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Deliver Me From The Days Of Old: Rock And Roll, Youth Culture, And The Civil Rights Movement

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**DELIVER ME FROM THE DAYS OF OLD
ROCK AND ROLL, YOUTH CULTURE, AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT**

by

BETH FOWLER

DISSERTATION

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Introduction

“Music is the best tool I have found. You can sucker people with good music and get them to think.”

Edward James¹

Popular culture is often depicted by scholars and contemporary critics alike as apolitical, a compendium of corporate tools intended to keep the masses down, and prevent them from resisting the systems of oppression that surround them. During the 1950s and 1960s, black and white teenagers began listening to, and imitating, music across racial, class, and regional lines. This boundary crossing led to the creation of a new genre, rock and roll, which encouraged many young listeners who came of age between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s to question established racial norms. This was not the first time that different genres of music were combined with one another, or transcended social divisions. It was not even the first time that a cultural genre that became corporatized and mass produced retained the ability to help listeners think critically about the world around them. But because rock and roll music developed and became popular at the same time that organized civil rights campaigns were gaining national (and international) attention, and because the genre originated from both European- and African-American musical traditions, this genre reinforced notions of moderate racial equality and desegregation in ways that earlier musical boundary crossings did not.

Music is often shaped by politics, but this time an explosively popular genre that was mass produced and sold around the world embodied characteristics that strengthened demands for more egalitarian laws and social structures. Listening to rock and roll did not *cause* cross-racial identification or support for civil rights causes, but it did work to *reinforce* both within the particular social and political climate of Cold War America. Former student activist Jim Mellen

¹ Edward James, interview by Bret Eynon, August, 1978, 8. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

stated that “There was such an interpenetration of the youth culture and the radical rebellion that many of our ideas actually penetrated down to the high schools. Students in high schools who loved the music and love the anti-authoritarianism of [activist groups] could very well see what we were talking about when we talked about the War and racism.”²

In the years following World War Two, African American activists and white allies rose up in record numbers to protest segregation and racial discrimination in what is now termed the civil rights or black freedom movement. Black protesters demanded immediate change by working from the bottom up, using massive boycotts and non-violent direct action protests to shape their demands for equality and freedom. Ultimately, their activism forced the federal government to intervene in racial policies by protecting the citizenship status and voting rights of all Americans, regardless of race. Structural racism and entrenched geographical and economic segregation, however, often rendered these decisions ineffective within people’s everyday lives. Many people in black communities realized that legislation alone could not eradicate the institutionalized racism that most whites failed to even recognize, and decided that the non-violent “beloved community” extolled by many earlier civil rights groups was unrealistic. Prolific R&B musician Johnny Otis, who is white, but identifies more with African Americans, wrote in his 1993 memoir that “In America today, it is not fashionable to blurt out racist slurs. Nobody stands on a corner, as was done in earlier times, and shouts ‘Get them niggers!’ Americans now express themselves with code words and euphemisms.”³ White supremacy is exercised covertly in decisions about housing, education, employment, medicine, banking, and finance, as was recently made clear during the

² Jim Mellen, interview by Bret Eynon, September 20, 1978, 16. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

³ Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head!: Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue*, by Johnny Otis (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press: 1993), 162.

aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the 2008 economic collapse. Whether or not white Americans' views on race actually changed, black Americans continue to face disproportionate levels of economic disadvantage, job and housing discrimination, and a lack of educational and professional opportunities.

The civil rights movement mostly eradicated legalized racism, such as Jim Crow segregation in schools and other public places, whites-only job advertisements, and bans on interracial marriage. It also helped make open displays of racial hatred, like the angry mobs students often faced as they entered newly desegregated schools publicly unacceptable. The movement did not, however, eliminate instances of daily racial prejudice, or deeply ingrained beliefs in white superiority and black inferiority. In many cases, the changes that did occur seem to have obscured racial issues behind a veil of supposed tolerance, making them even more difficult to combat, or even to properly identify. Some black civil rights activists instead focused their energies on strengthening African-American neighborhoods from within. This philosophy, known as Black Power, was more militant, with demands for a fundamental restructuring of societal structures rather than simple inclusion and integration. The majority of whites and middle-class blacks who had previously supported the fight for civil rights refused to offer their support, which further divided the movement. The legacy of the black freedom movement, for some, is therefore one of ambivalence, as political gains supposedly gave way to continuing economic and social inequalities. The beloved community may have won the rhetorical war, but in many ways its goals seem more elusive than ever.

The pessimistic conclusion of this narrative, however, usually fails to take into account that something crucial did change, aside from official legislation. A widespread shift in racial attitudes during this fairly short period, though often difficult to measure, is evident nevertheless. Scores of

books have been written about how segregation and living conditions for African Americans are no better, and perhaps even worse, now than they were after World War Two, but race relations are still approached and understood in a fundamentally different way. Not all people born during and after World War Two experienced shifts in their attitudes and behaviors towards race and desegregation, of course, and not all shifts were created equal. Some white kids continued to support the bigoted racial views of the parent culture, especially if they feared the effects of desegregation at school. Some black kids found the Black Nationalist messages of pride and community more appealing than integration. Many young people avoided thinking about the politics of race, even as civil rights campaigns became ubiquitous in the media.

Other members of this generational cohort, however, were so incensed by the perpetuation of racial inequality, and how it exposed the fault lines of so-called American democracy, that they decided to join campaigns that directly challenged political structures of power. Still others supported the goals of racial equality and desegregation of public spaces without active participation in political campaigns. Despite the relatively low numbers of civil rights participation among young people, a nation-wide survey of 2,000 to 3,000 teenagers of several racial backgrounds taken in October 1954, five months after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling that declared racial segregation in schools unconstitutional, found that 58 percent agreed with the statement “Pupils of all races and nationalities should attend school together everywhere in this country.” A further 19 percent maintained that they were undecided, or that they did not care one way or the other about movement outcomes.⁴ These groups and their opinions, which have rarely been examined, deserve attention. When a significant number of young people refrained from taking sides in the heated battle over racial equality, they implicitly decided to break

⁴ H.H. Remmers & D.H. Radler, *The American Teenager* (Charter Books, 1957), 202.

with the parent culture, even if they were loath to take more decisive stances. The spectrum of behaviors and attitudes among white and black teenagers during this period is fairly broad, but this research will mainly focus on those who supported moderate movement goals, or professed indifference towards them, without actively resisting power structures in the form of direct protest. Attention will be given to representations of race and youth culture in rock and roll music and performances, how teenage listeners received these representations, and how they engaged with this music in order to make meaning in their own lives. Institutionalized racism still underlies almost all political, economic and social interactions in America, and individuals continue to act on this racism while suffering few consequences. The fact remains, however, that overt racism is widely viewed as unacceptable, even if racist practices often receive little notice. The shifting attitudes and behaviors that this generational cohort helped to shape have much to do with this change.

Critics have noted that this shift merely constitutes a ban on what writer Mychal Denzel Smith calls “impolite racism.” “The lesson that this country has gleaned from centuries of freedom fighting and resistance and pushback to slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, economic exploitation, rape, theft and cultural/historical erasure is that you shouldn’t say mean things about black people,” he says. “So long as you don’t say mean things, everything else is fine. Everything else, in fact, is necessary, in order that the United States remains a place where white supremacy thrives.”⁵ It is sadly true that the widespread belief, especially among many white Americans, that the civil rights movement created true racial equality, has ironically obscured the ways that all forms of racial discrimination continue to shape the country’s essential structures. The term “racist” has become

⁵ Mychal Denzel Smith, “Donald Sterling’s Impolite Racism,” *The Nation*, April 28, 2014. Last accessed at <http://www.thenation.com/blog/179559/donald-sterlings-impolite-racism#> on April 29, 2014.

so vilified in contemporary society that it is rarely used to describe anything or anyone outside of the Ku Klux Klan or other racial hate groups when, in actuality, the very structure of American society, and the people who live within it, reinforce racist ideologies on a daily basis. Many progressive whites who espoused movement rhetoric during this period believed that racial segregation was a social, and even a moral ill, but did not necessarily advocate social interaction or policies that would ameliorate discrepancies among blacks and whites. But widespread shifts in attitudes, behaviours, and speech regarding race should not be dismissed quite so abruptly. Common belief in the evils of racism and segregation may not correct the abuses of housing discrimination, mass incarceration, or unequal urban/suburban tax bases, but it should be acknowledged as a preliminary step in what Martin Luther King, Jr. described as the long arc of the moral universe that ultimately “bends towards justice.”⁶

Structural racism is consistently remade through policies that profit the few at the expense of the many, but some cultural attitudes on race have changed on a more human level. These changes occur when individuals realize that racial discrimination is harmful for people of all races, and make decisions to act against it. The importance of people’s attitudes towards political structures is often treated with skepticism, but when they are affected across large populations, real change is possible. Psychologist H.H. Remmers, who conducted a 15-year-long study of over 10,000 adolescents from regions and class levels across the country a psychologist who conducted a 15-year-long study of over 10,000 adolescents from regions and class levels across the country in the early- to mid-1950s, explained that “Attitudes exert direct pressure on actions. This does not mean that *everyone* who feels a certain way will *act* a certain way. But the behavior of large

⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., Wesleyan University Commencement speech, Middletown, CT, 1964.

numbers of people can be predicted by the attitudes of these same people...attitudes, or ‘feelings,’ are indeed stable, and...they truly *are* the basis of most human behavior.”⁷

These changes can be incredibly difficult to effect on both individual and group levels. Howard Gardner, a cognition specialist at Harvard, took a special interest in how people come to accept ideas that are opposed to formerly held beliefs. He notes that “Mind change most often results from a slow, almost unidentifiable shift of viewpoint rather than by virtue of any single argument or sudden epiphany.” The very nature of how these changes occur, then, is difficult to pinpoint, and thus not always regarded as seriously as large-scale behavioral changes. But the nature of how people began to think differently about race and integration is integral in understanding how the viewpoints of one generation shifted in many ways from those of the parent culture, and in determining the ways that the civil rights movement succeeded. Gardner himself grappled with why social scientists should concern themselves with how the workings of the mind when actions are more easily quantifiable as evidence of different modes of thought. He notes, however, that “a key to changing a mind is to produce a shift in the individual’s ‘mental representations’—the particular way in which a person perceives, codes, retains, and accesses information.” These changes not always betray themselves through action, but they remain significant, as well as a sign of broader reception. Artwork in particular has the ability to affect people’s views indirectly, and even in ways that artists themselves may not predict. Artists “expand our notion of what is possible in an artistic medium,” Gardner asserts. They “help us to understand, indeed help us to define, the spirit of an era.”⁸ In order to truly understand the depth of change in ideology during this

⁷ Remmers & Radler, *The American Teenager*, 15.

⁸ Howard Gardner, *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People’s Minds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2006), 4-5; 122.

period, it is important to better understand how people's minds change, and how art, including rock and roll music, can precipitate or reinforce these changes.

Shifts in racial ideologies may not challenge the systems that promote deep levels of inequality, and most Americans would be loath to directly attack these systems anyway. Still, changes in culture and behaviour were monumental, and should not be dismissed as mere window dressing or alleviation of white guilt. These changes were partially due to legislative actions passed between the late 1950s and mid-1960s that forced people to change their behaviours, as overt legal discrimination was no longer acceptable as the foundation for federal law. But cultural shifts had to occur at the same time, both to prepare Americans to accept and support certain legislative changes, and to reinforce widespread attitudes of racial tolerance after the laws were passed. This is where the study of rock and roll music, and the youth culture that was spawned from it, becomes relevant.

In "Deliver Me From the Days of Old" I argue that rock and roll music helped reinforce support for moderate racial equality and desegregation of public spaces among middle-class white and black teenagers during the 1950s and 1960s. This music affected how teenage fans behaved in both public and private spaces, and allowed for some identification with, and admiration of, people from different racial backgrounds. This cultural exchange strengthened positive attitudes towards the desegregation of schools and other public places among this generation of Americans, and empowered them to challenge the parent culture's views on race. Rock and roll was a massively popular genre, of course, and not every teenager who enjoyed it re-examined their thoughts on racial equality in light of civil rights campaigns. Listeners espoused a range of responses, from merely listening to the music as entertainment, to having their racial worldviews dramatically uprooted. This research will focus on young people whose ideas about race and segregation were challenged by rock and roll music, and who, in turn, used the music to fuel further

challenges to racial power structures, as an extremely important, and often overlooked, group which helped to create widespread support for moderate racial equality.

Teenagers' responses to rock and roll music generally did not lead them to directly attack the systems of power that institutionalize racism the way that organized civil rights campaigns or lawsuits did, or to encourage others to alter their beliefs. But political action and thought is not limited to these widely accepted descriptions of direct resistance. People's everyday actions can either support power structures or challenge them, even if they are not always conscious of these deeper implications. Gradations exist, and even if listening to music or attending a concert may not attack white power structures the same way that direct action protests might, they should still be deemed political. Both U.S. historian Robin Kelley, who studies race, and French philosopher and social scientist Michel de Certeau have written about the deeper implications of what Kelley calls "infrapolitics" and de Certeau calls "the practice of everyday life." Politics, Kelley explains, do not just take place in the public realm of elections and politicians, especially where repressed people (which can include both African Americans and teenagers) are concerned. People find ways to act politically and to resist in their everyday lives or in ways which are not always construed as political—one of the many examples he gives is how wearing flashy "zoot suits" during World War Two helped black men in "constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work, [and] presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body."⁹ Similarly, de Certeau focuses on the notion of consumer production, arguing that people do not passively consume popular culture as producers intend, but that they bring their own experiences to these practices and items, and use them in ways that may subvert systems of power without fully

⁹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 50.

eradicating them. “The users of social codes turn them into metaphors and ellipses of their own quests,” he says. “The ruling order serves as a support for innumerable productive activities, while at the same time blinding its proprietors to this creativity.”¹⁰ Young listeners could therefore use a genre that had been co-opted by mainstream music labels to reinforce their changing ideas about race, power, and segregation. Ultimately this project looks at how teenage rock and roll fans, the majority of whom did not become active in civil rights campaigns, still managed to make a political stance that would alter race relations in modern America.

The origins of rock and roll, its initial reception, expansive popularity, and the wedges and bridges that it created between groups of people, can help historians understand changing attitudes and behaviours before and during the civil rights movement. This genre was created by artists, writers, and even music executives, who utilized elements from pop, rhythm and blues and country and western musics to form something that was familiar to each of these threads, yet distinctly its own entity. It was also formed by teenage fans, whose viewpoints are often minimized in literature that examines the links between rock and roll and the civil rights movement. White kids who were tired of syrupy pop songs trekked to traditionally black neighborhoods to purchase R&B albums. Black teenagers who felt alienated by the blues and gospel records of their parents joined throngs of white pop fans. Middle-class youth of both races responded favourably to the raw, supposedly more genuine sounds of country and western records. When record executives aimed to sell music across racial and class lines, they were not inventing a fad that fans were expected to blindly follow; instead, they were responding to pre-existing consumer demands. The resulting product was a new genre of music that emerged from the rapidly changing dynamic between producer and consumer.

¹⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), xxi.

Rock and roll music was such a mammoth phenomenon in the mid- to late-1950s and early- to mid-1960 that not all listeners could possibly be affected in the same ways. Still, by using the tools and methodologies of cultural history, we can see correlations between the incredible popularity of this biracial art form and support for (or at least ambivalence towards) moderate racial equality and desegregated public spaces among a significant segment of this population.¹¹ Although this relationship cannot be *proven* in any quantitative sense, oral histories and accounts from this era can be interpreted against an established historical backdrop in ways that suggest connections between rock and roll culture and shifting views on race relations. While it is nearly impossible to determine what people were thinking at a specific moment in time, historians should note that since political and social interactions regarding racial etiquette were so rigidly defined in the United States during the Cold War, any delineation must be viewed critically.

Sociologist Rhys Williams proclaims that “Movements arise within a cultural milieu. Adherents talk with each other, read each others’ writings, and attend events where others are present and acting. This has to be done in a shared language, with at least some shared understandings about the meanings of key symbols, to allow even the simplest forms of collective action to happen at all.”¹² Like any social movement, the U.S. civil rights movement did not erupt

¹¹ The so-called “cultural turn,” which was first identified in the mid-1970s, represented a new paradigm for historians to understand the past by reading people’s behaviours and beliefs as symbols that represent deeper meanings. In *Culture as History*, for instance, Warren Susman explains that “The cultural historian does not seek to know past experience, that is, to reexperience it in any sense. Rather he seeks to discover the *forms* in which people have experienced the world—the patterns of life, the symbols by which they cope with the world.” (Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, Smithsonian Books, 2003, 185). Even more succinctly, George Lipsitz wrote that the work of cultural historians is to show “how Americans made meaning for themselves out of cultural practices.” (George Lipsitz, “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Volume 42, Issue 4, December 1990, 623). This method can be difficult, but it can also help historians understand motivations and dynamics that would remain hidden in more traditional sources, and is also useful for examining histories of groups who left few formal records behind.

¹² Rhys H. Williams, “The Cultural Contexts of Collective Action: Constraints, Opportunities, and the Symbolic Life of Social Movements” in *Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 102.

spontaneously; it was built on a distinct culture that helped unify proponents and recruit supporters. Civil rights literature focuses mostly on the social and political foundations that allowed people to organize beyond regional campaigns.

Conversely, studies of movement culture are, music historian Reebee Garofalo explains, usually limited to “folkloric musical forms generally associated with the black church, agricultural workers, and the urban proletariat.”¹³ This is partly because civil rights activists used folk and gospel music as forms of protest during direct action campaigns. It is also because ways of listening to and engaging with music had changed substantially by the mid-twentieth century. What used to be a communal act, whether joining neighbours to sing along with live music, or family members gathering around a home’s sole radio or phonograph, had become, by the post-World War Two period, a largely solitary act. Inexpensive radios and record players were snatched up consumers at such high rates that parents and kids often listened to music separately. Since rock and roll emerged during this period of private listening, it would not have been considered protest music in the way that the more communal genres of folk and gospel were.

More than this, rock and roll was not viewed in conjunction with movement politics since it was often, Garofalo says, “disparagingly seen as the vacuous culture of an undifferentiated mass whose only function is consumption, as opposed to folk culture which expresses the values and

¹³ Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*, ed. Reebee Garofalo (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 1999), 2. For more on the social and political networks that provided the foundation for a broadly based movement to emerge, please see Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (Free Press, 1986), which focuses on the role of African-American churches, Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) which looks at networks of black universities and colleges, and Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2011) which examines how women rallied their communities to protect themselves from sexual aggression.

ideals of an identifiable group of real people.”¹⁴ Critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer took a staunch position on this theory in their influential 1944 essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” One of their major arguments is that popular culture “leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience,” that any perceived differences among cultural entities are as illusory as those between different car companies, and that it constitutes “the standardised average of late liberal taste, dictated with threats from above.”¹⁵ This essay was written some years before the advent of rock and roll music and the distinct political and social atmosphere that created the conditions for its origins. Their famous argument for the apolitical and homogenizing nature of pop culture consumption has, however, been challenged by scholars like Lizabeth Cohen and Grace Elizabeth Hale, both of whom show how consumption patterns throughout the early twentieth century revealed or altered political ideologies.¹⁶ Rock and roll in particular can be cast as a politicized genre, given how it was partially constructed by teenage listeners, and how it was received by black and white fans who were frustrated with elements of parent cultures. Especially when set against rigid political and social Cold War frameworks, the boundaries that both listeners and producers pressed against when creating and consuming this music could reinforce alternate ways of understanding racial divisions.

Civil rights historians often treat connections between movement activism and the mass cultural appeal of rock and roll with skepticism, partly because the number of teenagers and young adults who actually mobilized to fight for racial equality is statistically tiny. Most kids who grew

¹⁴ Garofalo, “*Rockin’ the Boat*,” 2.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm> Last accessed May 16, 2014.

¹⁶ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

up during the 1950s and 1960s listened to rock and roll music, yet few decided to join an organization or partake in a demonstration. Unlike folk and gospel songs, which activists routinely sang during marches and sit-ins, and in jail cells, and which were often used to encourage unity among demonstrators, rock and roll seems to exist in the background of these struggles, intersecting at times, but never establishing a solid link between music and movement goals.¹⁷ Many civil rights historians, in fact, acknowledge that connections *may* exist, but since rock and roll was not directly used in civil rights campaigns, and most of the genre's fans did not actively participate, they are often hesitant to make definitive claims about these links, particularly with regards to teenage agency.

Young people may have responded favorably in record numbers to rock and roll, but they are often portrayed as having followed a fad that was created by record companies, and that they themselves barely understood. Other accounts depict bored white teenagers looking for an exoticized outlet for their repressed sexuality, or a musical genre that was powerful enough to challenge existing authority on its own, without any input from the young people who listened to it. Louis Cantor, a former deejay at Memphis's black-oriented WDIA, argues in his history of the station that "It was...the music that bridged the racial gap and shook up popular culture. The music

¹⁷ The literature on the use of folk and gospel music as a tool within the civil rights movement is vast. Some excellent sources include Kerran L. Sanger, "*When the Spirit Says Sing!*" *The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Routledge, 1995) and the documentary film *Let Freedom Sing: How Music Inspired the Civil Rights Movement* (Time Life Entertainment, 2009), both of which examine how singing together could unify activists, alleviate fear in the face of danger, and alert their opponents that they would not be defeated. One of the most insightful explanations of how song was used as a movement tactic was provided by former Freedom Rider Bernard L. Lafayette, who was imprisoned at Parchman State Penitentiary with fellow riders when the buses crossed state lines into Mississippi. To keep from feeling dejected, the prisoners began singing to remind themselves and prison officers that more buses would arrive shortly, and that they would fill the jails in protest if they had to. "We made up a song saying 'The Buses Are a Comin'" and we sang it to the jailers to tell them, to warn them to get ready, to be prepared, that we were not the only ones coming," he recalled. "So we started singing 'Buses are a-coming, oh yes'... We say to the jailers 'Better get you ready, oh yes'... And they'd say 'All right, shut up, all that singing, hollerin' in here. This is not no playhouse, this is the jail house.' So we said to ourselves, 'What are you going to do, put us in jail?'" For more, please see Stanley Douglas, *Freedom Riders* (Firelight Media for PBS, American Experience, 2010).

alone had this quality. It was subversively subtle, with no pressing need to cry out for social revolution and racial change. It needed neither violent protest nor peaceful picket lines. It helped shatter Jim Crow's cultural barriers without firing a shot or lifting a protest sign."¹⁸ Rock and roll did encourage the felling of racial boundaries, but only when people who listened to the music decided to act on these messages. Music itself is not capable of challenging racial inequality; rather, it inspires people to think, to question, and ultimately to change their ideas or actions based on these new ideas. Cantor's depiction is fairly common among scholars who study this connection, in that it is "the music alone" which has the ability to shape ideas about race, independent of living, breathing human beings capable of making decisions. Even when the opinions of teenage listeners are addressed, they are usually portrayed as *not caring* about segregation rather than actively deciding to oppose it. Historians acknowledge that artists, record executives, and even the music itself had the power to break down barriers, but they either omit or underestimate the effect that young listeners had on this exchange.

Without a more focused examination of teenage agency, scholars miss a vital component in understanding the actual changes that resulted from civil rights struggles, and how they became widely accepted. Some historians, like Michael Bertrand and Brian Ward, acknowledge that teenage reception was an integral part of the music's immense popularity, and make note of possible political implications. Bertrand, whose book, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* studies the impact of rock and roll on Southern white teenagers, cites the importance of nationwide popular culture in helping ease the South out of an agrarian past, and notes a strong correlation between music and changing racial attitudes. He points out that this group of young people were "transitory figures

¹⁸ Louis Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis: The Life and Times of a Rock 'n' Roll DeeJay* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 229.

living in a time of major transition,” and that “in many ways, their musical choices signaled a significant generational departure from traditional racial attitudes and comportment.” He acknowledges that, “for many, rock ‘n’ roll created an environment conducive to racial sensitivity.” Still, even though he examines how the musical choices of young Southern whites reflected many of the changes wrought by civil rights campaigns, their responses are not as salient as the mere fact that they were brought up in a rapidly changing society, and were therefore primed by external forces to think differently than their parents.¹⁹ In *Just My Soul Responding*, a history of black popular music in the postwar period and its parallels with the civil rights movement, Ward argues more forthrightly that, “At the very least, there was a striking historical parallel between the evolution of the black freedom struggle and the various transformations of Rhythm and Blues,” and that teenage listeners had a role in shaping this connection. “Factors of production were never the sole determinants of the multiple meanings of Rhythm and Blues,” he says. “Black and white audiences could not only shape the social and political meanings of musical products by the manner of their consumption, but in choosing to consume some styles in great quantities while ignoring others, they could even encourage the industry to move Rhythm and Blues in new directions which reflected the changing moods and needs of its customers.”²⁰ Here, Ward mostly refers to the more melodic “black pop” records that were produced according to the tastes of black teenagers, who identified more with the romanticized middle-class values in pop songs, and white kids, who were interested in African-American culture, yet still craved a degree of familiarity. Indeed, his book consistently examines how producers and young consumers entered into a

¹⁹ Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 2-3; 10; 160.

²⁰ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 2-3; 5.

dialogue that ultimately produced the new genre of rock and roll. My goal is to build on these findings, and to concentrate more distinctly on how teenage agency and listener response were both informed by, and strengthened, support for moderate civil rights policies.

Other historians who look at the links between new racial ideals during the civil rights movement and rock and roll music tend to focus more on producers, performers, and even the music itself as initiators of change. This focus can often lead to arguments that any apparent connection was weak, and that rock and roll, much like the goal of integration, could reinforce racist convictions under a new guise of apparent tolerance. Cultural historian Craig Werner takes a hopeful look at how black music can help relieve racial tensions by providing a dialogue between blacks and whites in his book, *A Change is Gonna Come*, but his focus is on the healing powers of music itself rather than the decisions that young people of both races made when they chose to listen.²¹ Sociologist Philip Ennis says that rock and roll can “transcend racial and other prejudices, no matter how justified may be the cries of theft, imitation, or exploitation,” while, in a 1997 interview, journalism professor William McKeen compared Elvis Presley to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, explaining that he “was part of a movement to knock down barriers in society.” In each of these cases, however, the writer credits the music itself with being the active agent, rather than the people listening to it.²² This argument subsequently becomes more of a top-down narrative, as power is attributed to rock and roll artists and producers, who were somehow able to lure impressionable teenagers away from their traditions.

²¹Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998).

²² Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Culture* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 253; “He Said It,” *The Detroit Free Press*, August 5, 1997, 4A. Elvis Presley Clippings, Russell B. Nye Collection, Special Collections, Michigan State University Libraries.

Grace Elizabeth Hale, whose work focuses on the intersections among race, popular culture, and consumerism, refers to rock and roll as a form of minstrelsy that served the needs of middle-class white teenagers, “displacing incompatible desires onto fantasies of blackness and then taking them back up, cleansed of contradiction, through identification with African Americans.”²³ And, after revealing in his book, *The Kids are Alright*, that white homeowners still railed against any attempt to desegregate neighborhoods in Philadelphia, at the same time that homegrown program *American Bandstand* was garnering support among interracial audiences, historian Matthew Delmont argues that rock and roll in its mass produced form did not encourage young white listeners to fight for racial equality.²⁴ Even popular music scholar Reebee Garofalo, who argues that “as the Civil Rights Movement exploded on the national scene, its impact on the national consciousness was more clearly reflected in popular music” focuses more on the timelines shared by politics and the production of rock and roll rather than the decisions listeners made in response.²⁵

Some scholars do, however, see a solid connection between rock and roll music and support for desegregation and moderate racial equality created by black and white teenagers during this period. In *Young, White, and Miserable*, sociologist Wini Breines portrays mid-century adolescents as caught up in such strong cultural transitions that they are forced to make decisions that would shape the attitudes of a new generation. Although she focuses on middle-class white suburban girls and the often hidden resistance they directed towards traditional gender norms, Breines’ arguments can also be used to explain changing racial attitudes among teenagers as a

²³Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 87.

²⁴Matthew Delmont, *The Kids Are Alright: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).

²⁵Garofalo, “Rockin’ the Boat,” 231.

whole. “The enormous popularity of rock and roll, while not merely a sign of rebellion—since it was also a sign of being a teenager—suggests that teenage girls were drawn to otherness,” she says.²⁶ “Rock and roll was a successful challenge by youth—crossing racial, class, and ethnic lines—to hierarchal American cultural attitudes.”²⁷ Similarly, historian of popular culture Glenn Altschuler argues that rock and roll became known “for promoting integration and economic opportunity for blacks while bringing to ‘mainstream’ culture black styles and values.” These scholars are able to identify concrete ways that young people were able to identify across racial lines through rock and roll music, and to show how this identification was a crucial step towards encouraging support for the desegregation of public places and moderate racial equality. They also show how teenage fans were instrumental in making some of the decisions that solidified this link, and hastened the acceptance of changes made during the civil rights movement.

Still, many historians are hesitant to acknowledge the contributions of teenage rock and roll fans because most did not become active participants in civil rights campaigns. This reluctance is understandable given the lack of solid evidence that connects popular, ultimately mainstream music with a movement that seemed radical, or at least transgressive, to many bystanders. Limiting studies of how the civil rights movement affected young Americans solely to those who were active in organized campaigns, however, prevents us from recognizing the true breadth of movement politics and culture. Political engagement spans a wide spectrum; people’s minds and behaviors may change in accordance with their ideologies even if they do not explicitly try to disable systems of power.

²⁶ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1992), 129.

²⁷ Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable*, \$\$

Movement campaigns did not, unfortunately, result in true equality or in an elimination of the discriminatory frameworks that shape political and economic systems in the United States. But they did succeed in provoking support for legislative equality and creating a culture that is widely unaccepting of overt racism. These changes hardly ushered in an era of racial harmony and egalitarianism, and, as Mykal Denzel Smith points out, they often paint a false picture of equality that obscures deeper inequities and hatreds. Historians still need to examine how these feats were accomplished, though, even if the movement did not eliminate racial inequality. Widespread change is never quick or easy, but during the civil rights movement, mainstream cultural norms shifted between support, or at least tacit acceptance, of white supremacy, and assumptions of color-blind fairness, all within the span of one generation. Cultural ideals that prompted white Americans to justify racial inequality as an intrinsic element of the country's political and social cultures were hastily replaced with assertions that the democratic process was working properly now, and that the civil rights movement had swiftly annihilated centuries of embarrassing racial politics. Accusations of racism have become uncomfortable, something that people of all racial backgrounds hesitate to discuss publicly. This shift does not solve most issues regarding racial discrimination in the United States, but it is still startling that it took place so quickly, and on such a broad scale. In order to understand how racial ideals changed significantly within mainstream culture, historians need to go beyond studying the relatively small numbers of people who actively participated in movement campaigns, and focus more on how large segments of the youth population absorbed and responded to demands for black freedom and equality.

This period is best viewed as a time of transition when blacks and whites began to try to understand each other and realize that a dialogue was possible. It would have been impossible for any agent to transform a society entrenched in racism into a completely tolerant and equal one.

Concrete connections between listening to music and changing racial attitudes are, of course, next to impossible to make, but historians can understand some of these shifts by reading the words and actions of young people growing up during this period against a backdrop of intense awareness of racial divisions, and what it meant to cross these boundaries. Cultural historian George Lipsitz explains that “Under these conditions, struggles over meaning are also struggles over resources. They arbitrate what is permitted and what is forbidden; they help determine who will be included and who will be excluded; they influence who gets to speak and who gets silenced.”²⁸ By looking at how kids talked about and reacted to rock and roll music during a period of racial and political upheaval, historians can gain greater insight into changing thoughts and beliefs that they may otherwise have kept to themselves.

For the purposes of this study, “activist” or “political activism” will be used to connote activities that directly challenged systems of power and oppression with the express intent of changing or eradicating them, such as coordinating or participating in a sit-in demonstration, or attending marches and rallies. This distinction in no way implies that other forms of dissent, including mass consumption and responses to popular culture, cannot successfully resist power structures, or effect political change. But a distinction does exist between kids purchasing albums across racial lines and deciding to join a sit-in at a lunch counter or a boycott of downtown retailers. The latter necessitated organization, large numbers of people, and the realization that these activities may result in violence or arrest. This was dangerous, intense, uncertain work that few teenagers or young adults would have been willing or able to partake in. Scholars have used these low participation numbers to argue that listening to rock and roll music did not have an appreciable effect on the way that young people viewed the civil rights movement. This view, however, ignores

²⁸ Lipsitz, “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen,” 632.

the fact that active protest was risky on a number of levels, and that many kids were simply too young to get involved without their parents' consent. This does not necessarily mean that their ideas about race and desegregation were not challenged by both the music and broadcast of movement activities, only that other obstacles prevented them from getting involved. Indeed, young blacks and whites were taking decisive action in ways that were far more politicized than most scholars or contemporary critics have given them credit for. The choices they made, both as individuals, and as a group, indicate political engagement with the civil rights movement. Sometimes cultural decisions acted as foreshadowing for direct political activism, but they did not necessarily have to—young people could be affected by both the music and the movement, and make decisions in their everyday lives that helped support a more racially equitable political culture without ever accepting the burden of activism further down the line.

Civil rights movement literature rarely focuses on young people who did not commit themselves to direct action. Again, this is not because their contributions to the widespread acceptance of movement goals did not exist or were unimportant, but because it is difficult to track personal beliefs, and to identify when everyday activities take on a political cast. Still, the movement would not have been successful had it only garnered support from those who were able and willing to put their bodies on the line in direct action campaigns, or to lend financial or legal support to these endeavours. The quick transition between mainstream culture's tacit acceptance of racial inequality and its conception of racism as an evil required a widespread desire among young Americans to challenge elements of the parent culture even if they never participated in direct activism. The fact that teenagers were willing to break with established attitudes on race and integration enough to listen to this music, for instance, shows that they were more open to racially progressive ideals than members of prior generations, even if these changes occurred in private

spaces. The biracial nature of rock and roll music also affected listeners, especially teenage listeners, whose brains absorb information differently than adults, and in ways that helped them see people of different races as human beings with whom they shared similarities. Listening to rock and roll music did not make teenage fans more likely to participate in civil rights activities, but it did foster a mindset that allowed for identification with individuals of other races and support for desegregation of public spaces. This mindset was integral in establishing a mainstream culture that technically espouses racial equality even if deeper foundational issues remain to be addressed.

In order to use popular culture as a lens through which we may better examine shifts in thought among young black and white Americans, it is essential to first establish the cultural and political environments that framed their experiences. By the mid-1950s, most Americans were aware that something was happening with regards to the unstable nature of unequal race relations. The Supreme Court ruled against racial segregation in schools in the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, while black Montgomery citizens captured the nation's attention the following year by demanding equal treatment and an end to segregation on the city's buses using non-violent direct action and civil disobedience. These forms of activism would be rejuvenated in the early 1960s by students, religious supporters of social justice, and, ultimately, larger numbers of both black and white Americans, who used media outlets' eagerness to capture dynamic stories to draw attention to racial inequality with sit-ins on interstate buses and in restaurants and retail areas. Ultimately, this activism forced the federal government to intervene in racial policies by protecting the citizenship status and voting rights of all Americans, regardless of race. Housing and job discrimination were also outlawed in the Civil Rights Act of 1968, but centuries of racism and segregation rendered this decision fairly ineffective against ingrained racial patterns which inevitably oppressed African Americans. Many people in black communities,

realizing that legislation could not eradicate the institutionalized racism that most whites failed to even recognize, decided that the non-violent “beloved community” extolled by many earlier civil rights groups was unrealistic, and instead focused their energies on strengthening African-American neighborhoods from within.

Most whites who lived in Northern and Western states dismissed these campaigns as a peculiarly Southern issue, even though civil rights organizations had implemented campaigns, mostly demanding fair access to jobs and equal treatment in retail shops, in Northern urban areas for decades. These campaigns, however, did not have the media coverage and moralistic narrative of Southern struggles against Jim Crow. Southern organizers cleverly ensured that each battle was staged for the cameras so that none but the most massive resisters could object to images of cute children sharing an interracial classroom or properly dressed African American church women boarding desegregated buses. These images and narratives, on television, the radio, and in the pages of newspapers and magazines, allowed white Northerners to congratulate themselves on their supposedly more enlightened views of race, and to demonize white Southerners who violently tried to suppress any semblance of racial progress. They made white Southern children uncomfortable by bringing the brutality that enforced the so-called “Southern way of life” to the surface, revealing that racial segregation was anything but natural. They encouraged pride among black Southerners, most of whom viewed desegregation campaigns as a crucial first step towards equality rather than the ultimate goal. And they inspired black Northerners to think more critically about the merits and failures of desegregation, and about how true equality could be achieved beyond the boundaries of the Jim Crow South.

Despite these differences in interpretation, the expansive power of mid-twentieth century mass media, and the tactics chosen by movement organizers to appeal directly to journalists,

ensured that almost all Americans knew about Southern civil rights campaigns as they were happening.²⁹ People across the country were confronted with racial inequality, which had often been shaped as natural in the past, but which was now understood as solidly politicized. Even though most Americans, black or white, Northern or Southern, did not directly participate in movement activities, almost everyone who was confronted with these stories in the media was forced to examine their thoughts on race relations and movement goals more closely.

Children and teenagers, who were already growing up amidst the broad social and political changes of the post-World War Two era, were also thinking about the implications of the movement activities they saw on television and heard on the radio. Black and white teenagers were caught up in a society in flux, where Depression and war had altered the relationship between citizens and the federal government, and the domestic economy had shifted more resolutely from manufacturing to service work. The generation born during and after the war, dubbed ‘the Baby Boom,’ was the largest in American history, with about 4 million new births between 1954 and 1964. This demographic ‘boom’ would explode throughout the 1950s and ‘60s as all of these children entered adolescence, and, because of increased prosperity, were able to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood longer than their predecessors did. By 1959, of the approximately 19 million American teenagers, the vast majority (97 percent of 14-15-year-olds and over 80 percent of 16-17-year-olds) were enrolled in high school, while the number of students in college had more than doubled since 1945. Most of these kids came from relatively affluent backgrounds, with families that could afford to have them study rather than working to contribute to household

²⁹ For an extensive study on the media coverage of civil rights campaigns, please see Gene Roberts and Hank Klibinoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

expenses, and lived in socially constructed neighbourhoods divided by race and class. Despite this supposedly rosy picture, however, the omnipresent spectre of Cold War fears, particularly the atomic bomb, caused many youth to view the parent culture as a destructive force with the capacity to result in the ultimate end of things. Disillusionment with cultural and political norms dovetailed with an expansion of mass media and technology that connected people and informed them about events near and far in almost instantaneous time. Even though most would not have described themselves as actively interested in politics, the choices they made because of this awareness would have political ramifications as they grew up.

The popularity of rock and roll grew just as news coverage of organized civil rights campaigns expanded across the country, but a shared timeline is not the only connection between the two. The music's essential nature, a combination of European-American and African-American musical characteristics that featured both white and black performers, urged teenage listeners to pay more attention to civil rights struggles, and helped them make sense of movement goals. Since young people were surrounded by news coverage of campaigns demanding racial integration, and any form of racial boundary crossing was understood within this framework, most quickly realized that rock and roll represented an integrated art form. Admiring musicians or even musical characteristics from other racial backgrounds encouraged cross-racial identification and wider acceptance of others as human beings rather than as members of a particular race. Listening to this music also allowed white and black kids to enter an abstract integrated space that was dynamic and exciting, which contrasted with the dire warnings of white supremacists and the understandable fears of black parents who wanted to protect their children from exploitation and racial violence.

Many artists, cultural commentators, and historians have observed that young black and white listeners were quick to embrace this integrated genre partially because racial separation has always had to be strictly enforced in American society. As much as segregation was presented as natural, centuries of legal slave codes, economic repression, and Jim Crow laws had to be continually reinforced if they were not to falter under the weight of their falsity. Grace Elizabeth Hale adroitly explains that “To be American is to be both black and white. Yet to be a modern American has also meant to deny this mixing, our deep biracial genesis.”³⁰ Cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes that, in popular culture at least, this duality has always existed, though it is often “silenced and unacknowledged.”³¹ The popularity of rock and roll made the falsity of racial segregation clear, encouraging listeners to question political and cultural norms, and, according to Hale, to see this separation as “the product of human choice and decision, of power and fear, of longing, even of love and hate.”³² In his book *Soul on Ice*, for instance, radical journalist and Black Power activist Eldridge Cleaver made use of a wide array of stereotypes, defining whites as ‘the Mind,’ and blacks as ‘the Body.’ Yet, he defined integration as the melding of the mind to the body, and consistently maintained that each has been harmed by its separation from the other, that the only way to truly function is to make the individual whole again. Despite his political call for independent black communities, Cleaver detailed an American culture that is only complete when both races come together.³³ Gerald Early, a scholar of race and culture, goes further, writing that the 1950s and 1960s “were the years...in which America recognized, cringed before, the social

³⁰ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 3.

³¹ Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* Vol. 20, No. 1/2 (51-52), Spring-Summer 1993, 105.

³² Hale, *Making Whiteness*, xi.

³³ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1999), 223.

reality...of a miscegenated culture in which, beneath the mask of inhuman racial etiquette where everyone supposedly was...separated... there lurked an unquenchable thirst for mixing and the ‘new’ popular music helped to expose the false separation of America from itself, by revealing the culture’s essential fusion all the more inescapably.”³⁴ Here, Early does not see a divided American culture that needs mending, but one that has been integrated under the guise of racial separation all along. What occurred during the civil rights movement, and with rock and roll music specifically, is that the veil was stripped away, and this guise was revealed.

Rock and roll music also encouraged identification with people of other races and with moderate civil rights goals by establishing a middle ground between black and white youth. This abstract space acted as a form of dialogue between the two, both minimizing racial difference and intensifying an already deepening generation gap. If integration, musical or otherwise, was to have a chance of survival, it would have to incorporate elements of both races to allow people to feel comfortable exploring difference on their own terms. It was out of this space that rock and roll would emerge and prosper.

The theory of a cultural ‘middle ground’ was conceived by early American historian Richard White, whose book, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, focuses on cultural and political relations between Huron tribes in North America and French colonizers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. First Nations peoples, he argues, had a degree of power which allowed for true inter-cultural relations with the Europeans. “The meeting of whites and Indians, creates as well as destroys,” he argues. “Contact was not a battle of primal forces in which only one could survive. Something new could appear.”

³⁴ Gerald Early, “One Nation Under a Groove,” *New Republic* July 15-22 1991, 38.

He terms this delicate space for attempting to understand the culture of an alien group “the middle ground”:

On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative and often expedient misunderstandings. People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and the practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices—the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground.³⁵

White’s conception of a middle ground is therefore shaped by cultural misunderstandings that had to be justified by each group if they were to communicate with one another. “The creation of the middle ground involved a process of mutual invention by both the French and the Algonquians,” he says. “On both sides, new people were crammed into existing categories in a mechanical way.”³⁶ Rock and roll music, however, deviates from this description by representing a middle ground shaped by commonalities between groups which were often assumed to share few similarities. Because of its biracial musicological origins and artists, writers, and producers of both black and white ancestry, rock and roll music can also be posited as a middle ground wherein both black and white listeners could learn to understand the culture of another while remaining in familiar territory. Reebee Garofalo calls the space shaped by popular culture “contested terrain,” noting that “It is regarded as one arena where ideological struggle—the struggle over the power to define—takes place.”³⁷ The genre could be used this way because songs were familiar enough to

³⁵ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xxv-xxvi.

³⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 50-51. Some of White’s examples of how these misunderstandings helped shape a middle ground include limited comprehensions of French and Algonquin legal proceedings creating a new diplomatic forum and religious rituals and ceremonies taking on Algonquin characteristics under the guise of Christianity.

³⁷ Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat*, 1.

allow members of each race to recognize elements from their own cultures and identify with the artists, but with enough characteristics from the “Other” culture as to force an abstract confrontation.³⁸

Chuck Berry’s 1957 hit “School Days,” which contains the lyric that inspired the title of this work, provides an intriguing look at how rock and roll songs could act as a middle ground between white and black adolescents. The single, which hit #1 on the R&B charts and #3 on the pop charts, signalling that it was almost equally as popular with listeners from both racial backgrounds, could be heard as both a poppy teen anthem and as an indication of rock and roll enthusiasts’ desire to throw off the shackles of racial segregation, especially during the early years of school desegregation. “School Days” details a day in the life of a typical student, with the omniscient narrator bemoaning, “Back in the classroom, open your books/Gee but the teacher don’t know how mean she looks,” yet hearkens back to roots firmly rooted in the blues, by declaring “Soon as three o’clock rolls around/You finally lay your burden down,” and concluding with a gospel cry uttered to a contemporary savior: “Hail, hail rock and roll/Deliver me from the days of old.” This song brought traditional black musical idioms to middle-class suburbs, showing teens of both races that the same resources could be used to fight their common enemies. Middle-class black kids could have recognized the song’s blues framework and gospel-tinged lyrics, while also

³⁸ In this work, the capitalized, subjective term “Other” will be used to refer to groups or individuals of groups who are characterized as racially separate from another group, limiting the amount of possible communication or identification between them. This description is somewhat different from Edward Said’s conception of “Othering” as a process of removing power and, sometimes, humanity from members of marginalized groups in order to strengthen the standing of elites. White Americans did partake in this process as a means of denying civil and economic rights to black contemporaries, but for the purposes of this research, the term will also be used to describe how blacks characterized whites, both as a group and as individuals. The purpose of using this phrase is to show how the construction of difference between these groups created the sense of a chasm between black and white youth, and that rock and roll music helped listeners realize that many distinctions were, in fact, falsely enacted to support segregation and white supremacy. For more on the topic, please see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

identifying with their own experiences as relatively affluent high school students. They also may have been drawn to the song's cheery overtones that implied that racial progress had been made, and that segregation was successfully being challenged. After all, Berry, who is African American, sings in the first-person about being a student in a school that would also have been recognizable to middle-class white listeners. Despite the narrator's burdens, they have nothing to do with the poverty or racial inequality that black blues and gospel musicians tended to write about; they are, instead, familiar to any teenager who struggled under the repressive strain of a high school education. Conversely, white listeners could be drawn to the new, R&B-tinged sounds and lyrics, while also identifying with the narrator's problems with school and adult authority. Despite the fact that the song was released only three years after the *Brown* ruling, the implication was that black and white students had similar experiences at school, and that these similarities could override racial divisions in certain cases.³⁹

To listen to a song identified as totally "black" or "white," however, could lead to the troubling issue of stereotyping, or a simple failure to truly understand what the piece was trying to say. Hale cautions that white kids "imagined and tried to build coalitions based in shared emotions...rather than shared class positions and political ideology. Often, in fact, they assumed that shared emotions meant shared interests," while Brian Ward warns that white admiration for black musicians and musical characteristics could actually reinforce racist conceptions of black inferiority.⁴⁰ Risks of exoticization, or of misplaced identification that did not acknowledge structural racism existed, of course, but they did not fully define black and white kids' responses to rock and roll as a middle ground. Indeed, sociologists argue that it is necessary for cultural shifts

³⁹ Chuck Berry, "School Days," 1957.

⁴⁰ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 164; Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 12.

to accompany the growth of social movements if movement goals are to appeal to the public outside their ranks. Garofalo says that “Groups for whom the dominant public symbols are not part of ‘their’ culture must step outside their ‘home’ languages in order to communicate publicly,” particularly with regards to the civil rights movement.⁴¹ Oftentimes these symbols, which change people’s minds indirectly, are crucial for a movement’s acceptance among broader groups of people. Howard Gardner, for example, explains that “More conceptions of the Spanish civil war were formed and altered by Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* and by the novels of Ernest Hemingway and Andre Malraux than by a thousand news dispatches.”⁴² Rock and roll songs usually did not address issues of racial inequality as explicitly as these works confronted war and fascism (although there are some exceptions), but they could work to change people’s minds in similar ways.

Part of the reason that rock and roll music could resonate so deeply with people from different backgrounds comes from its unique biracial origins. This genre is often derided as mere white theft of black cultural forms, and its popularity compared to white enthusiasm for the blues, jazz, and other earlier African-American musics. Use of consumer goods to exoticize different groups of people and strengthen white, American supremacy has been thoughtfully detailed by Kristin Hoganson, who notes that middle-class white women endorsed these divisions while simultaneously learning more about other cultures by cooking “foreign” recipes or wearing different ethnic fashions during the turn of the twentieth century.⁴³ Similarly, white musicians and fans alike have also been accused of engaging in exoticization through consumer products, separating and degrading different races in order to ensure that they are treated as alien and inferior.

⁴¹ Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat*, 103.

⁴² Gardner, *Changing Minds*, 114.

⁴³ Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

There is some truth to these accusations, as many white rock and roll stars and the labels that backed them became wealthy releasing songs that black musicians received a pittance for—and which were sometimes stolen from them outright. Even in the absence of theft, the fact that white artists like Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis shot to fame using performance techniques they learned from watching and listening to black musicians caused many contemporaries, as well as scholars like Hale, to conclude that mid-century rock and roll was nothing more than modern-day minstrelsy. This comparison is flawed, however, firstly because the genre became popular just as organized civil rights campaigns gained national media attention. White kids who were drawn to black musical forms were aware, not only that crossing racial lines was contentious in this political climate, but also that their choice to consume black-oriented or inspired music had deeper consequences given the well-publicized struggle for racial equality. The framework of the civil rights movement meant that whites who listened to rock and roll music had to grapple with these demands for freedom at some point. Not all listeners thought very deeply about these connections, but this distinct political setting meant that white affection for black music took on a different cast in the post-World War Two period than it had in earlier decades.

But timing is not the only argument for why rock and roll should be considered distinct from other examples of racial and musical exploitation. This new genre was indeed created out of cultural and political systems that consistently exploited black artistic traditions, even if they were enjoyed by whites and helped to form the foundation of American culture as a whole. In a 2013 response to Miley Cyrus's controversial MTV performance, writer Jody Rosen argued that "For white performers, minstrelsy has always been a means to an end: a shortcut to self-actualization." Concerns still abound over white inability to understand the historical pain and oppression that allowed African-American music to emerge the way it did, and whether this inability results in

simple mimicry used for white profit and self-definition.⁴⁴ Exoticization may also occur if whites, who are part of the dominant racial structure in America, utilize elements of another culture as a temporary means of escaping their own whiteness. Writer Katie Ryder argues that “If we only welcome difference when it’s on the bill—a rap show, a queer night at a club—or when we imitate it, whiten it, and straighten it, but don’t want it as part of our regular space, we don’t really welcome it at all. If difference has to be invited, the walls are still up for all of us.”⁴⁵

A long history of this “invited difference” exists between whites and blacks in America, and, although white appropriation of black culture is more insidious, transactions have also operated in the opposite direction. Sometimes these exchanges do result in exploitation and reinforcement of racial stereotyping. But cross-racial exchanges are not doomed to only fall prey to these traps; they can also allow for interracial identification and actual behavioral and attitudinal shifts among both parties, which occurred, in many cases, with the advent of rock and roll. Because of this pervasive history, however, cries of exoticization are heard in the wake of almost every instance of cultural integration. Dodai Stewart, who writes about race, gender, and popular culture, for instance, warns that “white people have been mimicking black people for fun and profit from Al Jolson to Amos n’ Andy to Elvis,” and that said mimicry allows whites to “play at blackness without being burdened by the reality of it.” This is a legitimate concern, of course, but she is unclear about what kinds of interracial cultural exchanges would *not* involve mimicry. Although she notes that whites “need to be reminded that the stuff they think is cool, the accoutrements they’re borrowing, have been birthed in an environment where people are...systematically

⁴⁴ Jody Rosen, “The 2013 VMAs Were Dominated by Miley’s Minstrel Show,” August 26, 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/08/jody-rosen-miley-cyrus-vm-as-minstrel.html>, last accessed August 27, 2013.

⁴⁵ Katie Ryder, “White Music Fans Are Afraid of Difference,” salon.com, August 1, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/08/01/white_music_fans_are_afraid_of_difference/, last accessed August 27, 2013.

discriminated against and struggling in a system set up to insure that they fail,” this warning does not offer any suggestions on how to engage in this borrowing *without* engaging in exoticization.⁴⁶ Similarly, writer Sesali Bowen has commented that white appropriation of black cultural elements are “only cool when you do it for fun, not if those are valid practices from your lived experiences,” and that when “folks with certain privilege are willing and able to float in and out of [black cultural territory] at will,” then institutionalized racism and distance persists rather than deteriorates.⁴⁷ Her point that white privilege may act as a “buffer zone” between white norms and supposedly exotic black cultural traditions, is often true, but her ultimate argument is problematic. No one can completely identify with the lived experiences of anyone else, so limiting means of cultural expression to a particular background prohibits any attempt at building modes of communication across social and cultural divisions. This kind of restriction is also almost impossible in the United States, where a distinct culture was formed by European, African, and other traditions right from the start, and in a rapidly converging global community, where fast, effective travel and communications have weakened national boundaries, and people learn about and share with other cultures more than ever before.

Cultural exchange can and should occur. Artists and fans alike must be aware of some of the pitfalls of engaging in these transactions, but not every artist who borrows across racial lines is guilty of exoticization. Writer and cultural critic Tamara Winfrey Harris asserts that “It matters who is doing the appropriating. If a dominant culture fancies some random element (a mode of dress, a manner of speaking, a style of music) of my culture interesting or exotic, but otherwise

⁴⁶ Dodai Stewart, “On Miley Cyrus, Ratchet Culture and Accessorizing with Black People,” jezebel.com, June 20, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/on-miley-cyrus-ratchet-culture-and-accessorizing-with-514381016>, last accessed August 27, 2013.

⁴⁷ Sesali Bowen, “Let’s Get Ratchet! Check Your Privilege at the Door,” feministing.com, March 28, 2013, <http://feministing.com/2013/03/28/lets-get-ratchet-check-your-privilege-at-the-door/>, last accessed August 27, 2013.

disdains my being and seeks to marginalize me, it is surely an insult.” She expands on this seemingly straightforward explanation with an anecdote about white, British songstress Amy Winehouse, who effectively interpreted African-American blues, jazz, and soul stylings into her music. “I might feel that Winehouse was executing an homage to my culture, had the addled chanteuse not been caught on video singing racist slurs,” she says. Respect and sincere admiration for both the cultural elements one is borrowing, and the people who create them, are therefore essential in avoiding exploitation.⁴⁸

Of course, Harris points out, the thornier problem of white artists “being inspired by black music and finding fame with an ‘exotic’ but safer sound, while their black muses languished in obscurity,” is somewhat more difficult to avoid.⁴⁹ Rock and roll, however, emerged because of a sincere desire on behalf of both white and black teenagers to integrate elements of each other’s cultures with their own by listening to new forms of music, and by musicians who eagerly combined their catholic interests into a truly integrative art form. Jerry Wexler, a former music journalist who co-owned the initially black-oriented Atlantic Records from 1953 to the late 1990s, and who was responsible for signing some of the postwar period’s most emblematic performers, insisted that listeners were willing to cross racial lines *before* white musicians were recruited to add black cultural elements to their performances. “First came the fans, and not long after, the musicians,” he said. “The collision between openly integrated music and a tightly segregated society created a new kind of energy. You can hear a subtle defiance in the songs. White Southern musicians...lived the blues themselves, saw them, tasted them, were rooted in the same soil as

⁴⁸ Tamara Winfrey Harris, “Cultural Appropriation: Homage or Insult?” [whattamisaid.com](http://www.whattamisaid.com/2008/09/cultural-appropriation-homage-or-insult.html), September 16, 2008, <http://www.whattamisaid.com/2008/09/cultural-appropriation-homage-or-insult.html>, last accessed August 27, 2013.

⁴⁹ Harris, “Cultural Appropriation: Homage or Insult?”

their black teachers.”⁵⁰ While Wexler’s own white privilege was evident in the fact that he seemingly believed that Southern white musicians could understand Southern black experiences simply because they were often raised in the same or neighboring communities, he was also correct that these lived experiences could form a sort of mutual respect between members of both races just as they could also foster continuing racism. And while cultural appropriation was never as one-sided as many critics make it seem, rock and roll musicians and fans were also more likely than their cultural forebears to more explicitly engage in two-way borrowing among whites and blacks. Finally, exoticization may become an issue if, as Harris warns, members of the dominant race or class merely “play at” living out the experiences of oppressed and underprivileged peoples, but also if these characteristics are adopted wholesale by the privileged as a means of either renouncing or rebelling against their own cultural expectations. The construction of a middle ground based on generation wherein individuals of both races are able to engage in dialogue with one another must involve genuine interest in the culture of the ‘Other,’ rather than simply using this culture to define oneself against his or her own expected cultural norms.

Rock and roll was not black music, and it was not “whitened” R&B. Whereas pop and country music were almost always produced by and sold to whites, and genres like the blues and jazz emerged from black communities and black artists, rock and roll was shaped by both, and written and performed by artists of both racial backgrounds. These foundations were acknowledged and celebrated, and so the notion of racial separateness or distinction was never quite so apparent. White fans were aware of the black components of rock and roll, but it was never seen solely as a black musical form; if anything, it was described during its initial popularity in the mid-1950s, as the music of the younger generation rather than any particular race. White

⁵⁰ Wexler & Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 192-193.

fans could listen to rock and roll music, attend concerts, learn to play songs, and idolize both black and black-influenced stars of the genre *without having to separate themselves from their own communities and traditions*. Cultural revolutionary John Sinclair, who founded the White Panther Party in 1968 as a militant anti-racist organization, provided an anecdote about his adolescence which illustrates this difference beautifully: “I went to Albion College for two years where I hung up my rock and roll shoes (the ones with the long-pointed toes) and got turned on the beatnik scene for the next few years, dropped out of school and wandered the streets of the North Side black ghetto in Flint, Michigan, trying to be black,” he said.⁵¹ Sinclair did not need to change anything (save his dancing shoes, perhaps) to enjoy rock and roll. He could listen to and learn from the music, but there was little danger in exoticizing something that possessed so many culturally familiar characteristics. Once he became interested in jazz, however, his life totally changed, and he actually began trying to “become” black, one of the hallmarks of exoticization.

Other African-American musical genres did not actually cause whites to engage in this sort of drastic behavior, of course, but exoticization was more common among white admirers of these older musics than it was for white rock and roll fans. The exoticization of black music (and ultimately people) could still occur, but the very fact that white teenagers were able to accept black cultural traditions and the artists who helped produce them as an integral part of their daily lives shows that, at least in the cultural realm, cross-racial similarities were valued over racial distinctions. White teenagers definitely used rock and roll, replete with its black influences, to define themselves against their own racial norms. But since they did not have to break away from all of these norms in order to do so, black culture could be viewed as a normal aspect of American culture rather than completely cut off from mainstream white society. They could then view

⁵¹ John Sinclair, *Guitar Army; Street Writings/Prison Writings* (New York: Douglas Book Corp, 1972), 56.

African Americans as people *in the same way that whites were people*, rather than as a completely different subset, which is how jazz and swing fans often unintentionally viewed them. Stan Wells, who grew up in a white family in rural Alabama in the late 1950s and 1960s, and played in a rock and roll band as a teenager, emphasized that “white kids became big fans of a lot of black musicians and made them very successful. Once they were main stream music we just considered them people.”⁵²

During this period, rock and roll music was used as one of the languages that helped appeal to people beyond the movement contingent, and make its goals comprehensible, especially to younger allies. Although it is often compared to earlier African-American art forms that were exploited by corporate interests and exoticized by whites, this genre operated differently than jazz or the blues, and often provoked reactions that promoted cross-racial identification rather than outright theft. Rock and roll was created out of a combination of supposedly disparate genres. Once listeners entered a musical space based on many elements familiar to their own cultural backgrounds, they were forced to recognize the contribution of the Other on its own terms. Even if activists did not intentionally use rock and roll music as a means of attracting young people to their cause, and most fans did not go on to explicitly fight back against the systems that reinforce racial disparity, the music’s function as a middle ground helped black and white kids to realize that the gulf between them was largely constructed, and that goals of desegregation and moderate equality therefore made sense.

Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin, who studies the effects of music on the brain and human behaviour, explains that the workings of this musical middle ground actually take place at the neural level, often without the listener’s full awareness of what is going on. “When a musical piece

⁵² Stan Wells, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions. December 20, 2011.

is too simple we tend not to like it, finding it trivial,” he says. “When it is too complex, we tend not to like it, finding it unpredictable—we don’t perceive it to be grounded in anything familiar. Music, or any art form for that matter, has to strike the right balance between simplicity and complexity in order for us to like it.”⁵³ In order for a song to resonate with listeners, it has to fit many preconceived cultural notions of what a musical piece ought to include, yet also include a surprising or unexpected element to maintain interest. Rock and roll was often able to offer fans both simultaneously, allowing an easier acceptance of cultural idioms across racial boundaries. This genre, with its mixture of musics from different racial backgrounds, thus provided both white and black teenagers with new features to excite them while remaining grounded in familiar cultural concepts. This combination is what separates rock and roll from earlier black-oriented musics, and prevented it from becoming, as many critics wrongly describe it, simple white exploitation of African-American art forms.

Technology also helped shape rock and roll as distinctly different from art forms that were exploited by whites in the past. Early- twentieth-century white fans of jazz or the blues generally had to be comfortable crossing into majority-black spaces if they wanted to hear black-oriented music. Few specialized radio stations existed, and signals were not as strong as they would later become, which made it difficult to hear new music from home. Since crossing public racial lines involved making distinct decisions to violate racial etiquette laws, white fans of black music often had to renegotiate their own identities and links to their communities. By the post-World War Two period, however, technological and consumer advances resulted in a proliferation of radio stations aimed at distinct demographics, stronger signals, and homes that routinely featured more than radio or record player. It became far easier for whites to stumble upon black-oriented music, or to search

⁵³ Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Plume Printing, 2006), 229.

it out without having to technically leave the confines of their race-segregated neighbourhoods. More people had access to music that they might never have even heard of before this period, and it therefore became far easier to integrate these new sounds into one's own life without having to eschew their own cultures. Exploitation still occurred, but in this case, a middle ground that would have been impossible even decades earlier was able to form.

George Lipsitz describes how new technologies helped popular culture to function as a middle ground in mid-twentieth century America in "Against the Wind," a chapter of his book *Time Passages*. He utilizes semiotic and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's method of dialogic criticism to explain how rock and roll developed out of older forms of African and European musics. "Everyone enters a dialogue already in progress," Lipsitz says, and "all speech carries within it part of the social context by which it has been shaped." Rock and roll, then, is part of a long history of musics that have been intertwined by musicians of both races. In this case, popular culture can function as a form of shared memory among disparate groups of people who feel disconnected from the past. This is particularly resonant for a generation struggling to define itself amidst changing social and political mores due, according to Lipsitz, to "mass communications, upward mobility, and the anti-foreign atmosphere fueled by hysterical anti-communism and exaggerated 'patriotic' Americanism [which] left many middle-class youths without tangible ties to their own pasts." National, all-encompassing popular culture has the potential, then, to manufacture ties to a constructed cultural meaning that feels relevant to distinct groups of people. "Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry," he continues, "consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have

never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection.”⁵⁴

Still, perhaps more than any of these other distinctions, the similar timeline shared by the emergence and popularity of rock and roll music and the emergence of civil rights organizing on a national scale helped both white and black kids to understand this music as more than mere theft or exoticization. As organized civil rights campaigns garnered more attention from journalists, their presence on television news programs, and in newspapers and magazines, became all but inescapable to their nationwide audiences. Marches in Montgomery and Birmingham beamed into living rooms as families ate dinner in front of the television, kids saw photos of students like themselves being harassed as they tried to enter classrooms in Little Rock, Jackson, and Tuscaloosa, and images of Martin Luther King collecting his Nobel Peace Prize in Sweden, or of Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman Stokely Carmichael smiling sweetly out from the pages of *Life* magazine while intoning “We feel that integration is irrelevant. We have got to go after political power” graced coffee tables across the country.⁵⁵ Young people were aware of the intense fights against racial equality, and knew that, as racial lines were drawn in preparation for the battle that would finally fell Jim Crow, any action that transgressed these borders would be politicized. Enjoying music, purchasing albums, and attending concerts across racial lines or in desegregated spaces may have simply signaled aesthetic tastes or even examples of exoticization in earlier eras, but, set against the backdrop of civil rights struggles, they took on deeper meanings which were unmistakable to those around them.

⁵⁴ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 99-100; 122; 5.

⁵⁵ Charles L. Sanders, “The Tortuous Road to Oslo,” *Ebony*, March 1965, 36; “Unemotional Mrs. King Gets Excited Over Mate’s Big Win,” *Jet*, October 29, 1964, 25; Theodore H. White, “Power Structure, Integration, Militancy, Freedom Now!” *Life*, November 29, 1963, 94.

So despite the fact that relatively few young people joined the movement as political activists, many civil rights goals resonated with members of this generation who were already primed to support legal racial equality and desegregated public spaces. Some were inspired to put their bodies on the line and make the transition into direct activism, but others, who were unable or unwilling to do so, may have felt that they had done enough already by embracing ideas about race that contradicted those of the parent culture. Shifts in personal beliefs and behaviours do not constitute direct political action, and they are not enough to address the deeper structural problems that continue to reinforce racial discrimination and inequality. But when these shifts occurred on a broader scale, encouraged as much by a culture that prompted the younger generation to distinguish itself from older norms as they were by social movement politics, younger people helped to create an environment that was more conducive to accepting the changes demanded by civil rights activists. The aim of this research is to examine how these shifts occurred within the intersection of mass civil rights organization and the broad-based appeal of rock and roll music, and to show how teenage behaviours in public and private spaces and responses to movement activities reflected these changes.

This theory resonates with the remarks of numerous teenage rock and roll fans during this period who asserted that they were looking for something real and meaningful in a world dominated by change and instability which often did not make sense to them. It also helps explain how young people from different racial backgrounds could find something familiar, urgent, and perhaps even comforting, in the musical traditions of another group. “For the first time, we baby boomers were all listening to the same thing,” singer Janis Ian, who became famous in 1964 at the age of 16 for writing and performing the folk-pop ballad “Society’s Child,” which focused on an interracial romance, recalled. “We now had, not just a common spoken language, but a common

musical language. And since the music soon became infused with the politics of social change, we had that in common, too.”⁵⁶

In order to further examine these connections, I turned to a number of archival and primary sources. I was one of the first visitors at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, arriving to browse the center’s holdings roughly three months before its grand opening, and was fortunate to view papers collected from deejay Alan Freed, generally depicted as one of rock and roll’s founding fathers, record producers Jerry Wexler, Milt Gabler, Ralph Bass, and Mo Ostin, and corporate holdings and memos from Atlantic and Specialty Records. I also utilized sources from the National Visionary Leadership Project and the Voices of the Civil Rights Movement exhibition, both housed at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the Civil Rights History Project at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I supplemented this research with oral histories from the Contemporary History Project conducted by Bret Eynon for his book, *Something Exploded In My Mind: Voices of the Ann Arbor Anti-War Movement*, and housed at the Bentley Library at the University of Michigan. These interviews were undertaken with former members of Students for a Democratic Society and the Black Action Movement in Ann Arbor in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and although most are with individuals who joined organizations or participated in political campaigns, they help explain why attitudes on race and authority were changing during this period, and provide detailed examinations of how difficult it was to partake in these movements.

I also conducted roughly 20 interviews with people who identify as either black or white, were teenagers or young adults in the United States between 1955 and 1968, and who listened to rock and roll music during this period. Through the use of online advertisements and word of

⁵⁶ Janis Ian, *Society’s Child* (New York: Tarcher: 2008), 55.

mouth, I was able to speak with conduct online interviews with people in Northern urban centers like New York, Pittsburgh, and Detroit, and Southern areas, including Atlanta, Little Rock, cities in Virginia, and rural Alabama. While this group is diverse, it is admittedly small, as well as selective—most participants were professionals and college graduates, or had children who fit these categories, since the advertisement was posted on an academic listserv, among others. My research is not based on proving causation, however, but on interpreting meaning from people's words and actions, and therefore a smaller sample size, in conjunction with other primary sources, should be viewed as representative rather than definitive. Since my project concerns middle- or aspiring-class teenagers, the self-selection of this group should not be considered a weakness.

Another concern is that which affects all oral histories: interviewees may romanticize their pasts, either consciously or unconsciously shaping their memories to present their past selves in the best possible light, and minimize any discomfort or regret they may feel. Memory loss or fuzziness, especially after 50 or 60 years, is also an issue that all oral historians must consider when undertaking their research. I have kept these issues in mind while interpreting the information provided by participants, and am careful to note when I identify pieces that should be analyzed more closely, or that may say more than the speaker originally intended. Memories, particularly emotional ones, should, of course, be critically analyzed, but that does not mean that they are devoid of truth. People responded to the call for participants because something about the subject of linking rock and roll music with racial tolerance during the civil rights movement resonated with them. If respondents exaggerate the extent to which they realized these connections at the time, or the level of self-awareness they had regarding their own thoughts on race and segregation, this probably denotes years of gradual realizations about how they actually felt and why they behaved in certain ways during this period rather than disingenuousness. The layers of

meaning that often shroud one's youth should not be viewed as exigent to memory, but, rather, as complementary, if flawed, components of personal recollections.

Finally, I have utilized newspapers and magazines from this period, particularly nationally-based publications like *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*, black-oriented publications like *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *The Pittsburgh Courier*, and music and cultural sources, including *Billboard*, *Cash Box*, and *Variety*. Since this project takes a national focus, I have chosen to rely mostly on media sources that were available across the country. This allows greater insight into how publishers, writers, editors, and photographers attempted to appeal to the greatest possible audience without offending anyone, or, if they did choose to take a side in civil rights debates, to show where and how changes were made. *Billboard* music charts are also used to measure popularity of different genres among distinct groups of listeners, as well as how and when music began crossing racial lines, and rock and roll emerged as a distinct entity.

Chapters one and two focus on the development of a middle ground between black and white teenagers as they began to question elements of the parent culture amidst increasing economic prosperity, Cold War fear psychosis, and unfulfilled democratic ideals. Chapters three and four detail the origins of rock and roll, showing how this music was originally created as white and black teenagers began seeking out musical alternatives across racial lines, blending different genres until something new was formed. This genre was quickly co-opted by corporate music labels, but its origins as a cultural and racial middle ground persisted even as pale imitations (both racially and musically) were marketed to white teenagers by the end of the 1950s. Chapter five details the explosive popularity of rock and roll, its distinctions from the genres of music it emerged from, and why it appealed to this generation of white and black kids, both socially and cognitively. Chapter six deals with the cover song phenomenon against an historical background

of cultural exoticization, and looks at how young people's responses to rock and roll transcended these obstacles by paralleling their reactions to the music with their thoughts on school desegregation, a civil rights campaign that resonated with many teenagers. Finally, chapter seven looks at how teenagers of both races responded to rock and roll music and race in private, and chapter eight details reactions when listening took place in public, often desegregated, spaces. Ultimately I hope to show that the decisions teenagers made concerning race and movement politics during this period were shaped by a combination of media coverage of the black freedom movement and widespread love of rock and roll, and that real, lasting changes altered the way Americans talk about and understand race. This may not be enough of a change to deem the civil rights movement an unqualified success, but it does show that positive, interracial outcomes are possible.

Chapter One

In the aftermath of the Second World War, most Americans would have been hard-pressed to argue with “New Journalism” writer Norman Mailer’s statement that the war “presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it.”¹ In a world where nothing seemed to make sense anymore, previous values and assumptions were questioned, and a direct link to the past seemed to be broken. Singer Janis Ian poetically wrote in her memoir that she

Was born into the crack that split America. On one side of the chasm was the America my parents lived in. There, the country was still congratulating itself on winning the war after the War to End All Wars...Blacks knew their place, whites knew theirs, and there wasn’t much room between. On the other side of the crack was the America I grew up in, bounded by anarchy and a passion for truth...We didn’t know our place.²

Although the late 1940s and 1950s are often cast as placid and prosperous in the country’s grainy collective recollection, the fissure Ian described was growing increasingly deeper, and would result in profound societal repercussions.³ Many people’s lives shifted dramatically during the postwar period, as mass interior migration, urbanization, Cold War fears, and newfound economic affluence created new communities, and older identities were challenged. The generation that was born during and after the war, and which came of age during the 1950s and 1960s, was the largest in American history, and, because of all of these changes, as family and cultural historian Elaine Tyler May succinctly explains, “children were now born into a world unfamiliar even to their parents.”⁴ Middle-class kids who grew up in this environment were more likely to engage in the

¹ Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1970), 3.

² Janis Ian, *Society’s Child* (New York: Tarcher: 2008), xi-xii.

³ For more on how the 1950s was actually a period of fomenting dissent in the United States, please see Joel Foreman’s introduction in *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* ed. Joel Foreman (Champaign & Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁴ Elaine Taylor May, *Homeward Bound* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 26-27.

same activities, purchase the same products, and identify with similar values, whatever their racial backgrounds, as they became more detached from their families' pasts. This was a period of transition, when age or generation became an important signifier that many young people used to create new meaning in their lives. This generational distinctiveness resulted in some similarities in the lives of middle-class white and black teenagers.

This does not mean that racial divisions were abolished among middle-class teenagers. White kids were more likely to resist conformity and to express anger about what they saw as falseness in their culture. Conversely, black kids often wanted to repress some of the more disturbing aspects of their heritage, like the brutality of slavery and the humiliation of Southern segregation, which they either did not identify with or wanted to distance themselves from. Most of these kids maintained a distinct racial pride, but also wanted to enjoy some of the freedoms that many of their ancestors had not been able to partake in. Still, like consumer proclivities, middle-class values, and an unnerving sense that atomic destruction was imminent, generational distinctiveness served as a point of identification among teenagers of both races. This middle ground was shaped by a convergence of numerous historical events and developments, many of which have deep roots in American and world history, but all of which came to a head in the immediate postwar period.

The Great Depression and World War Two left indelible scars on the world. In some ways, nations became more cognizant of the increasingly interrelated nature of global trade, diplomacy, and culture, and began moving towards more cooperative and humane policies. The most celebrated of these was the creation of the United Nations, a non-governmental, centralized body which would provide balance among the great powers of the world and help to protect smaller nations. This organization allows representatives of all member countries to meet and discuss

international matters in a secure space, and is meant to prevent the rise of dictatorial powers, economic disasters, and the outbreak of war. Since many people were concerned about the atrocities committed against vulnerable groups in Adolf Hitler's Germany and Josef Stalin's USSR, the UN also aimed to end genocide by adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which stated:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.⁵

This declaration marks the first time that the rights of entire groups of people were upheld, rather than mere individual rights, which do not always apply to acts committed against racial, ethnic, religious, sexual or disabled minorities.

This declaration created a sense of hope for oppressed peoples around the world, who felt that they now had the power of a global tribunal on their side—in fact, the venerable American civil rights association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), almost immediately submitted a petition demanding that the UN protect African Americans, who suffered the sorts of legal and extralegal discrimination that seemingly violated this clause. “The disenfranchisement of the American Negro makes the functioning of all democracy in the nation difficult,” the petition read, “and as democracy fails to function in the leading democracy in the world, it fails the world.”⁶ The UN ultimately took no action on this particular petition, but the mere adoption of the declaration emphasized the importance of

⁵ “Preamble, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Last accessed July 17, 2013, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

⁶ Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 44.

preventing racism and other forms of prejudice. Members of the parent generation, both white and black, were more likely to support the American government, which they saw as having delivered them from depression and war, and to take the democratic rhetoric it espoused at face value. Their children, who did not live through these terrible struggles, were, however, more likely to insist that the spirit of this declaration actually be fulfilled. R&B musician Johnny Otis recalled thinking during this period that “we were going to realize the American Dream...[We would say] it’s a bitch, there’s still a lot of racism, but it’s going to be OK because our kids will realize a fresh new democratic America. Oh, how wrong we were.”⁷

The United States actively participated in the establishment of the UN, but unlike its fellow member states, the nation emerged from almost two decades of scarcity and war in a position of near-unimpeachable power. Very little war violence took place on American soil, and relatively few American soldiers perished during the war. What really set the United States apart in the immediate postwar period, though, was its incredible economic power. Despite a brief recession in 1946, American wealth and production grew to such staggering amounts that the following twenty years would be dubbed ‘The Affluent Society.’ Much of this affluence was due to the expansion of government power and federal spending during World War Two, which reinvigorated manufacturing sectors needed to produce war resources, and resulted in an almost negligible unemployment rate. Factories and farms outputted such a huge amount of materials for the war effort, however, that the war’s end actually stoked fears that the economic system would falter and the country would plunge back into depression. These fears were addressed by the federal government’s commitment to reconversion, a wide-ranging effort to transfer factories from war to consumer production. Within a short span of time, factories which had previously sent tanks, rifles,

⁷ George Lipsitz, introduction to *Upside Your Head!: Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue*, by Johnny Otis (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press: 1993), xxvi.

and bombing equipment down their assembly lines were producing massive quantities of automobiles, refrigerators, toaster ovens and televisions. Unemployment would remain low, and the economy would continue humming—just as long as Americans actually *purchased* all of these new consumer goods, many of which had previously been considered luxury or novelty items.

Amazingly, they did so, and the Affluent Society continued to grow. Millions of Americans were left with funds to spend when the war ended, as they were able to cash in the war bonds they had been encouraged to purchase. People also had extra money to spend because there was very little to purchase during the war years; most manufacturers simply halted production on consumer items, so any superfluous income was saved instead. Employment levels remained high throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and jobs provided workers with more substantial incomes than ever before. Organized labor gained power during the war, when workers were needed at any cost, and the federal government actually intervened to smooth negotiation processes in order to ensure full manufacturing levels. At the same time, private companies that had signed cost-plus contracts with the federal government to produce war materials were making such high profits that they were actually willing to compromise on some worker demands. The result is that wages rose 53 percent during wartime, and workers continued to see a 2 percent increase in pay every year thereafter for the following two decades; indeed, between 1947 and 1960, average real income increased as much as it had over the past 50 years.⁸

These advances helped to perpetuate a narrowing of the income gap between the wealthiest and poorest Americans, and a rapidly expanding middle class which was eager to spend much of its newly disposable income on goods heretofore identified as luxury items. After four long years of sacrifice, Americans were delighted to purchase the many consumer goods for sale, and

⁸ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 89; 106.

possessed the steady income needed to support these acquisitions. Although the Affluent Society did not affect everyone equally, and the white middle- and lower-middle classes profited most from these changes, it did promote more similar lifestyles based on steady employment and consumerism at a national level among all races and classes. This new affluence also acted as a mark of division between two generations, one shaped by the sacrifices made and the scarcities endured during two monumental global crises, and the other unaccustomed to insecurity, and wanting for little. It is in this space that a middle ground between white and black teenagers was established, and where age began to act as a signifier that was, in some cases, more powerful than race in determining cultural and political proclivities.

The term ‘affluent’ can also be used to describe reproductive levels during this period. The so-called ‘Baby Boom’ generation actually started during the war, but the incredible number of children born each year resulted in the largest generation in American history. This demographic ‘boom’ would explode throughout the 1950s and ‘60s as these children entered adolescence, and, because of increased prosperity, were able to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood longer than their predecessors did. Since these children came from families who could afford to have them stay in school throughout their adolescence, and even into their early adult years, this huge population of teenagers who were able to briefly forestall adulthood is a product of the affluent society. The birthrate was, in fact, “more pronounced among those with more schooling (and status),” a sharp divergence from pre-war demographic numbers. Sociologist Jessie Bernard, who studied the behavior of adolescents and family dynamics throughout the 1950s and 1960s, remarked at the time that “Teen-age culture is essentially the culture of a leisure class,” while Philip Ennis notes that “Whatever middle-class life had to offer the nation, the nation was going

to get a lot more of it.”⁹ Members of this generation, both white and black, would therefore be shaped from the start by the values of the class from which it originated.

The establishment of a Cold War between former allies the United States and the USSR also shaped fundamentally new ways of understanding power, privilege, nationality, democracy, and even the nature of life itself. As democratic and communist nations began to square off in an ultimate battle for global dominance, people’s relationships towards their governments and guiding ideologies began to change. The introduction of the atomic bomb particularly unnerved people, as an escalating crisis might mean the instantaneous and widespread destruction of entire regions of both countries. Four years of warfare had produced a certain amount of pervasive fear among Americans, but this was fear of “irrational death,” described by cultural historian Paul Boyer as “death of a new kind, death without warning, death en masse.” This fear ultimately led to “the sense that the meaning of one’s existence—at least in social and historical terms—was being radically threatened....What meaning can one’s individual life have when all human life might vanish at any time?”¹⁰ Writer and memoirist Mary McCarthy elucidated on this notion, recalling that, upon reading of the initial atomic blast over Hiroshima in 1945 while shopping, “I remember...saying to myself as I moved up to the counter, ‘What am I doing buying a loaf of bread?’”¹¹ This was the first time in history that human beings actually possessed the ability to destroy themselves, and it produced curious psychological effects which were often manifested differently according to generation.

⁹ Jessie Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture: An Overview* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1961), 2; Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Culture* (Middtown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 286.

¹⁰ Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 278.

¹¹ Mary McCarthy, “The Fact in Fiction” in *On the Contrary* (New York: Octagon Books, 1961), 267.

While the parent generation attempted to repress many of these fears by emphasizing security above all else and focusing their energies on domestic life where they could exert some control, many of their children chafed against a system that allowed for the proliferation of such fears.¹² Sociologist Elise Boulding, who came from the parent generation, told interviewer Bret Eynon that “My generation had grown up in a world in which World War I had been survived, and the Depression had been survived, and World War II had been survived. We knew that calamities and crises came to an end and you had another chance...It took a long time to realize that our children didn’t think they’d live to grow up.”¹³ Given the atmosphere that so many postwar children grew up in, it is difficult to imagine otherwise. Janis Ian remembered that “Bomb drills were held in every classroom” at her school in suburban New Jersey. “The siren would start, and we’d scramble to the floor while the teachers pretended we could survive a nuclear attack.” ‘Pretended’ may be the key word here, as Ian learned a terrible truth at a very young age: “I knew safety was a myth. Even if we survived the initial blast, the windstorm, and the firestorm, we’d be cut down by radiation sickness. The government knew it. I knew it. My family and friends knew it. The only ones who didn’t know it were the rest of America, busy building fallout shelters that only guaranteed they’d die alone.”¹⁴ Barbara Fuller, a minister and peace activist who participated in student antiwar movements in the early 1960s, dealt with this truth the only way she (and probably scores of other young people) knew how—with denial. “There was a kind of quiescence that wasn’t terribly peaceful,” she said. “It was sort of like people were letting things mull around

¹² For more on the concept of ‘domestic containment,’ please see Elaine Taylor May, *Homeward Bound* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

¹³ Elise Boulding, interview by Bret Eynon and Ellen Fishman, November, 1978, 6-7. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹⁴ Ian, *Society’s Child*, 16.

in their mind. I remember I was very concerned about nuclear warfare, but I didn't want to admit it to myself. I sort of pushed it down. I didn't do a lot of reading, I didn't even want to think about it, and I didn't want to talk about it. I sort of ignored it for a number of years. I imagine a lot of people did.”¹⁵ But these deep-rooted fears had a way of reaching the surface no matter what one did to keep them at bay. Social scientist John Barron Mays, who wrote extensively on teenage delinquency in the 1960s, noted that “the shadow of the bomb and total war...while it may not figure very largely in the minds of young people themselves, foments a general psychological climate of anxiety and despair.”¹⁶ These fears could not be brushed away lightly, and would ultimately contribute to a growing chasm between adolescent and parental generations.

The federal government, intent on enforcing loyalty to a democratic system, stoked fears of atomic devastation, the expansion of Soviet communism, and the infiltration of communist spies among its citizenry in a strategy that came to be dubbed the second ‘Red Scare.’¹⁷ Government offices distributed pamphlets and films teaching people what they needed to know to “survive” an atomic blast, despite the fact that few of their suggestions had any factual basis. Politicians like Senator Joseph McCarthy, and others in influential positions, warned of the existence of spies lurking in every American city, and at every level of government and private enterprise—they could very well even exist in the most innocent-looking neighborhoods! If fear alone did not bring people into line, however, censorship, both official and informal, was used to stifle any point of view not in keeping with the government’s stance on anticommunism. The House Un-American

¹⁵ Barbara Fuller, interview by Ellen Fishman, July 13, 1979, 1-2. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹⁶ John Barron Mays, “Teen-age culture in contemporary Britain and Europe” in Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture*, 31-32.

¹⁷ The first Red Scare denotes the period between 1919 and 1921 when fears of the communist Russian Revolution and massive numbers of immigrants with supposedly anarchist or Leftist politics ushered in an era of fear, repression and the denial of certain civil rights in America.

Activities Committee (HUAC), created in 1938 to root out anti-American propaganda, was refashioned ten years on to rid the country of communist influence. HUAC was chaired by a group of senators who had the power to blacklist anyone suspected of communist activity—even if this activity was not based on solid evidence. Any insinuation of communist sympathy could be grounds for employment dismissal or even legal action, and would almost certainly guarantee exclusion from most social circles. Most people, then, became exceedingly careful not to vocally support any ideas that could be construed as radical, as the right of dissent increasingly diminished.

Although the majority of older Americans supported these measures to some extent as necessary for combating communist influence, many of their children were skeptical. Basic rights, including freedom of speech and freedom of association, were being violated in the name of “protecting” democracy, which struck many as counterintuitive. This attitude was not always clear at first. Kids who had been raised among Cold War hysteria had been taught to hate anything or anyone associated with Communism, the Soviet Union, or even broadly leftist politics. These elements could be traced to their unsettling fears of the bomb and global annihilation. Many young people initially accepted their government’s assertions that drastic measures had to be taken in order to prevent this unorthodox enemy from infiltrating the peaceful confines of American prosperity. Psychologist H. H. Remmers warned of resultant “Fascistic” tendencies among teenagers when his study was released in 1957, even noting that adolescents may become even more conservative than their parents. His findings revealed that “Eighty-three per cent of today’s teens okay wiretapping. Sixty per cent go for censorship of books, newspapers, magazines...Nearly half of our teenagers are ready to dispense with freedom of the press. One-quarter of them think police should be free to search your home or your person without a warrant. A third of them believe American free speech should be denied certain people if it seems

convenient.” Furthermore, roughly 75 percent “state that obedience and respect for authority are the most important habits for children to learn,” a number that he soberly reminds readers is “an overwhelming majority.” Remmers spoke out against these attitudes, cautioning that the exaggeration of Cold War fears and justification of constitutional violations was creating a generation “in favor of totalitarian practices and economic power vested in the government.”¹⁸ However these thousands of teenage subjects might have answered Remmers’s questionnaires, though, his fears would be somewhat unfounded. Some members of this generation did, in fact, begin to question what they increasingly saw as hypocrisy stemming from their parents and their government.

Comedic writer Bill Bryson, who has authored many memoirs on his 1950s childhood, remembered how glaring the gulf between abject fear and heightened optimism could appear to children, and how it could cause them to think more critically about what they were being told. People “thought there would be a global disaster, probably in the form of world war, within five years and half of those were certain it would be the end of humanity,” he said. “Yet the very people who claimed to expect death at any moment were at the same time busily buying new homes, digging swimming pools, investing in stocks and bonds and pension plans, and generally behaving like people who expect to live a long time.” What he accurately dubbed “a curious blend of undiluted optimism and a kind of eager despair” could perhaps be expected from a group of people trying to come to terms with a fate that was out of their collective hands, but it led many of their children to question the goals of their Cold War government, and the methods used to achieve those goals.¹⁹ A professor at Berkeley remarked, “I saw that the students represented the first

¹⁸ H.H. Remmers & D.H. Radler, *The American Teenager* (Charter Books, 1957), 16-17; 193-194.

¹⁹ Bill Bryson, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 197.

generation that hadn't experienced World War II directly....For their elders the war was culturally non-negotiable. It was a good thing; Hitler was wrong; America was right. But the war did not settle the problems of the world, and the young expressed a certain impiety toward it.”²⁰ Countercultural leader John Sinclair articulated his dissent from his parents' generation by noting that “Elimination of the evil was not a possibility. The square philosophy ruled out the possibility of such a change ever taking place. But with enough rules and regulations, structures and institutions, the chaos might be fenced in, imprisoned, and thus rendered less immediately menacing.”²¹ When none of these tactics worked, many young people started to question exactly what it was that the parent culture deemed ‘evil,’ and what it was that they really thought they could control.

As these children grew up and inequalities and nuclear threats persisted, they became more likely to resist what they were being taught. One high school junior wondered “What right has the government to spend seventy-five per cent of its income on better ways to kill more people while there are people in America who can not [sic] afford decent housing, and while there is such a dreadful shortage of schools and teachers?”²² This disconnect became even more evident when the Attorney General published a list of “suspect” organizations which were liable to investigation and prosecution, with no right of appeal. Many civil rights groups, including the NAACP, were targeted, forcing leaders to expel any members with communist or socialist ties. The explanation given was that these people were radical, and therefore not ‘American’ enough—they were fighting against segregation and giving the Soviets ammunition to criticize American racial

²⁰ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 245.

²¹ Bret Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” November 21, 1977, 2. Michigan Historical Collections, Contemporary History Project Papers, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

²² Remmers, *The American Teenager*, 258.

policies at a time when they should be wholeheartedly supporting their country.²³ Even though, as Michael Klarman argues, the federal government did support many desegregation efforts in order to present the United States as a bastion of global democracy, activists who fought for more expansive change, particularly those with leftist politics, were seen as unpatriotic and potentially troublesome.²⁴ Cold War rhetoric seemed to be producing a more repressive state rather than a democratic one. This led many Americans who came of age after World War Two to start questioning what democracy really meant, and whether their country was truly advocating a system where freedom and equality were granted to all citizens.

This culture spread relatively rapidly, especially during and after World War Two. This was a time of mass interior migration of both soldiers moving to Army bases, mostly in the South, and people from rural areas moving en masse to Northern and Western urban centers to find wartime manufacturing work. As members of these groups embarked on their journeys, they were both influenced by urban, nation-wide cultural norms, and further contributed to their creation by maintaining their own traditions in cities far from home. Southern historian James Gregory explains that the interior movement of millions of people assisted in “collapsing what had been huge cultural differences between that region [the South] and the rest of the United States.”²⁵ Although Southerners were more likely to migrate than people from any other regions, this phenomenon was not germane to their experience. Historian Beth Bailey notes that “At the end of

²³ For more on the interaction between civil rights activism and Cold War politics and rhetoric, please see Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* and Kevin Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²⁴ Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁵ James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press: 2005), xii.

the war, people didn't always land where they'd started out. Even those who went back home, settled down, married the girl or boy next door, for better or worse carried something of their faraway experiences with them. In countless minor arguments and adjustments over dinner tables or in the workplace, their new ideas and new ways unsettled local knowledge."²⁶ Wherever they came from, and wherever they went, Americans across the nation and from all backgrounds were forced to contend with this new culture, and to figure out how they could contribute to it so that their own traditions might live on in some form. Preserving musical traditions proved particularly important to people migrating to new cities, which ultimately led to Southern genres like the blues and country gaining popularity across the United States, and a mixing of musical traditions that would lead to the birth of rock and roll.

Postwar generational and racial politics were also exacerbated by these monumental demographic shifts. A nation which had become increasingly urban, as well as more racially and economically diverse, during the first half of the twentieth century suddenly saw massive numbers of white inhabitants flee the confines of the city for the supposedly greener pastures of new suburban developments. These communities were carved out of the acres of farmland that surrounded most major urban cities, and promised burgeoning families a comfortable, private home replete with a small patch of green lawn for their children to play on. They exploded in popularity after developer William Levitt made a fortune selling 17,500 reasonably priced, prefabricated houses on Long Island in 1948. Since the homes were built on such a massive scale, they were quite cheap to manufacture, which rendered them affordable for families who were otherwise relegated to stuffy, cramped city apartments.

²⁶ Beth L. Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 16.

If the appeal of safe, new neighborhoods bursting with inexpensive, privately-detached, if rather conformist, homes was not enough to inspire millions of urbanites to make the switch to homeownership, the federal government eased the transition even further. In an attempt to ensure that the housing market, an integral aspect of a healthy economy, did not spiral out of control, the federal government intervened in the private sector to a remarkable degree, prodding families, many of whom could not otherwise afford housing prices, to purchase suburban homes. Through the Serviceman's Readjustment Act (more popularly known as the G.I. Bill), for instance, returning veterans were not only granted historically low interest rates on suburban mortgages, but the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) guaranteed these loans. The result is that banks and other lending institutions had no reason to deny loans on suburban houses to people who qualified under the G.I. Bill, as they would be reimbursed by the FHA if the applicant defaulted on his mortgage. To further sweeten the incentives for suburban home ownership, many loan periods were also extended from two to five, ten, or even 30 years. Federal and state governments also indirectly persuaded people to move to the suburbs by pouring funds into suburban neighborhoods to create necessary infrastructure such as water and sewage pipelines and community institutions like schools and neighborhood centers. Even the Aid to Federal Highways Act, passed in 1956 to build 41,000 miles of highway in an attempt to support the automotive and oil industries, made the transition to suburbia easier by linking new developments with the cities where people still overwhelmingly worked. The result is that purchasing a home in a new, well-funded suburb was often cheaper than remaining in cities that were rapidly decaying due to aging and overextended infrastructures and the funneling of government funds to the suburbs. The housing market, then,

was a huge contributor to the robust economy which would fuel the notion of an all-encompassing “Affluent Society.”²⁷

This society was not entirely affluent for everyone, though. Despite the fact that over one million African Americans served in the military during World War Two and were therefore eligible for the same G.I. Bill benefits as their white counterparts, few were able to actually take advantage of them in the same way. Northeastern, Midwestern and Western suburban communities became even more racially divided than many Southern areas which were segregated by law during this period. Even middle- and upper-income African-American families were often left with no other option than to live in decaying city centers with increasingly fewer government resources. One of the reasons for this is that the FHA would only guarantee loans for homes purchased in “stable” areas, a code word which meant all white. City maps were issued to banks, real estate and insurance offices with red outlines around neighborhoods that would be supported by the FHA, and those that would not. “Redlining” areas became an efficient means of keeping African Americans out of certain neighborhoods, which the FHA and lending organizations maintained was important for appeasing white residents’ anti-black racism, keeping the peace, and ensuring that residents would remain in their homes (and keep up with stable mortgage payments) for years to come. In addition, African-American families who asked to look at homes in new suburbs or otherwise all-white areas were effectively “steered” out of the neighborhood by real estate agents who sought to maintain the racial status quo set by the FHA.²⁸

²⁷ The term “Affluent Society” comes from the title of a book by sociologist John Kenneth Galbraith. Published in 1958, the book foretold of class struggle in the United States, even amidst the unprecedented prosperity that vaulted more Americans than ever into the middle classes. For more, please see John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998).

²⁸ For more on the construction of American suburbs, including racial politics, federal and state intervention, and shifting racial attitudes of white suburbanites, please see David Freund *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton University Press, 2005), Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The*

Even if African Americans managed to bypass these rules, however, most suburban housing developments had racially restrictive covenants written into the clauses of each house in the neighborhood. Although restrictive covenants are commonly included in housing deeds to prevent fences being built, or the use of the premises to maintain farm animals, these covenants strictly forbade the owner of the home from ever selling to someone “other than a member of the Caucasian race.” These covenants, which were legally enforceable until 1960 despite numerous efforts by the NAACP and other civil rights organizations to abolish them, effectively prevented African Americans from purchasing homes in most suburbs, although builders like Levitt consistently maintained that they were only practicing good business sense, not furthering racial stereotyping. “The plain fact is that most whites prefer not to live in mixed communities,” he maintained in a 1954 statement after being pressed about the “Caucasian only” clause enforced on his developments.

This attitude may be wrong morally, and some day it may change. I hope it will. But as matters now stand, it is unfair to charge an individual with the blame for creating this attitude or saddle him with the sole responsibility for correcting it. The responsibility is society’s. So far society has not been willing to cope with it. Until it does, it is not reasonable to expect that any builder should or could undertake to absorb the entire risk and burden of conducting such a vast experiment.²⁹

Although Levitt and other builders were often chided for lining their own pockets at the expense of racial equality, changing racial politics did propel many whites to leave their urban homes for the racially homogenous suburbs. The depiction of African Americans as poor, violent and criminally inclined was persistent in both popular culture and news accounts, and ultimately

Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North (Random House, 2008) and Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁹ “The Levittown Decade,” *Newsday*, September 2, 1957.

led some white potential homeowners to act based on these unfortunate stereotypes. These depictions, which historian Khalil Muhammad traces back to faulty crime statistics from 1890 that were altered to depict a prison population that was over 30 percent African American, effectively equated blackness with criminality and poverty. “Violent crime rates in the nation’s biggest cities are generally understood as a reflection of the presence and behavior of the black men, women, and children who live there,” he says.³⁰

This connection allowed structural discrimination against and disenfranchisement of blacks to continue, despite the legal eradication of slavery. “Black criminality offered both a discursive and a practical solution to healing the deep sectional divisions of a war-torn nation,” Muhammad continues. “For white Americans of every ideological stripe...African American criminality became one of the most widely accepted bases for justifying prejudicial thinking, discriminatory treatment, and/or acceptance of racial violence as an instrument of public safety.” Since crime statistics were inevitably higher in urban centers, cities were increasingly depicted as dirty and dangerous, especially as large numbers of African Americans migrated to these areas during World War Two. Despite the fact that “‘the machinery of justice’ was after all, as many had long observed, ‘entirely in the hands of the white man’ as ‘were democracy and the economy,’” Muhammad says, “Blackness now stood as the singular mark of a criminal.”³¹

This link was firmly entrenched in the collective minds of many whites looking for postwar housing. Ken Avuk, a lawyer who began to resist his parents’ views on race when he entered adolescence, remembered that his family’s move from Brooklyn to suburban Farmingdale, New

³⁰ Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

³¹ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 4; 271.

York was affected by racial stereotyping. “A lot of my parents’ generation moved from New York City and it was true for many, many, many people, they moved from areas in Brooklyn that...became heavily black areas in many parts of Brooklyn,” he said. In his family’s case, his parents moved when he was ten years old

Specifically...because of that. This was a neighborhood where they grew up, and while there was certainly a move to the suburbs for any number of reasons, race was definitely a primary motivating factor with my parents, that “our” people were moving out, and black people were moving in, and this is just not a good neighborhood anymore and there’s danger, and so we don’t want to live here.³²

Some blacks were able to take advantage of this government-sanctioned “white flight” if they could afford it. Johnny Otis, who, despite his white racial background, chose to identify with African Americans from a young age, is married to a black woman, and has mostly worked with and befriended African Americans throughout his life noted that

In 1950, for a mere \$18,000, I bought a fourteen-room mansion in the Los Angeles Sugar Hill district. I had only \$1,200 as a down payment, but it was a time of Blacks moving into upscale neighborhoods and whites (in their haste to escape) practically giving these lovely homes away before fleeing to the suburbs... We could never have afforded such a luxurious home, but prejudice works in mysterious ways. This one time, at least, in our favor.³³

Most African Americans, however, even people with advanced degrees and middle-class jobs, had to accept older housing in urban neighborhoods that were starting to deteriorate, since larger shares of federal and state funding went straight to the suburbs, while almost completely emptying city coffers.

Moving to the suburbs was also appealing to members of various European ethnic groups, as well as small numbers of Cuban- and Asian-American families. In the early part of the twentieth

³² Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author, November 22, 2011.

³³ Otis, *Upside Your Head!*, 125.

century, the term ‘white’ was mostly reserved for those of Anglo-Saxon, French, or Scandinavian extraction, while others, including ‘Celts,’ ‘Jews,’ and ‘Greeks’ were designated by their ethnic background, no matter how pale their actual skin tones. By the 1960s, however, most of these groups had been absorbed into the ‘Caucasian’ category, even if in-group delineations still existed. This process began earlier in the twentieth century, as government officials and ‘naturalized’ Americans decided to ‘Americanize’ the millions of Eastern and Southern European immigrants who might otherwise diminish the nation through radical politics, crime, and native customs. State and federal policies to eradicate ethnic-based crime syndicates were passed, organizations and businesses offered citizenship and English-language classes, and eager individuals logged volunteer hours helping new immigrants learn the law (and language and customs) of their new land. Many families were able to use these services to eventually work their way out of poverty, and start to feel like they belonged in their new nation. Khalil Muhammad says that “Regardless of whether one views Americanization programs as an attempt to strip European immigrants of their language, religion, and cultural institutions, the impetus grew out of a desire to eradicate differences rather than to accentuate them.”³⁴ This process accelerated considerably in the postwar period. ‘Whiteness,’ then, has historically had little to do with pigmentation and everything to do with contemporary political machinations and a power structure which came to be based more on a black-white binary after World War Two. While many historians credit the rise of the black freedom movement for the solidification of this binary, which limited the fracturing of European identities, moving to the suburbs also ensured that a family would “become white” in the process.³⁵

³⁴ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 273.

³⁵ For more on the history and consequences of the process of whiteness, please see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2001).

Just as scholar Linda Gordon notes that a train moving west to Arizona from New York in the first years of the twentieth century could render an “Irish” passenger “white” when he or she arrived simply because the Eastern system of racial and ethnic stratification did not exist in the West, purchasing a suburban house allowed families to “become” white upon arrival.³⁶ Part of this is because the redlining process, which limited home purchases to white buyers, did not restrict people of various European ethnicities, classifying them as ‘white’ for official purposes. Another reason is that suburban living implicitly encouraged a level of conformity which prodded non-Anglo-Saxon Europeans to minimize their ethnic traditions and “Americanize” in order to better fit in. Culture and media studies scholar Lynn Spiegel explains that, “Even while prejudices still existed...the prefabricated postwar suburbs encouraged a flattening out of religious identities and also leveled ethnicity to the extent that the communities allowed second-generation European immigrants to sever their national and ethnic ties with urban neighborhood networks.”³⁷ The word “allowed” is interesting in this case, as many members of these groups were, in fact, somewhat eager to shed at least some of the trappings of their pasts in exchange for the privileges of white American citizenship, however painful this process might be. Radical Detroit writer Art Johnson recalled that “The dudes that played the role got the jobs and promotions. Everybody became ashamed of their own cultural background, their own roots, in their panic to emulate the crew cut Anglos. Pass the mashed potatoes please.”³⁸

Many people, especially members of the younger generation, were keen to fit in with their peers, but in a postwar society that was rapidly defined by a sharp contrast between black and

³⁶ Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, 19.

³⁷ Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁸ “John Sinclair: Hipster,” 3.

white, most ethnic Europeans were quite clear about which side they chose to identify with. By the early 1960s, sociologist Jessie Bernard noted that “The child of the recent immigrant is pulled between the ethnic culture of his family, which is separatist in effect, and the teen-age culture of his peers,” but ultimately came to the conclusion that “the teen-ager of today is so far removed from his ethnic background that it in no way affects his participation in teen-age culture. Those who pander to teen-age tastes do not have to worry about competition from ethnic cultures.”³⁹ Americanization, and the ultimate transition to ‘whiteness’ seemed to be a rousing success among suburbanites, especially youth who were seeking ways to separate from their parents. As fear of ‘blackness’ eclipsed fear of ‘ethnic whiteness’ in the nominally Anglo-Saxon American mindset, people of Italian, Jewish, Greek and even, in some cases, Asian and Cuban ancestry were allowed to claim the mantle of ‘whiteness’ once they moved in next door. Ultimately, says David Freund, who writes about race and housing during the postwar period, “the politics of exclusion helped unify a suburban population that was remarkably diverse.” The lives of children who grew up in these suburbs, then, began to look remarkably similar, despite the fact that they may have come from different ethnic backgrounds. So long as their skin color was actually white, they knew they could belong.⁴⁰

This so-called diversity was, of course, not extended to black Northerners who were consistently left out of this otherwise fairly inclusive process. The North and West may have seemed like beacons of freedom to Southerners suffering under the oppression of Jim Crow, but discriminatory real estate practices, police violence, and educational and economic inequalities rendered many Northern areas scarcely more hospitable to African Americans than the segregated

³⁹ Bernard, “Teen-Age Culture: An Overview,” in *Teen-Age Culture*, 11; ix.

⁴⁰ Freund, *Colored Property*, 41.

South. Bunyan Bryant, a social worker, worked as a camp counselor in Ann Arbor, Michigan during the late 1950s and early 1960s while he completed his studies. Though he says he rarely questioned outright segregated practices while growing up in an African-American family in Little Rock, Arkansas, he felt compelled to join his local Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) branch after he experienced looking for an apartment in Ann Arbor. “A phone conversation might go something like this,” he said.

‘Hello, I’m calling about the apartment you have advertised in the paper...Oh it’s still available...How much are you asking...Do you mind renting to Negroes?’ It was really a pain in the ass to not say who you were and take the time to see the apartment only to be told that it was no longer available. ‘We just rented it just before you came.’ Some people would be nice enough to show us around the apartment before they would say that it had been taken. Other people were straight up and would say they didn’t rent to Negroes. Believe it or not, it saved a lot of time when people were straight up in those days.⁴¹

Walter Blackwell, who also worked for civil rights organizations after moving to Ann Arbor from Petersburg, Virginia, in the late 1950s, said that he felt a kinship with Southern civil rights activists after he found a burning cross on his lawn.⁴² Dootsie Williams, a former swing band leader and independent, black-oriented record label owner, remembered racial boundaries in his hometown of Los Angeles where “Blacks were not allowed south of Slauson for many years...That was it until you go way south, all the way to Watts at about 94th Street. I remember a Black family had the nerve, the audacity, to move in at 92nd Street, and the whites gave them a terrible time.”⁴³ And although legendary record producer and music impresario Quincy Jones asserted that “I didn’t understand racism too well” as a child growing up in a mostly white

⁴¹ Bunyan Bryant, interview with Ellen Fishman, January, 1979, 6. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

⁴² Walter Blackwell, interview with Ellen Fishman, July 17, 1978, 4. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

⁴³ Otis, *Upside Your Head*, 19.

Washington state community, he did recall that all of the black people in the area lived in St. Clair Heights, which was “Way outta town. Then you’d get off the bus, we had to walk up a hill for three miles.”⁴⁴

In some cases, Northern racism was capable of stinging even deeper than Southern Jim Crow legislation since it was less obvious, and often more unambiguous. Black folksinger Odetta, who grew up in Los Angeles, asserted that “there were no signs, but... We knew [where] not to, and where it was possible to. So it was ‘up South’ ... I didn’t see any colored signs and white signs, but I knew where I could and couldn’t go. So I was educated in that area.”⁴⁵ And Motown Records founder Berry Gordy said of his father, who moved from rural Alabama to Detroit in the 1930s, that “the first thing he learned was that it was not a new world at all, but the same old one with a different accent. Prejudice existed in Detroit just as it did in the South, and in some cases more insidiously. There were many areas where he was not allowed to live.”⁴⁶ Northern and Western suburbs did not need to pepper their communities with Jim Crow signs; racial exclusion was at the foundation of their very existence, something that most blacks were painfully aware of once they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line.

Ultimately, most suburbs came to be seen as racially and economically homogenous, despite the fact that the communities themselves were responsible for glossing over any ethnic or class differences. Most ‘Baby Boomers’ and their immediate predecessors, then, grew up amongst people much like their own families, with no one else to compare themselves to, and no

⁴⁴ Quincy Jones, interview with Camille Cosby, September 23, 2003, 5. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress.

⁴⁵ Odetta, interview with Camille Cosby, May 26, 2003, 7-8. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress.

⁴⁶ Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 15.

acknowledgement of people from different cultures. In some ways, this environment shielded white suburban children from any other ways of life, leading many to believe that the whole world operated as it did in their own communities—if they thought about it at all. For Arnie Bauchner, a student activist whose parents owned a thriving business in New Jersey, “for the most part, I never felt any material lack in my life. That was not an issue for me. For sure, we weren’t like wealthy rich, but I just felt like anything I wanted was there.”⁴⁷ Even the aesthetic design of suburban communities lulled kids into thinking that their mode of life was shared by people across the country. When moving into a new suburban development in New York, medical doctor and author Austin Kutsher recalled thinking that “The only difference among houses was the color of the shutters and whether the garage was on the left side or the right.”⁴⁸ Decorating contests sponsored by William Levitt, as well as *McCall’s* and *Life* magazine, intended to showcase how individual creativity could flourish in an apparently uninspired environment, did little to quell a growing sense of alienation among many young suburbanites who felt stifled by the conformist nature of these neighbourhoods, especially as they began to learn more about life beyond their suburban boundaries.⁴⁹

Suburban life also led kids to believe that only two periods of life existed: parenthood and childhood. Since most communities were inhabited as soon as they were built, almost exclusively by young families, older people and adolescents were not present in these neighborhoods. According to Canadian social historian Doug Owram, “the continuity of generations was

⁴⁷ Arnie Bauchner, interview with Bret Eynon and Ellen Fishman, December, 1978, 3. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

⁴⁸ Austin Ken Kutsher, *Watching Walter Cronkite: Reflections on Growing Up in the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Gordian Knot Books, 2009), 16.

⁴⁹ “Unfinished: Expanding and Decorating Levittown.” Last accessed July 17, 2013, <http://tiger.uic.edu/~pbhales/Levittown/Decorating.html>

broken...From the beginning, the baby boom generation lived in a world where generational distinctiveness was a part of daily life.”⁵⁰ The structure that the parental generation imposed on family life only intensified this chasm. “The only problems the kids had were with their elders,” John Sinclair said.

The world they saw was so different that the two groups couldn’t understand each other. The kids couldn’t fathom the older generation’s emphasis on rules, order, achievement, and status. The Squares couldn’t understand why the kids weren’t happy to fit into the rules they had laid out—after all, they were giving the kids everything that they themselves had ever wanted.⁵¹

Since children greatly outnumbered their parents, they began to identify more with their peer group. This identification was strengthened by the fact that most kids spent their adolescence in high school, a space that, while technically a bureaucratic entity, was also “as nearly a separate world as could be tolerated by a society that still held onto the family as its basic unit of morality and economy and to the local community as the site of a family-based power.” Large numbers of kids who were beginning to distance themselves from the dictates of their parents, and were then grouped into one building for the majority of the week, were bound to create their own distinct values. Philip Ennis explains that “With the growth of that educational Gargantua, American youth interests were gradually separated from any and all other social groups. Within the schools and college campuses, students invented their own organizational forms, belief systems, and culture, set within specific territorial enclaves.”⁵² An almost inevitable generation gap was created, as kids sensed that this stifling atmosphere was not going to allow them any of the freedoms they desired.

⁵⁰ Doug Owsam, *Born At the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 81.

⁵¹ “John Sinclair: Hipster,” 22.

⁵² Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 247; 293-294.

While the seemingly endless material goods that advertisers promised and parents actually purchased were supposed to bring happiness to kids in white suburbia, the singling out of this demographic produced a startling effect. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) leader Todd Gitlin noted, “Where the parental generation was scourged by memories of the Depression, the children of the middle class...were raised to take affluence for granted.”⁵³ Indeed, a 1959 *Life* magazine article detailing the importance of the “new teen-age market,” profiled 17-year-old Suzie Slattery, the daughter of a local TV announcer, who

Pays \$4 every two weeks at the beauty parlor. She has her own telephone and even has her own soda fountain in the house. On summer vacation days she loves to wander with her mother through fashionable department stores, picking out frocks or furnishings for her room or silver and expensive crockery for the hope chest she has already started. As a high school graduation present, Suzie was given a holiday cruise to Hawaii and is now in the midst of a new clothes-buying spree for college.

Still, the reporter maintained that “her parents' constant indulgence has not spoiled Suzie. She takes for granted all the luxuries that surround her because she has had them all her life.”⁵⁴ But this generation’s tendency to “take for granted” all of the material goods and parental attention bestowed upon them could also produce resistant attitudes, often as young people realized that such wealth did not solve every problem—either in the world, or in their own lives. This attitude is apparent in a classic scene from the 1955 hit film *Rebel Without a Cause*. A father, played by Jim Backus, is desperate to understand what is driving his son Jimmy’s (played by James Dean) seemingly destructive behaviour. “Don’t I give you everything you want?” he asks exasperatedly. “A bicycle—you get a bicycle. A car—““You buy me many things,” a drunken Jimmy responds

⁵³ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1993), 17.

⁵⁴ “Life Magazine Identifies the New Teen-Age Market, 1959” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Ed. Robert Griffith and Paula Baker (Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 2006), 89.

sarcastically. “Thank you.”⁵⁵ The affluent lifestyle that so many white middle-class parents tried to provide for their children often backfired, deepening the generation gap between parents and children, who were beginning to suspect that true contentment could not be bought, and perhaps must be fought for. Ken Avuk, who grew up in an increasingly multicultural Brooklyn neighborhood until his parents moved to an all-white suburb in the mid-1950s, explained that

There was a great, I think, cultural divide, between the World War Two and Depression generation...who fought very hard to get to the middle and didn't quite understand why they worked so hard to get to where they were, and why their children were sort of rejecting so much of their, what we considered, bourgeois values—the conformity of the suburbs and certain racial attitudes.⁵⁶

Gitlin expanded on this idea, noting, “I think there was also a motive of guilt for being middle class and white, and unserious. There was some notion that the world we inhabited was unreal and sterile.”⁵⁷ This group of kids became conditioned to getting almost whatever they wanted when they wanted it, to being treated as special and ‘separate’ right from the beginning, but there was some unease about this, especially as they realized that not all Americans enjoyed the privileges of the white middle class.⁵⁸ Members of this generation felt from the start that they were inherently different from their parents, with different tastes and needs; they could change things, and the outside world would only cheer them on as it had since birth. The attention focused on Baby Boomers could definitely be suffocating, but it also allowed them, Owram puts it, “so much confidence...that it denied the force of history. For boomers, the past simply had to give

⁵⁵ *Rebel Without a Cause*, directed by Nicholas Ray (Hollywood CA: Warner Brothers, 1955), film.

⁵⁶ Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author.

⁵⁷ Todd Gitlin, interview with Bret Eynon, September 16, 1978, 9. Contemporary History Project: The New Left, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

⁵⁸ Owram, *Born At the Right Time*, 99.

way to the future.”⁵⁹ Subversive and unprecedented attitudes, what historian Joel Foreman refers to as “nascent rebellion and liberation,” were being formed within suburbia, a supposedly conservative, family-friendly space.⁶⁰ John Sinclair stated that

We had seen our parents turned into robots on the job and robots at home, stuck in front of meaningless television sets and bashed over the head with the hard sell hour after hour, day after day, year in and year out, desensitized and degraded without even knowing what was happening to them. We could see this happening, and we could see what it meant, but all that we could do was reject it out of hand with no way of putting into words what we felt at all—we just knew that we didn’t want that to happen to us.⁶¹

While the end of the war and the fight against Communism theoretically weakened oppression against blacks by presenting the United States as a truly democratic country which treated all citizens equally, many young middle-class whites found that these events frightened and angered them, dissolving the trust they had in parents and institutions. As much as the parent generation anxiously tried to shelter their children from the harms they had faced, most Baby Boomers were aware of rumblings beneath the surface. One young woman raised in the 1950s notes that while her generation was “born to peace and apparently endless opportunity, we were also born to the stifled groans from Auschwitz, Belsen, Nagasaki and Hiroshima.”⁶² Arnie Bauchner, who lost many relatives in the Holocaust, stated that “There was a sense that people were fucked over in the world, and it gave me some sense of the need to fight back.”⁶³ Many in this group would undoubtedly grow to agree with SDS co-founder Tom Hayden when he wrote in

⁵⁹ Owsam, *Born At the Right Time*, x.

⁶⁰ Foreman, *The Other Fifties*, 4.

⁶¹ John Sinclair, *Guitar Army; Street Writings/Prison Writings* (New York: Douglas Book Corp, 1972), 12.

⁶² Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1992), 7.

⁶³ Arnie Bauchner, interview with Bret Eynon and Ellen Fishman, 1.

the group's 1962 manifesto, The Port Huron Statement, that "the horrors of the twentieth century, symbolized in the gas-ovens and concentration camps and atom bombs, have blasted hopefulness"⁶⁴ in authority. Bibb Edwards, who grew up in a white family in rural Virginia, recalled the psychological ramifications of growing up amidst pervasive fear caused by a shadowy 'Red Menace' of the Cold War Communist threat. "The world was scary enough to a child," he maintained:

There were many pitfalls to avoid and bad things that could happen to those of us who were less-than-careful. My mother provided me a long list of concerns: moving vehicles, water over my head, germs, sharp and hot things, etc....And then, as we got older, there were communists—whatever they were—and world-ending atomic bombs—which, thanks to movies and TV, needed no imagination. By high school we were being warned about sex, drugs, and—to a lesser extent—rock and roll. And I had a happy childhood! I could have grown up in Mayberry.⁶⁵

When these children, who had been more or less protected from the world, began to realize that they "may be the last generation in the experiment with living," the distance between kids and parents widened still.⁶⁶ Young people realized that they would need to look elsewhere for inspiration and role models whom they could trust.

But young people were dealing with unprecedented changes outside the suburbs as well. Despite the fact that this generation gap is not often discussed with regards to black teenagers, many of them were dealing with frustrations, tensions, and fundamental changes both similar to and distinct from those that were plaguing their suburban white peers. The black freedom movement began during World War Two among soldiers and those on the home front, both of whom seized on unique opportunities to fight racial discrimination in a systemized manner.

⁶⁴ Tom Hayden, "The Port Huron Statement," 1962. Last accessed July 17, 2013, <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html>

⁶⁵ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with author. Written response to interview questions. November 13, 2011.

⁶⁶ Hayden, "The Port Huron Statement," <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html>

African Americans who wanted to enlist often had to convince draft boards to accept them even when they were wanting for soldiers. Once accepted, they were often sent to segregated training camps in the South, where even all-black regiments were led by white officers. Although black people from the North were hardly strangers to racial prejudice, they were not used to all-encompassing, systemized racial segregation. At one camp in Salina, Kansas, for instance, black soldiers sat at a lunch counter and were told that the establishment did not serve “colored” people—even though German POWs were eating at the same counter! Soldier Lloyd Brown, who encountered this spectacle, mused “If we were untermenschen in Nazi Germany, they would break our bones. As ‘colored’ men in Salina, they only break our hearts.”⁶⁷ On the plantation where legendary blues musician B.B. King worked as a sharecropper in his youth, “German prisoners-of-war used to come and pick cotton” alongside them, he recalled. “They would come to work at eight or nine o’clock in the morning and they would go back 3:30 or four o’clock in the evening. We had to be there all day. They could eat at the cafes, but we weren’t allowed to go there. Now, that I know. That’s sort of sad when I think about that today, how we were treated.”⁶⁸ African Americans who had enlisted, even those from the South, began to question who was really being treated as the enemy. They were risking their lives to fight a war for democracy abroad when they could not exercise their full democratic rights at home.

This realization was strengthened when soldiers went abroad and found that they were not usually subject to the same kind of racist treatment they received at home. In Europe, they were treated as *Americans* rather than as *African Americans*, and were allowed to eat or congregate with

⁶⁷ Lloyd L. Brown, “Brown v. Salina, Kansas,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 1973, 31.

⁶⁸ B.B. King, “Blues Man Interviewed in Jacksonville FLA,” by Joe Nick Patoski, December 27, 2003, 14. Voices of the CRM Project, 2005/015, American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress.

white friends in non-segregated spaces. Southern black soldiers, many of whom had never left their hometowns or counties before, also came to see that racial segregation and brutality were part of a system that was historically constructed, and therefore subject to change. Amzie Moore, a soldier who would later become an NAACP leader in Mississippi, recalled seeing ancient Roman ruins when stationed in Italy, and realizing that they had been part of a great empire, just like the United States—a great empire that fell. If this beautiful and complex civilization could falter, then so too could Jim Crow.⁶⁹ The tensions of battle and the importance of relying on fellow soldiers for survival also revealed the absurdity of American racial divisions. “It was all so illogical,” said David Dinkins, a Marine who would become mayor of New York City.

Here we’re going to fight this war to end all wars, yet we got second-class citizenship. As far as I knew, there weren’t going to be white bullets and black bullets. There weren’t going to be white graves and black graves. We were all going to be together—or so I thought. But when those Marines who may have thought Jim Crow was okay got pinned down under fire in places like Guam, boy—they just loved to see black Marines landing and bringing ammo. They were so relieved and delighted they hugged them.⁷⁰

Indeed, Beat writer and Black Arts Movement proponent Amiri Baraka argued that the realization “that social inequities suffered by the black [person] could for the first time be looked at somewhat objectively by [blacks] as an *evil*, and not merely as their eternal *lot*,” ultimately led to more organized demands for equality.⁷¹ Sociologists identify these fundamental shifts in thought as essential “framing processes” which must occur before social movements are organized—in other words, “grievances that previously seemed just and immutable have to be ‘reframed’ to seem

⁶⁹ Michael Garvey, “Oral History with Mr. Amzie Moore, Black civil rights worker” The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage Digital Collections, 31. Last accessed July 17, 2013, <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/5707>

⁷⁰ “David Dinkins,” *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience*, ed. Juan Williams (New York: Sterling: 2004), 43.

⁷¹ Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed From It* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1995), 113.

unjust and mutable” in order to urge large groups of people to action.⁷² This process was intensified when soldiers returned to the South from battlefields, where their heroism had been more or less applauded, yet discovered that they were still treated like second-class citizens. These men were heroes and warriors; they were not coming back to pick cotton.

But soldiers were not the only black Americans who helped orchestrate the nascent civil rights movement. Those on the home front also recognized the discrepancy between fighting a war for democracy when so many American citizens were denied their rights at home. Wartime work and support was encouraged, but it became painfully clear that race still divided Americans, whatever their contributions. Quincy Jones remembered that the houses built for black wartime workers in St. Clair Heights, Washington were “designed so that there was a telephone booth at each corner, no phones in any house because they didn’t want anybody to stay there after the war.”⁷³ Scholar and film producer Camille Cosby, who has been active in many civil rights campaigns alongside her husband, legendary actor and comedian Bill Cosby, grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Los Angeles that was predominantly black and Japanese-American, and remembered being very upset when some of her neighbors were sent to Japanese internment camps. “I knew how dastardly those representing the government and how low they could sink,” she said. “They did not arrest Italians, and they did not arrest Germans, okay?...I think, as African Americans, we certainly know what the government can do.”⁷⁴ Many people on the home front were as spurred to action by the injustices and opportunities presented by the war as their contemporaries fighting overseas and serving on army bases. Both experiences operated as framing

⁷² David A. Snow, “Framing Processes, Ideology, and Discursive Fields,” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi (Hoboken NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 383.

⁷³ Quincy Jones, interview with Camille Cosby, 5.

⁷⁴ Odetta, interview with Camille Cosby, 8.

processes, which, in turn, helped create a major foundation for the postwar civil rights movement—the Double ‘V’ Campaign.

This campaign—so-named because supporters were fighting for two kinds of victory, over tyranny abroad and white supremacy at home—became an incredibly popular way for African Americans to voice dissent in a patriotic manner, and helped make systematic organizing acceptable during a time of war. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), for example, was formed in 1942, and began organizing sit-ins against segregation in Northern public facilities and sending integrated buses into Southern states, where enforcement of segregated interstate travel was brutal. Many proponents also supported labor leader A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement, which pledged to send over 50,000 black protestors to the nation’s capital if equal access to jobs in the defense industry, which were underwritten by the federal government, was not protected. This campaign was one of the most successful of the early civil rights movement. President Franklin Roosevelt, afraid of the humiliation the United States would undergo if Randolph kept his word, agreed to pass Executive Order 8802, which prevented any companies with federal defense contracts from racial discrimination in hiring or pay, and even created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to ensure that companies adhered to this order. The result was a mass migration of over 2.5 million black Southerners who came north to work in defense plants, which paid about 60 percent more than other positions open to African Americans.

By the end of the 1940s, legal segregation of public facilities had largely been abolished in the North, mostly due to the efforts of civil rights organizations and the ‘Double V’ campaign,

even though racist housing and employment practices remained largely unchanged.⁷⁵ Southern white people, however, who were aware of these challenges, began gearing up for a fight. In many areas black veterans were forbidden from wearing their uniforms in public, as white Southerners wanted to reinforce their inferiority under the Jim Crow system. After Isaac Woodard, a returning vet, tried to board a bus in South Carolina in his uniform, and was subsequently beaten and blinded, the brutal treatment of African Americans in the supposedly free and democratic United States made headlines around the world. The NAACP and other civil rights groups staged a campaign that emphasized how the United States would be humiliated around the world if those who committed the crime were not properly punished, leading President Harry Truman to order a federal investigation into this case. Although the state fought this investigation at every turn, Truman continued on a more progressive path by creating the Committee on Civil Rights in 1948, which was tasked with investigating instances of racial discrimination, and ultimately passed Executive Order 9981, called for the desegregation of the Armed Forces. These acts prompted the mass exodus of scores of white Southern Democrats, who began calling themselves “Dixiecrats.” This move would eventually change the nature of the Democratic Party, while also giving hope to African Americans that, perhaps, they might be protected by some elements of the federal government.

As the country, especially the South, moved away from an agrarian-based economy, and towards urban and service-oriented industries, the white population’s need to keep blacks ‘in their place’ diminished somewhat. Farms became increasingly mechanized, minimizing the need for low-paid black laborers. The millions of black Southerners who headed north for war employment

⁷⁵ For more on how legal obstructions to desegregation in public places were dismantled in the North, and how racially unjust policies continued to shape Northern cities and institutions, please see Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

may not have left all vestiges of racial prejudice or segregation behind, but greater educational and professional opportunities led to a sharp increase in numbers for the black middle class. The passage of Executive Order 8802, for example, resulted in larger numbers of African Americans working in higher-paid, white-collar positions. The NAACP's crusade to send more African Americans to universities and colleges also led to higher numbers of black students enrolling in higher education, which further increased the status of many families. Finally, the existence of legal or *de facto* racial segregation had created a need for black professionals to service African-American communities since the late nineteenth century. As black people moved into cities and new communities across the country, demand grew for teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, bankers, and other professionals to cater to people who might be turned down by white institutions. Social worker Madison Foster, who led the Black Arts Movement in Ann Arbor, and participated in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers while attending the University of Michigan in the 1960s, was the son of a physician who was unable to practice as a surgeon in his hometown of Monroe, Louisiana. "They didn't allow blacks to belong to the hospital staff," he recalled. "We were in a sense an anomaly in that neighborhood because my father was a physician and my mother was a public health nurse." Both of his parents committed themselves to black patients, and were able to attain a degree of financial security, if not at the same level as their white contemporaries.⁷⁶ Indeed, in his influential yet controversial 1957 study, *Black Bourgeoisie*, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier wrote that "Since the Second World War, Negroes have continued to receive a larger share of the national income than they did before the War." In addition, he stated, "the racial barriers in the North, where nearly a third of the Negroes now live, have tended to be lowered in all phases of

⁷⁶ Madison Foster, interview with Bret Eynon, July, 1978, 1. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

public life. Even in the South...students have been admitted to some of the public universities. As a result of the changes in the economic status of the Negro, the Negro middle class, or the 'black bourgeoisie' has grown in size and acquired a dominant position among Negroes."⁷⁷

Frazier has been criticized, both for simplifying and questioning the stability of this supposed newfound affluence, but as a group, African Americans did indeed see overall increases in income in the postwar period. Historian and former radio deejay Louis Cantor notes that, by 1953, black income was growing at a faster rate than white income, and that over 90 percent of African Americans past the age of 14 were gainfully employed."⁷⁸ A widely read two-part article, published in the radio-advertising trade publication *Sponsor* in the fall of 1949, urged stations and potential corporate patrons to consider the "Forgotten 15,000,000" African Americans as an untapped demographic. Their newfound financial stability rendered them potential consumers, but they were still being ignored because of old-fashioned assumptions about black impoverishment. "In numbers and in buying power the American Negro market is growing by the proverbial leaps and bounds," the article's author exhorted.

The generally accepted annual Negro income figure is \$10,000,000,000 although from a national survey conducted in 1946 by Edgar A. Steele, then director of research for the Research Company of America, the total is closer to \$12,000,000,000... In any advertiser's book that ought to represent a potent buyer's market—and yet very little is known of advertising techniques that will effectively sell the Negro.⁷⁹

Bert Ferguson, manager of WDIA-Memphis, which would become the country's first all-black radio station, declared in the late 1940s that "the Memphis Negro has found a new financial security and a much higher standard of living from the present-day industrial growth of the South,"

⁷⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 22-23.

⁷⁸ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 144.

⁷⁹ "The Forgotten 15,000,000," *Sponsor*, October 10, 1949, 24-25.

while black percentage of retail sales in Atlanta was recorded at over 30 percent, a total of almost 7 million dollars.⁸⁰ One 1940 *New York Times* article touted the relatively large proportion of blacks working in professional positions in Connecticut, making special note of Frank T. Simpson, special assistant to the state's governor.⁸¹ More black families than ever were identified as middle class, which one reporter noted with surprise, writing that "the large majority of Harlem...lead ordered, backbone-of-the-nation lives."⁸² Radio programs like *Tan Town Homemaker*, where Willa Monroe "does interviews with women (mostly of her own race), reports on Negro social and civic happenings in Memphis, and gives home-making hints to housewives," and *Spotlight*, where "Aunt Carrie" doled out romantic advice to women, were directed specifically at black housewives.⁸³ These types of programs started in Memphis at WDIA, but quickly spread to other cities, including Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Charleston.⁸⁴ This demographic would have been considered unprofitable before the war. In the aftermath, however, more black men were earning salaries large enough to allow their wives to tend house and raise children, as was fashionable for many of their middle-class white counterparts. Another radio station, WEAS in Decatur, Georgia, offered "contests among Negro college students, with suitable prizes awarded to stimulate educational interests," as well as "planned programs of on-the-job training for Negro personnel," which both intended to appeal to college students or kids planning on attending college.⁸⁵ Again,

⁸⁰ Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale*, 144-45; "The Forgotten 15,000,000, Part Two: How to Build Negro Sales," *Sponsor*, October 24, 1949, 53.

⁸¹ George Streater, "Connecticut Jobs Open to Negroes," *The New York Times*, July 26, 1940, 23.

⁸² Fannie Hurst, "The Other and Unknown Harlem," *The New York Times*, August 4, 1946, 96-97.

⁸³ "The Forgotten 15,000,000, Part Two: How to Build Negro Sales," 42; Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale*, 118.

⁸⁴ "The Forgotten 15,000,000, Part Two: How to Build Negro Sales," 54.

⁸⁵ "The Forgotten 15,000,000, Part Two: How to Build Negro Sales," 53.

this group was small enough to be considered statistically irrelevant among sponsors before the war, but the relative increase in black families able to afford higher education for their children in the postwar period demanded to be taken into account.

African-American families who were able to take advantage of the still-limited economic and social opportunities which arose after World War Two entered an unsteady space where they were able to enjoy some of the financial and social benefits of the middle class without the firm economic foundation that solidified the positions of their white contemporaries, whose stability was subsidized by government programs.⁸⁶ African-American unemployment rates, while still relatively low in the postwar period, were three times higher than those for whites. Black families were much closer to losing their financial stability through the loss of a job, racist employment practices that prevented people from finding new jobs, attaining payment at the same level as white workers, or lack of home equity. Cantor says that “Black people’s salaries in Memphis and the Mid-South were egregious,” a statement that could aptly describe the financial situations of millions of people across the country. “Even with the obviously improved postwar economic conditions the annual income for the average black male living in the city in 1950 was less than \$1500 a year...Even blacks who held prestigious positions in Memphis and the Mid-South did little better...Only about 100 black Memphians earned more than \$10,000 a year.”⁸⁷ If a growing number of African-American households making a suitable living, working in professional or unionized jobs, preparing their children for university and participating in a thriving consumer economy cannot exactly be deemed “middle class” in the same way that financially stable whites

⁸⁶ For more on how white Americans were able to gain financial security through government-sponsored programs and policies, please see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005).

⁸⁷ Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale*, 150.

can be, they may instead be considered part of what historian Michele Mitchell terms the “aspiring class.”

Mitchell originally used this term to describe African Americans who lived in the early twentieth century, but her description of a class “comprised of workers able to save a little money as well as those who worked multiple jobs to attain class mobility” yet which “tended to be particularly tenuous in that economic downturn or personal calamity was more likely to move aspiring African Americans into poverty due to limited opportunity” applies equally well to people who saw an increase in lifestyle after World War Two.⁸⁸ African-American workers and professionals saw greater opportunities than they ever had before, as well as the willingness, at times, of the federal government and certain labor organizations, like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), to ensure some level of employment equality. This financial stability, however, was far shakier than that of their white contemporaries. Madison Foster, for instance, as the son of a doctor and a nurse, should have enjoyed a more economically stable childhood than many of his black peers. He grew up in a poorer neighborhood, though, because his parents felt it was important to live among the people they served. “My father died when I was 20 and didn’t leave a large sum of money because he gave a lot of gratis medical care,” he said. “My mother didn’t make much money as a public health nurse. On paper it looked as if I was well to do as a southern black, but the contrary was true...I didn’t learn to write until I was nine. I went to the public schools like all the black kids in Newtown.”⁸⁹ Nat Williams, who became famous as the first black deejay at a prominent Memphis radio station, and who hosted many community events,

⁸⁸ Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction*, (Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 9-10.

⁸⁹ Madison Foster, interview with Bret Eynon, 5-6.

was only able to maintain his family's middle-class lifestyle by keeping his full-time job as a history teacher at Booker T. Washington high school.⁹⁰ This financial precariousness, however, was rarely discussed among middle-class African Americans, most of whom were grateful for such new opportunities, and eager to join the growing ranks of the middle class no matter how tenuous their actual situation.

This sentiment explains the controversy surrounding E. Franklin Frazier's publication. "Some of the anger was undoubtedly due to the fact that I had revealed the real economic position of the Negro," he explained in a later edition. "They were particularly incensed by a mere statement of fact that the total assets of all Negro banks in the United States were less than those of a single small white bank in a small town in the State of New York. The anger of the middle class over this statement showed how much they regarded the book as a threat to their economic interests."⁹¹ In order to protect their status culturally, if not economically, many turned to what Mitchell calls "propriety," including "a belief that morality, thrift, and hard work were essential to black progress."⁹² Comedian Arsenio Hall's father, a strict Baptist, was also "an old-fashioned disciplinarian who forbade dancing in the house and made his son dress up for dinner."⁹³ Singer Cissy Houston remembered her parents, who came to Newark, New Jersey from Georgia, as being very strict with regards to education. "We went to school every day," she said. "You didn't not go to school, now. That was not a—um-mm. You went to school and you did your homework. That's what I'm saying. You came home on Sunday night by 7:00. If you hadn't done your homework on

⁹⁰ Cantor, *Wheelin' On Beale*, 27.

⁹¹ Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 2.

⁹² Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 9-10.

⁹³ "Let's Get Busy," *Time*, November 13, 1989, 95. "African Americans in Television," Russell B. Nye Collection, Special Collections Michigan State University Libraries East Lansing MI.

Friday, you certainly did it on Sunday before you went.”⁹⁴ And much like white suburbanites, who rushed to invest in new homes, actress and singer Diahann Carroll said that when her family “bought a brownstone on 148th Street...that’s where I began to understand what property meant to my father. Property meant *everything* to my father.”⁹⁵ In this way, many “aspiring-class” black parents espoused many of the same values and exerted many of the same demands on their children as middle-class white parents, even if their living situations differed.

The promotion of similar values does not by any means imply that African Americans were imitating white society—in fact, many aspiring-class black parents were wont to support racial pride and advancement even if some advised their children against overt protest. Madison Foster remembered that his father and grandfather actively worked against racism and discrimination in his community, advocating for more black employees at the local hospital and voter registration campaigns, as well as encouraging black pride in general. “My father would never shop in the downtown area because he didn’t think that he got the kind of respect that he should have received, not as a physician, but just as a man,” he said. However, “They wouldn’t let me be so pro-black that I would be anti-white. My father had friends that were white. My grandfather travelled this country and had an international perspective on racism even though he lived in a ghetto. He didn’t allow me to say, ‘white people are so and so.’”⁹⁶ Scholar and musician Tony Thomas also recalled being taught about racial pride in his home outside Hartford, Connecticut, although his parents’ views on white people were borne more out of a sense of self-protection than deeper tolerance or

⁹⁴ Cissy Houston, interview with Renee Pouissant, December 14, 2006, 11. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress.

⁹⁵ Diahann Carroll, interview with Camille Cosby, 18. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁹⁶ Madison Foster, interview with Bret Eynon, 1.

awareness. “My mother especially and my grandmother particularly talked about how you should be aware that white people are not going to like you because you are black,” he said.

There also is a big part of black ideology that you don’t want to conform to stereotypes white people have about black people that are bringing down the race. You want to be...a credit to the race. That was a big part of it. There were conversations about bad things that white people do, but I don’t remember very many articulate discussions about race in our family. There was also just a very strong view that my grandmother had throughout her life that [talking] about what’s wrong with white people shouldn’t be done. I remember when Malcolm X was assassinated that my grandmother said, “That’s what you get when you run your mouth too much.”⁹⁷

Although Thomas’s recollection encapsulates the fear, pride, and ambivalent feelings toward assimilation felt by many aspiring-class African Americans, his family also asserted a sense of racial pride, particularly when black people were portrayed as talented or respectable. “[I]n the 1950s if a black person was going to be on television, you might be a kid out playing, and my mother or grandmother or father would call you into the house to see that, it was so rare.” He also remembered a moment from his youth when he discovered the balance that could exist between racial pride and assimilationist values among members of the aspiring class. “I can remember my grandmother taking me and my brother...somewhere, and her stopping the car to listen to “Fingertips” by Stevie Wonder when that first came out,” he said. “That was such an exciting and wonderful thing, it was real black music, even though my grandmother is somebody who articulated statements was extremely assimilationist, extremely opposed to any black people saying anything bad about white people.”⁹⁸

Achieving this balance could be both exhausting and frustrating for black parents. Cultural studies scholar and professor Najee Emerson Muhammad, who grew up in Queens, New York,

⁹⁷ Tony Thomas, in discussion with the author, November 9, 2011.

⁹⁸ Tony Thomas, in discussion with the author.

explained that his father, the first black installer for the New York Bell Telephone Company, did not trust white people and encountered racism every day, but “he also engaged in internalized oppression because of racism.” His mother, who worked for a foster care agency, “was mindful and watchful of racism and how it was practiced.”⁹⁹ Muhammad’s parents and others like them had to be cautious of how they reacted towards racism if they were to maintain the elevated class status they had worked so hard to achieve. This caution did not, however, mean that aspiring-class African Americans failed to support advances towards racial equality or upholding racial pride. Black and white parents may have come from significantly dissimilar backgrounds, and they may have taught their children how to navigate society with somewhat different goals in mind. Still, the fact that children of both races were being persuaded by their parents to embrace some degree of conformity to a middle-class ideal, as well as traditionally middle-class virtues like propriety, thrift and patience, means that they were being raised to have more in common with one another than previous generations.

Race definitely affected the kinds of challenges that young people faced in the years after World War Two, and played a large role in shaping their backgrounds. But the postwar period was also shaped by an increase in middle-class prosperity, and the expansion of a more uniform culture, both of which brought kids from across the country, both black and white, closer together. Teenagers of both races were far more likely than their parents to attend high school, to have disposable income to spend on items directed specifically at their age bracket with little regard to race, to engage in particularly adolescent cultural activities, and to resist some of the values of the parent culture. As young people struggled to piece together a culture that could help them make sense of a world that seemed both poised for atomic destruction and unmoored from any traditional

⁹⁹ Najee Emerson Muhammad, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions. November 20, 2011.

anchors, a middle ground emerged that was shaped by generational distinctiveness and biracial cultural attributes. Black and white teenagers might have come from a variety of different environments, but they would be able to identify with one another through the combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity found within this distinctive space.

Chapter Two

In a 1959 *Harper's* magazine article, editor Russell Lynes attempted to explain the new concept of the teenager: "The change came during and after the Second World War, the result of the dislocation of families both physically and spiritually," he said. "[Teenagers] began to look more than ever to their contemporaries for security, and they began to look for their own set of rules to live by."¹ Since both black and white kids were affected by the war, and because the notion of a specialized teenage culture was so widespread in the 1950s, it is possible to argue that this culture ostensibly included both blacks and whites, though it was invariably presented with a middle-class white face. Sociologist Wini Breines writes that:

A national culture that shaped teenage life and against which those who rejected or were excluded from dominant conventions defined themselves successfully established itself in the postwar period. The conventions of middle-class youth were articulated as if they were everyone's...Black and white teenagers of all classes participated, if differentially, and were able to function as a group not only in market terms, but self-referentially as well.²

Both groups of teenagers were trying to distance themselves from many of the mores of their parents, and establish values that made more sense to their particular circumstances. As white kids attempted to discover a culture and a way of life that seemed more "genuine" and "meaningful" than that which existed in suburban neighborhoods and Cold War rhetoric, black teenagers often grappled with being "caught in two intersecting cultures," sociologist Jessie Bernard explained in her 1964 examination of this age group. "The clash is between the traditional values professed by American society which he now studies in school and the discriminating culture he still sees in operation around him."³ As both groups maintained a separation between themselves and their

¹ Russell Lynes, "Teen-Agers Mirror Their Parents," *The New York Times*, January 28, 1959, 22.

² Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable*, 136-137.

³ Jessie Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture: An Overview*, 11.

parents, they began investing in a rapid exchange of cultural elements that would help shape a postwar middle ground.

The 1950s were marked by the spread of a more uniform culture that impacted people across the country, as well as an increase in affluence across racial and class lines. Mass marketing and television, however much it denied the uniqueness of black heritage or culture, offered a space for both black and white youth to be included and to hold something in common. The variety of these cultural representations prepared them to see rock and roll as a biracial entity, and provided a familiar foundation from which to explore different racial traditions. As this generation broke more and more with the values of their parents, mass culture helped to shape a middle ground that crossed racial boundaries and tentatively included all young people. These groups, however, did not approach this ground from the same point. They may have been privy to the same cultural dialogue, which undoubtedly levelled some of the differences between them. But even though black teenagers watched the same programs and purchased the same advertised products as their white counterparts, they were still not represented onscreen and in mainstream advertising campaigns.

Still, the creation of this middle ground helped to reinforce this generation's changing views on race. White kids were more likely to support the concept of desegregation than their parents were, and were even willing to challenge more liberal views.⁴ Racial inequality was still rife, despite the ubiquitous Cold War rhetoric assuring all Americans that they lived in a free and just nation. Black kids actively supported integration, mainly because, amidst this rhetoric and their own more favourable living circumstances, they were raised to feel that they should be treated

⁴ For examples of surveys or polls showing generational differences among whites regarding racial equality and desegregation of public places, please see H.H. Remmers & D.H. Radler, *The American Teenager* (Charter Books, 1957), 202-205; 220-221; Education Held Integration Key," *The New York Times*, May 20, 1956, 81; and Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 227.

equally. This position often conflicted with that of their parents, many of whom were thankful for what they had, and tried to avoid making trouble even if they personally supported racial integration, or were frightened by the potential racial violence that whites could commit against them in integrated spaces. Others, like A.T. Walden, president of the Atlanta National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch during this period, and one of the first African-American lawyers in the South, had gained some degree of autonomy within the confines of Jim Crow, and doubted that desegregation would encourage black prosperity. Legal scholar Tomiko Brown-Nagin explains that many black elites practiced what she calls “pragmatism,” which “privileged politics over litigation, placed a high value on economic security, and rejected the idea that integration (or even desegregation) and equality were one and the same.” Walden and many others like him often tried to work within the system for greater economic integrity and racial dignity which, she says, may have been more difficult to achieve in a desegregated system. They “sought to remedy racial injustice through negotiation and without resort to litigation,” she says. “Perhaps most important, he and other black elites in Atlanta never fully embraced school desegregation.” White supremacists continued to view elite African-American professionals as dangerous no matter how they framed their fight for justice, but Walden and others like him also had to suffer the indignity of being called “Uncle Toms” by activists who were more committed to the integrationist movement. Finally, many black parents feared the violent reprisal that might accompany direct action and demands for racial equality. Thurgood Marshall, who became the first African-American Supreme Court justice in 1967, never publicly spoke out against direct action campaigns, but he secretly gave voice to the fears of many when he accused Martin Luther King and youth activists of “get[ting] people killed.”⁵

⁵ Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2-4.

Younger blacks were also more likely than their parents to support integration because they felt they had more in common with white kids of their own age, even though they were careful to maintain a distinct pride in being black. The creation of a cultural middle ground reinforced the tendencies of both groups to support moderate racial equality and desegregation of public spaces just as these issues became the focus of organized campaigns, especially in the South. Rock and roll music would become one of the most important elements in the creation of this middle ground, but it was not the only cultural entity that encouraged this generation's nascent resistance against segregation and racial inequality.

The country experienced a massive rural-urban shift which began in the late 19th century, accelerated during and after World War One, and came to a head during World War Two, as 20 million people moved to urban centers for wartime employment, mostly in factories. Even within cities, immense changes were taking place, as an industrial economy based on manufacturing shifted to a service economy. This shift placed more of an emphasis on education and a middle-class ethos than on the progressive labor policies that were more likely to be embraced in factories. All of this displacement produced a lack of distinct ties to the past or to any particular community, along with, sociologist John Barron Mays explained in an early 1960s study, "greater social mobility between the various income groups, the high speed of social and technical change, a confusion of ethical values, and a general climate of public opinion disposed to questioning the validity of traditional beliefs and standards." Such rapid social changes resulted in what contemporary social scientists termed "anxiety-disposing forces" that "have, in many sections of society, resulted in further instability," as well as the need for a new culture which would fill the gaps left by these losses.⁶

⁶ John Barron Mays, "Teen-age culture in contemporary Britain and Europe" in Jessie Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture: An Overview* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1961), 24.

This widespread flux both precipitated and responded to the creation of a more uniform popular culture, which was already starting to dominate radio waves and print culture by the 1930s. Radio stations still varied region to region, but the establishment of the National Broadcast Company (NBC) and Columbia Broadcast Station (CBS) in the 1920s provided similar programs to listeners across the country, allowing people across regional, racial, and class boundaries to listen to the same offerings. Popular programs like “Amos ‘n’ Andy,” for instance, were broadcast everywhere at the same time every day. This set-up provided the foundation for a more uniform popular culture that, according to Beth Bailey, “changed the country’s cultural geography, creating new arenas of possibility and new spaces for contestation and change.” People who lived in smaller towns and rural areas were no longer isolated within their own communities, at least not culturally—they could be just as knowledgeable about important events or cultural trends as their urban contemporaries, thus defining themselves within a more national context rather than simply regional. Bailey adds that “Throughout America, people were affected by what was happening on a national scale, whether structural changes that touched their lives directly or simply awareness of geographically distant events through the omnipresent mass media.”⁷

This new, less regionally distinctive culture technically unified people from backgrounds in the quest for as many consumers as possible, but it also encouraged the breaking of ties with older ethnic, urban and/or working-class traditions. This break produced a strong desire for community and familiarity in many newly middle-class white youth. These desires, however, could not be satiated by the constructed communities their parents had carved out in their brand-new suburban neighborhoods. In order to truly feel accepted, these kids would have to create their own systems of support. This might be a difficult feat in areas which were overwhelmingly

⁷ Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 14; 5.

homogenous, but technological advances, particularly the radio, record player, jukebox and television, which were all becoming widely available to both middle- and working-class youth during this period, provided disenchanted young people with the ability to reach out beyond their own immediate peer groups. George Lipsitz explains that

Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible. Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection. This capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present.⁸

What Lipsitz terms “electronic mass media” may act as a middle ground between the white middle class and the creative, emotive values often associated with non-white, working-class groups that were missing from their own cultural consciousnesses. In this way, culture becomes politicized, as new communities, shaped by technology, mass culture, and the values of a new generation, became capable of crossing divisions reinforced by the state.

This search for a common memory led, in many cases, to a sincere interest in the people who produced alternative cultural entities. Lipsitz asserts that

Facing a choice between the sterile and homogenous suburban cultures of their parents or the dynamic street cultures alive among groups excluded from the middle-class consensus, a large body of youths found themselves captivated and persuaded by the voices of difference...Mass consumer culture had become so hegemonic that middle-class young people flocked to the cultures of the dying industrial city for connection to the past, for emotional expression, and for a set of values that explained and justified rebellion.⁹

⁸ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 5.

⁹ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 123.

In doing so, many white suburban youth began what Lipsitz would later describe as a quest for a common memory with their non-white, often working-class peers that explicitly eschewed the values of the parent culture. John Sinclair explained that “The ones who were able to reject Squaredom the quickest found themselves...outside the mainstream of American society. Looking for an alternative, they...picked up on black culture.”¹⁰

Historically, whites often imposed any unacceptable human traits onto black people in order to ‘purify’ the white self, which often resulted in the exoticization of African-American traditions and art forms. It remains a commonly-held belief that social segregation ensured that black culture grew mostly in isolation from whites up until this point, and that whites were therefore unable to understand it. The music, then, often took on the same stigmas bestowed upon black people by white racist standards. Although Lawrence Levine, Grace Elizabeth Hale and other scholars have refuted the notion that blacks and whites ever occupied spaces that were so isolated from the other that they did not intersect at points, prejudiced and derogatory criticisms of black music still flourished among the white middle classes: it was considered ‘primitive,’ overtly sexual, and even dirty.¹¹ The black “aspiring” classes, which placed an emphasis on education and moral uprightness in order to ‘advance’ black culture, often echoed these concerns. The general consensus among these communities was that secular black music, particularly the blues and jazz, denigrated their race and rendered them vulnerable to further exploitation.¹² At the same time,

¹⁰ Bret Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” November 21, 1977, 25-25. Michigan Historical Collections, Contemporary History Project Papers, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹¹ For more on this, please see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1977) and Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*.

¹² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Rethinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* Ed. Cornel West & Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 210; 214.

certain groups of white Americans have also framed black musical traditions as more genuine, partially because they emphasized feelings that were deemed too raw or sexual for polite white society, and partially because of the flawed belief that they had developed wholly apart from mainstream American culture. Hale argues that “In America, the romance of the outsider always racializes the concept of the real. And looking for ‘the real’, no matter what the professed political beliefs of the seeker, perpetuates the politics of inequality.”¹³ The conception of a biracial interest in the same music as a middle ground, then, is vulnerable to criticism that it instead constituted racial exoticization, rather than a step towards understanding and tolerance.

White fascination with black culture exploded in the late 1940s, most prominently among a group called the Beats. These mostly middle-class white artists and writers dropped out of their own communities to congregate in Greenwich Village and North Beach, and discover a more fulfilling and ‘real’ mode of existence. Beats, or “hipsters” as they were called with both derision and pride, John Sinclair, said,

Broke all of the rules that governed the life of the Square. Where the American dream demanded conformity, the hipster believed in individuality. For passivity, Hip substituted creative activity. With their disdain for neat clothes and sterile rooms, Hipsters violated the middle-class taboo against dirt... They spoke openly of their disgust with American and all that it stood for. Hipsters did everything that Squares shouldn’t, or couldn’t, or at least wouldn’t do.¹⁴

Well-known Beats, including Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Diane di Prima, and Hettie Jones, often expressed their disenchantment with white, middle-class culture by using African-American styles and art forms to guide their work and lifestyles. The most prominent Beat literary works, like *On the Road* and “Howl” are written in a stream-of-consciousness method with

¹³ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 236.

¹⁴ Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” 6.

a meter meant to emulate the unstructured nature of jazz. Adherents often spoke in what di Prima called a “bastardization of the black argot,” and dressed in black clothing, or in ensembles inspired by working-class fashion, replete with flannel shirts, fishermen’s sweaters, and blue jeans.¹⁵ A few black artists who moved in these circles, including Amiri Baraka and Bob Kaufman, also described themselves as Beats, much to the delight of white members, who felt that their presence validated these efforts to truly live on the margins of society.

The Beats adopted aspects of black and working-class culture as a way of defining their own rebelliousness. Many believed, as Johnny Otis said, that “There’s nothing particularly fascinating about most European Americans. They are usually, to one degree or another, racist, ethnocentric, and seemingly unable (certainly unwilling) to embrace the concept of brotherhood in real life. They are big on lip service to lofty ideas about equality.”¹⁶ Beats often had good intentions trying to break from these attitudes, but they were rarely able to cast off their own misunderstandings of black culture. Even their self-imposed isolation was an imitation of the black person’s forced withdrawal from society. It is this tension, perhaps, that allowed the Beats to give their lives over to black style without truly understanding it in many cases. The Beats could admire jazz music, but they were doomed to remain outsiders to a musical form that was in complete opposition to their culture. They could befriend black people without realizing that their exclusion from society, like that of their white jazz musician-predecessors, was completely voluntary, and allowed them little common ground with those they sought to admire. Black culture, then, became little more than a collection of stereotypes to the Beats, who had trouble seeing blacks as actual people. Cultural critic and journalist Nelson George notes that this fascination set race relations

¹⁵ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1992), 141.

¹⁶ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 153.

back further, as the Beats engaged in “often unintentional rape of black ideas and styles,” while Norman Mailer attested, “In the wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry.”¹⁷

Strangely enough, Baraka, who wrote at great length about race and cultural appropriation, did not accuse the Beats of exoticization—perhaps because he was married to a white Beatnik girl, had many Beat friends, and generally considered himself part of this cohort. Instead, he considered their identification with black culture as ‘reciprocal.’ In his seminal work of cultural criticism, *Blues People*, he wrote,

The reciprocity of this relationship became actively decisive during the fifties when scores of young Negroes...began to address themselves to the formal canons of Western nonconformity as formally understood refusals of the hollowness of American life, especially in its address to the Negro. The young Negro intellectuals and artists in most cases are fleeing the same ‘classic’ bourgeoisie situations as their white counterparts.¹⁸

If blacks and whites are extricating themselves from the same repressive society, he mused, then exoticism did not necessarily have to be a factor if they should find common ground with one another. Madison Foster noted that “This isn’t the first generation that white people have been influenced by black culture,” echoing a common refrain by both black and white critics alike. “There were white hipsters long before the sixties. In some ways, they were more discerning, more sensitive, and had a more thorough understanding of black culture than some of the whites in the counter-culture of the sixties.”¹⁹ In some cases, even a faulty attempt to reach out across racial boundaries could be seen as a positive development, especially in a repressive Cold War atmosphere.

¹⁷ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (Penguin Books, 1988), 6; Mailer, *The White Negro*, 4.

¹⁸ Baraka, *Blues People*, 231.

¹⁹ Eynon, interview with Madison Foster, 36-37.

It was partially a sense of separateness, or what Baraka called “secretness,” that appealed to whites who felt disenchanted with their own culture. “As a folk expression of a traditionally oppressed people, the most meaningful of Negro music was usually ‘secret,’ and as separate as that people themselves were forced to be,” he explained. “But as the secretness and separation of Negroes in America was increasingly broken down, Negro music had to reflect the growing openness of communication with white America.”²⁰ African-American culture has always been separate and ‘exoticized,’ he said, not because blacks are a different kind of American than whites are, but because they have been brutally repressed, and because the races have long been understood as inherently unequal. African-American culture never really existed *separately* from mainstream American culture—it overlapped in many areas, and they helped shape one another, sometimes through imitation, and sometimes through the tensions that existed between them. In one interview, John Sinclair spoke admiringly of blacks, saying “They put themselves as far outside the mainstream of American life as they could and said, ‘Fuck it.’ We don’t want to integrate with these people. We don’t want to join them. They’re devils. They’re terrible.”²¹ Sinclair obviously sympathized with this view on white cultural and political leaders. He did not appreciate, however, that, as a white man himself, he was able to make the decision to cut ties with mainstream society, as opposed to blacks, who were overwhelmingly forced to the margins. Grace Elizabeth Hale explains, “However the margins and center were defined, the key imaginative act was the ‘discovery’ of difference. These encounters with outsiders enabled some middle-class whites to cut themselves free of their own social origins and their own histories and in identifying

²⁰ Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed From It* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1995), 174.

²¹ Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” 13.

with these others to imaginatively regain what they understood as previously lost values and feelings. They remade themselves. They became outsiders too.”²²

One alternative for these restless suburban white kids was to look towards the suitably ‘exotic’ black community that, on the surface, seemed to offer a more truthful and honest experience due to its supposed isolation from corrupt white culture. In postwar America, Hale says, “ringing out in contradiction to an image of America as a place of rising conformity, middle-class white kids learned that rebellion sounded black. White middle-class Americans imagined people living on the margins, without economic or political or social privilege, as possessing something vital, some essential quality that had somehow been lost from their own lives.”²³ She references a famous passage from Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, a paeon to, and inspiration for, restless young white people struggling within the confines of Cold War culture. “At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro,” he wrote, “feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night.”²⁴ Exoticization, and the reduction of the black experience to expressive, primitive desires, are both apparent here, but the lure of a culture that seemed different enough from their own, yet grounded in their country’s history, was almost palpable for kids who felt stifled by the values of their own communities.

This desire was often expressed through style, particularly for white teens who were not sure if they were discontent enough to try rebellion. A popular way of expressing dissatisfaction

²² Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 3.

²³ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 49; 3.

²⁴ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 180.

with one's own culture involved dressing like people from another racial background. This was generally a minor transgression for blacks, who were often encouraged to conform to so-called 'proper' dress codes. The trend of whites dressing to echo black culture, however, was almost revolutionary in a milieu based on preventing racial mixing. John Sinclair noted that "Those few whites who had the courage to step out of the Square world in the early fifties found themselves alone, isolated from the great majority of white Americans. So they turned to black people, and black culture. They adopted much of the black style and outlook on life."²⁵ They often did so in surprising ways, often taking the notion of 'blackness' literally. "It was a white time in America," Wini Breines says, referring not only to an assumption of white racial stability, but to the popularity of pale, pastel shades for fashions and home décor, and even blonde hair color. "It is thus not surprising that dissenters were, felt, or were imagined to be dark...Black clothes signified [dissent]: black turtleneck shirts, black stockings, black sunglasses."²⁶ Art historian and cultural critic Kobena Mercer argues that "Black leather jackets and dark glasses...were already inscribed as stylized synonyms for 'rebelliousness' in white male subcultures from the 1950s. There, via Marlon Brando and the metonymic association with macho and motor bikes, these elements encoded a youthful desire for 'freedom,' in the image of the American highway and the open road, implying opposition to the domestic norms of their parent culture." He adds that while the color black definitely carried racial connotations, it was also used "to suggest mystery, 'cool,' outsider status, anything to 'alienate' the normative values of 'square society.'"²⁷ White kids who dressed

²⁵ Bret Eynon, "John Sinclair: Hipster," 5.

²⁶ Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable*, 148.

²⁷ Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," 42.

in black visually separated themselves from the rest of middle-class society by way of sartorial choices that overtly signified a combination of resistance and racial difference.

Other white kids, like a young Elvis Presley, pushed the racial envelope further by shopping at shops frequented by African-American teenagers, and imitating their styles. Nelson George writes that “Even before he’d made his first record, Elvis was wearing one of black America’s favorite products, Royal Crown Pomade hair grease, used by hep cats to create the shiny, slick hairstyles of the day.”²⁸ Along with his predilection for shopping on Memphis’ traditionally black Beale Street, his style seemed to testify as to which side of the racial divide he felt himself to be on. The appeal of cross-racial dressing increased for middle-class whites in the 1960s, as support for racial equality grew. Rick Turner, a lifelong Southerner whose white family virulently supported civil rights despite living in strictly segregated Richmond, Virginia, remembered that, by the time he was 16:

I wouldn’t go to certain places that were white. I didn’t want to dress like a white guy... I started wearing brightly colored clothes, like I started wearing orange-colored pants, pink pants and blue pants, all of the things that I would see at the concerts I would go to that I would see blacks wearing...I would go downtown to the black stores and buy my clothes there. Number one to be different, but to show people that what I was saying, what I was doing just wasn’t to show off, this was who I really was.²⁹

Turner’s anecdote offers an excellent response to critics who accused white kids who “dressed black” of exoticization, and of stealing black styles without understanding the history behind them. Yes, Turner chose to shop at stores patronized by African-American customers and to dress in the brighter fashions he found there, which indicates both a degree of white privilege and his choice to use black culture as a means of separating from Southern white social mores. But in his hometown, where any deviation of racial norms was grounds for exclusion, criticism, and

²⁸ George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 62.

²⁹ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author, November 20, 2011.

even violence, Turner's choice to visually separate himself from segregated society made him a threat to social norms at first glance. No one would have to actually talk to him in order to discern his feelings on race or integration—his clothing announced these positions immediately, since fashion too was racially politicized in the South. Very few young whites would have decided to dress this way, at least not on a regular basis, for fear of backlash, so his choice to do so rendered his stance on racial division abundantly clear. Indeed, Turner's openness often left him vulnerable to verbal and even physical attack, since his blatant identification with African Americans, and with the freedom movement gaining speed across the South, was so evident. Sociologist Rhys Williams notes, for instance, that "Many movement challenges are embodied in the person, dress, behavior, or even existence of activists themselves."³⁰ In this case, Turner used dress not only to express his desire to distance himself from white segregationists and mainstream, middle-class mores, but to explicitly position himself alongside blacks fighting for equality.

But resistance was not limited to style. White children born during and after World War Two often questioned their parents' stances on race, although often only after initially accepting these views. Bibb Edwards, who grew up in rural Virginia in the 1950s, said of his parents, "what I picked up from them was through example, not instruction... They did not question—at least to me—the social order of that time and place; neither did I. I was just trying to figure it out, fit in."³¹ The prevailing image of white Southerners during this period is often of, as historian Jason Sokol describes them in his book, *There Goes My Everything*, "immoral rednecks of below-average

³⁰ Rhys H. Williams, "The Cultural Contexts of Collective Action: Constraints, Opportunities, and the Symbolic Life of Social Movements," *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi (Hoboken NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 103.

³¹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions. November 13, 2011.

intelligence.”³² Aside from the entrenched racial hostilities and segregation which defined almost every aspect of life in the South, many lower-middle-class, working-class, and poor whites felt that they were already denied many of the privileges of their wealthier contemporaries. Members of these groups were often unwilling to support black advancement as they struggled to get by on what little they had, simply because they did not feel there would be enough political or economic equity to go around. Stan Wells, for instance, who grew up in both Huntsville and rural Alabama, said of his parents, “Much like others of their generation, they viewed black folks with suspicion, and that given a chance they would be up to no good.”³³ Mary Ellen Kutsher, a medical administrator who grew up in Norfolk, Virginia in the 1950s and 1960s, was devastated when she heard the news that Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. Her mother, however, replied “I’m so sorry, but I guess it serves him right, with all he’s been saying for the Negroes. He’s too far ahead of this country.”³⁴

Other white Southerners have described their parents as kind, educated, and able to simultaneously cling to a solidly racist worldview while decrying the racial violence advocated by massive resisters, but most respondents recalled growing up amidst these more complex racial worldviews. Edwards noted of his parents that, “For their time and place they were probably moderates...I don’t think they were supportive of extralegal expressions on either side, neither the Klan (which was slinking about where I lived) nor black demonstrations [or] violence. They seemed to be willing to let change evolve under the law.”³⁵ Ann Wells, who grew up in rural

³² Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 14.

³³ Stan Wells, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions. December 20, 2011.

³⁴ Austin Ken Kutsher, *Watching Walter Cronkite: Reflections on Growing Up in the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Gordian Knot Books, 2009), 203.

³⁵ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

Alabama, said “My parents and grandparents were always friendly and kind to other races, but always felt we each had our own ‘place’.”³⁶ Bob Croonenberghs, a marine biologist who hails from Virginia Beach, regarded his parents’ views on race as particularly fluid. “My father was usually not racist, but at times skirted nearer than I liked,” he says. “[He] would sometimes tell jokes that had just a little touch of racism in them, though they were not overtly racist.” Croonenberghs described his mother, however, as “pretty liberal, concerning her background and the times. She evolved over my high school and college times.” He remembered that when his mother hired Florence, a black maid, to work for the family, “at first, though being fair and kind with her, [she] still regarded a separation of culture in practice.” Later though, his mother visited Florence’s family, and was even “warmly received” when she attended a funeral for one of her family members.³⁷ Johnny Otis described most white people as “over all decent folk,” but explained how Southern whites could be kind to black people as individuals, yet still maintain fairly rigid beliefs in white supremacy. “Woven right into their basic decency is an indecent attitude toward African Americans and other non-whites, although they don’t seem to realize it,” he said. “Once they swallow the lies about Blacks being more violent, prone to criminal activity, lazy, less intelligent, unqualified, inferior culturally, a threat to their jobs, and so forth, they are able to purge themselves of any conscious guilt.”³⁸ In this sense, the racial views of many Southern whites remained incredibly harmful, and continued to bolster the dividing line laid down by Jim Crow, even if they cloaked these beliefs in more refined tones.

³⁶ Ann Wells, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 9, 2011.

³⁷ Bob Croonenberghs, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, December 13, 2011.

³⁸ Otis, *Upside Your Head!*, 154.

The ability to balance a white supremacist worldview with kindly feelings towards black individuals, or even African Americans as a group, was a far more common attitude in the American South by this period than the biting racial hatred which encouraged riots and made the news. Jason Sokol argues, in fact, that it was this more complex attitude towards race relations, as described by many of the respondents above, which resulted in most white Southerners grudgingly accepting the changes wrought by the civil rights movement. Most members of this demographic were afraid of what would happen once Southern white supremacy and Jim Crow were dismantled. But they were also disturbed by the widely publicized police violence in their hometowns, and the disruptions to their daily lives that were advocated by massive resisters. “Most white Southerners identified neither with the civil rights movement nor with its violent resisters,” he asserts. “They were fearful, silent, and often inert. The age of civil rights looked different in their eyes.”³⁹ He quotes an Atlanta storekeeper, for instance, who betrayed his true priorities by telling a reporter, “We’re all segregationists, the white people of Georgia; or most of us are. But we’ve got caught up in something that’s bigger than us, and we’ve got to live with it.”⁴⁰ This is not the virulent call for segregation readers are used to, but a practical, yet reticent, adaptation to what seems to be inevitable. It is not that racism ceased to exist; only that it was displaced somewhat to allow this man to continue with his daily life as best as he could. Sokol also points to Frank Myers, who served as mayor of Americus, Georgia: “I’m still about forty percent bigoted,” Myers said. “There just ain’t no way to grow up like I did without having prejudices... It’s gonna be our children finally who’re going to deliver us out of this thing that’s been going on down here ever since slavery.”⁴¹

³⁹ Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 4.

⁴⁰ Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 5.

⁴¹ Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 179.

Even as Myers realized the harm that has been caused by these myths, he acknowledged that it was next to impossible to overturn his entire belief system. It was this kind of thinking, which accommodated both white supremacist thought and the realization that society was, or even should, change, that shaped the formative years of many white Southerners born during or after World War Two, and ultimately allowed them to question the established racial system.

But not all white Southern households espoused this kind of rhetoric. Rick Turner asserted that, despite living in Richmond, Virginia, during the civil rights movement, “I was brought up entirely different than most white kids. My parents and I never had a problem with anything, especially as far as race, because we never knew there was a problem. We didn’t look upon African Americans as being any different than us and so we never disagreed on anything like that.”⁴² He recalled a particularly eventful dinner with neighbors where,

This guy, the husband of the family, kept on remarking and kept on saying that word, the n-word...Finally my dad had had enough of that, he said, “You’d better leave.” And of course he says “You’re going to have to make me leave,” and of course that was his swan song. The ambulance had to come pick him up, because my dad was just unmerciful, just beat him up, beat him to a pulp.⁴³

Turner’s father also taught him to work for more tangible change, even within the confines of a racist society. “The company he worked for was a family-owned business, white-owned, and even though they had one black employee, they still treated that employee like he was a second-rate citizen,” Turner explained. “Every time my dad would...get a raise, he’d say ‘Well, what about Johnny?’ and they’d say, ‘he’s just an old ‘N,’ he doesn’t need anything.’ And of course

⁴² Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

⁴³ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

my dad would stand up and fight for him. Sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn't."⁴⁴

With regards to the wider movement as a whole,

I can remember during the race riots of the 60s, they'd come on television, I can remember my father just running up to the TV and almost slamming his fists on the television, saying, "This is wrong son, you've got to do something about it. I can't, but you've got to do something about this, this is wrong." So my dad just kind of, not intentionally I don't think, he just kind of pushed me mentally towards civil rights.⁴⁵

Turner's father was not the only white Southerner who disagreed with racial discrimination and segregation. Economist and former radical student activist Barry Bluestone grew up in Detroit, and was surprised to discover that he and his friends had the sympathies of a white cab driver when they went south to Montgomery, Alabama, for a civil rights demonstration. "To our utter amazement, he said that he supported the demonstration and he'd find a way for us to get there," he said. When they got out, the driver refused payment. "He said, 'It's my city, and all of us whites and blacks gotta learn to live together.'"⁴⁶ Mary Ellen Kutsher was raised in a more racially tolerant home in Virginia by her grandparents, who allowed her to invite black friends over. She was actually confused enough by the attempt to desegregate the University in Mississippi in 1962 that she asked her grandparents what the fuss was about. "'Why don't they want that man to go to school, Gramps?' 'Because some people are prejudiced.' 'What's prejudice?' 'It's when you don't like somebody just because they have different skin color or go to a different church,' Grams answered." She then asked why she was allowed to play with black girls in her neighborhood if such prejudice existed. "Mary, that's because we're not prejudiced," her grandfather replied. "I've fought fires with white and Negro men, and tried to save the houses of Negro and white families."

⁴⁴ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

⁴⁵ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

⁴⁶ Barry Bluestone, interview with Bret Eynon, August, 1978, 10. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

When she responded that he should go out and tell the protestors his stories, he sadly replied, “They might not like it so much, Mary. But at least you know right from wrong.”⁴⁷ And radio deejay Shelley Stewart, who is black, recalled living with Clyde Smith, a wealthy white businessman in rural Alabama who adopted him after his own family threw him out of the house as a child, and who fought against racial prejudice in much the same way that Turner’s father did. “Clyde never used the words *Negro*, *colored*, or the popular racial slurs,” Stewart said. Once, when he and Smith were dining with Doc, the county blacksmith, Doc could not resist declaring “I hope you break those damn dishes” because “you let a nigger boy sit down in your house, that nigger sitting there at your table.” “Before the blacksmith could spew any more venom,” Stewart continued, “Papa Clyde decked him with a knuckle sandwich to the chin, sending him sailing over a chair. ‘What’s wrong?’ Doc said in befuddlement. ‘All I said was you let that nigger—’ Papa Clyde interrupted with another blow. He made it clear that the blacksmith was never to use that term again in describing me.”⁴⁸ Racial attitudes among white Southerners, then, were not uniform. Some parents actually did encourage their children to question racial norms and to fight back when the opportunity to do so arose.

In contrast to white teens’ search for a seemingly more emotive culture, middle- or aspiring-class African-American youth embraced certain aspects of middle-class American culture during this period. As their families made more money, particularly in Northern cities, some advertisers began marketing explicitly to African-American consumers. Interestingly, at a time when whites and blacks were still segregated on a number of levels, black and white consumers

⁴⁷ Kutsher, *Watching Walter Cronkite*, 66.

⁴⁸ Shelley Stewart with Nathan Hale Turner, *The Road South: A Memoir* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2002), 48; 51.

were not considered fundamentally different. Black publications from this period were filled with advertisements that barely differ from their white counterparts, other than that they featured black models. Children smiled after brushing with Crest toothpaste, well-adorned, middle-class wives covered grays with hair dye, and men in business suits enjoyed choice liquor at the office. The copy did not differ from “mainstream” white advertisements, and an orderly, middle-class lifestyle was upheld as the ideal.⁴⁹ Although many blacks understandably chafed at the fact that advertisers simply drew them into the whitened fold of mass marketing, historian Lizabeth Cohen notes that this practice was often championed by civil rights activists. “[W]hen full integration into white society was the chief goal of most black activists, the black media...set out to convince mainstream advertisers to incorporate the ‘Negro Market’ into their selling campaigns, both for the symbolic recognition and the expected boon to their own coffers,” she says. “For the black media soliciting their attentions, color-blind advertising symbolized social acceptance and progress beyond the racist stereotyping traditionally associated with black advertising characters.”⁵⁰ Memphis deejay Nat Williams endorsed this strategy, enthusiastically noting “‘Monst all this talk/About integration/As collud folk balk/’Gainst segregation/Looms one bodacious tho’t/It’s called ‘dollar-gration!’”⁵¹

The tension involved in trying to sell the same products to diverse groups of people has a history of creating a sort of rough equality amongst these groups based on the necessity of sales while, at the same time, reinforcing worldviews held by the dominant race or class and obviating

⁴⁹ Analysis based on advertisements in numerous issues of *Jet* from 1951 to 1964 and *Ebony* from 1960 to 1965.

⁵⁰ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 323.

⁵¹ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation’s First All-Black Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 47.

the needs and lifestyles of those who fall outside of these categories. Roland Marchand, who studies the dawn of modern advertising in America during the interwar period, argues that, right from the beginning, “Advertisements...contributed to the shaping of a ‘community of discourse,’ an integrative common language shared by an otherwise diverse audience.”⁵² By the early 1920s, savvy businesspeople realized that they stood to make the most profits by selling to potential consumers across social boundaries, despite the fact that most came from white, upper-middle-class backgrounds, and generally used the values and depictions of this group in order to sell products. “Most advertisers defined the market for their products as a relatively select audience of upper-class and upper-middle-class Americans,” he explains.

Moreover, most ad creators occupied a class position and displayed cultural tastes that distanced them from popular conditions and values. Not only were they likely to portray the world they knew, rather than the world experienced by typical citizens, but also they sometimes allowed their cultural preferences to influence their depiction of society.⁵³

To illustrate this point, Marchand provides a number of advertisements from the period featuring wealthy white models boating, playing tennis, driving expensive cars, dining in fine restaurants, and getting dressed in luxurious bedrooms, often with domestic help featured in the background. The white middle classes, then as now, were viewed as the most desirable market because of their relatively high numbers and disposable income, but advertisers were not strictly directing their attentions towards this group. Since working-class and non-white people made up such a large percentage of most growing cities, advertisements were directed towards these consumers as well. Still, they almost never depicted non-white models, or individuals partaking in working-class

⁵² Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xx.

⁵³ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, xvii.

pursuits like watching baseball games, attending religious services, or partaking in the work which actually allowed them to purchase consumer goods.

Marchand says that these ads, however, did not “breed class resentment. On the contrary, the very tableaux that most vividly depicted the extent of the class spectrum often used the contrasts not to separate but to unite.”⁵⁴ While advertisements featuring upper-class white models and pursuits might seem off-putting to people outside these groups, Marchand asserts that most potential consumers were urged to see them as “aspirational;” that is, the type of lifestyle that they could enjoy if they purchased the products in the advertisements. So while the advertising industry remained firmly rooted in white upper- and middle-class class values during the interwar period, it almost inadvertently created a common language that could be understood by anyone who had a dollar to spend—“a language that promised to assimilate [consumers] into a culture of high technology, complex economic and social relationships, and urbane sophistication.”⁵⁵ This language had its limits—by the late 1930s, Marchand notes, “these images had been made anachronistic simply by the scale of urban society. The parable encouraged readers to assume that they could finesse the new complexities of scale by seeking the satisfactions of ‘democratic’ participation through consumption alone.”⁵⁶ Socioeconomic divisions did not disappear within the public imagination because of the efforts of advertisers, but a common ground based on consumerism was undoubtedly laid in the decades before World War Two, and persisted afterwards.

⁵⁴ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 199.

⁵⁵ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 335.

⁵⁶ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 337.

Lizabeth Cohen delves more deeply into how these images and consumer products were received by distinct groups of worker-consumers. In her book, *Making a New Deal*, she shows how popular culture and advertising could work as a ‘common language’ among workers of different ethnic backgrounds during the Great Depression, linking the meaning making produced here to political organization. The growing importance of what she calls a “mass culture” predicated on consumption provided a space for people from different ethnic backgrounds to forge common ties with one another, which could then lead to labor and political unity. “The Polish and Bohemian worker laboring side by side at a factory bench were now living more similar lives than they had [previously],” she explains. “Not only were they more likely to speak English, but they also could talk about seeing the same motion pictures, hearing the same radio shows, and buying the same brand-name products from the same chain stores.”⁵⁷ Partaking in similar cultural pursuits, speaking the same language and purchasing the same goods made people with diverse ethnic backgrounds seem more familiar, and allowed bonds to be forged based on cultural similarities rather than differences. These bonds facilitated labor organizing, and often allowed for notions of unity to supersede ethnic difference. Advertisers clearly could not have expected that mass consumerism would have merited this result, but cultural similarities could help reinforce shared political and economic goals. Popular culture and consumption therefore became more overtly politicized as people used advertisers’ messages of unity to facilitate their own distinct goals.

Cohen is careful to note, however, that even though mass culture was supposed to standardize the way Americans lived, it “did not in itself challenge working people’s existing values and relationships. Rather, the impact of mass culture depended on the social and economic

⁵⁷ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 211.

contexts in which it developed and the manner in which it was experienced.”⁵⁸ She shows, for example, that, while a Mexican family and an Italian family could each purchase the same new phonograph from the same store, they could choose to play only Mexican or only Italian music on it, strengthening ties to their own cultures rather than forging new bonds across ethnic lines. Theatre-goers could watch the same films across the nation, but only enjoy them in the actual company of neighbors with similar backgrounds, while in many areas recent immigrants preferred to shop in smaller ethnically-based shops rather than larger chains, if for no other reason than they were more likely to extend credit.⁵⁹

Mass culture and consumption, then, did not *always* work to unify people across ethnic lines, but it *could*, and often *did* provide a space for such connections to occur, particularly among youth. In the early- to mid-twentieth century, a middle ground was shaped by popular culture and advertisements, often at a national level, and allowed for shared experiences that traversed ethnic lines among white immigrants. Cohen explains that, for children brought up by immigrant parents in the United States, mass culture could provide a means of breaking away from one’s family and becoming more “American.” “Young people looked to their ethnic peer groups to mediate mass culture,” she says, but “interests that seemed unorthodox at home were nonetheless pursued in ethnic company at neighborhood movie houses, club rooms, and dance halls.”⁶⁰ Members of the younger generation may have mostly socialized with friends from similar ethnic backgrounds, but they were doing so in cultural spaces that were shared by youth across the country. This foundation

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 101.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 106; 123.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 144.

ultimately prepared them to have more in common with people from outside their immediate neighborhoods when they did come into contact with other groups.

Grace Elizabeth Hale examines how popular culture and advertising operate as a form of common ground between Southern blacks and whites in her ground-breaking study of the intersection between consumer culture and the creation of Jim Crow segregation between Reconstruction and World War Two. Hale argues that, although advertising emphasized many Southern-style racist stereotypes, it could also challenge the dictates of racial segregation, and that both producers and consumers created ways of negotiating political culture and meaning. “Segregation remained vulnerable at its muddled middle, where mixed-race people moved through mixed spaces, from railroad cars to movies to department stores, neither public nor private, neither black nor white,” she says.⁶¹ Southerners used these middle grounds to resist racial norms in unexpected ways. Hale shows how companies used derogatory stereotypes of African Americans to sell a myriad of products, including Aunt Jemima pancake batter and Gold Dust washing powder, that ultimately spread views of black people’s racial inferiority associated with the Jim Crow South across the nation. Advertisements and a burgeoning consumer culture could, however, also encourage steps toward racial equality, as profit-driven companies proceeded to sell to anyone who could afford their wares, regardless of race. “If mass culture was a problem for some, it was also a solution for many,” she explains in another book, *A Nation of Outsiders*. “It was the place southern blacks traveled to find the shiny new Ford or the stylish new dress that showed up the crackers and shouted ‘We are not inferior’ above the din of segregation’s daily humiliations.”⁶²

⁶¹ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 9.

⁶² Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34.

Producers who meant to market a particular message could, then, find that message twisted and reshaped into something that helped consumers challenge racial inequality.

Although most African Americans did not earn as much as their white contemporaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they still consumed food, clothing, household items, tools, and leisure products. They also faced some of the same pressures to fit into the mold of being “American” as their white ethnic counterparts. Shopping for and consuming the same manufactured goods as white middle-class Americans, who were allowed to exercise all of their citizenship rights, could help black Americans reach for this status, the same way that ethnic whites did by anglicizing their names, speaking English, and downplaying their ethnic heritage. Blacks and whites, therefore, wound up purchasing and using many of the same products. Hale argues that this common space created by using the same consumer products compelled white Southerners to pass increasingly harsh Jim Crow laws, as the differences between black and white seemed to be becoming less overt. “In those very frequent instances when ‘whites and blacks could meet the other wearing the same hat or dress, drinking the same soda, or driving the same car,’ consumer culture could undermine white supremacy just as well as it could provide a vehicle for its mass promotion,”⁶³ she says. In fact, the ability for advertising and mass culture to resist the predominant racial order is a factor which led to the creation of a rigid racial segregation that would define Southern states for the next half-century. The emergence of a common ground based on consumerism could, in fact, result in racial division, as shown in Hale’s book. But advertising and a consumer culture based on the pursuit of profit could also provide a space for blacks and whites to identify with one another based on a similar material culture, even if the concept of the “American Consumer” was overwhelmingly beset with white features.

⁶³ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 95.

By the post-World War Two period, producers and consumers both had deemphasized stylistic differences between black and white youth for decades, although racial groups were not treated equally within this framework. While advertisers remained fairly color-blind when it came to profits, the polished images they promoted of the new, ‘typical’ teen-ager were decidedly narrow, resulting in alienation for kids of all races. By the early 1960s, sociologist Jessie Bernard wrote that “One study...found that there were 22 per cent [of teenagers surveyed] who felt left out of things, 11 per cent who felt ‘different,’ 44 per cent who seldom had dates, 13 per cent who felt they were not wanted, 20 per cent who felt lonesome, and 25 per cent who felt ill at ease at social affairs.”⁶⁴ As white teens found it difficult to live up to the expectations of adolescent perfection marketed to them, they often felt left out of mainstream culture too, even if this exclusion did not cut as deeply as it did for black teenagers. Girls, for instance, were inundated with images of smiling, blond, terribly pale and utterly flawless creatures they were supposed to emulate. Simply being white and female did not mean that one necessarily conformed to this ideal; many white girls tried in vain to live up to the impossible ‘glamour-girl’ ideal, just as their black counterparts, who often tried straightening their hair and bleaching their skin, strove to tone down much of their blackness.⁶⁵

Still, these whitened media images acted in a round-about way to break down barriers between teenagers of different races. Since almost no one, regardless of race, could relate to such images, an early identification with one another began to blossom in some cases. Janis Ian says that, when she entered a new school in East Orange, New Jersey, “There were only three white kids in my fifth-grade class, and they were already good friends. They were blond and redheaded,

⁶⁴ Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture: An Overview*, 10.

⁶⁵ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1992), 93-99.

blue- and green-eyed. I had black hair, brown eyes, and a suspect [Leftist] family. The white kids avoided me like the plague. Fortunately, the black kids were more welcoming.”⁶⁶ Feeling left out led some white kids to identify with black kids, who occupied a sort of perpetual outsider status in middle-class culture. Their skin color might have matched that of the almost ubiquitous movie stars and models they were exposed to, but the narrow beauty standards that they were supposed to live up to caused many to realize that they could never belong, and encouraged them to look elsewhere for alternative cultural standards. Conversely, many black kids, were finally on the receiving end of ‘mainstream’ culture (particularly advertising), but realized that they still fell short of achieving the whitened ideals presented to them.

Indeed, advertisements featuring black models were limited to black publications; non-white faces were conspicuously absent in the mainstream press, or on the most important conduit of product placement, television. Jerry Blavat, a white deejay in Philadelphia during the 1960s, noted, “Well, there was no integration back then...And I guess sponsor-wise...you have to understand it was white television back then in the 1950s, because dollar-wise, advertisers were not beaming into the black community.”⁶⁷ *Billboard* magazine addressed this problem directly as early as 1943, stating that “For years it has been, and still is, a rule in radio that Negro artists may not be introduced on any *commercial* network show with the appellation of Mr. Mrs. or Miss preceding his or her name....Radio still has a rule that a Negro cannot be represented in any drama except in the role of a servant or as an ignorant or comical person.”⁶⁸ Throughout the 1950s and

⁶⁶ Janis Ian, *Society's Child* (New York: Tarcher: 2008), 20.

⁶⁷ Matthew F. Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 47.

⁶⁸ Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Culture* (Middltown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1992, 173.

into the 1960s, Janis Ian asserted, “It was impossible to find black people on television unless it was a documentary about Africa. I still remember the first Doublemint gum commercial with black twins in it; at school the next day, no one talked about anything else.”⁶⁹

One exemption to this rule was *The Nat King Cole Show*, a variety and talk show which premiered on NBC in 1956. Cole was a black pop star who sang melodic standards, and was incredibly popular with both blacks and white adults. His fan base was racially integrated, but, unlike many black musicians, he often agreed to play segregated shows in the South, granting him widespread acceptance among Southern whites. He had many famous friends, and was a popular guest on other people’s talk shows, so NBC executives decided to take a risk and offer him his own show. The first show aired without nation-wide commercial sponsorship, as advertisers were hesitant to associate their products with a program fronted by a black man. The network agreed to absorb the costs, assuming that high ratings would soon lure sponsors. Although many Southern affiliates refused to air the program, and few national advertisers agreed to take the bait, the show consistently drew high viewing numbers across the country. For black families, seeing a positive image of an elegant, talented black man hosting his own show and charming his many famous guests produced feelings of pride, and encouraged many younger viewers to think that integration was perhaps a realistic goal. Suzanne deGrasse, who grew up in New York, and ultimately became a television producer and the owner of her own media company, recalled that she and her family were so unused to seeing positive images of black people onscreen that “My mother and all her friends crowded around when Nat ‘King’ Cole came on.”⁷⁰ White viewers were also struck by the

⁶⁹ Ian, *Society’s Child*, 11.

⁷⁰ Timothy Carlson, “Soul Providers: A TV Special celebrates the cultural contributions of black artists,” *TV Guide*, November 24, 1990. “African Americans in Television,” Russell B. Nye Collection, Special Collections Michigan State University Libraries East Lansing MI.

rare sight of a black man in charge of a production, socializing with white guests. Janis Ian noted that “For a black man to have a prime-time TV show was astonishing, a real sign of the changing times.”⁷¹

The statistics also meant that many white people watched Cole’s show, and therefore invited a black man into their homes by way of the television set, even if they may not have actually done so in real life. Grace Elizabeth Hale says that “Middle-class Americans after 1945 had easier and more varied access to people who seemed marginal, exotic, or primitive than they had possessed before this period.” New forms of media, including television, “enabled middle-class people to eavesdrop on and peer into other people’s lives, to hear their music and their stories, and to see where and how they lived, from the comfort and safety of their middle-class homes.”⁷² Cole’s show, then, helped to establish a tentative middle ground between the races. But it would not last long; While NBC was heartened by these numbers, and renewed the series for another year, few national sponsors would take the bait. When Max Factor cosmetics claimed that a “negro” couldn’t sell lipstick for them, Cole angrily replied “What do they think we use? Chalk? Congo paint?” After a difficult second season, NBC could no longer afford to keep running the show without national sponsorship, and proposed moving the show to Saturdays at 7 pm. Cole, realizing that this time slot was a precursor to cancellation, refused, and the show was removed from the air—not because of the inability to draw audiences, but because, he said, “Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark.”⁷³

⁷¹ Ian, *Society’s Child*, 11.

⁷² Hale, *Nation of Outsiders*, 5.

⁷³ Gourse, Leslie, *Unforgettable: The Life and Mystique of Nat King Cole* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 185; Nichelle Gainer, “Nat King Cole: ‘The Elegant Negro,’” *Ebony*, January 14, 2012.

As many white families participated in this growing middle ground by watching Cole's show for the brief time it was on, black kids enjoyed many of the same shows as their white peers, though television's lack of black characters caused some to question what they were seeing on the screen. DePasse noted that when she was young, "there were very few black people on television I would come home from school and watch *The Mickey Mouse Club* and Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*—and we [blacks] were not there."⁷⁴ Lack of a positive onscreen black presence does not mean that black teenagers stopped watching their favorite shows, but it did cause many to question the role that such representations had in fashioning their own understanding of integration and racial pride. The characters of Beulah, played by Hattie McDaniel and Ethel Waters, respectively, on the eponymous show, and Rochester on *Amos 'n' Andy*, "are as well liked by Negroes as they are by whites, yet there still is criticism in some quarters," a 1949 issue of *Sponsor* magazine reported. "The Negro criticism of Miss McDaniel, 'Rochester,' etc., usually stems from the fact that they are domestics in the home, subject to the orders, whims, and wishes of white people."⁷⁵ Even though these actors starred in their own programs, and thus delivered the implicit message that their life stories were valid and worth sharing, the lower-caste positions held by their characters in many ways solidified racial hierarchies without direct criticism.

Sometimes it took a while for black kids, who were raised watching television, to realize how damaging these characterizations could be, and to question who they were really being asked to identify with. As a child in the mid-1950s, for instance, writer David Bradley loved watching *The Gray Ghost*, a show about a Confederate officer, John Singleton Mosby. "I was too young (6 or 7) to understand what the Civil War was about, so I cheered Mosby's escapes from his blue-

⁷⁴ Carlson, "Soul Providers."

⁷⁵ "The Forgotten 15,000,000," *Sponsor*, October 10, 1949, 54.

coated enemies,” Bradley said. “But one day my father saw what I was doing and gave me a brief but unequivocal lesson in American history...I realized [I had been] deceived into thinking a ‘slaveholding rebel’ was *my* hero.” As he grew up, he realized that “blacks appeared nowhere. Certainly they were not heroes or heroines, and they were not even domestics in continuing roles...More important from the point of view of subliminal visual messages, they were not in the background. In television America you didn’t see black folks walking down the street or sitting on a bus.”⁷⁶ This did not stop some black teenagers with identifying with some of the white characters they saw on television, though. Bernice Johnson Reagon, a college student in the 1950s who eventually became a prominent SNCC activist, remembered her middle-class male friends not wanting their future wives to work “and that had nothing to do with anything which comes out of the black community, that really comes straight off TV.”⁷⁷

Some younger blacks, especially those from more upwardly-mobile families, identified with white characters on television partially because they had a difficult time incorporating a brutal heritage of slavery, violence, and discrimination into the somewhat more hopeful racial atmosphere of the postwar period. This tension was pinpointed as early as 1903, when Harvard-trained sociologist W.E.B. DuBois explained that black Americans possess a ‘double consciousness’ which catches them between African-American traditions and mainstream, or nominally white, culture that, although it technically seeks to eradicate their presence, theoretically embraces all Americans.⁷⁸ By the 1920s, many aspiring-class and elite blacks were dismayed to

⁷⁶David Bradley, “How TV Drew Our Family Together—in Spite of Its Messages: For a Young Black, Revelation and Anger,” *TV Guide*, July 11, 1987. “African Americans in Television,” Russell B. Nye Collection, Special Collections Michigan State University Libraries East Lansing MI.

⁷⁷ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 154.

⁷⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 9.

find that their social and economic status did not protect them from a racism that seemed more virulent than ever. The concept of the ‘New Negro’ was constructed to combat this prejudice, and was outlined by professor and Harlem Renaissance writer Alain Locke, who limned the qualities of the modern black individual in his book, *The New Negro*. “In this new group psychology,” he wrote, “we note the lapse of sentimental appeal, then the development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance; the repudiation of social dependence, and then the gradual recovery from hyper-sensitiveness and ‘touchy nerves,’...and finally the rise from social disillusionment to race pride; from the sense of social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution.”⁷⁹ With this description, Locke effectively stripped modern blacks of any ‘exotic’ or ‘primitive’ qualities that white culture was so quick to define them by, while also proclaiming that they have moved on from the horrors of slavery and are ready to become full American citizens. To many middle-class black youth, part of this transition necessitated moving away from some African-American traditions. By the middle of the century, Amiri Baraka noted that the blues, which he said was intrinsically “obscure to the mainstream of American culture,” had become somewhat shameful to blacks who felt that they were edging closer to belonging to mainstream white society, and were beginning to undergo the strain of keeping both sides of their consciousness unnaturally divided.⁸⁰

The effects of this double consciousness helped shape a particular form of generational distinctiveness among black youth in the postwar period. Some historians have noted that black kids did not experience the generation gap with their parents that their white counterparts did.⁸¹ Historian Susan Cahn, who studies the effects of the changing South on white and black teenage

⁷⁹ Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” *The New Negro* Ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 10-11.

⁸⁰ Amiri Baraka, “How You Sound??” *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* Ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1991), 37.

⁸¹ George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 68.

girls, observes how “some argue that black teens, because of the economic responsibility that rested on their shoulders, their lack of extended education, and their vulnerability to sexual assault by white men, never had an adolescence in any meaningful sense.”⁸² Because black teens had to face many of the same economic and racially-charged problems as their parents, youthful black resistance does not seem to have increased during the 1950s and 1960s the way it did for whites. This assertion, however, ignores the fact that many young black people had very different experiences during the postwar period than their parents and their poor black counterparts did. Leading a more middle-class lifestyle and enjoying many of the same cultural attributes as their white peers did not lessen the effects of racism, but it did provide kids with an outlook that necessarily differed from that of their parents. Furthermore, this distinction stigmatized African-American kids, who already had to accept the fact that they did not constitute the ideal (and profitable) “teenager” in the eyes of a nation that was increasingly obsessed with this demographic. Cahn argues that “by saying that black or white working-class teens did not have an adolescence or by always placing them as members of a larger group of adult women, historians define them out of the history of girlhood and adolescence. Economic responsibility, stunted education, and sexual vulnerability characterized the teenage years of many girls in the South, and thus those experiences must become part of the history of girlhood.”⁸³ The generation gap that existed between kids born during and after World War Two and their parents may not have been as immediately obvious in black families, but it existed nonetheless, often working in ways that both encouraged teenagers to identify more with their white peers and urged them towards greater black pride and civil rights activism at the same time.

⁸² Susan Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13-14.

⁸³ Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 13-14.

One issue of concern that emerged unexpectedly from the relative rise in black affluence was that middle-class families were trying to obscure their roots in order to assimilate into white society. This is a vast simplification, of course, but the mass movement of rural black people into urban centers and increasing middle-class numbers produced an attitude among many African Americans, especially youth, that it was better to look towards a more hopeful future than to be overly concerned with a brutal past. Part of this ideology comes from aspiring-class notions of optimism and advancement, but parents were also determined to ensure that their children not face the kinds of racial violence and discrimination they were often subject to. This attitude can be seen in both cultural and political spaces, and indicates a growing gap between parents, who worked incredibly hard to make sure their children had better lives than they did, and were therefore extra cautious, and children, who were often sheltered from some of the worst aspects of their families' histories.

Northern kids, for instance, experienced varied reactions to Southern movements, at least at first. Social Work professor Bunyan Bryant, who moved to Michigan from Little Rock at a young age, said

I was aware [of movement activities], I just wasn't involved in that. I was not conscious; I wasn't in touch with a lot of stuff. I thought Ann Arbor was a fantastic place to be and I was doing well personally. When King started picketing in the South, in the 1950s, I didn't understand. I knew that was a bad scene, but it was almost an embarrassment, you know, that somebody had to go out there and picket and demonstrate for their rights. I was pretty confused. My consciousness was not that sharp.⁸⁴

This notion of being embarrassed by fighting for civil rights is one that permeated many sectors of the black middle class in the North and West, at least until the mid-1960s. It shows that younger blacks who had achieved a modicum of financial stability and social acceptance were choosing to

⁸⁴ Bunyan Bryant, interview with Ellen Fishman, January, 1979, 5. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

be optimistic about racial progress, but it also shows that they were shielded from some of the worst racial abuses that many of their parents had to endure. This attitude worried many people who were older, or who lived in the South, who wanted to both preserve African-American culture and ensure that youth did not become apathetic in the fight for civil rights. E. Franklin Frazier warned in *Black Bourgeoisie* that, “As the result of the break with its cultural past, the black bourgeoisie is without cultural roots in either the Negro world with which it refuses to identify, or the white world which refuses to permit the black bourgeoisie to share its life.”⁸⁵ Many paid heed to this warning. Walter Blackwell, who went on to work for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the NAACP in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, remembered “hearing talk about background, and that for blacks, there was nothing to identify with in their past.”⁸⁶ B.B. King expanded on this concern, noting “We’ve been brainwashed to the point of where we think that we’re second best...If we get a little money, finally, or we get a pretty good education, we don’t like to talk about that so much other than to show that we’re big now...And I believe this happens a lot in the younger generation. And some just don’t seem to care.”⁸⁷

Young people’s desire to break with the past was more apparent in the cultural realm, which was often the result of traditional African-American culture being depicted as inferior, or aimed towards an uneducated, impoverished demographic. This depiction has a long history, and has been used to explain “cultural preferences for all things white as symptomatic of psychic ‘inferiorization’” among black people, at least throughout the twentieth century.⁸⁸ But this

⁸⁵ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 24.

⁸⁶ Walter Blackwell, interview with Ellen Fishman, July 17, 1978, 8-9. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

⁸⁷ B.B. King, interview with Camille Cosby, 44-45. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress.

⁸⁸ Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” *New Formulations*, Number 3, Winter 1987, 36-37.

categorization was not so simple in the postwar United States, as mainstream culture became more readily available, and applicable to, black teenagers, many of whom felt they had more in common with pop music and TV shows aimed at their own age group rather than traditional black culture. Blues musician John Lee Hooker remarked about this generation, “They’re thinking [black culture] drags them back.”⁸⁹ By this period, historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explains, “time and schooling distanced African Americans further and further from their slave past, [and] many became self-conscious, even critical of the culture of their forebears.”⁹⁰ B.B. King explained in a 2001 interview that the stereotypical depiction of the blues singer contributed to these opinions:

Most times you can’t read or write and my opinion of what they thought and think of me today... With a cap on his head that’s faced east and you got a jug a liquor on the west side, west of him. And his pants is tore in the south part. And he have a cigarette hanging on his lip somewhat on the northeast side of his mouth and he can’t read or write. He don’t speak very well... Well that’s the way they look at us.⁹¹

Traditional black culture, especially the blues, was often a signifier for poverty, immorality, vice, and a lack of propriety and hygiene. This view was shared by both whites and aspiring-class blacks, and encompassed the qualities that more prosperous African Americans were seeking to distance themselves from.⁹² Young people, brought up in more affluent, urban environments, and taught these lessons from a young age, felt even more of a need to distance themselves from a past that

⁸⁹ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock And Roll*, (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1996), 183.

⁹⁰ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Re-Thinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Major Problems in African-American History, Volume II: From Freedom to “Freedom Now”, 1865-1990s* Ed. Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 211.

⁹¹ Camille Cosby, interview with B.B. King, 42, National Visionary Leadership Project, The Library of Congress American Folklife Center.

⁹² For more on how class helped shape African Americans’ perceptions of the blues, please see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Rethinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* Ed. Cornel West & Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

they thought they could never identify with. “I think a lot of the young black people still think that way and it reminds them of slavery,” King continued. “They don’t even want to discuss it, nor do they want to admit that it once were.”⁹³ Johnny Otis agreed with this sentiment, noting that “We don’t have many young Blacks dealing with the traditional Black viewpoint. I’m afraid we haven’t preserved the traditional Black social wisdom.”⁹⁴ So a gap did develop between some aspiring-class black parents and their kids, leaving teenagers in search of something new that acknowledged their new social standing and living circumstances, while maintaining a distinct black pride, albeit one distanced somewhat from the more brutal bonds of history. Although these kids were likely to embrace desegregation efforts and the middle ground of mainstream popular culture, they were also more willing than their parents to fight for the right to be included, partially because of Supreme Court decisions that regulated people’s racial behaviors, but also because they had been raised in a more hopeful environment, where parents, teachers, advertisers, and pop culture icons all told them that they belonged, even if only tenuously.

The ways in which they confronted systems of inequality, however, present an interesting mix of pride, fear, and desire for both an integrated society where everyone is treated equally and a culture that validates black contributions. Most people who grew up in the South during this period, in fact, recall their parents telling them to treat everyone, both black and white, with kindness and respect, both because it is the right thing to do and because it would keep them from being hurt under a system that demanded black deference. Civil rights activist Jesse Epps, who grew up in rural Mississippi, stated that “We were taught some basic principles growing up: Love

⁹³ B.B. King, interview with Camille Cosby, 42-43.

⁹⁴ Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue*, (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press: 1993), 21.

of God and respect for our neighbors without regard to race. When you met a person along the way, speak to a lady, tip your hat. So the white folks loved that—they thought, ‘That young man is very respectful’—but we did it to the black folks too. My father taught us to say, ‘Yes, sir’...to every adult, black or white. He said you treat black folks and white folks one and the same.”⁹⁵ Epps’s father was therefore able to impart racial pride and support for integration to his son together in one lesson, thus satisfying both angles of Dubois’s double consciousness. B.B. King’s father became such good friends with his employer, Jim O’Reilly, that he actually named his son Riley (although King rarely goes by his first name). “He and my dad were very good friends,” King said. “This may be funny to hear. But even then, with Jim Crow, segregation and all that, there were black and whites that were friends. And I thank God for it, because had it not been for some of the good white folks there wouldn’t have been no black folks left, ‘cause white people could kill you. They could do anything they wanted and nothing was ever done about it. So it was good to have a white friend.”⁹⁶

Black Southerners were often taught to respect people of all races, but this respect had to go both ways, a lesson that is astonishing to consider in light of the punishments doled out to so-called “uppity” blacks. When Madison Foster came back home to Louisiana from Paris in the mid-1960s with long, straightened hair, his mother voiced her opposition. “Now here’s my mother, a southern black woman, different from whites, who fought for decent medical care for 30-something years, saying to me, ‘I don’t like your hair that long,’” he said. “She was essentially saying to me that that was not what she understood. ‘I don’t think you look as well. You don’t

⁹⁵ “Jesse Epps,” *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience*, ed. Juan Williams (New York: Sterling: 2004), 22.

⁹⁶B.B. King, “Blues Man Interviewed in Jacksonville FLA,” by Joe Nick Patoski, December 27, 2003, 11. Voices of the CRM Project, 2005/015, American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress.

have to do that to be a black man.' We differed."⁹⁷ Musician Chuck Brown warned that even though "back in them days you couldn't sass them white folks and get away," he still remembered that his mother did not shy away from a confrontation if she felt she or her son had been disrespected. "She didn't care. Fight them too." After a white woman yelled at Brown for allowing her son to pull him in his toy wagon, his mother confronted her: "He just as good you is. Just as good as your son is...He ain't no mule."⁹⁸ Walter Blackwell was similarly taught by his grandfather, a Baptist minister, to respect everyone, but also to combat any discrimination he might face as a black man.

The insurance man used to come to the house, and collect insurance. My grandmother was named Mary...he would say, 'Is Mary here?' My grandfather would hear this and he would say, 'What do you mean, Mary?' See, that was outspoken at that time, for a black man to be talking to a white man about respect. He was one of the inspirations in my life, because in the community he was respected. He'd walk into a store, and irregardless of his color, he got respect. One thing I got from him is, stand up and be a man.⁹⁹

Black Southerners, then, were apt to learn both respect for all races, even if part of this was borne of self-preservation, as well as pride from their parents. These lessons informed their attitudes towards the goal of integration, even if they showed their support in different ways. Many young Southerners, for instance, learned from living within a racially segregated system was how elastic some of the boundary lines could be, especially concerning interpersonal relations. DeeJay Shelley Stewart remembered one instance when, after walking a long distance from his home to town, "I found that I had gotten a little hungry. I asked a Negro man for few cents with which to

⁹⁷ Madison Foster, interview with Bret Eynon, July, 1978, 11. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

⁹⁸ Chuck Brown, interview with Renee Pouissant, 2007, 39-40. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress.

⁹⁹ Walter Blackwell, interview with Bret Eynon, 5.

buy something to eat. The man cursed at me and kicked me. A white man saw what had happened and went into the colored entrance of a restaurant. Minutes later he returned with a hamburger, potatoes, a pie, and soft drink for me.”¹⁰⁰ The white man who showed Stewart kindness still adhered to the dictates of the Jim Crow system, using the “colored entrance” to purchase food rather than the white entrance, even though, presumably, the items were the same. Still, despite the fact that this man was not really breaking any rules, and, indeed, seemingly went out of his way to enforce the rules of segregation, the lesson that Stewart gleaned from his actions was that the system and culture that enforced segregation was the true evil, rather than white individuals. Even if they supported segregation, there were instances where members of both races could treat each other with kindness and respect. It was this elasticity that allowed young Southerners of both races to understand the hypocrisy underlying the system as a whole, to realize that they could find supporters across racial lines, and to find the strength to challenge it.¹⁰¹

Racial attitudes in the North were no less complex. Despite the fact that Northern states did not openly advocate racial intolerance or Jim Crow segregation, black residents often had to deal with racist behaviors and social segregation on the part of their white contemporaries, as well as discriminatory housing, lending and employment practices. Tony Thomas, an academic and musician who grew up in a mostly-white Hartford, Connecticut community, remembered, “It was always kind of the subject if you went to the store how you would be afraid you might not be treated properly even if you always were treated properly...It was also pretty well-known in Hartford at the time that there were areas where black people weren’t particularly welcome.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Stewart, *The Road South*, 57.

¹⁰¹ Stewart, *The Road South*, 57.

¹⁰² Tony Thomas, in discussion with the author, November 9, 2011.

While growing up in Queens, New York, and attending an integrated school, Najee Muhammed remembered that “I had some White friends but not many. I didn’t visit their homes first, because I was never invited (although I invited them to where I lived) and second, because as a Black male you just didn’t go to certain places; the geographic racial boundaries were clear as you understood and knew ‘your place’.” Aside from these more subtle humiliations, Thomas said, “In a Catholic elementary school I was called a nigger at least every week.”¹⁰³ Despite this treatment, he noted that “the whole stress, and essentially in my particular family, what was really articulated really through the mid-60s was assimilationism, so the extent that you wanted to feel that you weren’t different, but you did feel different because you were different and everyone thought you were different and therefore you were different.”¹⁰⁴

Thomas may have received such mixed messages from his parents because they were trying to fit into a mainly white neighborhood, as well as a wider society that branded itself as racially equal even though everyone knew this to be untrue. This ambivalence resulted in a great deal of tension, and in many cases parents were hesitant to complain too loudly or to point out racial inequalities, often fearing repercussions. In a conversation about early civil rights activist and Harlem politician Adam Clayton Powell, bail bondsman Bob Barber remarked that “in those days, our own people...some of them...got nervous if you talked about standing up for your rights.”¹⁰⁵ Motown founder Berry Gordy recalled that “Though my parents tried to protect us from the outside world of racism by giving us lots of love and strengthening us through philosophy and religion, I

¹⁰³ Najee Emerson Muhammad, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions. November 20, 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Tony Thomas, in discussion with the author.

¹⁰⁵ Otis, *Upside Your Head!*, 7.

could see how they sometimes covered their own pain with laughter.”¹⁰⁶ A combination of assimilationism and black pride emerged from these tensions. While many black Northerners tried to fit into a culture that was supposed to accept them in theory, many experienced anger when they were consistently denied full access. This anger was often channeled into a form of racial pride that more closely resembled cultural nationalism. In her integrated New Jersey neighborhood, Janis Ian said, “My black friends’ parents didn’t want them dating whites. My white friends’ parents didn’t want them dating blacks.”¹⁰⁷ Northern parents often supported integration in theory, but unlike their southern contemporaries, were not as likely to encourage their children to try to spread these principles, and more often tried to inculcate a sense of black pride.

Middle-class suburban Northern whites often recall being unaware of any local racial problems during this period since they did not often come into daily contact with black people the way their Southern contemporaries did, and because the culture, however racist it was in practice, was not outwardly dependant on white supremacy the way that Southern culture was. Still, children who grew up in these households learned racial behaviors that spanned a broad spectrum, from true egalitarianism to outright hostility. Theodore Trost, who grew up in a household in Pennsylvania that was supportive of civil rights, proclaimed “My parents were ecumenical and inclusive. They believed in freedom and equality for all people.”¹⁰⁸ Jeff Titon, who spent his early childhood in New York City, then moved to Atlanta as a teenager, frankly stated that “My parents were liberal Democrats who believed in integration.”¹⁰⁹ Austin Kutsher, who lived in an upper-

¹⁰⁶ Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 12.

¹⁰⁷ Ian, *Society’s Child*, xv.

¹⁰⁸ Theodore Trost, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 10, 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Jeff Titon, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 5, 2011.

middle-class, almost entirely white New York suburb, recalled one time when his father, a dentist, met a black professor for dinner in Miami prior to a large dental conference. “The *Maitre ‘D* stopped them and refused to allow Dad’s co-editor to enter. My dad held his ground and threatened to cancel the entire dinner and two-day program unless they were all seated together. He won—*de facto* integrating this Southern hotel!” Ultimately, he said, “Although my parents weren’t activists per se, they knew right from wrong.”¹¹⁰ Fran Shor, whose family came from suburban Pittsburgh, said that, while

My parents and my extended family were generally pretty liberal on issues of race, I began to develop probably what was a stronger sense of connection to black culture, African-American culture, even though the suburban area where we lived was overwhelmingly white. So I think given my generation I was a lot more responsive to things that were happening.¹¹¹

Other white Northern families may have avoided discussing racial issues outright, but their silence could still betray a clarity of purpose. Ken Avuk, whose parents moved from Brooklyn to a majority-white suburb to escape growing numbers of black people in their neighborhood, noted that

The fact that they heard me advocate for equal rights really, really bothered them because that was sort of the one touchstone, the race issue, that they did not want to be anywhere around black people... They never used the ‘N’ word, they didn’t talk like that, but it was just a given that their reason for moving to the suburbs, the primary reason, was because they wanted to get away from black people.¹¹²

Even though Jerry DeGrieck, a student activist and politician, grew up in suburban Grosse Pointe, Michigan, he compared his family to one of the most vicious race-baiting politicians of the post-World War Two period, saying they were “overtly racist, George Wallace type. When I was real

¹¹⁰ Kutsher, *Watching Walter Cronkite*, 28.

¹¹¹ Fran Shor, in discussion with the author, November 15, 2011.

¹¹² Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author, November 22, 2011.

young, I got into terrible arguments with my father and grandfather about racism.”¹¹³ And while Barry Bluestone’s own parents were sympathetic to the black freedom struggle he became engaged in, his best friend’s parents were not quite as enlightened. “Back in high school days, Eddie’s parents wouldn’t even let him spend time with me because I was active in the civil rights movement,” he said. “They banned him from seeing me. We saw each other anyway, but it was pretty rough.”¹¹⁴ Finally, Johnny Otis’s parents provided an interesting example of how divergent white racial attitudes could exist side by side. When Otis married his wife, Phyllis, who is black, both were underage, which meant that their parents could insist on an annulment. His mother was so incensed by the marriage that she sent his father to dissolve their union. “But Pop had different ideas,” he recalled fondly. “The first thing he did when he saw Phyllis was to take her in his arms and hug her and kiss her. ‘Your mother sent me to annul the marriage, but I came to meet my new daughter,’ he said in Greek, with tears in his eyes. ‘And besides, I don’t want to get God on my case.’ I never loved that old man more than I did at that moment.” Otis’s mother, however, did not speak to her son for many years.¹¹⁵ White Northerners were therefore aware of their society’s deviations between tolerance and intolerance, even if they did not constantly have to confront them as their black peers did. Some of these young people became increasingly angry about what they saw as hypocrisy in the North, and were more inclined to support organized movement goals rather than the fictitious equality they were being told to believe in.

These tensions were often reflected in the differences that existed between kids and parents regarding racial attitudes. Many individuals who grew up during this period recall being upset with

¹¹³ Jerry deGriek, interview with Bret Eynon, October 11, 1978, 3. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹¹⁴ Barry Bluestone, interview with Bret Eynon, 2.

¹¹⁵ Otis, *Upside Your Head!*, 59.

the hypocrisy they saw, and the often gradual realization that what they were told was not always the truth. In the Port Huron Statement, the founding manifesto of Students for a Democratic Society, written in 1962, Tom Hayden, Al Haber, and other writers wrote about the dawning realization that “The proclaimed peaceful intentions of the United States contradicted its economic and military investments in the Cold War status quo.” Furthermore,

We witnessed, and continue to witness, other paradoxes. With nuclear energy whole cities can easily be powered, yet the dominant nation-states seem more likely to unleash destruction greater than that incurred in all wars of human history. Although our own technology is destroying old and creating new forms of social organization, men still tolerate meaningless work and idleness. While two-thirds of mankind suffers under nourishment, our own upper classes revel amidst superfluous abundance. Although world population is expected to double in forty years, the nations still tolerate anarchy as a major principle of international conduct and uncontrolled exploitation governs the sapping of the earth's physical resources. Although mankind desperately needs revolutionary leadership, America rests in national stalemate, its goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear, its democratic system apathetic and manipulated rather than "of, by, and for the people."¹¹⁶

In some ways, this anger was expected. William Haber, who served as a dean at the University of Michigan during the 1950s and 1960s, and is also the father of SDS co-founder Al Haber, argued that “This is the age, when you want to change the world. I like the age because it’s a very idealistic group...They can’t understand racial discrimination. ‘All men are created equal—the constitution guarantees it!’”¹¹⁷ Despite Haber’s obviously condescending tone, he did present a valid point: teenagers tend to be more idealistic than adults, and believe that they can make widespread changes. But even by the mid-1950s, there were signs that these changes would be more permanent. In Dr. Remmers’s 1954 survey of American teenagers, for example, over 88 percent

¹¹⁶ Tom Hayden, “The Port Huron Statement,” 1962. Last accessed July 17, 2013, <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html>

¹¹⁷ William Haber, interview with Bret Eynon, October 12, 1979, 6. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

of respondents believed that racism was a learned behavior, and could therefore be changed, a distinct shift from the Southern depiction of segregation as “natural” or nation-wide beliefs concerning the inherent inferiority of African Americans.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, this group of teenagers, whether black or white, Northern or Southern, were far more likely to support racial equality and desegregation efforts than their parents were. Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner explains that “While it is easy and natural to change one’s mind during the first years of life, it becomes difficult to alter one’s mind as the years pass. The reason, in brief, is that we develop strong views and perspectives that are resistance to change.”¹¹⁹ Young people are more receptive to different ideas on the whole, but the shifts that occurred during this period allowed for change to take root on a broader scale.

The sense that they were being lied to, and that they could no longer trust parents who had a stake in this system, truly affected the racial views of children who came of age after World War Two. White Southerners have tended to recall this realization as accompanied by a nagging sense that all was not right with their world. Ann Wells said that she “respected” her upbringing in rural Alabama, where she was taught that segregation was part of Southern culture, but, at the same time, “felt it should be different. In a child-like, kid-like heart, I really didn’t understand why we couldn’t be part of the same ‘place.’” Still, these feelings took a while to coalesce into actual worldviews. “[Racism] is wrong!” she asserted. “However, I know that deep within our beings, we all, race to race, struggle to overcome the opinions, attitudes, and mistakes of our ancestors. For my generation particularly, it is an acquired/learned behavior to be understanding and

¹¹⁸ H.H. Remmers & D.H. Radler, *The American Teenager* (Charter Books, 1957), 205.

¹¹⁹ Howard Gardner, *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People’s Minds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2006), 142.

accepting of other races. We (and I) did not come by it naturally.”¹²⁰ The invisibility of white privilege was partly to blame for this difficulty; in some instances, white Southern kids simply were not aware of how their way of life affected others until they were faced with a direct confrontation. In his book *Speak Now Against the Day*, a history of the earlier origins of the Civil Rights Movement, journalist John Egerton recalled his days as a student at Western Kentucky State College in the early 1950s:

In that all-white environment, I never gave a moment’s thought, one way or the other, to the matter of skin color. Segregation didn’t restrict me in any way, so it was easy to accept things the way they were, to take my freedom for granted and not worry about anybody else’s. I do remember, though, that when I was thrown together with many different kinds of people in the army, I sometimes felt vaguely defensive and inferior around strange-talking Yankees, who seemed a lot more weird and mystifying—and at times intimidating—than the black guys from Mississippi and Alabama.¹²¹

In this instance, Egerton noted his level of *comfort* with Southern black people, mostly because they appeared to know their “place.” His experience meeting people from different backgrounds, however, who perhaps were unused to these regional power dynamics, forced him to think more broadly about why the racial etiquette he has accepted all his life is implemented in the South and not in other places, and to recognize the immorality of this system.

Bibb Edwards was confronted with the realization that white supremacy was wrong through a direct, yet perhaps unexpected medium: a children’s church hymn sung in a white church in rural Virginia. “I remember singing the song in my Methodist Sunday school about Jesus loving the little children of the world, ‘Red and Yellow, Black and White,’” he said. “For some reason that song made a deep impression on me. That there was no mention of Jesus loving some more

¹²⁰ Ann Wells, in discussion with the author.

¹²¹ John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 614.

than others, or treating them differently, seemed significant at the time, as what I was seeing around me was Jim Crow.” He further explained that,

I just did not *get* why what blacks wanted was so bad, and created such a stir. I felt no threat. Children develop a very tightly wound sense of things not being *fair*. I saw no fairness in using the color of an individual’s skin to determine how to treat them. It is dangerous teaching the Golden Rule (or any rule) to children and then not following it. They will call you out first chance they get.¹²²

Stan Wells said of the black children who lived near his grandfather’s farm in Alabama that “I felt there was a sub-culture there I did not understand,” but sometimes this lack of understanding combined with a child’s more simplistic view of a world to provide opportunities for racial change.¹²³ Rick Turner explained that “once I read [Martin Luther King’s 1963] Letters from a Birmingham Jail [sic], that just completely brought me to my knees almost. Because I started reading these books and I started thinking, you know, I’m a kid, but I could understand things, and something is way wrong here. What is the matter with this country?”¹²⁴ If racial injustice and hypocrisy was something that bothered many Southern white kids from an early age, they were going to be more receptive to anything that made it easier for them to cross racial boundaries or show support for integration—however tentative that support might be. This is where the use of rock and roll music as a middle ground between black and white cultures would become so incredibly relevant to many white Southerners’ political awakenings.

Northerners with parents who were sympathetic to movement concerns, both black and white, have often said that, while they agreed with their parents’ stances to a certain extent, they wanted to further attack the racial injustices in their areas, albeit in different ways. A Fellowship

¹²² Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

¹²³ Stan Wells, in discussion with the author.

¹²⁴ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

Commission set up in Philadelphia in the late 1950s, says Matthew Delmont, “believed that young people held more malleable views on race and presented the most open audience for antiracist messages,” but also “viewed parents as important influences on teenagers’ racial attitudes, and believed that reaching both teens and adults together as citizens was a critical part...of fighting prejudice.”¹²⁵ Young people, however, proved much more likely to break with their parents’ racial attitudes if they did not agree with them. White Northerners who went on to actively challenge unequal structures often expressed a desire to dig out the root causes of racism and to fundamentally change society rather than simply believing in an abstract racial equality. Peter Rachleff, a labor historian who grew up in New London, Connecticut, said that, while his parents were “mildly liberal,” he “wanted to push harder, do more, and consider our own prejudices.”¹²⁶ Professor and musician Jeff Titon explained that “Like my parents, I believed in racial equality,” but, growing up in Atlanta as opposed to his parents’ native New York City, “as I had more experience with people of other groups, I became more firmly convinced of it.”¹²⁷ SDS activist Barbara Haber said that what challenged her to become politically involved was that she “knew everyone else was getting fucked over. I knew that there was something dead about suburbs. I knew I didn’t want privileges when black people were being treated terribly. I didn’t want to live that way.”¹²⁸ Even when raised in more racially tolerant households, many white Northerners were able to pinpoint deeper reasons for racial inequality, and were therefore more inclined to support movements to eradicate them.

¹²⁵ Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town*, 63.

¹²⁶ Peter Rachleff, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 17, 2011.

¹²⁷ Jeff Titon, in discussion with the author.

¹²⁸ Barbara Haber, interview with Bret Eynon, September, 1978, 6. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

For white kids whose parents were not quite so racially tolerant, the gap between them widened significantly as they made choices to support movements for racial equality. Jerry deGrieck remembered “my favorite argument with my father on the topic ended one time with both of us being extremely heated. Finally, he turned to me and he said, ‘Well, you wouldn’t marry one, would you,’ and I said, ‘Yes, I would if I loved her!’ One of those classics. We didn’t talk about it very much afterwards.”¹²⁹ Arnie Bauchner recalled his mother telling him whenever Bernie, a black employee who worked at his father’s store in New Jersey, would call in sick. “It was like, ‘What do you want me to do? Defend the guy? It’s like I call in sick to work too,’” he said.¹³⁰ Black Northerners, who were often taught not to make waves with regards to integration, absorbed these lessons, but often believed that true racial equality would only be achieved if some of those values were eschewed. Najee Muhammad asserted that he was “reared to respect people of other races, in particular people of European descent” while growing up in a somewhat racially integrated Queens, New York, neighborhood. He went to an integrated school and had white friends, “but I really didn’t care for White folk because they didn’t seem to care for me or my kind.”¹³¹ Some black Northerners would be more inclined to support Black Power when it emerged in the mid-1960s, although many took their parents’ tacit support for integration and pushed it further, believing that any movement for racial equality was a step in the right direction.

By the time that rock and roll was created, identified and embraced, then, a new generation of youth was already asking difficult questions about race and systems of power. Many issues, including the resistance to war, widespread education and prosperity, a seemingly banal Cold War

¹²⁹ Jerry deGrieck, interview with Bret Eynon, 3.

¹³⁰ Arnie Bauchner, interview with Bret Eynon, December, 1978, 5. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹³¹ Najee Emerson Muhammad, in discussion with the author.

culture built on repression and hypocrisy, and ambivalent parental attitudes combined to create an atmosphere that would be more receptive to moderate racial equality and desegregation of public spaces. As class and racial boundaries blurred, rock and roll emerged from the middle ground that was forming across the United States, and, in turn, helped to reinforce that middle ground by acting as a space where youth from different races could be introduced to each others' unique cultural traits.

Chapter Three

In the summer of 1949, thousands of African Americans across the country were struck by a story featured in the pages of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, one of black America's most prominent national media voices. "Many civic leaders below the Mason-Dixon line are of the opinion that this will do more for lowering jim-crow barriers than flowery oratory," the reporter confidently declared.¹ Since the *Courier* was one of the major mouthpieces of the civil rights movement, even in its early postwar stages, this sentence alone was hardly capable of riveting readers. What was intriguing about this article was its subject matter, the "this" that supposedly had the potential to help wage war against racial discrimination and segregation. The subject was Memphis radio station WDIA's shift to all-black programming. The station, which previously played the same mix of pop and country tunes as many others in the city, was the first in the country to devote its entire broadcasting focus to black-oriented music, news, and human interest stories. This shift, and the incredible profits that followed, shows that blacks were gaining a greater voice in the national popular culture landscape just as a broad-based political movement for desegregation was gaining momentum across the South.

The accepted narrative of this history holds that a supposedly monolithic "music industry" exploited naive black musicians and young white consumers flush with postwar affluence by attempting to sell black R&B music to white teenagers. This process was far more dynamic, however, as record executives, artists, and listeners all contributed to the creation of this new sound. Record companies and radio stations were supposedly acting on base, profit-driven motives, but they inadvertently created the breeding ground for the new genre of rock and roll

¹ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 170.

music to emerge. Since this music is comprised of a combination of pop, rhythm and blues, and country and western characteristics, it could only form if artists and fans were listening to and absorbing all three genres, and if record executives and artists decided to capitalize on these trends by recording combinations of these musics.

The first step towards this mixing, then, was for black and white teenagers to start listening to music outside of their racial comfort zones. Because blacks and whites were supposed to be segregated from each other, even in the North to an extent, the decisions consumers made to seek out different kinds of music were fraught with racial politics, and definitely predicted by music industry executives. And yet teenage listeners, and the important changes in racial attitudes that had to occur before music fans could cross these fairly strict lines, are often left out of rock and roll's origin narrative. Louis Cantor, one of WDIA's only white employees in the 1950s, gives credence to deejays and station managers, who "were all part of a concerted effort by white stations trying to hook white teenagers on black rock 'n' roll." His support for this argument "is evidenced by the fact that a great many young white Americans...listened systematically—if surreptitiously—to what was still considered in the early fifties forbidden music."² While shifts in programming and sales tactics did in fact encourage more white teenagers to listen to black-oriented music, and made it more acceptable to do so, they were not "concerted efforts" made by the powers that be, as Cantor argues, but responses to listening and purchasing habits that were already in flux among youth of both races. Rock and roll did not emerge from marketing strategies outlined in major record label offices; rather, both producers and consumers contributed to a dialogue that ultimately produced this new genre. To ignore this distinction is to discount the fact that teenagers in the postwar period were making their own decisions about culture and race that

² Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale*, 164.

were informed by, and contributed to, the emergence of a national movement for racial integration. These decisions would go on to encourage support for racial equality and desegregation efforts.

According to the official history of performing rights organization BMI, “The time was ripe for black entertainers who could appeal to white America without sacrificing their cultural heritage.”³ This statement also overlooks teenage agency in favor of change that was apparently shaped by inscrutable historical shifts. In the aftermath of World War Two, racial politics and youth culture would both ultimately be reshaped according to the mores of a generation that was trying to distance itself from the mistakes of its elders. As the music industry became more decentralized, offering more choices to supposedly narrow demographics, young people who were disenchanted with what their own culture had to offer them discovered that alternatives existed. White kids started listening to R&B in greater numbers, but there was also an increase in black demand for pop music that is often overlooked. At the same time, country music gained greater appeal among urban and suburban middle-class teenagers of both races. All of these cultural changes occurred within an atmosphere where racial inequality and segregation were being challenged on an increasingly national level. Racial integration on any level, even in music, was politicized as the battle lines were drawn between the powerful defenders of segregation and those who would challenge it.

By the early 1950s, the NAACP was fighting cases against racial segregation in schools, culminating in the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling, *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka*, which theoretically banned segregation in public schools. The following year, a diverse coterie of African-American churchgoers, domestics, and professional men and women in

³ Paul Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary: The Explosion of American Music 1940-1990* (The Country Music Foundation 1990), 39.

Montgomery, Alabama, organized a boycott against the city's bus lines that precipitated a court ruling against racial segregation on the buses—and forced the entire country to take notice of the indignities of Jim Crow. And in 1957, three years after the *Brown* ruling, and one year after 101 Congress members signed a 'Southern Manifesto' declaring that their states would not obey the court's decision, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called in the National Guard to prevent Little Rock's Central High School from being integrated by nine black students. When President Dwight Eisenhower sent federal troops in to ensure that the school abided by *Brown*'s ruling, cameras were able to capture mobs of whites hurling stones and racial epithets at frightened black children, whose only crime was trying to attend school. Although civil rights activists identified a range of political and economic inequalities facing African Americans, the first phase of the postwar civil rights movement clearly focused on eradicating legal racial segregation from schools and other public places.⁴

Teenagers growing up in the mid-1950s, then, were hearing about the fight for desegregation on the news, and some were beginning to see some of the changes wrought by movement successes. Many blacks who were young during this period recall going to a new school with white kids, for instance, while whites remember new black faces in their classrooms. At the same time, young people were listening to new kinds of music on radios, jukeboxes, record players, and at friends' houses. Loving music across racial lines, and even admiring musicians of other races, did not necessarily cause young fans to support the goals of the civil rights movement if they were not already somewhat inclined to do so. But the unmistakably biracial nature of popular

⁴ For greater detail on movement divisions, as well as similarities, between working for integration and for black dignity, please see James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* Vol. 91, Issue 4, March 2005, 1233-1263, and Steve Valocchi, "The Emergence of the Integrationist Ideology in the Civil Rights Movement," *Social Problems* Vol. 43, No. 1, February 1996, 116-130.

culture in the late 1940s and early 1950s did reinforce any positive attitudes that young people already had towards the movement and its goals. Listening to musicians of a different race also encouraged both black and white listeners to see members of other races as actual people they could share spaces with rather than stereotypes to be feared, which, in turn, reinforced support for desegregation.

The struggle for racial integration has become inextricably associated with the early years of the civil rights movement, but it was not a foregone conclusion that activists would focus on this particular goal. Organizations were wracked with disagreements over how they could best attack racial inequality, and divisions between Northern and Southern, rural and urban, and working- and middle-class activists often prevented campaigns from being fully executed. The eradication of Jim Crow was a necessary component of every civil rights campaign since government-sanctioned racial segregation violated the Constitutional rights of black citizens in the South and beyond, but supporters struggled over how best to frame this fight against a more complicated background of racial injustice. To focus solely on wiping Jim Crow laws from the books would not solve the deep-rooted political and economic inequalities that African Americans faced across the country, and could encourage the faulty notion that all would be made right if only blacks and whites could shop in the same grocery store aisles and share the same classrooms.

Northern, urban, working-class activists organized concerted campaigns for economic equality during World War Two, starting with labor organizer A. Philip Randolph's famous March on Washington movement. These movements continued after the war ended. Historian Martha Biondi argues that "The 'struggle for Negro rights' in postwar New York began as a fight to keep jobs," noting the tens of thousands of black migrants who were lured north to work for decent wages in wartime factories. "Black workers were determined not to lose ground during the

economy's conversion to peacetime production.”⁵ These activists, who staged effective “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” boycotts against storeowners who gladly took their money, but refused to hire black employees, did not much care about the righteous symbolism of having an integrated workplace; they simply demanded access to better-paying jobs so that they could live better lives.

Economic and political obstacles were so onerous that some Northern, urban blacks began to question how they could ever live meaningful lives in such a fundamentally racist realm. In his book *Black Is a Country*, historian Nikhil Pal Singh identifies a shift in how African Americans determined their identity as a people, which became especially prominent during, and immediately after, World War Two. Many decided that the only way to truly exercise the democratic rights they were supposed to enjoy in their home country was to leave it, or to at least declare solidarity with the oppression of non-whites throughout the world. If black Americans, who had fought, sacrificed, and died for their country, could not enjoy basic political liberties and economic benefits, even in the North, then a belief in nationalism and ‘democracy’ as it was defined by the United States would have to be submerged in a new worldview that situates African Americans in a global context rather than a national one.⁶

The battle against racial segregation, then, was not confined to the South, which renders the goal of racial desegregation one that concerned African Americans across the country. Still, even as Northern, urban activists lent their voices and their bodies to this struggle, they never framed integration as the ultimate goal of the civil rights movement. Race relations in the North

⁵ Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 17.

⁶ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

were not as rosy as they were projected to be, but both the modes of oppression facing African Americans, and the ways they responded to these inequalities, were necessarily different than they were in the South. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, civil rights organizations like the NAACP, which were almost completely banned in the South, flourished in Northern states like New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, gaining thousands of members, and exerting a degree of influence on established political and social systems. Voting, which was denied to Southern blacks for over fifty years, was used as a tool in the North, where most blacks were enfranchised. In the South, basic rights had to be won before subtler racial indignities could even begin to be addressed. Northern blacks, however, crafted a movement that Biondi says, encompassed “the totality of ideological, democratic, economic, and social changes during the war years [that] fostered a new rights consciousness among African Americans that permanently replaced a piecemeal and gradualist approach to racial equality with a new immediacy and sweeping vision.”⁷

Southern civil rights movement activists also realized that racism could not be abolished by the stroke of a legislative pen; that it lay within the poverty, inadequate housing, ritualized sexual and physical violence, and institutional segregation that had long ago been cemented in the nation’s structures. When Oliver Brown, the claimant in the landmark desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* complained to his NAACP branch that his six-year-old daughter was forced to go to an all-black school, for instance, he was concerned about his daughter having to walk a long distance when the family lived within the vicinity of a white school, not because he felt that her self-esteem was damaged because she was separated from white children.⁸ The men

⁷ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 16.

⁸ “Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.” in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle* Ed. Claybourne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine (New York, Penguin Books, 1991), 64-73.

and women who organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott demanded integration of the city's bus lines, but mostly because they felt that segregation was a form of disrespect that invited humiliation and sexual violence. In her book *At the Dark End of the Street*, historian Danielle McGuire persuasively portrays this campaign as the culmination of a decade-long struggle against racialized sexual violence orchestrated by Rosa Parks, Jo Ann Robinson, and many other women, including the fairly radical Women's Political Council, an organization which has not received the recognition it is due.⁹ And when the Little Rock school board picked nine black students to "integrate" Central High School, they did not choose to abandon the security of their old schools in favor of the fierce opposition they undoubtedly knew awaited them only to prove that blacks could achieve equality by mixing with whites. In her memoir, *Warriors Don't Cry*, Melba Pattillo Beals, who was one of the "Little Rock Nine," remembered a childhood spent dreaming about a world where she could take advantage of the opportunities that awaited students who attended the gleaming, modern, well-funded white high school. It was not a misguided sense of inferiority that propelled Beals to face increasing amounts of harassment every day for a year: it was her dream of a better education and a brighter future.¹⁰ Ernest Green, the only member of the Little Rock Nine to actually graduate from the school, earning him the distinction of being Central High's first black graduate, also forced himself to keep attending because he felt the school's higher academic standards could help him get into a better university.¹¹

⁹ Please see "Prologue," xv-xxii and Chapter 3, "Walking in Pride and Dignity," 84-134 in Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

¹⁰ Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1994), 3.

¹¹ *Eyes on the Prize: Fighting Back: 1957-1962* PBS Home Video, 1986.

Each of these cases represented a landmark effort in the fight for the desegregation of public places, and, in fact, activists often framed them as righteous efforts to show blacks were not inferior to whites, and that they deserved to occupy the same spaces. While this argument is undeniably true, it obscures the fact that, in each case, activists knew that integration alone could not solve the issue of brutal racial injustice in America, but that it was merely the first step towards achieving real equality. Southern blacks recognized the deeply-rooted political and economic issues that were really at the heart of American racism, but they first had to be granted basic rights, such as being able to receive a quality education at a well-funded school, or to ride a bus without being sexually humiliated, before they could attack the system as a whole. Economic inequality in particular was a contentious issue during the 1950s, as the United States staged a vicious campaign against anything remotely resembling communism. Civil rights organizations were already under scrutiny for their progressive goals; to attack the capitalist-democratic system as fundamentally unfair to African Americans would sound far too radical and, especially in the South, activists would be unprotected from legal ramifications and brutal violence. Members of civil rights groups and organizers of civil rights campaigns, then, decided that a focus on desegregation, which would not fundamentally upset the lives of most Americans, and could be shaped as a morally righteous fight for Constitutional guarantees that had gone unfulfilled, would be a safer and more effective choice.

As desegregation of public spaces became the highly-publicized main goal of the civil rights movement, music charts were also starting to report unexpected sales trends. These charts based their listings on what was selling at specific record shops, so stores in predominantly white areas would provide numbers that made up the pop charts, while shops in black neighborhoods would track sales for the R&B charts. It was easy, then, to identify when an album became popular

outside of its expected racial demographic. This phenomenon, which became increasingly common by the early 1950s, was rarely foreseen by either record executives or musicians, and it was definitely not part of any marketing plan. As early as 1945, executives were surprised to learn that R&B singer Cecil Gant's single, "I Wonder," was a hit in both white and black markets. While the song was essentially a piano ballad spiced up with a double-bass to give it rhythm, the fact that a black artist singing for a black audience became popular with both races foreshadowed some of the boundary crossing that was set to occur within the next few years.¹² Atlantic Records co-owner Jerry Wexler, who still wrote for music industry bible *Billboard* at the time, noted that "It sold hundreds of thousands of copies each week, reminding white executives that a record by and for blacks only could still make a mint."¹³

Gant's single may have been a surprise hit, but most record labels failed to take notice, even as black musicians drew large black audiences and increasing numbers of white listeners. Rock and roll legend Ray Charles initially gained local fame as the only black member of a country-western band called the Florida Playboys. He said that most audiences, even in the strictly segregated south, were welcoming, and that he encountered little resistance to his playing in this otherwise all-white band. "I could do it 'cause I could play the music right," he attested. "I could play that music with as much feeling as any other Southerner." His recollection implied that musical acuity could help bridge racial chasms, although Charles had another, less magnanimous, explanation for his audience's tolerance. "A lot of the black/white thing in the South is caused by

¹² Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1996), 165-66.

¹³ Jerry Wexler & David Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music* (St. Martins Press, 1994), 64.

white men worrying ‘bout black cats fucking with their women,” he said. “Since they saw I couldn’t see—I couldn’t be checking over their little ladies—I wasn’t a threat.”¹⁴

Despite this novelty, which Charles said saved him from the threat of lynch mobs several times throughout his career, other black musicians also began drawing greater numbers of white fans in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Ruth Brown, a young R&B singer who was dubbed “Miss Rhythm,” became incredibly successful touring mostly black clubs as a teenager. By 1948, at the age of 20, she was signed to a national contract with Atlantic Records, and began singing pop ballads and novelty songs in addition to her R&B standards. She quickly became popular with teenagers, both black and white, who were intrigued by “how she overcame a great personal tragedy [running away from home to elope] to become one of the top entertainers of this decade.” Her life was described in press materials as a fairy tale, where a beautiful girl overcomes challenges to be rewarded with wealth, fame, and married love. She was often photographed in sumptuous ball gowns adorned with glitter, satin, or chiffon, to match this persona.¹⁵ No 1950s melodrama or pulp novel could have better articulated the supposed aspirations of teenage girls of either race.

The most popular black artist to garner an interracial fan base in the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, was a New Orleans piano player nicknamed “Fats” Domino. Domino was raised in a family of musicians, and began making his name when he “joined forces with bandleader Dave Bartholomew to create a mellow, rolling style of boogie-woogie” that appealed to listeners of both races.¹⁶ His first hit “The Fat Man,” was also the biggest R&B hit up to that date, selling

¹⁴ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 105.

¹⁵ “Atlantic Long Playing Sales Fact Sheet 8004 Ruth Brown,” Atlantic Recording Corporation Records, Box 1, Folder 2, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹⁶ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 24; 28.

over one million copies within three years of its initial release date in 1950. The sense of humour in his songs, backed by furious boogie-woogie piano playing was exciting, but hardly threatening, a combination which made him the perfect R&B ambassador to white America. Domino continued to make a splash with audiences of both races throughout the 1950s, releasing mammoth hits like “Ain’t That a Shame” in 1955, “Blueberry Hill” in 1956, and “I’m Walkin’” in 1957, all of which hit both the pop and R&B charts. (“Blueberry Hill” also made the country and western chart.) A writer for *Downbeat*, a magazine directed at jazz and blues fans, exhorted in 1956 that “One of the most interesting aspects of Domino’s box office success is the fact that he draws a mixed audience wherever he goes. His attraction is as strong with a white audience as it is with a predominantly Negro audience. And his records are now selling in both the popular and r&b categories.” The same article focused on his particular attraction among teenagers, many of whom were turned away at his concerts for being underage. The age of his fans may have seemed surprising, given that Domino was already in his twenties, married, and had two children by the time he became famous, but it also shows that teenagers of both races were supporting these new black stars, and were ultimately helping to change the landscape of the music industry as a whole.¹⁷

This change was partially possible because music by black artists was more readily available. Before the war, a few black artists, including Sarah Vaughn, Lena Horne, Nat ‘King’ Cole, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Count Basie were able to achieve nationwide fame by singing pop or jazz standards.¹⁸ Most black musicians, however, did not achieve recognition outside of regional African-American communities. According to BMI’s

¹⁷ Ralph J. Gleason, “Fats Domino: Not Responsible,” *Downbeat*, September 15, 1956, 40; 46 in The Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹⁸ Louis Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis: The Life and Times of a Rock ‘n’ Roll DeeJay* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 97.

official history, “These sounds were not at all obscure or even unpopular; yet they were largely kept off network radio, out of the movies, and relegated to small-town radio stations.”¹⁹ This status changed rapidly after the war, as people across the country became attuned to music other than pop, and large record companies started to lose their all-encompassing grip on the market. One reason for the wider availability of this music is the partial dismantling of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), formed in 1914 in order to protect artists and ensure that they were properly compensated when their music was published or used in hotels, restaurants, jukeboxes, films, and, by the 1950s, on television. This group allowed some artists to actually earn a living making music, but it could hardly be described as egalitarian. ASCAP only protected dues-paying members, and in order to achieve this rank, one had to be fairly established as a songwriter for a major record label. By 1939, the society was comprised of 1,100 writers and 140 publishers, all of whom were linked to major music or film companies, and was only accepting members who had already published five songs. Writers, the BMI history proclaims, “needed hits to gain membership, yet they had to have membership to get paid for songs played on radio, since radio naturally wanted to feature only the music for which it was already paying.” This closed system ensured that about 15 large music publishing companies controlled about 90 percent of the market.²⁰

Since the market was dominated by only a few companies, few risks were taken, and the vast majority of musical output involved pop standards written by professional songwriters who lived in either New York or Los Angeles. These songs were performed either by established stars, who tended to be older, or by ingénues who were groomed and polished by A&R (Artists and

¹⁹ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 6.

²⁰ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 9; 11.

Repertoire) professionals. Anyone who fell outside of these confines, including young musicians and people who lived outside of major urban centers, was shut out of the society, and therefore unlikely to achieve any kind of nation-wide recognition. These stipulations also barred blues and gospel musicians, whose offerings were collectively dubbed “race records” despite the social differences between the two genres, and country and western artists, who were known somewhat pejoratively as “hillbilly” singers. The official history of BMI states that “Most country or blues singers—if they made recordings at all—received flat fees instead of royalty contracts. Their take frequently amounted to as little as \$25 per recorded song, no matter how many records were eventually sold. Moreover, as writers, it was next to impossible for these musical outsiders to gain admission to ASCAP, then the gatekeeper for performing rights income.” Popular 1940s and 1950s country singer and songwriter Pee-wee King asserted that “We couldn’t get published or programmed under any licensing firm, and ASCAP would not take us as members because at that time they said you have to have three or four or five hit songs.” Ultimately, the few blues or country singers who were able to publish or record at all were unable to make a living off of their accomplishments, while most simply went unheard.²¹

ASCAP’s hold on the music industry was challenged in the postwar years by two distinct developments: the establishment of BMI, an alternative music performing rights organization, and the introduction of several smaller, independent record labels and music publishing firms that responded consumer demands for the blues, gospel, and country music, especially among African-American and rural populations. BMI, which was founded by Sydney M. Kaye and other broadcasters in 1940, was created as a lower-cost organization that aimed to represent artists outside of the major music and publishing companies. BMI was also willing to represent “race”

²¹ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 6-11.

and “hillbilly” performers, and to help unestablished artists negotiate complicated agreements with radio and television stations, and “enterprises that rely on music as an important part of their business,” like hotels, restaurants, and music clubs. Since BMI’s fees were cheaper than ASCAP’s, many stations and venues were eager to sign agreements, even if it meant giving airtime to little-known artists. In some cases, these agreements even meant that places of leisure, including bars, dance clubs, skating rinks, and bowling alleys, which were often racially segregated, even in the North, started featuring music by both black and white artists in jukeboxes and on music systems.²² Jerry Wexler asserted that “Music heretofore ignored—a new kind of rhythmic blues emerging from the black urban centers, and hillbilly music coming out of the white South—was making commercial noise. This became BMI’s domain.”²³

During the war, Americans of all races and class levels were intent on purchasing different kinds of music in order to keep their spirits up, and the establishment of BMI made it possible for some alternative genres to become nationally available. Milt Gabler, a record producer who ran Decca in the 1950s and 1960s, and who headed the jazz-oriented Commodore Records during the war, recalled, “[W]e had million sellers in the 40s. Don’t forget, the war came along, and that was the 40s, and records sold—people bought gin and they bought records.”²⁴ By the end of the decade, radio sales amounted to about \$224 million, while 95 percent of American homes featured at least one radio.²⁵ But just as war-weary Americans developed an incredible hunger for records as a

²² Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 8; 12-13.

²³ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 60.

²⁴ Ralph Gleason, interview with Milt Gabler, 1974, 16. The Milt Gabler Collection, Box 4, Folder 18, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

²⁵ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 19; Philip H. Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 132.

means of temporary pleasure, major record companies, which were already more likely to sign ASCAP-approved pop and jazz artists and writers, were unable to produce enough product to fulfill consumer demand. Most 78 rpm records were made of shellac, a substance from India that was strictly rationed so that it could be used for war materials. This shortage drastically reduced the number of acts each label would be able to sign and promote. Jerry Wexler explained that “The war had caused a scarcity in shellac, and the majors were recording only their big-selling white acts and very few blacks. Thus black buyers’ demand for black records was great.”²⁶ “The war! We couldn’t produce enough records,” Gabler continued. “You couldn’t get enough material to satisfy the demand. Everybody had money—they’re working in plants and everybody was doing business, so records were selling. They really started to come into their own.”²⁷

Instead of dampening demand for alternative musical choices, however, a number of enterprising businessmen saw the chance to fill a hole in these markets, and began opening small independent record labels. Milt Gabler noted that “Larger companies wouldn’t sign a lot of acts because you couldn’t press enough records. You could sell a million by Bing [Crosby] and the Andrews Sisters, and you only had so much material... Little companies started to come in because you couldn’t make enough records.”²⁸ Indeed, more than one thousand record labels debuted between 1948 and 1954, almost all of them devoted to markets that supposedly went beyond mainstream taste, and looking to sign unknown musicians and writers. This talent pool ensured that smaller labels would have access to artists that were younger and often more dynamic, but it was also a way of keeping costs down. BMI’s official history also cites new technologies like tape

²⁶ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 78.

²⁷ Gleason, interview with Milt Gabler, 18.

²⁸ Gleason, interview with Milt Gabler, 17.

recording, helping encourage the creation of new record labels, which could now record artists without having “to ship bulky equipment from New York or Hollywood to distant sites, or pay the tab for artists and their bands to travel to these longtime recording centers. Anyone with a tape recorder and access to a pressing plant could start a record label.” Thousands of young entrepreneurs did exactly that. Atlanta deejay Bill Lowery, for example, started Lowery Music in his basement, and produced his first hit, “Be-Bop-A-Lula,” in 1955. “There was an abundance of young writers of creative talent,” he stated. “None of these young people had had an opportunity to have their songs published.”²⁹ But potential consumers across the country who craved alternatives to major-label pop music were about to have their prayers answered.

During this period blacks tended to purchase more records than their white contemporaries did. A 1949 study conducted by a Charleston advertising agency also found that roughly 80 to 95 percent of African Americans across the country owned radios.³⁰ This shift forced many companies to finally see them as an important, and heretofore untapped, demographic.³¹ Since black musicians, and the so-called “race music” that blues and gospel musicians proffered, were largely shut out by ASCAP and major record labels, approximately 400 to 600 of these new independent labels were devoted to black music.³² Most of these companies were started by white men who had developed an affinity for African-American culture, and wanted to immerse themselves in this world while helping their favorite musicians reach larger numbers of black customers; none thought of trying to appeal to white audiences, or to seek a larger fan base for the

²⁹ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 39; 19; 21.

³⁰ “The Forgotten 15,000,000,” *Sponsor*, October 10, 1949, 25.

³¹ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 9.

³² Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 176.

music they so loved. Art Rupe, who founded Specialty Records in Los Angeles in 1946, decided to open the label because the shellac shortage led the black and so-called “hillbilly music” that he loved to be eclipsed in favor of big-selling white names. “Some of this music moved me so much it brought tears to my eyes,”³³ he said. Phil and Leonard Chess, sons of Polish immigrants, who also loved the music they heard in predominantly black neighborhoods of their native Chicago, opened Chess Records in order to record the traditional southern blues that was often confined to live music scenes in urban African-American communities.³⁴ Finally, Atlantic Records was started in 1947 by Ahmet Ertegun and Herb and Miriam Abramson. Ertegun was the son of a Turkish diplomat who was so inspired by African-American culture that he decided to stay in his adopted hometown of Washington D.C. after his father died, and devote his life to the music he loved. “At age ten I saw Duke Ellington at the London Palladium,” Ertegun recalled. “This was my first encounter with black people, and I was overwhelmed by the elegance of their tuxedos, their gleaming instruments, and their sense of style. But mostly it was the music...I fell under the spell of black music. A new world opened up for me.” He was soon joined by *Billboard* editor Jerry Wexler, who had started journeying up to Harlem as a kid to see live music and collect records by black artists. Soon, Ertegun and Wexler were in charge of one of the most thriving independent labels in the country, and were responsible for recording hundreds of artists whose work would otherwise have only been heard in their respective communities.³⁵

³³ Billy Vera, “Specialty Records 40th Anniversary 1946-1986: Celebrating four decades of leadership in Rock, R&B, and Gospel Music,” 17. Specialty Records Collection, Box-Folder OS1-OF6, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland, Ohio.

³⁴ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 24.

³⁵ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 19; Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 76-77; 52; 56-57.

Radio stations that broadcast programs and music with black appeal were also responsible for spreading African-American culture across the country in the immediate postwar period. A few black-oriented radio programs, especially in the South, were in existence before they exploded in popularity after the war, but a truly historic event took place when WDIA Memphis made the shift to all-black music and programming in 1949. Historian and former employee Louis Cantor explains that, while “Other stations had tried an occasional program for blacks, WDIA was the first to program its entire format to the black audience.”³⁶ One of the first stations to play so-called “race” music, however, was WLAC in Nashville, when white deejays convinced management to let them play black artists at night. These nighttime programs were immediately successful, but station owners and managers were still hesitant about offending white listeners.³⁷ WDIA was floundering with its traditional format of pop music, country, and news, though, so when white co-owner and manager Burt Ferguson made the decision to switch over entirely to black programming, it was with the intention of saving the station financially. Fears of alienating white listeners had heretofore prevented station managers from capitalizing on the fact that black consumers did not have a radio station to call their own, despite statistics showing that roughly 95 percent of African-American homes at had least one radio, and that families listened an average of seven and a half hours per day.³⁸

The decision to turn WDIA into the country’s first all-black radio station, featuring Nat Williams, ostensibly the first on-air black announcer in the nation, was a monumental decision in a city that remained strictly segregated. Cantor asserts that, “For black people living south of the

³⁶ Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale*, vii.

³⁷ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 65-66.

³⁸ “The Forgotten 15,000,000, Part Two: How to Build Negro Sales,” *Sponsor*, October 24, 1949, 42.

Mason-Dixon line who wanted more than the ‘white man’s nigger’ on their radio, little else existed. For them—before WDIA—the chances of coming to the realization that articulate, intelligent black people existed just by listening to their local station were quite slim.”³⁹ This decision also pulled WDIA out of dire financial straits, making it one of the most popular stations in the country. According to Hooper and Pulse ratings, which were based on random telephone polls, WDIA was consistently first in “total number of daytime listening” in Memphis for most of the 1950s, and, in fact, had one of the highest ratings in the entire country. Avid listenership was also reflected in the eagerness of potential sponsors, including companies that had not previously considered selling to black consumers. Advertising salesperson Archie Grinalds even recalled that “I had the easiest job in the world,” noting that his day was often taken up with returning unsolicited calls to sponsors actively seeking airtime.⁴⁰

WDIA was so popular that other black-oriented radio stations started cropping up across the country, almost all of them white-owned. By 1949, Interstate United Newspapers, Inc. represented 22 independent, black-oriented stations across the country. WEDR Birmingham became another popular all-black station, and WERD Atlanta became the first black-owned and operated station when J.B. Blayton, Sr., the only black certified public accountant in Georgia, purchased the station and converted it to black programming. Another station in Kansas City, Missouri, was quickly snapped up by another black owner. By the mid-1950s, a “National Negro Network” of all-black programming was established by Chicago accountant, Leonard Evans, WCHB in Inkster, Michigan. It became the first black-owned and operated radio station to be built from the ground up, and roughly 36 stations across the country devoted their entire schedule to

³⁹ Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 159; 155.

⁴⁰ Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 146.

black programming. Again, most of these stations were owned by white businessmen, but the importance of a solid black consumer base was established, as was the realization that many listeners wanted to hear black deejays and announcers on the air.⁴¹ A widely-read 1949 *Sponsor* magazine article extorted, “More and more local advertisers are learning that Negroes in their communities can be sold by radio when local stations take the trouble to set up colored programs with colored talent and make a determined, intelligent effort to let the Negro know that these programs are for *him*—that the station they’re on is *his* station.” Although critics cried segregation, noting that all-black radio stations perpetuated the racist notion that African Americans were different, and needed to be kept separate from whites in all spaces, the article claimed that these stations appealed to listeners because they helped bolster pride in being identified as both black and as valued consumers. The *Sponsor* article’s author defined the new black consumer for its readers: “He has the money to respond to the sales messages leveled at him,” the copy crowed. “And because he has always felt discriminated against, the very fact that a station removes some of that feeling of discrimination by ‘talking’ directly to him is almost enough to guarantee that he will spend his money on the products and services advertised on that station.”⁴² Black listeners, especially those among the middle or aspiring classes, were drawn to these stations because they were capable of striking a balance between advocating racial pride and treating African Americans like any other class of potential consumer.

By mid-1949, WVEZ New Orleans hired its first black deejay, “Doctor Daddy-O,” who heralded the station’s 5-5:30 time slot. Within ten years, over 600 stations across 39 states featured

⁴¹ Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 161; 169; 171; Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 174-175; “The Forgotten 15,000,000, Part Two,” 30; Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 205.

⁴² “The Forgotten 15,000,000, Part Two,” 54. For more on African-American critiques of all-black radio stations, please see Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 171-172.

some form of black programming without shifting to an entirely all-black format. Louis Cantor explains that “The formula was simple enough: just add a Negro announcer or two to the staff, stir in a few more black recording artists, and serve up as an instant new black format.”⁴³ These decisions were almost always made with regards to profit. Sociologist Philip Ennis reminds readers that “The radio station’s definition of its target audience was not defined in status or behavioral terms but in sheer numbers. The broadcasters wanted the *largest* audience it could get. The larger the audience, the higher the station’s rate card. It was just that simple.” If black listeners were included in this supposedly faceless ‘public,’ that simply meant more advertising revenue for enterprising stations. Even though, Ennis says, “that public was predominantly the white high school teenager[,] black, Spanish, and other minority youths were to be incorporated. No distinction was made between working-class and middle-class kids; it was just *kids* that were to be celebrated.”⁴⁴ What resulted from these decisions were effectively desegregated radio stations that aimed to appeal to both white and black listeners.

These radio stations were often criticized for failing to overtly support the black freedom movement, though. While these stations would become powerful instruments of the movement in the 1960s, white owners were originally quite careful to present these media outlets as apolitical endeavors. Cantor explains that manager Burt Ferguson “was convinced that the station could do its best work by concentrating less on racial integration...and more on showcasing the separate accomplishments of blacks on the air.” When asked about his station’s efforts in the fight against Jim Crow segregation, Ferguson responded “We think we’re doing enough, and we’d rather move ahead as we’ve been moving in race relations than get involved in that, where we couldn’t do

⁴³ Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 160-161; Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 174-175.

⁴⁴ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 139; 154.

anything anyway.”⁴⁵ By all accounts, he treated his black employees well, and was the first white Southern manager to hire a black disc jockey, B.B. King. King, who worked at the station from 1949 to 1955, actually portrayed Ferguson as a role model, saying he was “fair to me: ‘You’re a person. I respect you for being a person. God made you.’”⁴⁶ Still, Ferguson was persistent in explaining to irate Southern whites, who feared the influence of black music permeating Southern airwaves, that this was a business, and, as owner, he was forced to follow the whims of the market in order to make the highest profits.

This tacit support for some form of desegregation did not necessarily translate to increased employment or higher-status positions for black people who lived in communities dominated by these radio stations. WDIA presented an interesting case of a radio station that made most of its profits from black listeners, employed the nation’s first black deejay, and assisted with charitable organizations in black communities while, at the same time, failing to promote black people to higher-paid positions in any appreciable number. More black deejays were hired following Nat Williams’s meteoric rise to local fame, but only white people were allowed to read the news and run the control board. Every executive at the station was white, except for A.C. Williams, a promotion consultant. Even the front-desk receptionist was white until Beatrice Roby was hired in the mid-1950s.⁴⁷ Inequality in racial hiring was by no means limited to WDIA. Deejay Shelley Stewart described WOKJ Jackson, Mississippi, where he worked in his early twenties, as “a microcosm” of the city’s segregated society. “All the on-air personalities...were black, of course,

⁴⁵ Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale*, 1.

⁴⁶ Joe Nick Patoski, “B.B. King, Blues Man,” December 27, 2003, 17. “Voices of the CRM Project,” The American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁴⁷ Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 172-174.

but the entire sales department, who received the fatter paychecks, was white and used a separate rest room,” he said. “Also, the blacks were expected to wash windows, clean floors, and take out the trash, jobs I told [station head John] McClendon I would not do.”⁴⁸ Behind the scenes, these radio stations often continued to enforce the most egregious elements of Jim Crow.

But most listeners were unaware of these inequalities. Black people who consistently tuned into these stations were more likely to view them as a source of pride and a potential instrument for change rather than perpetrators of the racial status quo. Shelley Stewart argued that many of these on-air personalities encouraged black people to get involved in freedom struggles. “Historically, the black community could not depend on the traditional white-oriented media to disseminate information on the struggle,” he said, “since most of them in...the South did not support the civil rights quest.”⁴⁹ More than that, black radio personalities helped to dispel unflattering stereotypes in a way that promoted black pride. Louis Cantor explains that, by the time WDIA switched to all-black programming, most images of blacks on radio and television “were little more than shiftless liars, clowns, or buffoons.” But WDIA’s announcers challenged these depictions. They were polished, well-spoken, funny, and intelligent, which “quickly destroyed the cardboard caricatures that had heretofore saturated the South’s airwaves.”⁵⁰ These images promoted black pride, and also acknowledged the growing numbers of educated, middle-or aspiring-class African Americans who would have made up a large segment of these stations’ consumer bases.

⁴⁸ Shelley Stewart with Nathan Hale Turner, *The Road South: A Memoir* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2002), 210.

⁴⁹ Stewart, *The Road South*, 246.

⁵⁰ Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale*, 154.

But the seemingly sudden popularity of black-oriented programming in the late 1940s and early 1950s also helped reinforce political goals of desegregation during the same period as the integrationist phase of the civil rights movement was gaining national attention. This is not because these radio stations actively sought a white audience for their programming. Although young whites began listening to these stations almost immediately, most station managers actively asserted that their programming was directed solely at black listeners, partly because they thought that whites would be offended by black-oriented material, and partly because they did not want to be accused of trying to lure whites into mingling with blacks, even if it was within the abstract space of the airwaves. One white deejay in Kentucky explained that he did not play R&B music on his show, “Not because the person is colored, but it’s the rhythm and tone of the things. It’s not melodic. Our audience doesn’t like this sort of thing. They would be ashamed if they thought that their friends knew they were listening to it. The quality of the music is poor, it really is. It brings out the ...well...the savage in people.”⁵¹ And yet, a form of integration emerged as more mainstream radio stations, eager to reap the profits of appealing to black listeners, began featuring some black programming, usually later at night, while the rest of their schedules remained devoted to reaching white listeners. Radio historian Mark Newman explains that “A major aspect of the boom was that stations did not turn their entire schedule over to racially designed programs...part-time black-appeal was the norm.”⁵²

Programs were not supposed to draw biracial audiences at the same time, but radio waves cannot easily be segregated when a station playing pop music aimed at white kids suddenly shifts to a black-oriented program headed by an African-American deejay simply because the hand of

⁵¹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 233.

⁵² Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 170.

the clock turns. White kids did not instinctively turn their radio dials when black programming began, and black kids did not wait around for these shows to start, then abruptly turn their radios off when the station returned to its regular schedule. People listened to both kinds of programming, were introduced to new forms of music when radio stations began to insert brief spans of black-appeal programming into their lineups, and often liked what they heard. The owners of these stations did not set out to endorse desegregation on any level, but because they often stood to lose money if they did not reach out to all prospective listeners, and because few music industry executives seemed to understand that it was impossible to enforce racial segregation over the airwaves, the mixture of white and black-oriented programming resulted in audiences of both races listening to both kinds of radio shows. Many of these radio stations, then, inadvertently reinforced nascent support for the movement against racial segregation, but only after realizing that they stood to lose profits, and sometimes even faced the threat of bankruptcy, if they failed to respond to popular demand for black-oriented programming.

White interest in African-American musical forms was not without precedent. In the early decades of the twentieth century, small numbers of whites became attracted to the blues and jazz, often because the qualities of primitivism and sexuality that were supposedly inherent in these musics were shunned in their own culture. They therefore responded to black cultural stereotypes that comprised repressed elements in mainstream society. By the 1920s, jazz clubs became especially popular among urban white sophisticates who were drawn to the exoticism of black entertainment. Some jazz enthusiasts truly enjoyed this new form of music, while others were drawn to the trendiness and sense of rebellion involved in venturing up to Harlem and other majority-black neighborhoods to see black performers.⁵³ Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale

⁵³ Charley Gerard, *Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 97.

Hurston, for instance, recalled visiting a Harlem jazz club with a white friend. While the performance seems to enflame the core of her being, her friend can only calmly state “Good music they have here.” Hurston then realized that white interest in black culture did not necessarily brought them closer to racial understanding. “The great blocks of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away.”⁵⁴

Although many white people seemed to listen to jazz on a fairly shallow level, there is nothing wrong with enjoying music for its aesthetics. Berry Gordy even saw this exchange as a positive development that might help ease racial tensions. While selling copies of *The Michigan Chronicle*, a black newspaper in Detroit, he decided that he would try to peddle the papers in white neighborhoods as well. “I figured white people there would probably love to buy them if they got the chance,” he said. “After all, you could always find them hanging out at the black nightclubs—like the Flame Show Bar or those down in Paradise Valley. I felt that everyone in the world had a lot more in common than they realized. Well, I was a big hit and sold more papers in less time than ever before.”⁵⁵ Problems of exoticization persisted, however, as many white patrons were quick to link the qualities of this music to black people themselves, and continued to espouse prejudice against blacks outside the safe realm of the club or dance hall. Kobena Mercer explains that “When rich white patrons descended on Harlem seeking out the salubrious spectacle of the ‘New Negro’ it became clear...that the Africa being evoked was not the real one but a mythological, imaginary ‘Africa’ of noble savagery and primitive grace.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to be Colored Me,” *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* Ed. Alice Walker (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 154.

⁵⁵ Gordy, *To Be Loved*, 41.

⁵⁶ Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” *New Formulations*, Number 3, Winter 1987, 42.

Even when white jazz fans viewed this “salubrious spectacle” with favor, they risked associating characteristics they heard in the music with stereotypical African-American group characteristics. Jerry Wexler noted that “A lot of Caucasians made it north of 110th Street [in New York] in search of poon.” Despite his admitting that “I knew enough not to patronize or try to be overcool. I knew not to pretend to be something I wasn’t,” he still managed to exoticize black patrons by noting that they accepted him because “I was also a good dancer...Most of the patrons, perhaps 80 percent, were black, meaning that the quality of dance was exceedingly high. The rhythm, though, overcame my inhibitions. The crazy rhythm got all over me.”⁵⁷ Even though Wexler disparaged white patrons who treated blacks in an inferior manner, his belief that he won them over because of his dance skills, which, apparently, African Americans are naturally good at, and that the “crazy rhythm” of black music could infiltrate his brain and take over his body, almost like a sort of curse, belied his own exoticization of the music and the people who created it. B.B. King recalled that the white audience members he encountered at jazz clubs “would listen to Duke Ellington; they listened to Ella Fitzgerald; they listened to many of the great people we had at that time. And they didn’t seem to discriminate unless you went there. The Cotton Club, for example. The white people went to see black acts, but they didn’t want any black people to come in there.”⁵⁸

In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine parses the unique culture of the Jazz Age to go beyond what is seemingly ‘exotic’ to produce reasoned accounts for the differences between black and white cultures. Lyrics, he writes, “were frank, uninhibited, realistic,

⁵⁷ Jerry Wexler and David Ritz, “Draft of Rhythm and the Blues,” 54; 56-57, Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 2, Folder 1, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁵⁸ Cosby, interview with B.B. King.

reflective of the life of the Negro subculture” not because blacks exhibited these qualities more so than whites did, but because white popular music was romanticized to the point that most people could not identify with it. The response of black musicians, then, was to create a more realistic musical counterpoint to excessively sentimental ballads. Although jazz was, of course, exoticized, white interest, Levine explains, emerged not only due to a fascination with the exotic, but because few whites could identify with pop music either.⁵⁹ “Many of those whites who found jazz and blues stimulating and attractive in the 1920s and 30s did so because these musical forms seemed to promise greater freedom of expression, both artistically and personally.”⁶⁰ This argument seems to promote black exoticism on the surface, but in light of his previous assertions, it actually underlies a broader racial understanding. Whites sought out black music that seemed real and genuine not because they stereotyped blacks as somehow less civilized, but because jazz musicians had actively ensured that their music *was* more realistic than the sentimental pop music of the period. Levine does not say that jazz meant the same thing to whites as it did to blacks, but he does see it as a sort of common ground upon which both races could identify their similarities.

Despite its initial trendiness, jazz remained on the fringes of American culture throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, and whites especially who were drawn to jazz were forced to make a radical break with their pasts and their white identities if they were to truly embrace it, or if they were to become jazz musicians themselves. Many of these musicians and jazz aficionados had black friends, married black women, and lived in black neighborhoods. Jerry Wexler recalled that “The hip of my generation, who were teenagers in the thirties, had always been drawn to black culture. In fact, I had always known White Negroes, not pretenders or voyeurs but guys who had

⁵⁹ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 280.

⁶⁰ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 294.

opted to leave the white world, married black women, and made Harlem or Watts their habitat. These guys *converted*.”⁶¹ He named producer Teddy Reig, “Symphony” Syd, and Monte Kay as examples, as well as one of the most famous white adherents of black culture, jazz clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow. Mezzrow began playing with black musicians early in his career, and became as smitten with African American culture as a whole as he was with jazz. In his autobiography, *Really the Blues*, Mezzrow wrote that “I not only loved those colored boys, but I was one of them—I felt closer to them than I felt to the whites, and I even got the same treatment they got. They were my kind of people. And I was going to learn their music and play it for the rest of my days. I was going to be a musician, a Negro musician, hippping the world about the blues the way only Negroes can.” He married a black woman named Johnny Mae, moved to Harlem, and declared himself a “voluntary Negro.”⁶²

Yet, despite Wexler’s seemingly favorable use of the term “White Negro,” this label, first used by writer and jazz fan Norman Mailer to describe whites who attempted to cast off the shackles of stifling mainstream society by adopting supposedly “black” characteristics which they thought could free them, remains incredibly problematic. The black individual, Mailer said, “could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body.”⁶³ Wexler might have used this term as a contrast to so-called “pretenders” and “voyeurs,” but many individuals who were characterized as White Negroes clearly engaged in the same racist behaviors and belief

⁶¹Wexler & Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 90-91.

⁶² Mezz Mezzrow & Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (New York: Citadel Press, 1946), 18.

⁶³ Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957), 2.

systems that they seemingly opposed. Grace Elizabeth Hale says that, to Mailer, “African Americans lacked repression, which he identified as white...Practiced in the art of survival, they lived with hopelessness by focusing on the present, on the joys and pleasures that could be snatched from the music and the body. They felt and expressed intense emotions, especially sexual desire, rather than deferring gratification to plan for a future that might not come.”⁶⁴ These emotions appealed highly to whites who felt oppressed by mainstream Cold War culture, but using them to describe African-American experiences in opposition to this culture resulted in exoticization, and in perpetuation of racist stereotypes.

Use of consumer items to differentiate one race from another has a long history in the United States. Kristin Hoganson has examined how foreign imports like silk, coffee, and chocolate, and “exotic” recipes, fashions, and décor helped define both an interest in international diplomacy and the distinction of white American supremacy for white middle-class women.⁶⁵ White middle-class and elite patrons became a mainstay in African-American jazz and blues clubs as soon as they opened, particularly in Harlem, New York, Chicago, and other majority-black neighborhoods that became “fashionable” to whites drawn to exoticism.⁶⁶ These musicians may not have obviously exoticized African Americans the way that Harlem nightclubbers did by ‘slumming’ in popular black clubs, but they were responding to some of the same stereotypical characteristics that allowed exoticization to take place, and often using these supposed characteristics to define

⁶⁴ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 74.

⁶⁵ Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁶⁶ For more on the concept of middle-class and elite white consumption of African-American music, please see Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 48, No. 3, Autumn 1995, Charley Gerard, *Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), and Baraka, *Blues People*.

themselves against their own whiteness. Although hardcore jazz enthusiasts defined such characteristics as positive attributes that white society was lacking, rather than exotic qualities which could be indulged from time to time and then hidden when one returned to “polite” (white) society, their attempts to shed their white identities in order to delve into a supposedly more authentic African-American lifestyle shows that they still acknowledged and even respected an absolute disconnect between blacks and whites.

But these opportunities often come at a cost. In “Jazz and the White Critic,” Amiri Baraka wrote that the first white jazz musicians “sought not only to understand the phenomena of Negro music but to appropriate it as a means of expression which they themselves might utilize. The success of this ‘appropriation’ signaled the existence of an American music, where before there was a Negro music.”⁶⁷ This well-meaning white interest did, in fact, lead to some form of integration, but it could also rob the black community of a culture with special meaning only to them. It could also lead to what Baraka called ‘Crow Jim,’ another term for well-intentioned exoticism, among whites who do not understand black culture: “The disparaging ‘all you folks got rhythm’ is not less a stereotype, simply because it is proposed as a positive trait,”⁶⁸ he asserted. This stereotype could, in fact, prevent any true cross-racial identification from occurring. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously wrote about the inability of those in power to understand the traditions and views of others as anything but marginal, and that “there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogenous Other referring only to our place in the seat of the Same or the Self.”⁶⁹ Many white musicians and

⁶⁷ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), “Jazz and the White Critic,” *Black Music* Ed. LeRoi Jones (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1968), 13.

⁶⁸ Baraka, “Jazz and the White Critic,” 13-14.

⁶⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 84.

record executives tried desperately to unlock the secret of a mythical “blackness” by leaving their communities behind and adopting supposedly African-American traits. But these traits could never signify the range of experiences of an entire group of people; they only made sense to those on the outside who needed cultural tropes to fashion counter-white identities for themselves that would have been foreign to many of their new black friends.

White musicians and fans may have been so moved by this music that they reconstructed their entire personalities and lifestyles, but this reconstruction was ultimately shaped by persistent racial stereotyping. Hale describes this interracial desire as “minstrelsy,” arguing that “In the blink of an eye or the beat of a drum, minstrelsy could flip between love and hate, insult and envy, liberation and enslavement, black and white.” White musicians and fans, she says, “could project their impossible longings for autonomy and rootedness onto African Americans and in their identification with blackness reabsorb a magical mix cleansed of contradiction.”⁷⁰ White jazz and blues musicians and enthusiasts may have tried to see blacks as actual people, but they were never the same kinds of people as whites were—that is why they were forced to reinvent themselves and to rely on often-exoticized characteristics to construct new identities. These new identities may have felt hipper and more progressive than the ones proffered by mainstream white culture, but they were ultimately shaped more by a decision to flee from one’s own whiteness than by support of racial equality. Mezzrow, for instance, ultimately became just as well-known for dealing marijuana as he was for his music, and reveled in this persona. Madison Foster, who became acquainted with countercultural icon John Sinclair while working in student activism groups in Ann Arbor in the 1960s, explained the influence that Mezzrow had on Sinclair, another self-described “White Negro.” “He talked about getting high, about really high-grade cannabis, about

⁷⁰ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 51; 53-54.

the relaxation that cannabis gave him, and the relaxation from the music,” Foster recalled. “He said that, when he hung with blacks, there was a certain coolness, a certain discernment, a certain personal life that was humane. It was slowed down. It was hip. It was cool. You felt good—you felt better. It wasn’t as frantic as the Euro-Americans tended to be.”⁷¹ These qualities may not have been highly valued in mainstream white society, but to assume that they were inherently black meant engaging in similarly racist assumptions. Comedian and writer Baratunde Thurston has argued that “Having a black friend is a mark of progressive success as a white person. It’s like: I’m cooler by proxy.”⁷² Most White Negroes would proclaim that their affection encompassed far more than this simplistic assumption, but the desire to live a freer, more genuine existence, which many whites assumed was coterminous with African-American lifestyles, undoubtedly shaped the decisions they made.

Even by the early 1950s, though, it was clear that the white market for black-appeal music was different than in the past. Elements of exoticization undoubtedly existed, as white teenagers sought music that sounded more “genuine” than what they found on mainstream radio stations. Most of these kids were unwilling to actually leave their own neighbourhoods and cross racial lines in order to hear black groups play, however, and even fewer would disown their own communities in favor of “becoming” black as Mezzrow and other jazz musicians felt the need to do. They could retain elements of their own cultural traditions while also enjoying the new sounds beaming into their bedrooms via black-oriented radio. And when some of these listeners decided to start playing and writing music themselves, they would not feel inclined to break with everything

⁷¹ Madison Foster, interview with Bret Eynon, July, 1978, 37. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

⁷² Baratunde Thurston, excerpt from *How to Be Black*, NPR, February 1, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/01/146198412/baratunde-thurston-explains-how-to-be-black?sc=fb&cc=fp>

they knew in order to fully embrace African-American traditions. Instead, they would combine everything they had grown to know and love into a new, inherently biracial, entity.

Finally, country and western, still dismissively referred to as “hillbilly” music, was also widely ignored by the music industry, although not to the same extent as black-oriented music. Much like “race” records, country music was almost completely barred from ASCAP representation, and most artists failed to achieve status beyond their own mostly rural communities. Country music experienced something of a renaissance during the Great Depression, as people sought out genuine forms of American folk expression, but record sales did not match this interest, and, although live performances could still be found on radio stations across the south, major record labels shuttered most attention to this genre. This decision was perhaps premature, as country music became incredibly popular again during World War Two. BMI’s official history notes that “In addition to farm-to-city migration, national prosperity, the appearance of country performers in USO tours, and the intermingling of persons from many regions in military service—which introduced this music to a great many northerners—the wartime climate of patriotism stimulated interest in all things American.”⁷³ BMI actually opened a separate branch in Nashville that was devoted to country music, and many independent labels devoted to black music, including Chess, Specialty, and Dot, began signing country acts.⁷⁴

Two independent labels ultimately became associated with the postwar rise in country music, however: Acuff-Rose, started by Tin Pan Alley songwriter Fred Rose and country star Roy Acuff, and radio announcer Sam Phillips’s hallowed Nashville landmark, Sun Records, which

⁷³ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 10; 20

⁷⁴ Johnny Sippel, “Hit Tunes and Good Talent are Keeping the Boxes Busy: Country & Western,” *Billboard*, March 15, 1952, 82.

recorded blues and country singers. Although the former was outfitted with far more resources and connections than the latter, which was housed in a small shop near the city's black district, both provided assistance for country artists who, like their blues and gospel contemporaries, had trouble recording and distributing their music.⁷⁵ Frances Williams-Preston, who headed BMI's country music division in the 1950s, and ultimately became president of the organization, said that "In those early days, country songwriters didn't know music as an industry. It was strictly an art form. They wrote their songs and kept them in shoeboxes. They wrote about their everyday lives. They didn't think about writing a song as a way to make money."⁷⁶ Some were actually forced to pay if they wanted to record—Phillips, whose small label rarely turned a profit after it first opened in 1950, allowed people to walk in off the street and record an "acetate" (or single recording) for a fee. Younger country musicians, music writer Michael Lydon says, "Didn't have a chance to get into the big company studios in Nashville, so they went down to Memphis and Sam Phillips's Sun Records." Because Phillips would record anyone who could pay, the studio drew a mixture of black blues and white country artists. Lydon attests that "That was a minor revolution by itself: a new generation of white country singers finding a 'nigger' label their natural home."⁷⁷ Most independent labels, no matter how far outside the mainstream, did not assume that they were selling to anyone outside of what were assumed to be very strict racial and class demographics. Even Phillips, whose studio accommodated both black and white musicians, did not think of trying to mix the two or to sell across racial lines; not, at least, until young listeners across the country triggered an undeniable trend that startled even the most astute cultural critics.

⁷⁵ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 20; 26.

⁷⁶ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 37.

⁷⁷ Michael Lydon, *Rock Folk: Portraits from the Rock 'n' Roll Pantheon* (New York: Citadel Press, 1971), 32.

What Sam Phillips, Ahmet Ertegun, Jerry Wexler, Art Rupe, and other independent record producers did not anticipate, however, was that the racial and class lines which supposedly divided these markets were beginning to blur. The black music industry had not set out to appeal to white consumers—it expanded during World War Two as a response to increased demand from African-American consumers. As black and white, Southern and Northern, and local and national customs were intermingling with one another, however, record sales exploded in all categories. Record companies, even independent ones, did not realize the potential of selling across racial or class lines at first. Although they were theoretically limiting sales by marketing only to distinct demographics, record companies and radio stations generally respected these boundaries. Within the segregated atmosphere of postwar America, no one specifically thought that non-blacks would ever venture into R&B audiences. As Jerry Wexler explained, “the notion of selling black music to whites[:] That idea wasn’t yet in the air. When I started working at Atlantic, I certainly had no such notions.”⁷⁸ Atlantic, he maintained, sought a black consumer base with mature tastes. “I’ve never been interested in confecting teenage music,” he said. “The gut of the Atlantic R&B catalogue was pointed at black adults. If white people went for it, fine; if not, we’d survive.”⁷⁹ In a 1980 interview, Sam Phillips admitted “that it hadn’t occurred to too many people that white people would listen to black singers.”⁸⁰ Ralph Bass, who worked as an A&R representative at independent, black-oriented labels like Chess, Savoy, and King, titled his tentative memoirs “I Didn’t Give a Damn if Whites Bought It.” “We never made [records] for kids, but for adults, black adults,” he said. “I wasn’t aiming at a teenage market, just a general market, kids from eighteen

⁷⁸ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 78.

⁷⁹ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 207-208.

⁸⁰ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 115.

and up, we didn't have no twelve, thirteen year old kids listening to our records, and of course, the Blues were one for black adults, we didn't even have whites in mind. I didn't give a damn if whites bought it—if they did groovy!”⁸¹ Finally, Ertegun remembered that “Sales were localized in ghetto markets. There was no white sale and no white radio play... We never cared about a white market. We didn't look for it.”⁸² Executives at independent black-oriented labels may not have been looking for a white market, but young whites would soon go looking for sales on their own.

Historians and music critics alike often describe the birth of rock and roll as a top-down enterprise. They often try to show how record executives, radio station managers, and deejays actively sought out young white audiences, and lured them towards the sounds of black beats in order to turn a profit. Music legend has it that after a few years of operating Sun Records, Sam Phillips was looking for “white country boys who could sing the blues” so that his label might have a chance at selling R&B singles to white stations.⁸³ Louis Cantor describes both Phillips and his good friend, the revolutionary Memphis deejay Dewey Phillips, as integral in introducing young Southern whites to black sounds, which they most certainly were. But he also gives them too much credit, almost completely ignoring the fact that both men were responding to pre-existing consumer demand among young whites, and instead arguing that they created this trend rather than simply reinforcing it.

⁸¹ *Reader, Chicago's Free Weekly*, Friday May 17, 1991, 8, Ralph Bass Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives; Ralph Bass with John Fleming, “A Life Recording,” 7, Ralph Bass Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁸² Arnold Shaw, *The Rockin' 50s: The Decade That Transformed the Pop Music Scene* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 77.

⁸³ Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26.

“From the beginning, Cantor says, “Sam understood the problems he faced in selling unknown black performers to white teenagers. His problem...how to accurately determine the size of the white audience.” His solution was to go “to Dewey’s studio with newly pressed acetates, knowing that [Dewey’s radio show] *Red, Hot and Blue* had become so popular that whites would be drawn to previously unheard black performers almost in spite of themselves.”⁸⁴ Here, Cantor depicts two enterprising music lovers attempting to force black music on an unsuspecting young, white populace, which they knew they could influence and profit from if they could only get them to *listen*. White teenagers would become fans of black music “almost in spite of themselves”—they just had to hear the music on a popular radio station, and would therefore be drawn in like lemmings. Although Cantor is not wrong to acknowledge the major contributions both men made in popularizing black music among both white and black teenagers, and in assisting with the rise of major stars like Elvis Presley, he also effectively removes any agency teenagers might have had in this cultural exchange.

This conception of how white teenagers were first drawn to black music opens the genre of rock and roll to accusations of racial theft, exoticization, and exploitation. White musicians, songwriters, producers, executives, and station managers did ultimately profit at the expense of black artists, who often saw their songs and musical styles become famous while they struggled to make ends meet. But to depict the complicated racial negotiation that had to take place in order for rock and roll music to emerge is to deny the very real affection white and black teenagers had for each other’s’ cultures, and the identification that was starting to grow across racial boundaries. Johnny Otis declared that “The appropriation of African American music by whites sounded a death knell for traditional rhythm and blues artists in the fifties,” even though he himself was a

⁸⁴ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 115.

white singer who embraced black culture in both his personal and professional lives. “Rockabillicies and other whites lifted the black blues and boogie creaties en masse. The major record companies and radio stations went full blast behind the white imitators, while the original African American art form took a beating.”⁸⁵ Blues and jazz saxophonist Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson “used to say that white performers, and particularly the singers, had the blues ‘Bassackwards.’ This doesn’t mean, of course, that the world perceives or understands the qualitative difference.”⁸⁶ And rock writer Nick Tosches asserts that rock and roll was not really “invented” until 1954, with

The greatest revolution in the history of the music business since the invention of sound-recording: whitefolk rock ‘n’ roll. What black men had been doing since the mid-forties was now recast by a handful of young white boys who had spent their youth hearing those black men, falling under the spell of their magic, learning... They called it rock ‘n’ roll, the same phrase that blacks had been using for more than a decade; but they let the white people who bought it think that they had invented the phrase, as they let them think that they had invented the music. This, too, they had learned from those black men.⁸⁷

In this description, rock and roll actually divided whites from blacks rather than representing a shared art form created by mixing characteristics from both backgrounds. The music, and even the name, did not emerge from a sharing of cultures and an embrace of cultural integration, but from thievery and deceit. When the agency of teenage listeners is subtracted from this equation, a flawed image of rock and roll music as mere white theft of black sound is the end result. This is why it is essential to acknowledge that, although record companies and radio stations eventually realized that they could profit by selling records across racial lines, young listeners were engaged in a cultural and consumerist dialogue that encouraged, and sometimes forced, music industry insiders to overlook racial and genre divisions, and produce more integrated sounds.

⁸⁵ Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 1.

⁸⁶ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 107.

⁸⁷ Nick Tosches, *Hellfire: The Jerry Lee Lewis Story* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 86.

Rock and roll did eventually become more of a corporate entity, but that would come later, in the mid- to late-1950s, after the genre had already proved to be popular among middle-class, white teenage audiences. Initially, however, rock and roll music emerged because both black and white youth began crossing racial and class lines to listen to different types of musics on their own, without any prodding from the music industry. This was not usually a decision that was made lightly—white fans of black music, in fact, often had to go out of their way or break long-standing social taboos in order to listen to or purchase records by black artists. Teenagers, who found something to be lacking in the music they were supposed to be listening to, were starting to make these decisions despite what the music industry was selling them. According to Bibb Edwards,

In the mid-1950s us boomers, in striking numbers...began to assert the power to listen to the music we wanted to. Further, many chose to listen to a form of music few of our parents seemed interested in. As we made it ours, the market kicked in. Music increased in quantity and variety, hopefully appealing to our demographic and taste, and opening our pocketbook.⁸⁸

Some historians are more forceful regarding the power adolescent consumers had to alter the cultural landscape. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo note that “The apparent increase in popularity of black music was a mysterious phenomenon for the major powers within the record business,” in their book, *Rock ‘N’ Roll is Here to Pay*. “At a grass roots level, even preceding major radio play, white kids were buying up ‘race’ records.”⁸⁹ Philip Ennis also challenges the accepted narrative and focuses more on the agency of listeners. “Did the music industry force-feed teenagers into the acceptance of rocknroll?” he asks. “To the contrary, it was almost the reverse.” He reminds readers that most elements of the mainstream music industry were “at that point either

⁸⁸ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with author. Written response to interview questions. November 13, 2011.

⁸⁹ Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, *Rock ‘N’ Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1978), 231.

blind, indifferent, or hostile to the rocknroll ‘craze’ or ‘fad,’ as it was called. No one in particular wanted it, and most fought it for years before they belatedly sought to get a piece of the action.”⁹⁰

Executives at black-oriented labels and record stations asserted from the beginning that they were only interested in selling to black audiences, so the realization that large numbers of white kids were listening to this music was truly shocking. Alan Freed, a classical music deejay in Cleveland, never thought of trying to appeal to white teenagers with black music until 1951, when he visited his friend Leo Mintz, who owned Record Rendezvous, a small independent record store that catered to black clients. While he was there, he was shocked to see teenagers trekking from white neighborhoods to purchase records by black musicians. Freed was surprised, for he did not think white kids would be able to relate to such raw music, but the customers dancing around the store to new R&B hits proved him wrong. This realization led him to create his esteemed “Moondog” Show, one of the first radio shows to play black music explicitly for a young, nominally white, audience, and ultimately to become one of the harbingers of the rock and roll craze. “The music belongs to them—they had a need for it and they discovered it,” he said in a 1957 interview. “I don’t set the pace—these kids do.”⁹¹

Radio deejays across the country asserted that they had little power over what they played—their teenage listeners had very specific tastes, which often crossed racial divisions, and they would lose their prime audience if they refused to play these songs. Ennis says that “‘Young people’ were thus the ‘leading audience,’ the ‘opinion leaders’ of the pop stream,” especially in the hours after school and evenings.⁹² Any deejay who wanted to keep his job, then, was compelled

⁹⁰ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 31.

⁹¹ Theodore Irwin, “Rock ‘n’ Roll ‘n’ Alan”, *Pageant*, July 1957 60; 57. The Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁹² Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 140.

to play the songs his audience demanded to hear, and this often involved playing black music for white teenage listeners. George Klein, a white deejay at WDIA, noted that “You could be the greatest disc jockey in the world, but if you weren’t playing the Drifters’ “Honey Love,” or you weren’t playing the Midnighters’ ‘Annie Had a Baby,’ and the guy across the street was, the kids would go listen to him.”⁹³ This shift sent tremors through the music industry, resulting in a 1955 study conducted by Columbia University that attempted to determine if deejays were infiltrating young, white America with black music. The results of the study ultimately “showed that disk jockeys tended to follow rather than lead popular taste. They ‘do not appear to have exerted a determining influence on the “popularity” of a particular rhythm and blues disks,’ the study concluded.”⁹⁴ Teenage listeners were at the crest of this shift, and the size and spending power of this generation forced many radio stations to acquiesce to their desires.

Similarly, executives at independent, black-oriented labels expressed surprise that their discs were selling so well among white teenagers. Jerry Wexler admitted that “Luckily, my arrival [at Atlantic Records] came at that fortunate point in American music when the lines between black and white were starting to fade. Things were getting blurry in a hurry, and Atlantic both benefited from and contributed to that breakdown.”⁹⁵ His label did not consciously sell to white audiences, it simply responded to their demand for black music, which Wexler felt fortunate to be able to fulfill—but he certainly did not help create this shift. “As far as we can determine, the first area where the blues stepped out in the current renaissance was the South,” he said, further emphasizing the fact that record executives were surprised by this phenomenon. “Distributors there about two

⁹³ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 99.

⁹⁴ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 5.

⁹⁵ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 90.

years ago began to report that white high school and college kids were picking up on the rhythm and blues records—primarily to dance to.” He also maintained that kids prompted this change rather than deejays or radio station executives, who followed rather than initiate shifts in musical tastes. “A few alert pop disk jockeys observed the current, switched to rhythm and blues formats, and soon were deluged with greater audiences, both white and negro, and more sponsors,” he said⁹⁶ Milt Gabler was even blunter when discussing artists who helped orchestrate the birth of rock and roll by appealing to interracial audiences: “We didn’t create the people,” he said of his time at the helm at Decca Records, “but they had their big success with us.”⁹⁷ Even Sam Phillips, who supposedly had the foresight to plan white desire for black music on a massive scale, was reportedly bemused by Elvis Presley’s first performance at Sun Studios. “It sounds pretty good, he said, but ‘what is it? I mean, who, who you going to give...it to?’”⁹⁸

A dynamic process did in fact exist between producers and consumers that allowed for the mixing of musical genres crucial to the creation of rock and roll. The creation of smaller labels after the war allowed music outside the mainstream pop genre to reach larger and unexpected demographics, particularly teenage audiences who were disenchanted with their own cultural environments, and were eager to seek out alternatives. Larger record companies and radio stations reinforced the popularity of rock and roll music among teenage fans, they did not create it. Instead, this genre evolved out of a complex mixture of pop, R&B, and country and western music that occurred as a variety of musics became more widely available, and dissatisfied black and white

⁹⁶ Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun, “The Latest Trend: R&B Disks are Going Pop,” *The Cash Box*, July 3, 1954, 56, The Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁹⁷ Bob Franklin, interview with Milton Gabler, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University November 1959, 36, Milt Gabler Papers, Box 4, Folder 19, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁹⁸ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 26.

youth across the country began searching for music that helped them make sense out of their rapidly changing life circumstances.

Pop music technically identified any sort of music that was popular and easily accessible to the mainstream, but there are a few qualities that can be used to describe most pop songs from the immediate postwar period. The nature of popular music changed significantly during the Depression and World War Two; it slowly became more decentralized and open, yet more tightly regulated at the same time. Most pop music songwriters and artists were under contract to major record companies like Decca, Victor, and RCA, all of which were based in New York. These were professional positions, requiring that employees hold regular schedules in their offices, and churn out as many chart-topping hits as possible. This formula both restricted and encouraged innovation, as artists were reluctant to stray too far from the status quo, yet, at the same time, were quick to capitalize on a trend if they believed it would sell and distinguish them from their competitors. The relative decline of ASCAP and ascent of BMI also changed the popular music industry during this period. Although many producers of this genre remained members of ASCAP, BMI began representing artists and songwriters who were not yet established. They were often younger, non-professional, and lived and worked across the United States. These artists and writers were “discovered” by A&R representatives, the music industry’s newest kingmakers. By the 1940s, Philip Ennis says, “It was into the hands of the record companies’ A&R men that the future of popular songs had fallen.” While A&R representatives were eager to root out any artists who could increase their companies’ profits, they were more likely to focus on only a few singers and songwriters whom they believed had mass appeal, and to ensure that they constantly recorded and were heavily publicized. This minimized the risk of trying to sell the public on untested innovations, and assured a base level of profit. Even though the postwar popular music industry

was not inherently conservative, it became a fairly narrow conduit for musicians to really connect with their public.⁹⁹

This genre was also almost entirely white. Even if a few 1950s pop artists like Nat King Cole or Johnny Mathis happened to be black, the music was created by white business people and marketed to white audiences. In a racially hierarchical society, whites owned most large music production and distribution businesses, and did not think much about trying to appeal to blacks, although technically the goal was to sell to as many people as possible. Ennis says that “Pop, of course, reached everywhere, no matter where its production was centered. It had a national reach, and by its sheer size crossed regional and racial boundaries with magisterial generosity, inviting everyone down the road to stardom. However, pop’s behind-the-scenes policies, especially in movies and broadcasting, were, paradoxically, implacably racist.”¹⁰⁰ In keeping with record companies’ desires to minimize consumer risk, the style of pop at this time did not shift much from record to record. Most were 32-measure songs with an 8-bar chorus that was repeated, led to a bridge and release, and then repeated once more. They were melodic, meant to encourage sing-alongs, and usually offered few musicological surprises, even though they were specifically engineered to get stuck in people’s heads.

The most important shared qualities of pop, however, were its subjects and the way singers sang about them. Performers were usually judged according to the technical precision to which his or her voice was capable of conforming, rather than any emotional impact they might evoke in listeners.¹⁰¹ Arnold Shaw, a music manager for Edward B. Marks Music Corporation in the 1950s,

⁹⁹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 99; 120.

¹⁰⁰ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 4-5.

noted that “pop music at mid-century had no relevance to the day’s events or problems—in fact, it avoided them.”¹⁰² “Music! Music! Music!,” for instance, was a huge number-one hit when recorded by Teresa Brewer in 1950. The song’s lyrics advised a potential paramour to “Put another nickel in/In the nickelodeon/All I want is having you/And music, music, music.”¹⁰³ On an even lighter note, the writers of “(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window?,” a 1953 chart-topper sung by Patti Paige, presented listeners with a surprisingly upbeat protagonist declaring “I must take a trip to California/And leave my poor sweetheart alone/If he has a dog he won’t be lonesome/And the doggie will have a good home.” Any lingering notion that she might be heartbroken is dispelled with the chorus, as Paige’s inquiry, “How much is that doggie in the window/The one with the waggley tail/How much is that doggie in the window/I do hope that doggie’s for sale” is broken up by a perfectly-timed “Arf, arf!” at the end of every other line.¹⁰⁴

Pop lyrics were generally banal and innocuous, and, while obsessed with either the presence or absence of sentimental love, also glossed over sexual or real-life experiences that listeners might identify with or aspire to.¹⁰⁵ While people of any age, race, or region might be able to listen to this music without being *offended*, it was unable to truly *resonate* with anyone. These descriptions did not apply to all pop music hits from the late 1940s and early 1950s. Frank Sinatra’s 1957 hit “Witchcraft,” for instance, depicted a partner who had a potentially sinister side, despite the fact that “There’s no nicer witch than you,” while Patti Paige, Tony Bennett, and Kay Starr were routinely given country, and even R&B songs to “cover” that flirted with more disconcerting

¹⁰² Shaw, *The Rockin’ ‘50s*, 14.

¹⁰³ “Music! Music! Music!” Stephen Weiss and Bernie Baum, 1949, version by Teresa Brewer, 1949.

¹⁰⁴ “(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window?,” Bob Merrill, 1952, version by Patti Paige, 1953.

¹⁰⁵ Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 10.

themes, including “Tennessee Waltz,” and “Cold, Cold, Heart,” both of which dealt with unfaithful lovers.¹⁰⁶ But overall, this music was meant to be as universal as possible, with any true emotion repressed in favor of more simplistic themes. In casting too wide a net the songs lost whatever hold they might have on an individual. No one could identify with a song that was meant to identify with everyone and everything. Mainstream popular music from this period, says Michael Lydon, “was *okay*, and you hummed the tunes when they were on Your Hit Parade. But they weren’t done for *you*, and they didn’t do anything *to* you. They were just there, coextensive with and as natural as that Ike-WASP-peace-and-prosperity consensus which was threatened only by a few commies at the top, no swelling from below. There was nothing to criticize because there was little else to know.”¹⁰⁷ Pop music fans therefore listened to this music in a more solitary manner, rather than feeling that the songs evoked a community of like-minded souls who could share in their emotional upheavals.

The musical answer to the prayers of many disenchanted young whites for more substance was found in the second element of rock and roll: rhythm and blues, or R&B. This genre evolved out of the blues, a music from the postbellum Deep South that constituted an actual coping strategy for musicians and audiences alike, designed to help an oppressed people carve a home for themselves out of an inhospitable land, particularly recent migrants who had moved to urban areas for war work, and felt displaced from their rural homes. The blues itself is descended from slave songs, music that was used as a survival device not, according to Lawrence Levine, to actually end

¹⁰⁶ “Witchcraft,” Cy Coleman and Carolyn Leigh, 1957, version by Frank Sinatra; “Tennessee Waltz,” Redd Stewart and Pee-Wee King, 1946; “Cold, Cold Heart,” Hank Williams, 1951.

¹⁰⁷ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 11.

misery, but to “[create] the necessary space between the slaves and their owners and [become] the means of preventing legal slavery from becoming spiritual slavery.”¹⁰⁸

But slave culture did not exist in a vacuum; while racially distinct, it nevertheless utilized elements from, and contributed to, an emerging American culture that was never wholly white. Black cultural elements may have been *exoticized* by whites who could not admit identification with slaves in any way, but, according to Levine, it was never actually *exotic*. He mentions a former slave woman’s story of how slaves mocked the formal dances of their masters as a means of coping with their oppression—and how whites generally enjoyed watching them: “I guess they thought we couldn’t dance any better,” she said. These dance moves, which were originally parodies, were then incorporated into new forms including the cakewalk and lindy hop.¹⁰⁹ Grace Elizabeth Hale explains that “although the musical recording industry in the 1920s pushed songs into categories based on assumptions about the color of the performers and potential listeners, there was simply never any pure white or black music.”¹¹⁰ Racial mixing occurred at a cultural level throughout American history, but systemic segregation was reinforced so strongly that few were willing to acknowledge the biracial nature of most cultural elements. Cultural elements were misleadingly characterized as either ‘white’ (mainstream) or ‘black’ (alternative) throughout the early twentieth century so that the façade of racial segregation could be upheld, but cracks were slowly forming,

¹⁰⁸ Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis*, (Urbana & Chamapaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 238.

¹⁰⁹ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16.

¹¹⁰ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 52. For more on the racial politics and cultural overlap regarding blackface performances, please see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso Books, 1997).

threatening to expose what Gerald Early calls “a miscegenated culture in which...there lurked an unquenchable thirst for mixing.”¹¹¹

This cultural mixing continued after the Civil War as African Americans in the South sought to make sense of their new identities as freed people. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo explain that “At first the blues had no standard form or rhythmic patterns, being totally improvisational and derived from the [slave] Field Hollers. Interacting with the European diatonic structure, the blues soon became standardized into two or three common forms.”¹¹² The blues style also utilized an unadorned technique and fallible human voice, as a way of voicing human sorrows in a manner independent from white traditions, and possessed a 12-bar structure. The use of a chorus, which was standard in popular music, was eschewed in favor of songs made up entirely of verses, with the third line of each verse providing a sense of closure to the lyrics. The structure of these songs implies that the person singing them will be able to go on living simply because he or she is able to recognize the pain in life and deal with it accordingly. Political activist and scholar Angela Y. Davis explains that “Through the blues, menacing problems are ferreted out from the isolated individual experience and restructured as problems shared by the community. As shared problems, threats can be met and addressed within a public and collective context.” The concept of community, which was so important to slave spirituals, remained integral to both the structure and the emotional effect of the blues, but, since the genre emerged after emancipation, emphases on individual stories and emotions were integrated into music by artists who were no longer technically enslaved. Davis says that the blues “articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires” which “therefore marked the advent of a popular culture of performance, with

¹¹¹ Gerald Early, “One Nation Under a Groove,” *New Republic*, July 15-22, 1991, 38.

¹¹² Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 243-244.

the borders of performer and audience becoming increasingly differentiated.”¹¹³ The blues was the music of free people who were still suffering under the restraints of their history; it was therefore both communal and personal at the same time.

This mixture of individual and communal, of old and new viewpoints, represented what historian Tera Hunter describes as “the blues aesthetic.” This aesthetic helped African Americans in post-Reconstruction Southern states to define a space for themselves that both linked them to and separated them from mainstream American culture, allowing people to simultaneously remember their pasts and to try to move forward. She explains that “jook joints,” popular night spots known for drinking and dancing to jazz and the blues, “were among the most important (re)creative sites of black working-class amusements at the turn of the century, where old and new cultural forms, exhibiting both African and European influences, were syncretized.”¹¹⁴ Between the end of Reconstruction and World War Two, when Jim Crow emerged and grew to maturity, African Americans had few political rights, and were subject to humiliating and often violent measures on a daily basis, but they were still entrenched in the culture of their homeland.¹¹⁵ Southern culture, which was shaped by white supremacy at every level, was brutal, and black Southerners were adept at forming separate spaces where their humanity could be reaffirmed and validated. But these spaces were essentially embedded in that wider Southern culture, which necessarily shaped and influenced even that which was created as a means of opposition.¹¹⁶ Angela

¹¹³ Angela Y. Davis *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 33; 5.

¹¹⁴ Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 171.

¹¹⁵ Please see Kidada E. Williams, *They Made Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: NYU Press, 2012) for a comprehensive examination of this issue.

Davis explains that, after initially high hopes for greater equality were dashed during Reconstruction, “blues created a discourse that represented freedom in more immediate and accessible terms.” Sexuality and travel especially were utilized as symbols of freedom in a society where political, economic, and even bodily autonomy was limited.¹¹⁷

This “blues aesthetic” is also an example of what Robin D.G. Kelley calls “cultural opposition.” “Black working people carved out social space free from the watchful eye of white authority or, in a few cases, the moralizing of the black middle class,” he says. “These social spaces constituted a partial refuge from the humiliations and indignities of racism, class pretensions, and wage work, and in many cases they housed an alternative culture that placed more emphasis on collectivist values, mutuality, and fellowship.” Although working-class black culture was specifically created to act as covert means of opposition to white or aspiring-class black mores, Kelley reminds readers that these people did not exist in a vacuum either, and that cultural overlap between races continued well into the twentieth century. He notes that “Black culture represents at least a partial rejection of the dominant ideology, but...it was forged within the context of struggle against class and racial domination.”¹¹⁸ When new cultural forms are created as a means of opposition, they also contain characteristics of the dominant culture, which provides the framework for all decisions and modes of thought, including those which are rebellious or revolutionary. Kobena Mercer cautions that “New World creations of black people's culture which, in First World societies, bear markedly different relations with the dominant Euro-American culture from those that obtain in the Third World” must be understood as part of the

¹¹⁷ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 7.

¹¹⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 36; 44.

dominant American culture rather than a form of outsider diasporan consciousness.¹¹⁹ As much as cultural opposition may be depicted as a “weapon of the weak” in Kelley’s words, it remains a weapon that, in part, emerged from the dominant culture as well. This helps explain why the blues maintained popularity throughout the early- and mid-twentieth century, even as millions of Southern blacks left their rural homes for Northern, Midwestern, and Western urban centers, where their life circumstances changed significantly. It also helps explain why the blues became popular with certain groups of urban whites in the 1920s and 1930s.

As the country’s demographics shifted considerably during and after World War One, several enterprising record labels realized that there were profits to be made in selling blues recordings to recently transplanted Southern blacks. In a precursor to the post-World War Two period, labels like Okeh, Victor, Vocalion, and Paramount began selling what were then known as “race records.” A significant difference, however, is that, other than the black-owned, Harlem-based Black Swan Records, these labels were not small, independent labels started by enterprising whites who loved black music, but larger record companies, or their subsidiaries. Paramount, Victor, and Vocalion published race records alongside classical and pop recordings by white artists, while Okeh, founded as a phonograph company in 1916, became one of the most preeminent race record labels before being acquired by Columbia in 1926.¹²⁰ Even though “race records” usually had their own divisions, sales directors, and A&R representatives, the labels themselves were not segregated, which meant that black music sales mattered to the larger record companies, and that they actually tried to profit from nascent urban white interest in the blues. Few

¹¹⁹ Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” *New Formations* No. 3, Winter 1987, 42.

¹²⁰ L.A. Jackson, *Music 2101: A Quick Start Guide to Music Biz History* (Lilburn GA: MKM Multimedia Works, 2013), 112-119.

music executives could ignore the power of these records when Mamie Smith's 1920 recording of "Crazy Blues" for Okeh became a huge hit, selling over 75,000 copies in its first month of release, while Columbia supported Bessie Smith's attempts to grow her existing white audience when she was signed in 1923.¹²¹ Many of the first artists who managed to "cross over" to white audiences were blues musicians signed to these labels throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Even as the blues were divorced from their rural, Southern roots, they remained popular with scores of black and white listeners. Blacks who arrived in city centers that were booming with wartime and post-war work were still in need of ties to their pasts. The genre's more emotive lyrics and communal characteristics of the blues also appealed to urban blacks and whites who tired of overproduced popular music. Angela Davis notes that "What is distinctive about the blues... is their intellectual independence and representational freedom. Those aspects of lived love relationships that were not compatible with the dominant, etherealized ideology of love—such as extramarital relationships, domestic violence, and the ephemerality of many sexual partnerships—were largely banished from the established popular musical culture."¹²²

These subjects were often covered in blues songs, partly because the style originated outside the dominant cultural structure, but also because naming specific problems was integral to the music's use as a means of providing communal support. If listeners feel as though the singer has experienced the same problems as they have, the implication is that all problems are surmountable. This is true even if artists did not actually write the lyrics, since the emotive delivery

¹²¹ Angela Davis explains that the "explicit references to marriage" in Bessie Smith's 1933 recording of "Take Me For a Buggy Ride" "may be attributed to the fact that Smith was seeking ways to cross over into mainstream culture," adding that she mostly chose to sing pop songs rather than the blues for her later recording sessions. This episode illustrates both the power that Smith had to make recording decisions, and the fact that record labels allowed, and, to some degree, supported black artists tackling different genres. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xii; 14.

¹²² Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 3.

that most blues singers brought to their records was enough to convince listeners that they were actually feeling the words they sang. “Is he true as stars above me?” Bessie Smith asks in “Yes Indeed He Do.” “What kind of fool is you?/He don’t stay from home all night more than six times a week/No, I know that I’m his Sheba, and I know that he’s my sheik/ And when I ask him where he’s been, he grabs a rocking chair/Then he knocks me down and says, ‘It’s just a little love lick, dear.” Although she endures domestic abuse and infidelity, Smith ultimately decides to stay with her man, and even threatens any other women who might try to steal him away from her.¹²³ If taken literally, the song’s message is problematic, but it also let listeners in similar predicaments know that they were not alone, and that they could endure relationship difficulties. The song could also work in a more covert manner, though, showing both men and women involved in violent partnerships how ridiculous and dangerous this situation was when viewed by an outsider, which could be more efficient than white and aspiring-class blacks’ pious attempts to “save” abused women. The subject matter of the blues, along with unembellished instrumentation, and frank, heartfelt vocals, continued to help blacks feel a sense of kinship with their communities and their roots, even as the genre gained popularity outside of the South.

The blues was not the only genre popular among listeners of “race records” in the 1920s and 1930s, though, and it was not the only traditional black music to shape R&B. Black gospel music, which originated in Southern churches in the early nineteenth century, began moving outside the spiritual realm by the early twentieth century, as the same labels that distributed the blues began recording gospel music, and even sermons, from black churches. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes that “Religious records enjoyed a popularity equal to that of the blues, and possibly greater. Produced in three-minute and six-minute sound bites, these records attempt to re-

¹²³ Bessie Smith, “Yes, Indeed He Do!” Columbia, 1924.

create the black worship experience, presenting highly emotional preaching.”¹²⁴ Again, transplanted urban blacks, as well as people who remained in Southern rural areas, responded to the religious messages of hope and deliverance that would help them endure continued hardships and racial discrimination.

Much like the blues, gospel was the music of an oppressed people. It emphasized truth, and used tales from the past to find answers for the future. But the religious nature of gospel music necessitated distinctions from secular blues songs that divided some listeners. Instead of focusing on the hardships of poverty or cheating romantic partners, and attempting to find solace in collective sadness as the blues did, gospel emphasized the love of God, and the promise of salvation after enduring the cruel slings of fate on earth. Instead of relying on the voice of one singer like the blues did, however, Philip Ennis says that “gospel is almost entirely a vocal music,” making use of soloists or groups of singers. Where the blues insisted on simplicity, gospel celebrated the ecstatic, as “[v]oices gave the impression of being controlled, or strongly affected, by their emotions.”¹²⁵ At times, the singers seemed to miss the note they were reaching for in their passion, not quite achieving it or sliding past it into a shriek. The listener was deeply moved by the implications of this failure.”¹²⁶ Indeed, Craig Werner argues that call and response reflected “the core of gospel politics,” since the response was largely left up to the congregants. “The response can affirm, argue, redirect the dialogue, raise a new question,” he says. “Any response that gains attention and elicits a response of its own becomes a new call. Usually the individual

¹²⁴ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Rethinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* Ed. Cornel West & Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 985.

¹²⁵ Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 11.

¹²⁶ Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 262.

who issued the first call responds to the response, remains the focal point of the ongoing dialogue. But it doesn't have to be that way."¹²⁷ The importance of community and collective endurance was made even more plain in this genre. Listeners expanded beyond their traditional confines to become participants in meaning-making, and their thoughts and emotions were deemed just as important as those of the primary performer. The democratic nature of gospel therefore appealed to many adherents, as did its promise of deliverance to the faithful.

Gospel was usually written in the more rollicking 8-bar progression rather than the traditional 12-bar blues pattern, and therefore tended to sound more joyous and upbeat, even when the lyrics told of sorrow and struggle. Many young blacks, including B.B. King, recall being first drawn to music at church. "When you go to the sanctified church and hear the people sing, in the area where we grew up everybody was very poor and the only instrument there was the guitar," King asserted. "That's the only instrument. And tambourines. The things you beat like that...And they had, to me, the best rhythm."¹²⁸ Churches were mostly segregated in both the North and the South, but the popularity of recorded gospel music spread to small white audiences as well. Specialty Records founder Art Rupe was introduced to black music through gospel, for instance, began attending services at a black Baptist church near his home in Greenberg, Pennsylvania as a young man, and ultimately began travelling to churches across the South in order to hear new sounds and discover new talent.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 71; 27.

¹²⁸ Camille Cosby, interview with B.B. King, 5, National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹²⁹ Vera, "The Specialty Story," 16; 21.

A firm divide was supposed to exist between gospel music, performed as part of religious services to show adoration for God, and the blues, which was routinely referred to as “the devil’s music” by aspiring-class blacks and the devoutly religious, who disapproved of the genre’s earthier themes and seeming approval of sinful behavior. Robin Kelley explains that “The church’s strict moral codes and rules for public behavior often came into conflict with aspects of black working-class culture. Baptists and Methodists disciplined members for patronizing gin joints, for wild dancing, and for gambling...A leader of the Baptist church warned that ‘The sure way to ruin is by way of the public dance hall.’”¹³⁰ Johnny Otis also wrote about this conflict, noting that “Many Black preachers carried on about what they called ‘the devil’s music,’” although these admonitions rarely did any good. “Black churchgoers, especially the young, listened to the anti-blues sermons and went out and enjoyed themselves anyhow.”¹³¹ Many listeners, in fact, were drawn to the commonalities between these two genres. Langston Hughes, one of the most acclaimed poets in American history, recalled loving the gospel music that emanated from World War One-era Chicago churches: “I was entranced by their stepped-up rhythms, tambourines, hand clapping, and uninhibited dynamics, rivaled only by Ma Rainey singing the blues at the old Monogram Theater,” he said, effectively linking the genres through their emotional resonance.¹³²

Indeed, many listeners made the common assertion that the lyrics represented the main dividing line between otherwise similar forms of music. Otis asserted that “If you got close enough, you could separate the club sounds from the church. If you heard the word ‘baby’ a lot it was the club. If you heard ‘Jesus,’ it was the church.”¹³³ Ray Charles talked about the two genres in a 1973

¹³⁰ Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 46.

¹³¹ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 60.

¹³² Higginbotham, “Rethinking Vernacular Culture,” 979.

¹³³ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 91.

Rolling Stone interview. “I don’t know what it is,” he said. “Gospel and the blues are really, if you break it down, almost the same thing. It’s just a question of whether you’re talkin’ about a woman or God. I come out of the Baptist Church, and naturally whatever happened to me in that church is gonna spill over. So I think the blues and gospel music is quite synonymous to each other.”¹³⁴ The fact that many people listened to both genres, and that the blues and gospel were not so distinct from one another as churchgoers would like to believe, is underlined by the fact that, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham shows, both recordings were often advertised side by side under the common heading of “race records.”¹³⁵ Together, these genres helped shape black musical culture in the interwar period, a culture that would ultimately produce the new category of rhythm and blues in the 1940s.

Reebee Garofalo explains that, before the early 1940s, “gospel singers simply did not perform ‘the devil’s music,’ and vice versa.” By the time war broke out, though, “as the faithful began to take their struggle to the streets, the musical influences of gospel—the prominent use of organ, soaring vocals, background choruses, and the call-and-response style—were quickly appropriated by the secular world of rhythm and blues and brought to the attention of a mass public.”¹³⁶ Bars and dance clubs catering to these tastes proliferated, and a livelier new dance music that exemplified both blues and gospel characteristics was created by “jump blues” band leaders and members like Louis Jordan, Lionel Hampton, Illinois Jacquet, and T-Bone Walker,

¹³⁴ Ben Fong-Torres, “Ray Charles” in *The Rolling Stone Interviews, 1967-1980* Ed. The Editors of *Rolling Stone* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1981), 262

¹³⁵ Higginbotham, “Rethinking Vernacular Culture,” 979.

¹³⁶ Garofalo, “Rock the Boat,” 232.

and singers like Wynonie Harris.¹³⁷ Johnny Otis recalled “The high-spirited exuberance of the African American church tradition and of the little honky-tonk clubs around America was being felt on the stages of the larger, more prestigious Black entertainment rooms” during this period. “They were demonstrating that artistry, energy, and fun could coexist in Black music without sacrificing artistic integrity.” Black people still had to face discrimination, racial violence, and economic disparity in wartime cities. The communal aspect of the blues, as well as the genre’s realistic, down-to-earth themes, imperfect diction, raw emotions, and often sexual implications were imparted into R&B performances to help listeners cope with these experiences. This new musical form, however, had to distinguish itself from its predecessors in order to communicate the new wartime and postwar experiences of urban African-Americans. Many found more stable, permanent jobs, and were ready to celebrate a more prosperous life in the city. Jump blues drummer and bandleader Roy Milton displayed this new attitude when he remarked that “The trick was to get all that crazy fun we had backstage out to the public.”¹³⁸

R&B songs were definitely livelier than their blues forebears. They were written in the gospel (8-bar) or pop (16-bar) tradition rather than the classic blues 12-bar, and the performances were louder and more dynamic in the gospel vein. A new reliance on instruments such as the saxophone, piano, guitar and drums made for a fresh, raw sound. Lyrics, although still more sexually and emotionally direct than mainstream popular music, moved the exuberance of the church into parties and clubs, topped off with biting cynicism and wit. Jump blues star Stick McGhee recorded one of the first national R&B hits in 1947 with “Drinkin’ Wine Spo-Dee-O-

¹³⁷ “Jump blues” refers to a livelier, up-tempo form of the blues, usually performed with a band or orchestra. For more information, please see Elijah Wood, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of Blues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) and Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Viking Press, 1981).

¹³⁸ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 46.

Dee.” The verses regaled listeners with the trouble that comes from too much drink: “Drinking that mess to their delight/When they gets drunk, start fighting all night/Knocking down windows and tearin’ out doors/Drinkin’ half a gallons and callin’ for more.” Still, this was not a cautionary tale, but a humorous, tongue-in-cheek look at a raucous party. “Wine spo-dee-o-dee, drinkin’ wine, bop ba,” McGhee croons in the chorus. “Pass that bottle to me.”¹³⁹ Louis Jordan’s phenomenal 1949 hit, “Saturday Night Fish Fry” focused on a “rockin’” party with “shufflin’ ‘til the break of dawn” where “folks was havin’ the time of their life” and “You don’t have to pay the usual admission/If you’re a cook, a waiter or a good musician.”¹⁴⁰ The mood here is celebratory, but the last line is a reminder of the precarious financial situation affecting many blacks, as well as the support a strong community could still offer, even in the supposedly anonymous confines of the city. The most important quality in R&B, however, was that it was essentially a dance music.¹⁴¹ Whereas pop was a style that was meant to be sung along with, rhythm and blues was, Arnold Shaw attested, “vocal music to dance to—and the rhythm of the words is more important than meaning, if a choice had to be made.”¹⁴² While the music of white America was supposed to speak to the heart, the music emanating out of black communities went for the soul.

This musical genre was clearly distinct from blues and gospel predecessors, but record companies continued recording and selling artists under the title of “race records” or, in the case of Decca’s subsidiary, created in 1941, the “Sepia Series.” The almost immediate popularity of these records prompted *Billboard*, the music industry’s preeminent trade publication-cum-bible,

¹³⁹ Stick McGhee, “Drinkin’ Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee,” Atlantic Records, 1949.

¹⁴⁰ Louis Jordan and Ellis Lawrence Walsh, “Saturday Night Fish Fry,” Decca, 1949.

¹⁴¹ Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 12.

¹⁴² Shaw, *The Rockin’ ‘50s*, 80.

to start printing the “Harlem Hit Parade,” a list of the top ten best-selling records in the predominantly-black New York neighborhood. On October 24, 1942. By 1945, the name of the chart was changed to “Race Records,” partly to reflect the fact that the list was no longer limited to Harlem, and was gauging black sales in a number of major urban areas. Jerry Wexler explained that “‘Race’ was a common term then, a self-referral used by blacks. ‘He’s a race man to the bricks’ was a compliment; it meant a musician’s ethnicity was out-front and formidable.” He admitted, however, that “On the other hand, ‘Race Records’ didn’t sit well. Maybe ‘race’ was too close to ‘racist.’”¹⁴³

Rhythm and blues records made money for mainstream record companies in the early 1940s, and, when “race record” subsidiaries had to be downsized or eliminated because of acetate shortages and shifts in music industry operations, independent, black-oriented labels continued to profit from this genre. And yet the title “race records” appealed to no one. Wexler may have been correct about the word’s unsettling undertone, but more than that, musicians and independent record executives wanted a title that better described this exciting new genre, and separated it from older black musical styles. They were eager to describe the music by its characteristics, not simply the fact that it was created, and most often performed, by black musicians. Terms like ‘Sepia’ and ‘Ebony,’ which had been used intermittently since the 1930s, were discarded as well.¹⁴⁴ When *Billboard* introduced the first ‘Rhythm and Blues’ chart on June 25, 1949, the name stuck, despite the fact that many musicians still do not think it properly expresses the essence of the genre. Legendary *Billboard* editor Paul Ackerman, an early proponent of jazz and blues musicians, is usually given credit for bestowing the moniker on this chart, although Wexler, who worked

¹⁴³ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 62.

¹⁴⁴ Chapple & Garofolo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay*, 237.

directly under Ackerman in the late 1940s, said the title was actually his own creation. “In 1949, my suggestion for change was adopted by *Billboard*,” he claimed. “I came up with a handle I thought suited the music well—‘rhythm and blues....’ Rhythm and blues,” I wrote in a turn-of-the-decade essay for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, ‘is a label more appropriate to more enlightened times.’ I liked the sound of ‘rhythm and blues’—it sung and swung like the music itself—and I was happy when it stuck—it defined a new genre of music.”¹⁴⁵

Despite protestations that the genre deserved far more than a simple addition of the word ‘rhythm’ to an existing musical form, Wexler’s explanation was convincing enough to help define this music for a new generation of listeners. His note about the name being “more appropriate to more enlightened times” also shows that, while this was clearly black-oriented music, it would not be confined to racial boundaries as other African-American genres had been in the past by the “race” label. Times were changing even by the late 1940s, and although music executives were not thinking about white crossover potential yet, the fact that race was not an appropriate selling point shows that ideas about racial segregation were changing, and that consumer products like records would help to reinforce these attitudes.

Finally, country and western music was also becoming popular outside its supposed target demographic. Like the emergence of rhythm and blues, the growing popularity of what was initially called “hillbilly” music also affected the way the music industry treated the genre, and how the concept of ‘popular music’ was understood by Americans across the nation. Traditionally, this label was given to the centuries-old folk music of the “American white South and Southwest.”¹⁴⁶ Since this music grew out of rural areas, it was often viewed as pure, and generally

¹⁴⁵ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 25; 172; Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 62.

¹⁴⁶ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 25.

untouched by the trends that developed across the rest of America. Since country and western was never as isolated as this depiction suggests, and, according to the official BMI history, “combined elements of Elizabethan and American folksong, blues, and various pop styles,” the genre was actually enjoyed by white and black Americans across the country, with live hillbilly shows airing from Boston, Pittsburgh, Des Moines, and Fort Wayne, even it remained most popular in the South.¹⁴⁷ Philip Ennis says that the style was known for a “passionate and energetic mix of secular dance tunes, sentimental story-songs, and spirituals” replete with “rural and religious traditions.”¹⁴⁸ Part of the music’s supposedly stripped-down and unpolished appeal was that it seemed to genuinely capture many of the emotional trials and tribulations of everyday life.¹⁴⁹

Louis Cantor argues that “Country and western sounds hardly had the potential for a musical revolution. In fact, country music has always been considered traditional—the closest thing the nation has had to a ‘standard American’ variety. Perceived as music of the working class, its whining tones and homiletic messages have made it palatable to a mass audience of all ages.”¹⁵⁰ During the postwar period, however, when middle-class whites especially were trying to distance themselves from overt emotion and any religious traditions that hearkened back to a superstitious past, this music seemed old-fashioned, embarrassingly unpolished, and even threatening. Pop music mirrored an anxious nation’s yearnings for stability and happy endings in the aftermath of World War Two and amidst the uncertainties of the Cold War, but country and western music spoke to the concerns of people who lived in areas largely forgotten by the dominant class. The potential revolution that Cantor dismisses lies with the fact that these concerns would also strike a

¹⁴⁷ Kingsbury, *50th Anniversary*, 10.

¹⁴⁸ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 169.

¹⁴⁹ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 10.

¹⁵⁰ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 138-139.

chord with both black and white youth who were drawn to the genre's emphasis on tradition, absence of overt consumerist pressures, and honest treatment of disturbing subjects.

Independent record labels and major branch subsidiaries were created during and after World War Two to capitalize on this demand, just as they were with black-oriented R&B music. Country underwent a similar transformation, reflecting some of the new challenges facing Southern rural whites and blacks as they migrated to Northern and Western cities. Musicians were also hampered by the same shortages and aversions to risk that limited music with black appeal. This had not always been true: record companies tried to harness new markets with "hillbilly" records throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and some recording artists even became national stars. The music of most country musicians was confined to their respective regions, but growing national popularity, and interwar rural-urban migration that never ceased, caused some radio stations to feature "live hillbilly talent" and record stores to start carrying more country discs. This popularity only intensified during World War Two, Ennis says, as "the intermingling of persons from many regions in military service...introduced this music to a great many northerners [and] the wartime climate of patriotism stimulated interest in all things American." Nashville, home to the Grand Ole Opry and a significant number of country music radio stations and programs, was officially established as the production site for country music in 1946.¹⁵¹ Major record companies responded half-heartedly in the more cautious wartime and postwar period, however. Red Foley's "Opry," recorded for Decca, hit both the pop and country charts, and country singers Gene Autrey, Roy Rogers, and Tex Ritter gained fame as cowboy singers in Western movies, but, the BMI official history says, "the songs they sang in films were usually written by Tin Pan Alley professionals and closely resembled the pop love songs of the period." These songs still appealed

¹⁵¹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 168.

to young people who loved seeing their cowboy idols onscreen and responded favorably to the genre's pared-down instrumentation and country 'twang.'¹⁵² But this is not the country music that would send shock waves through the postwar music industry and help shape the emergence of rock and roll. That music would come straight from the rural South, and spoke of sin, danger, violence, and regret.

Pop music continued to focus on comforting or familiar themes, but in a troubling Cold War climate where values were being questioned and reevaluated, country music's focus on real feelings and situations, however disquieting they were, appealed to greater numbers of young listeners. Love, in particular, was not given the glossy coat it received in pop music but was often presented as unrequited or caught in a triangle.¹⁵³ Hank Williams, a rural Alabama-bred musician who was signed to the independent Sterling record label, became one of the most popular country artists of all time, as, according to Charlie Gillett, his "style of singing established a personal presence that suggested connections between the feelings of the songs and his own experiences."¹⁵⁴ BMI's official history notes that "Williams's trademark was the mournful love song, framed by the saw of the fiddle and the cry of the steel guitar," musical elements which sounded refreshing to ears accustomed to pop's pitch-perfect melodies.¹⁵⁵

His lyrics were also widely resonant, as they spoke of real-world problems that listeners from all backgrounds could relate to. "There was a time when I believed that you belonged to me," he sang in his monumental 1951 hit, "Cold, Cold Heart." "But now I know your heart is shackled

¹⁵² Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 10; 20; 23; 11.

¹⁵³ Shaw, *The Rockin' '50s*, 14.

¹⁵⁴ Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 9.

¹⁵⁵ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 23.

to a memory/The more I learn to care for you, the more we drift apart/Why can't I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart."¹⁵⁶ The words of this song conveyed a deep sadness, a firm yet sorrowful realization that the singer's beloved will not come back to him, and that he must learn to accept this. This attitude stood in sharp contrast to how heartbreak was presented in pop songs like the 1951 hit, "Cry," where Johnnie Ray emotes "If your heartaches seem to hang around too long/And your blues keep getting bluer with each song/Remember sunshine can be found behind the cloudy skies/So let your hair down and go on and cry."¹⁵⁷ Here, heartbreak seems faceless and almost sweetened. The song became a top pop and R&B hit, but it could not resonate on the deep emotional level as Williams's self-penned, deeply personal lyrics. Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz explain that Williams's songs "articulate loneliness, frustration and despair as necessary parts of the search for love," noting that "This pessimism made a break with the traditional romantic optimism of popular music as crafted in Tin Pan Alley, but in the context of post-Second World War America it held special significance."¹⁵⁸ Part of this significance stemmed from the fact that Williams was not a professional songwriter—his songs were based on his own experiences, and many listeners were able to identify with his honesty. In a 1958 article for *Hit Parader* magazine, George Hamilton IV wrote, "That sincerity is what you and I and millions of others like best about our 'Country' folk-singers. They mean and feel what they sing so much that

¹⁵⁶ "Cold, Cold Heart," Hank Williams, Sr., Sterling, 1951.

¹⁵⁷ "Cry," Churchill Kohlman, Okeh Records, 1951.

¹⁵⁸ Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, "Age, the Body and Experience in the Music of Hank Williams," in *All That Glitters: Country Music in America* Ed. George H. Lewis (Bowling Green OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 28.

we know it and feel it with them. So they're not just 'hillbillies,' as highbrows call them. They are song-poets putting the people and places and life and times that they know into music."¹⁵⁹

Weary music listeners were drawn to this music that, like R&B and unlike pop, implied that the performer had been through some of the same troubles and joys the listeners had, and was somehow able to understand them. This personal connection was achieved because country played to a specific audience instead of trying to appeal to everyone, as pop music attempted to do. Country music was about more than just heartbreak, though. Specialty Records, which mostly produced R&B and gospel music, signed a number of country artists in the late 1940s, and marketed them by emphasizing the humor in their songs. Johnny Crockett's "Just a Minute" was sold with "a humorous angle, as every man has the memory of going to pick up his gal only to be met with 'I'll be ready in Just a Minute.' This usually means an hour or more of waiting." Bruce Trent and his Western Tunesters' "Alimony" "is a cute rhythm tune which explains the misfortune of a man who married a scheming woman. It serves as a warning to all men to look out for a gal who only wants you for your money." At the same time, "it has a good dance beat," undoubtedly meant to appeal to younger audiences. Despite the lighthearted descriptions of these songs, Specialty public relations made sure to highlight the musicians' backgrounds as rural songwriters who wrote about real feelings and issues, rather than pop tunesmiths who worked in New York office buildings. Crockett's family name is explicitly linked to his pioneer ancestor, Davey, while he himself is described as "a true son of the Blue Ridge Mountains" who "spent his youthful years on his dad's tobacco farm, which explains his love for and understanding of folk music." The authenticity of Trent's musicianship is supported by his background as a fiddler and caller for

¹⁵⁹ George Hamilton IV, "The Hank Williams Story," *Hit Parader*, December 1958, 15. Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 56, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives

square dances.¹⁶⁰ In order to appeal to country fans and gain new listeners, it was very important that artists be deemed “genuine” even if labels had to resort to trite stereotypes to impart this image.

Despite country music’s fairly consistent popularity, *Billboard* did not begin listing an actual Country and Western chart until June 25, 1949. The publication did, however, begin printing regular “American Folk Records” columns in 1942, and keeping track of jukebox activity in 1944 and retail activity in 1948. By the time radio play was charted, the terms “folk” and “hillbilly” had also been dropped, signaling both country music’s shift into mainstream popularity and its distinction from traditional regional music.¹⁶¹ By 1952, *Billboard* could eagerly report that “Television has played an increasingly important part in projecting the country talent. Most local TV weekly programming in any area features at least one, and, in some cases, as many as 15 different rustic talent shows per week.”¹⁶²

Country music continued to be most popular among rural Southern whites, but no one could avoid the genre entirely, and many people outside of this demographic were eager to hear more. Louis Cantor explains that “Attempting to draw a clear distinction between ‘black’ and ‘backwoods’ can often lead to trouble. The entities were never entirely isolated from one another, and an effort to separate them can be as misleading as it is frustrating.” B.B. King, for example, was a fan of the *Grand Ole Opry* radio shows. “I was familiar with Roy Acuff and Minnie Pearl and people like that—Merle Travis, Bill Monroe—all these people I knew very well from [WSM] radio,” he said in a 2001 interview. “You know, during the time growing up when I thought of

¹⁶⁰ Specialty Records Record Review Cards, Pre-release advance information, Specialty Release No. 21, Specialty Records Collection, Box-Folder OS1-OF6.

¹⁶¹ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 20.

¹⁶² Johnny Sippel, “Hit Tunes and Good Talent are Keeping the Boxes Busy: Country & Western,” *Billboard*, March 15, 1952, 82.

Wild Bill Elliott, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, I never thought of them as white. They was cowboys. I liked them. Why shouldn't...I have thought of them if they wasn't black, why would I like them? But I didn't think that way."¹⁶³ Ray Charles was drawn to what he calls the "human quality" of country music throughout his youth, well before he shocked the music industry by releasing *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* in 1962. "I really thought that it was somethin' about country music, even as a youngster," he said. "Although I was bred in and around the blues, I always did have interest in other music, and I felt the closest music, really, to the blues [was country and western]. They'd make them steel guitars cry and whine, and it really attracted me."¹⁶⁴ This music always held cross-racial appeal, but by the postwar period, it was receiving wider attention. Executives responded to this existing interest by specifically targeting these new listeners. In a 1959 interview, Milt Gabler recalled when his label put out an album called "Country Songs for City People with "all the big country songs that became hits on the Hit Parade" that was, he said, "a terrific seller." When the interviewer asked if the label planned to release "City Songs for Country People," Gabler laughed: "Well, that's rock and roll."¹⁶⁵

Gabler had a point: rock and roll would emerge out of the intermingling of these three musical genres. These musical crossovers began when white and black listeners, especially teenagers, began to search for different kinds of music that related to their changing circumstances, even if they had to venture out of expected racial and class demographics to find it. Younger music fans, along with the millions of black and white Americans who left smaller towns and rural areas for major urban centers during the early part of the century, persuaded the music industry to pay

¹⁶³ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 138; Camille Cosby, interview with B.B. King, 49.

¹⁶⁴ Chapple & Garofolo, *Rock 'n' Roll is Here to Pay*, 243.

¹⁶⁵ Bob Franklin, interview with Milton Gabler, 69.

more attention to R&B and country western music sales. Whereas *Billboard* had previously only cared to chart the latest pop hits diligently released by major New York music label, this exclusivity was broached in the late 1940s by the appearance of R&B and country and western charts that looked similar to the pop chart. Philip Ennis explains that, by 1953, a mere four years after the introduction of these two new charts, “*Billboard’s* annual survey of the nation’s record distributors...showed that they were handling pop, country, and rhythm and blues records in roughly the same proportions as were being produced. The percentages were 66 percent pop, 26 percent country and western, 8 percent rhythm and blues.” Aside from the fact that distributors for these genres were selling proportionately according to the number of records being released, Ennis also notes that, since *Billboard* used the same format when printing all three charts, readers could easily see what was popular in any genre, and discern that they were all part of the same consumer system of music distribution. “In *Billboard*, the three streams were given separate sections, but the charts were identical: Best Selling Singles, Most Played in Juke Box, Most Played by Disk Jockeys,” he notes.

From the typography, the organization of the page, and the information contained therein, the markets were made to appear as equal entities, even though the three were of distinctly different sizes. Any song, record, or performer moving among them was instantly recognizable to anyone with any familiarity with pop music. The surface identity of the three major streams by 1955, as seen in their visual presentation in *Billboard’s* pages, is startling compared to their look in 1948 or earlier when ‘folk’ and ‘race’ hardly mattered in the music trade.¹⁶⁶

Even though pop still accounted for about half of all record sales, Ennis continues, “the three major streams by 1950 looked exactly alike in their charts and were treated as fully equal to one another.”¹⁶⁷ Indeed, a 1952 article in the “Juke Box Special Issue” of *Billboard* titled “Hit

¹⁶⁶ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 184-185.

¹⁶⁷ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 184-185.

Tunes and Good Talent are Keeping the Boxes Busy” was comprised of three separate columns on “The Pops,” “Country and Western,” and “Rhythm and Blues.” Even though the musical genres were still segregated into distinct columns written by different authors, they were all presented as “hit tunes” and written about on the same page under the same major heading. Any person interested in music at all would presumably read all three columns, perhaps stimulating or reinforcing an awareness of and curiosity for other genres. This uniformity further encouraged young listeners to listen to music that might be outside of their racial or regional comfort zone, and could also convince them that these genres were accepted within the mainstream music industry. These charts reinforced the idea that hits in all three formats were trendy and available to them. Teenagers could then either seek out these songs on their own, or be aware of what they were listening to when they came into contact with different kinds of music.¹⁶⁸ This added sense of familiarity helped to further shape a middle ground out of which rock and roll music would eventually emerge.

But just because the charts looked similar on the esteemed pages of *Billboard* does not mean that sales were treated the same way. Black-oriented music especially was not always charted in a way that accurately reflected sales and listenership. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo explain that “Even today the distinction between r&b and pop is based less on music than the race of the performing artists.” They quote Curtis Mayfield describing this process: “No matter how deep they get into Beethoven of the symphony, that’s an r&b product. And pop, that’s the white artist.”¹⁶⁹ The process of charting musicians by their race was a bit more complicated than that—Nat King Cole consistently hit the pop charts, for instance, while Johnnie Ray’s Okeh-recorded

¹⁶⁸ “Hit Tunes and Good Talent are Keeping the Boxes Busy,” *Billboard*, March 15, 1952, 82.

¹⁶⁹ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay*, 236-237.

pop tunes scored high marks on the R&B charts. But ultimately, the pop chart measured the taste of the white middle class that most record companies and radio stations were so eager to reach by measuring sales at larger record stores and airtime on popular music stations. The R&B chart was compiled based on what was selling at music stores in black neighborhoods and being played on black-oriented radio stations. Country and western supposedly represented the predilections of Southern, mostly rural, whites since chart numbers mostly came from smaller record shops, Southern country music stations, and country music programs that were aired in larger areas across the country.

These numbers were clearly racialized and divided by region, which could hurt sales. Chapple and Garofalo state that “Pop music was music marketed by the major companies through their main distribution systems, which were national. R&B music was marketed by independent labels with independent regional distributors...The black audience was separated as a secondary market, with different and inferior promotion budgets.”¹⁷⁰ Even if a record was selling well, then, R&B discs and the companies that produced and distributed them were at a distinct disadvantage. Sometimes this disadvantage occurred when chart analysts declined to follow their own flawed system. Motown Records founder Berry Gordy recalled that “Black records weren’t always charted like white records. Even though many black artists sold more records in the black stores, the people who tracked sales for the different Pop charts would usually call the white stores more than they did the black stores.”¹⁷¹ Sales figures were therefore often skewed in favor of pop songs, usually performed by white artists.

¹⁷⁰ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay*, 236-237.

¹⁷¹ Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (Darby PA: Diane Publishing Company, 1994), 189.

Sales were also hurt by radio stations refusing to play records by black artists, sometimes simply for racial reasons, but also because these altered numbers did not always reflect just how well a single was selling. After recording “Open the Door, Richard,” for Black & White Records in 1947, A&R rep Ralph Bass tried to sell the single to Los Angeles-area radio stations, but “I couldn’t give it away, the DJs just wouldn’t play black music.” When he finally did find a pop deejay willing to play the record, it immediately caught people’s attention, and other stations were forced to ask Bass for copies.¹⁷² And Louis Jordan became so incensed about what he thought was Decca’s refusal to promote him enough that he actually left the label. Milt Gabler recalled, “He went into a lot of black record shops that didn’t have his records and—well, when we checked it out with our sales departments, they said ‘they’re on hold, they don’t pay their bills. We had no control over a lot of the stores he went to. They didn’t buy their records from us.’”¹⁷³ Independent record labels, especially those that specialized in R&B and country and western, were at a disadvantage, even when sales kept increasing and the *Billboard* charts were presented to readers in a similar fashion.

But this dynamic would change as teenage listeners became more and more unlikely to confine their musical tastes to a proscribed racial demographic. Because the process of measuring each genre was so heavily racialized, it was almost immediately apparent when these lines were being crossed. But cross they would, and the result would be a new genre of music that both mirrored and reinforced the growing movement towards racial integration.

¹⁷² John Fleming, “Ralph Bass, Synopsis” in “A Life Recording,” Ralph Bass Papers, Folder 2, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Archives.

¹⁷³ Ralph Gleason, interview with Milt Gabler, 12-13.

Chapter Four

Journalist John Fleming recalled in detail what it was like to listen to Africa-American music as a white boy growing up in the early- to mid-1950s. “Okay. Here’s where I come into the picture. This was the beginning of my interest in music, the birth of rock and roll,” he started. “I remember very well getting a clock radio for Christmas and staying up half the night searching the dial for those great ‘negro’ records. My mother had a fit when she found out the kind of music I liked, that sinful music with the ‘jungle beat’ and the filthy words. ‘It could brainwash you!’ she’d scream. ‘Don’t you know they make the drums set the pattern of your heartbeat to put you in a trance?’”¹ During the same period, future actress Diahann Carroll enjoyed hearing black artists on the radio, but her favorite program was *Arthur Godfrey Time*, which combined pop music performances with interviews and musings by the famously red-haired host. “[It] was the most popular radio show in the country,” she says, “maybe in the world, I don’t know. But he had young people like the McGuire Sisters. We were all young together.”²

These stories might not seem to have much in common, but they both depict teenagers crossing racial lines through music and displaying resistance to established racial norms. Fleming knew that he had to hide his predilection for black music from his mother, but her reaction was indicative of the kinds of obstacles white kids could expect to face if they voiced support for racial integration in any space, even if it was cultural. His mother’s warning that this music could “brainwash” her son speaks to the deep-rooted fears of white parents across the country, who felt that integration, whether in the classroom or over the radio, could threaten their children’s

¹ John Fleming, “A Life Recording,” 7, Ralph Bass Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

² Dianhann Carroll, interviewed by Camille Cosby, National Visionary Leadership Project Interview, Folder 257, 73, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

whiteness, and eventually lead to intermarriage, economic equality, and the loss of white supremacy. As a black teenager, Carroll would not have had to face such obstacles in order to listen to Godfrey's show, even if many black leaders worried about the younger generation forgetting their heritage amidst dominant pop cultural forces. But her remarks are no less revelatory than Fleming's. Carroll liked the music and entertainment that she heard on Godfrey's show because much of it was aimed at teenagers like her, regardless of race. Even her admission that she liked the McGuire Sisters, a trio of wholesome white pop singers, because "we were all young together" belies an identification based on age rather than race. Carroll does not even feel the need to justify this identification—she simply saw herself as part of the show's intended listening audience rather than someone who was stratified because of her race.

While Fleming and Carroll seemed to be moving in opposite directions here, they were actually moving towards each other, and towards a middle ground that was shaped by music and cultural attributes from both backgrounds. By the early 1950s, white teenagers were seeking out black music that they felt was more exciting and genuine than commercially-produced pop. Black teenagers were listening to popular radio programs and buying pop albums that were widely advertised within a new, more uniform pop culture that did not explicitly exclude blacks, even if they were not equally represented either. In doing so, they began to learn new things about people from different backgrounds, and also that they shared many similarities across racial lines. By the mid-1950s, teenagers across the country were listening to combinations of pop, rhythm and blues, and country and western music no matter what their racial background, a combination that would ultimately lead to the birth of rock and roll. Their children's catholic tastes also frightened many adults, who rightfully feared that integration in the cultural realm could reinforce support for racial mixing in public—and even private—spaces. "The musical integration was a joy to hear and to

behold,” producer and Atlantic Records co-founder Jerry Wexler exclaims. “I could see that Southern whites liked their music uncompromisingly black. Despite the ugly legacy of Jim Crow, their white hearts and minds were gripped, it would seem, forevermore.”³

Rock and roll emerged organically in the early 1950s as a combination of pop, R&B, and country and western characteristics. Wexler explained that, before World War Two, “The lid was kept on rhythm & blues music, country music, ethnic music, folk.” But, “Once the lid was lifted...the vacuum was filled by all of these archetypical American musics...that fused and became rock & roll.”⁴ This new genre emerged as R&B and country and western styles began to fixate white middle class youth and black teenagers increased their consumption of pop and country and western hits. Both groups were clearly searching for cultural experiences that provided them with something they felt was missing in the music that they were expected to consume, and set out to find it. This journey proved more difficult for white kids, who may have had to cross geographic and racial boundaries to purchase albums in black neighborhood record stores, find black-oriented radio stations, and hide these predilections from their disapproving parents. But black kids also faced conflicting emotions regarding their attraction to mainstream pop music, which was clearly marketed to whites despite its widespread availability, and country and western, which linked them to the rural Southern areas many of their parents and grandparents had fled because of poverty and racism. What both groups found when they embarked on these cultural journeys would draw them together in interesting and unexpected ways, combining the familiar

³ Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Culture* (Middltown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 192.

⁴ Paul Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary: The Explosion of American Music 1940-1990* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation, 1990), 31.

with the unfamiliar, and potentially creating a community of listeners who were capable of seeing beyond racial stereotypes, even if these views were shaped in fundamentally different ways.

Even though young Americans of both races helped to propel musical crossovers because they were dissatisfied with their own limited musical choices, they had to be introduced to these different forms of music first. Black kids from middle- and aspiring-class families could easily find pop and even some country music playing on most mainstream radio stations, on television, and at the movies, and the biggest hits by white artists were sold everywhere, even in black neighborhood record stores. What was new about this exchange was that black kids began identifying with and purchasing this music more, and even attending concerts by white performers, but they generally did not have to go out of their way to find or listen to it. This was not necessarily true for white kids who were entranced with R&B or other black-oriented musics. Since this music was marketed to a narrow black demographic, and would not have been easily found in majority-white neighborhoods, white kids often had to make an effort to seek it out.

This exchange extended to regional musical forms. The official BMI history recounts that “During the years between 1940 and 1955, pop, country, and r&b remained distinctive fields in many ways, but the boundary lines were never rigid. The borrowing was only natural, and it wasn't really all that new: many country singers had grown up with black neighbors and were well acquainted with the blues.”⁵ Many future Southern white rock and roll and rockabilly stars were, in fact, first introduced to African-American musical forms when socializing with black friends or sneaking into black spaces, both of which were inherently rebellious acts in the segregated South. Session musician Jim Payne was kicked out of a Jimmy Reed concert for being white, but most

⁵ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 24-25.

cross-racial musical experiences were far more positive.⁶ Carl Perkins grew up on a plantation in Lake County, Tennessee, where “we were the only white people on it. I played with colored kids, played football with old socks stuffed with sand. Working in the cotton fields in the sun, music was the only escape. The colored people would sing, and I’d join in, just a little kid, and that was colored rhythm and blues.”⁷ Jerry Lee Lewis, born to a poor branch of a wealthy family in Concordia Parish, Louisiana, first heard the music that would propel him towards forming the new genre of “rockabilly” when listening to a record at a black friend’s house. “The two boys did not comprehend the song that they heard, but they were mesmerized by the voice that sang it. It was a very painful, very black voice, the likes of which young Jerry Lee had never heard, not even in a dream. ‘There’s a hellhound on my trail/Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail.’ ‘That man singin’, he sold his soul to the devil,’ the colored boy said. ‘The devil give ‘im that voice.’” Lewis took this music to heart, and began searching it out, partially for the emotional pathos he felt as someone else who felt plagued by demons for the greater part of his life, and partially to inform his own burgeoning musicianship as a young boogie-woogie piano player. He and his cousin, future televangelist Jimmy Swaggert, would often read the ‘Among the Colored’ column in their local paper to see who was playing at the blues joint Haney’s Big House. After sneaking out and riding their bicycles down to the blues spot, “we’d sneak in there and old Haney, he’d catch us. He’d say, ‘Boy, yo’ Uncle Lee come down heah and *kill* me and you both!’ And he’d throw us out. But I sure heard a lot of good piano playin’ down there.”⁸

⁶ Michael Lydon, *Rock Folk: Portraits from the Rock ‘n’ Roll Pantheon* (New York: Citadel Press, 1990), Introduction.

⁷ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 32.

⁸ Nick Tosches, *Hellfire: The Jerry Lee Lewis Story* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 40-41; 58.

Sneaking out to hear black music became a popular way for budding white musicians to assert their independence from musical and social systems that did not make sense to them and to embrace something that did. Musician and producer Jim Dickinson, whose white family moved to Memphis from Chicago when he was a child, actually began to feel more at home after seeing the Memphis Jug Band, a group of black country blues artists, perform. “I saw them downtown with my father one Saturday afternoon,” he remembered. “It was so transcultural... To a nine-year-old white kid, it was like hearing Martians play music. It utterly changed my life. After hearing that band, other things in life just didn’t seem to be as important.” It was not always easy for Dickinson to indulge his passion, though. “I spent the next 10, 15 years of my life trying to find that music. It was right down the road, literally, but I couldn’t get there in 1950. A white kid couldn’t go where the music was.”⁹ Johnny Otis, whose Greek immigrant parents bought a house in a mostly black neighborhood in Berkeley, California, traced his lifelong love of African-American culture to the first time he accompanied his black friends to church. “That culture captured me,” he remembered, explaining that it seemed more immediate, relevant, and open to him than his own culture. When he was a little older, he and his friends “would try to slip into Slim’s [jazz club], but we’d usually get thrown out for being too young. When that happened, we would walk up the street to one of the blues joints where we were OK as long as we bought a beer.”¹⁰

White kids even found it difficult to track down records by black artists once their taste for this music was whetted. Other than popular exemptions like Nat King Cole, records by black musicians were normally sold only in majority-black neighborhoods, and jukeboxes were similarly

⁹ “Jim Dickinson” in *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience* Ed. Juan Williams (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005), 56.

¹⁰ Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), xviii-xix; 51.

segregated, at least until the mid-1950s.¹¹ Even though new record labels distributed R&B and country and western music widely enough that middle-class white kids were able to get a taste of these new sounds, they still had not planned to sell outside of their specified demographics. White kids had to actively make decisions to seek out this music in order for these genres to become popular outside of their targeted audiences. “*It happened before*,” Jerry Wexler wrote in a 1954 essay for *Cashbox*, a music industry trade publication. “In significant numbers, white people were listening to, buying, and playing black music. Atlantic’s black-and-red label carried the slogan ‘Leads the Field in Rhythm and Blues,’ but it was clear that our market, once exclusively black, was expanding.”¹² The appeal of these records was obviously so great that young white listeners were willing to breach Southern racial etiquette to find it. Philip Ennis says that

Black popular music simply didn’t exist for me in high school and never would have except for the accident of having a particular fraternity brother. Irvin Feld and his brother owned a drugstore in Washington, D.C., and invited me to work there on Saturdays. It was a new world, Seventh Street, one of the main drags in black Washington...Into the street blared the latest race records. Enough street traffic was lured into the store to fill half its interior with cartons of those records, all 78s and simply wonderful.¹³

In Memphis, many white kids indulged their love of black music at the Home of the Blues Record Shop, which Louis Cantor describes as “common ground for the black and white communities of Memphis because it was one of the few business establishments on Beale frequented by both races. Such mixing [was] rare in Memphis.” He goes on to describe the shop as “one of the few stores in Memphis where whites could feel comfortable purchasing black music...Most remember it as a place where both races shopped in open comfort...The store was

¹¹ Steve Chapple & Reebee Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1978), 233.

¹² Jerry Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 85.

¹³ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 9-10.

integrated in spirit if nothing else.” Jim Dickinson agreed with this assertion, noting “The closest thing you got to integration in Memphis in the early fifties was the Home of the Blues.”¹⁴ And for those who were unwilling or unable to leave their own communities, many insisted that black records be brought to them. “One of the big tip-offs is the record hop,” recalled Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun of how they first knew that white kids were enjoying black music.

The pop deejays in New England and the middle west who began to visit the high schools with a satchelful of Eddie Fisher’s and Jo Stafford’s found the kids asking for the Clovers and Fats Domino, and it behooved the spinners to find out who and what the kids had in mind and to produce the records. For every two or three Como’s and Patti Page’s, the record hop jockeys now have to put on a cat [R&B] record so that the kids can swing out.¹⁵

Finding access to black music was not always easy for white kids, especially ones who lived in suburbs or legally segregated areas, but many were diligent in doing so. Many helped shape the direction of music sales when they demanded that deejays carry their favourite R&B records, or when they started shopping at music stores in black neighborhoods in greater numbers.

Southern white kids also feverishly spun their radio dials in hopes of picking up the often-faint signals emanating from black stations. In cities like Memphis, white support for black-oriented stations or programs was evident almost immediately. A 1949 *Sponsor* magazine article claimed that WDIA co-owners Burt Ferguson and John Pepper were able to lure huge African-American audiences without losing white listeners, citing a Hooper report result of a 69.7 percent share.¹⁶ When WHBQ, a mainstream radio station in the city, began playing a program dubbed *Red, Hot and Blue*, featuring the outrageous white deejay Dewey Phillips, who playfully spun blues and R&B records in an attempt to gain black listeners in the evening, after WDIA signed off,

¹⁴ Louis Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis: The Life and Times of a Rock ‘n’ Roll Deejay* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 90-91.

¹⁵ Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun, “The Latest Trend: R&B Disks are Going Pop,” *The Cash Box*, July 3, 1954, 56, Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹⁶ “The Forgotten 15,000,000: Part 2,” *Sponsor*, October 24, 1949, 42.

“ratings...were off the charts, which meant a large white mainstream audience was listening to the R&B artists on Dewey’s show along with his black fans.” In fact, Bob Lewis, the switchboard operator who answered calls for Phillips’s show, declared that “He had a multiracial audience...Most of his calls were white teenage girls.”¹⁷ Shelley Stewart, who spun discs at WENN Birmingham, and was one of the first widely popular black deejays, said he “had the airwaves hopping as white kids phoned in from places like Dora and Sumiton, West End and Woodlawn, and black youths called from North Birmingham, Titusville, and Southside. Music bridged all social and cultural boundaries and was a language that everyone could appreciate.”¹⁸ Across the country, Philip Ennis declares, “Even forbidden stations were listened to by youth of both races.”¹⁹

This shift, however evident according to the numbers, was not always clear on a personal basis. Louis Cantor argues that “the received wisdom at the time had it that a great many whites listened frequently to the all-black WDIA but were reluctant to admit doing so when responding to telephone surveys.”²⁰ White kids listening to black radio stations or records in secret, away from the disapproving ears of their parents, was a widespread phenomenon, particularly in the South. Bibb Edwards frankly admitted that “stories of southern white young people of the period clandestinely listening to music their parents did not approve of—‘race’ music—are too numerous to count. It is just what we did.”²¹ John Fleming recalled how difficult it was to listen to the

¹⁷ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 93.

¹⁸ Shelley Stewart with Nathan Hale Turner, *The Road South: A Memoir*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2002), vii-viii.

¹⁹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 174.

²⁰ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 155.

²¹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 13, 2011.

“Negro” records he loved, but which his mother disapproved of. “I can’t count the number of hours I spent in my room ‘grounded’ from play, my friends and the phone because I got caught listening to music or practicing a new dance step,” he said.²² Memphis deejay George Klein recalled that “[white] kids would sneak off and listen to [WDIA] all the time.”²³ Rick Turner explained that “white kids in the south loved black music so we would get a way of trying to find that. A lot of white kids, they may not have admitted it, did listen to WANT [the black station in Richmond, Virginia].” Jeff Titon, however, did not recall the same level of secrecy associated with the choice to listen to black-oriented stations. “I didn’t do this in secret,” he insisted. “My parents and friends knew I listened to black radio stations, and some of my friends did, also. I have no idea if it was generally deemed acceptable, but in Atlanta, music was one area where white teenagers listened to a lot of black music, even on the mainstream radio stations, because it was there.”²⁴ Titon’s parents were fairly liberal New Yorkers, which may have mitigated his personal experiences with this music. Atlanta is also generally regarded as a Southern city that struck an interesting balance between maintenance of Jim Crow segregation and degrees of racial tolerance, so his experiences there may not have been singular.²⁵

Whether they listened in secret or not, black radio stations or programs that played black-oriented music presented a lifeline to white kids who felt trapped by the limits of postwar popular music. Klein said that Phillips’s show “was the only place you could get hot music at night.” Jim

²² Fleming, “A Life Recording,” 9.

²³ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 167.

²⁴ Jeff Titon, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 5, 2011.

²⁵ For more on how Atlanta “boosters” tried to shape the region as “The City Too Busy to Hate,” please see the introduction to Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Dickinson fondly recalled that “I suddenly found that there was this wonderful place on the dial where you could hear this ‘stuff’ that was what white folks were not supposed to listen to.”²⁶ Rick Turner even remembered the exact moment that he started listening to his favorite black-oriented station:

I would sit out there in the summertime with my transistor radio, and I would just turn the dial and try to find a station I liked. Most of it like today was all the same. And so actually I was turning the dial one morning and I heard this radio jingle, just the jingle of the station. And for some reason, that jingle hit me like a ton of bricks. I loved that jingle... So I would listen at the top of the hour and the bottom of the hour every day for that jingle ‘cause I liked it so much. And then once I said I couldn’t, in case I might miss it, I might listen for five minutes before or five minutes until it came on again, and I was like, I like this music!”²⁷

These kids were not *supposed* to listen to this music, but many radio stations quickly realized that they could profit from this unexpected surge in popularity. WHBQ never accepted sponsorship for *Red, Hot and Blue* from companies that made skin lighteners or hair straighteners, for example, since these products were only sold in black communities. This decision shows that the station’s owners and marketing team knew that white kids were listening, and had decided to accept this audience rather than fight it. Dewey Phillips, in fact, commonly referred to his listeners as “good people” on air.²⁸ Since the program had originally been intended for black audiences, then shifted to appeal to whites as well when station management realized that white kids were listening anyway, the insinuation is that Phillips had found a way to include all listeners without mentioning race simply by describing them as “good.” To think beyond racial categories in any capacity in

²⁶ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 167; 79.

²⁷ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author, November 20, 2011.

²⁸ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 93.

postwar Memphis was fairly transgressive, and a clear sign that these categories would not hold the same meaning among members of the younger generation.

Radio waves, as many concerned white Southerners were painfully aware, could not be segregated, and were therefore available to white kids who were intrigued by the R&B and other forms of black music they heard emanating from these stations. Radio historian J. Fred MacDonald notes proclaims that “The importance of rhythm and blues music on radio was that it was heard by integrated. In the privacy of one’s home, musical integration was as close as the radio dial.”²⁹ This privacy was perhaps integral for white kids who may have been hesitant about crossing racial boundaries in other capacities. Indeed, Matthew Delmont further argues that “Radio continued to have more freedom than television to play new music by black artists because the stations broadcast later at night and did not feature visual images.”³⁰ The act of listening in secret, or at least in private, and the fact that white kids would not have to actually see black faces performing or introducing these songs, meant that many could discreetly test the waters of racial rebellion to see if they were comfortable with it.

White deejays like Dewey Phillips, and mainstream radio stations that featured black programs, reinforced this behavior by presenting black music and artists as a trendy and acceptable cultural alternative. Louis Cantor says that “At least some whites who were strongly attracted to the black music were still constrained enough by their traditional prejudices to feel uncomfortable listening to an all-black station, especially in the presence of others or when called on a phone survey.” He argues that because of this hesitance, white deejays like Phillips were instrumental in

²⁹ J. Fred MacDonald, *Don’t Touch That Dial! Radio Programming in American Life from 1920 to 1960* (Stamford CT: Wadsworth Publishing, 1979), 368 in Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 223-224.

³⁰ Matthew F. Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2012), 41.

creating white demand for black music rather than simply reinforcing it. Phillips, he says, “belongs to that distinct era of early fifties radio...when white stations were already trying to lure the black audience but were still unwilling to employ a black announcer to do so,” he says. “The trick was to get a white announcer who would appeal to blacks, either by attempting to mimic what they considered a black dialect or by playing almost exclusively the new so-called race music.”

Although white deejays who took on a supposedly African-American persona were undoubtedly hired throughout the 1950s, this shift was a *response* to white and black kids listening to the same kinds of music, not what Cantor describes as “luring” or “part of a concerted effort by white stations trying to hook white teenagers on black rock ‘n’ roll.” Dewey Phillips himself, who helped to break down the color line in Memphis, said in a 1959 interview that Southern whites “weren’t sure whether they ought to like [black music] or not. So I got to thinking how many records you could sell if you could find white performers who could play and sing in this same exciting way [as black performers].” Phillips surely helped introduce large numbers of white Southerners to the black-oriented music he loved to play on his show. Yet he himself had been surprised at the number of white customers he served while working at Home of the Blues Record Shop, years before he started working at WHBQ. Furthermore, *Red, Hot and Blue* was never intended to appeal to white teenagers—at least, not at first. White deejays and part-time black programming helped legitimate black music in mainstream culture, introduced many teenagers to this music for the first time, and made it easier for fans of all races to listen in. But it is difficult to believe, as Memphis music critic David Evans asserted, that “If a white kid listened to WDIA in his home, his mother might get quite upset...They were afraid to listen to it. But [white] people like Dewey Phillips were legitimate.”³¹ Southern society especially was built on racial dictates that

³¹ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 5; 141; 164; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 62.

were far too strict to be broken down simply because a white man (and one with a fairly zany reputation, at that) led the charge. Again, the agency that white teenagers showed in choosing to seek out this music themselves is undercut by both historians and critics who instead depict the birth of rock and roll music as a mostly top-down endeavor rather than a dynamic process between producers and consumers.

Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo neatly sum up the more circular nature of the relationship between listeners and music producers: “Local radio was receptive to the grass roots popularity of rhythm and blues records among white kids, and promoted its commercial potential.”³² It is therefore crucial to point out that, while white deejays and radio stations reinforced this shift, and introduced many young white listeners to new forms of music, they were just as often responding to already existing desires. Jerry Wexler, who was continually surprised by white appetites for black music throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, stated that this cultural exchange began with teenage listeners. “A picture was beginning to emerge,” he wrote in his autobiography. “Kids, especially kids down South, were taking newly invented transistor radios to the beach. White Southerners, I believe, in spite of the traditional aura of racial bigotry, have always enjoyed the most passionate rapport with black music, itself a Southern phenomenon. And in the fifties, white Southern teenagers started the charge towards ballsy rhythm and blues.”³³

For this group of kids, R&B represented a number of elements that many felt were missing from pop music, and from their lives as a whole. The music’s energy and dynamism, sexuality, and sense of “genuineness” or “realness” which white teenagers felt were lacking in their culture,

³² Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay*, 231.

³³ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 86.

could stand in for the black experience for many whites, but it could also encourage them to start thinking about alternate ways of thinking that challenged dominant political and social systems. Representations of black music and musicians alerted discontented white kids to other possibilities that existed, and in some cases, those possibilities included political changes supportive of racial equality.

Almost every white respondent now says that they were drawn to the “high energy” or “energetic” nature of R&B when they were young.³⁴ For white kids growing up in new suburbs that were removed from any historical roots and from dynamic city life, where they were forced to associate only with people from their own racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, and to repress any fears of atomic or economic devastation, the vibrant beats of black-oriented music connected them to what they believed was a more lively existence. In this way, black-oriented music became what George Lipsitz describes as “one of the main vehicles for the expression of loss and the projection of hopes for reconnection to the past.”³⁵ Although sociologist Jessie Bernard proclaimed, as late as 1960, that “popular songs reflect the preoccupation of teen-agers with love in its various stages,” and that “political concern is not characteristic of teen-age culture,” many white teenagers remained uninspired by most of the music on the radio.³⁶ The perceived dullness of their environments was, for many middle-class white kids, echoed in the pop music of the day. Rock singer Janis Joplin recalled “It seemed so shallow, all oop-boop. It had *nothing*.”³⁷ Janis Ian

³⁴ Responses culled from over 20 interviews with author.

³⁵ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 12.

³⁶ Jessie Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture: An Overview* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1961), 1.

³⁷ Edward Willett, *Janis Joplin: Take Another Little Piece of My Heart* (Berkeley Heights NJ: Enslow Publishers, 2008), 29.

stated that “I listened to everything but white pop music, which my friends and I looked on with disdain. To our minds, the pop music of the late fifties and early sixties was just stupid.”³⁸ Bibb Edwards agreed with this sentiment, noting that “The country music of its day predominated on our local AM radio stations. I could not identify. Mainstream pop music was about all we heard on TV...Not me...what I heard did not speak to me, so I heard rather than listened.”³⁹

Whereas pop music relied on reassuring tropes and predictable melodies, R&B provided musical and lyrical jolts to bored listeners looking to escape their surroundings. Ann Wells recalled thinking of her favorite artists, “I imagined they lived a glamorous, celebrity life far removed from rural Alabama.”⁴⁰ Writer and countercultural revolutionary John Sinclair noted the music’s transgressive allure, as well as its connection to alternative politics and modes of thinking. “We had been given a world which posited Ed Sullivan and Steve Allen, or Richard Nixon and Adlai Stevenson, say, as extremes, or alternatives to each other,” he said. “And then all of a sudden there was Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, Fidel Castro, Billy Riley and His Little Green Men spreading the spectrum way over to where we had never been told it could go.”⁴¹ Fran Shor, who “had a notebook where I had written down all the names on the outside...of a variety of jazz performers like Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis and Stan Getz,” and was a fan of R&B progenitor Red Prysock, said that he sought out music from WAMO, Pittsburgh’s black-owned station, because “This was really very vital music to me, it was very powerful.”⁴² “

³⁸ Janis Ian, *Society’s Child* (New York: Tarcher: 2008), 21.

³⁹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

⁴⁰ Ann Wells, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 9, 2011.

⁴¹ John Sinclair, *Guitar Army; Street Writings/Prison Writings* (New York: Douglas Book Corp, 1972), 10.

⁴² Fran Shor, in discussion with the author, November 15, 2011.

Some white kids went farther by dismissing pop music altogether. Bibb Edwards explained that he did not care for most of what he heard on the radio because “All good music calls for some level of participation by the listener. If it did not move my body it needed to engage my mind. A perfect song did both.” When he started listening to R&B, he realized that “Finally, somewhere deeper, there were emotions to be stirred.”⁴³ The difference between pop music, which was melodic and meant to encourage sing-alongs, and R&B, a dance music that urged listeners to become movers, was especially intriguing to kids. “Wherefore this predilection?” Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun surmised with regards to white desire for black music. “In our opinion, it stems from the kids’ need for dance records.”⁴⁴ Milt Gabler also remarked on this trend. “The kids picked up on it right away and it became their kind of music,” he said. “They like to have things that are associated with them—young singers and that kind of song, and they were dancing.”⁴⁵ But *Ramparts* magazine editor Eldridge Cleaver probably explained the cross-racial appeal of R&B as a dance music best. “What do they care if their old baldheaded and crew-cut elders don’t dig their caveman mops?” he asked. “They couldn’t care less about the old stiff-assed honkies who don’t like their new dances....All they know is that it feels good to swing to way-out body-rhythms instead of draggassing across the dance floor like zombies to the dead beat of mind-smothered Mickey Mouse music.”⁴⁶

Many white kids responded to the dynamism and energy of R&B, but they also found the genre’s explicit treatment of sexuality refreshing and alluring, particularly since the subject was

⁴³ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

⁴⁴ Wexler and Ertegun, “The Latest Trend: R&B Disks are Going Pop,” 56.

⁴⁵ Bob Franklin, Interview with Milt Gabler, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1959, 36, Milt Gabler Papers, Box 4, Folder 19, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁴⁶ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1999), 81.

largely verboten in most areas of 1950s popular culture. Jerry Wexler effectively links the elements that made black-oriented music so popular among white teenagers: “As the Eisenhower decade became more conformist, the music became more rebellious, more blatantly sexual,” he said.⁴⁷ For teenagers experiencing (or anticipating) the trials and tribulations of burgeoning physical intimacy, R&B music provided both a useful guide on how to navigate unfamiliar romantic situations, and the sense that listeners were not alone in their desires and frustrations. At its most basic level, this music acted as a sexual stimulant, which was almost impossibly enticing to frustrated teenagers. Bibb Edwards recalled that “The first record I bought was Fats Domino’s “Blueberry Hill”....At 10 years old I had no idea what kind of thrills could be found on Blueberry Hill, but I was beginning to have my suspicions.”⁴⁸ Fran Shor enjoyed listening to “stuff like Hank Ballard and the Midnighters’ ‘Work with me Annie,’ and on the other side was ‘Annie Had a Baby.’ It was so overtly sexual and so, when your hormones are raging, you’re like, I don’t want to listen to ‘How Much is that Doggie in the Window’...So to me it was just much more vital, much more dangerous, in a sense, because of its overt sexuality.”⁴⁹

The energy, sexuality, and emotional directness of R&B produced the belief that black-oriented music, and culture in general, was more authentic than the popular culture that was aimed at the white middle class. This belief was partially shaped by the fact that most black-oriented music was released through independent record labels that were supposedly concerned with quality, rather than larger, more powerful corporations that were merely concerned with profits. This dichotomy is too deceptively simple to be true, as black-oriented record labels *had* to be

⁴⁷ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 86.

⁴⁸ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

⁴⁹ Fran Shor, in discussion with the author.

concerned with profits in order to stay afloat. Another reason that the music seemed more genuine to white kids than the manufactured pop they were used to lies with the musicological foundations of R&B music. “In Western music—music of the European tradition—[the major scales contain] the only ‘legal’ pitches; most instruments are designed to play these pitches and not others,” explains neuroscientist Daniel Levitin. “Sounds in between are considered mistakes (‘out of tune’) unless they’re used for expressive intonation (intentionally playing something out of tune, briefly, to add emotional tension) or in passing from one legal tone to another.”⁵⁰ These “in-between” pitches were not often used in more melodious postwar popular music, but since R&B utilized some non-Western musical characteristics, these songs were more likely to surprise the white listener with unexpected notes that seemed more akin to the wide spectrum of human emotion than did the more simplistic pop music scales. At the same time, most R&B and country songs were built on major chords, which are more dynamic and energetic than minor chords. This structure led many white kids to associate the music with positive emotions and a sense of realness that seemed to be lacking in mainstream popular culture.⁵¹

Since pop music often submerged any feelings that were offensive, disturbing, or overwhelming, white teenagers, who undoubtedly identified with such feelings, were relieved to hear them discussed honestly in R&B songs. Bibb Edwards asserted that “Blacks always sounded *real*, even if it just was a party song. Whites occasionally sounded as if a song meant something to them; but most of the time they were mailing it in.”⁵² Fran Shor remembered that “for those of us who were [black-oriented Pittsburgh radio station] WAMO followers, we sort of felt like there

⁵⁰ Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Plume Printing, 2006), 27-28.

⁵¹ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 38.

⁵² Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

was something inauthentic about living in an all-white environment. So that was a kind of pre-political consciousness.”⁵³ In this case, Shor and his friends detected a lack of so-called ‘realness’ in their community, mostly because of a racial separateness which was imposed on their neighborhood—and which exposure to black radio made more apparent.

The belief that black music sounded more “real” than the constructed and emotionally manipulative pop music that adults usually listened to ultimately deepened the rift between middle-class white kids and their parents. Jerry Wexler explained that “[Teenage] buying power was real, their emotional needs immediate, their libidinous drive no longer reflected by the dead-and-gone fox-trots of their parents. Suddenly there was another force at work—old but new, primal yet complex, a music informed by the black genius for expressing pent-up frustration, joy, rage, or ecstasy in a poetic context marked by hip humor and irresistible rhythm.”⁵⁴ For white teenagers, making black-oriented music a part of their own nascent popular culture was key to shaping their own political and social worldviews. Grace Elizabeth Hale explains that these cultural alternatives provided frustrated kids with realization that they did not have to accept the world as it was. “In the 1950s and 1960s, mass culture gave some young white Americans a glimpse of redemption,” she says. “Rebels and outsiders were out there. Other possibilities existed.”⁵⁵ Bibb Edwards also made note of this early connection. “There was much to listen to; we had many musical decisions to make,” he opined. “For each of us some music would resonate, some wouldn’t. Whatever we listened to it seemed important that our parents didn’t like it... We not only turned away from the music of our parents, many of us were turning away from them in other areas as well.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Fran Shor, in discussion with the author.

⁵⁴ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 86.

⁵⁵ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 17.

⁵⁶ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

As more whites began listening to black-oriented stations in record numbers, positive portrayals of black music, the black people producing it, and the black deejays, like B.B. King and Nat Williams, delivering it, challenged some white Americans' racist conceptions of African Americans. At the very least, many white Americans were entranced by the music that was emanating throughout segregated communities. Jerry Wexler later proclaimed that "The musical integration was a joy to hear and to behold. The racial mix was serendipitous...I could see that Southern whites liked their music uncompromisingly black. Despite the ugly legacy of Jim Crow, their white hearts and minds were gripped, it would seem, forevermore."⁵⁷ His use of the word "serendipitous" implied that music companies did not orchestrate the crossover between black and white, and the fact that he links white love of black music with the tangible facts of Southern segregation shows that he, like many of his contemporaries, was aware of the connection between the collapse of cultural boundaries and changing racial politics, as well as the hypocrisy of segregationist politics. The social flexibility that had to exist in order for white kids to seek out black music, and for record companies and radio stations to respond to this demand, betrayed some of the weaknesses of Jim Crow divisions. This realization may not have been immediately evident to all listeners, and even if it was, it did not necessarily eradicate white racist conceptions. But it did help reinforce doubts that some younger whites had about racial inequality and segregation, as well as the notion that integrationist goals of the early civil rights movement were humane and just. B.B. King asserted that his WDIA, where he worked as a deejay, "was a prominent leader in bringing all people—both black and white—closer together. As the first all-black radio station,

⁵⁷ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 192.

WDIA was a light that shined throughout the Mid-South, helping to truly integrate it and bringing hope and inspiration to the huge black audience who listened to the station religiously.”⁵⁸

At the same time, aspiring- and middle-class black kids were also crossing less treacherous, yet still revelatory, boundaries by embracing popular and country music generally marketed to whites. Since pop music was technically marketed to everyone and was the most widely-played genre on mainstream radio stations, black teenagers were never totally cut off from this field. Many, however, began to listen to pop music on a more regular basis and admire white pop stars in the early 1950s. Civil rights successes and the continuation of an affluent age that really did benefit larger numbers of black families contributed to the notion that these kids were being welcomed, if hesitantly, into the greater American fold. The greatest advances were made in the marketplace, as the money that black teenagers were eager to spend helped line manufacturers’ pockets just as well as that of their white contemporaries. Black kids consumed the cultural offerings aimed at adolescents just as whites did, purchasing records, reading teen magazines, and watching hit television programs.

Since the mass consumer market was largely represented as white, black youth were inundated with advertisements for pop records. They read articles on white pop and movie stars, and watched television programs featuring white performers. Even though black kids were more likely than whites to exert a critical eye towards mainstream popular culture, they still consumed it at high levels. Ray Charles recalled that “I was a great fan of Artie Shaw,” the hugely popular white band leader. “I used to think, ‘Man, ooh, he had the prettiest sound,’ and he had so much

⁵⁸ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation’s First All-Black Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), v.

feelin' in his playin', I always felt that, still feel it today."⁵⁹ Charles himself helped to spread the popularity of pop songs among black kids in 1958, when he released a collection of popular standards, including "Love and Marriage," "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing," "It's Delightful to be Married," and "Waltz Down the Aisle," all of which exalted romantic, conjugal bliss in an uncritical fashion. The disc also hit both the pop and R&B charts, signaling that it was popular with both black and white fans.⁶⁰ In a later interview, Marvin Gaye admitted that "My dream was to become Frank Sinatra. I loved his phrasing, especially when he was very young and pure.... Now this is going to surprise you, but I also dug Dean Martin and especially Perry Como."⁶¹ His affection would hardly have been shocking during this period, though. In one 1946 newspaper photograph, Alan Freed is pictured handing out Perry Como records as awards in a "How to Stop Vandalism" contest for teenagers. Both winners were high school boys, one black and one white.⁶²

Pop music was even alluring enough to help shape the performance and personas of black stars. Like many black teens, Della Reese admired Nat King Cole, partly because he "sang wonderful songs that were considered, quote/unquote, 'white songs.' He could sing the blues but he very seldom did." The fact that Cole had the power to choose, and even to go back and forth between the two genres if he so desired, appealed to Reese "I wanted the freedom to do all the music. I didn't want to be categorized to a particular thing and I was never going to do two jobs

⁵⁹ Ben Fong-Torres, interview with Ray Charles, *The Rolling Stone Interviews* Ed. Jann S. Wenner & Joe Levy (New York: Wenner Media, 2007), 65-79.

⁶⁰ "The Ray Charles Singers," Milt Gabler Collection Box 3, Folder 23, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁶¹ Gerald Early, "One Nation Under a Groove," *New Republic*, July 15, 1991, 1.

⁶² "How to Stop Vandalism?" 1946, Alan Freed Archives, <http://www.alanfreed.com/wp/archives/archives-1943-1949-radio-broa/> Last accessed on August 3, 2013.

for one.”⁶³ Some black musicians, especially those with an acute teenage following, were also marketed in similar ways as white pop stars were. Percy Mayfield, billed as “America’s Newest Blues Balladeer,” is nonetheless depicted in an early 1950s poster surrounded by animated black girls dressed in the latest fashions with towering beehives atop their heads. A swirl of cartoon hearts completes the picture. The marketing team that designed the poster was clearly trying to brand the blues singer as an acceptable romantic idol for middle-class black—and possibly white—girls.⁶⁴ This depiction was new for black musicians, especially ones who performed in more traditional African American idioms. Marketers were drawing on the same symbols and tropes to sell to both black and white teenagers, mainly because these were the sorts of images that kids were responding to. As young blacks listened to more pop music and felt more included in mass culture as a whole, the conceits of white teenage culture helped to shape black artistic and consumer imagery as well. The overlap between both racial backgrounds, and the cultural exchange between teenage fans, was difficult to miss.

Although country music was already popular among African Americans, the genre gained more fans during the early 1950s, as it became more acceptable in mainstream culture. But even though both black and white kids responded favorably to country music’s seeming genuineness, black fans were more apt to link their fondness for this music to its similarities with the blues. WHBQ deejay Dewey Phillips often mixed hits by white country artists like Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Roy Orbison in with his regular R&B playlist, for instance, emphasizing a clear link between the two genres for the show’s many black fans.⁶⁵ Sociologist Donald Horton “found

⁶³ Renee Pouissant, interview with Della Reese, May 21, 2004, 23. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁶⁴ Specialty Records Collection, Box-Folder: OS1-OF5

⁶⁵ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 114.

remarkable similarities” between country and R&B music in his 1957 study of popular song, ultimately declaring that “in all categories, courtship and downward course of love songs accounted for well over half of all songs.”⁶⁶ Ray Charles heard this similarity as well, though not necessarily in the lyrics: “I felt it was the closest music, really, to the blues—they’d make them steel guitars cry and whine, and it really attracted me.”⁶⁷ In terms of both emotional tone and lyrical content, R&B and country and western music had much in common, and black kids eagerly sought out both as they became more acceptable within mainstream culture.

This consumption often led black teenagers to embrace some of the values or norms of the white middle class. Della Reese was inspired after touring with Nat King Cole in the mid- to late 1950s. “When I was coming through, black women were supposed to sing the blues and shake their behinds,” she says. “I was never going to do that. Here was a man that stood tall and straight and sang. That’s what he did. He sat down and played the piano...I wasn’t going to sing and get paid for that while I shake my booty, which was another job that the stripper was doing.”⁶⁸ Quincy Jones also experienced the effects of these shifts growing up, though he was seemingly able to compartmentalize the time he spent in a world shaped by white values. “They talk about ‘selling out,’ man. Please, man, when we were 13, we would play white tennis clubs from 7:00 to 10:00, white cardigan jackets with bow ties, played ‘Room Full a Roses’ and ‘To Each His Own,’ all the pop hits of the time; right. Ten o’clock. Shazam, we’d change into our R&B stuff.”⁶⁹ Black and white kids were not coming from the same backgrounds or points of view, but the values of the

⁶⁶ Bernard, “Teen-Age Culture: An Overview,” 6.

⁶⁷ Fong-Torres, interview with Ray Charles

⁶⁸ Renee Pouissant, interview with Della Reese, 23.

⁶⁹ Camille Cosby, interview with Quincy Jones, September 23, 2003, 15. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

middle class, which were becoming more common for members of both races, were reinforced by cross-racial popular culture consumption on both sides. These similarities further shaped the growing middle ground between black and white youth.

As teenage listeners became more familiar with different kinds of music, they began demanding to hear it played more often, particularly on radio stations that catered to young audiences. The amount of power that individual deejays had over their playlists varied wildly from station to stations—in some instances, they were mostly free to play whatever they wanted, so long as it appealed to listeners, while in other cases, they were held strictly to playlists hammered out by station management. Some, according to Jerry Wexler, “were black-talking, blues-loving stars. The records they played influenced at least two generations of fans.” Deejays who actually spearheaded efforts to play black music on their respective stations tended to be “all white guys who broadcasted black, speaking with the timing and rhyming of the ghetto.”⁷⁰ Conversely, Johnny Otis recalls a particular job he held at a Los Angeles station in the mid-1950s at KFOX radio, where the owner, “a Texas oil man named Fetch,” immediately informed him “‘Don’t you play none of that goddamned nigger music!’ He was livid with rage at the thought, and we hadn’t even said hello yet.”⁷¹

Many deejays and station managers fell prey to the payola scandal that would erupt in the late 1950s, accepting money and gifts from record labels in exchange for playing their records. But in most cases, deejays, whether they personally enjoyed different genres of music or not, were compelled to play what their teenage audiences wanted to hear. Milt Gabler explained that “The kids are the only ones that buy single records, or take the trouble to call a disk jockey or vote or

⁷⁰ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 192; 87.

⁷¹ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 61.

make any stink about anything, and that's why you hear only their songs on the air."⁷² And white kids were demanding R&B music en masse. "For leading pop deejays in most important record markets," Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler declared

Three attitudes seem to prevail: (1) Cat music knocks me out—I'm going to play all the good ones I can and see if I can't put them over in my territory. (2) I don't know—if Jones, the top deejay in the city really makes one of these things locally, sure I'll play it, but I won't pioneer the stuff. (3) Not on my show. But what's significant is that everybody is compelled to take a stand. They've all heard about it and it's a real live issue.⁷³

Even when white deejays were not R&B fans themselves, then, many played these records simply because their young white audiences would turn the channel to another station if they did not. In a 1956 *Downbeat* magazine interview, New York deejay Art Fold proclaimed "People say—'Why do you play rock and roll?' I say—'don't ask me, ask the people why they like it, why they want it. Find out why they want it'...I try to reflect it in playing the music people want, because if I do anything less, I am being false to them. If it's difficult for me to understand rock and roll sometimes, then it's just my job to do what I am doing today...get ahold of an expert, find out, and study the subject."⁷⁴

By the early 1950s, demand for popular deejays who would play R&B music was accelerating. The writer of a 1952 *Billboard* magazine article announced, for example, that "[An] indication of the importance of r.&b. wax are the great number of radio disk jockeys who concentrate only on this field. A few years back the number of r.&b. jocks were few, but now they are on almost every station that plays records."⁷⁵ At this point, black-oriented record labels began

⁷² Bob Franklin, interview with Milton Gabler, 19.

⁷³ Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun, "The Latest Trend: R&B Disks are Going Pop," 56.

⁷⁴ Les Brown, "Elvis Presley: Can Fifty Million Americans Be Wrong?" *Downbeat*, September 19, 1956, 42. Alan Freed Papers, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁷⁵ Bob Rolontz, "Hit Tunes and Good Talent are Keeping the Boxes Busy: Rhythm & Blues," *Billboard*, March 15, 1952, 82.

to market records directly to popular radio stations and deejays. Specialty Records, for instance, sent out deejay tip sheets to stations across the country, complete with suggestions on R&B and gospel hits, and reviews by disk jockeys across the country. Although these sheets were also sent to black-oriented radio stations, it is telling that “Mona Lee,” the animated mascot depicted reading letters in the top corner of each one, is a seemingly blonde-haired white woman.⁷⁶ As early as 1951, then, Art Rupe’s label, which he never intended to appeal to whites, was not only selling to mainstream radio stations, but using the image of a white woman in order to do so. Age-old white Southern fears of “miscegenation” were perhaps not so important to younger listeners, or within the new consumer economy that the music industry was forced to adjust to, but they would ultimately become a powerful force in the fight against musical integration.

Interestingly enough, some of the most popular deejays of the early 1950s, both black and white, managed to voice support for moderate racial equality and desegregation movements, both implicitly and explicitly, even as they rose to national fame. Alan Freed, the man who became famous for playing black-oriented music for a young, white audience, was also the most upfront about the genre’s origins, and his desire for everyone to enjoy this music, regardless of race. During his infamous visit to Record Rendezvous, his friend’s black-oriented music shop in Cleveland, the classical music deejay says he had “one of the most thrilling experiences of my life. There were dozens of kids having a wonderful time listening to the records of some of the people who were destined to become the very top performers in the idiom.” Many of these kids were white, which utterly surprised him. “I spoke to some of the kids buying records at this shop. It became apparent that they were not only from the immediate neighborhood [i.e. the mainly black section of

⁷⁶ DJ Tip Sheets, 1951, Specialty Records Collection, Box-Folder OS1-OF4, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

Cleveland] but from all parts of town.” Although Freed’s love of opera had led him to work at classical stations, his uncles had been members of a blackface minstrel group, and he had grown up listening to the blues and jazz. “By the time I moved to Cleveland in 1949, I was a confirmed rhythm and blues fan,” he said. His love of many kinds of music allowed him to truly think about what was happening in that record store. “I listened,” he continued. “I heard the songs of such artists as LaVerne Baker and Della Reese, two girls with real contralto voices who know how to tell a story. I heard the tenor saxophones of Red Prysock and Big Al Sears. I heard the blues-singing, piano-playing Ivory Joe Hunter. I wondered.” After a week, he convinced his manager to let him follow up his classical program with a special show aimed directly at white teenagers. His “Moondog Show” would go down in history as the first program to play R&B music by black artists for a predominantly young, white audience.⁷⁷

Concerns that Freed exploited black music in order to gain white fans are somewhat valid, since his program ultimately brought him both wealth and nation-wide fame, sometimes at the expense of the little-known black musicians whose songs were sold for a pittance. But his genuine love of the R&B genre, and the fact that he commonly held station events for both black and white teenagers, show that he was, however imperfectly, trying to reinforce the joyful musical integration that he saw that day in his friend’s shop. Freed often deflected criticisms by claiming that his critics simply did not want white children listening to black music, and he did not shy away from explaining the music’s origins. “It began on the levees and plantations, took in folk songs, and features blues and rhythm,” he told *The New York Times* in 1957. “It’s the rhythm that gets the

⁷⁷ Alan Freed, “Alan Freed Says: ‘I Told You So...’” *Downbeat*, September 19, 1956, 44. Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives; Alan Freed, “The Big Beat is Here to Stay,” *TV Radio Mirror*, November 1958, 70. Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 56, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

kids. They are starved for music they can dance to, after all those years of crooners.”⁷⁸ Jerry Wexler later admitted that “He was far from the first black-sounding white deejay, but Alan led untold legions of whites to R&B like nobody else before or since. It’s as though he lit the fuse that exploded R&B into full-blown rock ‘n’ roll.”⁷⁹ Freed definitely popularized R&B among young white populations, and played a pivotal role in ensuring that this music reached wider demographics. But he himself consistently noted that he was merely responding to a shift that young people of both races had already set in motion.

Because of Freed, Cleveland is usually granted the title of “The Birthplace of Rock and Roll,” but if equal regard were given to both black and white contributions, then Memphis would undoubtedly wear that mantle. In this mid-South city, where blacks and whites intermingled far more than the rigidly segregated social and political structure would suggest, two deejays, Nat Williams at WDIA, and Dewey Phillips at WHBQ, played pop, R&B, and country hits for black and white adolescent audiences. Neither talked directly about the racial backgrounds of their audiences, but both presented themselves as public figures who welcomed racial integration, at least on a cultural level. Williams often mused, on air and in person, about the growing popularity of white stars among black teenagers and black musicians among white teenagers, both of which he viewed positively.⁸⁰ Phillips, whose mainly black-oriented show was bringing in white teenage audiences roughly two and a half years before Freed began his Moondog show in Cleveland, “never thought about the color of his audience,” proclaimed former WHBQ employee Charles Raiteri. “He only thought about the music...He didn’t care what color the listener was.” This

⁷⁸ Edith Evans Ashbury, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Teen-Agers Tie Up the Times Square Area,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 1957.

⁷⁹ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 129-130.

⁸⁰ Cantor, *Wheelin on Beale*, 194-196; Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 135.

description neatly explains why Phillips used the term “good people” when discussing his audience, which coyly avoided any racial division among listeners. Indeed, B.B. King asserted that, within a year of his taking the microphone at WHBQ, “he had as many black listeners as any other black disk jockey [on WDIA] had at the time and in a lot of cases more.” Phillips’s equal treatment of both races, which was uncommon in Memphis’s segregated society, reflected back on his own persona. King added that “I didn’t think of him as black or white,” which has to be considered a compliment within the confines of a Jim Crow system. Musician and WDIA deejay Rufus Thomas asserted that the city’s black community “didn’t even think about Dewey Phillips as being white...Dewey was not white...He had no color.”⁸¹

Even though most deejays were barred from discussing anything overtly political on the air, their treatment of both races as equal, and their ability to introduce and wax rhapsodic about music by both white and black artists, affected the ways that listeners viewed the prospect of racial integration. Many listeners identified with these deejays, despite the fact that most were older, and sometimes came from a different racial background (or acted as though they did) than their teenage audiences. Ken Avuk said of his favorite radio deejays “They were pretty much the same, but you tried to identify with them because you felt sort of a community....it was somehow just to have a human voice just gave you some sense of—again, you weren’t alone. You knew there were a whole bunch of people listening to this.”⁸² Memphis journalist Robert Johnson also spoke of the importance of connection, noting that Dewey Phillips “came over the air as the voice of a rather strange friend [listeners] knew and understood.”⁸³

⁸¹ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 3; 79; 53-54.

⁸² Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author, November 22, 2011.

⁸³ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 12.

That listeners felt a sense of community and identification with deejays they listened to on a daily basis may not be surprising, but since these audiences consisted of both black and white teenagers, this connection inadvertently weakened racial divisions. Shelley Stewart admitted that “I knew my Shelley the playboy radio persona had taken on a life of its own, but I was shocked to see how the airwaves had connected me to the brain waves of white teenagers.”⁸⁴ Rufus Thomas endeared himself to both white and black youth by claiming the nickname “World’s Oldest Teenager,” which implied that he was one of them, no matter which race a particular listener belonged to, and that he understood the particular qualms of the modern adolescent.⁸⁵ This sense of identification also occurred between white deejays and black listeners. Louis Cantor, who broadcast a ten-minute slot on WDIA as “Cannonball” Cantor in the early 1950s, said his run “was historic nonetheless because a white man enjoyed the rare distinction of being an ‘on-air personality’ at an all-black radio station.”⁸⁶ Dewey Phillips enjoyed such a strong following among black teenagers that his wife, Dot, recalled seeing just as many young black visitors as white who came to see him when he was in the hospital. His friend Max Carruthers said that, when Phillips would drive down predominantly black Beale Street, “Everybody would be hollerin’ at him, and he’d be hollerin’ at them. Seemed like every black person on Beale Street knew him.”⁸⁷ Najee Muhammad could list only black musicians and groups as favorite acts when he was growing up: doo-wop groups like The Flamingos, Little Anthony and the Imperials and Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers are mixed with Motown favorites Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Marvin Gaye

⁸⁴ Stewart, *The Road South*, vii.

⁸⁵ Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale*, 125.

⁸⁶ Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale*, 121.

⁸⁷ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 87-88.

and the Temptations and jazz performers Nina Simone, Miles Davis and Cannonball Adderley, but all are African American. He asserted, however, that he mostly listened to the programs hosted by white deejays Alan Freed and Symphony Sid, and that he identified with them as well.⁸⁸ Even though Muhammad was drawn to the work of black musicians to a fault, the fact that their work was presented by whites who also admired this music provided a bridge towards an emerging musical middle ground.

This cross-racial identification allowed deejays to have some influence over how their listeners understood movements for racial inequality and desegregation. Cantor noted that Dewey Phillips “was perfectly comfortable going into black clubs, churches, and juke joints,” and often entertained black people at his home, which “put Dewey at the cutting edge of changing race relations” despite the fact that he did not explicitly broach the subject of political integration.⁸⁹ Some went further, despite the criticism they faced for voicing their opinions. White deejays Bill Randle and “Daddy” Sears were both well known for voicing their support for civil rights, both on and off the air, in Cleveland and Atlanta, respectively.⁹⁰ Black deejays also took risks by talking directly about the civil rights movement and about support for racial equality, even though they were usually disciplined for doing so. Shelley Stewart said that, “By and large, I did what I could to foment the rumblings of freedom with my pronouncements on police brutality, the need to register to vote, and general social inequities. Sometimes on my program I took potshots at [Birmingham’s segregationist police chief Eugene ‘Bull’] Connor’s ‘redneck’ or ‘KKK’

⁸⁸ Najee Emerson Muhammad, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions. November 20, 2011.

⁸⁹ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 227.

⁹⁰ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 226.

policemen for beating the devil out of some hapless Negro male.”⁹¹ Georgie Woods, one of young Philadelphia’s most popular deejays, was known for using his radio show to raise money for civil rights activism, alerting listeners to struggles for racial equality, and even linking some of the songs he played on air to the integrationist movement.⁹² Even though explicit discussion of the civil rights movement and its ideals were rare in the 1950s, most listeners would have been aware of the more racially tolerant attitudes of their favorite deejays, which helped reinforce any existing support for racial integration.⁹³

These deejays started playing broader mixes of music, both in response to what their young listeners wanted to hear and their own variegated musical tastes. They tossed R&B and C&W singles in among the pop playlists in order to hook as many young listeners as possible, whatever their racial background, resulting in playlists which looked increasingly like multiracial mosaics. Very few 1950s special-format radio stations existed to play only one sort of music—even black-oriented stations tended to play a mixture of genres. Philip Ennis says that “Those students, collectively, had great influence over that music. Their feedback to the disk jockeys was definitely consequential...Their preferences were catholic; a typical record collection would contain everything from Elvis and Perry Como to Little Richard and the McGuire Sisters.”⁹⁴ Most stations, played top-selling singles that listeners demanded to hear, or that record companies bribed them

⁹¹ Stewart, *The Road South*, 185.

⁹² Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town*, 5.

⁹³ Although the direct use of radio airtime for the means of organizing and/or funding civil rights activities is not the purview of this project, Brian Ward has provided an expansive and engaging look at this topic in Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville FL: The University Press of Florida, 2006).

⁹⁴ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 250.

to play. The mixture of different music genres that both black and white kids heard on top radio stations, and saw for sale on record shop shelves, encouraged even more boundary crossing.

Since listening to the radio was an integral part of adolescent life in the postwar period, this change led many more teenagers to accept a mixture of pop, R&B and C&W songs as part of their daily soundtrack. Ken Avuk recalled that “The only way you’d hear new music was on the radio...I’m talking at that point, only AM radio. There were only a limited number of outlets...They were all Top 40 stations...pretty homogenous in the sense that they all played the same music and again the same songs all day, so they became very familiar.”⁹⁵ DeeJay and trumpeter Gabriel Hearn noted, “You gotta remember, radio wasn’t like it is now, each station only playing one sort of thing. They had hour shows of everything, so if you could play blues and ballads and country and novelty numbers, you reached more people.”⁹⁶ White deejays and station managers were initially reluctant to play black-oriented music at mainstream stations, and many black deejays and managers did not think, at first, that their audiences would want to hear white artists. But younger listeners were insistent about hearing a variety of songs when they turned on the radio, and so, by the early 1950s, the playlists of both mainstream and black-oriented shows were starting to “integrate.” Leonard Chess, co-owner of R&B label Chess Records, told *Music Business* that the “Negro” station the label acquired in the mid-1950s, played “jazz, pop, some r. and b., and a staff of announcers that are like the whole United Nations.” He asserted that “it’s brought the level of Negro radio right up to the top class of any white station.”⁹⁷ At mainstream Cleveland radio station WERE, legendary deejay Bill Randle

⁹⁵ Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author.

⁹⁶ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 8.

⁹⁷ Ren Grevett, “The Chess Records Story: R.&B. Hits,” *Music Business*, February 13, 1965, Atlantic Recording Corporation Records, Box 1, Folder 5, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

Sat in the booth, picking from a large stack of records in an apparently haphazard fashion...What emerged was a living *mélange*. Sometimes two or three records in a row would be by male vocalists; sometimes several instrumentals would be put together. A country tune, a new hit from the rhythm and blues charts, a currently popular choral number would be mixed together, violating the near sacred rules of conventional programming.⁹⁸

These diverse playlists, which were not assembled haphazardly at all, assured both black and white listeners that, whatever musical genre they were used to hearing, they could tune in and hear something new and fascinating amidst a batch of otherwise familiar songs. These playlists are valuable microcosms of the middle ground that allowed rock and roll to emerge, as listeners were more apt to embrace the unknown qualities of new music since it was played alongside music they were already comfortable with.

True to form, Nat Williams and Dewey Phillips were among the first deejays to integrate their playlists, but the popularity of these shows soon led plate spinners across the country to emulate their tactics. On Williams's show, Cantor explained, "The first number—as on all r-&-b shows—had to be fast and flashy, something like the Coasters doing 'Yakety-Yak' or Chuck Berry blasting out 'Maybellene.' After that Nat liked to play the ballads—The Platters' 'My Prayer' or 'Only You,' and always he would end up with a little hometown blues, like B.B. doing 'Sweet Little Angel' or 'The Thrill is Gone.'"⁹⁹ Although all of these artists are black, the switch from R&B to pop to the blues still allowed listeners to hear a diverse assortment of musics, and Williams ultimately began allowing more white artists into his rotations as listeners demanded their favorite hits, regardless of race. Even though Phillips's show was meant to lure black audiences in with black-oriented music, his playlists also scrambled R&B, gospel, and the blues with pop and country and western discs. Cantor noted that "Not only would most white teenagers never have

⁹⁸ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 157.

⁹⁹ Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale*, 126.

heard the black sounds, but, more important, they would have missed a great many other musical genres as well because Dewey wasn't playing black music exclusively." He gave an example of one of Phillips's eclectic playlists:

On *Red, Hot and Blue* could you have Dean Martin's 'That's Amore' followed by Big Mama Thornton's 'Hound Dog,'; Patti Page followed by Howlin' Wolf; Mahalia Jackson's 'Move on up a Little Higher' preceding Lloyd Price's 'Lawdy, Miss Clawdy'; and then Hank Williams and Rosetta Tharpe back to back. Only by listening to Daddy-O-Dewey did you hear everything from B.B. King's 'Three O'Clock Blues' to Muddy Waters's 'Hoogie Cootchie Man.' And just about the time that you thought Dewey had slipped totally out of the mainstream he'd throw Frankie Laine's 'That's My Desire' on the turntable."¹⁰⁰

This playlist, which joyfully mixed white with black, pop with R&B, country, gospel, and the blues, assured that all of Phillips's listeners, both black and white heard sounds they were accustomed to and sounds that were intriguingly different. More importantly, mixing these genres assured that young listeners were enjoying the same music at the same time, no matter what their racial background was. Age continued to define popular culture more than race did in many ways, which further prepared some of the youth of this generation to be more accepting of movements for desegregation and racial tolerance.

Even when listeners sought out a specific musical genre, they often had trouble doing so, since specialized radio programs were rare until the late 1960s. Tony Thomas recalled:

I tended to like more of the black tunes if they were played. Not all of them would be played. There was one format [for] music on the radio...It wasn't like now we're gonna play black songs. They would play five songs and might have Johnnie Horton singing "The Battle of New Orleans" followed by Mickie and Sylvia followed by the Everly Brothers followed by Paul Anka and it wasn't like there were specific programs. In other places there were black-oriented radio stations or country-oriented radio stations, but they didn't have anything like that then. So I think I tended to like of the white songs the more country-oriented songs, and I liked some of the black R&B things, but I also liked more rhythm-oriented stuff.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 140.

¹⁰¹ Tony Thomas, in discussion with the author, November 9, 2011.

Despite the fact that Thomas deliberately tried to listen to black-oriented music, he was unable to find a station which only played this genre in his hometown of Hartford, Connecticut. The songs he actually searched the airwaves for were mixed in with pop, folk, and country hits, so if he wanted to listen to R&B, he had to listen to other genres as well. In the process, he wound up appreciating country songs which were generally aimed towards a white audience. Similarly, blues artist Bobby Bland told a Memphis newspaper “that he wasn’t interested in hillbilly music until he came to Memphis and began to listen to the radio.” Louis Cantor explains that, like many black musicians in the city, Bland was a fan of Dewey’s *Red, Hot and Blue* show, where he heard country and western tunes alongside the R&B he originally tuned in for. “I still know more hillbilly tunes than I do blues,” Bland said. “Hank Snow, Hank Williams, Eddie Arnold—so much feeling, so much sadness.”¹⁰² Radio stations began playing more varied playlists *in response* to young audience demand, but this response precipitated wider musical interests in other listeners in turn. This dynamic cycle between producers and consumers allowed kids to be introduced to songs, and entire musical genres, which they might never have otherwise heard.

Even though popular radio programs delivered different mixes of music in an efficient manner, merely requiring that a potential listener turn to a particular station, young people were introduced to different genres through other methods as well. Odetta, for instance, remembered her childhood in Los Angeles, where she was affected by many genres from different places, often because her father introduced them to her. “We had on the radio rhythm and blues. We had popular ballads. We had big bands,” she said. “Daddy would take us every week when they changed the bill at the colored theater to hear the big bands...And on Saturday afternoons or mornings, came the Metropolitan Opera. And Saturday night came the Grand Ole Opry...Daddy was going to listen

¹⁰² Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 142.

to that whether I made faces or not. And it's amazing when I got into folk music how much I remembered of the music I thought I was not listening to. I remembered."¹⁰³ Sometimes jukeboxes, which, by the 1940s, began to feature an array of musical choices in certain areas, provided listeners with the ability to mix and match genres that they responded to. When Jerry Wexler went to college in Kansas, of all places, he found jukeboxes that played "the most marvelous mixture of genres. Jazz like Louis Armstrong's 'Ding Dong Daddy from Dumas' would be next to so-called race records like 'Take It Easy, Greasy, You've Got a Long Way to Slide.' Bing Crosby on button A1; Adolph Hofner on A2. The juxtaposition fascinated me. It was my first taste of country music, and I loved what I heard."¹⁰⁴ Jerry Blavat, a white R&B deejay who grew up in an Italian neighborhood in South Philadelphia in the 1950s, also recalled loving this 'juxtaposition' of musics. "I lived in a neighborhood where there was always music," he said. "And I would hear my aunts and my uncles playing the Four Aces, the Four Lads, Frankie Laine, and Rosemary Clooney...But I also hear rhythm and blues. 'Sh-Boom' by the Chords and 'Little Darling' by in those days the Gladiolas, before 'Little Darling' was remade by the Crew Cuts. And this music hit my ear even though I was listening to my aunts and uncles play the pop music of the day."¹⁰⁵ So the 'juxtaposition' of familiar and unfamiliar, black and white, that Wexler described and Blavat alluded to, is key to understanding the interracial appeal of listening to a variety of musics that would ultimately help shape the new genre of rock and roll. Supremes member Mary Wilson, for instance, attested, "We all loved Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Sam Cooke, and my personal

¹⁰³ Camille Cosby, interview with Odetta, National Visionary Leadership Project, May 26, 2003, 25. American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁴ Jerry Wexler, draft of *Rhythm and the Blues*, 68, Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 2, Folder 1, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹⁰⁵ Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town*, 39.

favorites included the McGuire Sisters, Doris Day, and Patti Page.”¹⁰⁶ Wilson, like so many of her compatriots, was able to group black rock and roll stars with white pop stars together without noting any incongruence. The jolt of this juxtaposition had, by the mid-1950s at least, ceased to be quite so shocking.

As early as the beginning of the decade, though, the music charts tracked by *Billboard* and other trade publications reflected teenage purchasing habits and deejay playlists. Popular singles and albums had been divided into three distinct lists, pop, R&B, and country and western by 1949, but these divisions represented supposed racial and regional preferences rather than musicological technicalities. The genres did differ from each other, of course, but nothing prevented a song from placing on more than one chart since the numbers merely reflected which records sold best in areas that supposedly catered to white, black, and rural demographics. Since young listeners were not allowing race or regional background to interfere with the kinds of music they purchased or listened to on the radio, the charts, like radio playlists, began to resemble each other more and more. If a pop song sold well in black neighborhoods, it would hit the R&B charts. If an R&B record was popular in larger or suburban music chain stores, it would make the pop charts. And country music selling anywhere outside of the South was destined to be granted a place on either of the other two lists. Such songs came to be known as “crossovers,” and the music industry was definitely not prepared for them to become so popular.

Philip Ennis insists that “The ‘crossover,’ a term familiar to us now, was a new and puzzling phenomenon in the early 1950s. A record that crossed over from one chart to another was a mysterious entity, raising questions about what had allowed it to cross that boundary and what

¹⁰⁶ Mary Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith: My Life as a Supreme* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), 24.

that stream boundary really was.”¹⁰⁷ The number of crossover hits increased into the mid-1950s, and the three charts began to resemble one another more and more. Young listeners were clearly making purchases and listening to music across racial lines in record numbers, and record labels eventually caught up. By 1965, Leonard Chess was able to tell an interviewer that

Today...you get hits from all over. Not just one city, and you get white and colored hits too. That's helped because today you don't have to be white to get a white audience and you don't have to be colored to get a colored audience. Everybody buys both kinds of records. And everybody is discovering what we knew a long time ago: there's nothing like good r. and b. Even a Muddy Waters or a Howlin' Wolf could make it today in the pop field.¹⁰⁸

This was a musical revolution driven by black and white teenagers' insistence on hearing music from different genres, which would help shape the emergence of rock and roll even further.

Crossover hits could occur in two ways. Sometimes, a particular record would sell so well in all markets that it would hit two or more charts simply by way of its expansive popularity.¹⁰⁹ The records of R&B pioneer Louis Jordan, for instance, were so popular with whites that 21 of his songs crossed over to either the pop or country charts between 1942 and 1951. “I made just as much money off white people as I did colored,” Jordan was fond of saying. “I could play a white joint this week and a colored next.”¹¹⁰ Records like these were able to broach what were supposed to be strong racial, class, and regional boundaries. Sometimes, however, a song would place on more than one chart only if it was recorded by different people. A good example of this form of crossover is Hank Williams's 1951 country hit, “Cold, Cold Heart,” which hit the pop charts when

¹⁰⁷ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 199.

¹⁰⁸ Grevatt, “The Chess Records Story,” 12.

¹⁰⁹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 200.

¹¹⁰ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 136-137.

Tony Bennett's more polished, melodic version came out, and the R&B charts when Dinah Washington's jazzy cover, complete with piano, saxophone, and smooth background vocals, was released.¹¹¹ In these cases, listeners responded to racial or regional divisions, as white suburbanites purchased Bennett's record, and blacks were more likely to go with Washington's. And yet, this kind of crossover still signaled a major cultural shift. Singers and arrangements might change, but the basic message and structure of the song remained intact, able to appeal across demographic lines. Furthermore, because the charts were printed on the same pages in music magazines like *Billboard*, and because radio station playlists were becoming more varied, listeners would have been aware that more than one version of the song was available, and would have been able to see that their favorite hits were also popular with people from different races and classes. For kids who were already more likely to support desegregation movements, this sense of identification across racial lines could help strengthen those beliefs.

At first, the most likely crossover was from the country chart to the pop chart. These hits were usually direct crossovers, although it became increasingly popular for established pop stars to release their own versions of country hits.¹¹² Within the first few years of the decade, however, as more and more records "crossed over," it became more likely for pop and R&B songs to share space on each other's charts. Seventeen records crossed over between the country and pop charts in 1950, while only eight did so between pop and R&B. By the following year, however, the number of hits to cross over between R&B and pop doubled, while records moving between country and pop charts suffered a significant hit. Philip Ennis argues that "most of the records that moved between rhythm and blues and pop were...those by artists doing songs well within the

¹¹¹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 200.

¹¹² Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 209.

limits of white pop performance styles” like Nat King Cole, but also admits that “whatever the manner, a black presence was becoming apparent in pop vocal records.”¹¹³

Most crossovers tended to be “cover” hits, like Dinah Washington’s 1951 version of Frank Sinatra’s hit, “I’m a Fool to Want You,” or Kay Starr’s cover of the Clovers’ “Fool, Fool, Fool” the same year. But direct crossovers were becoming more common. The Clovers’ version of “Fool, Fool, Fool,” for instance, hit the pop charts after Starr’s record did, implying that white kids searched it out and deejays started playing it after they were introduced to the poppier cover. Ennis also argues that, since this record was one of the first R&B singles to be covered by a white artist after achieving popularity among young and black audiences, that it indicates a move away from strict chart segregation, and towards a realization that black and white listeners could enjoy the same song—even if most record labels could not yet quite grasp that they would still listen to that song if sung by an artist of a different racial background.¹¹⁴ The same year, pop records like Les Paul and Mary Ford’s “How High the Moon” were reaching the R&B charts, while R&B records like Billy Eckstine’s “I Apologize” and the Dominoes’ “Sixty-Minute Man” were hitting the pop chart.¹¹⁵ “Sixty-Minute Man” was especially relevant, as it fit more clearly within African-American musical traditions. The single kept its high position on both the R&B and pop charts despite the fact that no white cover appeared to take its place. (This was perhaps due to the boastful adolescent sexuality scarcely concealed in either the title or the lyrics.) “Sixty-Minute Man” was a landmark record, showing that white teenagers were not allowing race to prevent them from purchasing music they felt they could relate to, and also that they were not afraid of black music

¹¹³ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 209-210.

¹¹⁴ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 215.

¹¹⁵ Songs and numbers taken from six representative copies of *Billboard*, January, June, and October, 1951.

and lyrics laden with sexual innuendo. Other, more distinctly black-oriented records like Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88" and Joe Turner's "Chains of Love" also did well on the pop charts, proving to industry insiders that the Dominoes' record was no fluke.¹¹⁶

Black and white listeners may have been purchasing records across racial lines in greater numbers, but direct crossovers between the country and R&B charts were still rare. Philip Ennis says that "In the first half of the fifties decade, hundreds of two-way crossovers took place between pop and country and between pop and rhythm and blues; but there were only two recorded songs that crossed *just* between country and rhythm and blues. The only way the wall between country and black pop could be surmounted was through the pop stream...Peculiarly, the pop chart was the shoehorn that allowed a song to fit both a country and a black pop shoe."¹¹⁷ Still, records were no longer confined to demographics shaped solely by race as younger music fans continued to expand their taste for something different, yet oddly familiar at the same time. In fact, the next crossover to take the music industry by surprise was Johnnie Ray's "Cry," a fairly traditional pop song sung by a white pop singer. Ray grew up loving Billie Holiday, though, and was not shy about admitting the influence she had over his more emotionally direct singing style. Again, this mixture of black and white, familiar and somewhat unfamiliar characteristics, appealed to teenagers of both races, who ensured that both "Cry" and its follow-up, "The Little White Cloud That Cried" remained atop both the pop and R&B charts for most of late 1951 and early 1952.¹¹⁸

Billboard took almost immediate notice of this shift, including an entire feature devoted to crossover potential in the March 15, 1952 issue. "Among the important developments that have

¹¹⁶ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 210-211.

¹¹⁷ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 200.

¹¹⁸ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 215; Arnold Shaw, *The Rockin' '50s*, (Hawthorn Books, 1973), 7.

been taking place in the rhythm and blues field over the past year, one of the most prominent is the increasing importance of the country or southern style blues and country style singer in this market,” one writer noted “Another noticeable aspect is the tremendous influence of r.&b. styles on the pop market.” White pop stars Johnnie Ray and Kay Starr are both mentioned as examples of artists whose “singing style [is] close to r.&b. vocalists,” and who “sells just as well in both fields,” a phenomenon which is depicted as popular and desirable.¹¹⁹ Another writer remarked that “The year 1951, too, was the year of country and Western songs spilling over into the pop field,”

The year 1951, too, was the year of country and Western songs spilling over into the pop field. Last year also was the year in which some rhythm and blues items made the grade in the pop market. While it seems as tho [sic] the line of demarcation among the various types of music are not as clearly defined as they used to be, it is not a certainty yet whether the line has permanently been breached and, perhaps, erased. It is fairly certain, however, that the operator cannot eliminate country artists or rhythm and blues artists or their songs only because they do not fit into what has been called the pop category. Anyone and at anytime can make a strong juke box record.¹²⁰

The concept of crossover hits was still so new that the writer was not quite sure what to make of these lines being “breached”; he even wondered if this was something permanent, or merely a passing fad. Also, the realization that listeners made R&B and country and western hits an essential part of the pop landscape as early as 1952 shows how quickly the crossover phenomenon happened, and how even industry experts were stymied by this shift.

But the crossover trend was just starting to accelerate. Record labels and radio stations quickly embraced this shift, which, in turn, introduced even less adventurous listeners to different kinds of music that they otherwise may not have sought out. In this way, producer responses to consumer demand reinforced this dialogue, creating more opportunities for a new genre to emerge. Decca, for instance, took out a full-page advertisement in a 1952 copy of *Billboard* announcing

¹¹⁹ Rolontz, “Hit Tunes and Good Talent are Keeping the Boxes Busy: Rhythm and Blues,” 82.

¹²⁰ Joe Martin, “Hit Tunes and Good Talent are Keeping the Boxes Busy: The Pops,” *Billboard*, March 15, 1952, 82.

the release of, not one, not two, but *four* different versions of a new song, “Honest and Truly.” Though written by professional popular songwriter Fred Rose, the song was released in all three formats: an R&B version by Little Donna Hightower, a country interpretation by Roland Johnson, and, intriguingly enough, what the ad describes as “two in the popular idiom”: one by white bandleader Guy Lombardo, and one by the Ink Spots, a black R&B and doo-wop group that had achieved considerable crossover success by the early 1950s, even though they had been popular on African-American concert circuits throughout the 1940s. Their considerable appeal to white consumers, however, rendered them as “popular” as Lombardo in Decca’s advertisements, despite the fact that their sound had not changed considerably since becoming a crossover hit. The faces of all four acts are featured prominently on the page, while the type reads

WE BELIEVE that HONEST AND TRULY is so memorable a song that it can be a simultaneous success in all fields: pop, country and western, rhythm and blues. ACTING ON THAT BELIEF, we have recorded HONEST AND TRULY four ways: two in the popular idiom, one country and western style, and one rhythm and blues. WE THINK each is a standout. ALL FOUR VERSIONS go on release the same day—March 10, 1952. WE BELIEVE that when you hear these four records you will agree that they are all candidates for the best-seller lists.¹²¹

Decca was obviously trying to capitalize on the crossover trend, and to profit as much as possible from the release of one song. But it is interesting that, in this case, the label attempted to sell all four versions to deejays, record shop retailers, and jukebox operators, who would undoubtedly play or sell them all to the same audiences. Different versions were recorded to appeal to different tastes, but the assumption here was that those tastes need not be defined by race, class, or region—radio stations and record shops in both black and white neighborhoods could feature all four versions, and expect that one or more would appeal to all listeners. The racial and regional divisions that informed the development of three separate charts were already disintegrating, and

¹²¹ *Billboard*, March 15, 1952, 85.

some enterprising record executives were keen to support this shift, so long as it meant increased profits.

Chart crossovers continued to increase throughout the early 1950s. Lloyd Price's energetic R&B hit, "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" was a huge pop hit upon release in 1952, shocking music industry insiders who did not think that white consumers would be able to relate to the rough Southern dialect or Price's bluesy vocals.¹²² The following year, a country-gospel song, "Crying in the Chapel," which had already hit the country and pop charts after being recorded by white artists Darrell Glen, June Valli, and Rex Allen, crept up the R&B charts when it was covered by the Orioles, a young black doo-wop group. The record immediately crossed directly over to the pop chart when it was released in the fall, and remained at the top of both charts for the remainder of the year. Again, both white and black teenagers eagerly purchased and listened to this record, as well as the other versions of the song, ensuring that they heard the same basic lyrics and melodic structure interpreted by both white and black artists using differing musical characteristics.

By 1954, the charts revealed a 50 percent increase in the number of crossovers from the previous year, most of which were comprised of R&B singles that crossed directly to the pop chart. In addition, Ennis points out, "almost twice as many records moved from R&B to pop than from country to pop—the exact reverse of the previous year. They introduced to young white audiences black artists, whose appeal could extend into country audiences if a white country performer could be persuaded to do a song identified with a black artist."¹²³ This year ushered in the start of "three-way crossovers," records that hit the pop, R&B, and country charts all at the same time, including

¹²² Billy Vera, "The Specialty Story: 1944-1964," Specialty Records, 1994, 27, Specialty Records Collection, Box-Folder OS1-OS6, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹²³ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 217.

“Hearts of Stone,” an R&B ditty by the Charms that was covered by pop act the Fontane Sisters and country singer Red Foley, and “Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight,” an R&B hit by the Spaniels that hit the pop charts when covered by the McGuire Sisters and the country charts when re-done by Johnny and Jack.¹²⁴ These records set a precedent, one that would last until the arrival of Elvis Presley, of R&B records providing the catalyst for three-way crossovers.¹²⁵

But the most explosive record of the year was clearly “Sh-Boom.” An old jailhouse song recorded by the Chords, a young black R&B group, this record, which was supposed to be the B-side to a cover of Patti Paige’s “Cross Over the Bridge,” immediately hit the R&B charts upon its release in March, 1954, and stayed there throughout the spring. Four months later, the song unexpectedly hit the pop charts, despite the fact that the record label did not do any extra advertising aimed at white markets. Enough white kids were reading the R&B charts and listening to black-oriented radio stations, though, that some decided to search out this record, or demand that record stores in their own neighborhoods carry it. Brian Ward ties the release of this record directly to the movement towards political desegregation, noting that, when the *Brown* ruling declaring school segregation unconstitutional came down in May 1954, the Chords’ record was slowly gaining popularity among white kids, thus truly desegregating the music charts. His reasoning for this connection is a bit problematic, though. “Before ‘Sh-Boom’, r&b forays into the pop record charts were relatively isolated phenomena, musical mavericks which implied no major realignment of white consumer preferences.” This assessment is inaccurate, however, as *Billboard* and many major labels and radio station networks recognized this shift as early as 1951. He is correct that “there was a sustained surge of r&b into the pop charts, with more than twice as many

¹²⁴ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 217.

¹²⁵ Numbers culled from a variety of 1954-1955 *Billboard* charts.

records crossing over in 1954 as in the previous year,” but this was part of an accelerating trend that began as early as 1950, not an abrupt shift precipitated by a particular record.

Despite the fact that a white Canadian pop group, the Crew Cuts, recorded a cover of the song a few months later that remained at the top of the pop charts for months and arguably became the definitive version of the song, this was not a case of a record label releasing multiple versions of the same song in order to gain profits. The Crew Cuts cover was, instead, a delayed response to the popularity of a black record among interracial audiences that had not been foretold by record executives. If anything, the odd initial success of “Sh-Boom” should be viewed as a reinforcement of the crossover trend, and the creation of an interracial middle ground, that was already in motion. “By the end of 1954, income from r&b records and tours constituted a \$25 million branch of the industry,” Ward asserts. “A growing, if still relatively small, contingent of young white fans had combined with the black audience to double the market share claimed by r&b from 5 per cent to 10 per cent of the total industry gross.”¹²⁶ He is correct that the white market for black music continued to grow throughout the 1950s (as did the black market for white music), but he still does not quite acknowledge the decision-making process young whites had to undergo in order to find and listen to this music, or the fact that doubling the total percentage of R&B’s market share might indicate an important trend, despite the still relatively small number of black-oriented discs selling among white consumers.

When white and black kids engaged in cross-racial listening habits, they were, at the same time, aware of the fight to desegregate public spaces. Walter Blackwell said that “one thing that sparked me was seeing or reading about conditions that were affecting people in this country and other places,” while Janis Ian recalled that “A couple of the [counselors at the camp run by her

¹²⁶ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 1; 19; 20; 46; 49.

parents]...had gone down South to register black voters; they were our heroes.”¹²⁷ Listening to music across racial lines, then, could precipitate or strengthen political awareness rather than representing a mere aesthetic choice among some black and white teenagers. Choices in music did not always correlate directly with political attitudes, but integration was being talked about in both arenas, and the acceptance of one could reinforce support for the other. Youth from both racial backgrounds knew what they were up against when they began listening to different genres of music, and the willingness to do so could strengthen any existing approval of racial integration. This reinforcement could help whites to become more comfortable voicing opposition to segregation, and blacks to promote the desegregation of public places despite its limitations, and the dangers they faced if they did so.

Today, people who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s generally talk about supporting desegregation movements no matter which racial background they identify with, but these goals, and the fights to achieve them, were often framed differently by whites and blacks. While whites tended to view the movement in terms of *righteousness*, blacks were more likely to see it as a fight for actual *rights*. Both groups could support the movement, and even sound like they were talking about the same objectives and participating in the same activities. But a person’s racial background could also bring the very real discrepancies within the philosophy of racial integration into focus.

Even today, sympathetic whites often talk about the movement in romanticized terms, of hoping to create a biracial “beloved community” where skin color no longer acts as any sort of determinant, and a sort of moral unity binds all Americans together. In a 19** interview, former SDS member Richard Flacks noted, “You could feel that there was something very significant about what was going on in the South. It sort of portended something that would be of longer term

¹²⁷ Walter Blackwell, interview with Ellen Fishman, July 17, 1978, 2, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan; Ian, *Society’s Child*, 29.

importance. It had a kind of moral quality, which was very important in overcoming the reluctance to be politically involved on the part of intellectual-type students.”¹²⁸ Former SDS president Todd Gitlin also recalled that “there was a lot of romanticism involved in the definition of the real people.”¹²⁹ This is why some white liberals began to listen to the rhetoric of nonviolence espoused by Martin Luther King Jr. and the actions of Montgomery churchgoers during the bus boycott: these words and actions were shaped by Judeo-Christian values and the espousal of Gandhian-style nonviolence. It was hard to deny the righteousness of their demands when televisions across the country broadcast images of calm, well-dressed black people being assaulted by snarling white police officers and their supporters. John Sinclair explained this framing of the movement as a sort of fight for absolute good, and why it appealed to middle-class white youth. “During its early phase, the civil rights movement carried with it an air of moral purpose so strong and so pure that almost everyone could see that blacks had right on their side,” he said.

Here were American citizens being beaten and arrested simply for asking for their constitutionally guaranteed rights. Opposing them were fat Southern sheriffs and cracker politicians like George Wallace and Lester Maddox. The message was clear, and millions of kids found themselves in sympathy with the black man’s struggle against unjust authority. When the children found out that their parents, their liberal parents, participated knowingly in the system of racial injustice, their respect for the Square ‘ideal’ was dealt a serious blow.”¹³⁰

Whites often frame their support of the movement, or at least their opposition to the massive resistance staged by Southern white supremacists, in terms of fairness, of justice, of a simple distinction between right and wrong. Bibb Edwards recalled that “it became obvious that

¹²⁸ Interview with Richard Flacks, Bret Eynon & Ellen Fishman, 5, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹²⁹ Interview with Todd Gitlin, Bret Eynon, September 16, 1978, 13, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹³⁰ Bret Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” November 21, 1977, 24, Michigan Historical Collections, Contemporary History Project Papers, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

these barriers had to come down. It was simple, the right thing to do.”¹³¹ Bob Razer, who grew up amidst civil rights struggles in Little Rock, Arkansas, remembered seeing “the inequality from not being able to eat at a lunch counter. That seemed silly to me.” He did not wish to disturb the status quo, however, until the events of 1963 and ’64, which occurred when he was in high school. “I was shocked by [Police Chief Bull] Connor’s use of dogs on protestors in Birmingham and by the bombing of the church that killed the girls,” he said. “I knew that wasn’t right, and to bomb a church was way wrong. Then a few months later [during the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign], Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were killed and I began to realize I was on the wrong side of this debate.”¹³² Fran Shor asserted that “I felt like this was just a matter of fairness and very much identified with the whole civil rights agenda as a matter of justice,” while Peter Rachleff remembered being “upset by injustice; I was uncomfortable about my family’s (and my) privilege.”¹³³ Arnie Bauchner, who played basketball with black schoolmates, admitted that “for whatever reasons—I don’t know what the roots were—I always felt I basically had liberal sentiments rather than feeling like people were fucked over. And probably feeling sorry, for a lot of it was internal, but it was like a basic sympathy.”¹³⁴ Ann Wells summed up this attitude towards integration and moderate racial reform perfectly, noting that “there was finally a peace for me personally when those barriers were removed. I felt that finally we were all allowed to experience the same ‘place.’ Without really realizing it, I guess my views had been fairly constant that these

¹³¹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

¹³² Bob Razer, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, December 31, 2011.

¹³³ Shor, interview with author; Peter Rachleff, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 17, 2011.

¹³⁴ Arnie Bauchner, interview with Bret Eynon, December, 1978, 4-5. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

things were wrong.”¹³⁵ In both the North and South, even if they did not act on their new beliefs, more young whites viewed the moderate, desegregationist goals of the civil rights movement as a way of bringing people together and making things right. Most, when asked about their feelings regarding integration, or towards people of other races in positions of power, said that they felt fine about it, or that it did not bother them because all Americans ought to be treated the same way, regardless of their skin color. Mistakes had been made; the movement, to many whites, was a chance to fix these mistakes, and to move forward as smoothly as possible.

Increasing numbers of young white people did not exhibit any real hostility to the idea of interracial cooperation or social integration during the moderate or integrationist phase of the movement, even if the reality had not yet been tested. Black activists, though, were motivated to fight for political and economic equality, the right to be treated fairly and with dignity, as was supposedly assured to them under the Bill of Rights. Creating an integrated beloved community was a nice thought, but it was not the true goal for most blacks, who were more concerned with equal treatment than they were with white acceptance. The *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, for example, was partially decided on the basis of Dr. Kenneth Clark’s argument that segregated schools fostered inferiority complexes among black children. Chief Justice Earl Warren’s opinion of the court supports this correlation:

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Ann Wells, in discussion with the author.

¹³⁶ “*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* - 347 U.S. 483,” <http://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/case.html>, last accessed August 11, 2013.

While it is undoubtedly true that racial segregation promoted feelings of inferiority among black children, the foundation of this inferiority did not come from being separated from whites—it came from the underfunded schools that black children were forced to attend, and the meager resources they were given to support their educations. In fact, the NAACP’s decision to focus on integration as a legal/political strategy was made because many activists felt that it would be the most effective way to achieve equal access to quality schools and balanced educational funding. Thomas Sugrue explains that, for Verda Bradley, who fought against the racially segregated school system in Detroit in the 1960s, “unlike integrationists, she did not believe that association with white students would help children...overcome their educational or ‘cultural’ deficiencies. She did not argue, as had the NAACP in its *Brown* case, that her sons’ self-esteem was at stake in Detroit’s segregated educational system...She cared simply about quality.”¹³⁷ During a 2003 interview with Camille Cosby, B.B. King explained a joke that he and his friends would play that reinforced the idea that blacks cared more about equality than they did integration. “One said ‘colored’ and the other one said ‘white’,” he said of public drinking fountains in the rural Mississippi area where he grew up. “Course we used to switch them sometimes...Then tried to see what did they do? How much it taste different to [whites]. But I’d never see them change. They’d keep drinking.” “But the water tastes the same, right?” Cosby asked. “Yes,” King remarked. “They wanted to see that.”¹³⁸ King and his friends pulled this rather dangerous prank in order to assure themselves that they really were equal despite what Jim Crow laws told them; they did not much care about sharing

¹³⁷ Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (Random House, 2008), 450.

¹³⁸ Camille Cosby, interview with B.B. King, National Visionary Leadership Project, 17, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

fountains with whites, they only wanted to see that the water tasted the same coming from both pipes. Even Oliver Brown, the parent whose complaint served as the basis for the *Brown* case, initially approached the NAACP because he was concerned about his daughter having to walk a long distance to a black school when the family lived within the vicinity of a white school, not because he felt that her self-esteem was damaged because she was separated from white children.¹³⁹

It was the need to strive for actual black *advancement* instead of mere civil equality that delineated the black view of the mainline civil rights movement from the white view. Many blacks supported Martin Luther King Jr. and his goals of integration, but they were also concerned that non-violent protest and a focus on desegregation alone would not produce true racial equality. Tyrone Williams supported this notion, explaining that he “was opposed [to the integrationist movement] since the issue of underfunding urban schools was not addressed.”¹⁴⁰ Bunyan Bryant recalled that, since many of the women in his family who worked as maids in white homes “they would tell us about how mean white people were and they would also tell us how good some of them were.” Ultimately, he did not see the need to reach out for white assistance. “When the civil rights activities began, my attitude was, ‘Why does King want to integrate anyway?’”¹⁴¹ Others were more inclined to support desegregation efforts simply because they grew up in neighborhoods with few racial problems. Chuck Brown described growing up in a poor area of rural North Carolina next door to a white family who also lived in poverty. “Their kids would play with me, no problem,” he said. “We had a good time.” When asked whether the black and white families

¹³⁹ “Black, White, and Brown,” *PBS NewsHour*, May 12, 2004.

¹⁴⁰ Tyrone Williams, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 4, 2011.

¹⁴¹ Bunyan Bryant, interview with Ellen Fishman, January, 1979, 5. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

in the area got along, he replied “Absolutely...Got along fine.”¹⁴² Cissy Houston also grew up in an integrated poor neighborhood, in the urban environs of Newark, New Jersey. “It was the kind of neighborhood where you shared,” she said. “You know, if you had meat and potatoes or rice or whatever, you shared it. Whoever didn’t have something, you’d share it.” When asked if “racial distinctions” ever hampered this sense of community, she answered. “No. Not really. Because...they were as poor or poorer than we were. [My dad] did have a job.”¹⁴³ Black people who were used to living in mixed-race neighborhoods were more likely to view movement goals of integration with the same sense of ambivalence as some of their white peers. Racial equality was a goal worth fighting for, but desegregated spaces would not necessarily foster equal treatment.

Other black people who grew up during this period may have been open to working with whites, but did not think that integration was necessary in order to achieve true freedom and equality. Najee Muhammad clarified this distinction, cautiously stating that “if [civil rights activists] were sincere, serious, and committed, I was proud of them and supported them.” He stipulated, however, that “I was not a follower of Martin Luther King’s approach. [I] understood that it was probably the way to go, but I didn’t like treatment of Black people who were protesting to just live unencumbered.”¹⁴⁴ Some were concerned that they might be more vulnerable to white harassment and violence in desegregated spaces. Walter Blackwell explained that, at first, “I was really very leery of white people. I came a long way; I have to admit that I had to relate to people

¹⁴² Renee Pouissant, interview with Chuck Brown, National Visionary Leadership Project, 2007, 33, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹⁴³ Renee Pouissant, interview with Cissy Houston, National Visionary Leadership Project, December 14, 2006, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

¹⁴⁴ Najee Muhammad, in discussion with the author.

as people.” His view of white people changed as he encountered like-minded activists, but he remained committed to working for equality rather than simple integration. “I came a long way, ‘cause I saw that there were white people who were saying, ‘Well, hey, you know, that’s an injustice’,” he says. “They were confronting the philosophies, combating the philosophies, just like I was. And my attitudes changed a lot. I said, ‘Well, damn, there’s some good people.’”¹⁴⁵ Madison Foster said of whites who fought for integration that “I could be their friend—we would sit and drink beer, we could hang out together. But I wasn’t going to let whites come in and equally participate in a black organization, when they weren’t clear on what it meant to be black.”¹⁴⁶ Sometimes white attempts at desegregation could be surprising, though. Odetta recalled meeting Jimmy Driftwood, a white teacher from Arkansas. “He came on with this accent and the hairs on my back stood up,” she recalled. “I was ready for whatever was coming, okay?...He seemed like a sweetheart, and, ‘You must come and visit us.’.... But I had to work really hard to get past that accent.”¹⁴⁷ Each of these people learned to like whites they came into contact with, and even appreciate some of the work they did to help fell Jim Crow laws, but integration was never the most prominent goal. The desire to freely mingle with white people, to enter white society, or to create a truly interracial community is not evident in any of these visions of racial equality, and, in some cases, is presented as potentially threatening. Instead, blacks were mainly concerned about ensuring that their rights would be granted and upheld.

If integration encompassed different visions and different goals for blacks and whites on political and economic levels, then, it makes sense that the understanding of music as a middle

¹⁴⁵ Eynon, interview with Walter Blackwell, 20.

¹⁴⁶ Madison Foster, interview with Bret Eynon, July, 1978, 16. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹⁴⁷ Cosby, interview with Odetta, 27-28.

ground could affect them differently as well, even if it provided a shared cultural space. While this space could act as a means of communication for the races, listeners did not always come away having heard the same messages. These variations, if significant enough, could hinder the power of this genre to help eradicate racial prejudices and misconceptions. Interestingly, different racial attitudes towards musical crossovers actually mirror white and black impressions of the desegregationist phase of the civil rights movement. These responses prompted listeners to have different interpretations of the music's ability to bring people together, even as they acknowledged that it did, in fact, possess the potential to do so.

Again, whites tended to focus on the concept of righteousness, concluding that it was wrong to treat people unfairly if you enjoyed their music and respected their abilities. Bibb Edwards explained this connection, noting, "I grew up with the attitudes and values of the Jim Crow era surrounding me. Yet by my mid-teens I had concluded that there was no justification for a segregated society. Somewhere between my 7th and 11th grades...something happened. I think it was who was making the music I loved that caused me to think of blacks as people just like me. And it was just simply wrong to treat them differently."¹⁴⁸ The allure of rebellion was also quite strong here. White youth who were beginning to see themselves on the right side of history were also standing in opposition to expected racial and societal guidelines and, sometimes, even their own parents. White teenagers definitely used black music to define themselves against their own racial norms. But since they did not have to break away from all of these norms in order to do so, black culture, and some of the people who delivered it to them, were seen as acceptable and normal rather than completely cut off from mainstream white society. They could then be understood as people *in the same way that whites were people*, rather than as a completely different group outside

¹⁴⁸ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

of their expected reality. Stan Wells emphasized that “white kids became big fans of a lot of black musicians and made them very successful. Once they were main stream music we just considered them people.”¹⁴⁹

But while white teenagers heard rebellion in the supposedly dissonant sounds of early rock and roll, black teenagers tended to hear something completely different: mainstream inclusion. Earlier black musical forms may have earned a degree of cultural recognition in certain white circles, but this was different. Rock and roll, with its distinctly African ‘beat’ and roster of black and black-inspired musicians, had become the most popular music in the land, at least among the young. Mainstream news outlets like *Time* and *Newsweek* printed articles about rock and roll music which actually acknowledged the genre’s African-American ancestry, and included profiles of some of the biggest black stars. To middle- and aspiring-class black teenagers, who were used to seeing most African-American accomplishments published only in black-oriented magazines like *Jet* and *Ebony*, this shift had monumental consequences. People who looked like them were being lauded by readers and listeners across the country. Although African-American influences have always helped to shape greater American culture, this was the first time that these influences were being acknowledged by the mainstream press. These acknowledgements were not always presented in the most positive light. But black youth were able to recognize, and feel proud about, African-American contributions to one of the most major cultural forces in the country. Although they did not always use the middle ground to rebel against expected norms as their white contemporaries were, this shared space helped them to feel that they could be included in mainstream American culture as well, and that they could share parts of this culture with like-minded white teenagers.

¹⁴⁹ Stan Wells, in discussion with the author.

Black and white teenagers in the early and mid-1950s definitely had different reasons for supporting desegregation movements and for crossing racial boundaries in music. Still, the fact that both sides were expressing interest in the cultural traditions of the other through music, and that both expressed more of a willingness to work towards racial integration and to at least try to understand the viewpoints of other races, helped create a middle ground enforced by both aspects. The connection between music and politics became apparent by the middle of the 1950s, as both the movement and the brand-new genre of rock and roll suffered blows that had the potential to limit change in either sphere.

Chapter Five

In 1952, or so the story goes, the R&B group Billy Ward and the Dominoes were guests on Alan Freed's popular Moondog Show. As they listened to the Dominoes' hit, "Sixty Minute Man," Ward described Freed's reaction: "It's not authentic rhythm and blues, or jazz or pop. It has no classification, really. We've got to find a name for it." As the line, "I rock 'em roll 'em all night long, I'm a sixty minute man," played, "Freed leaped to his feet. 'That's it!' He cried hoarsely. 'Rock and Roll! That's what it is!'"¹ Whether this event happened at all is under question, but most historians note that the term, which was slang for sexual intercourse in some black neighborhoods, gradually came to describe the music that combined elements from pop, R&B, and country and western, appealed mostly to teenagers, and had a strong dance beat, but otherwise held few discernible characteristics. It would, nevertheless, revolutionize music around the world, and help to shape a youth culture that became more and more powerful by the end of the decade.

By the mid-1950s, as civil rights campaigns made nightly news broadcasts across the country, rock and roll music reached its first apex of integrated popularity. Reebee Garofolo argues that "The eruption of civil rights as a national issue was anticipated by a number of regional struggles which also had parallels in popular music," noting that "when Rosa Parks moved up to the front of the bus in 1955, black artists like Fats Domino..., Little Richard..., and Chuck Berry...were just beginning to crossover into the pop market as heroes of rock 'n' roll."² Although he is correct that a distinct link exists between both forms of racial integration, it is not so much that musical integration "anticipated" movement support as it is that could work in tandem with

¹ Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Culture* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 18.

² Reebee Garofolo, "Popular Music and the Civil Rights Movement" in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements* Ed. Reebee Garofolo (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 1999), 232.

one another to reinforce favorable attitudes towards racial integration in both cultural and public spaces. Since this new genre was shaped by both white and black musical traditions and artists, it represented a middle ground for listeners of both races to become more comfortable with the differences between them, and to acknowledge their similarities.

Between 1954 and 1958, the *Billboard* music charts, which measured record purchases, radio spins, and jukebox play across the nation, were more racially integrated than ever before (or since, for that matter).³ Rock and roll, which emerged as a mixture of pop, R&B, and country musics, acted as a unique forum for the practice of cultural integration just as activists were fighting for political and spatial desegregation. This connection was identified as early as 1955, which *Billboard* dubbed “The Year R&B Took Over Pop Field.” This was the year that white country artist Carl Perkins’s “Blue Suede Shoes” became the first record to top the pop and R&B charts at the same time, indicating that both black and white fans were aware of new releases in all three genres, and were willing to purchase them.⁴ R&B records increased from 3 to 10 percent of the pop market, precipitating another headline the following year, “Desegregation of Chart Categories Earmarks ’56.”⁵ Since the term ‘desegregation’ was used quite frequently to describe civil rights goals, readers would not have missed the association here.

The unique mixture of racialized musical traditions embraced by most major artists also encouraged more positive views of racial integration. White artists like Elvis Presley and Bill Haley grew up listening to the blues and gospel, as well as country music, and had varying

³ For a detailed chart and explanation of the rise and peak incidence of crossover hits, please see Chapter 9, “The Early Crossovers” in Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 193-228.

⁴ Michael Lydon, *Rock Folk: Portraits from the Rock ‘n’ Roll Pantheon* (New York: Citadel Press, 1990), 15.

⁵ Steve Chapple & Reebee Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1978), 231; June Bundy, “Desegregation of Chart Categories Earmarks ‘56” *The Billboard*, January 26, 1957, 48.

connections to African-American culture and the black neighborhoods in their communities. At the same time, black musician Chuck Berry loved the country, pop, and R&B songs that he listened to on the radio while growing up in a fairly prosperous black neighborhood. These artists would ultimately emerge as the progenitors of rock and roll, due, in large part, to their mixed musical heritages.

Alan Freed may have claimed to have given rock and roll its name in 1952, but it was at least two years before the moniker caught on nationwide, when Bill Haley's cover of Joe Turner's "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" debuted to massive sales numbers in all three genres.⁶ Although many listeners and music industry insiders knew that something completely different was taking over the country's airwaves, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when rock and roll was defined as a distinctive genre rather than simply a collection of pop, R&B, or country songs that had crossover potential. Music writers and historians have nominated both "Sixty Minute Man" and Haley's version of "Shake, Rattle, and Roll," as well as "Rocket 88," a catchy, bluesy 1951 hit by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats (a *nom de plume* for Ike Turner's Kings of Rhythm), among others, as the first rock and roll record, but it is almost impossible to single out a particular song as the harbinger of this new genre. Rock and roll was not consciously created; it instead came to describe a genre of songs that combined pop, R&B, and country characteristics in such a way that they could no longer be aptly confined to any of these older formats. To try and condense a somewhat gradual shift into one singular record that supposedly first captured the major elements of the new genre of rock and roll is therefore bound to create problems. Michael Lydon argues that the

⁶ The August 7, 1954 issue of *Billboard*, for instance, includes many uses of the phrase "rock and roll," including a review of "Gonna Roll and Rock" by Lucky Joe Almond in the C&W pages. *Billboard* and other trade publications continued to use terms like "pop," "R&B," or "rhythm tunes" to describe what would later be considered rock and roll, but the actual label was used by this point, and gradually, by about 1956-57, overtook other descriptions.

recognition of rock and roll as a separate entity emerged between 1954 and 1956. “Some date rock back to Fats Domino’s first million seller (‘The Fat Man’) in 1948, or even to ‘Open the Door, Richard’ in 1946; the music does go back that far, but it really became rock ‘n’ roll when it met its response,” he says. “Neither music nor phenomenon alone, rock ‘n’ roll is a mass sensibility.”⁷ Although he is correct that it is best to understand the birth of rock and roll as a process rather try to pinpoint a distinct catalyst, attributes that helped to define this new genre appeared before most people knew to identify them as anything other than “crossovers.”

At first, many music industry insiders described R&B songs that hit the pop charts and pop records sung by black artists as “whitened blues,” or, in producer Phil Spector’s parlance, “pop blues,” partially because they had no other way to understand that a new genre was forming.⁸ The only method of explaining this phenomenon was to consider that listeners of both races liked the same songs because white people were singing bluesy styles, or black artists were adapting poppier melodies. Rock writer Nick Tosches, for instance, describes “the greatest revolution in the history of the music business since the invention of sound-recording” as the introduction of “whitefolk rock ‘n’ roll” in 1954.⁹ This depiction conjures images of white theft of black music rather than a fairly organic mixture of different musical genres, a sum that differed significantly from its parts. But as much as listeners and those who worked in the music industry slowly began to realize that a new category of music had in fact crept into recording studios and radio stations across the country, this allusion to ‘whitened blues’ persisted. In 1958, Alan Freed declared that, though he had allegedly given the genre its name, “Rock ‘n’ Roll is rhythm and blues and was called ‘Race

⁷ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 10.

⁸ “The Rolling Stone Interview: Phil Spector,” *Rolling Stone*, November 1, 1969, Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁹ Nick Tosches, *Hellfire: The Jerry Lee Lewis Story* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 86.

Music’ because the Negroes originated the blues. Today it’s not as pure, but the basis for all Rock ‘n’ Roll is still blues.”¹⁰ What is not quite “pure” about the music is undoubtedly its white influence. Even Freed, one of the genre’s most insistent proponents of rock and roll’s celebration of racial integration, cannot resist implying that the music is, more or less, a more melodic version of the blues made marketable for white teenagers. Even *Billboard* continued to refer to crossover hits as “a popularized form of r&b” as late as 1956.”¹¹ By the late 1960s, Michael Lydon described rock and roll as “blues with a beat, created by men whose potency had wider scope than sex alone.”¹² Even Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, who admit that “The differences between rock ‘n’ roll and r&b were real,” argue that said differences “were motivated by the tastes of the music’s new white audience.”¹³ Again, the genre is not defined by the integration of characteristics from three distinct musical formats, but by who is listening, and how it is marketed.

The problem with describing rock and roll as simply “whitened blues,” aside from the fact that this label ignores the real differences that separated this genre from its predecessors, is that it renders a music based on sharing and borrowing musical characteristics across racial lines as mere white theft of black music. This does not mean that actual theft did not occur as rock and roll music emerged as a distinct genre. Chapple and Garofalo state that “In the battle between major and independent record companies, a battle between white run big businesses and white run small business, black musicians lost out.” Saul Bihari, the white founder of Modern records, an independent label that signed jazz, blues, and R&B talent, including B.B. King and Etta James,

¹⁰ Anita Behrman, “What Alan Freed Really Thinks About Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *People Today*, October 1958, 22, Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 56, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹¹ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 231.

¹² Lydon, *Rock Folk*, introduction.

¹³ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 234.

told *Billboard* magazine, “We used to bring ‘em in, give ‘em a little bottle of booze and say, ‘Sing me a song about your girl.’ Or, ‘Sing me a song about Christmas.’ They’d pluck around a little on their guitars, then say “OK” and make up a song as they went along. We’d give them a subject and off they’d go.”¹⁴ Chapple and Garofalo note that

Big Mama Thornton recorded ‘Hound Dog’ three years before Elvis Presley, and according to her the song sold over 2 million copies. But as to her royalties she says ‘I got one check for \$500 and I never seen another.’ Presley also recorded ‘That’s All Right’ written by Arthur ‘Big Boy’ Crudup. Though the song was a big hit for Presley, Crudup was reputed to have received nothing more than an appreciative plaque from Presley and his manager.¹⁵

Enterprising white record executives were known to have white artists re-record hits by black musicians without any permission or payment. When challenged, high-priced company lawyers often drafted spurious arguments that the song in question was actually a traditional blues ballad, and belonged to the public domain. Even when these claims were patently false, most black artists or independent labels did not have the resources to fight back. Garofalo explains that it was incredibly easy for these artists to be denied monetary reparations, even if their songs became huge hits. “Black musicians seldom had access to good advice about record contracts, royalty payments, marketing, promotion, or career development,” he says.¹⁶ Chapple and Garofalo note that “Unlike in the pop field, it was not really necessary to pay any royalties. Composers’ rights were bought for a few dollars or even signed away for the ‘privilege’ of recording.”¹⁷ When Phil Spector was asked if he encountered any black resentment while he was working at Atlantic Records, which was both owned and operated by whites, he immediately replied, “Oh yeah, man.” Black

¹⁴ *Billboard*, January 3, 1953, 3.

¹⁵ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 234-235.

¹⁶ Reebee Garofalo, “Crossing Over: From Black Rhythm & Blues to White Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music* Ed. Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic Books, 2005), 127.

¹⁷ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 29.

musicians, he said, would proclaim, “We bought your home, goddamn, and you don’t forget it, boy. You livin’ in the house we paid for, you drivin’ a Cadillac we got, man. It’s ours. You stole it from us.”¹⁸ Even Ray Charles, who viewed the creation of rock and roll in a far more positive light, asserted that white theft was nevertheless integral to its origins. “They were white hits, but based on black sounds and black rhythms going round years before,” he said. “It wasn’t that I was angry at those white cats for taking from blacks. I’ve always said, just ‘cause Alexander Bell invented the phone don’t mean Ray Charles can’t use it. I gave the ofay boys credit for having good ears. Besides, I played with a white hillbilly band myself.”¹⁹

White music producers definitely earned incredible profits from black artists and songwriters, many of whom were paid little or nothing for their efforts. White artists who covered black songs, or who simply worked blues and R&B traits into their musical interpretations, were also more likely to gain fame and fortune than their black contemporaries, at least at first. But business practices that exploited black musicians and songwriters, and marketing plans that promoted white artists over black ones, did not render the entire creation of rock and roll an expression of racial theft. Black artists may have lost money and credentials *within* this cultural exchange, but the exchange itself was not based on an unpaid debt. To assume that it was is to perpetuate tropes of renewed racial animosities and maintenance of white cultural hegemony rather than identifying real forms of cultural integration that required both races to listen to, and borrow from, each other’s musical heritages.

What actually happened, in light of the craze for crossovers, is that young musicians, who had been listening to music from all three genres, began mixing these characteristics together when

¹⁸ “The Rolling Stone Interview: Phil Spector.”

¹⁹ Ray Charles with David Ritz, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles’ Own Story* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 72-73.

they began writing and performing their own songs. It was these combinations of pop, R&B, and country, not a one-way theft of music, which allowed the new genre of rock and roll to originate. Jerry Lee Lewis, for instance, grew up loving the country music his parents listened to, but also collecting R&B records by Stick McGhee, Lionel Hampton, and Wynonie Harris. As he learned to play the piano himself, he incorporated all of the different sounds he was accustomed to listening to into a new style that stymied his listeners. Lewis's biographer, Nick Tosches, explains that this was not theft, but a new form of musical expression that required white input as well as black. "He was singing something he had taken from the blacks, from the juke-joint blacks," Tosches says, "but he had changed what he had taken, not so much the way someone might paint a stolen pickup to hide his theft, but rather the way that [Lewis's] Uncle Lee had changed those cattle into horses: changed it by pure, unholy audacity."²⁰ Johnny Otis recalled of his days playing with blues and big band leaders in the late 1940s and early 1950s that "We began to develop something with something. It was a hybrid form that wasn't country blues. It was what was to become known as rhythm and blues, a hybrid form that became an art form in itself. It was the foundation of rocknroll."²¹ White artists were not the only ones to borrow across racial lines, though; Motown Records founder Berry Gordy admitted that, when he wrote his first song, "You Are You" at the age of 20, he was "thinking of general audiences even then." "General," in this case, meant white, or, at least, integrated, yet maintaining white appeal. "I had written this song with Doris Day in mind. She was America's girl next door. I knew when she heard it she would feel about it the same as I did and would die to record it."²²

²⁰ Tosches, *Hellfire*, 64-65.

²¹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 196.

²² Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 56.

Budding musicians were used to listening to music across racial lines, and ultimately incorporated elements of all three genres when writing or making their own music. Milt Gabler told an interviewer in 1959 that “Some of the kids get together and try to imitate the records. Their ears become attuned to these chord changes and sounds of guitars, rather than brass and lots of saxophones. It wasn’t long before it went from the real blues songs with a beat, Negro type blues, hillbilly blues, to folk music.”²³ The horns sections of R&B bands were phased out, resulting in a greater emphasis on instruments like the guitar and drums that young people could learn to play by themselves. These kids became the stars of the music industry by the mid-1950s. According to BMI’s official history, “The typical rock & roll songwriter of the period was as young as his audience. Rather than composing songs and submitting them in the traditional “lead sheet” fashion, the rock & roll songwriter instead made a demonstration record, or demo” and brought it to A&R representatives, who were anxious to sign the next big thing.”²⁴ Alan Freed told an interviewer in 1958 that “If ever there was a youth revolution, this is it. Tin Pan Alley lost its monopoly. Kids who never even heard of the Brill building have written their own tunes, recorded them themselves and turned them into hits. Some are no older than their audience.”²⁵ Rock and roll music was created by people who had eagerly listened to music from different genres, and who then combined characteristics from these genres to form something new. Exploitation and racism existed within the music industry, of course, but the development of rock and roll would not have been possible

²³ Bob Franklin, interview with Milton Gabler, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, November 1959, 38, Milt Gabler Collection, Box 4, Folder 19, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

²⁴ Paul Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary: The Explosion of American Music 1940-1990* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation, 1990), 30.

²⁵ Alan Freed, “The Big Beat is Here to Stay,” *TV Radio Mirror*, November 1958, 71, The Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 56, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

without the willingness of young black and white musicians to listen to music across racial lines, and to borrow and re-shape musical characteristics they heard from all three genres.

As these musical boundaries collapsed and young musicians continued to borrow from different musical heritages, rock and roll began to be acknowledged as a separate genre of music rather than a meaningless term for songs that simply had crossover and youth appeal. This genre was instead inspired by the product of mixed musics. It did not mock the cultures they borrowed from, or present itself as a temporary alternative for restless youth who would soon tire of its novelty and move on to more “acceptable” music. There were no formal musical styles for rock and roll to adhere to, and the notion of formal training was often shunned. The idea was that anyone could pick up an instrument, start singing, and become a rock and roll star so long as that person was young and sang with emotion about true, heartfelt experiences. Still, rock and roll was more a simple catch-all term for music that was popular with young people and contained some combination of pop, R&B, and country traits. Political scientist and former *Rolling Stone* reporter Langdon Winner says that “the most fundamental defining characteristic of rock and roll... has always been a 4/4 time signature in which the second and fourth beats are heavily accented. In all rock lyrics and dances the ineluctable ‘one-TWO-three-FOUR’ is the force which sustains the motion.”²⁶ This “motion” he mentions gave rock and roll music the irresistible dance beat that so many black and white teenagers responded favorably to. The genre is also defined by a focus on rhythm, typically provided by drumming. Theodore Gracyk explains that

In addition to a characteristic afterbeat syncopation, rock celebrates it by singling it out and calling it to our attention. So it’s not just what rock does with the rhythm, it’s also how it’s presented in the music’s arrangement. Classical composers tend to subordinate rhythm by incorporating it into harmony and melody. The rhythms of Mozart’s symphonies—even when syncopated—are no less driving, predictable, and insistent than those of the Rolling Stones. *The issue is thus one of arranging, of ‘orchestration,’ not just syncopation of the*

²⁶ Langdon Winner, “The Strange Death of Rock and Roll,” in *Rock and Roll Will Stand* Ed. Greil Marcus (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 46.

meter. In rock, the syncopation is usually emphasized by the drummer, who hits the snare on the second and fourth beats. The backbeat is emphatic.²⁷

Gracyk stresses that, although this backbeat may be created by either guitar or piano, drums are what really drive the pulsating rhythm of rock and roll music. “The lesson, then, is that rock’s beat is not just a rhythm that is played along with the music. Rock’s beat, particularly as highlighted by the drummer, is a matter of strategically accenting and interacting with the beats present in the rest of the music.”²⁸ This foundation, as well as the insistent focus on a backbeat provided by a drummer, differentiates rock and roll from any of the other three genres that it originated from, despite the fact that its 4/4 time signature is derived from pop melodies, and its reliance on rhythm comes from both R&B and country music traditions.

Rock and roll music also maintained the more plaintive vocal tones and relatable lyrics of R&B, while increasing the tempo so that the music sounded more positive. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo argue that “Rock ‘n’ roll was just that forceful. It is the difference, for example, between Elvis Presley’s version of ‘Hound Dog’ and the original sung by Big Mama Thornton. She was an old blues ‘mama’ who knew what it was like to be put through the mill. Presley was a good ol’ country boy having the time of his life shaking his tail feathers on the Ed Sullivan Show.”²⁹ Of Presley’s first single, a cover of blues singer Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup’s “That’s All Right,” critic Greil Marcus makes a similar comparison, arguing that “It’s the blues, but free of all worry, all sin; a simple joy with no price to pay.”³⁰ The fear that whites were singing or performing

²⁷ Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 135-136.

²⁸ Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 135-137.

²⁹ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 234.

³⁰ Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 170

songs written by blacks or shaped by black musical traditions without really understanding the pain and suffering that caused the music and lyrics to be formed in the first place is evident, and yet it still does not detract from rock and roll's function as a form of cultural integration. Both black and white artists made music that was undoubtedly more upbeat and positive than songs in the blues or country traditions. If white audiences responded because they could not sympathize with the brutalities of racism, though, black teenagers who came from middle- and aspiring-class families were also drawn to songs that focused on a more promising future rather than reminding them of the tribulations of continuing racial discrimination. In making these songs more optimistic, rock and roll stars of both races managed to combine the more emotionally direct elements of R&B and country with a brighter attitude that encouraged listeners that everything really would be "all right."

Aside from its ability to encompass musical traits from both white and black cultural backgrounds, rock and roll was also defined by its young audiences, and the role it played in helping to shape the widening gap between adults and teenagers. John Sinclair asserted, "The rock 'n' roll audience was mainly adolescent. It spoke in a language that adolescents could understand, and concerned itself with adolescent issues. Songs about romance rebellion, dancing, and cars helped youngsters to break out of the rigid patterns of their parents."³¹ At the time, Alan Freed stated that "Rock 'n' roll was discovered by the kids themselves...They feel it's new; for their generation alone...when they encountered the powerful, affirmative jazz beat of rock 'n' roll, it was like making an amazing discovery."³² Even though rock and roll music was shaped by

³¹ Bret Eynon, "John Sinclair: Hipster," November 21, 1977, 11, Michigan Historical Collections, Contemporary History Project Papers, Bentley Collection.

³² Theodore Irwin, "Rock 'n' Roll 'n' Alan," *Pageant*, July 1957, 59, Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

musicological traits that distinguished it from other genres, youth appeal was integral to how it was represented and received. At first, producers assumed that only younger teenagers listened to this genre, which meant that the label was bestowed upon almost any song that was popular among high school kids. Not every single with youth appeal could really be called “rock and roll,” but the fact that most musicians and listeners were either teenagers or young adults ultimately helped to define rock and roll against other musical genres; more so, at times than its actual musicological distinctions.

Even though Alan Freed stated that he came up with the phrase “rock and roll” in 1952 to describe new music that incorporated both black and white musical elements, the term did not enter general parlance until the mid-1950s, and it continued to flummox those who did not understand its appeal. Oftentimes, blues, R&B, or simply songs recorded by black artists were mislabeled as rock and roll, and vice versa. A 1957 issue of *Pageant* magazine, for instance, did not seem able to accurately identify the genre. “Rock ‘n’ Roll has come a long way in a short time,” the article read. “At this writing 46 of the top 60 tunes are ‘Big Beat’ numbers. More and more popular singers are turning to rhythm tunes.”³³ It is unclear how the author determined which songs actually constituted rock and roll tunes when “Big Beat” was a term that had long been used to describe pop records, and “rhythm tunes” generally connoted R&B songs. If rock and roll consisted of both, then it is hardly surprising that so many of the most popular records could be classified as such. At the same time, Atlantic Records listed more traditional R&B artists Clyde McPhatter, Ruth Brown, Joe Turner, and Ivory Joe Hunter alongside newer sensations Ray Charles and the Drifters as the “six most prominent Rock & Roll artists” and noted that they “are basic inventory in this idiom and will be sales dynamite with the teenagers as long as there is any market

³³ Alan Freed, “Wonderful World of Rock,” *Pageant*, July 1957, 60, Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

for Rock & Roll at all.”³⁴ In this case, black artists with strong teenage followings were described as rock and roll acts, despite the fact that their musical styles varied widely, from the Drifters’ doo-wop ditties, to Joe Turner’s more traditional (and adult-oriented) rhythm and blues numbers. This confusion lasted well beyond the 1950s. Milt Gabler, for instance, struggled to explain these distinctions as late as 1974. “I had had rock and roll with Sammy Price—well, it goes back actually to the old blues—and Trixie Smith had that famous record, ‘Rock Me Daddy with a Steady Roll,’” he said. “Al Freed started to call the music ‘rock and roll’—I had a blues with Sammy Price and some blues singer [written in Albern Timer Jones, ‘Hole in the Wall’]—that had the phrase ‘rock and roll’ in the lyric, but it wasn’t called that until Freed—Al was really the one who got everybody to call it rock and roll music. I believe he should get credit for that.”³⁵ Gabler, as vice-president of Decca Records during the 1950s, was obviously aware of the current trends, and had an impressive knowledge of black musical traditions, but he still grappled with the concept of rock and roll, even as he oversaw the release of many of the genre’s early hits.

The struggle to define rock and roll continued, but it became emblematic of a racial middle ground almost immediately. The BMI official history describes Fats Domino, one of the first real rock and roll stars, as someone in whom “youngsters white and black alike heard delicious echoes of the country and r&b fusion that was breaking loose all across the nation. (In fact, Dave Bartholomew, a New Orleans musician who often played with Domino, has said, ‘We all thought of him as a country and western singer.’)”³⁶ Here, Domino is described as both an R&B and a

³⁴ “Atlantic Long Playing Sales Fact Sheet: Atlantic Releases 6 Rock and Roll Long Plays by its 6 Top Artists. The Biggest Hits by the Biggest Names in the ‘Big Beat’ Idiom,” Atlantic Recording Corporation Records, Box 1, Folder 5, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

³⁵ Ralph Gleason, Interview with Milt Gabler, 1974, 11, Milt Gabler Collection, Box 4, Folder 18, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

³⁶ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 29.

country singer; while he did, in fact, incorporate elements of both genres in his music, he was able to appeal to fans of both musics by allowing them to hear something familiar and something new at the same time. Rock and roll, with its mixture of musics from different racial backgrounds, thus provided both white and black teenagers with new features to excite them, while remaining grounded in familiar cultural concepts.

Since rock and roll music utilized elements from pop, R&B, and country, almost every young listener could recognize what he or she was hearing without being put off by anything too unfamiliar. At the same time, teenagers of both races who were looking for cultural alternatives were able to hear difference in the chords of these new songs. White teenagers, for instance, could be drawn to the “blues notes” found in many rock and roll songs, while also appreciating the tunes’ melodies or upbeat tempos. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo explain that

To the Western ear, a blue note is a note which sounds a little flat, but not flat enough to be the next note down on the scale. In fact the blue note is an Africanism. In the European scale, the smallest interval between notes is a half-tone. In African song, which bears a close relationship to speech patterns, it is a common practice to ‘bend’ the notes of a given scale to achieve a particular mood. Many of the bluesmen thus sounded as if they were singing in between the notes of the diatonic scale. They were thought to be ‘off key’ by musically limited Western critics. In fact they were singing in their own hidden scale. Blue notes could be found all over rock ‘n’ roll, in for example Elvis Presley’s recording of ‘Hound Dog’ and Jerry Lee Lewis’ ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’,’ both of which also follow a classic twelve bar blues structure.³⁷

These songs, and others released around the same time, gave white teenagers the “off” blues notes that sounded more emotionally direct, while maintaining the European verse-chorus form, rather than the strophic blues structure. At the same time, black kids might recognize blue notes and emotive quality, but be drawn to songs that were arranged like the popular tunes they were used to hearing on general-appeal radio. The fact that such black-appeal music was being marketed like pop music may also have heightened rock and roll’s appeal for black kids who were eager to

³⁷ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 244.

participate in mainstream popular culture, and glad that African-American characteristics were helping to shape it.

A musical middle ground like rock and roll, that comprises both familiar and unfamiliar elements, and allows supposedly segregated groups to exchange ideas in a cultural forum, can attract greater numbers of listeners, especially younger ones. Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin explains that people learn to develop certain “expectations” regarding the music they grow up hearing. “The tension in music motivates us to imagine musical scenarios that will come next—to form predictions,” he says. “When our predictions come true, we feel rewarded and pat ourselves on the back.”³⁸ The habit of “predicting” musical notation occurs when people hear music that is common to their cultural upbringing. This is not a conscious process; Levitin explains that the brain adapts to the basic musical structures of a particular culture, and learns to anticipate certain changes, as well as when the notes return “home” again (i.e. when the expected octave is sounded). Familiar song patterns assure and comfort the brain, but they tend not to stimulate it. “When music is too predictable, the outcome too certain, and the ‘move’ from one note or chord to the next contains no element of surprise, we find the music unchallenging and simplistic,” Levitin continues. “But we can learn even more when our predictions are not true, if events unfold in a way that is logical but is simply not one we would have thought of before ourselves.”³⁹

Combinations of unexpected song elements, like the blue notes or verse-chorus structure, were therefore capable of jolting listeners’ expectations, and forcing them to pay closer attention. Levitin says that “Music communicates to us emotionally through systematic violations of

³⁸ Daniel Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (New York: Plume Printing, 2009), 107.

³⁹ Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Plume Printing, 2006), 230; Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 107.

expectations. These violations can occur in any domain—the domain of pitch, timbre, contour, rhythm, tempo, and so on—but occur they must. Music is organized sound, but the organization has to involve some element of the unexpected or it is emotionally flat and robotic.”⁴⁰ At the same time, if listeners find a piece of music completely foreign, their brains are unable to comprehend it, to receive any of the “rewards” that Levitin describes, at least at first, and are likely to tune out instead. “When [music] is too complex, we tend not to like it, finding it unpredictable—we don’t perceive it to be grounded in anything familiar,” which explains why it is rare for people of one culture to wholly embrace the unadulterated music of another culture. And so, “music, or any art form for that matter, has to strike the right balance between simplicity and complexity in order for us to like it. Simplicity and complexity relate to familiarity, and *familiarity* is just another word for a schema.”⁴¹

Rock and roll did both, for teenagers of both racial backgrounds, at the same time, which helps to explain why it was popular with both groups. But this explanation also shows how rock and roll was able to strike that perfect balance for kids who were struggling to break away from their backgrounds, yet also hesitant about fully embracing new cultural attitudes. Levitin says that “The setting up and then manipulating of expectations is the heart of music. Miles Davis and John Coltrane made careers out of reharmonizing blues progressions to give them new sounds that were anchored partly in the familiar and partly in the exotic.” Although he uses two jazz artists in this instance, rock and roll musicians, who included white and black, pop R&B, and country elements in their repertoires, also achieved this balance.⁴²

⁴⁰ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 168-169.

⁴¹ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 229.

⁴² Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 110.

When listeners of both races tuned into this music, excitedly waiting for the “violations of expectations” that Levitin describes, they were able to learn something new about musical possibilities, which, in turn, helps expand the brain’s capability to process and categorize new experiences. “Learning new things should feel good in our brains because it is usually adaptive,” Levitin says, explaining why listeners are drawn to musical notations that might seem idiosyncratic at first.⁴³ What happens, on a neural level, when people hear an unexpected chord change or a note that seems off, is that “listeners reappraise the entire sequence, subconsciously of course, and realize that there exists a *plausible alternative* to the overlearned sequence they expected to hear. The listener, with the composers’ help, has learned something new about the world.”⁴⁴ But the process does not stop there. Upon repeated listening, the brain actually expands its capability to understand and discover patterns in previously unfamiliar musical structures so that they ultimately become part of a listener’s learned experiences. Robert Zatorre and Valorie Salimpoor of the Montreal Neurological Institute note that “Cortical circuits allow us to make predictions about coming events on the basis of past events. They are thought to accumulate musical information over our lifetime, creating templates of the statistical regularities that are present in the music of our culture and enabling us to understand the music we hear in relation to our stored mental representations of the music we’ve heard.”⁴⁵

When listeners continue to seek out musical structures that surprise them, these innovations become established within stored mental representations, and are often connected to real lived experiences. Zatorre and Salimpoor state that “Each act of listening to music may be thought of as

⁴³ Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 107.

⁴⁴ Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 108.

⁴⁵ Robert J. Zatorre & Valorie N. Salimpoor, “Why Music Makes Our Brains Sing,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2013.

both recapitulating the past and predicting the future. When we listen to music, these brain networks actively create expectations based on our stored knowledge.”⁴⁶ The unfamiliar, then, slowly becomes part of the familiar, expanding the horizons of what is expected, and preparing the brain to accept even more unexpected sequences. Levitin explains that “The first time I heard John Lennon or Donald Fagen sing, I thought the voices unimaginably strange. I didn’t want to like them.” That was not the end of his relationship with these musicians, however. “Something kept me going back to listen, though—perhaps it was the strangeness—and they wound up being two of my favorite voices; voices that have gone beyond familiar and approach what I can only call intimate; I feel as though these voices have become incorporated into who I am. And at a neural level, they have.”⁴⁷

Listening to rock and roll allowed listeners of both races to hear unfamiliar musical patterns, but these new patterns ultimately became expected aspects of their shared musical culture. What also happened, Levitin argues, was that the traditions, and sometimes the people, behind this music also became more familiar to listeners, partly because their brains learned that plausible alternatives existed. This realization may not have been confined solely to music. If teenagers were learning that there were other ways of understanding the world through music, then entirely other worldviews may exist outside of music as well.

This kind of mindset would have been more likely to accept divergent ideas, listen to people from other backgrounds, and to accept that the sociopolitical perspectives surrounding them were not the only ones that existed. Sometimes listening to new forms of music actively caused young listeners to reformulate their views of the world and their own experiences. Levitin explains that

⁴⁶ Zatorre & Salimpoor, “Why Music Makes Our Brains Sing.”

⁴⁷ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 235-236.

“Each time we hear a musical pattern that is new to our ears, our brains try to make an association through whatever visual, auditory and other sensory cues accompany it. We try to contextualize the new sounds, and eventually, we create these memory links between a particular set of notes and a particular place, time, or set of events.”⁴⁸ When a white kid consistently listened to songs with heavy R&B notes, or black kids sought out pop and country hits, their brains helped make these previously unfamiliar musical forms a part of their individual consciousness by associating certain musical elements with experiences from their own lives and worldviews. These connections helped to make musical traditions from other racial backgrounds, and the people who created them, less threatening, and even so familiar that, like Levitin’s example of learning to love John Lennon and Donald Fagan, they became a part of the listener’s self-consciousness. When this process occurred for black and white teenagers, the concept of racial segregation could seem both ridiculous and harmful since this acceptance of alternative worldviews had already occurred on a neural level for some young listeners.

Rock and roll’s status as a racial middle ground was further intensified by the musical borrowing and sharing that occurred among musicians of both races, who often toured, recorded, or simply socialized together. Music writer Michael Lydon explains that “All the stars, white and black, toured together, and heard and were influenced by each other’s music. Elvis was tremendously influenced by blues singers (he had been one of those kids in the white spectator section).” By the mid-1950s, he continues, “many producers and writers for black music have been white. Lieber and Stoller wrote ‘Hound Dog,’ virtually all the material for the brilliantly comical Coasters, and some of the Drifters’ best work after 1959. Phil Spector produced a number of the

⁴⁸ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 36-37.

black girl groups and then the most baffling blue-eyed soul group ever, the Righteous Brothers.”⁴⁹ Again, these instances of cultural exchange could be subject to accusations of white theft of black musical enterprise, and many particular cases unfortunately support these assertions. Still, the sad fact that too many black artists and songwriters lost out on royalties that instead went to white music executives does not negate the fact that cultural exchange occurred, and that honest appreciation of music across racial lines went both ways.

Singer Jo-Ann Campbell, for example, perfectly fit the blonde, white glamour girl ideal of the 1950s. She recorded a few pop songs, but was unsuccessful until she made a stunning debut at Harlem’s renowned Apollo Theater with an R&B-tinged performance. The approval of an overwhelmingly black audience led to a new record contract, and a successful, if rather short-lived career, as a rock and roll performer. A program for Alan Freed’s Christmas Jubilee concert implicitly detailed the influence that African-American culture had on her musical career. ”Jo-Ann has always had a desire to sing, and being born and brought up in the South, the music they now call rock and roll came natural to her, it was the music she was weaned on, the music that was part of her,” kids could read as they waited for the show to begin. “She has sung at various night spots and was hailed by Variety for her rock and roll tunes in an Apollo Theatre stint that literally took the Harlem hotspot and the entertainment world by storm.”⁵⁰ Although the storm that ignited Campbell’s career was perhaps not quite as “literal” as the program attested, audience members were definitely meant to understand that her Southern upbringing, the notion that “rock and roll came natural to her,” and the fact that her Apollo performance was such a hit all implied that this

⁴⁹ Michael Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 15; 252.

⁵⁰ Program, “Alan Freed’s Christmas Jubilee,” Sieg Music Corporation, 1958, Alan Freed Collection, Box 2, Folder 4, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

chaste-looking white singer was heavily influenced by black culture, and supported by black fans. All of this is written about in a positive manner, showing that crossing racial boundaries made her more appealing to both white and black fans.

Another example of a rock and roll star crossing racial boundaries to achieve success (however brief) is the strange case of L'il Julian. Julian was, apparently, a Chicano R&B musician who caught Johnny Otis's ear as both played majority-black clubs around 1950s Los Angeles. After Otis produced L'il Julian's first single, "Lonely Lonely Nights," a local hit with teens of all races when released in 1956, he found out that his protégé was actually Ron Gregory, an East Coast native of Hungarian Jewish origin. Otis wrote in his memoir, "Thus, the first L.A. Chicano rock and roll star turned out to be a Hungarian Jew." Furthermore, he had been "produced and promoted by" Johnny Otis, "a Greek who thought of himself as Black!"⁵¹ Greeks and Jews were not necessarily considered "white" yet, but many were going through the process of "becoming" white by moving into all-white suburbs, and as the white-black binary became the nation's defining racial construct. This made racial crossing and mixing fairly threatening for members of these groups, many of whom were trying to identify as white, even as Gregory and Otis claimed alternative, politically inferior racial identities. Amidst all of this chicanery, it is evident that rock and roll music provided a common ground for people of many different backgrounds, to celebrate and share musical characteristics, and for an emphasis on racial tolerance to be accepted by musicians and listeners alike.

The music charts of the mid- to late 1950s were dotted with numerous acts, both black and white, who combined elements from different racial backgrounds in their performances. Philip Ennis explains that "Though the number of country crossovers was significant in the mid-fifties,

⁵¹ George Lipsitz, "Introduction" in Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), xxvi-xxvii.

it was nothing compared to the direct release of rhythm and blues records into the pop stream, in surprising numbers and at an explosive rate after 1956. It startled the whole music world. Any young black sound, it was thought, had an automatic invitation into the pop stream.”⁵² Some of these performers and groups were hastily thrown together by record executives eager to profit from young people’s seemingly sudden and unquenchable thirst for rock and roll. The most popular and enduring musicians, however, were those who displayed an honest appreciation for different kinds of musics, and had usually grown up amidst the traditions of racial cultures other than their own. Despite the calculated attempts of the most powerful record labels to copy the sounds that had captivated teenage ears, those who presided over the first golden age of rock and roll were musicians like Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry, who sincerely embraced different musical forms across racial boundaries, and whose enthusiasm for this cultural integration was not lost on their eager fans, and led to the almost complete collapse of distinct chart genres by the mid-1950s. Philip Ennis says of this shift that

The old guard in country and black pop were barely in evidence. Younger performers such as [white country-pop singer] Marty Robbins and Little Richard swamped the lists; half the pop best sellers were rocknroll records that were also spread across the other charts... Young white country performers appeared on the R&B chart. At least one black performer made the country chart (Fats Domino doing the pop standard ‘Blueberry Hill’). Clearly, the grid had been taken out of the ice cube tray.⁵³

The mixing of different racial and regional musical traditions, the willingness to cross musical and racial boundaries, and a focus on youth-oriented themes combined to create some of the first real rock and roll stars. And the first artist to personify this new sound on a national level, the first whose records so escaped racial classification that the mass media had to be label them rock and roll, was Bill Haley.

⁵² Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 239.

⁵³ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 236.

In 1956, two years after Haley exploded onto the national popular music scene, his manager, James Ferguson, told *Downbeat* magazine that, “Although...the term rock ‘n’ roll originated with New York disc jockey Alan Freed... Haley [has] the distinction of having originated the actual music.”⁵⁴ This assertion is patently false, since other, mostly black, performers, including Fats Domino, Ike Turner, and the Dominoes all vied for this title, and, again, it is erroneous to hold any one artist responsible for developing rock and roll. Still, Ferguson is correct to note that Haley was the first artist whose music was ubiquitously labeled “rock and roll,” partly because the national mainstream media did not quite know what to make of a white musician who combined pop, R&B, country, and gospel characteristics to the point where the dividing lines between these genres simply dissolved. Haley initially started out as a white country singer in his native Pennsylvania, but he grew up listening to and loving black gospel and R&B, especially Louis Jordan. He often covered older R&B songs while performing on the road, and while he noted that audiences often did not know what to think of his performances or the genre he performed within, steady streams of both black and white teenagers continued coming to his shows. Ennis says of the musician’s instant popularity with teenagers of both races that “In spite of the incongruity of Haley’s chubby adult persona, the live performance of his small group of musicians thrashing their instruments and leaping about emblazoned rocknroll with a visual vocabulary. This movement, mainly from black theatricality, was essential and laid the basis for the subsequent rock superstars and their settings”⁵⁵ Haley himself displayed a fairly insouciant view of his cross-racial performances, one that parallels many white kids’ nonchalance regarding racial desegregation.

⁵⁴ Al Portch, “Manager of Bill Haley Defends the ‘Real Thing,’” *Downbeat*, date, 1956, 43, Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁵⁵ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 221.

“Why shouldn’t a country-and-western act sing rhythm-and-blues music?” he asked. “It was unheard of in those days...I didn’t see anything wrong in mixing things up.”⁵⁶

When Haley sang these songs, he neither disrespected the black tradition behind them nor neglected his own. While the beats in his 1954 cover of the Joe Turner R&B classic “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” the first single to be widely described as ‘rock and roll,’ and the 1955 hit “Rock Around the Clock,” were more calculated and overbearing than the R&B style dictated, they still erupted with the emotional dynamism typical of the genre.⁵⁷ Listeners had no doubt about Haley’s race, as he kept “the country twang” in his voice, but, as Arnold Shaw explained, “[l]ike blues singers, he shouted rather than vocalized [though] his voice lacked the bluesman’s burden of time.”⁵⁸ Milt Gabler, who oversaw Haley’s recordings at Decca, also added that the members of his band, the Comets, were trained to play in the same style as Louis Jordan’s band. “Yeah, now Bill at one point, on radio in the Philly area had been doing, well we called it hillbilly, not country and western, and he’d heard all the blues records and things,” Gabler said. Despite his assertion that “he didn’t have a great voice,” Gabler noted that “Bill Haley is the one that—well, it wasn’t black, and it wasn’t country and western, and it was really a thing that he’d come up with on his own.”⁵⁹ Haley’s first hit, a cover of R&B legend Joe Turner’s already popular “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” had, according to Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, “domesticated its sexual content, moving the action from bedroom to kitchen. But even with milder lyrics, Haley’s exaggerated style intensified the forcefulness of the music.”⁶⁰ Philip Ennis points out that 24 of his records hit the

⁵⁶ Arnold Shaw, *The Rockin’ 50s*, (Hawthorn Books, 1973), 139.

⁵⁷ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1996), 17-18.

⁵⁸ Shaw, *The Rockin’ 50s*, 136.

⁵⁹ Cleason, interview with Milt Gabler, 1947, 8-9; 11.

⁶⁰ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 234.

pop charts, while only three crossed over to the R&B list, and none to the country charts. “Bill Haley kept trying to find that musical combination of the three streams that would open all their markets,” he says.⁶¹ But since both “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” and “Rock Around the Clock” both hit the number-one spot on the R&B chart, and all of his songs retained distinct country characteristics, it is understandable that music executives responded to his success with a degree of bafflement.

Haley enjoyed explosive popularity with “Rock Around the Clock,” which became something of a youth anthem after its release in 1955. He clearly appealed to both black and white teenagers, who ensured that his biggest songs made both the pop and R&B charts, but by the end of the decade, he faded from the spotlight. His descent was partly due to his age; even though he was only 30 when “Rock Around the Clock” was released, that was roughly a decade and a half older than most of his target audience. Ennis explains that “Haley himself was simply too old and too square. His visual appearance with his band would hardly frighten the parents, much less inflame the kids.”⁶² Bill Haley may have been the first to be widely labeled a rock and roll musician, but he would not lead the charge for this particular revolution. That position would be filled by two musicians, one white and one black, both of whom altered music history, and helped to define new possibilities for a disenchanted generation of teenagers.

Elvis Presley grew up poor in Tupelo, Mississippi, but in 1948, when he was 13, his parents moved the family to Memphis. Anthony Mattiaccio explains, “There he found a music totally new. All the white country music he had been steeped in since infancy was there, supplanted by the coarse call of the blues: the exciting ‘barrelhouse’ tempos and smoky honky-tonks of Beale

⁶¹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 220.

⁶² Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 222.

Street.”⁶³ As a teenager, Presley became even more ensconced in the blues and country music scenes. B.B. King recalled “Presley, his long hair combed up into a pompadour, ‘hanging around’ the black music clubs on Beale Street.” Dr. Herbert Brewster, pastor at East Trigg Baptist Church, one of the most prominent black churches in the city, said that “Presley, enjoying himself ‘to the highest,’ frequently could be seen ‘right down front’ at the church’s Sunday night revival scene,” which was a popular spot for white admirers of black music. Louis Cantor says that “In order to attend East Trigg Baptist, Elvis would sometimes sneak away from his own church, the First Assembly of God, with his girlfriend Dixie Locke. Even if he had to miss a service he would try to tune in for its broadcast on WHBQ.”⁶⁴ When Presley began playing his own music, then, he combined all of the different musical influences he had absorbed into something new. Even Sam Phillips, owner of Sun Records, was flummoxed when he first heard Presley, who had come into the studio with two friends to record a single as a birthday gift for his mother. According to the official BMI history,

On this hot July night, [Phillips] listened as the young white trio tried one number after another without quite getting the sound he was after. During a break between recording takes, the 19-year-old singer began clowning around with "That's All Right," a minor blues hit written and recorded by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup a few years before. The guitarist and bass player jumped right in. It was lively, it was fun, and it was fresh. Somehow, effortlessly, it blended a rhythm & blues feel with a country voice and country instruments. "What are you doing?" asked Phillips. They didn't quite know themselves.⁶⁵

⁶³ Anthony Mattiaccio “Voice from the heart of the country,” *Lifestyles*, May 13, 1979, A Folk Music Portrait of Elvis Presley AFS 19,879-19,880, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁶⁴ Irene Oppenheim, “Rocking the American Dream: Elvis Presley and Bruce Springsteen,” *The Threepenny Review*, Winter, 1982, 22, Russell B. Nye Collection, Elvis Presley Clippings Folder, Michigan State University Archives; Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 86. For more on East Trigg Baptist Church’s Sunday-night services, featuring live gospel music performances, and the role that Brewster, Presley, and deejay Dewey Phillips played in popularizing the services among young whites, please see Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 82-86.

⁶⁵ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 26.

Music legend has it that Phillips had been looking for “white country boys who could sing the blues” so that his label might have a better chance at selling R&B to white stations. Many white teenagers in Memphis were quick to turn the dial to WDIA or to hear Dewey Phillips on WHBQ, but some had to do so in secret because their parents found this trend socially unacceptable. Sam Phillips, apparently, believed that these kids would be more likely to embrace black music if it was performed by a white musician, and that he could make a fortune if he found the right performer. He popularized this story himself in later years, telling countless interviewers that he knew immediately that Elvis had this potential when he walked into Sun Studios. Peter Guralnick, who has written extensively on Elvis Presley, says, “White kids liked the music by the black musicians that Phillips recorded and distributed. But ‘the southern ones,’ [Phillips] told an interviewer in 1959, ‘weren’t sure whether they ought to like it or not. So I got to thinking how many records you could sell if you could find white performers who could play and sing in this same exciting way [as black performers].’”⁶⁶ This may be true to an extent, but Phillips probably did not recognize Presley as the perfect cross-racial conduit right away. Upon hearing Presley’s rendition of “That’s All Right” for the first time, “[I felt] like someone stuck me in the rear end with a brand new supersharp pitchfork,” he later told an interviewer. Yet, he was still confused about what this performance actually meant. “What is it?” he recalled asking. “I mean, who, who you going to give it to?”⁶⁷

Despite the fact that Phillips’s secretary, Marion Keisker, said she recalled him saying, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion

⁶⁶ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 96.

⁶⁷ Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26.

dollars,” Presley did not fit this description exactly.⁶⁸ The music that he began recording under Phillips’s guidance at Sun combined elements from all three major genres, but, even more so than with Haley, none of these labels could aptly describe this new sound. Presley sang the blues with the dynamism and deep emotional intensity as was fitting for that genre, but, Glenn Altschuler explains, he “did not have the ragged tone, irregular rhythms, and intonation that blues singers used.”⁶⁹ He also incorporated the country music he loved into his performances; in fact, when asked to describe his sound, he responded, “It’s country music with fire in it. I felt I had to burn it up a little.” Anthony Mattiaccio says that this joyful mixture of pop, R&B, and country—the very essence of rock and roll—“demonstrates the kinship—a harmonious meshing—of music types usually separate. Vocal phrasing ordinarily applied to a feverish blues Elvis used, instead, to inflame a country song... To the evangelical spirit of gospel music he added the belting rhythm of bluegrass... All the music he had ever heard merged to the downtrodden delta life with jazzy cries of Bourbon Street.”⁷⁰ Ever since his musical debut, Presley has been accused of perpetuating the minstrel tradition of white musicians donning some level of symbolic blackface in order to deliver verboten African-American entertainment to white audiences. But the music he recorded, and the performances he put on, revealed a much more complex interchange of cultural attributes than this description suggests.

As Presley began making recordings for Sun, Phillips decided that his protégé’s first release would feature the cover of “That’s All Right” on one side and Bill Monroe’s country ditty “Blue Moon of Kentucky” on the other. Ennis calls this decision “as obvious as it was effective;

⁶⁸ Jerry Hopkins, *Elvis: The Biography* (Open Gate Books, 1971), 56.

⁶⁹ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 26.

⁷⁰ Mattiaccio, “Voice from the heart of the country.”

one-half black, one-half country, both pop.”⁷¹ It may have been obvious that Phillips aimed to sell the record to white audiences who enjoyed black music by combining Presley’s versions of an R&B and a country hit on the same record, but it was hardly certain that this record would be a hit. This release was revolutionary, Ennis maintains, in that “Presley did something no one had ever done before. He brought black culture and white culture together on one record.”⁷²

But it was also revolutionary that this record was immediately popular with both black and white audiences, first in Memphis, but then very quickly beyond that city’s limits. He did not achieve such rapid success simply by transmitting black culture through performances as a white man. Instead, he combined different racial and musical elements so effectively that he appealed to listeners across racial lines who were both intrigued by the unfamiliar aspects of his performances and comforted by the elements they were familiar with. Ennis notes that “Elvis stated a real contradiction on the ground—in this case, the incongruence of white doing black—and then solved the contradiction in air—he did black being white.”⁷³ He was not stealing from black culture, he was using what cultural elements that he had grown up with to help express his own musical perspective. And, despite the fact that Presley technically recorded an R&B and a country hit for the two sides of his first single, this perspective resonated with fans across racial lines, and shattered expectations of genre. In fact, on early demos of this single, Sam Phillips can be heard uttering, “That’s different. That’s a pop song now.”⁷⁴ Presley did not sound like the prototypical pop singer, but even this connotation was starting to change. Berry Gordy explained that “In the music business there had long been the distinction between black and white music, the assumption

⁷¹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 234.

⁷² Oppenheim, “Rocking the American Dream,” 22.

⁷³ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 253.

⁷⁴ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 234.

being that R&B was black and Pop was white.” By the mid-1950s, though, these divisions were being challenged on many levels. He explained that

With Rock ‘n’ Roll and the explosion of Elvis those clear distinctions began to get fuzzy. Elvis was a white artist who sang black music. What was it? (a) R&B, (b) Country, (c) Pop, (d) Rock ‘n’ Roll or (e) none of the above. If you picked C you were right, that is, if the record sold a million copies. ‘Pop’ means popular and if that ain’t, I don’t know what is. I never gave a damn what else it was called.⁷⁵

Presley’s debut signaled that rock and roll was, indeed, a distinct entity from the three genres it descended from, and that it had the power to appeal to teenage listeners across racial lines. Although most music charts remained divided until the end of the decade, it became increasingly difficult to determine which category a song fell into, as well as which demographics artists were supposedly targeting.

“That’s All Right” did not make the charts when it debuted in 1954, but the disc sold so well in Memphis and across the Mid-South that Sam Phillips knew he had discovered a star. Dewey Phillips played the record nonstop, and, when his teenage listeners demanded to know more about this mysterious singer, invited him in to give his first interview. Presley’s mystique grew despite, or perhaps because, as Phillips explained, “At the time, believe me, Elvis was a strange creature. They didn’t know whether he was fish or fowl.” His music struck a problem for genre-specific deejays and radio stations who did not know how to categorize him. Louis Cantor explains that “R&B deejays felt ‘he shouldn’t be played after the sun comes up’ because he sounded way too country. Country deejays throughout the South, however, said that they ‘would get run out of town because he sounds too black.’ And, of course those who played the usual pop material said ‘We have got to have our Perry Como, we got to have our Eddie Fisher, people like that.’” Many radio stations were forced to overlook their initial reluctance, as Presley’s efforts at mixing genres helped

⁷⁵ Gordy, *To Be Loved*, 99.

collapse musical and racial divisions. “The first play went out on Dewey’s show, and all hell broke loose,” Cantor continues. “Sam had nearly six thousand back orders before the record had been cut for sale in Memphis let alone released in any market outside the city.”⁷⁶

Wild listener enthusiasm spread unabated throughout the South, and, ultimately, the nation as a whole. What made Presley different from other crossover artists, including Bill Haley (aside from his incredible sex appeal and rebellious nature) is that he mixed all three genres together so effortlessly that it hardly seemed surprising when his songs began hitting the pop, R&B, and country charts at the same time. These records were less crossover singles than inspired mixes that sounded like they *belonged* on each chart, even if they also incorporated elements from other genres. Furthermore, when Presley was introduced, Philip Ennis says, “rhythm and blues was leaking into country, breaching the deepest line of cleavage in all the American popular musics.”⁷⁷ Even though the line between R&B and country was barely broached in the early 1950s, Presley’s use of both traditions, and his management team’s efforts to sell his performances to country audiences, felled this final division. Presley was booked to perform at a number of country venues, and his first platinum single, “Heartbreak Hotel,” which was released in 1956, hit number one on the pop and country charts (and number five on the R&B chart, for good measure), and was written by Nashville songwriters Mae Boren Axton and Tommy Durden.⁷⁸ According to Jerry Wexler, “[Presley] combined hillbilly and rhythm and blues, the harmonious marriage of two tough styles

⁷⁶ Louis Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis: The Life and Times of a Rock ‘n’ Roll DeeJay* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 148-149; 152.

⁷⁷ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 236.

⁷⁸ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 235; Kinsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 34.

destined to coexist for decades to come.”⁷⁹ Quite quickly, rock and roll seemed to threaten the supposedly impenetrable country music market. The official BMI history states that

Suddenly, teenagers had forsaken country favorites for new rock & roll stars. Country record sales dipped, as did gate receipts for country road shows. Many country radio stations converted entirely to rock & roll...For their part, Nashville record executives faced the problem of how to record country music that could compete with rock & roll and maybe even "cross over" to the pop charts once in a while.⁸⁰

Again, teenage taste in music dictated trends that many record labels and radio stations initially fought against. Ultimately, however, many music industry executives realized that they could earn greater profits if they produced music that crossed racial and genre boundary lines. Record labels and artists guided country music out of relative isolation, combining new singles with pop and R&B characteristics in order to appeal to the desires of younger listeners. The result is that all three charts began to look more and more alike, as country music became more viable crossover fodder, and rock and roll contained elements that appealed to country listeners as well as pop and R&B fans. Even Presley’s cover of “That’s All Right” was covered itself, in 1955, by country-pop artist Marty Robbins, and promptly hit the country charts at number seven.

Presley revealed himself to be a dominant national force with cross-racial and genre appeal by 1956. This was the year that “Love Me Tender,” “Hound Dog,” and “Don’t Be Cruel,” as well as “Heartbreak Hotel,” were released, all of which promptly swept the charts and earned the neophyte singer hordes of ecstatic fans across the country. Even though crossovers had been slowly taking over the charts since the early 1950s, no other artists had ever placed a record on all three charts at the same time—something Presley was able to do nine times. Although three other artists

⁷⁹ Jerry Wexler with David Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 125.

⁸⁰ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 35.

also had three-way crossover hits in 1956, his massive appeal was unmatched. Starting in 1956, Presley had roughly nine records a year hit the pop charts, and five on the R&B and country charts.⁸¹ “Love Me Tender” was the first record to hit number one on all three charts simultaneously, while “Don’t Be Cruel/Hound Dog” repeated this feat, and ultimately remained at the top of the charts for 11 weeks, a record that was not broken until 1992.⁸² Presley would become the real harbinger of rock and roll, as both white and black teenagers responded to his performances and music. The musical middle ground that had been forged by early crossovers came to fruition as the divisions between supposedly race-specific genres were felled, and rock and roll, in many cases, took their place.

Elvis’s status as a bridge-builder between the races has often been questioned by historians and music critics who see him more as a modern-day minstrel singer who profited from black music by giving fans the means to engage with this culture without having to deal with actual black people or work through their own racist viewpoints. While few dispute his personal anti-racist beliefs, many contend that he was recruited to act as a safe vessel to deliver black music to whites who were not ready for the real thing. Ray Charles once remarked, “You know where Elvis *got* that from—he used to be down on *Beale* Street in *Memphis*. That’s where he saw *black* people doin’ that. Ain’t no way they’d let anybody like us get on TV and do that, but *he* could ‘cause he’s white.”⁸³ Johnny Otis admitted that Presley’s title as the “King of Rock and Roll” was “not without some justification because he brought a lot of originality with him,” but still maintained that “the true kings of rock ‘n’ roll—Fats Domino, Little Richard, [and] Chuck Berry” were overshadowed

⁸¹ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 241; 244.

⁸² Shaw, *The Rockin’ 50s*, 152; Adam Victor, *The Elvis Encyclopedia* (New York: Overlook, Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc., 2008), 115-116.

⁸³ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 246.

by Presley's looming, hip-swiveling stature. "What happens is black people—the artists—continue to develop these things and create them and get ripped off and the glory and the money goes to white artists," he said. "This pressure is constantly on them to find something that whitey can't rip off."⁸⁴ Otis perpetuated the notion that Presley was more popular than his black contemporaries simply because he allowed white teenagers to enjoy African-American music and dance styles without having to deal with the presence of an actual black body. But again, this perception ignores the racial and cultural mixing inherent in Presley's performances.

The notion of Presley as a white musician who appropriated black culture also overlooks the fact that he was not exactly considered "white," at least in the eyes of those who disapproved of his cross-racial and overtly sexual sensibilities. Susan Cahn argues that "The record industry's success in marketing Elvis Presley to white audiences should not suggest that Presley represented white norms." She points out that "Elvis vaulted into fame as a highly transgressive figure, appealing to teenagers seeking out the wilder side of life. Moreover, his white fans did not restrict their enthusiasm to white performers alone; they were excited equally by African American stars like Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard."⁸⁵ Presley may have been utilizing elements of black culture in his performances, but his doing so actually rendered him more threatening to the white power structure, in many ways, than a black artist would have been, since he was forsaking his role as a white man and choosing instead to engage in black cultural attributes without making fun of them. Still, many historians and critics continue to view Presley as a "safer" alternative to black artists. Despite the fact that Presley was always unfailingly polite offstage, Grace Elizabeth Hale says, "Elvis made the singing and dancing character seem more wild, and for

⁸⁴ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock 'n' Roll Is Here to Pay*, 246.

⁸⁵ Susan Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 248.

many white fans more black. The polite Elvis rarely broke character, daring respectable audiences to call his bluff. The wild performing Elvis cracked constantly, laughing at his own popping eyes and flirting tongue, grinning at his own growls and moans. The contrast between the two characters revealed that the act was an act.”⁸⁶ Although many performers display distinct personas on- and offstage, Hale understands this dichotomy to mean that Presley was, like blackface musicians before him, appropriating black culture to make a profit, and then “washing off” his performative blackness when he finished.

Misgivings about Presley are understandable given the problematic history of white performances that have exploited African-American culture for hegemonic purposes, and ultimately reinforced ugly racial stereotypes. But Presley was not appropriating black culture for exploitative purposes; he was combining musical and cultural elements he had been drawn to all his life to create music that appealed to him, and to his legions of black and white fans. Even though Alan Freed questioned Presley’s credentials as an actual “rock-and-roller,” he did admit that “He’s the only white man who can really sing the blues. He’s got a real feeling for it. It comes from the contact he had as a child with Negroes in Tennessee. Elvis is truly a phenomenon in the music business.”⁸⁷ Presley also increased mainstream exposure for black musicians, many of whom he was friendly with, and others whom he had admired throughout his life. In a 1982 interview, Little Richard noted that “When I came out...they wasn’t playing no black artists on Top 40 stations....It took people like Elvis...to open the door so I could walk down the road.”⁸⁸ Tony Thomas recalls that by “1954, ‘55 in general, there was more black music that came [out] as

⁸⁶ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67.

⁸⁷ Behrman, “What Alan Freed Really Thinks About Rock ‘n’ Roll,” 22.

⁸⁸ Oppenheim, “Rocking the American Dream,” 22.

rock and roll came.” The reason behind “that kind of change was when Elvis was on....There was more black music as part of that. Elvis was kind of like black music. I remember my grandmother bought a gospel album that Elvis came out with shortly after he was nationally public. So I remember liking what I now think of as some of the black music.”⁸⁹ And even though Presley was often accused of taking songs previously performed by black artists, like Arthur Crudup’s “That’s All Right,” and Willie Mae Thornton’s “Hound Dog,” and profiting from them because of his whiteness, Greil Marcus notes that “the mysteries of black and white in American music are just not that simple.” The song was actually written by white songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, so when Thornton first recorded it, “Hound Dog” already represented a form of cultural exchange. By the time Presley recorded it, he changed the words so that the song signified a man talking to another man instead of a woman denouncing her no-good lover, and increased the tempo so that the bluesy number could now qualify as a dance tune. “All you can say,” Marcus says, “is this was Elvis’s music because he made it his own.”⁹⁰

Presley’s performances were therefore more reflective of sincere cross-racial respect and interest, and yet, when he is presented as merely a modern incantation of a blackface performer, his popularity with both white and black teenagers drained of any true political and cultural import. White suburban teens, whose sensibilities were inflamed every time Presley curled his lip, are viewed not as supporters of a transgressive mix of racial musics, but as passive consumers of white pop culture. White fans of black music in the past may have consciously desired to break with mainstream society by embracing an alternative culture, but most white teenagers in the mid- to late 1950s had no such plans. These kids did not have an explicit agenda to try to rebel, and their

⁸⁹ Tony Thomas, in discussion with the author, November 9, 2011.

⁹⁰ Marcus, *Mystery Train*, 180 in Oppenheim, “Rocking the American Dream,” 22.

discontent was often hidden or even repressed. The fact that they were not overtly rebellious makes their embrace of Elvis and others like him all the more astonishing because it means that they were responding to the music, and therefore the culture, on its own terms. White teenagers, then, were learning to do what their minstrel predecessors never could: appreciate black culture for being black, not just as a useful tool to examine whiteness, although some were still liable to do the latter.

The fact that blacks also approved of Presley is generally forgotten, but in the singer's early years many African Americans saw him as a white man who utilized black musical elements because they spoke to him, not because he was searching for some kind of misplaced exoticism. Robert Thomas, a "record expert" at WDIA, said that "Elvis got so big and so hot that we naturally had to play a few of his records sometimes," even though the Memphis station's playlists normally featured black artists.⁹¹ DeeJay Rufus Thomas remembered playing his records, even though he was told not to, since station managers "thought that black folks didn't like Elvis." After black kids ecstatically welcomed his presence at a 1956 concert, however, Thomas said he "started playing Elvis' records all the time."⁹² Nat Williams remarked that Presley "had that certain humanness about him that Negroes like to put in their songs," and pondered over "how come cullud girls would take on so over a Memphis white boy?"⁹³ He ultimately wondered if Presley's popularity among black teenagers "doesn't reflect a basic integration in attitude and aspiration which has been festering in the minds of most of your folks' women-folk all along." WDIA deeJay Honeymoon Garner also noticed Presley's widespread appeal among black kids in Memphis, adding that "My kid, man, loved Elvis. He made me buy him one of those toy Elvis Presley guitars

⁹¹ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 195.

⁹² Cantor, *Wheelin' On Beale*, 195.

⁹³ Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004., 206-207; Cantor, *Wheelin' On Beale*, 196.

for Christmas.”⁹⁴ And esteemed Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes “wondered whether he had emerged out of the ‘same sea [as black artists]...[for] some water has chlorine in it and some doesn’t.”⁹⁵

Many black people were able to hear that Elvis admired their culture enough to mix it with his own, and still manage to appeal to everyone. On meeting Presley for the first time in 1954, B.B. King recalled,

I didn’t think too much of him at the time...And I noticed soon after that he did one—a black guy’s tune. A guy called Big Boy Crudup. So Elvis did the song sounding almost like him. Sounding black...and wooo. Then I noticed that things that hadn’t been done for us started to be done for him...Then when I heard him then it was different. He sounded like, you know Elvis then. Then I started to respect him for being himself...And he was nice. He was nice to us.⁹⁶

In this case, King acknowledged that Presley’s incorporation of black musical styles, and the fact that he covered Crudup’s R&B tune, gained him the kind of prestige and attention that were denied to many black artists, but he also recognized that he made the music his own, that he created something unique, and that he respected other black musicians. Cissy Houston affirmed this depiction, saying that when she worked with Presley in the 1970s, “It was really wonderful... He would give good money and good pay and good—it was a nice atmosphere...people said, ‘He was prejudice.’ [sic] I said, ‘Well, I never felt his prejudice.’ And I don’t think he was prejudice, you know...[He treated] everyone the same...He had black singers and white singers.”⁹⁷ Again, Presley was able to earn the respect of black musicians who appreciated his sincere interest in

⁹⁴ Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 195.

⁹⁵ Bertrand., *Race, Rock and Elvis*, 217.

⁹⁶ Camille Cosby, interview with B.B. King, National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

⁹⁷ Renee Pouissant, interview with Cissy Houston, National Visionary Project, December 14, 2006, 31, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

African-American culture, and his desire to incorporate musical characteristics that he had come to identify with into his own performances.

Although Presley's black fan base would diminish by the late 1960s, he initially played to crowds of screaming fans of both races. Arnold Shaw attested that "He was *dynamite* in personal appearances, affecting Southern girls, white and black—as Sinatra once had."⁹⁸ At one WDIA concert, which took place in December, 1956, deejay George Klein invited Presley, whom he had gone to high school with, to stage a surprise performance among an otherwise all-black lineup. Louis Cantor explains that "Most station employees were naïve enough to assume that Elvis probably would not be all that popular with a totally black audience...especially since the show was being headlined by Ray Charles and B.B. King. Therefore, most thought that when Presley was introduced, there would be perfunctory applause, Elvis would take his polite bow, and that would be it." When Presley came out, however,

What followed can only be described as spontaneous mass hysteria. Nat D. Williams said: 'Folks, we have a special treat for you tonight—here is Elvis Presley.' That did it. Elvis didn't even get out on stage. He merely walked out from behind the curtain and shook his leg. That's all it took. At that point, thousands of black people leaped to their feet and started coming directly toward Presley from both sides of the auditorium.

Fan reaction was so intense that Presley did not even get a chance to perform—he was forced to leave with police officers who worried for his safety.⁹⁹ The WDIA employees who planned the concert were flummoxed. Nat Williams recalled "A thousand black, brown and beige teenage girls in that audience [who] blended their alto and soprano voices in one wild crescendo of sound that rent the rafters, and took off like scalded cats in the direction of Elvis." George Klein said that "over the years, I'd say that less than 1 percent of his audience at concerts were black. I could

⁹⁸ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 238.

⁹⁹ Cantor, *Wheelin' On Beale*, 194-195.

never figure that out, because at that Goodwill Revue, those kids went crazy.”¹⁰⁰ Cantor cautions that “Exactly what would have happened had the crowd gotten to him is anybody’s guess,” yet concludes, “the entire event was a dramatic indication of how popular Elvis already was with the black audience.”¹⁰¹ This concert revealed what the charts had been noting for a year and a half: that Presley was popular with both black and white audiences. His music and his performances provided a middle ground for teenagers of both races to identify with one another through musical similarities, and also to be drawn to unfamiliar aspects that spoke to them nevertheless. As musical and racial divisions dissipated, rock and roll could emerge as an integrative musical form, one that paralleled demands for an end to legal segregation, which were spreading across the South.

Even though Elvis has since been crowned the King of Rock and Roll, racial and cultural divisions were eroding to such an extent that black artists who similarly combined elements from a variety of different genres also vied for this title. Philip Ennis explains that “Equally important for the reality of rocknroll, Chuck Berry, the Coasters, Smokey Robinson, Frankie Lymon, and others were also ‘mythic’ in that they were black doing white. Rocknroll became a racially integrated stream.”¹⁰² More than any of these artists, Chuck Berry emerged as one of rock and roll’s most important and popular performers among both races. Although he grew up in segregated St. Louis, rock critic Michael Lydon explains that his father earned a good living as a contractor, his neighborhood was marked by “small brick houses and tree-lined streets. His family were sober middle class, devout choir members at the toney Antioch Baptist Church.” Although he went to an all-black school, it still catered to the wealthiest African-American families in the

¹⁰⁰ Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 196.

¹⁰¹ Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale*, 195.

¹⁰² Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 253.

city, and Berry remembered feeling ashamed of his middle-class status among fellow students who drove expensive cars and wore the latest fashions to class.¹⁰³ If Elvis Presley had been introduced to R&B and gospel while growing up in working-class Southern neighborhoods, Berry, like many of his middle-class contemporaries, enjoyed listening to white pop and country artists. Even though he idolized Louis Jordan, Nat “King” Cole, and Muddy Waters, he also grew up listening to Frank Sinatra and Hank Williams, all of which informed his own music when he eventually began writing his own songs.¹⁰⁴ By his early twenties, he was playing as a professional musician at clubs around St. Louis, and consciously trying to appeal to fans of both races. Lydon describes him as “A city kid exposed all his life to normal American culture,” and says that “Berry could also play a wider range of music than the country-born bluesmen, moving easily from country blues to the ballads of Nat ‘King’ Cole and Louis Jordan (his idols), or even to a country and western tune.”¹⁰⁵ While his use of the word “normal” to describe mainstream white culture is clearly problematic, Lydon’s point that Berry, as a middle-class teen, was exposed to the same cultural milieu as his white contemporaries, and that this exposure helped inform his abilities as a musician and songwriter, is sound. Philip Ennis further argues that “Berry’s appeal to country audiences was not an accident. He was a skilled performer of current ‘hillbilly’ hits, amusing his mixed white and black audiences in the St Louis area with interpretations of Hank Williams songs. Idolizing the styling of both Nat Cole and his friend and mentor Muddy Waters, and influenced by the guitar of such jazz masters as Charlie Christian, Berry synthesized all these musics in the service of the high school

¹⁰³ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 62-63.

¹⁰⁵ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 8.

experience.”¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, as Jerry Wexler notes, “Berry was writing for white adolescents out of a country bag, and his diction is unalloyed white middle America.”¹⁰⁷

Indeed, Berry quite plainly notes that he set out to court a white middle-class audience because that is where he felt he could profit the most. Reebee Garofalo explains that this decision was in keeping with many civil rights goals during the 1950s. “The strategy of the early CRM was integrationist, and it was in this historical context that Berry pursued his career,” he says. “While he never disowned his blackness, his goal was full acceptance in the white mainstream.” Indeed, Berry himself recalled asking, “Why can’t I do as Pat Boone does and play good music for the white people and sell as well there as I could in the neighborhood?”¹⁰⁸ The fact that Berry wanted to write and perform music in the same vein and for the same audiences as Boone, a non-threatening white pop singer, shows how intertwined popular music had become by the 1950s. Berry’s blackness did not prevent him from appreciating the kind of music that white pop performers released, or from believing that he could attract the same white, middle-class listeners who bought Boone’s records. Perhaps most importantly of all, he did not depict himself as distinctly different from Boone, but rather as a similar musician vying for teenage fans. Race would play a major role in how both were represented in the media, of course, but it did not prevent Berry from envisioning himself, and his career, as fitting into the same framework that allowed for Boone’s popularity.

When Berry first met with the Chess brothers, for example, the label expressed interest in his remake of the blues and country standard, “Ida Red.” The song, despite seemingly pleasant

¹⁰⁶ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 227.

¹⁰⁷ Wexler & Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 110.

¹⁰⁸ Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat*, 23.

sounding lyrics like “Light's in the parlor, fire's in the grate/Clock on the mantle says it's a'gettin' late/Curtains on the window, snowy white/The parlor's pleasant on Sunday night,” was generally known to be about a man in love with either a prostitute or a married woman who, nevertheless, is unfaithful to him.¹⁰⁹ Chess asked Berry to rejuvenate the song by writing new lyrics, and he was quick to oblige. The result was “Maybellene,” a stunning mix of old and new, black and white, middle-class teenage semi-propriety and working-class adult frivolity. Whereas the protagonist of “Ida Red” questions his promiscuous paramour in a seedy parlor, “Maybellene” evokes the “blues” of a man whose girlfriend has cheated on him with a wealthier opponent. “As I was motivatin' over the hill/I saw Maybellene in a Coup de Ville/A Cadillac a-rollin' on the open road/Nothin' will outrun my V8 Ford.”¹¹⁰ All three characters in the song have cars, indicating that this story takes place in modern, middle-class America rather than a rural or poor section of town in the early twentieth century. Black and white teenage audiences responded with overwhelming support. “Maybellene” hit the top five on both the pop and R&B charts in 1954, and was even a country hit when covered by Marty Robbins the following year.¹¹¹ Berry, and his label, knew where their profits were coming from, and set about writing and recording songs that were explicitly directed towards middle-class teenagers.

Since Berry grew up in a middle-class black family in a city separated by Jim Crow divisions, he was able to relate both to the pressures of segregation and racism and to the more carefree teenage world of high school, cars, and dates. His songs were therefore able to speak to teens of both races, who could share some of his experiences and emotions, yet were then

¹⁰⁹ Lyrics taken from recording made by Bob Willis for Vocalion, 1938, though even this version included words “borrowed” from “Sunday Night,” Frederick W. Root, 1878.

¹¹⁰ Chuck Berry, “Maybellene,” 1954.

¹¹¹ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 29.

introduced to an alternate racial viewpoint at the same time. The middle ground he portrayed in his songs and performances was not without its shortcomings, though. Reebee Garofalo points out that “*Brown* may have rocked the Board of Education in the historic school desegregation case in 1954, but Chuck Berry’s depiction of ‘School Days’ in 1957 did not describe the educational experience in Little Rock, Arkansas that same year. Berry conjured up the image of teachers teaching ‘the golden rule’ even as Eisenhower had to send federal troops to Little Rock to enforce the Supreme Court’s school integration edict.”¹¹² Berry could be criticized for ignoring the plight of black students who attended segregated schools that usually received far less funding than their white counterparts, even if he attended a well-funded institution himself.

The similarities between black and white adolescent desires in Berry’s songs, however, began to chip away at the differences that both groups were taught existed between them. Alan Freed remarked in 1957 that “An old geezer, asked if he dug Chuck Berry could only tell you that all the berries he knew grew on vines. “But you youngsters had heard Chuck sing *Maybellene* and *Too Much Monkey Business*. The words resounded over school lunchroom tables.”¹¹³ Here, Freed implied that age was more of a distinguishing factor among Berry’s fans than race, as the voice of a black man was said to play throughout the halls of undoubtedly segregated schools. White and black teenagers did not have the exact same experiences in their day-to-day lives, but what Berry focused on were the similarities that did exist between these two groups. In doing so, he made the differences seem less severe.

Cars, sex, and objection to authority, the entwined teenage obsessions of the 1950s, were explored in tones both bubbly and serious, leading white kids to believe that Berry’s blackness

¹¹² Garofalo, *Rocking the Boat*, 233.

¹¹³ Freed, “Wonderful World of Rock,” 39; 58.

was the only thing that separated him from them. Indeed, Susan Cahn argues that “More than any other artist, Chuck Berry used his talents as a songwriter to recreate the experiences of teenage high school culture.”¹¹⁴ Although Berry ably courted a young white market, he never hid his racial identity, and, in fact, maintained the hard beat and blues basis in his songs. But he added lyrics that dealt with subjects all teens could identify with, like homework, crushes, and yearning for independence from parental authority, as well as twangy country guitar rhythms. Black youth were included in his songs as well, not only in the acknowledgement that African Americans were prone to enjoy the same activities and experience similar frustrations as their white counterparts, but in the structures of the songs, which echoed black musical traditions.

What was transgressive about this was the way that Berry was able to identify with the experiences of both black and white kids—and they with him in return. Michael Lydon says that “No one fully grasped what was happening, but Chuck Berry seemed to have an idea. Of all the musicians, he was the one who best recognized these new American kids, and he loved and encouraged them. With an extraordinary leap of empathy, he knew and expressed their feelings, and they understood themselves through him.”¹¹⁵ Sometimes this identification could lead to dangerous insinuations of interracial relationships. Cahn notes that “Berry’s unique mixture of country, rock, and R&B influences drew acclaim from white listeners this meant that their sexual interlocutor was a black man addressing white girls on matters of love and desire. By the 1950s such lyrics addressed to white as well as black girls suggested nothing less than interracial relations.”¹¹⁶ Like Elvis Presley, who surprised and angered many members of the parental

¹¹⁴ Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 254.

¹¹⁵ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 16.

¹¹⁶ Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 254.

generation by appealing to audiences—especially girls—across racial lines, Chuck Berry’s popularity and sex appeal threatened the very foundations of Jim Crow and broader racial inequality. His songs may have seemed like raucous ditties designed to appeal to simplistic teenage fantasies, but implying that black kids engaged in the same middle-class pursuits and emotional experiences as their white counterparts, and that a black musician could appeal so fervently to his young white fans, was nothing less than revolutionary. Kids who listened to Chuck Berry were not just abiding by mindless trends. They were learning that they could identify with the artist who sang these songs, and with listeners of other races because of the shared experiences mentioned in the lyrics and insinuated in the musical patterns. White kids who listened to these records could be forced to reexamine existing racial attitudes, while black kids could feel even more empowered to fight for racial integration since, in the world these songs existed in, at least, they already fully belonged.

Even more than white rock and roll stars who blurred racial boundaries with their performances and musical tastes, R&B legend Johnny Otis saw himself as a white man who became black by choice. In the introduction to Otis’s memoirs, George Lipsitz explains that Otis dropped out of high school after a teacher scolded him for spending too much time with his black friends. He played almost exclusively with black jazz, swing, and R&B artists in several different bands, married his black high school sweetheart, moved his family to an upscale black neighborhood in Los Angeles, attended black churches, changed his family name, Veliotis, to downplay his Greek ancestry, and, according to Lipsitz, “began to think of himself as ‘Black by persuasion.’”¹¹⁷ Throughout his memoirs and interviews, in fact, Otis refers to himself as part of an African-American community, warning that “*our* kids don’t know how *we* are always in danger

¹¹⁷ Lipsitz, introduction to Otis, *Upside Your Head!* xiii.

of disaster because of racism” and “white society kicked *our* asses every day.”¹¹⁸ Lipsitz notes that, “Like some of those Euro-Americans ‘captured’ by Native American tribes in early U.S. history, Otis became an extremely ferocious defender of his adopted community and an equally zealous opponent of white supremacy.”¹¹⁹

This phenomenon where, as Peter Guralnick noted, “the whites live in the projects with their black wives, lip goatees, and revolutionary rhetoric. The blacks meanwhile are moving out to the suburbs,”¹²⁰ expanded among some music executives and artists in the postwar era. White executives at black-oriented record labels, including Jerry Wexler, Leonard Chess, Art Rube, Herman Lubinsky, and Ralph Bass “went black,” according to *Billboard* journalist and Mercury Records executive Johnny Sippel. “They talked black, affected black mannerisms, and some of them married black women...Ralph Bass divorced a white wife to marry a black gal.”¹²¹ The interest they took in African-American culture, even beyond that which was touched by music, was undoubtedly genuine in many cases, and individual decisions to reach out to black friends and romantic partners could reveal a true desire to see them as actual people, and not as token members of an exoticized race. Otis, in particular, became an outspoken civil rights advocate early on, as Lipsitz says, “he joined picket lines protesting against segregation and worked tirelessly to raise money for the struggle” and “creating panethnic antiracist communities in music, religion, politics, and business.”¹²² The near-constant habit of referring to “black talk” and the “natural” rhythm that

¹¹⁸ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 21; 79. In both sentences, the emphasis on the possessives is mine and not Otis’s.

¹¹⁹ Lipsitz, introduction to Otis, *Upside Your Head!* xiii.

¹²⁰ Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues & Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1999), 236.

¹²¹ Brian Van Der Horst, “Rock Music,” 13, Ralph Bass Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹²² Lipsitz, introduction to Otis, *Upside Your Head!* xix-xx.

supposedly blessed all members of this race belies a tendency to accept simulacra that dominated mainstream white conception of blackness. Jim Dickinson, who was first taught to “play an octave and a major triad...back and forth between your hands, right, left, right, left” by an older black friend who worked for his parents, said, “That’s the racial difference. The crux is how the implied eighth-notes of rock ‘n’ roll are handled. Whether it’s politically incorrect or not, I don’t care. It’s absolutely true. Black people do it one way. White people do it another way. The difference is feeling, therefore interior.”¹²³ Johnny Otis attested, “I never had to instruct my horn players how to phrase a passage...The whole flavor of traditional African American culture came to bear on their interpretations.” Playing music apparently had less to do with “mere lyrics or melodies, or saxophones or guitars.” Otis instead declared that

It had to do with the way Black folks lived and were raised in their homes. The music grew out of the African American way of life. The way mama cooked, the Black English grandmother and grandfather spoke, the way daddy disciplined the kids—the emphasis in spiritual values, the way Reverend Jones preached, the way Sister Williams sang in the choir, the way the old brother down the street played the slide guitar and crooned the blues, the very special way the people danced, walked, laughed, cried, joked, got happy, shouted in church.¹²⁴

Despite the fact that playing in a band as renowned as Johnny Otis’s would have required years of dedicated practice, enough money to purchase an instrument and become educated in its use, and special skills that most people, black or white, would have been unable to cultivate, Otis instead maintained that a particular working-class, seemingly Southern background which ostensibly applied to all African Americans, imbued them with a preternatural sense of rhythm and musical aptitude. “When the music grows out of a unique way of life and it reflects the inside workings of

¹²³ “Jim Dickinson” in *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience* Ed. Juan Williams (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005), 57.

¹²⁴ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 117.

a particular people, as the blues does, then it certainly follows that artists within that culture will function in a freer and more natural manner,” he said, “and, no matter how skilled the emulator, he or she will never get it quite right.”¹²⁵ Since Otis consistently identified as African American, he presumably did not see himself as one of these emulators, but his description belied his status as someone who retained many white beliefs and prejudices regarding black Americans, despite his genuine efforts to eradicate racial inequality.

In 1954, Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun explained to a *Cash Box* journalist that the popularity of black artists among white audiences was cyclical, and therefore not worth worrying about. “It happened before, back in the ‘twenties, when Perry Bradford and Spencer Williams were as hot as Berlin and Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters sold their records in the millions into a lot of white parlors,” they said. “It’s happening again, and the blues will get stronger before they get weaker, but regardless of its impact on the pop field, the blues will surely go on.”¹²⁶ It may have been too early for the heads of Atlantic records to realize that rock and roll would break this cycle, at least temporarily, but many historians and critics continue to see the genre as simply another instance of white musicians and fans using black culture to distinguish their own identities without really understanding it. Art is always used to help people shape their own identities, of course, but early rock and roll did not exoticize African Americans to the same extent as earlier forms of black music. Still, Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that

Listening to rock and roll, white teenagers embraced what they thought of as black music. And, as had many white minstrel fans a century earlier, many of them missed the theatricality of the performance. They heard and understood the new music not as the assertion of an individual self against an oppressive world, but as the assertion of *the*

¹²⁵ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 107.

¹²⁶ Jerry Wexler & Ahmet Ertegun, “The Latest Trend: R&B Disks are Going Pop,” *The Cash Box*, July 3, 1954, 56, Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Archives.

individual self, some innate and authentic blackness. They did not hear black transformation. They heard black transcendence.¹²⁷

Johnny Otis was similarly skeptical about white ability to appreciate black music on its own terms, without resorting to trite or exoticized stereotypes. “We found that we moved the white audiences more by caricaturing the music, you know, overdoing the shit—falling on your back with the saxophone, kicking your legs up,” he recalled of his days playing with R&B bands. “And if we did too much of that for a black audience they’d tell us—‘Enough of that shit—play some music!’”¹²⁸ By both assessments, rock and roll represented nothing more than another instance of white musicians and fans shaping their own discontent with what they believed was the freedom, emotion, and eroticism of African-American culture that black people themselves may not have identified with.

“Until we have a time and color changing machine, it is impossible to recreate someone else’s history,” Hale recounts of some of the criticisms facing white musicians who sang rock and roll.¹²⁹ But exoticization was not as prevalent among white musicians and young people interested in rock and roll as it was in those who admired previous black musical styles. Rock and roll constituted more of a biracial entity than jazz or the blues, both of which emerged out of strictly African-American urban and rural communities, even if they were also shaped by other European cultural entities. Art forms that were largely unfamiliar to whites could be easily exoticized, but the mainstream white pop elements of rock and roll music allowed young whites to see rock and roll as music that belonged to their culture as well, and were therefore less likely to see African-American components as completely separate. It was this understanding of ‘separateness’ that

¹²⁷ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 62.

¹²⁸ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here to Pay*, 234.

¹²⁹ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 97.

marked the difference between prior white interest in black musical forms and rock and roll. Even though jazz and the blues were not completely isolated from white musical traditions, they emerged mainly from African-American communities, and were usually written and performed by black artists. Most jazz musicians and fans were black, and so whites who were drawn to jazz often made radical decisions about the rest of their lives, from the communities they lived in, to the people they associated with, down to the way they dressed. Even if their intentions were good, strict racial distinctions were taken for granted; white musicians and fans might cross racial lines, but those lines remained intact, whereas rock and roll began to blur them.

Black teenagers also embraced this music as a biracial entity, and although they understood the implications of this middle ground in different ways than their white contemporaries, this aspect also made the genre less likely to inspire exoticization. There is no question that black teenagers understood that rock and roll had white origins as well as black; white musicians like Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, and Jerry Lee Lewis quickly became some of the genre's biggest stars, and all three were roundly embraced by both black and white teenagers. Each was heavily influenced by black musicians and their traditions, but the fact that black teenagers eagerly attended their concerts, and that numerous singles by white artists hit the R&B charts, revealed an acknowledgment of white contributions to this genre. Indeed, even when rock and roll was erroneously labeled 'whitened rhythm and blues' in the late 1950s, black listeners continued to purchase singles and attend concerts performed by white artists. All of this casts doubt on Hale's argument, that white rock and rollers performed in metaphorical "blackface," and were scarcely different than "the early twentieth-century Society for the Preservation of Spirituals, a group of rich southern whites who dressed like antebellum planters and sang black sacred songs in dialect

and in Gullah [who] had sounded ‘black’ too.”¹³⁰ Not all white rock and roll fans abstained from exoticization, of course, but because it was shaped and delivered by both white and black musicians and listeners, Presley could not be described as singing in “blackface” any more than Berry could be accused of performing in “whiteface.” In Spivak’s terms, rock and roll represents an instance where what was previously marginal became part of the center without wholly displacing that center, thus allowing both the privileged and the oppressed to speak within the same structural framework.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 97.

¹³¹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Chapter Six

In 1956, an incredibly important moment in civil rights history was achieved: Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally" outsold Pat Boone's cover version of the same tune. For the first time, a song written and performed by a black artist bested a later white version on the charts, an especially pertinent feat given that Boone had scored a bigger hit covering Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti" mere weeks earlier.¹ The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) announced that total record sales had more than tripled since the previous year, as *Billboard* declared that "R&B TOOK OVER POP FIELD," with a roughly 200 percent increase in sales (although Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo astutely point out that black artists still only accounted for 3 to 10 percent of the pop market).² Rock and roll had become the cornerstone of youth culture just as the first wave of the integrationist movement—the focus on desegregation in schools and other public spaces—made headlines across the country. Garofalo notes the parallels here, explaining that "In its integrationist phase, the movement tended to play down real differences in favor of the slogan 'Black and White together.'"³

The NAACP and numerous civil rights organizations made the calculated decision to emphasize the legal desegregation of schools and public places not because this was the direct route to true equality, but because it seemed like a winning plan. Especially in the aftermath of the *Brown* ruling and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, civil rights activists threw their support behind desegregation efforts in the hopes that these victories would ultimately lead to further structural

¹ Paul Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary: The Explosion of American Music 1940-1990* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation, 1990), 29.

² Steve Chapple & Reebee Garofalo, *Rock 'n' Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1978), 229; 231.

³ Reebee Garofalo, "Popular Music and the Civil Rights Movement" in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements* Ed. Reebee Garofalo (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 1999), 233.

and economic changes. Since rock and roll was one area where integration had already occurred, its popularity helped to reinforce the integrationist goals of the civil rights movement, framing them for white youth as the reasonable, and even obvious, direction that society should be headed in, and as an acceptable, and possibly more successful, alternative to both assimilation and more strident demands for black kids. Fierce opposition to desegregation efforts was well-documented by journalists, and often supported by white adults, so kids of both races who crossed racial boundaries by listening to this new music were undoubtedly aware of how high the stakes were in this viciously contested battle. Few could claim that listening to music performed by an artist from a different racial background, or one who was highly influenced by different racial traditions, was a completely innocuous act when newspapers across the country proved almost daily how any instance of racial integration was violently opposed by white Southerners.

The initial popularity of cover songs also shows how race and the prospect of racial integration helped to shape the American music industry in the mid- to late 1950s. A cover song is technically a song that is rerecorded by one artist after it has already been released by another performer, but during this period, the practice was explicitly racialized. Hit records by black artists were ‘covered’ by white performers, replete with toned-down beats and sanitized lyrics. At first, these covers almost always overtook black originals on the charts, which led concerned white music executives—and parents—to believe that they had saved their children from the damaging effects of both black music and racial integration. This popularity has, unfortunately, led to the flawed depiction of rock and roll as simply ‘whitened’ rhythm and blues. This simplistic explanation ignores the complicated racial mixing required for rock and roll to emerge, but it also obfuscates the fact that, while cover songs did not really wane in popularity until the mid-1960s, they were often overtaken on the charts by the originals performed by black artists. Oftentimes

white teenagers were introduced to a song when it played on the radio as covered by a white artist, but went looking for the initial black recording once they learned of its existence. In certain cases, a cover song could represent a genuine mixture of different genres and racial traditions, and could, in its own way, reinforce the middle ground of rock and roll. But the mainstream music industry's attempt to eliminate any of the genre's black elements quickly lost favor with large segments of white audiences, who enjoyed rock and roll precisely because of its embrace of musical integration. 'Whitened' R&B was simply not what these kids were looking for.

By the late 1950s, however, both rock and roll and the civil rights movement seemed to be weakening. While civil rights groups grappled with leadership problems, economic woes, and questions about organizational efficiency during what historian Adam Fairclough has dubbed the "fallow years" of the movement, major record labels were introducing bland pop stars repackaged as rock and roll idols to supposedly gullible middle-class white teenagers.⁴ On the surface, it seemed as though the fight for racial integration in both the political and cultural arenas was rapidly becoming a lost cause. This was not really true in either case: both the movement and the music would explode with renewed vigor in the early 1960s, but neither was quite so "fallow" in the latter years of the 1950s either. The push for racial integration in politics and in culture suffered many blows during this period, but support for both remained constant enough to allow both to flourish in the decade to come.

For white kids, especially in the South, rock and roll music often encouraged nascent or repressed feelings of unease with the Jim Crow system. Northern white kids, by contrast, were more likely to understand the success of the music as a sign that supporting desegregation efforts

⁴ Please see Chapter Two, "The Fallow Years: 1957-1959" in Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference & Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), pages 37-57.

was the right thing to do, although they often underestimated the extent that racism pervaded American institutions in both the North and South. For black kids, most of whom supported the desegregationist aims of the movement even as they realized the greater political and economic changes that were needed to ensure true racial equality, rock and roll's explosive popularity meant that elements of African-American culture were being openly celebrated in mainstream culture. Again, at a time when the goals of the civil rights movement focused on the desegregation of public spaces, cultural integration could be viewed as a sign that politics were moving in the same general direction. The fact that the integrationist phase of the civil rights movement coincided with the desegregation of musical strains does not mean that a strict cause and effect relationship exists between the two, but it can show that younger music fans were not afraid to broach racial divisions in order to purchase music or listen to their favorite artists. Ultimately, movement activists' overt demands for racial equality combined with rock and roll's celebration of its biracial origins to reinforce support for moderate racial equality and desegregation among young listeners.

News of desegregation campaigns were everywhere by the mid-1950s. Americans across the country watched as public school boards across the South voted to shut down all-white institutions rather than allow token numbers of black students to attend—and as white parents formed campaigns to keep the schools open rather than risk their children's educations.⁵ The nation was also captivated by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which ultimately resulted in a Supreme Court ruling declaring racial segregation on the bus lines illegal, and by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that was hastily assembled to institutionalize the protest. The success of this campaign, which was mostly organized and led by so-called “local people” who were otherwise not professional activists or

⁵ Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 66.

organizers, led King and his compatriots to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) a year later, which would operate as an organization of Southern black churches protesting segregation and legal inequalities.⁶ The SCLC often faced violent threats from white supremacists, as well as criticism from more progressive groups because of its acceptance of established power structures. But the organization's use of non-violent direct protest appealed to moderate whites and blacks who may have been hesitant to embrace radical or violent campaigns.

The success of the SCLC inspired smaller grassroots organizations to utilize non-violent direct protest through marches and overt appeals to the public. This new way of fighting was confrontational, yet explicitly eschewed the use of any violence whatsoever. Non-violent direct protest, which had been famously utilized by Mahatma Gandhi in his crusade to free India from British control in the 1930s and '40s, was widely appealing to protestors and potential supporters, and to black and white moderates, for a number of reasons. It allowed practitioners to gain the moral upper hand because they abstained from using violence, and revealed the righteousness of their cause to an often unsupportive public at large. The sight of protestors being harassed or arrested by police when they did nothing to deserve this treatment (and, in fact, refused to fight back when attacked) also incurred sympathy among those who watched these scenes unfold, particularly Northern white liberals, who were still seen as potential allies in the fight for desegregation of public spaces. But what was arguably the most appealing aspect of this protest method was that it was unmistakably confrontational. Whites who were generally able to ignore the racial problems created by Jim Crow were suddenly forced to react as black protestors

⁶ For more, please see chapters two and three, "Negroes Every Day are Being Molested" and "Walking in Pride and Dignity" in Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (Knopf, 2010), 48-135, and chapter one, "The Preachers and the People: The Origins of SCLC" in Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 11-37.

challenged them directly in spaces that were supposed to be reserved for whites only. This method, utilized by Rosa Parks, promoted by Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King Jr., and captured by thousands of news cameras, urged large numbers of black Southerners to protest in their own neighborhoods. Its appeal transformed the civil rights movement from a disparate network of protestors and organizations into a well-organized throng of citizen activists intent on ensuring that their demands would be heard throughout the land, and around the world.

The omnipresence of the media ensured that the rest of the country was able to see protestors fighting these battles, as well as the massive resistance they were up against. Journalists flocked to cover the trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, white Southerners accused of torturing and murdering 14-year-old Emmett Till, as well as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and scores of school desegregation attempts. Gene Roberts and Hank Klibinoff argue that, after an initial period of attempted neutrality, some print journalists and photographers actually helped frame civil rights stories as a battle between good and evil so that readers would side with movement activists.⁷ The nation's newfound fascination with television also ensured that people would not only *read* about the civil rights movement: they would watch it unfold before their eyes. The number of households with television sets skyrocketed to 87 percent by the late 1950s, and, with so few channels available, televised news was viewed on a regular basis by a large percentage of these homes. Fran Shor said that he thought the media played a large role in making people aware of movement aims: "I think what happened is that the evening news, which was very limited at the time, only 15 minutes long, there were only 3 major stations, ABC, CBS and NBC, that was a major story for

⁷ Gene Roberts & Hank Klibinoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (Knopf, 2006).

them.”⁸ When television journalists began covering movement activities, Americans across the country were confronted with the fight for racial equality.

People who grew up during the 1950s and 1960s remember being inundated with reports about the movement, even if they did not otherwise follow the news. Jeff Titon recalled that he “was very much aware of the efforts to integrate the public schools, the restaurants, and other public facilities in Atlanta.”⁹ “[I knew] a lot!” said Ann Wells. “Living in Alabama, growing up in the ‘60s, the effects of the Movement were ever present.”¹⁰ Northern kids were often just as aware of what was going on in the South, even if their day-to-day experiences allowed them a bit of distance. Tyrone Williams, who grew up in Detroit, noted that “It was all over television so I knew about it,” while New London, Connecticut, native Peter Rachlaff said that he knew “a pretty good bit. Some from school, some from TV, some from friends, some from older mentors in the community.”¹¹ Although Najee Muhammad also learned a lot about the movement from “The media: TV news, newspapers, [and] magazines,” he also cited “dialogue and personal experience” as a means of information, even though he lived in New York. “The best way for me to answer this,” he noted, “is to say that I knew because I lived it.”¹²

Others found that an early interest in racial matters was encouraged by news coverage of the movement. Bibb Edwards explained that he “followed it closely, especially after I entered high

⁸ Fran Shor, in discussion with the author, November 15, 2011.

⁹ Jeff Titon, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 5, 2011.

¹⁰ Ann Wells, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 9, 2011.

¹¹ Peter Rachleff, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 17, 2011.

¹² Najee Emerson Muhammad, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions. November 20, 2011.

school in 1959. It certainly was something that could soon affect me, and it did.”¹³ As a white Southerner, Edwards was aware of how the achievement of movement goals could fundamentally change his life and community, but northern white kids could be transfixed by the movement too. Theodore Trost recalled that, “As a child in Pennsylvania I knew a lot about Martin Luther King, who spoke at Franklin and Marshall College, and with whom my parents dined one evening. There were numerous marches and boycotts in Lancaster when we lived there. Colleagues of my parents were involved in the civil rights movement. We also hosted civil rights workers from the South in our home.” In addition, he also “followed civil rights news on TV and in the newspaper.”¹⁴ By the mid-1950s, then, Americans were very much aware of the struggle for racial equality and integration no matter where they lived or which race they identified with.

With such a high level of media saturation, some northern moderates began expressing disapproval with Southern racial segregation, and with the way that the federal government seemed loathe to interfere. Intense media coverage of the movement was not confined to the United States, and when these stories began spreading around the world, government officials realized that they could no longer try to maintain a relatively neutral stance on the subject of racial equality. There was simply too much at stake. Mary Dudziak artfully explains that, during the Cold War, American officials had to maintain an image of freedom and democracy in order to convince other nations to repudiate communism and become allied with the United States. The rest of the world was appalled at how the United States treated its black citizens, and if the country did not try to solve its racial dilemma, nation after nation would turn to communism rather than what was increasingly

¹³ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 13, 2011.

¹⁴Theodore Trost, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 10, 2011.

seen as a false democracy.¹⁵ Coverage of the civil rights movement was so all-encompassing that the racial hypocrisies embedded in American democracy were becoming blatant around the world, and many federal officials felt an urgent need to rehabilitate the country's stance on race relations. The first step was to acknowledge the dignity of the movement and the activists who propelled it, and to actually listen to some of their objectives. Nikhil Pal Singh explains that, "For a brief period, the demands and critiques of black intellectuals, activists, and masses of black people who took to the streets could not be ignored by a nation-state intent on legitimizing its claims to global power and domestic consensus."¹⁶

Although the federal government was forced to take some kind of stand in the fight for civil rights, it did not always explicitly side with movement activists. Citizenship and voting rights, which were supposed to be upheld by the federal government under the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, continued to be denied to African Americans in most Southern states. Southern politicians still held a lot of power in both the Democratic Party, which was more inclined to consider civil rights legislation, and in Congress as a whole, and the federal government was hesitant to lose their support—or to encourage violence in the area, which always seemed a distinct possibility in areas where campaigns were organized. Instead, the government and the media both worked to shape a narrative that presented the movement as morally righteous, a fight that would ultimately succeed in breaking down the strictures of Jim Crow and eradicating racism, but not until some magical moment when all Americans, hostile white Southerners included, were "ready" for such changes.

¹⁵ Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 13.

This newfound perspective continued to shape how civil rights struggles were understood in the press. Dudziak notes that stories of racial brutality, including Autherine Lucy's crossing the color line to attend the University of Alabama, were relayed in newspapers with the belief that "the conflict will be resolved quickly and relatively painlessly, in compliance with the ruling of the Supreme Court."¹⁷ Neither foreign nor domestic media were able to cling to this framework with the Little Rock school debacle, however, as viewers around the world became disgusted by the sight of white mobs and the Arkansas National Guard forcibly keeping black children from attending school. In the ensuing days, she says, the federal government lost its grip on how America was presented to the world, but was able to get it back somewhat when President Eisenhower called in the National Guard to ensure students safe passage. This image was safeguarded further with the decision of *Cooper v. Aaron*, which denied Arkansas Governor Faubus the right to close public schools rather than desegregate them. According to Dudziak, "It preserved the argument that racial equality was an American ideal."¹⁸ Faubus was deemed an isolated villain in the matter, and the racial narrative was upheld. As long as activists demanded legal or political change that federal officials could somewhat easily provide, and that would place the United States in a sympathetic light across the world, the federal government would support their campaigns.

The government's tacit acceptance of moderate desegregation campaigns was challenged in the aftermath of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling as Southern school boards grappled with how—or whether—they would implement the order to desegregate. Some school board administrators, bolstered by the arguments of political demagogues and White

¹⁷ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 113.

¹⁸ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 147.

Citizens Councils that the *Brown* ruling went beyond the confines of federal law and should not be followed, chose to close schools in their districts rather than admit even token numbers of black students. White families who could afford to rushed to send their children to private schools, but many were left to sit out the school year, angering both parents and children alike. Other school boards abided by the letter of the law, approving only a few African-American students (usually those who were at the top of their classes) for admittance to previously all-white schools. A few schools, usually located in border states, made active attempts to create integrated schools that would help eradicate racial prejudice among their students. Whatever the outcome, one constant remained: the federal government almost always refused to intervene or to create any kind of standard guidelines to ensure that school boards would desegregate in a systematic manner, or by a certain date. Unless violence broke out, or a high-profile demagogue publicly opposed the federal government and urged others to do so, as in the cases of Central High School in Little Rock or at the University of Alabama, the process of desegregation, and whether or not it would be pursued, was largely left up to individual school boards.

In an effort to help explain the complexities of the desegregation process, *The New York Times* categorized the attitudes of Southerners across racial and age lines into six distinct groups: “the moderate, the white supremacist, the segregationist, the white student, the Negro student, the adult Negro.”¹⁹ Although this breakdown was far too simplistic to account for the subtle variances among all of these groups, what is interesting is that the attitudes of adults and teenagers concerning school desegregation were considered different enough to merit distinct groups for each despite their racial background. Even when teenagers agreed to some extent with their

¹⁹ Claude Sitton, “Troubled Actors in the Little Rock Drama,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 1958, SM11.

parents, divergences were deep enough to warrant a distinct categorization for each group. The generation gap divided kids from their parents in this instance, of course, but it also helped define attitudes towards racial desegregation. White teenagers were more likely than their parents to embrace some degree of racial integration, and black teenagers tended to view desegregation as a positive step towards African-American advancement, while their parents could be more skeptical about its supposed benefits. Ultimately, this divergence was so deep and so obvious that neither black nor white teenagers could claim ignorance of the consequences of embracing any type of racial mixing—even the kind that allowed for the emergence of rock and roll.

Overall, most white adults in the South did not support dismantling the Jim Crow system, or what many genteelly called the “Southern way of life.” As Southern states grappled with the *Brown* decision, a 1956 survey published in *The Catholic Digest* reported that a mere 17 percent of Southern whites “favored bringing Negroes and whites closer together” while 58 percent of Northern whites voiced their approval for some form of integration.²⁰ The minority of Southern white adults who actually supported racial integration were often subject to social exclusion and even violence. Teachers and educational administrators who fell into this category, however, found that the ruling urging schools to desegregate presented an educational opportunity. After a small number of African-American students were admitted to Oliver Cromwell Elementary School in Baltimore, for instance, “a group of agitated white mothers gathered near the school, said they’d heard the Negro children were carrying knives.” The principal, Elizabeth Storm, a Mississippi native, told *The New York Times* that she ““went outside to meet them, told them it wasn’t true, and to come in and see for themselves...There’s nothing very special about it,’ she says. ‘It’s just people living together, that’s all. People talk about this sort of thing being so complex, when it’s

²⁰“Education Held Integration Key,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 1956 , 81.

really so simple. If you're a teacher, you realize that you're serving your fellow man. But it can't be a perfunctory thing. You have to have a deep desire to do the work.'"²¹

Other teachers and administrators realized that their actions may help the next generation to break the virulent cycle of racist thought and behavior that allowed the perpetuation of racial inequality. At another Baltimore school profiled by *The New York Times*, principal Frances Harwood

Called the children in assembly. She told them that the previous Sunday a minister had said that the Lord didn't distinguish between colors, only between good and bad, in people. She spoke to the pupils' parents about children coming into the world without hate; they learn their prejudices from others, usually grown-ups. Last September, when her school reopened, fifty Negro students enrolled.²²

Once classes began, children were also instructed on how to respect one another, regardless of race. One teacher, Eve Dashew, noted that "I haven't had any trouble, perhaps because I accepted [integration] and the children knew I wouldn't stand for any nonsense." At another Baltimore-area school, the sixth-grade class elected a black student as class president "because he was the smartest of us." *The New York Times* journalist profiling the class noted that "Everyone has a chance to make the rules. The youngsters reflect their teacher's outlook." In this school, teachers' views on race affected their students outside the classroom as well. "After class, Martha Cook and Loretta Tunstall, one white, the other Negro, wait for each other and start home together," the story continued. "They are 'best friends.' Martha says, 'Mr. Bryant says we're all the same. He says if God wanted us to be the same color, He'd have made us that way.' Loretta says, 'I haven't been around white children before. Martha and me, we like the same things. Mr. Bryant says that we all

²¹ Gertrude Samuels, "School Desegregation: A Case History" *The New York Times*, May 8, 1955, 69.

²² Samuels, "School Desegregation," SM9.

have the same heart inside of us and that's what's important.'"²³ The attitudes of teachers and administrators who worked in Southern schools could therefore have a positive and far-reaching effect on how their students understood racial integration and equality.

Most white educators in the South agreed to uphold the *Brown* ruling, but not all of them were as eager to inculcate notions of racial equality to their students. Many asserted that they would follow the law even if they did not actually agree with it. *The New York Times*, for instance, interviewed "a high-ranking school official in Louisville, a man with a key responsibility in making the integration program there work, and a man who has done his job well." Although his actions may have indicated strong support for racial equality, the newspaper reported that "Twice in a brief conversation he referred to 'the niggers in the white schools.' The second time he caught himself up short, with an embarrassed laugh. 'I keep forgetting that they're Negroes now,' he said."²⁴ This man may simply have been experiencing a gradual transition in his views on race, but other teachers and administrators often found ways to undermine the spirit of the ruling by treating the small numbers of African-American students who were accepted into their schools as inferior to their white peers. *The Times* reported that "In some secondary schools, principals and teachers failed to prepare their students for the change-over, and young adults reflect their lack of guidance." The article quoted adolescent white students who declared, "I figure if Negroes have their own schools, they should stay there," and "I can't see a minority pushing a majority around," and added that "In three senior high schools, students who have had no contact with Negro students bridled at the mention of social or sports activities involving Negroes."

²³ Samuels, "School Desegregation," SM9; 69.

²⁴ Phillips, "Integration: The Pattern Emerges," 211.

The paper traced these attitudes directly back to school officials. “When a Negro girl was elected to the student council, one principal denied her the honor because of a ‘rule’ (invented by the principal) that new girls had to ‘prove’ themselves for two years,” the reporter explained. “In another school a teacher lining up her children for play exclaimed in the presence of other classes as well; ‘Oh, these colored children! They’re so slow, just like the colored people working for you at home.’”²⁵ Walter Blackwell recalled that “it didn’t change by itself. We had to ask for the change.” He was on the school council at his high school in Virginia, where black students were upset “because [school administrators] were keeping the beauty contest lily-white; the queen had to be blue-eyed and blonde. And they couldn’t get to be cheerleaders and so forth, and they were real angry about the whole bit.” When both black and white students got together to discuss the problem, however, they were met with obstacles. “The teachers’ attitudes were problems,” he said.

The school administration allowed these individuals to come in from the uncivilized areas, perpetrating their own kinds of attitudes, instead of trying to relate to the community as a multi-ethnic group. They were coming in with ‘This is ours, and that’s yours’, and kids don’t like that. Especially since people were moving away from ‘Negro’ to demanding their rights, demanding justice, demanding the same opportunity.²⁶

It is especially interesting to note that teachers at this school were intervening in an interracial effort to make the school more equal for all students. Both white and black kids continued to participate in an effort meant to make school experiences fair for everyone, despite the objections of many of their teachers. Similarly, Janis Ian’s ideas on racial equality were actually solidified after her white teacher chided her for befriending a black girl. She “said I should choose someone else to be ‘best pals’ with. I bristled, thinking it was because Pat was black. *No*, she said, *it’s because of your IQ. You’re just too smart to be friends with someone like that. You’re out of her*

²⁵ Samuels, “School Desegregation,” 69.

²⁶ Walter Blackwell, interview with Ellen Fishman, July 17, 1978, 9, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

league.” Ian, however, realized that her teacher’s assumption of her intellectual superiority was intertwined with her race. She did not stop socializing with black girls, but her trust in school officials was shaken.²⁷ The lessons that both black and white children received at newly (and nominally) integrated schools could therefore affect their views on accepting people of different races.

White parents also dealt with the *Brown* ruling in a variety of ways. Most grudgingly accepted nominal integration in public schools, especially after public school boards across the South voted to close their doors entirely rather than let white and black children share classrooms. In an article examining the effects of school desegregation in three Southern cities, *The New York Times* reported that “Even though there is a basic feeling that the Supreme Court is wrong, the majority of white parents have accepted integration...The white parents, faced with a situation they know is backed by the force of law, have found themselves in a position where integration is the least of the evils they can choose.”²⁸

After being forced to keep their children home in certain jurisdictions, all but the most virulent white supremacists realized that it was better to accept the ruling and allow students to go back to school than it was to make a stand and to deny them their education. The father of a white student at Sturgis High School in Sturgis, Kentucky announced that “My daughter is not going to lose her education because of some nigger.” One mother, who had previously distributed White Citizens Council pamphlets urging parents to keep their children from attending integrated schools in her hometown of Louisville, changed her mind after she saw the effects of keeping kids from getting an education. “I don’t like it, and no one I know likes it, but what can we do about it?” she

²⁷ Janis Ian, *Society’s Child* (New York: Tarcher: 2008), 25-26.

²⁸ Phillips, “Integration: A Pattern Emerges,” 210.

asked. “I’ve just told my youngsters to stay as far away from them as possible.” She had no regrets about her choice, admitting, “Actually it worked out pretty well. There wasn’t any trouble, and as long as none of those nigger boys tries anything with the white girls, I don’t suppose there will be any.”²⁹ Bob Razer, whose parents did not espouse racist rhetoric, remembered similar tensions in his household, especially during the furor which erupted over the desegregation of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. Although Razer was only eight that year, his sister attended the school. “My parents’ viewpoint was that the black students had a nice high school to go to (Horace Mann was the black high school and was only a couple of years old) so why should they go to the “white” school?” Razer explained. “They didn’t give [racial politics] much thought, I don’t think, except for the integration of Central which was ‘local.’ They were too polite to be “radical” segregationists, though, or to outwardly show disrespect to a black person.” This seeming ambivalence towards racial matters affected his parents’ political views as well. “After the integration of Central, I know they both voted for Faubus in 1958 for governor...because they didn’t like the federal intervention,” he said. “But they did not agree with Faubus closing the public high schools here for the 1958-59 school year in an attempt to avoid integration. I don’t think they ever voted for him again after that though he kept getting elected until the 1968 election.”³⁰

Although the majority of Southern white parents reluctantly sent their children back to school to (perhaps) share classrooms with a few black kids in the autumns of 1957 and 1958, more radical white supremacists remained obstinate even in the face of federal intervention. This group believed that most white parents had given up too easily, and that it would take a fight to preserve white supremacist racial norms. Indeed, *The New York Times* reported that “the major conflict is

²⁹ Phillips, “Integration: The Pattern Emerges,” 210.

³⁰ Bob Razer. Interview with the author. Written response to interview questions. December 31, 2011

not between whites and Negroes but between those white groups who bow to the court's ruling and those who do not recognize it as law. Their tirades are directed not against Negroes so much as against the whites who would abide by the court decision."³¹ Hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan and other disgruntled individuals promoted this position by organizing "dynamite blasts near Negro homes, fiery crosses burned, and rocks thrown at Negroes as they entered white schools."³² White Citizens Councils, which were comprised of middle- and upper-middle-class white men, did not openly advocate violence, but their inflammatory rhetoric preaching absolute noncompliance with federal law often led others to commit brutal acts—sometimes with the covert participation of Council members.³³

Violence did not break out at every school undergoing desegregation, but the potential was there in every speech given by a white supremacist promising to fight back against the ruling, and most Southern whites did not wish to be a part of it, even if they agreed in theory. The father of a high school student in Clinton, Tennessee voiced the concerns of many of his contemporaries, proclaiming that "If you think I'm going to jail over some nigger kid, you're crazy."³⁴ Another father from Sturgis, Kentucky, initially joined the White Citizens Council in his town to prevent integration of his daughter's school, but left within the year: "All [Wright] Walker [head of the Council] did was bring the National Guard in here last year, and if he doesn't shut up he's going to bring them back again," he said disdainfully. "I kept my daughter out of school while the

³¹ Phillips, "Integration: A Pattern Emerges," 210-211.

³² Phillips, "Integration: A Pattern Emerges," 211.

³³ For more, please see Neil McMillen, *The Citizens Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964* (Champaign & Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1994).

³⁴ Phillips, "Integration: A Pattern Emerges," 210.

Negroes were going last year, and as a result she darn near flunked. This year she's going to school, no matter what."³⁵

While most white Southern adults did not join the ranks of the massive opposition that made headlines around the world and shamed the government and many Northern white moderates into some kind of support for the Southern civil rights movement, those who advocated for true racial equality were also in the minority. The vast majority of white Southern kids saw their parents relent on the subject of school integration amidst incredible pressure from the federal government, but their true feelings on the subject were always clear. No one growing up in a white Southern home could say that their parents supported racial equality simply because they stopped protesting the *Brown* ruling; Southern white beliefs in white supremacy and the need to keep the races separate and unequal remained all too clear. White parents may have been forced to relinquish some of their power with regards to the public school system, but they often remained staunchly opposed to racial mixing in other areas, including music and popular culture. Most white Southern adolescents may not have grown up in homes that advocated violent resistance against changes in racial norms, but neither were they raised to believe that crossing racial borders was acceptable. Southern kids, both black and white, knew the kind of opposition they would be up against if they deviated from racial norms in any capacity.

Compared to their parents, many white kids who grew up in the decades immediately following the war overwhelmingly disagreed with racial segregation in schools and public places, with many voicing support for desegregation in their own communities and institutions. According to H.H. Remmers's March 1954 poll of thousands of teenagers across the country, 54 percent of high school students agreed that "pupils of all races and nationalities should attend school together

³⁵ Phillips, "Integration: A Pattern Emerges," 210.

everywhere in this country.” By October, five months after the *Brown* ruling, the statistic rose to 58 percent. School integration was overwhelmingly favored in both the East and West (74 and 80 percent, respectively), and was still approved of by a majority of students in the Midwest (58 percent), though only 27 percent agreed with this statement in the South. Still, in a region so fundamentally defined by Jim Crow, it is interesting to note that only 51 percent of Southern students fully disagreed with integration. Furthermore, when asked “How do you *personally* feel about attending the same school with pupils of different races?” 46 percent chose the option “I like it; definitely approve.” Remmers further pointed out that “Easterners, Midwesterners and Westerners rarely chose the third alternative, ‘Don’t like it and would change it if I could,’ but 35 per cent of Southern teenagers checked this response.” With regards to violent or aggressive anti-integration school demonstrations, a majority of students in the East, Midwest, and West (75, 64, and 78 percent) disapprove, but so do 48 percent of Southerners.³⁶

Interestingly enough, only 13 percent of Southern kids said “I approve, but I would not take part,” while 20 percent chose the option “I approve, and I personally would take part in such actions.” White Southern adults often shrouded their racial beliefs in a veil of politesse, and were unwilling to violently fight for what they saw as a dying cause, even if they disagreed with measures supporting desegregation. Almost half of Southern students also disagreed with these demonstrations on the whole. Those who did not take issue with them were more willing to participate than members of their parents’ generation, indicating that young proponents of massive resistance displayed a higher level of dedication to legal white supremacy than most white

³⁶ H.H. Remmers & D.H. Radler, *The American Teenager* (Charter Books, 1957), 202-205; 220-221. Please note that, although Remmers asserted that he interviewed teenagers from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and did, indeed, include anecdotal evidence from some black teenagers’ survey replies, these questions were framed as though they were only posed to white students. Since he did not provide a racial breakdown, it is uncertain how many black responses he received, and how they would have understood this question differently from their white peers.

Southerners. In other words, the quiet, polite support of Jim Crow was waning among young white Southerners. A faint majority supported racial reforms, so those who did advocate white supremacy had to be more extreme in their beliefs in order to make their voices heard, and to show how committed they were to their cause. Overall, a vast majority of high school students across the country favored some degree of desegregation or integration, and, as Remmers points out, this percentage spiked significantly among middle-class students, especially those whose parents had more than a secondary-school education.³⁷

Many Southern white kids did, however, describe faint, often unpleasant feelings regarding overt segregation, even if they were able to successfully hide or repress these feelings in order to fit the status quo as they matured. Racial segregation simply did not coincide with the lessons on fairness and kindness that they were supposed to imbibe in Sunday school. While Bibb Edwards admitted, “when I was small I accepted legal segregation without much thought,” he also recalled instances which strained this easy acceptance. “At our local movie theatre the balcony was for ‘coloreds only,’” he said. “But we all saw the same movie buying the same ticket for the same 25 cents; no problem...I could take at face value ‘separate but equal’ for a while, [but] it became apparent that in fact we were separate and very unequal. As TV, national magazines, and books later opened my eyes to other ways of living, it became obvious that these barriers had to come down.”³⁸ Diane McWhorter, who grew up in one of Birmingham’s most prominent white families, yet went on to write *Carry Me Home*, a pivotal history of the city’s civil rights movement, remembered that

I never felt hatred toward blacks. I felt condescension. I remember in the sixth grade, a lot of my friends would hem and haw and say, ‘Oh, you know, I have to admit it, yes, I am prejudiced.’ I was the class know-it-all, so I said, ‘Well, you know, I’m a white

³⁷ Remmers, *The American Teenager*, 202-205; 220-221.

³⁸ Bibb Edwards, interview with the author.

supremacist, but I'm not prejudiced against them.' I thought that was a brilliant moral distinction. It meant that, 'Yeah, we're better than they are, but you don't have to be ugly about it. They haven't done anything to you.'

Still, despite her cocksure attitude, she admitted that "I knew better. I knew it was wrong. All the adults knew it was wrong, but they wouldn't do anything. Segregation served their own interests: it's nice to pay somebody to clean your house for a dollar a day."³⁹ Even though these feelings were not always voiced, many white kids were beginning to be encouraged by early civil rights movement activists, and the untold thousands of Southern black people who risked both life and livelihood to participate in mass marches and boycotts.

This attitude did not prevail among all white Southern teenagers, though. In 1955, *The New York Times*, which published a special case study on school desegregation in Baltimore, reported that

A year ago, in an all-white high school, a class of 16-year-olds reacted violently to the idea of Negro classmates. Of the group of forty-five, mostly from modest or underprivileged homes, no one looked forward to the change; most spoke in the clichés of prejudice—from 'They're dirty, look at their homes' to less printable ones. They wouldn't want to play football or shower with 'them.' Their tones suggested that Negroes were subhuman. Today these same students are unchanged in their attitudes. They figured in a strike against the schools last fall, defied their teachers and terrorized a group of enrolled Negroes. Their speech echoes the old prejudices—'Amos and Andy,' 'boogies.'⁴⁰

One white teenager from North Carolina responded to Remmers's October, 1954 survey question about segregation by writing him a letter with the heading "My Problem." "My problem is segregation," he insisted.

Although it does not effect me [sic] directly, yet I feel that when it comes, it will help neither race...In a recent television program I saw, the cameras visited a town in North Carolina and another in Louisiana. They asked students both black and white, what they thought of the segregation problem. Both races in both towns firmly declared they did not

³⁹ Diane McWhorter in *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience* Ed. Juan Williams (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005), 88-89.

⁴⁰ Samuels, "Desegregation: A Case Study," SM9.

want to go to school with each other. I don't believe the Negroes anywhere want to go to school with us anymore than we do with them.⁴¹

In this instance, unlike the previous example, the respondent did not use terms of hatred or prejudice in his reply. Racism undoubtedly informed his thoughts on the matter, but he used an interview with both white and black students to explain that neither desired school desegregation. Using black resistance to these campaigns in order to disparage them was a common tactic among Southern segregationists, which shows that not all white kids were quick to challenge the parent culture.

Despite the existence of these incidences and attitudes, many young whites supported some of the goals of the integrationist movement to an extent, even if they did not always voice their support at the time. White Southern kids are often portrayed as hesitant to accept the racial desegregation of public areas at best, and as cruelly imitative of their massive resistance elders at worst. But the truth was often far murkier. Like their parents, many members of this demographic were frightened about the both the changes occurring and the potential for violence that stalked any movement activities. Ann Wells remembered that “living in Alabama, growing up in the 60s, the effects of the Movement were ever present,” and admitted,

I was scared. I had no idea how desegregation might change our lives, and I was terribly scared of some of the tactics used in getting there. Watching Governor George Wallace and the National Guard barricade school entrances, seeing the pushing, shoving, shouting, and violent reactions of both races was frightening. I was not wise enough to understand the magnitude of the movement or the magnitude of the injustices they were trying to overcome. I just knew it was large, and was not going away without resolve.⁴²

Despite her fear, Wells remembered that fights for integration brought about

Comfortable changes. I remember ‘whites only’ restrooms at the courthouse, ‘whites only’ drinking fountains, and ‘whites only’ at the hamburger joint on the square, ‘blacks to the

⁴¹ Remmers, *The American Teenager*, 204.

⁴² Ann Wells, interview with author.

back of bus' signs and the sick/scared/wrong feeling I got when I saw those signs. As a child, I didn't understand why they weren't allowed, and worried about what would happen if they broke the restrictions. I wondered what 'they' (whomever 'they' were) would think if they knew I played in the cotton fields with a black girl. There was finally a peace for me personally when those barriers were removed. I felt that finally we were all allowed to experience the same 'place.'"⁴³

The effects of desegregation and the unraveling of Jim Crow could be traumatic, and Wells admitted that she was initially unsure about whether she supported these changes or not. When they occurred, however, she realized that the small triumphs of desegregation were in line with personal beliefs she had held ever since she was young, and was able to embrace them more wholeheartedly. Similarly, remarks made by William Ray, a white student from Mississippi who participated in a nationwide, interracial conference on school desegregation in 1956, revealed the same combination of hope and fear expressed by Wells. According to *The New York Times*, Ray “declared that many young people in the South favored racial integration. But lines of bitterness between the races have hardened in the past year, he asserted, and it will take a great effort ‘just to maintain interracial communication in a spirit of Christian love. Things will get worse before integration comes.’”⁴⁴

Southern white teenagers also expressed attitudes of ambivalence regarding integration, echoing their parents' condemnations of racial mixing in principle, yet insisting that integration did not much bother them so long as they could complete their school years in peace. Lauren Lee, who was a senior the year that the Little Rock Nine attempted to desegregate her school, Central High, told *The New York Times* that “I am not an integrationist...but I want to go back to

⁴³ Ann Wells, interview with author.

⁴⁴ Stanley Rowland, “Southern Youths Back Integration,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1956, 42.

school...Integration will have to come because they can't close all the schools." She went on to tell the reporter that

She has no objection to desegregation so long as school is not disrupted. However, she made no effort to make friends with the nine Negroes who attended Central. At first she felt this might have been because it would have been unpopular with her friends. But then she says: 'If nobody cared I still wouldn't be friendly. I wouldn't be friendly. I wouldn't be rude to them. I just don't care to be friends.' Her only explanation for her attitude is her Southern upbringing.

The power of her upbringing, however, only goes so far. "The blame for the troubles of Little Rock," Lee told the paper, "lies with the parents."⁴⁵

Other white students shared Lee's ambivalence, although they recalled being more open to the idea of racial integration as long as it did not disrupt their own lives. Bob Croonenberghs said that, when he was in school, "I had no strong feelings...about trying to integrate schools, though I hated racism."⁴⁶ Bob Razer remembered that racial segregation of public places "seemed silly to me. I think I probably began to question school integration then too – my schools had no problem with black students (though we had very few black students) and neither did the white students, though it was only nominal integration. I have no idea what the black students' view of things were as I had no interaction with them. I suspect they felt very isolated."⁴⁷ Interestingly enough, both Croonenberghs and Razer separated their anti-racist stance from a support for school desegregation. Although it might make sense to assume that the former would necessitate the latter, the dictates of white privilege allowed these students to oppose racism in the abstract while ignoring the small racial changes in their own schools (as well as the black kids themselves, who, consequently, often suffered from alienation and loneliness in desegregated classrooms).

⁴⁵ Claude Sitton "Troubled Actors in the Little Rock Drama," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1958, 22.

⁴⁶ Bob Croonenberghs, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, December 13, 2011.

⁴⁷ Razer, interview with the author.

Still, all three of these reactions should be considered quite ground-breaking when viewed in light of the brutal and omnipresent nature of the Jim Crow system in the South. The need to protect white supremacy meant that *everything* in the Southern United States was fundamentally shaped by race, and by the need to keep blacks in an inferior position. This system was essentially unstable, so any deviation, no matter how minute, was punished severely, with legal repercussions, social ostracization, violence, and even death. Furthermore, white kids attending school in the mid-to late-1950s and early 1960s were all too aware of both the disproving attitudes of many of their parents and of the massive opposition that many Southern whites mounted against civil rights activists in an attempt to protect this system. The fact that Lee, Croonenberghs, Razer, and many other white Southern kids like them could attend school *without caring* that they were sharing the same hallways with black students, even a few of them, shows that racial attitudes were changing from those of their parents, who generally remained staunchly resistant to integration even as they were forced to accept it. It may have taken more than token integration to get some white Southern kids interested in actual racial justice, but if they could carry on with the rest of their lives, knowing that the foundation of their society was crumbling before them and yet do nothing to prevent this from happening, then it is clear that many members of this generation were a lot more amenable to integration, at least on a limited level, than their parents were.

Some white Southern kids went further, and actively welcomed black students to their schools, despite the disapproval they were sure to receive from friends, teachers, and family members. One white adolescent girl bravely addressed a Baltimore meeting of school board officials, teachers, parents, and students, and announced, "It's right to end segregation because

we're all free and equal, and they [black students] don't have a \$6 million school like ours."⁴⁸

Another white high school student, when asked to write an essay on 'brotherhood,' mused,

To me, brotherhood means getting along with everyone, no matter what their religion, race, or nationality. In Laurel Hill, North Carolina, the people heard about the colored girls and boys going to school with the white in the North, and they were scared to death that it was going to happen down there. The grown-ups even had the boys and girls saying that they would quit school if it did happen. I even said it myself. When we moved to Baltimore and I started coming to this high school, I saw that colored girls were coming and at first I didn't like the idea. I have been coming to this school ever since Nov. 16, 1954, and the colored girls have treated me just as nice as the white girls. I think that we all should get along.⁴⁹

The decision to embrace classroom integration was not without its consequences for white kids. Rick Turner remembered meeting a black student when he was in the eighth grade, the year that his previously all-white middle school admitted small numbers of African-American kids. "I immediately, the first day, the first class of the day, went up to him and started talking to him, and by the weekend I was up at his house with him playing basketball, we were good friends throughout school," he said. "We became instant friends and we stayed that way all the way through school... Then your friends that you had, they're not going to associate with you anymore because you're friends are of another color." Aside from simply losing many friends, Turner suffered other forms of abuse. "I can remember walking to the school bathrooms in my high school and seeing people writing over the walls 'Ricky Turner is an N-lover,'" he said. "I can remember being jumped after a basketball game by five or six white guys because of my feelings, of talking to a black person after school or someone going out to eat with them or something. I was crucified for that."⁵⁰ Turner spoke out directly against racial segregation, and made an effort to reach out to

⁴⁸ Samuels, "School Desegregation: A Case History," 68.

⁴⁹ Samuels, "School Desegregation: A Case Study," 69.

⁵⁰ Rick Turner, interview with author.

black students, but even he depicted racial integration as something that was not worth making a fuss over rather than a monumental shift in Southern culture. “They integrated the school with 32 blacks in 1964,” he recalled,

And the enrollment went from 1800 down to 1600 because people were taking their kids out of school because there would be blacks there...I’m thinking, what’s the matter with y’all? What’s the big deal? And even my [future] wife’s parents, they wanted to take her out of school because there would be blacks there. They told her, ‘if you get into a class and a black person sits beside you, you come home and tell me and I’ll get you moved.’ And I’m thinking, what in the world?⁵¹

Turner, who was reared in an actively anti-racist household, made overt attempts to befriend the few black students in his school, and faced harassment because of his choices, still framed integration as something ordinary and expected, something which did not merit the amount of attention, both positive and negative, directed towards it. His actions showed that he believed in racial justice, but his attitude betrayed a belief that was held by a number of his contemporaries: that racial integration could not be stopped, and that it really was no big deal.

African-American adults across the country worked hard to eradicate the strictures of racial segregation, so a 1956 poll stating that blacks “voted 90 per cent in favor of integration...no matter where [they] lived, or how much income or education they had,” is hardly surprising.⁵² Still, this heady number obscured the all-too-real divisions among black attitudes towards integration. Some saw the coming together of blacks and whites in any space as a step towards ending old racial prejudices and the revelation of a new, racially harmonious atmosphere. Many adults were, in addition, deeply suspicious of white people and white institutions, and were more ambivalent about what a desegregated America would mean for them and their children. And there were those, like

⁵¹ Rick Turner, interview with author.

⁵² “Education Held Integration Key,” 81.

A.T. Walden, one the first black lawyer in the South, who graduated from the University of Michigan in 1911, and went on to practice in Atlanta, who had benefitted, financially and socially, from segregation, and were loath to give up both their individual wealth and what they felt was a special, distinct sense of community in order to give integration a try.⁵³

Others supported the fight for integration in theory, given that segregation was enacted in law in order to protect white supremacy, yet questioned whether any real advancement could be had for blacks once the barriers of Jim Crow were removed. The issue they were concerned about was equality, and support for the desegregation of public spaces was often believed to be the preliminary means of achieving this goal, as well as a way to finally benefit from programs and infrastructure that they tax dollars paid for, but which they had heretofore been unable to take advantage of. Dr. Stephen Winrock, the leader of the Little Rock NAACP branch in 1958, explained that “As our children attend school with white children, they will be able to talk over their common problems and they will be able to understand each other better.” His comment was idealistic, and yet the reporter following this story added that, “To Dr. Winrock, the school fight here is a symbol: ‘Just one aspect of the Negro’s effort to achieve full citizenship.’”⁵⁴ Here, desegregation was viewed as an important step towards equality, but it did not signal actual equality in and of itself.

The relationships that blacks had with whites or white institutions could both complicate and ease the transition to a desegregated South. In certain cases, black adults were pleased to find white allies who supported their cause. One reporter interviewed the mother of a high school girl

⁵³ Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

⁵⁴ Sitton, “Troubled Actors in the Little Rock Drama,” SM11.

who lived in a predominantly white neighborhood in Clinton, Tennessee, and asked how her daughter was coping with attending a newly-integrated school. “If it wasn’t for the help of the good white people around here,” she replied, “I never would have been able to keep my daughter in that school. But our white neighbors still speak kindly with us, and the people I work for have all told me to do what I thought was right, no matter what anyone said.”⁵⁵ The knowledge that she had support, and probably a degree of protection, from the whites in her community, who would have had more influence with their local governments, gave this mother the strength to keep encouraging her daughter’s difficult course. Her story was not universal, though. Southern black families generally describe feeling isolated as they dealt with sending their children to integrated schools for the first time, and having to deal with these stresses on their own.

Younger black Southerners also supported integration, despite the harassment and alienation they often faced when they entered previously all-white schools. While these kids shared their parents’ hopeful views on both racial integration and black advancement, they tended to be more optimistic regarding the overall goals of the movement. Members of the younger generation were more likely to extol the virtues of a racially integrated society, and to endure the hardships of attending nominally integrated schools in order to advance the cause of civil rights generally, and their own prospects specifically. These kids had to deal with the direct consequences of school integration more than their parents did, and yet they usually remained more committed to the cause. Here too a shift in racial attitudes and behaviors is evident between the two generations. The gap may not have been quite as pronounced as it was in Southern white families, but it was wide enough to affect the way that black kids viewed the civil rights movement, and to support a middle ground between the races nevertheless.

⁵⁵ Phillips, “Integration: The Pattern Emerges,” 211.

As school desegregation efforts began in the South, some black children displayed similar attitudes towards integrated classrooms as their more progressive white contemporaries; that it was inevitable and nothing to get upset about. One tenth-grade Southern girl who wrote to H.H. Remmers's poll on teenage behavior, for instance, declared, "I am a Negro. I live in a white community and attend a white school. Many's the time when I think I've been graded unfairly but for the average teenager I don't have too many problems."⁵⁶ A younger girl who attended an all-black school in Baltimore, announced, "If white children came into my class, I would treat them as if they were members of our own race."⁵⁷ Some kids were more apprehensive about integration, but they still tended to display a greater sense of optimism regarding the future of race relations than their parents did. Joan Drake, a black teenager from Little Rock who applied to attend Central High School as it began accepting small numbers of black students, was interviewed by a reporter who observed that, "No bitterness is apparent in her outlook. She took a rather dim view of most whites until she made a trip to California, where she met some who were 'very nice.' Since then she accepts them for what they believe and hopes for the best."⁵⁸ While she did not expect that racial desegregation would immediately bring about harmonious and equal race relations, and she hardly viewed the situation as lightly as some of her white peers did, she was also a lot less wary than many black parents were.

Black kids were more aware than any other generation of the great responsibility they were given to succeed, not only personally, but for the benefit of the movement as a whole. Joan Drake asserted that going to Central High School "would mean an opportunity to obtain a better

⁵⁶ Remmers, *The American Teenager*, 18.

⁵⁷ Samuels, "School Desegregation: A Case History," 68.

⁵⁸ Sitton, "Troubled Actors in the Little Rock Drama," 24.

education. She feels she should not be denied these advantages because of her race.”⁵⁹ Carol Swann, who was chosen as one of only two 12-year-old girls to “integrate” Chandler Junior High in Richmond, Virginia in 1960, said that “My parents and I never considered not going, because we had made a commitment to the struggle. It was an obligation that you had to your people. It was a double-edged sword for me because if I did anything wrong, if I made any mistakes, I was letting myself down, my family down, the entire race.” She remembered “Little old black ladies—total strangers—would come up to me on the street and say, ‘We’re counting on you to show them that we’re smart, that we’re human.’”⁶⁰ Black kids were certainly just as invested in the educational and eventual economic benefits that attending better-funded, predominantly-white schools would bring as their predecessors and Northern contemporaries were. But they were faced with the extra duty of moving the movement forward by showing that they were every bit as smart, respectable, and capable as white students. They bravely took on this task, despite the hardships that they faced, because, unlike previous generations, these kids truly believed that racial relations had improved to the extent that the harassment they initially faced would die down. Ultimately, many felt that they would ultimately be allowed to attend integrated schools on equal terms with their white peers.

The torment that many white Southern students unleashed on incoming black students could have been taken straight from the playbooks of adult massive resisters. At Clinton High School in Clinton Tennessee, where a scant 12 African-American kids enrolled alongside 800 white students in the fall of 1956, *The New York Times* reported that “forty white students carried out the pestering of the Negro pupils.” For a few days, black students “boycotted the classrooms

⁵⁹ Sitton, “Troubled Actors in the Little Rock Drama,” 24.

⁶⁰ Williams, “My Soul Looks Back in Wonder,” 65;68.

because of ‘insults’ and ‘mean incidents’ they were subjected to by some of the white students. These included name-calling, jostling in corridors and pouring ink over a Negro girl’s books.” However, “The school principal, D.J. Brittain Jr., had warned that white students would be expelled if they continued to molest the Negro children in the building,” and the kids returned to their educations.⁶¹ Carol Swann recalled a garden variety of abuse, including name-calling, spitting, tripping, and having white students flatten her tires, spray her with ink, or knock the books out of her arms. “Lunch was always very messy because they would throw all kinds of things,” she said. “Afterward you frequently looked like you had swum through your lunch. If any adults saw it, they did nothing. The teachers didn’t intervene. They didn’t want us there.” Furthermore, “Gym was particularly horrible because we had to do sit-ups. The other students saw us as contaminate; no one wanted to hold down our feet or have any kind of physical contact.” Afterwards, “Everyone was trying to get through a relatively narrow opening in the locker room at the same time. There was a lot of pushing and shoving. If someone accidentally touched Gloria or me, they’d start screaming, ‘Help, help!’ Then their friends would rush up and brush them off.”⁶² Swann persisted, however, as she, like many other black students who helped integrate Southern schools, saw her experience as a chance for both personal and group advancement. And no matter how difficult their circumstances, these students must have believed that things would get better, or else they would not have been able to endure such treatment for long.

Not all white students treated their new black peers with such cruelty, of course, but, again, there were penalties to be had for any true acts of decency. Swann said that “There were a couple of white students who tried to be friendly, but they put themselves at risk. When I was in junior

⁶¹ John N. Pophan, “Violence Shuts Clinton School,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 1956, 44.

⁶² Williams, *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder*, 65.

high, there was one girl who was friendly when no one was around. But if she was talking with me and someone came down the hall, she would pretend she didn't know me.”⁶³ At a school in Baltimore, “15-year-old Raymond Bundy, a lawyer's son, plays trombone in the school band, because a white boy taught him over the taunts of other members.” In addition, “Several Negroes are members of the football and lacrosse teams. Most Negro students have been coached by their parents to ignore the name-calling and worse, to ‘scratch it out like a wrong problem.’ They are well aware of their role as pioneers.” At another high school, where only 10 black kids existed in a population of 1900, “Negroes...mingle with other boys in sports, campus and social activities. They come with their dates to the monthly school dances.”⁶⁴ Most black students had to put up with despicable treatment when they first entered previously all-white schools, and many understandably chose to leave after a year or two. But those who stayed could also come to feel accepted as part of a wider, integrated student body that ultimately benefited kids of both races, and further contributed to the construction of a racial middle ground between them. It was not just the promise of a better education and brighter future that drew these kids to integrated schools and convinced them to persevere amidst humiliating circumstances, but the pride they could take in becoming part of a new future that seemed, sometimes, to promise equality for everyone.

Outside of the South, schools were usually not legally segregated, even though residential policies often led to schools and leisure spaces that were dominated by one race. Still, many kids growing up in the North, Midwest, and West in the 1950s and early 1960s shared their classrooms and social spaces with at least a few people from different racial backgrounds, although these experiences did not always result in racial harmony. In Philadelphia, Matthew Delmont says that

⁶³ Williams, *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder*, 68.

⁶⁴ Samuels, “Desegregation: A Case Study,” 69.

there were “opportunities for casual and friendly interracial interactions at [West Philadelphia High School], basement parties, and some snack shops,” but

Many popular social and recreational spaces used by young people, such as roller skating rinks, bowling alleys, and swimming pools, had segregated admissions practices that flouted the city’s antidiscrimination policies. The Adelphia Skating Rink in West Philadelphia on 39th and Market Street, for example, operated as a club that required teens to be sponsored by members in order to be admitted. Using this policy, the rink’s manager turned away any potential customers he deemed undesirable, including all black teenagers.⁶⁵

By 1953, Delmont recounts, the NAACP and ACLU began assisting a local civil rights group that was protesting the skating rink’s policies. The owner, Joe Toppi, “said he would not exclude anyone, but that he would do everything he could to influence white and black teens to come on different nights.” He tried to sway his customers by “publicizing three ‘white nights’ and three ‘sepia nights’ a week.” When interracial groups of teenage customers arrived on these nights, they were admitted, in accordance with the city’s by-laws, and no disturbances were recorded. Still, Delmont says, “Toppi kept his signs up and continued encouraging white teens to skate on white nights and black teens to come on sepia nights until at least the following year.”⁶⁶ Public spaces and schools could not legally be segregated in Philadelphia, but both personal and institutionalized racism continued to divide white teenagers from black in many instances. Networks existed to challenge these examples of discrimination, and hospitable integrated spaces were available in certain neighborhoods, allowing black and white kids to mingle and learn from one another. But these elements did not eradicate the very real inequality and harassment that black kids faced in desegregated spaces across the North, Midwest, and West, every day.

⁶⁵ Delmont, *The Kids Are All Right*, 28-29.

⁶⁶ Matthew F. Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2012), 29.

Black kids often had to deal with white teachers and administrators who did not understand the obstacles they faced, or doubted their intellectual capabilities. Austin Kutsher, who is white, recalled, “I was taking an English elective, ‘The Black Man in White America.’ Only in Scarsdale, with less than ten black students in the entire school, could we have the balls to have such a class.”⁶⁷ Berry Gordy said of attending a majority-black school in Chicago that “Around the time I started kindergarten, I was jolted into reality. At school most of the kids were black...but all the teachers were white. They were the bosses and had all the right answers.”⁶⁸ Even older students suffered. Madison Foster came to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor from Virginia expecting to experience fewer instances of racial discrimination than he did under a strictly segregated system. What he encountered there was less concrete than the strictures of Jim Crow, but hardly inconspicuous. “The kind of pain some of us went through, like myself, who came here as a student in the School of Social Work in 1963, when there were no blacks here,” he recalled, was extensive. “We were seen as being not as bright as other people. They would talk to us funny. They had no sympathy or understanding of what our intellectual interests were. I think that’s a kind of violence. It’s a kind of intellectual death. It hurts. It makes you uneasy. It gives you, as I had, a tick in your shoulder. You don’t feel good.”⁶⁹ These more subtle, yet extremely pervasive examples of racially-motivated harassment could be found across the country. James Rucker remembered trying to take the bus through his hometown of Gary, Indiana to pay his parents’ insurance premium. “The bus driver asked me, ‘Where you going?’ And he pulled the bus over and asked ‘Where you going?’ I

⁶⁷ Austin Ken Kutsher, *Watching Walter Cronkite: Reflections on Growing Up in the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Gordian Knot Books, 2009), 199.

⁶⁸ Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 10-11.

⁶⁹ Madison Foster, interview with Bret Eynon, July, 1978, 27. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

said, 'I'm going right there, to the insurance company.' And he purposely went two blocks past it so I would have to walk back."⁷⁰

Most black kids who grew up outside of the South had similar experiences, but attending racially integrated schools or leisure activities could also promote higher levels of racial tolerance and support for equal institutions. A white California high school junior wrote a response to a 1954 survey on school desegregation attitudes that H.H. Remmers called "representative of the prevailing American attitude." "Another one of my dislikes is the segregation in the southern school," the student wrote "I think its stupid and very un-american. Our Constitution says that all men are created equal, but, the way thing are today, well it a disgrace. Just because their skin is black doesn't mean that thier different than the white. They want an education, home, job, just like anybody else. [sic]"⁷¹ Although this student did not seem to recognize the discrimination that undoubtedly existed in his own community, he was clearly disheartened by both legal segregation and racial inequality as a whole since he described black people as having the same hopes, dreams, and even physiological makeup as whites. Quincy Jones was also exposed to a high level of racial tolerance among his white classmates in Bremerton, Washington.

A little white kid named Robin Fields said, How'd you like to run for Boys Club president?" he recalls. "I said, Man, don't be silly. You know, there's 2300 kids there, something like that, and about 37 black or something like that. I said, Forget it. And guess what? My family was getting ready to move to Seattle. Says just okay anyway. I won... And it was an amazing transition because it was—it's when I got into the thing of taking people one by one; you know."⁷²

⁷⁰ Interview with James Rucker, Voices of Civil Rights Collection, Series III: Bus Interviews (Audio), Box 4, American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress.

⁷¹ Remmers, *The American Teen-Ager*, 203.

⁷² Camille Cosby, interview with Quincy Jones, National Visionary Leadership Project, September 23, 2003, 6-7, American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress.

Despite the many public areas where racial segregation continued to be enforced, in violation of antidiscrimination bylaws, in Philadelphia, Delmont says that “at least one attempted to welcome both black and white teenage customers. Joe’s Snack Bar, located across the street from the West Philadelphia High School, placed advertisements in the school’s yearbook every year from 1954 to 1960...every Joe’s Snack Bar ad pictured the proprietors, a middle- aged white couple, happily serving an interracial group of students.”⁷³ Desegregated public spaces could still foster unequal and inhospitable environments for black kids, but they also held the potential for interracial harmony and friendships to blossom.

What stands out among the many stories that black kids told about attending desegregated schools is the fact that many remembered transitioning from an age where race did not seem to be an issue among their peer group to a point where racial lines were more firmly drawn. This transition often occurred soon after children began grade school. Diahann Carroll proclaimed that “My neighborhood elementary school [in New York] was PS 46, and totally integrated, and I had no idea what that meant at that time. If you’ve never attended a school that was segregated, you really don’t understand the impact of white children and black children going to school together. So it didn’t impact me, have that impact on me, until maybe years later.” Carroll went on to explain that, in her group of friends, race did not affect the children’s abilities to play together. “We did plays together that were about, I don’t know, Pinocchio. And whomever could play Pinocchio played Pinocchio and whoever was Jiminy Cricket was Jiminy Cricket. So there is a break in my complete understanding that we don’t know how to operate together which is what we were being taught at that time.” When she and those same friends went to school, however, “they were trying to make us understand that we could not function together, whites and blacks, and then I went

⁷³ Delmont, *The Kids Are All Right*, 28.

everyday to a school where I functioned...with little girls and little boys who were white, and then I had to begin to think of them as white.” Carroll and all of her friends, both white and black, had to be taught that race divided them, even though they grew up in fairly integrated neighborhoods and attended integrated schools. Of one white friend, she noted “I just knew that she was a little girl that I liked to play with. I liked to play ball and we liked to read plays together...What changed about her? What was there about this word or this...what changed? She was the same yesterday as she is today.”⁷⁴

Similarly, when James Rucker started school, he was one of ten black kids in an otherwise all-white class. His memories support sociological findings that children, who have not yet grown into their societal roles, do not inherently discriminate according to skin colour. “We got along very well,” he said, “but that was the makeup of the neighborhood and the school that I went to. As a kid growing up, I didn’t know anything about what we would call now or then prejudice, because we just didn’t see it in our particular neighborhood.” Unfortunately, this innocence with regards to racial inequality did not last. “As I got older I found out that there were certain places downtown Gary that I just wasn’t able, or I shouldn’t say able, I wasn’t really welcome there,” he explains. “I could go, but you could see that you were not welcomed...The way they would look at you, ‘What do you want?’ Or if it was late at night, what are you doing down here? The police would stop you, ‘What are you doing down here?’”⁷⁵ In Los Angeles, Odetta “lived in a neighborhood that was an un-self-conscious U.N. neighborhood. Filipinos, Cubans and Mexicans, Japanese, you name it, us blacks, you just name it we had it...So the kids, all of us went to school

⁷⁴ Camille Cosby, interview with Diahann Carroll, National Visionary Leadership Project, 34-37, American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress.

⁷⁵ Interview with James Rucker.

together. So we were pretty protected by that.” She said that all of the kids in her neighborhood went to the same grade school, but by high school, they were mostly separated by race. “In walking distance of our home was the [predominantly white] Marshall High School, but we were sent to [predominantly black and Latino] Belmont High School when you had to take a bus there...Does that give you any clue?...So, and that’s not hard even for an innocent kid to read, you know.”⁷⁶

Many kids who grew up in more racially integrated spaces among peers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds described being surprised and saddened when they learned about racial norms that divided them from their friends. Since segregation was not legally enforced in many Northern, Midwestern, and Western communities, some children spent their earliest years largely unaware of the racial inequality that persisted in these areas. But they could not remain innocent forever, and by adolescence, most had been confronted with laws and social expectations that upheld white supremacy well outside of the South. These kids, both black and white, had positive experiences living in integrated spaces that they could look back on, and force them to question why the rest of society could not operate in the same way. These experiences could help prepare white and black adolescents to support the goals of the integrationist movement in public spaces, and in other more abstract, areas as well. As children and teenagers were grappling with the experiences of segregation and desegregation of schools and public spaces across the country, they continued to listen to rock and roll music, which was, as *Billboard* music editor Paul Ackerman argued in 1958, “one aspect of America’s cultural life...[where] integration has already taken place.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Camille Cosby, interview with Odetta, National Visionary Leadership Project, May 26, 2003, 7; 9, American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress.

⁷⁷ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (New York et al: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 39-40.

Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry may have disturbed the staid façade of postwar America, but Little Richard blew it wide open. He was born outside of Decatur, Georgia to an aspiring-class family with strict moral and religious ideals. His father, the son of a poor Baptist minister, worked as a brickmason and made and distributed moonshine on the side. His mother, however, came from one of the area's wealthiest black families—as an adult, Richard could still recall being fascinated by his grandparents' large home, outfitted with glass windows, French doors, and indoor plumbing. In his own family home, as long as the children were “obedient and got our education we had a place at home,” Richard said in his authorized biography. “And we didn't have to work...he took care of everything. My daddy was a very independent man. We weren't a poor family and we weren't a rich family. Daddy provided for us and we had the things that normal children should have, such as a bicycle and things of that nature.”⁷⁸ His use of the term “normal” here was problematic, as he clearly equated middle-class values and the acquisition of consumer goods with social acceptability, something that would have been denied many poorer African Americans who lived in this area. He even specifically compared his family to poorer blacks in his neighborhood, stating “My daddy was one of those progressive types of people. Everyone else had gas lamps...we had electric light.”⁷⁹ Still, his depiction of family and home life was common among aspiring- and middle-class African Americans, who absorbed middle-class values, and used them to create distance from poor and working-class African Americans. People who held these beliefs continued to perpetuate damaging racial and class tensions, but they did not necessarily forsake traditional cultural elements. Richard, for instance, found ways to combine the gospel and country blues that

⁷⁸ Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Quasar of Rock* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 3; 6.

⁷⁹ White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, 6.

provided a daily soundtrack in his community with pop musical forms and performance styles, resulting in a unique style of early rock and roll.

The first songs that Richard remembered from his childhood were church songs. He loved the music so much, and put so much energy into his renditions, that his family, who performed gospel standards in local church contests, promoted him to featured soloist by the age of eight. Beyond the churchyard, Richard's biographer, Charles Smith said, "music vibrated through the streets in the black areas of Macon...People sang as they went about their work. In the evenings people would sit outside their homes and make music together. Almost any meeting, religious or secular, would feature group singing, with everybody joining in the well-known traditional song." Richard absorbed these influences as well. "I used to go up and down the street...just singing at the top of my voice," he said. "There'd be guitar players playing on the street."⁸⁰ Music helped bridge the class gap that may otherwise have existed between Richard and his neighbors, and created a distinct link to the past for a child whose sights were clearly set beyond the boundaries of his Georgia hometown. Gospel and country blues also helped inform his performance style, no matter which genre of music he sang. He started singing in local clubs and with travelling shows at the age of 14, and was forced to learn about music beyond the sacred realm. At first, "I would sing 'Cal'donia, Cal'donia, what makes your big head so hard,'" he said. "That was by Louis Jordan and the Tympani Five. It was the only song I knew that wasn't a church song." After gaining a modicum of success, "we went all over Georgia, playing in white clubs, and I would sing [pop hits] 'Goodnight Irene' and 'Mona Lisa,' and all those different kinds of ballads." He also routinely sang in minstrel shows, which, despite their degrading nature, allowed him to indulge his love for theatrical costumes and makeup onstage, an experience which would further transform his *outré*

⁸⁰ White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, 15.

stage presence. Through his adolescence, Richard learned to sing pop and R&B standards while maintaining the ecstatic quality of gospel in his performances, which effectively mixed black, white, middle- and working-class traditions into a new stream of rock and roll.⁸¹

Richard soon found it necessary to supplement his income by working as a dishwasher at a diner in Decatur, where he frequently clashed with his white boss. He knew that to argue or voice any sort of displeasure would result in loss of employment or even worse in the South, so he came up with the phrase “A wop-bop-a-loo-mop, a lop-bam-boom!” to express his anger without suffering any repercussions.⁸² This subversive bit of Jim Crow resistance would soon be on the lips and record players of white and black teenagers across the country, as it provided the chorus for Richard’s first hit, “Tutti Frutti.” Richard was first contacted by Specialty Records because owner Art Rupe loved his voice and his frenetic piano playing. Richard recalled of his first time visiting the studio in 1955 that “There was a definite trend toward a more basic and simple music in which the feeling was the most important thing. A singer could make a hit recording if he sang with a lot of feeling, regardless of how imperfect everything else might be.”⁸³

Rupe was convinced that his new discovery would be the perfect mouthpiece for songs written and performed by others, but his reps did not hear anything that inspired him until one caught Richard hammering out “Tutti Frutti” on the piano while on a break. “Wow! That’s what I want from you, Richard. That’s a hit!” The rep said. He knew, though, “that the lyrics were too lewd and suggestive to record. It would never have got played on the air.”⁸⁴ Indeed, Richard’s

⁸¹ White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, 21-23.

⁸² Pete Jordan, *Dishwasher: One Man’s Quest to Wash Dishes in All Fifty States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 343.

⁸³ White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, 45.

⁸⁴ White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, 49.

original lyrics, “Tutti Frutti, good booty/If it don’t fit, don’t force it/You can grease it, make it easy,” while a humorous celebration of gay culture in the South, would not have passed muster with radio censors, particularly those who were keenly attuned to explicit references to black sexuality. Specialty recruited songwriter Dorothy LaBostrie to create heteronormative and less overtly sexual lyrics for the song, resulting in verses that instead described misadventures with Sue who “knows just what to do” and Daisy who “almost drives me crazy.” The offending chorus was transformed into a repeat of the nonsensical “Aw-rootie,” rendering it bereft of real meaning perhaps, but also encouraging scores of teenage listeners to sing along as they danced to the driving beat. Richard’s inventive response to his employers, sung a cappella as an intro to the rest of the song, helped cross racial boundaries once more, as white kids across the country responded favorably to an outcry of anger and frustration against a stifling system of oppression. Most would not have been aware that Richard specifically coined the phrase to rail against the specificities of Jim Crow, but they could still identify with the emotion. He was clearly resisting *something*, and doing so with firm yet exuberant sincerity. This resonated with black kids, who were strafing against the same racial inequality that Richard was initially responding to, and white kids anxious to break out of the repressive social mold that they were expected to conform to.⁸⁵

Little Richard’s gospel background allowed him to transform R&B-tinged pop songs like “Tutti Frutti” and “Long Tall Sally” with frenetic, ecstatic performance, in which he let forth a number of whoops and yelps, revealing, Arnold Shaw says, “an agitation and effervescence approached by few singers” and a “violent emotionalism and sweat-pouring expenditure of energy.”⁸⁶ As he was one of the first artists to unleash gospel styling onto rock and roll songs,

⁸⁵ White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, 51; “Tutti Frutti,” Penniman, LaBostrie, Lubin, Specialty Records, 1955.

⁸⁶ Arnold Shaw, *The Rockin’ ‘50s*, (Hawthorn Books, 1973), 162.

Specialty was understandably worried about how his performance, sound, and exaggerated appearance, replete with makeup, high pompadour, and blinding jewelry, would be received by white America. America as a whole must have been ready for him, however, for he was an immediate hit with both black and white audiences, who were enthralled with his electric presence and penchant for flamboyance and embellishment. Ultimately, “Tutti Frutti” took the second-highest spot on the R&B chart, and hit #17 on the pop chart, proving that his outrageous performance style was exactly what teenagers of both races were craving.

Black groups singing pop songs aimed directly at teenagers were also trendy during the mid- to late-1950s, and, similarly, held deeper importance than might be suspected at first. Sometimes these acts were marketing ploys concocted to capitalize on fashionable rock and roll while remaining within the pop vein, but many were as inspired by the intermingling of genres as Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry were. Mike Leiber, a white songwriter who wrote many early rock and roll hits with his partner Jerry Stoller, explained that “I was brought up in Baltimore in a mixed black –and- white neighborhood during World War Two...and I was exposed to a lot of country music and delta blues...I decided I wanted to be a songwriter and naturally those sounds, the subject matter of blues material, jokes in the blues vein, the kind of backhanded social commentary in the blues were the elements of my work.”⁸⁷ According to BMI’s official history, “No one typified the new generation of songwriters more than the team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Enthralled by black music, these white, middle-class teenagers wrote rhythm & blues songs that rang true for teenage listeners black and white alike.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Shaw, *The Rockin’ 50s*, 135.

⁸⁸ Kingbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 41.

This songwriting team was hired by Atlantic Records in 1956 to write for young black groups like the Coasters, the Platters, and the Drifters, all of whom reached the top of the pop and R&B charts singing Leiber and Stoller hits. Many of their songs focused on the everyday experiences of black teenagers. “Charlie Brown,” a 1959 hit for the Coasters, details a day in the life of the titular character, a “clown” who smokes in the auditorium, “walks in the classroom, cool and slow [and] calls the English teacher ‘Daddy-O.’” It is somewhat problematic that white adults like Leiber and Stoller presented a young black group with a song about a delinquent black teen who does not seem to care about his education, but there are deeper levels to this song that helped it appeal to both white and black audiences. Charlie Brown flouts petty instances of high school authority, as many teenagers of both races wished they could during this period. He is not a criminal, he is simply disregarding some of the rigid terms of institutionalized education that chafed students across racial lines. Charlie Brown also gets the last line in the chorus, breaking in to plead, “Why’s everybody always picking on me?”⁸⁹ Black kids might have related to this line because they often felt racially discriminated against, in the Jim Crow South, and in uneasily integrated spaces in the North. But white teenagers often felt as though they were punished for refusing to bow to the pressures that their parents and teachers bestowed upon them, which means that they could also identify with Brown’s troubles. Blacks and whites could both see a bit of themselves in this song, even if the reasons for these identifications varied.

Leiber said of his and Stoller’s songs that “The material was potent, the metaphors sometimes hidden...After reading the lyrics, [Coasters member] Billy Guy would predict, ‘Man, they’re gonna hang us in Mississippi from the highest tree.’”⁹⁰ His comment illustrates that, while

⁸⁹ Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller, “Charlie Brown,” Atco Records, 1959.

⁹⁰ Jerry Wexler with David Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 135.

Coasters songs were meant to be fun party records marketed to teenagers, they also carried social messages that were clear to those who were able to hear them. These messages could be interpreted by both black and white listeners. Janis Ian said that “Like folk music, the music I was now hearing spoke to what I was feeling. Songs like ‘Get a Job’ dealt with the real world we inhabited, where good jobs were hard to come by, and everybody wanted one.”⁹¹ Even though the subject of this Leiber and Stoller song, performed by the Silhouettes, dealt with the dearth of well-paying jobs in African-American communities, as told by a narrator whose woman wakes him each morning by hitting him in the face with the want ads, it also resonated with working-class white kids, and with middle-class whites, who found their employment options limiting and uninspiring. The lyrics depict the repressed anxiety of a man whose girlfriend “Tell[s] me that I’m lying ‘bout a job/That I never could find,” indicating a particular problem among black youth, who continued to face racial discrimination in hiring and pay even in the midst of the supposedly Affluent Society.⁹² But this man’s seeming apathy towards a system that does not work for him no matter how hard he tries would also have been familiar to white listeners.

Leiber explained that, when he and Stoller were writing these songs, “we crawled inside the skins of our characters, we related to the guys in the singing groups, and the result was a cross-cultural phenomenon: a white kid’s take on a black kid’s take of white society. Color lines were blurred.”⁹³ The writers, however, did not so much succeed at pretending to know what it was like to be black in postwar American society as they did at showing that, despite deep, persistent racial inequality, black and white teenagers shared many similarities. Leiber and Stoller may not have

⁹¹ Ian, *Society’s Child*, 21.

⁹² Leiber & Stoller, “Get a Job,” Ember Records, 1957.

⁹³ Wexler & Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 134.

been able to escape their white vantage points, even when writing songs for black groups, but their words were able to strike cords with teenagers across racial lines nevertheless. And when these words flowed from black mouths, the middle ground between these groups was established even more. “Even though we were white, we didn’t play off a white sensibility,” Leiber continued. “We identified with youth and rebellion and making mischief. We thumbed our nose at the adult world.”⁹⁴ He may not have been wholly right on this point, but it is interesting that he contrasted “white” with “youth.” Youth was not necessarily signified as black, but it did denote an identity separate from the racial categories of white and black, possibly one that encompassed both at the same time.

Racial lines were further blurred as the Platters and the Drifters, both black pop groups that appealed to teenagers, became popular for scoring top hits on the pop charts without white cover versions of their songs to fuel the process.⁹⁵ Musicologically, this made sense, as both groups performed songs that were melodic, encouraged sing-alongs, and focused on subjects of romance and heartache that every teenager could relate to. Still, because the members of these groups were black, and could trace the roots of their poppy concoctions back to doo-wop performances that became popular on street corners in African-American neighborhoods in the 1930s and ‘40s, their presence on the pop charts was still striking. It meant that black groups could be appreciated by white listeners on their own terms, rather than having to “play” at whiteness by doing a cover song in order to gain entrance to the mainstream.

⁹⁴ Wexler & Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 134.

⁹⁵ Shaw, *The Rockin’ 50s*, 142-145; Bob Rolontz, “The Drifters: 10 Years at the Top,” *Music Business*, February 13, 1965, Atlantic Recording Corporation Records, Box 1, Folder 5, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

Donned in lacy prom dresses and elegant suits, the Platters depicted the face of the black middle class for many of their white (and black) fans, while still maintaining some traditional African-American musical characteristics. Milt Gabler explained that

The thing that makes [the Platters' 1958 cover of Jerome Kerns's standard, "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes"], for me, is the way the fellow wails when he gets to the phrase. It's a little thing he inserted in the song, which is very contrary to the way Jerome Kern intended it to be sung—but it is a fresh sound and a fresh treatment of the song, and the youngsters do like it. After you hear it quite a while you'll like it yourself, in spite of the impurities in it.⁹⁶

This "wail" that lead singer Tony Williams inserted came straight from blues and R&B traditions, and was the source of Gabler's assertion that the song was both "fresh" and somehow impure. This insertion, however, is part of why the single appealed to such a broad audience of both black and white teenagers. Whites could identify with them on every level except skin color, which led many to conclude that race did not constitute such a rigid line of demarcation as once thought. Blacks could identify with the group based on race, while noting their widespread acceptance by both listeners and media outlets. The Platters and the Drifters were not, in fact, depicted any differently from white groups in music magazines and concert programs, which again gave hope to black teenagers who wanted to be treated equally while still maintaining pride in their culture.

The same can be said of other popular black rock and roll acts in the mid- to late-1950s. The covers of concert programs for Alan Freed's famous rock and roll shows advertised each musician playing the show, while the interior featured full-page photographs of each act or performer. White acts and black acts were pictured next to one another, a visual affront to segregated public spaces, and to fears of interracial relationships. The cover of Freed's 1956 "Holiday Jubilee," for instance, included a picture of The Bonnie Sisters, a white girl group,

⁹⁶ Bob Franklin, interview with Milton Gabler, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, November 1959, 41-42, Milt Gabler Papers, Box *, Folder 19, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

sandwiched between black jazz singer Joe Williams and black doo-wop group the Heartbeats with little fanfare. Inside, a photo of the dapper black Valentines was placed right next to one of Gloria Mann, a white Marilyn Monroe look-alike in a dress with a plunging neckline, an image capable of causing cardiac arrest among Southern white supremacists—and many white suburban parents in the North.⁹⁷ The program for Freed’s “Third Anniversary Show” similarly portrayed Shaye Cogan, a white singer and actress, outfitted in pearls, fur, and décolletage, directly next to Larry Williams, a black rock and roll legend who was known for his virile sexuality.⁹⁸ These particular images made light of white fears of interracial sex without direct comment; like the white kids who professed that school integration was no big deal, Freed and the other promoters who designed the programs portrayed these visual interactions as normal rather than revolutionary. White and black performers mingled on stage and off, and there was little reason to worry about any of this racial mixing, even when it occurred between glamorous white women and attractive black men.

In these program photographs, musicians were almost always dressed in formal or semi-formal attire indicative of middle- or upper-class success, no matter what their race. The “Easter Jubilee” program featured LaVern Baker in a stunning mermaid-tail evening dress, while another dubbed black duo Shirley and Lee, dressed in suitably stylish attire, the “Sweethearts of the BLUES.”⁹⁹ The program for Freed’s “Summer Festival” featured white singer Jodie Sand next to black couple Johnnie and Joe, all of whom look like they are headed to the prom—an issue that

⁹⁷ “Alan Freed and his ‘Rock ‘N Roll Holiday Jubilee,” Sieg Music Corp, 1956, Alan Freed Collection, Box 2, Folder 4, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁹⁸ “Alan Freed’s Third Anniversary Show,” Sieg Music Corp, 1956, Alan Freed Collection, Box 2, Folder 4, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁹⁹ “Alan Freed and his ‘Rock ‘N Roll’ Easter Jubilee” program, Seig Music Corp, 1955; “Alan Freed Christmas Jubilee” program, Seig Music Corp, 1956, Alan Freed Collection, Box 2, Folder 4, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

some kids encountered in real life as they headed to desegregated dances for the first time.¹⁰⁰ Most programs included pictures of all-black groups like the Flamingos, the Cleftones, and the Heartbeats dressed in matching suits or tuxedos, just like their white counterparts, the Jodimars and the Crickets. Even the poses were similar, alternating between rigid class photo stances and “outtake” pictures, where the young men are shown engaged in carefully choreographed horseplay.

The layout of these photos was echoed in a 1957 *Pageant* magazine article, where Freed was asked to name the most popular rock and roll stars of the moment. Pictures of black groups the Platters and the Moonglows were dressed in the same tuxedos as white pop stars Jimmy Bowen and Buddy Knox, and white country singer Charlie Grace, again indicating that similar middle-class values systems informed their fashions, and, presumably, their worldviews, even across racial, class, and musical genre boundaries.¹⁰¹ These values resonated with aspiring- and middle-class blacks, many of whom followed what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham called the politics of respectability. Propriety, etiquette, and cleanliness were advocated as ways to demand equal treatment from whites, and to help elevate the African-American middle classes.¹⁰² Many black parents took pains to ensure that their children were dressed to reflect these values to the outside world. “We didn’t beg. We went to school dressed neat,” Little Richard recalls of his childhood.¹⁰³ Gloria Wade-Gaynes noted, “Only by our address...could our teachers identify many of us as

¹⁰⁰ “Alan Freed’s Summer Festival” program, Seig Music Corp, 1957, Alan Freed Collection, Box 2, Folder 4, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹⁰¹ “Alan Freed Picks: The 12 Top RocknRollers Today,” *Pageant*, July 1957, 40-41, in “Summer Festival” program, Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Archives.

¹⁰² For more on the politics of respectability, please see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁰³ White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, 6.

residents of the project. We wore starched hand-me-downs or inexpensive clothes bought on time and in basement sales at stores on Main Street.”¹⁰⁴

When some of these children grew up to become performers, their clothing choices belied the same need to be taken seriously as an artist, on par with any white musician. DeeJay Gabriel Hearn recalled that Chuck Berry was always “professional—he made his guys wear uniforms and be real neat...Chuck was a perfectionist, always had the best equipment, even bringing his own mikes to a job. Things had to be right, and, man, that was always Chuck’s way.”¹⁰⁵ This surface perfectionism should be viewed as political, partly because images of black performers in formal and semi-formal attire resonated with middle-class white audience members who dressed similarly, and could look to these artists as trendsetters. But it could also encourage more positive self-images among black teenage listeners. Robin Kelley argues that, for working-class blacks in the postwar period, “Seeing oneself and others ‘dressed up’ was enormously important in terms of constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body, and reinforcing a sense of dignity that was perpetually being assaulted.”¹⁰⁶ Again, images of fashionable African-American artists displayed next to white performers who were posed and dressed similarly may have appealed to white and black teenagers for different reasons, but they were still able to find common ground with one another because of these supposedly superficial similarities.

This common ground between black and white teenagers continued to expand, as black rock and roll musicians and groups came to be identified with popular youth culture just as much

¹⁰⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 50.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Lydon, *Rock Folk: Portraits from the Rock ‘n’ Roll Pantheon* (New York: Citadel Press, 1971), 8.

¹⁰⁶ Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 50.

as their white counterparts were. Frankie Lymon's backup group, which was comprised entirely of black adolescents, was actually called "The TeenAgers," while Lewis Lymon and the Teen Chords were also an all-black group. This nomenclature was not accidental—it implied, first of all, that black kids identified with the moniker of "teenager" as much as white kids did, including the high school hijinks, relationships, leisure activities, and consumerism that went with it. The term was fairly new, and applied mostly to the middle classes, who were able to struggle with crushes and homework, go to dances, and spin the latest records at diner jukeboxes because their parents could afford to keep them in school longer. Kids who were denied these experiences because they had to work to support their families, or who married young and started their own broods, may have technically fit into this demographic because of age, but they would have been unable to identify with the auspices of the mythical 'teenager.' When these black groups performed under these names, then, they were asserting their right to participate in this privileged, consumer-oriented space. This right could be based on similar class backgrounds, on aspirations to join the middle class, or on racial equality, and the belief that all young people should be able to access the same cultural materials. These beliefs and assumptions both emanated from, and supported, campaigns for racial desegregation.

The recording and marketing decisions that helped make Sam Cooke a star also show how the image of the middle-class teenager had expanded to include both white and black kids. Cooke had sung with the popular gospel troupe, the Soul Stirrers, for many years before he was tapped to record a solo album with Specialty Records. He had become somewhat disenchanted with his gospel performances, however, and so asked Art Rupe if he could record more romanticized pop music instead. Rupe was intrigued, and plans were set for Cooke to record an album of pop standards, as well as a few new songs written by Cooke himself. This gamble paid off, as one of

Cooke's original creations, "You Send Me," a dreamy romantic ballad with a distinctive urgency, courtesy of the singer's gospel background, hit number one on both the pop and R&B charts in the fall of 1957.¹⁰⁷ The music hit a nerve with listeners, but Cooke's heartthrob looks also made him an immediate hit with teenage girls of both races. One promotional headshot from 1957 portrays his smiling visage resting gently on crossed arms, the same sweetly non-threatening pose favored by white teen idols.¹⁰⁸ The image was clearly meant to be hung on the bedroom walls of teenage girls across the country, and to inspire scores of heart-encircled "Mrs. Cookes" on their notebooks. Cooke had always received his share of ecstatic female exhortations while performing with the Soul Stirrers, but Specialty's decision to market him as a teen pop idol in exactly the same way that a white musician would be portrayed shows that a major transition had occurred.

Cooke's depiction as a potential love interest for both white and black girls severely infringed on racial sexual norms, which aimed to prevent white girls from becoming romantically involved with black boys. White Southern fear-mongering based on the image of the "black beast rapist" seems ridiculous when faced with Cooke's non-threatening good looks and apparently gentle disposition, which girls from both racial backgrounds were quick to embrace. The decision to market Cooke as a teen pop idol was not only a business coup for Specialty, it reinforced support for a small group of integrated rock and roll groups, especially the Del-Vikings, which an Alan Freed program described as consisting of "five handsome young men of the United States Air Force" without any mention that three members were black and two were white.¹⁰⁹ The group's

¹⁰⁷ Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 39.

¹⁰⁸ Billy Vera, "The Specialty Story: 1944-1964," Specialty Records, 1994, Specialty Records Collection, Box-Folder OS1-OF6, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹⁰⁹ "Alan Freed's Third Anniversary Show," Sieg Corporation, 1956, Alan Freed Collection, Box 2, Folder 4, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

biggest hit, “Come and Go With Me,” was released in 1957, and hit both the pop and R&B top ten lists to apparently little fanfare. Some rock and roll fans of both races had therefore begun to see white and black musicians as equally representative of cultural expression among teenagers.

This cross-racial acceptance was briefly halted by the popularity of cover songs. Mainstream music companies found an interesting—and profitable—way of dealing with the problem of delivering black music to white kids, many of whom had parents who strongly disapproved, and therefore limited their children’s spending on popular records. The solution was to purchase R&B songs, alter the tempos and lyrics so that they were more ‘suitable’ for white audiences, and get fresh-scrubbed, non-threatening pop stars to ‘cover’ them. Arnold Shaw, whose job it was to purchase popular R&B songs that were to be covered, said that one reason for this ‘cleansing process’ was that, “In this transition period, young white listeners were reacting to black records. But having been raised on the polish and varnish, the velvet and satin of big orchestras and syrupy crooning, only a small percentage were ready for the raw and exuberant earthiness of rhythm and blues.”¹¹⁰

For all of the ink spilt over cover songs and their ability to ‘whiten’ black elements of popular singles, however, it is important to note that this was already common practice by the early 1950s, and that it was not always racialized. Demand for music was so high in the years after the war that enterprising labels would observe which songs were most popular, purchase them, and have their own artists re-record them, all within a matter of weeks. *Billboard* charts from the early- to mid-1950s are therefore incredibly repetitive, as songs often made the Top 20 chart two, three, or even four times during the same week. *Billboard* itself framed this process as merely a profit-making endeavor in 1952, reporting that “artists and repertoire brass have often seen fit to ‘cover’

¹¹⁰ Shaw, *The Rockin’ 50s*, 126.

a hit on another label by turning out a short, coin-catching rendition in hopes of getting the juke box business in lieu of some of the retail sales already gobbled up by the original hit platter.”¹¹¹

Furthermore, one or more of these covers often hit the R&B and country and western charts as well. White pop artists sometimes covered R&B songs, but this was not the most common form of cover song. Pop artists who covered songs by country and western artists, however, became increasingly common by the early 1950s, as the latter genre swelled in popularity. More often, a song performed by one white pop artist would be purchased for *another* white pop artist, often a more established performer whose talent could assure large returns, or a rising ingénue whom producers felt could skyrocket to the top with the right song. Instead of trying their luck with an untested song, many executives figured that their chances for success with an unknown performer would be higher with a single which was already a qualified hit. Country artist Pee-Wee King’s record “Tennessee Waltz,” a minor country success in 1947, became a huge pop hit when it was covered by Patti Page three years later. Country star Hank Williams sold millions of his own records, but his words reached even more listeners when Tony Bennett, Dinah Washington, and Jo Stafford covered his songs, allowing them to reach the heights of all three charts. Leadbelly’s posthumous folk-pop hit, “Goodnight, Irene,” became even bigger when covered by folk group the Weavers. And even the innocuous “Kokomo” by Gene and Eunice was covered by a bevy of other white pop stars, including fifties headliner Perry Como, whose version became the standard.¹¹² Numerous covers of the same song were also listed on the “Most Played by [Disc Jockeys] charts, so radio listeners were undoubtedly used to listening to the same lyrics sung by

¹¹¹ Joe Martin, “Hit Tunes and Good Talent are Keeping the Boxes Busy: The Pops,” *Billboard*, March 15, 1952, 82.

¹¹² Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 20-23; Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 239.

different artists throughout the day on the radio. Music fans were therefore accustomed to hearing cover songs well before music executives began their attempts to sway white kids away from black performers and towards more staid and acceptable white pop artists. They were also used to having a bevy of different versions of the same song to listen to, choosing a favorite among these versions, and being able to enjoy all of them simultaneously.

The sort of race-conscious cover songs which emerged after 1954 or so, were, however, different in kind. Whereas previous cover songs may have utilized distinctive arrangements, quickened or slowed-down tempos, and even tonal changes to differentiate themselves from their predecessors, executives began making a conscious effort to tone down the black influences in popular R&B songs to be covered by white artists. Usually the pace of the song would be slowed, sharp drum and guitar beats replaced with orchestral arrangements, and enunciation of lyrics made more precise. Sometimes even the visuals would change— Najee Muhammad remembered when, “back in the day, album jackets would have White people on the cover of albums recorded by Black people.”¹¹³

But perhaps the most telling difference between regular cover songs and race-conscious cover songs is that lyrics were often altered in the latter in order to make some of the supposedly more ‘vulgar’ allusions acceptable for a white audience, while such changes were never made in other cover songs. For example, the music business could not ignore Etta James and Richard Berry’s huge R&B hit, “Roll With Me Henry,” which remained at the top of the R&B charts for four weeks, and made some inroads on the pop chart as well. Unfortunately, record executives also could not allow their white pop star, Georgia Gibbs, to sing lines like “Roll with me, Henry/You better roll it while the rollin’ is on.” The offending lyrics were replaced with “Dance with me,

¹¹³ Najee Muhammad, interview with the author.

Henry/Let's dance while the music rolls on," the song became a top five pop hit, and the problem was ostensibly solved. Likewise, the lyrics to Joe Turner's suggestive-to-point-of-obvious "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" were changed from "Get out of that bed" and "Well you wear low dresses,/The sun comes shinin' through" to "Get out in that kitchen" and "You wear those dresses/Your hair done up so nice" when Bill Haley released his version in 1954.¹¹⁴ Milt Gabler, who worked with Haley on the record, explained that the lyrics had to be "clean[ed] up" not because he feared that white kids would not be able to handle the content, but because "I didn't want any censor with the radio station to bar the record from being played on the air. With NBC a lot of race records wouldn't get played because of the lyrics. So I had to watch that closely."¹¹⁵ The moral qualms that white and some black parents had about their children listening to explicit lyrics were racially charged, and encouraged censorship in the music business. At first, this plan seemed to work: both 'whitened' cover songs bested the black originals on the charts. Interestingly enough, Turner and Haley both hit the top spot on the R&B list. Haley's version did better on the pop charts, though, taking the seventh spot, while Turner's peaked at number twenty-two.¹¹⁶

This practice may have begun with the intention of cleansing rock and roll of its more obviously African-American characteristics, but this goal was not always achieved. Some of these songs were not so much covers as they were inspired mixes of the genres that had only recently been allowed to transgress their boundaries. Jerry Butler, the lead singer of the Impressions, told *Rolling Stone* in 1969 that "The offensive part is that black music that has been denied can be accepted because guys in white skin are doing it." Still, he did admit that "to be copied—imitation

¹¹⁴ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1996), 25.

¹¹⁵ John Swenson, *Bill Haley: The Daddy of Rock and Roll* (New York: Stein and Day, 1982), 52.

¹¹⁶ Jim Dawson & Steve Propes, *What Was The First Rock 'n' Roll Record?* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1992), 128, 130.

is the first sign of greatness. So if anybody imitates something that I do, I feel a little flattered. For me, for a guy to say, ‘Wow, that’s great music I want to learn how to play it,’ that’s a compliment. But [for the audience] to accept it from him and not accept it from me is a putdown.”¹¹⁷ A fine line existed between artistic reinterpretations and simpering remakes meant to profit off of black musicians and the racist obstacles that prevented them from making it big in the music business. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo note that Presley’s cover of “Hound Dog” was “artistically legitimate in [its] own right.” Some listeners similarly realized that Haley’s version of “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” was not exactly a theft, but more a contribution to an ongoing musical dialogue which had existed between the races for many years.¹¹⁸

There were more practical reasons to support Haley and other white artists who (sincerely) covered black songs as well. Tony Thomas explained that he listened to some of these white musicians because

There was more black music as part of that. Elvis was kind of like black music... You had the stuff where black artists were producing stuff for the rock and roll audience too. This was more the mix.... But it was looked upon as a favorable thing because Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, all went to the top of the R&B charts with their big hits. That was seen by people, especially because there wasn’t a lot of black music on the radio, it was seen as something in that direction or that in terms of what you actually got to hear.¹¹⁹

Najee Muhammad also mentioned that the popularity of rock and roll, even when it was performed by white artists, “was posed as a favorable thing that because it did mean that more black music was being played. Once Bill Haley’s ‘Shake Rattle and Roll’ [was released], they probably played, at least sometimes, on the radio the version by Big Joe Turner.”¹²⁰ Even though Haley’s version

¹¹⁷ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 256.

¹¹⁸ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 238.

¹¹⁹ Tony Thomas, in discussion with the author, November 9, 2011.

¹²⁰ Muhammad, interview with the author.

bested Turner's on the pop charts, the original version gained support on the pop charts after the cover was released. Their dual successes prompted the two men to plan a 1957 tour together, where audience members could hear both versions. White covers of black songs could therefore be embraced by African Americans, which explains the startling popularity of white cover artists on the R&B music charts between 1955 and 1958.¹²¹

As the decade progressed, covers began to take up a great deal of space on all three charts, as R&B and country and western fans were delighted to find elements of their favorite musics in pop formats at first. Mildly adventurous middle-class white listeners were able to get their helping of R&B through singles designed especially for the pop charts and sung in what Charlie Gillett calls "the simple 'sing-along' mode, emphasizing the melody with little concern for the more complicated feelings contained in the original versions by the black groups."¹²² Pat Boone became one of the decade's biggest breakout stars, second only to Elvis Presley in terms of white teenage adoration, and sometimes even surpassing him, according to a 1957 high school survey, by covering R&B hits to create "a palatable white sound."¹²³ Like Sam Phillips before him, Randy Wood, founder of Dot Records, was looking for a wholesome, inoffensive white pop singer to record the R&B tunes that young whites craved, but which their parents disapproved of. Wood, Philip Ennis explains, "knew that the three pop streams were coming together and that the trick was to find a young white performer who could carry R&B to pop."¹²⁴

¹²¹ Elvis Presley and Bill Haley were not the only white musicians to place covers of records by black musicians on the R&B charts; Pat Boone, who based his career on covering R&B records to be sold to white audiences, saw four of his songs hit the top 15 on the R&B charts between 1955 and 1957. Please see *Billboard* charts for July and October, 1955, December 1956, and May, 1957.

¹²² Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 47.

¹²³ Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Culture* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 251, Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 253.

¹²⁴ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 246.

Boone's first release, a cover of the black pop group the Charms' "Two Hearts," hit number 16 on the pop charts. But his follow-up, a new version of Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame," replete "with slightly 'corrected' lyrics and a pop styling, took the sales action away from the Domino recording almost completely, making for Boone his first number one record."¹²⁵ The response from white teenagers was immediate and overwhelmingly favorable. The 1957 survey proclaimed that "Pat Boone is the nearly two-to-one favorite over Elvis Presley among boys and preferred almost three-to-one by girls...Pat represented to the middle majority their safe dreams; Elvis, their more dangerous fantasies."¹²⁶ Throughout the latter half of the decade, Boone scored hit after hit, with covers of Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti" and "Long Tall Sally," Joe Turner's "Chains of Love," and the Harptones' "I Almost Lost My Mind."¹²⁷ Most of his singles made the pop charts, although "Ain't That a Shame," "At My Front Door," "Don't Forbid Me," and "Love Letters in the Sand" were top 15 R&B hits as well, indicating that black teenagers also enjoyed Boone's innocuous charms.¹²⁸

The fact that these racialized covers generally bested the originals was both a blessing and a curse for black artists and the companies who managed them, as they were able to make a much higher profit selling copyrights to powerful labels than they could by simply releasing their songs unchanged. While this development implicitly acknowledged blacks' contributions to American culture, the fact that radio stations would often stop playing the original once the white cover was

¹²⁵ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 246.

¹²⁶ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 251.

¹²⁷ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 239.

¹²⁸ *Billboard* charts for July and October, 1955, December 1956, and May, 1957.

released reminded them that equality was still a long way off. Ahmet Ertegun remembered that radio stations would

Copy our records, except that they'd use a white artist and the white stations would play them while we couldn't get our records on. 'Sorry,' they'd say, 'It's too rough for us.' Or: 'Sorry, we don't program that kind of music.' And I'd say: 'But you're playing that song in your Top Twenty. It's a copy of our record.' There'd be one excuse or another. But that's the way things were.¹²⁹

Luckily, 'things' were about to change.

One of the first signals of this shift occurred in 1954 when the Chords' "Sh-Boom!," a single that, despite its pop flavor, kept its explosive dance beat and intense vocal involvement intact, hit the pop charts and remained there, even as the (white) Crew Cuts' cover surpassed it later that year, taking the number one spot, and holding it for 20 weeks. As both records remained on the pop charts, the Chords' original version began to creep higher, eventually peaking at number nine, the highest spot ever for a rock and roll song by a black group. Listeners who enjoyed the cover version were clearly inclined to seek out the original, thus boosting sales for both.¹³⁰ Matthew Delmont relates an instance of this transition occurring on national television, where *American Bandstand* deejay Bob Horn had started playing the Crew Cuts' version in the summer of 1954. But, he says, it was not long before "the show's regulars complained that the Crew Cuts's song was not the real version and persuaded Horn to test the Chords' version on the show's rate-a-record segment. After the Chords' record received a high rating, Horn agreed to play the original."¹³¹

¹²⁹ Shaw, *The Rockin' 50s*, 86.

¹³⁰ Joel Whitburn, *Top Pop Records 1940-1955* (Menomonee Falls WI: Record Research, 1973), 12; 16.

¹³¹ Delmont, *The Kids Are Alright*, *.

Despite the fact that Pat Boone and other white pop singers continued to cover black material well into the mid-1960s, originals began to vie for popularity with covers on the pop charts almost immediately after their initial burst of success. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo argue that the “initial suppression of black music” was mostly over by 1956, as “rock ‘n’ roll... was becoming a dominant pop style, and the original versions of songs were in demand by a more sophisticated white audience,” while Philip Ennis compares cover albums to “training wheels for the emerging rocknroll—useful in the beginning but soon to be discarded in favor of freewheeling.”¹³² Even contemporary music insiders were aware that cover records were merely a passing fad, and were not meant to replace the dynamism of black R&B and rock and roll musicians in white adolescent record collections. A clearly irate Alan Freed wrote in 1957 that “Youngsters showed great maturity and understanding during the great copy-record scandal. When leading record companies tried to fool you kids into buying arrangements of Rock ‘n’ Roll tunes that had been copied note for note from originals done by authentic rhythm and blues artists, you fans listened to me and bought only the first released arrangement.” Although he credited himself here with warning teenage listeners about the follies of purchasing cover records, he was also quick to point out that these same listeners followed their own instincts when deciding which music they wanted to purchase. “The hit tunes are picked exclusively by the boys and girls themselves,” he continued, “youngsters whose loyalty at the record counter saved the careers of dozens of struggling artists in the early days when big name stars tried to steal the arrangements of then unknown rhythm and blues singers.” Although “this learning took time and for almost a year the artists suffered,” Freed listed Fats Domino and Little Richard as examples of artists “who fell victim to the copy cats at first,” but who ultimately enjoyed widespread support among black and

¹³² Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 239; Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 216.

white fans. He even targeted Pat Boone and Dot Records indirectly, slyly noting that “other companies copied [Domino’s] first hit record *Ain’t That a Shame*, and outsold him on the market. But it took just one synthetic and the kids were wise. Today he has one hit on top of another. No one has cared to ape his catchy *I’m Walkin’*.”¹³³ White teenage listeners were beginning to assert themselves, and despite the lingering popularity of cover artists, original recordings by black artists started to gain more traction on the pop charts.

Record company executives quickly became aware of this transition. As early as 1954, Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun noted that “The pop record companies are taking cognizance, and they’re covering. In some instances the cover records make out. In most cases the original r&b or cat record seems to wax stronger with each additional cover version.”¹³⁴ Since these men were in charge of releasing records by mostly black musicians at Atlantic, they obviously had a vested interest in promoting the viability of these discs, but the so-called “pop companies” came to the same realization, albeit somewhat later. By 1959, Milt Gabler explained that “What we used to do, if a record would be started by some girl on a little label and we thought it had something, we would take it and make it,” clearly referring to black-oriented companies when he mentions “little labels.” “We made a more musical version and copied the pattern of the arrangement, but did a brand new arrangement, and she got the glory. Today you can’t do that anymore. Witness the fact that Georgia Gibbs doesn’t copy anything any more, the McGuire Sisters don’t—because they’d get killed. The original record goes all the way.”¹³⁵ Although Gabler continued to avoid discussing

¹³³ Alan Freed, “Wonderful World of Rock,” *Pageant*, July 1957, 60, Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹³⁴ Jerry Wexler & Ahmet Ertegun, “The Latest Trend: R&B Disks are Going Pop,” *The Cash Box*, July 3, 1954, 56, Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹³⁵ Bob Franklin, interview with Milton Gabler, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, November 1959, 57, Milt Gabler Collection, Box 4, Folder 19, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

race specifically here, his use of the term “more musical” implied that producers tried to erase any distinctly African-American sounds from the record. His mention of Georgia Gibbs and the McGuire Sisters, two wholesome white female acts known for covering black R&B hits, only confirmed the fact that he was indeed discussing racialized cover songs here. But, as he himself said, by 1959 this was a dying business practice, as white listeners flocked to purchase rock and roll records by black artists.

Many young white rock and roll fans were learning the difference between covers and originals, and began searching out discs by black performers rather than their white covers. Although covers were popular at his Virginia high school, Rick Turner asserted that he was never interested in listening to them—and he was not shy about making his preferences known. “They’d ask me what I think and I’d say nah, I didn’t listen to any of that...I’d say, well I listen to WANT [a black-oriented radio station in Richmond], you know, which is the black station. And oh, that was just like, you’re a weirdo.”¹³⁶ Turner’s predilections were not quite so rare when viewed in a national context, though. Bibb Edwards explained that

From the beginning my favorites were black. Blacks always sounded *real*, even if it just was a party song. Whites occasionally sounded as if a song meant something to them; but most of the time they were mailing it in. When I heard two versions of the same song – which was very common back then – I preferred the black artist...Even my pre-teen self could tell the difference between Pat Boone & Ivory Joe Hunter, LaVern Baker & Georgia Gibbs. Children develop pretty good BS detectors. I knew which I wanted to listen to.¹³⁷

Similarly, Fran Shor recalled:

I used to listen to...a black-owned station called WAMO in Pittsburgh...[that would] play stuff like Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, ‘Work with me Annie,’ and on the other side was ‘Annie Had a Baby.’ And it was so overtly sexual and so, when your hormones are raging, you’re like, I don’t want to listen to ‘How Much is that Doggie in the Window,’ ...and I don’t want to listen to the cover song. The white cover song for that was ‘Dance

¹³⁶ Rick Turner, interview with author.

¹³⁷ Bibb Edwards, interview with the author.

With Me Henry.’ So to me it was just much more vital, much more dangerous, in a sense, because of its overt sexuality.¹³⁸

What is interesting about these two recollections is that they both focused on music that genuinely affected listeners. It is perhaps unsurprising that Edwards, who grew up in the South, would be drawn to a more abstract concept of what constitutes “genuine” emotion while the Northern Shor was able to pinpoint the fact that much of this genuineness was derived from a more unabashed sexuality, given the deep-rooted fear of interracial sex that shaped Southern politics and social mores. Northern white kids may have felt repressed, but they were at least more free to envision the realities of what Southerners delicately called “social equality” than their contemporaries who lived below the Mason-Dixon Line. Still, both men recalled a sense of “realness,” whether a “vital” and “dangerous” reality that existed outside of sanitized middle-class suburbs that Shor identified, or the less-threatening emotional authenticity described by Edwards, that drove them to listen to black singers rather than the cover songs sung by white artists. This ‘realness’ may be linked to stereotypes that whites had long used to exoticize African-American behavior, but the difference is that Edwards, Shor, and others like them identified with these characteristics. Whereas their jazz- and blues-loving forebears may have gone looking for such attributes that they found lacking in white culture, most were quick to dispense with these behaviors when they returned to their “normal” lives; the few who forsook their own pasts and identities could not reconcile their own backgrounds with the alluring traits they discovered in African-American culture. In these anecdotes, however, both Edwards and Shor found better ways to understand emotions they were already having, and the means to connect with others who were properly conveying these emotions on a daily basis. They did not have to create a disconnect between themselves and their families and communities in order to relate to black singers and writers. Instead, they were able to actually

¹³⁸ Fran Schor, interview with the author.

relate to people of another race based on shared emotional traits that formed a core part of their identities. There is, perhaps, no better definition of a true ‘middle ground’ than this.

Despite the creation of this middle ground among adolescents, in both popular culture and politics, the mid-1950s rise in civil rights movement activity seemed to decline somewhat by the end of the decade. These so-called “fallow years” of the civil rights movement, between 1957 and 1959 are often depicted as witnessing a decline in the racial progress was able to take root after the highly publicized fights for school and transportation desegregation in the mid-1950s, and before the student sit-ins of the early 1960s. Adam Fairclough argues that a number of factors, including the acceptance of Martin Luther King as a “national leader” who was “honored by universities, indulged by foreign heads of state, and consulted by the president,” inter-organizational struggles, and the tendency of non-violent activists to shy away from overt political alliances, resulted in the decline of radical movement activity. Another reason that movement activities seemed to fall quiet during this period was because of earlier successes. Stanley Levison, a movement activist who also acted as an advisor to King, explained that “What happened...was that in some of the cities victory came very fast. The city power structure...decided that they didn’t want to go through a Montgomery. So they quietly desegregated buses. And, therefore, a great wave of boycotts didn’t develop.” Fairclough further explains that any similar boycotts or protests planned in the South “were little more than one-day protests designed to provoke the necessary arrests on which to base a legal challenge after the precedent of *Browder v. Gayle*, the MIA-backed suit which brought about integration in Montgomery.”¹³⁹ In other words, the lack of widespread movement activity or calls for radical change were partly due to the success of early campaigns.

¹³⁹ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 41-43.

The storm may have appeared to have subsided, but rumblings just beneath the surface indicated that the fight was far from over.

The integration of music charts had also become threatening—so much so that, by the late 1950s, as cover records failed to dominate the pop charts as they once had, record executives rushed to ‘soften’ rock and roll by promoting the melody in songs and pushing artists of both races to dull any raw edges, thus making music that was more palatable to whites. White artists like Fabian, Frankie Avalon, Bobby Rydell, Connie Francis, and Ricky Nelson achieved teen idol status not by covering prior works by black musicians, but by singing and performing in a manner that was shaped by the characteristics of early rock and roll, yet significantly diluted. Specialty Records’ official history proclaims that “The ABC network ‘suits’ encouraged the booking of these cuddly white boys, feeling artists like [Specialty head Art] Rupe’s label roster of sweaty black guys were too scary for teeny-bopper consumption.”¹⁴⁰ The records made by these performers, which were directed specifically at a white teenage audience, often relied on a percussive beat, and nearly always promoted a celebration of youth, just as early rock and roll records had. But they were also drained of many directly African-American influences. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo refer to these acts as “schlock rockers,” explaining that, while “they had no identifiable ties to any musical form (except the elusive notion of pop)” they also “had some semblance of rhythm and were young, [and so] they were marketed as rock ‘n’ roll singers. They effectively gave rock ‘n’ roll its final facelift of the fifties by whitening up the hit charts.”¹⁴¹ By 1959, Bret Eynon says, “virtually every major artist of the early period had disappeared from the scene. The new ‘stars’ who took their places were white, where the originals had been black, were clean cut,

¹⁴⁰ Vera, “The Specialty Story: 1944-1964,” Specialty Records, 1994, 38.

¹⁴¹ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 247.

where the originals had been wild and unpredictable, and most importantly were controlled by the major recording studios.”¹⁴² This strategy initially worked. Ken Avuk, for example, recalled that, while he initially listened to Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, he ultimately “gravitated to the music that was, shall we say, more mellow” during this period.

You had Ricky Nelson...Ricky was a young handsome guy, I thought he was so cool because he was a good singer and he was not shaking his hips, he was not threatening. So this was the music I was listening to, sort of the non-threatening version of rock and roll. Very different than, like I said, Jerry Lee Lewis or Chuck Berry who, you listen to this music later on, you say, well this is very sexual. I wouldn't have had a clue at that age....it was popular. It sounded good. It was palatable, it was accessible. It was not disturbing. This was not music that was going to make you think or be sad or anything. It was about what we were supposed to be striving for, having dates, riding in convertibles and going to drive-ins. I was young for that, of course, this is not anything I did at that early age, but it was something that I thought, boy, this is what you were supposed to do when you were an American teenager. Listen to this music and dance on the beach like they did in the music and listen to kind of brainless music and all the guys all looked like astronauts and the women all looked like cocktail waitresses, and that was the popular image at that point. And everyone was of one race.¹⁴³

While the charts were not entirely bombarded with white pop acts aping rock and roll trends, large record companies did attempt to regain control over the charts while maintaining their white adolescent fan base. They heavily marketed these artists as though they came from the same traditions as Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, even though there was an obvious gulf between the two types. Black artists continued to make their presence known on the charts, but the period between 1957 and 1960, when Motown Records released the Miracles' “Shop Around,” which hit the top spot on the R&B chart and the second-highest on the Top 100, a list created in 1959 to include music from all genres, is generally regarded as a low point in the history of rock and roll. Little Richard gave up the devil's music when he found religion and became a minister, Elvis was

¹⁴² Bret Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” November 21, 1977, 12. Michigan Historical Collections, Contemporary History Project Papers, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹⁴³ Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author, November 22, 2011.

drafted, sent to Germany, and (gasp) cut his hair, Jerry Lee Lewis earned the disgust of a nation by marrying his 13-year-old cousin, and Chuck Berry was unceremoniously arrested for attempting to transport a minor girl across state lines.

Grace Elizabeth Hale places much of the blame for this transistion on white supremacist attitudes and corporate apathy. “By the late 1950s the liberating force of the music seemed spent, buried under derivative product and the outpouring of criticism from politicians, ministers, and parents, as well as the growing force of the segregationists,” she says.¹⁴⁴ Michael Lydon instead faults the passage of time, neatly stating that “The first rock ‘n’ rollers were now voting adults, and the jet-setters were twisting at the Peppermint Lounge. What had been fresh in 1955 had become formula, and then simply repetition.”¹⁴⁵ According to Jerry Wexler, all of these elements helped contribute to a musical era that seemed just as fallow as the movement towards racial equality. “Ahmet and I had begun moving in different directions back in the late fifties, early sixties,” he recalled. “His success with Bobby Darin set him on a new track, introducing him to the California scene, where he would later discover a number of lucrative pop acts. As Ahmet grew older, he grew less judgmental and more interested in a wide range of commercial forms, particularly the exploding white rock ‘n’ roll. I stayed with what I knew and loved.”¹⁴⁶ But whatever the reason, many white rock and roll fans were left to struggle with the somewhat less dynamic acts they were expected to embrace. Janis Ian maintained that “The singers looked manufactured, stamped out with cookie cutters by evil music-haters who just saw dollars signs instead of ways to change the world. The songs, too, sounded manufactured, with the same chord

¹⁴⁴ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86.

¹⁴⁵ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 21.

¹⁴⁶ Wexler & Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 161.

progressions and awful guitar parts. Fabian, Frankie Avalon—what was with these guys? Not to mention their hair...”¹⁴⁷

Finally, a widespread investigation of radio stations, deejays, and personalities including Alan Freed and Dick Clark over the practice of “payola,” or illegal payment or gifts made in exchange for radio airplay, nearly devastated the genre. Investigators consistently implied that the only reason rock and roll dominated the airwaves and the charts is because record companies underwrote its popularity.¹⁴⁸ Freed was ruined by this investigation and Clark very nearly brought down as well—in fact, many critics point out that Freed, who consistently acknowledged black contribution to the rock and roll genre, hired numerous black artists to appear on his live tours and television show, *Alan Freed’s Dance Party*, and refused to play cover songs, seemed far more threatening than the clean-cut Clark, who tended to accept the racial status quo, and only allowed token black participation on his show, *American Bandstand*.¹⁴⁹ The assumption that fired these investigations, however, ignored the more intricate history of rock and roll, that it emerged from a dynamic exchange between music company producers, artists, and young listeners rather than stolen by record executives and forced on an unwitting public. *Billboard*, in fact, aimed to calm fears that rock and roll would simply fade away in the wake of the payola scandal, noting that “Rock and roll’s demise, like that of Mark Twain’s, has been greatly exaggerated. For now, even after the payola scandals and the attempt to link all payola with rock and roll recordings, the music with a beat still dominates over 60 per cent of The Billboard’s ‘Hot 100’ chart.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Ian, *Society’s Child*, 21.

¹⁴⁸ For more on this, please see Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 260-268 and Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 63.

¹⁴⁹ For more, please see Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town*.

¹⁵⁰ “R&R Still Beams Plenty of Life,” *The Billboard*, January 18, 1960, 6.

Still, it may be fair to say that these years constituted a fallow period in the history of rock and roll, just as they are depicted in the general civil rights movement timeline. The author of the very *Billboard* article supporting rock and roll also admitted that “This is not to say that rock and roll isn’t fading, or actually evolving into pop music,” and included Frankie Avalon, Paul Anka, Fabian and Bobby Rydell, alongside Lloyd Price, Joe Turner, Fats Domino, Bill Haley and Ray Charles among its list of popular “out-and-out rockers,” as though no difference existed between these groups.¹⁵¹ It may sound ludicrous not to differentiate between crooning pop idols who were groomed by large record labels and given trite tunes to sing, and some of the hard-rocking progenitors of the genre whose gritty songs necessitated the need for them to be toned down in the first place. Just like the fallow period of the civil rights movement, however, rumblings of change existed just beneath the surface. *Billboard*, for instance, apparently saw no need to segregate this list into black (or black-inspired) and white performers: the mere fact that their music had a beat—however weak that beat might be—and that it was popular with teenagers meant that it could be identified as rock and roll. This classification is problematic in a musicological sense, and also incurred the wrath of critics who described record companies and white pop artists during this period as thieves of black music who utilized the label without any true acknowledgement of African-American culture.

At the same time, however, this list indicates that the editors were accepting of black and white artists performing within a broad spectrum of musical traditions as equal in terms of what constituted “rock and roll” music. This may not have comprised an ideal model of racial integration, but it nevertheless reflected a shift towards an interracial ideal. The shift is particularly astounding considering that black and white artists rarely shared a particular chart before the early

¹⁵¹ “R&R Still Beams Plenty of Life,” *The Billboard*, January 18, 1960, 6.

1950s, and the term ‘race records’ had only recently fallen out of favor. This intriguing racial dynamic again paralleled that which shaped the country as a whole at the time. Civil rights groups were having trouble choosing their next plan of action, and racial struggles were not front-page news the way they were during the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Central High School debacle in Little Rock. But this does not mean that the movement was stagnant; it was merely undergoing a transition while the country reacted to changes wrought by the demands to desegregate public spaces. Racial struggles continued, albeit in a quieter way, as school systems struggled with how best to incorporate (or prevent) racial integration, and bus passengers grappled, sometimes courteously, sometimes violently, with a new racial etiquette. In the same way, the celebration of black musical traditions was far less overt during these years than it had been in the middle of the decade, but the effects of rock and roll’s musical integration continued to shape popular music and the artists who performed it.

Even though this period might seem regressive, as white pop stars mostly replaced a biracial coterie of rock and rollers on the charts, popular music continued to act as a middle ground between the races, albeit in subtler ways. Specialty Records’ official memoir admits that “Ironically, the early Frankie Avalon and Fabian records followed the Specialty formula, replete with sax section riffs, heavy eighth-note rhythm, and tunes with girls’ names in the titles—the difference being that they were sung by those pretty boys in fluffy sweaters, pandering to middle-American pre-teen romantic fantasies.”¹⁵² Since Sam Cooke was performing in the same sweaters and appealing to the same audiences, though, it is difficult to glean why this seemed so bewildering. Black stars were marketed by record labels as wholesome teen idols in much the same way that their white contemporaries were, even if their numbers were never quite so great.

¹⁵² Vera, “The Specialty Story: 1944-1964,” 38.

The biggest star of 1960, in fact, was black pop singer Chubby Checker, whose cover of black R&B group Hank Ballard and the Midnighters' "The Twist" hit the top spot on the pop, R&B, and Top 100 charts. Despite his racial background, Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo dub Checker a member of "the second generation of schlock," who was "created by a corporate decision in the offices of Philadelphia-based Cameo-Parkway Records," and, like his white counterparts, became famous by covering a previously raucous R&B tune by a black group. The authors admit that "The twist itself is ambiguous socially" since "it was first successful at a time when the black liberation movement in the United States was surfacing," but ultimately determine that "its leading exponent was a harmless corporate controlled black men. It was essentially a frivolous fad welcomed by white audiences as a retreat from the worries of bomb shelters and missile gaps and an ever-imminent imagined war with Russia, but it released white bodies from their petrified stiffness, and anticipated more openly sexual dances."¹⁵³ Black Power activist Eldridge Cleaver agreed that the Twist encouraged white listeners to embrace the more dynamic dance patterns emblematic of working-class black communities, but posited that this was a political shift rather than a "frivolous fad." "The Twist was a guided missile, launched from the ghetto into the very heart of suburbia," he famously argued in his memoir, *Soul on Ice*, written while serving time in Folsom Prison in 1965. "The Twist succeeded, as politics, religion, and law could never do, in writing in the heart and soul what the Supreme Court could only write on the books."¹⁵⁴

Chapple, Garofalo, and Cleaver may have identified elements of racial transgression in the relatively freewheeling dance moves corresponding to the song, but Checker's career as a black

¹⁵³ Chapple & Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 247-248.

¹⁵⁴ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1999), 197.

“schlock rocker” actually displayed a continuing support of integrationist goals, even during the so-called fallow years. The most blatant example of support for racial integration, a duet between Checker and white “schlock rocker” Bobby Rydell entitled “Teach Me How to Twist,” was released in April, 1962 to lukewarm critical and popular reviews. Still, the cover, featuring Rydell with his hand on Checker’s shoulder, and both men dressed in similar pastel-colored button-down shirts with V-neck cardigans, instantly relayed a sense of interracial friendship and equality. Even the positioning of both men’s names was integrated. Checker’s name was spelled out in green letters and Rydell’s in blue, but they were positioned to read “Chubby Rydell” over “Bobby Checker,” indicating that they were almost interchangeable pop stars—except for the coloring, apparently, of both skin tone and lettering. The lyrics to this record also engaged the listener in a non-threatening interracial exchange between two friends. Rydell, the supposedly clueless white singer, chants “Chubby, teach me to twist/For I don't know how/Look at all I miss,” as Checker responds “It's so easy to twist...Bobby, I'll teach you to twist.” Although the song may have reinforced stereotypes about “inherent” black dance rhythms and a denial of white physicality, it also presented a friendship between black and white pop stars as natural and normal. Also, since Rydell was able to pick up the steps to this “easy” dance by the end of the tune, the indication was that the rhythm that is supposedly essential to black culture was, in fact, accessible to anyone open enough to engage with it. By the end of the song, “The whole world is twistin'/Now everybody's doin' the twist.”¹⁵⁵ Whites and blacks learned to engage with each other around the world through music and dance, and it was clear that there was no going back at this point.

As the decade ended, all of rock and roll’s original musical strands had melded together so well that the genre was allowed to stand on its own as a distinct category without its influences

¹⁵⁵ Kal Mann & Dave Appell, “Teach Me How to Twist,” Cameo-Parkway Records, 1962.

being constantly picked apart. *Billboard* recognized this trend by scrapping the pop list in 1958 and replacing it with the 'Hot 100' chart, which remains to this day. Although the magazine continued printing separate R&B and country and western charts, the 'Hot 100' listed hits according to airplay and single sales regardless of which genre they fell into or which demographic they appealed to.¹⁵⁶ Sub-charts remained divided, but the main chart was no longer a euphemism for middle-class white purchasing habits. When nascent musicians began emulating their favorite stars, then, they were not influenced by the separate fields of R&B or country and western or gospel, but by rock and roll itself. Artists who emerged during the 1960s were therefore more likely to play music that was influenced by rock 'n' roll specifically, rather than the separate strands that combined to produce it. This music was marketed to everyone regardless of region or race, as the new generation had learned that they could purchase what genuinely touched them instead of what a particular chart told them to ought to purchase.

¹⁵⁶ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 185.

Chapter Seven

In 1955, Mitch Miller, head of the pop division at Columbia Records, told *The New York Times* that he sensed a connection between trends in the music industry and the rise of civil rights activities. “By their new-found attachment to rhythm-and-blues young people might also be protesting the Southern tradition of not having anything to do with colored people,” he said. “There is a steady—and healthy—breaking down of color barriers in the United States; perhaps the r-&-b rage—I am only theorizing—is another expression.”¹ Thirteen years later, *Rolling Stone* writer Ralph J. Gleason, stationed in San Francisco, wrote Jerry Wexler that “Out here—as in some other places—we are developing a generation, in rock anyway, who are, I sense, beginning to work this thing out. There are an increasing number of blacks getting into this thing here...and the assumptions on which the relationship is based are healthier than in jazz so the result is better.”² During this time span, rock and roll music, and the fact that it was enjoyed by both black and white teenage fans, helped form cultural opposition to racial segregation and inequality that was starting to gain recognition. This opposition was cultivated in public spaces, like concert venues and record shops, but this chapter will focus on how resistance to racial norms was formed in private spheres, within individual homes, living rooms, bedrooms, and even within the inner sanctums of adolescent minds.

When teenagers listened to rock and roll in these private areas, some of them began to identify with the emotions and words created by musicians and songwriters who often came from different racial backgrounds, or who were inspired by different cultural traditions. They also became part of a virtual community that technically included listeners across racial, class, and

¹ Mitch Miller, “June, Moon, Swoon and Ko Ko Mo,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1955, 21.

² Letter from Ralph J. Gleason to Jerry Wexler, November 10, 1968. Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

regional lines, creating a sense of belonging based more prominently on age than on other social categories. White kids may have come from families who actively supported white supremacy, or who avoided the topic of race altogether, and black kids from homes where their parents warned them about the violence and harassment that whites could inflict upon them in desegregated spaces. And yet these forms of identification through culture helped young people of both races to see the similarities that existed among them, and to view desegregation and other moderate civil rights goals as desirable rather than threatening.

Listening to records in the safety and solitude of one's own room or watching performances on television might not seem like political stances, especially if those records and TV programs enjoyed widespread popularity among one's peer group, but not all forms of adolescent rebellion were created equal. In the Jim Crow South, especially, crossing racial boundaries in any capacity threatened the unstable foundations of racial segregation. Historian Raymond Arsenault explains, "It was all-encompassing, this so-called Southern way of life. It would not allow for any breaks. It was a system that was only as strong, the white Southerners thought, as its weakest link. So you couldn't allow people even to sit together on the front of a bus, something that really shouldn't have threatened anyone, but it did."³ Because of these high stakes, any form of integration, even if transmitted through sound and airwaves into the relative safety of private relative spaces, could constitute a political act. The very nature of rock and roll encouraged communication and emotional identification with performers, which could lead to a more cogent understanding of how people of other races could share similar desires and frustrations as their listeners.

It is not easy to change people's minds even if that is the stated goal, and most rock and roll musicians did not intentionally set out to do so. Still, cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner

³ Stanley Douglas, dir., *Freedom Riders*, (Firelight Media for PBS American Experience, 2010), film.

notes that there are specific steps that can change people's minds, even implicitly through works of art and music. He says that "Creators in the arts...change minds primarily by introducing new ideas, skills, and practices" and that a dynamic process must occur between artists and audiences for true change to happen. "Tipping points," he explains, "have been achieved when fellow artists alter their practices and when audience members alter their tastes." Generally, he argues, deep changes in belief require six components: a rational understanding of the issue, research on why current beliefs are misguided, a resonance in the individual's life, an ability to be represented in different forms, the resources to support a change, and social changes which precipitate these shifts. They also require low levels of resistance, both from individuals inquiring into new issues, and in the form of social pressures. Gardner explains that, in the case of indirect changes in belief through art, that representation and awareness of resistance are most important. What rock and roll music provided for many young listeners was an alternate representation of the world, of people from different racial backgrounds, and of integration. Racial mixing sounded fun, and performers seemed approachable, in direct contrast to dire white supremacist warnings and the fears of black parents. Kids were aware of the resistance they faced by listening to the music, but they also knew that civil rights campaigns were starting to succeed, and many had deep reservations against the culture they lived in anyhow. Shifts in belief were still gradual, but rock and roll music could work in tandem with media accounts of movement struggles to change people's minds in these ways.⁴

Black and white teenagers approached this music from different cultural backgrounds, though, and understood the implications of this racial mixing in different ways. But a middle ground, heavily shaped by middle-class values and mass culture, was still forged between them,

⁴ Howard Gardner, *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2006), 121; 15-17; 114.

allowing white teens to see blacks as actual human beings whom they could identify with, and who were worthy of equality within an integrationist framework. Conversely, black teens often took pride in the fact that African-American performers, and the musical traditions they brought with them, had become such an integral part of mainstream culture. This middle ground allowed them a means of identification with white contemporaries, but it also showed that black teenagers envisioned a different sort of integrationist future than whites did. Racial mixing and boundary crossing were viewed as positive and desirable, but only if black culture and black people were given equal respect, and if integration was treated as a step towards greater political and economic equality. While whites seemed more likely to welcome blacks into an already established cultural (and, ultimately, political) fold during this period, black kids generally made it clear that they would only accept an integrationist framework that granted full cultural and political dignity to African Americans.

Indeed, young blacks and whites were taking decisive action in ways that were far more politicized than most scholars or contemporary critics have given them credit for. The choices they made, both as individuals, and as a group, indicate growing political consciousness. If everyday decisions and behaviors either support or resist established political systems, then listening to rock and roll music often belied a deep sense of resistance, even if listeners did not explicitly attack these systems, attempt to change laws, or convince people to support alternative political ideals. Sometimes this consciousness acted as foreshadowing for more direct engagement. Reebee Garofalo explains that “The social movements of the 1960s challenged historical notions of radical politics—indeed, the very notion of what is political. These changes were accompanied by reformulations of political theory which invariably assigned culture a more prominent and

relatively autonomous role in political struggle.”⁵ His argument supports social movement theory that shows how pre-existing cultural environments can encourage support political goals at different levels. David Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi argue that, although social movements are usually defined as “challengers to or defenders of existing institutional authority,” they may also be concerned with “patterns of cultural authority, such as systems of beliefs or practices reflective of [intuitional] beliefs.”⁶

Rhys Williams agrees, explaining the concept of “boundedness,” which indicates “something ‘external’ to a social movement [that] is either (or both) a storehouse of symbolic elements from which a movement can draw, or a source of constraint on possible movement actions and ideas.” Boundedness may create “the conditions we can think of as a cultural environment” if said cultural aspects resonate deeply enough with potential movement supporters. “They appeal to movement members and nonmembers in a readily accessible, and hence broadly legitimate, language,” he says of cultural attributes that may or may not directly intersect with movement goals. “It is usually a language that accepts and ratifies many dimensions of status quo social arrangements, while focusing change on specified or delimited arenas of life.”⁷ Rock and roll music may be understood as such a language, as it did indeed focus on change, with regards to both race relations and generational demographics, even if it was not intentionally created to challenge established political systems. When Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) leader Al Haber wrote that “students in the North...[need] greater personal knowledge of the movement,”

⁵ Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' the Boat: Music and Mass Movements*, (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992), 2-3.

⁶ David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, & Hanspeter Kriesi, “Mapping the Terrain,” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* Ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, & Hanspeter Kriesi (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 9.

⁷ Rhys H. Williams, “The Cultural Contexts of Collective Action,” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* Ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, & Hanspeter Kriesi, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 101.

and “must be able to know what is going on, to be able to identify personalities and feel some direct involvement in the struggle,” he was thinking of using folk music to accomplish these goals, but in many ways rock and roll primed middle-class white and black kids to embrace the movement more than direct political culture ever could.⁸

Many future student activists agree that cultural changes, including the popularity of rock and roll, inspired them to start thinking about politics even before they became active. In the introduction to his interview with White Panther Party co-founder John Sinclair, Bret Eynon explains that, in mainstream American society, “There was one way to live, and only one way. Anything else was considered deviant, degenerate, and probably Communist-inspired... The act of rebellion alone was progressive enough to encourage John and his friends.”⁹ These social structures were so rigid that anything that existed even partially outside of this framework, including rock and roll, could inspire kids to question prevailing political and social norms. Eynon continues to argue that Sinclair “came to understand the complexities of the musical form of Afro-American music. He learned it long before the civil rights movement was turning into the black power movement, and the black power movement influenced the counter-culture.”¹⁰ Listening to black-oriented music and enjoying black culture ultimately encouraged Sinclair to challenge prevailing racial norms before civil rights campaigns achieved national recognition. White student activist Arnie Bauchner said that listening to R&B and the blues while volunteering in predominantly African-American neighborhoods “helped me break down a lot of my own racism.

⁸ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 168.

⁹ Bret Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” November 21, 1977, 27. Michigan Historical Collections, Contemporary History Project Papers, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹⁰ Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” 32.

I can't even remember how, but I just think being there—it also made me totally reactive to the white world.”¹¹

Black student activist Madison Foster argued even more strongly for music during this period to be seen as politicized culture. “You can't talk about the counter-culture, as it is manifested in this period, with all the symbols, without talking about the general fervor and agitation of Afro-Americans,” he said. “For me, the early symbols came from an overlap of the Left and the civil rights movement....Some of those persons participated in the same movements. Some of their gestures, some of their sentences...they listen to the music, they slap hands, and ‘umm-hmm’; the grunt symbol is the same. There's an overlap.”¹² The direct connection between the rhythmic characteristics of rock and roll and R&B and the chants of solidarity used by activists during civil rights protests is particularly astonishing, but these links did not have to be so direct to encourage thoughts of resistance. Johnny Otis wrote of his adopted community that “All over this weary, Jim Crow land, Black folk had to sit in the back of the bus, but when Joe [Lewis] flattened a white fighter we stood ten feet tall...I think the way for Black folks to beat the system in America is to play piano or basketball.”¹³

Even though young people's ideas about politics and social systems often developed further as they listened to rock and roll, few historian and musicologists explicitly support this link. The fact that teenagers were willing to break with their parents' attitudes on race and segregation enough to listen to this music, however, shows that they were more open to racially

¹¹ Arnie Bauchner, interview with Bret Eynon, December, 1978, 7-8. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹² Madison Foster, interview with Bret Eynon, July, 1978, 34. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹³ Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 79-81.

progressive ideals than members of prior generations, even if these changes occurred in private spaces. The biracial nature of rock and roll music also affected listeners, especially teenager listeners, whose brains absorb information differently than adults, and in ways that made them more conducive to understanding people of different races as human beings with whom they shared similarities. Listening to rock and roll music did not make teenage fans more likely to get involved in civil rights activities, but it did foster a mindset that allowed for identification with individuals of other races and support for desegregation of public spaces.

This phenomenon is not new; practically every generation has decried the one following it, and adolescents have been defined by rebellious behavior ever since the age category was distinguished in the early part of the twentieth century. Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin explains that “During our teenage years, we begin to discover that there exists a world of different ideas, different cultures, different people. We experiment with the idea that we don’t have to limit our life’s course, our personalities, or our decisions to what we were taught by our parents, or the way we were brought up.” These experiments are often borne out through personal expression, including the music that people choose to listen to. Levitin says that “We listen to the music that our friends listen to. Particularly when we are young, and in search of our identity, we form bonds or social groups with people whom we want to be like, or whom we believe we have something in common with...Music and musical preferences become a mark of personal and group identity and of distinction.”¹⁴ Furthermore, according to George Lipsitz, “Mass popular culture and especially radio offered young people an opportunity to expand their cultural tastes in private, away from the surveillance of adult authority,” providing teenagers with both a tangible and an abstract space in

¹⁴ Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Plume Printing, 2006), 226.

which to create and act out new forms of personal expression.¹⁵ Although a degree of rebelliousness and openness to new cultural forms might distinguish adolescents of any background or era, the fact that an enormous young cohort was indulging in this sort of group identification just as old racial values were being systematically challenged made the choice to rebel more political than ever before. While their parents may have ruffled their elders' feathers by swooning over Frank Sinatra or preferring the blues to religious music, this group of teenagers actually crossed racial lines when they sought to separate themselves from expected norms. Even when this separation occurred in the relative safety of residential spaces, it challenged the political and social systems which were under attack by civil rights activists.

Many historians and musicologists have, however, discussed the phenomenon of the 'casual listener' who gives little or no thought to the music they profess to like, or employs it merely as a soundtrack to dances and gatherings.¹⁶ While teenagers might *appear* to listen to music half-heartedly, the process is often more complex. Mid-century sociologist David Riesman explained that "When a [teenager] listens to music, even if no one else is around, [he/she] listens in a context of imaginary 'others'—[his/her] listening is indeed often an effort to establish connection with them."¹⁷ Media critic Susan Douglas's reminiscences of her own 1950s girlhood depict this theory at work. "The music burrowed into the everyday psychodramas of our adolescence, forever intertwined with our most private, exhilarating, and embarrassing memories," she says.

¹⁵ George Lipsitz, "Land of a Thousand Dances," in Lary May, *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 279.

¹⁶ For more on the definition and process of casual listening, please see Jin Ha Lee & J. Stephen Downie, "Survey of Music Information Needs, Uses, and Seeking Behaviours: Preliminary Findings" *The International Society for Music Information Retrieval*, 2004.

¹⁷ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1996), 14.

This music exerted such a powerful influence on us, one that we may barely have recognized, because of this process of identification. By superimposing our own dramas, from our own lives, onto each song, each of us could assume an active role in shaping the song's meaning...The songs were ours—but they were also everyone else's. We were all alone, but we weren't really alone at all. In this music, we found solidarity.”¹⁸

This notion of a virtual community of listeners who enjoyed songs that helped them understand their own lives while showing them that others, even from different racial backgrounds, could share the same hopes and frustrations, explains how assumed racial barriers could be broken with the advent of interracial listening. White teens who listened to Chuck Berry and black teens who listened to Elvis Presley were more likely to hear the music played within an *integrated* imagined community of listeners since they already come from a different racial background than the performer. Since all of these listeners are able to identify with the same song, and with the artist performing it, an element of interracial identification, one that may surprise listeners themselves, is able to flourish. This phenomenon, which only existed in the consciousness of listeners, could help them become more open to integrated gatherings in real life since they had already “experienced” a positive form of integration in an abstract realm.

Teenage listeners also learned to identify with musicians singing their favourite hits, even if that musician came from a different racial and class background than they did. Kids who listened to albums scores of times and learned the lyrics by heart did so because they responded to something deeply personal in the words or music, or possibly both. Some scholars, however, are skeptical of the extent to which white listeners especially could truly identify with black musicians without resorting to exoticization. Grace Elizabeth Hale says that “This emphasis on feelings made authenticity into an internal rather than an external quality. Being alike on the inside, as people

¹⁸ Susan J. Douglas. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (Random House, 1995), 87-88.

who shared emotions and the need for self-expression, replaced being alike on the outside, as people who shared a history of oppression and isolation. Emotionalism replaced materialism.”¹⁹

Still, this relationship revealed a level of intimacy that was heightened after commercial headphones hit the market for the first time in 1958, which made it seem as though musicians were singing from inside the listener’s head. Furthermore, Levitin explains, “most contemporary recordings are filled with [a] type of auditory illusion. Microphone techniques can make a guitar sound like it is ten feet wide and your ears are right where the soundhole is—an impossibility in the real world.”²⁰ The distance between musician and listener was almost entirely eradicated in the space between soundwaves and listeners’ auditory nerves. This perceived intimacy could then provoke cross-racial identification on a deeply personal basis when white listened to black, and vice versa.

Finally, since most teenagers listened to music in their bedrooms when they were home, they were, in a sense, inviting performers who were often of another race, or at least influenced by different racial backgrounds, into their innermost sanctuaries, generally one of the only places they felt comfortable expressing their private thoughts and desires. To do so meant engaging in a level of trust with certain artists, even if this trust was purely one sided. Since this relationship often existed between musicians and listeners of different races, many rock and roll fans began to feel like these singers understood them, their lives, and their deepest secrets. These relationships were particularly alarming to parents of white teenage girls who listened fervently to black singers like Sam Cooke and Chuck Berry in the privacy of their bedrooms, but in any case, the very act of listening to music that crossed racial lines could provoke sympathy and identification with people

¹⁹ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 98.

²⁰ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 105.

of other races, and that segregation and racial inequality were fallacies that needed to be questioned.

Music that emerged from African-American traditions has historically promoted this sense of community among listeners more so than music from European-American traditions. The blues tradition of connecting to the audience remained intact in rhythm and blues, and, ultimately, in rock and roll. The performer's main concern was to strike a chord with his or her listeners by communicating specific experiences that people could relate to. Rhythm and blues songs also played with metrical extraction in order to provoke intense emotion, something that teenagers of both races undoubtedly would have connected with. Levitin says that "Metrical extraction, knowing what the pulse is and when we expect it to occur, is a crucial part of musical emotion. Music communicates to us emotionally through systematic violations of expectations... Music is organized sound, but the organization has to involve some element of the unexpected or it is emotionally flat and robotic."²¹ For teens who felt they had had enough of the often "robotic" sounds emanating from mainstream pop music, R&B became more accessible by focusing on emotional connections and on the musical "violations" that they heard in this new music rather than on technical precision.

John Sinclair wrote that he was drawn to black-oriented music because it "expressed the unity of the black world view. There was less separation between body and mind, less separation of one person from other people, and less separation between people and their environment. It was a culture that recognized the uncertainty of life and was prepared to accept it."²² Although his description of music expressing "the unity of the black world view" is somewhat distressing

²¹ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 168-169.

²² Eynon, "John Sinclair: Hipster," 5.

coming, as it did, from a white person who seemed to gloss over the divisions within African-American groups, it is clear that he related to this music on a far more personal level than white-oriented pop music. This music also seemed much more truthful and optimistic than pop music did, which was ironic given the lengths music producers went to douse these records, and the people who sang them, with sunshine. But teenage listeners could tell the difference between manufactured smiles and real, unwavering hope in the face of adversity. Bret Eynon explained that, when he interviewed Sinclair, “He talks about the essence of black culture, as it comes from a culture of abundance, and that, consequently, it’s a culture with a positive view of human nature.”²³ Bibb Edwards said he was drawn to the realness of this music. He recalled

Having problems with the musicians I was listening to being described as *acts*...An actor pretends to be somebody else; they speak lines written by another. If one is able to entertain for a while the notion that rock and roll became a generation’s medium of communication, then musicians—some musicians anyway—were not acting. They were using music to transport ideas from their heads into ours...So at some point I began to perceive music less as entertainment and more about connecting with others and learning about the world around me.²⁴

For many white listeners, R&B musicians, and the rock and roll performers who utilized elements of emotional dynamism and violations of metrical extraction, were easier to identify with than the pop acts that were marketed to their demographic, but which inspired no sense of connectedness or community with listeners.

A unique sense of identification ultimately formed between listener and performer, not only because repeated plays left listeners feeling as though they knew the inner workings of the performer’s consciousness as well as they knew their own, but because of the way the human brain reacts to musicological elements, allowing the pleasant sensations that result from bursts of

²³ Eynon, interview with Madison Foster, 36.

²⁴ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 13, 2011.

dopamine to be associated with the artist performing the song. This emotional connection to performers, which helps to explain the hysterics that sometimes accompany music fandom, the intense desire to meet favorite performers, to know intimate details about their lives, and the intent to possess every recording the artist has ever made, could also be consciously fostered by songwriters. Daniel Levitin talks about how Paul McCartney has admitted that, early in their songwriting careers, “he and John intentionally—somewhat calculatingly—tried to inject personal pronouns into as many of the early lyrics and song titles as they could. They took seriously the task of forging a relationship with their fans in a very personal way. ‘She Loves *You*,’ ‘I Want to Hold *Your* Hand,’ ‘P.S. *I* Love *You*,’ ‘Please Please *Me*,’ ‘From *Me* to *You*.’”²⁵ Many songwriters clearly understand that crafting a virtual, yet emotionally genuine, connection to their listeners on a level that *seems* individual even if it is communal in nature can help turn casual listeners into ardent fans. Distance between the performer and the listener becomes collapsible, and artists become understood as real people in the minds of their fans rather than remote or constructed stage personalities.

Some of the musicological elements of rhythm and blues have been shown to affect the brain in ways that might make new listeners, particularly the white middle-class teenagers who began seeking out this music in larger numbers in the years after World War Two, more open to these kinds of connections. “Call and response,” a technique that originated with gospel and is common to many forms of African-American music, was often utilized to great effect in R&B songs. It involves a primary singer asking a question or otherwise “calling” out to her audience, and receiving an “answer” in return. According to Craig Werner, “When the preacher or singer shapes a call, it is already a response to the shared suffering of the community. If the members of

²⁵ Daniel Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (New York: Plume Printing, 2009), 32-33.

the congregation or audience recognize their own experiences in the call, they respond.”²⁶ An invitation to identify with the artist and compare one’s own pain with his or hers is therefore inherent in the structure of black music, and may have especially appealed to teenagers who felt that no one else could understand their troubles.

Other elements that invited listeners almost subconsciously into songs are polyphony, the simultaneous release of many different sounds, and the “‘vocalized’ quality” of instrumentation, both of which are common in West African musical traditions, and rare in European music.²⁷ Both characteristics create a sense of community, which encouraged worried and isolated people to know that they were not alone. Sociologist Theodor Adorno explained that “The merriment switched on by music is not simply the merriment of individuals at large. It is that of several, or of many, who substitute for the voice of the whole society by which the individual is outcast and yet gripped.”²⁸ Here, Adorno described people who felt isolated, and were looking for meaning and excitement in the lives of others. This description applied to teenagers of both races during this period who sought something relevant and ‘real’ in the musical traditions of others. He also described how the use of polyphony and call and response in rock and roll and traditional African and African-American musics enveloped listeners in a temporary virtual community. To become part of this community, even if it only existed in the mind, was to recognize similarities and nurture a kinship with artists of different races, providing a foundation for racial tolerance to prosper. For white teenagers who were quietly disillusioned with what they felt was a narrow existence, such

²⁶ Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 14.

²⁷ Charles Hersch, *Democratic Artworks: Politics and the Arts from Trilling to Dylan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 98.

²⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Introduction to the Sociology of Music” in *Musical Aesthetics: A Historical Reader. Volume III: The Twentieth Century* Ed. Edward A. Lippman (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 1990), 309.

qualities could lead to the realization that oppressed artists might be able to understand their problems better than some of the people in their own neighborhoods. Bibb Edwards explained that, when listening to R&B and rock and roll, he felt “connected to something larger than myself. It was akin to how people often describe a religious moment. For an isolated pre-teen peering out of the rural south into the grownup world, that was exciting, and a comfort.”²⁹

The vocalized and polyrhythmic qualities of R&B, and, ultimately, rock and roll, were intrinsic to African musical forms, and yet almost unheard of in most European traditions. In West African musical traditions, drums were used to keep the beat, but since African-American slaves were forbidden from using them, they replaced the instrument with polymetric finger popping, handclapping, and foot stomping. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo explain that “The Big Beat that was rock ‘n’ roll, in which the drummer accented the second and fourth beats of each measure on a snare drum while keeping the sustaining 4/4 rhythm on a bass a drum and ride cymbal was derived from a basic African polyrhythm. It was found in virtually every up tempo rock ‘n’ roll tune, including all the rockabilly tunes.”³⁰ Since vocalized, polyrhythmic music tends to accent the “beat” of a particular piece, the term was often racialized during this period. Daniel Levitin says that “The word *beat* indicates the basic unit of measurement in a musical piece. Most often, this is the natural point at which you would tap your feet or clap your hands or snap your fingers.”³¹ African and African-American musical forms rely more heavily on the prominence of beats than European musical forms, a concept which was not lost on white critics of black music. Since emphasis of the beat almost intuitively triggers the need for human movement, black musical forms

²⁹ Edwards, interview with the author.

³⁰ Steve Chapple & Reebee Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1978), 243; 245.

³¹ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 57.

like rhythm and blues invited active participation from listeners, and an implicit acceptance from both the musicians and others partaking in the musical experience. This feeling further provided the illusion of a welcoming community, which would have appealed to alienated teenagers. When white listeners felt accepted by a black musical community, even if this community existed only for the duration of a song, some began to view African Americans as people with similar needs and values as themselves, which could ultimately lead to more racially tolerant behaviours and attitudes.

Finally, most African-American music was written to instill hope in the black community that redemption, or at least a solution, was possible, even in the most blighted landscape. Gerald Early, writing on black musical traditions, observes that: “everyone has troubles but they can be endured, that happiness is not lasting, so don’t be fooled by your good times...[there is no] promise that people will not be unhappy, but that unhappiness can be transcended.”³² While this sentiment was obviously influential in mobilizing black America, whites who were suffocating from the repression of their culture were also likely to take comfort in this music. Essentially, the racial divide began to crumble as white youth lost faith in the society they were born into and realized that elements from other cultures could help them to survive.

Musical influence across racial lines went both ways, though. Black teenagers identified with pop music as they became a more powerful consumer demographic sought out by advertisers, and as more job and educational opportunities were opened up to them. Even though Pat Boone is remembered largely as a pop star marketed directly to white kids and their parents, for instance, black teenagers sent four of his records to the R&B top 20 charts between 1955 and 1957, only

³² Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 70.

one of which was a cover song originally released by a black artist.³³ Three of these singles hit the number-one spot on the pop charts, while only placing between 10 and 14 on the R&B lists, to say nothing of the fact that Boone had 72 singles crack the top 100 without placing on the R&B chart at all.³⁴ His audience was still predominantly white, but the point here is that even a pop star who was clearly marketed as a white alternative to supposedly threatening black or black-oriented rock and roll musicians still managed to appeal to black kids in certain cases. Another example of this somewhat unexpected cross-racial appeal is the initial popularity of surf music in the early 1960s, a supposedly white-oriented rock and roll genre that celebrated California beach life, among black teenagers. Jan and Dean, one of the first surf rock groups, had a #1 pop hit with “Surf City” in 1963 that also hit #3 on the R&B charts, while their first two albums also placed on this list.³⁵ Dick Dale and the Del-Tones also had success with black audiences, while three Beach Boys singles hit the R&B charts in 1963.³⁶ Philip Ennis says that “This fact clearly suggests that the emerging southern California surfing culture contained in its music something sympathetic to black youngsters, few of whom would ever ‘hang ten,’” noting that surf music was influenced in part by the guitar work of Chuck Berry and groups like the Four Freshman.³⁷ Still, the upbeat sunny tones of the music and romantic, carefree lyrics about finding love on the beach seemed to resonate beyond the white fan base that marketers originally had in mind.

³³ “Ain’t That a Shame,” originally released by Fats Domino, which hit #14 on the R&B charts in 1955. Other songs are “At My Front Door,” #12 in 1955, “Don’t Forbid Me,” #10 in 1956, and “Love Letters in the Sand,” #12 in 1957. Please see <http://www.musicvf.com/Pat+Boone.art> for full chart listings.

³⁴ <http://www.musicvf.com/Pat+Boone.art>. Last accessed January 22, 2014.

³⁵ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 275.

³⁶ “Be True to Your School,” “Little Deuce Coupe,” and “Surfer Girl,” <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-beach-boys-mn0000041874/awards>

³⁷ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 275-276.

Many songs released by black artists during the mid- to late-1950s also reflected a shift towards the uncomplicated romanticism, teenage heartache, and simple melodic instrumentation that white pop stars utilized to great effect. Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers had a hit in 1956 with “Why Do Fools Fall in Love?” which hit #1 on the R&B charts and #6 on the pop charts. The lyrics, inspired by love letters sent to a member of the band, could resonate with listeners befuddled by unrequited crushes: “Why do fools fall in love?/Why do birds sing so gay?/And lovers await the break of day/Why do they fall in love?”³⁸ These words, in fact, differed little from “A Teenager in Love,” a #5 pop hit released three years later by white rock and roll group Dion and the Belmonts. “Each night I ask the stars up above/Why must I be a teenager in love?”³⁹ Both songs were written from the express viewpoint of teenagers, detail the helplessness that often accompanies adolescent breakups, which both black and white kids could easily understand, and were set to sweetly poppy melodies. It is therefore unsurprising that both songs would have cross-racial appeal, but the overt pop characteristics, and the romanticized, uncomplicated views of young love and heartbreak were both fairly new elements in black popular music. These songs were easy for whites to identify with, yet, at the same time, offered young blacks an examination of the common experiences of adolescence that were often ignored because of their racial heritage. Black teens may have encountered different, and harsher, obstacles because of their race, but common tropes of adolescence, like falling in love, experiencing heartbreak, and frustration with parental authority, were often ignored in favor of focusing on racial differences. This music heightened the similar experiences that black and white teenagers shared, which only strengthened the middle ground between them.

³⁸ Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, “Why Do Fools Fall in Love?” Gee Records, 1956.

³⁹ Doc Pomus & Mort Shuman, “A Teenager in Love,” Laurie Records, 1959.

Both the similarities and differences in how black and white teenagers listened, and responded, to the same hit songs can be identified by examining how song lyrics are processed. Although listeners usually respond more readily to rhythm than they do to lyrics, a combination of the two actually results in better recollection. Daniel Levitin explains that “Lyric recall in songs [is] typically better than lyric recall without them. This is one reason why the average person probably has a more intimate and emotional connection to music than to poetry—because he or she can recall more of it, and more effortlessly.”⁴⁰ Lyrics do matter, then, and can speak to listeners in ways that can help bring them together. “So much of recovery is knowing we’re not alone and that we’re understood,” Levitin continues. “And good music, like good poetry, can elevate a story to give it a sense of the universal, of something larger than we or our own problems are.” Teenagers especially “who feel misunderstood, cut off, and alone find allies in lyricists who sing of similar alienation. In affluent societies around the world, so many teenagers feel as though they don’t fit in, that they’re not among the cool; they feel lonesome and alone....The implicit message of these songs was ‘You’re one of us—you’re not alone—the things you think and feel are normal.’”⁴¹ The implication, then, is that black teenagers who listened to the words of white musicians and white teenagers who sang along with black artists were able to identify with what they were singing about, and felt a sort of support across racial boundaries that may have eluded them in their own social networks. Cambridge University music professor Ian Cross explains that listeners who feel vulnerable, depressed, or alienated are most likely to identify with lyrics expounding on these themes, regardless of the voice singing them. “Basically, there are now *two* of you at the edge of the cliff,” he says. Listeners are apt to think, “This person understands me. This person knows

⁴⁰ Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 166-167.

⁴¹ Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 132; 127-128.

what I feel like.”⁴² These feelings, even if they occurred at a subconscious level, could help teenagers identify with people outside of their racial demographic, and realize that they may share many similar emotions and experiences.

The lyrics to hit rock and roll songs were not always understood in exactly the same way, though; sometimes a listener’s race affected how he or she received the basic message of the song. The Platters 1955 hit, “The Great Pretender,” for instance, was a huge success on both the pop and R&B charts. It has also been disseminated by present-day critics, though, because its lyrics, which proclaim that “I’m the great pretender...I seem to be what I’m not, you see,”⁴³ seemed to have been received differently according to a listener’s race. Many critics and historians think that whites would have simply heard a song about someone presenting a collected persona to the world while experiencing utter loneliness behind his or her imposed mask. Blacks, on the other hand, could have identified with the idea of trying to ‘pass’ where they were not always welcome in white society. While each of these critiques could definitely ring true, in the end it does not matter which meaning was conjured up for the listener. Even if the deeper racial meaning of the song was not apparent to white listeners, they still could have identified with the sense of confusion and alienation expertly wrought by lead singer Tony Williams’s vocal expressions. Everyone experiences feelings of isolation and having to pretend to be something one is not, especially during adolescence.

Similarly, “Get a Job,” written and released by the black doo-wop group The Silhouettes in 1958, reached #1 on both the pop and R&B charts, partly because lyrics like “Every morning about this time/she get me out of my bed/a-crying get a job” resonated with both black and white

⁴² Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 133-134.

⁴³ Buck Ram, “The Great Pretender,” Mercury Records, 1955

kids looking for work.⁴⁴ Black teenagers, who faced far more employment obstacles than their white counterparts, and often came from families whose incomes were somewhat precarious, were used to dealing with this issue even if they identified as part of the middle class. One teenage girl who lived in the Midwest explained that “Being only 15 or 16 years of age makes it hard to find suitable work. In many families, mine for one, the mother is the sole support of the family and it would be a great help to her if I had a part time job.”⁴⁵ But this issue was not confined to black teenagers—youth unemployment was a growing issue that crossed racial boundaries. Milt Gabler, who helped produce the song, recalled that “Actually it was a very important commentary on what was probably happening to 50,000 or 100,000 boys. It was humorous...But when a kid sings about coming home every day and his mother says, ‘Why don’t you get the paper and go out and get a job instead of hanging around loafing?’—there’s an analogy. The kids can picture themselves in that position.”⁴⁶ The ability to identify with these lyrics may have been exacerbated for black kids whose employment options were limited by institutionalized racism and shaky family incomes, but many white kids grappled with a lack of work options as well, and were also able to understand this situation.

Many rock and roll songs popular with both white and black kids could be interpreted in different ways based on lived circumstances shaped partially by race. The stalwart rock and roll hit, “Blue Suede Shoes,” written by rockabilly pioneer Carl Perkins and released as a single in 1956 before it shot to the top of all three charts when covered by Elvis Presley, gives voice to a narrator who proclaims: “Well, you can knock me down, step in my face/Slander my name all over

⁴⁴ The Silhouettes, “Get a Job,” Ember Records, 1958.

⁴⁵ H.H. Remmers & D.H. Radler, *The American Teenager* (Charter Books, 1957), 146.

⁴⁶ Bob Franklin, interview with Milton Gabler, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, November 1959, 44-45. Milt Gabler Collection, Box **, Folder 19, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

the place/Do anything that you want to do/But uh-uh, Honey, lay off of my shoes.”⁴⁷ He could be responding to a romantic rival who is trying to cut in on his date at a dance or drawing a line when faced with white supremacist taunts—either interpretation could be valid depending on the experiences of the person listening. The meaning behind Gale Storm’s energetic 1955 single “I Hear You Knocking” could also be shaped by the race and experiences of each listener. The chorus, which repeats the lines “I hear you knockin' but you can't come in/I hear you knockin', go back where you been” may remind teenagers of trying to protect their privacy by keeping their parents out of their bedrooms, or civil rights activists of defying police orders during protests. The second part of the chorus, “I begged ya not to go but you said goodbye/Now you come back tellin' all those lies” belies the fact that the song actually fit into a long history of blues songs depicting relationships gone bad and those who survive them, sometimes even enacting revenge on their paramours.⁴⁸ And Sam Cooke’s seminal civil rights ballad from 1964, “A Change is Gonna Come,” seemed to speak straightforwardly about Jim Crow segregation and racial inequality with lyrics like “I go to the movie/And I go down town/Somebody keep telling me don’t hang around,” but white kids who felt like outsiders in their schools or neighbourhoods could simply hear a cry for human contact in an isolating world.⁴⁹ Black and white teenagers were both able to hear the sounds of their own discomfiting feelings in the lyrics of these songs depending on their own experiences, identify with them, and ultimately with each other, even if the reasons for these feelings differed according to race. Teens from different races may have approached the song from

⁴⁷ Carl Perkins, “Blue Suede Shoes,” Sun Records, 1956.

⁴⁸ Dave Bartholomew & Pearl King, “I Hear You Knocking,” Imperial Records, 1955.

⁴⁹ Sam Cooke, “A Change Is Gonna Come,” RCA Victor, 1964.

their own cultural backdrop, but a middle ground was formed in the space where they were able to realize that loneliness and disaffection knew no racial boundary.

These aspects helped disaffected young people feel even more inclined to identify with performers, and even to understand their own life experiences within the framework of certain songs or the lives of artists who sang them. Bibb Edwards explained that “At least for a while, what was sung about—generally the usual teen-age boy/girl monologues—was not as important as who was doing the talking and listening...many of us had developed a sense of identity far across those divisions of a decade earlier. My feeling is that our music not only spoke across lines, it began to blur them.”⁵⁰ As these lines blurred, listeners began to imagine elements they had in common with musicians. In her study of the white appeal of Southern black folk songs in the 1950s and 1960s, Grace Elizabeth Hale quotes one reporter who noted, “When [white kids] sing about the burdens and sorrows of the Negro, for example, they are singing out their own state of mind as well.” She agrees with his stance that “Traditional black music articulated not only ‘the Negro’s longing for liberation’; the songs also expressed ‘any man’s bid for freedom,’” and criticizes this notion. She is right to do so—again, black and white listeners often had different interpretations of the same songs, and the fact that whites could relate to what black musicians were singing about did not mean that they could understand the injustice that black people experienced on a daily basis.⁵¹ But even if white and black teenagers developed different interpretations of the same songs, the basic emotional truths that both groups could identify with helped to form a unique means of communication across racial lines.

⁵⁰ Edwards, interview with the author.

⁵¹ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 98.

Listeners usually heard new music first on the radio during this period, and would often begin this identification process before they saw what performers actually looked like. Since black and white rock and roll stars utilized traits culled from both racial traditions to shape their performances, it was often difficult to determine an artist's race. Bibb Edwards, for instance, remembered that, when watching his favorite performers on *American Bandstand*, "the sometimes deliberately blurred racial identity of a singer was revealed, frequently enough to my surprise."⁵²

Journalist John Egerton, who grew up in the South in the 1950s, recalled when

Late at night I tuned in to WLAC in Nashville and listened to "Hoss" Allen and Gene Nobles spinning rhythm-and-blues platters...I never would have believed that they were white guys who just sounded black (not many blacks believed it, either). In the mainstream of pop music, the incredibly sensuous and exotic voice of Eartha Kitt singing "C'est Ci Bon" had me convinced that she was French, and I assumed that she was white; in fact, though, she was young and black and Southern—not long out of her teens, but a far piece from her origin in the tiny cotton-field hamlet of North, South Carolina.⁵³

Even Elvis Presley remembered "...you could hear people around town saying 'Is he [black], is he?' And I'm going 'Am I, am I?'"⁵⁴ People were so confused about Presley's race that when he was first interviewed on Dewey Phillips's "Red, Hot, and Blue" show in 1954, Phillips made a point of announcing that Presley went to Humes high school. This announcement was no mere piece of trivia; Humes was a white high school in Memphis, and Phillips's inclusion of this information was a not-so-subtle way of informing listeners that, however 'black' Presley may have sounded on the radio, he was, in fact, Caucasian.⁵⁵

⁵² Edwards, interview with the author.

⁵³ John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 537.

⁵⁴ David Pichaske, *A Generation In Motion: Popular Music and Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), v.

⁵⁵ Louis Cantor *Dewey and Elvis: The Life and Times of a Rock 'N' Roll DeeJay* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 148-149.

Uncertainty regarding a rock and roll performer's race was endemic, as mixtures of different genres and characteristics made it difficult to identify whether a musician was white or black based on the music alone. This is partly because, as Grace Elizabeth Hale points out, "there is no clear consensus on what sounding black means, because black and black-sounding are such shifting and contested terms."⁵⁶ The racial mixing that was crucial to rock and roll's origins actually helped to prove, Hale argues, that "racial crossing proved highly unstable...because early rock and roll simultaneously assaulted the very idea that sounds could be segregated, that they could ever actually be black or white. If a black man, Chuck Berry, could sound to some people like a white man trying to sound like a black man, what did these classifications mean?"⁵⁷ Listeners of both races who believed they could tell the difference based on elocution, timbre, and emotional delivery found that their expectations were confounded by rock and roll musicians. Many sounded very similar to one another because of the mixture of cultural characteristics that devised this genre.

This confusion often led to surprising revelations that challenged racial conceptions of both blacks and whites. An *Ebony* article printed in 1953 that extolled its readers to "Relax and Be Yourself" made note of the fact that "Whites have out-eaten the Negro right down to Saturday's neck bones and Sunday's red beans and rice. They have aped his style of music so well it is sometimes impossible to tell when the blues are black or white."⁵⁸ The tension between the article's title, which seemed to assure black readers that their culture was valid simply because of white interest, and the almost sardonic tone of the content belied the ambivalence that many blacks felt about white appropriation of African-American culture. And yet, despite the author's

⁵⁶ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 321, fn 29.

⁵⁷ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 51.

⁵⁸ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 73.

somewhat disapproving use of the term “aped” to describe this process, the admission that “it is sometimes impossible” to guess the race of a “blues” (by this point in time, and in a popular publication, this was probably shorthand for R&B) singer was presented with no sarcasm whatsoever—it was, by the mid-1950s, something most fans of the genre would have encountered. Marcus Van Story, a white Memphis musician who often worked the same clubs as Jerry Lee Lewis in the early 1950s, recalled that “A lot of people...would come up to us before the shows an’ ask, ‘Who’s that black guy on piano who’s got a record out?’ They thought Jerry Lee was a black guy. We used to kid him ‘bout that.”⁵⁹ Berry Gordy, who wrote the poppy 1958 single “Everyone Was There” for Bob Kayli, was chagrined when sales stagnated after Kayli’s appearance on *American Bandstand*. “People were shocked,” he said. “This white-sounding record did not go with his black face. Bob Kayli was history. When that happened, I realized this was not just about good or bad records, this was about race.”⁶⁰ Racial confusion actually helped record sales in other cases, most famously with Elvis Presley. Music writer and critic Greil Marcus explained that “In Elvis’s first records you couldn’t tell whether he was black or white, and in many ways he sounded androgynous, exuding a sexuality you couldn’t hear anywhere else. On some level, even the crudest symbols in our society didn’t work anymore. He stopped people in their tracks.”⁶¹

When listeners realized that artists they had come to admire and identify with actually came from a different racial background, racial stereotypes and their “crudest symbols” began to crumble. Indeed, once people were confronted with the ‘Other’ element in a song, they were forced

⁵⁹ Nick Tosches, *Hellfire: The Jerry Lee Lewis Story* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 124.

⁶⁰ Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 99.

⁶¹ William C. Brisick, “PW Interviews Greil Marcus” *Publishers Weekly*, November 15, 1991, vol. 238, no. 50, 53. Russell B. Nye Collection, Special Collections, Michigan State University Libraries.

to identify with the artist, and by extension, the writer, producer, and backing musicians. The feelings and ideas that inspired the listener had to have been experienced by the engineers of the song also. To acknowledge this commonality was to realize that the other person had similar feelings and experiences, and could not be dismissed with mere stereotypes. As *Cash Box* proclaimed in a January 1955 issue, “How better to understand what is unknown to you than by appropriation of the emotional experiences of other people? And how better are these emotions portrayed than by music?”⁶² If the listener could not immediately identify the race of the performer, then he or she had to accept or disregard the song on non-racial terms. Many blacks were surprised to find that white rock and roll musicians like Elvis Presley could sing with the passion they believed was unique to members of their race, and whites would have been forced to re-think their views of what constitutes the divide between ‘black’ or ‘white’ if they simply could not tell the difference.

The rise of rock and roll variety television shows aimed at teenagers challenged these conceptions by beaming visual performances by black and white musicians into homes across the country, and by including audience members and fans of both races on camera. The most popular and beloved of these shows, *American Bandstand*, actually started as a local show aimed at teens in Philadelphia and its environs before achieving catastrophic success as a nation-wide broadcast. Starting in 1952, WFIL-TV began airing the program, hosted by local deejay Bob Horn, who would play hit records as teenage couples performed the latest dance moves. Each show also featured lip-synced performances from musical guest stars, all of whom were white pop stars, at least at the outset. White kids began demanding to hear more of their favourite R&B and rock and roll hits by black artists, but the racial makeup of the show’s phenomenally popular teenage

⁶² Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis*, 97.

dancers remained white to a fault. Black teenagers protested this decision, but producers obstinately refused to allow them to even enter the studio where the show was filmed. Matthew Delmont explains that “*Bandstand*’s producers wanted to make the show’s representations of Philadelphia teenagers safe for television advertisers and viewers in WFIL—Philadelphia,” a demographic that extended beyond the borders of Maryland and Delaware, where Jim Crow-style segregation was often enforced, especially in school systems.⁶³

Bandstand became so popular that, by 1957, it was picked up by ABC and reformatted as a national broadcast. Horn, who had recently been arrested on a drunk driving charge, was jettisoned in favor of New York deejay Dick Clark, but only after pioneering R&B spinner Al Jarvis, who was white, declined the honor because of the network’s reluctance to feature black performers or dancers.⁶⁴ Clark became well known almost immediately for “integrating” the show by insisting that black performers and teenage dancers be featured regularly. Years later, he promoted this myth himself, exclaiming that “Rock ‘n’ roll—and by extension *Bandstand*—owed its very existence to black people, their culture and their music. It would have been ridiculous, embarrassing *not* to integrate the show.”⁶⁵ The program’s immediately loyal legions of teenage fans were therefore greeted with a somewhat integrated adolescent fantasy when they flipped on their TVs every afternoon after school, even if the show never included more than one black couple, and black dancers kept a careful distance from white dancers. White teenagers saw this nominal form of racial integration presented as natural, while black teenagers were able to see

⁶³ Matthew Delmont *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2012), 38; 3; 41; 34.

⁶⁴ Garofalo, *Rock and Roll Is Here to Pay*, 247.

⁶⁵ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 168.

black youth represented as popular, fashionable, fun, and scarcely different from their white contemporaries.

Bandstand's popularity skyrocketed across the country with teenagers from many different backgrounds, a trend which had noticeable implications for the integrationist movement right from the start. Berry Gordy, whose first songwriting hit, "Reet Petite" debuted on the show in 1959 when singer Jackie Wilson took the stage, recalled being shocked at the sight of "Jackie's big booming voice blasting for millions all over the country, and all those white kids dancing up a storm to my song." Gordy's ambition had been to write and produce black-oriented music that would also appeal to the supposedly deeper pocketbooks of white teenagers, and this broadcast seemed to show that his goal was supported by youth across the country.⁶⁶ Since the newly formatted *Bandstand* featured performers as diverse as black soul singer Sam Cooke, white rockabilly star Buddy Holly, and white pop acts like Bobby Vee and Connie Francis, teenage viewers were able to see black and white musicians performing in somewhat different genres (although always under the umbrella of rock and roll) who were treated in the same manner by the show's producers, shared the same stage, and inspired adulation from young fans across racial lines.⁶⁷ Upon seeing *Bandstand* for the first time, Bibb Edwards recalled that "Now we could see the musicians. We learned the names of the teen-age dancers on the show. My classmates talked about the clothes they wore, who was dancing with whom, and the latest dances. Sure, they were all Yankees with odd names, and few Negro couples danced on the floor as well; but nobody seemed to care."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Gordy, *To Be Loved*, 89.

⁶⁷ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 274.

⁶⁸ Edwards, interview with the author.

It is therefore unsurprising that *Bandstand* and its host and producers would be remembered as facilitating acceptance of racial integration, at least in abstract realm of television programming, but Matthew Delmont's qualms about the show bearing "little resemblance to the interracial makeup of Philadelphia's rock and roll scene" even as its popularity was based on the musical crossovers between R&B and pop, continued to haunt the program.⁶⁹ The limited number of black dancers allowed onscreen, and rules against interracial dance partners, betrayed the fact that, although *Bandstand* acknowledged rock and roll's black origins, its intended audience was mainly white. Still, Delmont's assertion that "the exclusionary racial practices of *American Bandstand* marginalized black teens from this imagined national youth culture" is somewhat extreme.⁷⁰ The show validated the contributions of black individuals, showed that teenagers of both races listened and responded to the same kinds of music, dance, and clothing styles, and forced their audiences to visually acknowledge the biracial nature of rock and roll in a way that radio could not. At a time when integrationist goals were still paramount among civil rights activists, these programs could provide viewers with the realization that the community of listeners they envisioned while listening to rock and roll was, in actuality, racially mixed. Identification across racial lines based on musical preference could then lead to deeper degrees of recognition. Bibb Edwards said that, among his Southern contemporaries, "The interracial components of *Bandstand* were just accepted by most of us. I don't recall it being discussed. By this time most of us understood that race was THE hot button issue. So we left it alone."⁷¹ The show did not depict true equality or integration as Clark

⁶⁹ Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town*, 6.

⁷⁰ Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town*, 6.

⁷¹ Edwards, interview with the author.

and his supporters attested, but it did present a view of society that tacitly included blacks as well as whites.

A few months before ABC introduced kids across the country to *Bandstand*, it had made an initial attempt to draw in teenage viewers with another rock and roll variety program, *The Big Beat*, hosted by pioneering deejay Alan Freed. This show had a set-up that was similar to *Bandstand*, but Freed ensured that greater numbers of black dancers were allowed on the floor, although interracial pairings were still forbidden. This caveat would ultimately fell the show during its third episode when Frankie Lymon, one of the featured performers, took a break from his song and began dancing with a white girl. ABC affiliates across the South pulled the show in indignation, and the network ultimately decided that the specter of social integration was just too risky. Freed lost his national broadcast, but *The Big Beat* was picked up by the ABC affiliate in New York, where it ran until late 1959. During this period, Freed's show continued to portray positive images of integration, showcasing black performers like Jackie Wilson, Little Anthony, and even a return appearance of Frankie Lymon, alongside white rockabilly, surf, and pop acts like Rock-a-Teens, The Revels, and Freddy Cannon. Black couples danced alongside whites on the dance floor, and, in some cases, even intermingled, although only during free dance periods.⁷²

Freed's show incurred little controversy, juggling sponsorships from teen-friendly companies like Coke, Fritos, Tasty Cake, Blemstick, Dentyne, and Wash and Curl Shampoo, as well as businesses more inclined to sell to viewers' parents, like Westinghouse and Emenee Organ. Prizes given out on the show were similarly divided between those meant for teen viewers, including record players and cases, jewelry, handbags, tape recorders, and musical instruments,

⁷² For a video of black and white teens sharing the dance floor during a 1959 broadcast of *The Big Beat* on WNEW-TV New York, please visit http://www.onlineshoes.com/Womens-steve-madden-rawlings-grey-suede-p_id310149?adtrack=tpart

and “Parents Prizes,” such as lamp sets, perfume, dinnerware, and a hot dog “Dog-o-matic.”⁷³ These forms of sponsorship portrayed generation as the great divide among people rather than race. Black and white musicians shared the stage, and dancers intermingled on the dance floor, but prizes needed to be allocated based on age. Teenagers were encouraged to drink the same soft drinks and use the same skincare regiments, and their parents to vie for kitchen accoutrements, whether they were black or white, but generational lines were distinct. Still, the fact that advertisements and a special prize section were directed specifically towards parents shows that many found the show acceptable, and may have even watched along with their kids. By the late 1950s, rock and roll had become somewhat accepted in mainstream culture, and many parents, especially in larger Northeastern cities like New York, had relaxed former objections. Still, the fact that Freed’s show prospered while presenting teenagers as fairly racially unified, yet divided from their elders, featuring interracial stages and dance floors even after the national program was nixed precisely because of this, showed that black and white teenagers, and sometimes their families, were so accepting of onscreen images of integration that they failed to enact much controversy. Again, it is not that viewers were unaware of tensions regarding these issues—civil rights struggles appeared in the news almost daily. The fact that Freed’s show remained consistently popular even as both white and black teenagers were surrounded by news of racial conflicts, however, shows that they were making small, daily choices that threatened the viability of racial segregation and other forms of inequality in the United States.

Indeed, many performers and music industry insiders also believe that rock and roll helped to open young people’s minds to the possibility that racial stereotypes did not apply when they crossed these boundaries themselves, even the virtual ones that were brought down over the

⁷³ All information on the Alan Freed *Big Beat* show is from The Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 35, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, Cleveland, OH.

airwaves and while listening to records. Shelley Stewart, a black deejay in the 1950s and 60s, remarked that “Music really started breaking down the barriers long before the politics in America began to deal with it. [The races] began to communicate...because of the music...and the black radio in the black community being accepted and enjoyed...by the white community.”⁷⁴ He recounted one instance where this communication actually helped ward off violence. Joe Medlin, an Atlantic Records promoter, was standing on the sidewalk outside the station in Birmingham where Stewart worked, when white police officers began yelling, telling him to vacate the premises. He refused, and even though the officers eventually left him alone, Medlin was so upset that he placed calls to Jerry Wexler and Leonard Chess, telling them “Police are swinging billy clubs...My people need help down here. You’ve got to call up some of your rich-ass friends and get some money here.” Chess called him back a short time later to say that a number of record company executives had pledged to send money to civil rights organizations in Birmingham.⁷⁵

Other musicians and music industry insiders also recognized a connection between music and social change during this period. Ralph Bass told an interviewer in 1991 that “the one great accomplishment of my career is I brought young white kids and black kids together through music. We didn’t have to depend upon laws or preaching.”⁷⁶ As early as 1955, R&B saxophone great Illinois Jacquet proclaimed that black entertainers helped to “change the white man’s opinion of the Negro. They learn a lot of stereotyped things they’ve heard aren’t so.”⁷⁷ B.B. King, whose career benefited from the resurgence of interest in blues among young whites in the 1960s,

⁷⁴ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 128.

⁷⁵ Shelley Stewart with Nathan Hale Turner, *The Road South: A Memoir* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2002), 248-249.

⁷⁶ Reader, Chicago’s Free Weekly, May 17, 1991, 39. Ralph Bass Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁷⁷ Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis*, 159.

seconded this motion: “Along with this music, these white kids were hearing and feeling the souls of black people. They were getting to know us and like us and appreciate our talent.”⁷⁸ These viewpoints all give rock and roll music credit for encouraging white kids to accept black people as fully human, even though this process was not as unilateral as depicted. Still, during a period where desegregation remained the main, albeit contested, goal of civil rights protests, this kind of connection worked in tandem with political and social movements. And others realized that the combination of music and movement politics had the potential to do even more. Singer Curtis Mayfield later told an interviewer, “You know, to talk about the ‘60s almost brings tears to my eyes. What we did. What we all did. We changed the world... We really did. Barriers broke down for us. And for all black musicians afterwards.”⁷⁹ The dignity, respect, and sense of belonging that Mayfield described here transcends the dismissive notions that only white people were affected by rock and roll’s cross-racial origins and appeal, or that it advocated assimilation for black kids.

Teenagers of both races knew the sorts of obstacles they faced when choosing to listen to this music and admire musicians who transgressed racial boundaries, particularly when news coverage of the civil rights movement expanded in the aftermath of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. These decisions can therefore be deemed political, even when they were made privately. Many teens, for instance, were forced to listen to this music in secret. Their parents were frequently opposed to rock and roll, and often forbade their children to listen to it even in the privacy of their own bedrooms. Rock and roll pioneer Little Richard recounted tales of the white fans who purchased his album. “The white kids, they wanted to hear me and so they were still bringing me in their house! And they didn’t want their mama [to] know I was in their house, so they put [white

⁷⁸ Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis*, 233.

⁷⁹ Garofalo, *Rocking the Boat*, 239.

cover artist] Pat Boone on the top of the bed and they put me in the drawer. But I was still in the same house.”⁸⁰ In this instance, it is telling that Little Richard’s unwelcome status as a black voice in white homes would literally be ‘covered’ by the parentally-approved Boone, who performed “Tutti Frutti,” one of Richard’s biggest-selling (and most controversial) songs. Sometimes, white kids had to literally leave their houses in order to enjoy the music they craved without incurring their parents’ disapproval. Chairman Johnson of the group Chairman of the Board mused “It was at the beach that racial segregation began to break down, white kids could listen to R&B behind their folks’ backs.”⁸¹ These listeners may not have been attending sit-ins or political rallies because they felt like they did not *have* to; they had already made up their minds not to cooperate with the dictates of racial segregation while in the relative comfort of their own homes and social spaces, which shows that the white supremacist system was breaking down at a social and cultural level as well as on the wider political stage.

In the South, listening to rock and roll music was especially fraught with political implications. In a land built upon white supremacy and black subjugation, and bowed down by Jim Crow segregation, culture was shaped primarily by racial politics. Historian Adam Fairclough asserts that “In the context of the rural South, even the most innocuous act—reading the *Pittsburgh Courier*, driving a flashy car, failing to yield the sidewalk—represented a subversion of white authority and an assertion of equality.”⁸² Bibb Edwards further explained the persistence of race consciousness in the South: “The Civil War was almost time within memory. We—most of us anyway—saw *others* only through a historical lens, colored in many ways by that conflict and its

⁸⁰ *Rock and Roll Renegades: Episode One: Renegades* dir. David Espar, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1995.

⁸¹ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 128.

⁸² Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), xvii-xviii.

aftermath.”⁸³ In this deeply historical, racially charged atmosphere, rock and roll was politicized, born as it was out of the mingling between black and white musics. As Susan Cahn explains, “Whether first undertaken as purposeful rebellion or thoughtless amusement, the collective embrace of rock ‘n’ roll posed a genuine threat to the social order. Integrated sounds, bands, and dance floors diminished white control of racialized spaces that were central to the imposition and maintenance of racial hierarchy.”⁸⁴ This combination, which reminded more than a few white Southerners of physical or “social” miscegenation (i.e. interracial sex and relationships), was deemed threatening right from the start. Few teens could doubt the implications of listening to this music, especially during a period when the racially unequal foundations of Southern politics and society were starting to crack.

As racial segregation and inequality began to be seriously challenged by a widespread social movement in the 1950s and ‘60s, the overt acknowledgement of cultural integration that surrounded discussions of rock and roll music became particularly threatening to Southern segregationists. Members of this group were, in fact, the first to recognize the parallels between the civil rights movement and rock and roll music, and for this reason the white supremacist elements in America were far more vocal in their opposition than parents who simply disliked this new ‘loud noise’ (though these criticisms also reveal suppressed fears of racial mixing). White Citizens Councils in particular made rock and roll one of their prime targets. Early in 1956, Asa Carter, executive secretary of the Council’s North Alabama branch, and a former radio announcer, told *The New York Times*, “The National Advancement of Colored People had ‘infiltrated’ Southern white teen-agers with ‘rock and roll music,’” declared the music an NAACP conspiracy

⁸³ Edwards, interview with the author.

⁸⁴ Susan Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 267-268.

to promote integration, and told a television interviewer that “[t]he obscenity and vulgarity of the r&r music is obviously a means by which the white man and his children can be driven to the level of the nigger.”⁸⁵ When outfitting his office headquarters, Carter ensured that passerby would instantly be made aware of his feelings on popular music, posting a sign that read “Be-Bop Promotes Communism.”⁸⁶ Since white supremacists frequently characterized civil rights campaigns as Communist attempts to undermine the American status quo, this slogan neatly identified rock and roll music as a supposed tool of the movement to eradicate segregation.

Another Alabama White Citizens Council chair was televised in front of a sign declaring ‘We Serve White Customers Only’ as he explained that the group had “set up a 20-man committee to do away with their vulgar nigger rock and roll.”⁸⁷ This branch of the Citizens Council distributed brochures warning that “Rock ‘n’ roll will pull the white man down to the level of the negro,” and petitioned for juke box operators “to throw out ‘immoral’ records in the new rhythm.”⁸⁸ When many operators protested that this action would result in a massive loss of profit, Carter reaffirmed his group’s position in even more uncertain terms, declaring that “records featuring Negro performers also should be ‘purged.’”⁸⁹ Interestingly enough, the jukebox operators did not refute Carter’s argument that this music crossed racial boundaries and had the potential to bring listeners of both races closer together. Rather, they simply noted that they could not afford to get rid of their

⁸⁵ “Segregationist Wants Ban on ‘Rock and Roll,’” *The New York Times*, March 30, 1956, 27; Pichaske, *A Generation In Motion*, 38; *Rock and Roll Renegades: Episode One: Renegades*, 1995

⁸⁶ David Mark Chalmers, *Backfire: How the Ku Klux Klan Helped the Civil Rights Movement* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) 7.

⁸⁷ “Rock and Roll: The Early Days,” produced by Patrick Montgomery, directed by Patrick Montgomery and Pamela Page, Archive Film Production, 1984.

⁸⁸ Peter Blecha, *Taboo Tunes: A History of Banned Bands and Censored Songs* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Publishing, 2004), 25.

⁸⁹ “Segregationist Wants Ban on ‘Rock and Roll,’” 27.

best-selling singles—and most refused to relent. Carter’s argument may have been muddled by inflammatory rhetoric and demagoguery, but few Southerners could refute that he correctly identified the music’s biracial, and possibly integrationist, nature. Yet profits remained more important to many business owners than the need to prop up a segregationist system that had already started to falter.

As early as 1955, Alan Freed proclaimed,

To me, this campaign against ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll’ smells of discrimination of the worst kind against the great and accomplished Negro song writers, musicians and singers who are responsible for this outstanding contribution to American music. It is American! And, people throughout our nation can look forward to the day when they will be able to see on their TV screens and eventually in person, the famous Negro artists, who have brought us the ‘off-spring’ of the only basic American musical heritage we can call our own.⁹⁰

It was this concept of an American “we,” meaning whites and blacks together, that white supremacists undoubtedly found most terrifying, and it was not difficult to identify this connection. Shelley Stewart asserts that “This same music was now apparently a threat to the white power structure. I had already been labeled ‘Shelley the Plowboy’ by the infamous Birmingham Police Commissioner Bull Connor, who warned the white community about the evils of jungle bunny music... The fear of racial integration or, bluntly, miscegenation was a burr under the saddle of the whole gang of them.” In one instance, “a white girl didn’t have anything for me to write on so she pulled her skirt up above her knee and I wrote: ‘Best wishes. I love you madly.’ Four or five police cars showed up, and an officer cursed me and said I needed to get back to ‘Niggertown.’”⁹¹

Stewart’s actions, the music he played on his show, and the reactions he inspired in white girls particularly, threatened the structure of white supremacy to such an extent that he frequently

⁹⁰ Alan Freed, “The Big Beat Has Arrived: Izzy Rowe’s Notebook,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 1955.

⁹¹ Shelley Stewart, *The Road South*, viii, 190.

became the target of racially-inspired violence. Stewart, for example, once realized that his station was losing its signal. When he called the radio tower engineer, the man replied that he already knew: “There are some folks out here, some Klansmen, cutting the guide wires.” When Stewart asked if he could stop them, the engineer replied “Nope. I can’t do that...’cause I’m one of them too.” On a separate occasion, Stewart was greeted with “the letters KKK written in the blood of some unfortunate animal” on the wall of the station when he went into work.⁹² George Lipsitz explains that, as black rock and roll artists became popular with white audiences, “municipal officials joined with moralists...to censor its sales and radio exposure, to close down night clubs and dance halls where races mingled, and to prosecute entertainers and promoters on ‘morals’ charges rarely faced by artists in other branches of popular music.”⁹³ Johnny Otis explained forthrightly that “The reason the establishment was so uneasy about the new rhythm and blues discs was the radically new sound. The fact that the musicians and singers were Black didn’t help our case either. The straight-laced American moralists saw the new music as alien and subversive.”⁹⁴ According to Michael Lydon, these people “did indeed have something to fear; rock ‘n’ roll was the beginning, however tentative, of a state of mind (if not a way of life) beyond race in America. If only while they danced, those outrageous rock ‘n’ rollers, in pink and black peg pants, toreadors and pin curls, were integrated Americans.”⁹⁵

This fear was clearly the driving force behind a brutal attack on black pop singer Nat King Cole, carried out by Ace Carter and a coterie of seven supporters when he played to an all-white

⁹² Stewart, *The Road South*, 187-190.

⁹³ George Lipsitz, introduction to *Upside Your Head!* Johnny Otis, xxvi.

⁹⁴ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 60.

⁹⁵ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 16.

audience in Birmingham in 1956. This hackneyed plan revealed that Carter did not know much about either rock and roll or youth culture since Cole, a singer and television talk show host who rarely involved himself in politics, appealed to a largely mainstream adult audience. Still, strict white supremacists disliked the fact that Cole was successful and well-respected among both whites and blacks, as well as his readiness to pose for pictures with white women. Carter's already ill-conceived plan went awry, as the men who rushed the stage were forcibly removed by police, six were arrested, and the city apologized to Cole.⁹⁶ But Carter's argument about the racial integration implicit in rock and roll was made plain in numerous media accounts of this debacle. And Carter was not the only voice of Southern massive resistance to link rock and roll music with the potential for racial integration in other spaces. Politicians and church leaders were often eager to speak out about the damaging effects that rock and roll music had on Southern youth, and these warnings were almost always racialized. Bibb Edwards recalled that "some ministers and small-time politicians told us animalistic "negra" music would ruin the morals of white children."⁹⁷ In an age of mass communication, these criticism spread beyond the South. Ken Avuk, for instance, lived in suburban New York, yet remained aware of Southern white supremacist arguments. "I would hear...about the attempts by Southern ministers to burn rock and roll music because it was the devil's music or actually because it was really black music, which is why I think they objected to it," he said.⁹⁸

The link between massive resistance against desegregation and rock and roll music was therefore clearly cemented by the mid-1950s, for Southern teens, and for anyone who was aware

⁹⁶ "White Council vs. Rock and Roll," *Newsweek*, April 23, 1956, 32.

⁹⁷ Edwards, interview with the author.

⁹⁸ Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author, November 22, 2011.

of Southern efforts to equate this music with efforts to integrate. If teenagers growing up amidst Jim Crow segregation and the brutally entrenched racial inequality that molded much of Southern culture, could somehow miss the fact that listening to music that combined black and white traditions was transgressive, these explicit admonitions, which were widely reported on throughout the country, could not escape notice. The decision to listen to this music, then, constitutes an act of protest against the massive resistance campaign to link rock and roll to racial integration and the downfall of Jim Crow. The fact that a Southern teenager enjoyed rock and roll music does not necessarily mean that he or she supported desegregation of public places or denounced Southern traditions based on racial inequality. But it does mean that a certain segment of white teenagers were not as concerned as their elders were about the link between rock and roll and racial integration, while some black teenage listeners ignored the increasingly sinister warnings coming from White Citizens Councils and churches that preached massive resistance. Susan Cahn explains, for instance, that

As regional politicians gathered their forces for legal battles and a strategy of ‘massive resistance,’ teenagers appeared on the surface to be moving in the opposite direction. They had created an autonomous popular culture in which the lines of race were becoming more and more blurred as black and white performers shared stages and songs, the airwaves integrated black and white music, and adolescents embraced the music and dance of rock ‘n’ roll regardless of race.⁹⁹

Indeed, one white teenage girl was quoted in a 1956 edition of the *Charlestonian* as saying that “Rock and roll is an outlet for tension of teenagers....You adults give us a world of racial unrest and expect us to be [like you.] We are not going to be led around like sheep.”¹⁰⁰ Even more explicitly, a Birmingham newspaper printed this teenager’s message to Asa Carter: “...if anything

⁹⁹ Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 267.

¹⁰⁰ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 124.

has to go, then it is the White Citizens Council, because rock and roll is here to stay, regardless whether the voice coming from the jukebox is black or white.”¹⁰¹ Bibb Edwards said that “Even when I was a pre-teen I thought it unlikely my morals and those of my friends were at risk from music...I assure you the effect of these grown-ups trying to “protect” me from this music caused me for the first time to ask questions and think through these issues. Whatever they thought they were doing backfired, at least with me.”¹⁰² Finally, another white adolescent told *Jet* in 1957, “I wish the parents would go home. Integration has to come sooner or later. I’m not afraid of Negroes. I’m afraid of parents.”¹⁰³ Even if these teenagers did not join civil rights campaigns, they expressed more support for a racially-mixed culture than for protection of a strictly segregated South. Amidst almost ubiquitous debate over racial equality and the rise of a nationally-recognized Southern civil rights movement, this position became politicized, as teenagers took a stand against white supremacist demands to protect established racial norms.

Racial anxieties surrounding rock and roll were strongest in the South, but they also permeated views in other parts of the country, especially as news of civil rights campaigns spread through the national media. Northern and Western regions were not so obviously built upon racism as in the South, though, so opposition from parents and other authoritative institutions were not always explicitly race-conscious—though they often revealed racial anxieties lurking just below the surface. Many were afraid of the overt sexuality and implied danger of the music, and feared that teens were headed towards a life of moral degradation if they continued listening to it. Others expressed trepidation simply because it was an almost purely adolescent phenomenon which they

¹⁰¹ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 165.

¹⁰² Edwards, interview with the author.

¹⁰³ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 188.

failed to understand. All of these aspects can be attributed to latent racism that Northerners and Westerners may have felt uneasy expressing more directly.

Although statements explicitly linking fears of racial integration to rock and roll music are far rarer in Northern, Western, or national accounts, these fears were often expressed indirectly. Many indirect allusions supported the philosophy of Logocentrism, which “establishes a symbolic order which naturalizes oppression and injustice” by “privileging...written texts over other forms of discourse,” and advocates a “crude dismissal of competing systems of thought as ‘primitive’ and ‘barbaric.’”¹⁰⁴ The racial aspects of these criticisms may seem veiled, since most white adults outside of the South hesitated to voice overtly racist beliefs, but the language was usually clear enough that most teenage listeners would have easily understood its true meaning. During the peak period of rock and roll’s popularity in the mid- to late-1950s, Michael Lydon explains, “you couldn’t say why you loved rock ‘n’ roll, not only because you didn’t know why (and you didn’t), but also because maybe you didn’t dare. And maybe ‘they’ couldn’t understand your love for the same reason. For that sensibility was not just sensuality, speed, and rebellion, but also *black*—how much still isn’t clear, but more black than anyone was willing to admit in 1955.”¹⁰⁵

According to historians Kerry Martin and Martin Segrave, “Most anti-rock hysteria contained little that was openly racist,” but alluded to the music’s biracial elements through buzzwords and descriptions that seemed more fitting coming out of the mouth of Asa Carter than from some of the world’s most respected media outlets and professional organizations.¹⁰⁶ When the first Congressional Committees on Rock and Roll were held in 1953, for instance, social

¹⁰⁴ George Lipsitz, “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Volume 42, Issue 4 (Dec., 1990), 617-618.

¹⁰⁵ Lydon, *Rock Folk*, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 42.

commentator Vince Packard, a paid witness for the Songwriters of America, which was concerned about the growing influence of this genre, remarked that it "was inspired by what had been called race music modified to stir the animal instinct in modern teenagers."¹⁰⁷ Three years later, *The New York Times* quoted "noted psychiatrist" Dr. Francis J. Braceland's views that rock and roll was "cannibalistic and tribalistic" and that it could be likened to a "communicable disease," while *Downbeat* magazine featured disc jockey Art Ford's opinions that Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally" was "rock and roll at its wildest and lustiest," and Elvis Presley's "I'm Left, You're Right" had a "sort of a savage, animal-like quality in his performance, in a way which is lacking in the usual theatrical refinements of show business, sort of a naturalistic school of singing."¹⁰⁸ Bo Diddley was originally turned down by black-oriented record label Vee Jay because "They said it didn't sound right—said it was 'jungle music.'"¹⁰⁹ Even the Encyclopedia Britannica weighed in, deeming rock and roll a "style of rhymetric [sic] chant [which] concentrated on a minimum of melody line and a maximum of rhythmic noise, deliberately competing with the artistic ideals of the jungle itself."¹¹⁰ By 1960, sociologist John Barron Mays wrote that "Music and dancing, the semitribalistic, drugging, modern jives and jitters, dressing up, experimenting sexually are all no doubt activities which meet genuine adolescent needs," but cautioned parents that "there is a lack, in the lower social groups in particular, of what, for want of a better term, we may call intellectual

¹⁰⁷ Paul Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary*, 31.

¹⁰⁸ "Rock-and-Roll Called 'Communicable Disease,'" *The New York Times*, March 28, 1956, 33; Les Brown, "Elvis Presley: Can Fifty Million Americans Be Wrong?" *Downbeat*, September 19, 1956, 42. Alan Freed Papers, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹⁰⁹ Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 131.

¹¹⁰ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 219.

stimulation.”¹¹¹ In each case, the author or speaker’s use of terms like “primitive,” “jungle,” “tribal,” and “cannibal” easily conjured pervasive racist imagery of African Americans as less civilized and intelligent than white Americans, all of which were meant to strengthen the hold of white supremacy on nation-wide popular culture. There was little doubt, then, about rock and roll’s black origins in any of these cases, or about the music’s supposed influence on otherwise ‘civilized’ white youth. Indeed, Alan Freed clearly stated, on more than one occasion, that “The race question...is the real reason for all the hue and cry about rock and roll.”¹¹²

These racialized allusions to rock and roll and the power it had over teenage listeners were not always framed in a decidedly negative way, but, nevertheless, they imparted messages of black inferiority. In June of 1956, *Time* magazine printed an article about the growing popularity of rock and roll. Although it was accompanied by a photograph of the smiling, white Bill Haley, the author’s message was clear: “Rock ‘n’ roll is based on Negro blues, but in a self-conscious style which underlines the primitive qualities of the blues with malice aforethought.” The author went on to describe the music as having an “obsessive beat,” and informed concerned parents that “Rock ‘n’ roll got its name, as it got some of its lyrics, from Negro popular music, which used ‘rock’ and ‘roll’ as sexy euphemisms.”¹¹³ Similarly, New York columnist Hy Gardner voiced his approval of up-and-coming rock and roller Jerry Lee Lewis by noting that his music accurately captured “the contagious, almost frightening beat of a tribal drummer.”¹¹⁴ Another respectful portrait of Elvis Presley, featured in a 1957 edition of *The New York Times*, declared the musician

¹¹¹ John Barron Mays, “Teen-age culture in contemporary Britain and Europe” in Jessie Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture: An Overview* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1961), 29.

¹¹² Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 160.

¹¹³ “Yeh-Heh-Heh-Hes, Baby,” *Time*, June 18, 1956, 54.

¹¹⁴ Tosches, *Hellfire*, 168.

a “Rocking Blues Shouter” who was greatly influenced by black traditions.¹¹⁵ Here, the link between excessive sexuality, primitivism, disease, a beat that drives youth into a frenzy, and African-American culture was evident. Some musicians even took advantage of this label themselves, as singles like Warren Smith’s “Ubangi Stomp” and Hank Mizell’s “Jungle Rock” were both released in the mid-1950s to wide acclaim.

In more implicit, yet hardly less demeaning language, ‘hoodlum’ and ‘the beat’ were also used to racially distinguish this music. Hoodlums were imagined to be dark and working-class at any rate, but linking the term to rock and roll among other more blatantly racist words secured it as purely black in the white imagination. And the meaning of ‘the beat,’ while seemingly innocuous, was clear to any concerned parent: everyone knew, after all, that rock and roll developed when melodic white pop met beat-laden rhythm and blues. Even though the term “beat,” according to Daniel Levitin, merely indicates “music’s most basic rhythmic pulse” as “the basic unit of measurement in a musical piece,” and can generally be identified by “the natural point at which you would tap your feet or clap your hands or snap your fingers,” the fact that African music relied on a stronger beat than most Western musics meant that the term was often racialized when used to voice opposition to rock and roll. Theodore Grycyk expands on this, noting that “The line that traces the rock beat back to ‘the jungle’ (West Africa, to be precise) is indirect but genuine, and it provides a useful reminder of rock’s overwhelming debt to the music of African Americans.”¹¹⁶

When Reverend Jimmy Snow, the son of country and western star Hank Snow, proclaimed that rock and roll caused an “evil feeling” which emanated from “the beat,” then, his racialized

¹¹⁵ John Wilson, “Elvis Presley: Rocking Blues Shouter,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 1957, X16.

¹¹⁶ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 57; *Rhythm and Noise*, 131.

argument was made fairly explicit. “If you talk to the average teenager...and you ask them what it is about rock and roll music that they like, the first thing they’ll say is the beat, the beat.”¹¹⁷ In many cases, “the beat” was code for “black,” even when presented in positive terms. In 1956, for example, Alan Freed proclaimed, “I asked some of the kids, who came from all parts of town, what they liked about this ‘new’ music. They said it was the beat, the rich excitement the signers and instruments provided...Also, it has contributed something—a prominent beat—which reminds us in the music business that rhythm can’t be ignored.”¹¹⁸ In this case, Freed did not specifically mention anything black or African American, but his pointed reference to kids “from all parts of town” implied that he spoke to listeners in both white and black neighborhoods. His note about rhythm that “can’t be ignored,” meanwhile, was an allusion to the music industry’s efforts to sugarcoat black music by offering white cover versions. In another instance, Bill Haley’s manager, Al Portch, neatly linked the two, noting “The rock ‘n’ roll beat stems from old Negro church music, and there’s nothing vulgar about that.” And yet, he continued to describe the beat as something uncivilized, and almost disease-ridden, in terms that could have been borrowed from the propaganda eagerly doled out by White Citizens Council members. “It’s a beat and drive that’s contagious,” he said. “And the drive is the z-z-z-zing that gives life to something. Rock ‘n’ roll is the savage beat of the tomtom come to us down through the ages. The music is bbbrrrooom-boom, and all the rest is showmanship.”¹¹⁹ Not only was the black element in rock and roll presented as “savage” and jungle-like, but also as somewhat instinctual—musicians were able to grab hold of audiences not because they had finely honed skills, but because of “showmanship” and some sort

¹¹⁷ *Rock and Roll: The Early Days*, dir. Patrick Montgomery & Paula Page, Archive Film Production, 1984.

¹¹⁸ Alan Freed, “Alan Freed Says...‘I Told You So,’” *Downbeat*, September 19, 1956, 44, Alan Freed Papers, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹¹⁹ Al Portch, “Manager of Bill Haley Defends ‘The Real Thing,’” *Downbeat*, September 19, 1956, 43, Alan Freed Papers, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

of abstract tonal element almost genetic in nature. Portch may have been trying to defend the black characteristics of rock and roll, but he ultimately wound up supporting every distasteful stereotype that Asa Carter would have been proud to hear spewing from his own bully pulpit.

Despite the fact that words like ‘jungle,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘cannibalistic,’ and ‘the beat’ were meant to root out rock ‘n’ roll’s black origins in a derogatory fashion, these terms actually made the music more appealing to some white fans. John Lennon recalled that he was first drawn to rock and roll because “it is primitive enough and has no bullshit, really, the best stuff, and it gets through to you its beat. Go to the jungle and they have the rhythm... You get the rhythm going, everybody gets into it,” while Mick Jagger recalled that “My father used to call it ‘jungle music’ and I used to say, ‘Yeah, good description.’”¹²⁰ Even rock and roll’s loudest proponents admitted that they were partly enamored because of the supposedly primitive characteristics that black musicians brought to their music. Jerry Wexler described the time that he and associate Herb Alpert ventured into the Louisiana swamps in search of the almost mythical “Professor Longhair.” He and Alpert were driven to “a shack—which, like an animated cartoon, appeared to be expanding and deflating with the pulsation of the beat. The man at the door was skeptical. What did these two white men want?” Like intrepid explorers, they talked their way in, and were awed by what they found buried in the heart of the bayou. “Instead of a full band, I saw only a single musician—Professor Longhair—playing these weird, wide harmonies, using the piano as both keyboard and bass drum, pounding a kick plate to keep time and singing in the open-throated style of the blues shouters of old,” he recalled. “‘My God,’ I said to Herb, ‘we’ve discovered a primitive genius.’”¹²¹ Even Alan

¹²⁰ Jerry Wexler with David Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 21-22.

¹²¹ Wexler, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 78.

Freed, who consistently advocated the intermingling of black and white performers and audiences, fell prey to this form of racialized speech, writing that rock and roll's "roots go back thousands of years to the primitive men who reproduced this rhythm on the barks of trees and by clashing stone against stone—portraying the rhythms of their moods, and victories. These rhythms came as naturally to primitive men as the mating calls are native to wild animals."¹²²

For many whites who felt trapped by the confinements of Cold War America, anything that seemed like a viable link to a past that was almost forgotten could seem appealing. George Lipsitz explains that the "pre-industrial" values of the working classes that were eschewed during this period in favor of a middle-class culture and economy based on efficiency, timeliness, and wholesomeness persisted to some extent in African American culture because of systemic racism that prevented blacks from full assimilation into mainstream culture in the first half of the twentieth century. This culture therefore held a fascination for middle-class whites, and even blacks, who felt cut off from their collective histories, and sought to resist cultural norms that struck them as hollow. Lipsitz notes that "Popular culture has played an important role in creating this crisis of memory, but it has also been one of the main vehicles for the expression of loss and the projection of hopes for reconnection to the past." Sometimes reminders of this past were implicit in the very notes of rock and roll, and other African-American and working-class-inspired musics. "Workers never wholeheartedly embraced time-work discipline, and their culture reflected that refusal," he says. "Instead of the regular beat that measured time by the clock, working-class musics embraced polyrhythms and irregular time signatures as a way of realizing in culture the mastery over time

¹²² "Alan Freed and his 'Rock 'N Roll' Easter Jubilee" program, Seig Music Corp, 1955, Alan Freed Collection, Box 2, Folder 4, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

denied workers in the workplace.”¹²³ When viewed through this lens, white middle-class kids who desired music with a “beat,” or who found “jungle music” appealing were not so much reacting to these racialized terms as a means of defining themselves as more civilized than blacks as they were drawn to musical styles that fulfilled a deep-rooted cultural longing for something they had been forced to leave behind.

White authority figures across the country undoubtedly recognized the threat apparent in rock and roll, but most were disinclined to utilize the tactics of Southern massive resistance in order to dissuade kids from listening to it. Some, however, attempted to depict white fans of rock and roll as engaging in an expected rebellion against their parents rather than questioning racial and social norms. White flight to the suburbs, and the resultant boredom, conformity, and alienation that supposedly came with it, were often listed as catalysts for white teenage rebellion. Social critics assured parents that this search for difference was a passing, and apolitical, phase, as well as an important part of their psychological growth. In a 1956 issue of *Downbeat*, for instance, a journalist asked psychologist Ben Walstein if the sexual suggestiveness of Elvis Presley’s performances was “necessarily evil” or “a normal secondary outlet for this kind of urge that might be in youngsters.” His reply must have soothed the fears of many worried white parents. “I have listened to some of the rock and roll records at home, and I have listened to these records here this evening, and in my opinion I see nothing particularly harmful about the music per se,” he insisted. “I don’t see why—if the kids today have decided that this is the kind of music that expresses their search and their frustration—why we should ban it or interfere with their listening to it.”¹²⁴

¹²³ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 12; 111-112.

¹²⁴ Les Brown, “Elvis Presley: Can Fifty Million Americans Be Wrong?” *Downbeat*, September 19, 1956, 42. Alan Freed Papers, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

Psychologist H.H. Remmers agreed with this point in his 1959 study of adolescent behavior, noting of the stern parental generation that, “Shaking a sad head and pointing an accusing finger, it says: ‘But *this* younger generation *is* going to the dogs...Notice how these would-be delinquents go wild over that “mixed-up kid,” Elvis Presley. Or look how they idolize another crazy, mixed-up kid—this time a dead one—Jimmy Dean.’...“But let’s remember that the perennial adolescents represented by such stars as Presley and Dean, Marlon Brando and Jerry Lewis—all are the creation of adult minds and adult money.”¹²⁵ It was unfair to characterize most of these artists as corporate creations when the aspects that made them desirable to teenagers resulted from real resistance against cultural and social norms. But Remmers’s point that each was represented by corporate interests, and had become a part of mainstream popular culture, was meant to assure parents that nothing transgressive was seeping into their children’s bedrooms and sub-conscious thoughts as they listened to rock and roll or worshipped teen film idols. The fact that rebelliousness and cross-racial inclinations had been made semi-acceptable within mainstream youth culture should perhaps have been viewed as more threatening to the status quo than Walstein and Remmers portrayed it to be. But both maintained that, since teenagers were expected to rebel before they came of age and learned better, and because rock and roll had been blessed with corporate approval in some cases, this cultural shift would not leave any real impact on young adherents.

Parents were not supposed to worry about any lasting impressions rock and roll might have on their children, then, since it was portrayed merely as a fad void of any racial or social relevance. Bob Razer explained that “[My] parents thought a lot of it was just noise but it didn’t really bother them since I listened to it in my room when I was in high school and had headphones.

¹²⁵ Remmers, *The American Teen-Ager*, 36.

They...thought the commotion over it was a little much, but then they remembered the commotion over Elvis and Frank Sinatra, so they just figured it was a generational thing like Elvis and Sinatra had been.”¹²⁶ Ken Avuk also experienced this reaction from his parents, noting that “Some people would just say it’s noisy or it’s not going to last, when you grow up you’re not going to listen to that music...[The prevailing attitude was that] it was just kind of childish and noisy, it wasn’t really good music. But certainly my parents and my parents’ friends did not take the position that it was evil or the devil’s music or that it stirred the senses or anything like that.”¹²⁷

Despite attempts in both the North and South to prevent enthusiasm for rock and roll from spreading, by the mid-1950s, rock and roll music, along with the increasing visibility of civil rights campaigns, helped to shape some teenagers’ views on racial inequality so that integration was viewed in either a positive light, or as a change that was not worth getting upset over. Some listeners were able to overcome the resistance surrounding both rock and roll and desegregation campaigns to see the connections between them in ways that were emotionally resonant. This transition was particularly striking in Southern white families, where even nonchalant attitudes towards racial integration would have meant taking an oppositional stance to Southern law and custom. Bob Razer admitted that “the more familiar someone is with something, I think the more accepting they are of it, since it becomes a ‘known’ rather than an ‘unknown.’ So I can see how familiarity with black music and black singers and liking them, could generate more positive feelings from white people toward civil rights for blacks.”¹²⁸ Many white Southerners who grew up during this period later acknowledged a fairly direct connection between the music they listened

¹²⁶ Bob Razer, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, December 31, 2011.

¹²⁷ Avuk, interview with the author.

¹²⁸ Razer, interview with the author.

to and a growing acceptance of integrationist goals. Ann Wells recalled that “With more exposure to their music and culture, I questioned even more the unfairness of segregation. When we invited [black musicians] into our homes through television or radio, and enjoyed their company there, our views had to start changing or at least be recognized within ourselves.” Ultimately, she concluded that “exposure through music caused people to stop, watch, and question if they had perhaps been wrong. Like myself, music might have been the start for many to learn about another race.”¹²⁹ Jeff Titon remembered he and his friends listening “to a good deal of black rock and roll... I’m sure it must have affected my views on race by broadening my knowledge of black people and their abilities and accomplishments, back in high school.”¹³⁰

Although Stan Wells was careful to note that he was “not sure that black people in general benefitted” from the widespread popularity of rock and roll and white embrace of black musicians, he did “think white kids became big fans of a lot of black musicians and made them very successful. Once they were main stream music we just considered them people.”¹³¹ This statement may not be a ringing endorsement of actual racial equality, and may, in fact, fit into a classic Southern trope of whites accepting black individuals when becoming personally acquainted with them, while maintaining an intact racial worldview concerning African Americans as a group. But this connection was also capable of striking deeper chords. Bibb Edwards directly stated that a love for rock and roll and R&B music was one of the main reasons that he began to support campaigns for racial equality. “My parents did not express strong racial views either way,” he said.

I was not rebelling. The subject was never directly brought up in church. I had no older brothers or sisters to influence me. My teachers never addressed the subject of contemporary racial issues at all. I grew up with the attitudes and values of the Jim Crow

¹²⁹ Ann Wells, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 9, 2011.

¹³⁰ Jeff Titon, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 5, 2011.

¹³¹ Stan Wells, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions. December 20, 2011.

era surrounding me. Yet by my mid-teens I had concluded that there was no justification for a segregated society. Somewhere between my seventh and eleventh grades, 1958 to 1962, something happened. I think it was who was making the music I loved that caused me to think of blacks as people just like me. And it was just simply wrong to treat them differently.¹³²

Edwards's assertion that he "was not rebelling" is especially telling. Both his choice to listen to rock and roll, and his questioning of Southern racial norms were depicted as natural and almost unavoidable, resulting when an otherwise obedient kid had his eyes opened to the persistent injustice that existed around him, and realized he could no longer take part. White Southern kids were not just partaking in expected teenage rebellion when they listened to this music and began to embrace more tolerant racial attitudes. The combination of listening to rock and roll and becoming aware of civil rights campaigns allowed some of them to view regional racial norms critically, rather than simply accepting them as timeless and unquestionable.

Black Southerners often felt somewhat ambivalent about the ability of rock and roll music, in light of civil rights protests, to effect real change in their lives, even if race relations improved. In a 1978 interview, Madison Foster proclaimed, "You can look on television, and you can see black comedians doing things, making jokes that are virtually black, and even dealing with the question of race. I suppose that has some benefit for some people, but I'm not sure what it does to health care, transportation, education, and food for the masses of Afro-Americans. I don't think it means a whole lot, but you can feel better by watching television."¹³³ In this case, Foster was aware of the more positive images of black people in the media, and fairly widespread acceptance of black celebrities and points of view by white Americans. And yet he doubted that this shift in culture and attitudes amounted to any sort of real equality or improvement in the lives of black

¹³² Edwards, interview with the author.

¹³³ Eynon, interview with Madison Foster, 37.

Americans. His perspective also paralleled the ways that many young black Southerners viewed desegregation during the civil rights movement as the positive overture to a much longer and harder fight, even if time made him somewhat more cynical.

But this parallel could also take on a more optimistic tone. When B.B. King was asked about the power of rock and roll and the blues in a 2004 interview, he focused on the changes that the music wrought among young black listeners rather than how it helped white kids become more tolerant. “I don’t go out hoping that well, not trying to preach to them, ‘Like this. Like this. This is part of your culture.’ I don’t want that,” he insisted. “But I want them to open their minds into the history and say, ‘Well yes, maybe I don’t like this.’ You have a right to like or dislike anything you want. But you shouldn’t be ashamed of it because it is a part of us. We started this. This is us.” He did not discount the need for integration or the connection between rock and roll and this particular movement, but he seemed to see it more as a catalyst for social change rather than an endpoint. “Like it or dislike it, you know, whether your children white, black or otherwise and you’re another color, there you was. This is ours. This is what we have.”¹³⁴ King presented African American musical traditions as a vital part of the American cultural landscape as a whole, which anyone could enjoy and participate in. But they have special resonance for black Americans, whom he hoped would not forget their heritage even if the country did become completely integrated. Many black Southern kids could identify with this conception of racial integration as a worthy cause, yet still, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, only the tip of a much deeper iceberg. And as much as cultural integration appealed to many black Southerners, they also felt an impetus to protect distinct African American traditions to prevent assimilation into white cultural norms.

¹³⁴ Camille Cosby, interview with B.B. King, 2004, 52. National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress.

The lack of an overt, all-encompassing system of white supremacy in the North might imply that white kids who embraced rock and roll were not making a statement on racial politics the way that their Southern counterparts were. Most white Northerners did not like to consider themselves ‘racist’ even if they did not really see blacks as equals in any other regard, which provided a useful shield for biased attitudes and behaviors. At the same time, a white teenager’s decision to listen to a black musician’s record, or a rock and roll song that was shaped by both black and white musical traits, might not have had the same impact as it would in the South because of this false sense of racial tolerance. Even if a particular listener came from a disapproving family or community, his or her musical choices would not necessarily have been deemed racially controversial beyond these more limited spheres. In other words, the mere fact that racial lines were being crossed might not have been considered as threatening in the North as it was in the South. In fact, some white Northerners shared the skepticism of some of their black contemporaries about the ability of culture to affect the fight for racial equality. Former SDS president Todd Gitlin asserted that “I liked rock and roll in the fifties...but, one could not delude oneself any further, even if it meant anything for political change.”¹³⁵ The effects of listening to this biracial musical form, then, may not have been as strong on white Northerners, who were more likely to support a integration in theory anyway.

What, then, explains the fact that so many white Northerners, some of whom came from more progressive family backgrounds, actually experienced similar reactions to rock and roll, and the musicians who produced it, as Southern whites did? Theodore Trost, whose family was engaged in the struggle for civil rights, saw the connection early on in a way that would probably have eluded most Southerners. “I believed that all people were meant to be equal,” he recalled.

¹³⁵ Interview with Todd Gitlin, Bret Eynon, September 16, 1978, 19, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

“Musically—over the radio and in my unsegregated record collection—they were. Politically, I was aware of inequality and was engaged in some activities...to work against it.”¹³⁶ But others echoed the assertions made by Ann Wells and Bibb Edwards that admiration for this music caused them to sympathize further with the plight of the people who made it, or that, after a certain point, the music ceased to be classified as either black or white. Fran Shor noted that he “thought that, here is this really vital, vibrant music being created by people who still don’t have first-class citizenship, how is that possible? It was as simple as that.”¹³⁷ Janis Ian also said that identifying with black musicians helped shape her burgeoning political identity and encouraged her to challenge established political norms. “Smokey Robinson was my hero; it was impossible to compare ‘Tracks of My Tears’ to ‘Teen Angel’ and not switch sides,” she said. “I couldn’t understand how anyone could enjoy such vapidness, and my friends agreed. White pop music was something Republicans listened to, not people like us.”¹³⁸ Ken Avuk further explained that, “You realized that this was a whole different genre. And this music came from a different tradition. That the roots of rock and roll was black music.” This unfamiliar quality did not last long, however. “After awhile it didn’t seem to be a [case of] music segregation, certainly by the late 60s, because again, even though you had a lot of black signers, it was still pretty much at that point one source of music. It was, again, the radio.”¹³⁹ Although Avuk did not undergo the more dramatic shift in understanding racial identity that Stan Wells explains, he still came to the same conclusion: that the music, and the people who produced it, lost much of their unfamiliarity. Identification across

¹³⁶ Theodore Trost, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 10, 2011.

¹³⁷ Fran Shor, in discussion with the author, November 15, 2011.

¹³⁸ Janis Ian, *Society’s Child* (New York: Tarcher: 2008), 21.

¹³⁹ Avuk, interview with the author.

racial lines could then lead to more support for integration and other moderate steps towards racial equality among young whites in the North.

But even though reactions among white teenagers were similar across regional lines, they come from fundamentally different places. Southerners often had to hide their predilection for this music, while Northerners, despite their parents not necessarily caring for rock and roll, were usually guarded by the belief that they were simply following a teenage fad. Fad or not, anything that directly attacked the very nature of the political, economic, and social system of segregation was far more dangerous in the South. What would have been unmistakably political, and threatening to the very social fabric in the South may not have been so directly controversial in the North. And yet, listeners reported having similar reactions to the music, and recognizing clear connections between admiration for R&B and rock and roll and support for moderate racial equality and desegregation. Part of the reason for this is that many white Northerners grew up in suburbs that were even more segregated than the Southern towns they condescended to, and were not used to interacting with, or even seeing, African Americans on an average basis. Many contended that, unlike white Southerners, they were almost wholly unfamiliar with African-American culture. The kind of racial mixing they heard in rock and roll music introduced a culture that had been previously closed off to them, even if their parents had tacitly accepted the basic premise of racial integration.

Whereas Southerners were aware, at all times, of racial etiquette and the import of knowing one's supposed "place," most white Northerners, separated from black communities by suburban gates and by the vast highway system funded by the federal government, which began construction in 1956, were not often confronted directly with thorny issues of racial inequality. The very invisibility of African Americans and black culture in the North, in fact, could make the topic seem

verboden, which, in many homes and neighborhoods, it undoubtedly was. Ken Avuk noted that “Until you became conscious of that as you learned things later on, or even saw movies of how some of these groups started, and where they came from, and their struggles to even get recorded or to have their music played...you had no sense of that early on, that this was a struggle for anybody. I mean, who knew? We certainly didn’t talk about that in the house.”¹⁴⁰ The lack of a truly segregated system in the North provided a front of racial tolerance, even though public and even private discussions of race remained alarming for many whites. This system was a lot less concrete and a lot more abstruse than the certainties of Jim Crow, which made many white Northerners uncomfortable discussing racial topics. At the same time, they also piqued the curiosity of teenagers seeking what they considered a more “genuine” culture that they could identify with on deeper emotional levels. When these kids started listening to, and admiring, rock and roll musicians, they may not have been breaking any clearly-defined boundaries, but they were still making a choice to root out what was supposed to be left untouched, to celebrate that which was usually ignored. Despite the fact that this music was co-opted by mainstream radio stations and record labels fairly quickly, it remained a dividing line between older Northern white racial norms, which suppressed talk of true integration or racial equality, and younger attitudes, which embraced both musical and political integration more openly. Listening to rock and roll music, then, could still constitute a political act, even among Northern white teenagers.

Larger numbers of middle-class black teenagers, and the fact that mainstream advertising and teenage culture reached working-class black kids, resulted in new attitudes among African-American youth in the North as well. This embrace of both black and white cultural offerings was echoed in the words of one black girl who grew up during the 1950s: “We all loved Little Richard,

¹⁴⁰ Avuk, Interview with the author.

Chuck Berry, and Sam Cooke, and my personal favorites included the McGuire Sisters, Doris Day, and Patti Page.”¹⁴¹ But even though black adolescents listened to the same integrated playlists as their white contemporaries, they understood this integration differently. Black teenagers enjoyed mainstream pop culture, but at the same time, were proud of black cultural contributions. Most seemed happy to support integration, but only if black people and their traditions were considered just as important as their white counterparts. The same holds true for rock and roll—black teenagers generally enjoyed listening to both black and white musicians, but only when African-American musical contributions were respected and acknowledged. Again, black and white teenagers understand integration, both political and cultural, differently, but their common support nevertheless allowed for a middle ground to flourish in both realms.

Still, many black adults and teenagers alike were upset about the negative stereotypes they felt were perpetuated in this music. They feared that black youth would forget the positive elements of their heritage, and that whites would reduce their experiences to what they heard in popular songs, or that admiration for a specific musician or type of music would not challenge broader racial attitudes. These fears were not groundless. Glenn Altschuler recounts the story of a Virginia girl who claimed to love Elvis Presley being photographed for a national magazine smiling and waving a Confederate flag.¹⁴² Eric Burdon, the lead singer for the English group, the Animals, remembered talking with a Southern girl who deemed Otis Redding to be one of the greatest people in the world, yet denounced black people in general with a pejorative term all within the same sentence.¹⁴³ Bibb Edwards recalled that his college roommate was “well known for extreme

¹⁴¹ Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable*, 155.

¹⁴² Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 49.

¹⁴³ Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, v; Burdon, Eric. “An ‘Animal’ Views America.” *Ebony*, December, 1966.

racism...He dropped the “n” word every now and then, to my discomfort, but with no real malice in his voice. He seemed perfectly normal for the time and place, except that he was obsessed with James Brown...He had all the records, played them all the time.”¹⁴⁴ Madison Foster explained that these white fans could love rock and roll while retaining views on racial inequality because “The counter-culture took the guts of what it is to be black, and stayed white ...They’ve been socialized to feel that it’s theirs. They don’t understand that rock music has a particular relationship to black music.”¹⁴⁵ This seemed to be the case with people like Bob Croonenberghs, who did not support racial inequality or segregation, yet admitted, “I certainly loved the Supremes, Four Tops, etc as music, but did not integrate them into any racial view.”¹⁴⁶ Foster’s argument also explained how historian David Roediger could claim that, during his childhood, “We hated blacks in the abstract, but...We listened to Chuck Berry and Tina Turner...A few of us became firm fans of Motown music, especially Smokey Robinson. These tastes did not supplant racism.”¹⁴⁷ In these cases, white kids could listen to rock and roll music and think of it as part of their own culture without understanding its origins or identifying with the black musicians they admired in the abstract.

But music did not touch everyone in the same way, though. Some people *were* simply casual listeners who could use these songs to reinforce ugly stereotypes, and whose racism was seemingly unaffected by the songs they heard. These recollections, however, should not be allowed to speak for an entire generation of people. The South especially was undergoing a period of intense transition at the time, and young whites were caught between the attitudes of their parents

¹⁴⁴ Edwards, interview with the author.

¹⁴⁵ Eynon, interview with Madison Foster, 32.

¹⁴⁶ Bob Croonenberghs, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, December 13, 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 217.

and the new ideas sprouting across the nation. Often the prejudices of the past were not easy to shake, even when an attraction to black entertainment was apparent. Charlie Gillett speculates that the girl Burdon mentions might have “echoed her parents’ feelings about black people in general, [but] she might be sympathetic toward some Negroes she had personal contact with.”¹⁴⁸ Others might have been so ashamed of any feelings of identification that they hid or refused to understand them. While some lovers of rock and roll were undoubtedly unmoved by the many appeals for racial understanding, it is significant that Roediger, for instance, somehow outgrew his prejudices enough to write books about the construction of racism, and its persistence in working-class white households, much like the one he grew up in, and that Croonenberghs noted that his own racial attitudes are more progressive than the ones he grew up with. While it is difficult to make concrete links between people’s thoughts and the actions that may result from them, the connections between culture and social change became so explicit by the end of the 1950s that they were recognized by both Baby Boomers and their often hostile parents. Perhaps Roediger, and others like him, were more affected by this music than they might have first thought at.

¹⁴⁸ Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, v.

Chapter Eight

The 1993 film, *What's Love Got to Do With It?*, a dramatic re-telling of Ike and Tina Turner's rise to stardom and tempestuous marriage, opens with a shot of Ike, played by Laurence Fishburne, performing at a concert venue in early 1950s St. Louis. As he emphatically croons an R&B tune, the black teenagers sitting in the seats below him explode with excitement, reaching out to try and touch their favourite star. In the balconies hovering above the stage, the scene is almost exactly the same. Properly dressed adolescent girls scream, "I love you, Ike!" with as little abandon as their peers down below, but with one difference: these girls are white.¹ Jim Crow laws were still in place at this time in Missouri, and concert venues, where authorities feared that white and black teens might intermingle and perhaps even break codes forbidding miscegenation, were strictly segregated according to race. The political imposition of racism on the physical space of the concert venue does not appear to matter much to the fans in the film, though. The approval that white and segregated audiences granted black musicians in public places was strictly forbidden once the music stopped. But in the brief span of time it took to perform a set of songs, however, both musicians and audience members participated in a shift in racial attitudes that would soon explode across the South.

Unlike listening in private, public support for rock and roll music and musicians implied that teenagers were making conscious choices, often in light of political and social obstacles. Former Memphis deejay Louis Cantor explained that "Listening to music and going inside clubs were two entirely different things. For a young white teenager from Mississippi it was a quantum leap from flipping on a radio dial or dropping a needle on a turntable to physically walking toward the end of Beale Street and realizing that you were the only young white person for blocks

¹ *What's Love Got to Do With It?* directed by Brian Gibson (Touchstone Pictures, 1993).

around.”² Most rock and roll listeners did not engage in these actions with the specific intent of challenging political systems. And yet, decisions to express affection for this music in public, venture into new neighbourhoods to purchase records unavailable in their own communities, or attend rock and roll concerts, where physical spaces could be shared by both black and white teenagers. These public activities shaped by music could help young fans become active agents with more tolerant views on desegregation movements and moderate racial equality. Harry Weinger, who played with black pop group The Platters, noted that “Because of our music, white kids ventured into black areas. They had a sense of fair play long before the civil rights movement.”³ Listening to rock and roll music may not have *caused* cross-racial identification or support for moderate civil rights causes, but it *reinforced* both within the particular social and political climate of Cold War America.

These actions displayed a political consciousness that, in some cases, became more distinctly activist as young fans fought to listen to and enjoy music in desegregated public spaces. Teenagers were making decisions that overtly contradicted legal and social dictates on race mixing in ways that sometimes extended the theories and tactics that drove movement desegregation campaigns to entertainment venues. Even though these actions were almost always spontaneous and reactionary, in contrast with tightly organized campaigns to end legal segregation in public spaces, they still constituted acts of resistance against systemic racial inequality and separation. Even if direct challenges to power structures were avoided, interracial mixing that violated social taboos, and sometimes legal precedent, often took place in these venues. Theodore Trost noted

² Louis Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis: The Life and Times of a Rock ‘n’ Roll DeeJay* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 144-145.

³ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 128.

that “Much of the strife that was evident in other places in the society didn't matter in music. It was a way of overcoming "difference" and sharing a common value and experience with a broad range of people.”⁴

Most teenagers, whatever their racial, class, or regional background, did not participate in campaigns that directly attacked power structures. But a relative dearth of overt political activism did not mean that younger people were not questioning and challenging these systems in other ways. As Philip Ennis succinctly notes of high school students in the 1950s and 1960s, “The overwhelming majority of kids were somewhere in the middle, just trying to understand, trying to get on with their lives, but not afraid to jump right into the pudding.”⁵ Ideas and beliefs about racial divisions were changing fairly rapidly, and many young people undoubtedly felt that they already supported desegregation movements and moderate equality in theory, or, at least, did not understand why these goals seemed so threatening. Many obstacles also prevented teenagers from becoming political activists, but that does not mean that this group was apolitical. Not all teenagers articulated a sophisticated political stance when journeying to a record store across town or attending concerts, but they were still forced to make decisions to refute past racial beliefs. After all, these kids still had to go home afterwards and live in a world outside the entertainment venue, so a simplistic love of a rock and roll artist or group does not totally explain the decision to go against one’s family, social traditions, and sometimes even the law, in order to attend. By the time a teenage fan stepped through the door of an unfamiliar record shop or bought a concert ticket, then, she had already made decisions that further challenged the establishment of public racial inequality.

⁴ Theodore Trost, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 10, 2011.

⁵ Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Culture* (Middltown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 294.

The strides that had been made during the mid-to-late-1950s through legal efforts, non-violent protests, and widespread media coverage of these events ensured that movement politics could no longer be ignored or contained. Despite these achievements, however, many young blacks especially were becoming disillusioned by the relative decline in organized, highly-publicized movement activity, and by massive resistance campaigns that were becoming seemingly more brutal. Even though most still supported desegregation campaigns, they also shared the long-held Black Nationalist belief that if blacks had to rely on white acceptance of their methods and goals, freedom might be a long time coming. As in music and cultural choices, however, age and generation became primary identifiers, more so than race in some cases. Black and white teenagers and young adults, particularly college students, were drawn to movement activities in larger numbers than ever before, particularly after February 1, 1960, when four black students staged a sit-in at a Woolworth's counter in Greensboro, North Carolina that gained immediate notice and inspired countless similar actions across the country, and around the world.

This protest provoked almost immediate reaction, from students who realized they could directly challenge the tenets of racial segregation with little advance planning, and from institutional leaders like Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and Martin Luther King, who realized that the tactics and ideas that young people were utilizing could reinvigorate the movement. Contrary to movement myth, however, the four North Carolina A&T State University students who decided to sit at a lunch counter reserved for whites until they were served did not invent this method of protest, nor were they directly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's famous methods of non-violent direct activism. Sit-ins had taken place at retail, dining, and entertainment establishments throughout the 1950s, perhaps most notably at the Royal Ice Cream Parlour in Durham, North Carolina, in 1957. When local minister Douglas Moore and a handful of black teenagers were

arrested after sitting in booths reserved for white patrons, their actions, aside from some local news coverage, were widely ignored by media outlets, and were met with derision from both blacks and whites in the community. Mary Clayburn, one of the teenagers who took part in the sit-in, recalled that many blacks were “madder than the white folks.” Christina Greene recounts in her book, *Our Separate Ways*, the fact that most civil rights and black organizations, including the local NAACP branch, refused to support this method of protest, or the people involved, mostly because of fears of white backlash and the chaos that might occur if campaigns were not soundly organized from the top down by established leaders.⁶ Black Southerners often feared the use of direct action because of the threat of economic backlash. This was close to impossible for white power structures to enact when whole communities engaged in protest, as in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but fairly simple when individuals or small groups provoked unrest. Adam Fairclough explains that “Arrest on a sit-in, a picket line, or a demonstration...invited economic disaster. Apart from the cost of bail (usually exorbitant), legal fees (often considerable), and fines (frequently heavy), there was the real possibility of a spell in jail. Either way, fine or jail, arrestees faced the likelihood, often amounting to a near certainty, of losing their jobs.” This would only change, he says, “in 1960, when black students entered the fray in large numbers.”⁷

A scant three years later and 86 km down the road, during a late-night dorm room session, four members of the local NAACP youth council, Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, Jr., and David Richmond, complained that, although they could shop at Woolworth’s, a store which eagerly took their money, they were unable to eat at the lunch counter reserved for whites, and,

⁶ Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 65-67.

⁷ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference & Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 54.

instead, were forced to dine on rickety picnic tables outside the store's back door. Because of their experience in the NAACP, they were aware of many of the forms of protest used by civil rights activists, and were inspired by the concept of non-violent direct action. They decided the next day to sit at that counter, and refuse to leave unless they were served. Their decision to use non-violence as a tactic, directly confronting the system of segregation and refusing to acquiesce to it, resounded locally and nationally in a way that the Royal Ice Cream Parlour sit-in did not, revealing both the new power that young people had to provoke change, and the frustrations people had with the inability of established organizations to further the movement.

Perhaps surprisingly, a black woman who worked behind the counter told them to leave, and that they were ruining things for all black people, while a white customer quietly relayed her support. But, aside from the manager instructing the counter staff not to serve the students, they were more or less left alone. The next day, the four initial protesters were joined by more than 20 black students, and the day after that over 60 young people, including some whites. Although the protestors were completely non-violent, focusing their attention on schoolbooks as the store's entire staff continued to ignore them, white patrons began to heckle, and eventually harass them, yelling in their ears, throwing food at them, and even putting out cigarettes on their arms. Journalists streamed in to cover the story, and the store's business came to a halt, but the protestors were not arrested. The sit-in continued, as McCain recalled that "Now it came to me all of a sudden...Maybe they can't do anything to us. Maybe we can keep it up."⁸

Local advocates of white supremacy were not about to let the protest go on without a fight, though. When confronted with this direct action, many chose to avoid the store and the complications that came along with acknowledging the protest. By the fourth day, as over 300

⁸ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 10.

black and white students packed themselves into the increasingly crowded store, an angry white mob gathered outside screaming obscenities. The North Carolina A&T football team had to be recruited to protect the students as they left, but ultimately McCain's intuition proved correct—no one was arrested or seriously injured. Media coverage quickly spread beyond local and even state boundaries, inspiring students in over 100 cities, mostly in the South, to stage their own sit-ins over the course of the year. Their enthusiasm was fueled by the fact that this protest method was fairly easy to organize, especially if church, or youth groups already existed in the area. Protests could be quickly implemented, did not lead to high incidences of arrests or violence, and seemed to work, especially after Woolworth's announced the desegregation of lunch counters in most Southern stores in June. Many young middle-class whites and blacks found that they could identify with activists who were students like themselves. They might not have been able to see a place for themselves in the movement before, but now people of their own generation had carved out a niche on their own terms, showing the world that Jim Crow could be felled with youthful moral righteousness. Perceptions of civil rights activism, and who could participate, began to change.

Since these students were affiliated with a school instead of a church, enacted the plan without the help of an organization, and directly infiltrated white space instead of public arenas, many civil rights leaders quickly realized that the movement was headed in a different direction. If they did not act quickly, their organizations could lose any control they might have over this momentum. Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins attempted to corral these new activists into the SCLC and NAACP respectively, but Ella Baker, an established activist who founded and led several political and social organizations over her lifetime, had a different idea. Instead of trying to lure young activists into established organizations in order to co-opt some of their ideas, she

encouraged them to start their own group. In April, Baker invited interested students to Shaw University in Raleigh where, over the course of a weekend, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was created. This organization was founded on the principles of self-leadership, non-violent, direct action taken at the grassroots level, and the establishment of a multiracial “beloved community.” Historian David Chalmers says that the group explicitly “included young people and people of both races for the first time,” and led to a “rash of student sit-ins which occurred in the spring of 1960....[and] transformed the cautious civil rights coalition of the late 1950s into a genuine social movement.”⁹ The influx of eager young activists and new ideas based on direct action ultimately helped to rejuvenate flagging campaigns across the country.

By 1961, CORE instituted a Freedom Ride campaign by stacking buses on interstate lines with black and white passengers to publicize state-level segregation in the South, despite the fact that federal law declared segregation on interstate transportation to be illegal. During the five-week operation, buses were set aflame, and their inhabitants beaten and arrested. Both black and white activists participated, especially students, who made up the bulk of the Nashville cadre’s demographics, which threatened the racial status quo, and further encouraged black and white middle-class youth to identify with movement activists. Activism inspired and implemented by young people’s concerns continued through 1962, as James Meredith, a black student admitted to the previously all-white University of Mississippi, refused to retreat, even when faced with vicious massive resistance, to the point that President John F. Kennedy had to send Federal troops in to ensure his safe access. Again, the focus on students and school made the subjects of segregation and racism seem more urgent and understandable to middle-class kids. Widely publicized and

⁹ David Chalmers, *And the Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 22; Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty? The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1988), 112.

broadcast protests in Birmingham and the March on Washington, which both took place the following year, legitimized movement concerns among moderate Americans across age and racial divisions, and showed how direct activism stemming from young, multi-racial groups continued to revitalize established organizations like the SCLC and NAACP. Still, as Adam Fairclough points out, Southern blacks were especially reluctant to utilize forms of direct action. “Few blacks doubted that they had a clear right to deny patronage to a business or public service—they could spend their money as they pleased,” he notes. “But it was one thing to boycott segregated buses, quite another to ‘sit in,’ or otherwise physically intrude, at the premises of a private business. Such tactics involved breaking the law, courting arrest, and risking fines and incarceration.”¹⁰ This method of action therefore remained mostly the purview of the young.

Focus shifted back to student and youth leadership in the summer of 1964, as the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an umbrella group uniting the powers of SNCC with the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, and other groups, organized the Freedom Summer campaign. Black and white college students were recruited to infiltrate the state of Mississippi, and work directly with the state’s poor, rural black populations on voter rights and education. As this program was mostly designed and implemented by young people, it represented a shift from desegregationist campaigns towards concrete efforts to build truly integrated and equal beloved communities in the South, or, Grace Elizabeth Hale argues, “a version of an integrated world” that was too romanticized to ever come to fruition.¹¹ Other scholars, however, saw distinctly different possibilities in participants’ efforts. Sara Evans argues that “The urban sit-ins had been in many ways attempts by middle-class

¹⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 53.

¹¹ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 194.

blacks to gain access to the social rights and privileges of the white middle-class by integrating public facilities. Voter registration, on the other hand, required reaching out to the impoverished masses of rural Southern blacks and experiencing sustained violence and the constant threat of death from local whites.”¹²

Freedom Summer was contingent on the participation of middle- and upper-middle-class students, as many activists believed that journalists would follow their stories, providing visibility, and thus protection, against the harsh realities of white massive resistance. The almost immediate murder of CORE workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mike Schwerner by the Ku Klux Klan in Philadelphia, Mississippi, a mere month into the operation, and the almost constant threats of violence that haunted participants throughout the course of the summer proved this logic to be false. The appalling, well-publicized violence did not quell the number of mostly Northern students who continued to participate, though. Many scholars have noted that white students who came from progressive or radical backgrounds made up a large percentage of volunteers, but this group alone did not account for the hundreds of white students who made the trip down to Mississippi. For teenagers from non-political white families, Evans says, “the discovery of massive domestic poverty and discrimination inspired a simple desire to ‘make things right.’”¹³ The white South was changing too, or at least its youth was. By the early 1960s, a poll concluded that 88 percent of young Southern whites approved of equal voting rights for blacks, 75 percent supported the integration of public transportation, and 80 percent of equal job opportunities.¹⁴ Black students from both the North and South joined poor African Americans from Mississippi to take part in this

¹² Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 41.

¹³ Evans, *Personal Politics*, 61.

¹⁴ Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Champaign & Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 227.

struggle as well, knowing that violence was always possible, and that their own families and communities, who were also afraid of violent retaliation, as well as political or economic backlash, often disagreed with their political stances. Even this generational divide was taken advantage of, however, as Fairclough notes that “The difficulty of mobilizing black adults remained, but the demonstration in 1960 that black parents would rally behind their children pointed towards an answer...Young people made up the initial phalanx, the entering wedge.”¹⁵ In this instance, parents were expected to follow the guidance their children provided, which would ostensibly lead towards racial justice doled out within harmoniously integrated political and social frameworks.

Support from both black and white youth was therefore crucial in shifting the framework of the movement towards a focus on direct action tactics and on building truly integrated communities and spaces. Activists decided to participate for a number of reasons, but identification across racial lines, and the popular culture that embraced and reinforced this process throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s affected many people’s decisions to risk their lives and their economic and social well-being to get involved. Grace Elizabeth Hale writes that “Time and time again, young middle-class whites in the sixties described hearing about southern student activism or meeting southern student activists (mostly African Americans but also some whites) as encounters that changed their lives. Their feelings about the civil rights movement in the South sparked the process through which they began to see themselves as outsiders too.”¹⁶ SDS co-founder Sharon Jeffrey recalled having an encounter like this at a conference held only a few weeks after the Greensboro sit-in, which featured black students who had staged their own sit-in at an all-white library. “Well, if that didn’t energize that conference!” she said. “The timing was incredible...We

¹⁵ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 55.

¹⁶ Hale, *Nation of Outsiders*, 164.

flew them up, and, of course, everyone was interested, so a lot of people came and there was a lot of excitement...After that, we in Ann Arbor organized supportive sit-ins for what was going on in the South.”¹⁷ Hale is rightfully critical of this form of identification, but these “supportive sit-ins” ultimately led white students in the North to better recognize discrimination in their own communities, which was often under realized, at least until the mid-1960s. Black students were also inspired to resist Northern racial norms after hearing about black Southern resistance. Larry Hunter, who grew up in Ypsilanti, Michigan, remembered participating in a high school walkout where students, guided by their local NAACP branch, demanded that teachers acknowledge black contributions to American history and that the school board hire more black teachers. “We completely shut the place down, forcing a head-on confrontation with the board of education,” he said. “We felt that not only should the textbooks be screened, but there should be a black history course that would give blacks as well as whites the opportunity to learn about black history.”¹⁸ Jeffrey’s and Hunter’s experiences show how identification across racial and regional lines inspired young people to fight racial discrimination outside of the South.

Politicized cross-racial identification was often preceded or reinforced by an emphasis on interracial intersection in contemporary popular culture, particularly rock and roll music. SDS co-founder Tom Hayden admitted in a 1972 interview that, as a teenager, “I’d never heard or seen a demonstration...There was no sense that there was something like a political form of protest, so whatever that was, it was mainly like trying to mimic the life of James Dean or something like that. It wasn’t political.”¹⁹ Since engaging in cultural opposition did not directly attack systems of

¹⁷ Sharon Jeffrey, interview with Bret Eynon, October 1978, 3, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹⁸ Larry Hunter, interview with Bret Eynon, September 9, 1979, 15-16, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

¹⁹ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 169.

oppression, Hayden did not consider it to be political. And yet however much he tried to minimize the political nature of his decision to rebel against societal constraints, his efforts to emulate Dean and other pop cultural icons who seemed to embody both cross-racial elements and dissent in general very quickly led him to identify the legal, economic, and social inequalities he would help enumerate in the 1962 Port Huron Statement.

Some white students who participated in Freedom Summer and Southern voting campaigns cited folk musicians, both white and black, as inspiring their decisions to risk their lives by participating. Grace Elizabeth Hale refers to a handful of Freedom Summer applications that mention guitar-playing as a valuable skill for this endeavour, while one specifically stated that he “suffered the rebukes of James Baldwin and the laments of Peter Seeger” and that “The time for empathy without action is long past. I am impatient and will act now.” Growing numbers of white youth joined civil rights organizations, Hale says, “because popular culture had already taught many college students from outside the region how to romanticize southern blacks.” She does not focus on young black people who were also inspired by cultural elements to engage with the movement, an uneven view which causes her to fixate on the very real issue of romanticization, but at the detriment of any real connections made in spite of, or alongside the tendency to engage in racial mythmaking. Still, the link she makes between adolescent culture based on interracial appeal and rebellion and fights against racial injustice, especially in the South, is telling. “That young people their own age were risking expulsion, beatings, and jail to change the South fascinated many white students from outside the region,” she says. “College students in the early sixties had grown up with the romance of the outsider, with rock and roll and rebel movies... They had learned to value self-expression and to link this kind of individualism as well as emotional authenticity with people on the margins, with artists, outcasts, and the poor, and especially with

rural African Americans.”²⁰ Romanticization represented an obstacle for Northern whites involved in student civil rights campaigns, but it did not entirely inform their decisions to act under often dangerous circumstances. New values reinforced by both popular culture and awareness of civil rights struggles did encourage this form of identification among white youth, but they also urged black kids to act.

New values reinforced by both popular culture and awareness of civil rights struggles did encourage this form of identification among white youth, but they also urged black kids to act. Shelley Stewart, a prominent Birmingham deejay in the 1950s and 1960s, says that he and other Southern platter spinners used the time between playing rock and roll and R&B hits to speak out against racial injustice. “I attempted to help persuade more members of the black middle class to get involved in their own future by joining in demonstrations, and continued spotlighting inequities for minorities,” he said. When Martin Luther King began planning Alabama campaigns, he contacted some of them and asked for assistance in gaining support. They complied by “using codes to help civil rights demonstrators outmaneuver Bull Connor’s police department. It was common knowledge that the police employed informants among the civil rights demonstrators. One of our challenges was to distract the police so a phalanx of demonstrators could attempt to integrate lunch counters in the department stores like Woolworth’s or Newberry’s.” Stewart and other area deejays worked out a plan where “An agreed-upon song would be played on a signal from a leader such as the Reverends King, N.H. Smith, and Andrew Young. It could be anything from ‘Wade in the Water’ to ‘Yakkety Yak.’ Once a protest leader sent a messenger for [a deejay] to play the tune, people would walk from New Pilgrim Baptist on Southside to a downtown

²⁰ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 196; 175; 166.

store.”²¹ The connection between the SCLC’s famous Birmingham campaign and rock and roll songs, like the Coasters’ “Yakety Yak,” was therefore established for black youth who were alerted to this action by their favourite radio station personalities, and relied on them for vital information.

It is important to note that Stewart and his fellow disc jockeys did not oversee directly political news programs—their shows consisted mainly of rock and roll hits popular with young blacks and some whites in the city. In this case, rock and roll music was used as a tool to organize black (and some white) Birmingham residents, and to give them specific directions about how they should act within a movement context. Civil rights leaders and deejays alike acted on the assumption that kids who listened to popular music programs mostly centered around rock and roll and R&B were supporters of the campaign’s goal of integrating public spaces, and would be likely to join in the protest. The fact that this music was used as a code to relay these messages also shows how, yet again, rock and roll could be viewed as a symbol for racial integration. Asa Carter and other white supremacists knew as much, but this link could also be viewed positively, as a means of assisting organizers with recruitment and execution.

Despite the widespread popularity of rock and roll music among young people in the 1950s and 1960s, relatively few of them actually put their bodies on the line in sit-ins and protests. Scholars often use these low participation numbers to argue that listening to rock and roll music did not have an appreciable effect on the way that young people viewed the civil rights movement, or on race relations in general. This view, however, does not consider the fact that active protest was dangerous on a number of levels, and that many kids were simply too young to get involved without their parents’ consent. This does not necessarily mean that their ideas about race and

²¹ Shelley Stewart with Nathan Hale Turner, *The Road South: A Memoir*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2002), 243; 247-248.

desegregation were not challenged by both the music and broadcast of movement activities, only that other obstacles prevented them from getting involved.

The well-publicized violence that civil rights demonstrators faced was one of the major reasons that both black and white kids were hesitant to get directly involved. The threat of racial violence was not new, but it did escalate as organized campaigns grew larger, and garnered broader support and media attention, leading protectors of white supremacy to fear that their society was crumbling. Journalists eagerly covered CORE and SNCC-sponsored training sessions where participants in Freedom Ride and Freedom Summer campaigns were taught how to react when (not if) they were attacked by police or other hostile opponents. Vicious attacks on protestors in Anniston, Alabama, Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, and scores of rural and semi-rural areas in Mississippi, were broadcast into living rooms around the world. These images deeply frightened young people and their parents, who saw children and adults alike beaten with nightsticks, attacked by dogs and fire hoses, and forced off of buses set aflame. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael told *Jet* magazine about his sometimes harrowing experiences with SNCC: “The girls screamed when they were beaten. The boys yelled and writhed when the special handcuffs—‘wrist breakers’—were clamped on and the protruding screws dug into their veins.” The journalist asserted that, despite Carmichael’s lasting presence in the organization, “By the time he was 22 he had acquired an ulcer and was close to a nervous breakdown.”²² People across the country (and even around the world) were more aware than ever of the brutality facing anyone who dared to resist white supremacy in the South. Future SDS member and white college student Barry Bluestone said that his trip to Montgomery to participate in a civil rights campaign “was one of the most frightening experiences I have ever had.” When the integrated car that he was travelling in was stopped by police outside

²² Stokely Carmichael *Jet*, May 19, 1967, 78.

the city, they were given directions to go north. “As it turned out, we learned later, the police were leading us right into the town where the Ku Klux Klan had their Alabama state headquarters,” Bluestone said. “Fortunately, nothing happened as we went through that town, but later people told us, ‘Jesus they sent you right in to get killed.’”²³ Paul Potter, who would later become president of SDS, also participated in a Southern voter rights campaign where violent opposition was a constant threat. “We had to stay in a motel and arrange, by clandestine means, to meet a car in a darkened section of the black ghetto in a Southern town in Mississippi,” he recalled. “We had to be let out of a rented car, and lie on the back floor of a parked car in a parking lot. Somebody then picked it up and drove us—because it would have been too dangerous for whites and blacks to be in the same vehicle, even at night.”²⁴

The threat of violence was enough to prevent many young people from getting involved in a cause that they otherwise supported. Bob Razer, who was in the ninth grade in Arkansas during the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign, admitted that he “admired the northern college kids who came south...[I] thought ‘I wouldn’t be that brave,’ especially after [Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair] were killed in Mississippi.”²⁵ Walter Blackwell explained why many Northern black students refused to go south, even when they supported movement goals. “People were just getting killed,” he iterated. “And people who were going down, the only thing they wanted to do was just demonstrate. They weren’t going down to do any harm. But they were getting killed.” Even protestors in his city, Ann Arbor, Michigan, “were afraid of

²³ Barry Bluestone, interview with Bret Eynon, August, 1978, 9-10. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

²⁴ Hale, *Nation of Outsiders*, 170.

²⁵ Bob Razer, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, December 31, 2011.

getting waylaid by local hoodlums,” further limiting participation.²⁶ Barbara Haber noted the romantic appeal of going South and fighting for civil rights for Northern white students. “Here we are—white kids who grew up in nice homes, want a nice life—here we were playing this nice, comfortable game of, ‘I’m going to play president, and I’m going to make speeches in front of the Washington Monument, and I’m going to march and all that,’” she said. “All of a sudden, you get the feeling that in order to really do the things you want, you’re going to have a bloody revolution, and that’s scary. It’s bombs and guns, and people’s heads being blown off, and people being blinded, and people having no legs, and sitting in wheelchairs, and losing the person you love.”²⁷ The dangerous reality that awaited protestors was enough to prevent many young people from getting involved, even if they admired activists and supported movement goals.

Other young people were prevented from participating in movement campaigns because they were too young, and their parents still controlled many of their decisions. College students and young adults over the age of eighteen made up the bulk of younger movement participants, but younger teenagers supported these actions too, even if they could not yet join up themselves. Many white Northerners, for instance, supported the movement, but lacked a support system that would have allowed them to journey South and take part. Austin Kutsher recalled envying his older brother, who surreptitiously participated in marches and protests near their New Jersey home: “I was 15 and still living at home, too young to sneak out, too afraid to speak out, and too valuable to my dad’s work at home,” he said. “I was not yet emancipated. Instead, I read about the

²⁶ Walter Blackwell, interview with Ellen Fishman, July 17, 1978, 6-7, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

²⁷ Barbara Haber, interview with Bret Eynon, September, 1978, 28. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

demonstration in the papers the next day.”²⁸ Arnie Bauchner admitted, “I used to have fantasies about going to the South, which I never acted out. There was not enough of a support system, and I never was forceful enough to really decide on my own to go South.”²⁹ Bob Razer, who actually lived in the South, said that “In retrospect, those fighting for civil rights in the 1960s were right. I was too young at the time to fully realize it then.”³⁰

Even those who found ways to become active in the movement found that they had to negotiate their parents’ concerns or outright protestations. Barry Bluestone said that his parents “were very concerned about me going to the South because of the danger. But they did come up to Ann Arbor and left me \$89, after unsuccessfully trying to talk me out of it.”³¹ Carolyn Maull, whose family attended the same Birmingham church that became famous when four young girls were killed there after a white supremacist bombed the building, decided to join church rallies and protests at the age of 14. “I never even thought about discussing it with my parents, though,” she said. “I knew they’d worry about me. Plus I knew they were opposed to taking such a direct stand.” She snuck out anyway, and was hit by one of Bull Connor’s notorious fire hoses. “My parents took one look at my appearance—I was still wet, and my sweater was torn—and my father said, ‘Where in the devil have you been?’ I told him. I didn’t really hear what they said to me, but I’m sure they were afraid for me and didn’t want to show how much. My father told me I could not go back, that I could not be a part of the demonstrations.” Their admonitions did not dissuade her, though. “I could go to church. And if I happened to be at the church and somebody happened to organize a

²⁸ Austin Ken Kutsher, *Watching Walter Cronkite: Reflections on Growing Up in the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Gordian Knot Books, 2009), 152.

²⁹ Arnie Bauchner, interview with Bret Eynon, December, 1978, 4. Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

³⁰ Bob Razer, interview with the author.

³¹ Barry Bluestone, interview with Bret Eynon, 9.

demonstration, I could join it. He never connected the two.”³² Part of the reason that Maull was able to continue participating despite her parents’ objections is because she belonged to a highly-organized African-American church community that provided her with a support system. Most kids did not belong to mobilized communities like this, though, which further prevented direct action.

Still, this did not preclude sympathy or support for the movement’s missions. Bibb Edwards explained that he supported the movement, “but not actively,” while growing up in a white family in Virginia. The threat of backlash in his home and community was simply too great for him to risk. “Even a small miscalculation could have led to me being kicked out of college and drafted, not something I wished for...Additionally I did not want to run the risk of (further) alienating my parents, who toward the end of my college years probably saw me changing more than they care[d] to.”³³ This threat prevented many young people from becoming active in the movement, even if they supported its goals. Fear of being labelled a communist prevented Bob Razer from expressing more interest in civil rights groups, while Edwards explained that “Being called a “nigger lover” (along with queer) was about the worst epithet that could be hurled about...There seemed to be much incentive to keep such thoughts to one’s self.”³⁴

Beyond the very real consequences of associating with civil rights organizations, many young people did not necessarily see themselves playing the part of activists, and were embarrassed about identifying with these groups. Edwards admitted that “While I became estranged on the race issue (and others) from the majority back home, I never felt all that

³² “Carolyn Maull” in *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience* Ed. Juan Williams (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005), 78.

³³ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 13, 2011.

³⁴ Bob Razer, in discussion with the author, and Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

comfortable around activists on the other side either, [I was] a bit shy and unsure of myself, I have never been much of a joiner.”³⁵ SDS member Richard Flacks remembered that his roommate “was very reluctant to join the picket line. He thought it was embarrassing to be standing there with a sign in public.”³⁶ Even Tom Hayden was loathe to assume the identity of an activist. By the time he was in college, he “had reluctantly joined a couple of pickets—he found protesting ‘uncomfortable.’”³⁷

Many obstacles prevented young people from putting their bodies on the line in civil rights campaigns, but their absence does not mean that they were apathetic about racial politics. Kids who grew up during the 1950s and 1960s often supported movement goals of desegregation and moderate racial equality, but did not want to take on the burden of supporting these views with direct action. Instead, some felt that their own changing beliefs would ultimately help reform the system. Bob Croonenberghs, who grew up in a white household in Virginia Beach, explained that “the culture played a much larger role than the political side, at least that was my exposure...The political side fought the boundaries in the press, something that I was not really paying much attention to, but the culture was omnipresent among the people that I associated with. One was either a part of this movement or not, and if a part, most supported most aspects.”³⁸ Here, his depiction of movement support echoes the theory that everyday actions are political, in that they either support existing systems, or resist them.

³⁵ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

³⁶ Interview with Richard Flacks, Bret Eynon & Ellen Fishman, 5, Contemporary History Project: The New Left in Ann Arbor, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

³⁷ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 167.

³⁸ Bob Croonenberghs, in discussion with the author.

In retrospect, many people who grew up during this period expressed regret for not having done more to support civil rights, despite the very real impediments they faced. “Carolyn Maull recalled that when she went to college, “there was a hard-core group of civil rights activists on campus. It was the time of Freedom Rides and demonstrations, and I felt guilty, like I was wimping out by not joining in. I’d rationalize it by saying, ‘Well, it ain’t going to do any good for me to get beat up.’ I suppose in some ways I was just a chicken. It bothered me that I wasn’t out there.”³⁹ Arnie Bauchner felt similarly. “A lot of my desire to go [South] was in terms of very romantic heroics,” he said. “I remember Goodman and Chaney and Schroeder [sic] were murdered; and Viola Liuzzo was murdered that summer too... That was like very intense and heavy and a little ‘it could’ve been you,’ I guess, to myself.”⁴⁰ Janis Ian attempted to hedge her bets by acting the part of a typical suburban student during the week, while spending her weekends covertly fraternizing with folk musicians and protestors in Greenwich Village. “I stayed hidden in both worlds, keeping secrets, swinging between the two poles,” she said. “One... part would join SDS to protest the war in Vietnam... The other part worried about looking ‘dykey,’ got straight As, and wondered if the government might just be right.”⁴¹ Bibb Edwards summed up the feelings of many people who grew up during this period, however, noting, “I wish I had understood myself and my surroundings a bit more clearly, done more. To me it became a simple moral decision, a no-brainer.”⁴² Lack of direct political participation did not always mean disinterest in the movement; in many cases,

³⁹ “Carolyn Maull,” *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder*, 79.

⁴⁰ Bauchner, interview with Bret Eynon, 4.

⁴¹ Janis Ian, *Society’s Child* (New York: Tarcher: 2008), 30.

⁴² Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

young people were prevented from making overt political protest for other reasons while remaining supportive of civil rights goals.

This support came out in other ways, though. Some admired civil rights activists from afar, even as they realized they could never join their ranks. Edwards said that he generally admired protestors: “I identified with them certainly more than those who opposed them.”⁴³ After studying the movement years after it had lost momentum, Bob Razer began to see that “SNCC was simply the more liberal of the groups involved. Not radical at all. John Lewis is a hero to me.” He also reevaluated the entire concept of political activism, which shifted somewhat during this period. “I think people were involved in the civil rights movement in a lot of ways,” he said. “People involved weren’t even necessarily ‘activists.’ I saw that immediately since the Little Rock Nine were just local black teenagers trying to go to a high school they thought was better than the black high school. The Montgomery bus boycott was a boycott by “regular” people.”⁴⁴ Some of these so-called regular people attempted to affect change in smaller ways. Larry Hunter, who said he was “spiritually identified to SNCC,” helped organize petitions against racial discrimination in Ann Arbor public schools, while Ken Avuk wrote letters to the editors of local newspapers and supported political candidates with more progressive views on civil rights.⁴⁵ But ultimately, the fact that so many people’s ideas about race and discrimination were changing would lead to cultural and political shifts in favour of moderate civil rights and racial equality. These ideas did not always lead to direct action, but they challenged existing racial norms nevertheless.

⁴³ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

⁴⁴ Bob Razer, in discussion with the author.

⁴⁵ Larry Hunter, interview with Bret Eynon, 8; Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author, November 22, 2011.

These challenges were often revealed through means of resistance that represented public objections to unequal racial laws or customs. Spaces where people gathered to hear music in groups particularly encouraged young listeners to re-evaluate the ways that racial discrimination affected their own lives, and to react against many of these divisions. Since rock and roll music was created by black and white musicians out of both European- and African-American traditions, and drew audiences comprised of all races, spaces where this music was performed, purchased, or consumed provided opportunities for young people to be confronted with divisions where they would be forced to choose a side. Oftentimes the very teenagers whom scholars define as apolitical fought to be able to listen to the music that inspired them, and to enjoy this music in desegregated areas. Theodore Trost argued that “What you buy, what concerts you go to, what media you listen to: these are all political acts. In the pre-iPod era, people listened to music together. That too was a form of consciousness-raising.”⁴⁶ This rise in awareness could take place in small groups of like-minded friends and acquaintances, herein defined as “musical communities,” in music stores where diverse groups of customers gathered to purchase and listen to records, and in concert halls and venues, where large, often racially mixed audiences heard live performances from both black and white artists. In each of these spaces, listeners could confront racist ideals and people from other racial backgrounds, and decide how they would act, and what side they wanted to be on.

When teenagers acted on their love of rock and roll music in public spaces, or when this music prompted them to cross into areas outside their usually limited neighbourhoods and communities, their actions could reflect support for civil rights endeavours. Jim Crow laws divided public space in the South, where signs, legal authorities, and local customs delineated spatial zones according to race, while Northern areas were demarcated by urban-suburban divides, and other

⁴⁶ Theodore Trost, in discussion with the author.

boundaries which unmistakably signified racial segregation and inequality. These boundaries were not absolute in either case; many factors influenced the ways that people negotiated racialized spaces to fit their own lives and needs, so that blacks and whites were never completely cut off from one another, even in terms of geographical space. Nevertheless, spaces were clearly marked with racial signifiers in ways that perpetuated systems of inequality and politicized the transgression of boundaries, even if the person acting was not engaged in overtly political activities. Areas marked as “black,” for instance, were coded by whites as poor, dirty, and dangerous, while “white” spaces were understood as clean and safe.⁴⁷ In the postwar period, these distinctions were exacerbated by suburbanization and discriminatory housing policies. Thomas Sugrue explains that “The process of housing segregation set into motion a chain reaction that reinforced patterns of racial inequality. Blacks were poorer than whites and they had to pay more for housing, thus deepening their relative impoverishment. In addition, they were confined to the city’s oldest housing stock, in most need of ongoing maintenance, repair, and rehabilitation.”⁴⁸ As state and municipal resources and private investment fled city centers for predominantly white suburban areas, largely black urban areas became more run-down, which whites often saw as evidence of black laziness and inferiority. In this cycle of discrimination, city spaces played a powerful role in shaping cultural and political views on race.

Teenage rock and roll fans who crossed these physical boundary lines did not always act in accordance with their environmental surroundings, though. In his pioneering examination of social spaces, sociologist Henri Lefebvre examined the difference between *spatial practice*, or how people physically move through space, and *representational space*, a social term for how

⁴⁷ Laura Helper-Ferris, “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Rice University, 2008.)

⁴⁸ Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 34.

space is lived and experienced.⁴⁹ Spaces marked by race, then, were supposed to influence how people moved through these areas, how they acted, and presented themselves, and who they communicated with. In some cases, however, young people violated social expectations when they crossed into mixed-race spaces, or those dominated by another race, showing that they were comfortable with varying degrees of integration in public areas, and that they did not support racial division of public spaces. Whites always had more power to enter black spaces, particularly if they were doing so as part of a “slumming” exercise that only served to emphasize their social and political dominance. These spaces were still marked as dangerous, though, and white kids who crossed into black neighbourhoods were aware that just being in these areas could harm their reputations and mark them personally as dirty, criminal, or transgressive.

Conversely, white spaces, which were depicted as clean and safe to their inhabitants, were marked as unsafe for blacks, who risked violence, harassment, and arrest if they crossed these boundaries. Hale shows how these conceptions were not accidental, as white Southerners rushed to recreate environments that reinforced white supremacy and black inferiority after Reconstruction by classifying urban public spaces, which were highly visible, densely populated, and usually the seat of regional political and economic power, as white. Images of black people working at menial jobs and dressing in cheaper clothing were meant to consistently support this structure, especially when viewed alongside professional, well-dressed whites. The result is that any blacks who deviated from these patterns by dressing fashionably or betraying their educational or professional status, were harassed.⁵⁰ These patterns had long been set in place in Northern cities, but the speed with which they were constructed in the South, as a means of ensuring racial

⁴⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (New York: Wiley, 1991).

⁵⁰ For more, please see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

hierarchies in the absence of legalized slavery, was quite astonishing. Within a generation, most public, urban spaces in both the North and South were raced as “white,” a construction that neither white nor black teenagers would have been unaware of by the 1950s.

Just as the popularity of rock and roll encouraged whites to seek out music and performances in black areas, however, aspiring-class black kids with disposable income increasingly used their power as consumers and their desires to share in the same pop cultural experiences as their white peers to demand access to white space. In both cases, teenagers who were supposed to avoid certain racialized spaces, or allow their presence and actions to be shaped by crossing into new territory, refused to allow established spatial norms to guide their behaviours. Kids of both racial backgrounds mingled, listened, purchased, danced, screamed, and struggled to meet their favourite performers in similar ways, without adhering to the hierarchical roles that such spaces were supposed to infer upon them. In some cases, young rock and roll fans even overtly fought authorities for the right to enjoy music in mixed-race spaces in ways that were reminiscent of the direct action tactics used by civil rights activists. A shared love of rock and roll music ultimately encouraged both black and white teenagers to enter new spaces and, through their actions, help convert them into mixed-race zones, even if only temporarily.

When he started listening to rock and roll music, Bibb Edwards recalled, “At first I was alone, usually in my bedroom.” As he got older and grew more comfortable expressing his views in public, however, he started sharing some of his musical experiences with others “Over time it became more of a communal experience – visiting with friends, parties, road trips, late night dorm sessions.”⁵¹ The progression he described is fairly typical of many young rock and roll fans during this period. When they were very young and had limited mobility and freedom of expression, kids

⁵¹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

mostly listened to music alone in their rooms. As they got older, however, broadened their social circles, and started to think more deeply about the political and social conflicts surrounding them, many fans began to feel comfortable sharing their opinions with groups of people with similar viewpoints. When people shared the same taste in music, it was often implied that they had similar political and social opinions, which allowed for a sense of unity among individuals who might otherwise have felt isolated. “In Western culture in particular, the choice of music has important social consequences,” neuroscientist Daniel Levitin explains.

We listen to the music that our friends listen to. Particularly when we are young, and in search of our identity, we form bonds or social groups with people whom we want to be like, or whom we believe we have something in common with. As a way of externalizing the bond, we dress alike, share activities, and listen to the same music... Music and musical preferences become a mark of personal and group identity and of distinction.⁵²

Even though music was not always the only thing that bound like-minded young people together, it often provided a means of identification that signalled or solidified other connections. These informal groups of friends and acquaintances may therefore be referred to as “musical communities.”

Indeed, Bibb Edwards asserted that “Music could be personal—a medium of expression intended to convey ideas. These ideas could be revelations, solace, or inspiration that connected people. These connected people formed communities, perhaps in much the same way as religious tracts or political pamphlets helped create the first virtual communities a couple of centuries or so earlier.”⁵³ The strong feelings he mentioned here partially stemmed from the relief many rock and roll fans felt when they discovered others who shared their tastes, and the implication that they perhaps shared other common traits as well. Fran Shor, who listened to WAMO, the black-oriented

⁵² Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Plume Printing, 2006), 226.

⁵³ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

station in his hometown of Pittsburgh, sought out the “one or two other people” in his neighborhood who were also fans of this music. “On occasion when we would have parties in junior high and high school, some of us would have [a] Red Prysock [record] and we’d always put that on, which would sort of clear the room, because nobody could dance to it! These are all white kids. And we would just listen to it, just as a way of thumbing our noses at what we thought were our uptight teenage cohorts.”⁵⁴

These musical communities could work to change people’s minds in similar ways to consciousness-raising groups, which were particularly resonant among second-wave feminist groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These groups did not originate in feminist circles, but women’s liberation activists did utilize them to encourage community among women, who could feel less alone if they realized that others shared their gender-based concerns. They also worked, as activist and historian Ruth Rosen explains, “to publicize their private and public injuries” and to “find a language with which to express common grievances.” As women discussed the kinds of discrimination and injustice they faced in their everyday lives, they were able to give a name to sometimes amorphous feelings of discontent, and to realize that, in movement parlance, the personal truly was political.⁵⁵ Musical communities were not designated political activities. Participants did not see themselves as actively fighting oppression, and their thoughts were shared in a spirit of comfort and friendship rather than with a more distinct goal in mind. Still, when rock and roll fans gathered to listen to, and talk about, music, their minds could be changed in ways that were similar to the processes that occurred during consciousness-raising sessions. First of all, participants could realize that some of their thoughts and feelings were shared by others,

⁵⁴ Fran Shor, in discussion with the author, November 15, 2011.

⁵⁵ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 36; 197.

heightening feelings of community, and normalizing ideas that challenged the parent culture. Communications scholars Stacey Sowards and Valerie Renegar point out that consciousness-raising groups allow women “to relate to one another and generalize experiences,” and encourage connectivity and the concept of a “cultural family,” which could also occur within musical communities.⁵⁶ Kids who felt like they did not fit into mainstream society, or share accepted values (a fairly large contingent, according to a 1960 survey) could realize, through listening to music, that they were not alone, and that they could share their feelings without fear of being rejected.⁵⁷ They could also come to see how their personal ideas about music could be viewed as political. Sowards and Renegar explain that popular culture can be read as “mass-mediated consciousness-raising,” as television shows, movies, and music could “expose viewers [and listeners] to new ideas of...empowerment” and present more accessible models of ideological change that teenagers would feel comfortable emulating.⁵⁸ Within the safe spaces of these groups, kids could talk about their admiration for musicians of other races, or their love of music across supposed racial boundaries, realize that others shared their affections, and then be able to connect these predilections to the civil rights campaigns that they heard about on the news. These realizations became easier to make in groups, especially when members felt at ease sharing more intimate thoughts, as women’s liberation activists would later find.

Musical knowledge was not only a means of setting his group of friends apart from their contemporaries, it also helped racialize them as less white and “uptight,” identities which many

⁵⁶ Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar, “The Rhetorical Functions of Consciousness-Raising in Third Wave Feminism,” *Communication Studies*, Vol 55, No 4 (Winter, 2004), 535-536.

⁵⁷ Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture: An Overview*, 10.

⁵⁸ Sowards and Renegar, “The Rhetorical Functions of Consciousness-Raising in Third Wave Feminism,” 544.

young white people were eager to minimize. Edwards said much the same thing when he admitted that “I was looking for those with whom I thought I had something in common. Record collections expressed tastes and values. I probably was not going to find I had much in common with someone whose collection was dominated by the Sinatras, Pat Boone, Connie Francis, Tony Orlando, [or] Bobby Darin.”⁵⁹ These white pop artists were mainstream celebrities with largely white, middle-class fan bases, and the power of large record labels behind them. Although younger pop stars continued to be marketed as rock and roll acts into the mid-1960s, fans of the original R&B and country-infused music saw the folly in this, and sought to separate themselves from peers whose tastes did not challenge social norms in the same ways.

These musical communities were usually informal, but they almost always took on an air of exclusivity that paralleled the separation from middle-class society that many white youth in particular were cultivating. Rick Turner recalled that “By the time I got to high school, my four or five friends, we hung around all the time, music was our passion as well. And so we always went out, we liked the same kind of music, so we always hung out at each other’s houses and we’d go buy new albums, bring them over, listen to it, see what it was.”⁶⁰ Bibb Edwards asserted, “Sometimes musical preference influenced friendships. I could usually look at someone’s record collection and size them up very quickly. I met one of my oldest friends because of his copy of *Ray Charles Greatest Hits*.”⁶¹ Shor said that, when he and his group of friends listened to rock and roll on the radio, “we’d often have competitions with those other guys who were friends of mine,

⁵⁹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

⁶⁰ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author, November 20, 2011.

⁶¹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

to name the name of groups. Even though I didn't purchase them, we all had to know the label and the color of the label. We'd have these sort of competitions about knowing this sort of stuff."⁶²

Sometimes these passions would fuel the creation of short-lived bands: Shor belonged to one, as did Stan Wells, who noted that "Several times a black blues group from my high school came over to my house to jam with us." He added that "I enjoyed that a lot, but we did not discuss civil rights."⁶³ Even though these meetings lacked explicit political discussion, they still represented a blow to the racist structures that informed people's everyday lives, especially in places like Wells's semi-rural Alabama hometown. In all of these cases, affection for rock and roll or black-oriented music helped white youth create communities that signified distance from middle-class white norms, and strengthened their resolve to challenge them. Their separation from mainstream white society may have been temporary, especially at first, as they learned to appreciate modes of music that came from different racial backgrounds. But even these temporary cultural ventures helped shape the ways that teenage listeners viewed and understood the society they lived in. The realization that others shared some of their concerns and questions was undoubtedly helpful, and rock and roll music was one tool for discovering these similarities. As Bibb Edwards recalled thinking, "If I could find someone who shared my musical interests, maybe we had other things worth sharing."⁶⁴

These shared musical interests helped teenagers who may have otherwise felt alone and perhaps afraid to challenge established systems to feel like others accepted them, and to feel more comfortable expressing more progressive views. This sense of community was sometimes

⁶² Fran Shor, in discussion with the author.

⁶³ Stan Wells, in discussion with the author.

⁶⁴ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

questioned by adults, who saw friendships based on similar cultural tastes as insubstantial or even counterfeit. Chicago journalist Joan Beck confidently asserted that teenagers “have a deep-seated sense of inferiority, a deep longing to be popular that often leads them to pretend an enthusiasm for a teen-age idea or idol they may not actually feel,” using as an example “the high school freshman who shrieks over Elvis Presley records when her friends are around but listens quietly and matter-of-factly when she’s alone.”⁶⁵ In this instance, she was trying to inform parents that their children’s fits over rock and roll stars were all acts put on to impress others, and that the kids themselves were not out of control. What was ignored, however, was the fact that listening to music in communal settings, among like-minded friends, encouraged forms of self-expression and shared joy that are impossible to replicate alone. What the journalist outlined in this article might not have been an act put on by a self-conscious adolescent, but an example of the difference between listening in private and listening among members of a musical community. Rock and roll fans may have absorbed more of each song when listening alone, yet felt more secure expressing themselves vocally or physically, actions which were viewed as more transgressive, in a supportive group.

Listening within these communities often allowed participants to feel more comfortable voicing their opinions on race and racism, and allowing these opinions to evolve. “For those of us who were WAMO followers, we sort of felt like there was something inauthentic about living in an all-white environment,” Fran Shor said, linking the love he and his friends had for the Pittsburgh black-oriented radio station to their frustrations with racial inequality in the mostly-white suburbs. “So that was a kind of pre-political consciousness.”⁶⁶ Peter Rachleff said that this connection

⁶⁵ Joan Beck, “Teens’ Emotion Over Elvis a Search for Security,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 3, 1956.

⁶⁶ Fran Shor, in discussion with the author.

between politics and culture encouraged him to expand his social circle, noting that listening to rock and roll music as a young person “confirmed and encouraged my inclinations to oppose racism and seek inter-racial friendships.”⁶⁷ In instances like these, musical communities could grow to include members of both races, or at least urge listeners to consider making friends across racial lines, thus reinforcing the connection between integrated musical audiences, and support for desegregation on a broader scale.

Sometimes the national popularity of rock and roll, and the fact that similar musical communities made up of teenage fans existed across the country, helped disenchanted young people to realize that they were not alone, and that they too could challenge the injustices they saw around them and on television. Todd Gitlin recalled that, during this period, there were “some moments when politics and oppositions seem to converge. You sit in one city, and you listen to Dylan singing his songs, and you go to another city, and the same record is on, and people look more or less the same. We see the world as unified, we see ourselves as unified against it.”⁶⁸ This sense of commonality was often clear to listeners, who could then see that their reactions connected them to something greater than their small group of contemporaries. Bibb Edwards noted that, when Sam Cooke’s seminal civil rights anthem, “A Change Is Gonna Come” was released in 1964, “As I sought out the song then, listened to it, sung along, and recommended it to friends, I was participating - albeit in a very small way - in the Civil Rights Movement. That was one of many things larger than myself.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Peter Rachleff, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 17, 2011.

⁶⁸ Todd Gitlin, interview with Bret Eynon, September 16, 1978, 17-18. Contemporary History Project: The New Left, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

⁶⁹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

This politicized cultural stance was strengthened when teenagers made decisions to visit public places or private homes in other neighbourhoods, and mingle with people of other races over shared musical interests. Music-informed racial boundary crossing often took the form of white kids leaving all-white suburban neighbourhoods to visit record shops in majority-black communities that sold music unavailable anywhere else, although black teenagers also violated segregation laws by shopping for pop and country music, or attempting to enter clubs reserved for white patrons. Cleveland deejay Alan Freed may have famously expressed surprise at the number of white customers in his friend's Cleveland record shop in 1951, but black record shops across the country were selling to interracial consumer bases by the late 1940s, even though most whites had to trek outside of their own communities to get there. The Dolphin Record Shop in Los Angeles famously sold to a black and white clientele after World War Two, while Mrs. B.F. Ramsey, owner of a black-oriented record shop that Jerry Lee Lewis frequented in Ferriday, Louisiana, posted an advertisement in 1950 that read "We will appreciate your patronage, white or colored."⁷⁰ Singer-songwriter Neil Sedaka recalled when he and his friends "used to go to search for these records in the black neighbourhoods because you couldn't get them in the white neighbourhoods except the Pat Boone covers."⁷¹ Another white music fan fondly reminisced in a 1968 interview, "As a teen-ager, I remember traveling to a black neighborhood in Arlington, Virginia, to find a store that carried a 45-rpm single called 'I Got a Woman.' That was in 1954, and Ray [Charles] was *not* singing about married couples who slept in twin beds with a night table in between."⁷² Additionally, a publicity photo of R&B star Percy Mayfield labeled "with

⁷⁰ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 43; Tosches, *Hellfire*, 69.

⁷¹ *The Hitmakers: The Teens Who Stole Pop Music*, directed by Morgan Neville (Peter Jones Productions, 2001).

⁷² "Record Industry," *Cosmopolitan*, July 1968 in Jerry Wexler Papers, Box 1, Folder 8, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

fans in record store” portrayed him flanked by two female fans, one black and one white, among the offerings at a shop that was clearly geared towards African American consumers.⁷³

Mayfield’s label, Specialty Records, was oriented towards black listeners, but the fact that a white girl was included in this picture shows that the company was also marketing its artists towards white fans, some of whom were already familiar enough with record shops in black neighbourhoods to be included in publicity materials.

Young listeners who were willing to publicly move through racially segregated spaces and befriend people of other races challenged existing racial norms by showing that they either disagreed with, or did not care about these divisions. This was a fairly major step for many white kids who lived in suburban areas. Most were content to shop at the drug and department stores in their own communities; as Bob Razer said, “I never went to record stores in the black sections of Little Rock, though I knew the stores were there.”⁷⁴ Even the fact that Razer, a young white Southerner, knew about specific record shops in African-American neighbourhoods shows that his peers must have shopped there, or they were discussed or advertised in local mainstream news. But actually making the decision to cross socially, and sometimes legally, demarcated boundary lines that divided white and black areas of town showed that the transgressor refused to help maintain these artificial borders. Even if these kids never actively fought for an end to racial segregation, their actions showed that they did not believe in the basic tenets, and simply refused to abide by them. In fact, so many young white customers flocked to purchase records at Grant’s Department Store and the Home of the Blues Record Shop on Beale Street, the heart of black

⁷³ Billy Vera, “The Specialty Story: 1944-1964,” Specialty Records, 1994, 26, Specialty Records Collection, Box-Folder OS1-OS6, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁷⁴ Bob Razer, in discussion with the author.

Memphis, that native Memphian Louis Cantor notes that the racial composition “likely had something close to a 50-50 mix.”⁷⁵

Sometimes these trips were mere one-day passes for white kids who were bored with what their local music stores had to offer, and were looking for a bit of excitement. But in other cases, they encouraged white fans to find and engage with entirely new communities. Rick Turner made his first visit to a record shop in a black neighbourhood in Richmond, Virginia, when he went in search of Little Richard’s “Tootie Frootie,” a song he heard on the black-oriented station, WANT. He was only able to locate the Pat Boone cover version at stores near his home in a white community, however, and so asked his father to take him “twenty miles across town to a black neighborhood to buy the record because white stores wouldn’t carry it. And so that’s when I started making those trips and even after when I was a teenager, ten years after that, I knew where to get the music.” Even though he was often the only white kid in the store, he remembered talking to the owner and sales clerks, who, he said, “were always happy and glad to see me.” The clerks could, of course, be abiding by Jim Crow etiquette, which mandated a degree of politeness to whites since they could easily make trouble for blacks who deviated, but what is intriguing here is that Turner recalled their behaviour with fondness and appreciation, not as expected deference. The difference in attitudes here reflects the distinction between a parent culture built on the assumption of white supremacy and a youth culture that questioned it.

Turner and members of his own musical community, a handful of like-minded white friends, began making regular trips to record shops in this neighbourhood, and, eventually, even to the WANT station to chat with the deejays. “They loved it because they were just so excited that we took an interest, that we weren’t the ‘radicals,’” he said, meaning supporters of massive

⁷⁵ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 39; 51.

resistance. “So they were just as tickled to death as I was, as we were.” Turner and his friends became such mainstays at the station that they were even called out by name on air when walking past a live broadcast downtown. “We heard on the speaker, we heard the disc jockey say ‘Hey folks, look at this, those two blue-eyed soul brothers Rick Turner and Larry Muldoon, they walking down the street right now.’ I’m thinking, hey we’re white, and they’re talking about us on the black station!”⁷⁶ In this case, Turner and his friends broadened their musical community to include black radio personnel and record shop clerks. In doing so, they were publicly marked as racial transgressors and supporters of racial tolerance since they had to physically cross into segregated black spaces in order to pursue these relationships, and the music that brought them there in the first place.

Record shops were not the only physical sites of racial boundary crossing that were shaped by music, however. Interracial friendships were not exactly common among teenagers who lived in different communities, but common musical tastes could help to encourage these relationships, and coax young people out of their own neighbourhoods to visit private homes across racial boundaries. When Detroit Artists Market and White Panther Party founder John Sinclair worked at the Albion College radio station, for instance, he quickly made a name for himself by playing records by African-American artists. One of the school’s two black students was intrigued enough to visit him at the station, and invited Sinclair to his house to listen to music. The two became friends, and spent much of their time at each other’s homes bonding over rock and roll and jazz, and introducing each other to new types of music.⁷⁷ Sometimes friendships across musical and

⁷⁶ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

⁷⁷ Bret Eynon, “John Sinclair: Hipster,” November 21, 1977, 13, Michigan Historical Collections, Contemporary History Project Papers, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan.

racial boundaries occurred with less forethought. Producer Weldon McDougal grew up in a fairly integrated neighbourhood in Philadelphia among Italian- and Irish-American households, as well as black families like his own. He and his friends first started socializing with white neighbours when they were teenagers, usually because they would hear rock and roll music spilling out of nearby windows, and realized that they were listening and dancing to the same songs. “You could hear a party going on in another basement,” he said, “so you go down there, and you know there some kids there dancing and having a good time. Well, anybody could come down there. And like I said, we lived next door to white guys and everything so they would come to the dances. Between twenty and fifty teenagers, mostly black but some Italian and Irish teens from the neighborhood, squeezed into these basements to dance to their favorite R&B songs, and whatever other 45s they brought to the party.”⁷⁸ In both cases, similar musical tastes allowed young people to befriend individuals whom they might never have even met and crossed physical boundaries to socialize with them. Rock and roll did not cause these friendships, of course, but it could act as a sort of introduction between kids who had long been taught that they had little in common with people from other racial backgrounds, and urge them to look for other similarities.

Concert venues could also act as physical spaces that encouraged racial boundary crossing. Although rock and roll acts drew both black and white fans to their shows, and could feature black and white musicians playing the same bills, the amount of racial mixing differed based on region, venue, and each individual concert. Popular belief holds that Southern venues were racially segregated, at least until 1964, and that Northern venues were not, but this was not always the case. In larger Southern cities, certain areas were restricted to either black or white audiences, but as rock and roll shows proved profitable, more and more venue operators realized that they were

⁷⁸ Matthew F. Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2012), 27.

losing money by not allowing patrons of all races to purchase tickets. More and more black kids from aspiring-class families had disposable income to spend on tickets to shows featuring white entertainers or integrated acts, and increasing numbers of white kids were trying to see African-American acts in black clubs, where they received varying levels of acceptance. Still, these operators had laws and customs to contend with. In some cases, the same acts were booked for two separate shows, one for black audiences, and another for white audiences, so that racial mixing was prevented from the outset. If staging separate shows proved inefficient, venues would be segregated, with black patrons forced to sit in balconies or back row seats, and dance floors divided by rope so that kids would be deterred from dancing, or even talking to, people of different races. Venues in Northern areas were usually not legally segregated, although certain cities had bylaws restricting racial mixing in public areas. Some places did not discriminate among ticket buyers, and, indeed, pictures and film taken by both journalists and promoters display integrated audiences at concerts during this period, although people from one racial background usually formed a majority. In other cases, however, venue operators, police officers, city councillors, and other concerned authority figures did attempt to divide teenage concertgoers by race, by segregating seating arrangements, or with thinly-veiled pressure intended to prevent kids from mingling across racial lines.

Across the country, rules that attempted to separate black and white patrons in public spaces were implemented in a number of ways, with varying degrees of severity. Young concertgoers often resisted these divisions, however, in ways that could echo or parallel the methods of SNCC protestors, who directly confronted racist laws by filling public spaces with integrated bodies, and forcing authorities to act, rather than passively acquiescing with unjust laws. Unlike civil rights activists, concertgoers usually did not set out to protest racial dictates, and when

they did so, they mostly resulted from spontaneous anger or frustration over rules that prevented them from choosing where they could sit or dance, or whom they could talk to. Their actions, however, show how popular culture could become politicized by informing the ways that both white and black youth responded when they entered mixed-race public spaces, and when authorities tried to maintain racial divisions.

The unity and group cohesiveness that could form during these concerts was particularly challenging to oppressive racial strictures, and could help young concertgoers understand the basic folly of these divisions. The race of the performers on stage or the people in the crowds did not seem to matter once the music started—everyone was free to revel in the performances and to sing along with their favourite songs. Similarities overrode differences, and kids of many different backgrounds could finally see the other music fans who had previously existed only among their imagined communities of listeners. The sense of belonging that often arose was particularly salient for teenagers who often felt like outsiders in their schools and communities. Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin explains that “People who do something together that is antisocial or somewhat off-center enjoy a bond,” a theory that was clearly at work during rock and roll shows where concertgoers could eschew social norms, scream, shout, dance, and act freely among large numbers of mixed-race, yet like-minded contemporaries.⁷⁹ Indeed, 14-year-old Roseann Chasen told a *New York Times* journalist about the appeal of letting loose at rock and roll concerts. “It’s just instinct, that’s all,” she said. “I come to hear [the music] because I can sing and scream here. Because it’s not like at home where your parents are watching TV and you can’t. Here you can scream all you like. And the stars wave to you and don’t act like they don’t care whether you’re there or not.”⁸⁰ Chasen

⁷⁹ Daniel Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (New York: Plume Printing, 2009), 62.

⁸⁰ Gertrude Samuels, “Why They Rock and Roll—And Should They?” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1958.

clearly linked a friendly, accepting space and feelings of acceptance within the concert venue to the ability to express herself freely, which many teenagers found difficult to do in their everyday lives.

The program given out at a 1957 Alan Freed concert made this sentiment clear by presenting the show as a safe space for young people who felt out of place in their social groups. “There’s no fear of being a failure as a Rock ‘n’ Roll fan,” the copy crowed. “The heavy beat engulfs everyone in the crowd. IF you can clap your hands and move your feet you’re *in*. The dancing is good exercise for everybody. As a guy you *might* make the varsity team. As a gal you *might* win a beauty contest while your girl friends placed way down the list, but *everyone* comes out on top with Rock ‘n’ Roll music. Everyone can dance and enjoy the beat.”⁸¹ The term “everyone” here included both the black and white concertgoers who routinely filled the seats at Freed’s shows. Racial divisions and high school social status meant little inside the concert venue, though, since enthusiasm for the music had the power to draw people together. This concept could be dismissed as the work of an overly enthusiastic copy writer, but scientific evidence shows that enjoying music in communal settings does, in fact, strengthen bonds among participants. Daniel Levitin explains that “Collective music making may encourage social cohesions. Humans need social linkages to make society work, and music is one of them.”⁸² Singing in a group setting, which was common among young concertgoers, releases oxytocin, a chemical “known to be involved in establishing bonds of trust between people,” and also “conveys that they are not simply

⁸¹ “Alan Freed, “Wonderful World of Rock,” *Pageant*, July 1957, 39-58, Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁸² Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 252.

acting as independent entities... that they are aware and sensitive to the physical and mental states of each member of the group.”⁸³

Black and white kids might not always come into close contact with one another in their daily lives, but singing together could help them identify as part of the same group. Levitin explains cognitive psychologist Jamshed Bharucha’s theory, that “We feel this exhilaration, which comes from the neurochemical activity... As we sense a change in our emotional state, we look around to see what’s going on in the world that could explain our mood. In the case of group synchrony, we look around us and see all these other people dancing and singing with joy and excitement.”⁸⁴ When teenage concertgoers did so, they were more likely to see both black and white concertgoers singing along to the same songs that moved them so much, thus establishing their status as members of a new community shaped by age and musical appreciation rather than race. Even if concertgoers failed to actually speak to one another, the act of dancing and singing along to music in a group setting constituted a form of interaction that encouraged identification. Levitin notes an experiment he did where people were asked to tap their fingers on a desk, first in time with a metronome, then in time with another person. He was surprised to find that the latter inspired closer synchronization than the former, since the metronome is more predictable than human beings could ever be. “But the studies show that humans accommodate one another’s performance,” he says. “They *interact* with one another, but not with the metronome, leading to a greater drive to coordinate.”⁸⁵ When people listened to music in groups, then, they were not only in conversation with the performers, but with the other people in the audience as well. When that

⁸³ Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 51; 48.

⁸⁴ Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 56-57.

⁸⁵ Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 51.

audience included people of different races, possibilities for interracial identification increased, even if they did not engage with each other in other ways.

Authority figures who tried to disrupt rock and roll concerts may not have been aware of the depth of musical group consciousness that could occur during these performances, but it was clear that any example of interracial cohesion or solidarity taking place in public spaces threatened systemized racial discrimination. Since contemporary critics and historians both tend to describe young people as engaging in expected youth rebellion, it is important to pinpoint exactly what teenagers were up against when they made the decision to attend a rock and roll concert. In the South, some concertgoers risked breaking the law. Most public urban areas were legally segregated well into the late 1960s, and any attempt to transgress these boundaries could result in police action and possibly violence. In addition, the decision to attend a show featuring artists who were either black or influenced by black traditions, alongside black audience members, even though ropes or balconies separated them, meant disavowing much of their parents' belief systems, which were inextricably wound up in the black-white dichotomy. In the North, teenagers still had to fight their parents' often-racist beliefs to attend these concerts, even if they segregated themselves when they got there. Northern teens risked violence, either from other concertgoers, or on the part of police who constantly trolled concerts for trouble, as well as opposition from their parents. Parents of both races undoubtedly feared that their children would be hurt if they attended shows in mixed-race spaces, both because whites often believed in stereotypes about black criminality, and because black adults were all too aware of the violent harassment their kids might face if they crossed racial boundaries.

In the South, this activity was especially fraught with political implications. To actually attend a concert celebrating this music, in a room filled with both black and white concertgoers

and artists, even if they did segregate themselves upon arrival, was an affront to traditional Southern values, which many already feared were on the brink of destruction. Teenage attendees had to decide that going to hear their favourite rock and roll musicians play was more important than the racial restrictions their traditions were based on—and that the wrath of parents and legal officials was worth the risk. In the wake of *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka*, many white Southerners feared that all public spaces would soon be forced to desegregate, prompting city and county bylaws, and even state acts, against interracial activities. In 1956, Louisiana's legislature passed Act 14, which explicitly stated that all recreational activities, including dancing, “shall be operated separately for members of the white and colored race in order to promote and protect public health, morals, and the peace and good order in the State.” Those who broke the dictates of this Act could expect to be fined between 500 and one thousand dollars, be imprisoned for three to six months, or both.⁸⁶ Bibb Edwards recalled one night in the mid-1960s when he went on a double date to see Doug Clark and the Hot Nuts, a black rock and roll group, play a show in his Virginia college town. “The first part of the show went on as expected. Everyone was having a good time,” he said. As the band was gearing up for the second act, however, suddenly “from every direction, local police entered the room and stopped the music. One officer took the stage with much dignity...May have been the Chief. He announced that the show was over and for everyone to leave quietly and go home. There was some grumbling, but we meekly filed out passed the policemen at the doors.”⁸⁷ Authorities at all levels across the South made it their mission to prevent any race mixing at all during these shows, even if it meant breaking them up in the middle of otherwise non-eventful performances. Despite threats of legal and social repercussions,

⁸⁶ Louisiana State Legislature 1956, Act No 14, House Bill No 435.

⁸⁷ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

however, white and black teenagers across the South often refused to quietly comply with what they increasingly saw as unreasonable demands.

Southern cities with large populations sometimes featured concert venues that could afford to stage the same show twice—once for white patrons, and once for black audiences. This way, race-mixing could be avoided at all costs, and venue operators did not have to worry about being charged for violating segregation orders. In November, 1956, Bluefield Auditorium in Bluefield, West Virginia, featured a “Colored Rock ‘N’ Roll Dance” with all black acts, including The Coasters, The Tune Weavers, and Ernie Freeman’s Orchestra. The Coasters and Ernie Freeman stayed in town to perform at a show held for white patrons five days later, where ticket prices were fifty cents cheaper, but little else differed. Posters for the two events looked exactly the same, used the same colours, font for the lettering, and even the same pictures of the musical acts performing at both shows.⁸⁸ In Memphis, pioneering deejay Rufus Thomas remembered performing shows at the all-black Handy Theater for black audiences at 8 pm, then, on Thursday nights, replicating his act for white audiences at midnight. By 1954, however, white demand was so great that the theater reversed its show times, increasing profits by encouraging more whites to attend earlier shows.⁸⁹ Even though the organizers were careful to plan two shows to keep black and white fans separate, the posters did not need to be altered to appeal to different tastes—indeed, they attracted the same kind of teenage music fans, regardless of race. By utilizing their power as potential consumers who were not afraid to cross racial boundaries, these young music fans were helping to re-shape the limits of segregated spaces.

⁸⁸ Bluefield Auditorium Posters, FF. 1.2.3., The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁸⁹ Louis Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation’s First All-Black Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 8; Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 94.

Many venue operators realized it would be inefficient to hold completely different shows, though, so they compromised by imposing some form of race-based division on the space. Some responded to increasing white interest by allowing “white spectators” to purchase tickets to all-black shows. These tickets cost less than the normal price of admission, but relegated patrons to the backs of theaters, often without chairs, and prevented them from using the dance floor.⁹⁰ In these instances, white kids endured substandard conditions despite their status as paying customers, a position that their black contemporaries suffered through in almost every other segregated public space in the South. But their enthusiasm for these shows did not diminish. Indeed, posters advertising all-black rock and roll shows held at Bluefield Auditorium between 1956 and 1957 betrayed little racial tension amidst their Technicolor designs and the bright, punchy look of their graphics other than the fact that separate ticket prices were listed for “admission” and “white spectators.”⁹¹ Again, there was no difference in how the posters attempted to draw both white and black kids to the shows; the assumption was that patrons from both groups would respond positively to the same acts, designs, and slogans. The forced separation that shaped the concert space appeared almost as an afterthought, even though, in mid-1950s West Virginia, this was a highly contested issue that informed almost every political and social component.

If young white Southerners had fundamentally agreed with the tenets of racial segregation, it would have been easy for them to abide by these dictates and enjoy these shows separated from people of other races. They did not always abide by the carefully planned racial guidelines laid out to prevent race mixing in public spaces, however, even when they were able to purchase tickets and see their favourite musicians perform. Ralph Bass, an A&R representative for Chess records,

⁹⁰ *Reader, Chicago's Free Weekly*, Friday May 17, 1991, 39, Ralph Bass Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

⁹¹ Bluefield Auditorium Posters, FF. 1.2.3.

explained that even when white patrons were forced to sit in roped-off “spectator” sections, “pretty soon they started jumping over the rope to dance” among black concertgoers. In other instances, white Southern kids would often drive to all-black clubs on the outskirts of their towns and try to check out the musical performances inside. “The promoter would be at the door with a gun in his belt for protection,” he said. “Kids came in and he’d say, ‘You kids can’t come in here. You know it’s against the law.’ They said, ‘Look out. We’re coming in.’” The privilege of having white skin in the South clearly allowed these young people to break the rules, but there were often consequences to their actions. Bass noted that promoters, who could be at the mercy of local law enforcement or violent mobs for allowing integrated audiences in their clubs, often called the police. Sometimes, officers would stop performances, as in Bibb Edwards’s case, and lead the white patrons out. The worst punishment most faced was a call to their parents, but still, it was clear that authorities were intent on preventing race mixing at black clubs.⁹² These instances did not prevent white kids from continuing to find room for themselves in black spaces. Venue operators, Bass said, “had to keep enlarging [white areas] anyway, ‘cause they just couldn’t keep the white kids out, and by the early fifties they’d have white nights sometimes.”⁹³ These areas grew so rapidly that, in some cases, roles were reversed, and dance floors were limited to white patrons with special sections for “colored spectators,” even at shows with black headliners.⁹⁴ The profits that could be made from young white Southerners’ love of rock and roll music trumped the implementation of strict segregation in many cases, even if operators continued to create measures that ensured racially divided spaces.

⁹² *Reader, Chicago’s Free Weekly*, Friday May 17, 1991, 39, Ralph Bass Papers.

⁹³ Michael Lydon, *Rock Folk: Portraits from the Rock ‘n’ Roll Pantheon* (New York: Citadel Press, 1990), 9-10.

⁹⁴ Bluefield Auditorium poster, May 6, 1957.

These changes, which allowed white youth some control over previously all-black spaces, show that white supremacy impacted all decisions made in the South, even those that could result in some form of racial boundary crossing. Black kids were punished far more harshly for trying to integrate white spaces, and in most cases were prevented from even trying to do so. White kids were not content with segregation restrictions under Southern laws, however, even when their desires to watch black musicians perform in previously all-black clubs were tacitly allowed. Instead, black and white concertgoers continued to challenge any form of segregation erected within concert venues, repositioning these spaces as sites of protest. The heightened political consciousness formed by listening to rock and roll music in private, or in small musical communities, prepared teenagers of both races to accept these venues as sites for interracial interaction. Many shows featured interracial playbills, so concertgoers arrived with the knowledge that they would be seeing white and black performers sharing the same stage. Since Southern racial boundaries were always made clear lest anyone cross them unwittingly, concertgoers would have known before the show whether they were entering a space that was reserved for whites and blacks only, if “spectators” would be allowed, or if people of different racial backgrounds were expected to remain in their own sections. When teenage fans purchased tickets to these shows, then, they knew if they would be cheering for performers of different races alongside interracial audiences, even if they were supposed to remain separated from one another. These expectations often combined with young people’s acceptance of rock and roll as a biracial art form to make concert venues sites where racial barriers were challenged rather than maintained.

The spatial dimensions of many concert venues would have provided a very basic challenge to the philosophical foundations of racial segregation and white supremacy. Most venues, then as now, were designed with floor or raked seating leading up to a prominent stage, so that performers

were literally standing above audiences. Since it was becoming more common for black musicians to perform in front of all-white or mixed-race audiences, the Southern racial hierarchy that mandated black inferiority and white superiority in all aspects of life was quite literally inverted, as black musicians found themselves performing above adoring mixed or all-white audiences. Since anything that positioned blacks above whites signified a shift in power dynamics, the fact that audiences continued to cheer shows that they accepted this reversal, even if only within the confines of the performance. Many Southern venues had segregation built right into the layout, with ‘whites-only’ balconies ensuring both that whites and blacks would not come into contact with one another, and that the white audience was physically positioned above any blacks in the building. Still, the fact that black artists were obviously the focus of the audience’s attention in a positive way automatically allotted a power to the performers that was denied them outside the concert’s doors. In the South, where a white crowd surrounding a black person was more reminiscent of a lynching than anything positive, musicians recognized the important transitions that had to occur for this admiration to be possible.

But teenagers made politically conscious decisions to challenge the brutal system of segregation by forcing interracial interactions at rock and roll concerts in other ways. As early as 1953, performer Billy Eckstine told show business trade publication *Variety*, that his concerts drew “a mixed audience that helped facilitate a better understanding between whites and Negroes” and that whites were “forgetting the prejudices of their parents and [had] nothing more on their minds than to be entertained.”⁹⁵ Here, he portrays young patrons as *not caring* about segregation, rather than actively opposing these laws and divisions. Many of the actions they took, however, including occupying cross-racial spaces, tearing down divisions like ropes, mingling with people across

⁹⁵ “South May Be Ready for Mixed Acts in Five Years, Sez Billy Eckstine,” *Variety*, April 22, 1953, 48.

racial lines, and publicly acting on cross-racial crushes, paralleled actions that civil rights and student groups organized to overturn Jim Crow laws. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that SNCC and CORE campaigns were routinely covered by journalists, and most kids would have been familiar with images of sit-ins and other methods of direct action. Actions taken by Southern teenagers in mixed-race concert venues were not planned in advance, though, and they did not intend to attack the political system as a whole. Furthermore, Grace Elizabeth Hale cautions against overly politicizing the actions of white concertgoers at mixed-race performances. “The trip did not require white college students to quit school or work and live on a SNCC salary, a pittance the organization only sometimes even paid,” she asserts.

It did not require them to confront their racist or worried parents and friends or to face being beaten, gassed, kicked, arrested, and even killed. Singing together enabled people to feel the music. Deep in the heart, singing was not an argument or an ideology. It was a feeling. It was the tap of the foot and the leap of faith. While some people were inspired to go south and work, all a person had to do to ‘feel’ like part of the movement was to sing along.⁹⁶

Hale is correct that the mostly spontaneous acts of resistance within the confines of concert spaces did not demand the same levels of sacrifice or work as active participation in civil rights organizations. They should still be viewed as political actions, however, since both black and white participants were completely aware of the boundaries separating them, and the potential consequences of any violations. Even if concert patrons did not have to articulate any sort of political ideology in order to take part in these actions, they still had to make decisions about the existing political system that could lead to violent or legal retribution. Participating in these actions, then, constitutes more than a mere “feeling,” particularly when set against the growing awareness and political importance of civil rights campaigns.

⁹⁶ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 115.

Local authorities and venue operators alike realized that the arrangement of these spaces might lead to unwanted interracial mingling. In situations where black and white patrons would be sharing the same space, a rope was often strung along the floor to separate white and black audience members, and prevent them from talking, touching and, especially, dancing. On the whole, teenage concertgoers did not appreciate these efforts. Chuck Berry remembered that, at a concert he performed in Mobile, Alabama in the 1950s, “Over a dozen patrolmen were lined up forming a path for the show people to walk through [separating black band members from white fans]...The isolation ignited ill feelings in the fans as well as the artists.”⁹⁷ Rick Coleman, whose biography of rock and roll pioneer Fats Domino examines the peculiarities of playing to Southern audiences, says that the rope held psychological connotations for white concertgoers. “There was a curious turnabout,” he says, “as whites now felt the bondage of both the ropes that segregated them away from the dance floor and their own repressive moral dictums, as they enviously watched the blacks dance.”⁹⁸ For blacks, the rope was rather a more frightening entity, the divisive color line of the South made tangible, threatening both races with the weight of centuries of brutal Southern history behind it should they attempt to cross its boundaries. Despite this pressure, stories of teenage concertgoers dismantling these ropes so that blacks and whites could dance freely together are legion. Bass explained that “they put a rope in the middle of the floor—whites on one side, blacks on the other. And then the twist came, and the rope came down.”⁹⁹ Teenage concertgoers were clearly making decisions to bring down the last bastion of segregation within the confines of the concert venue, turning a segregated arena into a truly interracial public space.

⁹⁷ Chuck Berry, *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography* (New York: Harmony Books, 1987), 126.

⁹⁸ Rick Coleman, *Blue Monday: Fats Domino and the Lost Dawn of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2006), 82-83; 114.

⁹⁹ *Reader, Chicago's Free Weekly*, Friday May 17, 1991, 39, Ralph Bass Papers.

It is surprising, then, that contemporary observers and historians alike rarely saw this action as a political stance against segregation, and instead attributed it to being caught up in the ‘rhythm’ or ‘euphoria’ of the music. Coleman, despite his insightful examination of the rope, depicts the teenagers who brought it down at a Fats Domino concert in Mississippi as though they are in a trance: “Everyone swayed to his euphoric music and the dancers started knocking down the rope,” he says. Despite police intervention, “The dancers kept dancing, now mixing freely.”¹⁰⁰ During this period, singer LaVern Baker mused, “[Kids] broke the rope because they had what you call musical tantrums...Nobody paid any attention to what color was there.”¹⁰¹ In these cases, the music seemingly transfixed teenage concertgoers to the point where they no longer noticed or cared about racial differences. This assumption was framed positively in each instance, as an initial step towards racial tolerance, but it denied young people the agency they had to possess in order to attack the symbol of Southern segregation, breaking the law (or at least the rules of the venue they were attending), and choosing to associate with people of other races.

Music has been used since the beginning of human history to encourage people into transcendental states, so uses of terms like “euphoric” and “tantrums” are perhaps understandable in certain cases. Daniel Levitin explains that “Rhythmic elements...typically take on a more regular, hypnotic quality that can induce trance states. Just how music induces trance is not known, but it seems to be related to the relentless rhythmic momentum, coupled with a solid, predictable beat.” He notes that this beat “can cause shifts in brain-wave patterns, easing us into an altered state of consciousness that may resemble the onset of sleep, or the netherworld between sleep and wakefulness, or even a druglike state of heightened concentration coupled with increased

¹⁰⁰ Coleman, *Blue Monday*, 114.

¹⁰¹ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 174.

relaxation of the muscles and a loss of awareness of time and place.”¹⁰² This description, however, is not in keeping with explanations of the behaviour of teenage concertgoers through the eyes of authority figures like sociologist Jessie Bernard, who noted that “Indications of mass hysteria are to be found in the wild, unrestrained adulation of pop singers and the mushroom growths of fan clubs.”¹⁰³ Even adults who supported this culture made note of the music’s supposed ability to encourage intense emotion in young listeners. Alan Freed attested that “Our in-person shows...are a wonderful outlet. When performers come on stage, the children jump and scream, drowning out the entertainers. Why? Because the kids have listened to records of those songs, and know every note and word, so they do the performing.”¹⁰⁴ Rhythm-based music may have the ability to lull people into dreamy, slumber-like states, but the raucous singing and dancing described in these cases did not seem to fit the scientific description of a trance. Rock and roll music definitely excited teenage listeners, and encouraged them to express themselves more freely than they were used to, but their abilities to make choices and understand their surroundings does not seem to have been impaired.

Even when they avoided insinuating that teenagers were caught up in musical “trances,” contemporary observers did not give them credit for actively choosing to integrate dance floors, or, at least, to destroy the symbol of segregation that divided them. One of Little Richard’s band members, H.B. Barnum, recalled, “When I first went on the road there were many segregated audiences. With Richard, although they still had the audiences segregated in the building, they were there together. And most times, before the end of the night, they would all be mixed

¹⁰² Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 214.

¹⁰³ Jessie Bernard, *Teen-Age Culture: An Overview* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1961), 28.

¹⁰⁴ Theodore Irwin, “Rock ‘n’ Roll ‘n’ Alan,” *Pageant*, July, 1957, 59. Program for Summer Festival. The Alan Freed Collection, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

together.”¹⁰⁵ Even though he presumably would have noticed people taking the ropes down from his onstage vantage point, the action itself was strangely absent from his recollection. Ralph Bass connected the downfall of the rope concretely to fights against segregation, but he also refrained from attributing these actions to teenage concertgoers’ active choices. “They’d put a rope across the middle of the floor, the blacks on one side, whites on the other, digging how the blacks were dancing and copying them,” he said. “Then, hell, the rope would come down, and they’d all be dancing together. And you know it was a revolution...We did it as much with our music as the civil rights acts and all of the marches, for breaking the race thing down.”¹⁰⁶ The term “we” here referred not to an inclusive group of musicians, fans, and representatives, but to Bass and his music industry contemporaries only, as became clear in another interview he gave about this issue. “We first did ‘The Twist’ with Hank Ballard,” he said of his then-label, King Records. “So, I played a very important part in my lifetime bringing white kids and black kids together.”¹⁰⁷ By his recollection, the music itself, and the industry executives who released it, caused the rope to spontaneously fall, rather than the kids who actually decided to pull the rope down with their own hands, and possibly face drastic consequences for their actions.

Even though Bass recounted audiences who, again, were so swept up in the music that they somehow ceased to care about the harsh Southern traditions that engulfed them and the police officers who were usually watching closely, at the very least he allowed for a political reading of the activity, though the active agent is the music and not the people listening to it. The decisions made by rock and roll fans constitute a vital missing link within the relationship between music

¹⁰⁵ Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Quasar of Rock* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 69.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Lydon and Ralph Bass, “Ralph Bass” in *Boogie Lightning* (New York: The Dial Press), 92.

¹⁰⁷ *Reader, Chicago’s Free Weekly*, Friday May 17, 1991, 39, Ralph Bass Papers.

and civil rights politics. On interracial dancing at concerts, for instance, Michael Bertrand notes, “white couples apparently inferred *nothing wrong* [my emphasis] in sharing a dance floor with their black counterparts.” On the rope specifically, he says, “Traditional community restrictions on conduct and activities sometimes took a back seat to the euphoria of the moment, and artificial restraints, like ropes and cords, fell to the floor.”¹⁰⁸ Many teenagers did, in fact, make light of these divisions when asked for their opinions. Bob Razer, for instance, recalled authorities “concerned about an integrated audience” when musicians with cross-racial appeal played his hometown of Little Rock in the late 1950s and early 1960s. “Somehow they divided the auditorium in half with black people on one side and the white people on the other,” he said. “I think they ran a rope down the middle of the auditorium as the divider. How silly was that.”¹⁰⁹

Although it was common for both white and black teenagers to maintain that they did not care about efforts to segregate public spaces, or that these efforts seemed like a waste of time, their seeming indifference actually reveals a lack of support for Jim Crow laws and racial separation. Southern institutions based their very livelihood on keeping the races separate; it is doubtful that they ever simply “took a back seat” so that kids could enjoy a temporary dance together. And for couples to think “nothing wrong” with mixed dancing, which many Southerners viciously denounced as leading to that greatest of horrors, “social miscegenation,” a clear choice already had to have been made as to which side one was on, especially in the midst of visible civil rights organizing. This decision was clear during a Chuck Berry concert in Jacksonville, Florida, where the rope remained intact. Nevertheless, “At the close of the show, twice as many young whites as blacks rushed toward the stage, climbed on, and began socializing with us,” Berry recalled. “We

¹⁰⁸ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 183; 174.

¹⁰⁹ Bob Razer, in discussion with the author.

knew the authorities were blazing angry with them for rushing on stage and at us for welcoming them, but they could only stand there and watch young public opinion exercise its reaction to the boundaries they were up against.”¹¹⁰ These kids were aware of the consequences they would undoubtedly face, but they decided that, in this situation, rules of segregation did not matter, and that it was more important to show their appreciation for Berry and his band amongst an integrated community of listeners.

These acts of desegregating dance floors and concert venues made an impact on their own, neatly paralleling student activist sit-ins in segregated public spaces. But concertgoers often engaged in political actions that further revealed either outright distaste or seeming indifference to systems of racial segregation and hierarchy. Even though true interracial friendships among teenagers remained rare, concerts with mixed-race audiences offered a rare opportunity for actual cross-racial communication to occur. Nat King Cole mused, “Maybe at intermission a white fellow will ask a Negro for a match or something, and maybe one will ask the other how he likes the show. That way you have started them communicating, and that’s the answer to the whole problem.”¹¹¹ Photographs of rock and roll concerts often show musicians playing to fairly integrated audiences, or to majority-white crowds with black kids scattered throughout, indicating some level of interaction among the concertgoers.¹¹² Bob Croonenberghs, who grew up in Virginia Beach, said that he and his friends thought that “integration was fine” at the concerts they attended, and noted that some audience members mingled across racial lines “and it did not raise any

¹¹⁰ Berry, *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography*, 124.

¹¹¹ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 182; 185-186.

¹¹² Please see Vera, “Specialty Records 40th Anniversary 1946-1986,” 24-25. Specialty Records Collection, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, for these pictures.

concerns.”¹¹³ Jeff Titon recalled that he and his friends were among the only white attendees at many shows in Atlanta, including a Ray Charles concert, but added that “We always were treated very courteously.”¹¹⁴ Again, both men, who are white and grew up in Southern states, talked about interracial mingling as though it was unremarkable, even though most public spaces they encountered would have been segregated, shaped by implicit or explicit support of white supremacy. This nonchalance was fairly revelatory, then, since these kids had to decide that they did not support these hierarchical boundaries in order to profess no caring about them.

But not all interracial interactions were this subdued. When Rick Turner attended his first concert at a majority-black venue in Richmond, Virginia, at the age of 12 in 1961, he remembered being shocked by the friendly treatment he received. “People that you knew in your neighborhood and people that you knew in church and in school, and the things that you saw on television were always portraying black people in a negative light,” he said. “Well my experience with that was 180 degrees opposite of that. So that had tremendous impact on my life. And I noticed when I’d go to shows the black artists would take their time to speak to me, to talk to me, would treat me like I was one of them. And when I went to white shows, I didn’t get that treatment at all.”¹¹⁵ Unlike many Southern white families, Turner was raised to treat everyone equally, and to disregard white supremacy. Yet he still identified the first majority-black concerts he attended as crucial in shaping his own anti-racist views since these venues were among the few public spaces where he could comfortably converse with people across racial lines.

¹¹³ Bob Croonenberghs, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, December 13, 2011.

¹¹⁴ Jeff Titon, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 5, 2011.

¹¹⁵ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

Cross-racial mingling at concerts remained fairly rare, even in instances where black and white kids were able to enjoy performances side by side. Jeff Titon said that, although most concerts he went to were not legally segregated, “the races didn’t mix much.”¹¹⁶ Stan Wells said that he never witnessed any problems among concertgoers of different races, but added that most shows he went to were either majority-white or majority-black, which minimized the chance for any real cross-racial interaction.¹¹⁷ And even Turner, whose own views on race were affected so profoundly by his experiences at majority-black concerts, reiterated that he was often one of the only white people in attendance, and that most people did not attempt to communicate across racial boundaries. “In retrospect, [black concertgoers] were just as, I don’t want to say the word afraid, but they were just as cautious as I was. Because it was a new thing for both of us.”¹¹⁸ And yet, just like Daniel Levitin’s metronome and finger tapping experiment, the very act of enjoying and participating in musical performances in the same space could connect people across racial lines, and help them see desegregated venues as places of identification and acceptance rather than the threat that most white Southerners consistently said they were.

Even if they did not actually speak to one another, patrons at mixed-race concerts could recognize their shared love for a particular musical genre or performer when faced with kids from other racial backgrounds within the space of the concert venue. Affection for musicians that crossed racial lines could indicate reception towards racial desegregation campaigns, but even if fondness for individuals did not translate into interracial communication, cross-racial fandom indicated that concertgoers were not afraid to publicly act on their sometimes transgressive

¹¹⁶ Jeff Titon, in discussion with the author.

¹¹⁷ Stan Wells, in discussion with the author.

¹¹⁸ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

enjoyment a particular performer. These kids could be comfortable with racial desegregation in the abstract, but actual social interaction would have required extra dedication that many were not prepared to engage in. What they displayed here, however, was a receptiveness to racial integration, which indicated an important first step towards creating spaces where movement successes were possible.

Rick Turner recounted two instances where his proclivity for black musicians challenged Southern racial norms. The first occurred in 1968, when he and his best friend got to walk onstage with the Temptations. “We went back to the bus and met ‘em right off the bus and grabbed ‘em arm in arm, walked straight to the stage and they began to sing,” he said. “And I began to think, here’s two white kids, 18 years old, bringing up the Temptations to the stage. How cool is this?” The second time occurred a year later, when he scored front-row seats at a James Brown concert. “I was grooved out,” he recalled. “And James Brown turns to his band and throws his hands up and tells his band to stop playing. And then he looks dead to me and points his finger and says ‘Brother!’ and I said ‘Yes Sir!’ and he says ‘Get up here.’ And I got to dance on stage with James Brown.”¹¹⁹ In each case, Turner’s personal affection for particular black musicians allowed him access to desegregate concert stages, which allowed the rest of the audience to view a publicly integrated space that was fun and enjoyable, and where hierarchies could be broken down. Even though Turner and his friend were just kids, the image of them linking arms with the Temptations onstage signified a rare form of racial equality and camaraderie. These images may not have been fully replicated outside the walls of the concert venue, but they could provide patrons with a template for what racial integration might look like, and how it might be viewed by young white and black Southerners.

¹¹⁹ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

The historic white Southern intent to protect white female virtue by preventing miscegenation was also pierced when female rock and roll fans developed crushes on musicians of a different race. Musician Lloyd Price recognized this shift early on, noting that “The backlash didn’t come from the population in American. It came mostly from the South...because again now here’s what you’re doing. Remember when I say white people, white girls liked that music. They was coming round seeing them little black boys and shaking and stuff like that, that was a no-no in this country.”¹²⁰ Bibb Edwards speculated that a concert he attended as a teenager that featured Doug Clark and His Hot Nuts was broken up by police because “the white city fathers really did not care about the musical tastes of a bunch of college boys; but they were not going to be seen standing by and letting black men talk dirty in front of their daughters.” He added, however, that “Those sensitive daughters... seemed just interested at hearing The Show as their escorts.”¹²¹

Teenage girls of both races seemed disinclined to hide their affections for rock and roll musicians, even if these crushes crossed racial lines. When black girls swooned over Elvis Presley at every appearance, black deejay Nat Williams mused, “Beale Streeters are wondering if these teenage girls’ demonstration over Presley don’t reflect a basic integration in attitude and aspiration which has been festering in the minds of your womenfolk all along.”¹²² Presley’s cross-racial sex appeal surprised both white and black observers, but he was not the only white musician who commanded the attention of black girls. When Jerry Lee Lewis first played the Apollo Theatre in Harlem in 1957, “he was pleased,” biographer Nick Tosches attests, “to find that colored girls

¹²⁰ *Rock and Roll Renegades: Episode One: Renegades*, directed by David Espar, (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1995).

¹²¹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author.

¹²² Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 135.

screamed for him almost as much as the white girls he had encountered in recent months.”¹²³ These dynamics may have surprised both white and black adults, who did not necessarily expect young black girls to view nominally older white men with romantic potential. After all, many grew up in mostly segregated communities where white men’s power afforded them financial, physical, and sexual control over younger black women. The fact that these girls responded so favourably to celebrities like Presley and Lewis shows that the threat that many black women understandably associated with white men had dissipated in these particular instances, and that integrated spaces did not have to be viewed as sites of exploitation or menace. This does not mean that young female fans were suddenly unaware of the fact that racial and gender hierarchies could place them in precarious positions, or that they did not understand that the long history of sexual exploitation of black women by white men continued to shape many interracial interactions. It does, however, show that many young black girls did not necessarily view *all* interactions with white men as inherently threatening, and that they were comfortable in certain desegregated spaces. As these racial and sexual tropes became somewhat weakened, black youth could view integrationist goals as favourable rather than potentially dangerous.

These public acts of affection may have surprised observers, but they were not entirely transgressive. White men had long claimed the right to use black women’s bodies for their own purposes, so despite the gendered reversal of girls acting publicly on their own desires, these interactions kept most racial and gender hierarchies intact. The hordes of white female fans who made themselves available to black stars presented a direct challenge to both power structures. Chuck Berry proclaimed that he “noticed the friendliness of the white females more than that of the white males, going beyond normal musical appreciation to wanting to personally meet and

¹²³ Nick Tosches, *Hellfire: The Jerry Lee Lewis Story* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 137.

associate with the singers, something I never expected to occur.”¹²⁴ News stories of black musicians assailed by white female fans abounded, often accompanied by photos of girls screaming over celebrities like Little Richard, James Brown, Billy Preston, and Jackie Wilson, who was, as one journalist noted, “mobbed” by “hundreds of shrieking female fans” in Philadelphia. “The horde of bobby-soxers,” the writer continued, “literally ripped the clothing from the star’s back in a frantic search for souvenirs and one teenager threw both arms around his neck, screaming ‘I’ll never turn him loose.’”¹²⁵ This audience was integrated, but use of the term “bobby-soxers,” which was usually used to describe prim middle-class white girls, is telling. Either white girls were taking the lead in swarming Wilson, indicating desires that violated Southern law and custom, or middle-class black girls were presenting themselves in ways that identified them with their white peers. Either way, when black male musicians performed to integrated groups of adoring fans, racial and gender boundaries were blurred far more easily than might be expected in states where these divisions were clearly drawn and, supposedly, non-negotiable.

These violations threatened Southern race and gender ideals, which justified oppression of women and African Americans by positing that white men needed to protect the virtue and purity of white Southern womanhood. When Southern white girls unabashedly acted on their desires for black men in public spaces, despite the fact that almost all aspects of their society were based on preventing these relationships from forming, they were challenging racial and gender hierarchies, often at personal risk. They were also declaring support for at least some integrated spaces and taking control of their own sexual and romantic decisions. These changes ultimately extended

¹²⁴ Susan Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 254.

¹²⁵ Louie Robinson, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Becomes Respectable,” *Ebony*, November 1965; “Philly Fans Brush by Cops, Mob Jackie Wilson,” *Jet*, July 20, 1961, 62.

beyond concert venues; *Jet* magazine noted a preponderance of “mixed dating” at integrated schools, which often began when couples met at school dances. One white girl from Milwaukee stoked the fears of white protectors of “the Southern way of life” across the country when she admitted that “Almost every white girl I know had a secret crush on one of the colored boys.”¹²⁶ White girls pursuing black romantic interests gave the lie to the Southern myth of sexually aggressive black men who preyed on pure white women, which then threatened to undermine the entire system of institutionalized white supremacy. Susan Cahn points out that “The press reported similar behavior among black and white girls” at concerts and dances. “Throwing caution to the wind, girls of both races willfully cast aside the passivity and restraint required of the white southern ‘lady’ or middle-class ‘respectable black woman.’” Female audience members were often categorized as “crazed” or “hysterical,” she says, but those labels did not prevent the fact that “female fans rushed the stage, screamed from their seats, wet their underpants, and lusted after male rock idols” of both races.¹²⁷ Southern political systems were being attacked, by civil rights demonstrators, rock and roll musicians, and their ardent fans, which led to sometimes dangerous encounters between performers and audience members.

Many black musicians found themselves in peril if they were believed to be involved with white women, especially in the South. Chuck Berry, for instance, was arrested and briefly jailed for “trying to date” a 20-year-old Mississippi white girl.¹²⁸ Perhaps even more ominously, Ike Turner recalled visiting his home state of Mississippi with his white girlfriend when “the police started inquiring about who she was and why she was there. The woman had no idea of the danger

¹²⁶ “White Girls Take Lead in Mixed Dating, Says Coed,” *Jet*, November 27, 1958, 24.

¹²⁷ Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 243.

¹²⁸ “Negro Singer Jailed,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1959, 38.

involved in a relationship between a black man and a white woman in the South. Her actions almost got me hanged.”¹²⁹ Many performers took pre-emptive steps to avoid compromising positions that might expose them to violence or legal repercussions. Wynonie Harris, for example, once hid in the washroom for almost an hour to avoid an overzealous white admirer.¹³⁰ Little Richard explained that the attention from white girls led (at least partially) to the creation of his flamboyant image: “They didn’t like it ‘cause the white girls was screamin’ over me...That’s the reason I started wearin’ makeup, so that they wouldn’t feel threatened when I was in clubs, around the white girls.”¹³¹ Although Southern authorities would not have deigned to ascribe political motivations to these flirtations, Wini Breines sees something deeper. Being attracted to ‘dark’ men, she says, “meant being unable to attain, or rejecting, prevailing values and standards of attractiveness, being an outsider.” Furthermore, “As fans, they constructed their idols in a process of exploration, as an escape, even a protest.”¹³² By coming on to black artists, then, white girls were positioning themselves in opposition to dominant cultural norms, and removing themselves from Southern ideology, which focused obsessively on the purity of white women. Even though engaging in crushes on black musicians was not the same as directly attacking Jim Crow structures, white supremacists understood reception to interracial sex as threatening to the very foundation of the Southern political system. These girls, then, were asserting active positions in the face of harsh resistance.

¹²⁹ Ike Turner and Nigel Cawthorne, *Takin’ Back My Name: The Confessions of Ike Turner* (London: Virgin Books, 1999), 68.

¹³⁰ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 177.

¹³¹ Andy Gill and Little Richard, “Ten Questions for Little Richard,” in Kandia Crazy Horse, *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock ‘N’ Roll* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 2-3.

¹³² Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1992), 149; 158.

Instances of teenagers opposing the segregation of concerts should, then, be viewed as part of a wider pattern of resistance to white supremacist ideals in the South. In Houston, Texas, where racial roles were not always as rigid as they were in other parts of the South, rock and roll fans demonstrated their feelings towards segregation on three separate occasions in 1956, in ways that precipitated the use of direct action tactics by civil rights activists. In June, *Jet* magazine described a concert “where the cops got an unscheduled workout trying to stop white girls from dancing with Negro men. They broke up a first floor session only to have other mixed couples start rug-cutting in the second and third balconies.”¹³³ In this instance, the police officers chose to let the matter go. Two months later, when Carl Perkins invited white teens, who made up roughly 60 percent of his audience, to join blacks on the dance floor, police also declined to intervene. When white teenagers attempted the same feat at a Record Stars show featuring Fats Domino one week later, however, the results were different. When police stopped the music to tell blacks to go back to their seats so that white kids could dance separately, Domino refused to play. Hundreds of concertgoers ran to the box office to demand refunds, and police panicked, ending the show, and escorting the promoters out of the facility. Promoter R.J. Rausaw was offended, telling black newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* that, “he did not give Negro or white dances and all were invited to come. Since all the talk about desegregation, white teenagers are no longer content to come to dances featuring Negro artists and sit and listen while Negroes dance.” *The Courier* concurred, noting, “white teenagers are getting their first taste of discrimination and they don’t like it.”¹³⁴

¹³³ Dan Burley, “People Are Talking About,” *Jet*, June 14, 1956, 43.

¹³⁴ Cliff Richardson, “Police Attempt to Halt Rock ‘n’ Rollers Fails: Integrated Houston Dance Draws 4,000,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 25, 1956, 21.

The week after this incident, Houston Police Chief Carl Sheptnine told promoters they would be denied the use of concert venues if they did not ensure that the races were kept separate during shows. In response, the *Courier* noted, “there has not been a single interracial incident at the Houston dances in question. All the incidents have been touched off by police insisting on strict segregation and white teen-agers determined to dance.”¹³⁵ Yet again, adolescents were not portrayed as challenging hallowed Southern institutions—all they wanted to do, it seems, is dance, even if it meant directly confronting white supremacist laws and institutions in order to do so. Teenagers were, however, becoming active agents in opposing desegregation in public spaces a full four years before direct action techniques became widely used among student civil rights organizations.

These instances of opposition kept occurring in concert venues across the South, especially among young white listeners who, although they faced many risks, were unlikely to encounter the kind of brutal violence or legal punishment that black kids who fought these obstacles may have endured. Shelley Stewart remembered when a sock hop he had organized in Birmingham in 1960 was surrounded by 80 klansman shortly. The manager told the audience that the KKK “doesn’t feel like our friend Shelley the Playboy is good enough to entertain here.” The audience, comprised of about 800 white kids, responded “Like hell he isn’t” and “went after the Kluxers like bees swarming over a honeycomb.” As Stewart and his group tried to escape out the back door, “Several Klansmen danced in close in an effort to swing chains at our heads,” he recalls. “A few white girls then pressed themselves against us. ‘If you hit them, you are going to have to hit us too,’ they screamed. The chains went limp at the sides of the antagonists.” Ultimately, the kids “kept the Klansmen busy fighting,” allowing Stewart to escape the premises. “Those 800 white kids...burst

¹³⁵ Richardson, “Police Act to Prevent Integrated Dances,” 20.

out those doors and jumped on the klan...fighting for me,” he later told Brian Ward in an interview.¹³⁶ In Greensboro, North Carolina, a so-called ‘riot’ erupted after police tried to stop interracial couples from dancing together, even resorting to throwing tear gas into the crowd.¹³⁷ In Memphis, fifteen whites were barred from entering a blues and rock and roll concert benefiting the Booker T. Washington band’s trip to an international Negro Elks Convention. As incendiary as this situation was, the owner relented, allowing the white fans to attend the black-oriented concert so long as they sat in a separate section. They refused. Again, a choice had been made.¹³⁸

In addition to these obstacles, Southern white kids often had to face the enmity of their parents in order to attend mixed-race shows. Rick Turner recalled the difficulty he had persuading his girlfriend’s parents to let him take her to concerts featuring black musicians. “The first question I’d get was ‘Any blacks gonna be there?’” he said. “Well yeah, that’s the only kind of music I really liked, of course there’s gonna be blacks there!”¹³⁹ Beyond their own homes, Southern kids could also face often violent opposition from white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council. Both groups recognized the music’s potential for bringing the races closer together almost immediately, and acted against it. But rock and roll fans almost always refused to capitulate, even when faced with these formidable and violent foes, cementing their status as active agents in the fight against segregation. Rick Coleman recounts an incident that occurred in South Carolina in 1950: “[T]he Ku Klux Klan raided an African American bar, Charlie’s Place...to stop the ‘race-mixing’ dancing there. The Klansmen even shot up the

¹³⁶ Stewart, *The Road South*, viii-ix; Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 129.

¹³⁷ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 181.

¹³⁸ “Whites Banned From Beale Street Musical Show,” *Jet*, September 5, 1957, 61.

¹³⁹ Rick Turner, in discussion with the author.

offending jukebox.” They also beat the club owner, but, Coleman pointedly notes, “He, like the music, survived.”¹⁴⁰

In other instances, teenagers directly confronted this opposition themselves, risking legal trouble and violent threats. Ike Turner remembered playing at a club that catered to white kids: “The police would raid the club on Sunday evenings,” he said. “This club was only for teens and there were no wrongdoings going on, but the police didn’t like these kids mixing with blacks. So they loaded up the truck with the white kids, took them to the police station and called their parents to come and pick them up. They’d tell the parents that their kids were hanging round blacks and so they’d been brought in before they got into trouble.”¹⁴¹ When seventeen-year-old singer-songwriter Janis Ian released her hit single “Society’s Child” in 1965, she was amazed by some of the responses she received from those who were offended by the song’s focus on the sad breakup of an interracial couple. “People got crazy,” she said. “A radio station in Atlanta dared to put ‘Society’s Child’ in rotation, and someone burned the station down. Strangers walked up to me in restaurants and spit in my food. Sometimes, when I tried to walk onstage from the audience, a person would deliberately put their foot out to trip me.” She and her producer routinely received death threats, mostly from angry white respondents, though they came from across the country. “The mail I got spanned the gap between heaven and hell; one letter would thank me for bravely speaking out, the next would have razor blades taped to the envelope so I’d shred my fingers opening it.” These responses left Ian perplexed. “Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney had been found dead in Mississippi, killed just for helping people register to vote,” she said. “All I’d done was write a song, make a three-minute record.” Despite the implicit assertion that her actions were

¹⁴⁰ Coleman, *Blue Monday*, 83.

¹⁴¹ Turner and Cawthorne, *Takin’ Back My Name*, 69.

not political, at least not in the same way that direct action protests were, she did recognize the connection between the two. “Those same people wanted *me* dead” she said of the white supremacist opposition that applauded and covered up the Mississippi murders. “The stakes were pretty high.”¹⁴²

White youth were therefore acutely aware of the white supremacist positions on rock and roll, and what members were willing to do to maintain the status quo. And yet they continued to resist. At a 1956 Bill Haley show, for example, where “Council demonstrators carried placards reading ‘Down with be-bop’ and ‘Ask your preacher about jungle music’” outside the arena, *Jet* magazine triumphantly proclaimed that “Young rock ‘n’ roll fans promptly picketed the picketers...Opposing the Council picketers were teen-age boys carrying signs reading ‘Rock ‘n’ roll is here to stay.’”¹⁴³ Teenagers might have been fighting for the right to hear the music they identified with in a public space among both black and white musicians and fans, but they were doing so using direct action techniques borrowed from civil rights struggles, in opposition to the same white massive resistance that tried to violently prevent children from desegregating public schools, or activists from staging sit-ins in local businesses. The political nature of opposing the Citizens Council in favour of rock and roll is explicit in this case, but it was present every time a Southern teenager attended one of the many concerts picketed by this group. As one white adolescent told *Jet* in 1957, “I wish the parents would go home. Integration has to come sooner or later. I’m not afraid of Negroes. I’m afraid of parents.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Ian, *Society’s Child*, xv-xviii.

¹⁴³ “Rock ‘n’ Roll Show Picketed, Fans Picket Pickets,” *Jet*, May 31, 1956, 56.

¹⁴⁴ Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 188.

Northern and Western kids also decided to take stands against racial discrimination and division in public spaces. As in the South, this action often took the form of attending rock and roll concerts, although some aspects of the experience were necessarily different in the North and West. First of all, even though some public areas were segregated by the owner or by patrons, in most places they were not legally defined as segregated venues. This fact hid some of the discomfort with the racial elements of rock and roll concerts that were so apparent in the South. Still, when teenagers bought tickets to rock and roll shows in the North or West, they remained aware of the kind of opposition they were up against.

Although most public spaces outside of the South were not legally segregated, they remained racially divided in many cases. Thomas Sugrue argues that “Many northern whites supported integrationism in rhetoric but rejected it in practice,” a conflict that shaped how people’s rights and behaviours in public areas.¹⁴⁵ Rock and roll shows often featured large rosters of integrated musicians performing on the same stage. Race was not mentioned on advertisements for these shows, and performers were usually listed according to name recognition rather than race. In some occasions, white acts opened for black performers, and few complaints were raised.¹⁴⁶ Alan Freed said of one of his famous Rock ‘n’ Roll Revues in 1956 that “No stage or band pit separated them from the performers. The boys and girls danced on camera with me. They shared the screen with Ivory Joe Hunter. When LaVern Baker gave out with *Jim Dandy Got Married*, the audience joined right in on the refrain and kept time with their hands and feet.” Even though many of Freed’s shows were integrated, the majority of audience members were white, which meant that

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (Random House, 2008) xxv-xxvi.

¹⁴⁶ For examples of integrated posters, programs, or playbills, please see the Programs boxes in the Alan Freed Collection; Tosches, *Hellfire*, 142-145; and Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 17.

they ignored any perceived boundaries to dance and sing with black performers. Freed's emphasis on the lack of division between the audience and musicians is also telling. "Nowhere in show business will you find a more democratic relationship between entertainers and audience," he reiterated.¹⁴⁷ Teenage fans were very much aware that when they purchased a ticket to one of Freed's revues that they would be entering a more open public space where socializing with musicians and other audience members across racial boundaries might occur. Most were more than happy to embrace this lack of division.

Much like their Southern contemporaries, Northern teenagers were well aware of the controversy they were courting by attending mixed-race shows, even if they did not encounter the obvious legal divisions that marked Jim Crow spaces. Janis Ian recalled performing at a 1967 concert in California where she was greeted with signs screaming "Nigger lover go home!" and "No race mixing allowed here!"¹⁴⁸ More than a decade earlier, Johnny Otis recalled constant battles with the Los Angeles police over performing for mixed-race audiences. "They hated to see white kids attending the dances along with Black and Chicano youngsters," he said. "At first, the cops would stand around glaring at the kids and harassing them with bullshit questions, checking their ID's, and so on." Teenagers of all racial backgrounds continued to purchase tickets, though, so the police moved to harsher tactics. "They began to use ancient blue laws against us," Otis said. "These old laws read as follows: it is unlawful for a fifteen-year-old to dance with a sixteen-year-old, a sixteen-year-old shall not dance with a seventeen-year-old, a seventeen-year-old must not dance with an eighteen-year-old, and so forth." Ultimately, Otis and the bands he played with were forced to rent a stadium outside of Los Angeles, in the predominantly Mexican-American suburb

¹⁴⁷ Freed, "Wonderful World of Rock," 36.

¹⁴⁸ Ian, *Society's Child*, xx.

of El Monte, in order to escape police harassment. Their gamble worked: enough white and black kids made the trek out to see these shows that audience numbers often numbered 2000 people a night.¹⁴⁹ In this case, teenagers showed that they were willing to endure police interrogation and possible legal trouble, and to subsequently cross into a racially and economically marked space when the show was forced to change venues. Intimidation from above was obvious, and it was clearly driven by fear of public race mixing, but it did not prevent kids from crossing into racially distinct spaces in order to enjoy their favourite music. Their actions may not have been directed at bringing down entire political and social systems, but they were clearly negative reactions to the limits enshrined by these systems.

Even if laws restricting spaces along racial lines were largely absent across the North and West, euphemisms that emphasized black primitivism, criminality, and excessive sexuality were often used by white critics to describe black and mixed-race spaces and customs without sounding overtly racist. These terms could indicate an author's distaste for the racially-mixed atmospheres of rock and roll concerts, and in some cases provoke opposition to the infusion of black culture into mixed-race areas. As early as 1954, an *Our World* columnist sent to review one of Alan Freed's Moondog shows in Brooklyn, wrote about the police having to subdue a "mob" as a "Rock 'n' Roll Orgy Surges." The show was bombarded, the author said, by "stampeding thousands of youngsters" who besieged the theater" and were "presided over by Alan Freed, disk jockey and high priest of the rock 'n' roll cult." "On the first day, the fervent two-beat rhythm set the devotees to dancing in the aisles, standing on the seats, and pounding with hands and feet in time to the music," he continued. "Some local newspapers consulted psychologists and came up with comparisons of the craze to the dancing frenzy of the Middle Ages, St. Vitus' dance and the

¹⁴⁹ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 60-61; xxvi.

like.”¹⁵⁰ This short article is rife with racialized descriptions of rock and roll music, and how teenage patrons reacted to it in public. The show itself was sexualized as an “orgy,” the depiction of Freed as the “high priest” of a “cult” indicated incivility, while the kids who seemed to be caught up in a musical frenzy seemed to have caught a primitive disease. Freed blithely pasted pieces from this article in the program for his 1957 Summer Festival, with the comment “Apparently rock ‘n’ roll has no charms to soothe the savage beast, for its impact upon youthful masses has been at times explosively violent.”¹⁵¹ His tongue-in-cheek response revealed some of the hyperbole in the article, but it did not directly challenge the racialized remarks—in fact, it reinforced them. In some cases, perhaps, whites who found desegregation acceptable did not always object to the racist language that reiterated black inferiority. Even though Freed openly supported integration efforts and civil rights campaigns, he was unable or unwilling to call attention to the racist euphemisms used in this article.

These euphemisms could be found in press reviews of concerts across the United States, and even in other countries. In 1956, the city of Burbank intervened to tell the Platters not to play their song “I Wanna,” declaring the hit “too jumpy, hot stuff” for teenagers.¹⁵² A “special correspondent” revealed to *The London Times* that English youth were copying their American peers “in what seems to be a mingling of primitive dance and ritual,” adding derisively that Bill Haley “is reported as saying that [the music’s] beat stems from old Negro church music.”¹⁵³ When the *Times* sent its own correspondent to Washington D.C. to report on an American concert, the

¹⁵⁰ “Dear Mr. Moondog,” *Our World*, August 1954. Cited in Irwin, “Rock ‘n’ Roll ‘n’ Alan,” *Pageant*, 1957. The Alan Freed Collection.

¹⁵¹ Irwin, “Rock ‘n’ Roll ‘n’ Alan,” *Pageant*, 1957, 56. The Alan Freed Collection.

¹⁵² “Rock and Roll Badgered ‘n’ Battered,” *Variety*, July 18, 1956, 46.

¹⁵³ “Stimulus Behind ‘Rock ‘N’ Roll’ Disturbances,” *The London Times*, September 15, 1956, 4.

horrified reporter agreed with an observer that “the theatre jammed with adolescents ‘rings and shrieks like the jungle bird house at the zoo.’” After describing “Outbursts of violence spurred by the heavy, pulsing beat of this latest derivative of Negro blues, by the moaning suggestiveness of most of its songs,” the correspondent went on to confidently attest that “Social workers, seeing a connexion between [rock and roll’s] jungle rhythm and juvenile delinquency, concede that most trouble can be attributed to the craze for ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll’ among the young ‘hoodlum’ elements.”¹⁵⁴ Back in the United States, Gertrude Samuels, listed as “a staff writer for *The Times Magazine* and a parent,” described teenage concertgoers as being lulled into a mindless frenzy by the music, which “is an extension of what was known as Rhythm and Blues, a music...that aimed primarily at the Negro market.” She went on to link the old with the new: “Rock ‘n’ roll exploits this same heavy beat—by making it heavier, lustier, and transforming it into what has become known as The Big Beat. It is a tense, monotonous beat that often gives rock ‘n’ roll music a jungle-like persistence.”¹⁵⁵

These racial euphemisms were often used to voice opposition to the ways that female fans violated gender norms with their enthusiastic public reactions to rock and roll musicians. One *Life* magazine columnist noted disdainfully of a 1956 performance by Elvis Presley that “He does not just bounce to accent his heavy beat. He uses a bump and grind routine usually seen only in burlesque. His young audiences, unexposed to such goings-on, do not just shout their approval. They get set off shock waves of hysteria, going into frenzies of screeching and wailing, winding up in tears.”¹⁵⁶ Here, the journalist combined the over-sexualized, feminized description of

¹⁵⁴ “U.S. Scenes Recall ‘Jungle Bird House At The Zoo,’” *The London Times*, September 15, 1956, 4.

¹⁵⁵ Gertrude Samuels, “Why They Rock ‘n’ Roll—And Should They?” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1958, SM16.

¹⁵⁶ “Elvis—A Different Kind of Idol,” *Life*, August 27, 1956, 101-102.

audience members in hysterics with portrayals of them “screeching and wailing” like primitive beings. *New York Times* writer David Dempsey also used these buzzwords to indicate concern over racial and sexual transgressions among young female fans, albeit in a more obvious manner. “Although idolatry in popular music is nothing new, the method of expressing this idolatry seems to be changing,” he explained in a 1964 article. “As our singers get progressively frenzied, and an audience that once swooned in the presence of its favorite singer, or at best squealed, has given way to a mob that flips.” He emphasized the music’s African-inspired origins in a disapproving tone, noting that “It is generally admitted that jungle rhythms influence the ‘beat’ of much contemporary dance activity... [it] is strongly reminiscent of those tribal dances performed to the tune of a nose flute and the beat of a tom-tom.” Dempsey also made sure that readers knew where to place the blame. “Today’s music is a throwback, or tribal atavism, made endemic through mass communication,” he said. “It is probably no coincidence that the Beatles, who provoke the most violent response among teen-agers, resemble in manner the witch doctors who put their spell on hundreds of shuffling and stamping natives.”¹⁵⁷ It may appear curious that The Beatles, a group of polite British boys dressed for success in immaculate Pierre Cardin suits, would be identified with the supposedly threatening aspects of African-inspired rhythm and blues and rock and roll, but this comment revealed a widely-held concern that most rock and roll artists, particularly those, like the Beatles, who came from working-class backgrounds, embodied questionable racial and gender attributes, whatever their race.

Even outside the South, then, teenagers were aware that much of the opposition against rock and roll was racialized, especially when very real racial boundaries were crossed or blurred

¹⁵⁷ David Dempsey, “Why the Girls Scream, Weep, Flip,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 1964.

in public spaces. When they crossed these lines, they were making decisions that violated racial expectations, and displayed at least temporary acceptance of engaging within interracial spaces. Many authorities realized that established racial norms were being threatened, and without the solid basis of Jim Crow laws to fall back on, feared that this boundary crossing would lead to more radical political and social demands. Consciously or not, these fears helped to shape negative views of rock and roll concerts to the point that many shows were associated with the outbreak of violence. The major reason for these eruptions seems to be the overreaction of local authorities, as many concerts were swarming with police officers trolling the aisles for any sign of trouble. A tape of an Alan Freed concert in Boston that broke out in violence clearly shows white and black male audience members clapping and enjoying the music together side by side until police start cracking down on them.¹⁵⁸ Police officers insisted that they prepared for trouble after violence broke out at one of Freed's pioneering Moondog shows in Cleveland in 1952, when 30,000 eager fans showed up for a concert that seated 10,000, and wound up breaking down the doors and overcrowding the venue. Freed later told an Ohio paper "I don't consider them riots, [just] Teen-agers showing they liked music. The Cleveland Arena held 12,000, we drew 30,000. I warned the Cleveland police that they ought to have every available man out on Euclid Avenue. They didn't pay any attention, same as the New York police didn't at first. So the doors gave in at the Cleveland Arena—and everybody got in free."¹⁵⁹ He did, however, perceptively identify the real cause for police intervention. "Those Cleveland affairs appealed most to colored people," he noted. "In fact, after I ran them, I received batches of poison-pen letters calling me a 'nigger-lover.'"¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ "Rock and Roll: The Early Days," directed by Patrick Montgomery and Pamela Page (Archive Film Production, 1984).

¹⁵⁹ Earl Wilson, April 13, 1957, www.alanfreed.com

¹⁶⁰ Irwin, "Rock 'n' Roll 'n' Alan," 61, The Alan Freed Collection.

Sometimes racism was too deeply entrenched to really change concertgoers' minds: A fight between white and black teens which took place after a Boston concert, for example, was trumpeted in the media after two white boys were thrown onto a subway platform and one was hospitalized.¹⁶¹ But incidents like these seem to have been rare. Sociologists Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave perceptively observe that large numbers of officers ready to clamp down on anything from overcrowding to dancing to stomping their feet led to a tense atmosphere where violence became possible.¹⁶² Bo Diddley shared this theory in a 1970s interview, proclaiming, "The cops call it a riot, but it's the cops who start it. They call [a show] off saying there is gonna be a riot—how can they know that unless it's them who makes 'em?'"¹⁶³ Catalysts for violence were often difficult to pin down, however, and outright racism would not have been received well in the North, so the aforementioned terms that associated rock and roll with derogatory blackness were used to warn parents what they were up against—and kids what they were getting into should they choose to violate the North's invisible color line by attending.

This threat, based on the mendacious link between criminality and blackness, was so persistent that many shows were actually cancelled in advance in order to prevent perceived violence, and some cities even made the move to ban rock and roll acts from performing there. When New Haven and Bridgeport, Connecticut, became two of the first cities to ban rock and roll concerts, Bridgeport Superintendent of Police John A. Lyddy insisted it was because "Teen-agers virtually work themselves into a frenzy to the beat of fast swing music."¹⁶⁴ In San Diego, Elvis

¹⁶¹ "Rock 'N' Roll Fight Hospitalizes Youth," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1957, 23.

¹⁶² Linda Martin & Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1993), 28.

¹⁶³ Michael Lydon and Bo Diddley, "Bo Diddley," in Michael Lydon, *Boogie Lightning* (New York: The Dial Press, 1974), 76.

¹⁶⁴ June Bundy, "Obscene R&B Tunes Blasted In New England," *Billboard*, April 2, 1955, 18.

Presley's "style [which] embraces sensuous gyrations and a savage beat" was cited as inciting a riot.¹⁶⁵ A fight that broke out at a Bill Haley show at the National Guard Armoury in Washington D.C. was attributed to "that jungle strain that gets 'em all worked up" by manager Arthur 'Dutch' Bergman.¹⁶⁶ In Jersey City, New Jersey, Mayor B.J. Benny declared, "It is our feeling here in Jersey City that rock and roll rhythm is filled with dynamite and we don't want the dynamite to go off [here]."¹⁶⁷ Mayor John Hynes of Boston banned shows in his town because of "rock-'n'-roll paganism," while more concerts were cancelled, prohibited, or limited across the Northeast and Midwest.¹⁶⁸

In each case, the (black) music was blamed for rioting and violence, not the (white) kids who disregarded the orders of police. They were still presented as proper adolescents who simply had the misfortune of being misled by black element in music, which, again, was characterized as primitive and hypersexual. Coleman cites a concert in San Jose featuring Fats Domino that erupted into a riot involving 2,500 teenagers and causing 3000 dollars in damages. Although police determined that alcohol and overcrowding caused this ruckus, mainstream newspapers delightedly reported that "the pulsating rhythms of Fats Domino drove the teens wild."¹⁶⁹ Fats' astonishingly powerful 'beat' was also blamed after a "melee among white and Negro sailors and marines and their wives and dates" in Newport, Rhode Island. Although commanding officer Admiral Ralph

¹⁶⁵ "Rock 'n Roll B.O. 'Dynamite,'" *Variety*, April 11, 1956, 60.

¹⁶⁶ "Youth: Rocking and Rolling," *Newsweek*, June 18, 1956, 42.

¹⁶⁷ Montgomery, "Rock and Roll: The Early Days."

¹⁶⁸ Tosches, *Hellfire*, 146; Al Portch, "Manager of Bill Haley Defends 'The Real Thing,'" *Downbeat*, September 19, 1956, 43, Alan Freed Papers, Box 1, Folder 55, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

¹⁶⁹ "2,500 Youths Riot At Dance On Coast," *The New York Times*, July 9, 1956, 13; Coleman, *Blue Monday*, 127.

D. Earle Jr. stated that “Racial factions or friction between sailors and marines were ruled out as contributing factors” in the violence, *The New York Times* felt obligated to inform readers that “the riot...developed when someone doused the lights as Fats Domino’s band reached a frenzied tempo.”¹⁷⁰ Even when it was clear that violence was not caused by racial strife, terms like “frenzied” associated with Domino’s African-American band made it clear that racial mixing and black music were to blame for this uproar.

The racialized nature of this opposition was clear enough that some groups fought back, explicitly identifying racial mixing as the true cause behind the uproar. In 1956, after the city of El Monte, California, issued a ban on any rock and roll concerts from being held within city limits, The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) joined forces with the NAACP and the American Federation of Musicians Local 47 to sue the city for passing “a measure designed primarily to prevent young people from mingling in a mixed-race situation.”¹⁷¹ Although city authorities claimed the ban was essential because rock and roll was “detrimental to both the health and morals of our youth and community,” the ACLU noted that “There has been evidence that the objection to the music extends to, and may be based upon, the fact that it is largely the product of Negro bands.” The ban was a response to a concert given by Chuck Higgins, a locally popular black orchestra leader. When police entered the auditorium after midnight, one lieutenant noted that the audience was “engaged in suggestive, stimulating and tantalizing motions induced by the provocative rhythms of an all-negro band.”¹⁷² Even though the city’s official response said nothing direct about race, the intent was abundantly clear—so much so that the lawsuit was ultimately

¹⁷⁰ “‘Rock ‘N’ Roll’ Banned,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 1956, 29.

¹⁷¹ George Lipsitz, introduction to *Upside Your Head!: Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue*, by Johnny Otis (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press: 1993), xxvi.

¹⁷² “Civil Liberties and Rock ‘N’ Roll,” *Variety*, August 15, 1956, 52.

successful, and the ban removed. Just like their Southern peers, Northern kids knew that purchasing a ticket to one of these concerts constituted an act against the implicit racism that defined their cities. Ike Turner declared that “Because of [musicians], things changed. You had a younger generation that was not hooked on race... They didn’t care how prejudiced or biased their parents were, they came out and said, ‘I want to see for myself.’”¹⁷³

Some teenagers in the North and West did seem more inclined than their Southern contemporaries to attempt actual communication across racial lines at rock and roll concerts. This may be because few tangible divisions existed within these concert venues—there were usually no ropes to pull down, and most places would not have mandated that blacks and whites sit in separate areas. When shows appealed to both black and white patrons, then, it was more likely that they would sit or stand in interracial spaces. Even though seating arrangements did not inevitably lead to mingling, they did make communication easier. Johnny Otis explained, “As the music grew in popularity, more and more white kids came to our dances, sometimes (God forbid!), even dancing with African American and Mexican American teenagers.”¹⁷⁴ When Carl Perkins appeared on the Perry Como Show singing his hit, “Blue Suede Shoes,” an audience of white and black teens, though technically separated, was seen peacefully dancing the same dances side by side.¹⁷⁵ Alan Freed consistently told the press that he realized that rock and roll was a distinct genre when interracial audiences were drawn to his Moondog Shows. “The audiences were about 70 percent white and 30 percent Negro,” he said. “This was the first inkling I had that white people enjoyed rhythm and blues. Rock ‘n’ roll had moved out of the limited ‘race’ classification into big

¹⁷³ Turner and Cawthorne, *Takin’ Back My Name*, 121.

¹⁷⁴ Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 60.

¹⁷⁵ Montgomery, “Rock and Roll: The Early Days.”

business.”¹⁷⁶ Pictures from rock and roll concerts across the North and West, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s revealed audiences that were usually dominated by one race, yet almost always included members of other races dotted throughout the venue. This was true even in predominantly white or black neighbourhoods, where race mixing might be unexpected.¹⁷⁷

Most teenagers did not often enter spaces where their common interests with people of other racial backgrounds could be publicly expressed. Sometimes people’s behaviours were not much affected; many white rock and roll fans in particular remembered attending shows where people rarely congregated with those outside their own race. Ken Avuk recalled that he “didn’t see a lot of black people who would go to, say, the Four Seasons, for example,” when attending concerts near his Long Island home in the 1960s. “I mean, I don’t even remember the audience at the Supremes, [but] I think generally the audiences were very heavily white.”¹⁷⁸ In other cases, though, examples of interracial communication were evident. Theodore Trost, who grew up in a white neighbourhood in Pennsylvania, said that concerts he attended were “majority white but definitely mixed,” and that many people mingled: “I was personally engaged in conversations with people of other races.”¹⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Tyrone Williams, who lived in a mostly black community in Detroit, noted that while “most rock concerts were all white, [and] most R & B concerts all

¹⁷⁶ Irwin, “Rock ‘n’ Roll: Madness or fun?” *Pageant*, July 1957, 61.

¹⁷⁷ For examples of these pictures, please see Otis, *Upside Your Head!* 63; “Dear Mr. Moondog,” Louise Robinson, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Becomes Respectable,” *Ebony*, November 1965, and *Our World*, August, 1954, Robert Sullivan, “Rock ‘n’ Roll—‘n’ Riot,” *Sunday News*, September 18, 1955, 88, “Alan Freed Reopens State Jan. 11-12,” *Hartford Connecticut Times*, April 13, 1958, all accessed at www.alanfreed.com.

¹⁷⁸ Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author.

¹⁷⁹ Theodore Trost, in discussion with the author.

black,” that he also attended shows with mixed-race crowds where “white and black audiences were energetic, upbeat, enthusiastic.”¹⁸⁰

Musicians also noticed these changes. Chuck Berry, for instance, detailed incidents of harmonious racial mixing, which surprised and enthused him after growing up in segregated St. Louis. In Buffalo, “The white people there mixed with the blacks who were black as well as those who appeared white, leaving no black blacks or white whites feeling uncomfortable,” he recalled. Even at the Apollo Theatre, the cultural heart of black Harlem, “White folks mingled and conversed as black as colored folks, if you know what I mean. [Blacks and whites] jived between each other. All were artists, playing foolish, having fights, and making love as if the rest of the world had no racial problems whatsoever.”¹⁸¹ Shirley Reeves, a member of the Shirelles, a top-selling black girl group in the early 1960s, later noted that “I’m just amazed at it now everyone got along so well and this was a time of real high prejudice, you know. But in New York there was...you never saw it.”¹⁸² Indeed, Alan Freed’s first New York concert, the 1955 Rock ‘N’ Roll Jubilee Ball, featured an all-star, all-black line-up that drew a crowd that was roughly half black and half white. “Though their parents had heard R&B pulsing through bedroom walls, most would have been appalled to see their children amidst black faces,” Rick Coleman explains, but “the beat united everyone.”¹⁸³ These teenagers had been exposed to the suppressed racism of their parents’ generation, but had decided instead to act against it.

¹⁸⁰ Tyrone Williams, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 4, 2011.

¹⁸¹ Berry, *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography*, 135; 116.

¹⁸² Neville, “The Hitmakers: The Teens Who Stole Pop Music.”

¹⁸³ Coleman, *Blue Monday*, 97.

Although rock concert attendance was not an outright stance against the injustice of racism as it had to be in the South whenever the races mixed harmoniously, part of the rationalization of attending could still involve a rejection of this racism along with the decision to define oneself against the parental generation. Fran Shor explained that “It didn’t have to be within a political framework. It just had to be within a subcultural framework where given the degree of knowledge of the music and given the preponderance of black artists that you were there because you were embracing that culture and moving beyond—it was in a liminal state, as I like to call it. Moving beyond just your sense of whiteness.” Even though his father had brought him to jazz concerts with majority-black audiences as a child, he still saw the rock and roll shows he attended with friends as a teenager within an oppositional political framework. “I think it was our little act of rebellion as kids who were in this vanilla suburb wanting to, following the George Clinton thing, wanting to get into the Chocolate City,” he said.¹⁸⁴ The rebellion he referred to here was not against his own family, but against the institutionalized, spatial racism that separated whites and blacks. This separation was so profound that teenagers could sense these inequalities without full awareness of their causes, and sometimes sought to rectify them in their own small ways. Artists often saw these changes occurring on a more personal level. When he toured in the North before mixed audiences for the first time, Chuck Berry recounted, “I doubt that many Caucasian persons would come into a situation that would cause them to know the feeling a black person experiences after being reared under old-time southern traditions and then finally being welcomed by an entirely unbiased and friendly audience, applauding without apparent regard for racial

¹⁸⁴ Fran Shor, in discussion with the author.

difference.”¹⁸⁵ What was personal to both young concertgoers and the musicians who performed for them had undoubtedly become political.

Sometimes this link was exemplified by teenage rock and roll enthusiasts who combined their love of this music with direct political tactics. Trish Follett, for example, was 15 years old when she was profiled by *Life* magazine. Trish made such a ruckus when attending performances by rock and roll acts at McCormick Place Theater in Chicago that the concert promoter had her banned. She was so incensed that she “staged a sit-down protest strike in the ladies’ room and kept police thumping outside in adult despair.”¹⁸⁶ Memphis musician Jim Dickinson remembered teenagers carrying placards outside their high school reading “Bring Back Dewey!” after deejay Dewey Phillips’s contract with WHBQ was not renewed, while Matthew Delmont recounts how “throughout 1954, white and African American teenagers fought outside of WFIL- TV’s West Philadelphia studio on an almost daily basis” because of the station’s reluctance to feature black teenagers to dance on *American Bandstand*.¹⁸⁷ The studio claimed that spots on the show were open to all teenagers, and that applications were evaluated without regard to race, but the vast majority of onscreen dancers were white, even though *Bandstand* enjoyed popularity among viewers of both races. Walter Palmer, a black teenager who was active in this protest, proudly explained how he came up with a plan to test the studio’s racially discriminatory policies. “I engineered a plan to get membership applications, and gave them Irish, Polish, and Italian last names,” he said. “They mailed the forms back to our homes and once we had the cards we were able to get in that day.” When these kids arrived at the studio, they often faced violence from angry

¹⁸⁵ Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 65.

¹⁸⁶ “There’s Always a Song in my Head,” *Life*, May 21, 1965, 98.

¹⁸⁷ Cantor, *Dewey and Elvis*, 191; Delmont, *The Kids Are Alright*, 11-12.

whites outside, in what Palmer called “all-out race riots,” and were denied entry, both of which proved their point about the show’s discriminatory nature.¹⁸⁸ Rock and roll fandom presented a unique way for teenagers to question policies of racial segregation and discrimination, the roles they were expected to fill within deeply divided societies, and alternative methods of understanding their own identities. These kids framed their grievances as protests with methods perfected by civil rights activists, indicating at least a faint approval of their goals of racial equality. Each also felt empowered enough to make vibrant and public statements against parents, city and state officials, and powerful business heads, who often had to forcibly wrest protesters from these venues.

On the transitional attitudes of postwar teenagers, sociologist Mirra Komarovsky writes, “The old and the new moralities exist side by side dividing the heart against itself.”¹⁸⁹ Teenage fans had to determine which ‘morality’ they would choose before deciding whether or not to breach cultural norms by acting on their love for rock and roll in public spaces, and by engaging with people of other races on a variety of levels. Although teenage concertgoers and the musicians who played to them are generally given little credence for contributing to new racial attitudes even when the music itself is credited with building bridges, both groups proved themselves active agents in the new battle against racism. By the time that civil rights activists won the passage of long-awaited civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s, the racial views of this younger generation had already undergone a profound shift that rendered some of them able to welcome what would ultimately prove to be a revolution. The stage was set for political change,

¹⁸⁸ Delmont, *The Kids Are Alright*, 44.

¹⁸⁹ Mirra Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World: Their Education and Their Dilemmas* (Rowman Altamira: 2004), 48.

and those who participated in rock and roll concerts had made it clear where they had chosen to stand.

Conclusion/Epilogue

In 1965, *Time* magazine ran a 10-page article proclaiming rock and roll music as “The Sound of the Sixties.” The title might have indicated a resounding triumph on the part of a genre that had long been maligned in the mainstream press, for either its excessive (and heavily racialized) sexuality, or its supposedly mind-numbing capabilities, but the tone of the article suggested that it is meant more as a capitulation to forces beyond the parent culture’s control. “For the past ten years, social commentators, with more hope than insight, have been predicting that rock would roll over and die the day after tomorrow,” the author began. “Yet it is still very much here, front, center, and belting out from extra speakers on the unguarded flank. Many cannot take rock ‘n’ roll, but no one can leave it. The big beat is everywhere...It has become, in fact, the international anthem of a new and restless generation, the pulse beat for new modes of dress, dance, language, art and morality.”¹ What was once rebellious, causing organizations from the White Citizens Council to the American Psychological Association to issue warnings on how teenagers might be affected by this interracial music, had become mainstream.

This categorization was not limited to the white pop singers who were bestowed with the title, if not the language, of rock and roll in the late 1950s: black and white musicians who continued to challenge the boundaries of their genres were met with greater mainstream acceptance than ever before—and some of their fans came from unlikely places. “The big boost for big-beat music has come, amazingly enough, from the adult world,” the article stated. “Where knock-the-rock was once the conditioned reflex of the older generation (“Would you want your daughter to marry a Rolling Stone?”), a surprisingly large segment of 20-to-40-year-olds are now facing up to

¹ “Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Sound of the Sixties,” *Time*, May 21, 1965
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901728,00.html> last accessed May 22, 2014.

the music and, what is more, liking it.” The author went on to list some of the “5,000 discotheques [that] have cropped up in the U.S.,” many in chic sections of New York, Los Angeles, Aspen, and even Paris, where socialites mingled with liberal yet staid politicians like Bobby and Ethel Kennedy and Jacob Javits, and noted that “No debutante cotillion or country-club dance is complete these days without a heavy dose of rock ‘n’ roll.” As adult appeal grew, the article insinuated, the genre’s ability to reinforce rebellion of any sort among young people seemed to diminish. “Everywhere the couples go-going on the dance floor are like, well, old,” the author continued. “Moans one teenager: ‘Nothing is sacred any more. I mean, we no sooner develop a new dance or something and our parents are doing it.’”² Rock and roll was becoming respectable, and, the generation gap, perhaps, was starting to close.

Except that the author’s focus on generation and respectability obscured the real reason for rock and roll’s increasing appeal across age and class lines: that acceptable racial ideals had changed. Ten years earlier, few adults, black or white, would have admitted to listening to rock and roll, or allowed themselves to be seen dancing to the genre’s rhythms in public places. By the middle of the 1960s, though, enough had changed, politically, socially, and culturally, that the racial integration inherent to its very being was no longer quite so controversial. Crossing racial boundaries, at least culturally, became somewhat par for the course, devoid of the intense political scrutiny that marked most of civil rights era. Passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and an additional Civil Rights Act in 1968, signaled the federal government’s support for political equality, and fulfilled the movement’s moderate goals of eradicating racial segregation in public places, and setting up federal structures to decrease racial discrimination in voting, employment, and housing. These acts were finally passed in Congress after years of direct

² “Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Sound of the Sixties.”

action undertaken by activists across the country embarrassed many of the nation's leaders into trying to implement real democratic measures.

The appearance of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, a party organized by SNCC in protest of the state's all-white delegation, at the Democratic National Convention in 1964, engaged viewers across the country when leader Fannie Lou Hamer, a stalwart activist and rural sharecropper, shared her story in front of news cameras. This horrified President Lyndon Johnson, who called a straw-man press conference in order to divert attention away from her. Still, damage had been done, and many members of the Democratic Party, including the president, realized that political disruptions would persist until they took action. Johnson used the political capital he had accrued as House Majority Leader, as well as continuing bereavement for John F. Kennedy, who began work on a civil rights bill shortly before he was assassinated, to force the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through Congress, but this was not enough to calm the growing storm.³ On the evening of March 7, 1965, television news broadcasts beamed terrifying images of 600 civil rights activists, many of them women and children, being beaten by police forces in Selma, Alabama for forming a march to Montgomery for voters' rights. Johnson realized that this footage portrayed the United States as anti-democratic, both domestically and internationally, and used resulting public anger to push the Voting Rights Act through Congress.

³ Johnson spoke at length about why a vote for the Civil Rights Act could help the country heal after Kennedy's assassination. "No memorial oration or eulogy...could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill for which he fought so long," he told Congress. "We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter—and to write it in the books of law." After his presidency, he told historian Doris Kearns Goodwin that "Everything I had ever learned in the history books...taught me that martyrs have to die for causes. John Kennedy had died. But his 'cause' was not really clear. That was my job. I had to take the dead man's program and turn it into a martyr's cause." For more, please see Robert Caro, *The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Knopf/Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), xv; 600-601.

Passage of both acts led to significant political realignments (as Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, he reportedly uttered “There goes the South for a generation”). The Democratic Party voiced support for moderate racial equality under the law, while the Republican Party depended on a “Southern” strategy to gain votes from disenchanted whites by supporting policies that would roll back civil rights wins using the “coded” language of colour-blind meritocracy and individual rights. The entire political system systematically moved further to the Right, as formerly Democratic states shifted allegiance, one by one, to the Republican Party, Democratic politicians lent their support to “moderate” policies that often chipped away at the gains created by these civil rights acts, and the country’s economic and political climate became defined by a new philosophy dubbed “neoliberalism.”

In the following decades, the civil rights movement has been depicted as almost hallowed historical ground, a pivotal, isolated moment when black people, mostly in the South, fought for, and received, equality under the law, with little opposition other than from hardcore racists like Asa Carter and Bull Connor, the likes of whom have subsequently disappeared, almost time out of mind. As most of the radical politics that informed the movement have been wiped clean from official histories, Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday was transformed into a national holiday in the 1980s (even segregationist senator Strom Thurmond supported the bill), and conservative pundit Glenn Beck argued for conservatives to “reclaim the civil rights movement,” it is clear that backlash against progressive gains have further ingratiated racist systems and practices, in many ways, by attempting to render them invisible.⁴

⁴ Merle and Earl Black, *The Rise of the Southern Republican* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 5; 115; 75; 326; Gabriel Winant, “Glenn Beck, Park 51 and the Politics of Hallowed Ground, Salon.com, August 30, 2010, http://www.salon.com/2010/08/30/beck_park51_hallowed_ground/ last accessed on May 19, 2014.

But these efforts have never been entirely successful. Civil rights activism still exists in many forms, and even though attempts to achieve economic equality (a hallmark of Black Power philosophies) proved too revolutionary for many moderates, including those who supported desegregation movements, most black Americans, and many white Americans, are still aware of the pervasiveness of racial inequality, and hopeful for solutions. This is one legacy of the civil rights movement, but the most prominent change is one that cuts both ways, assisting neoliberal efforts towards eradicating progressive racial policies while simultaneously turning outright racial discrimination into an evil. This change has been rightly criticized, as racism has become so vilified in contemporary culture that few are willing to recognize in either structures or individuals unless they can be completely maligned.⁵ And yet, the very fact that the culture has transformed so significantly, from varying levels of acceptance of racial inequality and segregation, to positioning even simplistic notions of racial equality as the norm from which any deviance is rendered exceptional, should not be dismissed as a setback.

These changes can obscure instances of racism that do not fit the malicious mold that was crafted in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, but they also reflect the decisions of a sizeable number of young Americans to discard old racial notions and embrace something more equitable and humane, even if the results are too superficial to attack deeply rooted problems. Ken Avuk, for instance, remembered his political and social values shifting as he entered high school. “I remember supporting the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Before that I wouldn’t have because I would have thought somehow it interferes with individual choice, things like that,” he said. “By around ‘64, ‘65, my position started evolving...I became more sympathetic to civil

⁵ Good contemporary examples include public ire over a recording of Donald Sterling, owner of the L.A. Clippers, telling his mistress that he did not want her to be seen in public with black friends, rather than the racist practices he utilized in his property units, or Paula Deen being castigated for using a racial epithet rather than the unfair employment practices in her restaurants.

rights and anti-war and I saw how much of that was considered the best part of America, this whole myth of this entirely middle-class country driving Chevrolets all over the place was very much a myth, that there were people whose rights were being trampled on.”⁶ Millions of people like Avuk, born into a world in flux during and after World War Two, experienced similar challenges to their worldviews, and, especially if they came from middle- or aspiring-class families, realized that old ideas about race and segregation were not worth supporting. It became far more common for both whites and blacks born in this generation to teach their children about an idealistic equality that will exist if we act as though it does, and that living among, and even socializing with, people of different races is nothing to be afraid of. These lessons do not always work out in a nation still so severely stratified by racial inequalities, but they still represent a positive movement outcome that should not be ignored.

These changes were already becoming apparent when the *Time* article was published in 1965. Rock and roll music continued to dominate the charts, but it sounded somewhat different than it had during its inception. The banal white pop acts that had masqueraded as rock and roll during the late 1950s and into the early 1960s were eschewed in favour of more dynamic tunes from white British acts emulating black rock and roll legends like Smokey Robinson, Little Richard, and Muddy Waters, and black musicians performing poppy, gospel-tinged earworms under Berry Gordy’s phenomenally successful Motown label. Both forms rejuvenated the genre, took over the charts, and, despite popular recollection, continued to mix black and white musical elements, selling well amongst both groups. The Beatles, for instance, “had twelve singles in *Billboard’s* Hot 100, including the top five positions,” in 1964, and, in addition, “for about three weeks the Beatles accounted for 60 percent of all singles sold.” A rise in the popularity of white

⁶ Ken Avuk, in discussion with the author, November 22, 2011.

British Invasion artists may have accompanied a decline in black musicians' sales, down 20 percent from 42 percent between 1962 and 1966, but black Motown artists made up for much of this discrepancy, sending 70 percent of their recordings to the Hot 100 list by 1967.⁷ After what seemed like successful campaigns in Birmingham and Mississippi, and federal support for the civil rights acts, the concept of integrated popular culture no longer seemed quite so threatening, and both black and white kids responded favourably. Rock and roll could still act as a middle ground, even as the rhythm of the movement shifted.

It was not for nothing that Sam Cooke once referred to white British Invasion groups like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Animals as "ghetto kids."⁸ Members of these groups, says Reebee Garofalo, "openly and repeatedly acknowledge[ed] their debt to black music, and tour[ed] with black r&b greats," refusing to cover up the integrated nature of their music.⁹ Most of the Beatles' early songs, including "She Loves You" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand" are examples of white British boys trying to copy the words and styles of black girl groups, and John Lennon admitted attempting to mimic Smokey Robinson's distinctive falsetto more than once.¹⁰ The Rolling Stones so adhered to the sounds and posturing of their rhythm and blues forebears that journalist Chet Flippo once noted that "If there were any way to get temporary skin transplants, these Limey boys would be black every night onstage."¹¹ And Eric Burdon credited rock and roll

⁷ Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' the Boat: Music and Mass Movements*, (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992), 249; Paul Kingsbury, *BMI 50th Anniversary: The Explosion of American Music 1940-1990* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation, 1990), 59.

⁸ Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 44.

⁹ Garofalo, *Rockin' the Boat*, 225.

¹⁰ Steve Turner, *A Hard Day's Write: The Stories Behind Every Beatles Song* (London: Carlton Books, 1994), 27-38.

¹¹ Mike Daley. "Why Do Whites Sing Black?: The Blues, Whiteness, and Early Histories of Rock," *Popular Music and Society* June 2003, 3.

with helping to eradicate racial prejudice in the United States, noting that “when rock and roll came along, so did integration...people didn’t care whether the singers were Negro or white as far as the music went. The races were playing together.” He went on to explain that rock and roll and rhythm and blues music, performed by black musicians, led directly to his desire to learn more about African-American life and his decision to advocate on behalf of their civil rights struggles. “I’ve learned so much, not only about their music, but about life from people like Sonny Boy Williamson, B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, Nina Simone...and Chuck Berry,” he said. “Through these associations I soon learned, however, that these people were being treated as something different from the rest of the population in their homeland because they were a different color...I started collecting things—photographs, newspaper articles, magazine clippings—to find out why Negroes were being mistreated, often brutally so.”¹²

However, the same concerns about exoticization and white theft of black music that haunted Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and others during the early days of rock and roll were also lobbied against British Invasion groups. Garofalo points out that these groups “were simply much more marketable than the black artists they imitated” because of their race.¹³ This was not necessarily their intent; Mick Jagger, for instance, later explained, “We didn’t want to do blues forever, we just wanted to turn people on to other people who were very good and not carry on doing it ourselves... I mean what’s the point in listening to us doing ‘I’m a King Bee’ when you can listen to Slim Harpo doing it.”¹⁴ Whatever their reasons, British Invasion bands were widely seen as safe conduits for black music; the *Time* article even wryly noted that “The Beatles...made

¹² Eric Burdon, “An ‘Animal’ Views America,” *Ebony*, December 1966, 166; 162; 168.

¹³ Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat*, 249.

¹⁴ Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat*, 255.

it all right to be white.”¹⁵ But this depiction, much like those used to categorize early rock and roll when Alan Freed first took to the airwaves, obscured listeners’ abilities to hear inspired mixtures of different musical traditions, as well as the genre’s continued capabilities as a musical middle ground. Former SNCC leader and Georgia Representative Julian Bond remembered “reading some Beatle comment about [their black influences] and just being taken aback and saying. ‘Hey, way to go!’”¹⁶ Even though integrationist politics and support for moderate racial equality were becoming more common by the mid-1960s, respectful musical interchanges that crossed racial lines were still politically meaningful in light of large-scale campaigns and legislative victories.

Many white British groups also made public their stances on racial matters: The Beatles, for instance, refused to play any segregated venues on their first tour of the United States in 1964. Paul McCartney told CBS News, “I think it’s silly to segregate people because, you know, coloured people are no different, they’re just the same as anyone else. There are some people that think that they’re animals or something, but I just think it’s stupid. You can’t treat other human beings like animals...There’s never any segregation in concerts in England, and in fact if there was we probably wouldn’t play them.”¹⁷ Another white British Invasion band, the Young Rascals, went further, announcing that they would only play concerts that also featured black musicians.¹⁸ The public stances that white British musicians took with regards to racial inequality reinforced the racially mixed nature of their music, and often alerted younger listeners to their predecessors’ work. Bibb Edwards proclaimed that “After the near death (attempted murder) of rock and roll in

¹⁵ “Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Sound of the Sixties.”

¹⁶ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 175.

¹⁷ “The Beatles Encounter a Segregated America in 1964,” <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/the-beatles-encounter-a-segregated-america-in-1964/> last accessed on May 21, 2014.

¹⁸ Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat*, 256.

the late '50s and early '60s we were very pleased to have our American music handed back to us by the Brits. That brought about an introduction to many black artists to our generation we missed the first time around. We were older by then, and more adult themes made sense to us. So discovering old Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Louis Jordan records became the thing to do.”¹⁹

But millions of kids, both black and white, were already listening to black musicians, albeit a new crop of polished pop performers recording on Berry Gordy's Motown label. Again, much has been made of Gordy's intent to create music written and performed by black artists that would sell to white teenagers—Jerry Wexler even proclaimed, in 1969, that “I don't consider Motown black; I consider them half and half. Black people making white music.”²⁰ Indeed, Berry ordered Motown artists to take elocution lessons so that that white kids would easily be able to sing along, and produced lyrics devoid of sexuality such as, “You can't hurry love/No, you just have to wait/She said love don't come easy/It's a game of give and take.”²¹ His sisters Gwen and Anna famously dictated etiquette and fashion rules to Motown's female artists so that they would fit in at all levels of white society.²²

But like white British bands, Motown represented more of a racial middle ground than a capitulation to white norms. Gordy did consciously set out to gain the attention of white teenagers, a demographic with large amounts of discretionary income, but he did so while asserting the dignity and strength of African-American culture. Most of the songs he recorded shared many

¹⁹ Bibb Edwards, in discussion with the author. Written response to interview questions, November 13, 2011.

²⁰ “The Rolling Stone Interview: Phil Spector,” *Rolling Stone*, November 1, 1969, Jerry Wexler Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives.

²¹ Holland-Dozier-Holland, “You Can't Hurry Love,” Motown, 1966.

²² Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 182-183.

characteristics with pop standards, but were also heavily influenced by African-American gospel music. The “churchy feel” of gospel inspiration, such as use of the tambourine and the repetition of words over the chorus, were utilized, Craig Werner asserts, “to set Motown apart from bland white pop.”²³ Lyrics such as, “So take a good look at my face/You know my smile looks out of place,” that harkened back to the Platters’ black isolation in a white world, and “They tell me that the river’s too deep and it’s much too wide/Boy you can’t get over to the other side,” which conjured images of civil rights activists fighting for equal treatment at all costs, also belied a more thoughtful mix of African- and European-American characteristics that could resonate with both blacks and whites.²⁴ Black Motown artists sounded and dressed similarly as their white contemporaries, and both sang songs with relatable teenage themes like domestic tranquility and romantic love. But even though white kids could both identify with Motown artists, the songs had a special resonance for black kids, especially those from the middle classes. Actress and comedian Whoopi Goldberg recalled that “Most of us wanted to be Diana [Ross] or The Temptations. We wanted to be hip and cool and rich and happy—and some of us wanted to be white, but we got over that. Because that’s what we saw, until Motown came along.”²⁵ Images of black stars who were presented in similar fashions as their white counterparts, yet retained pride in their heritage allowed kids a glimpse of what a happily integrated world might look like, where race was not used to discriminate or separate, but to empower. Even the label’s slogan, “The Sound of Young America,” is telling—this was both black and white music, music for a new generation that, hopefully, had learned to view racial barriers with suspicion.

²³ Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 19.

²⁴ Stevie Wonder, Hank Cosby, and Smokey Robinson, “The Tears of a Clown,” Tamla, 1967; Berry Gordy, Jr. and Smokey Robinson, “Way Over There,” Tamla, 1960.

²⁵ Timothy Carlson, “Soul Providers: A TV Special celebrates the cultural contributions of black artists,” *TV Guide*, November 24, 1990, 25, Russell B. Nye Collection, Special Collections, Michigan State University Libraries.

Despite the incredibly integrated nature of all forms of rock and roll, and its growing acceptance from many segments of society, the *Time* article still treated the genre with levels of suspicion and condescension reminiscent of alarmist descriptions from the 1950s. The author wrote about “The sudden public acceptance of rock ‘n’ roll by so many people who supposedly should know better” (i.e. adults), and even engaged in the same coded race-baiting that had plagued cultural commenters a decade earlier. The author ensured that readers knew that rock and roll was originally “played by Negroes for Negroes,” and that “cured in misery, it was a lonesome, soul-sad music, full of cries and gospel wails, punctuated by a heavy, regular beat.” Yet again, the concept of “the beat” was Africanized as “relentless” and “perhaps the most kinetic sound since the tom-tom or the jungle drum.” Teenagers who screamed were “orgiastic,” referencing both the sexuality in the genre and the stereotypes associating blackness with sexual promiscuity, and those who expressed themselves engaged in “some of the most wildly creative dancing ever seen by modern or primitive man.” The old concept of teenagers lulled into trances by so-called “primitive beats” was seemingly alive and well in “discotheque[s], where the sound is so loud that conversation is impossible, the hypnotic beat works a strange magic. Many dancers become literally transported. They drift away from their partners; inhibitions flake away, eyes glaze over, until suddenly they are seemingly swimming alone in a sea of sound.”²⁶

It is perhaps surprising that rock and roll continued to be depicted in such an overtly racialized and demeaning fashion even after pivotal civil rights goals had been achieved. The language used here shows that, despite widespread support for desegregation and moderate racial equality, old stereotypes and conceptions proved far more difficult to break. Rock and roll may have been the accepted cultural norm among teenagers, and even many adults, but it still

²⁶ “Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Sound of the Sixties.”

represented a form of racial mixing that remained controversial. And yet, the author was somewhat aware that [s]he was fighting a losing battle. “Some of it, in fact, is very good, far better than the adenoidal lamentations of a few years ago,” the article admitted. “Some of it is still awful, as might be expected in an industry that grinds out more than 300 new records each week. But for the first time rock 'n' roll can boast a host of singers who can actually sing. The music, once limited to four chords, is now more sophisticated, replete with counterrhythms, advanced harmonics, and multivoiced choirs.” These admissions, combined with examinations of such respected personages as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and Walter Cronkite doing the Twist and the Frug, betrayed a grudging acknowledgement that the world had changed, and that rock and roll, as much as it continued to espouse cross-racial elements, had become widely accepted, much like moderate civil rights goals had.

In 1969, *Billboard* introduced the “Soul” chart, listing the best-selling releases by black musicians who, yet again, found ways to re-work established musical forms to reflect their own experiences. Soul was derived from rock and roll, as well as R&B, gospel, the blues, and jazz, but it was usually smoother, and featured socially and politically conscious lyrics that responded to shifting movement goals and philosophies. Urban uprisings that broke out in over 100 Northern cities between 1964 and 1968 erupted out of the structural racism that was often overlooked in favour of Southern desegregation campaigns, which were easier to frame for mass audiences. Misconceptions were immediate, with whites wondering why black Northerners would fight back just as civil rights legislation was being passed, and blacks condemning those who participated for, apparently, making African Americans look bad just as powerful whites were starting to listen to their cause. Indeed, Republican Richard Nixon won the 1968 presidential election on a platform advocating “Law and Order” in the streets, promising to take a tough stance on those who engaged

in destructive activities without acknowledging the root problems that caused them. Scores of mostly white voters responded, refusing to understand or care about the structural issues that resulted in extreme income, housing, and educational inequality, or the depletion of urban resources without which suburban neighbourhoods would be unable to function.

Many young blacks were discouraged by these quick turns of events, but Black Nationalist philosophies, which had always helped inform strains of movement thought, were revitalized as Black Power, and offered new hope and strategies to address these issues. The term was first used in 1966 when Stokely Carmichael, the new chairperson of SNCC, called for unapologetic pride in African-American identity and traditions, black self-sufficiency, both within his organization and the black community as a whole, and the expulsion of whites from SNCC. Not everyone agreed with these decidedly different tactics—many white SNCC members who had dedicated years of their lives to the cause were particularly heartbroken—but Carmichael effectively tapped into the need to separate from an integrationist movement which had more or less reached its end point. That same year, Oakland, California college students Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party, which put Black Power into action by fighting back against white oppression, supporting black separation from white corruption, and aiming to help black communities become self-function with schools, daycare centers, and poverty-reducing initiatives created and implemented by the people who would use them. Sensing a threat to the entire system, one that actually targeted structural inequalities and aimed to solve them with grassroots solutions that challenged governmental and corporate power, the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program began tracking and harassing members of what were dubbed "black hate organizations," while the mainstream media focused more on the Panther Party's militaristic language and dress rather than

the group's community activism.²⁷ Most white Americans, and many black Americans, especially members of the middle class and others who felt like they could still benefit from the politics of integration, felt alienated by this shift. The movement did not end in the late 1960s, but it did change courses, as mainstream political goals gave way to economic and cultural issues, and blacks and whites no longer came together to form integrated campaigns.

This growing division was mirrored on the music charts, as the soul chart came to imply "black" just as R&B had in the 1950s. Many black artists were taking cues from these political shifts and started to break from the interracial genre of rock and roll to devote themselves to more explicitly black sounds. As Ahmet Ertegun noted, "Black people tend to think about the future more. Black musicians don't like to play in an old style; they prefer to play in today's or tomorrow's style...They're thinking of what's next."²⁸ While soul grew out of the rock and roll tradition and therefore still retained pop characteristics such as the use of a repeated chorus and melodic refrains, it was meant to be a black music for black people, and so drew heavily on gospel traditions. The difference between soul records like Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" and James Brown's "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" and earlier forms of gospel-derived music such as the songs of Ray Charles is that soul tended to explicitly address the political concerns of Movement-era blacks in a way that celebrated blackness as a worthy trait. Blacks who were

²⁷ One of the most famous Black Panther images, for instance, is that of Newton, Seale, and other California Black Panther Party members, standing on the steps of the State House in Sacramento in full military garb, armed with rifles. The narrative that most people got from newspapers and television news was that angry Black Panther Party members were trying to violently take over the State House building. In actuality, this was a highly theatrical protest, a response to the proposed Mulford Act, which would make it illegal to carry firearms in public places. The Panthers, who were scrupulous in their adherence to legalities when it came to owning and using firearms, rightly interpreted the Act as an attempt to limit their power. The protest on the steps of the State House was therefore meant to show that Panther members knew how to use their weapons, but backfired because their message was obscured by politicians and journalists who engaged in fear mongering in order to limit the Party's power.

²⁸ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 93.

receptive to the ideals of Black Power, then, were drawn to music that consciously applauded blackness instead of pressuring them to conform to white standards.

This change in music, and how it was measured by *Billboard* and other charts, indicated that, like the movement itself, the high point of racial integration had passed, in both music and politics. For a brief moment in the 1950s and 1960s, both rock and roll music and moderate civil rights campaigns emphasized the inherent righteousness of racial equality, while the music allowed young listeners to see that integration could be fun and not, as so many white and black kids had been led to believe, something to be feared. Once legal equality was achieved through passage of the civil rights acts, and real equality still proved elusive, black activists and musicians had to move on to other endeavors. Structural racism continues to shape the lives of all Americans, and in many ways it has been made invisible simply because overt, legalized racial discrimination was eradicated between 1964 and 1968.²⁹ Just like their aspiring-class forebears, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “Black families, regardless of income, are significantly less wealthy than white families.” He notes that white households have, on average, 20 times the wealth as black households. They also face restrictions with regards to housing and neighbourhood choice, a deeply harmful form of discrimination that is enforced from above by governments, banks, insurance companies, and real estate agents, and below from agitated potential neighbours. “Black people with upper-middle-class incomes do not generally live in upper-middle-class neighborhoods,” Coates attests, citing a study that shows that upper-middle-class African-

²⁹ Even this point is debatable, as the Supreme Court ruled in 2013 that Section 4(b), which allocates federal oversight to elections held in jurisdictions that had historically discriminated against African Americans, to be unconstitutional.

American families routinely “live in the kinds of neighborhoods inhabited by white families making \$30,000.”³⁰ Cycles of poverty and urban segregation therefore prove difficult to break.

And yet this period should not be viewed as an isolated attempt to right injustices that ultimately persisted. The civil rights activism that changed the national conversation so that overt racism is no longer considered acceptable should not be dismissed simply because it can, at the same time, obscure deeper inequities. “The lives of black Americans are better than they were half a century ago,” Coates insists. “The humiliation of WHITES ONLY signs are gone. Rates of black poverty have decreased. Black teen-pregnancy rates are at record lows—and the gap between black and white teen-pregnancy rates has shrunk significantly.”³¹ More African Americans are in positions of leadership than ever before, and larger numbers of workplaces and institutes of higher education include are at least nominally integrated. Black characters are presented as more fully realized human beings (in some cases!) on television and in film. These shifts often encourage people to interact across racial lines, mostly in public places, and to address the needs and concerns of different groups, even if only on a surface level. More importantly, they reinforce the need to educate children about the equality of all people, which can hopefully eliminate bigotry and hate within a few generations. This does not mean that deeper forms of injustice will be addressed—indeed, several studies have shown that members of the millennial generation, while overwhelmingly opposed to racism, do not entirely understand what the term implies, or how it continues to shape people’s life experiences—but it is a start, and greater tolerance generally leads to open-mindedness and a propensity to question established norms.

³⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/> last accessed May 22, 2014.

³¹ Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”

Like the movement itself, integrated musical idioms splintered somewhat, but the charts, and the buying and listening habits they represented, did not return to their segregated, pre-1950s form. The Hot 100 chart, created in 1959 as a list of all best-selling releases regardless of the race of either artist or listeners, persists to this day measuring music sales by numbers rather than racialized genre. Separate charts are still maintained: Pop, Country, and the renamed R&B/Hip-Hop are now listed alongside more specialized genres like Dance/Electronic, Latin, Christian/Gospel, and the elusive “Rock,” which mainly consists of bands comprised of white male musicians making music for white male audiences. But the importance of rock and roll as an integrated art form persists, not so much as a contained genre, but as the basis from which artists in all of these other fields start from. This music continues to inform all other genres, and acts to tie white and black artists and listeners together, even if the outcomes diverge from one another. In this way, the trajectory of rock and roll parallels that of the civil rights movement: a middle ground was formed, it did not entirely break down the boundaries between black and white, but it also persisted despite several attempts to eradicate it. Michael Bertrand says that an enduring relationship emerged between music and politics, since “Consciousness as developed in the cultural realm [did] not suddenly disappear once it encounter[ed] the political arena.”³² After a long century of blacks and whites tentatively trying to understand (or avoid) their relations to one another after the abolition of slavery, some honestly appealing solutions appeared under the cloak of a biracial popular culture.

When John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival was asked why he was drawn to black musical forms, he answered “I wasn’t born on Tibet or Mars.”³³ America was built on the

³² Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 239.

³³ Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, xvi.

cultures of both white and black, and any attempt to separate the two had failed, at least in certain areas. The success of rock and roll music as an integrated genre encouraged positive images of integration in other areas, helping to reinforce moderate movement goals and re-shape the way the nation thinks about race. Geographer David Harvey explains that “When you change the language, you can change the way people think and their mental conceptions. And when that changes, you can start to push in new politics.”³⁴ Not everything has changed for the better. As Coates attests, living in the contemporary United States, “It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us.”³⁵ These effects do, indeed, remain, but before those issues can be tackled, it is first integral to stop making new purchases. This, in essence, is the legacy left to us by the civil rights movement, and reinforced by rock and roll music: crucial steps were taken towards eliminating racial discrimination, and promoting tolerance and identification. These efforts were preliminary, but they were essential in precipitating a much more prolonged struggle to address the wrongs of the past and to create a truly just and equitable society for all.

³⁴ Scott Carlson, “Mapping a New Economy,” *The Chronicle Review*, May 12, 2014
<http://chronicle.com/article/Mapping-a-New-Economy/146433> last accessed May 22, 2014.

³⁵ Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”

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ABSTRACT**DELIVER ME FROM THE DAYS OF OLD: ROCK AND ROLL, YOUTH CULTURE,
AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

by

BETH FOWLER**December, 2014****Adviser:** Dr. Kidada Williams**Major:** History**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

The U.S. civil rights movement is almost always presented as an undisputed success in mainstream culture and educational curricula, but scholars continue to question whether the widespread protests against racial segregation and inequality that swept the nation in the 1950s and 1960s led to meaningful economic, or social change. These criticisms extend to shifts in popular culture and the emergence of rock and roll music, which, as many contemporary critics noted, were areas where racial integration had already occurred. Since rock and roll emerged from both African-American and European-American cultural traditions, it introduced both black and white listeners to sounds and styles indicative of different racial backgrounds that were simultaneously integrated with musical elements that were still familiar to them. This new genre helped to encourage cross-racial identification among some young listeners. In “Deliver Me From the Days of Old: Rock and Roll Music, Youth Culture, and the Civil Rights Movement,” I argue that rock and roll music converged with widespread media coverage of civil rights activism to encourage support for the desegregation of public spaces and moderate racial equality among certain groups of middle-class white and black teenagers during the 1950s and 1960s.

Many historians agree that rock and roll had the potential to disrupt racial divisions, but that music industry exploitation, as well as persistent political and economic oppression that

overtaken cultural integration, prevented it from doing so. Others note a correlation between changing racial politics and the birth of rock and roll, but do not explicitly show how this genre, and the decisions teenagers made to embrace it, emerged within a civil rights context that promoted integration as a positive change. While all of these historians offer insight into the origins of rock and roll, their accounts ignore the fact that teenage rock and roll fans made their own decisions about music and culture that were informed by, and contributed to, the emergence of a national movement for racial integration. When these decisions are ignored, the origin story of rock and roll music becomes one of exploitation rather than one of cultural integration.

Although many rock and roll fans did not become politically active in the civil rights movement, they were not the passive consumers of popular culture that they are often depicted as. The choices they made to listen to and embrace this music and the artists who performed it constitute a form of political consciousness in light of the strict censures that existed in both the North and the South against racial integration. Since most rock and roll fans did not flock to sit-ins or voter registration drives, many scholars have assumed that the music's appeal was mostly aesthetic, and that teenagers who did not explicitly participate in movement activities were fairly apolitical. And yet, the ways they acted and communicated in both public and private spaces during this period indicates a shift in thinking that is in keeping with moderate civil rights goals.

But this viewpoint ignores the changing attitudes and behaviors exhibited by many people born during and after World War Two, which ultimately led to at least tacit support for the desegregation of public spaces and moderate racial equality among black and white youth. Black teenagers usually supported actions against segregation, and often suffered the direct repercussions when entering previously all-white schools or breaking racial barriers at concert halls. Most stated that they would only work for integration if they were treated with full respect and dignity, not if

they were expected to adjust to white norms. White youth were not as aware of the challenges facing their black contemporaries, but many were eager to resist conformist Cold War culture and politics, the expansion of the military-industrial complex, unregulated capitalist development, and overt racial segregation and discrimination, even outside of traditional Southern boundaries. Rock and roll music therefore helped young people to talk about race relations and discrimination in both public and private spaces, and to challenge racial norms during the civil rights movement. Even though racial discrimination and structural racism did not disappear, this new middle ground, shaped by a popular new art form, helped young people of both races find ways to communicate across supposedly rigid racial lines.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Beth Fowler received her Ph.D. from the Wayne State University Department of History in September, 2014 after earning her Master of Arts and Honours Bachelor of Arts degrees from the University of Windsor. She was born in Windsor, Ontario, and now resides in Michigan. She currently holds a Senior Lecturer position at the Wayne State University Irvin D. Reid Honors College.