

Blackness in Music

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Abstract

Throughout the course *Theatre and Performance 282*, we have read and discussed Black culture and the oppression Black people face every day. We have also read about Black music and the fear of a Black world and after reading that piece, I wanted to take a deeper look into Black music. As a society, we have this bias against Black people but so much of our music has been shaped by their culture and roots. We have such a strong bias and think of Black people in a negative way based on stereotypes that have been formed over centuries of racism that as a society, we rarely take the time to look at how Black people have influenced some of our favorite cultural trends, particularly through music.

Keywords

Music, Black artists, rap/hip-hop

Arguably, our society stigmatizes Blackness while simultaneously embracing Black music and culture. It could further be suggested that without the historical and contemporary contributions of Black artists, many of the most iconic white performers would not have gotten the status they have today, and the world would simply not see the amount of culture and depth it has today if not for what Black people have brought to the music industry and beyond.

More specifically, American music would not be the same today if it weren't for Black artists, and more importantly, Black writers - each genre of music, from disco to R&B or Rock n' Roll have Black roots associated with them (Madden). Something about the music industry that usually goes under the radar is theft of Black music, lyrics, and overall creativity. This can also be referred to as whitewashing (Global News, 2019). Take Sister Rosetta Tharpe for example, she is usually referred to as one of the godmothers of Rock n' Roll, but many people do not know who she was (Eaglin).

Elvis Presley serves as another example of Black creativity being appropriated by white artists. While people often associate the song "Hound Dog" with Elvis, it was in

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fact initially written for, and first recorded by Big Mama Thornton, a Black female R&B artist.

There are so many songs that are written by Black people and are made “famous” by white artists while the original authors often die penniless and nameless, without their due credit (Global News). In short, many of the classic songs the world loves today were written by Black artists and most of the people who listen to them have no idea.

Music influences our society in many ways, one being the politics surrounding Black music, specifically rap/hip-hop music. In her book titled “Fear of a Black Planet”: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s,” Tricia Rose illustrates the politics surrounding the rap industry, highlighting not only the politically charged lyrics many had, but also the way they themselves were impacted by the politics of the day. In one example, after a stabbing at a rap concert (a consequence of theft) many began to associate rap concerts with violent behavior and many venues owners and managers refused to book rappers.

Of courses many rappers use Hip Hop to protest the social issues going on in the world. Throughout history, music has been an outlet for artists to protest and to express what they believe needs to change in the world, especially for Black artists. For example, artists from Sara Martin to Kendrick Lamar have used music to speak out about state violence, which is a political issue that persists to this day. *Black Messiah* by D’Angelo was an album that came out in 2014 and it was his most political album, as it “discussed war, the emotional toll of racism, and global ramifications of climate change” (Time).

Many other albums came out that year and it also led to the many protest songs that came out in 2016 when America started to see police brutality and gun violence rise as Donald Trump became president. Artists like Rhianna and Beyonce both had albums that came out that year that were full of dissent and introspection (Time).

Lastly, with music, there comes music videos to further tell the stories artists are trying to share with their audience. A lot of music videos tell a deeper story and really help people capture the full message of what an artist is singing/rapping about. An example of this is found in Beyonce’s music video for “Formation.” The video displays many aspects of empowered Black femininity, for instance the way that Black women's bodies were literally choreographed into lines and borders which permit them to physically be both inside and outside of a multitude of vantage points (Vice). Black women artists often use multiple voices to communicate in a diversity of discourses and in this instance the “choreography reveals are the embodiment of a particular kind of 21st Century Black feminist freedom in the United States of America” (Vice).

Another great example of a powerful message portrayed through a Black artist's music and music video was Childish Gambino’s “This is America” music video. The music video displays many metaphors about race and gun violence in America. You see

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Gambino dancing throughout the video amid social-political chaos happening behind him, which could be interpreted in many ways, one being that the dancing can be used as a distraction the same way society uses Black art as a distraction from the plaguing problems in America (Time). The gunned down choir also represents the Charleston shooting where a white supremacist shot and killed 9 Black people in a church.

Another example of songs with deeper meanings in the lyrics and music video would be "Humble" by Kendrick Lamar, whose "Humble" video is a poignant exercise in irony and is also filled with messaging that could be perceived as anti-conformist" (Billboard). There are so many more songs and music videos by Black artists that portray a very deep story and meaning. These videos open the public's eyes to societal problems that may not be seen on regular news or talked about in schools.

After researching Blackness in music and how it has influenced society. Throughout the course, there has been a lot to learn about Black lives and how Black people live day to day while being continuously oppressed by society. Reading about their experiences with oppression and living in a society that does not accept them as equal humans compared to their white peers has been an eye opener and it is clear to see when you look at the oppression through creativity and music. Music has been an outlet for Black people to express how they feel, and they are able to tell their stories through lyrics, beat, and visuals. It is a powerful tool, especially for protest since it is both made to be peaceful with no violence and it is also very eye opening to all of those who hear it.

In close, without the historical and contemporary contributions of Black culture, the music that is thoroughly enjoyed by so many today would not exist. Centuries of bias and stereotypes implanted into our minds have led to a lack of realization by many that Western society and culture are very heavily influenced by Black culture and will likely continue to be for the foreseeable future.

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