Weber, Samuel
Weber, Samuel, and Hent de Vries

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Before singer Axl Rose auto-destructed on 1989’s “One in a Million,” bringing his band Guns ‘n’ Roses along with him, the summer of 1988 saw a phenomena that would seem to have presaged an altogether different future. New York City–based black rockers Living Colour, with Vernon Reid on guitar, released their debut album, Vivid, which featured the great song “Cult of Personality.” MTV picked up the video, and the song won the 1989 Grammy for Best Hard Rock Performance. Vivid went double platinum and, for a heady moment, rock seemed at a crossroads. Would it reward Rose’s cramped vision of a white America hemmed in on all sides by minorities and gays, or would it embrace Living Colour’s expanded vision of rock ‘n’ roll rebellion?

“Cult” opens with a clip of Malcolm X promising to speak in “a language that everybody here can easily understand.” This call is followed, after a beat, by the response of the song’s unforgettable opening riff, linking lead guitarist Vernon Reid’s virtuosity to X’s black universalism. “Cult,” which astonished me on the cusp of adolescence, was as compelling as Melle Mel’s pioneering 1982 conscious rap “The Message.” Only—unlike that latter song, which my suburban Midwestern ears heard as a reportorial on a gritty and remote other world—“Cult” spoke to the dilemmas of being a black person awash in a sea of white. The song managed to perform black historical memory in a “white” idiom, while simultaneously undertaking an immanent critique of black identity. It did so by linking the then-growing cult of Malcolm X to a broader problematic of authoritarian personality in modern society, a mode rock has always challenged. Was it possible, in 1988, that a pop single could have exposed political
charisma with arresting juxtapositions like “Joseph Stalin and Gandhi”? That radio could have embraced a song that so unmoored the complacent anomie of teenage paranoia, exposing instead the more rigorous challenge of dwelling among difference?

Before Guns ‘n’ Roses urged me to suppose differently, I assumed rock was black music and that Vernon Reid’s virtuosity was black virtuosity. In Kandia Crazy Horse’s excellent new collection, Rip It Up, Paul Gilroy, in his essay “Bold as Love? Jimi’s Afrcyberdelia and the Challenge of the Not-Yet,” notices how the “shocking power of amplified sound solicits identification differently” (37) from visual culture, an observation that Living Colour lead singer Corey Glover underscores in the line from “Cult,” “when the mirror speaks, the reflection lies.” Living Colour “dispatched [us] to new bodily predicaments,” as Gilroy writes of Jimi Hendrix’s showman shamanism (37).

But Gilroy’s emphasis on the shamanic, over and against showmanship, bespeaks an ongoing difficulty in black performance criticism. The emphasis on music over performance hinges on a regrettable dualism between sound and vision. A more sympathetic attitude to showmanship might be found in the example of Little Richard, whose song gives the collection its title. Conjuring the gender defiance of a Little Richard—a theatricality that can be read across both his stage persona and his musical virtuosity—is especially refreshing at a moment when a single and overdetermined mode of black male authenticity is, ironically enough, shutting a generation off from its authentic heritage. The shamanic hermeticism of Hendrix was not the only modality within which black rock aesthetics have resisted the narrowing straitjacket around black performance.

Because black rock is perceived as part of the rock scene, rather than the black music scene, its impact has been minimized. While performers like Ruth Brown and Little Richard are acknowledged forbearers of rock, Greg Tate suggests in the foreword to Rip It Up that guitar-based music sounds inauthentic to contemporary black American youth. Rock and hip hop are not just any two musical genres after all: they have been the yin and yang of American youth music for the last two decades, caught in what Dick Hebdige memorably termed the “frozen dialectic” between black and white in Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979). Conspicuous instances of rock-rap fusion, such as Run DMC’s collaboration with Aerosmith, or Jay-Z’s more recent match-up with Linkin Park, prove, through their very exceptionality, that this fundamentally melodramatic representation of blacks and whites exists in separate but equal cultural universes that periodically collide in a cosmic freak accident, like Marvel and DC comic book characters. Despite Tate’s suggestion that it is the fans voting with their feet that preserves this distinction, rock and hip hop undoubtedly serve the recording industry best by differentiating themselves from each other, even when white people are the principal consumers of both.

Tate is a founding member of the Black Rock Coalition (BRC), the subject of Maureen Mahon’s informative new ethnographic study, Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race. A musician’s organization whose primary claim to fame has been helping launch Living Colour, the BRC has served since the mid-1980s to push audiences toward what Tate terms a “postliberated black aesthetic” (1992:200). “Postliberated” black style, an idea Mahon meditates upon at chapter length, melts the frozen dialectic of the music industry and permits black artists to draw upon a broader range of influences—“both Jim and Toni Morrison,” as Trey Ellis put it in 1989 (234). Mahon’s study illumines the often mundane cultural work, from meeting attendance to record distribution, involved in making such a vision a reality. Her approach sheds new light on the black rock phenomenon, verifying the presupposition that it is a genre performed and enjoyed primarily by members of a middle class who have experienced integrated schools and communities (or who, like Reid, and Guns ‘n’ Roses lead guitarist Slash, were born or raised abroad).

Claims that “rock is black music” notwithstanding, many or most black rockers were first drawn to the music in predominantly white settings. That at least describes my own first exposure to Living Colour, one of the first concerts I ever attended. Driving in from suburban Ann Arbor, Michigan, to a rock club in Detroit, I shared with my white car mates a near-total ignorance of the black musical forms then emerging out of Detroit’s neighborhoods, styles like Detroit rap and techno. But we did
know everything about Living Colour, Jimi Hendrix, and Bad Brains, who we discussed alongside white rockers Nirvana, Nine Inch Nails, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Whether or not this amounted to “postliberation” is another matter. The idea of “postliberated black aesthetics,” like the more recently bandied about “post-black art,” seems to depend upon an individualistic paradigm of analysis in which one black person’s experience of expressive freedom and social mobility summarizes the fate of all black people. Still, it is hard to quarrel with Mahon when she points to the racism in the music industry that cordons off black rockers from the mainstream. The contradiction between professed values of rebellion and independence, and actual practices of stereotyping and installing glass ceilings, is well developed both in Mahon’s work and in the essays in Rip It Up, many of which are interviews with working black rock artists.

In focusing on an artist’s advocacy organization, Mahon implicitly takes up the call sounded by critic Norman Kelley in his essay “The Political Economy of Black Music” (2002), where he castigates academics for focusing exclusively on the representational merits of particular performances or genres, while neglecting to analyze the relations of exploitation that Kelley claims characterizes the music industry as a whole. Kelley’s figures are startling: In 2001, U.S. hip hop alone did $1.8 billion in sales, but the entirety of the U.S. black-owned entertainment industry took in only $189.75 million. Kelley argues that black music exists in plantation-like conditions, in which the bulk of the wealth it generates goes to megacorporations (which he assumes are predominantly or exclusively owned and controlled by nonblacks), and that under such conditions, any ostensible independence of expression afforded to specific performers is nugatory. While his argument presumes a more simplistic definition of black music than the one Mahon offers, both authors broaden our analysis of the working conditions of blacks in the entertainment industry, and expose its continuing structural inequity.

Seen from the vantage point of 2005, the opposite of the postliberated aesthetic that Tate, Ellis, and others had hoped for in the mid-1980s seems to have triumphed in popular music. Instead of a greatly expanded range of black expressive freedom, the success of one particular black cultural form has come to eclipse all others, and to present itself, in commodified form, as the arbiter of black realness. Strong contenders, from house to techno to jungle to drum ‘n’ bass, have all been more or less beaten back by rap and hip hop, at least in America. This situation is underscored in James Spooner’s fine independent documentaryAfropunk: The “Rock ’n’ Roll Nigger” Experience about blacks in the punk rock scene today. Broadening from Mahon’s focus on musicians (and her concentration on the L.A./New York axis), Spooner used the internet and plain old traveling around to collect the stories of a broad swath of black punk rock fans from across the heartland. Their stories are moving and at times hilarious. The punk critique of capitalist culture industries that Afropunk both documents and strives to exemplify—with its D.I.Y. distribution and its online community building at afropunk.com—is also part of an anticapitalist black heritage now submerged by the current ethos of “get rich or die trying” (à la 50 Cent).

Shunning the “minority within a minority” discourse that would have rendered the film pious but unwatchable, Spooner directs his camera toward the moments of tension in punk, as its white, male, and ostensibly politicized fans struggle to grasp the fact that race is also a political issue. One scene shows a group of hardcore fans enthusiastically chanting the conscious lyrics of a group of Rastafarians. When interviewed after the show, they are unable to decipher the meaning of the polemics against Babylon they were just spouting. Such missed opportunities for connection—for example, the one cited in the film’s subtitle, Patti Smith’s notorious punk anthem “Rock ’n’ Roll Nigger”—are the real theme of Spooner’s documentary, and, in a way, of the Mahon and Crazy Horse books as well.

In retrospect, the crossroads of 1989 seems just such a missed opportunity. After entertaining the notion of integration, the music industry decided to pursue the more securely profitable strategy of commodifying black authenticity. Video really did kill the radio star, and by 2000 the range of representation in the average black musical video was narrower than it was in 1990. Unfortunately, Mahon’s relentlessly upbeat narrative of the BRC—which continues to thrive—does not fully explore
the reasons why postliberated black aesthetics foundered in the 1990s. Readers will have to fill in this story for themselves.

The legacy of Living Colour’s breakthrough can be compared to Ray Charles’s 1962 album, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*. In American pop culture, the only non sequitur funnier than a black person into rock is a black person into country. Charles’s gamble, however, paid off, scoring him a huge international success with his cover of Hank Williams’s “I Can’t Stop Loving You.” That same year, he followed up with a second disc, kicking off with an exuberant version of the Jimmie Davis–Charles Mitchell tune, “You Are My Sunshine.” With standout vocals by Margie Hendrix, Charles’s recording of “Sunshine” excavates the tension between the saccharine title and the desolate implications of the lyric, and preserves this tension in the elevated and intensified form of an up-tempo jazzy R&B number. Small changes: From the male panic of “[I]f you leave me / To love another / You’ll regret it all some day” to “[B]ut now you left me / And you love another / You’ve shattered all of my dreams,” sharpen the divergence between song and lyric, converting potential into actual loss. Charles’s big, fast sound turns a maudlin ballad into a raucous modernist anthem, illustrating Fred Moten’s definition of blackness as “an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line” (2003:1). A comparison of Charles’s performance with Norman Blake’s conservatory approach to the song on the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack (2000) is evidence that, 40 years down the line, Charles’s vision is still futuristic.

But the consequence of that moment in 1962 was that the United States and the world embraced Charles as a soul/jazz/R&B performer, and ignored his revivifying contributions to country and rock. The function of the exceptional crossover performance, apparently, is less to unfreeze the dialectic between “black” and “white” music than it is to spin the dial forward to its next point of stasis. Living Colour’s triumph as a hard rock act did not open the gates to other black performers in hard rock as much as it helped make possible, through its negation, for a new absolutist image of black performance to triumph in the 1990s.

—Tavia Nyong’o

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