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Reality of Their Surroundings: Fishbone & the Construction of Blackness in Rock Music

You've taken my blues and gone –
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me –
Black and beautiful –
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

-Langston Hughes
(qtd. in NAACP 58)

Here is the reality of Fishbone's surroundings:
We're living a lifestyle of the famous but not rich;
This road to stardom is one big grand illusion.
Lots of pictures and autograph signing,
And the bank account is constantly declining.
Gray hair is seeing its days, weak knees can take a bow –
On the outside I'm smiling, but on the inside I'm crying now.
All my rich and famous buddies, massive money stacked,
While I'm still driving in a bucket, living in a shack.

-Angelo Moore, Fishbone
(qtd. in Ozuna)

With sixty-six years separating the above poems, it is clear that not much has changed in the world of American popular music. Hughes lamented in 1940 the appropriation of black art

forms by whites who went on to great success imitating black culture. Moore, in 2006, describes what happens to the black artists who have had their art appropriated – they see little of the success that their white counterparts do. Moore's all-black rock & roll group Fishbone is the perfect case study of the appropriation of black art by white artists. Despite the construction of the rock & roll form by blacks in the 1940's and 50's, white appropriation of the style was so complete by the 1980's that black rock bands were considered an anomaly. Fishbone, with their punk, ska, funk, soul, and metal, were not only too multi-styled for the close-minded and linear American music industry – they were also black. Their blackness, and the fact that they addressed it within their song lyrics, challenged the prevailing stereotype that black people only played r&b and hip-hop, and as a result, Fishbone was denied real access to mainstream radio, music television, or promotion from record companies. Told they were "too black" for white rock audiences, and "too white" for black audiences, Fishbone, despite their cult status as one of the greatest alternative bands of the last 20 years, saw little of the success that their white friends, such as Red Hot Chili Peppers and Faith No More, enjoyed. Fishbone, therefore, is a perfect model for Hughes' lament, and for the construction of blackness in post-1970's rock & roll, when blackness was essentially removed from its rock & roll roots.

Fishbone formed in 1979 in the Los Angeles area, when six black friends in junior high school decided to create a rock & roll band. Angelo Moore, vocalist and saxophonist, grew up as a black minority in predominately white Woodland Hills, and had few contacts with blacks until he attended Hale Junior High, where bussing integration programs brought blacks from the Crenshaw neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles to attend school in Woodland Hills. Moore befriended five young black musicians who were from the Crenshaw area: Kendall Jones (guitar and back vocals), Chris Dowd (keyboards, vocals, and trombone), Walter "Dirty Walt"

Kibby (trumpet and vocals), and the Fisher brothers, Norwood (bass and vocals) and Phil (drums). The six young men had similar tastes in music – they liked hip-hop, but also Bootsy Collins, Funkadelic, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, James Brown, and Led Zeppelin (Beyond). They also shared a keen interest in reggae and ska music (which they thought they had created in Chris' mother's basement one day, until Kibby brought the truth to light that the sped up reggae music they were playing had been done before, and was called ska). The band began by playing covers of these groups in their parents' basements, and took the name Fishbone, ostensibly due to the rhythm section of the Fisher brothers (Phil Fisher was also known simply as "Fish"). Moore recalls a revelation one day that added a new element to the group's music: "Originally, I was a hip-hop kid with jeri curl,…when I first heard the [punk thrash group] Bad Brains, I thought, 'these white boys are bad,' but when I found out they were Black, my world just stopped" (qtd. in Gonzales).

With punk now firmly in the Fishbone mix, the group "practiced until 1983" and then began to play local clubs, which they were still too young to enter as patrons (Critical Times). The group was signed by Columbia records in 1984, and released a debut eponymous EP in 1985. Fishbone contained mostly upbeat ska and new wave rock, and included "(?) Modern Industry", which was in some ways a critical look at modern rock radio, but certainly a far cry from how the band felt 10-20 years later about the industry. As Moore made abundantly clear in 2001, "When we hooked up with the music industry, that's when the deterioration started. When we hooked up with the music industry, the deterioration *started*. The *deterioration* started when we hooked up with the music industry" (Critical Times).

Fishbone's local popularity continued to grow, albeit to a mostly white audience. In 1986, the band released their first full-length album, In Your Face, which continued with the ska

and new wave sounds of the first record, but added more of the band's rock and funk sounds to the mix as well. Somewhat confused as to what to do with the band as far as marketing, Columbia chose to market Fishbone specifically to white rock or ska listeners, despite the fact that they were all-black and included reggae and funk heavily in their sound. As a result, the band's shows were often with white rock groups performing for mostly white crowds. Fishbone began to perform regularly on bills that included white rock/funk groups such as Red Hot Chili Peppers and Jane's Addiction, both who became good friends of the band. Columbia, deciding to use the upbeat, happy quality of their ska music as a marketing point, had Fishbone appear in the 1986 film *Back to the Beach*, where they performed "Jamaican Ska" behind Annette Funicello. 1987 saw Fishbone go on a resulting tour with The Beach Boys, and then release a Christmas EP, the frenetic It's A Wonderful Life, both of which further aligned them with a white ska and "surf" audience.

In 1988, however, Fishbone began to let their live punk and rock distortion filter through to their recording. Truth and Soul, released that year, was stylistically as diverse as anything in rock history, including the band's trademark ska but also including soul, funk, punk, and hard rock. The album was a further challenge to Columbia's confused marketers, as it included "Freddie's Dead", a cover by Curtis Mayfield from the distinctly black culture of blaxploitation film Superfly, along with such punk rants as "Deep Inside" and "Subliminal Fascism", which the industry (wrongly) saw as distinctly emanating from white culture. The album also had lyrics that, more than ever before, clearly stated the band's leftist, idealist, and very Black politics. Columbia decided again to stick to white listeners, and Truth and Soul quickly became a college radio hit. A b-side single, "Skankin' To The Beat", provided further publicity for Fishbone, when it was included on the soundtrack to the film Say Anything. Additionally, the movie's star,

John Cusack, publicly acknowledged his love for the band. Fishbone's local Los Angeles white counterparts, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Faith No More, and Jane's Addiction, as well as the Bay Area's Primus, were also seeing heavy play on college radio. In 1989, Fishbone embarked on a major tour with Red Hot Chili Peppers that had both bands feeling on the edge of "breaking into the big time".

Following the further success of 1990 EP Set the Booty Upright, which included college radio hit "Hide Behind My Glasses", Fishbone went into the studio to record what they thought would be their breakthrough record. The addition of jazz/rock guitarist, keyboardist, backing vocalist John Bigham (who had played with Miles Davis during the late 1980's) further expanded the group's sound and confidence. The result of the band's studio labor was 1991's The Reality of My Surroundings, which displayed even more diversity in its sound than Truth and Soul, and yet in a way that tended to combine all the band's influences into each song, so that each track was a mix of many styles. Additionally, the band turned up the distortion and really began to let loose the thrash and metal that they had been playing live since the days in high school when they discovered Bad Brains. Lyrically, Reality was more explicit in its language, harsher in its humor, stronger in its sexuality, darker in its social commentary, and more radical in its politics than anything Fishbone had previously done. Columbia produced two high budget videos, one for the soul funk single "Everyday Sunshine", and the other for the hard rocking "Sunless Saturdays". These two songs represented the polar opposites of the Fishbone sound, and yet "Everyday Sunshine" was marketed toward the same white rock demographic as "Sunless Saturdays", once again demonstrating Columbia's confusion as to how to market the band. Additionally, a collection of old and new Fishbone videos, including 1991 commentary from the group, was released. In it, the band's optimism is clear, with the band appearing

confident and excited about the new record. They were aware of how their old friends Red Hot Chili Peppers and Jane's Addiction had recently broken big, and Fishbone looked forward to the same. As Kendall Jones remarks on the video, "We've declared this the Fishbone Decade. We're goin' all the way for 2000, G!" (Reality).

But as 1992 dawned, and Red Hot Chili Peppers became MTV darlings and the symbol of the explosion of alternative rock & roll, Fishbone stalled out. Sales of The Reality of My Surroundings, though good, were not competitive with those of the the Chili Peppers, or of the many grunge bands from Seattle such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam. Columbia, always confused as to how to market Fishbone as an all-black group who played rock music, essentially stopped trying, focusing their marketing and money towards white grunge. 1993 saw Fishbone's last record for Columbia, the barely promoted Give a Monkey a Brain and He'll Swear He's the Center of the Universe. Fishbone played Lollapalooza, the big alternative music festival, that summer, and still had a huge cult following, but it was clear that they would not follow in the footsteps of their white counterparts, Primus, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Jane's Addiction, who would go on to make millions of dollars as megastars playing the same mix of funk, punk, and hard rock that Fishbone had been playing before any of them.

Fishbone's stalemate mirrored that of black rock's in general in 1993. Living Colour, the all-black rock group, who with the help of the Black Rock Coalition and Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, was signed to a major record deal in 1987, had begun to lose support from their label as well. Despite a massive hit in 1988, "Cult of Personality", and a Grammy-winning debut album, "Vivid", Living Colour and black rock in general had, by 1993, begun to be considered a fluke by the record industry. In fact, in many ways, the industry had never seen it as anything else. Outside of Fishbone, who already had a major label deal before Living

Colour's, barely any all-black rock groups were able to get major record deals. Amazingly, rather than try to pursue other black bands after Living Colour's huge success, the record companies put all their energy into signing white groups with the "Seattle sound" and effectively shut the door on any inroads that black rock had made with Living Colour and Fishbone. Black rock groups such as New York's Faith were thus forced to release albums on their own. As a Faith fan said outside the group's release show in 1993, "Columbia couldn't, *couldn't* get with it, Spike Lee couldn't get with it, 40 Acres and a Mule couldn't get with it, so Faith did it on their own" (qtd. in Mahon 2). Though this was a compliment to Faith's do-it-yourself persistence, the disappointment could not be denied for aspiring black bands, who were essentially being shut out once again by the record companies despite what had seemed like a change in the right direction in the late 1980's with the success of Living Colour.

The irony of the situation, if one is to study rock & roll history, is that black rock even *needed* a "change in the right direction" to be taken seriously. As anthropologist Maureen Mahon points out, "For older African Americans…who remember [Chuck] Berry, Little Richard, and Bo Diddley from the 1950's, the concept of rock & roll as anything *but* black is absurd" (Mahon 92). That today's music listeners do *not* see rock & roll as a black art form is a testament to the great success of white appropriation of black art forms that has taken place in America ever since the 19th century. In music, this appropriation began with black face minstrel shows, continued on with the blues and jazz, and then with rock & roll (or rhythm & blues, as it was earlier known). The pattern goes something like this: white audiences delight in a performance of black music by a black artist, but due to segregation and taboo, it becomes necessary for white cover bands to perform the black styles for white people in white venues.

Over time, the white performers fully appropriate the black style as "white" in the eyes of other whites, due to what professor Beverly Tatum calls the process of omission:

> [A student] expressed her dismay [to me] that she had never learned about any Black authors in any of her English courses…a White male student in the class responded...'It's not my fault that blacks don't write books.' Had one of his elementary, high school, or college teachers ever told him that there were no Black writers? Probably not. Yet because he had never been exposed to Black authors, he had drawn his own conclusion that there were none (Tatum 5).

This same process of omission works with white appropriation of black musical styles, due to the inherent segregation of whites from blacks both in the media and in venues. The final effect of white appropriation, and one of the worst for black artists, is that because whites are the dominant economic group that control the recording industry, these white performers make significantly more money and get significantly more media attention than the black artists whose styles they borrowed.

With rock & roll, this white appropriation began shortly after World War II as the music industry shifted away from swing. After rising costs forced the big bands of jazz out of business, "jump" bands became increasingly popular as a dance alternative to the heady bebop music which was a "musician's music". These "jump" groups, in the late 1940's, began to develop into even smaller groups that were more focused on guitar and saxophone than horn sections. The style that these smaller bands played became known as rhythm & blues (r&b), due to its use of the 12-bar blues form coupled with a big dance beat. Called "race music" by the white mainstream, r&b slowly began to creep into the consciousness of white youth in the 1950's, as new radio stations with young, experimental deejays began to mix in black r&b with white pop.

For a white teenager, the choice between the stuffiness of the Andrews Sisters or the sexiness of the Ink Spots was clear: black music became the thing to listen to among white teens. Alarmed at this, white adults attempted to co-op r&b and "clean it up" by having white pop singers, such as Pat Boone, perform cover versions of black singles.

This had some success, but white teens longed for the real thing rather than the bland covers, and so the "problem" of r&b was not solved – that is, until Elvis Presley came along in 1954. Presley was a young white Southerner who, like many others like him, grew up listening to country music but had a keen interest in black blues and r&b. This was common because, as music writer Ren Cravatt pointed out, "the country blues and the Negro blues have strong ties" (qtd. in Bertrand 105). Presley and other young whites began to experiment with a new form of music – rockabilly – which essentially fused r&b with country music. These songs were no simple covers – they included an authentic r&b sound and, most importantly and horrifyingly to white adults, their performers used authentic black dance moves and vocal styles. Soon, Presley (who recorded rockabilly first), Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Ronnie Hawkins, and others were sweeping white teens off their feet across the nation. This did not please many white parents, but it was a better alternative than having their children listening to black musicians.

However, a number of black musicians (whom Presley and other whites had been influenced by) had become popular enough with white teens that radio was playing a mix of both white rockabilly *and* black r&b. Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Bo Diddley were the most famous of these black artists, and they began to have increasing success with white audiences as radio became more integrated. This integration on the radio caused Cleveland deejay Alan Freed to label all of the music he played, both white and black, "rock & roll", which was actually slang for sex that came from the blues. The public and the industry (unaware of its meaning) jumped

on the bandwagon, and the name rock & roll came to define the new popular music of the 1950's.

Black musicians, though, soon found their music had been reverted back to the name of r&b. This was no small issue – rock & roll had become a huge industry quickly, and rock & roll musicians were getting paid well and becoming famous. Meanwhile, r&b was relegated to being the separate and unequal partner where pay and promotion were lacking in comparison to rock. As Bo Diddley complained, "R&b don't stand for nothing but rip-off and bullshit"...whites began playing the style, and suddenly, "*they* was rock & roll and we were r&b" (qtd. in Mahon 152). Meanwhile, as the 1950's became the 1960's, whites, who either didn't realize that Presley's dance moves and vocal delivery were black, or didn't want to admit it, crowned him King of Rock & Roll. Black music had officially become appropriated as white.

Yet, despite the growth of soul music and Motown in the 1960's, and the fact that few blacks were playing rock music, radio stations continued to mix both "white" and "black" music throughout the 60's and most of the 70's. As one current black music executive recalls, "There was just radio. There was one station and along with Motown would be Led Zeppelin...So you listened to everything" (qtd. in Mahon 36). Another black entertainment professional recalls being told a story by another black man that he remembered having "a picture of Huey Newton at his stereo in his house, about to put on a Bob Dylan album," which the entertainment professional found "a completely believable kind of scene because I remember those days" (qtd. in Mahon 37). In addition to this integration of the radio playlists, there were still some blacks playing rock styles, such as the Isley Brothers, Sly & The Family Stone, Jimi Hendrix, and Funkadelic, so that overall, though rock was definitely considered "white", there was enough integration on the radio to allow for the idea that black people could "rock" as well.

The 1980's, however, were the dawn of the notion that black people could *not* rock. Radio had shrunk its scope into ever narrowing playlists, with the categorization of music into many different styles that each radio was to represent. Along with this move came the idea that there should be *black radio* and *white radio*. Black radio would handle contemporary soul, r&b, and the new genre of rap music, while white radio would handle everything else. This division was mimicked by the recording industry (which had racially segregated its artists for decades anyhow), as well as the new genre of music television, represented initially by MTV and followed later by VH1 and BET. The combined weight of this industry shift to mercilessly categorizing music by race and sub-genre after sub-genre was that racial identity was altered in America (Mahon 18). Black music, as it was now defined, was limited to simply rap and r&b, thus marking a black person with an interest in rock "as someone who has either misunderstood which music is appropriate for his or her consumption or has abandoned black culture by investing in what is perceived as a white music form" (Mahon 9,10). Black rock groups such as Fishbone were thus viewed as an anomaly rather than historically the norm, and were ostracized as being "inauthentic" in their blackness for playing "white music". Unfortunately, few journalists reacted to these accusations the way that one jazz critic did in the New York Amsterdam News in 1930: "Often when Negro performers are accused of imitating white ones they are only taking back what was originally theirs...The Negro has gone deeper into American life than is realized, and he will go deeper still" (qtd. in Spencer 183).

The forces, then, that conspired against Fishbone in the 1980's and early 1990's spawned from an American history of racism in both the music industry and society at large. Psychologist Beverly Tatum has broken down the elements of this racism into a number of key concepts: prejudice, racism, internalized oppression, and white privilege.

"Prejudice," she writes, "is a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information" (Tatum 5). This "limited information" could refer to outright omission, as was described earlier, or an individual repeating commonly held stereotypes from the greater society. Prejudice thus corresponds with what critical race theorists would call the "idealistic" view that race is solely a social construction built on attitudes and stereotypes, and that through adjustment of these attitudes and stereotypes, racism can be defeated (Delgado & Stefancic 17).

It is possible, Tatum writes, that a "member of the stereotyped group may internalize the stereotypical categories about his or her own group to some degree....This process ...has a name, *internalized oppression*" (Tatum 6). For Tatum, internalized oppression is something related to prejudice only, and not to racism.

Racism is different, she says, because it "is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies," or, as David Wellman defines it, "'a system of advantage based on race'" (Tatum 7). Critical race theorists would associate this idea with the "economic determinist" or "realist" view of racism, which holds that "racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools, and invitations to parties..." (Delgado & Stefancic 17).

Those who do receive these benefits, the dominant group, are owners of privilege due to their dominant status. In discussions of race in America, this is known as "white privilege", which critical race theorists define as "the myriad of social advantages, benefits, and courtesies that come with being a member of the dominant race" (Delgado & Stefancic 78). Tatum notes that the tricky thing about white privilege is that it can occur without the white beneficiary realizing it:

> The apartment that would otherwise have been rented to that person of color is still available for a White person. The White tenant is, knowingly or unknowingly, the beneficiary of racism...The unsuspecting tenant is not to blame for the prior discrimination, but she benefits from it anyway (Tatum 9).

Tatum's distinctions concerning the complex forces of racism are all present in the case of Fishbone and other black rock groups like them. Prejudice can be seen in the ultimatums that "black people cannot play rock" or "should not play rock", which, as has been shown, were the dominant stereotypes of 1980's music culture, and still are today. The pressure of these stereotypes come from both white and black culture. White rock musicians often treat black rock musicians with less respect – i.e. the commonly heard myth in the white heavy metal community that Living Colour guitarist Vernon Reid is "too sloppy." Obviously, white executives have a decidedly more negative impact on black rockers when they decide whether or not to sign a band based on the stereotype that "blacks can't/don't rock." In general, whites who espouse this view, whether they are musicians, executives, or listeners, are in essence denying American history. As black musician Bruce Mack notes, "'Black Rock' is redundant...The name is a play on the ignorance of America" (qtd. in Mahon 64).

Unfortunately for bands such as Fishbone, whites are not the only ones who Mack is speaking of when he speaks of the "ignorance of America". As black rapper Chuck D complains, many black music journalists "will claim they love music by know little about its history" (Chuck D 267, 268). He goes on to accuse blacks of not recognizing "a country that has found the right formula for pimping the so-called culture" that effectively narrows the definition of black music to a few choices (Chuck D 268). The idea that a band such as Fishbone would be "not black enough" or a "sell-out to the race" because they play "white music" is certainly an

example of a lack of understanding of history as much as the white view that "blacks can't rock." This internalized oppression is evident in this 1988 review, of Living Colour's debut record, by black cultural critic Armond White:

> Living Colour "narrows the definition of rock & roll" by following "the strictest – whitest – ideas of what rock music should be....[Living Colour guitarist/founder Vernon] Reid has made a political fetish of white rock as a result of the guilty pleasure it's given him" (qtd. in Mahon 160).

Strangely, this sounds very similar in tone to an opera review of a black soprano performance, in 1928, by white critic Olin Downes:

> Could not certain of the harmonizations have been less formal, more exotic? For us there was too much evidence of the musical influence of the whites and not enough of the originality of the race which has given America the spirituals and the dance rhythms that have gone over the whole world (qtd. in Spencer 4).

A band like Fishbone or Living Colour, then, is faced on both sides of the racial lines with criticism based on prejudice and internalized oppression from faulty stereotypes. This double bind of authenticity can be likened to Nigerian Olúfémi Táíwò's experience as a black immigrant in the United States, when he says, "We newly minted blacks are victims twice over of inauthenticity. To whites, if we are good, it is because we are aping white people...To blacks, we are denying ourselves. Both assume that we are out of place in the life choices that we make" (Táíwò 48). Black author Elizabeth Anderson adds that as black artists, "we are too often the prisoners of the real, trapped in fantasies of 'Negro authenticity' that dictate the only way we truly exist for a mainstream audience is in their fantasies of our authentic-ness" (Anderson 7). Fishbone bassist/vocalist Norwood Fisher agrees that the concept of black authenticity has

trapped the band: "We don't fit the mould, there's [sic] not too many black musicians out there like us....it's just too bad the way of the world is with race or should I say the illusion of race" (qtd. in Lucas-Smith). Bandmate Angelo Moore agrees that Fishbone breaks the stereotypes and moulds of society, while others do not, because "the majority of people are afraid to be nuts. They're afraid to let their real self [sic] come out" (qtd. in Beyond).

What makes it so difficult to let the "real self" out and to escape the prejudices of American music is what Bowling Green State University professor Awad Ibrahim calls the "ultra-visibility" of the Other (Ibrahim 78). Ibrahim's Other is the Black body, which he, as a black immigrant like Táíwò, experienced for the first time after arriving in North America. Ibrahim says that in "North America, my Black body speaks a language of its own, it cheats me, it ritualizes me, where I become a condensed moment of historicity, an inscribed repetition of convention..." (Ibrahim 78). According to Ibrahim, the experience of blackness in North America is such that one's skin color speaks for oneself in social situations in ways that are not intended, due to the fact that so many stereotypes precede the individual (Ibrahim 84). In this way, white people see black people as an Other that they "know" even if they have not met them. Ibrahim describes the process that brings this labeling about as the "politics of ultravisibility" when "the unmarked is marked and made visible...If the 'norm' – whiteness in North America, for example – is made obscure and invisible through technologies of normalization and naturalization,...then the hailed Other – Blackness, in this case – can only be made ultra-visible" (Ibrahim 79). For a black rock musician, then, to allow oneself to let one's "real self" to come out, there are definite consequences due to the fact that one is challenging the accepted definitions of what is "known" about the ultra-visible Other by the mainstream. As Moore said to an Australian interviewer in 2007, "The American music industry still has a huge racist

element – especially when it comes to an all-black band playing rock & roll. It would be much easier for us if we played to the stereotypes that the industry has in place" (qtd. in Miss B).

Tatum and Wellman would agree with Moore about the American music industry's racism, as the industry very neatly fits their definition of racism as a "system of advantage based on race" (Tatum 7). As an institution with whites in power at the most important positions, the music industry has been set up in such a way that it benefits white people. As Jean Baker Miller puts it, "Dominant groups, by definition, set the parameters within which the subordinates must operate," and in the case of the American music industry, those parameters involve a sixty year history of segregation between white and black that gives advantage to whites (qtd. in Tatum 23). Since 1942, for instance, Billboard Magazine has had a separate chart for "authentic black artists," which has gone by many different names such as "Harlem Hit Parade", "Race Records", "Rhythm & Blues", "Soul", "Hip-Hop/R&B", and just "Black" (Mahon 159). The important fact about these charts is that the blacks who are on them make considerably less money and have considerably less media exposure than those on the comparable "white chart", actually known as the "Pop-Rock" chart.

The record industry has a similar delineation set up much like Billboard's. In every major record company, there are two divisions: a Pop/Rock division and a Black division. The fact that the Pop/Rock division is marketed strictly towards middle class white America and is not called the White division, while the division that markets to black people is called the Black division, is a perfect example of the concepts of white privilege and ultra-visibility, where whiteness is invisible and blackness is the Other. As far as musical styles, the Black division is to deal with "authentic black music" such as r&b and hip-hop, while the Pop/Rock division deals with everything else under the popular music framework.

Because the Pop/Rock division is not defined strictly by race, the concept of the "crossover artist" and "crossover hit" exists (Mahon 163). A crossover occurs when an artist in the Black division has enough monetary success and popularity that he or she may "cross-over" to the Pop/Rock division. This is key for two reasons: one, the Pop/Rock division has more money for promotion, and two, it markets towards the mainstream whites who are buying the most albums. In essence, as Maureen Mahon points out, "when black artists cross over into pop success they cease to be black in the music industry sense of the word" (Mahon 163).

What the "crossover" means for a black rock group is that they are given two options by the record label: either change your style to r&b, be signed under the Black division, and attempt to "crossover", or be signed under the Pop/Rock division and not get promoted (Mahon 170). For Fishbone, who refused to change styles (though they were already doing a lot of what would be considered r&b by most listeners), they were signed under Columbia's Pop/Rock division. As was seen earlier, these Pop/Rock marketers went from being confused on how to promote the band, to outright not promoting them.

The segregation of the record industry and Billboard has been copied by radio and music television. Black radio stations play only r&b and hip-hop, but Pop/Rock radio stations, or "Top 40", play whatever is selling, which includes r&b and hip-hop. Recently, the trend has been that the two types of stations are nearly identical, due to the immense popularity of r&b and hip-hop in the 2000's. The same can be said for MTV, although early on, the station had some of the most racially discriminative programming anywhere, with nearly no black artists represented at all, due to the fact that the station considered itself a "rock only" station. Thus, the few black rock musicians at the time, like Rick James, were left out in the cold despite huge success on the charts (Mahon 168). It was not until 1983, when CBS threatened to withhold all of their artists

from MTV exposure if the station would not play Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" video, that MTV began to include r&b and hip-hop in its programming (Mahon 169). Still, MTV has kept its black music shows (i.e. r&b and hip-hop) separate from its rock shows, thus repeating the racial bias against black rock that the record industry and radio have made the norm.

Overall, it is clear that the American music industry is indeed "a system of advantage based on race." In 1987, after an inspection of the music industry in America, the NAACP came out with the following statement: "The record industry is overwhelmingly segregated and discrimination is rampant. No other industry in America so openly classifies its operations on a racial basis" (NAACP 56).

For the black rock artist such as Fishbone, as has been shown, the racial segregation of the music industry is particularly acute, and combined with the prejudiced stereotypes that blacks do not or should not play rock music, it makes for nearly insurmountable odds against success. The reason that Fishbone believed in 1991 that it was destined for success must be understood in the light of the work of the Black Rock Coalition in the mid to late 1980's. Formed in New York City in 1985 by Living Colour leader/guitarist Vernon Reid, Village Voice writer Greg Tate, and artist manager Konda Mason, the BRC became a non-profit, volunteer-based association dedicated to the advancement of black rock music and Black Rock politics. The group issued a manifesto in 1985 in which it asserted that:

> Rock & roll is Black music and we are its heirs...For white artists, working under the rubric 'rock' has long meant the freedom to expropriate any style of Black music – funk, reggae, blues, soul, jazz, gospel, salsa, as infinitum – then sell it to the widest possible audience....We too claim the right of creative freedom and

> total access to American and international airwaves, audiences, and markets (qtd. in Mahon 14, 89).

Although the coalition was very New York-centric for its first years (one of its main aims was to get Reid's band Living Colour a major label deal), a Los Angeles chapter of the BRC was formed in 1989, with Fishbone as charter members.

One of the main problems that the BRC attempted to combat, besides the obvious stereotype that rock music was inherently white, was the way that labels reacted to black rock bands speaking about black issues. Time and time again, black rock bands were being told that their music was "too racially charged" and that white rock audiences "wouldn't get it" (Mahon 124). For a band like Fishbone, who was proud of their black heritage, being asked not to write about the issues of race that they faced in their lives was tantamount to becoming a polka band and moving to Germany. As Angelo Moore said in 1994, on whether he thought his lyrics reached Fishbone's largely white fan base, "A lot of times I feel like I'm yelling into a vast void, but I just can't keep my mouth shut...I tell people what I've seen in South Central L.A. and on tour and the racism I've experienced. Some can relate...but other are far away from it" (qtd. in Joost). Whether or not his fans can relate to his lyrics or the music industry is comfortable with them, Moore is unwilling to give up his political and social commentary. In an interview in 2001, he related a story explaining why his black identity as a rock musician is so important to him:

> Well, you know, I think the thing that might've made me keep singing is when I was sittin' at the bus stop in Woodland Hills, which was a predominately white neighborhood, and some guys drove by in a pick-up truck, and they called me nigger...I was carrying a tenor saxophone case and a boom box, and I was running

> towards Thrifty's or Von's. [Moore imitates the pursuers]: "We're gonna kill you, nigger!" And I was like, 'Damn, what the hell is that?' because they threw something at me and I picked it up and threw it back, maybe it was a rock or a milk carton, or what-the-fuck-ever. And so I said, 'These guys aren't gonna stop me from playing my music or listening to my music. So it was the *music* that kept me goin' (Critical Times).

The Black Rock Coalition's first major success was also controversial. When Reid's band Living Colour was signed to a major record deal in 1987, many in the BRC hailed it as a major victory. Due to the presence of white patron Mick Jagger, however, who was the one to actually convince Epic Records to sign the band, others found Living Colour's success as fundamentally opposed to the vision of the BRC. One BRC band, The Family Stand, reacted by writing a song called "Plantation Radio" with the lyrics:

> Christopher Columbus, please discover me discover me
> Mr. Jagger, Mr. Simon, Mr. Sting if you're not busy
> Please tell them that I'm happening
> So that they will believe
> I need a Christopher Columbus
> So I'll win a Grammy (qtd. in Mahon 158)

Despite this negative spin on the band's success, Living Colour's Grammy victory was indeed a huge step for black rock in the 1980's in that it seemed that they had accomplished the impossible – mainstream success as a black rock band with Afro-political and social commentary in their lyrics. Many black rock bands saw this as an opening up of the doors by the industry to

black rock, and Fishbone was among them as they steadily increased in popularity in the late 1980's.

By 1993 unfortunately, as was mentioned earlier, Living Colour and black rock had faded in the eyes of record executives. Living Colour's follow-up records to Vivid had not sold as well as Epic had hoped, and in late 1993 they demanded that the band go out on an additional tour to further promote their new record, Stain. Some of the few black rock groups that had been signed to major labels post-Vivid, such as New York's 24-7 Spyz, were dropped from their contracts. Most other black rock groups were forced to settle for self-releases for their albums. Fishbone, meanwhile, was becoming increasingly angry about the lack of support from Columbia Records. In the words of Angelo Moore:

> It's a conspiracy...Everything we do, some asshole tries to undermine or undo. Fishbone's never been just an ordinary band with the same kind of music on one record - we've got all kinds of music on one record. Our record label just wanted us to be like all the other bands...We turned in songs for the new record and the man just laughed in my face, telling me they needed "something different." They just stopped talking to us and kept changing their minds about whether they'd let us go or not. We never wanted to pack it in. We just had to figure out a different way of going around the bullshit (qtd. in Galloway).

Moore also lamented the way the industry was segregated racially: "When I watch MTV and listen to the radio it's all segregated...So a kid will have his ideas of who should be playing what segregated in his mind...It puts people in a black and white state of mind" (qtd. in Joost).

The stress and disappointment were getting to the band in 1993, so much so that two members left the group. The first was Kendall Jones, who had a psychotic break during the

recording of Give A Monkey A Brain. As Norwood Fisher says, “He went bug wild, chasing the devil through the walls of his apartment....He was seeing the devil in everything. To him, his whole life had been in service to Satan, in some subliminal fashion” (qtd. in Bottenberg). Jones left the band and joined an extreme religious cult. Worried about the friend he had had since junior high school, and after failed verbal attempts at persuading Jones to see a psychiatrist, Norwood Fisher took action. In 1994, Fisher attempted to physically apprehend Jones and bring him to medical help. Unfortunately, Jones and his family filed kidnapping charges against Fisher. Though Fisher was acquitted, he was forced to give up on any ideas of helping Jones, and the incident obviously left him and the band in a state of shock.

The second member to "depart" was Chris Dowd. After Jones left in 1993, Dowd became increasingly disgruntled and, according to bandmate Walter Kibby, began to drink excessively. Kibby and Norwood Fisher claimed that the band was forced to kick Dowd out in 1994 due to his increasingly negative behavior, which, by late 1993, included berating the band’s fans from the stage. Dowd denies this accusation, and claims that he quit the band because it was not the same without Jones. Either way, there was no love lost between old friends, as Dowd wrote a song about Fishbone entitled "Flogging A Dead Horse", and Fishbone responded with a dig at Dowd called "Beergut".

Fishbone, now a five-piece, spent the next two years looking for a label to sign them, and ended up signing, surprisingly, with Atlanta r&b label Rowdy Records, a division of Atlantic Records which was known for producer Dallas Austin’s super-smooth r&b grooves. Moore claims that Fishbone signed with Rowdy because they hoped that it would help them get more black fans, "especially those punk-ass R&B kids who don't know rock & roll as they should (qtd. in Galloway). In 1996, after a semi-turbulent experience in the studio with Austin, the band

released Chim Chim's Bad Ass Revenge, easily Fishbone's heaviest and angriest record to date. On such tracks as "Rock Star", Moore and Kibby railed against the music industry that had sent Fishbone into a spiral:

> When I was a kid I would go to the show and see the rock star
> I'd play my records and look at the album cover at the rock star
> Sometimes I'd check out the R&B
> But the polka, salsa classical scene just was not me
> I wanted to be like Bootsy, Dr. Funkenstein or Jimi the rock star
>
> Color meant nothing to me
> Everything was equal as far as I could see
> Ignorant to the racist music industry music industry music industry
>
> Music industry... White rock star
> Everywhere I look... White rock star
> Read it in the paper... White rock star
> Watch it on TV... White rock star
>
> Only just a little... Black rock star
> Only for a token... Black rock star
> Sing no controversy... Black rock star

Unfortunately for Fishbone, Chim Chim, though a favorite among many fans and a statement of protest against the way black rock is treated in America, did not sell well and did not get the band more black fans. Additionally, the band entered into a multi-year dispute with CEO Austin over payment, and lost their record label when Rowdy was closed down by Atlantic.

Fishbone spent another 4 years without a record label, during which the situation worsened as two more core members left the group. Drummer Phil "Fish" Fisher left the band (and his brother Norwood) because he was tired of not making any money. John Bigham also left because the band's exhausting touring did not leave him enough time to spend with his family. Now with only three original members – Moore, Norwood Fisher, and Walter Kibby – the band hired Spacey T on guitar, John Steward on drums, and used a rotating cast of keyboard, trombone, and additional guitar players to return to a larger sound.

In 1999, a surprise of sorts occurred. The band was signed by Disney Corporation for a three album contract, the first of which Disney intended to make a major comeback for the group by including a number of famous Fishbone admirers as guests on the album. Fishbone also invited a number of their own guests, and what resulted was Fishbone & The Familyhood Nextperience presents the Psychotic Friends Nuttwerx in 2000. Such celebrities as HR from Bad Brains, George Clinton, Flea from Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Gwen Stefani appeared on the record, but Fishbone had been at constant war with Disney and their producer, Steve Lindsey, about how the corporation kept trying to tinker with the band's sound to get a radio hit or Grammy nomination. Both sides were fed up with each other by the end of the recording, and Disney ceased promoting the record and dumped Fishbone from its contract.

Despite the long and hard road that has continued for the band, including the departure of original member Walter Kibby in 2003 along with guitarist Spacey T, Fishbone has soldiered on, leaving a long legacy of what it means to black and want to play rock & roll in America. Somehow, Norwood Fisher and Angelo Moore have managed to persevere through over twenty years of racism, fighting the stereotype that "blacks can't rock" and that "rock is white music", battling the racist music industry to pay and promote them properly all the while. Yet, the two still have retained a positive outlook due to their love for the music. With a brand new 2007 album, Still Stuck In Your Throat, the band now includes a solid lineup that mirrors the band's glory days in its composition: Moore on vocals, saxophone, and theremin, Fisher on bass and vocals, Dre Gipson on keyboards and vocals, John McKnight on rhythm guitar, vocals, and trombone, Curtis Storey on trumpet and vocals, fomer Suicidal Tendencies member Rocky George on guitar, and John Steward on drums. Despite being denied success as a black rock band in a society that constructs blackness as r&b, the remaining two original Fishbone members

have reason for optimism. The band has become wildly popular in Europe and Australia, and, as Fisher noted in a 2001 interview, there was an upside to still being an underground band, and that is the connection with the fans:

> The more that I think about it, the pinnacle for Fishbone...it would be the ability to be here *now*, still doin' this shit. 'Cause you know, a lot of my friends that we came up with went on to sell millions and millions of records, and became really, extremely, *extremely* rich, and a lot of 'em don't have bands anymore and couldn't if they did. I'm just glad to be around to touch the fans still. If I can reach out to 'em one more time, then that's the pinnacle (Critical Times).

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