From Bad Brains to Afro-Punk: An Analysis of Identity, Consciousness, and Liberation Through Punk Rock from 1977-2010

by Aaron Lee Thompson

FROM BAD BRAINS TO AFRO-PUNK: AN ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND LIBERATION THROUGH PUNK ROCK FROM 1977-2010

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a critical study of African Americans in punk rock. It highlights the music and culture as forms of consciousness and liberation, providing an analysis of selected lyrics as a reflection of such awareness. The discussion of black punk music importantly delves into areas that traditionally have been examined in relation to black experiences in the United States, as well as ideas specific to punk rock experiences. Some of the pertinent inquiries are: How does black punk rock express a reaction to prevalent stereotypes of black people? Why and how might this music/culture be seen as "white"? Does the movement reflect a self-hatred, or does it contribute to liberation from prescribed roles for African Americans? What factors led to the rejection of rock and more specifically, punk rock, in the black community? What does this suggest for the future of black identification with punk and rock music?

As the above questions are foundational ones, they serve as a guide for a thesis that investigates the notion of black identity with regard to music. This work examines the idea of punk rock not only as a form of self-love, but more importantly as an instrument for breaking the barriers of race-based generalization. Discussing the contributions of bands such as Bad Brains, The Objex, Whole Wheat Bread, and singer Tamar-kali, it analyzes the ways in which a non-mainstream music and culture both work to provide an environment that (re)defines blackness. Furthermore, it counters common surface-level assumptions that black punk rockers and audiences aspire to whiteness. By providing an explanation of the context in which punk rock was created, this thesis identifies African American influences and participants in the origins of punk rock. In addition, it conveys the messages of the genre through its own music, and addresses outside influences on its popularity.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Aaron Thompson was born July 7, 1982, in Tupelo, Mississippi. He also spent his formative years in Tupelo, located 90 miles southeast of Memphis, Tennessee, and 30 miles west of Alabama. A product of Tupelo Public School District, he earned an academic scholarship to the University of Mississippi. At the University of Mississippi, he earned Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and Spanish. Graduating summa cum laude, he was awarded membership in the Phi Beta Kappa honor society.

The next year, Aaron was accepted to the University of Mississippi's Master of Arts program in Spanish. After a semester in the department, he joined the Mississippi Teacher Corps, earning a Master of Arts degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Designed to address teacher shortages in critical-needs school districts, the Mississippi Teacher Corps provides educators for underserved schools. During his first year in the program, Aaron taught English and Spanish in the Mississippi Delta, one of the poorest regions of the United States. His Spanish classes were the first foreign language offered at the rural school since five years prior to his arrival. In his second year in MTC, he moved to the state capital, where he taught in an inner-city school in south Jackson.

After devoting two years to teaching in his home state, Aaron moved to South Florida, where he taught in a suburb of Fort Lauderdale. Upon being offered the chance to study at Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center, Aaron accepted the opportunity. After graduation, he plans to return to Florida with a career in the field of education.

I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and to incur my own abhorrence.

-Frederick Douglass

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PREFACE

As an adolescent, I enjoyed various genres of music. Like many children my age, I developed my musical preferences based on those of my siblings, the media, and other daily contacts. By the age of eight, I was a fan of hip-hop and rock music, among other genres. Influenced by music videos on MTV, my brother and I developed an appreciation for the glam rock band, Poison. When my mother refused to allow my brother to purchase their *Flesh & Blood* album, it only heightened our interest in rock music. Intrigued by Guns N' Roses, Aerosmith, The Black Crowes, and many other bands, we also enjoyed the hip-hop of Run-DMC, LL Cool J, and other rappers. Thus, we found ourselves participants in both rock and hip-hop cultures. At the time, our innocence prevented us from fully understanding the magnitude of how race and culture intertwine with music to produce restrictive roles, stereotypes, and expectations. We did not quite grasp the challenges of being African American and publicly appreciating rock music.

At the age of nine, however, I, along with my brother and friends, met the realities of race and music. Enjoying the rock-influenced film *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* several years earlier, we attended the opening of the sequel, *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*. As we, four black boys, entered the crowded theater, a white teenager yelled "Hey, this is Bill & Ted, not Amos 'n Andy!" As he laughed, his friends joined him. Even though I didn't know the significance of the characters from the show, the boy's general tone conveyed his meaning. Humiliated, we took our seats, hoping for the moment to pass. Although it lasted mere seconds, it felt like a lifetime. It was at this moment that I began to question what constituted acceptable interests in terms of music and popular culture. For me, society's expectations of what it meant to be African American were now real.

I never completely stopped listening to rock music, but I understood more about the world. By the time I reached college, hip-hop comprised most of my music collection. I enjoyed live music, so I was still open to other genres. One night, I went to a live performance by an all-black band named Izm. This experience was my first introduction to punk rock, and equally important, *black* punk rock. The band played many original songs as well as their own renditions of famous ones. I was impressed by Izm's punk rock interpretation of Ben E. King's "Stand by Me," because it showed the creativity inherent in punk rock. I, along with friends, saw the band perform on numerous occasions. The lead singer ended each performance with an a capella version of Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come." His soulful voice spoke to how deeply he understood the meaning. The song proved both powerful and relevant because of the band's struggle for acceptance as African Americans in a predominantly white genre.

Because of these varied experiences, I have developed a passion for rock music. Punk rock represents the voices of those who refuse to accept the status quo; thus, for me, it in many ways parallels hip-hop. Both genres create agency within marginalized communities as they speak for those who are seemingly silenced. While scholars have sought to address the history of punk rock, many of these efforts have ignored the presence of African Americans within the genre. As a participant in the intellectual community, I chose to use this thesis in order to fuse my passion for the genre with a project that addresses gaps in music and Africana scholarship. This thesis narrates the lives of African Americans who chose to embrace punk rock against all odds.

Introduction
The Foundation: Rock 'n' Roll Sets the Stage for Punk Rock

Running beneath all punk origin narratives are roots in African diaspora musics, belying some critics' absurd assertion that punk is purely white music.[1]

-Steven Taylor

In his analysis of punk rock's emergence, Steven Taylor explains that punk rock, as an extension of rock music, was based on the idea of opposing anything the musicians considered to be the norm.[2] This observation continues to hold true as punk rockers work to maintain their independence, disassociating themselves from more commercial versions of rock. Regardless of the distance that exists between these forms of music, however, rock 'n' roll has been central to the formation of punk rock.

Rock 'n' roll has existed for several decades as both a musical and social force. The elements of rock were previously present in blues, jazz, gospel, slave songs, and various other forms of African and African American expression. Importantly, the blues provided a foundation upon which rock music was built. Blues guitarists such as Robert Johnson, B.B. King, and Buddy Guy were predecessors and contemporaries of rock musicians.[3] Characteristics of the blues infiltrated what would eventually become rock music. Although an endless catalog of rock artists have contributed to the music's origins, several key African Americans[4] within the field have led the genre in the popular imagination. As an early participant in the rock industry, Chuck Berry used his poetic skill to craft lyrics that vividly portrayed images with which

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[1] Steven Taylor, *False Prophet: Fieldnotes from the Punk Underground* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003) 54.
[2] Steven Taylor, *False Prophet.*
[3] *Electric Purgatory: the fate of the black rocker,* dir. Raymond Gayle, DVD, Payback Productions, 2005.
[4] The phrase "African American" is used interchangeably with the term "black" throughout this thesis. This is because the focus of the thesis is the black community within the United States; "African American" is used for the sake of simplicity.

young audiences could relate. His songs discuss themes ranging from teenage experiences to the rejection of parents and authority figures.[5] Many of his songs, such as "Roll Over Beethoven" (1956) and "Johnny B. Goode" (1958),[6] are well-documented within popular culture; these two songs have been used in modern films.

Meanwhile, Little Richard (born Richard Penniman) was another participant in the founding of rock 'n' roll. He infused energetic performances into the movement.[7] While Little Richard contributed songs that are still popular, such as his 1956 hit "Tutti Frutti," one of his most important footprints on popular culture was his playing for multiracial audiences.[8] As musicians such as Little Richard and Chuck Berry used their music as a platform for integrating public spaces, their attraction of multiracial audiences also influenced the categorization of their work. The mainstream shift from the term *rhythm and blues (r&b)* to *rock 'n' roll* reflected the perception of the latter as a multiracial genre, while the former was (and is) associated commonly with African Americans. Because of his multilayered interests in rock music, Little Richard has impacted the genre in many ways. Notable singers and musicians such as James Brown, Joe Tex, and Jimi Hendrix became successful, in part, because they were originally members of Little Richard's band.[9] Conversely, their membership also enhanced the Little Richard's popularity in the genre. Such associations proved meaningful in an industry where social networks sometimes determined success. Meanwhile, future popular bands such as the Rolling Stones slept at Little Richard's house before becoming internationally successful, and he was even offered fifty percent ownership in The Beatles before the band's worldwide successes.[10]

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[5] Samuel Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 178.
[6] Ibid., 177.
[7] Ibid., 178-179.
[8] Ibid.
[9] *Electric Purgatory: the fate of the black rocker,* dir. Raymond Gayle, DVD, Payback Productions, 2005.
[10] Ibid.

Black rockers dominated much of the rock genre in its earliest years. This prevalence continued into the 1960s as Jimi Hendrix emerged as the leader of his own band. Influenced by the Delta blues as well as Howlin Wolf, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard, Hendrix originally played in Little Richard's and the Isley Brothers' bands.[11] Such experiences underscore his wide variety of styles, which ranged from to blues-influenced rock to soul. As he influenced contemporaries such as guitarist Ernie Isley, Hendrix also honed his own skills through the influences of others. This musical exchange is representative of the ways in which black musicians of gospel, soul, r&b, funk, and rock adopted and adapted elements of genres outside their own. Although he in some ways emulated his blues, soul, and rock precursors, Jimi Hendrix also led rock music in a new direction. His use of "fuzz, distortions, wah-wahs, and bent notes…", although renditions of earlier musicians' works such as those of Howlin Wolf, became sounds for which Hendrix was famous.[12] His "gloriously damaged sound"[13] reflected a desire to reject the mainstream.

In addition to his music, Jimi Hendrix contributed to the notion of counterculture through his stances on drugs, youth, and rebellion.[14] This independence was representative of the goals of rock music and culture. Hendrix, like other leaders in rock music, sought a rejection of mainstream U.S. values such as unconditional patriotism, limitations on free speech, and restricted sexuality, because these values had largely ignored the interests of marginalized groups like African Americans. However, it is also important to note that many of Hendrix's followers were white; some of his supporters assumed the role of a marginalized demographic

[11] Samuel Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 201-202.
[12] Ibid., 202.
[13] Paul Gilroy, "Bold As Love? Jimi's Afrocyberdelia and the Challenge of the Not-Yet," *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll*, ed. Kandia Crazy Horse (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2004) 27.
[14] Ibid.

based on characteristics other than race (e.g., generational differences, anti-government views).

Ultimately, rock music became a successful movement, earning large profits. Originally, rock music had represented those who saw themselves as oppressed.[15] Thus, a strong connection existed with some African Americans during such turbulent times as the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights eras. Members of what author Maureen Mahon refers to as the *postliberated generation*, African Americans "…born between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s",[16] embraced rock music as a form of creativity, social commentary, and expression. Meanwhile, leaders such as Little Richard and Chuck Berry, who had directly influenced society's social norms such as segregation and racism, drew large amounts of black support. However, by the mid-1970s, some audiences felt that much of rock music had lost its identity, offering only a diluted version for mainstream America. As the music became less dangerous and more accepted within American society, those who saw themselves as marginalized felt that rock music no longer represented them.

As a result, some of the support for the genre splintered. While some people continued to support what was labeled as rock, new efforts at marketing the music away from African Americans resulted in black support for funk, soul, and other genres that, at heart, were actually rock and rock-influenced genres. Funk, in particular, was used as a vehicle for addressing social issues as rock became more closely associated with a profit-driven industry. The segregation of the music industry, importantly, was a reflection of racial tensions that continued to amplify even after the political and social successes of the 1960s. The perception of rock music as a racially-

[15] Steven Taylor, *False Prophet: Fieldnotes from the Punk Underground* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003) 32-33.
[16] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 34.

shared music continued to fade because such a coalition was not wholly representative of race relations in the U.S. at the time. Meanwhile, the birth of hip-hop and funk created other avenues of expression for marginalized groups such as African Americans, impoverished people, and youths. Many African Americans saw these as new forms (although funk shared qualities with rock music) that were authentic and representative of black experiences. As the label 'rock music' became associated with whiteness, black support for the music waned. In both the United States and Britain, punk rock formed as an effort to return to rock music's origins.[17]

Punk Rock: The Music of the Marginalized?

During the 1970s, disillusioned musicians and fans, some of whom lacked the technical experience of their predecessors, saw the need for a renewed adherence to rock's original goals. As parallel movements, American and British rockers created a new subgenre that was eventually termed "punk rock." This new form of music would purportedly reflect the lives of people who were oppressed. Thus, one would assume that, like hip-hop, punk rock would be a mouthpiece of the African American community. Unfortunately, punk rock largely magnified the problems of segregation in rock music. Many punk scenes proved unwelcoming to black people, and even much of the scholarship surrounding it has failed to acknowledge the black bands that have been significant in the history of punk rock. Consequently, the popular images that infiltrated the minds of the public were not truly reflective of the reality of a more diverse genre.

'Punk rock' is a fluid term, changing as the times change. At its core, the music is defined by independent rock musicians who focused their existence around

[17] Steven Taylor, *False Prophet: Fieldnotes from the Punk Underground* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003) 34.

the DIY (do-it-yourself) lifestyle.[18] Although there are various styles of punk rock, much of the music centers on simplicity. The electric guitar, electric bass guitar, drums, and the microphone are the only essential tools of punk rock. In fact, punk rockers have not traditionally needed the experience that was necessary for success in mainstream rock music (hence the DIY work ethic).[19] However, most of today's commercially successful punk bands do carry high levels of skill, even as some of these bands intentionally simplify their sound. For instance, the pop-punk band Blink-182's 1999 hit "All the Small Things" presents a seemingly low level of ability. The song's rudimentary sound emanates from inconsistent speed, off-beat layering of vocals, drumming, and guitar, as well as basic rhythms and chords. Ironically, Blink-182's drummer Travis Barker has been chosen repeatedly for award shows, tributes, remixes of songs, and rock-rap mash-ups because of his reputation as one of the most talented drummers in today's music.

The term 'punk' has various definitions, in some cases suggesting homosexuality, while at other times indicating a "…criminal of low status."[20] While the latter definition became common in some American communities, the former remained dominant in many black neighborhoods.[21] Because of the association with homosexuality (and the common homophobia in many black communities at the time), the term 'punk' was one that held a negative connotation.

'Punk' was eventually linked to the disillusioned rock music of the mid-1970s, because it was perceived as a simple, primitive form of rock.[22] The simplicity of the

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[18] Ibid., 14.
[19] *Afro-Punk*, dir. James Spooner, DVD, Image Entertainment, 2003.
[20] Steven Taylor, *False Prophet: Fieldnotes from the Punk Underground* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003) 16.
[21] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 222.
[22] Steven Taylor, *False Prophet: Fieldnotes from the Punk Underground* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003) 16.

music opposed the growing complexity of mainstream rock. In both the United States and Britain, several bands formed the foundations of the movement. As with rock music, the list of influential bands throughout the history of punk is seemingly infinite. Scholars have documented the impacts of these bands, although much of their work tends to ignore black bands.

The events leading to the creation of punk rock began as Lou Reed and John Cale founded Velvet Underground in 1965, a band that is widely considered to be the first underground rock band—meaning its primary intent, at least in the public perception, was not to mass market its music.[23] Later, the New York Dolls also became a precursor to punk rock; they displayed a "glam rock" image that parodied America's culture of excess.[24] Musicians Richard Hell and Patti Smith performed music as early as 1975 that they referred to as punk. Smith's album *Horses* is regarded as the first punk rock album.[25]

Of the long history of punk rock, 1975 and 1976 were the most significant years, because it was during this time that the music of influential punk bands such as Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols, and The Ramones became widespread. Basing their work on an experimental style and independence that free jazz artists such as Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Albert Ayler had used, punk rockers looked to these musicians as guides for their own music. For instance, they used art gallery settings as well as poetry readings to create new forms of entertainment.

In Britain, the Sex Pistols were the most popular punk band, focusing on subjects such as "…anarchy, fascism, monarchy, abortion […] and unemployment."[26] They represented those who were poor, unprotected, and underserved by the

[23] Ibid., 48.
[24] Ibid., 53.
[25] Ibid.,39.
[26] Ibid., 64.

government. In the United States, a parallel movement produced The Ramones, the most popular American punk band. Unlike the British, they discussed subjects such as sex and "self-destruction."[27] Formed in 1974, they played short, fast songs and embraced the basic instruments of rock music.[28]

African Americans in Punk Rock

Punk rockers and their audiences adopted the social status and environments of the oppressed.[29] Ironically, in the United States, much of the punk community consisted of (and continues to consist of) white suburban teenagers who were not forced to experience the oppression discussed in their music. Whereas British punk represented its working class and poor citizens, American punk rock scenes were and still are largely composed of less-than-marginalized groups. Many American punks parody the lifestyles of model All-American teenagers and their families,[30] often choosing to ignore the affluent lives that they (the punk rockers) have enjoyed. The contrived marginalization of many American punks, or at least their conscious decision to commit themselves to this lifestyle, differs vastly from the experiences of American punks who have experienced oppression. Among this latter group are African American punk rockers who support a music that is both authentic for them and reflective of their experiences. Recent literature has addressed the (re)emergence of hipster, or alternative cultures, but where it has discussed African American hipsters, it has approached them mostly through the lens of hip hop. Meanwhile,

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[27] Ibid.
[28] Clinton Heylin, *The Birth of American Punk Rock: From the Velvets to the Voidoids* (London: Helter Skelter Publishing, 1993) 174.
[29] Ruben Ramirez-Sanchez, "Marginalization from Within: Expanding Co-cultural Theory Through the Experience of the *Afro Punk*," *Howard Journal of Communications* 19.2 (2008): 89-95.
[30] Bill Osgerby, "Chewing Out a Rhythm on My Bubble-Gum: The Teen Aesthetic and Genealogies of American Punk," *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999) 156.

works such as Robert Lanham's satirical critique *The Hipster Handbook* approach punk culture, but do not seriously engage African Americans. Because much of the scholarship and society in the United States have avoided in-depth discussions of African Americans in punk rock, this thesis examines the issue. While a narrative detailing the full history of black punk rock is beyond the scope of this work, this project highlights the contributions of several bands and individuals within the movement.

This work approaches punk rock through a lens of race, and in some cases, gender, areas that have traditionally been at the root of the genre's injustices. While much of this project focuses on what would appear to be a black-white dichotomy, one must note that punk rock is a diverse music and culture. Many bands do not fit into such a dichotomy, and therefore, it is important to recognize that various races, classes, and other groups compose punk rock. Although this work, at some points, addresses the experiences of black and white punk rockers in a comparative manner, it does not use either group as a standard against which other groups should be measured. Instead, the experiences of white (in many cases, male) punk rockers are used in order to highlight the gaps and misconceptions in previous scholarly works, media attention, and popular perceptions.

Significant Scholars and Participants in the Punk Rock Industry

Several figures and organizations have contributed significantly to the growth of scholarship on black women and the growth of the rock and punk rock movements. Because Patricia Hill Collins has contributed significantly to scholarship about African American women, Chapter Two of this thesis uses her *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Her work is chosen because it utilizes and expands on works by other black feminists.

Meanwhile, several other organizations have influenced the black rock and punk rock movements. Chapter Three discusses the contributions of the Black Rock Coalition. The BRC is an organization created in 1985 by musician Vernon Reid and critic Greg Tate, designed to promote rock and alternative music by African Americans.[31] The BRC served as a major source of access to the industry for black rockers. Through a record label, concerts, discussions, and a rethinking of what constitutes black music, the BRC has become a resource for black rockers.[32] The BRC has launched the musical careers of many bands and solo musicians, including those of Living Colour and Me'Shell Ndegeocello.[33] Scholar Maureen Mahon's *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* discusses, in detail, the birth and growth of this organization.

Finally, James Spooner's *Afro-Punk* is central to this thesis. Because the documentary (which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three) fueled the creation of a website, festival, tour, and ultimately a movement, Spooner is a key participant in the renewed attention given to punk and rock music in the black community. As a biracial man who self-identifies as an African American, and who matured under the influences of punk rock, he presents a documentary that resonates with black punk rockers, or Afro-Punks, today. Spooner's identity struggles, while not discussed directly in this film, are reflected through the interviews of a multitude of punks.

The Aim of This Thesis

This thesis argues that punk rock has been a liberating force for African Americans within U.S. society. Contrary to many popular assumptions, this subgenre

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[31] Harry Allen, "Interview with Vernon Reid," *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll*, ed. Kandia Crazy Horse (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2004) 129.
[32] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 14-18.
[33] Ibid., 16, 134.

has been a significant instrument utilized in embracing blackness. In particular, this thesis investigates the ways in which African Americans have used punk rock and its accompanying culture to confront society's stereotypes of black identity while challenging institutional racism. Furthermore, it addresses the challenges of attracting black communities to punk rock. Chapter One analyzes the experiences and lyrics of Bad Brains, the Objex, and Whole Wheat Bread, underscoring their attempts to redefine the possibilities of African American identity. Chapter Two discusses the experiences of African American women in punk rock, focusing on the work of Tamar-kali, a black female punk rocker. It compares and contrasts the goals of black women in punk rock with those of the Riot Grrrl movement. Finally, Chapter Three examines the marketing of black punk rock and black rock music, describing the past and present obstacles that restrict their popularity. It also addresses factors impacting the future of African Americans in punk rock. As a whole, this thesis presents punk rock from several angles, showing the magnitude of the genre.

Chapter 1
Punk Rock as Liberation: An Analysis of the Bad Brains, the Objex, and Whole Wheat Bread

I believe we all have a tool within us for liberation. Not everybody wants or cares about getting free, but for me, that's my end goal in life. I want to know what it's like to think without having my thoughts informed by white supremacy…[34]

-James Spooner, director of Afro-Punk

Historically, music has provided societies with an expressive form that has served various purposes ranging from entertainment to cultural identification. In recent and contemporary societies, it has become the foundation of a large industry, although it also has maintained its significance as an art of cultural value. Throughout the history of the United States, the African American community has been largely responsible for the creation of genres of music such as blues, jazz, hip-hop, r&b, and rock. In addition to their initial founding of rock 'n' roll, black musicians have continued their participation in the genre. Importantly, African Americans were instrumental in the creation of several subgenres of rock music. In particular, the Bad Brains[35] were one of the original bands to play what has become known as hardcore punk rock.

While the Bad Brains are significant because they have become part of the lineage of legendary black rock groups, they are at least equally important because of the cultural statement that they have provided through both what they represent as a black punk band and the messages of their lyrics.[36] This chapter will investigate the

[34] Onome, "Filmmaker James Spooner Goes In-Depth with Afro-punk: the 'rock n roll nigger' experience," *A Gathering of the Tribes*, October 31, 2006, retrieved December 5, 2009, <http://www.tribes.org/web/category/essays/page/4/>.
[35] The term "the Bad Brains" is used interchangeably with the band's official name "Bad Brains" in most texts and media. Thus, the former will be used throughout this thesis.
[36] The Bad Brains are notably absent from Steven Taylor's extensive work on punk rock, *False Prophet*. In his chapter entitled "Hardcore," he discusses the Washington, D.C., hardcore scene, never mentioning the Bad Brains. Such an omission represents a key problem area in music scholarship.

ways in which the Bad Brains, through their identity and existence, have assumed the role of participants in what I refer to as "the black punk paradox." Next, the chapter will analyze the lyrics of the Bad Brains, focusing on their *Bad Brains* and *Rock for Light* albums. In particular, it will discuss the lyrics as they relate to the concepts of paradox and liberation. Also, this chapter will examine these themes in the music of a relatively recent addition to the punk rock world, the female-led band The Objex. Finally, the chapter will highlight the contributions of a contemporary descendant of the Bad Brains, Whole Wheat Bread. As a whole, the discussion will span the years of 1977 to 2010.

The Black Punk Paradox

The black punk paradox[37] is a phrase that describes the position in which black punk musicians find themselves; it explains many popular notions about the idea of being black and punk. First, it is necessary to define the term *paradox*. Among other definitions, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English language defines *paradox* as "A seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true."[38] In addition, it offers the following: "A statement contrary to received opinion."[39] In the case of black punks, the popular imagination both within and outside of the black community has been instrumental in creating a paradox.

The black punk paradox exists in two layers. First, it refers to the common notion that being black and playing punk rock are mutually exclusive ideas. Although

[37] In *False Prophet: Field Notes from the Punk Underground*, Steven Taylor describes punk rock as a paradox. He explains that, for instance, many punks were anti-capitalists, yet they allowed their clothing and images to be mass marketed in order for them to gain profits (8). While the phrase I coin, the "Black Punk Paradox," sounds similar in word choice, it differs in that I emphasize the experiences of African Americans within the community. White punk rockers do not have the same experiences, because they do not confront the same stereotypes.

[38] "paradox," *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 17 Nov. 2009. <Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/paradox>

[39] Ibid.

some media, educational institutions, communities, and other information outlets have led many people to associate punk rock with whiteness, and hip-hop and r&b with blackness, this chapter will prove that black punk rock has, in fact, worked in the interests of educating and liberating the black community. The assumption that punk rock, in general, perpetuates hatred through associations with Nazism and other intolerant lyrics is an inaccurate one. Clearly, some punks choose to use their music to advocate the tenets of such intolerant groups; however, black punks have tended to use their lyrics to promote acceptance as well as social and political progress. Instead of using their music as a vehicle to celebrate whiteness as a standard to which to aspire, groups such as the Bad Brains use their lyrics as a way to inform the public of challenges facing the black community.

In addition to the paradox in their lyricism, several black punk bands break common stereotypes through the images that they convey. Presentation is key in attracting an audience, and contrary to what might at a surface level seem to be mirroring white punks, bands such as the Bad Brains and Whole Wheat Bread use their presentation to avoid embodying negative stereotypes of African Americans. This chapter will explore how black punks use themselves to create images of African Americans that counter common stereotypes. More specifically, it will address how bands such as the Bad Brains and Whole Wheat Bread confront images of black men as thugs, non-intellectuals, and absent fathers.

The Bad Brains' Impact on Punk Rock and Society's Stereotypes

The Bad Brains emerged during the origins of black punk music in 1977. Although many African American rock musicians such as Little Richard and Chuck Berry played rock music before the Bad Brains, no black band had previously become popular within the punk rock subgenre. As a movement, punk rock was and still is

viewed largely as a white movement, a notion that results in black punks' being perceived as a group attempting to adopt white culture. However, one might argue that much of the black community has simply allowed itself to be limited by what the majority determines "being black" to mean.[40] Many black punks such as the Bad Brains have proven creative and self-aware, ideas that are evidenced through their creation of their own understandings of black authenticity. Through their music and participation in a subculture that has not always welcomed non-white members, the Bad Brains pushed the barriers of stereotypes.

Raised in District Heights, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., a group of friends that became the Bad Brains began by playing various forms of music.[41] Although the band began as Mind Power, they changed their name and began playing hardcore punk in 1977.[42] The members, H.R., Darryl Jenifer, Earl Hudson, and Dr. Know, used punk rock as a form of escape. They desired a musical form of expression that differed from the D.C. Go-Go scene, and hardcore provided a suitable musical outlet for releasing their energy and emotions.[43]

Interestingly, the Bad Brains play music that went against several norms. During a time when hip-hop was emerging and r&b already existed, they chose to participate in a form of music that had been disassociated from black people. Punk was traditionally linked to white people, but this is because its precursor, rock music, had already been inaccurately connected with whiteness in the popular imagination. Thus, Greg Tate proclaims, "…the Brains are black; hardcore is white (and no matter

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[40] Ruben Ramirez-Sanchez, "Marginalization from Within: Expanding Co-cultural Theory Through the Experience of the *Afro Punk*," *Howard Journal of Communications* 19.2 (2008): 89.
[41] Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 21.
[42] Darryl A. Jennifer, "Play Like a White Boy: Hard Dancing in the City of Chocolate," *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll*, ed. Kandia Crazy Horse (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2004) 92-93.
[43] Ibid.

how much Hendrix and Berry they ripped, it still ain't nothing but some whiteboy sounding shit now)."[44] Such a comment is problematic, yet also in some ways truthful. The authenticity of punk as white or black music is a complicated matter because it exhibits both white and black origins as a subgenre, and black origins as a form of rock. Should one concede that hardcore is white, or is it equally black because of its rock influences?

Even if punk, more specifically hardcore punk, is found to have roots in the practices of white cultures as a category, one questions the assumption that it negatively affects the ability of bands such as the Bad Brains to use it effectively in critiquing society and promoting changes within the African American community. By playing hardcore, they fight the tendency of the media and popular culture to essentialize both black music and rock music. Whether or not they intended to create a large counterculture movement, the Bad Brains helped reconnect rock with blackness. In fact, they eventually emerged as one of the foremost bands to play black rock music after the death of Jimi Hendrix.

Stuart Hall explains an idea that is detrimental, not only to music, but also the black community: "We are tempted to display that signifier as a device which can purify the impure, bringing the straying brothers and sisters who don't know what they ought to be doing in line, and police the boundaries—which are of course political, symbolic, and positional boundaries—as if they were genetic."[45] Accordingly, the Bad Brains should not be held to a standard created by others, even people within the black community.

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[44] Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 23.

[45] Stuart Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," *Black Popular Culture* ed. Michele Wallace and Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992) 30.

Darryl Jenifer of the band admits that they originally attempted to reflect the fashions of the white punk band Sex Pistols, although they eventually wore clothing influenced by the Rastafari movement. This shift was more than a fashion decision; it was reflective of their conversion to this form of religion.[46] Interestingly, some white punk bands also adopted Rasta clothing and visual style as they embraced reggae as a rebellious form of music.[47] White punks' appropriation of Rasta style also presents the possibility that the Bad Brains' Rasta-influenced image was also influenced by white punks' adoption of Rasta style. Given such possibilities, does this mean that the Bad Brains were apathetic to, or actively against the interests of the African American community? Or, does this mean that Rasta-fashioned white punks lacked self-interest? Importantly, one concludes that to equate dress inspired by the members of another culture with self-hatred limits the possibility of growing as a culture, because all cultures are influenced by contact with others.[48] Because black authenticity has been associated inaccurately with difference from white culture, one must be careful not to prejudge the Bad Brains as a band that aspires to whiteness in its beliefs. To assume that blackness and whiteness, particularly within the context of the contemporary U.S., are mutually exclusive categories ignores the historical narrative of a multiracial past. The notion of race must not be used as a restrictive term, because races as well as cultures continuously adopt customs from each other.

The image of the Bad Brains has put them in a precarious position within the African American community. Ironically, such a role fits both the goals and challenges of the band. On one hand, to be punk means to assume the role of the

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[46] Darryl A. Jennifer, "Play Like a White Boy: Hard Dancing in the City of Chocolate," *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll*, ed. Kandia Crazy Horse (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2004) 94.
[47] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1979) 66-67.
[48] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 10.

outcast, the reject. This is done in order to disassociate oneself from the flaws of mainstream society. In this case, being punk allows the Bad Brains to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes of some segments of the African American community. Meanwhile, being punk itself causes the band to escape the mainstream culture of the United States as a whole. Following this logic, the Bad Brains' embracing of a hardcore punk image allowed them to be "doubly punk". They have chosen to be punk (i.e., outcasts) of American culture. However, this decision also situates them at the fringes of both the African American and punk communities. They were not traditionally accepted by many African Americans as sufficiently black because of their music style and image, yet their blackness prevented them from being accepted as fully punk in some circles. Thus, the Bad Brains are uniquely punk (i.e., marginalized) within the punk culture.

The decision to become punk rockers has undoubtedly cost the Bad Brains as much as it has benefited them. While they have effectively distanced themselves from the negative aspects of black culture (a move that has allowed them to show the positive characteristics that African Americans embody), it has the consequence of creating the perception (for some people) that the Bad Brains do not work in the interests of the black community. Because they turned their backs on various forms of music traditionally linked to African American culture, the Bad Brains tread a thin line in terms of support. Punk musician Patti Smith's song "Rock and Roll Nigger" suggests the idea of being marginalized by society,[49] yet she could not have fathomed the multiple ways being punk and black would affect one's relationship with society. As originators of hardcore punk, the Bad Brains brave the consequences of challenging society's parochial views.

[49] Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules! Punk Rock and the Making of a Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989) 57.

The Theme of Liberation in the Lyrics of the Bad Brains: *Bad Brains* and *Rock for Light*

The lyrics of the Bad Brains are of equal magnitude in a discussion of their influences on the black community. Using traditionally fast and concise songs, they address issues ranging from the government's oppression of its citizens to the desire to escape a society that refuses to acknowledge and include all people. H.R., the vocalist, sings in a manner that is difficult for the untrained ear to understand. His use of the scream renders some lyrics virtually unintelligible, but fortunately, the band provides a transcribed copy of the lyrics in many of the albums' liner notes.

Bad Brains, the band's first album, contains several noteworthy songs. On this album, the band uses its musical medium to address law enforcement in "The Regulator," while they confront issues of alienation in "Banned in D.C." In "The Regulator," H.R. passionately screams:

> You tell me what to say and when to say it
> You tell me what to do and how to do it
> And if I ask you why, you'll arrest me
> And if I call you a lie, you'll detest me
> You control what I'll be, you control what I see
> And if I let you, you'll control me
> You're the man who owns all the keys to the stores
> You're the man who always wants so much more
> You're the Regulator…[50]

In examining the song, one immediately notices the references to 'The Regulator,' but it is apparent that the target of the song is potentially more than one person (or group). First, one assumes that the song is the Bad Brains' confrontation of law enforcement's profiling of specific demographics in society. However, H.R. paints a picture of a larger problem, one in which a police state exists. His declaration,

[50] Bad Brains, "The Regulator," *Bad Brains*, Reachout International Records, Inc., 1982.

"You tell me what to say […] You tell me what to do…"[51] suggests the government's or potentially other civilians' prohibiting freedom of speech/expression; on the other hand, his assertion "…And if I let you, you'll control me…"[52] extends the government and/or civilian authority to a point of no return.

The speaker's scenario could also highlight racial injustices in the United States. Even without specifically referring to race, H.R. depicts a society in which whites are in positions of authority and ownership, whereas African Americans are in less powerful roles. Importantly, the speaker qualifies his expectation of complete government/white control by acknowledging his own agency with regard to the matter. Thus, even if the government or whites can determine his rights, they can only do as much as the individual and the black community allow it to do.

Even as the Bad Brains' lyrics appeal, ironically, in some cases, to their young, rebellious, predominantly white audience, the lyrics ring true for African Americans such as themselves. With the album released in 1982, such a song as "The Regulator" would have coincided with fears in the African American community that a still relatively new Reagan era might contribute to the destruction of black neighborhoods. The presence of poverty, drugs, and the imprisonment of young African Americans at high rates led to a lack of faith in government, and in some cases, distrust of other ethnicities. As some black neighborhoods began to more closely resemble police states, the messages of a disillusioned band such as the Bad Brains would prove relevant. Meanwhile, the theme of "The Regulator" would additionally appeal to an audience that at a young age had experienced the violence of the Civil Rights era. At the time of the album's release, the members of the Bad Brains and their audiences

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

would have been old enough to have seen firsthand the government's abuse of African Americans during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

In their song "Banned in D.C.," the Bad Brains address liberation from more of a social standpoint. They do not emphasize political power; instead, they focus on social escape. "Banned in D.C." explains:

> Banned in D.C. with a thousand other places to go
> Gonna swim across the Atlantic
> Cause that's the only place I can go
> You, you can't hurt me
> Why I'm banned in D.C. D.C. […]
> Don't worry, no worry, about what the people say
> We got ourselves
> We gonna make it anyway […]
> And if you ban us from your clubs
> It's the right time
> With the right mind…[53]

The idea of being banned from a club is one that relates to punk rockers, but it also holds implications of a rejection of the Bad Brains for other reasons. The speaker declares his decision to "…swim across the Atlantic…,"[54] which, for him, allows a form of escape. Whether he intends to travel to Africa, Europe, or another region is unclear, but any place seems to be more accepting than Washington, D.C. (and the United States as a whole). The audience is unsure if the song refers to punks, African Americans, or simply those who feel ostracized. This degree of ambiguity makes the lyrics inclusive of everyone who feels alienated; it promises the possibility of freedom.

"We got ourselves/We gonna make it anyway…"[55] expresses the Bad Brains' emphasis on the punk DIY (do-it-yourself) motto. It shows confidence in themselves

[53] Bad Brains, "Banned in D.C.," *Bad Brains*, Reachout International Records, Inc., 1982.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

as a band, but can also be interpreted as racial unity. In the end, the song presents a band, genre, and/or racial group that refuses to allow an outside force to determine its success or lack thereof.

One can analyze "Banned in D.C." many different ways based on its use of a common theme in punk music, that of rejection. In addition, the song raises the question of how the Bad Brains see themselves. As hardcore punks, they use the lyrics to propose a criticism of several figures of authority. On the surface level, it is evident that the song is directed at the proprietors of certain establishments. Meanwhile, one might interpret the song as opposition to white oppression of minorities in the United States.

As many bands have done, the Bad Brains continue a dialogue about marginalization by the majority. However, "Banned in D.C." can also be read as a critique of the African American community by its own members. Interpreted from the perspective of the black punk rock community, this would mean that African Americans are the ones rejecting the African American punks. In this case, the line "You, you can't hurt me/ Why I'm banned in D.C. D.C…"[56] would suggest the Bad Brains' determination to alter the stereotypes of what it means to be black in D.C. Instead of conforming to standards set by others, the Bad Brains offer a declaration that they will be agents in the destruction and re-creation of a more open-minded intra-race understanding of what it is to be acceptably African American. In this way, "Banned in D.C." liberates African Americans from preconceived expectations of blackness and replaces these with the possibility of (re)embracing musical, and equally important, social alternatives. Even at the cost of emigrating from the United States to another continent, the Bad Brains are determined to have freedom.

[56] Ibid.

The Bad Brains have been consistent throughout their albums in using the work as a platform for advocating social and political change. The band's second release, *Rock for Light*, continues to address issues plaguing the black community. In fact, the album presents songs that are more direct than the above songs in their calls for action.

"Joshua's Song" issues a call for action in order to liberate the African American community. Without using any references to race or ethnicity, the lyrics portray a moment of decision:

> We're gonna have to draw the line
> We're gonna have to free our lives
> It's time for us to fight and die
> This time for us and you know why
> With revolution in the air
> and people changing everywhere…[57]

First, the speaker's use of repetition underscores the theme of the song. Using a reiterative style reminiscent of black religious oratorical traditions, the repetitive phrases "We're gonna have to…" and "…time for us…"[58] draw attention to the sheer urgency of action. In addition, the speaker's use of the first-person plural perspective conveys a sense of unity, one that the audience might infer to be a representation of the black community. If, indeed, the speaker is communicating a call to action for black people, the lines "It's time for us to fight and die/ This time for us and you know why"[59] provide an unquestionable dedication to the struggle for freedom. Willing to face the ultimate consequence of death, the Bad Brains paint themselves as agents of social change. Even if fellow African Americans perceive the band as traitors to the

[57] Bad Brains, "Joshua's Song," *Rock for Light*, Metrotube Productions, Inc, 1983.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

community because of their genre, a closer examination suggests the opposite to be true.

Furthermore, the Bad Brains' "Destroy Babylon" extends the call to action. Invoking symbols of the Rastafari movement, the band uses Babylon to represent the Western world. The lines resemble those of "Joshua's Song", because they also imply a need for black people to liberate themselves:

> …How many days do we sit around,
> While they keep on burying all our leaders in the ground.
> Organize, centralize.
> It's time for us to fight for our lives.
> De-stroy Babylon
> De-stroy Babylon
> Oh there is a way.[60]

The lines appeal to the audience through a division of society into two parts, 'Us' and 'Them'. Juxtaposing the fact that "we sit around…" and "they keep on burying all our leaders…,"[61] the speaker demands a sense of urgency. Being complacent is no longer acceptable, and the African American community must directly address its marginalization and oppression. As opposed to many Bad Brains songs, this work makes an unambiguous declaration: Rejection as punks pales in comparison to their rejection as African Americans. One does not need a specific reference to blackness in this case; the discussion of deceased leaders and the need to organize establishes the themes of racial oppression and liberation. In fact, the imperative "de-stroy Babylon…"[62] is based on an Afrocentric form of religion. The emphasis on the destruction of Western society implies the removal of a white populace as authority figures in the United States.

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[60] Bad Brains, "Destroy Babylon," *Rock for Light*, Metrotube Productions, Inc, 1983.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

Perhaps one of the most salient features of the Bad Brains' music has been their sound. Most of their songs exhibit an aggressive, frantic style. The combination of the scream as a reaction to society's injustices, coupled with raw, simple guitar and drums, reflects what the band views as urgent issues. While the scream calls the attention of the audience, the frenzied mood of the music serves as a microcosm for a society that the Bad Brains depict as unsettling.

The Struggle for Identity As Seen in the Music of the Objex: *Attack of the Objex*

Throughout their time in the music industry and their growth as a band, the Bad Brains have maintained their focus on issues of marginalized groups. However, they have not been the only black punk band to do so. Formed in 2006, The Objex have created their own space within the black punk movement. This space has been symbolic of a new generation in black punk rock. They represent an evolution in punk that includes more multicultural, genre-blurring bands. The Objex consist of Felony Melony (vocals), Aly 2x (bass, vocals), Jim Nasty (guitar, vocals), and Chile (drums).[63] In contrast to the heavy male presence in punk rock, the band has two females in prominent positions, including the role of lead singer.

The Objex discuss race and the issue of marginalization (by stereotyping) prominently in their music, led by the self-proclaimed "Punk Rock Tina Turner,"[64] Felony Melony. Their lyrics directly confront the barriers society has placed on specific races. "Kill Your Stereotypes" discusses issues with which both African Americans and other marginalized groups deal:

> Don't label me by my race
> You're headed for disgrace

[63] "The Objex," *myspace.com*, November 2009, retrieved November 23, 2009, <http://www.myspace.com/objexlv>.
[64] Ibid.

Don't label me by what I do
You know it's all wrong to[…]
I want to kill your stereotypes (3x)
Such a negative sight
So kill your stereotypes[…]
Black, white,
Red, night
You're separated by race and fear
Sex, money, love, and tears
You classify us with a check in the box
Buying lies like trading stocks[…]
I know where I stand
Don't tell me who I am[…]
Don't judge me, dictate me
Your views don't create me…[65]

"Kill Your Stereotypes" targets society and its (mis)treatment of various races. The speaker's demand that no one judge her is inclusive of both whites and her own black community. "Don't label me by my race…,"[66] therefore means that although whites should not expect negative things of an African American, the black community should not categorize its own members (whether in a positive or negative manner).

The Objex, like their predecessors the Bad Brains, use an equally crude sound in order to reflect their message. Their anger is communicated through Felony Melony's vocal delivery, one that more closely resembles a scream than more traditional delivery methods. This method, as in the case of the Bad Brains, reflects the anger of the speaker.

The overall tone of "Kill Your Stereotypes" is one of determined independence. The Objex represent both the liberation of the black community (and other minority groups) and the empowerment of black women. The black woman as a voice for liberation is a notion that has been largely ignored in music, even more so in

[65] The Objex, "Kill Your Stereotypes," *Attack of the Objex*, The Objex, Tolduso Records, Inc., 2007.
[66] Ibid.

the history of punk rock. Felony Melony of the Objex exposes complex issues of marginalization through lines such as "You classify us with a check in the box."[67] The 'us', in this case, points to both her race and gender. Thus, by being a black female punk rocker Melony is breaking many stereotypes. As a lead singer, Melony exudes authority, and she presents an image that mirrors that of her idol, Tina Turner.

The multiethnic composition of the Objex presents the possibility of a new generation of punk that is ethnically more inclusive than the bands of earlier decades. The Objex, which consist of black, Latino, and white members, are commonly associated with black punk rock bands. However, the band speaks to issues that are relevant to various marginalized and minority communities.

The practices of the Objex also represent the evolution of punk rock. Formed during the new millennium, they have become part of the new generation of black punk rockers who use the internet's various forums (e.g., MySpace) as primary forms of communication and marketing. In addition, their audiences are composed of teenagers and young adults who were born after the apex of the Bad Brains' impact on punk. Thus, the Objex are presumably capable of relating to younger black punks, many of whom never lived during the Civil Rights era.

The Objex and their contemporaries address many of the same themes as their black punk predecessors, but they use them to appeal to a younger audience. Meanwhile, they often present punk and black issues through the lens of women, thus providing a perspective that many bands of the older generation lacked and/or chose to ignore. Whereas many Bad Brains fans are now middle-aged, the Objex breathe life into the genre through their ability to attract a new demographic. The marketing and accessibility of this new generation of punk rock will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

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[67] Ibid.

Dirty South Punk Rock: The Intersection of Southern Blackness and Punk Rock in Whole Wheat Bread's *Minority Rules, Punk Life,* and *Hearts of Hoodlums*

As the Objex present punk life from various perspectives, including that of a black woman, other black punks of the new generation contribute their voices and experiences. Whole Wheat Bread was formed in Jacksonville, Florida, in 2003. The band originally consisted of Aaron Abraham, Nicholas Largen, and Joseph Largen; however, after the incarceration of Nicholas Largen, Will Frazier joined the band.[68]

Whole Wheat Bread created an innovative form of punk rock that they commonly refer to as "Dirty South Punk Rock." This form of music infuses fast punk rhythms and simple, yet theme-oriented, lyrics with Southern hip-hop influences. Whole Wheat Bread, named as a play on the term "White Bread," has become one of the U.S. South's most popular black punk bands. The title of the band's first album, *Minority Rules,* provides various layers of insight into the band's understanding of what it means to be a minority in the United States. On one hand, the phrase 'Minority Rules' can be interpreted as a set of regulations that determines minority experiences; on the other hand, however, it can also be viewed as a declaration of minority power. The songs of Whole Wheat Bread's various albums extend this ambiguity. While some lyrics merely portray a sense of hopelessness, others assert agency. This agency is apparent as several songs emphasize the need to defend oneself, whether one does so as an African American, a punk rocker, or both. "Police Song," from the band's first album, addresses law enforcement's abuse of its authority position:

> Thinking that you're so tough
> With your guns and handcuffs

[68] Whole Wheat Bread, *Minority Rules*, Fighting Records, LLC, 2005.

Back against the wall and put your hands up
I never thought that this would happen to me (we're still not moving)
Lot of sweat invested
So we can be protected
Let's live our lives as if being arrested
Sounds like something's wrong with this country (well no one's moving) […]
Mr. Police Officer
We're not doing nothing wrong
Take your damn hands off of us
Or we're not gonna get along…[69]

The theme of "Police Song" resembles that of songs from various genres that have addressed problems between minorities and law enforcement. The idea of hopelessness versus agency resonates with punk and other marginalized communities. Lines such as "Thinking that you're so tough…" and "Back against the wall and put your hands up…"[70] establish an image of a person who abuses his or her authority. It is unclear whether Aaron Abraham intends to represent African Americans, youths, punks, or some combination of the three, but the song has the effect of persuading the audience to empathize with marginalized groups as a whole.

Meanwhile, the line "I never thought this would happen to me (we're still not moving)…"[71] seems puzzling to the audience. Is the speaker feigning surprise, or does it really shock him to be an African American male accosted by law enforcement? In addition, does he assume that being associated with the punk rock scene (instead of hip-hop) will afford him certain rights that are not available to other black males? Interestingly, he explains, "we're still not moving…" and "well no one's moving…"[72] In the literal sense, Aaron Abraham intends to maintain his physical presence, refusing to obey the officer's order. In a figurative manner, however, one

[69] Whole Wheat Bread, "Police Song," *Minority Rules*, Fighting Records, LLC, 2005.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

might perceive this as a statement about the community's reaction to police abuse. Perhaps the African American community is not moving, meaning that there is inaction. Or, the speaker might be suggesting that the black community refuses to bow to the authority of a law enforcement that does not, in reality, protect it. Finally, the speaker's demand, "Take your damn hands off of us/ Or we're not gonna get along"[73] predicts action if the abuse continues. Careful to avoid a more specific threat, the line does, however, promise a response.

Whole Wheat Bread continues to highlight instances of the government's injustices toward its citizens on their EP, *Punk Life*. "Symbol of Hope" draws attention to the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina in 2005. It not only underscores the failures of the government in stereotyping its citizens and failing to adequately respond to the event; it also points to a larger political problem in the United States:

Verse One:

Somebody's screaming something
They never seen it coming
The streets are bleeding
And all you can see is people running
These are the repercussions
'Cause you pledge allegiance
Doesn't mean you got your freedom cousin […]
I represent the voices of the weak and poor
Getting exploited with the need for more […]

Verse Two:

Outcast in the streets
First thing people see
Light brown skin tone
And my shiny gold teeth […]
Read it in the newspaper
Just another casualty […]
Stuck growing up
In the system

[73] Ibid.

Brainwashed by the enemy.
They don't give back
Nothing to the lower class
And tell me that I'm 'posed to vote for that?[74]

The excerpt of the first verse portrays the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. People attempt to flee, but they have no haven to which they can escape. The speaker uses this as an opportunity to highlight the futility of patriotism for poor people. According to this mindset, Hurricane Katrina revealed a problem more complex than race. In addition to African Americans, the government failed those who live in poverty, and it continues to do so. In this verse, the speaker claims the role of leader, stating "I represent the voices of the weak and poor…"[75] In this line, he reclaims the authority that the government has failed to use appropriately.

In the second verse, the speaker discusses an inequity that primarily revolves around race. Hurricane Katrina's surrounding chaos brought this issue to the forefront, but racism is not a new problem for the black community. In this case, the speaker explains his understanding that generalizations will be made about African Americans based on their skin color and clothing. He seems to be hopeless about the situation, explaining that black and poor people are "Stuck growing up/ In the system/ Brainwashed by the enemy…"[76] The implication that the government is an enemy is a strong one; it suggests that the government, in general, does not care about those who need its protection the most. In the end, the song expresses a complete lack of faith in the government.

Since their emergence in the past several years, Whole Wheat Bread has created a unique experience within the genre of punk rock. Although bands such as Limp Bizkit, Linkin Park, and others have attempted to blur the boundaries between

[74] Whole Wheat Bread, "Symbol of Hope," *Punk Life*, Fighting Records, LLC, 2006.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

rock and rap, Whole Wheat Bread is one of the few bands that has been successful in merging the underground-oriented culture and sound of punk rock with influences from a more mainstream form of hip-hop, thus forming Dirty South Punk Rock.

Whole Wheat Bread differs noticeably from many of their rap-influenced rock predecessors because they are a black band, whereas many rock bands influenced by rap were white. Meanwhile, they create their own space as black hip-hop influenced punks, because they are not primarily rappers; instead, they consider themselves punk rockers, and their music presents itself as such. Thus, their attempt at genre bending is wholly different than the rap-rock of people such as Run-DMC, Outkast, and Lil' Wayne. Furthermore, Whole Wheat Bread differs from the efforts of previous rock-rap bands because they are not a band merely appropriating the musical and popular traditions of other communities and cultures. Instead, they present a punk-dominated melding of musical genres that are all authentic to African Americans.

The band's newest album is the first to include their new lineup of Aaron Abraham, Joseph Largen, and bassist Will Frazier. This album, *Hearts of Hoodlums*, continues to emphasize several of the themes from previous albums. Many of the songs place the excesses of punk culture on exhibit for the world to see. The band, as with all of their albums, appeals to a younger crowd through portraying itself as reckless and free-spirited. This self-characterization is problematic because it creates two conflicting messages. The album's title perpetuates a negative generalization about black men. Songs such as "Throw Your Sets Up" extend this image by promoting violence as a means of maintaining one's pride.[77] "I Can't Think," meanwhile, glorifies a culture of drug use, disrespect toward women, and the effects of such a lifestyle on the brain.[78]

[77] Whole Wheat Bread, *Hearts of Hoodlums*, Fighting Records, LLC, 2009.
[78] Ibid.

Heart of Hoodlums is the epitome of a punk album, because it proposes freedom through a willingness to challenge popular expectations that one live a morally acceptable life. The album reflects the same carefree lifestyle that white punk bands such as Blink-182 have described in their works. On the other hand, however, *Hearts of Hoodlums* also has songs that show another side of the band, one that advocates the virtues of being a positive black male. "Ode 2 Father" fights the negative media image of a perpetually-absent African American father. The speaker explains the following about his father:

Verse One:

My dad's the strongest man I know (My dad's the strongest man I know)
That's who I choose to feel has made me who I am
He taught me everything I know (He taught me everything I know)
I got his shoes to fill and I don't know if I can

Chorus:

But I try, and that's why
This world will know my name when I die
This pen cries, when I write
This page will show the strain in my life […]

Put this guitar in my hand
Sometimes it's all that I have
I made this song 'cause I am
Proud to have you as my dad…[79]

"Ode 2 Father" is somewhat unusual, especially within the punk genre. Punk songs typically lack the sensitivity to express such feelings toward an older family member. The image of a strong African American father who has influenced his son in a positive way is a rare depiction in the popular imagination. In the first verse, the

[79] Whole Wheat Bread, "Ode 2 Father," *Hearts of Hoodlums*, Fighting Records, LLC, 2009.

speaker's statement about his dad's emotional strength resembles that of a youth who aspires to his father's greatness. Meanwhile, the chorus shows the limits of a father's abilities. The father can teach his son to be a strong responsible man, but cannot protect him from "the strain in [his] life…"[80] When his father cannot help him, punk rock has been a safe haven for the speaker. This is conveyed in the line "Put this guitar in my hand/ Sometimes it's all that I have…"[81] Thus, the father figure proves important to the potential successes of the speaker. Music additionally provides a productive resource for escape. Clearly, the privileged life of being a black male with a responsible father, combined with having the opportunity to play an instrument, is not indicative of the lives of most black males; nonetheless, this scenario provides hope for such a situation to become reality. As a whole, Whole Wheat Bread counterbalances their negative lyrics with songs such as this one. Like musicians of many other genres, the band exhibits both positive and negative qualities. Therefore, it is the duty of the audience to discern which productive lessons the music has to offer.

Black Punk Rock: Freedom Through Music

As one can see, African Americans have used punk rock since 1977 to successfully contribute to the liberation of the black community. Contrary to popular notions about punk rock, bands such as the Bad Brains, the Objex, and Whole Wheat Bread have used their music as a vehicle for black protest against government inaction, as well as its abuse of authority. In addition, their albums provide alternatives to negative stereotypes about African Americans.

[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.

Whereas punk rockers of the late 1970s emphasized characteristics such as simplicity, fast and short songs, and the DIY lifestyle, contemporary punk rockers have expanded on these core values. Bands such as the Objex and Whole Wheat Bread, participants in a new generation of punk rock, now include a wide range of musical styles, many ethnicities, and various levels of technical skill. As a result, the label *black punk rock* now encompasses many types of bands.

Regardless of the changes in black punk rock over time, these bands have maintained agency in addressing injustices. By virtue of being punk rockers, they have challenged the construct of race, especially with regard to the perpetually-changing definitions of black identity. Although rock music has black origins, the punk rock generations have allowed African Americans to reclaim a culture that tends to be disassociated from them. The black punk paradox has continued to exist because of the assumption that to be punk means to be apathetic about black experiences in America. Bands such as the Bad Brains, the Objex, and Whole Wheat Bread, however, remind their audiences that a narrow definition of blackness is unacceptable and counterproductive in the fight for equality and true freedom. The next chapter continues the discussion of African American liberation through punk rock. In particular, it examines the experiences of African American women within the genre.

Chapter 2
Tamar-kali and Black Women in Punk: From Riot Grrrl to Sista Grrrl Riot

Maintaining images of U.S. Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression.[82]

-Patricia Hill Collins

Throughout the history of punk rock, women have contributed in many ways. In its early years, however, the male-dominated genre limited access to the stage, sometimes even reacting violently to female attempts to play concerts. While singers like Patti Smith enjoyed prominence within the genre, most women were, at best, ignored and, in many instances, violently denied access. In recent years, however, women have begun to reap the rewards of their struggles within punk rock. Even though inequalities still exist in punk society, women continue to claim their roles as agents in the fight for a more balanced music and culture.

This chapter examines the emergence of black women as a force in punk rock and their impacts as proponents of and participants in the fight for social change. In particular, the chapter provides an analysis of the punk rock and social movement known as Riot Grrrl. It will discuss the successes and challenges associated with Riot Grrrl, calling attention to sexism and racism. Next, this chapter presents singer/guitarist Tamar-kali as a representative of black female punk rock. It will explore her background and contributions to the punk rock movement.

After examining the histories of Riot Grrrl and Tamar-kali, this chapter will use the U.S. black feminism movement to provide context for the discussion of the marginalization of black women within punk rock. Furthermore, it will analyze the ways in which a movement known as Sista Grrrl Riot, associated with black women

[82] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 21.

such as Tamar-kali, provides a cultural outlet for African American women. A comparison of Riot Grrrl and Sista Grrrl Riot will underscore the necessity of the latter.

Moreover, Chapter Two presents some of the perspectives of African American women. The words and ideas of black female punk rockers will be used as a foundation for the text. Ultimately, the lyrics of Tamar-kali will be used as indicative of some of the experiences of black women in punk rock.

Riot Grrrl: A Declaration of Women's Significance in Punk Rock

While punk rock has existed for several decades, male bands and audiences have not always met women in the genre with acceptance. The first several decades consisted of a male-dominated genre; few female bands received the credit and opportunities that they deserved. During the 1980s, however, several factors changed the landscape of punk rock. The combination of the Reagan and Bush eras (which were seen as oppressive within much of the punk community), the continuation of a second major wave of feminism, and the lasting influences of punk rock from the 1970s created a perfect storm for a women's movement within the genre.[83] Reacting against economic policies that were perceived as supportive of wealthier communities as well as a slogan declaring war on drugs, punk rockers aligned themselves with oppressed groups in the United States.

Many women in punk rock faced issues that were specific to them. Neither the existence of women in the genre nor problems with female image expectations was new in the 1980s, but media attention began to grow during this period. Some punk women wore zippers, pins, and hairstyles that were unacceptable to corporate

[83] Neil Nehring, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997) 109.

America.[84] As the acceptance of misogynistic lyrics was becoming more widespread throughout music and society in the early 1990s, it created a hostile environment for women. As groups such as 2 Live Crew were successful in gaining legal protections for their right to express themselves freely (including degrading women)[85], negative stereotypes of women continued to permeate society, especially within the African American community.

As these events occurred, a social movement and accompanying punk rock component were created. The Riot Grrrl movement was formed in 1991 when groups of women from Olympia, Washington, and Washington, D.C., decided to meet and begin a public discourse about issues of sexism within the punk community and society as a whole. Inspired by anti-racism protests in Washington, D.C., at the time, they sought to create a community that would spread the cause throughout the nation using popular culture.[86] Hillary Carlip explains that the spelling 'grrrl' was chosen to reflect in an onomatopoeic sense the sound of an angry growl.[87]

As Riot Grrrl became well-known throughout the U.S., many female punk rockers joined the movement. Riot Grrrl bands were identifiable in several ways: First, they tended to upend traditional roles (they played instruments, as opposed to participating solely as singers). Next, they used their songs to communicate messages against misogyny and other problems. Finally, they undermined stereotypical beauty images by refusing to wear sexually suggestive clothing.[88] Bikini Kill, one of the most famous bands associated with the movement, was instrumental in

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[84] Lucy O'Brien, "The Woman Punk Made Me," *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999) 188-189.
[85] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 82.
[86]Kristen Schilt, "A Little Too Ironic: The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 26.1 (2003), December 3, 2009, 5-7. <http://www.public.asu.edu/~kleong/staffpage/course/riottgrrl%20analysis.pdf>.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 207.

communicating the views of Riot Grrrl. In addition to becoming a punk band, they issued 'fanzines', which were fan-created magazines about punk rock. In their self-titled fanzine, Bikini Kill presented a statement known as the Riot Grrrl Manifesto.[89] The movement seemed to have created a community that could empathize with the challenges plaguing oppressed communities.

Creating Tamar-kali: Black Women in Punk Rock

Although Riot Grrrl was significant in the history of punk rock, it has not been the only source of female empowerment through punk rock in recent years. Black women in punk rock have much in common with those of so-called "alternative" genres. In particular, African American female musicians who exist outside of hip-hop, gospel, and r&b tend to be seen as eclectic musicians. Thus, black women as punk rockers share certain experiences, such as their marginalization by both African Americans and other segments of society.

Before the arrival of Tamar-kali to the punk rock scene, several of her black and Latina predecessors exposed the U.S. to music beyond the scope of the popular imagination. For example, Me'Shell Ndegeocello is a singer/bassist/keyboardist who defied categorization. By breaking the stereotypes of only singing r&b, she blurred the lines of genre. In addition, Ndegeocello used her music to promote messages of liberation. For an album cover, she used an image of a minstrel face with a line through it, indicating her desire to break the limitations previously placed on African Americans.[90]

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[89] Kristen Schilt, "A Little Too Ironic: The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 26.1 (2003), December 3, 2009, 5-7. <http://www.public.asu.edu/~kleong/staffpage/course/riottgrrl%20analysis.pdf>.
[90] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 135.

Meanwhile, other minority female-led groups such as Sophia's Toy also attempted to cross boundaries in the music industry. Unfortunately, during 1994 and 1995 Sophia's Toy, led by Sophia Ramos, met the same resistance that future black punk rock bands would meet. According to Maureen Mahon's account, Ramos felt that the black and Latino audience her band attracted caused fear within record companies. Because they saw minority support for minority rock bands as a fad, executives were hesitant to support Sophia's Toy.[91]

It was in this context in which Tamar-kali entered the punk rock scene. A native of Brooklyn, New York, she joined the rock genre in 1993 as a member of Funkface.[92] Becoming a member of the punk scene during the height of the Riot Grrrl years, Tamar-kali found her own unique role in the genre and culture. Eventually, she became a member of Song of Seven. Her growth within the band ultimately enhanced her position as a black woman advocating for equality in and outside of music. Her website offers the following explanation of her maturation process: "…Her strength as a woman in a male dominated genre led to creative conflict and compelled her toward her own expression as a writer and vocalist."[93] As she gained control over her musical process and role, Tamar-kali reflected the views of female agency that she would later espouse through her music.

In 2005, Tamar-kali released her first EP entitled *Geechee Goddess Hardcore Warrior Soul*, the title referencing her summers spent in South Carolina's islands.[94] Interestingly, the title revealed to the audience her consciousness of the extant African influences in the United States. Paying homage to these South Carolinian communities of African descendants that have maintained many elements of their

[91] Ibid, 213-214.
[92] "Bio: Tamar-Kali," *flamingyoni.com*, 2006, Flaming Yoni Productions, retrieved December 4, 2009, <http://flamingyoni.com/content/bio.html>.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

West African culture, Tamar-kali conveys knowledge of the African diaspora through both her music and image.

Women's Liberation Movements: Feminism vs. U.S. Black Feminism

In discussing the role of black women in punk rock, one must also understand the development of various women's liberation movements. Because these movements did not necessarily pursue identical goals, people aligned themselves with those that most closely resembled their respective lives.

Some scholars categorize the various forms of feminisms into three major waves. The first wave consists of efforts from the nineteenth through the early twentieth century. During this time, scholars such as Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott Sorenson contend, liberation movements in the U.S. and Europe improved conditions for women in these societies.[95] However, it is important to note that such perspectives represent a Eurocentric perspective, in that they do not allow for the possibility of feminisms' existence on other continents. For instance, they fail to acknowledge pre-colonial African communities in which women exhibited authority.

Following the general categorization of feminism as three waves, the second wave consisted of the period from the 1960s to the early 1990s. This era of feminisms was complex—it was comprised of leftist groups, advocates for racial and ethnic minority interests, proponents of legal protections for homosexuality, and other various branches.[96] More attention will be devoted to the second wave, as this is where U.S. black feminism becomes a central issue.

Finally, Krolokke and Sorenson, among others, argue that the third wave began in the mid-1990s. It emphasizes the interdependent world of contemporary society,

[95] Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott Sorenson, *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006) 1.
[96] Ibid.

highlighting issues such as technology and diversity.[97] It is within this wave that Riot Grrrl falls. While this wave claims to embrace diversity, some forms of its feminism fail to acknowledge inherent differences in experiences based on race, ethnicity, and/or nationality; instead, some of the factions argue that all women are equal and should, therefore, be treated equally (while failing to truly empathize with the realities that differences cause).

Returning to the complications associated with feminisms of the second wave, one encounters a conflict of interest. Liberal feminism advocated a more inclusive remolding of society's institutions, one that would invite women into roles traditionally held by males. However, radical feminists protested the very nature of such institutions, arguing that they were inherently male-oriented, capitalistic systems.[98] Noticeably, neither of these forms of feminism addressed the challenges specific to African American or poor women. Thus, what traditionally had been deemed "feminism" was actually a movement that tended to benefit middle-class white women.

Patricia Hill Collins is one of several scholars who discusses the impacts (or lack thereof) of feminist movements on the African American community. Following the works of women such as bell hooks and Alice Walker,[99] Collins presents the concept of U.S. black feminism. Collins explains that by excluding black women from intellectual thought, society has perpetuated its sexist and racist stereotypes of them.[100] Because African American women were not heard by other feminists, there was little understanding of the unique challenges that they met.

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[97] Ibid.
[98] Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott Sorenson, *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006) 11.
[99] Ibid, 12-13.
[100] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 5.

Black feminism in the U.S. provides a movement that serves the interests of many women who have been oppressed. Collins explains, "Black feminist thought's identity as a 'critical' social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of similarly oppressed groups".[101] Black feminism in the United States is not only responsible for improving conditions for African Americans; it also addresses the hardships associated with other demographics. As a whole, black feminism in the U.S. extends its reach beyond the goals of other forms of feminism by refusing to limit itself by race and class.

Riot Grrrl vs. Sista Grrrl Riot: Finding a Voice for Black Women in Punk Rock

The marginalization of African American women in punk rock serves as a microcosm for the so-called 'traditional' feminism versus black feminism dichotomy the U.S. In fact, while Riot Grrrl considered itself amenable to serving the interests of all women, it largely failed to do so. Riot Grrrl was comprised mostly of middle-class white women, many of whom hoped to use punk rock to transcend race.[102] Such an approach, however, ignores the reality in which African American women exist. For example, as they consciously avoided clothing that appealed to audiences and record labels based on sexual images, most white Riot Grrrls failed to acknowledge their privilege. Not needing sexually suggestive clothing, they were able to appeal to white audiences and attract attention from record companies based on a society that tends to laud Euro-centered beauty standards. Even without sexually suggestive clothing, their bodies were portrayed and perceived as innately beautiful. From early punks such as Patti Smith to contemporary women such as Paramore's Hayley Williams, white

[101] Ibid, 9.
[102] Kristen Schilt, "'Riot Grrrl Is…': The Contestation Over Meaning in a Music Scene," *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual,* eds. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004) 121.

women in punk rock have been afforded the ability to present themselves as attractive presence cloaked in a guise of anti-beauty. Men's clothing and casual, ill-fitting attire became costumes that attacked some traditional beauty standards while subtly endorsing others (whiteness as beauty). White women's physical features afforded them access that was unavailable for African American female punk rockers.[103] Record companies saw black women's skin, hair, and body shapes as obstacles, or in some cases, exotic novelties (rather than standards) for selling their music to largely white fan bases.

When compared to members of the Riot Grrrl era, black women such as Tamar-kali are presented with a dilemma. On one hand, as a feminist, she avoids selling herself as merely a sexual image. Therefore, she does not wear revealing clothing in order to attract audiences. On the other hand, Tamar-kali, like other black women in punk rock, uses her position to create a new popular black aesthetic. Adorning herself in culturally relevant ways, she pays homage to her ancestors. For instance, her various facial piercings reflect knowledge of cultural customs in Africa, while she sometimes wears a Mohawk to show respect for her Native American (Mohawk) ancestors.[104]

A few white Riot Grrrl bands did, in some ways, attempt to underscore the inherent privileges they had. For instance, Kristen Schilt points to Bratmobile's "Polaroid Baby," a song about the idea of whiteness as beauty.[105] Such a concept criticizes America's infatuation with Eurocentric standards. Meanwhile, Schilt highlights Heavens to Betsy's "White Girl," a song about the need for white Riot

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[103] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 215.
[104] *Afro-Punk*, dir. James Spooner, DVD, Image Entertainment, 2003.
[105] Kristen Schilt, "A Little Too Ironic: The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 26.1 (2003), December 3, 2009, 8. <http://www.public.asu.edu/~kleong/staffpage/course/riottgrrl%20analysis.pdf>.

Grrrls to address racism within themselves before attempting to confront sexism and other oppressions.[106]

These attempts to include non-white women in Riot Grrrl were noble efforts, yet they were not widespread. More importantly, they did not and could not express African American experiences. The Riot Grrrls acknowledged African American women, but did not fully include them. The predicament in which black female punks found themselves resembles tensions within the larger world of feminism. Just as several factions of second-wave feminism ignored the realities of racial/ethnic minorities and non-middle class women, the Riot Grrrl movement spoke to issues concerning its predominantly white, middle class audience. The parallel between the tensions existing in both feminism and punk rock was one that leaders like Tamar-kali have begun to address.

James Spooner, the director of the film entitled *Afro-Punk*, describes Tamar-kali through her significance in creating a movement that is representative of black women, saying that he met her at a series of concerts that she participated in called "Sista-Grrrl Riot."[107] The concerts featured bands that were all led by black women. In addition, the women played instruments such as the guitar and drums.[108]

The Sista Grrrl Riot musicians have created more than a concert series—they have formed a movement comparable in some ways to Riot Grrrl, although the intended audiences differ. Tamar-kali has led black punk rockers by becoming one of the most well known in the genre during recent years. Interviewed extensively on the *Afro-Punk* documentary, she encouraged many other black women to join the movement. Also, her participation in New York City's annual Afro-Punk festival, an

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[106] Ibid.
[107] Onome, "Filmmaker James Spooner Goes In-Depth with Afro-punk: the 'rock n roll nigger' experience," *A Gathering of the Tribes*, October 31, 2006, retrieved December 5, 2009, <http://www.tribes.org/web/category/essays/page/4/>.
[108] Ibid.

annual two-week concert series consisting of black punk and alternative bands, has created wider exposure for her and other Sista Grrrl Riot members.

Furthermore, Sista Grrrl Riot has provided a complement to women who associate with the Black Rock Coalition. Scholar Maureen Mahon argues that institutions such as the BRC were created to support common ideas among African Americans (e.g., black rock and alternative music), but they still indirectly supported sexism. These organizations did not account for the variety of experiences that gender differences can cause.[109] Consequently, black women were largely marginalized within the rock genre, even in black rock music. In fact, one might argue that organizations like the BRC perpetuated sexism by only focusing on racism in the music industry. Sista Grrrl Riot, however, fills the gap left by the BRC (i.e., sexism), as well as the area largely ignored by Riot Grrrl (i.e., racism).

Tamar-kali and Sista Grrrl Riot challenge the stereotypes of both society and the music industry in many ways. They expose the flaws that exist from various angles, including the perspectives of musicians, audiences, and the processes associated with the recording industry. As a musician, Tamar-kali challenges notions of the roles that women should play in punk rock.

With both Riot Grrrl and Sista Grrrl Riot, female punk rockers approach their music with a level of emotion that has been misinterpreted by the mainstream. In both situations, the women face a cultural divide that has led to misunderstanding. Neil Nehring argues that because much of the media has been unable to identify with the frustrations of punk rock, they have traditionally viewed punk rock as an expression of emotion without meaning.[110] He explains, "…emotions are rational judgments formed

[109] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 218.
[110] Neil Nehring, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997) 99-100.

out of social interaction."[111] This suggests that emotions such as anger are not just instinct; they are an expression of reason. Thus, punks are expressing initial reactions to their marginalization as well as calculated diatribes based on their experiences. Punk rock groups are not as simple as one might believe; instead, their communication via raw emotion is actually an observation and analysis of their lives.

The act of screaming is not merely a form of release; it is designed to attract others in a public way.[112] Punk rockers such as the Bad Brains, the Objex, and Tamar-kali use it to draw empathy from the audiences. One might view this cultural action as a ritual, because the punk community uses it as a protest against society's practices. The audience joins the musician in a collective effort to achieve a common goal, that of transforming their marginalization into agency. Many of these bands complement the scream with the use of equally raw sounds emanating from their instruments. The distorted guitar, as well as the lack of dynamic range in drumming (much of the music is played loudly, with little variation in volume), match the rage exhibited by the human voice.

Unlike the Riot Grrrls of the early and mid-1990s, Tamar-kali's use of the scream and emotion in her music confronts the issue of racial and gender-based stereotypes. Patricia Hill Collins describes the prevalent negative generalizations about black females in four categories: African American women are typically portrayed in the media as the mammy figure, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and/or the Jezebel figure.[113] The mammy figure is based on the idea of the black woman who is "…the faithful obedient domestic servant."[114] Meanwhile, the matriarch stereotype describes "…the 'bad' Black mother…" who is aggressive and emasculates men in her

[111] Ibid, 107.
[112] Ibid, 154.
[113] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 72-81.
[114] Ibid, 72.

life.[115] The image of the welfare mother represents a black woman who abuses government resources,[116] and the Jezebel is a black female who is excessively promiscuous.[117]

African American women in punk rock battle the stereotypes of the matriarch and the Jezebel figure, complicated by some characteristics of the welfare mother and the mammy. As musicians like Tamar-kali use emotion and image to convey their messages, they meet several challenges. Neil Nehring points out that white males' use of anger in their music is mostly understood by outsiders to be protest in the interest of progress. Riot Grrrls, on the other hand, challenge the idea that it is only acceptable for white males to be angry.[118] Meanwhile, Sista Grrrl Riot is faced with a society that has already deemed it unacceptable, in many cases, to be black and angry. For instance, events such as town hall meetings in which predominantly white audiences express anger at the government are presented as legitimate protests, while rallies in black communities against police brutality are portrayed as unproductive chaos. In cases where anger is not deemed dangerous and/or unacceptable, the expression of black rage is sometimes ignored because of mainstream desensitization to racial injustices in recent decades.

Black women who choose to express anger run the risk of being categorized as the overly-aggressive matriarch, commonly referred to as the "angry black woman." Therefore, Tamar-kali, Felony Melony of the Objex, and other black female punks consciously accept the challenge of creating a new model for what being black means.

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[115] Ibid, 75.
[116] Ibid, 78.
[117] Ibid, 81.
[118] Neil Nehring, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997) 151.

Also, the threat of being labeled as the Jezebel poses an obstacle for African American women in punk rock. Many musicians in the rock industry market themselves as sexual figures. However, black women must question whether it is worthwhile to pursue such images. After struggling to remold an industry that has traditionally hailed white womanhood as beauty, African Americans must tread the line between presenting black women as physically beautiful and exploiting them, playing into the Jezebel image. Because of the various negative stereotypes of black women, those in punk rock find themselves in a precarious position.

The Realities of Being Black, Female, and Punk/Rock Musicians: First-Hand Experiences

In discussing the roles of African American women in the punk, and more generally, rock, genres, first-hand accounts become necessary in order to portray the experiences as accurately as possible. In her work entitled, *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll*, Kandia Crazy Horse presents interviews that include both male and female accounts of life in the rock industry. In fact, her interview with Venetta Fields, one of the early black women in rock music, provides insight into the realities of being in the rock industry. Before forming Venetta's Taxi, Fields spent years as a background singer in bands such as Pink Floyd. She explains that in the early decades of rock music, black women tended to land positions in the background, because a race barrier prevented them from leading bands.[119]

Interestingly, Venetta Fields comments that the only black female lead singer she remembers from the early rock decades is Tina Turner.[120] This statement brings to light an issue that still exists in punk rock and rock as a whole. If one were to survey

[119] Kandia Crazy Horse, "Interview with Venetta Fields," *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll*, ed. Kandia Crazy Horse (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2004) 62-66.
[120] Ibid., 66.

the general public, or even the African American community, how many African American women in rock music would they be able to identify? From the early era of rock to contemporary times, few black women have been readily identifiable.

Patricia Hill Collins argues that there is a need to complement black scholars within the academy with intellectuals outside of it. In the tradition of musicians such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Queen Latifah, and Sistah Souljah, she explains, there are still black women in the music industry who contribute to the education and liberation of the black community.[121] While she acknowledges the need for more women to lead the black community, Collins noticeably avoids the punk rock genre. Perhaps this is indicative of a perceived larger lack of connection between punk rock and African Americans. Black rock critic Kandia Crazy Horse suggests that the gap exists because the black community simply does not imagine the possibility of a black woman as a rock icon,[122] whereas Suzanne Thomas, a rock guitarist, specifies that accepting black women in rock music is not the principal problem for most people within the industry—recognizing the talents of black women who play instruments is the key challenge.[123] Clearly, there are exceptions to this idea such as musician Sheila E., who contributed both her talents as a percussionist and a vocalist, but one might argue that such successes have not represented the paths of most black women in rock music. In addition, Sheila E.'s opportunities were unique in that her father's musical successes coupled with her own playing in musician Prince's band afforded her a more readily available path into the industry. Chapter Three will investigate obstacles to success, such as the media's influence on the public's imagination and stereotypes.

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[121] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 15.
[122] Kandia Crazy Horse, *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music,* Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University-Bloomington, Conference November 13-14, 2009.
[123] Suzanne Thomas, *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music,* Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University-Bloomington, Conference November 13-14, 2009.

Regardless of the various factors that result in the marginalization of black women, musicians like Tamar-kali continue to strive for a more inclusive scene. According to Tamar-kali, gender has become more of an obstacle than race in her pursuit of success.[124] As organizations like the Black Rock Coalition and Afro-Punk have emerged, they have softened the barriers for black men, but they have not necessarily offered black women the same advantages. Therefore, musicians of the Sista Grrrl Riot movement use their music as a vehicle for advancing the causes of both African American women and the black community as a whole.

Empowering the Black Community: An Analysis of Tamar-kali's "Boot" and Arts and Sciences' "Boxes"

Tamar-kali has used punk rock as well as other genres to influence the African American community. Her first EP, *Geechee Goddess Hardcore Warrior Soul*, presents a foray into a form of punk rock influenced by several genres. In addition to a full voice that resembles that of a gospel singer, Tamar-kali is accompanied by a wide range of instruments. In fact, the inclusion of guitar, electric bass, drums, upright bass, piano, viola, and cello[125] reflect her understanding of both composition and orchestra, a technical knowledge that complicates her existence within the punk realm. Such an in-depth musical knowledge might otherwise threaten the perception of her authenticity, yet Tamar-kali balances this musical skill with lyrics that directly address her punk identity (i.e., her marginalization).

While the structure of the band presents a unique sound, the lyrics of *Geechee Goddess* are equally significant in that they discuss issues central to African American

[124] Tamar-kali, *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music*, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University-Bloomington, Conference November 13-14, 2009.
[125] Tamar-kali, *Geechee Goddess Hardcore Warrior Soul*, OyaWarrior Records, 2003, 2008.

women as well as the society that creates stereotypes about them. "Boot," in particular, calls attention to society's standards of beauty:

> Her hair is short
> Her legs are brown
> Her lips are full
> Her head hangs down
> Her eyes ain't blue
> Her ass is round
> Her breath smells sweet
> And she wears a crown
> She is sweet-tasting fruit
> Whose juice is bitter tears
> She is love's worn out boot
> Tattered and torn you wear…[126]

"Boot" directly confronts the social expectations of what punk rock music includes, and therefore excludes. First, the speaker describes a black girl who carries phenotypic African characteristics. Beginning with the fourth line, however, the speaker describes the features in a way that seem to make the girl an outcast. The girl's "…head hangs down…"[127] because she lacks European features, an apparently essential factor in being acceptable to both punk rock and society.

The verse from "Boot" conveys an attitude of ambivalence toward the black girl's physical features and her realities. On one hand, she is made to feel deficient because of her blackness; yet, the speaker's declaration that "…she wears a crown…"[128] suggests a sense of pride. The girl is portrayed as the victim of abuse, but she is still beautiful. Even though she is not seen by others as valuable, the speaker explains to the audience that she is a gift.

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[126] Tamar-kali, "Boot," *Geechee Goddess Hardcore Warrior Soul*, OyaWarrior Records, 2003, 2008.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

As intriguing as the song proves to be, the "Boot" video also makes a statement of African American women's reclaiming rock music. It portrays what could easily be Tamar-kali as a youth. In the video, a black girl locks herself in her bedroom. As she listens to the song, she decides to unbraid several cornrows on top of her head, leaving the others braided backward. In effect, she creates a "faux-hawk." Additionally, the girl changes into combat boots and a blue-jean jacket. She also paints her face in makeup, including heavy eye shadow. Toward the end of the video, she dances in a carefree manner, breaking the mirror with which she has been infatuated. As the song concludes, Tamar-kali stands over the girl's sleeping body, indicating it was all a dream.[129]

The "Boot" video is symbolic in many ways. First, the girl's physical transformation into a punk rocker parallels the decision for black women to join the punk rock movement, regardless of what the rest of the punk rock and/or black communities think. Second, the act of breaking the mirror coincides with the breaking of stereotypes. African American women do not fit under a single generalization, nor do they have a need to prove themselves to others. As Tamar-kali stands over the sleeping girl (who is dressed in the clothing from the beginning of the video), the audience is left with several possibilities. Does the end of the video mean that the dream of liberation through punk rock was just that, a dream? Or, is the sleeping girl meant to symbolize black women's need to awaken and free themselves of society's stereotypes?

Tamar-kali's "Boot" speaks about both the abuse of black women by the punk community and society in general. It depicts black punk life from a woman's

[129] Tamar-kali, "Boot (video)" *Geechee Goddess Hardcore Warrior Soul*, OyaWarrior Records, 2003, 2008.

perspective; it is part of a larger effort to (re)insert punk rock into the black community. Other songs also contribute to this message of defining oneself.

Arts and Sciences' "Boxes" tells the story of what many black punks experience as youths. It is told from the standpoint of a black woman, which allows the narrative to differ from the male-dominated canon of punk rock that has been the norm in the popular imagination. In "Boxes," the speaker confesses:

> I used to listen to lots of rock songs
> As I was growing up
> But they used to call me a white girl
> Man that really tore me up
> Into little pieces
> Scattered hither and thither and 'yond
> I never thought I'd fit in boxes
> But I guess I better try it on
> 'Cause there must be something wrong with me
> You know *they* know best
> *They* always know best…[130]

The speaker documents her youth, explaining that she was ostracized by other African Americans for listening to rock music. Even though the black community surrounding her apparently assumes that she aspires to whiteness, and through her use of Victorian English she displays some understanding of European identity, she is actually saddened by the idea of wanting/having to be someone else. The lines "…I never thought I'd fit in boxes/ But I guess I better try it on…"[131] show that, ironically, the speaker will be forced to eschew her own identity in order to be accepted by other African Americans; being part of the rock community, however, would have offered the opportunity to remain true to herself.

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[130] Arts and Sciences, "Boxes," *Rock 'N' Roll Reparations, Volume 1*, 2005, BRC Records, retrieved December 9, 2009, <http://www.myspace.com/blackrockcoalition>.
[131] Ibid.

Ultimately, the speaker in "Boxes" chooses to follow the prevalent stereotypes of African Americans. As a teenager, she feels that it is more important to be accepted than to form her own understanding of who she is. In an ad lib section of the song, she describes how she gave up her passion, dancing, in order to fit the prescribed role of being a cheerleader.[132] Presumably, she associates this decision, as in the case of her musical choice, with the need to make the popular choice among black girls or face negative results. "Boxes" promotes independence through a tale of consequences. It is only as an adult that the speaker is able to identify the life-changing events.

Songs such as "Boot" and "Boxes" underscore the challenges that face African American women in punk rock. Black women in this genre have been marginalized by the actions of white men and women, and notably, black men. Although organizations such as the Black Rock Coalition now promote the interests of African American women within the industry, the struggle for equality still exists.

Creating a society in which punk rock is widely seen as a force of black liberation will require education on many levels. Musicians and educators continue to reclaim rock music as an African American cultural form; punk rock is an extension of this genre. For the significance of rock/punk rock to reach the remaining segments of the black community, other institutions will also necessarily be held accountable. Importantly, the historical and current role of black women in punk rock must be acknowledged as a part of this process. The next chapter describes the process of (re)connecting African Americans with punk rock and rock music as a whole.

[132] Ibid.

Chapter 3
Marketing Punk/Rock Music as a Tool of Black Liberation in the Contemporary U.S.

For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.[133]

-Frantz Fanon

In the United States, the tendency has been to associate black people with certain types of music. These music genres have included gospel/religious music, rhythm & blues, jazz, blues, and most notably, hip-hop. However, the music and media industries have worked to perpetuate another noticeable phenomenon—the perception that black people do not contribute to rock music, and more specifically, punk rock. First, this chapter will investigate the ways in which the industry and academia have attempted to maintain rock music as a largely white-oriented type of music. In particular, it will highlight several music icons that exemplify black rock music, whether these musicians are commonly associated with the genre or not. Next, the chapter will underscore the influence of society in its use of racial stereotypes to perpetuate the distance between blackness and rock/punk rock. The final section will address the future of marketing black rock/punk rock music. It will discuss potential indicators of an emerging acceptance of these genres.

The Influence of the Industry and Academia on the Racial/Ethnic Identity of Rock Music

Rock music in the United States has long been marketed toward specific demographics other than the African American community, although several of the

[133] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967) 110.

founders of the genre were black. Throughout the decades since the beginning of rock music in the U.S., the music industry has categorized black music according to its own interests.

Raymond Gayle's documentary, *Electric Purgatory: The Fate of the Black Rocker* directly addresses the concerted effort to bleach rock music.[134] One might argue that since the fame of Jimi Hendrix, rock music has largely ignored black musicians. Discussing Hendrix, Spacey T, of the rock group Fishbone, asserts: "Somebody realized something, or came to some realization, and said 'Well, that's gonna never happen again'. Did it?"[135] The musician's assessment of mainstream rock music has, for the most part, proven accurate. Aside from crossover artists such as Prince and Lenny Kravitz, few black musicians have been categorized as rock artists.

Nefertiti Jones, Angelo Moore of Fishbone, and Jimi Hazel of 24-7 Spyz argue that record companies have chosen not to sign black artists who identify themselves as rock musicians. According to these members of bands, major labels denied them the opportunity to sign because they felt the music would not be easily marketable. However, these bands have been influential. Fishbone, for instance, laid the foundation for bands such as No Doubt and Limp Bizkit, according to *Electric Purgatory*.[136]

Meanwhile, much of academia historically has also contributed to the portrayal of rock music as solely a white genre and culture, whereas this thesis and several other contemporary scholarly works offer an alternative narrative. In particular, the history of punk rock has been, until recently, misleading. Several histories of punk rock have

[134] *Electric Purgatory: the fate of the black rocker*, dir. Raymond Gayle, DVD, Payback Productions, 2005.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.

provided representations of the typical punk experience; however, many of them have been largely silent about the participation of black people. Tricia Henry's *Break All Rules! Punk Rock and the Making of a Style* offers a history of punk rock in both the United States and Britain. Like many texts about the subject, it highlights major figures such as Sex Pistols and other groups, but it fails to acknowledge the significance of bands such as the Bad Brains.[137] This version of punk history is useful in that it underscores the problem of punk rock's being typically associated with white males (which ultimately aids in the categorization of black music as non-rock, and non-punk music).

Furthermore, the lack of identification with black music as rock music has been perpetuated by black radio and video outlets. In examining the BET (Black Entertainment Television) website, one finds that all features such as songs, video clips, and interviews emphasize an allegiance to r&b and hip-hop.[138] As one of the most popular visual outlets for black music and culture, it is easy to closely identify the network with blackness. However, upon further investigation, it becomes apparent that BET does not fully represent black music and culture; it simply works to restrict the role of black musicians to traditional popular stereotypes.

Perhaps as significant as black television networks such as BET is the idea that black radio stations have determined for the public the genres that comprise black music. For instance, BlackRadioStations.org, a source of black online radio stations, provides the following categories of radio station links: "hip-hop/r 'n' b, jazz/blues, reggae/dancehall, and black gospel."[139] Clearly, this source for online black music

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[137] Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules! Punk Rock and the Making of a Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989).
[138] *Black Entertainment Television* website, 2009, retrieved December 10, 2009, <http://www.bet.com/>.
[139] *BlackRadioStations.org* website, 2009, retrieved December 10, 2009, <http://www.blackradiostations.org>.

assumes that black punk (or more generally, black rock music), is not a legitimate genre/subgenre of its own.

In addition, large owners of the radio stations determine the fate of black rock music in the mainstream. The following excerpt is taken from the website of Radio One, a broadcasting company: "Radio One, Inc. (www.radio-one.com) is one of the nation's largest radio broadcasting companies and the largest radio broadcasting company that primarily targets African-American and urban listeners […] Radio One owns and/or operates 53 radio stations located in 16 urban markets in the United States.[140] Interestingly, a closer analysis of these radio stations reveals a tendency toward "urban", hip-hop, r&b, gospel, and "adult urban contemporary" categories.[141] As hip-hop, r&b, and gospel fit traditional stereotypes, the "urban" and "adult urban contemporary" titles are simply alternate names for hip-hop and r&b music, and therefore conform to these same stereotypes. Although Radio One should be a leader in the presentation of black music to the public, it has chosen to yield to other media-created stereotypes of what constitutes black culture and music. This action (or lack thereof) has resulted in what Shelly Nicole refers to as the "Radio Ghetto,"[142] meaning that many African Americans listen to stations that define for them what 'black music' is.

In her discussion of the media's effect on black music, author Maureen Mahon offers the following lyrics of The Family Stand:

> Christopher Columbus, please discover me discover me
> Mr. Jagger, Mr. Simon, Mr. Sting if you're busy
> Please tell them that I'm happening
> So that they will believe
> I need a Christopher Columbus

[140] *Radio One* website, 2008, retrieved December 10, 2009, <http://www.radio-one.com.>.
[141] Ibid.
[142] "Features: Deleted Scenes," *Electric Purgatory: the fate of the black rocker*, dir. Raymond Gayle, DVD, Payback Productions, 2005.

So I'll win a Grammy.[143]

The above lyrics highlight the influence of white musicians as compared to black musicians in the rock industry. On a deeper level, they point to the idea of so-called discovery[144]; as in the case of Columbus' encounters with the Western hemisphere, the "discovery" of black rock musicians would simply be acknowledgement of something that already existed. This type of institution reflects a system eerily similar to sharecropping, in which African Americans are perpetually indebted to their white counterparts.

Perhaps it is useful to present a current example of the music industry's effect on musicians and the product that consumers ultimately buy. Hip-hop artist Lil' Wayne has become one of the most well-known, best-selling artists of the genre. He recently decided to resist expectations of young black male musicians by creating a rock-influenced album entitled *Rebirth*. In fact, Lil' Wayne's song "Prom Queen" peaked at numbers 22 and 15 on the Billboard Pop and Hot 100 charts, respectively.[145] Two important points must be made concerning the relative success of the song.

First, it is noteworthy that Lil' Wayne was listed at a peak of number 16 on the "Bubbling Under R&B/Hip-Hop Singles" chart.[146] While Billboard charts are based on radio play and sales, the categorization as an r&b/hip-hop song suggests a problematic radio, sales, and review industry. How is it possible that "Prom Queen," comprised of traditional rock elements, could be labeled under r&b/hip-hop? The use of electric guitar, drum set, singing (although done with a synthesizer), and other rock

[143] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 157; The Family Stand, "Plantation Radio," EastWest America, 1991.
[144] Ibid.
[145] *Billboard* website. 2008, retrieved December 10, 2009, <http://www.billboard.com>. search keyword "Lil' Wayne 'Prom Queen.'"
[146] Ibid.

elements would seemingly construct a rock song. However, Lil' Wayne's blackness in combination with his success as a rapper has apparently limited the way radio stations market his music. The musical equivalent of a typecast actor, Lil' Wayne is currently in the middle of a struggle to redefine the ways in which we consume and understand music. This challenge underscores the necessity of balancing his creative aspirations with economically responsible decisions. The gamble over moving into rock or blending genres has to benefit both Lil' Wayne and the companies he represents in order for it to receive full support.

In addition to the fate of "Prom Queen", Lil' Wayne's music is relevant to the discussion of black rock music because of his recently released album, *Rebirth*. This album is an effort that echoes the previous rock albums of well-known rappers such as Ice-T. The release of *Rebirth* was postponed several times, with various internet media blogs suggesting that the issues of marketing a black rapper/rocker contributed to the delays. Universal did not comment publicly on the reasons for the postponements, but the attention drawn to the situation has proven as significant as the possible causes for delay. The album was finally released in anticipation of Lil' Wayne's pending prison sentence, but the question of marketing a black rapper/rocker to consumers is one that lingers in today's society. Lil' Wayne's imprisonment presented all involved parties the opportunity to avoid the issue because the album's potential lack of success could be easily attributed to his lack of concert and promotional appearances. Therefore, Lil' Wayne's career as a successful rapper avoids being placed in jeopardy.

Organizations such as the Black Rock Coalition are essential to the future of punk and rock industries that will be inclusive of all ethnic and/or racial backgrounds. The BRC, which was instrumental in achieving radio access for groups such as Living Colour, would potentially provide access for many of today's new bands. In addition,

the purpose of the BRC is to allow for a flexible definition of rock music. Scholar Maureen Mahon examines a key difference between the goals of earlier punks and the BRC. While the former promoted "…the rejection of establishment rules that informs most subcultures," the latter seeks to "…change existing practices and perspectives."[147] As a result, the BRC is beneficial to black punks; it offers action, whereas the early years of the punk rock industry focused solely on an expression of anger. While the message of punk rock's anger is significant, the BRC's efficacy in achieving the necessary changes in the industry will prove pivotal to securing exposure for today's bands.

The Influence of Society on the Racial/Ethnic Identity of Rock Music

As with all forms of music, black rock music has endured the pressures of the environments in which it was created. Even before rock music became disassociated from the African American community, its very existence was seen by some as a threat. For instance, members of the white Citizen's Council in Alabama supported the banning of rock music in 1956 because they saw it, as well as other forms of black music, as an attempt to impose black culture on American and southern society.[148] The irony of African Americans' need to reclaim rock music today becomes apparent when one grasps the degree to which whites as well as blacks originally linked the music genre with blackness. Young black punk rock fans are left to confront a racial identity struggle that did not originally exist in rock music. While black followers of Little Richard, James Brown, and Rick James were embraced by other African Americans during the earlier decades of rock music, today's black punk rockers

[147] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 101.
[148] Lawrence N. Redd, *Rock Is Rhythm and Blues (The Impact of Mass Media)* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1974) 40; *Newsweek*, April 23, 1956, 32.

confront a society that is less accepting of such an idea. As profitability has assumed a more prominent role in the popular and industry support for music, rock music has lost its original luster in the black community. Because much of the industry has already embraced hip-hop and r&b as the major forms of profitable music in African American communities, record companies will be less than likely to support a type of music that requires new marketing strategies and a re-teaching of black authenticity in rock music. The issue of black identity in punk rock is a complicated one, but at the root is the media's determination of who can be punk rockers (i.e., white males, and now, white women). The depiction of the music as shown by television, radio, and music stores is one that has directly affected the ways in which audiences consume it.

During recent years the black punk movement has expanded beyond music, becoming a larger cultural movement. The most significant work regarding contemporary black punk rock music and culture is James Spooner's documentary entitled *Afro-Punk*.[149] This film exposes a unique aspect of punk rock—the experiences of black musicians and audiences in a predominantly white environment. *Afro-Punk* provides a major contribution because of its open discussion of issues such as alienation, identity struggles, relationships, and lifestyles.

Spooner's *Afro-Punk* is a central work with regard to the music because of its perpetual influences on black punk culture. Previous efforts at unifying less-mainstream cultures were promoted through groups such as Vernon Reid's and Greg Tate's Black Rock Coalition, created in the 1980s.[150] James Spooner's documentary approaches the subject of black rockers, and more specifically, black punks. However, Spooner's film provides a wider geographical exposure, one with which black punk audiences from large metropolises and small towns nationwide can relate.

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[149] *Afro-Punk*, dir. James Spooner, DVD, Image Entertainment, 2003.
[150] Harry Allen, "Interview with Vernon Reid," *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll*, ed. Kandia Crazy Horse (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2004) 129.

Afro-Punk, in effect, makes it acceptable to be both black and punk (to audiences, not just musicians). The beginning of the documentary states the following purpose, one that shows individuals in the black punk community that they are not alone: "This is dedicated to every black kid who has ever been called a nigger…and every white kid who thinks they know what that means."[151]

Spooner's beginning quotation depicts a black musician/fan who cannot fully identify with white audiences who appreciate punk rock, because of his/her unique race-related experiences; yet, he or she cannot fully identify with mainstream black communities because of the love of punk rock. Black punk, or Afro-Punk, as Spooner refers to it, creates an environment that embraces multiple notions of blackness. In addition to the obvious irony of needing to name a music with origins in the black community "Afro," the term also suggests a challenge to a culture that has previously hailed the beauty of Mohawk hairstyles and other straight(ened) hair forms, at the expense of naturally-styled African hair. For African Americans who have been self-conscious about their own natural hair, it promotes the beauty of their own bodies.

The pressures to conform to r&b and hip-hop have largely been undocumented by the media. Because much of society has deemed it normal and natural for black people in the United States to follow certain types of music, punk rock and rock as a whole have been continually limited demographically. Until recently, no scholarship existed addressing these assumptions. However, some organizations have been moderately successful in confronting the plight of black rock musicians.

For instance, the Black Rock Coalition, as mentioned earlier, was formed as a way to attract black audiences to the movement. In her explanation of the BRC's impact on society's preconceived notions, Maureen Mahon asserts the following: "…I

[151] *Afro-Punk*, dir. James Spooner, DVD, Image Entertainment, 2003.

have struggled to demonstrate that BRC members are concerned with exploring a broader range of possibilities for black American identity so that stepping beyond the boundaries of what currently constitutes 'acceptable' blackness is not interpreted as inauthentic, an identity crisis, or otherwise pathological."[152] This statement reflects the frustrations of both musicians and audiences as they are forced by American communities to either identify with blackness or publicly support rock music.

Finally, it is important to discuss how hip-hop and rock (especially punk) music have influenced each other in the black community. Because of the rebellious origins of both hip-hop and punk, the two genres have given musicians and audiences an avenue for expressing disillusionment with mainstream America. As a result, the two forms examine similar political and social issues. Following the examples set by Run-DMC, some hip-hop artists have moved in the direction of punk and rock music. As mentioned, rappers such as Ice-T and Lil' Wayne have explored rock music. In addition, rapper Cee-lo has created the group Gnarles Barkley, which continues to blur the lines between genres.

However, hip-hop has sometimes increased tensions between the two genres with lackluster attempts at rock-related ventures. For example, rap group Shop Boyz rose to prominence based on their 2007 hit "Party Like a Rockstar."[153] The single, which was a hip-hop song that simply used catch phrases and images such as skulls and wallet chains, was a weak attempt to identify with a wider base. While the song became part of a larger desire in hip-hop to be seen as rock stars, the fad undermined the true efforts of black rock musicians. Even today, rap stars embrace certain styles that were previously associated with rock music.

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[152] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 160.
[153] *Shop Boyz* website, 2007, retrieved December 11, 2009, <http://www.shopboyzonline.com/>.

Hip-hop has been influenced by rock music, but rock music has also accepted certain elements of hip-hop. Whole Wheat Bread, for instance, while typically categorized as a black punk band, presents some elements of hip-hop. The use of rapping in combination with instruments and vocals commonly associated with punk music is indicative of a more inclusive contemporary black punk culture.[154]

As hip-hop and rock music have worked to influence each other, it is important that the musicians and audiences acknowledge the implications of such products. Both genres have much to contribute to the world of music, and they should acknowledge the common elements of their origins. Hip-hop has become a form of music traditionally associated with the black community; the community should also fully acknowledge and embrace rock music and culture.

The Future of Marketing Black Punk/Rock Music and Culture

In the United States, black music continues to change and push the limits of stereotypes. The industry, media, academia, and the general public are beginning to re-embrace alternatives to traditional black music categories. Several current innovations and events have led to the emergence of a wider acceptance of black punk rock and rock music among various communities. In addition, these innovations and events could potentially lead to a broader acceptance within the music industry.

In terms of marketing and selling black punk and rock music, the industry will need to focus on two central areas: the product distribution (black punk/rock music) and the promotion of the product. In order to be successful with distribution, the industry will need to focus initially on live concerts and individual song downloads as ways of spreading the messages of the music. These methods will allow black punk and rock music to infiltrate society through a less-commercial movement. In addition

[154] *Whole Wheat Bread* website, retrieved April, 2009, <http://www.wholewheatbread.net>.

to downloads, the use of small concerts and tours will allow the movement to expand as bands sell their albums at the venues. Instead of large concerts aimed at distributing the music of a single band, smaller concerts featuring many bands will allow the various artists to play and sell their music.

Meanwhile, the promotional aspect of the black punk and rock industries will need to utilize innovations such as satellite radio. The blurring of traditional genre lines through subscription services will expand targeted demographics, breaking traditional genre paths. While it will unavoidably create new categories and stereotypes, satellite radio can create channels labeled as "Underground Music" and other such titles, ones that will begin to reimagine the ways in which audiences consume music. However, in order to be successful, they must avoid simply repackaging narrowly defined music expectations (e.g., labels such as "urban" that only include hip-hop and r&b). The packaging and distribution of music through innovative means is discussed in further detail in a later section of this chapter.

In addition to technology, recent events have begun to help expand the popularity of black punk and rock. First, James Spooner's *Afro-Punk* documentary has drawn attention to the movement on a large scale. The addition of a website and an annual festival has led to more mainstream discussions about the black punk rock culture. In fact, the annual Afro-Punk Festival in New York City has grown exponentially since its inception. According to the Afro-Punk website, 30,000 people attended a recent festival, which was included sponsorship by companies such as Mountain Dew.[155] Media such as MTV have even discussed the emergence of the movement, indicating Afro-Punk's new areas of expansion into genre-crossing music.[156] Afro-Punk no longer represents solely black punk music; it represents an

[155] *Afro-Punk* website, 2008, retrieved April 20, 2009, <http://www.afropunk.com>.
[156] *MTV* website, 2009, retrieved April 20, 2009, <http://www.mtv.com>.

alternative black identity—the creation of a new black aesthetic. Black musicians and audiences have become agents in the creation of new categories for what is labeled as black music. The music industry can use this genre-blurring movement to feed into the re-creation of radio and the distribution of music as a whole.

In the academic arena, scholars are now beginning to acknowledge the contributions of black rock musicians throughout history. Indiana University-Bloomington recently hosted a conference in order to examine the ways in which black rock music emerged.[157] The conference, *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music*, also focused on the future of writing, performing, and marketing black rock music.[158] Panelists, ranging from musicians to scholars and authors, encouraged dialogue about rock music from various angles, including the impact of geographic region, gender, and other issues.

Why Black Punk Rock Matters

In the attempt to gauge the steps necessary for progress in the rock and punk rock arenas, attention must ultimately be given to the reasons underlying the need for a reclamation of the genre and subgenre. Maureen Mahon's explanation of the BRC's significance centers on a contrast between black rockers and whites who play music rooted in black culture.[159] Perhaps a readily identifiable example of this relationship is shown through a discussion of the rock band Living Colour and the rapper Eminem.

Living Colour, made famous by their 1988 hit, "Cult of Personality,"[160] entered the rock world as one of the few black bands in the genre at the time. In fact,

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[157] *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music*, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University-Bloomington, Conference November 13-14, 2009.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 92-93.
[160] Living Colour, "Cult of Personality," *Vivid*, Epic Records, retrieved December 14, 2009, <http://www.myspace.com/livingcolourmusic>.

they contributed to the short list of black rock bands that bridged the gap between the many black rock musicians of the 1970s and those of the 1990s.[161] Living Colour played rock music during the era after the industry's and media's disassociation of rock music from blackness. Consequently, they challenged the norm of what was acceptable. Because of this, their emergence as a band that appeared to be unique contributed largely to their popularity. While the band's skill was undeniable to the music industry and audiences, their race was a key factor in their initial success.

Years later, rapper Eminem became one of the bestselling artists of all time in the hip-hop genre. He, like Living Colour, had an obvious appeal based on his high level of skill within the genre. Similarly, he also gained popularity from his status as one of few artists of his race within the genre. As a white rapper, Eminem proved to the world that one need not be black in order to be respected as a talented artist.

At the surface, one might perceive the paths and successes of Living Colour and Eminem as parallels. However, Maureen Mahon's argument concerning authenticity suggests that the experiences are vastly different. Eminem might have much invested in his love for hip-hop, but he is contributing to the genre solely based on that relationship. Living Colour, on the other hand, represents a desire to reclaim rock music, based in part on the significance of authenticity. The band uses their music to *once again* attract black audiences to the music.

While it is important to avoid claiming rock or hip-hop as genres exclusively available to African Americans, an understanding of the necessity to reclaim rock music provides the basis for a more inclusive future. As an extension of rock music, punk rock is largely presented as historically white. Indeed, precursors such as the New York Dolls and early punk bands the Ramones and Sex Pistols consisted of white members. However, just as one should avoid portraying any contemporary U.S. genre

[161] Ibid.

as a product available to a single racial or ethnic group, punk rock's early white bands should not restrict the subgenre's contemporary makeup.

The marketing of black punk bands and their music is important because radio, television, companies, and music stores have projected stereotypes of what blackness means. Punk allows the black community to break those generalizations, thus empowering African Americans by offering competing images. Not all young black Americans will embrace the music and culture of punk rock, but this is not the expectation. Restructuring how music is marketed will promote choice, resulting in more African Americans breaking social barriers. Ultimately, it will destroy the concept of the 'Radio Ghetto.'[162]

Black punk bands avoid the influences of large record companies because most of them do not aspire to be major label, mainstream bands. The DIY lifestyle allows the bands to create their own sound without worry of restrictions. Unlike mainstream rock bands, they do not have to play watered down versions of their music in order to reach MTV or other such outlets. In fact, the present and future of the music industry actually benefit black punk bands. Changes in the way music is distributed to the public open the industry to more independent bands. Technology in the form of satellite radio and internet downloading aids the non-mainstream community, thereby becoming useful to African Americans in punk rock.

The Era of Satellite Radio and iTunes

In recent years, the creation of satellite radio has provided a unique form of exposure for musicians. This technology offers music divided according to various interests. A subscription requires periodic fees, but satellite radio has many benefits

[162] "Features: Deleted Scenes," *Electric Purgatory: the fate of the black rocker*, dir. Raymond Gayle, DVD, Payback Productions, 2005.

for audiences of independent music. Satellite radio, as compared to traditional radio, parallels the differences between premium cable channels and traditional antenna broadcast television. Satellite radio programs, like some premium cable channels, present material in a less-restricted format. Some satellite radio stations offer unedited music, although a narrow focus on genre could be a potentially negative consequence. These versions of the songs use language and content that would be controversial for traditional radio stations; consequently, bands convey their messages to audiences based on uncensored themes within their genres. For instance, a potential listener might subscribe to an 'underground' satellite radio station, or he/she might subscribe to a satellite station catering to those who are specifically interested in punk rock.

Satellite radio stations cover wide distances, unlike radio stations of the past. According to Sirius Satellite Radio, a leading provider, the "…unique listening experience is available to subscribers from coast-to-coast in the United States."[163] Because satellite radio spans multiple geographical areas, bands can spread their messages to regions outside of their immediate area. The concept of a 'Radio Ghetto' can potentially become virtually obsolete as satellite radio increases its dominance. Even if much of the African American community is initially apathetic to the music and culture of punk rock, the underground satellite radio stations could potentially use punk bands with hip-hop influences (e.g., New York-based Game Rebellion) to begin reintroducing rock music to African Americans.

Meanwhile, black punk rock is likely to gain exposure, and therefore, marketability, through the advent of internet-based individual song downloads. These sales are now commonplace, as exhibited by the success of programs such as Apple's iTunes. Also, Rhapsody now rivals iTunes as a download-sale program. Both

[163] *Sirius/XM Satellite Radio* website, 2009, retrieved December 29, 2009, <http://www.sirius.com/aboutus>.

programs allow listeners to purchase songs as singles, whereas most stores have limited consumers to full album purchases. iTunes and Rhapsody will likely expose audiences to a wider variety of musicians, as consumers no longer have to commit to the prices of full albums. Furthermore, musicians are able to avoid the politics of persuading store chains to sell their music.

While technological innovations strengthen the connection between musicians and consumers, it seems that the strategic distancing of blackness from rock music will be counteracted through an equally strategic movement. Just as rock music was effectively disassociated from African Americans over a period of several years, bands that employ certain elements of rock and punk will potentially open dialogue between African Americans and punk rock culture. The process has begun, and the agents of change will likely take several years to succeed.

Game Rebellion: The End Justifies the Means

New York-based punk band Game Rebellion contributes to the struggle for African Americans' participation in punk rock. Their website describes the band as "An all Black all outta Brooklyn band whose metal, punk and rudeboy skanking licks sound as credible and crunchy as their hiphop lyrics and headnodding bounce."[164] Game Rebellion promotes the idea that punk rock is an area in which African Americans can be successful. The band rejects past notions of what constitutes punk music. They use traditional instruments such as lead guitars, bass, and drums, yet they infuse the music with the central hip-hop element—the MC.

At one level, Game Rebellion appears to be a reflection of previous rock-rap bands, but they instead use their music in order to liberate the black community from music's impractical categorizations. Netic, the lead vocalist/MC of Game Rebellion,

[164] *Game Rebellion* website, retrieved December 30, 2009, <http://gamerebellion.com/>.

explains that he would love to write and perform traditional hardcore punk rock in addition to their rap-influenced repertoire.[165] However, such a move at this point would be counterproductive, because the group is attempting to attract young inner-city African Americans.[166] Game Rebellion, like similar bands, hopes to reach its target audience by performing music that resembles that with which African Americans have become accustomed. Eventually, they will commit to a hardcore sound; however, the band's rationale behind the gradual change is an effort to attract African American youths to punk rock.

Interestingly, Netic's background also serves as a positive influence on black teenagers. The vocalist/MC portrays himself as a rebellious type, but he also values education. His previous educational experience as "…a brain and cognitive sciences major at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) […] where he enrolled at the age of 16"[167] allows Netic to complement his rough image with one of intellectual aptitude. As a result, African American youths see both someone with whom they relate on social and academic levels. Musicians like Game Rebellion's Netic use a hip-hop influenced image to simultaneously make punk rock and education areas that interest their target audience.

Game Rebellion is representative of one approach to embracing punk culture and music in contemporary society. They are part of a renewed effort within the African American community to play punk rock, although their music differs from that of early bands such as the Bad Brains. Through the contributions of bands like

[165] *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music*, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University-Bloomington, Conference November 13-14, 2009.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Program Brochure, *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music*, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University-Bloomington, Conference November 13-14, 2009.

Game Rebellion, as well as documentaries, festivals, and concerts, punk rock continues to pursue success in black America.

Success in Punk Rock

African Americans have been influential in rock music as a whole, as well as in punk rock. In many ways, black musicians from outside of punk rock are responsible for its existence, but the genre also includes significant black bands. From 1977 to the present, African Americans have increasingly become visible as punk rockers in the public imagination. Historically, much of academia has tended to ignore black punk rockers, even as scholarship has examined the impacts of Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and others on rock music. Paralleling the experiences of British and American musicians, scholars of British punk have acknowledged the impacts of black participants on ska and reggae as influential to early punk rock; however, those who wrote about U.S. punk, until recently, ignored groups such as the Bad Brains and Fishbone.

Regardless of the work done in academia, black punks have used their music and culture as a vehicle for liberation from government oppression and social stereotypes. Innovations of the past two decades have aided musicians in exposing their work to diverse audiences. In addition, people such as director James Spooner (*Afro-Punk*) have spread the message of black inclusion through documentaries and festivals. Ultimately, black punk rock symbolizes more than an obsession with a specific genre. It calls for an opening of American society to include other, more flexible, definitions of blackness. The message of alternative realities for African Americans is one that embraces various genres of music as well as social experiences.

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