst serious critics of rock-'n'-roll's history that find Boone trading in a distinctly "diluted" version of black r&b – and, what is more, directly competing for the economic rewards of such mainstream r&b.[85]

This example proves, however, how utterly contingent is white musical appropriation, for while Boone may serve as a poster-boy for "corporate dilution," acts like the MC5 did not see themselves as agents for any corporate takeover of black culture, nor did they compete with their black counterparts for the financial gains of blues-based styles.[86] Appropriation could only "contribute to cultural genocide," Gracyk notes, if this threatened culture still served a mediating role in contemporary African-American individual or collective traditions; by all accounts this seems simply not to have been the case with the blues by the end of the American Sixties. Gracyk summarizes:

> Rather than driving black musicians away from their own culture, as Baraka supposes, white appropriation may be precisely what keeps "dead" cultural forms alive when

[83] Quoted in Gracyk, 109.
[84] *Ibid*, 109-110.
[85] For select commentaries on Pat Boone, refer to Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970), 32; Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 49; Craig Hansen Warner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006 [1998]), 86. Readers will note that words like "pedestrian," "clinical," "diluted," and "sanitized" are the oft-preferred descriptors from most serious scholars of rock-'n'-roll history regarding Pat Boone's contributions to American pop music.
[86] "Motor City is Burning" is indeed one of the few contemporary black-produced tunes the group would record, and even here their appropriation of Hooker's tune did not substantially threaten the success of the bluesman's original; "Motor City is Burning" was never released as a single by Hooker, and in fact he (or to be precise, the song's writer Al Smith) would earn royalties on every sale of the MC5's product.

> African Americans shift to newer forms. While this process changes both the sound and cultural meanings of black music, it does not follow that racist "corporate owners" of the music business…are the main culprits in the process by which music gets watered down.[87]

This brings us back to the issue of intention, and the acknowledgment that, however "inauthentic" Baraka believed the white blues to be, its employment by groups like the MC5 was not to provide a competitive alternative to African-American blues but to expand the use of this "'dead' cultural form," and what is more, to proudly and frequently declare their indebtedness to the originators of this form – which had not always been the case with white musical appropriation. If this should seem a soft argument for exonerating the MC5 of charges of "Great Music Robbery," it should be remembered that many of the early practitioners of the blues received boons, financial and otherwise, from white rock groups' resuscitation of the blues as a viable cultural medium.

All of this is to say that, like Rob Tyner's parading of black bodily identity and the White Panthers' nominal (if impractical) support of revolutionary black nationalism, the MC5's routine use of the blues in the service of self-interest should not be dismissed as a wholly exploitative phenomenon, when in fact these often uncomfortable processes are more complex in both motivation and execution. Caught between competing urges of "love and theft," the group sought to authenticate itself by reference to the mythical cultural capital that attended white perceptions of the blues. These perceptions inherently connected the blues to a presumed idyll of a frozen moment in the cultural past wherein there dwelt some original, pure and unsullied blues tradition, ready to inform the offerings of white musicians who felt drawn towards its promise of roots authenticity. The fantasy was misguided, surely, but not especially injurious; such an essentializing of

[87] Gracyk, 127.

a black cultural past could not and indeed did not seek to deny the vitality of contemporary African American musical performance, which continued to evolve unhindered according to the choices of its producers. The MC5 and their ilk were left as the curators of a largely disused antecedent black musical form that, if somehow diluted in its co-optation, nevertheless posed no significant challenge to the agency or commercial viability of a remarkably rich contemporaneous black musical project.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed two phenomena of the MC5's performativity that, while no doubt linked to the same initial impulse – an overarching "fascination with black manhood" – probably ought to be understood and critiqued in isolation: namely, the conspicuous emulation of black masculinity and black nationalist signifiers, and the employment of identifiably black musical tropes as a means of authenticating these "black masks," as it were. While both elements speak to the promise of White Negritude as a means of enacting an oppositional stance to white mainstream culture, they suggest somewhat different ramifications for the very real political projects of groups like the Black Panthers and cultural nationalists like Amiri Baraka. The co-optation of the blues as a site of white liberal dissent is arguably the more easily critiqued, for in spite of the totalizing sentiments of critics like Baraka and his charge of the "Great Music Robbery," white blues of the MC5's sort was, in substance, more an effort at cultural revival and continuation than the more racially-loaded notion of cultural genocide. There was, to be sure, a healthy dose of "the same old primitivism" undergirding the performances of most white blues musicians within the American counterculture (Gayle Wald's "racial

projection" of white fantasies onto blues traditions); these projections, on the other hand, did not consciously work to extend hegemonic displays of white dominance over black America at large, but were at all points directed towards the (undoubtedly naïve) program of standing outside an economic system of exploitation and commercialism through the seemingly unmediated sounds of rock music.

The point is not to exonerate white cultural producers, as some monolithic group, for the borrowing (or theft) of historically black-inflected styles; behind Baraka's sharp critique of "Music Robbery" is an important historical process that can at times look much like cultural genocide – of artists like Pat Boone joining in a deliberate industry-wide effort to sideline black musicians with their more palatable expressions of "blackness," so to speak. Rather, the intent of writers like Theodore Gracyk is to provide a crucial complication of musico-racial exchange and co-optation, to understand how issues like the late-1960s embrace of black blues styles by white musicians cannot be dismissed outright as merely the latest wave of cultural theft. This process was not so simple as many of its proponents believed, of merely picking up on African-American cultural traditions and presenting them to new audiences, but it was not so injurious that the intent of this cultural co-optation – to declare one's empathy and support for a rich musical heritage, and to "sample" the benefits of the black mask – was entirely subverted in its execution. If black critics like Margo Jefferson were repelled by the naivete of the MC5's agenda, it would have been nearly as difficult for the group members themselves to digest her blunt accusation: that they could not rid themselves of their white privilege, could only wear the musical black mask transiently, no matter how earnest their intent.

Performing the *black male body*, on the other hand, cannot be so confidently defended, but neither can it sustain the sort of automatic, politically-correct condemnation that might be our first response to the racialized and gendered performance of the MC5. If, as Eric Lott suggests, the first performances by whites of the black male body (i.e., the minstrel show) served to solidify a white identity against a foil of fantasized blackness, then how might we handle a group who enacted a similar performance for the purposes of *dis*-identifying with whiteness? Perhaps we ought, like Michael Omi and Howard Winant, to insist on gradient levels of racist (or essentialist) projects: to accept that some "primitivism crap" is, however awkward to our sensibilities, nonetheless impelled by misplaced envy as opposed to – or at least not consciously directed towards – the desire for control over the black body.

Such comparatively benign essentialism was itself, however, freighted with murky contradictions that did not seem to register with these white celebrants of blackness. The more fervently the MC5 tried to position themselves within the oppositional culture of the BPP's black militancy, the more their program seemed to refract the fears and racial anxieties of the detested "honkie culture." With performances like "Motor City is Burning," the group was offering a dangerous proposition; like Norman Mailer a decade before, Tyner and his band sought to exploit the disruptive power of the black Other, but in doing so reinscribed an image of blackness that could serve no agenda but their own. Within their own small corner of American culture they conjured an image of radical dissent that traced a familiar and surprisingly mainstream narrative – of the Black Panthers as "white America's nightmares," bad, black and bodily and ready to burn the village for the simple pleasure of wreaking nihilism on an

oppressive culture. It was a narrative too facile to truly engage with the roots of American racism, propelled by a distaste for whiteness that could never deliver on its promise of throwing off the white mask permanently.

Even so, we must still accept that this disowning of the white mask was precisely what motivated the MC5 – and others like them – to partake in the agenda of the White Negro. The fantasies of the black body and black musical culture that pervade the group's performances mirror an outspoken, and one might even argue fruitful, engagement with the politics of whiteness: a dialogue, as it were, concerning the desirability of whiteness, and the quest to complicate white identity as something more than a monolithic social category. Theirs was a performative fantasy that seemed to promise a transgression or even transcendence of race through the racial masquerade of the White Negro – an opportunity to deny one's birthright of white privilege, and to stand outside of the parent culture through a complex strategy of self-marginalization. The fantasy was naïve, but not uniquely so; ultimately, the nihilistic enactments of black maleness so prominent in songs like "Motor City is Burning" stand as the last vestiges of an explicitly drawn White Negritude, which would become less permissible as it grew more repugnant in the wake of the radical social reordering spurred on by the gains and disappointments of America's Long Sixties.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Race has always been a principle organizing factor in the processes by which American popular musics have been received and understood; as this analysis has illustrated, it is perhaps the single most important narrative thread in the story of postwar musics. And yet too often it seems we accept an understanding of racialized sounds as something that is driven by intuition – something we just "get," which doesn't need to be scrutinized because it is derives from a language of everyday common sense. To return to the quotation that opened the Introduction of this essay, "everyone knew that Elvis and Jerry Lee sounded black, while the Mills Brothers and Lena Horne sang white." The apparent common sense that feeds into these widely-shared views is a false one, however: a common sense engendered by a recording industry that, in an attempt to order its products into a coherent system of distribution, chose to create a dichotomous division between white and non-white musics that would far outlive both its practical application and its contextual space. Within a decade of the creation of *Billboard*'s "Race" chart in 1942, many of the most popular recordings reaching American consumers were tunes that emphatically defied this common sense – recordings that blurred the ultra-fine distinction between white and non-white styles and threatened to reveal this accepted dichotomy as mere nomenclature.

This moment – the moment when it became apparent that "Elvis…sounded black" and "Lena Horne sang white" – ought to have prompted a reconsideration of the

racialized logic adopted to describe American popular musics. Instead, the ingrained habits of typing popular musics according to expected racial signifiers gave rise to an interpretive dissonance, that has remained an uncomfortable traveling companion for critics of popular musics ever since. The socio-cultural and biological markers of racial categorization became detached from musico-racial signifiers: suddenly there were white bodies singing black, and black singers sounding white. Against a theoretical position of cultural hybridity, this does not seem remotely surprising; within the rigid demarcations of "Pop" and "Race" musics, however, with all of their implicit or explicit racialized expectations, this phenomenon served to further complicate an already inadequate critical understanding of how race in music was negotiated.

This introduced an intriguing interstitial space, between the racial body on the one hand and historical expectations of racialized musics on the other. For many artists, like James Brown or Rosemary Clooney, there was no apparent discrepancy between what they looked like and what they sounded like; they were decipherable to consumers in that they did not occupy these interstices. For singers like Marvin Gaye, however, codified expectations of racial performance prompted some discomfort: Gaye looked black (that was "common sense"), but he supposedly sang, behaved and danced "white" (that is, until his embrace of soul music in the late 1960s). The question became whether to define Gaye racially according to his self-identification as a black man or his commitment to so-called white musics. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this analysis, such questions are surely misguided, probably irrelevant, and potentially even dangerous to our efforts to comprehend racial constructions in postwar musics; but

they are questions that are no less historically real, and they must be engaged with as part of a program to complicate our racialized readings of American musics.

This program must seek not only to understand stylistic expressions like Gaye's black pop within their immediate historical context, but also to recognize the ways in which these styles have been reflected on historiographically – and sometimes even ahistorically. Criticisms surrounding the supposed "whiteness" of postwar black pop singers often reflect an inappropriate projection of later historical developments in racial consciousness backwards, onto an earlier social landscape that did not support proud and often oppositional declarations of black identity as did the later era of Black Power and the counterculture. Such criticisms thus reflexively write into the narrative of black pop a sort of embarrassing acquiescence to white expectations – "white music produced by blacks," in Michael Bane's less-than-revealing phrase – without committing to understand the motivations for black pop's existence in the first place. Surely we cannot seriously consider black pop a product of some continental mass self-delusion, wherein black consumers and cultural producers convinced themselves to sample white culture while secretly yearning to be "blacker."

It was, of course, the White Negroes of the MC5 variety who yearned to be blacker, and in following this impulse the group promoted a program that provided a fascinating counterpoint to the early works of Marvin Gaye. As I have suggested, if Marvin Gaye was somehow seen as a "whitened" black singer, there was little interest in parsing the conditions of this whiteness; essentialist racial perspectives of a predictable sort led commentators only to conclude that Gaye and the Motown faction did not subscribe to displays of *identifiable* blackness. Operating within a nearly-identical racial-

essentialist framework, the MC5 did indeed seek to define and critique whiteness as its own, non-normative racial category. The group's conspicuous emulation of an essentialist black manhood worked cooperatively with its efforts to "out" whiteness as an hegemonic privilege; in an interesting inversion of whiteness' traditional role as the unexamined normative, the group sought to transform whiteness into the Other through their sympathetic embrace of a disruptive black mask. The MC5 were "white boys," to be sure, but even within this acknowledgment we can read a clear discounting of the importance of a biologically-given racial identity. Recognizing these ambiguous spaces, between the biological body and the performance of racial identity, the group saw in racial masquerade the promise and potential of transgressing not only musical but even behavioural racialized boundaries; whether they succeeded or not is of course a subjective consideration. What is clear is that within these recognized ambiguities the MC5 enacted a supremely complex mediation of racial positions: white bodies performing blackness, by reference to an historically black music that was by that point largely the trade of white musicians. What had been a mere implication in the reception of Gaye's black pop – namely, the indistinctness of that singer's racial signification – became an explicit site of experimentation within the works of the white hard rockers.

The reverse side of this coin involved some troublesome (and troubling) assumptions regarding the freedoms available to sympathetic white radicals on the supposed behalf of their black counterparts. Irrespective of how much love and admiration the White Negro held for the marginalized black American, it was a stale and cartoonish image of black manhood that was made manifest by his racial costumes. This is to say that, whatever service the image of blackness provides to the White Negro, it is

an image born of simplistic racial perspectives, and it is taken unilaterally for the gain of the white enactor. This "use" of black culture, into which the white performer injects his own meanings and his own racial fantasies, defines the paradox of the White Negro: his sympathy is constantly undermined, however well-intentioned, by his inability to grasp the true imbalance of his donning of the black mask. Believing he has left behind his white privilege and its attached expectations, he thus believes he has entered the subject position of the black man, and is thenceforth in a position to speak on his behalf. Such naïve underpinnings, made even more uncomfortable by a long and often degrading history of white experiments in the mask of blackness, must always temper the more celebratory aspects of such utopian visions as those of the MC5 and their countercultural ilk.

Ultimately what this project has sought to achieve is a nuanced consideration of the racialized terms we continue to use to clarify and comprehend the performance of postwar popular musics in America. Marvin Gaye and the MC5 are not exceptions to prove our rule of what we may casually term "white" and "black" genre styles or performed identities; they are illustrative examples of just how irreducible popular music and performance can be. If it is a cliché to speak of "complicating" our analyses of these issues, this is surely because there is much work left to be done to align our scholarly findings with the diverse motivations of historical actors and cultural producers. Totalizing sentiments – that blackness will sound a certain predictable way; that white cooptation of black musics is theft; that the black mask is a willfully racist affectation – can only serve to corroborate knee-jerk assumptions that may prove an ill fit when considered more carefully. As in all aspects of American society, past and present, race

deserves to occupy a central place in our dissections of popular music's history; if its presence seems to frustrate our desires for universal answers, then the task to clarify its meanings is all the more essential.

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