

May 2020

In Search of Harmony in Culture: An Analysis of American Rock Music and the African American Experience

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Boxill-Clark, Cleopatra, "In Search of Harmony in Culture: An Analysis of American Rock Music and the African American Experience" (2020). *Master of Arts in Humanities | Master's Theses*. 13.

<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2020.HUM.04>

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**In Search of Harmony in Culture: An Analysis of American Rock Music
and the African American Experience**

By

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A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of
California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Humanities

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2020

Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between the evolution of African American cultural identity and the evolution of rock and roll music. The Black Rock Coalition formed in 1985 as a group of black rock musicians who were frustrated that society had seemingly forgotten that rock and roll began with almost exclusively African American artists. They proposed a cultural reclaiming of rock and roll music in order to reestablish inclusiveness within the industry and within African American culture. I will retrace the narrative that the BRC suggests to discover how African American expression led to the creation of rhythm and blues, which then became a popular new genre called rock and roll in the early 1950s. I will explore how early artists broke into the business and how that process eventually influenced new music genres and outlets for African American expression. Finally, I will illustrate how African American music continues to inform rock and roll culture and how music can lead to a more culturally conscious world.

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Introduction

African American music has had a significant influence on all American mainstream music. As African American people experienced their cultural journey from the days of slavery to the present day, we observe the use of oral tradition and distinctive rhythm and lyrical stylings, setting the foundation for rock music. While the genre of rock and roll music was born in the 1950s via African American musicians such as Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Fats Domino, the association between rock music and African American musicians began to steadily decline until the early 1980's when black rock acts were being denied recording contracts. Formerly, rhythm and blues music was rebranded and ultimately popularized as rock and roll, but became less associated with African American people as more white artists created rock and roll music. Black audiences eventually began to feel less connected to the genre. The separation between rock music and the African American community following the civil rights era grew as the struggle to establish and balance two objectives. One was to be accepted into a singular American identity and the other to retain a unique black identity. Ironically, rock music is inherently both an American tradition and a black tradition, but its roots had been forgotten. Despite this separation, African American perspectives within rock music have remained. Ideas relating to black culture and socio-economic disposition can be heard and felt throughout the evolution of Rock music. Cheryl L Keys, musician and associate professor of ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles, characterized the African American vernacular in

music as having the voice of a sage philosopher. A sage philosopher is well versed in community and cultural beliefs and values. They make critical assessments and scrutinize rationality while setting aside their personal beliefs. Keys goes on to explain:

Sage philosophers interrogate, 'scrutinize rationally,' past Western-generated music theoretical concepts when applied to black music and when necessary replace them with appropriate realizations that can only be made possible and elucidated by, in this case, a cultural insider. (Keyes 16)

This unique viewpoint is defined by situational awareness and societal critique that motivates change. It emerged as early as African American spirituals and work songs during slavery leading to early blues music. The coupling of this point of view and musical style is the basis for all rock and roll music as we know it today.

The same music, which was once categorized as rhythm and blues, came to be known as rock and roll music in the 1950s. This music built a reputation for documenting journeys, validating struggles, and celebrating triumphs. It also served as a comfort tool to encourage and entertain as a way to distract from the problems of everyday life. Rock and roll music appealed to a young audience and united people and created a sense of community. However, it eventually lost its valuable roots which were firmly grounded in the African American experience.

In music, mainstream popularity often leads to conforming to industry expectations rather than artistic freedom. Artists creating the music they genuinely desire to make from their unaltered viewpoint is the goal. This

authenticity in art requires full autonomy to exercise artistic expression. Authenticity in art is situated in direct opposition to most mass-produced art, which is impersonal. It has the singular purpose of making money. As rock and roll music became more popular and more lucrative, record executives promoted more white musicians to promote the form. While this process of whitewashing sold records, prominent figures in rock and roll such as Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, and The Rolling Stones graciously credit black music as being highly influential in their musical construction. By giving credit in this way, these artists are helping to properly acknowledge roots and preserve an authentic form of rock and roll.

The history of African American cultural expression is rich with traditions born from genuine response to real-life experience. The declaration to preserve authentic music as a united culture is a powerful statement. Rock music continues to question and inform society from the point of freedom and unfiltered expression. Rock music is usually presented in an unapologetic and sometimes controversial way. Birthed out of the African American experience, rock music is perpetually informed by those aligned with counterculture, and people within rock culture pride themselves as individuals above all.

A pivotal moment occurred in the 1980s when a group of black musicians and colleagues addressed the disassociation between African Americans and rock music. They decided to take action. The Black Rock Coalition was formed in 1985 by guitarist Vernon Reid, journalist Greg Tate, singer D.K. Dyson, and producer Konda Mason. The BRC members who were

all of a similar age had witnessed the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Nationalist Movement and the Black Arts Movements of the 1960s, all of which laid the foundation for understanding their own identity as black people and black artists. Their main concern centered around the music industry's refusal to accept black rock artists and the negative criticism from black peers questioning their blackness. All of these issues stopped black rock from thriving and interfered with creative choice for black musicians and their supporters. The main goal of the BRC was to reclaim the African American roots that had seemingly been erased from the story of rock and roll music. They were faced with the task of finding the balance between music and race, content and context, and art and politics. (uclabunchecenter) Their ultimate goal was to become advocates for black musicians seeking a future in rock music. The initial agreed-upon objectives from the BRC's first official meeting were as follows:

1. Performance outlets for progressive Black artists
2. Recording opportunities for progressive Black artists
3. Videotape recording opportunities for the archival documentation of cultural events
4. Educational opportunities for people inside and outside the organization in the form of lectures, workshops, library resources, audio-visual resources, and public forums/discussions.
5. Creative funding and fund location resources for individual artist projects
6. Networking opportunities so that like-minded individuals can come together and share ideas and resources. (Mahon 89)

The BRC inadvertently started their own Black Cultural Arts Movement as a result of casual conversations and airing gripes over the reasons they had not yet made it big in the music industry. Mahon notes how founding member, Konda Mason characterized the BRC as follows:

In characterizing this organization as the Harlem Renaissance 'with a twist' Konda links the BRC to previous African American art movements and locates its members in a long and illustrious history of African Americans who have used language to place themselves on the cultural and political map. (Mahon 85)

The organization's passion for music and its ability to unite people enabled them to examine the reflective relationship between African American culture and rock music culture. America has always maintained an intimate relationship with music as one of many vehicles for freedom of speech, as well as freedom of cultural and religious expression.

While the impact of the Black Rock Movement is still slow-moving, today's music climate encourages the blurring of music genres. African American rock musicians and rock fans are still in the minority, but the environment is welcoming. Advances in technology and the download age means that fans have access to a wide variety of music. Additionally, internet recording and distribution technology have provided musicians freedom from being forced to choose a particular musical style that aligns with their race. This is a freedom which, up until the advent of such technology, had primarily been reserved for white musicians. "For white artists working under the rubric 'rock' has long meant the freedom to expropriate any style of Black music - funk, reggae, blues, soul, jazz, gospel, salsa, as infinitum - then sell it

to the widest possible audience.” (Mahon 89) New musicians have the option to independently record and distribute their music, giving them much more creative freedom. African American artists now have the initial ability to align with whichever genre they choose without having to convince music executives of its marketability.

History has proven that the art form known as rock and roll is derived from black music. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, the form evolved, and so did the demographic of fans and artists themselves. The music industry responded by marketing rock and roll music to its growing young white demographic. The BRC recognized that the difficulties they faced while attempting to enter the music industry as black rock artists could be helped through a grassroots movement to reclaim rock music as a black art form. By doing so, they reinforced the notion that rock music can be a multi-racial platform. It has the potential to become a beacon of American freedom transcending stereotypes for all people who choose to align themselves with this art form.

Chapter One of this thesis examines the similarities between African American identity and rock and roll culture. The definition of “black rock” is described here as well as the struggle to find authenticity as an artist even though the industry and society fail to see the value of black rock. Chapter Two of this thesis examines the history of African American self-expression. Starting with early African American spirituals and work songs up through to today's rap music, African Americans have used music in celebratory ways, as

encouragement during struggles and in protest of the government. Chapter Three of this thesis examines the birth of rock and roll music. Early pioneers Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Jimi Hendrix are featured, along with how the geographical origins, introduced in Chapter Two, influenced musical style and career opportunity. Chapter Four of this thesis examines the current state of rock and roll music. Current rock artists honoring early African American rock and roll musicians are featured. The current recording environment and new black rock artists are discussed as well as their ability to unite and inform audiences with the freedom to make music that is not required to fit the confines of rigid categorization rules imposed by the recording industry.

Chapter 1- Rock Identity vs. Black Identity; the Challenges and the Unity

When comparing two cultures like rock culture and African American culture, we must determine how and why they either come together or assimilate. Keeping in mind that rock and roll music is an American-grown art form, it is essential to observe how African American culture evolved within the art form. Conversely, it is imperative to observe how rock culture evolved to expel African American culture. It is equally, if not more important, to recognize how the identity of rock music has changed over time to document significant changes impacting mainstream American society. This is reminiscent of the perspective of the sage philosopher frequently present in black forms of music.

In the realm of black art, there is a great fear of appropriation or assimilation as a result of comingling. Often there is either a white ideal that black artists aspire to or innovation or style used solely in black art that is adapted by white artists. This process can be detrimental to the form. With the art form known as rock and roll music, the opposite is true. Rock music is improved when it fuses with other genres. The notion that black people who participate in a rock or punk rock lifestyle aspire to be white is a common fallacy. In reality, most black rock artists and black rock fans are steadfast in their black identities. As black artists, they communicate and inspire one another to create a broader definition of what it means to be black. They also disrupt the form itself by challenging each other to achieve continued mastery by nurturing relationships and gleaning inspiration from fellow white artists.

Historically, we have seen the same communication and redefinition process among African American authors and filmmakers.

Contemporary subgenres of rock and roll music include but are not limited to Punk Rock, Hard Rock, and Alternative Rock. They all appeal to youth who feel alienated from mainstream culture. There is an undeniable relationship between the musical expression in rock and the feeling of alienation as a result of race, socio-economic background, and gender. Rock music is controversial, rebellious and has often been used as a tool for expressing disdain for government and social inequality. It represents a departure from mainstream America in an unapologetically edgy fashion. For this reason, the true nature of rock music has evolved to speak directly to, and unite, a diverse group of like-minded individuals. So why is there a misconception that rock music is a genre of music created and consumed by young white males only? The answer lies mainly in the music industry itself, but it also lies in the evolution of African American identity.

By the 1980s, in a sharp departure from its early beginnings, rock music was no longer considered a black genre of music. The Black Rock Coalition was formed in 1985 by guitarist Vernon Reid, journalist Greg Tate, singer D.K. Dyson, and producer Konda Mason. They are a non-profit organization whose purpose is to promote and lobby for black rock music through a cultural reclaiming process. The Black Rock Coalition, also known as the BRC, began to grow and define its mission just as Vernon Reid's band Living Colour began its rise to mainstream fame. Although the band formed in 1984, it was not until

1989 when the band toured as the opening act for the Rolling Stones that the band began to gain exposure and mainstream success. Despite Living Colour's apparent musical talent, major record labels were still reluctant to sign a black rock band. It was Mick Jagger's personal influence that finally helped Living Colour get signed to a major record label. (Mahon 6-7)

Reid and the other members of the BRC conducted frequent meetings discussing experiences and challenges they faced in dealing with record company executives. The capitalist climate of the time had overshadowed the process of securing talent. It had become increasingly profitable to make artists adhere to strict popular genres that divided artists by race. Most executives either flat out rejected black rock artists or encouraged them to alter their music to conform to more mainstream black genres such as soul, R&B, or rap in an effort to market them more quickly and ultimately sell more records. The pure statistical supply and demand nature of the music industry was one major catalyst that helped to remove the African American presence from rock and roll music. Another major catalyst was the fact that record executives were willing to invest in white rock acts in a way that nurtured their artistic creativity, but were unwilling to do so for black rock artists. In the documentary *Electric Purgatory: The Fate of the Black Rocker*, Vernon Reid used the example of how Pink Floyd recorded seven albums prior to recording *Dark Side of the Moon*, which has been critically acclaimed as one of the greatest albums of all time. They were an experimental band making non-conventional rock music. Somehow their efforts were supported and funded by the same

industry that repeatedly closed the door on black rock bands because they considered black rock music to be too much of a gamble. Reid went on to point out how black rock acts were being denied the opportunity to discover their true potential because no one wanted to invest in multiple albums. Artists had no concrete feedback. Record executives expected instant success from black artists, but in the eyes of the industry, that was only possible when black artists made black music. Rock music, in their eyes, was not black music. (Gayle)

The boundaries set by industry standards and the policing by industry executives led to a kind of cultural politics. Industry professionals and their unwillingness to accept black rock is what inspired the BRC to take action. This denial of black rock limited its public exposure which further suppressed demand and perpetuated the stereotype that black people and rock music do not go together. By excavating the roots of rock and roll and showcasing its black history, the BRC was determined to reinsert black people into rock music. The BRC also seized the opportunity to support, mentor and advocate for black rock artists creating more alternatives to black mainstream music (uclabunchecenter)

Cultural anthropologist Maureen Mahon pondered the term "black rock." Is this term redundant or an oxymoron? Mahon determined that to answer such a question depended on generational positioning. People who came of age in the early 1950s when rock and roll music was first introduced undeniably recognized rock music as a black art form noting pioneers such as Chuck

Berry, Fats Domino, and Little Richard. On the other hand, people who came of age in the post-1960s Civil Rights era recognize rock music as predominantly if not a solely white form. (uclabunchecenter)

The question remains, what is black rock? Simply put, the definition of black rock has evolved alongside the development of mainstream rock music. Just like mainstream rock, black rock features live instruments most centrally the guitar. Black musicians were fluid in their art and, therefore, continually progressing and adapting. For this reason, the BRC welcomed artists and supporters of all forms of black music. In order to understand and ultimately change the common misconception that rock music is not a black art form, Mahon suggests that the Black Rock Coalition chose to use the term “Black Rock” in its name to spark conversation over this topic:

The category black rock was a direct challenge to the narrow understanding of black cultural production that dominated decision making in the music industry and people’s everyday thinking. In addition to being an aesthetic category, ‘black rock’ was also a political concept, one that BRC members developed to articulate and legitimate an aesthetic position that racialized thinking had rendered incomprehensible (Mahon 8)

The BRC’s goal was not just to promote and uplift black rock artists, but also to reclaim rock music as a black art form by creating a demand for black rock music through a grassroots movement. This movement would allow black artists to disrupt the stereotypes of black musicians.

Early on, the BRC promoted a black rock band called Civil Rite. They released an album entitled *Corporate Dick*, which directly took aim at

navigating the politics of the music industry and stereotypes as black rock artists. The song "Black Assid," included lyrics like this:

*I am big and black
 And I'm intimidating you
 That's okay
 I intimidate me, too
 I am loved and pretty
 And I'm bothering you
 That's okay
 I bother me, too (Ruffin)*

The song title itself is reminiscent of blues pioneer Ma Rainey and her song "Black Bottom," recorded in 1928. Both song titles imply, "here I am, I'm black, and here is my black rear end; love it or hate it." Later on, in "Black Assid," the lyrical question is posed, "Should I dance, should I bang my head?" (Ruffin) This is the perfect illustration of how black rock artists were being faced with the choice of making styles of music considered mainstream black music, like dance music or to continue on struggling to forge a path as a head-banging rock and roll artist. The lyric also represents an awareness of how white audiences perceive their music. As black people struggle to establish cultural identity awareness as Americans and as black people, W.E.B Du Bois defined this as "double consciousness". He describes the phenomenon as being how a person sees one's self and the way everyone else perceives that person:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 8)

It is quite surprising that both Civil Rite and Ma Rainey called attention to their blackness using similar sassy song titles 75 years apart, and the sentiment is still valid.

Artists like Civil Rite used their music to shine a light on the perceived problematic nature of black rock music, "Their music represented a breach of the racial etiquette that keeps black Americans confined to a limited set of separate and unequal positions and practices that are widely understood to be appropriately black." (Mahon 8) This begs the question: What is "appropriately black" music, and who is the gatekeeper of that definition? As previously discussed, the overall corporate climate of the music industry sought out artists to supply music based solely on what executives perceived to be mainstream demand. This demand was based on a negligible supply of black rock artists. Many people blamed information tracking such as Nielsen Soundscan and the push to restrict artists into sellable popular music categories. Still, others looked for answers within the black community. (Gayle)

The music industry controlled which artists were best suited to promote hits based on public expectations; however, the black art aesthetic, emphasized black authenticity. Black authenticity was determined within the black community. In her 2003 lecture at the University of California at Los Angeles,

Mahon pointed out that the challenge with post-liberated African American cultural identity was the competing interests of desegregation and the Civil Rights movement on the one hand, and the Black Nationalist movement on the other hand. She continues to point out that the goal of the Civil Rights movement was for the United States government to acknowledge equality and advocate for a singular, united American culture made up of people from all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The Black Cultural nationalist movement of the 1960s, however, focused on preserving black cultural identity and rejecting the idea of assimilation. It sought to instill pride in black identity and demonstrate autonomy within black communities. (uclabunchecenter) All things considered, the challenge at hand was to reclaim black history and identity while moving forward within mainstream white America as equals, but with distinct cultural identities. The search for authenticity included the process of reclaiming rock music as a black form. The BRC served to reassure black rock artists that they would be able to collaborate and be inspired by white rock artists while being secure in their own black identity.

Many members of the BRC enjoyed a diverse middle-class upbringing. Born in the mid-1960s, they were experienced in the civil rights movement and the integration of schools. This keen awareness proved to secure what Maureen Mahon calls cultural capital: "Knowledge, influence, and power based on cultural rather than economic resources" (Mahon 42). BRC members observed similar experiences as post-liberated middle-class African Americans. Many members experienced living in a predominantly black urban community but

attending a private school populated predominantly by white students. This led to a broader worldview than those who remained segregated. Many BRC members would not have otherwise been exposed to a wide variety of rock music had it not been for this diverse home and school dynamic. (Mahon 38-58)

During the first few meetings, BRC members and shared the personal stories of their upbringing as well as their experiences of trying to make a name for themselves as black rock musicians. They realized that both white people and black people viewed rock and roll music as a white genre. The BRC felt the overwhelming need to insert black rock into the black public sphere. The most effective way to reclaim the form was to create a demand. To do this, they needed to create a genuine interest in the form by curating positive interactions with rock and black rock music and offering a black historical context along the way. To date, the BRC continues to promote, mentor, and network a wide array of black artists encouraging live performances in a variety of venues, including urban venues and cultural festivals. One successful concert consisted of a tribute to Otis Blackwell. This African American songwriter wrote iconic rock songs such as Elvis Presley's "All Shook Up" and "Don't Be Cruel" and Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire." While songwriters do not often seek the spotlight in the same way that performers do, it might come as a surprise that an African American man had written so many famous songs for the most famous white rock and roll artists (Black Rock Coalition)

While African American fans of rock music still represent a small portion of the demographic of fans attending live mainstream rock performances such as Metallica or Aerosmith, their presence is welcome. Many die-hard rock fans are artists or musicians themselves, and they recognize that the history of rock music and the evolution of all music, in general, relies on a wide variety of musical influence. Rock music also relies on artists from all walks of life who have a desire to tell their stories in an authentic and unfiltered way through their music. While past mainstream black rock artists were few and far between such as Prince or Lenny Kravitz, recent acts such as Fantastic Negrito and Gary Clark Jr. prove that black rock needs exposure rather than a label to be successful and appeal to the masses. It has become more difficult now than ever to categorize artists into one particular genre. This is a move in the right direction. For the BRC, part of the reclaiming process included reclaiming creative freedom and new opportunities for worldwide distribution. This is a legacy that was left by early pioneers of rock and roll music.

Chapter 2 - History of African American Cultural expression

The BRC's desire to link rock and roll music to African American culture unearths a rich journey through the history of African American expression. African American cultural expression can be seen in all forms of African American art, including music, dance, prose, and poetry with various purposes including celebratory, religious, or ritual and protest. Members of the BRC drew from this history to encourage an awareness of African American participation in the development of rock and roll music. It is important to identify significant historical moments and locations sparking African American cultural expression through art before taking a deeper dive into the early careers of significant musicians directly influencing rock and roll music beginning in the early 1950s which will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Negro spirituals and work songs are among the oldest forms of African American musical expression. This music represents the slave's perspective, the hardships they endured, and their exposure to the King James Bible. Negro spirituals are a kind of folk song in that they are born out of oral tradition. These songs were taught to each new generation; therefore, their original authors are usually unknown. As a result, it is difficult to trace the time and place of origin of Negro spirituals. The most recognizable forms of spirituals are thought to have originated around the early eighteenth century. (S. Brown 45)

Spiritual and work song characteristics included keeping time through stomping and clapping and utilizing syncopated beats. Some songs included stringed instruments like the banjo or any other makeshift variation thereof.

Many songs utilized an antiphonal or call and response style of singing together with sorrowful lyrics. Biblical references from the book of Exodus spoke to the aspiration to be free of slavery like in the song “Go Down Moses”. Slaves drew a connection between themselves as slaves and the story of the Israelites as slaves in Egypt. The motifs were adapted to represent the slaves and their experiences. In songs, slaves referred to themselves as Israelites, Moses was their leader, Egypt-land was the American South, and Pharaoh was the slave master. Slaves began to sing and communicate with one another using these codes. Some slave owners caught on, and as a result, the singing of songs like the "Go Down Moses" with the chorus "let my people go" was banned in some slave states. As early forms of African American musical expression, negro spirituals were developed for communication and protest. They voiced a longing for freedom in life, while spiritual elements expressed faith that in death, rest and freedom were guaranteed. (S. Brown 47)

The following song called “Jesus Gonna Make Up My Dyin’ Bed” illustrates a desire to secure an “easy” death in contrast to living a hard life.

*When you heah that I’m a-dyin’,
I don’t want you to be afraid;
All I want my frien’s to do
Is take de pillow from under my haid*

Refrain:

*Well, well, well, so I kin die easy,
Well, well, well, so I kin die easy,
Well, well, well, so I kin die easy,
Jesus gonna make up my dyin’ baid.* (Dobie 56-57)

Like many Negro spirituals, this song became a popular gospel song and was changed and adapted throughout its many incarnations. Gospel blues

musician Blind Willie Johnson's recorded his variation of the song in 1927. Bob Dylan covered Johnson's version of the song in 1962, followed by Led Zeppelin's cover in 1975 using the title "In My Time of Dying." (Songfacts, In My Time of Dying by Led Zeppelin - Songfacts)

Blues music in America was created from joining elements of the English ballad and the call and response elements of African American work songs. While it is difficult to confirm exactly when blues music was established, its most notable emergence likely occurred following the Civil War. Former slaves continued to use music to encourage and distract from difficult daily life as they struggled to now make a life for themselves in America. Many blues songs from this time feature themes about traveling to symbolize the African American journey through America as free people. (Redd 33)

The Great Migration occurred between 1917 and 1970 when 6 million African Americans relocated from the southern United States to the North, West, and Midwest in an effort to escape segregation and the Jim Crow laws. The migration resulted in a host of opportunities that would have otherwise remained untapped had individuals not relocated to a more favorable lifestyle for African Americans. It was in no way easy for blacks to leave the only life they knew to embark on a journey to the unknown. Nevertheless, out of the Great Migration, budding authors and musicians were able to cultivate their artistic talents. Many used their talents to preserve history through the retelling of their own and their ancestor's life experiences using art. (TED)

Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Toomer are writers associated with the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. The movement represented an awakening of African American talent and creativity. The Harlem Renaissance was an opportunity for African Americans to embrace their unique cultural perspective through art while also cultivating intellect through literacy. Most importantly, they were able to express their identity and document their own cultural history freely. Jazz music emerged in African American communities in New Orleans as a fusion of Blues and Swing. The key elements of the music included improvisation and syncopated beats. ("Jazz." The Harvard Dictionary of Music) This music served as a soundtrack for African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. With their newly discovered freedom of cultural expression, life was improvisation. In 1934 the 125th Street Apollo Theater reopened with a shift in its marketing goal from burlesque to variety acts with the intent to attract the growing African American community in Harlem. (Apollo Theatre) The strong connection between the African American experience, music and Harlem was reflected in jazz poet Langston Hughes' poem called *Juke Box Love Song*:

*I could take the Harlem night
and wrap around you,
Take the neon lights and make a crown,
Take the Lenox Avenue busses,
Taxis, subways,
And for your love song tone their rumble down.
Take Harlem's heartbeat,
Make a drumbeat,
Put it on a record, let it whirl,
And while we listen to it play,
Dance with you till day—
Dance with you, my sweet brown Harlem girl. (Hughes 178)*

In the early 1950s, many African Americans from the deep south were drawn to Chicago in hopes of finding steady work in steel mills. Since many of them were musicians, they continued the tradition of using their art to express their experiences; however, making a living as a musician was rarely an aspiration for black musicians, particularly from the south. (Videos) Buddy Guy, Howlin' Wolf, and Willie Dixon were a few of the most notable early Chicago blues musicians. Chicago blues evolved from the Delta blues, which was an early form of blues originating in the deep south. The aforementioned artists traveled to Chicago in search of professional music opportunities. Their careers were launched by two Jewish brothers who immigrated from Poland. Leonard and Phil Chess founded Chess Records in Chicago in 1950. The record company was instrumental in curating and disseminating black music such as soul, gospel, blues, and rock and roll securing the future of African American musical expression. (Videos)

As black writers and musicians continued to pursue their dreams during the Great Migration, they looked toward one another for inspiration and encouragement during this difficult journey. Those already on the road to success did not hesitate to assist a fellow struggling black artist. Little Richard helped to launch the careers of Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, Sam Cooke, and Billy Preston as they were featured as members of his band or his opening acts. Little Richard also assisted the Rolling Stones early on in their career by allowing them to sleep on the floor in his house. Decades later, Mick Jagger paid the favor forward by playing a key role in helping to launch the career of

Vernon Reid and his band Living Colour. It was out of this diverse blend of community and the desire to cultivate music that links African American people as an integral part of the foundation of American music.

With the 1960s and 1970s came the Black Arts Movement. The movement focused on black differences with an emphasis on black empowerment and promoted the idea that black is beautiful. The Black Arts movement picked up where the Harlem Renaissance left off, with the added belief that black artists are able to realize their authentic talent through embracing their black identity. (uclabunchecenter)

Alex Haley's miniseries *Roots* aired in January of 1977, and it provided a vivid retelling of the Middle Passage through post-Civil War from a slave's perspective. (Roots) It also introduced the topic of black heritage into public thought to all American people. Coupling prolific stories of African American's and their harrowing journeys and immense struggles, along with their creativity and self-awareness, black artists voiced all of this through their work. Protest songs by African American artists of the 1960's and 1970's tackled issues of Civil Rights, the Vietnam War, and black empowerment. Some examples of Protest songs were: Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" (1964), James Brown's "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968), Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" (1971), and Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (1971). Protest songs represented a deliberate stance on American social issues and a telling of history from a black person's perspective.

In 1986 Paul Simon recorded the album *Graceland* in Johannesburg South Africa. While he collaborated with black South African musicians on the project, he was heavily criticized and accused of breaking a cultural boycott because South Africa was an apartheid state at the time. Simon viewed his collaboration as a way of celebrating black South African music and culture during their time of overwhelming oppression. A longtime lover of various musical and cultural aesthetics, Simon had previously worked with Jamaican and South American musicians. He explored and promoted their native musical styles. The *Graceland* album inspired a tour with the South African musicians. This created a tremendous amount of exposure and interest worldwide. When Simon returned to the United States, he used his experience as inspiration to compose and collaborate with African American artists too. To some, this was an authentic gesture of admiration, but others viewed this as exploitation. Paul Simon's fame played a crucial role in showcasing the artistry in a compassionate light for the South African musicians. It was his way of showing the world the beauty of black art even when created in a state of adversity.

In the 1980s, Black Entertainment Television and programs such as Yo! MTV Raps allowed the public access to images of black musicians, comedians, and lifestyles. Soul, R&B, and rap music were most frequently featured on BET and Yo! MTV Raps. (Black Entertainment Television) Rap music had a profound impact on African American cultural expression. Rap songs told a story. It was usually a biographical narrative that could be centered around anything from

everyday life in urban areas to the plight for social justice. The genre began in the 1970s but grew to new mainstream popularity in the 1980s and 1990s.

Ice-T, known musically as a gangster rapper, had a side project band by the name of Body Count. It was and still is a hardcore thrash metal band. In 1992 the band came under scrutiny for releasing a song called "Cop Killer." The song was written in response to the infamous Rodney King incident, where a black motorist was beaten by five white police officers in Los Angeles, California in March of 1991. In 1992, a jury acquitted the officers of all charges, and riots ensued in protest of what was perceived to be a blatant case of racism.

Although the subject of the song "Cop Killer" aligned with the anti-cop sentiment heard in songs released by other gangster rappers, Body Count was a thrash metal band performing to a white demographic. The concern of fueling the flames of the racial tension at the time was valid; however, what was overlooked with regard to this protest song by Body Count was its intended target audience. Ice-T's song raised the flag of systemic racism to a predominately white male audience, and the thrash metal form ignited an emotional response. This was considered problematic as the song had a widespread influence that included white males within the hardcore rock culture. In the end, "Cop Killer" was removed from the band's album; however, the song became exponentially more popular in the midst of the controversy. (Songfacts, Cop Killer by Body Count - Songfacts)

The Black Rock Coalition recognized the origins and framework of African American cultural expression. They aimed to reconnect that history to

the production of rock and roll music going forward. BRC members currently advocate for a continued embracing of all musical expression for all artists. They argue that rejecting rock and roll music means missing out on a golden opportunity to reach a wider audience and an opportunity for black culture and rock culture to develop cultural consciousness.

Chapter 3 - The Birth of Rock Music

Following the analysis of African American cultural expression, we observed a key point. The interest in developing black music was a shared vision between black musicians and white record producers, the Chess brothers. The relationship between black musicians and white record producers was vital in the dissemination of rhythm and blues and ultimately, the early development of rock and roll music.

While examining the story of how rock and roll began, it is imperative to consider two competing narratives. One includes the element of racism in America, and the other omits it. The narrative that includes racism brings to light the social marginalization African Americans faced even as prominent figures in the early days of rhythm and blues and rock and roll music. The other narrative downplays the contributions of early African American rhythm and blues and rock and roll musicians, only focusing on how rock and roll flourished at the hands of white musicians. By sterilizing the story of rock and roll, the African American roots related to the emergence of the form are greatly understated. At the same time, it misses the opportunity to showcase the form as a perspective of America as a melting pot. Mahon illustrates how both white and black communities contributed to the development of rhythm and blues as follows:

In the period after World War II, performers blended blues, hillbilly music, jazz, and gospel to produce rhythm 'n' blues, rockabilly, and eventually rock and roll. These forms were associated with poor blacks and poor whites, the bottom of the southern class caste system (Mahon 147)

Music executive Ralph S Peer established the term “race music” to identify all recordings made by African American artists. During the 1920s up until the 1940s, any recording made by African American artists, in the style of jazz, swing, blues, or gospel, it was labeled "race music." One of the main purposes of imposing this label was to inform mail-order consumers as to which artists were white and which artists were African American. (Race Music)

Flagging African American artists aligned with other segregation practices in America at the time; however, it did not stop the growing popularity and consequently, the demand for blues, i.e. race music, by white consumers. In the 1940s, race music became more celebratory and up-tempo utilizing electric guitars, drums, and other brass instruments. “Consequently, in 1948 Billboard, following the lead of RCA Records, dropped the term ‘race music’ as a classification label. It was shortly thereafter that Billboard began to use the term rhythm and blues.” (Redd 34). All of these efforts to differentiate black music from mainstream white music evolved over time. The real question is who had the power to do so and why did they do so? The answer is that record and radio executives, white mainstream America, and the black community in America have all had the power and various reasons to separate black music from white music at various moments throughout history.

In the early 1950s, popular music acts such as Doris Day and Perry Como appealed to the American adult white middle class. These popular artists were considered safe and non-controversial. By contrast, when rock and roll emerged, it appealed to American teenagers and was considered much edgier.

Post War American teen culture was important to the rock and roll movement in America. Teens and their disposable income were linked to the rapid growth of rock and roll music. Bill Haley has been credited as one of the first acts to perform under the category of rock and roll music; however, many African American artists influenced the form. They contributed various musical characteristics from different geographical regions of the United States to develop the signature sound and expressive nature of rock and roll. (Videos)

While Bill Haley and the Comets blended country, rhythm and blues and pop in 1952, African American artists such as Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Little Richard emerged as American rock and roll artists by way of southern rhythm and blues. Different versions of rock music emerged, and their sound reflected the geographical location from which it was derived. In the north, musicians drew from their urban roots. In the south, versions of rock and roll emerged from country blues which was directly descended from slavery via work songs and negro spirituals. In Chicago, electric blues emerged as a result of African American musicians who grew up in the south listening to country blues, but they also incorporated amplified musical instruments especially the electric guitar. Bill Haley's rockabilly sound of rock and roll music gained popularity throughout the east coast, while Fats Domino's version of rock and roll music was as a result of having performed it within the New Orleans rhythm and blues and jazz scene since the early 1940s. Little Richard, who was born and raised in Macon Georgia, also began his career by playing and recording within the thriving New Orleans music scene. (Videos)

Up until today's download age, radio disc jockeys played key roles in popularizing music in America. In 1951, Alan Freed, a white disc jockey from Cleveland Ohio, hosted a "popular American" music program and upon discovering rhythm and blues music, he decided to add African American programming. In the tradition of segregated music programming, the Moon Dog show followed Freed's main popular music show program. In 1954 Freed's show relocated to a new radio station in New York. When he was forced to rename the Moon Dog program or face legal issues, Freed began to refer to the show which featured rhythm and blues music as the "Rock and Roll Show." (Redd 36) Freed also hosted live rhythm and blues performances which also helped to expose the music to more people, thus creating more interest in the already popular genre and associating the term rock and roll with rhythm and blues music. The access to live music helped to popularize the music as audiences could appreciate the unfiltered, unprocessed sound.

Rhythm and blues music was renamed, rebranded, and essentially appropriated for a mainstream white audience; however, given the true nature of African American music and oral tradition, this was a positive step forward in promoting the fruits of African American musical expression. This was also vital for the budding careers of African American rock artists. Redd explains the practice of white recording artists covering popular songs originally recorded by black musicians as follows:

It was standard practice in the mid-fifties for white artists to record songs initially released by black artists. Consequently, the publisher would earn money from both markets. But black artists were prevented

from competing in the white-controlled economic pop market; it was de facto economic segregation. (Redd 38)

Pat Boone did several covers including “Tutti-frutti” by Little Richard and “Ain't That a Shame” by Fats Domino and one of Bill Haley’s big hits, “Shake Rattle and Roll” was a cover originally performed by Big Joe Turner. Although the covers were not necessarily appropriation, it was a blatant attempt at whitewashing black music. Boone even expressed the desire to change the word “Ain’t” to “Isn’t” in Fats Domino’s song. It was an attempt to adjust the music to fit a more palatable white rock and roll audience. As much as producers wanted the covers to have more exposure than the original, many fans sought out the originals which ultimately boosted sales for the African American artists as well. In the case of Pat Boone, the originals became much more popular than his covers. Audiences preferred authenticity over imitation. While cover songs by white artists were meant to outsell the originals performed by black musicians, that was not always the result. Disc Jockey’s like Alan Freed banned covers like the ones recorded by Pat Boone in an effort to present authentic rhythm and blues.

In the early 1950s, Chuck Berry had already been performing at small clubs in his hometown of St. Louis Missouri to support his family. In 1955 Berry had traveled to Chicago in search of a record deal. At the advice of Muddy Waters, he auditioned with the Chess brothers. At the time, they were actively searching for an artist to blend Chicago’s electric blues style with rock and roll. Chuck Berry’s sound fit the bill. The Chess brothers also went on to promote Bo Diddley. (Videos)

As mentioned earlier, safe and non-controversial artists had a better chance of gaining mainstream success. While Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Fats Domino gained success among black and white audiences and by extension, allowing them to flourish on the billboard pop charts, African American artists such as Frankie Lymon gained even more success. The Teenagers featuring Frankie Lymon had a youthful and innocent “white” sound (Videos). By promoting sterilized cover songs performed by white artists and “safe” black artists coupled with the rebranding of rhythm and blues music, the identity of rock and roll music was put into question. At the same time, there was a desire to promote white artists with a natural ability to perform rock and roll music authentically with the same spirit and vitality as black artists.

Although there was an emerging Memphis country blues scene, African American recording artists were unable to record their music. In 1950 recording engineer Sam Phillips opened a recording service and then eventually his own record company including and featuring black blues musicians. White audiences in Memphis grew up listening to country and western music, so the music that Sam Phillips was promoting was of little interest to them until country artists began to use blues elements in their music. The most notable musician to use blues elements and capture the attention of country blues music fans in Memphis was Elvis Presley. (Videos) “Elvis Presley began his career as a rhythm ‘n’ blues recording artist, performing rhythm and blues music. As a matter of fact, Sam Phillips had signed Presley to a recording

contract expressly because he was a white singer who ‘sounded’ black.” (Redd 40) Coincidentally, it wasn’t until Elvis covered the Arthur Crudup song “That’s alright, Mama,” did Phillips express any interest in Elvis. To this day, there is a distinct difference between white artists performing to uplift and carry on the blues tradition with respect and authenticity, like Elvis, and those who chose to exploit and whitewash African American rhythm and blues into a popular music aesthetic, like Pat Boone.

Artists such as Little Richard, Elvis, and Jerry Lee Lewis performed in a manner synonymous with rock and roll showmanship. Their song lyrics and performances were considered edgy—a far cry from the safe musical performances promoted in the mainstream. The flare and the larger than life “all eyes on me” attitude continues to define rock and roll performances today. In the 1950s, however, there was much resistance to rock and roll music, particularly in the south. Religious organizations and community organizations such as an Alabama white citizens council that advocated a ban on rock and roll music cited the rhythms, lyrical content, and ties to the African American culture to be sinful. They claimed that the music was propaganda that encouraged race mixing and white assimilation. Public scrutiny of rock and roll music led to the U.S. government launching a 1958 investigation into payola, the practice of disc jockeys accepting payment in exchange for playing certain music. (Videos)

During the 1960s and 1970s, the radio industry fueled the separation of music genres. As televisions became popular, families favored watching

television over listening to the radio. Radio advertising dollars became scarce, prompting advertisers to work with radio stations capturing their product demographic. As a result, radio stations adjusted their format to suit the advertiser's needs resulting in a clear separation between black radio programming and white radio programming. "In 1969 Billboard began to classify rhythm 'n' blues as Soul Music, a popular term which had evolved in the early 1960s." (Redd 42)

While rhythm and blues music had previously been relabeled as rock and roll effectively masking its black roots, the renaming of rhythm and blues to soul music served the purpose of reinforcing its connection to and black culture. The fact that this relabeling was intentional and considered necessary proves that these forms were inherently more alike than different. But what about rock and roll music? As time progressed, new sounds and innovations were welcome within the genre; however, the rock music definition became more dependent upon the instrumentalist rather than the vocalist. R&B and soul music often featured vocal performance, whereas rock and roll featured electric guitar and other live instruments sharing the spotlight with vocal performance. Black artists such as Rick James, Ohio Players, and Parliament-Funkadelic performed what was considered by definition, rock and roll music. Their music featured live instruments; however, during the '60s and '70s, their music was played on black radio and targeted toward black audiences. There was one black artist who managed to achieve a relatively mixed fanbase while uplifting and introducing new innovations to rock and roll music, Jimi Hendrix.

Jimi Hendrix was born in Seattle, Washington in 1942. He taught himself to play the guitar at the age of 13, and by the time he was in high school, he was playing in bands with classmates. After dropping out of high school, Hendrix served in the United States Army from 1959-1962, receiving an honorable discharge following a back injury. While in the Army stationed in Kentucky, Hendrix took an interest in the nearby Nashville music scene, so it is no surprise that when his time in the Army was done, he looked for gigs. Hendrix joined several different bands as a sideman, including Little Richard's band; however, the jobs never worked out long term. Jimi Hendrix had a flamboyant performance style that would frequently overshadow the featured performers. Hendrix moved to New York to attempt a solo career. He regularly played at various local clubs until 1966 when he was approached by Chas Chandler, who was the former bassist for the British group The Animals. He offered to manage Hendrix and bring him to London to form a new band, which would later become the Jimi Hendrix Experience. While in London, he discovered a circle of budding artists who were particularly influenced by black American music. These artists included Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Cream, and Pete Townsend. Following the release of his first album *Are You Experienced* in 1967, Hendrix extensively toured the United Kingdom as well as the United States. "By the late 1960's he was consistently the highest-paid act on the rock circuit." (Mahon 233)

To this day Jimi Hendrix is considered one of the greatest rock and roll icons of all time. Securing his place in rock history, however, was not without

its sacrifices. Hendrix discovered that the contract he signed early on left him with the short end of the stick financially. There were also accounts that Hendrix became unsatisfied with the limited creative freedom he had as a result of building a reputation for being eccentric and playing only rock and roll music. "He started to listen to jazz, to jam with black musicians schooled in jazz and West African forms, and to seek an opportunity to record with jazz trumpeter Miles Davis." (Mahon 243) This desire stemmed from the desire to gain autonomy over his musical creativity and broaden his audience to include more African American fans. Hendrix's fan base consisted of a disproportionate number of white fans to black fans because sales of his music were tracked via the pop billboard charts rather than R&B charts. As a result, his music was not played on black radio at the time. (Mahon 242)

A perfect storm had occurred. Fewer African Americans were producing rock and roll music at a time when African Americans began identifying and appreciating the black art aesthetic which did not include rock and roll music. Additionally, the success of Motown Records and its host of popular black artists making soul and R&B music captured the attention of many black music fans. It was not until black musicians with a strong desire to record and be marketed under the rock genre that the disconnect became apparent. Mahon describes this situation as follows:

Until Living Colour's arrival, black rockers had not been a part of the mainstream music scene since the halcyon days of Jimi Hendrix, who died in 1970. In fact, by the late 1980's when Living Colour released their first album, *Vivid*, African American musicians had been relegated to rhythm and blues, dance, and rap music. The prevailing view was that no one - not black audiences, not white audiences, and not black musicians - had an interest in black rock (Mahon 6)

Chapter 4 - The Current State of Rock Music

Unlike folk music and classical music, the majority of popular music, by definition, is meant to be perishable. ("Pop Music") It is meant to appeal to the taste of the majority of the population at a given time. Generally speaking, this is a characteristic that does not align with the goals of rock music or the goals of oral tradition and black music. Rock music, much like folk music, seeks to document history, critique society from the position of the sage philosopher, and to be remembered or passed down through oral tradition. Fans attach personal meaning to music. Today, rock fans and particularly fans of rock sub-genres such as heavy metal, punk, alternative, and progressive rock music often criticize bands once they cross over to the realm of popular music. They believe that blind mass appeal makes the music experience impersonal and unrelatable.

The 1990s ushered in an era of music seeking to shed its stereotypical rock aesthetic. It was a decade that saw the end of "hair" bands. Fueled by the popularity of MTV music videos, hair bands were pop-metal bands characterized by their look namely highly styled and teased hair, makeup, and wardrobe. New bands of the 1990s focused less on looks and more on musicality and authenticity. Lyrics were reality-based and mostly sorrowful, and instruments took center stage. MTV aired shows featuring alternative, heavy metal and progressive rock music with dedicated programs such as *Headbangers Ball* and *120 Minutes*. Artists were also featured performing stripped-down acoustic sets for a program called MTV's *Unplugged*. Many

notable rock bands from the 1990s chose to cover songs by black artists while at the height of their careers such as: The Black Crowes covering Otis Redding, Red Hot Chili Peppers covering Sly and the Family Stone, and Nirvana covering Lead Belly. All of these covers were carefully recreated as genuine tributes to the original artists without sounding as if they were attempts to imitate the original. These bands managed to express the original songs using their own signature sound. The covers provided context to their original work and fans soon recognized the influential connection between the old sound and the new. As a result, it prompted fans to explore more of the original content. Unlike the 1950s cover songs by Pat Boone, this was not a blatant attempt at fast money but a paying tribute to icons of rock and roll's past.

The Black Rock Coalition continues to curate and promote progressive black music. They are active on several social media platforms promoting sponsored events. The organization has not lost sight of their goal and continues to create teachable moments at events. Mahon describes the importance of the BRC's philosophy as follows:

They force us to acknowledge the black influences that shape forms and practices defined as 'American,' a term that often connotes 'white.' Rock 'n' roll music, a quintessential American form, is American music precisely because of its mixed black and white (or African and European) roots. (Mahon 13)

Many of the original BRC founding musicians such as Vernon Reid, Tori Ruffin, and Me'Shell NdegeOcello are still touring and releasing music on their own terms. The face of rock and roll music is changing considering bands such as Sevendust, Alice in Chains, and Sepultura are all fronted by African

American lead singers. All of these bands are wildly popular within their rock sub-genres and continue to enjoy long-term international success.

In April of 2019 Professor Maureen Mahon partnered with Quincy Jones and British director Steve McQueen to present a five-night concert series called “Soundtrack of America”. Each night featured a different group of up and coming African American musicians performing songs representing the evolution of black music. The goal was to demonstrate the impact that African American culture has had on music over time. “Soundtrack traces a musical ‘family tree’ that ranges from spirituals and blues to jazz, gospel, R&B, rock, hip hop and house, examining 400 years of creativity and ingenuity in the face of near-constant violence and persecution.” (Soundtrack of America Press Release 1) For this event, Mahon recreated a “family tree” as a visual aid given to audience members as their performance program for the evening. The concert was for the grand opening of the multi-cultural performance venue in New York City called The Shed.

As the download age advances, music is becoming less dependent on radio play. Record executives are no longer the biggest obstacle between black rock music and music fans. Is it possible to shift the perception of mainstream rock and roll to include a spectrum of sounds to include black rock? The future looks hopeful. Today’s black rock music is often a hybrid of the wide variety of both rock and any other traditional forms of black music such as funk, soul, R&B or Rap. This is liberating for everyone. The original objective of black music was to unite people through storytelling and celebration, and the BRC

fought for black artists to have the equal opportunity to integrate this into mainstream rock and other subgenres such as hard rock, progressive, and grunge.

In 2017, African American singer-songwriter Xavier Dphrepaulezz, better known by his stage name, Fantastic Negrito, won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Blues Artist for his album *The Last Days of Oakland*. The album documents how the city of Oakland, California has changed in recent times. The album includes song titles such as “Working Poor” and “Rant Rushmore” as well as a reimagined rendition of Lead Belly’s “In the Pines”. Fantastic Negrito reworks one verse as follows:

*Black girl, Black girl,
Your man has gone
Now you travel the world alone
You raised your child
All by your self
Then the policeman shot him down (Negrito)*

This classic tune has been covered by many artists including a highly appreciated version by Nirvana; however, Dphrepaulezz introduced a different process to his adaptation. He updated the lyrics to illustrate current issues observed within his home town of Oakland such as poverty, police violence, and the struggle of black single mothers. As Lead Belly was a famous country blues artist, Dphrepaulezz’s version used a similar folk style blues featuring acoustic guitar. The two renditions represent a similar worldview and how America has changed for the better and for the worse.

Fantastic Negrito and other new artists like him have the potential to create a musical renaissance. His style is heavily steeped in the early blues

tradition, and he is able to introduce this sound to new audiences. In 2016 Fantastic Negrito was the opening act for the Seattle grunge rock supergroup Temple of the Dog. It was their first and only tour. Intended as a one-time project, in 1991, members of Soundgarden and Pearl Jam wrote and recorded songs dedicated to their late friend and fellow Seattle musician Andrew Wood. The collaboration known as Temple of the Dog occurred when both bands were beginning to gain widespread popularity. In celebration of the 25th anniversary of the release of the Temple of the Dog project, the band toured for their eager fans who never imagined the artists would ever reunite. It was Fantastic Negrito and his unique blend of rock, blues, funk, and soul that caught the eye of Chris Cornell, lead singer of both Soundgarden and Temple of the Dog. Fantastic Negrito performed as the opening act for a portion of Cornell's solo tour as well as the entirety of the Temple of the Dog's tour and was well received by their fans. "The unconventional pairing won over fans and critics everywhere. From there Negrito went on to play major festivals tour extensively throughout Europe and North America." (Fantastic Negrito)

Conclusion

African American cultural expression evolved out of the African American experience and their desire to establish cultural identity. From spirituals and work songs during slavery, blues, and rock of the 1950s, protest songs of the 1960s and 1970s, to rap music and rock fusion of today, black music comes from the process of synthesizing life in America as a black person. From celebrating love to calling out inequality, there is an interpersonal connection between black people and black music. This relationship has been illuminated by the Black Rock Coalition for the purpose of reconnecting black people to rock music. While both internal and external factors have a role in establishing cultural identity, there is an element of cultural self-policing that the BRC engaged in their grassroots effort to reclaim rock and roll music culturally. Black rock and roll pioneers broke musical barriers, opening up a world of possibility for new innovations in music. They also planted the seed that people from all races and socio-economic backgrounds can come together to celebrate life through music. The BRC wanted the music industry to facilitate black musicians in their pursuit to carry on the legacy left by their rock and roll forefathers. Rock music and black people have always aligned and rock and roll music is a viable creative choice for artists and fans. Alas, rock and roll music is black music.

Gone are the days of black musicians performing to segregated crowds. As too are the times when black artists were forced to enter the venue in a separate location from their white audience. All musicians have the freedom to

celebrate their cultural identity and use that lens to create their art if they so choose. While the music industry's attention to supply and demand still leaves the door open for rewarding music that is impersonal, mass produced and sometimes falls into the category of a whitewashed cover, musicians can now avail themselves of new technology to secure more creative control over their music. While this choice may not be as lucrative as being funded by a large record company, artists can still disseminate their music to a large diverse audience. Over time this approach will disrupt capitalist music industry practices and demand a different business model to invest in new talent. Some black rock artists have the ability to achieve a level of transcendence beyond racial stereotypes. Their art is so engaging to white and black audiences alike that their racial heritage is not a consideration. Examine three of today's famous American rock guitar virtuosos: Prince, Slash, and Tom Morello. All three are of African American descent, and they all have the freedom to use their platform for any purpose they choose. Tom Morello from the band Rage Against the Machine, frequently uses music to address current political issues such as socio-economic and racial inequality. On the other hand, Slash from the band Guns n' Roses, primarily uses his music simply to entertain. Prince often used his music a balance between both of these functions.

The far and wide influence of regional musical style or claiming one's hometown in association with music is universal across genres and races. Their home towns inspire their art. Alicia Keys sings of the concrete dreams of New York City while Journey still sings about the lights going down in the city

by the Bay. Similarly, Artists from the same home town sometimes collaborate regardless of their race or the genre of music they make.

All artists who create work from a place of authenticity continue to struggle with public acceptance. They walk the fine line between presenting raw, unfiltered expression with the risk of being censored or diluting their work to align with what is socially palatable at a particular time and place. However, the mystery still remains. Why can white artists like Hall and Oats or Eminem captivate a mixed audience thereby dominating their respective music genres of soul and rap, but influential black ska/punk pioneers, Fishbone, remain relatively unknown? It could be that marketing white artists in black music categories like soul or rap is less complicated than marketing black rock. As long as their talent measures up to other popular acts within those genres, consumers will appear. Maybe marketing punk music is too obscure to predict demand. Or it could be that the soul and rap genres are not exclusively black music and the practice of categorizing music that started over one hundred years ago is now superfluous.

While public schools in America are underfunded, they are forced to cut programs in the arts and humanities. The cultural capital that members of the BRC advocate for is more important now than ever. Up and coming generations need tools to understand the changing world around them. A strong foundation in their own history will allow them to clearly define their own identity and see the beauty in the identity of others. Furthermore, learning how to articulate life experiences, triumphs, and struggles in various forms such as writing, art,

dance, and music is key. This is also paramount in developing the ability to recognize when they are being denied freedom of expression. Establishing fluid definitions of cultural expression coupled with individual authenticity provides richer and more rewarding interactions with one another.

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