

HAPPENINGS

From Ragtime to Rock'n Roll:

Black music exploited in America

"God bless the child that's got his own..."
Billie Holiday

"I'm the originator
 No imitator
 Sole inspirator
 By the Creator..."
Jimmy Cliff

"Get the funk outa my face..."
Brothers Johnson

by Rick Mitchell

Part of the officially unrecognized history of this country is the great contribution of Black musicians to American culture down through the centuries. African-derived musical concepts have influenced all forms of American music, both those generally regarded as "Black" musics — gospel, blues, jazz — and those more often played by whites — rock, country-western and bluegrass. Yet, historically, these contributions have largely been taken for granted, as the curators of American civilization have continued to look to Europe as the source and inspiration for our musical culture.

There are accounts of slaves performing at white social gatherings from as early as the 17th Century. The slaves played instruments familiar to the European ear, such as violins (interestingly, the violin has been traced to African origins by certain musicologists, who believe it was introduced to Europe in a primitive form by way of the Roman Empire), but they brought to them the African concepts of collective participation, improvisation, micro-tonal scales and heightened rhythm. It is not known how whites reacted to these alien elements infiltrating their music, but it's safe to say they continued to dance.

Unfortunately, most of the paths tracing the creative interplay between African-derived and European-derived music prior to the 20th Century have long been forgotten. It seems the people in charge of taking down and making up our history weren't too concerned with what went on in the slave quarters after dark, not when there were wars to be won and a continent to be conquered. For at least the last 85 years, however, a clear pattern has been visible; today's Black music will be tomorrow's white music, and whites will make more money on it.

Let's start with ragtime. In 1899, Scott Joplin published "The Mapleleaf Rag," which propelled ragtime music into national prominence. The following year, a white composer named Joseph Lamb learned to emulate Joplin's style well enough to publish his own ragtime piano roll with the dubious title "Cooontown Frolics." Lamb's tune, naturally, became the rage of fun-loving white society. Joplin, although he went on to compose 504 piano pieces, two operas and a ragtime ballet, was deserted by his white publisher in 1909, and died forgotten in a mental hospital in 1917.

That same year, a group of white musicians from New Orleans billed

as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band arrived in New York to produce what are commonly considered to be the first jazz recordings. While the group's contributions to the art form have long since been discredited, for a time they collected a small fortune in record royalties and performance fees. Meanwhile, truly original dixieland musicians (they didn't call it dixieland, by the way) such as King Oliver, who had been



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playing for years in the style "borrowed" by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, went widely overlooked. Of all the early Black jazz pioneers, only Louis Armstrong survived to break down at least some of the barriers separating Black musicians from the white public, and he did so at considerable cost to his original, brilliant jazz trumpet style.

In the late '20s, a white bandleader, Paul Whiteman, took some of the concepts of New Orleans jazz, sweetened them with string sections and visual novelties, and became known among whites as "the King of Jazz." In the late '30s, Benny Goodman hired Black bandleader Fletcher Henderson as his arranger, introduced Black musicians Teddy Wilson, Lionel Hampton and Charlie Christian to his group, and was labeled "the King of Swing." Goodman was, and is, a fine clarinetist. But how did he become "the King" while Duke Ellington, arguably the greatest serious composer this nation has known and unquestionably an incomparable jazz bandleader, was only "the Duke," and Fletcher Henderson, who ten years before had developed many of the ideas popularized by Goodman, was just plain Fletcher to most Goodman fans?

By the mid-'40s, integrated jazz groups were becoming more common. But often as not, Black musicians continued to carry the creative load while white musicians received a disproportionate share of the cash and credit. For a revealing glimpse at the racial attitudes of the white jazz audience, theoretically among the more enlightened segment of the American public in the '40s, take a look at the old popularity polls published by *downbeat* and *Metronome*, the leading jazz magazines of the time. The innovators Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie do appear, but they are invariably surrounded by white players of lesser caliber; i.e., saxophonist Charlie Ventura and various members of the Kenton band.

As the big band era faded in the late '40s, scaled-down urban Black groups began mixing elements of swing, blues and Tin Pan Alley pop into a new style called rhythm and blues. Sometimes, the rhythmic effect of this music was described as "rock 'n' roll." By the mid-'50s, Black singer-songwriters Fats Domino, Chuck Berry and Richard Penniman (aka Little Richard) had come up with the distinctive fusion of blues, rhythm and blues and country-western forms that serves as the foundation of modern rock music. Yet it wasn't until Sam Phillips of Sun Records in Memphis discovered in Elvis Presley what he had been looking for — "a white boy who can sing Black" — that rock and roll gained mass appeal among white teenagers.

Presley's vocal talent was real enough, but his tastes were easily molded by those around him. Several of his late '50s hits were penned by a Black man named Otis Black-

well. Listening to Blackwell's demos and comparing them to Presley's million-selling versions, one comes away with the unmistakable impression that Presley was instructed to sound as much like Blackwell as possible. His talent was that he could do it so well. (Blackwell is still alive, incidentally. He has one record in print, a collection of his songs including "All Shook Up," "Don't Be Cruel" and "Great Balls of Fire.")

Since Presley, rock and roll has come to be considered a music primarily of, by and for whites, while most popular Black artists are marketed as soul, funk or "disco." White rockers have never hesitated to borrow from older Black sources, however, sometimes even while paternalistically putting down more contemporary forms of Black music. In the mid-'60s, a generation of British bands led by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones reintroduced American teenagers to the songs of Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Later in the decade, British guitarists Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck were at the forefront of a "blues revival" that led to a brief flourishing of expanded interest by whites in authentic bluesmen such as Muddy Waters and Albert King. In the early '70s, Bruce Springsteen won critical plaudits as "the future of rock and roll"



Interest in the music of authentic bluesman Muddy Waters was spurred by the popularity of white "blues revivalists" Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck.

with a stage show modeled largely after that of James Brown, an observation not intended to slight Springsteen's genuine talents as a songwriter and performer.

During the mid-'70s, white deejays and critics (supported, one suspects, by major record labels) stirred up a backlash against "disco" music among the rock audience. In Portland, two formerly popular deejays met in a stadium and burned "disco" records, which apparently meant any new album with a Black face on the cover other than Jimi Hendrix or Stevie Wonder. True, much of the music categorized as "disco" is bland, shallow and over-produced. So is most mainstream rock and roll.

Given the historical pattern of the last 85 years, it is not surprising that the latest trend in rock is *funk*. A host of white, pseudo-funk bands, most of them British, have been doing well on the pop charts with an approach that borrows slightly-dated Black American funk rhythms and sweetens them with string sections and visual novelties. Sound familiar? Meanwhile, of course, all but a few Black American funk bands are denied airplay on pop and "rock radio" stations, and Michael Jackson, one of the exceptions, couldn't get his video shown on the Music Television network, better known as MTV, until CBS Records President Walter Yetnikoff threatened to yank all of his white artists from MTV's rotation. The fact that Jackson had the number one single and the number one album in the country at the time was apparently



Even though he had the number one single and number one album in the country, Michael Jackson couldn't get his video shown on MTV until CBS threatened to pull all of their videos by white artists.

not enough to sway MTV from its apartheid approach to programming.

So, now that we've got the facts straight, what's a socially-aware music lover to do? Certainly it's long past time for this country to start giving credit where credit is due to the Black originators of our music, but one must always beware of oversimplifications. The interplay between white and Black music has historically been a two-way street, remember. In recent decades, white jazz musicians Bill Evans, Stan Getz, Chick Corea, Joe Zawinul, John McLaughlin and others have broadened the art form to legitimately encompass their perspective as whites, just as Bix Beiderbecke did in a much more isolated way fifty years ago. Rock and roll has also taken on its own validity, like it or not, as a music played by young whites based on Black roots. Just as it was possible for some to enjoy the music of swing-era dance bands such as Glenn Miller and Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, though they should not have been confused with the real jazz of Count Basie and Duke Ellington, it may be possible for some to enjoy the music of the better white, New Wave funk bands, though they should not be confused with real funk, which is Black music.

Sadly, the distinction is lost on much of the white public, who continue to ignore great Black artists while making white emulators rich. It reminds me of a scene from the movie "The Jerk." Steve Martin, as a white raised by a Black family, can't seem to clap on the same beat as everyone else when the family gets together to sing the blues. Then he hears some lame big band music on the radio and discovers his identity as a white man. That's why they called him a jerk.

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