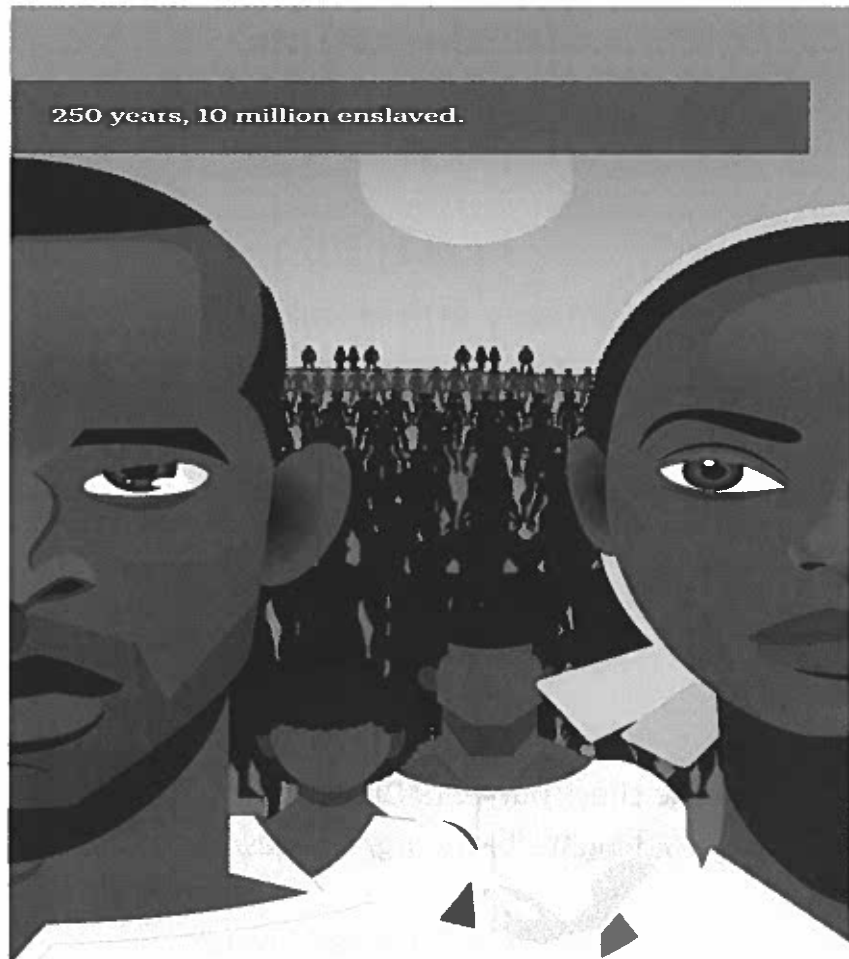


1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



Topic: Stealing Black Culture: Music

Thursday February 11, 2021

6:30 – 8:00 pm

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

Upcoming 1619 programs

March 11, 2021

Stealing Black Culture: Sports

6:30 – 8:00 pm

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

April 8, 2021

Slavery and Health Care

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

May 13, 2021

1619 versus 1776 Projects

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For more information

Contact: John Piche' at jpiche@heightslibrary.org

Why Is Everyone Always Stealing Black Music?

 [nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/music-black-culture-appropriation.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/music-black-culture-appropriation.html)

By WESLEY MORRIS

August 14,
2019

I've got a friend who's an incurable Pandora guy, and one Saturday while we were making dinner, he found a station called Yacht Rock. "A tongue-in-cheek name for the breezy sounds of late '70s/early '80s soft rock" is Pandora's definition, accompanied by an exhortation to "put on your Dockers, pull up a deck chair and relax." With a single exception, the passengers aboard the yacht were all dudes. With two exceptions, they were all white. But as the hours passed and dozens of songs accrued, the sound gravitated toward a familiar quality that I couldn't give language to but could practically taste: an earnest Christian yearning that would reach, for a moment, into Baptist rawness, into a known warmth. I had to laugh — not because as a category Yacht Rock is absurd, but because what I tasted in that absurdity was black.

I started putting each track under investigation. Which artists would saunter up to the racial border? And which could do their sauntering without violating it? I could hear degrees of blackness in the choir-loft certitude of Doobie Brothers-era Michael McDonald on "What a Fool Believes"; in the rubber-band soul of Steely Dan's "Do It Again"; in the malt-liquor misery of Ace's "How Long" and the toy-boat wistfulness of Little River Band's "Reminiscing."

Then Kenny Loggins's "This Is It" arrived and took things far beyond the line. "This Is It" was a hit in 1979 and has the requisite smoothness to keep the yacht rocking. But Loggins delivers the lyrics in a desperate stage whisper, like someone determined to make the kind of love that doesn't wake the baby. What bowls you over is the intensity of his yearning — teary in the verses, snarling during the chorus. He sounds as if he's baring it all yet begging to wring himself out even more.

Playing black-music detective that day, I laughed out of bafflement and embarrassment and exhilaration. It's the conflation of pride and chagrin I've always felt anytime a white person inhabits blackness with gusto. It's: *You have to hand it to her*. It's: *Go, white boy. Go, white boy. Go*. But it's also: *Here we go again*. The problem is rich. If blackness can draw all of this ornate literariness out of Steely Dan and all this psychotic origami out of Eminem; if it can make Teena Marie sing everything — "Square Biz," "Revolution," "Portuguese Love," "Lovergirl" — like she knows her way around a pack of Newport; if it can turn the chorus of Carly Simon's "You Belong to Me" into a gospel hymn; if it can animate the swagger in the sardonic vulnerabilities of Amy Winehouse; if it can surface as unexpectedly as it does in the angelic angst of a singer as seemingly green as Ben Platt; if it's the reason Nu Shooz's "I Can't Wait" remains the whitest jam at the blackest parties, then it's proof of how deeply it matters to the music of being alive in America, alive to America.

It's proof, too, that American music has been fated to thrive in an elaborate tangle almost from the beginning. Americans have made a political investment in a myth of racial separateness, the idea that art forms can be either "white" or "black" in character when aspects of many are at least both. The purity that separation struggles to maintain? This country's music is an advertisement for 400 years of the opposite: centuries of "amalgamation" and "miscegenation" as they long ago called it, of all manner of interracial collaboration conducted with dismaying ranges of consent.

"White," "Western," "classical" music is the overarching basis for lots of American pop songs. Chromatic-chord harmony, clean timbre of voice and instrument: These are the ingredients for some of the hugely singable harmonies of the Beatles, the Eagles, Simon and Fleetwood Mac, something choral, "pure," largely ungrained. Black music is a completely different story. It brims with call and response, layers of syncopation and this rougher element called "noise," unique sounds that arise from the particular hue and timbre of an instrument — Little Richard's woos and knuckled keyboard zooms. The dusky heat of Miles Davis's trumpeting. Patti LaBelle's emotional police siren. DMX's scorched-earth bark. The visceral stank of Etta James, Aretha Franklin, live-in-concert Whitney Houston and Prince on electric guitar.

But there's something even more fundamental, too. My friend Delvyn Case, a musician who teaches at Wheaton College, explained in an email that improvisation is one of the most crucial elements in what we think of as black music: "The raising of individual creativity/expression to the highest place within the aesthetic world of a song." Without improvisation, a listener is seduced into the composition of the song itself and not the distorting or deviating elements that noise creates. Particular to black American music is the architecture to create a means by which singers and musicians can be completely free, free in the only way that would have been possible on a plantation: through art, through music — music no one "composed" (because enslaved people were denied literacy), music born of feeling, of play, of exhaustion, of hope.

What you're hearing in black music is a miracle of sound, an experience that can really happen only once — not just melisma, glissandi, the rasp of a sax, breakbeats or sampling but the mood or inspiration from which those moments arise. The attempt to rerecord it seems, if you think about it, like a fool's errand. You're not capturing the arrangement of notes, per se. You're catching the spirit.

And the spirit travels from host to host, racially indiscriminate about where it settles, selective only about who can withstand being possessed by it. The rockin' backwoods blues so bewitched Elvis Presley that he believed he'd been called by blackness. Chuck Berry sculpted rock 'n' roll with uproarious guitar riffs and lascivious winks at whiteness. Mick Jagger and Robert Plant and Steve Winwood and Janis Joplin and the Beatles jumped, jived and wailed the black blues. Tina Turner wrested it all back, tripling the octane in some of

their songs. Since the 1830s, the historian Ann Douglas writes in "Terrible Honesty," her history of popular culture in the 1920s, "American entertainment, whatever the state of American society, has always been integrated, if only by theft and parody." What we've been dealing with ever since is more than a catchall word like "appropriation" can approximate. The truth is more bounteous and more spiritual than that, more confused. That confusion is the DNA of the American sound.

It's in the wink-wink costume funk of Beck's "Midnite Vultures" from 1999, an album whose kinky nonsense deprecations circle back to the popular culture of 150 years earlier. It's in the dead-serious, nostalgic dance-floor schmaltz of Bruno Mars. It's in what we once called "blue-eyed soul," a term I've never known what to do with, because its most convincing practitioners — the Bee-Gees, Michael McDonald, Hall & Oates, Simply Red, George Michael, Taylor Dayne, Lisa Stansfield, Adele — never winked at black people, so black people rarely batted an eyelash. Flaws and all, these are homeowners as opposed to renters. No matter what, though, a kind of gentrification tends to set in, underscoring that black people have often been rendered unnecessary to attempt blackness. Take Billboard's Top 10 songs of 2013: It's mostly nonblack artists strongly identified with black music, for real and for kicks: Robin Thicke, Miley Cyrus, Justin Timberlake, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, the dude who made "The Harlem Shake."

Sometimes all the inexorable mixing leaves me longing for something with roots that no one can rip all the way out. This is to say that when we're talking about black music, we're talking about horns, drums, keyboards and guitars doing the unthinkable together. We're also talking about what the borrowers and collaborators don't want to or can't lift — centuries of weight, of atrocity we've never sufficiently worked through, the blackness you know is beyond theft because it's too real, too rich, too heavy to steal.

Blackness was on the move before my ancestors were legally free to be. It was on the move before my ancestors even knew what they had. It was on the move because white people were moving it. And the white person most frequently identified as its prime mover is Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a New Yorker who performed as T.D. Rice and, in acclaim, was lusted after as "Daddy" Rice, "the negro *par excellence*." Rice was a minstrel, which by the 1830s, when his stardom was at its most refulgent, meant he painted his face with burned cork to approximate those of the enslaved black people he was imitating.

In 1830, Rice was a nobody actor in his early 20s, touring with a theater company in Cincinnati (or Louisville; historians don't know for sure), when, the story goes, he saw a decrepit, possibly disfigured old black man singing while grooming a horse on the property of a white man whose last name was Crow. On went the light bulb. Rice took in the tune and the movements but failed, it seems, to take down the old man's name. So in his song based on the horse groomer, he renamed him: "Weel about and turn about jus so/Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow." And just like that, Rice had invented the fellow who would become the mascot for two centuries of legalized racism.

That night, Rice made himself up to look like the old black man — or something like him, because Rice's get-up most likely concocted skin blacker than any actual black person's and a gibberish dialect meant to imply black speech. Rice had turned the old man's melody and hobbled movements into a song-and-dance routine that no white audience had ever experienced before. What they saw caused a permanent sensation. He reportedly won 20 encores.

Rice repeated the act again, night after night, for audiences so profoundly rocked that he was frequently mobbed *during* performances. Across the Ohio River, not an arduous distance from all that adulation, was Boone County, Ky., whose population would have been largely enslaved Africans. As they were being worked, sometimes to death, white people, desperate with anticipation, were paying to see them depicted at play.

Other performers came and conquered, particularly the Virginia Minstrels, who exploded in 1843, burned brightly then burned out after only months. In their wake, P.T. Barnum made a habit of booking other troupes for his American Museum; when he was short on performers, he blacked up himself. By the 1840s, minstrel acts were taking over concert halls, doing wildly clamored-for residencies in Boston, New York and Philadelphia.

A blackface minstrel would sing, dance, play music, give speeches and cut up for white audiences, almost exclusively in the North, at least initially. Blackface was used for mock operas and political monologues (they called them stump speeches), skits, gender parodies and dances. Before the minstrel show gave it a reliable home, blackface was the entertainment between acts of conventional plays. Its stars were the Elvis, the Beatles, the 'NSync of the 19th century. The performers were beloved and so, especially, were their songs.

During minstrelsy's heyday, white songwriters like Stephen Foster wrote the tunes that minstrels sang, tunes we continue to sing. Edwin Pearce Christy's group the Christy Minstrels formed a band — banjo, fiddle, bone castanets, tambourine — that would lay the groundwork for American popular music, from bluegrass to Motown. Some of these instruments had come from Africa; on a plantation, the banjo's body would have been a desiccated gourd. In "Doo-Dah!" his book on Foster's work and life, Ken Emerson writes that the fiddle and banjo were paired for the melody, while the bones "chattered" and the tambourine "thumped and jingled a beat that is still heard 'round the world."

But the sounds made with these instruments could be only *imagined* as black, because the first wave of minstrels were Northerners who'd never been meaningfully South. They played Irish melodies and used Western choral harmonies, not the proto-gospel call-and-response music that would make life on a plantation that much more bearable. Black artists *were* on the scene, like the pioneer bandleader Frank Johnson and the borderline-mythical Old Corn Meal, who started as a street vendor and wound up the first black man to perform, as

himself, on a white New Orleans stage. His stuff was copied by George Nichols, who took up blackface after a start in plain-old clowning. Yet as often as not, blackface minstrelsy tethered black people and black life to white musical structures, like the polka, which was having a moment in 1848. The mixing was already well underway: Europe plus slavery plus the circus, times harmony, comedy and drama, equals Americana.

And the muses for so many of the songs were enslaved Americans, people the songwriters had never met, whose enslavement they rarely opposed and instead sentimentalized. Foster's minstrel-show staple "Old Uncle Ned," for instance, warmly if disrespectfully eulogizes the enslaved the way you might a salaried worker or an uncle:

Den lay down de shubble and de hoe,
Hang up de fiddle and de bow:
No more hard work for poor Old Ned —
He's gone whar de good Niggas go,
No more hard work for poor Old Ned —
He's gone whar de good Niggas go.

Such an affectionate showcase for poor old (enslaved, soon-to-be-dead) Uncle Ned was as essential as "air," in the white critic Bayard Taylor's 1850 assessment; songs like this were the "true expressions of the more popular side of the national character," a force that follows "the American in all its emigrations, colonizations and conquests, as certainly as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day." He's not wrong. Minstrelsy's peak stretched from the 1840s to the 1870s, years when the country was as its most violently and legislatively ambivalent about slavery and Negroes; years that included the Civil War and Reconstruction, the ferocious rhetorical ascent of Frederick Douglass, John Brown's botched instigation of a black insurrection at Harpers Ferry and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Minstrelsy's ascent also coincided with the publication, in 1852, of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," a polarizing landmark that minstrels adapted for the stage, arguing for and, in simply remaining faithful to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, against slavery. These adaptations, known as U.T.C.s, took over the art form until the end of the Civil War. Perhaps minstrelsy's popularity could be (generously) read as the urge to escape a reckoning. But a good time predicated upon the presentation of other humans as stupid, docile, dangerous with lust and enamored of their bondage? It was an escape into slavery's fun house.

What blackface minstrelsy gave the country during this period was an entertainment of skill, ribaldry and polemics. But it also lent racism a stage upon which existential fear could become jubilation, contempt could become fantasy. Paradoxically, its dehumanizing bent let white audiences feel more human. They could experience loathing as desire, contempt as adoration, repulsion as lust. They could weep for overworked Uncle Ned as surely as they could ignore his lashed back or his body as it swung from a tree.

But where did this leave a black performer? If blackface was the country's cultural juggernaut, who would pay Negroes money to perform as themselves? When they were hired, it was only in a pinch. Once, P.T. Barnum needed a replacement for John Diamond, his star white minstrel. In a New York City dance hall, Barnum found a boy, who, it was reported at the time, could outdo Diamond (and Diamond was *good*). The boy, of course, was genuinely black. And his being actually black would have rendered him an outrageous blight on a white consumer's narrow presumptions. As Thomas Low Nichols would write in his 1864 compendium, "Forty Years of American Life," "There was not an audience in America that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro." So Barnum "greased the little 'nigger's' face and rubbed it over with a new blacking of burned cork, painted his thick lips vermilion, put on a woolly wig over his tight curled locks and brought him out as 'the champion nigger-dancer of the world.'" This child might have been William Henry Lane, whose stage name was Juba. And, as Juba, Lane was persuasive enough that Barnum could pass him off as a white person in blackface. He ceased being a real black boy in order to become Barnum's minstrel Pinocchio.

After the Civil War, black performers had taken up minstrelsy, too, corking themselves, for both white and black audiences — with a straight face or a wink, depending on who was looking. Black troupes invented important new dances with blue-ribbon names (the buck-and-wing, the Virginia essence, the stop-time). But these were unhappy innovations. Custom obligated black performers to fulfill an audience's expectations, expectations that white performers had established. A black minstrel was impersonating the impersonation of himself. Think, for a moment, about the talent required to pull *that* off. According to Henry T. Sampson's book, "Blacks in Blackface," there were no sets or effects, so the black blackface minstrel show was "a developer of ability because the artist was placed on his own." How's that for being twice as good? Yet that no-frills excellence could curdle into an entirely other, utterly degrading double consciousness, one that predates, predicts and probably informs W.E.B. DuBois's more self-consciously dignified rendering.

American popular culture was doomed to cycles not only of questioned ownership, challenged authenticity, dubious propriety and legitimate cultural self-preservation but also to the prison of black respectability, which, with brutal irony, could itself entail a kind of appropriation. It meant comportment in a manner that seemed less black and more white. It meant the appearance of refinement and polish. It meant the cognitive dissonance of, say,

Nat King Cole's being very black and sounding — to white America, anyway, with his frictionless baritone and diction as crisp as a hospital corner — suitably white. He was perfect for radio, yet when he got a TV show of his own, it was abruptly canceled, his brown skin being too much for even the black and white of a 1955 television set. There was, perhaps, not a white audience in America, particularly in the South, that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the majestic *singing* of a real Negro.

The modern conundrum of the black performer's seeming respectable, among black people, began, in part, as a problem of white blackface minstrels' disrespectful blackness. Frederick Douglass wrote that they were "the filthy scum of white society." It's that scum that's given us pause over everybody from Bert Williams and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson to Flavor Flav and Kanye West. *Is their blackness an act? Is the act under white control?* Just this year, Harold E. Doley Jr., an affluent black Republican in his 70s, was quoted in The Times lamenting West and his alignment with Donald Trump as a "bad and embarrassing minstrel show" that "served to only drive black people away from the G.O.P."

But it's from that scum that a robust, post-minstrel black American theater sprung as a new, black audience hungered for actual, uncorked black people. Without that scum, I'm not sure we get an event as shatteringly epochal as the reign of Motown Records. Motown was a full-scale integration of Western, classical orchestral ideas (strings, horns, woodwinds) with the instincts of both the black church (rhythm sections, gospel harmonies, hand claps) and juke joint Saturday nights (rhythm sections, guitars, vigor). Pure yet "noisy." Black men in Armani. Black women in ball gowns. Stables of black writers, producers and musicians. Backup singers solving social equations with geometric choreography. And just in time for the hegemony of the American teenager.

Even now it feels like an assault on the music made a hundred years before it. Motown specialized in love songs. But its stars, those songs and their performance of them were declarations of war on the insults of the past and present. The scratchy piccolo at the start of a Four Tops hit was, in its way, a raised fist. Respectability wasn't a problem with Motown; respectability was its point. How radically optimistic a feat of antiminstrelsy, for it's as glamorous a blackness as this country has ever mass-produced and devoured.

The proliferation of black music across the planet — the proliferation, in so many senses, of being black — constitutes a magnificent joke on American racism. It also confirms the attraction that someone like Rice had to that black man grooming the horse. But something about that desire warps and perverts its source, lampoons and cheapens it even in adoration. Loving black culture has never meant loving black people, too. Loving black culture risks loving the life out of it.

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And yet doesn't that attraction make sense? This is the music of a people who have survived, who not only won't stop but also can't be stopped. Music by a people whose major innovations — jazz, funk, hip-hop — have been about progress, about the future, about getting as far away from nostalgia as time will allow, music that's thought deeply about the allure of outer space and robotics, music whose promise and possibility, whose rawness, humor and carnality call out to everybody — to other black people, to kids in working class England and middle-class Indonesia. If freedom's ringing, who on Earth wouldn't also want to rock the bell?

In 1845, J.K. Kennard, a critic for the newspaper *The Knickerbocker*, hyperventilated about the blackening of America. Except he was talking about blackface minstrels doing the blackening. Nonetheless, Kennard could see things for what they were:

“Who are our true rulers? The negro poets, to be sure! Do they not set the fashion, and give laws to the public taste? Let one of them, in the swamps of Carolina, compose a new song, and it no sooner reaches the ear of a white amateur, than it is written down, amended, (that is, almost spoilt,) printed, and then put upon a course of rapid dissemination, to cease only with the utmost bounds of Anglo-Saxondom, perhaps of the world.”

What a panicked clairvoyant! The fear of black culture — or “black culture” — was more than a fear of black people themselves. It was an anxiety over white obsolescence. Kennard's anxiety over black influence sounds as ambivalent as Lorde's, when, all the way from her native New Zealand, she tsk-ed rap culture's extravagance on “Royals.” her hit from 2013, while recognizing, both in the song's hip-hop production and its appetite for a particular sort of blackness, that maybe she's too far gone:

Every song's like gold teeth, Grey Goose, trippin' in the
bathroom
Bloodstains, ball gowns, trashin' the hotel room
We don't care, we're driving Cadillacs in our dreams
But everybody's like Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your
timepiece
Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash
We don't care, we aren't caught up in your love affair

Beneath Kennard's warnings must have lurked an awareness that his white brethren had already fallen under this spell of blackness, that nothing would stop its spread to teenage girls in 21st-century Auckland, that the men who "infest our promenades and our concert halls like a colony of beetles" (as a contemporary of Kennard's put it) weren't black people at all but white people just like him — beetles and, eventually, Beatles. Our first most original art form arose from our original sin, and some white people have always been worried that the primacy of black music would be a kind of karmic punishment for that sin. The work has been to free this country from paranoia's bondage, to truly embrace the amplitude of integration. I don't know how we're doing.

Last spring, "Old Town Road," a silly, drowsy ditty by the Atlanta songwriter Lil Nas X, was essentially banished from country radio. Lil Nas sounds black, as does the trap beat he's droning over. But there's definitely a twang to him that goes with the opening bars of faint banjo and Lil Nas's lil' cowboy fantasy. The song snowballed into a phenomenon. All kinds of people — cops, soldiers, dozens of dapper black promgoers — posted dances to it on YouTube and TikTok. Then a crazy thing happened. It charted — not just on Billboard's Hot 100 singles chart, either. In April, it showed up on both its Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart and its Hot Country Songs chart. A first. And, for now at least, a last.

The gatekeepers of country radio refused to play the song; they didn't explain why. Then, Billboard determined that the song failed to "embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version." This doesn't warrant translation, but let's be thorough, anyway: *The song is too black for certain white people.*

But by that point it had already captured the nation's imagination and tapped into the confused thrill of integrated culture. A black kid hadn't really merged white music with black, he'd just taken up the American birthright of cultural synthesis. The mixing feels historical. Here, for instance, in the song's sample of a Nine Inch Nails track is a banjo, the musical

spine of the minstrel era. Perhaps Lil Nas was *too American*. Other country artists of the genre seemed to sense this. White singers recorded pretty tributes in support, and one, Billy Ray Cyrus, performed his on a remix with Lil Nas X himself.

The newer version lays Cyrus's casual grit alongside Lil Nas's lackadaisical wonder. It's been No.1 on Billboard's all-genre Hot 100 singles chart since April, setting a record. And the bottomless glee over the whole thing makes me laugh, too — not in a surprised, yacht-rock way but as proof of what a fine mess this place is. One person's sign of progress remains another's symbol of encroachment. *Screw the history. Get off my land.*

Four hundred years ago, more than 20 kidnapped Africans arrived in Virginia. They were put to work and put through hell. Twenty became millions, and some of those people found — somehow — deliverance in the power of music. Lil Nas X has descended from those millions and appears to be a believer in deliverance. The verses of his song flirt with Western kitsch, what young black internetters branded, with adorable idiosyncrasy and a deep sense of history, the "ye-haw agenda." But once the song reaches its chorus ("I'm gonna take my horse to the Old Town Road, and ride til I can't no more"), I don't hear a kid in an outfit. I hear a cry of ancestry. He's a westward-bound refugee; he's an Exoduster. And Cyrus is down for the ride. Musically, they both know: This land is their land.

Wesley Morris is a staff writer for the magazine, a critic at large for The New York Times and a co-host of the podcast "Still Processing." He was awarded the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

The Whitewashing of Black Music on TikTok

 [newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-whitewashing-of-black-music-on-tiktok](https://www.nytimes.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-whitewashing-of-black-music-on-tiktok)

Sheldon Pearce

If you download the video-sharing app **TikTok** right now and scroll the “For You” page, it likely won’t be long before you stumble upon teen-agers hip-thrusting and chest-popping to the sounds of Jersey club. The hyper-percussive subgenre, pioneered by producers such as Tim Dolla and DJ Tameil, and **reflecting** the Black and Latino communities of Newark, continues to advance outward from its home in the Garden State. The fun, active music is unbelievably catchy, highlighted by heavy kicks and choppy vocals, and it’s perfectly suited for the dancing found in short videos.

TikTok users noticed. DJ Flex’s Jersey-club **remix** of “**Down in the DM**” spread across the platform last year, and the trend continued during our **pandemic** summer. A few popular remixes—including of the 2005 hit “**Laffy Taffy**,” by D4L, and “**Honesty**,” by Pink Sweat\$—have spawned **various viral challenges**. But no song has risen further than Cookiee Kawaii’s “**Vibe (If I Back It Up)**,” which has been used in more than **1.9 million videos**. In an interview with **NJ.com**, the Jersey-club practitioner DJ Jayhood, who recommended that Kawaii put her vocals on a club track, said that the song’s reach “put Jersey Club at a different respect level.”

The dance challenges that use Jersey club have been taken up by the mostly white stars who dominate the platform, performers such as **Charli D’Amelio**, Addison Rae, and Noah Beck (who have eighty million, fifty-seven million, and twelve million followers, respectively). It can be somewhat unsettling to see niche, largely Black club music being co-opted by white influencers in the name of clout. The white stars feed on the content of smaller users in an act of vampirism, growing stronger as competitors wither away, using culture as a commodity to maintain their positions. Obviously, thousands, and sometimes millions, of people of all races participate in TikTok trends, but the most visible (and, usually, the most followed) of these users are white. Viewers who encounter these songs through such accounts often have no idea where they came from. The higher up the chain these viewers go, the further the sounds of club music get from their roots. Instead of rewarding Black creators, TikTok bolsters the white early adopters. “Jersey Club songs go viral on Tiktok all the time . . . they’re not ‘tik tok songs,’” Kawaii **tweeted**. At the very least, the optics play into a long, infamous history of white appropriation of Black arts.

Pore over comments and tweets about the use of Jersey-club music on TikTok and a common phrase surfaces: the music is being “gentrified” by the star video-makers trolling for content. Historically, gentrification has referred to the concept of “improving” a neighborhood to attract consumers in a higher strata, raising the cost of living and forcing out the (usually Black) people who live there. But, increasingly, the colloquial use of the term has shifted the

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word's meaning to refer to the white repossession or appropriation of any Black commodity, or the erasure of Black involvement in the creation of something. The idea of gentrifying a sound may seem odd, but it is less so when you think about TikTok as a space where sound is one of the greatest assets and how that asset is being mined to widen a gap between white poachers and Black originators, marginalizing those that it should be centering.

The talk of gentrification on the app doesn't stop with Jersey club. Recently, the emerging "slowed + reverb" production style has been criticized as an attempt to gentrify the classic Houston rap style of chopped and screwed. That sound is nearly the inverse of Jersey club: developed by the late Houston producer DJ Screw, the music involves slowing a song way down, until it sounds like it's melting, and then cutting up its lyrics. Slowed and reverb is far less technical, and it doesn't utilize DJ Screw's chopping technique, but its methods clearly echo screwed music, and it longs to induce the same mood. As slowed and reverb grows more popular across TikTok, it isn't the music itself that's drawing the backlash; it's the excision of DJ Screw from its narrative.

The source of the ire is an account called @songpsych, short for "song psychology." The account description reads, "Breaking down your fav songs." The video about slowed and reverb is presented, explainer style, from a place of authority, by the "host," Dev Lemons, with tags like #learnontiktok and #musictheory. She breaks down slowed and reverb to its base characteristics, referring to the sound as a "phenomenon" and crediting the innovation to the producer Slater. (Though Lemons is white and the majority of the popular slowed-and-reverb accounts are run anonymously, it's worth mentioning that Slater is Black and from Houston.) Lemons does not mention that slowed and reverb is derivative. It is not clear that she knows.

Fans of Houston rap were quick to issue a correction. "You just spent all this time editing, and putting in graphics and motion graphics, to not even know what you're talking about," the comedian Kevin Fredericks said in a video, doing his own counter-explainer. The producer at the center of the @songpsych explainer, Slater, pushed back, too: "I will pay you \$3,000 to have this scrubbed from the internet," he tweeted, in reference to the video, before adding, "for the record, i am and what I created are 10000% inspired and influenced by DJ screw because that's what i grew up on." The backlash prompted the @songpsych account to post another video about DJ Screw's influence, but the mishap served as a powerful illustration of the way that unearned white authority overwrites Black history, and, more specifically, the way some white influencers perpetuate expertise.

The blunder may seem innocuous, and attempts to redress it feel earnest, but many immediately saw the explainer video for what it was: the early signs of erasure, or the perversion of a cultural hallmark. Both the @songpsych breakdown of slowed and reverb and the whitewashing of Jersey club are examples of the insidious ways that Black cultural history can be blotted out by whiteness. In each case, the influencer is defining the art's

relationship with their audience—placing the white body at the center of a trend removed from its local history of dance, or else prioritizing the white interpreter, stripping a style of its substance and subtext.

The rich backgrounds of these sounds extend beyond the parameters of TikTok, and that context is crucial to comprehending the music's value to a community. As DJ Slink once said, Jersey club is bigger than the Internet. It's important that the TikTok users capitalizing on the sound understand that.

RIPPING OFF BLACK MUSIC

From Thomas "Daddy" Rice to Jimi Hendrix

Part the First: Being an Exposition on the Development of the Myth of Rock Music as Viewed by Antagonistic Participants, and Containing as Much of the History of the Minstrel Show as Is Necessary for the Reader's Understanding.

ELVIS PRESLEY was the greatest minstrel America ever spawned, and he appeared in bold whiteface. He sang like a nigger, danced like a nigger, walked like a nigger, and talked like a nigger. Chuck Berry, unfortunately, was a nigger. They are two of the more splendid beings in the Great Chain of Minstrelsy that stretches from the start of the nineteenth century to the present, encompassing circuses, medicine shows, Broadway, the Fillmore East, nightclubs, concert halls, television, and Las Vegas.



Thomas "Daddy" Rice

The patriarch of the minstrel show was Thomas "Daddy" Rice, a white gentleman who, with a keen eye for entertainment, based his 1829 debut on the antics of a deformed and rheumatic ex-slave. The ex-slave made a few pennies a day performing a necessarily limited but appealing song and dance he called "Jump Jim Crow"; charmed with it, Daddy studied, rehearsed, and in a short time made show-business history. His "Jump Jim

Crow," buttressed with ragged clothes and blackface makeup, was acclaimed the comic performance of the Louisville season; within weeks Daddy was the toast of New York, and eight years later the toast of London.

Naturally, minstrel shows grew like Topsy, playing to the highborn and the lowly across the land. With their Irrepressible High Spirits they cheered the South through the Civil War, and managed to create such goodwill in their audiences that by the late 1860s even Negro performers were in demand. Negro minstrels, though, were accorded no special privileges, the assumption being that none had a patent on the "pathos and humor," the "artless philosophy," or the "plaintive and hilarious melodies" of Negro life once it became public entertainment. Like their white co-workers, black minstrels wore burnt cork makeup and colorful rags (as country bumpkin Jim Crow) or white gloves and tails (as city dandy Zip Coon). Once these Ethiopian hards overcame some prejudice, particularly among Southern audiences, they were said to be very funny indeed.

Secession, abolition, the Civil War, and Reconstruction passed: the minstrel remained. When the form itself faded toward the century's end (lamented by song publisher E.B. Marks as a sign that manners no longer flourished in America), its clowning and soft-shoe routines trotted into vaudeville and its songs drifted into Tin Pan Alley and musical comedy. Songs by black writers were placed in white shows, serving as vehicles for white stars and as best sellers for white publishers. White composers, updating Stephen Foster's habit of borrowing melodies from black churchgoers and boatmen, spent hours in black clubrooms writing down the tunes they heard and copyrighting them as their own.

Song-and-dance comics George Walker and Bert Williams were billed

for a time as "The Two Real Coons" by managers anxious to distinguish them from numerous noncoon rivals. And James Weldon Johnson writes about the famous New York producer who gained a reputation for inventiveness by studying the Will Cook-Paul Lawrence Dunbar show, *Clorindy—the Origin of the Cakewalk*, and learning from it that choruses might be taught to sing and dance simultaneously, and that a certain syncopated beat was very catchy when applied to orchestral music. As radio took its place in the entertainment pantheon, minstrels began to call themselves Amos 'n' Andy; and when the first talkie musical film opened, no one was surprised to see veteran vaudeviller Al Jolson enter in blackface, prance down a runway, fall on one knee and cry "Mammy!" while the orchestra played "Swanee" furiously in the background.

The white minstrel has an endless supply of incarnations: playing nigger is first-rate theater. It has laughs, tears, cheap thrills—a bargain catharsis. The performer's white skin, like an actor's curtain call, is an ingenious safety device, signaling that the show is over and nothing has changed. Aristotle neglected to mention that the aftermath of a catharsis is the viewer's smug satisfaction with the capacity for feeling, a satisfaction that permits a swift and comfortable return to business as usual. You can't lose playing the White Negro, because you are in the unique position of retaining the material benefits of being white while sampling the mythological ones of being black.

MUCH HAS BEEN MADE of the 1950s, when America's teenagers thrilled to the sounds of rhythm and blues. It began, so they say, with a small group, first listening to the

Margo Jefferson, a free-lance writer living in New York, graduated from Columbia University School of Journalism in 1971.

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fugitive sounds on black radio stations, then venturing into black clubs and theaters. White disc jockeys took notice, white record producers and radio station owners took action, and faster than you could say "Zip Coon" the country's youth was dancing to the sounds of Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry.



Chuck Berry



Elvis Presley

In fact, one portion of America chose Elvis, son of Daddy Rice, and the other opted for Chuck, bastard of Jim Crow. Elvis was a good boy. In addition to appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, he made movies in Hollywood with scrubbed starlets and stage-set teenagers who bopped like the Peter Gennaro Dancers. Chuck Berry remained in rock shows and black theaters, complaining about courts and car salesmen, mocking high school, and begging rock and roll to deliver him from the days of old. Elvis lived quietly in Hollywood with his mother while Chuck tried to smuggle a child bride across the Georgia state line, and when Elvis went into the Army, Chuck went to jail.

Then there was Bo Diddley, Chicago follower of Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, who declared that he had a tombstone hand and a graveyard mind, a taste for diamond rings, barbed wire, and cobra snakes; he warned, prophetically, that you can't judge a book by looking at its cover. And there was Little Richard, who piled his hair in lush waves, dressed in satin and brocade, taught the Beatles to cry "Woooo!" and forbade a young band member named Jimi Hendrix to wear a fancy shirt onstage

because "I am the King, the King of Rock and Rhythm. I am the only one allowed to be pretty."

There was Fats Domino too, and Jackie Wilson and Chuck Willis; also Bill Haley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Bobby Darin; there was LaVern Baker, minstrelized by Theresa Brewer, and Etta James, Jane Crowed by Georgia Gibbs. There were many others too, like Big Maybelle, Ruth Brown, the Chantels, and the Jesters, who stayed in the rhythm and blues market, with their unpalatably ethnic voices and rhythms, and were rarely heard of by whites until the 1950s revival nearly twenty years later, when no one cared to spoil the nostalgia by remembering whom they had or hadn't grown up listening to. Peter Townsend of the Who has written about those days:

*I'm a substitute for another guy,
I look pretty tall but my heels are high.*

*The simple things you see are all complicated,
I look pretty young but I'm just backdated.*

*It's a substitute lies for fact . . .
I look all white but my dad was black . . .*

Elvis and his contemporaries shocked and thrilled because they were hybrids. What had taken place was a kind of Immaculate Miscegenation, resulting in a creature who was at once a Prancing Nigger and a Blue-Eyed Boy.

THE BEATLES emerged before American audiences in 1963, with a varied assortment of songs, some clever updatings of the Everly Brothers sort, some new versions of old black rock hits by the Isley Brothers, the Shirelles, Little Richard, the Miracles, and Chuck Berry. According to rock and roll chroniclers, the Beatles "revolutionized rock and roll by bringing it back to its original sources and traditions"—in other words, they brought Us together. It would be more accurate to say that the Beatles seasoned, cooked, and served some of Us up to others of Us with appropriate garnishing. They refined and ex-purgated the minstrel show performed rather crudely by Elvis, preferring to sketch what he had filled in and to suggest what he had made literal.

Their charm lay in the fact that they were the visual antithesis of what they sang, "a minstrel entertainment en-

tirely exempt from the vulgarities which have hitherto characterized negro extravaganzas." * When Chuck Berry sings, "Roll Over Beethoven/ Dig these rhythm 'n' blues!" it is an outlaw's challenge to white culture. When the Beatles sing their version, it has the sweet naughtiness of Peter Pan crowing "I Won't Grow Up."

The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and others sparked a jubilee. In news conferences they boldly announced that they listened to Chuck Jackson, Smokey Robinson, and Solomon Burke; white fans listened too, or at least memorized the names. The Stones pronounced Wilson Pickett's "Midnight Hour" the best record of the year; "Midnight Hour" became the hit record of the year.

Far from breaking ground, these groups were the inheritors of a tradition that began in England with the eighteenth century, when "Negro songs" were first performed on the concert stage. In 1866 a black minstrel troupe visited London, and the local streetsingers began to blacken their faces; English music-hall stars were soon crossing the Atlantic to popularize black-inspired American songs with white American audiences. During the 1920s small groups of English people began to cultivate the jazz styles that black creators had abandoned, collecting records, bringing performers to Europe, and forming their own bands.



Howlin' Wolf

Muddy Waters

Eventually a country blues revival developed, during which bluesmen like Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and Leadbelly

* An advertisement for the Virginia Minstrels, one of the most successful white groups of 1843.

found themselves celebrated less as musicians than as walking marks of American oppression. Tours for "authentic" blues and gospel singers were arranged and the new urban blues represented by Muddy Waters' electric guitar frowned upon. By the early Sixties, though, rhythm and blues had taken hold, and young Britishers were listening eagerly to Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin' Wolf, Slim Harpo, and Bo Diddley, while practicing black voices in local clubs and basements. After a time they began to take themselves very seriously: "We sing more colored than the Africans," boasted John Lennon, and few Americans were inclined to dispute him.

High-school and college students stepped out in style. People began to drive onto campus in their convertibles with the local soul station blaring at maximum intensity. Boys began to landscape their sentences with "man," "together," and "can you dig it?" Everybody had an amusing story about a trip to the Apollo or the Regal in the custody of a black friend. Black rock history became fashionable as a kind of gutter camp: one spoke of how dynamic the Temps were live; one spent an afternoon in Roxbury tracking down a copy of "Function at the Junction." One murmured the words of songs by Gary "U.S." Bonds and the Coasters, and invited them to perform at one's school, wishing privately that they would get rid of their iridescent suits and try to look as if they hadn't been drinking. If one was really *into* black music, one spoke to a black friend about the tragedy of Billie Holiday—did she know the song "Don't Explain"?—and one was puzzled and a bit hurt when the black friend answered sharply that she had known "Don't Explain" since she was eleven years old.

It is jarring and most distressing to walk into a room one has considered private and find it ringed with cameras, spotlights, and insistent strangers claiming long acquaintance and making plans to move in and redecorate without being invited. Black music and with it the private black self were suddenly grossly public—tossed onstage, dressed in clown white, and bandied about with a gleeful arrogance that just yesterday had chosen to ignore and condescend.

Blacks, it seemed, had lost the battle for mythological ownership of rock, as future events would prove.

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Part the Second: A Short Account of the Monterey Pop Festival, With Special Attention Paid to Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.

THE MONTEREY POP FESTIVAL. Summer. 1967. California. Acid rock was decreed the new force in rock music, its best exponent being the Jefferson Airplane. The East was honored through Ravi Shankar, Africa acknowledged through Hugh Masakela, and hovering over it all was Otis Redding, veteran of the rhythm and blues-gold lamé suit circuit. Having been largely ignored by American whites until Monterey (and possibly until England voted him the number one vocalist of the year), Otis was praised extravagantly and dubbed the King of Soul promptly after he died that winter. A tragedy that he had been so taken for granted (blacks were unaware that they had taken him so for granted), and there will never be another Otis (no, of course not, said blacks, but there will be Wilson and Bobby and LeRoy and Sonny), and his recording of "Satisfaction" was not up to the Stones', still . . .

Monterey was the counterculture melting pot, and the blend was, as usual, suspiciously lacking in variety. "It's an American Dream," declared Eric Burdon. "Includes Indians too." There were none onstage at Monterey and few in the audience, but clearly people thought well of them: why else were they all wearing beaded headbands and fringed vests?

Two cult figures performed at Monterey: Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. Jimi Hendrix learned to play the

guitar listening to Muddy Waters, Elmore James, B.B. and Albert King. He played with Little Richard, the Isley Brothers, Ike and Tina Turner, and King Curtis, and he found success in England with music that was a tense fusion of acid electronics, jazz, and blues. He made himself a grotesque and a god—America's hand-crafted Spade, obscene and absurd, sensual and elegant. He came onstage at Monterey with pressed hair and a shirt of scarlet ruffles. He shuffled, jived, flashed his teeth, and announced to the crowd, "I just want to grab you and—you know—one of them things man, one of them things. But I just can't do that. So I'm gonna sacrifice something I really love. We're gonna do the English and American combined anthem. Now don't get mad . . . It's the only thing I can do." And he began to chant "Wild Thing." Then, determined to fulfill or to parody every living fantasy of black macho-sexuality, he rapped his guitar, set it on fire, and danced as it burned.

Two years later he came to Woodstock. "Wild Thing" had become an autopsy of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, his ingratiation a distant "You can all leave if you want. We're just jamming." He stood still and played, and while his music grew multiple and rich he seemed to splinter and fragment. To blacks he was the pimp of a cheap acid rock craze; to whites he was a sacred whore, dispensing grace and salvation by playing Black Stud Madman over and over. And so he began with his guitar and ended by sacrificing himself to an audience that fed off his complex pain as they would have from a dazzling display of costumes at a Ziegfeld spectacular. When he screamed they cheered; when he pounded his feet they clapped their hands; when he choked on his own vomit they played "Purple Haze" and told each other that he was kissing the sky. It was a common death, though, like the alcoholic Chicago winter death of Blind Lemon Jefferson, or the drug death of Charlie Parker; a sinister death, like Sam Cooke's shooting and Otis Redding's Wisconsin plane crash.

And then there was Janis, shifting from Bessie Smith to Mavis Staple to Big Mama Thornton, stopping at Otis Redding, Tina Turner, and Big Maybelle along the way. She was a misfit from Port Arthur, Texas—"I got treated very badly in Texas—they

don't treat beatniks too good in Texas"—and she discovered early that identifying with archetypal misfits makes life a little easier. She was 1920s in style, with ostrich feathers, silver bracelets, and a raunchiness she sometimes wore like a new and slightly tight piece of clothing. Janis's life had echoes of Bessie Smith's, both being small-town Southern girls who took the cities with their singing, drinking, and swearing; both being dubbed Queen of the Blues, which means be on top when you sing "Down-Hearted Blues" and be a winner when you sing "Women Is Losers." But Janis was a white woman using a black woman's blues to get to her own. At her worst she parodied and hid the other; at her best (harder to come by, not as pleasing to her audience), the mimicry stopped and her own pain came out in her own way. She may have dismissed or forgotten the distance between an actress and her role: having purchased a tombstone for Bessie Smith some thirty years after the fact, she died a few weeks later, on the same day Bessie had.

Part the Third: Containing an Examination of the Rock Star, in Both His White and His Black Incarnations.

ELVIS, THE BEATLES, the Stones, the Animals, Mountain, Cream, Joe Cocker, Julie Driscoll, the Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, Leon Russell, Rod Stewart, fans and record buyers—all took some part of the particular style of hedonism, toughness, sexuality, and cynicism found in black music and committed the sins of legitimization, definition, and miscomprehension against it. The crudity of the Daddy Rice-Jim Crow transaction has been smoothed out over the years, but no black performer yet has been able to get the praise and attention he or she deserves independent of white tutelage and translation. Rock has adopted and refined Europe's neurotic patronage system, based on a birthright of race rather than family. Here the benevolent aristocrat, sometimes a critic, more often a performer, dips into the vat of scrambling musicians and extracts one or two who appeal to him—whose impurities have been boiled away over the years. Sonny Boy Williamson, B. B. King, Muddy Waters, Papa John Creach, simmered and done to a turn.



Jimi Hendrix

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The Rolling Stones

A Stones tour is rarely complete without a black performer, be it Stevie Wonder or Ike and Tina Turner; the black performer gets nationwide fame and fortune; the Stones get a crack at authenticity. Mick Jagger stood in the wings every night to watch Tina and the Ikettes slide, turn, and kick with impeccable abandon; at the time he was content to move about the stage hitting a tambourine until it broke and then hitting another. By the tour's end, much to Tina's surprise, he had managed to devise a unique if labored form of rhythmic dancing, though it is said he repaid their beneficence by having the microphones turned off if they performed too well. B.B. King, Muddy Waters, and most of the long standing bluespeople were brought to theaters, clubs, and large audiences by bands of their young, white, and much more successful imitators. Brenda Holloway of "Every Little Bit Hurts" sings trifling backups for Joe Cocker; Merry Clayton was "discovered" backing the Stones; Billy Preston was brought forth from the wilderness by George Harrison.

What follows is inevitable. There is measured praise in the *New York Times*, comparing the performer to other black "greats" and warning against commercialism. There is a hipper interview or review in *Rolling Stone*, which also mentions commercialism (tied, it seems, to the black's over eagerness to be successful). There is a brief appearance on the Johnny Carson or Dick Cavett show where the performer is hustled off without being allowed to speak or asked for a definition of soul. There is a string of tours and an album, with notes written by a white disc jockey, producer, or performer, referring to the funkiness of the artist and the down-home quality of the black musical experience.

The economics of the patronage system are obvious. Rock music is managed by the big powers that con-

trol Madison Avenue and by the smaller ones that wish they could. Whites control the media that promote a performer, the apparatus that produces records and arranges the right concert appearances, and as consumers, they outnumber blacks ten to one. Under these circumstances it is difficult for black audiences to support black performers financially as they need and deserve to be supported, and it is not realistic to expect performers to shun an audience of several million when the returns are so great. And so whites take other whites' word on which black performers to listen to, and these black performers move from the chitling to the chopped-steak-and-caviar circuit because certain whites were clever enough to detect how black, hence how successful with black audiences, they were. The Ethiopian Business, as Stephen Foster called it, is a strange business indeed.

Part the Fourth: In Which Patterns of Imitation and Sacrifice Are Examined and Found Wanting.

THE CURRENT FAMILIARITY, then, breeds contempt, exploitation, and a great deal of bad music. Borrowing itself is not the question, since music lives by eclecticism. Still, if you borrow, you must return, and nobody wants an imitation back if they've lent out an original. Bonnie Raitt, Carole King, Bonnie Bramlett, Randy Newman, Joy of Cooking, Tracey Nelson, Bob Dylan, and some others have characters or traditions of their own to which they have joined blues and jazz. Others are singing and playing in styles that derive more from Country and Western, pop and musical, or classical forms. But far too many white performers thrive and survive on personas and performances that are studies in ventriloquism and minstrelsy, careless footnotes to a badly read blues text. "There are a lot of colored guys who can sing me off the stage," says Rod Stewart. "But half the battle is selling it, not singing it. It's the image, not what you sing."

And the minstrel image has grown more complex over the years: starting, as Imamu Baraka has said, with a simple, "Watch these Niggers," it moved to, "Watch how well I imitate these Niggers," then to, "Let's all abandon ourselves and act like Ne-

groes," and finally to, "Observe, participate and enjoy, as I, a white, adopt certain characteristics of the blacks, bestowing upon them a style and a setting that they are missing in their natural, rougher form."

Has a young admirer ever attached himself to you? He dogged your footsteps, dressed as nearly like you as possible, acquired your mannerisms and expressions, and told everyone how wonderful you were. At first you may have been amused, even flattered. But you became uneasy, then annoyed. You were being caricatured, your individuality undermined and cheapened. You felt used, fed off of, and your admirer took on the lewdness of the voyeur. You were being appropriated for his needs, used as raw material in his efforts to divert or remodel himself. Finally, you despised him.

Imitation is a form of cannibalism. And the imitator is never content merely to nibble; oh no, every so often, when life becomes dull or frustrating, he becomes greedy. Nothing will satisfy him but the whole, body and blood.

Black musicians have made up an impressive display of sacrifices over the years. Their records are distributed with the reverence accorded the wine and wafer, while magazine litanies lament the cruelty of the world and the tragedy of candles burned at both ends. Nevertheless, the sacrifice, it is finally agreed, was for the good of the community, since the appetite satisfied was the spiritual craving for fresh vision and emotional rebirth. Or, as Eric Clapton told the *New York Times*, the death of Jimi Hendrix was "almost a necessity." Sacrifices are always "almost a necessity" when you are not the victim.

The night Jimi died I dreamed this was the latest step in a plot being designed to eliminate blacks from rock music so that it may be recorded in history as a creation of whites. Future generations, my dream ran, will be taught that while rock may have had its beginnings among blacks, it had its true flowering among whites. The best black artists will thus be studied as remarkable primitives who unconsciously foreshadowed future developments.

Two weeks later Janis Joplin was dead. What does that mean? I asked myself, momentarily confused. It means she thought she was black and somebody took her at her word. □