

Ragtime Country

Rhythmically Recovering Country's Black Heritage

ABSTRACT In 1955, Elvis Presley and Ray Charles each stormed the pop charts with songs employing the same propulsive rhythm. Both would soon be hailed as rock 'n' roll stars, but today the two songs would likely be described as quintessential examples, respectively, of rockabilly and soul. While seeming by the mid-50s to issue from different cultural universes mapping neatly onto Jim Crow apartheid, their parallel polyrhythms point to a revealing common root: ragtime. Coming to prominence via *Maple Leaf Rag* (1899) and other ragtime best-sellers, the rhythm in question is exceedingly rare in the Caribbean compared to variations on its triple-duple cousins, such as the Cuban clave. Instead, it offers a distinctive, U.S.-based instantiation of Afrodiasporic aesthetics—one which, for all its remarkable presence across myriad music scenes and eras, has received little attention as an African-American “rhythmic key” that has proven utterly key to the history of American popular music, not least for the sound and story of country. Tracing this particular rhythm reveals how musical figures once clearly heard and marketed as African-American inventions have been absorbed by, foregrounded in, and whitened by country music while they persist in myriad forms of black music in the century since ragtime reigned. **KEYWORDS** race and ethnic studies, popular music, music history

In 1955, Elvis Presley and Ray Charles each stormed the pop charts with songs employing the same propulsive rhythm. Both would soon be hailed as rock 'n' roll stars, but today the two songs would likely be described as quintessential examples, respectively, of rockabilly and soul. Ironically, the horn hits that mark Charles's “I Got a Woman” as a jump blues with deep ties to big band jazz accent the very same beats that, in Elvis's “Mystery Train,” articulated on a twangy guitar by Scotty Moore, could be heard as bringing the hillbilly to the rock 'n' roll party. While seeming by the mid-50s to issue from different cultural universes mapping neatly onto Jim Crow apartheid, their parallel polyrhythms point to a revealing common root: ragtime. Coming to prominence via Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* (1899) and other best-sellers of the era, the rhythm in question is not the well-known “cakewalk” or *tresillo* 3+3+2 polyrhythm, also prevalent in ragtime. Notably, this particular figure, which could be counted as 2+3+3+3+3+2, is exceedingly rare in the Caribbean compared to variations on its triple-duple cousins, such as the Cuban *son* clave (3+3+4+2+4) or the “double tresillo” (3+3+3+3+4). Instead, it offers a distinctive, American-accented instantiation of Afrodiasporic aesthetics—one which, for all its remarkable presence across myriad genres and eras, has received little attention as an African-American “rhythmic key” that has

proven utterly essential to the history of American popular music, not least for the sound and story of country.

Employed by countless ragtime string bands, this figure carries forward into jazz orchestration and improvisation in the 1920s and into the repertory of country ragtime, blues, and folk musicians. Mississippi John Hurt punctuates his 1928 recordings with the rhythm, while Louis Armstrong riffs on it for an entire chorus of his 1929 version of “Mahogany Hall Stomp.” Doubled up, it’s the beat of the defining “doo-wop” in Duke Ellington’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (1931). It’s also the groovy hook that Chet Atkins and Merle Travis use to entrance listeners on such revealing country standards as *Cannonball Rag*. The rhythm is integral to the influential Muhlenberg County guitar style and what has become politely known as “Travis picking” (a phrase that avoids and erases its former designation as “n---r picking”). And indeed, it is with Atkins and Travis, rather than any black forbears, that genealogies of Scotty Moore’s style tend to end.¹ It becomes a go-to bluegrass flourish for the likes of Earl Scruggs and Doc Watson, and by the 1960s the figure indexes the rural past in the so-called “American Primitive” guitar of John Fahey and Leo Kottke. At the same time, the rhythm has remained central to the sounds of modern blackness, propelling the funky soul of James Brown and Marvin Gaye, innumerable disco songs and house tracks, and the rap cadences of 50 Cent and Kendrick Lamar. From the Piedmont to the Delta, and from exceptional black string bands to the Average White Band, this particular rhythm reveals how musical figures once clearly heard and marketed as African American inventions have been absorbed by, foregrounded in, and whitened by country music even as they persist in myriad forms of black music in the century since ragtime reigned.

Having become so established in the putatively white world of mid-century country, the rhythm’s presence in Presley’s early recordings for Sun, accenting such breakout hits as “That’s All Right,” “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” and “Mystery Train,” was inevitably, if ironically, heard in certain contexts as part of the scenery of musical whiteness, the country complement to Elvis’s transgressive foray into the blues. Presley biographer Jerry Hopkins provides a typical version of this narrative when describing the Sun sessions:

What had been cut in the tiny studio was in many ways historic: Elvis and his two backup musicians combined the sounds of white country and black blues to form what would be called “rockabilly.” On “That’s All Right [Mama],” the blues song, the instrumentation gave the version a country sound, and on Bill Monroe’s bluegrass hit,

1. An obituary for Moore in *The Guardian*, for example, describes the “ingenuity of his style” as having “owed much to his adoration of the country star Chet Atkins,” for, “Like Atkins, and Merle Travis before him, Moore played in a fingerpicking style on his Gibson, using a thumbpick and relying chiefly on his thumb and first two fingers.” Laura Barton, “Scotty Moore did more than play guitar—he invented the role of the rock guitarist,” *The Guardian*, 29 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/jun/29/scotty-moore-rock-guitarist-death-elvis-presley-tribute/>. Similarly, an article focusing on Moore’s “rockabilly licks” in *Premier Guitar* magazine describes a passage featuring this particular rhythmic approach as demonstrating “Scotty’s superb Travis-picking ideas.” Levi Clay, “Beyond Blues: Scotty Moore’s Raucous Rockabilly Licks,” *Premier Guitar*, 22 October 2016, <https://www.premierguitar.com/articles/24844-beyond-blues-scotty-moores-raucous-rockabilly-licks>.

Elvis sang the blues At the time, mixing black and white music wasn't as acceptable as it would be just a few years later.²

Never mind that Arthur Crudup's original version of "That's All Right" (1946) featured nearly identical instrumentation, as well as the rhythm in question, or that legions of white (and black) performers prior to Elvis had recorded blues numbers in a country style. In order to interpret Presley's sound as a form of bold, ingenious musical miscegenation, Hopkins must reinscribe the very racist assumptions Elvis is celebrated for challenging. These assumptions about a musical color line with country on one side and blues on the other were codified by the recording industry in the 1920s and, ironically, have enabled a rhythm such as the one Moore plays on Elvis's first records to thrive on either side of that imaginary line, reinforcing rather than offering evidence that audibly undermines it.

A growing number of scholars have worked to dismantle these far too frequently repeated narratives about race and Southern music. Their work shows how fantasies of music's racial hermeticism on either side of the color line have more often been the products of marketing than on-the-ground social realities that bear witness to a long history of inter-racial musical influence and collaboration.³ Even as such scholarship has helped many of us to recalibrate how we hear the color of country, recent controversies over Beyoncé's "Daddy Lessons" or Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" bear witness to a persistent belief in country's fundamental whiteness. This essay (and accompanying mega-mix) aims not to reproduce and reaffirm racist ways of listening but, rather, to invite people to hear the abundant evidence of something else. Attending to the color-line crossing contours of this particular rhythm across the long twentieth century allows us to appreciate how such a figure can possibly serve as a racialized form of common property while its history reveals, over and over again, the limits and lies of the American racial imagination.

"AMERICAN" "CLAVE"?

That this particular story appears to have eluded music historians to date seems as noteworthy as the fact that the rhythm has never been named. Snaking through American popular music for the last 120 years, the pervasive presence and distinctive turns of this figure should give it a certain pride of place among Afrodiasporic rhythms, especially in the United States. Although not as commonplace as some polyrhythms, it has animated a remarkable number of performances, classic and obscure, crossing the color line even as it supports ideas about racial boundaries. For the purposes of this article and to stimulate further discussion and research, I propose to call it, provisionally and provocatively, "American clave." While I have reservations about the nationalist implications of such a name, never mind the hemispheric

2. Jerry Hopkins, *Elvis: The Biography* (London: Plexus Publishing, 2007), 47.

3. Allen Farmelo, "Another History of Bluegrass: The Segregation of Popular Music in the United States, 1820–1900," *Popular Music & Society* 25, no. 1–2 (2001): 179–203; Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Moreover, the recent Ken Burns documentary on country music, which explicitly scrutinizes race, clearly builds on this work, popularizing such perspective on the history of the genre.

chauvinism of once again seeming to claim American-ness for the United States alone, I hope this name will provide some analytical value. In order to explore the meaning and significance of such a phrase, some disambiguation is in order.

Let's begin with the rhythm in question, which divides a four-beat measure by placing a group of four 3s right in the middle, beginning on the first offbeat just after the downbeat:



FIGURE 1. 2+3+3+3+2, aka “American clave”

By beginning on the first offbeat, the rhythm creates a surprising and delightful sense of rhythmic displacement that satisfyingly resolves toward the end of the measure—an instantiation of the principle of “rhythmic contrast” that Olly Wilson identifies as a salient connection between African and African-American musical traditions.⁴ Consistent with Wilson’s contention that we should look not so much for direct “survivals” from African traditions as the underlying “core concepts” that generate specific forms, the American clave might be heard as an archetypal example of the ways that African Americans reimagined and transformed their music and culture.

When I consulted Ghanaian master drummer Emmanuel Attah Poku about the American clave rhythm, he affirmed that while it seemed consistent with West African rhythmic principles, it was not a rhythm found in the traditional drumming of Ghana. Rather, while it resembled a common rhythm in Ghanaian traditional and popular music, it seemed “off” to him by starting on the offbeat rather than the downbeat. “If I start it here,” Poku explained, “I start it in the right place.” And he proceeded to drum the following rhythm, which can be heard in all manner of African and Afrodiasporic music, not to mention early jazz, and which some might term a “double tresillo”⁵:



FIGURE 2. 3+3+3+3+4, aka a “double tresillo” starting “in the right place”

As you can see, we might understand the American clave as a rotation or displacement of this far more common rhythm. Music theorist Nicole Biamonte, pointing to the opening riff in Van Halen’s “Jump,” would call the American clave “a double tresillo pattern displaced backward by an eighth note.”⁶ But we run the risk of obscuring the peculiar national character of this rhythm by using such Cuban terms as *tresillo* (or *clave*, for that matter). This displaced “double tresillo” or “American clave” rarely appears in the music of Cuba or

4. Olly Wilson, “‘It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing’: The Relationship Between African and African American Music,” in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. Sheila S. Walker, (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 164.

5. Nicole Biamonte, “Formal Functions of Metric Dissonance in Rock Music,” *Music Theory Online* 20, no. 2 (June 2014), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.14.20.2/mto.14.20.2.biamonte.php>.

6. Ibid.

any other site in the African diaspora.⁷ Although similar to kindred rhythms across the Americas, this particular manifestation of Afrodiasporic rhythm seems remarkably restricted to the U.S., and taking such rhythmic license struck Poku as a rather African-American thing to do. “Once you bring it here,” he said, referring to the United States, the rhythm can become something that more traditional approaches do not permit. This interpretation accords not only with Wilson’s conception of the relationship between African and African-American music, but in bassist Melvin Gibbs’s recent remarks on African-American rhythm in particular:

There’s this geometric idea called ‘translation,’ which is when you take a shape and just twist it—it’s the same shape but it looks different because you twisted the direction. That’s what happens with African-American rhythms: They’re all the same, rhythms that came from Africa, but they’ve all been twisted slightly. What we’re gonna do is take this really basic rhythm and we’re gonna twist it.⁸

These perspectives also support the otherwise audacious claim to invention of the first person to commit the American clave rhythm to paper, African-American performer and composer Ernest Hogan. The first published song to advertise a “ragtime arrangement” on its cover, Hogan’s 1896 sheet music hit, “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” popularized syncopated rhythms on Tin Pan Alley as it inaugurated the “coon song” craze that would continue into the first decades of the twentieth century. Despite its denigrations, with “All Coons,” Hogan insisted, “a new musical rhythm was given to the people,”⁹ and the composition not only succeeded in spreading a new syncopated figure among ragtime composers, it also furthered the cultural politics of Hogan and his contemporaries at the Hotel Marshall in Manhattan’s Tenderloin district. According to historian David Gilbert, “Ragtime syncopation resonated as the sound of modern black America, and Hogan hoped that it might become an important development in American show business, by and for ‘the people.’”¹⁰

While it’s possible that the American clave was an ingenious musical novelty concocted by an aspiring entertainer and businessman such as Hogan, it’s worth noting that Hogan may have also been drawing on the contemporary practices of workaday black musicians. Just as the rhythm seems to roll across the page and through time, it also rolls off the three-fingered approach of the banjoists who specialized in minstrel tunes and the good-time secular dance music of the jook. The three-fingered banjo roll lends itself to such combinations of 2s and 3s, and even without hard evidence in the form of earlier recordings, sheet music, or transcriptions, we might surmise that Hogan plucked this rhythm out of the ragtime-era air—as, indeed, he claims to have lifted the song itself, which he originally heard

7. One notable exception is Brazil, where the pattern, which percussion instructors sometimes call the “2–3 Brazilian clave,” appears relatively regularly in bossa nova drumming, especially as a rimshot figure. Its presence in twentieth century Brazilian music is, however, inextricable from the influence of ragtime and jazz, and I have yet to find pre-ragtime examples from Brazil, or anywhere for that matter.

8. Brad Cohan, “Melvin Gibbs Isn’t Looking Back,” *JazzTimes*, 2 April 2019, <https://jazztimes.com/features/profiles/melvin-gibbs-isnt-looking-back/>.

9. Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business: The Tom Fletcher Story* (New York: Burdige, 1954), 141.

10. David Gilbert, *The Product of Our Souls: Ragtime, Race, and the Birth of the Manhattan Musical Marketplace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 32.

performed in a Chicago tavern as “All Pimps Look Alike to Me.” In the recently restored and reissued 1891 recording of “Keep in de Middle ob de Road” by banjoist Charles Asbury, for instance, the rhythm seems to surface as a composite of the main melody and a flourish of banjo accompaniment during the chorus, suggesting that the historical record is only limited by the number of extant recordings pre-dating Hogan’s hit.

The origin of this rhythm is less important than the ways it gathers steam and accrues meaning over the twentieth century. Notably, similar to the conspicuous lack of instances in the music of Latin America and the Caribbean, I have been unable to locate any tunes containing this rhythm that predate the ragtime era, despite consulting several specialists on “old time” fiddle and banjo repertory.¹¹ If what I am proposing that we call here the “American clave” does not appear to emerge prior to the rise of ragtime publishing and recording, we might as well hear it as a modern, American invention of sorts, and an African American one in particular. That this rhythm becomes such a suggestive, seductive symbol of modern blackness explains why African American artists have embraced it with such a sense of ownership in the century since, as well as why, as with ragtime and jazz and rock and hip-hop, it has also appealed to white Americans as a trans-racial symbol of American modernity. Like the Cuban clave, itself a diasporic distillation of African aesthetics,¹² the American clave’s peculiar distribution across geography and history offers the tantalizing sense that it may serve as a reliable way to trace and track the ways that music moves and becomes meaningful, how it overflows even as it is channeled into racial and national categories.

INTO THE COUNTRY: WHITENING RAGTIME

Despite its African-American origins, the “American clave” is remarkably present throughout the history of the various styles associated with country music and its implicit or explicit whiteness: old time, hillbilly, square dance, Western swing, bluegrass, rockabilly, American Primitive. The rhythm works ironically to center white American artists in the mainstream of these styles as well as to serve, nearly always on a twangy guitar, as a rootsy signifier for putative outsiders to the genre—to the likes of the Beatles or George Michael, artists from outside the United States seeking a quick nod to some stateside *downhomie*, or to such U.S. acts as Credence Clearwater Revival or the Flying Burrito Brothers, looking to shore up their countrified bona fides while rocking out.

American clave’s passage from ragtime to country, and from black to white, reminds us that ragtime was not only initially a “country” music in terms of its rural origins, it was also primarily played by black fiddlers, banjoists, and mandolinists, and into the twentieth century, even after its popularization as urbane piano music, ragtime remained a genre that most people would encounter via the local string band.¹³ A continuation of the preference

11. I am grateful to my Berklee colleagues Bruce Molsky, Matt Glaser, and Tony Trischka for discussing the rhythm with me in this context. Thanks also to Emmanuel Attah Poku, K. E. Goldschmitt, Dave Gilbert, Elijah Wald, and Nathaniel Braddock for their perspectives.

12. Bertram Lehmann, “The Syntax of Clave: Perception and Analysis of Meter in Cuban and African Music” (Master’s thesis, Tufts University, 2002), 144.

13. Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock’n’Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 30.

for black musical labor that defined American dance music since at least the 1690s,¹⁴ these black string bands remained at the core of rural music, playing for black and white dances alike, well into the 1920s, when record companies made the fateful decision to market such music primarily to white audiences, usually, though not exclusively, as purveyed by white bands modeled on their black counterparts' style.¹⁵ White musicians enjoyed far more freedom to bring ragtime and blues into their old time or hillbilly recordings than the few black bands that were recorded playing breakdowns and fiddle tunes, as long as there remained enough "twang" to convince audiences of their authenticity—or, more likely, to affirm record labels' fantasies about racially hermetic consumer tastes.¹⁶ The pattern continues today in a country music market that gives Florida Georgia Line license to employ "trap" beats and rapped vocals and remain in the mainstream while a black artist like Lil Nas X combining the same musical features with country tropes is disqualified for lacking "enough elements" to make his music country.¹⁷ That the American clave could casually rear its head in such putatively white contexts as a square dance should offer a reminder to the Henry Fords of the world that square dancing too was in many ways, from musical style to dance calling, transformed by black musicians to the delight of dancers on either side of the color line.¹⁸

When record companies finally began recording rural black musicians in the late 1920s, including such purveyors of "ragtime blues" as guitarists Blind Blake and Mississippi John Hurt, the recordings stand as evidence that this particular rhythm had long been a part of their repertory. They also provide a direct link for how the rhythm comes to be heard and used as a way of signifying the (white) country of old time days. Hurt's approach on his 1928 recordings seems to point forward to the most common way white musicians would use the figure in the future: as an occasional fill, often in a turnaround measure, alternating with a more straight duple/offbeat feel. This intricate finger-picking style would soon become synonymous with country "picking" more generally, popularized and re-branded by such influential guitarists as Maybelle Carter and Merle Travis in mainstream country, by the likes of Doc Watson and Earl Scruggs in the bluegrass world, and by John Fahey and Leo Kottke in their invention of so-called American Primitive. Received country histories often obscure

14. Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 80.

15. Patrick Huber, "Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old Time Records, 1924–32," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 19–81.

16. Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 43–69.

17. Elias Leight, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind," *Rolling Stone*, 26 March 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/>.

18. As recounted in 1972 by David Lewis, and more recently on the internet, notorious racist and antisemite Henry Ford promoted square dance as a putatively (and erroneously) white bulwark against jazz in the 1920s. See David L. Lewis, "The Square Dancing Master," *American Heritage* 23, no. 2 (February 1972): 49–52; Philip A. Jamison, "Square Dance Calling: The African-American Connection," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 387–98; Cory Doctorow, "Square dancing was a racist hoax funded by Henry Ford to get white people to stop dancing to black music," *Boing Boing*, 8 December 2017, <https://boingboing.net/2017/12/08/dr-pappy-shaw.html>.

the amount of cross-racial borrowing that continued long after the 1920s, especially the ways that jazz and swing served as a potent resource for such players. (Of course, the music of a group like Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, avatars of Western swing and lovers of American clave, makes such connections explicit.) Tellingly, a YouTube comment on Flatt & Scruggs' "Foggy Mountain Special" identifies Earl Scruggs's patented rhythmic rolls on the banjo with Glenn Miller's swing hit that re-animates the American clave of Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*: "I have just started to learn this one, as at our jam i was doing the Earl 'In the Mood' roll over a 12 bar blues (noodling between songs really) and everyone hooked onto it and loved it."¹⁹

Vehicles such as Merle Travis's *Cannonball Rag*, "the anthem of Travis-pickers,"²⁰ served as powerful conduits for the rhythm, which became integral to the influential rebranding of a finger-picking or thumb-picking style originally credited to black banjoists and guitarists as belonging to the white virtuosos of Muhlenberg County, Kentucky. An exchange on Johnny Cash's television program circa 1970 is revealing in this regard. Hosting Ike Everly and his son, Don (one half of the Everly Brothers), Cash asks Don Everly about his father's playing style:

Cash: You guys have got a real unusual style of guitar playing—the rhythm—did you learn that from your daddy Ike?

Everly: Yeah, I guess you could call that sort of the Muhlenberg County guitar picking, I guess. We didn't learn as much as we should have, I don't think.

Cash: No, I think you guys have got a style of your own, but your dad, Ike Everly, is one of the most imitated guitarists I've ever known. Let's get him up here, what do you say?

Ike Everly proceeds to take the stage and launch into a rendition of *Cannonball Rag*, and the prevailing rhythm he showcases is unmistakable. Nearly every measure is replete with strummed or arpeggiated American clave rhythms. Everly verbally affirms the importance of this particular rag, and no doubt others like it, in shaping this approach to country guitar picking: "Most of the old thumb-picking guitar players played this tune one time or another." He then cites "Mother Maybelle" Carter as "just about my favorite" guitar player before they duet on a tune called *Victory Rag* with Ike picking the rhythms and Maybelle fingering the chords. Ragtime hiding in plain sight, as white. Of course, as early as 1921, James Weldon Johnson had remarked, "Probably the younger people of the present generation do not know that Ragtime is of Negro origin."²¹ No doubt the same could be said of such songs and playing styles by the 1960s.

19. As heard on the mega-mix, a more direct antecedent to Miller's "In the Mood" (1939) is Fletcher Henderson's "Hot and Anxious" (1931), which features a very similar arrangement and offers a clear precedent for using the American clave rhythm to propel a 12-bar blues.

20. William E. Lightfoot, "The Three Doc(k)s: White Blues in Appalachia," *Black Music Research Journal* 23, no. 1–2 (Spring-Autumn 2003): 186.

21. Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock'n'Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

Passing from Ike Everly and his playing partner Mose Rager down to Merle Travis and Doc Watson and on to Scotty Moore and the world, the Muhlenberg style and mythology represents but one striking way that black musicians' contributions to the shaping of country music has been obscured if not erased. The story of black Kentuckian multi-instrumentalist Arthur Schultz and his influence on the development of Bill Monroe's approach to playing what would be re-crowned as bluegrass offers another example.²² Moreover, as William Lightfoot contends, the sound of the Carter Family was indelibly shaped not just by recordings of black music but by collaborations with local black musicians, such as Leslie Riddle, who taught the family many songs and guitar techniques including "ragtime finger-picking style."²³ Maybelle Carter's signature thumb-picking approach, aka the "Carter scratch," owes a great debt to the three-fingered banjo style pioneered by black musicians and otherwise known as "thumbing" or "thumb-lead clawhammer." So when guitarist Scotty Moore was called in to add some country twang to Elvis Presley's first recordings for Sun Records, he knew just what to do, adding twangy American clave flourishes to key moments in "That's All Right" (1954). The rhythm has been part of rock's lexicon ever since, especially for groups seeking to infuse a song with rural rootsiness, and it echoes endlessly in mainstream country arrangements spanning the decades, as heard in the music of Marty Robbins, Merle Haggard, Gram Parsons, Ricky Skaggs, Chris Stapleton, and countless others. Just as the banjo "became white," the American clave rhythm played on one, or on a twangy guitar, did likewise.

The recordings of black country ragtime players would also serve to seed another, later, white flowering of American clave in the 1960s, a surprising ingredient in what would coalesce over the next couple decades as New Age. Inaugurating the broader folk revival, Harry Smith's influential *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), a compilation of forgotten recordings from the 20s and 30s, re-introduced black ragtime guitarists, country blues musicians, and jug bands to a new generation of listeners and players, among them guitarists such as John Fahey and Leo Kottke. Re-presenting what was initially a dance-oriented style as music for contemplative listening, these musicians employed regular American clave riffs in the making of what came to be known as American Primitive and, through the marketing of such record labels as Windham Hill, eventually re-branded as New Age. The style—and the place of this rhythm in it—survives today in the music of such Fahey acolytes as Glenn Jones or in the "Cosmic Pastoral" of William Tyler.²⁴ Such uses may seem like far-flung products of the work of early twentieth century black rural guitarists, yet the lines are clear, and the ironic whitening of American clave bears witness to a foundational process at the heart not just of "country" but of American music and culture writ large.

22. Erika Brady, "Contested Origins: Arnold Schultz and the Music of Western Kentucky," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 100–18.

23. William E. Lightfoot, "The Three Doc(k)s: White Blues in Appalachia," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 23, No. ½ (Spring-Autumn 2003): 167–93.

24. William Tyler, "Cosmic Pastoral: William Tyler on New Age, Windham Hill, and Emerging Sounds," *Aquarium Drunkard*, 23 January 2019, <https://aquariumdrunkard.com/2019/01/23/william-tyler-new-age-windham-hill/>.

RACE MUSIC AND POLYRHYTHMIC PERSISTENCE

At the same time that the American clave was becoming a sign of musical whiteness, black composers and musicians were doubling down on their use of it in jazz, blues, and other music confined to the “race” category or otherwise cast as black (and proud). The rhythm enjoys a parallel, and occasionally overlapping, social life as it becomes a key figure for influential bandleaders like Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington, ensuring its continued resonance in swing and rock ’n’ roll, and onward into soul, funk, disco, house, techno, and hip-hop. Moreover, at the same time the Beatles invoke the rhythm to signify rootsy Americana, fellow countrymen such as the Who and the Rolling Stones embrace it as a hip signifier and, for them, a nod to the rhythm & blues and black musical traditions that inspired them, a process that would be replayed in the disco and hip-hop era with similar gestures on the part of Daft Punk or Eminem.

Crucial to this side of the story is the ability to hear American clave not as a sign of old times and whiteness but of black modernity. This has been true since the beginning, when Ernest Hogan hailed it as “a new rhythm” and when Scott Joplin foregrounded, refined, and popularized the rhythm at the turn of the new century. The new and modern character of ragtime supported a particular cultural politics for the black professionals working to carve out more freedom and opportunity for themselves amid the repressions of Jim Crow. As Dave Gilbert argues, “Rather than align ragtime rhythms with the centuries-old influence of Africans or even black slaves, many black entertainers in New York emphasized their novelty and modernity.”²⁵ Hogan “understood ragtime rhythm as an innovation, something forged in the cultural imagination of African Americans surely, but one that signaled modern black sophistication rather than an ahistorical and transcontinental black past.”²⁶ If such rhythms could give the “New Negro” an ironic but long-sought cultural edge and advantage—indeed, supporting a “unique contribution” to American culture²⁷—it’s deeply ironic how quickly they also came to signify whiteness when, say, meeting up with the blues in the early recordings of Elvis Presley. But it would be wrong to think that African Americans abandoned these rhythms in the same way that they “put the banjo down.”²⁸

Into and after the ragtime era, syncopated rhythms in general and the American clave in particular remained powerful resources for marketing black music as modern, thrilling, and a site of black excellence. The rhythm appears, alongside a telling tango, in W. C. Handy’s *St. Louis Blues* (1914), a juxtaposition that created an utterly “up-to-date” sound. James Reese Europe, the biggest bandleader in New York City between 1905 and his untimely death in 1919, would himself invoke the rhythm both to signal a modernized nod to black country roots on *Down Home Rag* (1913) and, on *Russian Rag* (1919), to suggest cosmopolitan exoticism. Carrying such significations into the jazz age, Fletcher Henderson

25. David Gilbert, liner notes to *The Product of Our Souls: The Sound and Sway of James Reese Europe’s Society Orchestra*, Archeophone 6010 (CD), 2018: 11.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 12.

28. Tony Thomas, “Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down,” in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 143–70.

incorporates American clave rhythms into many of his groundbreaking arrangements from the late 1920s—arrangements that would, a decade later, underwrite the swing era success of Benny Goodman. Duke Ellington uses a version of the rhythm that extends twice as long, crossing the bar line, to demonstrate the modernity and meaning of swing. In the post-bop era Thelonious Monk dresses it in dissonance while improvising over the changes of “Locomotive” (1954), and the rhythm rears its head yet again in the “soul jazz” of the 1960s, working in solidarity with Afrodiasporic rhythms from places like Cuba and Brazil, sometimes on the same track. Ray Charles, of course, was himself drawing deeply from jazz in “I Got a Woman,” borrowing his rhythmic riffs from swing and jump blues as he reworked a song by gospel group the Southern Tones into the prototype of soul music. Like Scotty Moore’s guitar licks on Elvis’s Sun sessions, Charles’s driving, staccato horn rhythms resurface not only in takeoffs like Sam Cooke’s “Ain’t That Good News” (1964) and more broadly into the field as on James Brown’s “Out of Sight” (1964), they resound in the contemporary covers and derivative recordings of the Who, the Rolling Stones, and other British bands inspired by soul and rhythm & blues artists and echoing jazz-age white forbears who pursued their own forms of freedom and transgression through a demonstrated fluency in black style.

For all its persistent presence over the twentieth century, one of the most striking turns for this rhythm’s history is its surging popularity and ubiquity in the disco era. From the music of soul stalwarts such as Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye, to more obscure sides from Philadelphia International Records or Salsoul favored by underground DJs in New York, to international disco-boom anthems like Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” (1977), the American clave cuts across insistent four-on-the-floor kick drums and offbeat hi-hats like a not-so-secret sauce that no 70s session musician could resist. The degree to which the American clave suffuses disco means, of course, that it rears its head yet again in all manner of 80s pop and R&B (and, more recently, 2010s pop that harkens back to it, from Beck to Janelle Monae). Moreover, rising from the dust of Disco Demolition and the genre’s commercial bust, the rhythm rides again in the synth-driven productions of Chicago house and Detroit techno producers—not to mention devoted white emulators, such as Moby or Daft Punk. Connecting back to the jook from which it no doubt took shape, at some point the American clave also entered the repertoire of African-American party chants—oh oh oh oh oh!—as heard at countless house parties or, on record, in the simulated party ambience of Grandmaster Flash’s *Salsoul Jam 2000* and the earworm chorus of Jagged Edge’s and Nelly’s *Where the Party At* (2001). Allowing dancers to impose this rolling polyrhythm at will, the chant embodies the same sort of rhythmic sensibility as black social dance itself, a participatory, playful sense of grounding and possibility, individual competence and community value.

Further testament to the rhythm’s enduring value in African-American oral/aural tradition is that the American clave pops up in numerous hip-hop songs, sometimes in the form of samples or synth claps, but also as a striking accent in rappers’ vocal rhythms, or flows. Clearly, the American clave is part of the broad rhythmic stew that rappers dip into when crafting their lyrics, offering a precise, sinewy, and familiar rhythmic motive on which to string rhyming syllables. In projecting their own sense of urbane cool, rappers from Kendrick

Lamar to Eminem, 50 Cent to Cardi B draw on this tried-and-true rhythm—and hardly as an old time or country gesture, or even a nod to jazz or ragtime. Rather, in the context of contemporary black music, American clave has long been and continues to be heard as both grounded in tradition and utterly up-to-date.

HOW WE DO: NOTES ON THE MEGA-MIX AND THE POETICS OF REPRESENTATION

It is my hope that, beyond this article’s attempt at synthesis and stimulation, the mega-mix that accompanies it can tell the story more directly, eloquently, and heteroglossically. For many years, I have embraced the narrative affordances of what I call “technomusicology,” using musical technologies and the forms that flow from them (e.g., DJ mixes and mashups), in order to share musicological stories with listeners outside (as well as inside) my circle of expert colleagues and fellow scholars. The American clave mega-mix is my attempt to let the audio speak for itself, even as I acknowledge—and lay claim to—being a framing agent, part of the big “we” that this rhythm has moved over the years, another American musician inspired by the myriad shapes and meanings of this figure and motivated to repeat and invoke it myself in a way that might help redress historical distortions and injustices.

Stitching together more than a century of genre-spanning music while tracing distinct but also overlapping lines presents no end of musical challenges and representational quandaries, especially with regard to race: How to connect the dots without simply redrawing the color line? How to portray particular lineages while also representing contemporary cross-racial simultaneity? I address these questions of poetics, aesthetics, and the decisions I’ve made, along with an expanded discussion of this rhythm’s specificity and relationship to other Afrodiasporic forms, at the following page on my website, where you will also find the mix: http://wayneandwax.com/?page_id=9315

American clave is the story of a profoundly collective musical heritage, one from which we can all draw, especially if we listen, sing, and twang along with greater perspective on the histories we play into when we do so. The mega-mix and mini-essay together aim to contribute to ongoing revisions and recoveries of country music history, and consequently, of the history of music in this country. ■

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