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Like a jungle sometimes

'How did we move to a position where the most potent of black musical forms has been hijacked, where discrimination is seen largely as a vestige of a bygone age, and where the term racial is barely used save when prefixed by "post"?'

Whites love black life. They don't want to live it; they just want to experience it vicariously. They want the thrill of the internecine strife that implodes in ghetto violence, the intrigue of dealing dope on street corners, the rancor that seems to fire many black Americans. And they don't just want to sit in the audience, like they used to when the minstrels clowned and sang about joy amid misery on the plantations. They want to get on the inside.

It's not hard to see why some black artists are so appealing: they don't just act like thugs or sing about the ghetto; they seem to be the real thing. Take the artist known (variously) as P. Diddy, Puffy, Sean Combs, Sean John and Swag. A night out for a few drinks with him is rarely uneventful. Back in 1999, when he used another appellation, Puff Daddy, and hung with J.Lo, he took her to a Manhattan nightclub to celebrate his protégé Jamal "Shyne" Barrow's new record deal.

At some point during the evening, an argument broke out and someone threw a wad of money at Diddy. Not a gesture, you might think, to occasion vexation, though Barrow took exception and drew a 9-millimeter Ruger from his waistband. Three bystanders were shot and wounded, and Combs spent the day in a police lockup, eventually charged with criminal possession of a gun, though not the one used in the shooting. Barrow was jailed for nine years and deported to his native Belize for the attack. Diddy was cleared of any wrongdoing in the criminal case, but he and Barrow, as well as the now-shut club's owners, were targeted in a \$130 million (£81 million) legal battle for compensation in 2008. The case dragged on until 2011, when Natania Reuben, who had been shot in the face, received \$1.8 million (£1.1 m), some of which was from Diddy's own pocket. By then, he was worth \$475 million, according to *Forbes*, and on his way to becoming a billionaire.

The nightclub shooting happened when rap was earning its reputation as a reliable expression of ghetto life. Two years before, Diddy's friend Biggie Smalls, a former crack dealer and Bad Boy recording artist, was killed in a Los Angeles shooting. The murder remains unsolved, but is still thought to be one

of a series of attacks that formed part of a feud between Bad Boy and Death Row Records, a LA-based rival label. Smalls' death came six months after the killing of Tupac Shakur. In 1996, Snoop Doggy Dogg, as he then preferred, was acquitted of first- and second-degree murder charges in a 1993 killing. (First-degree is willful and premeditated; second-degree is not planned in advance.) These and many more incidents made rap seem much more than a musical offspring of hip-hop culture: it was a terrifying guide through the streets, where vengeance is a dish served searing hot and respect is a resource so scarce but so valuable that people's lives often depend on it.

"Rap conforms to many dominant stereotypes of black identity, both negative (e.g. rappers represent the vulgar and violent tendencies of blacks) and positive (e.g. rappers draw on the colorful, verbal style and rhythmic abilities blacks possess to tell the truth about the black experience in America)," wrote the anthropologist Maureen Mahon in 2000 (p. 288).

The central character in this truth-telling was the gangsta, an urban outlaw, scowling scarily out of tv screens, his tattoos or burn marks signaling his membership of a crew or the amount of time he has spent in prison. The gangsta projected "a conscious commitment to otherness and nihilistic responses to the social containment of black men," according to Ken McLeod (p. 223).

Jesse Weaver Shipley adds: "Ideas of 'keeping it real' and 'thug life' imply a unified singular subject produced in opposition to a hostile society" (p. 662). Well, maybe in the 1980s and 1990s, when the rappers celebrated their outcast status and resisted whatever moral codes they suspected had been contrived by whites to restrain them (like: breaking the law is wrong).

Tracks like NWA's "Fuck tha police" from 1988, or Public Enemy's 1989 "Fight the power" spat out contempt for authority and urged a return to the subversive days of black power. "Moreover, as it evolved, rap became more confrontational and unabashedly antagonistic towards America's power structures, suggesting a willingness, a desire even, to draw the scrutiny of the world around it," observed Erik Nielson of the global popularity of music with origins in the American ghettos, but which seemed "to give voice to marginalized people" (p. 1,269).

For a while the truculence reverberating out of the boomboxes grabbed the attention of the police: Nielsen describes how the Miami Police Department kept dossiers on several rap artists and set up a task force to monitor their behavior. Its operations were "reminiscent of the government's COINTELPRO days of the 1950s and 1960s, when Black activists, writers, artists, and musicians were routinely surveilled by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies" (p. 1,255). The forces of law and order were spooked enough to keep a close watch.

Rap music sounded like collective hatred, howling and untamed. And then something happened: it was broken. Like a wild Mustang that becomes accustomed to a saddle and a rider.

A fresh-faced young white man drives through spotlessly clean suburbs, pointing at puzzled pedestrians as he lip-syncs, "It's like a jungle sometimes." It looks anything but. His passengers are two middle-aged African Americans, dressed in the baggy tracksuits and bling favored by rappers in the 1980s. The music adds to the bizarreries. Incongruous harsh boomings jar with the residential surroundings, suggesting wormholes to another time, another place. "Makes me wonder how I keep from going under," mimes the driver, who arrives home from the supermarket to be asked by his wife whether he remembered to get diapers.

At the other end of the wormhole, we are in 1982 and in a place that looks like South Central Los Angeles, the archetypal black ghetto. The music is "The message," a six-minute inspection of ghetto life, in which the rapper observes rodents and insects roaming through his abode. Anyone who heard Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's influential track knew that it was intended to prompt a feeling of dread. The singer compares his environment to a jungle, complete with baseball bat-wielding predators, and cautions no one in particular, "Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge."

"The song contains the type of graphic description of oppressive conditions found in the best Blues and R&B commentaries, and issues the type of subtle warning to external audiences found in some of the more assertive commentaries," writes James B. Stewart in his 2005 analysis "Message in the music" (p. 219).

In the early 1980s, "The message" carried a terrifying portent: African Americans were caught between the salvation promised by civil rights two decades before and the damnation pronounced by a culture steeped in two centuries of white racism. Even the civil rights instigated by the landmark legislation of the 1960s had brought few visible signs of progress. Black people, as the song pointed out, were forced to play their traditional roles, performing for the delectation of whites: "I'd dance to the beat, shuffle my feet."

Hip-hop artists The Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five recorded the tribulations of black people, the main one being racism-induced poverty. It was a documentary that scavenged for material in the human landfills of North America. The music didn't celebrate the indomitability of the African American spirit: it suggested how it would soon be broken. It was a pioneer of a genre that would morph from cutting-and-mixing into rap.

Chuck D. of Public Enemy, another hip-hop behemoth of the 1980s, described rap as "CNN for black people." He meant that, like the television news channel, his and other black musicians' output entertained people, but was also "a direct source of information" amid a media largely owned and staffed by whites. But it was also "a new community theater project," according to Stewart, "largely unfettered by corporate attachments, fueled by the harsh realities of inner-city life" (p. 219).

Hip-hop was probably the most transparent of all black music: it offered a glimpse into ghetto life in the 1980s replete with "Rats in the front room,

roaches in the back, junkies in the alley,” as “The message” put it. Sampled and mashed copiously over the years, that track remains one of most powerful, colorful, lurid, uninhibited, shocking and scabrously realistic pieces of musical social commentary ever. So we come to the question: how did it end up in a television commercial for Kia cars (and worse: the “on hold music” of countless phone systems)?

That’s what lay at the other end of the wormhole: 30 years after its release, the track was procured by the Korean car company and included in its advertisement for the Sportage vehicle. The two middle-aged black guys sitting alongside the white driver were members of the original band. Some might cry “race treason,” the crime of betraying one’s own ethnic group for money. When, in 2007, Oprah stood before a gathering of 30,000 at Howard University and declaimed, “My integrity is not for sale, and neither is yours,” she appeared to speaking about this very crime. “Do not be a slave to any form of selling out,” advised Oprah – who has frequently been accused of doing exactly that.

Were the hip-hop artists of the 1980s treasonous? Did they betray the cause, such as it was, they set out to advance? After all, if you are going to write and record a frighteningly explicit image of black life, you don’t allow someone to use it to sell SUVs to white suburbanites (or to pacify callers while they are waiting to be connected). It’s like entrusting a biography of Martin Luther King to Pixar: you know they’ll do a bang-up job, but you also know a lot of the import and gravitas will be lost in the adaptation.

“Hip Hop culture is the single most widespread preoccupation among today’s African American diasporan youth,” wrote Pero Gaglo Dagbovie in 2005 (p. 300). Dagbovie considered that the music, the speech, the dress and, generally, the posture of hip-hop engrossed young black youth (which he considers dispersed and divorced from their original spiritual homeland – “diasporan”). While youths of other ethnic backgrounds – white, Latino, Asian – may not have shared the “preoccupation” Dagbovie sensed among blacks, they too were enthusiastically absorbed in the dispatches from the ghetto. “Hip Hop artists,” in Dagbovie’s view (he doesn’t use the hyphen), “recount their own personal histories of resilience, which mirror the overall theme of perseverance against the oppression that dominate the African American experience” (2005, p. 301).

These themes, remember, were the same ones that resurfaced in the car advertisement. What conceivable relevance could they have to well-heeled and, presumably, mainly white consumers? Even the watered-down radicalism, as Dagbovie calls it, wouldn’t appear to have much significance in selling \$12,000 commodities. Dagbovie deepens the mystery when he offers a personal testimony: “Members of the Hip Hop generation are linked mainly by the fact that we were born after the major struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and have collectively inherited a great deal from the battles waged by our elders” (2005, p. 302).

It's a muscular affirmation, though the writer doesn't specify exactly what has been "inherited," or how it's been used; we can inherit our parents' money and squander it, or our big brother's clothes and never wear them for fear of looking old-fashioned. Dagbovie makes a further observation that from 1995, black people have "not responded collectively to black oppression or made distinctive contributions to the black 'tradition of protest'" (2005, p. 306).

When hip-hop culture and rap music surfaced in the 1980s, it provided audiences with a wiretap on black life – not as whites suspected it was, but as it was lived; that is, without access to the kinds of desirable features afforded to their white contemporaries. This is what gave rap its astringency: other kinds of music with black origins expressed criticism in less sharp, more ambiguous ways. Rap was social critique as music. So here's the conundrum: how, in the space of about 30 years, did we move to a position where the most potent of black musical forms has been appropriated, or hijacked, depending on your perspective, where discrimination is seen largely as a vestige of a bygone age, and where the term "racial" is barely used save when prefixed by "post"?

African Americans who are "permitted" by whites to become successful are "bright children," no matter how old. This is the view of Jan Nederveen Pieterse: his version of history suggests blacks who used their talents, whether in entertainment or sport, to delight white audiences were only allowed to do so under certain conditions. If they met whites' popular expectations, they were fine; often, they were infantilized, treated in a way that denied them their maturity either in age or experience. The simple act of calling someone "boy" conceals a psychological stratagem with enormous cultural consequences. African Americans who gave the impression they opposed or even questioned the existing order of things were either banished or subjected to a kind of symbolic emasculation that left them weaker or less effective.

If they were too menacing, their work was expropriated by whites and turned into a more domesticated product. Blues, for example, found its life and heartbeat in the misery and oppression of the South of the 1920s. African Americans migrating north took the music with them: their songs told of sickness, imprisonment, alcohol, drugs, and sex. Unlike gospel or the negro spirituals, blues didn't develop out of the churches and this, combined with its earthly subject matter, earned it the soubriquet "devil's music."

Blues provided an alternative to spiritual music that gloried in God's grace and anticipated a journey to the Promised Land. There was no hope, only realism. In his *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine captures the distinction between the two by quoting the singer Mahalia Jackson (1911–72), who sang blues but refused to give up gospel music: "Blues are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope. When you sing them you are delivered of your burden" (p. 174).

It was the singer, not the song that gave blues its emotional power and, ultimately, commercial appeal. When Ma Rainey (1886–1939), Trixie Smith (1895–1943), or Blind Lemon Jefferson (1897–1929) sang, there was an almost palpable bond with audiences (listen to Jefferson’s classic “Black Snake Moan” at: <http://bit.ly/-BlackSnakeMoan>).

For all its intrinsic qualities, the enduring success of blues came from without: the phonographic recording ensured a wide audience across America – and, later, the world. “It had begun as early as the 1920s,” writes Gerri Hirshey. “Scouts and field engineers were being sent out by white companies to find and record black singers down South” (p. 60).

So folk music was turned into a commercial product, mechanically reproduced and traded in the marketplace. In the process it became available to many more people than would have had access to blues before: few whites would have ventured into blacks-only taverns and clubs. Authenticity was a selling feature of blues: early entrepreneurs might have used it as a marketing ploy, but there was a sense in which blues conveyed aspects of the black experience in a way that sounded genuine and unvarnished. Race music, as music performed by African Americans was called, was popularized by a recording industry in search of new products.

The people scouting for music were not corporate types sensing opportunities to make money off the backs of poor blacks: more typically, they were devotees of folk music. W.C. Handy (1873–1958) was a one-time minstrel, then bandleader turned promoter, who became aware of the emerging twelve-bar chord sequences that were the hallmark of black folk music. Teaming up with partner Harry H. Pace, he started the Black Swan Phonograph Company, with W.E.B. Du Bois on its board of directors, in 1923. Its records were an eclectic mix, blues being only one of a number of styles. “The only genuine colored record” was the boast made on its labels. Ethel Waters (1896–1977, whom we covered in chapter 7) was signed to the label, though Pace refused to let her sing the blues and insisted she concentrate on ballads.

Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), the entrepreneur, journalist and proponent of Black Nationalism who encouraged African Americans to return to their African homeland, took objection to Pace, describing him as “a business exploiter who endeavors to appeal to the patriotism of the race by selling us commodities at a higher rate than are charged in the ordinary ... markets” (quoted in Ted Vincent’s *Keep Cool*, p. 104).

The other noteworthy label of the era was Okeh Records, started improbably by a German jazz enthusiast in 1918 and which featured Louis Armstrong (1900–71) on several of its releases. A major influence on jazz, Armstrong was a horn player, as well as bandleader and singer, who went on to feature in Hollywood movies, such as 1943’s *Cabin in the Sky* (with Lena Horne and Ethel Waters). Miles Davis (1926–91) once pointed out that, “Jazz is a white man’s word,” and “blues is a white man’s invention,” his inference

being that the genres were only given coherence when packaged in a saleable form by white record companies and impresarios. In its “natural states,” the music played by African Americans was not demarcated: white corporations introduced the boundaries.

What we now recognize as early jazz, with its strong two-beat rhythm and improvisation, originated in New Orleans in the early twentieth century and became known as Dixieland. The music swept northwards to the major cities. “The Jazz Age Black music in Chicago appears to have been mostly under the control of African-Americans from 1918 into late 1921,” writes Vincent (p. 70). After this, white interests arrived and grew progressively parasitic. Davis himself resisted bowdlerizing his music for record companies and, as a result, became even more compelling. While “cool” is now part of the popular vernacular, its sources lie with Davis and the group of musicians who emerged in the 1950s. “These musicians were less secular stars than quasi-religious figures, and their fans often referred to them with godly reverence,” Nelson George discerns (p. 25).

Historians too have religious zeal when competing over the origins of jazz. In his *Blues People*, Leroi Jones argues that, Davis apart, most musicians associated with cool were actually white. Certainly, many of the musicians responsible for popularizing jazz were white innovators. Glenn Miller (1904–44), Tommy Dorsey (1905–56), and Benny Goodman (1909–86) were major influences in swing, a variant that was the dominant form of jazz in the 1940s. Similarly, blues had a surge in popularity after white artists combined its lyricism and simple melodies with a heavy beat to deliver rock ‘n’ roll. It seems ludicrous now, but when rock ‘n’ roll first set a generation’s pulse racing, it was damned by many for its primitivism: “jungle music,” as it was called (even by *Encyclopedia Britannica*), was banned by radio stations and dance halls across America. White DJ Alan Freed (1921–65) was one of its champions and persisted in playing rock ‘n’ roll on his influential “Moondog” radio show in Cleveland. Whether it was integrity or showmanship, we’ll never know, but Freeman promoted the new music to the hilt in the 1950s and is even credited in some circles with coining the term rock ‘n’ roll. He played race music, as it was still widely known, or rhythm & blues (as distinct from today’s R&B), which was an up-tempo variation of blues practiced by black artists.

The aura of rock ‘n’ roll greatness still surrounds Elvis Presley (1935–77), Jerry Lee Lewis (b.1935) and other white artists who were either giants or dwarves standing on the shoulder of giants, depending on your perspective. Elvis’ first commercial recording was in 1954, “That’s All Right, Mama,” a blues number written by Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup (1905–74) and recorded originally by him in 1946, as “That’s All Right.” Lewis featured “Good Golly, Miss Molly” and “Tutti Frutti,” both recorded earlier by black artist Little Richard. Bill Haley was the white artist most readily associated with rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s, though many of his commercial hits, such as “Rocket 88”

and “Shake, Rattle and Roll” were covers of black artists’ materials, the former often acknowledged as a rhythm & blues track that prefigured rock ‘n’ roll, and credited to Jackie Brenston and his Delta Kings, written by Ike Turner, in 1951. The latter was written by one-time minstrel Jesse Stone (1901–99), whose friend and bluesman Big Joe Turner (1911–85) recorded it in 1954.

Whatever your perspective, rock ‘n’ roll was undeniably white, attracting a young, overwhelmingly white audience. Only later did African Americans get credit and, even then, it was due in large part to British bands, like the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds, who self-consciously modeled themselves on black blues performers and dipped liberally into the back catalogs of artists such as John Lee Hooker (1920–2001) and Sonny Boy Williamson (c.1899–1965). This was in the 1960s, when the civil rights movement prompted a re-evaluation of the cultural contributions of African Americans. Earlier in this chapter, I used *expropriation* to describe the way whites dispossessed African Americans of their music. It’s an apposite description, though white artists piqued deeper interest in the original blues and this had the effect of conferring at least some credit on influential bluesmen like Howling Wolf (1910–76) and Muddy Waters (1915–83).

Some argue that the blues throbs in rock music even today. The historical fact remains: white artists took the initial plaudits and were responsible for steering race music, or at least a sanitized version of it, into the mainstream. Black artists were permitted entry only later and, even then, with reservations.

“Are you ready for a brand new beat? Summer’s here and the time is right for dancing in the street.” It was 1964, a time for exultation. A year before, 200,000 people had marched on Washington DC to listen to Martin Luther King’s inspirational “I have a dream” speech. The suavely imposing Sidney Poitier (b.1927) became the first black American actor to win an Academy Award for his role in *Lilies of the Field* (1963). Poitier was a substantial character uninterested in playing up to stereotypes and, as such, made a crack in a wall that had stood before black actors, obstructing their progress.

Or was it a time for commiseration? Memories of the killing of three civil rights workers, all members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), by the Ku Klux Klan were still fresh. The murders were later to become the subject of the film *Mississippi Burning*.

On July 2, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which banned discrimination in employment and in public places: it was the culmination of a protest that had started in 1955. Was this why people were dancing in the street? Or was “dancing” a figure of speech? Within weeks of the new legislation’s passing, rioting broke out in Harlem and Rochester, New York. A year later, there was more rioting in Los Angeles and several other major cities.

Some people were dancing with joy, as Martha and the Vandellas encouraged them to do in their track “Dancing in the street.” Others were dancing to a

different beat: frustrated by the failure of civil rights to deliver any immediate, tangible change, they took more immediate, violent action. Whether the song itself was intended as anything more than a catchy addition to what was then an expanding Motown catalog, we don't know. Even if it was, it was invested with so much social and political meaning that it didn't matter: it became an anthem of both rapture and rage.

Martha Reeves, the lead singer of the band, had worked at the Motown studios in Detroit since 1962. The owner, Berry Gordy, was a singer, songwriter and entrepreneur, who had worked on the Lincoln-Mercury assembly line and watched cars start out as a frame pulled along a conveyor belt until they emerged at the end of the line as complete cars. He applied the same principles to recording artists. He was aware of several other record labels owned by African Americans, such as Vee-Jay Records, and Peacock Records, specializing in race music, but had a different agenda: he wanted a record company run by black people, with black artists, but with a white market. The music-industry term is crossover.

Other labels, such as Chess Records and Specialty Records, released material by black artists; but at a time when African Americans were sequestered in segregated parts of town and denied many basic human rights, the labels were likely to remain in their niche markets. The civil rights movement had exposed much of the suspicion and hatred many whites still harbored a century after Emancipation. Gordy's Motown assembly line turned black artists into performers who were not considered unpredictable or potentially threatening: safe entertainers.

Nat King Cole (1919–65) could have provided Gordy with a case study. Born in Alabama, Cole recorded for Capitol Records, which had mostly white artists such as Frank Sinatra and Judy Garland on its roster. In 1948, Cole was the first African American to have his own radio series and, in 1956, transferred to the then fast-growing medium, television. NBC featured him in its "Nat King Cole Show," but struggled to find advertisers. "Madison Avenue," said Cole, "is afraid of the dark." (Madison Avenue, in Manhattan, is the center of the advertising industry). Cole wore his hair "conked," or straightened, and, for the tv show, wore makeup that lightened his skin; he also sang duets with white artists, effecting, it seemed, an almost perfect integration. Almost.

In *Crosstown Traffic*, Charles Shaar Murray senses: "The black entertainer succeeds with the white audience either by embodying an aspect of blackness with which that audience feels comfortable, or else by appearing almost tangential to the black community" (p. 79). NBC presumably felt Cole was sufficiently unaffiliated that he fell into the latter category. Ray Charles (1919–2004), who emerged slightly later in the 1950s, would have given form to an aspect of blackness that made whites comfortable: he was conversant with blues, jazz and even country music, played, wrote and performed with

virtuosity and was blind. His disability had a symbolic as well as physical character and, from a white perspective, rendered him safe.

Cole, like Louis Armstrong, had made the transition, however incomplete, to the popular market and, in doing so, made accommodations to white tastes. Neither artist was promoted as a bearer of black culture. "Black entertainers were decorative and not necessarily emancipated figures," writes Pieterse. "The figure of the black waiter or bartender melts easily into that of the black performer" (p. 141).

Gordy envisioned his artists as attractive, showy and, like Cole, unrecognizable from a tuxedoed maître d'. The Jackson 5 got the Motown treatment, as did internationally famous bands like the Temptations and Smoky Robinson and the Miracles, though Diana Ross (b.1944) was perhaps the most illustrious product of the Motown assembly line; she is still touring and releasing albums.

As Motown waded into the mainstream, another record label, Atlantic/Stax, stuck to its own tributary with a roster of black and a few white artists whose gospel-fused rhythm & blues was designated soul. (Big Joe Turner's original "Shake, rattle and roll" was released on the label). The music was more gutsy and less processed than Motown's output, leading one of its house musicians and producers, Steve Cropper, to conclude: "To me, Motown was white music" (quoted in Hirshey's *Nowhere to Run*, p. 307). Coming from a white musician, this seems a harsh appraisal, though Gordy may have taken it as a compliment. In his 1994 biography, Gordy recounts how, in the early 1960s, his brother Robert released a single "Everyone was there" under the name Bob Kayli. It sold respectably; so Bob Kayli went on a promotional tour. When he went on the road, sales dropped. "This white-sounding record did not go with his black face," writes Gordy. "I realized this was not just about good or bad records, this was about race" (p. 95).

This realization, coupled, presumably, with a knowledge of Cole's experience, persuaded Gordy that if his black artists were to integrate, they would have to be, to repeat Murray, tangential: appearing to diverge from the path of African American music. In the process, Motown artists were rendered safe: brilliant artists that they were, the likes of Ross et al. were not likely to cause trouble, socially or politically.

Some artists grew to resent this. Marvin Gaye, for example, who co-wrote "Dancing in the street," initially "did everything he could to win a mainstream middle-class audience, crooning the ballads he thought white music lovers wanted to hear," according to his biographer David Ritz (p. 107). He may not have liked it, but he went along with Gordy's strategy, performing on the dinner-club circuit dressed in tux and bowtie. He told Ritz: "Sometimes I felt like the shuffle-and-jive niggers of old, steppin' and fetchin' for the white folk" (p. 106).

Unlike many of his predecessors, Gordy made no claim to authenticity: his music was not sold as if salvaged from a forgotten or neglected culture such as

gospel or blues, both of which were rooted in the black experience. Motown was an entirely new and unique artifice: it didn't exist separately from Gordy's Hitsville studios, as they were known. The demise of the many artists after they left Motown added another meaning to this observation.

Soul was dealt a blow with the death of Otis Redding in 1967, though it would survive and adapt in new forms, but with a defined market. By the early 1970s two songwriter/producers from Philadelphia were practically outdoing Motown at what it did best: making black music for white audiences. Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff's Philadelphia International Records produced a sound that was part sedative, part stimulant. Using African American artists, including Barry White (1944–2003) and Harold Melvin (1939–97), they embellished recordings with string accompaniments to make a sound that had moved as far from blues as black music had ever traveled.

Much of the Philadelphia output was absorbed into disco, a celebratory music that, in the 1970s, echoed a kind of communion between gays, straights, blacks and whites: the dance floor was a shared domain. Watch the 1977 movie *Saturday Night Fever*, discussed earlier, and it serves as a frescoed social history of disco. Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall*, his first adult album, was released in 1979. Disco was, by then, approaching the end of its natural cycle, though several Jackson tracks, especially "Don't stop 'til you get enough," were disco-ready.

Less assimilated into mainstream – and, by implication, white – culture were the grittier sounds of bands such as Sly and the Family Stone, the brainchild of Texan multi-instrumentalist Sylvester Stewart (b.1943), who followed in the tradition of Stax soul, and, like James Brown (1933–2006), created a challenging yet compelling sound. Greil Marcus contrasted his project with that of Motown: "Sly was less interested in crossing racial and musical lines than in tearing them up" (p. 81). In a sense, the forerunners of rap were just as unhelpful.

All art aspires to provoke; rap music more than most. When C. Delores Tucker (1927–2005) spoke, she spoke with credibility: she boasted a lifetime's left-wing social action and had the backing of several black, feminist, liberal organizations. So, when she teamed up with arch conservative and adviser to Republican presidents William J. Bennett (b.1943), in 1995, it seemed a dangerous liaison. Their shared concern was with what they regarded as the hate and sexism perpetrated by rap and endorsed, albeit indirectly, by record companies, such as Death Row Records. They condemned the lyrics as "sleazy, pornographic smut," and warned that rap music was toxic; among its noxious effects were the promotion of violence and the degradation of women.

The Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's delight" was the first commercially successful rap record in 1979. This was sampled from Chic's "Good times," which is still acknowledged as a disco classic. The Sugar Hill Gang's number

was a free and easy dance track (“you’re rocking to the rhythm, shake your derriere/you’re rocking to the beat without a care,”) though the character of rap changed dramatically over the next couple of years. “The message,” as we saw earlier, was a much weightier and disturbing contribution, and offered a glimpse into how music could radicalize the black experience. Much of the rap music that followed was invective against the police, injunction to challenge authority, and construal of criminal behavior as political action. For example, *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted* was Ice Cube’s first album after he left NWA: it pushed the parameters of rap, integrating various perspectives from law enforcement officers, judges as well as offenders. The album opens with the sound of Cube being led to the electric chair.

In 1991, NWA’s second album *Niggaz4Life* entered the *Billboard* pop chart at number two, unassisted by a trailer single, video or the promotional backing of a big record company. By the time of Tucker’s intervention, the genre was no longer a subterranean music produced by independent labels. A tier of African American entrepreneurs and producers, the most celebrated being Russell Simmons, had emerged. Others included Andre Harrell, Antonio “LA” Reid, and the man who would become P. Diddy.

Lawsuits, bans, even a Rico (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) suit (intended to combat the mafia) flew in rap’s direction. In the early 1990s, it was the most controversial music since rock ‘n’ roll. Public anxiety was initially about the alleged incitement to hatred, but it broadened as the appeal of rap itself broadened. By the mid-1990s, rap’s audience was ethnically mixed and there were signs that an African heritage was not a prerequisite for performers, either.

Eminem, the nom de plume of Marshall Mathers, was an oddity: a white man who could write and perform rap with the best. His 1999 album *The Marshall Mathers LP* was the fastest-selling solo album in United States history. There had been white rappers before, but Eminem enjoyed the respect of rappers and producers like Dr Dre, of NWA, and Snoop Dogg, with whom he toured and performed. From one perspective, Eminem’s success was a *reductio ad absurdum* of rap: a white man stretching the genre to a logical, but ridiculous, extreme. From another, it was the remaking of the genre. The common themes of poverty, racism, criminality and sex were still there. But the *enfant terrible* was white and, actually, he wasn’t so *terrible* after all.

In 2000, *Entertainment Weekly*’s Owen Gleiberman hailed Eminem as “The first great white rap star – the first to channel, with electrifying obsessiveness, the anger and the strut, the power-lust desperation, the proud sociopathic *hardness* that has become the unholy essence of hip-hop” (December 23). Gleiberman divined that Eminem would “be to rap what Elvis Presley was to rhythm and blues.”

In view of the expropriation covered earlier in this chapter, it seemed a fair assessment. And how about the cross-cultural effects of both artists on what

were once black genres? Eminem might not have been such a cuddly teddy bear as Elvis, but nor was he as menacing as his black predecessors: his fans didn't hear in his music the dreaded rumble of the coming 2pacalypse.

Like Elvis, Eminem branched into film with 2002's *8 Mile*, not the first rap-themed movie, but the first to feature a white lead actor. And, as if to continue the housebreaking, several rap-themed films and tv shows quickly followed in 2003. These included *Malibu's Most Wanted*, in which Snoop Dogg did a voiceover for a talking rat, and *Bringing Down the House*, in which Queen Latifah, "hip-hop's first lady" as she was sometimes called, had a starring role opposite Steve Martin. Perhaps the animated comedy *Lil' Pimp* in 2005 confirmed that rap was not just domesticated; it had been trained to do tricks to amuse white audiences. The film depicted a world that seemed a long way from the one described in "The message."

Instead of being embarrassed by comparisons with their forebears, hip-hop artists relinquished any responsibility to chronicle, critique or challenge, and opted for voluntary domestication. As 50 Cent certified in his *I'm a Hustler*: "Rule number one, don't go against the grain." The same artist, in an interview with Kaleem Aftab, reflected on the price of fame: "In exchange for not being able to walk around in the mall, you can buy everything in it."

Hip-hop became a market-driven genre. The morality or propriety of a course of action was typically considered, but usually not too deeply. "I'm not just like some green motherfucker that's just doing things to make money," insisted P. Diddy (total wealth: \$475 million, according to *Forbes*). "I've never drunk beer, wine, never drunk whisky," he explained to Guy Adams. "Vodka is what I've drunk all my life" (p. 19). Hence, the only alcoholic beverage he promoted was Ciroc vodka.

Business tie-ups with Diageo, the makers of Ciroc, or Coca-Cola (a vitamin-water company part-owned by 50 Cent sold out to the soft drinks corporation) may not be what hip-hop culture was once about, but today's rap artists "frequently speak of ten-figure desires," as Zack O'Mally Greenburg puts it.

When exactly did a rogue culture become an adjunct of consumer culture? On July 19, 1986, according to Steve Stoute, who recalls a Run-DMC concert at New York's Madison Square Garden. When the band performed "My adidas," a kind of exaltation of the German sportswear, the audience responded by hoisting their own adidas shoes in the air. Stoute believes that, after that, commercial companies sensed the music's potential for selling products, and white audiences became curious: "Suddenly it began to appeal and sell to consumers from zip codes where rap wasn't even on the radio, much less being stocked in the record stores" (p. 34).

Adams dates the end hip-hop, or the start of what he calls "commercial hip-hop," later; at May 1997, when Diddy, as Puff Daddy featuring Faith Evans, released *I'll Be Missing You*. After that, rap slipped its moorings. Snoop Dogg (annual income: \$8.5 m) proudly wore a gold knuckle-duster, as if in parody

of the violent ghetto culture that gave birth to hip-hop. Kanye West (\$9.8 m pa) commissioned artist George Condo to design the album cover for *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, requesting “something that will be banned.” He confidently tweeted, “Yoooo they banned my album cover!!!!” Imagine his disappointment when it wasn’t banned.

It’s as if hip-hop artists were desperately trying to live up – or down – to a stereotype that generations of black people had been striving to destroy. As Armond White uncovers: “There’s been a change in the pop perception of black stereotypes that creates rapport for even the meanest black social conditions.” He alludes to ghettocentric logic, which I’ll explain in chapter 10. White goes on: “Through hip-hop, more Americans come to identify with black public figures than ever before: It’s the common ground Bill Cosby shares with Snoop Dogg.”

Today, rap is up there with pop, rock, dance and R&B as one the most popular mainstream music genres; even the surfeit of “nigga” and “muthfucka” in the lyrics sounds tiresomely familiar. Diddy and Snoop vie with Jay-Z and 50 Cent in the race to become rap’s first billionaire. Where there was once substance, there is now a density of crassness that inflates hip-hop’s fatuous subject matter and renders it good for only one thing: selling products. Fratricidal murders are the stuff of history, ghettos are strictly in the imagination, and it’s difficult to believe that tracks such “The Nigga Ya Love To Hate” and “Gangsta Gangsta” are torchbearers. *Newsweek*’s Allison Samuels wonders whether rap’s enraged and unpredictable young firebrands were really revenants, “minstrels in baggy jeans.”

In his *Notes of a Native Son* James Baldwin revealed: “It is only in his music ... that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story.” Black music, in all of its forms, has echoed the experiences of African Americans. The unruly multiplicity of genres has expressed often coded messages about the meaning of being black. Negro spirituals with lineage traceable to slavery, no less than blues, were mournful cries of a wretched and forlorn people, dispossessed and woebegone.

All the way through to hip-hop, the music has told a story. It is a story that whites have not just wanted to hear, but experience. They will also pay for the privilege. As the saying goes, he who pays the piper calls the tune. Black artists today, no less than the minstrels who clowned for whites 150 years ago, are subject to conditions laid down by whites. If they are prepared to meet them, they survive and sometimes flourish, but the chances are that they will be obliged to make compromises or sacrifices, depending on how you look at it. Remember: one of the most expressive and caustic social commentaries ever written on the black experience ended up on a tv commercial.