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Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues? (1994)

Joel Rudinow

The first time we toured with the Beastie Boys was the Raising Hell *tour in 1986: Run-DMC, Whodini, LL Cool J and the Beastie Boys. We were playing the Deep South . . . and it was just black people at those shows. The first night was somewhere in Georgia, and we were thinking, "I hope people don't leave when they see them." But the crowd loved them, because they weren't trying to be black rappers. They rapped about shit they knew about: skateboarding, going to White Castle, angel dust and mushrooms. Real recognizes real.*

—Darryl McDaniels of Run D.M.C. (McDaniels 2004)

Joel Rudinow's essay, which appeared in "The Philosophy of Music," a special issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, is a fine example of how philosophers argue a thesis, and a model for students to emulate in their own writing. An argument in philosophy is a proposition or set of propositions, one of which is a conclusion, and all of which are subject to dispute or questioning. Rudinow's argument here is complex, as he defines his terms, asks questions of them, argues for opposing positions, and so forth. This essay's rigorous definitions and argument help us to think in a more precise and nuanced manner about terms such as race, racism, ethnicity and authenticity as they apply to popular music in America.

Rudinow begins with a simple question: *Can white people sing the blues?* One's immediate reaction is likely to be "yes" (after all, Janis Joplin can surely sing the blues), but the question turns out to be more complex than it might seem at first hearing, and it connects in fundamental ways with the issue of race in popular music.

Is the negative answer—*whites cannot sing the blues*—a racist answer? What would make it racist? Characteristically, Rudinow begins by defining racism, the doctrine that "there are races whose members share genetically transmitted traits and characteristics not shared by members

of other 'races,' and which makes moral distinctions or other (for example aesthetic) distinctions with moral implications, on this basis alone." As he notes, there is no genetic or biological basis for "morally significant" classification of humans by race; intelligence, musicality, and other talents are not racially determined. Ethnicity is another matter, for ethnicity is defined by shared culture (experience, language, religion, and so forth). Thus, the negative answer (whites can't sing the blues) is racist only if one asserts that whites are *genetically* incapable of making blues sounds.

But no one seriously claims that the issue is race; rather, it is authenticity. Authenticity, according to Rudinow, is credibility, of the kind that comes from having a direct connection to an original source. (For other, more common definitions of this term as it applies to popular music, see Shuker 2005, 17.) Thus authentic blues are those that are stylistically and expressively derived from the original sources of the blues. So now the negative answer becomes: ". . . white musicians cannot play the blues in an authentic way because they do not have the requisite relation or proximity to the original source of the blues." That answer is based on two related arguments: the "Proprietary Argument" and the "Experiential Access Argument."

Who owns the blues? Who has authority to use, interpret or profit from the blues? The Proprietary Argument says that because the original bluesmen and women were black, the genre belongs to African Americans. When whites perform (and profit from) the blues, they steal from blacks, just as they have stolen every other significant black musical innovation (New Orleans and big band jazz, Rhythm & Blues, hip hop, and so forth). This is what Amiri Baraka calls the "Great Music Robbery."

Rudinow considers possible objections to this argument. The first is "ownership," which suggests that because the originators were black, their heirs, according to the modern notion of intellectual property, have rights to their creative work. But who are these heirs? The originators were individuals: they may indeed have heirs, but those heirs are not "the African-American community."

Returning to authenticity, Rudinow considers the "Experiential Access Argument," which has more to recommend it. This argument concerns meaning and understanding. To put it bluntly, ". . . one cannot understand the blues or authentically express oneself in the blues unless one knows what it's like to live as a black person in America, and one cannot know this without being one." Those whites who try to sing the blues are doomed to fail, doomed to produce shallow and inauthentic imitations. As Rudinow notes, this argument too seems dubious, because the experience of blacks today is probably as remote as that of whites from slavery or sharecropping or life on the Mississippi delta in the 1920s and 30s, unless one claims that there is some sort of "Ethnic Memory" that enables blacks today to access the experience of their ancestors. A more subtle proof is that there is a kind of secret code at work in the blues, which allows access to its deeper layers of meaning. The key to the code is familiarity with the African American experience, which may indeed exclude whites.

By way of conclusion, Rudinow suggests that if the question "Can white people sing the blues"? turns not on race but instead on ethnicity (which admits the possibility of mastering the blues language), then the answer is probably "Yes. Unless you're a racist."

> The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle class blues singer.
>
> Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People*

> It is unlikely that [the blues] will survive through the imitations of the young white college copyists, the "urban blues singers," whose relation to the blues is that of the "trad" jazz band to the music of New Orleans: sterile and derivative. The bleak prospect is that the blues probably has no real future; that, folk music that it is, it served its purpose and flourished whilst it had meaning in the Negro community. At the end of the century it may well be seen as an important cultural phenomenon—and someone will commence a systematic study of it, too late.
>
> Paul Oliver, *Blues Off the Record*

Can white people sing the blues? Can white people play the blues? On the surface, these may seem to be silly questions. Why not? What is Mose Allison, if not a white blues singer? Surely the performances of guitarists Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan and pianist Dr. John must count as playing the blues. But the question "Can white people sing (or play) the blues?" is much more persistent, elusive, and deep than such ready responses acknowledge. The above passage from Paul Oliver exemplifies a tradition of criticism which distinguishes between the performances of black and white blues musicians, preferring those of black musicians and refusing to recognize as genuine those of white musicians.[1] This tradition raises questions of race, ethnicity, and expressive authenticity which go to the heart of the contemporary debate over multi-culturalism, the canon, and the curriculum. I derive my title, and take my theme, from the late jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason, who raised the issue definitively, at least for white liberals in the late 1960s, saying:

> [T]he blues is black man's music, and whites diminish it at best or steal it at worst. In any case they have no moral right to use it.[2]

When I raise this issue in my Aesthetics classes, I find I must first get my students to appreciate it as a genuine and genuinely deep issue. They tend to dismiss it rather quickly by simple appeal to their own musical experience. They tend to think that the mere mention of the name "Stevie Ray Vaughan" settles it. It doesn't. Nevertheless, there's something in this naive response. It reflects the central dialectic of the issue—the difficulty of appreciating its depth and significance in the face of its apparent implications. In an age of renewed and heightened racial and cultural sensitivity such a critical stance seems paradoxically to be both progressive and reactionary, and to stand in need of both clarification and critique. It seems to embody, as well as any, the problematic of "political correctness." The stance taken, as in the case of Gleason and Oliver, by white critics and scholars seems progressive in that it unambiguously credits its African-American culture as the authoritative source of the blues as musical genre and style, something the dominant culture has by and large systematically neglected. And yet it seems reactionary—indeed, prima facie racist—to restrict access to the blues as a medium of artistic expression. Check through the "blues" racks at your best local roots record store. There you'll find quite a few white recording artists among the many black recording artists. Mike Bloomfield, Paul Butterfield, Dr. John, Mark and Robben Ford, Nick Gravenites, John Hammond, Delbert McClinton, Charlie Musselwhite, Johnny Otis, Roy Rogers (not the cowboy), Stevie Ray Vaughan,

[1] For convenient reference, I'll call this the "negative position," and distinguish it from the "affirmative position" represented so far by the above "ready responses."

[2] Ralph J. Gleason, "Can the White Man Sing the Blues?," *Jazz and Pop* (1968): 28–29.

Marcia Ball, Lou Ann Barton, Rory Block, Angela Strehli, and so on. This would appear to make the affirmative case. Add to this list the non-black sidemen in the backup bands of many recognized blues artists—Jesse Edwin Davis (in Taj Mahal's early bands), Tim Kaihatsu (the Japanese second guitarist in Robert Cray's touring band), Albert Gianquinto (James Cotton's piano player for many years), to name only a few—and the thesis that the blues is a musical idiom which knows no racial or ethnic barriers begins to look pretty well confirmed. In the face of such evidence, what could have prompted our question in the first place? Is there some crucial difference between John Lee Hooker's blues and John Hammond's? What sort of difference could it be? Do the notes sound different when played with black fingers? If Leontyne Price can sing opera, and Charlie Pride can sing country, why can't Bonnie Raitt sing the blues?

I. A "RACIST" ARGUMENT?

Part of appreciating the issue is rescuing it from a racist reading. Let us first get clear about what would make the negative position "racist." "Racism" is widely discussed and many would say even more widely practiced, but it is rarely defined or clarified conceptually. For present purposes I will consider as racist any doctrine, or set of doctrines which presupposes that there are "races" whose members share genetically transmitted traits and characteristics not shared by members of other "races" and which makes moral distinctions or other (for example aesthetic) distinctions with moral implications, on this basis alone.[3] Essentially racism seeks to establish a scientific, in this case biological, basis for differential treatment of human beings—a basis in the nature of things for discrimination.

Thus critiques of racism have attempted to establish that there is no genetic or biological (i.e., scientific) basis for *morally significant* classification of human beings into races, by arguing that those genetically determined gross morphological characteristics whereby individuals are assigned to racial categories (pigmentation, bone structure, and so on) are not morally significant and that those human characteristics which *are* or *can be* morally significant (intelligence, linguistic capability, and so on), though genetically determined, do not vary significantly with race. A more radical critique of racism would undercut the concept of "race" itself as an artificial and harmful construct without objective foundation in science, arguing in effect that there is no foundation in biology or genetics for *any* system of classification of humans by "race." This might be based on the observation that the degree of variation, with respect even to gross morphological characteristics, within a given "racial" group exceeds that between "typical" members of different groups, and on the generally accepted finding in genetics that the probability

[3]This follows Kwame Anthony Appiah's account in "Racisms," in David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Anatomy of Racism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 3–17. Racist attitudes and practices are no doubt more prevalent than racist *doctrines*. Following Appiah, I take racist doctrines as theoretically fundamental. To the extent that racist attitudes and practices can be rationalized at all, and thereby rendered accessible to rational assessment and critique, it is on the basis of racist doctrine. For a critical account of the concept of race presupposed by racist doctrine and practice thus defined, see Appiah's "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 21–37.

of any particular genetic difference occurring between two members of the same "racial" group is roughly the same as for any two human beings.[4] We might do well to wonder whether, if either of these critiques has force, (and they both seem forceful to me), we can raise the issue of the authenticity of white blues musicians at all. Is there a way to enter into such a discussion without reifying "race" and investing it with moral significance? Doesn't the very question presuppose race as a morally significant human category with a verifiable basis of some sort?

Suppose we begin to answer this by distinguishing between race and ethnicity. Unlike race, let us say, which is supposed to be innate and in nature, ethnicity requires no genetic or biological foundation. Ethnicity is a matter of acknowledged common culture, based on shared items of cultural significance such as experience, language, religion, history, habitat, and the like. Ethnicity is essentially a socially conferred status—a matter of communal acceptance, recognition, and respects.[5]

Thus the negative position may *seem* racist since it may appear that nothing other than race is available as a basis for what is evidently both an aesthetic and moral distinction between black and white blues artists and performances. The negative position would *be* racist if, for example, it held that white people were genetically incapable of producing the sounds essential to the blues. Is there a difference between John Lee Hooker's blues and John Hammond's blues? Well, certainly. There are many. The diction, phrasing, and intonation of each as vocalist, as well as their techniques of instrumental self-accompaniment are distinctive and immediately identifiable (which shows that whatever differences there are are relevant *aesthetically).* If someone proposed to explain these differences on the basis of the genetically inherited expressive capacities and limitations of members of different races, and then went on to argue for some form of differential assessment of performances or treatment of artists on this basis, that would qualify as a racist account.

However, the question raised by the negative position is not one of genetically transmissible expressive or musical capabilities and limitations, but rather one of "authenticity." Again, the negative position would *be* racist if it held that music made by white people, however much it may resemble blues and be intended as blues, isn't authentic blues *simply because it is made by people of the wrong race.* But nobody says this. Nor does any serious adherent of the negative position hold that white people are somehow *genetically* incapable of delivering an authentic blues performance. What makes one blues performance authentic and another inauthentic? The question of authenticity is really a matter of "credentials."

[4]See Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 21 and 30–31. Appiah notes that not all biologists are ready to accept, as an interpretation of the genetic data, that the notion of distinct "races" of human beings is an artificial construct without objective foundation in science, however attractive the idea may be for its egalitarian implications. The scientific debate is outside the scope of this discussion (and my competence). I am interested in its conceptual implications.

[5]One important writer on these topics, W.E.B. Du Bois, attempted to reconceptualize "race" as a special case of ethnicity in order to avoid the irrational evils of racism while at the same time facilitating access to and expression of truths about peoples (such as the Negro people) united by common origins and struggles. See W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890–1919*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), cited in Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument."

II. THE AUTHENTICITY QUESTION

Authenticity is a value—a species of the genus credibility. It's the kind of credibility that comes from having the appropriate relationship to an original source. Thus authenticity's most precise, formal, and fully institutionalized application in the artworld is to distinguish from the forgery a work "by the author's own hand." When we authenticate a work in this sense, what we want to know is whether or not the putative author is who he or she is represented to be. In this application the "authentic/inauthentic" distinction is dichotomous, the alternatives both mutually exclusive and exhaustive, and the appropriate relationship is one of identity.

More broadly, less precisely, but in an essentially similar way, "authenticity" is applicable to the artifacts and rituals which are a culture's "currency," conferring value on those "acceptably derived" from original sources. So, for example, an authentic restoration of a turn of the century Victorian house might be one reconstructed according to original plans and specifications and perhaps using only the tools, techniques, and building materials of the period. An authentic Cajun recipe might be one traceable to a source within the culture using ingredients traditionally available within the region. In such applications authenticity admits of degrees. A given piece of work may be more or less authentic than another. And the standards or criteria of authenticity admit of some flexibility of interpretation relative to purpose.

In the literature of musical aesthetics the authenticity question has been focused largely on the relation between performances and "the work"—or, because the work is conceived of as a composition, between performances and what the composer intended—and the criteria for authenticity have been understood in terms of accuracy or conformity with performance specifications which constitute the work. As applied to blues performances the authenticity question must be focused somewhat differently, for although we may speak of blues "compositions," what we thereby refer to consist of no more typically than a simple chord progression shared by many other such "compositions" with no definite key signature, no particular prescribed instrumentation, and a lyrical text which itself is open to *ad lib* interruption, interpretation, and elaboration in performance. As a musical genre, the blues is characterized by what we might call "compositional minimalism" and a complementary emphasis on expressive elements. The question of the authenticity of a given blues performance is thus one of stylistic and expressive authenticity, and our question becomes, "Is white blues 'acceptably enough derived' from the original sources of the blues to be stylistically authentic and authentically expressive within the style?" The negative position can now be understood as: white musicians cannot play the blues in an authentic way because they do not have the requisite relation or proximity to the original sources of the blues.[6] No

[6]Some may be tempted at this early stage to dismiss the negative position as an instance of the "genetic fallacy," which misconstrues an aesthetic property of the work or performance itself as a relational property arising out of the origins of the work or performance. However, I don't think this move would be fair. First of all, as I've said above, I think the negative position is right in taking authenticity as fundamentally relational. More important, the negative position, as we shall see presently, raises an issue of an essentially moral and political nature, and makes arguments of sufficient depth and substance to merit assessment on their own terms.

one has made the case for the negative position more provocatively, eloquently, profoundly, and forcefully than Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). In what follows I will consider that case, which I believe consists of two interrelated arguments, which I will call the "Proprietary Argument" and the "Experiential Access Argument."[7]

III. THE PROPRIETARY ARGUMENT

The proprietary argument addresses the question of ownership. Who "owns" the blues? Who has legitimate authority to use the blues as an idiom, as a performance style, to interpret it, to draw from it and to contribute to it as a fund of artistic and cultural wealth, to profit from it? The originators and the major innovative elaborators of the blues were in fact members of the African-American community. Women and men like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Professor Longhair, and so on. The question arises, to whom does this cultural and artistic heritage belong? Who are Robert Johnson's legitimate cultural and artistic heirs and conservators?

The proprietary argument says in effect that the blues as genre and style belongs to the African-American community and that when white people undertake to perform the blues they misappropriate the cultural heritage and intellectual property of African-Americans and of the African-American community—what Baraka refers to as "the Great Music Robbery."[8] Baraka describes a systematic and pervasive pattern throughout the history of black people in America—a pattern of cultural and artistic co-optation and misappropriation in which not just the blues, but every major black artistic innovation, after an initial period of condemnation and rejection as culturally inferior, eventually wins recognition for superior artistic significance and merit, only to be immediately appropriated by white imitators whose imitations are very profitably mass produced and distributed, and accepted in the cultural mainstream as definitive, generally without due credit to their sources. Calling the blues "the basic national voice of the African-American people,"[9] he writes:

> ... after each new wave of black innovation, i.e., New Orleans, big band, bebop, rhythm and blues, hard bop, new music, there was a commercial cooptation of the original music and an attempt to replace it with corporate dilution which mainly featured white players and was mainly intended for a white middleclass audience.[10]

This is not an aberrant or accidental phenomenon, nor is it benign. Rather it is part and parcel of a subtle and systematic form of institutionalized racism which reinforces a racist socio-economic class structure.

> The problem for the Creators of Black Music, the African-American people, is that because they lack Self-Determination, i.e., political power and economic self-sufficiency,

[7]See *Blues People* (New York: Quill, 1963) and *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York: Morrow, 1987).
[8]"The Great Music Robbery," in *The Music*, pp. 328–332.
[9]"Blues, Poetry and the New Music," in *The Music*, p. 262.
[10]"Jazz Writing: Survival in the Eighties," in *The Music*, p. 259.

various peoples' borrowings and cooptation of the music can be disguised and the beneficiaries of such acts pretend they are creating out of the air.[11]

Let's consider a possible objection, or set of objections, to this argument. The crucial claim is the ownership claim: that the blues as genre and style belongs to the African-American community. How is this claim warranted? Part of the warrant is the factual claim that the originators and major innovative elaborators of the blues were members of the African-American community like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Professor Longhair, and so on. There is an interpretive tradition which holds, contrary to this, that the blues is an oral folk form with an ancient and untraceable pre-history, but in spite of this let us take the factual claim as true. But what is the principle or set of principles which connects this factual claim with the ownership claim that the blues belongs to the African-American *community*?

The crucial assumption underlying this as a *critical* question—as the basis for a series of objections—is the modern notion of intellectual property[12] as applied to the blues. On this assumption, an *individual* is understood to have certain rights regarding the products of his or her original creative work, including the right to control access to the work for the purposes of commercial exploitation, etc. So one could say that the musical literature of the blues rightly belongs to *certain members* of the African-American community like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Professor Longhair, or their estates, legitimate heirs and assigns. But this list, even drawn up on the basis of a liberal reading of "legitimate heirs and assigns," even if *padded*, is not coextensive with "the African-American *community*."

Moreover, these rights can be alienated voluntarily and involuntarily in various ways. They can be purchased, sold, exchanged, wagered, and so on. So for example the rights inherent in Robert Johnson's entire catalogue of recorded compositions now belong to something called King of Spades Music and the rights to the recordings of his performances of them belong to CBS Records, part of the Sony Corporation. In other words, on this assumption a number of individual and corporate ownership claims would seem to follow from the facts, but not the communal ownership claim central to Baraka's case.

Finally, the proprietary argument claims ownership of the blues as genre and style, so that musical and expressive elements as elusive as timbre, diction, vocal inflection, timing, rhythmic "feel," and their imitations become the subjects of dispute. For example, the rock group ZZ Top has obviously imitated or "borrowed from" elements of John Lee Hooker's distinctive style in several of their original compositions.[13] For Baraka this constitutes misappropriation—just another instance

[11]"Where's the Music Going and Why?" in *The Music*, p. 179.

[12]As understood, for example, in Article One, Section 8 of the United States Constitution, which gives Congress the power "to promote the progress of science and the useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries."

[13]Compare ZZ Top's "La Grange" or "My Head's in Mississippi" with John Lee Hooker's 1948 recording of "Boogie Chillun."

of The Great Music Robbery. But where in the notion of music as intellectual property can one find precedent for this? If anything, the history of music provides ample precedent for accepting such borrowings as legitimate forms of tribute and trade in ideas. The modern notion of intellectual property as applied to music can be used to support ownership claims concerning compositions but not musical ideas as ephemeral and problematic for purposes of documentation as these "elements of style."

Arguably this series of objections does very little damage to the proprietary argument. First of all, what the objection grants is important evidence in support of the proprietary argument. The modern notion of intellectual property, insofar as it is applicable to the blues, would seem to warrant at least an indictment of the American music establishment on the offense of Great Music Robbery, just as Baraka maintains. The means whereby the intellectual property rights inherent in the creative work of African-American blues musicians were alienated from the artists, later to turn up in various corporate portfolios at greatly appreciated value, were in many cases questionable, to say the least.[14]

But more important, though it may not be entirely inappropriate to apply an eighteenth-century English legal concept of intellectual property[15] to the blues—after all, the blues *is* modern American music—it's not entirely appropriate either. Approaching the blues via such a conceptual route entails treating the blues as a collection of compositions, discrete pieces of intellectual property, convenient as commodities to the economic apparatus of the twentieth-century American music and entertainment industries, whereas attention and sensitivity to the social context of the music, its production, presentation, and enjoyment disclose phenomena rather more in the nature of real-time event and communally shared experience, in which the roles of performer and audience are nowhere near as sharply delineated as would be suggested by the imposition of the notions of creative artist and consumer upon them.

> Stories, jokes, and music are all part of the blues performance. They flow together in small rooms filled with smoke and the smell of alcohol as couples talk, slow drag, and sing with the performer. . . . During blues sessions the audience frequently addresses the singer and forces him to respond to their comments through his music. . . . [T]he blues singer sometimes prevents fights by talking the blues with his audience and integrating their conversations between his blues verses. After he sings a verse, the musician continues instrumental accompaniment and develops a talk session. He may then sing another verse while participants remember rhymes and short jokes which they introduce at the next verse break. The singer always controls this talk

[14]It's worth noting that the music industry, and entertainment industry more generally, are tough businesses, and blacks are not the *only* creative artists whose work has been stolen. This is not to deny the existence also of discrimination on the basis of race.

[15]Intellectual property became a matter of English statutory law with the 1710 Statute of Anne, which gave exclusive copyright to the author for a renewable fourteen year period. Prior to this statute the "right of copy" was held by licensed printers as a matter of royal patronage and its function was not to secure compensation to the author of a work but to order and regulate publication in the interests of the church and the state.

> through his instrumental accompaniment. . . . [This] shows the limitations of using blues records in the study of oral tradition, for studio conditions completely remove the performer-audience dimension of blues. Listeners influence the length and structure of each blues performed and force the singer to integrate his song with their responses. . . . [W]hat I first saw as "interruptions" were, in fact, the heart of the blues performance.[16]

Thus the question of how to derive communal ownership claims from individual intellectual property rights needn't detain us. Indeed it arguably misleads attention from the real sources of the communal ownership claim, namely that the blues as genre and style originated as a communicative idiom and practice within the African-American community.

Finally, in insisting on a contrast between musical compositions as documentable items of intellectual property and relatively problematic ephemera of musical and expressive style, the objection begs a complex set of deeply intriguing questions concerning the ownership and regulation of musical "fragments" as commodified abstract ideas—which, ironically, rap music (particularly in its employment of the technology of digital sampling) has lately elevated to the status of a pressing legal issue.[17] But even more to the point, far from being problematic ephemera, the elements of blues style, when understood within the context of the music's historical origins and the social context of its production, take on crucial semantic and syntactic significance.

On balance, the modern notion of intellectual property as applied to the blues seems little more than an elaborate red herring which in effect obscures crucial facts about the social circumstances of the music's production, appreciation, and indeed, *meaning*. This brings me to what I am calling the "experiential access argument."

IV. THE EXPERIENTIAL ACCESS ARGUMENT

Where the proprietary argument addresses the question of ownership, the experiential access argument addresses the questions of meaning and understanding as these bear centrally on issues of culture, its identity, evolution, and transmission. What is the significance of the blues? Who can legitimately claim to understand the blues? Or to speak authoritatively about the blues and its interpretation? Who can legitimately claim fluency in the blues as a musical idiolect? Or the authority to pass it on to the next generation? Who are the real bearers of the blues tradition?

The experiential access argument says in effect that one cannot understand the blues or authentically express oneself in the blues unless one knows what it's like to live as a

[16]William Ferris, *Blues From the Delta* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1978), pp. 101–103. Cf. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), chapters 6 and 7, where Keil develops the notion of blues performance as ritual and the connection between the role of the blues singer and that of the preacher.

[17]See Andrew Goodwin, "Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction," in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), pp. 258–274; Bruce J. McGiverin, "Digital Sounds Sampling, Copyright and Publicity: Protecting Against the Electronic Appropriation of Sounds," *Columbia Law Review* (December 1987): 1723–1745. There is even a rap group calling itself KLF (Kopyright Liberation Front).

black person in America, and one cannot know this without being one. To put it more elaborately, the meaning of the blues is deep, hidden, and accessible only to those with an adequate grasp of the historically unique experience of the African-American community. Members of other communities may take an interest in this experience and even empathize with it, but they have no direct access to the experience and therefore cannot fully comprehend or express it. Hence their attempts to master the blues or to express themselves in the idiom of the blues will of necessity tend to be relatively shallow and superficial, i.e., inauthentic. Jazz players have an expression, a motto of sorts: Fake it 'till you feel it—the point being that authentic expression is expression derived from felt emotion. The experiential access argument in effect posits the experience of living as a black person in America as a precondition of the felt emotion essential to authentic expression in the idiom of the blues. Delfeayo Marsalis, in the liner notes to Branford Marsalis's 1992 release *I Heard You Twice the First Time,* writes:

> Yes, one must pay serious dues in order to accurately translate the sorrow and heartache of the blues experience into musical terms. The great blues musician Charlie Parker once said, "If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn."

And Baraka writes:

> Blues as an autonomous music had been in a sense inviolable. There was no clear way into it, i.e., its production, not its appreciation, except as concomitant with what seems to me to be the peculiar social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of a black man in America. The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle-class blues singer. The materials of blues were not available to the white American, even though some strange circumstance might prompt him to look for them. It was as if these materials were secret and obscure, and blues a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood.[18]

In the context of the kinds of questions raised here about culture, its identity, evolution, and transmission, the appeal to experience functions as a basis upon which to either establish or challenge authority, based on some such principle as this: Other things equal, the more directly one's knowledge claims are grounded in first hand experience, the more unassailable one's authority. Though there is room for debate about the centrality of experience as a ground of knowledge, as for example in current discussions of "feminist epistemology," such a principle as this one seems plausible and reasonable enough.

Nevertheless, stated baldly, and understood literally, the experiential access argument seems to invite the objection that it is either a priori or just dubious. The access that most contemporary black Americans have to the experience of slavery or sharecropping or life on the Mississippi delta during the twenties and thirties is every bit as remote, mediated, and indirect as that of any white would-be blues player. Does the argument subscribe to some "Myth of Ethnic Memory" whereby mere membership in the ethnic group confers special access to the lived experience of ancestors

[18]*Blues People,* pp. 147–148.

and other former members? It would be just as facile and fatuous for a Jewish-American baby boomer (such as myself) to take the position that only Jews can adequately comprehend the experience of the holocaust.

However the argument is susceptible of a more subtle and defensible reading, namely that the blues is essentially a cryptic language, a kind of secret code. Texts composed in this language typically have multiple layers of meaning, some relatively superficial, some deeper. To gain access to the deeper layers of meaning one must have the keys to the code. But the keys to the code presuppose extensive and detailed familiarity with the historically unique body of experience shared within and definitive of the African-American community and are therefore available only to the properly initiated.

There is a certain amount of theoretical and historical material, as well as textual material within the blues, available to support this argument. A general theoretical framework for understanding the development of cryptic devices and systems of communication under repressive circumstances can be found in the work of Leo Strauss. Strauss maintains that where control of the thought and communication of a subjugated population is attempted in order to maintain a political arrangement, even the most violent means of repression are inadequate to the task, for "it is a safe venture to tell the truth one knows to benevolent and trustworthy acquaintances, or . . . to reasonable friends."[19] The human spirit will continue to seek, recognize, and communicate the truth privately in defiance of even the most repressive regimes, which moreover cannot even prevent public communication of forbidden ideas, "for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines."[20] Unjust and repressive regimes thus naturally tend to engender covert communication strategies with "all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage—that it reaches only the writer's acquaintances, [and] all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage—capital punishment for the author."[21]

Evidence of the employment of such strategies within the African-American community is fairly well documented. For example, the evolution of "Black English," as well as a number of its salient characteristics, such as crucial ambiguity, understatement, irony, and inversion of meaning ("bad" means "good," and so on), may best be explained as the development of cryptic communicative strategies under repression.

> Blacks clearly recognized that to master the language of whites was in effect to consent to be mastered by it through the white definitions of caste built into the semantic/social system. Inversion therefore becomes the defensive mechanism which enables blacks to fight linguistic, and thereby psychological, entrapment. . . . Words and phrases were given reverse meanings and functions changed. Whites, denied access to the semantic extensions of duality, connotations, and denotations that developed within black usage, could only interpret the same material according to its original singular meaning . . . enabling blacks to deceive and manipulate whites without penalty. This protective process, understood and shared by blacks, became a contest of matching wits . . . [and a] form of linguistic guerrilla warfare [which] protected the subordinated, permitted the masking and disguising of true feelings, allowed the subtle assertion of self, and promoted group solidarity.[22]

[19]Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 23–24.
[20]Ibid., p. 24.
[21]Ibid., p. 25.

Ethnomusicologists, working independently and apparently absent any familiarity with Strauss's work in political philosophy or sociolinguisitic studies of Black English, have arrived at strikingly similar conclusions regarding the origins, functions, and stylistic features of jazz and blues.[23]

Lyrically the blues are rife with more or less covert allusions to the oppressive conditions of black life in America. If Jimmy Reed's "Big Boss Man"

> (Big-boss man, can't you hear me when I call [twice] Well you ain't so big, you just tall, that's all)

is overt, it is merely extending a more covert tradition central to the blues. As Paul Oliver observes:

> An appreciation of the part African-Americans have played in United States society and of the rights and other aspects of living that were denied them is of major assistance in understanding the blues. But there are barriers to appreciation presented by the manner of delivery, of speech, and of form, and [even] when these are overcome the full significance of the blues to the black audience still remains elusive. . . . Many black terms arose through the deliberate intention to conceal meaning. . . . [I]nnocuous words were often given secondary meanings which were closed to all but the initiated and by their use the singer could be more outspoken in the blues than might otherwise be prudent Some of these became traditional terms recognized and used throughout the states by blacks, for whom the colored man was the "monkey," the white man the "baboon." With comparative immunity Dirty Red could sing:
>
> Monkey and the baboon playing Seven-Up,
> Monkey win the money, scared to pick it up.
> The monkey stumbled, the baboon fell,
> Monkey grabbed the money an' he run like hell![24]

Similarly, the blues are full of covert and even overt references, both musical and lyrical, to the esoterica of African religions whose practice on this continent was prohibited and systematically repressed. When Muddy Waters sings:

> I got a black cat bone
> I got a mojo too

[22]Grace Simms Holt, " 'Inversion' in Black Communication," in Thomas Kochman, ed., *Rappin' and Stylin' Out* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), quoted in Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 221–222.
[23]See Ben Sidran, *Black Talk: How the Music of Black America Created a Radical Alternative to the Values of the Western Literary Tradition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart &Winston, 1971). Cf. Roger Taylor's account of the origins and significance of jazz, blues, and in particular the New Orleans piano tradition in *Art, an Enemy of the People* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978), chapter 4.
[24]Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (2nd ed, Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 265ff.

I got John the conqueror root
I'm gonna mess wit' you

we understand very little unless we recognize the references to the conjures and charms of the Dahomean religion which migrated to the Americas under slavery as vodun or "voodoo." Similarly we lose whole realms of meaning in Robert Johnson's "Crossroads" if we miss the symbolic reference to the Yoruba deity Eshu-Elegbara. The prevalence of such references not only tends to confirm the Straussian hypothesis of a covert communicative strategy, but also begins to suggest what might be involved in a "proper initiation."[25]

Having said all this, it nevertheless remains apparent that neither the proprietary argument nor the experiential access argument quite secures the thesis that white people can not sing (or play) authentic blues. The experiential access argument has undeniable moral force as a reminder of and warning against the offense of presumptive familiarity, but it distorts the blues in the process by obscuring what is crucially and universally *human* about its central themes.[26] And it leaves open the possibility of the proper initiation of white people and other non-blacks, if not entirely into the African-American ethnic community, then at least in the use of the blues as an expressive idiom and so into the blues community. Obvious examples would include Johnny Otis[27] and Dr. John.[28] Given this, the force of the proprietary argument is also limited, since initiation into the blues community presumably carries with it legitimate access to the blues as a means of artistic expression.

This of course leaves the authenticity question still open on a case-by-case basis. Many white attempts at blues certainly come off as inauthentic, as no doubt do some black ones. However, if the authenticity question turns not on race but rather on ethnicity, which admits of initiation, and on the achievement and demonstration of genuine understanding and fluency, which are also communicable by other than genetic means, then it is hard to resist the conclusion that Professor Longhair's legitimate cultural and artistic heirs include Dr. John, and that Robert Johnson's legitimate cultural and artistic heirs include John Hammond. It is tempting to conclude on this basis that the answer to the question "Can white people sing (or play) the blues?" is: "Yes. Unless you're a racist."

[25]The lyric is from Willie Dixon's "Hoochie Coochie Man." For an exegesis and interpretive analysis of this and other lyrical references within the blues see Oliver, op cit. But see also Stanley Edgar Hyman's critique of Oliver's interpretive analysis in "The Blues" and "Really the Blues" in *The Critic's Credentials* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), pp. 147–182. For an introduction to the sources of African-American art in African religious traditions see Roben Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

[26]Hyman, op. cit.

[27]A white American of ethnic Greek ancestry, whose biggest hit was "Willie and the Hand Jive." As a rhythm and blues bandleader for forty years, Johnny Otis gave Little Esther Phillips, the Coasters, Little Willie John, and Big Mama Thornton their initial breaks.

[28](Mac Rebennak), a central figure in New Orleans music since the late fifties, a founding member (and the only white member) of the black artists' cooperative AFO (All for One) Records, and arguably the leading current exponent of the New Orleans piano tradition.

V. CODA: HOW TO KEEP THE BLUES ALIVE

This isn't very likely to hold up as the last word, however—at least not yet. Some issues seem to persistently elude—and yet at the same time haunt—the discussion. Here I'm still bothered by the issues of race and racism despite my earlier attempt to set them aside. I wanted to say something in this paper about the authenticity of white blues without either descending into or inviting hateful discourse. And I'm afraid that, though the distinction I introduced earlier between race and ethnicity helps somewhat, it doesn't quite do the whole trick.

I can imagine someone objecting to the line of reasoning I've developed so far: "To dismiss black concerns about white cultural imperialism as 'racist'—to co-opt the notion of racism in this way—is the height of disingenuous arrogance. This so-called 'evolution' of the blues community and tradition is just another case of the Great Music Robbery. It's true that the racial makeup of the blues community has evolved over the years, especially if you count these white musicians as blues players (i.e., if you insist on begging the question). Just look at the contemporary blues audience: mostly white people who can't seem to tell the difference between John Lee Hooker (the real thing) and John Hammond (the white imitation)!" Such objections are not hard to come by. Charles Whitaker, in a recent *Ebony Magazine* article entitled "Are Blacks Giving Away the Blues?" goes even further when he notes with alarm the prevalence in the contemporary blues audience of "yuppie-ish white people who clap arrhythmically *(sic)*."[29] This seems prima facie racist, but is it? What if Whitaker said, "Of course I don't think it's a *genetic* thing, but they (white people) just haven't got it (rhythm). It's an *ethnic* thing." How much does this help? Is ethnocentrism a significant advance beyond racism? Certainly not when measured by the horrors and pointless suffering which have been inflicted over the years in the name of each. This is no way to keep the blues alive.

Of course not all talk of issues of ethnic heritage and authenticity need be ethnocentric. The fact that ethnocentric applications and uses of the concept of ethnicity are possible does not show that the concept itself is harmful or useless. There is a certain amount of truth in the observation that different ethnic groups use music in different ways and that members of different ethnic groups tend to make and respond to music in ways that are characteristic of their respective communities. And to be fair to Baraka—to avoid suggesting *he* be read as a clumsy ethnocentrist—it must be said that he does recognize the possibility of (and even sketches an ordered progression of) initiation into African-American musics. He writes:

> Jazz, as a Negro music, . . . and its sources were *secret* as far as the rest of America was concerned. . . . The first white critics were men who sought, whether consciously or not, to understand this secret, just as the first serious white jazz musicians ... sought not only to understand the phenomenon of Negro music but to appropriate it as a means of expression which they themselves might utilize. The success of this "appropriation" signaled the existence of an American music, where before there was a Negro music. . . . The white

[29]Cf. Charles Whitaker, "Are Blacks Giving Away the Blues?," *Ebony Magazine* (October, 1990).

> musician's commitment to jazz, the *ultimate concern*, proposed that the sub-cultural attitudes that produced the music as a profound expression of human feelings, could be *learned*. . . . And Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made. The white jazz musician carne to understand this attitude as a way of making music, and the intensity of his understanding produced the "great" white jazz musicians, and is producing them now.[30]

In other words, the essence of the blues is a *stance* embodied and articulated in sound and poetry, and what distinguishes authentic from inauthentic blues is essentially what distinguishes that stance from its superficial imitations—from *posturing*. I think that if we wish to avoid ethnocentrism, as we would wish to avoid racism, what we should say is that the authenticity of a blues performance turns not on the ethnicity of the performer but on the degree of mastery of the idiom and the integrity of the performer's use of the idiom in performance. This last is delicate and can be difficult to discern. But what one is looking for is evidence in and around the performance of the performer's recognition and acknowledgement of indebtedness to sources of inspiration and technique (which as a matter of historical fact *do* have an identifiable ethnicity). In the opening epigram Paul Oliver estimates the blues' chances of survival through these times of ethnic mingling as "unlikely." This kind of "blues purism" is no way to keep the blues alive either. The blues, like any oral tradition, remains alive to the extent that it continues to evolve and things continue to "grow out of it." The way to keep the blues alive is to celebrate such evolutionary developments.[31]

[30]Baraka, "Jazz and the White Critic," *Down Beat* (1963), reprinted in *Black Music* (New York: Apollo, 1968), p.13.

[31]This paper has been an embarrassingly long time in gestation. I want to thank Bill Bossart, one of my first teachers in philosophy and aesthetics, for encouraging me to think about topics like this one. This paper began to take its present form as part of the syllabus for a course in Philosophy of Art and Contemporary Rock and Soul Music jointly sponsored by the Department of Philosophy and the American Multi-Cultural Studies Department at Sonoma State University. I am grateful to Stan McDaniel and Jim Gray, the chairpersons of the two departments for supporting the course proposal, to Cynthia Rostankowski for including a workshop based on the course in the program of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers Conference on Teaching Philosophy in a Multicultural Context, to Stan Godlovitch and Michael Barclay for stimulating conversations, both musical and philosophical, on this and related subjects, and for their gracious and insightful criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, I wish to thank the students in the course for discussing these issues with me. Two students in particular, Eric Charp and Sean Martin, made especially helpful contributions to my work.

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Race (1999; excerpt)

Russell A. Potter

When people worldwide refer to American *music, they often mean, by way of shorthand, black music.*

—Norman Kelley (Kelley 2002, 7)

From "race records" in the 1920s to hip hop today, the American popular music industry has been divided along racial lines. But as Russell Potter, Professor of English at Rhode Island College and author of *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995), notes, despite the industry's charts and formats, whites have always listened to black music, and blacks to white. Categories generated by the music industry are slippery (whites buy more hip hop recordings than do blacks, and their tastes have fundamentally shaped that music), and also inadequate, because they can't begin to describe the heterogeneous mixtures characteristic of contemporary popular music.

For many students today, race may seem an issue of the past, a problem solved. In the '70s and '80s it seemed that way to Potter too, but he was forced to reconsider his opinion when he encountered early blues and, later, the rap music of N.W.A. The blues introduced Potter to "race records," of which he gives a useful historical overview. Rap's noise and message provoked the uncomfortable realization that, as a white suburbanite, he might be partly responsible for the desperate situation of inner-city blacks. We should beware of "hazy constructions of a [racially united] musical utopia."

Citing the critic Nelson George, Potter notes that once hip hop got enough attention for the major record labels to notice, its path was similar to that of early Rhythm & Blues: "appropriation, commodification, and an end to innovation." Potter contends that by the time hip hop arrived on the Grammy stage, it was already dead. Finally, he observes that race in American popular music is no longer simply a question of black and white. Latinos now outnumber blacks in this country, and their music has an increasing presence in our culture. Asian-American popular music may well follow suit.

DIGGING IN THE CRATES

In 1977, when I was seventeen, one of my friends told me that the best blues guitarist he had ever heard was someone named Blind Blake. He suggested that I pick up some of his records. Running off a strangely syncopated rolling bass line, he grimaced and remarked, "It's kinda like that, but better." I tried to copy the riff, but I couldn't quite get the timing right. Not long afterwards, I set out to the local record stores in search of this apparently unheralded guitar genius. No one, it soon appeared, had ever heard of him, at least not at the chain record stores, or even at the funkier independent record shops where Jethro Tull and Jeff Beck shared the shelves with bongs, pipes, and black-light posters. I finally found a store that said it had some of his recordings, a store on the other side of town, one of the first big music mega-stores. I went there—it took two bus rides lasting over an hour—and in one corner of its warehouse-like spaces I found a whole rack full of music by performers I'd never heard of before. Who was Georgia Tom? Victoria Spivey? Big Maybelle? Son House? Their recordings, for the most part, consisted of reissues of scratchy old 78 r.p.m. records, compiled by equally obscure labels with names like Biograph, Yazoo, and Document. The covers of these albums featured grainy old black-and-white publicity photographs, sepia-toned images of young black men and women in dark suits, laced up leather shoes, and felt hats with downturned brims. There often seemed to be only one known photograph of any given artist, since the same photo would be used on every album. Some of them, like Bo Carter (author of the irresistible "Banana in your Fruit Basket"), were eternally grainy and out of focus—their only surviving photograph must have been a small one, taken maybe in an early version of those take-your-own-picture photo booths. Almost all of these recordings had been made in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and the eerie surface noise of the originals ran over each of the albums like a Brillo Pad over Teflon, etching away the smooth musical surfaces and sticking their riffs to my mind. I picked up a couple of Blind Blake discs and was soon sitting at home with the eerie strains of songs such as "Black Dog Blues," "Dry Bone Shuffle," "Hard Pushin' Papa," and "Too Tight Blues #2" emanating from my Realistic speakers.

Reading over the closely printed liner notes, written evidently by a small group of aficionados and cognoscenti who actually possessed these old discs, I learned of something known as "race records," which seemed to me at the time to represent some ancient chapter in musical history when records and their audiences had a race. After all, this was the 1970s; my friends and I listened to a complicated mix of artists that didn't appear to line up along segregated racial lines. Music by the artists we listened to most—Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder, Jethro Tull, Aretha Franklin—seemed to appeal to everyone, and while race was certainly seen as an ingredient in their styles and personalities, it didn't produce anything approaching a one-to-one correspondence with audience. No doubt this had something to do with radio at that time, since you could still hear all these artists and more—everyone from Eric Clapton to Isaac Hayes, from the Pointer Sisters to Jackson Browne—on a single radio station, even in the course of a random half-hour listen. But it also had to do with a sense that my friends and I shared, a sense that the promise of increasing racial equality and social justice was in some sense being fulfilled by the intensely intertwined musical cross-influences that shaped our ears and excited our minds. There was a train a'comin, and whether it was sung on its way by Curtis Mayfield or Rod Stewart, we were ready to climb aboard. "Race" records, like segregated schools and the Negro Leagues, seemed a strange reminder of a worldview we thought had surely passed, or was soon to pass away.

RACE AND THE MARKETING OF POPULAR MUSIC

Alan Freed the waves just like Lincoln freed the slaves.

Chuck D of Public Enemy

It was not that long ago when things were quite otherwise. The history of the relationship between the recording industry and race is a long and convoluted one, and not susceptible to a brief summary. Nonetheless, its pivotal points are hardly secrets. It is the stuff of legend that when, on August 10, 1920, Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds recorded "Crazy Blues," her record company did not anticipate substantial sales. After all, it was reasoned, how many black folks could afford to own Victrolas? When the record went on to become the industry's first million seller, that logic was refuted, but its fundamental assumptions went unquestioned. The recording companies did not consider the possibility that white folks were buying blues recordings (though they certainly were); they simply figured that black listeners were more numerous than they had imagined. All the major labels of the day—RCA, Paramount, Columbia—set up separate "race" labels with different names and catalog numbers. They then sought out publications, such as the *Cleveland Call*, the *Pullman Porters' Review*, and the *Chicago Defender*, where they could reach and "target" black consumers. When, a few years later, a similar market was discovered for the music of the Southeast and West, the record companies took the same route, establishing separate "Hillbilly" and "Mexican" labels, and advertising these titles in places where their presumptive audiences would see them.

And so it remained for the next thirty years and more. Even as white artists became immensely successful with their versions of "swing" and "jazz" music, the major labels kept separate catalogs and series numbers, a musical apartheid that reflected and amplified the historic divisions in theater and vaudeville. It was undeniable that black musical forms had given birth to the biggest sales boom in the history of commercial recordings, but this perception was safely sealed behind a wall of heavy black bakelite, and wrapped in a brown paper sleeve festooned with images that evoked a world divided by stereotypes. How did the intended consumers react to record labels featuring darktown strutters in a panoply of latter-day minstrelsy, or straw-hatted hillbillies sipping moonshine from jugs? The record companies neither knew nor cared; it was the fiction of the audience that counted, and the music business still functioned with a largely top-down marketing attitude. The fantasy of the consumer took the place of actual market research, and there was

little reason for anyone to question the assumptions that had so far brought in such substantial profits.

This system did not come to a crisis until the 1950s. In the postwar boom years, many things were changing. A bumper crop of young kids both black and white were craving something new and had little vested interest in the sounds of their parents' generation. New neighborhoods and new industries, along with the GI Bill, were raising standards of living and creating a dynamic, rapidly growing audience of increasingly affluent listeners. More mobile in both class and regional terms, this generation was ready to cross over boundaries and tune its dial to wherever the musical action was found to be. The growing black middle class could tune to superstations of its own, such as Memphis's WDIA, where Martha Jean the Queen and Rufus Thomas ruled the waves. Yet, at the same time, ostensibly "white" radio began to flirt with DJs who, though white, consciously sought to talk "black." Radio (and later television) was a mass marketing tool that no one quite understood, and its potential for crossing over neighborhood lines was immense. One such DJ who discovered (belatedly) that he had tripped over a live wire was Cleveland's Alan Freed.

Freed, a DJ at Cleveland's WJW, played rhythm and blues (R&B) records for a largely black listening public. Unlike Memphis's WDIA, WJW did not, however, specifically *target* black listeners or advertisers, and only programmed R&B in the late night hours. This tacit acknowledgment of both black and white listenership was increasingly common as the 1950s rolled along, but in 1952 few people realized that such part-time fare was drawing a substantial audience, quite possibly more substantial than the regular daytime programming. Freed himself, known by his on-air moniker of Moondog, had little idea of the size of his audience, and when in March 1952 he decided to organize an R&B concert at the Cleveland Arena, his main concern was that he might not sell enough tickets to make back the cost of renting the hall. This was the infamous "Moondog Coronation Ball," advertised on its handbills as "The Most Terrible Ball of Them All." When the first fans began showing up around 8 p.m. on March 21, Freed was relieved that most of the tickets had sold in advance. The crowd was mostly black (though some music historians have promulgated the fiction that it was almost all *white*), and most of them had heard about the concert on Freed's radio show (aside from the handbills, the radio plugs were the show's only advertising). An hour later, as several hundred fans without tickets began to gather around the entrance, Freed realized there was going to be trouble. In Cleveland, a segregated city whose black population had grown substantially in the wake of the "Great Migration," a crowd of black folks made the all-white police on the scene nervous. Was this going to be some kind of riot? Around 9:30, when the crowd (now grown to more than six thousand) pushed in four of the arena's doors and walked right past the startled ticket-takers, the police called for reinforcements. After a tense period when the arena was filled far beyond its capacity (and with only the first song of the first act having been performed), the police shut down the concert and ordered everyone out, a process which took several more hours.

This is the show often hailed as the "first rock 'n' roll concert," usually because Freed was the one to introduce the term "rock 'n' roll" to describe the uptempo R&B

discs he played. Yet in many ways it was just another R&B concert, with the distinction that it was not advertised on a "black" radio station and did not appear at a "black" venue. In later years, Freed would be accused by some Afrocentric music critics of being instrumental in stealing black music and repackaging it for white consumers, but in 1952 Freed's audience was still mostly black, and he did nothing to consciously attract white listeners. In later years, Freed certainly tried to cash in on the huge crossover craze for rock 'n' roll, but he was far from alone. By then, the record companies themselves (belatedly, as usual) realized that R&B recordings were no longer being sold only (or even primarily) to black consumers, and, having tried a variety of tactics to siphon off the profits made by the small labels that released most R&B records, began to sign R&B artists themselves, or acquire exclusive distribution deals. The industry magazine *Billboard* reflected this change, at first altering the chart listing of "Race Recordings" to "Rhythm and Blues," and finally (in 1963) eliminating the R&B chart altogether on the theory that R&B was then fully a part of pop.

Yet, two years later, the R&B charts were back, part of a trend that has continued to this day of listing individual charts for each genre and category of music. It turned out that the labels that were releasing R&B *wanted* to have a separate chart so that their sales figures could be sorted out from the burgeoning music marketplace, which was just then undergoing a "British Invasion" that denied most R&B recordings their top chart status. The double irony—that this supposed "British Invasion" was led by bands who imitated and followed in the footsteps of Little Richard, Bo Diddley, and Muddy Waters—was not lost on these originators of R&B, though most Americans today, with characteristic cultural amnesia, think of "rock" as a music without a race. Yet "R&B" is still an industry category, with "Urban Contemporary" as its sister label for radio-station formatting, and most major record companies still divide their marketing and A&R departments along these lines.

POSTMODERNITY IN THE MARKETPLACE

But now it's the late 1990s. The new national *Zeitgeist* declares that *because* race as a category is now supposed to have been largely transcended, we don't need to acknowledge race as a meaningful question—in fact, to do so somehow marks us as cynical old leftists who can't get with the new post-racial reality. Yet, strangely enough, this is also the era when even more intensely racialized musical categories—"urban contemporary," "R&B," or "Latino"—dominate radio and music stores, and audience targeting and "formatting" guarantee that the listeners to one kind of music, however much they may overlap in reality, will be perceived and marketed as distinct groups. If there is one tacit point of agreement, however, between the micro-marketing and racialized genre terms of the industry (an industry now almost entirely controlled by three or four companies) and cultural critics, it is that all categories are slippery.

This was made eminently clear when SoundScan, introduced in order to replace the industry's quasi-fictional sales estimates with actual figures from cash registers at a representative series of stores, revealed that sales figures for R&B and hip-hop CDs were far greater than had been previously assumed, and that the great bulk of

sales occurred in suburban malls and chain stores whose clientele was presumed to be mostly white. Furthermore, with artists as well as audiences more and more heteroglot in their configurations, it became increasingly difficult to predict success (or failure) by using categorical notions of difference. What to do with Apache Indian, who blended Pakistani bhangra with Jamaican dancehall and American R&B while living in England? What about constructed sounds such as that of Enigma, which blended Gregorian chants and South American tribal religious songs with machine-generated drumbeats, or Liu Sola's "Blues in the East," which mixed blues and jazz with Chinese zither and bang zi vocal styles? As the array of such generically heterolectic artists grew, no category seemed broad enough to be accurate or narrow enough to be predictably marketed. The recording industry, which had always in the past divided its audiences in order to conquer them, seemed lost in the crosstalk between the tracks, nervously gobbling up small independent labels whose A&R staff could serve, at least temporarily, as prosthetic taste buds.

Within music criticism, a similar tension over race and genre has long been manifest. In the early criticism of jazz, the bulk of published critics were white men who venerated the sound of New Orleans in much the same way they lauded Michelangelo's David or Mozart's Requiem, as a cultural artifact in need of curatorial attention and meticulous cataloging. As Amiri Baraka (1967, p. 18) noted, this kind of care was in fact a kind of assassination, a reduction of a living tradition to "that junk pile of admirable objects and data that the West knows as culture." There was a strong sense that black music demanded its own critics, who would understand the music in its full cultural context. Such critics need not be black, but they needed a whole lot more than a degree from Harvard or Julliard. Baraka himself and the musician-critic Ben Sidran were two early writers who met these criteria. In the years since the bop revolution, jazz finally won the critical and institutional recognition it long sought, but at a price very much like the one Baraka feared—it has become a cultural *object*, an institutional *subject*, but only in isolated cases the living breathing improvisational *practice* it once was.

The blues, a close second to jazz in terms of recording history, endured a much different critical reception. The first "critics" of the blues were not aestheticians but folklorists, who were far more interested in classifying narrative tropes and variants than in looking at cultural politics. These early folklorists worked with the assumption that the blues was a characteristic—perhaps quintessential—*folk* art. Thus, they treated its performers as necessarily naive and untutored practitioners of an oral tradition. This need to see musicians as untutored was so deeply rooted that when Big Bill Broonzy recorded an album for Mose Asch's Folkways label in the 1950s, the liner notes were written to suggest that Broonzy had scarcely left the plantation where his forefathers sharecropped. No mention was made of his twenty years' recording experience as an urban Chicago bluesman. Other folklorists, such as the indefatigable Harry Smith (editor of the landmark collection *American Folk Music*), deliberately interwove recordings by black and white artists, annotating them chiefly in order to note their common relationship to well known themes and traditions, thereby effectively erasing the issue of race altogether.

Rock, the stepchild of the blues and R&B, received the most belated attention from critics who liked to think of themselves as "serious." Its critical beacons, from Lester Bangs to Greil Marcus, have tended to be eclectic and impressionistic in their approaches, as most of them cut their teeth writing for small independent rock magazines. Marcus, for one, has always preferred to celebrate the quirky and at times absurdist juxtapositions of pop music and pop culture. In *Dead Elvis*, he celebrates the postmortem postmodernism of Elvis kitsch, while in *Invisible Republic* he plays gleefully idiosyncratic riffs around Dylan's folkloric roots. In *Lipstick Traces*, his most ambitious work to date, he finds threads with which to connect everything from Johnny Rotten to the Situationist International, suggesting without necessarily documenting the shattered holograms of mass culture and its discontents. Yet Marcus has seldom addressed the question of race *per se*. For this, readers must turn to more politically committed critics, such as Nelson George. George's *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* is quite possibly the most direct and cogent account of the cultural politics of race and music, as well as of the music industry's unsuccessful attempts to render such issues predictable.

Along with *Village Voice* page-mate Greg Tate, George was also one of the first critics to take a serious look at hip-hop culture. Hip-hop, more than previous musical forms, had a very specific cultural origin: the South Bronx. One could, in fact, make a map of its spread from the Bronx to Queensbridge to Brooklyn and beyond (Tricia Rose offers one such map in her book *Black Noise*). Thus it was New York writers who first took notice, just as it was small New York-based record labels that first recorded it. Black-owned enterprises such as Enjoy, Winley, and Sugar Hill released the earliest hip-hop recordings in the late 1970s. Yet, as documented by Nelson George, once hip-hop became viable enough for the major recording companies to sit up and take notice, its path was frustratingly similar to that paved for R&B: appropriation, commodification, and an end to innovation. Small labels were absorbed, artists were dropped after their sophomore efforts had disappointing sales, artists were signed but left to rot on the shelf when the marketing breezes blew another way, and trends were relentlessly reproduced until they died.

A full critical discourse about hip-hop has emerged only in the late 1980s and 1990s, a good twenty years after the first artists broke through. The first few books read more like bluffers' guides than actual criticism, though some, such as David Toop's classic *Rap Attack*, are masterpieces of documentary musical reportage. In recent years, fuller treatments by Brian Cross (1993), Tricia Rose (1994), and Russell Potter (1995) have added to the critical weight of hip-hop, and rappers such as KRS-One and Chuck D have put their own books up on the shelf. Because of its focus on lyrical content, hip-hop is also the first music to contain its own critically aware and dynamic dialogue (although in recent years this dialogue has been increasingly lost in a sea of gangsta-rap sloganeering).

REDRAWING THE MAP

My own route into hip-hop was a circuitous one which caused me to question many of my earlier figurations of the musical universe. In the wake of the self-immolation

of punk in the early 1980s, rock seemed eviscerated and all-too-predictable. At the same time, R&B still bore the scars of its own disco inferno, and there was a sense that popular music in general no longer had the kind of raw, rebellious energy that had once, to quote Dylan Thomas, through the green fuse driven the flower. It was at this time that I remember my first dim inclinations toward musical nostalgia, the sense that what had come before was better than what was or what was likely to emerge in the near future. I spent hours listening to old protest songs by Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, which seemed somehow far more urgent and pertinent than the blasé, ironic meanderings of Culture Club or OMD. MTV was on the air and commercial-free, but most of the videos were so predictably aimless that they were scarcely more stimulating than a test signal. Such occasional flourishes of musical activism as there were sounded disappointingly smug and treacly to my ears. "USA for Africa"? "We are the World, We are the Children"? "No Nukes"?

In the midst of these musical doldrums, hip-hop was gradually emerging from the streets of New York as one of the brashest and most rebellious sounds of the century. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released "The Message" in 1983, and the year after, Run-DMC broke out with their riff on "Walk This Way," but I never heard either song until years later. Why? Was it because the new generation of AOR (album-oriented rock) superstations rarely played hip-hop, and mainline R&B stations shunned it as well? Was it because college kids were still noodling around with their own post-punk experiments and never looked at the wall to see what time it was? Was it because I was still assuming that revolutionary music could only be played on a guitar? What had really happened, I belatedly realized, was that the ostensibly egalitarian and eclectic notions of race fostered in the musical environment of the 1970s had never really run that deep. At best, they were tenuous alliances; at worst, a kind of willed illusion, a dreamy *Zeitgeist* that temporarily papered over deep and persistent cultural and economic rifts. In seeming to move beyond race by imagining music as a transcendent force, my generation of suburban white boys had in fact abandoned the possibility of cultural crosstalk. In this we were aided and abetted by a music industry which studiously avoided risks, didn't put much stock in hip-hop and other emerging musical forms until well into the 1980s, and plugged into the popularity of hip-hop only after it felt it could market such dangerous music in a safety-sealed package.

The first time I actually stopped and listened to hip-hop, it was a strange and uncanny experience, something like the emergence of Chauncey Gardener from his late employer's mansion in the book and film *Being There*. Chauncey, a middle-aged gardener who has remained indoors for decades while the neighborhood outside slowly turned into a ghetto, attempts to deflect the threats of some local street kids by pointing his television remote at them and pushing the button. In a similar way, I found myself both enthralled and repelled when a friend sat me down and played the first few tracks of *Straight Outta Compton*. This was strong stuff, stronger than anything I'd imagined, and it cut across all my deep-seated liberal mores. "Fuck the Police," now that sounded fine, but EazyE's and Ice Cube's luridly violent threats, many of which seemed aimed directly at the listener, overflowed the vessel of rebellion. Unlike leftist anthems such as Phil Ochs's "Cops of the World," this music did not allow its listeners the comfort of feeling good about themselves. These cops weren't in Cambodia or Santo Domingo. They were parked around the corner carrying badges and guns paid for by taxpayers like you and me. Police sirens, gunshots, and screeching tires were aurally imported into the mix, creating a tense environment within which white listeners were both vulnerable and culpable. There was no room for righteous empathy, at least not before confronting a few of the skeletons in the white liberal closet.

My early encounter with N .W A. was only a very timid beginning, and it was only after many hours of listening that I could really hear it in the context of hip-hop as a whole. To endorse hip-hop was not necessarily to endorse N.W.A., any more than listening to rock meant that you had to become an apologist for Alice Cooper, but it took me a long time to be able to separate the issues. The subjective experience of any musical form or genre is such that no listener can take in the whole before understanding the formal codes of difference—which perhaps is part of the reason why hip-hop's long absence from radio made it so difficult for baby-boomer ears to grasp. It was not until a younger generation came of age that hip-hop gained a significant following among white teenagers. Unfortunately, this also meant that white listeners, who were generally more affluent, exercised a disproportionate influence over what the industry perceived as market-place trends. So it was that, as the more militant black nationalism of late 1980s and early 1990s rappers began to fade, a new school of West Coast "gangsta" rappers took their place. One irony in all this is that the popularity of gangsta rappers among white listeners has sustained a large part of their sales (though that certainly does not much support the conspiracy theories of black anti-rap crusaders like C. Delores Tucker, who claims that rap records are a plot foisted on black communities by white-owned record companies). Another irony is that, as Chuck D has noted, the music industry only "let this shit succeed" when they were ready. The arrival of hip-hop on the stage at the Grammy Awards has in many ways been its death.

The most significant legacy of the past few years may ultimately be that the problematics of race must be acknowledged, and that we need to be suspicious of hazy constructions of a musical utopia (especially when they take place on televised award shows). Even beyond that, we must be no less suspicious of the old pieties of liberal championing of black art forms. In fact, the traditional bifurcation between black and white can no longer be said to constitute the question of race, not in a United States where the Latino population will shortly outnumber African-Americans, and the number of Asian-Americans has steadily increased. This is still more evident in popular music, where the recombinant influences of multiple generic and cultural threads have long since made it impossible to draw clear-cut ethnic or racial genealogies. Hip-hop backbeats have supported vocalists as far-flung as Bruce Springsteen and Sinéad O'Connor, and digital samples have crossed over still more unexpected territory. Hip-hop producers have recently sampled everyone from Sting to Joni Mitchell to Stephen Stills, and multimedia transcriptionists such as Beck have created aural textures so dense that, like James Joyce, they might well keep scholars busy for three hundred years and more.

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In Pop Music, The Races Remain Far Apart (1984)

John Rockwell

Despite Michael Jackson's remarkable success in 1983 and 1984 (he sold some 40 million copies of his album *Thriller* and won 8 Grammy awards), and despite the fact that much of the music popular then was based on black musical styles, white artists generally continued to reap far greater rewards than black artists, as they nearly always have in American culture and society.

In the 1950s and '60s white fans of popular music were surely aware of black artists. Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and others had numerous Top-40 hits in the '50s, as did Motown and Soul artists in the '60s. But by the '80s the charts had again become racially divided, as they were in the earlier era of so-called "race music."

Why did pop re-segregate? John Rockwell provides two explanations: the fashion for demographics in the '70s, and the video revolution of the '80s. Demographics meant targeting music to specific audiences, and in radio that meant breaking up the old single multi-purpose Top-40 format into multiple categories. Black music was banished to black stations, and many whites (but not white musicians!) knew relatively little of it.

In the '80s, MTV and its music videos were requisite for chart success and sales, but black musicians had trouble getting on the channel. Michael Jackson's videos broke the color barrier at MTV and for a time were often played; nevertheless, by March 17, 1984 MTV's "heavy rotation" list included twenty-one names, not one of which was a black artist. In other words, black musicians had become invisible to the largest pop-music audience.

Why does this matter? For one thing, in 1984 many whites and blacks were unaware of exciting music being made across the color divide. That might still be true today. More importantly, popular music is based on fusion: rock began as mixture of styles and continues to develop by mixing styles in new combinations. Without cross pollination, it might wither and die.

The sight of Michael Jackson shyly cradling his eight Grammy Awards like so many Christmas toys might seem to allay forever the suspicion that blacks aren't properly recompensed for their contributions to American popular music. Mr. Jackson's eight

prizes were more by two than anybody had ever won at a Grammy ceremony. His latest album, *Thriller*, may sell 35 million "units," a unit being a record, cassette or compact disk. When it reached 25 million a few weeks ago, it became the biggest-selling record of all time.

Yet while black music has been and remains the primary inspiration for the Anglo-American rock style, the vast majority of the most famous, most handsomely rewarded pop stars are white. The situation is more dramatic just below the superstar stratum on which Mr. Jackson so sweetly dwells. The pop-music business, and hence the listening habits of most of pop's audience, are more strictly segregated today than they were 10 or 20 years ago, when black music was a commonplace on top-10 sales charts and top-40 radio playlists. For a variety of reasons, all of them logical in a short-run business sense but questionable in a long-run artistic, social and even financial sense, pop music today has become a deeply divided art form.

None of this is to suggest a conspiracy motivated by conscious racial hostility; most white record and radio executives would still profess a personal commitment to integration and tolerance. The causes run deeper than individual intention, involving basic shifts in the music business and, perhaps, in the cultural climate at large.

Ironically, pop music was the anthem of integration and the conscience of the country in the 60's. But now, the racial divisions in music run deeper than in the popular theatrical arts of film and television, which tend to cast a careful representation of blacks and other minorities.

Such seeming tokenism, however well intended, sometimes looks self-conscious. But it reflects social reality in the schools and workplace, and it may well prove helpful for the future—creatively, by tapping the full, diverse range of the country, and socially, by providing images that make casual integration look completely natural not too many years hence.

How great is the racial division in pop music today? That's easily ascertained by a comparative analysis of the Billboard top-10 mainstream pop LPs versus the magazine's "Black LPs" chart, as of the March 17 issue. (Needless to say, the very existence of separate "black" charts is in itself a reflection of racial division.)

The main chart includes sales to blacks as well as whites; it counts everybody, but by numbers and economic advantage, whites obviously dominate. There are only two black artists in the mainstream top 10—Mr. Jackson at No. 1 and Lionel Richie at No.4. And except for Culture Club at No. 13, the other top seven mainstream LPs simply aren't on the black chart, which includes 75 entries.

It might also be remarked that the biggest black star on the mainstream chart, Mr. Jackson, and the biggest white star on the black chart, Boy George of Culture Club, are both visually ambiguous, floating serenely or self-amusedly above normal racial and sexual stereotypes, appealing to never-never-land teen-age fantasies of disembodied love.

This racial division is hardly unprecedented. It was Elvis Presley (preceded by the equally white, blander Bill Haley) who successfully brought rock-and-roll into the

commercial mainstream, not Chuck Berry. Pat Boone re-recorded songs by Little Richard, and made them massively popular first.

But Mr. Berry and Little Richard had hits, too; whites knew their music to a degree that they don't know the work of George Clinton today, not to speak of such street-wise, vanguard performers and producers as Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaattaa. By the 60's, with the rise of Motown and soul, everyone in America who cared about pop music at all routinely knew the latest black hits; it was the minimal sign of hipness. There was still legitimate cause for complaint, that inferior whites got richer faster than comparable or superior blacks. But optimists had real evidence for their hope that racial inequities in pop music were fading.

Today, both black and white pop share a heavy dance beat and soul-inflected, blues-based vocal styles. But while black music has tended to settle into sometimes cliche-ridden "funk," or extended dance instrumentals, white bands have developed a dessicated kind of "techno-pop," or dance music based on synthesizers and electronic effects.

Underlying both sides, however—perhaps the basic trend in pop music today—is the steady dissolution of the classically derived song form of Tin Pan Alley, rock and even the blues in favor of extended, rhythmically charged instrumental jams with chanted vocal refrains. This style has its roots in African music and 19th-century New Orleans communal drum sessions, and it lives on today in the most challenging black pop music.

But for white audiences, it lives on mainly in adulterated form. No. 10 on the mainstream chart, for instance, is Duran Duran, one of a number of fashionable British bands that purvey a slicked up, techno-pop version of funk. Even an admired American art-rock band like Talking Heads, for all the originality of style it brings to this genre, is still recycling black funk for white ears.

What happened, to sour the widespread impression of 60's communality on the radio and in the record stores? Ultimately, of course, what happened was the reactive shift to more conservative lifestyles and art forms in the country as a whole. But two specific developments within the pop-music business itself encouraged racial separation in the music. They were the fashion for "demographics" in the 70's and the video revolution of the 80's.

Demographics is the "science" whereby an advertiser, radio station programmer, magazine publisher or movie producer attempts to target his product to a specific audience, which will then presumably be more receptive to one, unadulterated kind of artistic or advertising message. In radio, that meant the break-up of the old, multi-purpose top-40 rock programming into the multitude of special formats we have today—top 100, urban contemporary (i.e., black), adult contemporary, album-oriented rock, middle-of-the road, etc.

The existence of separate sales charts in Billboard and other music trade publications is part of the same process—and there are many more charts than just these, slicing up the demographic pie. On this rationale, black music could be effectively banished to black stations, with white stations left free to play music by whites.

Then, in the 80's, came video, primarily in the form of Warner Communications' Music Television, or MTV, a cable outlet that plays mostly "rock," meaning white, video shorts. This de-facto segregation has occasioned vociferous protests from the rock press. In response, MTV officials have denied the charge, or argued that black music wasn't really rock but something else, or suggested that black videos weren't as good as white videos, or pointed to that old favorite, demographics, to justify their exclusivity.

Indeed, MTV was slow to add even Mr. Jackson's videos to its playlists. Now, of course, his videos have since won every video award imaginable. And MTV officials point to Mr. Jackson and a few other blacks as proof that the color line, if it was ever up, is now down on music television.

But a look at the MTV playlist in that same March 17 Billboard tells another story. On MTV's "heavy rotation," meaning the videos most played and played most often at optimum times, there are 21 names listed, not one of them black. And there are precious few on the medium and light rotation lists, either.

Video's new emphasis on rock visuals seems to have reinforced the racially divisive tendencies of the music business as a whole. Since white funk and black funk can sound very much alike, a black band had a better chance of getting exposure when it was only heard, not seen.

It may not even get the opportunity to be seen: because of demographics and MTV's exclusivity, black bands find it difficult to obtain a comparable level of record-company financing for their videos. Such financing is crucial in a competitive climate that demands increasingly lavish and expensive video productions. Given the fixation of the record business on video today, and the diversion of money that used to go into tour support into video, it seems almost impossible for any new artist to succeed without video exposure.

It is possible to contend that all this represents no great harm. Music of all kinds is available on radio today, perhaps more than ever, with both AM and FM and the rise of National Public Radio and lively college stations. And what's so wrong, one might ask, with young people seeking out role models of their own kind? Certainly black music is not going unheard by white musicians, since it still forms the basis of most white bands' styles to this day.

The trouble is, only the professionals and the aficionados can be expected to ferret out those influences directly. The vast majority of the populace sinks back in upon itself, lazily content with its own traditions and only vaguely aware of more vital, unfamiliar, challenging music just a few notches away on the dial. This applies to blacks as well, who may be missing out on exposure to challenging forms of white music they now don't hear often enough. Black and white music can overlap indistinguishably. But they have divergent stylistic tendencies, and those extremes can grow flaccid or eccentric when they aren't pollinated by the other—when audiences aren't regularly, unself-consciously exposed to styles other than their own.

Ultimately, the racial divisions in music may simply recede, as the listening public and the country as a whole grow more open-minded. If that happens, then

maybe Mr. Jackson's success will turn out to have presaged something positive, after all. Maybe the MTV spokesmen, despite the evidence of their current playlist, are correct, that the situation is gradually improving. Maybe the rock-music business, egged on by its critical Cassandras, will regain its idealism and institute policies that override short-term goals in favor of social morality and musical integrity. Maybe, but don't count on it.