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Race, Hegemony, and the Birth of Rock & Roll

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Race, Hegemony, and the Birth of Rock & Roll

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Introduction

The Blues Had a Baby and They Named it Rock & Roll

On his Grammy winning album, *Hard Again*, McKinley Morganfield (a.k.a. “Muddy Waters”) sings his song *The Blues Had a Baby and They Named it Rock & Roll*.¹ What are the racial and social implications of this rebirth? In this study, I will argue that the cultural context during the birth of Rock & Roll was such that Blues music had to be “reborn” in order to enter into the predominantly white mainstream. From the perspective of a Blues musician, Morganfield’s use of the idea of rebirth is a subtle apology for the Blues, preserving the filiation and downplaying the issue of racial division. However, a more critical analysis of the situation questions the aptitude of rebirth as a metaphor for the process of change that was required of (Rhythm &) Blues music before it could be embraced as a mainstream art form. Contemporary scholarship suggests a range of terms as more accurate descriptors of this transformative process, including appropriation, assimilation, blanching, and subsumption.² We can add terms like “translation” and “renaming” to this list, each bringing a slightly different perspective to the issue.³ By attempting to recognize a convergence of unseen or “behind the scenes” forces that cause this transformation to take place, the current study seeks to demonstrate their consequences not simply with respect to the development of popular music, but with respect to the larger relationship between popular culture and race in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Review of Literature

The study at hand seeks to discern an account of the birth of Rock & Roll that is informed by multiple perspectives including social, economic, biographical, historical, and political ones. While such an approach will help us avoid the pitfalls of more commonplace approaches to this subject, it also risks complexity. Part of the strategy behind our study is therefore to rely on simple guiding threads that will work for cohesion. These include a theoretical perspective that is centralizing in nature as well as the breakthrough of Elvis Presley that will serve as a sort of window through

which we can take in the various forces at work. A third thread—and the one with which we will begin our survey of literature—is an appraisal of scholarship that uses race as a way to address the birth of Rock & Roll. Among these are works by Glenn Altschuler, Nelson George, Margo Jefferson, and Eileen Southern that focus on the white power structure disenfranchising black creators.⁴ Others by Paul Eichgrun and Ross Porter applaud the function of all or part of the corporate structure while a final group of studies is focused on the few players of the pre-civil rights era who crossed over the color barrier.⁵ Authors of these studies include Robert Pielke, Reebee Garofalo, and Steve Perry.⁶

Common to almost all of the consulted literature are two interrelated discussions that address the institutional process of transformation that turned black R&B into mainstream Rock & Roll. These issues are cover songs and the development of the persona of Elvis Presley. The importance of the first issue includes its commentary on the nature of creation in pop culture as well as the fact that, in this particular instance, we find it acting as a vehicle by which musical compositions are reorganized and assimilated across racial borders. This is an essential context for locating the main camps of critical interpretation that are organized around the initial explosion of Presley as a nationally visible artist.

“Covers” are songs that are initially released by one recording artist and then re-recorded and released again by another. Covering another artist’s material is more common to artists in the early stages of their careers, as younger artists depend on their influences as reference points to help them carve out a new artistic terrain. As Michael Bertrand indicates in his insightful *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, by the end of 1954 “the majors had pushed their new cover tactics to fruition and were successful in getting their own R&B type material into the pop market.”⁷ In other words, the tactic of major labels releasing a white version of a song originally released by a black artist had achieved some success by late 1954. However, other critics are keen to point out the truism that there is “no original riff” in music and likely in representational art due to the fact that representation implies imitation.⁸ As a result, creation can be understood as quotation or pastiche, where artists are nodding to each other by including parts of each other’s work in new creations—as opposed to creating *ex nihilo*. As Garofalo reminds us, what sets popular music apart in circa-1950 America is the fact that nearly all the original compositions are by black artists and nearly all the cover versions are by white artists.⁹ A sample list of this

common practice might include *Shake, Rattle and Roll* (Bill Haley, 1954 from Jesse Stone, 1953); *Rocket 88* (Bill Haley, 1952 from Ike Turner, 1951); *A Little Bird Told Me* (Evelyn Knight, 1948 from Paula Watson, 1947); *Sh-Boom* (the Crew Cuts, 1954 from the Chords, 1952). In all of these instances, the cover version would place near the top of the more lucrative pop music charts while the original versions may or may not reach the less lucrative R&B charts. Adopting a perspective oriented toward class and race alone (prior to any economic consideration), contemporary scholarship has used names like “assimilation,” “blanching,” or “subsumption” to describe this situation. Each of these terms presupposes a certain perspective on the birth of Rock & Roll. “Assimilation” has been both used and criticized by scholars of race due to the relationship it presumes between black and white culture. “Blanching” is a more figurative variation of “assimilation” that likewise assumes an act of authorship on behalf of all of white America—yet the idea of a writing that also involves erasure is worthy of note in this context. “Subsumption” is also a recasting of “assimilation” in that it presumes a dissymmetry of social class, but recasts the scenario on the model of human learning, apprehension, and learning. We will return to the discussion of the relevance of these terms in the conclusion of this study. For now, let us note that the translation across cultural borders is marked by an act of renaming.

There is more ambivalence in the literature when it comes to the evaluation of Elvis. The major division separates those who associate Elvis with all the other cover artists and those who have recently begun to reappraise him using separate theoretical criteria. The works of Southern and Bertrand represent opposite ends of the spectrum. While the first group essentially labels him more as an opportunist or even thief than an artist of note, a second includes socio-economic and musicological perspectives that rescue the “hillbilly hep cat” from academic infamy. The central thesis of Bertrand’s work, for example, is that Elvis’ impoverished upbringing resulted in experiences that made black music (and the culture itself) much more accessible to him than mainstream white culture. In turn, John Morthland takes the stance that Elvis borrowed equally from Country, black and white Gospel, Blues, and R&B before turning out his own style, originally dubbed as “hillbilly bop.”¹⁰ In other words, seeing his work in only black and white terms is myopic and limited in scope. Garofalo insists that it is important to prioritize the disenfranchisement of the black musical community in this instance, but this does not necessarily

make Elvis part of the problem. Authors like Bertrand support this position by using criteria like social caste to give greater resolution to what is left unaddressed by a strictly race-based argument. Showing that Elvis was initially in the same boat as other early Rock & Rollers, including Fats Domino and Roy Orbison (all of whom suffered from record company mismanagement of artist royalties), Bertrand calls for us to see larger social forces at work both within and beyond the music business. From this perspective, the lines of division are not drawn strictly by race, but by the location of an individual within the hierarchy of power, ownership, and control. The current study considers these two perspectives to be complementary rather than exclusive.

A final point of interest regards the development of Elvis' persona in the first five years of his national presence. Like the Beatles, Elvis had an active career arc that witnessed several phases. Scholarship that seeks to use him as an example, oftentimes fails to attend to the development of his artistic persona. For example, Robert Pielke's 1986 study entitled *Rock Music in American Culture* is based primarily on Elvis' initial phase in which he represented a negation of the values and codes of decency imposed by standing conservative tradition. Several authors show that Elvis elicited fear in the establishment: the threat of racial mixing, the rise of the independent labels out-earning majors ill-prepared to exploit this new "trend," broadcast media forced to censor any shots that included his gyrating waist. Bertrand's work exemplifies the value of consulting the larger cultural context (in his case, the socio-economic situation) for a greater understanding of the forces at work during the birth of Rock & Roll. A good example is that by 1952, the major labels saw they were unable to control that market by means of cover songs and they needed a new tactic. Paraphrasing George Lipsitz, Bertrand writes: "[...] if the popular music establishment had to 'accept' the fad, it would make sure that only one 'Rock & Roll revolutionary' from outside the mainstream received corporate clout and a national forum from which to articulate the music's working class message."¹¹ This theory of R&B's subsumption by the mainstream was realized by RCA who signed Presley in 1955 to a \$40,000 contract. Within a year, teen magazines carried interviews with Presley in which he was beginning to cultivate a "whitewashed" image: "I don't smoke and I don't drink, and I love to go to movies. Maybe someday I'm gonna have a home and a family of my own, and I'm not gonna budge from it. I was an only child but maybe my kids won't be."¹² Bertrand's

study is exemplary in its approach. It invites us to step back and address these issues anew. In the following pages, we will carefully attend to the process by which Elvis was “brought in line,” properly owned and exploited, washed of his dangerousness and made to signify a more idealized version of whiteness.

Theories of Control through Mass Culture

The attempt to bring into view that which is normally unseen (structures of ownership, systematic and class-based disenfranchisement) or that which is a condition of visibility (mythologies of identity) requires the destruction of assumptions and beliefs purported as common sense, *status quo*, or simply as given facts that need not be questioned. The study at hand uses a perspective provided by cultural theoreticians exploring a Marxist interpretation of popular culture. Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), Louis Althusser (1918-1990), and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) are all Western European philosophers who address popular culture to some extent.¹³ As an ensemble, their theories allow us to approach popular culture from a philosophical perspective that takes into account the ways that dominant social classes maintain their position. The decades leading up to the civil rights movement in the U.S. are immediately pertinent from this theoretical perspective because of the increased significance of popular culture, and in particular, the political valence of Rock & Roll. Such a historical context corresponds to the issue of the institutional protection of mainstream white image and identity at a time when control of this identity was threatened if not temporarily lost.

A common question that unites the cultural theorists above is, “How can subordinate classes make a claim to meaningful historical change through popular culture?” This question encourages us to reappraise the idea of narrative or “text.” While the history of pop culture is certainly composed of books, films, songs, and other storytelling media, there is also the idea of deciphering historical events as being brought about by forces that makeup another sort of text. While Marcuse reads popular culture as an institutional means of using illusion to blunt any real instinct of popular insurgence, Gramsci insists on a more nuanced reading. He sees popular culture in terms of a constant negotiation between dominant and subordinate classes. Althusser’s take on the issue assumes a sort of middle ground between Marcuse and Gramsci inasmuch as it adds the element of consent on the part of those that the official discourse seeks to construct as

a subject. While the macro-vision of the theoretical model itself remains the same, it is ultimately the agency of the subordinate (as opposed to dominant) group that separates these philosophers. Marcuse sees popular culture as a top-down imposition of order, Gramsci sees it as a space for negotiation, resistance, and ultimately translation, while Althusser sees it in a hybrid fashion—an apparatus of the state that creates subjects only once they buy in. Despite the fact that Gramsci is the eldest of these three cultural theorists, his contribution to the conversation was later than the others due to a tardy English translation of his works. The impact of these ideas upon popular culture studies thus develops the understanding of social interrelation by progressively inscribing the non-dominant classes with a certain agency. In the hands of Gramsci, this agency is expressed as negotiation—the key characteristic of his central concept, hegemony.

In *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, John Storey describes Gramsci's particular elaboration of this key concept:

Although hegemony implies a society with a high degree of consensus, it should not be understood to refer to a society in which all conflict has been removed. [...] That is, hegemony is maintained (and must be continually maintained: it is an ongoing process) by dominant groups and classes. [...] Because hegemony is always the result of 'negotiations' between dominant and subordinate groups, it is a process marked by both 'resistance' and 'incorporation'; it is never simply power imposed from above.¹⁴

Storey goes on to elucidate the meaning of this "negotiation" as it is applied to popular culture. He uses the French term *bricolage* to refer to the process by which youth subcultures appropriate commercially provided commodities for their own purposes, recombining them in ways not intended by their producers. It is not difficult to see this process exemplified in the use of network news footage by short form music video directors at the outset of the MTV era. The end result is work that often opposed the political establishment by using reconfigured bits of its official language. Likewise, this theoretical perspective has pragmatic effects for the current study. It brings into value a type of historical interpretation that seeks to identify multiple layers to a given event, much in the manner of Stuart Hall.¹⁵ If we can identify and then dispel a dominant version of the birth of

Rock & Roll, it will clear the way to other, negotiated or even oppositional readings of the same event.

More specifically speaking, this study values various socio-cultural media as the terrain of negotiation between what Max Horkheimer calls “authentic” and “mass” or “commercial” culture.¹⁶ In other words, media is subject to the time it takes for a theoretically “authentic” expression from below (subordinate classes) to be assimilated, repackaged, and marketed by the dominant ones. The version that is resold following this process is the “negotiated version.” As such, media are primary texts that allow for interpretation and critical reading of the Rock & Roll assimilation. These include traditional media such as radio broadcasts and television programming as well as those media that are specific to the music industry, such as musical compositions and recordings of those compositions. In order to respect the fact that the industry depends on the exploitation of the latter, we are compelled to recognize the ownership structures that use traditional media (the first group) as promotional vehicles for the sales of songs and records. We therefore accord a particular value and double status to record companies and publishing companies as both owners of records and songs, as well as mainstream institutions that either support or subvert mainstream values. By the same token, the broadcasting industry is simultaneously paid and contracted by the music industry to promote specific properties while also having the power to support or subvert the *status quo*. This then is the theoretical expression of our particular industrial or corporate situation.

Adding the racial situation into this picture requires some preliminary observations. First of all, it must be noted that the mainstream of American music at this time is owned, controlled, and defined by four white-owned major record companies: Capitol, Decca, Columbia, and RCA/Victor. The 1950s however witness the rise of the independent labels that are either immigrant owned or feature black artists (Chess, Specialty, Atlantic, Sun, Modern, Aladdin, VeeJay, Duke, Imperial, etc.). The issue of race is therefore rather neatly expressed on the level of music industry ownership of the period. Mainstream American values are represented via a small group of larger corporations with white ownership and talent while smaller companies with non-white ownership and/or talent are relegated to the margins in terms of status (independent labels), genre (race records like Blues, Gospel, and R&B), distribution, and above all, sales. Looking at this issue from the dual perspectives of race and ownership demonstrates the corpo-

rate interest in both defining and exploiting the mainstream. Furthermore, it is important to avoid a related over-simplification—namely, that only mainstream, white-owned corporations were subject to greed and abuse of the creative component (artists, musicians, songwriters, etc.). Scores of exploited artists, black and white alike, testify to the fact that greed was not exclusively a feature of the major labels.

With the theoretical perspectives outlined above, let us turn to an analysis of the developments surrounding the birth of Rock & Roll in 1950s America. Some questions that will guide our analysis seek to recognize the socio-economic situation of this period. In particular, we are interested in gaining an understanding of how mainstream American society perceived black American culture, both at large and with respect to its music. Beyond the collapse of segregation, what specific threats to mainstream America are posed by Rhythm and Blues music? We are likewise interested in the possible means of regulation by which upper echelons of society might exert control over black music. By what processes can we see the establishment (government, religion, media, education) re-branding Rhythm and Blues as Rock & Roll? In particular, we are interested in the role of mass media as a possible means of control. What position did the first Rock & Roll radio stations assume with respect to the black community as they essentially functioned to bring this “race” music to larger audiences?

Identifying and Confronting the Threat

The threat of black music in 1950s America is largely that of black culture itself. Examples abound of local and regional officials from the clergy, municipal government, educators, citizens associations, law enforcement, and even broadcasters who decried the savage obscenity and vulgarity of Rock & Roll music that they saw as a threat to debase white society (Figure 1). There are two aspects of this well-documented story of censorship and racial ignorance that merit its inclusion here. First of all, anti-Rock & Roll activity is not exclusively a southern phenomenon—despite the pre-civil rights hostility towards all things black that continues to stigmatize the south. This observation invites us to question other ways that early rock & rollers threatened the authorities. Secondly, the fact that the issue of “Rock & Roll as threat” receives national attention, and the development of that story, including the way it is framed, all point to forces at play that are not directly related to the issue of segregation.¹⁷ To this

NOTICE!

STOP

Help Save The Youth of America

DON'T BUY NEGRO RECORDS

(If you don't want to serve negroes in your place of business, then do not have negro records on your juke box or listen to negro records on the radio.)

The screaming, idiotic words, and savage music of these records are undermining the morals of our white youth in America.

Call the advertisers of the radio stations that play this type of music and complain to them!

**Don't Let Your Children Buy, or Listen
To These Negro Records**

For additional copies of this circular, write
CITIZENS' COUNCIL OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS, INC.
509 Delta Building New Orleans, Louisiana 70112

Permission is granted to re-print this circular

Figure 1. Citizens' Council of Greater New Orleans, early 1960s.

point, our research shows two points that are worthy of consideration: the fact that the majors initially passed on Rock & Roll as a fad and the impact of black culture imported through Rock & Roll upon the extant mores, customs, and values of mainstream white America.

In his authoritative book, *The Recording Industry*, Geoffrey Hull discusses the rise of the independent record companies during the period of interest. In the year 1950 the recorded music market was similar to that which we see today—it is essentially an oligopoly (i.e., few companies control the vast majority of the marketplace). Columbia, RCA/Victor, Decca, and Capitol controlled 78% of all record sales (leaving 22% of sales to other, independent labels).¹⁸ Much like today, this led to a listening experience that lacked diversity and innovation. The resulting situation is also similar to our own—the public hungers for something new. Another effect of this type of environment is that the idea of what makes a “hit” can become very narrow. For the purposes of this study, such a situation represents a highly normalized marketplace where the *status quo* is maintained with minimal disruption. Hull’s description of the *late* 1950s however, is radically different: the independent labels preside over 76% of sales leaving just 24% for the majors.¹⁹ In the space of less than ten years, the market share any one of the majors had enjoyed became the total percentage to be shared by all five of the majors! The average market share enjoyed by a given major over this period goes from approximately 15% down to 5%.

A primary reason for this powerful disruption of the former stability is a new sound emerging from black culture and exploited by a growing number of independent labels. “Sepia tones,” “race records,” “boogie,” “jump blues,” and “nigger bop” were all names for this music, names that betray a wide spectrum of affinity for black culture in 1950s U.S.A. The division however was not as much along racial lines as along generational ones. Thanks to the efforts of a handful of pioneering DJs (to be discussed below), this new music that was essentially an up-tempo black pop music was gaining considerable grass roots momentum among white youths. To the extent that younger whites adopted it, their parents tended to reject it. So a self-perpetuating cycle took root that threatened to rip the very fabric of mainstream society by virtue of this music serving as the vehicle for a new youthful defiance. Also serving as the grounds of this tussle between parent and child, black music enabled white youths to give a voice to an entire set of topics held to be taboo by the older generation: those that revolved around human sexuality, overt emotionalism, and even self-de-

termination. In addition to a damn good time, this music allowed for white youths to identify themselves against the Victorian values by which they would have otherwise been restricted.

If it seems too dramatic to speak of this music in terms of white parents' struggle for the hearts and minds of their children, it requires no license to speak of its direct and overt challenge to the Victorian value system within which the older generation rooted their authority as adults and sometimes parents. As Rhythm and Blues artist Hank Ballard points out in the documentary *The History of Rock & Roll*, "movement of the butt, shakin' the leg... these were considered obscene for white folks."²⁰ In addition to the liberated dancing and artistic performance of this music by the original artists, some were known for making a career with *double entendre* lyrics whose references to intercourse were more or less veiled. Wynonie Harris enjoyed great success in the late 40s with songs that used food metaphors to articulate the carnal enjoyment of his partner: songs like *Keep on Churnin'*, *Lollipop Momma*, *I Like My Baby's Puddin'*, and others. Due to his crossover success with the song *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, Big Joe Williams' lyric is equally notable as he sang of the fruits of his romantic labor "like a one-eyed cat, peepin' in a seafood store."

The need for a white purveyor of this music can be understood in relationship to some of these threats. Real or rumor, Sam Phillips' purported prayer for a "white singer who can play black music" was answered on July 5, 1954 when young Elvis Presley cut two sides, *That's Alright Mama* and *Blue Moon of Kentucky*. The former, a cover of the obscure bluesman Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, was particularly indicative of the historical impact Presley was to have on American pop music. At 20,000 copies, sales were not enough to earn a spot on any national charts, however it did put Elvis on the map and within eighteen months he had a major record deal with RCA as well as a series of national television appearances. It is important to note that Elvis as a white practitioner was not enough to immediately inoculate the white masses to the perceived threat of black popular music. Instead, we can see this as a process of development—not unlike the shortening of his name from Elvis Aaron Presley to simply "Elvis." This is to say that certain elements of his early image were too much for the mainstream public to cope with, and they had to be removed. As Ballard has already told us, the "movement of the butt" was simply too much for the older generation, but it was exactly the thing that made the youngsters go wild. As it turns out, adults and not youngsters owned the

major labels and broadcasting firms, so part of the re-branding for white America included Elvis in a tux and, following that failure, no television shots that included his hips. By the time the dangerous sexuality had been erased (omission as blanching), it was a matter of the institution who authored this change to inscribe its ownership, not in the artist, but in the genre itself: R&B was out to the margins of race and lowered sales, lesser stardom, and Rock & Roll, now disinfected and de-sexualized was fit for consumption. Each of these steps (subsumption, renaming, and ultimately coronation) belongs to the larger process of hegemonic negotiation. Little matter that there are already several kings of the upbeat, Blues-based boogie from which Rock & Roll is derived (Albert King, B.B. King, Freddie King), Elvis was now the figure of translation by which all of the best artistic innovation was free to enter into the pantheon of mainstream American stardom. The actual men and women who had created that art form were all too often left outside looking in.

Media, Ownership and the Myth of the Pioneering DJ

There is a common mythological story of Rock & Roll. It is the soundtrack to a generation demarcating itself from the values and identity of preceding ones. Overlooking issues of class and color ultimately in favor of love, unity, and freedom, Rock & Roll as a cultural movement reveals the old, Victorian sensibility as stilted, stiff, and a bit uptight. While the co-mingling of these influences presents a compelling artistic balance, the social, cultural, and political stakes were perceived as too great to be supported by the ruling class, corporations, the government... in short, the *man*. Thus Rock & Roll is used to frame a struggle for the hearts and minds of America's youth. The dominant, conservative values starkly oppose the liberating beats and moods portrayed by Rock's forebear, Rhythm and Blues. Although the black artists were likely indifferent to crossing over, their music appears to the establishment as a battleground for the allegiance of America's youth. In between the forces of subversive artistic expression and hegemonic *status quo*, the early Rock & Roll DJs are often painted as heroically but naively constructing an impossible bridge. Such is the image of Rock & Roll's early years handed down through various media.

Looking more closely at the role of the music and associated media that spread this new world-view into the U.S., we find a romantic quality. It is the rise of the oppressed given voice by the irresistible force and ar-

tistic energy jumping off the grooves of the “race records” that could not be contained by any federal declarations. The somber truth is that the role of mass media only exacerbated the speed with which the “Rock & Roll beat” would overrun the land. The fact that many of its greatest propagators were white DJs is a remarkable historical fact that provides an important moment for critical reflection and debate. Here we can ask, “To what degree are these music businessmen—mostly young white men—exploiting the work of black artists for profits that are beyond professional measure and standard?”

While the condensed nature of the current study does not allow space for a case-by-case study of these DJs’ presentation of black music to a mainstream audience, some general remarks are in order. Let us consider the romantic if not heroic way that these music industry professionals are portrayed by the various media for which they worked. This group of mostly white men is celebrated for their bravery to take the music of the oppressed through a gatekeeping system of ownership and profit-seeking that had marginalized race music because it is poor folks’ music. However, a more objective stance reveals a couple of basic truths. First, these were in fact members and employees of prominent radio stations, and as such were caught up in the effort to exploit the recorded musical compositions of artists. Secondly, when we look at the larger arcs of the entire careers of these individuals, we find that their careers are definitively marked by the corruption of the federal anti-payola hearings. We should point out that there are strong camps on each side of this issue.²¹ One claims that the payola hearings of the late 1950s were a straw-man issue used by the government to oppress any surge towards black entry into mainstream popular culture. Another side argues that DJs and record company owners and their A&R reps were in collusion to exploit the artists in any way possible, but most frequently by inserting themselves into rights and royalty streams of income that should have been enjoyed by the artists themselves. Although these issues are not 100% mutually exclusive, when we apply the litmus test of race—and to a lesser extent, class—we find that the true nature of, and conduct of, these DJs is, at best, questionable.

In his commendation of WHBQ’s Dewey Phillips—the DJ credited as the first to spin Elvis’ debut record (Sun 209) *That’s Alright* b/w *Blue Moon of Kentucky*—fellow Memphis DJ Rufus Thomas said, “He was the only white who could go anywhere he wanted on the black side of town.”²² Thomas goes on to indicate the extent to which Phillips was embraced by

the black community for his defiant playing of their music on the radio. The “crazed hillbilly” persona he adopted as his on-air personality was also the one on display during his short-lived television show on WHBQ/TV-13. Let us note that Dewey’s relationship to his audience was mediated by an invented personality, or mask, that may have left some part of his identity hidden. Without impugning anyone’s motives, it is important to recognize that the contrived nature of their public face at the very least obscured these motives. The adoption of a larger than life persona is common to this pioneering generation of race-music playing disc jockeys. The “wild bunch” at WLAC in Nashville is also credited with being the first or among the first white DJs to bring R&B to white audiences. By adopting black colloquial speech, John Richbourg, Bill “Hoss” Allen, and Gene Nobles took this public persona to another level. From a psycho-linguistic perspective, this “hepster” mask is not unlike a form of invisible black-face with the important exception that it not only served as a marker of authenticity to racially and socially locate the music in modern black culture, but it also appears to have worked as a means of access for these DJs to address that black culture. Richbourg in particular is remembered not only for his “down-home” (or derivative “black”) phrasing as a pitchman, but for marketing scam products directly to his black clientele as well. Products included a box of live baby chicks that were sold under the idea of a “month’s worth of chicken dinner” when raised and bred, but the customer actually ended up with a box of a couple dozen dead baby chickens that were unable to withstand the rigors of ground service postal delivery.

From the larger perspective of the career trajectories of these men, we find a strong and nefarious association with the wealth that was amassed in the process of their pioneering ways. Between 1960 and 1963, two of the most visible DJ’s of this era, Hunter Hancock and Alan Freed, had careers that were ended by the payola scandals, while Richbourg and “Hoss” Alan escaped to other corners of the music business. Regardless of where we stand on the issue of payola, the mere association of business and race music is one that works to separate these DJ pioneers from the black culture for whom they are painted as champions in the *Invaders* documentary. On the side of the artists and musicians themselves, their creative work justifies their ownership of any original songs according to U.S. copyright law. Due to the relatively high levels of illiteracy and low levels of education, artists, performers, and songwriters were often disenfranchised not only by accepting one time, flat fee payments for their studio work, but by

signing away their ownership rights when asked to sign what they were told was a “receipt for payment.” Once the song was recorded and signed away in this fashion, the rights to the song and the recording both resided with the record company. As we have seen, this was not just a white-black power play. For example, Bill Haley’s mega-hit on Decca records *Rock Around The Clock* has Decca executive Milt Gabler listed as a co-writer. “Ghost writing” is the term for this tactic used by executives to insert themselves into (and thereby dilute) the artist royalty stream.

In this situation, the only barriers to instant wealth were promotion and ensuing distribution. This is the place and function of the disc jockey and the reason why record companies made large cash payments to disc jockeys to get them to spin certain records. One hit would yield a hundred times return on the initial investment in the 1950s, a thousand times in the 60s, ten thousand times in the 70s. If the DJs were in fact the champions of the black community—only in it for the music and invested in the subversive power of Rock & Roll culture—then we should find something more along the lines of “Robin Hood” and less along the lines of “Pied Piper.” In other words, the cash payoffs to the DJs did not find their way back to the black artists, songwriters, and musicians. In fact, we would have never heard about any of this if the DJs had only paid taxes on this common expense called radio promotion. The main vehicles that brought this situation into the light—the federal payola hearings of 1960 and the anti-payola laws from five years earlier—are both functions of the fact that the U.S. government was not getting its piece of the action: the DJs were evading taxes, not claiming this as part of their income. This is what is passing for justice: the greed of the DJs is clearly evident, and Uncle Sam is simultaneously getting paid while slapping the hands of the growing music industry. But without the songs, the beats, and the performances, none of the industrial and economic machinery can run. Regardless of what mask they wore, we must not consider these early DJs as champions of the black community. They were entrepreneurs, not pioneers, and as such their proper place is inside this industrial complex of power relationships that safeguard the mainstream. The story of the early Rock & Roll DJs supports our hegemonic reading by indicating that positions of power are primary in revealing motives that are often hidden by some more beautiful story.

Rebranding Race Music

Applying the theory of hegemony to the two-year period from 1958-1960 is a useful way to outline a major adjustment of mainstream culture as it absorbs the Rock & Roll movement. During this period, a select group of the Rock & Roll luminaries find themselves somehow, and sometimes permanently, removed from the national spotlight. In March of 1958 Elvis was inducted into the United States Army, in December, 1959 Chuck Berry was sentenced to three years in prison for bringing a minor across state lines, and from 1958 to 1960 Alan Freed saw his career decimated by pressures that could justly be called hegemonic. Religious authorities, law enforcement, network broadcasters, citizen groups, and ultimately the federal investigation into payola became an impenetrable force working to silence the New York-based DJ and promoter who had built a career acting as a powerful voice and advocate for Rock & Roll. As we have already seen, all of the “pioneering” DJs who chose to build their national personae on bringing R&B to mainstream audiences during the mid 50s, were no longer doing so by the end of the decade. The year 1960 demonstrates a major adjustment by mainstream society to the Rock & Roll movement. In March, Elvis returned from Germany to find that the music that inspired him had brought the inner workings of the music industry under federal inspection as the payola hearings were already underway. One important result of this process would not only be the spectacular demise of Freed’s career—an effective warning to others who might wish to emulate him—but a locking of the door by which popular music could make it onto the air. The keys to that door were now being taken away from DJs and small, independent record labels only to be handed over to managers and majors in the form of increased rates and federal regulation.

The genie had, however, been let out of the bottle and even though the government might be able to discourage future “disruption” to the proper operation of the recording industry, there was no way to make mainstream youth forget the new sensibility introduced by the Rock & Roll sound. In the summer of 1960, less than a year after being called before the Senate payola hearings, Dick Clark debuted *The Twist* on his show, *American Bandstand*. The formerly illicit “movement of the butt” by whites was certified as acceptable behavior by mainstream America. Interestingly, the song was a cover version—but this time it was the “wholesome and black” Chubby Checker who sang the song of another, older black artist, Hank Ballard. Checker’s version hit number one in 1960 and again in 1962 (his

Let's Twist Again reached number eight in 1961), while Ballard's original hit the twenty-eighth spot in 1960. So fervent was the twist craze during this time, that the Peppermint Lounge in New York City became a twist-only dance club where the upper crust of white society would wait in line for hours for the chance to experience "movement of the butt" set to lively, musical accompaniment. Between 1960 and 1964, seventeen twist-themed songs made the *Billboard* charts, along with the national release of two feature films.

The operation of the subtle, unseen reifications of the *status quo*, coined by Gramsci as hegemony, is clear in this process of translation. To adopt a Marxist perspective, the base of production—maintaining control of mainstream recordings from signing the talent all the way to retail record sales—is safeguarded by the superstructure. The first generation of Rock & Roll (ca. 1952-1959) is a disruption to that system of control on many fronts including the economical, social, and educational. The responses to this disruption are made from these very arenas in an effort to regain control of the hearts and minds of the (white) youth. Schools begin to enforce dress codes defined explicitly against Rock & Roll dress (leather jackets, tight skirts); religious leaders reinforced this message by addressing Rock & Roll as a cancer to spiritual sanctity. Grassroots citizen associations spontaneously spring up in reaction to this threat, echoing the language of the educational and religious leaders. Corporate media outlets cut ties with any employees who had prospered by masquerading as "white renegades" embracing this new black music. It is interesting to note that this operation includes its own process of nomination. Once cleansed of its residual contagion from the maternal R&B music, the music would then be repackaged for a more mainstream consumption, under the name of Rock & Roll.

Conclusion

While the bias of some writers is evident in their use of terms like "theft" and "disinfection," such vitriol threatens to compromise a critical account that attends to the complexity of the process at hand. Criticism of the term "assimilation" to describe black-white relations in America is based largely on the fallacies that underpin its use. As Marcus Garvey's analysis of the term shows, the primary presumption is that black cultural expressions need to conform to the values of the larger white system in order to become legitimate.²³ Though we are interested in demonstrating

the corrupt nature of such assumptions and their place in 1950s America, the theory of racial assimilation by way of popular music is problematic on multiple accounts.²⁴ On the other hand, “blanching” refers to any whitening process as exemplified by various processes (medical, cooking, horticulture). Its linguistic heritage has roots in renaissance rhetoric where it describes a process through which a writer seeks to make a point by way of suppressing certain information. While these ideas of whiteness, erasure, and omission do apply to the general contours of the social situation surrounding the birth of Rock & Roll, “blanching” also suffers as a critical concept in much the same way as assimilation. Namely, they presume a unified cause of action on the part of white society as a whole. Finally, “subsumption” provides a more nuanced theoretical framework for the study at hand. A descendant of Gestalt theory as well as those of Schema, subsumption is a theory of learning based on the idea that new material is related to relevant ideas in the existing structure.²⁵ This theory invites us to metaphorically reconceive our socio-cultural situation along the lines of learning and early human development. We are less bound by the idea of an overt, communal gesture imported by the previous terms. One interesting shift that comes with this new way of seeing the birth of Rock & Roll is that it decenters our perspective from its position of white or “hegemonic” predominance. Now, the culture of black America is represented more as a separate kind of knowledge—or even a new epistemology—about which mainstream white America must learn in order to grow. The idea of white predominance is effectively relegated to that of the confrontation of two cultures within what Garvey describes as “the great panorama of races.”²⁶

To varying extents, each of the theoretical perspectives we have considered has its pros and cons. Nonetheless, the act of considering them together benefits us with a wider perspective. Individually, they naturally invite us to see a single historical moment in multiple ways. Perhaps the greatest benefit of theories like hegemony, cultural theory, and subsumption is their displacement of the critical perspective that now sees the birth of Rock & Roll from the more objective point of view of cultural confrontation rather than solely from the perspective of one of the cultures in question. There is, nonetheless, something that passes between black and white popular cultures in the years leading up to the “Rock & Roll Era.” The direct and vibrant musical inspiration is but one part of a larger way of being that is translated between the two cultures, a lesson learned on a mass scale by the youthful “counter culture” raised in the 1960s. Muddy

Waters' metaphor of Rock & Roll as the baby of the Blues is thus curiously insightful. It recasts the nuances of cultural communion, translation, and the communication of a lesson in beautifully simple and poetic verse.

I want to tell all you peoples, you know the Blues got soul.

This is a story, a story ain't never been told:

You know the Blues got pregnant, and they named the baby Rock & Roll.²⁷

Endnotes

1. McKinley Morganfield (a.k.a.: “Muddy Waters”), *Hard Again*, copyright 1977, 1994 by Blue Sky Records, CDSKY 323576, Compact Disc.
2. See Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000) for the use of the term “assimilation,” and *Rock & Roll Invaders: The AM Radio DJs*, DVD, produced by Paul Eichgrun and Ross Porter (Carson City: Filmwest Associates, 1998) for use of the term “blanching,” and Herbert London, *Closing the Circle: A Cultural History of the Rock Revolution* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1984) for use of the term “subsumption.”
3. A more detailed discussion of the implications of these terms is below in the section entitled “Review of Literature.”
4. Among these are historical analyses: Glenn Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (New York: Penguin, 2003); Margo Jefferson, “Ripping off black music,” *Harper’s*, January, 1973, 40-45; and Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 1971).
5. *Rock & Roll Invaders: The AM Radio DJs*.
6. Robert Pielke, *You Say You Want a Revolution: Rock Music in American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1986); Reebee Garofalo, “Black Popular Music: Crossing over or going under?” in *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*, ed. Tony Bennett et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 231-248; Steve Perry, “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough: The Politics of Crossover,” in *Facing the Music: Essays on Pop, Rock and Culture*, ed. Simon Frith (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 55-87.
7. Bertrand, op. cit., 77.
8. Ortiz Walton, *Music: Black, White, and Blue: A Sociological Survey of the Use and Misuse of Afro-American Music* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1972).
9. Garofalo, op. cit., 234.
10. John Morthland, “An Oral History of Elvis,” *Country Music*, July, 1997, 46-56, 79-82.
11. Bertrand, p. 80. He is paraphrasing George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis:

- University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
12. Elvis Presley, *Elvis Presley: The 1950's Interviews*, copyright 1957, 1991 by Magnum Records, CDD 270, Compact Disc.
 13. Herbert Marcuse was a member of the Frankfurt School established in the 1920s at Columbia University in New York. His *One Dimensional Man* (London: Sphere, 1968) discusses mass media as an arm of the state to dissuade popular revolt. The Algerian-born Louis Althusser contributes the idea of "hailing" as a means of seeing how dominant groups construct subjects through the media in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). The Italian Marxist and political philosopher Antonio Gramsci set down his theory of hegemony while a political prisoner in Rome. We are referring to the initial English translation, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971). The work of Theodor Adorno is a useful entry point to critical theory.
 14. John Storey, *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 126.
 15. In his seminal article, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), Stuart Hall sets forth modes of reading he calls "dominant," "negotiated," and "oppositional" that have varying degrees of complicity or subversion with respect to the message intended by the speaker.
 16. Max Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communications*, vol. 12, ed. by Peter Davison, et al. (Cambridge: Chadwyck Healey, 1978).
 17. For example, various anti-rock "activists" couched their rhetoric in religious terms, referring to rock & roll as "the devil's music." Other motivating factors include race as well as the fear of communism.
 18. Geoffrey Hull, *The Recording Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 123.
 19. *Ibid.*, 124.
 20. *The History of Rock 'n' Roll*, VHS, produced by Jeffrey Peisch (Burbank: Time Life Video & Television, 1995).
 21. For social, historical, and cultural reviews of the payola hearings of the late 1950s, see Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 84-91; Russell and David

- Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 173-177; and Wes Smith, *The Pied Pipers of Rock 'n' Roll: Radio Deejays of the 50s and 60s* (Athens, Georgia: Longstreet Press, 1989).
22. *Rock & Roll Invaders: The AM Radio DJs.*
 23. Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Amy Jacques-Garvey (*The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2009) eBook, 20.
 24. In addition to the issues raised by Garvey, assimilation presumes a unified cause of action on the part of white America as a whole, which was not the case.
 25. David Ausubel, *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View* (New York: Holt McDougal, 1978).
 26. Garvey, op. cit., 20.
 27. Morganfield, op. cit.

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