
‘American Popular Music’ by Wesley Morris

...My friend Delvyn Case, a musician who teaches at Wheaton College, explained in an email that **improvisation** is one of the most crucial elements in what we think of as black music: “The raising of individual creativity/expression to the highest place within the aesthetic world of a song.” Without improvisation, a listener is seduced into the composition of the song itself and not the distorting or deviating elements that noise creates. Particular to black American music is the architecture to create a means by which singers and musicians can be completely free, free in the only way that would have been possible on a plantation: through art, through music — music no one “composed” (because enslaved people were denied literacy), music born of feeling, of play, of exhaustion, of hope.... **“American entertainment, whatever the state of American society, has always been integrated, if only by theft and parody.”** What we’ve been dealing with ever since is more than a catchall word like “appropriation” can approximate.

Sometimes all the inexorable¹ mixing leaves me longing for something with roots that no one can rip all the way out. **This is to say that when we’re talking about black music, we’re talking about horns, drums, keyboards and guitars doing the unthinkable together. We’re also talking about what the borrowers and collaborators don’t want to or can’t lift² — centuries of weight, of atrocity³ we’ve never sufficiently worked through, the blackness you know is beyond theft because it’s too real, too rich, too heavy to steal.**

1. Inexorable - unrelenting, unending
2. lift - take or steal
3. atrocity - horror

1. How does the author describe Black music, and Blackness in music?

Minstrel Shows:

In 1830, Rice was a nobody actor in his early 20s, touring with a theater company in Cincinnati (or Louisville; historians don’t know for sure), when, the story goes, he saw a decrepit⁴, possibly disfigured old black man singing while grooming a horse on the property of a white man whose last name was Crow. On went the light bulb. Rice took in the tune and the

movements but failed, it seems, to take down the old man's name. So in his song based on the horse groomer, he renamed him: "Weel about and turn about jus so/Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow." **And just like that, Rice had invented the fellow who would become the mascot for two centuries of legalized racism. That night, Rice made himself up to look like the old black man — or something like him, because Rice's get-up most likely concocted² skin blacker than any actual black person's, and a gibberish dialect³ meant to imply black speech.** Rice had turned the old man's melody and hobbled movements into a song-and-dance routine that no white audience had ever experienced...What they saw caused a permanent sensation. He reportedly won 20 encores. Rice repeated the act again, night after night, for audiences so profoundly rocked that he was frequently mobbed during performances. Across the Ohio River, not an arduous⁴ distance from all that adulation⁵, was Boone County, Ky., whose population would have been largely enslaved Africans. **As they were being worked, sometimes to death, white people, desperate with anticipation, were paying to see them depicted at play...A blackface minstrel⁶ would sing, dance, play music, give speeches and cut up for white audiences, almost exclusively in the North, at least initially.** Blackface was used for mock⁷ operas and political monologues⁸ (they called them stump speeches), skits, gender parodies and dances. Before the minstrel show gave it a reliable home, blackface was the entertainment between acts of conventional plays. Its stars were the Elvis, the Beatles, and the 'NSync of the 19th century. The performers were beloved and so, especially, were their songs...

1. Decrepit - weak from old age
2. concocted- made up
3. gibberish dialect - nonsense way of speaking
4. arduous - difficult
5. adulation - devotion
6. minstrel - performer
7. mock - make fun of
8. monologues - speech

Modern Times:

The modern conundrum¹ of the black performer's seeming respectable, among black people, began, in part, as a problem of white blackface minstrels' disrespectful blackness. Frederick Douglass wrote that they were "the filthy scum of white society." ...But it's from that scum that a robust, post-minstrel black American theater sprung² as a new, black audience hungered for actual, uncorked black people. **Without that scum, I'm not sure we get an event as shatteringly epochal³ as the reign of Motown Records.** Motown was a full-scale integration of Western, classical orchestral ideas (strings, horns, woodwinds) with the instincts of both the black church (rhythm sections, gospel harmonies, hand claps) and juke joint⁴ Saturday nights (rhythm sections, guitars, vigor). Pure yet "noisy." Black men in Armani. Black women in ball gowns... Respectability wasn't a problem with Motown;

respectability was its point. **How radically optimistic a feat of antiminstrelsy for it's as glamorous a blackness as this country has ever mass-produced and devoured.**

The proliferation⁵ of black music across the planet — the proliferation, in so many senses, of being black — constitutes a magnificent joke on American racism. It also confirms the attraction that someone like Rice had to that black man grooming the horse. But something about that desire warps and perverts⁶ its source, lampoons and cheapens it even in adoration.

Loving black culture has never meant loving black people, too. Loving black culture risks loving the life out of it. And yet doesn't that attraction make sense? **This is the music of a people who have survived, who not only won't stop but also can't be stopped. Music by a people whose major innovations — jazz, funk, hip-hop — have been about progress, about the future,** about getting as far away from nostalgia⁷ as time will allow, music that's thought deeply about the allure of outer space and robotics, music whose promise and possibility, whose rawness, humor and carnality call out to **everybody** — to other black people, to kids in working class England and middle-class Indonesia. If freedom's ringing, who on Earth wouldn't also want to rock the bell?

1. Conundrum - something puzzling
2. Sprung - began
3. Epochal - significant, important
4. Juke joint - bar traditionally with music, where black people would go
5. Proliferation - rapid growth
6. Pervert - change (negative)
7. Nostalgia - the past