

THE CULTURAL DIALECTIC OF THE BLUES

LARRY PORTIS

Near the very end of Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*, we are left with Antoine Roquentin, an "alienated," guilt-ridden history professor, whose powers of observation and introspection had become so sharp that life seemed devoid of all meaning. Then, suddenly, without warning in the last few pages, Roquentin incongruously discovers existential affirmation, a life-force independent of, and resistant to his own morbid prescience and cartesian ratiocination. From a scratchy record on the jukebox of a café in provincial Bouville ("Mudville"), comes the voice of a "Negresse" singing "Some of These Days." In a satoric flash, Roquentin sees a "Jew" sweating in a muggy room on the twentieth floor of a New York apartment building. The man is sitting at a piano and his brain is dulled by the summer heat and the alcohol that he intermittently swallows. He wants to sleep but he must finish noting the tune he plays over and over: "Some of these days, you'll miss me honey." Roquentin listens to the singer's timeless rendition of the song, imagines its composition, and realizes that the production of art is the only way to gain immortality — to escape the "viscosity" of existence. He decides to give up his historical research and write a novel:

This idea upsets me all of a sudden, because I no longer believed myself capable of such emotion. I feel something which timidly touches me, and I don't dare move for fear it will go away. Something that I had lost: a kind of joy.

The Negresse sings. Can, therefore, her existence be justified? Just a little bit? I feel incredibly intimidated.¹

In this way, Sartre acknowledged the apparent regenerative power that music derived from Afro-American sources has exerted on Western consciousness.

However, the social and political implications of the fusion of white-European and Afro-American musical cultures are no more clear today than they were when Sartre wrote his optimistic novel. On the one hand, doubts about the liberating potential of popular music have been reinforced by theorists like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse who have emphasized that the maintenance of an *appearance* of liberation is, in fact, an essential means of socio-cultural repression in capitalist society. Given the resiliency and adaptability of the capitalist system, any creative negation of capitalist culture is immediately stripped of its critical character by the process of commercialization. Such cultural production survives, consequently, only as articles of consumption, thus contributing to a generalized commodity fetishism that is the very antithesis of cultural liberation. On the other hand, over the past

thirty years many individuals in the capitalist West have experienced certain phases of the transformation of popular music as moments crucial to their development as thinkers critical of society. The fact that relatively recent musical syntheses such as rock and roll, rock and reggae have been associated with various movements of cultural revolt, and have possibly helped to raise the general level of socio-political understanding, points to a need to re-evaluate elements of critical theory that seemingly deny any liberating potential to popular music in a capitalist society. For example, it is perhaps overly schematic to construct typological polarities such as "kitsch" vs. "avant-garde" and "profit" vs. "culture." Theodor Adorno's bias in favor of what he clearly considered socially transcendent forms of aesthetic expression is understandable given the historical conditions which existed in Germany during his intellectually formative years, but it restricts rather than facilitates the study of popular culture and consciousness.²

It is not enough to say, as Adorno does, that jazz is essentially "a dance music which has held sway for thirty years and has now given in completely to the demands of the market."³ Although all forms of music derived from Afro-American sources have certainly "given in" to the demands of the market, such music has shown that it can extend the boundaries of social empathy and even of political consciousness. Adorno's characterization of the consumption of popular music as the simple maximization of sensory pleasure, an impulse he felt to be in contrast with the ability of "good music" to extend enlightenment must, therefore, be at least qualified. It is not as easy as Adorno intimates to distinguish "the feeling for which a work of art stands" from the "feeling which it excites."⁴ The dialectic between aesthetic appreciation and social movement does not respect abstract categories, and the question of the socio-political implications of cultural "vitality" remains an open one. As Adorno himself noted, all music continues to be inspired by "collective practices of cult and dance," and these pre-industrial influences can in no way be written off as mere points of departure: "Rather this historical source remains the unique sensory subjective impulse of music, even if it has long since broken with every collective practice."⁵ In order to extend our understanding of the socio-political dynamics of cultural transformation, it is necessary to establish the historical specificity of particular aesthetic forms. Given its central place within the development of popular music in the twentieth century, and its essential ambiguity with respect to liberation and social oppression, the blues lends itself importantly to such an analysis.*

The cultural dialectic of the blues is the product of concrete historical circumstances, which need to be taken into consideration if it is to be fully understood. To begin with, it is characterized by the adaptation of an entire population to a new social and cultural environment. The blues developed as a result of the American black population's appropriation of a new language, a new technology and an alien political system. But if the blues can be interpreted in terms of the influence of white-European culture on the Afro-American mentality, it is also true to say that this new cultural synthesis almost immediately began to influence white modes of cultural expression. Thus, an aesthetic reciprocity between white and black cultures is an important dimension of this dialectic. A further factor to be borne in mind is the growth of the "music industry" throughout the twentieth century and the

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"commodification" of what had been primarily a non-market oriented mode of musical expression. The market process accelerated the fusion of white and black musical cultures, often contributing to a heightened group identity with social and political ramifications. The civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s and the expressions of protest on the part of American youth during the same period are related to this process. To speak of the cultural dialectic of the blues, therefore, is to speak of the cultural consequences of race relations in the United States and at the same time to evoke the cultural effects of the commodification of art and popular expression peculiar to capitalist society.

There is, however, a danger of lapsing into a sort of mechanical determinism when considering the role of the blues in more general socio-cultural changes. For one thing, we must put aside the idea that the blues was a purely traditional folk music which has only recently been exploited by white musicians and composers. In fact, even at its point of origin the blues was a product of cultural synthesis. What white people perceived as "Negro folk music" was an intricate fusion of African elements with those derived from European sources. However, the blues was not a simple combination of African sensibilities and concerns and a relatively rational European musical structure; it was rather the expression of new experiences by using and adapting the available means. The substitution, to take just one example, of the guitar and its harmonic potential for the relatively simple (in terms of their construction) stringed instruments used in West Africa was a logical appropriation of the available means of musical production which could not help but contribute to a fusion of musical traditions. The rich literature which has emerged in recent decades concerning the African roots of black culture in America is important inasmuch as it has reflected or contributed to a more positive cultural identity for American black people, but it is only one aspect of the overall cultural transformation that blues music has represented. The sentiments and emotions expressed in the blues and other types of Afro-American music were dictated by specific conditions of existence. Whether the chiliastic "other worldliness" of gospel music, the stoicism and qualified resignation of the work-gang songs, or the lyricized complaining of the blues, Afro-American music has been a single creative response to the oppressiveness of captivity, terror and humiliation. This orientation has not excluded humor, whimsy and joy from Afro-American musical expression, but it is responsible for the recurrent themes in blues music as well as the peculiar musical tone that, in the end, *is* the blues. The calculated use of seventh and ninth notes and the slurring of notes are all too obviously designed to "touch" the generalized undercurrent of frustration that black people in America could not escape, regardless of what form these sentiments took. The "pathos" of the blues, and of jazz, is its quintessence.⁷

Musical technique and social sensibility is at the aesthetic core of the blues, although critical analysis has, unfortunately, tended to focus on blues lyrics. Such a purely textual analysis of the blues can be misleading inasmuch as it can lead to the projection of preconceived notions of "what black people must have been expressing" given the difficult conditions of their existence. This tendency to celebrate black creative consciousness has received its most subtle and thus interesting treatment from Paul Garon, who has emphasized the objectively critical

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substance of a marginal culture which calls into question the less dynamic art of a white, bourgeois society. In the terms of this analysis the blues are an exceptionally rich and potentially explosive example of a primordial, romantic urge to challenge the aesthetic conventions of a social order based on rational calculation, the suppression of overt social conflict, and hypocritical self-satisfaction. Blues is thus important evidence of the human will to revolt, a will that has achieved its most conscious and organized expression in the surrealist movement. "The blues singer," Garon explains, "like the surrealist poet or painter, often with an incredible array of the most startling images, and with a candour that is often stunning, creates works concerned with the most basic human desires and needs. Poetry is generally the result when bourgeois/Christian morality is defeated by desire."⁸ This analysis rejects the idea that the blues is a "primitive" mode of cultural expression, and stresses the richness of imagination, symbolism and conscious manipulation of poetic images and everyday points of reference that enable the artist to communicate the most profound human emotions.

However, a truly dialectical consideration of the blues as art and socio-cultural expression must avoid investing them with the romantic concerns of white bohemia. It is true that the blues was expressive of an extreme socio-cultural marginalization, in spite of the fact that it began to influence white musical expression very early in the twentieth century, but there remains a problem when we consider whether the blues was an organic expression of a people for itself or a revolt against the cultural and social domination of a master class. It was obviously both. And yet, a methodological and conceptual problem remains because it is all too easy either to reduce the blues to the simple status of being part of a folk culture or to impute to them exaggerated preternatural powers of observation and expression. This is a problem related, on the one hand, to the western intellectual's psychological-emotional difficulty when confronted with modes of expression that appear "non-rational", and, on the other hand, the difficulty inherent in "explaining" creativity.

One cannot reduce the blues to a set of rationally ordered literary formulas. In the bourgeois worldview, which the western intellectual cannot completely escape or transcend, explanation invariably returns to a tendency to categorize observable phenomena by artificially separating its imagined elements into specific areas. Musical expression is, however, particularly resistant to such rational categorization not only because of the alchemical difficulty of transmuting one medium into another, but also because of the unconscious foundations of aesthetic sensibility which tend to limit one's receptivity to the nuances of another culture's creative expression. The distinction between "high" and "popular" culture in capitalist societies is based most often on class perspectives; when racial and ethnic differences are added to the equation, an even greater amount of incomprehension and condescension can be expected.

While some whites manifest a disdain for the blues similar to that of Adorno for jazz, others have exhibited an uncritical glorification of them. There are *aficionados* of the blues who have "passed to the other side" in order to justify their rejection of the bland and reactionary culture of the white bourgeoisie. Thus, black culture is often adulated because of its apparent lack of the refined "sophistication"

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appreciated by upper class whites. Such an appreciation renders analysis more difficult because it places a priority on maintaining the idea that the blues is a relatively pure form of folk expression that exists in contradistinction to the culture of bourgeois society. This idea inhibits a proper understanding of how the blues has actually contributed to the transformation of the dominant white culture. The history of the blues is not the story of how blacks in America created a form of musical expression that acted only as a catharsis in response to social and racial oppression, it is rather the story of how a social-outgroup was able to adapt to the dominant society and culture by transforming the available means of musical production in the course of a continuing dialectic of reciprocal assimilation and creative cultural mutation.

In understanding this process of cultural mutation that the blues has always represented, we have to reject the idea of the blues' purity as organic folk expression; the blues was never the expression of a "traditional" society. Regardless of the origins of the blues in the work and gospel music created by African slaves, it is difficult to say that the blues truly existed before the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries when it took on an identifiable character, primarily by virtue of its commercial potential. "That blues began as folk expression goes without saying. Nor have the original folk-type blues musicians ever gone out of existence. But in point of historical fact, once W.C. Handy had arranged, scored and published *The Memphis Blues* (1912), the *St. Louis Blues* and *Yellow Dog Blues* (1914) and *Beale Street Blues* (1916), it was no longer possible to restrict blues music to the category of folk expression."⁹ Blues was a commercialized form of musical expression that had its star performers, its touring circuits, its legions of hopeful young artists, its fans, groupies and financial exploiters.

Nevertheless, there exists a tendency to think of blues artists as down-and-out victims of a cruel and unappreciative society who, when they did not meet tragic ends, finished in obscurity. Two things must be kept in mind in the interest of avoiding this romanticized image of the blues musician. Firstly, most musicians, regardless of their color, are underpaid, unappreciated, in contact with marginal and disreputable social milieux, and ultimately forgotten by their erstwhile public. Secondly, a large number of the blues musicians of the 1920s and 1930s, who are often thought of as unsung heroes sacrificed to their "traditional" desire to express a folk culture and scorned and discriminated against by white people, were in fact recording artists with the status of minor stars for a significant portion of their potential audience — the black population. If, for example, Bessie Smith is thought of as a pathetic woman forced to sing lascivious songs in bars until she died in an automobile accident in the mid-1930s, our historical understanding of the place of blues music in modern cultural transformation is certainly deficient. Bessie Smith was working theatres as early as 1912 and "was already a vaudeville prima donna with a considerable following before her first records were released. By the end of 1923 her popularity was that of a superstar."¹⁰ The black artists that white fans have considered as exponents of a "traditional folk culture" were in fact professional performers interested in selling a product. As such, blues musicians and singers represented the margins of the entertainment industry in a capitalist economy whose technological advances — the phonograph, the radio, the cinema

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— had created a greatly expanded and potentially lucrative market for an increasingly sophisticated product.¹¹ Blind Lemon Jefferson, Big Bill Broonzy, Robert Johnson, and legions of other performers fashioned their art from both their individual experiences and the collective existence of black people; they were also professional "songsters", willing and able to adapt their styles, and their lyrics, to whatever circumstances demanded. Music was their livelihood. They were obliged to deal with managers and record producers, and they worried about the distribution of their product as much as any would-be recording star does today.¹² Listening, for example, to Blind Willie McTell explain his recording career to John Lomax, recording for the Folk Music archives of the Library of Congress in 1940, is a lesson in how to set-up a curriculum vitae.

As part of a rapidly evolving commercial culture, blues music immediately began to influence white musicians and to absorb, in its turn, new elements from the white musical culture. Throughout the twentieth century there has been a slow and elaborate cross-fertilization between black and white musical cultures. This reciprocity has especially been observed between the culture of blacks and that of poor, Southern rural whites. Between the hillbilly and blue grass music derived from the British Isles and the country blues, there are points of contact that represent more than mere borrowing. By the time we arrive at Jimmy Rodgers (the "Singing Brakeman") and Big Bill Broonzy in the late 1920s, both cultures are heavily indebted to one another; and American "folk" music, although still racially distinguishable, is well on the way to becoming an amalgam variegated primarily along ethnic and regional lines. The great popularity of jazz in the 1920s and after carried this fusion of musical cultures to more privileged social classes. By the late 1940s, at the very latest, "race" music was ceasing to exist.

Within the blues idiom, there are now a multitude of styles which are obviously related to regional white influences of an ethnic or cultural nature: the jazz-tinged blues of southern California, the big band style of the Kansas City area, the "Cajun" blues of Louisiana, the dramatic "delta blues" of the deep South, the throbbing industrial sounds produced in northern centers like Chicago and Detroit. To a significant extent, this diversity reflects different living and working conditions, but the cultural peculiarities of the local white population form an ineluctable part of the black environment and are invariably integrated into black cultural production.

Technological developments have combined with socio-cultural factors to encourage the assimilation of blues by the white public. In particular, the innovation of the electrically amplified urban blues in the late 1940s — with its more aggressive musical attitude — found a high degree of acceptance among young whites. The latent aggression, the peculiar "attack" of the electric guitar, or the piercing, shrill tension of the amplified harmonica working on the surface of a steadily rumbling, "walking" bass line has had a special appeal for the post-World War II generations of white youth in the Western world. It is tension, the latent aggression of pent-up emotion, that particularly characterizes urban blues. For example, in an arrangement as simple as that of Elmore James' amplified version of Robert Johnson's *Dust my Broom*, the simple "shuffle" rhythm performed on the bass strings of the guitar is a counterpoint to a violent semi-staccato "lead-fill"

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performed on the treble strong. The lead-fill is, in effect, a sudden outburst of aggression. The initial shock of this contrast between regular passivity and violent attack is heightened into a general state of tension by the expectation of the next explosion. The creation of this atmosphere of anxiety and latent rebellion can justifiably be thought of as the musical representation of the existential conditions of black life and culture. Without excessively pushing this analysis, we can say that the "shuffle" rhythm corresponds all too well to the facade of self-effacing humility that black people have to assume in a racist society in order to cover up fear, resentments and anger; the contrasting lead-fill represents a release of the resultant tensions.

To argue that the blues has been a commercial product to a greater degree than is generally admitted, does not diminish its importance as a form of creative expression peculiar to black people; it merely poses a fundamental question with respect to creativity in a capitalist society: what is the relationship between honest self-expression and a desire for pecuniary gain and/or social acceptance? It is in the context of this question that the peculiarity of music as a mode of expression/representation is revealed. Because of its potential to be rapidly commodified, musical inspiration in a market-oriented society is suspect at the very moment of its conception, and the existence of an ontological chasm between performer and audience has logically become a cultural characteristic of capitalist societies. Questions concerning the motivations underlying such creative inspiration do not arise in "traditional" societies where the possibilities for the commercial exploitation of individual talent are minimal, and where the musical culture can be said to be relatively "organic" — an integral and essential component of a ritualized collective life.

It is not surprising, therefore, that it is in "developing" societies that all the traditional rhythms and musical devices characteristic of the previous, more stable, social structures are adapted quickly to modern technology. In these "developing" societies, where cultural institutions disintegrate and where urban proletariats develop very quickly, conditions exist for the rapid and intense fusion of traditional music with capitalist production and marketing techniques. The recent examples of Jamaica and Nigeria stand out in this regard. One sees, for example, in the film, *The Harder They Come*, how such a cultural fusion can simultaneously express the condition of the collectivity and serve the strictly pecuniary interests of a capitalist class. In this case, the explicit "message" being transmitted by reggae music often calls for liberation from the very forces which allow that message to be transmitted. The situation of the blues in the 1920s and 1930s is analogous to the recent development of musical synthesis in "developing" societies, where undoubted "folk" expression of a sincere and disinterested nature is subjected to a commercial culture that pushes the music towards a rapid evolution. Such is, in fact, the dialectic of contemporary popular culture, where a blues-derived music — rock and roll — continues to exhibit the two poles of real social expression and the most crass attempts to manipulate consumer behavior.

Like any other product in capitalist society, the blues has been shaped by commercial considerations such as the need to satisfy perceived consumer trends and the related necessity for the performer to conform to an existing text or musical

arrangement. Creativity in the context of these demands is itself a fortuitous combination of expertise, intuition and luck. Blues musicians in the 1920s and 1930s traveled well-worn circuits and struggled to win recognition, simultaneously resisting and conforming to market forces, just as musicians do today. Then, as now, successes must be understood against the background of the legions of musicians, composers, and performers who never hit the bigtime. This musical reserve army effectively keeps salaries down and allows agents, producers and distributors to maintain a stranglehold on the artists. "Creativity" is a raw material which must be carefully restrained, "tailored" to the market, and administered to the public in measured doses — never too much or too little at a time. Demand must be kept high by the repression of individual and collective creative forces. It is this repression of creativity which characterizes cultural life in capitalist societies; it is a repression which is fully characteristic of the capitalist polity in that it is just as potentially liberating as it is frustrating and alienating.

Capitalist marketing techniques possess an objective capacity for the adaptation of virtually any initially critical cultural product. Even more importantly, the techniques of musical reproduction in capitalist society require specific social relations of production which insure that no individual artist can succeed in communicating with his or her audience on any other basis than that of mutual mystification. The elevation of the performer to "star" status — the fetishization of the performer who, in fact, becomes the product — "massifies" the audience in the same measure that the artists achieve a sort of mythical status. Regardless of the fact that the artist tends to become a mere tool of production in the entertainment industry, and thus subject to a process of alienation similar to that experienced in other proletarianized segments of the work force, this same artist is held up to his or her audience as evidence of the fluidity and openness of the social structure. The myth of the self-made man is nowhere so strong at the present time as in the music industry. We see this tendency in all aspects of commercial music — B.B. King is the "king" of the blues, Elvis Presley was the "king" of rock and roll, the Rolling Stones are "the greatest rock and roll band in the world" and so on and so on.

More than mere hucksterism, this Barnum and Bailey approach to the marketing of musical performers is part of the emergence of a specific stage in the development of capitalist culture. As Adorno pointed out in his discussion of the advent of the symphony conductor as a new focus of aesthetic attention, the elevation of an individual personality to "superstar" status is designed by capitalist marketing "to establish the lost communication between work and public through the sovereignty of its 'concept' by exorcizing the configuration of the work in a type of enlargement or bigger-than-life image. This image might, of course, be unsuited to the work; nonetheless, it guarantees the effect upon the public."¹³ Corporate control of production and marketing requires both a large pool of reserve labor and an easily manipulated mass of consumers. The resort to extreme psychological conditioning in the maintenance of the labor force and the consuming public has been, therefore, an historically logical development which has both increased the possibilities of social and commercial exploitation and created a highly volatile socio-cultural environment.

In fact, the market can be explosive, unpredictable, liable to escape the control

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which promoters and advertisers exert over it. When the market-public tacitly joins forces with artist-performers or, rather, when the carefully maintained distinction between artist and public suddenly breaks down, limitations and repression are reduced accordingly. There is, during such moments, a release of pent-up creative energy, a flooding of poetic self-expression that temporarily inundates the market and produces chaos within the commercial milieu and even within the hierarchy of capitalist enterprise as it relates to the "music industry." During the post-war era there have been two such moments of major organizational dysfunction with the musical culture industry: during the years 1954-56 and 1966-68. Both occasions represented a spontaneous rejection of commercial product, to the point where marketing programmers suddenly lost touch with consumer trends; and both occasions involved a new fusion of blues and white popular music.

The emergence of rock and roll, which is the first and most important of these historical moments, deserves special consideration, for although rock and roll is often thought to be a mere adaptation of blues to white modes of representation, the reality is far more complex. Two points must be stressed in this regard. First, rock and roll was not, in fact, created by white people. It was, rather, part of a trend within the development of Afro-American music — rhythm and blues — which transformed the "boogie" (i.e. a greatly accelerated 12-bar blues, with eight notes to the bar) into a predominately vocal style reinforced by more elaborate orchestration. This trend — well-advanced by the end of the 1930s — was given even more impetus from 1940 on by the use of amplified instruments. Second, if post-1954 rock and roll was indeed characterized by the adaptation of blues songs and blues chord-progression to an up-tempo, white repertoire, such adaptation constituted a natural assimilation of Afro-American influences by a new generation of young, white musicians and singers who, for various historical reasons,¹⁴ were increasingly receptive to black culture.

By 1954, when white recording artists began to cover black material in a massive way, rock and roll had already come to dominate the music industry.¹⁵ What really happened in that year, when white acts like Bill Haley and the Comets and Elvis Presley burst on the scene, was less the creation of a new form than a shift in white musical sensibility that amounted to a rejection of the standard product offered the public by the major recording companies and the czars of show business.

This shift in musical tastes was accompanied by the appearance of a plethora of small, independent recording companies which simultaneously encouraged the development of new "market trends" and attempted to profit from them. "These small independent companies — mongrel labels, they were classed within the industry — were the breeding grounds of rock 'n' roll. None of them had any real ethnic or esthetic identity. They all released whatever they thought might sell."¹⁶ Once their "mongrelized" product of blues, rhythm and blues, country and bebop began to sell to the masses of "baby boom" youth in the middle 1950s, capitalist interests reacted confusedly. "The major companies were paying now for their sins. Looking askance for too long at rock 'n' roll, thinking that it was a passing trend . . . they began to see exactly how much money they had been missing out on since the late forties. All the best-selling rock 'n' roll hits, all the biggest artists, had belonged to those mongrel labels."

"As 1955 began, the major labels tried desparately to cash in on rock 'n' roll. Since

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they really did not understand what rock 'n' roll was, the maladroitness of their greed was ridiculous to behold."¹⁷ The major companies ludicrously (and unprofitably) compelled established crooners like Tony Bennett to jive-up their singing styles in imitation of authentic rock and roll performers. Such a marketing strategy was, of course, inadequate given the sudden predominance of aesthetic criteria defined in opposition to those promoted by the major recording companies. The only real solution for these powerful companies was to bring the new artists under contract and then refine the product in such a way as to make it acceptable to the greatest number of potential consumers. As a result, rock and roll quickly lost the rawness and intensity that characterized it when it was first exposed to a mass, multi-racial public. By 1957, the industry had not only adapted to the new sensibility, it had gained control over it, and the "mongrel labels" were either absorbed into the large ones or they tended to fall back into obscurity.

However, the few years during which Afro-American musical influences made direct and uncontrolled contact with a white mainstream audience were enough to mark a whole generation of post-war youth. Eventually, they prepared the way for an even more significant fusion of Afro-American and white music. This process involved the ideological formation of a generation, a mutation of consciousness that led to the "counter-cultural" and "protest" movements of the 1960s and after. In 1971, Peter Guralnick explained how the commodification of rock and roll had led him to discover the blues. Speaking in particular of the 1954-56 period, he remarked: "The great thing about it, in the beginning at least, was that there seemed to be no one in control. It was *our* music in more than just name . . . because it was for the most part beneath the contempt of those who were marketing it."¹⁸ The feeling was fleeting. Rock and roll was brought under control suddenly and brutally. Guralnick's generation experienced the effects as a rupture with the past and even a betrayal of out-group solidarity — a seminal, negative experience with the "establishment" and those who "sold out" to it: "What we did at the age of fifteen was to retreat into the past. The past year or two."¹⁹ In search of compensation, Guralnick and his peers turned to "folk music", and discovered the blues.

By 1958, the recordings of Elvis Presley and others had given way to polished products using full orchestration and other techniques designed to increase the mass appeal of rock and roll by defusing the vital rebelliousness that tended to polarize the public. At the same time, the so-called "payola" investigations into alleged corruption between record companies and radio disk jockeys reduced the threat that the mongrel labels posed to the major companies. The payola "scandal" was used, on the one hand, to demonstrate the corrupting influence of rock and roll and, on the other hand, to impose oligarchical control over the promotion of music industry products: "Program directors were put in to supervise the deejays, who became increasingly anonymous: playlists were drawn up by these directors and the deejays could only play records which appeared on their stations' lists; direct payments were replaced by the elaborate conventions of plugging as record companies began to employ even more intensely their professional radio salesmen, the pluggers, to persuade program directors to playlist their wares, to gamble on their success. The big companies regained their promotional advantage. . . ."²⁰ The consequent debilitation of rock and roll was such that, for several years, American

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popular music seemed to be an increasingly sterile commodity. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, therefore, white youth in North America turned away from "pop music" towards "folk music" and rapidly discovered the Afro-American musical culture — the blues in particular — that had produced rock and roll in the first instance.

The emergence of "rock" music — the second major post-war phase of the infusion of blues into mainstream music — came in the 1960s, as the generation which had been exposed to rock and roll in their early adolescence began to either take an intellectual interest in the phenomenon or to reproduce the music themselves. An undercurrent of aesthetic and cultural exploration began to mount as legions of young, white musicians began to emulate blues artists. By 1964-65, the "British invasion" of the Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Animals, etc. revealed that an even younger generation was receptive to a blues-derived or blues-influenced music that was quite different from that which marketing planners considered to be the ideal product.

By 1966, these factors had contributed to an explosion of creativity which presented the corporate order with a new set of problems. Although the role of small, independent recording companies was not as great during this second wave of musical creativity, musicians who tended to let counter-cultural propensities and socio-political ideals determine their business dealings forced a certain reorientation and even reorganisation of the music industry. The major recording companies were not only forced to deal with new companies such as Warner Reprise, Kama Sutra, Buddah, Motown and Electra, but the artists themselves often demanded much more control over "product" than they had ever been accorded in the past. It was not until the early 1970s that the major companies regained a firm grip on all phases of production within the industry.

The periodic appropriation of Afro-American music has thus revealed the essential instability of market forces in capitalist society. In both the rock and roll explosion of the mid-1950s and the rock music phenomenon of the late-1960s, the wild scramble to exploit new tastes revealed that the public had succeeded briefly in imposing its own aesthetic criteria on the industry as a whole. The overall phenomenon can be understood, on the one hand, as a failure of the popular music industry to study properly the market, and consequently as a failure to reinvest in the capital-reproductive capacity of the industry and, thus, as a structural weakness inherent in the industry itself. On the other hand, the periodic crises of the music industry can be seen as the result of sporadic popular revolts, as spontaneous reactions of a culturally oppressed population, as attempts to negate an artificially "packaged" culture by participating in the generation of new forms of popular expression.

Although it is certain that, beyond its immediate impact, any conscious attempt to use the medium of commercial music to modify the consciousness of listeners is bound to fail, the generation and cooptation of anti-capitalist cultural formations nevertheless imply a series of critical moments in cultural development itself — moments of "sudden illumination"²¹ that can clarify social forces and political power relationships. Regardless of the cooptive capacity of capitalist production and marketing, "It is incorrect to believe that no actual need lies at the basis of the

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consumption of music — as though all musical life were nothing but some type of resounding cultural backdrop, erected by bourgeois society for the concealment of its own true purposes. . . .”²² In the short run, the critical expression of such needs as moments of relative social demystification can indeed lend itself to an utopian *illusion* of accelerated historical development; but, in the long run, it can also open the way to a profound process of critical thought. Reflection upon lived experiences can result in enlightenment, more informed commitment and, eventually, more considered social action. The fusion of Afro-American music with white-European music has periodically produced the kinds of sparks that have led to moments of sudden illumination, regardless of the productive and commercial processes that moved as quickly as possible to dampen them.

The blues was, to adapt Adorno’s formulation, “A music internally suited to the function” of the black population within the objective confines of capitalist production and social relations. The various moments of its fusion with white musical forms represented a critical appropriation of the negativity of black music in relation to the dominant culture. By its very nature, this mutual appropriation of culture was progressive and reactionary at the same time. The fusion of black and white music represented a different kind of liberation for blacks and whites. Ultimately, it represented a new kind of cultural domination for both racial groups.

The cooptive process inherent in capitalist production and marketing techniques was successful in neutralizing “the acuteness of the attack and the coherence of every technical formulation” of the blues.²³ At the present time the blues is not exerting a particular critical influence on popular music in the United States. A significant proportion of the black population has rejected the blues as being too reminiscent of their ghettoization, while the creative vitality that it once lent to white commercial music is largely spent. The influence of Afro-American music is stronger than ever, but its socially critical content has been effectively neutralized.

Since the 1960s, it has been increasingly necessary to analyze the transformation of capitalist culture in terms of national cross-fertilizations and mutual inspirations. The dialectic of cultural revolt and repression has expanded its global parameters in the measure that capitalism has penetrated and subjugated non-capitalist economies and social structures. The effects of this continuing mutation of aesthetic and social consciousness will undoubtedly give rise to new forms of cultural synthesis. The past decade has demonstrated that fusions such as reggae, salsa and commercialized rhythms from all parts of Africa are able, like the blues, to focus social consciousness, to create new fields of commercial exploitation and to contribute to the continuing dialectic of cultural hegemony and revolt.

Université de Paris 7 (Charles V)
American College in Paris

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Notes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris, 1938), p. 247.
2. James Marsh says this of Adorno's analysis in general. James L. Marsh, "Adorno's Critique of Stravinsky," *New German Critique* no. 28, Winter, 1983.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York, 1973), p. 171. See also: Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York, 1976), pp. 13-14.
4. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music, op. cit.*, p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- In this essay, I do not privilege popular music as a liberative dimension of popular culture. In spite of the tendency of a market economy to enforce the acceptance of artificially devised aesthetic criteria, there exists a counter-tendency in virtually every area of human activity: the spontaneous invention of new cultural forms which simultaneously require socio-political cooptation and invite commercial exploitation. In this context, one could mention such recent examples as the hot rod or custom car cult of the 1940s and 1950s and the sartorial innovations of the whole post-war period. The importance of such popularly generated culture in the formation of group identities susceptible to politicization has never been lost on social scientists and guardians of public morality.
6. Lawrence W. Levine stresses both of these points: "The precise time and manner of the emergence of the blues are lost in the irrecoverable past." "... blues was the most typically American music Afro-Americans had yet created and represented a major degree of acculturation to the individualized ethos of the larger society." Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York, 1977), p. 221.
7. The "slide" or "bottleneck" technique in blues guitar playing can add considerably to the emotional force of the blues. Often, words in the vocalization are arbitrarily substituted for by notes, and vice-versa. The result is that the performer can "cry" the word or "declare" it at will, thus effectively changing the figurative sense and the emotional context.
8. Paul Garon, *Blues & the Poetic Spirit* (New York, 1975), p. 67. For a detailed critique of Garon's book, and a fine discussion of blues in general, see: Carl Boggs, "The Blues Tradition: from Poetic Revolt to Cultural Impasse." *Socialist Review* 8 (2), March-April, 1978, pp. 115-134.
9. Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York, 1976), p. 70. Levine agrees with Murray: "Certainly early examples of the blues existed in the last half of the nineteenth century and possibly even during slavery, but it was not until the twentieth century that it became one of the dominant forms of black song." Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
10. Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
11. On the importance of the recording industry in the evolution of the blues, see: Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-226 and LeRoi Jones, *Blues People, Negro Music in White America* (New York, 1963), pp. 98-103.
12. Or, as Roosevelt Sykes (1906-83) sang it:
"Music is my business,
Well, I'm not ashamed (2x)
Now music is not a game,
But Mr. Piano is my name." *Forty-four Blues*
13. Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Social Situation of Music," *Telos* no. 35, Spring, 1978, p. 150.
14. Massive demographic shifts during the 1940s tended to create a more mobile and urbanized society in which there was greater inter-cultural contact between the races.
15. According to Nick Tosches, the blues singer Trixie Smith may have been the first to *record* the expression "rock and roll", in her song "My Daddy Rocks Me (with one steady roll)" (1922), while in 1934 the Boswell sisters actually sang a song entitled "Rock and Roll". Over the next

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twenty years, and especially after 1940, the word "rock" was increasingly used as either a verb or a noun in song titles and lyrics, advertising copy, critical reviews and record company names. See Nick Tosches, *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York, 1984), p. 7.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
18. Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home* (New York, 1971), p. 16.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
20. Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York, 1981), p. 119.
21. This is Adorno's expression in description of the initial effect of the work of Weill and Brecht. Adorno, "On the Social Situation of Music," *op. cit.*, p. 144.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

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