BLACK MUSIC— MORE THAN MEETS THE EAR

by Ann L. Carter

In almost any black home in America today—from the most affluent neighborhoods to the poorest housing projects, from urban centers to rural farmlands—one can find a common thread in all of these homes. This common thread is woven into the rich tapestry of music—black music being played, listened to, and enjoyed. Note the plethora of transistorized radios, portable cassette players, record players, various stereo and component units, and innumerable records and tapes in all of these home environments. It has been estimated that $2.36 billion is annually spent in retail sales on records and tapes,[1] and stereo equipment purchases add another million dollars annually.[2] Though no precise figures exist for determining the black share of this music market, it is undoubtedly a large one.

Unquestionably, black music has a prominent place in our culture. Far too often, however, music has been primarily used for entertainment. We, as black people in all walks of life, have not utilized this ever-present resource to its fullest. We have not used our music consistently and systematically to strengthen our unity, to express and develop our uniqueness, and to enrich our mental health. In short, we have not tapped this source to its fullest potential. The purpose of this article is to discuss how music, one of our most plentiful and inexpensive resources, can be more richly and completely utilized by all.

Historically, music has been used for its soothing, healing, and relaxing properties.[3] In traditional Africa, for example, music was used in all parts of daily life; it was an integral part of all important activities. African-Americans have carried forth this heritage. Much of the music of the Slavery, Reconstruction, Harlem Renaissance, and Militant Protest Periods have reflected our struggles, hopes, frustrations, and dreams. Music has indeed played an important part in our daily activities. Yet, this music which surrounds and permeates our lives can be even more constructively harnessed and utilized by all blacks—teachers, students, workers, parents, and consumers. It can be a viable learning tool for enhancement of positive mental health. Especially today with the ever growing electronic sound in music, it is necessary to go beyond the beat, the rhythm, the exterior trappings, and examine the lyrics. No one doubts the importance of the rhythmic beat of music; it is necessary, but insufficient by itself. We must concentrate upon the words—the real essence of the images being portrayed. Just as we may appreciate literature for its rhyme and meter, it is the

message, the essence of the prose or poetry, that is important. So it is with music.

As many parents, educators, and other concerned persons are becoming increasingly interested in the effects of television and film upon children and youth, so we, too, as blacks must be concerned about what our children and youth listen to and how it affects them. A conservative survey estimates that the average person spends 23.5 hours per week listening to the radio.[4] From observational data, it is believed that for children and youth, this figure is probably too low. Though there are almost 8,000 radio stations in the United States,[5] a very small number are black oriented, and an even smaller number are black owned. It becomes obvious, then, that we control a minute amount of what is played on the radio; yet it is a very influential medium. Thus, some important questions become: (1) How do we respond to what is on the air? (2) How do we help explain and interpret to our children and to ourselves what we hear? (3) Are we aware of the images (subtle though they may be) that are being projected to and internalized by us in general, and our children and youth in particular; or are we so mesmerized by the tantalizing rhythmic pulsations that we give no or only fleeting thought to the message? In short, how do we react to the images that are constantly being broadcast into our community?

The influence of images on black self-concept has been documented,[6] and the effects of the visual media on black self-concept is becoming increasingly noted.[7] The results of all of these studies converge into one basic conclusion: images, specifically those portrayed via the media, have a definite impact not only on self-concept but also on behavior. Moreover, it appears from these and other studies that the self-concept and behavior of children and young people are more acutely affected by images portrayed by the media.[8]

Just as we are selective about the literature that comes into our home so too must we be selective with music. We must help our children and youth to selectively screen, interpret, and understand music. We must make them more aware and expose them to music that embodies a positiveness. Positiveness in music, as defined in this article, are lyrics that are uplifting and that provide a forward-moving, enhancing mental direction for the listener. Conversely, at the other end of the continuum, negativeness in music is defined as lyrics that are not uplifting and that do not provide a forward-moving, enhancing direction for the listener. Midway between this continuum is music that can neither be classified as positive or negative; it portrays a kind of blandness or insipidness and is defined as neutral music. Obviously, these definitions are broad guidelines that may need to be expanded. For example, in selecting positive music, it may be helpful to keep in mind the seven Karenga principles (unity, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purposefulness, creativity, and faith) as additional guides.

Though there is a paucity of literature on the effects of black popular music on children and youth, there is no doubt that it influences their self-concept and thus behavior. This influence is further underlined when it is realized that the teenager and young adult purchase the greatest number of records and tapes. Some research has been done on the therapeutic effects of music with "special populations,"[9] as well as with "normal populations."[10] This research in general has shown that music which is selected for its positiveness and mental enhancement has had a positive effect upon the self-concept and images and behaviors of the patient or client as well as upon his relationships

with others. These findings are consistent with the theoretical foundations of music therapy, which state that regardless of the setting, clientele, therapist, and theoretical orientations employed, three principles will emerge: (1) the establishment or reestablishment of interpersonal relationships; (2) the bringing about of self-esteem through self-actualization; and (3) the utilization of the unique potential of rhythm to energize and bring order.[11] For the most part, however, these studies have been in controlled settings (either hospitals, school groups, group counseling/therapy session, etc.) and have not utilized black popular music.

It is felt that these studies and the basic underlying principles of music therapy do suggest some practical implications; namely, that it is possible to utilize and select the popular black music that surrounds us and transform it into a potent force for mental enhancement and positive behavioral change. We can practically and effectively implement these concepts from empirical research data and music therapy into our every day life and environment via popular black music. Before we examine these implementations and settings, some general guidelines are necessary.

Regardless of the setting, the leaders-facilitators (parents / guardians, school personnel, clergy / laity) need to take the time to listen to and familiarize themselves with the current popular music so that they will be able to discuss with their groups the pros and cons of the lyrics, as well as the resulting implications. The discussion should include all types of music—the positive, the negative, and the neutral. Though the rhythmic beat of the music will help in setting a relaxed mood for the discussion of the lyrics, and as mentioned earlier, will serve to energize and bring order, it should be secondary in the discussion process. The primary task is to facilitate the listeners in analyzing the content of the lyrics and images and how these influence behavior. A discussion will now be given on the implementation of this concept in the home, school, and church environments.

Home

As a recording is listened to, ask the children how they feel about the words—would they want to be in the portrayed situation or position? Why or why not? How are the people themselves portrayed in the songs—weak, strong, enduring, shiftless, persistent? Are these qualities that are important to emulate? What do these projected roles suggest and imply? Now in discussing, it is important not to "analyze all the enjoyment and fun" out of the music. It should not be a homework assignment with right and wrong answers, but a time to increase awareness of the lyrics and thus the concomitant images and philosophies that consciously and unconsciously flood one's mind. Since it is important to keep the discussion a pleasant, flowing one, it should be done in an informal atmosphere—perhaps on the weekends, during or after dinner, or any time when all or most of the family members are together and relaxed.

School

This concept can be brought up at the PTA meetings or other school-community get-togethers. Perhaps even some parents who have tried it successfully in their homes might give a brief demonstration of its effectiveness at the school meeting. This is an issue that all the school personnel can address and participate in. Black music in the schools does not have to be restricted to the music period of the school, or to black history celebrations. The lyrics of black music can easily be discussed in English classes, social studies classes, and in values classes. The counselor or psychologist could very effectively use this medium in group counseling sessions for enhancement of self-con-

cept and for discussing and bringing out many of the concerns and problems of students. And, of course, musically talented staff and students could create various types of black music for discussion. Again, the purpose is not to "put down" any particular artist or to ban students from listening to particular music (which is virtually impossible anyway) but to make the listener more cognizant of images that are presented to her/him and how these affect her/his behavior.

Church

Sunday school classes, student or adult discussion groups, and other church gatherings would provide an ideal setting for introducing the concept of images portrayed in music. Popular black music will add a new dimension to the discussion and can serve as a unique and relevant teaching tool that will have applicability not only for the church setting, but also for the remainder of the week.

The important role of music in black culture, the need to be more aware of the images that are portrayed through popular black music, and the ways these images can influence our self-concept and behavior have been examined in this article. Practical implications and suggestions, supported by research studies and principles of music therapy, were given for utilization by parents, school personnel, and the clergy-laity.

In our increasingly technological-cognitive world, it is especially crucial that our children and youth are taught to critically examine and analyze not only music lyrics, but also all aspects of life that impact upon them. This is essential for survival and for positive mental health and growth. In this space and time in history, we occupy an advantageous position to creatively facilitate the development of our children and youth via popular black music. Our history has shown us to be a very creative people. Let us take advantage of this opportunity, and once again demonstrate that creativity is utilizing what is common in an uncommon way.

Notes

1. *Billboard International Buyer's Guide—Section 2* (Los Angeles: Billboard Publications, Inc., 1976), p. 9.

2. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

3. Alvin, Juliette, *Music Therapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 21-70. See also Gutheil, Emil, *Music and Your Emotions* (New York: Liveright, 1970).

4. Shemel, Sidney, and M. William Krasilovsky, *This Business of Music* (New York: Billboard Publications, Inc., 1977), p. xviii.

5. Billboard, op. cit., p. 11.

6. Banks, James A., and Jean D. Grambs, *Black Self Concept: Implications for Education and Social Science* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972). See also Gayle, Addison, Jr. (Ed.), *The Black Aesthetic* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972); Gerald, Carolyn F., "The Black Writer and His Role," ibid., pp. 349-356; and Yamamoto, Kaoru (Ed.), *The Child and His Image* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

7. Chisholm, Shirley, "The White Press: Racist and Sexist," *The Black Scholar* (September 1973), Vol. 5, No 1, 2-10. See also Douglas, Pamela, "Black Television: Avenues of Power," *The Black Scholar* (September, 1973), Vol. 5, No. 1, 23-31; Hatcher, Richard G., "Mass Media and the Black Community," *The Black Scholar* (September, 1973), Vol. 5, No. 1, 2-10; Leifer, Aimee Dorr, and Donald Roberts, *Children's Responses to Television Violence* (U.S. Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document ED 054-596, August, 1971); Poussaint, Alvin R., "Blaxploitation Movies—Cheap Thrills that Degrade Blacks," *Psychology Today* Vol. 7, No. 9, 1974, pp. 22, 26, 27, 30, 39, 98; and Ward, Francis, "Black Male Images in Films," *Freedomways*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1974), pp. 223-229.

8. Ward, Renee, "Black Films, White Profits," *The Black Scholar* (May, 1976), Vol. 7, No. 8, pp. 13-24. Note quote by Roland Jefferson on p. 23.

9. Brooks, H. Bryce. "The Role of Music in a Community Drug Abuse Prevention Program." *Journal of Music therapy* (Spring, 1973), Vol X, No 1, pp. 3-6. See also Mitchel, Donald E. and Dorothea M. Farrell. "Music and Self Esteem: Disadvantaged Problem Boys in an all Black Elementary School." *Journal of Research in Music Education* (Spring, 1973), Vol 21 No 1, pp. 80-84; Nordoff, Paul and Olive Robbins. *Music Therapy in Special Education.* New York: The John Day Company, 1971; and Wilson, Anna-

mary E. "Music in the Treatment and Education of Emotionally Disturbed Children." In E. Thayer Gaston (Ed.) *Music in Therapy*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968.

10. Carter, Ann L. "An Analysis of the Use of Contemporary Black Literature and Music and its Effects upon Self Concept in Group Counseling Procedures." (Unpublished dissertation) Purdue University, 1974. See also McNeill, Willie Jr. "Verbal and Creative Responses by Fifth Grade Children to Three Types of Black American Folk Music (Unpublished dissertation) The Pennsylvania State University, 1975.

11. Gaston, op. cit., p. v.

South Street, Philadelphia

the auction
The new slaves work weekends
at the coffeehouse
The minstrel/meat takes the stage
without chains
Jazzing payment from between
the owners' thighs
No messages
thru their drums now/
they let them play

The bidders travel
to these little digs and dives
from townhouses built
on ghetto bones
to these slick pits on repaved streets
This is called consciousness/raising
skirts over thighs A
Revival of the Cotton Club
in the name of nostalgia

Between sets the drummer disappears
The clarinetist packs a bag
The trumpeteer is taken for the night
No messages pass thru hollow hands
to drums/
they let them play

—Chelle McMichael