The 1619 Project examines the legacy of slavery in America. **Read all the stories.**

For centuries, black music, forged in bondage, has been the sound of complete artistic freedom. No wonder everybody is always stealing it.

By Wesley Morris
AUG. 14, 2019

I've got a friend who's an incurable Pandora guy, and one Saturday while we were making dinner, he found a station called Yacht Rock. "A tongue-in-cheek name for the breezy sounds of late '70s/early '80s soft rock" is Pandora's definition, accompanied by an exhortation to "put on your Dockers, pull up a deck chair and relax." With a single exception, the passengers aboard the yacht were all dudes. With two exceptions, they were all white. But as the hours passed and dozens of songs accrued, the sound gravitated toward a familiar quality that I couldn't give language to but could practically taste: an earnest Christian yearning that would reach, for a moment, into Baptist rawness, into a known warmth. I had to laugh — not because as a category Yacht Rock is absurd, but because what I tasted in that absurdity was black.

I started putting each track under investigation. Which artists would saunter up to the racial border? And which could do their sauntering without violating it? I could hear degrees of blackness in the choir-loft certitude of Doobie Brothers-era Michael McDonald on "What a Fool

Believes"; in the rubber-band soul of Steely Dan's "Do It Again"; in the malt-liquor misery of Ace's "How Long" and the toy-boat wistfulness of Little River Band's "Reminiscing."

Then Kenny Loggins's "This Is It" arrived and took things far beyond the line. "This Is It" was a hit in 1979 and has the requisite smoothness to keep the yacht rocking. But Loggins delivers the lyrics in a desperate stage whisper, like someone determined to make the kind of love that doesn't wake the baby. What bowls you over is the intensity of his yearning — teary in the verses, snarling during the chorus. He sounds as if he's baring it all yet begging to wring himself out even more.

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Playing black-music detective that day, I laughed out of bafflement and embarrassment and exhilaration. It's the conflation of pride and chagrin I've always felt anytime a white person inhabits blackness with gusto. It's: *You have to hand it to her*. It's: *Go, white boy. Go, white boy. Go.* But it's also: *Here we go again.* The problem is rich. If blackness can draw all of this ornate literariness out of Steely Dan and all this psychotic origami out of Eminem; if it can make Teena Marie sing everything — "Square Biz," "Revolution," "Portuguese Love," "Lovergirl" — like she knows her way around a pack of Newports; if it can turn the chorus of Carly Simon's "You Belong to Me" into a gospel hymn; if it can animate the swagger in the sardonic vulnerabilities of Amy Winehouse; if it can surface as unexpectedly as it does in the angelic angst of a singer as seemingly green as Ben Platt; if it's the reason Nu Shooz's "I Can't Wait" remains the whitest jam at the blackest parties, then it's proof of how deeply it matters to the music of being alive in America, alive *to* America.

It's proof, too, that American music has been fated to thrive in an elaborate tangle almost from the beginning. Americans have made a political

investment in a myth of racial separateness, the idea that art forms can be either “white” or “black” in character when aspects of many are at least both. The purity that separation struggles to maintain? This country’s music is an advertisement for 400 years of the opposite: centuries of “amalgamation” and “miscegenation” as they long ago called it, of all manner of interracial collaboration conducted with dismaying ranges of consent.

“White,” “Western,” “classical” music is the overarching basis for lots of American pop songs. Chromatic-chord harmony, clean timbre of voice and instrument: These are the ingredients for some of the hugely singable harmonies of the Beatles, the Eagles, Simon and Fleetwood Mac, something choral, “pure,” largely ungrained. Black music is a completely different story. It brims with call and response, layers of syncopation and this rougher element called “noise,” unique sounds that arise from the particular hue and timbre of an instrument — Little Richard’s woos and knuckled keyboard zooms. The dusky heat of Miles Davis’s trumpeting. Patti LaBelle’s emotional police siren. DMX’s scorched-earth bark. The visceral stank of Etta James, Aretha Franklin, live-in-concert Whitney Houston and Prince on electric guitar.

But there’s something even more fundamental, too. 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.

What you’re hearing in black music is a miracle of sound, an experience that can really happen only once — not just melisma, glissandi, the rasp of a sax, breakbeats or sampling but the mood or inspiration from which those moments arise. The attempt to rerecord it seems, if you think about it, like a fool’s errand. You’re not capturing the arrangement of notes, per se. You’re catching the spirit.

[Listen to an episode of the "1619" podcast with Wesley Morris and Nikole Hannah-Jones on the birth of American music.]

And the spirit travels from host to host, racially indiscriminate about where it settles, selective only about who can withstand being possessed by it. The rockin' backwoods blues so bewitched Elvis Presley that he believed he'd been called by blackness. Chuck Berry sculpted rock 'n' roll with uproarious guitar riffs and lascivious winks at whiteness. Mick Jagger and Robert Plant and Steve Winwood and Janis Joplin and the Beatles jumped, jived and wailed the black blues. Tina Turner wrested it all back, tripling the octane in some of *their* songs. Since the 1830s, the historian Ann Douglas writes in "Terrible Honesty," her history of popular culture in the 1920s, "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. The truth is more bounteous and more spiritual than that, more confused. That confusion is the DNA of the American sound.

It's in the wink-wink costume funk of Beck's "Midnite Vultures" from 1999, an album whose kicky nonsense deprecations circle back to the popular culture of 150 years earlier. It's in the dead-serious, nostalgic dance-floor schmaltz of Bruno Mars. It's in what we once called "blue-eyed soul," a term I've never known what to do with, because its most convincing practitioners — the Bee-Gees, Michael McDonald, Hall & Oates, Simply Red, George Michael, Taylor Dayne, Lisa Stansfield, Adele — never winked at black people, so black people rarely batted an eyelash. Flaws and all, these are homeowners as opposed to renters. No matter what, though, a kind of gentrification tends to set in, underscoring that black people have often been rendered unnecessary to attempt blackness. Take Billboard's Top 10 songs of 2013: It's mostly nonblack artists strongly identified with black music, for real and for kicks: Robin Thicke, Miley Cyrus, Justin Timberlake, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, the dude who made "The Harlem Shake."

Sometimes all the inexorable 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 lift — centuries of

weight, of atrocity we've never sufficiently worked through, the blackness you know is beyond theft because it's too real, too rich, too heavy to steal.

Blackness was on the move before my ancestors were legally free to be. It was on the move before my ancestors even knew what they had. It was on the move because white people were moving it. And the white person most frequently identified as its prime mover is Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a New Yorker who performed as T.D. Rice and, in acclaim, was lusted after as "Daddy" Rice, "the negro *par excelle*nce." Rice was a minstrel, which by the 1830s, when his stardom was at its most refulgent, meant he painted his face with burned cork to approximate those of the enslaved black people he was imitating.

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 decrepit, 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 concocted skin blacker than any actual black person's and a gibberish dialect 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 before. 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 arduous distance from all that adulation, 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.

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Other performers came and conquered, particularly the Virginia Minstrels, who exploded in 1843, burned brightly then burned out after only months. In their wake, P.T. Barnum made a habit of booking other troupes for his American Museum; when he was short on performers, he blacked up himself. By the 1840s, minstrel acts were taking over concert halls, doing wildly clamored-for residencies in Boston, New York and Philadelphia.

A blackface minstrel 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 mock operas and political monologues (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, the 'NSync of the 19th century. The performers were beloved and so, especially, were their songs.

During minstrelsy's heyday, white songwriters like Stephen Foster wrote the tunes that minstrels sang, tunes we continue to sing. Edwin Pearce Christy's group the Christy Minstrels formed a band — banjo, fiddle, bone castanets, tambourine — that would lay the groundwork for American popular music, from bluegrass to Motown. Some of these instruments had come from Africa; on a plantation, the banjo's body would have been a desiccated gourd. In "Doo-Dah!" his book on Foster's work and life, Ken Emerson writes that the fiddle and banjo were paired for the melody, while the bones "chattered" and the tambourine "thumped and jingled a beat that is still heard 'round the world."

But the sounds made with these instruments could be only *imagined* as black, because the first wave of minstrels were Northerners who'd never been meaningfully South. They played Irish melodies and used Western choral harmonies, not the proto-gospel call-and-response music that would make life on a plantation that much more bearable. Black artists *were* on the scene, like the pioneer bandleader Frank Johnson and the borderline-mythical Old Corn Meal, who started as a street vendor and wound up the first black man to perform, as himself, on a white New Orleans stage. His stuff was copied by George Nichols, who took up blackface after a start in

plain-old clowning. Yet as often as not, blackface minstrelsy tethered black people and black life to white musical structures, like the polka, which was having a moment in 1848. The mixing was already well underway: Europe plus slavery plus the circus, times harmony, comedy and drama, equals Americana.

And the muses for so many of the songs were enslaved Americans, people the songwriters had never met, whose enslavement they rarely opposed and instead sentimentalized. Foster's minstrel-show staple "Old Uncle Ned," for instance, warmly if disrespectfully eulogizes the enslaved the way you might a salaried worker or an uncle:

> Den lay down de shubble and de hoe,
> Hang up de fiddle and de bow:
> No more hard work for poor Old Ned —
> He's gone whar de good Niggas go,
> No more hard work for poor Old Ned —
> He's gone whar de good Niggas go.

Such an affectionate showcase for poor old (enslaved, soon-to-be-dead) Uncle Ned was as essential as "air," in the white critic Bayard Taylor's 1850 assessment; songs like this were the "true expressions of the more popular side of the national character," a force that follows "the American in all its emigrations, colonizations and conquests, as certainly as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day." He's not wrong. Minstrelsy's peak stretched from the 1840s to the 1870s, years when the country was at its most violently and legislatively ambivalent about slavery and Negroes; years that included the Civil War and Reconstruction, the ferocious rhetorical ascent of Frederick Douglass, John Brown's botched instigation of a black insurrection at Harpers Ferry and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Minstrelsy's ascent also coincided with the publication, in 1852, of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," a polarizing landmark that minstrels adapted for the stage, arguing for and, in simply remaining faithful to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, against slavery. These adaptations, known as U.T.C.s, took over the art form until the end of the Civil War. Perhaps minstrelsy's popularity could be (generously) read as the urge to escape a reckoning. But a good time predicated upon the presentation of other humans as stupid, docile,

dangerous with lust and enamored of their bondage? It was an escape into slavery's fun house.

What blackface minstrelsy gave the country during this period was an entertainment of skill, ribaldry and polemics. But it also lent racism a stage upon which existential fear could become jubilation, contempt could become fantasy. Paradoxically, its dehumanizing bent let white audiences feel more human. They could experience loathing as desire, contempt as adoration, repulsion as lust. They could weep for overworked Uncle Ned as surely as they could ignore his lashed back or his body as it swung from a tree.

But where did this leave a black performer? If blackface was the country's cultural juggernaut, who would pay Negroes money to perform as themselves? When they were hired, it was only in a pinch. Once, P.T. Barnum needed a replacement for John Diamond, his star white minstrel. In a New York City dance hall, Barnum found a boy, who, it was reported at the time, could outdo Diamond (and Diamond was *good*). The boy, of course, was genuinely black. And his being actually black would have rendered him an outrageous blight on a white consumer's narrow presumptions. As Thomas Low Nichols would write in his 1864 compendium, "Forty Years of American Life," "There was not an audience in America that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro." So Barnum "greased the little 'nigger's' face and rubbed it over with a new blacking of burned cork, painted his thick lips vermilion, put on a woolly wig over his tight curled locks and brought him out as 'the champion nigger-dancer of the world.' " This child might have been William Henry Lane, whose stage name was Juba. And, as Juba, Lane was persuasive enough that Barnum could pass him off as a white person in blackface. He ceased being a real black boy in order to become Barnum's minstrel Pinocchio.

After the Civil War, black performers had taken up minstrelsy, too, corking themselves, for both white and black audiences — with a straight face or a wink, depending on who was looking. Black troupes invented important new dances with blue-ribbon names (the buck-and-wing, the Virginia essence, the stop-time). But these were unhappy innovations. Custom obligated black performers to fulfill an audience's expectations, expectations that white performers had established. A black minstrel was impersonating the impersonation of himself. Think, for a moment, about

the talent required to pull *that* off. According to Henry T. Sampson's book, "Blacks in Blackface," there were no sets or effects, so the black blackface minstrel show was "a developer of ability because the artist was placed on his own." How's that for being twice as good? Yet that no-frills excellence could curdle into an entirely other, utterly degrading double consciousness, one that predates, predicts and probably informs W.E.B. DuBois's more self-consciously dignified rendering.

American popular culture was doomed to cycles not only of questioned ownership, challenged authenticity, dubious propriety and legitimate cultural self-preservation but also to the prison of black respectability, which, with brutal irony, could itself entail a kind of appropriation. It meant comportment in a manner that seemed less black and more white. It meant the appearance of refinement and polish. It meant the cognitive dissonance of, say, Nat King Cole's being very black and sounding — to white America, anyway, with his frictionless baritone and diction as crisp as a hospital corner — suitably white. He was perfect for radio, yet when he got a TV show of his own, it was abruptly canceled, his brown skin being too much for even the black and white of a 1955 television set. There was, perhaps, not a white audience in America, particularly in the South, that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the majestic *singing* of a real Negro.

The modern conundrum 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." It's that scum that's given us pause over everybody from Bert Williams and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson to Flavor Flav and Kanye West. *Is their blackness an act? Is the act under white control?* Just this year, Harold E. Doley Jr., an affluent black Republican in his 70s, was quoted in The Times lamenting West and his alignment with Donald Trump as a "bad and embarrassing minstrel show" that "served to only drive black people away from the G.O.P."

But it's from that scum that a robust, post-minstrel black American theater sprung as a new, black audience hungered for actual, uncorked black people. Without that scum, I'm not sure we get an event as shatteringly epochal 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 joint Saturday nights (rhythm sections, guitars, vigor). Pure yet “noisy.” Black men in Armani. Black women in ball gowns. Stables of black writers, producers and musicians. Backup singers solving social equations with geometric choreography. And just in time for the hegemony of the American teenager.

Even now it feels like an assault on the music made a hundred years before it. Motown specialized in love songs. But its stars, those songs and their performance of them were declarations of war on the insults of the past and present. The scratchy piccolo at the start of a Four Tops hit was, in its way, a raised fist. 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 proliferation 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 perverts 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 nostalgia 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?

In 1845, J.K. Kennard, a critic for the newspaper The Knickerbocker, hyperventilated about the blackening of America. Except he was talking about blackface minstrels doing the blackening. Nonetheless, Kennard could see things for what they were:

> “Who are our true rulers? The negro poets, to be sure! Do they not set the fashion, and give laws to the public taste? Let one of them, in the

> swamps of Carolina, compose a new song, and it no sooner reaches the ear of a white amateur, than it is written down, amended, (that is, almost spoilt,) printed, and then put upon a course of rapid dissemination, to cease only with the utmost bounds of Anglo-Saxondom, perhaps of the world."

What a panicked clairvoyant! The fear of black culture — or "black culture" — was more than a fear of black people themselves. It was an anxiety over white obsolescence. Kennard's anxiety over black influence sounds as ambivalent as Lorde's, when, all the way from her native New Zealand, she tsk-ed rap culture's extravagance on "Royals," her hit from 2013, while recognizing, both in the song's hip-hop production and its appetite for a particular sort of blackness, that maybe she's too far gone:

> Every song's like gold teeth, Grey Goose, trippin' in the bathroom
> Bloodstains, ball gowns, trashin' the hotel room
> We don't care, we're driving Cadillacs in our dreams
> But everybody's like Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your timepiece
> Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash
> We don't care, we aren't caught up in your love affair

Beneath Kennard's warnings must have lurked an awareness that his white brethren had already fallen under this spell of blackness, that nothing would stop its spread to teenage girls in 21st-century Auckland, that the men who "infest our promenades and our concert halls like a colony of beetles" (as a contemporary of Kennard's put it) weren't black people at all but white people just like him — beetles and, eventually, Beatles. Our first most original art form arose from our original sin, and some white people have always been worried that the primacy of black music would be a kind of karmic punishment for that sin. The work has been to free this country from paranoia's bondage, to truly embrace the amplitude of integration. I don't know how we're doing.

Last spring, "Old Town Road," a silly, drowsy ditty by the Atlanta songwriter Lil Nas X, was essentially banished from country radio. Lil Nas sounds black, as does the trap beat he's droning over. But there's definitely a twang to him that goes with the opening bars of faint banjo and Lil Nas's lil' cowboy fantasy. The song snowballed into a phenomenon. All kinds of people — cops, soldiers, dozens of dapper black promgoers — posted

dances to it on YouTube and TikTok. Then a crazy thing happened. It charted — not just on Billboard's Hot 100 singles chart, either. In April, it showed up on both its Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart and its Hot Country Songs chart. A first. And, for now at least, a last.

The gatekeepers of country radio refused to play the song; they didn't explain why. Then, Billboard determined that the song failed to "embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version." This doesn't warrant translation, but let's be thorough, anyway: *The song is too black for certain white people.*

But by that point it had already captured the nation's imagination and tapped into the confused thrill of integrated culture. A black kid hadn't really merged white music with black, he'd just taken up the American birthright of cultural synthesis. The mixing feels historical. Here, for instance, in the song's sample of a Nine Inch Nails track is a banjo, the musical spine of the minstrel era. Perhaps Lil Nas was *too* American. Other artists of the genre seemed to sense this. White singers recorded pretty tributes in support, and one, Billy Ray Cyrus, performed his on a remix with Lil Nas X himself.

The newer version lays Cyrus's casual grit alongside Lil Nas's lackadaisical wonder. It's been No.1 on Billboard's all-genre Hot 100 singles chart since April, setting a record. And the bottomless glee over the whole thing makes me laugh, too — not in a surprised, yacht-rock way but as proof of what a fine mess this place is. One person's sign of progress remains another's symbol of encroachment. *Screw the history. Get off my land.*

Four hundred years ago, more than 20 kidnapped Africans arrived in Virginia. They were put to work and put through hell. Twenty became millions, and some of those people found — somehow — deliverance in the power of music. Lil Nas X has descended from those millions and appears to be a believer in deliverance. The verses of his song flirt with Western kitsch, what young black internetters branded, with adorable idiosyncrasy and a deep sense of history, the "yee-haw agenda." But once the song reaches its chorus ("I'm gonna take my horse to the Old Town Road, and ride til I can't no more"), I don't hear a kid in an outfit. I hear a cry of ancestry. He's a westward-bound refugee; he's an Exoduster. And Cyrus is down for the ride. Musically, they both know: This land is their land.

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