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2. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); Horace Clarence Boyer, *How Sweet the Sound: The Golden Age of Gospel* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark, 1995).

3. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford, 1980).

4. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford, 1977).

5. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

6. Boyer, *How Sweet the Sound*; Anthony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1997); Robert Darden, *People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

7. Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford, 1992).

8. Jerma A. Jackson, *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Gayle Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

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## African Americans and Rock 'n' Roll

Maureen Mahon

Rock 'n' roll is a quintessentially American musical product, the result of African American and European American crossings and borrowings. Rock 'n' roll has a long list of black progenitors and an early history as a form played by and for black people under the name rhythm and blues in the 1940s and 1950s. Over the years, however, rock 'n' roll has come to be viewed as white music for white people, a result of its association with white performers and audiences. Black musicians who strike out in the white-dominated rock 'n' roll terrain are in the peculiar position of looking like anomalies in a genre created by black people. Rock 'n' roll's first performers were predominantly poor, black, and Southern. Over the years, this initial association with the nation's outsiders and its appeal to youth who were resisting elements of mainstream society helped rock 'n' roll develop an image as an antiestablishment art form driven by the quest for rebellion, liberation, and unreserved self-expression, including the expression of sexuality, a taboo in mainstream America. The idealized story of rock 'n' roll is of openness and experimentation, a musical embodiment of the American dream of self-fashioning through a quest for a new sound and a better beat. Telling a more accurate story requires historicizing the black American presence in and contribution to rock 'n' roll, addressing the challenges that its black practitioners have experienced.

The major limitation for black Americans in rock 'n' roll is the racially defined labeling and marketing systems that the recording industry has always used for popular music. Assessing the findings of its 1987 study of the industry, the NAACP concluded, "No other industry in America so openly classifies its operations on a racial basis. At every level of the industry, beginning with the separation of black artists into a special category, barriers exist that severely limit opportunities for blacks."<sup>1</sup> These barriers are long-standing, as evidenced by *Billboard* magazine's early decision to use a separate chart to track the sales of music targeted to black audiences. Since 1942 the chart has been called Harlem Hit Parade, Race, Rhythm

and Blues, Soul, Black, Hip Hop, and Urban.<sup>2</sup> These names distinguish music made for black audiences from music made for white audiences, exemplifying and perpetuating segregationist belief and practice. Commenting on the impact of this mentality on music categories, music critic Robert Palmer observed:

By the sixties, "rock and roll" carried such "white" connotations that writers began referring to the new, rhythm-oriented styles in black popular music first as "soul," then "funk." By the time rap and hip-hop came along, many younger artists took pains to differentiate their music from "rock and roll" altogether.<sup>3</sup>

Segregation is one of the cornerstones of popular music marketing. It dominates the industry's approach to signing and promoting artists, restricting the type of music they perform and the audiences they reach. This article discusses the effect of segregation and racially defined marketing practices on key African American figures in the history of rock 'n' roll and charts their contributions to the form even in the face of these limitations. It also traces how, in the years since the emergence of rock 'n' roll, black Americans have been distanced from the form but have continued to participate in it. Success as a professional musician depends on talent, drive, and luck—but, as this article demonstrates, for African Americans in the field of rock 'n' roll, the ability to express one's musical vision also requires negotiating the additional burden of race.

#### FROM RHYTHM AND BLUES TO ROCK 'N' ROLL

In 1949, in an effort to find a more palatable term, *Billboard* magazine changed the name of its black music chart from "race" music to "rhythm and blues."<sup>4</sup> Rhythm and blues (R&B) encompassed a spectrum of music linked by the blackness of its performers and audiences. Aesthetic factors also connected music in the R&B category: "honking" or "screaming" saxophones, propulsive piano, loud drums, vocals shouted over instrumentation, and danceable boogie-woogie rhythms that presaged the importance of the beat in rock 'n' roll. R&B began to gain radio exposure as a small coterie of white disc jockeys programmed it on their shows. AM radio signals were wide reaching, and the black music played on stations such as Nashville's WLAC could be heard in the Caribbean and Canada and as far west as the Rocky Mountains.<sup>5</sup> These shows reached young white listeners as well as their intended black audiences.

In June 1951, Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed began calling his R&B radio show *Moondog's Rock'n'Roll Party*.<sup>6</sup> He hoped the new term would downplay the blackness that R&B indexed and ease the crossing over of the

Little Richard in *Mister Rock and Roll*, 1957.



Paramount Pictures/Photofest

music. *Rock 'n' roll* indicated "music that was black ('R&B') in style but not necessarily made by black artists or aimed at black audiences."<sup>7</sup> Freed's new label was a colloquial term for *sex* in the black community, but rocking and rolling also meant dancing, and sanctified churchgoers "rocked" when the spirit took them. The convergence of the sexual, physical, and spiritual in the term *rock 'n' roll* is fitting, given the fusion of these features in the music. Changing R&B's name to package black music for white audiences is significant in light of the form's history of simultaneous dependence on and erasure of black people, a contradictory relationship to blackness that is at the heart of the form and the challenges that African Americans face in it.

It is impossible to isolate a single moment when rhythm and blues transformed into rock 'n' roll, but *Rocket 88*, released in 1951, is often identified as the first rock 'n' roll record.<sup>8</sup> Credited to Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats, the song was recorded by Brenston and guitarist Ike Turner and his Kings of Rhythm at Sun Studios. The song has many of the features associated with rock 'n' roll: a lyric about a car, a prominent boogie rhythm, and well-amplified, distorted guitar. Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun Studios and the record's producer, asserted that *Rocket 88* paved the way

for rock 'n' roll, encouraging "young white males and females . . . to get even more interested in rhythm and blues or black music."<sup>9</sup> Phillips, a white Southerner, had opened his studio to record the blues and R&B of black musicians such as Brenston and Turner, but he soon recognized the limits that black artists faced in a segregated nation. He began to search for white musicians who could play with what he called "the Negro sound and the Negro feel," certain he could profit if he did.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, he discovered and recorded Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis, white Southerners who had learned the Negro sound and feel from black musicians.

Before the arrival of these performers, black R&B artists such as Ruth Brown and Fats Domino were charting with songs that shaped rock 'n' roll. Brown signed to the independent R&B label Atlantic Records, where she was directed to approach music with a new rhythm. Her first hit, "Teardrops From My Eyes" (1950) stayed on the R&B charts for 11 weeks.<sup>11</sup> Other releases, including "5-10-15 Hours" (1952) and "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean" (1953), were similarly successful. Known for a vocal squeak that influenced Little Richard, Brown was dubbed Miss Rhythm in recognition of her facility with a new beat that went on to shape rock 'n' roll. Brown, like many other R&B artists, saw little difference between R&B and the more lucrative crossover form called rock 'n' roll. She explained:

When they called it rock 'n' roll it was only rhythm and blues now being done by white kids and accepted and danced to and being played on the Top 100 and the Top 10 stations. . . . Like Fats Domino said, "I had been singing rock 'n' roll 15 years before they started calling it that."<sup>12</sup>

Born in New Orleans, Antoine "Fats" Domino Jr. played boogie-woogie piano but sang with a country twang. Domino is one of rock 'n' roll's best-selling performers; with the exception of Elvis Presley and the Beatles, he achieved more gold records than any artist working in rock 'n' roll's first decades.<sup>13</sup> A stout man who often wore a smile, Domino had a calm sound and warm, laid-back delivery. Never overtly sexual, Domino was a "safe" black performer, a fact that may have eased his acceptance by white audiences who were enticed by the "clean arrangements, simple melodies, casual feels, and catchy lyrics" that characterized his music.<sup>14</sup> Having started his career at the beginning of the 1950s, Domino was the R&B artist who most successfully crossed over to the rock 'n' roll audience, producing hits like "Ain't That a Shame" (1955), "Blueberry Hill" (1956), "I'm Walkin'" (1957), and "Walking to New Orleans" (1960).<sup>15</sup>

Although at first *rock 'n' roll* was a term for R&B being promoted to white listeners, "the change in name induced a change in the music

itself."<sup>16</sup> To engage its teenage audience, rock 'n' roll's producers simplified R&B's rhythm, accenting the backbeat, and narrowed its lyrical references to teen themes.<sup>17</sup> Rock 'n' roll was a young person's music and seasoned R&B artists, with their adult voices and adult lyrical content, had a difficult time crossing over to young white audiences.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, black rock'n'rollers conveyed youthful energy, sang about young people's concerns, and developed unusual visual styles that helped to sell their new rhythms. Along with Fats Domino, the black artists who were most successful in the early years of rock 'n' roll—Little Richard, Bo Diddley, and Chuck Berry—popularized an aesthetic and attitude that laid the groundwork for future generations of rock'n'rollers.

Commenting on his contribution to the genre, Little Richard (born Richard Wayne Penniman) proclaimed, "I'm the innovator, I'm the emancipator, I'm the originator, I'm the architect of rock 'n' roll."<sup>19</sup> Little Richard's effervescent flash and over-the-top enthusiasm drew fans to the genre while providing a primer on how to rock and roll. Little Richard had a remarkable visual style: an outrageously high pompadour, pancake make-up and eyeliner, and sharp suits. He played the piano with ferocity and sometimes stood on his instrument. Mixing boogie-woogie and blues, Little Richard performed in traveling carnivals, medicine shows, and the black clubs that made up the chitlin circuit. His creative and commercial breakthrough came with the song "Tutti Frutti" (1955). Little Richard recalled the recording as being a result of an attempt to distinguish himself from other R&B singers at a session: "I started singing 'Tutti Frutti' as loud as I can. 'A Womp-Bomp-a-Loo-Momp Alop-Bomp-Bomp! Woooo!' Just screaming. And people said, 'Oh, he's gone crazy.'"<sup>20</sup> "Tutti Frutti" was a risqué ditty that Little Richard sang in clubs.<sup>21</sup> Once his production team decided that the song could be a hit, they enlisted the help of Dorothy La Bostrie, a New Orleans songwriter, to clean up the lyrics. "Tutti Frutti" sold 500,000 units and was successful on both the R&B and pop music charts; later releases such as "Rip It Up" (1956), "Long Tall Sally" (1956), and "Good Golly, Miss Molly" (1958) also fared well. Black and white teenagers were attracted to his infectious songs and ecstatic vocal blend of "sighs, moans, screams, whoos and breathless panting" that later generations of rock 'n' roll singers emulated.<sup>22</sup>

As a teenager, Bo Diddley (born Ellas Otha Bates McDaniel) shifted from violin to guitar and began experimenting with rhythm. He explained, "I couldn't play like Muddy Waters or John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed and Howlin' Wolf and all these people so I had to go back in the corner and try and develop a style of my own and I stumbled upon that rhythm and that's the rhythm that I made my first record with."<sup>23</sup> Taking fragments of children's rhymes and fusing them to a Latin rhythm, Bo Diddley created what has come to be called the Bo Diddley Beat, a shuffling rhythm that turns

up repeatedly in rock 'n' roll. Bo Diddley's search for a new sound is typical of musical innovators in all genres: he was looking for a unique form of expression. He explained, "I mainly play chords and stuff like that and rhythm. I'm a rhythm fanatic. I played the guitar as if I were playing drums. That's the thing that makes my music so different. I do licks on the guitar that a drummer would do."<sup>24</sup> Like the other early rock 'n' rollers, Diddley telegraphed his musical difference visually. Although he and his band members were neatly attired, the group looked a bit peculiar. The square and V-shaped bodies of Diddley's guitars (which he designed and built himself) were futuristic and cartoonish.<sup>25</sup> The traditional bass, drum, and guitar ensemble was supplemented by an electric violin and maracas. He also made the unconventional decision to feature women instrumentalists in his band, a vivid sign that this new music was upsetting a tradition.

As a guitarist, singer, songwriter, and performer, Chuck Berry (born Charles Edward Anderson Berry) is rock 'n' roll's most influential early performer. His pithy lyrics, filled with internal rhymes and wordplay and delivered with a rapid fluency, are models of masterful storytelling. Beatle John Lennon called Chuck Berry "the greatest rock 'n' roll poet," and Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, on whom Berry's influence is clear, described him as having "the whole sound—rhythm, lyrics—the sound" of rock 'n' roll.<sup>26</sup> In spite of his stature as a rock 'n' roll pioneer, Berry is modest when describing the development of his classic rhythm:

The first time I heard that was in one of Carl Hogan's riffs in Louis Jordan's band . . . I love T-Bone Walker: slurs and it's bluesy. So, put a little Carl Hogan and a little T-Bone Walker and a little Charlie Christian, the guitarist in Tommy Dorsey's band, together: Look what a span of people that you will please. And that's what I did . . . And making it simple is another important factor, I think, that resulted in a lot of the artists understanding and being able to play my music. If you can call it "my music." But there's nothing new under the sun.<sup>27</sup>

Aware of the commercial limitations of R&B, he made musical and lyrical choices that he hoped would help him reach as broad an audience as possible. He overlaid his R&B derived riffs with country-inflected vocals that featured lyrics about school, cars, and love, subject matter with which young rock 'n' roll fans could identify. Starting with "Maybellene" in 1955, Berry released a string of hits now recognized as rock 'n' roll classics: "Roll Over, Beethoven" (1956), "Rock and Roll Music" (1957), "Johnny B. Goode" (1958), "Sweet Little Sixteen" (1958), and "Almost Grown" (1959). Delivering these songs live, Berry put on a show intended to maintain audience attention, dropping down into a "duckwalk" while playing the guitar. His signature moves, along with his sound, solidified Berry's place in the

rock 'n' roll canon. The racial ambiguity of Berry's hillbilly-inflected music and a vocal twang that did not "sound black" eased his acceptance by white audiences but also created confusion when people who had heard his records saw him play. They expected a white man to step on stage. Berry's effort to gain a white audience was successful, but in pitching his music to white teens, Berry and his music were distanced from black audiences.

### ROCK 'N' ROLL REPERCUSSIONS

Rock 'n' roll developed alongside the growing Civil Rights movement. Although rock 'n' rollers were not political activists, they were at the forefront of integration. Their milieu was not lunch counters or public schools, but the concert halls, clubs, television programs, and movie theaters where they performed to mixed and majority white audiences. Low-budget rock 'n' roll films including *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956) and *Mr. Rock & Roll* (1957) featured black rock 'n' rollers such as Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Chuck Berry, and LaVern Baker performing for approving white teenagers. The rock 'n' roll tours that brought the music to communities across the country were integrated. White artists such as Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers performed alongside Fats Domino and Chuck Berry, touring for months at a time and sometimes playing several shows a day. These tours were difficult for black artists whose experience on the road—especially in the South—included police harassment, refusal of service at white-owned eateries, and often futile quests for accommodations that would accept black patrons. In some cases, they had to play one show for black people and one for white people to appease club owners who didn't want "race mixing" at their venues; in these cases, they usually received payment for only one show.<sup>28</sup> Describing a run-in with the police while touring in Georgia, Bo Diddley recalled:

I was made to get out of the car, me and my band, and because we didn't have no liquor . . . they pulled out the gun and said, "Since you all are musicians, entertainers, you all entertain us and we'll let you go." . . . They made us take off the [doo-] rags and dance . . . With a .38 in your face and a shotgun, you'll do flips and everything. In order to deliver the music, we went through some terrible ordeals to continue, to get to where it has come now. We built a hell of a highway.<sup>29</sup>

The major problem was that rock 'n' roll exposed white people to black culture, upsetting an entrenched preference for denying the significance of African Americans. Rock 'n' roll's distinguishing features contributed to the frenzied embrace of the form among youth and the impassioned negative

response from their elders. Guardians of propriety regarded the music's sound and its performers' antics as threats to decency. Moreover, they routinely characterized rock 'n' roll as "jungle music" and "primitive," attacking the form at its black roots. Sometimes they attacked the performers physically. Little Richard remembered, "I had police take me off the stage in Augusta, Georgia . . . and beat me with blackjacks, but I had so much energy I just bounced off them. . . . 'You're down there singing all this nigger music to these white kids.' That's what they said."<sup>30</sup> Producer Sam Phillips noted that white rock'n'rollers were also harassed: "They accused us of causing white people to love 'niggers.' They accused us of mutilating music by trying to integrate and trying to copy and just totally destroy all that was good in music. Believe me, the resistance on this was absolutely incredible."<sup>31</sup>

Involvement in rock 'n' roll, it seemed, could compromise the morals of white youth, especially young white women who were often featured—on television and in photographs—screaming enthusiastic responses to the performances of black male rock'n'rollers. The specter of miscegenation conjured by these images led some white adults affiliated with white citizens' groups to organize against what they called "vulgar animalistic nigger rock and roll bop."<sup>32</sup> Rock 'n' roll's revolutionary fusing of black musical style and white teenage frustration was potent and presumed dangerous. Blackness and sexuality bubbled in the music and in the hip-swinging performances of its leading artists. Rock 'n' roll's connection to these taboos fueled white youths' interest. Not only did rock 'n' roll have a great beat, it also irritated their parents. Rock 'n' roll's image as a form of youthful rebellion grew out of these tensions.

The moral panics stirred by rock 'n' roll did not suppress the music, but the actions of the mainstream recording industry limited some of its artists. When rock 'n' roll first emerged, major label executives assumed it was a fad. They had long ignored black rhythm and blues—both forms were recorded on independent labels—and saw no reason to embrace the fledgling offshoot. The majors gambled that they could ride out rock 'n' roll's popularity by using the white pop artists they had under contract to compete with genuine rock'n'rollers recording on independent labels. Their white acts would cover songs originated by black artists, allowing the labels to tap into the rock 'n' roll market without having to commit to it. This approach not only made economic sense but fit long-standing white American resistance to black American advancement. Little Richard, whose songs "Tutti Frutti" and "Long Tall Sally" were covered by white pop singer Pat Boone, argued, "They didn't want the white kids looking up at this big ol' greasy black guy out of Georgia, out of Mississippi, out of Chicago. They wanted their kids to see a little smooth white boy looking pretty and on duty."<sup>33</sup> Covers submerged the vibrant energy of musical blackness and circumscribed the career possibilities of black people.

Major labels released their cover versions soon after the originals and used their considerable influence on radio stations and distributors to flood the market with their artists' work. This made it almost impossible for the black artists' original versions to receive the kind of radio exposure that generated sales. This was the case for Etta James, the dyed-blond vocalist who recorded an answer song to the racy Hank Ballard and the Midnighters tune "Work With Me, Annie" in 1955. Changing James's original song title "Roll With Me, Henry" to the tamer "The Wallflower" seemed like a good way for James to get radio airplay, but white pop singer Georgia Gibbs covered the song before James's version had a chance at the charts. Describing her outrage at Gibbs's "Suzy Creamcheese version," James observed:

[Gibbs] turned "Roll With Me, Henry" into "Dance With Me, Henry." Now if you listen to the original version, I really was talking about dancing. . . . It's just that the word *roll* had a sexual suggestiveness prudes couldn't handle. Georgia's cutesy-pie do-over went over big. My version went underground and continued to sell while Georgia's whitewash went through the roof. Her Henry became a million seller. I was happy to have any success, but I was enraged to see Georgia singing the song on *The Ed Sullivan Show* while I was singing it in some funky dive in Watts.<sup>34</sup>

James's comments indicate the importance of double entendre in R&B and the way that covers proffered a single, safe meaning. Her use of the term *whitewash* for this process is apt: it was not a simple "cleaning up" but an actual whitening that occurred when a white singer copied a black artist's song. Performers whose work was covered had no legal protection; no law prohibited copying an arrangement. Independent labels reaped financial rewards for licensing songs to the majors, but the artists who originated the songs received nothing. As teens became more educated consumers, they demanded the black originals—but covers undercut black performers and enabled major labels to profit from black creativity without compensating black people.

White covers of black R&B and the growing number of white rock'n'rollers put a wedge between black performers and rock 'n' roll so that, as Bo Diddley noted, "R&B became what we was doing and rock 'n' roll became what the white kids was doing."<sup>35</sup> Racialized definitions of musical categories, covers, and the racism that limited black opportunity in the United States marginalized the black pioneers of rock 'n' roll from the form they had created. By the 1980s, it became apparent that they had also lost out on the financial side when Ruth Brown, famous in her heyday for a vocal squeak, became a "squeaky wheel" about the economic exploitation

of early R&B artists. Brown's label, Atlantic Records, was known as "The House That Ruth Brown Built" with her consistent chart success in the 1950s, but Brown herself received little financial benefit from her labor. Working with a tenacious legal team on behalf of several R&B artists, Brown went public with a battle for royalties. Testifying before Congress and commenting in the media, she revealed industry practices that contributed to the precarious financial position that many R&B artists were in as they approached retirement age. Most artists in the 1950s were paid a flat rate to record—Brown received \$69 per side—and recouped little in terms of royalties.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Brown had received no royalty payments between 1964 and 1983, even though her records sold throughout this period.<sup>37</sup> The case demonstrated that record labels often went to great lengths to avoid paying royalties.<sup>38</sup> With public exposure and legal decisions, Brown and other artists began to receive back royalties. To further assist R&B pioneers, Brown helped start the Rhythm and Blues Foundation in 1988, using seed money from the labels to provide financial and medical assistance to the black forebears of rock 'n' roll.

### ROCK 'N' ROLL VOCAL GROUPS

By the end of the 1950s, the artists most identified with rock 'n' roll had vanished from the scene: Little Richard returned to the Church, Elvis Presley had joined the army, Jerry Lee Lewis was ostracized for his marriage to his thirteen-year-old cousin, and Chuck Berry was entangled in legal proceedings stemming from charges that he violated the Mann Act. In spite of these setbacks, rock 'n' roll did not disappear. It shifted form as vocal groups took center stage. Rooted in the harmonized singing of black gospel groups and secular street corner singing, doo-wop had found a place on the R&B and pop charts during the 1950s. This rock 'n' roll vocal style, performed by black artists, was named for the nonsense phrase sometimes used in its background vocals.<sup>39</sup> Among the most popular groups were the Coasters, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, and the Platters, whose single "The Great Pretender" (1955) was the first doo-wop record to top the pop charts.<sup>40</sup> Many vocal group recordings resulted from the collaboration of white songwriters and producers and black vocalists. For example, the white songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller penned the rock 'n' roll classic "Hound Dog" (1953) for black R&B singer Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton (Elvis Presley covered it in 1956), "There Goes My Baby" (1959) for The Drifters, and humorous scenarios of teen life such as "Young Blood" (1957), "Yakety Yak" (1958), and "Charlie Brown" (1959) for the Coasters.

The vocal group tradition changed as all-female groups (known as "girl groups" because of the youth of the performers) became prominent in the

early 1960s. Performing songs written by professional songwriters, the Shirelles, the Chiffons, the Chantels, the Crystals, the Marvelettes, and the Ronettes introduced a new style of rock 'n' roll. The girl groups continued rock 'n' roll's focus on teen love, but from a female perspective. The Shirelles' "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" (1960), written by Carole King and Jerry Goffin, for example, articulates a concern many young women struggled with: the consequences of giving in to a boyfriend's pleas for intimacy. Although both black and white girl groups recorded, the leaders of the movement were young African American women, prompting songwriter Jerry Goffin to observe, "In the 1960s, God was a black girl who could sing."<sup>41</sup> With few exceptions, however, the writers and producers were white. Among the most influential was Phil Spector, who created "the wall of sound." For his recording sessions, Spector would assemble an enormous orchestra—two pianos, two drum kits, as many as five guitars, and three basses, as well as large horn and string sections—whose sheer size produced a loud, echoing sonic wall. The singers on these recordings had brash vocal power, but they received little individual credit for their work. Darlene Love, one of his primary vocalists, contributed lead and backing vocals to numerous Spector recordings that were released under other artists' names. The lead singer of the Ronettes, Veronica Bennett (known as Ronnie Spector once she married Phil Spector), managed to forge an individual identity. She had the ideal rock 'n' roll voice: an emotional catch in the throat accompanied by stuttered "oh, oh, ohs" that conveyed the passion and frustration of adolescence. Her sound and sultry appearance helped her become an early rock 'n' roll sex symbol. Phil Spector's greatest chart successes came through his work with black girl groups in songs such as "He's a Rebel" (1962) and "Da Doo Ron Ron" (1963) by the Crystals and "Be My Baby" (1963) and "Walking in the Rain" (1964) by the Ronettes.

Another major contributor to the vocal group sound was Berry Gordy Jr., a jazz-loving independent record producer who founded Motown Records in Detroit in 1960. Gordy hired African American songwriters, producers, singers, and musicians, making the label an exception to the white producer/black artist model that dominated the era's rock 'n' roll production. Gordy wanted his label's music to have appeal and sales beyond the black community, and his staff mastered the art of mining and modulating musical blackness to create a listener-friendly sound that meshed with popular tastes. Motown's records blended black gospel and white pop into songs replete with catchy hooks, memorable key phrases, and danceable rhythms. At "Hitsville, USA," as Gordy nicknamed his label, staff members applied the assembly line practices of their hometown's automobile industry to music production. Company songwriters such as William "Smokey" Robinson Jr., Norman Whitfield, and the team of Eddie

Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Brian Holland were encouraged to find and use formulas that produced hit records. Performers followed company dictates about the material they recorded and the way they recorded it. A band of former jazz musicians, known as the Funk Brothers, played on most of the tracks, helping to give the label its sound.

Attention to quality control was intense, and the public image of the artists was a concern. Motown artists trained with Maxine Powell, whose "finishing school" taught the mostly working-class Motown singers the rules of etiquette and self-presentation. Choreographer Cholly Atkins provided dance moves and body postures that rocked—but in a tasteful way. This type of polishing was in keeping with Gordy's desire to go beyond the chitlin circuit, presenting his acts in elite venues, including on television. It also prompted the charge that Motown artists were so carefully handled to meet the presumed preferences of white audiences that they compromised their blackness. Motown's middle-class striving and pursuit of crossover reveal Gordy's investment in the Civil Rights movement's goals of integration and resulted in the label becoming one of the most profitable black-owned businesses in U.S. history. Over the years, Motown released an unprecedented number of pop chart hits by the Miracles (featuring Smokey Robinson), Martha and the Vandellas, the Marvelettes, Mary Wells, the Four Tops, the Temptations, Marvin Gaye, "Little" Stevie Wonder, the Supremes (featuring Diana Ross), Gladys Knight and the Pips, and the Jackson Five. Holland-Dozier-Holland alone penned twenty-eight songs that became Top 20 pop hits.<sup>42</sup> During the 1960s, the Motown staff created what Gordy had dubbed "The Sound of Young America," a body of music that made an indelible imprint on rock 'n' roll and U.S. culture.

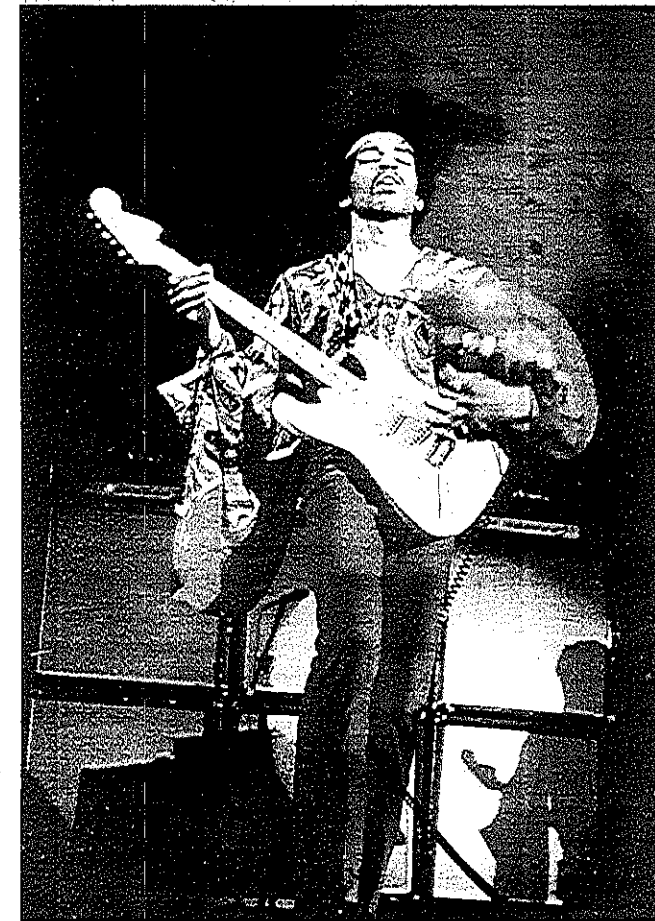
African American vocal groups promoting their music in the early 1960s probably could not have imagined that their primary competitors would be white British bands playing black American blues, R&B, and rock 'n' roll. Not even the members of the Beatles, the English band that started this shift, expected to succeed in the United States. They assumed that American audiences would prefer the black American artists who originated the type of music they played. Industry professionals also had low expectations; in fact, no major label would take on the stateside release of the Beatles' first single, leaving Vee-Jay, an independent, black-owned label to issue the first American copies of "She Loves You" (1964).<sup>43</sup> As it turned out, the English band took the U.S. teenage record-buying public by storm and launched the British Invasion of the American pop market. The success of bands such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Animals confirmed Sam Phillips's supposition that white people with "the Negro sound and feel" would be able to sell black music. The success of British bands precipitated the disappearance of many black vocal groups from the pop charts. Racial commonality mattered and white American kids, it turned

out, were happy to see other white kids perform the black music that they had begun to embrace as their own.

### 1960s ROCK

By the late 1960s, rock 'n' roll was a central part of youth culture. The sound and attitude of rock 'n' roll were changing, and fans began to call their music "rock." Performers began to write their own material, and the subject matter expanded as references to cars and love were complemented by poetic commentaries on politics and everyday life. Musicians began focusing on producing albums intended to make conceptual and

Jimi Hendrix



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artistic statements, and rock became a site of authentic self-expression. The standard of dress changed as both performers and audiences followed the era's casual approach to self-presentation. White artists and fans dominated the scene, and the majority of young African Americans focused on soul music. Still, black American musicians were involved in rock: the most prominent were musical giants Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix and psychedelic cult figure Arthur Lee.

Working in Los Angeles, Arthur Lee formed a band with Johnny Echols, a black guitarist, and Bryan Maclean, a white guitarist and songwriter. Inspired by the sound of folk rock and the British Invasion, they set aside the R&B covers they had previously felt obligated to play and began to write their own material in 1965. Lee explained, "I realized I could sound like the Byrds and the Beatles, and I said, 'Hey, *this* is you. Stop trying to be an imitator' [of R&B acts]."<sup>44</sup> Maclean, steeped in the music of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, and Lee, immersed in the British sound, composed songs that meshed classic American pop with a garage band's grit: jangly guitars ringing out against lushly orchestrated strings and brass. Taking the name Love, the band appropriated one of the words most associated with the burgeoning hippie movement, or Love Generation. Lee was a proud part of this counterculture and often lamented that his friend Jimi Hendrix got credit for being the first black hippie.<sup>45</sup> As Love's front man, Lee wrote and sang surreal lyrics, contributing to a style of writing that evoked the imagery and emotions unleashed in the "acid trips" made possible by the ingestion of LSD, the counterculture's drug of choice.

Love performed in the major rock 'n' roll venues in Los Angeles, becoming the top band on the circuit. Commenting on Love's profile in the scene, Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek observed, "Arthur Lee and Love, they were in charge. We would see them play the Whisky A Go-Go and think that one day we wanted to be like Love."<sup>46</sup> The first rock band to sign to the Elektra label, Love released its first and eponymous album in 1966, featuring a cover of "Hey Joe," a song later made famous by Jimi Hendrix. In 1967, with more original material under its belt, Love released the albums *Da Capo* and *Forever Changes*. The latter is widely considered to be a rock 'n' roll masterpiece. Replete with arcane titles such as "Maybe the People Would Be the Times or Between Clark and Hilldale," the album's beautifully arranged songscapes jostle against images of decay and mutation that indexed the visual and emotional effects of the Vietnam War.<sup>47</sup> Lee's resistance to touring stymied Love's ability to break out beyond the Los Angeles scene, and Love disbanded in 1972. Their music circulated on record, however, and took hold in Great Britain, where fans and musicians celebrated Arthur Lee as an influential innovator and the "prince of orchestral acid pop."<sup>48</sup>

Arthur Lee's low profile contrasts with the fame of Sly and the Family Stone, who burst onto the airwaves in 1968 with the infectious song

"Dance to the Music." Formed two years earlier, the seven-member band was the brainchild of San Francisco Bay-area resident Sylvester Stewart, a disc jockey and record producer known as Sly Stone. With Freddie Stone, his brother, on guitar, his sister Rose Stone on keyboards, Cynthia Robinson on trumpet, Jerry Martini on saxophone, Larry Graham on bass, and Greg Errico on drums, Sly Stone (on electric organ) founded an interracial, mixed-gender band. A rare example of black and white men and women making music together, the band played a vibrant fusion of soul and rock and seemed to embody Love Generation and Civil Rights-era ideals of positive energy and racial harmony.<sup>49</sup> Their songs featured soul horn blasts, gospel inspired vocals, and the prominent bass riffs of Graham, who expanded the rhythmic territory of funk that James Brown was exploring. Unlike bands with a single lead singer, the members of the Family Stone shared vocal duties, incorporating a range of vocal timbres into a song. Songs such as "Everyday People" (1968), "Sing a Simple Song" (1968), "Stand!" (1969), and "Everybody Is a Star" (1970) tapped popular catchphrases and childhood chants and conveyed life-affirming messages to a nation facing serious political challenges, notably the Vietnam War and the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy.

Significantly, Sly and the Family Stone was a predominantly black band, but they were marketed to the white rock 'n' roll audience, an approach Sly Stone had insisted on when he signed his contract with CBS Records.<sup>50</sup> In spite of the label executives' concern that a white audience would not "get" the band, it became a favorite on the rock circuit. They were among the few black performers invited to Woodstock, the 1969 concert that was the counterculture's most important gathering. Sly and the Family Stone's profile changed with the 1971 release of *There's A Riot Going On*. The joyous chants were replaced with a starker sound and vision. These tendencies were present in the acerbic "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey" (1969), and *Riot* marked a complete shift. Spare with muted and distorted vocals, the songs stretched beyond radio-friendly length. A breakthrough album, *Riot's* content was too black and too bleak for some white listeners.<sup>51</sup> Exacerbated by the erratic behavior of Stone, the album precipitated a break with the mainstream audience that the group's more accessible follow-up, *Fresh* (1973), could not heal. By 1975, Sly and the Family Stone had disbanded, leaving behind an extraordinary body of music.

Guitarist Jimi Hendrix is rock's most recognized black star. Born in Seattle, Hendrix began playing guitar when he was thirteen. By the time he was in his early twenties, he was touring as a sideman on the R&B circuit, playing in black clubs before black audiences with artists such as Little Richard and the Isley Brothers. Hendrix settled down in New York City in the mid-1960s and performed in Greenwich Village's predominantly white rock 'n' roll clubs.

His break came when Chas Chandler, a former member of the British Invasion band the Animals, convinced Hendrix that his music would connect with the white British bands and fans of black American blues and R&B. In 1966, Hendrix relocated to England, changing the spelling of his name from Jimmy to Jimi on the way. Chandler assembled a band for his protégé—Noel Redding on bass and Mitch Mitchell on drums—and the trio began recording. Their first release, *Are You Experienced* (1967), sold well in England, and the songs “Purple Haze” and “Hey Joe” established Hendrix as an artist worth watching.

The Jimi Hendrix Experience made its unforgettable U.S. debut at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival. Using the showmanship he learned on the chitlin circuit, Hendrix performed with an arresting, sexually suggestive style. In addition to playing his guitar behind his back and with his teeth, he made metaphoric love to the instrument before concluding the show by setting it on fire. Some critics worried that his performance pandered to white stereotypes of black male sexuality, but others were enthusiastic about his inventive playing. The bottom line was that Hendrix had captured the American rock 'n' roll community's attention. He released *Axis: Bold As Love* (1967) and *Electric Ladyland* (1968), critical and popular successes, and became one of the highest-paid performers of the era, reigning at the top of the scene until his untimely death in 1970. Hendrix's influence reverberates in rock 'n' roll. His use of volume, distortion, feedback, and electronic effects define how rock guitar should sound, and his blend of technical wizardry and passionate playing set the standard for the guitarists who have followed him.

Hendrix's relationship to black and white mainstreams demonstrates the challenges faced by a black artist in the rock milieu.<sup>52</sup> Hendrix was not marketed to black audiences; although he had black fans, his audience was predominantly white. In an era of increasing black cultural consciousness, Hendrix's association with his white band mates and the white hippie counterculture, coupled with the sound of his high-volume, blues-derived guitar playing, marginalized him from the mainstream of black American culture.<sup>53</sup> Explaining the reason black Americans accepted the black rock 'n' roll of Sly Stone, but rejected that of Hendrix, music historian Nelson George notes, “Hendrix drew from a style blacks had already disposed of; Sly shrewdly stayed just a few steps ahead of the crowd.”<sup>54</sup> And, as cultural critic Greg Tate observes, “Hendrix wasn't just a racial-political heretic but a musical one as well.”<sup>55</sup> The voice, Tate argues, was the most important instrument to black audiences, and Hendrix's vocals were far from the powerful soul man's voice that appealed to mainstream African Americans.<sup>56</sup>

In the late 1960s, Hendrix began to leave behind his showy entertainer persona and focus on musicianship. He also seemed to assert the blackness that had been muted and questioned, splitting off from his white band

mates and working with black musicians. In 1970, he released *Band of Gypsys*, the self-titled document of his new all-black band with drummer Buddy Miles and bass player Billy Cox. As with Stone's *Riot*, the “blacker” sound of the Band of Gypsys did not sit well with some of Hendrix's white fans. Up to that point, they could erase or ignore his race, characterizing him as someone who “didn't seem black.” This allowed them to account for the presence of a black man in their midst without disrupting notions of “normal” black behavior or questioning the general absence of black people in their scene. It also explained the appeal of someone from a reviled demographic. Rock critic Charles Shaar Murray sees Hendrix's “whitening” as a response to a long standing conundrum: “the central thrust of twentieth century American popular music [is] the need to separate black music (which, by and large, white Americans love) from black people (who, by and large, they don't).”<sup>57</sup> The usual approach to the dilemma is to celebrate white performers who possess “the Negro sound and feel,” but the process took a different form with Hendrix. His white fans separated him from his black identity and proclaimed his “raceless” musical brilliance.

As a black man in the white counterculture, Hendrix was hypervisible. Another experience for African Americans in rock is invisibility. For example, few people—black or white—comment on the fact that one of the producers who helped usher in the folk-rock movement was black. Tom Wilson produced Bob Dylan's first electric album—*Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), a rock 'n' roll landmark—as well as Dylan's biggest hit single, “Like a Rolling Stone” (1965).<sup>58</sup> In 1966, Wilson produced *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*, Simon and Garfunkel's debut album. It was his idea to add an electric guitar, bass, and drums to the duo's acoustic hit “The Sounds of Silence”—and the new version went to number one.<sup>59</sup> Wilson also signed experimental rockers Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground to recording contracts and produced some of their early tracks. Sometimes visible and always audible were the numerous black women who provided background vocal support to many of the best-known white artists of the era.<sup>60</sup> Black women vocalists such as Darlene Love, Minnie Riperton, Chaka Khan, Patti Austin, Claudia Lennear, Venetta Fields, Madeline Bell, and Merry Clayton lent their vocal talents to the recordings of artists such as Joe Cocker, Rod Stewart, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Steely Dan, and Dusty Springfield. White British artists in particular were passionate about black music and, in addition to styling their vocals in ways that “sounded black,” they drew on the vocal resources of black women to lend more musical authenticity to their projects. The list of artists with whom Merry Clayton recorded indicates the pervasive presence of black women in rock. Clayton sang on the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* (1969), Carole King's *Tapestry* (1971), and Joe Cocker's *With a Little Help from My Friends* (1970), as well as on recordings by Buffalo Springfield, Leon Russell, Jerry Garcia, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Neil

Young, Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Phil Ochs, and Rare Earth. Clayton is best known for her riveting vocals on the Rolling Stones' single "Gimme Shelter" (1969).

### BLACK ROCK 'N' ROLL IN THE 1970s

The crossover success of Sly and the Family Stone, Hendrix, and Motown, as well as the strong sales of the soul produced on independent labels such as Stax and Atlantic convinced major labels of the profitability of music by African American artists. In the early 1970s, they launched black music departments to produce and promote this music. Although this meant expanded opportunities for black artists, few of whom had been signed to major labels until then, the labels maintained a racially defined approach. By the end of the 1960s, rock was in place as a white youth-oriented form distinct from its parent rock 'n' roll. With few exceptions, black men and women were confined to the clearly demarcated field of black music. Still, in spite of labeling practices that separated black people from rock, the early 1970s saw a new breed of black rock'n'rollers such as the Isley Brothers, Parliament, Funkadelic, Labelle, the Ohio Players, Mandrill, Rufus (featuring Chaka Khan), War, Mother's Finest, and Betty Davis. These artists were inspired by the artistry of Stone, Hendrix, and James Brown and were influenced by the sonic and visual impact of the rock counterculture.

Usually, these bands were large, with seven, eight, or nine members—double the size of most white rock bands—and featured keyboards, horns, and percussion alongside bass, drums, and guitars. The black rock groups' "funk" rhythm, pioneered by James Brown in the late 1960s, placed the emphasis on the first beat of the measure. In funk, the bass was prominent and the polyrhythmic interplay between instruments was central. This music was confusing to a segregated marketplace. Although audible blackness in backing vocals and the efforts of white lead vocalists to sound black were common parts of rock production, the actual blackness of a lead singer and band members, coupled with the mixing of rock, soul, and Latin styles, led to black rock groups' categorization outside of rock. These bands were often "too black" and bass-heavy to fit comfortably on album-oriented rock (AOR) radio and "too rock" and raucous for black stations. Indeed, many of these black self-contained bands muted the guitar and sweetened their sound to secure airplay on black radio.<sup>61</sup> Although sometimes referred to as "black rock," the music produced by black bands during this period is usually categorized as funk, a label that maintained the racially segregated process of naming and selling music.<sup>62</sup>

The rock 'n' roll impulses of high volume, pleasurable revelry, and challenging the mainstream, however, were very much a part of the performance aesthetic of funk as exemplified by bandleader George Clinton's Funkadelic

and Parliament. During the 1960s, the Parliaments had met the expectations of the vocal group era, performing doo-wop harmonies and wearing matching uniforms and processed hair. Working on the periphery of Motown, the group had one hit, "(I Wanna) Testify" in 1967. Not long after this, Hendrix and Sly Stone captured Clinton's attention, and he set about transforming his group. He called his new band Funkadelic, a merging of funk and psychedelic, the musical genres his band was exploring. By the mid-1970s, Clinton was also leading a band with the resuscitated name Parliament. The two bands shared personnel and became known as an ever-expanding collective that included the classically trained keyboard-player Bernie Worrell and William "Bootsy" Collins, a young bass player who had cut his professional teeth in James Brown's band. With Funkadelic, Clinton developed his version of rock 'n' roll. He mined the unmentionable and celebrated the life force through irreverent references to sex and partying, while addressing threats to good times. The band played gigs with the Stooges and the MC5, white Detroit bands known for their garage rock sound. Funkadelic was similarly testing the limits of volume, distortion, and feedback; its early recordings *Funkadelic* (1970), *Free Your Mind . . . and Your Ass Will Follow* (1970), and *Maggot Brain* (1971) feature the guitar pyrotechnics of Tawl Ross and Eddie Hazel in multidimensional songs that owed as much to Pink Floyd, the English psychedelic band, as they did to Hendrix.

Funkadelic resisted the strictures of soul performance and stretched out with epic rock jams and irreverent stage antics. Band members wore oversized hats, enormous platform boots, and sparkling capes, and used stage props such as the Mothership, a spaceship that the band beckoned down to the stage with its funky riffs. These visual markers were part of the black science-fiction-meets-comic-book cosmology that Parliament-Funkadelic wove. For all their irreverence, the band also slipped in social commentary in quips such as "Think! It ain't illegal yet!" and the album title *America Eats Its Young* (1972). Funkadelic did not enjoy much chart success, but it did have cult credibility. Parliament, developed with a greater commercial focus in mind, garnered hits for the collective. In 1978, Clinton hit the jackpot with two R&B number one songs: "Flash Light" by Parliament and "One Nation under a Groove" by Funkadelic.<sup>63</sup> The music Clinton made with Parliament-Funkadelic is among the most sampled in hip-hop, and its breadth and experimental vitality inspired the next generation of black rock musicians, white funk rockers (such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers), and rap iconoclasts Outkast.

### PUNK AND ROCK IN THE 1980s

The musicians who emerged in the 1980s were the first generation to be raised with the sound of rock 'n' roll as a given and the first to come of age in a period when rights for African Americans were legally protected. As

members of the post-Civil Rights generation, many of these black musicians had grown up in integrated contexts and expected to have the same rights and access as white Americans.<sup>64</sup> They were fans of black musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, James Brown, Miles Davis, and George Clinton, as well as of white bands such as Led Zeppelin. They were also paying attention to a significant change in music that had started in the mid-1970s when a coterie of musicians that had wearied of the excesses of corporate rock responded with a stripped down sound. Eventually called punk, the new music featured simple three-chord songs that expressed the rage and disillusion of the young people who performed it. Punk bands such as London's Sex Pistols and New York's Ramones inspired a new generation of youth to pick up instruments and form bands of their own.

Among them were the young black men who formed Bad Brains, a leading band in the Washington, D.C., homegrown punk rock scene. Raised in the Maryland suburbs of the nation's capitol, Dr. Know (born Gary Miller) on guitar, Darryl Jenifer on bass, Earl Hudson on drums, and his brother H. R. (born Paul Hudson) on vocals started their band in the late 1970s. They began as a fusion band but changed their focus after hearing an album by the punk band the Dead Boys and seeing reggae artist Bob Marley.<sup>65</sup> The resulting link between punk rock energy and Rastafarian philosophy changed the sound of punk. Taking advantage of the musicianship they had developed when playing fusion, Bad Brains perfected the high-speed playing, rapid-fire lyrics, dramatic pauses, and performance intensity that characterized hardcore, the new style of punk that the quartet helped create. The band included straight-up reggae songs in their performances and recordings, and their versatility and musicianship were unusual in a scene that celebrated amateurism. Working far outside the mainstream recording industry, Bad Brains followed punk's Do It Yourself ethos and made their first recordings at local studios that were supporting the work of musicians in Washington's burgeoning punk rock scene. Their song "Pay to Cum" (1980) is often identified as hardcore's first single; their albums *I Against I* (1986) and *Attitude: The ROIR Sessions* (1989), a collection of early singles, are indispensable punk documents. The members of Bad Brains embraced Rastafarianism and sported long dreadlocks, choices that indexed their blackness. Still, although Bad Brains had black fans (many of whom went on to form bands of their own), the band stood out for being an all-black band in the white punk rock context. They were a fixture at Washington's 9:30 Club and then moved to Manhattan, where they made their name at CBGB, the birthplace of punk in the United States. Bad Brains influenced black rockers such as Fishbone and Living Colour and also hard-rocking guitar bands such as punk's Minor Threat, metal's Metallica, and indie rock's Nirvana.<sup>66</sup>

As the 1970s wound down, another major black rock 'n' roll artist emerged. Multi-instrumentalist, singer, and songwriter Prince (born Prince

Rogers Nelson) launched his eclectic career with two fairly standard R&B albums. *For You* (1978) and *Prince* (1980) displayed his musical promise and yielded "I Wanna Be Your Lover" (1979), a song that reached the pop Top 20 and hit number one on the R&B charts. With his first albums, Prince acceded to the recording industry's standard approach for handling black artists: he created music that proved successful in the R&B market before being actively marketed to the mainstream. He started to express his broad musical vision with *Dirty Mind* (1980) and *Controversy* (1981), albums on which he connected sexual and social liberation and treated the spiritual and the erotic as two sides of an enticing coin. Mining the history of black rock 'n' roll, Prince meshed hard rock, funk, and soul impulses and produced music with exemplary guitar playing, vocal expressiveness, and rhythmic energy. He performed with James Brown-style screams and spins and was a clear musical descendent of Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone. He embraced the sound of a fiery lead guitar and a vision of multiracial unity, forming a mixed-race, mixed-gender band. Prince grabbed attention through sexually evocative song titles such as "Head" and "Soft and Wet" and a stage presentation in which he wore black bikini underwear and high-heeled boots. His

Prince (as The Kid) in Albert Magnoli's 1984 film *Purple Rain*.



Warner Bros./Photofest

glossy pompadour, sexual ambiguity, and transgressive lyrics recalled Little Richard and continued the rock 'n' roll spirit of rebellion on albums such as *1999* (1982), *Purple Rain* (1984), and *Sign o' the Times* (1987).

Although Prince received a great deal of exposure on MTV, the 24-hour music-only cable television station, access to the network was not a given for black artists. Launched in 1981, when the majority of cable television subscribers were suburban whites, MTV used a format that it presumed would appeal to its white, middle-class, and under-twenty-five target audience.<sup>67</sup> Music by black performers was rarely programmed. In MTV's first year and a half, the station played 750 videos, fewer than twenty-four of which featured black artists. In 1983, funk rock guitarist Rick James was among the first to publicly charge the station with racism: his album *Street Songs* (1981) had sold three million copies, but he could not get MTV airplay. Industry executives worried that absence from MTV would deny black artists the improved sales that were almost guaranteed for artists played on MTV. Ultimately, it took pressure from CBS/Epic Records to convince MTV to program black artists. The label threatened to withhold all of its artists' videos unless the station put Michael Jackson's video for the song "Billie Jean," from his album *Thriller* (1982), into rotation. The popularity of Jackson's video helped make *Thriller* a blockbuster and paved the way for black musicians such as Prince, Lionel Richie, Donna Summer, and rock 'n' roll survivor Tina Turner on MTV.

Tina Turner's arrival on MTV was the final phase of a hard-fought comeback. Born Anna Mae Bullock, Turner started her career in the mid-1950s, when Ike Turner hired her to sing with his R&B band. Ike changed her name to Tina to help create a more exotic image.<sup>68</sup> Recording as the Ike and Tina Turner Revue even before they were married, they scored an R&B hit in 1960 with "Fool in Love" and toured tirelessly during the 1960s and early 1970s. Tina Turner was revered for her powerful voice, exuberant dancing, and shapely legs. The undisputed Queen of Rock, she appeared on the cover of the second issue of *Rolling Stone*, the counterculture's premier magazine.<sup>69</sup> After divorcing Ike in 1976, Tina started over professionally, performing in small clubs and building a show as a solo artist. She received assistance in her endeavor from white British musicians who were longtime fans. Both Rod Stewart and the Rolling Stones invited her to perform with them in 1981, giving her access to their audiences. Before long, she had secured a record deal. On *Private Dancer* (1984), Turner left behind the rough edges of R&B for a slicker sound rooted in the commercial pop of the era. It was a remarkably successful move. With the help of heavy MTV rotation of the single "What's Love Got to Do With It?," *Private Dancer* sold ten million copies. The Top 5 album had three Top 10 singles and garnered Grammy awards for Turner who, after almost three decades in the business, finally got her commercial due.<sup>70</sup>

Tina Turner in 1985



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### THE POLITICS OF BLACK ROCK

Turner's story notwithstanding, commercial success was hardly guaranteed for black rock musicians. Fishbone's trajectory exemplifies the dilemmas faced by many black rockers. The Los Angeles band made jubilant musical leaps from ska to punk to funk to metal and developed a reputation for live performances infused with frenzied energy. Formed as a sextet when they were in junior high school, Fishbone's original members were Angelo Moore on vocals and saxophone, Walt Kibby on vocals and trumpet, Kendall Jones on guitar, Chris Dowd on keyboard and trombone, and brothers John Norwood Fisher and Phillip "Fish" Fisher on bass and

drums, respectively. The band's promising first single, "Party at Ground Zero" (1985), was a euphoric, ska-inflected dance number, but its releases on Columbia Records, which included *Truth & Soul* (1988), *The Reality of My Surroundings* (1991), and *Give a Monkey a Brain* (1993), did not achieve significant chart success in spite of critical praise, consistent positive response to live shows, and inclusion in high-profile rock events such as the inaugural Lollapalooza traveling rock music festival in 1991. One common explanation was that their eclectic sound caused them to fall through the cracks, not quite right either for rock radio or for black radio. The irony was that the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Jane's Addiction, white bands that had come out of the same genre-blending Los Angeles scene as Fishbone, were commercially successful.

It seemed that racial barriers were at least partly to blame for Fishbone's situation. In spite of rock 'n' roll's countercultural image, the industry that sold the music followed the American tradition of segregation. By the mid-1980s, the recording industry had been operating with race-based assumptions about music taste for a long time: rock music was made by and for white people; black people were only interested in R&B and dance music. In 1985, a collective of New York-based African American musicians, artists, and music industry professionals formed an organization to respond to this situation. Led by cofounders Vernon Reid (a guitarist), Greg Tate (a writer), and Konda Mason (an artist manager), the Black Rock Coalition (BRC) addressed the racial segregation of music in the recording industry and provided a support network for black rock musicians playing outside the industry-dictated confines of black music. Founded during the conservative Reagan era, when Civil Rights-era gains were being eroded at the federal level, the BRC drew attention to the fact that racism was still an issue. So was historical amnesia. BRC members asserted that contrary to the dominant image of rock music as white music, the form derived from black music and was developed through the innovations of black artists.

Reclaiming the black contribution to rock 'n' roll was also a way for BRC members to justify their musical taste in the face of the common charge that black people who played rock were trying to be white. On the contrary, their argument went, they were engaged in a black cultural practice that white people had appropriated. The BRC stressed that black and white Americans alike needed to acknowledge the black roots of rock 'n' roll. Claiming that "rock and roll is black music and we are its heirs," the BRC critiqued recording industry practices that limited black musicians to only a few forms of musical expression.<sup>71</sup> Using the language of expressive freedom so valued in the rock community and of rights so important to African American political organizing, the BRC declared the musical independence of black musicians and united artists who played punk, funk, fusion,

hard rock, and metal. The organization presented concerts showcasing black rock bands and tribute shows celebrating black rock forebears. The BRC also sponsored panel discussions and released recordings that compiled the music of member bands. Over the years, artists who have affiliated with the organization include Jean Paul Bourelly, Burnt Sugar, the Bus Boys, Don Byron, the Family Stand, Dave Fiuczynski, Nona Hendryx, Kelvyn Bell, Michael Hill's Blues Mob, Meshell Ndegeocello, Sekou Sundiata, 24-7 Spyz, and Living Colour, the most commercially successful act to emerge from the BRC.

It was Living Colour guitarist Vernon Reid's frustration with the contradictory reception his all-black rock band was receiving in the mid-1980s that led him to call the meetings that started the BRC. Living Colour had

Living Colour, circa 1980s. Shown from left: Will Calhoun, Vernon Reid, Corey Glover, Muzz Skillings.



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a reputation as one of New York City's best unsigned bands, but the major label executives Reid met with were not prepared to sign a black rock band. Although the publicity that the BRC generated may have helped, the band's big break came when Rolling Stone Mick Jagger became a supporter of the band and financed some of the band's early demos. Living Colour finally got a deal—with Epic Records—and released its first album, *Vivid*, in 1988 with Reid on guitar, Corey Glover on vocals, Muzz Skillings on bass, and William Calhoun on drums. Living Colour was unquestionably a rock band. Influenced by the volume, distortion, and guitar-centered arrangements of Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and Carlos Santana as well as the propulsive rhythms of funk, the band forged a distinctive, heavy sound. The band's visibility was raised when it opened for the Rolling Stones on their 1989 Steel Wheels tour and when "Cult of Personality," a single from *Vivid*, was placed into heavy rotation on MTV. *Vivid* went platinum, and the band won Grammy awards in the rock category, an unprecedented achievement for an all-black band. The band continued its genre-crossing on follow-up albums *Time's Up* (1990) and *Stain* (1993)—Doug Wimbish replaced Skillings on the latter. Living Colour disbanded in 1995 and regrouped in 2000.

The members of Living Colour and the Black Rock Coalition made critiquing the segregated recording industry part of their mission. Other black rock 'n' roll artists who were their contemporaries eschewed this type of direct engagement while producing work that also did not fit into the black music category. In 1988, Tracy Chapman surprised the recording industry with the success of her self-titled debut album. An acoustic guitarist, singer, and songwriter, Chapman had a stripped down, folk-informed sound. Her rich alto voice and spare songs captured the imagination of a broad base of fans both black and white, male and female. Her Top 10 single "Fast Car" and the song "Talkin' Bout a Revolution" presented vignettes about people on the margins who longed for better lives. *Tracy Chapman*, a multiplatinum album, helped her garner a Best New Artist Grammy. A year later, rocker Lenny Kravitz released his debut *Let Love Rule* (1989). Like Chapman, he produced a record that returned to the aesthetic of an earlier era, drawing on Hendrix and the Beatles. Once signed to a major label, Kravitz was marketed, like Hendrix and Sly and the Family Stone, to a rock audience and, like Living Colour and Chapman, never received much airplay on black radio stations. Kravitz has received multiple Grammy awards and his albums *Are You Gonna Go My Way* (1993) and *Greatest Hits* (2000) achieved multiplatinum sales. Above all, he has enjoyed a long, commercially successful career—a rarity for black rock musicians.<sup>72</sup>

During the 1990s and 2000s, a critical mass of black rock musicians emerged. Along with Kravitz, Chapman, Living Colour, and Fishbone came Terence Trent D'Arby, Dionne Farris, Marc Anthony Thompson

(who performed under the name Chocolate Genius), Toshi Reagon, Ben Harper, Stew (born Mark Stewart) of the Negro Problem, Meshell Ndegeocello, Cody ChesnuTT, Faith, Tamar-kali, the Veldt, Apollo Heights the Family Stand; Follow for Now; Weapon of Choice; Earl Greyhound, and TV on the Radio. In spite of their growing number, most of these artists had to explain their engagement in rock and nonparticipation in rap and R&B. When rapper Mos Def formed his all-black rock group Black Jack Johnson in the early 2000s, he fielded so many questions that he told a reporter, "This is the most I've had to explain myself about any project. And if I was [sic] a White boy doing it, I wouldn't be going through this questioning. I'm treated like I'm approaching something that's foreign to me. My artistic pockets are being patted down because I want to do rock 'n' roll."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in the new millennium, the presence of black people in rock 'n' roll was still unusual enough to warrant coverage from media outlets looking for a good story. Articles discussed the latest wave of black rockers, noting their persistent attachment to a genre in which black people were at once foundational and marginal.<sup>74</sup>

The turn of the millennium also saw the arrival of books and films documenting the experiences of African Americans in rock 'n' roll.<sup>75</sup> James Spooner's self-produced, low-budget documentary *Afro-Punk* helped black punk rock fans across the United States build a sense of community through the Internet, film screenings, and concerts at local clubs. The Do It Yourself mode of production that Spooner used to make and distribute his film had long been a part of punk rock. As the new century began, musicians of all races were beginning to use the independent model. Increasingly accessible technology—low-cost, professional-quality studio equipment and computer programs for mixing music—enabled artists to produce, promote, and distribute their music on their own. The Internet facilitated the promotion of this music on artists' Web sites and through social networking sites such as Myspace.com. The online environment enabled the sale of music in digital format, challenging the primacy of compact discs as people in their teens and twenties—a crucial demographic—revealed a preference for this option. This approach allowed artists to avoid the pitfalls of major label deals (really production loans repaid by artists) and gave them greater creative control over their products. Instead of waiting to be discovered, artists could make their music on their own terms.

For African American artists who had witnessed in frustration the ineffective ways major labels promoted black rock artists such as Fishbone and who were tired of being told to play a more marketable style of black music, independent production offered an opportunity for self-determination and a respite from the racism that festered in the mainstream recording industry. In fact, the major label deal that had so preoccupied BRC members and

most fledgling rock bands in the previous decade became somewhat less important. Although a major label still offered the broadest distribution possibilities, the independent approach to making and circulating music was viable.

Limitations remain, but these technological shifts offer ways for contemporary black rock'n'rollers to circumvent old problems embedded in an industry that has historically resisted their presence and impeded their progress. A commitment to rock music puts African American musicians in the position of having to negotiate the demands and expectations of a racially segregated professional environment while following their creative preference for artistic integration. They have been involved in this struggle since the beginning of rock 'n' roll, and in the new millennium, they are still rocking, still striving for access and success.

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## Hip-hop Moguls

Christopher Holmes Smith

During the waning years of the Clinton administration, and at the peak of the dot-com stock market bubble, black entertainer-cum-entrepreneurs such as Russell Simmons, Sean "Diddy" Combs, Percy "Master P" Miller, Damon Dash, and Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter reached a new threshold of public recognition and acclaim for their ability to legitimize and diversify hip-hop's commercial appeal. In a time of imminent technological dislocation in the recording industry, all these men became famous for turning the relatively segmented market for urban music into a sprawling mainstream empire of lifestyle-based merchandise spanning fashion, restaurants, soft drinks, film and theatrical production, and personal services. Under their leadership—seemingly overnight—it became possible for the business of hip-hop culture to become a defining feature of the culture itself. This trend represented a profoundly new direction within the hip-hop tradition.

Throughout the late 1970s, 1980s, and early to mid-1990s, rappers had regularly rendered lyrical compositions that reflected a deep-seated "double-consciousness" toward the music industry. On the one hand, songs such as EPMD's "Please Listen to My Demo" expresses the ardent desire every unknown MC had to be discovered by a record label's A&R representative and summarily signed to a deal that would signal the beginning of a long and lucrative career.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, songs such as A Tribe Called Quest's "Show Business" depicts record companies and their executive leadership as nothing more than duplicitous and opportunistic hucksters intent on peddling a watered-down version of rap music and hip-hop culture to the mainstream audience for a fast profit.<sup>2</sup> Rappers' pronounced level of mistrust for big business in general, and music industry managerial practice specifically, stemmed from popular memory of how black artists and musicians had been exploited in the early days of rhythm and blues.<sup>3</sup> Throughout black America, impressions of record label procedures were significantly influenced by grassroots "stories of chart-topping