

RIPPING OFF BLACK MUSIC

From Thomas "Daddy" Rice to Jimi Hendrix

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

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



Thomas "Daddy" Rice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

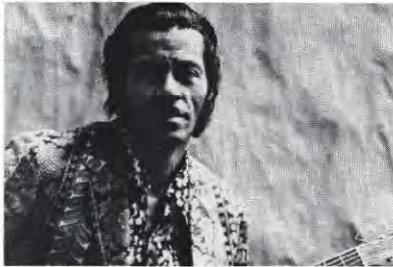
MUCH HAS BEEN MADE of the 1950s, when America's teenagers thrilled to the sounds of rhythm and blues. It began, so they say, with a small group, first listening to the

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

PERFORMING ARTS

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

Chess



Chuck Berry

RCA



Elvis Presley

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Howlin' Wolf

Muddy Waters

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

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

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

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

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

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



Remedios Guanzon. Father dead. Mother blind.

REMEDIOS GUANZON
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35 YEARS OF HELP WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Jimi Hendrix



The Rolling Stones

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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