

## **Black Culture - White Nature?**

Finding Traces of white masculinity in popular music

by Rosa Reitsamer

If one is interested in race, this has come to mean that one is interested in any race and any culture except than the white one. But race is not only attributable to people who are not white. Representations of whites are ignored in contemporary discourses about race, but at the same time we, whites, function as a human norm within the Western culture. Whites are everywhere in representation. In this article, I will discuss representations of whiteness in rock and pop.

Whiteness in music has only recently become an issue because most of the discourses on race in rock and pop focus on black popular music. As Barry Shank notes, race enters the discourses on music as a bundle of contradiction. Some critics have argued against the validity of terms like "Black music", "African-American Music" or "White music" because current rock and pop share traits derived from both, Europe and Africa. But there is no doubt that the question of race and racial difference lies in the core of rock and pop. Racial segregation in the United States shaped the creation of the music industry. For some critics who are members of the Black community, Black music has become an important outlet for the articulation of Blackness. For other critics and theorists from the Black community the mainstream success of Black music represents a step towards cultural and social integration<sup>1</sup>.

Apart from the discourses on race in rock and pop, we find critics and theorists drawing on feminist theory. They have argued that certain musical genres such as rock and the classical tradition privilege masculine forms. While many discourses on race ignore that gender plays a crucial role in the music industry and that the music industry is mainly dominated by white men, feminist discourses overlook the fact that whiteness and masculinity are

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linked dimensions. As Frankenberg notes in her study on white identity, many of the white women interviewed by her said that they "did not have a culture"<sup>2</sup>.

In the following section, I will try to bring together feminist discourses on music with discourses on whiteness in rock and pop. I will use the definition of whiteness of Ruth Frankenberg, who defines whiteness as a set of linked dimensions. The first dimension of whiteness is a location of structural advantages. Second, whiteness is a "standpoint" from which white people look at themselves, at other and at society. Third, whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.<sup>3</sup>

The link between whiteness and masculinity is visible on many levels in rock and pop. When we look at the "human norm" in rock and pop, we will note that it is mainly represented by white heterosexual performers/musicians, an audience dominated by whites and a certain racialised musical tradition. First, I will discuss how whiteness is expressed through a recognisable musical sound in classical tradition. This specific musical sound is still found in many rock and pop songs until today. In the second part, I will discuss how whiteness corresponds with masculine and heterosexual forms of rock and pop. I will describe a few masculine stereotypes that were established in the 1960s and 1970s. These stereotypes are examples of cultural practices that privilege the representation of white, male musicians in rock and pop. Certainly, there are a lot more white, masculine stereotypes in rock and pop such as Heavy Metal, and many overlaps and contradictions can be found in these stereotypes. My aim, however, is to show how specific stereotypes in rock and pop embody whiteness and masculinity.

Whiteness as a racialised musical tradition

Classical music is the central musical tradition in Western culture which is dominated by white, middle-class Europeans.

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Musicologist Susan McClary suggests that the structures of much classical music can be described as a masculine form. This masculine form has to be understood as a white form, too, because it has had central impacts on Western culture. In the 17th century composers of classical music invented a narrative structure which expresses fundamental elements of the Western discourse. McClary argues that the tonality of Western concert music is underlined by a sort of erotic imagery. She writes:

The principal innovation of seventeenth century tonality is its ability to instil in the listeners an intense longing for a given event: the cadence. (...) After the need is established (...) tonal procedures strive to postpone gratification of that need until delivering the payoff in what is technically called the 'climax', which is quite clearly to be experienced as metaphorical ejaculation.<sup>4</sup>

When the "cadence" and the "climax" emerged as erotic metaphors, they were distinguished from each other along gender associations. While the image of pleasure was generally projected onto women, the metaphorical ejaculation was seen as part of the male character. After the climax-principle had been established in classical music (and literature), it gained the status of a value-free universal form in western culture.

The complexity of Western classical music is primarily represented in its melodic and harmonic structures. In contrary, the theorist Tricia Rose notes that African and Afrodiasporic music is based on rhythmic and percussive density and organisation. Although the distinctions between Western classical music and African/Afrodiasporic music along harmony versus rhythm is a simplification, the terms harmony and rhythm represent significant differences in sound organisation.

Rhythm and polyrhythm layering is to African and African-derived musics as harmony and the harmonic triad is to

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Western classical music. Dense configurations of independent, but closely related, rhythms, harmonic and nonharmonic percussive sounds, especially drum sounds, are critical priorities in many African and Afrodiasporic musical practices.<sup>5</sup>

With reference to the distinction between Western classical music and African/Afrodiasporic music, we find two racialised musical traditions in contemporary rock and pop. On the one hand, we find the recognisable musical sound of Western classical music, the so called "climax-principle" which is based on harmony and melody in many rock and pop songs. On the other hand, we find the musical tradition of African/Afrodiasporic music in contemporary dance music such as HipHop, Techno and House.

In the following section, I will discuss how whiteness enters rock and pop as the racial identification of the performers and the audience. Furthermore, I will describe a few masculine stereotypes in rock and pop that are linked to whiteness. Certainly, masculine stereotypes can be found in Black music and Black popular culture, too. But, as whiteness and masculinity are two main dimensions which remain unmarked and unnamed in discourses on rock and pop, I will mainly concentrate on them.

### White, Masculine Stereotypes in Rock and Pop

Rock culture plays a crucial role in the process of constructing white, male sexuality. Rock offers the framework for a variety of acceptable male sexual poses which are most often expressed in terms of stereotypes. In this chapter, I will discuss some of these stereotypes.

In 1978, the Cultural Studies theorists Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie suggested that rock operates as both, as a "form of sexual expression" and as a "form of sexual control" which privilege the presentation and marketing of masculine styles. They

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distinguished between two specific masculine forms which they explore by means of the terms "cock rock", on the one hand, and "teenybop", on the other.

By cock rock we mean music making in which performance is an explicit, crude and often aggressive expression of male sexuality - it's the style of rock presentation that links a rock and roller like Elvis Presley to rock stars like Mick Jagger (...).<sup>6</sup>

Cock rock performers express an aggressive, dominant male sexuality by using the guitars and microphones as phallic symbols. The music is loud and built on the musical structure of the climax-principle. While Rock'n'roll developed out from rhythm'n'blues and country; cock rock adds a cruder male physicality to rhythm'n'blues in terms of hardness and sexual control. The musical skills of cock rock performers become synonymous with their sexual skills. Lyrics are often used to express their opinion of women. In their eyes, women are either sexually aggressive and therefore unhappy, or sexually repressed and therefore in the need of male servicing.

In contrast, the teenybop plays with the romantic love conventions. A teenybop performer uses the image of the friendly boy next door that is sad, thoughtful and pretty. His lyrics focus on being let down (by women), about loneliness and frustration and looking for the "true" love of his life which fulfil all his ideas of a heterosexual relationship. Musically his form is not the climax-principle, rather the teenybopper rather prefers pop ballads and soft rock. If cock rock plays on conventional concepts of male sexuality as dominant and aggressive, the teenybopper is soft, romantic, easily hurt and taking female sexuality seriously. But still, women emerge as more selfish and unreliable than men.

Cock rock and teenybop are two established stereotypes for white masculinity in rock and pop that were developed in the 1960s. At

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that time rock became the music of educated white middle-class men who could identify with cock rock and teenybop musicians. At that stage whiteness entered rock and pop as a racial identification of the performers/musicians and the audience.

Another masculine stereotype that was established by the end of the late 1960s and the early 1970s was the one of glam rock. For glam rock musicians such as David Bowie the stage performance became an expression for sexual ambiguity. If cock rock and teenybop play with well known masculine conventions, glam rock musicians use homo- and transsexual images for their performances. Glam Rock can be understood as a musical genre that offered a specific framework for the privileged white heterosexual musicians. By the end of the 1960s neither female musicians nor gay male musicians were allowed to switch between certain masculine/feminine or homosexual/heterosexual images. By that time the position for female musicians in the music industry was very limited. For women rockers such as Janis Joplin it was necessary to become "one of the boys". The other success route open to women was the one of the singer/songwriter. Women musicians felt a huge pressure to fit into the conventional stereotypes, between sensitivity, passivity, and sweetness on the one hand and hardness and aggression on the other. According to theorists of gay culture, gay and lesbians musicians/performers remained mainly invisible in the music industry. In glam rock once again we find that it was mainly white, male musicians who took advantage of their privileged position in society to play with any gendered (masculine) or sexual image. Women musicians, Black musicians or gay/lesbian musicians had to fit into the male groove of the music industry.

Punk was the first form of rock which did not rely on love songs and attacked romantic conventions and social norms. Punk musicians erased sex from their lyrics and started to ask questions about society. It was mainly white, middleclass teenagers who established this new subculture with a "do-it-yourself" attitude

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by playing guitar poorly with maximum volume, giving concerts in small clubs, getting drunk and taking drugs. One of the positive results of this new subculture was that female musicians could play more than marginal roles. While in cock rock, teenybop or glam rock only a very few women musicians could be found, punk gave them a possibility to step out from heterosexual stereotypes and conventions. Although punk refused conventional masculinity, it was still a white phenomenon that played a crucial role for Great Britain's youth culture.

As Cultural Studies theorist Lawrence Grossberg has pointed out, at the time when punk became a new subculture, rock was already the central formation for a mainly white middle-class youth of the United States and Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Cock rock, teenybop, glam rock and punk are selected examples of white masculinity in rock and pop music. Being since, the above described stereotypes have had several revivals in different formations and contexts. By the end of the 1980s it seemed as if the music industry was almost desperate to find new acceptable forms for representing whiteness and masculinity. On the one hand, Black musicians and DJs who invented new forms of dance music such as HipHop, House and Techno questioned the dominance and hegemony of whites in the music industry. On the other hand, feminist theorists marked with their critiques the specific representation of masculinity in rock and pop. I will look at two examples, Britpop and the so-called "Hamburger Schule", to explore how the music industry and the media came up with new modes of representation for whiteness and masculinity in rock and pop.

Britpop was a musical phenomenon which emerged around 1993, and Britpop bands such as Blur and Oasis became well represented in popular mass culture in the following years. In naming itself as it did, Britpop claimed to represent British pop and aimed at reconstructing the British pop identity. The music critics Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson write:

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The bands (...) all played music which self-consciously referenced to retroactively-imagined tradition of British white guitar pop, from The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Kinks, The Who and The Small Faces in the 1960s through to The Smiths and The Stone Roses in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup>

British pop identity as a term has been mobilized centrally by young, white musicians playing "classic" guitar pop on conventional rock instruments. It articulates two very specific associations: First, it means guitar pop = Britishness = white masculinity, and second it points to a certain musical tradition chain: The Beatles - The Kinks - The Smiths - Blur/Oasis. Britpop can be understood as an example of redefining a white British pop identity by referring to a racialised musical tradition. The result was the articulation of a coherent sense of "Britishness".

The second example representing whiteness and masculinity in rock and pop is the "Hamburger Schule". At the same time as Britpop became popular in Germany, bands such as Tocotronic, Die Sterne or Blumfeld launched their careers. These bands founded a new tradition of a German pop phenomenon. Most of the bands rejected the term "Hamburger Schule" because it was introduced by music journalists, but still the bands have had a lot in common. They came out of the punk or post-punk-movement and had therefore a certain interest in politics, lived in the German city Hamburg and used the German language for their lyrics. The lyrics deal with political issues in youth culture and the problems of white male adolescence. Although the musicians tried to reflect their own position in society by questioning certain rock traditions and the social system in general, the "Hamburger Schule" stayed mainly a white, masculine and heterosexual genre.

Britpop and the "Hamburger Schule" were the results of redefinitions for whiteness and masculinity in rock and pop at the beginning of the 1990s. These two new models excluded an extraordinary range of people, sounds and experiences at a time

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when female, Black, gay and lesbian musicians were more or less established in the music industry. Music genres such as punk or soul, which allowed women more than marginal roles, had evidently nothing to do with Britpop or the "Hamburger Schule". And traditionally gay- and black-identified forms, such as disco or most obviously contemporary dance music, from house to techno to jungle, have also nothing to do with these new models for white masculinity.

This essay has tried to focus on some dimensions of whiteness and masculinity in rock and pop. Whiteness is a location of "race privileges" and structural privileges in society. In rock and pop it is especially white male musicians that gain advantages from their gender and their race. They are allowed to play with conventional masculine stereotypes and with any gendered and racialised image. As soon as the white masculine positions in rock and pop are criticised by theorists and/or musicians, new images and styles from any culture and any musical tradition will be incorporated.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Shank, Barry: From Rice to Ice: the Face of Race in Rock and Pop. In: Frith, Simon / Straw, Will / Street, John (eds.): The Cambridge Companion of Pop and Rock. Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 256-259

<sup>2</sup> Frankenberg, Ruth: White Women, Race Matters. The Social Construction of Whiteness. Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press 1991, p. 192

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>4</sup> McClary, Susan: Feminine Endings. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 125

<sup>5</sup> Tricia, Rose: Black Noise. Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America. University Press of New England. Hanover/London 1994, p. 65-67

<sup>6</sup> Frith, Simon / McRobbie, Angela: Rock and Sexuality. (1978) in: Frith, Simon / Goodwin, Andrew: On Record. Rock, Pop, and the Written Word. Routledge, London 1990, p. 372

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<sup>7</sup> Grossberg, Lawrence: What's going on? Cultural Studies und Popularkultur. Cultural Studies Band 3. Turia und Kant, Vienna 2000

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert, Jeremy / Pearson, Ewan: Discographies. Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound. Routledge, London / New York 1999, p. 169