

**Edited by Bruce Ziff  
and Pratima V. Rao**

# BORROWED POWER

**ESSAYS ON CULTURAL  
APPROPRIATION**

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## African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation

African-American musical sensibilities have profoundly affected mainstream popular culture over the years, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. During the 1930s, for example, Benny Goodman became the “King of Swing” leading a mostly white band. It is true that in the course of his career Goodman, who was considered a progressive in racial matters, had the relatively good taste to feature several Black musicians and to eventually hire Fletcher Henderson as chief arranger.<sup>1</sup> (Of course, Goodman’s rise to eventual coronation owed something to the twenty-four arrangements he had bought from Henderson earlier.)<sup>2</sup> Otherwise, with the exceptions of “Duke” (Edward Kennedy) Ellington and “Count” (William) Basie, among a few others, the era was dominated, in terms of both image and economics, by white bands and white musicians who were adapting, imitating, creating variations of, and in other ways “playing off” innovative sensibilities forged wholly within the crucible of African-American suffering, struggle, and triumph.

At this and similar points in the history of Black music, it becomes clear that a complex “love-hate” relationship connects mainstream society and African-American culture—in which white America seems to love the melody and rhythm of Black folks’ souls while rejecting their despised Black faces. In no area is this complex relationship more evident than in musical tradition.<sup>3</sup> The pattern of separating the art from the people leads to an appropriation of

aesthetic innovation that not only “exploits” Black cultural forms, commercially and otherwise, but also nullifies the cultural meaning those forms provide for African Americans. The appropriated forms become ineffective as expressions and affirmations of the unique cultural experiences from which they arise. Thus, at this and similar historical points new musical forms have emerged that seemed once again to establish the distinctiveness of Black music in a given sociohistorical context. This ironic process seems to reproduce itself perpetually as new forms are subjected to similar processes of cooptation and appropriation.

In this essay I explore the dynamics of diffusion and appropriation involved in this dialectic process in which certain patterns and formations recur. In this process fundamental African-American cultural sensibilities are continually reformed and co-opted, to be replenished and reformed again as a result of contact and interaction with the dominant Euro-American culture. This examination involves looking at the contexts and means by which innovation and appropriation tend to shape African-American popular music, the centrality of traditional “folk/popular” and African-derived aesthetic sensibilities in such innovations, and the manner and result of their exposure in and appropriation by the white-dominated wider culture. The essay’s investigations suggest that mainstream absorption of aesthetic dimensions of Black culture does not lead to comparable embrace of Black culture at the human level.

There are few today who will argue with the premise that African America’s contributions to American musical culture are foundational, definitional, and immense. Yet any more than surface examination of the process by which those contributions are realized reveals nefariously ambiguous dimensions in the cultural relationship of America to its (arguably) favorite sons and daughters in this regard. Emergent forms are initially ridiculed and subjected to attempted suppression. When, as is consistently the case, this resistance proves futile as musical forms are absorbed, they eventually become reshaped and redefined, subtly and otherwise, in ways that minimize their association with “Blackness.” Award (recognition) and reward (compensation) structures often evolve that grossly enrich white appropriators, while only a few Black innovators have comparable levels of compensation.

Most poignantly, the Black human beings whose collective living experiences most consistently contribute innovative impulses to the music of the wider culture continue as despised, feared, rejected symbols of undesirability. This description does not refer specifically to individual performers and artists who bring innovation to the wider culture, though many of them have indeed suffered abuse of various kinds in this process. Rather, it suggests that,

while the white-dominated wider culture absorbs aesthetic innovation, it continues to avoid engaging or embracing the human reality, the very humanity, of those whose shared living experiences collectively created the context in which such innovation is nurtured, maintained, and supported. In the course of this appropriative process, these people and their experiences, their connection to the aesthetics, have in essence become “invisible” as the forms purport to become “color-blind.”

Looked at from this perspective, the process of cultural appropriation as it relates to Black music involves not so much a “borrowing” as a virtual “strip-mining” of Black musical genius and aesthetic innovation. Although this analogy may appear extreme, it accurately depicts a process in which the essential, social, aesthetic, and economic value of a form or instance of cultural innovation is fundamentally extracted and separated from the collective human host that cultivated it. And arguably this analogy exemplifies the more general manner in which people of color have given their lands, labor, culture, and much of their humanity to the enrichment of Western life.

### Dynamics of Innovation

The processes involved in innovation in African musical culture invariably involve sentiments and sensibilities associated with the least assimilated sectors of the Black community. Contexts where dominant culture norms are absent or relatively inoperative, such as New Orleans’s famous Congo Square (where enslaved Africans gathered by the hundreds outside the purview of any masters), a slave quarter, or a basement “rent party,” often function as repositories for African-American cultural sensibilities in their most potent form. As Black culture has transformed throughout the decades, the least culturally assimilated sectors of the Black cultural landscape, where African orality and rhythmicity are strongest, have tended to generally coincide with the lower socioeconomic strata among African Americans.

It turns out, then, that sociostructural isolation leads not only to survival of these root sensibilities but also to cultural environments highly supportive of significant innovation that engages these sensibilities. In this context forms of Black music function to validate a distinctive sense of Black humanity in cultural spaces separated and differentiated from the dominant culture, spaces in which the dominant culture’s scorn, devaluation, and rejection are replaced by affirmative expressions of self. This is an especially salient function of music, among other expressive forms, in the folk/popular reference frame of those relatively unassimilated segments of Black communities.

## White Reaction: The Dynamics of Interaction

Assessment of the role of white attitudes toward expressions of African cultural sensibility in this process is confounded by several factors. White America has often become exposed to emerging forms of Black popular music, for example, as part of some more general confrontation of social mores and cultural sensibilities in which the source of these innovations is invariably dehumanized and devalued. Thus, although whites have consistently been attracted by Black rhythmic/musical sensibilities, this attraction is often obscured or distorted by racist habits of thought and association that provoke suppression and denial, even while conjuring powerful attractions. Aesthetic attraction produces a dissonance that must be resolved through interpretation or incorporation of the attraction in ways consistent with the social construction of racial hierarchy.

Plantation diaries and antebellum travel reports consistently refer to whites' awareness of and interest in Blacks' rhythmic sense, along with other cultural traits whites found peculiar, yet fascinating, whether in the context of religious worship, work practices, or other observed activities. Typical is the observation of George W. Moore regarding the mistress of the Baring plantation: "I have often seen Mrs. Baring, when the Negroes were singing, catch the motion of their bodies and do just as they did."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, New Orleans's Congo Square attracted not only congregations of blacks who re-created aspects of the various African cultures from which they had come but also attracted interested white observers whose recorded fascination now forms part of our contemporary window to that time and place (throughout much of the antebellum period and into the 1880s) where African rhythms reverberated, possibly in their most potent form in North America.<sup>6</sup>

As innovations like ragtime and jazz emerge from such relatively unassimilated cultural spaces, they become visible to some whites, who view them initially from the safety of their own side of the cultural boundary. From this perspective, whites often describe their fascination, sometimes disguised as disgust or horror, in terms consistent with their own perceived cultural superiority. This framework is incompatible with recognition of innovation as genuine artistic or aesthetic achievement. Thus, initial reaction to new forms of musical expression is consistently negative and resistant, at least on the surface. Ragtime, for instance, came to general awareness initially as part of the "sporting life"—a euphemism usually associated with brothels, bars, gambling establishments, and other sites where sins of the spirit and flesh are partaken—and was therefore rejected by "polite" society. Commenting on what eventually turned out to be ragtime's redefinition of the American piano tradition in 1918, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* instructed its readers that

"rhythm, though often associated with melody and harmony, is not necessarily music." Indeed, rhythm was an "atrocious in polite society, and . . . we should make it a point of civic honor to suppress it. Its musical value is nil, and its possibilities of harm are great."<sup>7</sup> Eventually, however, ragtime revolutionized American popular music, in addition to influencing such "serious" European and American composers as Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, and Charles Ives.<sup>8</sup>

Jazz was similarly associated with guilt in connection with the social environment of its formative period, which overlapped and paralleled that of ragtime, in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, during jazz's early formative period—from the mid-1890s until around 1905—the new sound was largely invisible to whites, indistinguishable from the "honky-tonk" and ragtime music associated with fast, sinful living. Charles "Buddy" Bolden—a musical ancestor claimed by virtually every one of the early New Orleans innovators—was trying his new sound as early as 1895. And though the eventual contribution of Creoles to the transformation was considerable, light-skinned Creoles initially scorned jazz as honky-tonk music, while "Papa" Jack Laine, considered a "white father" of New Orleans jazz, claimed he had never heard of Bolden at this point, although Laine apparently was familiar with some of the Creole players.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, then, the new sound remained unknown in the white community and was resisted by the established Black musical community. It was thus a phenomenon of the folk/popular masses, the least structurally and culturally assimilated sector of the community. By 1905, however, Black New Orleans was thoroughly in tune with the new music, and Creole musicians had been won over or had adapted by necessity. Over the next ten years the rest of the city followed suit.<sup>10</sup> Although (or, perhaps, because) the social activities associated with jazz were probably quite familiar to most residents, the established press's first nonderogatory mention of jazz did not occur until 1933, according to one source.<sup>11</sup>

## Innovation: Western Form, African Essence

Ragtime and jazz also illustrate how the emergence of new forms involves the ascendance of or reemphasis on African-derived musical sensibilities that are retained in the folk, popular, or traditional African-American cultural reference frame and that contribute critically to the periodic reformation of distinctive musical forms. Piano ragtime was achieved from the imposition of African rhythmic patterns on piano playing styles—a syncopated attack on Western musicological sensibility that subordinated and extended Western harmonic concepts with the drive of African polyrhythms and in the process

transformed the piano into a rhythm instrument. Similarly, jazz evolved from an original “New Orleans synthesis” involving aesthetic and social elements that met, merged, and mingled with the ancestral spirits of Congo Square in that city from the 1890s through the first two decades of the new century.

New Orleans’s large Black population—especially large after hardening post-Reconstruction Jim Crow laws defined the numerous light-skinned Creoles as Black for segregation purposes—provided aesthetic elements, social context, and economic support for this musical transformation. The Creole tradition, forced by Jim Crow to socially redirect itself, brought band instruments and European training and performance styles. Creole bands (said to be adapted from the French tradition of military marching bands), string orchestras, and other musical ensemble forms contributed new instruments and instrumental arrangements that—like ragtime in relation to the piano—could be used to reexpress African-derived rhythmic, tonal, and improvisational senses, provided mostly by uptown Blacks.

The New Orleans tradition of brothels (as in the city’s much-remembered Storyville red-light district), sporting establishments, and the like made it a significant center of ragtime piano music since such establishments were prime employers of its players.<sup>11</sup> Throughout jazz’s developmental years, Mardi Gras, funeral and other parades, picnics, dances, private parties, and other mostly but not entirely Black affairs also provided an economy sufficiently organized to support jazz’s innovators at the turn of the century.<sup>12</sup>

Blues, as a musical force and as a philosophy of life, came with the increasing numbers of residents from the delta areas in Mississippi and other rural enclaves who were finding their way to the city. In New Orleans and other Black urban environments, the equivalent of the field holler—described as the root from which rural blues grew in the late 1800s—was heard in the cries and chants of street hawkers, selling vegetables and other goods, each with a unique cry, sometimes accompanying themselves on harmonica, or home-made flute.<sup>13</sup>

Ragtime songs provided materials and concepts for adapting these instruments and arrangements to polyrhythmic and improvisational techniques in band performance. The multi-instrumental format—the fact that several musicians, instead of one piano player, were playing—allowed a geometrical increase of layers of rhythmic complexity and degrees of improvisational freedom.<sup>14</sup> Blues contributed an approach, a performance style, a body of melodies, a “vocal tonality” (techniques that shape the sound of instruments—especially in jazz horns—to imitate the human voice, recalling the rural cries, moans, and field hollers), and a pattern of improvisational interplay.

Thus, instruments designed in the European literate tradition of “reading” music fixed on paper were adapted to the African oral tradition of finding it

“by ear.” Led or directed by fluid, syncopated rhythmic patterns, this “aural” proficiency enabled melodic variation or improvisation. Ensembles composed of those instruments—which in the European tradition played fixed arrangements together—were redefined to accommodate fluid flights of polyphony in which the various instruments collectively improvised melodic variation on a polyrhythmic foundation. This saturation of a Western form with African music sensibility yielded the emotional directness—a unity between composition and performance—characteristic of Black performance styles. From this synthesis emerged a musical form that was unique and new, a form that involved Euro-American forms, instruments, and “influences” but was nonetheless wholly a product of Black experiences. As such, this form encompassed a reemphasis on “Black” aesthetic and cultural sensibilities in the form of African-derived orality and rhythmicity.

Black New Orleans around the turn of the century (when Crescent City had one of the largest urban concentrations of African Americans) was a crucible in which these sensibilities were forged and out of which boiled the major musical innovation in North American history. From these rich beginnings jazz innovators eventually moved up the Mississippi valley to Chicago (and places such as Kansas City, St. Louis, and Los Angeles), where jazz’s potency spread into the consciousness of a broader world and became a social phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

### **Diffusion, Appropriation, and All That Jazz**

The fact that jazz, ragtime, rhythm and blues, and other forms have become firmly entrenched in American musical culture in spite of typical resistance and rejection affirms the premise stated earlier that, contrary appearances notwithstanding, white America has consistently been attracted by Black musical sensibilities. (During the twentieth century in particular, each generation has had a connection to an innovation in Black musical culture.) Black musical innovations eventually cross over into mainstream culture, and African-American cultural traits manage to penetrate social boundaries.

As new forms emerge to influence and even dominate mainstream musical culture, however, so also do events that lead to appropriation, on various levels, by the white-dominated wider culture of such aesthetic innovations. One aspect of this process is the tendency of the forms to become dissociated, in the discourse and perceptual framework of the white-dominated mainstream, from the African-American experiential context that created them. Actually, it seems more accurate to say that for the white-dominated mainstream the separation of the musical phenomenon from the people, and hence from previous negative associations with Black people and Black culture, is a

necessary accommodation to the accomplished fact that such penetration has occurred in spite of previous criticism and rejection.

At the point at which ragtime's influence was expressed in the work of classical composers, the "influence" seemed to be far separated from the folk and the experience that had created it. As part of a "classical" composition, or a popular show tune, the rhythmic influence of ragtime (the name came from the fact that the syncopated rhythmic approach sounded like "ragged time" to Western ears attuned to conventional rhythm) had become diluted and was no longer connected to Blackness or to the stigmatized association with "low" life and culture.

In addition to separation of the aesthetic and experiential dimensions, the perception of economic value and the subsequent impact of market forces contribute to this dissociative tendency. In case of jazz, both aspects are evident. The process of obscuring the association between Black culture and jazz was evident before most New Orleans jazz players had even been heard by outsiders. Although riverboats and vaudeville tours had been spreading the new jazz sound over many regions in the early 1900s, what became widely accepted as jazz were derivations of the original New Orleans synthesis that came into wide popularity following the first release of a jazz record, made by a white—and inappropriately named "Original Dixieland Jazz Band"—in 1917.<sup>14</sup> In other words, by the early 1920s—when New Orleans originals such as King Oliver and his cornetist Louis Armstrong, pianist Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton, and clarinetist Sidney Bechet had settled in Chicago to further develop and expose the new art form—jazz was already, in the minds of many, associated with white musicians.

Armstrong and Morton, pivotal figures linking New Orleans jazz with future forms, were in their most fertile, creative, and innovative periods during the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> Under the precepts of the recording industry's segmented marketing systems, however, recordings of their music were distributed on "race record" labels geared specifically to Blacks and remained invisible to most whites.<sup>16</sup> By that time music recorded by white dance bands, led by Paul Whiteman's, was being introduced to mainstream whites as "jazz" through record labels and performance venues specifically marketed to them.

The "symphonic jazz" of the 1920s was not particularly or closely associated with Blackness or with the "low-culture" contexts in which these forms had arisen. Whiteman ostensibly performed "symphonic" jazz by "taming" its "primitive rhythms" and making it more acceptable to white audiences.<sup>19</sup> The ironic result of this appropriation was that the music eventually lost much of the emotional directness and rhythmic vitality that had made it distinctive and provoked attraction in the first place.

In cultivating and exploiting this audience, Whiteman exemplifies one

odious result of this pattern of appropriation: reaping value and economic profit from aesthetic innovations emerging from the tradition of cultural sensibility among ordinary Blacks, who remain mostly as disadvantaged and disenfranchised as ever. Whiteman became "King of Jazz" in this market, grossing \$1 million in a single year during the 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

Among Armstrong's white fans during his early days in Chicago was a group of high school-age youths, several of whom later became important jazz figures. This group included Bix Beiderbecke, described in most sources as the best white jazzman of the latter 1920s.<sup>21</sup> From his apprenticeship in Chicago, Beiderbecke went on to facilitate the spread of jazz with the Wolverines, a young white band that played colleges, amusement parks, and resorts throughout the Midwest during the early 1920s.<sup>22</sup> Among the white dance bands he enlivened later in his career was the Whiteman band, where his presence no doubt constituted the closest that band came to jazz authenticity.

Meanwhile, Jelly Roll, along with several other original innovators, was to end his life in ignominious obscurity by the time band jazz became "swing" in the 1930s. Regarding Jelly Roll, who died in 1941, one writer observed, "In Morton's fifty-six years . . . are to be found the whole course of ragtime and jazz, their acceptance, their rejection, their triumphs, and their subtle spurious 'improvement' by the music business, the swift alternations of the true masters between comparative riches and fame, and complete oblivion."<sup>23</sup> Armstrong was more fortunate, although his earnings were less than one-tenth of Whiteman's.<sup>24</sup> Though many came to associate his popularity with "Uncle Tomism," his career and fame survived through the 1930s, in part because he *did* successfully appeal to whites as well as Blacks.

## Systemic Issues

Even though some individuals, such as Whiteman, could be accused of crass commercial exploitation of aesthetic innovation, it would be inaccurate to say that *individuals* necessarily orchestrate the struggle that seems to ensue over definition and ownership once a form is absorbed or accepted into the broader cultural milieu. (This process of appropriation which often has indifferent or tragic results for Black innovators.) Attitudes and orientations among whites who are owners, producers, agents, or performers may range from cynically exploitive to wholly or at least relatively sympathetic, like those of Bix Beiderbecke, Benny Goodman, or Johnny Otis (a white rhythm-and-blues pioneer). As for the results, in which white participants are disproportionately recognized, rewarded, and compensated, it may be that the exploitive individuals are more numerous or more powerful. Or such results may



simply illustrate that this struggle for cultural ownership is perhaps not especially a struggle of individuals—that systemic forces are prominent in this process.

The effects of racism, prejudice, and stereotypes, along with customs and habits of thought, on white-dominated mainstream social, institutional, and economic structures seem to move them inexorably, not needing any self-conscious conspiracy of individuals to reproduce patterns of racial inequality in matters of recognition and compensation. Indeed, the outcomes seem oblivious to the individual wills of the Bix Beiderbeckes, Benny Goodmans, Elvis Presleys, and John Lennons of the music world. Beiderbecke is often considered a sympathetic character in the story of jazz, and some even portray him as another victim of the process of appropriation.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the market segregation practices of that time meant that the millions of people he may have played for never heard of Armstrong, much less appreciated and proportionately or appropriately rewarded his contributions to America's most original art form. In the instance of Beiderbecke, his presence in various white bands in the segregated music world of the 1920s helped spread the idea of jazz as a music not connected with the Black experience, no matter his will or intention.

As forms of jazz developed throughout the 1930s, the emergence of white swing bands and the Depression helped further legitimize this idea. The precise, arranged style of “swinging” that became a national phenomenon emerged among a group of Black bands (Fletcher Henderson, Don Redmon, Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford, among others) that played regularly for predominantly white audiences.<sup>26</sup> In adapting a “hot” style of playing to appeal to these audiences, those Black “preswing” bands may have been guided by an optimistic sense that their merit as musicians and entertainers would be recognized, accepted, and fairly rewarded. Likely, however, the very popularity among white audiences of the arranged, “riffing” style that emerged between 1929 and 1935 contributed to its eventual appropriation and domination by whites. The combination of the effects of the Depression on recording, broadcast, and performance and the appropriation of the swing style by white bands, led by Goodman's but including Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, the Dorsey brothers, and a host of others, severely limited Black exposure in this mainstream market and led to disproportionate distribution of the rewards and recognition of swing.

In the recording industry, session opportunities for Black band musicians became severely limited during the 1930s. Similarly, the lucrative big-band dance/concert circuit of the 1930s and early 1940s featured less than a handful of Blacks among the names associated with that storied era of swing. Moreover, so-called “jazz polls . . . began in the middle thirties wherein no Negro

players won top positions, few Negroes even made the listings, and Harry James [Benny Goodman's trumpeter] invariably won top trumpet over Louis Armstrong.”<sup>27</sup>

Fletcher Henderson's position as Goodman's chief arranger represented the prescribed pinnacle available to Black musicians in terms of mainstream recognition and compensation. Nor were economics and recognition the only, or necessarily the most important, terms in which losses are to be measured here. Not only did the industry built from the music called jazz—sprung from the very bosom of Black life—no longer support Black musicians economically; the music itself also was not even particularly associated with Blackness in the public mind. It could no longer function as a living definition and affirmation of what it meant to be Black in that time.

### Appropriation and Cultural Meaning

Cooptation and expropriation of this kind tend to render such innovations in music, language, or other cultural traits ineffective in the key culture function—of marking and affirming Black ethnicity and identity.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, such episodes or tendencies are consistently accompanied and/or followed by some kind of reformation of indigenous African-American identity that clarifies and refocuses Black sensibilities and sets them off from those of whites. In the area of music this usually involves a reemphasis on rhythmic and poly-rhythmic techniques and other aspects of the orality of Africa's heritage.

Like Congo Square—which allowed a maximum degree of coalescence and coherence among African slaves from many different cultures in an environment outside of the immediate purview of their dominators—each innovative period or context features increased cohesion among Blacks (including erstwhile disparate elements) as a community, the result of both external and internal factors. The New Orleans jazz synthesis occurred during a period in which cohesion had been largely imposed by Jim Crow definitions of social orientation after the failure of Reconstruction. During the 1930s, the sense of hopeful inclusion that had been evident in the “Jazz Age” of the 1920s was betrayed when economic depression forced many musicians out of the mainstream music economy.

Thus, in some ways this thrust toward new cohesion was imposed from without. Just as Jim Crow laws had forced uptown Blacks and downtown Creoles together in New Orleans, so did Depression economics force many who had thought in terms of an integrated musical universe to reconsider their options. Socially alienated and economically displaced, Black musical practitioners looked inward—in terms of community and perhaps also in terms of personal psychology—to find their aesthetic and economic constitu-

ency. And while the white icons of swing raked in the big bucks, Black bands played to, and were revitalized by, all-Black audiences on this "chitlin circuit."

In some ways this turning inward was an aesthetic choice. With swing, the rhythmic sense of jazz became watered down, and improvisation became limited and restrained. Before the crash "black musicians used more and more Western song forms, incorporated Western harmony, and played for increasingly integrated audiences."<sup>29</sup> All-Black bands on the chitlin circuit, however, especially the Southwest circuit that included Kansas City, St. Louis, and Oklahoma, had, according to LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka), "developed very much differently than the big Northeastern bands. . . . They had always remained much closer to the older, blues tradition, even after they began to master some of the instrumental techniques of the Eastern bands, they still . . . relied heavily on the blues."<sup>30</sup>

Popular on that circuit were bands led by Bennie Moten and by Count Basie, where many future innovators, including Lester Young and Charlie Parker, served apprenticeships.<sup>31</sup> In addition to theaters and other venues that catered to Blacks along this chitlin circuit, small clubs in city neighborhoods, southern rural roadhouses, and private house or rent parties—especially in the South, Southwest, and Midwest regions, where African-American folk masses have historically been concentrated—were settings for a revitalization, a reconnection to indigenous roots, to primordial African rhythms, residing, as they always have, in the cultural world of the folk masses.

Relieved, in a way, of the need, or stripped of the motivation, to alter expressive modes to appeal to white sensibilities, Black musicians found the space and the means to refresh their musical art by emphasizing those elements that made performance spaces distinctly African American, remaking Black identity in cultural terms, reforming the framework of ethnicity that defined Blackness and distinguished it from whiteness. Largely invisible to the swing mainstream, this flourishing Black "underground" moved contemporary Black expressive forms away from assimilationist pretensions and back toward the folk, popular, and African roots of core African-American culture.

The postwar era of the late 1940s and 1950s saw this underground culture emerge in two major innovative thrusts—the esoteric be-boppers and the raunchy, "jump-blues" band acts that became rhythm and blues. In both cases the reascendance of or reemphasis on African-derived rhythmicity was of central importance in reinforcing characteristics that most effectively distinguished the Black musical sensibility from that of the non-Black. The boppers brought a refocus on the primacy of syncopated polyrhythms, while engaging even more complex improvisational structures and extensions of European harmonic concepts. Jump-blues took its rhythmic pulse from the "boogie-woogie" sounds emerging from 1930s underground culture—a "fast shuffle"

that anchored a pulsating dance rhythm at rent parties and juke joints—and came with an attitude that projected much more of what was considered unpretentious, down to earth, even raunchy and "gut-bucket," about Black life and much less of what was considered sophisticated and pretentious. It was as if Black musicians were deliberately making cultural space between themselves and perceived mainstream sensibilities, as if their wish was to make sure they were not mistaken for someone trying to appeal to "white" or otherwise highfalutin' tastes.

## Postwar Popular Music

The role of these forms, especially rhythm and blues, in the subsequent lineage of American popular music reveals the recurrence of patterns applicable to the past. (Although bebop would require a somewhat different analysis, many of these patterns apply to it as well.) As was the case in New Orleans, some Blacks—in this case, middle-class, assimilation-minded, or ostensibly sophisticated ones—resisted the new "ethnicity" evident in the new rhythm and blues, characterizing it as "gut-bucket" and unrefined. And as was the case with the New Orleans synthesis, this "underground" was initially invisible to mainstream whites. Major record companies showed no initial interest in this "lower-class" Black music. The result was that a bevy of smaller, independent record companies, some which were Black owned, became important institutions in the "rhythm-and-blues world."<sup>32</sup> In 1949 when *Billboard* changed the name of its Black pop-music chart from "race" to "rhythm and blues," "it wasn't setting a trend, but responding to a phrase and a feeling the independent labels had already made part of the vocabulary."<sup>33</sup>

Conceivably, the perceived raw, raunchy attitude of early rhythm and blues made it unattractive to major companies, as it was for some middle-class Blacks. It is also conceivable that this very attitude, along with the pulsating rhythm, *did* help make it attractive to some young whites, progeny of the swing generation. With radio playing an important role (records and radio had been an important factor with jazz in the 1920s and 1930s), the sound of rhythm and blues drifted in and apparently was music to the ears of a generation of young whites in search of causes for which to rebel.<sup>34</sup> Eventually the rhythm-and-blues term *rock and roll* (which referred to having sex) came to serve as a label for a body of music that included some elements of rhythm and blues (for example, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard) and a lot of younger, mostly white, groups and musicians, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, Buddy Holly, trying to move with the pulsating rhythmic sense that drove rhythm and blues.

As had been the case in previous instances of aesthetic appropriation, the

evolution of rhythm and blues into rock and roll eventually overshadowed the connection of the Black music to Black humanity. The initial rock-and-roll explosion seemed to energize, even define, a new generation of white youth with electrifying dance rhythms. By 1960, however, it seems that "the state of [mainstream] popular music in America was a sorry one, with the initial wave of rock-and-roll having been replaced by the plastic posturings of the Fabians and Frankie Avalons."<sup>35</sup> Nearly to the extreme of Whiteman's "symphonic jazz," in the 1920s, this rock and roll came to represent a redefinition of Black music forms for non-Black uses. Little Richard clearly understood this, reminiscing on a Home Box Office television special about how a version of his rock anthem "Tutti Frutti" reached the number one spot on the pop charts: "By Pat Boone," Richard said, grimacing to the camera.

"Soul" music, which flowered in the 1960s, seemed in part a reaction to the rock-and-roll appropriation of earlier forms. Aesthetically, the evolution of rhythm and blues into soul music emerged from 1950s innovators such as Ray Charles and Sam Cooke, who obliterated tenuous barriers between sacred and secular worlds and brought gospel-inflected harmonies and gospel-style fervor (and call-response rhythmicity) to their decidedly secular performances.<sup>36</sup> Socially soul music functioned to reestablish a distinctive Black musical sound, an instrument of cultural cohesion in the context of the shared consciousness and heightened cohesion accruing from the social movements of that period.

Soul music's effectiveness as an instrument of cultural cohesion as well as of musical innovation was in part related to the mainstream music industry's inability to control it. Although many of the early companies specializing in rhythm and blues were no longer in business, independents were still controlling the market as soul music bloomed throughout the 1960s. The most important independent companies were New York-based Atlantic Records, Motown in Detroit, and Stax-Volt, out of Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>37</sup> With these legendary "indies" pumping out soulful sounds continually, the pale imitations offered by major companies in the late 1950s and early 1960s were of small effect.

Atlantic had survived from the early postwar era and remained an important rhythm-and-blues institution until the 1970s. White owned, Atlantic was Black oriented from the start and was where Ray Charles developed his pioneering "soul" sound. Motown rose in the late 1950s and established a dominant 1960s sound. Owned by a now-legendary black entrepreneur, Motown deliberately programmed some of its products for the white "crossover" market (Motown billed its products as "The Sound of Young America").<sup>38</sup> Although Motown's pursuit of the "legitimacy" and profits associated with white acceptance suggests a certain kind of assimilationism within the cultural

context of soul music, that trend was counterbalanced during the mid- and late 1960s as a southern soul sound developed in Memphis (with Stax records), Muscle Shoals (Alabama), and other southern centers. And although this southern-based sound was aimed at the traditional, Black rhythm-and-blues market, white fans of 1960s soul also gravitated to this more "authentic" Black sound.<sup>39</sup> Eventually Motown counterbalanced itself, instituting its own version of this sound on a new label named "Soul," where Junior Walker and the All-Stars, Shorty Long, and Gladys Knight and the Pips were recorded.<sup>40</sup>

The 1960s and 1970s then, like the 1920s and 1930s, were a period when "the music of the black culture . . . became part of mainstream American expression."<sup>41</sup> And like the 1930s, the 1970s turned out to be an era when the potency of Black musical forms (1960s soul) merged with mainstream forms and sensibilities to create a "raceless" (disco) phenomenon that closed out that postmodern decade. Soul's success with crossover, like that of its popular culture predecessors, may have been a cause of its ultimate appropriation as disco.

Disco emerged in a period after the dominant Black or Black-oriented independent record companies had come under influence or control of major record companies and other large corporations, a process described in penetrating detail by Nelson George.<sup>42</sup> Once again, music forms that had come from African-American innovation and creativity were redefined, aesthetically and culturally, as a result of white participation. In the 1970s, after a furious evolution of media and communications technology, popular dance music could not be as completely divorced from Black culture as it had been in the 1920s or 1930s, when market channels were so separate that Blacks who were "lined up for Bessie [Smith] or Ma [Rainey], never heard of Paul Whiteman," and vice versa.<sup>43</sup> The channels of cultural separation were, by comparison, considerably more porous. Eventually, however, the notion that "raceless mainstream" meant white in the dominant reference frame became as clear as the image of actor John Travolta, whose "white-dancin'-fool" character in the movie *Saturday Night Fever* became, for the mainstream, the disco star of the 1970s. Moreover, the brazen attempt of MTV to take to the air with virtually no videos by Black musicians (rationalized again in terms of its projected "mainstream" or "classic rock" market) showed a still-enduring tendency to redefine Blackness out of mainstream conceptions of popular music.

However, even though images of disco pseudosophistication dominated the 1970s, the countercurrents of a "funk underground" can be found in that same period as well—an underground, or counterculture, that rejected pretentious sophistication in favor of the melodically stripped down, rhythmically souped up riffs of James Brown's "JBs," George Clinton's "P-Funk," and the music of other stars of 1970s funk. As had been the case in similar trans-

formative moments in Black music history, the emergence of funk in the 1970s involved a new synthesis of mainstream form with essential Black rhythmic sense. In this case electrified instruments, instrumental techniques, and the form of the self-contained band were adapted from the "rock" music of that era. Like the previous underground, the funk sound was especially audible in the South and Midwest, where Black community concentrations abounded. It was heard less distinctly around the East and West Coasts, where disco chique was all the rage.<sup>44</sup> And like that previous counterculture, 1970s funk connected with elements that erupted in the 1980s as rap, hip-hop, and other "radicalized" forms of African-American musical culture, beginning once again the pattern of diffusing into and transforming mainstream culture itself.

The recent eruption of black urban youth culture as hip-hop and rap music illustrates the continuation of dynamics accompanying the emergence of previous forms. Just as early rhythm and blues expressed a rejection of attempted middle-class sophistication, rap music rejects pretentious sophistication in favor of knowing, in the starkest terms, "what time it is."<sup>45</sup> Like early rhythm and blues in the late 1940s, rap initially survived and grew largely on independent record labels, despite lack of interest, rejection, and even attempted suppression on the part of the mainstream record companies and radio stations.<sup>46</sup>

Rejection, criticism, and attempted censorship by mainstream whites and Blacks as well have not prevented large-scale identification among young Blacks with rap music and other hip-hop cultural symbols, such as language, dress, and "attitude." Moreover, the significant and growing attraction of rap for some white middle-class youths affirms the historical pattern of diffusion of indigenous cultural sensibilities into the wider culture. Although no especially dominant "white hip-hop" has yet emerged, the audience for this renegade sound has become dominated by yet another generation of middle-class white youths. This is one factor that may yet lead to a replay of musical changes in the familiar historical chord progression.

### **Appropriating the Meaning of Appropriation**

Having examined the dynamics of aesthetic appropriation regarding African-American musical sensibilities, I wish to point to the role that scholars, analysts, and other formal observers may have in the process of separating aesthetic innovation from its experiential context. There is, for example, a tendency in jazz literature to pronounce that the opening of the Benny Goodman band at the Polomar in Los Angeles on August 21, 1935, "was the beginning of Swing as a mainstream development in popular music."<sup>47</sup> Such

analyses may or may not also incorporate the broader perspective on swing's emergence such as is available in Thomas Hennessey's recently updated review of jazz's historical path into American mainstream culture.<sup>48</sup> (In considerable depth, Hennessey highlights the emergence during the late 1920s and early 1930s of the arranged "riffing" big-band style that became a national phenomenon and that was principally associated with black arrangers such as Fletcher Henderson, Don Redmon, Duke Ellington, and Benny Moten.) Regardless of whether jazz writers do incorporate this broader historiographic perspective, their assertions that Goodman's band marks "the beginning" help subtly shape discourse that diassociates aesthetic innovation from its experiential context. The language of the discourse has determined that "the Swing era was the era of Benny Goodman, of Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, the Dorsey brothers, Charlie Barnet, Harry James, Woody Herman, Gene Krupa, and others."<sup>49</sup>

In the case of jazz, unfortunately, a significant amount of this kind of discourse comes from observers who undoubtedly consider themselves to be strong advocates and affiliates. For example, although most writers almost ritually acknowledge the African-American roots of jazz, James Collier, credited with among the most comprehensive of the jazz histories, proposes with remarkable alacrity that "it is therefore surprising—indeed astonishing—that the direct evidence for this belief is slim to nonexistent."<sup>50</sup> His logic for this somewhat startling assertion involves first minimizing the significance of figures such as Buddy Bolden and then arguing that other originators such as Jelly Roll Morton, Kid Orly, and Sidney Bechet were Creoles, "not 'blacks' in the ordinary sense of the word."<sup>51</sup>

His argument seems to miss what may be a subtle factor. When Creoles constituted a separate caste from Blacks in the Louisiana social hierarchy, they did not play jazz. In an otherwise illuminating summary of the Creole tradition in Louisiana history, Collier fails to note how Creole musicians, as a result of losing their "downtown" jobs, where they worked with and among whites, following the enforcement of local segregation legislation, had to redirect themselves aesthetically and economically toward the "uptown" Black community. At that time, Creole musicians did, in fact, become "blacks in the ordinary sense of the word," and it was in this specific context that they, incorporating techniques they had learned from uptown Blacks, participated in the creation of jazz. Indeed, it might be stated that Creole participation in jazz came directly as a result of the "discovery" by Creole musicians of their Blackness. In this context the answer to Collier's rhetorical question—"Is jazz actually 'expressive of and uniquely rooted in the experience of black Americans?'"—is simple.<sup>52</sup> Yes. Emphatically yes. It is.

## Conclusion

In many ways it is certainly true, as Collier wants to argue regarding jazz, that popular music forms derived from Black innovation "surely . . . belong[s] to all of us."<sup>53</sup> As part of facilitating the evolution of popular culture from pre-modern folk cultural roots, demographics, modern technology, media, and various other factors have appeared to blur the distinction between what music or culture is or is not Black. It has become less accurate to speak of Black popular music than of the "Black influence on popular music."

However, the added complexity of modernity has not changed the basic dynamics of innovation, interaction, and diffusion with respect to African-American musical sensibility. Despite blurred or changing cultural boundaries, a discernible folk/popular strain of African-American culture remains the chief source of distinctiveness as well as the main source of innovation for those Black musical sensibilities that diffuse into and are appropriated by the white-dominated wider culture. The "mouth" or "source" of the historical stream of sensibilities connecting Black Americans with an African cultural heritage has always been located among the least assimilated sectors of the Black community. Historically this was the South. Today it also includes the least assimilated, structurally isolated urban areas.

As new aesthetic energies emerge from such sectors, diffusion into the white-dominated wider culture provides motivation for Black musicians to shape their products to cater especially to that interest, even while it also motivate whites to imitate or reproduce the new forms. In addition to profit as a motivation for appealing to white audiences, African American performers and innovators may be motivated by the possibility of being recognized and rewarded as artists rather than rejected and scorned as lowlifes, as Black entertainers in earlier periods were. (Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll both craved this recognition—even more, perhaps, than the financial reward—which tragically eluded both.)

In this process of interaction with mainstream culture, the new music form becomes a less authentic means of representing and expressing the peculiarities of Black "beingness." In effect, the now "integrated" phenomenon becomes redefined, and invariably the new concept is "white" for all practical purposes; it is no longer connected to blackness. Undoubtedly with the best of intentions, Collier, whose logic seeks to separate jazz from Black culture per se, illustrates how this happens almost better than I could: "Jazz has had a primarily white audience for perhaps seventy-five years. Jazz criticism was devised by whites and has been mainly in white hands ever since. Jazz education, since it began to have a real existence in the early 1950s, had been dominated by whites. And ever since jazz began to revive in the 1970s . . .

white players . . . have done as much to give the music direction as blacks have."<sup>54</sup>

Although some African-American artists have been able over the years to improve on the legacies of those earlier creative but tragic figures, the involvement of whites, as consumers, performers, and owners, with forms of Black music has the result of keeping that number low and of rewarding, in several senses of that term, white appropriation more than Black innovation. Moreover, as the innovations become dissociated from the experiential context from which they arise, they begin to lose their functions as statements of affirmation and humanity relative to those contexts. In the end the appropriative process accomplishes a destructive consumption of the dreams, the creative hearts, the very souls of Black folks. In some sense even the millions, really billions or trillions, of dollars reaped from "commercial exploitation" of African-American aesthetic genius cannot pay for that loss. It is perhaps some consolation that in spite of the continual siphoning of the creative impulses of African-American culture, its dynamism somehow allows it to go on re-creating, reshaping, and reaffirming Black humanity.

## Notes

1. At various times and in various formats, pianist Teddy Wilson, vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, trumpeter Cootie Williams, and guitarist Charlie Christian were also featured.
2. Or he bought as many as thirty-six scores, depending on sources. See James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 261; Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 200.
3. Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: De Capo Press, 1971), 32.
4. Quoted in William D. Pierson, *Black Legacy: America's Hidden Heritage* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 173.
5. Donald A. Donaldson, "A Window on Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1800-1862," *Journal of Negro Education* 69(1) (Spring 1984): 61-72.
6. *Times-Picayune*, June 20, 1918.
7. William J. Schafer and Johanness Riedel, *The Art of Ragtime* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977; originally published in Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), xi.
8. Donald M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 43.
9. *Ibid.*, 74.
10. E. Belfield Spriggins, "Excavating Local Jazz," *Louisiana Weekly*, April 22, 1933, 5; quoted in Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 2.
11. Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1971; originally published in New York: Knopf, 1950). "As early as elsewhere there was a school of piano ragtimers in New Orleans. Back so far indeed that

the black, itinerant John the Baptist of that city, who roamed the mid-American red-light districts from the late seventies into the nineties, is almost a legend. . . . Piano and band developed separately in New Orleans, but grew side by side into the same sort of music" (165).

12. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 33.
13. Sidran, *Black Talk*, 37; Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 37.
14. Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 168.
15. Martin W. Laforse and James A. Drake, *Popular Culture and American Life: Selected Topics in the Study of American Popular Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1981), 75.
16. *Ibid.*, 43.
17. Laforse and Drake, *Popular Culture and American Life*, 82; Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 168.
18. Laforse and Drake, *Popular Culture and American Life*, 89.
19. Paul Goodman and Frank Otto Gatell, *America in the Twenties: The Beginnings of Contemporary America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 87.
20. Sidran, *Black Talk*, 68.
21. Laforse and Drake, *Popular Culture and American Life*, 89.
22. *Ibid.*, 91.
23. Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 176.
24. Laforse and Drake, *Popular Culture and American Life*, 45.
25. Beiderbecke certainly does share at least one fact in common with several important African-American innovators: a tragically short life. A familiar gang of suspects—alcohol, disaffection, alienation, and economic ruin—lurk suggestively around his death at age twenty-eight in 1931.
26. Thomas Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing: African-American Jazz Musicians and Their Music, 1890–1935* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), chaps. 5–7.
27. Sidran, *Black Talk*, 78.
28. Perry A. Hall, "Toward a Dramaturgical Analysis of Historical Transformation in African-American Musical Culture," *Word: A Black Culture Journal* 1(1) (Spring 1991): 29–38.
29. Sidran, *Black Talk*, 59.
30. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It* (New York: Morrow, 1963), 167.
31. *Ibid.*, 182.
32. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Dutton, 1988), 26.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 61–69.
35. Ian Hoare, Tony Cummings, Clive Anderson, and Simon Frith, *The Soul Book* (New York: Dell, 1975), 25.
36. Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 50–66.
37. George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, chap. 3.
38. Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 103.
39. Hoare et al., *The Soul Book*, 55.
40. George, *Where Did Our Love Go?* 128.
41. Sidran, *Black Talk*, 53.

42. George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, chaps. 5–6.
43. Sidran, *Black Talk*, 67.
44. George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 154.
45. Tommie Lee Lott, "Marooned in America: Black Urban Youth Culture and Social Pathology," (1990, unpublished ms), 19.
46. *Detroit Metro Times*, February 19, 1990.
47. Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America: From the Spirituals, Minstrels, and Ragtime to Soul, Disco, and Hip-Hop* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 145.
48. Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*.
49. Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 146.
50. James Lincoln Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 189. However, according to Collier, the generally accepted view is that, "though the genesis of jazz in the black subculture was widely accepted, by the middle of the 1920s it seemed clear to most people that it had washed through the society enough to have escaped the culture of its birth" (186).
51. *Ibid.*, 189.
52. *Ibid.*, 185.
53. *Ibid.*, 224.
54. *Ibid.*, 219.