Introduction

> Because we have so often chosen to reduce the extraordinary democratic explosion of the post-World War Two Black freedom movement into a manageable category called civil rights, it has been difficult, usually impossible, to know what to do in our classrooms with the powerful release of creative energy which was so central to that era of transformation. . . . A narrow "civil rights" approach may have led many persons of every age group to miss the possibility that the study of artists and their work can be enjoyable, exciting, *and* fundamental to the creation of a more just and democratic society. (Vincent Harding)[1]

Synchronicity

In the middle of March 1954, the Chords, a black six-man r&b vocal group from the Morrisania district of the Bronx, recorded their reworking of an old jailhouse song called "Sh-boom". A month later "Sh-boom" was the fourth release on the Cat label, a short-lived subsidiary of Atlantic Records. On 3 July, having climbed to number eight on *Billboard*'s national Rhythm and Blues singles chart, "Sh-boom" suddenly appeared on that journal's traditionally white best-seller list.[2]

On 17 May 1954, while "Sh-boom" was beginning to pick up the radio play and white record sales which eventually enabled it to cross over from the black market into the mainstream pop charts, the United States Supreme Court delivered its own blow to segregation in American life, declaring in the case of *Brown* vs *the Topeka Board of Education* that separate public school facilities for black and white children were inherently unequal. This landmark decision undermined the constitutional and intellectual foundations

upon which the system of Jim Crow apartheid in the American South had been constructed for more than half a century. While the tradition of black protest and resistance to racial oppression stretched back through the Jim Crow era into the dark heart of slavery, *Brown* marked the dawn of the modern civil rights movement and a new phase of mass black struggle in the southern states and beyond.

These two contemporaneous events provide convenient twin starting points for this book, which employs Rhythm and Blues – used here (capitalized) as a generic term encompassing most forms of post-war black popular music outside the sacred and jazz traditions: namely r&b, black rock and roll, black pop, soul, funk and disco – to illuminate changes in mass black consciousness during the peak years of civil rights and black power activities. Although conceived primarily as a contribution to the historical literature on the black freedom struggle, the book also reinterprets many of the conventional wisdoms about the history of Rhythm and Blues by setting it firmly within the context of changes in American race relations during this period.

At the very least, there was a striking historical parallel between the evolution of the black freedom struggle and the various transformations of Rhythm and Blues, as art and industry, process and product. In the decade after the Second World War, a time when blacks were still routinely, and in the South legally, excluded from equal participation in many aspects of American society and politics, r&b music was also a segregated phenomenon. Honking saxophonists like Big Jay McNeely vied for black attention with electric bluesmen like T-Bone Walker and Elmore James. Vocal groups like the Five Royales, mistresses of rhythm like Ruth Brown, and mighty shouters like Wynonie Harris were hugely popular with black audiences but had only a tiny white following. The diverse sounds and sentiments of r&b were produced by black musicians for consumption on record, or in concert, or on black-oriented radio stations, by overwhelmingly black audiences.

Although it was not the first r&b record to penetrate the white pop charts, the crossover of "Sh-boom" nonetheless signalled the start of a new era in American popular music in which young whites increasingly turned to black music and its derivatives for their entertainment. Black rock and roll, as exemplified by artists like Little Richard and Chuck Berry, emerged as a distinctive sub-category of Rhythm and Blues while the white rock and roll of Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly flourished alongside it. Both forms were bitterly attacked by white adults, who saw them as nothing less than part of a systematic assault on core, essentially white middle-class American social, sexual and racial values. In the heart of the Cold War, hostility to rock and roll thus formed part of a broader conservative and censorious cultural mesh, constructed to preserve the hegemony of these putatively all-American values from a variety of perceived "alien" threats; threats which emanated, not just

from beyond the iron curtain, but also from a range of marginalized and mistrusted ethnic, racial and class groupings within America. In the South, the campaign against rock and roll became inextricably linked to the rise of organized white resistance to desegregation and black insurgency in the region.

Rock and roll, like the nascent civil rights movement, survived these challenges but was not unchanged by them. Black rock and roll was quickly supplemented, and then largely supplanted, by a "sweeter", less musically and lyrically earthy black pop style personified by the Platters, Brook Benton, and a whole host of girl groups. This black pop made calculated concessions to nominally white musical and lyrical preferences in order to maintain and extend a major black presence in the pop market which had been unimaginable half a decade earlier. As a result, these black pop stylings have usually been dismissed as an aberrant interlude between the supposedly more "authentic" black sounds of 1950s r&b and the equally "authentic" sounds of mid-1960s soul.

Here, however, the mass black preference for black pop between roughly 1956 and 1963 is treated seriously, since this pattern of creation and consumption – alongside a hitherto neglected black admiration for some of the white pop of the period – reflected a mood of rising optimism about the possibility of black integration into a genuinely equalitarian, pluralistic America. Fashioned by the early promise of the civil rights movement, this was an era in which all symbols of black access to, and acceptance in, mainstream culture were seized upon as portents of a coming new day of racial amity and black opportunity.

When this initial black optimism began to disintegrate amid persistent southern white resistance to black advance and habitual racism and systemic discrimination throughout the nation, a new pattern of black music-making and consumption emerged, grouped around the more nationalistic sounds of soul. Whereas black pop had deliberately muted some of its "blackest" musical and lyrical elements, soul was characterized by its reliance upon musical and presentational devices drawn from a gospel tradition to which blacks had an intensely proprietorial relationship. By the mid 1960s, blacks rarely bought white records anymore, although the white market for black music remained buoyant and, in the South at least, there was a good deal of interracial co-operation in the production of soul. As the decade wore on, however, blacks increasingly consumed soul and funk as a self-conscious assertion of the racial pride which was one of the most important legacies of the Movement, and a defining characteristic of the black power era.

This sort of psychological empowerment was apparent even among the majority of blacks in America who never marched, sat-in, joined voter registration drives, rioted, or took part in any of the myriad political actions which historians have usually recognized as the outward manifestations of

inner transformations in black consciousness during the two decades after *Brown*. This book contends that changes in black musical style and mass consumer preferences offer a useful insight into the changing sense of self, community and destiny among those blacks who rarely left the sorts of evidence, or undertook the sorts of activities, to which historians are generally most responsive. Like Lawrence Levine's groundbreaking work on black culture and consciousness during slavery and its aftermath, it is driven by the belief that "historians have tended to spend too much of their time in the company of the 'movers' and 'shakers' and too little in the universe of the mass of mankind".[3]

The book is also guided by the belief that the popular cultures of oppressed groups usually contain within them – explicitly or implicitly – a critique of the system by which those groups are oppressed, and thus actually constitute a mode of psychological resistance to their predicament. Yet this is a complicated and elusive business. As we shall see, black Rhythm and Blues, as art and commerce, politics and entertainment, was also deeply inscribed with many of the social, sexual, moral, economic and even racial values of the dominant culture. Ultimately, the story of Rhythm and Blues reveals the inadequacy of both excessive romanticizations of the counter-hegemonic power of black popular culture, and of Frankfurt School-style critiques of mass culture which reduce it to little more than a succession of profitable commodities whose main function is to reinforce and perpetuate existing configurations of social, sexual, political and economic power. In fact, Rhythm and Blues was a complex, often deeply paradoxical phenomenon which managed both to challenge and affirm the core values and assumptions of mainstream America.[4]

Three premisses

In writing this study of the relationship between black protest and consciousness, race relations, and Rhythm and Blues music, I have clung to the belief that, even in this postmodern, thoroughly deconstructed world, it is still possible to write a sensible book about popular culture which is not so heavily freighted with jargon that it becomes inpenetrable to all but a cabal of cultural theorists. As part of this concern for plain speaking, the major theoretical premisses which underpin the project will – mercifully – seldom intrude upon, let alone dominate, the pages which follow. It may, however, be useful to mention them briefly here.[5]

The first key assumption is that the social or political meanings of any given piece or style of commercially produced popular music are located at the intersection of a number of different, sometimes antithetical, musical, economic, legal, racial, gender, class, generational and other forces. These

factors can be crudely divided into forces of production and consumption. Regarding the former, the diverse agendas of songwriters, musicians, engineers, producers, label owners, lawyers, accountants, music publishers, marketing executives, deejays, and radio programmers have all affected the writing, performance, production and distribution of Rhythm and Blues, and thus contributed to its social functions and cultural meanings.

Yet these factors of production were never the sole determinants of the multiple meanings of Rhythm and Blues. Those meanings were also constructed by individual and collective listeners, sometimes in ways which defied the initial intentions of the artists involved and transcended the economic priorities and racial conventions of the industry within which they worked. Black and white audiences could not only shape the social and political meanings of musical products by the manner of their consumption, but in choosing to consume some styles in great quantities while ignoring others, they could even encourage the industry to move Rhythm and Blues in new directions which reflected the changing moods and needs of its customers. Thus, while it would be foolish to underestimate the potential of the entertainment industry to influence consumer preferences, this book actually illustrates just how ineffectual it has generally been in initiating trends, or even sustaining existing ones, which have not had some kind of genuine social, political, or psychological relevance for their audiences.

The crucial point here, and the second major theoretical plank for the book, is that black consumers have never been passive in their consumption – not even, whisper it gently, when some of them bought white pop records and adored Elvis Presley in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Black consumers were not the perpetual victims of commercial forces, any more than were those black musicians who worked within the exploitative and often racist confines of a capitalist industry to create music which was frequently humbling in its sheer beauty and emotional power. Just as black performers often found room for personal expression and communal celebration in their music, so black fans made conscious, if never entirely "free", choices about what they wanted to buy on record, hear in concert, dance to in clubs, or listen to on the radio. Of course, it is ultimately impossible to isolate all the factors which motivated individual blacks to buy or request individual records. Yet, insofar as those choices were made in conjunction with hundreds of thousands of other blacks and conformed to broadly identifiable shifts in mass black preferences over time, they deserve to be interrogated for what they might reveal about the changing state of mass black consciousness in an era of great racial ferment and struggle.

The third key proposition in this book is that in America there exists a conventionally recognized spectrum of musical techniques and devices which ranges from nominally "black" to nominally "white" poles. The analytical

perils of this sort of "black" versus "white" schema have been fully exposed by Philip Tagg, who has pointed out that none of the musical characteristics traditionally associated with black American music are actually unique to the music of black Americans, any more than the techniques considered typically "western" or "white" are unknown in African, or Asian, or African-American musics.[6]

To summarize, as befits a music which has always been inextricably linked to dance, black American styles have tended to be more rhythmically complex and forceful than most, although not all, white American music forms, some of which have also been geared to the needs of the dance. European art music has tended to be slightly more harmonically rooted than most, but not all, black American and African musical forms. There is little to choose between Africa, Asia, Europe, or any admixture of the three continents, as regards the emphasis on melody. The quest by black musicians for a distinctive, individualistic performance style, and the prioritization of emotional honesty and personal expressiveness over classical ideas of *bel canto* precision, all have their equivalents in musics around the globe, including the folk musics of the West. Certainly, in the American context, the long historical process of musical borrowings, theft, parody, influence and counter-influence across racial lines has been so complex that musicologists have frequently struggled to discern the exact provenance of particular musical techniques and sensibilities. In the main, they have struggled even less successfully to explain their conclusions to anyone not also trained as a musicologist.[7]

Despite its shortcomings, however, the idea of a black-white musical spectrum remains a useful conceptual framework simply because both black and white audiences have cognitively accepted its existence. Indeed, to a large extent black and white responses to successive popular music styles were determined by where those styles appeared to fit along this black-white spectrum. Adult white resistance to rock and roll in the 1950s depended crucially on the fact that it sounded "black", even when sung by some whites. Similarly, the special relationship between the black masses and the soul of the 1960s, or between rap and the black b-boys of the 1980s and 1990s, derived from those musics' dependence on devices which were deemed quintessentially "black".

While it can hardly be an exact science, this book plots the changing position of successive and overlapping Rhythm and Blues styles along this notional black-white musical – and lyrical – spectrum. Locating where, at any historical moment, the black masses allowed their most popular musics to settle between two musical poles which were redolent of the "nationalistic" and "assimilationist" strains within black thought, politics and culture, offers a glimpse into the state of black consciousness and the struggle for freedom and equality at that moment.

A word on sources

In order to establish which musical styles the mass of black Americans have listened to most frequently on the radio and bought most heavily on disk since the 1950s, this study relies on the black-oriented charts printed weekly since the late 1940s under various titles in the trade journal *Billboard*. The *Billboard* black singles charts indicated the relative national sales performances of top Rhythm and Blues records in "black" retail outlets, while its deejay charts listed the records most frequently played by black-oriented broadcasters throughout the nation. In addition to these national black charts, *Billboard* also published regional record and deejay charts for many major black urban markets. These local charts suggest that, although important regional and urban-rural variations persisted, Rhythm and Blues was a genuinely national phenomenon. All of the major stylistic transitions with which this book deals were broadly accepted by black audiences across the nation, even if they sometimes proceeded at a different pace, and with a different intensity, according to location.

This idea of a truly national, if regionally differentiated, Rhythm and Blues culture is important. Black popular culture, especially the music distributed by an increasingly sophisticated recording industry and a deeply penetrative broadcast media, was a crucial factor in (re)creating some of the black unity, that incipient black nationhood, which the various mass migrations from the South in first half of the century had strained and sometimes ruptured. Indeed, at one level, this book tells the story of what happened after the Second World War to historically southern, often rural, forms of black music when they migrated to the cities of the North and West – and South – and were transformed, just like the people who made those same journeys, by their encounters with a multitude of new urbane, cosmopolitan influences. Perhaps most importantly, this urbanization went hand-in-hand with the steady secularization of much black culture and the transference of many social and cultural functions once associated with the church into the realm of popular culture. That process was more or less completed with the triumph of soul music and style in the 1960s.[8]

Problems and inconsistencies with the ways in which the various *Billboard* black charts have been compiled, coupled with periodic scandals about chart-rigging and payola payments to deejays and retailers in order to get particular records on the air or into store racks, inevitably raise doubts about the reliability of these listings as indices of mass black tastes. By the early 1970s, album sales were outstripping those of singles – even in the black market, which was traditionally singles-based. The widespread availability of cassette recorders and the unquantifiable home-taping of official commercial releases further compromised the reliability of the black sales and airplay charts as an accurate guide to black tastes.[9]

Certainly, the presence of numerous maverick hits on the black singles charts encourages caution when claiming direct links between black consciousness, black protest and patterns of mass black record buying. There is something rather disconcerting about finding that white prankster Ray Stevens' "Harry the hairy ape" was just ending a successful run in the Rhythm and Blues charts at the moment when the 1963 March on Washington was marking the symbolic high point of the early civil rights movement. Nonetheless, even such anomalies can be instructive: in this case by calling into question the sort of racial stereotyping which routinely depicts the black audience as an unimpeachable bastion of cool style and good taste, and denies it the freedom to indulge in whimsical purchases or enjoy the occasional novelty hit.

There are other limitations on the usefulness and accuracy of the black record charts. They are not sensitive to generational differences in black tastes; they do not reveal how many blacks bought these hit records, how often they listened to them, or how frequently they tuned in to the black-oriented radio shows which played them. They do not describe which other records were also available for the black consumer to buy, or request on the radio, or programme on the jukebox – a crucial consideration if one wishes to read political and racial significances into the exercise of consumer choice. The charts themselves do not tell us anything about the actual sound or lyrical content of the records, or about the lives and concerns of those who wrote, recorded and aired them, or about the workings of the industry from which they emerged. Despite these problems, however, the black record and deejay charts remain the best available guide to shifting mass black musical tastes and, fortunately, there are other sources for much of the biographical, musical and statistical information which the charts themselves do not reveal.

Ultimately, of course, there is no substitute for hearing these recordings – the hits and the misses, the released and the canned. And if there are places in what follows where the prose turns a little more purple than might be seemly, it is only in a doomed attempt to convey just a little of the music's enormous emotional and sensual power; its bright wit, intelligence and integrity. It is not necessary to be moved by, or even to know, this music in order to understand the argument and analysis in this book. But it is important to recognize that, although rooted deep in the particularities of the African-American experience, Rhythm and Blues has demonstrated a phenomenal capacity to move hearts, minds, feet and sundry other extremities, irrespective of boundaries of race, class, gender, religion or nationality.

If the recordings themselves comprise the major primary source for understanding the development of the music, there are also some excellent journalistic accounts of Rhythm and Blues in its many incarnations, including those by Arnold Shaw, Gerri Hirshey, Peter Guralnick, and Barney Hoskyns which are essentially oral histories of aspects of Rhythm and Blues. Even

better for unearthing the fascinating minutiae of Rhythm and Blues history are specialist magazines like *Yesterday's Memories*, *Bim Bam Boom* and *Goldmine*, which combined interviews with thoroughly researched accounts of particular styles, artists, writers and labels. Far from being superficial or unrefereed, these popular magazines have enjoyed a sort of instant peer review by experts who seldom allow an erroneous matrix number, or a case of mistaken identity among members of the horn section on a particularly obscure recording session, to pass uncorrected beyond the next issue.[10]

In addition to these secondary sources on the history of Rhythm and Blues, discographical guides to important labels and artists have made it possible to determine what records were actually being cut and issued by whom at any given time. Moreover, the fact that Rhythm and Blues was a lucrative commercial product meant that the record, radio and advertising industries were forever probing the popular music market to see who was buying and listening to what. Consequently, it is possible to place recorded and broadcast Rhythm and Blues somewhere near the heart of a contemporary black culture in which "Statistics show that on a per capita basis, blacks regardless of income buy more records and record playing equipment and spend more money for entertainment than anyone else in the major markets". Although blacks in their late teens and early twenties were usually the heaviest purchasers of records, until the mid-to-late 1970s generational and even class differences in musical tastes appear to have been much less pronounced in the black community than they were among whites.[11]

Away from the music, the vast and expanding literature on the black freedom struggle, together with the many sociological studies dealing with American race relations and the black experience, comprised another major building block for this book. It is astonishing that there has been so little real dialogue between these two adjacent fields of enquiry into the contemporary black experience – the musical and the historical/sociological. Certainly, Movement historians have generally paid scant attention to the cultural dimensions of their subject beyond a perfunctory mention of, typically, the freedom songs or, less typically, the Black Arts movement and cultural nationalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The notion persists that, at best, the world of popular culture somehow reflected deeper, more significant, racial struggles going on elsewhere in American society – in the schools, courtrooms and jails, on the buses, and at the polls. In fact, popular culture was one of the most important arenas in which the struggle for black equality was being waged. Popular music and popular entertainment more generally have always constituted major fields of social activity in which black and white racial identities, values and interests have been defined and tested, attacked and defended in America.

Finally, I confess that this book also resorts to the sort of traditional primary sources central to more conventional histories. The black and white press, records of congressional hearings, manuscript collections of private

and public papers, the records of leading civil rights organizations, together with a wide range of oral history interviews, were all used to explore extensive, but hitherto undocumented, financial, administrative and cultural links – as well as many fissures and tensions – between formal black protest activities and the world of Rhythm and Blues during the quarter-century after *Brown*. They also made it possible to trace the evolution of contemporary black and white, official and private responses to successive Rhythm and Blues styles against the backdrop of the black freedom struggle.

Authenticity

Although they are by no means mutually exclusive, it is proven commercial success with a mass black audience, not artistic merit, which provides the main criterion for including a particular style or performer in this book. As a result, while disco gets its due, there is not much discussion of the blues, which had already declined in mass black popularity by the mid-to-late 1950s. Nor is there much discussion of modern jazz, which many fans, some activists, and even a few artists hailed as the quintessential musical expression of heightened black racial consciousness during the civil rights and black power eras. Jazz, however, had not been the leading popular music of the black masses since at least the swing of the 1930s, and even some of its foremost advocates recognized that, as Lawrence Nahs put it, it had generally failed to "extend itself into the black community" in the same way as Rhythm and Blues.[12]

It is, however, rather ironic that this book should rest on the idea that sustained commercial success offers one of the best guarantees that a particular musical style, or lyrical perspective, or performance technique, had some real social, political or psychological relevance to the black masses. The historiography of slavery is full of attempts to reconstruct antebellum black consciousness from what we know of the popular culture of the slaves, and there have been numerous attempts to use blues, jazz and gospel to illuminate the black mental and material experience in the twentieth century. Yet Rhythm and Blues, the most pervasive and demonstrably popular form of black cultural production in post-Second World War America, has rarely been used by historians of the contemporary black experience and race relations in similar ways.

There is a sense that these other, earlier black styles were somehow purer, more authentic, less haunted by the spectre of an all-powerful commercial apparatus controlling the production and consumption of the music, than Rhythm and Blues. As a result they seemed to offer clearer insights into the collective black mind. This book offers an extended critique of such views, not least on the grounds that jazz, blues and gospel were themselves cultural commodities and inextricably bound to a commercially oriented and

often exploitative entertainment industry. Indeed, as Ted Vincent's pioneering account of black politics, commerce and culture in the 1920s has revealed, energetic black artists and entrepreneurs like W.C. Handy, Lester Walton and Clarence Williams were at the forefront of efforts to create a recognizably modern, national entertainment industry founded on black jazz and blues talents. Any attempt to use twentieth-century black popular music forms to probe mass black consciousness which fails to view them as simultaneously cultural commodities and creative forms of individual and communal expression is deeply suspect.[13]

Even more critically, this book takes issue with the spurious notions of "purity" and "authenticity" which pervade much of the popular and scholarly literature on black music. As black poet, journalist and jazz critic Frank Marshall Davis once explained, "Both culturally and ideologically we are a goulash of Europeans, Africans, and American Indians – with African dominant". As Davis was well aware, African-American music has always been characterized by its willingness and seemingly endless capacity to fuse many varied, often apparently incompatible, influences into a succession of styles which have reflected and articulated the changing circumstances, consciousness and aspirations of black Americans; black Americans who have themselves been differentiated by class, gender and geography, and doubly defined by their immanent American, as well as by their more distant African, heritages.[14]

Indeed, within an American culture which is, as Albert Murray neatly put it, "incontestably mulatto", black American music has been the classic dynamic hybrid. Rich, complex, restless, ceaselessly reinventing itself in the context of multiple overlapping influences and needs, black music has always been, to borrow from Imamu Amiri Baraka, a constantly "changing same".[15]

And yet the earnest quest for some sort of mythical, hermetically sealed, "real" black American music, unadulterated by white influences and untarnished by commercial considerations, continues. This is most apparent in a rather crude form of Afrocentrism which is unable to acknowledge any kind of cross-racial cultural exchange which cannot safely be reduced to simple white exploitation or expropriation of black style and creativity – of which, of course, there have been no shortage of examples. Ironically, however, this sort of racial essentialism actually undervalues the dazzling complexity and syncretic brilliance which have characterized black American musical forms in favour of a desperate search for African roots and retentions, as if these comprised the only criteria for evaluating the worth and relevance of contemporary African-American music. As black writer Eddy Harris has noted, some champions of black identity and heritage appear to "have so little pride that they will look to find their roots generations behind them in a land they never knew and in a people they are not now". "Rather than mourning the loss of some putative ancestral purity", Henry Louis Gates, Jr,

has wisely counselled that some of these critics would do better to "recognize what's valuable, resilient, even cohesive in the hybrid and variegated nature of our modernity".[16]

The white audience for Rhythm and Blues and race relations

Unfortunately, many of the notions of what constitutes "real" black American music advanced by some of its more precious black and white guardians have conformed to, and inadvertently helped to perpetuate, hoary old racial stereotypes about blacks and their culture. This has important implications for another of the major themes of this book which concerns the relationship between white responses to Rhythm and Blues and changing patterns of race relations in America. At least until the late 1960s, many blacks genuinely believed that the unprecedented white enthusiasm for Rhythm and Blues reflected important changes in white racial attitudes more generally. In fact, this genuine admiration for black music did not necessarily challenge basic white racial beliefs and assumptions at all, but frequently served to reinforce them.

White enthusiasts routinely reduced the diverse sounds and lyrical perspectives of Rhythm and Blues to a set of stock characteristics which they had always – sometimes correctly, sometimes incorrectly, but invariably in deep ignorance of the realities of black life – associated with the unremittingly physical, passionate, ecstatic, emotional and, above all, sexually liberated black world of their imaginations. Paradoxically, in so doing, white fans of black music neatly fitted black music, style and culture into much the same normative categories so dear to the most bigoted opponents of black music and black equality. Of course, one must be careful not to apply a sort of racial double standard here. Blacks also enjoyed the sweet sensuality and raunchy ribaldry of much Rhythm and Blues music, and revelled in its powerful corporeal drives. Yet black audiences were less likely than their white counterparts to mistake these qualities for the totality of the black experience, or to reify them as the defining characteristics of a diverse and complex black existence.

The Rhythm and Blues industry

If some blacks hoped that a shared love of Rhythm and Blues might offer a much needed means of communication with white America, many also believed that the expansion of black-oriented radio would "bring the races closer", as one black magazine optimistically put it in 1955. While it had a mixed record in this regard, black-oriented radio nonetheless provided the main means of exposure for Rhythm and Blues recordings, which in turn

comprised the major portion of its broadcast fare. Indeed, black-oriented radio and its black announcers emerged as important social institutions with considerable power and potential influence within the black community.[17]

Ultimately, however, black-oriented radio struggled to provide black Americans with much in the way of political or economic leadership, or even on occasions with accurate news coverage of their own community and its travails. In part, this was a consequence of the basic racial configuration of economic and managerial power within the industry. Whites historically owned and managed the vast majority of the radio stations and record labels which serviced the black market. Few of these individuals or corporations showed much inclination to use their power and influence to spearhead, or even assist, the black struggle for freedom and equality of opportunity.

Blacks, meanwhile, remained woefully under-represented as owners and executives within both the record and radio industries. For a while in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a concerted effort to improve the number of blacks in positions of financial power and executive influence within the world of black-oriented entertainment formed an important part of the broader black power impulse. Although those efforts, led by the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers (NATRA), met with little success, they revealed much about the complexities and ambiguities of the black power era, and permanently changed the tenor of race relations within the music and broadcasting industries.

Black capitalists, celebrities and the Movement

These efforts at black empowerment in the entertainment and media industries were undertaken in the belief that greater black representation at executive and proprietorial levels would automatically create more responsive and socially responsible services for the black community. In fact, successive generations of wealthy and relatively powerful black entrepreneurs and performers like Jesse Blayton, Sam Cooke, Berry Gordy, Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff, were remarkably consistent in subordinating, if never eradicating, specifically racial concerns to their personal economic interests. American dreamers to the core, black capitalists and professionals invariably pursued the rewards of the mainstream, rather than settle for success in some segregated racial enclave.

While the black entrepreneurs of Rhythm and Blues were generally conservative in matters of black politics and protest, most Rhythm and Blues singers were equally cautious about publicly associating themselves with formal Movement activities – at least until the black power era, when conspicuous gestures of solidarity with the black struggle became almost obligatory for any artist hoping to maintain credibility and sales. Yet if Rhythm and Blues artists and entrepreneurs were poorly represented among the

artists and celebrities who supported the Movement most vigorously in the decade or so after *Brown*, this was not entirely their fault. For reasons which revealed much about the class co-ordinates, strategic concerns, and funding arrangements of the early Movement, the major civil rights organizations failed to produce a coherent strategy for deploying Rhythm and Blues and its artists as fundraisers, morale-boosters, or publicists until the late 1960s, by which time the Movement was already rapidly disintegrating.

If, contrary to the conventional wisdom and sometimes their own retrospective assertions, few Rhythm and Blues artists actually did much to help the organized black freedom struggle before the black power era, they also – again with some notable exceptions like Nina Simone – generally eschewed explicit discussion of the black struggle in their songs until around 1967. Thereafter, soul and funk were filled with graphic descriptions of the black experience and bold celebrations of black pride and style which have much to offer anyone wishing to map the mass black mood during this era. Nevertheless, it is worth looking beyond the more obvious references to black pride, predicament and politics in black music for clues to the changing configuration of black consciousness. In particular, this book focuses on the sexual politics of Rhythm and Blues since the 1950s and the ways in which the level of sexual spite and suspicion, violence and vitriol in black music has been directly related to the changing state of black protest, and the prospects for black equality and justice.

While these lyrical matters are important, often it has not been the things which Rhythm and Blues has said, but the ways in which it has said them, which have carried the burden of its message. Certainly, there are many songs which only made sense and revealed their racial or sexual politics on the dance floor, or through their bass lines, or in the gospel grain of their towering vocals. In other words, Rhythm and Blues absorbed changes in mass black consciousness and reflected them primarily by means of certain musical devices and performance techniques, rather than in the form of neat narrative expositions.

The relative lack of artistic or political engagement with the early civil rights movement by most Rhythm and Blues singers makes rather a nonsense of casual claims that they were the philosophers or messengers of the Movement, community leaders who helped to create, shape and direct black protest in concrete ways. Harlemite Bob Moses, the mercurial organizational genius of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) may have served as a travelling maths tutor for the juvenile black star Frankie Lymon – and as a result received his first introduction to the Jim Crow South – but there is no reason to believe that the lyrics of "Goody, goody" left more of an imprint on Moses' political philosophy than Gandhi and Camus. Even when Rhythm and Blues did deal explicitly with issues of race and the black struggle, there is nothing much to refute R. Serge Denisoff's assertion that "there is very little, if any, concrete or empirical evidence to

indicate that songs *do* in fact have an independent impact upon attitudes in the political arena". Nor is there anything much in the pages that follow to challenge Denisoff's insistence that simply hearing, enjoying, or even buying a protest song about a particular cause did not necessarily make one an active supporter or participant in that cause.[18]

And yet, there was another level at which popular music did shape people's views of the world, their sense of selfhood and community, even their perceptions of right and wrong. Popular music did contribute to the ways in which ordinary people arranged their beliefs, values and priorities. As Simon Frith has written, "Pop tastes do not just derive from our socially constructed identities; they also help to define them". Ultimately, the most popular black musical styles and artists of the past 40 years have achieved their popularity precisely because they have dramatized and expressed, but also helped to shape and define, a succession of black consciousnesses. This book is about the relationship between those consciousnesses, Rhythm and Blues, and the ongoing black struggle for justice and equality in America since *Brown*, or rather, since "Sh-boom".[19]