# Popular Music — Style and Identity

### Edited by

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*Stacey Johnson*
*Rebecca Sullivan*
*Paul Friedlander*

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**with Gary Kennedy**

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# "CROSSOVER" AND THE POLITICS OF "RACE"

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By way of an introduction to this session, I want to raise some general issues around "crossover." I want to begin by expressing some reservations about the very term itself, and by unpacking this rather slippery category. "Crossover," to my mind, suggests an industry discourse, one defined and shaped by the marketing needs of record companies, commercial music radio and trade journals. "Crossover" connotes a process whereby particular genres, emerging from particular social and historical contexts, and often with particular audiences, are packaged and marketed in specific forms to wider, mass audiences. It is essentially about the movement of products from "specialised," "peripheral" markets into those of mainstream pop and rock. The paradigm case is the long tradition of African-American musical forms "crossing over" to a mass white audience, although similar processes have occurred with Caribbean, African, Latin and "ethnic" and "folk" musics.

My first major reservation is that "crossover," in these instances, involves a particular *racialization* of markets, genres and tastes, a process which reproduces certain musical and cultural divisions which are, in practice, more fluid and permeable. "Crossover" also tends to assume *homogeneous* musical forms, cultures and taste groups — categories which, in practice, are a good deal more fragmented, dynamic and syncretic. This is especially problematic when considering the long and rich tradition of cross-fertilization between black and white musicians and musical cultures, for example, in American popular music. That tradition can be traced right through to contemporary collaborations between Heavy Metal/Hardcore and Rap artists. There is also, of course, an equally long and rich tradition of *mixed* groups, from the Del-Vikings, through the Specials to the Stereo MCs.

The second reservation I have about "crossover" is that it conceals the *power relations* involved in the music industry's handling of these forms, power relations that are both *economic,* in terms of control, ownership, expropriation and unequal exchange, and *cultural,* in terms of the forms in which these genres and traditions have been marketed and rendered "palatable" to a mass audience through the production of institutionalized images of black music/musicians which have involved particular *constructions* of blackness and black culture, and particular discourses of "authenticity," "sexuality," and exoticism (Gilroy 1991).

My third reservation is that "crossover" conceals a number of more interesting questions, about cross-cultural processes and appropriations, about the ways in which black musical forms have acquired a resonance for

*non-black* social groups, musicians and listeners, and how "racial" and ethnic identities are negotiated in musical practices. How, for example, have forms such as blues, reggae and rap, become international sounds of "rebellion" at different moments, acquiring a resonance for other subordinated social groups. How have these forms been rearticulated within different social formations, to express the local and particular, whether in Japan, Sweden or Australia? How are these forms differently inflected in those formations, to stand for "modernity," "freedom," "sexual expression," "urbanism" etc. What kinds of syncretic and hybrid musical forms have resulted from these processes?

The question that has occupied most of my attention, however, is the dialectic between black musics and white musicians and listeners. White appropriations of black musics remains a problematic and politically loaded issue. However, rather than simply condemning these appropriations as latter day forms of minstrelsy, and reducing them to the same level, I think we need a way of describing and *differentiating* between them, musically, discursively and aesthetically. I think we need to make some distinctions between that which *is* clearly plagiarism or unacknowledged appropriation, and those instances where black musical forms have been used as a *catalyst* or departure for something else (ie "youth" music in 60s British beat or blues-based rock) or where white artists have sympathetically inhabited black musical traditions and conventions and explicitly acknowledged their relation to those traditions, both within their music and outside of it in public discourses and statements. In practice, then, if we were looking at the field of rap, for example, this would mean making some subtle but important distinctions between the positions occupied by Vanilla Ice, Young Black Teenagers, House of Pain and 3rd Bass.

The second question here, still worth exploring I think, is the continuing mass popularity and cultural magnetism of black musics amongst young whites. What are the attractions and identifications at work here? What do young white people "hear" in black musics? What are some of the diverse ways in which black musics are read, used and rearticulated? This is an enormously complex issue, and there is no way I can do justice to that complexity here. What I want to do is simply offer a very crude and over-simplified inventory of some of the elements that seem to me to be at play in this relation.

On the "downside" are those elements which involve a distanced and racialized romanticizing and mythologizing of black musics and performers, whether

as signs of "authenticity", the "natural", the "sexual", as "risk" and "hip", the "exotic", the "body" — as "Other". Equally problematic are those appropriations which reproduce "black culture" in parodied forms, for example white male translations of stereotypical black masculinities in which black male artists represent models of urban "cool", self-aggrandizement or "badness". Also on the downside are those attractions which revolve around particular fantasies of "blackness" which substitute and circumvent the difficulties of sharing leisure space with real live black people. On the political "upside" are those instances in black musics have been drawn upon as a source of knowledges, critiques and insights into work, gender relations, domination and powerlessness; in which young whites have found a resonance in black music's symbols of opposition and rebellion, in its notions of communalism and collectivity, tradition, continuity and time, eroticism and uses of the body (Gilroy, 1987); those instances in which black musical forms and practices have been used to articulate transgression or "difference" in relation to adults, or to white/bourgeois/suburban cultures; those instances in which black performers, such as Bob Marley or Ice-T, have become respected popular heroes and icons for young whites; and those instances in which whites are forced to negotiate, in politically interesting ways, the Afrocentric, and race-specific discourses in black musical forms.

Of course, when thinking about *particular* identities and attractions, we are always going to be faced with a highly contradictory mix of these "positive" and "negative" elements. The important question, for me, however, is what are the *possibilities* opened up by these processes in terms of the cultural politics of "race". What effects might they have? In what direction might they lead? I think the only way to answer these questions is to situate and explore them in specific localities and contexts, in terms of their relations with other social practices and relations. Some of this kind of grounded, ethnographic research has been done in areas of urban Britain by myself and others (Hewitt, 1986; Jones, 1988; Back, 1991). This research has shown that in contexts where white appropriations of black culture, music and style are mediated by direct and sustained social interactions between young black and white people, and based on a shared experience of locality, class, unemployment, leisure space, schooling and friendship patterns, black musical and cultural forms (reggae in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and rap and dance music in the late 1980s and 1990s) can become a common cultural denominator and a shared practice for white working class, Afro-Caribbean and Asian youth. The kinds of networks, affiliations and identities that result from these processes have the potential to disrupt and destabilise notions of "race" and racial difference, and, amongst some young whites, to undermine investments in whiteness and Britishness.

In the light of this research, the question I want to ask, in conclusion, is whether there are similar kinds of processes currently occurring in the American context, around rap. Of course, there are important differences in the dynamics of these cross-cultural movements in the United States and Britain, the product, as they are, of quite *different* historical, social and economic relations between black and white communities — differences, for example, in the dynamics of race and class, in the degree of cultural, economic and geographical separation in schooling, leisure and social space. Such differences, on the face of it, cause me to be more pessimistic about the anti-racist potential of these processes in the American context than in Britain currently. Nevertheless, these processes do suggest that the field of popular music is a potentially rich area for anti-racist work amongst young people, and that such potential, in the American context, has, as yet, been largely untapped.

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