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## Bad Reptutation: Rock Studies Rethinks American Identity

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# Review Essay

## Bad Reputation: Rock Studies Rethinks American Identity

Jennifer Lynn Stoever

Tim Parrish. *Walking Blues: Making Americans from Emerson to Elvis*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.

Theodore Gracyk. *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*. Temple University Press, 2001.

Rock and roll is almost fifty. That tempestuous, impetuous, and distinctly “American” child of the mid-twentieth century is currently suffering a middle age crisis and a perpetual bad reputation; critical conversation has repeatedly labeled it the apex of pop culture frivolity. Through strikingly different methodologies, these two new studies actively seek to help rock and roll reignite its waning birthday candles by placing it at the forefront of current academic debates about the importance of cultural studies, the questionable ability to transmit political messages in art, and the ever-changing nature of American identity. This recent scholarship suggests that the controlled chaos of rock and roll’s most ferocious, hip-shaking moments may well be the key to understanding what constitutes “American” identity.

This argument, while seductive, is not a particularly new one within rock studies. Greil Marcus staked this claim back in 1975 in his seminal text *Mystery Train*:

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*Images of America in Rock and Roll Music*, claiming that rock artists “tend to see themselves as symbolic Americans . . . . Their records dramatize a sense of what it is to be American; what it means, what it’s worth, what the stakes of life in America might be” (4).<sup>1</sup> At the time, such a bold assertion was provocative; after all, it had only been twenty years since rock was termed the “devil’s music” and blamed for the breakdown of American society, the disintegration of white bourgeois values, and “dangerous” race and class mixing, even the spread of communism. A move to claim this riotous music as American during these earlier years was a cry for legitimacy, a plea for rock to be viewed as more than noise. Marcus’s statement attempted to link rock’s rebellious essence to the “revolutionary spirit of ‘76” mythos that supposedly represented America in its best light.

Now, in 2004, the legitimacy of rock is no longer such a debated issue. There has been a tremendous explosion in rock and roll criticism; over 70 book-length studies of rock were published in 2001 alone. The importance of rock and roll as both art and cultural artifact is merely a starting point for these texts. However, a tremendous undercurrent of anxiety runs through many of these critical undertakings.<sup>2</sup> While rock has certainly revitalized the shelves of the university library, does it still have credibility on the streets? Rock’s rehabilitated reputation came at the price of increasing capitalist cooption; it is now the ubiquitous soundtrack of “hip” television commercials selling everything from cars to shoes. The rock and roll revolutionaries of yesteryear are today’s marketing executives and advertising pitchmen. Furthermore, while rock remains important to the process of constructing and expressing personal identity, it is rapidly losing its rebellious underground status and prime CD bin space to the newer “CNN of the streets,” hip hop. Although there is still no serious shortage of teenagers taking up the guitar, many are eagerly on the hunt for a DJ and a MC. Alongside a surge in hip hop’s popularity, the steady rise of electronica, pop, rhythm and blues, and country music threatens to push rock even further to the margins.

In light of these current crises, why a renewed interest in draping rock and roll in the stars and stripes? At this moment in cultural history, a legitimate claim can be made that rock and roll captures the worst of America: a history of racism, sexism, and corporate greed. At the same time, rock has enabled an unprecedented amount of intercultural and cross-class relations within a country largely hostile to these connections. So what then are these critics celebrating when they claim it as quintessentially “American”? Tim Parrish places blues music at the root of not just rock, but of an American popular culture that acts as “a realm in which the conflicts resulting from our Edenic democratic promises are acting out” (196). Theodore Gracyk embarks on a more questionable project, endeavoring to recuperate rock’s negative reputation and place it at the heart of a culture that values freedom of identity almost as much as freedom of its markets. With various levels of success, these studies ultimately promote a vision of rock that is regenerative and inclusive . . . but is it accurate? More importantly, does it capture the realities of American identity or merely endorse yet another utopian version of it?

Of the books reviewed here, Parrish’s *Walking Blues* is the most comprehensive and ambitious, attempting to recover a pragmatic view of American identity as

an ongoing, collective process, using the metaphor of the blues and the symbol of Elvis Presley. Parrish, an English professor at the University of North Texas, endeavors to construct a wide-ranging theory of American identity by combining philosophy, literary criticism, history, music analysis, and cultural studies. His populist purpose asserts that we need to “account for our cultural diversity and its consequences without either insisting that we are all the same or denying that we share crucial ties that unite us as Americans . . . . I examine how Americans of diverse cultural backgrounds talk to and make one another over *as Americans* . . . . Be it Elvis or Emerson, each figure is considered as a maker of America among other American makers” (7). While his treatment of each figure certainly reflects this desire to democratize American cultural production, the term “diverse” is a bit misleading, as the figures Parrish discusses within his work are overwhelmingly male and predominantly white, black, and Jewish. It remains to be seen whether the approach to identity outlined here carries equal theoretical validity for a more varied sampling of texts and cultures.

Parrish’s pragmatist argument, that American identity is a social process rather than an essential product, is compelling, and his refusal to calcify this American heritage as either an ahistorical palimpsest or an overtly racist Puritanical legacy is as refreshing as his use of the blues as a position of critical entry into the identity debate.<sup>3</sup> Not only does the blues serve as his primary point of reference, the “representative cultural practice that invents us as Americans” (15), but it structures his text on a deeper methodological level as well. Parrish’s opening two chapters are recuperative readings of Horace Kallen, Mary Antin and Henry James (chapter 1) and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the blues (chapter 2). They serve as a critical “call,” demanding a “response” from chapters four and five, a detailed analysis of the work of Philip Roth and a critical exploration of Elvis Presley as representative Pragmatist, respectively. Continuing the musical metaphor, Parrish describes his third chapter, an Emersonian reading of Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*, as a “bridge” somehow intended to negotiate between the two major sections of the text. Through this musical structure, Parrish weaves diverse aspects of American cultural practice into a coherent expression of the restless “Walking Blues” that best characterizes American identity. While the approach is novel, it is fairly unguided, and Parrish depends a bit too heavily upon the reader to make the crucial linkages necessary to transform these wide-ranging ideas into a cohesive critical song. This may be due to the construction of the text itself, as all five chapters of *Walking Blues* have been previously published as journal articles. As a result, Parrish’s chapters certainly stand on their own, but would have benefited from more narrative coherence.

Parrish is definitely at his best when performing recuperative acts of criticism. Through careful close reading and historical contextualization, he opens *Walking Blues* with a reversal of the conventional wisdom that has cast Horace Kallen as a racist figure whose “cultural pluralism” threatened to entrap Americans in racially essentialized identities. By exploring Kallen’s early relationship with Harlem Renaissance critic Alain Locke and clarifying his ideological connections with teacher and thinker William James, Parrish recovers Kallen’s definition of “difference” as a

vital framework for thinking about shared cultural identity. By Parrish's reading, Kallen felt that every American "was potentially alien, at the very least ethnic, and invariably hyphenated" and ultimately insisted that to be an "American" is to acquire an identity, not to inherit one (34). As each "American" struggles to define herself as such, the very nature of the society is that of displacement and almost constant transformation. While this unstable notion of identity can lead to a perpetual feeling of homelessness, Parrish insists that it remains the key to the most powerful promises of the American experience.

This feeling of displacement is central to the African-American tradition of the blues, which Parrish places both at the heart of his argument and at the core of the American ideological tradition. He reads the blues in concert with Ralph Waldo Emerson, suggesting that practitioners of the blues in the early twentieth century embodied the pragmatist intellectual practice Emerson envisions in his famous essays "The American Scholar" and "The Poet." "The American Scholar," originally a Phi Beta Kappa address delivered at Harvard in 1837, urges Americans to break out of the artistic paradigms of Europe and to use nature and books not as prescriptive guides, but as the raw materials of their own intuitive self-expression. Furthering this idea, the second essay delineates the ideal role of the poet as defined by his relationship to other men and guided by his desire to repair the spiritual malaise of the country. Unfortunately, Parrish moves fairly quickly through these essays without a thorough discussion of Emerson's positionality and attitudes toward race, a conversation which so enriched his treatment of Mary Antin and William James, and gender, an issue notably elided in all three readings. These oversights weaken both the link he purports to establish between Emerson and the blues tradition as well as the pragmatist thread he attempts to weave through all the texts explored in *Walking Blues*.

According to Parrish, Blues artists reconfigure their history into a powerful new expression of their present circumstances, creating an open-ended cultural artifact that future generations will distill and re-envision. Citing blues artists from Son House to Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson to Memphis Slim, Parrish characterizes the blues as a communal, transformative act rather than a passive tradition inherited wholesale. In a risky critical move, Parrish uses the blues retroactively to make Emerson "boogie" (his term), reinvigorating and recontextualizing him at the same time that he hopes to embed the blues within a larger cultural framework accessible to all Americans (106). He attempts this revision by juxtaposing excerpts from Emerson's work with reflections and lyrics from blues artists, such as Johnny Shines and Robert Wilkins, in an effort to illustrate that Emerson was really "thinking in blues" (67). Through this process, the blues becomes an example of the "sort of American culture-making that Emerson tried to prepare future generations to recognize" while Emerson acquires a new sense of urgency as part of a continuing U.S. project of cultural change and revolution (66).

This maneuver is at once idealistic and tremendously problematic. Parrish does breathe new critical life into both Emerson and the blues, but he does so by positing Emerson as somehow prescient of any cultural interventions that the blues had to offer. Canonization of the blues comes at the expense of much of its

historical context as well as its specific origins within the black community. In addition, Parrish highlights the connection between Emerson's work and the intellect, while relegating the blues to an expression of "the exertion of the body and the language that emerged from this act," reinvoking the old racist binary that associates whites with the mind and blacks with the body (67). Ultimately, this symbolic inclusion of the blues within the heart of the American cultural project does not address the very real segregation that takes place in the world outside its libraries. As Amiri Baraka argues, "[t]here can be no inclusion as 'Americans' without full equality, and no legitimate disappearance of black music into the covering sobriquet 'American' without constant recognition of the history, tradition, and current needs of the black majority, its culture, and its creations" ("Great Music Robbery" 331). While Parrish does treat blues music as a historical entity, carefully describing its African-American originators and innovators, he cuts the "blues process" loose from its temporal moorings in a way that does not entirely do it justice. This is, however, the edgy territory explored by *Walking Blues*, a place where the "doing" of American hybridity involves letting go of some of the fixed ideas about "being" treasured in the past.

Without a formal conclusion to knit the diverse elements of his theory together, readers must take "Don't Be Cruel: Elvis Reinvents America Again" as Parrish's last word. Although a formal summary of his overarching argument would be helpful, his provocative analysis of Presley does not entirely disappoint. Reading against the common claim that Elvis was a talentless appropriator of African-American culture, Parrish posits that "the fear that Elvis stole black music is not just an issue of cultural theft, but one of cultural mixing" (189). Essentially, Parrish uses Elvis to place America reluctantly at the blues' legendary "crossroads," where the possibilities of communal integration raise the potential for cultural displacement.<sup>4</sup> Elvis and his rock and roll sound threaten both black and white identities with the reality of what a truly hybrid American culture ultimately demands of its practitioners: the recognition that no identities are "pure," coupled with mutual intercultural access that leads to endless reinvention. While certainly energetic, Parrish's reading of Elvis is not as convincing as his previous arguments, primarily due to his emphasis on biographical, rather than textual material. The extended discussion of Elvis's artistic exchanges with Jackie Wilson and his intimate friendship with James Brown certainly complicates racial stereotyping, Parrish's goal, but it also removes the focus from Elvis as author of musical texts. Parrish pores copiously over his literary evidence, yet chooses to analyze musicians' lives while merely glossing their artistic products. He seems unsure how to approach musical texts with the same depth and rigor as he does literary work, creating an imbalance that weakens the interdisciplinary ambition of his overall project. A more complex reading of Elvis's music, especially its relationship to capitalist modes of production and the significant questions of musical authorship that surround it, would give his discussion some additional texture.

Parrish also falters when he attempts to build a case for Elvis as American archetype in the final chapter of *Walking Blues*, claiming "Elvis, along with the blues singers discussed, [is] the exemplary pragmatist of this study" (192). While

many of the issues that Parrish raises are important, his reading of Elvis as America's paradigmatic hybrid sparks this reviewer's suspicion that for Parrish the only subjectivities capable of such cultural synthesis are white. Not only are the blues artists lumped together as an undifferentiated mass next to the solitary icon of Elvis, but Parrish ignores African-American rock musicians like Chuck Berry — also noted for his talented fusion of blues and country — who recorded his national pop hit "Maybelline" in 1955, seven months before Elvis Presley laid down "Heartbreak Hotel" for RCA. Rather than taking popular history at face value, Parrish should have questioned Elvis's suspect designation as the "King of Rock and Roll" before crowning him prince of American hybridity. Elvis Presley is certainly a fascinating example of what Parrish terms "cultural confusion" (194), but reifying him as the exemplary "American maker" undercuts the recuperated vision of U.S. identity that *Walking Blues* attempts to establish and replicates a model where the default white male subject is celebrated for using the identities of Other(s) to enhance his own.

Ultimately, *Walking Blues* is a dense but intriguing text that is a worthy addition to the growing interdisciplinary scholarship within American Studies. While the entirety of the work is best suited to advanced students of literary criticism, the musical chapters can be "sampled" on their own. Parrish even provides an annotated discography for further musical exploration.

Theodore Gracyk's *I Wanna Be Me* is an interesting scholarly companion to Parrish's study, also conceiving of U.S. identity as socially constructed rather than essentialist in nature. He provides a critical framework for "reading" musical texts that would further Parrish's project, but adds to the critical debate about how music constructs both racial and gendered identities as well. Gracyk, a professor of philosophy at Minnesota State University, Moorhead, and a self-professed fan of rock music, uses philosophy, aesthetic theory, ethnomusicology, and rock and roll history to argue that rock music is the first truly mass art form. Although Gracyk makes his readers work for their rock and roll fix, the copious examples of the musical practices of such artists as the Rolling Stones, the Sex Pistols, the Velvet Underground, and Muddy Waters certainly help to sustain interest in his mostly theoretical musings.

*I Wanna Be Me* represents Gracyk's latest attempt to bridge the gap between traditional aesthetic designations of "high" and "low" culture and to provide rock scholars with the appropriate critical tools.<sup>5</sup> Truly operating from a philosopher's background, Gracyk uses inquiry to guide his text rather than pronounced theses, with this overarching question: "In an era where popular music is understood to be a major source of identity, what sort of identity can that be?" (16). To answer this question, Gracyk divides his text perhaps too neatly into three distinct movements: part one ("Frameworks") theorizes rock as mass art, part two ("Issues of Appropriation") deals with the racial conflicts that arise through musical appropriation, and part three ("Gender") closes the text with a discussion of the connection between gender identity and rock music. Despite the overall focus on the instability of individual identity construction within rock, there is an undercurrent of the personal as political running throughout the work. As Gracyk claims near the end of the text, "Questions about what counts as music are really questions about political

control” (206). Gracyk explores these politics through the dual, but unfortunately separated lenses of race and gender.

Gracyk begins by detailing the formation of the Rolling Stones in 1961, an occurrence that was only possible due to rock’s status as mass, recorded art. After all, if Muddy Waters’s vibrant blues recordings never crossed the Atlantic in the late 1950s, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards might have spent a lifetime separated by intense class divisions rather than strutting around each other on stage. He builds a case for focusing rock studies on the recorded text, rather than the ritual aspect of concert performance, as the primary subject of analysis. Certainly the durability, near-perfect reproducibility, and seemingly easy accessibility of these recorded artifacts help spread rock music far beyond the spatial and temporal borders of any immediate audience, but Gracyk’s move to pin an unruly rock music to its recorded evidence is to do it a tremendous disservice.

This privileging of recorded material, while friendly to academics who feel most comfortable working with written texts, misses the powerful energy that has always been central to rock music and fails to capture the experience of most rock musicians, who see music both as a generative and a responsive act. Simply because live rock performances cannot be easily quantified does not mean that they have not been a vital part of its tradition. In addition, looking at rock as a strictly recorded art aligns its study with a long Western history of prizing the written word over oral traditions. This necessarily distances it from the black musical practices that gave birth to it. Not only was blues culture linked to an African oral tradition, but the performative act was the heart of its existence. In addition, the power to record music has historically remained in the hands of a predominantly white music industry; only in the last five years, with the growth of digital recording capabilities and music-sharing computer programs such as Napster and Kazaa, has this stranglehold been significantly threatened.

In a moment strikingly similar to Parrish’s overall discussion of American identity, Gracyk argues that the recorded past of rock and roll often problematizes its present, as “linear change gives way to an endless series of epicycles” (30). However, while Parrish constructs his argument as a novel way to retrace change through history, Gracyk slyly attempts to justify a theoretical approach that looks at rock in a surprisingly dehistoricized fashion, allowing him to pick and choose the rock examples that support his theory. This method has problematic consequences later in his work, when he mounts a defense of (white) musical appropriation that assumes a level economic playing field within the United States belied by even the most cursory historical survey.

Although Gracyk makes some interesting points concerning the necessarily open-ended meanings of rock and roll music, it is unclear why these same theories have not held true for other mass-produced art forms, such as film, poetry, and literature. It also presupposes that the sole reason for rock music’s popularity revolves around a unique opportunity for audiences to dissolve their identities into their favorite songs. While this surely accounts for some of rock’s appeal, it assumes that listeners both desire and have the ability to shed their skins as easily as they slip on their headphones. Gracyk does not account for the historical pro-



cesses that continue to inscribe human bodies with racial, gendered, and classed meanings that cannot be easily cast aside. His analysis also presumes that racialized and gendered identities are inherently undesirable and that everyone wants to be someone new. I wonder, as does Rosi Bradiotti: "Is this nonchalant detachment not the privilege of caste and whiteness?" (21). Historically, white maleness has been the quintessential subject position allowed free experimentation with identity, as underscored by Parrish's treatment of Elvis.<sup>6</sup> Women and/or people of color are most often the mirrors against which the white male reimagines himself as an(other). Unfortunately, Gracyk's work does little to dismantle this paradigm.

*I Wanna Be Me*'s second portion delves into issues of appropriation, disputing the charge that rock's first practitioners were white Promethean figures who stole their stoking fire from the African-American blues tradition.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, Gracyk is interested in rehabilitating rock music from its odious history of racism and misogyny. But why? Do listeners need academics to declare rock music "innocent" of such charges to connect with it in any meaningful way? Fifty years of music history suggests otherwise. Perhaps it is the commemorative nature of the new rock and roll museums in Cleveland and Seattle that demand such a suspect exoneration. Rather than attempt to understand what hybridity has meant for rock music, Gracyk's mission to complicate the African-American genealogy of rock's roots, most explicitly addressed in this section, seems ultimately to justify why the majority of its most celebrated figures are white and male. Appealing to the logic that all cultures are hybrid and dynamic, and building upon his earlier argument that recorded texts are superior to oral performances, Gracyk even goes as far as staking a white claim on the ancestry of the blues: "Blues may have arisen 'as a white idea about blacks' that infiltrated the African American community in its recorded, mass-mediated form" (89). Such uncritical use of hybridity, as Jennifer Natalya Fink argues, "may produce a recolonizing multiculturalism that homogenizes the complexity of cultural identities and erases the (already violently erased) historical specificity of narratives of origin" (250). There is an inherent danger in projects like Gracyk's, which suggest that in order for a cultural practice to be celebrated as "American" it must be cleaned up and dehistoricized. The end result of this sanitizing process is that marginalized peoples are rhetorically included in the country's canons and museum cases via the language of hybridity, but continue to be excluded de facto outside the retrospective exhibits. The remote, ahistorical nature of Gracyk's theorizing often undercuts the possibility of the head-on confrontation with race and gender that *I Wanna Be Me* promises and rock so desperately needs.

Gracyk opens the section on appropriation with a discussion of four different cases in which the white artists Nirvana, Paul Simon, George Harrison, and David Bowie were accused of appropriation. While the intent of these case studies is to incite readers to ponder the nature of media imperialism and cultural dilution, their effect is ultimately to position Gracyk in the role of rock's defense attorney. For example, Gracyk assesses Simon's 1985 album *Graceland*, for which Simon traveled to South Africa during the height of apartheid to record "township" musicians. In a surprisingly brief analysis, especially concerning the tremendous controversy this move sparked,<sup>8</sup> Gracyk does little more than show that Simon has been appropriat-

ing for the duration of his career, moving from imitating Elvis and other Southern musicians in his early music to borrowing Peruvian rhythms in his later efforts. While Gracyk reluctantly admits that Simon's recording practices may have been dominative, he ultimately exonerates Simon because he cannot see "how ideology ever gets encoded into the music in a way that would reach most listeners" (98). Ultimately, these four cases cement Gracyk's methodology for this section, in which he consistently reifies the musical product while obscuring its connections to the economic and political power structures that produced it.

Following these vignettes, Gracyk proceeds to identify the prosecution as the "many cultural theorists and persons of color [who] believe that appropriations by white Europeans and Americans from other cultures are automatically exploitative and fundamentally wrong" (97). In particular, his critique targets the work of ethnomusicologist Charles Keil and African-American cultural theorist Amiri Baraka. Ironically, Gracyk obscures the essential point upon which he and Baraka agree: that appropriation, in and of itself, is not wrong. In fact, Baraka clearly states: "It is the lack of democracy that makes [appropriation] criminal" ("Great Music Robbery" 332). In a world where African-Americans are treated with the same respect as whites and have equal access to systems of power, both cultural and material, this musical interchange would be perfectly allowable, perhaps encouraged. This is the fictional universe that Gracyk's depoliticized and ahistoricized analysis allows him to inhabit. Essentially, in this section of his book, Gracyk is not just defending rock and roll, but the imperialist practices of the capitalist system itself. Like Parrish, Gracyk implicitly characterizes the economic base of the United States as just, affording all cultural groups the freedom to choose how and when to sell themselves to the American system.

Gracyk justifies musical appropriation in a number of ways. First, contrary to his earlier analysis of rock musicians' cultural productions, he downplays the view that rock artists "have attained enough status to count as intellectuals and members of the dominant sphere of culture" (98). Second, he characterizes opposition to the commodification of music as both "paternalistic" (101) and socialistic, arguing that "if one is not already dedicated to the ideal of a classless society, the commodification of a social enterprise is not obviously a loss" (102). He supports these assertions with manipulative "common sense" analogies, referencing everything from Navajo sand painting to Starbucks franchises. However, he does not supply musical examples that are as convincing. The one illustration he does provide, that of London's poor whites adopting Southern white "rockabilly" as a music of resistance to English authority, is deliberately an example of white, class-based appropriation that evades the racial issues he claims to be confronting within the United States.

Arguing that all cultures must necessarily change, Gracyk denies that some forms of appropriation contribute to cultural genocide and are therefore unjust. Although he is careful to mention that he opposes "economic exploitation in which some musicians live in poverty while the music they made delivers fat royalty checks to someone else," Gracyk erroneously assumes these pernicious acts are "independent of the corrupting influence of appropriation" and therefore unwor-

thy of in-depth exploration (160).

In fact, anything short of outright bullying simply does not register with Gracyk:

As long as Joseph Shabalala and the other musicians are not *coerced* into working with Paul Simon, and as long as Muddy Waters is not *coerced* into working for Leonard Chess or playing music with Eric Clapton, the Band, Johnny Winter, and the Rolling Stones, the cultural homogeneity that might follow from such choices is not a matter for assigning blame. (115, emphasis added)

Gracyk irresponsibly refuses to connect rock music appropriation to the larger systems of hegemony at work in the United States and in its larger global dealings; within these often imperialist projects, “coercion” and consent are habitually inextricable. As Stuart Hall points out, “there is no pure case of coercion/consent—only different combinations of the two dimensions. Hegemony is not exercised in the economic and administrative fields alone, but encompasses the critical domains of cultural, moral, and ethical leadership” (426). While Leonard Chess may not have forced Muddy Waters to sign his name on the dotted line, the complex system of racial domination functioning at the time certainly meant that Waters was lucky to earn even a penny for playing the blues, particularly when many black men of his generation were locked in prison or wage slavery. Possessing neither access to the means of record production nor the social capital necessary for large-scale distribution, Waters’s choice to sign with Chess was a specious one at best. If he wanted his music to reach a larger audience, he could either sign with Chess or another white man just like him.

In addition, Gracyk also refuses to acknowledge the often deeply affective elements housed within the concept of culture. His definition refers only to culture as “a system of *symbolic forms* through which people ‘communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude toward life,’” leaving no room for a discussion of the potential for psychic damage that results when one culture’s music becomes another culture’s “texts” (111). Near the close of chapter 6, “Don’t Play that Song,” he asks: “If African Americans are alienated from white culture and are therefore engaged in a resistive project of self-definition, why do they care about inept white imitations of their music?” (125). Unfortunately, he buries the beginnings of an answer in an offhand statement deep within his gender section in chapter 10: “[W]hite appropriations of blues structures are often reserved for overt misogyny and stereotypically masculine renderings of sexuality” (179). If these “inept” white artists are consistently utilizing traditionally black musical styles to vocalize some of their cruelest urges, African Americans should care very deeply. As Baraka says, “[I]abor is being stolen, resources vandalized, and the colored still ain’t got nothin’ but bad reputations” (“Great Music Robbery” 332). This is just one striking example of how rock musicians often implicate themselves within the larger hegemonic process, recreating, reaffirming, and profiting from the racial stereotypes that the U.S. system of domination propagates, while hiding behind the banner of free expression and hybridity that Gracyk waves throughout this section.<sup>9</sup>

At this point in rock and roll studies, I feel the hybridity of rock’s roots needs

no more rehashing; the rich and tremendous legacy of African-Americans should be a given. It is the conscious historical project to remove this cultural intermingling from the public imaginary that needs more thoughtful, direct, and bold exploration.<sup>10</sup> During the 1960s, African-Americans all but vanished from the scene they were so integral to fashioning, and this phenomenon cannot be explained by the sense of cultural “restlessness” upon which Gracyk relies as an explanation (127). It cannot, for example, explain why Jimi Hendrix felt so alienated from the rock and roll scene in mid-1960s America that he was unable to find an audience until he emigrated to England.<sup>11</sup> Nor does it encompass the struggles of Vernon Reid, guitarist of Living Color, who founded the Black Rock Coalition in the mid-1980s (to little avail) as a support group for black musicians still playing when “the idea that black people wanted to play rock and roll was implausible to many record executives—and indeed many music consumers—who held rigid opinions as to what constituted black music” (Mahon 283). In 2004, many music fans still consider Lenny Kravitz to be America’s biggest rock appropriator and deem hip hop artist Mos Def’s plans to release a rock album a novel and edgy proposition. No amount of disembodied theorizing nor disinterested listening can retroactively alter these perceptions. They demand open confrontation, discussion, and exploration within their respective historical contexts; unfortunately this does not occur within the defensive terrain of *I Wanna Be Me*. While Gracyk’s serious appraisal is laudable, this text sorely lacks an intersectional vision and a historically responsible framework that would allow a sustained consideration of race and gender issues. While it does stretch the discourse concerning rock and social art somewhat, it is far from a definitive statement on the subject. In its best light, *I Wanna Be Me* should be considered only a supplement to the mounting library of rock scholarship and a text desperately in need of a spirited and informed critical response.

As rock and roll rests its weary and formerly rebellious bones, settling uncomfortably into museum display cases, VH1 retrospectives, and academic studies, critics, fans, and musicians alike struggle over exactly how it will be memorialized. This critical conversation is intensifying, especially concerning rock’s place as a subversive social art form and its relationship to U.S. identity formation. I am wary, however, of the new enterprise to fix rock so readily at the heart of the U.S. cultural project. While rock certainly makes a significant statement about U.S. political structures and national cultures, it does not sing the utopian, multicultural tune critics like Parrish and Gracyk suggest. If anything, it seems stuck in the same discriminatory groove as much of American history. Perhaps instead of using rock to illuminate an American identity, scholars need to examine how America has shaped both rock’s visionary ideals and its hypocritical shortcomings.

Ultimately, though, the true battle explored in these two texts is not over America, but rather the proper trajectory of the study of rock music itself. There is a clear struggle within rock studies to establish its terms of analysis. While the two books reviewed here claim rock as an art form with no fixed boundaries or meanings, a discourse constantly engaged in epicycles of renewal and recontextualization, their respective critical approaches suggest something else. *Walking Blues* posits rock as an American reliquary of passion that can be tapped to incite the dustier, decid-

edly more square academic figures to “get down with their bad selves.” *I Wanna Be Me* makes a case for rock and roll as an exceptional art form, worthy of its own critical discourse, methodologies, and post-structuralist debates, irresponsibly freed from the messy and damning issues that history so often exposes. Rock critics have yet to come to terms with the uglier elements of rock’s past in a manner that is both historically precise and critically generous, slicing through the celebratory rhetoric in search of what truly lies “behind the music.” Although it is a bit tired to claim that the raw power and energy of rock music has yet to be tapped, all signs suggest that we can prepare ourselves for many more books with hip song lyrics in their titles. The critical mix-down is far from complete.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Barbara O’Dair points out, it is important to note that Marcus references rock artists as “these men” within the extended version of this passage, thus illustrating how rock music by women has been thwarted and ghettoized within the larger project of popular music study.

<sup>2</sup> This is most notable in Gracyk’s discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Earlier critics who used the blues to enter into identity discourse include Amiri Baraka in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Houston A. Baker, Jr. in *Blues, Ideology, and African American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, and Angela Y. Davis in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

<sup>4</sup> There is a large body of scholarship on Elvis, especially concerning his raced, classed, and gendered identities. Some recent full-length studies include Vernon Chadwick’s anthology *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art and Religion*, Susan M. Doll’s *Understanding Elvis: Southern Roots Vs. Star Image*, and Michael T. Bertrand’s *Race, Rock, and Elvis*.

<sup>5</sup> Other works by Gracyk in this regard include “What Goes On: The Double Bind of Theorizing Rock” and *Rhythm and Noise*, a full-length attempt to develop a comprehensive aesthetics of rock music.

<sup>6</sup> Although treated as tangential, Gracyk also mentions Elvis in connection with hybridity and white identity, claiming “in the days before Elvis Presley, there were clear ideas about what was white and what was not” (85).

<sup>7</sup> Study upon study has identified the first rock and roll musicians as African-American artists, most recently and notably Paul Gilroy’s “Analogues of Mourning, Mourning the Analogue,” Reebee Garofalo’s “Off the Charts,” and James Smetherst’s “How I got to Memphis: The Blues and the Study of American Culture.”

<sup>8</sup> For a critically insightful and historically nuanced treatment of the controversy surrounding this album and its connection to issues of appropriation, see Lipsitz.

<sup>9</sup> According to Gayle Wald,

[George] Lipsitz, Peter Guralnick, Greil Marcus, and Andrew Ross, among others, describe this process as one in which white male performers seek to “own” the qualities they romantically ascribe to black male performers while simultaneously projecting these qualities onto black performers in the depreciated form of “natural” talent or “biologically-driven urges” . . . . [T]he concealment of this symbolic commerce is fundamental to white male performers’ ability to maintain control over the terms of the “real” economic commerce—in other words, to sustain the impression of owning, and therefore justly profiting from, certain black cultural practices. (160)

<sup>10</sup> For a far more direct and provocative treatment of the crucial issue of this cultural erasure see Reebee Garofalo's excellent discussion of the Payola Scandals of the early 1960s in "Off the Charts." Garofalo discusses how the government used the Payola trials to regain control of radio stations that were playing culturally mixed rock and roll programs. He also includes a fascinating look at Latino contributions to rock and roll heritage, attempting to break the black and white polarity that he feels is an artificial construct within the rock and roll "roots" mythology.

<sup>11</sup> In "Racial Rehabilitation" Mark Pendergrast finds that "[a] reading of the history reveals that Hendrix was interested in developing a music where soul, funk, jazz, and rock would be unified, yet his white management constantly pressurized him to return to the Experience days where he fronted a white English group and appealed to a massive white audience" (40).

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