Music of the Common Tongue

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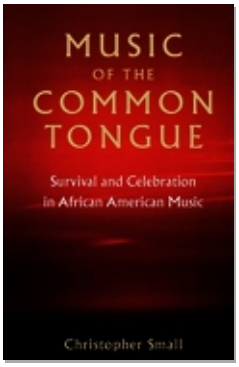

Chapter 13

STYLES AND RITUALS: WANTING TO BE PART OF THAT MUSIC

The eruption of rock'n'roll into popular music in the mid-1950s took most white people by surprise; it seemed as if this extraordinary raucous but exciting music had suddenly come from nowhere to displace the familiar strains to which they had been accustomed as a background for social events and for decorous dancing. That it was in fact a product of the long evolution which I have been describing in this book, and that it had strong links with other contemporary styles of Afro-American musicking was not at that time clear to many people, and indeed it is still largely obscured by an imposed taxomony which tends to conceal its true origins. In this chapter I intend to show the strength of those links by tracing the main lines of its development both backwards into its past and forward to the present forms of popular music.

One of the major difficulties in discussing the great four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle that is Afro-American music, and in showing how the various elements articulate one with another, lies in the necessity of using the literary medium, which is obstinately sequential, to represent a process in which so many interlinked things have been going on at the same time. Performers and listeners alike have resisted the pigeonholing that both entrepreneurs, trying to make money out of the musicians' activities, and scholars, trying to make a tidy and manageable order out of what is essentially an untidy and unmanageable activity, have tried to impose on them. The record industry, which

has of course been intimately involved with the development of all kinds of western musicking since at least the turn of the century, has always been keen to pigeonhole its artists and its publics; built as it is on music as a commodity for sale, it finds that this practice makes for greater ease of packaging and marketing, as well as making it possible to direct sales efforts towards specific markets and from time to time to produce the illusion of having something new to sell. There can be no doubt that this packaging of artists for a particular market has had its effect on the history of western music in this century, not excepting classical music, and has played a large part in the erection of what are often quite artificial categories in Afro-American music. In real life, however, musicians have always been willing to work in as wide a variety of styles and milieux as their skills will permit (the two musicians described by Titon in Chapter 7 are by no means exceptional), while on the other hand audiences have on the whole not cared to confine their listening to one musical style only; this need not surprise us since identity is a complex, dynamic and many-layered affair. The categories that are commonly used are at best convenient approximations, at worst commercial and even political fictions, and trying to establish the boundaries between them is like trying to put fences between the colours of the rainbow.

That is not to say that giving names to styles of Afro-American music, or any other music for that matter, has no basis in reality. Styles do crystallize and become dominant, and musicians as they play, listeners as they listen and dancers as they dance, do group themselves together, bound by common values and identities; such groups frequently adopt names for the purpose of self-identification. The fact that the power to name is also the power to define is of great importance in musicking, concerned as it crucially is with identity, and we need to look very carefully always at how a name is given, who gives it, and whose power of definition it reflects. The need becomes more pressing when the musicking under discussion is concerned with the self-definition of large

numbers of people, as is that modern popular Afro-American music known as rock, or pop.

The most notable instance in this century of self-definition on a mass scale through music occurred in the mid-1950s, with the coming of rock'n'roll, perhaps the most profound and enduring reshaping of a dominant musical style to have taken place since the Renaissance. An astonishing feature of that reshaping, in an age of mass communications (that is, one-way communication), is that it took place initially without the mediation of the controllers of mass communication, the major record companies and the radio and television networks. How it took place is a much-told tale, but it needs retelling here, since the way in which the story is told and has become accepted is itself a significant part of that history.

According to the conventional history, up to the early 1950s the popular music that was most widely known to the majority (that is to say, the white) audience across the industrialized world was the literate, usually 32-bar, popular song which we encountered in Chapter 9. The great majority of the artists, like the audience, were white, and the music was cast in the form of the two most popular dances of the time, the foxtrot and the quickstep, with an occasional waltz. Those few black artists who did make hit records, such as Nat 'King' Cole and the Ink Spots, did so by making themselves sound as 'white' as possible and by conforming to popular-song conventions (though the Ink Spots, like the earlier Mills Brothers, were drawing all unbeknownst to their audience on the male gospel-quartet tradition); but they were few indeed. Every now and then a hint of another culture would emerge and cross over into the popular-music field; in hits like Count Basie's *One O'Clock Jump* of 1941 and a few other 'jump' (that is, rhythm-and-blues under another name) records, notably by the great Louis Jordan, those of us who were in our teens at the time felt a whiff of something stronger than the offerings of Bing Crosby, Vera Lynn and Glenn Miller, although we had no idea where it came from. On the whole, however, the melodies and the rhythms, like the artists, were firmly European in origin, with just a hint

of jazz-blues inflection. The record market itself was dominated by six 'major' companies, which had control not only of the artists and the repertoire, but also of recording facilities, production and marketing. It was, as we noted earlier, essentially a music that was aimed at adult tastes and experience; adolescents (there was no such creature as a teenager until the 1950s) accepted the music and its curiously stylized lyrics as part of their environment. Jazz, and especially blues, were esoteric, acquired tastes, the latter in any case not widely available outside the black ghettos of the United States.

We have seen how blues was transformed in the late 1940s by the new mood and expectations of black Americans; it was also transformed musically by a greater emphasis on the dancing beat, as well as by the application of electrical amplification to the guitar, giving it not only new bite and penetration but also greatly increased sustaining power. Dance has always been an important part of the function of the blues, but, as the rhythm sections of blues bands became more powerful and emphatic, the character of the music changed, gaining for it, according to the conventional account, the name of 'rhythm-and-blues'. This was a music still made more or less exclusively by and for black people. It was hardly at all recorded by the major record companies and mostly ignored by the radio networks, but there were individual radio stations that played it, and even some that specialized in it, and more adventurous white listeners, bored with the offerings of the networks, would turn the knobs of their radio sets and pick up this music, which was the antithesis of the networks' staple; it was loud, often crudely produced and recorded, with a powerful dance beat and the harsh but vibrant voices of such now legendary figures as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Joe Turner — and it was, above all, exciting.

The conventional account tells also how the real expansion of interest in this music among white audiences came when a Cleveland disc jockey named Alan Freed launched it, first in his radio programme and then in a series of monster live shows in Cleveland and, later, New

York, coining the term 'rock'n'roll' in an attempt to render the music more acceptable to the white majority audience. These shows presented in the flesh for the first time to that audience such artists as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Joe Turner and The Drifters, the last-named being one of the many black vocal groups whose singing, often called doo-wop after the sounds made by the backing singers, was based on the gospel tradition. Recordings of these, and other artists, were made not by the major companies, who regarded the whole thing as a fad and beneath their notice, but by a number of smaller companies that had grown up in the space they had left vacant: Chess in Chicago, Sun in Memphis, King in Cincinatti and a host of others that came and went almost overnight. In the absence of those large-scale resources for the production, promotion and marketing of records which the majors had at their disposal, it was some time before rock'n'roll became a dominant music — not, in fact, until the majors woke up to its commercial possibilities.

Before that could happen there needed to be an injection from white American music, notably, the story goes, from country music. Enter, stage left, a country band called The Saddlemen, to be transformed by Milt Gabler, who happened to have also been Louis Jordan's record producer, into Bill Haley and the Comets, the first *real* rock'n'roll band. They brought a dash of country style of instrumental performance to what was basically rhythm-and-blues, as well as a spectacular stage show in which Haley pranced about the stage, played the sax while lying on his back with his legs in the air, and generally set the style for subsequent rock'n'roll performance. Enter, stage right, a young man who in the summer of 1954 had walked into Sam Phillips' Sun studio in Memphis, legend has it to make a birthday record for his mother. Phillips, who had recorded a number of successful rhythm-and-blues performers on his Sun label, had developed a unique recorded sound, and, after a number of false starts, a record of Elvis Presley was issued in July 1954, with on one side a black blues and on the other a white country song. It was an astonishing debut, assured, even arrogant,

and it initially puzzled listeners as to whether the singer was black or white — an important question in those segregated days. It was the first of five discs by Presley that were issued on the Sun label before Phillips sold his contract to RCA in December 1955; it was then with all the resources of a big record company behind him, that he began the historic career that opened with *Heartbreak Hotel* and continued with a string of huge successes that aroused the young to ecstasy and their elders to fury. But from that point on it was downhill all the way to the sordid moment in 1977 when, fat and stuffed with drugs, he died in his Memphis mansion at the age of forty-two.

The synthesis brought about by Presley and Haley between white country and black blues styles was followed up by a number of white artists — Jerry Lee Lewis, Charlie Rich, Carl Perkins and many others — which crystallized into a moment that was given the picturesque name of Rockabilly before it was recognized, simply, as rock'n'roll. The blues form is clearly recognizable in much of this music, but its subject matter is far removed from the blues's traditional concerns. Carl Perkins's *Blue Suede Shoes*, later recorded by Presley, is typical; it is a twelve-bar blues, but the words, delivered in the nasal voice and southern accent of the country singer, speak of a new hedonism and narcissism previously unknown in traditional blues, black or white.

The conventional account of subsequent development can be quickly summarized. As was inevitable, once the major companies had recognized the commercial potential of the new music (newly affluent teenagers of the postwar boom years were discovering the delights of independent purchasing power) they were quick to enter the field and take it over. First they issued cover versions, by their own contracted artists, of records originally made by rock-'n'roll artists (Pat Boone covered Little Richard's *Long Tall Sally* and the Flamingos' *I'll Be Home*, while a white group, the Crew Cuts, covered The Chords' *Sh-Boom* and The Penguins' *Earth Angel*), then by creating white stars of their own. A series of unrelated events — Presley's induction into the army for two years, Chuck Berry's

conviction under the Mann Act in 1959, the deaths of Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran in 1959 and 1960, in plane and car crashes, the British scandal concerning Jerry Lee Lewis's marriage to his thirteen-year-old cousin — removed some of the major artists of the first generation from the scene, creating a vacuum that the record companies were only too happy to fill. The names of their instant stars of the later 1950s read like caricatures, record executives' notions of teenage fantasies: Bobby Vee, Frankie Avalon, Fabian, while the names' owners were often chosen more for their photogenic qualities in the centrefolds of fan magazines than for any real musical ability. Britain endured the same thing around the same time, with Johnny Gentle, Marty Wilde, Billy Fury and Tommy Steele; a few singers in both countries survived their rechristening to show real ability and staying power. The effect, however, was to dilute the revolution wrought by the earlier artists of rock'n'roll and reduce the music to pop pulp. Rock'n'roll, as Charlie Gillett observed, was rechristened 'rock and roll'. 'The industry, with typical sleight of hand, killed off the music but kept the name, so that virtually all popular music (with the exception of what came to be called "easy listening") was branded rock and roll. The abolition of the apostrophe was significant — the term looked more respectable but sounded the same. Perfect. Upon a younger generation than that which had discovered and insisted upon the original rock'n'roll was palmed off a softer substitute which carried nearly the same name'.[1] And to that younger generation by 1960, at least in white America, the names of Chuck Berry, of Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis, and of other heroes of rock'n'roll meant little or nothing. The only artist of the group who was still consistently producing hit records was Elvis Presley, but he was by now only a shadow of his former self.

Black music was, of course, by no means extinct in the United States at that time; it continued to develop and, more importantly, to break down the barriers of segregation that had been breached with rock'n'roll. Rhythm-and-blues continued popular with black audiences

through the 1950s, and in 1960 Tamla Motown, the first black-owned-and-operated record company to achieve international success, began its lucrative and influential career with artists who were able to draw on the resources of rhythm-and-blues and of gospel. They aimed unashamedly at the larger commercial market, and they won it. What they achieved for black America also was a new image of glamour and success before white audiences as well as black, using the full resources of theatre — careful visual presentation, with choreography and costume playing an important part — in a way that, rather than denying their own tradition, as many black artists before them had been obliged to do, drew upon it.

With rock and roll in the doldrums in America, a new impetus was to come, unexpectedly, from Britain, whose own popular music had since the invasion by ragtime and jazz between 1910 and 1920 been a mere province of the American. Rock'n'roll had established itself there in the early 1950s, mainly as a working-class music, unlike in the United States (British middle-class youth listened to New Orleans revival jazz and despised rock'n'roll — a whiff of class still hangs around rock'n'roll in Britain) and was linked indissolubly in the anxious public mind with the Teddy-boy cult and with violence. This association was 'proved' by incidents, made much of by the press, during screenings of the film *Rock Around the Clock*, in which Bill Haley and the Comets starred, when youngsters, excited by the music but prohibited from getting up and dancing to it, took to ripping up the seats instead. Such home-grown rock'n'roll stars as existed were pale imitations of the Americans. But British rock'n'roll did spawn one important, if short-lived music: skiffle, a kind of simplified rock'n'roll played on home-made instruments, generally washboard and tea-chest bass, with only an acoustic guitar as melody instrument. It was a way of musicking that broke through the barriers of formal skill and freed many youngsters, who would otherwise have remained musically impotent, to take an active part. When the craze faded, around 1959, many groups continued to play and these provided a reservoir not only of, admittedly somewhat

elementary, skill but also, more important, of self-confidence and experience, the feeling that there was something that they could do.

Rhythm-and-blues did not form part of the received tradition for British musicians, but still it is less surprising than it might at first appear that British musicians should have been enthusiastic about it when their white American contemporaries had all but forgotten about it. To them at that time, in the early 1960s, race was not an issue, and rhythm-and-blues was exotic and exciting, so that when The Beatles served their apprenticeship, clad in leather, in rough Hamburg bars, it was on the records of Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters, of the early rock'n'rollers and the Motown artists that they based their performances — as did their contemporaries from London, The Rolling Stones, whose very name comes from a Muddy Waters song, and as did countless others in British pubs and clubs. And when The Beatles and The Stones arrived in New York in 1964, they were in fact bringing rock'n'roll back to white America, along with elements that were specifically British, notably the tendency towards pentatonicism and the modality of Anglo-Celtic folk song.

This development out of the spirit of rock'n'roll became known simply as rock, and it has not only gone out through the whole world but has also been in a constant state of development, change, and, in particular, synthesis. Rock melded with the already powerful American folk-music revival to produce folk-rock; it enlivened the seemingly moribund rock'n'roll style, still around in places, to produce 'rock revival' or 'heavy metal'; in the drug culture of 1960s California, it became 'psychedelic' or 'acid' rock; it became part of the literature and mythology of political protest; it entered the new discotheques of the 1960s, where little mattered except a pounding, dancing beat, to become disco music; and it fused with one wing of jazz to become jazz-rock or 'fusion'. Its heroic age was undoubtedly the 1960s, and its association with the hippie ethos and the revolutionary youth movements of that decade, with its love-ins and its mammoth rock festivals, is well known. At the time it all seemed like a breath of fresh

air, a tremendous new liberating art of community in which everyone could join, a final throwing-off of the industrial ethic, a revolution through music that would be quite painless except perhaps for the effect of too many decibels on tortured eardrums. What was hardly noticed at the time was that the music, the festivals and even the love-ins were as much dependent on high technology as were the weapons which were at that time being used in Vietnam, and that commercial interests had very early on staked a claim to the counter-culture. From the vantage point of the cynical 1980s, it all seems incredibly naive and self-indulgent; nevertheless, the music remains, a testimony to a remarkable explosion of creative energy, even if the new society which it was to introduce has proved only an even more depressing version of the old, and it continues to absorb the energy of countless musicians and listeners.

This is the conventional history of the popular music of the last thirty years or so; I have before me a copy of a book written by a respectable American academic, and intended for use in schools, which gives exactly this version. At the same time popular music and the industry it supports have been extensively researched by sociologists, psychologists and journalists, as well as by Marxist historians and aestheticians seeking evidence either of the collapse of capitalism or of its continuing malign power; it has been researched as commodity, as industry, as business, as racket, as provider of role models for young people, as corruptor of young morals, as opium of the people, as magic ceremony, as counter-culture, as career, as educational problem and as educational challenge. Studies of these and other kinds are doubtless important in helping people to come to terms, from their own point of view, with the music, and many have resulted in valuable insights, especially into the relations between music (rarely *musicking*) and society. My own reservations concerning practically all of them are twofold: first, like the history I have just summarized, they ignore and even obscure the music's continuing nature as *act* rather than as thing, by concentrating their attention on what is on record, and,

secondly, they tend to view today's popular music as an isolated phenomenon rather than as part of the great Afro-American tradition which we have been studying in this book. What most histories of the popular music of the last thirty years or so describe, is in fact the history, not so much of the musicking and of those who took part in it, as of recordings and of the attempts by record companies, radio networks and others to control a form of musicking that began as a spontaneous affirmation of identity by members of an underdog group in society.

Let us look at what these reservations imply. The ubiquity of records, and indeed of recording artists, suggests to the casual observer that the whole of popular music is to be found in the grooves of vinyl discs or in electro-magnetic impulses on tape, and that, therefore, total control is exerted over the content of popular music by those who control the record industry, or, to put the matter more mildly, that control is a tug-of-war between the record industry which offers the commodity, music, for sale, and those who exercise their choice, greatly influenced, it is assumed, by advertising and by peer pressure, of either buying or not buying what is on offer. Therefore, we find that much attention is given to relations between producers (the record companies) and consumers (those who buy the records and concert tickets), to the ways in which the producers try to control the consumers' buying behaviour, to the uses (not always those which the producers intended) made by consumers of the records, and to the effects of the records on the customers. Little attention is paid to the act of musicking itself in the popular tradition, to the effect the musicking has on the performers, or to the relations between performers and listeners. History is written mainly in terms of those musicians who have been recorded and of their recordings, while critical commentary and musical analysis are based entirely on what can be heard from the record grooves.

This is natural enough, since what is in those grooves is all the audible evidence we have of past performances, but it is quite unjustifiable to treat those artefacts, simply because they are all that *remains*, as if they were all that

there ever *was*, or to draw conclusions concerning the music process or about the genesis of musical styles solely on the evidence of records. In the first place, those who actually get to record are only a small proportion of the musicians who are actually playing at any time in the history of that particular music; in the second, the act of recording imposes limits on the musicians' performance and changes it, often considerably; and in the third, and perhaps most important, those who make commercial recordings are not necessarily the most active, innovative or even representative performers. Concentrating on the product only, in fact, diverts attention from what has been a major premise of this book: that the meaning of music is to be found not in the music object but in the act of musicking, which, we recall, involves listeners no less than performers. This is not, of course, to say that records and recording are not vitally important elements in present-day musical culture the world over, but to give attention solely to records and to the music and musicians that are recorded is to impose a seriously one-sided view of both the history and the meaning of music of all kinds, and popular music in particular.

Popular music is popular not only because it is accessible to all listeners, without the need for formal training or classes in musical appreciation, but also because it is accessible to all performers. This means, not that no skills are required, but rather that there are no institutional barriers to the acquisition of skills; anyone with a mind to do so can engage in performance, just as anyone can acquire the skills of language and engage in conversation. And anyone is capable of making a creative contribution to the development of his or her own chosen musical style. This means that in cities, towns and villages of the industrial world there are thousands upon thousands of people engaging in musicking at every possible level of skill in an enormous variety of popular styles, from polka bands to steelbands to jug bands to rock groups to folk singers. The great majority are using an instrumentation which derives from that of blues or rock'n'roll bands — electric guitars, drumkit and possibly saxophone and keyboards — and they will be playing in a way which owes at least something to the blues. There would be many more were it

not, as I suggested earlier, that so many people accept the label 'unmusical' that is hung on them in school music classes.

I have already mentioned the thousand or more rock groups that in 1983 were reported as active in Liverpool. Another well-documented scene is that of San Francisco in the 1960s, when groups such as Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and Creedence Clearwater Revival, came to the attention of the public. These bands, and others like them, grew out of a spontaneously erupting social scene to which musicking was central as an act of self-definition. The fact that many of those who formed the early bands around 1964 were, to put it mildly, minimal in terms of musical skill was no barrier to that self-definition, but indeed formed an element of it, since, initially at least, the fantasy of being a musician was as important as actually being one. It was only later that the latent musicality and the skills of some of the performers emerged under the pressure of nightly professional performances — the reverse of what is generally assumed to occur. The history of one of the first San Francisco groups is instructive.

The Charlatans were formed in the spring of 1964 by one George Hunter, who recalled later: 'A style emerged, a musical and visual concept. It had to do with simply seeing what style was already there and picking up all the good pieces of it, bringing them together. It was the blues guitar of Wilhelm; baby-faced Olsen the kid from Chicago; an old-time piano player who looked like he'd just stepped out of a saloon. Together it had a certain connotation. It was set against what was going on in society at the time, with everyone getting tired of a plastic world. It seemed like a good assemblage and people were ready for it.'[2] Having auditioned successfully for a job in a saloon in Virginia City, Nevada, when everyone present was so tripped-out on LSD (still legal at that time) that they didn't know what was going on, they found themselves playing, in Hunter's words, 'four sets a night, five nights a week for a hundred dollars a week apiece along with bed and board, as we were really getting good' with what was described as 'an increasingly tight repertoire of rollicking rock'n'roll.'[3] The band's career came abruptly, if appropriately, to an end when they were all busted for drugs, but by the autumn of

1964 a number of similar groups had been formed from the emerging San Francisco hip scene.

As these groups found themselves working as professional musicians so they became more professional, while retaining, the best of them at least, something of the cheerful anything-goes amateurism of the early days, as well as a healthy distrust of record companies and professional managements and entrepreneurs. The record companies were obliged to make concessions to what the bands saw as their integrity; one of the comic spectacles of the late 1960s was that of record executives growing their hair and moustaches and adopting hippy dress and speech mannerisms. It is true that the whole San Francisco scene, and its innumerable spinoffs throughout the industrialized world, can be seen as the self-indulgence of well-heeled white youth in a well-heeled society, but it is equally true that through its musicking the particular community that congregated in the Bay Area in the 1960s did contribute to the formation of a sense of identity in those who, like the Kent State University students and those at the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention, as well as just across the Bay in Berkeley, were confronting the industrial society and its troops head-on. The assumption implicit in the whole hippie ethos of which San Francisco was a centre, that revolution can be fun, may seem naive and self-indulgent today, but the fact remains, equally, that the reclaiming of fun as part of the serious business of human life is the most subversive and revolutionary aim of all. The sixties have left, still, a large number of unexploded bombs in our society.

The genesis of the musical culture of the Bay Area in a hip community whose tool for the affirmation, exploration and celebration of identity it was, and the resistance of that culture to being taken over as a commodity for sale, has been well documented, because for the most part those who took part were white, broadly middle-class, and thus literate, educated and listened-to. All accounts of the musicking of that place and time show that it arose out of a community whose musicians and audiences shared a set of values, and that the musicians developed their techniques, sometimes based on conventionally-acquired skills, sometimes not, over a period of time, to articulate those values — not necessarily a

conscious process. Like all musicians, of course, they were not averse to any access of fame or fortune, but their attitude to such matters seems to have been casual, even careless, and they adopted a distinctly take-it-or-leave-it stance towards the record companies. That the dozen or so bands who made names as recording artists were only a tiny fraction of those who were active at the time is shown by a list compiled by Ralph J. Gleason, one of the editors of *Rolling Stone* magazine, of over four hundred bands in San Francisco in 1969. 'It is,' remark Gene Sculatti and Davin Seay, 'perhaps the only time such groups as Black Shit Puppy Farm, The Drongos and Hofmann's Bicycle ever saw their names in print.'[4]

These, then, were young, white, mostly middle-class and formally-educated people who found that their questioning of the values in which they had been brought up was inseparable from their questioning of the musical values of their society, and that that musical questioning did give them tools for the affirmation and celebration of an identity which did not depend, at least not wholly, on those values. In adopting musical techniques, that is to say, ways of going about the making of music, that were based firmly on the blues, and in using the instrumentation and performance style which had been developed by black musicians, they adopted also values, and an identity, which served to replace the nine-to-five mentality which their upbringing and education had prepared for them: the values and the identity of black Americans, viewed no doubt through the same lens of romanticism and wishful thinking that their predecessors, forty years before, had used when approaching jazz, but no less potent for that. The hip stance (the very word comes from black culture) of cool, knowing self-possession, the hip vocabulary, the use of marijuana as favoured drug rather than alcohol, the accent on total style, and the central position of musicking in the definition of that style — all these came from black culture, as did the models for instrumental and vocal sound production (listen to Janis Joplin), for rhythmic structure and even the subject matter of the lyrics, and as did, and still do, the models for relationships among performers, between performers and listeners and among listeners. There is nothing in traditional European music, whether 'folk' or

'classical', that offers either a model or a parallel for relationships of that kind. It is in fact blues that is the consistent thread, the *only* consistent thread, that runs through this and through the whole of modern popular music; in no matter how attenuated or distant a form, no matter how distorted by commercialism, it is always there.

We have, then, to understand two important things: first, that the vast majority of the musicking going on in western society today is what is known, curiously, as 'live', that is to say, in an environment where performers and listeners are directly face to face; records, however dominant they may appear, have rarely been the source of significant musical innovation or invigoration, but have ridden on what has already been generated collaboratively between performers, listeners and, generally, dancers, in those face-to-face situations. This is true even in the post-*Sergeant Pepper* era of the record producer and of multi-track recording. And, second, that innovation and invigoration have, almost without exception, come from black musicians or through their influence; it is to their enduring ideals of community and sociability no less than to their ways of performing, which we have encountered over and over again in this book, that modern popular musicians, no matter how 'commercial', and their audiences owe their musical models and their concept of identity. These two facts are linked by the assumption made in black culture, and validated by nearly four hundred years of black musicking in the Americas, that the act of musical creation is open to everyone, and that, just as with words, the resources for musical creation lie within the community and the culture for everyone to use. If I place those two facts against what is the obvious commercialism and exploitativeness of the modern popular-music scene, it is in order to justify the claim that within popular musicking lies the potential, at least partly realized, for its use as a tool for self-definition and autonomy in opposition to the official values and the imposed identities of industrial society. We need therefore to look again, somewhat more carefully, at the history of that music in order to correct certain misconceptions which have been propagated, not necessarily deliberately, in conventional accounts, and which have had the effect of writing black musicians out of their

central role in that history.

It will be recalled from Chapter 7 that blues and other black ways of musicking were, at the time of the first recordings, kept well segregated from what at the time was regarded as the main stream of American popular music, by the simple expedient of issuing the records of that music on separate labels (the 'race' labels) which were available only in the black ghettos or on mail order. This accorded with the rigidly segregated nature of American society at that time. By the late 1940s black musicians were beginning, in line with their new social and political expectations, to show resentment at this musical segregation, which cut them off from their proper rewards and allowed white musicians to win fame and fortune using their techniques and often even their songs and performances. It was due to their pressure that when, around 1948, black music began to cross over into the main stream of popular music, the industry and the trade papers abandoned the term 'race music' and adopted the term 'rhythm-and-blues' instead. The formation at that time of a new performing-rights organization, BMI, which was more interested in black music than the older ASCAP, was an important factor in that crossover. Rhythm-and-blues was in fact a code term which, while it happened to suit the changing nature of blues itself, did nothing to abolish the segregation, since the code was well known to all concerned.

It was radio, by its nature a desegregated medium, at least for its listeners (since no control can be exercised over who listens to which programme), that was responsible for the wider dissemination of rhythm-and-blues; the conventional history is accurate enough on that point. The role of Alan Freed in popularizing the name 'rock'n'roll' is clear also (he called his 1954 New York radio show, the first to play rhythm-and-blues on a white-oriented station, the 'Rock'n'Roll Show') but he did not coin the term, which had been in currency among black Americans for a long time; his motive was also clear enough, since he was trying to widen the appeal of rhythm-and-blues by playing down its black associations. But Freed was under no illusion that rock'n'roll was a new music or any kind of black-white fusion; to him it was still black blues, and he regarded it and its makers highly. In later

years he wrote in the journal *Down Beat*: 'To me, this campaign against Rock and Roll smells of discrimination of the worst kind against the great and accomplished Negro songwriters, musicians and singers who are responsible for this outstanding contribution to American music.'[5]

The conventional version of history, that rock'n'roll was born out of a marriage between black blues and white country music, does not stand up, even at this stage. The records which were played by Freed, and, very soon after, by numerous imitators on other local stations, were made by black artists such as Little Richard, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters and Little Esther; thirty years and more later they still sound fresh, vital and earthy, and are suffused with a sexy human warmth which must have been overwhelming in the 1950s, in the America of Eisenhower and HUAC. It was on the success of those musicians that Bill Haley, leader of a country band, made several attempts to capitalize before hitting the jackpot in 1956 with a cover of a rhythm-and-blues song, *Rock Around the Clock*, that had been recorded the previous year by a black artist called Sonny Dae. Its success was in fact fortuitous, in that it was used on the soundtrack of the hugely successful film *The Blackboard Jungle*, and from there it reached the big radio networks and television, which still at that time would not touch black artists. Thus it was that white America as a whole got its first taste of rhythm-and-blues, rechristened rock'n'roll, from Haley's not very skilful imitations of black musicians, notably of Louis Jordan, imitations which extended to the on-stage behaviour which I mentioned earlier. The sensational success of Elvis Presley's first nationwide hit, *Heartbreak Hotel*, followed in the next year, and was confirmed by his appearances on television, to which black artists had little access.

There is no doubt that Elvis was a superb performer from the moment of his first recordings, and he did bring together elements from both black and white music — not surprisingly since both, as we have already seen, were part of his everyday culture. It is a puzzle, listening to those early records today, that anyone could have thought he sounded like a black singer; he himself never thought so, and he would not in all probability have liked the thought. His own comment was 'I

don't sing like nobody'; but his art owed more to black musicians than just the blues which formed part of his early repertoire. And he was one of a kind: *as a singer* he had no successors. *As a success*, however, he did, and those white rockabilly musicians mentioned earlier got their chance from his breakthrough; as he retreated into the softer side of country music, with only occasional flashes of his old brilliance (after the early period his lifestyle, down to his stage costume, remained that of the country singer), they too retreated back into what was their natural style, from which they had been tempted by the promise of fame. Only Jerry Lee Lewis, another superb unclassifiable, has stayed, if somewhat erratically, the course.

The truth is that, for all his brilliance as a performer, Elvis's overwhelming success was really a creation of the media, in particular television whose darling he was from the moment of his first, from-the-waist-upwards only, appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. Even as late as 1957, at the height of his fame, his records were still being outsold by those of Little Richard — but Little Richard, despite being an even more electrifying performer (one journalist described him as having 'a bounce and flash that made even Elvis look slow and a voice with more speed than a runaway express train')[6] was black, and although he took rock'n'roll, or rhythm-and-blues, to new heights of controlled excitement, he never received the kind of treatment from press or television which was accorded to 'The King', and which served to define rock'n'roll as a separate music, created by white artists from a fusion of black and white elements. This enabled black artists to be written out of the presumed evolutionary process, leaving them stranded in the role of predecessors and forerunners, of historical interest only — and of course once again denied the rewards that accrue to the winners in the game. It is a process that has occurred more than once in the history of Afro-American music.

As with many acts of racial exclusion, it is hard to know just how deliberate it was, and how much it was simply the consequence of those assumptions that white people, in Britain and Europe no less than in the United States, make unthinkingly about blacks. But John Lennon, for one, was

under no illusions; in an interview given as late as 1982 he was forthright: 'The only white I ever listened to was Elvis Presley on his early music records and he was doing black music. I don't blame him for wanting to be part of that music. I wanted to be like that. I copied all those people and the other Beatles did, and so did the others until we developed a style of our own. Black music started this whole change of style, that was started by rock and roll, and rock and roll is black. I appreciate it, and I'll never stop acknowledging it.'[7]

'Wanting to be part of that music' is the key to the subsequent history of modern popular music. If the term 'rock'n'roll' has any meaning at all apart from rhythm-and-blues, it could be used for the musicking of white musicians trying to come to terms with, and to catch something of the joyous sexy spirit of, black blues, as did Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, the songwriting and producing team of Lieber and Stoller, and countless others. This is in itself an entirely honourable, not to mention sensible, thing to do, the more so in that blues offers itself and accommodates itself in a truly human and courteous way to so many local styles of musicking, and provides, from Liverpool to Wellington to Tokyo, an idiom, which is to say a community, for those who wish to take back to themselves the power of self-definition through music. The muddying of values that occurs when the pure spirit of the musical act (the 'redemptive three-minute flash'[8] as one commentator called it) encounters the commercialism of the professional music world is another matter; the basic impulse behind the attempt by white musicians (an attempt which has resulted in kinds of musicking that have their own power and urgency) to assimilate to black music lies, as it always has lain, in the search for those values, and for that community, real or imagined, which is brought into existence whenever the music is performed. No matter how diluted, no matter how distorted or attenuated by that commercialism which, one might say in a sour moment, is Europe's and Euro-America's gift to the music, it is the spirit of the blues, and, further back, of the black churches and even the spirituals, that lies behind every popular performer today.

I quoted in an earlier chapter Albert Murray's comment on certain white jazz musicians; one might adapt it to say that

modern white popular musicians see 'certain Negroes not just as kindred spirits but as ancestor figures indispensable to their sense of romance, sophistication and elegance as well. Negroes like Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Louis Jordan, Little Richard, B.B. King, Smokey Robinson and others too numerous to mention inspire white musicians like John Lennon, Janis Joplin, Eric Clapton and countless others to their richest sense of selfhood and their highest levels of achievement.' It doesn't quite work in a literal way, but there is a truth there: the ancestor figures of modern popular music, as of modern popular dance, the models of romance, sophistication and elegance to which all musicians and all dancers aspire, are not European but Afro-American, and ultimately African.

The other important matter I have already discussed briefly: that records and the record industry, and even the world of the professional musician, are not the whole of that process of self-definition which is modern popular music, and quite possibly do not even represent its most inventive or creative phases. For this reason it is probably impossible ever to write a true history of popular music, since the only hard evidence of what the music has been like is on record and tape — and they are just as unreliable, or at least as incomplete, as indicators of what really happened when the musicians played as are scores of the true history of classical music. Certainly, to write a history of popular music, or indeed to make any kind of study of it, in terms of recorded performances and performers alone is to explore a picture which, while interesting and even valuable, is very partial indeed; one might go so far as to say that to work in that fashion is to reduce the history to a downmarket version of that of classical music, with rock stars substituted for The Great Composers. Similarly, to study the present-day meaning of the music only in terms of the relationship between the record industry and the buying public is not only to acquiesce in the rigid producer-consumer dichotomy which we have seen afflicts classical music today but also to ignore the complex reasons why musicians — and I do not mean professionals only — make music; by ignoring those reasons we leave room for a tacit assumption to creep in, the pervasive economist's

assumption about human activities, that they are only doing it for the money. People make music, of course, for a variety of reasons, of which making money is one (that applies no less to the classical than to the vernacular musician), but there are easier ways to make money, and the *pure* motive of financial gain is probably not common among musicians, even those who cheerfully admit to having sold out; certainly it is rarer than among, say, stockbrokers.

It is no doubt true that for most listeners the majority of music they hear comes through the media of records, radio and TV, but that is to look at the matter from a narrowly consumerist point of view. If we look at the music act, the performance, itself, we see that notwithstanding the growth of those electronic media the vast majority of musicking that takes place today still involves 'live' musicians and 'live' audiences. A record, after all, still represents only one performance, even though it may duplicate that performance millions of times. The point is not a trivial one, but is important to an understanding of the nature of popular music today; most musicians, even if they ever see the inside of a commercial recording studio (and more do not than do) still spend more time playing outside it than in it. That is not to say that the record industry has not had a profound effect on the history of popular music; it clearly has, but what takes place in recording studios represents only a small part of the musicking that is going on at any one time, and, further, it is to a large extent parasitic on, or at most symbiotic with, the activities of the very large number of musicians who never get to make a commercial recording. Behind every artist who makes a record stands an untold number of musicians of whose musicking his or her own represents at best a synthesis. One only has to consider the number of black musicians whose musical activities created the music which we hear today on blues records, and the number of young people in the late 1950s whose performances on guitar, washboard and tea-chest bass contributed to the remarkable recapturing of British popular music from the Americans, and indeed the four hundred or so groups listed as active in San Francisco in the mid-1960s — and those only the groups offering themselves for professional employment (how many more just

played for their own benefit and for that of friends?) The surfacing of rap in the last few years as a powerful new form of musical expression provides us with an outstanding contemporary example of the same thing.

Rap is not new at all, of course, but stems from the perennial admiration given in black culture to the possessor of highly developed speech skills. As David Toop observes:

> 'With the coming of the new American music called Rap in 1979, people all over the world began to be aware of it — thinking of it as a description of rhythmic talking over a funk beat. The first so-called rap records were in fact the tip of the iceberg — under the surface was a movement called hip hop, a Bronx-based subculture, and beneath that was a vast expanse of sources reaching back to West Africa. The praise singing, social satires and boasting of savannah griots that appeared to reincarnate in groups like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Afrika Bambaataa and Cosmic Force, The Treacherous Three and Funky Four Plus One More, had all been present in black music over the past eighty years.'[9]

Like the breakdancing with which it is associated, it is essentially a street culture, what Toop calls 'the sophisticated cross-cultural fusions which meld the oldest traditions with the freshest of musical technologies, or, at the other pole and clinging for life, the bottom line of street survival.'[10]

From an interview with David Toop by the Harlem record producer Bobby Robinson we learn of the spontaneous origins of rap, compared by him to that gospel-inspired, group vocal harmony music, called doo-wop, which in groups like The Orioles, The Chords and The Penguins, formed an important element of rock'n'roll in the 1950s. Both musical styles were, it is clear, fully developed long before the first record company A & R man ever got wind of them:

> 'Doo-wop originally started out as the black teenage expression of the '50s and rap emerged as the black teenage ghetto expression of the '70s. Same identical thing that started it — the doo-wop groups down the street, in hallways, in alleys and on the corner. They'd gather anywhere, and, you know, doo-wop doo wah da da da da.

> You'd hear it everywhere. So the same thing with rap groups around '76 or so. All of a sudden, everywhere you turned you'd have these kids rapping. In the summertime they'd have these little parties in the park. They used to go out and play in the park. They used to go out and play at night and kids would be out there dancing. All of a sudden, all you would hear was, hip hop, hit the top don't stop. It's kids — to a great extent mixed-up and confused — reaching out to express themselves. They were forcefully trying to express themselves and they made up in fantasy what they missed in reality.'[11]

Finally, Toop emphasises the function of rap for young people trying to work out who they are in a society that bombards them ceaselessly with self-serving stimuli, and shows it to be simply a new aspect of the continuing struggle for survival:

> '. . . the mythological tricksters and heroes are replaced by electronic-age superheroes recruited from kung-fu, karate, science fiction, and blaxploitation movies, re-run television series, video games, comic books and advertising. The central heroes, of course, are the rappers themselves, aggressively claiming respect (as a means of finding self-respect) with the same expertise in verbal expression as that wielded by streetcorner orators, standup comics, testifying preachers and vernacular poets for generations.'[12]

It is not possible to make a commercial takeover of something unless that something already exists; behind every kind of recorded music, even the most relentlessly trivialized such as can be heard on top 40 radio, stands a huge crowd of musicians, amateur and professional and all stages in between, who, while they themselves may, and do, draw upon the work of recorded artists, are not bound by any musical market other than that transaction which involves themselves and their listeners directly. The musicians and their audiences are jointly, and in however confused a way, working to explore, affirm and celebrate their identity; the techniques may often be crude, even rudimentary, but the message they bring is always clear: *This is who we are*. And, further, the language, the idiom, of that affirmation and celebration is, at some remove or other, derived from those idioms which black

people in the Americas have forged and used through the generations in order, not just to survive, but to make survival worth fighting for.

Modern popular music is not just the creation of commercial interests, but is part of an historical continuity that stretches back to the first encounters between Africans and Europeans when African slaves were first shipped to America in the early years of the sixteenth century. The ruthless commercialism that pervades it today is the creation, not of the musicians themselves, but of those who stand to profit from their work; that some in each generation allow themselves to be taken over and used in return for the not inconsiderable rewards of their capitulation is of course no news, but for every musician, every band, that gives in to the ceaseless pressures which commercial interests apply to those trying to make a living from their art, there are many more who engage in constant negotiation with those interests, and try to retain control of their own performances. It is that process of negotiation which we must now examine.

NOTES

1. GILLETT, Charlie: *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, London, Souvenir Press, 2nd edition 1983, p 168.
2. SCULATTI, Gene and SEAY, Davin: *San Francisco Nights: The Psychedelic Music Trip, 1965–1968*, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985, p 28.
3. *ibid.*, p 35.
4. *ibid.*, p 168
5. quoted in REDD, Lawrence N.: 'Rock! It's Still Rhythm and Blues', *The Black Perspective in Music*, Vol 13, No 1, p 38.
6. quoted in ELSON, Howard: *Early Rockers*, London, Proteus (Publishing) Ltd., 1982, p 92.
7. quoted in REDD, Lawrence N.: *op. cit.*, p 43.
8. FULWELL, Pete: *Dancing in the Rubble*, feature broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 9 January, 1983.
9. TOOP, David: *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*, London, Pluto Press, 1984, p 8.
10. *ibid.*, p 12.
11. quoted *ibid.*, p 84.
12. *ibid.*, p 28.

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